

FICTION

Ruby M. Ayres

The Second Honeymoon

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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THE SECOND HONEYMOON

by

RUBY M. AYRES

Author of A Bachelor Husband, The Scar, Etc.

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THE SECOND HONEYMOON

CHAPTER I

THE PAST INTERVENES

James Challoner, known to his friends and intimates as Jimmy, brushed an imaginary speck of dust from the shoulder of his dinner jacket, and momentarily stopped his cheery whistling to stare at himself in the glass with critical eyes.

Jimmy was feeling very pleased with himself in particular and the world in general. He was young, and quite passably good-looking, he had backed a couple of winners that day for a nice little sum, and he was engaged to a woman with whom he had been desperately in love for at least three months.

Three months was a long time for Jimmy Challoner to be in love (as a rule, three days was the outside limit which he allowed himself), but this--well, this was the real thing at last--the real, romantic thing of which author chaps and playwright Johnnies wrote; the thing which sweeps a man clean off his feet and paints the world with rainbow tints.

Jimmy Challoner was sure of it. His usually merry eyes sobered a little as he met their solemn reflection in the mirror. He took up a silver-backed brush and carefully smoothed down a kink of hair which stood aggressively erect above the

rest. It was a confounded nuisance, that obstinate wave in his hair, making him look like a poet or a drawing-room actor.

Not that he objected to actors and the stage in the very least; on the contrary, he had the profoundest admiration for them, at which one could hardly wonder seeing that Cynthia--bless her heart!--was at present playing lead in one of the suburban theatres, and that at that very moment a pass for the stage box reposed happily in an inner pocket of his coat.

Cynthia was fast making a name for herself. In his adoring eyes she was perfect, and in his blissful heart he was confident that one day all London would be talking about her. Her photographs would be in every shop window, and people would stand all day outside the pit and gallery to cheer her on first nights.

When he voiced these sentiments to Cynthia herself, she only laughed and called him a "silly boy"; but he knew that she was pleased to hear them all the same.

Jimmy Challoner gave a last look at his immaculate figure, took up his coat and gloves and went out.

He called a taxi and gave the address of the suburban theatre before he climbed in out of the chilly night and sat back in a corner.

Jimmy Challoner was quite young, and very much in love; so much in love that as yet he had not penetrated the rouge and grease-paint of life and discovered the very ordinary material that lies beneath it. The glare of the footlights still blinded him. Like a child who is taken for the first time to a pantomime, he did not realise that their brilliance is there in order to hide imperfections.

He was so perfectly happy that he paid the driver double fare when he reached the theatre. An attentive porter hurried forward.

Just at the moment Jimmy Challoner was very well known in that particular neighbourhood; he was generous with his tips for one thing, and for another he had a cheery personality which went down with most people.

He went round to the stage door as if he were perfectly at home there, as indeed he was. The doorkeeper bade him a respectful good evening, and asked no questions as he went on and up the chill stone passage.

At the top a door on the right was partly open. A bar of yellow light streamed out into the passage. A little flush crept into Challoner's youthful face. He passed a hand once more nervously over the refractory kink before he went forward and knocked.

A preoccupied voice said, "Come in."

Challoner obeyed. He stood for a moment just inside the door without speaking.

It was not a very large room, and the first impression it gave one was that it was frightfully overcrowded.

Every chair and table seemed littered with frocks and furbelows. Every available space on the walls was covered with pictures and photographs and odds and ends. The room was brilliantly lit, and at a dressing-table strewn with make-up boxes and a hundred and one toilet requisites, a girl was reading a letter.

At first glance she looked very young. She was small and dainty, with clearly cut features and beautiful hair, the most beautiful hair in all the world Jimmy Challoner thought for the thousandth time as he stood in the doorway looking across at her with his foolish heart in his eyes. She seemed to feel his gaze, for she turned sharply. Then she drew in her breath hard, and hurriedly thrust the letter away in a drawer as she rose to her feet.

"You!" she said; then, "Jimmy, didn't--didn't you get my letter?"

Challoner went forward. His confident smile had faded a little at the unusual greeting. It was impossible not to realise that he was not exactly welcome.

"No, I haven't had a letter," he said rather blankly. "What did you write about? Is anything the matter?"

She laughed rather constrainedly. "No--at least, I can't explain now." Her eyes sought his face rather furtively. "I'm in a hurry. Come round after the first act, will you?--that's the longest interval. You won't mind being sent away now, will you? I am due on almost directly."

She held her hand to him. "Silly boy! don't frown like that."

Challoner took the hand and drew her nearer to him. "I'm not going till you've kissed me."

There was a touch of masterfulness in his boyish voice. Cynthia Farrow half sighed, and for a moment a little line of pain bent her brows, but the next moment she was smiling.

"Very well, just one, and be careful of the powder."

Challoner kissed her right on the lips. "Did you get my flowers? I sent roses."

"Yes, thank you so much, they are lovely."

She glanced across the room to where several bouquets lay on the table. Challoner's was only one of them.

That was what he hated--having to stand by and allow other men to shower presents on her.

He let her go and walked over to the table where the flowers lay. He was still frowning. Across the room Cynthia Farrow watched him rather anxiously.

A magnificent cluster of orchids lay side by side with his own bouquet of roses; he bent and looked at the card; a little flush crept into his cheek.

"Mortlake again! I hate that fellow. It's infernal cheek of him to send you flowers when he knows that you're engaged to me----"

He looked round at her. She was standing leaning against the littered dressing-table, eyes down-cast.

There was a moment of silence, then; Challoner went back and took her in his arms.

"I know I'm a jealous brute, but I can't stand it when these other fellows send you things."

"You promised me you wouldn't mind."

"I know, but--oh, confound it!" A faint tap at the door was followed by the entrance of a dresser. Challoner moved away.

"After the first act, then," he said.

"Yes." But she did not look at him.

He went away disconsolately and round to the stage box. He was conscious of a faint depression. Cynthia had not been pleased to see him--had not been expecting him. Something was the matter. He had vexed her. What had she written to him about, he wondered?

He looked round the house anxiously. It was well filled and his brow cleared. He hated Cynthia to have to play to a poor house--she was so wonderful!

A lady in the stalls below bowed to him. Challoner stared, then returned the bow awkwardly.

Who the dickens was she, he asked himself?

She was middle-aged and grey-haired, and she had a girl in a white frock sitting beside her.

They were both looking up at him and smiling. There was something eagerly expectant in the girl's face.

Challoner felt embarrassed. He was sure that he ought to know who they were, but for the life of him he could not think. He met so many people in his rather aimless life it was impossible to remember them all.

His eyes turned to them again and again. There was something very familiar in the face of the elder woman--something--- Challoner knit his brows. Who the dickens---

The lights went down here, and he forgot all about them as the curtains rolled slowly up on Cynthia's first act.

Challoner almost knew the play by heart, but he followed it all eagerly, word by word, as if he had never seen it before, till the big velvet curtains fell together again, and a storm of applause broke the silence.

Challoner rose hastily. He had just opened the door of the box to go to Cynthia when an attendant entered. He carried a note on a tray.

"For you, sir."

Challoner took it wonderingly. It was written in pencil on a page torn from a pocket-book.

"A lady in the stalls gave it to me, sir," the attendant explained, vaguely apologetic.

Jimmy unfolded the little slip of paper, and read the faintly pencilled words. "Won't you come and speak to us, or have you quite forgotten the old days at Upton House?"

Challoner's face flashed into eager delight. What an idiot he had been not to recognise them. How could he have ever forgotten them? Of course, the girl in the white frock was Christine, whose mother had given his boyhood all it had ever known of home life!

Of course, he had not seen them for years, but--dash it all! what an ungrateful brute they must think him!

For the moment even Cynthia was forgotten in the sudden excitement of this meeting with old friends. Challoner rushed off to the stalls.

"I knew it must be you," Christine's mother said, as Jimmy dropped into an empty seat beside her. "Christine saw you first, but we knew you had not the faintest notion as to who we were, although you bowed so politely," she added laughing.

"I'm ashamed, positively ashamed," Jimmy admitted, blushing ingenuously. "But I am delighted--simply delighted to see you and Christine again--I suppose it is Christine," he submitted doubtfully.

The girl in the white frock smiled. "Yes, and I knew you at once," she said.

Challoner was conscious of a faint disappointment as he looked at her. She had been such a pretty kid. She had hardly fulfilled all the promise she had given of being an equally pretty woman, he thought critically, not realising that it was the vivid colouring of Cynthia Farrow that had for the moment at least spoiled him for paler beauty.

Christine was very pale and a little nervous-looking. Her eyes--such beautiful brown eyes they were--showed darkly against her fair skin. Her hair was brown, too, dead brown, very straight and soft.

"By Jove! it's ripping to see you again after all this time," Jimmy Challoner broke out again eagerly. He looked at the mother rather than the daughter, for though he and Christine had been sweethearts for a little while in her pinafore days, Jimmy Challoner had adored Mrs. Wyatt right up to the time when, in his first Eton coat, he had said good-bye to her to go to school and walked right out of their lives.

"And what are you doing now, Jimmy?" Mrs. Wyatt asked him. "I suppose I may still call you Jimmy?" she said playfully.

"Rather! please do! I'm not doing anything, as a matter of fact," Challoner explained rather vaguely. "I've got rooms in the Temple, and the great Horatio sends me a quarterly allowance, and expects me not to live beyond it." He made a little grimace. "You remember my brother Horace, of course!"

"Of course I do! Is he still abroad?"

"Yes, he'll never come back now; not that I want him to," Jimmy hastened to add, with one of those little inward qualms that shook him whenever he thought of his brother, and what that brother would say when he knew that he was shortly to be asked to accept Cynthia Farrow as a sister-in-law.

The great Horatio, as Jimmy disrespectfully called the head of his family, loathed the stage. It was his one dread that some day the blueness of his blood might run the risk of taint by being even remotely connected with one of its members.

"He's not married, of course?" Mrs. Wyatt asked.

Challoner chuckled. "Married! Good Lord, no!" He leaned a little forward to look at Christine.

"And you?" he asked. "Has the perfect man come along yet?"

It had been an old joke of his in the far away days, that Christine would never marry until she found a perfect man. She had always had such quaintly romantic fancies behind the seriousness of her beautiful brown eyes.

She flushed now, shaking her head. "And you?" she asked. "Are you married?"

Challoner said "No" very quickly. He wondered whether he ought to tell them about Cynthia. The thought reminded him of his promise to go to her after the first act. He rose hastily to his feet.

"I quite forgot. I've got an appointment. If you'll excuse me, I'll come back, if I may."

He bowed himself off. Christine's beautiful eyes followed him wistfully.

"I never thought he'd be half so good-looking when he grew up," she said. "And yet somehow he hasn't altered much, has he?"

"He hasn't altered in manner in the least," Mrs. Wyatt laughed. "Fancy him remembering about your perfect man, Christine? We must ask him to dinner one night while we are in London. How funny, meeting him like this. I always liked him so much. I wonder he hasn't got married, though--a charming boy like that!" But her voice sounded as if she were rather pleased to find Challoner still a bachelor.

"I don't know why he should be married," Christine said. "He's not very old--only twenty-seven, mother."

"Is that all? Yes, I suppose he is--the time goes so quickly."

Challoner, meanwhile, had raced off to the back of the stage. He could not imagine how on earth he had even for one second forgotten his appointment. He was flushed with remorse and eagerness when he reached Cynthia's room.

A dresser was retouching her hair. Challoner waited impatiently till Cynthia sent her away. It occurred to him that she was deliberately detaining her. He bit his lip.

But at last she was dismissed, and the door had hardly closed before he stepped forward.

"Darling!" his eager arms were round her. "Are you angry with me? Did you think I had forgotten? I met some old friends--at least, they spotted me from the stalls and sent a note, and, of course, I had to go and speak to them."

She was standing rather stiffly within the circle of his arms.

"You're not wild with me?" he asked in a whisper. "I'm so sorry. If you knew how badly I wanted to see you."

He kissed her lips.

She was singularly unresponsive, though for a moment she let her head rest against his shoulder. Then she raised it and moved away.

"Jimmy, I want to talk to you. No, stay there," as he made a little eager movement to follow. "Stay there; I can't talk to you if you won't be sensible."

"I am sensible." Challoner dragged up a chair and sat straddled across it, his arms on the back, looking at her with ardent eyes. She kept her own averted. She seemed to find it hard to begin what it was she wanted to say. She stood beside the dressing-table absently fingering the trinkets lying there. Among them was a portrait of Challoner in a silver frame. The pictured eyes seemed to be watching her as she stood trying to avoid the human ones. With sudden exasperation she turned.

"Jimmy, you'll hate me--you'll--oh, why didn't you get my letter?" she broke out vehemently. "I explained so carefully, I--" she stopped.

There was a little silence. Challoner rose to his feet. He was rather white about the lips. There was a dawning apprehension in his eyes.

"Go on," he said. "What is it you--you can't--can't tell me?"

But he knew already, knew before she told him with desperate candour.

"I can't marry you, Jimmy, I'm sorry, but--but I can't--that's all."

The silence fell again. Behind the closed door in the crowded theatre the orchestra suddenly broke into a ragtime. Challoner found himself listening to it dully. Everything felt horribly unreal. It almost seemed like a scene in a play--this hot, crowded room; the figure of the woman opposite in her expensive stage gown, and--himself!

A long glass on the wall opposite reflected both their figures. Jimmy Challoner met his mirrored eyes, and a little wave of surprise filled him when he saw how white he was. He pulled himself together with a desperate effort. He tried to find his voice.

Suddenly he heard it, cracked, strained, asking a one-word question.

"Why?"

She did not answer at once. She had turned away again. She was aimlessly opening and shutting a little silver powder-box lying amongst the brushes and make-up. All his life Jimmy Challoner remembered the little clicking noise it made.

He could see nothing of her face. He made a sudden passionate movement towards her.

"Cynthia, in God's name why--why?"

He laid his hands on her shoulders. She wriggled free of his touch. For an instant she seemed to be deliberately weighing something in her mind. Then at last she spoke.

"Because--because my husband is still living."

"Still--living!" Jimmy Challoner echoed the words stupidly. He passed a hand over his eyes. He felt dazed. After a moment he laughed. He groped backwards for a chair and dropped into it.

"Still--living! Are you--are you *sure*?"

So it was not that she did not love him. His first thought was one of utter relief--thank God, it was not that!

She put the little silver box down with a sort of impatience. "Yes," she said. She spoke so softly he could hardly catch the monosyllable.

Challoner leaned his head in his hands. He was trying desperately to think, to straighten out this hopeless tangle in his brain, but everything was confused.

Of course, he knew that she had been married before--knew that years and years ago, before she had really known her own mind, she had married a man--a worthless waster--who had left her within a few months of their marriage. She had told him this herself, quite straightforwardly. Told him, too, that the man was dead.

And after all he was still living!

The knowledge hammered against his brain, but as yet he could not realise its meaning. Cynthia went on jerkily.

"I only knew--yesterday. I wrote to you. I--at first I thought it could not be true. But--but now I know it is. Oh, why don't you say something--anything?" she broke out passionately.

Challoner looked up. "What can I say, if this is true?"

"It is true," her face was flushed. There was a hard look in her eyes as if she were trying to keep back tears. After a moment she moved over to where he sat and laid a hand on his shoulder.

Jimmy Challoner turned his head and kissed it.

"Don't take it so badly, Jimmy. It's--it's worse for me," her voice broke. A cleverer man than Jimmy Challoner might have heard the little theatrical touch in the words, but Jimmy was too genuinely miserable himself to be critical.

At the first sob he was on his feet. He put his arms round her; he laid his cheek against her hair; but he did not kiss her. Afterwards he wondered what instinct it was that kept him from kissing her. He broke out into passionate protestations.

"I can't give you up. There must be some way out for us all. You don't love him, and you do care for me. It can't be true, it's--it's some abominable trick to part us, Cynthia."

"It is true," she said again. "It is true."

She drew away from him. She began to cry, carefully, so as not to spoil her make-up. She hid her face in her hands. Once she looked at him through her white fingers to see how he was taking it. Jimmy Challoner was taking it very badly indeed. He stood biting his lip hard. His hands were clenched.

"For God's sake don't cry," he broke out at length. "It drives me mad to see you cry. I'll find a way out. We should have been so happy. I can't give you up."

He spoke incoherently and stammeringly. He was really very much in love, and now the thought of separation was a burning glass, magnifying that love a thousandfold.

There were voices outside. Cynthia hastily dried her eyes. She did not look as if she had been crying very bitterly.

"That's my call. I shall have to go. Don't keep me now. I'll write, Jimmy. I'll see you again."

"You promise me that, whatever happens?"

"I promise." He caught her fingers and kissed them. "Darling, I'll come back for you when the show's over. I can't bear to leave you like this. You do love me?"

"Do you need to ask?"

The words were an evasion, but he did not notice it. He went back to the stage box feeling as if the world had come to an end.

He forgot all about the Wyatts in the stalls below. Christine's brown eyes turned towards him again and again, but he never once looked her way. His attention was centered on the stage and the woman who played there.

She was so beautiful he could never give her up, he told himself passionately. With each moment her charm seemed to grow. He watched her with despairing eyes; life without her was a crude impossibility. He could not imagine existence in a world where he might not love her. That other fellow--curse the other fellow!--he ground his teeth in impotent rage.

The brute had deserted her years ago and left her to starve. He had not the smallest claim on her. How. By the time the play was ended Jimmy Challoner had worked himself into a white heat of rage and despair.

Christine Wyatt, glancing once more towards him as the curtain rose for the final call, wondered a little at the tense, unyielding attitude of his tall figure. He was standing staring at the stage as if for him there was nothing else in all the world. She stifled a little sigh as she turned to put on her cloak.

The house was still applauding and clamouring for Cynthia to show herself again. Challoner waited. He loved to see her come before the curtain--loved the little graceful way she bowed to her audience.

But to-night he waited in vain, and when at last he pushed his way round to the stage door it was only to be told that Miss Farrow had left the theatre directly the play was over.

Challoner's heart stood still for a moment. She had done this deliberately to avoid him, he was sure. He asked an agitated question.

"Did she--did she go alone?"

The doorkeeper answered without looking at him, "There was a gent with her, sir--Mr. Mortlake, I think."

Challoner went out into the night blindly. He had to pass the theatre to get back to the main street. Mrs. Wyatt and Christine were just entering a taxi. Christine saw him. She touched his arm diffidently as he passed.

"Jimmy!"

Challoner pulled up short. He would have avoided them had it been at all possible.

Mortlake! she had gone with that brute, whilst he--he answered Mrs. Wyatt mechanically.

"Thanks--thanks very much. I was going to walk, but if you will be so kind as to give me a lift."

He really hardly knew what he was saying. He took off his hat and passed a hand dazedly across his forehead before he climbed into the taxi and found himself sitting beside Christine.

He forced himself to try to make conversation. "Well, and how did you enjoy the play?"

It was a ghastly effort to talk. He wondered if they would notice how strange his manner was.

"Immensely," Mrs. Wyatt told him. "I've heard so much about Cynthia Farrow, but never seen her before. She certainly is splendid."

"She's the most beautiful woman I have ever seen," said Christine.

Challoner shot her a grateful look. Most women were cats and never had a word of praise for one of their own sex. He felt slightly comforted.

"If you've nothing better to do, Jimmy," said Mrs. Wyatt, "won't you come back to the hotel and have some supper with us? We are only up in town for a fortnight. Do come if you can."

Challoner said he would be delighted. He was very young in some ways. He had not the smallest intention of calling on Cynthia that night. He wished savagely that she could know what he was doing; know that in spite of everything he was not breaking his heart for her.

She was with that brute Mortlake; well, he was not going to spend the next hour or two alone with only his thoughts for company.

He wondered where Cynthia had gone, and if she had known all along that Mortlake was calling for her. He ground his teeth.

The two women were talking together. They did not seem to notice his silence. Christine's voice reminded him a little of Cynthia's; a sudden revulsion of feeling flooded his heart.

Poor darling! all this was not her fault. No doubt she was just as miserable as he. He longed to go to her. He wished he had not accepted the Wyatts' invitation. He felt that it was heartless of him to have done so. He would have excused himself even now if the taxi had not already started.

Mrs. Wyatt turned to him. "I suppose you are very fond of theatres?"

"Yes--no--yes, I mean; I go to heaps." He wondered if his reply sounded very foolish and absent-minded. He rushed on to cover it. "I've seen this particular play a dozen times; it's a great favourite of mine. I--I'm very keen on it."

"I think it is lovely," said Christine dreamily.

She was leaning back beside him in the corner. He could only see her white-gloved hands clasped in the lap of her frock.

"You must let me take you to some," he said. He had a rotten feeling that if he stopped talking for a minute he would make a fool of himself. "I often get passes for first nights and things," he rambled on.

Christine sat up. "Do you! oh, how lovely! I should love to go! Jimmy, do you--do you know any people on the stage--actors and actresses?"

"I know some--yes. I know quite a lot."

"Not Miss Farrow, I suppose?" she questioned eagerly.

"Yes--yes, I do," said Challoner.

She gave a little cry of delight. "Oh, I wish I could meet her--she's so beautiful."

Challoner could not answer. He would have given worlds had it been possible to stop the cab and rush away; but he knew he had got to go through with it now, and presently he found himself following Mrs. Wyatt and Christine through the hall of the hotel at which they were staying.

"It's quite like old times, isn't it?" he said with an effort. "Quite like the dear old days at Upton House. Don't I wish we could have them again."

"The house is still there," said Mrs. Wyatt laughing. "Perhaps you will come down again some day."

Challoner did not think it likely. There would be something very painful in going back to the scene of those days, he thought. He was so much changed from the light-hearted youngster who had chased Christine round the garden and pulled her hair because she would not kiss him.

He looked at her with reminiscent eyes. There was a little flush in her pale cheeks. She looked more like the child-sweetheart he had so nearly forgotten.

Mrs. Wyatt had moved away. He and Christine were alone. "I used to kiss you in those days, didn't I?" he asked, looking at her. He felt miserable and reckless.

She looked up at him with serious eyes. "Yes," she said almost inaudibly.

Something in her face stirred an old emotion in Jimmy Challoner's heart. This girl had been his first love, and a man never really forgets his first love; he leaned nearer to her.

"Christine, do you--do you wish we could have those days over again?" he asked.

A little quiver crossed her face. For a moment the beautiful brown eyes lit up radiantly. For a moment she was something better than just merely pretty.

He waited eagerly for her answer. His pride, if nothing deeper, had been seriously wounded that night. The tremulous happiness in this girl's face was like a gentle touch on a hurt.

"Do you--do you wish it?" he asked again.

"Yes," said Christine softly. "Yes, if you do."

CHAPTER II

JILTED!

It was late when Jimmy got home to his rooms; he was horribly tired, and his head ached vilely, but he never slept a wink all night.

The fact that Cynthia's husband was alive did not hurt him nearly so much as the fact that Cynthia had avoided him that evening and left the theatre with Mortlake. Jimmy hated Mortlake. The brute had such piles of money, whilst he--even the insufficient income which was always mortgaged weeks before the quarterly cheque fell due, only came to him from his brother. At any moment the Great Horatio might cut up rough and stop supplies.

Jimmy was up and dressed earlier than ever before in his life. He went out and bought some of the most expensive roses he could find in the shops. He took them himself to Cynthia Farrow's flat and scribbled a note begging her to see him if only for a moment.

The answer came back verbally. Miss Farrow sent her love and best thanks but she was very tired and her head ached--would he call again in the afternoon?

Challoner turned away without answering. There was a humiliating lump in his throat. At that moment he was the most wretched man in the whole of London. How on earth could he get through the whole infernal morning? And was she always going to treat him like this in the future? refusing to see him--deliberately avoiding him.

He wandered about the West End, staring into shop windows. At twelve o'clock he was back again at his rooms. A messenger boy was at the door when he reached it. He held a letter which Challoner took from him. It was from Cynthia Farrow.

He tore it open anyhow. His pulses throbbed with excitement. She had relented, of course, and wanted to see him at once. He was so sure of it that it was like a blow over the heart when he read the short note.

DEAR JIMMY--I am afraid you will be hurt at what I am going to say, but I am sure it is better for us not to meet again. It only makes things harder for us both, and can do no good. I ought to have said good-bye to you last night, only at the last moment I hadn't the courage. If you really care for me you will keep away, and make no attempt to see me. I can never marry you, and though we have had some very happy days together, I hope that you will forget me. Please don't write, either; I really mean what I say, that this is good-bye.

CYNTHIA.

The messenger boy fidgeted uncomfortably, staring at Jimmy Challoner's white face. Presently he ventured a question. "Is there an answer, sir?"

Challoner turned then, "No, no answer."

He let himself into his rooms and shut the door. He felt as if he were walking in space. For the moment he was unconscious of any emotion.

He walked over to the window and read the letter again. The only thing about it that really struck him was its note of finality.

This was no petulantly written dismissal. She had thought it well out; she really meant it.

He was jilted! The word stung him into life. His face flamed. A wave of passionate anger swept over him. He was jilted! The detestable thing for which he had always so deeply pitied other men of his acquaintance had happened to him. He was no longer an engaged man, he was discarded, unwanted!

For the moment he forgot the eloquent fact of Cynthia's marriage. He only realised that she had thrown him aside--

finished with him.

And he had loved her so much. He had never cared a hang for any other woman in all his life in comparison with the devotion he had poured at Cynthia's feet.

He looked round the room with blank eyes. He could not believe that he had not fallen asleep and dreamed it all. His gaze was arrested by Cynthia's portrait on the shelf--it seemed to be watching him with smiling eyes.

In sudden rage he crossed the room and snatched it up. He stood for a second holding it in his hand as if not knowing what to do with it, then he dashed it down into the fireplace. The glass splintered into hundreds of fragments. Jimmy Challoner stood staring down at them with passionate eyes. He hated her. She was a flirt, a coquette without a heart.

If he could only pay her out--only let her see how utterly indifferent he was. If only there was some other woman who would be nice to him, and let him be nice to her, to make Cynthia jealous.

He thought suddenly of Christine Wyatt, of the little flame in her brown eyes when last night he had reminded her of the old days at Upton House. His vain man's heart had been stirred then. She liked him at all events.

Mrs. Wyatt had said that she hoped they would see much of him while they were in London. If he chose, he knew that he could be with them all day and every day. Cynthia would get to hear of it, Cynthia would know that he was not wearing the willow for her. He would not even answer her letter. He would just keep away--walk out of her life.

For a moment a sort of desolation gripped him. He had been so proud of her, thought so much of their future together; made such wonderful plans for getting round the Great Horatio; and now--it was all ended--done for!

His careless face fell into haggard lines, but the next instant he got a fresh grip of himself. He would show her, he would let her see that he was no weakling, no lovelorn swain pleading for denied favours. He squared his shoulders. He took up his hat and went into the street again. He called a taxi and gave the address of the hotel where Christine and her mother were staying.

CHAPTER III

THE TWO WOMEN

Christine was just crossing the hall of the hotel when Jimmy Challoner entered it. She saw him at once, and stood still with a little flush in her face.

"I was just thinking about you," she said. "I was just wondering if you would come and see us to-day; somehow I didn't think you would."

She spoke very simply and unaffectedly. She was genuinely pleased to see him, and saw no reason for hiding it. "Have you had lunch?" she asked. "Mother and I are just going to have ours."

If he had given way to his own inclinations he would have gone without lunch--without everything. He was utterly wretched. The kindness of Christine's eyes brought a lump to his throat. He did not want her to be kind to him. She was not the woman he wanted at all. Why, oh, why was he here when his heart was away--God alone knew where--with Cynthia!

What was she doing? he was asking himself in an agony, even while he followed Christine across the hall to the dining-room; had she really meant him to accept that note of dismissal as final? or had it just been written in a moment of petulance?

He had not meant to think about her; he had vowed to put her out of his thoughts for ever, to let her see that he would not wear the willow for her; and yet--oh, they were all very well, these fine resolves, but when a chap was utterly--confoundedly down and out---

He found himself shaking hands with Christine's mother.

"Jimmy hasn't had any lunch," Christine was saying. "So I asked him to have some with us."

Her voice sounded very gay; the little flush had not died out of her cheeks.

"I am very pleased you have come," said Christine's mother. She shook hands with Jimmy, and smiled at him with her mother-eyes.

Jimmy wished they would not be so kind to him. It made him feel a thousand times more miserable.

When he began to eat he was surprised to find that he was really hungry. A glass of wine cheered him considerably; he began to talk and make himself agreeable. As a matter of course, they talked about the old days at Upton House; Jimmy began to remember things he had almost forgotten; there had been an old stable-loft---

"Do you remember when you fell down the ladder?" Christine asked him laughingly. "And the way you bumped your head---

"And the way you cried," Jimmy reminded her.

"Didn't she, Mrs. Wyatt?"

Mrs. Wyatt laughed.

"Don't refer to me, please," she said. "I am beginning to think that I never knew half what you two did in those days."

Christine looked at Jimmy shyly.

"They were lovely days," she said with a sigh.

"Ripping!" Jimmy agreed. He tried to put great enthusiasm into his voice, but in his heart he knew that he had long since outgrown the simple pleasures that had seemed so great to him then. He thought of Cynthia, and the wild

Bohemianism of the weeks that had passed since he first got engaged to her; that was life if you pleased, with a capital letter. It seemed incredible that it was all ended and done with; that Cynthia wanted him no longer; that his place in her life was filled by another man; that he would never wait at the theatre for her any more; never---- He caught his breath on a great sigh. Christine looked at him with her brown eyes. She, at least, had never outgrown the old days; to her they would always be the most wonderful of her whole life.

"And what are we going to do this afternoon?" Mrs. Wyatt asked when lunch was ended.

"Anything you like," said Jimmy. "I am entirely at your disposal."

"Mother always likes a nap after lunch," said Christine laughing. "She never will stir till she has had it."

"Very well; then you and I will go off somewhere together," said Jimmy promptly. "At least"--he looked apologetically at Mrs. Wyatt--"if we may?" he added.

"I think I can trust you with Christine," said Christine's mother.

"But you'll be in to tea?"

Jimmy promised. He did not really want to take Christine out. He did not really want to do anything. He talked to Mrs. Wyatt while Christine put on her hat and coat. When they left the hotel he asked if she would like a taxi.

Christine laughed.

"Of course not. I love walking."

"Do you?" said Jimmy. He was faintly surprised. Cynthia would never walk a step if she could help it. He pondered at the difference in the two women.

They went to the Park. It was a fine, sunny afternoon, cold and crisp.

Christine wore soft brown furs, just the colour of her eyes, Jimmy Challoner thought, and realised that her eyes would be very beautiful to a man who liked dark eyes in preference to blue, but--thoughts of Cynthia came crowding back again. If only he were with her instead of this girl; if only---- Christine touched his arm.

"Oh, Jimmy, look! Isn't that--isn't that Miss Farrow?"

Her voice was excited. She was looking eagerly across the grass to where a woman and a man were walking together beneath the trees.

Jimmy's heart leapt to his throat; for a moment it seemed to stop beating.

Yes, it was Cynthia right enough; Cynthia with no trace of the headache with which she had excused herself to him only that morning; Cynthia walking with--with Henson Mortlake.

Christine spoke again, breathlessly.

"Is it? Oh, is it Miss Farrow, Jimmy?"

"Yes," said Jimmy hoarsely.

Cynthia had turned now. She and the man at her side were walking back towards Jimmy and Christine.

As they drew nearer Cynthia's eyes swept the eager face and slim figure of the girl at Jimmy's side. There was the barest flicker of her lids before she raised them and smiled and bowed.

Jimmy raised his hat. He was very pale; his mouth was set in unsmiling lines.

"Oh, she is lovely!" said Christine eagerly. "I think she is even prettier off the stage than she is on, don't you? Actresses so seldom are, but she--oh, don't you think she is beautiful, Jimmy?"

"Yes," said Challoner. He hated himself because he could get nothing out but that monosyllable; hated himself because of the storm of emotion the sight of Cynthia had roused in his heart.

She had looked calm and serene enough; he wondered bitterly if she ever thought of the hours they had spent together, the times he had kissed her, the future they had planned. He set his teeth hard.

And apparently the fact that her husband still lived was no barrier to her walking with Mortlake. He hated the little bounder. He----

"Who was that with her?" Christine asked. "I didn't like the look of him very much. I do hope she isn't going to marry him."

"She's married already," said Jimmy. He felt a sort of impatience with Christine; she was so--so childish, so--so immaturish, he thought.

"And do you know her husband?" she asked. She turned her beautiful eyes to his pale face.

"I've never seen him," said Jimmy. "But I should think he's a brute from what I've heard about him. He--he--oh, he treated her rottenly."

"What a shame!" Christine half turned and looked after Cynthia Farrow's retreating figure. "Jimmy, wouldn't you be proud of such a beautiful wife?"

Jimmy laughed, rather a mirthless laugh.

"Penniless beggars like me don't marry beautiful wives like--like Miss Farrow," he said with a sort of savagery. "They want men with pots and pots of money, who can buy them motor-cars and diamonds, and all the rest of it." His voice was hurt and angry. Christine looked puzzled. She walked on a little way silently. Then:

"I shouldn't mind how poor a man was if I loved him," she said.

Jimmy looked down at her. Her face was half-hidden by the soft brown fur she wore, but he could just get a glimpse of dark lashes against her pale cheek, and the dainty outline of forehead and cheek.

"You won't always think that," he told her cynically. "Some day, when you're older and wiser than you are now, you'll find yourself looking at the L. s. d. side of a man, Christine."

"I never shall," she cried out indignantly. "Jimmy, you are horrid!"

But Jimmy Challoner did not smile.

"Women are all the same," he told her darkly.

Oh, he was very, very young indeed, was Jimmy Challoner!

CHAPTER IV

JIMMY GETS NEWS

There was a letter from the "Great Horatio" on Jimmy's plate the following morning. Jimmy looked at the handwriting and the foreign stamp and grimaced.

The Great Horatio seldom wrote unless something were the matter. He was a good many years older than Jimmy, and Jimmy held him in distinct awe.

He finished his breakfast before he even thought of breaking the seal, then he took up the letter and carried it over with him to the fire.

Jimmy Challoner was breakfasting in his dressing-gown. It was very seldom that he managed to get entirely dressed by the time breakfast was ready. He sat down now in a big chair and stuck his slippers out to the warmth.

He turned his brother's letter over and over distastefully. What the deuce did the old chap want now? he wondered. He gave a sigh of resignation, and broke open the flap.

He and the Great Horatio had not met for two years.

Horatio Ferdinand Challoner, to give him his full name, was a man whose health, or, rather, ill-health, was his hobby.

All his life he had firmly believed himself to be in a dying state; all his life he had lived more or less at Spas, or on the Riviera, or at health resorts of some kind or another.

He was a nervous, irritable man, as unlike Jimmy as it is possible for two brothers to be.

For the past two years he had been living in Australia. He had undertaken the voyage at the suggestion of some new doctor whose advice he had sought, and he had been so ill during the six weeks' voyage that, so far, he had never been able to summon sufficient pluck to start home again.

Jimmy had roared with laughter when he heard; he could so well imagine his brother's disgust and fear. As a matter of fact, it suited Jimmy very well that the head of the family should be so far removed from him. He hated supervision; he liked to feel that he had got a free hand; that he need not go in fear of running up against Horatio Ferdinand at every street corner.

He read his brother's closely written pages now with a long-suffering air. Jimmy hated writing letters, and he hated receiving them; most things bored him in these days; he had been drifting for so long, and under Cynthia Farrow's tuition he would very likely have finally drifted altogether into a slack, nothing-to-do man about town, very little good to himself or anyone else.

Horatio Ferdinand wrote:--

DEAR JAMES,-- (He hated abbreviations; he would never allow people to call him "Horace"; his writing was cramped and formal like himself.) I have heard a rather disquieting rumour about you from a mutual friend, and shall be glad if you will kindly write to me upon receipt of this letter and inform me if there is any truth in the allegation that you are constantly seen in the company of a certain actress. I hardly think this can be so, as you well know my dislike of the stage and anything appertaining thereto. My health is greatly improved by my visit here, and all being well I shall probably risk making the return voyage after Christmas. Upon second consideration, I shall be glad if you will cable your reply to me, as the mail takes six weeks, as you know.--Your affectionate brother.

Jimmy crushed the letter in his hand.

"Damned old idiot!" he said under his breath. He got up, and began striding about the room angrily. The tassels of his dressing-gown swung wildly at each agitated step; the big carpet slippers he wore flapped ungracefully.

"Confounded old fathead."

Jimmy was flushed, and his eyes sparkled. He ran his fingers through his hair, making it stand on end. After a few strides he felt better. He went back to the armchair and took up his brother's letter once more.

After a moment he laughed, rather a sore laugh, as if something in the stilted wording of the letter hurt him.

What would he not have given now to be able to cable back:

"Quite right; she is my wife."

But as it was----

"Let him think what he likes. I don't care a hang," was the thought in Jimmy Challoner's mind.

He sat there with his chin drooping on his breast, lost in unhappy thought.

It was not yet two days since Cynthia had sent him away; it seemed an eternity.

Did she miss him at all? did she ever wish she could see him? ever wish for one hour out of the happy past? Somehow he did not think so. Much as he had loved her, Jimmy Challoner had always known hers to be the sort of nature that lived solely for the present; besides, if she wanted him, she had only got to send--to telephone. He looked across at the receiver standing idle on his desk.

So many times she had rung him up; so many times he had heard her pretty voice across the wire:

"Is that you, Jimmy boy?"

He would never hear it again. She did not want him any more. He was--ugly word--jilted!

Jimmy writhed in his chair. That any woman should dare to so treat him! The hot blood surged into his face.

It was a good sign--this sudden anger--had he but known it. When a man can be angry with a woman he has once loved he is already beginning to love her less; already beginning to see her as less perfect.

Some one tapped at his door; his man entered.

Costin was another bone of contention between Jimmy and the Great Horatio.

"I never had a valet when I was your age," so his brother declared.

"What in the wide world you need a valet for is past my comprehension."

Jimmy had felt strongly inclined to answer that most things were past his comprehension, but thought better of it; he could not, at any rate, imagine his life without Costin. He knew in his heart that he had no least intention of sacking Costin, and Costin stayed.

"If you please, sir," he began now, coming forward, "Mr. Sangster would like to see you."

"Show him up," said Jimmy. He rose to his feet and stood gnawing his lower lip agitatedly.

How much did Sangster know, he wondered, about Cynthia? He would have liked to refuse to see him, but--well, they would have to meet sooner or later, and, after all, Sangster had been a good friend to him in more ways than one.

Jimmy said: "Hallo, old chap!" with rather forced affability when Sangster entered. The two men shook hands.

Sangster glanced at the breakfast-table.

"I'm rather an early visitor, eh?"

"No. Oh, no. Sit down. Have a cigarette?"

"No, thanks."

There was little silence. Jimmy eyed his friend with a sort of suspicion. Sangster had heard something. Sangster probably knew all there was to know. He shuffled his feet nervously.

Sangster was the sort of man at whom a woman like Cynthia Farrow would never have given a second glance, if, indeed, she thought him worthy of a first. He was short and squarely built; his hair was undeniably red and ragged; his features were blunt, but he had a nice smile, and his small, nondescript eyes were kind.

He sat down in the chair Jimmy had vacated and looked up at him quizzically.

"Well," he said bluntly, "is it true?"

Jimmy flushed.

"True! what the----"

The other man stopped him with a gesture.

"Don't be an ass, Jimmy; I haven't known you all these years for nothing. . . . Is it true that Cynthia's chucked you?"

"Yes." Jimmy's voice was hard. He stared up at the ceiling under scowling brows.

Sangster said "Humph!" with a sort of growl. He scratched his chin reflectively.

"Well, I can't say I'm sorry," he said after a moment. "It's the best thing that's ever happened to you, my son."

Jimmy's eyes travelled down from the ceiling slowly; perhaps it was coincidence that they rested on the place on the mantelshelf where Cynthia's portrait used to stand.

"Think so?" he said gruffly. "You never liked her."

"I did--but not as your wife. . . . She's much more suited to Henson Mortlake--I always thought so. He'll keep her in order; you never could have done."

Jimmy had been standing with his elbow on the mantelpiece; he swung round sharply.

"Mortlake; what's he got to do with it?" he asked fiercely. "What the deuce do you mean by dragging him in? It was nothing to do with Mortlake that she--she----"

Sangster was looking at him curiously.

"Oh! I understood--what was the reason, then?" he asked.

Jimmy turned away. He found the other man's eyes somehow disconcerting.

"She's married already," he said in a stifled voice. "I--I always knew she had been married, of course. She made no secret of it. He--the brute--left her years ago; but last week--well, he turned up again. . . . She--we--we had always believed he was dead."

There was a little silence. Sangster was no longer looking at Jimmy; he was staring into the fire. Presently he began to whistle softly. Jimmy rounded on him.

"Oh, shut up!" he said irritably.

Sangster stopped at once. After a moment:

"And the--er--husband!" he submitted dryly. "You've--you've seen him, of course."

"No, I haven't. If I did--if I did, I'd break every bone in his infernal carcass," said Jimmy Challoner, between his teeth.

He stared down at his friend with defiant eyes as he spoke.

Sangster said "Humph!" again. Then: "Well, there's as good fish in the sea as any that were caught," he said cheerily.

"Look at it philosophically, old son."

Jimmy kicked a footstool out of his way. He walked over to the window, and stood for a moment with his back turned. Presently:

"If anyone asks you, you might as well tell them the truth," he said jerkily. "I--don't let them think that brute Mortlake--"

He broke off.

"I'll tell 'em the truth," said Sangster.

He leaned over the fire, poking it vigorously.

"What are you doing to-night, Jimmy?" he asked, "I'm at a loose end----"

Jimmy turned.

"I'm taking some people to the theatre--old friends! Met them quite by chance the other night. Haven't you heard me speak of them--the Wyatts?"

"By Jove, yes!" Sangster dropped the poker unceremoniously. "People from Upton House. You used to be full of them when I first knew you, and that's how many years ago, Jimmy?"

"The Lord only knows!" said Jimmy dispiritedly. "Well, I've got a box for a show to-night, and asked them to come. Christine's dead nuts on theatres. Remember Christine?"

"I remember the name. Old sweetheart of yours, wasn't she?"

"When we were kids."

"Oh, like that, is it? Well, ask me to come along too."

"My dear fellow--come by all means."

Jimmy was rather pleased at the suggestion. "You'll like Mrs. Wyatt--she's one of the best."

"And--Christine?"

"Oh she's all right; but she's only a child still," said Jimmy Challoner with all the lordly superiority of half a dozen years.

CHAPTER V

SANGSTER TAKES A HAND

"And so you and Jimmy were children together," said Arthur Sangster.

The curtain had just fallen on the first act, and the lights turned up suddenly in the theatre had revealed Christine's face to him a little flushed and dreamy.

Sangster looked at her smilingly. Jimmy had called her a child; but he had not said how sweet a child she was, he thought, as his eyes rested on her dainty profile and parted lips.

She seemed to wake from dreaming at the sound of his voice. She gave a little sigh, and leaned back in her chair.

"Yes," she said. "We used to play together when we were children."

"Such a long, long time ago," said Sangster, half mockingly, half in earnest.

She nodded seriously.

"It seems ages and ages," she said. She looked past him to where Jimmy sat talking to her mother. He might have sat next to her, she thought wistfully. Mr. Sangster was very nice, but--she caught a little sigh between her lips.

"Jimmy has told me so much about you," Sangster said. "I almost feel as if I have known you for years."

"Has he?" That pleased her, at all events. Her brown eyes shone as she looked at him. "What did he tell you?" she asked, interestedly.

Sangster laughed.

"Oh, all about Upton House, and the fine time you used to have there; all about the dogs, and an old horse named Judas."

She laughed too, now.

"Judas--he died last year. He was so old, and nearly blind; but he always knew my step and came to the gate." Her voice sounded wistful. "Jimmy used to ride him round the field, standing up on his back," she went on eagerly. "Jimmy could ride anything."

"Jimmy is a very wonderful person," said Sangster gravely.

She looked rather puzzled.

"Do you mean that?" she asked. "Or are you--are you joking?"

He felt suddenly ashamed.

"I mean it, of course," he said gently. "I am very fond of Jimmy, though I haven't known him as long as you have."

"How long?" she asked.

He made a little calculation.

"Well, it must be five years," he said at length. "Or perhaps it is six; the time goes so quickly, I lose count."

"And do you live in London too?"

"Yes; I live in an unfashionable part of Bloomsbury."

"Near Jimmy?"

"No; Jimmy lives in the Temple."

"Oh."

It evidently conveyed nothing to her.

"And do you know his brother--the great Horatio?" she asked laughingly.

"I had the honour of meeting him once," he answered with mock gravity.

"So did I--years ago. Isn't he funny?"

"Very." Sangster agreed. He thought it a very mild word with which to describe Horatio Ferdinand; he pitied Jimmy supremely for having to own such a relative. The stage bell rang through the theatre, the curtain began to swing slowly up.

"We went to see Cynthia Farrow the other night," Christine said.

"Isn't she lovely?"

"I suppose she is!"

"Suppose! I think she's the most beautiful woman I have ever seen," Christine declared vehemently. "Jimmy knows her, he says." She turned her head. "Do you know her too?"

"Yes--slightly."

"You don't sound as if you like her," she said quickly.

He laughed in spite of himself.

"Perhaps because she doesn't like me," he answered.

"Doesn't she?" Christine's grave eyes searched his face. "I like you, anyway," she said.

Sangster did not look at her, but a little flush rose to his brow.

"Thank you," he said, and his voice sounded, somehow, quite changed.

As the curtain fell on the second act, he rose quietly from his seat and went round to where Jimmy stood.

"Take my place," he said in an undertone. Jimmy looked up. He had not been following the play; he had been thinking--thinking always of the same thing, always of the past few weeks, and the shock of their ending.

He rose to his feet rather reluctantly. Sangster sat down beside Mrs. Wyatt.

Once or twice he looked across to Christine. She and Jimmy were not talking very much, but there was a little smile on Christine's face, and she looked at Jimmy very often.

Jimmy sat with his chin in the palm of his hand, staring before him with moody eyes. Sangster felt a sort of impatience. What the deuce could the fellow ever have seen in Cynthia Farrow? he asked himself. Was he blind, that he could not penetrate her shallowness, and see the small selfishness of her nature?

A pretty face and laugh, and an undoubted knowledge of men--they were all the assets she possessed; and Sangster knew it. But to Jimmy--Sangster metaphorically shrugged his shoulders as he looked at his friend's moody face.

How could he sit there next to that child and not realise that in his longing he was only grasping at a shadow? What was he made of that he saw more beauty in Cynthia Farrow's blue eyes than in the sweet face of his boyhood's love?

Sangster was glad when the play was over; theatres always bored him. He did not quite know why he had invited himself to Jimmy's box-to-night. When they rose to leave he smiled indulgently at Christine's rapt face.

"You have enjoyed it," he said.

"Yes--ever so much. But I liked Miss Farrow and the play she was in better."

Jimmy turned sharply away; nobody answered.

"We're going on to Marnio's to supper," Jimmy said as they crossed the foyer. "Christine has never been there."

She looked up instantly.

"No, I haven't."

"It's the place to see stage favourites," Sangster told her.

In his heart he was surprised that Jimmy should choose to go there. He thought it extremely probable that Cynthia Farrow and some of her numerous admirers would put in an appearance; but it was not his business, and he raised no objection.

When they entered the long room he cast a swift glance round. She was not here yet, at all events; one could only hope that she would not come at all.

Everything was new and wonderful to Christine. She was like a child in her delight. She sat in a corner of one of the great, softly cushioned sofas, and looked about her with wide eyes.

Jimmy sat beside her. Sangster had manoeuvred that he should. He and Mrs. Wyatt were opposite.

The orchestra was playing a dreamy waltz. The long room was brilliantly lit, and decorated with pink flowers.

Christine leaned across and squeezed her mother's hand.

"Oh, isn't it just too lovely?" she said.

Mrs. Wyatt laughed.

"You will turn Christine's head, Jimmy," she said to Challoner. "She will find Upton House dull after all this gaiety."

Jimmy was slightly bored. It was no novelty to him. He had spent so many nights dining and supping in similar places to Marnio's. All the waiters knew him. He wondered if they were surprised to see him without Cynthia Farrow. For weeks past he and she had been everywhere together. He met Sangster's quizzical eyes; he roused himself with an effort; he turned to Christine and began to talk.

He told her who some of the people were at the other tables. He pointed out a famous conductor, and London's most popular comedian. Christine was interested in everyone and everything. Her eyes sparkled, and her usually pale face was flushed. She was pretty to-night, if she had never been pretty before.

"I suppose you come here often?" she said. She looked up into Jimmy's bored young face. "I suppose it's not at all new or wonderful to you?"

He smiled.

"Well, I'm afraid it isn't; you see----" He broke off; he sat staring across the room with a sudden fire in his eyes.

A man and woman had just entered. The woman was in evening dress, with a beautiful sable coat. Her hand was resting on the man's arm. She was looking up at him with smiling eyes.

Jimmy caught his breath hard in his throat. For a moment the gaily lit room swam before him--for the woman was Cynthia Farrow, and the man at her side was Henson Mortlake.

CHAPTER VI

JIMMY DEMANDS THE TRUTH

Sangster had been sitting with his back to the door by which Cynthia and her escort had entered. When he saw the sudden change in Jimmy Challoner's face, he turned in his chair quickly.

Cynthia was seated now. She was languidly drawing off her long white gloves. A waiter had taken her sable coat; without it the elaborate frock she wore looked too showy; it was cut too low in the neck. A diamond necklace glittered on her white throat.

Sangster turned back again. Under cover of the table he gave Jimmy a kick. He saw that Christine had noticed the sudden change in his face. To hide his friend's discomfort he rushed into speech. He tried to distract the girl's attention; presently Jimmy recovered himself.

Mrs. Wyatt alone had not been conscious of any disturbing element.

She had lived all her life in the country, and her few visits to London had been exceedingly brief, and always conducted on the most severe of lines--a dull, highly respectable hotel to stay in, stalls for plays against which no single newspaper had raised a dissentient voice, and perhaps a visit to a museum or picture gallery.

It had only been under protest that she had consented to visit the suburban theatre at which Cynthia Farrow was playing.

Under the guidance of Jimmy Challoner, London had suddenly been presented to her in an entirely fresh light. Secretly she was thoroughly enjoying herself, though once or twice she looked at Christine with rather wistful eyes.

Christine was so wrapped up in Jimmy . . . and Jimmy!--of course, he must know many, many other women far more attractive and beautiful than this little daughter of hers. She half sighed as she caught the expression of Christine's eyes as they rested on him.

Suddenly Jimmy rose.

"Will you excuse me a moment? . . . There is a friend of mine over there. . . . Please excuse me."

Sangster scowled. He thought Jimmy was behaving like a weak fool. He would have stopped him had it been at all possible; but Jimmy had already left the table and crossed to where Cynthia was sitting.

The sight of her in Mortlake's company for the second time that day had scattered his fine resolutions to the winds. There was a raging fire of jealousy in his heart as he went up to her.

A waiter was filling her glass with champagne, Mortlake was whispering to her confidentially across the corner of the table.

"Good evening," said Jimmy Challoner.

He did his best to control his voice, but in spite of himself a little thrill of rage vibrated through it.

Mortlake raised himself and half frowned.

"Evening," he said shortly.

Cynthia extended her hand; she was rather pleased than otherwise to see him. She liked having two strings to her bow; it gave her worldly heart an odd little pang as she met the fierceness of Jimmy's eyes. . . . He was such a dear, she thought.

Mamio's was not a place where he could make a scene either, even supposing . . . she shot a quick glance at Mortlake. After all, it was rather unfortunate Jimmy should have seen them together--just at present, at any rate; it would not

have mattered in a week or two's time. She wondered if he had heard anything, if already he had discovered by some unforeseen means how she had lied to him? . . . She gave him one of the sweetest smiles.

"Are you having supper here, Jimmy? I didn't see you."

It was not the truth. She had seen him the moment she entered, but she thought it more effective to pretend otherwise.

"I am over there with friends," said Jimmy curtly. He glanced across to the table he had just left, and met Christine's eyes.

Somehow he felt uncomfortable. He looked sharply away again, and down at the beautiful smiling face raised to his.

"When may I come and see you?" he asked bluntly.

He spoke quite distinctly; Mortlake must have heard every word.

Cynthia looked nonplussed for a moment; then she laughed.

"Come any time you like, my dear boy. . . . I am always pleased to see you--any afternoon, you know."

She smiled and nodded. Jimmy felt that he had been dismissed. After a moment he walked away.

His heart was a dead weight in his breast. He sat down again beside Christine. She turned to him eagerly.

"Wasn't that Miss Farrow? . . . Oh, Jimmy, why didn't you tell me?"

Jimmy drained his wineglass before answering.

"I forgot you were interested; I'm sorry. . . . She isn't alone, you see, or--or I would introduce her--if you cared for me to, that is."

"I don't think Miss Wyatt would care for Miss Farrow," said Arthur Sangster quietly.

Jimmy looked furious. Angry words rushed to his lips, but he choked them with an effort.

"Narrow-minded old owl!" he said, half jokingly, half in earnest.

Later, when the two men had left Mrs. Wyatt and Christine at their hotel, and were walking away together, Jimmy burst out savagely:

"What the devil do you mean about Christine not liking Cynthia? . . . It's a gross piece of impertinence to say such a thing."

"It's the truth, all the same," said Sangster imperturbably. "The two girls are as different as chalk from cheese. Miss Wyatt would soon dislike Cynthia--they live in different worlds."

"Fortunately for Cynthia perhaps," said Jimmy savagely. "For pure, ghastly dullness, recommend me to what is called the 'best society' . . . Christine is only a child--she always will be as long as she is tied to her mother's apron-strings. I like Mrs. Wyatt awfully, but you must admit that we've had a distinctly dull evening."

There was a moment's silence.

"If you really think that," said Sangster quietly, "I should keep away from them, and I should most certainly give up paying attention to Miss Wyatt."

Jimmy Challoner stopped dead. He turned and stared at his friend.

"What the devil are you talking about?" he demanded. His face looked furious in the yellow light of a street lamp they were passing. "I pay attention to Christine! Why"--he laughed suddenly--"She's only a child."

"Very well, you know your own business best, of course; and Jimmy----"

"Well?"--ungraciously.

Sangster hesitated; finally:

"Did--did Cynthia say anything to you to-night?--anything special, I mean?"

Jimmy laughed drearily.

"She said it was cold, or something equally interesting. She also said that I might call upon her any afternoon, and that she was always pleased to see her 'friends.'" He accented the last word bitterly. "What did you expect her to say to me?" he inquired.

"Nothing; at least . . . you know what they are saying in the clubs?"

"What are they saying?"

"That she is engaged to Mortlake."

Through the darkness he heard Jimmy catch his breath hard in his throat.

"Of course, that may be only club talk," he hastened to add kindly.

"I never thought it could be anything else," said Jimmy with a rush. "I know it's a lie, anyway. How can she be engaged to Mortlake, or any other man--if her husband is living?"

"No," Sangster agreed quietly. "She certainly cannot be engaged to any other man if her husband is still living."

There was an underlying meaning in his voice. Jimmy swung round savagely.

"What are you trying to get at?" he asked. "If you know anything, tell me and have done with it."

"I don't know anything; I am only repeating what I have heard."

"A pack of gossiping old women"--savagely.

They walked a few steps silently.

"Why not forget her, Jimmy?" said Sangster presently. "She isn't the only woman in the world. Put her out of your life once and for all."

"It's all very fine for you to talk . . . things are not forgotten so quickly. She's done with me--I told you so--and . . . oh, why the devil can't you mind your own business?"

CHAPTER VII

LOVE AND POVERTY

But in spite of his fine sounding words, Jimmy had not done with her, and the next afternoon--having shaken off Sangster, who looked in to suggest a stroll--he went round to Cynthia Farrow's flat.

She was not alone; half a dozen theatrical people, most of whom Jimmy knew personally, were lounging about her luxuriously furnished boudoir. They were all cheery people, whom Jimmy liked well enough as a general thing, but to-day their chatter bored him; he hardly knew how to contain himself for impatience. He made up his mind that he would stay as long, and longer than they did--that wild horses should not drag him away till he had spoken with Cynthia alone.

She was very kind to him. It might have struck a disinterested observer that she was a little afraid of him--a little anxious to propitiate him; but none of these things crossed Jimmy's mind.

He adored her, and she knew it; he would do anything in the world for her, and she must know that too. Why, then, should she be in the very least afraid of him?

He found himself talking to an elderly woman with dyed hair, who had once been a famous dancer. She was pleasant enough company, but she had not yet realised that her youth was a thing of the past. She ogled Jimmy as if she had been eighteen, and simpered and giggled like a girl.

She was the last of them all to leave. It struck Jimmy that Cynthia had purposely asked her to stay, but he could not be sure. Anyway, it did not matter to him. He meant to stay there all night or until he had spoken with her alone.

As soon as the door had closed on the rustling skirts of the dancer's juvenile frock, Jimmy rushed over to where Cynthia was sitting.

She was smoking a cigarette. She threw it pettishly into the fire as he dropped on his knees beside her.

"Cynthia," said Jimmy Challoner hoarsely, "aren't you--aren't you just a little bit pleased to see me?" It was a very boyish appeal; Cynthia's face softened before it. She laid a hand for a moment on his shoulder.

"I am always pleased to see you, Jimmy; you know that. I hope we shall always be friends, even though--even though--"

Jimmy caught her hand and covered it with kisses.

"Darling!"

She moved restlessly.

"Jimmy, you're such a boy." There was a hint of impatience now in her voice. "Aren't you ever going to grow up?"

He rose to his feet and moved away from her. The momentary flash of happiness had fallen from him; he felt very old and miserable as he stood leaning his elbow on the mantelshelf staring down at the fire. She no longer cared for him; something in her voice told him that as no actual words would have done. She had not wanted him to come here to-day. Even now she wished that he would go away and leave her. He suddenly remembered what Sangster had said last night. He turned abruptly, looking down at Cynthia.

She was sitting up now, looking before her with puckered brows. One small foot tapped the floor impatiently.

Jimmy moved nearer to her.

"Do you know what they are saying in the clubs?" he demanded.

She raised her eyes, she shrugged her slim shoulders.

"They are always saying something! What is it now?"

But her voice was not so indifferent as she would have had it; her eyes were anxious.

"They are saying that you are engaged to Mortlake."

Jimmy's eyes never left her face; it was a tragic moment for him.
Cynthia's white hands clasped each other nervously.

"Are they?" she said. "How--how very amusing."

Her eyes had fallen now; he could only see the outline of darkened lashes against her cheek.

He waited a moment, then he strode forward--he covered the space between them in a stride; he put a hand beneath her chin, forcing her to look at him.

"Is it true?" he asked. "Is it true?"

His voice was strangled; his breath came tearing from between clenched teeth.

Cynthia shivered away from him, back against the pile of silken cushions behind her.

"Don't hurt me, Jimmy; don't hurt me," she whimpered.

He took her by the shoulders and shook her. "*Is it true--is it true?*"

For a moment he thought she was going to refuse to answer; then suddenly she dragged herself free. She started up, and stood facing him pantingly.

"Yes," she said defiantly. "*Yes, it is true.*"

And then the silence fell again, long and unbroken.

It seemed an eternity to Jimmy Challoner; an eternity during which he stood there like a man in a dream, staring at her flushed face.

The world had surely come crashing about him in ruins; for the moment, at least, he was blind and deaf to everything.

When at last he could find his voice--

"It was all--a lie then--about your--husband!--a lie--to--to get rid of me."

"If you like to put it that way."

Jimmy turned blindly to the door. He felt like a drunken man. He had opened it when she called his name; when she followed and caught his hand, holding him back.

"Jimmy, don't go like that--not without saying good-bye. We've been such friends--we've had such good times together."

She was sobbing now; genuine enough sobs they seemed. She clung to him desperately.

"I always loved you; you must have known that I did, only--only---- Oh, I couldn't bear to be poor! That was it, Jimmy. I couldn't face being poor."

Jimmy stood like a statue. One might almost have thought he had not been listening. Then suddenly he wrenched his hand free.

"Let me go, for God's sake--let me go!"

He left her there, sobbing and calling his name.

She heard him go down the stairs--heard the sullen slam of a distant door; then she rushed over to the window.

It was too dark to see him as he strode away from the house; everything seemed horribly silent and empty.

Jimmy had gone; and Cynthia Farrow knew, as she stood there in the disordered room, that by sending him away she had made the greatest mistake of her selfish life.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SECOND ENGAGEMENT

Out in the night Jimmy Challoner stood for a moment in the darkness, not knowing where to go or what to do.

He had had a bad shock. He could have borne it if she had only thrown him over for that other man; but that she should have thought it worth while to lie to him about it struck him to the soul. She had made a fool of him--an utter and complete fool; he would never forgive her as long as he lived.

After a moment he walked on. He carried his hat in his hand. The cool night air fanned his hot forehead.

He had lost everything that had made life worth living; that was his first passionate thought. Nobody wanted him--nobody cared a hang what became of him; he told himself that he could quite understand poor devils who jumped off bridges.

He went into the first restaurant he came to, and ordered a neat brandy; that made him feel better, and he ordered a second on the strength of it. The first shock had passed; anger took its place.

He would never forgive her; all his life he would never forgive her; she was not worth a thought. She had never been worth loving.

She was a heartless, scheming woman; little Christine Wyatt had more affection in the clasp of her hand than Cynthia had in the whole of her beautiful body.

The thought of Christine recalled Sangster's words.

Sangster was a fool; he did not know what he was talking about. Christine and he had been sweethearts as children certainly, but that anything more could ever exist between them was absurd.

But he began to remember the little flush that always crept into Christine's face when she saw him, the expression of her beautiful eyes; and the memory gave him back some of his lost self-confidence. Christine liked him, at all events; Christine would never have behaved as Cynthia had done . . . Christine. . . . Jimmy Challoner hailed a passing taxi, and gave the address of the hotel where Christine and her mother were staying.

His desire for sympathy drove him there; his desire to be with someone who liked his company. He was bruised all over by the treatment he had received from Cynthia Farrow; he wanted balm poured on his wounds.

The hall porter told him that Mrs. Wyatt was out, but that he thought the young lady----

"It's Miss Wyatt I wish to see," said Jimmy impatiently.

After a moment he was asked to come upstairs. He knew the Wyatts had a private sitting-room. Christine was there by the fire when he entered.

"Jimmy," she said eagerly.

Jimmy Challoner went forward with outstretched hand.

"I hope you don't mind my coming again so soon; but I was bored--thoroughly fed-up," he explained stumblingly.

Christine looked radiant. She had not yet learned to disguise her true feelings. Jimmy was still holding her hand; she tried gently to free it.

"Don't--don't take it away," said Jimmy. The double dose of brandy and his own agitation had excited him; he drew her over to the fire with him; he hardly knew what he was doing.

Suddenly: "Will you marry me, Christine?" he said.

There was a sharp silence.

Christine's little face had grown as white as death; her soft brown eyes were almost tragic.

"Marry you!" She echoed his words in a whisper. "Marry you," she said again. "Oh, Jimmy!" She caught her breath in something like a sob. "But--but you don't love me," she said in a pitiful whisper.

Jimmy lost his head.

"I do love you," he declared. "I love you most awfully . . . Say yes, Christine--say yes. We'll be ever so happy, you and I; we always got on rippingly, didn't we?"

Nobody had ever made love to Christine before, since the days when Jimmy Challoner had chased her round the garden for kisses, and she had always loved him. She felt giddy with happiness. This was a moment she had longed for ever since that night in the suburban theatre when she had looked up into the stage box and seen him sitting there.

Jimmy had got his arm round her now; he put his hot cheek to her soft hair.

"Say yes, Christine," he whispered; but he did not wait for her to say it. He could be very masterful when he chose, and with sudden impulsive impatience he bent and kissed her.

Christine burst into tears.

He had swept her off her feet. A moment since she had never dreamed of anything like this; and now--now her head was on Jimmy Challoner's shoulder, and his arm round her.

"Don't cry," he said huskily. "Don't cry--I didn't mean to be a brute. Did I frighten you?"

He was already beginning to realise what he had done. A little cold shiver crept down his spine.

He had kissed this girl and asked her to marry him; but he did not love her. There was something still of the old boyish affection for her in his hearty but nothing more. Remorse seized him.

"Don't cry," he begged again with an effort. "Would you like me to go away? . . . Oh, don't cry, dear."

Christine dried her eyes.

"It's--it's only be-because I'm so h-happy," she said on the top of a last sob. "Oh, J-Jimmy--I do love you."

The words sounded somehow infinitely pathetic. Jimmy bit his lip hard.

His arm fell from about her waist.

"I--I'm not half good enough for you," he stammered.

He really meant that. He felt himself a perfect rotter beside her innocent whole-hearted surrender. Christine was looking at him with tearful eyes, though her lips smiled tremulously.

"Oh, Jimmy--what will mother say?" she whiskered. "And--and Mr. Sangster?"

Jimmy laughed outright then. She was such a child. Why on earth should it matter what Sangster said?

Christine did not know why she had spoken of him at all; but his kind face had seemed to float into her mind with the touch of Jimmy's lips. She was glad she had liked him. He was Jimmy's friend; now he would be her friend, too.

There was an awkward silence. Jimmy made no attempt to kiss her again--he did not even touch her.

He was thinking of the night when he had asked Cynthia to marry him. It had been in a taxi--coming home from the theatre. In imagination he could still smell the scent of the lilies she wore in her fur coat--still feel the touch of her hair against his cheek.

That had been all rapture; this--he looked at Christine remorsefully. Poor child, she missed nothing in this strange

proposal. Her eyes were like stars. As she met Jimmy's gaze she moved shyly across to him and raised her face.

"Kiss me, Jimmy," she said.

Jimmy kissed her very softly on the cheek. She put her hands up to his broad shoulders.

"And--and you do--really--love me?" she asked wistfully.

Jimmy could not meet her eyes, but--

"Of course I do," he said.

* * * * *

It was late when Jimmy got back to his rooms that night. Mrs. Wyatt had insisted on him staying to dinner. There was no doubt that she was delighted at the turn affairs had taken, though she had said that it was soon--very soon. They must be engaged a few months at least, to make sure--quite sure.

She kissed Jimmy--she kissed Christine; she said she was very happy.

Jimmy felt a cad. He was thankful when the evening was ended. He drew a great breath of relief when he walked away from the hotel.

He was an engaged man--and engaged to Christine. He felt as if someone had snapped handcuffs on his wrists.

Being Christine's fiance would mean a very different thing from being engaged to Cynthia.

The two girls lived very different lives, had been brought up very differently.

Jimmy had liked the free and easy Bohemianism of the set in which Cynthia moved; he was not so sure about Christine's.

He was utterly wretched as he walked home. He had tied himself for life; there would be no slipping out of this engagement.

Poor little Christine! she deserved a better man. He felt acutely conscious of his own unworthiness.

He walked the whole way home. He was dog tired when he let himself into his rooms. Sangster rose from a chair by the fire.

Jimmy stifled an oath under his breath as he shut the door.

Sangster was the last man he wished to see at the present moment. He kept his eyes averted as he came forward.

"Hallo!" he said. "Been here long?"

"All the evening. Thought you'd sure to be in. Costin said you'd be in to dinner, he thought."

"I meant to . . . stayed with the Wyatts, though."

Jimmy helped himself to a whiskey. He knew that Sangster was watching him. His gaze got unbearable. He swung round with sharp impatience. "What the devil are you staring at?" he demanded irritably.

"Nothing. What a surly brute you're getting. Got a cigarette?"

Jimmy threw his case over.

"By the way," he said with overdone carelessness, "I've got some news for you. It'll be in all the papers to-morrow, so I thought I might as well tell you first." There was a little pause.

"Well?" said Sangster shortly.

Jimmy struck a match on the sole of his shoe.

"I'm engaged," he said, "to Christine."

It seemed a long, long time before Sangster moved or spoke. After a moment Jimmy Challoner swung round irritably.

"Well, why don't you say something?" he demanded. "It's a nice friendly way to receive news. Why the devil don't you say something?" he asked again angrily.

Sangster said something then; something which Jimmy had never expected.

"You ought to be shot!"

And then the silence fell once more.

Jimmy kicked at the blazing coals furiously; he had got very red.

"You ought to be shot!" said Sangster again. He rose to his feet; he threw his unsmoked cigarette into the grate and walked towards the door.

Jimmy turned.

"Here--come back! Where are you going? Of all the bad-tempered beggars----" His face was abashed; there was a sort of wavering in his voice. He moved a step forward to overtake his friend.

Sangster looked back at him with biting contempt in his honest eyes.

"I'm fed up with you," he said. "Sick to death of you and your abominable selfishness. I--oh, what's the good of talking----?" He was gone with a slam of the door.

Jimmy dragged a chair forward and flung himself into it. His face was a study; now and then he gave a little choked exclamation of rage.

What the deuce did Sangster mean by taking such an attitude? It was like his infernal cheek. It was no business of his if he chose to get engaged to Christine and half a dozen other girls at the same time. Anyone would think he had done a shabby trick by asking her to marry him; anyone would think that there had been something disgraceful in having done so; anyone would think---

"Damn it all!" said Jimmy Challoner.

He took a cigarette and lit it; but it went out almost immediately, and he flung it into the fire and lit another.

In a minute or two he had thrown that away also; he lay back in his chair and closed his eyes.

He was an engaged man--it was no novelty. He had been engaged before to a woman whom he adored. Now he was engaged to Christine, the girl who had been his boyhood's sweetheart; a girl whom he had not seen for years.

He wondered if she believed that he loved her. He sat up, frowning. He did love her--of course he did; or, at least, he would when they were married and settled down. Men always loved their wives--decent men, that is.

He tried to believe that. He tried to forget the heaps and heaps of unhappy marriages which had been brought before his notice; friends of his own--all jolly decent chaps, too.

But, of course, such a thing would never happen to him. He meant to play the game by Christine, she was a dear little thing. But the face of Cynthia would rise before his eyes; he could not forget the way she had cried that evening, and clung to him.

He forgot how she had lied and deceived him; he remembered only that she loved him--that she admitted that she still loved him.

It was all the cursed money. If only the Great Horatio would come out of his niggardly shell and stump up a bit! It was not fair--he was as rich as Croesus; it would not hurt him to fork out another five hundred a year.

Jimmy leaned his head in his hands; his head was aching badly now; he supposed it was the quantity of brandy he had drunk. He got up from his chair, and, turning out the light, went off to bed. But the darkness seemed worse than the

light; it was crowded with pictures of Cynthia. He saw her face in a thousand different memories; her eyes drew and tortured him. She was the only woman he had ever loved; he was sure of that. He was more sure of it with every passing, wakeful second.

He never slept a wink till it began to get light. When at last he fell asleep he had dreadful dreams. He woke up to the sound of Costin moving about the room. He turned over with a stifled groan.

"Good morning, sir," said Costin stolidly.

Jimmy did not condescend to answer. Pale sunlight was pouring through the window. He closed his eyes; his head still ached vilely. He got up late, and dressed with a bad grace.

He ate no breakfast. He tried to remember whether he had promised to go round to the Wyatts' that morning or not; everything was a blank in his mind except the one fact that he was engaged to Christine.

He could remember that clearly enough, at all events.

About eleven he took his hat and went out. He was annoyed because the sun was shining; he was annoyed because London was looking cheerful when he himself felt depressed beyond measure.

Unconsciously he found his way to the Wyatts' hotel; they were both out, for which he was grateful.

"Miss Wyatt left a message for you in case you called, sir," the porter told him. "She said would you come back to lunch?"

Jimmy muttered something and walked away. He had no intention of going back to lunch; he wandered down Regent Street. Presently he found himself staring in at a jeweller's window. That reminded him; he would have to buy Christine a ring.

He wondered if Cynthia intended to keep the one he had given to her; it had cost him a fabulous sum. He had been hard up for weeks afterwards in consequence; and even then it was not nearly so fine as some she already had--as some Mortlake could afford to give her, for instance.

He could not yet realise that this detestable thing had really happened to him. He made up his mind that if Christine would have him, he would marry her at once. There was nothing to wait for--and he wanted to let Cynthia see that he was not going to wear the willow for her.

He turned away from the window and the dazzling rows of diamond rings and walked on. He remembered that he had not answered his brother's letter; on the spur of the moment he turned into the nearest post office and sent a cable:

Letter received. Am engaged to Christine Wyatt, of Upton House. You remember her.--JAMES.

He never signed himself "Jimmy" when he was writing to the Great Horatio. The cable, together with his brother's address, cost him fifteen shillings; he grudged the expense, but he supposed it had to be sent.

He wandered on again up the street.

He had some lunch by himself, and went back to the Wyatts' hotel. Christine came running down the stairs to meet him; her eyes were dancing, her face flushed.

"Oh, Jimmy!" she said. She looked as if she expected him to kiss her, he thought; after a moment he lightly touched her cheek with his lips.

"I'm sorry I couldn't come to lunch," he said stiltedly. "I--er--I had an engagement. If you care to come out----"

He knew he must sound horribly casual and indifferent; he tried in vain to infuse some enthusiasm into his voice, but failed.

Christine seemed to notice nothing amiss; she assented eagerly when he suggested they should go and look at the shops.

"You--er you must have a ring, you know," he said.

His heart smote him when he saw the way her lips trembled. He took her hand remorsefully.

"I mean to make you very happy," he said. He dropped her hand again and moved away.

In his mind he kept comparing this with the first days of his engagement to Cynthia. He had not been tongue-tied and foolish then; he had not needed to be reminded that it was usual to kiss a girl when you were engaged to her; he--oh, confound it!

Christine had gone for her hat and coat.

"Mother is not at all well," she said anxiously when she came back. "Do you know, Jimmy, I have thought sometimes lately that she really isn't so well and strong as she tries to make me believe."

Jimmy was not impressed; he said that he thought Mrs. Wyatt looked A1; not a day older than when she had mothered him down at Upton House all those years ago. Christine was pleased; she adored her mother; she was quite happy as they left the hotel together.

"You choose what you like," he told her when they were in the jeweller's shop. The man behind the counter thought him the most casual lover he had ever yet served. He looked at Christine with a sort of pity; she was so eager and happy. He brought another tray of diamond rings.

Christine appealed to Jimmy Challoner.

"I would much rather you chose one for me. Which one would you like best?"

He shook his head.

"I don't mind--anything you like; you've got to wear it." He saw a little swift look of amazement in her eyes; he roused himself.

"Diamonds are nice," he said with more enthusiasm.

Christine chose a single stone; the ring just fitted, and she turned her little hand about delightedly to show Jimmy how the diamond flashed.

She felt as if she were walking on air as they left the shop. Now and then she glanced at Jimmy as if afraid that she had dreamed all this.

She had loved him all her life; she was sure that he, too, must have loved her, or he would never have asked her to be his wife.

They had tea together. Over the buttered muffins Jimmy said suddenly:

"Christine, why can't we get married--soon, I mean!"

Lovely colour dyed her face.

"But--but we've only just got engaged," she said breathlessly.

"I know; but engagements are always short nowadays. If you are willing----"

Apparently she was more than willing; she would have married him that minute had he suggested it. She said she must speak to her mother about it.

"There is your brother to tell, too," she said.

"I cabled to him this morning," Jimmy answered.

"Did you!" Her eyes brightened. "How sweet of you, Jimmy. Do you think he will be pleased?"

"He's never pleased about anything," said Jimmy with a little laugh.

He leaned an elbow on the corner of the table and looked into her eyes.

"Say yes, Christine," he urged. "If you want to marry me, Mrs. Wyatt won't stand in the way; after all, you've known me all your life."

She flushed and stammered:

"Jimmy--I--I think I'm a little afraid. Supposing--supposing you found out that--that you'd made a mistake----" Her eyes were troubled.

Jimmy's face caught the flush from hers; for a moment his eyes wavered.

"We're going to be awfully happy," he asserted then, almost violently.

"If you love me----"

"You know I do." His hand fell carelessly to hers.

"Very well, then say yes."

Christine said it.

She thought everything perfect; she had never been so happy in all her life. If Jimmy did not love her tremendously, he would not be so anxious to be married, she told herself. There was going to be one of those romantic marriages of which one reads in books.

"Shall I speak to Mrs. Wyatt, or will you?" he asked her.

"I think I would like to--first," she told him.

"Very well." Jimmy was relieved. He was somehow a little afraid of Mrs. Wyatt's kind mother eyes; he dreaded lest she might read deep down into his heart, and know what he was doing--guess that he was only marrying Christine because--because why?

To forget another woman; to pay another woman out for the way she had treated him. That is how he would have answered that question had he been quite honest with himself; but as it was he evaded facing it at all. He merely contented himself with assuring Christine all over again that he was going to be very good to her and make her happy.

"I'll tell mother to-night," Christine said when they went back to the hotel. "And I'll write to you, Jimmy; I'll----" she broke off. The porter had come forward; he spoke to Jimmy in an undertone.

"May I speak to you a moment, sir?"

Christine moved away.

"If you will ask the young lady to wait, sir," the man said again with a sort of agitation.

A little flame of apprehension swept across Jimmy's face. He spoke to Christine.

"Wait for me a moment--just a moment." He turned again to the man.

"Well--well, what is it?"

The man lowered his voice.

"The lady, sir--Mrs. Wyatt; she was taken very ill an hour ago. The doctor is with her now. I was told to tell you as soon as you came in, so that you could warn the young lady, sir."

Christine had come forward.

"Is anything the matter?" she asked. She looked from Jimmy to the porter wonderingly. Jimmy took her hand.

"Your mother isn't very well, dear." The little word slipped out unconsciously. "There is a doctor with her now. . . . No, don't be worried. I dare say it's nothing. I'll come up with you and see."

Christine fled up the staircase. She was already in her mother's room when Jimmy overtook her. Through the half-closed door he could see the doctor and a woman in nurse's dress. His heart began to race. Supposing Mrs. Wyatt were really ill; supposing---- The doctor came out to him as he stood on the landing.

"Are you--are you a relative of Mrs. Wyatt's?" he asked.

Jimmy hesitated.

"I--I am engaged to Miss Wyatt," he said. "I hope--I hope there is nothing serious the matter?"

The doctor glanced back over his shoulder. Jimmy's eyes instinctively turned in the same direction; he could see Christine on her knees beside the bed in the darkened room.

"Mrs. Wyatt is dying, I regret to say," the doctor said; he spoke in a low voice, so that his words should not reach Christine. "It's only a question of hours at most. I've done all I can, but nothing can save her. It's heart trouble, you know; she must have been suffering with it for years."

Jimmy Challoner stood staring at him, white-faced--stunned.

"Oh, my God!" he said at last. He was terribly shocked; he could not believe it. He looked again to where Christine knelt by the bed.

"Does she--Christine--who is to tell her?" he asked incoherently.

The doctor shook his head.

"I should suggest that you----" he began.

Jimmy recoiled. "I! Oh, I couldn't. . . I----" He broke off helplessly. He was thinking of the old days down at Upton House; the great kindness that had always been shown to him by Christine's mother. There was a choking feeling in his throat.

"I think you are the one to tell her," said the doctor again, rather stiffly.

Christine had heard their voices. She looked towards the door; she rose softly and came out to where the two men stood.

Her eyes were anxious, but she was a hundred miles from guessing the truth. She spoke to Jimmy Challoner.

"She's asleep, Jimmy. The nurse tells me that she only fainted. Oh, I ought not to have left her when I knew she wasn't well. I shall never forgive myself; but she'll be all right now if she has a nice sleep, poor darling."

Jimmy could not meet her eyes; he bit his lip hard to hide its sudden trembling.

The doctor came to Jimmy's rescue.

"Has your mother ever had similar attacks to this one, Miss Wyatt?" he asked.

Christine considered.

"She hasn't been very well lately. She's complained of being tired several times, and once she said she had a pain in her side; but----" She broke off; she looked breathlessly into his face. Suddenly she caught her breath hard, clutching at Jimmy Challoner's arm.

"Jimmy," she said shrilly.

Jimmy put his arm round her; his voice was all broken when he spoke.

"She's ill, Christine--very ill. Oh, my dear----" He could not go on; he was very boyish still in many ways, and he felt more like breaking down and weeping with her than trying to comfort her and help her through the ordeal she had got to face.

But Christine knew in a minute. She pushed him away; she stood with hands clasped together, staring before her

through the half-closed door with wide, tragic eyes.

"Mother," she said uncertainly; and then again, "Mother!" And now there was a wild sort of cry in her voice.

"Christine," said Jimmy huskily. He caught her hand; he tried to hold her back, but she broke away from him, staggered a few steps, and fell before either of the men could save her.

CHAPTER IX

MOTHERLESS

Sangster was writing letters in his rooms in the unfashionable part of Bloomsbury when Jimmy's urgent message reached him. It was brought by one of the hotel servants, who waited at the door, yawning and indifferent, while Sangster read the hastily scrawled lines:

For God's sake come at once. Mrs. Wyatt died suddenly this afternoon, and there is no one to see to anything but me.

Dead! Sangster could not believe it. He had admired Mrs. Wyatt tremendously that night when they all went to the theatre together; she had seemed so full of life, so young to have a grown-up daughter like Christine. Oh, surely there must be some mistake.

"I'll come at once," he said. He crushed Jimmy's note into his pocket and went back for his hat. He called a taxi, and took the man from the hotel back with him; he asked him a few questions, but the man was uncommunicative, and apparently not very interested. Yes, the lady was dead right enough, so he had been told, he admitted. The gentleman--Mr. Challoner--seemed in a great way about it.

Sangster was terribly shocked. He had quite forgotten the manner of his parting with Jimmy; he was only too willing and anxious to help him in any way possible. When they reached the hotel he was shown into the Wyatt's private sitting-room. Jimmy was there at the telephone; he hung up the receiver as Sangster entered the room; he turned a white, worried face.

"Awful thing, isn't it?" he said. Even his voice sounded changed; it had lost its usual light-heartedness.

"It's given me a most awful shock," he said again. "She was as well as anything last night; nobody had any idea----" He broke off with a choke in his voice. "Poor little Christine," he said after a moment. "We can't do anything with her. I wondered if you--but I suppose you can't," he added hopelessly.

"Where is Miss Wyatt?" Sangster asked. His kind face was very grave, but there was a steadiness in his eyes--the eyes of a man who might be trusted.

"She's in her room; we had to take her away forcibly from--from her mother. . . . You don't know what a hell I've been through, old chap," said Jimmy Challoner.

Sangster frowned.

"You!" he said with faint cynicism. "What about that poor little girl, then; she----" The door opened behind them, and Christine came in. She stood for a moment looking across at the two men with blank eyes, as if she hardly recognised them. Her face was white and haggard; there was a stunned look in her eyes, but Sangster could see that she had not shed a tear. He went forward and took her hand. He drew her into the room, shutting the door quietly. Jimmy had walked over to the window; he stood staring into the street with misty eyes. He had never had death brought home to him like this before. It seemed to have made an upheaval in his world; to have thrown all his schemes and calculations out of gear; life was all at once a thing to be feared and dreaded.

He could hear Sangster talking to Christine behind him; he could not hear what he was saying; he was only too thankful that his friend had come. The last hours which he had spent alone with Christine had been a nightmare to him. He had been so unable to comfort her; he had been at his wits' end to know what to do or say. She was so utterly alone; she had no father--no brothers to whom he could send. He had wired to an uncle of whom she had told him, but it was impossible that anyone could arrive before the morning, he knew.

Sangster was just the sort needed for a tragedy such as this; was a brick--he always knew what to say and do.

The room seemed very silent; the whole world seemed silent too, as if it had stopped aghast at this sudden tragedy

which had been enacted in its midst.

Then Christine began to sob; the most pathetic, loneliest sound it was through the silent room. Jimmy felt himself choking--felt his own eyes blurred and misty.

He turned impulsively. Christine was huddled in one of the big chairs, her pretty head down-flung on an arm. Sangster stood beside her, his hand on her shoulder.

Jimmy never looked at his friend, or he might have learned many, many things from the expression of his eyes just then as he moved back silently and let Jimmy pass.

He fell on his knees beside Christine. For the moment, at least, everything else in the world was forgotten between them; she was just a motherless, broken girl sobbing her heart out--just the girl he had once loved with all a boy's first ardour. He put his arms round her and drew her head down, so that it rested on his shoulder, and her face was hidden in his coat.

"Don't cry, my poor little girl," said Jimmy Challoner, with a break in his own young voice. "Oh, Christine, don't cry."

Sangster, watching, saw the way her arms crept upwards till they were clasped round Jimmy's neck; saw the way she clung to him; heard the anguish in her voice as she said:

"I've got no one now, Jimmy; no one at all."

Jimmy looked up, and, across her bowed head, his eyes met those of his friend with a sort of defiance in them.

"You've got me, Christine," he said with a new sort of humbleness.

CHAPTER X

JIMMY HAS A VISITOR

"I'm going to be married, Costin," said Jimmy Challoner.

He was deep in an arm-chair, with his legs stuck up on the seat of another, and he was blowing rather agitated puffs of smoke into the room from an expensive cigar, for which he had not paid.

Costin was mixing a whisky-and-soda at the table, and just for an instant the syphon jerked, sending a stream of soda-water over the cloth.

"Yes, sir; certainly, sir; to--to Miss Farrow, I presoom, sir."

There was a momentary silence, then:

"No, you fathead," said Jimmy Challoner curtly. "To Miss Wyatt--a Miss Christine Wyatt; and I'm going to be married the day after to-morrow."

"Yes, sir; I'm sure I wish you every happiness, sir. And if I may ask, sir--will you still be requiring my services?"

Jimmy stared.

"Of course I shall," he said blankly. "Who the police do you think is going to look after my clothes, and shave me?" He brought his feet down from the opposite chair and sat up. "I'm going to be married in London--quietly," he said; he did not look at Costin now. "Miss Wyatt has lost her mother recently--I dare say you know. I--er--I think that is all," he added, with a sort of embarrassment, as he recalled the times, the many times, he had made a confidant of Costin in the days before he was engaged to Cynthia; the many little gifts that Costin had conveyed to her; the notes he had brought back. Jimmy stifled a sigh in his broad chest; he rose to his feet.

"And, Costin----"

"Yes, sir."

"There is no need to--to mention--Miss Farrow--if--you understand?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"Very well; get out," said Jimmy.

Costin obeyed imperturbably. He knew Jimmy Challoner very well; and in this case, at all events, the master was certainly no hero to the valet. Left alone, Jimmy subsided again into his chair with a sigh. The day after to-morrow! it seemed as if it must be the end of everything; as if he would be brought up sharply against an unscalable brick wall when his wedding-day came.

Poor little Christine! she had changed very much during the past few days; she looked somehow older--more grown-up; she smiled less frequently, and she was very quiet--even with Jimmy. And she loved Jimmy; she seemed to love him all the more now that he was all that was left to her. Jimmy realised it, too, and it worried him. He meant to be good to her--he wanted to be good to her; but--involuntarily he glanced towards the blank space on the mantelshelf where Cynthia Farrow's portrait used to stand.

He had not seen her since that night when she had told him the truth; when she had told him that she had thrown him over because he was not rich enough, because she valued diamonds and beautiful clothes more than she valued his love. He wondered if she knew of his engagement; if she had been told about it, and if so--whether she minded.

So far nobody had seemed particularly pleased except the Great Horatio, who had cabled that he was delighted, and that he was making immediate arrangements to increase Jimmy's allowance.

Jimmy had smiled grimly over that part of the message; it was hard luck that the Great Horatio should only shell out now, when--when--he pulled up his thoughts sharply; he tried to remember that he was already almost as good as a married man; he had no right to be thinking of another woman; he was going to marry Christine.

The door opened; Costin reappeared.

"Please, sir--a lady to see you."

"What!"

Jimmy stared incredulously. "A lady to see me? Rot! It's some mistake----"

"No, sir, begging your pardon, sir," said Costin stolidly. "It's--if you please, sir, it's Miss Farrow."

Jimmy stood immovable for a moment, then he turned round slowly and mechanically, almost as if someone had taken him by his shoulders and forced him to do so.

"Miss--Farrow!" he echoed Costin's apologetic utterance of Cynthia's name expressionlessly. "Miss--Farrow . . ." The colour rushed from his brow to chin; his heart began to race just as it used to in the old days when he had called to see her, and was waiting in her pink drawing-room, listening to the sound of her coming steps on the landing outside. After a moment:

"Ask--ask her to come in," he said.

He turned back to the mirror; mechanically he passed a hand over the refractory kink in his hair; he looked at his tie with critical eyes; he wished there had been time to shave, he wished--and then he forgot to wish anything more at all, for the door had opened, and Cynthia herself stood there.

She was beautifully dressed; he realised in a vague sort of way that she had never looked more desirable, and yet for the life of him he could not have told what she was wearing, except that there was a big bunch of lilies tucked into the bosom of her gown.

She held out her hands to him; she was smiling adorably.

"Jimmy," she said.

Jimmy's first wild instinct was to rush forward and take her in his arms; then he remembered. He backed away from her a step; he began to tremble.

"What--what have you come here for?" he stammered.

She laughed.

"Jimmy, how rude! You don't look a bit pleased to see me. You--oh, Jimmy, I thought you'd be so happy--so delighted."

She came across to him now; she slipped a hand through his arm; she leaned her cheek against his coat-sleeve; the scent of the lilies she wore mounted intoxicatingly to his head.

He tried not to look at her--he tried to stiffen his arm beneath her cheek; but his heart was thumping--he felt as if he were choking.

There was a moment of silence, then she looked up at him with a little spark of wonderment in her eyes.

"You're not going to forgive me--is that it?" she asked blankly.

She moved away from him; she stood just in front of him, looking into his face with the witching eyes he knew so well.

He would not look at her; he stared steadily over her head at the door beyond; he tried to laugh.

"It's not a question of forgiveness--is it?" he asked jerkily.

"You--you chucked me up. You--you told me a lie to get rid of me.

It--it isn't a question of forgiveness, do you think?"

She looked nonplussed, then she smiled. She took Jimmy's face between her hands, holding it so that he was forced to meet her eyes; she stood on tiptoe and softly kissed his chin.

"I'm sorry," she said, and now there was a very genuine ring of earnestness in her voice. "I'm more sorry than I can ever say. Forgive me, Jimmy; I've been punished enough. I--oh, if you knew how miserable I've been."

Jimmy stood like a man turned to stone; he stared at her with a sort of dread in his eyes. There were tears in hers; one big tear fell from her long lashes, and splashed down on to the lilies she wore.

After a moment he spoke with difficulty.

"Are you . . . what are you trying to say to me?"

Her hands fell to her sides; she looked down with a touch of shame.

"I'm trying to say that I'm sorry; I'm trying to tell you that I--I don't mind how poor you are. I thought I did, but--oh, Jimmy, I'd rather have you, and no money at all, than--than be as rich as Croesus with--with any other man."

"Cynthia!" Jimmy spoke her name in a stifled voice; she raised her eyes quickly. There was none of the passionate joy in his face which she had so confidently expected; none of the passionate joy in his voice which her heart told her ought to be there. Suddenly he turned aside from her; he put his arm down on the mantelshelf, hiding his face in it.

"Jimmy." She whispered his name with a sort of fear. "Jimmy--what--what is it? Oh, you are frightening me. I thought you would be so glad--so glad." She caught the limp hand hanging against his side; she laid her soft cheek to it.

Jimmy Challoner tore himself free with a sort of rage.

"It's too late--too late," he said hoarsely.

"Too--late!" She stared at him, not understanding. "What--what do you mean? That--that you can't forgive me; that--that you're so angry that--that----"

He swung round, white-faced and quivering.

"It's too late," he said again hopelessly. "I'm engaged to be married. I--oh, why did you ever send me away?" he broke out in anguish.

Her face had paled, but she was still far enough from understanding.

"Engaged to be married--you! To whom, Jimmy?"

He answered her in a voice of stifled rage.

"It's your doing--all your fault. You nearly drove me mad when you sent me away, and I--I----" There was a long pause. "I told you that I met some friends in the theatre that night when you . . . well, I'm engaged to her--to Christine. I've known her all my life. I--I was utterly wretched . . . I asked her to marry me. We're--we're going to be married the day after to-morrow."

Twice she tried to speak, but no words would come. She was as white now as the lilies she wore; her eyes had a stunned, incredulous look in them. She had never even remotely dreamed of this; it was like some crude nightmare. . . . Jimmy engaged! Jimmy who had sworn a thousand times never to love another woman; Jimmy who had been heart-broken when she sent him away. She broke out in vehement protest:

"Oh, no--no!"

"It's true," said Jimmy obstinately. "It's true."

For the moment he was hardly conscious of any feeling except a sort of shock. It had never once crossed his mind that she would come back to him; he could not believe even now that she was in earnest; he found himself remembering that night in her dressing-room at the theatre when she had lied to him, and pretended, and deceived him. Perhaps even this was all part of the play-acting; perhaps she was just trying to win him back again, to make a fool of him afresh.

Cynthia broke out again.

"Well, this girl must be told; she can't care for you. You say you haven't seen her for years. It's--it's absurd!" She took a step towards him. "You must tell her, Jimmy; you must explain to her. She . . . surely there is such a thing as buying her off."

The vulgarity of the expression made him wince; he thought of Christine with a sort of shame.

She would be the last girl in the world, he knew, to wish to hold him to a promise which he was unwilling to fulfil; he thought of her pale face and wistful brown eyes, and he broke out strenuously:

"It's impossible . . . it's too late . . . we are to be married on Thursday; everything is fixed up. I--oh, for God's sake, Cynthia, don't go on talking about it. You drove me to do what I have done. It's too late--I can't go back on my word."

She stood twisting her fingers agitatedly. Suddenly she went to where he stood; she tried to put her arms round his neck, but he resisted fiercely. He held her wrists; he kept his head flung back beyond her reach.

"It's too late, Cynthia--do you hear! I've given my word; I'm not going back on it now. You can't blame me. . . . I--I'd have given my life for this to have happened before--just a few days ago; but now----"

"You don't love me," she accused him passionately; she began to cry. "You said you would never love any woman but me as long as you lived. I thought you cared more for me than I do for you, but now I know you don't--you don't care so much. If you did you would give up this--this girl, whoever she is, without a single thought." Her voice dropped sobbingly. "Oh, Jimmy--Jimmy, don't be cruel; you can't mean it. I love you so much . . . you belonged to me first."

"You sent me away; you lied to me and deceived me."

He felt that he must keep on reminding himself of it; that he dared not for one instant allow himself to forget everything but how beautiful she was, and how much he wanted her.

She fell back from him; she dropped into a chair, hiding her face, and sobbing.

There was a touch of the theatrical in her attitude, but Jimmy was too miserable to be critical. He only knew that she was miserable and on his account, and that he loved her.

He broke out agitatedly:

"Don't, Cynthia--don't cry; you break my heart. . . . Oh, for God's sake, don't cry."

"You don't care how miserable I am," she sobbed. "You--you haven't got a heart to break, if you can stand there like a stone and tell me that it's too late. It's not too late; you're not married yet. Tell her the truth; oh! if you love me tell her the truth, Jimmy."

Jimmy was looking at her, but for a moment he only saw the big sitting-room at the hotel where Mrs. Wyatt had died, and the crushed little figure of Christine herself, as he had knelt beside her and drew her head to his shoulder.

"Oh, Jimmy, I've got no one now--no one." Her voice came back to him, a mournful echo; and his own husky answer:

"You've got me, Christine!"

How could he go back on that--how could he add to her weight of sorrow?

"She's got nobody but me in all the world," he said simply; he was looking at Cynthia now, as if he found it easier. "She has just lost her mother, and she's the loneliest little thing----" he stopped jaggedly.

For a moment she did not answer; she had stopped sobbing; she was carefully wiping her eyes; she got up and walked over to the glass above the mantelshelf; she looked at herself anxiously.

"Well, I suppose it's good-bye, then," she said heavily; her voice dragged a little. She picked up her gloves and a silver chain-bag which she had thrown down on the table; she turned towards the door. "Good-bye, Jimmy."

Jimmy Challoner did not answer; he could not trust his voice. He walked past her and put his fingers on the door handle to open it for her; he was very white, and his eyes were fierce.

Cynthia stood still for an instant; she was quite close to him now.

"Good-bye," she said again faintly.

He tried to answer, but could not find his voice; their eyes met, and the next moment she was in his arms.

He never knew how it happened; never knew if he made the first move towards her, or she to him; but he held her fast, kissing her as he had never kissed little Christine--her eyes, her hair, her warm, tremulous lips.

"You do love me, then, after all?" she whispered.

Jimmy let her go; he fell back against the door, hiding his eyes.

"You know I do," he said hoarsely.

He hated himself for his momentary weakness; he could not bear to look at her; when she had gone, he sat down in the big arm-chair and hid his face in his hands.

His pulses were racing; his head felt on fire.

The day after to-morrow he was to marry Christine. He had given his promise to her, and he knew that it was too late to draw back--too late to break her heart. And yet there was only one woman in all the world whom he loved, and whom he wanted--the woman from whom he had just parted; the woman who was even then driving away down the street with a little triumphant smile on her carefully reddened lips.

CHAPTER XI

HUSBAND AND WIFE

". . . to love, cherish, and to obey till death us do part."

Christine raised her soft brown eyes shyly and looked at Jimmy Challoner.

A ray of sunlight, piercing the stained glass window above the altar, fell on her face and slim figure; her voice was quite clear and steady, though a little sad perhaps, as she slowly repeated the words after the rather bored-looking clergyman.

Jimmy had insisted on being married in a parish where neither of them was known; he had got a special licence, and there was nobody in the church but the verger and Sangster, and a deaf uncle of Christine's, who thought the whole affair a great bother, and who had looked up a train to catch back home the very moment that Christine should have safely passed out of his keeping into her husband's.

He bade them "good-bye" in the vestry; he kissed Christine rather awkwardly, and said that he hoped she would be happy; his voice seemed to imply a doubt. He shook hands with Jimmy and called him a lucky dog; he spoke like a man who hardly realises what he is saying; he shook hands with Sangster and hurried away.

They heard him creaking down the aisle of the church, and the following slam of the heavy door behind him; there was a little awkward silence.

The clergyman was blotting Christine's new name in the register; he looked up at her with short-sighted eyes, a quill pen held between his teeth.

"Would you--er--care to have the pen, Mrs.--er--Challoner?"

He had a starchy voice and a starchy manner.

Christine was conscious of a sudden feeling of utter home-sickness; everybody was so stiff and strange; even Jimmy--dearly as she loved him--seemed somehow like a stranger in his smart coat and brand-new tie, and with the refractory kink in his hair well flattened down by brilliantine.

She wanted her mother; she wanted her mother desperately; she wanted to be kissed and made much of by someone who really wanted her to be happy. Tears smarted in her eyes, but she would not let them fall. Her throat ached with repressed sobs as she took the brand-new quill pen from the white hand extended to her, with a little shy:

"Thank you."

Sangster came forward.

"Shall I take care of it for you, Mrs. Challoner? We must tie a white bow round it, shall we? You will like to keep it, I am sure."

Christine turned to him eagerly. He spoke so kindly; his eyes looked at her with such sympathy. A big tear splashed down on the bosom of her black frock.

She was all in black, poor little Christine, save for white gloves, and some white flowers which Jimmy had sent her to carry. She tried to smile and answer Sangster when he spoke to her, but the words died away in her throat.

The gloomy London church depressed her; her own voice and Jimmy's had echoed hollowly behind them as they made their responses; her hand had shaken badly when she gave it to him to put on her wedding ring.

She was married now; she looked at Jimmy appealingly.

Jimmy was very flushed; when he spoke his voice sounded high and reckless. Christine heard him asking Sangster to come and have some lunch with them; he seemed most anxious that Sangster should come. Christine listened with a queer little sinking at her heart; she had wanted to be alone with Jimmy; she had so looked forward to this--their first meal together as husband and wife; but she bravely hid her disappointment.

"Do come; please do," she urged him.

They all left the church together. Christine walked between the two men down the long aisle; she did not feel a bit as if she had been married; she wondered if soon she was going to wake up and find that she had dreamt it all.

There was a taxi waiting at the church door. She got in, and both men followed. Jimmy sat beside her, but he talked to Sangster all the way. He was terribly nervous; he kept twisting and torturing the new pair of grey gloves which he had never put on; they were all out of shape and creased long before taxi stopped again at the quiet restaurant where they were to lunch.

Christine looked at Jimmy.

"What can I do with my flowers? I--everybody will know if I take them in with me." She blushed as she spoke. Jimmy's own face caught the reflection from hers.

"Oh, leave 'em in the taxi," he said awkwardly. "I'll tell the chap to come back for us in an hour."

He surreptitiously stuffed the new gloves into a coat pocket; he tried to look as if there were nothing very unusual about any of them as he led the way in.

Christine hardly ate anything; she was shy and unhappy. The kind efforts which Sangster made to make her feel at her ease added to her embarrassment. She missed her mother more and more as the moments fled away; she was on the verge of a breakdown when at last the interminable meal was ended.

She had hardly touched the champagne with which Jimmy had insisted on filling her glass; there were two empty bottles on the table, and she wondered mechanically who had drunk it all.

Sangster bade her "good-bye" as they left the restaurant; he held her hand for a moment, and looked into her eyes.

"I hope you will be very happy; I am sure you will."

Christine tried to thank him; she wished he were not going to leave them; she had not wanted him to come with them in the first place, but now she was conscious only of a desire to keep him there. Her heart pounded in her throat as he turned away; she looked apprehensively at Jimmy--her husband now.

He was looking very smart, she thought with a little thrill of pride; she was sure he was quite the best-looking man she had ever seen. He was talking to Sangster, but she could not hear what either of them was saying.

"Be good to her, Jimmy . . . she's such a child."

That was what Sangster was saying; and Jimmy--well, Jimmy flushed uncomfortably as he answered with a sort of bravado:

"Don't be a silly old ass! Do you think I'm going to beat her?"

Then it was all over, and Christine and Jimmy were driving away together.

Jimmy looked at her with a nervous smile.

"Well--we're married," he said eloquently.

"Yes." She raised her beautiful eyes to his face; her heart was throbbing happily. Unconsciously she made a little movement towards him.

Jimmy put out his hand and let down the window with a run.

"Jove! isn't it hot!" he said.

He was beginning to wonder if he had drunk too much champagne; he passed his silk handkerchief over his flushed face.

"I thought it was rather cold," said Christine timidly.

He frowned.

"Does that mean that you want the window up?" He did not mean to speak sharply; but he was horribly nervous, and Sangster's parting words had not improved matters at all.

Christine burst into tears; she was overstrung and excited; her nerves were all to pieces; she sobbed for a moment desolately.

Jimmy swore under his breath; he did not know what to do. After a moment he touched her--he pressed his silk handkerchief into her shaking hands.

"Don't cry," he said constrainedly. "People will think I've been unkind to you . . . already!" he added with a nervous laugh.

She mopped her eyes obediently; she felt frightened.

The horrible feeling that Jimmy was a stranger came back to her afresh. Oh, was this the kind boy lover who had been so good to her that day her mother died--the kind lover who had taken her in his arms and told her that she had him, that he would never leave her?

She longed so for just one word--one sign of affection; but Jimmy only sat there, hot and uncomfortable and silent.

After a moment:

"Better?" he asked.

"Yes . . ." She tried to control herself; she stammered a little shamed apology. "I'm so sorry--Jimmy."

He patted her hand.

"That's all right."

She took courage; she looked into his face.

"And you do--oh, you do love me?" she whispered.

"Of course I do." He put an awkward arm round her; he pressed her head to his shoulder, so that she could not see his face. "Of course I do," he said again. "Don't you worry--we're going to be awfully happy." He kissed her cheek.

Christine turned and put her arms round his neck; she was only a child still--she saw no reason at all why she should not let Jimmy know how very much she loved him.

"Oh, I do love you--I do," she said softly.

Jimmy coloured hotly; he felt an uncontrollable longing to kick himself; he kissed her again with furtive haste.

"That's all right, dear," he said.

They had arranged to stay a week in London.

Christine liked London. "And we couldn't very well do anything very much, could we?" So she had appealed to him wistfully. "When mother----" She had not been able to go on.

Jimmy had agreed hastily to anything; he had chosen a very quiet and select hotel, and taken a suite of rooms. He did not know how on earth they were going to be paid for; he was counting on an extra cheque from the Great Horatio as a wedding present. He was relieved when the taxi stopped at the hotel; he got out with a sigh; he turned to give his hand to Christine; his heart smote him as he looked at her.

Sangster was right when he had called her "such a child." She looked very young as she stood there in the afternoon sunshine, in her black frock, and with her white flowers clasped nervously in both hands. Jimmy felt conscious of a lump in his throat.

"Come along, dear," he said very gently; he put his hand through her arm. They went into the hotel together.

Christine went upstairs with one of the maids. Jimmy said he would come up presently for tea; he went into the smoking-room and rang for a brandy and soda. For the first time in his life he was genuinely afraid of what he had done; he knew now that he cared nothing for Christine. It was a terrifying thought.

And she had nobody but him--the responsibility of her whole life lay on his shoulders; it made him hot to think of it.

He tossed the brandy and soda off at a gulp. He looked at his watch; half-past four. They had been married only two hours; and he had got to spend all the rest of his life with her.

Poor little Christine--it was not her fault. He had asked her to marry him; he meant to be good to her. A servant came to the door.

"Mrs. Challoner said would I tell you that tea is served upstairs in the sitting-room, sir."

Jimmy squared his shoulders; he tried to look as if there had been a Mrs. Challoner for fifty years; but the sound of Christine's new name made his heart sink.

"Oh--er--thanks," he said as carelessly as he could. "I'll go up." He waited a few moments, then he went slowly up the stairs, feeling very much as if he were going to be executed.

He stood for a moment on the landing outside the door of the private sitting-room, with an absurdly schoolboyish air of bashfulness.

He passed a hand nervously over the back of his head; he wriggled his collar; twice he took a step forward and stopped again; finally the appearance of a servant along the corridor drove him to make up his mind. He opened the door with a rush.

Christine was standing over by the window; the afternoon sunshine fell on her slim, black-robed figure and brown hair. She turned quickly as Jimmy Challoner entered.

"Tea has been up some minutes; I hope it's not cold."

"I like it cold," said Jimmy.

As a matter of fact, he hated tea at any time, and never drank it if it could be avoided; but he sat down with as good a grace as he could muster, and took a cup from her hand with its new ring--his ring. Jimmy Challoner glanced at it and away again.

"Nice room this--eh?" he asked.

"Yes." Christine had sugared her own cup three times without knowing it; she took a cake from the stand, and dropped it nervously. Jimmy laughed; a boyish laugh of amusement that seemed to break the ice.

"Anyone would think you had never seen me before," he said, with an attempt to put her at her ease. "And I've known you all your life!"

"I know; but----" She looked at him with very flushed cheeks. "I'm afraid, Jimmy--afraid that you'll find you've made a mistake; afraid that you'll find I'm too young and--silly."

"You're not to call the lady I have married rude names."

"But it's true," she faltered. She put down the cup and went over to where he sat. She stood with her hands clasped behind her, looking down at him with a sort of fond humility.

"I do love you, Jimmy," she said softly. "And I will--I will try to be the sort of wife you want."

Jimmy tried to answer her, but somehow the words stuck in his throat. She was not the sort of wife he wanted, and

never would be. That thought filled his mind. All the willingness in the world could not endow her with Cynthia's eyes, Cynthia's voice, Cynthia's caressing way of saying, "Dear old boy."

He choked back a big sigh; he found Christine's hand and raised it to his lips.

"We shall get along swimmingly," he said with an effort. "Don't you worry your little head."

But she was not satisfied.

"I must be so different from all the other women you are used to," she told him wistfully. "I'm not smart or amusing--and I don't dress as well as they do."

Jimmy smiled.

"Well, one can always buy clothes," he said. A sudden wave of tenderness swept through his heart as he looked at her. "Anyway, you've got one pull over all of them," he said with momentary sentiment.

"Have I--Jimmy! What do you mean?"

He kissed her trembling little fingers again.

"You were my first love," he said with a touch of embarrassment. "And it's not many men who can claim to have married their first love."

Christine was quite happy now; she bent and kissed him before she went back to her seat. Jimmy felt considerably cheered. If she were as easily pleased as this, life would not be the difficult thing that he had imagined, he told himself. He selected a chocolate cake--suitably heart-shaped--and began to munch it with a sort of relish.

"How would you like to run over to Paris for a few days--later on, of course, I mean?" he added hastily, meeting her eyes. It would be rather fun showing Christine round Paris, he thought. He looked at her with a twinkle.

She was very pretty, anyway; he was proud of her, too, deep down in his heart. No doubt after a bit they would be quite happy together.

He finished the chocolate cake, and asked if he might smoke; he was longing for a cigarette. He was not quite sure if it would be correct to smoke in a room which would be chiefly used by Christine. With Cynthia things had been so different--she smoked endless cigarettes herself; there was never any need to ask permission of her.

He could not imagine Christine with a cigarette between her pretty lips. And yet--yet he had liked it with Cynthia. Odd how different women were.

"Please do smoke," said Christine. She was glad he had asked her; glad that for the rest of his life whenever he smoked a cigarette, it would not merely be Jimmy Challoner blowing puffs of smoke into the air, but her husband. She glowed at the thought.

Jimmy was much more happy now; to his own way of thinking he was getting on by leaps and bounds. He went over and sat on the arm of Christine's chair; another moment and he would have put an arm round her, but a soft, apologetic tapping at the door sent him flying away from her to the other side of the room.

He was carefully turning the pages of a book when he answered, "Come in," with elaborate carelessness. One of the hotel servants entered; he carried a letter on a tray; he handed it to Christine.

"A messenger from the Sunderland Hotel has just brought this, madam. He told me to say that it has been there two days, but they did not know till this morning where to send it on to you."

Christine's face quivered. She did not want to think of the Sunderland; her mother had died there; it would always be associated in her mind with the great tragedy of her life. She took the letter hesitatingly; she did not know the writing. She waited till the servant had gone before she opened it.

Jimmy was still turning the leaves of the railway guide feverishly. At the shutting of the door he turned with a sigh of relief.

"A letter?" Christine was drawing the paper from its envelope; pink paper, smelling faintly of lilies. Jimmy lit a fresh

cigarette. He walked over to the window and stood looking into the street; a horribly respectable street it was, he thought impatiently, of good-class houses, with windows neatly curtained and knockers carefully polished.

He was really quite anxious to kiss Christine; he was wondering whether she, too, was anxious for him to kiss her. After a moment he turned a little, and looked at her tentatively.

But Christine was not looking at him; she was sitting with her eyes fixed straight in front of her, a frozen look of horror on her little face. The letter had tumbled from her lap to the floor.

"Christine!" said Jimmy sharply. He was really alarmed; he took a big stride over to where she sat; he shook her. "Christine--what has happened? What is the matter?"

She looked at him then; she turned her beautiful eyes to his face, and at sight of them Jimmy caught his breath hard.

"Oh, Christine!" he said almost in a whisper.

His thoughts sped back incongruously to a day in the years that had gone; when he and she had been children together down in the country at Upton House.

He had stolen a gun belonging to the Great Horatio, and they had crept out into the woods together--he and she--to shoot rabbits, as he had confidently told her; and instead--oh, instead they had shot Christine's favourite dog Ruler.

All his life Jimmy remembered the broken-hearted look in Christine's eyes when she flung herself down by the fast-stiffening body of her favourite. And now she was looking like that again; looking at him as if he had broken her heart--as if--- Jimmy Challoner backed a step; his face had paled.

"In God's name, what is it--what is it?"

And then he saw the letter lying there on the floor between them in all its brazen pinkness. The faint scent of lilies was wafted to his brain before he stooped and grabbed it up. He held it at arm's length while he read it, as if already its writer had become repellent to him. There was a long, long silence.

The letter had been written two days ago. Jimmy realised dully that Cynthia must have gone straight from his rooms that evening and sent it; realised that it had been lying at the hotel where Mrs. Wyatt died until now.

Perhaps Cynthia Farrow had not realised what she was doing--perhaps she judged all women by her own standard; but surely even she would have been more than satisfied with the results could she have seen Christine's face as she sat there in the big, silent room, with the afternoon sunshine streaming around her.

Twice Jimmy tried to speak, but no words would come; he felt as if rough hands were at his throat, choking him, squeezing the life out of his body, Then suddenly he fell on his knees beside his wife.

"Christine--for God's sake----" He tried to take her in his arms, but she moved away; shrank back from him as if in terror, hiding her face and moaning--moaning.

"Christine . . ." There was a sob in Jimmy Challoner's voice now; he broke out stammeringly. "Don't believe it--it's all lies. I'd give my soul to undo it--if only you'd never seen it. I swear to you on my word of honour that I'll never see her again. I'll do any mortal thing, anything in the wide world, if only you'll look at me--if you'll forgive me---- Oh, for God's sake, say you forgive me----"

Her hands fell from her face; for a moment her eyes sought his.

"Then--then it *is* true!" she said faintly.

"Yes. I can't tell you a lie about it--it *is* true. I *did--did* love her. I was--engaged to her; but it's all over. I swear to you that it's all over and done with. I'll never see her again--I'll be so good to you." She hardly seemed to hear.

"Then you never really loved me?" she asked after a moment. "It wasn't because--because you loved me?"

"N-no." He got to his feet again; he strode up and down the room agitatedly. He had spoken truly enough when he said that he would have given his soul to undo these last few moments.

Presently he came back to where she sat--this poor little wife of his.

"Forgive me, dear," he said, very humbly. "I--I ask your pardon on my knees--and--it isn't too late; we've got all our lives before us. We'll go right away somewhere--you and I--out of London. We'll never come back."

She echoed his words painfully.

"You and I? I--I can't go anywhere--ever--with you--now!"

He broke into anger.

"You're talking utter nonsense; you must be mad. You've married me--you're my wife. You'll have to come with me--to do as I tell you. I--oh, confound it----!" He broke off, realising how dictatorial his voice had grown. He paced away from her again, and again came back.

"Look at me, Christine." She raised her eyes obediently. The hot blood rushed to Jimmy's face. He wondered if it were only his fancy, or if there were really scorn in their soft brownness. He tried to speak, but broke off. Christine rose to her feet; she passed the pink letter as if she had not seen it; she walked to the door.

"Where are you going?" asked Jimmy sharply.

She looked back at him. "I don't know. I--oh, please leave me alone," she added piteously as he would have followed her.

He let her go then; he waited till the door had shut, then he snatched up Cynthia's letter once again, and read it through.

It was an abominable thing to have done, he told himself--abominable; and yet, as he read the skilfully penned words, his vain man's heart beat a little faster at the knowledge that she still loved him, this woman who had thrown him over so heartlessly; she still loved him, though it was too late. The faint scent of the lilies which her note-paper always carried brought back the memory of her with painful vividness. Before he was conscious of it, Jimmy had lifted the letter to his lips.

He flung it from him immediately in honest disgust; he despised himself because he could not forget her; he tried to imagine what Christine must be thinking--be suffering. With sudden impulse he tore open the door; he went across to her room--their room; he tried the handle softly. It was locked.

"Christine!" But there was no answer. He called again: "Christine!"
And now he heard her voice.

"Go away; please go away." An angry flush dyed his face. After all, she was his wife; it was absurd to make this fuss. After all, everything had happened before he proposed to her; it was all over and done with. It was her duty to overlook the past.

He listened a moment; he wondered if anyone would hear if he ordered her to let him in--if he threatened to break the door down.

He could hear her crying now; hear the deep, pitiful sobs that must be shaking her whole slender body.

"Christine!" But there was nothing very masterful in the way he spoke her name; his voice only sounded very shamed and humiliated as, after waiting a vain moment for her reply, he turned and went slowly away.

CHAPTER XII

SANGSTER IS CONSULTED

Jimmy had been married two days when one morning he burst into Sangster's room in the unfashionable part of Bloomsbury.

It had been raining heavily. London looked grey and dismal; even the little fat sparrows who twittered all day long in the boughs of a stunted tree outside the window of Sangster's modest sitting-room had given up trying to be cheerful, and were huddled together under the leaves.

Sangster was in his shirt-sleeves and old carpet slippers, writing, when Jimmy entered. He looked up disinterestedly, then rose to his feet.

"You! good heavens!"

"Yes--me," said Jimmy ungrammatically. He threw his hat on to the horsehair sofa, which seemed to be the most important piece of furniture in the room, and dropped into a chair. "Got a cigarette? My case is empty."

Sangster produced his own; it was brown leather, and shabby; very different from the silver and enamel absurdity which Jimmy Challoner invariably carried.

After a moment:

"Well?" said Sangster. There was a touch of anxiety in his kindly eyes, though he tried to speak cheerfully. "Well, how goes it--and the little wife?"

Jimmy growled something unintelligible. He threw the freshly lit cigarette absently into the fireplace instead of the spent match, swore under his breath, and grabbed it back again.

Suddenly he sprang to his feet.

"I've made the devil's own mess of it all," he said violently.

Sangster made no comment; he put down his pen, pushed his chair back a little and waited.

Jimmy blew an agitated puff of smoke into the air and blurted out again: "She says she won't stay with me; she says---" He threw out his hands agitatedly. "It wasn't my fault; I swear to you that it wasn't my fault, Sangster. Things were going swimmingly, and then the letter came--and that finished it." He was incoherent--stammering; but Sangster seemed to understand.

"Cynthia Farrow?" he asked briefly.

"Yes. The letter was sent on from the hotel where Christine had been staying with her mother. It had been delayed two days, as the people didn't know where she was." He swallowed hard, as if choking back a bitter memory. "It came about an hour after we left you."

"On your wedding day?" Sangster was flushed now; his eyes looked very distressed.

Jimmy turned away.

"Yes," he said in a stifled voice. "If I'd only seen the accursed thing--but I didn't; she opened it, and then----" There was a long pause before he went on again jerkily. "I did my best--even then--but she wouldn't believe me; she doesn't believe me now. I swore that I'd never see Cynthia again; I swore that I'd do anything in the whole world she wanted---"

"

"Except the one thing which you cannot do, I suppose," Sangster interposed quietly.

"What do you mean?"

"Love her," said Sangster. "That's what I mean."

Jimmy tried to laugh; it was a miserable failure. "She's hardly spoken to me since," he went on, after a moment, wretchedly. "I've--oh, I've had a devil of a time these last two days, I can tell you. I can't get her to come out with me--she hardly leaves her room; she just cries and cries," he added with a sort of weariness. "Just keeps on saying she wants her mother--she wants her mother."

"Poor little girl."

"Yes--that's how I feel," said Jimmy. "It's--it's perfectly rotten, isn't it? And she looks so ill, too. . . . What did you say?"

"I didn't say anything."

"Well, then, I wish to God you would," said Jimmy with sudden rage. "I'm about fed-up with life, I can tell you----" He broke off. "Oh, I don't mean that; but I'm worried to death. I--what the devil *can* I do?" he asked helplessly.

Sangster did not know how to answer; he sat staring down at the worn toes of his carpet slippers and thinking of Christine.

She was such a child, and she loved Jimmy so much. It made his heart ache to think of the shy happiness he had always read in her eyes whenever she looked at Jimmy.

"Of course, I shouldn't have told you, only I know you won't say a word," said Jimmy presently. "I--I stood it as long as I could; I stood it till I felt as if I should go mad, and then I bolted off here to you. . . . She's got nobody but me, you see." He drew a long breath. "I only wish to God Mrs. Wyatt were alive," he added earnestly.

Sangster said nothing. "I wondered if, perhaps, you'd go round and see her, old chap," Jimmy jerked out then. "She likes you. Of course, you needn't say you'd seen me. Couldn't you 'phone up or something? Get her to go out. . . . She'll die if someone can't rouse her."

Sangster coloured.

"I--I'm not good at that sort of thing, Jimmy. It's not that I'm unwilling to help you; I'd do anything----"

"Well, then, try it; there's a good chap. You--you were so decent to her that day Mrs. Wyatt died; you've got a sort of way that I haven't. I--I should be no end obliged. I'll--I'll keep out of the way myself for a bit, and then----" He looked anxiously at his friend. "Will you go?"

"She probably won't see me if I do."

"She will. She's sick of the sight of me."

Sangster smiled in spite of himself. He got up, stretching his arms; he shook his head at Jimmy.

"Oh, I know what you're thinking," said Jimmy savagely. "But I swear to you that it's not my fault this time, anyway. I swear to you that I've done my best. I----"

"I'm not doubting it," said Sangster dryly. He fetched his hat and coat from a room adjoining, and they went out into the street together.

"Take her out to lunch," said Jimmy nervously. "Take her for a walk in the park--try to rouse her a bit; but for heaven's sake don't talk about me."

He looked anxious and worried; he really was very upset; but he was conscious of an enormous sense of relief as he and Sangster parted at the street corner. As soon as Sangster was out of sight he hailed a taxi, and told the man to drive him to his club. He ordered a stiff brandy and soda, and dropped into one of the deep leathern arm-chairs with a sigh. He had been married only three days, and already it seemed like three years. Of course, he was not blaming Christine, poor little girl; but--oh, if only she hadn't been quite such a child!

He lifted the glass, and looked at its contents with lugubrious eyes.

"Well, here's to a brighter future," said Jimmy Challoner drearily; but he sighed heavily as he tossed off the brandy and soda.

* * * * *

Sangster felt decidedly nervous when he reached the hotel where Jimmy and his wife were staying. He had no faith in his own powers, though apparently Jimmy had plenty for him; he was no ladies' man; he had never troubled about a woman in his life, probably because none had ever troubled about him. He asked punctiliously for Jimmy; it was only when told that Mr. Challoner was out that he asked for Christine.

A little gleam of something like sympathy shot into the man's eyes. The chambermaid who waited on Christine was voluble, and a friend of his, and he had heard a great deal from her that was untrue, mixed up with a smattering of truth.

He said that he was sure Mrs. Challoner was in; he sent a page-boy up with Sangster's card.

It seemed a long time before the reply came. Mrs. Challoner would be pleased to see Mr. Sangster; would he go up to her sitting-room.

Sangster obeyed reluctantly; he dreaded tears; he dreaded to see grief and disillusionment in the beautiful eyes which he could only remember as happy and trusting. He waited nervously till she came to him. He looked round the room apprehensively; it had an empty, un-lived-in look about it, though there were various possessions of Jimmy's scattered about it—a pipe, newspapers, and a large box of cigarettes. There was a small pair of Christine's slippers, too, with high heels. Sangster looked at them with eyes which he did not know were tender. They seemed to appeal to him somehow; there was such a solitary look about them, standing there in a corner by themselves.

Then the door opened and she came in; a little pale ghost of the girl whom he had last seen, with quivering lips that tried to smile, and shadows beneath her eyes.

It was an effort to Sangster to greet her as if he were unconscious of the tragedy in her face; he took her hand in a close grip.

"I am so glad you allowed me to come up; I didn't want to intrude; I asked for Jimmy, but they told me he was out, and so I wondered if you would see me—just for a moment."

"I am very glad you came; I"—she bit her lip—"I don't think Jimmy will be back to lunch," she said.

"Capital!" Sangster tried to speak naturally; he laughed. "Then will you come out to lunch with me? Jimmy won't mind, and----"

"Oh, no, Jimmy won't mind." There was such bitterness in her voice that for a moment it shocked him into silence; she looked at him with burning eyes. "Jimmy wouldn't mind no matter what I did," she said, almost as if the words were forced from her against her will. "Oh, Mr. Sangster, why did you let him marry me?—you must have known. Jimmy doesn't care any more for me than—than you do."

There was a tragic pause. She did not cry; she just looked at him with broken-hearted eyes.

"Oh, my dear; don't—don't say that," said Sangster in distress.

He took her hand and held it clumsily between his own. Her words had been like a reproach. Was he to blame? he asked himself remorsefully; and yet—what could he have done? Christine would not have believed him had he tried to tell her.

"It's true," she said dully. "It's true . . . and now I haven't got anybody in all the world."

Sangster did not know what to answer. He broke out awkwardly that things were always difficult at first; that Jimmy was really one of the best; that if only she would have a little patience, everything would come right; he was sure of it.

But she only shook her head.

"I ought to have known; I can't think now why it is that I never guessed," she said hopelessly. "All the other women he has known are so much better than I am."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, don't say that," he broke out; there was a sort of horror in his face as he contrasted Cynthia and her friends to this girl. "You're ill and run down," he went on urgently. "Everything seems wrong when you're not

well. Will you come out with me? It's not raining now, and the air's beautifully fresh. I'm longing for a walk myself; I've been writing all the morning. We'll have some lunch together, and walk in the park afterwards, shall we?"

He thought she was going to refuse; she shook her head.

"Please do," he urged. "I want to talk to you; there are so many things I want to say to you." He waited a moment. "You told me once that you liked me," he submitted whimsically. "You've not gone back on that, have you?"

The ghost of a smile lit her eyes.

"No, but----"

"Then please come."

There was a moment's silence.

"Very well," said Christine. Her voice was quite apathetic. He knew that she was absolutely indifferent as to where she went or what she did. She looked so broken--just as if someone had wiped the sunshine out of her life with a ruthless hand.

She went away to dress, and Sangster stood at the window, frowning into the street.

"Infernal young fool!" he said savagely after a moment; but whether he referred to a youth who was just at that moment passing, or to Jimmy Challoner, seemed uncertain.

CHAPTER XIII

CHRISTINE HEARS THE TRUTH

Sangster took Christine to a little out-of-the-way restaurant, where he knew there would not be many people.

He carefully avoided referring again to Jimmy; he talked of anything and everything under the sun to try and distract her attention. She had declared that she was not hungry; but, to his delight, she ate quite a good lunch. She liked the restaurant; she had never been in Bohemia before. She was very interested in an old table Sangster showed her, which was carved all over with the signatures of well-known patrons of the house. A little flush crept into her pale cheeks; presently she was smiling.

Sangster was cheered; he told himself that she only needed understanding. He believed that if Jimmy chose, he could convince her that everything was going to be all right in the future; he believed that with a little tact and patience Jimmy could entirely regain her lost confidence. But patience and Jimmy seemed somehow irreconcilable; Jimmy was too young--too selfish. He sighed involuntarily as he looked at Christine.

When they had left the restaurant again, and were walking towards the park, he deliberately began to talk about Jimmy.

"I suppose Jimmy never told you how he and I first met, did he?" he asked.

"No." Her sensitive little face flushed; she looked up at him eagerly.

"It isn't a bit romantic really," he said. "At least, not from my point of view; but I dare say you would be interested, because it shows what a fine chap Jimmy really is." He took it for granted that she was listening. He went on: "It was some years ago now, of course--five years, I think; and I was broke--broke to the wide, if you know what that means!" He glanced down at her smilingly. "I'm by way of being a struggling journalist, you know," he explained. "More of the struggling than the journalist. I'm not a bit of good at the job, to be quite candid; but it's a life I like--and lately I've managed to scrape along quite decently. Anyhow, at the time I met Jimmy I was down and out . . . Fleet Street would have none of me, and I even had to pawn my watch."

"Oh!" said Christine with soft sympathy.

Sangster laughed.

"That's nothing; it's been pawned fifty times since it first came into my possession, I should think. Don't think I'm asking for sympathy--I'm not. It's the sort of life that suits me, and I wouldn't change it for another--even if I had the chance. But the night I ran across Jimmy I was fairly up against it. I hadn't had a square meal for a week, and I was ill to add to the trouble. Jimmy was coming along Pall Mall in evening-dress. He was smoking a cigar that smelt good, and I wondered as he passed me if I dared go up and ask him for a shilling."

"Oh, Mr. Sangster!" He looked down hearing the distress in her voice.

"Don't look so sorry!" he said very gently. "It's all in a day's march for me. I've had my good times, and I've had my bad; and when I come to write the story of my life--when I'm a bloated millionaire, that is!" he added in laughing parenthesis--"it will make fine reading to know that I was once so hard up that I cadged a shilling off a swell in evening-dress!"

But Christine did not laugh; her eyes were almost tragic as she looked up wonderingly at Sangster's honest face.

"And--and did you ask him?" she questioned.

"Did I not!" said Sangster heartily. "I went up to him--Jimmy stopped dead, I believe he thought I was going to pinch his watch--and I said, 'Will you be a sport and lend me a bob?' Not a bit romantic, you see!"

Christine caught her breath.

"And did he--did he?" she asked eagerly.

Sangster laughed reminiscently.

"You'll never guess what he said. He asked no questions, he took the cigar from his lips and looked at me, and he said, 'I haven't got a bob in the world till my brother, the Great Horatio, sends my monthly allowance along; but if you'll come as far as the next street, I know a chap I can borrow a sovereign from.' Wasn't that just Jimmy all over?"

Christine was laughing, too, now.

"Oh, I can just hear him saying it! I can just see him!" she cried.

"And then what did you do?"

"Well, we went along--to this pal of Jimmy's, and Jimmy borrowed a fiver. He gave me three pounds, and took me along to have a dinner. And--well, we've been pals ever since. A bit of luck for me, wasn't it?"

"I was thinking," said little Christine very earnestly, "that it was a bit of luck for Jimmy."

Sangster grew furiously red. For a moment he could think of nothing to say; he had only told the story in order to soften her towards Jimmy, and in a measure he had succeeded.

Christine walked beside him without speaking for some time; her brown eyes were very thoughtful.

Sangster talked no more of Jimmy; he was too tactful to overdo things. Jimmy was not mentioned between them again till he took her back to the hotel. Then:

"I don't know how to thank you for being so kind to me," she said earnestly. Her brown eyes were lifted confidently to his face. "But I've been happier this afternoon than--than I've ever been since my mother died."

Sangster gripped her hand hard for a moment.

"And you will be happy--always--if you're just a little patient," he said, rather huskily. "Jimmy's a spoiled boy, and--and--it's the women who have to show all of us--eh? It's the women who are our guardian angels; remember that!"

He hated himself for having had to blame her, even mildly, when the fault was so utterly and entirely Jimmy's. It seemed a monstrous thing that Christine should have to teach Jimmy unselfishness; he hoped he had not said too much.

But Christine was really much happier, had he known it. She went up to her room, and changed her frock for one of the few simple ones she had had new when she was married. She did her hair in a way she thought Jimmy would like; she sent one of the servants out for flowers to brighten the little sitting-room; she timidly ordered what she thought would be an extra nice dinner to please him. The waiter looked at her questioningly.

"For--for two, madam?" he asked hesitatingly.

"Yes, please. Mr. Challoner and I will dine up here this evening."

As a rule, Jimmy dined downstairs alone, and Christine had something sent up to her. She was vaguely beginning to realise now how foolish she had been. The little time she had spent with Sangster had been like the opening of a door in her poor little heart, letting in fresh air and common sense. After all, how could she hope to win Jimmy by tears and recriminations? She had heard the doctrine of "forgive and forget" preached so frequently; surely this was the moment in which to apply it to herself and him.

Her heart beat a little fast at the thought. She spoke again to the waiter as he turned to leave the room.

"And--and will you find out what wine Mr. Challoner has with his dinner, as a rule; and--and serve the same this evening."

The man hesitated, then:

"Mr. Challoner told me he should not be dining in this evening, madam," he said reluctantly. "He came in about three o'clock, and went out again; I think there was a message for him. He told me to tell you if you came in." He averted his eyes from Christine's blanching face as he spoke. "I am sure that is what Mr. Challoner said, madam," he repeated awkwardly.

"Oh, very well." Christine stood quite still in the empty room when he had gone; it seemed all the more lonely and empty, now that once again she had been robbed of her eager hopes.

Jimmy was not coming home. Jimmy found her so dull and uninteresting that he was only too glad of an excuse to stay out.

She wondered where he had gone; whom the message had been from.

A sudden crimson stain dyed her cheek. . . . Cynthia Farrow!

She tried hard to stamp the thought out of existence--tried hard to push it from her but it was useless. It grew and grew in her agonised mind till she could think of nothing else. She walked about the room, wringing her hands.

If Jimmy had gone to Cynthia, that was the end of everything. She could never forgive this. If Jimmy had gone to Cynthia, she hoped that she would die before she ever saw him again.

She could not believe that she had ever talked to him of Cynthia--that she had ever admired her, or thought her beautiful. She hated her now--hated her for the very charms that had so hopelessly captivated the man she loved. If Jimmy had gone to Cynthia . . . she stood still, fighting hard for self-control.

She tried to remember what Sangster had said:

"Jimmy is such a boy; give him a chance." And here she was already condemning him without a hearing.

She bit her lips till they bled. She would wait till she knew; she would wait till she was sure--quite sure.

She did her best to eat some of the dinner she had ordered, but it was uphill work. Jimmy's empty chair opposite was a continual reminder of his absence. Where was he? she asked herself in an agony of doubt. With whom was he dining whilst she was here alone?

After dinner she tried to read. She sat down by the fire, and turned the pages of a magazine without really seeing a line or picture. When someone knocked at the door she started up eagerly, with flushing cheeks; but it was only the waiter with coffee and an evening paper.

She asked him an anxious question:

"Mr. Challoner has not come in yet?" She tried hard to speak as if it were nothing out of the ordinary for Jimmy to be out.

"Not yet, madam." He set down the coffee and the evening paper and went quietly away. Outside on the landing he encountered the maid who waited on Christine.

"It's a shame--that's what it is!" the girl said warmly when he told her in whispered tones that Mrs. Challoner was alone again. "A shame! and her only just married, the pretty dear!"

She wondered what Christine was doing; she hovered round the door, sympathetic and longing to be able to help, and not knowing how.

Christine had taken up the paper. She did not know how to pass the evening; the minutes seemed to be dragging past with deliberate slowness.

She looked at the clock--only eight! She waited some time, then looked again. Five past. Why, surely the clock must have stopped; surely it must be half an hour since she had last glanced at its expressionless face.

She sighed wearily.

She had never felt so acutely alone and deserted in all her life; she had hardly been separated for a single day from her mother till death stepped in between them. Mrs. Wyatt's constant presence had kept Christine young; had made her more of a child than she would have been had she had to look after herself. She felt her position now the more acutely in consequence.

"Serious accident to Miss Cynthia Farrow." Her eyes caught the headline of the paragraph as she idly turned the page; she gave a little start. Her hands clutched the paper convulsively.

She read the few lines eagerly:

"Miss Cynthia Farrow, the well-known actress, was the victim of a serious motor-car accident this afternoon. Returning from the theatre, the car in which Miss Farrow was riding came into collision with a car owned by Mr. C. E. Hoskins, the well-known airman. Miss Farrow was unfortunately thrown out, and is suffering from concussion and severe bruises. Miss Farrow has been appearing at the --- Theatre as"

Christine read no more. She did not care for the details of Cynthia Farrow's life; all she cared was that this paragraph settled for once and all her doubt about Jimmy. Of course, Jimmy could not be with her if she were ill and unconscious. She felt bitterly ashamed of her suspicion; her spirits went up like rockets; she threw the paper aside. The terrible load of care seemed lifted for a moment from her shoulders; she was asking Jimmy's pardon on her heart's knees for having ever dreamed that he would do such a thing after all his promises to her.

She opened the door and looked into the corridor. Downstairs she could hear a band playing in the lounge; it sounded inviting and cheery. She went down the stairs and found a seat in a palm-screened corner.

Jimmy had begged her to mix more with other people, and not stay in her room so much. If he came in now he would be pleased to see that she had done as he asked her, she thought with a little thrill.

She could look ahead now, and make plans for their future. She would consent to leaving London at once, and going somewhere where Cynthia Farrow's influence had never made itself felt. She would start all over again; she would be so tactful, so patient. She would win him over to her; make him love her more than he had ever loved Cynthia.

Her face glowed at the thought; her eyes shone like stars. She lost herself in happy introspection.

"Yes--rotten hard luck, isn't it?" said a voice somewhere behind her. "Just when she's on the crest of the wave, as you might say. Doubtful if she gets over it, so I hear."

Christine listened apathetically. She wondered who the voice was talking about; she half turned; trying to see the speaker, but the palms effectually screened him.

A second, less distinct voice made some remark, and the first speaker answered with a little laugh:

"Yes--dead keen, wasn't he, poor beggar; but he wasn't rich enough for her. A woman like that makes diamonds trumps every time, and not hearts, you know--eh? Poor old Jimmy--he always hated Mortlake like the devil. . . . She was in Mortlake's car when the smash occurred, you know . . . No, I don't much think she'll marry him. If she goes on at the rate she's going now, she'll be flying for higher game in a month or two. I know women of that stamp--had some myself, as you might say. . . . What--really! poor old chap! Thought he only got married the other day."

The second voice was more audible now:

"So he did; some little girl from the country, I hear. God alone knows why he did it. . . . Anyway, there can't be any affection in it, because I happen to know that Jimmy was sent for to-night. They said she asked for him as soon as she could speak. . . . Jimmy, mark you! not a bob in the world. . . ." The voice broke in a cynical laugh.

Jimmy! They were talking of Jimmy--and---

All the blood in her body seemed to concentrate suddenly in her heart, and then rush away from it, turning her faint and sick. The many lights in the big lounge seemed to twinkle and go out.

She pressed her feet hard to the floor; she shut her eyes.

After a moment she felt better; her brain began to work again stiffly.

So Jimmy was with Cynthia, after all. Jimmy had been sent for, and Jimmy had gone.

This was the end of everything; this was the end of all her dreams of happiness of the future.

She sat there for a long, long time, unconscious of her surroundings; it was only when the band had stopped playing, and a sort of silence fell everywhere, that she moved stiffly and went back up the stairs to her own room.

She stood there by the bed for a moment, looking round her with dull eyes; the clock on the mantel-shelf pointed to nine.

Too late to go away to-night. Was it too late? A sudden memory leapt to her mind.

Jimmy and she had gone down to Upton House by a train later than this the day after her mother died. She tried to remember; it had been the nine-fifty from Euston, she was sure. She made a rapid calculation; she could catch that if she was quick--catch it if she hurried. She threw off her slippers; she began to collect a few things together in a handbag; her breath was coming fast--her heart was racing. She would never come back any more--never live with him again. She had lost her last shred of trust in him--she no longer loved him.

She was pinning on her hat with shaking fingers when someone tried the handle of the door--someone called her name softly.

"Christine . . ." It was Jimmy.

She stood quite still, hardly daring to breathe. She pressed her hands over her lips, as if afraid that he would hear the quick beating of her frightened heart.

"Christine . . ." He waited a moment, then she heard him saying something under his breath impatiently; another second, and he turned away to the sitting-room opposite.

She heard him moving about there for some time; she looked at the clock. Almost too late to go now; a fever of impatience consumed her.

If only he had not come back--if only she had gone sooner.

She turned out the light, and softly, an inch at a time, opened the door. There was a light burning in the sitting-room; there was a smell of cigarette smoke. Jimmy was still there.

She wondered if she could get away without him hearing her; she tiptoed back into the room, took up her bag from the bed, and crept again to the door.

The floor seemed to creak at every step. Half a dozen times she stopped, frightened; then suddenly the half-closed door of the sitting-room opposite opened, and Jimmy came out.

He was in evening-dress; he still wore a loose overcoat.

For a moment he stared at her blankly. The lights had been lowered a little in the corridor, and at first he was not sure if it was she. Then he strode across to her and caught her by the wrist in a not very gentle grip.

"Where are you going?" he asked roughly.

She cowered back from him against the wall; her face was white, but her eyes blazed at him in passionate defiance.

"I am going away. Let me go. I am never coming back any more."

He half led, half dragged her into the sitting-room; he put his back to the door, and stood looking at her, white-faced, silent.

The breath was tearing from his throat; he seemed afraid to trust himself to speak.

Presently:

"Why?" he asked hoarsely.

Christine was standing against the table, one trembling hand resting on it; she was afraid of him and of the white passion in his face, but she faced him bravely.

"I am never going to live with you any more. I--I wish I had never seen you."

Even her voice seemed to have changed; he realized it dully, and the knowledge added to his anger. She no longer spoke in the half-trembling childish way he remembered; there was something more grown-up and womanly about her.

"Don't be a little fool," he said roughly. "What is the matter? What have I done now? I'm sick to death of these scenes and heroics; for God's sake try and behave like a rational woman. Do you want the whole hotel to know that we've quarrelled?"

"They know already," she told him fiercely.

He came nearer to her.

"Take off your hat and coat, Christine, and don't be absurd. Why, we've only been married a little more than a week." His voice was quieter and more gentle. "What's the matter? Let's sit down and talk things over quietly. I've something to tell you. I wanted to see you to-night; I came to your door just now."

"I know--I heard you."

"Very well; what's it all about? What have I done to upset you like this?"

She shut her eyes for a moment. When he spoke to her so kindly it almost broke her heart; it brought back so vividly the boy sweetheart whom she had never really forgotten. And yet this Jimmy was not the Jimmy she had known in those happy days, This Jimmy only looked at her with the same eyes; in reality he was another man--a stranger whom she feared and almost hated.

He took her hand.

"Christine--are you ill?"

She opened her eyes; they were blazing.

The touch of his fingers on hers seemed to drive her mad.

"Yes," she said shrilly, "I am--ill because of you and your lies, and your hateful deception; ill because you've broken my heart and ruined my life. You swore to me that you'd never see Cynthia Farrow again. You swore to me that it was all over and done with; and now--now----"

"Yes--now," said Jimmy; his voice was hoarse and strained. "Yes--and now," he said again, as she did not answer.

She wrenched herself free.

"You've been with her this evening. You've left me alone here all these hours to be with her. I don't count at all in your life. I don't know why you married me, unless it was to--to pay her out. I wish I'd never seen you. I wish I'd died before I ever married you. I wish--oh, I wish I could die now," she ended in a broken whisper.

Jimmy had fallen back a step; he was no longer looking at her. There was a curious expression of shocked horror in his eyes as they stared past his wife into the silent room.

Presently:

"She's dead," he said hoarsely. "Cynthia Farrow is dead."

CHAPTER XIV

BITTERNESS

"Dead!" Christine echoed Jimmy's hoarse word in a dull voice, not understanding. "Dead!" she said again blankly.

He moved away from the door; he dropped into a chair and hid his face in his hands.

There was a moment of absolute silence.

Christine stared at Jimmy's bowed head with dull eyes.

She was trying to force her brain to work, but she could not; she was only conscious of a faint sort of curiosity as to whether Jimmy were lying to her; but somehow he did not look as if he were. She tried to speak to him, but no words would come.

Suddenly he raised his head; he was very pale. "Well?" he said defiantly.

His eyes were hard and full of hurt; hurt because of another woman, Christine told herself, in furious pain; hurt because the woman he had really and truly loved had gone out of his life for ever.

She tried to say that she was sorry, but the words seemed to choke her--she was not sorry; she was glad. She was passionately glad that the beautiful woman whom she had at first so ardently admired was now only a name between them.

"So you've no need to be jealous any more," said Jimmy Challoner, after a moment.

No need to be jealous! There was still the same need; death cannot take memory away with it. Christine felt as if the dead woman were more certainly between them now, keeping them apart, than ever before.

The silence fell again; then suddenly Christine moved to the door.

Jimmy caught her hand.

"Where are you going? Don't be a little fool. It's ever so late; you can't leave the hotel to-night."

"I am not going to stay here with you." She did not look at him; did not even faintly guess how much he was longing for a kind word, a little sympathy. He had had the worst shock of his inconsequent life when, in reply to that urgent summons, he had raced round to Cynthia Farrow's flat, and found that he was too late.

"She died ten minutes ago."

Only ten minutes! Jimmy had stared blankly at the face of the weeping maid, and then mechanically taken his watch from his pocket and looked at it. Only ten minutes! If he had not had to hang about for a taxi he would have been in time to have seen her.

Now he would never see her again; as yet he had had no time in which to analyse his feelings; he was numbed with the shock of it all; he listened like a man in a dream to the details they told him. It passed him by unmoved that she had been in Mortlake's car when the accident occurred; it had conveyed nothing to his mind when they told him that the only words she had spoken during her brief flash of consciousness had been to ask for him.

As he stood there in the familiar scented pink drawing-room, his thoughts had flown with odd incongruity to Christine.

She would be kind to him--she would be sorry for him; his whole heart and soul had been on fire to get back to her--to get away from the harrowing silence of the flat which had always been associated in his mind with fun and laughter, and the happiest days of his life.

A fur coat of Cynthia's lay across a chair-back; so many times he had helped her slip into it after her performance at the

theatre was ended. He knew so well the faint scent that always clung to it; he shuddered and averted his eyes. She would never wear it again; she was dead! He wondered what would become of it--what would become of all her clothes, and her jewelry and her trinkets.

Suddenly, in the middle of more details, he had turned and rushed blindly away. It was not so much grief as a sort of horror at himself that drove him; he felt as if someone had forced him to look on a past folly--a folly of which he was now ashamed.

He had thought of Christine with a sort of passionate thankfulness and gratitude; and now there was nothing but dislike and contempt for him in her brown eyes. Somehow she seemed like a different woman to the one whom he had so lightly wooed and won such a little while ago. She looked older--wiser; the childishness of her face seemed to have hardened; it was no longer the little girl Christine who faced him in the silent room.

He broke out again urgently:

"Don't be absurd, Christine. I won't have it, I tell you, I forbid you to leave the hotel. After all, you're my wife--you must do as I wish." She seemed not to hear him; she stood with her eyes fixed straight in front of her.

"Please let me go."

"Where are you going? You're my wife--you'll have to stay with me." His hand was on the door handle now; he was looking down at her with haggard eyes in his white face.

"Let's begin all over again, Christine. I've been a rotter, I know; but if you'll have a little patience--it's not too late--we can patch things up, and--and I'll promise you----"

She cut him short.

"You are saying this because she is dead. If she were living you would not care what I did, or what became of me." Suddenly her voice changed wildly. "Oh, let me go--let me go!"

For a moment their glances met, and for the first time in his spoiled and pampered life Jimmy Challoner saw hatred looking at him through a woman's eyes. It drove the hot blood to his head; he was unnerved with the shock he had suffered that evening. For a moment he saw the world red; he lifted his clenched fist.

"Go, then--and a damned good riddance!"

"Jimmy!" Her scream of terror stayed his hand, and kept him from striking her. He staggered back, aghast at the thing he had so nearly done.

"Christine--Christine----" he stammered; but she had gone. The shutting and locking of her bedroom door was his only answer.

CHAPTER XV

SANGSTER SPEAKS IN RIDDLES

Sangster heard of Cynthia Farrow's death late that night.

He was walking up Fleet Street when he ran into a man he knew--a man whom Jimmy knew also; he stopped and caught him by his buttonhole.

"I say, have you heard--awful thing, isn't it?"

Sangster stared.

"Heard! Heard what?"

"About Cynthia Farrow. Had a frightful accident--in Mortlake's car."

Sangster's eyes woke to interest.

"Badly hurt?" he asked briefly.

"Dead!"

"My God!" There was a moment of tragic silence. "Dead!" said Sangster again. He could not believe it; his face was very pale. "Dead!" he said again. His thoughts flew to Jimmy Challoner. "Are you sure?" he asked urgently. "There's no mistake--you're quite sure?"

"Sure! Man alive, it's in all the papers! They've all got hold of a different story, of course; some say she never recovered consciousness, and others----" He lowered his voice. "I happen to know that she did," he added confidentially. "She sent for Challoner, and he was with her when she died."

"Challoner--Jimmy Challoner!" Sangster repeated his friend's name dully. The one shocked thought of his heart was "Christine."

"I always knew she really liked him," the other man went on complacently. "If he'd had Mortlake's money----" He shrugged his shoulders significantly.

Sangster waited to hear no more; he went straight to Jimmy's hotel. It was late then--nearly eleven. The hall porter said in reply to his inquiry that Mr. and Mrs. Challoner had both been in all the evening, he thought, and were still in; he looked at Sangster's agitated face curiously.

"Was you wishing to see Mr. Challoner, sir?"

"No--oh, no. I only thought--you need not tell him that I called." He went away wretchedly; he wondered if Christine knew--and if so, what she must be thinking.

He never slept all night. He was on the 'phone to Jimmy long before breakfast; he was infinitely relieved to hear Jimmy's voice.

"Hallo--yes, I'm all right, thanks. Want to see me? Well----"

There was a pause here. Sangster waited in a fever of impatience. After a moment:

"I'll meet you for lunch, if you like. . . . No, can't before. . . .
What do you say? Christine? Oh, yes--yes, thanks; she's very well."

There was another pause. "One o'clock, then."

Jimmy rang off.

Sangster felt easier as he sat down to his breakfast. Jimmy's voice had sounded fairly normal, if a little constrained; and it was not such a very long time till one o'clock, when he would hear all there was to hear.

He forced himself to work all the morning. He did not even glance at a paper; he knew they would be full of Cynthia Farrow's accident and tragic death; he dreaded lest there might be some inadvertent allusion made to Jimmy. He was still hoping that Christine would never know that Jimmy had been sent for; he rightly guessed that if she heard it would mean a long farewell to any hope of happiness in her married life.

Jealousy--bitter jealousy; that was what had been rending her heart, he knew. He stopped writing; he took up a pencil, and absently began scribbling on his blotter.

If Cynthia were out of the way, there was no reason why, in time, Jimmy and his wife should not be perfectly happy. He hoped with all his heart that they would be; he would have given a great deal to have seen Christine smiling and radiant once more, as she had been that night when they all had supper at Marino's.

He sighed heavily; he looked at the lines he had been so absently scribbling.

Christine--Christine--Christine. Nothing but her name. It stared up at him in all shapes and sizes from the blotter. Sangster flushed dully; he tore the sheet of paper free, and tossed it into the fire. What was he dreaming about? Where were his thoughts?

He had arranged to meet Jimmy at the same little restaurant where yesterday he had taken Christine to lunch. He was there a quarter of an hour before the appointed time.

When Jimmy arrived Sangster glanced at him anxiously. He was very pale; his eyes looked defiant; there was a hard fold to his lips.

"Hallo!" he said laconically; he sat down opposite to Sangster. "I don't want any lunch; you fire away."

He seemed to avoid Sangster's eyes; there was a little awkward silence.

"How's the wife?" Sangster asked nervously.

Jimmy laughed mirthlessly.

"She's left me; she says she'll never live with me again."

"Left you!"

"Yes. . . . Oh, don't look so scandalised, man! I saw her off from Euston myself; it was all outwardly quite a friendly arrangement. She's gone down to Upton House; she's going to have a friend of hers to stay with her for a time--a Miss Leighton----" He paused, and went on heavily: "Of course, you've heard about--about----"

"Yes----"

"Well--well, they sent for me. It was too late! She--she was dead when I got there; but Christine found out somehow--I don't know how. I give you my word of honour I meant to have told her; but--she wouldn't believe anything I said. . . . We--we had a row last night; I dare say it was my fault. I was upset, of course----"

"Of course."

"And this morning I tried to apologise. I asked her to overlook everything that had happened, and--and start again." Jimmy laughed dully. "I--well, I believe she hates the sight of me."

Jimmy caught his breath hard on the memory of the burning hatred that had looked at him from Christine's beautiful brown eyes.

"It's quite for the best--this arrangement. Don't think I'm blaming her--I'm not; perhaps if she'd been a little older--if she'd known a little more about the world--she'd have been more tolerant; I don't know. Anyway, she's gone." He raised his humiliated eyes to Sangster's distressed face.

"She will forgive you. She's hurt now, of course; but later on . . ."

Jimmy shook his head.

"She's made me promise to keep away from her for six months. I had no option--she thinks the worst of me, naturally. She thinks that I--I cared for--for Cynthia--right up to the end. . . . I didn't." He stopped, choking. "She's dead--don't let's talk about it," he added.

Sangster had hardly touched his lunch; he sat smoking fast and furiously.

"Six months is a long time," he said at last.

"Yes--it's only a polite way of saying she never wants to see me again; and I don't blame her."

"That's absurd; she's too fond of you."

Jimmy hunched his shoulders.

"That's what I tried to flatter myself; but I know better now. She--she wouldn't even shake hands with me when I said 'good-bye' to her at Euston." There was a little silence. The thoughts of both men flew to Christine as she had been when she first came to London; so happy--so radiantly happy.

And Jimmy could look farther back still; could see her as she had been in the old days at Upton House when she had been his first love. Jimmy gave a great sigh.

"What a damnable hash-up, eh?" he said.

"It'll all come right--I'm certain it will."

Jimmy looked at him affectionately.

"Dear old optimist!" He struck a match and lit the cigarette which had been hanging listlessly between his lips. "I suppose--if you'd run down and have a look at her now and then," he said awkwardly. "She likes you--and you could let me know if she's all right."

"If you don't think she would consider it an intrusion."

"I am sure she wouldn't; and you'll like Upton House." Jimmy's voice was dreamily reminiscent. "It's to be sold later on, you know; but for the present Christine will live there. . . . It would be a real kindness if you would run down now and then, old chap."

"I will, of course, if you're sure----"

"I'm quite sure. Christine likes you."

"Very well."

Sangster kept his eyes downbent; somehow he could not meet Jimmy's just then.

"And you--what are you going to do?" he asked presently.

"I shall go back to my old rooms for a time, and take Costin with me; he'll be pleased, anyway, with the new arrangement. It was really funny the way he tried to congratulate me when I told him I was going to be married----" He broke off, remembering that afternoon, and the way Cynthia had come into the room as they were talking.

He would never see her again; never meet the seductive pleading of her eyes any more; never hear her laughing voice calling to him, "Jimmy dear."

The thought was intolerable. He moved restlessly in his chair; the sweat broke out on his forehead.

"My God! it seems impossible that she's dead," he said hoarsely.

Sangster did not look up.

There was a long pause.

"She was in Mortlake's car, you know," said Jimmy again, disjointedly.

Sangster nodded.

"He'll be shockingly cut-up," said Jimmy again. "I hated the chap; but he was really fond of her."

"Yes." Jimmy's cigarette had gone out again, and he relit it absently.

"Christine will never believe that it hasn't broken my heart," he said in a queer voice.

No answer.

"You won't believe it either?" he said.

The eyes of the two men met; Jimmy flushed scarlet.

"It's the truth," he said. "I think, ever since I knew that she--that she had tried to get rid of me----" He stopped painfully.

"It makes me wonder if I ever--ever really, you know."

"We all make mistakes--bad mistakes," said Sangster kindly.

Jimmy smiled a little.

"You old philosopher . . . I don't believe you've ever cared a hang for a woman in all your life."

"Oh, yes I have." Sangster's eyes were staring past Jimmy, down the little room.

"Really?" Jimmy was faintly incredulous. "Who was she--wouldn't she have you?"

"I never asked her, and she is married now--to another man."

"A decent fellow?"

There was a little silence, then:

"I think he'll turn out all right," said Sangster quietly. "I hope so."

CHAPTER XVI

THE PAST RETURNS

Christine had learned a great deal since her marriage. As she stood on the platform at Euston that morning with Jimmy Challoner she felt old enough to be the grandmother of the girl who had looked up at him with such glad recognition less than a month ago in the theatre.

Old enough, and sad enough.

She could not bear to look at him now. It cut her to the heart to see the listless droop of his shoulders and the haggard lines of his face. It was not for her--his sorrow; that was the thought she kept steadily before her eyes; it was not because he had offended and hurt her past forgiveness; but because Cynthia Farrow was now only a name and a memory.

The train was late in starting. Jimmy stood on the platform trying to make conversation; he had bought a pile of magazines and a box of chocolates which lay disregarded beside Christine on the seat; he had ordered luncheon for her, although she protested again and again that she should not eat anything.

He racked his brains to think if there were any other little service he could do for her. He was full of remorse and shame as he stood there.

She had been so fond of him--she had meant to be so happy; and now she was glad to be leaving him.

The guard blew his whistle. Jimmy turned hastily, the blood rushing to his white face.

"If you ever want me, Christine----" She seemed not to be listening, and he broke off, only to stumble on again: "Try and forgive me--try not to think too hardly of me." She looked at him then; her beautiful eyes were hard and unyielding.

The train had begun to move slowly from the platform. Jimmy was on the footboard; he spoke to her urgently.

"Say you forgive me, Christine. If you'll just shake hands----"

She drew back, as if she found him distasteful.

The train was gathering speed. A porter made a grab at Jimmy.

"Stand back, sir."

Jimmy obeyed mechanically. Christine would not have cared had he been killed, he told himself savagely.

But for his pig-headed foolishness, he and Christine might have been going down to Upton House together; but for the past----

"Damn the past!" said Jimmy Challoner as he turned on his heel and walked away.

* * * * *

But the past was very real to Christine as she sat there alone in a corner of the first-class carriage into which Jimmy had put her, and stared before her with dull eyes at a row of photographs advertising seaside places.

This was the end of all her dreams of happiness. She and Jimmy were separated; it seemed impossible that they had ever really been married--that she was really his wife and he her husband.

She dragged off her glove, and looked at her wedding ring; she had never taken it off since the moment in that dingy London church when Jimmy had slipped it on.

And yet it was such an empty symbol. He had never loved her; he had married her because some other woman, whom

he did love, was beyond his reach.

She did not cry; she seemed to have shed all the tears in her heart. She just sat there motionless as the train raced her back to the old house and the old familiar scenes, where she had been happy--many years ago--with Jimmy Challoner.

He had wired to Gladys Leighton; Gladys would be there at the station to meet her. She wondered what she would say to her.

She thought of the uncle who had journeyed to London with such reluctance to give her away; he would tell her that it served her right, she was sure. Even on her wedding day he had trotted out the old maxim of marrying in haste.

Christine smiled faintly as she thought of him; after all, she need not see much of him--he did not live near Upton House. When the restaurant attendant came to tell her that lunch was ready, she followed him obediently. Jimmy had tipped him half-a-crown to make sure that Christine went to the dining-car. She even enjoyed her meal. A man sitting at the same table with her looked at her curiously from time to time; he was rather a good-looking man. Once when she dropped her gloves he stooped and picked them up for her; later on he pulled up the window because he saw her shiver a little. "These trains are well warmed as a rule," he said.

Christine looked at him timidly.

She liked his face; something about his eyes made her think of Jimmy.

"Are you travelling far?" he asked presently.

She told him--only to Osterway.

He smiled suddenly.

"I am going there, too. Do you happen to know a place called Upton House?"

Christine flushed.

"It's my home," she said. "I live there."

"What a coincidence. I heard it was in the market--I am going down with a view to purchase."

Her face saddened.

"Yes--it is to be sold. My mother died last month. . . . Everything is to be sold."

"You are sorry to have to part with it?" he asked her sympathetically.

"Yes." Tears rose to her eyes, and she brushed them, ashamedly away. "I've lived there all my life," she told him. "All my happiest days have been spent there." She was thinking of Jimmy, and the days when he rode old Judas barebacked round the paddock.

The stranger was looking at Christine interestedly; he glanced down at her left hand, from which she had removed the glove; he was surprised to see that she wore a wedding ring.

Surely she could not be married--that child! He looked again at the mourning she wore; perhaps her husband was dead. He forgot for the moment that she had just told him of the death of her mother.

He questioned her interestedly about Osterway. What sort of a place was it? Were the people round about sociable? He liked plenty of friends, he said.

Christine answered eagerly that everyone was very nice. To hear her talk one would have imagined that Osterway was a little heaven on earth. The last few weeks, with their excitement and disillusionment, had made the past seem all the more roseate by contrast. She told this man that she would rather live in Osterway than anywhere else; that she only wished she were sufficiently well off to keep Upton House.

When the train ran into the station he asked diffidently if he might be allowed to drive her home.

"My car is down here," he explained. "I sent it on with my man. I am staying in the village for a few days. . . . Upton House is some way from the station, I believe?"

"Two miles. . . . I should like to drive home with you," she told him shyly. "Only I am meeting a friend here."

"Perhaps your friend will drive with us, too," he said.

Christine thought it a most excellent arrangement. She looked eagerly up and down the platform for Gladys Leighton, but there was no sign of her.

"Perhaps she never got my telegram," she said in perplexity. She asked the stationmaster if there had been a lady waiting for the train; but he had seen nobody.

The man with whom she had travelled down from London stood patiently beside her.

"Shall we drive on?" he suggested. "We may meet your friend on the road."

They went out to the big car; there was a smart man in livery to drive them. Christine and her companion sat together in the back seat. They drove slowly the first half-mile, but there was no sign of Gladys anywhere. Christine felt depressed. She had counted on Gladys; she had been so sure that she would not fail her; she began to wonder if Jimmy had sent that wire; she hated herself for the thought, but her whole belief and idea of him had got hopelessly inverted during the past days.

They seemed to reach Upton House very quickly.

"You are evidently expected," her companion said; "judging by the look of the house."

The front door stood open; the wide gate to the drive was fastened back. As the car stopped the housekeeper came to the door; she looked interestedly at Christine, and with faint amazement at her companion. For the first time Christine felt embarrassed: she wondered if perhaps she had been foolish to accept this man's offer of an escort. When they were inside the house she turned to him timidly.

"Will you tell me your name? It--it seems so funny not to know your name. Mine is Christine Wyatt--Challoner, I mean," she added with a flush of embarrassment.

"My name is Kettering--Alfred Kettering." He smiled down at her. "The name Challoner is very familiar to me," he said. "My greatest friend is a man named Challoner."

Christine caught her breath.

"Not--Jimmy?" she asked.

"No--Horace. He has a young brother named Jimmy, though--a disrespectful young scamp, who always called Horace 'the Great Horatio.' You don't happen to know them, I suppose?"

Christine had flushed scarlet.

"He is my husband," she said in a whisper.

"Your--husband!" Kettering stared at her with amazed eyes, then suddenly he held out his hand. "That makes us quite old friends, then, doesn't it?" he said with change of voice. "I have known Horace Challoner all my life; as a matter of fact, I was with him all last summer in Australia. I have been home myself only a few weeks."

Christine did not know what to say. She knew that this man must be wondering where Jimmy was; that it was more than probable that he would write to the Great Horatio and inform him of their chance meeting, and of anything else which he might discover about her mistaken marriage.

"I don't think Horace knows that his brother is married, does he?" the man said again, Christine raised her eyes.

"We've only been married ten days," she said tremulously.

"Is that so? Then I am not too late to offer you my most sincere congratulations, and to wish you every happiness." He took her hand in a kindly grip.

Christine tried to thank him, but somehow she seemed to have lost her voice. She moved on across the hall into the dining-room, where there was a cheery fire burning and tea laid.

"You will have some tea with me," she said. "And then afterwards I will show you over the house--if you really want to see it?" She looked up at him wistfully. "I should like you to have it, I think," she told him hesitatingly. "If it has got to be sold, I should like to know that somebody--nice--has bought it."

"Thank you." He stood back to the fire, watching her as she poured out the tea.

Married--this child! It seemed so absurd. She looked about seventeen.

Suddenly:

"And where is Jimmy?" he asked her abruptly. "I wonder if he would remember me! Hardly, I expect; it's a great many years since we met."

Christine had been expecting the question; she kept her face averted as she answered:

"Jimmy is in London; he saw me off this morning. He--he isn't able to come down just yet."

There was a little silence.

"I see," said Kettering. Only ten days married, and not able to come down. Jimmy had never done an hour's work in his life, so far as Kettering could remember. He knew quite well that he was living on an allowance from his brother; it seemed a curious sort of situation altogether.

He took his tea from Christine's hands. He noticed that they trembled a little, as if she were very nervous, he tried to put her at her ease; he spoke no more of Jimmy.

"I wonder what has happened to your friend?" he said cheerily. "I dare say she will turn up here directly."

"I hope she will." Christine glanced towards the window; it was rapidly getting dusk. "I hope she will," she said again apprehensively. "I should hate having to stay here by myself." She shivered a little as she spoke. She turned to him suddenly.

"Are you--married?" she asked interestedly.

He laughed.

"No. . . . Why do you ask?"

"I was only wondering. I hope you don't think it rude of me to have asked you. I was only thinking that--if you were married and had any children, this is such a lovely house for them. When we were all little we used to have such fine times. There is a beautiful garden and a great big room that runs nearly the length of the house upstairs, which we used to have for a nursery."

"You had brothers and sisters, then?"

"No--but Jimmy was always here; and Gladys--Gladys is the friend I am expecting--she is like my own sister, really!"

"I see." His eyes watched her with an odd sort of tenderness in them.

"And so you have known Jimmy a great many years?" he asked.

"All my life."

"Then you know his brother as well?"

"I have met him--yes; but I dare say he has forgotten all about me."

"He will be very pleased with Jimmy's choice of a wife," he answered her quickly. "He always had an idea that Jimmy would bring home a golden-haired lady from behind the footlights, I think," he added laughingly.

He broke off suddenly at sight of the pain in little Christine's face.

There was an awkward silence. Christine herself broke it.

"Shall we go and look over the house before it gets quite dark?"

She had taken off her coat and furs; she moved to the door.

Kettering followed silently. He was fully conscious that in some way he had blundered by his laughing reference to a "golden-haired lady of the footlights"; he felt instinctively that there was something wrong with this little girl and her marriage--that she was not happy.

He tried to remember what sort of a fellow Jimmy had been in the old days; but his memory of him was vague. He knew that Horace had often complained bitterly of Jimmy's extravagance--knew that there had often been angry scenes between the two Challoners; but he could not recall having heard of anything actually to Jimmy's discredit.

And, anyway, surely no man on earth could ever treat this little girl badly, even supposing--even supposing----

"It's not such a very big house," Christine was saying, and he woke from his reverie to answer her. "But it's very pretty, don't you think?" She opened a door on the left. "This used to be our nursery," she told him. They stood together on the threshold; the room was long and low-ceilinged, with a window at each end.

A big rocking-horse covered over with a dust-sheet stood in one corner; there was a doll's house and a big toy box together in another. The whole room was painfully silent and tidy, as if it had long since forgotten what it meant to have children playing there--as if even the echoes of pattering feet and shrill voices had deserted it.

Kettering glanced down at Christine. Her little face was very sad; she was looking at the big rocking-horse, and there were tears in her eyes.

She and Jimmy had so often ridden its impossible back together; this deserted room was full of Jimmy and her mother--to her sad heart it was peopled with ghost faces, and whispering voices that would never come any more.

Kettering turned away.

"Shall we see the rest of the house?" he asked. He hated that look of sadness in her face; he was surprised because he felt such a longing to comfort her.

But they had no time to see the rest of the house, for at that moment someone called, "Christine--Christine," from the hall below, and Christine clasped her hands delightedly.

"That is Gladys. Oh, I am so glad--so glad."

She forgot all about Kettering; she ran away from him, and down the stairs in childish delight. He followed slowly. He reached the hall just in time to see her fling herself into the arms of a tall girl standing there; just in time to hear smothered ejaculations.

"You poor darling!" and "Oh, Gladys!" and the sound of many kisses.

He stood there awkwardly, not knowing what to do. Over Christine's head, his eyes met those of the elder girl. She smiled.

"Christine . . . you didn't tell me you had visitors."

Christine looked up, all smiles now and apologies, as she said:

"Oh, I am so sorry--I forgot." She introduced them. "Mr. Kettering--Miss Leighton. . . Mr. Kettering has been looking over the house; I hope he will buy it," she added childishly.

"It's a shame it has got to be sold," said Gladys bluntly. There was something very taking about her, in spite of red hair and an indifferent complexion; she had honest blue eyes and a pleasant voice. She looked at Kettering a great deal as she spoke; perhaps she noticed how often his eyes rested on Christine. When presently they went out into the garden, she walked between them; she kept an arm about Christine's little figure.

"I missed the train," she explained. "I got your husband's wire, Christine. Oh, yes, I got it all right, and I rushed to pack the very

minute; but the cab was slow, and I just missed the train. However, I'm here all right."

She looked at Kettering.

"Do you live near here?" she asked him.

"No; but I am hoping to soon," he said; and again she wondered if it were only her imagination that his eyes turned once more to Christine.

When they got back to the house he bade them "good-bye." The big car was still waiting in the drive; its headlights were lit now, and they shone through the darkness like watchful eyes.

"Who is he, anyway?" Gladys asked Christine bluntly, when Kettering had driven off. Christine shook her head.

"I don't know; he came down in the train with me, and we had lunch at the same table, and he spoke. He was coming down here to look at our house, and so--well, we came up together."

"What do you think Jimmy would say?"

"Jimmy!" There was such depths of bitterness in Christine's voice that the elder girl stared.

"Jimmy! He wouldn't care what I did, or what became of me. I--I--I'm never going to live with him any more."

Gladys opened her mouth to say something, and closed it again.

She had guessed that there had been something behind that urgent wire from Jimmy, but she wisely asked no questions. They went back into the house together.

"You'll have to know in the end, so I may as well tell you now," Christine said hopelessly. She sat down on the rug by the fire, a forlorn little figure enough in her black frock.

She told the whole story from beginning to end. She blamed nobody; she just spoke as if the whole thing had been a muddle which nobody could have foreseen or averted.

Gladys listened silently. She was a very sensible girl; she seldom gave an impulsive judgment on any subject; but now--

"Jimmy wants his neck wrung," she said vehemently.

Christine looked up with startled eyes.

"Oh, how can you say such a thing!"

"Because it's true." Gladys looked very angry. "He's behaved in a rotten way; men always do, it seems to me. He married you to spite this--this other woman, whoever she was! and then--even then he didn't try to make it up to you, or be ordinarily decent and do his best, did he?"

"He didn't love me, you see; and so----" Christine defended him.

"He'll never love anyone in the wide world except himself," Gladys declared disgustedly. "I remember years ago, when we were all kiddies together, how selfish he was, and how you always gave in to him. Christine"--she stretched out her hand impulsively to the younger girl--"do you love him very much?" she asked.

Christine put her head down on her arms.

"Oh, I did--I did," she said, ashamedly. "Sometimes I wonder if--if he hadn't been quite so--so sure of me! if--if he would have cared just a little bit more. He must have known all along that I wanted him; and so----" She broke off desolately.

The two girls sat silent for a moment.

"And now--what's he going to do now?" Gladys demanded.

Christine sighed.

"I told him I didn't want to see him. I told him I didn't want him to come down here for six months--and he promised. . . . He isn't to come or even to write unless--unless I ask him to."

"And then--what happens then?"

Christine began to cry.

"Oh, I don't know--I don't know," she sobbed. "I am so miserable--I wish I were dead."

Gladys laid a hand on her bowed head.

"You're so young, Christine," she said sadly. "Somehow I don't believe you'll ever grow up." She had not got the heart to tell her that she thought this six months separation could do no good at all--that it would only tend to widen the breach already between them.

She was a pretty good judge of character; she knew quite well what sort of a man Jimmy Challoner was. And six months--well, six months was a long time.

"Mr. Kettering knows Jimmy's brother," Christine said presently, drying her eyes. "So I suppose if he comes to live anywhere near here, he will know what--what is the matter with--with me and Jimmy, and he'll write and tell Horace."

"And then Jimmy will get his allowance stopped, and serve him right," said Gladys bluntly.

Christine cried out in dismay:

"Oh, but that would be dreadful! What would he do?"

"Work, like other men, of course."

But Christine would not listen.

"I shall ask Mr. Kettering not to tell Horace--if I ever see him again," she said agitatedly.

Gladys laughed dryly.

"Oh, you'll see him again right enough," she said laconically.

CHAPTER XVII

JIMMY BREAKS OUT

It took Jimmy a whole week to realise that Christine meant what she said when she asked him not to write to her, or go near her. At first he had been so sure that in a day or two at most she would be sorry, and want to see him; somehow he could not believe that the little unselfish girl he had known all his life could so determinedly make up her mind and stick to it.

He grumbled and growled to Sangster every time they met.

"I was a fool to let her go. The law is on my side; I could have insisted that she stayed with me." He looked at his friend. "*I could have insisted, I say!*" he repeated.

Sangster raised his eyes.

"I'm not denying it; but it's much wiser as it is. Leave her alone, and things will work out their own salvation."

"She'll forget all about me, and then what will happen?" Jimmy demanded. "A nice thing--a very nice thing that would be."

"No doubt she thinks that is what you wish her to do."

Jimmy called him a fool; he threw a half-smoked cigarette into the fire, and sat watching it burn with a scowl on his face.

The last week had seemed endless. He had kept away from the club; the men in the club always knew everything--he had learned that by previous experience; he had no desire for the shower of chaff which he knew would greet his appearance there.

Married a week--and now Christine had gone! It made his soul writhe to think of it. It had hurt enough to be jilted; but this--well, this struck at his pride even more deeply.

"I thought you promised me to go down to Upton House and see how things were," he growled at Sangster. "You haven't been, have you? I suppose you don't mean to go either?"

"My dear chap----"

"Oh, don't 'dear chap' me," Jimmy struck in irritably. "Go if you mean to go. . . . After all, if anything happens to Christine, it's my responsibility----"

"Then you should go yourself."

"I promised I wouldn't--unless she asked me to. If you were anything of a sport----"

In the end Sangster consented to go. He was not anxious to undertake the journey, much as he wanted to see Christine again. At the end of the second week he went off early one morning without telling Jimmy of his intentions, and was back in town late the same night. Jimmy was waiting for him in the rooms in the unfashionable part of Bloomsbury. It struck Sangster for the first time that Jimmy was beginning to look old; his face was drawn--his eyes looked worried. He turned on his friend with a sort of rage when he entered.

"Why couldn't you have told me where you were going. Here I've been waiting about all day, wondering where you were and what was up."

"I've been to see your wife--and there's nothing up."

"You mean you didn't see her?"

"Oh, yes, I did."

"Well--well!" Jimmy's voice sounded as if his nerves were worn to rags; he could hardly keep still.

"She seemed very cheerful," said Sangster slowly. He spoke with care, as if he were choosing his words. "Miss Leighton was with her; and we all had tea together."

"At Upton House?"

"Yes."

Jimmy's eyes were gleaming.

"How does the old place look?" he asked eagerly. "Gad! don't I wish I'd got enough money to buy it myself. You've no idea what a ripping fine time we used to have there years ago."

"I'm sure you did; but--well, as a matter of fact, I believe the house is sold."

"Sold!"

"Yes; a man named Kettering--a friend of your brother's, I believe--is negotiating for it, at any rate. Whether the purchase is really completed or not, I----"

"Kettering!" Jimmy's voice sounded angry. "Kettering--that stuck-up ass!" he said savagely.

Sangster laughed.

"I shouldn't have described him as stuck-up at all," he said calmly.

"He struck me as being an extremely nice sort of fellow."

"Was he there, then?"

"Yes--he's staying somewhere in the neighbourhood temporarily, I believe, from what I heard; at any rate, he seemed very friendly with--with your wife and Miss Leighton."

Jimmy began pacing the room.

"I remember him well," he said darkly, after a moment. "Big chap with a brown moustache--pots of money." He walked the length of the room again. "Christine ought not to encourage him," he burst out presently. "What on earth must people think, as I'm not there."

"I don't see any harm," Sangster began mildly.

Jimmy rounded on him:

"You--you wouldn't see harm in anything; but Christine's a very attractive little thing, and----" He broke off, flushing dully. "Anyway, I won't have it," he added snappily.

"I don't see how you're going to stop it, unless----"

"Unless what?"

"Unless you go down there." Sangster spoke deliberately now. In spite of his calm assertion that there was no harm in Kettering's visit to Upton House, his anxious eyes had noticed the indefinable something in Kettering's manner towards Christine that had struck Gladys Leighton that first evening. Sangster knew men well, and he knew, without any plainer signs or telling, that it was not the house itself that took Kettering there so often, but the little mistress of the house, with her sweet eyes and her pathetic little smile.

He got up and laid a hand on Jimmy's shoulder as he spoke.

"Why not go down yourself?" he said casually.

Jimmy swore.

"I said I wouldn't. . . . I'm not going to be the first to give in."

It was her doing--she sent me away. If she wants me she can say so."

"She has her pride, too, you know,"

Jimmy swore again. He was feeling very ill and upset; he was firmly convinced that he was the most ill-used beggar in the whole of London. Remorse was gnawing hard at his heart, though he was trying to believe that it was entirely another emotion. He had not slept properly for nights; his head ached, and his nerves were jumpy.

"I'll not go till she sends for me," he said again obstinately.

Sangster made no comment.

He did not see Jimmy again for some days, though he heard of him once or twice from a mutual acquaintance.

"Challoner's going to the devil, I should think," so the mutual acquaintance informed him bluntly. "What's the matter with the chap? Hasn't anybody got any influence over him? He's drinking hard and gambling his soul away."

Sangster said "Rubbish!" with a confidence he was far from feeling.

He did not really believe it; he knew Jimmy was a bit reckless and inclined to behave wildly when things did not entirely go to his taste, but he considered this a gross exaggeration of the truth; he made a mental note to look Jimmy up the following day.

But it was the very same night that Costin, Jimmy Challoner's man, presented himself at the rooms in the unfashionable part of Bloomsbury and asked anxiously for Mr. Sangster.

Sangster heard his voice in the narrow passage outside and recognised it. He left his supper--a very meagre supper of bread and cheese, as funds were low that week--and went to the door.

"Do you want me, Costin?"

The man looked relieved.

"Yes, sir--if you please, sir. It's Mr. Challoner, I'm afraid he's very ill, but he won't let me send for a doctor, so I just slipped out and came round to you, sir."

* * * * *

Sangster found Jimmy Challoner huddled up in an arm-chair by a roasting fire. His face looked red and feverish, his eyes had a sort of unnatural glazed look, but he was sufficiently well to be able to swear when he saw his friend.

"Costin fetched you, of course. Interfering old idiot! He thinks I'm ill, but it's all bally rot! I've got a chill, that's all. What the deuce do you want?"

Sangster answered good-temperedly that he didn't want anything in particular; privately he agreed with Costin that it was more than an ordinary chill that had drawn Jimmy's face and made such hollows beneath his eyes. He stood with his back to the fire looking down at him dubiously.

"What have you been up to?" he asked.

"Up to!" Jimmy echoed the phrase pettishly. "I haven't been up to anything. You talk as if I were a blessed brat. One must do something to amuse oneself. I'm fed-up--sick to death of this infernal life. It's just a question of killing time from hour to hour. I loathe getting up in the morning, I hate going to bed at night, I'm sick to death of the club and the fools you meet there. I wish to God I could end it once and for all."

"Humph! Sounds as if you want a tonic," said Sangster in his most matter-of-fact way. He recognised a touch of hysteria in Jimmy's voice, and in spite of everything he felt sorry for him.

"Give me a drink," said Jimmy presently. "That idiot, Costin, has kept everything locked up all day. I'm as dry as blazes. Give me a drink, there's a good chap."

Sangster filled a glass with soda water and brought it over to where Jimmy sat huddled up in the big chair. He looked a pitiable enough object--he wanted shaving, and he had not troubled to put on his collar; his feet were thrust into an old

pair of bedroom slippers. He sipped the soda and pushed it away angrily.

"I don't want that damned muck," he said savagely.

"I know you don't, but it's all you're going to have. Look here, Jimmy, don't be an ass! You're ill, old chap, or you will be if you go on like this. Take my advice and hop off to bed, you'll feel a heap better between the sheets. Can I do anything for you--anything----"

"Yes," said Jimmy sullenly. "You can--leave me to myself."

He held his hands to the fire and shivered; Sangster looked at him silently for a moment, then he shrugged his shoulders and turned towards the door. He was out on the landing when Jimmy called his name.

"Well?"

"Where the deuce are you going?" Jimmy demanded irritably. "Nice sort of pal, you are, to go off and leave a chap when he's sick."

Sangster did not make the obvious reply; he came back, shutting the door behind him. Jimmy was leaning back in his chair now; his face was nearly as red as the dressing-gown he wore, but he shivered violently from time to time. There was a little silence, then he opened his eyes and smiled rather apologetically.

"Sorry to be so dull. I haven't slept for a week."

It would have been nearer the truth to say that he had hardly closed his eyes since the night of Cynthia Farrow's death, but he knew that if he said that Sangster would at once bark up the wrong tree, and conclude that he was fretting for her--breaking his heart for her, whereas he was doing nothing of the kind.

It was Christine, and not Cynthia, who was on his mind day and night, night and day; Christine for whose sake he reproached himself so bitterly and could get no rest. She was so young--such a child.

Every day he found himself remembering some new little incident about her; every day some little jewel from the past slipped out of the mists of forgetfulness and looked at him with sad eyes as if to ask:

"Have you forgotten me? Don't you remember----"

He could not help thinking of Christine's mother too; he had been fond of her--she had mothered him so much in the old days; he wondered if she knew how he had repaid all her kindness; what sort of a hash he had made of life for poor little Christine.

"You'd better cut off to bed," Sangster said again bluntly.

He lit a cigarette and puffed a cloud of smoke into the air; he was really disturbed about Jimmy. The repeated advice seemed to annoy Jimmy; he frowned and rose to his feet; he caught his breath with a sort of gasp of pain. Sangster turned quickly.

"What's up, old chap?"

"Only my rotten head---it aches like the very devil."

Jimmy stood for a moment with his hand pressed hard over his eyes, then he took a step forward, and stopped again.

"I can't--I--confound it all----"

Sangster caught his arm.

"Don't be an ass; go to bed." He raised his voice; he called to Costin; between them they put Jimmy to bed and tucked him up. He kept protesting that there was nothing the matter with him, but he seemed grateful for the darkness of the room, and the big pillows beneath his aching head.

Sangster went back to the sitting-room with Costin.

"I don't think we need send for a doctor," he said. "It's only a chill, I think. See how he is in the morning. What's he

been up to, Costin?"

Costin pursed his lips and raised his brows.

"He's been out most nights, sir," he answered stoically. "Only comes home with the milk, as you might say. Hasn't slept at all, and doesn't eat. It's my opinion, sir, that he's grieving like----" He looked towards the mantelshelf and the place which they could both remember had once held Cynthia Farrow's portrait.

Sangster shook his head.

"You mean----" he asked reluctantly.

"Yes, sir." Costin tiptoed across the room and closed the door which led to Jimmy's bedroom. "He's never been the same, sir, since Miss Farrow died--asking your pardon," he added hurriedly.

Sangster threw his cigarette end firewards.

"It's a rotten business," he said heavily. In his own heart he agreed with Costin; he believed that it was Cynthia's death that was breaking Jimmy's heart. He would have given ten years of his life to have been able to believe that it was something else quite different.

"Well, I'll look in again in the morning," he said. "And if you want me, send round, of course."

"Yes, sir."

Costin helped Sangster on with his coat and saw him to the door; he was dying to ask what had become of Mrs. Jimmy, but he did not like to. He was sure that Jimmy had merely got married out of pique, and that he had repented as quickly as one generally does repent in such cases.

Sangster walked back to his rooms; he felt very depressed. He was fond of Jimmy though he did not approve of him; he racked his brains to know what to do for the best.

When he got home he sat down at his desk and stared at the pen and ink for some moments undecidedly; then he began to write.

He addressed an envelope to Christine down at Upton House, and stared at it till it was dry. After all, she might resent his interference, and yet, on the other hand, if Jimmy were going to be seriously ill, she would blame him for not having told her.

Finally he took a penny from his waistcoat pocket and tossed up for it.

"Heads I write, tails I leave it alone."

He tossed badly and the penny came down in the waste-paper basket, but it came down heads, and with a little lugubrious grimace, Sangster dipped the pen in the ink again and squared his elbows.

He wrote the letter four times before it suited him, and even then it seemed a pretty poor epistle to his critical eye as he read it through--

"Dear Mrs. Challoner;--I am just writing to let you know that Jimmy is ill; nothing very serious, but I thought that perhaps you would like to know. If you could spare the time to come and see him, I am sure he would very much appreciate it. He seems very down on his luck. I don't want to worry or alarm you, and am keeping an eye on him myself, but thought it only right that you should know.--Your sincere friend,

"RALPH SANGSTER."

It seemed a clumsy enough way of explaining things, he thought discontentedly, and yet it was the best he could do. He folded the paper and put it into the envelope; he sat for a moment with it in his hand looking down at Christine's married name, "Mrs. James Challoner."

Poor little Mrs. Jimmy! A wife, and yet no wife. Sangster lifted the envelope to his lips, and hurriedly kissed the name

before he thrust the envelope into his pocket, and went out to post it.

Would she come, he wondered? he asked himself the question anxiously before he dropped the letter into the box. Somehow deep down in his heart he did not think that she would.

CHAPTER XVIII

KETTERING HEARS SOMETHING

"I shall never be able to manage it if I live to be a hundred," said Christine despairingly.

She leaned back in the padded seat of Kettering's big car and looked up into his face with laughing eyes.

She had been trying to drive; she had driven the car at snail's pace the length of the drive leading from Upton House, and tried to turn out of the open carriage gate into the road.

"If you hadn't been here we should have gone into the wall, shouldn't we?" she demanded.

Kettering laughed.

"I'm very much afraid we should," he said. "But that's nothing. I did all manner of weird things when I first started to drive. Take the wheel again and have another try."

But Christine refused.

"I might smash the car, and that would be awful. You'd never forgive me."

"Should I not!" His grave eyes searched her pretty face. "I don't think you need be very alarmed about that," he said. "However, if you insist----" He changed places with her and took the wheel himself.

It was early morning, and fresh and sunny. Christine was flushed and smiling, for the moment at least there were no shadows in her eyes; she looked more like the girl who had smiled up from the stalls in the theatre to where Jimmy Challoner sat alone in his box that night of their meeting.

Jimmy had never once been mentioned between herself and this man since that first afternoon. Save for the fact that Kettering called her "Mrs. Challoner," Christine might have been unmarried.

"Gladys will think we have run away," she told him presently with a little laugh. "I told her we should be only half an hour."

"Have we been longer?" he asked surprised.

Christine looked at her watch.

"Nearly an hour," she said. "We were muddling about in the drive for ever so long, you know; and I really think we ought to go back."

"If you really think so----" He turned the car reluctantly. "I suppose you wouldn't care for a little run after lunch?" he asked carelessly. "I've got to go over to Heston. I should be delighted to take you."

"I should love it--if I can bring Gladys."

He did not answer for a moment, then:

"Oh, bring Gladys by all means," he said rather dryly.

"What time?"

"I'll call for you at two--If that will do."

They had reached the house again now; Christine got out of the car and stood for a moment with one foot on the step looking up at Kettering.

There was a little silence.

"How long have we known each other?" he asked suddenly.

She looked up startled--she made a rapid calculation.

"Nearly three weeks, isn't it?" she said then.

He laughed.

"It seems longer; it seems as if I must have known you all my life."

The words were ordinary enough, but the look in his eyes brought the swift colour to Christine's cheeks--her eyes fell.

"Is that a compliment?" she asked, trying to speak naturally.

"I hope so; I meant it to be."

Her hand was resting on the open door of the car; for an instant he laid his own above it; Christine drew hers quickly away.

"Well, we'll be ready at two, then," she said. She turned to the house. Kettering drove slowly down the drive. He was a very fine-looking man, Christine thought with sudden wistfulness; he had been so kind to her--kinder than anyone she had ever known. She was glad he was going to have Upton House, as it had got to be sold. He had promised her to look after it, and not have any of the trees in the garden cut down.

"It shall all be left just as it is now," he told her.

"Perhaps some day you'll marry, and your wife will want it altered," she said sadly.

"I shall never get married," he had answered quickly.

She had been glad to hear him say that; he was so nice as a friend, somehow she did not want anyone to come along and change him.

She went into the house and called to Gladys.

"I thought you would think we were lost perhaps," she said laughingly, as she thrust her head into the morning-room where Gladys was sitting.

The elder girl looked up; her voice was rather dry when she answered:

"No, I did not think that."

Christine threw her hat aside.

"I can't drive a bit," she said petulantly. "I'm so silly! I nearly ran into the wall at the gate."

"Did you?"

"Yes. Gladys, we're going over to Heston at two o'clock with Mr. Kettering."

Gladys looked up.

"We! Who do you mean by 'we'?"

"You and I, of course."

"Oh"--there was a momentary silence, then: "There's a letter for you on the table," said Gladys.

Christine turned slowly, a little flush of colour rushing to her cheeks. She glanced apprehensively at the envelope lying face upwards, then she drew a quick breath, almost of relief it seemed.

She picked the letter up indifferently and broke open the flap. There was a moment of silence; Gladys glanced up.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

Christine was staring out of the window, the letter lay on the floor at her feet.

"Jimmy's ill," she said listlessly.

"Ill!" Gladys laid down her pen and swung round in the chair. "What's the matter with him?" she asked rather sceptically.

"I don't know. You can read the letter, it's from Mr. Sangster--Jimmy's great friend."

She handed the letter over.

Gladys read it through and gave it back.

"Humph!" she said with a little inelegant sniff; she looked at her friend. "Are you going?" she asked bluntly.

Christine did not answer. She was thinking of Jimmy, deliberately trying to think of the man whom she had done her best during the last three weeks to forget. She tried to think of him as he had been that last dreadful night at the hotel, when he had threatened to strike her, when he had told her to clear out and leave him; but somehow she could only recall him as he had looked at Euston that morning when he said good-bye to her, with the hangdog, shamed look in his eyes, and the pathetic droop to his shoulders.

And now he was ill! It was kind of Sangster to have written, she told herself, even while she knew quite well that Jimmy had not asked him to; it would be the last thing in the world Jimmy would wish.

If he were ill, it was not because he wanted her. She drew her little figure up stiffly.

"I shan't go unless I hear again that it is serious," she said stiltedly.

"Not--go!" Gladys's voice sounded somehow blank, there was a curious expression in her eyes. After a moment she looked away. "Oh, well, you must please yourself, of course."

Christine turned to the door--she held Sangster's letter in her hand.

"Besides," she said flippantly, "I'm going over to Heston this afternoon with Mr. Kettering."

She went up to her room and shut the door. She stood staring before her with blank eyes, her pretty face had fallen again into sadness, her mouth dropped pathetically.

She opened Sangster's letter and read it through once more. Was Jimmy really ill, and was Sangster afraid to tell her, she wondered? Or was this merely Sangster's way of trying to bring them together again?

But Jimmy did not want her; even if he were dying Jimmy would not want to see her again.

If he had cared he would never have consented to this separation; if he had cared--but, of course, he did not care!

She began to cry softly; big tears ran down her cheeks, and she brushed them angrily away.

She had tried to shut him out of her heart. She had tried to forget him. In a defensive, innocent way she had deliberately encouraged Kettering. She liked him, and he helped her to forget; it restored her self-esteem to read the admiration in his kind eyes, it helped to soothe the hurt she had suffered from Jimmy's hands; and yet, in spite of it all, he was not Jimmy, and nobody could ever take Jimmy's place. She kept away from Gladys till lunch time, when at last she appeared, her eyes were red and swollen, and she held her head defiantly high. Gladys considerately let her alone. Somehow, in spite of everything, she quite expected to hear that Christine was off to London by the afternoon train, but the meal passed almost in silence, and when it was finished Christine said:

"We'd better get ready; Mr. Kettering will be there at two."

Gladys turned away.

"I'd rather not go, if you don't mind," she said uncomfortably.

"Not--go!"

"No--I--I don't care about motoring. I--I've got a headache too."

Christine stared at her, then she laughed defiantly.

"Oh, very well; please yourself."

She went upstairs to dress; she took great pains to make herself look pretty. When Kettering arrived she noticed that his eyes went past her gloomily as if looking for someone else.

"Gladys is not coming," she said.

His face brightened.

"Not coming! Ought I to be sorry, I wonder?"

She laughed.

"That's rude."

"I'm sorry." He tucked the rug round her, and they started away down the drive. "You don't want the wheel, I suppose?" he asked whimsically.

Christine shook her head.

"Have you--you been crying?" Kettering asked abruptly.

Christine flushed scarlet.

"Whatever makes you ask me that?"

"Your eyes are red," he told her gently.

She looked up at him with resentment, and suddenly the tears came again. Kettering bit his lip hard. He did not speak for some time.

"I've got a headache," Christine said at last with an effort. "I--oh, I know it's silly. Don't laugh at me."

"I'm not laughing." His voice dragged a little; he kept his eyes steadily before him.

"I thought perhaps something had happened--that you had had bad news," he said presently. "If--if there is anything I can do to help you, you know--you know I----"

"There isn't anything the matter," she interrupted with a rush. She was terrified lest he should guess that her tears were because of Jimmy; she had a horror nowadays that everyone would know that she cared for a man who cared nothing for her; she brushed the tears away determinedly; she set herself to talk and smile.

They had tea at Heston, in the little square parlour of a country inn where the floor was only polished boards, and where long wooden trestles ran on two sides of the room.

"It looks rather thick," Kettering said ruefully, standing looking down at the plate of bread and butter. "I hope you don't mind; this is the best place in the village."

Christine laughed.

"It's like what we used to have at school, and I'm hungry."

She looked up at him with dancing eyes; she had quite forgotten her sorrow of the morning. Somehow this man's presence always cheered her and took her out of herself. She poured tea for him, and laughed and chatted away merrily.

Afterwards they sat over the fire and talked.

Christine said she could see faces in the red coals; she painted them out to Kettering.

He had to stoop forward to see what she indicated; for a moment their heads were very close together; it was Christine who drew back sharply.

"Oughtn't we to be going home?" she asked with sudden nervousness.

She rose to her feet and went over to the window; the sunshine had gone, and the country road was grey and shadowy. Kettering's big car stood at the kerb. After a moment he followed her to the window; he was a little pale, his eyes seemed to avoid hers.

"I am quite ready when you are," he said.

She was fastening her veil over her hat; her fingers shook a little as she tied the bow.

Kettering had gone to pay for the tea; she stood looking after him with dawning apprehension in her eyes.

He was a fine enough man; there was something about him that gave one such a feeling of safety--of security. She could not imagine that he would ever deliberately set himself to hurt a woman, as--as Jimmy had. She went out to the car and stood waiting for him.

"All that tea for one and threepence!" he said, laughing, when he joined her. "Wonderful, isn't it?"

She laughed too. She got in beside him and tucked the rug round her warmly.

"How long will it take to get home?" she asked. She seemed all at once conscious of the growing dusk, conscious, too, of anxiety to get back to Gladys. She was a little afraid of this man, though she would not admit it even to herself.

"We ought to be home in an hour," he said. He started the engine.

The car ran smoothly for a mile or two. Christine began to feel sleepy. Kettering did not talk much, and the fresh evening air on her face was soothing and pleasant. She closed her eyes.

Presently when Kettering spoke to her he got no answer; he turned a little in his seat and looked down at her, but her head was drooping forward and he could not see her face.

"Christine." He spoke her name sharply, then suddenly he smiled; she was asleep.

He moved so that her head rested against his arm; he slowed the car down a little.

Kettering was not a young man, his fortieth birthday had been several years a thing of the past, but all his life afterwards he looked back on that drive home to Upton House as the happiest hour he had ever known, with Christine's little head resting on his arm and the grey twilight all about them. When they were half a mile from home he roused her gently. She sat up with a start, rubbing sleepy eyes.

"Oh! where are we?" He laid his hand on hers for a moment.

"You've been asleep. We're nearly home."

He turned in at the drive of Upton House. He let her get out of the car unassisted.

Gladys was at the door; her eyes were anxious.

"I thought you must have had an accident," she said. She caught Christine's hand. "You're fearfully late."

"We had tea at Heston," Christine said. She ran into the house.

Kettering looked at the elder girl.

"You would not come," he said. "Don't you care for motoring?"

"No." She came down the steps and stood beside him. "Mr. Kettering, may I say something?"

He looked faintly surprised.

"May you! Why, of course!"

"You will be angry--you will be very angry, I am afraid," she said.

"But--but I can't help it."

"Angry! What do you mean?"

There was a moment's silence, then:

"Well," said Kettering rather curtly.

She flushed, but her eyes did not fall.

"Mr. Kettering, if you are a gentleman, and I know you are, you will never come here again," she said urgently.

A little wave of crimson surged under Kettering's brown skin, but his eyes did not fall; there was a short silence, then he laughed--rather mirthlessly.

"And if I am *not* the gentleman you so very kindly seem to believe me," he said constrainedly.

Gladys Leighton came a little closer to him; she laid her hand on his arm.

"You don't mean that; you're only saying it because--because----" She broke off with an impatient gesture. "Oh!" she said exasperatedly, "what is the use of loving a person if you do not want them to be happy--if you cannot sacrifice yourself a little for them."

Kettering looked at her curiously. He had never taken much notice of her before; he had thought her a very ordinary type; he was struck by the sudden energy and passion in her voice.

"She is not happy now, at all events," he said grimly.

She turned away and fidgeted with the wheel of the car.

"She could not very well be more unhappy than she is now," he said again bitterly.

"She would be more unhappy if she knew she had done something to be ashamed of--something she had got to hide."

He raised his eyes.

"Are you holding a brief for Challoner?" he asked.

She frowned a little.

"You know I am not; I never thought he was good enough for her. Even years ago as a boy he was utterly selfish; but--but Christine loved him then; she thought there was nobody in all the world like him; she adored him."

He winced. "And now?" he asked shortly.

She did not answer for a moment; she stood looking away from him.

"There was a letter this morning," she said tonelessly. "Jimmy is ill, and they asked her to go to him."

"Well!"

"She would not go. She told me she was going to Heston with you instead."

The silence fell again. Kettering's eyes were shining; there was a sort of shamed triumph about his big person.

Gladys turned to him impatiently.

"Are you looking glad? Oh, I think I should kill you if I saw you looking glad," she said quickly. "I only told you that so that you might see how much she is under your influence already; so that you can save her from herself. . . . She's

so little and weak--and now that she is unhappy, it's just the time when she might do something she would be sorry for all her life--when she might----"

"What are you two talking about?" Christine demanded from the doorway. She came down the steps and stood between them; she looked at Kettering. "I thought you had gone," she said, surprised.

"No; I--Miss Leighton and I have been discussing the higher ethics," he said dryly. He held his hand to Gladys. "Well, good-bye," he said; there was a little emphasis on the last word.

She just touched his fingers.

"Good-bye." She put her arm round Christine; there was something defensive in her whole attitude.

Kettering got into the car; he did not look at Christine again. He started the engine; presently he was driving slowly away.

"Have you two been quarreling?" Christine asked. There was a touch of vexation in her voice; her eyes were straining through the darkness towards the gate.

Gladys laughed.

"Quarrelling! Why ever should I quarrel with Mr. Kettering? I've hardly spoken half a dozen words to him in all my life."

"You seemed to have a great deal to say to him, all the same," Christine protested, rather shortly.

They went back to the house together.

It was during dinner that night that Gladys deliberately led the conversation round to Jimmy again.

They had nearly finished the unpretentious little meal; it had passed almost silently. Christine looked pale and preoccupied. Gladys was worried and anxious.

A dozen times during the past few days she had tried to decide whether she ought to write to Jimmy or not. Her sharp eyes had seen from the very first the way things were going with regard to Kettering, and she was afraid of the responsibility. If anything happened--if Christine chose to doubly wreck her life--afterwards they might all blame her; she knew that.

She was fond of Christine, too. And though she had never approved of Jimmy, she would have done a great deal to see them happy together.

It was for that reason that she now spoke of him.

"When are you going to London, Chris?"

Christine looked up; she flushed.

"Going to London! I am not going. . . . I never want to go there any more."

Gladys made no comment; she had heard the little quiver in the younger girl's voice.

Presently:

"I suppose you think I ought to go to Jimmy," Christine broke out vehemently. "I suppose you are hinting that it is my duty to go. You don't know what you are talking about; you don't understand that he cares nothing about me--that he would be glad if I were dead and out of the way. He only wants his freedom; he never really wished to marry me."

"It isn't as bad as that. I am sure he----"

"You don't know anything about him. You don't know what I went through during those hateful weeks before--before I came here. I don't care if I never see him again; he has never troubled about me. It's my turn now; I am going to show him that he isn't the only man in the world."

Gladys had never heard Christine talk like this before; she was frightened at the recklessness of her voice. She broke in quickly:

"I won't listen if you're going to say such things. Jimmy is your husband, and you loved him once, no matter what you may do now. You loved him very dearly once."

Christine laughed.

"I've got over that. He wasn't worth breaking my heart about. I was just a poor little fool in those days, who didn't know that a man never cares for a woman if he is too sure of her. Oh, if I could only have my time over again, I'd treat him so differently--I'd never let him know how much I cared."

Her voice had momentarily fallen back into its old wistfulness. There were tears in her eyes, but she brushed them quickly away.

"Don't talk about him; I don't want to talk about him."

But Gladys persisted.

"It isn't too late; you can have the time all over again by starting afresh, and trying to wipe out the past. You're so young. Why, Jimmy is only a boy; you've got all your lives before you." She got up and went round to where Christine was sitting. She put an arm about her shoulders. "Why don't you forgive him, and start again? Give him another chance, dear, and have a second honeymoon."

Christine pushed her away; she started up with burning cheeks.

"You don't know what you're talking about. Leave me alone--oh, do leave me alone." She ran from the room.

She lay awake half the night thinking of what Gladys had said. She tried to harden her heart against Jimmy. She tried to remember only that he had married her out of pique; that he cared nothing for her--that he did not really want her. As a sort of desperate defence she deliberately thought of Kettering; he liked her, she knew. She was not too much of a child to understand what that look in his eyes had meant, that sudden pressure of his hand on hers.

And she liked him, too. She told herself defiantly that she liked him very much; that she would rather have been with him over at Heston that afternoon than up in town with Jimmy. Kettering at least sought and enjoyed her society, but Jimmy----

She clenched her hands to keep back the blinding tears that crowded to her eyes. What was she crying for? There was nothing to cry for; she was happy--quite happy; she was away from Jimmy--away from the man whose presence had only tortured her during those last few days; she was at home--at Upton House, and Kettering was there whenever she wanted him. She hoped he would come in the morning again; that he would come quite early. After breakfast she wandered about the house restlessly, listening for the sound of his car in the drive outside; but the morning dragged away and he did not come.

Christine ate no lunch; her head ached, she said pettishly when Gladys questioned her. No, she did not want to go out; there was nowhere to go.

And all the time her eyes kept turning to the window again and again restlessly.

Gladys did not know what to do; she was hoping and praying in her heart that Kettering would do as she had asked him, and stay away. What was the good of him coming again? What was the good of him making himself indispensable to Christine? The day passed wretchedly. Once she found Christine huddled up on the sofa crying; she was so miserable, she sobbed; nobody cared for her; she was so lonely, and she wanted her mother.

Gladys did all she could to comfort her, but all the time she was painfully conscious of the fact that had Kettering walked into the room just then there would have been no more tears.

Sometimes she thought that it only served Jimmy Challoner right; sometimes she told herself that this was his punishment--that Fate was fighting him with his own weapons, paying him back in his own coin; but she knew such thoughts were mere foolishness.

He and Christine were married, no matter how strongly they might resent it. The only thing left to them was to make the

best they could of life.

She sat with Christine that night till the girl was asleep. She was not very much Christine's senior in years, but she felt somehow old and careworn as she sat there in the silent room and listened to the girl's soft breathing.

She got up and went over to stand beside her.

So young, such a child, it seemed impossible that she was already a wife, this girl lying there with her soft hair falling all about her.

Gladys sighed and walked over to the window. It must be a great thing to be loved, she thought rather sadly; nobody had ever loved her; no man had ever looked at her as Kettering looked at little Christine. . . . She opened the window and looked out into the darkness.

It was a mild, damp night. Grey mist veiled the garden and shut out the stars; everything was very silent.

If only Christine's mother had been here to take the responsibility of it all, she thought longingly; she had so little influence with Christine herself. She closed the window and went back to the bedside.

Christine was moving restlessly. As Gladys looked down at her she began to laugh in her sleep--a little chuckle of unaffected joy.

Gladys smiled, too, involuntarily. She was happy in her dreams, at any rate, she thought with a sense of relief.

And then suddenly Christine woke with a start. She sat up in bed, throwing out her arms.

"Jimmy----" But it was a cry of terror, not of joy.

"Jimmy--Jimmy--don't hurt me. . . . oh!"

She was sobbing now--wild, pitiful sobs.

Gladys put her arms round her; she held her tightly.

"It's all right, dear. I'm here--nobody shall hurt you." She stroked her hair and soothed and kissed her; she held her fast till the sobbing ceased. Then:

"I've been dreaming," said Christine tremblingly. "I thought"--she shivered a little--"I thought--thought someone was going to hurt me."

"Nobody can hurt you while I am here; dreams are nothing--nobody believes in dreams."

Christine did not answer. She had never told Gladys of that one moment when Jimmy had tried to strike her--when beside himself with passionate rage and misery he had lifted his hand to strike her.

She fell asleep again, holding her friend's hand.

CHAPTER XIX

A CHANCE MEETING

Two days passed uneventfully away, but Kettering did not come to Upton House. Christine's first faint resentment and amazement had turned to anger--an anger which she kept hidden, or so she fondly believed.

She hardly went out. She spent hours curled up on the big sofa by the window reading, or pretending to read. Gladys wondered how much she really read of the books which she took one by one from the crowded library.

The third morning Christine answered Sangster's letter. She wrote very stiltedly; she said she was sorry to hear that Jimmy was not well, but no doubt he was all right again by this time. She said she was enjoying herself in a quiet way, and very much preferred the country to London.

"I have so many friends here, you see," she added, with a faint hope that perhaps Sangster would show the letter to Jimmy, and that he would gather from it that she did not miss him in the very least.

And Sangster did show it to Jimmy; to a rather weak-looking Jimmy, propped up in an armchair, slowly recovering from the severe chill which had made him quite ill for the time being.

A Jimmy who spoke very little, and asked no questions at all, and who took the letter apathetically enough, and laid it by as soon as he had read it.

"You wrote to her, then," he said indifferently.

"Yes."

"You might have saved yourself the trouble; I knew she would not come. If you had asked me I could have told you. Of course, you suggested that she *should* come."

"Yes."

Jimmy's eyes smiled faintly.

"Interfering old ass," he said affectionately.

Sangster coloured. He was very unhappy about Jimmy; he had always known that he was not particularly strong, and, as a matter of fact, during the past few days Jimmy had grown most surprisingly thin and weak, though he still insisted that there was nothing the matter with him--nothing at all.

There was a little silence.

"I suppose that's meant for a dig at me," said Jimmy presently. "That bit about having so many friends. . . . She means Kettering, I suppose."

"I don't see why she should," said Sangster awkwardly.

Jimmy laughed rather grimly.

"Well, it's only tit for tat if she does," he said. "But I thought----" He did not finish; did not say that he had thought Christine cared too much for him ever to give a thought to another fellow. He turned his head against the cushions and pretended to sleep, and presently Sangster went quietly away.

He thought that Christine had--well, not behaved badly. How could anyone blame her for anything she chose to do or not to do, after what had occurred? But, still, he was vaguely disappointed in her; he thought she ought to have come--just to see how Jimmy really was.

But Christine was not thinking very much about Jimmy in those days at all. Somehow the foreground of her life seemed

to have got filled up with the figure of another man; a man whom she had never once seen since that drive over to Heston.

Sometimes she thought she would write a little note and ask him to come to tea; sometimes she thought she would walk the way in which she knew she could always meet him, but something restrained her.

And then one afternoon, quite unexpectedly, she ran into him in the village.

He was coming out of the little post office as she was going in, and he pulled up short with a muttered apology before he recognised her; then--well, then they both got red, and a little flame crept into Kettering's eyes.

"I thought I was never going to see you any more," Christine said rather nervously. "Are you angry with me?"

"Angry!" He laughed a little. "Why ever should I be angry with you? . . . I--the fact is, I've been in London on business."

"Oh!" She looked rather sceptical; she raised her chin a dignified inch. "You ought to have told me," she said, unthinkingly.

He looked at her quickly and away again.

"I missed you," said Christine naively.

"That is very kind of you." There was a little silence. "May I--may I walk a little way with you?" he asked diffidently.

"If you care to."

He checked a smile. "I shall be delighted," he said gravely.

They set out together.

Christine felt wonderfully light-hearted all at once; her eyes sparkled, her cheeks were flushed. Kettering hardly looked at her at all. It made him afraid because he was so glad to be with her once more; he knew now how right Gladys had been when she asked him not to come to Upton House again. He rushed into conversation; he told her that the weather had been awful in London, and that he had been hopelessly bored. "I know so few people there," he said. "And I kept wondering what you were----" He broke off, biting his lip.

"What I was doing?" Christine finished it for him quickly. "Well, I was sitting at the window most of the time, wondering why you didn't come and see me," she said with a laugh.

"Were you----"

She frowned a little; she looked up at him with impatient eyes.

"What is the matter? I know something is the matter; I can feel that there is. You are angry with me; you----"

"My dear child, I assure you I am not. There is nothing the matter except, perhaps I am a little--worried and--and unhappy."

He laughed to cover his sudden gravity. "Tell me about yourself and--and Jimmy. How is Challoner?"

He had never spoken to her of Jimmy before; his name had been tacitly unmentioned between them. Christine flushed; she shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know; he wasn't very well last week, but I dare say he is all right again now." Her voice was very flippant. In spite of himself Kettering was shocked; he hated to hear her speak like that; he had always thought her so sweet and unaffected.

"He ought to come down here for a change," he said in his most matter-of-fact tones. "Why don't you insist that he comes down here for a change? Country air is a fine doctor; he would enjoy it."

"I don't think he would; he hates the country." She spoke without looking at him. "I am sure that he is having a much better time in London than he would have here----" She broke off. "Mr. Kettering, will you come back and have tea with me?"

Kettering coloured; he tried to refuse; he wanted to refuse; but somehow her brown eyes would not let him; somehow--

"I shall be delighted," he heard himself say.

He had not meant to say it; he would have given a great deal to recall the words as soon as they were spoken, but it was too late. Another moment and they were in the house.

He looked round him with a sense of great pleasure. It seemed a lifetime since he had been here; it was like coming home again to be here and with the woman he loved. He looked at little Christine with wistful eyes.

"Gladys is out," she said, "so you will have to put up with me alone; do you mind?"

"Do I mind!" She coloured beneath his gaze; her heart was beating fast.

He followed her across the hall. He knew he was doing the weak thing; knew that he ought to turn on his heel and go away, but he knew that he intended staying.

An hour with Christine alone; it was worth risking something for to have that. Christine opened the drawing-room door.

"We'll have tea here," she said; "it's much more cosy. I----"

She stopped dead; her voice broke off into silence with a curious little jarring sound.

A man had risen from the sofa by the window; a tall young man, with a pale face and worried-looking eyes--Jimmy Challoner!

CHAPTER XX

LOVE LOCKED OUT

Jimmy only glanced at Christine; his eyes went past her almost immediately to the man who was following her into the room; a streak of red crept into his pale face.

It was Kettering who recovered himself first; he went forward with outstretched hand.

"Well, I never! We were just talking about you."

His voice was quite steady, perfectly friendly, but his heart had given one bitter throb of disappointment at sight of Christine's husband. This was the end of their little half-hour together. Perhaps it was Fate stepping in opportunely to prevent him making a fool of himself.

Jimmy and he shook hands awkwardly. Jimmy had made no attempt to greet his wife. One would have thought that they had met only an hour or two previously, to judge by the coolness of their meeting, though beneath her black frock Christine's heart was racing, and for the first few moments she hardly knew what she was doing or what she said.

Jimmy looked ill; she knew that, and it gave her a faint little headache; she avoided looking at him if she could help it. She left the two men to entertain each other, and busied herself with the tea-tray.

Kettering rose to the occasion nobly. He talked away as if this unwelcome meeting were a pleasure to him. He did his best to put Christine at her ease, but all the time he was wondering how soon he could make his excuses and escape; how soon he could get out of this three-cornered situation, which was perhaps more painful to him than to either of his companions.

He handed the tea for Christine, and sat beside her, screening her a little from Jimmy's worried eyes. How was she feeling? he was asking himself jealously. Was she glad to see her husband, or did she feel as he did--that Jimmy's unexpected presence had spoiled for them both an hour which neither would easily have forgotten?

"How is your brother?" he asked Jimmy presently. "I haven't heard from him just lately. I suppose he has thought no more of coming home? He has talked of it for so long."

Jimmy roused himself with an effort. He had not touched his tea, and he had given the cake he had mechanically taken to Christine's terrier. He looked at her now, and quickly away again.

"He is on his way home," he said shortly.

There was a little silence. Christine's face flushed; her eyes grew afraid.

"On his way home--the Great Horatio?"

Jimmy's nickname for his brother escaped her unconsciously. Jimmy smiled faintly.

"Yes; I heard last night. I--I believe he arrives in England on Monday."

It was Kettering who broke the following silence.

"I shall be glad to see him again. He will be surprised to hear that I have come across you and Mrs. Challoner." He spoke to Jimmy, but his whole attention was fixed on the girl at his side. He had seen the sudden stiffening of her slim little figure, the sudden nervous clasp of her hands.

And then the door opened and Gladys Leighton walked into the room. She looked straight at Kettering, and he met her eyes with a sort of abashed humiliation. He rose to his feet to offer her his chair. Jimmy rose also. He and Gladys shook hands awkwardly.

"Well, I didn't expect to see *you*," said Gladys bluntly. She glanced at Christine.

"None of us expected to see him," said Jimmy's wife, rather shrilly. "The Great Horatio is on his way home. I suppose he has come down to tell us the news." Her voice sounded flippant. Jimmy was conscious of a sharp pang as he listened to her. He hardly recognised Christine in this girl who sat there avoiding his eyes, avoiding speaking to him unless she were obliged.

Once she had hung on his every word; once she had flushed at the sound of his step; but now, one might almost have thought she was Kettering's wife instead of his.

He hated Kettering. He looked at him with sullen eyes. He thought of what Sangster had said of this man--that he was always at Upton House; that he seemed very friendly with both the girls. A vague jealousy filled Jimmy's heart. Kettering was rich, whilst he--well, even the small allowance sent to him by his brother looked now as if it were in danger of ceasing entirely.

If the Great Horatio knew that he and Christine were practically separated; if the Great Horatio ever knew the story of Cynthia Farrow, Jimmy Challoner knew that it would be a very poor lookout for him indeed.

He wondered how long Kettering meant to stay. He felt very much inclined to give him a hint that his room would be preferable to his company; but, after all, he himself was in such a weak position. He had come to see Christine unasked. It was her house, and in her present mood it was quite probable that she might order him out of it if he should make any attempt to assert his authority.

She spoke to him suddenly; her beautiful brown eyes met his own unflinchingly, with a curious antagonism in them.

"Shall you--shall you be staying to dinner, or have you to catch the early train back to London?"

He might have been the veriest stranger. Jimmy flushed scarlet. Kettering turned away and plunged haphazard into conversation with Gladys Leighton.

Jimmy's voice trembled with rage as he forced himself to answer.

"I should like to stay to dinner--if I may."

He had never thought it possible that she could so treat him, never believed that she could be so utterly indifferent. Christine laughed carelessly.

"Oh, do stay, by all means. Perhaps Mr. Kettering will stay as well?"

Kettering turned. He could not meet her eyes.

"I am sorry. I should like to have stayed; but--but I have another engagement. I am very sorry."

The words were lame enough; nobody believed their excuse. Kettering rose to take his leave. He shook hands with Gladys and Jimmy. He turned to Christine.

"I will come and see you off," she said.

She followed him into the hall, deliberately closing the door of the drawing-room behind her.

"We must have our little tea another day," she said recklessly. She did not look at him. "It was too bad being interrupted like that."

She hardly knew what she was saying. Her cheeks were scarlet, her eyes were feverish. Kettering stifled a sigh.

"Perhaps it is as well that we were interrupted," he said very gently. He took her hand and looked down into her eyes.

"You're so young," he said, "such a child still. Don't spoil all your life, my dear."

She raised defiant eyes.

"My life was spoilt on my wedding day," she said in a hard voice.

"I---- Oh, don't let us talk about it."

But he did not let her hand go.

"It's not too late to go back and begin again," he said with an effort. "I know it--it must seem presumptuous for me to talk to you like this, but--but I would give a great deal to be sure that you were happy."

"Thank you." There was a little quiver in her voice, but she checked it instantly. She dragged her hand free and walked to the door.

It was quite dark now; she was glad that he could not see the tears in her eyes.

"When shall I see you again?" she asked presently.

He did not answer at once, and she repeated her question: "When shall I see you again? I don't want you to stay away so long again."

He tried to speak, but somehow could find no words. She looked up at him in surprise. It was too dark to see his face, but something in the tenseness of his tall figure seemed to tell her a great deal. She spoke his name in a whisper.

"Mr. Kettering!"

He laid his hand on her shoulder. He spoke slowly, with averted face.

"Mrs. Challoner, if I were a strong man I should say that you and I must never meet again. You are married--unhappily, you think now; but, somehow--somehow I don't want to believe that. Give him another chance, will you? We all make mistakes, you know. Give him another chance, and then, if that fails----" He did not finish. He waited a moment, standing silently beside her; then he went away out into the darkness and left her there alone.

Christine stood listening to the sound of his footsteps on the gravel drive. He seemed to take a long while to reach the gate, she thought mechanically; it seemed an endless time till she heard it slam behind him.

But even then she did not move; she just stood staring into the darkness, her heart fluttering in her throat.

She would have said that she had only loved one man--the man whom she had married; but now. . . . Suddenly she covered her face with her hands, and, turning, ran into the house and upstairs to her room, shutting and locking the door behind her.

CHAPTER XXI

THE COMPACT

Down in the drawing-room things were decidedly uncomfortable.

Gladys sat by the tea-table, enjoying her tea no less for the fact that Jimmy was walking up and down like a wild animal, waiting for Christine to return.

Secretly Gladys was rather amused at the situation. She considered that whatever Jimmy suffered now, it served him right. She blamed him entirely for the estrangement between himself and his wife. She had never liked him very much, even in the old days, when she had quarrelled with him for being so selfish; she could not see that he had greatly improved now, as she watched him rather quizzically.

After a moment:

"You'll wear the carpet out," she said practically,

Jimmy stood still.

"Why doesn't Christine come back?" he demanded. "What's she doing with that fool Kettering?"

"He isn't a fool," said Gladys calmly. "I call him an exceedingly nice man."

Jimmy's eyes flashed.

"I suppose you've been encouraging him to come here and dangle after my wife. I thought I could trust you."

Gladys looked at him unflinchingly.

"I thought I could trust you, too," she said serenely. "And apparently I was mistaken. You've spoilt Christine's life, and you deserve all you get."

"How dare you talk to me like that?"

She laughed.

"I dare very well. I'm not afraid of you, Jimmy. I know too much about you. Christine married you because she loved you; she thought there was nobody like you in all the world. It's your own fault if she has changed her mind."

"I'll break every bone in Kettering's confounded body." Jimmy burst out passionately. "I'll--I'll---" He stopped suddenly and sat down with a humiliating sense of weakness, leaning his head in his hands.

Gladys's eyes softened as she looked at him.

"You've been ill, haven't you?" she asked.

He did not answer, and after a moment she left the tea-table, got up and went over to where he sat.

"Buck up, Jimmy, for heaven's sake," she said seriously. She put her hand on his shoulder kindly enough. "It's not too late. You're married, after all, and you may as well make the best of it. You may both live another fifty years."

Jimmy said he was dashed if he wanted to. He said he had had enough of life; it was a rotten swindle from beginning to end.

Gladys frowned.

"If you're going to talk like an utter idiot!" she said impatiently.

He caught her hand when she would have moved away.

"I'm sorry. You might be a pal to a chap, Gladys. I--well, I'm at my wits' end to know what to do. With Horatio coming home----"

Her eyes grew scornful.

"Oh, so *that's* why you've come here!"

"It is and it isn't. I wanted to see Christine. You won't believe me, I know, but I've been worried to death about her ever since she left me. Ask Sangster, if you don't believe me. I swear to you that, if it were possible, I'd give my right hand this minute to undo all the rotten past and start again. I suppose it's too late. I suppose she hates me. She said she did that last night in London. She looks as if she does now. The way she asked me if I was going to stay to dinner--a chap's own wife!--and in front of that brute Kettering!"

"He isn't a brute."

Gladys walked away and poured herself another cup of tea.

"Christine has been hurt--hurt much more than you have," she said at last. She spoke slowly, as if she were carefully choosing her words.

"She was so awfully fond of you, Jimmy." Jimmy moved restlessly. "It--it must have been a dreadful shock to her, poor child." She looked at him impatiently. "Oh, what on earth is the use of being a man if you can't make a woman care for you? She did once, and it ought not to be so very difficult to make her care again. She--she's just longing for someone to be good to her and love her. That's why she seems to like Mr. Kettering, I know. It is only seeming, Jimmy. I know her better than you do. It's only that he came along just when she was so unhappy--just when she was wanting someone to be good to her. And he *has* been good to her--he really has," she added earnestly.

Jimmy drew a long breath. He rose to his feet, stretching his arms wearily.

"I don't deserve that she should forgive me," he said, with a new sort of humility. "But--but if ever she does----" He took a quick step forwards Gladys. "Go and ask her to come and speak to me, there's a dear. I promise you that I won't upset her. I'll do my very best."

She went reluctantly, and as soon as the door had closed behind her, Jimmy Challoner went over to the looking-glass and stared at his pale reflection anxiously. He had always rather admired himself, but this afternoon his pallor and thinness disgusted him. No wonder Christine did not want to look at him or talk to him. He passed a nervous hand over the refractory kink in his hair, flattening it down; then, remembering that Christine had once said she liked it, brushed it up again agitatedly.

It seemed a long time before she came down to him. He was sure that half an hour must have passed since Gladys shut the door on him, before it opened again and Christine stood there, a little pale, a little defiant.

"You want to speak to me," she said. Her voice was antagonistic, the soft curves of her face seemed to have hardened.

"Yes. Won't you--won't you come and sit down?" Jimmy was horribly nervous. He dragged forward a chair, but she ignored it. She shut the door and stood leaning against it.

"I would rather stay here," she said. "And please be quick. If there is anything important to say----"

The indifference of her voice cut him to the heart. He broke out with genuine grief:

"Oh, Christine, aren't you ever going to forgive me?"

Just for a moment a little quiver convulsed her face, but it was gone instantly. She knew by past experience how easily Jimmy could put just that soft note into his voice. She told herself that it was only because he wanted something from her, not that he was really in the very least sorry for what had happened, for the way he had hurt her, for the havoc he had made of her life.

"It isn't a question of forgiveness at all," she said. "I didn't ask you to come here. I didn't want you to come here, I was quite happy without you."

"That is very evident," he said bitterly. The words escaped him before he could stop them. He apologised agitatedly.

"I didn't mean that; it slipped out; I ought not to have said it. I hardly know what I am saying. If you can't ever forgive me, that settles it once and for all, of course; but----"

She interrupted.

"Why have you come here? What do you want?"

The question was direct enough, and in desperation he answered it as directly.

"I have come because my brother will be home next week, and I want to know what I am to tell him."

For the first time she blanched a little. Her eyes sought his with a kind of fear.

"Tell him? What do you mean? What does it matter what you tell him?"

"I mean about our marriage. The old boy was so pleased when he knew that I--that you---- It will about finish him if he knows how--if he knows that we--" He floundered helplessly.

"You mean if he knows that you married me out of pique, and that I found it out?" she added bitterly.

He attempted no defence; he stood there miserable and silent.

"You can tell him what you like," said Christine, after a moment. "I don't care in the very least."

"I know you don't. I quite realise that; but--but if, just for the sake of appearances, you felt you could be sufficiently forgiving to--to come back to me, just--just for a little while, I mean," he added with an embarrassed rush. "I--I wouldn't bother you. I--I'd let you do just as you liked. I wouldn't ask anything. I--I----"

Christine laughed.

"You are inviting me to have a second honeymoon, in fact. Is that it?" she asked bitterly. "Thank you very much. I enjoyed the first so tremendously that, of course, it is only natural you should think I must be anxious to repeat the experiment."

Jimmy flushed to the roots of his hair.

"I deserve everything you can say. I haven't any excuse to offer; and I know you'll never believe it if I were to tell you that--that when Cynthia----"

She put up her hands to her eyes with a little shudder.

"I don't want to hear anything about her; I don't ever want to hear her name again."

"I'm sorry, dear." The word of endearment slipped out unconsciously. Christine's little figure quivered; suddenly she began to sob.

She wanted someone to be kind to her so badly. The one little word of endearment was like a ray of sunshine touching the hard bitterness of her heart, melting it, breaking her down.

"Christine!" said Jimmy in a choked voice.

He went over to her. He put an arm round her, drawing her nearer to the fire. He made her sit in the arm-chair, and he knelt beside her, holding her hand. He wanted to kiss her, wanted to say all the many passionate words of remorse that rose to his lips, but somehow he was afraid. He was not sure of her yet. He was afraid of startling her, of driving her back into cold antagonism and suspicion.

Presently she stopped sobbing; she freed her hand and wiped away the tears.

"It was silly to cry," she said jerkily. "There was nothing to cry for." She was ashamed that she had broken down; angry that the cause of her grief had been that one little word of endearment spoken by Jimmy.

He rose to his feet and went to stand by the mantelshelf, staring down into the fire.

There was a long silence.

"When--when is Horatio coming?" Christine asked him presently.

"I don't know for certain. The cable said Monday, but it may be later or even earlier."

She looked at him. His shoulders were drooping, his face turned away from her.

There was an agony of indecision in her heart. She did not want to make things harder for him than was absolutely necessary; and yet she clung fast to her pride--the pride that seemed to be whispering to her to refuse--not to give in to him. She stared into the fire, her eyes blurred still with tears.

"I suppose he'll stop your allowance if he knows?" she said at last, with an odd little mirthless laugh.

Jimmy flushed.

"I wasn't thinking of that," he said quickly. "I don't care a hang what he does; but--but--well, I would have liked him to *think* things were all right between us, anyway."

He waited a moment. "Of course, if you can't," he said then, jaggedly, "if you feel that you can't I'll tell him the truth. It will be the only way out of it."

A second honeymoon! Christine's own words seemed to ring in her ears mockingly.

She had never had a honeymoon at all yet. That week in London had been only a nightmare of tears and disillusionment and heartbreak. If it meant going through it all again---

She got up suddenly and went to stand beside Jimmy. She was quite close to him, but she did not touch him, though it would have seemed the most natural thing in all the world just at that moment to slip a hand through his arm or to lay her cheek to the rough serge of his coat. She had been so proud of him, had loved him so much; and yet now she seemed to be looking at him and speaking to him across a yawning gulf which neither of them were able to bridge.

"Jimmy, if--if I do--if I come back to you--just for a little while, so that--so that your brother won't ever know, you won't--you won't try and keep me--afterwards? You won't--you won't try and force me to stay with you, will you?"

"I give you my word of honour. I don't know how to thank you. I--I'm not half good enough for you. I don't deserve that you should ever give me a thought; I'm such an awful rotter," said Jimmy Challoner, with a break in his voice. He tried to take her hand, but she drew back.

"It's only--only friends we're going to be," she whispered.

He choked back a lump in his throat.

"Only friends, of course," he echoed, trying to speak cheerily. He knew what she meant; knew that he was not to remember that they were married, that they were just to behave like good pals--for the complete deception of the Great Horatio.

"Thank you, thank you very much," he said again. "And--and when will you--when----" he stammered.

"Oh, not yet," she told him quickly. "There is plenty of time. Next week will do. You can let me know when your brother arrives. I'll come then. I'll----" Someone knocked at the door. It was Gladys. She looked apologetic. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but there's a telegram for Jimmy. I thought it might be important." She handed him the yellow envelope.

Jimmy took it agitatedly. His heart was thumping. He was sure that he knew what were its contents. He broke open the flap. There was a little silence; then he handed the message to his wife.

"Horatio arrives in London to-morrow morning. Wire just received. Thought you ought to know at once.--SANGSTER."

Christine read the message through, then let it flutter to the floor at her feet; she looked up at Jimmy's embarrassed face.

"Well?" she said sharply.

"He's coming to-morrow, you see," Jimmy began stumbly. "He--he'll be in London to-morrow, so if--so if----" He cast an appealing glance at Gladys.

"I suppose I'm in the way," she said bluntly. "I'll clear out."

She turned to the door, but Christine stopped her.

"You're not in the way--I'd rather you stayed. You may as well hear what we're talking about. Jimmy's brother is coming home, and--and, you see, he doesn't know that I--that we----"

"I've asked her to come back to me--at any rate, for a time," Jimmy interrupted valiantly. "I know I don't deserve it, but it would make such a deuce of a difference if she would--you know what Horatio is--I--I'd give anything to prevent him knowing what a mess I've made of everything," he added boyishly.

They were both looking at Gladys now, Jimmy and Christine, and for a moment she stood irresolute, then she turned to Jimmy's wife. "Well, what are you going to do?" she said, and her usually blunt voice was quite gentle.

Christine moved closer to her friend.

"Oh, what do you think I ought to do?" she appealed in a whisper.

Gladys glanced across at Jimmy Challoner; he looked miserable enough; at the sight of his thin face and worried eyes she softened towards him; she took Christine's hand.

"I think you ought to go," she said.

Jimmy turned away; he stood staring down into the fire; he felt somehow as if they were both taking a mean advantage of Christine; he felt as if he had tried to force her hand; he was sure she did not wish to come back to him, but he was sure, too, that because in her heart she thought it her duty to do so, he would not return to London alone that night.

Nobody spoke for a moment; Jimmy was afraid to look round, then Christine said slowly:

"Very well, what train are we to go by?"

Her voice sounded a little expressionless; Jimmy could not look at her.

"Any train you like," he said jerkily. "My time is yours--anything you want . . . you have only to say what you would like to do."

A few weeks ago she would have been so happy to hear him speak like that, but now the words seemed to pass her by.

"We may as well have dinner first, and go by a fast train," she said. "I hate slow trains. Will you--will you pack some things for me?" She looked at Gladys.

"Of course." Gladys turned to the door, and Christine followed her, leaving Jimmy alone.

He did not move; he stood staring down at the cheery fire, his elbow resting on the mantleshelf.

He wished now that he had not asked this of his wife; he wished he had braved the situation out and received the full vent of the Great Horatio's wrath alone. Christine would think less of him than ever for being the first to make overtures of peace; he could have kicked himself as he stood there.

Kettering loomed in the background of his mind with hateful persistence; Kettering had looked at Christine as if--as if-- Jimmy roused himself with a sigh; it was a rotten world--a damned rotten world.

Upstairs Gladys was packing a suit-case for Christine, and talking about every conceivable subject under the sun except Jimmy.

Christine sat on the side of the bed, her hands folded in her lap. She took no interest in the proceedings, she hardly seemed to be listening to her friend's chatter.

Suddenly she broke into a remark Gladys was making:

"You really think I am doing the right thing, Gladys?"

Gladys sat back on her heels and let a little silk frock she had been folding fall to the floor. She looked at the younger girl with affectionate anxiety.

"Yes, I do," she said seriously. "Things would never have got any better as they were. It's perfectly true, in my opinion, that if you don't see a person for a long time you don't care whether you ever see him again or not, and--and I should hate you and Jimmy to--to have a final separation, no matter what I've said, and no matter what a selfish pig he is."

Christine smiled faintly.

"He can't *help* not caring for me," she said.

"No, but he can help having married you," Gladys retorted energetically. "Don't think I'm sympathising with him. I assure you I'm not. I hope he'll get paid out no end for what he's done, and the way he's treated you. But--but all the same, I think you ought to go back to him."

Christine flushed.

"I hate the thought of it," she said with sudden passion. "I shall never forget those days in London. I tried to pretend that everything was all right when anybody was there, just so that the servants should not see, but they all did, I know, and they were sorry for me. Oh, I feel as if I could kill myself when I look back on it all. To think I let him know how much I cared, and all the time--all the time he wouldn't have minded if he'd never seen me again. All the time he was longing for--for that other woman. I know it's horrid to talk like that about her, but--but she's dead, and--and----" she broke off with a shuddering little sigh.

"Things will come all right--you see," said Gladys wisely. She picked up Christine's frock and carefully folded it. "Give him a chance, Christine; I don't hold a brief for him, but, my word! it would be rotten if the Great Horatio found out the truth and cut Jimmy off with a shilling, wouldn't it? Of course, *really* it would serve him right, but one can't very well tell him so." She shut the lid of the case, and rose to her feet. "There, I think that's all. It must be nearly dinner time."

But Christine did not move.

"I wish you would come with us," she said tremblingly. "Why can't you come with us? I shouldn't mind half so much if you were there."

Gladys glanced at her and away again.

"Now you're talking sheer rubbish," she said lightly. "You remind me of that absurd play, *The Chinese Honeymoon*, when the bride took her bridesmaids with her." She laughed; she took Christine's hand and dragged her to her feet. "You might smile a little," she protested. "Don't let Jimmy think you're afraid of him."

"I *am* afraid. I don't want to go." Suddenly she began to cry.

Gladys's kind eyes grew anxious, she stood silent for a moment.

"I'm ever so much happier here," Christine went on. "I hate London; I hate the horrid hotels. I'd much rather be here with you and----" she broke off.

Gladys let go of her hand; there was a pucker of anxiety between her eyes. What had Kettering said to Christine? she asked herself in sudden panic. Surely he had not broken his word to her. She dismissed the thought with a shrug of the shoulders.

"Don't be a baby, Chris," she said a trifle impatiently. "It's up to you this time, anyway. What's the use of being young and as pretty as you are if you can't win the man you want?"

Christine dried her eyes, her cheeks were flushed.

"But I don't want him," she said with sudden passion. "I don't want him any more than he wants me."

Gladys stared at her in speechless dismay, she felt as if a cold hand had been laid on her heart. She was unutterably thankful when the dinner gong broke the silence; she turned again to the door.

"Well, *I* want my dinner, that's all I know," she said.

She went downstairs without waiting for Christine.

Jimmy met her in the hall; he looked at her with a sort of suspicion, she thought, and she knew she was colouring.

"Look here, Jimmy," she said with sudden brusqueness, "if she comes back here again without you it will be the last time you need ask me for help. You've got your chance. If you can't make her want to stay with you for the rest of your natural life I wash my hands of the whole affair."

"I'll do my best. I----" he floundered.

Gladys caught his arm in friendly fashion.

"I've no right to tell you, I suppose," she said, lowering her voice, "but it won't be easy. I never thought she'd change so, but now--well----" She shrugged her shoulders.

A little flame flashed into Jimmy's eyes.

"You mean that she doesn't care a hang for me now, is that it?" he asked roughly.

Gladys did not answer, she turned her face away.

Jimmy put his hands on her shoulders, forcing her to look at him.

"Gladys, you don't mean--not--not Kettering?"

There was a thrill of agony in his voice.

"I don't know--I can't be sure," Gladys answered him agitatedly. "I don't know anything. It's only--only what I'm afraid of." She moved hurriedly away from him as they heard Christine's footsteps on the landing upstairs.

"I suppose it was wrong of me to have said that," she told herself in a panic as she went in to dinner. "But after all, it serves him right! Perhaps he'll understand now something of what she suffered, poor darling."

Out in the hall Jimmy was standing at the foot of the stairs looking up at Christine.

"I--I feel such an awful brute," he began agitatedly. "I don't deserve that you should consider me in the least. I--I'll do my best, Christine."

She seemed to avoid looking at him. She moved quickly past him.

"Don't let's talk about it," she said nervously. "I'd much rather we did not talk about it." She went on into the dining-room without him.

Jimmy stood for a moment irresolute, he could not believe that it was Christine who had spoken to him like this. Christine, who so obviously wished to avoid being with him.

A sudden flame of jealousy seared his heart, he clenched his fists. Kettering--damn the fellow, how dared he make love to another man's wife!

But he had conquered his agitation before he followed Christine. He did his best to be cheerful and amusing during dinner. He was rewarded once by seeing the pale ghost of a smile on Christine's sad little face; it was as if for a moment she allowed him to raise the veil of disillusionment that had fallen between them and step back into the old happy days when they had played at sweethearts.

But the dinner was over all too soon, and Gladys said it was time to think about trains, and she talked and hustled very cleverly, giving them no time to feel awkward or embarrassed. She was going to escort them to the station, she

declared, conscious, perhaps, that both of them would be glad of her company; she said that she wished, she could come with them all the way, but that, of course, they did not want her. And neither of them dared to contradict her, though secretly Jimmy and Christine would both have given a great deal had she suddenly changed her mind and insisted on accompanying them to London.

She stood at the door of the railway carriage until the last minute; she sent all manner of absurd messages, to the Great Horatio; she told Christine to be sure, to give him her love; she kept up a running fire of chaff and banter till the train started away, and a pompous guard told her to "Stand back, there!" and presently the last glimpse of Christine's pale little face and Jimmy's worried eyes had been swallowed up in the darkness of evening.

Then Gladys turned to walk home alone with a feeling of utter desolation in her heart and an undignified smarting of tears in her eyes.

"I hope to goodness I've done the right thing in letting her go," she thought, as she turned out on to the dark road again. "I hope--I beg your pardon," she had bumped into a tall man coming towards her.

He stopped at sound of her voice, it was Kettering.

"Miss Leighton, what in the world----" he began in amazement.

"I've been seeing Jimmy off," Gladys explained airily, though her heart was beating uncomfortably. "Jimmy and Christine; they've gone off on a second honeymoon," she added flippantly.

"Jimmy--and Christine!" he echoed her words in just the tone of voice she had dreaded and expected to hear, half hurt, half angry. She could feel his eyes peering down at her, trying to read her face through the darkness, then he gave a short, angry laugh.

"I suppose you think you are protecting her from me," he said roughly.

Gladys did not answer at once, and when she spoke it was in a queer, strangled voice:

"Or perhaps I am protecting you--from her!"

There was a little silence, then she moved a step from him. "Good night," she said.

He followed. "I will walk back with you." He strode along beside her through the darkness; he was thinking of Christine and Jimmy, speeding away to London together, and a sort of impotent rage consumed him.

Jimmy was such a boy! So ignorant of the way in which to love a woman like Christine; he asked an angry question:

"Whose suggestion was this--this----?" He could not go on.

"I don't know--they agreed between themselves, I think. Horatio is coming home--the Great Horatio, you knew," Gladys told him, her voice sounded a little hysterical.

"And are you staying on here?"

"I shall for the present--till Christine comes back--if she ever does," she added deliberately.

"You mean that you think she won't?" he questioned sharply.

"I mean that I *hope* she won't."

They walked some little way in silence.

"You'll find it dull--alone at Upton House," he said presently in a more friendly voice.

"Yes." Gladys was humiliated to know how near she was to weeping; she would rather have died than let Kettering know how desolate she felt.

"You don't care for motoring, do you?" he said suddenly. "Or I might come along and take you out sometimes."

"I do, I love it."

She could feel him staring at her in amazement.

"But you said----" he began.

"I know what I said; it was only another way of expressing my disapproval of--of--- Well, you know!" she explained.

"Oh," he said grimly; suddenly he laughed. "Well, then, may I call and take you out sometimes? We shall both be--lonely," he added with a sigh. "And even if you don't like me----"

He waited, as if expecting her to contradict him, but she did not, and it was impossible for him to know that through the darkness her heart was racing, and her cheeks crimson because--well, perhaps because she liked him too much for complete happiness.

CHAPTER XXII

TOO LATE!

Jimmy and Christine travelled to London at opposite ends of the carriage.

Jimmy had done his best to make his wife comfortable, he had wrapped a rug round her though it was a mild night, he had bought more papers and magazines than she could possibly read on a journey of twice the length, and seeing that she was disinclined to talk, he had finally retired to the other end of the carriage and pretended to be asleep.

He was dying for a smoke, he would have given his soul for a cigarette, but he was afraid to ask for permission, so he sat there in durance vile with his arms folded rightly and his eyes half closed, while the train sped on through the night towards London.

Christine turned the pages of her magazines diligently, though it is doubtful if she read a word or saw a single picture.

She felt very tired and dispirited, it was as if she had been forced back against her will to look once more on the day of her wedding, when the cold cheerlessness of the church and vestry had frightened her, and when Jimmy had asked Sangster to lunch with them. The thought of Sangster gave her a gleam of comfort; she liked him, and she knew that he could be relied upon; she wondered how soon she would see him.

And then she thought of Kettering and the last words he had said to her on the steps at Upton House, and a little sigh escaped her. She thought Jimmy was asleep, she put down the magazine and let herself drift. There was something about Kettering that had appealed to her as no other man had ever done, something manly and utterly reliable which she found restful and protecting. She wondered what he would say when he heard that she had gone back to Jimmy, and what he would think.

She looked across at her husband, his eyes were wide open.

"Do you want anything?" he asked quickly.

"No, thank you." She seized upon the magazine again, she flushed in confusion.

"I've been wondering," said Jimmy gently, "where you would like to stay when we get to town. I think you'd be more comfortable in--in my rooms if you wouldn't mind going there, but----"

She interrupted hastily, "I'd much rather go to an hotel. I don't care where it is--any place will do."

She spoke hurriedly, as if she wished the conversation ended.

Jimmy looked at her wistfully, she was so pretty, much prettier than ever he had realised, he told himself with a sense of loss. A thousand times lately he found himself wishing that Cynthia Farrow had not died; not that he wanted her any more for himself, not that it any longer made him suffer to think of her and those first mad days of his engagement, but so that he might have proved to Christine that the fact of her being in London and near to him affected him not at all, that he might prove his infatuation for her to be a thing dead and done with.

Now he supposed she would never believe him. He looked at her pretty profile, and with sudden impulse he rose to his feet and crossed over to sit beside her.

"I want to speak to you," he said, when she made a little movement as if to escape him. "No, I'm not going to touch you."

There was a note of bitterness in his voice, once she had loved him to be near her--a few short weeks ago--and she would have welcomed this journey with him alone, but now things were so utterly changed.

"I must speak to you, just once, about Cynthia," he said urgently. "Just this once, and then I'll never mention her again. I can't hope that you'll believe what I'm going to say, but--but I do beg of you to try and believe that I am not saying all

this because--because she--she's dead. If she had lived it would make no difference to me now; if she were alive at this moment she would be no more to me than--than any other woman in the world."

Christine kept her eyes steadily before her; she listened because she could not help herself, but she felt as if someone were turning a knife in her heart.

"The night--the night she died," Jimmy went on disconnectedly, "I was going to make a clean breast of--of everything to you, and ask you to forgive me and let us start again. I was, 'pon my honour I was, but--but Fate stepped in, I suppose, and you know what happened. When I married you I'll admit that--that I didn't care for you as much as--as much as I ought to have done, but now----"

"But now"--Christine interrupted steadily though she was driven by intolerable pain--"now it's too late. I'm not with you to-night for any reason except that--that I think it's my duty, and because I don't want your brother to know or to blame you. We--we can't ever be anything--except ordinary friends. I suppose we can't get unmarried, can we?" she said with a little quivering laugh. "But--but at least we need never be anything more than--than friends----"

Jimmy was very white; Christine had spoken so quietly, so decidedly, they were not angry words, not even deliberately chosen to hurt him, they sounded just final!

He caught her hand.

"Oh, my God, you don't mean that, Christine, you're just saying it to--to punish me, just to--to--pay me out. You don't really mean it--you don't mean that you've forgotten all the old days, you don't mean that you don't care for me any more--that you never will care for me again. I can't bear it. Oh, for God's sake say you don't mean that."

There was genuine anguish in his voice now, and in his eyes, but Christine was not looking at him, she was only remembering that he had once loved another woman desperately, passionately, and that because that woman was no longer living he wished to transfer his affections; she kept her eyes steadily before her, as she answered him:

"I am sorry, I don't want to hurt you, but--but I am afraid that--that is what I do mean."

There was a moment of absolute silence. She did not look at Jimmy; she was only conscious of the fierce desire in her heart to hurt him, to make him feel, make him suffer as he had once made her suffer in the days that seemed so far away now and dead that she could look back with wonderment at herself for the despair she had known then.

She was glad that she no longer suffered; glad that she had lost her passionate love for him in this numbed indifference. She wondered if he really felt her words, or if he were only pretending.

Once he had pretended to her so well that she had married him; now, as a consequence, she found herself suspecting him at every turn, doubting him whenever he spoke.

The train shot into a tunnel, and Christine caught her breath. She shrank a little farther away from Jimmy in the darkness, but she need not have feared. Seeing her instinctive movement he rose at once and walked away to the other side of the carriage. He hardly spoke to her again till they reached London.

It was late then. Christine felt tired, and her head ached. She asked no more questions as to where they were going or what he proposed to do with her. She followed him into the taxi. She did not hear what directions he gave to the driver. It seemed a very little while before they stopped, and Jimmy was holding out his hand to help her to alight.

They went into the hotel together, and for a moment Jimmy left her alone in the wide, empty lounge while he went to make arrangements for her.

She looked round her dully. The old depression she had known when last she was in London returned. She hated the silence of the lounge; even the doors seemed to shut noiselessly, and everywhere the carpets were so thick that footsteps were muffled.

Jimmy came back. He seemed to avoid her eyes.

"I have taken rooms for you; I think you will be comfortable. Will you--will you go up now? I have ordered supper; it will be ready in fifteen minutes. I will wait here."

Christine obeyed wearily. She went up in the lift feeling lonely and depressed. A kind-faced maid met her on the first

landing. She went with Christine into her bedroom; she unpacked her bag and made the room comfortable for her; she talked away cheerily, almost as if she guessed what a sore heart the girl carried with her. Christine felt a little comforted as she went downstairs again.

It was nearly eleven o'clock. A few people were having supper in the room to which she was directed. Jimmy was there waiting for her.

They sat down together almost silently.

"A second honeymoon!" Gladys Leighton's words came back to Christine with a sort of mockery.

She looked at her husband. He was pale and silent. He only made a pretence of eating; they were both glad when the meal was over.

There was a moment of awkwardness when they rose from the table.

"I am tired," Christine said when he asked if she would care to go to the drawing-room for a little while. "I should like to go to bed."

"Very well." Jimmy held out his hand. "Good night." He looked at her and quickly away again. "I will come round in the morning."

She raised startled eyes to his face.

"You are not staying here then?"

He coloured a little.

"No; I thought you would prefer that I did not. I shall be at my rooms--if you want me."

"Very well." She just touched the tips of his fingers. The next moment she was walking alone up the wide staircase.

She never slept all night. Though she had felt tired at the end of her journey, she never once closed her eyes now.

She wished she had not come. She hated Jimmy for having persuaded her; she hated Gladys for having practically told her that it was her duty to do as he wished; she hated Jimmy afresh because now, having got her to London, he had gone off and left her.

She did not choose to believe that he had really done so because he thought she would prefer it. She felt lonely and deserted; tears welled into her eyes.

"A second honeymoon!" What a farce it all was.

It seemed an eternity before the rumble of traffic sounded again in the streets and the first grey daylight crept through the blind chinks.

She wondered what Gladys was doing, what Kettering was doing, and if he knew that she had gone, and where.

She deliberately conjured the memory of his eyes and voice as he had last looked at her and spoken.

Her heart beat a little faster at the memory. She knew well enough that he loved her, and for a moment she wondered what life would be like with him to always care for her and shield her.

He was much older than Jimmy. She did not realise that perhaps his knowledge of women and the way in which they liked to be treated was the result of a long apprenticeship during which he had had time to overcome the impulsive, headlong blunderings through which Jimmy was still stumbling.

She was up and dressed early; she had had her breakfast and was ready to go out when Jimmy arrived. He looked disappointed. He had made an effort and got up unusually early for him in order to be round at the hotel before Christine could possibly expect him. He asked awkwardly if she had slept well. She looked away from him as she answered impatiently:

"I never sleep well in London--I hate it."

He bit his lip.

"I'm sorry. What would you like to do this morning?"

"I'm going out."

"You mean that you don't wish me to come?"

Christine shrugged her shoulders.

"Come if you wish--certainly."

They left the hotel together. It was a bright sunny morning, and London was looking its best. Christine rushed into haphazard speech.

"Have you heard from your brother again?"

"No; I hardly expected to."

Something in the constraint of his voice made her look at him quickly.

"I suppose--I suppose he really is coming?" she said with sudden suspicion.

Jimmy flushed scarlet.

"I haven't deserved that," he said.

Christine laughed--a hard little laugh, strangely unlike her.

"I am not so sure," she answered.

They had turned into Regent Street now. A flower-girl thrust a bunch of scented violets into Jimmy's face.

"Buy a bunch for the pretty lady, sir."

Jimmy smiled involuntarily. He looked at Christine.

"May I buy them for you?" He did not wait for her answer; he gave the girl a shilling.

Christine took the flowers indifferently. She kept marvelling at herself. It seemed impossible that she was the same girl who had once walked these very streets with Jimmy, her heart beating fast with happiness. Then, had he given her a bunch of violets, she would have thrilled at the little gift; but now--she tucked them carelessly into the front of her coat. She did not notice when presently they fell out; but Jimmy had seen, and there was a curiously hurt look in his eyes.

They walked through the park. Jimmy met several people he knew; he raised his hat mechanically, making no attempt to stop and speak.

Christine looked at everyone with a sense of antagonism.

Of course all Jimmy's friends knew that once he had loved Cynthia Farrow; no doubt many of them had seen him walking with her through this very park. Something of the old jealousy touched her for a moment. She would never be able to forget, even if she lived for years and years; the memory of the woman who had wrecked her happiness would always be there between them--a shadow which it was impossible to banish.

"What about some lunch?" said Jimmy presently. He glanced at his watch. "It's half past twelve."

"I should like to ask Mr. Sangster to come with us," Christine said quickly. "Is he anywhere--anywhere where we can find him?"

"I can 'phone. He's not on the 'phone himself, but the people downstairs will take a message, if you don't mind waiting for a moment."

"I don't mind at all."

She was dreading another *tete-a-tete* lunch with her husband. It had been in her mind all the morning to suggest that Sangster came with them. She remembered bitterly how once Jimmy had suggested bringing his friend to share their wedding breakfast. Things had strangely reversed themselves since that morning.

She waited outside the call box while Jimmy went in; she watched him through the glass door. He was standing with his hat at the back of his head, his elbow resting on the wooden box itself. He looked very young, she thought, in spite of his slightly haggard appearance. Something in his attitude reminded her of him as he had been in his Eton days--long-legged and ungainly in his short jacket. She smothered a little sigh. They had drifted such a weary way since then; too far to ever retrace their steps.

Presently he rejoined her.

"I am sorry--Sangster is not in."

"Oh!" She looked disappointed. "Is there--isn't there anyone else we can ask?"

His eyes searched her flushed face bitterly.

"You hate being alone with me as much as all that?"

She looked away.

"I only thought it would be more lively."

"You find me such dull company."

She made no reply.

"Things have changed since we were engaged, haven't they?" said Jimmy then, savagely. "You were pleased enough to be with me then; you never wanted a third."

"Things are reversed--that is all," she told him unemotionally.

He laughed ironically.

"I don't think you know quite how successfully you are paying me out," he said.

"I would rather not talk about it," she interrupted. "It can do no good. I have done as you asked me; I told you I could do no more, that you must expect nothing more."

There was a little silence.

"I'm sorry," said Jimmy stiltedly.

They lunched together.

"I'll get some tickets for a theatre to-night," Jimmy said. "That will kill the time, won't it?"

"I didn't say I found the time drag," she told him.

"No; but you look bored to death," he answered savagely.

It was such an extraordinary situation--that Christine should ever be bored with him. It cut Jimmy to the heart; he looked at her with anger.

She was leaning back in her chair, looking round the room. She was as little interested in him as he had once been in her.

Twenty times during the day he cursed himself for the mad infatuation that had wrecked his happiness. There was something so sweet and desirable about Christine. He would have given his soul just then for one of her old radiant smiles; for just a glimpse of the light in her eyes which had always been there when she looked at him; for the note of shy happiness in her voice when she spoke to him.

The days of delirium which he had spent with Cynthia Farrow seemed like an impossible dream now, when he looked back on them: the late nights and champagne suppers, the glare of the footlights, the glamour and grease paint of the theatre. His soul sickened at the thought of the unnatural life he had led then. All he wanted now was quiet happiness--the life of domesticity for which he had once pitied himself, believing it would be his lot as Christine's husband, seemed the most desirable thing on earth; just he and she--perhaps down in the country--walking through fields and woods, perhaps at Upton House, with the crowd of old memories to draw them together again, and wipe the hard bitterness from little Christine's brown eyes.

It was pouring with rain when they left the restaurant; the bright sunshine of morning had utterly gone, the street was dripping, the pavements saturated.

"We shall have to go home, I suppose," said Jimmy lugubriously.

"Home?" Christine looked up at him. "Do you mean to the hotel?" she asked.

"I suppose so, unless you would care to come to my rooms," said Jimmy, flushing a little. "There's sure to be a fire there, and--and it's pretty comfortable."

For a moment she hesitated, and his heart-beats quickened a little, hoping she would agree to the suggestion; but the next moment she shook her head.

"I don't care to--thank you. I will go back to the hotel."

Jimmy hailed a taxi. He looked moody and despondent once more. They drove away in silence.

Presently--

"I will go to your rooms if--if you will answer me one thing," said Christine abruptly.

Jimmy stared. The colour ran into his pale face.

"I will answer anything you like to ask me--you know I will."

"Did--did Miss Farrow ever go to your rooms?"

She asked the question tremblingly; she could not look at him. With a sudden movement Jimmy dropped his face in his hands; the hot blood seemed to scorch him; this sudden mention of a name he had never wished to hear again was almost unbearable.

"Yes," he said; "she did." He looked up. "Christine--don't condemn me like that," he broke out agitatedly. He saw the cold disdain in her averted face.

"She lived such a different life from anything you can possibly imagine. It's--well--it's like being in another world. Women on the stage think nothing of--of--the free-and-easy sort of thing. She used to come to my rooms to tea. She used to bring her friends in after the theatre--after rehearsals." He leaned over as if to take her hand, then drew his own away again. "I--I ask you to come now because--because I thought you would take away all the memories I want to forget. Can't you ever forget too? Can't you ever try and forgive me? It's--it's--awful to think that we may have to live together all our lives and that you'll never look at me again as you used to--never be glad to see me, never want me to touch you." His voice broke; he bit his lip till it bled.

Christine clasped her hands hard in her lap.

"It was awful to me too--once," she said dully. "Awful to know that you didn't love me when I was so sure that you did. But I've got over it. I suppose you will too, some day, even if you think it hurts very much just now. I dare say we shall be quite happy together in our own way some day. Lots of married people are--quite happy together, and don't love each other at all."

She dismissed him when they reached the hotel. She went up to her room and cried.

She did not know why she was crying; she only knew that she felt lonely and unhappy. She would have given the world just then for someone to come in and put kind arms round her. She would have given the world to know that

there was someone to whom she really mattered, really counted.

Jimmy only wanted her because he realised that she no longer wanted him. The wedding ring of which she had been so proud was now an unwelcome fetter of which she would never again be free.

They went to the theatre in the evening. Jimmy had taken great pains to make himself smart; it was almost pathetic the efforts he made to be bright and entertaining. He told her that he had sent a note to Sangster to meet them afterwards for supper. It gave him a sharp pang of jealousy to notice how Christine's eyes brightened.

"I am so glad," she said. "I like him so much."

She was almost friendly to him after that. Once or twice he made her laugh.

He was very careful to keep always to impersonal subjects. He behaved just as if they were good friends out for an evening of enjoyment. When they left the theatre Christine looked brighter than he had seen her for weeks. Jimmy was profoundly grateful. He was delighted that Sangster should see her with that little flush in her cheeks. She did not look so very unhappy, he told himself.

Sangster was waiting for them when they reached the supper-room. He greeted Christine warmly. He told her jokingly that he had got his dress-suit out of pawn in her honour. He looked very well and happy. The little supper passed off cheerily enough. It was only afterwards, when they all drove to the hotel where Christine was staying, that Sangster blundered; he held a hand to Jimmy when he had said good night to Christine.

"Well, so long, old chap."

Jimmy flushed crimson.

"I'm not staying here. Wait for me; I'm coming along."

"You're a silly fool," Jimmy said savagely, as they walked away. "What in the world did you want to say that for?"

"My dear fellow, I thought it was all right. I thought you'd made it up. I'm awfully sorry."

"We haven't made it up--never shall from what I can see," Jimmy snapped at him. "Oh, for the Lord's sake let's talk about something else."

Sangster raised his troubled eyes to the dark starless sky. He had been so sure everything was all right. Jimmy had made no recent confidence to him. He had thought Christine looked well and happy--and now, after all. . . .

"It looks as if we shall have some more rain," he said dully. "It's been awful weather this week, hasn't it?"

"Damn the weather!" said Jimmy Challoner.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE UNEXPECTED

Four days passed away, and still the Great Horatio had not arrived in London. He had sent a couple of telegrams from Marseilles explaining that a chill had delayed him.

"Sly old dog," Jimmy growled to Sangster. "He means that he's having a thundering good time where he is."

Sangster laughed.

"Marseilles isn't much of a place. Perhaps he really is ill."

Jimmy grunted something unintelligible.

"I doubt it," he added. "And the devil of it is that Christine doesn't believe me. She doesn't think the old idiot's coming home at all; she doesn't believe anything I tell her--now."

"Nonsense!" But Sangster's eyes looked anxious. He had seen a great deal during the last four days, and for the first time there was a tiny doubt in his mind. Had Christine really lost her love for Jimmy? He was obliged to admit that it seemed as if she had. She never spoke to him if she could help it, and he knew that Jimmy was as conscious of the change as he, knew that Jimmy was worrying himself to a shadow.

"Your brother will turn up when you're least expecting him," he said in his most matter-of-fact voice. "You'll see if he doesn't--and then everything will come right."

Jimmy grunted. He fidgeted round the room and came to anchorage in front of the window. He stood staring out into the not very cheerful street.

Sangster knocked the ashes from his pipe and rose.

"Well, we may as well be going," he said. "I thought you told me we were to lunch with your wife."

"So I did. She's gone shopping this morning--didn't want me. I said we'd meet her at the Savoy at one. I want to call in at my rooms first, if you don't mind." Jimmy spoke listlessly. He was a great deal with Sangster nowadays. Christine so often made excuses for him not to be with her, and he had got into that state when he could not tolerate his own company. He dreaded being left to his thoughts; he would not be alone for a minute if he could help it.

They left Sangster's rooms and went to Jimmy's.

"I asked Christine to come here the other day," Jimmy said with a short laugh as he fitted his key in the door. "She wouldn't, of course."

"Why not?"

"Because Cynthia had been here." He looked away from his friend's eyes. "I don't blame her. She'll never understand the difference. That--that other---- I wonder how it ever came about at all now, when I look back."

Sangster followed him silently.

"I shall give the d----d place up," Jimmy said sullenly. "I can't afford to keep it on really; and if she won't come here----"

Sangster made no comment. Jimmy put his hat down on the table and went over to the sideboard for whisky and glasses.

"Don't be a fool, Jimmy," said Sangster.

He shrugged his shoulders when Jimmy told him to mind his own business. He turned away.

"Here's a telegram," he said suddenly.

Jimmy turned.

"For me?"

"Yes--your brother I expect."

Jimmy snatched up the yellow envelope and tore it open. He read the message through:

"Coming to London to-night. Meet me Waterloo eight-thirty."

He laughed mirthlessly.

"The Great Horatio?" Sangster asked.

"Yes."

Jimmy had forgotten the whisky. He took up his hat.

"Come on; I must tell Christine." He made for the door.

"You'd better take the wire to show her," said Sangster. They went out into the street together.

"It's too early to go to the Savoy," said Jimmy. He was walking very fast now. There was a sort of eagerness in his face; perhaps he hoped that his brother's presence, as Sangster had said, would make all the difference. "We'll hop along to the hotel and fetch her."

He walked Sangster off his feet. He pushed open the swing door of the hotel with an impatient hand.

"Mrs. Challoner--my wife--is she in?"

The hall porter looked at Jimmy curiously. He thought he and Christine were the strangest married couple he had ever come across. There was a little twinkle in his solemn eyes as he answered:

"Mrs. Challoner went very early, sir. She asked me to telephone to you at the Savoy at one o'clock and say she was sorry she would not be able to meet you----"

"Not be able to meet me?" Jimmy's voice and face were blank.

"That is what Mrs. Challoner said, sir. She went out with a gentleman,--a Mr. Kettering, she told me to say, sir."

Sangster turned sharply away. For the first time for many weeks he was utterly and profoundly sorry for Jimmy Challoner, as he stood staring at the hall porter with blank eyes. The eager flush had faded from his face; he looked, all at once, ill and old; he pulled himself together with an effort.

"Oh! All right--thanks--thanks very much."

His voice sounded dazed. He turned and went down the steps to the street; but when he reached the pavement he stood still again, as if he hardly knew what he was doing. When Sangster touched his arm he started violently.

"What is it? Oh, yes--I'm coming." He began to walk on at such a rate that Sangster could hardly keep pace with him. He expostulated good-humouredly:

"What's the hurry, old chap? I'm getting old, remember."

Jimmy slackened speed then. He looked at his friend with burning eyes.

"I'll break every bone in that devil's carcass," he said furiously. "I'll teach him to come dangling after my wife. I ought to have known that was his little game. No wonder she won't go anywhere with me. It's Kettering--damn his impertinence! I suppose he's been setting her against me. He and Horace always thought I was a rotter and an outsider. I'll spoil his

beauty for him; I'll----" His voice had risen excitedly. A man passing turned to stare curiously.

Sangster slipped a hand through Jimmy's arm.

"Don't be so hasty, old chap. There's no harm in your wife going out to lunch with Kettering if she wants to. Give her the benefit of the doubt for the present, at least."

"She's chucked me for him. She promised to meet me. She thinks more of him than she does of me, or she'd never have gone." There was a sort of enraged agony in Jimmy's voice, a fierce colour burned in his pale face.

Sangster shrugged his shoulders. It was rather amusing to him that Jimmy should be playing the jealous husband-- Jimmy, whose own life had been so singularly selfish and full of little episodes which no doubt he would prefer to be buried and forgotten.

Jimmy turned on him:

"You're pleased, of course. You're chuckling up your sleeve. You think it serves me right--and I dare say it does; but I can't bear it, I tell you--I won't--I won't."

The words were boyish enough, but there was something of real tragedy in his young voice, something that forced the realisation home to Sangster that perhaps it was not merely dog-in-the-manger jealousy that was goading him now, but genuine pain. He looked at him quickly and away again. Jimmy's face was twitching. If he had been a woman one would have said that he was on the verge of an hysterical outburst. Sangster rose to the occasion.

"Let's go and get a drink," he said prosaically. "I'm as dry as dust and we haven't had any lunch."

Jimmy said he wasn't hungry, that he couldn't eat a morsel of anything if it were to save his life. He broke out again into a fresh torrent of abuse of Kettering. He cursed him up hill and down dale. Even when they were in the restaurant to which Sangster insisted on going he could not stop Jimmy's flow of expletives. One or two people lunching near looked at them in amazement. In desperation Sangster ordered a couple of brandies; he forced Jimmy to drink one. Presently he quieted a little. He sat with his elbows on the table and his head in his hands. With the passing of his passionate rage, depression seemed to have gripped him. He was sullen and morose, he would not answer when Sangster spoke to him; when they left the restaurant he insisted on going back to Christine's hotel.

He questioned the porter closely. Where had she gone? Had they driven away together or walked?

They had had a taxi, the man told him. He began to look rather alarmed; there was something in Jimmy's white face and burning eyes that meant mischief, he thought. He told the "Boots" afterwards: "We shall hear more of this--you mark *my* words."

"A taxi--yes. . . . Go on." Jimmy moistened his dry lips. "You--you didn't hear where--what directions? . . ."

"Yes, sir. The gentleman told me to say Euston, told me to tell the driver to go to Euston, I mean, sir----" the man explained in confusion. He was red in the face now and embarrassed.

"Euston," said Jimmy and Sangster together. They looked at one another, Jimmy with a sort of dread in his eyes, Sangster with anxiety.

"Yes, sir. Euston it was, I'm sure. And the gentleman told me to tell the driver to go as fast as he could."

There was a little silence. Sangster slipped a hand through Jimmy's arm.

"Thanks--thanks very much," he said. He led Jimmy away.

He called a taxi and told the man to drive to Jimmy's rooms. He made no attempt to speak, did not know what to say. Jimmy was leaning back with closed eyes.

Presently:

"Do you think she's gone?" he asked huskily.

Sangster made a hurried gesture of denial:

"No, no."

Jimmy laughed mirthlessly.

"She has," he said. "I know she has. Serves me damned well right. It's all I deserve." There was a little pause. "Well," he said, "she's more than got her own back, if it's any consolation to her to know it."

He felt as if there were a knife being turned in his heart. His whole soul revolted against this enforced pain. He had never suffered like this in all his life before. Even that night at the theatre, when Cynthia Farrow had given him his *conge*, he had not suffered as now; then, it had been more damage to his pride than his heart; but this--he loved Christine--he knew now that he loved little Christine as he had never loved any other woman, as he never would love anyone again.

He cursed himself for a blind fool. It goaded him to madness to think of the happiness that had been his for the taking, and which he had let fall to the ground. He clenched his teeth in impotent rage. When they reached his rooms he threw his hat and coat aside, and began pacing up and down as if he could not keep still for a moment. Life was insufferable, intolerable; he could not imagine how he was going to get through all the stretch of years lying in wait for him. He had forgotten that the Great Horatio was coming home that night; the Great Horatio had suddenly faded out of the picture; it was no longer a thing of importance if his allowance were cut down, or stopped once and for all. All he wanted was Christine--Christine. He would have given his soul for her at that moment, for just one glimpse of the old trust and love in her brown eyes, for just a sight of the happy smile with which she had greeted him when they were first engaged. They had all been his once, and now he had lost her forever.

Another man had taken and prized the treasure he had blindly thrown away. Jimmy groaned as he paced up and down, up and down.

Sangster was pretending to read. He turned the pages of a magazine, but he saw nothing of what was written there. In his own way he was as unhappy as Jimmy, in his own way he was suffering tortures of doubt and apprehension.

He did not know Kettering; had only seen him once at Upton House; but he fully realised that the man had a strong personality, and one very likely to hold and keep such a nature as Christine's.

But he could not bear to think of the shipwreck this meant for them all. He could not believe that her love for Jimmy had died so completely; she had loved him so dearly.

Jimmy came over to where he sat:

"Go and ring up again, there's a dear chap," he said. His voice was hoarse. "Ring up the hotel for me, will you? She may have come back. . . . Oh, I hope to God she has," he added brokenly.

Sangster rose at once. He held out his hand.

"I'm so sorry, Jimmy. I'd give anything--anything----" he stopped. "But it's all right, you see," he added cheerily, struck by the despair in his friend's face. "She'll be back there by now. We're both getting scared about nothing. . . . I'll ring up."

He walked over to the desk where Jimmy's 'phone stood. There was a moment of suspense as he rang and gave the number.

Jimmy had begun his restless pacing once more. His hands were deep thrust in his trousers pockets, his head bent. His heart seemed to be hammering in his throat as he tried not to listen to what Sangster was saying--tried not to hear.

"Yes. . . . Challoner--Mrs. Challoner. I only wondered if she had returned. . . . Not yet--oh. . . . Yes. . . . A wire. . . . Yes. . . ."

There was a little silence; a tragic silence it seemed to Jimmy. He was standing still now. He felt as if his limbs had lost all power of movement. His eyes were fixed on Sangster's averted face. After a moment Sangster hung up the receiver.

He did not turn at once; when, at last, he moved, it was very slowly. He went across to Jimmy and laid a hand on his arm. "She's not there, old man; but . . . but there's a wire from her--she wired to the manager. . . ." He paused. He looked away from the agony in Jimmy's eyes. He tried twice to find his voice before he could go on, then:

"She--she's not coming back to-night," he said. "The--the wire was sent from--from Oxford . . ."

And now the silence was like the silence of death. Sangster held his breath. He could feel the sudden rigidity of Jimmy Challoner's arm beneath his hand.

Then Jimmy turned away and dropped into a chair by the table. He fell forward with his face hidden in his outstretched arms.

"Oh, my God!" he said in a hoarse whisper.

It was so useless to try and offer any consolation. Sangster stood looking at him with a suspicious moisture in his honest eyes. Christine--little Christine! His heart felt as if it were breaking as he thought of her--of her love for Jimmy--of the first days of their engagement. And now it was in vain that he tried to remember that Jimmy was to blame for it all. He tried to harden his heart against him; but, somehow, he could not. He went over to where he sat and laid a kind hand on his shoulder.

"Don't give up yet, boy." At that moment he felt years older than his friend. "There may be some mistake. Don't let's give up till we're sure--quite sure----"

Jimmy raised his face. His lips were grey and pinched.

"It's no use," he said hopelessly. "No use. . . . Somehow I know it. . . . Oh, my God! If I could only have it over again--just a day. . . ." The anguish in his voice would have wrung a harder heart than Sangster's. For a moment there was unbroken silence in the room. Then Jimmy struggled to his feet.

"I must go after her. She won't come back, I know. But at least I can try. . . . It may not be too late---- Kettering--damn him! . . ." He broke off. He stood for a moment swaying to and fro.

Sangster caught his arm.

"You're not fit to go. Let me. . . . I'll do all I can. . . . I give you my word of honour that I'll move heaven and earth to find her. And we may be mistaken. We may. . . ." He broke off. Someone had knocked softly on the door. For a moment neither of them answered, then the handle was softly turned, and Christine stood there on the threshold. . . .

Sangster caught his breath hard in his throat. He looked at her, and he had to hold himself back with an iron hand to keep from rushing to her, from falling at her feet in abasement for the very real doubt and dread that he had cherished against her.

She looked so young--such a child, and her brown eyes were so sweet and shy as she looked at Jimmy--never at him. He realised it with a little stabbing pain that it was not once at him that she looked, but past him, to where Jimmy stood like a man turned to stone.

Then: "Christine," said Jimmy Challoner with a great cry.

He put out his hand and touched her, almost as if he doubted that she was real. His breath was coming fast; he was ashen pale.

"Christine," he said again in a whisper.

Sangster moved past him. He did not look at Christine any more. He walked to the door and opened it. He hesitated a moment, wondering if either of them would see him going, be conscious of his presence. But he might not have been there for all they knew. He went out slowly and shut the door behind him.

It was the shutting of the door that broke the spell, that roused Jimmy from the lethargy into which he had fallen. He tried to laugh.

"I'm sorry. I--I didn't expect you." The words sounded foolish to himself. He tried to cover them. "Won't you sit down? I'm--I'm glad. . . ." A wave of crimson surged to his face. "Oh, my God! I am glad to see you," he said hoarsely.

He groped backwards for his chair and fell into it.

A most humiliating weakness came over him. He hid his face in his hands.

Christine stood looking at him with troubled eyes; then she put out her hand and touched him timidly:

"Jimmy!"

He caught her hand and carried it to his lips. He kissed it again and again--the little fingers, the soft palm, the slender wrist.

"I thought I should never see you again. I couldn't have borne it. . . . Christine--oh my dear, forgive me, forgive me. I'm so wretched, so utterly, utterly miserable. . . ."

The appeal was so boyish--so like the old selfish Jimmy whom Christine had loved and spoiled in the days when they were both children. It almost seemed as if the years were rolled away again and they were down at Upton House, making up a childish quarrel--Jimmy asking for pardon, she only too anxious to kiss and be friends.

Tears swam into her eyes and her lips trembled; but she did not move.

"I want to tell you something," she said slowly.

He looked up, his eyes full of a great dread.

"Not that you're going away--I can't bear it. You'll drive me mad--Christine--little Christine." He was on his knees beside her now, his arms round her waist, his face buried in the soft folds of her dress. "Forgive me, Christine--forgive me. I love you so, and I've been punished enough. I thought you'd gone away with that devil--that brute Kettering. I've been half mad!" He flung back his head and looked at her. She was very flushed. Her eyes could not meet his.

"That's--that's just what I want to tell you," she said in a whisper.

Jimmy's arms fell from about her. He rose to his feet slowly; he tried to speak, but no words would come. Then, quite suddenly, he broke down into sobbing.

He was very much of a boy still, was Jimmy Challoner. Perhaps he would never grow up into a man as Kettering and Sangster understood the word; but his very boyishness was what Christine had first loved in him. Perhaps he could have chosen no surer or swifter way to her forgiveness than this. . . .

In a moment her arms were round his neck. She tried to draw his head down to her shoulder. Her sweet face was all concern and motherly tenderness as she kissed him and kissed him.

"Don't, Jimmy--don't! Oh, I do love you--I do love you."

She began to cry too, and they kissed and clung together like children who have quarrelled and are sorry.

Jimmy drew her into his arms, and they sat clasping one another in the big arm-chair. It was a bit of a squeeze, but neither of them minded. His arms were round her now, her head on his shoulder. He kissed her every minute. He said that he had all the bygone years of both their lives to make up for. He asked her a hundred times if she really loved him; if she had forgiven him; and if she loved him as much as she had done a month ago--two months ago; if she loved him as much as when they were children; and if she would love him all his life and hers.

"All my life and yours," she told him with trembling lips.

He had kissed the colour back to her cheeks by this time. She looked more like the girl he had seen that fateful night in the stalls at the theatre. He kissed her eyes because he said they were so beautiful. He kissed her hair.

Presently she drew a little away from him.

"But I want to talk to you," she said. She would not look at him. She sat nervously twisting his watch-chain.

"Yes," said Jimmy. He lifted her hand and held it against his lips all the time she spoke.

"It's about--about Mr. Kettering," she said in a whisper.

Jimmy swore--a sign that he was feeling much better.

"I don't want to hear his confounded name."

"Oh, but you must--Jimmy. I--I--he----"

"He's been making love to you----"

No answer. Jimmy took her face in his hands, searching its flushed sweetness with jealous eyes.

"Has he?" he demanded savagely.

"N-no . . . but . . . oh, Jimmy, don't look like that. He only came up this morning because--because Gladys is ill. He thought I ought to know and--and--I thought I would go down and see her. But in the train----" she faltered.

"Yes . . ." said Jimmy from between his teeth.

Christine raised her brown eyes.

"He said--he said----" Suddenly she fell forward, hiding her face against his coat. "Oh, it doesn't matter, dear; it doesn't matter, because it was then that I knew it was only you I wanted--only you I loved. I knew that I couldn't bear any other man to say that he loved me--that it was you--only you."

"Oh, my sweet!" said Jimmy huskily. He turned her face and kissed her lips. "I don't deserve it; but--oh, Christine, do believe that there's never been anyone like you in my life; that I've never cared for anyone as I do for you--all that--that other----"

"I know--I know," she was thinking remorsefully of the days when Kettering had seemed to come before Jimmy in her heart; of the days when she had been unhappy because he stayed away. And now there was a deep thankfulness in her heart that he himself had brought things to a climax. She had been so pleased to see him when he called at the hotel that morning. She had never dreamed that sheer longing had driven him to London to see her, or that he had made Gladys the excuse. She had readily agreed to a run down to Upton House to see Gladys. She had started off with him quite happily and unsuspectingly. And then--even now it sent a little shiver of dread through her to think of the way he had spoken--the way he had pleaded with her--looked at her.

He had held her hands, kissed them, he had tried to kiss her, and it had been the touch of his lips that had melted the numbness of her heart and told her that she loved Jimmy; that in spite of everything that had happened, everything he had done, he was the one and only man who would ever count in her life. Passionate revulsion had driven her back to London. She had parted with Kettering then and there. She had told him that she never wished to see him again. She had felt as if she could never be happy till she was back with Jimmy, till she had made it up with him, till they had kissed and forgiven one another. She told him all this now simply enough. The little Christine of happier days had come back from the land of shadowy memories to which she had retreated as she sat on Jimmy's knee and kissed him between their little broken sentences and asked him to forgive her.

"I've never, never loved anyone but you, Jimmy," she said earnestly.

"I've never really loved anyone but you."

And Jimmy said, "Thank God!"

He looked at her with passionate thankfulness and love. He told her all that he had suffered since he went to the hotel and found she had gone. He said that she had punished him even more than she could ever have hoped.

"And that wire---- There was a wire to say that you were not coming back," he said with sudden bitter memory. She nodded.

"I sent it from Oxford. We had to change there. I meant to stay with Gladys. Poor Gladys!" she added with a little soft laugh of happiness.

"She can do without you--I can't," he said quickly.

"Really and truly?" she asked wistfully.

Jimmy drew her again into his arms. He held her soft cheek to his own.

"I've never really wanted anything or anyone badly in all my life until now," he said. "Now you're here, in my arms, and I've got the whole world."

They sat silent for a little.

"Happy?" asked Jimmy in a whisper.

Christine nodded.

"Quite--quite happy," she told him.

Presently:

"Jimmy, you won't--you won't be horrid to--to Mr. Kettering, will you?
He was kind to me--he was very kind to me when--when I was so unhappy."

"Were you very unhappy, my sweet?"

"Dreadfully."

"I'm sorry, darling--so sorry. I can't tell you."

Christine kissed him.

"You won't ever be unkind again, Jimmy?"

"Never--never! Do you believe me?"

She looked into his eyes.

"Yes."

"And you do love me?"

Christine made a little grimace.

"I'm tired of answering that question."

"I shall never be tired of asking it," he said. "And about Kettering? We shan't ever need to see him again, shall we? So there'll be no chance for me to tell him that I should like to punch his beastly head."

Christine laughed happily, then she grew serious all at once.

"Jimmy, do you know that I somehow think he will marry Gladys----"

"*What!*" said Jimmy in amazement.

She nodded seriously.

"I believe Gladys likes him. I don't know, but I do believe she does.
And she'd make him a splendid wife."

Jimmy screwed up his nose.

"Don't let's talk about her," he said. "I'd much rather talk about my own wife----"

Christine flushed.

"Do you think I shall make a--*nice* wife, Jimmy?" she asked in a whisper.

Jimmy caught her to his heart.

"Do I? Darling--I can't--somehow I can't answer that question. I'm not half good enough for you. I don't deserve that you----" he began brokenly.

She laid her hand on his lips.

"You're not to say rude things about my husband," she told him with pretended severity.

He kissed the hand that covered his mouth.

"And so when the Great Horatio comes----" said Christine. Jimmy gave a stifled exclamation; he dragged his watch from his pocket.

"By Jove!" he said.

"What's the matter?" she asked anxiously.

He explained:

"I had a wire from the old chap. We were to meet him at Waterloo this evening at eight-thirty; it's nearly eight now."

Christine climbed down from his knee with a sudden show of dignity.

"We must go at once--of course we must." She came back for a moment to his arms. "Oh, Jimmy, aren't you *glad* that we're really--*really* all right, that we haven't got to pretend now the Great Horatio is home?"

"I can never tell you how glad," said Jimmy humbly.

They kissed, and Christine danced over to the looking-glass to put her hat straight.

Jimmy watched her with adoring eyes. Suddenly:

"I shall tell him that we can't stay after to-night," he said decidedly. "I shall tell him that he can't possibly expect it."

Christine looked round.

"Tell whom--your brother? What do you mean--that he can't expect it?"

Jimmy put an arm round her.

"I shall tell him--don't you know what I shall tell him?" he said fondly. He bent his head suddenly to hers. "I'll tell him that we're going away to-morrow"--his voice dropped to a whisper--"on a second honeymoon."

"Oh!" said Christine softly.