

CHAMBERS

ROBERT

WILLIAM

THE FIGHTING CHANCE

Robert Chambers
The Fighting Chance

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CHAPTER I. ACQUAINTANCE

The speed of the train slackened; a broad tidal river flashed into sight below the trestle, spreading away on either hand through yellowing level meadows. And now, above the roaring undertone of the cars, from far ahead floated back the treble bell-notes of the locomotive; there came a gritting vibration of brakes; slowly, more slowly the cars glided to a creaking standstill beside a sun-scorched platform gay with the bright flutter of sunshades and summer gowns.

“Shotover! Shotover!” rang the far cry along the cars; and an absent-minded young man in the Pullman pocketed the uncut magazine he had been dreaming over and, picking up gun case and valise, followed a line of fellow-passengers to the open air, where one by one they were engulfed and lost to view amid the gay confusion on the platform.

The absent-minded young man, however, did not seem to know exactly where he was bound for. He stood hesitating, leisurely inspecting the flashing ranks of vehicles—depot wagons, omnibusses, and motor cars already eddying around a dusty gravel drive centred by the conventional railroad flower bed and fountain.

Sunshine blazed on foliage plants arranged geometrically, on scarlet stars composed of geraniums, on thickets of tall flame-tinted cannas. And around this triumph of landscape gardening, phaeton, Tilbury, Mercedes, and Toledo backed, circled, tooted; gaily gowned women, whips aslant, horses dancing, greeted expected guests; laughing young men climbed into dog-carts and took the reins from nimble grooms; young girls, extravagantly veiled, made room in comfortable touring-cars for feminine guests whose extravagant veils were yet to be unpacked; slim young men in leather trappings, caps adorned with elaborate masks or goggles, manipulated rakish steering-gears; preoccupied machinists were fussing with valve and radiator or were cranking up; and, through the jolly tumult, the melancholy bell of the locomotive sounded, and the long train moved out through the September sunshine amid clouds of snowy steam.

And all this time the young man, gun case in one hand, suit case in the other, looked about him in his good-humoured, leisurely manner for anybody or any vehicle which might be waiting for him. His amiable inspection presently brought a bustling baggage-master within range of vision; and he spoke to this official, mentioning his host’s name.

“Lookin’ for Mr. Ferrall?” repeated the baggage-master, spinning a trunk dexterously into rank with its fellows. “Say, one of Mr. Ferrall’s men was here just now—there he is, over there uncrating that there bird-dog!”

The young man’s eyes followed the direction indicated by the grimy thumb; a red-faced groom in familiar livery was kneeling beside a dog’s travelling crate, attempting to unlock it, while behind the bars an excited white setter whined and thrust forth first one silky paw then the other.

The young man watched the scene for a moment, then:

“Are you one of Mr. Ferrall’s men?” he asked in his agreeable voice.

The groom looked up, then stood up:

“Yis, Sorr.”

“Take these; I’m Mr. Siward—for Shotover House. I dare say you have room for me and the dog, too.”

The groom opened his mouth to speak, but Siward took the crate key from his fingers, knelt, and tried the lock. It resisted. From the depths of the crate a beseeching paw fell upon his cuff.

“Certainly, old fellow,” he said soothingly, “I know how you feel about it; I know you’re in a hurry—and we’ll have you out in a second—steady, boy!—something’s jammed, you see! Only one moment now! There you are!”

The dog attempted to bolt as the crate door opened, but the young man caught him by the leather collar and the groom snapped on a leash.

“Beg pardon, Sorr,” began the groom, carried almost off his feet by the frantic circling of the dog—“beg pardon, Sorr, but I’ll be afther seem’ if anny of Mr. Ferrall’s men drove over for you—”

“Oh! Are you not one of Mr. Ferrall’s men?”

“Yis, Sorr, but I hadn’t anny orders to meet anny wan—”

“Haven’t you anything here to drive me in?”

“Yis, Sorr—I’ll look to see—”

The raw groom, much embarrassed, and keeping his feet with difficulty against the plunging dog, turned toward the gravel drive where now only a steam motor and a depot-wagon remained. As they looked the motor steamed out, honking hoarsely; the depot-wagon followed, leaving the circle at the end of the station empty of vehicles.

“Didn’t Mr. Ferrall expect me?” asked Siward.

“Aw, yis, Sorr; but the gintlemen for Shotover House does ginerally allways coom by Black Fells, Sorr—”

“Oh, Lord!” said the young man, “I remember now. I should have gone on to Black Fells Crossing; Mr. Ferrall wrote me!” Then, amused: “I suppose you have only a baggage-wagon here?”

“No, Sorr—a phayton”—he hesitated.

“Well? Isn’t a phaeton all right?”

“Yis, Sorr—if th’ yoong lady says so—beg pardon, Sorr, Miss Landis is driving.”

“Oh—h! I see.... Is Miss Landis a guest at Shotover House?”

“Yis, Sorr. An’ if ye would joost ask her—the phayton do be coming now, Sorr!”

The phaeton was coming; the horse, a showy animal, executed side-steps; blue ribbons fluttered from the glittering head-stall; a young girl in white was driving.

Siward advanced to the platform’s edge as the phaeton drew up; the young lady looked inquiringly at the groom, at the dog, and leisurely at him.

So he took off his hat, naming himself in that well-bred and agreeable manner characteristic of men of his sort,—and even his smile appeared to be part and parcel of a conventional ensemble so harmonious as to remain inconspicuous.

“You should have gone on to Black Fells Crossing,” observed Miss Landis, coolly controlling the nervous horse. “Didn’t you know it?”

He said he remembered now that such were the directions given him.

The girl glanced at him incuriously, and with more curiosity at the dog. “Is that the Sagamore pup, Flynn?” she asked.

“It is, Miss.”

“Can’t you take him on the rumble with you?” And, to Siward: “There is room for your gun and suit case.”

“And for me?” he asked, smiling.

“I think so. Be careful of that Sagamore pup, Flynn. Hold him between your knees. Are you ready, Mr. Siward?”

So he climbed in; the groom hoisted the dog to the rumble and sprang up behind; the horse danced and misbehaved, making a spectacle of himself and an agreeable picture of his driver; then the pretty little phaeton swung northward out of the gravel drive and went whirling along a road all misty with puffs of yellow dust which the afternoon sun turned to floating golden powder.

“Did you send my telegram, Flynn?” she asked without turning her head.

“I did, Miss.”

It being the most important telegram she had ever sent in all her life, Miss Landis became preoccupied,—quite oblivious to extraneous details, including Siward, until the horse began acting badly again. Her slightly disdainful and perfect control of the reins interested the young man. He might have said something civil and conventional about that, but did not make the effort to invade a reserve which appeared to embarrass nobody.

A staccato note from the dog, prolonged infinitely in hysterical crescendo, demanded comment from somebody.

“What is the matter with him, Flynn?” she asked.

Siward said: “You should let him run, Miss Landis.”

She nodded, smiling, inattentive, absorbed in her own affairs, still theorising concerning her telegram. She drove on for a while, and might have forgotten the dog entirely had he not once more lifted his voice in melancholy.

“You say he ought to run for a mile or two? Do you think he’ll bolt, Mr. Siward?”

“Is he a new dog?”

“Yes, fresh from the kennels; supposed to be house-and wagon-broken, steady to shot and wing —” She shrugged her pretty shoulders. “You see how he’s acting already!”

“Do you mind if I try him?” suggested Siward.

“You mean that you are going to let him run?”

“I think so.”

“And if he bolts?”

“I’ll take my chances.”

“Yes, but please consider my chances, Mr. Siward. The dog doesn’t belong to me.”

“But he ought to run—”

“But suppose he runs away? He’s a horridly expensive creature—if you care to take the risk.”

“I’ll take the risk,” said Siward, smiling as she drew rein. “Now Flynn, give me the leash. Quiet! Quiet, puppy! Everything is coming your way; that’s the beauty of patience; great thing, patience!” He took the lead; the dog sprang from the rumble. “Now, my friend, look at me! No, don’t twist and squirm and scramble; look me square in the eye; so!... Now we know each other and we respect each other—because you are going to be a good puppy... and obey... Down charge!”

The dog, trembling with eager comprehension, dropped like a shot, muzzle laid flat between his paws. Siward unleashed him, looked down at him for a second, stooped and caressed the silky head, then with a laugh swung himself into the phaeton beside the driver, who, pretty head turned, had been looking on intently.

“Your dog is yard-broken,” he said. “Look at him.”

“I see. Do you think he will follow us?”

“I think so.”

The horse started, Miss Landis looking back over her shoulder at the dog who lay motionless, crouched flat in the road.

Then Siward turned. “Come on, Sagamore!” he said gaily; and the dog sprang forward, circled about the moving phaeton, splitting the air with yelps of ecstasy, then tore ahead, mad with the delight of stretching cramped muscles amid the long rank grass and shrubbery of the roadside.

The girl watched him doubtfully; when he disappeared far away up the road she turned the blue inquiry of her eyes on Siward.

“He’ll be back,” said the young fellow, laughing; and presently the dog reappeared on a tearing gallop, white flag tossing, glorious in his new liberty, enchanted with the confidence this tall young man had reposed in him—this adorable young man, this wonderful friend who had suddenly appeared to release him from an undignified and abominable situation in a crate.

“A good dog,” said Siward; and the girl looked around at him, partly because his voice was pleasant, partly because a vague memory was beginning to stir within her, coupling something unpleasant with the name of Siward.

She had been conscious of it when he first named himself, but, absorbed in the overwhelming importance of her telegram, had left the analysis of the matter for the future.

She thought again of her telegram, theorised a little, came to no conclusion except to let the matter rest for the present, and mentally turned to the next and far less important problem—the question of this rather attractive young man at her side, and why the name of Siward should be linked in her mind with anything disagreeable.

Tentatively following the elusive mental dews that might awaken something definite concerning her hazy impression of the man beside her, she spoke pleasantly, conventionally, touching idly any topic that might have a bearing; and, under a self-possession so detached as to give an impression of indifference, eyes, ears, and intelligence admitted that he was agreeable to look at, pleasant of voice, and difficult to reconcile with anything unpleasant.

Which gradually aroused her interest—the incongruous usually interesting girls of her age—for he had wit enough to amuse her, sufficient inconsequence to please her, and something listless, at times almost absent-minded, almost inattentive, that might have piqued her had it not inoculated her, as it always does any woman, with the nascent germ of curiosity. Besides, there was, in the hint of his momentary preoccupation, a certain charm.

They discussed shooting and the opening of the season; dogs and the training of dogs; and why some go gun-shy and why some ace blinkers. From sport and its justification, they became inconsequential; and she was beginning to enjoy the freshness of their chance acquaintance, his nice attitude toward things, his irrelevancy, his gaiety.

Laughter thawed her; for notwithstanding the fearless confidence she had been taught for men of her own kind, self-possession and reserve, if not inherent, had also been drilled into her, and she required a great deal in a man before she paid him the tribute of one of her pretty laughs.

Apparently they were advancing rather rapidly.

“Don’t you think we ought to call the dog in, Mr. Siward?”

“Yes; he’s had enough!”

She drew rein; he sprang out and whistled; and the Sagamore pup, dusty and happy came romping back. Siward motioned him to the rumble, but the dog leaped to the front.

“I don’t mind,” said the girl. “Let him sit here between us. And you might occupy yourself by pulling some of those burrs from his ears—if you will?”

“Of course I will. Look up here, puppy! No! Don’t try to lick my face, for that is bad manners. Demonstrations are odious, as the poet says.”

“It’s always bad manners, isn’t it?” asked Miss Landis.

“What? Being affectionate?”

“Yes, and admitting it.”

“I believe it is. Do you hear that—Sagamore? But never mind; I’ll break the rules some day when we’re alone.”

The dog laid one paw on Siward’s knee, looking him wistfully in the eyes.

“More demonstrations,” observed the girl. “Mr. Siward! You are hugging him! This amounts to a dual conspiracy in bad manners.”

“Awfully glad to admit you to the conspiracy,” he said. “There’s one vacancy—if you are eligible.”

“I am; I was discovered recently kissing my saddle-mare.”

“That settles it! Sagamore, give the young lady the grip.”

Sylvia Landis glanced at the dog, then impulsively shifting the whip to her left hand, held out the right. And very gravely the Sagamore pup laid one paw in her dainty white gloved palm.

“You darling!” murmured the girl, resuming her whip.

“I notice,” observed Siward, “that you are perfectly qualified for membership in our association for the promotion of bad manners. In fact I should suggest you for the presidency—”

“I suppose you think all sorts of things because I gushed over that dog.”

“Of course I do.”

“Well you need not,” she rejoined, delicate nose up-tilted. “I never kissed a baby in all my life—and never mean to. Which is probably more than you can say.”

“Yes, its more than I can say.

“That admission elects you president,” she concluded. But after a moment’s silent driving she turned partly toward him with mock seriousness: “Is it not horridly unnatural in me to feel that way about babies? And about people, too; I simply cannot endure demonstrations. As for dogs and horses—well, I’ve admitted how I behave; and, being so shamelessly affectionate by disposition, why can’t I be nice to babies? I’ve a hazy but dreadful notion that there’s something wrong about me, Mr. Siward.”

He scrutinised the pretty features, anxiously; “I can’t see it,” he said.

“But I mean it—almost seriously. I don’t want to be so aloof, but—I don’t like to touch other people. It is rather horrid of me I suppose to be like those silky, plummy, luxurious Angora cats who never are civil to you and who always jump out of your arms at the first opportunity.”

He laughed—and there was malice in his eyes, but he did not know her well enough to pursue the subject through so easy an opening.

It had occurred to her, too, that her simile might invite elaboration, and she sensed the laugh in his silence, and liked him for remaining silent where he might easily have been wittily otherwise.

This set her so much at ease, left her so confident, that they were on terms of gayest understanding presently, she gossiping about the guests at Shotover House, outlining the diversions planned for the two weeks before them.

“But we shall see little of one another; you will be shooting most of the time,” she said—with the very faintest hint of challenge—too delicate, too impersonal to savour of coquetry. But the germ of it was there.

“Do you shoot?”

“Yes; why?”

“I am reconciled to the shooting, then.”

“Oh, that is awfully civil of you. Sometimes I’d rather play Bridge.”

“So should I—sometimes.”

“I’ll remember that, Mr. Siward; and when all the men are waiting for you to start out after grouse perhaps I may take that moment to whisper: ‘May I play?’”

He laughed.

“You mean that you really would stay and play double dummy when every other living man will be off to the coverts? Double dummy—to improve my game?”

“Certainly! I need improvement.”

“Then there is something wrong with you, too, Mr. Siward.”

She laughed and started to flick her whip, but at her first motion the horse gave trouble.

“The bit doesn’t fit,” observed Siward.

“You are perfectly right,” she returned, surprised. “I ought to have remembered; it is shameful to drive a horse improperly bitted.” And, after a moment: “You are considerate toward animals; it is good in a man.”

“Oh, it’s no merit. When animals are uncomfortable it worries me. It’s one sort of selfishness, you see.”

“What nonsense,” she said; and her smile was very friendly. “Why doesn’t a nice man ever admit he’s nice when told so?”

It seems they had advanced that far. For she was beginning to find this young man not only safe but promising; she had met nobody recently half as amusing, and the outlook at Shotover House had been unpromising with only the overgrateful Page twins to practise on—the other men collectively and individually boring her. And suddenly, welcome as manna from the sky, behold this highly agreeable boy to play with—until Quarrier arrived. Her telegram had been addressed to Mr. Quarrier.

“What was it you were saying about selfishness?” she asked. “Oh, I remember. It was nonsense.”

“Certainly.”

She laughed, adding: “Selfishness is so simply defined you know.”

“Is it? How.”

“A refusal to renounce. That covers everything,” she concluded.

“Sometimes renunciation is weakness—isn’t it?” he suggested.

“In what case for example?”

“Well, suppose we take love.”

“Very well, you may take it if you like it.”

“Suppose you loved a man!” he insisted.

“Let him beware! What then?”

“—And, suppose it would distress your family if you married him?”

“I’d give him up.”

“If you loved him?”

“Love? That is the poorest excuse for selfishness, Mr. Siward.”

“So you would ruin your happiness and his—”

“A girl ought to find more happiness in renouncing a selfish love than in love itself,” announced Miss Landis with that serious conviction characteristic of her years.

“Of course,” assented Siward with a touch of malice, “if you really do find more happiness in renouncing love than in love itself, it would be foolish not to do it—”

“Mr. Siward! You are derisive. Besides, you are not acute. A woman is always an opportunist. When the event takes place I shall know what to do.”

“You mean when you want to marry the man you mustn’t?”

“Exactly. I probably shall.”

“Marry him?”

“Wish to!”

“I see. But you won’t, of course.”

She drew rein, bringing the horse to a walk at the foot of a long hill.

“We are going much too fast,” said Miss Landis, smiling.

“Driving too fast for—”

“No, not driving, going—you and I.”

“Oh, you mean—”

“Yes I do. We are on all sorts of terms, already.”

“In the country, you know, people—”

“Yes I know all about it, and what old and valued friends one makes at a week’s end. But it has been a matter of half-hours with us, Mr. Siward.”

“Let us sit very still and think it over,” he suggested. And they both laughed.

It was perhaps the reaction of her gaiety that recalled to her mind her telegram. The telegram had been her promised answer after she had had time to consider a suggestion made to her by a Mr. Howard Quarrier. The last week at Shotover permitted reflection; and while her telegram was no complete answer to the suggestion he had made, it contained material of interest in the eight words: “I will consider your request when you arrive.

“I wonder if you know Howard Quarrier?” she said.

After a second’s hesitation he replied: “Yes—a little. Everybody does.”

“You do know him?”

“Only at—the club.”

“Oh, the Lenox?”

“The Lenox—and the Patroons.”

Preoccupied, driving with careless, almost inattentive perfection, she thought idly of her twenty-three years, wondering how life could have passed so quickly leaving her already stranded on the shoals of an engagement to marry Howard Quarrier. Then her thoughts, errant, wandered half the world over before they returned to Siward; and when at length they did, and meaning to be civil, she spoke again of his acquaintance with Quarrier at the Patroons Club—the club itself being sufficient to settle Siward’s status in every community.

“I’m trying to remember what it is I have heard about you,” she continued amiably; “you are—”

An odd expression in his eyes arrested her—long enough to note their colour and expression—and she continued, pleasantly; “—you are Stephen Siward, are you not? You see I know your name perfectly well—” Her straight brows contracted a trifle; she drove on, lips compressed, following an elusive train of thought which vaguely, persistently, coupled his name with something indefinitely unpleasant. And she could not reconcile this with his appearance. However, the train of unlinked ideas which she pursued began to form the semblance of a chain. Coupling his name with Quarrier’s, and with a club, aroused memory; vague uneasiness stirred her to a glimmering comprehension. Siward? Stephen Siward? One of the New York Siwards then;—one of that race—

Suddenly the truth flashed upon her,—the crude truth lacking definite detail, lacking circumstance and colour and atmosphere,—merely the raw and ugly truth.

Had he looked at her—and he did, once—he could have seen only the unruffled and very sweet profile of a young girl. Composure was one of the masks she had learned to wear—when she chose.

And she was thinking very hard all the while; “So this is the man? I might have known his name. Where were my five wits? Siward!—Stephen Siward!... He is very young, too... much too young to be so horrid... Yet—it wasn’t so dreadful, after all; only the publicity! Dear me! I knew we were going too fast.”

“Miss Landis,” he said.

“Mr. Siward?”—very gently. It was her way to be gentle when generous.

“I think,” he said, “that you are beginning to remember where you may have heard my name.”

“Yes—a little—” She looked at him with the direct gaze of a child, but the lovely eyes were troubled. His smile was not very genuine, but he met her gaze steadily enough.

“It was rather nice of Mrs. Ferrall to ask me,” he said, “after the mess I made of things last spring.”

“Grace Ferrall is a dear,” she replied.

After a moment he ventured: “I suppose you saw it in the papers.”

“I think so; I had completely forgotten it; your name seemed to—”

“I see.” Then, listlessly: “I couldn’t have ventured to remind you that—that perhaps you might not care to be so amiable—”

“Mr. Siward,” she said impulsively, “you are nice to me! Why shouldn’t I be amiable? It was—it was—I’ve forgotten just how dreadfully you did behave—”

“Pretty badly.”

“Very?”

“They say so.”

“And what is your opinion Mr. Siward?”

“Oh, I ought to have known better.” Something about him reminded her of a bad small boy; and suddenly in spite of her better sense, in spite of her instinctive caution, she found herself on the very verge of laughter. What was it in the man that disarmed and invited a confidence—scarcely justified it appeared? What was it now that moved her to overlook what few overlook—not the fault,

but its publicity? Was it his agreeable bearing, his pleasant badinage, his amiably listless moments of preoccupation, his youth that appealed to her—aroused her charity, her generosity, her curiosity?

And had other people continued to accept him, too? What would Quarrier think of his presence at Shotover? She began to realise that she was a little afraid of Quarrier's opinions. And his opinions were always judgments. However Grace Ferrall had thought it proper to ask him, and that meant social absolution. As far as that went she also was perfectly ready to absolve him if he needed it. But perhaps he didn't care!—She looked at him, furtively. He seemed to be tranquil enough in his abstraction. Trouble appeared to slide very easily from his broad young shoulders. Perhaps he was already taking much for granted in her gentleness with him. And gradually speculation became interest and interest a young girl's innocent curiosity to learn something of a man whose record it seemed almost impossible to reconcile with his personality.

"I was wondering," he said looking up to encounter her clear eyes, "whose house that is over there?"

"Beverly Plank's shooting-box; Black Fells," she replied nodding toward the vast pile of blackish rocks against the sky, upon which sprawled a heavy stone house infested with chimneys.

"Plank? Oh yes."

He smiled to remember the battering blows rained upon the ramparts of society by the master of Black Fells.

But the smile faded; and, glancing at him, the girl was surprised to see the subtle change in his face—the white worn look, then the old listless apathy which, all at once to her, hinted of something graver than preoccupation.

"Are we near the sea?" he asked.

"Very near. Only a moment to the top of this hill.... Now look!"

There lay the sea—the same grey-blue crawling void that had ever fascinated and repelled him—always wrinkled, always in flat monotonous motion, spreading away, away to the sad world's ends.

"Full of menace—always," he said, unconscious that he had spoken aloud.

"The sea!"

He spoke without turning: "The sea is a relentless thing for a man to fight.... There are other tides more persistent than the sea, but like it—like it in its menace."

His face seemed thinner, older; she noticed his cheek bones for the first time. Then, meeting her eyes, youth returned with a laugh and a touch of colour; and, without understanding exactly how, she was aware, presently, that they had insensibly slipped back to their light badinage and gay inconsequences—back to a footing which, strangely, seemed to be already an old footing, familiar, pleasant, and natural to return to.

"Is that Shotover House?" he asked as they came to the crest of the last hillock between them and the sea.

"At last, Mr. Seward," she said mockingly; "and now your troubles are nearly ended."

"And yours, Miss Landis?"

"I don't know," she murmured to herself, thinking of the telegram with the faintest misgiving.

For she was very young, and she had not had half enough out of life as yet; and besides, her theories and preconceived plans for the safe and sound ordering of her life appeared to lack weight—nay, they were dwindling already into insignificance.

Theory had almost decided her to answer Mr. Quarrier's suggestion with a 'Yes.' However, he was coming from the Lakes in a day or two. She could decide definitely when she had discussed the matter with him.

"I wish that I owned this dog," observed Seward, as the phaeton entered the macadamised drive.

"I wish so, too," she said, "but he belongs to Mr. Quarrier."

CHAPTER II IMPRUDENCE

A house of native stone built into and among weather-scarred rocks, one massive wing butting seaward, others nosing north and south among cedars and outcropping ledges—the whole silver-grey mass of masonry reddening under a westering sun, every dormer, every leaded diamond pane aflame; this was Shotover as Siward first beheld it.

Like the craggy vertebrae of a half-buried fossil splitting the sod, a ragged line of rock rose as a barrier to inland winds; the foreland, set here and there with tiny lawns and pockets of bright flowers, fell away to the cliffs; and here, sheer wet black rocks fronted the eternal battering of the Atlantic.

As the phaeton drew up under a pillared porte-cochere, one or two servants appeared; a rather imposing specimen bowed them through the doors into the hall where, in a wide chimney place, the embers of a drift-wood fire glimmered like a heap of dusty jewels. Bars of sunlight slanted on wall and rug, on stone floor and carved staircase, on the bronze foliations of the railed gallery above, where, in the golden gloom through a high window, sun-tipped tree tops against a sky of azure stirred like burnished foliage in a tapestry.

“There is nobody here, of course,” observed Miss Landis to Siward as they halted in front of the fire-place; “the season opens to-day in this county, you see.” She shrugged her pretty shoulders: “And the women who don’t shoot make the first field-luncheon a function.”

She turned, nodded her adieux, then, over her shoulder, casually: “If you haven’t an appointment with the Sand-Man before dinner you may find me in the gun-room.”

“I’ll be there in about three minutes,” he said; “and what about this dog?”—looking down at the Sagamore pup who stood before him, wagging, attentive, always the gentleman to the tips of his toes.

Miss Landis laughed. “Take him to your room if you like. Dogs have the run of the house.”

So he followed a servant to the floor above where a smiling and very ornamental maid preceded him through a corridor and into that heavy wing of the house which fronted the sea.

“Tea is served in the gun-room, sir,” said the pretty maid, and disappeared to give place to a melancholy and silent young man who turned on the bath, laid out fresh raiment, and whispering, “Scotch or Irish, sir?” presently effaced himself.

Before he quenched his own thirst Siward filled a bowl and set it on the floor, and it seemed as though the dog would never finish gulping and slobbering in the limpid icy water.

“It’s the salt air, my boy,” commented the young man, gravely refilling his own glass as though accepting the excuse on his own account.

Then man and beast completed ablutions and grooming and filed out through the wide corridor, around the gallery, and down the broad stairway to the gun-room—an oaken vaulted place illuminated by the sun, where mellow lights sparkled on glass-cased rows of fowling pieces and rifles, on the polished antlers of shaggy moose heads.

Miss Landis sat curled up in a cushioned corner under the open casement panes, offering herself a cup of tea. She looked up, nodding invitation; he found a place beside her. A servant whispered, “Scotch or Irish, sir,” then set the crystal paraphernalia at his elbow.

He said something about the salt air, casually; the girl gazed meditatively at space.

The sound of wheels on the gravel outside aroused her from a silence which had become a brown study; and, to Siward, presently, she said: “Here endeth our first rendezvous.”

“Then let us arrange another immediately,” he said, stirring the ice in his glass.

The girl considered him with speculative eyes: “I shouldn’t exactly know what to do with you for the next hour if I didn’t abandon you.”

“Why bother to do anything with me? Why even give yourself the trouble of deserting me? That solves the problem.”

“I really don’t mean that you are a problem to me, Mr. Siward,” she said, amused; “I mean that I am going to drive again.”

“I see.”

“No you don’t see at all. There’s a telegram; I’m not driving for pleasure—”

She had not meant that either, and it annoyed her that she had expressed herself in such terms. As a matter of fact, at the telegraphed request of Mr. Quarrier, she was going to Black Fells Crossing to meet his train from the Lakes and drive him back to Shotover. The drive, therefore, was of course a drive for pleasure.

“I see,” repeated Siward amiably.

“Perhaps you do,” she observed, rising to her graceful height. He was on his feet at once, so carelessly, so good-humouredly acquiescent that without any reason at all she hesitated.

“I had meant to show you about—the cliffs—the kennels and stables; I’m sorry,” she concluded, lingering.

“I’m awfully sorry,” he rejoined without meaning anything in particular. That was the trouble, whatever he said, apparently meant so much.

With the agreeable sensation of being regretted, she leisurely gloved herself, then walked through the gun-room and hall, Siward strolling beside her.

The dog followed them as they turned toward the door and passed out across the terraced veranda to the driveway where a Tandem cart was drawn up, faultlessly appointed. Quarrier’s mania was Tandem. She thought it rather nice of her to remember this.

She inspected the ensemble without visible interest for a few moments; the wind freshened from the sea, fluttering her veil, and she turned toward the east to face it. In the golden splendour of declining day the white sails of yachts crowded landward on the last leg before beating westward into Blue Harbour; a small white cruiser, steaming south, left a mile long stratum of rose-tinted smoke hanging parallel to the horizon’s plane; the westering sun struck sparks from her bright-work.

The magic light on land and water seemed to fascinate the girl; she had walked a little way toward the cliffs, Siward following silently, offering no comment on the beauty of sky and cliff. As they halted once more the enchantment seemed to spread; a delicate haze enveloped the sea; hints of rose colour tinted the waves; over the uplands a pale mauve bloom grew; the sunlight turned redder, slanting on the rocks, and every kelp-covered reef became a spongy golden mound, sprayed with liquid flame.

They had turned their backs to the Tandem; the grooms looked after them, standing motionless at the horses’ heads.

“Mr. Siward, this is too fine to miss,” she said. “I will walk as far as the headland with you.... Please smoke if you care to.”

He did care to; several matches were extinguished by the wind until she spread her skids as a barrier; and kneeling in their shelter he got his light.

“Tobacco smoke diluted with sea breeze is delicious,” she said, as the wind whirled the aromatic smoke of his cigarette up into her face. “Don’t move, Mr. Siward; I like it; there is to me always a faint odour of sweet-brier in the mÅ©lange. Did you ever notice it?”

The breeze-blown conversation became fragmentary, veering as capriciously as the purple wind-flaws that spread across the shoals. But always to her question or comment she found in his response the charm of freshness, of quick intelligence, or of a humourous and idle perversity which stimulates without demanding.

Once, glancing back at the house where the T-cart and horses stood, she said that she had better return; or perhaps she only thought she said it, for he made no response that time. And a few moments later they reached the headland, and the Atlantic lay below, flowing azure from horizon to horizon—under a universe of depthless blue. And for a long while neither spoke.

With her the spell endured until conscience began to stir. Then she awoke, uneasy as always, under the shadow of restraint or pressure, until her eyes fell on him and lingered.

A subtle change had come into his face; its leanness struck her for the first time; that, and an utter detachment from his surroundings, a sombre oblivion to everything—and to her.

How curiously had his face altered, how shadowy it had grown, effacing the charm of youth, in it.

The slight amusement with which she had become conscious of her own personal exclusion grew to an interest tinged with curiosity.

The interest continued, but when his silence became irksome to her she said so very frankly. His absent eyes, still clouded, met hers, unsmiling.

“I hate the sea,” he said.

“You—hate it!” she repeated, too incredulous to be disappointed.

“There’s no rest in it; it tires. A man who plays with it must be on his guard every second. To spend a lifetime on it is ridiculous—a whole life of intelligent effort, against perpetual, brutal, inanimate resistance—one endless uninterrupted fight—a ceaseless human manoeuvre against senseless menace; and then the counter attack of the lifeless monster, the bellowing advance, the shock—and no battle won—nothing final, nothing settled, no! only the same eternal nightmare of surveillance, the same sleepless watch for stupid treachery.”

“But—you don’t have to fight it!” she said, astonished.

“No; but it is no secret—what it does to those who do.... Some escape; but only by dying ashore before it gets them. That is the way some of us reach Heaven; we die too quick for the Enemy to catch us.”

He was laughing when she said: “It is not a fight with the sea; it is the battle of Life itself you mean.”

“Yes, in a way, the battle of Life.”

“Oh, you are morbid then. Is there anybody ever born who has not a fight on his hands?”

“No; only I have known men tired out, unfairly, before life had declared war on them.”

“Just what do you mean?”

“Oh, something about fair play—what our popular idol summarises as a ‘square deal’.” He laughed again, easily, his face clearing.

“Nobody worth a square deal ever laments because he hasn’t had it,” she said.

“I dare say that’s true, too,” he admitted listlessly.

“Mr. Siward, exactly what did you mean?”

“I was thinking of men I knew; for example a man who through generations has inherited every impulse and desire that he should not harbour—a man with intellect enough to be aware of it, with decency enough to desire decency.... What chance has he with the storms which have been brewing for him even before he opened his eyes on earth? Is that a square deal?”

The troubled concentration of her face was reflected now in his own; the wind came whipping and flicking at them from league-wide tossing wastes; the steady thunder of the sea accented the silence.

She said: “I suppose everybody has infinite capacity for decency or mischief. I know that I have. And I fancy that this capacity always remains, no matter how moral one’s life may be. ‘Watch and pray’ was not addressed to the guilty alone, Mr. Siward.”

“Oh, yes, of course. As for the balanced capacity for good and evil, how about the inherited desire for the latter?”

“Who is free from that, too? Do you suppose anybody really desires to be good?”

“You mean most people are so afraid not to be, that virtue becomes a habit?”

“Perhaps. It’s a plain business proposition anyway. It pays.”

“Celestial insurance?” he asked, laughing.

“I don’t know, Mr. Siward; do you?”

But he, turning to the sea, had become engrossed in his own thoughts again; and again she was first curious, then impatient at the ease with which he excluded her. She remembered, too, that the cart was waiting; that she had scarcely time now to make the train.

She stood irresolute, inert, disinclined to bestir herself. An inborn aptitude for drifting, which threatened to become a talent for indecision, had always alternated in her with sudden impulsive conclusions; and when her pride was involved, in decisions which sometimes scarcely withstood the analysis of reason.

Physically healthy, mentally unawakened, sentimentally incredulous, totally ignorant of any master passion, and conventionally drilled, her beauty and sweet temper had carried her easily on the frothy crest of her first season, over the eligible and ineligible alike, leaving her at Lenox, a rather tired and breathless girl, in love with pleasure and the world which treated her so well.

The death of her mother abroad had made little impression upon her—her uncle, Major Belwether, having cared for her since her father’s death when she was ten years old. So, although the scandal of her mother’s self-exile had been in a measure condoned by a tardy marriage to the man for whom she had left everything, her daughter had grown up ignorant of any particular feeling for a mother she could scarcely remember.

However, she wore black and went nowhere for the second winter, during which time she learned a great deal concerning the unconventional proclivities of the women of her race and family, enough to impress her so seriously that on an exaggerated impulse she had come to one of her characteristic decisions.

That decision was to break the unsavoury record at the first justifiable opportunity. And the opportunity came in the shape of Quarrier. As though wedlock were actually the sanctuary which an alarmed nation pretends it to be!

Now, approaching the threshold of a third and last season, and having put away her almost meaningless mourning, there had stolen into her sense of security something irksome in the promise she had made to give Quarrier a definite answer before winter.

Perhaps it had been the lack of interest in the people at Shotover, perhaps a mental review of her ancestors’ capricious records—perhaps a characteristic impulse that had directed a telegram to Quarrier after a midnight confab with Grace Ferrall.

However it may have been, she had summoned him. And now he was on his way to get his answer, the best whip, the most eagerly discussed, and one of the wealthiest unmarried men in America.

Lingering irresolutely, considering with idle eyes the shadows lengthening across the sun-shot moorland, the sound of Siward’s even voice aroused her from a meditation bordering on lassitude.

She answered vaguely. He spoke again; all the agreeable, gentle, humourous charm dominant once more—releasing her from the growing tension of her own thoughts, absolving her from the duty of immediate decision.

“I feel curiously lazy,” she said; “perhaps from our long drive.” She seated herself on the turf. “Talk to me, Mr. Siward—in that lazy way of yours.”

What he had to say proved inconsequent enough, an irrelevant suggestion concerning the training of field-dogs for close covert work and the reasons for not breaking such dogs on quail. Then the question of cross-breeding came up, and he gave his opinion on the qualities of “droppers.” To which she replied, sleepily; and the conversation veered again toward the mystery of heredity, and the hopelessness of escape from its laws as illustrated now by the Sagamore pup, galloping nose in the wind, having scented afar the traces of the forbidden rabbit.

“His ancestors turned ‘round and ‘round to flatten the long reeds and grasses in their lairs before lying down,” observed Siward. “He does it, too, where there is nothing to flatten out. Did you ever notice how many times a dog turns around before lying down? And there goes the carefully schooled

Sagamore, chasing rabbits! Why? Because his wild ancestors chased rabbits.... Heredity? It's a steady, unseen, pulling, dragging force. Like lightning, too, it shatters, sometimes, where there is resistance."

"Do you mean, Mr. Siward, that heredity is an excuse for moral weakness?"

"I don't know. Those inheriting nothing of evil say it is no excuse."

"It is no excuse."

"You speak with authority," he said.

"With more than you are aware of," she murmured, not meaning to say it.

She stood up impulsively, her fresh face turned to the distant house, her rounded young figure poised in relief against the sky.

"Inherited or not, idleness, procrastination, are my besetting sins. Can't you suggest the remedy, Mr. Siward?"

"But they are only the thieves of Time; and we kill the poor old gentleman."

"Leagued assassins," she repeated pensively.

Her gown had caught on the cliff briars; he knelt to release it, she looking down, noting an ugly tear in the fabric.

"Payment for my iniquities—the first instalment," she said, still looking down over his shoulder and watching his efforts to release her. "Thank you, Mr. Siward. I think we ought to start, don't you?"

He straightened up, smiling, awaiting her further pleasure. Her pleasure being capricious, she seated herself again, saying: "What I meant to say was this: evils that spring from heredity are no excuse for misconduct in people of our sort. Environment, not heredity, counts. And it's our business, who have every chance in the world, to make good!"

He looked down, amused at the piquant incongruity of voice and vernacular.

"What time is it?" she asked irrelevantly.

He glanced at his watch. She turned her eyes toward the level sun, conscious, and a little conscience-stricken that it was too late for her to drive to Black Fells Crossing—unless she started at once.

The sun hung low over the pines; all the scrubby foreland ran molten gold in every tufted furrow; flock after flock of twittering little birds whirled into the briars and out again, scattering inland into undulating flight.

The zenith turned shell pink; through clotted shoals of clouds spread spaces of palest green like calm lakes in the sky.

It grew stiller; the wind went down with the sun.

Doubtless he had forgotten to tell her the time; she had almost forgotten that she had asked him. With the silence of sunset a languor, the indolence of content, crept over her; she saw him close his watch with the absent-minded air which she already associated with him, and she let the question go from sheer disinclination for the effort of repetition—let the projected drive go—acquiescent, content that matters shape themselves without any interference from her. The sense of ease, of physical well-being invaded her with an agreeable relaxation as though tension somewhere had slackened.

They chatted on, casually, impersonally, in rather subdued tones. The dog returned now and then to see that all was well. All was well enough, it appeared, for she sat beside Siward, quite content, knees clasped in her hands, exchanging impressions of life with a man who so far had been sympathetically considerate in demanding from her no intellectual effort.

The conversation drifted illogically; sometimes he stirred her to amusement, even a hushed laughter; sometimes she smilingly agreed with his views, sometimes she let them go, uncriticised; or, intent on her own ideas, shook her small head in amused disapproval.

The stillness over all, the deepening mellow light, the blessed indolence of the young world—and their few years in it—Youth! That was perhaps the key to it all, after all.

"To-morrow," she mused aloud, knees cradled in her clasped fingers, "to-morrow they'll shoot—with great circumstance and fuss—a few native woodcock—there's no flight yet from the north!"

—a few grouse, fewer snipe, a stray duck or two. Others will drive motor cars over bad roads; others will ride, sail, golf—anything to kill the eternal enemy.”

“And you?”

“Je n’en sais rien, monsieur.”

“Mais je voudrais savoir.”

“Pourquoi?”

“To lay a true course by the stars”; he looked at her blue eyes and she laughed easily under the laughing flattery.

“You must seek another compass—to-morrow,” she said. Then it occurred to her that nobody could guess her decision in regard to Quarrier; and she partly raised her eyes, looking at him, indolent speculation under the white lids.

She liked him already; in fact she had liked few men as well on such brief acquaintance.

“You know the majority of the people here, or coming, don’t you?” she inquired.

“Who are they?”

She began: “The Leroy Mortimers?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Lord Alderdene and Captain Voucher, and the Page twins and Marion?”

“Yes.”

“Rena Bonnesdel, the Tassel girl, Agatha Caithness, Mrs. Vendenning—all sorts, all sets.” And, with an effort: “If I’m to drive, I should like—to—to know what time it is?”

He informed her; and she, too indolent to pretend surprise, and finding reproach easier, told him that he had no business to permit her to forget.

His smiling serenity under the rebuke aroused in her a slight resentment as though he had taken something for granted.

Besides, she had grown uneasy; she had wired Quarrier, saying she would meet him and drive him over. He had replied at once, naming his train. He was an exact man and expected method and precision in others. She didn’t exactly know how it might affect him if his reasonable demand was unsatisfied. She did not know him very well yet, only well enough to be aware that he was a gentleman so precisely, so judiciously constructed, that, contemplating his equitable perfections, her awe and admiration grew as one on whom dawns the exquisite adjustments of an almost human machine.

And, thinking of him now, she again made up her mind to give him the answer which he now had every reason to expect from her. This decision appeared to lubricate her conscience; it ran more smoothly now, emitting fewer creaks.

“You say that you know Mr. Quarrier?” she began thoughtfully.

“Not well.”

“I—hope you will like him, Mr. Siward.”

“I do not think he likes me, Miss Landis. He has reasons not to.”

She looked up, suddenly remembering: “Oh—since that scrape? What has Mr. Quarrier to do —” She did not finish the sentence. A troubled silence followed; she was trying to remember the details—something she had paid small attention to at the time—something so foreign to her, so distant from her comprehension that it had not touched her closely enough for her to remember exactly what this young man might have done to forfeit the good-will of Howard Quarrier.

She looked at Siward; it was impossible that anything very bad could come from such a man. And, pursuing her reasoning aloud: “It couldn’t have been very awful,” she argued; “something foolish about an actress, was it not? And that could not concern Mr. Quarrier.”

“I thought you did know; I thought you—remembered—while you were driving me over from the station—that I was dropped from my club.”

She flushed up: “Oh!—but—what had Mr. Quarrier to do with that?”

“He is a governor of that club.”

“You mean that Mr. Quarrier had you—dropped?”

“What else could he do? A man who is idiot enough to risk making his own club notorious, must take the consequences. And they say I took that risk. Therefore Mr. Quarrier, Major Belwether—all the governors did their duty. I—I naturally conclude that no governor of the Patroons Club feels very kindly toward me.”

Miss Landis sat very still, her small head bent, a flush still brightening her fair face.

She recalled a few of the details now—the scandal—something of the story. Which particular actress it was she could not remember; but some men who had dined too freely had made the wager, and this boy sitting beside her had accepted it—and won it, by bringing into the sacred precincts of the Patroons Club a foolish, shameless girl disguised in a man’s evening dress.

That was bad enough; that somebody promptly discovered it was worse; but worst of all was the publicity, the club’s name smirched, the young man expelled from one of the two best clubs in the metropolis.

To read of such things in the columns of a daily paper had meant little to her except to repel her; to hear it mentioned among people of her own sort had left her incurious and indifferent. But now she saw it in a new light, with the man who had figured in it seated beside her. Did such men as he—such attractive, well-bred, amusing men as he—do that sort of thing?

There he sat, hat off, the sun touching his short, thick hair which waved a little at the temples—a boyish mould to head and shoulders, a cleanly outlined check and chin, a thoroughbred ear set close—a good face. What sort of a man, then, was a woman to feel at ease with? What eye, what mouth, what manner, what bearing was a woman to trust?

“Is that the kind of man you are, Mr. Siward?” she said impulsively.

“It appears that I was; I don’t know what I am—or may be.”

“The pity of it!” she said, still swayed by impulse. “Why did you do—didn’t you know—realize what you were doing—bringing discredit on your own club?”

“I was in no condition to know, Miss Landis.”

The crude brutality of the expression might merely have hurt or disgusted her had she been less intelligent. Nor, as it was, did she fully understand why he chose to use it—unless that he meant it in self-punishment.

“It’s rather shameful!” she said hotly.

“Yes,” he assented; “it’s a bad beginning.”

“A—beginning! Do you mean to go on?”

He did not reply; his head was partly turned from her. She sat silent for a while. The dog had returned to lie at Siward’s feet, its brown eyes tirelessly watching the man it had chosen for its friend; and the man, without turning his eyes, dropped one hand on the dog’s head, caressing the silky ears.

Some sentimentalist had once said that no man who cared for animals could be wholly bad. Inexperience inclined her to believe it. Then too, she had that inclination for overlooking offences committed against precept, which appears to be one of those edifying human traits peculiar to neither sex and common to both. Besides, her knowledge of such matters was as vague as her mind was healthy and body wholesome. Men who dined incautiously were not remarkable for their rarity; the actress habit, being incomprehensible to her, meant nothing; and she said, innocently: “What men like you can find attractive in a common woman I do not understand; there are plenty of pretty women of your own sort. The actress cult is beyond my comprehension; I only know it is generally condoned. But it is not for such things that we drop men, Mr. Siward. You know that, of course.”

“For what do you drop men?”

“For falsehood, deception, any dishonesty.”

“And you don’t drop a man when you read in the papers that one of the two best clubs in town has expelled him?”

She gave him a troubled glance; and, naively: “But you are still a member of the other, are you not?” Then hardening: “It was common! common!—thoroughly disgraceful and incomprehensible!”—and with every word uttered insensibly warming in her heart toward him whom she was chastening; “it was not even bad—it was worse than being simply bad; it was stupid!”

He nodded, one hand slowly caressing the dog’s head where it lay across his knees.

She watched him a moment, hesitated, then smiling a little: “So now I know the worst about you; do I not?” she concluded.

He did not answer; she waited, the smile still curving her red mouth. Had she been too severe? She wondered. “You may help me to my feet,” she said sweetly. She was very young.

He rose at once, holding out his hands to aid her in that pleasantly impersonal manner so suited to him; and now they stood together in the purple dusk of the uplands—two people young enough to take one another seriously.

“Let me tell you something,” she said, facing him, white hands loosely linked behind her. “I don’t exactly understand how it has happened, but you know as well as I do that we have formed a— an acquaintance—the sort that under normal conditions requires a long time and several conventional and preliminary chapters.... I should like to know what you think of our performance.”

“I think,” he said laughing, “that it is charming.”

“Oh, yes; men usually find the unconventional agreeable. What I want to know is why I find it so, too?”

“Do you?” A dull colour stained his cheek-bones.

“Certainly I do. Is it because I’ve had a delightful chance to admonish a sinner—and be—just a little sorry—that he had made such a silly spectacle of himself?”

He laughed, wincing a trifle.

“Hence this agreeably righteous glow suffusing me,” she concluded. “So now that I have answered my own question, I think that we had better go. ...Don’t you?”

They walked for a while, subdued, soberly picking their path through the dusk. After a few moments she began to feel doubtful, a little uneasy, partly from a reaction which was natural, partly because she was not at all sure what either Quarrier or Major Belwether would think of the terms she was already on with Siward. Suppose they objected? She had never thwarted either of these gentlemen. Besides she already had a temporary interest in Siward—the interest that women always cherish, quite unconsciously, for the man whose shortcomings they have consented to overlook.

As they crossed the headland, through the deepening dusk the acetylene lamps on a cluster of motor cars spread a blinding light across the scrub. The windows of Shotover House were brilliantly illuminated.

“Our shooting-party has returned,” she said.

They crossed the drive through the white glare of the motor lamps; people were passing, grooms with dogs and guns and fluffy bunches of game-birds, several women in motor costumes, veils afloat, a man or two in shooting-tweeds or khaki.

As they entered the hall together, she turned to him, an indefinable smile curving her lips; then, with a little nod, friendly and sweet, she left him standing at the open door of the gun-room.

CHAPTER III SHOTOVER

The first person he encountered in the gun-room was Quarrier, who favoured him with an expressionless stare, then with a bow, quite perfunctory and non-committal. It was plain enough that he had not expected to meet Siward at Shotover House.

Kemp Ferrall, a dark, stocky, active man of forty, was in the act of draining a glass, when, though the bottom he caught sight of Siward. He finished in a gulp, and advanced, one muscular hand outstretched: "Hello, Stephen! Heard you'd arrived, tried the Scotch, and bolted with Sylvia Landis! That's all right, too, but you should have come for the opening day. Lots of native woodcock—eh, Blinky?" turning to Lord Alderdene; and again to Siward: "You know all these fellows—Mortimer yonder—" There was the slightest ring in his voice; and Leroy Mortimer, red-necked, bulky, and heavy eyed, emptied his glass and came over, followed by Lord Alderdene blinking madly though his shooting-goggles and showing all his teeth like a pointer with a "tic." Captain Voucher, a gentleman with the vivid colouring of a healthy groom on a cold day, came up, followed by the Page boys, Willis and Gordon, who shook hands shyly, enchanted to be on easy terms with the notorious Mr. Siward. And last of all Tom O'Hara arrived, reeking of the saddle and clinking a pair of trooper's spurs over the floor—relics of his bloodless Porto Rico campaign with Squadron A.

It was patent to every man present that the Kemp Ferralls had determined to ignore Siward's recent foolishness, which indicated that he might reasonably expect the continued good-will of several sets, the orbits of which intersected in the social system of his native city. Indeed, the few qualified to snub him cared nothing about the matter, and it was not likely that anybody else would take the initiative in being disagreeable to a young man, the fortunes and misfortunes of whose race were part of the history of Manhattan Island. Siwards, good or bad, were a matter of course in New York.

So everybody in the gun-room was civil enough, and he chose Scotch and found a seat beside Alderdene, who sat biting at a smoky pipe and fingering a tumbler of smokier Scotch, blinking away like mad through his shooting-goggles at everybody.

"These little brown snipe you call woodcock," he began; "we bagged nine brace, d'you see? But of all the damnable bogs and covers—"

"Rotten," said Mortimer thickly; "Ferrall, you're all calf and biceps, and it's well enough for you to go floundering into bogs—"

"Where do you expect to find native woodcock?" demanded Ferrall, laughing.

"On the table hereafter," growled Mortimer.

"Oh, go and pot Beverly Plank's tame pheasants," retorted Ferrall amiably; "Captain Voucher had a blank day, but he isn't kicking."

"Not I," said Voucher; "the sport is capital—if one can manage to hit the beggars—"

"Oh, everybody misses in snap-shooting," observed Ferrall; "that is, everybody except Stephen Siward with his unholy left barrel. Crack! and," turning to Alderdene, "it's like taking money from you, Blinky—which reminds me that we've time for a little Preference before dressing."

His squinting lordship declined and took an easier position in his chair, extending a pair of little bandy legs draped in baggy tweed knickerbockers and heather-spats. Mortimer, industriously distending his skin with whiskey, reached for the decanter. The aromatic perfume of the spirits aroused Siward, and he instinctively nodded his desire to a servant.

"This salt air keeps one thirsty," he observed to Ferrall; then something in his host's expression arrested the glass at his lips. He had already been using the decanter a good deal; except Mortimer, nobody was doing that sort of thing as freely as he.

He set his glass on the table thoughtfully; a tinge of colour had crept into his lean checks.

Ferrall, too, suddenly uncomfortable, stood up saying something about dressing; several men arose a trifle stiffly, feeling in every joint the result of the first day's shooting after all those idle months. Mortimer got up with an unfeigned groan; Siward followed, leaving his glass untouched.

One or two other men came in from the billiard-room. All greeted Siward amiably—all excepting one who may not have seen him—an elderly, pink, soft gentleman with white downy chop-whiskers and the profile of a benevolent buck rabbit.

“How do you do, Major Belwether?” said Siward in a low voice without offering his hand.

Then Major Belwether saw him, bless you! yes indeed! And though Siward continued not to offer his hand, Major Belwether meant to have it, bless your heart! And he fussed and fussed and beamed cordiality until he secured it in his plump white fingers and pressed it effusively.

There was something about his soft, warm hands which had always reminded Siward of the temperature and texture of a newly hatched bird. It had been some time since he had shaken hands with Major Belwether; it was apparent that the bird had not aged any.

“And now for the shooting!” said the Major with an arch smile. “Now for the stag at bay and the winding horn—

‘Where sleeps the moon On Mona’s rill—’

Eh, Siward?

‘And here’s to the hound With his nose upon the ground—’

Eh, my boy? That reminds me of a story—” He chuckled and chuckled, his lambent eyes suffused with mirth; and slipping his arm through the pivot-sleeve of Lord Alderdene’s shooting-jacket, hooking the other in Siward’s reluctant elbow, and driving Mortimer ahead of him, he went garrulously away up the stairs, his lordship’s bandy little legs trotting beside him, the soaking gaiters and shoes slopping at every step.

Mortimer, his mottled skin now sufficiently distended, greeted the story with a yawn from ear to ear; his lordship, blinking madly, burst into that remarkable laugh which seemed to reveal the absence of certain vocal cords requisite to perfect harmony; and Siward smiled in his listless, pleasant way, and turned off down his corridor, unaware that the Sagamore pup was following close at his heels until he heard Quarrier’s even, colourless voice: “Ferrall, would you be good enough to send Sagamore to your kennels?”

“Oh—he’s your dog! I forgot,” said Siward turning around.

Quarrier looked at him, pausing a moment.

“Yes,” he said coldly, “he’s my dog.”

For a fraction of a second the two men’s eyes encountered; then Siward glanced at the dog, and turned on his heel with the slightest shrug. And that is all there was to the incident—an anxious, perplexed puppy lugged off by a servant, turning, jerking, twisting, resisting, looking piteously back as his unwilling feet slid over the polished floor.

So Siward walked on alone through the long eastern wing to his room overlooking the sea. He sat down on the edge of his bed, glancing at the clothing laid out for him. He felt tired and disinclined for the exertion of undressing. The shades were up; night quicksilvered the window-panes so that they were like a dark mirror reflecting his face. He inspected his darkened features curiously; the blurred and sombre-tinted visage returned the stare.

“Not a man at all—the shadow of a man,” he said aloud—“with no will, no courage—always putting off the battle, always avoiding conclusions, always skulking. What chance is there for a man like that?”

As one who raises a glass to drink wine and unexpectedly finds water, he shrugged his shoulders disgustedly and got up. A bath followed; he dressed leisurely, and was pacing the room, fussing with his collar, when Ferrall knocked and entered, finding a seat on the bed.

“Stephen,” he said bluntly, “I haven’t seen you since that break of yours at the club.”

“Rotten, wasn’t it?” commented Siward, tying his tie.

“Perfectly. Of course it doesn’t make any difference to Grace or to me, but I fancy you’ve already heard from it.”

“Oh, yes. All I care about is how my mother took it.”

“Of course; she was cut up I suppose?”

“Yes, you know how she would look at a thing of that sort; not that any of the nine and seventy jarring sets would care, but those few thousands invading the edges, butting in—half or three-quarters inside—are the people who can’t afford to overlook the victim of a fashionable club’s displeasure—those, and a woman like my mother, and several other decent-minded people who happen to count in town.”

Ferrall, his legs swinging busily, thought again; then: “Who was the girl, Stephen?”

“I don’t think the papers mentioned her name,” said Siward gravely.

“Oh—I beg your pardon; I thought she was some notorious actress—everybody said so.... Who were those callow fools who put you up to it?... Never mind if you don’t care to tell. But it strikes me they are candidates for club discipline as well as you. It was up to them to face the governors I think—”

“No, I think not.”

Ferrall, legs swinging busily, considered him.

“Too bad,” he mused; “they need not have dropped you—”

“Oh, they had to. But as long as the Lenox takes no action I can live that down.”

Ferrall nodded: “I came in to say something—a message from Grace—confound it! what was it? Oh—could you—before dinner—now—just sit down and with that infernal facility of yours make a sketch of a man chasing a gun-shy dog?”

“Why yes—if Mrs. Ferrall wishes—”

He walked over to the desk in his shirt-sleeves, sat down, drew a blank sheet of paper toward him, and, dipping his pen, drew carelessly a gun-shy setter dog rushing frantically across the stubble, and after him, bare-headed, gun in hand, the maddest of men.

“Put a Vandyke beard on him,” grinned Ferrall over his shoulder. “There! O Lord! but you have hit it! Put a ticked saddle on the cur—there!”

“Who is this supposed to be?” began Siward, looking up. But “Wait!” chuckled his host, seizing the still wet sketch, and made for the door.

Siward strolled into the bath-room, washed a spot or two of ink from his fingers, returned and buttoned his waistcoat, then, completing an unhurried toilet, went out and down the stairway to the big living-room. There were two or three people there—Mrs. Leroy Mortimer, very fetching with her Japanese-like colouring, black hair and eyes that slanted just enough; Rena Bonnesdel, smooth, violet-eyed, blonde, and rather stunning in a peculiarly innocent way; Miss Caithness, very pale and slimly attractive; and the Page boys, Willis and Gordon, delightfully shy and interested, and having a splendid time with any woman who could afford the intellectual leisure.

Siward spoke pleasantly to them all. Other people drifted down—Marion Page who looked like a school-marm and rode like a demon; Eileen Shannon, pink and white as a thorn blossom, with the deuce to pay lurking in her grey eyes; Kathryn Tassel and Mrs. Vendenning whom he did not know, and finally his hostess Grace Ferrall with her piquant, almost boyish, freckled face and sweet frank eyes and the figure of an adolescent.

She gave Siward one pretty sun-browned hand and laid the other above his, holding it a moment in her light clasp.

“Stephen! Stephen!” she said under her breath, “it’s because I’ve a few things to scold you about that I’ve asked you to Shotover.”

“I suppose I know,” he said.

“I should hope you do. I’ve a letter to-night from your mother.”

“From my mother?”

“I want you to go over it—with me—if we can find a minute after dinner.” She released his hand, turning partly around: “Kemp, dinner’s been announced, so cut that dog story in two! Will you give me your arm Major Belwether? Howard!”—to her cousin, Mr. Quarrier, who turned from Miss Landis to listen—“will you please try to recollect whom you are to take in—and do it?” And, as she passed Siward, in a low voice, mischievous and slangy: “Sylvia Landis for yours—as she says she didn’t have enough of you on the cliffs.”

The others appeared to know how to pair according to some previous notice. Siward turned to Sylvia Landis with the pleasure of his good fortune so plainly visible in his face, that her own brightened in response.

“You see,” she said gaily, “you cannot escape me. There is no use in looking wildly at Agatha Caithness”—he wasn’t—“or pretending you’re pleased,” slipping her rounded, bare arm through the arm he offered. “You can’t guess what I’ve done to-night—nobody can guess except Grace Ferrall and one other person. And if you try to look happy beside me, I may tell you—somewhere between sherry and cognac—Oh, yes; I’ve done two things: I have your dog for you!”

“Not Sagamore?” he said incredulously as he was seating her.

“Certainly Sagamore. I said to Mr. Quarrier, ‘I want Sagamore,’ and when he tried to give him to me, I made him take my cheque. Now you may draw another for me at your leisure, Mr. Siward. Tell me, are you pleased?”—for she was looking for the troubled hesitation in his face and she saw it dawning.

“Mr. Quarrier doesn’t like me, you know—”

“But I do,” she said coolly. “I told him how much pleasure it would give me. That is sufficient—is it not?—for everybody concerned.”

“He knew that you meant to—”

“No, that concerns only you and me. Are you trying to spoil my pleasure in what I have done?”

“I can’t take the dog, Miss Landis—”

“Oh,” she said, vexed; “I had no idea you were vindictive—”

There was a silence; he bent forward a trifle, gravely scrutinising a “hand-painted” name card, though it might not have astonished him to learn that somebody’s foot had held the brush. Somewhere in the vicinity Grace Ferrall had discovered a woman who supported dozens of relatives by painting that sort of thing for the summer residents at Vermillion Point down the coast. So being charitable she left an order, and being thrifty, insisted on using the cards, spite of her husband’s gibes.

People were now inspecting them with more or less curiosity; Siward found his “hand-painting” so unattractive that he had just tipped it over to avoid seeing it, when a burst of laughter from Lord Alderdene made everybody turn. Mrs. Vendenning was laughing; so was Rena Bonnesdel looking over Quarrier’s shoulder at a card he was holding—not one of the “hand-decorated,” but a sheet of note-paper containing a drawing of a man rushing after a gun-shy dog.

The extraordinary cackling laughter of his lordship obliterated other sounds for a while; Rena Bonnesdel possessed herself of the drawing and held it up amid a shout of laughter. And, to his excessive annoyance, Siward saw that, unconsciously, he had caricatured Quarrier—Ferrall’s malicious request for a Vandyke beard making the caricature dreadfully apparent.

Quarrier had at first flushed up; then he forced a smile; but his symmetrical features were never cordial when he smiled.

“Who on earth did that?” whispered Sylvia Landis apprehensively. “Mr. Quarrier dislikes that sort of thing—but of course he’ll take it well.”

“Did he ever chase his own dog?” asked Siward, biting his lip.

“Yes—so Blinky says—in the Carolinas last season. It’s Blinky!—that’s his notion of humour. Did you ever hear such a laugh? No wonder Mr. Quarrier is annoyed.”

The gay uproar had partly subsided, renewed here and there as the sketch was passed along, and finally, making the circle, returned like a bad penny to Quarrier. He smiled again, symmetrically, as he received it, nodding his compliments to Alderdene.

“Oh, no,” cackled his lordship; “I didn’t draw it, old chap!”

“Nor I! I only wish I could,” added Captain Voucher.

“Nor I—nor I—who did it?” ran the chorus along the table.

“I didn’t do it!” said Sylvia gravely, looking across at Quarrier. And suddenly Quarrier’s large, handsome eyes met Siward’s for the briefest fraction of a second, then were averted. But into his face there crept an expressionless pallor that did not escape Siward—no, nor Sylvia Landis.

Presently under cover of a rapid fire of chatter she said: “Did you draw that?”

“Yes; I had no idea it was meant for him. You may imagine how likely I’d be to take any liberty with a man who already dislikes me.”

“But it resembles him—in a very dreadful way.”

“I know it. You must take my word for what I have told you.”

She looked up at him: “I do.” Then: “It’s a pity; Mr. Quarrier does not consider such things humorous. He—he is very sensitive.... Oh, I wish that fool Englishman had been in Ballyhoo!”

“But he didn’t do it!”

“No, but he put you up to it—or Grace Ferrall did. I wish Grace would let Mr. Quarrier alone; she has always been perfectly possessed to plague him; she seems unable to take him seriously and he simply hates it. I don’t think he’d tolerate her if she were not his cousin.

“I’m awfully sorry,” was all Siward said; and for a while he gloomily busied himself with whatever was brought to him.

“Don’t look that way,” came a low voice beside him.

“Do I show everything as plainly as that?” he asked, curiously.

“I seem to read you—sometimes.”

“It’s very nice of you,” he said.

“Nice?”

“To look at me—now and then.”

“Oh,” she cried resentfully, “don’t be grateful.”

“I—really am not you know,” he said laughing.

“That,” she rejoined slowly, “is the truth. You say conventional things in a manner—in an agreeably personal manner that interests women. But you are not grateful to anybody for anything; you are indifferent, and you can’t help being nice to people, so—some day—some girl will think you are grateful, and will have a miserable time of it.”

“Miserable time?”

“Waiting for you to say what never will enter your head to say.”

“You mean I—I—”

“Flirt? No, I mean that you don’t flirt; that you are always dreamily occupied with your own affairs, from which listlessly congenial occupation, when drawn, you are so unexpectedly nice that a girl immediately desires to see how nice you can be.”

“What a charming indictment you draw!” he said, amused.

“It’s a grave one I assure you. I’ve been talking about you to Grace Ferrall; I asked to be placed beside you at dinner; I told her I hadn’t had half enough of you on the cliff. Now what do you think of yourself for being too nice to a susceptible girl? I think it’s immoral.”

They both were laughing now; several people glanced at them, smiling in sympathy. Alderdene took that opportunity to revert to the sketch, furnishing a specimen of his own inimitable laughter

as a running accompaniment to the story of Quarrier and his dog in North Carolina, until he had everybody, as usual, laughing, not at the story but at him. All of which demonstration was bitterly offensive to Quarrier. He turned his eyes once on Miss Landis and on Siward, then dropped them.

The hostess arose; a rustle and flurry of silk and lace and the scraping of chairs, a lingering word or laugh, and the colour vanished from the room leaving a circle of men in black standing around the table.

Here and there a man, lighting a cigarette, bolted his coffee and cognac and strolled out to the gun-room. Ferrall, gesticulating vigorously, resumed his preprandial dog story to Captain Voucher; Belwether buttonholed Alderdene and bored him with an interminably facetious tale until that nobleman, threatened with maxillary dislocation, fairly wrenched himself loose and came over to Siward, squinting furiously.

“Old ass!” he muttered; “his chop whiskers look like the chops of a Southdown ram—and he’s got the wits of one. Look here, Stephen, I hear you fell into no end of a scrape in town—”

“Tu quoque, Blinky? Oh, read the newspapers and let it go at that!”

“Just as you like old chap!” returned his lordship unabashed. “All I meant was—anything Voucher and I can do—of course—”

“You’re very good. I’m not dead you know.”

“Not dead, you know’,” repeated Major Belwether coming up behind them with his sprightly step; “that reminds me of a good one—” He sat down and lighted a cigar, then, vainly attempting to control his countenance as though roguishly anticipating the treat awaiting them, he began another endless story.

Tradition had hallowed the popular notion that Major Belwether was a wit. The sycophant of the outer world seldom even awaited his first word before bursting into premature mirth. Besides he was very wealthy.

Siward watched him with mixed emotions; the lambent-eyed, sheepy expression had given place to the buck rabbit; his smooth baby-pink skin and downy white side whiskers quivered in premature sympathy with his listener’s overwhelming hilarity.

The Page boys, very callow, very much delighted, and a little in awe of such a celebrated personage, laughed heartily. And altogether there was sufficient attention and sufficient laughter to make a very respectable noise. This, being the major’s cue for an exit, he rose, one sleek hand raised in sprightly protest as though to shield the invisible ladies, to whose bournes he was bound, from an uproar too masculine and mighty for the ears of such a sex.

“Ass!” muttered Alderdene, getting up and pattering about the room in his big, shiny pumps. “Give me a peg—somebody!”

Mortimer swallowed his brandy, lingered, lifted the decanter, mechanically considering its remaining contents and his own capacity; then:

“Bridge, Captain?”

“Certainly,” said Captain Voucher briskly.

“I’ll go and shoo the major into the gun-room,” observed Ferrall—“unless—” looking questioningly at Siward.

“I’ve a date with your wife,” observed that young man, strolling toward the hall.

The Page boys, Rena Bonnesdel, and Eileen Shannon were seated at a card table together, very much engaged with one another, the sealed pack lying neglected on the green cloth, a vast pink box of bon-bons beside it, not neglected.

O’Hara and Quarrier with Marion Page and Mrs. Mortimer were immersed in the game, already stony faced and oblivious to outer sounds.

About the rooms were distributed girls en tÃˆte-Ãˆ -tÃˆte, girls eating bon-bons and watching the cards—among them Sylvia Landis, hands loosely clasped behind her, standing at Quarrier’s elbow to observe and profit by an expert performance.

As Siward strolled in she raised her dainty head for an instant, smiled in silence, and resumed a study of her fiancé's game.

A moment later, when Quarrier had emerged brilliantly from the mæle, she looked up again, triumphantly, supposing Siward was lingering somewhere waiting to join her. And she was just a trifle surprised and disappointed to find him nowhere in sight. She had wished him to observe the brilliancy of Mr. Quarrier's game.

But Siward, outside on the veranda, was saying at that moment to his hostess: "I shall be very glad to read my mother's letter at any time you choose."

"It must be later, Stephen. I'm to cut in when Kemp sends for me. He has a lot of letters to attend to.... Tell me, what do you think of Sylvia Landis?"

"I like her, of course," he replied pleasantly.

Grace Ferrall stood thinking a moment: "That sketch you made proved a great success, didn't it?" And she laughed under her breath.

"Did it? I thought Mr. Quarrier seemed annoyed—"

"Really? What a muff that cousin of mine is. He's such a muff, you know, that the very sight of his pointed beard and pompadour hair and his complacency sets me in fidgets to stir him up."

"I don't think you'd best use me for the stick next time," said Siward. "He's not my cousin you know."

Mrs. Ferrall shrugged her boyish shoulders: "By the way"—she said curiously—"who was that girl?"

"What girl," he asked coolly, looking at his hostess, now the very incarnation of delicate mockery with her pretty laughing mouth, her boyish sunburn and freckles.

"You won't tell me I suppose?"

"I'm sorry—"

"Was she pretty, Stephen?"

"Yes," he said sulkily; "I wish you wouldn't—"

"Nonsense! Do you think I'm going to let you off without some sort of confession? If I had time now—but I haven't. Kemp has business letters: he'll be furious; so I've got to take his cards or we won't have any pennies to buy gasoline for our adored and shrieking Mercedes."

She retreated backward with a gay nod of malice, turned to enter the house, and met Sylvia Landis face to face in the hallway.

"You minx!" she whispered; "aren't you ashamed?"

"Very much, dear. What for?" And catching sight of Siward outside in the starlight, divined perhaps something of her hostess' meaning, for she laughed uneasily, like a child who winces under a stern eye.

"You don't suppose for a moment," she began, "that I have—"

"Yes I do. You always do."

"Not with that sort of man," she returned naively; "he won't."

Mrs. Ferrall regarded her suspiciously: "You always pick out exactly the wrong man to play with—"

They had moved back side by side into the hall, the hostess' arm linked in the arm of the younger girl.

"The wrong man?" repeated Sylvia, instinctively freeing her arm, her straight brows beginning to bend inward.

"I didn't mean that—exactly. You know how much I care for his mother—and for him." The obstinate downward trend of the brows, the narrowing blue gaze signalled mutiny to the woman who knew her so well.

"What is so wrong with Mr. Siward?" she asked.

"Nothing. There was an affair—"

“This spring in town. I know it. Is that all?”

“Yes—for the present,” replied Grace Ferrall uncomfortably; then: “For goodness’ sake, Sylvia, don’t cross examine me that way! I care a great deal for that boy—”

“So do I. I’ve made him take my dog.”

There was an abrupt pause, and presently Mrs. Ferrall began to laugh.

“I mean it—really,” said Sylvia quietly; “I like him immensely.”

“Dearest, you mean it generously—with your usual exaggeration. You have heard that he has been foolish, and because he’s so young, so likable, every instinct, every impulse in you is aroused to—to be nice to him—”

“And if that were—”

“There is no harm, dear—” Mrs. Ferrall hesitated, her grey eyes softening to a graver revery. Then looking up: “It’s rather pathetic,” she said in a low voice. “Kemp thinks he’s foredoomed—like all the Siwards. It’s an hereditary failing with him,—no, it’s hereditary damnation. Siward after Siward, generation after generation you know—” She bit her lip, thinking a moment. “His grandfather was a friend of my grand-parents, brilliant, handsome, generous, and—doomed! His own father was found dying in a dreadful resort in London where he had wandered when stupefied—a Siward! Think of it! So you see what that outbreak of Stephen’s means to those whose families have been New Yorkers since New York was. It is ominous, it is more than ominous—it means that the master-vice has seized on one more Siward. But I shall never, never admit it to his mother.”

The younger girl sat wide-eyed, silent; the elder’s gaze was upon her, but her thoughts, remote, centred on the hapless mother of such a son.

“Such indulgence was once fashionable; moderation is the present fashion. Perhaps he will fall into line,” said Mrs. Ferrall thoughtfully. “The main thing is to keep him among people, not to drop him. The gregarious may be shamed, but if anything, any incident, happens to drive him outside by himself, if he should become solitary, there’s not a chance in the world for him.... It’s a pity. I know he meant to make himself the exception to the rule—and look! Already one carouse of his has landed him in the daily papers!”

Sylvia flushed and looked up: “Grace, may I ask you a plain question?”

“Yes, child,” she answered absently.

“Has it occurred to you that what you have said about this boy touches me very closely?”

Mrs. Ferrall’s wits returned nimbly from woolgathering, and she shot a startled, inquiring glance at the girl beside her.

“You—you mean the matter of heredity, Sylvia?”

“Yes. I think my uncle Major Belwether chose you as his august mouthpiece for that little sermon on the dangers of heredity—the danger of being ignorant concerning what women of my race had done—before I came into the world they found so amusing.”

“I told you several things,” returned Mrs. Ferrall composedly. “Your uncle thought it best for you to know.”

“Yes. The marriage vows sat lightly upon some of my ancestors, I gather. In fact,” she added coolly, “where the women of my race loved they usually found the way—rather unconventionally. There was, if I understood you, enough of divorce, of general indiscretion and irregularity to seriously complicate any family tree and coat of arms I might care to claim—”

“Sylvia!”

The girl lifted her pretty bare shoulders. “I’m sorry, but could I help it? Very well; all I can do is to prove a decent exception. Very well; I’m doing it, am I not?—practically scared into the first solidly suitable marriage offered—seizing the unfortunate Howard with both hands for fear he’d get away and leave me alone with only a queer family record for company! Very well! Now then, I want to ask you why everybody, in my case, didn’t go about with sanctimonious faces and dolorous mien repeating: ‘Her grand-mother eloped! Her mother ran away. Poor child, she’s doomed! doomed!’”

“Sylvia, I—”

“Yes—why didn’t they? That’s the way they talk about that boy out there!” She swept a rounded arm toward the veranda.

“Yes, but he has already broken loose, while you—”

“So did I—nearly! Had it not been for you, you know well enough I might have run away with that dreadful Englishman at Newport! For I adored him—I did! I did! and you know it. And look at my endless escapes from compromising myself! Can you count them?—all those indiscretions when mere living seemed to intoxicate me that first winter—and only my uncle and you to break me in!”

“In other words,” said Mrs. Ferrall slowly, “you don’t think Mr. Siward is getting what is known as a square deal?”

“No, I don’t. Major Belwether has already hinted—no, not even that—but has somehow managed to dampen my pleasure in Mr. Siward.”

Mrs. Ferrall considered the girl beside her—now very lovely and flushed in her suppressed excitement.

“After all,” she said, “you are going to marry somebody else. So why become quite so animated about a man you may never again see?”

“I shall see him if I desire to!”

“Oh!”

“I am not taking the black veil, am I?” asked the girl hotly.

“Only the wedding veil, dear. But after all your husband ought to have something to suggest concerning a common visiting list—”

“He may suggest—certainly. In the meantime I shall be loyal to my own friends—and afterward, too,” she murmured to herself, as her hostess rose, calmly dropping care like a mantle from her shoulders.

“Go and be good to this poor young man then; I adore rows—and you’ll have a few on your hands I’ll warrant. Let me remind you that your uncle can make it unpleasant for you yet, and that your amiable fiancé has a will of his own under his pompadour and silky beard.”

“What a pity to have it clash with mine,” said the girl serenely.

Mrs. Ferrall looked at her: “Mercy on us! Howard’s pompadour would stick up straight with horror if he could hear you! Don’t be silly; don’t for an impulse, for a caprice, break off anything desirable on account of a man for whom you really care nothing—whose amiable exterior and prospective misfortune merely enlist a very natural and generous sympathy in you.”

“Do you suppose that I shall endure interference from anybody?—from my uncle, from Howard?”

“Dear, you are making a mountain out of a mole-hill. Don’t be emotional; don’t let loose impulses that you and I know about, knew about in our school years, know all about now, and which you and I have decided must be eliminated—”

“You mean subdued; they’ll always be there.”

“Very well; who cares, as long as you have them in leash?”

Looking at one another, the excited colour cooling in the younger girl’s cheeks, they laughed, one with relief, the other a little ashamed.

“Kemp will be furious; I simply must cut in!” said Mrs. Ferrall, hastily turning toward the gun-room. Miss Landis looked after her, subdued, vaguely repentant, the consciousness dawning upon her that she had probably made considerable conversation about nothing.

“It’s been so all day,” she thought impatiently; “I’ve exaggerated; I’ve worked up a scene about a man whose habits are not the slightest concern of mine. Besides that I’ve neglected Howard shamefully!” She was walking slowly, her thoughts outstripping her errant feet, but it seemed that neither her thoughts nor her steps were leading her toward the neglected gentleman within; for presently she found herself at the breezy veranda door, looking rather fixedly at the stars.

The stars, shining impartially upon the just and the unjust, illuminated the person of Siward, who sat alone, rather limply, one knee crossed above the other. He looked up by chance, and, seeing her star-gazing in the doorway, straightened out and rose to his feet.

Aware of him apparently for the first time, she stepped across the threshold meeting his advance half-way.

“Would you care to go down to the rocks?” he asked. “The surf is terrific.”

“No—I don’t think I care—”

They stood listening a moment to the stupendous roar.

“A storm somewhere at sea,” he concluded.

“Is it very fine—the surf?”

“Very fine—and very relentless—” he laughed; “it is an unfriendly creature, the sea, you know.”

She had begun to move toward the cliffs, he fell into step beside her; they spoke little, a word now and then.

The perfume of the mounting sea saturated the night with wild fragrance; dew lay heavy on the lawns; she lifted her skirts enough to clear the grass, heedless that her silk-shod feet were now soaking. Then at the cliffs’ edge, as she looked down into the white fury of the surf, the stunning crash of the ocean saluted her.

For a long while they watched in silence; once she leaned a trifle too far over the star-lit gulf and, recoiling, involuntarily steadied herself on his arm.

“I suppose,” she said, “no swimmer could endure that battering.”

“Not long.”

“Would there be no chance?”

“Not one.”

She bent farther outward, fascinated, stirred, by the splendid frenzy of the breakers.

“I—think—,” he began quietly; then a firm hand fell over her left hand; and, half encircled by his arm she found herself drawn back. Neither spoke; two things she was coolly aware of, that, urged, drawn by something subtly irresistible she had leaned too far out from the cliff, and would have leaned farther had he not taken matters into his own keeping without apology. Another thing; the pressure of his hand over hers remained a sensation still—a strong, steady, masterful imprint lacking hesitation or vacillation. She was as conscious of it as though her hand still tightened under his—and she was conscious, too, that nothing of his touch had offended; that there had arisen in her no tremor of instinctive recoil. For never before had she touched or suffered a touch from a man, even a gloved greeting, that had not in some measure subtly repelled her, nor, for that matter, a caress from a woman without a reaction of faint discomfort.

“Was I in any actual danger?” she asked curiously.

“I think not. But it was too much responsibility for me.”

“I see. Any time I wish to break my neck I am to please do it alone in future.”

“Exactly—if you don’t mind,” he said smiling.

They turned, shoulder to shoulder, walking back through the drenched herbage.

“That,” she said impulsively, “is not what I said a few moments ago to a woman.”

“What did you say a few moments ago to a woman?”

“I said, Mr. Siward, that I would not leave a—a certain man to go to the devil alone!”

“Do you know any man who is going to the devil?”

“Do you?” she asked, letting herself go swinging out upon a tide of intimacy she had never dreamed of risking—nor had she the slightest idea whither the current would carry her.

They had stopped on the lawn, ankle deep in wet grass, the stars overhead sparkling magnificently, and in their ears the outcrash of the sea.

“You mean me,” he concluded.

“Do I?”

He looked up into the lovely face; her eyes were very sweet, very clear—clear with excitement—but very friendly.

“Let us sit here on the steps a little while, will you?” she asked.

So he found a place beside her, one step lower, and she leaned forward, elbows on knees, rounded white chin in her palms, the starlight giving her bare arms and shoulders a marble lustre and tinting her eyes a deeper amethyst.

And now, innocently untethered, mission and all, she laid her heart quite bare—one chapter of it. And, like other women-errant who believe in the influence of their sex individually and collectively, she began wrong by telling him of her engagement—perhaps to emphasise her pure disinterestedness in a crusade for principle only. Which naturally dampened in him any nascent enthusiasm for being ministered to, and so preoccupied him that he turned deaf ears to some very sweet platitudes which might otherwise have impressed him as discoveries in philosophy.

Officially her creed was the fashionable one in town; privately she had her own religion, lacking some details truly enough, but shaped upon youthful notions of right and wrong. As she had not read very widely, she supposed that she had discovered this religion for herself; she was not aware that everybody else had passed that way—it being the first immature moult in young people after rejecting dogma.

And the ripened fruit of all this philosophy she helpfully dispensed for Siward’s benefit as bearing directly on his case.

Had he not been immersed in the unexpected proposition of her impending matrimony, he might have been impressed, for the spell of her beauty counted something, and besides, he had recently formulated for himself a code of ethics, tintured with Omar, and slightly resembling her own discoveries in that dog-eared science.

So it was, when she was most eloquent, most earnestly inspired—nay in the very middle of a plea for sweetness and light and simple living, that his reasonings found voice in the material comment:

“I never imagined you were engaged!”

“Is that what you have been thinking about?” she asked, innocently astonished.

“Yes. Why not? I never for one instant supposed—”

“But, Mr. Siward, why should you have concerned yourself with supposing anything? Why indulge in any speculation of that sort about me?”

“I don’t know, but I didn’t,” he said.

“Of course you didn’t; you’d known me for about three hours—there on the cliff—”

“But—Quarrier—!”

Over his youthful face a sullen shadow had fallen—flickering, not yet settled. He would not for anything on earth have talked freely to the woman destined to be Quarrier’s wife. He had talked too much anyway. Something in her, something about her had loosened his tongue. He had made a plain ass of himself—that was all,—a garrulous ass. And truly it seemed that the girl beside him, even in the starlight, could follow and divine what he had scarcely expressed to himself; or her instincts had taken a shorter cut to forestall his own conclusion.

“Don’t think the things you are thinking!” she said in a fierce little voice, leaning toward him.

“What do you mean?” he asked, taken aback.

“You know! Don’t! It is unfair—it is—is faithless—to me. I am your friend; why not? Does it make any difference to you whom I marry? Cannot two people remain in accord anyway? Their friendship concerns each other and—nobody else!” She was letting herself go now; she was conscious of it, conscious that impulse and emotion were the currents unloosed and hurrying her onward. And with it all came exhilaration, a faint intoxication, a delicate delight in daring to let go all and trust to impulse and emotions.

“Why should you feel hurt because for a moment you let me see—gave me a glimpse of yourself—of life’s battle as you foresee it? What if there is always a reaction from all confidences exchanged?”

What if that miserable French cynic did say that never was he more alone than after confessing to a friend? He died crazy anyhow. Is not a rare moment of confidence worth the reaction—the subsidence into the armored shell of self? Tell me truly, Mr. Siward, isn't it?"

Breathless, confused, exhilarated by her own rapid voice she bent her face, brilliant with colour, and very sweet; and he looked up into it, expectant, uncertain.

"If such a friendship as ours is to become worth anything to you—to me, why should it trouble you that I know—and am thinking of things that concern you? Is it because the confidence is one-sided? Is it because you have given and I have listened and given nothing in return to balance the account? I do give—interest, deep interest, sympathy if you ask it; I give confidence in return—if you desire it!"

"What can a girl like you need of sympathy?" he said smiling.

"You don't know! you don't know! If heredity is a dark vista, and if you must stare through it all your life, sword in hand, always on your guard, do you think you are the only one?"

"Are you—one?" he said incredulously.

"Yes"—with an involuntary shudder—"not that way. It is easier for me; I think it is—I know it is. But there are things to combat—impulses, a recklessness, perhaps something almost ruthless. What else I do not know, for I have never experienced violent emotions of any sort—never even deep emotion."

"You are in love!"

"Yes, thoroughly," she added with conviction, "but not violently. I—" she hesitated, stopped short, leaning forward, peering at him through the dusk; and: "Mr. Siward! are you laughing?" She rose and he stood up instantly.

There was lightning in her darkening eyes now; in his something that glimmered and danced. She watched it, fascinated, then of a sudden the storm broke and they were both laughing convulsively, face to face there under the stars.

"Mr. Siward," she breathed, "I don't know what I am laughing at; do you? Is it at you? At myself? At my poor philosophy in shreds and tatters? Is it some infernal mirth that you seem to be able to kindle in me—for I never knew a man like you before?"

"You don't know what you were laughing at?" he repeated. "It was something about love—"

"No I don't know why I laughed! I—I don't wish to, Mr. Siward. I do not desire to laugh at anything you have made me say—anything you may infer—"

"I don't infer—"

"You do! You made me say something—about my being ignorant of deep, of violent emotion, when I had just informed you that I am thoroughly, thoroughly in love—"

"Did I make you say all that, Miss Landis?"

"You did. Then you laughed and made me laugh too. Then you—"

"What did I do then?" he asked, far too humbly.

"You—you infer that I am either not in love or incapable of it, or too ignorant of it to know what I'm talking about. That, Mr. Siward, is what you have done to me to-night."

"I—I'm sorry—"

"Are you?"

"I ought to be anyway," he said.

It was unfortunate; an utterly inexcusable laughter seemed to bewitch them, hovering always close to his lips and hers.

"How can you laugh!" she said. "How dare you! I don't care for you nearly as violently as I did, Mr. Siward. A friendship between us would not be at all good for me. Things pass too swiftly—too intimately. There is too much mockery in you—" She ceased suddenly, watching the sombre alteration of his face; and, "Have I hurt you?" she asked penitently.

"No."

“Have I, Mr. Siward? I did not mean it.” The attitude, the words, slackening to a trailing sweetness, and then the moment’s silence, stirred him.

“I’m rather ignorant myself of violent emotion,” he said. “I suspect normal people are. You know better than I do whether love is usually a sedative.”

“Am I normal—after what I have confessed?” she asked. “Can’t love be well-bred?”

“Perfectly I should say—only perhaps you are not an expert—”

“In what?”

“In self-analysis, for example.”

There was a vague meaning in the gaze they exchanged.

“As for our friendship, we’ll do the best we can for it, no matter what occurs,” he added, thinking of Quarrier. And, thinking of him, glanced up to see him within ear-shot and moving straight toward them from the veranda above.

There was a short silence; a tentative civil word from Siward; then Miss Landis took command of something that had a grotesque resemblance to a situation. A few minutes later they returned slowly to the house, the girl walking serenely between Siward and her preoccupied affianced.

“If your shoes are as wet as my skirts and slippers you had better change, Mr. Siward,” she said, pausing at the foot of the staircase.

So he took his congÃ©, leaving her standing there with Quarrier, and mounted to his room.

In the corridor he passed Ferrall, who had finished his business correspondence and was returning to the card-room.

“Here’s a letter that Grace wants you to see,” he said. “Read it before you turn in, Stephen.”

“All right; but I’ll be down later,” replied Siward passing on, the letter in his hand. Entering his room he kicked off his wet pumps and found dry ones. Then moved about, whistling a gay air from some recent vaudeville, busy with rough towels and silken foot-gear, until, reshod and dry, he was ready to descend once more.

The encounter, the suddenly informal acquaintance with this young girl had stirred him agreeably, leaving a slight exhilaration. Even her engagement to Quarrier added a tinge of malice to his interest. Besides he was young enough to feel the flattery of her concern for him—of her rebuke, of her imprudence, her generous emotional and childish philosophy.

Perhaps, as like recognises like, he recognised in her the instincts of the born drifter, momentarily at anchor—the temporary inertia of the opportunist, the latent capacity of an unformed character for all things and anything. Add to these her few years, her beauty, and the wholesome ignorance so confidently acknowledged, what man could remain unconcerned, uninterested in the development of such possibilities? Not Siward, amused by her sagacious and impulsive prudence, worldliness, and innocence in accepting Quarrier; and touched by her profitless, frank, and unworldly friendliness for himself.

Not that he objected to her marrying Quarrier; he rather admired her for being able to do it, considering the general scramble for Quarrier. But let that take care of itself; meanwhile, their sudden and capricious intimacy had aroused him from the morbid reaction consequent upon the cheap notoriety which he had brought upon himself. Let him sponge his slate clean and begin again a better record, flattered by the solicitude she had so prettily displayed.

Whistling under his breath the same gay, empty melody, he opened the top drawer of his dresser, dropped in his mother’s letter, and locking the drawer, pocketed the key. He would have time enough to read the letter when he went to bed; he did not just now feel exactly like skimming through the fond, foolish sermon which he knew had been preached at him through his mother’s favourite missionary, Grace Ferrall. What was the use of dragging in the sad old questions again—of repeating his assurances of good behaviour, of reiterating his promises of moderation and watchfulness, of explaining his own self-confidence? Better that the letter await his bed time—his prayers would be the sincerer the fresher the impression; for he was old-fashioned enough to say the prayers that an

immature philosophy proved superfluous. For, he thought, if prayer is any use, it takes only a few minutes to be on the safe side.

So he went down-stairs leisurely, prepared to acquiesce in any suggestion from anybody, but rather hoping to saunter across Sylvia Landis' path before being committed.

She was standing beside the fire with Quarrier, one foot on the fender, apparently too preoccupied to notice him; so he strolled into the gun-room, which was blue with tobacco smoke and aromatic with the volatile odours from decanters.

There were a few women there, and the majority of the men. Lord Alderdene, Major Belwether, and Mortimer were at a table by themselves; stacks of ivory chips and five cards spread in the centre of the green explained the nature of their game; and Mortimer, raising his heavy inflamed eyes and seeing Siward unoccupied, said wheezily: "Cut out that 'widow,' and give Siward his stack! Anything above two pairs for a jack triples the ante. Come on, Siward, there's a decent chap!"

So he seated himself for a sacrifice to the blind goddess balanced upon her winged wheel; and the cards ran high—so high that stacks dwindled or toppled within the half-hour, and Mortimer grew redder and redder, and Major Belwether blander and blander, and Alderdene's face wore a continual nervous snicker, showing every white hound's tooth, and the ice in the tall glasses clinked ceaselessly.

It was late when Quarrier "sat in," with an expressionless acknowledgment of Siward's presence, and an emotionless raid upon his neighbour's resources with the first hand dealt, in which he participated without drawing a card.

And always Siward, eyes on his cards, seemed to see Quarrier before him, his overmanicured fingers caressing his silky beard, the symmetrical pompadour dark and thick as the winter fur on a rat, tufting his smooth blank forehead.

It was very late when Siward first began to be aware of his increasing deafness, the difficulty, too, that he had in making people hear, the annoying contempt in Quarrier's woman-like eyes. He felt that he was making a fool of himself, very noiselessly somehow—but with more racket than he expected when he miscalculated the distance between his hand and a decanter.

It was time for him to go—unless he chose to ask Quarrier for an explanation of that sneer which he found distasteful. But there was too much noise, too much laughter.

Besides he had a matter to attend to—the careful perusal of his mother's letter to Mrs. Ferrall. Very white, he rose. After an indeterminate interval he found himself entering his room.

The letter was in the dresser; several things seemed to fall and break, but he got the letter, sank down on the bed's edge and strove to read,—set his teeth grimly, forcing his blurred eyes to a focus. But he could make nothing of it—nor of his toilet either, nor of Ferrall, who came in on his way to bed having noticed the electricity still in full glare over the open transom, and who straightened out matters for the stunned man lying face downward across the bed, his mother's letter crushed in his nerveless hand.

CHAPTER IV THE SEASON OPENS

Breakfast at Shotover, except for the luxurious sluggards to whom trays were sent, was served in the English fashion—any other method or compromise being impossible.

Ferrall, reasonable in most things, detested customs exotic, and usually had an Englishman or two about the house to tell them so, being unable to jeer in any language except his own. Which is partly why Alderdene and Voucher were there. And this British sideboard breakfast was a concession wrung from him through force of sheer necessity, although the custom had already become practically universal in American country houses where guests were entertained.

But at the British breakfast he drew the line. No army of servants, always in evidence, would he tolerate, either; no highly ornamented human bric-à-brac decorating halls and corners; no exotic pheasants hustled into covert and out again; no fusillade at the wretched, frightened, bewildered aliens dumped by the thousand into unfamiliar cover and driven toward the guns by improvised beaters.

“We walk up our game or we follow a brace of good dogs in this white man’s country,” he said with unnecessary emphasis whenever his bad taste and his wife’s absence gave him an opportunity to express to the casual foreigner his personal opinions on field sport. “You’ll load your own guns and you’ll use your own legs if you shoot with me; and your dogs will do their own retrieving, too. And if anybody desires a Yankee’s opinion on shooting driven birds from rocking-chairs or potting tame deer from grand-stands, they can have it right now!”

Usually nobody wanted his further opinion; and sometimes they got it and sometimes not, if his wife was within earshot. Otherwise Ferrall appeared to be a normal man, energetically devoted to his business, his pleasures, his friends, and comfortably in love with his wife. And if some considered his vigour in business to be lacking in mercy, that vigour was always exercised within the law. He never transgressed the rules of war, but his headlong energy sometimes landed him close to the dead line. He had already breakfasted, when the earliest risers entered the morning room to saunter about the sideboards and investigate the simmering contents of silver-covered dishes on the warmers.

The fragrance of coffee was pleasantly perceptible; men in conventional shooting attire roamed about the room, selected what they cared for, and carried it to the table. Mrs. Mortimer was there consuming peaches that matched her own complexion; Marion Page, always more congruous in field costume and belted jacket than in anything else, and always, like her own hunters, minutely groomed, was preparing a breakfast for her own consumption with the leisurely precision characteristic of her whether in the saddle, on the box, or grassing her brace of any covey that ever flushed.

Captain Voucher and Lord Alderdene discussed prospects between bites, attentive to the monosyllabic opinions of Miss Page. Her twin brothers, Gordon and Willis, shyly consuming oatmeal, listened respectfully and waited on their sister at the slightest lifting of her thinly arched eyebrows.

Into this company sauntered Siward, apparently no worse for wear. For as yet the Enemy had set upon him no proprietary insignia save a rather becoming pallor and faint bluish shadows under the eyes. He strolled about, exchanging amiable greetings, and presently selected a chilled grape fruit as his breakfast. Opposite him Mortimer, breakfasting upon his own dreadful bracer of an apple soaked in port, raised his heavy inflamed eyes with a significant leer at the iced grape fruit. For he was always ready to make room upon his own level for other men; but the wordless grin and the bloodshot welcome were calmly ignored, for as yet that freemasonry evoked no recognition from the pallid man opposite, whose hands were steady as though that morning’s sun had wakened him from pleasant dreams.

“The most difficult shot in the world,” Alderdene was explaining, “is an incoming pheasant, sailing on a slant before a gale.”

“A woodcock in alders doing a jack-snipe twist is worse,” grunted Mortimer, drenching another apple in port.

“Yes,” said Miss Page tersely.

“Or a depraved ruffed cock-grouse in the short pines; isn’t that the limit?” asked Mortimer of Siward.

But Siward only shrugged his comment and glanced out through the leaded casements into the brilliant September sunshine.

Outside he could see Major Belwether, pink skinned, snowy chop whiskers brushed rabbit fashion, very voluble with Sylvia Landis, who listened absently, head partly averted. Quarrier in tweeds and gaiters, his morning cigar delicately balanced in his gloved fingers, strolled near enough to be within ear-shot; and when Sylvia’s inattention to Major Belwether’s observations became marked to the verge of rudeness, he came forward and spoke. But whatever it was that he said appeared to change her passive inattention to quiet displeasure, for, as Siward rose from the table, he saw her turn on her heel and walk slowly toward a group of dogs presided over by some kennel men and gamekeepers.

She was talking to the head gamekeeper when he emerged from the house, but she saw him on the terrace and gave him a bright nod of greeting, so close to an invitation that he descended the stone steps and crossed the dew-wet lawn.

“I am asking Dawson to explain just exactly what a ‘Shotover Drive’ resembles,” she said, turning to include Siward in an animated conference with the big, scraggy, head keeper. “You know, Mr. Siward, that it is a custom peculiar to Shotover House to open the season with what is called a Shotover Drive?”

“I heard Alderdene talking about it,” he said, smilingly inspecting the girl’s attire of khaki with its buttoned pockets, gun pads, and Cossack cartridge loops, and the tan knee-kilts hanging heavily pleated over gaiters and little thick-soled shoes. He had never cared very much to see women afield, for, in a rare case where there was no affectation, there was something else inborn that he found unpleasant—something lacking about a woman who could take life from frightened wild things, something shocking that a woman could look, unmoved, upon a twitching, blood-soiled heap of feathers at her feet.

Meanwhile Dawson, dog-whip at salute, stood knee deep among his restless setters, explaining the ceremony with which Mr. Ferrall ushered in the opening of each shooting season:

“It’s our own idee, Miss Landis,” he said proudly; “onc’t a season Mr. Ferrall and his guests likes it for a mixed bag. ‘Tis a sort of picnic, Miss; the guns is in pairs, sixty yards apart in line, an’ the rules is, walk straight ahead, dogs to heel until first cover is reached; fire straight or to quarter, never blankin’ nor wipin’ no eyes; and ground game counts as feathers for the Shotover Cup.”

“Oh! It’s a skirmish line that walks straight ahead?” said Siward, nodding.

“Straight ahead, Sir. No stoppin’, no turnin’ for hedges, fences, water or rock. There is boats f’r deep water and fords marked and corduroy f’r to pass the Seven Dreens. Luncheon at one, Miss—an hour’s rest—then straight on over hill, valley, rock, and river to the ronyvoo atop Osprey Ledge. You’ll see the poles and the big nests, Sir. It’s there they score for the cup, and there when the bag is counted, the traps are ready to carry you home again.”... And to Siward: “Will you draw for your lady, Sir? It is the custom.”

“Are you my ‘lady?’” he asked, turning to Sylvia.

“Do you want me?”

In the smiling lustre of her eyes the tiniest spark flashed out at him—a hint of defiance for somebody, perhaps for Major Belwether who had taken considerable pains to enlighten her as to Siward’s condition the night before; perhaps also for Quarrier, who had naturally expected to act as her gun-bearer in emergencies. But the gaily veiled malice of the one had annoyed her, and the cold assumption of the other had irritated her, and she had, scarcely knowing why, turned her shoulder to both of these gentlemen with an indefinite idea of escaping a pressure, amounting almost to critical importunity.

“I’m probably a poor shot?” she said, looking smilingly, straight into Siward’s eyes. “But if you’ll take me—”

“I will with pleasure,” he said; “Dawson, do we draw for position? Very well then”; and he drew a slip of paper from the box offered by the head keeper.

“Number seven!” said Sylvia, looking over his shoulder. “Come out to the starting line, Mr. Siward. All the positions are marked with golf-discs. What sort of ground have we ahead, Dawson?”

“Kind o’ stiff, Miss,” grinned the keeper. “Pity your gentleman ain’t drawn the meadows an’ Sachem Hill line. Will you choose your dog, Sir?”

“You have your dog, you know,” observed Sylvia demurely. And Siward, glancing among the impatient setters, saw one white, heavily feathered dog, straining at his leash, and wagging frantically, brown eyes fixed on him.

The next moment Sagamore was free, devouring his master with caresses, the girl looking on in smiling silence; and presently, side by side, the man, the girl, and the dog were strolling off to the starting line where already people were gathering in groups, selecting dogs, fowling-pieces, comparing numbers, and discussing the merits of their respective lines of advance.

Ferrall, busily energetic, and in high spirits, greeted them gaily, pointing out the red disc bearing their number, seven, where it stood out distinctly above the distant scrub of the foreland.

“You two are certainly up against it!” he said, grinning. “There’s only one rougher line, and you’re in for thorns and water and a scramble across the back-bone of the divide!”

“Is it any good?” asked Siward.

“Good—if you’ve got the legs and Sylvia doesn’t play baby—”

“I?” she said indignantly. “Kemp, you annoy me. And I will bet you now,” she added, flushing, “that your old cup is ours.”

“Wait,” said Siward, laughing, “we may not shoot straight.”

“You will! Kemp, I’ll wager whatever you dare!”

“Gloves? Stockings?—against a cigarette case?” he suggested.

“Done,” she said disdainfully, moving forward along the skirmish line with a nod and smile for the groups now disintegrating into couples, the Page boys with Eileen Shannon and Rena Bonnesdel, Marion Page followed by Alderdene, Mrs. Vendenning and Major Belwether and the Tassel girl convoyed by Leroy Mortimer. Farther along the line, taking post, she saw Quarrier and Miss Caithness, Captain Voucher with Mrs. Mortimer, and others too distant to recognise, moving across country with glitter and glint of sunlight on slanting gun barrels.

And now Ferrall was climbing into his saddle beside his pretty wife, who sat her horse like a boy, the white flag lifted high in the sunshine, watching the firing line until the last laggard was in position.

“All right, Grace!” said Ferrall briskly. Down went the white flag; the far-ranged line started into motion straight across country, dogs at heel.

From her saddle Mrs. Ferrall could see the advance, strung out far afield from the dark spots moving along the Fells boundary, to the two couples traversing the salt meadows to north. Crack! A distant report came faintly over the uplands against the wind.

“Voucher,” observed Ferrall; “probably a snipe. Hark! he’s struck them again, Grace.”

Mrs. Ferrall, watching curiously, saw Siward’s gun fly up as two big dark spots floated up from the marsh and went swinging over his head. Crack! Crack! Down sheered the black spots, tumbling earthward out of the sky.

“Duck,” said Ferrall; “a double for Stephen. Lord Harry! how that man can shoot! Isn’t it a pity that—”

He said no more; his pretty wife astride her thoroughbred sat silent, grey eyes fixed on the distant figures of Sylvia Landis and Siward, now shoulder deep in the reeds.

“Was it—very bad last night?” she asked in a low voice.

Ferrall shrugged. "He was not offensive; he walked steadily enough up-stairs. When I went into his room he lay on the bed as if he'd been struck by lightning. And yet—you see how he is this morning?"

"After a while," his wife said, "it is going to alter him some day—dreadfully—isn't it, Kemp?"

"You mean—like Mortimer?"

"Yes—only Leroy was always a pig."

As they turned their horses toward the high-road Mrs. Ferrall said: "Do you know why Sylvia isn't shooting with Howard?"

"No," replied her husband indifferently; "do you?"

"No." She looked out across the sunlit ocean, grave grey eyes brightening with suppressed mischief. "But I half suspect."

"What?"

"Oh, all sorts of things, Kemp."

"What's one of 'em?" asked Ferrall, looking around at her; but his wife only laughed.

"You don't mean she's throwing her flies at Siward—now that you've hooked Quarrier for her! I thought she'd played him to the gaff—"

"Please don't be coarse, Kemp," said Mrs. Ferrall, sending her horse forward. Her husband spurred to her side, and without turning her head she continued: "Of course Sylvia won't be foolish. If they were only safely married; but Howard is such a pill—"

"What does Sylvia expect with Howard's millions? A man?"

Grace Ferrall drew bridle. "The curious thing is, Kemp, that she liked him."

"Likes him?"

"No, liked him. I saw how it was; she took his silences for intellectual meditation, his gallery, his library, his smatterings for expressions of a cultivated personality. Then she remembered how close she came to running off with that cashiered Englishman, and that scared her into clutching the substantial in the shape of Howard.... Still, I wish I hadn't meddled."

"Meddled how?"

"Oh, I told her to do it. We had talks until daylight.... She may marry him—I don't know—but if you think any live woman could be contented with a muff like that!"

"That's immoral."

"Kemp, I'm not. She'd be mad not to marry him; but I don't know what I'd do to a man like that, if I were his wife. And you know what a terrific capacity for mischief there is in Sylvia. Some day she's going to love somebody. And it isn't likely to be Howard. And, oh, Kemp! I do grow so tired of that sort of thing. Do you suppose anybody will ever make decency a fashion?"

"You're doing your best," said Ferrall, laughing at his wife's pretty, boyish face turned back toward him over her shoulder; "you're presenting your cousin and his millions to a girl who can dress the part—"

"Don't, Kemp! I don't know why I meddled!... I wish I hadn't—"

"I do. You can't let Howard alone! You're perfectly possessed to plague him when he's with you, and now you've arranged for another woman to keep it up for the rest of his lifetime. What does Sylvia want with a man who possesses the instincts and intellect of a coachman? She is asked everywhere, she has her own money. Why not let her alone? Or is it too late?"

"You mean let her make a fool of herself with Stephen Siward? That is where she is drifting."

"Do you think—"

"Yes, I do. She has a perfect genius for selecting the wrong man; and she's already sorry for this one. I'm sorry for Stephen, too; but it's safe for me to be."

"She might make something of him."

"You know perfectly well no woman ever did make anything of a doomed man. He'd kill her—I mean it, Kemp! He would literally kill her with grief. She isn't like Leila Mortimer; she isn't like

most girls of her sort. You men think her a rather stunning, highly tempered, unreasonable young girl, with a reserve of sufficiently trained intelligence to marry the best our market offers—and close her eyes;—a thoroughbred with the caprices of one, but also with the grafted instinct for proper mating.”

“Well, that’s all right, isn’t it?” asked Ferrall. “That’s the way I size her up. Isn’t it correct?”

“Yes, in a way. She has all the expensive training of the thoroughbred—and all the ignorance, too. She is cold-blooded because wholesome; a trifle sceptical because so absolutely unawakened. She never experienced a deep emotion. Impulses have intoxicated her once or twice—as when she asked my opinion about running off with Cavendish, and that boy and girl escapade with Rivington; nothing at all except high mettle, the innocent daring lurking in all thoroughbreds, and a great deal of very red blood racing through that superb young body. But,” Ferrall reined in to listen, “but if ever a man awakens her—I don’t care who he is—you’ll see a girl you never knew, a brand-new creature emerge with the last rags and laces of conventionality dropping from her; a woman, Kemp, heiress to every generous impulse, every emotion, every vice, every virtue of all that brilliant race of hers.”

“You seem to know,” he said, amused and curious.

“I know. Major Belwether told me that he had thought of Howard as an anchor for her. It seemed a pity—Howard with all his cold, heavy negative inertia.... I said I’d do it. I did. And now I don’t know; I wish, almost wish I hadn’t.”

“What has changed your ideas?”

“I don’t know. Howard is safer than Stephen Siward, already in the first clutches of his master-vice. Would you mate what she inherits from her mother and her mother’s mother, with what is that poor boy’s heritage from the Siwards?”

“After all,” observed Ferrall dryly, “we’re not in the angel-breeding business.”

“We ought to be. Every decent person ought to be. If they were, inherited vice would be as rare in this country as smallpox!”

“People don’t inherit smallpox, dear.”

“Never mind! You know what I mean. In our stock farms and kennels, we weed out, destroy, exterminate hereditary weakness in everything. We pay the greatest attention to the production of all offspring except our own. Look at Stephen! How dared his parents bring him into the world? Look at Sylvia! And now, suppose they marry!”

“Dearest,” said Ferrall, “my head is a whirl and my wits are spinning like five toy tops. Your theories are all right; but unless you and I are prepared to abandon several business enterprises and take to the lecture platform, I’m afraid people are going to be wicked enough to marry whom they like, and the human race will be run as usual with money the favourite, and love a case of ‘also-ran.’... By the way, how dared you marry me, knowing the sort of demon I am?”

The gathering frown on Mrs. Ferrall’s brow faded; she raised her clear grey eyes and met her husband’s gaze, gay, humourous, and with a hint of tenderness—enough to bring the colour into her pretty face.

“You know I’m right, Kemp.”

“Always, dear. And now that we have the world off our hands for a few minutes, suppose we gallop?”

But she held her horse to a walk, riding forward, grave, thoughtful, preoccupied with a new problem, only part of which she had told her husband.

For that night she had been awakened in her bed to find standing beside her a white, wide-eyed figure, shivering, limbs a-chill beneath her clinging lace. She had taken the pallid visitor to her arms and warmed her and soothed her and whispered to her, murmuring the thousand little words and sounds, the breathing magic mothers use with children. And Sylvia lay there, chilled, nerveless, silent, ignorant why her sleeplessness had turned to restlessness, to loneliness, to an awakening perception of what she lacked and needed and began to desire. For that sad void, peopled at intervals through her brief years with a vague mother-phantom, had, in the new crisis of her career, become suddenly

an empty desolation, frightening her with her own utter isolation. Fill it now she could not, now that she needed that ghost of child-comfort, that shadowy refuge, that sweet shape she had fashioned out of dreams to symbolise a mother she had never known.

Driven she knew not why, she had crept from her room in search of the still, warm, fragrant nest and the whispered reassurance and the caress she had never before endured. Yes, now she craved it, invited it, longed for safe arms around her, the hovering hand on her hair. Was this Sylvia?

And Grace Ferrall, clearing her sleepy eyes, amazed, incredulous of the cold, child-like hands upon her shoulders, caught her in her arms with a little laugh and sob and drew her to her breast, to soothe and caress and reassure, to make up to her all she could of what is every child's just heritage.

And for a long while Sylvia, lying there, told her nothing—because she did not know how—merely a word, a restless question half ashamed, barely enough to shadow forth the something stirring her toward an awakening in a new world, where with new eyes she might catch glimpses of those dim and splendidly misty visions that float through sunlit silences when a young girl dreams awake.

And at length, gravely, innocently, she spoke of her engagement, and the worldly possibilities before her; of the man she was to marry, and her new and unexpected sense of loneliness in his presence, now that she had seen him again after months.

She spoke, presently, of Siward—a fugitive question or two, offered indifferently at first, then with shy persistence and curiosity, knowing nothing of the senseless form flung face downward across the sheets in a room close by. And thereafter the murmured burden of the theme was Siward, until one, heavy eyed, turned from the white dawn silvering the windows, sighed, and fell asleep; and one lay silent, head half buried in its tangled gold, wide awake, thinking vague thoughts that had no ending, no beginning. And at last a rosy bar of light fell across the wall, and the warm shadows faded from corner and curtain; and, turning on the pillow, her face nestled in her hair, she fell asleep.

Nothing of this had Mrs. Ferrall told her husband.

For the first time in her life had Sylvia suffered the caresses most women invite or naturally lavish; for the first time had she attempted confidences, failing because she did not know how, but curiously contented with the older woman's arms around her.

There was a change in Sylvia, a great change stealing in upon her as she lay there, breathing like a child, flushed lips scarcely parted. Through the early slanting sunlight the elder woman, leaning on one arm, looked down at her, grey eyes very grave and tender—wise, sweet eyes that divined with their pure clairvoyance all that might happen or might fail to come to pass in this great change stealing over Sylvia.

Nothing of this could her husband understand had she words to convey it. There was nothing he need understand except that his wife, meaning well, had meddled and regretted.

And now, turning in her saddle with a pretty gesture of her shoulders:

“I meddle no more! Those who need me may come to me. Now laugh at my tardy wisdom, Kemp!”

“It's no laughing matter,” he said, “if you're going to stand back and let this abandoned world spin itself madly to the bow-wows—”

“Don't be horrid. I repent. The mischief take Howard Quarrier!”

“Amen! Come on, Grace.”

She gathered bridle. “Do you suppose Stephen Siward is going to make trouble?”

“How can he unless she helps him? Nonsense! All's well with Siward and Sylvia. Shall we gallop?”

All was very well with Siward and Sylvia. They had passed the rabbit-brier country scathless, with two black mallard, a jack-snipe, and a rabbit to the credit of their score, and were now advancing through that dimly lit enchanted land of tall grey alders where, in the sudden twilight of the leaves, woodcock after woodcock fluttered upward twittering, only to stop and drop, transformed at the vicious crack of Siward's gun to fluffy balls of feather whirling earthward from mid-air.

Sagamore came galloping back with a soft, unsoiled mass of chestnut and brown feathers in his mouth. Siward took the dead cock, passed it back to the keeper who followed them, patted the beautiful eager dog and signalled him forward once more.

“You should have fired that time,” he said to Sylvia—“that is, if you care to kill anything.”

“But I don’t seem to be able to,” she said. “It isn’t a bit like shooting at clay targets. The twittering whirr takes me by surprise—it’s all so charmingly sudden—and my heart seems to stop in one beat, and I look and look and then—whisk! the woodcock is gone, leaving me breathless—”

Her voice ceased; the white setter, cutting up his ground ahead, had stopped, rigid, one leg raised, jaws quivering and locking alternately.

“Isn’t that a stunning picture!” said Siward in a low voice. “What a beauty he is—like a statue in white and blue-veined marble. You may talk, Miss Landis; woodcock don’t flush at the sound of the human voice as grouse do.”

“See his brown eyes roll back at us! He wonders why we don’t do something!” whispered the girl. “Look, Mr. Siward! Now his head is moving—oh so gradually to the left!”

“The bird is moving on the ground,” nodded Siward; “now the bird has stopped.”

“I do wish I could see a woodcock on the ground,” she breathed. “Do you think we might by any chance?”

Siward noiselessly sank to his knees and crouched, keen eyes minutely busy among the shadowy browns and greys of wet earth and withered leaf. And after a while, cautiously, he signalled the girl to kneel beside him, and stretched out one arm, forefinger extended.

“Sight straight along my arm,” he said, “as though it were a rifle barrel.”

Her soft cheek rested against his shoulder; a stray strand of shining hair brushing his face.

“Under that bunch of fern,” he whispered; “just the colour of the dead leaves. Do you see?... Don’t you see that big woodcock squatted flat, bill pointed straight out and resting on the leaves?”

After a long while she saw, suddenly, and an exquisite little shock tightened her fingers on Siward’s extended arm.

“Oh, the feathered miracle!” she whispered; “the wonder of its cleverness to hide like that! You look and look and stare, seeing it all the while and not knowing that you see it. Then in a flash it is there, motionless, a brown-shaped shadow among shadows.... The dear little thing!... Mr. Siward, do you think—are you going to—”

“No, I won’t shoot it.”

“Thank you.... Might I sit here a moment to watch it?”

She seated herself soundlessly among the dead leaves; he sank into place beside her, laying his gun aside.

“Rather rough on the dog,” he said with a grimace.

“I know. It is very good of you, Mr. Siward to do this for my pleasure. Oh—h! Do you see! Oh, the little beauty!”

The woodcock had risen, plumage puffed out, strutting with wings bowed and tail spread, facing the dog. The sudden pigmy defiance thrilled her. “Brave! Brave!” she exclaimed, enraptured; but at the sound of her voice the bird crouched like a flash, large dark liquid eyes shining, long bill pointed straight toward them.

“He’ll fly the way his bill points,” said Siward. “Watch!”

He rose; she sprang lightly to her feet; there came a whirring flutter, a twittering shower of sweet notes, soft wings beating almost in their very faces, a distant shadow against the sky, and the woodcock was gone.

Quieting the astounded dog, gun cradled in the hollow of his left arm, he turned to the girl beside him: “That sort of thing wins no cups,” he said.

“It wins something else, Mr. Siward,—my very warm regard for you.”

“There is no choice between that and the Shotover Cup,” he admitted, considering her.

“I—do you mean it?”

“Of course I do, vigorously!”

“Then you are much nicer than I thought you.... And after all, if the price of a cup is the life of that brave little bird, I had rather shoot clay pigeons. Now you will scorn me I suppose. Begin!”

“My ideal woman has never been a life-taker,” he said coolly. “Once, when I was a boy, there was a girl—very lovely—my first sweetheart. I saw her at the traps once, just after she had killed her seventh pigeon straight, ‘pulling it down’ from overhead, you know—very clever—the little thing was breathing on the grass, and it made sounds—” He shrugged and walked on. “She killed her twenty-first bird straight; it was a handsome cup, too.”

And after a silence, “So you didn’t love her any more, Mr. Siward?”—mockingly sweet.

They laughed, and at the sound of laughter the tall-stemmed alders echoed with the rushing roar of a cock-grouse thundering skyward. Crack! Crack! Whirling over and over through a cloud of floating feathers, a heavy weight struck the springy earth. There lay the big mottled bird, splendid silky ruffs spread, dead eyes closing, a single tiny crimson bead twinkling like a ruby on the gaping beak.

“Dead!” said Siward to the dog who had dropped to shot; “Fetch!” And, signalling the boy behind, he relieved the dog of his burden and tossed the dead weight of ruffled plumage toward him. Then he broke his gun, and, as the empty shells flew rattling backward, slipped in fresh cartridges, locked the barrels, and walked forward, the flush of excitement still staining his sunburnt face.

“You deal death mercifully,” said the girl in a low voice. “I wonder what your ci-devant sweetheart would think of you.”

“A bungler had better stick to the traps,” he assented, ignoring the badinage.

“I am wondering,” she said thoughtfully, “what I think of men who kill.”

He turned sharply, hesitated, shrugged. “Wild things’ lives are brief at best—fox or flying-tick, wet nests or mink, owl, hawk, weasel or man. But the death man deals is the most merciful. Besides,” he added, laughing, “ours is not a case of sweethearts.”

“My argument is purely in the abstract, Mr. Siward. I am asking you whether the death men deal is more justifiable than a woman’s gift of death?”

“Oh, well, life-taking, the giving of life—there can be only one answer to the mystery; and I don’t know it,” he replied smiling.

“I do.”

“Tell me then,” he said, still amused.

They had passed swale after swale of silver birches waist deep in perfumed fern and brake; the big timber lay before them. She moved forward, light gun swung easily across her leather-padded shoulder; and on the wood’s sunny edge she seated herself, straight young back against a giant pine, gun balanced across her flattened knees.

“You are feeling the pace a little,” he said, coming up and standing in front of her.

“The pace? No, Mr. Siward.”

“Are you a trifle—bored?” She considered him in silence, then leaned back luxuriously, rounded arms raised, wrists crossed to pillow her head.

“This is charmingly new to me,” she said simply.

“What? Not the open?”

“No; I have camped and done the usual roughing it with only three guides apiece and the champagne inadequately chilled. I have endured that sort of hardship several times, Mr. Siward.... What is that furry hunch up there in that tall thin tree?”

“A raccoon,” he said presently. “Can you see the foxy head peeping so slyly down at us? Look at Sagamore nosing the air in that droll blind mole-like way. He knows there’s something furry up aloft somewhere; and he knows it’s none of his business.”

They watched the motionless ball of fur in the crotch of a slim forest elm. Presently it uncurled, cautiously; a fluffy ringed tail unfolded; the rounded furry back humped up, and the animal, moving slowly into the tangent foliage of an enormous oak, vanished amid bronzing leafy depths.

In the silence the birds began to reappear. A jay screamed somewhere deep in the yellowing woods; black-capped chickadees dropped from twig to twig, cheeping inquiringly.

She sat listening, bright head pillowed in her arms, idly attentive to his low running comment on beast and bird and tree, on forest stillness and forest sounds, on life and the wild laws of life and death governing the great out-world 'twixt sky and earth. Sunlight and shadows moving, speech and silence, waxed and waned. A listless contentment lay warm upon her, weighting the heavy white lids. The blue of her eyes was very dark now—almost purple like the colour of the sea when the wind-flaws turn the blue to violet.

“Did you ever hear of the ‘Lesser Children?’” she asked. “Listen then:

“Multitudes, multitudes, under the moon they stirred!
The weakerbrothers of our earthly breed;
All came about my head and at my feet
A thousand thousand sweet,
With starry eyes not even raised to plead:
Bewildered, driven, hiding, fluttering, mute!
And I beheld and saw them one by one
Pass, and become as nothing in the night.’
“Do you know what it means?

“Winged mysteries of song that from the sky
Once dashed long music down—’
“Do you understand?” she asked, smiling.

“Who has not seen in the high gulf of light
What, lower, was a bird!”

She ceased, and, raising her eyes to his: “Do you know that plea for mercy on the lesser children who die all day to-day because the season opens for your pleasure, Mr. Siward?”

“Is it a woodland sermon?” he inquired, too politely.

“The poem? No; it is the case for the prosecution. The prisoner may defend himself if he can.”

“The defence rests,” he said. “The prisoner moves that he be discharged.”

“Motion denied,” she interrupted promptly.

Somewhere in the woodland world the crows were holding a noisy session, and she told him that was the jury debating the degree of his guilt.

“Because you’re guilty of course,” she continued. “I wonder what your sentence is to be?”

“I’ll leave it to you,” he suggested lazily.

“Suppose I sentenced you to slay no more?”

“Oh, I’d appeal—”

“No use; I am the tribunal of last resort.”

“Then I throw myself upon the mercy of the court.”

“You do well, Mr. Siward. This court is very merciful... How much do you care for bird murder? Very much? Is there anything you care for more? Yes? And could this court grant it to you in compensation?”

He said, deliberately, roused by the level challenge of her gaze: “The court is incompetent to compensate the prisoner or offer any compromise.”

“Why, Mr. Siward?”

“Because the court herself is already compromised in her future engagements.”

“But what has my—engagement to do with—”

“You offered compensation for depriving me of my shooting. There could be only one adequate compensation.”

“And that?” she asked, coolly enough.

“Your continual companionship.”

“But you have it, Mr. Siward—”

“I have it for a day. The season lasts three months you know.”

“And you and I are to play a continuous vaudeville for three months? Is that your offer?”

“Partly.”

“Then one day with me is not worth those many days of murder?” she asked in pretended astonishment.

“Ask yourself why those many days would be doubly empty,” he said so seriously that the pointless game began to confuse her.

“Then”—she turned lightly from uncertain ground—“then perhaps we had better be about that matter of the cup you prize so highly. Are you ready, Mr. Siward? There is much to be killed yet—including time, you know.”

But the hinted sweetness of the challenge had aroused him, and he made no motion to rise. Nor did she.

“I am not sure,” he reflected, “just exactly what I should ask of you if you insist on taking away—” he turned and looked about him through the burnt gold foliage, “—if you took away all this out of my life.”

“I shall not take it; because I have nothing in exchange to offer... you say,” she answered imprudently.

“I did not say so,” he retorted.

“You did—reminding me that the court is already engaged for a continuous performance.”

“Was it necessary to remind you?” he asked with deliberate malice.

She flushed up, vexed, silent, then looked directly at him with beautiful hostile eyes. “What do you mean, Mr. Siward? Are you taking our harmless, idle badinage as warrant for an intimacy unwarranted?”

“Have I offended?” he asked, so impassively that a flash of resentment brought her to her feet, angry and self-possessed.

“How far have we to go?” she asked quietly.

He rose to his feet, turned, hailing the keeper, repeating the question. And at the answer they both started forward, the dog ranging ahead through a dense growth of beech and chestnut, over a high brown ridge, then down, always down along a leafy ravine to the water’s edge—a forest pond set in the gorgeous foliage of ripening maples.

“I don’t see,” said Sylvia impatiently, “how we are going to obey instructions and go straight ahead. There must be a stupid boat somewhere!”

But the game-laden keeper shook his head, pulled up his hip boots, and pointed out a line of alder poles set in the water to mark a crossing.

“Am I expected to wade?” asked the girl anxiously.

“This here,” observed the keeper, “is one of the most sportin’ courses on the estate. Last season I seen Miss Page go through it like a scared deer—the young lady, sir, that took last season’s cup”—in explanation to Siward, who stood doubtfully at the water’s edge, looking back at Sylvia.

Raising her dismayed eyes she encountered his; there was a little laugh between them. She stepped daintily across the stones to the water’s edge, instinctively gathering her kilts in one hand.

“Miles and I could chair you over,” suggested Siward.

“Is that fair—under the rules?”

“Oh, yes, Miss; as long as you go straight,” said the keeper.

So they laid aside the guns and the guide’s game-sack, and formed a chair with their hands, and, bearing the girl between them, they waded out along the driven alder stakes, knee-deep in brown water.

Before them herons rose into heavy flapping flight, broad wings glittering in the sun; a diver, distantly afloat among the lily pads, settled under the water to his eyes as a submarine settles till the conning-tower is awash.

Her arm, lightly resting around his neck, tightened a trifle as the water rose to his thighs; then the faint pressure relaxed as they thrashed shoreward through the shallows, ankle deep once more, and landed among the dry reeds on the farther bank.

Miles, the keeper, went back for the guns. Siward stamped about in the sun, shaking the drops from water-proof breeches and gaiters, only to be half drenched again when Sagamore shook himself vigorously.

“I suppose,” said Sylvia, looking sideways at Siward, “your contempt for my sporting accomplishments has not decreased. I’m sorry; I don’t like to walk in wet shoes... even to gain your approval.”

And, as the keeper came splashing across the shallows: “Miles, you may carry my gun. I shall not need it any longer—”

The upward roar of a bevy of grouse drowned her voice; poor Sagamore, pointing madly in the blackberry thicket all unperceived, cast a dismayed glance aloft where the sunlit air quivered under the winnowing rush of heavy wings. Siward flung up his gun, heading a big quartering bird; steadily the glittering barrels swept in the arc of fire, hesitated, wavered; then the possibility passed; the young fellow lowered the gun, slowly, gravely; stood a moment motionless with bent head until the rising colour in his face had faded.

And that was all, for a while. The astonished and disgusted keeper stared into the thicket; the dog lay quivering, impatient for signal. Sylvia’s heart, which had seemed to stop with her voice, silenced in the gusty thunder of heavy wings, began beating too fast. For the ringing crack of a gun shot could have spoken no louder to her than the glittering silence of the suspended barrels; nor any promise of his voice sound as the startled stillness sounded now about her. For he had made something a trifle more than mere amends for his rudeness. He was overdoing everything—a little.

He stood on the thicket’s edge, absently unloading the weapon, scarcely understanding what he had done and what he had not done.

A moment later a far hail sounded across the uplands, and against the sky figures moved distantly.

“Alderdene and Marion Page,” said Siward. “I believe we lunch yonder, do we not, Miles?”

They climbed the hill in silence, arriving after a few minutes to find others already at luncheon—the Page boys, eager, enthusiastic, recounting adventure by flood and field; Rena Bonnesdel tired and frankly bored and decorated with more than her share of mud; Eileen Shannon, very pretty, very effective, having done more execution with her eyes than with the dainty fowling-piece beside her.

Marion Page nodded to Sylvia and Siward with a crisp, business-like question or two, then went over to inspect their bag, nodding approbation as Miles laid the game on the grass.

“Eight full brace,” she commented. “We have five, and an odd cock-pheasant—from Black Fells, I suppose. The people to our left have been blazing away like Coney Island, but Rena’s guide says the ferns are full of rabbits that way, and Major Belwether can’t hit fur afoot. You,” she added frankly to Siward, “ought to take the cup. The birches ahead of you are full of woodcock. If you don’t, Howard Quarrier will. He’s into a flight of jack-snipe I hear.”

Siward's eyes had suddenly narrowed; then he laughed, patting Sagamore's cheeks. "I don't believe I shall shoot very steadily this afternoon," he said, turning toward the group at luncheon under the trees. "I wish Quarrier well—with the cup."

"Nonsense," said Marion Page curtly; "you are the cleanest shot I ever knew." And she raised her glass to him, frankly, and emptied it with the precision characteristic of her: "Your cup! With all my heart!"

"I also drink to your success, Mr. Siward," said Sylvia in a low voice, lifting her champagne glass in the sunlight. "To the Shotover Cup—if you wish it." And as other glasses sparkled aloft amid a gay tumult of voices wishing him success, Sylvia dropped her voice, attuning it to his ear alone: "Success for the cup, if you wish it—or, whatever you wish—success!" and she meant it very kindly.

His hand resting on his glass he sat, smiling silent acknowledgment to the noisy generous toasts; he turned and looked at Sylvia when her low voice caught his ear—looked at her very steadily, unsmiling.

Then to the others, brightening again, he said a word or two, wittily, with a gay compliment well placed and a phrase to end it in good taste. And, in the little gust of hand-clapping and laughter, he turned again to Sylvia, smilingly, saying under his breath: "As though winning the cup could compensate me now for losing it!"

She leaned involuntarily nearer: "You mean that you will not try for it?"

"Yes."

"That is not fair—to me!"

"Why not?"

"Because—because I do not ask it of you."

"You need not, now that I know your wish."

"Mr. Siward, I—my wish—"

But she had no chance to finish; already Rena Bonnesdel was looking at them, and there was a hint of amused surprise in Eileen Shannon's mischievous eyes, averted instantly, with malicious ostentation.

Then Marion Page took possession of him so exclusively, so calmly, that something in her cool certainty vaguely irritated Sylvia, who had never liked her. Besides, the girl showed too plainly her indifference to other people; which other people seldom find amusing.

"Stephen," called out Alderdene, anxiously counting the web loops in his khaki vest, "what do you call fair shooting at these damnable ruffed grouse? You needn't be civil about it, you know."

"Five shells to a bird is good shooting," answered Siward. "Don't you think so, Miss Page?"

"You have a better score, Mr. Siward," said Marion Page with a hostile glance at Alderdene, who had not made good.

"That was chance—and this year's birds. I've taken ten shells to an old drummer in hard wood or short pines." He smiled to himself, adding: "A drove of six in the open got off scot free a little while ago. Miss Landis saw it."

That he was inclined to turn it all to banter relieved her at once. "It was pitiable," she nodded gravely to Marion; "his nerve left him when they made such a din in the briers."

Miss Page glanced at her indifferently.

"What I need is practice like the chasseurs of Tarascon," admitted Siward.

"I willingly offer my hat, monsieur," said Sylvia.

Marion Page, impatient to start, had turned her tailor-made back to the company, and was instructing his crestfallen lordship very plainly: "You fire too quickly, Blinky; two seconds is what you must count when a grouse flushes. You must say 'Mark! Right!' or 'Mark! Left! Bang!'"

"I might as well say 'Bang!' for all I've done to-day," he muttered, adjusting his shooting-goggles and snapping his eyes like fury. Then exploding into raucous laughter he moved off southward with Marion Page, who had exchanged a swift handshake with Siward; the twins followed, convoying

Eileen and Rena, neither maiden excitedly enthusiastic. And so the luncheon party, lord and lady, twins and maidens, guides and dogs, trailed away across the ridge, distant silhouettes presently against the sky, then gone. And after a little while the far, dry, accentless report of smokeless powder announced that the opening of the season had been resumed and the Lesser Children were dying fast in the glory of a perfect day.

“Are you ready, Mr. Siward?” She stood waiting for him at the edge of the thicket; Miles resumed his game sack and her fowling-piece; the dog came up, looking him anxiously in the eyes.

So he walked forward beside her into the dappled light of the thicket.

Within a few minutes the dog stood twice; and twice the whirring twitter of woodcock startled her, echoed by the futile crack of his gun.

“Beg pardon, sir—”

“Yes, Miles,” with a glint of humour.

“Overshot, sir,—excusin’ the liberty, Mr. Siward. Both marked down forty yard to the left if you wish to start ‘em again.”

“No,” he said indifferently, “I had my chance at them. They’re exempt.”

Then Sagamore, tail wildly whipping, came smack on the trail of an old stager of a cock-grouse—on, on over rock, log, wet gully, and dry ridge, twisting, doubling, circling, every wile, every trick employed and met, until the dog crawling noiselessly forward, trembled and froze, and Siward, far to left, wheeled at the muffled and almost noiseless rise. For an instant the slanting barrels wavered, grew motionless; but only a stray sunbeam glinting struck a flash of cold fire from the muzzle, only the feathery whirring whisper broke the silence of suspense. Then far away over sunny tree tops a big grouse sailed up, rocketing into the sky on slanted wings, breasting the height of green; dipped, glided downward with bowed wings stiffened, and was engulfed in the misty barriers of purpling woods.

“Vale!” said Siward aloud, “I salute you!”

He came strolling back across the crisp leaves, the dappled sunshine playing over his face like the flicker of a smile.

“Miles,” he said, “my nerve is gone. Such things happen. I’m all in. Come over here, my friend, and look at the sun with me.”

The discomfited keeper obeyed.

“Where ought that refulgent luminary to scintillate when I face Osprey Ledge?”

“Sir?”

“The sun. How do I hold it?”

“On the p’int of your right shoulder, sir.—You ain’t quittin’, Mr. Siward, sir!” anxiously; “that Shotover Cup is easy yours, sir!” eagerly; “Wot’s a miss on a old drummer, Mr. Siward? Wot’s twice over-shootin’ cock, sir, when a blind dropper can see you are the cleanest, fastest, hard-shootin’ shot in the null county!”

But Siward shook his head with an absent glance at the dog, and motioned the astonished keeper forward.

“Line the easiest trail for us,” he said; “I think we are already a trifle tired. Twigs will do in short cover; use a hatchet in the big timber.... And go slow till we join you.”

And when the unwilling and perplexed keeper had started, Siward, unlocking his gun, drew out the smooth yellow cartridges and pocketed them.

Sylvia looked up as the sharp metallic click of the locked breech rang out in the silence.

“Why do you do this, Mr. Siward?”

“I don’t know; really I am honest; I don’t know.”

“It could not be because I—”

“No, of course not,” he said, too seriously to reassure her.

“Mr. Siward,” in quick displeasure.

“Yes?”

“What you do for your amusements cannot concern me.”

“Right as usual,” he said so gaily that a reluctant smile trembled on her lips.

“Then why have you done this? It is unreasonable—if you don’t feel as I do about killing things that are having a good time in the world.”

He stood silent, absently looking at the fowling-piece cradled in his left arm. “Shall we sit here a moment and talk it over?” he suggested listlessly.

Her blue gaze swept him; his vague smile was indifferently bland.

“If you are determined not to shoot, we might as well start for Osprey Ledge,” she suggested; “otherwise, what reason is there for our being here together, Mr. Siward?”

Awaiting his comment—perhaps expecting a counter-proposition—she leaned against the tree beside which he stood. And after a while, as his absent-minded preoccupation continued:

“Do you think the leaves are dry enough to sit on?”

He slipped off his shooting-coat and placed it at the base of the tree. She waited for a second, uncertain how to meet an attitude which seemed to take for granted matters which might, if discussed, give her at least the privilege of yielding. However, to discuss a triviality meant forcing emphasis where none was necessary. She seated herself; and, as he continued to remain standing, she stripped off her shooting-gloves and glanced up at him inquiringly: “Well, Mr. Siward, I am literally at your feet.”

“Which redresses the balance a little,” he said, finding a place near her.

“That is very nice of you. Can I always count on you for civil platitudes when I stir you out of your day-dreams?”

“You can always count on stirring me without effort.”

“No, I can’t. Nobody can. You are never to be counted on; you are too absent-minded. Like a veil you wrap yourself in a brown study, leaving everybody outside to consider the pointed flattery of your withdrawal. What happens to you when you are inside that magic veil? Do you change into anything interesting?”

He sat there, chin propped on his linked fingers, elbows on knees; and, though there was always the hint of a smile in his pleasant eyes, always the indefinable charm of breeding in voice and attitude, something now was lacking. And after a moment she concluded that it was his attention. Certainly his wits were wool-gathering again; his eyes, edged with the shadow of a smile, saw far beyond her, far beyond the sunlit shadows where they sat.

In his preoccupation she had found him negatively attractive. She glanced at him now from time to time, her eyes returning always to the beauty of the subdued light where all about them silver-stemmed birches clustered like slim shining pillars, crowned with their autumn canopy of crumpled gold.

“Enchantment!” she said under her breath. “Surely an enchanted sleeper lies here somewhere.”

“You,” he observed, “unawakened.”

“Asleep? I?” She looked around at him. “You are the dreamer here. Your eyes are full of dreaming even now. What is your desire?”

He leaned on one arm, watching her; she had dropped her ungloved hand, searching among the newly fallen gold of the birch leaves drifted into heaps. On the third finger a jewel glittered; he saw it, conscious of its meaning—but his eyes followed the hand idly heaping up autumn gold, a white slim hand, smoothly fascinating. Then the little, restless hand swept near to his, almost touching it; and then instinctively he took it in his own, curiously, lifting it a little to consider its nearer loveliness. Perhaps it was the unexpectedness of it, perhaps it was sheer amazement that left her hand lying idly relaxed like a white petalled blossom in his. His bearing, too, was so blankly impersonal that for a moment the whole thing appeared inconsequent. Then, as her hand lay there, scarcely imprisoned, their eyes encountered,—and hers, intensely blue now, considered him without emotion, studied him impersonally without purpose, incuriously acquiescent, indifferently expectant.

After a little while the consciousness of the contact disconcerted her; she withdrew her fingers with an involuntary shiver.

“Is there no chance?” he asked.

Perplexed with her own emotion, the meaning of his low-voiced question at first escaped her; then, like its own echo, came ringing back in her ears, re-echoed again as he repeated it:

“Is there no chance for me, Miss Landis?”

The very revulsion of self-possession returning chilled her; then anger came, quick and hot; then pride. She deliberated, choosing her words coolly enough: “What chance do you mean, Mr. Siward?”

“A fighting chance. Can you give it to me?”

“A fighting chance? For what?”—very low, very dangerous.

“For you.”

Then, in spite of her, her senses became unsteady; a sudden ringing confusion seemed to deafen her, through which his voice, as if very far away, sounded again:

“Men who are worth a fighting chance ask for it sometimes—but take it always. I take it.”

Her pallor faded under the flood of bright colour; the blue of her eyes darkened ominously to velvet.

“Mr. Siward,” she said, very distinctly and slowly, “I am not—even—sorry—for you.”

“Then my chance is desperate indeed,” he retorted coolly.

“Chance! Do you imagine—” Her anger choked her.

“Are you not a little hard?” he said, paling under his tan. “I supposed women dismissed men more gently—even such a man as I am.”

For a full minute she strove to comprehend.

“Such a man as you!” she repeated vaguely; “you mean—” a crimson wave dyed her skin to the temples and she leaned toward him in horror-stricken contrition; “I didn’t mean that, Mr. Siward! I—I never thought of that! It had no weight, it was not in my thoughts. I meant only that you had assumed what is unwarranted—that you—your question humiliated me, knowing that I am engaged—knowing me so little—so—”

“Yes, I knew everything. Ask yourself why I risk everything to say this to you? There can be only one answer.”

Then after a long silence: “Have I ever—” she began tremblingly—“ever by word or look—”

“No.”

“Have I even—”

“No. I’ve simply discovered how I feel. That’s what I was dreaming about when you asked me. I was afraid I might do this too soon; but I meant to do it anyway before it became too late.”

“It was too late from the very moment we met, Mr. Siward.” And, as he reddened painfully again, she added quickly: “I mean that I had already decided. Why will you take what I say so dreadfully different from the way I intend it? Listen to me. I—I believe I am not very experienced yet; I was a—astonished—quite stunned for a moment. Then it hurt me—and I said that I was not sorry for you... I am sorry, now.”

And, as he said nothing: “You were a little rough, a little sudden with me, Mr. Siward. Men have asked me that question—several times; but never so soon, so unreasonably soon—never without some preliminary of some sort, so that I could foresee, be more or less prepared.... But you gave me no warning. I—if you had, I would have known how to be gentle. I—I wish to be now. I like you—enough to say this to you, enough to be seriously sorry; if I could bring myself to really believe this—feeling—”

Still he said nothing; he sat there listlessly studying the sun spots glowing, waxing, waning on the carpet of dead leaves at his feet.

“As for—what you have said,” she added, a little smile curving the sensitive mouth, “it is impulsive, unconsidered, a trifle boyish, Mr. Siward. I pay myself the compliment of your sincerity; it

is rather nice to be a girl who can awaken the romance in a man within a day or two's acquaintance.... And that is all it is—a romantic impulse with a pretty girl. You see I am frank; I am really glad that you find me attractive. Tell me so, if you wish. We shall not misunderstand each other again. Shall we?"

He raised his head, considering her, forcing the smile to meet her own.

"We shall be better friends than ever," she asserted confidently.

"Yes, better than ever."

"Because what you have done means the nicest sort of friendship, you see. You can't escape its duties and responsibilities now, Mr. Siward. I shall expect you to spend the greater part of your life in devotedly doing things for me. Besides, I am now privileged to worry you with advice. Oh, you have invested me with all sorts of powers now!"

He nodded.

She sprang to her feet, flushed, smiling, a trifle excited.

"Is it all over, and are we the very ideals of friends?" she asked.

"The very ideals."

"You are nice!" she said impulsively, holding out both gloveless hands. He held them, she looking at him very sweetly, very confidently.

"Allons! Without malice?" she asked.

"Without malice."

"Without afterthoughts?"

"Without afterthoughts."

"And—you are content?" persuasively.

"Of course not," he said.

"Oh, but you must be."

"I must be," he repeated obediently.

"And you are! Say it!"

"But it does not make me unhappy not to be contented—"

"Say it, please; or—do you desire me to be unhappy?"

Her small, smooth hands lying between his, they stood confronting one another in the golden light. She might easily have brought the matter to an end; and why she did not, she knew no more than a kitten waking to consciousness under its first caress.

"Say it," she repeated, laughing uncertainly back into his smiling eyes of a boy.

"Say what?"

"That you are contented."

"I can't."

"Mr. Siward, it is unkind, it is shameless—"

"I know it; I am that sort."

"Then I am sorry for you. Look at that!" turning her left hand in his so that the jewel on the third finger caught the light.

"I see it."

"And yet—"

"And yet."

"That," she observed with composure, "is sheer obstinacy.... Isn't it?"

"It is what I said it was: a hopeful discontent."

"How can it be?" impatiently now, for the long, unaccustomed contact was unnerving her—yet she made no motion to withdraw her hands. "How can you really care for me? Do you actually believe that—devotion—comes like that?"

"Exactly like that."

"So suddenly? It is impossible!" with a twist of her pretty shoulders.

"How did it come—to you?" he asked between his teeth.

Then her face grew scarlet and her eyes grew dark, and her hands contracted in his—tightened, twisted fingers entangled, until, with a little sob, she swayed toward him and he caught her. An instant, a minute—more, perhaps, she did not know—she half lay in his arms, her untaught lips cold against his. Lassitude, faint consciousness, then tiny shock on shock came the burning revulsion; and her voice came back, too, sounding strangely to her, a colourless, monotonous voice.

He had freed her; she remembered that somebody had asked him to—perhaps herself. That was well; she needed to breathe, to summon strength and common-sense, find out what had been done, what reasonless madness she had committed in the half-light of the silver-stemmed trees clustering in shameful witness on every hand.

Suddenly the hot humiliation of it overwhelmed her, and she covered her face with her hands, standing, almost swaying, as wave on wave of incredulous shame seemed to sweep her from knee to brow. That phase passed after a while; out of it she emerged, flushed, outwardly composed, into another phase, in full self-possession once more, able to understand what had happened without the disproportion of emotional exaggeration. After all, she had only been kissed. Besides she was a novice, which probably accounted, in a measure, for the unreasonable emotion coincident with a caress to which she was unaccustomed. Without looking up at him she found herself saying coolly enough to surprise herself: “I never supposed I was capable of that. It appears that I am. I haven’t anything to say for myself . . . except that I feel fearfully humiliated.... Don’t say anything now . . . I do not blame you, truly I do not. It was contemptible of me—to do it—wearing this—” she stretched out her slender left hand, not looking at him; “it was contemptible!” . . . She slowly raised her eyes, summoning all her courage to face him.

But he only saw in the pink confusion of her lovely face the dawning challenge of a coquette saluting her adversary in gay acknowledgment of his fleeting moment of success. And as his face fell, then hardened into brightness, instantly she divined how he rated her, and in a flash realized her weapons and her security, and that the control of the situation was hers, not in the control of this irresolute young man who stood so silently considering her. Strange that she should be ashamed of her own innocence, willing that he believe her accomplished in such arts, enchanted that he no longer perhaps suspected genuine emotion in the swift, confused sweetness of her first kiss. If only all that were truly hidden from him, if he dare not in his heart convict her of anything save perfection in a gay, imprudent rôle, what a weight lifted, what relief, what hot self-contempt cooled! What vengeance, too, she would take on him for the agony of her awakening—the dazed chagrin, the dread of his wise, amused eyes—eyes that she feared had often looked upon such scenes; eyes no doubt familiar with such unimportant details as the shamed demeanour of a novice.

“Why do you take it so seriously?” she said, laughing and studying him, certain now of herself in this new disguise.

“Do you take it lightly?” he asked, striving to smile.

“I? Ah, I must, you know. You don’t expect to marry me . . . do you, Mr. Siward?”

“I—” He choked up at that, grimly for a while.

Walking slowly forward together she fell into step frankly beside him, near him—too near. “Try to be sensible,” she was saying gaily; “I like you so much—and it would be horrid to have you mope, you know. And besides, even if I cared for you, there are reasons, you know—reasons for any girl to marry the man I am going to marry. Does my cynicism shock you? What am I to do?” with a shrug. “Such marriages are reasonable, and far likelier to be agreeable than when fancy is the sole motive—certainly far more agreeable than an ill-considered yielding to abstract emotion with nothing concrete in view.... So, you see, I could not marry you even if I—” her voice was inclined to tremble, but she controlled it. Would she never learn her rôle? “even if I loved you—”

Then her tongue stumbled and was silent; and they walked on, side by side, through the fading splendour of the year, exchanging no further speech.

Toward sunset their guide hailed them, standing high among the rocks, a silhouette against the sky. And beyond him they saw the poles crowned with the huge nests of the fish-hawks, marking the last rendezvous at Osprey Ledge.

She turned to him as they started up the last incline, thanking him in a sweet, natural voice for his care of her—quite innocently—until in the questioning, unconvinced gaze that met hers she found her own eyes softening and growing dim; and she looked away suddenly, lest he read her ere she had dared turn the first page in the book of self—ere she had studied, pried, probed among the pages of a new chapter whose familiar title, so long meaningless to her, had taken on a sudden troubling significance. And for the first time in her life she glanced uneasily at the new page in the book of self, numbered according to her years with the figures 23, and headed with the unconvincing chapter title, “Love.”

CHAPTER V A WINNING LOSER

The week passed swiftly, day after day echoing with the steady fusillade from marsh to covert, from valley to ridge. Guns flashed at dawn and dusk along the flat tidal reaches haunted of black mallard and teal; the smokeless powder cracked through alder swamp and tangled windfall where the brown grouse burst away into noisy blundering flight; where the woodcock, wilder now, shrilled skyward like feathered rockets, and the big northern hares, not yet flecked with snowy patches of fur, loped off into swamps to the sad undoing of several of the younger setters.

There was a pheasant drive at Black Fells to which the Ferralls' guests were bidden by Beverly Plank—a curious scene, where ladies and gentlemen stood on a lawn, backed by an army of loaders and gun-bearers, while another improvised army of beaters drove some thousands of frightened, bewildered, homeless foreign pheasants at the guns. And the miserable aliens that escaped the guns were left to perish in the desolation of a coming winter which they were unfitted to withstand.

So the first week of the season sped gaily, ending on Saturday with a heavy flight of northern woodcock and an uproarious fusillade among the silver birches.

Once Ferrall loaded two motor cars with pioneers for a day beyond his own boundaries; and one day was spent ingloriously with the beagles; but otherwise the Shotover estate proved more than sufficient for good bags or target practice, as the skill of the sportsmen developed.

Lord Alderdene, good enough on snipe and cock, was driven almost frantic by the ruffed grouse; Voucher did better for a day or two, and then lost the knack; Marion Page attended to business in her cool and thorough style, and her average on the gun-room books was excellent, and was also adorned with clever pen-and-ink sketches by Siward.

Leroy Mortimer had given up shooting and established himself as a haunter of cushions in sunny corners. Tom O'Hara had gone back to Lenox; Mrs. Vendenning to Hot Springs. Beverly Plank, master of Black Fells, began to pervade the house after a tentative appearance; and he and Major Belwether pottered about the coverts, usually after luncheon—the latter doing little damage with his fowling-piece, and nobody knew how much with his gossiping tongue. Quarrier appeared in the field methodically, shot with judgment, taking no chances for a brilliant performance which might endanger his respectable average. As for the Page boys, they kept the river ducks stirring whenever Eileen Shannon and Rena Bonnesdel could be persuaded to share the canoes with them. Otherwise they haunted the vicinity of those bored maidens, suffering snubs sorrowfully, but persistently faithful. They were a great nuisance in the evening, especially as their sister did not permit them to lose more than ten dollars a day at cards.

Cards—that is Bridge and Preference—ruled as usual; and the latter game being faster suited Mortimer and Ferrall, but did not aid Siward toward recouping his Bridge losses.

Noticing this, late in the week, Major Belwether kindly suggested Klondyke for Siward's benefit, which proved more quickly disastrous to him than anything yet proposed; and he went back to Bridge, preferring rather to "carry" Agatha Caithness at intervals than crumble into bankruptcy under the sheer deadly hazard of Klondyke.

Two matters occupied him; since "cup day" he had never had another opportunity to see Sylvia Landis alone; that was the first matter. He had touched neither wine nor spirits nor malt since the night Ferrall had found him prone, sprawling in a stupor on his disordered bed. That was the second matter, and it occupied him, at times required all his attention, particularly when the physical desire for it set in, steadily, mercilessly, mounting inexorably like a tide.... But, like the tide, it ebbed at last, particularly when a sleepless night had exhausted him.

He had gone back to his shooting again after a cool review of the ethics involved. It even amused him to think that the whimsical sermon delivered him by a girl who had cleverness enough to marry many millions, with Quarrier thrown in, could have so moved him to sentimentality. He had ceded

the big cup of antique silver to Quarrier, too—a matter which troubled him little, however, as in the irritation of the reaction he had been shooting with the brilliancy of a demon; and the gun-room books were open to any doubting guests' inspection.

Time, therefore, was never heavy on his hands, save when the tide threatened—when at night he stirred and awoke, conscious of its crawling advance, aware of its steady mounting menace. Moments at table, when the aroma of wine made him catch his breath, moments in the gun-room redolent of spicy spirits; a maddening volatile fragrance clinging to the card-room, too! Yes, the long days were filled with such moments for him.

But afield the desire faded; and even during the day, indoors, he shrugged desire aside. It was night that he dreaded—the long hours, lying there tense, stark-eyed, sickened with desire.

As for Sylvia, she and Grace Ferrall had taken to motoring, driving away into the interior or taking long flights north and south along the coast. Sometimes they took Quarrier, sometimes, when Mrs. Ferrall drove, they took in ballast in the shape of a superfluous Page boy and a girl for him. Once Grace Ferrall asked Siward to join them; but no definite time being set, he was scarcely surprised to find them gone when he returned from a morning on the snipe meadows. And Sylvia, leagues away by that time, curled up in the tonneau beside Grace Ferrall, watched the dark pines flying past, cheeks pink, eyes like stars, while the rushing wind drove health into her and care out of her—cleansing, purifying, overwhelming winds flowing through and through her, till her very soul within her seemed shining through the beauty of her eyes. Besides, she had just confessed.

“He kissed you!” repeated Grace Ferrall incredulously.

“Yes—a number of times. He was silly enough to do it, and I let him.”

“Did—did he say—”

“I don't know what he said; I was all nerves—confused—scared—a perfect stick in fact!... I don't believe he'd care to try again.”

Then Mrs. Ferrall deliberately settled down in her furs to extract from the girl beside her every essential detail; and the girl, frank at first, grew shy and silent—reticent enough to worry her friend into a silence which lasted a long while for a cheerful little matron of her sort.

Presently they spoke of other matters—matters interesting to pretty women with much to do in the coming winter between New York, Hot Springs, and Florida; surmises as to dinners, dances, and the newcomers in the younger sets, and the marriages to be arranged or disarranged, and the scandals humanity is heir to, and the attitude of the bishop toward divorce.

And the new pavillion to be built for Saint Berold's Hospital, and the various states of the various charities each was interested in, and the chances of something new at the opera, and the impossibility of saving Fifth Avenue from truck traffic, and the increasing importance of Washington as a social centre, and the bad manners of a foreign ambassador, and the better manners of another diplomat, and the lack of discrimination betrayed by our ambassador to a certain great Power in choosing people for presentation at court, and the latest unhappy British-American marriage, and the hopelessness of the French as decent husbands, and the recent accident to the Claymores' big yacht, and the tendency of well-born young men toward politics, and the anything but distinguished person of Lord Alderdene, which was, however, vastly superior to the demeanour and person of others of his rank recently imported, and the beauty of Miss Caithness, and the chance that Captain Voucher had if Leila Mortimer would let him alone, and the absurdity of the Page twins, and the furtive coarseness of Leroy Mortimer and his general badness, and the sadness of Leila Mortimer's lot when she had always been in love with other people,—and a little scandalous surmise concerning Tom O'Hara, and the new house on Seventy-ninth Street building for Mrs. Vendening, and that charming widow's success at last year's horse show—and whether the fashion of the function was reviving, and whether Beverly Plank had completely broken into the social sets he had besieged so long, or whether a few of the hunting and shooting people merely permitted him to drive pheasants for them, and why Katharyn Tassel made eyes at him, having sufficient money of her own to die unwed, and—and—and then,

at last, as the big motor car swung in a circle at Wenniston Cross-Roads, and poked its brass and lacquer muzzle toward Shotover, the talk swung back to Siward once more—having travelled half the world over to find him.

“He is the sweetest fellow with his mother,” sighed Grace; “and that counts heavily with me. But there’s trouble ahead for her—sorrow and trouble enough for them both, if he is a true Siward.”

“Heredity again!” said Sylvia impatiently. “Isn’t he man enough to win out? I’ll bet you he settles down, marries, and—”

“Marries? Not he! How many girls do you suppose have believed that—were justified in believing he meant anything by his attractive manner and nice ways of telling you how much he liked you? He had a desperate affair with Mrs. Mortimer—innocent enough I fancy. He’s had a dozen within three years; and in a week Rena Bonnesdel has come to making eyes at him, and Eileen gives him no end of chances which he doesn’t see. As for Marion Page, the girl had been on the edge of loving him for years! You laugh? But you are wrong; she is in love with him now as much as she ever can be with anybody.”

“You mean—”

“Yes I do. Hadn’t you suspected it?”

And as Sylvia had suspected it she remained silent.

“If any woman in this world could keep him to the mark, she could,” continued Mrs. Ferrall. “He’s a perfect fool not to see how she cares for him.”

Sylvia said: “He is indeed.”

“It would be a sensible match, if she cared to risk it, and if he would only ask her. But he won’t.”

“Perhaps,” ventured Sylvia, “she’ll ask him. She strikes me as that sort. I do not mean it unkindly—only Marion is so tailor-made and cigaretteful—”

Mrs. Ferrall looked up at her.

“Did he propose to you?”

“Yes—I think so.”

“Then it’s the first time for him. He finds women only too willing to play with him as a rule, and he doesn’t have to be definite. I wonder what he meant by being so definite with you?”

“I suppose he meant marriage,” said Sylvia serenely; yet there was the slightest ring in her voice; and it amused Mrs. Ferrall to try her a little further.

“Oh, you think he really intended to commit himself?”

“Why not?” retorted Sylvia, turning red. “Do you think he found me over-willing, as you say he finds others?”

“You were probably a new sensation for him,” inferred Mrs. Ferrall musingly. “You mustn’t take him seriously, child—a man with his record. Besides, he has the same facility with a girl that he has with everything else he tries; his pen—you know how infernally clever he is; and he can make good verse, and write witty jingles, and he can carry home with him any opera and play it decently, too, with the proper harmonies. Anything he finds amusing he is clever with—dogs, horses, pen, brush, music, women”—that was too malicious, for Sylvia had flushed up painfully, and Grace Ferrall dropped her gloved hand on the hand of the girl beside her: “Child, child,” she said, “he is not that sort; no decent man ever is unless the girl is too.”

Sylvia, sitting up very straight in her furs, said: “He found me anything but difficult—if that’s what you mean.”

“I don’t. Please don’t be vexed, dear. I plague everybody when I see an opening. There’s really only one thing that worries me about it all.”

“What is that?” asked Sylvia without interest.

“It’s that you might be tempted to care a little for him, which, being useless, might be unwise.”

“I am... tempted.”

“Not seriously!”

“I don’t know.” She turned in a sudden nervous impatience foreign to her. “Howard Quarrier is too perfectly imperfect for me. I’m glad I’ve said it. The things he knows about and doesn’t know have been a revelation in this last week with him. There is too much surface, too much exterior admirably fashioned. And inside is all clock-work. I’ve said it; I’m glad I have. He seemed different at Newport; he seemed nice at Lenox. The truth is, he’s a horrid disappointment—and I’m bored to death at my brilliant prospects.”

The low whizzing hum of the motor filled a silence that produced considerable effect upon Grace Ferrall. And, after mastering her wits, she said in a subdued voice:

“Of course it’s my meddling.”

“Of course it isn’t. I asked your opinion, but I knew what I was going to do. Only, I did think him personally possible—which made the expediency, the mercenary view of it easier to contemplate.”

She was becoming as frankly brutal as she knew how to be, which made the revolt the more ominous.

“You don’t think you could endure him for an hour or two a day, Sylvia?”

“It is not that,” said the girl almost sullenly.

“But—”

“I’m afraid of myself—call it inherited mischief if you like! If I let a man do to me what Mr. Siward did when I was only engaged to Howard, what might I do—”

“You are not that sort!” said Mrs. Ferrall bluntly. “Don’t be exotic, Sylvia.”

“How do you know—if I don’t know? Most girls are kissed; I—well I didn’t expect to be. But I was! I tell you, Grace, I don’t know what I am or shall be. I’m unsafe; I know that much.”

“It’s moral and honest to realize it,” said Mrs. Ferrall suavely; “and in doing so you insure your own safety. Sylvia dear, I wish I hadn’t meddled; I’m meddling some more I suppose when I say to you, don’t give Howard his congÅ© for the present. It is a horridly common thing to dwell upon, but Howard is too materially important to be cut adrift on the impulse of the moment.”

“I know it.”

“You are too clever not to. Consider the matter wisely, dispassionately, intelligently, dear; then if by April you simply can’t stand it—talk the thing over with me again,” she ended rather vaguely and wistfully; for it had been her heart’s desire to wed Sylvia’s beauty and Quarrier’s fortune, and the suitability of the one for the other was apparent enough to make even sterner moralists wobbly in their creed. Quarrier, as a detail of modern human architecture, she supposed might fit in somewhere, and took that for granted in laying the corner stone for her fairy palace which Sylvia was to inhabit. And now!—oh, vexation!—the neglected but essentially constructive detail of human architecture had buckled, knocking the dream palace and its princess and its splendour about her ears.

“Things never happen in real life,” she observed plaintively; “only romances have plots where things work out. But we people in real life, we just go on and on in a badly constructed, plotless sort of way with no villains, no interesting situations, no climaxes, no ensemble. No, we grow old and irritable and meaner and meaner; we lose our good looks and digestions, and we die in hopeless discord with the unity required in a dollar and a half novel by a master of modern fiction.”

“But some among us amass fortunes,” suggested Sylvia, laughing.

“But we don’t live happy ever after. Nobody ever had enough money in real life.”

“Some fall in love,” observed Sylvia, musing.

“And they are not content, silly!”

“Why? Because nobody ever had enough love in real life,” mocked Sylvia.

“You have said it, child. That is the malady of the world, and nobody knows it until some pretty ninny like you babbles the truth. And that is why we care for those immortals in romance, those fortunate lovers who, in fable, are given and give enough of love; those magic shapes in verse and tale whose hearts are satisfied when the mad author of their being inks his last period and goes to dinner.”

Sylvia laughed awhile, then, chin on wrist, sat musing there, muffled in her furs.

“As for love, I think I should be moderate in the asking, in the giving. A little—to flavour routine—would be sufficient for me I fancy.”

“You know so much about it,” observed Mrs. Ferrall ironically.

“I am permitted to speculate, am I not?”

“Certainly. Only speculate in sound investments, dear.”

“How can you make a sound investment in love? Isn’t it always sheerest speculation?”

“Yes, that is why simple matrimony is usually a safer speculation than love.”

“Yes, but—love isn’t matrimony.”

“Match that with its complementary platitude and you have the essence of modern fiction,” observed Mrs. Ferrall. “Love is a subject talked to death, which explains the present shortage in the market I suppose. You’re not in love and you don’t miss it. Why cultivate an artificial taste for it? If it ever comes naturally, you’ll be astonished at your capacity for it, and the constant deterioration in quantity and quality of the visible supply. Goodness! my epigrams make me yawn—or is it age and the ill humour of the aged when the porridge spills over on the family cat?”

“I am the cat, I suppose,” asked Sylvia, laughing.

“Yes you are—and you go tearing away, back up, fur on end, leaving me by the fire with no porridge and only the aroma of the singeing fur to comfort me.... Still there’s one thing to comfort me.”

“What?”

“Kitty-cats come back, dear.”

“Oh, I suppose so.... Do you believe I could induce him to wear his hair any way except pompadour?... and, dear, his beard is so dreadfully silky. Isn’t there anything he could take for it?”

“Only a razor I’m afraid. Those long, thick, soft, eyelashes of his are ominous. Eyes of that sort ruin a man for my taste. He might just as reasonably wear my hat.”

“But he can’t follow the fashions in eyes,” laughed Sylvia. “Oh, this is atrocious of us—it is simply horrible to sit here and say such things. I am cold-blooded enough as it is—material enough, mean, covetous, contemptible—”

“Dear!” said Grace Ferrall mildly, “you are not choosing a husband; you are choosing a career. To criticise his investments might be bad taste; to be able to extract what amusement you can out of Howard is a direct mercy from Heaven. Otherwise you’d go mad, you know.”

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