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TO-MORROW AND TO-MORROW . . .

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TEX : A Chapter in the Life of ALEXANDER TEIXEIRA
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WHILE I REMEMBER

THE SECRETARY
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THE
SECRETARY OF STATE

BEING THE SECOND PART OF 'THE REALISTS'

BY

STEPHEN McKENNA



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TO
AGNES McKENNA

" Much has been done in the way of reforming Parliament in late years ; but that of itself seems to avail nothing, or almost less. The men that sit in Downing Street, governing us, are not abler men since the Reform Bill than were those before it. Precisely the same kind of men ; obedient formerly to Tory traditions, obedient now to Whig ditto and popular clamours. Respectable men of office : respectably commonplace in faculty,—while the situation is becoming terribly original ! Rendering their outlooks, and ours, more ominous every day."

THOMAS CARLYLE : *Latter-Day Pamphlets*.

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PROLOGUE

“Injuries should be done all together, so that being less tasted, they will give less offence. Benefits should be granted little by little, so that they may be better enjoyed.”

MACHIAVELLI: *The Prince.*

I

“**L**ORD, what a night! Lord, what a sea! Lord, what a *place!*” After four hours in the glare of a Pullman car, Max Hendry was blinded for a moment by the darkness of Valparaiso; and, though he had been two thousand feet and more above sea-level on his way from Santiago, he shivered as he climbed down from the train. “Lord, what a life!,” he added.

The wildest norther of the year had lately swept the Pacific coast of South America, shattering the weak and unmasting the strong. His eyes growing used to the darkness, he discerned that the vast circle of Valparaiso Bay was crowded with refugees. They were in no hurry to venture out; and the ocean liners, made fast fore and aft at the far edge of the harbour, were dragging at their moorings and tossing like corks in the after-swell of the hurricane.

Picking his way to the Mole across the dark tracks of the Santiago railway, he alternated between cajolery and sarcasm, threats and bribes, before he could find a crew to row him out; and he was hardly in his seat before the floor of the boat was under water.

"Refreshin', after the train," he decided philosophically; "and nothin' could make me dirtier."

Then he turned his back on the spangled half-circle of mountains above Valparaiso and tried to identify the *Ottomando* in the widely spaced line of steamers outside the buoys. Was there, Max wondered, a chance that she had been delayed at Lota? He was on his way back from a business visit to the capital and was preparing, with vast and unfounded misgivings, to entertain the first and only guest that he had ever invited to his house in Arica. The invitation had, indeed, contained a general warning that Mrs. Sheridan would be bored and uncomfortable; but it was only when she accepted and then sailed from England and then drew daily nearer on her unhurried passage up the coast of southern Chili that Max realized the extent of his own rashness.

"Wonder if she's dreadin' it as much as I am?," he mused. "The house isn't laid out for women; and God knows how I'm to keep her bright and happy. I haven't talked to a woman for two years. If it were a man, I'd feed him whiskey sours at short intervals and then go on with my work till he came to; but that won't do for Laura. I shall have to parade the perishin' fauna and tell her names of flowers!"

His misgivings were to some extent allayed when he found his guest awaiting him at the head of the accommodation-ladder and satisfied himself that in appearance at least she did him credit. What a wreck, he recalled, shaking hands, the woman had looked when they said good-bye in London! Broken in health, broken in nerve, broken in heart. Max could never think of her apart from the tragic frame of her room in Cleveland Row, whither she had summoned him to hear that she had fired her last shot and that it had missed. Though

it cost him his chance of a place in the cabinet, Ambrose Sheridan was determined to have his divorce; though her friends deserted her in a body, Auriol Otway was resolved to marry him as soon as he was free. It would be a disaster for both, said Laura; but, if it could not be prevented, it might be softened. Not till after that night of misery did she shew how she would help her husband of twenty years to the woman of his desire; at this meeting she was chiefly concerned to win a promise from Max that he would not stand in Auriol's way.

Max had promised readily enough. What else could he do, when Auriol first broke their engagement and then pretended they had never been engaged? He had promised that, so far as he could contrive it, neither the Otways nor the Sheridans should ever see him again. And for two years he had kept his promise so well that he hardly knew if they were alive or dead.

How remote seemed the world that Laura Sheridan recreated for a moment as the darkness lent her the frame in which he had last seen her! England, in the years when the peace-governments and the reconstruction-governments had failed to achieve peace or to reconstruct society, when politicians were divided into desperate socialists and scared antisocialists, when new leaders, proclaiming themselves "realists", elbowed out the traditional leaders who could not keep peace nor make war nor cure unemployment nor even state the problems which they were supposed to be solving. Laura Sheridan conjured up a vision of perpetual conflict, open or secret, always envenomed and not always scrupulous, between the new and the old: Ambrose Sheridan training the Sheridan press on Lord Orpington to secure himself the Colonial Office, Sir John Ferrers at the Carlton Club collecting promises that his colleagues would not serve in a

cabinet with Sheridan, Mr. Standish shambling about his dining-room in Downing Street and wondering whether it would be more disastrous to take Sheridan in or to keep him out. England, London, Westminster; political receptions and dinners, intriguing and wire-pulling; startling rumours and sudden surprises. They were stirring times for any one, not least for Ambrose Sheridan's secretary who had watched his chief hacking a way to the door of the cabinet and beyond, to the threshold of the House of Lords and across.

Stirring times, but now so remote that Max might well have created them in his imagination. Were the principals playing their old parts and repeating their old lines? Was Lord Orpington still beginning every speech with the statement that politics and horse-racing were alike in attracting the blackguards of every class? Did Selhurst and his sisters still mutter "As, for example, Lord Sheridan" at their father's chosen opening? Had Lord Otway prevailed on his family to "make the best of a bad job" now that Sheridan had married into it, or had Colin Otway enrolled his brothers-in-law and their wives in an implacable league against the interloper? Did the Selhursts and Otways really exist? Or did they belong to an imaginary world in which Max only fancied that he had once moved, dining, dancing and racing in the intervals of working for Sheridan? Was there such a place as Newmarket, Conway House, the Hendry stud-farm? Was there such a man as Sir Mark Hendry?

The coast of Chili was not more remote from England than Max's new way of life from the old. Thank God, he had found work. And, thank God again, it was at a distance! If Auriol chose to ruin her life by marrying an inspired blackguard, he would not be there to see. If Sheridan proceeded Napoleonically from triumph to

triumph, only the echo of victory would be borne across the sundering flood of the Atlantic. Never again, Max vowed bitterly, would he mix himself up with men and women whose word of honour broke before an unintelligible doctrine of "necessity".

II

It was two years since Max had slunk away, empty and defeated; and his bitterness had been mitigated by time, hard work and excessive loneliness. Why, here he was, asking Laura Sheridan to stay with him and knowing all the time that, in conversation at least, she must drag him back to the world he was trying to forget! And she had come and was grasping his hand and laughing with pleasure! Devilish attractive woman, Max thought. In two years of unhappy exile, she had contrived to make herself seem ten years younger. Her face had filled out; her brown eyes had lost their haunted expression; and her tortured nerves were at last calm.

"Gad, you're lookin' well! I should hardly have known you," Max told her, as he led the way to an empty seat.

"And you too. You're thin, but you look as if you were in fine condition," answered Laura. "And . . . you seem to have grown up, Max. I suppose it's the responsibility. You'll be glad to know I've had the most wonderful accounts of you from your chairman."

"Old Caldwell? Well, he told me to do my damnedest; and he gave me a free hand. The show runs itself now."

"You've *made* it run itself, Max. I think it's very fine, seeing you had no training."

As he bent to light his pipe, Laura saw a flush of

gratification breaking through the tan of the young face beside her, though the features remained set and impassive. Max seemed to have been studying detachment; and in two years he had become curiously denationalized. An Old Etonian tie betrayed his upbringing; a dozen tricks of speech or accidents of allusion would have caused a detective to visualize him against a brief, crowded panorama of the Grenadier Guards and White's Club, Hurlingham and Arkangel, the House of Commons and Sandown. In appearance, however, he belonged to the country of his adoption: dark-haired, olive-skinned and black-moustached, he looked an Anglo-maniac Spaniard.

"I believe you can do some things better if you're in a stinkin' temper," he expounded between tentative draws. "When I played golf, I was always on my game after a thick night. For one thing, I usually had a head and I wanted to lam out at something. For another, I didn't care if I hit the ball or not. So I usually drove into the middle of next week. I can tell you, I was in a pretty stinkin' temper when I came out here; and, as my job was to bang people's heads together, I didn't mind if I hurt 'em."

Laura sighed and remained without speaking for some moments. Then she took his arm for a walk up and down the deck.

"Unless you want to see about your cabin?," she asked. "Half Chili seems to have come on board."

"Oh, most of these people will get off before we sail. The national idea of a holiday, on this coast, is to board a British steamer first thing in the morning, play the piano, promenade the decks in family parties of four or five generations and then go ashore with anything you may have been able to acquire. 'Makes you feel quite

at home when you breakfast with a Chilian millionaire and find half his spoons engraved with the initials of the Pacific Steam Navigation Company. . . The family parties, I should add, are always in deepest mournin'. There must be an appallin' mortality in Chili . . . Well, I want to know how the world's been treatin' you in the last two years, Laura."

"Tell me about yourself first. How's the temper?"

Max laughed and wriggled his shoulder-blades impatiently :

"Oh, it's gone. And I rather miss it. Everything's so almighty flat now I've no more dagoes to oppress. I'm comin' on leave next year; and I hope the owners push me off somewhere else where I can get some scrap-pin'. If you mean . . . Well, of course you *do*. It's as bad as ever." The hand on his arm tightened sympathetically; and he patted it with clumsy tenderness. "Tell us about yourself."

"There's so little to tell! I'd much rather hear about your work. I've been travelling a certain amount. . . . I know what *you* mean; I'll talk about it later. You'll be surprised to hear I'm very happy. Let me see, we've not met since I went out to Ceylon that first winter." . . .

That night and for the rest of their short voyage up the coast, they pieced together, in a leisurely exchange of autobiography, the history of the last two years. Though they had left England on the same day, he for the west and she for the east, their last confidences had been exchanged when he came to bid her good-bye in Cleveland Row. They had corresponded regularly; but the distance between them set chasms between their letters and Laura could never expose herself on paper. For news of that far-off world in Westminster Max had depended

on the gossip of passing travellers and the colourless announcements of the press. In the second he read that the new secretary of state for the colonies, who had been raised to the peerage on accepting office, was instituting divorce-proceedings against his wife; from the first he gathered that all London and a great part of England were licking their lips over the most appetizing scandal of modern times; and, before Max had recovered from his first shock, Laura administered a second by writing: "*You must believe what you will of me; but don't defend me. If you do, you will only injure the people nearest your heart and mine*". So this was her way of softening the disaster which she could not avert!

From that letter Max had turned with feelings of physical nausea: nothing was too bad to believe of Ambrose Sheridan; but that Auriol should accept such a sacrifice, that the Otways should allow it and that every one who knew Laura did not horsewhip her husband through the streets of London were sins of commission and omission that shook a man's faith in human nature. Max found that he was less old than he had thought and that the world was less chivalrous than he had imagined.

"No, I don't feel as you do," Laura told him placidly, when he began to pour out the scorn that had been accumulating for eighteen months. "It may be wrong for people to grow tired of each other; but, if they break apart, the wrong's done then. I don't blame my husband for marrying again, though you see I still speak of him as my husband."

They were leaning over the side of the ship as she lay at anchor outside Mejillones. On leaving Valparaiso they had lost sight of land for a short time and recaptured it again in distant islands on the port bow and a monoton-

ous range of low mountains, blue-grey and misty, on the starboard. Antofagasta, nestling at the foot of deceptively high red-brown hills scored with gigantic advertisements cut in the rock, was Laura's first experience of a nitrate-port ; and, before she could express an opinion of it, she was warned that Mejillones would be a shock after Antofagasta, while Arica was even more desolate and untempting than Mejillones.

" Though one gets used to everything in time," Max sighed. " At first . . . "

III

At first, Laura could understand, this strange new world, revolving round something called nitrate, must have been bewildering to a young man raised in the safe surroundings of St. James' Street and Newmarket. Widely different he must have found the values here. A few big houses, she discovered, controlled everything : if a man was not working for Gibbs or Grace, he was working for Lairds or Patterson and Mackenzie. Every one was engaged in operating nitrate. Up and down the coast, every one was known to every one else ; and the overseers and managers passed from Iquique to Valparaiso, taking their holidays in Punta Arenas and making a rootless colonial life for themselves in one of the most barren and desolate parts of the world until they had saved enough money to return. This, she realized in amazement, was Max Hendry's life ; these were his prospects. Of those who travelled between one port and another, a few were more permanently established : she met men of English birth who had only been to England for their education, others who had never been out of Chili until they went home to take part in the war.

"I'm not used to you yet in this setting," she told Max. "When I remember . . ."

She broke off to point with a shudder to a hammer-headed shark. Max, in his turn, again marvelled at her new composure.

"If it comes to that . . ." he began.

Save when they flashed with quiet humour, the thoughtful brown eyes were steady; and her voice held the quiet assurance of complete understanding.

"I belong to Ambrose and *he'll* always belong to me," she explained, "whoever he's living with. We're one flesh . . . in *my* opinion. If he left Auriol, I should always hope he'd come back to me: I should ask him to, not from duty but because . . . well, because we *are* one flesh."

"Then I'm blest if I see . . ." Max confessed.

"How I gave him leave to break away and marry again? It seemed such a small thing to provide the means! I'm a realist too, Max! His career required it: he couldn't afford to be divorced by me; and I knew, better than he and Auriol put together, what his career meant to him." . . .

"But . . . but how he *let* you?," Max stammered.

"I told him to face facts: he mattered and I didn't. So I can't blame him. I don't blame Auriol, either." . . .

The figure beside her grew rigid; and an empty tobacco-tin was flung savagely down at the inquisitive nose of the shark.

"I do," said Max between his teeth. "When I'd been on the coast a month, I was so lonely I wrote to her. I simply couldn't help myself. She wrote to me at the same time, so our letters crossed. We agreed to be friends; and, after that, I couldn't tell her what I thought of her. But I wanted to! The idea of lettin' *you* . . .

We write ; but I don't want to see her again, though I honestly believe—as I told you—it gets worse every day. I never knew what she meant to me. . . . It'll be awkward when I go home," he ended jerkily.

They walked in silence to the end of the deck and watched the lighters on either side unloading. A sour reek of moist sugar floated across from the open hatch ; but he seemed not to notice it.

In two years Max had grown so well used to his new life that it fitted him as neatly as the broad pith-helmet and suit of gleaming duck. After a perfunctory question or two about conditions at home, he talked eagerly of the party-struggles in Chilian politics ; for him, economics had come to mean the price of nitrate and the unwisdom of paying salaries that did not enable a man to get back to England once in five years. His speech was beginning to be clipped, like that of the other nitrate men whom she met on board. Well for him, Laura decided in misgiving for his restlessness and youth, if he could adapt himself to this strange life ! Mejillones, which she was told she would only appreciate after she had seen Arica, proved smaller by day than she had expected from the wide expanse of light when they dropped anchor. It seemed, indeed, to consist of a background of tin sheds, a petroleum-reservoir and a smooth blue bay dotted with patches of dark-red fish-spawn. A second pair of lighters was mooring aft to load borax from the great lake on the Bolivian border. They would not sail till sundown, Max told her, as they had a cargo of tin to take on. The tin, she might be interested to know . . .

A strange setting, a strange life, strange interests for Max Hendry !

"You'll find Auriol very busy in her new position,"

Laura predicted, after a night's reflection, "and, if you go your way and leave her to go hers, it may be easiest and best for both of you."

"When a man has a cravin' for the bottle, it's probably best for him to give it a miss. That's not to say it's easy. And it don't help the cravin' at the time."

"But, if you're as sensible as I like to think you, Max. . . ?"

"Where she's concerned," he answered candidly, "I think I'm the damnedest fool God ever allowed to live; but, when I see how other men behave with other women, I think we're all damned fools together."

"You come on leave next year?"

"Unless the owners change their minds. I put in for this place, which is the best on the coast after Valpo, but I suppose they don't think I'm good enough. 'Can't be helped, but I *had* set my heart on it. I used to *pray* . . ."

Laura shaded her eyes and looked through a heat-haze to the bay and town of Iquique. A narrow frontage of level land was backed by abrupt, high mountains of the red-sandy surface to which she was becoming painfully accustomed. The monotony of cloudless sky and unvarying sunshine, of ports and towns that were almost indistinguishable, must be maddening! Here, the bay was broken by a reef of low rock intersected by channels through which an ice-cold sea poured backwards and forwards. On the reef stood a light-house; behind it was a mole; and in the sheltered water lay the green-and-white boat-house of the Iquique Boating Club. Without question, this was the best port on the coast after Valparaiso; but she had not realized how heavy an obsession weighed Max down till she found him praying and setting his heart on Iquique as the goal of his earthly ambitions.

"If she wants you, there's no reason you shouldn't see her," Laura decided at last, "provided you don't upset her. She's the person we have to consider."

"I wonder you don't get tired of considerin' other people," Max grunted.

"Isn't it the only thing left to me? And, if you really love Auriol, if you can't think of any other woman, isn't it the only thing left to *you*?"

IV

MAX was silenced; and for many minutes they stared over the side without speaking.

"It depends how you're made," he ventured at length. "Adversity's taken twenty years off you."

"Shall I tell you the secret? Give up saying to yourself that Auriol's twenty years younger than Ambrose and that, even if she doesn't run away from him, he *must die some day*."

Max felt his cheeks warming and was thankful to find that he was not being watched.

"Hang it all, Laura . . ." he expostulated.

She turned on him with a flicker of the nervous passion that had wasted her two years before:

"My dear, d'you think I didn't imagine every conceivable chance that might have brought Ambrose back to me? I pictured all sorts of quarrels; I killed off poor little Auriol a dozen times. That was what made me so ill. I wanted him so much that I believed in my dreams; we were always making new starts and living again through the glorious early days. When we used to meet, he came in like the walking corpse of the Ambrose *I'd* known. I woke from my dreams, I knew there was no hope. But that very night—I wonder any one could

live with as little sleep as I had!—, that night I used to drug myself again with the vision of what I wanted. My dear, I can so well understand the people who take to drink as an escape! I felt I was being led to the scaffold in the afternoon and reprieved at night. My *head* never took the reprieve seriously. Why, every time I saw Ambrose . . . But my heart still expected a miracle. When I realized it wasn't coming, I gave a great sigh of relief. I did know where I was at last. It was over, over. I spent about a week with Ambrose, arranging things, booking my passage to Ceylon. In that week, by the way, I put on two pounds!"

"And then?"

Laura turned from him and looked out to sea:

"Then I found a new way of being happy. If you have no children of your own, it's something to help bring up somebody else's child; and Ambrose now was Auriol's child. In spite of everything, I'd made friends with her. I could understand better than any one how Ambrose dominated her mind; as for her, I didn't see how any one could resist her! I went to say good-bye; and we talked as though we were mother and daughter. For all her book-cleverness she knew nothing: she'd have maddened Ambrose in a week with sheer, ignorant incompetence; so I took her in hand. They've a hard row to hoe, those two; and it was the last thing I could do for Ambrose. . . . It's the last thing you can do for Auriol, Max: to make this marriage a success. If she finds everything rather strange, if she misses the friends of her own age in that very sedate *milieu*, I believe you can help her. But you must be careful: my husband is jealous, especially of young men; and, if you can't help her without antagonizing him, I say you'd better not meet her. Even I . . . Nowadays I spend half the

year travelling; and the other half I live in a little flat the other side of the Park. Auriol comes to see me every day when she can spare time, but it's a dead secret. Ambrose would be jealous of *me* if he knew she talked her troubles over with any one else; and, with his merciless passion for efficiency, he'd never think the same of her if he heard that I'd helped with her first dinner-parties and so on. It's a secret, but it's a secret that makes me very happy. I never *see* him, of course, but I'm living with his reflection. I hear all about him. If we weren't so conventional, so much afraid of seeming ridiculous, we could make up a wonderful little *ménage à trois*; a *ménage à quatre*, with you . . . Perhaps you're too young, though; and then I don't know what to suggest. But you know now why I'm looking so well and happy. You *may* be able to do what I've done. If you can't, Max, promise me one thing: promise me you'll do nothing to unsettle poor little Auriol."

"I'll promise that willin'ly," he answered. "Why d'you always call her 'poor little' Auriol, though? Isn't she happy?"

"Radiantly; at present. Did you see the picture Christie painted of her for the Academy: *Lady Sheridan in her Drawing-Room in Cleveland Row*? It was reproduced in several of the papers." Max nodded and involuntarily touched his pocket. "I'm wondering if she'll be as happy when my husband's an old man and she's becoming a middle-aged woman; when she wakes up to find that youth and all that goes with it have somehow been left out of her life. Perhaps the excitement, day by day . . . And it must be exciting, you know!" . . .

For the rest of their voyage together they talked of common friends and of the changes that had taken place

in England since Max sailed for South America with a rash oath that he would never return. Lord Sheridan's new wife seemed to have stepped most accommodatingly into the shoes of the old ; she was living in the same house, employing the same servants and no doubt sending out her invitations from the same lists. The secretary of state had retained the services of Geoffrey Mallock as principal private secretary ; and Max learned from Laura that his own, unofficial position was now filled by her brother, Tony Rushforth.

" You know he's married now ?," she asked. " If you remember Evelyn Colthurst . . . Ambrose took her round the world as his personal secretary when he was chairman of that trade-commission."

" I always looked on Tony as a confirmed bachelor," said Max.

" They're the people who always give us the surprises ! Tony met her one night at dinner ; and they were married in about three weeks. There's one child at present, a boy . . . Now who else would you like to hear about ? The Otways ? They were very sweet, very sympathetic at the time of my trouble. I told them, as I told you, that, if we couldn't stop things, we must all work to make them run smoothly. I think they're quite reconciled to Ambrose now . . ."

She faltered as she found Max's attention wandering. No doubt each was speculating how much the other knew about Tony's surprising marriage. When Ambrose Sheridan turned on Mr. Standish's new government the artillery with which he had blown the labour government sky-high, the timid and the cunning had conspired to get rid of their most formidable critic. " If," said the prime minister, " unemployment could be cured by empire-settlement and a new policy for trade and com-

munications, let Mr. Sheridan go out and prepare his scheme: if he succeeds, we cure unemployment; if he fails, he can no longer attack us." "For six months," added Lord Orpington, "the Colonial Office will have a rest." "In six months," whispered Lord Otway, "Auriol may have forgotten Sheridan." So the royal commission was established; so the man who had been refused office by conservative, labour and liberal prime ministers went round the world, taking his political life in his hands, to find a policy where they had all failed.

Looking back on that three-year-old gamble, Max realized that in public and private every one had staked his limit, not excluding the lunatic who insisted on carrying his public life also in his hand by taking a "personal secretary" of greater physical charm than technical efficiency.

V

THE gamble had been justified by results; and in the press of public excitement every one had lost sight of Evelyn Colthurst.

The trap prepared for Sheridan opened to receive those who had digged it; before the mission had been a week at sea, confidence was returning to office and factory, a "good time" was achieved for no better reason than that every one believed a "good time" was coming and the head of the mission strode back to dictate his own terms. In those last weeks before Max left England, his chief seemed irresistible. He bullied Lord Orpington into resigning, he bullied Auriol Otway into a promise of marriage; and, when he heard that he could not take office one day and allow his wife to divorce him the next, he took the office and divorced his wife. There still

remained the "personal secretary" who had consoled him in the months when he was weighing one marriage against another; and he had swiftly married her off to his new private secretary. Did Tony realize, Max wondered, why this beautiful and well-dowered girl was willing to marry him at sight? Did Laura suspect who was the father of a child she had to call her nephew? Did Auriol imagine that there were old entanglements to be cleared up and tidied away before she could marry Ambrose?

"Is Tony taking kindly to married life?," Max enquired in spite of himself.

From her single, rapid glance Laura seemed to be deciding that they at least need not keep up pretences.

"I'm afraid Tony would never make a success, married or single," she answered. "He's my brother, but I can see he thinks too much of himself to bring much happiness into any one's life. He remained a bachelor because he was more courted when he was unattached. At one time he hoped to marry one of Lord Orpington's girls, but he was never in love with her and only thought of his prestige as an earl's son-in-law. I understand Evelyn has some money . . ."

"But you think he was caught?"

"We'll hope that *he* will never think that," said Laura.

Max tried to imagine the effect on Auriol's mind of a suspicion that Evelyn Rushforth was anything but her husband's former secretary and the wife of his present secretary. Ephemeral unions and unexpected marriages had punctuated the Sheridans' life for fifteen out of twenty years; but Ambrose had not heretofore looked so near home to find husbands for his discarded mistresses. The birth of the child had apparently passed unchallenged,

like the headlong marriage ; but there would be trouble in store if the boy grew up with Ambrose Sheridan's distinctive features and unmistakable temper.

" Well, for what it's worth," said Max, " you've got a return for all you've gone through. A peerage for him, a seat in the cabinet . . ."

Laura laughed exultantly :

" And he's *happy* ! ' For what it's worth ', indeed ! It was his great chance ; and I couldn't let him lose it. When you remember how people struggled to keep him out in the cold . . . They only let him in because they couldn't help themselves."

" And how does he get on now that he *is* in ?," asked Max.

" He's biding his time. He has to convert his colleagues."

" I don't envy him the job. When people talk of unifyin' empires and mobilizin' the English-speakin' peoples . . ."

" As Ambrose would say, the whole world doubted when Bismarck dreamed of unifying Germany."

" Somehow, with men like Standish and Ferrers and Orpington, I can't see any one doing it," Max persisted. " They call themselves conservative, they're conservative in spirit. They don't like construction or organization on a big scale . . ."

" Lord Orpington's out of the government now," Laura put in. " You remember . . ."

" He resigned to make way for your man. I remember." Max looked shrewdly at his companion to see if her words contained more than the correction of a trifling error. " Are we to take that as a portent ? Blue Peter stood in the way. Blue Peter had to go. If Ferrers gets in the way, Ferrers will have to go. Standish . . ."

It's not much use gettin' rid of Standish: your man could hardly take *his* place."

"Why not?"

"There's a strong feelin' *against* havin' the prime minister in the House of Lords."

"He can overcome that."

"I daresay. And, after all," Max laughed, "if the House of Lords happens to stand in his way, the House of Lords will have to go."

Laura smiled as though she found nothing surprising in such a solution:

"You know him almost as well as I do."

"I was private secretary for a good while." His tone changed suddenly. "You wouldn't think I *could* get in his way, but I did. And so *I* had to go. That's why I'm in *this* perishin' place."

"You can't forgive that?"

"I could forgive him if he'd won Auriol from me in fair fight, but he didn't. We were engaged. I was waitin' for a job. He knew it. And he took me on for a job where I couldn't possibly make good. You can't blame Auriol for thinkin' I was hopeless. . . . It was devilish clever of him: devilish, that's the word. If I'd had the chance then that old Caldwell gave me two years ago . . . But it's no good rakin' up might-have-beens. If I'd known him as well then as I do now . . ."

"My dear, if you'd known a single thing about him, you'd have known that he *must* have his own way. Always! In everything! It's like water to a fish, air to an animal! You and I may plot to make this marriage a success, but nothing will save it unless Auriol sees what kind of man she has married."

"Auriol has a will of her own," said Max.

“ I’ve the best reason for knowing it ! The next year or two, as the first glamour wears off, will be the critical time. The problem, the drama, rather . . . But we’ll hope there’s not going to be any problem or drama ! ”

PART I

CHAPTER I

"Lady Sheridan in Her Drawing-Room . . ."

"Distraction is the panacea, Sir!
I hear my oracle of Medicine say.
Doctor! that same specific yesterday
I tried, and the result will not deter
A second trial."

GEORGE MEREDITH: *Modern Love*.

I

THE last night of his voyage up the coast Max Hendry sat by himself on the boat-deck.

Laura Sheridan had gone down early to pack; and, though three other nitrate men urged him to join them at bridge, he knew that he could not give his attention to the game. Though his body was moored firmly enough to an English liner in the eastern Pacific, his spirit was adrift in time and space, wavering over a quarter of a century and being blown from one continent to another. He was not in England, he was not in Chili: he was not a man of twenty-five or twenty or any other age. From the detached height where his spirit hovered, he could look down on himself at all ages, in all settings.

"No good tryin' to remember what trumps are when you can hardly remember your own name," he muttered.

It was Laura who had stolen his power of concentration, bringing to life the old sights and sounds and scents which he had been trying to forget, incautiously

opening a door on a world whose existence he was nerving himself to doubt. He would pay for this in the morning ! Laura had said that he was somehow grown up : it was like complimenting a man on the strength of his head ! Seduced by such a compliment, a man might swallow that injudicious last drink which he was bound to regret next day ; he might intoxicate himself, in another way, by staring at a dog's-eared reproduction of *Lady Sheridan in her Drawing-Room in Cleveland Row*.

Though he knew that he must pay for his indulgence, Max moved into a circle of light and feasted his eyes guiltily on a face which he loved and dreaded equally. In the days when they were engaged, Auriol had never given him a photograph of herself. "It's such waste of time and money," she had protested. "You know what my comic face *looks* like." And Max had never pressed her for one, fearing to be ridiculed as sentimental. Their set, perhaps their generation, prided itself on being direct and cold-blooded, though at a distance of time and space one might wonder whether the set knew what it meant : Auriol was direct because she was intellectually impatient, cold-blooded because she was still too young to have been fired, but among her friends there were plenty, women and men, unmarried and married, whose blood coursed hotly and who forgot their directness when they had an intrigue to arrange or to conceal. The morals of these latter days were curious ; or perhaps they seemed curious because they were discussed so frankly. It was a mistake, probably, to talk of cold blood or hot : everybody's blood pulsed for one person and not for another.

"Barrin' Auriol. Which is what defeats me about her," Max murmured. "It's defeatin' Laura too."

A hasty critic of *Lady Sheridan in her Drawing-Room*

might have said that the picture was concerned first with the drawing-room, then with Lady Sheridan's clothes and, only by an afterthought of the painter's, with Lady Sheridan. The portrait was recognizable, but it would have been difficult to find the artist who could not extract a recognizable likeness out of Auriol's short chestnut hair and high, white forehead, her straight, tip-tilted nose and impudent mouth. Max felt, however, that she was included to complete a study of the room that a wealthy cabinet-minister might have, with the wife he had acquired to suit the room and the dress he had bought to fit the wife. She was the least important part, unless the painter maintained that he had given her the true value which she enjoyed in her husband's composition of the room and of their life.

“Far-fetched,” Max decided. “Thank God, I don't know anything about art, but I should say Christie had painted no end of a drawing-room because he couldn't get Auriol.”

It was hard to say what was amiss with the portrait : the more one looked for faults, the less one found. The more Max studied it, indeed, the deeper—to his surprise—grew his admiration. It was, after all, not half bad. It was good ! It was devilish good ! One was put off, at first, by something unfamiliar, but Christie had cunningly contrived to extract the essential woman where one had expected, perhaps, only a “photographer's expression”. In the original, painted life-size, one would not be in the least surprised to see Auriol springing up from her chair and walking out of the canvas ; one could hear her laugh and catch the scent of her hair. It was no dressed-up lay-figure, this, yet something was wanting. Were the clothes so well rendered that they smothered the wearer ? Max covered three-quarters of

the portrait with his hand, to realize uncomfortably that the painter had done his work too well. With only the face and neck visible, Auriol ceased to be Lady Sheridan, she ceased to be a woman, becoming something slight, gay, slender and essentially sexless.

It was what he had always supposed. When they called themselves engaged, Auriol was not in love with him. When she called herself Lord Sheridan's wife, she was still indifferent, unawakened. Why had she broken off her engagement? Why had she married at all? When would she begin to grow up?

II

MAX pocketed the photograph and tried to remember Auriol Otway as he had met her on his return from North Russia.

They had played together as children, then separated for a period that covered their school-days and the last years of the war, then met again in the tumultuous phase which pressmen and politicians called "reconstruction". And, after that, they had drifted aimlessly, talking of their engagement without hurry or conviction until they had talked it out of existence. Auriol in those days had political ambitions, inherited from her father and fostered at Cambridge; she surrounded herself with leaders of "movements" and looked with little patience on the men whom her brother Colin brought to the house.

Max, never so candid as with his own shortcomings, wondered sometimes why, in those early days, her impatience passed him by. In upbringing and in tastes he had more in common with Cavalry, whom Joyce Otway had married, and with Wainwright, who later carried

off Imogen, than with the writers and speakers and civil servants and party-organizers whom Auriol collected. Granted his heart's desire, Max would have joined Sir Mark at the Hendry stud-farm. Like Wainwright and Cavalry, he wanted to shoot in the autumn, to hunt in the winter and to race for the rest of the year; from these delights he only turned aside because the taxation of the last twenty years made them impossible. Wainwright had left the army to enter the city, Cavalry to become his father's agent. Colin Otway only remained at the staff college so long as Lord Otway was content to hold the family together with his directors' fees, but at any moment Colin too might have to earn his own living. The unremunerative career was disappearing with the big house, the life of leisure, the plenty and comfort that had made England so delectable before the war.

"More's the pity," sighed Max. "By the end of the nineteenth century we *had* made a fine art of living."

If Auriol had her way, the nineteenth century would not even be allowed an honourable death: it had to be helped on its road with a kick. There was no place now, she declared, for men who aspired simply to pass from Eton to the Brigade and thence to the unproductive ease of country gentlemen. The hereditary leaders of the nation must now lead in controlling industry, making peace between capital and labour, forming opinion and grappling generally with modern democracy. Society was not to be saved by voting conservative, talking about the traditions of English sport and relying on the Guards when strikers got out of hand.

This, not to be unkind, was Colin Otway's conception of statecraft; and Max had been reared so long in the

same school that he expected to fall under the ban which Auriol laid on most of his associates.

"I can't make out why we should be friends," she told Max once. "We've nothing in common except that we're both fond of dancing. In spite of that, I'd sooner be with you than with any man I know. I believe I must be in love with you or something."

"Well, I know I'm in love with you," Max had answered. "Oughtn't we to do something about it? Put up a bann? Send a line to the *Mornin' Post*?"

When Lord Otway ruled that Max had better find the means of supporting a wife before making himself responsible for one, a career or at least the emoluments of a career had to be discovered. It came in the happy-go-lucky manner that most things came to Max in those happy-go-lucky days. After a game of squash-racquets at the Bath Club, Ambrose Sheridan let fall that he was looking for a professional who would give him an hour's exercise each day in his own court.

"Take me on as your secretary, sir," Max suggested, "and the exercise will be thrown in."

Made with a smile, the proposal was accepted in earnest; and for a couple of years Max lived, rent-free, in St. James' Street with a salary that covered all reasonable expenses and with dark promises of the commanding heights to which a secretaryship might lead. For a few weeks Auriol shared his excitement; for a few months she asked at intervals when the promises were going to materialize; and for the rest of the two years, until even the shadows of their insubstantial engagement had been dispersed, she hardened in her conviction that Max was offered nothing better because he was fit for nothing better, because he wanted nothing better, because he was hopeless.

“A hopeless fool, if you like,” Max grumbled to the star-spangled night. “I believed Sheridan when he said he was keepin’ something on ice for me; and I should have believed any one who told me that my first loyalty was to the man whose money I was drawin’. It never occurred to me he was payin’ a retainer so that I couldn’t ride for any one else. I’m not sure even now,” he added with invincible fairness of mind.

Whether or no Sheridan had consciously set a trap, Max had walked into a cage. At the end of two years he was no better off in pocket or in prospects than at the beginning; and, for a great part of those two years,—on his introduction, so far as he could remember—Auriol had been thrown into contact with a man whose personality and record made most other men seem at least ineffectual. Auriol began by admiring Sheridan’s brains; artfully beguiled by scraps of autobiography which no one excelled him in making romantic, she had gone on to offer allegiance to a soldier of fortune whose lonely courage and tenacity were admitted even by his enemies. Sheridan won her on the day when he first came to seek her advice and to pretend that in some way she inspired him with her faith, her enthusiasm and her own wise judgement.

“He’s a handsome brute. After that I suppose she fell in love with him,” Max decided.

And yet she had not! One had to guard against the egotism of fancying that a woman could never fall out of love or that she could love no one but oneself; the Lady Sheridan of Christie’s picture, however, was not in love. She was still the Auriol Otway who kissed a man’s lips when other women would have hesitated to touch his hand, who protested that every one seemed to be obsessed by sex and that to bear children was like

presiding over a dinner-party, an incident in the business of being married. Auriol was not in love, she had never been in love. Perhaps she was passionless, perhaps she was immature.

Lady Sheridan in her Drawing-Room . . . She looked happy enough ; and she had every reason to be. There were no empty longings, no unsatisfied hungers, no nervous twinges of conscience, no disabling fear that she had married the wrong man. All men were alike to a girl who thought of them as heroes of careers before she thought of them as men. In Ambrose Sheridan she had found the required type of hero ; his career fulfilled her giddiest political ambitions. With him she was meeting all her cherished ministers and party-leaders and editors. The life which she had seen in a dream was made actual in that vast, imposing room. Philip Wainwright and Imogen, stranded between the military world which they had resigned and the commercial world which they had hardly assailed, could shew no such frame or life as this. Guy Cavalry and Joyce, buried in Warwickshire and shooting their own coverts by invitation of the tenants, had not realized more than a misty imitation of their dream. Colin, at Camberley, was revolving in a very small circle. Auriol would be hard to please if she were not happy.

“ Contrast her with the average wife of the average nitrate man out here . . .,” Max mused. “ ‘ There but for the grace of God,’ she’d say, ‘ goes Auriol Otway ’.”

The snug, comfortable life with her parents in Manchester Square, the old, spacious life at Lokshott when the family could afford to open the house : even this must seem small by comparison with the splendours that Ambrose Sheridan could lavish on her. To be sure, Auriol had not married for money ; her tastes were so

simple that inordinate wealth embarrassed her ; but her husband at least could never be too rich, for every penny that he amassed was new proof of greatness in the man she had married.

Sheridan must be considered a great man, Max supposed ; he had certainly made a great position for himself. Born in a sea-port slum, he had first run away and then deserted from his ship. He had served and ruled and served again, making money and losing it, buying and selling, rubbing shoulders with all sorts and conditions of men until a dependable flair for the public taste had become a well-nigh infallible flair. Though he had long retired from industry, his appraising touch was no less sure when he had to estimate how many millions of average people would buy a certain article at a certain price. Though he had long since abandoned the detailed control of his own papers, he could weigh the news-value of a paragraph better than the best of his sub-editors. And, though he had neither time nor taste for gambling on the stock-exchange, he could still forecast more accurately than professional speculators how the vagaries of mass-psychology would affect the markets. Forceful, pertinacious and indefatigable, he had taught himself organization and surrounded himself with deputies ; his consequent activity was more like that of a turbine than of a man ; and the day's work of a giant was followed by the night's work of a titan. Morning after morning, as Max ambled away between one and three, Sheridan was still at work, explaining his schemes and explaining himself, helpless without a pen in his hand, temperamentally incapable of keeping his ideas from those to whom he ultimately appealed.

“ ‘ The people I represent ’ ,” Max quoted, leaning over

the rail and staring at the moon's reflection in the water, " ' the people from whom I spring ' . "

It was a favourite phrase, worn threadbare in service but never to be worn out so long as any one wanted to explain Sheridan by a phrase. As a man of the people, he knew the people and whistled to the people as to a faithful dog. He was a demagogue or the spokesman of democracy, according to the prejudices of his critics. And in carving himself a place in politics he applied the same gifts and methods as in carving himself a position in journalism and industry. Preeminently he was the man with the flair. With a passionate certainty of what he wanted—certain as a child's if as quickly changing—, he knew what average men and women wanted. Relishing one way of approach and rejecting another, he presented his case in a form to win the twenty million other Ambrose Sheridans who made up average opinion. An opportunist, a drifting balloon, a political gadfly, he had still a sense of direction. It sometimes happened that average opinion looked beyond the " sensation " and the " cry " of the moment ; average opinion had no wish to be led by an epileptic. It sometimes happened that average opinion looked back ; and, dreading inconsistency, average opinion would have disliked a leader who was a man of peace on one day and a man of war the next, pro-this, pro-that, pro-the-other, but never of the same mind for two minutes together.

" He gives average opinion what it wants even in its lucid intervals ! "

The sense of direction was made manifest in the leading articles which Sheridan contributed in turn to one of his papers after another, modifying his language and suiting his arguments to his readers as, in another existence, he had offered the same fountain-pens at a

dollar to the masses and at three dollars, with a band of imitation-gold, to the elect. A business-government, realization of imperial resources, security . . . Brooding over the phrases, Max could almost hear the deep voice, almost see the massive head and lined face.

Fastidious critics always smiled a little contemptuously when they heard Sheridan or read his outpourings. Max frankly confessed himself to be one of Sheridan's most constant dupes.

“I'm not highbrow and I believe he's right, however much of a crook he may be and however much he repeats himself. 'I suppose I should call myself a realist in politics' . . .,” he quoted.

This favourite exordium ever conveyed a gentle suggestion that, while other people were sentimental or insincere, blind or squinting, Sheridan always and alone saw clearly. While others fumbled with the problems of the nineteenth century, he stood forth as the heir to the great war. Had not Napoleon been called the heir to the French Revolution?

III

By shutting his eyes, Max could hear Sheridan rolling the phrase appreciatively round his tongue; he could see him jumping up and striding to the window, or standing with his feet apart, his head thrust forward and his hands clasped behind his back. So long as it was innocent of irony, Sheridan never resented a comparison with Napoleon. And “the heir to the great war” was a sounding phrase, not unworthy to rank with the utterances of those who had spoken of “a war to end war” or of a war “to make the world safe for democracy”. How did Sheridan himself rank with the

men who had coined these phrases about "democracy" and "heroes" and "the rights of little nations"?

Looking back over the years of his secretaryship, Max found that he had met or heard most of the men whom Sheridan described derisively as "the saviours of society". Confined to London, he had never, indeed, seen Wilson or Lenin, Clémenceau or Mussolini, Benes or Masaryk, but he had listened to Balfour and Asquith, Baldwin, Churchill, Macdonald and Thomas. He had read with what understanding he could muster the case for and against a league of nations, for and against a pact of security, for and against a managed currency, the cancellation of war-debts, a capital levy and the nationalization of industry. The statesmen whom Sheridan dismissed contemptuously as "the old gang" had realized that the war had left behind it new problems for which the experience of the nineteenth century offered no guidance; to that extent they were "realists"; but they were hindered from solving these problems by old allegiances and outworn shibboleths, by timidity and want of imagination. Political parties were raising their heads again after the war, though the party politics which they had espoused were dead. The fiery controversies of which Max had read as a boy—the House of Lords veto, Welsh disestablishment, plural voting and Irish Home Rule—were settled or shelved. As Sheridan never wearied of proclaiming, party divisions were wiped out under the first labour government, when one faction dropped its capital levy, the other its tariff and no issue was left to guide an elector in voting labour or liberal or conservative. The political arena was empty; the ground was clear for an attack on the monsters of insecurity, privation, disorder and ultimate annihilation which had emerged from the smoke and ruin of the war. It was

in facing these apparitions that the elder statesmen failed. Most of them were tired ; all of them were unadaptable. None, so far, had shewn himself worthy to inherit and administer the legacy of the war.

To Sheridan's thinking, the “old gang” was incompetent even to state the difficulties that had to be overcome. “What's wrong with the world, Hendry?” he would ask Max ; or “What would you do to clear up the mess if I made you dictator for a year?” When Max hesitated, Sheridan would answer his own question :

“The vast majority of mankind are underfed and ill-housed. There's too much fear in their lives and too little enjoyment. Most men, condemned to eat their bread in the sweat of their face, are resigned to work, but the late war proved that no man from Nicaragua to Easter Island can rely on being allowed to enjoy the fruits of his work, marry a wife, bring up a family and die in his bed at the normal term of his days. There was no security before ; and there's no more security now. The first thing is to make war impossible ; and, until that's done, you're only wasting your energy in feeding and housing mankind, or teaching it, or making it healthy. You can render war impossible by universal disarmament, which no power, great or small, would endure ; or by surrendering the right of war to an international police-force, which no human being would trust in the present state of the world ; or by forming such an armed league of peace that no one would dare to make war. The English-speaking peoples could end war, but first they would have to organize. The British empire was never highly organized, but it's breaking into pieces now. If I could unify the empire, we could divide the control of the world with the United States ; but, rather than that, I would join with the United States.”

For a year, as Max recalled rather wearily, Sheridan had preached "security" in all his papers till one section of readers began to say that they prized security every whit as highly as Mr. Sheridan and another section became permanently uneasy. Then Sheridan went on to write, insistently, mercilessly, of the wasted opportunities of empire. He sketched a federation whereby all parts of the empire should meet in a senate at Westminster, with a standing council to take the place of the old imperial conference and to prepare the way for an imperial cabinet. He was still working on this theme when Mr. Standish's government despatched him round the world to investigate problems of emigration and possibilities of trade-expansion. Partly by a coincidence, partly by the growing faith which "average opinion" was imposing in him, the burden of unemployment became lighter on the day when Sheridan took it on his shoulders. He left England depressed and returned to find her prosperous. His personality, meanwhile, was stamped on the dominions and colonies which he visited; and, when the cabinet was reconstructed, the colonial office was given to a man who looked farther ahead than his fellows and spoke for a wider constituency than theirs. Nobody, indeed, expected that Sheridan would give ordered and proportioned shape to an empire which had grown by casual accretion, but of Sheridan nobody ever knew what to expect. He was passionately sincere and diabolically persuasive. It was by talking to Auriol of his dreams that he had captured first her imagination and then her.

"I've heard him myself," Max muttered. "I'm 'average opinion'; and he gets me every time."

Since his belated inclusion in the cabinet, Sheridan's name had been slightly less prominent. He still wrote, he still spoke, but Max fancied that he was consolidating

his position with new colleagues who had resisted him as long as they dared and would reject him as soon as they could.

"He must be finding some pretty odd stable-companions among his new friends!"

Recalling the criticism of his employer which he had been compelled to hear for two years, Max could not help smiling at the bitter words that must now be swallowed without even a wry grimace. "I know he's your chief, but I don't trust him." "He's very able, but I don't trust him." "I believe he's sincere, according to his lights, but I don't trust him." However it opened, the judgement closed always in the same words. Liberals abhorred a man who deserted them in their pride and reviled them in their abasement; labour scowled and muttered at a man who first fawned and then snapped; and the great conservative party, learning something and forgetting nothing of earlier free-lances, closed ranks against a man who boasted of his independence and offered his allegiance with an explanation that this party at this period of history was, all things considered, more useful to him than any other party. To get into the cabinet might be simpler for Sheridan than to make his voice heard inside it.

"And yet he'll never be content to say ditto to any one. They'll overwhelm him or he'll overwhelm them."

Which would it be? Max shut his eyes again and tried to conjure up the consequential figures of his brief political life.

More from loyalty to his government than from love of office, old Mr. Standish would always side with the majority when he saw where the majority lay; and at present, though they had conveniently forgotten their vow that they would never serve with Sheridan, the

party fire-eaters led by Sir John Ferrers commanded a presumed majority of votes and a certain majority of the principal offices. They were the "new men" of the conservative party, who had fought their way to the top by ability and force: Carmichael at the War Office, Rodney at the Admiralty and Ferrers at the Foreign Office had no tradition of birth, wealth or influence to assist them; and their presence constituted a protest against the old conservative policy of preferring family to brains. At first sight they might have welcomed Sheridan as one of themselves, but in purging and reconstructing the party they had insisted on exclusion of heterodoxy no less than on promotion by merit. Too often in recent years had the party been riven by disputes over a tariff, over Ireland, over the coalition; and the profession of faith which Sir John Ferrers would have extracted from every minister, member and candidate must have choked Sheridan in its first clause.

"He's up against a tough proposition," Max decided, "if he runs his head against the Ferrers triumvirate; but, if he doesn't stand up to them, he might as well be in the street."

Ranged against the "new men" from industry and the professions were a few conservatives of an older school. Led without by the Duke of Killarney and made articulate by the high-tory *Morning Telegraph*, they cultivated a natural gift of silence within the cabinet. For Sheridan they had less cause to feel affection than had Ferrers and Carmichael, though natural malice might dispose them to play the one off against the others.

"Tory country-gentlemen on one side," Max enumerated; "'progressive' middle-class bankers and lawyers on the other. Standish holding the balance. And Sheridan . . ."

It was impossible to guess what strategy Sheridan would adopt. The triumvirate was not to be conciliated ; and, if he approached the old Tories, they would probably think of Sheridan primarily as the man who had vituperated poor decent Peter Orpington out of office. And yet, if he could not collect friends, the only alternative was for him to annihilate his enemies. It was one against twenty, but Max would not have laid twenty to one or ten to one or five to one against Sheridan's chance of success.

“It's a winning stable. I'd like to see the finish. At least . . .”

IV

PACING the deck and listening to the lap of the waves against the ship's side, Max tried to determine whether he wanted to go on leave next year. He could fish in Canada or perhaps shoot a bear in the Rockies. And was England, glimpsed from this altitude and analysed from this remoteness, attractive to a man who had hardened his heart against returning ?

From all accounts, Max gathered, it was a precious uncomfortable place. Every normal expectation had been falsified. Take a man like Peter Orpington ! When he succeeded, there was a life-programme mapped out for such few men as filled a position like his. He would marry and beget a long family ; he would give adequate time to public duties, undertaking the work of a governor-general for some years, holding office for some years more in a government at home, maintaining his hereditary position in two counties, keeping alive a rare tradition of hospitality and devoting himself, like his father and grandfather, to becoming a benevolent despot in the

realm of sport. He would train one of his boys to succeed him ; and the others would enter one branch or another of the public service. His daughters would marry the sons of his peers. So, if he had ever thought about it, " Blue Peter " would have defined his purpose in life.

In that programme mighty few of the original items had been carried out ! Thanks to the foresight of their ancestors, the Selhursts would not for a generation or two be so nakedly impoverished as, say, the Otways ; and, if bankruptcy stared him in the face, Blue Peter would still have a house when other men were content with rooms in an hotel, he would still charter his special trains, still throw his doors open to all comers. This much he owed to family tradition ; he was living on his capital for the sake of dying beyond his means ; and young Selhurst, hardly in the nineteenth century and with no legacy from the eighteenth, would be left to clear up after the deluge. The Orpington sands, beyond question, were running out ; and sometimes Blue Peter must realize this. It was true that he had been lord-lieutenant of Ireland for a brief and troubled period, that he had received the Garter and held the seals of the Colonial Office, that he was a steward of the Jockey Club, the lord-lieutenant of his county, a power and a popular idol. This made only more poignant the certainty that he would be the last of his line to fill such a place ; and his private programme was more full of substitutions and cancellations than his public. Young Selhurst was not married because he was still looking for the heiress who would make good Blue Peter's depredations ; the other sons had been killed ; the daughters were stranded for want of suitable husbands.

" Most of their lot were knocked out," Max reckoned.

“The survivors, like me, have to earn our livin’s. And at present the Orpingtons would still prefer to see their girls unmarried than marryin’ beneath ’em. I expect I should find the same process runnin’ through the whole of that stratum. Uncomfortable . . .”

The earlier economic upheavals of English history had forced a new and usually more vital class to the top in place of the class that had outlived its social usefulness. No doubt, as the old aristocracy rusted away, the Inchcapes and Leverhulmes, the Finlays and Birkenheads, the Rothermeres and Beaverbrooks would form the spearhead of a new one. The industrial and professional middle-class, however, could not at this stage of history make a new governing class. Political power must henceforth be calculated by counting heads ; at intervals in the future it would be wielded by such men as Macdonald, Snowden and Thomas.

“Who are every bit as able and as honest and as patriotic as any three men on the liberal or conservative side,” Max had to concede. “And blessed with far more guts. They had to carry top-weight in every race they ran, a few pounds more than even Asquith, or F. E. or Max Aitken ; level weight with Sheridan, say. Since I’ve been out here, I’m all for the self-made man. Stands to reason ! And, if people like Selhurst and Colin Otway and me don’t do as well, we’ve chucked away all the benefits we were born with ; if we don’t do a dam’ sight better, we shall pile up the antiquated barges we happen to have inherited. The other fellers want to win a place in the sun ; and we want to keep ours. There ought to be room for both, but it’s goin’ to be a devilish uncomfortable adjustment, all the same. We’re fightin’ a losin’ battle. In a short time Peter Orpington and Hugh Lonsdale will be as obsolete as Protector Somerset ; and Selhurst or

Lowther will be as much an interestin' relic as Kenilworth. We must hang on as long as we decently can, for old sake's sake. It don't do to be too logical, or you lose all stability. It's absolute bolshevism, but in some ways I feel we've been hangin' on too long. Yet I hate to see democracy advancin'. Democracy doesn't understand the art of livin'. We shan't have a class-war, but there'll be class-tuggin', class-pullin' for the rest of my life. And all of us gettin' poorer all the time. No, I don't look forward to it."

A couple of nitrate men, promenading the deck for a last breath of air before going to bed, waved him good-night.

"There ain't much to look forward to," Max continued pessimistically, with a stare of disfavour at their departing backs. "We're losing ground in the international race. Those fellows . . . They've been born and bred to this life, but they don't speak the language as well as I do, they're always thinkin' of leave and gousin' about their pay. The poor bloody English seem to have given up work; and we're going to be beaten by the Hun, by the Yank and by the Belgian if we don't work longer hours for worse wages. Damn it! In the war there was no forty-eight hours' week; and, as for the precious standard of living, the people at home lived on their rations. Unless we get back to that, we shall be left."

A foot-sore deck-steward shuffled up and began to fold and stack the chairs for the brief remainder of the night. Max sighed, yawned and sighed again. He must go to bed some time. One really did no good by thinking about these things. And, when all was said and done, he had cut his connection with England and would only go thither as a transient visitor.

"The mornin' after the night before!," he grunted.

Already he was regretting the self-indulgence of thinking about England. The folly of staring at Auriol's portrait now stood confessed, like the folly of having yet one more drink when a fellow had already taken enough. It was partly Laura's fault; and, in part, he had still to think how and where he would spend his leave when it came. Laura seemed to think he could meet Auriol again if he promised himself not to upset her; she did not ask whether he would upset himself, whether he could meet her in any circumstances. Perhaps her position protected her. . .

Lady Sheridan in her Drawing-Room in Cleveland Row . . .

“Instead of fussin' about whether she's in love with Sheridan,” Max decided, “I should do better to remember that she's married him. I don't see Auriol goin' off the rails with any man; and, if she'd shewn any tendency that way, I should have been the last to encourage her. If I didn't always think of her as purity personified, I shouldn't want to marry her myself, I certainly shouldn't care whether she married an old rip like Sheridan. And, if I did anything to jolt her off her rocker, I don't see how I could face up to old Colin or the other girls or Otway or my lady. We *did* share the same perishin' nursery, when *all's* said and done. Not that Auriol's that kind, though you can never say what a girl may become when she marries a man without bein' in love with him. Still, if her pride in herself won't pull her up, her position will. Lady Sheridan . . .”

Half-undressed, Max sat on the edge of his berth and tried to see the Sheridans with the eyes of the general public. It was easier for a man to be a hero to his valet than for a cabinet minister's position to seem heroic to a secretary.

"I've known too many of the blighters at close quarters," Max grunted.

Sheridan was, of course, one of the dozen most important and influential men in England; he was one of the half-dozen most successful; and, of those half-dozen now breasting the tape, he was the one that had started farthest behind scratch. A millionaire, a peer, a secretary of state. . . .

"Nobody can say our blinkin' private soldiers don't carry marshals' batons in their knapsacks. Rufus Reading: I've an idea he started life before the mast. Jim Thomas: I believe he was a carriage-cleaner. And now Sheridan. There's not much left for Reading to get. I suppose J. H. will be the next labour prime minister. And Sheridan? I wonder if these Johnnies ever have time to look back. I suppose they take it in their stride. If you'd told Dizzy, as a boy, that he might end up as a duke, that would have seemed a pretty big achievement; but, after he'd had the power of making dukes for so long, he wouldn't take a dukedom when it was offered him. Vanity, vanity, saith the preacher. They must find everything pretty fair vanity. Damned cynics! And damned toughs! There's not much sentiment or mercy left, if Sheridan's a fair specimen."

Though he had been forced to admiration by his master's unflinching determination, Max had found time and detachment in the last two years to look back with repugnance on a way of life that was always overbearing and often unscrupulous. In business, Sheridan's rivals were given the choice of amalgamation on his terms or of instant extermination; in politics it was seldom possible to offer the choice of amalgamation. In helping with the private correspondence, Max had found that Sheridan's idea of truth—to use no harsher terms—paid

more attention to the letter than to the spirit. He would welcome to his table a man like Lord Orpington when his leader-writers were emptying their reservoirs of calumny behind his back ; and, at a protest, he would pretend that he did not interfere with the management of his papers.

“ I wonder how long it will take Auriol to find him out,” Max mused ; “ and I wonder what she’ll think of him when she does.”

It was a queer trait in human nature that people would defend, in those they loved, behaviour which they would never condone in themselves. If Laura Sheridan had allowed herself to be divorced in order that Ambrose might marry, say, Lady Winifred Selhurst, Auriol would have been the first to condemn the man as a cur, the older woman as a fool and the younger as a knave. Again, if her beloved Colin had been put into a blind-alley job so that he could never marry Winifred, Auriol would not have hesitated to brand such treachery as Machiavellian. Now, because she was infatuated, she could find excuses for whatever Ambrose did. Necessity knew no law ; and it was necessary for Ambrose to marry her if his work was to go on, necessary for him to end his first marriage without staining his own hands.

“ As for me, she’d never admit that she or he let me down. It was my own fault if I didn’t *make* opportunities for myself, my own fault if I didn’t believe her when she said she could never marry me.”

V

BEFORE he could lash himself to hotter indignation, Max jumped into bed and tried to read a book.

It was fruitless to fight these dreary battles over

again ; and, if he could not even think of England without forgetting his work, losing his fortitude and fretting about Auriol, he had better give England a wide berth. There were still bears to be shot and giant salmon to be caught. For the rest, as he was little more than one third of his way through the average span of life, he must keep his eyes fixed on the work of the day and not look ahead. Any one that looked ahead for fifty years in a nitrate-port would go out of his mind.

“ I wonder if *she* ever looks ahead.” He had promised himself not to think of her, but it was better to dispose of the subject once and for all time. “ I wonder if she realizes that, when she’s still in her prime, he’ll be a very old man. If he goes on eatin’ and drinkin’ and workin’ at his old rate, he’ll have a stroke before he’s fifty. . . . I wonder if she realizes in her heart that she’s by no means the first-comer and that in all human probability she won’t be the last. I wonder what she’d think if she knew the whole story of Evelyn Rushforth and her boy. Not very easy to make excuses there ! You can say that, while Sheridan was unhappily married, it was only natural for him to console himself as best he could, but it’s a bit thick when you marry your mistress off to your secretary just in time to save a scandal. ‘Wonder if Tony guesses ! ‘Wonder if he was paid to do it ? I think poorly of Tony Rushforth, but he’d hardly be skunk enough for that. And yet he’s skunk enough to take Sheridan’s money and to work for him after his own sister’s been pushed into the street. ‘Wonder what that half-wit Evelyn thinks of it all. I should think she’s too frightened of Sheridan to think at all. But *Auriol* . . .”

Auriol, clearly, could not know ; but, if she found out, it would be enough to end this marriage.

“ I believe Uncle Ambrose is sufferin’ from some sort

“LADY SHERIDAN IN HER DRAWING-ROOM” 59

of megalomania. The risks he takes! The enemies he makes! He thinks he's too big for any one to bring him down. God knows, *I* don't want to upset the apple-cart, but *I could*. Five minutes at White's, sayin' what I really thought of him . . . I shouldn't be surprised if Laura has that in mind whenever she tells me to help her in makin' a success of the marriage. And I will! I will! In the only way I can! And that's by keepin' at the other side of the world till I'm too old to care.”

CHAPTER II

The Shadow of a Self-Made Man

' At last one pays the penalty—
The woman—women always do.
My farce, I found, was tragedy
At last. One pays the penalty
With interest when one, fancy-free,
Learns love, learns shame. . . . Of sinners two
At last *one* pays the penalty—
The woman—women always do! "

THOMAS HARDY: *Poems of the Past and Present.*

I

THE *Ottomando* left Iquique in the evening and drew in to Arica at daybreak.

As she dressed, Laura saw through her port-hole an unbroken chain of rusty mountains. The northernmost port of Chili she found distinguished by a commanding rock which reminded her of a reduced, red-painted Gibraltar. On the rock she descried a fortress; from the rock, Max informed her, the last Peruvian army had been driven headlong into the sea.

"^{And} this," he added, "is where I live. Cheerful?"

Laura tried to conceal her sympathetic dismay. The little town could hardly have looked more dilapidated if it had emerged the day before from heavy bombardment; the steep streets, narrow and dirty, were lifeless and unsavoury. Of shops or offices she saw hardly a sign; and, though a few trees and shrubs presented rare, welcome

oases of green, she found herself in danger of saying that even these looked better from the sea.

"I think it's amazing that you've stood it for two years," she told him at last.

"There's every temptation to work," said Max. "It's that or drink. Perhaps you understand now why I wrote to Auriol that first time."

Laura pressed his hand silently. Since their last exchange of confidences, both had been shamefaced, as though they had confessed more than they had intended; now, though she did not yet understand why Auriol had felt constrained to write, Laura divined that they could talk again without embarrassment. In every conversation Max was shewing that he wanted a more intimate portrait than Christie's diploma picture of *Lady Sheridan in her Drawing-Room in Cleveland Row*; and in the long, airless evenings on the verandah of his ungraced, spartan house she now tried to supply it, starting sometimes from a reference to her own divorce, sometimes from a dispassionate criticism of her late husband's administration.

"You probably won't believe me," she admitted one night, "but I don't know even the name of the man who was cited as co-respondent! I was abroad. I refused to read the papers. And I carefully left no address for fear people would try to find out too much. There was bound to be a good deal of talk on account of the position Ambrose filled; but I'd been so little in the public eye that I think a good many people were quite surprised to find he had a wife to divorce. I didn't begin to read the papers again until he announced his engagement."

"And the stewards never *thought* of callin' on him or Auriol to explain the runnin'? My Lord! Don't let's talk about this part of it, Laura, or I shall say something that'll hurt you. How does your man get on with the

official crowd? I remember Blue Peter once told me that the departments didn't care who was their chief so long as he stood by them: the man who'd been a wild revolutionary the week before was eatin' out of the hand of the permanent undersecretary a week later."

"That's true as a general rule. People make a mistake, though, if they think Ambrose will become officialized."

II

MAX found his mind halting between two courses: he would have dearly liked to hear that the fellow was overreaching himself, but he was compelled to admire the unswerving aim and unfailing force which enabled Ambrose Sheridan to cleave his way through every opposition. Small wonder if he had withdrawn of late from the public eye! He was, as Max had suspected that last night on board, consolidating his position inside the cabinet before venturing on a distant campaign. The caricaturists were adding a chapter to their Napoleonic analogy by depicting Sheridan crushing the resistance of Austria and Prussia before setting out for Moscow and the lordship of Europe. To Mr. Standish was accorded the honour of representing Russia and the new Napoleon's ultimate objective; Austria was personated by Mr. Carmichael, Prussia by Mr. Rodney; and in the background, undefeated and invincible, waiting to win by attrition, lurked Sir John Ferrers in the guise of Spain. To newspaper-readers, Lord Sheridan stood in the same relationship to Mr. Standish as Mr. Chamberlain had once stood in relation to Lord Salisbury, or Mr. Lloyd-George to Mr. Asquith.

"I should think the permanent officials are more

likely to become Sheridanized," said Laura. "And not only the permanent officials. From hints I hear dropped . . ."

For more than a year, to judge by her account, the new secretary of state had been antagonizing the entire colonial service by making the work at home and abroad interchangeable. Officials who had covenanted for a comfortable life in Downing Street found themselves uprooted from their hearths and families to visit the colonies which they had hitherto administered from an ignorant distance; officials who had counted on an untrammelled existence in a remote colony were recalled to Downing Street and set to study the problems for which they had abused an unintelligent bureaucracy from abroad. The press and the public faintly applauded a policy by which the corresponding units of the service became acquainted with both sides of their common difficulties; but the new colonial secretary had to quell a general mutiny and to prepare for a general strike before he had purged and disciplined his forces.

This done, Sheridan had set himself to drill the dominions. In his despatches and official speeches, in articles and occasional addresses he worked unwearyingly for his ideal of a standing imperial council. The time for administering an empire by triennial conferences and intermittent telegrams was long past; if the colonies and dominions wished to make their voice heard, they must appoint plenipotentiaries whom they could trust. Before they raised again the familiar objection that their representatives become cowed by the majesty of Downing Street, they should remember the relative importance of the mother-country and of the dominions. Unflatteringly, almost brutally, Sheridan set out the population and wealth of every dominion and colony; side by

side he set the wealth and population of the principal English cities, leaving his audience at home and abroad to draw its own conclusions. A public that had been hypnotized by the vast area of the British empire awoke to the discovery that Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds and Glasgow numbered more men and turned over more money than the best advertised dominions. Sheridan was attacked in five continents for belittling the empire ; of all men, he was surprisingly dubbed a " little Englander ", not least by the people whom he had aroused to a sense of their own greatness. He went his way uncaring. The dream of an imperial council could never be realized until the empire was seen in perspective ; the dominions had been made vain and touchy by ignorant pandering to ignorant self-satisfaction, but, when they recovered from their first shock, they would not resent plain-speaking from a man who spoke with plain knowledge.

" No one else would dare talk to them like that," said Laura.

A self-made man, from an eminence in an old-established country, was warning self-made men in younger countries that to be self-made was not the be-all and end-all of life. The speaker was execrated ; his resignation demanded. The imperial idea, it was said, had been put back a generation by Sheridan's rasping frankness. He challenged his critics to dispute his facts or the inevitable inferences from them ; they took refuge in an attack on his manners and taste, which Sheridan left unanswered.

" And he'll win," Laura predicted. " He's saying what a great many people would have said if they'd had the pluck. Ambrose never had a single illusion about himself ; and he can never understand how other people can have illusions about *themselves*. That makes him

terribly cruel sometimes. . . . We may be thankful that poor little Auriol has nothing to hide except her youth."

As always, at the mention of her name, both fell automatically silent. Max could not yet determine whether it was a keener anguish to think of her as dead or to think of her as the living, radiant, sparkling wife of another man. He had tried both and was beginning to fancy that, if he had attended her wedding, if he could see her now in the Peeresses' Gallery or at the head of her table in Cleveland Row, he would be more resigned.

"Any signs of a family?," he asked at a seeming tangent.

In some way that he could not define, Auriol as the mother of Sheridan's children would lay the ghost of the Auriol who still haunted him.

"Not yet," Laura answered. "I wish there were. That would be the first natural bond between them; and I should feel happier for both their sakes."

"I can't see her, somehow . . ." Max began. Then he decided that it would be less painful in the end if he accustomed his eyes to the picture of Auriol as another man's wife. "I can't see her at all. She's so young still. I can't think of her runnin' a big house, entertainin' people. . . . While I saw that picture you were speakin' of—Christie's—, I said: 'Lady Sheridan? Oh, yes, of course: Auriol.' . . . You say Lord Otway is reconciled?"

"He and Lady Otway accepted the inevitable for fear of losing her. They can't help being pleased to see her having such a success. And I'm sure Ambrose will play up to his illustrious father-in-law," she added caustically.

"But, good Lord, he's not a snob, is he?," asked Max.

"He knows the value of background."

"But he could buy up half our 'titled and landed gentry' without noticin' it."

"A title is one of the few things that a self-made man would always rather inherit than buy. If you can't inherit it, then it's still something to marry it. Through Auriol he's now connected with half the old families of England. I daresay he despises them still, but he's glad to belong to them. Everything else he had already; and, when I heard about Auriol and who she was, I knew it was hopeless. The man who first talked about the 'Napoleon touch' struck deep! Ambrose has been accepted, which he never was before."

"It seems a small thing to covet when you've done so much."

"A self-made man is never content to be better than his neighbours, he has to be as good," Laura laughed, as she went indoors to dress for dinner.

III

THE *Ottomando* had taken on the transcontinental mails at Valparaiso; and, when Max came out of his bath, he found his hall-table loaded with three weeks' English letters and papers.

Glancing lazily at the envelopes, he found himself staring at Auriol's handwriting and discovered that his heart was thumping. Laura, he observed with conscious and almost guilty satisfaction, was still in her room; and he hurried on tiptoe to the lamp in the dining-room for a new solution of the enigmatic *Lady Sheridan in her Drawing-Room*: a Lady Sheridan who said nothing that was worth putting on paper and yet could not restrain herself from writing.

"Max dear!", she began with the frank friendliness that he had known in the days when they called themselves engaged. "Listen, my child!" He gritted his teeth and read on. "Mr. Caldwell (you know who I mean? Your Mr. Caldwell) was dining last night; and, after talking about you for the entire evening, I felt I must write and congratulate you. I suppose you know that the directors are delighted with all you've done? And I'm delighted too, Max, because I've always been fond of you and I've always believed you could do great things if you only made up your mind to it.

"Max dear, ever since you began to write, I've been wishing I were with you! It must have been such fun to go out all by yourself to a great strange country and to win through, as you have done, by sheer hard work and force of character. I've been trying to picture your house and office and the store and club. Big, shady rooms, I suppose, with white walls and green jalousies and long verandahs where you sit in a rocking-chair, cooling off at the end of your day's work and drinking things through straws. I see you riding in, rather dusty, in breeches and shirt and sun-helmet, very hard and sun-burnt (you were getting dreadfully puffy before you left England, Max!). Then you clap your hands or ring a bell; and some one brings you a drink in a long tumbler. And then I suppose you change and play tennis till dinner. And afterwards I see you lighting a pipe and going through your returns or writing madly before the mail closes.

"I've tried to picture you running your house; but I somehow can't see you in a domestic light, so I always have to come out and help you. When you ride in then, I always meet you on the verandah, where I've been mending your clothes. We talk about your day's work till dinner, which is always the most marvellous dinner in the world, pre-

pared with my own hands because we can't get servants, or, better still, because we can't afford them and we're both of us working all-out to make good. When you're ill, I dose you with quinine; and you tell people afterwards, with a lump in your throat: 'If it hadn't been for her, God bless her, I shouldn't be here to-day.' Just like the films. You'd probably call me 'a brave little lassie'; and then every one would get a lump in the throat and I should hand round lozenges.

"What nonsense I'm writing! You must blame your funny old friend Mr. Caldwell for making the life out there so vivid; and I must blame my indulgent husband for making life here so terribly soft. It's a mistake to marry a man who's arrived: you want to marry him in the making, when you can feel that some of the credit is due to you. I don't cook the dinner, I'm not allowed even to order it: Hallam enters majestically with the menu and, if I'm very brave, I gasp that I'd like lobster instead of sole and, if Hallam's very patient, he explains paternally that I mustn't eat shell-fish when I'm drinking red wine. No more of the Manchester Square cocktail-parties, which is just as well, perhaps, as I should certainly have poisoned some one sooner or later. No more work of any kind, as I understand it, though Ambrose pretends I'm working when I simply put on a new dress and sit at the head of his table. If only I could have got him where he is instead of taking his position ready-made! Still, I may help him to a greater position.

"You mustn't imagine that I find time hanging on my hands! I'm so busy that I see nothing of the old friends. I've given up dancing; and I've not attended a race-meeting since I married. This is really the first moment I've had for standing aside from myself and taking stock. Life's wonderfully interesting! I'm in the centre of things, meet-

ing all the big men, occasionally smoothing over little difficulties between them and convincing people that it's no good their trying not to be friends. My greatest success has been with the prime minister. Every one said he only offered Ambrose the C.O. because he couldn't help himself; and you know Ambrose well enough to be sure that he never propitiates people who don't propitiate him. I had to make them like each other; and now there's nothing Mr. Standish won't do for us. You've seen about the fight Ambrose had over the colonial service? He wants now to make the Foreign Office interchangeable with the diplomatic; and I believe he'll succeed. It was tried some years ago; and it broke down because the F.O. people didn't want to go abroad and the diplomatic people didn't want to work at home. I'm afraid Ambrose never minds when people say they don't 'want' to do things; and he's urging Mr. Standish to insist on this change. Then he wants to tackle the army and navy, so that executive officers will get their training in staff-work and the higher command will keep in touch with men and ships. It's hardly the province of the colonial secretary; and Ambrose, of course, has earned the undying hatred of all the services and all their heads in the cabinet. He says, though—quite rightly—that, while cabinet responsibility exists, he won't willingly make himself responsible for systems which he believes to be inefficient. The others say there's no end to this and he's trying to run all the departments; and then dear old Mr. Standish tells me to make peace. It would be easier for all if they would recognize Ambrose's energy! One office could never be enough for him, especially if he thought the neighbouring offices incompetent; and you can hardly think of a departmental reform that doesn't extend outside the department concerned. He condemns absolutely the present system of recruiting for the C.O.; but you can't change this without changing the

whole civil service examinations. 'Nothing I'd like better,' says Ambrose; 'and at the same time I'd like to overhaul the training for the army and navy and the education in our public schools and universities.' Mr. Standish pacified him by setting up a cabinet committee to investigate the question; but he's mistaken if he thinks it can be shelved. Ambrose will return to it the moment he can spare time. At present he's working on his scheme for an imperial senate. It's only in the form of an essay at present; and I don't know if we shall ever see such a change. It's wonderful, though, to be alive in such times; and it's doubly wonderful to be married to such a man and to see such work going on under one's eyes. He's the first man, of the business-calibre of Rockefeller or Carnegie, who's set himself to organize a government on business-lines. And, except for Mussolini, he's the first man since Napoleon with the driving-power to force reforms through against the dead-weight opposition of people who can't bear to be stirred up. There are big changes coming!

"I don't know that I've said anything indiscreet, but you'd better keep all this to yourself. The public knows nothing yet of the fights that are going on every day; there's not been time for the results to be seen; but, when you come back, I don't know whether you'll recognize the England you left two years ago. That's what makes the others so furious! They were counting on a long sleep and now they say you couldn't have a bigger revolution if a labour government were in power. Ambrose lets it be known that, if he can't get his way with Mr. Standish and the conservatives, there will be another labour government and he'll be in it. Imagine me now, Max, binding up the wounds of angry giants! I do it rather well, by flirting with them all impartially. And they all pat me on the head; and I catch Ambrose's eye; and we smile. He's working as he never worked before;

and, if you find me rather above myself, it's because I honestly believe that I do help him a bit.

"When are you coming home, by the way? I could send you sheets of enquiries from my parents and the Orpingtons and all your old friends, though I hardly ever see them nowadays. That's why I'm looking forward so much to your first leave, Max: I'm feeling so staid and old that I want you to rejuvenate me. We'll dance again at Bellamy's and I'll have a complete holiday from choleric old politicians. Mr. Caldwell said something about next year, but I really don't think I can wait till then. Write to me, anyway. You've probably forgotten (and you didn't believe me at the time); but I once told you that I expected to have rather a bad year waiting for the divorce and that your friendship would help me through. Well, we're in harbour now and I'm very, very happy; but your friendship means as much as it ever did, because I'm just as fond of you, dear old Max, as I ever was."

IV

CRUSHING the letter into his pocket, Max walked with an affectation of brisk unconcern on to the verandah.

Laura, he thanked Heaven, was not there to see his narrowed eyes and pursed lips. He dropped into a rocking chair and pretended to look at his other letters. There was one from his father, one from Mr. Caldwell; it was mail-day, with three weeks' glorious accumulation of papers! *Punch*, the *Field*, the weekly *Times* . . . He ripped the wrappers with a crooked forefinger and leant back to stare into the night. Mail-day. As in the films . . .

"Good! Oh, damned good!," he whispered bitterly. Somewhere, behind the green jalousies that divided

the open galleries from the bedrooms within, Laura was slowly bedecking herself in a dim, white-walled apartment. As soon as she appeared, he would order cocktails, by clapping his hands or ringing a bell! In honour of a guest from England, the manager of the Merchants' Bank of Chili had arranged a whiskey-poker party for the evening; otherwise they would have dined by themselves; and, if Laura had not been there, Max would have written a report on his visit to Santiago. Word for word, his life and surroundings were as Auriol, from divination or close attention to Mr. Caldwell, had described in her letter. When Laura left, the description would become mercilessly accurate, though neither Auriol nor any one else who had not been there could imagine the loneliness and monotony of leaving a secretly hostile office every afternoon to play lawn-tennis, perhaps, with the Bank of Chili people and to dine, conceivably, with the manager of Beston's or McIntyre's and to meet for whiskey-poker—quite certainly—with the three of them and their wives. By upbringing and in personal tastes, they had nothing in common; but the alternative was solitude, perhaps alleviated by a bottle of whiskey and followed immediately by an enlarged liver and ultimately by collapse of soul and body.

His other letters were robbed of interest by Auriol's; and he read it a second and third time in the half-light, as though he had reopened an old wound and were exploring its depth. He had forgotten how much she had hurt him and could hurt him again until she light-heartedly pictured herself as his wife. That the hurt was unintended did not make it hurt less, though he marvelled that any one could be unintentionally so clumsy.

“ ‘ You're here and I'm here, so what do we care ? , ’ ” he

hummed. "You're all right ; and he's all right ; so of course I must be all right." . . .

He broke off to wonder whether Auriol really was happy. The letter was a child's : in its careless cruelty, in its ingenuous self-importance, in its artless cordiality. She was enjoying her successes ; and she was glamoured by her position ; but he found no evidence that she was happy. She was too busy admiring Sheridan as a superman to think of him as a man ; and a hint of loneliness broke through her tale of triumph. She realized that her marriage had cut her off from all the friends of her own age.

"All the same, I don't see myself goin' back," he decided. "She could have had me if she'd wanted me."

He pocketed the letter again and began again to hack open his papers as Laura came out of her room. For a day or two it had seemed possible for him to copy her self-suppression ; but the ripple of Auriol's laughter dispelled the vain fancy. So long as he could feel resentment against her, he must be somewhat in love with her ; and, so long as he was in love with her, it was not safe for him to meet her. She was now, though he forgot it more often than he remembered it, another man's wife ; and, in general terms, it was a fool's game to be in love with another man's wife. It was a fool's game to think of her, though she had been diabolically successful in projecting her personality across so many thousand miles till she seemed to be walking with him from one room to another. "*I can't see you in a domestic light.*" She would turn up her nose at his few tattered books ; and she would cry aloud at his ideas of colour ; but, if she had come out with him, she could have arranged the house as she liked.

As they waited for the cocktails, Max looked through the slats of the green jalousies on the dim, irregular street.

The few offices and shops of Arica had all been closed for the night ; rare white-coated figures were hurrying home to dinner ; and the girls of the town were assembling for the endless, aimless promenade of Latin America, arm-in-arm through empty, dilapidated streets. This was their hour ; and Max envied them the faculty of winning so much enjoyment by means so simple and unchanging. Every evening they appeared in their short and flimsy frocks of blue or green or pink silk, the more affluent in white stockings and narrow high-heeled shoes ; their heads and arms were bare for the most part, though some wore vivid ribands and most carried a tiny scented handkerchief tucked inside a gold bangle above the elbow. Their colouring and features were Spanish ; but their slenderness of body and ease of movement derived from a far-away Indian mother ; and their speech was the clipped sing-song that betrays the mulatto and Eurasian stock throughout the world.

Max watched them with an interest which he felt to be illegitimate ; they had fascinated him since he first came out ; when the loneliness became unbearable, he debated anew whether he should bring one of them in to keep house for him. Among the bachelors of such a town it would pass unnoticed ; no one would be injured and no one would think the worse of him.

Max had never defined what held him back. Perhaps it was a mixture of chivalry and arrogance. When the time came for him to go back, he did not relish the prospect of leaving one of these pretty, voluptuous creatures to fend for herself ; and, before that day, he did not choose to put himself on a level with the coarse-grained managers and overseers, up and down the coast, who thought of women as cattle and watched with lewd inquisitiveness to see where the new Patterson and Mackenzie man would

bestow his patronage. At his first carnival, when the pampas emptied a ravening horde on each little town and every one was drunk for a week, Max asked himself what he gained by his pose of superiority. When he returned at night, however, to an empty house, still more when he tipped the prostrate bodies of his men into the icy water of the harbour, he reflected with sullen complacency that his superiority was more than a pose. If he liked monotony and loneliness no better than the men under him, at least he could support life without getting drunk; if one had to duck and another to be ducked, he would sooner be the man with the boat-hook, hitching drenched but now comparatively sober clerks on to the quay; and, when he invited Laura Sheridan to stay with him, he was glad that there was no chattering indiscretion to smuggle away, no brooch-pins to avoid, no tears or threats to drown.

V

NEVERTHELESS, this evening promenade fascinated him.

"How really beautiful the young girls seem out here!," Laura exclaimed.

"I suppose they are," he answered indifferently. "I can't say I have much time to think of them. If you want to make a success of your job . . ."

"Well, you're doing that. I've had a letter from Mr. Caldwell . . . That's why I'm so late."

"Gad, that reminds me I haven't finished readin' my mail yet," Max interrupted. "I saw a letter in Caldwell's writin'."

"He's in New York. He said something about coming down here or getting you to go up and see him. I hope this doesn't mean that he wants to postpone your leave."

“ I shouldn’t mind if he did. Life out here’s pretty stinkin’, but it’ll be worse in England. Give me your candid opinion of this drink while I read what uncle Caldwell has to say. . . . I bin thinkin’ over our talks the last few days, Laura : I can’t rise to your family-party ideas ; when I go home, I’d better give Auriol a wide berth.”

The announcement was received without surprise. Laura did not need to remind herself that she was twenty years older than the haggard boy who was knitting his brows over a letter held upside-down.

“ If you feel like that,” she counselled, “ you’d better avoid her altogether. She won’t make it easy, but you must insist.” . . .

CHAPTER III

An Exercise in Common Sense

'The old year's dead hands are full of their dead flowers,
The old days are full of dead old loves of ours,
Born as a rose and briefer born than she ;
Couldst thou not watch with me ? "

ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE : *A Wasted Vigil.*

I

AT the end of the month Laura continued her leisurely progress up the coast and through the Canal. Max accompanied her to Colon and transhipped for New York, where he found his chairman, Mr. Caldwell, red-faced and white-whiskered, irresponsible and flippant, dapper and whimsical, at the Plaza.

"As I believe you are new to this great country," said the old gentleman, "I took the liberty of booking you a room here (In the vernacular, I have 'gotten you your reservation'; and you are now 'located' here). Now tell me all about yourself. America, as I daresay you have seen, is dry. You will find that I have laid in a store which I hope will be adequate. That will spare you the nuisance of being pestered by every bell-boy in New York to buy liquor of which you know nothing. Tell me about yourself, my dear boy! I suppose you've had few opportunities of racing, though I remember, the last time I was out, there was a very decent little course at Viña del Mar. If you come home with

me now, you'll be in time for a good part of the flat-racing season, but we'll discuss that later. I want to hear all about you."

As at their first meeting more than two years earlier, when Max helped to extricate his future employer from a gang of card-sharpers in a race-train and was incontinently pressed to apply his coolness and resource to Patterson and Mackenzie's "peculiarly tough and detestable" branch at Arica, he found that, though he was cordially urged at short intervals to give the fullest possible account of himself, he was then precluded in the next breath from finishing one sentence before Mr. Caldwell had plunged headlong into a new stream of questions, comments and quotations. As before, however, he discovered that, though he seemed to be saying little, the old gentleman knew more of his history at the end of half an hour than Max could ever remember disclosing. His administration of the branch at Arica won a warmth of praise that set Max's cheeks flushing; and the reason for his summons to New York was revealed when Mr. Caldwell repeated his proposal that Max should accompany him back to England.

"They play poker on these ships," he explained. "And I shouldn't like to take a hand unless you were there to smooth over possible misunderstandings. What about your house and gear?"

"Are you sendin' me back to Arica?," Max enquired.

"Not if we can persuade you to take a better job."

"Then I can sell it as it stands to the manager of the Merchants' Bank of Chili. He took an option on it, when he heard I was comin' to see you."

"H'm. So he too thought you were too valuable to waste in Arica. By the way, a business man would have said nothing about the option: he'd have waited for

us to take the house off his hands at a fancy figure. I suppose you've left a lot of unpaid bills?"

"I settled everything before I came away, sir."

"H'm. A business man would have told me, man to man, that it was impossible to live on the salary we paid and that we might think ourselves lucky in not being robbed more than we are. I don't believe you'll ever be a business man, Hendry."

"You wait, sir, till I say I'll 'see you.' Now, you're not offerin' me a better job because you like the colour of my hair (I don't like it myself); you're offerin' it because you think I can help to earn you dividends. Perhaps I can, but I don't want to. I want to stay at Arica," Max declared with a grin. "I just love the perishin' place. Nothin' to do and no one to talk to after work; a club like the commercial-room of an English provincial hotel; and a climate . . . my stars, I never thought I should live to pray for rain."

Mr. Caldwell looked up at the petulant face of the loose-limbed, olive-skinned young man before him and chuckled with delight.

"*'The high, unaltered blue'*," he quoted. "You know your Kipling? Well, as one shower would be enough to ruin our nitrate-fields, I'm glad you didn't pray very hard."

"Oh, I prayed hard enough, sir, but I've no influence with the Almighty. If I had . . . Well, I warn you that you'll need dynamite to get me out of Arica unless you offer me something very much better. I'm talkin' a bit more like a business man now."

"A little bit. What happens if we fire you?"

"I go to Beston's and take your import and bankin' business with me. They've been castin' for twelve months."

"They also know a good man when they see one! And you refused to rise? Good for you, Hendry. Well, you've had a hard two years, but we wanted you to gain experience. I suggest that you come home now and see something of the work at headquarters. Then, if you care to have it, you can undertake the inspection of all our west-coast branches. How does that appeal to you?"

"I'll take it here and now."

Mr. Caldwell sighed whimsically:

"A business man would have asked about the salary; he'd have wanted to know how long the appointment would last; and what the next step would be. I'm afraid you'll never make a business man. Well, you're dining with me, but I must leave you now. I, *moi qui vous parle*, I am going to a cocktail-party; a friend has telephoned to say that he has received an unexpected consignment of alcohol ('booze', in the vernacular): '*As they gradually got on . . .*'—You know your *Grand Duke*?—

*'As they gradually got on,
They'd τρέπεσθαι προς τὸν πότον
Which is Attic for a steady and a conscientious drink.'*

I shall have a series of accidents with my glass. I doubt not that a cocktail, like still champagne, is an excellent thing for the carpet: it promotes a healthy action of the skin. . . . My poor friend, you have evidently not read your *Wrong Box*. I wonder whether I should more pity you for what you have missed or envy you what lies before you. Let us dine at eight."

II

OF the time left him before his friend's return, Max devoted half an hour to unpacking, half an hour to

thought and an hour to correspondence. One cable disposed of his house in Arica ; a second warned his father to expect him in a fortnight's time. At last, fully conscious that he had been postponing the hardest task to the end, he read through Auriol's letter and attempted to answer it :

" This will be a very short note, my dear. You'd be surprised if you didn't hear from me at all, but I shall be in England almost as soon as this. I can't say yet whether I shall see you or not, as I don't know how long I'm staying. I expect to be very busy at the head office for most of the time ; and the rest I shall spend with my poor old father. My job's been changed. That's why I've come up here. In future, so far as I can make out, I shan't have any fixed address, but shall drift up and down the coast. On this side of the Atlantic that sort of thing is called promotion.

" England seems the deuce of a long way off, though I am almost on my way there now. I've dropped out of politics so much that you mustn't expect me to comment on the political part of your letter. You seem to be making a great success of them and having a great time, so I'm glad.

" Ever yours,

" MAX."

On a second reading, the letter seemed cordial enough for the work of one who was notoriously unready in expression. Without ill-will on either side, their correspondence might now die without being revived when he took up his new post ; Auriol could not, after fair warning, be aggrieved if he failed to call ; and this time, whatever the temptation or the effort of resisting it, he would not be so weak as to write and beg for news of her.

"She's married now," he reminded himself. "The race is over. Objection over-ruled. Green flag hoisted over principal number-board. If I'd made up my mind to it earlier . . ."

As he bathed and dressed, Max composed himself to a state of sombre resolution. Life was very completely hopeless; but he could not make it less hopeless by drugging himself with false consolation. Once he had thought to make things more tolerable by getting drunk, but that was a fool's game. And once he had thought to forget Auriol by attaching to himself one of the moths who fluttered round his lighted gallery in Arica; but that was a cad's game. And all the time he had hoped that Auriol and Sheridan would be separated, by violence or the revenge of time, and that he would then be rewarded for his waiting; but that was the calculation of a fool and a cad in one.

"Well, I hope you've not been bored," said Mr. Caldwell on his return.

"I bin writin' letters, sir," Max answered; then, as though he had no power over his mind or lips: "I hear you were dinin' with a friend of mine before you came away: Lady Sheridan."

"I was, I was. Oh, of course, Sheridan told me you were his secretary once; I was wondering how you came to know them. A charming woman! We were talking about you. I'll tell you all about it at dinner. And about my cocktail-party. You know your *Breitmann Ballads*, I suppose? Oh, a pity. You're not a great reader, I take it?"

"I read a book once," Max defended himself. "I shall remember the name in a minute . . ."

"It will wait! I want to tell you about Lady Sheridan."

Throughout a long dinner Max made impatient discovery of a second characteristic in Mr. Caldwell's conversation : to balance his habit of talking without intermission when he had asked others to tell him about themselves; he questioned them unceasingly on the subjects which he had promised to explain. Max had to rehearse the family-history of the Otways before being told with maddening brevity that Lady Sheridan had asked how he was getting on ; and he was required to contribute many facts and not a few prejudices about Sheridan before he was allowed to learn, on the authority of an outsider, that the marriage, despite differences of age and upbringing, seemed a success.

" I suppose she married him for his money," Mr. Caldwell added. " You say the Otways are not too well-off ? "

" She was honestly in love with him," Max answered loyally.

" She seemed too young to know anything about it. Still, he's a handsome brute."

" Who else was there, sir ? "

" A fellow called Livingstone. Isn't he their solicitor ? A pompous ass with a pretty wife : would he be called Rushforth ? A relation by the first marriage, I suppose. . . . I've forgotten. I don't know their set ; I was really there by accident. I met little Lady Sheridan somewhere ; and, when she heard me speak of Patterson and Mackenzie, she at once asked me to dine and tell her how you were getting on. I don't know them ' at home,' as we used to say at school, though I've had business-dealings with Sheridan. Who hasn't ? To be plain, I never cared for the man : I never thought he gave his first wife a chance. And my fate hasn't lain very much among politicians. I'd like to see more of

your little friend. She struck me as having read all the right books ; and she always recognized my quotations, which I find gratifying in an illiterate age. Remember me very kindly to her when you see her."

"I don't suppose I shall, sir. You'll probably keep me on the run while I'm in London ; and I want to get in a bit of racin' if I can."

Seventeen days later Max landed at Southampton. As they caught their first glimpse of the English coast, Mr. Caldwell enquired how his companion felt.

"It's like goin' to school for the first time," Max answered. "Or joinin' a regiment."

"You don't mean to say you feel shy? I'll give a dinner for you as soon as you're settled in London! You'll be going to your father at Newmarket first, I suppose? I don't want to hurry you, but if I had an idea of what you wanted to do . . ."

"I want to get away, sir," Max answered with sudden vehemence. "Back to the coast or anywhere else you like to send me. You say I shall never make a businessman, but I've started a morbid passion for work. And, though I nearly broke my heart to get back here, I don't believe I shall like it. As soon as you're ready to send me out . . ."

"You must have a holiday first. And you mustn't let yourself be shy! Mark you, I know the feeling! The first time I was home—after five years, too . . ."

Max did not listen to the end of the anecdote. He was not shy, but he was sensitive ; and he knew that he lacked the social adroitness to protect himself against the insensitive friends who would ask him whether he had seen Auriol Sheridan yet. Whenever her name was mentioned in his hearing he became awkward, rigid of feature. If he confessed, after a week in London, that

he had not seen her, the insensitive friends would raise their eyebrows ; if he saw her . . .

“ I’m not going to see her,” Max whispered to himself, as he landed.

III

“ I’m not going to see her,” he declared a day later, when her telegram of welcome reached him at Conway House.

“ I’m not going to see her,” he repeated between his teeth when a summons from Patterson and Mackenzie brought him up to London from Newmarket. “ That’s all over. She’s married. The sooner I forget all about her . . . ”

When he fancied that the Sheridans were dismissed and forgotten, Max was thrown into consternation at having a meeting forced upon him. The first business that Mr. Caldwell propounded to him was that he should choose a night and help to select the guests for the dinner in his honour. Sir Mark must come, the old gentleman decreed, to witness his son’s triumphs ; and the Orpingtons, if they were in London ; a few more common friends ; any one Max wanted, whether known to his host or not ; and, as a happy afterthought, Lord Sheridan and his wife.

“ I don’t suppose he wants to meet me, sir,” Max objected. “ He wasn’t best pleased when I left him.”

“ We none of us are, when we lose a good man through our own stupidity. Well, he needn’t come unless he likes, but I shall ask them both.”

Max felt that it was useless to resist further. Some of the invitations had been sent out provisionally five hours after the *Gigantic* landed her passengers at Southampton ; and the dinner-party took place a week later

in Mr. Caldwell's lacquered dolls'-house in Bruton Street. For the first few minutes, while the other guests were arriving, Max cudgelled his brains for an excuse to run away: he was become unused to meeting people and had forgotten how to talk. Now, as two years before, every one spoke rapidly, loudly, huskily. The universal adverb then had been "terribly"; and everybody, everything—from a bore to a success—was "crashing". He listened to discover what words had taken their place. The intellectuals were then asking one another if they had read the last novel of a fellow called Huxley; they now asked one another if they had seen the last play of a fellow called Coward. Women were still flat-chested; and this new fashion of cropping the hair and plastering it to their heads made them more boyish than ever, though they seemed to be aiming at a nursery effect by wearing skirts to their knees and flesh-coloured stockings. The popular hero among the murderers in Max's last year at home had been Durrant, who smothered young girls with a travelling-cushion in railway-carriages. The divorce of the day, prior to the Sheridan affair, was Tony Hatterick's. It was Zermatt's Derby. And the waltz of the moment was *What'll I do?* Now . . .

They were talking of death-duties and of "the Jew Boy", who had won the Coronation Cup and the Great Midland Stakes with his second colours up, of "Fortuna" (presumably, a dancer) and the *Morning News* acrostic competition, of the raid on the Phœnician Club and of a play that had been banned, of the Ambleside divorce and Mornington's atrocious bust of the prime minister at the Essex Gallery. Max wondered dizzily whether he had ever, even for five minutes, been able to hold his own in such a company.

Then, as the well-remembered voices greeted him

with a casual "Hullo! Where have *you* been hiding yourself?," he began to wonder whether he had been away for two years or two weeks. The Selhurst girls, blonde and blameless, in their historic, interchangeable frocks of yellow, white and pink, met him in turn with equal friendliness and in turn asked him the same questions. Their father, in his unvarying blue dress-coat and skin-tight trousers, picked up a conversation which Max had abandoned as he hurried away from Westminster on the night of the dinner which Lord Orpington had given to Ambrose Sheridan and the royal commission on trade and communications. Lady Orpington, as usual, kicked over a table and trod on a cat. Sir Mark announced, as usual, to all concerned that he was selling his horses.

"Sheridan couldn't come," Mr. Caldwell told Max. "He's making a speech somewhere. Lady Sheridan will be here, though. I've put you next to her."

"Oh. . . . Who's on my other side?"

"Lady Aylwin Selhurst. You're backing the fire at the window end. Ah, here we are!"

Mr. Caldwell hurried away as Auriol came into the room; and Max hid himself behind Lady Orpington's convenient bulk. ("My dear!", he heard, "I lost four pounds in the first week. Marlowe, the name is. He makes it up in little tabloids which you take in water before meals. Marvellous! I can eat what I like now!") He had been a fool to come! Half these people must know that he and Auriol had been engaged, they were just standing on tip-toe to watch the meeting; the other half would guess something was up when he stammered or blushed or made a fool of himself generally. Auriol—trust her to keep her head!—was laughing and talking in the doorway as though their meeting must be the most natural thing in the world. "Divine of you to ask

me !," he overheard : " I was dying to see dear old Max again."

Dinner was announced ; and he hid himself more deeply in search of his partner.

" Cheero, Aylwin, I believe I'm takin' you in," he observed on finding her.

Auriol's clear voice cut again through the drone of conversation :

" He's here ? Oh, I haven't seen him ! "

Max turned his back on the voice and tried to concentrate his attention on Aylwin Selhurst, who was asking if he would still be in England for Goodwood.

" Well, you'd better come to us. We've missed you the last two years," she added.

Was it really two years ? All these people seemed to be finishing sentences which they had begun when he was last with them.

" You old fraud, Mark !," guffawed Lord Orpington. " You've been giving up racing ever since you began . . . and some time before."

" I'm sorry it was *your* cat," Lady Orpington was saying in half-hearted apology to her host, " but, if I have to tread on anything, I'd sooner it was a cat. Horrible creatures ! They're much more like human beings than animals. Graceful ? Oh, I agree. Beautiful. Charming. Also, cruel, selfish, cold-hearted, treacherous, self-seeking : just like us humans."

" Max, where *are* you ?," asked Auriol.

" Will the last man out leave the door open ? The room's rather stuffy," Mr. Caldwell cried over his shoulder.

It was not until they were both taking their seats that Max and Auriol met. Standing above the level of the table-lamps, their eyes were half in shadow ; and Max continued to stand till he was ready to face the

lights. If the others had changed little, Auriol had changed less; and, when she sat down, he saw that she was not more changed in appearance than in voice. As a married woman she was wearing more jewellery and a somewhat more sophisticated dress than before: but she looked as much the schoolboy-philosopher as ever. Her chestnut hair was still cut short and parted at one side. She seemed equally ready to preach a sermon or to climb a tree.

"Hullo! This *is* nice! I didn't know we were going to be together," she explained.

In a narrow, red-lacquered mirror Max caught sight of his own reflection and was comforted to find that he looked as self-possessed as any one else. He was thinner, as one or two of his friends observed, but not perceptibly older: spare, tall and dark, with clear whites to his eyes and a less easily mistakable moustache than he had taken abroad.

"Hullo, Auriol! How's life? You're lookin' very fit," Max answered, wondering if his hearty unconcern would seem excessive.

"Feelin' it too," she answered in swift mimicry "Burstin' all my buttons and scatterin' little g's all over the blinkin' floor. Sit down and try not to make me vulgärer than I am by nature. I got your letter, Max. I wish you were going to be here longer, but we must make the most of you. Ambrose told me to find out when you'd come and dine."

"That rather depends on Mr. Caldwell," Max answered guardedly.

"You're making excuses! Surely you can spare *one* night. I thought this was your leave."

"It is, but I'm not a free agent. When I took up this job, I could see with half an eye that the only way

to make a success of it was to put work first. I live for it now . . .”

Auriol looked at him in undisguised amusement, then glanced down the table at her host. As Max could testify, she was accustomed to having her requests granted as soon as they were made ; and, looking back over the long years of their friendship, he could not remember ever having made her ask twice. Perhaps that was why his prevarication was so unconvincing. Assuredly this was why she intended unmistakably to continue having her own way.

“ Where are you to be found ?,” she asked.

“ I don't know yet. I'm goin' back to stay with my father as soon as I can. If you write to Patterson and Mackenzie, they'll forward any letters.”

“ Oh, I can't wait for that ! I shall ask Mr. Caldwell what he's going to do with you.”

IV

As she turned away, Max plunged into conversation with Lady Aylwin. From time to time Auriol waited for a pause, but he gave her no chance of breaking in. His dinner, he found afterwards, had consisted of salted almonds and weak whiskey, consumed feverishly while he talked : anything more solid might have produced a silence ; and he dared not let Auriol speak again.

“ Max . . . Max, forgive me for interrupting you !” Auriol's voice, when at last she made it heard, was strained, as though she was hurt or at least surprised by his neglect. Though she smiled sunnily, he noticed an unwonted spot of colour on either cheek-bone. “ Max, I have to pick Ambrose up at the end of his meeting : I may have gone by the time you come upstairs. Mr.

Caldwell says he only wants you in the mornings this week . . .”

The cigars were being handed round ; and unwittingly Max had given Auriol her chance by pausing to light a match. As he threw it away, Lady Aylwin was claimed by her other neighbour ; and Mr. Caldwell, at the end of the table, raised his voice to ask if any one objected to cigar-smoke.

“ Otherwise, I suggest we have coffee down here,” he added. “ That’s the worst of a bachelor establishment : I have no one to act as hostess and look after the ladies until we come up.”

Max observed that Auriol was resting one elbow on the table and running her fingers impatiently through her hair. The gesture was a well-remembered indication of perplexity.

“ Only in the *mornin’s*,” he repeated gravely. “ Now, there are a certain number of people I *must* see . . .”

“ If you don’t want to come, I won’t press you,” Auriol broke in. “ You’re not as busy as all that, though.”

Max looked cautiously round the table and lowered his voice :

“ I’m not pretendin’ I am. It’s not easy, though : you’ve had two years to get used to bein’ who you are and what you are ; I haven’t. ’Mean to say, this is the first time I’ve seen you since the crash.”

She hesitated a moment, uncertain whether to rebuke his choice of language ; then her voice softened :

“ But, Max dear, that’s all over. We agreed ages ago that we were going to be friends.”

“ If we could. But can we ? I’m blest if I can make you out, Auriol. I must have cared a lot more for you than ever you cared for me ; and I suppose it takes me

longer to cool down I sometimes wonder if you ever *did* care." . . .

"For you? I told you I did; I do still."

"For any one," he persisted. "I'm not blamin' you. You like bein' friends with people, you like bein' admired—for your brains, not for your looks—; when we were supposed to be engaged, I used to kiss you and you took it as part of the day's work. I don't believe you wanted it. I don't believe you were awake." . . .

Though his tone was free from reproach, Auriol seemed unable to meet his eyes.

"I wasn't very old in those days," she sighed.

The incongruity of her looks and words set Max laughing :

"You're not very old now! But, on my soul," he added in surprise, "I don't believe you're any more awake than you were two years ago. You're wearin' a ring, but I swear that's the only change I see. I'm *beginnin'* to understand! I used to feel pretty bitter at the time, but I *don't* believe you knew what you were doin'. You didn't know the meanin' of passion; and you don't know it now. One man, *as* a man, was like any other; and marriage itself was a thing you took in the day's work. In those days . . ."

"I think we've talked enough about me," Auriol broke in uneasily.

Max reassured himself with another glance round the table. The men had pushed their chairs back and were sitting with one leg thrown over the other; the women had turned sideways to face them; every one was engrossed in his own conversation.

"I've not said anything you didn't like?," he asked. "I was tryin' to explain—to myself as much as to you—an amazin' difference between us: why it's damnably

hard for me to meet you even now, while you take it in your stride. I feel I've been a cad these last two years. I bin blamin' you, Auriol, for something you're no more responsible for than the shape of your nose. And yet I had some excuse. . . . Why, my Lord!, the very last letter you ever wrote me . . . You remember sayin' you couldn't picture me runnin' a house or some-thin' ? You had to come out yourself, you said. Cookin' the dinner ; sittin' on the verandah, darnin' socks. That's a tactful thing, I said, for *her* to write to me. But I suppose it never occurred to you." . . .

" *Did* I say that ? "

" Don't you remember ? "

As she lighted her cigarette, Auriol was frowning ; the cloud lifted from her face as she turned and looked him in the eyes :

" I remember writing it, but I thought I tore it up afterwards. I didn't mean to be tactless. I expect I was getting tired of big, official dinners." Max remembered her phrase about standing aside for the first time and taking stock of her life. " It seemed so romantic !," she continued with mounting enthusiasm. " I expect I was thinking what fun it would be to rough it for once. Yes, I *do* remember ! Mr. Caldwell had been describing the sort of life you led and the sort of house you lived in. I suddenly saw the two of us there, all alone, working tremendously hard and doing terribly well. I thought how marvellous it would have been if I'd gone out with you at the beginning and helped you . . . A ridiculous letter ! You destroyed it, Max ? "

" No."

" But I told you to ! "

" You said some of the political part wasn't public property yet, so I'd better keep it to myself. That was all."

They were interrupted by the butler, who came to announce that Lady Sheridan's car had arrived. Auriol caught Mr. Caldwell's eye and stood up to shake hands with her neighbours. When she turned to Max, he saw that her cheeks were flaming.

"Well, you'll destroy it now, won't you?" she whispered. "I . . . I oughtn't to have said what I did. Promise me on your honour that you'll destroy it!" Max bowed without speaking; and she smiled with her old self-possession. "If you *do* find you have a free night, why not ring up and find out what we're doing? Now I must fly! Good luck, Max. . . And good-bye."

V

As soon as he could invent an excuse, Max took his leave and walked slowly to his club.

If Laura Sheridan had been present, she would have seen and explained everything; but, even if he had been sure that she was in London, he could not consult her. He could consult no one. Auriol's unconscious avowal was sacred; and no counsellor would tell him to do anything but go back to South America at the first possible moment and to avoid this unhappy girl in the meantime.

"She *is* unhappy," Max decided. "Not *all* the time. Perhaps not *very* unhappy at any part of it. But I'll bet Sheridan has disappointed her. Shocked her too, I daresay. I thought it was just hot air when she talked about seein' the two of us out there, but she was tryin' to escape, in her mind's eye. Meant to tear the letter up and then tried to double-cross me by leavin' it and sayin' 'What rot!' Had the shock of her life when she found I hadn't burnt the letter; wondered why I remem-

bered it so well. Gave up tryin' to double-cross me and begged abjectly to have the thing destroyed. Then froze up. No more tellin' me I *must* dine, or askin' Caldwell when I can be spared. 'If you *do* find you have a free night, why not ring up?' Poor old Auriol! I knew it couldn't be a success, but I swear I didn't expect it to crash so soon. She sees it's crashed, but she'll go through to the bitter end. No complaints, no hints, no beggin' for sympathy even from her own people. She wouldn't have let herself go in that letter if she hadn't thought me too big a fool to notice. Not that there was much to see. . . . Poor old Auriol! I'd like to tell her I understand. But she'd think I was sayin' 'Told you so.' And, if she broke down or anything, I couldn't trust myself with her . . . or with Sheridan."

Auriol unhappy! And he unable to help her? Max set his teeth.

"You're out of it, my lad, through no fault of your own; but it'll be only your own fault if you don't keep out of it," he counselled himself. "That's common sense."

CHAPTER IV

“ *Lady Sheridan in Her Bedroom . . .* ”

“ Nay, look not big, nor stamp, nor stare, nor fret ;
I will be master of what is mine own :
She is my goods, my chattels ; she is my house,
My household stuff, my field, my barn,
My horse, my ox, my ass, my any thing.”

SHAKESPEARE : *The Taming of the Shrew.*

I

EVER since her marriage, Auriol Sheridan had looked upon the hour after midnight as the happiest of the twenty-four.

When every moment of every day had been a delight, the most delightful was the one in which she sat staring into the fire or gazing through open windows at the stars, savouring in retrospect and without haste the joys to which she was never able to do full justice at the time. Life was very sweet when you were young, when people admired you, when your husband and you understood each other, when you adored each other ; in a word, when you had “ found ” yourselves !

Whether she and Ambrose had spent the day together or apart, this was their opportunity for comparing notes and making plans. When he worked late, Auriol would busy herself with her diary ; but she never thought of turning out the lights until he had come into her room for their last talk.

On the night after Mr. Caldwell's dinner, he presented himself before his usual time and without waiting to take off his coat. Auriol, lazily brushing her chestnut hair and shivering with delight at the cool caress of a night-gown that was but an ounce of blue-ribbon and cream *crêpe-de-chine*, was still looking at her unopened letters. As ever, at this time, she was wondering, when the moment arrived for her diary to be written, how she should describe this night's dinner. So catholic was her appetite for enjoyment that entry after entry put on record “*A delightful party, where met*” so-and-so; or “*an enchanting evening, with all the right people and everybody in good form.*” To say that Mr. Caldwell's guests were not, one and all, “the right people” was defamatory to him and to them. So far as she could judge, “everybody” had been “in good form”. The evening, none the less, could not be called “enchanting”; the party had not been “delightful”. Had her appetite for enjoyment been temporarily blunted? She and Ambrose had sat in almost unbroken silence the whole way home; and his manner, in following her upstairs so quickly, suggested that he might be uneasy. Truth to tell, he always seemed uneasy when she dined anywhere without him; and, when they dined out together, he was uneasy if she shewed more than a minimum of civility to her neighbours. He really needed not to be so greedy for her, but his eagerness was irresistible.

“Come in, my dear!”

Auriol sent her maid to bed and continued to brush her hair while he stretched himself on her sofa and ripped open his letters. Once or twice their eyes met in the looking-glass over her dressing-table; and she blew him a kiss. It was hard to say whether she liked him best when he was dressed for exercise, bare-throated and in flannels, or

when—as now—he was in full war-paint, with his medals and the rich ribbon of the Bath shining through the opening of his coat. What was the old epigram her father always quoted? “*Nobody could ever be as wise as Lord Haldane always looks.*” Nobody, he was wont to add, could be so perfect a superman as Ambrose Sheridan always looked. He was almost too tall, his voice was almost too authoritative, his jaw almost too square. And yet any one that had lived with Ambrose for a year would think twice before sneering at him. Heroic in build, he was also heroic in temper and in appetites, in his humour and his rages. A great organizer, a great administrator, a great fighter . . .

And a great lover. As he crossed the room to throw away his torn envelopes, he paused to touch Auriol's bare shoulders with his lips; and, when she laid aside her brushes for a moment, he gathered her in his arms and lifted her on to his knees.

“My little flower!,” he whispered.

Looking up at his lined red face and waving, dark hair, Auriol achieved a smile. She liked him least when his grey eyes grew hot and his mouth slack, as though he wanted to eat her, but she would have liked him less if he had become indifferent to her. It was a question of seasons and moods. Even after a year she could have wished that he would remain downstairs until she said he might come up. To be stroked and kissed was rather distracting, when she wanted to brush her hair; and, though he was her husband, she still felt shy when he sat watching her shed garment after garment. In the early days, before she issued her one ultimatum, he used to drift in without knocking when her maid was undressing her; and he would not understand, she could never find words to explain, why her modesty was outraged

when he stared proprietorially at her in the presence of a spectator.

"We're married. We don't have to keep up a pretence," he had argued.

"It makes me uncomfortable," was all that Auriol could answer.

"But she's only a maid!"

There was strong temptation to retort:

"Yes! And I'm only your wife, to be peeped at and gloated over. Whether I *want* to be kissed and caressed at all hours of the day and night doesn't matter."

She resisted the temptation for fear that such an argument would recoil on herself. She it was, who had assured her mother and Joyce and Imogen that people made altogether too much fuss about the place of passion in marriage. Instead, she pressed her point that, if a thing embarrassed her, Ambrose should not persist in it; and, in return, she submitted uncomplainingly to the suffocating tenderness without which he seemed unable to address her. Men were strange creatures, at the mercy of their appetites one moment and inhumanly superior to appetite the next. Was it Byron who called man's love "*of man's life a thing apart*", but "*woman's whole existence*"?

II

WITH passive obedience, while her husband's hand played rhythmically down the smooth, cool surface of her arm, she described Mr. Caldwell's party:

"Lord Orpington took me in; and I had Max Hendry on the other side. He was looking very well; and I believe he's done too wonderfully in Chili, but I didn't

have any talk with him till the end. Ambrose, I *think* I've made our peace with the Orpingtons. After nearly two years' hard labour! Blue Peter wants us to go to him for Goodwood; and he went out of his way to include you."

"Afraid I've no time for things like that," said Sheridan grimly.

"I believe it would be a good thing."

"Well, my dear, accept for yourself. Orpington's no use to me."

Auriol smothered a sigh. Until her marriage, she had never lived with people who issued or accepted invitations by the criterion of utility; the Otways invited people because they liked them or were afraid of hurting their feelings. Ambrose had explained more than once that, with his limited leisure, he could neither see, nor consider the feelings of, all the people who invited him to their houses or expected him to invite them to his; but Auriol felt that a continuous feast on an elastic table would still have provided no place for a man adjudged useless. Lord Orpington had been "useless" since he retired from public life at her husband's none too gentle pressure; he would have no importance until he emerged to join those who clamoured for her husband's blood. Auriol was sometimes frightened by the number of recruits that Ambrose presented, with a contemptuous or malignant kick, to the enemy.

"He's an old friend of father's. And it's horrid to be on bad terms with people," she persisted.

"But you said you'd made peace? By the way, the P.M.'s lunching to-morrow."

Auriol clapped her hands in delight:

"The pet! Anything in particular happening?"

"Ferrers giving trouble again. He threatens to resign

from the F.O. if I don't cease 'meddling', as he very civilly calls it."

"One of these days he'll find himself taken at his word," said Auriol, who remembered pacifying the indignant Foreign Secretary less than a month before. "Is he coming too?"

Sheridan's smile indicated that Sir John Ferrers would die of starvation before he consented to break bread in Cleveland Row:

"No. It's a question what's to be done with him. He's persuaded Rodney and Carmichael to say *they'll* resign if I don't keep my nose out of the Admiralty and the War Office. The old triumvirate. I thought your father had unwittingly broken it up for me when he turned blackleg and offered to take office himself rather than let them boycott me." Ambrose could never deny himself a sneer at an adversary who had overreached himself: Lord Otway, two years before, had calculated that the best way to stop his daughter's marriage was by scotching her prospective husband's divorce and that the best way to achieve this was to hurry him into the cabinet and challenge him to face a scandal if he dared. To this end, the excommunication decreed by Ferrers had been raised by the prime minister. "They're coming together again. And Standish can't face the three of them. Or thinks he can't."

"What's he going to do?"

"He wants an undertaking from me that I'll keep myself *to* myself. Well, I said I would. By God, I would! I'd stick to the C.O., give up attending the cabinet and let the others go their own sweet way. *But*, I said, I must notify the king, I must tell the House of Lords and the public what I was doing. If there's to be collective responsibility, it must be a real responsibility.

I won't be responsible for systems that I want to alter and am not even allowed to criticize. Standish said there was no provision in the constitution for a cabinet minister who dissociated himself from the rest of the cabinet: a hint that, if I couldn't compromise with my conscience, I'd better resign."

"Oh, my dear! What did you say?"

"I told him he could have my resignation when he called for it and not when it seemed desirable to Ferrers or Rodney. I said too that, if I resigned, I should make known that I was resigning because I was profoundly dissatisfied with the three departments principally concerned with the peace of the empire. Standish didn't press the hint. He suggested instead that perhaps it was time for *him* to resign."

"Poor old man!"

"I told him not to think of it. We can't readily spare him till he's got rid of Ferrers and Co., though there'll be no constructive statesmanship with him in command." Some turn of phrase, forgotten as soon as uttered, recalled to Auriol's mind certain discussions which she had overheard when she was so young that no one troubled to be reticent in her presence. In those days, before people got their second wind in "the great war", those who were not responsible for the fate of the nation opined gloomily that the nation would be in a bad case so long as Asquith and his friends were responsible for its fate. They added hastily that they could not readily spare him until he had carried conscription for them. The enmities and intrigues of politicians seemed to vary little from generation to generation! "No! I think Standish is coming here to be soothed. Well . . . You might point out that Ferrers' threat can be disregarded. 'Resign and be damned,' say: 'your house has to be set in

order ; and, if you resign, we'll tell the world it's because you've been found out ; if the others go too, we'll say the same thing ; don't imagine I can shut Sheridan's mouth by calling for *his* resignation.' Standish is getting too feeble for his work."

Auriol made haste to change the subject before the list of proscriptions lengthened :

"How did the speech go to-night ? "

"Oh, all right. Infernally hot room."

"It's been a hot evening. Why don't you take your coat off ? "

The big hand, still stroking her neck and arm, seemed to scorch her ; and Auriol felt that, if he stood up to unbutton his coat, she might slip into bed.

"It's quite reasonably cool in here."

"But with a fat lump like me in your arms . . ."

She was not allowed to finish the sentence.

"You fat ? I can make my two hands meet round your waist ! You're the softest, sweetest, whitest, warmest . . . Darling Auriol ! "

Each epithet was accompanied by a kiss ; and at the end he pressed her to him. When she was imprisoned and helpless, he began to tickle her ribs.

"Oh, Ambrose, don't !," Auriol cried. "I can't bear being tickled ! It sends me nearly mad ! "

"You don't call that *tickling*, do you ?," he asked. As she struggled, one bare foot swung within reach of his disengaged hand. He seized it and began tickling the sole. "*Now* I shall know what to do with my little Auriol if she's naughty !," he laughed.

The pain was bad, but the indignity was worse. As she writhed and gasped, Auriol could only give vent to her feelings in hoots of inane laughter ; and, the more she laughed, the more his merciless hands tormented her.

Soon she had forgotten even the indignity : her carefully brushed hair was tossing in all directions as she struggled ; her flimsy nightgown was torn and trailing on the floor ; she seemed to have become a naked tangle of flying arms and legs.

“ Don't, don't ! *Please* don't ! ” she panted.

He would not see that her laughter was a cry of pain ; and for the first time in her life Auriol was frightened. In physical strength almost any man could master her ; but she had never imagined that any man would try. Alone in this big lonely house she was at her husband's mercy whenever he felt a taste for this horrible horse-play ; and worse, far worse than the pain of mind or body was a dreadful suspicion that it pleased him to shame and hurt her. He was like a boy teasing a dog.

And, unless she bit or scratched him, she was more helpless than a dog.

III

AN unexpected twist of her supple body landed her on the floor. Scrambling to her feet, she dragged a blanket from the bed and draped it round herself as she hurried to the door.

“ Here, where are you off to ? , ” asked Ambrose.

“ Stay where you are ! , ” she cried. He halted in unfeigned amazement ; and she faced him, breathless and scarlet. “ Listen to me, Ambrose ! I'm going to find Merriman and ask her to sleep with me. I . . . I shall tell her I'm not well : you've frightened me. ”

“ But I was only teasing you ! ”

“ I don't care what you were doing ! You've made me ashamed of you and you've made me ashamed of myself. Don't come any nearer ! ”

"But, Auriol, my darling child! . . ."

"Stay where you are and listen to me! I can't remain here if this is going to happen again. I should always be afraid of you. Will you promise me before God that you'll never lay a finger on me again?"

"But, my dear, it was all a joke! If I'd thought for one moment that I was frightening or hurting you . . ."

"Will you promise me that?"

Ambrose hesitated; and his lips curled sardonically:

"Am I allowed to shake hands with you?"

"Don't be absurd! You know perfectly well what I mean. You could break me in two with one hand; and I shan't feel safe till I have your solemn promise."

"I'll give it willingly. And I'll apologize from the bottom of my heart. I didn't mean to be rough, but you looked such a funny little thing, laughing and wriggling there . . ."

Auriol sighed wearily and got into bed.

"Don't let's say anything more about it," she begged. "You might pick up that chair before you go. And, Ambrose . . ."

"Yes?"

"I wish you'd remember this is *my* room. I had to ask you before not to come in while Merriman was dressing me . . ."

"And I've done my best to respect your wishes," he interrupted stiffly.

"Well, I ask you now not to come in till I say you may. You don't seem to understand that women like a certain amount of privacy."

"But when a woman marries . . ."

"She loses all her modesty?" Auriol taunted. "It's not a thing I can explain, so you must take my word for it. You sometimes make me wish I'd been born without

a body. In future, please, you keep to your room and I'll keep to mine. When we want to talk . . ."

"You're very modern, Auriol," he broke in sarcastically.

"Am I?" Her ribs were aching; and she felt bruised all over. "I know I'm very tired."

"Of me?"

"I didn't say that. I said I must have this room to myself."

"And I'm to be locked out, if you think fit? I'm afraid I can't agree to that."

How he persisted in misunderstanding her! And how he provoked her to say more than she intended! Fear and resentment had sapped her self-control; and, unless he left her instantly, she would burst out with something that they would remember with bitterness all their lives.

And he would not leave her. He was repeating, on the chance that she had not heard him the first time, that he could not agree to being locked out of her room.

"Then I shall have to ask Merriman to sleep in my boudoir," she answered.

"That's not to be thought of."

"Unless you do what I want, I shall have to do something more unthinkable still."

Sheridan looked at her closely and drew a chair to the side of the bed.

"We must understand each other, Auriol," he announced as he slipped his arms out of his overcoat.

Auriol glanced at her watch.

"To-morrow . . .," she began. Then her attention was caught by marks of blood on his shirt and collar. "Ambrose, you're bleeding!" Her anger evaporated; her recklessness left her "Did I do that? I'm so

sorry! I didn't mean to, but I simply didn't know what I was doing. Come here and let me look.”

Sheridan turned to a mirror and turned back with a frown :

“ Oh, that's all right. It's dry blood ; and not of your drawing. That's why I didn't take my coat off before.”

“ But what's happened ? ”

He frowned more deeply at the question and then smiled as he decided to answer it.

“ I had occasion to thrash a man,” he explained.

“ You ? ”

Auriol lay back open-mouthed, unable to say more. Her husband was inexplicable ! At one moment he was discussing plots and counterplots among his colleagues ; at the next he was romping like an uncouth, rowdy boy ; at the next again he was relating coolly that he, a cabinet minister, a peer of the realm, a man with a reputation to lose by any scandal, had been brawling !

“ I've been waiting for that fellow a couple of years,” he added with undisguised satisfaction.

“ Who was he ? ”

“ A fellow called Tuke. Journalist. He made certain statements and then disappeared before I could deal with him. I suppose he thought I'd forgotten. When I saw him in the audience to-night, I arranged to have him brought to me ; and at the end my excellent chairman kept the door while I gave Mr. Tuke his whipping.”

“ But . . . but, Ambrose !,” gasped Auriol. “ That's assault ! ”

“ Mr. Tuke won't take out a summons. He'll be very lucky if he wakes up to find himself alive. There wasn't much sign of life when I'd done with him. By the way, it's *his* blood,” he added, wrenching his collar off and inspecting himself in her long mirror. “ I'll wash it off.”

As he strode away to his dressing-room, Auriol tried to call out that she was too tired to see him again. Then she reflected that he would stay and resume their earlier discussion, whereas a well-placed question here and there might keep his mind on Mr. Tuke's castigation. At all costs she wanted to postpone this dreadful business of "understanding each other". But for the diversion of the blood-stain, Ambrose would have asked with his customary brutal directness whether she was challenging his rights over her, whether she expected him to be the servant of her whims and whether her vague threat of "something more unthinkable still" meant that she was going to run away from him. She had already said too much; and she had spoken too abruptly, but his behaviour had shocked her so deeply that she would need weeks before she could think of it calmly, months before she could hope to recover from it. Flinging his mask aside, he had revealed a satyr; and henceforth she was in danger of looking for the satyr in every man she met. If he had been drunk, she might have found an excuse for him; but a satyr-strain had to be included in his normal composition. Her physical fear gave place to mental, as she awaited his return. If he asked, in his contemptuous drawl, why she enjoyed fondling one day and recoiled from it the next, was she to degrade herself by confessing that she had always hated it and had only put up with it to please him?

An angry mistress might talk in that way, but not a wife. He would accuse her of being no longer in love with him. And, if frustration made him savage, he was equal to accusing her of being in love with some one else. Was it coincidence that he found all the men of her own age so uninteresting, or was he jealous of them? Heaven knew, he had no cause for jealousy! One after another,

she had dropped them : Bobbie Selhurst, Geoffrey Mallock, all her brother Colin's friends. And she had told him frankly that the only other man for whom she had felt the faintest tenderness was Max Hendry, now securely banished to South America or at least preparing to go into banishment again after their one meeting. No comment had been made when she said that she had sat next to Max at dinner ; but, for all she knew, the name might still be rankling. At all costs they must not reopen this wrangle about her room. If he asked whether she had taken a distaste for him since her meeting with Max, could she be sure of convincing him ?

Did she even know what her own feelings were ?

IV

SOUNDS of splashing in the dressing-room were followed by loud whistling and blowing. Ambrose always rubbed himself down as though he was grooming a horse.

Auriol closed her eyes and tried to get Max into focus. He belonged to a time when the world was younger and life incredibly simpler. In those days, when the most emancipated of women was still shackled by her sex, she wanted to influence a man and to help him in his career. Max had brains and ability, if only he would use them ; and she had dreamed of inspiring him till this one, average, young officer found a foothold in the reeling chaos which the war had left behind and rose, with her hand in his, to be a leader of men and a maker of history. She had chosen Max in preference to more promising material because, at his most exasperating, she could always trust him and because his companionship gave the same sense of peace that she won from a devoted dog. Why they ever talked of marrying she could not make out.

Perhaps it was the example of Imogen and Joyce ; perhaps it was the obsession of their age ; but she had never been in love with him.

Had she allowed herself to be blinded, she might have been more tolerant of his easy-going, pleasure-loving disposition ; but in that phase of her development Auriol had prided herself on being mercilessly clear-sighted. The discovery, so often and unflatteringly proclaimed, that poor Max was " hopeless " grew more deeply-rooted as she fell under the domination of another man, fiercely efficient and of proved success, who came to her for inspiration and shewed her that, if he was to set chaos in order, she must help him. Auriol had been dazzled ; but then and now, though Ambrose let his own obsession of marriage drive him through divorce-proceedings which she tried in vain to forget, she knew that she had never been in love with him either. Was she in some way different from other women ? Had she been right in protesting that, so far as she was concerned, other people invested all questions of sex with an importance that was incomprehensible to her ? Or was she only, as her mother hinted, abnormally young and abnormally ignorant ? After a year of marriage she was no nearer to giving Ambrose the heir he desired so wildly.

After a year of marriage she was no nearer to being in love : with him or with any one else. His hungry kisses only made her wish to be kissed by some other man, if she had to be kissed at all : some man who would keep love-making and love in their proper place. It was in one such mood of satiety that she had pictured a romantic, hard life with Max in Chili : burning sun, a blistered office, work, work, work, with herself as Kipling's *William the Conqueror* to inspire and reward. The day-dream brought into her life the scented wind of a summer morn-

"LADY SHERIDAN IN HER BEDROOM . . ." III

ing after the fiery caresses of her husband's hands. She only regretted her putting it on paper: dear old Max was hardly clever enough to read between the lines; but it was a dangerous delight, whenever Ambrose fondled her, to shut her eyes and imagine that Max had come back.

Auriol jerked herself upright in bed and looked guiltily towards the open door of the dressing-room. She had never confessed to herself before; there had surely been nothing to confess? So long as she could boast that, for better or worse, she had never been in love, she was innocent of spiritual infidelity. She could have sworn, until that moment, that she was indifferent to Max; but she could pretend no longer that she was indifferent to every one. Ambrose had lighted a fire; and Max was feeding it. She saw him whenever she shut her eyes. She had been seeing him for a year. If she had not shut her eyes and seen him, she could not have borne to be touched by Ambrose.

"Did you give young Hendry my message? I should like to see him again and hear how he's shap-ing."

Auriol turned with a start to see her husband standing in the open doorway. The jacket of his pyjamas lay open at the neck to reveal the swelling muscles of his chest. Standing barefoot, he nearly scraped the lintel with his head; and, as she looked to see if he was setting a trap for her, Auriol wondered what build of man the luckless Tuke had been.

"He expects to be very busy, so I told him to telephone and propose himself as soon as he has a free night," she answered. "Ambrose, I want to hear about this man you thrashed. Don't you realize there would be the most awful scandal if it got out? A cabinet minister . . .

You might have to resign. And if you've injured the man . . ."

"It's more a question whether I've killed him. They're going to telephone in the morning. Yes, I suppose it *would* be rather much for Standish if I were convicted of manslaughter. I had to teach the fellow his lesson, though; and, if any one else tries the same trick, he'll get precisely the same treatment."

"But what had he done?"

"He tried to attack me through you, judging very accurately, my dear, that that's where I'm most sensitive."

Auriol's eyes fell.

"You mean . . . about the divorce?" she asked.

"No. Not directly. He was telling people that the King's Proctor ought to have intervened on the grounds that you and I were living together before we married. I don't greatly care what people say about me, but when people attack my wife . . . Am I forgiven, darling? You know I didn't mean to hurt you or frighten you. Kiss me and say it's all forgiven and forgotten."

"Of course it's forgiven!" Auriol had to struggle with a temptation to cry as he sat down on the bed and drew her into his arms. "But I shan't forgive you if you go fighting people. I don't care what anybody says about me, especially when it's a lie. We always knew we should be attacked, we said we'd face it together. I'm not going to have you risking your position for me."

"It's my privilege, as your husband. And I *am* your husband still? You've forgiven and forgotten? Everything's as it was before?"

Auriol nodded quickly before the temptation to hesitate became too strong for her. As she turned her face up to be kissed, she looked him in the eyes and remembered

delightedly that, in bidding Max “good-night”, she had been prompted by some intuitive foreboding to bid him also “good-bye”.

“My poor little child, did I really hurt you?,” Ambrose whispered contritely. “I did! There’s a bruise over your ribs! What a brute of a husband you’ve married! Lift up your arm, sweetheart, while I kiss the place and make it well.”

Obediently, though she had to stifle a sigh, Auriol did her best to humour him. She felt tired beyond bearing, but she had promised that everything should be as before; and, while he crooned in baby-language, she dropped wearily back on her pillows and shut her eyes tightly. .

V

“TIRED beyond bearing!”

The phrase must have been ringing through her head all night, for, when her husband came in on his way downstairs, she offered the words in explanation of a most unusual reluctance to get up. Though her ribs were bruised, she was not tired physically; and, when she came to think over her encounters of the night before, she remembered them without feeling mentally tired. Perhaps “numbed” was a better word: she had come near to quarrelling with Ambrose; and, though peace reigned once more, her eyes had been opened. No longer was she able to say that she understood him or that they had “found” themselves; and, when she essayed a new portrait of him, she must give him a touch of brutality. His roughness with her, his savagery to the man he had thrashed, his ruthlessness to his opponents, his cruelty to Laura . . .

Suddenly Auriol remembered that Laura was back in

London and that she had promised to call. A promise was a promise, though these secret meetings were incredibly difficult. Laura would want to know all about Ambrose; she would probably describe her visit to Max in Chili. And, at the end, would come a moment that never changed in poignancy: the moment when one woman returned to her husband and the other remained by herself. Better, far better, if poor Laura could kill her devotion for the man who had cast her aside!

As Auriol dressed, she considered what news she would be able to give. The Ferrers-Carmichael revolt? Mr. Standish's threat of resignation?

"And I've no idea what line I'm to take when the poor sweet lunches here! Life generally is becoming a little bit too much for me!"

As she drove across the park in an open taxi, Auriol found her misgivings melting in the soft warmth of a May morning. Of the things generally considered necessary to happiness, she had youth, good health and money; by birth and by marriage she had a position that no sane woman could wish to enhance; and she had awoken daily—till this morning—with the taste of success and power freshly sweet on her lips.

"And we *have* made a success of it!" she declared with a defiant nod towards her father's house in Manchester Square.

Thanks in part to her, Ambrose now filled the post that he most desired and deserved; in time, and again partly through her help and encouragement, he would rise to even greater heights. After only a year it would have been surprising if there were no more small adjustments to make, but their love was never called in question; and her late worrying over Max was easily explained by

the state of her nerves, which compelled her to worry over something.

At its worst, what was her crime? That she had been thinking a great deal about Max when she ought to have been thinking about her husband? Well, Max was an old friend, she had come very near to marrying him and there was no unfaithfulness in her speculating dispassionately how they would have got on together. If Ambrose had qualities which Max lacked, no doubt Max had qualities which Ambrose lacked. Neither was perfect; and it was interesting to contrast them. Max had steadied and hardened more than she had fancied possible: if she had thought him capable of pulling himself together and doing so well, there was no saying but what she might have married him. They were of an age; to her at least he was attractive; and they had been brought up in the same tradition.

Auriol knitted her brows in recalling the series of tiny shocks by which she was made conscious that Ambrose had been reared in a different tradition. It was a great mistake to be insular, like her beloved father, who in his ultimate analysis relegated to a common limbo all foreigners—including the inhabitants of Great Britain outside Cornwall—with their faiths, politics and professions; it was ridiculous to imagine, with her brother Colin, that those who had not been at Eton and were now not in the army must bear some sinister “mark of the beast”; at the same time, their standards were not altogether to be despised. Neither of them, as their silence on the subject made eloquently clear, would have allowed even a guilty woman to save their careers at the expense of her reputation. Neither, if they had been practising politicians, would have fired from behind a white flag as Ambrose had undoubtedly fired on poor Lord Orpington.

Neither, in short phrase, would have admitted the Sheridan doctrine of "necessity".

She had tried more than once to explain the Otway point of view to her husband and to justify him to the Otways. As a rule, Colin or one of her brothers-in-law ended the discussion by observing complacently that politics was no job for a gentleman; and, the more parallels she found for her husband's most hotly criticized acts, the more she was told that all politicians were alike. They would not see, these dear, difficult relations of hers, that a cause might be greater than a man or that the obstructionist and incompetent must be removed without too nice regard for their feelings. Lord Orpington's idea of administration was summed up in the bluff exhortation: "Stand by your permanent officials and they will stand by you."

"Which, so far as I can make out, is entirely meaningless," Auriol sighed.

Such a man *had* to go; but she could have wished for a franker declaration of war; and she could have wished that Ambrose would be content with removing a man instead of killing him first and mutilating him afterwards. There was something ghoulish in the way he had slashed at Lord Orpington even in retirement; he would slash as ferociously at Sir John Ferrers or Mr. Carmichael or Mr. Rodney if they continued to oppose him; and ultimately he would cut Mr. Standish limb from limb. At the moment they were close friends; but Ambrose had once been close friends with Lord Orpington. He had paid court to Sir John and the others until he knew the way about their offices and could threaten an exposure of their methods.

As though every office and every minister would not be condemned, if the press published a one-sided statement

based on misleading facts and figures collected from inside! It was no wonder that a boy like Colin said bluntly: “Ambrose may be very clever, but he’s damned unscrupulous. You say he’s only doing what dozens of men did in the war when they had to get rid of dead-heads; but, when you think of the newspaper-men and financiers and ‘captains of industry’ and other adventurers who forced their way to the front during the War, do you want to take them as your model?”

Auriol was secretly relieved when her taxi stopped and her inconclusive argument was ended for her.

“Life in Arica may not be a bed of roses,” she muttered, “but any one that thinks *my* job is an easy one is welcome to try it!”

PART II

CHAPTER I

“*The Lone Wolf*”

“She is wedded to convictions—in default of grosser ties ;
Her contentions are her children, Heaven help him who denies !—
He will meet no suave discussion, but the instant, white-hot, wild
Wakened female of the species warring as for spouse and child.”

RUDYARD KIPLING : *The Female of The Species*.

I

WHEN she left Cleveland Row for the last time before her divorce, Laura Sheridan had spent a day looking for a new home in some part of London where she could be sure of not meeting her husband, but where he could reach her without delay if he wanted her.

In those days it seemed inevitable that somebody should want her : if not Ambrose, then Auriol and her parents ; if not the Otways, then her brother Tony and the vacant bride of whom Tony was saying that, with her looks and her money, anything might be made, if some woman of experience would only take her in hand a bit, polish her, give her a few social hints. The Rushforths had married into a furnished house on the north side of the park ; and, when it was found that Evelyn was going to have a child, they decided to remain there for her confinement. To his sister, Tony admitted that they would probably not take a house of their own until Evelyn was more adequately equipped to appear as his wife ; and, as the course of social instruction, interrupted

by the birth of the boy and protracted by the unreadiness and indifference of the pupil, threatened to be long, Laura felt justified in taking the lease of a flat in Palace Gate within easy reach of the Rushforths and not too far from Manchester Square for Auriol to call on her way to or from her parents. To the south side of the park, except when she was making for a railway station, Laura had never penetrated since she resigned Westminster to Auriol and her husband.

Two years, if they had taught her nothing else, made clear to Laura that she was not urgently needed by Tony or the Otways, Auriol or Ambrose. Directly or indirectly they all came to her for advice in the first twelve months ; but, as the Rushforths and the Otways were sucked into the stream of Ambrose Sheridan's life, their dependence on Laura weakened and their houses became perilous meeting-places. There was now no reason for her to remain in Palace Gate, but she hesitated to move if by moving she increased the distance between Auriol and herself. For six months of the year she was in London ; and during that time Auriol could visit her morning or afternoon, without telephoning beforehand, without asking or even wondering whether any one else might have business to transact or engagements to keep. If she could not make herself a necessity, Laura was content to become a habit.

"I revolve round her ; she revolves round Ambrose . . ."

They seldom corresponded, but Laura would write to say when she was going away or coming back. Ever since her return from South America, she had been expecting a visit ; and, when none came, she consoled herself as best she could with the reflection that life in Cleveland Row must be too harmonious for her help to

be needed. Long might the harmony continue ! Auriol had been married for rather more than a year ; and the first surprise and strangeness had no doubt worn off by now. Very soon, it was reasonable to hope, she would begin to have a family ; and in the problem of holding a just balance between children and husband no one could advise her. The difficult time, if there was to be one, would come later, when the first glamour of romance had passed away. By night and by day, on land or at sea, in England or under the Southern Cross, Laura could never drive from her mind the scene of her parting from her husband : while Ambrose assured her airily that in two, three years' time she would have made a new life for herself, she could only murmur that in three years' time anything might happen. Two of the three years had passed ; had anything happened, was anything threatening to happen ? When at last Auriol was announced, she examined her face for the answer and was surprised in spite of herself to see no change. In a moment she was talking of her travels ; Auriol followed with anecdotes of Mr. Standish and the triumvirate ; from time to time silence fell between them and one or other hastened to break it before they had time to become self-conscious.

“ Let me think if I have anything more to tell you before I go,” said Auriol, as the clock struck one. “ Any question . . . ? ” she continued with a hint of embarrassment.

These conversations always made her feel that Laura and she were trying to meet from opposite ends of a maze. There were so many forbidden paths and blind alleys. She must never admit personal difficulty or misgiving or resentment unless Laura first admitted that she had known similar lapses from faith ; she must never discuss

the marriage that had been ended through her and for her. And, if the marriage she had made proved a failure, she must keep it to herself; if a success, she must keep it to herself too, for fear of seeming to triumph over her parents and Laura. She could not talk of Max lest she seemed to be pining for him; and, if she hinted her perplexities about Ambrose, she would be thought to have criticized or at least to have misunderstood him.

When they met in their conversational maze, it was on the common ground of politics. Laura was interested in politics because they formed the air which Ambrose breathed, but even here Auriol had to be careful. She must not become patronizing or pedagogic, though in truth Laura had dropped out before Ambrose grew to be of political consequence.

"I thought *something* must be brewing when the papers became so quiet," said Laura, with a cast back to the later history of the triumvirate.

"We're in sight of a crisis. The poor P.M. is coming to pour out his woes at luncheon. I wish I knew what to advise him!"

"If Sir John insists on resigning, he'd better accept the resignation," recommended Laura. "Sir John, when all is said and done, . . ."

Where Ambrose asked whether a man would be "useful" to him, Laura seemed to ask whether he could be "dangerous".

"But if Rodney and Carmichael resign too?"

"He mustn't let them," said Laura. "After all, Ambrose hasn't attacked them . . . yet. It's a sympathetic strike. If Mr. Standish can't keep them in any other way, he can offer Rodney the Foreign Office when Ferrers resigns."

"He'd be a cur to accept it, but I suppose he would.

He's hated at the Admiralty. That doesn't help with Carmichael, though.”

Laura's gentle eyes flashed in amused contempt.

“ Tell the prime minister he needn't bother about him. The man's not a fighter ; and, if he were, he'd think twice before measuring swords against Ambrose. He hasn't forgotten what happened to Lord Orpington ; or, if he has, he'll remember very soon when he sees Sir John being annihilated.”

Auriol could not repress a slight shiver as she recalled her rumination in the taxi.

“ I sometimes wish Ambrose could be a *little* more merciful,” she sighed.

“ He would tell you that mercy in war encourages people to fight again ; and that means more bloodshed in the long run. Not that he minds shedding blood,” Laura had to admit. “ I saw that in some of his big business-amalgamations : if a man wouldn't come in, Ambrose laid himself out to destroy that man ; sometimes he nearly destroyed himself in the process, but the moral effect was that the next man came in on our terms. I've seen it, too, with people who've attacked him in the press : he's hunted them down and torn them in pieces. The moral effect is that people are chary of attacking him. He made an example of Lord Orpington, as he would say ; if he now makes an example of Sir John Ferrers, no one will be very anxious to cross him.”

“ But . . . I don't believe Sir John is any worse than any of the foreign secretaries we've had lately,” Auriol objected. “ I like him very much. I was at Cambridge with one of his daughters.”

Laura smiled a little sadly as she led her guest to the door :

“ I'm afraid all that counts for nothing with Ambrose.

He has the dictatorial spirit. He can't work under people or with people. He must be supreme ; and all his colleagues have to be his slaves. I've seen it with his business and I've seen it with his papers. I've seen it with his managers and secretaries ; my brother Tony . . . Now I'm waiting to see whether he *can* do it in politics."

Auriol sighed as she thought of her luncheon-party :
" Poor old Mr. Standish ! "

" You can't have more than one prime minister at a time ! When shall I see you again, dear ? Come whenever you can ! And you know if I can ever help you . . . "

" I know ! Bless you ! Good-bye, dear Laura. I don't know what I should do without you."

" You'll find things easier if you remind yourself that exceptional men have to be judged by exceptional standards."

II

WHEN Auriol reached Cleveland Row, she was still brooding over Laura's parting words.

The advice was not new ; but Auriol had never decided how far the exceptional man should be allowed to transgress. Young Buonaparte had cheated at cards ; the Emperor Napoleon had contrived a legal murder : if exceptional men required such latitude, might not the world say it would rather do without them ?

Ambrose had returned from the Colonial Office and was seated at his writing-table in the library, signing the letters which his secretary dealt him, with a mutter of brief explanation, from a piled-up basket. She nodded to Tony and glanced at the clock to see if Ambrose had left himself time to coach her before Mr. Standish arrived.

He was always so busy that he sometimes forgot to tell her things until it was too late ; and their review overnight had been interrupted in a way that she did not want to recall. Instead, she looked at the sleek and consequential Tony in the hope of overcoming a dislike which she felt to be unreasonable. He was so much more the cabinet minister than his master, so much better dressed, so much more pleased with himself ! If he could no longer technically speak of “ my brother-in-law, Sheridan ”, he could and did speak of “ Ambrose . . . Lord Sheridan, you know ”. Perhaps, after all, it was not unreasonable to dislike him ; one should not be required to like plump, strutting little flunkeys, though one might be vaguely sorry for them. Auriol was vaguely sorry for her husband’s secretary in that, with all his social ambitions, he had been lured—presumably by money—into marrying any one so commonplace as Evelyn.

Pulling off her hat and running her fingers through the thick waves of her hair, Auriol crossed to the window where Mrs. Rushforth, dazzlingly fair and wholly unintelligent, was waiting to take her husband home to luncheon. The baby, surrounded by wooden blocks, sprawled on a rug by her feet. The mother, for want of anything better to do, was superfluously reddening her lips. Auriol engaged her in a whispered conversation ; and, when the last of the letters had been carried away, Ambrose joined them and threw himself into the child’s game.

“ Are you going to keep him in London all the summer ?,” Auriol asked when Tony had packed up his papers.

“ That depends on the weather. Living near the Park like we do . . .” Mrs. Rushforth began. “ I always say,

you wouldn't hardly know you weren't in the country

“You won't find a healthier place than London anywhere in the world,” Ambrose put in. “Well, young man, what do you say to a ride?”

Auriol smiled to herself as her husband straightened his long back and began to canter round the room with the baby on one shoulder. Pathetically devoted to all children, he could always win his way to their hearts. It was part of the day's ritual that Mrs. Rushforth should call for Tony; and she was searchingly interrogated if she ever came without the baby. Ambrose only praised the hygienic properties of London because he did not want to lose the child; and, at the sight of so much affection running to waste, Auriol fell to thinking of her self-examination overnight. Had she failed to bear a child because she was not interested in any child of his? Could a woman bear children to a man when she was indifferent to him? This was a question which she must discuss with her mother.

The ride ended; and Mrs. Rushforth stood up to go.

“Have you done anything about putting him down for a school?” Ambrose enquired.

“There's plenty of time for that,” Tony answered.

“I don't agree. He's eighteen months old; and you don't want to feel, when it's too late, that you've neglected anything that may affect his chances in life. I should enter him for Eton . . .”

“That depends so much on what he's going to do afterwards,” Tony interposed.

“Eton,” Ambrose continued. “And Winchester And Oundle, in case he shews a taste for science. The same with the universities. The same with any clubs that have a long waiting-list. Remind me to-morrow.”

Obediently, though with no very good grace, Tony scribbled a memorandum in his note-book and looked pointedly at his watch. Auriol never felt that he was interested in the boy's future: it was Ambrose who arranged and ordered, Ambrose who laid down a pipe of port when the child was born, Ambrose who ransacked the toyshops at Christmas. She was sorry for the pretty, vacant young mother; but she was sorrier for Ambrose who prized and was denied what the other man neglected and had been granted.

“You'll find my husband stealing Oscar one of these days,” she predicted.

Mrs. Rushforth coloured and took the child into her arms.

“I'm afraid I can't spare him. He's all I have. Besides, Lord Sheridan would spoil him.”

“Of course he would! Children ought to be spoilt,” Auriol answered. “They aren't allowed to choose their parents or to say whether they want to be born: the least we can do is to give them a good time when they *do* come. I'm the youngest of the family; and every one says I was terribly spoilt. All I know is, unless I were sure of being spoilt, I'd just refuse to be born. Think how dull a baby's life must be! Sleeping and eating! I couldn't have stood it if the monthly nurse hadn't said I was the finest girl she'd ever seen, the living image of both my parents and all four grandparents (She'd never seen my grandparents; and daddy and mummy are as different as chalk from cheese, but it was the tactful thing to say). I don't know which of you this infant favours . . .”

Mrs. Rushforth turned away to collect the child's coat and hat.

“He *had* my hair, but it's getting darker every day,” she answered at length.

"I don't believe you can ever see likenesses at that age," said Ambrose.

Tony turned from the far window where he had been gazing into the peaceful backwater of Cleveland Row.

"The P.M.'s car," he announced. "Come along, Evelyn, or we shall make Lady Sheridan late for lunch."

Auriol accompanied them downstairs and waited in the hall to receive her guest. Though Mr. Standish detested formality and drifted across from Downing Street whenever he wanted to avoid a solitary meal, she always felt obliged to pay him a little additional homage. So few people seemed to like him; his constitutional melancholy was so profound; and he was so grateful for even a show of affection! Through the glazed upper half of the door, Auriol watched him getting out of his car; and her heart filled with protective sympathy as he shambled across the pavement. The mid-day sun struck revealingly on his lined face and white beard, causing the diffident, dreaming eyes to waver; and, as he came under the shelter of the canopy, Auriol could have fancied that he was mounting a scaffold and that the shadow in which he was suddenly enveloped had been cast by her husband.

"A pack of cards!," he mumbled enigmatically, as he came in.

Auriol helped him out of a threadbare coat and watched as he tidied his fluttering white hair and tried to stiffen his lank frame.

"You're not going to shew me tricks, are you?," she enquired anxiously.

"Tricks? Ah, I see! No. *Alice* . . . Not you, my dear! *Alice* Thingamabob. At the end, you know, where all the cards fall down. That's my state now. Everything's about my ears. I don't know what to do."

“ Well, don’t begin to think till you’ve had some food. I ordered your sherry downstairs to save you a walk . . . ”

“ You think of everything, my dear ! If I’d had you for a wife . . . And what a wife you’ll make for Sheridan when he’s broken a few more ministries and turned the constitution upside down and transferred the seat of government ! He’s keeping the monarchy, I gather, so you’ll be spared having to live at Buckingham Palace, but he’s not keeping much else. And all this under a conservative administration ! ‘ *Here lies John Standish, last conservative prime minister before the deluge.* ’ Last and worst. A pack of cards ! ”

III

As he sipped his sherry, Auriol rang for luncheon to be brought in.

It was difficult to attempt consolation with a man who knew his own shortcomings better than the most vigilant of his critics. Ever since she could remember, ardent conservatives had been saying that Mr. Standish’s day was past. In direct succession to prime ministers who had been called honest because their character was easier to praise than their intelligence, he had been chosen leader on a reputation for integrity and balance. The party, after ten years of opposition and another ten years of accommodation and shifting alliances, had turned with equal distaste from intellectuals, wizards and cheapjacks ; and in Mr. Standish it found a man who said frankly that the business of a conservative party was to conserve and of a conservative prime minister to avoid legislation, keep out of war and transmit to his successor a united army. The uninspiring policy was in harmony with the mournful personality of its author : slow, patient and submissive,

Mr. Standish would put up with private hectoring and public abuse if so he could escape dissensions in his cabinet. Strong differences robbed him of sleep; the threat of a resignation unmanned him. As Auriol was well aware, every cabinet-meeting since her husband took office had been a pitched battle; and the average fall of threatened resignations had increased suddenly to the dimensions of a blizzard. Other men would have accepted such reverses as inevitable accidents in the task of government; to Mr. Standish, who aspired only to keep his administration in being, they were the public proclamation of failure.

"You poor darling, it's too bad that you should be worried!," Auriol cried, as he set down his glass.

"I mustn't complain. I'm getting my release sooner than I expected," he answered.

"But *you're* not going to give up? There's no one to succeed you."

"I shall have nothing to leave my successor if I hang on longer. If three of my leading colleagues resign at the same moment . . ."

"You mustn't *let* them resign," she interrupted.

Throughout luncheon the conversation ran on matters of lesser moment. The ambassador in Washington was retiring by doctor's orders; and the two men canvassed the names of possible successors, moving up juniors to fill every vacancy they created and tracking their candidates through the pages of the *Foreign Office List*. One man would be unpopular with the Irish of America; another was handicapped by a shrewish wife; a third had every qualification but money. Of newcomers to the service, one was barred from Madrid by a boyish escapade which made him *persona ingrata* to the Spanish court; a second must await promotion till a certain post fell vacant;

another was being prepared for an under-secretaryship at the Foreign Office. From the diplomatic service they turned to the colonial: two of the first-class governorships were falling vacant; and the unending battle between the colonial-service officials and the illustrious outsider would shortly have another page added to its history. The Royal Commission on Civil Aircraft was presenting its interim report. A Regius Professor was dying. An archbishop was corresponding indiscreetly with a cardinal. The whips had included two or three inadmissible names in their submission for the birthday honours.

Auriol listened ecstatically. The machine of government, unfenced and at close quarters, was terrifying, but it was inexhaustibly fascinating. She realized the lure of power and the magnitude of the system over which these men exercised it in snatches of conversation, when the servants had left the room. She realized, too, for the first time Mr. Standish's difficulties and responsibilities in keeping a turbulent and opinionated cabinet together. As it happened, he was a tired man of second-rate ability; but, had he possessed the drive and brain of a Gladstone, his task would still have been stupendous. A cabinet, as she was learning daily, did not consist of two dozen mild and reasonable officials under the presidency of a paternal despot: they were two dozen men who had outdistanced their rivals at the bar, in business or through the searching ordeal of a long parliamentary life; they had fought their way to a narrow eminence which thousands of their fellows were trying to attain; they had been upheld in long years of conflict by blind faith in the wisdom of their own words or the force of their own characters; they were the scarred but victorious gladiators of a democratic government, banded together

at last to impose their will on their fellows, but ever ready to turn their swords on one another in the business of shaping the common will. In their way, Mr. Rodney, Sir John Ferrers and Mr. Carmichael were very similar to Ambrose: born, trained and accustomed to fighting, they would not submit to the interference of a rival gladiator nor listen to the gentle admonitions of the puppet they had chosen to lead them. Laura was right in advocating a war of extermination.

When coffee had been handed round, Mr. Standish raised his head with a jerk of spasmodic resolution and began to hunt through his pockets.

"Letter for you to read," he mumbled. "Ferrers wants to know if I'm satisfied with his administration of the F.O."

"And did you tell him you were?," asked Ambrose, preparing to give battle.

"I haven't answered him yet. If I'm not satisfied, he says he'll go. If, on the other hand, he still possesses my confidence, I must guarantee him against attacks by his own colleagues. That means you. . . . I wish you didn't find it necessary to spread yourself in print so much, Sheridan."

Ambrose read the letter carefully and handed it back.

"Yes. Well? I've not attacked him personally as yet. I've attacked the system. You told me you agreed with every word I said."

"Across this table. Ferrers objects to your writing twenty-page articles in the reviews, criticizing other departments. I can sympathize with him. And I don't think you'd like it."

"It all depends whether the criticism's justified. I've said and I shall say again that in administration, as in commerce and industry, the office staff must know

something of executive work. You'd be lynched if you replaced your Sea Lords with civil servants who didn't know one end of a battleship from the other, except on paper. I decided to extend the principle of exchange to my own department. I deliberately invited public discussion ; and the public was whole-heartedly on my side. The only people who tried to answer me were fat shirks living in London suburbs who saw themselves being marooned in St. Helena or Mauritius. Well, anything you can say in favour of this system for the C.O. can be said twenty times more strongly for the Foreign Office and the Diplomatic. Ferrers lets himself be frightened by the same breed of fat shirks. That's his affair. He says the experiment was tried before and proved a failure. It will be his affair if he's afraid to try again. *I* can't make him. I don't interfere with him. But I tell you candidly I shall go on preaching my sermon to any one who will listen. If Ferrers wakes up to find a bad press, that again is his affair."

IV

THOUGH he knew that the prime minister did not smoke, Ambrose set a point to his ultimatum by pushing the cigars across the table and striking a match.

Mr. Standish shook his head and shrank lower into his chair.

" But it's you who are getting him the bad press," he muttered. " I tell you again, I sympathize with him. We can say what we like in the cabinet ; but, outside, we must have unity, solidarity and loyalty. That's been a commonplace since cabinet-government began."

" It's another commonplace that the cabinet is jointly responsible for all cabinet policy. If I can't accept

responsibility for an inefficient system, I can try to get it altered in the cabinet ; if I fail, I may record my protest, but you say I must be silent outside ; if I refuse to be silent outside . . . ? ”

He paused ; and Mr. Standish averted his eyes.

“ Put yourself in Ferrers’ place,” he pleaded.

“ In Ferrers’ place I should have tried to set my house in order. If I refuse to sit silent, will you ask for my resignation ? I may tell you I shall not resign until you *do*. And, if I resign, I shall give my reasons. I doubt if they will secure Ferrers or the government a better press.”

The old man sat with bent head and closed eyes till Auriol fancied that he must have fallen asleep.

“ I don’t want any one to resign,” he muttered at last.

“ We’ve reached a deadlock, though.”

“ Unless Ferrers thinks fit to withdraw his demand for a ‘ guarantee ’,” answered Ambrose contemptuously.

“ He won’t. He’s not alone in this. Carmichael and Rodney feel that their turn is coming next. I can’t have three resignations.”

Auriol walked round the table and sat down between her husband and Mr. Standish.

“ Have they threatened to resign ?,” she asked.

“ Not yet. Ferrers dropped me a broad hint, though.”

“ But I told you, just before luncheon, you mustn’t *let* them resign ! ”

“ Ah, my dear, if you’ll tell me how that’s to be done ! ”

Auriol picked up Sir John Ferrers’ letter and looked up for permission to read it.

“ Why don’t you tell him that he has your confidence personally,” she began, “ but that you think the time has come to make certain changes ? Offer him the Embassy as Washington. It’s a great compliment to America if we send our foreign secretary as ambassador. If he accepts,

you can keep Mr. Rodney quiet by giving him the Foreign Office.”

“ And if he doesn't ? He'd have gone gladly enough at any other time, but he'll think I'm getting rid of him and surrendering to this husband of yours. There are plenty of people who say already that I haven't been able to call my soul my own for the last two years.”

Auriol looked up to find Ambrose eyeing her with amusement. As though he had put into words the thought which he would undoubtedly express when they were alone, he was saying : “ My little girl called in to advise the prime minister ! ” ; and sudden impatience lent her courage. So it had been ever since they married : he liked to dress her up and play with her like a doll ; but, unless she repeated faithfully the lessons which he taught her, he refused to talk seriously.

Hardly conscious that she was repeating a lesson which Laura had taught her, she folded up Sir John's letter and addressed herself to Mr. Standish :

“ You say it's a deadlock between Ambrose and these three. I should think it means the break-up of the government if you part with either side. Why don't you get rid of Sir John and divide the others ? Tell him he can have Washington if he likes ; but, if he feels you aren't supporting him at the F.O., he'd better resign. Send Mr. Rodney to take his place . . . ”

“ In Washington ? ”

“ No. At the Foreign Office. That leaves only Mr Carmichael. He won't fight alone, especially when he sees what has become of his allies.”

There was a long silence ; and Mr. Standish shuffled to his feet.

“ I must go,” he announced. “ I'm much obliged to you, my dear, for an excellent luncheon and some excel-

lent advice. Whether I shall be able to follow it . . . Did *he* put you up to this ? ”

“ No ! It’s not the advice he would have given. Is it, Ambrose ? ”

“ I wasn’t asked. The prime minister knows which is the better man here,” Ambrose laughed. “ What *should* I have said ? ”

“ I’ll tell you some time ! ”

As the car drove away, he repeated his question.

“ You’d have advised him to smash Sir John. Or to let you do the smashing for him. It would have been a lesson to the others.”

“ Standish managed to collect an amazing number of third-raters when he formed his government,” Ambrose observed at a tangent.

“ You mean that Mr. Rodney and Mr. Carmichael will have to go sooner or later ?,” asked Auriol, with a leap over many intervening questions. “ Why not smash them at the same time as Sir John ? Or smash him so badly that they’ll run for their lives ? Then only Mr. Standish will be left. Is that right ? ”

“ No. I only think of one at a time. I don’t want to get rid of Standish. I was very much afraid he might get rid of himself, which wouldn’t suit me at all. . . . Little girl, you seem to think I’m very fond of ‘ smashing ’ people, as you call it.”

Auriol squeezed his arm and walked upstairs to the library :

“ I felt so sorry for the P.M. He looked so old and shabby and battered, poor darling ; and his hands were so cold. I sat between you in order to protect him : you looked so overwhelming by his side. I suppose he ought to have retired long ago. He only hangs on from a sense of duty. And he was quite brilliant as a young man.”

With a rueful expression of dismay Ambrose threw himself into a chair and lighted a second cigar.

“That from you! After all I’ve tried to teach you!,” he lamented. “My little Auriol, the curse of this country is that people are too loyal to their old favourites. A brilliant youth—or the reputation for one—accompanies you into your dotage. It’s ruined our acting and singing; it’s ruining our literature. As for politics and the public services, why, it was the brilliant youths, unaccountably old and failing, who muddled us into the last war; it was broken-down generals, once brilliant subalterns, who flung away the flower of our manhood. I don’t doubt their good faith: *they* hung on from a sense of duty. They forgot the primal curse God laid on man, which is not that he dies but that he grows old. Some day . . .”

He stopped so abruptly that Auriol turned to see if any one had come into the room.

“Some day?,” she repeated.

To her amazement, Ambrose had let fall his cigar and was hiding his face in his hands.

“Some day . . . I too . . .,” he muttered with a quaver.

V

AURIOL hurried to his side and threw herself on her knees by his chair:

“My dear, don’t talk like that! You’re a *boy*! But, if *you* don’t like the idea of getting old, can’t you be more merciful to the people who are old already? It may be necessary to ‘smash’ people, but I’m so frightened of all the enemies you must make!” The image that had obsessed her mind at luncheon returned disconcertingly.

"You're such gladiators, all of you! It's all right so long as you win, but if you slipped up in the blood of one of them! Peter Orpington; Sir John; oh, I can think of a dozen. Wounded, but not quite dead; with strength enough to drag themselves into striking-range. . . . Ambrose, I'm frightened when I think of that day!"

For answer, he lifted her on to the arm of his chair and fingered idly a long chain of beads round her neck.

"The primal curse," he repeated at length.

"But what will you do? I'm not very old, but I can remember when Asquith and Lloyd-George fell. They'd had their ups and downs; but during the war, at different times, they were idolized. When the tide turned. . . ."

"There was none so poor to do them reverence. That's the risk you run in embarking on the career of a gladiator. If I go, like the others, I shall expect to be set on, like the others. Will you stand by me, Auriol?"

"You should be ashamed to ask me that!," she cried in passionate indignation.

"I shouldn't blame you if you didn't," he sighed. "This dreadful business of growing old! All my life I seem to have been sentencing people simply because they were too old for their jobs; inadequate for my purposes. Laura. . . ."

It was the first time since their marriage that he had mentioned her name; and Auriol held her breath.

"Will you sentence me if I'm 'inadequate'?" she asked.

"You absurd child!"

"Oh, you're in love with me now, but if I disappoint you. . . ."

"You'll never disappoint me; and, if you did, I should still love you. My dear, you're everything to me. I couldn't live without you."

“ Then, if you’ll stand by me, I’ll stand by you.”

She held out her hand ; and he crushed it in his own :

“ I shall need you, Auriol. . . . Yes, I’ve thought many times of the enemies I make, but it can’t be avoided. I don’t do it for fun . . . or through malice. And God knows I don’t do it for my own advancement ! Nobody would ever believe that. I don’t suppose you do . . . ”

“ My dear, I believe implicitly whatever you say ! ”

“ Then I tell you I’m not a free agent. I act in a certain way because I must. I’m fulfilling a purpose that is not my own. You know that ever since I was a boy I had a mission . . . ” His voice became suddenly sardonic. “ Don’t quote me, will you ? People always said they didn’t mind old Gladstone’s having an ace up his sleeve, but they objected to his pretending that the Almighty put it there. Whatever the ultimate cause, I can’t help making enemies ; and some day, no doubt . . . I expected them to close in at the time of my divorce, but they couldn’t find a weapon. They’ll have found it when they see me weakening. That’s all part of the game. The only thing is to get my work done while I’m in full strength. And that, in turn, means that I can’t wait for Standish to retire or Ferrers to die. If they’re in the way, they must be cleared out, though I’m adding another couple to the list of my enemies. It’s a vicious circle. My God, if I’d come into the game at thirty, twenty ! . . . Well, I must go and do some work. What’s happening to-night ? ”

“ We’re dining with father.”

“ A family party ? I shall have to leave early.”

“ I wish you wouldn’t work so late, Ambrose : I can’t believe it’s good for you.”

“ Am I shewing signs of the primal curse ? ”

“ You’re looking tired. And you would never have

admitted there was any such thing as a primal curse when we married."

Springing to his feet, he lifted her up at arm's length :

" Now, baby, I shan't tell you my secret thoughts if you're so solemn ! "

" You'll tear my dress ! " Auriol contrived to suppress a cry of pain, though his hands threatened to drive her ribs into her lungs. If she admitted that she was hurt, however, he would have maddened her with apologies and caresses. " Let me go, dear : you're making me late for an appointment. "

Left to herself, she tried to analyse her feelings towards a man who attracted and repelled her alternately, mystifying her all the time and rousing admiration, bewilderment, love, compassion, fear and disgust in as many minutes.

Exceptional people, she reminded herself, had to be judged by exceptional standards. Her tenderness for Sir John Ferrers and for the daughter who had been her friend at Cambridge seemed to have melted away. When Akela, her lone wolf, fought his last fight, there would be few left in the pack with eyes to see or throats to howl their triumph.

CHAPTER II

A Declaration of Independence

“ O world, O world,
O jurists, rimers, dreamers, what you please,
We play a weary game of hide-and-peek !
We shape a figure of our fantasy,
Call nothing something, and run after it
And lose it, lose ourselves too in the search,
Till clash against us comes a somebody
Who also has lost something and is lost,
Philosopher against philanthropist,
Academician against poet, man
Against woman, against the living the dead,—
Then home, with a bad headache and worse jest !”

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING : *Aurora Leigh*.

I

HAVING no appointment to keep, Auriol decided impulsively that she would make one.

Perhaps she was troubled by the memory of her passage with Ambrose overnight ; perhaps she was more frightened than she cared to admit by her husband's attitude of resignation. “ *Some day . . . I too . . .*” Whatever the cause, she felt that an unprecedented effort was required of her

“ *That's all part of the game.*” . . .

Yes, it was the stoic resignation of the failing Akela, as he waited for the pack to turn on him ; and Auriol felt a passionate need to protect her lone wolf from his enemies. In that moment she loved her husband as

she had never loved any one before ; she prayed only that her body might be suffered to shield him ; and she only feared that he might have ceased to want her before he came to need her. He at least was free from excessive loyalty to old favourites ; he recognized his own intolerance and was not ashamed to hint that Laura had outgrown her usefulness . . . to him, or to the purpose which he fulfilled in spite of himself.

If Laura, why not Laura's successor ? It was easy for Auriol to protest that she would never disappoint him ; but, whenever she saw him with another woman's child, she knew that she had disappointed him already. That morning, as she drove to Laura's little flat, she had been conscious of her old uneasiness at this meeting of past and present ; that afternoon, as she talked to Ambrose, she felt that the past was repeating itself in the present.

The appointment was made with her doctor. To him, Auriol decided, she could say things that would have set her mother inconveniently wondering. She returned from the consultation repeating exultantly : " There's no reason why you shouldn't bear children. There's every reason why you should." Every reason ! . . . Ambrose found her dressed and waiting when he came back from his office and stared in amazement at her shining eyes.

" What have you been doing to yourself, child ?," he asked.

" I don't know ! Getting rid of the primal curse," she laughed. " I feel so happy ! I want to dance."

" Dance to me while I dress," he proposed. " When you're in this mood, you make me feel a boy again. It's your wonderful youth that made me fall in love with you. When I said you inspired me . . . Auriol, you don't regret marrying me ? "

When he was humble, she loved him even more than when he was helpless. He made her feel like Delilah on learning the secret of Samson's strength and weakness ; unlike Delilah, she was on fire to return him his trust unabused.

" My dear one, I shall never regret it as long as I can help you and make you happy."

II

WHEN they reached Manchester Square, Auriol found that the " family dinner " had outgrown its original plans. Her sisters were there, as she expected ; but she found that Colin had arrived without notice from Aldershot and was demanding that a party should be organized to dance and sup at Bellamy's.

Before going into the drawing-room, Auriol detached her brother from the telephone, where he was scattering invitations broadcast, and walked upstairs with one arm linked through his and the other through her husband's. It was only by deliberate informality of this kind that she could escape the sense of making a " stage " entry. In the twelve months before her marriage, the house had reverberated with so many family-councils that the first moments of any meeting were disturbed by echoes. Imogen must from time to time be remembering her fiery declaration that in the eyes of God there was no difference between stealing a woman's husband in open adultery and marrying a man who had won his freedom through the divorce-court. Joyce could hardly have forgotten her reiterated taunt that Auriol lacked even the threadbare excuse of a great passion. And Colin, when he betrayed embarrassment, was perhaps recollecting that he had invited Ambrose to discontinue visiting the house.

A nightmare! One could usually laugh away the memory of unpleasant scenes when the play had reached a happy ending; but, whenever she saw Philip or Guy bending over the *Tattler*, Auriol was reminded, with a stab, of the old recurrent family-councils and of her brother-in-law's tact in looking up apologetically to say: "Afraid I wasn't listening! Well . . . I rather feel it's not my funeral." In coming back, she always felt that she had come back to defy them all.

And yet the time for defiance was over!

"I want to have a word with you some time," Colin was saying to Ambrose. "I don't know if you have any pull with Carmichael . . ."

As Auriol hurried forward to embrace her placid and inscrutable mother, she could not help smiling at the revenges of time. If "my brother-in-law Ambrose Sheridan" was a phrase no longer heard on Tony Rushforth's lips, this was largely because it was working so long a shift on the lips of Imogen Wainwright. And, when Colin sought the colonial's secretary's aid to induce the secretary of state for war to secure him an appointment to the staff of the commander-in-chief in India, much water must have flowed between the banks of Lethe since Lord Orpington's daughter, whom Colin hoped to marry on the strength of the Indian appointment, applauded her father's dictum that politics with special reference to Ambrose Sheridan, was like the turf in attracting the blackguards of every class.

"It's good of you to spare us an evening, Ambrose," muttered Lord Otway.

A shy boy, Auriol felt, addressing a supercilious girl, could not have been more bashful in using the Christian name.

"Auriol, I've a *really* deserving case that I want

you to interest yourself in . . ." clamoured Joyce Cavaly.

Auriol was too happy to feel vindictive, too thankful that she had recovered the affection of her family to taunt any one with worshipping treason when it had prospered.

"Tell me what you want ; and I'll do it," she promised her sister. "I'm so pleased with life that I'll do whatever any one likes. How are you, everybody? I'm very glad to be back here!"

Apart from Geoffrey Mallock, who was more her husband's principal private shadow than his principal private secretary, and Lady Winifred Selhurst, who was already almost a member of the family, there was no one but near relations present. Looking round the familiar dining-room, Auriol sighed in happy assurance that she was going to enjoy herself. Sometimes, when the family was gathered in force, she was reminded too insistently that her husband and her father were barred by temperament and training from ever seeing a thing with the same eyes: Lord Otway would lapse into silence when he could not trust himself to speak; and Ambrose would fling himself on a hackneyed sentiment and denounce it as cant. Three or four times at every meeting some one had to say with a strained smile: "I think we'd better agree to differ"; and Ambrose hated people to run away, differing from him, when by their staying he might have convinced them.

To-night, for a happy change, no one seemed bent on arguing. Colin and Winifred were conversing in undertones; and Auriol, suddenly recollecting that no reason had been given for this family-gathering, wondered if they were going to announce their engagement. Both families, she knew, would be delighted: Colin had done

well in the war and better at the Staff College; he lived for his work, as befitted the son of his father, and in looks and manner had continued the Otway tradition into another generation. Brick-red of face, raven-black of hair, thin and buttoned close, he was what his father must have been thirty years before. And Winifred was the perfect wife for him: steady, sound, loyal; not disturbingly clever but universally competent.

Auriol cast about in her mind to see what strings she could pull to get him his coveted appointment to the staff of the commander-in-chief in India. Everything depended on Mr. Carmichael or his successor at the War Office.

"O mummie!" She decided that she must drop a hint of her success with the prime minister that day. "Mr. Standish was lunching. Feeding out of my hand, you might say . . ."

"I might, but I shouldn't," Lady Otway interrupted tranquilly. "A vulgar phrase, I call it."

"I nearly made him promise to buy a new hat. I believe he will, if all goes well. I shewed him a way out of all his difficulties . . ."

"I hear he's recommending you for the M.B.E.," said Mallock, grinning aslant and looking at her through one eyeglass and over the other.

"Thanks, I work for love."

"So do I, barring a salary that hardly covers my expenses. I work for love of seeing how much the patient British public will put up with," said Mallock with a conscientious attempt to live up to his reputation as a cynic. "Have you had time to read the C.O. submissions for the birthday honours, sir?," he asked Ambrose. "I sent a box to your house just before dinner."

"I'm going home early to tackle it. I trust you've not been holding out too extravagant hopes?"

"Oh, I've said nothing, sir. And I've not put in for anything on my own account. I hear the P.M.'s had some corkers suggested for *his* list. People who don't deserve knighthoods clamouring for baronetcies to put one across the knights; the new peers standing out for viscounties in the hope of not being mistaken for brewers. If I had my way with our new nobility, I'd start 'em all as earls: it's about the only chance their daughters will have, poor girls, of being 'ladies'."

"If I had my way," sighed Lord Otway, "I'd ration all prime ministers. Not more than one new creation a year for the next fifty years. We might have some chance of assimilating the newcomers then."

"I can never see why *life-peerages* . . ." began Lady Otway.

"If a peerage is worth having, it must be hereditary," Ambrose interrupted. "It's well that names like Marlborough, Wellington, Nelson should become part of our daily life. But you must distinguish between a peer and a lord of parliament. If we ever *do* reform the House of Lords, I want to see it as a senate of the whole empire; but, without waiting for that day, we can eliminate the absentees. The first lesson I should teach my son, when he was old enough to understand anything . . ." The emphatic voice stopped as though the speaker had been struck dumb. There was a cough, a laugh; and Ambrose turned to Lady Otway: "But I expect you think, like most women, that in the first years a child's education ought to be entrusted to the mother?"

"The trouble about what I think," Lady Otway answered promptly, "is that I never think the same thing two days running. It makes Otway mad. Now I've

been reading your articles about education for the army and navy . . .”

As soon as she dared look up, Auriol tried to catch her mother's eye and thank her for bridging the disastrous gulf in Ambrose's confident discourse. Whether or no the others had noticed anything, Lady Otway had; Ambrose had, too, in the moment when he publicly revealed his secret yearning and then clumsily tried to pretend that he had revealed nothing. Auriol felt that he could not have hurt her more if he had struck her. If only, only he would be patient! She looked across at Winifred Selhurst, wondering whether she too had heard a woman openly upbraided by her husband for failing as a woman; was she, by any chance, asking herself if she would do better, reminding herself that the Otways would expect an heir from their heir? The girl was still listening to Colin, soft-eyed and oblivious. Her troubles were still to come; and Auriol hardly knew whether to envy or pity her. Twelve months made so much difference! She was younger than Geoffrey Mallock, Winifred, Colin; but none of them had yet begun to live. . . .

“Educating people,” Lady Otway enunciated, “is like aiming from a moving ship at a moving target. When Colin was ten, I knew what he should be taught. Then I changed; and he changed; and the world changed; and ideas changed. Life's a great muddle. I'm inclined to teach children that they should do as they would be done by and then leave them to educate themselves.”

III

At the end of dinner Ambrose excused himself and returned home to work.

As he kissed her good-bye, bidding her enjoy herself,

Auriol wondered whether he was still trying to cover up his blunder. Her earlier self-reproaches had by now been forgotten in a hot rush of indignation. She had only been married a year; and many women refused to bear children, many girls refused to marry, until they had been given a little time to enjoy themselves. Only that morning she had complained to Laura that a chapter had been missed out of her life between Cambridge and Cleveland Row.

"Are you going on with these young people or will you stay with us?," Lady Otway asked when she came into the drawing-room.

Auriol looked uncertainly at her dress. She had intended to accompany Ambrose or at least to follow him as soon as the car could return for her; but there was little object in her going home if he had to work all the evening. On the other hand, it was at Bellamy's—two years before—that she had told Max she was not going to marry him; and, ever since, she had avoided the place. Ever since that night, she had refused to wear green and to drink *château Yquem* and to dance when the band played *What'll I do?* No doubt she was cowardly or sentimental, but she wanted no gratuitous reminders of that evening. For two years she had felt that, though he were ten thousand miles away, she would still see his drawn, incredulous face; and she might now be meeting him in the flesh. Would she think of him the less or the more if she saw him? To be honest with herself, she had to admit that all her late nervous turmoil dated from his return. He had caused her, in some way, to lose her poise. . .

"Will they be very late?," she asked.

"You needn't stay if they are. Or, if you'd rather stop here, I'll ask Joyce or Imogen to go. The difficulty

is that Winifred didn't know anything about the party at Bellamy's ; and I think her mother might like it better if some one took charge of her. I don't know why marriage should be thought to make people either respectable or responsible, but it is. My experience is that girls keep their heads and married women lose them : I believe it has something to do with that throwing back the veil at weddings, it seems to loosen the screws. If you'll just put in an appearance, darling, I needn't bother."

Whether she needed an excuse or not, here was one to her hand. As soon as the car returned for her, Auriol set out with an almost forgotten sense of adventure, which survived until she found herself inside the room where she had dined so often with Max before her marriage. He was not there, she observed with thankfulness ; indeed, there was hardly any one that she knew, apart from Sir John Ferrers, monocled and fussy in one corner, and Mr. Carmichael, with a staid circle of daughters, in another. From considerations of policy, Auriol stopped for a few minutes at both tables, only leaving when the two men observed in almost identical terms : " What have you done with Sheridan ? Ah, he'd do much less harm dancing here than writing his everlasting articles ! "

Auriol laughed in a manner which was intended to convey that they must regard her husband as good-humouredly as she regarded them. No room in politics for a thin skin ! Then she remembered that she was off duty for the night and tried to feel young, but Geoffrey Mallock was an indifferent dancer and she could find no substitute. After a couple of collisions she elected to sit out ; and, when they all met for supper, Winifred Selhurst volunteered her own willingness for bed.

Auriol drove home, after dropping the others, with a

vague feeling of disappointment. Henceforth she was unlikely to hanker after another evening of this kind, but she was sorry to have her roseate illusion shattered. Had she really become so old in a year?

Her husband's work-room was in darkness; and she went up to the library. That also was dark; and she walked up a dark staircase to her bedroom. As the chauffeur had mentioned no change of plans, she could only presume that Ambrose had come home and then been called out by telephone.

"Another crisis? Poor old P.M.!", she sighed.

On such occasions Ambrose usually left a reassuring note on her dressing-table; but to-night, though one lamp had been left burning, there was no indication that he had been inside her room. Auriol undressed and began to write her diary for the last two days.

"Dined with Mr. Caldwell to meet Max on his return from Chili. A gem of a house in Bruton Street with the loveliest red-lacquer drawing-room I've ever seen. I'm afraid Mr. C. doesn't appreciate it a bit, though he's quite honest: it all came from his father and he keeps it purely from sentiment. I sat between Max and Peter Orpington and made record number of bread pills, as M. talked to Aylwin the whole evening and darling Peter gave us a history of horse-racing in England without addressing himself to any one in particular. A marvellous chestnut ice-pudding with sauce that I can only call hot ambrosia. Left early and picked A. up at the Leominster Rooms, where he had been speaking. He told me relations were strained once more in the cabinet: Ferrers, Carmichael and Rodney threatening to resign unless A. promises to keep his hands off their departments, in other words unless he resigns. We discussed this at length. Much upset by a fracas in

which A. engaged on my a/c. I wish he wouldn't; and I wish for many reasons he would remember how terrifically strong he is. I've seen men simply wincing when he shakes hands with them. Rather a bad night, as there are a lot of things I want to get clear and I was thinking about them instead of trying to sleep.

"Called on a friend in the morning and discussed many things, collecting one or two rather helpful ideas. Who was it who said you couldn't have an army composed entirely of field-m Marshals? Reminded of this to-day, when the P.M. came to lunch: all these cabinet troubles arise from fact that ministers have fought their way up from the ranks and are all much of a muchness in ability and obstinacy. I likened them to successful gladiators who had formed themselves into a Praetorian Guard. A. agreed to the extent of admitting that they'd go back to the gladiatorial business the moment any one of them became too weak or too strong for his place in the ranks. I don't know whether he was tired or whether he was just thinking aloud, but he rather made my blood run cold by talking of the 'primal curse': i.e. getting old. All the courage and all the hopelessness of your gladiator: hodie tibi, cras mihi; moriturus te saluto.

"Took expert advice (very comforting) on a point which has worried me lately. Put in mind of it quite suddenly before luncheon, when Mrs. Rushforth and her boy called for Tony . . ."

At a faint sound, Auriol broke off her guarded narrative and thrust the book into a drawer. The sound was not repeated; and she brought the record down to her return that night from Bellamy's. "*A. not in: presumably at No. 10.*" Then she looked at her watch.

Half-past two. It was incredible that Ambrose should still be at a conference; and she walked to the door.

There was no light in the hall or on the stairs. She made her way to the library, then to the work-room, but there was no sign of him in either. Coming up, she heard the earlier faint sound repeated and noticed for the first time a pair of shoes outside the dressing-room door. So he had been in the house all the while! In bed. Asleep. After wondering, perhaps, why she was so late. She listened at the door and was reassured by his regular breathing, but she could not forgive herself for coming home so late. He had wanted her; he had come to look for her and had left a light burning in her room. It was the first time in twelve months that she had not been punctually at hand to receive his confidences, his caresses, or his complaints.

Auriol got into bed with an uncomfortable feeling that she had failed him again.

IV

HE came into her room on the heels of the maid who brought her tea.

"You slipped in very quietly last night," he began.

"It's as well I did! I never imagined you could be in bed by one. I listened and listened. About half-past two I went down to see if you'd crept in without my hearing you; and, when I came up again, lo and behold!, there were your shoes outside your door. You weren't feeling seedy or anything, were you?"

"No. I expected to see you about eleven; so, when I'd finished my boxes, I didn't think it was worth beginning any new work."

He spoke sulkily, like a boy who had missed a treat through some one else's lateness. Auriol cleared the chair by her bedside and invited him to take it.

"I went on to Bellamy's," she explained. "When you said you'd be working till all hours, I didn't think I could do any good by hurrying home."

"Bellamy's?," he repeated with a frown. "I don't know him, do I?"

"It's not a person, darling, it's a place. A club where people dine and dance. Haven't you heard of it?"

"There's no reason why I should. I don't dance; and, if I did, that's hardly the place I should choose."

Auriol sipped her tea and glanced at the handwriting of her letters. Her brain was still drowsy; but she was wide enough awake to know that Ambrose was in one of his difficult moods. Instead of accepting the proffered chair, he stood stiffly at the foot of the bed as though he wished her to understand that he was not to be seduced by her pretty ways. As the hot tea roused her, she wondered whether to run the risk of justifying herself or the greater risk of being told that she was "trying to change the subject." His curt disparagement of Bellamy's constituted a rebuke which she ought not to accept in silence; but she might call down severer censure if she protested.

"I used to go there quite a lot before I married," she remarked indifferently. "It's become very dull, though, I thought last night."

"What was the party?"

"Colin, Geoffrey Mallock, Winifred Selhurst and me. The others never turned up, so mother asked me to look after Winifred in her place. Lady Orpington's rather old-fashioned in some ways and might not have liked her to go without a married woman."

"It's that kind of place, is it?"

Auriol struggled with a rushing tide of impatience:

"I don't quite know what kind of place you mean. I

used to go there unchaperoned ; but then I never saw any harm in dining alone with a man. Mother didn't either. I know there *are* people who take Lady Orpington's view . . ."

"I'm one of them," he interrupted. "Human nature being what it is, I don't trust women alone with men and I don't trust men alone with women."

So bluntly proclaimed, this jungle-code rather disgusted Auriol ; and she felt that an independent critic might justifiably tell Ambrose not to mete other people by his own measure.

"I think Winifred and Colin can look after themselves. So can Geoffrey. There wasn't really the least need for me to go . . ."

"Then I wish you hadn't gone. If any one had seen you there . . . As my wife you have a certain position."

It was only by bowing her head and biting her lip that Auriol could refrain from reminding him by words or looks that she had a certain position before she became his wife.

"But, Ambrose, you're not being fair to the place," she expostulated. "You've never been there . . ."

"I've been to places like it. Before you were born. The Bohemian, the Alcazar, the Florida. I know the kind of women who went there ; and the men ; and *why* they went."

"Then all I can say is, they must have been very different from Bellamy's. It was founded by people who thought the Stage and Turf was becoming too rowdy ; you may be interested to know that father was an original member."

The announcement gave him obvious cause for reflection ; but he refused to yield without a final attack :

"If it's so respectable, I can't see why Lady Orpington

should make trouble ; and I can't see why you and your mother should fancy she would make trouble. But I'll take the respectability for granted. What I don't like is your going off with a hare-brained party . . ."

"I've told you who was there," she warned him.

"Without consulting me. When you'd told me you were coming home as soon as I could send the car back."

Any answer that she could frame would have turned an altercation into a quarrel. Auriol put down her tray and began to open her letters.

"*'Mrs. Wilbur Carmichael requests the pleasure . . .'*" she began to read. "I'm afraid this is going to be awkward."

"We'll discuss that later. Have I made my wishes quite clear, Auriol?"

The dictatorial tone stung her into attack.

"I'm afraid you haven't," she answered. "Do you object to my going to a club where my father gives parties whenever he has young people to entertain? Do you object to my going with my own brother? Have you any fault to find with your own private secretary? Is Lady Winifred Selhurst an unsuitable companion for me? What is it, Ambrose?"

"I object to your going off behind my back . . ."

"Mother never *asked* me till after you'd gone," she protested wearily.

"I object to young married women dancing with the rag, tag and bobtail of a night-club."

"Colin and Geoffrey," she reminded him. "My brother ; and a boy I've known since I was in the nursery."

"But you're not in the nursery now. You're a young married woman ; Mallock's a young unmarried man . . ."

More was said, but Auriol could not listen to it. His pains in referring elaborately to a man as "Mallock"

when she spoke to and of him as "Geoffrey" seemed almost a rebuke. More than once Auriol had suspected that her husband was jealous of younger men, but she had never coupled jealousy, in a free-living cosmopolitan, with this incongruous streak of provincialism. In Victorian days, she knew, there were husbands who would not let another man take their wives down to dinner; in that epoch of fierce possessiveness every allusion to the stranger arm round the alien waist was become a classic, to be resurrected with its accompanying crinolines and hair-nets in reconstructed plays of the period. Now, if the practice survived anywhere, it must be in the dark temples of middle-class living. Auriol tried to picture the expressions of her friends if she told them, in the words Ambrose had used, that he did not like a young married woman to dance with a young unmarried man. It was a poor consolation to know that they would not believe her.

"I'm afraid I don't share your views a bit," she told him when at last he paused.

"Then what do you propose to do, may I ask?"

"My dear, I don't propose to do anything at the moment," she answered. "I shall use my judgement. You wouldn't call father and mother exactly . . . *careless* in the way they brought me up; and there's nothing I did as a *jeune fille* that I can't do as a married woman. Perhaps if I took to climbing trees, as I used to, that would seem undignified; so I shan't climb trees. You needn't be afraid for your position, Ambrose: I'm very proud of it and of you and of being your wife. I shan't cheapen it. I happen to be very proud of father's position, too; and I'd cut my hands off before I did anything to cheapen that or hurt him. It's only natural that you and I should think differently about some things. Life

would be very dull if we didn't. But, until you and father both tell me that I'm letting you down, I must decide things like last night's party for myself."

V

THOUGH her voice was steady, Auriol could feel her heart thumping.

Twice in thirty-six hours she had defied him ; and, as he stood silent, she felt that no one could ever have defied him before. Unreasonably, in the moment of her triumph, she wanted to recall her defiance and throw away her victory. Defeat was so much harder for him to bear than for other men ; defeat by a woman was not ordinary defeat ; and she, overshadowed by him, was not even an ordinary woman. As he was so fond of telling her, she was little more than a child ; and to press her victory seemed perverted cruelty.

Auriol wished that her summing-up had left him a flaw to seize. He stood like a big, sullen boy ; and she wanted to laugh him into good-humour, forcing him to be friends, perhaps—yes !—, perhaps even telling him he might have his own way after all. Instinct warned her against yielding. Two nights before she had surrendered on hearing that he had thrashed a man for her sake ; these scenes were sufficiently horrible without their being made fruitless by a show of strength on one day and of weakness on another.

" I see. We know where we are now."

The words were empty enough, but the tone infuriated her. If she had threatened to run away, if he were thanking her for the warning, he could not have put himself more openly into a state of war. As her patience evaporated, Auriol forgot all her pity for the disappointed

boy. Her party overnight, which she had hardly been able to endure, became a symbol of freedom and delight. She would go again! As Laura had urged more than once, she would collect again the friends of her own age, recreate her lost youth, make a life for herself instead of living as her husband's shadow. He could not stop her, he could not starve her! She had only to defy him; and he collapsed!

It was so easy: its very ease frightened her. She did not want these victories, least of all over a man she loved; a man, too, who could not bear to be beaten.

"Ambrose!"

"Yes?"

"Ambrose, come here! Quite close. Look me in the eyes! You know I love you. And you know you can trust me. If I flirted with every man I saw—which I don't, darling!—, it would mean nothing. You mustn't be jealous. At least . . . as long as you're jealous, I shall know you love me, but I don't want you to shew your love in that way. My dear one, I can't bear these scenes! Take me in your arms and tell me we're friends again!"

"You seem to think . . ."

"*Darling*, don't go on like this! We can't have scenes every time we disagree and we can't agree always. I'm not going to let you down . . ."

"You needn't bother about me. I'm not as easy to 'let down' as you think."

The unyielding arrogance of tone gave her a chance of appealing to his vanity.

"But you're afraid I shall let myself down? Isn't that it?," she asked. "You feel I'm rather a little idiot, when all's said and done . . ."

"I didn't say that; and I don't feel it. I *do* feel,

though, that I know rather more about the world than you do."

"And you want to protect me."

"I *am* your husband."

"I know. Thank you . . . Dearest, won't you be happy if I promise you never to do anything that I wasn't allowed and encouraged to do before I married? You can trust me as much as father did? Anything else: if I have the slightest doubt, I'll come to you for your advice. I *promise* that. Kiss me and say that's all you want."

The illusion of victory seemed to satisfy him; and he lifted her into his arms.

"All I want is to keep you from coming to harm," he whispered. "I love you so much that, if you were another man's wife, I couldn't trust myself not to steal you."

He kissed her hungrily and stroked her smooth skin as though he would have liked to devour her. Auriol shut her eyes against the light and nestled in his arms. It was good to have peace even at the cost of a shattered illusion: she would always be able to cajole him with flattery; and, so long as he was in love with her, she could always melt him with her beauty. It was strange to think she had ever protested that people exaggerated the importance of passion.

When he left her, Auriol lapsed into restless lethargy. She could not go to sleep again and she did not want to get up. There was no point in tossing on a hot bed; but there was nothing to be gained by going downstairs at nine o'clock. Long before she entered the house, it had been organized like any other department of her husband's life: a butler, a housekeeper or a secretary controlled every detail; if she returned without warning

after six months' absence, there would be flowers in every room and fresh biscuits by her bed. If she telephoned down to Hallam: "Thirty for luncheon in ten minutes' time," he would only reply "Very good, my lady." The first year of marriage ought to have been an adventure. If Colin got his Indian appointment and Winifred went out to marry him, they would begin their new life in a new country, with strange servants and an unfamiliar house; novel ways, an unknown language. Why, before Max sailed for South America, he had had to learn Spanish. . .

Auriol scrambled out of bed and hurried to her bathroom. It was hardly her fault if she had too much leisure; but it would be her fault wholly if she became dreamy and discontented.

As soon as she was dressed, she put her head in at the door of the work-room to enquire the plans for the day. For the first time in many weeks they had a disengaged evening; and Auriol felt that it would be better for the nerves of both if they did not dine alone.

"Shall I get tickets for a play?," she asked. "Or is there any one we can invite at short notice?"

"What about young Hendry?"

The question took her by surprise; but she knew no reason why it should disconcert her.

"I doubt if we shall get him," she answered. "He was to telephone as soon as he had a free night; and as I haven't heard from him . . ."

"There's no harm in trying. Don't you bother: I'll get Rushforth to see where he's to be found."

"Shall I ask any one to meet him?"

"We might keep him to ourselves. I want to hear how he's been getting on."

CHAPTER III

Time, the Healer

“ I have seen the desire of mine eyes,
The beginning of love,
The season of kisses and sighs
And the end thereof.”

ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE: *A Lamentation.*

I

FROM the moment when Tony Rushforth reported that Max would be delighted to dine, Auriol tried to imagine why he had been invited.

It was out of keeping with her husband's character that he should make public atonement for a private injury. He never admitted, indeed, that he injured any one; and Max was not “useful” enough to be worth conciliating. She could not be sure that Ambrose had ever regarded Max as a rival; he might well be honestly amazed to hear that his kindness in making an inexperienced boy his secretary was being interpreted as a malign plot to keep an ardent but impecunious suitor from earning enough to keep a wife. Ambrose and she never discussed Max; and she would not have suspected jealousy if she had not been conscious that her own restlessness and her husband's sudden aptitude for fault-finding dated from the night of Mr. Caldwell's dinner. Was Ambrose setting a trap? Did he want to see them together?

And why had Max consented to come ?

" I suppose he wants to see me again," Auriol decided, " though he wasn't very forthcoming the other night. Really, after two years . . . Time's a great healer." . . .

Though dinner was ordered for half-past eight, she went upstairs at seven and was dressed when her husband came in at eight.

" Hullo ! Is the party off ?," he asked, when he found her in a tea-gown, writing letters.

" Not that I know of," she answered in surprise.

" Oh ! When I saw you wearing that what-you-may-call it . . . I'm going to put on a long coat ; and I expect Hendry will, too."

" When it's only the three of us ? Tony ought to have warned him."

" I think a man should always wear a long coat in London if there are going to be women present. And, if the men wear full regimentals, I suppose the women have to doll themselves up to correspond. But you know more about these things than I do."

Whatever she knew or thought, Auriol decided that it was impolitic to disagree over a tea-gown ; and her complaisance was rewarded when he came in, half-way through his own dressing, to compliment her on the frock she had chosen in substitution. Together they explored her jewellery ; and, if Max had to wait by himself for ten minutes, she had the gratification of coming in on the arm of a contented husband.

While the men shook hands, Auriol was at pains to watch their faces. Both squared up, looking each other in the eyes ; a greyhound and a mastiff, she thought, each the best of his kind. There was no want of cordiality in voice or grip, but she fancied that each was taking the other's measure.

"Thinner, aren't you, Hendry?," Ambrose asked.

"I bin sweatin' the fat off," Max answered. "How you bin keepin', sir? You're lookin' well."

"I've never felt better in my life, thanks. Let me see, how long is it . . . ? Two years? I certainly don't feel two years older. . . . D'you find the house very different?," he asked, as Max looked round a room which he had last seen newly decorated and upholstered by Laura as a welcome to her husband on his return from touring the world with his royal commission. "That's my wife's handiwork."

"It does her credit." Max was looking less for changes than for marks of identification on a stage that had been set rather self-consciously by Mr. Christie as "*Lady Sheridan's Drawing-Room*". "Well, sir, I've read a certain amount about you . . ."

"Oh, that can wait! I want to hear everything from the beginning. Two years! And you've been all the time with what's-their-name, Patterson and Mackenzie? I forget whether you're married yet?"

"You couldn't ask a woman to bury herself in the place I've come from! Arica. I don't know if you've ever been there. That's been my headquarters." . . .

In a few sentences, as they went down to dinner, Max described a barren life in a barren country. If the description also was barren, this—Auriol decided—might be due to repetition. No doubt every one had been asking the same questions; and he seemed to be replying by rote. In time he appeared to notice that he was not gripping his audience; and the narrative ended abruptly.

"It doesn't sound a cheerful place," Auriol commented. "But you're being transferred now?"

"Not from Chili."

"D'you want to be?," asked Ambrose. "I was always

sorry you went there. Even two years ago I could have found you something less outlandish ; and when I went to the Colonial Office . . .”

Auriol experienced a pang of apprehension. Throughout the time that he had worked as private secretary, Max had been anæsthetized with illusory promises of wonderful appointments. It would be embarrassing if he were tactless enough to recall them, though Ambrose had hardly set a good example of tact by his thoughtless reference to marriage. His only excuse must be that he had never looked on Max as a rival.

“ I’m afraid you can only call it pure cussedness, sir,” Max laughed, “ brightened up with a bit of honest superstition. I was stayin’ with my poor old father ; and he as good as said I was hopeless. No use *me* lookin’ for a job. Oh, isn’t it ?, I said to myself ; and I set my teeth. That very day, comin’ up from Newmarket, I met the cove who offered me my present billet. I didn’t know him from Adam ; and he didn’t know me. But I felt it was the finger of fate.”

“ And you don’t regret it ? That’s champagne you’re refusing.”

“ Never touch it, thank you, sir. If I may have a weak whiskey-and-soda . . . You have to keep a pretty firm grip on yourself out on the coast. No, I regret nothing.”

II

Was there a hint of defiance in his voice ?

After their uneasy meeting at Mr. Caldwell’s house, Auriol could not understand why Max had exposed himself gratuitously to an encounter with a man whom he hated and a woman who made him uncomfortable. If

not defiant, the voice sounded arrogant. He had found his job when every one said he was hopeless ; did he now mean them to see that he grudged them nothing, perhaps even that he congratulated himself on his timely escape ? Sitting back in shadow, she studied the two faces : youth against middle age, the new and the old in pugilism. Max was not unlike Carpentier. . . .

“ I’ve not been in Chili for twenty years,” her husband was saying. “ That was Patagonia, though. A very big land-deal . . . ”

“ Yes ?,” said Max with polite interest.

As she listened to them talking, Auriol came to feel that they were indeed sparring. Though Ambrose affected to be appreciative, he contrived to make his appreciation patronizing : it was impossible for him to discuss Max’s appointment without adding that he could have improved on it ; he could not mention a land-deal in Patagonia without boasting that it was a “ very big ” land-deal. When he pointed out that it was champagne Max was refusing, he seemed almost to be hinting that his guest could not hope to be offered such champagne every day. It was the old hand taunting the newcomer for venturing into a ring where he could never hope to win a fight.

From stolidity or self-control Max shewed no sign of resentment. His forehead had puckered for a moment when Ambrose asked if he was yet married, but the frown might be only for the discomfort of the west coast. A bad moment, that, for a hostess. Really, Ambrose could not have been more maladroit if he had tried. Perhaps he *was* trying . . .

Auriol checked in horror. Natural consideration for a guest was developing into a fantastic suspicion of her husband. Had Ambrose invited Max in order to triumph

over him? However grotesquely, it explained the invitation in some sort. It explained why he had insisted on such a display of finery, why he chose her jewels himself and, under cover of a compliment to her taste, drew attention to the richness and beauty of the house. It explained his boast that he had not aged a day in two years. The race was not always to the swift; nor the battle to the strong.

"That's a poor drink. Are you sure you won't change your mind?"

Auriol looked up in time to see Max drowning a spoonful of whiskey in a tumbler of soda-water. Ambrose had finished his sherry and was beginning on the champagne. He would consume a bottle without assistance and, without ill-effects, mix it with anything that came afterwards. He ate as liberally as he drank; and he smoked as heavily as he ate. At other times Auriol took pride in the magnificent indestructibility of his constitution; but to-night his very eating and drinking seemed a calculated boast that the forties were more than a match for the twenties.

"I'm really in trainin', sir," Max answered. "I hope to get some polo while I'm here."

"What are your plans?," Auriol asked.

"I shall stay in London till after Ascot. Then I go to my poor old father for the July meetin's and to Blue Peter for Goodwood. I sail a week after that."

"And how long will you be away this time?"

"Can't say. Caldwell's taken me with all engagements and forfeits. He may cable next year to order me home on leave; or he may die without ever rememberin' he's sent me out there. I shall drift up and down the coast from Punta Arenas to Guayaquil: any boat I can find, any pub I can find . . ."

"H'm. What Patterson and Mackenzie do with their men is what I want to do with the colonial service," Ambrose muttered; and Auriol sat forward in sudden relief. So long as he would talk about himself or his work, the party might still escape being ship-wrecked. "In time you hope for a job in London?"

"If you know Arica . . .," Max laughed.

"Exactly," Ambrose interrupted. "Oh, I don't wonder our pampered Downing Street crowd jibs a bit. Don't you sometimes feel you'd like to marry and settle down in a permanent home?"

"Most of us have to wait for what we want, sir."

"I know. And perhaps we appreciate it all the more when we get it. Humanly speaking, my wandering days are over. I enjoyed them, but I'm glad to be in my own house, opposite my own wife, with my own books and pictures all round me. Now, *you* . . ."

Try as she would, Auriol could no longer struggle against the suspicion that her husband was deliberately taunting Max. He had ceased being vulgar only to become vindictive. Under his smooth generalizations, he was contrasting the man who had married her with the man who had failed to marry her; and he was now concerned less with his own success than with Max's failure. This was the penalty of aiming too high; the punishment for having caused Ambrose Sheridan a few months' anxiety. Hitherto, if Max suspected anything, he had not betrayed himself; but now, spreading over either cheek-bone, a faint flush warned her that some of her husband's many barbs had found their mark.

At the end of dinner Ambrose went to the telephone; and in his brief absence Auriol tried to make amends for his behaviour. At first she and Max were both embarrassed at being left alone; and he would only comment

conventionally on the flowers. When, however, she thanked him for coming at short notice, he regained his self-possession.

"I hadn't forgotten I was to propose myself, but I bin so busy," he explained. "You see, I'm takin' over the inspection of a dozen branches I've never seen. Each one employs a tidy number of men; and the directors want me to say whether A's doin' well enough to be promoted, whether B ought to be recalled and whether it's C's fault that the returns are goin' down. I'm learnin' the life-story of two or three hundred men I've never set eyes on. It's confusin' at first, but I'm gettin' the hang of it. Sorry if I've been duller than usual to-night, but my head's simply bunged up with names and confidential reports."

"But you haven't been dull, Max! I adore other people's shop. And it's so interesting from *you* of all people."

"It's all . . ., absolutely all I care about." For a moment Auriol thought he was going to say: "*It's all I have left*"; and to such a confession she had no answer ready. In his two years' schooling, however, Max had learned to control his feelings and to hide his thoughts. "Not business so much as trade," he continued, staring at the chandelier as though he was unconscious that they had been left alone together for the first time since their parting at Bellamy's two years before. "I tumbled to it in the war, when the submarines were pottin' our merchantmen: the movement of commodities about the world, the way we paid for them and so on. A cove I was with in the Arkangel show worked out a game that we used to play by the hour: imagine you've a charter to carry, oh, Christmas puddin's to Rangoon; how will you get back? We worked out where we had to water

and coal, how long we'd wait for a crop, what intermediate tradin' we'd do, port and canal dues, insurance and demurrage. Any ship-owner would have torn us in pieces, I expect, but it was good fun in those everlastin' Russian nights and we learnt a lot about where things grow and what not. Our colonel was a knowledgeable card ; and he used to umpire. I had the whole of my cargo seized once by puttin' in to Port of Mexico when there was a revolution ; and Billy Glasebrook—the cove I used to play with—paid millions in fines because he was always navigatin' on his own in compulsory-pilotage areas. Billy starved his men, too ; but then he always said I skimped my insurance. We had great fun."

" But why did you never tell me ? " Auriol had always believed that Max's reading in those days was confined to the *Racing Calendar*. " I'd have played too."

" Oh, you were too high-brow. While Billy and I were riskin' our lives at sea, you'd have been profiteerin' on the exchange. That was way above my head. We were humble merchants with one room in Leadenhall Street : two ships and a telephone. . . . I'd give something to see old Billy again ; but he's playin' about with cotton in Liverpool and I'm tryin' to knock common honesty into half-caste clerks."

" But you're happy ? " Auriol had not meant to ask such a question ; but she was piqued, in spite of herself, by Max's independence. Time had healed him almost more quickly and completely than she liked. She did not want to remind him that he had once been in love with her ; but he need not have forgotten that they had been close friends. So far, he had only looked at her when they shook hands ; and he had not asked her a single question about herself. " You're really absorbed in your work ? "

"Yes. 'Tain't an obsession. I'm enjoyin' my leave and I shall be sorry when it comes to an end."

"I must see lots of you before that, Max!"

"Oh, we're sure to meet. D'you ever go racin' nowadays?"

"Hardly at all. London is our best place for meeting. I'm usually engaged in the evening, but any afternoon you like to drop in . . ."

"I doubt if that's possible."

"You should have said you'd do all you could to *make* it possible," Auriol laughed reprovingly.

"My manners never *were* anything to write home about," he answered, unabashed, as Ambrose came back to his place.

III

THERE was a period of silence before any one could open a new conversational suit. Auriol asked whether the telephone-communication was important; her husband shrugged his shoulders; and Max recalled a forgotten anecdote of Billy Glasebrook. When coffee was brought in, Ambrose looked at his watch and enquired whether the car had arrived.

"I have to go out," he announced briefly. "Where are you staying, Hendry? I can drop you or send the car on."

"But it's only ten o'clock! You mustn't drive him away yet!," Auriol protested.

"He'll excuse you, I'm sure. You were very late last night and you're looking fagged out." Bending over her chair, he kissed her on both cheeks. "Be thankful you have me to look after you."

Refusing a cigar, Max shook hands and accompanied

his host with alacrity. Something, said in the hall, made both men laugh; and they were still laughing when Auriol went to her room. So the little party had been a success! Max could not have seen that he was being baited; perhaps she had only imagination to thank for making her fancy that there had been any tension between the two of them. And yet Max had told her only eight-and-forty hours ago that it was difficult, if not impossible, for them to meet! Was he cured? Had there ever been a wound to heal? Auriol found herself standing in front of her telephone; she was strongly tempted to find out from Laura what Max had said of her in Arica.

"To-morrow . . .," she decided. "And it isn't curiosity. It certainly isn't pique. If we're going to meet at the Orpingtons' for Goodwood, I must *know* . . ."

Driving across the Park next day at an earlier hour than usual, she remembered that she had not telephoned to find out if Laura would be at home. She always had been; Auriol assumed she always would be. What did she do with herself in the intervals between these clandestine visits? How did she occupy herself away from London? In belated contrition Auriol suddenly realized that she had never made a picture of the other woman's life. In the spring Laura came into existence, impinging very slightly and very secretly on her own life. In the autumn she disappeared; and, if any one had enquired her whereabouts, Auriol could have answered that her name would be found on the passenger-list of a certain ship and that the ship was at that moment on a certain parallel of latitude. By an effort of imagination which she had in fact never made, Auriol would have been able to add that Laura must now be resting, now pacing the decks, now getting into thinner clothes; but her image was invested with no more soul or body than that of any

one else who figured on the same list. Did she talk or read? Was she living again in the past? Or was her spirit five, ten thousand miles away, brooding over a corner of Westminster?

"I want to hear about *you* to-day," Auriol began, pointing to a litter of sailing-lists. "Where are you off to this year? Union-Castle . . . That means South Africa. Laura . . . Laura, when you go away like this, aren't you very . . . lonely?"

The sailing-lists were collected and slipped into a drawer.

"Lonely?" The older woman puzzled over the word before rejecting it. Her manner was at last so tranquil, her brown eyes so steady and her gentle face so composed that Auriol could hardly recognize in her the nerve-racked, hysterical woman who had invaded Manchester Square to stop the marriage. Did Laura herself recall that meeting, when she predicted that her husband's fever would have worn itself out in a year and that, if Auriol wanted to help him, she had better become his mistress until he needed fresher "inspiration"? In some way Laura had armed herself with a prophylactic against suffering: she had exhausted emotion or discovered philosophy. "Lonely?" she repeated. "Not in the ordinary sense. You see, I'd lost Ambrose so long before we parted finally. We weren't companions in those last years; and, though I felt I'd been robbed of my vocation when I couldn't even look after him, I've adjusted myself. . . . You're not old enough to feel it yet, Auriol, but you'll find the wife is only the crysalis of the mother; and I daresay women who have no children become mothers to their husbands earlier than other women. There's no one to compete for their love. . . . There was a time—I can't tell you when!—, a time when I found

myself looking on Ambrose as my son. I put up with things from him that a wife who was only a wife would never tolerate from her husband. Perhaps I put up with too much, perhaps I spoilt him; but he was such a boy that it made my heart ache to see him disappointed."

Auriol thought of the night when she had defied and beaten him, only to look for a means of undoing her victory.

"Oh, don't I know that?," she murmured.

"Already? . . . The bad time, since you ask me, was when we parted. He wasn't my lover, we'd brought no children into the world, but . . . my dear, you'll feel it when your eldest son becomes engaged: a woman, a strange woman between him and you, a woman who can't understand him as you do, a devilish woman with a devil's power of hurting him." . . . She paused to laugh at her own vehemence. "Later, so far as I see all round me, one finds that the strange woman is not so terrible; he's still your son, though you see very little of him. Ambrose . . . I never see him at all, I depend on you to tell me about him, but he's still what he was before we parted." She broke off and stared out of window. "If you'd said 'empty' . . .," she resumed pensively. "And yet, my life's no emptier than if my last child had married and gone to live abroad. That's the way to look at it!"

Auriol felt that she was admonishing herself and dared not point out the weakness of the analogy; to remind her that children who married and went to live abroad usually returned home would be to emphasize that Ambrose had disappeared for ever. And yet had he?

"You say you never see him at all now. Could it be arranged?," she asked. "If I told him I'd met you . . ."

The brown eyes filled with sudden alarm.

"No!"

"But why not? I think you've almost a right if you want to. He's under very great obligations to you . . ."

"Does *he* think so? If he does, he won't want to be reminded of them; no one does."

"But you could meet as friends. There's been no quarrel."

"There's antipathy, which is worse. He thinks of me as a woman he loved and outgrew: I represent a sickening history of petty irritations. No . . . Never tell him that you meet me (He'll never ask!): he'd think I was interfering; and, if you admitted that you sometimes asked my advice, he'd think poorly of you for needing it. I'll come when he sends for me, . . . from the ends of the earth."

"But I don't believe it would ever occur to him!"

"Perhaps not. Indeed, I hope not. If he did, it would mean something very serious. I used to think . . . No, I won't say that!"

"Oh, Laura, I thought we had no secrets!"

"Well, I used to think you *must* break apart. Age and upbringing . . . I was afraid he'd shock you."

Auriol looked up in sudden apprehension to see if an answer was expected of her. The satyr that was inherent in every man had no doubt grinned startingly at Laura; and to one of her reticence and aloofness the revelation must have been more disturbing than to women of a franker age who had been taught to say that it was morbid to be ashamed of nature.

"I imagine every husband does," she answered after a pause. "I only hope I haven't shocked him." If Auriol had a normal endowment of modesty, Ambrose had an abnormal endowment of false shame. "If you lose one or two illusions, you make up for it by your discoveries; and that's the important thing. If Ambrose died, every

man he'd ever employed would be in mourning. They adore him, they know he'll get them justice. He's a hard master ; they must have their souls saved for them in his way, but they look on him as the great underdog, who befriends all underdogs and never forgets his own struggles. I never guessed that till we married ; but the letters, the people who came to see me ! That sort of thing doesn't get into the press, but I'd forgive him a lot of disillusionment for it. To work for him would be an honour ! When I see notices about '*Hannah Smith, for thirty-eight years the faithful servant and friend . . .*', it makes my blood boil. If Hannah Smith had been in service with Ambrose, she'd have been properly paid and pensioned so that she could marry or retire or do whatever a free-born being wanted to do." . . .

She stopped at the expression of surprise on Laura's face. If she had not already been forgiven, Auriol knew that she was forgiven in the moment when she discovered that human suffering meant something to Ambrose and that of all who mumbled that there always had been plagues, pestilences and famines, he, almost alone, refused to admit that there always should be.

And yet, never realizing that suffering humanity was made up of sensitive units, he was probably oppressing some one at this moment !

"When you talk like that . . ." Laura began uncertainly.

IV

AURIOL kissed her wet cheeks and slipped out of the room.

In some way she had recaptured the old passionate enthusiasm that had first drawn her to Ambrose. Shocks ? There had been many ; and there would be more. She

invited a shock whenever she attempted to divide mankind into black and white. There would be shocks for Ambrose if she did not keep one side of herself veiled. Three years ago Auriol had plumed herself on her courage and candour, but now she had to embellish plain truth if Ambrose wanted to know where she had spent the morning. She had a hundred secrets from Laura which she was afraid to impart. Where Max was concerned, she could not be sure of telling herself the truth or of daring to learn it from anybody else. Max . . . She had not thought of him for an hour ; but there was no harm in thinking of him now. Time had healed him, but was there ever anything to heal ? It was the question that had brought her to Laura ; and she had come away without asking it !

“ If I were free and we met for the first time . . . ,” Auriol began.

She broke off to recall their first meeting, at Lord Orpington’s house in Sussex : she a precocious blue-stocking from Cambridge, he a precocious man of the world who neglected her at Goodwood in order to confer in whispers with his father’s trainer. She felt that he was neglecting her in order to “ shew off ” ! Dislike had ripened quickly to detestation before the end of the second day ; but she melted on the morrow, when she was kept in bed with a chill and he volunteered, after a visible struggle, to stay behind and read to her. It was unnecessary, it was unexpected, it was unwanted ; but it was rather lovable. . . .

“ Dear old Max ! I *must* see him again. One can be friends still, I suppose.”

She tied a knot in her handkerchief to remind her that she had still to get her Ascot badge and dismissed Max from her mind. All her attention was demanded by a

luncheon-party of three unknown colonial secretaries and their wives, all on leave from different parts of the empire and all, so far as Auriol could judge, moderately jealous of one another and immoderately eager to claim her husband's attention. When they were gone, all her attention was claimed by Ambrose, who had cancelled an engagement in order to be with her and announced grimly that, if she wanted to help him, she would soon have the chance.

"What's the matter?," Auriol demanded anxiously.

"Nothing at present, but there's trouble ahead. By the way, the new ambassador to Washington has been chosen."

"Sir John Ferrers? "

"The F.O. has been instructed to find out if he's a *persona grata*. Rodney succeeds him. Carmichael succeeds Rodney. I wonder what gave you the idea." . . .

"And who gets the War Office in Mr. Carmichael's place? "

"Killarney. A congenital idiot, I should have said, but Standish thinks he'll be popular with the soldiers; and England loves a duke. You might invite him to dine. I want to find out if he's sound on the reform of the House of Lords. It's time people began to think about that. I've written a couple of articles that may help, though I don't know that the P.M. will care very much about them. However, as he seems to have no policy of his own, he may be grateful to me for suggesting one. That will be our next big fight. If he doesn't support me . . . Oh, now that the Ferrers trouble is over, you might ask *him* to dine, too. You know how keen Standish is on 'solidarity'! Invite the whole lot."

Auriol hesitated perceptibly. If she had not known that Lady Ferrers was short-sighted, she might have

fancied that she was being cut when they sat within two yards of each other in the Ladies' Gallery of the House of Commons.

"I doubt if they'll come," she answered.

"You must make them! Didn't you tell me you were at Cambridge with one of the girls? And Carmichael married a cousin of yours. If they make trouble, you must explain that you aren't concerned with your husband's differences; you're asking them as friends and relations; people can disagree politically and agree socially."

"I'll try," Auriol promised submissively. "If they refuse?"

"We'll see what your mother can do. She might drop a hint that you're taking this to heart and that it's hard if you're to lose your friends because you've married me. Once they're here, we can do what we like with them. I've seen people trying to hold out against you, but I've never seen any one succeed. It's essential, though, that we should get 'em here. I . . ."

He hesitated, and put on his hat.

"Shall I drive down with you?," asked Auriol. In some way she must shew him that he could not invoke her family to win back the friends he wantonly threw away. "Then I could take the car on and see if any of these people are at home. That's better than telephoning or writing."

"Yes! Come along at once! The difficulty is always with the first: when A has accepted, you can ask B and C to meet him; B and C say 'If A's going, there's no point in our staying away.' I should approach Lady Ferrers first: they're going abroad and it's a serious responsibility if they refuse to attend a farewell dinner. Or you can tackle Killarney. He's too stupid to see that

he really owes his position to me, but that doesn't matter. The important thing is that he's the one man without a shadow of grievance against me. When he's accepted, you can ask Carmichael: the new man meeting his predecessor. Your birthday's so far off that we can't use that . . .," he continued rapidly. "I'm not sure that it wouldn't be best to make Standish the star-turn and ask the others to meet him. He never entertains on his own account. And yet I suppose some people would say I was usurping his job; and that's the very impression I want to avoid giving. Perhaps, after all, Lady Ferrers . . ."

As one suggestion trod on the heels of another, Auriol puzzled to make out why this show of reconciliation was so important.

"I'll try," she promised. "But, if Lady Ferrers won't come for me, I can't ask mother to intercede. It would be undignified. And it would be false, because I really don't care two pins whether they come or not."

"But I do! This is a critical time! The cabinet this morning was a very interesting study in atmosphere. I'd met it before, when I was present at a mutiny on board ship; and I'd met it in the first and only strike that any one tried to organize against me. Those three sat looking at me, the old triumvirate, while Standish talked about the Washington appointment, as much as to say: '*Don't bother about the P.M. Sheridan's the man who works him.*' They were beaten, but they were out for revenge. And the others—men I've no quarrel with—became very gently hostile. Finally the P.M. took the infection. Partly he resented the idea that I'd forced his hand; partly he felt—damn him, he always does!—that he'd like to be with the majority. I tell you, it was the sort of mutiny where your one loyalist tells you that

perhaps, all things considered, he'd better go over to the mutineers! If I hadn't tied the hands of the shell-back Tories by making a place for Killarney, I should have had *them* on my back; and I've only been able to live for the last year by playing them off against the live-wire group. It would have been laughable if it hadn't been so serious: the dukes being rallied by *me*, of all people, against the middle-classes. But it was as serious as any one could want! If Ferrers hadn't accepted Washington ten minutes before, the whole fight would have had to be fought again. That's the atmosphere I shall have to face unless you can make them comfortable in their minds. And old Standish won't stay out against them a second time: they'll persuade him his name is next on the list. . . . It has to be done, Auriol, and you can do it. Don't disappoint me!"

"I'll do my best," she promised again. "It's not much good, though, my making peace if you break it next day. These articles on the House of Lords: they'll lose you the duke almost before you've got him. He nearly landed us in a revolution by opposing the parliament bill. Reform is a red rag to him . . ."

"I've a means of making Killarney eat quite a number of his own words," Ambrose interrupted grimly. Auriol was afraid to have the means elucidated. "If he doesn't, he'll go."

His tone spurred her to speak as she had never dared before:

"Yes, that's what they all feel! If you don't get your own way, you'll force them to resign, like Lord Orington, or find jobs for them abroad, like Sir John. . . . If people don't trust you, the best dinner in the world won't make them."

Her vehemence daunted him

"Who says they don't trust me?"

"You said as much yourself. You said they'd be telling Mr. Standish his turn would come next. And you know it will. You're using him, as you've used the others: because you found him a convenience. Oh, my dear, people daren't tell me in words, but they make me feel it. Your colleagues *don't* trust you: they don't believe you're working with them, they think you're . . . well, you're using them."

"And if I am?"

"Don't be surprised if they unite against you."

V

AURIOL had never before spoken with such apparent hostility; and, when Ambrose sat back in his corner of the car with lips compressed and hard eyes, she dreaded to be told that, for all her fine promises, she too was turning against him when he most needed her help.

She was seeking a means of softening her charges when Ambrose surprised her by nodding slowly. And, as his lips parted in an unamiable smile, she guessed that his candour was going to match her own:

"Of course they'll unite against me when they get the chance. I'm expecting it; but I want it to come at my time, not theirs. I've been expecting it since I first entered political life. I know this precious party! When Bonar formed his government, was I offered a job to sweep his doorstep? Or Baldwin? Or Standish? I made Standish take me later on because he was afraid to drive into opposition the man who had succeeded where he'd failed. He thought he could silence me with office and sidetrack me in the Lords. The party—I won't abuse the king's English by saying the party 'thought';

it's incapable of thinking!—, the party felt in a fuddled way that it had paid me a good price and could look for good value. I was able; I was energetic; by some low cunning I had won people's confidence and was popular with the press. You had only to tell people I was tackling unemployment; and unemployment began to dry up. You had only to quote my considered opinion that we were nearer war in 1923 than in 1913; and people begged to have me brought into the government. Efficiency! When my name was mentioned, they all slobbered about efficiency. I was to be the new Kitchener, the new Eric Geddes. In other words, my dear, they saw a chance of using me!"

"But you don't object to that?"

Ambrose smiled again before answering:

"Did they want me as their master or their servant? We despised and detested each other too much ever to be colleagues. They didn't want me as a master! When I was a boy, I'd seen their fathers trying to use Jo Chamberlain. I'd seen them trying to use Lloyd-George. Bless you, this precious party never changes! When a man attracts votes, when he gets a reputation for brains, the party says: 'High time to nobble him!' You ask me why I'm always fighting, but what can I do? Should I hold up my hand and say ditto to men like Carmichael? You don't like the weapons I use, but d'you like theirs any better? Snobbery, snobbery, snobbery! Until they began lick-spittling Jo, he was a Brummagem manufacturer; till they did the same with Ll-G., he was only 'a little Welsh attorney'. They caricatured me with a woollen muffler till they learnt to their cost that I really could read and write. They made up limericks and told stories in which I was made to drop my aitches. They couldn't understand for the life of them how your father

let you marry me ; they thought I'd lent him money ! A poor sort of weapon, you'd think : simply saying ' He's not one of us ', when I never pretended to be. But a deadly weapon in a country so steeped in snobbery that it made bad jokes about ' temporary gentlemen ' when these same very gallant gentlemen were being blown in bits just as indiscriminately as their ' betters '. I except poor old Standish, who's too much of a real gentleman ever to use the word. I except your father, who's broad-minded in his curious way. I'm damned if I except any one else ! . . . Well, try your best, Auriol : no one can do more."

" Yes ! You can try and succeed," she answered. " Kiss me, darling ! God bless you and keep you ! . . . Will you tell Jebb to drive to Lady Ferrers' ? "

CHAPTER IV

From a High Mountain

“ I deem'd that time, I deem'd that pride,
Had quench'd at length my boyish flame ;
Nor knew till seated by thy side,
My heart in all,—save hope,—the same.”

LORD BYRON : *Well ! Thou Art Happy.*

I

“ I AM going to succeed,” Auriol told herself with dour determination at four o'clock in the afternoon.

“ I am succeeding,” she told herself, with a slight softening of expression, an hour later.

“ I *believe* I have succeeded,” she whispered in tentative triumph, as she returned home. “ Grand reconciliation scene ! ”

By dinner-time she had secured acceptances from the Killarneys and the Carmichaels. Lady Ferrers would write as soon as she had discussed dates with her husband. The Rodneys were away from London ; but their secretary had no reason to think they were engaged. The prime minister came out of his room and insisted on telling her in person that he would *always* come, *whatever* his other engagements, to *any* party she gave.

Auriol made no reference to her diplomacy. As Ambrose had put her on her mettle, she wanted to justify his confidence by full success ; and, ever since his outburst in the car, she had been looking for an

opportunity of making amends. Though he had not reproached her with joining his enemies, she felt almost included in their number when he talked of his single-handed fight against intangible prejudice. He was so much bigger than the popinjays who mocked him that she had never imagined he could be set back or hurt by them. And her conscience was troubled vicariously by the knowledge that some of the popinjays nested very near home. It had been a dogma among her friends two years ago that she was conferring a favour on Ambrose by marrying him ; the offensive fear that she was throwing herself away alternated with the more offensive hope that she would be clever enough to put polish on a notoriously rough diamond.

It would, Auriol had decided from the outset, be too silly for her to mind ! Her friends' attitude of complacent superiority broke down, invariably, at an encounter with the man so patronized, though she suspected that it was being assumed again that afternoon. When Lady Ferrers said : " My dear, we shall be *delighted* to come. Almost any night," she was adding : "*Poor girl, it's not her fault. She feels it as much as we do. I admire her for doing the right thing and at the same time not allowing any one to criticize him or pity her. It's a hard life : one must help her.*"

Driving away from the pretentious house in Lowndes Square, Auriol felt that the Ferrers should really be more careful whom they chose to patronize. Sir John was what Ambrose might have been if he had stopped short at the beginning of his career ; a self-made man who had tired of manufacture. His money he owed to his wife, his position to an undeniable faculty for being ruder than his more timid associates. It was Sir John, waving his eye-glass or tugging his moustache out of drawing, who

moved resolutions to declare that this minister must go or that member be hounded from the party. By acting as a megaphone for others, he had come to fancy that he was one of them, but he had little breeding and less intelligence ; he was included in the cabinet for fear of alienating the middle-class conservatives whom he represented ; and he was advanced to high office because the prime minister knew he would be the humble tool of his permanent officials.

“ A second-rate party-hack, I’m afraid,” Auriol sighed.

The Carmichaels were of slightly better stuff. As their position had been made for them a generation ago, they patronized the Ferrers and Rodneys so blandly that they failed to see they were being patronized in turn by the “ shell-backs ” of the party. As Mr. Carmichael lacked Sir John’s power of saying unpleasant things in an unpleasant way, he was on every hand applauded for his tact ; as he was endowed with no gifts of initiative or organization, he was reputed to be above intrigue and wire-pulling ; and, since in neurasthenic moods he found it easier to tender his resignation than to keep his temper, he contributed a character for disinterestedness and moral courage to the common stock of the triumvirate.

Mrs. Carmichael made her acceptance a personal favour to Auriol : “ I’ll come ; and, what’s more, I’ll make Harry come, . . . if I *can*. It’s really a matter of *principle* with him, though *apart* from that he hardly ever dines out,” she added hastily.

The Duchess of Killarney was maternally reluctant to disappoint a girl whom she had known as a child.

“ Why, yes ! I’ve never met this husband of yours ! I’m glad to say he and Hugh seem to be pulling together more than they used to, though they’ve said hard things about each other in the past. I believe most of us have

a period of bolshevism when we're young. I was quite keen on the emancipation of women when I was a girl: it was really too ridiculous that one should have no vote oneself when one's grooms and gardeners had them! I always said your husband would come round if we didn't hurry him. After all, he has a very big stake in the country. . . I hear you have the loveliest house and give the most wonderful parties! And it seems only yesterday that you were crawling about the floor with chocolate from ear to ear . . . How's your mother, my dear? And the sisters? And my little god-son? He must be quite a man now, but you all *do* shoot up so." . . .

Auriol decided that her house should be at its loveliest for the most wonderful of all her parties. She would shew them, quite quickly, that she had outgrown the days of smearing her cheeks with chocolate; and, after that, they should fall, one after another, under her husband's spell.

"A popinjay party," she whispered. "And you shall hop off your perch, my beauties, and feed out of his hand. There's a streak of popinjay about Colin. I'll ask him; and Winifred. Blue Peter's too sensible, but I'll ask him because I think he wants to be friends again." . .

II

THAT night and next morning she worked at her invitations until it was time to set out for Ascot. Ambrose, as she had feared, was unable to get away, so she called in Manchester Square and persuaded her parents to transfer themselves to her car.

"I won't ask you to put any bets on for me," she promised her father, "though Max told me the other night we must all have our shirts on Golden Rain."

"If he includes me, I consider him a very impertinent young man," said Lady Otway. "What else did he say?"

"Do you want his other tips? Or are you having a three-guinea special wire?"

"Neither! I go to Ascot to see my friends. I know nothing of racing, which is true of most women, and I don't pretend to know anything, which is true of hardly any. I wanted to hear how Max was. He hasn't been to see us yet. Some one told me that he and Aylwin Selhurst . . ."

"He's motoring down with her to-day. You can ask him," said Auriol. Had Aylwin Selhurst, in two weeks, healed the wound which Time, in two years, had left still open? The report was new to Auriol. It might explain everything, but she did not want to discuss it. "Talking of Aylwin, how are Colin and Winifred getting on?," she enquired.

"My dear, you know Colin!," cried Lady Otway. "He may be married already for all he tells us. He's very nearly as secretive as you."

"But, honey love!," Auriol protested. "I tell you everything!"

"Except the one thing that matters: are you happy?"

"Of course I am! And, if I weren't, d'you think I'd tell a living soul?"

"My precious, that's the trouble," her mother sighed.

For some reason, though there were a dozen things she wanted to discuss, Auriol found herself unable to talk. As no one could know of her difficulties and misgivings, there must be a tell-tale uneasiness in her manner to make her parents ask if she was unhappy. Sitting forward, she could see the reflection of her father's red, impassive face in the window before her: he was stealing a stealthy

glance whenever he fancied himself to be unobserved. And her mother, plump, white-haired and tranquil, seemed to be veiling an expression of concern under her whimsical smile.

As soon as they reached the enclosure, Auriol slipped away and debated with herself why her mother should be worrying over her happiness. Did she *look* unhappy? Were the popinjays croaking about "poor little Auriol"? A burst of distant cheering interrupted her reverie; and she stood up to curtsy as the royal procession swung down the course. Colin strode by to announce that his party had failed him. Lord Orpington, smiling enigmatically, pointed to a number on her card and passed on, one finger to his lips. The air round her became agitated with shrill injunctions to "meet by the judge's box". A tall figure in a gray hat, lavender waistcoat and white spats hurried by and then turned as she raised her head.

"Auriol! Like old times! What you doin' about food?"

"Poppin' it in my rose-bud mouth; masticatin'; swallowin'," she answered without hesitation. "How are you, Max?"

"Oh, several hours' sleep, thanks; no more bulletins. Is the lord and master here?"

"No, he couldn't come."

"Well, what about a quail and a nice glass of wine in the Guards' Club tent? I've broken free from Peter Orpington: too many perishin' dames wantin' their cards marked."

"I'd love to come. Has your father any horses running?"

"Two or three. If I could find a bookie who'd lay fives I couldn't name the last horse in all his races, I'd

have an accumulator. Here come the numbers! Bag a place by the rails while I see what the ring's sayin'. Two, three, four, seven, nine, thirteen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty. Sea-Urchin both ways, I should say. It's luck findin' you here, Auriol."

"But I told you I was coming, didn't I?"

"By yourself, I mean. I bin wantin' to see you again. Somethin' to tell you."

Auriol discovered that her heart was quickening its beat. Was he waiting to say that he was engaged to Aylwin? No news—honestly, *honestly*!—would be more welcome if she could believe that Aylwin would make him happy. He looked pleased enough, but then Max always looked pleased on a race-course.

"I've been hoping you might call one day. I wanted to apologize for that dinner: I'm afraid you must have found it terribly dull."

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about. You must excuse me if I don't call. I registered a vow that night that I'd never enter the house again. Nothin' to do with *you*, my dear. . . . Four to one bar one? What are they makin' favourite? Fives King Cob. Fives Sea-Urchin. Hold on while I investigate."

He was gone before she could demand an explanation; and on his return he regaled her with extracts from the book of form which left on her mind a confused impression that no less than four horses, carrying their present weights, must inevitably run a dead-heat. The race was in fact won by an outsider; and he spent the next five minutes explaining why the victory was theoretically impossible.

Not until they were crossing the course for luncheon did Auriol get an opportunity of exploring his uncompromising refusal to visit her.

"I don't feel I hit it off with your lord and master," Max answered frankly.

"It was *his* idea that I should invite you! I told him you'd ring up when you were free, but he wouldn't leave it at that."

"May have been all my imagination," said Max complacently; "but, if you even imagine you're not wanted, it's better not to butt in."

They entered a dim tent, redolent of trodden grass and sun-dried canvas. While Max helped her to lobster and champagne, Auriol considered whether she would confirm his suspicions by abruptly dropping the discussion of their ill-starred dinner. In other days she would have had his vague charge repeated and defined; but in the last two years he had become difficult to persuade and impossible to coerce. The change was a part of his annoying independence; and, as the word crossed her mind, Auriol wondered again whether he had thrown off her influence in bowing his neck to the influence of some one else.

"What does the Orpington party consist of?," she asked.

"Blue Peter. M'lady. Aylwin. And about six more I'd never heard of."

"I want to see Aylwin. Max, is it true . . . ? I heard a rumour . . ."

"About her? "

"And you."

Max helped himself to a whiskey-and-soda, frowning slightly.

"Some people must be damned hard-up for conversation!," he sighed.

"She's just the right wife for the right man," said Auriol.

"That I've always felt. By the way, I hear there's a

demi-semi sort of arrangement between Winifred and old Colin."

"You're trying to change the subject, Max!"

"I thought we'd exhausted it. Are you havin' quail or what the French call 'hot-cold of pullet'?"

"Quail, please. You haven't told me when you *are* going to marry?"

"You haven't asked me. And I don't know."

III

HIS voice sounded petulant; and Auriol felt obliged to shew that she was moved by more than curiosity.

"I believe you'd be much happier married," she told him.

"Ah, not havin' had any experience, I can't say. D'you like any sort of rabbit-food with that appetizin' morsel?"

While he looked round the long table for salad, Auriol took full advantage of her rest between rounds. It was clear that Max did not intend to betray himself; it was not so clear that he would win no betrayal from her. Was he challenging her to say whether marriage, from her experience of it, made for happiness? She could match him in evading challenges; but in fact he had stated only a self-evident proposition; and she would lose points in the next round if she admitted that marriage had either exceeded or fallen short of her expectations. It was interesting to know that Max had not transferred his affections to Aylwin Selhurst; but it would be more interesting to know whether he had ever had any serious affections to transfer.

"Do you remember the first time you took me racing?," she asked.

"At Goodwood? I should think I do! That was the year Double Dummy won the Stewards' Cup. The strongest finish I've ever seen little Herries ride. I had two ponies on that race."

"We had lunch under the trees . . ."

"In the duke's enclosure. Dam' good lunch, too, with about a pint of Peter's oldest brandy to top up with. I say, is that champagne drinkable? If not, I'll get you something else."

In his solicitude, as in his recollections, Auriol wished that Max could be less materialistic.

"It's quite all right, thanks. . . . When it was too late, I wished *I'd* had some of that brandy. I caught a most awful chill, splashing about in that wet paddock."

Max nodded with sympathy that seemed nicely calculated in its adequacy to a four-year-old pair of wet feet.

"Doncaster's the place for chills. I remember the year when Lonsdale won the Leger with Royal Lancer and the paddock was covered in straw to sop up the mud . . ."

"Do you remember being very sweet to me when I was ill, Max?," Auriol interrupted softly. "I wasn't really ill, of course . . ."

"I read bits of *Handley Cross* to you."

"I thought it was *Mr. Sponge*. . . ?"

"No, you ticked me off for swearin', because I said something was hellish dark and smelt of cheese. Talkin' of which, I think you should fortify your system with a meringue."

Auriol helped herself vaguely from the dish nearest her hand.

"I remember taking a strong dislike to you that first day, Max," she laughed.

"I expect I was rather fed up with havin' to trail about with you. I always maintain women shouldn't go to Goodwood unless they go on a coach. You can't take 'em on to the members' lawn; if they race from the paddock, they're about a mile from Tattersall's ring . . ."

"Ah, in those days you didn't mind walking a few yards to put a bet on for me," she teased him.

"I may not have *shewn* I minded . . ."

"And very soon after that you were only too pleased to 'trail about' with me."

Max looked at her for a moment in unfeigned perplexity. Then he offered her his cigarette-case :

"Long time ago it all seems! D'you want anything more, or shall we drift outside for some coffee? It's stuffy in here."

Auriol followed him into the sunshine with mingled feelings of amusement and exasperation. He was a fool, but he was contriving to make a fool of her. Was it deliberate? The table he was now choosing stood apart from the rest, as though inviting them to talk intimately without being overheard. The runners for the second race were being called as their numbers went up; and the whine of gipsy voices crept through the raucous shouts of the book-makers. Auriol looked at her watch and realized that, if she wanted to find out anything, there was no time to lose. Max was letting his coffee grow cold as he frowned over his race-card; and his preoccupation made her reckless.

"I suppose we shall have to go back soon," she reminded him.

"Yes. I want to see Scotch Fir runnin'. By Butter Scotch out of Fir Grove. You remember Butter Scotch winnin' the Cambridgeshire? It was the year before I went abroad."

"What a long time ago it all seems!," she mocked. "No, I'm afraid I never remember who's won anything."

"Then I wonder you come racin'."

"It's a good way of meeting one's friends. And we had great fun in those days. Don't you sometimes wish you could go back to them?"

"Do you?"

Auriol had not expected to have her question flung back at her; and his voice, now for the first time free from all incomprehension, rebuked her rashness.

"I enjoyed them," she answered indifferently. "I think you did, too."

"You know I did. Auriol, is this a flirtation?"

Then he was not a fool! From the first he had understood the trend of her questions and reminiscences. When he seemed to be perplexed, it was honest perplexity at her cheapening herself. At all costs, Auriol decided, she must convince him that he misapprehended her.

"Max . . ." Her eyes smiled at him, but her lips were rigid. "Max, if I didn't know you pretty well . . ."

"Is it?," he asked. "Because, if not . . ."

He paused and finished his coffee before lighting a cigar.

"Well?," she challenged him. "If it's not?"

"I can only say it's a dam' fine imitation. Shall we go back? They'll be clearin' the course in a minute."

IV

THEY walked in silence through a lane of tipsters and fortune-tellers. In silence they crossed the course and regained the enclosure.

By keeping half a pace ahead of him, Auriol hoped that Max would not see her scarlet cheeks; but, when they

came to a standstill by their former place on the rails, she could only trust that he would ascribe her flushed face to his own rudeness.

"Perhaps you'd like to apologize now?," she invited him.

"With pleasure, if you'll tell me I'm wrong."

"You're making it worse! Max, I'm not going to have a scene; and, if I were, I wouldn't choose the Royal Enclosure to have it in. We'd better go our own ways for the rest of the day. Thank you for giving me luncheon. If you'll let me have my parasol . . ." As he handed it over without protest, Auriol's indignation got the better of her discretion. "And I was looking forward to this!", she exclaimed. "Daddy asked me to lunch at the Marlborough, but I said I'd fend for myself. I was hoping we might have had just one day together for old time's sake . . . I think you might have warned me, Max. When you wrote first of all, I thought you wanted to be friends. You can't say I haven't done my best, though you didn't go very far to meet me. That night at Mr. Caldwell's . . ."

"I told you it would be very difficult for us to meet."

"I thought you were going to be busy. I never imagined you didn't want us to meet."

"I wanted it, but I saw it would be difficult," he reiterated. "Haven't we proved that?"

"And who made it difficult? It was my husband's fault, apparently, the other night. I suppose it's my fault to-day."

"My dear, it's the fault of us both."

"I was being perfectly charming . . ."

Max laughed a little bitterly before answering:

"You think that made it any easier? Auriol my child, it's no good pretendin' you don't understand. We

find it difficult to meet because we know it's dangerous. I'm not thinkin' of your husband: I'm thinkin' of you . . ."

The phrase, in such a context, could have but one meaning; and, for fear of admitting that she was in danger, Auriol had to deny it.

"Aren't you flattering yourself?," she enquired scornfully.

"I'm thinkin' of you and of me," he persisted with patient deliberation. "If we *could* meet as friends . . . But when you begin sentimentalizin' about the old happy days . . ."

"They don't seem very happy to you."

"I can't separate 'em from the days that came after."

With a quick intake of breath that was almost a sob, Auriol turned to watch the horses going down and compared the numbers on the saddle-cloths with those on her card. The spectators from the back of the enclosure were surging to the rails; and she was very conscious that Max and she had been talking with an intensity sufficient to make the green-coated rangers suspect an impending breach of the peace.

"Twelve? Virgin Vinegar. Seven? Midnight Sun. Three? Oh, there's your Scotch Fir. . . . Max, I thought that was all forgiven and forgotten!" she added in an undertone.

"Drawn the first place, by Gad. And O'Shea ridin'. I'm not bettin', because I believe she's only out for exercise to-day; but, if she runs again this week, you put your last bob on her . . . My dear, there was never anything to forgive, but forgettin''s quite a different pair of shoes. At least, I judge by myself . . . And I judge you by me . . . Shall we try for a place on the top of the stand?"

"Are you very keen to see it run? I want to sit down! Take me into the paddock. I don't care if people see us. I'm giddy!"

"Follow me!" He turned and pressed a way through the crowd. "You knew this, Auriol."

"Knew what? I never knew anything. I thought in time . . . Time heals everything."

"We'll hope it will. It's about the only thing we can hope," he answered grimly. "When you wrote to say you were picturin' yourself with me, I guessed there was something up. 'Mean to say, there are fools and bloody fools. I think I'm only the ordinary variety."

At the far end of the first ring, Max found a shaded seat and led her to it. The paddock had emptied of all but a few idlers by the boxes and a line of hurrying stragglers from the Marlborough Club tent. In the distance a deep repose settled on the stands and threw into violent contrast the ever-increasing roar of the book-makers; on either side of the course there rose staccato cries of "They're off"; a bell clanged quickly; and the many-voiced heath was struck suddenly dumb.

Auriol looked up in astonishment, as though she had lost her hearing:

"I thought I'd fainted!"

"Are you *feelin'* ill?"

"No, thanks. Only rather dizzy. I'm sorry I made a fool of myself. My nerves . . ."

She stood up, but Max had placed his hat on the seat and was drilling holes in the turf with the end of his cane. She was not to escape, physically or morally.

"Rather more than nerves, isn't it? I think we'd better have this out, don't you? First of all, are you stickin' to your husband?"

"But . . . of *course!*"

"Right! I shall be out of the country in two months' time; and, if we meet in the interval, we know where we are. For the rest, it's a question of bitin' on the bullet. It was a mistake for us to write, but I *had* to know how you were gettin' on. We won't commit *that* lunacy again. And yet . . . Auriol, just one question! You're not *actively* unhappy? He isn't unkind to you?"

As she tried to clear the confusion in her brain, Auriol felt that she was learning a new language and explaining a psychological discovery simultaneously. Until Max put the idea into words, she had not thought of leaving Ambrose; and, now that it had been suggested, she dismissed it with as little of compunction as Max had shewn of enthusiasm in mentioning it.

"I'm not unhappy," she declared. "I'm not sure that I know what you mean! That I've married the wrong man? I don't *feel* that, though perhaps I ought to have married you both." . . .

"But you're not in love with him?"

"No. . . . I never was. I told you so before I married him. I didn't think it mattered. Now . . . It's not enough and I've just seen it. Too late now! When I want it . . . Dear God, how I want it! . . . If anything happened to Ambrose, I should beg you to marry me, Max. I shouldn't say I'd changed my mind, but something's changed me. I don't *want* anything to happen! I should be heart-broken if I lost him. I . . . I really love him."

She puzzled to elucidate a love that was chequered by fear, contempt and disgust. The animalism of her husband repelled her; she was revolted by a strain of cruelty and frightened by a lack of scruple. While every one had blemishes and the exceptional man required an excep-

tional standard, she stood amazed at the devotion he could wring from her.

"I'm not going to leave him!," she cried suddenly. "No! . . . No! . . . I can't think of anything that would make me! He has faults, but in spite of them I'd cut myself in two for him. If he asked me not to see you again . . ."

"You'd agree. Quite right. You're his wife. It's only if he were makin' you unhappy . . ."

"He's not! I'm so proud of him, I'm so frightened for him! I feel he's utterly alone." . . .

A rising storm of cheers announced that the race was ending. Through an open gate to their left, the winners trotted in to the unsaddling-enclosure; and a flag fluttered to the top of the number-board as the placed jockeys came out of the weighing-room. Auriol rose with a sigh and walked to the ring where the horses for the next race were being led round.

"We must *pretend* to take an interest!," she whispered.

"Are you comin' to-morrow?," Max asked.

"Oh, I don't know *what* I'm going to do! Why?"

"Well, I don't feel we do much good by meetin'."

"But I can't *bear* to lose you!"

The agony in her voice left him without an answer. Side by side, leaning over the wooden rail of the ring, they ticked their cards mechanically and waited for the crowd to ebb away.

"We can fairly say we're losin' nothin', because we never had anythin' to lose. No good thinkin' what might have been. This is one of the times, savin' your presence, when we got to say: 'This is a bloody business, but we're goin' through with it.' In two or three years . . ."

"Oh, you don't *care*!," she broke in with a sob.

"Darlin' child, I'm tryin' to keep your head as well as my own. If I didn't care, should I try to avoid you? If you weren't the most precious thing in life to me, shouldn't I try to sweep you off your feet and damn the consequences? If I didn't care, would these two years have been such hell?"

"But, Max, I can't spend all my life feeling I've missed the one thing worth having! It is! I see that now! At least . . ."

"You're not quite sure? My dear, tell yourself it's *not* the only thing! Or, if it is, some of us have to get on without it."

"But we needn't say good-bye! I don't know what I should do if I thought I wasn't going to see you again. We can be friends. We can meet. I won't be silly again, Max. Say we may meet!"

"I hope to God we shan't regret it. We're playin' with fire, my dear."

V

As they strolled away from the ring, Lord Otway intercepted them with an invitation to tea.

If he or his wife noticed anything amiss with Auriol, they said nothing, though she was teased without mercy when she admitted that they had been too much engrossed in conversation to back any of the horses which they had recommended to their friends.

"Well, Max and I have hardly exchanged six words in two years," said Auriol. "What time d'you want to start back, mummie? If we leave before the last race, we shall dodge part of the crowd."

No one seemed to have noticed anything strange in

her eyes or voice. Emotion was out of place in the paddock at Ascot. No one would have believed her if she had repeated her conversation with Max. She hardly believed herself when her memory tried to persuade her that he had asked in his most matter-of-fact voice whether she intended to remain with her husband.

On the way back to London, Auriol concentrated her mind on that night's dinner-party. She must be able to talk about the day's racing and to explain, then or later, why she was not going to Ascot for the last three days of the meeting. She must also find a means of occupying three days of unexpected leisure. The popinjays promised a diversion; but, when they had been broken to the house, she would slip back into a life that had suddenly lost its savour. At eight o'clock every morning Ambrose came in to discuss the day's plans; at nine he was in his work-room, surrounded by his caricatures and albums of press-cuttings, with Tony Rushforth and a shorthand-writer ploughing through his letters at top-speed. At ten he was at his office. There, as in a relay-race against time, Geoffrey Mallock sprinted with him until Tony resumed the contest at noon. For five days in the week their luncheon-parties were round-table conferences. After them, unless he was in the House of Lords, Ambrose retired to the library and dictated his articles until the professional came to play squash-racquets with him. On three nights out of seven, there was a public engagement to fulfil; on the others, he dined and worked again, by himself, until two or three. At long intervals Auriol protested that he was killing himself; he always answered that, with her to inspire him, he would work twenty-four hours a day.

The vague phrase had lately begun to take on a new

meaning. Auriol could think of four occasions on which her advice had been followed ; but she no longer saw herself as a white-robed personification of duty, stern but kindly, beguiling weary titans to their work and pointing indefatigably upward and on. It would have been no less unprofitable to point sternly but kindly to a cascade and order the water to run downhill. Ambrose needed no whipping to his work ; when lust for achievement failed him, he could fall back on love of power. He was not working for her greater comfort or glory ; and, if she inspired him, it was only as a dozen women had inspired him before. When once he had made up his mind that he needed her, it was probably true that his work suffered until he was sure of her. His work suffered after a tedious party or a dull dinner ; their two recent scenes had thrown him out of his stride for half a morning. Auriol reflected that, if exceptional men had not to be judged by exceptional standards, any one would have said that his work suffered whenever he failed to get his own way.

As the car entered London, Lady Otway roused herself to murmur :

“ Back again ! An enjoyable day, my dear, but very tiring.”

“ It was certainly tiring,” Auriol agreed.

Back again ? She had been to the top of a high mountain and had seen the kingdoms of the world spread for her temptation. For a hundredth part of a second, as she looked into Max's eyes and saw that he understood, she had been happy.

“ If you'll let us drop you and take the car on,” her father proposed, “ you'll get a longer rest before dinner.”

“ Oh, I can't take you out of your way ! ”

To reach Cleveland Row ten minutes before she needed was to lengthen eternity by ten minutes.

"We should really prefer it," said Lady Otway. "It worries me when you look so tired."

"Well, rather than worry you, honey love . . ."

She had no right to shun her husband's house, as though he were to blame for her wrong choice.

"*I'm going to stick it out, Max,*" she wrote as soon as she was alone. "*No grouching, no praying and no expecting miracles. In time, please God, things may be easier. We may find it possible to love without being lovers. Meanwhile, you can make things very much easier if you like. Since I've found you, I feel so desperately lonely without you. Don't cut me off altogether! I'm stronger for knowing that you're going through it too; and I shall make a better show when I see how much better you face it than I do.*"

When the evening papers were brought to her room, she committed the names of the winners to memory and read the descriptions of the frocks. By the time her husband came up to dress, she was word-perfect; but, instead of questioning her about her fortunes at Ascot, he strode up and down her room unloosing complaints against the imbeciles with whom he was required to work:

"If I want a thing done properly, I have to do it myself. Rushforth, who ought to take all detail-work off my hands, either can't use his brains or won't. I don't know whether he thinks he's too big for the job . . ."

"He was rather old when he took it up. I really believe he does his best," Auriol pleaded.

"I took him on to please Laura. She pretended that he might make trouble over my divorce, but she only

wanted to secure him an easy billet. Well, he's slept in it for two years . . ."

"What's he been doing now?," she interrupted.

"It's what he *doesn't* do, what he leaves undone. Which is everything. I said to him to-day: 'Isn't your wife coming to fetch you?' No, he said: the child was seedy. Sore throat. I asked what he'd done about it: what did the doctor say? Oh, they hadn't had a doctor. They were going to see how the boy was later in the day. I didn't tell Master Rushforth at that moment what I thought of him, but I sat him down by the telephone and we had that doctor round inside half-an-hour. Then I gave the fool a piece of my mind. Neglecting sore throats with a child of that age. He didn't like it."

Auriol tried, without feeding her husband's indignation, to explain that most parents would resent an outsider's interference with their children.

"And did it turn out to be anything?," she added.

"They can't say yet. I ordered in a nurse." . . . He broke off and hurried to the telephone. "Rushforth promised to let me know when she arrived. She was due at six; it's half-past seven now; not a word! That's the man all over!"

"He may not have been able to get through. I should really give him a little longer. If you add to the confusion . . ."

"I want to clear it up! He's one fool and she's another. Ignorant, opinionated. Afraid to give herself away by admitting she doesn't know anything. So won't ask for advice and won't take it when it's offered. You don't *mind* my telephoning, do you?"

"Not a bit, but you can't make yourself responsible for everybody's troubles."

“ I should never forgive myself if anything happened to that little chap. After all, he’s my god-son.”

Really, Auriol felt, Ambrose could hardly have been more on edge if Oscar had been his son.

PART III

CHAPTER I

Escape

“ . . . A man he must go with a woman, which women don't understand—

Or the sort that say they can see it they aren't the marrying brand.”

RUDYARD KIPLING: *The Mary Gloster*.

I

“*FIRST day of Ascot,*” Auriol recorded in her diary. When the last of her guests was gone, she had—as usual—glanced at her letters, enquired if she could help Ambrose with his work and then retired to her room. As usual, she had undressed, written a few notes and was now busying herself with her journal till her husband came in to discuss the dinner-party. At all costs, everything must go on as usual; and by forcing herself to take up the old routine she might persuade herself that it had never been broken, even for that moment when the world seemed to stand still and she discovered she had made the only mistake that mattered to woman or man.

“*As A. couldn't come with me,*” she continued, “*I motored the parents down. Max took me to lunch in the Guards Club tent and we spent most of the afternoon talking in the paddock. I left before the last race and was back in time for a long rest before dinner.*”

Any greater detail was unsafe ; and Auriol reflected sombrely that, if she were ever in danger of forgetting that day, the reference to an afternoon's " talking in the paddock " would send hot needles through her memory.

She set herself to describe the dinner-party :

" Essentially a Colonial Office affair, though we had a few outsiders. Orders and decorations in honour of the Infante José, who expressed his gracious intention of coming when it was too late to change the character of the party. And at the last moment Mr. Standish telephoned to know whether we had room for him. I said of course there was ; and then I racked my brains to think of any woman I could ask at this hour of the day to balance him. By the mercy of Heaven, my long-suffering Imogen was alone and unoccupied. Where should we be without our sisters ? I'm afraid she's never quite forgiven A. over the divorce ; and, when I remember the fights we had when I first made known that I was going to marry him, it's a wonder that we're still on speaking-terms. We are, though ; and she never grudges me my good-fortune in marrying a richer husband and a bigger man than hers or in having a much more interesting life in every way. Imogen is wonderfully unpetty ; and I believe she's wonderfully contented with her babies and their stolid father. But she likes a change occasionally, to stretch her wings. She was tremendously excited to meet the prime minister ; and she'd be more than human if she didn't sometimes remember that both she and Joyce would be leading a more spacious life in every way if they hadn't surrendered all claims and shares so that Colin could start clear when the time comes for him to inherit. Something of this must have been in my mind, for I found myself talking to Hugh Killarney about the

sacrifices people make for a family or a place. He agreed that it was marvellously devoted, but he wasn't at all sure that we—England to-day—hadn't reached a point when no more sacrifices would be profitable. Taxation and death-duties had made it a losing battle for the big estates; and, though primogeniture could be justified in the days when you had room to turn round, he was afraid that the younger sons and the daughters were now being unfairly handicapped. Before he became duke, he was a younger son himself and he was sent out into the world with absolutely nothing. He wouldn't have minded if his sacrifices had made the estate safe for all time, but that's impossible; and he feels that the country suffers more by the starving of the cadets than it gains by the preserving of the big estates. A surprising doctrine from him! I've been brought up in the other school so much that I couldn't agree for a moment.

"We talked about primogeniture in relation to the empire. I maintained that we owe our empire to the fact that so many younger sons had to fend for themselves. It's always been the younger sons, the 'children of the manse', the people for whom there's no niche at home . . ."

Auriol stopped as the telephone-bell rang in her husband's dressing-room.

Ten minutes to twelve. Ambrose, naturally, was still at work downstairs: and some one was trying to reach him by the private wire. That meant one of the resident clerks at the office; or one of the secretaries; or the prime minister. No one else knew the number.

"Hullo?," she began.

"May I speak to Lord Sheridan, please?," asked a woman's voice.

"He's engaged at present. Can I give a message?"

“ Oh, it's Mrs Rushforth speaking. I don't know what to do about Oscar; and Lord Sheridan was so kind in all the trouble he took this morning . . . ”

II

As she hurried downstairs, Auriol tried to remember whether she had ever before invaded the sacred work-room at such an hour.

On summer nights, when Ambrose sat between an open window and door, she had seen him bent under the light of a table-lamp, sometimes in shirt-sleeves, sometimes with a green eye-shade clamped to his forehead, always with a pile of red, battered cabinet-boxes in front of him. When he had finished his boxes, he made notes—she believed—for the articles which his colleagues found so unbecoming in a minister; but by this time Auriol was always upstairs. She wondered, not without trepidation, how he would receive an interruption. Somebody, she felt convinced, would have to pay for it: Mrs. Rushforth for disturbing him, the child for being ill, Tony for not having called a doctor in sooner.

“ Mrs. Rushforth is at the telephone,” Auriol began. “ Upstairs! In your room!,” she added at once, for her husband was half-way to the door in three strides, scattering books and papers on either side as he sprang up.

Auriol locked the papers into an open despatch-box and returned to her room. Through the doorway she could see her husband brandishing the telephone like a cudgel while he roared his questions and stamped with impatience at the answers:

“ Yes! Yes! . . . OF COURSE!!! (What's the

woman thinking about? . . .) And meantime you've done nothing? . . . My God, if that child dies, I'll have you both in the dock!! No! . . . Don't do anything at all! Leave it to me! I'll come as soon as I've got the doctor." . . .

Slamming the receiver into place, he turned the pages of the directory and called a number. While he waited, Auriol dragged a skirt and jumper over her nightgown and scribbled: "*I'm getting you a taxi.*" She ran, bare-headed and in slippers, into Pall Mall and returned to find her husband in the hall.

"Thanks. Don't catch cold," he muttered absently.

"I'm coming with you," Auriol explained.

"Rubbish!"

"You may want to send me with a message, or something."

He nodded his head as emphatically now as he had shaken it a moment before:

"That's true. You must keep away, though. It's diphtheria."

"I've helped to nurse that before now. I can take care of myself. Is he bad?"

"Some difficulty about his *breathing*," Ambrose answered with the resentment of a man who was never himself ill and could not understand why other people gave way to illness. "I've sent for Matthew Ribble. He's supposed to be the best man for children. . . . My stars, but I'll give Rushforth a piece of my mind over this! He's not fit . . . not fit . . . I don't know what he *is* fit for. That boy . . . The quicker you get there, the better for you!" he called through the open window to the driver.

Then he subsided in his corner. The Rushforths lived in Bayswater; and Ambrose drove the rest of the way

as though he were unconscious that any one was with him. The door was opened for them by Tony ; and, as they went in, a private car pulled up behind their taxi.

" Sir Matthew ! Quick work !," Ambrose murmured with grim approval. "'Obliged, Sir Matthew. I don't think Mrs. Rushforth realized till quite lately how bad the child was. There's a nurse on her way here now. Rushforth will take you up. I shall be down here ; and you understand that, if you want a second opinion, anything, anything . . . The child must be saved."

As the doctor trod his way softly upstairs, Auriol set the front door ajar against the nurse's arrival and dragged a low basket-chair into the hall. Her business, she knew instinctively, was to keep her head and to help without being noticed. Ambrose dropped into the chair and sat with his eyes on the staircase ; he was unconscious of Tony's return, unconscious of her bare ankles and fluttering hair, unconscious of the strange figure he himself cut in evening trousers, an old tweed coat, the ribbon of the Bath and a soft felt hat which he had forgotten to take off. When the nurse arrived, he roused himself to nudge Tony. She was taken upstairs ; and Auriol heard a hushed consultation on the landing. At the end of half an hour Mrs. Rushforth floated down like an anguished wraith and despatched Tony on a whispered errand. Ten minutes later the doctor came down with his hand on Mrs. Rushforth's shoulders ; and Auriol, with an intuitive sense that she was in the way, melted into the gloom of the dining-room.

Her husband was the first to speak ; and Auriol hardly recognized his miserable :

" Well ? "

" He's very bad, poor child."

" I know that !," Ambrose cried in sudden fury.

"It's early to say anything yet. I'm doing all I can."

"But is he going to live?"

"Ah, if I could promise you that, Lord Sheridan . . ."

The voice of professional consolation, at a moment when every one was grappling with the idea of death and refusing to name it, rang cracked and insincere.

"God in Heaven!" Ambrose cried, "if *you* can't, I suppose some one else *can*? Take another opinion! Call in all Harley Street! Name your fees! You won't tell me you're *all* of you beaten!"

From Mrs. Rushforth Auriol heard a tremulous "Ssshhh, *please!*" Sir Matthew, when he spoke again, was calling up all the patience that he had acquired in associating for thirty years with the grief-distracted and hysterical.

"Have a second opinion, by all means. To prevent disappointment, however, I warn you that the diagnosis and the treatment will be word for word the same as my own. . . . I shall be back in half-an-hour . . ."

"But you're not leaving him!" whispered Ambrose in horror.

"Only for half-an hour. I left a case to come here; and I give you my word I couldn't do anything more by staying. The nurse understands her orders."

The closing of the door was followed by a creak as Ambrose dropped heavily back into his chair.

"If that child dies, Evelyn . . .," he began in cold and ferocious menace.

"As though I wouldn't die twice over to keep him!," the anguished mother flung back. "Oh, baby! Baby my heart! . . ."

With a strangled moan she pattered up the stairs; and Auriol slipped through the door behind her husband's back to the garden.

III

ALONE in the windless June night she clung to the railings and fought for breath.

It was only that evening that she had begun to suspect. Even now she could not remember when she first stopped to wonder at the adoration which Ambrose lavished on this child; perhaps it was one day when she laughingly pretended to be jealous and he protested too vehemently. If she suspected then, however, she had quickly allayed her own suspicion. Yes, she remembered despising herself at the time for thinking that any man could be so cynical: if the child had been his, he would never have dared to idolize it so publicly; he would have visited it secretly instead of making the mother come daily to his house; and he would have behaved differently—in some way that Auriol did not trouble to define—to the man who passed as the child's father.

Unthinkable! She deserved to be flung on her knees and held there till she choked of her own lies. This was sinning against the light and blaspheming the holy spirit. Because she had no child of her own, she must spin from her diseased imagination a foul suspicion against a woman more fortunate than herself, against her own husband; she must dishonour the child and the child's father.

"I . . . I didn't *mean* to," Auriol found herself gasping.

The scented, unstimulating night rebuked her. The un-sleeping, remote stars looked down on her agony. All that she knew of beauty waited for her to confess; and she could not. It was blasphemy against the holy spirit, but she could not recapture her suspicion. She found it

harder to credit her husband with a warm heart than to imagine him guilty of such deception, such depravity, such guile as the devil himself could hardly inspire. The devil himself must have inspired her to think these black thoughts! She was mad! What would she think if another woman told so fantastic a story? She would ask for proof. . . .

"I've no proof," Auriol admitted.

And, admitting it, she knew that she believed without proof. It was superfluous; and she was no longer dismayed by terrific phrases about "blaspheming the holy spirit". That was all irrelevant. It was confusing; and she had enough to confuse her already, with Ambrose and the boy and this woman. . . .

Tony's indifference to the child was explained, but did he realize why he was indifferent? Had Ambrose paid him to marry this woman? There were some things that no man could do! Then, had Tony married in ignorance of his wife's condition? Had Ambrose allowed him? It was difficult to say what Ambrose would or would not do, when it suited him. But, first of all, was the child his?

"I've no proof," whispered Auriol.

And now she would not have believed if all three of them had come running out of the house with irrefutable proof in their hands. She remembered the child's birth and the announcement in *The Times*: "*Evelyn, wife of Antony Rushforth, Esquire, of a son (Oscar)*". She had attended the christening and given a silver porringer. If she began to doubt, there were implications which she felt incompetent to face. Before they were engaged, Ambrose had warned her not to imagine him an ascetic: he was a normal man, unhappily married, and he had lived like a normal man. That, however, was all over.

If she began to doubt, Auriol must torture herself to guess when this affair with "Evelyn" had begun and ended. The child was eighteen months old and must therefore have been born about December. When the Rushforths had married Auriol could not remember. She did not want to remember. It was some time soon after Ambrose came back from his voyage round the world; not before, because "Evelyn" had accompanied him. The "affair" had probably started while they were abroad. When had it ended? And *had* it ended? How many more "Evelyns" were there, dotted about London?

Auriol remembered deciding a moment before that there had been no "affair". . . .

"Steady!" she whispered to herself. The doctor's car was returning; and she hid from sight behind a clump of rhododendron. "Steady . . ."

There was no evidence. Ambrose loved all children; this baby, as he had reminded her to-night, was his own god-son. Reason enough for commotion, especially when the parents seemed so incapable. And, if he called this woman "Evelyn", it might be by accident or from hearing the name on her husband's lips; they might have been friends before her marriage. . . . No evidence: Auriol thanked God for that. If there had been . . .

If there had been, it must have shewn a comprehensive treachery—to herself, to Evelyn and Tony, to Laura—that would have won Iago's commendation. Whenever the affair began, it was going on while Ambrose and his personal secretary travelled round the world. It was going on while he pretended to be making up his mind whether he could shake off his obsession and go back to his first wife. It was going on for six months after he had written to say that these six months would

make no difference, that he could not live or sleep or work without his Auriol to inspire him.

She turned towards the house, determined at all costs to find out whose child this was. The room over the hall was ablaze with light ; and she tried to identify the fantastic shadow-shapes that bent and straightened themselves against the blinds. Some one was leaning against the sill ; and, as he moved, she recognized Tony's profile. A thinner, smaller shadow approached him, gesticulating as a woman might gesticulate in wringing her hands over her dying child. A third figure, short and square, joined them and gave explanatory shrugs. Auriol bent her head and walked on.

Ambrose she found still in the hall, bowed double in the basket-chair and crooning softly to himself. She prepared her question but he would not answer to his name ; and, when she touched his shoulder, he looked up without recognizing her.

" O Absalom, my son Absalom ! " . . .

As though she had been caught eavesdropping at a confessional, Auriol crept into the darkened dining-room and sank into a chair. It was true, then, though her worst suspicions hitherto fell short of the truth. Men like his secretary, Geoffrey Mallock, the whole ship's company of the *Koh-i-nor*, had probably known from the first. They had raised their eyebrows when they heard a whisper that Sheridan was to marry again ; and, when they learnt who his second wife was to be, they had smiled and asked one another what would now happen to this Evelyn Colthurst.

What *had* happened ? She had, of course, been pensioned off, probably on generous terms ; and, when Ambrose heard that she was going to have a child, he had made prompt arrangements to avert a scandal.

But what did the girl make of it all? What did Tony think of his complaisant heiress? And Ambrose? What did he feel for the lives that he trimmed and twisted to their place in his scheme of maniacal selfishness?

"This finishes it," Auriol whispered.

IV

STEALING back to the wizened garden, she stood with her head thrown back and her eyes shut, breathing deeply as though she were trying to clear her lungs of noxious fumes.

Would this night ever end? Could none of these doctors and nurses put her to sleep? Since last she had felt a cool pillow against her burning head, she had spent a day at Ascot and bared her soul to Max Hendry and veiled it from her parents. She had presided over a vast dinner-party and reassured a harassed prime minister. She had run, half dressed, into the street and driven to a death-bed. She had lost her head and broken her heart. She had done five things simultaneously for the last twenty-four hours; and she had driven in double harness a pair of warring personalities till she seemed to have lost her identity. Auriol Otway: she knew, of course, who she was. Or, rather, she was Auriol Sheridan: the same person in vastly different surroundings. And something of incalculable importance had just happened; she was still repeating mechanically "This finishes it . . . Finishes it . . . Absolutely finishes it." . . .

Some time, in the last unending four-and-twenty hours, some one had asked her if she was "actively unhappy".

"I'm dazed, Max! I can't feel, I can't think," said Auriol and was startled to find herself speaking aloud.

It was strange to remember that she had ever reproached herself for speculating in all innocence how she and Max would have got on together. After this revelation, the one-sided bargain with her husband was at an end. She could not go back to Cleveland Row. Her parents would take her in while she thought out her next step; and, when the present chapter had been closed, she could open the next at leisure. Imogen and Joyce, without really meaning to be spiteful, would confide to one another that she had overestimated her powers; that, however, was unavoidable. It would be Colin's turn to lose his head and go berserk, her father's to break his heart and forget to smile, as she had already lost her head and broken her heart that day. Neither of them, however, would urge her to live under the same roof as a man who filled the house with his discarded mistresses and bastard children. Her mother should be her judge.

At some point in this eternal night Auriol had been arguing about the sacrifices that children should be glad to make for their family. She could hear herself telling the Duke of Killarney that Lokshott was more important than any one who chanced to live there for thirty or fifty years; the Otway tradition was of greater value than the transitory convenience of a single Otway. For that reason it was impossible to argue with people who urged that Lokshott should be sold and the money divided. Would the family demand that she should sacrifice herself now to avert a scandal? For a year before she married Ambrose, her life had been a series of family councils; to this hour she sometimes wondered whether

she could have carried the day if Laura had not allowed herself to be divorced. The family councils would begin again the moment she announced that she had left her husband.

"And I can't go back now," she decided. "That chapter's closed. The next step, I suppose . . ."

With her mind full of "next steps" and "present chapters", Auriol failed for some time to see that she had not determined what was to be done when she left that house and garden in five minutes' time. It was easy to say that she would not live under the same roof as Ambrose; but day after day, for a fortnight ahead, people would be coming on her invitation. Was she to tell her guests that she would not be able to receive them? Should she hand Ambrose the lists? The "popinjay dinner"—which she had designed to vindicate him!—was arranged for the end of the week; and, if she were absent, her story would have spread from one end of England to another before she had time to think. Oh, and more trivial still! Her manicurist was coming at eleven: a busy little woman, whose time one was not justified in wasting on fool's errands. And a needy school-friend was to lunch and have a look through Auriol's old frocks. Impossible to disappoint *her*! And yet, if one stayed for a single friend, a single dinner, to postpone a scandal . . .

It could only be postponed; and Auriol nerved herself to face the conclusion which she had so far been shirking. This meant the end of Ambrose's career. At the moment when he himself admitted that his enemies were multiplying too fast, he would stand forth as a man whose wife had been forced to leave him after a year. His divorce would be recalled; and, unless she imitated Laura and pretended that she had run away without cause, he would

stand forth as a man who had exceeded the endurance of two wives in two years. It mattered not who shouldered the blame! If he tried to divorce her, the whole story would be made public by her too zealous friends; if he allowed her to divorce him, he must resign.

Some time, in a night that had neither beginning nor end, the Duchess of Killarney had been saying that, however high Ambrose might rise, he stood higher now than ever before. "*Five years ago, my dear, people like John Ferrers and Harry Carmichael were telling Mr. Standish that, if your husband came in, they'd go out. Three years ago the prime minister and Peter Orpington sent him round the world in the hopes he'd dish himself. Two years ago he got in because they were afraid to keep him out any longer. And now, when they try to handcuff him, it's their own wrists that are handcuffed. He's got rid of Ferrers. He's stopped Carmichael's mouth. And he's given Rodney a scare. It'll be some time before any one tries conclusions with him again, unless, of course, he does something outrageous, which—fortunately—we needn't anticipate . . .*"

A second appearance in the divorce-court would be sufficiently "outrageous".

"But I can't go back," Auriol told herself again. "Perhaps, if we lived apart, without explanation . . ."

He might survive the scandal if they lived apart and let their neighbours think what they would. Auriol had no wish to punish him; but she had even less intention of punishing herself to please him. And to separate without a divorce was a bigger sacrifice than he was entitled to ask. She too had a right to expect something of life.

"And he's taken all I had!"

Less than twelve hours had passed since she was telling

Max that she admired and loved this trickster. For him she had thrown away her chance of happiness.

Auriol opened the gate and stole into the road. She must find Max and tell him what had happened. He must take her away where she could forget and be forgotten. If her husband chose to divorce her, he could ; if he preferred to say nothing, he could cling to his office and his career. The family must do its best to forgive her. Much as she owed to it, she owed to herself a certain measure of happiness. If through fear she failed to take it, she would be unworthy of it. God, if he saw all, must know that she had done no wrong.

“ My dear one ! O my dear !,” she whispered.

She half expected Max to step out of the shadows by the gate and to pick her up in his arms. When he kissed her, his lips would be clean. When he spoke, she could believe him. When she needed strength, he would supply it.

Not that she meant to falter !

“ A little honesty, for a change !,” she whispered bitterly.

V

AMBROSE would have to be told.

The sooner, the better. No shirking ! No twisting truth by a hair's breadth. She opened the gate and came back into the garden. Upstairs, vague heads were still silhouetted against the blinds. The door was still standing open. Lights were still burning in every room. Though she heard no sound in the garden, a deeper silence seemed to fall on the house as she came into the hall. Her husband she found still rocking slowly from side to side. His knuckles were pressed to his temples ;

and his eyes were shut. She hesitated to wake him ; but at the sound of a footstep on the landing he sprang up and faced the stairs.

Sir Matthew came half-way down, beckoning rapidly :

"I'm afraid. . . . You must come at once if you want to see him, Lord Sheridan."

"See?" Though his lips were working, he could say no more ; and Auriol heard a gasp as though he were being strangled. "S . . . see?"

"At *once!*" the doctor repeated.

"But he's not dying! He *shan't.*" Though the voice never rose above a whisper, it was hoarse with rage and pain. "If that child dies . . ."

As she watched him, Auriol recollected telling herself in some other existence that it was her business to keep her head and to help generally without being noticed.

"Come quietly, dear," she urged.

Ambrose stared at her and caught her outstretched hand :

"*You* don't believe he's dying?"

"I'm very much afraid . . . But he's not feeling anything, dear. He's asleep. And he'll just slip away without waking. That's all death is. So peaceful. No more hot heads and sore throats . . ."

He suffered himself to be led upstairs and stood, helpless and dazed, by the fire-place, with his back to the little cot. For the first time, Auriol felt, he was being defied in a matter that lay near to his heart. Unlike other adversaries, death was not to be bribed or bullied, cozened or cajoled ; it was deaf to the prayers of the frantic woman by the bed-side and scornful of the braggart by the fire who had said that the child should not die. Sooner or later, every one died ; in the long run death always prevailed ; it was time, death seemed to chuckle,

for Ambrose Sheridan to realize that he had met his match.

A faint sound from the bed warned Auriol that the young life was taking wing. She saw the mother drawing her head up and closing her eyes, perhaps in prayer for strength to carry her through her last agony. The doctor laid his hand on the child's wrist and nodded once, slowly, to Auriol. The nurse looked at her watch. Tony emerged from the darkness by the door and laid his arm about his wife's shoulders.

Before any one else could move, Auriol slipped her hand inside her husband's and pulled him gently towards the door. If he was going to break down, it must not be in that room ; and, if human dignity was to be abased, there should be no audience. Perhaps, however, she could get him home before he came out of his trance. In the hall he stared long at the basket-chair ; and, when she opened the door, he backed convulsively and plunged into the dining-room.

"Playing with his little bricks . . . only yesterday," he cried.

Then the trance ended ; and he fell forward across the table with his face in his hands.

Auriol locked the door and stood by him while he surrendered to his grief. The short June night was ending at last ; and the first twitter of sparrows blew in on the first freshening breeze of dawn. She saw the rhododendron-clump where she had hidden and the railings to which she had clung. The doctor's car had gone home ; but her own taxi was there, with the driver asleep on the box. A lorry, thundering out of London, set the windows rattling in their frames ; and a newspaper-van, driven at a gallop, heralded the arrival of a new day.

As the dry, rending sobs grew stilled, Auriol laid her hand on the bowed head.

"I'm going to take you home now," she whispered.

"You must give me a moment! I'm not fit to be seen. Oh, my God!" Turning from her, he buttoned his coat over his crumpled shirt and garish ribbon. "I'm . . . What's the time? I'm ready now. Your hat . . .? When . . . When did you turn up, Auriol?"

"I came with you to see if I could be useful. Have you forgotten?"

Covering his eyes with one hand, he shook his head vaguely:

"I must have. You were . . . here the whole time?"

If she could have convinced him by lying, Auriol would have said that she had only that moment arrived. His eyes, however, shewed her that no lying would spare him now.

"I was in the garden most of the time."

"But you understand? . . . I wonder what you think of it all."

"I haven't had much time to think."

"But . . . Oscar?"

"I only know you were devoted to him; and it's a bitter, bitter loss. I shan't try to comfort you now, dear. It's too near; and you're still blinded by it. In time . . . time heals everything, Ambrose. I know that."

"In time . . . I've *had* my punishment."

"I know. . . . Yes, I told you I understood."

"And that means you forgive?"

Auriol nodded and turned to the window. Only an afterthought, a presumptuous resolve to teach him a lesson in honesty and courage, had brought her back.

"Yes," she answered.

"Thank God," he whispered.

She stood without turning. If God heard prayers or thanksgiving, he must hear one that came with all her pride behind it: a prayer, how arrogant she cared not, that in forgiving she would have strength to hold nothing back.

He seemed to have forgotten her answer.

"That means you forgive?," he repeated.

"Yes. I must take you home now, sweetheart."

It meant more, but he would only have asked questions if she had said that she understood why he always won forgiveness. And Auriol could not have explained, though she knew now why Laura was powerless against him. Hitherto she had feared his strength; now she feared only the infection of his weakness.

CHAPTER II

Exceptional Men and Exceptional Standards

"When Great Men sink under the Length of their Misfortunes, this discovers, that it was not the Greatness of their Soul, but of their Ambition, that kept up their spirits so long ; and that, setting aside abundance of Vanity, Heroes are just like common Men."

DE LA ROCHEFOUCAULD : *Moral Reflections*,

I

FOR a week after the morning when Auriol brought her husband back to Cleveland Row, wandering in speech and broken in spirit, she found it expedient to pass as much as possible of her days and nights in public.

Under the first onslaught of his grief, Ambrose made no effort to explain or discuss or justify anything ; but, when he began to raise his head, she realized that, for all their talk of forgiving and forgetting, they could neither of them take up the old life quite as though nothing had happened. From vanity or from remorse he would be unable to bury this chapter without transfiguring or at least veiling its naked ugliness.

Auriol lived in public because she dreaded what he might say to her in private. She dreaded what he might say to her in private because she did not know what replies to make.

"If I do anything without the most careful thought,"

she told herself, " I shall come a cropper. And at present I'm much too jumpy to think carefully about anything."

As she realized hopelessly that first morning, there was no one to advise or steady her. Max? Laura? Her mother? She could not seek counsel without receiving sympathy; and her sense of loyalty was always outraged by discontented young wives who went about explaining that they were misunderstood or ill-used. Her pride, too, warned her that the first hot gush of sympathy would be succeeded by a reaction so chilling as to become antagonism. Her parents would feel, if they did not say, that she was reaping the whirlwind which they had cautioned her to expect. With her eyes, if not with her tongue, Laura would hint that a shock of this kind was what Ambrose Sheridan's wife must look to receive and that by her patience, her understanding and her magnanimity Auriol would prove whether she was worthy to be Ambrose Sheridan's wife. Max would not be brutal enough to say that her husband was only revealing the cloven hoof to which every one had pointed before he became her husband; but, remembering the tone in which she had been asked whether she was "actively unhappy", Auriol could not be sure that Max would not burst in one day with a white face, calling on Ambrose to come out and be whipped.

Maybe Max would repeat the other question that had haunted her since their meeting at Ascot: "Are you sticking to your husband *now*?"

"Well, I am," Auriol told herself, "but we must have an understanding. We've been married long enough to see each other's good and bad points. We can see the advantages and drawbacks in our marriage. We ought to know each other by now; and I have Laura's example to shew how you can go wrong by being *too* accommodat-

ing. I couldn't *absorb* Ambrose if I tried, but I must be careful that he doesn't absorb me. I'm not prepared to accept all his standards. And I'm not content simply to be his shadow."

Looking through her lists in preparation for what she called her "popinjay dinner", Auriol was struck by the change which twelve months of married life had made in the circle of her friends. Her parties were now attended by ministers and influential members of both Houses, by exalted officials of the home service and by colonial governors, by the chairmen of banks and the directors of great newspaper-combinations. She was surrounded by the unfenced machinery of government, as she had always wished; though she was deafened and blinded by the whirling wheels and thrusting pistons, this was the life which she had deliberately chosen in preference to drifting with Max from one race-meeting to another, arguing about the latest novels and discussing with young intellectuals during the London season whether the Russian ballet had reached its legitimate artistic limits and was degenerating into the extravagant and silly.

She had got what she wanted; and she had always wanted what she was now getting. Why did one always yearn for something more, trying to make the best of several worlds?

"Because you stifle, I suppose," she decided, "if you stick to one. Even fishes come up for air."

Since the night of her ill-starred visit to Bellamy's, Auriol had not tried to recapture the missing chapter of her youth by dancing in public places, but she still regretted the friends of her own age. There was no reason under heaven why she should not entertain them fifty times more often than in the Manchester Square days; her husband would not notice her absence if now,

as then, Max whirled her off to Sandown or if Bobbie Selhurst whisked her away to a theatre. In some way, however, Ambrose had made this impossible: she was never off duty even when he was in the House or the Colonial Office or his workroom, she had no life apart from him. And Auriol found herself sighing for her old room, her old associates and her old Bohemian interludes.

"Medmenham Abbey!," she whispered.

It was the name applied by Lord Otway to the old schoolroom at the back of his house. There, between six and seven of an evening, Auriol used to mix cocktails and distribute cigarettes to all that cared to come. Through a blue fog of smoke she could see again in imagination the crowded, disputatious scene: young girls with bobbed hair sitting cross-legged on the floor, talking of Virginia Woolf and Dorothy Richardson; young men with whiskers and queer ties, debating heatedly of Aldous Huxley and the Sitwells: critics of all ages, becoming involved and exotic; workaday journalists, not concealing their contempt for "high-brows"; and perhaps Colin or Guy Cavaly dashing in to gulp a cocktail and escape before becoming contaminated by "Auriol's perishers". Sooner or later, but always too soon, a stout figure, white-haired and smiling, came in to warn Auriol that she would be late for dinner. Once or twice Lord Otway had brought in a stranger with the explanation: "The editor of *Minerva* wants to know if you'll write something for him."

These happy, rough-and-tumble meetings, where new points-of-view were expressed and new opinions formed, lay buried in the past. When her elderly friends talked of books, Auriol found that they were content with second-hand verdicts; they did not read very much; they were

curiously incurious. She herself was reading less than formerly and had not kept abreast of the new men. Garnett, Arlen, Coward : she had little time to read new books and no one to discuss them with. Under the new dispensation, when she and Ambrose had come to an understanding, she must be allowed to bring her old interests to life again.

This, however, was a very small point by comparison with the main business of adjusting their standards. Auriol did not know where or how to begin, though she came in time to realize that she needed, more than anything, the detachment engendered of a holiday from her husband. Until the "popinjay dinner" was out of the way, she refused to make new engagements ; and, while it was preparing, she gave Ambrose no chance of hurrying her into elucidations or resolutions until she had found leisure to think. For a week, whatever misinterpretation he might put on her behaviour, she contrived never to be alone with him. In the library or the workroom she sheltered herself behind Geoffrey Mallock ; at meals she sat flanked by her guests ; and in her bedroom, which he no longer tried to carry by assault, her maid was with her until the lights were turned out at night.

In the morning her maid turned on the lights and remained with her till she was ready to seek shelter behind Geoffrey Mallock.

II

"*I FANCY,*" she wrote in her diary with greater frankness than in the days when she and her husband had pretences to keep up, "*I've really been trying all this week to get A. into perspective. I told him that morning I'd forgiven him ; and that's an implied promise that I'll stand by him.*

I've been regarding him dispassionately all these days to see whether I think him worth it.

"Two years ago I feel we were all faced with a tremendous risk. It came to us in different forms and we all of us stood to win so much. Begin where you will! Mr. Standish struggled with all his power to keep A. out of the government; he only took the risk of letting him in (and perhaps splitting the cabinet and dividing the party, certainly selling himself into eventual slavery), because he stood to win a policy and a man to carry it out. That sounds rather rhetorical, I'm afraid, but people are beginning to forget the state of despair they were in two years ago when one government after another vapoured about unemployment and did nothing to cure it. But for the dole there'd have been a revolution; and the dole was crippling industry and increasing unemployment. I regard that time as a nightmare! Labour could only talk of a rapprochement with Russia; our people could only talk about a tariff, which—rightly or wrongly—this country won't accept; and the liberals talked about the iniquities of the other parties. Ambrose had to be taken in because people believed he could cure unemployment and prevent war. We all believed in him. I took the risk of marrying him because he made me feel he couldn't get on without me. Laura took the risk of letting him divorce her because, oh, because we were all believing in him.

"That was two years ago. Well, I think he created a boom in trade as Lord K. created a boom in recruiting at the beginning of the war. It hasn't lasted, but it was a wonderful thing to do. People were hypnotized, just as I'm hypnotized by the advertisements for Kruschen salts. I believe I really should get 'that Kruschen feeling', if I took them.

"The boom made it impossible for any one to keep A. out of the cabinet any longer. And then everything came in a rush: the cabinet, a peerage and—for what I'm worth—

me. He couldn't do wrong. If we'd gone to Monte Carlo at that time, I'd have gone the limit en plein every time he told me. Since then, I seem to have been looking at life through the wrong end of the telescope. Everything's very small; and I can't make out whether familiarity has bred contempt or whether force of circumstance has been defeating Ambrose. For the last year he's been fighting first-class battles for tenth-class objectives: to get John Ferrers out of the way or to uproot the C.O. limpets and send them to learn something of their job abroad. For twenty-three hours out of the twenty-four I should call that very trivial game; but in the twenty-fourth he makes me feel that he's clearing away small but vital obstacles, that these engagements are all steps in a vast campaign, that he'll give us a new heaven and a new earth and—most disconcerting of all!—that it's not Ambrose Sheridan who's doing all this, but a Zeit-geist, destiny, god, whatever you will, operating through him. And all the time I feel, as the film-captions say, that 'one false step means death'. If he cracked up for a week, if he made one enemy too many, he'd be done for.

"All the time, too, I don't know if he's a genius, to be judged by exceptional standards, or a charlatan. If I did, I should know better how to adjust myself after last week's crash. I don't want to become introspective and I should like to think I'm making excuses for him because I love him, but I don't feel I'm as indignant as I ought to be. He behaved infamously, to everybody: there's no arguing about it. I think, though, I could make out a case for him. His strongest passion, equal to his passion for women and his passion for power, is the desire for children. Well, Laura didn't give him any. As it happens, I haven't given him any yet. I don't think I'm particularly unmaternal and I'm certainly not as sexless as I thought, but this passion of his has to be taken on trust. It seems to be so overwhelming

that I must make allowances for the way he seduced and left Evelyn, the way he tricked Tony. I must even persuade myself that, until I'd made good, he was justified in clinging to the child he had produced.

"I sometimes wonder if I shall ever understand him; but, whether I do or not, I must understand what other people think of him. That's my job since I decided not to leave him. And that was my purpose in collecting all the popinjays to-night.

"It was an extraordinarily interesting evening! I suppose I was frankly making friends for him. The triumvirate is broken, John Ferrers goes to Washington next month and Rodney and Carmichael are cowed. With A. to back him, the P.M. has asserted himself; and, if the 'young conservatives' (Carmichael and Co.) raise their heads, they'll find the old Tories under Hugh Killarney supporting the P.M. I felt all the time that A. was saying: 'Gentlemen, you fought well, but you've been beaten. You'll be beaten again if you fight again, but these fights are bad for us all. Isn't it better for us to be friends? You'll find I'm not a bad fellow, though of course you must always do what I tell you.'

"And he shewed—and I shewed—that he really wasn't a bad fellow. And he certainly wasn't a bad diplomatist! When the Ferrers family arrived, he laid himself out to captivate them, not by complimenting Sir John or propitiating Lady F., but by winning over the girls. I don't want to be unkind, but Rosamund and Nora are so nearly half-witted that nobody ever takes any trouble with them. A. took the trouble to talk for ten minutes as though they were his intellectual equals, regretting that their father was going abroad (even though they hadn't always seen eye to eye), but applauding the prime minister's choice at a time when America was sinking disgustedly back into political isola-

tion. Before he'd done, the entire Ferrers family was believing that Sir John was being sent to raise the new world and to redress the balance in the old.

"After that he laid himself out to captivate the Killarneys, lamenting to the duchess that Hugh had not been given high office before. The duke seemed rather bewildered, remembering his record as leader of the die-hards and remembering how A. in his radical days used to attack him. Now, though A. pretended it was all the prime minister's doing, the duke realized well enough that he owed his place to A. alone. And Mr. Standish admitted as much. Here again I thought A. was diplomatic. The poor P.M. may not have much drive, but he's very shrewd. No amount of flattery would convince him that he was anything but a tool in A.'s hand, so A. didn't make the mistake of flattering him. There was a hitch of some kind over dinner; and we began about ten minutes late. If it had been arranged, it couldn't have been more effective! Everybody had arrived and shaken hands, A. had shewn Ferrers that they must part friends and Hugh Killarney that they must make friends; then came a pause which at other times I should have found very awkward. Not so to-night! People began to look about and form themselves into groups. As the P.M. was the most important man, A. went and talked to him. The duke joined them. And Carmichael followed. After Carmichael came Rodney. There may, of course, have been nothing in it, but I felt that first Carmichael and Rodney, then the unofficial members standing in the other groups, then the wives, then the company generally realized that a new dispensation was beginning. Henceforward Mr. Standish and the duke and A. were going to rule the roast; and, the sooner the others recognized their new masters, the better for them.

"I'm not sure A. didn't have his greatest success with my own rather difficult relations . . ."

Auriol broke off to consider the attitude of her family to her husband. "Correct" was the first adjective to suggest itself, but she had to qualify it. "Artificially"? "Hypocritically"? They had fought like savages to keep her from marrying; to her father—one, two, three years ago—Ambrose the man was a libertine, Ambrose the politician was a cut-throat; to Lady Otway he was simply and devastatingly "a man of rather a different upbringing, unfortunately just old enough to be your father"; to Colin, Guy and Philip he was a "cad" or "an outsider", "hairy about the heel", "self-advertising". Then, in a night, these yelling, clawing savages had become the sophisticated slaves of convention. An order had gone forth; the family was to unite; the inevitable must be faced. Thereafter Ambrose met with the reception which the Otways would have accorded to a distinguished foreigner: his ways were not theirs, they did not understand more than a word or two of his language, foreigners were notoriously unpleasant in their habits and lax in their morals, but the family reputation for hospitality was at stake.

That night, Auriol fancied, a genuine cordiality had been achieved. She had heard Ambrose muttering to Colin: "It's going to be all right about your Indian appointment"; and to Colin's embarrassed "Very good of you to wangle it" he had replied: "My dear fellow, there was no wangling! As I don't want you to think me a prig, I won't say that nothing on earth would induce me to load the public service with one more incompetent; I'll say I'm so infernally unpopular with every branch of it that I can't take risks. I turned up your record and you'll be given this job on your merits. You'd probably have been given it without any interference from me, but as you asked me to see what I could do . . ."

Colin—dear, limited, direct Colin!—was left without an answer, but later in the evening Winifred Selhurst, prettily flushed, went up to thank Ambrose. A very human twinkle had come into the eyes of the “self-advertising outsider” as he asked why *he* was thanked and why *she* thanked him. “It affects other people besides Colin,” Winifred had answered demurely; and Auriol felt that perhaps the first people to be affected were Ambrose and herself. The feud with the Selhursts might now be regarded as at an end. When Lord Orpington, from force of habit, declared jocularly that politics, like the turf, seemed to attract the blackguards of every class, his daughters might now refrain from whispering: “As, for example, Ambrose Sheridan.”

To the popinjays among her own relations no less than to the superior members of their party Auriol felt that Ambrose had been saying: “You fought well, but I’ve beaten you. Isn’t it better to accept me?”

“*From almost every point of view,*” she wrote in her diary, “*the dinner and the reception must be considered a success. Perhaps A. was unduly nervous about his position before, but he’s more strongly entrenched now than he’s ever been.*”

If she could not call the success complete from every point of view, that was because she had not made up her mind whether he was a man for whom it was worth any one’s while to achieve success. The force of his personality and the strength of his will were beyond discussion. He had overcome his want of education and conquered poverty; he had triumphed over prejudice and borne down opposition. At their own game and on their own ground, he had beaten the industrialists and the financiers, the pressmen and the politicians; he had prevailed over

the committee-rooms and the drawing-rooms. Now at only a little over forty, he was a peer of the realm and a secretary of state. There were still a few further heights for him to scale ; and he would mount at his convenience. Of his contemporaries not Lord Northcliffe nor Lord Leverhulme had started with fewer advantages ; not Lord Birkenhead nor Lord Beaverbrook had climbed so high.

It was characteristic of the English to worship success. Every one, from Laura to Max, seemed to be hypnotized : the one spoke of a marvellous "career", the other philosophized on the "luck of a winning stable". No one appeared to reflect whether it was good for mankind that such a career should be helped or that the luck of such a stable should be maintained.

"I married Ambrose for what he could do," Auriol recollected, "not for what he could make of himself. I thought he had vision. I believed him when he talked about his 'mission' and I was ready to make any sacrifices for it. In himself I don't know that he's more deserving of sacrifices than the first man you see in the street. I stuck to him for what I thought he represented. Now I'm not sure that he represented anything but himself. I don't know. I must get away and think."

III

As Auriol locked her diary away, her maid came into the boudoir to know if anything more was wanted before she went to bed.

"I'm going to bed myself now, Merriman," she answered. "You might change the lights. I only want the one by the bed."

"His lordship told me to let him know when you'd

finished writing. He wanted to see you, he said, before you went to sleep, my lady."

Auriol felt her heart hammering and wondered whether Merriman would become suspicious if at the end of an hour's writing she suddenly discovered that she was too tired to say good-night to her own husband.

"I'm ready now," she answered.

Ambrose came in so quickly that Auriol fancied he must have been waiting in his dressing-room.

"I just wanted to make sure all these people hadn't worn you out," he began, with eyes averted.

"I won't say I feel as fresh as when I got up this morning," Auriol laughed, "but I wanted the party to be a success."

"It was. You completely won over Rodney and Carmichael."

"I flirted with them hard enough! Mummie says I've lost all sense of shame, but so long as I got a return for my shamelessness . . . I think we sent them away happy. Shamelessness doesn't come off beyond a certain age: I want you to get good value for me."

"I do! But you look tired out."

"So mummie said. She wants me to go down to Lokshott. I told her I should love to. I've purposely not made any engagements after to-morrow . . ."

She was not allowed to continue. At the mention of Lokshott, Ambrose shut the door, advanced to her dressing-table and stationed himself at her side, towering over her with his hands on his hips.

"Am I included?," he demanded.

"We didn't mention you," Auriol answered. "We never dreamt you could get away. Mummie thought I needed a change. Or, rather, I told her I did . . ."

"You told her? But why didn't you tell me, Auriol?"

I've asked you again and again whether you wouldn't like some place in the country where we could go for week-ends."

"But that isn't what I want. At present, anyway. One gets stale, meeting the same people and doing the same things. I thought if I could go down to Lokshott

...

"Without me."

Auriol looked up in amazement. He was making no effort to hide his chagrin; and, from his language, he might have been trying to fasten a quarrel on her. In spite of his menacing attitude, however, he could not keep his tone of resentment unmixed with some other quality. Was it the disillusion of self-knowledge?

"My *dear*, don't talk like that!", she cried. He would have been easier to answer if his charge had not been almost wholly true; but she could not hope to recover her balance until she was far enough away to forget him or at least to see him in his true proportions. "I only meant what I told mummie and what I've just said to you: I'm stale. I think everything went off all right this evening, but if you only *knew* what an effort it was . . . I can't help you as I should like when I'm feeling like this. As soon as I come back . . ."

"You're *coming* back?"

The words, beyond doubt, were meant for a question. He was in no state to threaten or command; and Auriol now understood the unfamiliar note that had jangled with his too familiar petulance. Ambrose, for some reason, had lost his confidence. He was frightened and humble.

"Why, what d'you think?," she exclaimed.

"I don't know. After that other night . . ."

"We said we'd forget that."

"You can't forget things by just saying you will. Swear to me, Auriol, by all you hold sacred . . ."

"That I'm not running away? Ambrose, if I'd ever thought of it—and I thought of a good many things that night—d'you imagine I'd choose this moment, just after the crash, when you're all raw and suffering? You must give me credit for a little more loyalty than that. I've said nothing all these days because I was simply afraid of hurting you, but I've been very, very sorry for you." She was still sorry for him, but on another score. From the shock of the boy's death he had recovered with complete and unseemly speed; and she would not have been surprised to hear him saying that he had no time for sentiment or that only fools cried over spilt milk. Now, like a dog, he was miserable at being found out; unlike a dog, he would not believe from her patting that he was forgiven. "If there's anything I can do . . ."

"You can stay here! If you *knew* how I needed you! I'm jealous, but it's only because you've made me greedy for you." His arms fell to his sides; and he dropped on one knee, bowing his head over her hands. "Stay here!"

Auriol raised the massive head and pillowed it on her breast, half expecting in another moment to hear him sobbing. The collapse was startling; and she needed time to understand this fever of passion that unmanned and prostrated him. Had she bargains to strike or wrongs to avenge, this was her moment; but, instead of making her tyrannical, this lately-revealed sense of power only embarrassed her. She wished that the scene could be ended with a jest; and she would have promised him anything if she had not feared to sow the seeds of new suspicions for the day when she should next hanker for fresh air.

"You don't mean it, dear, but you're not being very

complimentary," she whispered. "Have you forgotten the day when we talked about the primal curse? I told you then that I'd stand by you if you stood by me. I'll be quite honest about that other night: it gave me such a shock that I want new things to think about till I've had time to forget . . ."

"I suppose you knew the sort of man I was? Your friends told you; and they'll tell you now that they told you so before."

Auriol delayed to answer till she had overcome her impatience at this new suspicion. He seemed to think that she allowed people to criticize her husband in her hearing and that she would discuss him with relations whom he regarded with persistent distrust.

"I'm coming back," she promised; "but I want a change first."

IV

FOR nearly five weeks Auriol vegetated in the gardens of the house where she had been born and brought up.

In the first few days Ambrose bombarded her with long telegrams of enquiries; and the desperate abasement of his letters caused her first to burn them and then to hint that she was resting and wanted to be spared all unnecessary correspondence. Shut out from two ways of approach, he fell back on costly and ingeniously contrived presents, until Auriol begged him not to squander money that she would have preferred to give in charity. As though she were charging him with meanness, he sent her a cheque that would have paid all her subscriptions for five years.

"No, we've not quarrelled," she told her mother; "I've not run away; and he's not trying to buy me back. At least, if he is, it's very foolish and unnecessary, as I've

told him I'm going to Scotland with him in August and he ought to know I keep my word. I've had a shock, that's all."

"That I guessed," said Lady Otway. "Can't you . . . forget all about it?"

"Oh, it happened before I married. A woman, of course, but I won't condemn people who are sex-mad any more than I condemn people with a craving for drink or drugs. They're built that way, I suppose. It's when the drugs or the drink or the women rot out all their moral standards . . . Not that they have, with Ambrose. He has a different code; and that's my trouble! If he says 'All's fair in love and war' and I say 'Oh, no, it isn't!', we're going to crash sooner or later; he must convert me or I must convert him. And I don't want to be converted."

Under his saturating rain of presents and telegrams, Auriol wondered sometimes whether she was converting her husband. His dire dread of losing her, unrelieved by every disclaimer she could make, was a measure of her power; but it was a power that she could exercise only once to full effect, on the day she left him. In the hourly brush of one personality against another, she would be gently crushed: he was stronger and better used to getting his own way; he was cleverer; while she had known a little of one man, he had known much of many women; and there was a practised and professional touch in his way of manipulating this storm of jewelled trifles from Bond Street shops. Probably he had classified women into those who surrendered for food, those who required clothes and those who could only be bought or bought back with bangles and cigarette-cases. Evelyn Rushforth bore a price in her vacant eyes and weak, pretty mouth: expensive clothes, regardless of taste;

noise and bright lights ; rich food and much gilt paper on the champagne-bottles ; the whole incongruously shot with a timid demand for superficial respectability.

It was the thought of Evelyn that made Auriol protest against the daily arrival of his little registered parcels. When he substituted a cheque, she recalled that Laura had been silenced with big sums for charity and that he had afterwards struck at her through her schools and orphanages by threatening to withdraw his money unless she submitted. Probably he had classified women into those who could be coerced through their husbands, those who sacrificed themselves for their children and those who could be hurt in themselves.

" I'm not sure that this holiday is doing me much good," Auriol sighed. " I become terribly critical of Ambrose when I see him from a distance. And yet, if I surrender to his spell the moment I'm with him, that proves my case. I *shall* be gradually worn down. I shall become like Laura without any of her saintliness. I shall believe in the business of ' exceptional standards for exceptional men '. I wonder what Max or Colin would say to that doctrine if I told them about Evelyn and the baby? Perhaps, after all, it's good to get back occasionally to the old point of view."

She wondered which category Ambrose had chosen for her and decided that, for the present at least, he could not injure her or her family without injuring himself more. Without these ultimate trials of strength, however, she felt that he could always beat her. The trap which he had set for Tony Rushforth lay revealed by an accident. He would take better care next time.

" *Next time ?*," she whispered in horror and, on that word, bade farewell to the illusion that Ambrose could be converted to her code.

Must she accept his and consent to acts that, in the eyes of Colin and her parents, branded him as a man without honour or scruple ?

“ Does thinking do much good ?,” Lady Otway enquired after watching a frown that had hardly lifted for ten days. “ There’s no quarrel, you say . . .”

“ He’s wild for me to go back !,” Auriol cried. “ And I’ve said I will.”

“ And, having made up your mind, you’re still wondering whether you’ve done right ? ”

“ I should still go back if I knew I was doing wrong. . . Cussedness, darling, pure cussedness ! Also . . .” With a sudden melting of all her disgust and anger, Auriol remembered the weight of her husband’s massive head on her breast. “ Also, he can’t stand alone. I don’t understand him, but I love him, and I’m going to stick by him. It’s only . . . There are some things I say are wrong, wrong, wrong ! Even if he doesn’t agree, he might accept my point of view to avoid hurting and shocking me. If he believed in God and I didn’t, I shouldn’t shock him by making blasphemous jokes. I’m scheming and contriving. . . . That’s the only good thinking does ; and it hasn’t brought me anywhere yet.”

On the last day of her holiday Auriol had to admit that thinking had still brought her nowhere.

“ Ah, there I’ve done better than you,” said Lady Otway. “ If it’s only a difference of standards between you, it’s an easy task you have. Appeal to his sense of caste. Our code may be no better than his, but he thinks it is. Frown at *him*, darling, not at *me* ! I’ve long got over the stage of thinking that anybody’s ‘ better-born ’ than anybody else, but your husband hasn’t. The mere whisper that a thing’s ‘ not done ’ sets every quill on end.

When he married you, every one was saying he was a rough diamond and much too old for you, but he swept it all away by proclaiming that he was Ambrose Sheridan and that there was no more to be said about it. When he can't do that or when he thinks it isn't worth while, he comes into line with the meekness of an intelligent chorus-girl who's married out of her class and wants to avoid unnecessary mistakes. You can do a lot with Ambrose by shewing him just once—I've told you he's not stupid!—that certain things hurt you. He's very much in love with you, Auriol, and you could twist him round your finger if you liked; but I detest the attitude of 'I-won't-let-you-kiss-me-if-you're-not-good'. Bargaining. Exploiting his infatuation and making capital out of your physical attractions. It's horrible! But, if he loves you and isn't merely enslaved to your looks, he couldn't bear to hurt you, still less to forfeit your good opinion of him. If that's your only trouble . . ."

"I don't want any *more*!," Auriol sighed.

"Are you happy?," Lady Otway demanded abruptly.

"I ask you this question at short intervals."

"And you always get the same answer. Yes! If I'd been romantic . . ."

"I wonder whether it's good to be unromantic at your age," Lady Otway mused idly. "Or at mine. Thank goodness, I wake up every day with a conviction that something incredible is going to happen. When I was a girl, I was always going to inherit a fortune or make a great match. Later, I was always going to do brilliant and striking things for your father. And, later still, I was going to have staggering successes with my amazing children. My daydreams are about my grandchildren now: I see Claude as captain of the Eton eleven and little Cressida as the belle of every ball . . . It's great fun, Auriol;

you miss a lot by being so much more sensible than your old mother."

" I wonder ! "

" Whether you miss anything or whether you're more sensible ? "

" Both."

V

AURIOL continued to wonder throughout the day and a half that she spent on the road to Sussex.

It was idle to dream of inheriting wealth when she had married it or to picture herself in positions that could hardly be more exalted than her present one. It would be time enough to dream about her children when she had some ; of fairy princes the time for dreaming was past.

" If there's anything to miss, I've missed it," Auriol decided. " And it unsettles you to think and think and think what might have happened if everything had been different. I'm sensible enough to see that. If I weren't . . ."

For the first time in five weeks she allowed her memory to play over her meeting with Max at Ascot. To lose control of her mind and will was anything but sensible ; and late that night, as she stood in the Rushforths' garden, she had been very near the desperate and disastrous road which would have led her to Max's arms. It had leapt up out of the darkness, white, straight and inviting, as though Ambrose had turned a search-light on it. And she had forced it to fade, inch by inch, till she stood in darkness again, with her hand on her husband's bowed shoulders. It was an escape which she hardly deserved : if she had obeyed her impulse when it came, she would have been out of that garden and away when

Ambrose needed her. No doubt there would be people to say that he had forfeited all claims on her ; she could not say it to herself.

" If he'd even hinted : ' *So this is what you mean by standing by me . . .* ' I couldn't have stayed with Max after that. *Now . . .* "

Though she called herself unromantic and allowed her mother to call her sensible, Auriol could not be sure that it was wise for her to meet Max again so soon. Even to think of him was self-indulgence ; and, if she had not already thought of him till she became slack, the sudden collapse at Ascot might have been averted. As the Selhurst party would be big and he was going away at once, there could be no present or immediate danger ; but her unwisdom could be measured by the keenness of her disappointment when she realized that Max, perhaps, might have decided to stay away. She sat rigid and frightened as the dreadful possibility confronted her. The polo-ground was deserted ; she looked in vain for him on the lawn-tennis courts ; and she hardly knew whether to be relieved or dismayed when Lady Orpington and the Duke of Killarney strode along the terrace to meet her and shouted the names of the house-party.

" I hoped against hope we might capture that husband of yours," her hostess began, " but he wired that he simply couldn't get away. The duchess is here ; and old Mr. Caldwell. Sir Mark and Max are meeting us on the course and coming back at the end of the first day. I forget the rest. I expect they're the usual white rabbits who become so very attentive at Lords when they remember we've a house near Goodwood. How are you, my dear ? Colin tells me—he's here, by the way—that you've been seedy. Your looks don't pity you."

" I only wanted a change," Auriol answered.

“ Been doing too much ? Well, why not have a little rest before dinner ? ”

Though Auriol hated to lie down in the day-time, she submitted to being led upstairs in the hope that she would afterwards feel less inadequate to the demands of a big party. Five weeks' vegetation did little to quicken the tongue or sharpen the brain.

“ I really don't know what good all this thinking *has* done,” she told herself.

After five weeks she was no nearer deciding whether her husband was a man with a flair for excelling or a medium sent into the world to fulfil the purpose of providence and carry history to a logical conclusion. Though the phrase had been abused, the “ man of destiny ” could not be argued out of existence. Such men appeared at irregular intervals in the history of the world, sometimes in the guise of builders, sometimes of destroyers, sometimes of avengers. It might be maintained, perhaps, that they appeared only when the vitality of the world was low, building or destroying or avenging on an abnormal, gigantic scale ; and they seemed superhuman, they were called “ men of destiny ”, because the weak world could not resist them. The Near and Middle East were tired when Alexander appeared, cutting through history like a sword through cheese ; Rome was far gone in dropsy when Julius Cæsar came to operate. The world was tired to death spiritually, tired almost to death physically, when Buddha and Christ and Mahomet prevailed over its feeble resistance. France was weary with age and rotten with revolution when Napoleon administered his bath of blood. Had she married a man of this kind ?

“ I don't *really* mean . . . ” Auriol began.

The comparison was so grotesque that she did not complete it. Ambrose did not rank with Mahomet or

Cæsar ; it was doubtful whether he ranked with Lenin and Mussolini ; and yet he approximated more nearly to her idea of a " man of destiny " than the Macdonalds or Churchills or Lloyd-Georges of her experience. He was a greater man than most of his generation, but this was not to say that he was a great man. She was perhaps unduly set on finding a man of destiny because the times demanded it : the world was once more debilitated and lay at the mercy of an Attila who would waste it or a Paul who would convert it or a Napoleon who would organize it. Once she had thought that her husband was to be the new Napoleon.

" Two, three years ago," she muttered, " when I was looking through the right end of the telescope."

Was she seeing him in his proper proportions or had close contact dwarfed him ?

" If I knew that, I should know whether he was worth while ! "

A hidden bell, shattering the silence, made her jump out of her chair ; and she observed for the first time a telephone by her bed.

" London wants you, my lady," said an unknown voice ; and, after an interval of silence, she heard a flat " Hullo ! Hullo ! Is that Selhurst two-one ? " The tone changed abruptly. " Auriol ? My darling, I just wanted to know that you'd arrived safely ! How are you, child ? You've been away a *very* long time. Oh, *I'm* all right. Except for that one thing. Why, that you've been away so long, of course ! Darling, Lady Orpington said I might leave things open till the last moment, but I'm afraid I can't get away. There's a cabinet to-morrow and another on Thursday. I must try to be patient ! You'll be coming up on Friday night ? Or not till Saturday ? I want to see you at the earliest possible moment, but even more I

want you to enjoy yourself. I shall probably telephone again to-morrow night after dinner, if you won't be too busy. My dear, life's been very dull and I've been very lonely since you went away! Are you *really* feeling better?"

The distant voice was so fully charged with new tenderness that Auriol could hardly overcome a quaver in replying:

"I'm absolutely all right, thanks, darling. And not only in body. You understand? I wanted a little rest and a little change. I'm looking forward *eagerly* . . ."

"Have you missed me?," Ambrose interrupted.

He did not ask, fortunately, if she had regretted his absence.

"Of course I have!," Auriol answered, wondering if her tone sounded convincing at the end of so many miles. "How have things been going with you? Hugh Killarney's here—is he cutting the cabinets?—, but I haven't had time yet to talk to him or Blue Peter or any one. To judge by the papers, you've been having a quiet time."

A ghostly laugh travelled to her across the wires:

"I wouldn't quite say *that*! We've not done anything very spectacular, but you must prepare your ground and clear away your barbed wire before you can begin your advance. And that's what I've been doing. I wish you'd been here, child! One almost loses heart at times. Do you realize that in a very few weeks I shall have held my present office for two years? In that time I've been instrumental in ungumming one or two incompetents, I've put the fear of God into one or two more and I've got a machine that *will* move. But it's slow work! And now, now that the machine will go, I have to make a road for it to go on. Our system of administration is laugh-

able! However, you don't want to hear me on *this* subject . . ."

"But I do!," Auriol cried.

Talking politics by a trunk-line was supplementary to observing politicians through a reversed telescope.

"Then I can tell you the public service is a thousand times harder to reform than the cabinet. The navy, the army, the air-force, the civil service here and abroad, the universities and public schools: they're all up in arms. The long-suffering shade of Napoleon has been dragged out again as a warning to the public against me. Napoleon! I wonder how much Napoleon would have achieved with a cabinet of twenty! I suppose the answer is that he'd have got rid of the cabinet in something under five minutes. You can't do that nowadays, in this country. At least, *I* can't. When people talk about what Napoleon would have done in the last war, what he'd do now, I wonder if they realize what an easy, tiny job he had in comparison with ours . . ."

Somewhere between London and Selhurst a precise, hard voice broke in to enquire whether the speaker wished to have another three minutes.

"Yes, please," said Auriol.

"Don't cut us off!," said Ambrose. "What was I saying? Oh, about Napoleon! His whole little world was so much diseased that a nation which was only half healed could lord it over the rest. Distances were so much greater. Units were so much more independent. I don't say Napoleon's genius wouldn't have risen to the problems of our day. He was a realist. And for the life of me I can't find a man, woman or child who will face facts. At this moment Russia, Germany, Austria, France, Italy and LI-G's comic new states are all insolvent. We're living beyond our means and consuming more than we

produce. In spite of it all, we're armed to the teeth. And the next war, which we're doing nothing to avert, will leave as much behind it as a prairie-fire. Meanwhile we talk about housing-schemes and the age-limit in schools ! However, I don't want to make speeches by telephone when there's a chance of hearing your voice for the first time in five weeks."

"But I like to hear you," Auriol protested. "I've been wondering all this time whether you hadn't been caught up in the old machine. I won't mention names, but the personal fights, the departmental campaigns have all seemed so small, such a waste of time . . ."

"Hardly a waste of time. We had to clear the ground. And that's not done yet. I shall go forward as soon as the road's clear ; and I shan't stop till I die or reach the end of the road. Liberty ! That's what I never had till I won it for myself ; and that's what I want every man to have. Liberty to live and breathe and grow and work and think, without fear or favour, without disturbing any one else's liberty. Before you can think of that, though, you must achieve security. If I could make the world secure, I'd gladly leave my successors to make it free. I'm very modest, you see, in my ambitions, Auriol !"

He was laughing with his old happy assurance when the intermediate voice broke in again :

"Time's up ! I shall have to cut you off now !"

"Good-bye, darling," Ambrose called.

"Good-bye ! Bless you !," Auriol answered.

She hung up the receiver and strolled to the window. On the terrace below her, Lady Orpington was sitting with the Duke of Killarney, where she had left them. Their voices travelled clearly through the still air of early evening. The duke, no realist as Ambrose understood that term, was explaining that he did not

propose to attend that week's cabinets unless summoned urgently.

“Thank the Lord, things are very quiet! Unless anything unforeseen occurs, we shall run to the end of our term; and I maintain that's what the country wants. Standish is quite right: carry on and avoid legislation. We had a plethora of legislation before the war and during the war. Now that we've dismantled the war-machine, we want five or ten years of complete repose while industry recovers and while we look round to see what new social order the war has brought forth. Give the ordinary economic laws free play . . .”

CHAPTER III

The Tyranny of Tears

'Pride still is aiming at the blest abodes :
Men would be angels, angels would be gods.'

ALEXANDER POPE: *Essay on Man*.

I

BEFORE she went downstairs to join the rest of the party, Auriol glanced at the letters which had been forwarded from Cleveland Row.

The first to catch her eye was in an unknown, ill-educated handwriting, endorsed "*Private*" and heavily sealed with violet wax. Opening it and failing for a moment to recognize the address, Auriol turned to the end and was startled to find the signature "*Evelyn Rushforth*".

"Dear Lady Sheridan," she read:

"You must pardon me writing to you like this, but I feel it is my duty and though you may think I'm a funny sort of person to talk about duty I should feel worse than what I do if I didn't try to clear up the mess I've made of everything. I daresay you'll tear this up when you see who it's from and I shan't be surprised if you think what I'm saying is all a pack of lies, but I swear to you in the name of my dead baby that it's gospel truth and if you don't believe me I can't help it. I shan't care much one way or the other. I don't much care what happens now that

I've lost my Oscar. I don't care if Tony comes back. I just want to crawl away and die.

"It's this, Lady Sheridan, and you can believe it or not as you please. It was all over between me and Lord Sheridan before you married him and there's been nothing since. Honest to God! It was all over before you became engaged to him. If you want the whole story, it began about a year before he went round the world and I don't think you even knew him then. I'm not going to excuse myself and if you like to think of me as just a bad woman you must. I'm not going to blame Lord Sheridan either. Well, it started then and he took me round the world with his mission and everything came to an end before we got back. I don't know, of course, but I've fancied for a time that he went away to forget about you. He took me to help him forget you. And he hoped, when he came back, that he could go on with Mrs. Sheridan, just seeing me when he wanted me, and that you'd be over and done with. I don't know what happened. It must have been worse than he thought. I know there was one day, just before we got back, when I had to send a wireless message to Captain Hendry and after that he changed altogether. That was when the business ended. He never even kissed me after that day. I suppose he'd fixed things up with you.

"Lady Sheridan, you've just got to believe this! I can't stand anything more on my mind just now and I'd rather die than spoil your life. You've always been very decent to me, though I couldn't pretend to be your class. And I swear before God that the moment Oscar died wasn't as bad as the moment when I saw your face and tumbled to it that you understood. I suppose we're about the same age, but you always looked such a kid. And you had no reason to know what beasts men can be. As I watched you, I forgot all about Oscar. I was waiting to hear you scream, but

you didn't. You just led that poor soul away, never bothering about yourself. And I don't know if you were too fussed to remember it, but I shall never forget as long as I live. You came back from the door and put your arm round me and kissed me. And that broke me all up.

"Well, I can't see as I've done you any harm, or I'd never have the nerve to write like this. It was all over, I swear, before ever I heard of you. So what I want to say is this. Don't you go and spoil your life over a misunderstanding. I phoned your house the next day, before Oscar was buried, trying to make things right, but you were out. And I've tried again and again. They said you were away and still away and still away and nobody knew when you were coming back. Then I put two and two together, as the saying is. I knew you'd left him. Lady Sheridan, I haven't seen him since, he's not told me to write all this, I'm doing it simply because I don't want to come between him and you. Think what you like of me and think what you like of him, but as I hope to see my Oscar again in Heaven I swear I've not made him unfaithful to you since you married. Why can't you go back to him?"

As she put the letter down, Auriol was surprised to find herself crying. Brought up to a convention of reserve, she had hardly ever met such undisguised suffering or such unveiled despair. The little house in Bayswater, which she had not at once visualized from the address, took on sharp outlines; and she could picture a crushed figure in black laboriously penning this confession and asking herself in the middle of every sentence whether she had the "nerve" to go on. And it was all so unnecessary!

"I am coming back to London at the end of this week," Auriol wrote. "I should have been back before, but I have not been quite myself. You are very much in my

thoughts ; and I want to do everything in my power to comfort you. Please say I may come and see you the moment I am back. My love. Auriol."

Her next letter was also marked "*Private, Please Forward*"; it also was securely sealed ; and the address was typewritten. Inside, Auriol recognized Laura's handwriting.

"I hardly know how to begin. You now know what I have long suspected. Do you blame me for not telling you ? I did not know for certain ; and, even if my suspicions were well-founded, there was a chance—a good chance—that you would never find out. Until the blow fell, Tony himself never imagined he was not the poor child's father. I can only throw myself on your understanding and say that I acted, as I thought, for the best.

"I will not trouble you with other people's sides of the business. Poor Evelyn is heartbroken and desperate. Tony is dazed. By a merciful dispensation of providence, some of A's Canadian affairs have apparently been getting rather involved and Tony has gone out to investigate and report. Until he has had time to think calmly, no one can say what he will do. Of course the world at large would say that T. would be justified in anything he did to A. and that the one thing he must never do is to have any dealings with him again. I feel that people who talk so heroically as that have never been up against it, as the phrase runs. Tony may refuse to work for A., but he can't refuse to take his money, directly or through Evelyn. If he does, he must take it indirectly through me. That is where A. is so terribly skilful in making people dependent on him. He did it with Max, he did it with Tony, he did it with me. Tony is in sight of middle age ; he has a wife to support ; and he has no means of earning a penny. But I said I did not want to bother you about other people.

"I met your brother Colin several weeks ago; and he told me you were at Lokshott. At intervals since then I've put out feelers—to your father and Geoffrey Mallock and others—, always to be told the same story. Auriol, does this mean you're not coming back? I should not dare to put such a thought into words, if other people had not done it first. You were so active with your entertaining and what not that you're being missed. And people who don't like A. and would love to see him coming to grief are naturally being inquisitive. Some of them have asked me whether you're having a baby. I've said I don't know; and for a time, no doubt, you can drift on. Very soon, however, people will be enquiring seriously when you are coming back.

"I want to see you, Auriol, but I don't know where you are at this moment. Please, please, don't do anything hasty. At a time like this, the difference in our ages seems so great that I am terrified of giving you advice that would be humanly impossible for you to follow. Let me put my demands at the lowest level, then. When you married A., you were not in love with him, but you believed that you were necessary to him; and I only let him divorce me because I too believed that you were necessary to him. Well, you are still necessary to him, though I don't think you are any nearer to being in love with him. Auriol, you must go back. Whether or no you can ever again be a wife to him I do not know; I should be the last to blame you if you said that the contract was broken and that, if he went his way, you would go yours. But there must be an appearance of harmony. Please let me know when I may see you."

A little wearily, Auriol took up her pen to reply:

"I am returning to Cleveland Row at the end of the week. I will come and see you, if I may, the moment I am back in London. There is no need for anxiety."

Then, for fear of what the next letter might contain, she hurried downstairs and joined the house-party on the terrace.

II

DID Ambrose deserve the sacrifices that were made for him ?

As she chose a chair between Colin and the Duke of Killarney, Auriol felt that she would have to give different answers to the two men. To be brutally frank, Ambrose Sheridan was not worth an hour's discomfort of mind ; and she was grateful that Colin had never put the question so brutally. The Lord Sheridan, His Majesty's Secretary of State for the Colonies, seemed naturally entitled to any sacrifice that any one would make.

The duke, she found, was still extolling the merits of inertia as a policy for a convalescent empire.

" It's difficult to see what dividing-line we shall have in the next election," he told Colin. " I suppose one set of idiots will try to breathe life into the corpse of tariff reform ; and another will try to galvanize the capital levy and the nationalization of industry. Apart from those two groups we're all agreed ! Party politics are dead ! Home Rule, the Welsh Church, the franchise : for better or worse, these things which divided us in my young days are all settled. And you have the strange sight of your husband and me as colleagues," he added to Auriol. " Well, we've had one labour government ; and it was very like every other kind. The radicals are more tory than they were ; and the tories are more radical. The country wants a couple of dozen thoroughly reliable caretakers ; and Standish has provided them."

This funeral-oration on political parties and party-

politics made Auriol suspect that the tottering steps of the new secretary of state for war had been guided by the colonial secretary. She failed, however, to see Ambrose in the guise of a caretaker.

"There'll be a dividing-line when you come to reform the House of Lords," she suggested.

"Time enough to consider that when even twenty men of even one party have decided what they want," chuckled the duke. "There are as many schemes for reforming the House of Lords as there are systems for winning at Monte Carlo. That's our strength. And Asquith dished us by shelving the question of reform and simply curtailing our powers. It's still our strength! We're a compromise between past and present; and, like most compromises, we're a better thing than either extreme. Like all compromises, however, we can't stand examination at the hands of a logician. I hope Sheridan won't come a cropper over this. Before I vote for his precious imperial senate, I have to be convinced that the dominions want it. If they don't, I can't see that he'll do any good to anybody; and he may lose in prestige."

They were interrupted by the return of Lord Orpington and Mr. Caldwell from an afternoon visit to the stables. While they waited for tea, Auriol adroitly deflected the conversation from politics to horses before any one could whisper in malice that the Sheridan proposals for reforming the House of Lords would do good to Sheridan, whatever happened to the House of Lords. Two years before, when his friends expressed surprise at his accepting a peerage, Ambrose had explained that the prime minister wished to enhance the debating strength of the government in the upper house; when they asked if Ambrose had abandoned hope of being prime minister himself, he had replied that a peerage was not an insuperable bar. Of

recent years the king's first minister had always been chosen from the House of Commons, but in changing times the focus might shift from the one to the other; the president of an imperial council might fill a more commanding position than the prime minister of Great Britain; at worst, a peer might be empowered to choose in which house he would sit. Two years ago, as always, Lord Sheridan had been careful not to shut himself into a room until he had made sure of a way out.

Already, after two years, he might fairly be called the prime minister's deputy. And, as she coined the phrase, Auriol found the image of her husband overshadowed by the greater image of His Majesty's Secretary of State for the Colonies. It was strange to think that for a moment, six weeks before, she had been ready to tumble him headlong into the mire! For a moment, for many moments, six months or six years before, Ambrose had been challenging Nemesis to cast him down! If the wretched journalist whom he had beaten were to hear of that death-bed scene, if Tony or Evelyn or Sir Matthew talked unguardedly! The first two were dependent on his charity; the last was bound by professional honour; but there were others who would give a year of their lives to bring Ambrose Sheridan low.

"You're looking pensive, Auriol," said Lord Orpington.

"I was wondering why I was here. Or, rather, why you invited me. You've no reason to be grateful to us."

Lord Orpington laughed and led her away for a tour of the gardens.

"It would never do to let public differences penetrate into private friendships! As a matter of fact, your husband did me a great service. If he hadn't attacked me, I shouldn't have lost my temper; and, if I hadn't lost my temper, I shouldn't be the free man I am

now. I'm grateful to him for getting me out of the government."

"I wonder if the duke will be equally grateful for being got in," said Auriol. "If Ambrose hadn't attacked the F.O., Sir John Ferrers wouldn't have resigned and there'd have been no shuffling of offices."

"Oh, Killarney and Sheridan are as thick as thieves. Killarney swears by him. Well, that's natural enough. I confess I *don't* quite see . . ."

As he hesitated, Auriol finished the sentence for him :

"What Ambrose gets out of it?" She spoke a little bitterly, to rebuke herself at the same time as her interlocutor for entertaining the same suspicion. No one would ever believe that her husband could be disinterested! "They're in sympathy on so many subjects . . ."

"I'm *told*," said Lord Orpington, following his own line, "that those three are governing the country. The shell-backs take their orders from Killarney; and Killarney and Standish take their orders from your husband. What's he up to?"

Auriol was reminded vividly of the "popinjay dinner" and of the new triumvirate that formed in the middle of her drawing-room, tacitly inviting the rank and file to recognize their new masters.

"Isn't it all covered by the blessed word 'efficiency'?" she asked. "That's what caused the split with Sir John Ferrers and the others. That was his trouble with you over the C.O. He's been brought up in business all his life and he can't bear the haphazard way we run our government. Don't you think he's right? With all our men, our money, our territory, our resources, we've done nothing to organize ourselves. We should be worse off in another war than we were in 1914. When we have

unemployment in peace time, we have no system for remedying it, though there are great tracts of the earth's surface crying out for men. We could afford to drift in the nineteenth century, because we had such a start of other countries ; but now we can't compete with America alone until we've unified ourselves. That's all he's ' up to ', as you call it, Peter."

Lord Orpington smiled to himself and pressed Auriol's arm :

" Well, my dear, for your sake I hope he wins."

" But not for his ? "

" Candidly, no. Nor for the country's. It's a hard thing to say, but I feel he only sees the country as an opportunity for him to exercise his genius upon it. I felt the same about Lloyd-George, though I admired him tremendously. And I'm not alone, Auriol. Your husband has a newspaper following, but his colleagues don't trust him."

" They can't escape from their party ruts ! I find the so-called educated classes very similar to the mob, Peter. Their prejudices ! People never liked Lord Haldane even when they owed their skins to him ; and they'd have adored Lord Fisher even if you'd proved to them that his whole naval policy was wrong. *You* don't distrust my husband ? "

Lord Orpington looked at her in mild resentment at being challenged so directly when he was trying to impart good advice.

" Of course not," he answered quickly ; then, in revenge for her surprise attack : " Do you ? "

" Of course not !," Auriol laughed uneasily. " What a question ! . . . Peter dear, what time are we dining ? I think I ought to dress."

As they went indoors, Auriol reflected that she had

told the first lie of her life. She wondered whether it was any more convincing than Peter's. She wondered how many more she would have to tell and whether this was the first step in adjusting her code to her husband's.

III

THE Hendrys came by road and were hungrily awaiting luncheon, one winner each to the good, when the Selhurst party arrived.

"My last fling," Max announced to Mr. Caldwell. "I'm goin' to enjoy this."

"When d'you sail?," asked Lady Orpington.

"Next week, but we don't talk about it. I might be tempted to say something that would make my hard taskmaster think I wasn't keen on my job."

"It's by your own choice you're going," Mr. Caldwell reminded him. "I offered you another two months."

"Only prolongin' the agony. Besides, I wanted to leave a good impression." He opened out his shooting-stick, pushed his hat to the back of his head and surveyed the scene over a plate of sandwiches and a long tumbler, only taking care never to look in Auriol's direction. He was unwontedly voluble and jerky, she thought; and his good humour was almost too good. "God, this is a spot and a half! Trees, sun, downs . . . and *people*, bless 'em! I can hardly bear it!"

"You'll be back again soon," Sir Mark encouraged him.

"I wonder," Max murmured.

As he looked about him, Auriol felt he was taking leave of a place that he would never see again; and the wooded glory of the Sussex downs made her eyes fill suddenly with tears. The English countryside could be heart-

breaking in its beauty ! They had only exchanged a word of greeting, but she could not pretend that she was not driving him into exile as she had driven him two years before. In those days, however, it seemed likely enough that he would come back as soon as he was cured ; but, when he cut his leave short by two months, he was admitting that he was not yet cured and, perhaps, never would be. Auriol wondered why he gave himself the pain of this last meeting ; she was answered when he looked across and said :

“ You’re becomin’ a noted figure on the turf, Auriol. I never thought I should see you here.”

“ Didn’t I tell you at Ascot ?,” she asked.

“ Yes, but I heard you were ill. . . . Have you got any winners for me ? ”

“ I never get winners,” she sighed.

“ Nature’s compensation, my dear,” said the Duchess of Killarney : “ you get everything else.”

“ I can give you Bean Stalk for the Stewards’ Cup,” Max announced, suddenly intent on his card. “ Blue Haze in the last race . . . ”

“ Had a good season, Max ?,” asked Colin, between mouthfuls of hard-boiled egg.

“ Simply couldn’t miss ‘em.”

“ That must be nature’s compensation for something,” the duchess decided ; “ but I don’t quite know why you should need compensating. Are you unlucky in love ? ”

“ Ah, I can’t say till I’m dead. No bachelor can.”

“ Are you trying to be cynical ? ”

Max finished his sandwiches hurriedly and stood up :

“ I couldn’t be cynical if I tried, on a day like this ! . . . Does anybody know anything about the next race ? I think I shall drift back and have a look at the horses.”

He strode away without inviting any one to accompany him. The others had hardly begun their luncheon ; and only an old, now generally lost, reputation for uncouthness saved him from a charge of rudeness. Auriol followed with her eyes his loose-limbed slouch until he disappeared behind the hood of a car : it seemed her fate to drive him into exile ; and she gauged the atmosphere of the party in an attempt to find a means of escaping. If she feigned illness, Max would remember their first Goodwood meeting, when she was really ill and he read *Handley Cross* to her ; if she had herself recalled to London, Ambrose would wonder and Max would only think she could not bear to be in the same house with him instead of guessing that she was trying to leave him his last pleasure unspoiled.

Strange how she could let the infinitely big things be elbowed out of sight by the infinitely little ! She ought to be remembering, still more she ought to be trying to forget, that they were parting within three days, not to meet again ; however resolutely they set their teeth, both knew that they could expect nothing of life but the second-best ; and here she was blaming herself for marring a schoolboy treat and overclouding the last day of the holidays. Racing meant so much to poor Max ; and she had ruined Ascot for him, she was ruining Goodwood, she would ruin it equally whether she stayed or went.

"Coming to spot the winner, Auriol?," asked Lord Orpington, as luncheon ended.

"I'll keep you company to the paddock," she answered, "but, after that, I vanish. Women are nuisances at race-meetings. Did Max tell you about Ascot? I'd hardly seen him for two years, so I clawed hold of him, forced him to give me lunch, dragged him away from the

enclosure, gossiped, missed every chance of making our fortunes and misbehaved myself generally. I wonder we're still on speaking terms."

She broke off to wonder with more real concern why she was talking in this strain. It was insincere, it was deliberately misleading: what Max would call a "double-cross". Now, if they disappeared for hours on end, Colin and the others would say that there could be nothing in it or she would not have talked about it. No one would trouble to tell Ambrose. If the truth were improbable enough, she could get herself disbelieved by telling it: even as Ambrose "double-crossed" her by the very openness of his devotion to the Rushforth boy.

Auriol threw away her cigarette and joined Lord Orpington before she could disinter any more of a memory that she had promised to keep buried. With a little strength of purpose she could atone for her mistake in coming to Selhurst at all: one day was already well advanced, she could rest at home on the morrow and go back to London on Thursday afternoon. In the meantime she would not speak to Max unless some one else was present.

"I didn't answer your letter, Auriol. Truth to tell, I didn't know what to say."

She gripped the railing with both hands, trying to see without turning whether any one was in ear-shot. A moment before she had been standing between the Orpingtons; they had now moved away and Max was at her elbow, cross-kneed on his shooting-stick and tranquilly lighting a cigar.

"I'm glad you didn't," she answered, as soon as she had recovered her breath. "At the time I wrote . . . Max dear, I'm not going to make a nuisance of myself. I see now that I really oughtn't to have come, but I

couldn't let you go without a last glimpse. Perhaps we can still be friends, but I'm not going to be silly."

"You all right again?," he demanded brusquely.

"Quite, thanks."

"Were you bad?"

"No! Just tired. Bruised a bit."

Max threw away a cigar that was by now bitten in two.

"I made up my mind you were dyin'. And I couldn't get to you. Till then, you hadn't mattered, I couldn't have cared for you; but when I found this almighty wall between us and couldn't get over or under or through . . . I called at your house . . . and funk'd goin' in," he whispered in furious scorn. "I started out for Cornwall and then saw that I should only be makin' things worse. It makes things worse to talk like this, but I shall be safely packed up and on the high seas in a week's time. . . . If I go, that is . . ."

"If you go?"

"Yes. I want a talk with you, Auriol. I've heard about everything. From Laura. What I want to know is: what about it?"

IV

FOR a time, which she felt Max must be thinking very long, she could not concentrate her mind on his question.

How curious, she reflected, how really very curious of Laura to tell any one! And Max, of all people! Unless she wanted to drive them into each other's arms, she must know that she was only making a hard position well-nigh impossible. Presumably Max had heard of the flight to Lokshott and become suspicious. He had insisted on being told. There was a time, indeed, as Laura frankly admitted, when she prayed for a breach,

in the hope that Ambrose would come back to her; now, even if she were capable of keeping open a healing wound, she would not desire him to come back through the already familiar divorce-court. The Right Honourable the Lord Sheridan, His Majesty's Secretary of State for the Colonies, had to be kept on his pedestal. Yes, Laura had acted in good faith, under irresistible pressure.

"As soon as I heard . . .," Max was saying, but Auriol could not yet fix her thoughts on what he was trying to explain.

How strange it was, almost grotesque, that the emotional scenes of their life should be staged in the crowded enclosures and paddocks of fashionable race-courses! One man after another, hurrying back to the members' stand, half-turned to say: "Hullo, Max! How soon are you off again?" One woman after another murmured: "Auriol! My dear, I do hope you're better now!"

How perplexing it was of Max to tell Lady Orpington in one breath that he was leaving England in a week's time and then to add mysteriously, in the next: "If I go, that is"!

"What did Laura tell you?," Auriol enquired at last.

"That you'd found out. I'd suspected all along . . ."

"And you never warned me?"

"I didn't know for certain. And, if I had known, I shouldn't have cared much about trying to set you against the man you wanted to marry. And, if I'd tried, I shouldn't have succeeded."

"You think not? I should never have married him if I'd known. I shouldn't now, but two years ago when I was the crudest thing the Almighty ever allowed to survive. . . !"

"Then I'm sorry I didn't tell you, but it's no good tryin' to remake the past. What are you goin' to do now? I ask you again, with rather more justification: 'Are you stickin' to him?'"

"Yes. I forgave him within five minutes of the poor child's death . . ."

"Forgave?"

"Well . . . I said I would. And I told him last night that I was coming back at the end of this week."

Max nodded once slowly, keeping his face averted:

"I see."

"It was the only thing to do," Auriol sighed. "Wasn't it?"

"My dear, you mustn't ask my opinion about anything! I want to know your movements; and if I can help you in any way . . . I can't take the responsibility of influencin' you. I'm an interested party."

"What d'you mean?"

Looking up at a change in his voice, Auriol saw Max moistening his lips. She observed that the tip of his tongue was startlingly red by contrast with his lips, which were grey and dry.

"Well, obviously it *isn't* the only thing to do," he answered in seeming impatience. "Not bein' a lawyer, I don't know if he's done enough to constitute grounds for divorce . . ."

"My dear, I could never divorce him! Eighteen months ago I thought I was marrying a man: I find I'm sharing a public position! It's odd, isn't it? When I first found out, I looked back over the whole field and I was amazed at the way he twisted everybody to his will. The P.M.; Blue Peter; Laura; my father; you; Tony; this poor Evelyn; me. I couldn't see how he did it or why we all helped him. I'm seeing better now.

Every one concerned is once again making the utmost sacrifice to keep him where he is."

"And you're goin' back to him?"

"I'm going back . . . to share his public position. When I said I forgave him, I meant that I'd try my utmost not to let it make any difference. I'll work as hard for him as ever. No amount of fine words or good resolutions, though, can restore your trust in a person when he's wantonly shattered it. That's the hard part!," she added in a whisper. "It didn't matter that I wasn't in love with him so long as I believed in him . . ."

"But you're goin' back, though you don't trust him any more and are still not in love with him?"

"It's the only thing to do," she repeated.

Again keeping his face averted, Max shook his head:

"You could leave him. Separate. It would hurt his vanity, but it wouldn't injure his position. And no one could throw stones at you. And you wouldn't upset your people. I'm afraid, though, it wouldn't make much of a life for you; and, believin' as I do that we only have one life, I think we're all entitled to make the most of it. The only other thing is for you to come away with me. Will you?"

For the second time Auriol found herself unable to concentrate her attention. Instead of being surprised or moved by his proposal, she was only surprised by her dulness in not guessing before why he had talked of leaving at a certain time, "if I go, that is". And, instead of answering his question, she could only think incongruously of old Mr. Caldwell and wonder how he would receive the news.

"It would cost you your job, Max," she found herself replying coolly.

"I'm not sure," he answered in a tone as level as her

own. "If it did, I can tell you in all modesty that there are plenty of people on the coast to offer me a better one. I'm not sure it would be quite fair to old Pat and Mac if I went to a rival show, but there are other things I could do. Point o' fact, I went to Michael Herrick—the money-lender, you know—and asked him what he'd advance on my reversion. It wasn't a great lot, but it was enough to set me up in business. And I know something about business now."

His calm tone, restful a moment before, now seemed inhuman in its detachment ; and Auriol turned away with a shiver of exasperation.

"You didn't really think . . ." she began.

"I thought this was much too important for us to go into it with our eyes shut," he answered. "I'm bein' as cold-blooded as I know how, because I want your considered opinion. In a business of this kind, the woman has a rougher time than the man ; and it seems infernally unfair that you should have to put yourself in the wrong. Whether your people would come round when they'd had time to get over the shock . . ."

"It's not possible, Max!" At last Auriol could see before her a definite question, demanding a definite answer. "I could give you a hundred reasons, but you won't want to hear them when I've told you it's impossible. And I don't know that I could make you understand . . ."

She stopped abruptly as the blue-coated figure of Lord Orpington swung past and a mocking voice urged Max to make up his mind and have done with it :

"You can only lose your stake once! And you'll make yourselves ill if you stand there thinking about it any longer."

"I'm afraid we weren't even trying to find the winner,"

said Auriol. "I wanted Max's advice . . . Shall we go back?"

"Are you goin' to watch this from the top?," asked Max.

"Yes!," cried Auriol. "No! Anything but that," she added, when they were alone once more. "It's a horrid thing to say, but I know Winifred and Colin are there and I can't bear being with them. You know it's all fixed up? They're so dreadfully happy; and I can't look on at other people's happiness just now. When I've had time . . ."

"But, Auriol, there's no reason . . ."

"I've told you, there are a hundred!"

As they walked back in silence, Auriol wondered whether it was worth her while to explain something that no man would really understand. A pride which Max would think perverted kept her from sinking willingly to her husband's level; and, though she had told herself a dozen times that Ambrose had broken their contract, she could not find convincing words for the feeling that she must stand by him, at least in appearance, because he was too weak to stand alone. Henceforward, if she took a lover, she might feel that she had injured herself, but she would never feel that she had injured Ambrose. She was so indifferent to him as a man that she had not decided whether to forbid him her room; but, unless the future held something beyond her present comprehension, she could think of nothing that would absolve her from her responsibility towards a human being whom she had promised herself to protect. She would feel he had a grievance if she were not at hand when he needed her to mother him; he could have no grievance if she arranged the rest of her life in a way that would compensate her for being at hand in emergencies.

Max, she found, was talking to her :

“ Perhaps it would be better if I cleared out right away. I can say I haven't got all my kit yet.”

“ My dear, there's no need for *you* to run away . . .”

“ We can't go on like this. Every one will spot there's something up . . .”

“ Not if we bluff them ! I believe we might even bluff ourselves. Max, we *can* ! If we say we're going to have the most marvellous time . . . And we are !,” she cried in rising excitement. “ You must forget you're going away, I'll forget I'm losing you, we'll enjoy every moment of our holiday together ! The future just doesn't exist, Max ! This week will be like leave in the war. When we wake up and find ourselves in the future, what glorious memories we shall have ! Come on, Max ! Help me to pretend,” she cried with a quaver. “ You're not a merchant-prince any longer, I'm nothing and nobody. We've never been in love, we're meeting for the first time and finding each other great fun. This is the first time I've been to Goodwood ; and Blue Peter's told you to look after me. We've just got over our shyness ; and it doesn't matter what we say or do, because we're never going to meet again. Amuse me, Max !,” she went on hysterically. “ Do your duty ! You're responsible for me. Say : ‘ Are you keen on racin', Miss Otway ? ’ ‘ I'm afraid I don't know much about it, Captain Hendry. ’ Come on.”

V

SEIZING his arm, she led him to a place by the rails where they could watch the horses going down.

After an awkward beginning, Max threw himself into the game ; and, if their laughter at times rang hollow, it

was something, Auriol felt, that they could still laugh. With becoming gravity, Max escorted her to and from the paddock, put on her bets for her and, after a long-priced victory, led her back to the cars and offered her a cigarette and a glass of wine if she could be sure that her mother would not object. Auriol, in her turn, played the part of a rawly intellectual Cambridge graduate and engaged Max in abstract discussions of the socialistic state, the future life and the general purpose of existence. The game was suspended after the last race and resumed when they met before dinner in the long gallery.

"We're pretending we've just been introduced," Auriol explained to the rest of the party. "Max can't stand me, because I'm such a prig; and I can't stand him, because he's such a boor. As ill-luck will have it, we have to sit next to each other; but we've been well brought-up—at least, *did* you bring him up well, Sir Mark?—and we're doing our best. . . . May we hope for a fine day to-morrow, Captain Hendry?"

"Can't say, Miss Otway. I don't like the look of things this evenin'."

"Is it raining?"

"Not actually. 'Hellish dark and smells of cheese', though."

"Of course, if you're going to swear at me . . .," said Auriol with admirably affected rage.

"Bless the girl, it's a quotation . . ." Max's tone of contemptuous surprise matched her indignation. "I say, Auriol, did you really tell people I was a young man who evidently thought it manly to swear, or was Blue Peter pullin' my leg?"

"She said it," Lord Orpington affirmed.

"There were no depths I didn't reach in those days," Auriol sighed; "and I *did* dislike you! Come on! . . ."

I believe I've caught a chill in that wet grass, Captain Hendry."

"Well, if you *will* wear paper shoes . . . Hullo, signs of dinner! I'm hungry. Are we really sittin' together?"

"Yes. I arranged it. But you're not to talk horse-pedigrees the whole time as you did that first night."

The game languished in the presence of an audience ; and for the first half of dinner Max remained silent or monosyllabic. Very few nights remained before he must say good-bye to this hospitable house and this old-fashioned essence of all things English. The atmosphere and conversation, the furniture and pictures, the silver and glass were things which he had known from boyhood, things of which he could never tire. Why should he be condemned to wicker chairs, wooden houses and mosquito-nets, to obligatory lawn-tennis at the club, to poker-dice and cocktails, to exile—in a word—with its hell of monotony and loneliness? The champagne was circulating for the first time and Mr. Caldwell raised his glass to murmur: "Pleasant voyage and safe return, Hendry"; but the voyage would be unbearable and the return, if he ever came back, would be worse than the parting. Ambrose Sheridan was not going to die. They could look forward to this kind of night for the rest of their lives. . . .

"You're shewing that you mind. And you mustn't," Auriol whispered. "Talk to me just enough to keep up appearances. How d'you like my dress?"

"Stunnin'!" Max pulled himself together and glanced round the table. On either side a promontory of silence was projecting into the rising tide of conversation. Colin and Winifred were content to smile at each other, blissfully indifferent to the looks which they caused; and Auriol was fidgetting with her pearls, he was crumbling his toast while every one seemed to be watching them. "I was

tryin' to remember what we did that other time. You retired up with a chill, but you were here for dinner."

"We played *roulette*. Have you forgotten teaching me the rules?"

"By Jove, I had! An' you bullyragged me over my French!"

"Well, it was vile! '*Numéro dix-sept, rouge, impair et . . . mank*'!"

"To rime with 'bank', I was takin' it; and I made the best part of a pony. . . . Wonder if Blue Peter's goin' to play to-night? I've not spun a wheel for two years."

"Aylwin said some people were coming in to dance. I've hardly danced for two years."

"Will you spare me one?"

"As many as you like. Or as few."

"Comes to the same thing, doesn't it?"

"Not quite! . . ." She glanced cautiously round the table and lowered her voice. "Can you hear me? My dear one, I want to keep you to myself for the whole of our holiday! Only three days! But they're three days that will belong to me; and no one can take them away. During the war, a cousin of mine was married to a man who was killed after three days. I expected to find her absolutely broken up, but she wasn't. She was holding on to those three days, she's holding on to them still. I don't suppose she'll ever marry again; she's been ill, she has very little money, but it doesn't seem to matter. Those three days! You see a light coming into her eyes when she thinks about them. . . . I don't believe anything will matter to me, I should love to feel nothing would matter to you, if we had a memory like that to share. We'll laugh; and I'll tease you about your French; and we'll dance. You can read to me . . .

You *do* read badly, Max! At least you did. . . . We'll have such fun! It's all part of the game, dear, but I don't know that you're enjoying it. That's why I said: 'As many as you like; or as few.' *Are* you enjoying it?"

Max turned to face her and was arrested by the sight of his untouched whiskey-and-soda. His head was beginning to swim from the intoxication of her presence; he was ceasing to think of the future.

"I suppose I *am* sober," he muttered. "I had a nice glass of sherry-wine before dinner and a whiskey-and-soda at lunch. That's all, on my honour. Yes! . . . May I have the first one of all, Auriol? I'm enjoyin' it, good and plenty. And it *will* be as many as I like?"

Though they were talking in an undertone, the precaution was not needed. Every one, by this time, was launched on a cataract of conversation; and, when Auriol again looked round the table, she found that she and Max were no longer being watched. In dropping from the notice of their neighbours, they had dropped out of the common life; the brief chapter that should belong to them alone had already opened; and she was undecided whether to resent this babble of alien voices or to be grateful for a noise that fenced them in.

"I must have just one with Peter," she warned him rather breathlessly.

"And I must do my duty by Aylwin. I suppose Colin won't let any one go near Winifred."

"Dear Colin! They're so happy! And I'm so glad. I don't grudge it them now. *I'm* happy. You too?"

"I'm wonderin' . . ."

"Ah, don't! You're wondering what we shall think when we wake up in the future? There *is* no future, Max. There's these three days. After that, we shut windows

and doors, light the charcoal . . . Not *really*, goose ! But I want to live each moment of this time as if there were nothing, nothing to come after. We must be very sweet to each other : it would be unforgivable if we had a single regret at the end. We must be sweet to everybody ; and the happiness we lend them will be given back . . . when we need it. You *do* like my dress ? If not, I'll change it. Anything ! . . . Max, why don't you marry Aylwin ? She's such a darling ; and you need a wife. Even if you weren't as happy as I should try to make you, I believe you'd be happier than you are now. And, if you came to love her so that you forgot all about me, I should thank God for it. Why don't you ? O Max, my sweetheart, I'd cut myself in pieces to make you happy ! You're the only human being I've ever loved ! ”

CHAPTER IV

When the Comedy Ends

"The whole business was unfortunate: . . . the more reason that I should try to behave like a gentleman . . ."

"I have sometimes thought I should like to try to behave like a gentleman myself; only it's such a one-sided business . . ."

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON AND LLOYD OSBOURNE: *The Wrong Box*.

I

"WHAT," enquired Max with a frown, "is the name of a show where an actor-chap gets mixed up with the wife of another actor-chap? The second cove does the first one in, durin' the play. Can you place it? The moral, I take it, is that when a real tragedy overtakes people who've been playin' with tragedy for a livelihood . . .?"

"You don't mean *Pagliacci*, do you?," asked Auriol.

"That's the horse!"

"But what on earth makes you think of that?"

"Dunno. We've fooled about because it amused us, but I never thought we should be foolin' as a matter of life and death. And we had our tragic moments—or so they seemed at the time—, but now they look as if they were all a sort of play-actin' . . ."

"And this is real tragedy?," asked Auriol.

Max shrugged his shoulders without answering. "You're the only human being I've ever loved." His

head was ringing so wildly with her words that he could hardly be sure he had heard them aright. It was a trifle late in the day for avowals of this kind ; and Auriol, in this mood, frightened him. Though they had both flung discretion aside at the same moment, he seemed instinctively to have retained a leather jerkin of prudence ; she from greater fullness of love, greater fear of a half-gift, perhaps even from greater joy in freedom longer delayed, was dragging him by both hands towards an abyss to which he at least could not blind himself.

“ They’ll hear you !,” he whispered.

“ How I yearn to get away from this mob !,” Auriol answered.

The long dinner threatened to become unending. Lord Orpington, who seldom needed encouragement to talk, was being spurred from story to story ; when he addressed himself to his neglected plate, Sir Mark or Mr. Caldwell would tempt him away from it by a reminiscence which he had to embroider or by an anecdote which he was obliged to cap. Auriol, in abrupt reaction from her late fever, became listless and melancholy, shaking her head at the dishes offered her and drumming on her knee with fingers that trembled when she left them unoccupied. Once or twice she looked at Max out of the corner of one eye ; but his wistful smile perplexed her, as though he were looking on in mockery at his own collapse.

“ Don’t be so solemn !,” she begged.

“ I was wishin’ Blue Peter would hurry things up a bit. I want to smoke.”

“ You might have said you didn’t want to waste our holiday. How consistent you are with yourself, Max ! ”

“ Well, we can’t talk properly in here . . . ”

“ And you want to talk ? You’re not bored with me ? ”

"You needn't ask that, Auriol."

His voice bathed her in rapture ; but, when she turned to smile him her thanks, his expression froze the smile. Acquiescence might sometimes be too complete ; and his willingness to play her game of make-believe disconcerted her. Max at that moment looked less anxious to talk or smoke than to take her in his arms and rain kisses on her lips and eyes ; she could almost feel his hands burning her bare arms and shoulders.

"I . . . I had to," she faltered. "It seems such a silly game to play that I shouldn't blame you if you were bored to tears. If only we *can* talk, I shall feel so much better. All the things I've thought and wanted to say . . . You can guess them, I expect, but, when I've said them, I hope to draw a deep breath and tell you *that's* all right. I shan't make love to you," she laughed emptily ; "and you mustn't make love to me. That would spoil our holiday and leave something that we should regret. If I didn't trust you, I couldn't talk like this."

"I think your hostess is tryin' to catch your eye," Max improvised. "No, false start ! If Peter don't stop talkin', I shall smoke over his port ; and then you can listen while I'm thrown to the wolf-hounds."

Auriol lapsed into silence. The irrelevant interruption might have been fortuitous ; or Max might be shewing her that he did not understand what she was saying. She was far from sure that she herself understood ; certainly she could not explain that he disappointed her when he held aloof and frightened her when he drew near.

At the end of dinner she submitted to recollections of her own childhood from the Duchess of Killarney, finding comfort in being moored to her own family. When

coffee was brought in, she was handed a telephone-message from her husband :

“ I hope you are enjoying yourself. I tried to get through to you before, but the line was blocked. Now I hear you are at dinner.”

The unexpected intrusion comforted her even more. When Ambrose made his ridiculous objection to her dancing at Bellamy's, she had been able to answer in good faith that she was perfectly competent to look after herself. It was useful to be reminded of that boast. She could look after herself so well that she need not avoid Max nor change the note of their conversation ; and, though she would only do harm by telling Ambrose of this meeting, he might be grateful to Max for sending her back to him with heart and nerves at rest. When once she had said all that was simmering inside her, she could resign herself and live on the memory of three days in which she had been happy.

“ Now that I've got you to myself,” began the duchess, “ I want to tell you of something I'm sure you've forgotten . . . ”

“ Really . . . ? ”

The men were dawdling inexcusably over their wine. Auriol nodded and laughed mechanically through the unsparing record of her infantile scrapes ; but the laughs became ever harder to make convincing. Cars were beginning to arrive ; and she felt that, if she had been in Lady Orpington's place, she would have brought the men in by force. It was impossible to drop a hint for fear of seeming too anxious for Max ; and Winifred, who had every justification for wanting Colin, seemed content to talk all night to the new arrivals.

"If I'm going to dance, I shall have to change my shoes," she informed the duchess in a voice intended for her hostess' hearing.

"I shouldn't bother, if I were you," said Lady Orpington. "We've girls to spare. If you'd rather play bridge . . ."

"I'll do whatever you like," Auriol answered blankly. "Perhaps I'd better change, though, in *case* I'm wanted."

II

WHEN she returned to the drawing-room five minutes later, two tables had been set for cards; but there was still no sign of the men.

Strolling unnoticed on to the terrace, she could hear gusts of laughter at Lord Orpington's stories; and, as the laughter died down, she heard him starting again with "That reminds me of a thing that happened to me in Scotland once . . ." After an eternity of silence there came more laughter; then Sir Mark cut in with "You remember George Abercrombie in the Sixtieth? He told me this yarn himself. I won't swear it's true; and it's a long story, but I'll cut it as short as I can . . ."

Auriol came back to the drawing-room in despair and opened the piano.

"I don't suppose it's in tune," Lady Orpington warned her.

"Not too bad," Auriol answered. "And I'm certainly out of practice."

She had to play two waltzes and a rag-time before her hint was taken; and, when at last the men came in, old Mr. Caldwell blocked her escape by standing at her side

and nodding indiscriminate approval at everything she played. Max appeared, only to vanish again with Aylwin; the Killarneys, by an incomplete bridge-table, were looking in her direction for a victim; and Selhurst added the crown to her discomfiture by announcing that the band was not yet come.

Under cover of the questions and answers that followed, Auriol escaped once more to the terrace. Through the open windows of the ball-room she could see half-a-dozen couples practising steps and testing the floor.

"Five minutes," she murmured. "If they don't begin then . . ."

It was impossible to concentrate her thoughts on cards; and, if any one talked to her, she was in danger of crying. When the first chord was struck, she hurried in search of her host, proclaiming with a gaiety which rang false even to her that she must have the first dance with him. When he stopped breathless after one round, she anchored him by a door where Max could not fail to see her as he passed in or out.

"This is the part of dancing I like best," confided Lord Orpington: "looking on and letting others do the work. I'm going to get you a more comfortable chair . . ."

"But I'm dancing the next one with Max," Auriol interrupted in terror. "At least, unless he cuts me . . ."

"I'll see he doesn't do that. Max! A charming young lady here wants reassuring that you don't mean to cut her . . ."

"I wouldn't dream of it. This is the *encore*," Max answered.

As the music repeated itself, Auriol shut her eyes and tried to make her mind a blank. If Lord Orpington spoke she did not hear him; and, when Max arrived at last, she

could only smile and give him her hand, nodding towards the window.

"You're not faint, are you?," he asked in concern.

"It's hot in here," she answered. "The garden . . ."

The grip of his hand steadied her; and, when the music began again, she was ready to dance. Max led her back slowly and would have lingered by the open window to finish his cigarette if she had not twitched it out of his fingers and dragged him in. As soon as she felt his arm about her, Auriol became tranquil. Now, if she grew dizzy or fainted, it did not matter; so long as she was with Max, it did not matter if she died.

"The last time we danced together . . .," he began.

"Don't, darling! It hurts!," she whispered. "You mean that night at Bellamy's? Pretend we're going on from before that! Forget, just for three days, all that's happened since. How wonderful to be dancing with you again, Max! And yet we can't talk! Take me out where we shall be quite by ourselves. The belvedere, anywhere."

As the music grew slower, he steered her to the nearest window and escaped on to the terrace. When he asked if the air was too cold for her, she nestled closer to his side; and he felt her body trembling as she strained to him. They walked without speaking, as though a single word would convict them of wrong-doing; and their pace quickened as though they were consciously hurrying away from the light.

At the end of the terrace Auriol raised his hand to her lips and kissed it hungrily. Max slid his arm round her shoulders and heard a tremulous sigh of happiness. Behind them, the music became fainter; as they rounded the corner of the house, velvet darkness descended upon

them. Max stumbled over an unseen step ; and, as he stopped, Auriol swayed into his arms and drew his head down till she could kiss his lips.

" My darling, oh, my darling !," she whispered.

" We must mind how we go." Max could not trust himself to be anything but prosaic. " There are croquet-hoops about."

" Stay here ! There's a seat somewhere. But don't let me go, or I shall fall."

" I won't let you go."

As their eyes became used to the darkness, he traced the lines of a ghostly *loggia* and led her to a broad marble seat still warm from the afternoon sun. The beating of her heart hammered against his breast ; and her quick breathing fanned his cheek. Ahead of them, a pale effulgence heralded the moon ; and, when it rose, Max saw two dark eyes looking into his and caught a gleam of white teeth as she smiled up at him.

" You'll catch cold," he whispered.

" I don't care."

Her arms, soft and strong, rose slowly and twined themselves about his neck. He caught her to him and kissed her eager mouth.

" I shall crumple your dress."

" I don't care."

As their lips met, she shivered and then lay still.

" Have I hurt you ?," he asked.

" You couldn't. And I shouldn't care if you did."

" I should. My precious Auriol ! Every hair of your head . . ."

He bent to kiss her eyes and forehead, intoxicated by her faint, indefinable fragrance.

" They're yours, sweetheart. I'm yours."

" But, darling heart . . ."

" I don't care. I love you."

" But, Auriol . . ."

" I don't care, I don't *care!*," she whispered wildly.

" You *will!* "

She silenced him with another kiss and clung trembling as his own arms relaxed their hold on her.

" Don't you love me?," she asked in bewilderment.

" My God, yes!," he groaned.

" Don't you want me? "

He unclasped her arms and dragged himself to his feet :

" I'm thinkin' of the future. You."

" I've told you, I don't care!," she cried.

" But I do."

She stared at him for a moment in perplexity and then turned her back on him with a sob :

" I thought you loved me."

" I love you too much. That's the trouble."

III

FOR many minutes, neither spoke. In the grey half-light Max saw white arms flashing as Auriol smoothed her dress and tidied her hair.

Remembering the fragrance that had intoxicated him a moment earlier, he took a step forward, in spite of himself. Auriol remained where she was, indifferent to his approach. One shoulder-strap had slipped; and she pulled it into place. When all was in order, she turned without looking at him and walked slowly to the broad parapet of the *loggia*.

In the distance, as if to remind them of the world in which they were sleep-walking, a waltz was being endlessly repeated; and a deep voice, booming random

phrases, burlesqued the conventional sentiment of the words :

“ ‘ *Whad’ll Ah doo-oo*
When yoo-oo
Are far-ar-
Away-ay
And Ah-ah
’M fee-eeling
Bloo-oo-oo-oo ?
Whad’ll Ah doo-oo.’ . . . ”

“ That thing still goin’ ?,” Max muttered in surprise.

It had been the popular song of the year in the year when he sailed for Chili. There was a curious infelicity in its having survived until he was ready to sail again. Orchestras, barrel-organs and gramophones had all been playing it two years ago. He had danced to it with Auriol at Bellamy’s. Doubtless in two years it had undergone eclipse, but to-night some one must have said to the band : “ *Can you play that thing ‘ What’ll I do ? ’ I haven’t heard it, oh, for years.* ” An embodied spirit of malice might have said : “ *It will be so pleasant for Max : remind him of old times.* ” Lord Sheridan might well have made the request when he telephoned to Auriol after dinner. . . .

An outburst of clapping rewarded the vocalist ; and the song began again :

“ *Whad’ll Ah doo-oo . . . ?* ”

The repetition was more than fortuitous. Some one was reminding Max that life—his life, at least—was a repetition and that he had now completed another of his circles. Two years of exile, two years of slavery, two years of discipline had brought him back to the place where he had stood two years before. That did not

matter, that was all in the day's work ; he could bite on the bullet and grin cheerfully if he could bring Auriol back to her old happiness.

" I . . . There's somethin' . . . Auriol !," he stammered.

She peered at the watch on her wrist and sighed in utter exhaustion. They must go back, both seemed to feel ; but something must be said first.

" Forgive me, Auriol !," he whispered.

" Forgive *you* ? If you try to take the blame it will be *more* than I can bear !"

" I oughtn't to have come back."

" We can't control these things. Whenever you've had a chance of seeing right, doing right, you've taken it. *I've* been the fool. But destiny *meant* you to come back ! Destiny meant to shew what she could do."

" Then we've put one across destiny."

" You think so ? "

" You said we must have nothing to regret," he reminded her.

" Oh, I know. . . . I wonder that you think of me, Max."

" I only know I love you, Auriol."

" Will you try to forget this evening ? It was my fault, but I shouldn't like you to despise me."

" I should never do that. And it wasn't your fault, it was the fault, oh, of the whole damned scheme of existence !"

She beckoned him to her side and slipped her hand into his. He noticed that it was cold and limp, as though a long fever had just burnt itself out.

" It was my fault," she repeated, " two years ago. I suppose you'd say I was trying to correct my first mistake by making a bigger one. I don't know. . . . We should

have been happy for three days, Max, even if we'd regretted it afterwards. It's regret either way : you know we're always going to regret that we didn't have our one little moment of happiness now. Three days doesn't seem much in the whole of our lives."

" I wonder if we should have been happy. I don't set up to be any kind of saint, Auriol. Funny thing to say, but if it had been any other woman in the world . . . It's because it's *you*. If we could have gone away together . . . I wanted to, at Ascot, when you knocked me off my feet, but I didn't feel we had the right to smash things up for your people. That's still true, I suppose. Are you prepared to make a clean cut and come away ? "

" No, it's not fair to make them pay for my mistakes. They wouldn't have known, though, if we'd had our little moment together."

" But you couldn't have gone back to your husband as though nothing had happened."

Her faint shrug was less a protest than a hint that the issue could not be judged so summarily. Though she accepted Max's conclusion, she could not accept his reasons nor tell him her own. Go back "as though nothing had happened" ? Colin or her father might have said that ; or Joyce ; or Imogen ; or their dapper, stereotyped husbands : all in the same tone. To none of them could she explain that her marriage condemned her to play a game by rules which Ambrose Sheridan not only broke but failed to understand. Her pride would seem priggishness ; she would be joining her husband's detractors ; and he himself would only think, with a private sneer, that she was parading a fancied superiority of breeding.

" He hasn't behaved so particularly well to me," she sighed. " I shan't leave him, because I feel responsible

for him ; but he doesn't belong to me and I don't belong to him. Not entirely. If I told him you and I had been lovers, he couldn't throw the first stone."

" If you told him . . . ," Max agreed.

Because Sheridan could not be told, there must never be anything to refrain from telling. If they yielded to temptation, they must at once begin to play a part with Colin and the Orpingtons, with the Otways, with the whole of Auriol's official and political world. Their life would become a tangle of contrivances and stolen meetings and lies and guilty fears. The better they acted, the smaller would be the risk of detection ; but, the greater their proficiency, the more deeply they would come to despise one another.

IV

MAX looked at his watch as the music once more died away.

If they did not go back soon, some one would surmise, with a laugh, that they must be enjoying a delightful *tête-à-tête* and that it would be a shame to disturb them. That did not matter. If they were going to play a part, however, they must begin to rehearse without delay. They must go back and affect indifference ; he must dance with other women ; when Auriol went to bed, he must propose a rubber of bridge to keep people from thinking that he wanted to follow her. With Colin he must be unnaturally at his ease for fear of seeming uneasy.

" Is it time to go back ?," Auriol asked.

" Not unless you want to. We're sort of chartered libertines ; and people just smile when they see us together. We're up to no harm, they say. . . . And I

think we must live up to that, Auriol. I've made an ideal of you . . ."

"I've not left you very much of it!"

"I've made an ideal of you," he repeated, "and I want to keep it. There's not much else that I *can* keep. We've nothing to regret so far, but we're in danger of something we shall regret all our days. You're not cut out for double dealin'. Every moment we were together, you'd be haunted by the feelin' that you were lettin' up on yourself: your people and the way you've been brought up, everything. Imagine what you'd think if it were Joyce or Imogen! And I should feel a cad for leadin' you on. At present, you're distinct and apart, but you'd make me think you were like everybody else. You'd feel, yourself, that you were like everybody else. . . . You asked me if I loved you; and I said the trouble was I loved you too much. D'you understand what I mean now? I told you I wasn't a saint: I've been through the whole miserable business more than once. It was before I met you; and I can only think, though it's a beastly thing to say, that I never cared for the women and despised them for bein' so cheap. I suppose it was excitin', but I believe I was glad when it was all over. The lyin' and skirmishin'! I despised myself, mark you; and I've no doubt they despised me at the time and despise me still. I wouldn't let you go through that for anything on earth. And I won't lose the picture I've made of you. When we say good-bye on Friday, Auriol . . ."

Her hand was torn from his; and she turned away with a little gasp of misery:

"Don't! *Please, Max!*"

"It's all I have: my picture of you."

What she had not dared to say Max perceived for himself. "*Imagine what you'd think if it were Joyce or*

Imogen." They were enthralled to a code that was gradually weakening in its grip on the men and women of their generation. By that code her husband had never been bound. Max seemed to be saying that they must, at all costs, set the fellow an example and not come down to his level.

"You talk about double-dealing . . ." she began. "I'd have risked that! I could have borne anything if we'd belonged to each other for a moment! Three days in all our lives! If we'd despised ourselves, that might have cured us."

"By takin' away the one precious thing that's been left to us?"

"I don't know. . . . It's all so hopeless. What *are* we going to do, Max?"

"Grin and bear it, I suppose."

"But . . . not for ever? I shall go mad!" she cried in desperation.

"We're makin' each other mad by meetin'. It'll be easier when we've said good-bye. And this time, Auriol, we'd better not write. I'll send you a cable on your birthday . . ."

"And when you come back?"

"I don't know. We've made rather a mess of it this time. I shall come if you send for me. I'd come by the next boat if you were in trouble or needed me, but we oughtn't to meet till we can meet as cool and calm old friends. You'll have plenty to keep you busy, Auriol. I'm going to work as man has never worked before."

"You've been doing that for the last two years."

"It was the only thing to do."

"And at the end you were no better!"

"But it's the only thing to do. I bin bettin' most of my life, though I've never brought off anything like a

hundred-to-one chance. It don't enter into my calculations, though I know such things do happen. There's a hundred-to-one chance that Sheridan will sicken of you as he sickened of Laura. Or that he may do something you just can't stomach. He'll die some day, like the rest of us, though I'm not prayin' for his death or expectin' it or tellin' myself that, when he's out of the way, we shall be free to marry. Mug's game, that. You asked me at dinner, though, why I didn't marry Aylwin. Well, the only reason that matters is that I could never think of any woman but you. And the reason we have to keep our heads now is that, if the hundredth chance ever came our way, we must be ready to take it. You might be willin' to marry your ' old love ', as the sayin' is, but I'm damned if I want to see you marryin' your old lover. See what I mean? "

" Yes! I suppose you're right. You're a great darling, Max. And you're a great baby."

The night air was growing colder, though neither had noticed it before. Auriol shivered slightly and stood up. In the flooding light of the moon, her face was calm and her eyes steady.

*" Whad'll Ah doo-oo
When yoo-oo
Are far-ar
Away-ay
And Ah-ah-
'M fee-eeling
Bloo-oo-oo-oo? . . ."*

Max caught her hand and raised it to his lips.

" Better than when we said good-bye last time, sweetheart," he whispered. " I *know* now. We *both* know . . ."

Auriol drew his face down to hers.

" We shall say good-bye on Friday," she told him, " but, this is the real good-bye. Will you kiss me, Max ? For the last time. You've always been right ; and I've always made you pay for my mistakes. You're right now : it would have been the greatest mistake of all. Thank you, Max ; and thank you for pretending I haven't shattered the last of your illusions about me . . . "

" There's no pretendin'."

" Tell me one thing ! This hundred-to-one chance : you don't believe in it, Max ? "

" I oughtn't to, but I do. If I didn't . . . My God, if I didn't, in spite of sense and decency . . . "

V

At the anguish in his voice, Auriol took his arm and led him towards the house.

If he—and she with him—did not believe in their hundred-to-one chance, they would have no incentive to go on living. One chance in a hundred, or in a thousand ; or in ten thousand. One unit of possibility against ninety-nine of almost complete certainty ! Ambrose could look forward to another five-and-twenty years of life ; and she had no wish to shorten his span by a single day. She had no wish to be driven from him by some act that she could not pardon. She would not mind if he tired of her, but this seemed at present unlikely. Unlikely, but her one chance in a hundred !

To bet against Ambrose Sheridan, no matter at what price, was like betting against a certainty.

" Betting against his luck," said Auriol and was surprised to find herself speaking aloud.

" Backin' our own," suggested Max. " No luck, good or bad, holds for ever."

When they reached the terrace, a lonely glow marked the place where old Mr. Caldwell, despairing of partners, had established himself with a cigar and a couple of empty, inviting chairs. He reproached Auriol briefly for not remembering her promise of a dance and warned Max that, if he did not want to be blackmailed, they must both keep him company.

"If I told Lord Sheridan," he explained, "that you had spent the entire evening in the garden with his wife, you might find yourself called out."

Max could feel the figure by his side growing rigid in the effort of recovering self-control.

"It's your fault," Auriol answered, with a breathless laugh, "for taking my best friends and burying them in ghastly places like Chili. Max and I have been sobbing our hearts out at the thought that we're not going to meet again for Heaven-knows-how-many years."

While Mr. Caldwell affected sympathy, Auriol wondered whether she had been guilty of another "double-cross".

"Are you still pretending you've just met for the first time?" he enquired with gentle malice. "If so, I congratulate you both on your genius for friendship."

"Oh, we stopped playing at dinner," she answered. "'The comedy is finished', as Max would say."

"Me?," asked Max.

"You were quoting *Pagliacci* a moment ago. No, we haven't been playing at all. We've been talking in deadly earnest. What about? Oh, everything! Men and women; life; love; decency and duty . . ."

"I suggest you put duty *before* decency," interrupted Mr. Caldwell. "We have good authority for doing so. I wonder if anybody reads his *Midshipman Easy* nowadays. You read everything, of course, Lady Sheridan, and

Hendry reads nothing, but the average boy and girl . . . ? I wish you'd sit down and talk to me, both of you. Unless I'm breaking into the middle of a conversation, that is ! ”

“ I think we'd finished all we have to say,” Auriol assured him. “ Hadn't we, Max ? ”

“ Very nearly,” Max answered.

He spoke so listlessly and dropped so wearily into his chair that Auriol looked to see him falling asleep. The evening had been exhausting for them both.

EPILOGUE

“ Two Pots had been left on the bank of a river, one of brass, and one of earthenware. When the tide rose they both floated off down the stream. Now the earthenware pot tried its best to keep aloof from the brass one, which cried out : ‘ Fear nothing, friend, I will not strike you.’ ”

“ ‘ But I may come in contact with you,’ said the other, ‘ if I come too close ; and whether I hit you, or you hit me, I shall suffer for it.’ ”

ÆSOP'S FABLES : *The Two Pots.*

“ **I**F I am not being indiscreet,” said Mr. Caldwell, “ I should love to know what you were discussing when I interrupted you. I thought you both looked so tense that I was afraid you were quarrelling.”

To speak at all was almost beyond Auriol's powers, but she found herself obliged to speak as though her mind was at ease.

“ Max and I understand each other far too well to quarrel !,” she laughed. “ As a matter of fact . . . What *were* we talking about, Max ? ”

“ We were discussin' Lord Sheridan at that moment,” Max informed Mr. Caldwell. In the shadow thrown by his chair he tested the steadiness of his hand before lighting a cigarette. “ Not discussin' whether he was goin' to call me out for yarnin' to his wife all evenin', I'm afraid,” he added with a laugh. “ We were talkin' of luck.”

“ And you a racing man !,” Mr. Caldwell exclaimed. “ Find another word. ‘ Luck ’ on the turf is a combination of knowledge, intuition and daring. Your only ‘ luck ’ is when a certain winner gets killed in a railway-

accident and the horse you've backed is left without a rival. It's the same everywhere. If you said 'Lord Sheridan's *success*' . . ."

"Whatever it is, we were sayin' what a long run it had had."

Auriol shifted her chair till her back was to the moon and sat with her chin on one hand.

"I'm not competent to speak," said Mr. Caldwell. "I only know what every one knows."

"That's all I know," Max replied. "I was his secretary for some time. . . . I know he carried top weight when he had no known form. I know he led the field after the first furlong. He's leadin' still. I can't see why he shouldn't continue to lead . . . Does he ever tell you about the early days, Auriol?"

"Not much. When a thing's over, he seems to put it behind him. It's certainly been a wonderful career," she answered listlessly.

Wearily—so wearily that she seemed at times to be talking in her sleep—Auriol tried to piece together the fragments of autobiography that her husband had let fall in conversation during three years. Any one that cared to read the outpourings of his unresting pen had the means of constructing most of the chapters in his public life. *The Fourth Estate* told of his raid on the popular press at a date when the Northcliffes and Beaverbrooks were consolidating the victories of the Newnes and Pearsons. Ambrose Sheridan had bought and trained his own press till it heralded, or explained, or praised, or justified him as no paper had done for his predecessors. *Modern Business* described a series of undertakings in which a young man of small capital and no fixed habitation had sold and bought, wherever he happened to be at the moment, whatever he could sell most dearly or buy most

cheaply. The record began with muzzle-loading rifles and ended with South African war-stores. *Ismael M.P.* portrayed the unlabelled adventurer in politics. *An Audit of Empire* applied the lessons of commerce to politics. These four books, with a case full of articles, represented all that Ambrose Sheridan had so far thought fit to publish of his achievements and aspirations. They were held together and placed in perspective by the fact, well known and better advertised, that the author, who at forty was in sight of the cabinet, had at twenty hardly lost sight of the sailing-ship in which he had run away to sea at fourteen.

The pencilled comments in the margin were usually more interesting, always more revealing, than the text which had been chastened for public reading. If *Modern Business* recorded the enterprise of a man who would buy a fleet of colliers on one day and a rubber forest on another, the foot-notes contained the record of more humble ventures.

“ He has an extraordinary sense of popular taste,” said Auriol, more to herself than to her audience. “ When films were beginning, he saw they were going to take on and he did very well out of them. Other people did better ; everything moved quickly ; and he couldn’t give them his personal attention. He was one of the first, though, to see the possibilities of little private film-lanterns or whatever they’re called. I once asked him what put the idea into his head. He told me almost all of the world’s production was for people who worked hard, led dull lives and craved for cheap pleasure as an antidote. ‘ If I could save twenty pounds a year for *fun*,’ he said, ‘ I should spend all my spare time dreaming how I could use it best. I should want a gramophone and a wireless-set. A home-cinema and a motor-bicycle. A camera.

A new outfit of furniture on the instalment system. All the things you see advertised. And, what's more, I've done something to bring these things within the reach of the "twenty-pound-a-year-for-fun" people.' And he had! For some reason," she continued pensively, "I don't think he's very proud of it, but whatever the public wants I think he's supplied at one time or another. He used to write the advertisements himself. I've seen some of his sketches. Most of these things have been sold since he became a minister, but he used to have a private company holding his shares in secret. Pills and salts. People who weren't naturally unhealthy wanted to feel as healthy as his advertisements. Mental concentration and efficiency. Every clerk who was earning two hundred a year wanted to find out from his course how to make a thousand a year. Things to make fat people thin and thin people fat. Things to help people who'd ruptured themselves and couldn't afford an operation. Things for women with moustaches. 'Wherever a demand exists,' he used to say, 'it's someone's business to create a supply.' And he usually created it himself, though he was morbidly afraid of being found out and ridiculed to death. I can't see why. People are such snobs. I can't see why it's more dignified to build battleships than to make soap, but I expect Mr. Vickers looks down on Mr. Pears. . . . Ambrose had made a fortune out of giving the public what the public wanted years before he began his big operations. I only discovered that lately. It interested me. I felt this was the root of his luck or his success or whatever we're going to call it. Except where he himself is concerned, he's the finest living judge of popular taste. And until he loses his touch . . ."

"Why should he?," asked Mr. Caldwell.

Auriol started. If she had not forgotten that she was

thinking aloud, she had forgotten that this discussion of her husband had arisen from the question how long his run of luck would hold.

"I was sayin'," Max explained, "that no man's luck, good or bad, went on for ever."

"But I agree with Mr. Caldwell," said Auriol: "this isn't luck. It's been luck, perhaps, that he was blessed with a marvellous constitution. He's had odd streaks and patches of luck, but his life as a whole is the materialization of his spirit. He has a flair. He knows what human nature wants because he's quintessentially human. He's succeeded because he's what he is. I'm terribly afraid of using business-terms before you two merchant-princes, but, if you asked me to 'underwrite' Ambrose, I'd do it for love."

"And a very proper sentiment in any wife," said Mr. Caldwell.

Auriol laughed mechanically and turned half round to Max:

"I wouldn't bet against him in anything!" She hoped Mr. Caldwell would not find her voice too urgent. "If he were buying a stock, I'd hold on. If he were selling, I'd sell too. If he turned Seventh-Day-Adventist, I might not turn too, but I should know that was the religion to watch. I sometimes feel as if I were Cassandra," she continued. "Cassandra . . . or some one who sees other people walking over a precipice and can't call out to warn them. Half the people he's working with now . . . There's no personal feeling, but sooner or later he'll find they're in his way. And then they'll have to go . . ."

"As our host went?," asked Mr. Caldwell.

"And Sir John Ferrers. I wanted to warn him, but I couldn't. If you asked me to underwrite some of the

others, I should want a hundred *per cent.* For years people have been saying that he has the Napoleon touch

“ . . . ”
“ But Napoleon crashed at the end,” Max interposed. “ You understand I’m not wishin’ him any ill, don’t you, Auriol? I’m only sayin’ that no man’s luck holds for ever and you must be prepared to take the rough with the smooth. Ever since you married he’s been on the crest of the wave: a millionaire, a peer, a secretary of state and—best of all, my dear—your husband. More power to him! I rejoice in his success for the pleasure it brings you, but I shouldn’t like it if you were unhappy when his luck turns.”

“ *If it turns,*” said Auriol softly.

“ It must turn sooner or later.”

“ If,” said Mr. Caldwell, “ there be such a thing as luck.”

“ I don’t mind what you call it so long as you don’t bet against it,” laughed Auriol.

Mr. Caldwell offered Max his cigar-case; and the three of them sat for long without speaking. Their conversation, so full of temperate judgements and laudable sentiments, so consistently addressed to one person and directed at another, had ended on a perfect note. Ambrose Sheridan’s quality could be left undefined so long as no one risked his happiness in betting against it. His “ luck ” was in. The “ Napoleon ” touch was at present unailing. His own workpeople apart, seven men of every ten who had trafficked directly or indirectly with him would rejoice in his downfall: those who had been seduced by his advertisements, those who had been overwhelmed in fair fight, the men he had kicked and the women he had betrayed. There was a Napoleonic ruthlessness in his manner of trampling on their bodies and wading through their blood; there was a more truly

Napoleonic magnetism in his ability to make those whom he had betrayed and cast down rise up and serve him again. Laura and Tony; Max and Auriol. He paralysed them till their numbed brains could only repeat that nothing mattered to them so long as Ambrose Sheridan entered a cabinet or remained in a cabinet. "*Who dies if Ambrose lives?*", Auriol whispered to herself. And the epitaph of all his victims must be: "*He helped to make Ambrose, first Baron Sheridan, Secretary of State for the Colonies.*"

Secretary of state!

Secretary of state or high priest of Moloch? Secretary of state or outrider for Juggernaut?

Auriol stood up with a shiver:

"I'm getting cold, Max. If Mr. Caldwell can bear to let us go, you can take me for a brisk walk along the terrace."

"If you promise not to tell our hostess," said Mr. Caldwell, "I shall slip quietly off to bed."

"My room's just over the ball-room," Auriol sighed, "unfortunately."

"Unfortunately? You ought both of you to be dancing."

Though they paused for a moment at one of the open windows, neither would venture in. If they were seen to be idle, some one would come and separate them. If they danced again, they feared for their hard-won sanity. Max was ready to move on again as soon as he had seen the light falling for a moment on Auriol's blown chestnut hair. The little face, he thought, looked pinched; the hazel eyes, now dark and sunken, were looking beyond the ballroom and the shadowy terrace, beyond the grey lawns, and black enveloping woods, beyond the moon and stars, beyond space and time.

"Rather a grim night, I'm afraid," she murmured, as

they walked away. "I was thinking to-day what a genius I had for spoiling your pleasures, Max. Ascot. And now this. I believe you understand. I've never done anything wilfully cruel or selfish, but I just didn't know till it was too late. Nobody's to blame, not even Ambrose. He married me when he saw I wasn't in love with him, but I suppose he wanted me pretty badly. And I was ready to be your mistress because *I* wanted *you*. I'm glad you wouldn't let me. I wish I were more worthy of your ideal, but I *am* going to try. If Ambrose or any one tells you what a marvellous wife I am, you'll know I'm succeeding. No, we won't write: it would tear open too many wounds. And I shan't send for you. When you come back, you can announce it in the papers. If you tell me you're busy, I shall understand. And, if I tell you I'm busy, you'll understand too. Don't bank on that hundred-to-one chance . . ."

"I don't, . . . but I believe in it."

They had traversed twice the length of the terrace and were standing again by the chair where Mr. Caldwell had been sitting.

"What do you mean by that, Max?," she asked.

"I don't quite know. Durin' the war I believed I was comin' through somehow; and so I stuck it out. If I hadn't been sure in my bones, I'd have blown my head off. I hated it. I was frightened, like every one else except the two or three 'who did not know the meanin' of fear': and they were bloody fools, as a rule. If I weren't sure in my bones now . . ."

"But, darling heart, what *can* happen?" Auriol asked with a sob.

"How can I say? If I didn't believe it, I'd chuck myself under the first train. I shan't. I shall wait till you need me."

" I need you now ! "

" Till I can help you ! I believe in my chance as I believe in my life and in our love, Auriol. I don't ask *you* to believe. Don't think about it, don't think of me till you need me. When you send for me . . . "

" I shan't. "

" I shall come when I know you want me. And I *shall* know. . . . Auriol, I'm goin' back to London to-morrow. We can't stand the strain much longer . . . "

She shook her head miserably and turned her face up to his :

" Kiss me, sweetheart, and then take me back and say I've gone to bed with a headache. A long kiss, because it's good-bye to me and my happiness and everything that I once thought made this world lovely. . . . No ! Leave me here and let me cry in peace ! I'm all right ! It's only that my heart's broken. And that's what hearts are for. " . . .

" I shall come when you need me, if I have to wait all my life ! "

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