RICHARD DEHAN

THE DOP DOCTOR

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Dehan R.

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Содержание

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TO ONE ACROSS THE SEA

What have the long years brought me since first, with this pen for pickaxe, I bowed my loins to quarry from the living rock of my world about me, bread and a home where Love should smile beside the hearthplace, and chiefly for Love's dear sake, that men should honour you who, above all on earth, I hold most in honour – a name among the writers of books that live!

What have the long years brought me! Well, not the things I hoped. Just bread and clothing, fire, and a little roof-tree; the purchased soil to make a grave, and a space of leisure, before that grave be needed, to write, myself, this book for me and for you. Hope has spread her iridescent Psyche-wings and left me; Ambition long ago shed hers to become a working-ant. Love never came to sit in the chair beside the ingle. An ocean heaves between us, only for nightly dreams and waking thoughts to span. Were those dear eyes to see me as I am to-day, I wonder whether they would know me? For I grow grey, and furrows deepen in the forehead the dear hand will never smooth again. Remember me, then, only as I used to be; my heart is the same always; in it the long, long years have wrought no change.

But what have the long years brought me? Experience, that savoury salt, left where old tears have dried upon the shores of Time. Knowledge of my fellow men and women, of all sorts and conditions, and the love of them. Patience to bear what may yet have to be borne. Courage to encounter what may yet have to be encountered. Fortitude to meet the end, where faith holds up the Cross. Much have the long years brought me – besides your first smile and your last kiss. For your next, I look past Death, God aiding me, to the Eternal Life beyond…

South Wales,
April 22, 1909.

I

Upon a day near the end of August, one long, brilliant South African winter, when the old Vierkleur waved over the Transvaal, and what is now the Orange River Colony was the Orange Free State, with the Dutch canton still showing on the staff-head corner of its tribarred flag, two large, heavily-laden waggons rolled over the grass-veld, only now thinking about changing from yellow into green. Many years previously the wheels of the old voortrekkers had passed that way, bringing from Cape Colony, with the household gods, goods and chattels, language and customs of the Dutch, the slips of the pomegranate and peach and orange trees, whose abundant blossoming dressed the orchards of the farms tucked away here and there in the lap of the veld, with bridal white and pink, and hung their girdling pomegranate hedges with stars of ruby red. But days and days, and nights and nights of billowing, spreading, lonely sky-arched veld intervened between each homestead.

The flat-topped bills were draped and folded in the opal haze of distance; the sky was perfect turquoise; the rounded kopjes shone like pink topaz, unclothed as yet with the young pale green bush. To the south there was a veld fire leaping and dancing, with swirling columns of white smoke edged with flame. But it was many miles away, and the north-west wind blew strongly, driving some puffs of gold cloud before it. Perhaps there would be rain ere long. There had been rain already in the foremost waggon, not from the clouds, but from human eyes.

The broad wheels crashed on, rolling over the yellow grass and the dry bushes. Lizards and other creeping creatures scuttled across their wide tracks. The patient oxen toiled under the yoke, their dappled nostrils widespread, their great dewy eyes strained and dim with weariness. They dumbly wondered why they must labour in the daytime when all night long they had travelled without rest. The glorious sunrise had flamed in crimson and gold behind the eastern ranges full five hours before. They were weary to death, and no dorp or farm was yet in sight. The Cape boys who tramped, each leading a fore-ox by the green reim bound about the creature's wide horns, had no energy left even to swear at their beasts.

The Boer driver was wearied like the ox-team and the Cape boys. His bestial face was drawn, and his eyes were red-rimmed for lack of sleep. The long whip, with the fourteen-foot stock and the lash of twenty-three feet, had not smacked for a long time; the sjambok had not been used upon the long-suffering wheelers. Huddled up in his ill-fitting clothes of tan cord, he sat on the waggon-box and slept, his head nodding, his elbows on his knees. He was dreaming of the bad Cape brandy that had been in the bottle, and would be, with luck, again, when the waggon reached a tavern or a store.

A Kaffir drove the second waggon. It held stores and goods in bales, and some trunks and other baggage belonging to the Englishman, for you would have set down the tall, thin, high-featured, reddish-bearded, soft-speaking man who owned the waggons as English, even though he had called himself by a Dutch name. The child of three years was his. And his had been the dead body of the woman lying on the waggon-bed, covered with a new white sheet, with a stillborn boy baby lying on her breast.

For this the man who had loved and taken her, and made her his, had wept such bitter, scalding tears. For this his dead love, with Love's blighted bud of fruit upon her bosom, had given up her world, her friends, her family – her husband, first and last of all. They had played the straight game, and gone away openly together, to the immense scandal of Society that is so willing to wink at things done cleverly under the rose. They were to be married the instant the injured husband obtained his decree absolute. The State sanctioned the re-marriage of the divorced if the Churches did not. Their church should thenceforwards be the State. But there was no *decree nisi* even, the injured husband possessing a legal heir by a previously-deceased wife. Besides, in a cold way it gave him pleasure to think of that purpose foiled. He soon knew that his wife's lover had sold his commission in the Army, and he learned, later, through a communication forwarded through a London firm of solicitors,

that although he had chosen to ignore a certain appointment offered upon the opposite side of the Channel, the other man would merely consider it deferred until a suitable opportunity should occur. Meanwhile the writer was travelling in South Africa, not alone.

Never to be alone again, she had promised him that not quite four years ago. And to-day he sat on a box beside the waggon-bed where she lay dead with her dead boy, and the only thing left to him that had the dear living fragrance and sweet warmth of her slept smiling on his knees – their daughter.

The long fine beard that he had grown swept the soft flushed cheek of the little creature, and mingled with her yellow curls. Within the last few hours – hours packed with the anguish of a lifetime for him – there were sprinklings of white upon his high temples, where the hair had grown thin under the pressure of the Hussar's furred busby, the khaki-covered helmet of foreign service, or the forage-cap, before these had given place to the Colonial smasher of felt, and the silky reddish-brown beard had in it wide, ragged streaks of grey. He had worshipped the woman who had given up all for him; they had lived only for, and in one another during four wonderful years. Hardly a passing twinge of regret, never a scorpion-sting of remorse, spoiled their union.

But they never stayed long in any town or even in any village. Some sound or shape from the old unforgotten world beyond the barrier, some English voice that had the indefinable tone and accent of high breeding, some figure of Englishman or Englishwoman whose rough, careless clothing had the unmistakable cut of Bond Street, some face recognised under the grey felt or the white Panama, would spur them to the desire of leaving it behind them. Then the valises would be repacked, the oxen would be hastily inspanned, and their owners would start again upon that never-ending journey in search of something that the woman was to be the first to find.

At last, when the sun was high and the worn-out beasts were almost sinking, a group of low buildings came in sight a few miles away beyond a kloof edged with a few poplar-like trees and the kameelthorn. A square, one-storey house of corrugated iron, with a mud-walled hovel or two near it, had a sprawling painted board across its front, signifying that the place was the Free State Hotel. Behind it were an orchard and some fields under rude cultivation, and a quarter of a mile to the north were the native kraals.

At the sight the Boer shook himself fully awake, and sent the long lash cracking over the thin, sweat-drenched backs of the ox-team. They laboured with desperation at the yoke, and the waggon rumbled on.

The Englishman, hidden with his sorrow under the canvas waggon-tilt, roused himself at the accelerated motion. He rose, and, holding the sleeping child upon one arm, pushed back the front flap and looked out. He spoke to the taciturn driver, who shook his head. How did he, Smoots Beste, know whether a minister of the Church of England, or even a Dutch predikant, was to be found at the place beyond? All he hoped for was that he would be able to buy there tobacco and brandy cheap, and sleep drunken, to wake and drink again.

The waggon halted on the brink of the kloof. Little birds of gay and brilliant plumage, blue and crimson and emerald-green, rose in flocks from the bush and grasses that clothed the sides of the coomb; the hollows were full of the tree-fern; the grass had little white and purple flowers in it. At the valley-bottom a little stream, that would be a river after the first rains, wimpled over sandstone boulders, the barbel rose at flies. There was a drift lower down. It was all the goaded, worn-out oxen could do to stay the huge creaking waggons down the steep bank, and drag them over the river-bed of sand and boulders, through the muddied, churned-up water that they were dying for, yet not allowed to taste, and toil with them up the farther side.

The Englishman was not cruel. He was usually humane and merciful to man and beast, but just now he was deaf and blind. Beside him there was her corpse, beyond him was her grave, beyond that…

Both he and she, in that world that lay beyond the barrier had observed the outward forms of Christianity. They had first met in the Park, one May morning, after a church parade. They sat on a couple of green-painted chairs while Society, conscious of the ever-present newspaper-reporter,

paraded past them in plumage as gorgeous as that of the gay-coloured birds that flocked among the tree-fern or rose in frightened clouds as the waggons crashed by. And they discussed – together with the chances of the runners entered for the second Spring Meeting at Newmarket, and the merits of the problem play, and the newest farcical comedy – the Immortality of the Soul.

She wore a brown velvet gown and an ostrich-feather boa in delicate shades of cream and brown, and a cavalier hat with sweeping white plumes. Her hair was the colour of autumn leaves, or a squirrel's back in the sunshine, and she had grey eyes and piquant, irregular features, ears like shells, and a delicate, softly-tinted skin undefiled by cosmetics. She thought it wicked to doubt that one waked up again after dying, Somewhere – a vague Somewhere, with all the nice people of one's set about one. He said that Agnosticism and all that kind of thing was bad form. Men who had religion made the best soldiers. Like the Presbyterian Highlanders of the Black Watch and the "Royal Irish" Catholics – but, of course, she knew that. And she said yes, she knew; meeting his admiring eyes with her own, that were so grey and sweet and friendly, the little gloved hand that held the ivory and gold-bound Church Service lying in her lap. He longed to take that little white, delicate hand. Later on he took it, and a little later the heart that throbbed in its pulses, and the frail, beautiful body out of which the something that had been she had gone with a brief gasping struggle and a long shuddering sigh…

He kept the beloved husk and shell of her steady on the waggon-bed with one arm thrown over it, and held the awakened, fretting child against his breast with the other, as the sinking oxen floundered up the farther side of the kloof. Amidst the shouting and cursing of the native voor-loopers and the Boer and Kaffir drivers, the rain of blows on tortured, struggling bodies, and the creaking of the teak-built waggon-frames, he only heard her weakly asking to be buried properly in some churchyard, or cemetery, with a clergyman to read the Service for the Dead.

Before his field-glass showed him the sprawling hotel-sign he had hoped that the buildings in sight might prove to mask the outskirts of a native village with an English missionary station, or a Dutch settlement important enough to own a corrugated iron Dopper church and an oak-scrub-hedged or boulder-dyked graveyard, in charge of a pastor whose loathing of the Briton should yield to the mollifying of poured-out gold.

But Fate had brought him to this lonely veld tavern. He watched it growing into ugly, sordid shape as the waggon drew nearer. To this horrible place, miscalled the Free State Hotel – a mere jumble of corrugated-iron buildings, wattle and mud-walled stables for horses, and a barbed-wire waggon-enclosure – he had brought his beloved at the end of their last journey together. He shuddered at the thought.

The waggons were halted and outspanned before the tavern. The drivers went in to get drink, and Bough, the man who sold it, leaving the women to serve them, came forth. He ordinarily gave himself out as an Afrikander. You see in him a whiskered, dark-complexioned, good-looking man of twenty-six, but looking older, whose regard was either insolent or cringing, according to circumstances, and whose smile was an evil leer. The owner of the waggons stood waiting near the closed-up foremost one, the yellow-haired child on his arm. He looked keenly at the landlord, Bough, and the man's hand went involuntarily up in the salute, to its owner's secret rage. Did he want every English officer to recognise him as an old deserter from the Cape Mounted Police? Not he – and yet the cursed habit stuck. But he looked the stranger squarely in the face with that frank look that masked such depth of guile, and greeted him with the simple manner that concealed so much, and the English officer lifted his left hand, as though it raised a sword, and began to talk. Presently Bough called someone, and a smart, slatternly young woman came out and carried the child, who leaned away from her rouged face, resisting, into the house.

The English traveller would take no refreshment. He needed nothing but to know of a graveyard and men to dig a grave, and a minister or priest to read the Burial Service. He would pay all that was asked. He learned that the nearest village-town might be reached in three days' trek across the veld, and that the landlord did not know whether it had a pastor or not.

Three days' trek! He waved the twinkling-eyed, curious landlord back, and went up into the foremost waggon, drawing the canvas close. He faced the truth in there, and realized with a throe of mortal anguish that the burial must be soon – very soon. To prison what remained of her in a hastily knocked-together coffin, and drag it over the veld, looking for some plot of consecrated earth to put it in, was desecration, horror. He would bury her, and fetch the minister or clergyman or priest to read prayers. Later, if it cost him all he had, the spot should be consecrated for Christian burial. He came forth from the waggon and held parley with the landlord of the tavern. There was a wire-fenced patch of sandy red earth a hundred yards from the house, a patch wherein the white woman who was mistress at the tavern had tried to grow a few common English flower-seeds out of a gaily-covered packet left by a drummer who had passed that way. She had grown tired of the trouble of watering and tending them, so that some of them had withered, and the lean fowls had flown over the fence and scratched the rest up.

That patch of sandy earth brought a handsome price, paid down in good English sovereigns – the coinage that is welcome in every corner of the earth, save among the scattered islands of the Aleutian Archipelago, where gin, tobacco, and coffee are more willingly taken in exchange for goods or souls.

The Englishman was business-like. He fetched pen and ink and paper out of that jealously closed-up waggon, drew up the deed of sale, and had it witnessed by the Boer driver and the white woman at the hotel.

He had made up his mind. He would bury her, since it must be, and then fetch the clergyman. Knowing him on the road, or returning to the fulfilment of his promise, she would not mind lying there unblessed and waiting for six lonely days and nights. He whispered in her deaf ears how it was going to be, and that she could not doubt him. He swore – not dreaming how soon he should keep one vow – to visit the grave often, often, with his child and hers, and to lie there beside her when kind Death should call him too.

Then he left her for a moment, and sent for the Kaffir driver and the Boer to come, and, with him, dig her grave…

But Smoots Beste was already in hog-paradise, lying grunting on a bench in the bar, and the Kaffir had gone to the kraals with the Cape boys. The English officer looked at the rowdy landlord and the loafing men about the tavern, and made up his mind. No hands other than his own should prepare a last bed for her, his dearest.

So, all through the remainder of the long day, streaming and drenched with perspiration, which the cold wind dried upon him, he wrought at a grave for her with spade and pick.

It should be deep, because of the wild-cat and the hungry Kaffir dogs. It should be wide, to leave room for him. The ground was hard, with boulders of ironstone embedded in it. What did that matter? All the day through, and all through the night of wind-driven mists and faint moonlight, he wrought like a giant possessed, whilst his child, lulled with the condensed milk and water, in which biscuits had been sopped, lay sleeping in the tavern upon a little iron bed.

He had had the waggon brought close up to the wired enclosure. All the time he worked he kept a watch upon it. Did claws scrape the wide wheels or scurrying feet patter across the shadows, he left off work until the voracious creatures of the night were driven away.

The pale dawn came, and the east showed a lake of yellow… When the great South African sun rose and flooded the veld with miraculous liquid ambers and flaming, melted rubies, the deep, wide grave at last was done.

He climbed out of it by the waggon ladder, struggling under the weight of the last great basketful of stones and sandy earth. He dumped that down by the graveside, and went to the waggon and removed all stains of toil, and then set about making the last toilette of the beautiful woman who had so loved that everything that touched her should be pure, and dainty, and sweet.

He had dressed her silken, plentiful, squirrel-brown hair many times, for the sheer love of its loveliness. With what care he now combed and brushed and arranged the perfumed locks! He laid

reverent kisses on the sealed eyelids that his own hands had closed for ever; he whispered words of passionate love, vows of undying gratitude and remembrance, in the shell-like ears. He bathed with fresh water and reclad in fragrant linen the exquisite body, upon which faint discolouring patches already heralded the inevitable end. When he had done, he swathed her in a sheet, and fetched a bolt of new white canvas from the store-waggon, and lined the grave with that.

And then he placed a narrow mattress in it, and freshly covered pillows, and brought her from the waggon, and to the grave, and carried her down the light wooden ladder, and laid her in her last earthly home, with a kiss from the lips that had never been her husband's. It was so cruel to think of that. It was so hard to cover up the cold, sweet face again, but he did it, and lapped the sheet over her and brought the canvas down. Remained now to fill in her grave and fetch the man whose mouth should speak over it the words that are of God.

But first – fill in the grave.

The cold sweat drenched him at the thought of heaping back those tons of earth and stone above her, crushing with a frightful weight of inert matter the bodily beauty that he adored. He felt as though her soul hovered about him, wailing to him not to be so cruel, tugging at his garments with imploring, impalpable hands.

The thing must be done, though, before the sordid life stirred again under the roof of the tavern, before the vulgar faces, with their greedy, prying eyes, should be there to snigger and spy.

He loaded a great basket with fine gravelly sand, and carried it down and laid it on her by handfuls. What were his livid, parched lips muttering? Over and over, only this:

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust …"

Soon the white swathed-up form was hidden with the sandy gravel. That was a terrible pang. It wrenched the first groan from him, but he worked on.

More and more of the sandy gravel, but for precaution the stones must lie above. Should the voracious creatures of the night come, they must find the treasure in impregnable security. That thought helped him to lay in the first, and the second, and then greater and greater stones. He was spent and breathless, but still he laboured. He tottered, and at times the tavern and the veld, and the waggons on it, and the flat-topped distant mountains that merged in the horizon, swung round him in a wild, mad dance. Then the warm salt taste of blood was in his mouth, and he gasped and panted, but he never rested until the grave was filled in.

Then he built up over it an oblong cairn of the ironstone boulders, made a rude temporary cross out of a spare waggon-pole, working quite methodically with saw and hammer and nails, and set it up, under the curious eyes he hated so, and wedged it fast and sure. Then he knelt down stiffly, and made, with rusty, long unpractised fingers, the sacred sign upon his face and breast. He heard her still, asking him in that nearly extinguished voice of hers, to pray for her.

"Dicky!.."

Ah! the tragedy of the foolish little nickname, faltered by stiffening lips upon the bed of death!

"Catholics pray for the souls of dead people, don't they? Pray for mine by-and-by. It will comfort me to know you are praying, darling, even if God is too angry with us to hear!"

He held her to his bursting heart, groaning.

"If He is angry, it cannot be with you. The sin was mine – all mine. He must know!"

Later she awakened from a troubled sleep to murmur:

"Richard, I dreamed of Bridget-Mary. She was all in black, but there was white linen about her face and neck, and it was dabbled dreadfully with blood." The weak, slight body shuddered in his embrace. "She said our wickedness had brought her death, but that she would plead for us in Heaven."

"She is not dead, my beloved; I heard of her before we left Cape Colony. She has taken the veil. She is well, and will be happy in her religion, as those good women always are."

"I was not one of those good women, Richard – "

He strained her to him in silence. She panted presently:

"You might have been happy – with her – if I had never come between you!"

He found some words to tell her that these things were meant to be. From the beginning …

"Was it meant that I should die on these wild, wide, desolate plains, and leave you, Richard?"

He cried out frantically that he would die too, and follow her. Her dying whisper fluttered at his lips:

"You cannot! Think! – the child!"

He had forgotten the child, and now, with a great stabbing pang, remembered it. She asked for it, and he brought it, and she tried to kiss it; and even in that Death foiled her, and her head fell back and her eyes rolled up, and she died.

He remembered all this as he tried to say the prayer, without which she could not have borne to have him leave her.

The curious, mocking faces crowded at the tavern door to see him praying – a strange, haggard scarecrow kneeling there in the face of day.

But he was not the kind of scarecrow they would have dared to jeer at openly. Too rich, with all that money in the valise in the locked-up waggon-chest; too strong, with that sharp hunting-knife, the Winchester repeating-rifle, and the revolver he carried at his hip.

"*Our Father Who art in Heaven…*"

He knew, the man who repeated the words, that there was no One beyond the burning blue vault of ether Who heard … and yet, for her sake, supposing, after all, some great Unseen Ear listened, was listening even now…

"Hallowed be Thy Name. Thy Kingdom come…"

And if it came, should those have any part in it who had lived together unwed in open sin?

"Thy Will be done on earth as it is in Heaven…"

The words stuck in his dried throat. Be done, that Will that left him desolate and laid her away, a still fair, fast-corrupting thing, under the red earth and the great ironstone boulders!

"Give us this day our daily bread…"

Her love, her presence, her voice, her touch, had been the daily bread of life to him, her fellow-sinner. Oh, how many base, sordid, loveless marriages had not that illicit bond of theirs put to shame! And yet as a boy he had learned the Seventh Commandment: "Thou shalt not commit adultery." Had she not believed all along that the price of such sweet sinning must be paid, if not in this life, then in the life hereafter, and could it – could it be that her soul was even now writhing in fires unquenchable, whither he, who would have gladly died in torment to save her from outrage or death, had thrust her?

"Forgive us our trespasses…"

O Man of Sorrows, pitying Son of Mary, before Whom the Scribes and Pharisees brought the woman taken in adultery, forgive her, pardon her! If a soul must writhe in those eternal fires they preach of, in justice let it be mine! Thou Who didst pity that woman of old time, standing white and shameful in the midst of the evil, jeering crowd, with the wicked fingers pointing at her, say to this other woman, lifting up Thyself before her terrified, desperate soul, confronted with the awful mystery that lies behind the Veil…

"Neither do I condemn thee…"

And do with me what Thou wilt!

The ragged, wild-eyed man who had been kneeling rigid and immovable before the wooden symbol reared upon the new-raised cairn of boulders swayed a little. His head fell forward heavily upon his breast. His eyes closed in spite of his desperate effort to shake off the deadly, sickening collapse of will and brain and body that was mastering him. He fell sideways, and lay in a heap upon the ground.

II

They went to him, and took up and carried him into the tavern, and laid him down upon a frowzy bed in the room where the child lay upon the iron-framed cot.

He lay there groaning in the fierce clutches of rheumatic fever. They tended him in a rude way. A valise and an iron-bound leather lady's trunk had been brought from the waggon by his orders, and set in the room where he was in his sight. These contained her clothes and jewels, and he guarded them jealously even in delirium. About his wasted body was buckled a heavy money-belt. Bough could feel that when he helped the woman of the tavern to lift the patient. He winked to her pleasantly across the bed. But the time was not ripe yet. They must wait awhile. The English traveller was not always delirious. There were intervals of consciousness, and though he seemed at death's door, who knew? That strong purpose of his might even yet lift him from the soiled and comfortless bed, and send him on the trek again. Meanwhile the oxen were hired out to work for a farmer fifty miles away. That was called sending them to graze and gain strength for more work; and there was the keep of two Cape boys, and the Kaffir and the Boer driver, and the cost of nursing and sick man's diet, and the care of the child. A heavy bill of charges was mounting up against the English traveller. Much of what the belt contained would honestly be Bough's.

There was no doctor and no medicine save the few drugs the sick man had carried, as all travellers do. The milk for which he asked for himself and the child, which was procured from the native cattle-kraals for a tikkie a pint, and for which Bough charged at the price of champagne, kept him alive. Broth or eggs he sickened at and turned from, and, indeed, the one was greasy and salt, the others of appalling mustiness. He would regularly swallow the tabloids of quinine or lithia, and fall back on the hard, coarse pillow, exhausted by the mere effort of unscrewing the nickel-cap of the little phial, and tell himself that he was getting stronger. Sometimes he really was so, and then the child sat on his wide hollow chest, and played with the beard that was now all grey and unkempt and matted, until some word in her baby prattle, some look of wondering inquiry in the innocent eyes, golden-hazel and black-lashed, like his own, that were almost too beautiful to be a man's, people used to say, like the weak, passionate, gentle mouth under the heavy moustache, would bring back all the anguish of his loss, and waken anew that torturing voice that accused him of being false to his compact with the dead. Then he would call, and send the child away, borne in the arms of the Hottentot chambermaid to breathe the fresh air upon the veld. And, left alone, he would draw up the rough sheets over his head, with gaunt clutching fingers, and weep, though sometimes no tears came to moisten his haggard, staring eyes.

One night, while the flat gold hunting-watch ticked above his head in the little embroidered chamois-leather pouch dead hands had worked, Knowledge came to him with a sudden rigor of the muscles of the wasted body, and a bursting forth from every pore of the dank, dark-hued sweat of coming dissolution.

He was not ever going to get well, and fetch the clergyman to pray over and bless her resting-place. He was going to die and lie beside her there, under the red earth topped by the boulder-cairn. He smiled. What an easy solution of the problem! He had been too intent upon gratifying her last desire to entertain for a moment the thought of suicide. He had always held self-destruction as the last resource of the coward and the criminal, and besides there was the child.

The child!..

With a pang of dread and terror unfelt by him before, he raised his gaunt head with an effort from the uneasy pillow, and looked towards where she lay, with staring, haunted eyes. The window was open a little way at the top, and for fear of the night-chill his fine leopard-skin kaross had been spread over her… One dimpled, rounded, bare arm lay upon the soft dappled fur, the babyish fingers curled one upon the other. Rosy human tendrils that should never twine again in a mother's hair. Her

child, her daughter!.. Born of her body, sharing her nature and her sex, soon to be orphaned. For he who could not even lift himself from bed, and drag his body across the floor to cover that lovely babyish arm, would soon be no better protector than the restless ghost that tugged at his heart with its unseen hands. He knew now why it could not rest.

What would become of the child! Another fiery scourge, wielded by the Hand Unseen, bit deep into his shrinking conscience, into his writhing soul. His own act had brought this about. Be a cur, and accuse Destiny, blame Fate, lay the onus upon God, as so many defaulters do – he could not. He lay looking his deed in the foul face until the dawn crept up the sky, and learning how it may be that the sins of their fathers are visited on the children.

He called for ink and paper as soon as the house was awake, and with infinite labour and many pauses to recover spent strength and breath, for he was greedy of life now, for the reason that we know – he wrote a letter home to England, to a relative who was the head of his family, and bore a great historic title – so great that those who spelled it out upon the envelope were half afraid to slip the heated knife under the crested seal. But Bough did it, and opened, and read.

It was not going to be the soft snap he had thought, but it would be good enough. Wires might be pulled from Downing Street that would set the Government at Cape Town working to trace the tall thin Englishman who had travelled up with two waggons from Cape Colony in the company of a child and the woman now dead, and for whose sake he had given up those almighty swell connections. What a fool – what a thundering, juicy, damned fool the man had been! whose gaunt eyes were even now making out the landfall of Kingdom Come through the gathering mists of death.

The letter worried Bough. To have the English Government smelling at your heels is no joke, thought he. Any moment the mastiff may grip, and then, if you happen to be an ex-convict and deserter from their Colonial Police, and supposing you have one or two other little things against you … the most honest of speculators being occasionally compelled to dirty his hands, if only to tone down those immaculate extremities to something approaching the colour of other people's – then what becomes of the risky but profitable business of gun-running from the English ports through to the Transvaal?

For by men like Bough and his associates vast supplies of munitions and engines of war were wormed through. The machine-guns in carefully numbered parts came in cases as "agricultural implements," the big guns travelled in the boilers of locomotives, the empty cases of the shells, large and small, were packed in piano-cases, or in straw-filled crates as "hardware"; the black powder and the cordite and the lyddite came in round wooden American cheese-boxes, with a special mark; and the Mauser cartridges were soldered in tins like preserved meat. How handsomely that business paid only Bough and his merry men, and Oom Paul and his burghers of the Volksraad, knew.

But Her Majesty's Government, bound about with red-tape, hoodwinked by Dutch Assistant-Commissioners of British Colonies, and deceived by traitorous English officials, were blind and deaf to the huge traffic in arms and munitions. Not that there were no warnings. To the very end they were shouted in deaf ears.

What of that letter sent from the Resident Commissioner's office at Gueldersdorp, that little frontier hamlet on the north-east corner of British Baraland, September 4, 1899, little more than a month before the war broke out, the war that was to leave Britain and her Colonies bleeding at every vein?

The Boers were in laager over the Border. A desperate appeal for help had been made to the Powers that were, and the reply received to the now historic telegram, through the Resident Commissioner, has equally become a matter of history.

"All that was possible" was being done by the Imperial authorities, His Excellency assured the inquirer, to safeguard the lives and property of the inhabitants of the Gold-Reef Town in the event of an attack by a hostile force.

Also the military armament of the place was about to be materially increased.

And yet up to the little frontier town upon which so much depended not a single modern gun had been despatched.

An easy prey had the little town upon the flat-topped hill, set in the middle of a basin, proved to the Boer General and his commandos but for one thing. For weeks after the bursting of the first shell over Gueldersdorp three sides of the beleaguered town were so many open doors for the enemy. Only upon the threshold of each door stood Fear, and guarded and held the citadel.

III

That hard taskmaster, Satan, is sometimes wonderfully indulgent to those who serve him well. While Bough, the keeper of the tavern, was yet turning about the open letter in his thick, short, hairy hands, weighing the chances attending the sending of it against the chances of keeping it back, the woman who served as mistress of the place thrust her coarsely-waved head of yellow bleached hair and rouge-ruddled face in at the room door, and called to him:

"Boss, the sick toff is doing a croak. Giving up the ghost for all he's worth – he is. Better come and take a look for yourself if you don't believe me."

Bough swore with relief and surprise, delayed only to lock away the letter, and went to take a look. It was as he hoped, a real stroke of luck for a man who knew how to work it.

Richard Mildare – for Bough knew now what had been the name of the Englishman: Captain the Hon. Richard Mildare, late of the Grey Hussars – was dead. No hand made murderous by the lust of gold had helped him to his death. Sudden failure of the heart is common in aggravated cases of rheumatic fever, and with one suffocating struggle, one brief final pang, he had gone to join her he loved. But his dead face did not look at rest. There was some reflection in it of the terror that had come upon him in the watches of that last night.

Bough stayed some time alone in the room of death. When he came out he was extremely affable and gentle. The woman, who knew him, chuckled to herself when he met the Kaffir serving-maid bringing back the child from an airing in the sun, and told her to take it to the mistress. Then he went into the bar-room to speak to the Englishman's Boer driver.

Leaning easily upon the zinc-covered counter he spoke to the man in the Taal, with which he was perfectly familiar:

"Your Baas has gone in, as my wife and I expected."

Smoots Beste growled in his throat:

"He was no Baas of mine, the verdoemte rooinek! I drove for him for pay, that is all. There is wage owing me still, for the matter of that – and where am I to get it now that the heathen has gone to the burning?"

Smoots, who was all of a heathen himself, and regularly got drunk, not only on week days, but on Sabbaths, felt virtuously certain that the Englishman had gone to Hell.

Bough smiled and poured out a four-finger swig of bad Cape brandy, and pushed it across the counter.

"You shall get the money, every tikkie. Only listen to me."

Smoots Beste tossed off the fiery liquid, and returned in a tone less surly:

"I am listening, Baas."

Said Bough, speaking with the thickish lisp and slurring of the consonants that distinguished his utterance when he sought to appear more simple and candid than usual:

"This dead toff, with his flash waggon and fine team, and Winchester repeating-rifles, had very little money. He has died in my debt for the room and the nursing, and the good nourishment, for which I trusted him all these three weeks, and I am a poor man. The dollars I have paid you and the Kaffir and the Cape boys on his account came out of my own pocket. Rotten soft have I behaved over him, that's the God's truth, and when I shall get back my own there's no knowing. But, of course, I shall act square."

The Boer's thick lips parted in a grin, showing his dirty, greenish-yellow teeth. He scratched his shaggy head, and said, his tongue lubricated to incautiousness by the potent liquor:

"The waggons, and the oxen, and the guns and ammunition, and the stores in the second waggon are worth good money. And the woman that is dead had jewels – I have seen them on her – diamonds and rubies in rings and bracelets fit for the vrouw of King Solomon himself. The Englishman did not

bury them with her under that verdoemte kopje that he built with his two hands, and they are not in the boxes in the living-waggon."

"Did he not?" asked Bough, looking the Boer driver full in the face with a pleasant smile. "Are they not?"

Smoots Beste's piggish eyes twinkled round the bar-room, looked up at the ceiling, down at the floor, anywhere but into Bough's. He spat, and said in a much more docile tone:

"What do you want me to do?"

Bough leaned over the counter, and said confidentially:

"Just this, friend. I want you to inspan, and take one of the waggons up to Gueldersdorp, with a letter from me to the Civil Commissioner. I will tell him how the man is dead, and he will send down a magistrate's clerk to put a seal on the boxes and cases, and then he will go through the letters and papers in the pocket-book, and write to the people of the dead man over in England, supposing he has any, for I have heard him tell my wife there was not a living soul of his name now, except the child – "

"But what good will all this do you and me, Baas?" asked the Boer subserviently.

Bough spread his hands and shrugged his shoulders.

"Why, when the magistrates and lawyers have hunted up the man's family, there will be an order to sell the waggons and oxen and other property to pay the expenses of his burying, and the child's keep here and passage from Cape Town, if she is to be sent to England … and what is left over, see you, after the law expenses have been paid, will go to the settlement of our just claims. They will never let honest men suffer for behaving square, sure no, they'll not do that!"

But though Bough's words were full of faith in the fair dealing of the lawyers and magistrates, his tone implied doubt.

"Boer lawyers are slim rogues at best, and Engelsch lawyers are duyvels as well as rogues," said Smoots Beste, with a dull flash of originality.

Bough nodded, and pushed another glass of liquor across the bar.

"And that's true enough. I've a score to settle with one or two of 'em. By gum! I call myself lucky to be in this with a square man like you. There's the waggon, brand-new – you know what it cost at Cape Town – and the team, I trust you to take up to Gueldersdorp, and who's to hinder a man who hasn't the fear of the Lord in him from heading north-east instead of north-west, selling the waggon and the beasts at Kreilstad or Schoenbroon, and living on a snug farm of your own for the rest of your life under another man's name, where the English magistrates and the police will never find you, though their noses were keener than the wild dogs?"

"Alamachtig!" gasped Smoots Beste, rendered breathless by the alluring, tempting prospect. Surely the devil spoke with the voice of the tavern-keeper Bough, when, in human form, he tempted children of men. Sweat glistened on Smoots' flabby features, his thick hands trembled, and his bowels were as water. But his purpose was solidifying in his brain as he said innocently, looking over Bough's left shoulder at the wooden partition that divided off the bar from the landlord's dwelling-room:

"Aye, I am no dirty schelm that cannot be trusted. Therefore would it not be better if I took both teams and waggons, and all the rooinek's goods with me up to Gueldersdorp, and handed it over to the Engelsch landrost there?"

The fish was hooked. Bough said, steadily avoiding those twirling eyes:

"A good notion, but the lawyer chaps at Gueldersdorp will want to look at the Englishman's dead body to be able to satisfy his people that he did not die of a gunshot, or of a knife-thrust; we must bury him, of course, but not too deep for them to dig him up again. And they will want to ferret in all the corners of the room where he died, and make sure that his bags and boxes have not been tampered with – and then there is the child. In a way" – he spoke slowly and apologetically – "the kid and the goods are my security for getting my own back again – if ever I do. So you will inspan one of the waggons – the best if you like, with a team of six beasts, and you will trek up to Gueldersdorp

– you will travel light enough with only the grub you will need, and the Cape boys, and you will hand over the letter to the Resident Magistrate, and bring back the man who will act as his deputy."

But at this point Smoots Beste set down his splay foot. He would undertake to deliver the letter, but he objected to the company of the coloured voor-loopers or the Kaffir driver. He was firm upon that and, finding his most honeyed persuasions of no avail, Bough said no more. He would pay off the niggers and dismiss them, or get rid of them without paying; there were ways and means. He sent up country, and the team came down, six thin, overworked creatures, with new scars upon their slack and baggy hides, and hollow flanks, and ribs that showed painfully. Smoots Beste was about to grumble, but he changed his mind, and took the letter, buttoning it up in the flapped pocket of his tan-cord jacket, and the long whip cracked like a revolver as the lash hissed out over the backs of the wincing oxen, and the white tilt rocked over the veld, heading to the nor'-west.

"When will the Dutchy be back, boss?" asked the woman, with a knowing look.

Bough played the game up to her. He answered quite seriously: "In three weeks' time."

Then he strolled out, smoking a cigar, his hat tilted at an angle that spoke of satisfaction. His walk led him past the oblong cairn of ironstone boulders in the middle of the sandy patch of ground enclosed with zinc wire-netting. At the foot of the cairn was a new grave.

For the lover did not even lie beside his beloved, as he had vowed once, promised and planned, but couched below her feet, waiting, like some faithful hound that could not live without the touch of the worshipped hand, for the dead to rise again.

Why is it that Failure is the inevitable fate of some men and women? Despite brilliant prospects, positions that seem assured, commanding talents nobly used, splendid opportunities that are multiplied as though in mockery, the result is Nothing from first to last; while the bad flourish and the evil prosper, and the world honours the stealer of the fruit of the brains that have been scattered in frenzied despair, or have become so worn out from the constant effort of creation that the worker has sunk into hopeless apathy and died.

Bough was not one of those men whose plans come to nothing. He had prospered as a rogue of old in England, really his native country, though he called himself an Afrikander. Reared in the gutters of the Irish quarter of Liverpool, he had early learned to pilfer for a living, had prospered in prison as sharp young gaol-birds may prosper, and returned to it again and again, until, having served out part of a sentence for burglary and obtained his ticket-of-leave, he had shifted his convict's skin, and made his way out to Cape Colony under a false name and character. He had made a mistake, it was true, enlisting as a trooper of Colonial Police, but the step had been forced upon him by circumstances. Then he had deserted, and had since been successful as a white-slave dealer at Port Elizabeth, and as a gold-miner in the Transvaal, and he had done better and better still at that ticklish trade of gun-running for Oom Paul. Though, get caught – only once get caught – and the Imperial Government authorities, under whose noses you had been playing the game with impunity for years, made it as hot as Hell for you. Bough, however, did not mean ever to get caught. There was always another man, a semi-innocent dupe, who would appear to have been responsible for everything, and who would get pinched.

Such a dupe now trudged at the head of the meagre three-span ox-team. When, after a hard day's toil, he at length outspanned, the waggon-pole still faithfully pointed to the north-west. But before it was yet day the waggon began to move again, and it was to the north-east that the waggon-pole pointed thenceforwards, and the letter Bough had given Smoots Beste for the Chief Resident Magistrate at Gueldersdorp was saved from the kindling of the camp-fire by a mere accident.

The cat's-paw could not read, or the illegible, meaningless ink scrawl upon the sheet within the boldly-addressed envelope would have aroused his suspicions at the outset. So well had Bough, that expert in human frailty, understood his subject, that the letter was a bogus letter, a fraud, not elaborate – a mere stage property, nothing more. But yet he gave it in full belief that it would be burned, and that, the boats of Smoots Beste being consumed with it, according to the thick judgment

of the said Smoots, it would be as a pillar of fire behind that slim child of the old voortrekkers, hastening his journey north-eastwards. It is typical of the class of Smoots that it never once occurred to him to go north.

But Smoots Beste never bought a farm with the price of the oxen and the high-bulwarked, teak-built, waterproof-canvas tilted waggon that had cost such a good round sum. There was a big rainfall on the third day. It began with the typical African thunderstorm – deafening, continuous rolls and crashes of heavy cloud-artillery, and lightning that blazed and darted without intermission, and ran zigzagging in a horrible, deadly, playful fashion over the veld, as though looking for dishonest folks to shrivel. One terrible flash struck the wheel-oxen, a thin double tongue of blue flame sped flickering from ridge to ridge of the six gaunt backs … there was a smell of burning hair – a reek of sulphur. The team lay outstretched dead on the veld, the heavy yoke across their patient necks, the long horns curving, the thin starved bodies already beginning to bloat and swell in the swift decomposition that follows death by the electric fluid.

Smoots Beste crawled under the waggon, and, remembering all he had heard his father spell out from the Dutch Bible about the Judgment Day, and the punishment of sinners in everlasting flame, felt very ill at ease. The storm passed over, and the rain poured all through the night, but dawn brought in a clear blue day; and with it a train of eight transport-waggons, and several wearied, muddy droves of sheep and cattle, the property of the Imperial Government Commissariat Department, Gueldersdorp, being taken from Basutoland East up to Gueldersdorp, under convoy of an escort of B.S.A. Police. To the non-commissioned officer in command Smoots Beste, resigned to the discharge of a trust, handed the letter for the Civil Commissioner.

The sergeant, sitting easily in the saddle, looked at the boldly-written direction on the envelope, and smelt no rats – at least until he coolly opened the supposed letter. The scrawled sheet of paper it contained was a surprise, but he did not let Smoots see that. Then the following brief dialogue took place:

"You were trekking up to Gueldersdorp," he said to the decidedly nervous Smoots, "to fetch down a Deputy Civil Commissioner to deal with the effects of a dead English traveller, at a house kept by the man who wrote this letter – that is, three days' trek over the veld to the southward, and called the Free State Hotel?"

Smoots nodded heavily. The dapper sergeant cocked his felt smasher hat, and turned between pleasantly smiling lips the cigar he was smoking. Then he pointed with his riding-whip, a neatly varnished sjambok, with a smart silver top, to the north-west.

"There lies Gueldersdorp. Rum that when the lightning killed the ox-team you should have been trekking north-east, isn't it?"

Smoots Beste agreed that it was decidedly rum.

The sergeant said, without a change in his agreeable smile:

"All right; you can inspan six of our drove-bullocks, and drive the waggon with us to Gueldersdorp."

"Thank you, Baas!" said Smoots, without enthusiasm.

"If you like to take the risk," added the sergeant, who had not quite finished. He ended with an irrepressible outburst of honest indignation: "Why, you blasted, thieving Dutch scum, do you think I don't *know* you were stealing that span and waggon?"

And as Smoots, sweating freely, unyoked the dead oxen, he decided in his heavy mind that he would be missing long before the convoy got to Gueldersdorp.

Nine waggons rolled on where only eight had been before. The mounted men hurried on the daubed and wearied droves of Commissariat beasts. Smoots Beste drove the scratch team of bullocks, but his heart was as water within his belly, and there was no resonance in the smack of his whip. When the convoy came to a town, he vanished, and the story thenceforth knows him no more. The discreet sergeant of police did not even notice that he was missing until several days later, when the end of the

journey was near at hand. He was a sober, careful man, and a good husband. He shortly afterwards made quite a liberal remittance to his wife, and his troopers pushed Kruger half-sovereigns across most of the bars in Gueldersdorp shortly after the purchase by a Dopper farmer of a teak-built Cape waggon that a particular friend of the sergeant's had got to sell. And they were careful, at first, not to wag loose tongues. But as time went on the story of the English traveller who had brought the body of the woman to the Free State Hotel, so many days' trek to the southwards from Gueldersdorp, trickled from lip to lip. And years later, years too late, it came to the ears of a friend of dead Richard Mildare.

The sergeant maintained silence. He was a careful officer, and a discreet man, and, what is more, religious. In controversial arguments with the godless he would sometimes employ a paraphrase of the story of Smoots Beste to strengthen his side.

"A chap's a blamed fool that doesn't believe in God, I tell you. I was once after a bung-nosed Dutch thief of a transport-driver, that had waltzed away with a brand-new Cape cart and a team of first-class mules. Taking 'em up to Pretoria on the quiet, to sell 'em to Oom Paul's burghers, he was. Ay, they were worth a tidy lump! A storm came on – a regular Vaal display of sky-fireworks. The rain came down like gun-barrels, the veld turned into a swamp, but we kept on after the Dutchman, who drove like gay old Hell. Presently comes a blue blaze and a splitting crack, as if a comet had come shouldering into the map of South Africa, and knocked its head in. We pushed on, smelling sulphur, burnt flesh, and hair. 'By gum!' said I; 'something's got it'; and I was to rights. The Cape cart stood on the veld, without a scratch on the paintwork. The four mules lay in their traces, deader than pork. The Dutchman sat on the box, holding the lines and his voorslag, and grinning. He was dead, too – struck by the lightning in the act of stealing those mules and that Cape cart. Don't let any fellow waste hot air after that trying to persuade me that there isn't such a thing as an overruling Providence!"

Thus the sergeant: and his audience, whether Free-thinkers, Agnostics, or believers, would break up, feeling that one who has the courage of his opinions is a respectable man.

As for Bough, in whose hands even the astute sergeant had been as a peeled rush, we may go back and find him counting money in gold and notes that had been taken from the belt of the dead English traveller.

Seventeen hundred pounds, hard cash – a pretty windfall for an honest man. The honest man whistled softly, handling the white crackling notes, and feeling the smooth, heavy English sovereigns slip between his fingers.

There were certificates of Rand stock, also a goodly number of Colonial Railway shares, and some foreign bonds, all of which could be realised on, but at a distance, and by a skilled hand. There were jewels, as the Boer waggon-driver had said, that had belonged to the dead woman – diamond rings, and a bracelet or two; and there were silk dresses of lovely hues and texture, and cambric and linen dresses, and tweed dresses, in the trunks; and a great cloak of sables, trimmed with many tails, and beautiful underclothing of silk and linen, trimmed with real lace, over which the mouth of the woman of the tavern watered. She got some of the dresses and all the undergarments when Bough had dexterously picked out the embroidered initials. He knew diamonds and rubies, but he had never been a judge of lace.

There was a coronet upon one or two handkerchiefs that had been overlooked when the dead woman had burned the others four years previously. Bough picked this out too, working deftly with a needle.

He was clever, very clever. He could take to pieces a steam-engine or a watch, and put it together again. He knew all there is to know about locks, and how they may best be opened without their keys. He could alter plate-marks with graving tools and the jeweller's blow-pipe, and test metals with acids, and make plaster-cast moulds that would turn out dollars and other coins, remarkably like the real thing. He was not a clever forger; he had learned to write somewhat late in life, and the large, bold round hand, with the capital letters that invariably began with the wrong quirk or twirl, was too characteristic, though he wrote anonymous letters sometimes, risking detection in the enjoyment of

what was to him a dear delight, only smaller than that other pleasure of moulding bodies to his own purposes, of malice, or gain, or lust.

IV

There was a child in the tavern on the veld; it lay in an old orange-box, half-filled with shavings, covered with a thin, worn blanket, in the daub-and-wattle outhouse, where the Hottentot woman, called the chambermaid, and the Kaffir woman, who was cook, slept together on one filthy pallet. Sometimes they stayed up at the tavern, drinking and carousing with the Dutch travellers who brought the supplies of Hollands and Cape brandy and lager beer, and the American or English gold-miners and German drummers who put up there from time to time. Then the child lay in the outhouse alone. It was a frail, puny creature, always frightened and silent. It lived on a little mealie pap and odd bits of roaster-cakes that were thrown to it as though it were a dog. When the coloured women forgot to feed it, they said: "It does not matter. Anyhow, the thing will die soon!" But it lived on when another child would have died… There was something uncanny about its great-eyed silence and its tenacious hold on life.

It had only been able to toddle when brought to the tavern. The rains and thunderstorms of spring went by, the summer passed, and it could walk about. It was a weakly little creature, with great frightened eyes, amber-brown, with violet flecks in their black-banded irises, and dark, thick lashes; and the delicately-drawn eyebrows were dark too, though its hair was soft yellow – just the colour of a chicken's down. Many a cuff it got, and many a hard word, when its straying feet brought it into the way of the rough life up at the tavern. But still the scrap of food was tossed to it, and the worn-out petticoat roughly cobbled into a garment for its little body; for Bough was a charitable man.

It was a poor orphan, he explained to people, the child of a consumptive emigrant Englishman who had worked for the landlord of the tavern, and left this burden for other shoulders when he died. Charitable travellers frequently left benefactions towards the little one's clothing and keep. Bough willingly took charge of the money. The child strayed here, there, and everywhere. It was often lost, but nobody looked for it, and it always came back. It liked to climb the cairn of boulders, or to sit on the long, low hillock at the cairn's foot. The wire fencing had long been removed from the enclosure; it had gone to make a chicken-pen in a more suitable spot. The cross had been taken down when a prop was wanted for the clothes-line.

The child, often beaten by Bough and the woman of the tavern, might have been even worse treated by the coloured servants but for those two graves out on the veld. Black blood flows thick with superstition, and both the Kaffir cook and the snuff-coloured Hottentot chambermaid nourished a wholesome dread of spooks. Who knew but that the white woman's ghost would rise out of the kopje there, some dark night, and pinch and cuff and thump and beat people who had ill-used her bantling? As for the dead man buried at her feet, his dim shape had often been seen by one of the Barala stablemen, keeping guard before the heap of boulders, in the white blaze of the moon-rays, or the paler radiance of a starry night, or more often of a night of mist and rain; not moving as a sentry moves, but upright and still, with shining fiery eyes in his shadowy face, and with teeth that showed, as the dead grin. After that none of the servants would pass near these two graves later than sundown, and Bough welted the Barala boy with an ox-reim for scaring silly jades of women with lying tales. But then Bough avoided the spot by day as well as by night. Therefore, it became a constant place of refuge for the child, who now slept in the outhouse alone.

In the long, brilliant winter nights she would leave the straw-stuffed sack that had been her bed ever since the orange-box had been broken up, and climb the stone-heaps, and look over the lonely veld, and stare up at the great glowing constellation of the Southern Cross. In spring, when pools and river-beds were full of foaming beer-coloured water, and every kloof and donga was brimmed with flowers and ferns, she would be drawn away by these, would return, trailing after her armfuls of rare blooms, and thenceforward, until these faded, the ridgy grave-mound and the heaped cairn of

boulders would be gay with them. She never took them to the house. It might have meant a beating – so many things did.

Late in November, when the apricots and plums and peaches were ripening on the laden, starling-haunted boughs, she would wander in the orchard belonging to the house, while the heavy drenching rains drummed on the leaves overhead, and sudden furious thunderstorms rent the livid-coloured clouds above with jagged scythes and reaping-hooks of white electric fire, or leaping, dancing, playing, vanishing tongues of thin blue. Once this fire struck a krantz, under the lee of which the child was sheltering, and made a black scorched mark all down the cliff-face, but left the child unscathed.

No one had ever taught her anything; no one had ever laid a gentle hand upon her. When she first saw mother and daughter, friend and friend, sweetheart and sweetheart kiss, it seemed to her that they licked each other, as friendly dogs do. She had no name that she knew of.

"You kid, go there. You kid, fetch this or bring that. You kid, go to the drift for water, or take the besom and sweep the stoep, or scrub out the room there – do you hear, you kid?" These orders came thick and fast when at last she was old enough to work; and she was old enough when she was very young, and did work like a little beast of burden. A real mother's heart – all mothers are not real ones – would have ached to see the dirt and bruises on the delicate childish limbs, and the vermin that crawled under the yellow rings of hair. How to be clean and tidy nobody had ever shown her, though she had learned by instinct other things.

That it was best to bear hunger and pain in silence, lest worse befell. That a truth for which one suffers is not as good as a lie for which one gets a bigger roaster-cake, or the scrapings of the syrup-can. That to little, weak, and feeble creatures of their race grown human beings can be marvellously cruel. That the devil lived down in the kraals with the natives, and that God was a swear. It is a wonder that she had not sunk into idiocy, or hopelessly sickened and died, neglected, ill-used, half-starved as she was. But when the little one might have been six years of age, the Lady began coming. And after the first time, with very brief intervals of absence, she came every night.

V

As soon as you lay down on the sack of straw in the corner of the outhouse, slipping out of the ragged frock if the weather were hot, or pulling the thin old horse-blanket over you if the night were a cold one, keeping your eyes tight shut, for this was quite indispensable, you looked into the thick dark, shot with gleams of lovely colours, sometimes with whirling rings of stars, and gradually, as you looked, all these concentrated into two stars, large and not twinkling, but softly radiant, and you were happy, for you knew that the Lady was coming.

For she always came, even when you had been most wicked: when you were sent to bed without even the supper-crust to gnaw, and when your body and arms and legs were bruised and aching from the beating they told you you deserved. The stars would go a long way off, and while you tingled and trembled and panted with expectation, would come back again as eyes. Looking up into them, you saw them clearly; the rest of the person they belonged to arrived quite a little while after her eyes were there. Such eyes – neither grey, nor brown, nor violet, but a mingling of all these colours, and deepening as you gazed up into them into bottomless lakes of love.

Then her face, framed in a soft darkness, which was hair – the Kid never knew of what colour – her face formed itself out of the darkness that framed those eyes, and a warm, balmy breath came nearer, and you were kissed. No other lips, in your short remembrance, had ever touched you. You had learned the meaning of a kiss only from her, and hers was so long and close that your heart left off beating, and only began again when it was over. Then arms that were soft and warm, and strong and beautiful, came round you and gathered you in, and you fell asleep folded closely in them, or you lay awake, and the Lady talked to you in a voice that was mellow as honey and soft as velvet, and sounded like the cooing of the wild pigeons that nested in the krantzes, or the sighing of the wind among the high veld grasses, and the murmur of the little river playing among the boulders and gurgling between the roots of the tree-fern. You talked, too, and told her everything. And no matter how bad you had been, though she was sorry, because she hated badness, she loved you just as dearly as she did when you were good. And oh! how you loved her – how you loved her!

"Please," you said that night when she came first – you remember it quite well, though it is so long ago – "please, why did you never come before?"

And she answered, with her cool, sweet, fragrant lips upon your eyelids, and your head upon her breast:

"Because you never wanted me so much as now."

"Please take me back home with you," you begged, holding her fast. And she answered in the voice that is always like the sigh of the wind amongst the tree-tops and the murmur of the river:

"I cannot yet – but I will come again."

And she does come, and again and again. By degrees, though she comes to you only at night, when the outhouse is dark, or lighted only by the stars or the moonshine, you learn exactly what the Lady is like.

She wears a silken, softly-rustling gown that is of any lovely colour you choose. The hue of the blue overarching sky at midday, or the tender rose of dawn, or of the violet clouds that bar the flaming orange-ruby of the sunset: or the mysterious robe of twilight drapes her, or her garment is sable as the Night. The grand sweep of her shoulders and the splendid pillar of her throat reveal the beauty of her form even to the eyes of an untaught, neglected child. Her face is pale, but as full of sunlight as of shadow, and her eyes are really grey and deep as mountain lakes. The sorrow of all the world and all its joy seem to have rolled over her like many waters, and when she smiles the sweetness of it is always almost more than the Kid can bear.

Who is the Lady!

She has no other name than that. She is very, very good, as well as beautiful, and you can bear to tell her when you have been most wicked, because she is so sorry for you. She can play with you, and laugh so softly and clearly and gaily that you, who have never learned but to dread grown people's cruel merriment, join in and laugh too. When she laughs the corners of her eyes crinkle so like the corners of her lips that you have to kiss them, and there are dimples that come with the laughter, and make her dearer than ever.

Who is the Lady, tall, and strong, and tender? That dead woman lying out there under the Little Kopje was small, and slight, and frail. Who may the Lady be? Is she a dream or a mere illusion born of loneliness and starvation, physical and mental? Or has Mary, the Mother of Pity, laid aside her girdle of decades of golden roses, her mantle of glory, and her diadem of stars, and come stepping fair-footed down the stairway that Night builds between Earth and Heaven, to comfort a desolate child lying in a stable who never heard the story of the Christ-Babe of Bethlehem?

You ask no questions – you to whom she comes. You call her softly at night, stretching out your arms, and the clasp of her arms answers at once. You whisper how you love her, with your face hidden in her neck. The great kind dark that brings her is your real, real daytime in which you live and are glad. Each morning to which you waken, bringing its stint of hunger and abuse and blows renewed, is only a dreadful dream, you say to yourself, and so can face your world.

Oh, deep beyond fathoming, mysterious beyond comprehension is the hidden heart of a child!

VI

One afternoon when the Kid was quite as tall as the broom she swept the stoep with she had gone to the drift for water. It was a still, bright, hot day. Little puffs of rosy cloud hung motionless under the burning blue sky-arch; small, gaily-plumaged birds twittered in the bushes; the tiny black ants scurried to and fro in the pinkish sand of the river beach. She waded into the now clear, sherry-pale water to cool her hot bare limbs, and, bending over, stared down into the reflected eyes that looked back out of the pool.

Such a dirty little, large-eyed, wistful face, crowned by a curling tousle of matted, reddish-brown-gold hair. Such a neglected, sordid little figure, with thin drab shoulders sticking out of a ragged calico frock. She was quite startled. She had never seen herself in any glass before, though a cheap, square, wooden-framed mirror hung on the wall of the bar-room, with a dirty clothes-brush on a hook underneath, and there were swing toilet-glasses in the tawdry bedrooms at the inn. Something stirred in her, whispering in the grimy little ear, "*It is good to be clean*," and with the awakening of the maidenly instinct the womanly purpose framed.

She put off her horrible rags, and washed herself from head to foot in the warm clear water. She took fine sand, and scrubbed her head. She dipped and wrung and rinsed her foul tatters of garments, standing naked in the shallows, the hot sunshine drying her red-gold curls, and warming her slight girlish body through and through as she spread her washed rags to dry on the big hot stones.

There was a man's step on the bank above her, there was a rustling sound among the green bushes. She had never heard of modesty, but she cowered down among the boulders, and the heavy footstep passed by. She hid among the fern while her clothes were drying, put them on tidily, and went back with her filled water-bucket to the hotel. How could she know what injury the kind peremptory voice, bidding her be foul no longer, had done her! But thenceforwards a new cruelty, a fresh peril, attended her steps.

Bough and the white woman of the inn had quarrels often. She was no wife of his. He had not brought her from Cape Colony. When the hotel was built he had gone up to Johannesburg on business and on pleasure, and brought her back with him from an establishment he knew. He was generally not brutal to her except when she was ailing, when he gave her medicine that made her worse, much worse – so very ill that she would lie groaning upon a foul neglected bed for weeks, while Bough caroused with the coloured women and the customers in the bar. Then, still groaning, she would drag herself up and be about her work again. She did not want to go back to the house at Johannesburg. She loved the man Bough in her fashion, poor bought wretch.

She had quarrelled with him many times for many things, and been silenced with blows, or curses, or even caresses, were he in the mood. But she had never quarrelled with him about the Kid before. Now when he bought some coloured print and a Boer sunbonnet, and some shifts and stockings of a traveller in drapery and hosiery, and ordered her thenceforwards to see that the girl went properly clothed, a new terror, a fresh torture, was added to the young life. The woman had ignored, neglected, sometimes ill-used her, but she had never hated her until now.

And Bough, the big, burly, dark-skinned man with the strange light eyes, and the bold, cruel, red mouth, and the bushy brown whiskers, why did he follow her about with those strange eyes, and smile secretly to himself? She was no longer fed on scraps; she must sit and eat at table with the man and his mistress, and learn to use knife and fork.

She outgrew the dress Bough had bought her, and another, and another, and this did not make Bough angry; he only smiled. A man having some secret luxury or treasure locked away in a private cupboard will smile so. He knows it is there, and he means to go to the hiding-place one day, but in the meantime he waits, licking his lips.

The girl had always feared Bough, and shrunk from his anger with unutterable terror. But the blow of his heavy hand was more bearable than his smile and his jesting amiability. Now, when she went down to the kraals on an errand, or to the orchard or garden for fruit or vegetables, or to the river for water as of old, she heard his light, cautious, padding footsteps coming after her, and would turn and pass him with downcast eyes, and go back to the inn, and take a beating for not having done her errand. Beating she comprehended, but this mysterious change in the man Bough filled her with sick, secret loathing and dread. She did not know why she bolted the door of the outhouse now when she crept to her miserable bed.

Once Bough dropped into her lap a silver dollar, saying with a smile that she was getting to be quite a little woman of late. She leaped to her feet as though a scorpion had stung her, and stood white to the very lips, and speechless, while the big silver coin rolled merrily away into a distant corner, and lay there. The frowzy woman with the bleached hair happened to come in at that moment; or had she been spying through a crack of the door? Bough pretended he had accidentally dropped the coin, picked it up, and went away.

That night he and the woman quarrelled fiercely. She could hear them raging at each other as she lay trembling. Then came shrieks, and the dull sound of the sjambok cutting soft human flesh. In the morning the woman had a black eye; there were livid weals on her tear-blurred face. She packed her boxes, snivelling. She was going back along up to Johannesburg by the next thither-bound transport-waggon-train that should halt at the hotel – thrown off like an old shoe after all these years. And she was not young enough for the old life, what with hard work and hard usage and worry, and she knew to whom she owed her dismissal…

Ay, and if she could have throttled or poisoned the little sly devil she would have done it! Only – there would have been Bough to reckon with afterwards. For of God she made a jest, and the devil was an old friend of hers, but she was horribly afraid of the man with the brown bushy whiskers and the light, steely eyes. Yet she threw herself upon him to kiss him, blubbering freely, when at the week's end the Johannesburg transport-rider's waggons returning from the district town not yet linked up to the north by the railway came in sight.

Bough poured her out a big glass of liquor, his universal panacea, and another for the transport-rider, with many a jovial word. He would be running up to Johannesburg before she had well shaken down after the journey. Then they would have a rare old time, going round the bars and doing the shows. Though, perhaps if she had got fixed up with a new friend, some flash young fellow with pots of money, she would not be wanting old faces around?

Then he turned aside to pay the transport-rider, and the exile dabbed her swollen face with a rouge-stained, lace-edged handkerchief, and went out to get into the waggon.

The girl stood by the stoep, staring, puzzled, overwhelmed, afraid. A piece of her world was breaking off. As long as she could remember anything she had known this woman. She had never received any kindness from her; of late she had been malignant in her hate, but – she wished she was not going. Instinctively she had felt that her presence was some slight protection. Keeping close in the shadow of this creature's frowzy skirts, she had not so feared and dreaded those light eyes of Bough's, and the padding, following footsteps had kept aloof. As the woman passed her now, a rage of unspeakable, agonising fear rose in her bosom. She cried out to her, and clutched at her shabby gay mantle.

The woman snatched the garment from her hold. Her distorted mouth and blazing eyes were close to the white young face. She could have spat upon it. But she snarled at her three words … no more, and passed her, and got into the waggon.

"Halloa, there!" said Bough, coming forward threateningly, "what you rowing about, eh?" But no one answered. The girl had fled to the boulder-cairn, and the woman sat silent in the waggon, until the weary, goaded teams moved on, and the transport-train of heavy, broad-beamed vehicles lumbered away.

But the little figure on the cairn of boulders covering the dust of the bosom from whence it had first drunk life sat there immovable until the sun went down, pondering.

"*Missis now, eh!*"

What did those three words mean?

Then Bough called her, and she had to run. She served as waitress of the bar that day, and the men who drove or rode by and stopped for drinks, chatting in the dirty saloon, or sitting in the bare front room, with the Dutch stove, and the wooden forms and tables in it, that they called the coffee-room, to discuss matters relative to the sale of cattle, or sheep, or merchandise, stared at her, and several made her coarse compliments. She refused to touch the loathly-smelling liquor they offered her. Her heart beat like a little terrified bird's. And she was horribly conscious of those light eyes of Bough's following, following her, with that inscrutable look.

When the crowd had thinned he came to her. He caught her arm, and pulled her near him, and said between his teeth:

"You will sleep in the mistress's room to-night."

Then he went away chuckling to himself, thinking of that frightened look in her eyes. Later, he went out on horseback, and did not return.

The slatternly bedchamber, with its red turkey twill window-curtains and cheap gaudy wallpaper, which had belonged to the ruddled woman with the bleached hair, was a palace to the little one. But she could not breathe there. Late that night she rose from the big feather bed, and unfastened the inner window shutters, and drew the cotton blind and opened the window, though the paint had stuck, and looked out upon the veld. The great stars throbbed in the purple velvet darkness overhead. The falling dew wetted the hand she stretched out into the cool night air. She drew back the hand and touched her cheek with it, and started, for the fresh, cool, fragrant touch seemed like that of some other hand whose touch she once had known. She thought for the first time that if the woman who had been her mother, and who slept out there in the dark under the boulder-cairn, had lived, she might have touched her child so. Then she closed the window quickly, for she heard, afar off, the gallop of a hard-ridden horse drawing nearer – nearer. And she knew that Bough was coming back.

He came.

She heard him dismount before the door, give the horse to the sleepy Barala ostler, and let himself into the bar. She heard him clink among the glasses and bottles. She heard his foot upon the three-step stair, and on the landing. It did not pass by. It stopped at the locked door of the room where she was.

Then his voice bade her rise and open the door. She could not speak or move.

She was dumb and paralysed with deadly terror. She heard his coaxing voice turn angry; she listened in helpless terrified silence to his oaths and threats; then she heard him laugh softly, and the laugh was followed by the jingle of a bunch of skeleton keys. He always carried them; they saved trouble, he used to say.

They saved him trouble now. When the bent wire rattled in the lock, and the key fell out upon the floor, she screamed, and his coarse chuckle answered. She was cowering against the wall in a corner of the room when he came in and picked up the key and locked the door. But when his stretched-out, grasping hand came down upon her slight shoulder, she turned and bit it like some savage, desperate little animal, drawing the blood. Bough swore at the sudden sting of the sharp white teeth. So the little beast showed fight, eh? Well, he would teach her that the master will have his way.

There was no one else in the house, and if there had been it would have served her not at all. God sat in timeless Eternity beyond these mists of earth, and saw, and made no sign. It was not until the man Bough slept the heavy sleep of liquor and satiety that the thought of flight was born in her with desperate courage to escape him. The shutters had been left unbolted, and the window was yet a little way open. She sprang up and threw it wide, leaped out upon the stoep, and from thence to the ground, and fled blindly, breathlessly over the veld into the night.

VII

Bough, as soon as it was dawn, sent three of the Kaffirs from the kraals, in different directions, to search for her, and, mounted on a fresh pony, took the fourth line of search himself.

He had chosen the right direction for riding down the quarry. At broad high noon he came upon her, in a bare, stony place tufted with milk-bush. She was crouching under a prickly-pear shrub, that threw a distorted blue shadow on the sun-baked, sun-bleached ground, trying to eat the fruit in the native way with two sticks. But she had no knife, and her mouth was bleeding. Bough gave the tired pony both spurs when the prey he hunted came in sight. She leaped up like a wild cat when the mounted man rode down upon her, and ran, doubling like a hare. When overtaken, she fell upon her face in the sand, and lay still, only shaken by her long pants. Bough dismounted and caught her by the wrist and dragged her up with his bandaged right hand. He beat her about her cheeks with his hard, open left. Then he threw her across his saddle, but she writhed down, and lay under the pony's feet.

He kicked her then, for giving so much trouble, lifted her again, and tried to mount, holding her in one arm. But the frightened pony swerved and backed, and the girl writhed, and struggled, and scratched like a wild cat. She did not know what mercy meant, but she saw by the look that came into those light eyes that this man would have none upon her. She fought and bit and screamed.

Bough took an ox-reim then, that was coiled behind his saddle, and bound her hands. He tied the end of the leather rope to the iron ring behind his saddle, and remounted, and spurred his weary beast into a canter. The little one was forced to run behind. Again and again she fell, and each time she was jerked up and forced to run again upon her bleeding feet, leaving rags of her garments upon the karroo-bushes and blood-marks on the stones. And at last she fell, and rose no more, showing no sign of life under the whip and the spur-rowel. Then Bough bent over and drew his long hunting-knife and cut the reim, leaving her hands still bound. If any spark of life remained in he girl, he could not tell. Her knees were drawn in towards her body; her eyes were open, and rolled upwards; there was foam upon her torn and bleeding mouth. She was as good as dead, anyway, and the wild dogs would be sure to come by-and-by. Already an aasvogel was hovering above; a mere speck, the great bird poised upon widespread wings, high up in the illimitable blue.

Presently there would be a flock of these carrion feeders, that are not averse to fresh-killed meat when it is to be had.

Bough remounted, and, humming a dance tune that was often on his lips, rode away over the veld.

The great vulture wheeled. Then he dropped like a falling stone for a thousand yards or so, and hovered and dropped again, getting nearer – ever so much nearer – with each descent. And where he had hovered at the first were now a dozen specks of black upon the hot, bright blue.

A wild dog crept down from a cone-topped spitzkop, and stood, sniffing the blood-tainted air eagerly, whining a little in its throat.

The great vulture dropped lower. His comrades of the flock, eagerly following his gyrations and descents, had begun to wheel and drop also. Another wild dog appeared on the cone-shaped kop. Other furry, sharp-eared heads, with eager, sniffing noses, could be seen amongst the grass and bush.

Then suddenly the higher vultures rose. They wheeled and soared and flew, a bevy of winged black specks hurrying to the north. They had seen something approaching over the veld. The great bird hanging motionless, purposeful, lower down, became aware of his comrades' change of tactics. With one downward stroke of his powerful wings, he shot upwards, and with a hoarse, croaking cry took flight after the rest.

The wild dogs stole back, hungry, to covert, as a big light blue waggon, drawn by a well-fed team of eight span, came lumbering over the veld.

Would the ox-team veer in another direction? Would the big blue waggon with the new white tilt roll by?

The Hottentot driver cracked his giant whip, and, turning on the box-seat, spoke to a figure that sat beside him. It was a woman in loose black garments, with a starched white coif like a Dutchwoman's kapje, covered with a floating black veil. At her side dangled and clashed a long rosary of brown wooden beads, with a copper crucifix attached. There were two other women in the big waggon, dressed in the same way. They were Roman Catholic nuns – Sisters of Mercy coming up from Natal, by the order of the Bishop of Bellmina, Vicar-Apostolic, at the request of the Bishop of Paracos, suffragan to North-East Baraland, to swell the numbers of the Community already established in Gueldersdorp at the Convent of the Holy Way.

The oxen halted some fifty yards from that inanimate ragged little body, lying prone, face downwards, among the scrubby bushes that sprouted in the hot sand. Little crowding tiny ants already blackened the bloodstains on the ground, and the wild dogs would not have stayed long from the feast if the waggon had passed on.

One white-coifed, tall, black-clad figure sprang lightly down from the waggon-box, and hurried across to where the body was lying. A mellow, womanly cry of pity came from under the starched coif. She turned and beckoned. Then she knelt down by the girl's side, opened the torn garments, and felt with compassionate, kindly touches about the still heart.

The other two black figures came hurrying over then, stumbling amongst the stones and karroo-bushes in their haste. Lifting her, they turned the white, bloodless young face to the blue sky. It was cut and scratched, but not otherwise disfigured. Her bound arms, dragged upwards before it, had shielded it from the thorns and the sharp stones. They were raw from the elbows to the wrists.

They listened at the torn childish bosom with anxious ears. They got a few drops of brandy between the clenched little teeth. The sealed lips quivered; the heart fluttered feebly, like a dying bird. They gave her more stimulant, and waited, while the Hottentot driver dozed, and the sleek, well-fed oxen chewed the cud patiently, standing in the sun.

Then the Sisters lifted her, with infinite care, and carried her to the waggon. The twenty-four-foot whip-lash cracked, and the patient beasts moved on. Very soon the big white tilt was a mere retreating speck upon the veld. The ants were still busy when the wild dogs came out and sniffed regretfully at those traces on the ground.

Coincidence, did you say, lifting your eyebrows over the book, as the blue waggon of the Sisters rolled lumberingly into the story? The long arm of coincidence stretched to aching tenuity by the dramatist and the novelist! Nay! but the thing happened, just as I have told.

What is the thing we are agreed to call coincidence?

Once I was passing over one of the bridges that span the unclean London ditch called the Regent's Canal. I had walked all the way from Piccadilly Circus to Gloucester Crescent, haunted by the memory of a man I had once known. He was the broken-down, drunken, studio-drudge of a great artist, a splendid Bohemian, who had died some years before. Why did the thought of the palette-scraper, the errand-goer, the drunken creature with the cultivated voice and the ingratiating, gentlemanly manners, possess me as I went? I recalled his high, intellectual, pimply forehead, and large benevolent nose, in a chronic state of inflammation, and seedy semi-clerical garb, for the thing had been an ordained clergyman of the Church of England, and I grinned, remembering how, when a Royal visitor was expected at the great man's studio, the factotum had been bidden to wash his face, and had washed one half of it, leaving the other half in drab eclipse, like the picture-restorers' trade-advertisement of a canvas partially cleansed.

Idly I tossed the butt of a finished cigar over the bridge balustrade. Idly my eye followed it down to the filthy, sluggishly-creeping water that flows round the bend, under the damp rear-garden walls below.

A policeman and a bargeman were just taking the body of an old man out of that turbid canal-stream. It was dressed in pauper's garments, and its stiffened knees were bent, and its rigid elbows crooked, and a dishonoured, dripping beard of grey hung over the soulless breast.

The dreadful eyes were open, staring up at the leaden March sky. His face, with the dread pallor of Death upon it, and the mud-stains wiped away by a rough but not unkindly hand, was cleaner than I had ever seen it in life.

Nevertheless, I recognised in the soaked body in its workhouse livery the very man the thought of whom had haunted me, the great Bohemian painter's drunken studio-drudge.

VIII

School at the Convent of the Holy Way at Gueldersdorp was breaking up, suddenly and without warning, very soon after the beginning of the Christmas term. Many of the pupils had already left in obedience to urgent telegrams from relatives in Cape Colony or in the Transvaal, and every Dutch girl among the sixty knew the reason why, but was too astute to hint of it, and every English girl was at least as wise, but pride kept her silent, and the Americans and the Germans exchanged glances of intelligence, and whispered in corners of impending war between John Bull and Oom Paul.

That deep and festering political hatreds, fierce enthusiasms, inherited pride of race, and instilled pride in nationality, were covered by worked apron-bibs, and even childish pinafores, is anyone likely to doubt? Schoolgirls can be patriots as well as rebels, and the seminary can vie with the college, or possibly outdo it, occasion given. Ask Juliette Adam whether the bread-and-butter misses of France in the year 1847 did not squabble over the obstinacy of King Louis Philippe and the greed of M. Guizot, the claims of Louis Napoleon and the theories of Louis Blanc, of Odilon Barrot, and Ledru-Rollin? And I who write, have I not seen a North Antrim Sunday-school wrecked in a faction-fight between the Orange and the Green? Lord! how the red-edged hymnals and shiny-covered S.P.G. books hurtled through the air, to burst like hand-grenades upon the texted walls. In vain the panting, crimson clergyman mounted the superintendent's platform, and strove to shed the oil of peace upon those seething waters. Even the class-teachers had broken the rails out of the Windsor chair-backs, and joined the hideous fray, irrespective of age or sex.

"Miss Maloney – Miss Geoghegan – I am shocked – appalled! In the name of decency I command yees to desist!"

"Hit him again, Moggy Lenahan, a taste lower down!"

"Serve you right, Mulcahy! why would you march wid the Green?"

Thirty years ago. As I gaped in affright at the horrid scene of strife, small revengeful fingers twisted themselves viciously in my auburn curls, and wresting from my grasp a "Child's Own Bible Concordance," a birthday outrage received from an Evangelical aunt, Julia Dolan, aged twelve, began to pound me about the face with it. As a snub-nosed urchin, gifted with a marvellous capacity for the cold storage and quick delivery of Scripture genealogies and Hebrew proper and improper names, I had often reduced my mild, long-legged girl-neighbour to tearful confusion. Now meek Julia seemed as though possessed by seven devils. I had been taught the elementary rule that boys must not hurt girls, but the code had no precept helpful in the present instance, when a girl was hurting me. Casting chivalry to the winds, I remember that I kicked Julia's shins, and she fled howling; but not before she had reduced my leading feature to a state of ruin, which created a tremendous sensation when they led me home. Later, during the election riots, two young women fought in the Market Place, stripped to the waist, and wielding boards wrenched from the side of a packing-case, heavy, jagged, and full of nails. And when the soldiers were called out, we know how many a saddle was emptied by the stones the children threw…

Only a day previously the centipede-like procession of girls of all ages, in charge of nuns and pupil-teachers, in passing over the Gueldersdorp Recreation-Ground, had sustained an experience with which every maiden bosom would have been still vibrating had not an event even more exciting occurred between the early morning roll-call and prayers-muster and breakfast.

Greta Du Taine had had another love-letter!

The news darted from class-room to class-room more quickly than little Monsieur Pilotell, the French literature professor; it spread like the measles, and magnified like the mumps.

The Red Class, composed of the elder girls, "young ladies" who were undergoing the process of finishing, surged with volcanic excitement, hidden, but not in the least repressed. The White Class, their juniors, who were chiefly employed in preparing for Confirmation, should have been

immersed in graver things, but were not. They waited on mental tiptoe for details, and a peep at the delicious document. The Blue Class, as became mere infants ranging from six to ten years old, remained phlegmatically indifferent to the missive, yet avid for samples of the chocolates that had accompanied the declaration, made to eighty girls of all ages by one undersized, pasty, freckled young man employed as junior clerk and chain-assistant in a surveyor's office, and who signed at the end of a long row of symbolistic crosses the unheroic name of Billy Keyse.

He had seen and been helplessly stunned by the vision of Greta Du Taine out walking at the head of the long winding procession of English, German, Dutch, Dutch-French, Dutch-American, and Jewish girls. They are sent now to be taught in Europe, those daughters of the Rand millionaires, the Stock Exchange speculators, the wealthy fruit-farmers, or cereal-growers, or cattle and sheep breeders, who are descended themselves from the old pioneers and voortrekkers, but they do not get a better education than was to be had at the Convent school at Gueldersdorp, where the Sisters of Mercy took in and taught and trained coltish girl-children, born in a strongly stimulating climate, and accustomed to lord it over Kaffir and Hottentot servants to their hearts' content. These they tamed, these they transformed into refined, cultivated, accomplished young women, stamped with the indefinable seal of high breeding, possessed of the tone and manner that belongs to the upper world.

What shall I say of the Sisters of the Convent of the Holy Way at Gueldersdorp, I who know but little of any Order of Religious? They are a Community, chiefly of ladies of high breeding and ancient family, vowed to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, nurse the sick, comfort the dying, and instruct the ignorant. Like the Fathers of the Society of Jesuits, those skilled, patient, wise tillers in the soil of the human mind, their daily task is to hoe and tend, and prune and train, and water the young green things growing in what to them is the Garden of God, and to other good and even holy people, the vineyard of the devil. Possibly both are right?

I have heard the habit of the Order called ugly. But upon the stately person of the Mother Superior the garb was regal. The sweeping black folds were as imposing as imperial purple, and the starched guimpe framed a beauty that was grave, stern, almost severe until she smiled, and then you caught your breath, because you had seen what great poets write of, and great painters try to render, and only great musicians by their impalpable, mysterious tone-art can come nearest to conveying – the earthly beauty that has been purged of all grosser particles of dross in the white fires of the Divine Love. She was not altogether perfect, or one could not have loved her so. Her scorn of any baseness was bitterly scathing; the point of her sarcasm was keen as any thrusting blade of tempered steel; her will was to be obeyed, and was obeyed as sovereign law, else woe betide the disobedient. Also, though kind and gracious to all, tenderly solicitous for, and incessantly watchful of, the welfare of the least of her charges, she never feigned where she could not feel regard or love. Her rare kiss was coveted in the little world of the Convent school as the jewel of an Imperial Order was coveted in the bigger world outside it, and the most rebellious of the pupils held her in respect mingled with fear. The head-mistresses of the classes had their followers and admirers. It was for the Mother Superior to command enthusiasm, and to sway ambition, and to govern the hearts and minds of children with the personal charm and the intellectual powers that could have ruled a nation from a throne.

Well, she has gone to God. It is good for many souls that she lived upon earth a little. There was nothing sentimental, visionary, or hysterical in her character. Nor, in giving her great heart with her pure soul to her Saviour, did she ever quite learn to despise the sweetness of earthly love. Not all a Saint. Yet the children of those women who most were swayed by her influence in youth are taught to hold her Saint as well as Martyr. And there is One Who knows.

It was not until recess after the midday dinner that Greta Du Taine could exhibit her love-letter. She was a Transvaal Dutch girl with old French blood in her, a vivacious, sparkling Gallic champagne mingling with the Dopper in her dainty blue veins. Nothing could be prettier than Greta in a good temper, unless it might be Greta in a rage. She was in a good temper now, as, tossing back her superb golden hair plait, as thick as a child's arm, and nearly four feet long, she drew a smeary envelope from

the front of her black alpaca school-dress, and, delicately withdrawing the epistle enclosed, yielded the envelope for the inspection of the Red Class.

"What niggly writing!" objected Nellie Bliecker, wrinkling her snub nose in the disgust that masks the gnawing tooth of envy.

"And the envelope is all over sticky brown," said another carping critic.

"That's because *he* put the letter inside the chocolate-box," explained Greta, "instead of outside. And the best chocolates – the expensive ones – always go squashy. Only the cheap ones don't melt – because they have got stuff like chalk inside. But wait till I show you as much as the envelope of my next letter – that's all, Julia K. Shaw!"

Julia K. wilted. Greta proceeded:

"It's directed 'To My Fair Addored One,' because, of course, he didn't know my name. I don't object to his putting a d too much in adored; I rather prefer it. His own name is simple, and rather pretty." She made haste to say that, because she felt doubtful about it. "Billy Keyse."

"*Billy?*"

"Billy Keyse?"

"B-i-l-l-y K-e-y-s-e!"

The name went the round of the Red Class. Nobody liked it.

"He must, of course, have been christened William. Shakespeare was a William. The Emperor of Germany," stated Greta loftily, "is a William. Mr. Pitt and Mr. Gladstone were both Williams. Many other great men have been Williams."

"But not Billies," said Christine Silber, provoking a giggle from the greedily-listening White Class.

Greta scorched them into silence with a look, and continued:

"He is by profession a surveyor, not exactly a partner in the firm of Gadd and Saxby, on Market Square, but something very near it." (Do you who read see W. Keyse carrying the chain and spirit-level, and sweeping out the office when the Kaffir boy forgets?). "He saw me walking in the Stad with the Centipede," Greta added.

This was a fanciful name for the whole school of eighty pupils promenading upon its hundred and sixty legs of various nationalities in search of exercise and fresh air.

"Go on!" said the Red Class in a breath, as the White Class giggled and nudged each other, and the Blue Class opened eyes and ears.

"He was knocked dumb-foolish at once, he says, by my eyes and my figure and my hair. He is not long up from Cape Colony: came out from London through chest-trouble, to catch heart-trouble in Gueldersdorp" (do you hear hectic, coughing Billy Keyse cracking his stupid joke?). "And if I'll only be engaged to him, he promises to get rich, become as big a swell on the Rand as Marks or Du Taine – isn't that funny, his not knowing Du Taine is my father? – and drive me to race-meetings on a first-class English drag, with a team of bays in silver-mounted harness, with rosettes the colour of my eyes."

Greta threw her golden head back and laughed, displaying a double row of enviable pearls.

"But I've got to wait for all these things until Billy Keyse strikes pay-reef. Poor Billy! Hand over those chocolates, you greedy things!"

Somebody wanted to know how the package had been smuggled into the Convent. Those lay-Sisters were so sharp…

"They're perfect needles – Sister Tarsesias particularly, and Sister Tobias. But there's a new Emigration Jane among the housemaids. You've seen her – the sallow thing with the greasy light-coloured fringe in curlers, who walks flat-footed like a wader on the mud. I keep expecting to hear her quack… Well, Billy got hold of her. She didn't know my name, being new, but she recognised me by Billy's description, and sympathised with him, having a young man herself, who doesn't speak a word of English, except 'damn' and 'Three of Scotch, please.' I've promised to translate her letters;

he writes them in the Taal. And Billy gave her two dollars, and I've given her a hat. It's the big red one mother brought back from Paris – she paid a hundred francs for it at the Maison Cluny – and Emigration Jane thinks, though it's a bit too quiet for her taste, it'll do her a fair old treat when she trims it up with a bit more colour and one or two 'imitation ostridge' tips… I'd give another hundred francs for the Maison Cluny *modiste* to hear." Again the birdlike laugh rang out. "Now you know everything there is in the letter, girls, except the bit of poetry at the end, which only my most intimate friends may be permitted to read. Lynette Mildare!"

Lynette, bending over a separate table-desk in the light of the north window of the long deal match-boarded class-room, looked up from her work of tooling leather, the delicate steel instrument in her hand, a little gilding-brush between her white teeth, a little fold of concentrated attention between her slender brown eyebrows.

"Yes. Did you want anything?"

Greta jumped up, leaving the rest of the box of chocolates to dissolve among the White Class, and came over, threading her way between the long rows of desk-stalls.

"Of course I want something."

"What is it?" asked Lynette, laying down the little tool.

"What everyone has a right to expect from the person who is her dearest friend – sympathy," said Greta, jumping up and sitting on the corner of the desk, and biting the thick end of her long flaxen pigtail.

"You have it – when there is anything to sympathise about."

Greta tapped the letter, trying to frown.

"Do you call this nothing?"

"You have saved me from doing so."

"Lynette Mildare, have you a heart inside you?"

"Certainly; I can feel it beating, and it does its work very well."

"Am I, then, nothing to you?"

Lynette smiled, looking up at the piquant, charming face.

"You are a great deal to me."

"And I regard you as a bosom-friend. And the duty of a bosom-friend, besides rushing off at once to tell you if she hears anybody say anything nasty of you behind your back – a thing which you never do – is to sympathise with you in all your love-affairs – a thing which you do even seldomer."

Greta stamped with the toe of the dainty little shoe that rested on the beeswaxed boards of the class-room, and kicked the leg of the desk with the heel of the other.

"Please don't spill the white of egg, or upset the gold-leaf. And as I shall be pupil-teacher of the youngest class next term, I suppose I ought to tell you that 'seldomer' isn't in the English dictionary."

"I'm glad of it. I like my own words to belong to me, my own self. I should be ashamed to owe everything I say to silly Nuttall or stupid old Webster. You're artful, Lynette Mildare, trying to change the conversation. I say you don't sympathise with me properly in my affairs of the heart – and you never, never tell me about yours."

The beautiful black-rimmed, golden-tawny eyes laughed as some eyes can, though there was no quiver of a smile about the purely-modelled, close-folded lips.

"Don't tell me you never have, or never had, any," scolded Greta. "You're too lovely by half. Don't try to scowl me down – you are! I'm pretty enough to make the Billy Keyses stand on their silly heads if I told them to, but you're a great deal more. Also, you have style and grace and breeding. Anybody could tell that you came of tremendously swell people over away in England, where the Dukes and Marquesses and Earls began fencing in the veld somewhere about the eleventh century, to keep common people from killing the deer, or carving their vulgar names on the castle walls, and coming between the wind and their nobility. There's a quotation from your dear Shakespeare for you! He does come in handy sometimes."

"Doesn't he!" agreed Lynette, with an ardent flush.

"And you're descended from some of the people he wrote about," pressed Greta. "Own it!"

There was a faint line of sarcasm about the lovely lips.

"Shakespeare wrote of clowns and churls as well as of Kings and noblemen."

"If you were a clown, you wouldn't be what you are. The very shape of your head, and ears, and nails, bespeaks a Princess, disguised as a finished head-pupil, going to take over a class of grubby-fingered little ones – pah! – next term. And don't we all know that an English Duchess sends you your Christmas and Easter and birthday gifts! Come, you might as well speak out, when this is my last term, and we have always been such dear friends, and always will be," coaxed Greta, "because the Duchess lets you out, you know!"

She said it so quaintly that Lynette laughed, though there was a pained contraction between the delicate eyebrows and a vexed and sorrowful shadow on her face. Greta went on:

"We have all of us always known that you were – a mystery. Has it got anything to do with the Duchess?"

The round, shallow blue eyes were too greedily curious to be pretty at the moment. Lynette met them with a full, grave, answering denial.

"No; I am nothing to the Duchess of Broads, or she to me. She is sister to the Mother-Superior, and she sends to me at Christmas and Easter, and on birthdays, by the Mother's wish. Doesn't the Mother's second sister, the Princesse de Dignmont-Veziers, send Katie" – Katie was a little Irish novice – "presents from Paris twice a year?"

Greta's pretty eyebrows went up. Her blue greedy eyes became circular with surprise.

"Yes, of course – out of charity, because Katie was a foundling, picked up in the Irish quarter in Cape Town."

Lynette went on steadily, but, looking out of the window at the great wistaria that climbed upon the angle of the Convent wing in which were the nuns' cells.

"If Katie was a foundling, I am nothing better."

"Lynette Mildare, you're never in earnest?"

The shocked tone and the scandalised disgust on Greta's pretty face stung and hurt. But Lynette went on:

"I speak the truth. The Mother and the Sisters, who have always known it, have kept the secret. In their great considerate kindness, they have never once let me feel there was any difference between me and the other girls – not once in all these years. And I can never thank them enough – never be grateful enough for their great goodness – especially *hers*." The steady voice shook a little.

"We all know that you have always been the Mother's favourite." There was a little cool inflection of contempt in Greta's high, sweet, birdlike tones that had been lacking before. "And she is the niece of a great English Cardinal, and the sister of a Duchess and a Princess, and her step-brother is an Earl." The inflection added for Greta: "*And yet she turns to the charity child!*"

Lynette said in a low voice:

"It is because she is perfect in the way of humility. She is beyond all pride … greater than all prejudice … she has been more to me than I can say, since she and Sister Ignatius and Sister Tobias found me on the veld seven years ago, when they were trekking up from Natal to join the Sisters who were already working here."

Greta's face dimpled, and the bright, cold eyes grew greedy again. There was a romance, after all.

"My gracious! How did you get there? Did your people lose you, or had you run away from home?"

The delicate wild-rose colour sank out of Lynette's cheeks. Her eyes sank under those bold, curious, blue ones of Greta's. She said, with a painful effort:

"I – had run away from the place that was called my home. I don't remember ever having lived anywhere else before."

"My! And …?"

"It was a – dreadful place." A little convulsive shudder rippled through the girl's slight frame. Little points of moisture showed upon the delicate white temples, where clung the little stray rings and tendrils of the red-brown hair. "I wore worse rags than the children at the native kraals, and was worse fed. I scrubbed floors, and fetched water, and was beaten every day. Then" – she drew a deep, quivering breath – "I ran away – and – and ran until I could run no more, and fell down… I don't remember being picked up. I woke up one day here at the Convent; and I was in bed, and my hair was cut short, and there was ice upon my head. I said, 'Where am I?' and the Mother-Superior stooped down and looked into my eyes, and said, 'You are at home.' And the Convent has been my home ever since, and I hope with all my heart it always will be!"

Greta descended from the desk. She drew her embroidered cambric skirts primly about her, and said in a shocked voice:

"And I asked you to visit me – to come and stay with us at our place near Johannesburg – you who are not even respectable!"

Lynette grew burning red. One moment her eyes wavered and fell. Then she lifted them and looked back bravely into the pretty, shallow, blue ones.

"That is why I have told you – what you know now."

"Of course," Greta said patronisingly, "if you wish it, I shall not tell the class."

Lynette deliberately put away her tools and the calf-bound volume she had been working on, and shut and locked her desk. Then she rose. Her eyes swept over the long room, its lower end packed with giggling, whispering, squabbling, listening, gossiping, or reading girls. She said very clearly:

"It will be best that you should tell the class. Do it now. The girls can think it over while they are away, and make up their minds whether they will speak to me or not when they come back. Make no delay."

Then she went, moving with the long, smooth, light step and upright, graceful carriage that she had somehow caught from the Mother-Superior, out of the room. Curious eyes followed her; sharp ears, that had caught fragments of the colloquy, wanted the rest; eager tongues plied Greta with questions, as she stood reticent, knowing, bursting with information withheld, in the middle of the class-room, where honours she coveted had been won and prizes gained by the charity-bred foundling.

You may be sure that Greta told the story. It lost nothing by her telling, be equally sure. But all that heard it did not take it in Greta's way. The stamp of the woman who ruled this place was upon many minds and intellects and hearts here, and her teaching was to bear fruit in bitter, stormy, bloodstained years of days that were waiting at the very threshold.

"I tell you," said Christine Silber, the handsome Jewess, with a fierce flash of her black Oriental eyes, "foundling or charity girl, or whatever else you choose to call her, Lynette Mildare is the pride of the school."

Silber's father was President of the Groenfontein Legislative Council. A hum of assent followed on her utterance, and an English girl got up upon a form. She was the niece of a High Commissioner, daughter of a Secretary of Imperial Government, at Cape Town, who wrote K.C.M.G. after his name.

"Silber speaks the truth. Not a girl here is a patch on the shoes of Lynette Mildare. I am going home to London next winter to be presented, and we shall have a house in Chesterfield Gardens for the season, and if Lynette will come and visit us, I can tell her that she will be treated as an honoured guest. As for you, Greta Du Taine, who are always bragging about your father and his money, tell me which three letters of the alphabet you would find tattooed upon his conscience – if the strongest microscope ever made could find his conscience out? Shall *I* tell you them?" She held up her finger. "Shall I tell you how he bought those orange-groves at Rustenburg – and the country seat near Johannesburg – and the drag with the silver-mounted harness and the team of blood bays?"

"No, please!" begged Greta, flinching from the torture.
But the English girl was pitiless. She checked the letters off upon her fingers:
"I. D. B."
A shout went up from the Red Class.
Greta turned and ran.

IX

The cell was a large, light, airy room on the first-floor of the big two-storied Convent building that stood in its spacious, tree-shaded, high-fenced gardens beyond the Hospital at the north end of the town. Tall stained-wood presses full of papers and account-files covered the wall upon one side. There also stood a great iron safe, with heavy ledgers piled upon it. Upon the other three sides of the room were bookshelves, doubly and trebly laden, with Latin tomes of the Fathers of the Church, and the works and writings of modern theologians, many of them categorised upon the "Index Expurgatorius." Rows there were of English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish classical authors, and many volumes of recently-published scientific works. It might have been the room of a business man who was at the same time a priest and a scholar. There were roller maps upon the walls, and two or three engravings, Bougereau's "Virgin of Consolation," the "Madonna dei Ansidei" of Raffaelle, and a "Crucifixion" over the chimneypiece, which had three little statuettes in tinted alabaster – a St. Ignatius at one end, a St. Anthony of Padua at the other; in the middle, the Virgin bearing the Child.

The Mother-Superior sat writing at a bare solid deal table of the kitchen kind, with stained legs to add to its ugliness, and stained black-knobbed fronts to the drawers in it. Her pen flew over the paper.

Seated though she was, you could see her to be of noble figure, tall and finely proportioned. The habit of the nun does not hide everything that makes for beauty and for grace. The pure outlines of the small, perfectly-shaped head showed through the thin black veil that fell over the white starched coif. The small, high-instepped foot could not be hidden in walking; the make of the thick shoe might not disguise its form. The delicate whiteness and smooth, supple beauty of her hands, larger than the hands of ordinary women, their owner being of more heroic build, as of ampler mind and keener intellect, betrayed her to be a woman not yet old, though there were some deep lines and many fine ones on the attentive face that bent over the large square sheet of paper.

It was a curious face; its olive skin bleached to dull whiteness, its expression stern almost to severity. I have heard it likened to a Westmoreland hill-landscape. Lonely tarns lie under the black brows of the precipice; one feels chilly, and a little afraid. But the sun shines out suddenly from behind concealing mists, and everything is transformed to loveliness. I can in no other words describe the change wrought in her by her rare, sudden, illuminating smile. Her voice was the softest and the clearest I ever heard, a sigh made most audible speech; but in her just anger, only turned to wrath by the baser faults, the fouler vices, it could roll in organ-tones of thunder, or ring like a silver trumpet. And her eye made the lightning for such thunder, and the sword-thrust that followed the clarion-note of war.

She could have ruled an empire or a court, this woman who managed the thronged, buzzing Convent with the lifting of her finger, with the softest tone of her soft West of Ireland voice, devoid of all trace of the unbeautiful brogue, cultured, elegant, refined. As I have said, the lessons that she taught bore great fruit during that red time of war that was coming, and will bear greater fruit hereafter.

A little is known to me of the personal history of Lady Bridget-Mary Bawne – in religion known as Mother Mary of Bethlehem – that may be here set down. Some twenty-three years previously that devout Irish Catholic nobleman, the Right Honourable James Dominic Bawne, tenth Earl of Castleclare, Baron Kilhail, Count of the Holy Roman Empire, and D.L. for West Connemara, not contented with the possession of three very tall, very handsome, very popular daughters – the Right Honourable Ladies Bridget-Mary, Alyse, and Alethea Bawne – consulted his favourite spiritual director, and, as advised, offered his thin white hand and piously regulated affections to Miss Nancy McIleevy, niece and heiress of McIleevy of McIleevystown, the eminent County Down brewer, so celebrated for his old Irish ales and nourishing bottled porter.

This lady, being sufficiently youthful, of good education and manners, and of like faith with her elderly wooer, undertook, in return for an ancient name and the title of Countess of Castleclare, to find the widower in conjugal affection for the rest of his mortified life, and to do her best to supply him with the grievously-needed heir. There was no wicked fairy at Lord Castleclare's wedding, distinguished by the black-browed beauty of the three bridesmaids, his daughters; and two years later saw the beacons at the entrance of Ballybawne Harbour, on the West Connemara coast, illuminated by the Castleclare tenants in honour of the arrival of the desired heir, upon whom before his birth so much wealth had been expended by Lord Castleclare in pilgrimages, donations, foundations, and endowments that, some months after it, his lordship conveyed to his three daughters that, in the interests of the Viscount, to whose swollen gums a gold-set pebble enclosing a pious relic of an early Christian martyr was at that moment affording miraculous relief, he, their father, would be obliged by their providing themselves as soon as possible with husbands of suitable rank, corresponding religion, and sufficient means to dispense with the customary marriage portion.

Lady Alyse saw the justice of her father's views, and married the Duke of Broads, an English Catholic peer; her younger sister, Alethea, went obediently to the altar with the aged and enormously wealthy Prince de Dignmont-Veziers. Lady Bridget-Mary Bawne, eldest and handsomest of the three, pleaded – if a creature so stormy and imperious could be said to plead – a previous engagement to an Ineligible.

"We have all heard of Captain Mildare of the Grey Hussars, my dear child," said Lord Castleclare, going to the door to make sure that those shrieks that had proceeded from the Viscount's sumptuous suite of apartments, situated at the top of the staircase rising at the end of the corridor leading from his father's library, were stilled at the maternal fountain. Finding that it was so, he ambled back to the centre of the worn Bokhara rug that had been under the *prie-Dieu* in the oratory of James II. at Dublin Castle, and resumed. "We have all heard of Captain Mildare. At the taking of Ali Musjid – arah! – at Futtehabad, with Gough – arah! – and at Ahmed Khel, where Stewart cut up the Afghans so tremendously, Mildare earned great distinction as well as the Victoria Cross, which I am delighted to see, in glancing through the *Army and Navy Gazette*, Her Majesty has been pleased to confer upon him. As a gentleman and a soldier he presents all that is desirable; as a member of an old Catholic family, he certainly commands my suffrages. But as the husband of my eldest daughter I cannot look upon a younger son with – arah! – toleration. Honourable reputation is much, bravery is much, but my son-in-law must possess – arah! – other – other qualifications." The old gentleman stuttered pitiably.

"*One* other qualification, you mean, father, if that term can be given to the possession of a certain amount of money," said Lady Bridget-Mary, standing very straight and looking very proudly at her father. "Will you object to telling me plainly for how much you would be content to sell your stock, with goodwill?"

Lord Castleclare was a thin, courtly old gentleman, who had conquered, he humbly trusted, all his passions, except the passion for early Catholic Theological Fathers and the passion for Spanish snuff. But he was stung by the irony. He spilt quite a quantity of choice mixture over the long, ivory-yellow nail of his lean, delicate thumb as he looked consciously aside from the great scornful grey eyes that judged and questioned and condemned him as a mercenary old gentleman. And he caught himself wishing that this fine fiery creature had been born a boy. He looked back again at his eldest daughter. Her white arms were folded upon her bosom, her pearl-coloured silk evening gown was swept aside from the fire, to whose warmth she held an arched and exquisite foot. Her noble head, with its rich coronet of silken black coils, was bent; her broad brows had ceased to be stormy. With a half-dreamy smile upon her beautiful firm mouth, she was looking at a green flashing ring she wore on the third finger of her left hand. And the sight of her so sent a sudden pang of remembrance leaping through the old man's heart. He forgot his spoiled pinch of snuff, and stepped over to her, and took the hand, and looked at the emerald ring with her in silence.

"My dear daughter," he said, more simply and more sweetly than Lady Bridget-Mary had ever heard him speak before, "I think you love this brave gentleman sincerely?"

His daughter's large, beautifully-shaped hand closed strongly over the old ivory fingers. The great brilliant dark grey eyes looked at him through a sudden mist of tears, though she lifted her head and held it high. She said in a low, clear voice:

"Father, you remember how my mother loved you? And Richard is as dear to me as you were to her. I want words when it comes to speaking of so great a thing as the love I feel for him. But it is my life… I seem to breathe with his breath, and think his thoughts, and speak with his voice, since we found out our secret, and we are each other's for Time and for Eternity." Then she added, with a lovely smile that had a touch of humour in it: "And he will be quite content to take me with only my share of mother's money."

"Tschah!" said the old father. "Nonsense! Of course, St. Barre will be delighted to provide for you. Excuse me … I must go."

St. Barre, in the Castleclare nursery, had set up another squeal.

Thenceforwards the course of true love might have been expected to run smoothly for Lady Bridget-Mary and her gallant lover. But she had reckoned, not without her host, but without her Grey Hussar. In love there is always one who loves the more, and Lady Bridget-Mary, that fine, enthusiastic, tempestuous creature, was far from realising that she was less to her Richard than he was to her. The reason was not farther to seek than a few doors off in London, when the Ladies Bawne occupied their sombre old corner-house in Grosvenor Square. It was Lady Bridget-Mary's dearest Lucy and bosom-friend, who had married that handsome, grey-moustached martinet, Richard's Colonel. In Lady Lucy Hawting's drawing-room Lord Castleclare's elder daughter had met Captain Mildare, the hero of Futtehabad and Ahmed Khel. The Colonel's wife was a pretty, delicate, graceful creature, some three years older than her black-browed handsome friend, and much more learned, as, of course, befitted a married woman, in the ways of the world. And Lady Lucy saw the budding of young passion in the heart of her junior … and it occurred to her that it would furnish a very excellent excuse for the constant presence of Captain Mildare, if …! the sweetest and most limpid women have their turbid depths, their muddy secrets – and she had confided everything to dearest Bridget-Mary, except the one thing that mattered!

Well! We all know for what reason Le Roi Soleil addressed himself to the wooing of La Vallière. Louis fell genuinely in love with the decoy, not quite so Richard. But sometimes, when those proud lips meekly gave back his kisses, and that lofty beauty humbled itself to obey his will, he almost wished that he had never met the other. A day came when the secret orchard he had joyed in with that other was threaded with a golden clue, and the hidden bower unveiled to the cold-eyed staring day.

Captain Mildare and Lady Lucy Hawting went away together, and from Paris Richard wrote and broke to the girl who loved him, and had been his betrothed wife, the common, vulgar, horrible little truth. Bridget-Mary had been deceived by both of them from the very beginning. Estimate the numbing, overwhelming weight of that blow, delivered by a hand so worshipped, upon so proud a heart. Those who saw her, and should have honoured her great grief with decent reticence, say that she was mad for a while; that she grovelled on the earth in her abandonment, calling upon God and man to be merciful and kill her. Pass over this. I cannot bear to think that the mere love of a Richard Mildare should bring that lofty head so low.

While the scandal lived in the mouths of Society, Lady Bridget-Mary Bawne remained unseen. She was pitied – oh, burning, intolerable shame! She was commiserated as a catspaw, and sneered at as a dupe. Her sisters and her stepmother, her father and her seven aunts, her relatives, innumerable as stars in the Milky Way, found infinite relish in the comfortable conviction that every one of them had said from the very outset that Bridget-Mary would regret the step she had taken in engaging herself to that Captain Mildare. Sharp claws of steel were added to her scourge of humiliation by a thousand

petty liberties taken with this, her great, sacred sorrow, as by letters of sympathy from friends, who wrote as if she had suffered the loss of a pet hunter, or a prize Persian cat.

A suitor ventured to propose for that white rejected hand, addressing himself with stammering diffidence to Lord Castleclare. A young man, the son of an industrious father who had consolidated the sweat of his brow into three millions and a Peerage, hideously conscious of the raw newness of his title, painfully burdened with the bosom-weight of a genuine, if incoherent love, he seemed to Lady Bridget-Mary's family tolerable, almost desirable, nearly quite the thing…

"He has boiled jam into sweetness for the whole civilised world," said the most influential and awful of Lord Castleclare's seven sisters, a Dowager-Duchess who was Lady-in-Waiting, and exhaled the choicest essence of the Middle Victorian era. She still adhered to the mushroom-shaped straw hats of her youth, trimmed with black velvet rosettes, in the centre of each of which reposed a cut jet button. She went always voluminously clad in black or shot-silk gowns, their skirts so swelled out by a multiplicity of starched cambric petticoats, adorned with tambour-work, that she was credited with the existence of a crinoline. She had, in marrying her now defunct Scots Duke, embraced Presbyterianism, and though her brother believed her, as far as the next world was concerned, to be lost beyond redemption, he entertained for her judgment in the matters of this planet a great esteem.

"He has boiled jam enough to spread over the surface of the civilised globe, and now proposes to hive its concentrated extract for the benefit of our dearest girl, in the shape of a settlement that a Princess of the Blood might envy. I call the whole thing pretty," pronounced the Dowager, "almost romantic, or it might be made to sound so if a person of superior intelligence and tact would undertake to plead for the young man. His terrible title has quite escaped me. Lord Plumbanks? Thank you! It might have been Strawberrybeds, and that would have increased our difficulty. No time should be lost. Therefore, as you, dear Castleclare, with your wife and the boy, who, I am gratified to hear, has cut another, are going to Rome for Holy Week, perhaps you would wish me in your absence to break the ice with Bridget-Mary?"

Lord Castleclare's long, solemn face and arched, lugubrious eyebrows bore no little resemblance to the well-known portrait of the conscientious but unlucky Stuart in whose service his ancestor had shed blood and money, receiving in lieu of both, a great many Royal promises, the Eastern carpet that had belonged to the monarch's Irish oratory, and the fine sard intaglio, brilliant-set, and representing a Calvary, that loyal servant's descendant wore upon his thin ivory middle finger. He twiddled the ring nervously as he said:

"She has gone into Lenten Retreat at a Convent in Kensington. I – arah! – I do not think it would be advisable to disturb salutary and seasonable meditations with – arah! – worldly matters at this present moment."

"Fiddle-faddle!" said the Dowager-Duchess sharply.

Lord Castleclare lifted his melancholy arched eyebrows.

"'Fiddle-faddle,' my dear Constantia?"

"You have the expression!" said she. "Young women of Bridget-Mary's age and temperament will think of marriage in convents as much as outside them. Further, I dread delay, entertaining as I do the very certain conviction that this weak-minded man who has thrown your daughter over will be back, begging Bridget-Mary to forgive him and reinstate him in the possession of her affections before another two months are over our heads. That little cat-eyed, squirrel-haired woman he has run away with, and against whom I have warned our poor dear girl times out of number" – she really believed this – "is the sort of pussy, purring creature to make a man feel her claws, once she has got him. Therefore, although my family may not thank me for it, I shall continue to repeat, 'No time is to be lost!' Still, in deference to your religious prejudices, and although I never heard that the Catholic Church prohibited jam as an article of Lenten diet, we will defer from offering Bridget-Mary the pot until Easter."

But Easter brought the news that Lady Bridget-Mary had decided upon taking the veil, and begged her father not to oppose her wishes. The Dowager-Duchess rushed to the Kensington Convent… All the little straw-mats on the slippery floor of the parlour were swept like chaff before the hurricane of her advancing petticoats as she bore down upon the most disappointing, erratic, and self-willed niece that ever brought the grey hairs of a solicitous and devoted aunt in sorrow to the grave, demanding in Heaven's name what Bridget-Mary meant by this maniacal decision? Then she drew back, for at first she hardly credited that this tall, pale, quiet woman in the plain, close-fitting, black woollen gown could be Bridget-Mary at all. Realising that it could be nobody else, she began to cry quite hysterically, subsiding upon a Berlin woolwork covered sofa, while her niece rang the bell for that customary Convent restorative, a teaspoonful of essence of orange-flower in a glass of water, and returning to the side of her agitated relative, took her hand, encased in a tight one-button puce glove, saying:

"Dear Aunt Constantia, what is the use of crying? I have done with it for good."

"You are so dreadfully changed and so awfully composed, and I always was sensitive. And, besides, to find you like this when I expected you to beat your head upon the floor – or was it against the wall, they said? – and pray to be put out of your misery by poison, or revolver, or knife, as though anybody would be wicked enough to do it …"

A faint stain of colour crept into Lady Bridget-Mary's white cheeks.

"All that is over, Aunt Constantia. Forget it, as I have done, and drink a little of this. The Sisters believe it to be calming to the nerves."

"To naturally calm nerves, I suppose." The Dowager accepted the tumbler. "What a nice, thick, old-fashioned glass!" She sipped. "You hear how my teeth are chattering against the rim. That is because I have flown here in such a hurry of agitation upon hearing from your father that you have decided to enter the Novitiate at once."

"It is true," said Lady Bridget-Mary, standing very tall and dark and straight against the background of the parlour window, that was filled in with ground-glass, and veiled with snowy curtains of starched thread-lace.

"True! When not ten months ago you declared to me that you would not be a nun for all the world… You begged me to befriend you in the matter of Captain Mildare. I undertook, alas! that office…"

The Dowager-Duchess blew her nose.

"A little more of the orange-flower water, dear aunt?"

"'Dear aunt,' when you are trampling upon my very heart-strings! And let me tell you, Bridget-Mary, you have always been my favourite niece. '*For all the world,*' you said with your own lips, '*I would not be a nun!*' Three millions will buy, if not the world, at least a good slice of it… Figuratively, I offer them to you in this outstretched hand!" The Dowager extended a puce kid glove. "The husband who goes with them is a good creature. I have seen and spoken with him, and the dear Queen regards me as a judge of men. 'Consie,' she has said, 'you have perception…' What my Sovereign credits may not my niece believe?"

Lady Bridget-Mary's black brows were stern over the great joyless eyes that looked out of their sculptured caves upon the world she had bidden good-bye to. But the fine lines of humour about the wings of the sensitive nostrils and the corners of the large finely-modelled mouth quivered a little.

"Drink a little more orange-flower water, dear, and never tell me who the man is. I do not wish to hear. I decline to hear."

The Dowager-Duchess lost her temper.

"That is because you know already, and despise money that is made of jam. Yet coal and beer are swallowed with avidity by young women who have not forfeited the right to be fastidious. That is the last thing I wished to say, but you have wrung it from me. Have you no pride? Do you want Society to say that you have embraced the profession of a Religious, and intend henceforth to employ your

talents in teaching sniffy-nosed schoolgirls Greek and Algebra and Mathematics, because this Mildare has jilted you? Again, have you no pride?" She agitated the Britannia-metal teaspoon furiously in the empty tumbler.

Lady Bridget-Mary took the tumbler away. Why should the humble property of the Sisters be broken because this kind, fussy woman chose to upbraid?

"You ask, Have I no pride?" she said. "Why should I have pride when Our Lord is so humble that He does not disdain to take for His bride the woman Richard Mildare has rejected?"

"You are incorrigible, dearest," said the sobbing Dowager-Duchess, as she kissed her, "and Castleclare must use all his influence with the Holy Father to induce the Comtesse de Lutetia to give you the veil. All of you think I am damned, and possibly I may be, but if so I shall be afforded an opportunity (which will not be mine in this life) of giving Captain Mildare a piece of my mind!"

So the Dowager-Duchess melted out of the story, and Lady Bridget-Mary Bawne became a nun.

X

This is what the Mother-Superior wrote to her kinswoman, with her mobile, eloquent lips folded closely together as she thought, and her grave eyes following the swift journey of the pen as it formed the sentences:

> "Now let me speak to you of Lynette Mildare. I have never thought it necessary to make the slightest disguise of my great partiality for this, the dearest of all the many children given me by Our Lord since I resigned my crown of earthly motherhood to Him."

She stopped, remembering what another great lady, also a relative of hers, had remarked when it was first made public that she intended to enter the Novitiate:

"Indeed! It would seem, then, that you are devoid of ambition, my dear, unlike the other people of your house."

She had said, paraphrasing a retort previously made:

"Does it strike you as lack of ambition that one of our family should prefer Christ before any earthly spouse?"

What a base utterance that had seemed to her afterwards! How devoid of the true spirit of the religious, how hateful, petty, profane! But the great lady had been greatly struck by it, and had gone about quoting the words everywhere. She, who had spoken them, repented them with tears, and set the memory of them between her and ill-considered, worldly speech, for ever.

She wrote on now:

> "She has no vocation for the life of a religious. I doubt her being happy or successful as a teacher here, were I removed from my post by supreme earthly authority, or by death, either contingency being the expression of the Will of God. She has a reserved, sensitive nature, quick to feel, and eager to hide what she feels, indifferent to praise or popularity among the many, anxiously desirous to please, passionately devoted where she gives her love…"

The firm mouth quivered, and a mist stole before her eyes. Being human, she took the handkerchief that lay amongst her papers and wiped the crowding tears away, and went on:

> "I could wish, in anticipation of either eventuality named, that provision might now be made for her. Those who love me – yourself I know to be among the number – will not, I feel assured, be indifferent to my wish that she should be placed beyond the reach of want."

She wrote on, knowing that the implied wish would be observed as a command:

> "We have never been able to trace any persons who might have been her parents – we have never even known her real name. – Those among whom her childhood was spent called her by none. As you know, I gave her in Holy Baptism one that was our dear dead mother's, together with the surname of a lost friend. She is, and must be always, known as Lynette Mildare."

Her eyes were tearless, and her hand quite steady as she continued:

> "You must not be at all alarmed or shaken by this letter. I am perfectly well in health, be quite assured; I trust I may be spared to carry on my work here for many long years to come. But in case it should be otherwise, I write thus:
>
> "The country is greatly disturbed, in spite of the reassuring reports that have been disseminated by the Home Authorities. I do not, and cannot, imagine what the

official view may be in London at this moment, but it is certain that the Transvaal and Free State are preparing for war. Every hour the enmity between the Boers and the English deepens in intensity. It will be to many minds a relief when the storm bursts. The War Office may think meanly of the Africanised Dutchman as a fighting force, but the opinion of every loyal Briton in this country is that he is not a foe to be despised, and that he will shed the last drop of his own blood and his children's for the sake of his independence.

"Above the petty interests of greedy capitalists looms the wider question: Shall the Briton or the Dutchman rule in South Africa? Here in this insignificant frontier town we wait the sounding of the tocsin. The Orange Free State has openly allied itself with the Transvaal Government. There are said to be several commandos in laager on the Border. A public meeting of citizens of this town has been held, at which a vote of 'No confidence' in the Dutch Ministers has been passed, and an appeal for help has been made to the Government at Cape Town. It is not yet publicly known what the response has been, if there is any. I think it ominous that all of our Dutch pupils, save one, should have been hurriedly sent for by their parents before the ending of the term. Knowing my responsibility, I am sending all home, except the few who happen to be resident in this town, and the school will remain closed, at all events, until the outlook assumes a less threatening aspect. It is a relief to many that a Military Commandant has been appointed by the authorities at Cape Town, and that he arrived here a week ago. He is reported to be an officer of energy and decision, and as he has already set the troops under his command to work at putting the town into a condition of defence, and is organising the civil male population into a regiment of armed – "

There was a light knock at the door. She responded with the permission to enter, and a tall, slight girl, with red-brown hair, came in and closed the door, dropping her little curtsy to the Mother-Superior. She wore the plain black alpaca uniform of the Convent, with the ribbon of the Headship of the Red Class, to be resigned when she should become a pupil-teacher at the opening of the next term; and the rare and beautiful smile broke over the face of the elder woman as the younger came to her side.

"Are you busy, Reverend Mother? Do you want me to go away?"

"I shall have finished in another five minutes, and then there will be no more letters to write, my child. Sit where you choose; take a book, and be quiet; I shall not keep you waiting long."

The words were few; the Mother-Superior's manner a little curt in speaking them. But where Lynette chose to sit was on the cheap drugget that covered the beeswaxed boards, with her squirrel-coloured hair and soft cheek pressed against the black serge habit.

The Mother-Superior wrote on, apparently absorbed, and with knitted brows of attention, but her large, white, beautiful left hand dropped half unconsciously to the silken hair and the velvet cheek, and stayed there.

There is a type of woman the lightest touch of whose hand is subtler and more sweet than the most honeyed kisses of others. And the Mother-Superior was not liberal of caresses. When Lynette turned her lips to the hand, the face that bent over the paper remained as stern and as absorbed as ever. She went on writing, directed, closed, and stamped her letter, and set it aside under a pebble of white quartz, lined and streaked with the faint silvery green of gold.

"Now, my child?"

The girl said, flushing scarlet:

"Reverend Mother, I have told the Red Class the truth about me!"

The Mother-Superior started; dismay was in her face.

"Why, child?"

"I – I mean" – the scarlet flush gave place to paleness – "that I have no name and no family, and no friends except you, dearest, and the Sisters. That you found me, and took me in, and have kept me out of charity."

"Was it necessary to have told – anything whatever?"

"I think so, Mother, and I am glad now that I have done it. There will be no need for deception any more."

"My daughter, there has never been the slightest deception of any kind whatsoever upon your part, or the part of anyone else who knew. No interests suffered by your keeping your own secret. Who first solicited your confidence in this matter?"

"Greta Du Taine."

"Greta Du Taine." Very cold was the tone of the Mother-Superior. "May I ask how she received the information she had the bad taste to seek?"

"Mother – she took it – not quite as I expected."

"Yet she and you have always been friends, my child."

Lynette rose up upon her knees. The long arm of the Mother-Superior went round the slight figure that leaned against her, and in the sudden gesture was a passion of protecting motherhood.

"Mother, she does not wish to be my friend any longer. She was quite horrified to remember that she had invited me to stay with her at the Du Taine place near Johannesburg. But she said that if I liked she would not tell the class."

"I have no fear of the rest of the class. They have honour, and good feeling, and warm hearts. What was your reply to Greta's obliging proposition?"

"I told her that the sooner everybody knew the better; and I went out of the room, and came to you – as I always do – as I always have done, ever since – "

Her voice broke in the first sob.

"*Ah!*" cried the voice of the mother-heart she crept to, as the long arms in the loose black serge sleeves went out and folded her close, "*ah, if I might be always here for you to run to! But God knows best!*"

She said aloud, gently putting the girl away:

"Well, the ordeal is over, and will not have to be gone through again. And for the future, bear in mind that every human being has a right to regard his own business – or hers – as private, and to exclude the curious from affairs which do not concern them." She reached out quick tender hands, and framed the wistful, sensitive face in them, and added, in a lower tone: "For a little told may beget in them the desire to know more. And always remember this: that the only just claim to your perfect confidence in all that concerns your past life, and I say *all* with meaning" – the girl's white eyelids fell under her earnest gaze, and the delicate lips began to quiver – "will rest in the man – the honourable and brave and worthy gentleman – who I pray may one day be your husband."

"No!" she cried out sharply as if in terror, and the slight figure was shaken by a sudden spasm of trembling. "Oh, Mother, no! Never, never!"

With a gesture of infinite pity and tenderness the Mother drew her close, and hid the shame-dyed face upon her bosom, and whispered, with her lips upon the red-brown hair:

"My lamb, my dearest, my poor, poor child! It shall be never if you choose, Lynette. But make no rash vows, no determinations that you think irrevocable. Leave the future to God. Now dry these dear eyes, and put old thoughts and memories of sorrow and of wrong most resolutely away from you. Be happy, as Our Lord meant all innocent creatures of His to be. And do not be tempted to magnify Greta's offence against friendship. She has acted according to her lights, and if they are of the kind that shine in marshy places, a better Light will shine upon her path one day. I know that you have real affection for her … though I must own I have always wondered in what lay the secret of her popularity in the school?"

"She is so amusing – and so pretty, Mother."

"She is exquisitely pretty. And beauty is one of the most excellent among all the gifts of God. Our sense of what is beautiful and the delight we have in the perception of it must linger with us from those days when Angels walked visibly on earth, and talked with the children of men. A lovely soul in a lovely body, nothing can be more excellent, but such a body does not always cage what St. Columb called 'the bird of beauty.' And we must not be swayed or led by outward and perishable things, that are illusions, and deceits, and snares."

The Mother-Superior reached out a long arm, and took a solid leather-bound, red-edged volume from the table, and opened it at a page marked by a flamingo's feather, whose delicate pink faded at the tip into rosy-white.

"I was reading this a little while before you came in. If you were not a little dunce at Greek, you would be able to construe the classic author for yourself."

"But I am a dunce, dear, and so I leave you to read him to me," said Lynette triumphantly.

"Well, balance this heavy book, and listen."

She read:

> "'When first the Father of the Immortals fashioned with his divine hands the human shape:
>
> "'An image first he made of red clay from Idâ, tempered with pure water from the stream of Xanthos, and wine from the golden kylix borne by beautiful Ganymede, and it was godlike to look upon as a thing fashioned by the hands of the god. But the clay was not tempered sufficiently and warped in the drying. Then Zeus Patêr fashioned another shape with more cunning, and this was tempered well and warped not. And he bent down to breathe between its lips the living soul. But as he stooped, Hephaistos, jealous of the divine gift about to be conferred upon the mortal race, sent from his forges smoke and vapour, which obscured the vision of the Almighty Workman. So that the imperfect image received that which was meant for the perfect one.
>
> "'And Zeus Patêr, being angered, said: "See what thy malice has wrought. Behold, a beautiful soul has been set in a body unbeauteous and through thine act, and god though I be, I cannot take back the gift that I have given." Then into the other image of Man the divine maker breathed a soul. But Zeus being wearied with his labours, and angered by the craft of Hephaistos, it was less pure than the first. And so two men came into being.
>
> "'And he whose body had been fashioned perfectly and without flaw by the hands of the divine craftsman, walked the earth with gracious mien. Fair-eyed was he, with locks like clustering vine-tendrils, and cheeks rosy as the apples of Love; but the soul of this man was cunning, and he rejoiced in evils and cruelties, and deceits and mockeries were upon his lips.
>
> "'And he whose image had warped in the drying was unbeautiful in body and swart to look upon, as though blackened by the forge-fires of Hephaistos, but he dealt uprightly and hated evil, and on his lips there was no guile, but faithfulness and truth.
>
> "'And he who was imperfect in body was yet fairer in the eyes of Zeus Patêr than his brother; because there dwelt within him a beauteous soul.'"

"And yet, Mother, if your beautiful soul had not been given beautiful windows to look out at, and a beautiful mouth to kiss me or scold me with, and beautiful hands to hold, it would have been a beastly shame!"

Is there a woman living who can resist such sweet daughterly flatteries? This was very much a woman, and very much a mother, if very much a nun. She kissed the mouth distilling such dear honey.

"This, not for the compliment, but because it is seven years to-day since I found you, lying like some poor little strayed lamb on the veld, under the burning sun."

"That was my real birthday, dearest, dearest…"

The girl pressed closer to her with dumb, vehement affection, as though she would have grown to the bosom that had been her shield since then.

"On that day a little later, when I looked down and you looked up with big eyes that begged for love, I knew that we had found each other. And we have never lost each other since, I think?"

She smiled radiantly into the loving eyes.

"Never, my Mother. But if we did … if we are ever to be estranged or parted, it would be better … oh! it would be better if you had passed by in the waggon, and left me lying, and the aasvogels and the wild-dogs had done the rest."

The Mother-Superior said, loosening the clinging arms, and speaking sternly:

"Never, my daughter. You do gravely wrong to say so. Holy Baptism has been yours, and Confirmation, and you have shared with His Faithful in the Body of Christ… Never let me hear you say that again!"

"Mother, I promise you, you never shall. But I had a dream last night that was most vivid and strange and awful. It has haunted me ever since."

The Mother-Superior started, for she also had had a strange dream. Of that vision had been born the written letter that now lay under the quartz paper-weight – the letter that was to be sent, with others, by the next English mail that should go out from Gueldersdorp, which said mail, being intercepted by the Boers, was not for many months to reach its destination. Supposing it had, this story need never have been written, or else another would have been written in its place.

"Dear heart, I do not think that it is good or useful to brood upon such things, or to relate them. And the Church forbids us to take account of mere dreams, or in any way be swayed by them."

"That has always puzzled me. Because, you know … supposing St. Joseph had refused to credit a dream?.."

"There are dreams and dreams, my dear. And the heavenly visions of the Saints are not to be confounded with our trivial subconscious memories. Besides, sweets and fruits and pastry consumed in the seniors' dormitory at night are not only an infringement of school rules, but an insult to the digestion."

"Mother, how did you find out?" cried Lynette. There was something very like a dimple in the bleached olive of the sweet worn cheek, lurking near the edge of the close coif, and a twinkle of laughter in the deep grey eyes that you thought were black until you had learned better.

"Well, though you may not find it easy to believe, I was once a girl at a boarding-school, and I possibly remember how we usually celebrated a breaking-up. There is the washing-bell; the pupils' tea-bell will ring directly; you must hurry, or you will be late. One moment. What of this unpleasant incident that took place during the afternoon walk yesterday? Sister Cleophée and Sister Francis-Clare have not given me a very definite account."

Lynette's fair skin flushed poppy-red.

"Mother, they hooted us on the road to the Recreation Ground."

Upon the great brows of the Mother-Superior sat the majesty of coming tempest. Her white hand clenched, her tone was awfully stern:

"Who were 'they'?"

"Some drunken Boers and store-boys – at least, I think they were drunk – and some Dutch railway-men. They cried shame on the Dutch girls for learning from vile English idolaters. Then more men came up and joined them. They threw stones, and threatened to duck Sister Cleophée and the two other Sisters in the river. And they might have tried to, though we senior girls got round them – at least, some of us did – and said they should try that on us first – "

"That was courageous."

"We" – Lynette laughed a little nervously – "we were awfully frightened, all the same."

"My dear, without fear there would have been no courage. Then I am told an English officer interposed?"

"He was coming from the direction of the Hospital – a tall thin man in Service khâki, with a riding-sjambok under his arm. But it would have been as good as a sword if he had used it on those men. When he lifted it in speaking to them they huddled together like sheep."

"You have no idea who he was, of course?"

"I do not know his name, but I heard one of the Boers say, 'That slim duyvel with the sjambok is the new Military Commandant.' Another officer was with him, much younger, taller, and with fair hair. He – "

"I hope I shall soon have an opportunity of thanking the Commandant personally. As it is, I shall write. Now go, my dear."

Lynette took her familiar kiss, and dropped her formal curtsy, and went with the red sunset touching her squirrel-coloured hair to flame. The tea-bell rang as she shut the door behind her, and directly afterwards the gate-bell clanged, sending an iron shout echoing through the whitewashed, tile-paved passages, as if heralding a visitor who would not be denied. An Irish novice who was on duty with the Sister attendant on the gate came shortly afterwards to the room of the Mother-Superior, bringing a card on a little wooden tray.

The Mother, the opening sentences of her note of thanks wet upon the sheet before her, took the card, and knew that the letter need not be sent.

"This gentleman desired to see me?"

"He did so, Reverend Mother," whispered the timid Irish girl, who stood in overwhelming awe of the majestic personality before her. "'Ask the Mother-Superior will she consent to receive me?' says he. 'If she won't, say that she must.' Says I: 'Sir, I'd not drame to presume give Herself a message that bowld, but if you'll please to wait, I'll tell her what you're after saying.'"

"Quite right, Katie. Now go and tell Sister Tobias to show him into the parlour. I will be there directly."

Katie bobbed and vanished. When the Mother-Superior came into the parlour, the visitor was standing near the fireplace, with his hands behind his back. One wore a shabby dogskin riding-glove. The other, lean and brown and knotty, held his riding-cane and the other glove, and a grey "smasher" hat. He was looking up quietly and intently at a framed oil-painting that hung above.

It represented a Syrian desert landscape, pale and ghastly, under the light of a great white moon, with one lonely Figure standing like a sentinel against a towering fang of rock. Lurking forms of fierce beasts of prey were dimly to be distinguished amongst the shadows, and by the side of the patient, lonely watcher brooded with outspread bat-wings, a Shadow infinitely more terrible than any of these. It was rather a poor copy of a modern picture, but the truth and force and inspiration of the original had made of the copyist an artist for the time. The pure dignity and lofty faith and patience of the Christ-eyes, haggard with bodily sleeplessness and spiritual battle, the indomitable resistance breathing in the lines of the Christ figure, wan and gaunt with physical famine as with the nobler hunger of the soul, were rendered with fidelity and power.

The stranger's keen ear caught the Mother's long, swift step, and the sweep of her woollen draperies over the shiny beeswaxed floor. He wheeled sharply, brought his heels together, and bowed. She returned his salutation with her inimitable dignity and grace. With his eyes on the pure, still calmness of the face framed in the white close coif, the Colonel commented mentally:

"What a noble-looking woman!"

The Mother-Superior thought, as her composed eyes swept over the tall, spare, broad-shouldered figure and the strong, lean, tanned face, with its alert, hazel eyes, nose of the falcon-beak order, and firm straight mouth unconcealed by the short-clipped moustache:

"This is a brave man."

XI

The great of soul are not slow to find each other out. These two recognised each other at meeting. Before he had explained his errand, she had thanked him cordially, directly, and simply, for his timely interference of the previous day.

"One of the lesser reasons of my visit, which I must explain is official in character," he said, "was to advise you that your pupils and the ladies in charge of them will not henceforth be safe from insult except in those parts of the town most frequented by our countrymen, and rarely even there. It would be wise of you under existing circumstances, which I shall explain as fully and as briefly as I may, to send your pupils without delay to their homes."

"All that have not already left," she assured him, "with the exception of those whose parents reside in the town, or who have no living relatives, and therefore do not leave us, go North and South by early trains to-morrow."

"Ma'am," he said, "I am heartily glad to hear it." He added, as she invited him to be seated: "Thank you, but I have been in the saddle since five this morning, and if you have no objection I should prefer to stand. And for another reason, I explain things better on my legs. But you will allow me to find you a seat, if – any of these may be moved?" His glance, with some perturbation in it, reviewed the stiff ranks of chairs severely marshalled in Convent fashion against the varnished skirting-board.

"They are not fixtures," she said, with quiet amusement at his evident relief, and he got her a chair, the largest and most solid that the room offered, and planted himself opposite her, standing on the hearthrug, with one hand resting on the corner of the high mantelshelf, and the toe of a spurred riding-boot on the plain brick kerb.

"I may as well say …" – he ran a finger round the inside of the collar that showed above the khâki jacket – "that, though I have often had the pleasure, and I will add, the great advantage, of meeting ladies of – of your religious profession before, this is the first time that I ever was inside a Convent."

"Or a boarding-school?" she asked, and her rare, sudden smile irradiated her. His hand dropped from his collar. He looked at her with a sudden warmth of admiration there was no mistaking. But her beauty went as suddenly as it had come, and her arched, black brows frowned slightly as she said, in tones that were very cold and very clear, and rather ironical:

"Sir, you are good enough to waste valuable time in trying to break, with due consideration for the nerves of a large household of unprotected women, the news we have expected daily for months. You have come here to announce to us the bursting of the cloud of War. Is it not so?"

He was taken aback, but hid it like a diplomat.

"Ma'am, it is so. The public notice was posted in the town this morning. Forces of Boers are massed on the West Natal and East Baraland borders, waiting until the British fire a shot. Their secret orders are to wait that signal, but some unlooked-for event may cause them to anticipate these… And we shall be wise to prepare for eventualities. For myself, having been despatched by the British Government on special service to report to the Home Authorities upon our defences in the North – it is an open secret now – I have been sent down here to put the town into a condition to withstand siege. And frankly, without apology for necessary and inevitable bluntness, one of the most important of those conditions is – that the women and children should be got out of it."

The blow had been delivered. The angry blush that he had expected did not invade the pale olive of her cheeks.

He added:

"I hope you will understand that I say this because it is my duty. I am not naturally unsociable, or bearish, or a surly misogynist. Rather the contrary. Quite the contrary."

She remembered a slim, boyish, young lieutenant of Hussars with whom she had danced in a famous London ball-room more than twenty years back. That boy a woman hater! Struggle as she would the Mother-Superior could not keep Lady Bridget-Mary Bawne from coming to the surface for an instant. But she went under directly, and left nothing but a spark of laughter in the beautiful grave eyes.

"I understand," she said. "Woman in time of peace may add a certain welcome pleasantness to life. In time of war she is nothing but a helpless incubus."

"Let me point out, ma'am, that I did not say so. But she possesses a capacity for being killed equal in ratio to that of the human male, without being equally able to defend herself. In addition to this, she eats; and I shall require all the rations that may be available to keep alive the combatant members of the community."

"Eating is a habit," agreed the Mother-Superior, "which even the most rigid disciplinarians of the body have found difficult to break."

His mouth straightened sternly under the short-clipped brown moustache. Here was a woman who dared to bandy words with the Officer Commanding the Garrison. He drew a shabby notebook from a breast-pocket, and consulted it.

"On the eleventh, the day after to-morrow, a special train, leaving No. 2 platform of the railway-station, will be placed by the British Government at the disposal of those married women, spinsters, and children who wish to follow the example of those who left to-day, and go down to Cape Town. Those who prefer to go North are advised to leave for Malamye Siding or Johnstown, places at a certain distance from the Transvaal Border, where they will be almost certain to find safety. Those who insist upon remaining in the town I cannot, of course, remove by force. I will make all possible arrangements to laager them safely, but this will entail heavy extra labour upon the forces at my command, and inevitable discomfort – possibly severe suffering and privation – upon themselves. To you, madam, I appeal to set a high example. Your Community numbers, unless I am incorrectly informed, twelve religious. Consent to take the step I urge upon you, retreat with your nuns to Cape Town while the opportunity is yours."

He folded his arms, having spoken this curtly and crisply. The Mother-Superior rose up out of her chair. It seemed to him as though she would never have done rising, but at last she stood before him, very straight and awfully tall, with her great stern eyes an inch above the level of his own, and her white hands folded in her black serge sleeves.

"Sir," she said, "we are here under the episcopal jurisdiction of the Catholic Bishop of the Diocese. We have received no order from His Eminence to quit our post – and until we receive it, give me leave to tell you, with all respect for your high official authority, that we shall remain in Gueldersdorp."

Their looks crossed like swords. He grew crimson over the white unsunburned line upon his forehead, and his moustache straightened like a bar of rusty-red iron across his thin, tanned face. But he respected moral power and determination when he encountered them, and this salient woman provoked his respect.

"Let us keep cool – " he began.

"I assure you that I have never been otherwise," she said, "since the beginning of this interview."

"Ma'am," he said, "you state the fact. Let me keep cool, and point out to you a few of the – peculiarities in which the present situation unfortunately abounds."

He laid down, with a look that asked permission, his hat and cane and the odd glove upon the round, shining walnut-table that stood, adorned with mild little religious works, in the geometrical centre of the Convent parlour, and checked the various points off upon the fingers of the gloved hand with the lean, brown, bare one.

"I anticipate very shortly the outbreak of hostilities." He had quite forgotten that he was talking to a member of the squeaking sex. "I have begun immediately upon my arrival here to prepare for

them. The nucleus of a sand-bag fort-system has been formed already, mines are being laid down far in the front, and every male of the population who has a pair of capable hands has had a rifle put into them."

She looked at him, and approved the male type of energy and action. "If I had been a man," she thought, "I should have wished to be one like this." But she bent her head silently, and he went on.

"We have an armoured train in the railway-yard, with a Maxim and a Hotchkiss. We have a Nordenfeldt, a couple of Maxims more, four seven-pounder guns of almost prehistoric date, slow of fire, uncertain as regards the elevating-gear, and, I tell you plainly, as dangerous, some of 'em, to be behind as to be in front of! One or two more we've got that were grey-headed in the seventies. By the Lord! I wish one or two Whitehall heads I know were mopping 'em out this minute. Ahem! Ahem!"

He coughed, and grew red under his sun-tan. Her eyes were elsewhere.

"Ma'am, you must try to recollect that the Boer forces are armed with the newest Krupps and other guns, and that it is more than possible they may attempt to shell the town. In that case artillery of tremendous range, and a flight almost equal to that of sound itself – I won't be too technical, I assure you! – will be mustered against our crazy pieces, only fit for the scrap-heap, or for gate ornaments. Understand, I tell you what is common knowledge among our friends – common jest among our enemies. And another thing I will tell you, ma'am. Those enemies shall never enter Gueldersdorp!"

She was radiant now, with that smile upon her lips, and that glow in the great eyes that met his with such frank approval. Confound it, what business had a nun to be anything like so beautiful? Would she pale, would she tremble, when he told her the last truth of all?

"Your Convent, ma'am, unluckily for your Community, happens to be, if not the biggest, at least the most conspicuously situated building in the place, lying as it does at a distance of four hundred yards from the town, on the north-east side. Like the Hospital, of course, it will be under the protection of the Red-Cross Flag. But the Boer is not chivalrous. He does not object to killing women or sick people, nor does he observe with any standing scrupulousness the Geneva Convention. Any object that shows up nicely on the skyline is good enough to pound away at, and the Red-Cross Flag has often helped him to get a satisfactory range. If they bombard us, as I have reason to believe they will, you'll have iron and lead in tons poured through these walls."

She said:

"When they fall about our ears, Colonel, it will be time to leave them!"

He adored a gallant spirit, and here was one indeed.

"Ma'am, I am disarmed, since you take things in this way."

"It is the only way in which to take them," she said. "There should be no panic in the hearts of those who wait on the Divine Will. Moreover, I should wish you to understand in case of siege, and an extra demand upon the staffs of the Town and Field Hospitals, that we are all – or nearly all – certificated nurses, and would willingly place our services at your disposal. Let me hope that you will call upon us without hesitation if the necessity should arise."

He thanked her, and had taken leave, when he asked with diffidence if he might be permitted to see the Convent chapel. She consented willingly, and passed on before, tall and stately, and moving with long, light, even steps, her flowing serge draperies whispering over the tiled passages. The chapel was at the end of a long whitewashed corridor upon the airy floor above. His keen glance took in every feature of the simple, spotless little sanctuary as the tall, black-clad figure swept noiselessly to the upper end of the aisle between the rows of rush-seated chairs, and knelt for an instant in veneration of the Divine Presence hidden in the Tabernacle.

"Unfortunately situated!" he muttered, standing stiffly by the west door. Then he glanced right and left, a thumb and finger in the breast-pocket of his jacket, feeling for a worn little pigskin purse. As he passed out before her at the motion, and she mechanically dipped her fingers in the holy-water font, and made the Sign of the Cross before she closed the chapel door, she saw that he held out to her a five-pound note.

"Ma'am, I am not a Roman Catholic, but …"

"There is no box for alms," she said, pausing outside the shut door, while the lay-Sister waited at the passage end, "as this is only a private chapel."

"I observed that, ma'am. I am, as I have said, a Protestant. But in the behalf of a dear friend of mine, a British officer, of your own faith, who I have reason to believe died without benefit of his clergy, perhaps with this you would arrange that a service should be held in memory of the dead?"

"I understand," said the Mother-Superior. "You suggest that Holy Mass should be offered for the repose of your friend's soul? Well, I will convey your offering to our chaplain, Father Wix, since you desire it."

"I do desire it – or, rather, poor Mildare would."

An awful sensation as of sinking down through the solid floors, through the foundations of the Convent, into unfathomable deeps possessed her. Her eyes closed; she forced them open, and made a desperate rally of her sinking forces. Unseen she put out one hand behind her, and leaned it for support against the iron-studded oak timbers of the chapel door. But his eyes were not upon her as he went on, unconsciously, to deal the last, worst blow.

"I said, ma'am, that my dead friend … the name is Richard Mildare, Captain, late of the Grey Hussars… You are ill, ma'am. I have been inconsiderate, and over-tired you." He had become aware that great dark circles had drawn themselves round her eyes, and that even her lips were colourless. She said, with a valiant effort:

"I assure you, with thanks, that you have been most considerate, and that I am perfectly well. Are you at liberty to tell me, sir, the date of Captain Mildare's death? For I know one who was also his friend, and would" – a spasm passed over her face – "take an interest in hearing the particulars."

"Ma'am, you shall know what I know myself. About twenty years ago Captain Mildare, owing to certain unhappy circumstances, social, and not pecuniary ones, sent in his papers, sold his Commission, and left England."

She waited.

"I heard of him in Paris. Then, later, I heard from him. He was with her here in South Africa. She was a woman for whom he had given up everything. They travelled continually, never resting long anywhere, he, and she, and – their child. She died on the trek and he buried her."

"Yes?"

The voice was curiously toneless.

"Where he buried her has only recently come to my knowledge. It was at a kind of veld tavern in the Orange Free State, a shanty in the grass-country between Driepoort and Kroonfontein, where travellers can get a bad lodging, and bad liquor, and worse company. 'Trekkers Plaats' they call the place now. But when my friend was there it was known as the 'Free State Hotel.'"

Her lips shut as if to keep out bitter, drowning waters; her face was white as wax within the starched blue-white of the nun's coif; his slow sentences fell one by one upon her naked heart, and ate their way in like vitriol. Quite well, too well, she knew what was coming.

"He dug her grave with his own hands. He meant to have a clergyman read the Burial Service over it, but before that could be arranged for he also died – of fever, I gather, though nothing is very clear, except that the two graves are there. I have seen them, and have also ascertained that whatever property he left was appropriated by the scoundrel who kept the hotel, and afterwards sold it, and cleared out of South Africa; and that the child is not to be found. God knows what has become of her! The man who robbed her father may have murdered or sold her – or taken her to England. A man bearing his name was mixed up in a notorious case tried at the Central Criminal Court five years ago. And the case, which ruined a well-known West End surgeon, involved the death of a young woman. I trust the victim may not have been the unhappy girl herself. My solicitors in London have been instructed to make inquiries towards the removal of that doubt…"

If those keen eyes of his had not been averted, he must have seen the strong shuddering that convulsed the woman's frame, and the spasm of agony that wrung the lips she pressed together, and the glistening damps of anguish that broke out upon the broad white forehead. To save her life she could not have said to him, "She whom you seek is here!" But a voice wailed in her heart, more piercingly than Rachel's, and it cried: "Richard's daughter! She is Richard's daughter! The homeless thing, the blighted child I found upon the veld, and nursed back to life and happiness and forgetfulness of a hideous past; whom I took into my empty heart, and taught to call me Mother… She is the fruit of my own betrayal! the offspring of the friend who deceived and the man who deserted me!"

The visitor was going on, his grave gaze still turned aside. "Of course, the age of the unhappy girl whose death brought about the trial I speak of – everything depends upon that. Mildare's daughter was a child of three years old when she lost father and mother. If alive to-day she would be nineteen years of age. I wish it had been my great good fortune to trace and find her. She should have had the opportunity of growing up to be a noble woman. In this place, if it might have been, and with an example like yours before her eyes … ma'am, good-afternoon."

He bowed to her, and went away with short, quick, even steps, following the lay-Sister who was to take him to the gate.

She tottered into the chapel, and sank down before the altar, and strove to pray. Her mind was an eddying blackness shot with the livid glare of electric fires. Her faith rocked like a palm in the tempest; her soul was tossed across raging billows like a vessel in the grip of the cyclone. Being so great, she suffered greatly; being so strong, she had strong passions to wrestle with and to subdue. Awhile, like that other Mary, who, unlike her, was a fleshly sinner, she strove, rent as it seemed to her, by seven devils. And then she fell down prone at her Master's nail-pierced Feet, and found there at last the healing gift of tears.

XII

Emigration Jane, the new under-housemaid on trial at the Convent, had a gathering on the top joint of the first finger of the hand that burned to wear Walt Slabberts' betrothal-ring, and the abscess being ripe for the lancet, she had an extra afternoon in the week to get it attended to. She found Walt waiting at the street-corner under the lamp-post, and her heart bounded, for by their punctuality at the trysting-place you know whether they are serious in their intentions towards you, or merely carrying on, and her other young men had invariably kept her waiting. This new one was class, and no mistake.

"Watto, Walt!" she hailed joyously.

Her Walt uttered a guttural greeting in the Taal, and displayed uncared-for and moss-grown teeth in the smile that Emigration Jane found strangely fascinating. To the eye that did not survey Walt through the rose-coloured glasses of affection he appeared merely as a high-shouldered, slab-sided young Boer, whose cheap store-clothes bagged where they did not crease, and whose boots curled upwards at the toes with mediæval effect. His cravat, of a lively green, patterned with yellow rockets, warred with his tallowy complexion; his drab-coloured hair hung in clumps; he was growing a beard that sprouted in reddish tufts from the tough hide of his jaws, leaving bare patches between, like the karroo. The Slabberts was an assistant-clerk at the Gueldersdorp Railway-Station Parcels-Office, and his widowed mother, the Tante Slabberts, took in washing from Uitlanders, who are mad enough to change their underwear with frequency, and did the cleaning at the Gerevormed Kerk at Rustenberg, a duty which involves the emptying of spittoons. Her boy was her joy and pride.

Young Walt, the true Boer's son that he was, did not entertain the idea of marrying Emigration Jane. The child of the Amalekite might never be brought home as bride to the Slabberts roof. But all the same, her style, which was that of the Alexandra Crescent, Kentish Town, London, N.W., and her manners, which were easy, and her taste in dress, which was dazzling, attracted him. As regards their spoken intercourse, it had been hampered by the Slabbertian habit of pretending only a limited acquaintance with the barbarous dialect of England. But a young man who conversed chiefly by grunts, nudges, and signs was infinitely more welcome than no young man at all, and Emigration Jane knew that the language of love is universal. She had sent him a lovely letter in the Taal making this appointment, causing his pachydermatous hide to know the needle-prick of curiosity. For only last Sabbath she had spoken nothing but the English, and a young woman capable of mastering Boer Dutch in a week might be made useful in a variety of ways – some of them tortuous, all of them secret, as the Slabbertian ways were wont to be.

He advanced to her, without the needless ceremony of touching his hat, eagerly asking how she had acquired her new accomplishment?

But the brain crowned by the big red hat that had come from the Maison Cluny, and cost a hundred francs, and had been smartened up with a bunch of pink and yellow artificial roses, and three imitation ostrich-tips of a cheerful blue, did not comprehend. Someone who spoke the Taal had written for her. The bilingual young woman who was to be of such use to Walt had only existed in his dreams. And yet – the disappointing creature was exceeding fair.

"Pity you left your eyes be'ind you, Dutchy!" giggled Emigration Jane, deliciously conscious that those rather muddy orbs were glued on her admiringly.

The hair crowned by the screaming hat was waved and rolled over the horsehair frame she had learned to call a "Pompydore"; the front locks, usually confined in the iron cages called "curlers," frizzled wonderfully about her moist, crimson face. She had on a "voylet" delaine skirt, with three bias bands round the bottom, and a "blowse" of transparent muslin stamped with floral devices. Her shoes were of white canvas; her stockings pink and open-worked; her gloves were of white thread, and had grown grey in the palms with agitation. One of them firmly grasped a crimson "sunshyde," with green and scarlet cherries growing out of the end of the stick.

The young Dopper warmly grasped the other, provoking a squeal from the enchantress.

"Mind me bad finger! Lumme! you did give us a squeeze an' a' arf."

"If I shall to hurt you I been sorry, Miss!" apologized the Slabbert.

"All righto, Dutchy!" smiled Emigration Jane. "Don't tear your features." She bestowed a glance of almost vocal disdain upon a Kaffir girl in turkey-red cotton twill, with a green hat savagely pinned upon her woolly hair. At another ebony female who advanced along the sidewalk pushing a white baby in a perambulator she tossed her head. "Funny," she observed, "when I was 'ome I used to swaller all the tales what parsons kep' pitchin' about that black lot 'aving souls like me an' you. When I got out 'ere, an' took my fust place at Cape Town, an' 'eard the Missis and the Master continual sayin', 'Don't do this or that, it ain't Englishwomen's work; leave it to the Caffy,' or 'Call the 'Ottintot gal,' I felt quite 'urt for 'em. Upon me natural, I did! But when I knoo these blackies a bit better, I didn't make no more bones. Monkeys, they are, rigged up in brown 'olland an' red braid, wot 'ave immytated 'uman beings till they've come to talk langwidge wot we can understand, and tumble to our meanings. 'Ow do you like me dress, Walty dear? An' me 'at? That chap what passed with the red mustash said to 'is friend as I looked a bit of fair all right, and no mistake. But I'd rather 'ear you say so nor 'im if you 'ad enough English to do it with. Wot do I care about the perisher along of you?"

It was hard work to talk for two, and keep the ball of courtship rolling after the approved fashion of Kentish Town, when the slouching young Boer would only grunt in reply, or twinkle at her out of his piggish eyes. But Emigration Jane had come out to South Africa, hearing that places at five shillings a day were offered you by employers, literally upon their knees, and that husbands were thick as orange-peel and programmes on the pit-floor of the Britanniar Theayter, 'Oxton, or the Camden Varieties on the morning after a Bank Holiday. She had left her first situation at Cape Town, being a girl of spirit, because her mistress had neglected to introduce her to eligible gentlemen acquaintances, as the pleasant-spoken agent at the Emigrants' Information Office in Cheapside, the young gentleman of Hebrew strain, whose dark eyes, waxed moustache, and diamond tie-pin had made a deep impression upon the susceptible heart of his client, had assured Jane the South African employer would take an early opportunity of doing. The reality had not corresponded with the glowing picture. The employer had failed in duty, the husbands-aspirant had not appeared. Ephemeral flirtations there had been, with a postman, with a trooper of the Cape Mounted Police, with an American bar-tender. But not one of these had breathed of indissoluble union, though each had wanted to borrow her savings. And Emigration Jane had "bin 'ad" in that way before, and gone with her bleeding heart and depleted Post Office Savings-book before the fat, sallow magistrate at the Regent's Road County Court, and winced and smarted under his brutal waggeries, only to learn that the appropriator of her womanly affections and her fifteen sovereigns had already three wives.

The brute, the 'artless beast! Emigration Jane wondered at herself, she did, as 'ad bin such a reg'ler soft as to be took in by one to whom she never referred in speech except as "That There Green." That she softened to him in her weaker moments, in spite of his remembered appetite for savings and his regrettable multiplicity of wives, gave her the fair hump. That something in the expression of this new one's muddy eyes recalled the loving leer of "That There Green," she admitted to herself. Womanly anxiety throbbed in the bosom, not too coyly hidden by the pneumonia blouse, as the couple passed the gilded portals of a public bar, and the Slabberts' elbow was thrust painfully into her side, as its owner said heavily:

"Have you thirst?"

She coyly owned to aridity, and they entered the saloon, kept by a Dutchman who spoke English. Two ginger-beers with a stick of Hollands were supplied, and the stick of Slabberts was as the rod of Moses to the other stick for strength and power. But as Emigration Jane daintily sipped the cooling beverage, giggling at the soapy bubbles that snapped at her nose, the restless worm of anxiety kept on gnawing under the flowery "blowse." Too well did she know the ways of young men who hospitably ask you if you're thirsty, and 'ave you in, whether or no, and order drinks as liberal as lords, and then

discover that they're short of the bob, and borrow from you in a joking way… Her heart bounded as the Slabberts put his hand in his pocket, saying:

"Wat kost het?"

The Dutch bar-keeper, who seemed to know Slabberts, answered in English, looking at Emigration Jane:

"Half a dollar."

Half a dollar is South African for eighteenpence. Slabberts rattled something metallic in his trousers-pocket, and said something rapidly in the Taal. The Dutch bar-keeper leaned across the counter, and said to Emigration Jane:

"Your young man has not got the money."

They were all, all alike. A tear rose to her eye. She bravely dried it with a finger of a white cotton glove, and produced her purse, an imitation crocodile-leather and sham-silver affair, bought in Kentish Town, where you may walk through odorous groves of dried haddocks that are really whiting, and Yarmouth bloaters that never were at Yarmouth, and purchase whole Rambler roses, the latest Paris style, for threepence, and try on feather-boas at two-and-eleven-three, plucked from the defunct carcase of the domestic fowl. She paid for the drinks with a florin, and it was quite like old times when Slabberts calmly pocketed the sixpence of change. The bar-keeper leaned over to her again, and said, surrounding her with a confidential atmosphere of tobacco and schnaps:

"He is a good man, that young man of yours, and gets much money. He means to give you a nice present by-and-by."

Her grateful heart overflowed to this friendly patronage. She showed the bar-keeper her gathered finger, and said it did 'urt a treat. She expected it would 'urt worse before Dr. de Boursy-Williams – "'adn't 'e got a toff's name?" – 'ad done with it.

"You go to that Engelsch doktor on Harris Street, eh?" said the bar-keeper, spitting dexterously.

"Sister Tobias – that's the nun wot 'ousekeeps at the Convent – give me a order to see 'im, to 'ave me finger larnced," explained Emigration Jane. "Ain't 'e all right?"

"Right enough," said the bar-keeper, winking at the Slabberts, and adding something in the Taal, that provoked chuckles among the bystanders and called forth a fine display of neglected teeth on the part of the personage addressed. "There are plenty other Engelsch will be wishing to be as right, oh, very soon! For De Boursy-Williams, he has sent his wife and his two daughters away on the train for Cape Town yesterday morning, and he has gone after them that same night, and he has left all his patients to the Dop Doctor."

"Some red-necked baboons are wiser than others," said the Slabberts in the Taal, and there was a hoarse laugh, and the humorist turned his big heavy body away, and became one of a crowd of other Dutchmen, who were, in veiled hints and crooked allusions, discussing the situation across the Border. Emigration Jane was not sensitive to the electricity in the atmosphere. She knew no Dutch, and was perfect in the etiquette of the outing, which, when the young woman has been supplied with the one regulation drink, stands her up in the corner like an umbrella in dry weather as long as her young man is a-talking to 'is pals.

"So," the bar-keeper went on, "if you shall want that bad finger of yours looked to, you will have to wait until the Dop Doctor wakes up. He is a big man, who can drink as much as three Boers… He came in this morning to get drunk, and you shall not wake him now if you fire off a rifle at his ear. But he will get up presently and shake himself, and then he will be quite steady; you would not guess how drunk he had been unless you had seen… He is over there, sleeping on that table in the corner, and it will be very bad for the man who shall wake him up. For, look you, that Dop Doctor is a duyvel. I have seen him break a man like a stick between his hands for nothing but cutting up a thieving monkey of a little Kaffir with the sjambok. And he took the verdoemte thing home where he lives, they say, and strapped up its black hide with plaster, and set its arm as if it had been a child of Christians. But every Engelschman is mad. Groot Brittanje breeds a nation of madmen."

The saloon got fuller and fuller. The air solidified with the Taal and the tobacco, and other things less pleasant. It was not the hour for a crowd of customers, but nobody had seemed to be working much of late. They were all Transvaalers and Free Staters, tradesmen of the town, or Boers from outlying farms, and not a man there but was waiting a certain signal to clear out and leave Gueldersdorp to her fate, or remain in the place on a salary paid by the Republics as a spy. The English customer who came in knew at one whiff of the thick atmosphere that it was unhealthy, and if the man happened to be alone, he ordered, and paid, and drank, and went out quickly. If he happened to be with friends, he pointedly addressed his conversation to his countrymen, and left with a certain degree of swagger, and without the appearance of undue haste.

Once the swing-doors of the saloon opened to admit a short, spare, hollow-chested, dapper young Englishman, whose insignificant Cockney countenance was splashed with orange-coloured freckles of immense size. Between his thin anæmic lips dangled the inevitable cigarette. And Emigration Jane, toying with the dregs of her tumbler, recognized the pert, sharp, sallow face seen over the sleeve of a large burgher's outstretched arm. With some trouble she caught the eye of the short, pale young man, and he instantly became a red one. To reach her was difficult, but he dived and wriggled his way across the saloon, wedging his frail person between the blockish bodies with a cool address that reminded her of the first night of a "noo show" at the Camden "Theayter," and the queue outside the gallery door.

"'Ullo, 'ullo! Thought I reckonised you, Miss." He touched his cheap imitation Panama with swaggering gallantry, and winked. "But seeing you eight sizes more of a toff than what you were when I previously 'ad the pleasure, I 'esitated to tip you the 'Ow Do."

She tossed her imitation ostrich plumes in joyous coquetry.

"As if I didn't know wot you're after. Garn! You only wants to know if I acted on the stryte about …"

His projecting ears burned crimson.

"Well, an' suppose I do. Did she – "

"Did she wot?"

"You pipe well enough. Did she 'ave it?"

"Ain't you anxious?"

"Tyke it I am anxious. Did she? No cod?"

"Did she git your letter wot you put in the box o' choc's? O' course she did, Mister. Wot do you tyke me for? A silly looney or a sneakin' thief?"

"I'll tell you what I tyke you for. A jolly little bit of English All Right. Say! Do you think …" The prominent Adam's apple jutting over the edge of the guillotining double collar worked emotionally. "Think she'll send an answer, eh?"

"Reckon she will; you watch out an' see!"

"You fust-clarss little brick!"

"Garn!"

"I mean it. Stryte. Next door to a angel – that's wot you are. She's the angel. Tell 'er I said so – that's if you can, you twig? And say that when I 'eard that nearly all the gay old crowd o' pupils 'ad gone away, day before yesterday, I could 'a blooming well cut me throat, thinkin' she'd gone too. Becos' when I swore in for the Town Guard, it was with the idear – mind you rub that in! – of strikin' a blow for Beauty as well as for Britanniar, twig?" The thin elbow in the tweed sleeve nudged her, provoking a joyous giggle.

"I'm fly, no fear. Are you to 'ave a uniform, an' all like that?"

His face fell. "The kit don't run to much beyond a smasher 'at an' puttees, but they're the regular Service kind, an' then there's the bandolier – an' the gun. She ain't the newest rifle served out to Her Majesty's Army, not by twenty years. Condemned Martini, a chap says, who's in the know – an' kicks like a mule when I let 'er off – made me nose bleed fust time I tried with blank. But when we gets

a bit more used to each other, it 'll be a case of bloomin' Doppers rollin' over in the dust, like rock-rabbits. Don't forget to tell 'er as wot I said so."

"Why … ain't she a Dutchy 'erself? She wrote a letter for me in their rummy lingo to my young man!"

"Cripps!" He stared in dismay. "Blessed if I 'adn't forgot. But if an Englishman marries a foreigner," he swelled heroic, "that puts 'er in the stryte runnin'. And 'art an' 'and I'm 'ers, whenever she'll 'ave me! Tell 'er that – with a double row of crosses from W. Keyse! And – can you remember a bit o' poetry?" He recited with shamefaced rapidity:

"It is my sentry-go to-night,
And when I watch the moon so bright,
Shining o'er South Africa plain,
I'll think of thee, sweet Greta Du Taine."

Her eyes were full of awe and wonder. "Lor! you don't mean to say you made up that by yourself?"

The poet nodded. "Reckon about as much. Like it?"

"It's perfect lovely! Better than they 'ave in the penny books."

"Where Coralline and the Marquis are playin' the spooney game, and 'im with a Lady Reginer up 'is dirty sleeve. An' there's another thing I want you to let 'er know." His eyes were on hers, his breath fanned her hot cheeks. "There isn't another woman on the earth but her for me. Dessay there may be others; wot I say is – I don't see 'em!" He waved his hand, dismissing the ardent creatures.

A pang transpierced the conscience hiding under the cheap flowery blouse. Emigration Jane hesitated, biting the dog's-eared finger-ends of a cotton glove. Should she tell this ardent, chivalrous lover that the Convent roof no longer sheltered the magnificent fair hair-plait and the mischievous blue eyes of his adored? That Miss Greta Du Taine had left for Johannesburg with the latest batch of departing pupils! If she told, W. Keyse would vanish out of her life, it might be for ever; or, if by chance encountered on the street, pass by with a casual greeting and a touch of the cheap Panama. Emigration Jane was no heroine, only a daughter of Eve. Arithmetic and what was termed the "tonic sofa" had been more sternly inculcated than the moral virtues at the Board School in Kentish Town. And she was not long in making up her mind that she would not tell him – not just yet, anyway.

What was he saying, in the Cockney that cut like a knife through the thick gutturals of the Taal? "I shall walk past the Convent to-morrer in kit and 'cetras, on the charnce of 'Er seein' me. Two sharp. And, look 'ere, Miss, you've done me a good turn. And – no larks! – if ever I can do you another – trust me. Stryte – I mean it! You ask chaps 'oo know me if Billy Keyse ever went back on a pal?"

She swayed her hips, and disclaimed all obligation. But, garn! he was gittin' at 'er, she knew!

"I ain't; I mean it! You should 'ave 'arf me 'eredittary estates – if I 'ad any. As I 'aven't, say wot you'll drink? Do, Miss, to oblige yours truly, W. Keyse, Esquire."

W. Keyse plunged a royal, reckless hand into the pocket of his tweed riding-breeches, bought against the time when he should bestride something nobler than a bicycle, and produced a half-sovereign. He owed it to his landlady and the rest, the coin that he threw down so magnificently on the shiny counter, but you do not treat your good angel every day… Emigration Jane bridled, and swayed her hips still more. His largeness was intoxicating. One had dreamed of meeting such young men.

"Port or sherry? Or a glass of cham, with a lump o' ice in for a cooler? They keep the stuff on draught 'ere, and not bad by 'arf for South Africa. 'Ere, you, Mister! Two chams for self and the young lydy, an' look slippy!"

The brimming glasses of sparkling, creaming fluid, juice of vines that never grew in the historic soil of France, were passed over the bar. A miniature berg clinked in each, the coldness of its contact with the glowing lip forcing slight rapturous shrieks from Emigration Jane.

"We'll drink 'Er 'ealth!" W. Keyse raised his goblet. "And Friends at 'Ome in our Isle across the Sea!"

He drank, pleased with the sentiment, and set down the empty glass.

The Dutch bar-keeper leaned across the counter, and tapped him on the arm with a thick, stubby forefinger.

"Mister Engelschman, I think you shall best go out of here."

"Me? Go out? 'Oo are you gettin' at, Myn'eer Van Dunck?" swaggered W. Keyse. And he slipped one thin, freckled hand ostentatiously under his coat of shoddy summer tweed. A very cheap revolver lurked in the hip-pocket of which Billy was so proud. In his third-floor back bed-sitting-room in Judd Street, London, W.C., he had promised himself a moment when that hip-pocket should be referred to, just in that way. It was a cheap bit of theatrical swagger, but the saloon was full, not of harmless theatrical pretences, but bitter racial antagonisms, seething animosities, fanged and venomed hatreds, only waiting the prearranged signal to strike and slay.

Emigration Jane tugged at the hero's sleeve, as he felt for an almost invisible moustache, scanning the piled-up, serried faces with pert, pale, hardy eyes.

"'E ain't coddin'. See 'ow black they're lookin'."

"I see 'em, plyne enough. Waxworks only fit for the Chamber of 'Orrors, ain't 'em?"

"It's a young woman wot arsks you to go, not a bloke! Please! For my syke, if you won't for your own!"

Billy Keyse, with a flourish, offered the thin, boyish arm in the tweed sleeve.

"Righto! Will you allow me, Miss?"

She faltered:

"I – I can't, deer. I – I'm wiv my young man."

"Looks after you a proper lot, I don't think. Which is 'im? Where's 'e 'id 'isself? There's only one other English-lookin' feller 'ere, an' 'e's drunk, lyin' over the table there in the corner. That ain't 'im, is it?"

"Nah, that isn't 'im. That big Dutchy, lookin' this way, showin' 'is teeth as 'e smiles. That's my young man."

She indicated the Slabberts, heavily observant of the couple with the muddy eyes under the tow-coloured thatch.

"'Strewth!" W. Keyse whistled depreciatively between his teeth, and elevated his scanty eyebrows. "That tow-'eaded, bung-nosed, 'ulking, big Dopper. An' you a daughter of the Empire!"

Oh! the thrice-retorted scorn in the sharp-edged Cockney voice! The scorching contempt in the pale, ugly little eyes of W. Keyse! She wilted to her tallest feather, and the tears came crowding, stinging the back of her throat, compelling a miserable sniff. Yet Emigration Jane was not destitute of spirit.

"I … I took 'im to please meself … not you, nor the Hempire neither."

"Reckon you was precious 'ard up for a chap. Good-afternoon, Miss."

He touched the cheap Panama, and swung theatrically round on his heel. Between him and the saloon-door there was a solid barricade of heavy Dutch bodies, in moleskin, tan-cord, and greasy homespun, topped by lowering Dutch faces. Brawny right hands that could have choked the reedy crow out of the little bantam gamecock, clenched in the baggy pockets of old shooting-jackets. Others gripped leaded sjamboks, and others crept to hip-pockets, where German army revolvers were. The bar-keeper and the Slabberts exchanged a meaning wink.

"Gents, I'll trouble you. By your leave?.."

Nobody moved. And suddenly W. Keyse became conscious that these were enemies, and that he was alone. A little hooliganism, a few street-fights, one scuffle with the police, some rows in music-halls constituted all his experience. In the midst of these men, burly, brutal, strong, used to shed blood of beast and human, his cheap swagger failed him with his stock of breath. He was no longer the hero

in an East End melodrama; his heroic mood had gone, and there was a feel of tragedy in the air. The Boers waited sluggishly for the next move. It would come when there should be a step forward on the part of the little Englishman. Then a clumsy foot in a cow-leather boot or heavy wooden-pegged veldschoen would be thrust out, and the boy would be tripped up and go down, and the crowd would deliberately kick and trample the life out of him, and no one would be able to say how or by whom the thing had been done. And, reading in the hard eyes set in the stolid yellow and drab faces that he was "up against it," and no mistake, W. Keyse felt singularly small and lonely.

Then something happened.

The drunken Englishman who had been lying in a hoggish stupor over the little iron table in the corner of the saloon hiccoughed, and lifted a crimson, puffy face, with bleary eyes in it that were startlingly blue. He drew back the great arms that had been hanging over the edge of his impromptu pillow, and heaved up his massive stooping shoulders, and got slowly upon his feet. Then, lurching in his walk, but not stumbling, he moved across the little space of saw-dusted, hard-beaten earth that divided him from W. Keyse, and drew up beside that insignificant minority. The action was not purposeless or unimpressive. The alcoholic wastrel had suddenly become protagonist in the common little drama that was veering towards tragedy. Beside the man, Billy Keyse dwindled to a stunted boy, a steam-pinnace bobbing under the quarter of an armoured battle-ship, its huge mailed bulk pregnant with possibilities of destruction, its barbettes full of unseen, watchful eyes, and hands powerful to manipulate the levers of Titanic death-machines.

Let it be understood that the intervener did not present the aspect of a hero. He had been drunk, and would be again, unless some miraculous quickening of the alcohol-drugged brain-centres should rouse and revivify the dormant will. His square face, with the heavy smudge of bushy black eyebrows over the fierce blue eyes, and the short, blunt, hooked nose, and grim-lipped yet tender mouth, from the corner of which an extinct and forgotten cigar-butt absurdly jutted, bore, like his great gaunt frame, the ravaging traces of the consuming drink-lust. His well-cut, loosely-fitting grey morning-coat and trousers were soiled and slovenly; his blue linen shirt was collarless and unbuttoned at the neck. His grey felt smasher hat was crammed on awry. But there was a thick lanyard round the muscular neck, ending in a leather revolver-pouch that was attached to his stout belt of webbing. A boy with a fifteen-and-sixpenny toy revolver you can laugh at and squelch; but, Alamachtig! a big man with a Webley and Scott was another thing. And the frowy barrier of thick, coarsely-clad, bulky bodies and scowling, yellow-tan faces, began to melt away.

When a clear lane showed to the saloon door, the Dop Doctor took it, walking with a lurch in his long stride, but with the square head held upright on his great gaunt shoulders. W. Keyse, Esquire, moved in the shadow of him, taking two steps to one of his. The swing doors opened, thudded to behind them…

"Outside… Time, too!"

The wide, thin-lipped Cockney mouth grinned a little consciously as W. Keyse jerked his thumb towards the still vibrating doors of the saloon. "Reg'ler 'ornets' nest o' Dutchies. And I was up agynst it, an' no mistyke, when you rallied up. An', Mister, you're a Fair Old Brick, an' if you've no objection to shykin' 'ands …?"

But the big man did not seem to see the little Cockney's offered hand. He nodded, looking with the bloodshot and extremely blue eyes that were set under his heavy straight black brows, not at W. Keyse, but over the boy's head, and with a surly noise in his throat that stopped short of being speech, swung heavily round and went down the dusty street, that was grilling in the full blaze of the afternoon heat, lurching a little in his walk.

Then, suddenly, running figures of men came round the corner. Voices shouted, and houses and shops and saloons emptied themselves of their human contents. The news flew from kerb to kerb, and jumped from windows to windows, out of which women, European and coloured, thrust eager, questioning heads.

The Cape Town train that had started at midday had returned to Gueldersdorp, having been held up by a force of armed and mounted Boers twenty miles down the line. And a London newspaper correspondent had handed in a cable at the post-office, and the operator's instrument, after a futile click or so, had failed to work any more.

The telegraphic wire was cut. Hostilities had commenced in earnest, and Gueldersdorp, severed from the South by this opening act of war, must find her salvation thenceforwards in the cool brains and steady nerves of the handful of defenders behind her sand-bags, when the hour of need should come.

History has it written in her imperishable record, that is not only printed upon paper, and graven upon brass, and cut in marble, but stamped into the minds and hearts of millions of men and women of the British race, how, when that hour came, the hero-spirit in their countrymen rose up to meet it. And for such undying memories as these, and not for the mere word of suzerainty, it is worth while to have paid as Britain has paid, in gold, and blood, and tears.

XIII

"Dop," being the native name for the cheapest and most villainous of Cape brandies, has come to signify alcoholic drinks in general to men of many nations dwelling under the subtropical South African sun. Thus, apple-brandy, and peach liqueur, "Old Squareface," in the squat, four-sided bottles beloved no less by Dutchman and Afrikander, American and Briton, Paddy from Cork, and Heinrich from the German Fatherland, than by John Chinkey – in default of arrack – and the swart and woolly-headed descendant of Ham, may be signified under the all-embracing designation.

It did not matter what the liquor was, the bar-tenders were aware who served the Dop Doctor, as long as the stuff scorched the throat and stupefied the brain, and you got enough of it for your money.

His eyes were blood-red with brutal debauch now, as he neared the De Boursy-Williams dwelling, a one-storied, soft brick-built, corrugated-iron-roofed house on Harris Street, behind the Market Square. It had been a store, but green and white paint and an iron garden-fence had turned it into a gentlemanly residence for a medical practitioner. Mrs. De Boursy-Williams, a lady of refinement, stamped with the ineffaceable cachet of Bayswater, had hung cheap lace curtains in all the windows, tying them up with silk sashes of Transvaal green. Between the wooden pillars of the stoep dangled curtains yet other, of chopped, dyed, and threaded bamboo, while whitewashed drain-pipes, packed with earth and set on end, overflowed with Indian cress, flowering now in extravagant, gorgeous hues of red and brown, sulphur and orange.

The Dop Doctor, left to maintain the inviolate sanctity of this English Colonial home, hiccoughed as he stumbled up the stately flight of three cement steps that led between white-painted railings, enclosing on the left hand a narrow strip of garden with some dusty mimosa shrubs growing in it, to the green door that bore the brass plate, and had the red lamp fitted in the hall-light above it. The plate bore this comprehensive inscription:

G. DE BOURSY-WILLIAMS, M.D., F.R.C.S. Lond.

Consulting-Room Hours: 10 a.m. to 12 a.m.; 6 p.m. to 8 p.m.

MODERN DENTISTRY IN ALL ITS BRANCHES.

And, scanning the inscription for perhaps the thousandth time, the grim, tender mouth under the ragged black moustache took a satirical twist at the corners, for nobody knew better than Owen Saxham, called of men in Gueldersdorp the "Dop Doctor," what a brazen lie it proclaimed. He heard the town-clock on the stad square strike five as he pulled out the latchkey from his pocket and let himself in, shouting:

"Koets!"

A glazed door at the end of the passage, advertised in letters of black paint upon the ground-glass as "Dispensary," opened, and a long, thin Dutchman, dressed in respectable black, looked out. He had been hoping that the drunken Englishman had been shot or stabbed in a saloon-brawl, or had fallen down in apoplexy in a liquor-bout, and had been brought home dead on a shutter at last. His long ginger-coloured face showed his cruel disappointment. But he said, as though the question had been asked:

"No, there is no telegram from Cape Town."

Then he shut the glazed door, and returned to the very congenial occupation in which he had been engaged, and Owen Saxham went heavily to the bedroom placed at the disposal of the *locum tenens*. The single window looked out upon a square garden with a tennis-ground, where the De Boursy-Williams girls had been used to play. The apricot on the south wall was laden with the as yet immature fruit, an abandoned household cat slept, unconscious of impending starvation, upon a bench under a pepper-tree.

It was a small, sordid, shabby chamber, with a fly-spotted paper, a chest of drawers lacking knobs, a greenish swing looking-glass, and a narrow iron bedstead. His scanty belongings were

scattered about. There were no medical books or surgical instruments. The Dop Doctor had sold all the tools of his trade years before. He turned to Williams's books, standard works which had been bought at his recommendation, when he wished to refresh his excellent memory; the instruments he used when to the entreaties of a fatherly friend Williams added the alluring chink of gold belonged also to that generous patron. There were some old clothes in the ramshackle deal wardrobe; there was some linen and underclothing in the knobless chest of drawers. With the exception of a Winchester repeating-rifle in excellent condition, a bandolier and ammunition-pouch, a hunting-knife and a Colt's revolver of large calibre, in addition to the weapon he carried, there was not an article of property of any value in the room. Old riding-boots with dusty spurs and a pair of veldschoens stood by the wall; a pair of trodden-down carpet slippers lay beside a big cheap zinc bath that stood there, full of cold water; some well-used pipes were on the chest of drawers, with a tin of Virginia; and an old brown camel's-hair dressing-gown hung over a castorless, shabby, American-cloth-covered armchair. And an empty whisky-bottle stood upon the washstand, melancholy witness to the drunkard's passion.

Yet there were a few poor little toilet articles upon the dressing-table that betokened the dainty personal habits of cleanliness and care that from lifelong use become instinctive. The hands of the untidy, slovenly, big man with the drink-swollen features were exquisitely kept; and when the dark-red colour should go out of the square face, the skin would show wonderfully unblemished and healthy for a drunkard, and the blue eyes would be steady and clear. Excess had not injured a splendid constitution as yet. But Saxham knew that by-and-by …

What did he care? He pulled off his soiled, untidy garments, and soused his aching head in the cold, fresh water, and bathed and changed. Six o'clock struck, and found Dr. Owen Saxham reclothed and in his right mind, if a little haggard about the eyes and twitchy about the mouth, and sitting calmly waiting for patients in the respectably-appointed consulting-room of De Boursy-Williams, M.D., F.R.C.S. Lond.

Usually he sat in the adjoining study, near enough to the carefully-curtained door to hear the patient describe in the artless vernacular of the ignorant, or the more cultivated phraseology of the educated, the symptoms, his or hers.

Because the cultured man of science, the real M.D. of Cambridge University and owner of those other letters of attainment, was the drunken wastrel who had sunk low enough to serve as the impostor's ghost. If G. de Boursy-Williams, of all those lying capitals, were a member of the London Pharmaceutical Society and properly-qualified dentist, which perhaps might be the case, he certainly possessed no other claim upon the confidence of his fellow-creatures, sick or well. Yet even before the Dop Doctor brought his great unhealed sorrow and his quenchless thirst to Gueldersdorp, the smug, plump, grey-haired, pink-faced, neatly-dressed little humbug possessed an enviable practice.

If you got well, he rubbed his hands and chuckled over you; if you died, he bleated about the Will of Providence, and his daughters sent flowery, home-made wreaths to place upon your grave, and it all went down, adding to the python-length of the bill for medical attendance.

This world is thick with De Boursy-Williamses, throwing in bromides with a liberal hand, ungrudging of strychnine, happily at home with quinine and cathartics, ready at a case of simple rubeola; hideously, secretly, helplessly perplexed between the false diphtheria and the true; treating internal cancer and fibrous tumours as digestive derangements for happy, profitable years, until the specialist comes by, and dissipates with a brief examination and with half a dozen trenchant words the victim's faith in the quack.

Three years before, when the Dop Doctor, coming up from Kimberley by transport-waggon, had stumbled in upon Gueldersdorp, the verdict of a specialist consulted by one of his patients, much lacking in the desirable article of faith, had given De Boursy-Williams's self-confidence a considerable shock.

Does it matter how De Boursy, much reduced in bulk by a considerable leakage of conceit, came across the Dop Doctor? In a drink-saloon, in a music-hall, in a gaming-house or an opium-den,

at any other of the places of recreation where, after consulting and visiting hours, that exemplary father and serious-minded Established Churchman, was to be found? It is enough that the bargain was proposed and accepted. Four sovereigns a week secured to De Boursy-Williams the stored and applied knowledge, the wide experience, and the unerring diagnosis of the rising young London practitioner, who had had a brilliant career before him when a Hand had reached forth from the clouds to topple down the castle of his labours and his hopes. For Owen Saxham the money would purchase forgetfulness. You can buy a great deal of his kind of forgetfulness with four pounds, and drink was all the Dop Doctor wanted.

Now, as the red South African sunset burned beyond the flattened western ridge of the semicircle of irregular hills that fence in the unpretending hamlet town that lies on the low central rise, Owen Saxham sat, as for his miserable weekly wage he must sit, twice daily for two hours at a stretch, enduring torments akin to those of the damned in Hell.

For these were the hours when he remembered most all that he had lost.

Remembrance, like the magic carpet of the Eastern story, carried him back to a rambling old grey mansion, clothed with a great magnolia and many roses, standing in old-time gardens, and shrubberies of laurel and ilex and Spanish chestnut, and rhododendron, upon the South Dorset cliffs, that are vanishing so slowly yet so surely in the maw of the rapacious sea.

Boom! In the heart of a still, foggy night, following a day of lashing rain, and the boy Owen Saxham, whom the Dop Doctor remembered, would wake upon his lavender-scented pillow in the low-pitched room with the heavy ceiling-beams and the shallow diamond-paned casements, and call out to David, dreaming in the other white bed, to plan an excursion with the breaking of the day, to see how much more of their kingdom had toppled over on those wave-smoothed rock-pavements far below, that were studded with great and little fossils, as the schoolroom suet-pudding with the frequent raisin.

More faces came. The boys' father, fair and florid, bluff, handsome, and kindly, an English country gentleman of simple affectionate nature and upright life. He came in weather-stained velveteen and low-crowned felt, with the red setter-bitch at his heels, and the old sporting Manton carried in the crook of his elbow, where the mother used to sew a leather patch, always cut out of the palm-piece of one of the right-hand gloves that were never worn out, never being put on. A dark-eyed, black-haired Welsh mother, hot-tempered, keen-witted, humorous, sarcastic, passionately devoted to her husband and his boys, David and Owen.

David and Owen. David was the elder, fair like the father, destined for Harrow, Sandhurst, and the Army. Owen had dreamed of the Merchant Service, until, having succeeded in giving the Persian kitten, overfed to repletion by an admiring cook, a dose of castor-oil, and being allowed to aid the local veterinary in setting the fox-terrier's broken leg, the revelation of the hidden gift was vouchsafed to this boy. How he begged off Harrow, much to the disgust of the Squire, and went to Westward Ho, faithfully plodded the course laid down by the Council of Medical Education, became a graduate of Trinity Hall, Cambridge, and took his degree brilliantly; registered as a student at St. Stephen's Hospital; won an Entrance Scholarship in Science, and secured the William Brown Exhibition in his second year. Thenceforward the world was an oyster, to be opened with scalpel and with bistoury by Owen Saxham.

Oh, the good days! the delectable years of intellectual development, and arduous study, and high hope, and patient, strenuous endeavour! The man sitting with knitted hands and tense brain and staring eyes there in the darkening room groaned aloud as he looked back. Nobody envied that broad-shouldered, lean-flanked, bright-eyed young fellow his successes. Companions shared his triumphs, lecturers and professors came down from their high pedestals of dignity to help him on. When he obtained his London University diploma with honours for a thesis of exceptional merit, he had already held the post of principal anæsthetist at St. Stephen's Hospital for a year. Now, a vacancy occurring

upon the Junior staff of surgeons to the Hospital's in-patient Department, Owen Saxham, M.D., was chosen to fill it. This brought Mildred very near.

For he was very much in love. The hot red blood in his veins had carried him away sometimes upon a mad race for pleasure, but he was clean of soul and free from the taint of vice, inherited or acquired, and the Briton's love of home was strong in him. And wedded love had always seemed to him a beautiful and gracious thing; and fatherhood a glorious privilege. Stern as he seemed, grave and quiet and undemonstrative as he was, the youngest and shyest children did not shrink from him. The pink rose-leaf tongue peeped from between the budding rows of teeth, and the innocent considering eyes questioned him only a moment before the smile came. To be the father of Mildred's children seemed the lofty end of all desire that was not mere worldly ambition.

Mildred was the elder daughter of a county neighbour down in Dorsetshire. She had known Owen Saxham from her school-days, but never until he took to calling at the house in Pont Street, to which Mildred, with her family – mere satellites revolving in the orbit of that shining star of Love – migrated in the Season. She was tall, slight, and willowy, with a sweet head that drooped a little, and round brown eyes that were extremely pretty and wore a perpetual expression of surprise. She was rather anæmic, preferred croquet to lawn-tennis – then the rage – and kept a journal, after the style of an American model. But the space which Mary McMullins cribbed from Mary McMullins to devote to a description of the bathroom in which the ablutions of her family were performed, and a vivid word-picture of their tooth-brushes ranged in a row, and their recently wrung-out garments in the act of taking the air upon the back-garden clothes-line, was all devoted to Mildred in Mildred's journal. In it Owen found a place. He was described as a blend between "Rochester" in "Jane Eyre" and "Bazarov" in Turgenev's "Fathers and Children." In one specially high-flown passage he was referred to as a grim granite rock, to which the delicate clematis-like nature of Mildred, clinging, was to envelop it with leaf and blossom. She read him the passage one day. Their faces were very close together as they sat upon the sofa in the pretty Pont Street drawing-room, and his newly-bought engagement-ring gleamed on her long white hand… The remembrance of that day made the Dop Doctor laugh out harshly in the midst of his anguish. So trivial and so weak a thing had been that love of hers on which he had founded the castle of his hopes and desires.

Now the aspiring young man bought a practice with some thousands advanced by his father out of the younger son's portion that should be his one day. It lay just where Hyde Park merges into Paddington. Here a medical man may feel the pulse of Dives for gold, and look at the tongue of Lazarus for nothing, and supply medicine into the bargain, if he be of kindly soul, and this hopeful, rising surgeon and physician had an open hand and an unsuspecting nature.

God! how much the worse for him. The sweat-drops ran down into the Dop Doctor's eyes as he remembered that.

He set up his bachelor tent in Chilworth Street, furnishing the rooms he meant to inhabit with a certain sober luxury. By-and-by the house could be made pretty, unless Mildred should insist upon his moving to Wigmore Street, or to Harley Street, that Mecca of the ambitious young practitioner. Probably Mildred's people would insist upon Harley Street. They were wealthy; their daughter would be quite an heiress, "another instance of Owen's luck," as David, long ago gazetted to a crack Cavalry regiment, would say, and Owen would laugh, and admit that, though he would have been glad enough to take his young fair love without dower and plenishing, it was pleasant enough to know that his wife would have an independent fortune of her own. It was one of David's best jokes that Owen was marrying Mildred for her money. David's ideas of humour were crude and elemental. On the other hand, his manners were admirable, and his physical beauty perfect of its type, though men and women turned oftenest to look at the younger brother, whom the women called "plain, but so interesting," and the men "an uncommonly attractive sort of fellow, and as clever as they make them." When the great crash came Owen Saxham, M.D., F.R.C.S., was about twenty-nine.

Do you care for a description of the man at his prime?

He was probably five feet ten in height, but his scholar's stoop robbed him of an inch or more. The great breadth of the slightly-bowed shoulders, the immense depth and thickness of the chest, gave his upper figure a false air of clumsiness. His arms were long and powerful, terminating in strong, supple, white hands, the hands of the skilled surgical operator; his thick, smooth, opaque, white skin covered an admirable structure of bone, knit with tough muscles, clothed with healthful flesh. One noticed, seeing him walk, that his legs were bowed a little, because he had been accustomed to the saddle from earliest childhood, though he rode but seldom now, and one saw also that his small muscular feet gripped the ground vigorously, through the glove-thin boots he liked to wear. He showed no tendency to dandyism. His loosely-cut suits of fine, silky black cloth were invariably of the same fashion. In abhorring jewellery, in preferring white cashmere shirts, and strictly limiting the amount of starch in the thin linen cuffs and collars, perhaps he showed a tendency to faddism. David told him that he dressed himself like a septuagenarian Professor. Mildred would have preferred dear Owen to pay a little more attention to style and cut, and all that, though one did not, of course, expect a man of science to look like a man of fashion. One couldn't have everything, at least, not in this world…

She said that one day, standing beside the writing-table in the Chilworth Street study, with David's portrait in her hand. It usually stood there, in a silver frame – a coloured photograph of a young man of thirty, stupid, and beautiful as the Praxitelean Hermes, resplendent in the gold and blue and scarlet of a crack Dragoon Regiment. Owen stood upon the hearthrug, for once in Mildred's company, and not thinking of Mildred. And with tears rising in her round, pretty, foolish eyes the girl looked from the face and figure enclosed within the silver frame, to the face and bust that had for background the high mantel-mirror in its carved frame of Spanish oak.

There was the square black head bending forwards – "poking," she termed it – upon the massive, bowed shoulders; the white face, square too, with its short, blunt, hooked nose and grim, determined mouth and jaws, showing the bluish grain of the strong beard and moustache that Owen kept closely shaven. The heavy forehead, the smutty brows overshadowing eyes of clear, vivid, startling Alpine blue, the close small ears, the thick white throat, were very, very unattractive in Mildred's eyes – at least, in comparison with the three-volume-novel charms of the grey-eyed, golden-moustached, classically-featured, swaggering young military dandy in the coloured photograph. David had been with his regiment in India when Owen had first seemed to be a good deal attracted to Pont Street. He had wooed Mildred with dogged persistency, and won her without perceptible triumph, and Mildred had been immensely flattered at first by the conquest of this man, whom everybody said was going to be famous, great, distinguished … and now … the wedding-day was coming awfully near. And how on earth was it possible for a girl to tell a man with Owen's dreadfully grim, sarcastic mouth, and those terrible blue eyes that sometimes looked through and through you – that she preferred his brother?

Poor, dear, beautiful, devoted David! so honourable, so shocked at the discovery that his passion was reciprocated, so very romantically in love. Only the day previously, calling in at Pont Street at an hour unusual for him, Owen had found them together, Mildred and David, who, having been unexpectedly relieved of duty by an accommodating brother-officer, had, as he rather laboriously explained, run up from Spurhambury for the day. It was an awfully near thing, the guilty ones agreed afterwards, but Owen had suspected nothing. These swell scientific men were often a little bit slow in the uptake…

But to-day – to-day their dupe saw clearly. He recalled the Pont Street incident, and the flushed faces of the couple. He saw once more the silver-framed photograph in the girl's hand, he felt the mute disparagement of her glance, and was conscious of the relief with which it left him to settle on the portrait again. Ah, how unsuspicious he had been whom they were duping! Doubtless Mildred would not have had the courage to own the truth, doubtless she would have married him but for the scandal of the Trial. He wrenched his knitted hands together until the joints cracked. She would have married him, and forgotten David. He, the man of will, and power, and patience would have possessed her, stamped himself like a seal upon her heart and mind, given her other interests, other

hopes, other desires, children, and happiness. But for the Trial the little germinating seed of treachery would never have grown up and borne fruit.

Had it been treachery, after all? Far, far too grand the word. Who would expect a modern woman to practise the obsolete virtue of Fidelity? Fool, do you expect your miniature French bulldog or your toy-terrier to dive in and swim out to you, and hold your drowning carcase up, should you happen to become cramped while bathing in the sea? The little, feeble, pretty, feather-brained thing, what can it do but whimper on the shore while you are sinking, perhaps be consoled upon a friendly stranger's lap while your last bubbles are taking upward flight, and your knees are drawing inwards in the final contraction? Happy for the little creature if the kindly stranger carry it away!

Poor, pretty, foolish Mildred, whose gentle predilections were as threads of gossamer compared with the cable-ropes of stronger women's passions! She had nestled into the strong protecting arm, and dried her tears for the old master on the sleeve of the new one, whimpering a little, gently, just like the toy-terrier bitch or the miniature bull.

And yet he had once seen a creature tinier and feebler than either of these, a mere handful of yellow floss-silk curls, defend its insensible master with frenzy, as the sick man lay in the deadly stupor of cerebral congestion, from those who sought to aid. Valet and nurse and doctor were held at bay until that snapping, foaming, raging speck of love and devotion and fidelity had been whelmed in a travelling-rug, and borne away to a distant room, from whence its shrill, defiant, imploring barks and yelps could be heard night and day until, its owner being at last conscious and out of danger, the tiny creature was set free.

Ergo, there are small things and small things. Beside that epic atom Mildred dwindled inconceivably.

And David … David, who had shaken his handsome head sorrowfully over his brother's ruined career, who had been horribly sick at the scandal, shudderingly alive to the disgrace, sorrowfully, regretfully compelled to admit that the evidence of guilt was overwhelming … he did not trust himself to think of David overmuch. That way of thought led to Cain's portion in the very pit of Hell. For six months subsequently to the finding of the Jury in the well-known criminal case, The Crown *v.* Saxham, David had married Mildred. If she had been innocent of actual treachery, here was the smooth, brotherly betrayer, unmasked and loathly in the sight of the betrayed.

How quietly the storm-clouds had piled up on his bright horizon at the close of his second year of active, brilliant, successful work!

The first lightning-flash, the first faint mutter of thunder, had passed almost unnoticed. Then the tempest broke, and the building wrought by a strong man's labours, and toils, and hopes, and joys, and dolours had been lifted, and torn, and rent, and scattered as a hill-bothy of poles and straw-bundles, or a moorland shelter of heather and bushes is scattered by the fury of a northern mountain-blast.

His practice had become a large and, despite the many claims of Lazarus at the gates, a lucrative one by the commencement of his third year of residence in Chilworth Street. It was the end of April. He was to be married to Mildred in July. That move to Harley Street had been decided upon, the house taken and beautified. Though his love for her was not demonstrative or romantic, it was deep, and tender, and strong, and hopeful, and Life to this man had seemed very sweet – five years ago. He was successful professionally and socially. He had been chosen to assist a surgeon of great eminence in the performance of a critical operation upon a semi-Royalty. He had written, and publishers had published, a remarkable work. "The Diseases of Civilisation" had been greeted by the scientific reviewers with a chorus of praise, passed through four or five editions – had been translated into several European languages; and his "Text-Book of Clinical Surgery" had been recommended to advanced students by the leading professors of the Medical Schools when the horrible thing befell.

XIV

It was in '94, when even the electro-motor was not in general use, and the petrol-driven machine was slowly convincing Paris and New York of its magnificent possibilities. Saxham used a smart, well-horsed, hired brougham for day-visits, and for night work a motor-tricycle. There were no stables to the house in Chilworth Street. He left the motor-tricycle at the place where he had bought it second-hand. The machine was cleaned and kept in order, and brought to his door by one of the employés at a certain hour, for a fixed weekly sum paid to the proprietor of the establishment, Bough by name, an Englishman born in the Transvaal, who had quite recently, or so he gave out, emigrated from South Africa, and set up in London as a cycle-seller and repairer, though there were not many cycles at the shop. Heavy packing-cases and crates were always being delivered there, and always being despatched from thence, via Cape Town and Port Elizabeth and Delagoa Bay to the Transvaal, Bough being agent, or so he said, for several South African firms engaged in the transport of agricultural machines. Bough had a wife, a large-eyed, delicate-looking, pretty little woman, who seemed afraid of the big, muscular, tanned fellow of thirty-eight or so, with the odd light eyes, and the smooth manner, and the ready smile, and the short, expert, hairy, cruel-looking hands. He had seen life, had Bough, at the goldfields and at the diamond-mines, and as a trooper through the Zulu and Matabele campaigns, and he was ready to talk about what he had seen. Still there were reservations about Bough, and mysteries. The Doctor suspected him of being brutal to his wife, and would not have been surprised any morning upon receiving the news of the man's arrest as one of a gang of forgers, or coiners, or burglars. But he lived and let live, and whatever else the big Afrikander may have been, he was an excellent workman at his trade.

One evening Bough rode round on the motor-tricycle himself, and mentioned casually that his wife was ailing. The Doctor, in the act of mounting the machine, put a brief question or two, registered the replies in the automatic sub-memory he kept for business, and told the man to send her round at ten o'clock upon the following morning.

She came, punctual to the hour, and was shown into Owen's consulting-room – a little woman with beautiful, melancholy eyes and a pretty figure. Illiterate, common, affected, and vain to a degree, hideously misusing the English language in that low, dulcet voice of hers, ludicrous in her application of the debatable aspirate to words in the spelling of which it has no part.

Rather an absurd little person, Mrs. Bough. Yet, a tragic little person, in Saxham's eyes at least, by the time she had made her errand plain.

He heard her tell the tale that was not new to him. Cultured, highly-bred women had made such appeals to him before, and without shame. How should this little vulgar creature be expected to have more conscience than they?

They beat about the bush longer, they put the thing more prettily. They spoke of their frail physical health and their husbands' great anxiety, and quoted the long-ago expressed opinion of ancient family physicians, who possibly turned uneasily in their decent graves. But the gist of the whole was, that they did not want children, and Dr. Saxham had such a great and justly-earned reputation in skilful and delicate operations … and, in short, would he not be compliant and oblige? They would pay anything. Money was positively no object.

How many such tempting sirens sing in the ears of young, rising professional men, who are hampered by honourable debts which threaten to impede and drag them down; who are possessed of high ideals and moral scruples, which, not being essentially, fundamentally embedded and ingrained in the conscience of the man, may possibly be argued away; who have not implanted in their souls and hearts the high reverence for motherhood and the deep tenderness for helpless infancy that distinguished Owen Saxham!

He heard this woman out, as he had heard all the others. He began as he had begun with every one of them – the delicate, titled aristocrats, the ambitious Society beauties, the popular actresses, the women who envied these and read about them in the illustrated interviews published in the fashion-papers, and sighed to be interviewed also – to not one of these had he weighed out one drachm less of the bitter salutary medicine that he now administered to Mrs. Bough.

He invariably began with the personal peril and the inevitable risk. Strange how they ignored it, blinded themselves to it, thrust it, the grinning, threatening Death's-head, on one side. Of course, he talked like that! It was most candid of him, and most conscientious. But if they were willing to take the risk – and antiseptic surgery had made such *huge* strides in these days that the risk was a mere nothing… Besides, there was not really need for anything like an operation, was there? He could prescribe the kind of dose that ought to be taken, and everything would then be all right.

He would open that grim mouth of his yet again, and speak even more to the purpose. To these mothers who did not wish to be mothers, who threw the gift of Heaven back in the face of Heaven, preferring artificial barrenness to natural fecundity, and who made of their bodies, that should have brought forth healthy, wholesome sons and daughters of their race, tombs and sepulchres – to these he told the truth, in swift, sharp, trenchant sentences, that, like the keen sterilised blade of the surgical knife, cut to heal. When they argued with him, saying that the thing was done, that everybody knew it was done, and that it always would be done, by other men as brilliant as, and less scrupulous than, the homilist; he admitted the force of their arguments. Let other men of his great calling pile up and amass wealth, if they chose, by tampering with the unclean thing. Owen Saxham would none of it. At this juncture the woman would have hysterics of the weeping or the scolding kind, or would be convinced of the righteousness of the forlorn cause he championed, or would pretend the hysterics or the conviction. Generally she pretended to the latter, and swam or stumbled out, pulling down her veil to mask the rage and hatred in her haggard eyes, and went to that other man. Then, after a brief absence accounted for as a "rest cure," she would shine forth again upon her world, smiling, triumphant, prettier than ever, since she had begun to make up a little more. Or, as a woman who had passed through the Valley of the Shadow, with only her own rod and staff of vanity and pride to comfort her, she would emerge from that seclusion a nervous wreck, and take to pegging or chloral or spiritualism. Most rarely she would not emerge at all, and then her women friends would send wreaths for the coffin and carriages to the funeral, and would whisper mysteriously together in their boudoirs, and look askance upon the doctor who had attended her. For of course he had bungled shockingly, or everything would have gone off as right as rain for that poor dear thing!

Little Mrs. Bough was of the type of woman that pretends to be convinced. She had cried bitterly in the beginning, as she confessed to Saxham that she was not really married to Bough, and that the said Bough, whom Saxham had always suspected of being a scoundrel, would certainly go off with "one of them other women and leave her if she went and 'ad a byby." She cried even more bitterly afterwards, as she wondered how she ever could 'a dreamed o' being that wicked! Bough might kill her – that he might! – or go back to South Africa without her; she never would give in, not now. Never now – the Doctor might depend upon that, she assured him, drying her swollen eyes with a cheap lace-edged handkerchief loaded with patchouli. She was shaken and nervous, and in need of a sedative, and Saxham, having the drugs at hand, made her up a simple draught, unluckily omitting to make a memorandum of the prescription in his pocket-book, and gave her the first dose of it before she went away, profuse in thanks, and carrying the bottle.

And he saw his waiting patients, and stepped into his waiting brougham, and, having for once no urgent call upon his professional attention, dined with Mildred at Pont Street, and was coaxed into promising to take her to the opening performance of a classic play which was to be revived three nights later at a fashionable West End theatre. Mildred had set her heart upon being seen in a box at this particular function, and Saxham had had some trouble to gratify her wish.

He remembered with startling clearness every remote detail of that night at the theatre. Mildred had looked exquisitely fair and girlish in her white dress, with a necklace of pearls he had given her rising and falling on the lovely virginal bosom, where the lover's eyes dwelt and lingered in the masterful hunger of his heart. Soon, soon, that hunger of his for possession would be gratified! It was April, and at the end of July, when work was growing slack, they would be married. They were going North for the honeymoon. A wealthy and grateful patient of Saxham's had placed at his disposal a grey, historic Scotch turret-mansion, standing upon mossy lawns, with woods of larch and birch and ancient Spanish chestnuts all about it, looking over the silver Tweed. In the heat and hurry of his daily round of work, Saxham, who had spent an autumn holiday at this place, would find himself dreaming about it. The smell of the heather would spice the air that was no longer hot and sickly with the effluvia of the city, and the hum of the drowsy black bees, and the cooing of the wood-pigeons would replace the din of the London traffic, and Mildred's eyes would be looking into his, and her cool, fragrant lips would be freely yielded, and her arms would be about his neck, and all those secret aspirations and yearnings and dreams of wedded joy would be realised at last.

He grinned to himself sitting there in the hot darkness of the South African night, the great white stars and the vast purple dome they throbbed in shut out of sight by the miserable little gaily-papered ceiling with its cornice of gilt wood, remembering that everything had ended there. Thenceforth no more hopes, no dreams, for the man whom Fate and Destiny, hitherto propitious and obliging, had conspired to lash with scourges, and drive with goads, and hound with despairs and horrors to the sheer brink where Madness waits to hurl the desperate over upon the jagged rocks below.

He supped with them at Pont Street. Mildred came down to say good-night at the door.

"Have you been happy?" he had asked, framing the sweet young face in tender hands, and looking in the pretty, gentle brown eyes.

"You have been so very dear and kind to-night," she had answered, "how could I have helped being happy? And He" – she meant the Semitic actor-manager, whom she romantically adored; whose thick, flabby features and pale gooseberry orbs, thickly outlined in blue pencil, eyebrowed with brown grease-paint; whose long, shapeless body, eloquent, expressive hands, and legs that were very good as legs go, taking them separately, but did not match, had been that night, his admirers declared, moved and possessed by the very spirit of Shakespearean Tragedy – "He was so great! Don't you agree with me – marvellously great?"

Saxham had laughed and kissed the enthusiast. It had appeared to him a dreary performance enough, or it would have, had it not been for Mildred and the dear glamour with which her presence had invested the great gilded auditorium, with its rows of bored, familiar, notable faces in the stalls, representing Society, Art, Literature, Music, and Finance; its pit and gallery crowded with organised bodies of theatre-goers, one party certain to boo where the other applauded, riot and disorder the inevitable result, unless by a coincidence rare as snow at Midsummer the rival associations might be won upon to display a unanimity of approval, upon which the dramatic Press-critics would rapturously descant in the newspapers next morning.

XV

Saxham said his lingering sweet good-night, and shut Mildred into the warm, lighted hall, and ran down the steps, and hailed a passing hansom, and was driven back to Chilworth Street. It had rained, and the heat, excessive for April, had abated, and the wise, experienced stars looked down between drifting veils of greyish vapour upon the little human lives passing below.

As he jumped down at his door and paid his cabman, his quick eye noticed a bicycle leaning against the area-railings. One of his poorer patients was waiting for the Doctor. Or a messenger had been sent to summon him. He let himself into the lighted hall, whistling the pretty plaintive melody of Ophelia's song.

A woman sat on the oak bench under the electric globe, her little huddled-up figure making rather a sordid blotch of drab against the strong, rich background of the wall, coloured Pompeian red, and hung with fine old prints in black frames. Her tawdry hat lay beside her, her haggard eyes were set, staring at the opposite wall; her lower jaw hung lax; the saliva dribbled from the corner of her underlip; her yellow, rigid hands gripped the edge of the bench. It was the woman who passed as the wife of the man Bough. And in instant, vivid, wrathful realisation of the desperate reason of her being there, Saxham cried out so loudly that the servant who had let her in and was waiting up for his master in the basement heard the words:

"Are you mad? What do you mean by coming here? Haven't I told you that I will have nothing to do with you and your affairs…"

The voice that issued from her blue lips might have been a scream, judging by the wrung anguish of the awful face she turned upon him; but it was no more than a dry, clicking whisper that the now listening servant could barely hear:

"Don't be 'ard on a woman … hin trouble, Doctor."

"Hard on you… On the contrary, I have been too considerate," he said, steeling his heart against pity. "You must go home to your husband, Mrs. Bough, or apply elsewhere for medical advice. I have none to give you."

His square face was very stern as he took the cab-whistle from the hall-salver, that was packed with cards and notes, and letters that had come by the last post, and a telegram or two. She moaned as he laid his hand on the knob of the hall-door.

"It wasn't my doings, Doctor… Hi told Bough what you said. Hi did, faithful … an' 'e swore if you wasn't the man to do what 'e wanted, 'e'd be damned but 'e'd find a woman as would! And she come next night – a little, shabby, white-faced, rat-nosed hold thing, shiverin' an' shakin'. Five pounds she 'ad of Bough, shakin' an' shiverin'. An' he wasn't to send no more to the haddress he knew, because she wouldn't be there. Always move hout … she says, after a fresh job! Oh, my Gawd! An' Bough, he hordered me, an' Hi 'ad to give in. An' to-night Hi reckoned Hi was dyin' an' 'e said Hi best harsk you, 'e was about fed up with women an' their blooming sicknesses. So Hi biked 'ere because Hi couldn't walk. An' now!.." She groaned: "Hi *ham* dyin', aren't Hi?"

Even to an observation less skilled than that of the expert medical practitioner the signs of swift and speedy dissolution were written on the insignificant, once pretty, little face. Dying, the miserable little creature had ridden to Chilworth Street, hastening her own inevitable end by the stupendous act of folly, and ensuring Saxham's. That certainty had pierced him, even as the first horrible convulsion seized her and wrenched her sideways off the bench. He caught her, and shouted for his man, and they carried her into the consulting-room, and laid her on a sofa, and he did what might be done, knowing that his mercy on her involved swift and pitiless retribution upon himself. Mrs. Bough died three hours later, as the grey dawn straggled through the blinds, and the men with the district ambulance waited at the door, and Dr. Owen Saxham went about his work that day with a strange sensation of expecting some heavy blow that was about to fall. It fell upon the day following the Coroner's Inquest.

He was sitting down to breakfast when a Superintendent of Police arrested him upon a warrant from Scotland Yard.

His servant, very pale, had announced that the Superintendent wished to see the Doctor. The Superintendent was in the room, courteously saluting Saxham, before the man had fairly got out the words.

"Good-morning, sir. A pleasant day!"

"Unlike the business that brings you here, I think, Mr. Superintendent?" said Saxham, with his square jaw set. His man spilt the coffee and hot milk over the cloth in trying to fill his master's cup. "You are nervous, Tait. You had better go downstairs, I think, unless – " Saxham looked interrogatively at the burly, officially-clad figure of the Law.

"No, sir, thank you. We do not at present require your man, but it is my duty to tell him that he had better not be out of the way, in case his testimony is wanted."

"You hear?" said Saxham; and as white-faced Tait fled, trembling, to the lower regions: "Of course, you are here," he went on, pouring out the coffee himself with a firm hand, and looking steadily at the Superintendent, "with regard to the case of Mrs. Bough? I have expected that a magistrate's inquiry would follow the Inquest. It seemed only natural – "

The Superintendent interrupted, holding up a large hand.

"It is my duty to tell you, Dr. Saxham, that everything you say will be taken down and used against you in evidence."

"Naturally," said Saxham, putting sugar in his coffee. The sugar was used against him. It amused him now to remember that. The Superintendent had never seen a gentleman more cool, he told the magistrate.

"You see, sir, this Case has been fully considered by the authorities, and it has an ugly look; and it has therefore been decided to charge you with causing the death of the woman Bough by an illegal act, performed here, in your consulting-room, on the twentieth instant, when she visited you …"

"For the first time," put in Saxham quietly.

"That may be or may not be," said the Superintendent. "You were often at her husband's place of business, you know, and may have seen her or not seen her."

"As she used to be in Bough's shop, it is possible that a great many of the man's customers besides myself did see her," Saxham went on, eating his breakfast.

"One of my men out there in the hall – I've noticed you looking towards the door – " began the Superintendent.

"Wondering what the shuffling and breathing at the keyhole meant?" said Saxham quietly. "Thank you for explaining."

"One of my men will fetch a cab when you have finished breakfast, and then, sir," said the Superintendent, "I am afraid I must trouble you to come with me to Paddington Police Station."

"Very well," said Saxham, frowning, "unless you object to using my brougham, which will be at the door" – he looked at his silver table-clock, a present from a grateful patient – "in ten minutes' time."

"I don't at all mind that, sir," agreed the obliging Superintendent; "and the men can follow in the cab. Any objection?"

Saxham had winced and flushed scarlet to the hair.

"For God's sake, don't make a procession of it! Let things be kept as quiet as possible for the sake of my – family – and – my friends." He thought with agony of Mildred. They were to be married in July, unless —

The Superintendent coughed behind his glove. "The question of Bail will rest with the magistrate, of course," he said. "But I should expect that it would be admitted, upon responsible persons entering into the customary recognisances."

Saxham rose. He had drunk the coffee, but he could not eat. "Like all the rest of them, in spite of his show of coolness," thought the Superintendent.

"I will ask you for time to telephone to some friends who will, I have no doubt, be willing to give the required undertaking, and arrange for a colleague to visit my patients. You will take a glass of wine while I step into the next room? The telephone is there, on the writing-table."

"And a loaded revolver in the drawer underneath, and poisons of all kinds handy on the shelves of a neat little cabinet," thought the Superintendent. But he said: "With pleasure, sir, only I must trouble you to put up with my company."

A tingling thrill of revulsion ran through Saxham. He set his teeth, and conquered the furious, momentary impulse to knock down this big, burly, smooth-spoken blue-uniformed official.

"Ah, very well. The usual procedure in cases of this kind. Please come this way. But take a glass of wine first. There are glasses on the sideboard there, and claret and port in those decanters."

"To your very good health, Dr. Saxham, sir, and a speedy and favourable ending to – the present – difficulty." The Superintendent emptied a bumper neatly, and with discreet relish, and followed Saxham into the consulting-room, and once more, at the sound of the measured footfall padding behind him over the thick carpet, the suspect's blood surged madly to his temples, and his hands clenched until the nails drove deep into the palms. For from that moment began the long, slow torture of watching and following, and dogging by the suspicious, vigilant, observant Man In Blue.

A Treasury Prosecution succeeded the Police-Court Inquiry, and the accused was formally arrested upon the criminal charge, and committed to Holloway pending the Trial. The Trial took place before Mr. Justice Bodmin in the following July, occupying five days of oppressive heat in the thrashing out of that vexed question, the guilt or innocence of Owen Saxham, M.D., F.R.C.S. who for airless, stifling years of weeks had eaten and drunk and slept and waked in the Valley of the Shadow of Penal Servitude. Who was conveyed from the dock to the cell and from the cell to the dock by warders and policemen, rumbling through back streets and unfrequented ways in a shiny prison-van. Who came at last to look upon the Owen Saxham of this hideous prison nightmare, the man of whom the Counsel for the Crown reared up, day by day, a monstrously-distorted figure, as quite a different person from the other innocent man whom the defending advocate described in flowery, pathetic sentences as a martyr and the victim of an unheard-of combination of adverse circumstances.

Things went badly. The case against the prisoner looked extremely black. That monstrous figure of Owen Saxham, based upon an ingenious hypothesis of guilt, and plastered over with a marvellous mixture of truths and falsities, facts and conjectures, grew uglier and more sinister every day.

The principal witness, the bereaved husband of the hapless victim, dressed in deep mourning and neatly handled by Counsel, evoked a display of handkerchiefs upon his every appearance in the witness-box, from the smart Society women seated near the Bench. Many of them had been Saxham's patients. Several had made love to him, nearly all of them had made much of him, and quite an appreciable number of them had asked him to be accommodating, and render them temporarily immune against the menace of Maternity. These had received a curt refusal, accompanied with wholesome advice, for which they revenged themselves now, in graceful womanly fashion, by being quite sure the wretched man was guilty. More than possible, was it not? they whispered behind their palm-leaf fans: it was sultry weather, and the vendors of these made little fortunes, hawking them outside. Was it not more than possible that he had been the dead woman's lover? The Crown Counsel improved on this idea. Wretched little Mrs. Bough, of infinitesimal account in Life, had become through Death a person of importance. Much was made out of the fact that she had gone to Chilworth Street some days previously to her deplorable ending, and remained closeted with Dr. Saxham for some time. He had supplied her with a bottle of medicine upon her leaving – medicine of which no memorandum was to be found in his notes for the day. She had taken the first dose then and there. According to the testimony of the Accused, the bottle had contained a harmless bromide sedative. Upon the oath of the Public Analyst, the same bottle, handed by the husband of the deceased woman

to the Police upon the night of her death, and now produced in Court with two or three doses of dark liquid remaining in it, contained a powerful solution of ergotoxine – a much less innocent drug. Who should presume to doubt its administration by the Prisoner, when the label bore directions in his own characteristic handwriting? Who should dare to affirm his innocence, seeing that to him his victim had hastened, almost in the act of death, begging him, with her expiring breath, "not to be hard on a woman," who had ignorantly trusted him, Gentlemen of the Jury! only to find, too late, the deceptive nature of his specious promises? A whip, cried the Bard of Avon, England's glorious, immortal Shakespeare, should be placed in every honest hand to lash such scoundrels naked through the world! Let that whip, in the honest hands of twelve good Britons, be – the verdict of guilt! The Counsel for the Crown, red-hot and perspiring, sat down mopping his streaming face, for it was tropical weather, with the white handkerchief of a blameless life. Irrepressible applause followed, round upon round thudding against the dingy yellow-white walls, beating against the dirty barred skylight of the stifling, close-packed Court. Then the Judge interposed, and the clapping of hands and thumping of stick and sunshade ferrules upon the dirty floor died down, and the Counsel for the Defence got up to plead for his man, who, by the way, he firmly believed to be guilty.

That remembrance made the Dop Doctor merry again, this scorching night in Gueldersdorp, five years later. But it was ugly mirth, especially when he recalled his agony of sympathy upon hearing, through her mother, that Mildred was ill in bed. Ah! how he hated the simpering, whispering, sneering, giggling women in Court when he pictured her, his innocent darling, his sweet girl, suffering for love of him and sorrow for him. David, detained by onerous duties at Regimental Headquarters throughout the whole of the Case, wrote chilly but fraternally expressed letters on blue official paper. Of his mother, of his father, Owen dared not think. Innocent as he was, the shame of his position, the obloquy of the Trial, must be a branding shame to them for ever.

It had killed them, the Dop Doctor remembered, within a few years of each other – the hale old Squire and Madam, his Welsh wife, feared by the South Dorset village folks for her caustic tongue, beloved for her generous heart, her liberal nature. It was Mildred who he had believed would die if the Verdict went against him – Mildred, who had consoled herself so quickly and so well – Mildred, whom he had held a spotless blossom of Paradise, a young saint in purity and singleness of heart, in comparison with those other women.

Bah! what a besotted idiot he had been! She was as they were. The nodding of their towering hats was before his eyes; the subdued titter that accompanied their whispered comments was in his ears; the lavender, white rose, and violet essences with which they perfumed their baths and sprinkled their clothes were in his nostrils; suffocatingly, as his Counsel went on pleading. The intention of his trenchant cross-questioning of Bough, who had lied from the beginning, like a true son of the Devil, his father, showed plainly now. Little by little the evidence accumulated.

Here, free and unsuspect and doing his best to send another man to Penal Servitude, was the man who had all to gain by fixing the guilt upon the Accused. He had sent the woman, his mistress, to the prisoner; he had resented the prisoner's refusal to commit or to abet a dangerous and illegal operation. He had compelled his hapless victim to submit herself to the hands of a wretch who lived by such deeds. Possibly he had sickened of his poor toy – he had told her as much. Possibly he had determined, by a bold and daring stroke, to free himself of a wearisome burden, and let another man pay the penalty for his own crime. The substitution of the lethal drug found in the bottle for the harmless bromide mixture given to Mrs. Bough by Dr. Saxham would naturally suggest itself to such a wretch, whose calculating cleverness had been crowned with success by the culminating masterstroke, admirable in its simplicity, damnable in its fiendish cunning, of sending the unhappy woman whose deliberate murder he had really planned and carried out, to die upon the threshold of the innocent victim of this diabolical plot. Let those who heard hesitate before they played into the hands of a villain by condemning the blameless to suffer! Let them look at the young man before them, whose hard work had won him, early in life, his brilliant position as one of the recognised pioneers of the

new School of Surgery, as an admitted authority on Clinical Medicine, whose wedding-bells – the handkerchiefs came out at this – had rung to-morrow but for this harrowing and bitter stroke of adverse Destiny. Which would they have? Let the Jury decide for Christ or Barabbas! He spoke in all reverence, because the upright, innocent, charitable, self-denying life of a diligent healer of men would support the analogy of Christ-likeness beside that of the principal witness in this Case, the evil liver, the slanderer, the ex-thief and burglar, the English ticket-of-leave man who had emigrated to South Africa eighteen years previously, had enlisted under a false name in the Cape Mounted Police, had deserted, been traced to Kimberley, and there lost sight of, and who, under the name of Bough, had recently returned to England, giving himself out as an Afrikander, and setting up in business in London upon the accumulated savings of a career most probably in keeping with his abominable record.

Warders from Wormwood Scrubbs and Portland Prisons were there to swear to the identity of Abraham Brake, *alias* Lister, *alias* Bough, whose photographs, thumb-prints, and measurements an official from the Criminal Identification Department of Scotland Yard was prepared to place before the Court, for whose re-arrest, as a ticket-of-leave man who had failed to keep in proper touch with the Police, an officer with a warrant waited. What, then, was to be the Verdict of the Jury? Was Dr. Owen Saxham innocent or guilty? If innocent, then, in the name of God, let him go forth from bondage, to the unutterable relief of those who waited in anguish for the Verdict. His father, his mother, and the fair young girl – the Court was drowned in tears at this last touching reference, even his Lordship the Judge being observed to remove and wipe eyeglasses that were gemmy with emotion, as Counsel dwelt upon the touching picture of the sorrowing bride-elect, whose orange-blossoms had been blighted by the breath of this hideous, this unbearable, this most unfounded charge…

XVI

The Judge summed up, with an evident bias in favour of the Accused. An old advocate in criminal causes, his Lordship had formed his own opinion of the principal witness for the Crown, though there was no evidence to prove the guilt of the astute Mr. Abraham Brake, *alias* Lister, *alias* Bough.

The Jury retired, to return immediately. The Verdict "Not Guilty" was received with applause and cheers. Bough departed, to pay the prison penalty of not keeping in touch with the Police… More cheers, strongly deprecated by the Judge. The Dop Doctor could hear that ironical clapping and braying five years off. It was over, over! He was free! Oh, the mockery of the word!

His Counsel shook his hand warmly, and several old friends and colleagues pressed round him with hearty congratulations. Then a telegram was handed to him.

"No bad news, I hope," said the advocate who had defended, seeing Saxham's lips blanch. "You have had enough trouble to last for some time, I imagine?"

"It appears as if my measure was not quite full enough," said Saxham quietly. "My father died suddenly last night, down at our place in South Dorset. The wire says, 'An attack of cerebral hæmorrhage,' probably brought on by worry and distress of mind over this damned affair of mine." He ground his teeth together, and went on: "I must go to my mother without delay. How soon can I get away from here?"

It was oddly difficult to realise that all the doors were open, and that the following shadow of the Man In Blue would no longer dog his footsteps. It was strange to drive home in the brougham of a friend to Chilworth Street, and let himself into the dusty, neglected, close-smelling, shut-up house. All the servants were out; probably they had been making holiday through all the weeks that had preceded the Trial. His man returned as the master finished packing a portmanteau for that journey down to Dorsetshire. Saxham left him to finish while he changed his clothes and scrawled a letter to Mildred. Nothing else but this death could have kept him from hurrying to the embrace of those dear arms. As it was, he half expected her to rush in upon him, stammering, weeping, clinging to him in her overwhelming relief and gladness… At every rumble and stoppage of wheels in the street, at every ring, he made sure that she was coming. But she did not come, and he sent his man to Pont Street with his letter, and went down into Dorsetshire by special train from Waterloo, and found the dead man's dogcart waiting for him, with the old bay cob in harness, and the old coachman who had taught him to ride his pony, waiting, with a band of crape about his sleeve, and drove through the deep, ferny lanes to the old home standing in its mantle of midsummer leafage and blossom in the wide gardens whose myrtle and lavender hedges overhung the beach below. There was a little, old, bent, white-haired woman in a shabby black gown and white India shawl waiting for him on the threshold, and only by the indomitable, unquailing spirit that looked out of her bright black eyes did Owen Saxham recognise his mother. She called him her David's dearest son, and her own boy, and took both his hands, and drew his head down, and kissed him solemnly upon the forehead.

"That is for your father, my dear," she said. "He never doubted you for one moment, Owen. And this is for myself. We have both believed in you implicitly throughout. We would not even write and tell you so. It would have seemed, your father thought, like admitting, tacitly, that we doubted our son. But other people believed you guilty, and oh! Owen, I think it killed him!"

"I know that it has killed him," Owen Saxham said simply. The early morning light showed to the mother's eyes the ravages wrought in her son's face by the mental anguish and the physical strain of those terrible weeks that were over, and Mrs. Saxham, for the first time since the Squire's death, burst into a passion of weeping. Owen's eyes were dry, even when he stooped to kiss the high, broad forehead of the grand old grey head that lay upon the snowy, lavender-scented pillow in the cool, airy

death-chamber, where the perfume of the climbing roses that flowered about the open casements came in drifts across the sharp, clean odour of disinfectant.

Captain Saxham arrived late that night. His greeting of his brother was stiff and constrained; his grey eyes avoided Owen's blue ones; he did not refer to the events of the past ten weeks. He had always had a habit of twisting and biting at one of the short, thick ends of his frizzy light brown moustache. Now he wrenched and gnawed at it incessantly, and his usually florid complexion had deteriorated to a muddy pallor. Black mufti did not suit the handsome martial figure, and there is no dwelling so wearisome as a house of mourning, when the servants move about on tiptoe, wearing faces of funereal solemnity, and the afternoon tea-tray is carried in in state, like the corpse of a domestic usage on its way to the cemetery, with the silver spirit-kettle bubbling behind it as chief mourner. But, as the elder son, there was plenty to occupy Captain Saxham. There was business to be transacted with the Squire's solicitor, with his bailiff, with one or two of the principal tenants. There were the arrangements to be made for the Funeral, and for the extension of hospitality to relatives and friends who came from a distance to attend it. When it was over and the long string of County carriages had driven home to their respective coach-houses, Owen Saxham returned to town.

"Give my dear love to Mildred. Tell her, if she grudged the first sight of you to me, she will forgive me when she has a son of her own," his mother said.

"You talk as though she were my wife!" he said, the bitter lines about his set mouth softening in a smile.

"She would be but for what is past," said Mrs. Saxham. "She must be soon, for your sake. Your father would have wished that there should be as little delay as possible. Marry quietly at once, and take her abroad. If she loves you, as I know she does, and must, she will not regret the wedding-gown from Paquin's and the six bridesmaids in Directoire hats."

For that deferred wedding was to have been a gorgeous and impressive function at St. George's, Hanover Square, with a Bishop in lawn sleeves to pronounce the nuptial benediction, palms, Japanese lilies, smilax, and white Rambler roses everywhere, while the celebrated "Non Angli sed Angeli" choir of boy-choristers had been specially engaged to render the anthem with proper fervour and give due effect to "The Voice that Breathed."

Owen promised and went back to London. There were cards and envelopes upon the salver in the hall, but not one from Mildred. That stabbed him to the heart… Not a line, O God! – not a written line, in answer to that letter in which he told her of the acquittal, and of his father's death, and of his own anguish at having to answer the stern call of filial duty, and leave dear Love uncomforted by even one kiss after all these weeks of famine, and hurry away to lay that grand grey head in the vault that covered so many Saxhams. Not a line. But here was the letter, which his idiot of a servant, demoralised by the recent catastrophe, had forgotten to send on lying waiting upon the writing-table in his study. He snatched at it in desperate haste, and tore the envelope open.

Her letter bore the date of that day. She said she had written before and torn the confession up … it was so difficult to be just to him and true to herself… It was a roundabout, involved, youthfully grandiloquent epistle in which Mildred announced that her love for Owen was dead, that nothing could ever resuscitate it; that she could not, would not, ever marry him, and that she had returned in an accompanying packet his ring, and presents, and letters, and would ever remain *his friend* (underlined) Mildred. In a rather wobbly postscript, she begged him not to write or to attempt to see her, because her decision was irrevocable. She spelt the word with only one *r*.

Saxham read the letter three times deliberately. The walls of the castle he had built, and fondly believed to be a work of Cyclopean masonry, had come tumbling about his ears, and lo! the huge blocks were only bits of painted card, and the Lady of the Castle, his true love, was the false Queen, after all. He folded up the letter and put it away in his pocket-book, and went over to the mantel-glass and looked steadily at the reflection of his own square face, haggard and drawn and ghastly, with eyes of startling blue flaring out from under a scowling smudge of meeting black eyebrows. He laughed

harshly, and a mocking devil looked out of those desperate eyes, and laughed back. He unlocked an oak-carved, silver-mounted cellaret, and got out a decanter of brandy, and filled a tumbler, and drank the liquor off. It numbed the unbearable mental agony, though it had apparently no other effect. But probably he was drunk when he rang the bell and said quietly to his man:

"Tait, do you believe there is a God?"

Tait's smooth, waxy countenance did not easily express surprise. He answered, as though the question had been the most commonplace and ordinary of queries:

"Can't say I do, sir. I reckon the parsons are responsible for floating 'Im, and that they made a precious good thing out of bearin' stock in Heaven until the purchasers began to ask for delivery, and after that…" He chuckled dryly. "I've lived with one or two of 'em, and, if I may say so, sir – I know the breed!"

"He knows … the breed …" repeated Saxham heavily.

He asked another question, in the same thick, hesitating way, as he moved across the carpet to the oak-and-silver cellaret.

"Tait, when things went damned badly with you, when that other man let you in for the bill you backed for him, and that girl you were to have married went off with someone else, what did you do to keep yourself from brooding? Because you must have done something, man, as you're alive to-day!"

Tait looked at his master dubiously as he poured out more brandy, and went over and stood upon the hearthrug with his back to the empty fireplace, drinking it in gulps. "I did what you're doing now, sir: I took a sight of drink to keep the trouble down. And – " He hesitated.

"Go on," said Saxham, nodding over the tumbler.

"You're not like other gentlemen in your ways, sir," said smooth Tait, "and that makes me 'esitate in saying it. But I took on a gay, agreeable young woman of the free-and-easy sort, and went in for a bit o' pleasure, and more drink along with it. One nail drives out another, you know, sir. And if the young lady have thrown you hover – "

"Why, you damned, white-gilled, prying brute! you must have been reading my correspondence," said Saxham thickly, as he lifted the tumbler to his mouth.

Tait grinned. He could venture to tell his master, drunk, what he would not have dared to tell him sober.

"No need for that, sir. I've come and gone between this house and Pont Street too often not to know what was in the wind. Why, Captain Saxham was there with her often and often when you never suspected…"

The tumbler fell from Saxham's hand, and struck the fender, and smashed into a hundred glittering bits.

"Go!" said Tait's master, perfectly, suddenly, dangerously sober, and pointing to the door. The man delayed to finish his sentence.

"While you were in Holloway, sir, and all through the Trial…"

The door, contrary to Tait's discreet, usual habit, had been left open. He vanished through it with harlequin-like agility as a terrible, white-faced black figure seemed to leap upon him…

"I've 'ad an escape for my life!" he said, having reached in a series of bounds the safer regions below stairs.

"Of the Doctor?.. Go on with your rubbishing nonsense!" said the cook.

"What did you go and do to upset 'im, pore dear?" demanded the housemaid, who was more imaginative, and cherished the buddings of a romantic passion for one who should be for ever nameless:

"Her at Pont Street has wrote to give 'im the go-by – that's what she've done," said pale-faced Tait, wiping his dewy brow. "And seeing the Doctor for the first time since I've been in his service a bit overtook with liquor, and more free and easy like than customary – being a gentleman you or

me would 'esitate to take a liberty with in the ordinary way o' things – I thought I'd let 'im know about the Goings On."

"Of them two…" interpolated the cook – "Her and the Captain?"

"Shameless, I call 'em!" exclaimed the incandescent housemaid as Tait signified assent.

"'Aven't they kep' it dark, though!" wondered the cook.

"They're what I call," stated Tait, who had not quite got over the desertion of the young woman he was to have married, and who had gone off with somebody else, "a precious downy couple. And what I say is – it's a Riddance!"

"How did 'e take it, pore dear?" gulped the housemaid.

"Like he's took everythink – that is, up to the present moment," admitted Tait. "But this is about the last straw."

The housemaid dissolved in tears.

"He'll get another young lady," said the cook confidently. "And him so 'andsome an' so clever, an' with such heaps of carriage-swells for patients."

Tait shook his prim, respectable head.

"The swells'll show their tongues to another man now, my gal, who 'asn't the dirt of the Old Bailey on his coat-sleeve. Whistle for patients now, that's what the doctor may. Why, every one of 'em has paid their bills, and them that haven't have asked for their accounts to be sent in. And it's 'Lady So-and-so presents her compliments,' instead of 'Dear Dr. Saxham.' Done for, he is, at least as far as the West End's concerned… Mind, I don't set up to be infallible, but experience justifies a certain amount of cocksureness, and what I say is – Done for! Best he can do is – sell the practice, and lease, and plate, and pictures, furniture, and so on, for whatever he can get – the movables would have provoked spirited biddin' at auction if the verdict had been Guilty, but, under the circumstances, they won't bring a twentieth part of their valoo – and go Abroad." Tait's gesture was large and vague.

"Foreign parts. Pore dear, it do seem cruel!" sighed the cook.

"And 'is young lady false to 'im, and all. I wonder he don't do away with hisself," sobbed the housemaid. "I do, reely!"

"With all them wicked knives and deadly bottles handy," added the cook.

"Not him!" said Tait. "I'm ready to lay any man the sporting odd against him committing sooicide. He's not the sort. Lord! what was that?"

That was only the oversetting of a chair upstairs.

XVII

While the servants talked in the kitchen the master had been sitting quietly in the darkening study. All without and within the man was eddying, swirling blackness. Heat beat and glowed upon his forehead, like the radiation from molten metal; there was a winnowing and fanning as of giant wings or leaping of furnace-fires. The blood in his throbbing temples sang a dull, tuneless song. But presently he became aware of another kind of singing.

It was a little hissing voice that came from the inside of the oak-and-silver cellaret. And it sang a song that the man who sat near had never heard before.

"Why think of the sharp lancet or the keen razor, why long for the swift dismissing pang of the fragrant acid, or the leap down upon the railway-track under the crushing, pulping iron wheels?" sang the little voice. "I can give you Forgetfulness. I can bring you Death. Not that death of the body which, for all you know, may mean a keener, more perfect capability to live and suffer on the part of the Soul, stripped from the earthly husk that has burdened and deadened it. The Death that is Death in Life… Here am I, ready to be your minister. Drink deep, and die!"

The man who heard lifted his white, wild, desperate face. The song came more clearly.

"Wronged, outraged, betrayed of the God you blindly believed in and the man and the woman who had your passionate love, your absolute faith, have your revenge upon the One – as upon those two others. Degrade, cast down, deface, the image of your Maker in you. Hurl back every gift of His, prostitute and debase every faculty. Cease to believe, denying His Being with the Will He forged and freed. Your Body, is it not your own, to do with as you choose? Your Soul, is it not your helpless prisoner, while you keep it in its cage of clay? Revenge, revenge, through the body and the soul, upon Him who has mocked you! Do you not hear Him laugh as you sit there desolate in the darkness – poor, broken reed that thought itself an oak of might – alone, while your brother kisses the sweet lips that were yours. David and Mildred are laughing too, at you. Hasten to efface every memory of the lying kisses she has given you upon the bosoms of the Daughters of Pleasure! Love, revel, drink! Drink, I say, and you will be able to laugh at the One and the two…"

The little hissing voice drove Saxham mad. He leaped up, frenzied, oversetting the chair. He tore open and threw wide the doors of the oak-and-silver cellaret, and sought in it with shaking hands. He found a bottle of champagne and the brandy-decanter, and a long tumbler, and knocked off the wired neck of the bottle against the chimneypiece, and crashed the foaming wine into the crystal, and filled up the glass with brandy, and tossed off the stinging, bubbling, hissing mixture, and laughed as he set the tumbler down.

The thing inside the oak-and-silver cellaret laughed too.

* * * * *

The hall-door shut heavily as Tait and the women in the kitchen sat and listened. They had not spoken since the crash of the falling chair in the room overhead. The area-door was open to the hot, sickly night air of London in midsummer. Tait slid noiselessly out and listened as his master hailed a passing hansom and jumped lightly in. The flaps banged together, the driver pulled open the roof-trap and leaned down to catch the shouted address. Tait's sharp ear caught it too, and the knowing grin that decorated the features of the cabman was reflected upon his decent smug countenance. His tongue was in his cheek as he returned to the kitchen. For his master had given the direction of a house of ill-fame.

Thenceforwards the door would have shut for ever upon the strenuous, honourable, cleanly, useful life of Owen Saxham, were it not that the For Ever of humanity means only a little space of

years with God – sometimes only a little space of hours. Saxham did not need the evidence of the shower of cheques from people who hated paying, the request from the Committee of his Club that he would resign membership, the averted faces of his acquaintances, the elaborate cordiality of his friends, to tell him what he knew already. As the astute Tait had said, as Society knew already, he was a ruined man. He had made money, but the enormous expenses of the Defence swallowed up thousands. By bringing an action against the Treasury he might have recovered a portion of the costs – so he was told, but he had had enough of Law. He resigned his post at the Hospital, in spite of a thinly-worded remonstrance from the Senior Physician. He dismissed his servants generously. He disposed of his lease and furniture and other property through a firm of auctioneers who robbed him, and sold what stocks he had not realised upon, and wrote a farewell letter to his mother, and sailed for South Africa. Thenceforwards he was to build his nest with the birds of night, and rise from the stertorous sleep that is born of drunkenness only to drink himself drunk again.

From assiduous letter-writing friends David heard reports of his brother that grieved him deeply. He told these things to Mildred, and they shook their heads over them and sighed together. Poor Owen! It was most fortunate for his family that the Jury had taken so lenient a view of the case … otherwise …! They were quite certain in their own minds that poor Owen had been culpable, if not guilty. They were married six months later. The Directoire hats were out of date, of course, but Louis Quinze, with Watteau trimmings suited the six bridesmaids marvellously, and the "Non Angli sed Angeli" choir rendered the Anthem and the "Voice that Breathed" to perfection.

And Mildred, who never omitted her nightly prayers, made a special petition for the reformation of poor misguided Owen upon her wedding-night.

"Because we are so happy," she told David, who had found her kneeling, white and exquisitely virginal in her lace and cambric draperies by the bedside. "And *he* must be so miserable. And you know, though I never *really* cared for him, he was perfectly devoted to me."

"Who could help it?" cooed enamoured David, and knelt and kissed his bride's white feet. The white feet would show no ugly stains, although to reach the bridal bed, towards which her husband now drew her, they must tread upon his brother's bleeding heart.

XVIII

The Dop Doctor lifted his head as the bell of the front door rang loudly at the back passage-end. Two mounted officers of the Military Staff at Gueldersdorp had trotted up the street with an orderly behind them a moment before. The elder of the two had pulled sharply up in front of the green door whose brass-plate flamed in the last rays of sunset. He had dismounted lightly and gone up the steps and rung, saying something to his companion. The other officer had saluted and ridden on, as though to carry out some order: the orderly had come up and got off his horse and taken the bridle of the officer's, as the Dutch dispensary-attendant, Koets, had plodded heavily along the passage and opened the door, and now slouched heavily back, ushering in a presumable patient.

"Light the lamp," said the Dop Doctor in Dutch to the factotum, as he rose up heavily out of his chair. "It will be dark directly."

"There is no need of more light, I am obliged to you," said the stranger, cool, alert, brown of face as of dress: a thin man, distinct of speech, quiet of manner, and with singularly vivid eyes of light hazel. "In the actual dark I can see quite clearly. A matter of training and habit, because I began life as a short-sighted lad. Do we need your assistant further?"

In indirect answer to the pointed question, the Dop Doctor turned to the Dutch dispensary-assistant, and said curtly:

"Ga uit!"

Koets went, not without a scowl at the visitor.

"A sulky man and a surly master," thought the stranger, scanning with those observant eyes of his the gaunt figure in the shabby tweed suit. "Has seen trouble and lived hard," he added, mentally noting the haggard lines of the square face under the massive forehead, over which a plume of badly-brushed hair, black with threads of grey in it, fell awkwardly.

"English and a University man, I should say. Those clothes were cut by a Bond Street tailor in the height of fashion about five years ago. And the man is in the second stage of recovery from a bout of drunkenness – unless he drugs?" But even while the visitor was taking these memoranda, he was saying in the customary tone of polite inquiry:

"I have, I think, the pleasure of speaking to Dr. Williams?"

"Sir, you have not. Dr. De Boursy-Williams has left for Cape Town with his family. You are speaking to his temporary substitute." The bloodshot blue eyes met his own indifferently.

"Indeed! Well, I do not grudge the family if, as I believe is the case, it chiefly ranks upon the distaff side. But the Doctor will miss a good deal of interesting practice. As to yourself, you will allow the inquiry… Are you a surgeon as well as a medical practitioner?"

"If I were not, I should not be here."

"I will put my question differently. I trust you will not consider its repetition offensive. Have you an extensive experience in dealing with gunshot wounds?"

Saxham said roughly:

"I have experience to a certain extent. I will go no further than to say so. I am not undergoing examination as to my professional capabilities that I am aware of, and if you doubt them you are perfectly at liberty to seek medical advice elsewhere."

"My good sir, I *have* been elsewhere, and the other doctor, when he learned the purport of my visit, relished it as little as your principal is likely to do. With the imminent prospect of a siege before us, we are making …" The speaker, slipping one hand behind him, moved a step backwards and nearer to the room-door. "As I said, sir, with the imminent prospect of a siege before us, we are making a house-to-house requisition… Ah, I thought as much!"

The door-knob had been quietly turned, the door suddenly pulled open, bringing with it Koets, the Dutch dispensary-attendant, whose large red ear had been glued to the outer keyhole.

"Your Dutch factotum has been listening. Pick yourself off the mat, Jan, and take yourself out of earshot." The stranger whistled the beginning of a pleasant little tune, with a flavour of Savoy Opera about it.

"Ik heb not the neem of Jan," snarled the detected Koets, retiring in disorder.

The whistler left off in the middle of a deftly-executed embellishment to say: "Unfortunate; because I don't know the Dutch word for spy." The keen hazel eyes and the haggard blue ones met, and there was the faint semblance of a smile on the grim mouth of the Dop Doctor. Keeping the door open, the visitor went on:

"I have some notes here – entries copied from the Railway freight-books. Three weeks ago twenty carboys of carbolic acid, with a considerable consignment of other antiseptics, surgical necessaries, drugs, and so forth were delivered to Dr. Williams' order at this address. Frankly, as the officer commanding Her Majesty's troops on this border, I am here to make a sequestration of the things I have mentioned, with all other medical and surgical requisites stored upon the premises, that are likely to be of use to us at the Hospital. In the name of the Imperial Government."

The smile died out on the grim mouth. A sombre anger burned in the blue eyes of the haggard man in shabby tweeds.

"Damn the Imperial Government!" said the Dop Doctor.

The stranger nodded in serious assent. "Certainly, damn it! It is your privilege and mine, shared in common with all other Britons, to damn our Government, as long as we remain loyal to our Queen and country."

The other man quivered with a sudden uncontrollable spasm of hate, rage, and loathing. He clenched his hand and shook it in the air as he cried:

"You employ the stock phrases of your profession. They have long ceased to mean anything to me. I have been the victim and the sacrifice of British laws. I have been formally pardoned by the State for a crime I never committed. I have been robbed, plundered, ruined, betrayed, by the monstrous thing that bears the name of British Justice. And as I loathe and hate it, so do I cast off and repudiate the name of Englishman. You speak of the imminent prospect of a siege. What other causes have operated to bring it about but British greed, and the British lust for paramountcy and suzerainty and possession? Liberal, or Conservative, or Radical, or Unionist, the diplomats and lawyers and financiers who urge on your political machinery by bombast and bribes and catchwords and lying promises, are swayed by one motive – governed by one desire – lands and diamonds and gold. Wealth that is the property of other men, soil that has been fertilised by the sweat of a nation of agriculturists, whom Great Britain despised until she learned that gold lay under their orchards and cornfields." He broke into a jarring laugh. "And it is for these, the robbers and desperadoes, that the British Army is to do its duty, and for them that De Boursy-Williams is to help pay the piper. As for his property, which you are about to commandeer in the name of the British Imperial Government, I suppose I am legally responsible, being left here in charge. Well, be it so!.. I can only protest against what I am free to regard as an act of brigandage, reflecting small credit upon your Service, and leave you, sir, to discover the whereabouts of the carboys for yourself!"

He waved his hand contemptuously, and swung towards the door.

"A moment," said the other man, "in which to assure you that the fullest acknowledgments will be given in the case of the stores, and that their owner will be paid for them liberally and ungrudgingly. And, granting that much of what you have said is true, and that the leaven of self-seeking is to be found in every man's nature, and that greed is the predominating motive with those men who, more than others, work for the building-up of an Empire and the profitable union of Britain with her Colonies, don't you think that there may be something in the good old footballer's motto, 'Play the game, that your side may win'?"

The Dop Doctor made a slight sound that might have been of indifferent assent or of contradiction. The other chose to take it as assent.

"Take the present situation, purely as football. They have picked me as a forward player. And I mean – to play the game!"

The Dop Doctor might or might not have heard. His square, impassive face looked as if carved in stone.

"To play the game, Doctor. Perhaps I have my bone or two to pick with – several of the Institutions of my country. Possibly, but I mean to play the game. Fate has ridden me on a saddle-gall or two, and mixed too much chopped straw in proportion to the beans, but – there's the game, and I'm going to play it for all I'm worth. As an old University man, that way of looking at things ought to appeal to you."

Still no answer from the big, sullen, black-haired man in the shabby worn clothes. But his breathing was a little quickened, and a faint, smouldering glow of something not yet quenched in him showed in the haggard blue eyes.

"It's a confoundedly handicapped game, too, on the defending side. Doesn't that fact rather appeal to the sportsman in you, Doctor?"

The other said slowly:

"I gather that the struggle will be unequal. It was stated in my hearing yesterday afternoon that a considerable force of Boers were advancing on Gueldersdorp from the direction of Geitfontein, and, later, that another large body of them were on the march along the river-valley from the west. I did not attempt to verify what I had heard from my own observation. I was – otherwise engaged." The half-incredulous surprise that the other man could not keep out of his eyes stung him into adding: "Frankly, I did not care to trouble. It did not interest me."

The Colonel said, with a dry chuckle:

"No? But it will presently, though! And, seen through the glass even now, it's an instructive spectacle. Masses of Dutchmen, well-weaponed and thoroughly fed if insufficiently washed, gathering in all quarters – marching to the assembly points, dismounting, unlimbering, going into laager. Ten thousand Boers, at a rough estimate, not counting the blacks they have armed against us… And, behind our railway-sleepers and sand-bags, eight hundred fighting European units, twenty per cent, of them raw civilians; and seven thousand neutral Barala and Kaffirs and Zulus in the native Stad – an element of danger lying dormant, waiting the spark that may hurry us all sky-high… By God, Doctor, the game's worth playing, except by cowards and curs!"

The smouldering glow in the Dop Doctor's eyes had been fanned into a fire. The visitor saw the flame leap, and went on:

"There's a native proverb – I wonder whether you know it? – a kind of Zulu version of the regimental motto, *Vestigia nulla retrorsum*. It runs like this: '*If we go forward, we die; if we go backward, we die. Better go forward and die.*'" He reached out a long, lean, brown right hand. "Come forward with us, Doctor. We can do with a man like you!"

The impassive face broke up. Saxham gripped the offered hand as a drowning man might have done. He cried out hoarsely:

"You don't know the sort of man I am, Colonel. But everybody else in this cursed place knows, or should know. They call me the Dop Doctor. You understand what that nickname implies?" He held out his shaking hands. "Look at these! They would tell you the truth, even if I lied. What use can a man like me be to you, or men like you? I am a drunkard, sir. I have not gone to bed sober one night in the last five years!"

There was a pause before the Colonel answered, filled up in the odd way characteristic of the man by a softly-whistled repetition of the opening bars of the pleasant little tune. Then he said quietly and dryly:

"There is another proverb, not Latin nor Zulu, but English, which impresses on us that it is never too late to mend!" He looked at a tarnished Waterbury watch, worn on a horse's lip-strap. "I am due to inspect the Hospital tomorrow at ten o'clock sharp. If you will meet me there punctually

at the half-hour, I shall have the pleasure of introducing you to – your Colleagues of the Medical Staff. And now, if you please, as I have just five minutes left to spare, we will have a look at those carboys of carbolic."

"They are in the old Chinese godown at the bottom of the garden," said Saxham. He felt in one of the baggy pockets of the old tweed coat, pulled out a key, and offered it silently to the conqueror, who motioned it back.

"Keep it, if you'll be so good. We'll send a waggon and a careful man or two round from the Army Service Stores Department within an hour; for that stuff in your friend's carboys is more precious than rubies to us just now – a man's life in every teaspoonful. And if, as you tell me, there is some mercurial perchloride, Taggart and the Medical Staff will jump for joy. What we owe to Lister, Koch, and those fellows! You'd say so if you'd ever seen gangrene on War Hospital scale – in Afghanistan, in 1880, even as recently as the Zululand Campaign of 1888. The Pathan and the Zulu are slim, and the Boer is even slimmer, but the wiliest customer of 'em all is the Microbe. No wonder Wellington's old campaigners used to slit the throats of badly-wounded soldiers, or that the ambulance-men of Soult and Bonaparte were merciful enough to knock on the head every poor beggar who had been bayonetted in the body. They knew there was not the atom of a chance. But to-day we know how to deal with the invisible enemy. Thanks to Antiseptic Surgery, that younger daughter of Science and Genius, as some smart fellow puts it in the *National Review*."

And the pleasant little tune was whistled through to its final grace-note as the two men went down the house-passage and crossed the garden. Verily, to some other men that have lived since Peter of the Nets has it been given to be fishers of their kind! This man said that night to an officer of the Staff:

XIX

"I landed twenty carboys of carbolic to-day, and a lot of other Hospital stores, by talking football to a man who knows the game, chiefly from the ball's point of view."

"That counts to you, Colonel," called out Beauvayse, the Chief's fair, boyish junior aide-de-camp, from the bottom of the table, "against the awful failure you were grousing about this morning."

"Ah! you mean when I tried to frighten some Sisters of Mercy into leaving the town by painting them a luridly-coloured verbal picture of the perils of the present situation," said the Colonel. His keen hazel eyes twinkled, though his mouth was grave. "I ought to have remembered that you can't scare a religious, be he or she Roman Catholic, Buddhist, or Mohammedan, by pointing to the King of Terrors. He does to frighten lay-folk, but for the others Death's grisly skeleton-hand holds out the Keys of Heaven."

"What will it hold for some of us others, I wonder," said one of the dinner-guests, a moody-looking civilian, of Semitic features, whose evening clothes made a dull contrast with the mess-dress of the Staff officers gathered about their Chief's table in his quarters at Nixey's Hotel on the Market Square, "before this month is out?"

The host leaned forward to reply:

"My dear Mr. Levison … special mention in Despatches Above, with honours and promotion for those of us who have been approved worthy. For others, who have tried and failed, a merciful overlooking of blunders, a generous acceptance of the intention where the performance came short… And for the rest … a grave on the yellow veld in the shadow of a rock or thorn-bush, with the turquoise sky of day overhead, shimmering in the white-hot sunshine; or an ocean of purple ether, ridden by what old Lucian called 'the golden galley of the regnant Moon.' That in South Africa; and at home in England, one's memory kept warm and living in, say, three hearts that recognised the best in one, and loved it. A mother's heart, the heart of a friend – and *hers*!"

There was no insincerity of flattery in the hum of applauding comment that ensued. All earnest original thought has beauty; and this man could not only think, but clothe his thoughts in direct and simple language, and add to it the charm of well-modulated and musical utterance.

"I call that good enough," said the senior Staff Officer, a dark, handsome, eagle-faced Guardsman, who bore a great historic name, "for you or me or any other fellow here – we're not taking into account the living dead ones."

The Chief leaned forward in his characteristic attitude, and spoke, a long, lean brown forefinger emphasising the sentences, his hawk-keen glance driving them home. "I tell you, Leighbury, that some of those, the rottenest corpses among 'em, will shed their grave-clothes, and rise up and do the deeds of living men before, to quote Levison, this month is out. Never take it for granted that a man is dead until the grass is growing high over his bare bones, and don't make too sure even then! Because to-day I saw such dry bones move – and it's an instructive if an uncanny sight."

"Whose were the bones, Colonel?" called out the handsome young aide at the bottom of the table.

The host, his thin, brown fingers busy at the clipped moustache, was listening to the Mayor of Gueldersdorp, who sat upon his right. He withdrew his attentive eyes from that stalwart sportsman's broad, ruddy countenance, to glance smilingly at the fair, handsome face, and reply:

"Whose? Well, up to the present they have belonged to the Dop Doctor."

"That man!" The Mayor, in the act of taking another slice of the roast, looked round as at the mention of a name familiar, shrugging his portly shoulders. "Surely you know who the fellow is, Colonel? He drifted up here from Cape Colony three years ago. A capable – confoundedly capable man, handicapped by a severe muscular strain," the Mayor's twinkling eye heralded the resurrection of an ancient jest – "contracted in lifting a cask of whisky – a glass at a time!"

White teeth flashed in alert tanned faces. The schoolboy laugh went round the table; then the Babel of talk rose up again. Most of these men were quite young … their seniors barely middle-aged, not a man but was what they themselves would have termed both "fit" and "keen." They had wrought for many days in the erection of sand-bag defences, in the digging of trenches, in the drilling of Baraland Irregulars and Rifle Volunteers and the newly-enrolled Town Guard. This was the pleasant social time of lull before the storm, and they were not to get many more good dinners or peaceful nights in bed for a long siege to come. They did not show outwardly the tension of strung nerves that waited, as the whole world waited, for the echo of the first shot, rattling amongst the low hills to the south. Nor did it occur to them that there was anything heroic or dramatic in their quiet unaffected pose. Gathered together upon one little spot of border earth destined to be the vital, tragic, throbbing centre of great events and tremendous issues, actions glorious, and deeds scarce paralleled upon the page of History, let us look upon them, well-groomed, well-bred, easy-mannered, cheery, demolishing the good dishes furnished by the *chef* of Nixey's Hotel, with the hungry zest of schoolboys, exchanging fusillades of not very brilliant chaff.

Scraps of scientific and technical conversation with reference to telephonic and telegraphic installations between outlying forts and headquarters, electric communication with mines, automatic warning-apparatus, the most effective methods of constructing bomb-proof shelters, the comparative merits of Maxim and Nordenfeldt, crossed in the air like fragments of bursting projectiles, impelled by those admirable engines of destruction. Mingled with reminiscences of cricket, golf, tennis, polo, and motoring, then in its infancy; anecdotes new and old, and conjectures as to what the fellows at home were doing? Hurlingham and Ranelagh, Maidenhead and Henley, Eton and Oxford, Sandhurst and Aldershot, Piccadilly in the season, Simla in the heats, the results for Kempton Park and Newmarket Races – of all these they talked, with rhino and elephant shooting and the big battues of pheasants now taking place in the Home Midlands and up North. But though the watch-fires of their pickets burned upon the veld, and though the Boer lay in laager over the Border, of him they said not one word. That reticence upon the vital point was characteristically English. The excitable Gaul would have wept, kneaded his manly bosom, and alluded to his mother; the stolid Muscovite would have wept also, referring to his Little Father, the Czar; the Teuton would have poured forth oceans of turgid sentiment about the Fatherland; the dignified Spaniard would have recognised himself as a warrior upon the verge of a Homeric struggle, and said so candidly; the hysterical American would have sung "Hail, Columbia!" and waved pocket-handkerchief-sized replicas of the Star-Spangled Banner until too exhausted to agitate or vocalise. But to these men indulgence in sentiment was "bad form," and unrestrained patriotic utterance merely "gas," tainting the air with an odour as of election-eggs or sulphuretted hydrogen. Therefore were many words to be avoided.

A pose, if you will, an affectation, this studied avoidance of all appearance of enthusiasm or excitement; showing the weak spot in the armour of these heroes, henceforth to be of epic fame. But Man is essentially a weak being. It is only when the immortal spirit of him nerves the frame of perishable bone and muscle that he rises to heights that are sublime. Such souls of fire burned within these men, that when the Wind of Death blew coldest and the lead-and-iron hail beat hardest, they only glowed more fiercely radiant; and Want and Privation, instead of weakening, only seemed to make them more strong; – strong to endure, strong to foresee plots and avert perils and oppose wit to cunning, and strategy to deceit; so strong that, by reason of their strength, that little frontier town became a fortress of Titans. And their names, other than those I have given them in this story, shall go ringing down the grooves of Time, until Time itself shall be no more.

XX

While they ate and drank, laughed, and chatted, the man who was to be their comrade, sharer in all those perils and privations yet to come, was tramping up and down the bare boards of the dingy bedchamber in Harris Street, wrestling desperately with his tragic thirst.

"Why did he come and look at me, and take me by the hand, and awaken my deadened senses to the sting of anguish that has no name? Why could he not have left me alone in this living death I had attained!" he cried. "When first I took to the infernal, blessed liquor, it was for the sake of respite from mental pain, torture unbearable. Then I was a man, only unhappy. Now I am lower than the lowest of the sensible, cleanly, decent brutes, because I desire the drink for its own sake, and find gratification in physical degradation. O God, if Thou indeed art, and I must perforce return to live the life of a man amongst men, help to burst the chains that fetter me! Help me to be free!"

He swallowed a great draught of water, and stumbled to the unused bed, and threw himself across it, raging and panting, and defiant of the very Power he invoked. And then, against hope, sleep came to him, drowning memory and obliterating thought, and relieving physical suffering. The lines smoothed out of the heavy forehead, and the grim mouth relaxed in the smile that his dead mother had kissed, coming in with the shaded candle to look at her sleeping boy.

Just as the Mayor of Gueldersdorp, that stalwart Yorkshireman, mighty hunter of elephant, rhino, giraffe, and lion in the reckless days of bloodshed that were before the introduction of the Game Laws into South Africa, was saying to the Colonel:

"Irreclaimable, sir. Hopeless! A confirmed drunkard, who has soaked away all self-respect, who has been cautioned and warned and fined a score of times, by myself and other magistrates. Dr. de Boursy-Williams, our leading practitioner here, has taken the fellow under his wing, in a manner – bails him out when it is necessary, and, I believe, when the man is sober enough, gives him work in his dispensary and allows him to administer the anæsthetic when it's a question of a surgical operation. Wonder he trusts him, for my part! Yet De Boursy-Williams is a remarkably successful operator, and hardly ever loses a case. It is unfortunate that he should have been called away to Cape Town at this juncture."

"He has left Dr. Saxham as *locum tenens*, I understand."

The Mayor shrugged his portly shoulders

"As to his qualifications, there's no doubt. Ranked high at one time as a London West End specialist. I have seen his name myself in a British Medical Directory of some years back as principal visiting-surgeon to St. Stephen's and the Ludgate Hospital for Diseases of the Chest. Has written books – scientific works that are quoted now. Must have been making money hand-over-hand when the collapse came. The usual thing – one slip – and a Police-court Inquiry follows, and down goes the unlucky wretch with the Crown on top of him, and all the Press pack yelping for soft snaps. True, the finding of the Jury was 'Not Guilty,' but the fact of there having been a prosecution was enough to ruin Saxham professionally. Ah, I thought you must have heard the name!"

For the listener had moved suddenly. He did remember the name of the distinguished London practitioner who had been discreditably mixed up in the case of Mrs. Bough, the young, miserable, murdered creature, who might possibly have been the daughter of Richard Mildare. Tough and cool as his tried nerves were, he shuddered at the thought, and a sickly heat made the points of perspiration stand out upon his forehead. But the Mayor, good man, was prosing on:

"I can't say the facts of the case are very clear in my recollection, but I have a file of the *Daily Wire* at home, extending over six years back, so the Criminal Court proceedings must be reported in it. The woman's name, I do remember, was Bough. As regards her age, now you ask me" – for the Colonel had put a quick question – "I fancy she must have been twenty-two or three. Indeed, I am

almost certain that was the age as stated by the Medical Witness for the Prosecution… However, I'll go into the reports and let you know for certain."

"Thank you, Mr. Mayor. And, in case those *Daily Wire* files are bomb-proof, possibly it would be better to take the family with you – and stop until times improve."

"Not bad, not half bad, Colonel! But to tell the truth, I wouldn't miss what we used to call the shindy, and these boys of yours term the 'scrap' for a pile of Kruger sovereigns. And – I can shoot better than most men, if I am in the sere and yellow sixties." The Mayor was slightly ruffled; the diplomatic touch smoothed him down.

"My money is on you, Mr. Mayor, when it comes to stopping a Boer with a rifle-bullet at four hundred yards. By the way, I have a little confidence to repose in you. When you meet – as I am convinced you will meet – Dr. Saxham at the Hospital or elsewhere, metaphorically clothed and in his right mind, and in the active discharge of duties which no man, judging by your own testimony, is better fitted to perform, let him down gently."

The Mayor, conscious of civic dignity and magisterial warnings from the Bench ignored, swelled obviously.

"My dear sir, you can't let the Dop Doctor down anyhow. He is – just about as low as a man can get – short of being underground."

"Lend him a hand up – in the first instance – by forgetting that confounded nickname which I was clumsy enough to blurt out just now. Be oblivious of what he is, because of what he has been in the past, and will be in the future. For there is tremendous stuff in the fellow even now – or I am a bad judge of men."

"Colonel, you're a thundering bad judge of drunkards, from the Bench's point of view, but you'd be a damned good special pleader for a client in need of all the excuses that could be trumped up for him."

"We all have something we'd like to have an excuse for, Mr. Mayor." The keen hawk-eyes held a twinkle in reserve. "There was a man I knew, a mighty hunter before the Lord – and before the Game Laws." The thin brown fingers of the muscular hard-palmed hand played with the stem of a wineglass as the sentences came out, crisp and pointed. "Well, this is the story of a mistake, and an old *shikari* of your experience can find even more excuses for it than I can … but perhaps I bore you?"

"On the contrary – on the contrary, sir."

The fish had taken the bait, remained to play the quivering captive until his last swirling struggle brought him within reach of the skilful dip and lift of the angler's net.

"It was about four years ago, in the Portuguese coast-lands, South of the Zambesi, where elephants are to be had, and rhino, particularly the Keitloa variety with the long posterior horn, and a bad habit of charging the man behind the 600 bore…"

Mr. Mayor's capacious white waistcoat was agitated by a subterranean chuckle. His double chin shook merrily. "A side shot through the head – solid bullet – is the best cure for that, Colonel. But you had to wait in the high swamp-grass and keep the wind of him, and make sure of your aim."

"Quite so. This man, from the shelter of a rock, waited to make sure of his aim. The rhino was feeding tsetse as he dozed in the high swamp-grass. His biggest horn showed, and a bit of his shiny black skin. One forward lunge of the brute's head – and the hunter could get that side-shot. For that he waited, patience being, as we know, a virtue to be cultivated by the successful stalker of big game – "

The Mayor, boiled prawn-pink to the receding boundary-line of his upright white hair, coughed awkwardly.

"The man waited two hours. Then the unclad and obese native lady, carrying a long pointed grass-basket on her back, who had squatted down in the high grass to smoke a pipe and administer maternal refreshment to a shiny black piccannin of three or four – !"

The Mayor, purple now, burst out:

"Got up and went on! And, if these boys of yours get wind of that story, I shall be roasted within an inch of my life. Whoever told you? For the love of Heaven, don't give me away!"

The keen eyes, were dancing now – the big fish had fairly got the gaff.

"I promise, Mr. Mayor, upon the understanding that you don't give away my man… It's a compact? Thanks tremendously! And here comes the Manager to be congratulated upon the haunch. I never tasted better venison, Mr. Nixey, though, as you say, this is rather far North for koodoo. And the quail were beyond praise. Waiter, a glass for Mr. Nixey… Port – and we're going to ask you to join us in drinking a toast…"

The beautiful, flushed boy rose solemnly, glass in hand. About the long board, adorned with a fine epergne full of roses, Cape jessamine and purple bougainvillea, spread with Nixey's best plate and linen, crystal, and dishes of Staffordshire china piled with golden mandarins, and loquats, the fruit of October; there was a great uprising of those phlegmatic, self-contained Britons. Straight as the flames of unblown torches, they burned about the table. And with a simultaneous movement all those eyes of varied colours turned to the lean brown face of the Chief, as the sweet young clarion rang out:

"Gentlemen – the Queen!"

The brimming glasses rose high, – one crystal wave with the crimson of blood in it. The resonant English and the thinner Colonial voices answered together with a crash. As of the wave breaking on white cliffs northwards, and a great surge of love and loyalty went out from all those hearts to England, throbbing to the steps of the Throne where She sat, bowed with great griefs and great joys and great triumphs and glories, and white-haired with the full burden of her venerable years.

"The Queen!"

XXI

They lingered not long over wine and cigars. Lady Hannah Wrynche, entertaining what she disdainfully termed a "hen party" in her private rooms at Nixey's, vacated in her honour by the landlord's wife – expected them to coffee. Much to the relief of the military authorities at Cape Town, Milady, most erratic of Society meteors, had quitted that centre of painstaking official misinformation, for the throbbing spot of debatable land whence events might be gathered as they sprang. Shooting across the orbit of the reddening, low-hanging War-planet, she had descended upon Gueldersdorp in a shower of baggage-trunks, fox-terriers, and interrogations. For one thing, she explained to everybody, she had undertaken to supply a London Daily with a series of articles, written from the Seat of Hostilities, and for another, Bingo was on the Staff, and it would be so nice for him, poor dear, to have his wife near him in case he happened to get … was "chipped" the proper technical term, or "potted"? The articles were intended to be the real thing – racy of the soil, don't you know? and full of "go" and atmosphere. Let it be said here that they achieved raciness. The London print in which they appeared came to be christened by the scoffer and the incredulous the *Daily Whale*– it swallowed and disgorged so many of the Jonahs rejected by other editors. But the profits increased, and the proprietors could afford to smile at envy.

Just now the insatiable gold fountain-pen from whence our indefatigable Lady Correspondent derived her literary pseudonym, was employed in recording merest gossip, in the absence of the longed-for opportunity for its wielder to prove herself the equal, if not the superior, of Dora Corr. Dora was the woman Lady Hannah admired and envied above all others. Colonial Editor to *The Thunderbolt*, War Correspondent, financial expert, political leader-writer, and diplomatic go-between when Cabinet Ministers and Empire-builders would arrive at understandings, the serfdom of sex, the trammels of the petticoat, may have been said to weigh as lightly upon this thrice-fortunate spinster as though it were no drawback to be a daughter of Eve.

Oh! prayed Lady Hannah, for the chance of proving that another woman can equal this brilliant feminine Phœnix! Meanwhile her bright eyes and quick sense of humour took note of the toilettes of some of her guests, wives and daughters of notable citizens who had not hurried South at the first mutterings of the storm. The purple satin worn by the Mayoress tickled her no less than the unfeigned horror of its wearer when offered from her hostess's châtelaine cigarette-case the choicest of Sobranies. Lady Hannah's laugh was the rattling of a mischievous boy's stick across his sister's piano-wires, and the metallic jangle preceded her assurance that everybody did it – all women in Society, at least, and you were thought odd if you didn't. After dinner, in the most exclusive houses, the most rigid of hostesses invariably allowed their women guests to smoke. They knew people worth having wouldn't come if they weren't allowed to.

"Never beneath my roof!" gasped the shocked and scandalised wearer of the purple splendours demanded of the wife of a Chief Magistrate. "Never at my table!" Of course, the agitated Mayoress went on to say, one had heard of the doings of the Smart Set. But one had hoped it wasn't true, or, at least, had been very much exaggerated by "writing-people." The Mayoress, though a mild woman, had her sting.

Lady Hannah, immensely tickled to find the morals of Bayswater rampant, as she afterwards expressed it, in the centre of South Africa, cackled as she helped herself to a second liqueur-glass of Nixey's excellent apricot-brandy. Small, thin, restless, she presented a parched appearance, with bright, round, beady eyes continually roving in search of information from beneath the straggling fringe of a crumpled Pompadour transformation, for those horrors had recently become fashionable, and the whole world of women were vying with one another in the simulation of the criminal type of skull, with the Dolichocephalic Bulge.

"My dear lady, tobacco-ash is an excellent thing for killing moth in carpets, and Time, – when one is compelled to bestow it upon dull people; and a perfectly healthy, Nonconformist conscience must be a comfortable lodger. But as regards the sacred roof, and the defended table, it's a question how long both British institutions remain intact, with those big guns getting into position round us…" She waved her small hand, its once well-tended nails superbly ignored, its sun-cracks neglected, its load of South African diamonds coruscating magnificently in the light of Nixey's electric bulbs, and shrugged her thin, vivacious shoulders.

The entrance of the gentlemen relieved the situation. Lady Hannah jumped up and rushed at the Colonel. "As if she meant to eat the man," the Mayoress said afterwards, in the shadow of that threatened roof. But, impervious to the entreaty of the bright black eyes and the glittering hand that gesticulated with the urgent fan, he bowed, smiled, said a few pleasant words to his hostess, and walked "straight across" – as the Mayoress afterwards confided to the Mayor – to take a seat beside the large, placid, matronly figure palpitating in purple satin on an imported Maple sofa.

Pleased and flattered, she made room for him, while Lady Hannah became the gossip-centre of a knot of Mess uniforms…

"Both babies well?" It would have been unlike him not to have remembered that he had seen children at her house. "Hammy and Berta made great friends with me the other day… Tell them I haven't forgotten the promise to rummage up some odd native toys I picked up in Rhodesia – made of mud and feathers and bits of fur and queerly-shaped seed-pods – the most enchanting collection of birds and beasts that ever came out of the Ark. And the Makalaka have a legend about a big flood and a wise old man who built a house of reeds and skins that floated… The North American Indians will tell you that it was a Big Medicine Canoe, and amongst the tribes of the Nilghiri Hills you find exactly the same story that the Chaldean scribes wrote on their tablets of clay. To-day in Eastern Kurdistan they'll point you out the peak on which the Ark grounded. The Armenians hold it was Ararat… It's curious how the root-legend crops up everywhere…"

"But of course it must." Her good, calm eyes showed surprise, and her broad, white, matronly bosom was a little fluttered. "Doesn't the Bible teach us that the Deluge covered the whole earth? Even Hammy and Berta can tell you the whole story about Noah, and the raven – and the dove."

He smoothed his moustache with a palm that wiped the smile out.

"I must get them to tell it me one of these days." The twinkle in his eye was not to be repressed. "It would save such a deal of trouble to believe there was only one Noah, and only one Ark, don't you know?"

Her motherly bosom panted.

"*My* children shall *never* believe anything else!"

He was grave and sympathetic, though a muscle in his thin cheek twitched.

"I believe the toy Ark of our happy childish memories is built, if not of gopher-wood, at least upon the lines laid down in Scripture. Has Hammy ever tried to get his to float? Mine invariably used to sink – straight to the bottom of the bath. Perhaps that continually-recurrent catastrophe had something to do with the sapping of my infant faith, or the establishment of a sinking-fund of doubt regarding the veracity of the Noachian reporter?"

She leaned towards him, her placid grey eyes dilating with pity for this man.

"You ought to come and sit under our minister Mr. Oddris, on Sundays. Pray do. He would convince you if anybody could. Such an eloquent, able, well-informed man, and so *truly pious* and *brave*!"

The laugh perforce escaped him. The convincing Apostle Oddris had called on him at official headquarters that day, to inquire whether, as the said Oddris's wife and children were going to the Women's Laager, his place as a husband and father was not by their side? Being informed that able-bodied male beings were not included in the list of the defenceless, he had become importunate in the matter of at least a bomb-proof shelter to be erected in his back-yard.

"I had rather sit under Hammy and hear about Noah, with Berta on the other knee."

Her heart went out wholly to him… 'Out of the mouths of babes.' … Wasn't *that* one of the texts with promise?..

"You love children?"

"Bless the little beggars!" he said heartily, "they're the jolliest company in the world."

She leaned towards him, palpitating between her shyness of the Commander of the Garrison and her womanly curiosity to know more about the man.

"Hammond – the Mayor has told me – I hope it is not indiscreet to mention it – that the first thing you did, on joining your regiment in India as a young subaltern, was to gather all the European children in cantonments together and march them through the place, playing 'The Girl I Left Behind Me' on the flute."

His brow grew black as thunder. The utterance came, terse and sharp.

"Ma'am, you have been gravely misinformed."

She jumped in terror.

"Oh!.. Can it be?.. Colonel, I do so beg you to forgive me! Let me assure you that neither the Mayor nor myself will ever again repeat the story."

"Ma'am, if you do …"

"But I promise, never …"

"Ma'am, if you never do, at least remember that the flute was an ocarina."

He left the good soul in an ecstasy of giggles, and crossed to Lady Hannah. She welcomed him with a glitter of eyes and teeth and discovered the reserve-chair that had been covered by her somewhat fatigued and wilted draperies of maize Liberty-silk, veiled with black Maltese lace.

"What it is to be a man of tact! You've made that purple creature perfectly happy. Don't say you're going to be less kind to another woman!"

She tapped with a reproachful fan the scarlet sleeve of his thin serge mess-jacket, her appraising eye busy with the badges worn on the dark green roll-collar and the miniature medals and star. If a clever woman could be the confidante of a Cabinet Minister, the post of right-hand to the Officer Commanding H.M. Forces in Gueldersdorp might be won. And then the world would know what Hannah Wrynche was born for. What was he saying?

"I never warn my victims beforehand."

"Sphinx! and I hoped to find you in the relenting mood!"

"If possible, ma'am, my granite bosom is more unyielding than on the last occasion when …"

"Do go on!" said the fan.

"When you tried to tap it."

"You're all alike." She sighed. "That is, you give the keynote, and the others take up the tune. Even Bingo – Bingo, whom I firmly believed incapable of keeping a secret in which his dearest interests were concerned longer than ten minutes – Bingo has sprung a surprise on me. I shall end by falling in love with my own husband – such an indecent thing to do after seven years of married life!"

"Fortunately, the scene of your lapse from the crooked path of custom is distant from the West End of London nearly seven thousand miles. And you can rely upon me for secrecy."

"Ah, that!.. If only you *did* leak a little information now and then." Her eyebrows went up to the dry fringe of her Pompadour transformation. "For the sake of the thirsting public at home, to say nothing of my reputation as a Special Correspondent – "

"Drive over and call on General Brounckers at Head Laager, Geitfontein, on the Border, early to-morrow. Perhaps he would oblige you with matter for a paragraph, and forward the cable by private wire?"

Her birdlike eyes were bright on him.

"I would go if I thought I could get anything by going. Special information – with reference to a Plan of Attack. Oh! if you knew how I'm dying to be really under fire. To hear bullets zip-zip – isn't that the sound? – as they strike the ground or walls, and shells scream overhead!"

She clasped her sunburnt little jewelled hands in affected ecstasy. His eyes were stern, and the lines about his mouth deepened.

"Pray to-night that you may never hear those sounds you speak of!"

She struck an exaggerated attitude of horrified consternation.

"But no! Why am I here?"

"The Lord only knows. I've seen a hen peck at a lump of dynamite…"

"Ah, you never will take me seriously. But own in your secret heart you're as much afraid as I am that a Relieving Column will be sent down from – Do tell me again where Grumer is with the Brigade? Uli, in Upper Rhodesia – thanks! Well, Grumer is quite a near friend of Bingo's, and an old flame of mine. But – to burst our lovely peacock bubble of Siege and let the whole situation down, *sans coup férir*, into muddy commonplace – may Grumer never come!" She held up her coffee-cup, and drank the toast.

"Only for the women and children here," he said, and his thin nostrils moved to the measure of his quickened breathing, and a hot spark glowed in his keen eyes, "I'd have joined you in that. But under the present circumstances – I'd give five years of life – and I love life! – if our lookouts could pick up Grumer's Advance by the time grey dawn creeps up the east again."

She was incredulous.

"You, who said when you got orders to sail for South Africa – I have it on the authority of your Henley hostess – 'I hope they'll give me a warm corner'!"

"I did say – just that. And I meant it."

His lips pursed in a soundless whistle. She went on:

"I've seen your preparations. The little old forts, put into such repair! and the armoured train, with a Maxim and a Hotchkiss, standing in the Railway siding, ready for business. And the earthworks! And the trek-waggon barricades, and the shelters panelled and roofed with corrugated iron. And your bomb-proof Headquarter Bureau, the iron skull that's to hold the working brain of the place … with underground telegraphic and telephonic communications with all the forts and outposts. It's colossal! A masterpiece of cool, deadly, lethal forethought… I thought I was incapable of the delicious shiver of expectation that the schoolboy enjoys, sitting in the stalls of dear Old Drury, waiting for the curtain to rise on the first act of the Autumn Drama. But you've given it to me – you and our friends out there!" She waved the dry little glittering hand. "And you can talk in cold blood of marching out – and leaving the hive – and all the honey you might have had out of it. Sweet danger, perilous sport, the great Game of War – played as a man like you knows how to play it in this little sandy world-arena, with all the Powers and Dominions looking on. Preserve us! Oh, to be in your shoes this minute, if only for one week! But as I can't, it's you I hope to see riding the whirlwind and directing the storm. Not only for my own sake and the wretched paper's – though, mind you, I don't pretend to be anything but a mercenary, calculating worldly creature …"

His eyes were very kind.

"Bingo knows better!"

Her laugh did not jangle this time.

"Lady Grasby, that vitriol-tongued water-nymph, as somebody clever once called her, said that if Bingo got killed by any chance, I should sit down and write a gossipy descriptive article, dealing with his military career, married life, and last moments, before I ordered my widow's-weepers. Horrible things! They've come in again, too! Talking of gossip, which I know you only pretend to despise, I found the son of a mutual acquaintance dying in the Hospital here. You know the Bishop of H …?"

"His eldest son, Major Fraithorn, was my senior when I was Assistant Military Secretary at Gibraltar in '90. And the Bishop is quite a dear crony of my mother's."

"The Bishop," she said, "was always a person of excellent good taste – except when he cut off his second son, Julius, with two hundred a year for turning Anglican, wearing a soft hat and Roman collars, and joining the staff at that clerical posture shop in Wendish Street West as Junior Curate."

"St. Margaret's. I know the church. Often go there when I'm at home."

"It's the Halfway House to Rome, according to the Bishop, who won't be content with running at every red rag of Ritualism that flutters in his own diocese, but keeps up the character of belligerent Broad Churchman by writing pamphlets and asking questions in the House of Lords with reference to affairs which are the business of other people. According to him, the red cassocks of the acolytes at St. Margaret's are cut out of the very skirts of the Woman of Babylon, and Father Turney and his curates – they're all Fathers there, and celibates by choice – are wolves in wool, and Mephistophelean plotters against the liberties of the Church. *Punch* published a cartoon of the Bishop shutting his eyes and charging at a windmill in a cope and chasuble. He is sending out a string of Protestant-Church-Integrity vans all over England, Scotland, and Wales this season, with acetylene-lantern pictures from Foxe's 'Book of Martyrs,' and a lecturer to point the morals and adorn the tales… But if he could see his Mary's boy to-day, he'd put up with any amount of felt-basin hats and Roman collars, and incense and altar-genuflections wouldn't count for a tikkie. Oh! it's been a sore with me this many a year, but when I saw him to-day I said, 'Thank God I never had a child!' Because to have seen a boy or girl grow up and wither away as that beautiful young fellow is withering, is a thing that a mother must shudder to look back upon, even when she has found her lost one again in Heaven."

There was genuine feeling in her voice, usually loud, harsh, and tuneless. The bright black bird-eyes had a gleam as of tears. He turned to her with sympathetic interest.

"The Bishop will be obliged to you for finding this out. No hint of it had reached me. I am due at the Hospital in the morning, and we'll see if something can't be done for the boy."

She shook her head.

"It's a case of tuberculous lung-disease. He developed it in the Clergy House at St. Margaret's, and made light of it, supposing or pretending that the cough and wasting and difficulty of breathing meant bronchial trouble, the result of London fogs. These young people who don't value Life – glorious gift that it is! When he broke down utterly, at the end of a rampant campaign against Intemperance – he wouldn't be the Bishop's son if he didn't gall the withers of some hobby-horse or other – the doctors agreed there was nothing for him but South Africa."

He frowned, knowing how many sufferers had died of that deadly prescription. She went on:

"So he came out – alone – upon the advice of the well-intentioned wiseacres, knowing nothing of the country, to live on his two hundred a year until the end. And the end is coming – in Gueldersdorp Hospital – with giant strides." She blinked. "They've isolated him in a small detached ward. He has a kind friend in the Matron, and the chart-nurse is in love with him, unless I'm mistaken in the symptoms of the complaint. And he looks like St. Francis of Assisi, wedded to Death instead of Poverty – and coughs – fit to tear your heart. B'rrh!" she shuddered.

He repeated: "I'll see what can be done to-morrow. These cases are deceptive. There may be a gleam of hope."

"There is one doubt about the case which might infer a hope. I don't know what discoveries the London doctors made, but I wormed out of the chart-nurse, who plainly adores him, that the doctors in Gueldersdorp can't scare up a bacillus for the life of them."

His eyes lightened involuntary admiration, though his tone was jesting.

"You're thrown away on mere journalism. Criminal Investigation or Secret Intelligence would offer wider fields for your abilities."

"Wait!" she said, her beady eyes black diamonds. "I shall hope to prove one day that an English woman-journalist can be as useful as a Boer spy in the matter of useful information. Why, why am I not a man? You only don't trust me because I am a woman."

He had touched the rankling point in her ambition. He applied balm as he knew how.

"Your being a woman may have made all the difference – for Fraithorn. I shall set Taggart of the R.A.M.C. at him to-morrow; the Major's a bit of a crack at pulmonary cases. And he shall consult with Saxham, and – "

"Saxham." Her eyebrows were knitted. "I thought I knew the names of your Medical Staff men. But I can't recall a Saxham."

"This Saxham is Civilian – and rather a big pot – M.D., F.R.C.S., and lots more. We're lucky to have got him."

She stiffened, scenting the paragraph.

"Can it be that you mean the Dr. Saxham of the Old Bailey Case?"

"The Jury acquitted, let me remind you."

"I believe so," she said; "but – he vanished afterwards. I think an innocent man would have stopped and faced the music, and not beaten a retreat with the Wedding March almost sounding in his ears. But – who knows? You have met his brother, Captain Saxham, of the – th Dragoons? It was he who stepped into the matrimonial breach, and married the young woman."

"The young woman?"

"His brother's fiancée – an heiress of the Dorsetshire Lee-Haileys, and rather a pretty-faced, silly person, with a penchant for French novels and sulphonal tabloids. I always shall believe that she liked the handsome Dragoon best, and took advantage of the Doctor's being – under the cloud of acquittal by a British Jury, to give him what the dear Irish call 'the back of her hand.'"

"The better luck for him!"

"It was mere instinct to let go when the man was dragging them both under water," she asserted.

"A Newfoundland bitch would have risen above it."

"You hit back quick and hard."

"I'm a tennis-player and a polo-player and a cricketer."

"What game is there that you don't play?"

"I could tell you of one or two… But I must really go and speak to some of these ladies. One of them is an old friend."

"I know whom you mean. If I didn't, her glare of envy would have enlightened me. Did I tell you that *I* encountered an old friend – or, at least, a friend of old – at the Hospital yesterday?"

"You mean poor Fraithorn?"

"Not at all. I'm only a friend of his mother. I had only heard of the boy, not met him, until I tumbled over him here. But this face – severely framed in a starched white *guimpe* and floating black veil – belonged to my Past in several ways."

He showed interest.

"Your friend is a nun? At the Convent here? How did you come across her?"

"She called to see the Bishop's son – while I was with him. It seems that, judging by the poor dear boy's religious manuals and medals, and other High Church contraptions, the Matron had got him on the Hospital books as a Roman Catholic. And, consequently, when my friend looked in to visit a day-scholar who was to be operated on for adenoids – I've no idea what they are, but a thing with a name like that would naturally have to be cut out of one – she was told of this poor fellow, and has shed the light of her countenance on him occasionally since. Yesterday was one of the occasions, and Heavens! what a countenance it is even now! What a voice, what eyes, what a manner! I believed I gushed a bit… She met me as though we'd only parted last week. Nuns are wonderful creatures: *she's*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.