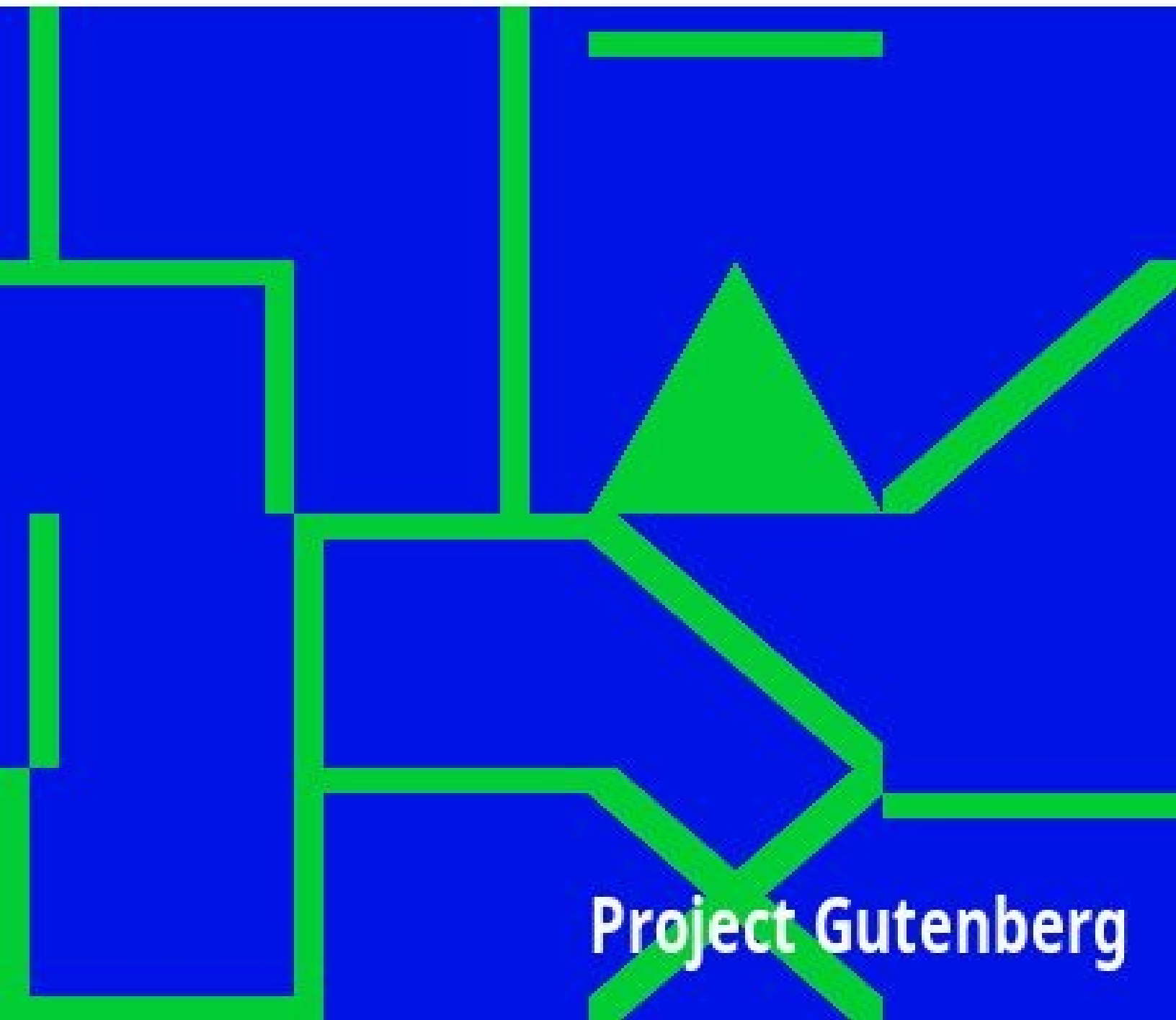


The Phantom Lover

Ruby M. Ayres

An abstract geometric design featuring a solid blue background. Overlaid on this are several thick yellow lines and shapes. On the left, a vertical line descends from the top, and a horizontal line connects it to a vertical line that continues down. To the right of this, a horizontal line is positioned near the top. Further down, a yellow triangle points upwards. A diagonal line extends from the right edge towards the triangle. Below the triangle, a series of connected yellow lines form a zig-zag pattern, ending in a horizontal line on the right. The text 'Project Gutenberg' is written in white at the bottom right, partially overlapping the yellow lines.

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Title: The Phantom Lover

Author: Ruby M. Ayres

Release Date: October 19, 2009 [EBook #30286]

Language: English

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THE PHANTOM LOVER

BY
RUBY M. AYRES
AUTHOR OF
A BACHELOR HUSBAND,
THE SCAR, ETC.

emblem
NEW YORK
GROSSET & DUNLAP
PUBLISHERS

Made in the United States of America

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Printed in the United States of America

DEDICATED
TO MY FRIEND
Janet Moore
THE REAL 'JUNE MASON'
IN THIS STORY

THE PHANTOM LOVER

CHAPTER I

Somewhere out in the night a woman was crying, crying desolately. The sad, rather monotonous sound broke the silence of the street and floated through the open window of a room where Micky Mellowes was wondering how the deuce he should get through the long evening lying before him.

Micky was in a bad temper. It was not often that he was in a bad temper, but he had begun the day by waking with a headache, which was still with him, and which accounted for the wide open window and the breath of icy air which was filling the room and fluttering the curtains; and half an hour ago some people with whom he had been going to dine had rung up and told him that the party was off owing to the sudden death of a relative, thereby leaving the evening long and empty on his hands.

It was New Year's Eve, too, which made matters a thundering sight worse.

He wondered if Marie Deland was feeling as sick about it as he was. Micky was in the middle of an interesting flirtation with Marie, which bade fair to develop into something deeper with careful engineering on the part of her family, for Micky was a catch, and though so far he had proved himself singularly adroit in avoiding mothers with marriageable daughters, the Delands were beginning to pat each other on the back and to look pleased.

When the sound of crying reached him he had been feeling so thoroughly fed-up⁴ with life that it had seemed impossible for anything ever to interest him again; but now he climbed out of his chair with a faint show of energy and strolled over to the window.

It was a cold, clear night, with myriads of stars in the dark sky that seemed to shed a faintly luminous light to earth, bright enough at all events for Micky to distinguish the figure of a girl walking slowly along the pathway below.

She was walking so slowly and dispiritedly that a sort of vague curiosity stirred in Micky's heart; here, at least, was some one even more fed-up with life than he himself, and with a sudden impulse he turned from the window, and, snatching up a hat and coat which he had thrown down when he came in an hour earlier, made for the stairs.

He was half-way down when an apologetic cough at his elbow arrested him; he stopped and turned.

“Well, what is it?”

“If you please, sir, Mr. Ashton has just sent round to ask if you could make it convenient to be in at ten o’clock this evening, as he wants to see you particularly.”

Micky looked surprised; Ashton had been very particularly engaged for that evening, he knew. Evidently something had happened to upset his plans as well.

“Ten o’clock? All right; I dare say I shall be in.”

He went on down the stairs.

Out on the path he paused and looked up and down the street.

The impulse that had sent him out had died away; it was beastly cold, and much more comfortable by the fire. He hesitated, and in that moment he saw the figure of the girl again.

She had stopped now in the light of a street lamp, and seemed to be looking at something she carried in her arms—a child! Surely not a child!

Micky’s curiosity was aroused. He buttoned the collar of his coat more closely round his chin and went on.

The girl had moved too, almost as if she felt instinctively that she was being followed, and as Micky drew abreast with her she shrank a little to one side as if afraid.

“What’s the matter?” asked Micky bluntly.

They were some few yards from the lamp now. But, as she turned to look up at him with startled eyes, its yellow light fell on her face; and Micky saw with amazement that she was quite young and exceedingly pretty, in spite of the distress in her eyes, and the tears that were still wet on her cheeks.

“What’s the matter?” he asked again, more gently, and waited for the pathetically shaken denial which he felt sure would come.

“Nothing—nothing at all.”

“Nothing!” There was a note of exasperation in his voice. “You were crying—I heard you, and people don’t walk about the streets at this time of night and cry if there’s nothing the matter. If that’s a baby you’ve got with you, you ought to

know better than to——” He broke off. She was laughing, a weak, uncertain little laugh.

“A baby!” she said tremulously. “It isn’t a baby; it’s a cat.”

“A cat!” Micky’s voice was full of disgust. He looked down at her from his superior height with sudden suspicion. If this was just a hoax?

“Well, what’s the matter anyway?” he asked again.

She looked away from him without answering.

Micky began to feel a bit of a fool; he wished he had not yielded to the impulse to follow her. After all, it was no business of his if a stranger chose to walk about his road and weep; he looked at her impatiently.

Her hair beneath its not very smart hat shone golden in the lamplight, and the little oval of cheek and rounded chin which was all he could see of her averted face somehow touched a forgotten chord in his heart and made him think of his boyhood and the girl-mother who had not lived long enough to be more than a memory....

“Don’t think I’m interfering or trying to annoy you,” he said again. “But if there is anything I can do to help you....”

She shook her head.

“There isn’t anything.... I ought to have known better than to let you hear that I was crying ... there’s nothing the matter, I——” Then quite suddenly she broke down again into bitter sobbing. “Oh, I’m so miserable—so utterly miserable—I wish I were dead!”

Micky was appalled; he had heard women say that sort of thing before, and had said it himself scores of times, but never with that note of tragedy which he heard in this girl’s voice.

Ten minutes ago he had considered himself the most miserable of mortals because he had been let down over a dinner; he was ashamed of his temper now as he stood there in the starlight and listened to this girl’s sobbing.

“Look here,” he said after a moment, “you’ll never feel any better if you stay out here in the cold. I don’t suppose you’ve had a respectable meal for hours either—I know what women are. Where do you live? You’ll soon feel better when you get beside a fire and have something to eat.”

“I’m not going home any more,” she said.

She spoke quite quietly, but with a sort of despair which there was no mistaking. Micky was a rapid thinker. He had clean forgotten his headache. This was adventure with a capital letter. There was still something of romance in the world which his jaded palate had not yet tasted.

“I’m sure you’re tired,” he said gently, “and probably fed-up. So am I. I was just wondering what in the world to do with myself when I heard you crying. It made me feel a sort of kinship with you—it did, upon my word. If I’d been a woman I dare say I should have been howling like anything. Will you come along with me and let me give you some supper? I’m hungry too....”

She shrank back from him with a little gesture of fear.

“Oh no—please let me go!...”

She tried to pass him, but Micky barred the way.

“You can’t walk about the streets all night,” he said determinedly. “The cat will hate it anyway, even if you don’t mind.” There was a hint of laughter in his voice, though he had never felt more serious in all his life. “And if you don’t want me to take pity on you, you might at least take pity on me ... please don’t think I’m a bounder trying to annoy you or anything like that ... perhaps I want a friend just as badly as you do....” He stopped, aghast at his own temerity.

“If you do,” she said tremulously, “I am more sorry for you than I can say.”

“I’m glad you said that,” Micky answered, “because now you’ll come along and have that supper with me. There’s a little café quite near here that I know. If we are both miserable, we can at least be miserable together.”

Something told him that this girl was at the end of her tether; that she was desperate, and his first casual curiosity concerning her deepened in the most surprising fashion.

He felt in some inexplicable way that a curtain had been lifted from a phase of life hitherto hidden from him; as if he were standing on the threshold of a new world, where women only weep for something real and tragic, not just butterfly tears of petulance like the women of his own class.

The girl was silent for a moment; then suddenly she laughed, a hard little laugh of recklessness.

“Very well,” she said. “I suppose I may as well.”

Micky was infinitely relieved; somehow he had not really thought that she would

allow him to accompany her.

They walked along for a few steps in silence. Once or twice the cat, tucked under the girl's arm, gave a faint mieow of protest, and Micky smiled to himself in the darkness.

It was the cat that seemed to give such a real touch of pathos to the whole adventure, he thought, and wondered why. He looked down at her deprecatingly.

"Let me carry it," he suggested.

"Carry it?" she echoed. "What do you mean?—Oh, the cat; no, thank you. He wouldn't like it: he hates strangers."

"Oh!" said Micky. He felt chagrined. "Is it a great pet?" he asked.

"Yes." She hunched her queer burden more closely under her arm. "It isn't really mine," she explained. "But they were so unkind to it in the house that I had to bring it."

Micky was dying to ask questions, but somehow it hardly seemed a propitious moment. He did not speak again till they reached the little café.

It was a quiet little downstairs place, and just now was almost deserted.

Micky chose a corner table which was partially screened from the rest of the room. As he stood up to take off his coat he looked at the girl interestedly.

She was better than pretty, he decided with a little pleasurable thrill; he could not remember when he had seen a face that appealed to him so strongly in spite of its pathos and the tear stains round her eyes.

And such sweet eyes they were!—really grey with dark lashes and daintily pencilled brows. She looked up suddenly, meeting his earnest regard.

"Well?" she said. There was a touch of defiance in her voice; the colour had risen in her white cheeks.

"Well?" said Micky with a friendly smile.

He sat down opposite to her; he was thanking his lucky stars that the Delands' message had reached him before he changed into evening clothes; somehow as he looked at this girl he felt slightly ashamed of his own lazy, luxurious life and the banking account which, like the cruse of oil, never failed. That this girl had no surplus of this world's goods he was certain, though she was neatly dressed and was unmistakably a lady. Her gloves were worn and had been carefully mended, and her coat looked far too thin for such a cold night.

“Well, what are we going to have?” he asked. It was surprising how cheerful he felt. “And what about that wonderful cat of yours? By the way, hasn’t it got a name?”

She smiled faintly.

“I call him Charlie,” she said.

“Charlie!” Micky’s eyes twinkled. “Well, it’s original, anyway,” he said with a chuckle. “And Charlie must have some milk, I suppose. I say, he’s a bit thin, isn’t he?” he asked dubiously.

She had taken off the shawl which had been wrapped about it, and the poor animal sat on her lap blinking in the light, a forlorn enough specimen, with a long tail and fierce eyes.

The girl stroked its head.

“He’s been half starved,” she said. “You’d be thin if you hadn’t had any more to eat than he’s had.”

“I’m sure I should,” said Micky humbly. He thought guiltily of the waste which he knew went on in his own establishment; it was odd that it had never struck him before that there must be many people in the world, not to mention cats, who would be glad enough of the waste from his table.

He picked up the menu to hide his discomfort. When the waiter came he ordered the best dinner the restaurant served. He was conscious that the girl was watching him anxiously. When the waiter had gone, she said, “I can’t afford to have a dinner like that.”

Micky flushed crimson.

“I thought you were dining with me,” he stammered. “I—I hope you will—I shall be only too honoured....”

Her grey eyes met his anxiously.

“I’ve never done a thing like this before,” she said in distress. “I don’t know what you are thinking of me ... but ... well, I suppose I was just desperate....” She broke off biting her lip, then she rushed on again. “I don’t suppose you’ll ever see me any more, so it doesn’t really matter much, but....”

“I hope to see you again, many times,” said Micky, with an earnestness that surprised himself.

She looked away, and her face hardened.

“I suppose men are all the same,” she said, after a moment. “However....” she shrugged her shoulders with a sort of recklessness that made Micky frown. She leaned back in her chair with sudden weariness. “It’s very kind of you,” she said disinterestedly.

“It’s not kind at all,” he hastened to assure her. “I’m much more pleased to be with you than you are to be with me. If it hadn’t been for you I should have spent this evening alone—New Year’s Eve, too,” he added, with a sort of chagrin and a sudden memory of Marie Deland.

“New Year’s Eve!” she echoed. She closed her eyes for a moment, and Micky had an uncomfortable sort of feeling that she was looking back on the year that was dying and could see nothing pleasant in the whole of the twelve months. Presently she opened them again with a little sigh. “Well, I don’t want another year like the last one,” she said.

“You won’t have,” he told her promptly. “I’ve got a sort of feeling that there are lots of good things coming along for you. The luck has to change some time or other, and if you’ve had a rotten time in the past you won’t have it in the future.”

“I don’t believe in luck,” she said.

“Don’t you? I do,” Micky declared. He hated the despondency in her face; he felt a strong desire to see her smiling and happy. He rattled on, talking any nonsense that came into his head.

The waiter came down the room and set the dishes on the table. He gave a sort of supercilious sniff when Micky asked for a saucer of milk for the cat. He looked at Charlie with scorn—Charlie, curled up on the girl’s lap now and purring lustily.

“Of course, you know, we really ought to have a bottle of wine,” Micky said dubiously. “Just something cheap, as it’s New Year’s Eve.”

He would like to have given her champagne, but dared not suggest it. He was quite sure that if she knew he was a rich man she would fly off at a tangent. He ordered an inexpensive bottle of red wine and filled her glass.

“Well, here’s luck to the New Year,” he said sententiously. “And to our delightfully unexpected meeting,” he added.

She flushed up to her eyes.

“Are you always as kind to people as you have been to me?” she asked tensely.

Micky blushed.

“Oh, I say!” he protested. “You don’t call this being kind, do you? I assure you it’s just pure selfishness. I should have spent my evening alone if we hadn’t met—and I hate being alone; I bore myself stiff in five minutes. I’m just—honoured that you should have allowed me to eat my supper with you. If you knew how beastly fed-up I was feeling ... the world seemed a positively loathsome place.”

She laughed; she leaned her elbows on the table and her chin in her hands, looking at him with thoughtful eyes.

“Are you poor?” she asked with disarming frankness.

“Poor as a church mouse,” said Micky promptly. “At least”—he hastened to amend his words—“I’m one of those unfortunate beggars who spend money as fast as they get it. I’ve never saved a halfpenny in my life.”

This at least was the truth.

She nodded.

“Neither have I—I’ve never had one to save....”

The despondency was back again in her voice; Micky broke in hastily—

“Before we go any further I think we ought to know one another’s names.” He fumbled in a pocket for a card, but changed his mind quickly, remembering that his cards bore the address of the expensive flat which he honoured with his presence. “My name is Mellows,” he said. “I’ve got several Christian names as well, but people call me Micky....” He waited, looking at her expectantly. “Won’t you tell me yours?” he asked.

She was staring down at her plate. He could see the dark fringe of lashes against her cheeks. Suddenly she looked up.

“Why do you want to know my name? We shall never meet again, I——”

Micky leaned a little forward.

“If we don’t,” he said quietly, “it will be the greatest disappointment I have ever had.”

She looked at him with a sort of fear.

“You don’t mean that,” she said, with a catch in her voice. “You don’t really mean that ... you’re just one of those men who say things like that to every

woman you——” She broke off, struck by the chagrin in Micky’s face. “No—I oughtn’t to have said that,” she went on hurriedly. “I beg your pardon ... I ought not to have said it, and I will tell you my name if you really want to know. My name is Esther—Esther Shepstone.”

“Thank you!” said Micky. “And now we’re going to drink to good resolutions for the New Year ... have you made one yet?”

She shook her head.

“What’s the use? Besides ... I don’t want to make any.”

“Very well, then, I’ll make one for you.” He refilled her glass and handed it to her. “Now say after me: ‘I resolve that during the coming year I will be good friends with Micky Mellowes——’ Oh, I say, don’t—please don’t....”

She had dropped her face in her hands again, and Micky had a miserable conviction that she was crying.

But he was wrong, for presently she looked up again, and her eyes were dry, though a little hard and bright.

“I don’t believe in a man’s friendship for a woman,” she said. “But I’ll say it, if you like,” and she took the glass from his hand.

“And to-morrow,” said Micky presently, “I’m going to take you out to tea or something—if I may,” he added hurriedly.

He waited, but she did not speak. “May I?” he asked.

She was twisting the stem of her wineglass nervously; after a moment she began to speak jerkily.

“When I came out to-night I didn’t mean to go back any more,” she said. Her voice was low and full of a weary bitterness. “I was so unhappy I didn’t want to live.” She caught her breath. “If it hadn’t been for you”—she was looking at him now with shame in her eyes. “If it hadn’t been for you I shouldn’t have gone back—ever——” she added. “But now....”

“But now,” said Micky as she paused, “you’re going back, and we’re going to start the new year—friends, you and I! Is that a bargain?” he asked.

“Yes....”

Outside Micky hailed a taxicab.

“You’re much too tired to walk,” he said when she protested. “And it will be a

new experience for Charlie,” he added with a twinkle.

He put her into the cab, and stood for a moment at the door.

“And the address?” he asked.

She hesitated, looking away from him; then suddenly she told him.

“It’s Brixton Road—it’s—it’s a very horrid boarding-house,” she added with a half-sigh.

“Boarding-houses are all horrid,” said Micky cheerily. “But I’ll come down myself to-morrow and see how bad it really is.”

He tried to see her face.

“Shall you be in if I come in the afternoon?” he asked anxiously.

“Yes.”

“About four, then,” said Micky. He groped for her hand, found it, and pressed it.

“Good-night,” he said.

“Good-night.”

And the next moment Micky was alone in the starlight.

He stood looking after the taxi with a queer sense of unreality. Had he just dreamt it all, and was there really no such girl as Esther Shepstone? No Charlie? He shook himself together with a laugh. Of course it was real, all of it! He walked on soberly through the cold night.

To-morrow he would go to the very horrid boarding-house in the Brixton Road and see her again.

Esther! He liked her name; there was something quaint and old-world about it. It seemed impossible that they had only met a few hours ago.

His headache had quite vanished. He was whistling a snatch of song when he let himself into the house and went upstairs.

He opened the door of his sitting-room, and then stopped dead on the threshold. The lights were burning fully, and a man was ensconced in his favourite armchair by the fire—Ashton. Lord! he had forgotten all about Ashton.

Micky looked guiltily at the clock—nearly eleven!—he began a half-apology.

“Awfully sorry, old man—I was kept.... Been waiting long?”

“I got here at ten.”

Ashton climbed out of the chair and looked at Micky with a sort of shamefacedness.

“Don’t take your coat off,” he said suddenly. “I want you to come out again——”

“Out! Now! Look at the time, man!”

“I know—it’s only eleven.... I’m catching the midnight to Dover....”

Micky stared.

“Dover! What in the world....”

Ashton turned round and looked down at the fire with a sort of embarrassment.

“It’s the mater,” he said jerkily. “She’s found out——”

Micky looked puzzled.

“Found out! What on earth....”

Ashton made an impatient gesture. He was a good-looking man, with dark eyes that could look all manner of things without in the least meaning them.

“About that girl at Eldred’s,” he said in a strangled voice. “You know! I told you about her. Lord, man, don’t look so confoundedly ignorant! I told you about her,” he broke off. “Well, some one’s told the mater, and this morning....” he shrugged his shoulders. “There’s been old Harry to pay! She told me if I didn’t give her up she’d cut me out of her will. She would, too!” he added, in savage parenthesis.

“Well! and what did you say?”

Ashton looked round.

“Hang it all! what could I say? Told her I would, of course.”

There was a sharp silence.

“I thought you liked the girl,” said Micky bluntly.

The other man winced.

“So I did—so I do.... It’s a rotten shame. If you’d ever seen her ... you never have, have you?”

“No.”

“Neither has the mater.... Women are all the same; because the girl has to work

for her living they think she isn't fit for me to marry.... It's all a lot of rot.... However—beggars can't be choosers—and so I'm off to-night."

Micky looked at him keenly.

"You mean that you're going without a word to the girl?"

"What can I do?—I went and saw her this morning—we had a rotten scene. I meant to tell her it was all up, but somehow I couldn't; I'm too dashed fond of her, and that's the truth. I can't bear to see her cry—it makes me feel such a cur...."

He waited a moment, but Micky made no comment.

"So the only thing is to clear out," Ashton went on jerkily. "I can't afford to quarrel with the mater, you know that.... Perhaps some day...." He stopped. "After all, she can't live for ever," he added brutally.

Micky said nothing.

"So I'm off to-night," Ashton went on with an effort. "I wanted to see you—I knew I could trust you...." He fumbled in a pocket. "There's a letter here.... I've written—I couldn't see her again. I know I'm a coward, but ... well, there it is!"

He threw the letter down on the table.

"Will you go and see her, old chap, and give her that?" he asked with an effort. "Tell her I—oh, tell her what you like," he went on fiercely. "Tell her that if I could afford it...."

He stopped again, and this time the silence was unbroken for some minutes.

Then he roused himself and picked up his coat. "Well, I must be getting along. I left my baggage at the station."

He looked at Micky. "I suppose you think I'm an infernal sweep, eh?" he asked curtly.

"No," said Micky.

He had always expected that Ashton's romance would end like this, and he felt vaguely sorry for the girl, though he had never seen her. She must have expected it, too, he thought. She must have known Ashton's position all along. He followed his friend out of the room.

"You haven't told me her address," he said suddenly.

He decided that it would be better to send the letter—he did not want to see her.

He hated a scene as much as Ashton did.

Ashton was at the top of the stairs.

“It’s on the letter. What have you done with it?”

There was an irritable note in his voice. “Don’t leave it lying there for that man of yours to see.”

Micky went back into the room. The letter lay on the table where Ashton had thrown it down.

He picked it up, glancing casually at the written address as he did so. Then suddenly his tall figure stiffened, and a curiously blank look filled his eyes, for the name scribbled there in Ashton’s writing was—

“Miss Esther Shepstone,” and, below it, the number of the very horrid boarding-house in the Brixton Road.

CHAPTER II

Micky stood staring at the envelope in his hand. He felt as if something had happened to paralyse all power of action.

Esther Shepstone and Ashton's girl from Eldred's were one and the same; that was all he could grasp, and it sounded absurd and impossible.

He had heard so much of this girl—Ashton had talked about her times without number—Lallie he had called her; now he came to think of it, Micky could not remember having ever heard her spoken of by any other name; and Lallie and Esther Shepstone were one and the same.

Was this, then, why she had cried, because of Ashton...?

Ashton called to him impatiently from the stairs.

"What the deuce are you doing? I shall miss my train."

Micky roused himself with a start, and, dropping the letter into his pocket, went slowly out of the room; he felt as if he could not have hurried had his life depended upon it; there was an absurdly cold sort of feeling round his heart.

It was ridiculous, of course; it was nothing to him if the girl with whom he had dined an hour ago loved Ashton; he had never seen her before. That sounded an absurd truth, too; it seemed impossible that until this evening he and she had never met.

"For heaven's sake, hurry up, man," said Ashton again sharply.

He was at the bottom of the stairs; the face he turned over his shoulder to Micky looked pale and harassed.

Micky quickened his steps and joined his friend in the porch below; they stood together out on the path waiting for a taxicab.

Micky glanced at Ashton with a curious sense of unreality; he felt as if he had never seen him before; it seemed impossible that this Ashton could know Esther—and Charlie!

A taxicab drew up to the kerb; Ashton banged open the door and got in. Micky followed, and they drove some way in silence.

“I’ll take thundering good care I don’t stay away long,” Ashton said suddenly, with a sort of growl. “And if the mater thinks it will make me forget Lallie——”

“I thought her name was Esther,” said Micky quietly. He was looking out of the window into the starry night.

“So it is—but I always call her Lallie.” He looked at his friend with a sort of vague suspicion. “How do you know what her name is?” he asked.

“I saw it on the letter you gave me.”

Ashton grunted.

“I think it would be better if you posted it to her yourself and have done with it,” Micky said with an effort. “I’m a rotten hand at this sort of thing. It can’t do any good if I go and see her.”

“You said you would go—you might be a sport and stick to your word,” Ashton protested. “I’d do the same for you any day.”

Micky rather doubted it, but did not like to say so.

“If you knew how sick I am about the whole business,” Ashton went on jerkily. “You may not believe me, but I tell you, Micky, that I’d marry that girl tomorrow if only——”

“If only—what?” Micky asked as he paused.

“Oh, you know! What the dickens can I do without a bob to my name except what the mater chooses to dole out? I tell you,” he went on with a sort of snarl, “it’ll be very different when I get the money. Gad! if only I’d got it now!”

“Money isn’t everything,” said Micky sententiously. “And if you like the girl, why not marry her and face it out?”

Ashton gave a savage little laugh.

“It’s all very fine for you to say that money isn’t everything—that’s only because you’ve got it, and are never likely to be without it. You don’t know what it feels like to be up to your eyes in debt and not knowing where to turn for a fiver. Bah! what’s the good of talking?” He let down the window with a run, turning his face to the keen night air.

They were nearing their destination, and there was still something he wanted to

say to Micky which so far, he had been afraid to put into words.

“Well, I suppose I shan’t be seeing you again for a bit,” he said, with rather a forced laugh. “You’ve been a good pal to me, Micky—”

Micky said “Rot!” rather shortly; he frowned in the darkness; Ashton got on his nerves; he rather wished he had not come to see him off.

“Oh, but you have—whether you like me to say so or not,” the other man went on obstinately. “And—and there’s one last thing I’m going to ask you before I go....”

He waited, but Micky did not speak.

The taxi was turning into the station yard now, moving slowly because of the congested traffic.

“If you could give Lallie some money,” Ashton went on with a rush. “I’d send her some, but I’ve only just got enough to get out of the way with. I’ll pay you back as soon as the mater condescends to send me another cheque....”

Micky’s face felt hot.

“Hasn’t she—hasn’t she got any, then?” he asked with an effort.

“No—at least I promised her some when I saw her this morning. She—she’s left Eldred’s. You see”—he drew a hard breath—“you see, I hoped we’d be able to get married, and so—well, there was no sense in her staying on there. She was worked to death, poor kid.”

He glanced at Micky, but could not see his face.

“You understand, don’t you?” he said, encouraged by his silence. “She owes them a bit at the boarding-house where she is living. I promised to wipe it off for her, but the mater cutting up rough altered everything, and so ... if you could give her a little—”

“I’ll see to it,” said Micky. He opened the door of the taxi and got out before it was at a standstill. He took off his hat and let the cold air play on his hot forehead. He could hardly trust himself to speak.

He was thankful when Ashton went off to see to his luggage. He walked into the station and found himself aimlessly staring at a notice board. He could not remember when he had felt so furiously angry.

Had Ashton changed? he was asking himself in bewilderment. Or was it merely that he had never seen the man he really was until to-night?

He tried to remember what Ashton had told him about Esther Shepstone in the past. That she had been at Eldred's he knew, and that Eldred's was a place where women bought silk petticoats and things he also knew. He had heard Marie Deland and her friends talking about it lots of times. Marie had once invited him to accompany her there when they had been out together, but he had refused and had waited outside for her. Now he came to think of it, that was about all Ashton had ever told him of Esther Shepstone.

He knew that Ashton had been seen about with her a great deal; knew that he had had to stand a lot of harmless chaff in consequence; he himself had joked about Ashton's "latest" as they had all called her: it seemed a memory to be ashamed of, when he thought of the way he had heard her sobbing in the street that night, of the distress in her eyes, of the hopeless way in which she had spoken.

Ashton rejoined him.

"Buck up! The train's in."

They went along the platform, followed by a porter with Ashton's baggage. Micky looked at it resentfully; Ashton was evidently prepared to enjoy himself; this was no rush after mere solitude and forgetfulness.

He stood stiffly at the carriage door while Ashton stowed his smaller traps on the rack. Presently he came to the window.

"You'll do the best you can, won't you, old man?" There was a real anxiety in his eyes, but Micky was not looking at him; he answered stiffly—

"Yes, I'll do what I can."

"She'll soon get another job," Ashton went on, with forced confidence. "I'm sorry she left Eldred's, now it's come to this, but how was I to know?" he appealed to Micky, but he might as well have appealed to a brick wall for all response he got.

"And when I come back—" he said again. "Tell her that when I come back many things may be all right again ... tell her that, will you?"

"I'll tell her," said Micky stolidly.

The guard was blowing his whistle now, doors were being shut.

Micky roused himself and looked at his friend.

"Are you—er—are you going to write to her?" he asked constrainedly.

Ashton coloured.

“No—it’s better not—far better let the thing drop till I come back. I’ve explained it all in my letter—she’ll understand. It’s no use writing—don’t you think it’s better not—”

Micky hunched his shoulders.

“It’s your affair,” he said laconically.

“Yes, well, I shan’t write—I’ll send you my address as soon as I know where I’m staying, and you can let me know what she said and how she takes it.... Oh, confound it!”

A porter had come along and slammed the door; the train was slowly moving; Micky was vaguely glad that there had been no time in which to shake hands. A moment, and he was walking away alone down the platform.

His hands were deep thrust in the pockets of his coat; he took no notice of anything; he walked on and out of the station.

Well, this had been an eventful New Year’s Eve with a vengeance; he glanced up at the clock in the dome behind him—only a quarter to twelve now, and yet so much had been crowded into the past four hours. Since the moment when the Delands rang up to cancel his engagement to dine he seemed to have stepped out of the old world into a new. He wondered what Esther Shepstone was doing in the very horrid boarding-house of which she had told him—if she was thinking of Ashton.

What a cad the man was, what a cad!—he was amazed that he had not discovered it before—to clear off and leave a girl like this, without a word of farewell except the letter. He wondered if he meant to deliver it and admit that he knew Ashton, or if he meant just to stick a stamp on and post it to her.

He realised that there was nothing very much to be proud of in an admission that he knew Ashton, and yet they had been friends for years.

It was striking twelve when he got home; he stood for a moment on the doorstep, looking up at the starry sky.

Several clocks were chiming midnight in the distance; he listened with a queer sense of fatalism.

This was the strangest New Year’s Eve he had ever spent in his life. At this hour last year he had been dancing the old year out, and to-night, had things gone as

he had thought, he would have been somewhere with Marie Deland—he might even have proposed to her by this time. He smiled faintly, remembering that the intention had really been somewhere in the background of his mind; but that, too, had faded out now to give place to other, more important, factors.

Nine, ten, eleven, twelve! He counted the strokes mechanically; there was a breathless pause, then the clash of bells.

Some irrepressibles in a block of flats near by raised a cheer; the front door of a house opposite was open, and Micky caught a glimpse of a crowded hall and black-coated men and girls in pretty frocks.

He felt strangely removed from all the noise and laughter; after a moment he turned and went up to his room.

The fire had been carefully made up and his slippers and dressing-gown put to warm. Micky looked at them with a sort of disgust; it was sickening for a healthy grown man to be so pampered; he kicked the slippers into a corner and tossed the dressing-gown on to the couch.

He wondered what sort of a room Esther Shepstone had in the very horrid boarding-house—what odd corner the thin black cat curled into to sleep.

He took Ashton's letter from his pocket and stuck it up against the clock on the mantelshelf.

“Miss Esther Shepstone....”

It was fate, that's what it was! He wondered if she would ever have lived to get that letter had fate not thrown her across his path that night.

She had been desperate—at the end of her tether, and all for the sake of that cad Ashton.

He turned his back on the letter and lit a cigarette, but he let it go out almost at once, and turned back again to stare once more at the name scrawled on the envelope.

What had Ashton written to her? It worried him because he did not know. Ashton had had other love-affairs—not quite such serious ones, perhaps, but still serious enough—and Micky knew that when he had wearied of them he had set about getting free of them by the shortest route, caring little if it were also a brutal one. He thought of the despair he had seen in Esther's face that evening; he dreaded that there might be something in Ashton's farewell letter that would plunge her back more deeply into her misery.

Out in the night the bells were still ringing joyously.

It was New Year's morning, and perhaps, if he sent that letter ... He stood quite still for a moment, staring at it; then suddenly he threw his cigarette into the fire and snatched the letter down from the shelf.

He tore it open impulsively and drew out the enclosure. He unfolded it and began to read. The silence of the room was unbroken save for the little crisp sound as Micky turned the paper; then the letter fluttered to the rug at his feet and lay there, half-curved up, as if it were ashamed of the words it bore and wished to hide them.

Micky raised his eyes and looked at his reflection in the glass above the mantelshelf. The pallor of his face surprised him, and the look of passionate anger in his eyes.

He was a man of the world. He was no better and no worse than many of the men whom he knew and called his friends, but this letter, in its brutal callousness, seemed to shame his very manhood.

He had liked Ashton, had been his constant companion for months, but he had never suspected him of being capable of this.

He supposed he ought to be ashamed of having opened the letter, but he was not ashamed; he was glad that he had been able to spare the girl this last and hardest blow of all—the knowledge that the man whom she loved and trusted was unworthy.

Presently he picked the letter up from the rug. He picked it up with the tips of his fingers, as if it were something repulsive to him, and threw it down on the table.

The first few words stared up at him as it lay there.

“DEAR LALLIE,—By the time you get this letter I shall be out of England, and I hope you won't make things worse for me than they already are by trying to find out where I have gone or by writing to my people and making a scene. The worst of these little flirtations is that they always have to end, as this must, and you must have known it.”...

Micky drew in his breath hard; not an hour ago in this very room Ashton had made out how cut-up he was at the turn his affairs had taken, and yet all the time he had written this letter.

He flicked over a page and read on:—

“... I shall never forget you and the good times we’ve had together. I should try and get back at Eldred’s, if I were you. It’s a good thing we didn’t get married as matters have turned out, or the fat would have been in the fire with a vengeance. As it is, I shall have all my work cut out to put the mater in a good temper again. I am sending you some money by Mickey Mellowes; he’s a friend of mine and as rich as Cræsus, and as selfish as the devil. If he offers to take you out, let him, by all means. It wouldn’t be a bad thing if he took a fancy to you; he doesn’t care a hang for any one but himself. If only I’d got half his money ... but what’s the use of talking about it? Anyway, this is good-bye; I shan’t write again. Be a sensible girl, and try to see things from my point of view. It would only have meant ruin for both of us if I’d stuck to you. Good-bye; I send you my love for the last time.

RAYMOND ASHTON.”

And this from the man whom she loved; the man who had pretended to love her! Micky dragged forward a chair with his foot and sat down straddlewise. He leaned an elbow on the chair-back and ran his fingers through his hair with a sort of bewilderment.

“He’s as rich as Cræsus and as selfish as the devil....”

And this from Ashton, his friend—the man whom he had helped out of scrapes scores of times; the man to whom he had lent money without the least hope of its ever being returned; Micky felt as if he had a blow in the face.

His thoughts were in a whirl; the whole world needed readjusting. Was he selfish? he asked himself in perplexity—if so, it was quite unconsciously, and anyway Ashton was the last person who should have made the accusation.

“I am sending you some money by a friend of mine....”

There was no hint that the money was first to be borrowed; he had evidently been sure of his prey; Micky swore under his breath.

Of course, Ashton had not dreamed of the letter being opened, had not dreamed of anything but that his carefully-made plans would be minutely carried out and nothing more said.

Micky sat for a long time, lost in thought; the hands of the clock crawled round to one and the chime struck; he looked up then, glancing at the clock vaguely.

If he had not met Esther Shepstone there might have been no Esther in the world

at all now; if he allowed that letter to reach its destination he would be plunging her back again into the abyss of despair from which he had dragged her only that evening. She loved Ashton; of that Micky was sure. Very well then, she should at least have some part of her ideal left to her.

He went over to his desk and took up paper and pen; he spread Ashton's letter out before him and studied the writing carefully.

Ordinary sort of writing, rather unformed and sprawly, but after a trial run Micky managed a very presentable copy of it.

He sat back in his chair and eyed his handiwork with pride; he had missed his vocation, he told himself with a chuckle; he ought to have been a forger.

Then he dipped the pen in the ink again and squared his elbows. He had never written a love-letter in his life, but he knew positively that he was about to write one now.

He thought of Esther and the wistfulness of her grey eyes; she was the girl whom a man could love. He coloured a little as the thought involuntarily crossed his mind; she was a girl whom—he began to write rapidly.

“My darling little girl—”

Micky was naturally rather eloquent with his pen, though he had never before tried it in this especial direction.

“This is the most difficult letter I have ever had to write in all my life; first, because I love you so much; and, secondly, because I am afraid it is going to hurt you nearly as much as it hurts me. Dear, as it will be some time before I see you again, and because I cannot explain everything to you, I am going to ask you to trust me till we meet again. I am leaving England to-night....”

Micky paused and ran his fingers through his hair agitatedly before he struggled on once more: “I shall be thinking of you every minute till we meet again, and of the happy times we have had together. I will write to you whenever I can....” The pen paused, and Micky groaned, recalling that Ashton had said he should not write at all.

“It'll have to do, anyway,” he muttered, and again the pen flew: “I'm not much of a hand at writing letters, as you know, but you must try and read between the lines, and guess at all I would say were we together ... All I will say to you when we meet again.”

That last sentence was rather neat, Micky thought with pride, then a wave of

compunction swept through his heart as he remembered the tragedy behind it all, and he finished the page soberly enough: "Ever yours, Raymond Ashton."

"Damn him!" said Micky under his breath, as he blotted the signature; then he took two ten-pound notes from a drawer in his desk, and, enclosing them in the envelope, sealed and stamped it.

It was half-past one, but Micky climbed into his coat again. He locked Ashton's letter into his desk, and, taking the one he had written, went quietly down to the street.

The world was sleeping and deserted, and Micky's footsteps echoed hollowly along the pavement.

"You're a fool, you know!" he told himself, with a sort of humour. "You're a bally fool, my boy! It won't end here, you see if it does."

But he went on to the pillar-box at the street corner.

When he reached it he stood for a moment with the letter in his hand.

"You're a fool," he told himself again hardily. "Micky, my boy, you're a bally idiot, interfering with what doesn't concern you—with what doesn't concern you in the very least."

He looked up at the stars and thought of Esther Shepstone, of her eyes and her wavering smile, and the soft note in her voice as she had asked him—

"Are you always as kind to every one as you have been to me?"

No concern of his! It was every concern of his; he knew that he was only living for the hours to pass before he saw her again. No concern of his! when the greatest miracle of all the world had come to pass during those last hours of the old year, inasmuch that Micky Mellowes, heartwhole and a bachelor for thirty odd years, had been bowled over by a girl without a shilling to her name—a girl who loved another man, but a girl to whom Micky had without wishing it, without knowing it, dedicated the rest of his life!

He was her champion for the future, some one to stand between her and the callousness of the man of whom even now she was probably thinking.

"No concern of mine!" said Micky to himself with fine scorn. "Why, of course it is! Every concern of mine."

He squared his shoulders and dropped the envelope into the pillar-box.

And so Micky Mellowes posted his first love-letter.

CHAPTER III

In spite of the events of the night Micky Mellowes slept soundly. It was half-past nine when he woke, to find his man Driver moving noiselessly about the room.

When he saw that Micky was awake he approached the bed.

“Good-morning, sir, and a happy New Year.”

Driver had an expressionless voice; he announced tea or tragedy in exactly the same tone.

“Eh?” said Micky vacantly; the words opened the door of memory, and he sat up with a start. It was New Year’s Day, and last night ... ye gods! what had not happened last night? Micky tingled to the tips of his fingers as he remembered the letter he had written and posted; he had expected to feel rotten about it in the light of day; it was an agreeable surprise to find that he did not feel anything of the kind.

When he went in to breakfast there was a pile of letters waiting for him; he looked them through carelessly—there was one from Marie Deland, which he opened with a vague feeling of nervousness.

Marie was a nice little girl; he really was quite fond of her, and yet ... surely the days of miracles had not yet passed away, seeing that in a few short hours his feeling for her had changed from something warmer to more brotherly affection.

It made him feel uncomfortable to read what she had written; it was really only quite an ordinary letter of regret that she had not seen him last night, but Micky imagined he could read more between the lines.

“... I quite hoped you would drop in, if only for a few moments,” so she wrote. “It’s been so dull. I am writing this alone in the library.”

Micky knew that library well; he and she had spent a good deal of time there together talking sweet nothings; he wondered if he would have been an engaged man by this time if that relative of the Delands had not so conveniently died, and if Esther had not chosen his particular street in which to weep.

He screwed the letter up and tossed it into the fire; he would answer it some time, or call; there was no immediate hurry. When he had finished his breakfast he went to his locked desk and took out Ashton's letter—somehow until he actually saw it again he could not quite believe that the events of last night had not all been a dream; but the letter was real enough, at all events with its callous beginning to "Dear Lallie."

The morning seemed to drag; twice people rang him up on the 'phone and asked him to lunch, but Micky was not in the mood for lunch; he felt a suppressed sort of excitement, as if something of great import were about to happen.

Driver looked at him woodenly once or twice; his face was as expressionless as his voice, but his dull eyes saw everything, and behind them his keen brain wondered what had happened to make Micky so restless.

Towards one o'clock he ventured a gentle reminder.

"You have an engagement for half-past three, sir—Miss Langdon's."

Micky was yawning over the paper then; he looked up with an absurdly blank face.

"Oh, I say!—well, I can't go, anyway. What was it for? I'm going out—I've got an important appointment."

Driver never showed surprise at anything if he felt it.

"It was a musical 'At 'Ome,' sir," he answered stolidly. "Shall I ring up and say that you won't be able to come?"

"Yes, ring up," said Micky. He coloured self-consciously beneath the man's stoic eyes and hurriedly buried his head again in the newspaper.

At three o'clock he changed his clothes for an immaculate morning-coat and grey trousers; then, remembering what Esther had said about the very horrid boarding-house, he changed them again for the oldest tweed suit in his possession, and a pair of brown boots that had seen their best days and long since been condemned by Driver.

"How in the world do I get to Brixton?" Micky asked the man when he was ready. "I know I could take a taxicab, but I don't want to. What other ways are there?"

Driver told him.

"There's the train, sir, or a tram."

Micky jumped at the tramcar. He was sure that people who lived in Brixton must all use tramcars.

“How long would a tramcar take?” he asked.

Driver considered. Finally he said that he thought it might be the best part of an hour.

Micky glanced at the clock. It was already a quarter past three. He took up his hat hurriedly and went out into the street.

A taxicab would have to do for to-day anyway. He could dismiss it at the corner of the road and walk the last few yards. A moment later he was being whirled through the streets.

He sat leaning back in the corner with his feet up on the seat opposite, feeling decidedly nervous.

Supposing he did not see Esther—supposing she were not there? Supposing she had purposely given him the wrong address? Supposing ... oh, supposing a thousand and one things! Micky was full of apprehension when at last the taxicab stopped at the corner of the Brixton Road and the driver came to the door to ask what number.

Micky scrambled out.

“Oh, I’ll walk the rest of the way.”

He paid the man liberally, and set out along the crowded pathway. There were so many people about that he thought it must be a market day or something. A word with a policeman elicited the information that he was at quite the wrong end of the street for the number he wanted. Micky was rather glad. He felt that he needed time in which to collect his thoughts, and yet when at last he reached his destination he felt as nervous as a kitten and strongly inclined to go back. But he went on and up the bare strip of garden which led to the front door of the house. It wasn’t such a bad-looking house, he thought. Not nearly as bad as he had expected from the girl’s description. In fact, once upon a time it must have been rather a palatial residence, but all the windows now were boxed up with cheap, starchy-looking curtains, and there was a sort of third-rate atmosphere about the basement and the cheap knocker on the front door.

Micky looked for a bell, but there wasn’t one, so he knocked.

It seemed a long time before anybody came. When at last they did he heard them coming for a long time before the door was opened, heard slipshod steps on

shiny linoleum, and a husky sort of breathless cough.

The owner of the cough was young and scared-looking, in shoes several sizes too large for her, and a skirt several inches too short. When Micky asked for Miss Shepstone she stared without answering for a moment, then she turned and slopped back the way she had come, leaving the door on the chain.

Micky chuckled to himself; she evidently did not like the look of him.

He waited patiently; then he heard another step along the shiny linoleumed floor of the hall—a very different step this time—and, turning eagerly, he saw Esther herself in the doorway.

“I didn’t really think you would come,” she said breathlessly.

For a moment Micky could not find his tongue. If he had thought this girl pretty last night with the tears in her eyes he thought her a thousand times prettier now. She looked as if some magician hand had wiped the distress from her face and convinced her that the sun still shone.

She wore the same clothes she had worn last night, but even they seemed somehow to have changed. There was a bunch of violets pinned in her jacket. Micky wondered if it were the violets that were responsible for the alteration.

“When I make an appointment I always keep it,” he said.

He had almost added “with any one like you,” but thought better of it. “And are you going to let me take you out to tea?” he asked.

She hesitated; she glanced back into the dingy hall behind her.

“I am leaving here to-day,” she said. “My box has gone already. If you will wait a moment ... I would ask you in, but you’d hate it so.”

“I’ll wait outside,” said Micky.

He went down into the street. For the moment he had quite forgotten all about Ashton and the letter which must by this time be in Esther’s possession.

“And what about Charlie?” he asked whimsically when she joined him.

She smiled, shaking her head.

“I sent him on—in a basket. Nobody wants him here—he only gets badgered about all day long; so I’m taking him with me. Do you think I ought not to?”

“I think Charlie is a most fortunate cat,” said Micky.

She did not take him seriously.

“I think he will be happier with me anyway,” she said “I’m going to quite a nice boarding-house now. I went out this morning and found it.” She looked up at him with a smile. “I don’t think even you would mind coming to tea there,” she said.

“I thought you were going to say mind coming there to live,” Micky told her audaciously. “I’ve been looking about for fresh diggings; I’m tired of mine.” He stopped and glanced behind him. “Can we get a tramcar here?”

“I’m not tired,” she said quickly.

“Well, I must admit that I am,” Micky answered. He hated walking at the best of times, and he did not like to suggest another taxicab. “Let’s go on top.”

They climbed up and found a front seat; there was a working man next to them smoking shag in a clay pipe; he looked at Micky and Esther doubtfully, then asked—

“Does your good lady mind smoke, mister?”

Esther flushed.

“I don’t mind at all,” she said, laughing.

“You got home all right last night, then?” Micky said presently. “After you had gone I wished I had seen you safely in....”

“It’s kind of you, but I was quite all right.” There was a note of constraint in her voice. “I should like to thank you for what you did for me last night,” she said hesitatingly.

“If it hadn’t been for you....” She stopped.

Micky did not know what to say.

“Anyway, it’s all right now, eh?” he asked presently, with awkward cheerfulness. “I thought it would be; when things look so black that they can’t possibly look any blacker, they always begin to mend. I’ve found that out before; I don’t know if you have.”

“I found it out this morning.”

Micky looked down at her. She was sitting with her hands clasped together in her lap; there was a little flush in her cheeks, and her lips were curved into a faint smile.

“It seems so wonderful too,” she went on softly, “that it should have happened on New Year’s Day——”

“Fares, all fares, please,” said the conductor beside them. Micky dived into a pocket and found a shilling.

“Two, please,” he said.

He had paid for and shared taxicabs with Marie Deland times without number, but it had never given him quite the same pleasurable little thrill as he experienced at this moment.

There was something so pleasantly familiar about this tramcar ride, the fact of sharing the same uncomfortable seat with Esther Shepstone.

“Penny ones?” the conductor asked.

Micky looked at the girl.

“Where shall we get off?” he asked.

“Penny ones will do,” she said.

Micky took the tickets and pocketed his change.

“I don’t know if there are any decent teashops round here,” he said dubiously. “If you would rather go up to the West End....”

But finally they found a confectioner’s quite close to where the penny fare ended.

Micky looked round critically.

“Is this all right?” he asked. “I’ve never been here before.”

“I have, often,” she said. She was drawing off her gloves.

Micky glanced hurriedly at her hands; she was wearing a ring. Hardly knowing that he did so, he leaned across and touched it.

“Is that an engagement ring?” he asked. His voice sounded a little breathless.

She looked up at him, drawing her hand away.

“Why do you ask me?”

He drew back; he shrugged his shoulders.

“I beg your pardon. I suppose I have no right to ask.”

He ordered tea. He talked rather forced platitudes for the rest of the time. He was

just going to call for the bill, when Esther Shepstone said suddenly—

“Mr. Mellowes, I should like to tell you something.”

“Yes!” Micky did not look at her. Somehow he could not trust himself.

“I don’t in the least know why I want to tell you,” she said again nervously.

“But—you’ve been so kind to me....”

“Yes!” said Micky gently, as she paused. “Yes, what is it?”

She was twisting her teaspoon, and she kept her eyes lowered.

“Last night, when I met you—I was very unhappy ... There didn’t seem anything to live for in the world.... I don’t know if you’ve ever felt like that, or if you have ever cared for any one—really cared, I mean—but if you have....” She stopped again.

“I think I understand,” Micky said, with an effort. “You mean that there’s some one, some man....”

She raised her grey eyes to his face.

“Yes, that’s what I mean.”

“Some man you care for—care for very much,” Micky went on slowly. “Perhaps some one you have quarreled with—who hadn’t been quite as ... kind as he might have been—”

The soft colour flooded her face.

“Did you guess—last night?” she asked shyly.

Micky smiled.

“Did I? I am not sure, perhaps.” He drew a long breath that was half a sigh. “Well?” he queried.

“I don’t know why I am telling you this—” she said again, with a sort of distress. “It cannot interest you, but, somehow, I think I should like you to know.”

“It interests me very much—I am honoured that you should tell me.” Micky looked again at the ring she wore; quite a cheap little ring, with a couple of inferior diamonds. “You mean that you are engaged to be married?”

“Yes; at least—” The words were only a whisper.

Micky sat very still.

“Well, I suppose you will have me for a friend all the same, won’t you?” he asked with an effort.

She looked at him in faint amazement.

“I thought if I told you that perhaps you’d rather not....” She stopped in confusion.

Micky leaned a little closer over the table.

“You said last night that you didn’t believe in a man’s friendship for a woman,” he said. “Well, I am going to make you believe in it. I’m going to be your friend. The fact that you are engaged makes no difference to me, if it doesn’t to you.”

She looked at him earnestly.

“If you mean that,” she said, “I think I’m very glad.”

“Thank you. I suppose I mustn’t ask who the—the lucky man is?”

She shook her head.

“I can’t tell you. And he’s away now—out of England.”

Her voice changed a little, her eyes looked past Micky as if for the moment she had forgotten him.

Micky watched her jealously.

“And so whatever was wrong last night is all right to-day, is that it?” he asked with an effort.

“Yes ... somehow I never thought it would be, but this morning—”

“This morning?” he echoed as she stopped.

“I had a letter this morning,” she told him, and her voice had softened so wonderfully that Micky caught his breath. “Oh, I wonder if you have ever been as unhappy as I was last night, and then had a letter, a wonderful letter like I had this morning? There was something in it that seemed to put everything right straight away; something that I’ve always wanted before and never had. I can’t explain it any better than that, but perhaps you understand. I’m just telling you because I feel so happy I must tell somebody, and because I didn’t want you to misjudge him as I did yesterday. I thought he didn’t really care, and I wanted to die, but to-day, when his letter came——” She broke off into a little happy laugh.

Micky had rammed his clenched hands into his pockets; the blood was hammering in his temples; his brain felt in a whirl; somehow in all his wildest

imaginings he had never dreamed of this.

It was his letter that had brought that new look of happiness to her eyes! His letter which perhaps even then lay against her heart; the first love-letter he had ever written to any woman, and she believed it to have been written by Raymond Ashton!

He did not realise how long he sat there without speaking till Esther spoke to him again. There was a little anxious note in her voice.

“I’m afraid I’ve bored you horribly with all this. I know it’s no interest to you, but I felt that I must tell somebody.”

Micky roused himself with an effort.

“It’s of great interest to me,” he said. “And you mustn’t ever say a thing like that again. We’re going to be friends, and real friends are always interested in everything that concerns the other. I’m more glad than I can say that you’re happy. I only hope it’s going to last for ever.”

Perhaps there was a dubious note in his voice, for an anxious gleam crept into the girl’s eyes.

“You sound as if you don’t think that it will,” she said quickly.

Micky made a hurried disclaimer.

“I do think so, of course I do! You deserve all the happiness you can get, and whoever the man is, if he doesn’t make you happy——”

He stopped, with frowning memory of Ashton and their parting only last night.

He hoped in his heart that they would never meet again; if they did, he realised that there would be quite a few nasty things he would feel called upon to say to him.

The waitress brought the bill at that moment and put an end to further conversation, for which he was thankful. He realised that he was getting rather out of his depth. He breathed more freely when they were safely out in the street.

“And where is the new boarding-house?” he asked presently. He wanted to change the subject; every moment he was afraid that he would say something to give himself away. He supposed he had behaved like an impetuous fool. He ought never to have posted that letter—ought never to have opened Ashton’s; and yet—if he had not done so.... He looked down at the girl beside him, and wondered grimly how she would have felt if he had allowed that callous farewell

to reach her.

“It’s quite close to where we are now,” she told him. “It’s rather more expensive than the last one, but it’s well worth the extra money, and”—she glanced up at him smilingly—“I’m better off to-day than I was yesterday,” she explained. “And when I go back to work again——”

“Are you going back, then?” he asked quickly.

“Of course I am. I must do something, and they will take me back at Eldred’s, I know——”

“Eldred’s!” Micky frowned. “That’s the petticoat shop, isn’t it?”

She laughed.

“Yes; how did you know?”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“I’ve seen the place lots of times. A girl I know buys all her——” He stopped. “Do you want to go back there?” he asked.

“Not particularly, but it’s easier than looking for a fresh place, and I know they will take me. I’m in the workroom, and it’s not really such a hard life.”

Micky did some rapid thinking; it was surprising how easily his brain had taken to hard work during the last twenty-four hours.

“Why don’t you get a job as a companion to a nice old lady or somebody?” he suggested vaguely.

She laughed again.

“It doesn’t sound a bit attractive,” she said frankly. “I think you need an awful lot of patience. It’s very kind of you to be interested, but I think I shall go back to Eldred’s, for a time, at least.”

Micky did not like the idea at all, but he let the subject drop.

“Are you going back to the Brixton Road?” he asked after a moment.

“Oh no; I paid them before I left this afternoon, so I shall go straight to the new place.”

“I should like to walk there with you, if I may,” said Micky.

“Of course you may.”

“And when shall I see you again?” he asked. “You’re not going to vanish for days, are you? I’ve got no end of time to kill, and——”

“But I haven’t,” she reminded him. “At least, I shan’t have when I start work. But I should like to see you again,” she added kindly.

“Thank you,” said Micky with faint sarcasm.

He felt vaguely disappointed with the whole afternoon. She was holding him so decidedly at arm’s length. He supposed it was that infernal fellow Ashton that stood between them. There was a sort of irony, too, in the fact that he himself had by his own action established him more firmly than ever in this girl’s affections.

And the fellow was not worth a thought! That was the rotten part of it. As he looked at her he felt strongly tempted to blurt out the truth; to tell her that it was he who wrote that letter—to undeceive her once and for all.

But the thing was manifestly impossible. She would probably think it an abominable thing to have opened Ashton’s letter; she would probably be furious if he let her know that the money she had received had come from him. Whichever way he turned he seemed to be in a corner.

They had reached the new boarding-house now, and Micky was relieved to see that it was a decided improvement on the one in the Brixton Road.

The windows were not boxed up, and the steps and the bell were clean. It was on the sunny side of the road, too, and had an air of cheerfulness about it.

“It’s much better than the other one, isn’t it?” Esther asked.

“Streets better,” he assured her. “I shouldn’t mind living here myself....” He waited, but she made no comment, and he felt rather snubbed.

There was a little silence.

“Don’t you like the place where you are living now?” she asked after a moment. “Don’t they make you comfortable there?”

“Oh, it’s comfortable enough,” said Micky. He wondered if he looked as guilty as he felt. “But I don’t believe in sticking on anywhere too long. A change is good for every one. I shall be shifting out some day soon, I expect.”

There was a little silence.

“I shall see you again soon,” he said. “And if there is anything I can do for you——”

“Thank you, but there isn’t.” She spoke quite kindly, but Micky had the uncomfortable sort of feeling that her thoughts were elsewhere. He waited a moment, then held out his hand.

“Well, good-bye.”

“Good-bye, and thank you for my tea.”

She nodded and smiled and turned away from him.

There was nothing else for Micky to do but to go; he raised his hat and walked off disconsolately.

CHAPTER IV

When Esther went upstairs to her room in No. 11 Elphinstone Road, she found the door standing open, and she could hear some one talking inside.

She stood still for a moment in amazement; she thought perhaps she had made a mistake and come to the wrong room, but a glance reassured her; the number of her room was 23, and this one was 23; she pushed the door wider and went in.

Her boxes were there, standing one upon the other, so as to make more space in the small room, and on the rather shabby rug by the fireplace a woman was kneeling with her back to the door.

She did not hear Esther enter, and for a moment the girl stood staring at her in blank amazement. She could not see her face, but she could see that the woman was small and slightly built, with a wealth of jet black hair coiled in becoming carelessness with a couple of yellow pins to fasten it.

She wore a yellow blouse, which Esther would have thought hideous on any one else, but somehow against that dark coil of hair it looked decidedly picturesque.

Esther moved a little, deliberately knocking against a chair to attract attention, and the girl on the hearthrug looked round with a startled exclamation; then scrambled to her feet.

"I heard there was a cat," she explained. "Lydia told me that he was shut up here alone, so I just had to come in and see him. I hope you don't mind. I brought him some milk."

For a moment Esther was too taken aback to answer. She looked from the little woman in the yellow blouse to Charlie, sprawled on the rug and purring lustily, and then back again to the little woman.

She was very attractive looking, that was Esther's first thought, and her next that she had never seen any one with such a beautiful complexion.

"You're Miss Shepstone, aren't you?" her visitor queried in the friendliest of tones. "You see, I know quite a lot about you already. Lydia told me—Lydia's

the housemaid—you'll like her; she's a really nice girl. My name is June Mason—I live here, too, and I hope we will be great friends."

There was something so breezily disarming about her that Esther held out her hand.

"You're very kind. I hardly know what to say...."

"Don't say anything," Miss Mason answered airily. "I'm going to like you; I knew I should somehow when I first heard your name. I believe in that sort of thing—I don't know if you do, but as soon as Lydia told me who it was that had taken this room I knew I should like you. I think your name is sweet—Esther! So quaint and old-world. Have you had your tea?—yes, oh, what a shame! I've got some ready for you in my room. Oh, I hope you don't think it's awful cheek," she broke out with a sort of embarrassment. "I've got a sitting-room here as well as a bedroom, and I always make my own tea, it's better than you can get downstairs. I've got a fire there too, and if you're ever cold I hope you'll come and sit with me. I'm out a good deal but you can always use my room when I'm not there, if you care to. Take off your hat and come and see it now, or are you too tired? I don't want to worry you."

"I'm not a bit tired," Esther said, laughing; she felt a little bewildered by this sudden offer of friendship, but June Mason interested her, and after a moment she took off her hat obediently.

"We'll bring the cat too," Miss Mason said; she swooped down with a quick movement and caught the cat up in her arms. "I love cats," she said. "What's his name?"

"Charlie," said Esther shyly. "He's very thin, but they weren't kind to him where he belonged before...."

"What a shame! I simply loathe people who are not kind to animals. Never mind, he'll soon get all right. Now come along—I'll help you unpack your boxes presently."

She led the way downstairs, and Esther followed.

She had been feeling a little scared of this new boarding-house. She felt grateful for this girl's unaffected overture.

"Mine's the best room in the house," Miss Mason informed her. She pushed open the door of a room immediately below Esther's. "Sit down and make yourself at home. I'll get the tea in half a minute. I know you'll have another

cup. I shall, anyway. Do you smoke?"

"No," said Esther.

"Well I do. I hope you're not shocked. I find it's so soothing when you've got nerves; and I'm a frightfully nervy person. I am hardly ever still; I'm always on the go."

Esther could well believe it. She looked on with a slightly dazed feeling while June Mason lit a cigarette and bustled about the room.

It was a very comfortable room, with plenty of easy-chairs and lots of cushions all in the same pale shade of mauve.

"I didn't think there would be any rooms as comfortable as this in the house," Esther said. "I suppose you pay a great deal for it, though."

"I don't know about that. Most of the furniture is mine and all the cushions. Do you like my cushions?"

She put down the teapot, which she had been about to fill, and caught up one of the cushions, plumping its softness together with her white hands.

"Mauve is my lucky colour," she rattled on. "Everything I do in mauve turns out well. But perhaps you don't believe in a superstition like that?"

Esther was rather bewildered.

"I'm not sure. I never thought about it," she said hesitatingly. "But it's a very pretty colour."

Miss Mason dropped the cushion to the floor, and stooping picked Charlie up and deposited him on it.

"Doesn't he look sweet?" she demanded. "And a black cat is lucky too, you know, so that's a comfort."

She went back to the teapot, made the tea, and poured out a cup for Esther.

"Is that chair comfy?—yes, lean back! What are you looking at? Oh, my photographs! Yes. I have got a lot, haven't I? Lydia dusts them for me! Lydia's a treasure! You'll love her. When I get married she's going to leave here and come with me——"

Esther looked interested.

"Are you going to be married?" she asked.

Miss Mason laughed.

“Am I? No, I’m not. I’m too fond of my independence. Not that I don’t like men. I do like them, and I’ve got some awfully good pals amongst them, too. Look!”

She turned with one of her rapid movements, caught up a photograph from the shelf and handed it to Esther.

“There! that’s one of the nicest men I ever met in my life,” she said enthusiastically. “Don’t you think he’s got a ripping face?”

Esther took the portrait laughingly—she thought June Mason one of the most amusing people she had ever met—then she caught her breath on a little smothered exclamation as she found herself looking straight into the pictured eyes of Micky Mellowes.

June Mason was too occupied with a fresh cigarette to notice the blank look that filled Esther’s eyes.

She sat there in the big chair, staring at Micky’s portrait with a sense of foreboding. Surely it was something bigger than just chance that had introduced him into her life for the second time.

“He’s one of the best,” June Mason went on. She dragged forward another chair and plumped down into it comfortably.

“Don’t you admire him?” She opened her eyes wide, looking across at Esther.

“Yes, oh yes! I think he’s quite nice,” Esther said stiltedly. “But not a bit good-looking, do you think?” she asked, with a sort of hesitation.

Miss Mason took the portrait from her and held it at arm’s length.

“Um!” she said critically. “Perhaps he isn’t, but I like him so much, you see, that I’m not a fair judge. He’s been a good friend to me, at all events.”

She got up, replaced the frame on the shelf, and plumped back once more amongst her mauve cushions.

“My people wanted me to marry him at one time,” she went on airily. “I might have done so only I liked him too well. He didn’t care for me, except as a friend, and it seemed a shame to spoil it, so I put my foot down.”

“You mean that you refused him?”

Esther was interested; she was remembering how Micky had told her that he had never really cared for any woman in all his life.

“He never asked me, my dear,” Miss Mason answered candidly. “I let him see that it wouldn’t be any good if he did, and I know he was frightfully relieved. We were never so nearly in love with one another as we were when we both knew that we didn’t mean to get married.” She chuckled reminiscently. “It finished me with my people, though,” she added, “so I cleared out and came here.”

“And—Micky?” Esther asked. “I—I mean Mr. Mellowes....”

Miss Mason looked faintly surprised.

“How did you know his name?” she asked. “Did I tell you? I suppose I did. Oh, he’s all right; he’s the kind of man who always will be all right. He’s got another girl on the tapis now. I don’t know if it will come to anything, though. Anyway, she’s not good enough for him.”

“You seem very fond of him,” Esther said.

“I am. He’s a dear! I should love to see him happily married to a girl with a heart of gold like his own. I think I know him better than most people, and his little corner of the world would be amazed if they knew the amount of good Micky manages to do.”

She had flushed up with her own enthusiasm. Her curious eyes (Esther could not decide if they were grey, blue, or green, or a mixture of all three) were very bright and expressive.

“I’ve heard lots of rotten things said about him,” she went on, “and I know that none of them are really deserved—at least most of them are not. He isn’t a saint—but what man is, I should like to know? But Micky’s the sort who would give his life for a friend or any one little and weak. Do you know”—she flung away the half-smoked cigarette and leaned forward with her elbows on her knees—“last winter, down in the country, I saw Micky go into a dirty pond in evening dress to rescue a drowning cat. What do you think of that?”

“A—a—cat!” said Esther faintly. She looked at Charlie, and remembered how Micky had paid for milk for him the night of their strange meeting.

“A miserable drowning cat!” Miss Mason went on with tragic emphasis. “He heard it mewling from the road, and he went in after it without stopping to think. Now, I call a man a hero who will do a thing like that when he is on his way to a dance he is very keen about, don’t you?”

“Yes,” said Esther. Her heart warmed towards Mellowes. Kind as he had been to her, she had not been quite sure of him; it made her feel happier to hear him so

warmly championed.

“You’ll be sick to death of my chatter,” June Mason broke out with sudden change of voice. She helped herself to a third cigarette. “I hope you don’t mind smoke,” she apologised. “I’m always at it; I think I smoke dozens a day——”

“Or throw them away half smoked,” Esther thought amusedly. “I don’t mind at all,” she answered.

“You haven’t told me a thing about yourself,” Miss Mason reminded her reproachfully. “And it’s not fair that I should do all the talking. I know your name, and that’s about all. Have you got any people? Where do you come from?”

Esther flushed a little.

“There isn’t much to tell you. I haven’t any people. I was born in India, and my mother died there. I don’t know anything about my father. I was sent home to an aunt, and she looked after me till about three years ago, when she died. I came to London then, and they took me on at Eldred’s—do you know Eldred’s?”

“Do I not?” said Miss Mason fervently. “Scrumptious things they make; but what prices! I can’t afford them very often, but I go in there a good deal. I know the manager, and he’s going to do some business for me—at least I hope he is. If I can get my stuff into his place it will be a splendid thing. All London shops there, you know; all London with any money, that is!”

Esther looked mystified.

“Your stuff!” she echoed. “What do you mean?”

June Mason laughed merrily. She had a very infectious laugh and a trick of covering her face with her hands while she was laughing.

“I forgot that you didn’t know!” she said. “I seem to know you so well, I can’t remember that we never saw one another before to-day. My dear, I make face cream. Wait a moment.”

She sprang up and disappeared behind a mauve curtain into an adjoining room. Esther heard her moving about, opening and shutting boxes and singing a snatch of song all the time. Presently she came back with a tray crowded with little pots and phials of all sizes and descriptions. She plumped down on her knees beside Esther’s chair.

“There you are!” she said lightly, though there was an odd dash of pride in her

voice. "Face cream, night and day cream, eyelash tonic, and all the rest of it! Of course, I'm only just starting—I'm not like those people who advertise in all the papers and charge about a guinea for a shilling jar; but my stuff is as good as theirs any day, and better, because it's pure. Look!" She took a lid off a little white pot with a mauve label and held it to Esther.

"Isn't that a glorious perfume?" she demanded. She sniffed it herself with relish. "And it's all my invention, and I'm as proud of it as a cat would be of nine tails. When I've got things a little more ship-shape, Micky's going to put it on the market for me. It wants a man behind all these sort of things you know. I can do all the donkey work, but I've got no head for business. I never know the difference between a loss and a profit. It was partly over this that I quarrelled with my people—they said it was low-down to make face cream and sell it—they're awful snobs! So I just cleared off and changed my surname and came here. I'm quite happy, and if I haven't got as much money as I had, I don't mind—I've got my liberty, and that's worth every thing."

"I think you're just wonderful," Esther said. She picked up a lid from one of the little pots and looked at the mauve and white label.

"June Mason's natural beautifier..."

She looked at the glowing face opposite to her.

"Do you use it for your own skin?" she asked shyly.

Miss Mason chuckled; she pushed the tray to one side along the floor.

"I don't mind telling you that I've never used cream to my skin at all," she said. "But people think I do, and so there you are! Have some more tea?"

She refilled Esther's cup and lit another cigarette. "So that's what I am," she said. "And now go on, and tell me about yourself. You said you were at Eldred's!"

"Yes, I was there for two years. I rather liked it! I love pretty things, and I was in the workroom. They paid me quite well, too, though it was hard work, and then—well, then I left—" her voice changed subtly.

"Why?"

The query was only interested, and not at all impertinent.

Esther flushed.

"Well—well—I thought I was going to be married. He—well, he asked me to

leave to marry him, and so I did....”

“But you’re not married?”

“No——” Esther was looking away into the fire. “No, I’m not married,” she said in a stifled voice. “He—my fiancé—has had to go away on business—abroad, and I don’t know when I shall see him again.”

Her voice sounded sad and dispirited.

“You poor little thing!” said June Mason. She leaned over and laid her hand on Esther’s. “Never mind! The time will soon pass, and then he’ll come back and you’ll live happily ever after——”

Esther smiled.

“I know. I keep on telling myself it’s foolish to worry. I felt quite happy this morning. I had a letter from him, and somehow when I read it things didn’t seem half so bad; but——”

“And you’ll have another to-morrow, I expect.” Miss Mason insisted. “And another the next day, and one every day while he’s away. There! That’s better,” she added cheerily as Esther laughed.

“I don’t like to see you look so sad. I’m going to cheer you up. I shan’t allow you to be miserable. And anyway,” she added, with a sudden softening, “you’ve got some one who loves you, and that’s worth everything else in the world.”

“Yes,” said Esther. Her eyes shone and she thought of the letter which was even then lying against her heart. Somehow she had never realised how much he really cared for her till to-day.

“And what are you going to do till he comes home?” Miss Mason asked interestedly. “If you had something to do you’d find the time pass ever so much more quickly.”

“It’s a question of having to do something rather than how to pass the time,” Esther said. “I haven’t any money except what I can make. My aunt left me a little when she died, but it was only a very little, and I spent most of it at first while I was looking for work. So I’m going back to Eldred’s—if they will have me, and I think they will.”

Miss Mason said “Humph!”

“I think you’re too good for a petticoat shop,” she said bluntly. “You’re wasted there! Nobody sees you, and you’re so pretty——”

“Oh, what nonsense!” Esther exclaimed. She laughed in sheer amusement. To her it seemed absurd for this girl to call her pretty; she considered June Mason such a personality—so attractive!

She really did make a picturesque figure as she sat there with her mauve cushions all around her. Her yellow blouse and dark hair and wonderful rose-leaf skin reminded one of some brilliant portrait painted by a master-hand.

Esther would have been surprised could she have known the thought in June’s mind at that moment.

“She’s just sweet! I don’t know when I’ve seen a face I admire more. Micky would adore her! She’s just the sort of woman he always raves about. I must ask him to tea to meet her one day.”

“There are heaps of other berths going besides Eldred’s, you know,” she said earnestly. “However, you must do as you like, of course.” She threw away another unfinished cigarette. “Do you think we are going to be friends?” she asked.

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“I am sure we are,” Esther said. She really did think so; she had never met any one in the least like June Mason before. She began to feel glad that she had come to this house. It was much more expensive than the Brixton Road, certainly, but it was well worth it, even if only because she had met this quaint little woman.

It was nearly seven o’clock before she thought of going back to her own room, and then it was only the chiming of a clock on the shelf that roused her.

“Nearly seven!” She started up in dismay. “I had no idea it was so late. I am sorry for having stayed so long.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry for,” June declared. “You may go shares with this room if you like. I’m out so much, it isn’t used half the time. Think it over, will you?”

Esther flushed nervously.

“It’s awfully kind of you; I should love to, but I couldn’t afford it. I’m really paying more money now than I ought to. I want to save, too——”

Miss Mason laughed.

“For the wedding! Lucky girl! I hope you’ll ask me to come and see you married—and I hope he’s very nice,” she added.

“He is,” said Esther eagerly. “And he’s very handsome,” she added shyly.

But Miss Mason was not impressed.

“I don’t care a fig if a man is handsome or not,” she said bluntly. “If he’s just manly and straightforward and kind, that’s all I expect him to be. Now look here—we have dinner at half-past seven in this establishment. It’s only supper really, but we all put on our best blouses—if we’ve got any—and call it dinner. I’ll call for you on the way down and we’ll go in together. I’ll tell Mrs. Elders you are going to share my table, if you like; it’s deadly dull sitting alone.”

“I should like to sit with you very much,” Esther said eagerly. “But I really haven’t got a ‘best’ blouse.” She glanced down at the plain white silk shirt she wore; it had been washed many times, and had lost its first freshness. 54

“Come down as you are, then,” Miss Mason urged, “and I will too! I hate changing. This yellow rag is good enough for the old tabbies we get here.”

Esther went half-way down the stairs and came back.

“Charlie—I’ve forgotten Charlie.”

“Charlie can stay where he is till bedtime,” June declared. “You can come up and fetch him then. Hurry, or you’ll be late.”

Esther went down to her room, feeling more light-hearted than she had done for a long time.

As she unpacked her boxes and tidied her hair she could hear June Mason moving about upstairs, singing cheerily.

“I’m going to like her—I’m going to like her awfully,” she told herself. She hurried to be ready in time, but the rather unmelodious dinner-bell had clanged through the house twice before June came to the door.

“You’ve unpacked, then?” she said. She looked round the small room approvingly. “I can see you’re one of the tidy ones,” she said. “I’m not; I wish I were. However, we can’t all be the same. Are you ready?”

She took Esther’s arm and they went downstairs together.

“Every one knows you’re coming,” June said as they neared the dining-room. “Every one always knows everything that goes on here. Don’t take any notice if they stare a lot; they must stare at something, poor darlings. I’ll tell you who they all are and all about them.”

The dining-room was a long, narrow sort of room that looked as if it once had been two rooms recently thrown into one; the floor was covered with slippery green linoleum, and there was a long table running almost the length of the room, with a few smaller ones on either side.

A grey-haired woman with pebble glasses stood at the head of the long table; Esther recognised her as the proprietress, Mrs. Elders.

She said good-evening to Esther and stared frigidly at June, as if she did not like to see the two girls together. She did not approve of the little face cream lady, though she was careful never to say so, as June was one of her best paying propositions.

Esther was glad when they reached their own table; glad, too, that she was more or less out of the way of curious glances.

The dinner was plain, but infinitely superior to the fare she had had to put up with in the Brixton Road.

“Do you have all your meals here?” she asked June presently.

“No—only breakfast and supper—and not always supper. I go out with friends

sometimes. Every one hasn't given me up just because my family have. But the food is quite good here. They're rather too fond of rice and stewed apples; but it might be worse. Turn round presently and look at the man behind you with the grey hair. Isn't he handsome? We call him the colonel, though I don't believe he's a colonel at all. He's a dear, but he always complains about everything. I know he gives notice regularly on Saturday morning and takes it back again on Saturday night. Mrs. Elders would think he wasn't well if he missed giving her notice."

She laughed, and turning in her chair spoke to a young man who was sitting alone at one of the smaller tables behind her.

"Is your cough better?" she asked. "I'm going to give you some special stuff to-night for it. No, it isn't at all nasty." She turned back to Esther. "May I introduce Mr. Harley—he's the most interesting person in the whole house. He writes stories and things, Mr. Harley, this is Miss Shepstone—a great friend of mine."

Harley bowed. He was pale, delicate-looking young man with fine dark eyes.

"You never told me that you knew Miss Shepstone," he said to June.

"I didn't know her till this afternoon," she answered promptly; "but I make friends quickly, as you know."

"You'll like Harley," she told Esther presently in an undertone. "He's very clever, but so delicate, poor boy! He ought to live in the country instead of in London. He's the sort of person I should love to help if I were rich."

"It must be wonderful to be rich," Esther said. There was a little flush in her cheeks; she was really enjoying herself. "It's the dream of my life to have enough money to be able to do anything I like," she added earnestly. "Just for a month! If I could be really rich just for one month I wouldn't mind going back to being poor again."

Miss Mason said "Rubbish!" briskly. "Money can't buy happiness, my dear, and don't you forget it. My people think it can, and lots of other people think the same. It only shows what fools they are. It was the money my people couldn't get over when I declined to marry Micky Mellowes...." She made a little wry face. "I remember my mother coming into my room one night in her dressing-gown—poor soul!—when she heard I'd told Micky there was nothing doing, and saying tragically: 'June, you must be mad—stark, staring mad! Why, the man's as rich as Cræsus!'"

"Rich!" Esther was conscious of an odd little sinking at her heart. "Is Mr.

Mellowes rich, then?" she asked constrainedly.

Miss Mason was helping herself to a pat of butter. She held it poised for a moment on the end of her knife while she answered—

"Rich? I should think he is! He's one of the richest men in London."

"One of the richest men in London!—but he——" Esther had been going to add "But he told me that he was poor;" she only just checked the words in time.

June nodded.

"He's the despair of all the match-making mammas," she said lightly. "Over thirty, he is, and still a bachelor! I'm not sure if he isn't on the verge of being caught now, but you never can tell! With a little luck he may escape—she isn't good enough for him, anyway. Have you finished? I'm dying for a cigarette, and we aren't allowed to smoke here. Come up to my room and I'll make you some coffee; the stuff they give us here isn't fit to drink."

She pushed back her chair and rose, and Esther followed.

She kept her eyes down as she walked the length of the room; the colour rose in her cheeks as she realised how every one was staring at her. The colonel, whom June had declared was not a colonel at all, rose and held the door open for them to pass out.

June chuckled as they went upstairs.

"You've made an impression, my dear! It isn't often he does that for any one." She slipped an arm through Esther's. "Why are you frowning so? Have I said anything to annoy you?"

Esther laughed.

"Of course not. I was only thinking.... Do you—do your friends ever come here to see you?"

She was thinking of Micky Mellowes, and wondering if he ever came to the boarding-house, and if so, why he had not told her that he knew somebody living here. After all, if he had deceived her in one instance he would do so in many others—she felt a curious sense of hurt pride; why had he gone out of his way to tell her he was a poor man, when all the time——?

"To tell you the truth," June said frankly, "none of my friends know where I am living. Call it false pride if you like, but there you are. I have all my letters, except business ones, sent to my club—I belong to an unpretentious club—I'll

take you there some day—and not even Micky knows that I live here. You see, when I flew in the face of providence, otherwise my noble family, they stopped my allowance, so as I'm entirely self-supporting, I had to be careful and live inexpensively, so I came here. And I'm very comfortable. If I want to meet any of my friends we meet out somewhere. I think it's better; it leaves me quite free....”

They were back in her room again now, and Charlie had looked up with one eye from his mauve cushion, and purred, by way of a greeting.

June lit a cigarette and rushed about in pursuit of the coffee-pot. All her movements were quick. She seemed to breathe life and energy.

Esther walked over to the fireplace, and found herself looking at Micky's photograph.

After all, he was just like all the other men she had ever known; apparently none of them could be simple and sincere; she supposed it had been his way of condescending to her, to pretend that he was poor and in similar circumstances to herself; perhaps he had guessed that she would never have allowed him to pay for her supper or tea, or have talked to her as he had done, if she had known him to be a rich man.

She need never see him again, that was one thing; her heart hardened as she met the frankness of his pictured eyes; he was not as honest as he looked.

She had mistaken condescension for kindness. She bit her lip with mortification as she recalled the confidence she had made to him only that afternoon. He was probably laughing at it now, and no doubt would repeat all she had said to his friends as a good joke.

She went to her own room as soon as she had had the coffee. She made the excuse that she was tired, but when she went upstairs she sat down on the side of the bed and made no effort to undress. A sort of shadow seemed to have fallen on her spirits. She felt mortified that Micky should so deliberately have lied to her; her cheeks burned as she thought of the despair she had been in last night when she met him. She hoped she would never see him again.

She looked round the little room with angry eyes. If only Fate had set her feet in sunnier paths. She looked at the plain furniture and cheap carpet; the wallpaper was hideous; there was a frightful oleograph of two Early Victorian women with crinolines and ringlet curls hanging over the mantelpiece. They both looked smug and self-satisfied. There was an enlarged photograph of a bald-headed man

wearing a Masonic apron on another wall. He was fat and had his right hand plastered carefully along a chair-back to bring into prominence a large signet ring. Esther looked at him and shivered. She felt utterly alone and cut off from the world. She longed for Raymond Ashton with all her soul. She hated Micky Mellowes because his kindly condescension had made her feel her position more acutely now she knew him to be what he was.

In spite of the new friend she had made in June Mason she felt lonely and unwanted; she began to cry like a child, as she sat there on the side of the iron bedstead; the tears ran down her cheeks and she made no effort to wipe them away.

She wanted to be happy so badly, and it seemed as if she never was to be happy. The elation that had come to her when she read Micky's letter that morning had faded miserably; after all, what was a letter when it was a real, living personality she wanted, and not mere words?

Downstairs she could hear June Mason moving about and singing; she at least was happy with her little mauve pots and her cheery optimism.

Esther cried all the time she undressed; she crept into bed sobbing miserably, like a child who sleeps at a boarding-school for the first time.

CHAPTER V

Micky passed three days before he made any attempt to see Esther Shepstone again; days that seemed like a month at least, and during which he lost his appetite and forgot to smoke.

That she did not particularly care if she saw him again or not, he was miserably sure. She had no thoughts for any one but Ashton. He felt as if he could not settle to anything. On the third morning Marie Deland rang him up. He had told her many times that her voice on the telephone cheered him, but to-day it made him frown.

He tried to answer her cheery "That you, Micky?" as cheerily, but he knew it was a failure.

"What's the matter?" she asked quickly. "Aren't you well? Or are you cross?"

There was a hint of laughter in her voice. She had never known Micky cross; he was always the cheeriest of mortals.

Micky grabbed at the excuse she offered him.

"I've got a brute of a headache," he said.

"Poor old boy!" The pretty, sympathetic voice irritated him. "Come out for a walk; it will do you good."

"Thanks—thanks awfully, but I don't think it would. I'm a perfect bear—you'd hate me. Some other time."

There was a little pause. Micky could have kicked himself as he remembered on what terms they had parted. It was not her fault that a miracle had happened since then to metamorphose the whole world. He supposed uncomfortably that she was just the same as she had been when he last saw her. He knew she must be wondering why he had stayed away so long. He tried to soften his words.

"I'll look in to-night, if I may. Sorry to be such a bear."

She answered rather dispiritedly that it was all right, that she was sorry he felt ill.

It was a relief when she rang off. He took his hat and went off to call on Esther.

He felt that he could settle to nothing till he had seen her again; there was a curious jealousy in his heart about Ashton; he would have given anything he possessed to be able to disillusion her, but knew it was impossible without hopelessly compromising himself.

It was a bitter disappointment to find that she was out when he reached the boarding-house; his face fell absurdly when he turned and walked away.

He wondered if she really was out, or only out to him.

After a moment he laughed at himself. A few days ago he had not known there was such a person as Esther Shepstone in the world, and yet now here he was, consumed with jealousy because she was not in when he called.

He took a taxicab back to the West End; he walked about for half an hour staring aimlessly into shop windows, then went back to his rooms. He could not understand his extraordinary restlessness; he had only once before felt anything like it in all his life, and that had been the first time he ever backed a horse, and was waiting a wire from the course to say if the brute had won.

He recalled the fever of impatience that had consumed him then, and laughed; after all, it had been nothing compared with this.

Driver came into the room.

"If you please, sir, Miss Mason has been on the 'phone. She said would I ask you to meet her for tea."

Micky did not look enthusiastic; he liked June awfully, but to-day every one and everything seemed a bore.

"Tea! Where?" he asked vaguely.

"Miss Mason said that you would know, sir; the same place as usual."

"Oh, all right!"

Micky looked at the clock and sighed. After all, June was always amusing; he went off almost cheerfully to the unpretentious club of which she had spoken to Esther. He had to wait in the lobby while a boy in buttons fetched June to him. She came downstairs looking very much at home, and smoking the inevitable cigarette. It was one of June Mason's charms that she always managed to look at home wherever she was.

She had taken off her coat, but she wore a green hat with a gold ornament that

suiting her to perfection, set on her dark head at rakish angle.

"I began to think you were not coming," she said.

She gave him her left hand, and Micky squeezed it in friendly fashion. They went upstairs together to a small tea-room, which was just now deserted save for two waitresses who were giggling together over a newspaper.

June walked over to a table in the window, and Micky followed.

He had been here with her scores of times before, and the two waitresses smiled at one another knowingly; they were quite sure that this was romance.

Micky was sitting with an elbow on the table, absently smoothing the back of his head; he was wishing it was Esther sitting opposite to him; he looked up with a little start when June spoke to him.

"What's up, Micky? I've never seen you looking so depressed."

He roused himself with an effort.

"Oh, nothing, nothing! It's the beastly weather, I expect."

She looked at him quizzically with her queer eyes.

"I shouldn't have thought the weather would depress you," she said. "However, if you say it does——"

He shook himself together.

"I'm not depressed any longer," he declared. "Well, and how are you? And how is the swindle?" It was Micky's pet joke to call June's invention the "swindle," though in his heart he was almost as proud of it as she was.

She laughed.

"It's very well, thank you; but that isn't what I want to talk to you about to-day. Micky, would you like to come to tea with me one afternoon?"

Micky stared.

"Tea! Haven't I come to tea with you to-day?"

"Silly! I don't mean here; I mean where I live. It's a boarding-house. I dare say you'll hate it, but it's really quite a nice place, and beggars can't be choosers, anyway. I've got a very comfortable sitting-room and most of my own furniture, and I can give you a good cup of tea, or anything else, if you prefer it."

"I shall be delighted," Micky looked puzzled. "But isn't this rather a breaking of

rules? It's not so very long ago that you made me swear never to try and find out where you lived. I thought it was all to be a deadly secret."

"So it was, but I've decided to admit you. I know you're safe, and, Micky, wouldn't you like to meet the dearest, prettiest, most attractive little girl...."

Micky moved his chair back in mock alarm.

"June! You're not turning match-maker! If you are, I give you fair warning that our friendship will have to end once and for ever. I'll put up with a lot from you, but not this—not...."

"Don't be an idiot!" said June calmly. "There isn't the slightest fear! And anyway——" she added, with a half sigh, "she's engaged, so it wouldn't be any good. But I want you to help her.... Oh, I know I'm always bringing you foundlings to help and look after, but you've got such a big heart—and such a big banking account," she added audaciously.

"Well, go on——" he said resignedly. "Who is the foundling this time, and what am I to do?"

Micky laughed.

"She's a darling," June said warmly. "I've only known her for four days—she lives in the same house. I took a fancy to her from the first moment I saw her. No, it was before that—it was when I first heard her name...."

Micky raised his brows.

"What a creature of impulse! My dear, you'll burn your fingers badly some day."

"And when I do," said Miss Mason sharply, "I shan't come crying to you for sympathy; however ... Well, she's poor! she's one of those horribly poor, frightfully proud people whom it's impossible to help. I've tried all ways! I asked her to go shares with my sitting-room, and she said she couldn't afford it; she'll hardly let me give her a cup of tea or coffee for fear I should think she is sponging on me. She seems most frightfully alone in the world. She says she engaged to a man, but he's abroad, and I'm sure he's not nice, anyway. He's only written to her once since I've known her, at all events, and this morning when there wasn't a letter, I know she went back to her room and cried. I knocked at the door, but she wouldn't let me in."

She paused, and looked at Micky for sympathy.

He half smiled; he knew how enthusiastic June always was about everything.

“Well, and what do you want me to do for this damsel in distress?” he asked gently.

“I want you to get her a berth somewhere,” he was told promptly. “No, it’s no use saying you can’t! My dear man, you must know scores of people who’d take her in. She thought she was fixed up all right, but now it appears that the people she was with before haven’t got a vacancy for her, and so that’s knocked on the head. She told me that she’s have to just take the first thing that came along. I don’t believe she’s hardly got a shilling to her name. I offered to take her into partnership with me. I said we’d go travelling together for my beauty cream, but she wouldn’t hear of it.... She’s so proud!”—and here a sound of tears crept into June Mason’s voice. “I ask you, Micky, what can be done with any one like that?”

Micky shrugged his shoulders.

“If she’ll take anything that comes along, she ought to get a job pretty soon,” he said laconically. “I’ll speak to a man I know—can she write a decent hand and all that sort of thing?”

“Of course she can! But I want a good berth, mind you! I’ve never been so fond of anybody as I am of her. She’s awfully worried about this horrid man she’s engaged to. She doesn’t say much about him, but this morning she said that there didn’t seem to be anything to live for, and her eyes looked so sad....”

Micky smiled at her serious face.

“You’d make an eloquent appeal in a court of law,” he said. He took a pencil from his pocket and an envelope. “Give me her name and address, and I’ll see what I can do. I don’t promise anything, mind you, but I’ll do what I can....”

“You’re a dear,” said June warmly. “I know you were the one to come to. I’m quite sure when you’ve seen Esther you’ll ... why, what’s the matter, Micky?”

Micky had looked up sharply. His face had paled a little.

“What name did you say?” he asked. He never knew how he managed to control his voice. His heart seemed to be thumping in his throat. “What name did you say?” he asked again, with an effort. “I did not catch it—”

“It’s Esther,” said June, “Esther Shepstone.”

CHAPTER VI

Micky's pencil jerked suddenly, sending an aimless scrawl across the paper; for an instant he stared at his companion with blank eyes. Fortunately June Mason was too intent on the relighting of her cigarette to have any attention to spare for him; she went on talking as she puffed.

"Yes...."—puff—"that's her name...." Another puff. "Isn't it a change from your eternal Violets and Dorothys?"... Puff, puff. "Oh, bother!" She threw the cigarette into an empty grate behind her and prepared to give Micky her undivided attention once more. "Well, what do you think about it? You haven't written her name down. Esther Shepstone, I said.... Write it down," she commanded.

Micky obeyed at once. He was beginning to recover himself a little.

"I shall be able to help her all right," he said quickly. "Only, of course, you won't let her know I'm mixed up in it at all; she'd hate it if she knew, she...."

"How do you know she would?" June demanded with suspicion.

Micky met her eyes squarely.

"Well, you said she was proud or something, didn't you? And anyway I don't want to pose as a blessed philanthropist; I'm not one either, but I'll see what I can do for—for this new friend of yours. You say she's poor?"

"Horribly poor, I'm afraid," said June with a sigh. "Micky, it's rather pathetic—somebody sent her some money—not very much, but still, it was money she evidently didn't expect. I've got a sort of idea that it was from this man she's supposed to be engaged to——"

"Why do you say 'supposed'—she is engaged to him, isn't she?"

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June shrugged her shoulders.

"She says so, and she wears a ring, but I've a sort of instinctive feeling that there's something funny behind it. Anyway, I know she's not happy; but don't interrupt. About this money—well, it was partly my fault! I persuaded her to go

and buy herself some clothes—she had such a few things, poor child! And I even went with her and she bought a frock and a new coat....”

“Yes,” said Micky eagerly; he was glad she had bought a new coat; he remembered how thin hers had been on that memorable night, and how she had shivered in the cold night air.

“She was as pleased as a child with a new toy,” Miss Mason went on. “She brought them all up to my room to show me when they came home, and we both tried them on ... and you’ve no idea how sweet she looked,” she added with enthusiasm. “Of course, I suppose this is boring you horribly,” she said deprecatingly.

“No,” said Micky honestly. “It’s not boring me at all, I promise you.”

“Well, anyway, she got the clothes, and now the place where she was before say they can’t take her back—it’s Eldred’s, the petticoat shop. I don’t suppose you know it, but——”

“I know it very well,” said Micky.

“Oh, do you?” She laughed. “Well, they either won’t or can’t take her back, and now she feels that she ought not to have spent the money on the new frock and coat, and this morning she told me that she was afraid she would have to leave Elphinstone Road, as it was more than she could afford.” June’s eyes flashed. “Micky, what can one do with people who are poor and proud? It’s a most difficult combination to fight. I blundered in and offended her by offering to lend her some money, and, of course, she wouldn’t hear of it, and there you are!”

She sighed, and leaned back in her chair despondently.

“Have a cake,” said Micky absently; he pushed the plate across to her. “The ones with the white sugar are nice.”

Miss Mason ignored him.

“If that’s all the interest you take——” she said offendedly.

Micky started.

“My dear girl, I’m full of interest—chock full to the brim! But we came here for tea, so we may as well eat something while I try to think of a plan.” He wrinkled his forehead. “Of course,” he ejaculated, “that chap—what did you say his name was?”

“What chap? Oh, the fiancé! I don’t know; she hasn’t even let me see his

photograph yet; but she says he writes dreams of letters. I haven't seen them either, of course."

"He may send her some more money. After all, you say it's only four days since she heard from him. That's not very long; men are always rotten letter writers."

Miss Mason looked wise.

"Four days is a long time when you're in love," she said. "If you were engaged to Esther Shepstone I'll bet you'd write to her every day. You're just the kind. Oh, I know what you're going to say—that you're cut out for a bachelor, and rubbish like that, but you wait and see, Micky—it's never too late."

"I've never written a love-letter in my life," Micky declared indignantly. "And, anyway——"

June leaned across the table and looked at him with accusing eyes.

"Never? On your word of honour, Micky?"

Micky laughed and coloured.

"Well, perhaps—once!" he admitted. "But that's beside the point, isn't it?... I'll think things over and write to you."

"Yes, but soon, Micky, soon! It's not a case where you can sit down with your feet on the mantelpiece and give yourself a week to turn things over in your mind. I want to know at once, to-morrow—to-night, if possible. I know what Esther is—she'll be gone before I can turn round, and I should hate her to go. I haven't got many friends, and I do feel that she and I are going to be real friends—great friends ... I don't know when I've taken such a fancy to anybody——"

"You don't know how glad I am to hear you say that," said Micky. His eyes were shining. Then he realised that he had displayed rather unnecessary warmth and hastened to amend his words. "I always said that what you wanted was a real woman friend," he added more quietly.

June was drawing on her gloves; she had very white hands and beautifully-kept finger-nails, and she was very proud of them.

"Never mind me," she said briskly. "You bustle about and find a post for Esther, and I'll love you for ever. Are we ready?"

She rose and gathered up her various belongings. Micky declared that she was always laden with small, oddly-shaped parcels.

“Samples, my dear man, samples!” she said briskly when Micky asked if he might not be allowed to carry some. “And they’re much too precious to risk you dropping any.”

“There’s just one stipulation,” Micky said as he followed her downstairs again. “You’re not to tell Miss Shepstone anything about me—I’m going to be very strict on this subject. Will you promise?”

“Bless your heart, yes—and if you come to tea one day——”

“Oh, I don’t think I’ll come to tea,” Micky said hastily. “I should only feel rotten—self-conscious and all the rest of it, even if I was quite sure she didn’t know anything—not that there’s anything to know yet,” he added quickly. “I may not be able to help her.”

Miss Mason laughed.

“Oh, you’ll help her right enough,” she said breezily. “I know you.”

She dismissed him when they reached the street. “No, I don’t want you to come with me; I’ve got some business to see to and you’d only be a nuisance.” She gave his hand a squeeze. “Good-bye, and thanks ever so much Micky. You’ll write to me—or wire?”

“As soon as there is anything to report.”

He raised his hat and turned away, and June dived across the road, perilously near to a motor-omnibus, clutching her samples jealously to her heart.

“It’ll be all right now,” she told herself, with a sense of comfort. “Everything’s always all right as soon as Micky gets hold of it.”

A soliloquy which made it seem all the more curious that she should have hesitated to trust herself to him for life. Perhaps, as she had told Esther, she cared too much for him to take the risk for them both. He had told her candidly that he did not care for her as a man should care for the woman he marries.

“And he makes a ripping friend! Ripping!” she told herself as she scurried along to interview another beauty specialist about the “swindle,” as Micky politely called it.

CHAPTER VII

Micky went straight home when he left June. What he had heard about Esther had disturbed him very much. He loathed to think that she was unhappy.

The question was, how best to help her, and quickly. He was thankful she had made a friend of June. June was one of the best, the loyalest pal a man could ever have.

But, as June had said, Esther was too proud to take help unless it was most tactfully offered. He racked his brains in vain. It was a sickening thought that, with all his wealth, he could give her nothing. Even the few paltry pounds she had unconsciously taken from him would have been indignantly rejected had she known who was the donor.

With sudden impulse he sat down and wrote to her. After all, she had accepted his friendship; there was no reason on earth why he should not write and ask to be allowed to see her again. He wrote most carefully lest she should discover some likeness to the letter he had written to replace Ashton's.

Might he take her out to dinner one night? Any night would suit him. And did she like theatres? He had a friend who sometimes gave him a couple of seats for a show. He would arrange for any night she liked to mention.

He thought that was a neat stroke of diplomacy—of course, she would not think he could afford to buy seats, and anyway it was true that he had a friend who often gave him boxes and things—he would have to be careful that Phillips did not send along a box this time though.

He ended up by hoping formally that she and Charlie were quite well and comfortably settled into their new home, and he signed himself: "Yours very sincerely, Micky Mellowes."

When he had finished the letter, he realised that he had written it on his own heavily embossed writing paper, so he had to dig Driver up and borrow a cheap sheet of unstamped grey paper and write it all out again. Then he went out and posted it himself.

As soon as it had gone he wished he had sent it by hand; it meant such a deuce of a time to wait for a reply; he calculated that he could not possibly hear before to-morrow night.

But in this he was pleasantly disappointed, for his own letter reached the boarding-house in Elphinstone Road that night, and Esther's reply was waiting for him with the kidney and bacon in the morning.

Micky's heart began to thump when he saw the letter beside his plate; he had never seen Esther's handwriting, but he knew by instinct that it was hers. He scanned the first lines eagerly, and his face fell.

“DEAR MR. MELLOWES,—Thank you for your letter. I am sorry, but I cannot come out with you, either to dinner or to a theatre.—

Yours very truly, ESTHER SHEPSTONE.”

Micky's face was pathetic in its disappointment. He read the few curt lines through again and again, vainly trying to find something more behind the unmistakable refusal, but there it was in all its bald decision.

She did not want to go out with him any more; she did not care if she saw him again or not.

Micky left his breakfast, he no longer had any appetite. He had never had such a snub in all his life—out of his disappointment anger was rising steadily; she had no right to snub him like that without a reason.

Driver, coming into the room at that moment, saw the untouched breakfast and halted midway between door and table to stare at his master.

Micky stood with his hands deep thrust into his pockets, glowering into the fire. Driver advanced a step.

“Beg pardon, sir—but wasn't you well?” he asked stoically.

Micky began to swear, then his mood changed and he laughed.

“Yes, I'm all right—” He hesitated. “Driver, would you like to go to Paris?”

Driver raised wooden eyes.

“Anywhere you wish, sir,” he answered, in his usual expressionless voice. “When were you thinking of starting, sir?”

“I'm not thinking of starting at all,” said Micky. “I want you to go—alone! You've been often enough now not to get lost. Do you think you can manage it?”

“Yes, sir, if you think you can manage without me here.”

There was the faintest touch of amazement in the man’s even voice; he knew how helpless Micky was, or pretended to be—knew how he hated being left to do for himself.

But Micky only laughed.

“Oh, I can manage all right. I shall probably go away somewhere myself for a few days. Besides, you won’t be gone long——” He paused.

“No, sir,” said Driver.

Micky was leaning against the mantelshelf; his eyes were all crinkled up into a laugh as if he had heard some excellent joke which he was about to repeat.

“No, you won’t be gone long,” he said again. “A couple of days, I should think. You can put up at the hotel we stayed at last time; they’ll look after you, and the manager speaks English.”

“Yes, sir——” Driver hesitated. “And—what were you wanting me to do when I get there, sir?” he asked, after a moment.

Micky clung to his joke for an instant longer, then suddenly he let it go.

“I want you to post a letter for me,” he said.

Driver was too well trained to show amazement at Micky’s instructions, but just for a fractional second he forgot to answer with his usual “Yes, sir,” and stood immovable. Then he recovered himself, and said it twice with hurried apology.

“And am I to go at once, sir?”

“To-morrow morning will do,” Micky said. “You can go by the first boat train.” He looked at the man anxiously. He had a sort of uncomfortable feeling that Driver must be thinking he was not quite right in the head. After a moment he dismissed him.

Then Micky went over to his desk and rummaged amongst the many papers and letters there till he found a sheet of paper embossed with the name of an hotel in Paris. It had not been used, and Micky heaved a sigh of relief.

He went to bed late that night. He forgot all about his promise to go round to the Delands. He spent the time writing letters and tearing them up again till the wastepaper basket was full; then he carried it over to the fireplace and burnt every scrap of paper it contained.

There were two finished letters lying on his desk. One was sealed and addressed, but not stamped, and the other was written on a sheet of Driver's plain notepaper, which Micky folded and unfolded with a sort of nervous dissatisfaction.

Its contents were not very long, but they had taken a good deal of composing.

“DEAR MISS SHEPSTONE,—I received your note in reply to my letter and cannot help saying that I feel very hurt at your decided refusal to allow me to take you out. I thought we were to be friends? Have I been so unfortunate as to offend you? If so, I can only assure you that it has been utterly unintentional. Won't you let me see you, if only for a moment? I will meet you at any time or place.— Yours sincerely, MICKEY MELLOWES.”

He gave a dissatisfied growl as he finished reading it. Not a very eloquent epistle. There was so much more which he wanted to say, but did not dare to. He folded it again and thrust it into an envelope; then he addressed it and laid it beside that other on his desk, comparing the two handwritings with complacency.

Not in the least alike! Nobody would ever suspect that they had been written by the same person.

He rang for Driver and gave him the unstamped envelope. “This is what I want you to post in Paris. Mind you put enough stamps on. You'd better have it weighed.”

“Yes, sir.” Driver looked at the other letter. “And—is that for the post too, sir?”

Micky put his hand behind him with a guilty gesture.

“No; I'll post that myself,” he said, and he went out then and there into the cold night and did so.

As it dropped into the letter-box Micky looked up at the stars and sighed.

What the dickens could he have done to make her so distant? At any rate he would let her see that he was not to be so easily snubbed. If she didn't answer his letter he would go boldly round to Elphinstone Road, and stay there till he saw her.

He was half way to bed before he remembered that he had promised to go to the Delands that evening. He stopped short with his necktie half undone and swore.

What the deuce would they think of him?

Well, he would have to plead that headache still, that was all, and if Marie chose to cut up rough.... Micky felt mean because he rather hoped that she would. He knew that he wanted their friendship to cease, but, man-like, he did not altogether like having to take the initiative. Marie was a nice little girl, and if it hadn't been for that relative of hers dying on New Year's Eve—well, he would probably have been engaged to her by this time.

He went to bed feeling miserable.

Driver had just left the house to catch the boat train the following morning when June Mason rang Micky up.

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“Any news for me?” she demanded. “I hate worrying you so soon, but Esther’s given notice. She’s told Mrs. Elders that she can’t afford to stay on. I nearly shook her this morning. I asked her to let me help her for the time being. I even said that I would take five per cent. interest on the hateful money if she was so abominably proud, and she laughed! She cried the next minute and said I was much too kind to her, but she wouldn’t listen. What have you done?”

“Everything,” said Micky promptly. “In a couple of days—”

“My good man, that’s much too long to wait.”

“It’s the best I can do,” said Micky rather shortly. “And you’ll find it’s a good best if you’ll be patient.”

He heard the sigh she gave.

“Honest Injun!” he said seriously.

“Oh, very well. If you let me down, Micky——”

“You won’t be let down,” Micky said.

June went back to Elphinstone Road with a heavy heart.

She was very thorough in her friendships, and it really seemed a terrible thing to her that Esther would not accept help.

She felt so genuinely fond of the girl herself that she could not understand the feeling of affection and confidence not being reciprocated; she went up to her room and tucked herself into the big armchair amongst the mauve cushions and smoked innumerable cigarettes. Charlie was asleep by the fire; he found his way upstairs now without invitation; he was beginning to get quite respectable-looking; he had lost his wild, scared look, and even his purr had taken on a sleekier, smoother sound.

June stared at him for some time, then suddenly she got up and went downstairs.

She knocked at Esther’s door, but there was no answer, and she went back to her own room dejectedly.

If only Esther were not so proud they might have such good times together! If only Esther had a little money and could go shares with this room; but what was 77 the good of wishing? She hurled one of the mauve cushions across the room, and after that she felt better.

She went down to lunch because she hoped Esther would be there, but she was

not. The long room was rather empty, and June ate her cold meat and pudding hurriedly and went back upstairs.

It was getting dusk when she heard Esther come in; she waited eagerly, but the footsteps did not come on to her door. June threw another cushion across the room to keep the other company; it was her chief vent for anger or irritation.

“Confounded pride,” she said under her breath. She paced up and down for some minutes, then she caught Charlie up from his cushion and went downstairs to Esther’s room with him in her arms.

Her knock was answered immediately and Esther stood there in the doorway.

June spoke without looking at her.

“I’ve brought Charlie down—I thought if he stayed up in my room any longer you’d be wanting to pay me for his board and lodging.”

She thrust the cat into Esther’s arms and turned away.

She was feeling very sore; hers was such a generous nature that she could not understand why Esther could not see how glad she would have been to help her; she went back to her own room and slammed the door.

A moment later she was sorry for what she had done; twice she went half way down the stairs to apologise, then came back again.

“Do her good,” she told herself snappishly. “I’ve no patience with such silly pride, and as for you, my boy,” she stopped and shook her fist at Micky’s photograph, “if you don’t buck up and find her something....”

The two days dragged away. June purposely avoided Esther; she never went into the dining-room to meals, and Esther never came upstairs to June’s room; there was a kind of armed neutrality between them.

Charlie, too, seemed to have been told to keep away, and June missed his lusty purr in the silent room.

She shed a few tears into the mauve cushions; she thought Esther was wilfully misunderstanding her; she wrote to Micky on the second day with a great deal of emphasis.

“Are you dead or asleep? Here am I, just living to hear from you, and you leave me without a word! Esther and I haven’t spoken for two days, not that you care, of course. You don’t believe in my friendships, I know, but it’s a very serious thing for me. I’m more fond of that girl than I’ve ever been of anybody, and now

she'll walk out of this house and my life, and it will be your fault....”

She knew this was unfair to Micky, but she knew that Micky would understand—Micky always understood.

But Micky frowned over the letter. Did she imagine he enjoyed sitting down here doing nothing? What pleasure did she suppose he was getting out of the whole thing?

He threw the letter into the fire. Something ought to happen to-morrow, anyway. The last two days had seemed like months.

To kill time he went round to the Delands. He felt a little nervous as he reached the house. It seemed an unconscionable time since he was last here. When the butler opened the door he felt an insane desire to say, “Good evening, Jessop! You’re still here, then.” Such a decade ago it seemed since Jessop had been wont to admit him without question and take his hat and coat.

But Jessop did not smile to-night, and did not move back an inch when he saw who was the caller.

Micky was nonplussed.

“Er—anybody in?” he asked awkwardly.

“No, sir; the mistress and the young ladies are all out, sir....”

“Oh!” There was a little silence; then Micky turned on his heel. “Well, good-night!” he said jerkily.

He walked away, not sure if he was relieved or disappointed. A few yards down the road he almost cannoned into a man he knew.

“Hullo, Philips! Where are you off to?”

Philips stopped.

“Hullo, Micky! Not coming my way? I’m going to the Delands. What’s up with you? Haven’t seen you for a week or more.”

“I’ve been seedy,” Micky said hurriedly. “And the Delands are out. I’ve just called there myself.”

“Eh?” Philips tried hard to see his face through the darkness. “Rot,” he said at last. “They’ve got a musical evening on—I had a special invite.”

Micky said nothing. This was a nasty blow; apparently the Delands were only “not at home” to him. Jove! he must have behaved caddishly. He walked on

feeling very subdued. Had he quite lost his wits, he wondered, that for the sake of a girl who would have none of him he was willing to offend all his old friends? He tried to look at his behaviour from Marie Deland's point of view. Yes, it must look pretty rotten, he was forced to admit.

He thought about it all the time he walked home. He asked himself honestly if this new game was worth the candle.

Esther loved another man.

Already she had shown him that she cared nothing for him or his friendship, and yet—yet— Micky set his teeth. He had never wanted anything really badly in all his life before, but now he wanted this girl.

"I'm not done yet, anyway," he told himself. "After all—let the best man win."

He felt that he had decided a question of great importance as he went back to his rooms; it was a pleasant surprise to find Driver there; Micky beamed.

"You've got back, then?"

"Yes, sir."

The man took Micky's hat and coat, and turned to go.

Micky stared.

"Everything all right?" he asked, with a touch of anxiety.

"Yes, sir."

"You posted the letter?"

"Yes, sir, and had it weighed...." There was a little pause.

"Is that all?" Micky asked. "Nothing else happened?"

The man raised his expressionless eyes.

"I should have got in this morning, sir, but we had a rough crossing, and I was ill—"

Micky smiled.

"Poor old Driver!—anything else?"

"Yes, sir—I met Mr. Ashton in Paris. He seemed very surprised to see me there without you, sir."

Micky's face changed; he had not counted on this.

“Good Lord!” he said. “You didn’t tell him you——?”

Driver raised his eyes.

“I never tell anybody anything, sir,” he said woodenly.

Micky breathed a sigh of relief.

“Good man.... He was alone, of course?”

“Alone at the hotel, but I saw him out driving twice with the same lady, sir.”

“You saw him out twice—driving with the same lady?” Micky echoed the man’s words vaguely. “All right—you can go.”

“Thank you, sir.” Driver departed, closing the door noiselessly.

Ashton had soon found consolation, Micky thought savagely. He wondered what Esther would say if she could know. What was Driver thinking about it all? Driver was safe as the Bank of England; but, all the same, it was not altogether pleasant to feel that he had had to give himself away to his valet.

He looked up at the clock. Past nine! So there would not be another post in to-night.

Esther had not answered his note, and two whole days had elapsed.

Micky began pacing the room. Why had she so suddenly thrown him over, he wondered miserably.

He could not imagine what he had done to offend her.

He hardly knew how the days had passed since New Year’s Eve. He had not visited any of his old haunts or seen any of his friends. It almost seemed as if he had opened the book of a new life and forgotten about the old.

She might have answered his letter. Dash it all! he wasn’t just a bounder who had spoken to her for his own amusement. He kicked a hassock out of his way and went to bed.

If he didn’t hear in the morning, he would risk it and go round to see her. At the worst she could only have the door shut in his face....

“And even then——” he told his reflection in the mirror fiercely, as he struggled with a stud. “Even then I’m not done—and I’ll show her that I’m not....”

June Mason was mixing perfume the following morning when a little knock came at her door.

She looked up from her work and listened; after a second she resumed her occupation briskly.

“Come in,” she said.

She did not raise her eyes when the door opened, though she knew quite well who had entered the room, and for a second Esther Shepstone stood on the threshold hesitatingly, then she spoke.

“May I come in?”

June Mason looked up with an exaggerated start; she was a picturesque figure at that moment in a big white overall, and with a scarf of her favourite mauve tied over her dark head.

She held a little phial in either hand, and there was a delicious faint smell of rose perfume in the room.

“You!” she said. “Gracious! I thought you were dead and buried long enough ago. Oh yes, come in.... You don’t mind me going on with my work, do you? I’m up to my eyes in it.... Sit down.”

But Esther stood where she was, the eagerness died out of her pretty face.

“I won’t stay if you’re busy,” she said. “I’ll come another time, but——” she hesitated. Across the room the eyes of the two girls met, and June Mason promptly put down the two little phials.

“Come in and apologise, and so will I,” she said heartily. “There!” She reached up—Esther was taller than she—and gave the younger girl a sounding kiss. “There! I don’t often kiss people, so you can consider yourself flattered.” She dragged forward a chair and pushed Esther into it. “Now, what do you want, and where’s that Charlie? You’ve no idea how I’ve missed him. No—you stay there, and I’ll go and fetch him up.”

She darted off, and returned a moment later with Charlie in her arms. There were yards of mauve ribbon lying on the table and she cut off a length and tied it in a bow round his neck; then she kissed his head and dropped him on to his cushion. “There! Now, we’re quite at home again,” she said. “And now, fire away and tell me why you’re here.”

She packed all the dishes and boxes on to a tray, put them out of sight behind a screen and came back to the fire.

“Do you like this perfume? It’s something new! I’m trying to blend it with white

rose. Isn't it gorgeous?"

"Beautiful!" said Esther. She consented to have her chin dabbed. "What are you making now?" she asked.

Miss Mason chuckled.

"Oh, I'm only experimenting, as Micky calls it," she said lightly. "We don't want to talk shop. You've got some news; I can see by your face that you have."

Esther laughed and flushed.

"Oh, I have," she said tremulously. "Such wonderful news."

"Humph!" said June drily. "From the young man, of course? Well, is he on his way home, and have you got to get a wedding dress in the next five minutes or something?"

"Oh no, it isn't anything like that," said Esther. There was a shade of regret in her voice. "But he's in Paris—he says he's not staying there, but he had to pay a business call."

June gave a rather unladylike sniff, but Esther was too engrossed to notice.

"He seems to have been very lucky," she went on. "He hadn't got very much money when he went away, but he's got some appointment now; he does not say what and...."—she gave a little excited laugh—"he says that he's going to send me £3 a week for as long as he is away.... Isn't it wonderfully good of him? I suppose I ought not to take it, but he says that if things had turned out as he hoped, we should have been married, and so ... you don't think it's wrong of me to take it, do you?" she asked anxiously.

June rose to her feet. She looked chagrined; she had been so sure that this man was a rotter, that it was a bit of a set-back to hear this news.

"You take it, my dear, and don't be a goose," she said promptly. "As he says, if you were his wife you'd take it, and as you're going to be married, it's quite the right thing if he's well off that he should help you! I hope you won't let your silly pride make you send it back; you'd only hurt his feelings."

"I wouldn't do that for anything," Esther said quickly. "But it's such a lot of money."

"Rubbish!" said June. "Why, Micky Mellowes wouldn't even stop to pick it up if he dropped it in the road."

"We are not all millionaires like Mr. Mellowes," Esther said sharply. "And he

ought to be ashamed of himself if he really wouldn't stop to pick it up."

June laughed.

"Don't you take things so literally, my dear," she said. "I know you don't like Micky, though you've never seen him, but I'm going to ask him here to tea one day, if he'll come——"

"I don't suppose he will," said Esther. "Elphinstone Road wouldn't be good enough for him, would it?"

June frowned.

"I don't like to hear you talk like that about Micky! It's not fair, when you don't know him. I tell you he's one of the best—and, anyway, as he's a friend of mine——"

Esther flushed.

"I'm sorry—I'd no right to have said anything about him at all; please forgive me."

"Oh, it's all right," June said laconically. "But he isn't a bit of a snob; he'd do anything in the world for anybody."

Esther glanced up at his portrait on the shelf. She felt a trifle ashamed of what she had said; after all, Micky had been good to her in his own way, even if his own way had been patronising.

"And so I shall stay on here," she said, after a moment. "And if you think you would still like me to share this room——"

June pounced upon her.

"You darling! It's too good to be true. Of course, I should love it! I'll go and tell old Mother Elders straight away; it will put her in a good temper for a month."

"She's out," Esther said quickly. "I went to tell her myself as soon as I got my letter.... It only came this morning." She coloured sensitively beneath June's quizzical eyes.

"And of course you've been devouring it ever since," June said. "Well, and very nice too! There's nothing to be ashamed of. I'll admit that I didn't think somehow that he could be a very nice sort of person, this young man of yours. No, I don't know why I thought so—just an idea of mine. I get hold of ideas like that. But I've changed my mind now; I'm sure he's a dear, or you'd never look so happy."

“I should love you to see him,” Esther said with enthusiasm. “I’m sure you would like him. I don’t know his people, of course—I suppose if they thought he cared for me they’d be angry—but it doesn’t really matter, and I know he doesn’t care at all for his mother...”

June looked up from stroking Charlie.

“Now, I wish you hadn’t said that,” she said frankly. “No man can be really nice who doesn’t love his own mother.”

Esther looked distressed.

“But she’s horrid!” she said eagerly. “He has told me how horrid she is to him—really she is—and as he’s her only son——” She stopped. “After all,” she went on, “there’s no law to make you like a woman just because you happen to be her son, is there?”

“It’s unnatural not to,” June answered shortly. “However, as neither of us know his mother, we’ll give him the benefit of the doubt. She may be a perfect old cat. Some women are.”

She wandered round the room to find a cigarette, and Esther sat looking into the fire.

She could not remember her own mother. But somehow she felt sure that, had she been living, she would have adored her.

She had never heard Raymond say anything nice of Mrs. Ashton—he had always spoken about her in a bitter, half sneering way.

She looked across to June timidly.

“Do you always judge people by what you call ‘instinct’?” she asked. “When I first knew you you told me that you felt sure you would like me before ever you saw me, and——”

“And I was right,” June said triumphantly. “I nearly always am right when I get an instinct about anything. Micky says it’s all rot!—there I am, talking about him again—it’s a habit, so don’t notice it! But even he has to admit how often I am right; I could give you dozens of instances.”

Esther did not pursue the subject; she was remembering how June had said that she had an “instinct” that Raymond was not nice.

“I think you’re the most original person I’ve ever met,” she said with a little smile.

June laughed.

“Eccentric, Micky says I am——” she answered, then broke off with a comical look of despair. “You really must excuse me for everlastingly dragging him in,” she apologised. “As I said before, it’s a habit—and there goes the dinner gong. Are we going to feed here to-day?”

Esther rose from the chair.

“I am,” she said. “And I’m hungry, so I do hope there’s something nice.”

They went down together.

“Curry,” said June, sniffing the air critically. “The colonel will be pleased; he’s always telling us how they used to make curry in India, poor old chap! Though I don’t think any of us really believe that he’s ever been there.”

But the colonel was not there.

“He’s ill,” so young Harley told the two girls as they sat down at their table. “I went up to see him this morning, and he really looks ill.”

“You don’t look in exactly rude health yourself,” said June in her blunt fashion. She noticed that Harley looked at Esther a great deal, and she made up her mind to tell him at the earliest opportunity that Esther was engaged. June scented romance everywhere.

“They are the first violets I have seen this year,” Esther was saying, looking at a little bunch the young man wore in his coat.

He took them out eagerly and laid them down beside her plate.

“Do have them, will you? I never wear flowers really, but a girl in the street begged me to buy them.”

Esther took them up eagerly.

“They are my favourite flowers,” she said. “And I haven’t had any given to me for—oh, for ever so long.”

It gave her a little pang to remember that Ashton had always brought her violets in the first days of their acquaintance. It was one of the many little attentions which he had gradually dropped.

“You’re not to let Mr. Harley fall in love with you, mind,” June said severely as they went upstairs after dinner. “He’s much too nice to be made unhappy—even by you,” she added affectionately.

Esther stared.

“Why, whatever do you mean?” she cried. “I never see him or speak to him, except at meal times.”

“I mean what I say,” June insisted. “Didn’t you see how he looked at you when you took his violets?”

Esther flushed with vexation.

“Why, what perfect nonsense!” she protested.

But June only laughed.

“Onlookers see most of the game,” she declared. “Aren’t you coming up to my room? Our room, I mean.”

“I’ve got to go out—I had an appointment at half-past two, but I’ll love to come to tea with you,” she added, seeing the disappointment in June’s face.

“Very well, then, four o’clock. But who is the appointment with? You won’t need to find a berth now. You’re a lady of leisure.”

“But I shall try all the same. I don’t mean to be lazy just because he’s so good to me. I shall save all I can. I went to an agency yesterday——”

“They’ll rob you,” June protested. “They always do. I know what agents are,” she added darkly.

Esther laughed.

But if she had hoped great things from her call that afternoon she was disappointed. The thin, aristocratic-looking person who owned the “Bureau,” as it was called, looked at her with coldly critical eyes, and said that she had no vacancies likely to suit her.

“But you told me to call,” Esther protested.

“Certainly; there might have been something,” was all the answer she received. “Call again to-morrow, if you please.”

Esther went out dispiritedly. There were so many girls of her own class and age in the bare waiting-room; she felt quite sure that they would all get berths before she had a chance.

She felt glad that she had June Mason to go back to. June was always sympathetic. She went straight upstairs to the sitting-room with the mauve cushions.

June opened the door before she had time to knock.

“I thought it was you. I heard your step. What’s the matter? You sounded dispirited as you came upstairs.”

Esther laughed.

“I believe you must have second sight, or whatever they call it. But you’re right this time; I am rather down on my luck. They haven’t anything at the agency to suit me. I——” She stopped, looking past June into the cosy room to where a man had just risen from a chair by the fire—a tall man—who looked across at her with eyes that were half-abashed, half-defiant. Micky Mellowes.

CHAPTER VIII

June introduced Micky and Esther with a sort of hurried self-consciousness. It was not by her invitation that Micky was here this afternoon, and the fact that she had asked him to help Esther embarrassed her.

“Mr. Mellowes—Miss Shepstone; you’ve both heard of each other, so I can leave you to entertain one another while I get tea.”

And she bolted out of the room.

Esther looked after her with angry eyes; she thought June might have stayed—she took a quick step forward to call her back, but Micky stopped her; he put a hand on the door above her head, shutting it fast.

“I’m going to speak to you, whether you like it or not,” he said.

She faced him angrily; she was very flushed.

“I don’t know what you mean. You’ve no right to speak to me like that. If Miss Mason has asked you here to meet me——”

“June didn’t know I was coming. She has no more idea than the dead that we have ever met before. I haven’t told her, and I don’t suppose you have—or will,” he added grimly. “However, as we are alone, will you tell me what I’ve done to offend you? It’s not fair to take me for a friend and then fling me over as if I were an old glove.... If I’ve annoyed you, the least you can do is to tell me how and give me a chance to explain.”

Esther had walked back to the fire and Mellowes followed her. He knew that he had only got a few moments, and he meant to make the most of them.

“You refuse to see me or to allow me to take you out,” he went on urgently. “And you haven’t even answered my last letter. If I have offended you——”

“You haven’t,” said Esther, as he paused. “I’m not at all offended.”

“Then why, in the name of all that’s holy——” he began again, in exasperation. She cut him short.

“You didn’t tell me the truth about yourself. You made out you were poor! You pretended to be some one quite different to what you are. You’ve a perfect right to, I suppose, if you wish, but I hate being deceived and treated like that. I suppose you think anything is good enough for me! Perhaps it is, but——”

Micky brought his fist down with a bang on the back of the big armchair.

“I give you my word of honour, Miss Shepstone, that what I said was only because it seemed the best way to make you trust me. I had absolutely no other reason for pretending to—to—be anything but what I am. I know you’d have gone off at a tangent if I’d said I was unfortunate enough to be rich, I know——”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“You didn’t even write to me from your real address—you just put a number.” She broke into an angry little laugh. “I suppose you thought I shouldn’t understand that a number can also be an expensive flat.”

Micky turned pale with anger.

“You’re deliberately trying to make out that I’m a bounder. It’s not fair—I don’t deserve it; and as to thinking anything good enough for you—I suppose you’d only take it as a fresh insult if I told you that there is nothing in the world I consider good enough for you.... I ... oh, what’s the good of arguing,” he broke out with sudden rage.

“It’s no good at all, and there’s nothing to argue about,” Esther said stiffly. She had taken off her gloves and was flattening them out nervously. “You offered me your friendship, and now I decline it. I suppose I am free to do so?”

“No,” said Micky violently, “you’re not ... I—I ...” He turned away sharply, realising with dismay how nearly he had blurted out the truth about Ashton. After a moment he spoke more quietly.

“It is pure chance that brought me here. I have known June Mason for years; we are old friends. She has no idea that I have ever seen you before, but I will tell her this moment if you wish it——”

She raised passionate eyes to his face.

“I will never forgive you as long as I live if you dare to,” she said stormily.

Micky frowned till his brows nearly met above his kind eyes.

“Whatever I say or offer to do is wrong, of course,” he said savagely. “If I had not offered to tell her, you would probably have said that I was ashamed of

knowing you ... oh, good Heavens! whatever have I said now?" he added as he saw the hot blood rush to her face.

He went over to her and tried to take her hand. "Do forgive me; I beg of you to forgive me—I'm a clumsy idiot—but you don't know how hurt I've felt about being turned down in this way."

"It's absurd to feel hurt—I haven't turned you down; I wish you wouldn't keep saying that I have. Why I—I hardly know you," she added with a little angry laugh.

Micky turned away; he stood staring down into the fire; neither of them spoke again till June returned.

She carried a tray of cakes and hot toast; she set it down with a thump on the round table by the fire.

"I coaxed it out of Mrs. Elders," she explained breathlessly. "I generally keep some cake up here myself, but I haven't got a bit to-day. Esther, fetch the cloth, there's a dear; and, Micky, you put the kettle on—I have filled it."

She bustled about, talking the whole time; if she noticed the constraint between the other two she said nothing till tea was ready, and she sat down amongst the mauve cushions with a breathless sigh.

"Now we're going to be cosy. Well, and how have you two been getting on? Micky, I've told Esther so much about you, she's sick to death of the sound of your name."

"I never said so," Esther protested quickly.

"Have some cake," Micky said; he deposited a slice on June's plate and adroitly changed the subject. He was furiously angry; he had not believed that Esther had it in her to turn on him as she had done. But the more she snubbed him, the more determined he was not to be snubbed. As he sat there stirring his tea and listening to June's chatter he was watching Esther all the time.

She had taken off her coat now. He wondered if it was the coat his money had bought her; it was not half good enough, anyway. He thought of the furs and expensive gloves which Marie Deland wore, and he longed to be able to give some to this little girl who sat there with such angry defiance in her eyes.

He realised that this pride of hers was going to be the hardest barrier of all between them.

She could not forgive him because he was a rich man and had pretended to be poor; she could not forget that he had paid for her dinner and a saucer of milk for the cat. He looked down to where Charlie sat blinking in the firelight, and a little smile crossed his face. He wondered if perhaps some day soon she would offer to repay him for that night—if she would insist on doing so, as she had insisted on paying her share of everything with June.

“More tea?” June demanded across the table, and Micky said, “Oh—er—yes, thanks,” hurriedly. As long as the meal was unfinished Esther would have to stay in the room, he thought; she could not very well leave before; but in this he was mistaken, for Esther put her cup down almost at once and looked at June.

“Will you think me very rude if I run away?” she asked. “I’ve got to see Mrs. Elders and tell her I am staying on—I think she has been trying to let my room.”

June looked disappointed. “Oh, well, if you really must go,” she said. “Come back when you’ve seen her.”

“Thank you,” said Esther. She turned to Micky, who had risen. “I won’t say good-bye, then,” she said with an effort to speak lightly.

He held open the door for her, and a moment later she had gone. As soon as he came back to his chair June rounded on him.

“What have you said to annoy her?” She looked quite angry! “I wanted you to like each other. Really, Micky, you are the limit! She won’t come back again, you see if she does.”

“No,” said Micky. “I don’t think she will.” He laughed a rather chagrined laugh. “I haven’t said anything as far as I know,” he added. “It’s what you’ve said, I fancy. You’ve fed her up with accounts of what a wonderful person I am.”

“So you are,” said June.

He frowned.

“It’s kind of you to think so, but I don’t know anybody else who shares your opinion.”

“Well, I can’t help the world being full of idiots, can I?” she demanded in exasperation. “And, Micky, why did you come here to-day? When I asked you before you said you didn’t want to come; you’ve soon changed your mind.”

“I came to tell you about Miss Shepstone. You asked me to get her a berth....”

June laughed.

“My dear boy, you’re too late! She doesn’t want your help now, or mine either, for that matter,” she added ruefully. “She’s a lady of means—that wonderful man of hers who’s tucked up in Paris having the time of his life is going to allow her three pounds a week.”

She paused and looked across at him expectantly.

“Well, why don’t you look surprised?” she asked.

Micky swallowed hard.

“I am surprised!” he said. “Too jolly surprised for anything. It’s good news, eh? I suppose she was pleased....”

“Of course she was! She’s staying on now, and is going to share my room. She had a qualm just for a moment, as to whether she ought to take the money, but I soon put her mind at ease. ‘Take all you can get, my dear,’ I said. After all, I dare say if the man’s giving her three pounds he could afford to give her about double that amount; men are not particularly generous from what I know of them—except you, Micky....”

Micky got red.

“But three pounds a week is enough to live on? Don’t you think it is?” he asked, with a touch of anxiety in his voice.

“It’s enough to live here on,” June admitted. “But it’s not great wealth. Still, she’s going to get a berth as well, so perhaps, after all, the one you’ve heard of will suit her. What is it?”

Micky was stooping, patting Charlie’s head.

“It’s in an office,” he said, after a moment; his voice sounded a little uncertain. “I don’t think it would really suit her, though—now I’ve seen her,” he hastened to add. “It would be too hard work—late hours and all the rest of it, dontcherknow.”

June looked at his bent head shrewdly.

“Humph!” she said. “Perhaps it’s just as well this phantom lover of Esther’s has turned up trumps, if that’s all you’d got to offer her.”

“Phantom lover!” said Micky; his voice sounded as if he were annoyed. “Whom are you talking about?”

“Esther’s beloved,” June said airily. “She won’t tell me his name, so I call him the phantom lover, because I’ve got an eerie sort of feeling in my mind about

him that he doesn't really exist. What do you think, Micky?"

"My dear girl, how can I possibly know?"

June produced some cigarettes.

"If he were all that she'd like me to believe he is," she said shrewdly, "she'd tell me more about him. She certainly got a bit more confidential to-day, and said that he had a cat for a mother and a few things like that. She had another letter from him this morning; he's in Paris—on business, so he tells her." She laughed, turning her face for a moment against the mauve cushion. Suddenly she sat upright again, "Micky, I should hate that man if I knew him!"

Micky smiled.

"Another of your 'instinctive hates'?" he asked whimsically.

She nodded.

"I know you don't believe in them, but...."

"Don't I?" said Micky thoughtfully. "I'm not so sure." He looked at his watch. "Well, I must be trotting. There's nothing else I can do for you, I suppose? No more waifs who want billets...?"

"You're laughing at me."

"I'm not—I never laugh at you." He laid his hand on her shoulder for a moment. "Don't bother to get up; you look so comfortable ... Good-bye——"

"Good-bye—and, Micky, don't make up your mind not to like Esther just because of this afternoon."

"My dear, I never thought of such a thing," he protested lamely.

June snuggled more cosily into the cushions.

"Ah, but I know what you are," she said, for once hopelessly on the wrong track.

Micky laughed to himself as he went down the stairs; he wondered if he was getting clever, or if June was not so quick to see a thing as he had believed, that she had not noticed the constraint between himself and Esther.

He looked about him eagerly as he went out, hoping to catch a glimpse of Esther, but the house seemed deserted, quite different from what he had pictured it to be. He had always thought that a London boarding-house must be noisy and crowded and perpetually smelling of soap and cabbage water; he was relieved to find that this was fairly comfortable and quiet.

He picked up a taxicab at the corner of the road and was driven back to his flat. He felt very depressed. Everybody seemed to have interests in life except himself. He wished he had got married years ago and settled down. He thought of Marie Deland with remorseful affection. Here was another woman who must be thinking him a positive outsider. How in the world did a man put an end to a flirtation that was growing rapidly into something else without hurting a woman's feelings, he wondered.

Ashton had accomplished it quite successfully several times. Micky sighed, and let himself into his flat.

There were several letters lying on the table; he flicked them through disinterestedly; then he stopped—the last one was from Ashton.

Micky stood for quite a minute staring down at the handwriting, which he had been at such pains to copy. Then he ripped open the envelope.

Ashton wrote from Paris:—

“DEAR MICKEY,—Just a line to send you my address, as promised. Hope things are going well with you. I am staying on here for the present, as I have run up against Maisie Clare—you remember her, Tubby Clare's little widow? My son, she's got pots of money, and at the present moment things are looking promising! The mater would be pleased if I could manage to pull it off. By the way, I dare say Driver told you I met him the other day—he was very mysterious and hadn't a word to say! Surely he wasn't joy-riding over here by himself? Remember me to every one.—Yours, R. F. ASHTON.”

And not one word about Esther! Not a single mention of the girl who was thinking of him night and day, and only living to see him again.

Micky crushed the letter and tossed it into the fire. That settled it, he told himself; he no longer had the slightest compunction in cutting Ashton out; the fellow was not worth a moment's consideration.

CHAPTER IX

Esther trudged to and fro from the agency where the stiff and stately lady presided so many times during the next few days that she began to hate the sight of the tall building and the dark stairs covered with worn linoleum.

Every day the waiting-room seemed crowded with girls, many of whom were a great deal more shabby and hopeless looking than she was, and they all sat patiently on the wooden chairs and eyed one another with a sort of jealous suspicion till their turn came to pass within the magic portal which guarded the stiff and stately lady from the vulgar gaze.

"I told you an agency wouldn't be any good," June Mason said when Esther came home after another fruitless journey. "They take your money and forget you till you turn up to remind them that you're still in existence. Give it up, my dear, and come into partnership with me. I should love to take you round to all the big stores and tell them that you owe your milk and rose complexion to my famous cream." She burst out laughing. "Can't you imagine it! Esther, you and I ought to tour the country in a caravan or something. Call ourselves the new Sequah." She rolled over in the big chair and hid her face in the cushions.

Esther laughed; she felt quite at home now in June's room. There were a few of her own possessions lying about, and she had bought Charlie a new cushion of his own. It gave her a sense of independence to know that she was paying her share of everything.

"I shall get something if I wait long enough," Esther said presently. "Do you know, I rather think I should like to be a companion, after all. I told Mr.—" She stopped; she had been about to add that she had once told Micky how she would hate it.

"It might not be so bad," June admitted; "but you want some one with pots of money and a good temper."

She looked at Esther consideringly.

"There wouldn't have to be any eligible sons either," she said bluntly. "You're

much too pretty——”

Esther laughed.

“What nonsense!”

June dragged Esther to her feet and made her look in the glass.

“Now dare to call it nonsense—look at yourself,” she commanded.

But Esther only looked at June.

“Next to you,” she began, but June cut her short.

“If you’re going to try blatant flattery,” she said.

They both laughed at that.

Some one tapped at the door; Lydia, the smiling housemaid, appeared; she looked at the two girls with a sort of parental expression; she was very fond of them both, and never minded how late or how hard she worked to do little extra jobs for either of them. It was her greatest pride to stay in when her “evening out” came and help June label the little mauve pots; she recommended the famous cream to all her friends; she was as proud of it as if it were her own invention.

She carried a note on a tray now, which she handed to Esther.

“I found it on the hall table, Miss,” she said. “It must have been left by messenger.”

She waited a moment to make up the fire and tidy the hearth; she was always glad of an excuse to stay in the room; she was never tired of telling her friends what a pretty room it was—she loved the mauve cushions and the many photographs.

She went away with a reluctant backward look. June yawned.

“Another love-letter?” she asked chaffingly. She looked across at Esther, and was surprised to see the embarrassment in the girl’s face.

“It’s from Mr. Harley,” she said, in distress. “Oh, I’m sure I’ve never let him think I——” She handed the letter to June. “He wants me to go to a theatre with him,” she added in confusion.

“Well, I should go,” said June promptly. “You don’t get much fun, and the man knows you’re engaged, and if he likes to chance it——”

“But how does he know I’m engaged? I’ve never told him.”

“I did,” June said calmly. “I saw the way the wind was blowing and told him to save complications.” She made a little grimace at Esther. “And after this note are you still going to declare that he isn’t more than ordinarily interested? Esther, you’re the most unsuspecting baby— Say you’ll go, of course. There’s no harm in it.”

“I certainly shall not go,” Esther said; “I don’t want to, for one thing, and, for another, it would not be fair——”

“You mean to Mr. Harley?” June asked.

“Yes, and to——”

“To the phantom lover! Oh, I see!” said June drily.

Esther coloured.

“I don’t know what you mean,” she said with a touch of dignity.

“Oh yes, you do,” June declared. “Don’t look so angry! What am I to call him, pray? You haven’t told me his name.” She waited, but Esther did not speak. “Of course, if you’d rather not,” she added, rather stiffly.

Esther got up and came over to sit on the arm of her chair.

“It isn’t that I don’t want you to know, but—well, I promised him not to tell any one; you see, his people would be furious if they knew. After all, I suppose I’m not anybody, and——”

June pushed her away.

“Oh, you make me tired!” she said crossly. “Why will you insist on belittling yourself? Who on earth is this wonderful man that he sets himself up for such a model of superiority? He can’t be anybody if he’s ashamed of you. You don’t like Micky, I know, but, with all his money and position, if he loved you he’d be only too proud to shout it from the housetops, and not care a hang what the world thought. There’s no rotten pride about Micky—if he loved a beggar girl he’d be proud of it.... No, don’t say any more, it makes me boil!”

She lit another cigarette and puffed at it furiously.

“Do you—do you think I should go with Mr. Harley, then?” Esther asked presently. Her pretty face was flushed and troubled.

“No, I don’t,” said June emphatically. “I think you ought to please yourself. I

don't want to advise you, but it does seem to me that you're throwing away any chance of real happiness for a—for a, what do they call it?—something beginning with a 'c'....”

“Chimera,” said Esther. She sat with downcast eyes for a moment, then suddenly she began to cry. Perhaps in her heart she felt in some mysterious way that June was right, that this girl, with her odd instinct, had put her hand right on the heart of things, and that her happiness did not really lie with Raymond Ashton.

And yet she loved him. Night and day he was never out of her thoughts. She slept with his letters under her pillow. Since he went away he had done much to blot out all that had gone before. And yet sometimes the memory of that past unhappiness, of its disagreements and quarrels and petty unkindnesses would raise its ugly head and look at her with a sort of leer as if daring her to forget entirely.

June was all remorse in a moment.

“I'm a pig!” she said disgustedly. “I ought to be kicked. Why do you let me talk so much? It's awful cheek of me to dare to criticise you. I'll never do it again. He may be an angel for all I know. Esther, if you don't stop crying I shall cry too, and then there'll be a nice sort of noise.”

Esther dried her eyes and laughed shakily.

“I'm silly; I don't know why I cried. There's nothing to cry for,” she protested.

“That's why women always cry,” said June hardily.

CHAPTER X

Esther climbed the stairs of the agency again the following morning. There was a little feeling of despondency in her heart. She had slept badly, and she had not been able to forget what June had said about Ashton.

Esther was influenced by June's "instincts," as she chose to call them; she knew it was foolish, but the fact remained all the same.

When she opened the waiting-room door she felt half inclined to turn and go away again. She would only meet with the same answer: "Nothing that will suit you to-day, Miss Shepstone."

But for a wonder the room was almost empty, and the tall and stately one was standing at the communicating door.

When she saw Esther she came forward.

"I was hoping you would call, Miss Shepstone. Will you come into my room?"

Esther's heart leapt. She obeyed eagerly.

A lady was sitting at the table looking rather bored and irritated.

She was grey-haired and handsome, and most beautifully dressed. She turned slightly when Esther entered, and stared at her through her lorgnette, then she looked at the stiff and stately one.

"Is this—er—the young lady?" she asked.

"Yes, madam—this is Miss Shepstone." The stately one introduced Esther with a wave of her hand. "This lady, Miss Shepstone, is looking for a companion. Some one who can work well—and read aloud." She looked at Esther sharply. "Can you read aloud?" she asked.

Esther stammered out that she supposed she could, but ...

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"That is a minor detail," the lady with the lorgnette interrupted. "Miss Shepstone, I am not wanting a companion in the ordinary sense of the word. That is to say, I do not want you to be constantly with me. You will have your

own bedroom and sitting-room—and I shall only want you at certain hours of the day. You will write letters for me and make yourself generally useful.” She paused, she searched the girl’s eager face through her glasses.

“How old are you?” she asked.

“Twenty-four,” said Esther.

“Humph! And what have you done up till now?”

Esther flushed.

“I was in the workroom at Eldred’s. The manager has promised to give me a reference, but——”

“Eldred’s!” the sharp gaze wavered a little. “And why did you leave there, may I ask?”

“I left to get married, but——”

“But you are not married, of course.”

“No.”

“Nor going to be?”

“Not for the present, but——”

She was cut short again.

“I don’t want to get used to you and to get you used to my ways and then for you to leave me,” she was told. “And I don’t want a young man constantly dangling round the house.” Her voice was sharp, but not unkind, and there was a smile in the keen eyes.

“No,” said Esther. “I quite understand.”

There was a little silence.

“Well,” said the owner of the lorgnette then, “what do you think about it? Do you think you would like to come? Do you think you would like me?”

Esther smiled, there was something in this blunt questioning that reminded her of June Mason.

“Yes,” she said. “I think I should, but——”

“I hate that word,” she was told promptly. “I don’t want any ‘buts’ in the question. You either wish to come or you do not. I will give you fifty pounds a

year, and your keep, of course. It's too much for an inexperienced girl like you, but I think I shall rather like you. Well, what do you say?"

Esther did not know what to say. The offer was tempting enough, but she thought of June Mason and the room with the mauve cushions where she was settling down so happily, and her heart sank.

"I should like to think it over," she said, stammering. "I have a friend I should like to talk it over with if you don't mind. If you will give me just a day or two...."

"Take a week by all means. I am going away myself for a few days, and I shan't want you till I come back. Write and tell me what you decide to do. Here is my card...." She took one from a heavy silver case and laid it on the table. She looked at Esther quizzically, then suddenly she held out her hand.

"Good-bye, Miss Shepstone. I hope I shall see you again," and the next moment she had gone.

The stiff and stately owner of the agency was smiling, well pleased.

"You are most fortunate, Miss Shepstone," she said. "You have secured one of the best posts I have on my books. If you take my advice you will not hesitate. Make up your mind at once."

Esther did not answer. She took up the card from the table, then she drew in her breath with a hard sound, for the name printed there was Mrs. Raymond Ashton.

CHAPTER XI

Esther never knew how she got out into the street. She walked along like some one in a dream; her cheeks were burning hot.

Mrs. Raymond Ashton! Raymond's mother! The woman of whom he had spoken so often and so bitterly. The woman who had raised such a fierce objection to her marriage with Raymond.

There was not much resemblance between mother and son; they were both handsome, but there was a sort of humour in Mrs. Ashton's face which Raymond's lacked. Esther tried vainly to find some likeness between them.

She realised how different this woman was to what she had pictured her, remembered that spontaneously offered hand. Had Mrs. Ashton known who she was? Oh, surely not, or she would never have appeared so anxious to engage her.

How angry Raymond would be. Angry that the woman he loved was to go to his mother as a paid companion. Esther could not help smiling. For her own sake she would not mind it. At least she would be with his mother and in his home; but, of course, the thing was impossible—such a situation would not be tolerable. She would have to write and refuse.

"Good afternoon!" said a voice, and, turning hurriedly, Esther found Micky Mellows beside her.

He looked as if he were not quite sure of his reception; but to-day Esther had other thoughts to occupy her which were more interesting than he was—and the smile she gave him was almost friendly.

"Good afternoon! Isn't it cold?"

"Very.... Where are you hurrying off to?"

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He tried to speak casually, but his heart was beating uncomfortably.

"I'm just going back home," Esther said. "I've been to an agency looking for a berth."

“A berth!” A frown came between his eyes. “What sort of a berth?” he asked quickly.

Esther laughed.

“Well, I’m think of taking your advice—and going as companion to an old lady—not that she’s very old,” she added doubtfully, with sudden memory of Raymond’s mother.

“You mean that you have decided?”

She hesitated.

“Well, I have the refusal of it.” She looked at him with defiant eyes. “I am only just hesitating—I want to talk to Miss Mason about it—she is much more worldly wise than I am.”

“June is a very sensible woman,” he said. “I am glad you like her.” He hesitated. “And the—er—post?” he asked with an effort. “Will it be in town?”

“Oh yes.”

She was obviously not going to tell him any more, but Micky persevered.

“I wonder if it is likely to be any one I know. I have quite an extensive acquaintance in London.”

“Yes,” said Esther. “But I don’t suppose you will know these people, anyway,” she added with an unconscious touch of loftiness in her voice. “The name is Ashton—Mrs. Raymond Ashton.”

There was the barest possible silence before Micky answered, a silence during which the blank dismay and anger that crossed his face would have been amusing had it not also had something of pathos in it.

“Ashton?” he said. “Oh, yes, I know Raymond Ashton very well.” He was watching her with jealous eyes, and she turned her head sharply and looked up at him.

Just for a moment a traitorous eagerness crossed her face; he could almost see the quick question on her lips, then she laughed.

“Really! How funny! But, of course, as you say, you must know a great many people.”

“I have known the Ashtons for years. You will like Mrs. Ashton.”

There was a sort of quiet insinuation in the words, and Esther bit her lip.

“And—the son?” she asked. “I think you said you knew the son.”

“Yes, I know him—he is in Paris, I believe.”

Micky was conscious of a queer tightening about his throat; it was a tremendous effort to force himself to speak lightly.

“And shall I like him as well, do you think?” Esther asked deliberately.

Micky did not answer.

“Do you like him?” she persisted.

Micky’s restraint broke its bonds; if he had died for it he could not have checked the words that rushed to his lips.

“I detest the fellow!” he said. “He’s a beastly outsider!”

He dared not look at her. He held his breath, waiting for the storm to break, but if he had lost his self-control she kept hers admirably.

“Really,” she said. Her voice was a little breathless, but quite calm. “What does a man mean when he calls another man—such a name?”

Her face was quite colourless, even to the lips, and her hands were clenched in the shabbiness of the cheap little muff she carried.

He blunderingly tried to make amends.

“I ought not to have said that, just because he’s not the sort of man I care about,” he said stammeringly. “He’s quite all right—it all depends from what point of view you regard him. I hope you will forget that I said that, Miss Shepstone. It—it was unpardonable.”

“It’s a matter of complete indifference to me what you say about—Mr. Ashton,” she told him.

She stopped. They had been walking along together.

“Which way are you going?” she asked.

Micky flushed up to his eyes; he knew this was a dismissal.

“I was coming along to see June,” he said. “I hoped you would allow me to walk along with you—if I am not intruding.”

Esther forced a smile, but her lips felt stiff.

“Oh, but I am not going back,” she said. Her voice sounded as if it were cut in

ice. "So I won't detain you. Good-bye."

She turned and left him, walking quickly away again in the direction from which she had just come.

Her eyes were smarting with tears that had to be restrained.

"How dare he—oh, how dare he?" she asked herself passionately. "What does he know about Raymond?"

She could not trust herself to go back home. She walked about in the cold till she was tired out. She wanted to be sure that Micky would have left Elphinstone Road before she got there. She wondered if June knew the Ashtons too. She probably did, as Micky Mellowes knew them. They were both of Raymond's own world, these two. It was only she, who loved him best, who was outside the magic circle of his friends.

It was nearly supper time when she got in. She paused for a moment in the hall and looked anxiously at the rows of coats and hats hanging there. She thought she would know Micky's if she saw them there. She forgot that he might have taken them up to June's room. She turned away with a little sigh.

At the foot of the stairs she met young Harley. He coloured sensitively when he saw her and stood aside for her to pass.

Esther flushed too. She wondered what he thought of her note refusing the theatre. With sudden impulse she spoke—

"I hope you are not angry with me, Mr. Harley, but—but perhaps you do not know that I am engaged to be married, and so ... so I don't think I should accept invitations from any one else, though—though it was kind of you to ask me," she added.

"I should have been delighted if you could have come," he said. "But, of course, if your fiancé would not care about it—" He broke off as if there was nothing more to be said.

Esther wondered if Raymond really would mind; at first he had been very jealous, and could not bear her to speak to another man, but latterly—she hated it, because she could not forget that once he had told her she could marry a man with money if she only played her cards carefully—the man who had said that seemed a different personality altogether from the man whose letters she had only lived for during the last fortnight.

Was she mean and unforgiving that she continually found herself remembering

the quarrels and scenes they had had? She wanted so earnestly to forget them; she went up to June's room with dragging steps.

The door of the room opened before she reached the landing, and June came out.

"I knew it was you," she said. "Poor soul! how tired you sound. Another day of miserable failure, I suppose. Never mind, come and sit down in the warm, and you'll soon forget it."

Esther laughed rather shamefacedly.

"It's been a day of success, strange to relate," she said. "But I'm tired, dead tired—I must have walked miles." She suddenly remembered Micky; she looked round with—a quick suspicion. "Have you been alone all the afternoon?" she asked.

"Yes, quite alone," June laughed. "Who did you expect to find here, pray?" she demanded.

"Nobody—I only wondered if you had had any visitors."

"I might have known it wasn't the truth that he was coming here," she told herself vexedly.

"Well, and what about the success?" June asked; she was sitting on the hearthrug stroking Charlie. "You don't mean to say that the old dear at the agency really had something to offer you this time?"

Esther nodded.

"Yes, and she's desperately anxious for me to take it, too. It's quite a good offer, but it means leaving here and living in; and I don't believe I want to leave here," she added ruefully.

June looked dismayed.

"I shan't let you go," she said promptly. "Just as we are settling down so cosily." She put her white hands over her ears. "No, I don't want to hear another thing about it, if that's it," she said. "I shan't listen—write and refuse it—write and refuse it at once."

Esther laughed; she pulled June's hands down and held them firmly.

"Tell me," she said. "Do you know any people named Ashton?"

She was longing to find out if June did know them; it seemed such a lifetime since she had seen Raymond or spoken to him, she was hungry to hear him

spoken of, even if only by this woman who probably had merely known him as an ordinary acquaintance.

“Ashton!” June wrinkled up her nose. “I know some Ashtons who live in Brayanstone Square,” she said at last. “A mother and son. A very handsome woman she is, with white hair, she has a sort of grande dame look about her—the sort of woman you can imagine in a powdered wig and a crinoline, curtsying to the queen.” She scrambled up, and, snatching a paper fan from the shelf, swept Esther a graceful curtsy to illustrate her meaning.

But Esther was too much in earnest to be amused.

“It must be the same Mrs. Ashton,” she said eagerly. “This is her card—she gave it to me to-day—Mrs. Raymond Ashton.”

June glanced at the card and nodded briskly.

“Yes, it’s the same. I don’t know her frightfully well; she’s rather reserved, too; but I admire her immensely—well, go on.”

“She wants me to go to her as a sort of companion—she has offered me fifty pounds a year.”

June whistled.

“Not bad, is it? But you’ll refuse, of course?”

“I asked her to let me think it over; I said I should like to talk it over with you first.”

June clasped her hands round her knees and stared into the fire thoughtfully.

“She’s a widow, isn’t she?” Esther said hesitatingly. “At least—she didn’t say anything about a husband.”

“Yes, she’s a widow right enough,” June said. “And delighted to be, I should think,” she added bluntly. “I never knew the departed spouse, but from all accounts he was a perfect terror.”

Esther said nothing. Raymond had always spoken of his father as being a “rare old sport.”

After a moment—

“There’s a son, too,” June said. “A kind of Adonis to look at, beautiful eyes and all that sort of thing.”

“Yes,” said Esther. She tried hard to keep the eagerness from her voice. “Do

you—do you know the son too?” she asked nervously.

June gave a queer little laugh.

“Oh yes, I know him. That is to say, I say ‘How d’ye do’ to him when I have the misfortune to meet him, but——”

Esther’s hands were clasped in her lap.

“Why—why—misfortune?” she asked.

June Mason shrugged her shoulders.

“Oh, I don’t know—it’s hard to explain—he’s never done me any harm, but there are some people one hates by instinct, and Raymond Ashton is one of the people I hate.” She smoothed a crease in the skirt of her frock. “He’s such a—such an awful outsider,” she added, unconsciously choosing the word Micky Mellows had used a few hours before.

Esther sat very still. Twice she tried to speak, but no words would come. She knew that it was unfair to June to sit there and allow her to go on talking about Raymond, but something in her heart seemed to have set a seal on her lips.

“He’s that insufferable kind of creature who thinks himself irresistible,” June went on. “Micky has often told me the way he brags about his so-called ‘conquests.’ Conquests, indeed! What are they but a few poor ignorant girls hoodwinked by his handsome face and smooth tongue? Dozens of girls he’s had, my dear, literally dozens! Only the other day some one told me that Mrs. Ashton had to threaten to cut him off with a shilling if he didn’t give up some little person he was supposed to be going to marry! I don’t know how true it is, mind you, but that’s the sort of man he is—I’ve no time for him at all,” she finished vigorously.

She turned to look at Esther, and gave a little exclamation of alarm. “How pale you are! Don’t you feel well?”

“I’m quite all right—I’m just tired—I don’t think I’ll go down to supper to-night. I’ll just stay here and be quiet. I wanted to hear what you had to say about my future employer.”

“Future fiddlesticks!” June retorted. “You’re not going to her, my dear; I shan’t let you. If Raymond came home while you were there, you’d never have any peace.”

Esther was lying back now with closed eyes. Over and over again in her mind

she was saying to herself—

“I don’t believe it—I don’t believe a word of it; it’s all cruel lies—first Mr. Mellows and now June. They both hate him, that’s what it is; but I don’t believe a word of what they say.” June was bustling about the room fetching cushions and a light rug which she had laid over Esther.

“You have a little sleep, and you’ll feel heaps better,” she said.

She went away, shutting the door quietly; and Esther hid her face in her hands.

She hardly knew why she was crying, she only knew that she was utterly miserable.

She took Ashton’s last letter from her dress and read it through again—how could any one, reading it, doubt that he loved her? How could any one, knowing his careful thought for her, believe that he was the detestable personality June and Micky had described?

She kissed the signature passionately. Nobody in all the world counted but this one man.

She got up and went over to June’s desk, which both girls used; she felt that she must write to him and tell him how much she wanted him.

When she had finished writing she looked to the head of the paper on which she had written for the address, and then she saw a postscript scribbled in a corner which she had not noticed before.

“Don’t write to me here—I shall have left this hotel by the time you get my letter. I will write again as soon as possible.”

It was like a door with iron bars being closed in her face; she could not write after all! She could have no relief for all her longing and unhappiness; she must just wait and wait, eating her very soul out, till he wrote again.

She tore up what she had written and threw it into the fire.

“The phantom lover”—June’s half playful, half mocking words came back to her with foreboding. Was he indeed only a phantom lover? Just a creation of her own brain and desire? She tried to thrust the thought from her; she was tired and fanciful; in the morning she would be all right; it was not fair to him, it was not fair to herself to be so doubting. She went back to June’s couch and curled up amongst the mauve pillows; life was so hard, so disappointing; it gave so little of all that one desired; the tears fell again, presently she cried herself to sleep.

June came back on tiptoe; she stole across the room and looked at Esther, then she went back to the hearthrug to keep Charlie company.

The fire had died down and she replenished it as quietly as she could, putting a knob on at a time with her fingers.

As she leaned over to poke them softly together she caught sight of a scrap of paper lying in the grate. It looked like part of a torn letter, and without thinking June picked it up—the one word “dearest” stared up at her in Esther’s writing.

June looked at it for a long moment, then she turned her head and glanced at Esther, still sleeping.

June frowned; she hunched her shoulders impatiently.

“More phantom lover, I suppose,” she told herself crossly; she threw the little scrap of paper into the fire and watched it burn with a sort of vixenish delight.

CHAPTER XII

"I've decided to accept Mrs. Ashton's offer," said Esther suddenly.

It was the following afternoon, and she had been helping June paste labels on to the little mauve pots. She looked up as she spoke, with the paste brush still in her hand and her fingers all sticky.

"Did you hear what I said?" she demanded guiltily.

"Yes, I heard," June said rather tartly. "And I think you're a mean pig. However, go on! Have your own way! Don't mind me."

"It isn't that at all," Esther declared. "But I must do something—I've been idle quite long enough. I shall be sorry to leave you, but I shall still pay for my half of the room."

"Thank you—thank you very much," said June drily. Esther flushed in distress.

"Don't be so unkind! It's not that I want to leave you. I've been happier here with you than anywhere else, but I must work, I can't live on nothing...."

"You could live on three pounds a week if you wished to. What do you suppose the phantom lover will say if he knows that his money hasn't helped you, and that you're going to make a drudge of yourself?"

"I shan't be a drudge—I——"

June broke in impatiently.

"Oh, very well—I don't want to argue, but I think it's mean of you. If you really liked me you'd stay...."

"I shall come to see you whenever I get any time off."

"Yes, once a week for two hours, I suppose—and when I shall probably be out."

"I shall write first and let you know when I'm coming."

June took no notice; she screwed the lid on to a perfume bottle and wiped her fingers on the white overall.

“You needn’t put any more labels on,” she said shortly. “I can do the rest myself.”

She took the tray away from Esther and carried it into her bedroom; when she came back there was a suspicion of tears in her eyes. Esther looked distressed. She felt that she was behaving meanly, and yet she meant to go to Mrs. Ashton’s.

“Micky Mellows is coming directly,” June said tartly. “If you don’t want to see him you’d better go. I know you hate him....”

Esther turned scarlet. She took off the apron she had borrowed from June and turned to the door.

Before she reached it June followed.

“I’m a pig. I apologise humbly! Please stay. Why don’t you box my ears when I speak to you like this?” She dragged Esther back to the fire. “I’m wild because you’ve made up your mind to leave me. Our friendship doesn’t mean anything to you.... There’s Micky—he’ll want to know why I’ve been crying. Amuse him for five minutes, there’s an angel, and I’ll come back.”

She was gone in a flash.

A smiling Lydia showed Micky into the room. Lydia liked Micky; he was always courteous, and he had been generous with his tips on each occasion that he had visited the house.

Micky looked a little embarrassed when he saw Esther. He glanced quickly round the room. “June ... I——”

“She’s coming in a moment,” Esther explained. “Won’t you sit down?”

Micky sat on the arm of the big chair; he was cold; he leaned forward, rubbing his hands vigorously. Esther watched him critically.

She had told June that she did not consider him in the least good-looking, but now the thought crossed her mind that this had not been quite a fair thing.

He was tall and well made, and he had brown hair that grew well about his temples, and waved slightly where it parted.

His nose was nothing particular and slightly crooked, and his eyes were nondescript in colour, but kind ... so kind! Esther remembered it was the first thing she had noticed about him the night they met.

He looked up.

“Well,” he said, “have you found another berth yet?”

“I’m going to Mrs. Ashton’s,” Esther said.

She was amazed at the sudden change in his face; a look of furious anger flashed into his eyes; he rose to his feet.

“You’re not serious?” he said quietly.

Esther laughed; she felt painfully nervous without knowing why.

“Serious? Indeed I am!” she answered. “Mr. Mellowes, what are you doing?...”

Micky had caught her hands. Jealousy was driving him with whips of fire—jealousy of this phantom lover, whom he himself had created.

“You’re not to go,” he said hoarsely. “I—I—I can’t bear to think of you having to work for your living. There’s no need—it’s all nonsense. You’d hate being at the Ashtons.... Esther—”

She wrenched herself free; she was white to the lips.

“You must be mad!” she said. “How dare you speak like this? What is it to you what I do? How dare you try to interfere? What business is it of yours?”

Micky laughed shakily; he had recovered himself a little now.

“It’s everything to me,” he said rather hoarsely. “You must know that it is. Esther, will you marry me?”

If only premeditated proposals were made, there would be few marriages in the world. Ten minutes ago, when Micky Mellowes walked into the room, he had no intention of asking Esther to marry him, but now it seemed as if he had come for that express purpose as he stood there, grimly obstinate.

There was a moment of silence; then Esther drew herself up.

“I think you must be mad,” she said. “I’ve only seen you once or twice in my life. I have told you that I am already engaged.”

“I know, but it makes no difference,” said Micky. “I ask you to marry me—will you marry me?”

She drew back from him.

“You must be mad.”

Micky laughed. “You’ve said that two or three times already, but I assure you that I’m quite sane. I loved you the first moment I ever saw you, but, of course,

you won't believe it. However, that doesn't matter—you haven't answered my question. Will you marry me?"

"You know I am engaged—how dare you?..." She backed away from him till she was close to the door. Micky laughed savagely.

"You needn't be afraid—I'm not going to hurt you—I'm not going to move from this hearthrug, but I should like you to answer my question. Once again, will you marry me?"

"No——"

He forgot his promise and took a step towards her.

"I can make you happier than any other man possibly could. I've never cared for a woman in my life till I met you...."

"I wouldn't marry you if you were the only man in the world—I—I don't even like you...." Her voice shook with anger now. "My answer is no—no—no! I shall never change my mind if I live to be a hundred ..." she added vehemently. The words seemed forced from her by something in his eyes.

"You will," said Micky calmly, though he felt anything but calm. "Women always do; but if you don't feel like changing it just at this moment, will you please tell June I am here? I came to see her, and I'm tired of waiting...." He turned away and went back to his seat on the arm of the big chair as if nothing had happened, but his hand shook when he tried to light a cigarette.

When June came back he was absently turning the pages of a magazine; she looked at him for a moment, then began to laugh.

"Micky! What in the world has happened to you lately? Do you always read a paper upside down?"

Micky started, looked down at the magazine, and said a bad word; then he laughed too, and flinging the magazine across the room got to his feet, stretching his long arms.

"Where's Esther?" June demanded. "I asked her to stay and amuse you till I came back...."

"She did her best," said Micky drily. "But I am afraid I bored her."

June looked annoyed.

"I do think you two might try and like one another, if only for my sake," she said. "It's so perfectly obvious that you hate one another, and I cannot see why

for the life of me.”

“One of your instinctive hates, perhaps,” Micky submitted, with a touch of irony. He went back to the chair.

“Miss Shepstone tells me she has found a berth,” he said, after a moment. June nodded.

“Yes. Did she tell you with whom?”

“Yes; Mrs. Ashton.”

Something in the tone of his voice made June look up quickly.

“Well?” she said.

Micky shrugged his shoulders.

“Nothing—I dared to suggest that perhaps she would not like the place, and she flew at me.”

June laughed.

“That’s just like Esther; she asks for your advice, and then——”

“She didn’t ask for mine,” Micky cut in. “I very kindly volunteered the information.”

“Oh!” June was on her knees now toasting buns.

“They’re stale,” she informed Micky candidly. “But you won’t know it when they’re toasted.”

Micky watched in silence. He was wondering if June had heard anything of his conversation with Esther; they had both spoken rather loudly. He was also wondering whether he should tell June the whole story.

“You must make allowances for her,” June said briskly, as he was still hesitating. “I know she’s worried about this man. I discovered another thing this morning, Micky”—she turned with a sudden jerk to look at him, and the bun fell off the fork into the fire.

Micky laughed.

“Well, what have you discovered now?” he inquired.

“Why, that she can’t write to him—he doesn’t give her an address—or, if he does, he takes good care to move on before she has time to answer his letters. It looks to me, Micky, as if that young man is shirking his responsibilities. If you ask my candid opinion, Esther won’t ever see him again.”

Micky said “Rot!” rather uncomfortably. “If the fellow is travelling—moving about....”

“He could give her an address and have the letters sent on, couldn’t he?” June demanded.

Micky rubbed his chin.

“What’s she want to write to him for?” he asked presently.

June swung round, and a second bun almost shared the fate of the first, but she grabbed it back in time.

“What does she want to write to him for?” she echoed with scorn. “My poor child, what does any one want to write to any one for? She’s in love with the man, and when you’re in love you simply have to write it down—at least, that’s what I understand from people with wide experience. Esther’s bursting to write and tell the phantom lover how much she loves him and what a wonderful man he is; as a matter of fact she does write to him, and tears the letters up again, and that’s no satisfaction. I wish to goodness he’d get run over and done with,” she added exasperatedly.

“I don’t suppose she wishes it,” said Micky.

“That’s because she doesn’t know what’s good for her; he was probably the first man who had ever paid her any attention, and from what she says he’s a bit of a swell, and I suppose she was flattered....”

“Rot!” said Micky violently; it made him boil to hear June say things like this. Ashton superior to Esther? It was like the man’s confounded impudence to even think such a thing.

“Not such rot,” June said wisely. “And that’s what all the trouble is about, or my name’s not what it is. He has a stuck-up old cat of a mother who won’t condescend to know Esther.... What did you say?”

“Nothing,” said Micky. He got up and began strolling about the room with his hands in his pockets, and June finished toasting her buns and made the tea.

“I’ll just go up and tell Esther,” she said. She went out of the room and upstairs.

“Tea,” she announced cheerfully, knocking at Esther’s door; she turned the handle and went in. Esther was standing by the window looking out into the neglected garden at the back of the house; she turned.

“I’m not really hungry, and if you’d like to have Mr. Mellows to yourself——” she began.

June stared at her.

“My dear,” she said then drily, “if I’d wanted to have Mr. Mellows to myself I should have married him long ago; so don’t pretend you’re not dying for one of the stale but toasted buns.”

She linked her arm in Esther’s, and they went downstairs together. Esther did not want to come, but it seemed easier to give way than to make excuses. She took the chair which Micky brought forward; she felt a little nervous and ill at ease. Once, when their eyes met, she found herself colouring sensitively.

Micky let her alone in a marked fashion and talked to June. He had found the man he had been looking for for months, he declared, a good business man, honest——

“Really honest, Micky?” June asked, laughing.

“Really honest,” Micky maintained. “Do you think I’d put you on to him else? I’ve told him all about you. I went out to lunch with him yesterday and we talked face creams and vanities till my head reeled. He’s full of ideas, bursting with fresh notions for advertising. He didn’t say so in actual words, but he thinks

you'll be a little gold mine if you'll put yourself in his hands."

June's eyes sparkled; she jumped up from her chair, put her arms around Micky's neck, and gave him a sounding kiss.

"You're a dear," she said, "and I just love you!"

Esther glanced up quickly. June need not have done that, she thought with a touch of irritation, but Micky only laughed.

"Come here and you shall have that back with compound interest," he said, but June shook her head.

"That's enough for to-day, and Esther's looking shocked to death."

"I'm not—I never thought about it," Esther protested indignantly. June laughed.

"Well, you looked angry anyway," she declared. "Didn't she, Micky?"

"I'm afraid I didn't notice," he answered coolly, but he had, and for a moment his pulses had leapt at sight of the anger in Esther's eyes; she could not surely hate him as much as she pretended if it annoyed her that June should kiss him.

But she was indifferent enough now at all events; she was leaning back listlessly, her eyes fixed on the flames, her face sad and thoughtful.

She was thinking about Ashton, Micky told himself savagely, wishing he were here, no doubt—Ashton, who even at that moment was probably running round Paris with Tubby Clare's little widow.

June was packing the tea things on to the tray and humming a snatch of song. Esther rose.

"Let me do that—you cleared away yesterday."

She took the tray.

June asked Micky for a cigarette.

"I've got heaps somewhere," she said vaguely. "But I never know where they are." She looked over to Esther. "Don't bother to put the cups away now," she said. "Come back and be cosy."

She was rather surprised that Esther obeyed; she had quite expected her to go off and not return.

Fond as she was of Esther, she could not quite make her out; she was full of surprises. It was getting dusk, and the room was full of shadows.

“Shall I light up?” Micky asked. “Or do we like the firelight?”

“We like the firelight,” June said promptly; she nestled down amongst her mauve cushions.

Micky was sitting straddle-ways across a chair between the two girls, and Esther had drawn back a little so that her face was in shadow. Micky glanced at her once, but could only see the glint of firelight on her hair and her hands clasped listlessly in the lap of her frock. He glanced at them; she still wore Ashton’s ring, with its three inferior stones; he wondered how long the farce was going to be kept up and what would happen to bring it to an end.

“If some one doesn’t talk,” June said drowsily, “I shall go to sleep.”

There was a quiet peacefulness in the cosy little room. Micky crossed his arms on the chair back and leaned his chin on them, staring into the fire, and Esther, from her place in the shadows, looked at him unobserved.

Not in the least good-looking, she told herself again, and yet in common fairness she had to admit to herself that there was something about Micky Mellowes that was undeniably attractive.

She liked the obstinacy of his chin—she liked the way his hair grew, and the shape of his hands—strong, manly hands they were, in spite of the fact that they had probably never done a day’s useful work in their lives. Of course he was too well dressed. To begin with, there was no need to wear grey spats over his shoes, or to have his trousers so immaculately creased. She forgot that she had liked Ashton to indulge in both these weaknesses.

Micky was whistling a snatch of a love-song under his breath. Esther did not know what it was; she had never heard the melody before, but something in the softly sentimental notes brought the tears to her eyes; before she was aware of it they were tumbling down fast.

June sprang suddenly to her feet.

“Why are we all mooning like this? Micky, give me a match.” She almost snatched the box from him and lit the gas; the yellow flare flooded the room. Micky, glancing at Esther, saw the tears on her cheeks and the way she averted her head.

He scowled and rose to his feet, standing so that his tall figure shielded her.

“Well, I must be getting along,” he said. He pulled out his watch and looked at it, but he never noticed what the time was.

He was thinking of Esther and the tears he had surprised.

“And when are you going to introduce me to this man who is to make my fortune?” June demanded crisply. She was standing on a footstool, trying to see herself in a glass above the mantelshelf.

“Esther, you might have told me what a sight I look! My hair is all over the place.”

“I thought it looked nice,” Esther said hurriedly. She knew Micky had seen her tears, and was silently hating him for it.

Micky answered hesitatingly, “I’ll let you know—I’ll fix it up and let you know. There’s no hurry, is there? I don’t want him to think we are too keen.”

“But I am keen,” June insisted. “Wouldn’t you be keen if some one had told you you would be a gold mine, properly handled?” she laughed. “Oh, I forgot! money is no object to you. Well, bide your own time, my dear, but don’t let it be too long.... Must you really go?”

“I’m afraid so; and, June——”

“Um!” said June, intent on another cigarette.

Micky fidgeted. He looked down at the carpet.

“If you don’t hear anything of me for a few days you’ll know I’m out of London....” He looked at Esther, but she was kneeling down by the fire stroking Charlie.

“Out of London!” June said in surprise. “Where are you going?”

Micky cleared his throat.

“I thought of running over to Paris for a day or two,” he said.

“Paris!” They were both looking at him now. Micky was painfully aware of the eagerness in Esther’s face.

“Yes; I haven’t been since September. Anything I can do for you while I’m there?”

June raised her brows comically.

“Not for me, but perhaps Esther ... Esther has a great friend over there, haven’t you, my child?”

Esther turned crimson from chin to brow.

“Mr. Mellowes is not at all likely to meet any friend of mine,” she said stiffly.

Micky felt horribly sorry for her.

“Don’t be too sure, Miss Shepstone,” he said lightly. “It’s a small world, you know, and it’s the most unexpected things that happen.”

But Esther seemed not to have heard.

CHAPTER XIII

Micky went to Paris. “No, I shan’t want you, Driver,” he told his man awkwardly. “I’m only going for a day or two. I—er—I shan’t want you,” he said again lamely.

He looked at the man guiltily, but Driver was as impassive as ever. “Very good, sir,” he said. He could not understand what had happened to Micky; as a rule, he refused even to take his own railway ticket or speak to a porter. This new independence worried him.

But Micky went off cheerfully enough. He rang June up at her club the morning he started and told her he was really going. He heard her cheery laugh across the telephone. “Micky, you’re not up to any mischief?”

“As if I should be!” he answered with dignity.

“I wouldn’t trust you,” she said promptly. “However, have a good time, and if you see the phantom lover, you might push him into the Seine for me.”

“I’ll remember,” Micky said grimly. He hesitated. “Everything all right?” he asked.

She echoed his words, not understanding. “Everything all right? Do you mean the swindle? Oh, yes, it’s going fine, thank you. I had another order from those American export people this morning.”

“Good.... And—Miss Shepstone gone?”

“No, she’s going on Saturday. Sickening, isn’t it?”

“I don’t think she’ll stay long,” Micky said soothingly. “It won’t do her any harm to see how she likes it. Well, good-bye.”

He stood for a moment after he had hung up the receiver, staring at it. He wished he had not arranged to go to Paris. Supposing Ashton took it into his head to come back while he was away? Supposing he went home and found Esther there?

He tried to believe that it was not at all likely, but at the last moment, as he got into the train and received his ticket from the solemn Driver, Micky said—

“You know where to find me if anything happens—if anything should be the matter?”

“Yes, sir.” Driver raised wooden eyes to his master’s face. “Was you expecting anything to happen, sir?” he asked stolidly.

Micky got red. “No, you fool!”

“Very good, sir,” Driver retorted unmoved.

And so Micky went to Paris. It was dark when he got there, and he drove at once to a small and unpretentious hotel in a narrow side street, where he had never been before, but of which he had heard from Philips.

After all, it was only for a few nights. He did not want to stay in Paris long—Paris always bored him, but he made a little grimace as he looked up at the windows of the hotel. It certainly was a rotten-looking little show, he thought as he followed the concierge into the hall. This, too, was small and unpretentious, with a polished floor and wicker chairs scattered about. There was a kind of winter garden leading from the lounge, where a few neglected palms and ferns were struggling for an existence, and the whole place was silent, almost deserted.

Micky was too late for dinner, but a smiling host, with a short dark beard, assured him that he could have a most excellent supper in less time than he would enumerate of what that supper would consist. Micky said he didn’t care what it was. He followed his suit-case up the wide, shallow stairs to a quaint little room with a low ceiling and polished floor.

He was beginning to feel more at home after all; one could be quiet here and not be eternally running up against people whom one knew; he felt more cheerful when he went down to his supper.

He asked the waiter if there were many people staying there. His tone of voice sounded as if he sincerely hoped there were not, and the waiter tactfully submitted that the place was almost empty.

Micky proceeded with his supper.

It was nearly ten o’clock, but he went out into the lounge when he had finished and sat down at a table in one of the most secluded corners.

There were pen and ink and a supply of hotel note paper, which Micky looked at with great satisfaction, before he took up a pen, carefully examined the nib, squared his elbows and began to write.

“My darling——”

Micky wrote the words hurriedly and covered them over with a sheet of blotting paper as if they made him feel guilty.

“I thought I should have been leaving Paris before now, but have been delayed. I shall be staying here till the end of the week and am writing this so that you can let me have a letter before I leave. I hope you have received both my other letters safely, and are quite well and as happy as possible, seeing that we cannot be together——”

He sat back for a moment and looked at this frowningly, then he wrote on hurriedly.

“I want you to miss me, you see—I want you to feel as I do, that there is only one thing to look forward to and that is when we shall be together again. Dearest, it seems now that I have never really told you how well I love you. Some day, if all that I wish for comes true, I will tell you the many things you would not let me say when we were last together....”

Micky’s pen flew easily enough. For the moment he had forgotten why and for whom he was writing, and thought only of Esther as she had looked when he last saw her with the tears wet on her cheeks.

“Write to me as soon as you get this, so that I may have a letter to take with me when I leave. I shall watch for every post and count the minutes till it comes. I have arranged with my bankers to send the money to you every week. Dearest, if this is not enough, please let me know, and I will send some more....”

Micky scratched out the last five words, finally rewriting the whole page to add

“... Let me know and we must see what can be done. I cannot bear to think that you are wanting anything which it is in my power to give you. Tell me all about yourself; if you are well and happy—and how often you think of me. I shall write again soon, perhaps to-morrow ... and till then, and for ever, I am always yours, Micky”

He added his own signature without noticing it, then realised what he had done and rewrote the last page in a panic.

Supposing he had sent it!—it made him hot all over to think what would have happened. He would have to be more careful, he told himself severely. He carefully directed the letter and went out to post it, then he went to bed in the little room with the low ceiling and lay awake half the night.

Now the letter had gone he wished he had never sent it; after all, it was cheating Esther. It was not fair to make her write to him; he felt that he had behaved like a cur ... he tossed and turned from side to side. Perhaps she would not write! He almost hoped she would not. When at last he dozed off it was almost daybreak; when he woke it was eleven o'clock and the sunshine was pouring into his room.

He had a bit of a headache and felt wretched; he drank four cups of strong coffee and went out.

He avoided the popular thoroughfares; he sauntered about till lunch time and then went back to the hotel. Apparently the waiter had spoken the truth when he said the place was almost empty, for only two of the twenty tables were occupied beside his own.

Micky felt bored; he made up his mind to tell Philips what he thought of his recommendation when he got back to London. He slept all the afternoon, then dressed and went off to dinner at the hotel where he and Driver stayed when they were last in Paris. Here at least was a welcome; most of the waiters recognised him; the attention was excellent, and he got a decent dinner. The hotel was full, but though Micky looked suspiciously at every one who came in, he recognised nobody.

He wondered how long he had got to stay in Paris. Esther could not get his letter and send a reply that would arrive in less than three days; he calculated that he could not get back to London before Sunday morning.

And Esther was going to Mrs. Ashton's on Saturday.

He had just finished his dinner when the swing doors opened and a man came into the room with a lady in evening dress.

Micky looked at them, and his heart began to race—for the man was Raymond Ashton, and the woman, Tubby Clare's little widow.

Ashton saw Micky at once, and his face fell into almost comical lines of dismay, but he pulled himself together at once and spoke to the woman beside him.

Micky knew Mrs. Clare slightly; he rose and went towards them.

“I heard you were in Paris,” he said. He shook hands with Mrs. Clare; she was rather a pretty little woman, small and plump, with round, meaningless eyes and a friendly smile.

“We’re going to the opera,” Ashton said. “Mrs. Clare is not staying here, but she very kindly consented to come and dine with me. Are you staying here, Micky? When did you come over?”

“Last night; and I’m not staying here. Just dropped in for some grub.”

“You’d better dine with us,” Ashton said, but he did not sound very enthusiastic.

Micky laughed. “Thanks, but I have dined. I was just leaving when you came in.” He thought of Esther, and his face hardened. This was the man of whom she was thinking all day and every day; this man who was so obviously going to try and marry Tubby Clare’s little widow.

He stood talking to them for a few moments, then excused himself.

“You haven’t told me where you are staying,” Ashton said.

“No—and I’m going away to-morrow anyway.... When are you coming back to town?”

Ashton looked quickly at his companion. “Oh, not yet awhile,” he said.

“I see.” Micky met his eyes steadily. “By the way, I got your letter,” he said after a moment. “You didn’t ask about that letter you gave me. I posted it——”

Raymond turned crimson. “The letter—oh yes, thanks—thanks, very much. You didn’t take it then?”

“No, I posted it.” Micky’s voice was flinty.

“Er—thanks awfully!” Ashton said again. He twisted his moustache nervously. “I’ll see you some other time,” he said with a rush. “I’ll drop you a line.”

“Right oh!” said Micky laconically.

“I hope I shall see you again too, Mr. Mellows,” Mrs. Clare said. She thought she was saying the right thing. She thought these two men were friends, and she was sufficiently in love with Raymond to wish to be liked by his friends.

“Thank you, Mrs. Clare,” Micky said stolidly. “But I am going back to London to-morrow; I am afraid I shall have very little time, though I should be delighted, of course——”

He felt rather sorry for this woman. After all, she was harmless and good natured, she deserved a better fate than to be snapped up by a good-looking fortune-hunter.

He was getting into his coat in the lounge when Ashton came after him. He looked worried and abashed; he asked a hurried question.

“Everything’s all right, eh, Micky?—Lallie, I mean—I thought from the way you looked just now—she—she’s all right—eh?”

“My dear chap—how should I know? She never answered my letter, though I sent the money, as you wished. I thought you would have heard.”

“I told you I didn’t mean to write—I said that I wanted the whole affair cut out,” Ashton said irritably.

Micky made no response.

“She sure to be all right, anyway,” Ashton said after a moment. “If she hadn’t I should have heard—eh?”

Micky looked at him coolly.

“You rather sound as if you were expecting to hear she’d done something foolish—jumped off Waterloo Bridge or something——” he said drily.

Ashton laughed. “Well, you never know,” he said heartlessly. “Women are such queer creatures—and Lallie was so excitable; she said more than once that she’d do away with herself—it’s all rot, of course, but ... what did you say?”

“Nothing,” said Micky curtly. “Good-night.” He turned on his heel and went out.

CHAPTER XIV

Micky stayed in Paris four days; the four longest days of his life.

He wandered about killing time and wishing everything and every one at the bottom of the sea.

It seemed impossible that he had ever managed to have a good time over here—the noise and bustle of the streets got on his nerves; the things that had always amused him before bored him and left him cold; he thought of London with a deadly sort of home-sickness.

Esther did not mean to write to him, he was sure, and in some ways he hoped she would not; he realised that he was playing a mean trick on her, cheating her out of fond words and a love-letter to which he had not the smallest claim.

He tried to salve his conscience by making up his mind to leave on the Monday morning whatever happened; if there was no letter by that time there would never be one. Esther would have gone to Mrs. Ashton's. It was surprising how much he hated the thought of her being with Raymond's mother. During the interminable hours when he walked about Paris trying to kill time he thought out all manner of possibilities that might result from this unforeseen contingency. Mrs. Ashton might get fond of Esther—and if she got fond of Esther, well—who knew what might happen in the future in spite of Tubby Clare's little widow? He had not run across Ashton again, and he sincerely hoped that he would not.

When Monday morning came he packed his portmanteau before he left his room—there would be no letter for him, so he might as well clear out and go home without making a further fool of himself. There was not the least hope in his heart when he went to the bureau and asked for letters; the reply came as it had done each morning: "Nothing for monsieur...."

Micky turned away. He was half way to the dining-room before it suddenly dawned upon him that they did not know he was expecting letters in the name of Ashton—that he had forgotten to tell them. He went back hurriedly to the bureau.

“Any letters for Ashton?—I am expecting one for a friend of mine of that name....”

He waited breathlessly while the girl sorted through the pigeon-holes on the wall; he felt as if he could hardly breathe when she came back with a grey envelope in her hand.

“Mais oui....” she said smilingly. “I did not know it was for monsieur....”

Mickey almost snatched it from her; he had not even glanced at the writing, but he knew it must be from Esther. He sat down at the breakfast table with his thoughts in a whirl; he was sure that the waiter must know how excited he felt. He ordered coffee and rolls before he opened the envelope; he laid it down on the cloth beside him and stared at it very much as a sentimental girl might stare at her first love-letter, hesitating to open it, wishing to prolong the ultimate delight.

Finally he cut it open carefully and drew out the contents. His pulses were racing, he did not know if shame or delight were the greatest emotion in his heart; he glanced at the first two words and the blood rushed to his face.

It seemed almost sacrilege to read what she had written to the man she loved—he pushed the paper back into its envelope—he did not look at it again till he had finished his pretence of a meal, then he took it out with him into the rather dingy winter garden and sat down in the quietest corner he could find.

There he faced the greatest moment of his life; as to whether he should go on with this thing or wipe it out of his life once and for all.

Ashton had done with Esther; he was as sure of that as he was sure that Ashton meant to marry Mrs. Clare. This being so, was it wrong of him to try and give Esther some happiness in place of what she had lost? She had refused to marry him—she had said that she could never care for him; could he hope to make her change her mind? In his heart he was sure that he could; he wanted her so badly that it seemed to him as if the very force of his desire must compel some return from her.

He sat staring down the dismal garden with moody eyes. He knew it was a big risk; he thought of her as he had first seen her and as he had last seen her. He had never once really thought that she looked happy—she had never quite lost the shadow in her eyes or the droop to her lips which he had at first noticed, and he wanted her to be happy. He wanted her happiness far more than he wanted his own.

He took the letter from his pocket and looked at the address on the envelope. "Raymond Ashton, Esq...."

He hated the sight of that name—some day Esther would hate it too, when she knew how he had deceived her.

It was a great risk—but ...

"I'll chance it," said Mickey under his breath, and drew out the letter again.

"MY DARLING BOY,—You can never know how glad and happy I was to get your letter to-night and to know that I can really write to you at last. I have been so miserable during these weeks in spite of all your goodness—and you have been good. It makes me feel mean and ungrateful now when I remember how horrid I often was to you before you went away. When you come back I will make it all up to you, and show you how nice I really can be, because I do love you—I have never loved any one but you. Thank you so much for the money you have sent me—I was very much down on my luck when it came. They haven't a vacancy for me just now at Eldred's, or else they did not want me back, and I am going to try and find another berth. I am living in a new boarding-house, as you will see; it's ever so much nicer than the Brixton Road, and I shall be able to stay on now you are so generously sending me money. I have made a nice friend here, too, a girl named June Mason—she tells me that she knows your mother, and you, too!—I did not let her know how well I knew you, dear, as I thought perhaps you would rather I said nothing about it. She has a man friend who sometimes comes to see her—a Mr. Mellows—she thinks the world of him, but I think he is detestable...."

Mickey caught his breath hard. After a moment he went on reading:

"June tells me he is very rich, and quite a 'somebody,' but I cannot see anything out of the ordinary about him, and he isn't a bit good looking. He knows you, too—but he does not say much about you. Dearest, it seems such a long time since I saw you—and I cannot help wondering if you really miss me and want me as much as I want you.... Sometimes I would give just anything to lay my head on your shoulder and say how much I love you. I'm very lonely, really; though June is so kind she isn't any one of my very own, is she? And now I wonder if you will be very angry with me if I ask you something? I don't think I should have dared

to, only your last letters have been so dear and kind. Raymond, why can't I come out to you and be with you? We could get married, and we should be ever so happy even if we have to be poor—at least, I know I could, and from your letters, somehow I think it sounds as if you, too, have realised that there isn't much happiness away from me. I have had the offer of a good post—I won't tell you what it is, as I want it to be a surprise to you if I do take it. But if you would like me to come, I will just leave everything and come to you. Couldn't you send me a wire when you get this letter? I shall be longing and waiting to hear from you. I am a little bit afraid in my heart, really, now I have written this, but your last letter is lying beside me, and I keep peeping at it and reading what you say there, and somehow I feel that it's going to be all right.—

With all my love for ever and ever, LALLIE.

Mickey sat there staring down at her signature a long time after he had reached the end.

Then he moved slowly as if it cost him an effort. He was rather pale now, and there was a hard line round his mouth. So that was how she thought of him! Somehow he had not imagined how much it would hurt to read the fond words and to know all the time that they were written to another man. And to a man so unworthy! He thought of Ashton as he had seen him three nights ago with Mrs. Clare; of his callous questioning about Esther; of his almost brutal remarks, and it made his blood boil.

He could picture her so well—waiting for a wire that would never come.

He hated Ashton at that moment. His brows almost met above his eyes in a scowl as he went up to the bureau and asked for his bill. The smiling French girl sobered a little meeting his gaze; for once she did not dare to smile or dimple; she gave him his account silently.

“Ah, but they are funny, these English;” she told her father afterwards. “To-day he had no smile, the tall monsieur—not even one little smile!”

She watched Micky across the lounge with interested eyes as he sat down at one of the tables and proceeded to write a letter. It took him a long time, and twice she saw that he tore up what he had written and flung it into the wastepaper basket, but at last he had finished, and getting up, stalked away.

Celeste ventured out then—there was nobody about, and tiptoeing across the lounge, took the torn papers from the paper-basket. They were torn across and

across, but on one or two slips the writing was visible, and she carried them back with her to the shelter of the bureau.

She spread them out on the desk before her, carefully piecing them together. She knew English quite well, and she soon made out one sentence:—

“It is not that I do not love you—I have never loved you better than at this moment—but...”

Celeste was sentimental. She gave a big sigh of sympathy for the big Englishman. “No wonder he has no smile!” she told herself. “*C’est si triste!*”

CHAPTER XV

It was raining and miserable when Micky arrived in London. The roads were wet and slippery, and every taxi and omnibus splashed pedestrians with mud.

Micky shivered as he stood waiting while a porter lugged his traps down from the rack. He had felt depressed in Paris, but now London seemed a thousand times worse. The sight of Driver waiting on the platform annoyed him. He answered the man's stolid greeting snappishly. He had wanted to come home, and yet now he was here he wished himself a thousand miles away. He leaned back in a corner of the taxi and shut his eyes.

The last four days had got on his nerves; Esther's letter in his pocket was like an eternal reproach.

Why had he come back at all? She did not want him—nobody wanted him in the whole forsaken world. The silence of his flat seemed a thing to be dreaded in his present mood. Driver's inscrutable face would, he felt, drive him mad. With sudden impulse he leaned forward and called to the chauffeur, "Stop—I've changed my mind—drive me back to the Savoy...."

There would be life there, at any rate—life and people and music—something to make a man forget the depression that sat like a ton weight on his shoulders.

He felt utterly at a loose end; he stalked moodily into the lounge. There were many people there, girls in pretty dinner frocks, with their attendant cavaliers. Micky glanced at none of them, till suddenly a girl who had been sitting on a couch listening rather listlessly to the conversation of a youth beside her, rose to her feet when she saw Micky, the hot colour flying to her cheeks.

For a moment she hesitated, waiting for him to look at her, to speak—but Micky had stalked by without turning his eyes, and after the barest second she followed and touched his arm.

"Micky...." she said breathlessly, and again "Micky," with an odd little catch in her voice.

Micky turned as if he had been shot, then stopped dead, colouring up to the roots of his hair, for the girl was Marie Deland.

She smiled tremulously, reading the distress in his eyes.

“I thought I was never going to see you any more,” she said. She tried hard to speak casually, but her voice quivered a little. “Where have you been hiding all this time, Micky?”

Micky stammered out that he really didn’t know—that he’d only just come back from Paris—that he did call to see her one night, but that they told him she wasn’t in. She broke in there impetuously—

“I know; I’m so sorry. It wasn’t my fault. I was there all the time. Mother——” She stopped, biting her lip, but there was no need to explain further. Micky could well imagine that it was by Mrs. Deland’s orders that the butler had said “Not at home.”

His heart was full of remorse as he looked down at Marie. Such a little while ago he had thought of her as his wife. He had fully meant to marry her.

He broke out again agitatedly—

“I know you must think I’m an awful sweep. I—I—oh, I can’t explain.” He glanced past her to where the rather vapid-looking youth to whom she had been speaking sat tugging at an incipient moustache.

“What are you doing here?” he asked again. “Who are you with?”

She told him that she was with her married sister and some friends.

“We’re going to have dinner here,” she said. She was longing to ask Micky to dine with them, but was obviously afraid to do so.

After a moment—

“I suppose I ought to be going,” she said. “Violet will wonder where I am, Micky.” She looked up at him with abashed eyes. “I—I suppose—you wouldn’t—will you come out to tea with me to-morrow?”

Micky’s face reflected the flush in her own; he looked away in miserable embarrassment. He knew that she felt the same towards him as she had done before that memorable New Year’s Eve, and he knew that whatever happened now he could never feel the same to her any more.

He answered that he would be pleased, very pleased. Where should he meet her—or should he call for her?

“I’ll meet you,” she said quickly. “You know where we always used to go—I’ll be there at four, Micky.”

She put out her hand and Micky was forced to take it; he felt how her fingers shook in his, and he cursed himself for a brute as he turned away and left her.

In a way he was glad they had met. Any other woman would have given him the snubbing which he knew he so richly deserved. Deep down in his heart he wished that she had done so; anything would have been easier to meet than this trembling overture of friendship. He knew that the little abashed expression in Marie’s dark eyes could only mean one thing, that he had cut her to the soul and that she still cared for him.

He left the Savoy without having any dinner; he went back to his rooms, where the imperturbable Driver was brushing and refolding his master’s clothes. It had almost broken Driver’s heart to see the way in which Micky had packed his things; he raised eyes of wooden reproach as Micky entered the room.

There was a pile of letters on the table. Micky flicked them through carelessly; nothing of interest—a few bills and a good many invitations; nothing from Esther—not even a note from June.

He sat down by the fire and proceeded to cut the many envelopes open. He kept thinking of Marie and wondering if it would be kinder not to meet her tomorrow, after all; if he could possibly write her a note that would tactfully explain the situation.

He just glanced at each of the notes as he opened them, and let them drop to the carpet at his feet. They could be answered later; there was nothing of importance, nothing he ... his attention was arrested:—

“DEAR MR. MELLOWES,—I wonder if it will be asking too much of you to come round and see me one afternoon for half an hour?—

Yours sincerely, LAURA ASHTON.”

Micky glanced quickly at the address at the top of the paper—it was from Raymond’s mother.

What in the world could she want with him, he wondered blankly. He looked across at Driver.

“This note—the one that came by hand—when did it come?” he asked.

Driver replied that it had been there for two days. He waited a moment, then

went on brushing Micky's coat.

Micky felt rather disturbed.

Raymond's mother! What in the wide world could she want with him? Supposing it were anything to do with Esther ...

He wrote a note in reply at once and said he would call the following afternoon; he could just look in early for half an hour and go on afterwards to meet Marie; it was strange how he dreaded both these appointments.

He felt ridiculously nervous when he reached Mrs. Ashton's house. For the first time it occurred to him that possibly Esther would be here too.

He was kept waiting some minutes in the drawing room—minutes during which he wandered restlessly about staring at the pictures and the photographs.

There were many portraits of Raymond—Raymond at all stages of his chequered career, smiling and handsome. Micky turned his back on them with a feeling of disgust.

The door opened behind him, and, turning sharply, he found himself face to face with Mrs. Ashton.

She came forward with outstretched hand.

“This is kind of you, Mr. Mellowes. I did not know you had been away till I got your note this morning. I was wondering why I had had no reply to mine.”

Micky blurted out that he had been in Paris—that he only came back yesterday evening.

Mrs. Ashton’s face changed a little.

“Paris! Have you been with that son of mine?” she asked sharply.

Micky coloured. “I met him—quite by chance, though. We were not together more than a few minutes.”

She smiled rather ironically.

“Have you got tired of him at last, then?” she asked. She moved over to the fire. She looked back at Micky quizzically. “I have often wondered how you put up with his friendship so long, Mr. Mellowes,” she added rather sadly.

Micky felt embarrassed. He had always liked Mrs. Ashton. He stammered out that he and Raymond had always been very good friends.

She drew her chair a little closer to the fire.

“Very well—then, perhaps, you will be kind enough to answer a question I am going to ask you. Mr. Mellowes, what was the name of that girl at Eldred’s whom Raymond was always about with before Christmas?”

The question was so unexpected that Micky was utterly taken aback. Before he was aware of it he had told a lie.

“I don’t know—at least, he always spoke of her as ‘Lallie.’ I never once saw him with her, Mrs. Ashton—he never introduced me to her.”

She looked rather incredulous.

“And yet you were such friends,” she said.

Micky coloured.

“Our tastes were not always identical,” he said rather stiffly. “I am not very interested in women, and he——”

“And he is,” she finished for him. “There is no need to tell me that—I know my son. So you cannot tell me the name of this girl? I had hoped that you would be able to do so.”

Micky met her eyes unflinchingly.

“I dare say I could find out,” he said. “If she is still at Eldred’s.”

“She is not there.” Mrs. Ashton looked up at Micky with an anxious line between her handsome eyes. “Mr. Mellowes, I have always prided myself on my sense of justice, and somehow lately I have got an uncomfortable feeling that when I forbade Raymond to have anything more to do with that girl it would have been better if I had advised her to have nothing more to do with him. He is my son, and perhaps it seems strange for me to speak about him like that, but you cannot have been friends with him all these months without finding him out, so I need not apologise. Raymond is just his father over again....” She paused, and a painful little smile curved her lips.

She looked at Micky rather pathetically. “There is no need for me to say any more, is there?” she asked.

Micky did not answer. He had heard many stories about Raymond’s father, all more or less unsavoury, and he knew that from all accounts Mrs. Ashton had been greatly to be pitied during his lifetime.

“So if you can’t help me in this,” she went on presently, “I am afraid I have brought you here for nothing. I want to find out who this girl is, and see her for myself.” She paused, but Micky’s face was inscrutable.

In his heart he was convinced that she did not believe him, but he had no intention of telling her Esther’s name; he longed to know if Esther were in the house, but, of course, it was impossible to ask.

It almost seemed as if Mrs. Ashton could read his thoughts, for she said suddenly—

“Do you know, Mr. Mellowes, that I am going to have a companion?”

Micky echoed her last word vacantly.

“Companion?—I—er....”

“Yes, a girl,” Mrs. Ashton went on; “I have always envied people with daughters; a daughter is so much more to a mother than a son; but as I was not fortunate enough to have one of my own I am going to try having a companion.

Raymond will be annoyed, I dare say—he has always pooh-poohed the idea when I have mentioned it to him, but now——” she shrugged her shoulders and sighed impatiently. “Well, he can no longer object, I think, seeing that he is to be married himself....”

Micky made a little quick movement, almost knocking over a vase of flowers standing at his elbow; he recovered himself with an effort.

“Married?” he said. “Why, I thought....” he broke off. “He did not say anything about it to me when I met him in Paris,” he said lamely.

“No?” Her handsome eyes searched his agitated face critically. “Well, he is to be married all the same,” she said. “I heard from him only this morning. He is engaged to Tom Clare’s widow—Tubby Clare, I believe he was always called.”

CHAPTER XVI

When Micky left Mrs. Ashton he raced off to meet Marie.

She was looking quite her prettiest, in dark furs with a bunch of violets in the breast of her coat, but Micky would not have noticed if she had been shabby, his thoughts were elsewhere. He did not even see that she wore the bracelet he had given her for a Christmas present, or remember that he had once told her violets were his favourite flowers.

He apologised breathlessly for being late.

“I had an appointment,” he explained. “Raymond’s mother; she wrote and asked me to call this afternoon.” He hesitated, then added, “Did you know that Raymond is going to be married? Oh, but, of course, you cannot know, as Mrs. Ashton only knew this morning.”

Marie’s dark eyes opened; like most women, she loved to hear of an engagement or marriage.

“Really?” she said. “At last!—not to—surely not to that little girl at Eldred’s?”

Micky flushed angrily. Did every one know about Esther? he asked himself savagely. He answered shortly that it was to Mrs. Clare, Tubby Clare’s little widow.

Marie looked amazed.

“But we all thought——” she said, then stopped, remembering that Micky and Raymond had been great friends. “I hope he’ll be happy,” she said lamely.

Micky laughed shortly.

“I don’t,” he said. “He doesn’t deserve to be.”

She made no comment.

There was an excited flush in her cheeks, and a nervous note in her voice when she spoke; it was like old times to be here with him again, until she met his eyes across the little table, and then it seemed as if she were looking into the face of a

stranger, a man who was like Micky—enough like him to hurt, and yet not Micky at all.

She aroused herself to amuse him. Micky had always told her she cheered him up in the old days, but this afternoon he answered her in monosyllables, and she saw with bitter mortification how often he looked at the clock. At last she was driven to remark on it.

“Micky, are you in a hurry to get away?”

She asked the question lightly, but there was a strained note in her voice.

Micky did not look at her.

“No—no, not at all,” he said hurriedly. “But I suppose we ought to be moving soon....” There was a little pause. “It’s been nice seeing you again,” he added with an effort.

She sat staring down at her plate. Her pretty colour had faded; she was very pale, and she bit her lip hard to hide its trembling.

Suddenly she looked up at him.

“Micky—may I ask you a question?...”

“A hundred if you like.”

She picked up a teaspoon and twisted it nervously. Micky watched her with apprehension; he knew what was coming, and his heart sank.

If only she would be content to leave things as they were; if only she would accept the friendship he was willing to give and close the book of the past for ever.

He did not understand that it was because she cared for him so much that at the risk of losing her self-respect and pride she must ask him for the truth, must know ...

He heard her catch her breath, then suddenly she spoke:

“Micky ... why was it? What have I done?”

There was a quiver in her voice that set him on edge; he could not stand the sound of unhappiness in any woman’s voice, and he had once thought he loved Marie....

He answered without looking at her, realising that it was kinder to tell the truth out and have done with it.

“I meant to have written to you—I hope some day you will try and forgive me, but ... but....” He could not go on for the life of him, but he had said enough, and he knew that she understood.

“You mean ... you mean that there is some one else?” she asked with stiff lips.

“Yes.” He looked at her white, stricken face, and felt himself a brute.

It seemed an eternity before she could steady her voice enough to speak.

“Is it—is it some one I know?”

“No, dear,” said Micky very gently. “It isn’t any one you have ever seen——”

She picked up her big muff suddenly and held it so that her face was hidden; the little word of endearment that had escaped Micky’s lips had almost broken her down. This was the end of all she had ever hoped for, and for the moment she could not choke the anguish in her heart.

The following silence seemed unending; then she looked round for her gloves, and put them on, buttoning them with shaking fingers.

“I am ready if you are,” she said. She did not look at him, but it felt like dying to walk beside him out of the shop and into the cold air and know that perhaps this was the last time they would ever be alone, he and she. Once her steps faltered a little, and Micky put out his hand to steady her, but she drew away from him.

“Please don’t,” she said in a whisper.

There was a taxi waiting at the roadside, and Micky called to the man. There was a slight cold drizzle of rain falling as he held open the door. He would have followed but she stopped him. “I should like to go alone, if you don’t mind.”

He looked up, and for a moment he saw her face in the light of the taxi lamp; such a white, quivering face it was.

“Marie!...” said Micky in a choked voice, but she waved him away.

He stood there on the kerb till the taxi had whirled out of sight, and once again he asked himself desperately if it were all worth while, if he were not throwing away the real thing for a chimera.

There was probably a no more unhappy man in London at that moment than Micky Mellowes.

CHAPTER XVII

Esther had spent a week indoors with a cold, and it was the longest she could ever remember. June was kindness itself, and fussed and petted and made much of her, but the days dragged.

There was only one thing to live for—the post! And though the rat-tat rang through the house three or four times a day, there was never anything for Esther.

Her own letter to Paris remained unanswered. The telegram for which she longed never came.

June watched her with a mixture of sympathy and impatience.

What was the good of putting all one's eggs in the same basket? she asked herself crossly. What was the good of falling in love if nothing better than unhappiness ever came of it? She began to hate the phantom lover, as she called him, with increased hatred.

"I don't think you're strong enough to go yet, you know," she said to Esther one afternoon when they were sitting together in the firelight. "Write and tell Mrs. Ashton you can't come for another week, or that you can't go at all. I do wish you would."

Esther shook her head.

"I promised to go, and I must do something. I shall be all right by Monday. Mrs. Ashton has waited long enough as it is."

She looked pale and ill, June thought angrily, and put it all down to "that man."

"Has Mr. Mellowes come back from Paris yet?" Esther asked suddenly. June was faintly amazed; Esther never spoke of Micky. She answered rather dubiously that she did not know.

"I expect he's having such a good time that he'll stay for weeks," she added. "I wish he would come back, I want him to get on with my business...."

"Mr. Mellowes...." announced Lydia at the door.

June scrambled to her feet with a scream of delight.

“Micky! you villain! we were just talking about you. When did you come back? Why haven’t you been before? What have you been doing?”

She dragged him over to the fire; she fussed over him and told him he was just in time for tea.

“Esther’s been indoors a week with a cold,” she explained. “No, don’t you get up, Esther. Micky won’t mind....” She pushed Esther back amongst the sofa pillows. “Poor darling! She’s really been quite ill,” she declared.

Micky said formally that he was sorry that she was not well, but that the weather was enough to kill anybody; he added that he had been in town since Sunday, but ...

“Four days, and you’ve not been to see me!” said June. “What a shame, to neglect us so!”

“I’ve been busy,” Micky defended himself; “I expected to hear you had gone to Mrs. Ashton’s,” he said to Esther.

She raised her eyes.

“No—I am going on Monday.”

“Oh,” said Micky blankly.

June had opened the door and was calling over the balusters to Lydia for hot water.

“And bring lots of it,” she said. “We’re thirsty....” She came back into the room. “The postman’s just come,” she said with a nod and a smile to Esther. “Lydia will bring our letters up if there are any.” She turned again to Micky. “Well, truant! And what have you been doing? Having a good time?”

“No, I have not,” Micky said decidedly. “Paris is not what it used to be, or I am not!” He laughed. “How’s the swindle?”

June began to answer, but stopped as Lydia came into the room. She brought a jug of hot water. June danced up to her.

“No letters? I thought I heard the postman.”

“One for Miss Shepstone,” Lydia said smilingly.

Micky looked across at Esther—her whole face was transformed as she turned eagerly with outstretched hand.

There was a moment of silence, then she gave a little sigh of utter contentment. June sniffed inelegantly—Micky looked hard into the fire; his heart was thumping; that letter ought to have been delivered yesterday, he knew; it was cursed bad luck that it should arrive while he was here.

There was a little silence in the room while Esther opened it. She seemed to have forgotten that she was not alone. Her pale cheeks were flushed and her whole face tremulous.

June was bustling about, making a great clatter with the teacups. Micky got up and began to prowl round the room; his nerves felt jumpy. Because he knew so well who had written that letter he was sure every one else must know it too. Presently June nudged him as she passed. When he looked at her she made a little grimace.

“Isn’t it awful?” she said in a stage whisper.

Micky smiled stiffly.

“Can’t I help get the tea?” he asked. “Toast some buns or something?”

“There aren’t any to toast,” she told him. “Sit down and make yourself at home. Esther!”—she raised her voice elaborately—“are you going to have any tea, my child?”

Esther had come to the end of her letter; she folded it hurriedly and put it away; she cast a quick look at Micky, but he did not see it. June was chattering away.

“So Esther is going on Monday,” she informed Micky, “and I shall be left once more to my lonesome. I’m not at all sure that I shall stay on myself,” she added. “It’s been so jolly having some one to share this room with me that I’m not looking forward to my own eternal company.”

There was a little silence.

“I may not go after all,” Esther said suddenly. There was a note of nervousness in her voice. She coloured, meeting June’s amazed eyes.

June screamed.

“Not go! Well, I never!” She sat down in a heap on the hearthrug staring at Esther. “I never knew such a girl,” she complained. “Micky, I appeal to you....”

But Micky was not going to be appealed to; he was stolidly stirring his tea.

“I suppose I can change my mind if I like?” Esther said.

“Oh, it isn’t you who have changed your mind,” June cut in ironically. “It’s something that phantom lover of yours has said in his letter. Own up, now.”

“Well, and if it is?” Esther demurred. “I suppose he has a right to say what he likes, hasn’t he?” But she was laughing as she spoke; she felt wonderfully happy and light-hearted. “I believe you’re jealous,” she declared.

“Jealous, indeed!” said June indignantly. Then suddenly she sighed. “Well, perhaps I am; who knows? What does he say? or mayn’t we ask?”

Micky had stopped stirring his tea; there was a sort of intentness about his big figure.

Esther looked at him, and suddenly she stiffened.

“Never mind what he says,” she answered defensively.

June laughed.

“Oh, all right—sorry if I was inquisitive.” She deliberately turned and began talking to Micky; Esther was left to herself, but she did not mind, she had enough now to think about. The longed-for letter had come at last.

She woke from her reverie with a start when Micky rose and said he must be going.

“And don’t you be so long before you come and see me again,” June said in her downright way. “And don’t go without that sample, Micky—it will go in your pocket quite easily.” She darted off to her room to fetch it, and Micky moved a step nearer to Esther.

“You have had good news?” he said.

She looked up startled.

Micky’s eyes flamed.

“That being so, of course, it is useless for me to ask if you have changed your mind yet?” he said again.

Esther gave a stifled cry.

“Are you trying to insult me?” she asked under her breath.

He half smiled.

“I am, if it’s an insult to ask you to marry me.”

There was no time for more. June came back then with her hands full of

samples, which she proceeded to stuff into Micky's pocket.

He submitted laughingly.

"Supposing I get run over!" he said resignedly. "People will think I've been robbing a beauty shop."

"It will be a fine advertisement for me, anyway," June declared. "Can't you see all the halfpenny papers coming out with great headlines? Tragic Death of a Young Millionaire! Pockets Stuffed with June Mason's Skin Food!" She laughed merrily. "That would be worth something, eh, Micky?"

"Heartless woman!" he answered. He turned to Esther. "Good-bye, Miss Shepstone."

Esther was glad that he did not offer to shake hands with her; she was glad that June went to see him off. As soon as the door had closed on them she took her letter out again; she pressed the paper to her lips.

It was worth waiting for, worth the heartache and disappointment; she closed her eyes for a moment and thought of Raymond Ashton. How she must have misjudged him in the past. It did not seem true now that they had ever quarrelled, or parted in anger; that she had ever been so unhappy that she did not want to live....

June came running up the stairs; she was singing cheerily; Esther smiled as she listened ... it must be wonderful to be always as happy and light-hearted as June.

"Well, dreamer?" said June. She shut the door with a little slam and came over to where her friend sat. "A penny for your thoughts."

She looked at Esther's flushed face in the firelight.

"And so everything is all right after all, eh?" she asked.

Esther nodded.

"And I'm not really going to Mrs. Ashton's after all," she said with a sort of shamefaced delight. "Only I didn't want to say so in front of Mr. Mellowes.... Oh, aren't you glad?" she asked anxiously.

"My dear, of course I am!" said June heartily. "But for the life of me I can't understand how it is that this man of yours has got such an influence over you. He's only got to hold up his little finger and you're on your knees. I'm beginning to think he must be a kind of wonder after all."

Esther did not answer for a moment.

“No,” she said. “He isn’t at all wonderful, really, except to me, and—and I love him, you see,” she added shyly. “I suppose every man is wonderful to the woman who loves him.”

“Until she’s his wife,” said June tartly. “And then she thinks he’s all sorts of an idiot, and tells him so.”

But Esther was too happy to take her seriously.

“You’ve never been in love,” she said, “or you wouldn’t talk like that.”

“And I never wish to be in love, thank you,” said June. “If you and Micky are samples of objects who are in love....” She made a little grimace, screwing up her nose in disgust.

Esther coloured.

“Micky!” she said, surprised into using his Christian name. “Is he in love? How do you know he is?”

“I’m not a bat, and I haven’t known Micky years for nothing. He hasn’t been himself for a long time. I’ve seen it, though I haven’t said a word. He’s in love right enough, there can’t be any other explanation, seeing that he’s too rich to ever be in debt, and they are the only two things that ever make a man miserable,” she added.

Esther wondered if June was trying to sound her.

“I don’t know who the wretched female is,” June went on, puckering her brows. “I’ve tried to guess, but it’s no good. There was a Miss Deland he used to go about with at one time, but I know that’s all off.”

“Was he engaged to her?”

“No—not really! But her people wanted it, and Micky didn’t mind; he’d have drifted into it sure enough if something very tremendous hadn’t happened to make him change his mind. I know Micky—he’d have slipped into matrimony as easily as he gets into a taxi, unless some one had turned him away from it.” She glanced down at the letter in Esther’s lap. “Tell me what he says,” she coaxed. “Take pity on a poor creature who hasn’t a phantom lover of her own, or a real one either,” she added laughing.

Esther hesitated.

“I’m never quite sure whether you’re laughing at me or not,” she said nervously. “I know you don’t mean to, but—”

June laid her hand on Esther's lap.

"I laugh at every one and everything," she said. "But it's only my way, and doesn't mean anything. Perhaps I'm a bit jealous—because you love this phantom lover so much better than you love me," she added.

Esther drew the letter from its envelope.

"I'll read you just a few little bits," she said shyly. The blood surged into her pretty face.

June leaned back in a corner and closed her eyes. She held a cigarette between her lips and puffed at it lazily. There was a little silence; then Esther said suddenly—

"I can't. It makes me feel too self-conscious. But he just says that he doesn't want me to go into any berth just yet. He says that he may be home very soon now...."

"Oh!" said June chagrined. "And then, of course, you'll be married and live happily ever after...."

"Yes," said Esther. "I hope so."

June opened her eyes.

Charlie, curled up on his cushion, started to purr lazily. Presently June flopped down on her knees beside him and began stroking his head.

"You'll let me have Charlie when you're married, won't you?" she said suddenly. "I am sure the phantom lover won't want him."

Esther did not answer; she hated herself for remembering that Raymond had once said he loathed cats.

"I told you how Micky went into a pond after a drowning kitten, didn't I?" June asked reminiscently. "I should have loved him for that alone, if for nothing else...."

Esther made no comment. She moved a little, and the letter slipped from her lap to the floor.

June picked it up.

"Or is it sacrilege to touch it?" she asked teasingly. She laid it on Esther's lap.

"Well, I couldn't help seeing the writing," she said, after a moment. "And, do you know, it's awfully like Micky's! If I hadn't known it wasn't his I should

have declared it was,” she said rather disconnectedly.

Esther grabbed the letter up.

“Well, it isn’t his, anyway,” she said sharply.

June laughed.

CHAPTER XVIII

Esther wrote to Mrs. Ashton that same night and told her she must regretfully decline the offered position; she gave no reason, but she permitted herself a little sigh of regret when the letter was dispatched.

She would like to have gone; she would like to have seen Raymond's home and to have got to know his mother, but it was his wish that she should not go.

She tried to believe that she was happy in the knowledge of his love, but in her heart she knew that she was restless and dissatisfied.

"If I had something to do I should be ever so much happier," she told June again and again, and June quite agreed.

"It must be awful, killing time," she said. "When I think of the life I used to lead at home before I started trying to improve people's complexions, I wonder I didn't go mad. Nothing but silly tea-parties and scandal.... Ugh! But all the same Micky and I agreed that you wouldn't like being at Mrs. Ashton's."

"Micky!" said Esther scornfully. "As if I care what he thinks...."

June looked mildly amazed.

"Oh, all right," she said smoothly. "I suppose I may mention his name sometimes, mayn't I?" She began to laugh. "Do you know that for once in my life I've been totally wrong with regard to you two? I was so sure you'd more than like each other—I even thought it quite possible that Micky might fall in love with you—you're so exactly suited to him."

"I'm glad you think so," said Esther drily. "I'm sorry I can't oblige you by agreeing."

June said "Humph!" She yawned. "All the same," she added after a moment, "I'm convinced that things would have been different if it hadn't been for that phantom lover of yours; you're so crazy about him." There was a touch of exasperation in her voice.

Esther flushed angrily.

“It’s absurd of you to talk like this,” she said. “Mr. Mellowes is the last man on earth I should ever have looked at, even supposing Raymond....” She had spoken the name before she was aware of it; in her momentary flash of temper the secret she had so carefully guarded escaped her.

It was too late to attempt to cover what she had said; she knew by the sudden expression of June’s face that she had heard.

There was a poignant silence, then June sat up with a little jerk.

“Of course, that’s let the cat out of the bag,” she said curtly. “And you let me run him down! How mean, how unutterably mean of you, Esther!... I can’t think now why I never guessed! Raymond Ashton!”

Esther had flushed scarlet.

“I never said that was his name,” she tried to defend herself. “It’s purely your imagination. And even supposing it is, do you think I mind what you say about him, or Mr. Mellowes either? Neither of you know him as I do, or you would never say such cruel, wicked things.” She stopped with a sob in her voice.

“Then it is Raymond Ashton?” June said gently. She got up and came over to where Esther was sitting. “Oh, I am sorry I said anything about him!” she cried impulsively. “You ought to have stopped me. How on earth was I to know?”

“I don’t care what you said; it’s all untrue,” Esther protested stormily. “Nothing you could ever say about him would influence me or make me feel any differently.”

June got up for a cigarette; when she was nonplussed she invariably had to smoke; she took several agitated puffs before she looked at her friend again.

“Well, anything I said was in absolute innocence, you know that,” she said in distress. “I’d no more idea than the dead that you and he.... So that’s why he doesn’t want you to go to his mother?”

“He doesn’t know; I never told him it was to Mrs. Ashton’s—I just said I had had an offer of a berth. I suppose you are trying to make out now that he——”

“Heaven bless the child!” June cried. “I’m not trying to make out anything! I’m struck all of a heap like! as Lydia says. So he’s the phantom lover, is he?... Well—I can’t find any words to suit the case.”

“He’s not a phantom lover,” Esther protested. “He’s a real lover, a very real lover.”

June stopped and took her hand.

“I’m not going to let you quarrel with me over him, no matter how badly you want to,” she said. “No man is worth two friends having a row over. I’m quite prepared to take him to my arms and love him if you do.... Oh, Esther, don’t look like that!”

There were tears in Esther’s eyes, and her lips were trembling. “You’re making fun of me,” she protested. “It’s unkind of you.”

June turned away; she wondered if perhaps, after all, she and every one else had thoroughly misunderstood Raymond, and if this girl’s warm championing of him was deserved.

“He’s not nearly good enough for her,” she was telling herself indignantly. “She’ll never really be happy with him.”

“I hope you won’t tell Mr. Mellows, or any one else,” Esther was saying defiantly. “I don’t want my affairs talked over by every one.”

“I shall not tell any one,” June said quietly.

She stood looking down into the fire, and her face was troubled.

Presently she walked to Esther, and, stooping, kissed her.

“I’m awfully glad I know,” she said. “It makes our friendship seem so much more real.”

Esther smiled faintly.

But June was ill at ease. She felt instinctively that things were not all right.

“It isn’t the man himself,” she told herself obstinately. “It’s some foolish, mistaken ideal of him that she has created.”

She wondered what he really was doing in Paris. Micky would know—he and Micky had been such great friends. There would be no harm in speaking of him to Micky, at least that would not be betraying any secret or confidence.

She rang Micky up the following morning. She made the excuse that she wanted to see him on business. She took him to lunch at her club.

“You don’t look well,” was her greeting. “What’s the matter, Micky?”

Micky frowned. If there was one thing he hated it was for any one to remark on his appearance. He answered brusquely that he had never been better in his life.

“By the way, I was going to write when you rang up,” he said. “I’ve got some tickets for a first night to-morrow. Would you care to come along and—and bring Miss Shepstone?”

June beamed. She liked going out with Micky.

“I should love it,” she said with enthusiasm. “I can’t answer for Esther, though.”

“Try to persuade her,” he urged carelessly. “I don’t suppose she’s been about much; it would do her good.”

“She told me she loves theatres,” June admitted; “but the trouble will probably be that she hasn’t got a dress.”

“A dress?” Micky echoed vaguely. “Can’t you lend her one of yours?”

June laughed.

“My dear boy, she’s much taller than me and slimmer. ... However, I’ll see what can be done. Where shall we meet you?”

“I’ll call for you at seven. We’ll have some grub first.”

“Good! And if Esther won’t come?”

“Oh, well, if she won’t, you come along, of course; but try and persuade her.”

“She’s refused Mrs. Ashton’s offer, you know,” June said presently. She kept her eyes lowered; she felt self-conscious and guilty.

“Has she?” Micky did not sound particularly interested.

“Yes; the phantom lover objected, or something, and I think it’s just as well.”

“She said something about it when I had tea with you the other day.”

June nodded.

“So she did. I dare say that wretched Raymond would have tried to make love to her if she had gone,” she added deliberately.

“He’s away just now,” Micky said quickly. “I ran across him when I was over in Paris last week.”

June looked up quickly.

“Did you? What’s he doing there?”

“Nothing particular; he often goes over, you know.”

“I can’t stand that man,” June said, after a moment.

“No?” Micky’s voice was casual.

“I never could see why you were so thick with him,” she went on.

Micky laughed lazily.

“Perhaps because I haven’t your gift of second sight, my dear,” he said.

“I shouldn’t have thought it would need second sight to see what he is,” June declared.

She looked across at Micky and was surprised by the hard expression of his face. “I hate men who flirt,” she added. “Micky, do you know that I’ve got a kind of feeling about Esther’s phantom lover that he doesn’t really exist?”

Micky sat up with sudden attention.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

She shrugged her shoulders.

“I mean that he isn’t really a tangible man,” she explained haltingly.

Micky laughed.

“Oh yes, he is,” he said.

June caught her breath.

“You don’t mean—oh, do you mean that you know him?” she asked excitedly.

Micky met her eyes with a faintly ironical smile in his own.

“Yes, I know him,” he answered hardily. “And so do you. My dear, I may be very green, but your careful questioning wouldn’t deceive a mouse.”

“Micky!” said June indignantly. She flushed all over her face, and her queer eyes blazed angrily. She really felt that she had done a dreadful thing in having allowed him to guess.

“You needn’t look so upset,” Micky said. “You’ve not told me anything; I knew it long before you did.”

“When? How—oh, Micky, do tell me!”

“There’s nothing to tell. Ashton often spoke about her to me. I knew she was at Eldred’s, and—well that’s all,” he added lamely.

“All!” said June disappointedly. “But surely you know more than that! What do you think of him? Do you think he really cares for her? Oh, Micky, do you think

he's good enough for her?"

Micky looked away.

"I don't know that it matters very much what I think," he said drily. "She—she loves him apparently, and that's all that counts, I imagine."

"Yes, she loves him right enough," June admitted gloomily. "It was quite an accident that she told me his name, of course, and she made me promise not to tell any one, particularly you. I suppose because she knows that you and he were friends."

"Possibly, if she does know. I rather doubt if Ashton said much to her about me, though. He used to keep things to himself a good deal." He picked up the menu. "Aren't you going to have anything more to eat? I thought you were hungry."

"I'm not now; I'm too excited. Micky, when you saw him in Paris, didn't he say anything, ask you anything? Oh, it all seems so extraordinary!"

"My dear girl, what could he ask me?" Micky objected gently. "I never discuss—Miss Shepstone with him, and he is not in the least likely to tell me his private affairs, and I'm sure I don't want to know them."

June was silent for a moment.

"Esther is laying up trouble for herself," she said then. "Don't you think she is?"

"I haven't thought about it," Micky maintained stolidly. "And if you take my advice, you won't either. It never does to meddle with other people's affairs."

"But she's my friend," June objected hotly. "And do you mean to say that I have got to stand by and see her ruin her life?"

Micky shrugged his shoulders.

"She's not married yet," he said laconically. "Have some tipsy cake, will you?"

"No—I don't want any more."

"Well, I do. Waitress...."

It was a deliberate attempt to change the conversation, and June knew it; she sat back in her chair frowning.

She supposed Micky would not talk about Ashton because he was his friend; men were so absurdly loyal to one another.

"If you loved Esther as much as I do," she said suddenly, "you wouldn't stand by

and say nothing while she goes and marries that man.”

Micky was prodding the tipsy cake with a fork.

“She hasn’t married him yet,” he said stoically. “And if she’s happy——”

“She isn’t, my good man! at least only in theory!” June declared. “It’s not Raymond Ashton she really cares for, but some wonderful person she thinks he is. She is looking at him through rose-coloured glasses.”

Micky smiled.

“That’s what most women do, isn’t it?” he asked. “My dear girl, don’t get so upset; I thought you wanted to bring me out to talk business.”

“This is business, my business at least, even if you’re not interested. No wonder you didn’t want her to go to Mrs. Ashton’s!”

Micky coloured.

“Well—I thought it would be better not, certainly.”

June regarded him severely.

“You’re a deep soul,” she said. “I never even guessed that you knew anything.”

“Why should you? And I don’t know anything. Can’t we talk about something else?” he asked plaintively.

It was getting on his nerves, this constant conversation about Esther.

“So you’ll come along to-morrow, eh?” he asked presently. “It’s a long time since we went for a little jaunt together.”

“I shall love it.” But June answered absently; her thoughts were still with Esther.

Silence fell. Micky had finished his tipsy cake and was leaning back in his chair, a cigarette hanging dejectedly between his lips. He had lit it, but it had gone out, and though matches stood beside him he made no effort to light it again.

June watched him across the table. He didn’t look a bit well, she thought. What was the matter with him?

“You know, Micky,” she said impulsively, “I had quite made up my mind that you and Esther were to fall in love with one another. It would have been ideal, wouldn’t it?” she asked wickedly.

A little spasm crossed Micky’s face, but it was gone so quickly June could never be quite sure if she had not imagined it.

“Ideal,” he said quietly. “Shall we go?”

“I’ll let you know about to-morrow,” June said, as they parted. “I shall have to wear the same old purple frock I wore when you took me out last time; you won’t mind?”

“Not a bit, as long as you come; and ... let me know about Miss Shepstone. If she won’t come I’ll give the ticket away.”

“I’ll let you know,” said June vaguely.

She walked home deep in thought. So Micky had known all along? She was not quite sure that she was pleased with him for keeping the fact from her. They had been such pals, he and she; surely he might have trusted her and told her!

“I suppose I’m not to be trusted with a secret, though,” she thought with a comical sigh. “Look how easily I gave Esther’s away!”

Tea was ready when she got in, and Esther and Charlie sat curled up together in the firelight.

“I’ve got an invitation for us both to-morrow night,” June said, even as she opened the door.

Esther looked up eagerly; she had had rather a dull day of it.

“A theatre,” said June. “It’s from Micky. I tell you at once, so you shan’t throw cold water on it. He’s got some seats for a first night, and asks us both to go. What do you say?”

“I haven’t a dress,” said Esther promptly.

“I told him you’d say that,” June answered calmly, “and he said it didn’t matter—or something to that effect. Micky never notices what you wear,” she went on airily. “I’m going to wear an old purple rag that I’ve had for about forty years.”

Esther laughed. “I dare say I can buy one in time,” she said; she did not intend Micky to think she could not afford a frock. “I think I should rather like to go,” she added shyly.

“Good!” June hid the amazement she felt. “Well, Micky’s going to call for us and take us out to dinner first. It’ll be a scrumptious dinner—Micky always does the thing in style!”

“It’s kind of him to ask me,” Esther said.

“Why?” June demanded. “Oh, you mean because you don’t like one another? But that wouldn’t trouble Micky; he’d take you out if he hated the sight of you,

he's so kind-hearted."

"Thank you for a doubtful compliment," said Esther.

She was making plans rapidly in her mind. Micky had never seen her well dressed.

"I had another cheque from Raymond this morning," she said flushing. "So it will come in useful. I can get a ready-made frock—I shan't look so bad."

"You'll look an angel whatever you wear," said June affectionately. "I know a little woman just off the Brompton Road who'll fix you up," June said eagerly. "She's got the tiniest shop, but it's cram full of the sweetest things. She's awfully nice, too."

"I can't afford much," Esther said dubiously.

"She won't charge you much," June declared. "She's a friend of mine. She has my creams on her counter. It's a fine advertisement, you see. She gets lots of actresses and smart people in, and they ask what it is, and try a jar and send for more, and, there you are!"

Esther laughed.

"If she's too expensive——" she protested.

But she ended by paying much more than she had originally intended. There was such a gem of a frock—black velvet and a white transparent bodice.

"You look a duck!" June declared. "Doesn't she, Ffine?"

But the mirror told Esther how charming she really looked without any further words.

"I really ought not to have spent so much," she said as they went home. "But it is rather nice, isn't it?"

"Micky will be absolutely bowled over," June declared. "I shall have to take a back seat all the evening."

And Micky apparently was "bowled over," judging by the look that crept into his eyes when he arrived and found Esther alone in the sitting-room.

June was late, as usual; she called out to him from her room that she wouldn't be half a minute.

"There's no hurry," Micky answered quickly. He went over to where Esther stood, a little flushed and shy in her new frock.

“It’s very kind of you to come,” he said rather agitatedly. She looked up.

“It’s very kind of you to ask me,” she answered. She felt much more at her ease with him now. She knew that she was looking particularly pretty. “And it isn’t the first time we have had dinner together, is it?” she asked.

He answered eagerly that he was glad she remembered; he had almost thought she must have forgotten.

“No, I shall never forget that, though it seems so long ago since that night. I was unhappy then, but now....”

“But now?” he asked as she paused.

“Now everything has come right,” she told him. “You said you were sure it would, if you remember.”

His face changed a little.

“I am glad I was such a good prophet,” he said.

June came bustling in; she was flushed and breathless, and laden with flowers, fan, and gloves, all of which she dropped to the sofa.

“I’m quite ready. Esther, where’s my cloak? Do find it, there’s an angel. Oh, and my slippers—I’ve got everything else....”

But it was at least another ten minutes before they were in the taxi and racing away through the night.

“I’ve booked a table at Marnio’s,” Micky said. “I hope you like Marnio’s, June?”

“I like anything to-night,” she told him. “I’m going to enjoy myself thoroughly, whatever happens.”

Micky glanced at Esther.

“And you, Miss Shepstone?” he asked rather nervously.

“Esther’s too excited to speak,” June answered for her. “Oh, are we here already?”

She led the way into the lounge of the big restaurant; Micky was well known here apparently.

“Every one in London knows Micky,” June whispered to Esther with a sort of pride. “Look at the attention he gets!”

Esther glanced at him; probably anybody with Micky’s money could get the

same attention, she thought.

There were a good many people in the lounge; Esther looked at them interestedly. Some of the women were beautifully dressed, but the black and white frock held its own bravely.

“You look nicer than any of them,” June told her. “I knew—hullo!—Micky’s found a friend.” She looked across to where he was standing, and Esther followed her gaze.

Micky was talking to two ladies—one of them was young and rather pretty, and the other—Esther’s face flushed suddenly, and she bit her lip hard, for the other was Mrs. Ashton, Raymond’s mother.

CHAPTER XIX

Esther unconsciously put out her hand and grasped June's arm; she would have given anything had it been possible to run away. She saw Mrs. Ashton turn and look towards where they were standing, and in another moment she had crossed the lounge and was shaking hands with June.

"I was just inviting Mr. Mellowes to come and dine with us," she said. "But he tells me he already has an engagement." Her eyes smiled at June. "I suppose you are the engagement?" she submitted.

June laughed.

A string band was playing a ragtime tune when they entered the restaurant. To Esther's unaccustomed eyes the room with its flowers and many lights was the most wonderful place she had ever seen. She kept close to Micky as he threaded his way through the small tables till he found their own, rather at the end of the room and away from the noisy band.

He put Esther into a comfortable chair and himself took her cloak.

"You don't mind being left while I go back for June?" he asked hurriedly; "she seems to have got lost."

Esther looked after him as he went quickly back down the length of the room. She liked him in evening dress. If only it had been Raymond instead!—she stifled a little sigh; she meant to enjoy herself this evening; she was not going to allow one single despondent thought.

June and Micky rejoined her almost at once.

"I thought some one had eloped with you," June said laughingly. "Where did you get to? Micky, how hot this room is—I'm just stifling!"

She threw off her wrap and snatched up a paper fan from the table. Micky sat down between the two girls.

"Miss Shepstone didn't want to see Mrs. Ashton, I rather fancy," he said coolly. He looked at Esther with a slight smile in his eyes. "I believe she was afraid Mrs.

Ashton would demand a reason for having had her kind offer so cavalierly refused," he went on banteringly.

Esther laughed.

"Yes, I believe I was," she admitted. "I'm an awful coward over explaining things to people."

"So am I," said Micky drily. He was wondering how he was ever going to explain the most difficult occurrence of his whole life, and if, when he had done so, it would ever be believed.

He looked at Esther a great deal during dinner; he had never seen her so animated; her eyes were sparkling, and her cheeks were flushed; she talked a great deal, and was particularly friendly to him; he was quite sorry when it was time to go on to the theatre.

As they left the restaurant he noticed that she kept close to him again, and that she looked anxiously round for Mrs. Ashton.

"It's all right," he said. "She's upstairs in the gallery."

She smiled. She thought he was very quick to understand her. Raymond had never seemed to understand things without an explanation. She wished he had been rather more like Micky in some ways; she wished—she looked up at Micky guiltily; how could she compare the two men?—the one whom she loved, and the other whom she did not even like!

They were late, and the curtain had risen when they were shown into their seats. The theatre was dark, and Esther could hardly see her way. She put out her hand with a smothered laugh and felt for Micky's. "I can't see," she said.

His fingers closed about hers; such a little hand it felt. He wondered why she was being so kind to him to-night. He did not realise that she was enjoying herself so much that she felt on good terms with the whole world.

Esther sat between him and June, and Micky hardly looked at the stage at all. His eyes turned again and again to her rapt face and the eagerness of her eyes.

She had been to theatres lots of times, so she told him in a whisper, but never in the stalls before. She asked him if he didn't like some of the frocks worn by the people close by.

Micky's eyes flashed.

"Not so well as yours," he said.

She drew away from him a little, and he wished he had not said it. In that one moment he felt that he had broken down all the friendliness she had shown him that evening. She did not speak again for some time.

In the interval June leaned over to him.

“Are you bored, Micky? You look bored to death.”

Micky stifled a sigh.

“No,” he said rather wearily.

His eyes wandered round the crowded house. There were several people in the stalls whom he knew. He noticed that people were looking at Esther, and he felt a little thrill of pride.

They were wondering who she was, of course. He wished with all his heart that he could stand up in his seat and announce to an interested world that she was the woman he intended to marry.

When the light went down again Esther leaned a little closer to him.

“Mr. Mellowes——” she said.

“Yes.” Micky bent his head towards her eagerly. He could hear her agitated breathing, hear too the little quiver in her voice when she spoke.

“Did you see who was in that box on the right?—the lower box.... I thought it was Mrs. Ashton.”

Micky answered casually that very likely it was.

“Odd, eh,” he said, “that we should dine at the same place and have tickets for the same show?”

Esther said “Yes—yes” twice in nervous hurry.

There was something strained and unnatural about her, and though Micky could not see her face clearly he knew that something had happened to distress her.

“What is it?” he asked anxiously. “Is anything the matter?”

She shook her head.

“No.... No.”

She sat very still till the curtain fell again, but Micky had the feeling that she was not paying the least attention to what was going on on the stage, and he knew that her eyes turned again and again to the stage box. What was she afraid of, he

asked himself in perplexity, even if Mrs. Ashton did see her and recognize her, surely—then in a flash he knew ... the light had been turned up suddenly, and in that moment he saw the figure of a man move quickly from the front of the box to the screen of the curtains.

Micky gripped the arms of his seat; for the moment he could not move.

It was Raymond—he knew it as certainly as if he had been told.

No doubt he had seen Esther, whilst she ... poor child! Had she seen him too?

He looked down at her; she was sitting up stiffly, her hands clasped in the lap of the new frock of which she had been so innocently proud; her face was as white as the soft tulle of her sleeves, and her eyes were fixed on the box with its velvet curtains where Mrs. Ashton sat laughing and chatting with a girl in a pink frock.

They both turned from time to time to some one who stood behind them in the shadow; once the curtains moved a little and a man's hand and arm showed distinctly.

Micky could bear it no longer; he touched Esther's clasped hands.

"Are you ill?—would you like me to take you out?"

But she shook her head.

"No, no ... please leave me alone."

June had discovered a friend in a seat a row or two ahead with whom she was trying to carry on a conversation; she had no eyes for Micky or Esther. Micky gave a sigh of relief when the lights were lowered again; he could feel all that Esther was suffering, he could put himself in her place so thoroughly.

If he went round to the box and made sure if it were Ashton, perhaps that would be the best way; he could manage to give him the tip then to keep out of the way. He half rose in his seat, but Esther moved at once, laying her fingers on his arm.

"Oh, don't go—don't leave me here," she said tremulously.

It was not the man himself she wanted, but his presence somehow gave her a feeling of confidence; if, indeed, it was Raymond up there in the box. She tried to argue herself out of the fancy; he would have let her know if he had come to London—surely she would have been the first to whom he would have come; she was mad to ever think the man up there in the background could be Raymond.

But the conviction was there in her mind.

“It is he—I know it’s he,” something in her heart was saying over and over again obstinately.

The rest of the play seemed endless; she rose with a quick breath of thankfulness when it was over.

“You are in a hurry,” June said. “Haven’t you enjoyed it?”

“Yes, oh yes, but it’s hot—I want to get out.”

Micky was deliberately being as slow as he could—he blocked the way out obstinately; the stalls were almost empty when at last they left them.

June touched his arm.

“Micky—is—Esther ill? Look how white she is.”

Esther was some little way ahead of them; she seemed to be trying to get out as quickly as possible.

“It’s too hot for her, poor darling!” June said. “Micky——”

Micky laughed savagely.

“It’s not that,” he said, “but Ashton was up in that box with his mother, and she saw him.”

“Micky——” He silenced her with a frown. He followed Esther as quickly as he could, but she was outside in the cold night air before he overtook her. There was a crowd here too—rows of cars and carriages outside, and women in thin evening frocks and furs shivering in the cold wind.

Micky drew Esther’s hand through his arm.

“We shall find our cab this way, I think,” he said evenly.

He had seen Mrs. Ashton only a few yards away, and he dreaded every moment that Esther would see her, and see, too, who was with her.

A sudden block in the crowd momentarily hindered them, and in that second a man’s light laugh rang out above the noise and chatter of voices.

Micky felt the girl beside him give a convulsive start. She tried to drag her fingers from his, but he held them fast.

The crowd was moving again now; a second, and Raymond and his mother were lost to sight.

Micky had slipped an arm round Esther; he was white to the lips. He knew now

how near he had been to discovery and the wreck of all his hopes. He tried to pretend that he did not understand the cause of her agitation. He looked down at her.

“Better now you’re in the air?” he asked. “It was hot in the theatre. I— Esther——”

She had swung heavily against him, and looking down in sudden alarm, Micky saw that she had fainted.

CHAPTER XX

Looking back to that night at the theatre it always seemed to June Mason that she had been most extraordinarily blind in not seeing before that it was Esther for whom Micky Mellowes cared.

One glance at his face as he lifted the girl in his arms told her more than any words would have done; there was a sort of indescribable rage and pain in his eyes as he looked down at the white face lying against his shoulder.

People gathered about them, curious and sympathetic. June heard some one say that it had been so “deuced hot in the theatre, no wonder people fainted,” but she knew all the time that it was nothing to do with the heat; she stooped mechanically and picked up Esther’s gloves which had fallen from her nerveless hand before she followed Micky back into the foyer, where he laid Esther down on one of the long velvet lounges.

Afterwards she realised that the sudden discovery that Micky loved her friend had been something of a shock to her, that she had even been faintly jealous; she did not want to marry him herself, and yet they had been such good friends, it gave her an odd little pain to think that there was somebody else whom he placed a long way ahead of her in his heart.

Most of the people had gone, one or two of the theatre attendants lingered; it seemed a long time before Esther opened her eyes. She lay for a moment, looking vaguely about her, then her eyes came back to Micky, who was bending over her, his face scarcely less white than her own.

She made an effort to lift herself from his arm; then quite suddenly she burst into tears.

The little sound of sobbing broke the spell that seemed, to have held June; she went down on her knees beside her, both arms round the slender, shaking figure.

Micky had risen to his feet. June glanced up at him.

“Go and find the taxi and leave her to me,” she said sharply. The look of

suffering in his face hurt her. Micky went out into the cold night bareheaded. He hardly knew what he was doing. He stood for some minutes on the path forgetting why he had come out at all, before some one, jostling against him, brought him back to a sense of time and place.

He went down the road to look for a taxi. When he came back Esther was sitting up, wrapped in her cloak. She was not crying now, but she looked like a child who wants to cry but is determined not to.

June was standing beside her.

“We’re quite ready,” she said. She kept an arm about Esther, and Micky followed them silently.

He saw them into the cab, but did not follow. June asked a sharp question: “Aren’t you coming?”

“No—at least, not if you can manage without me.” His voice sounded unnerved; he looked away from June to where Esther was huddled into a corner beside her, and suddenly, as if urged by an impulse he could not control, he leaned forward, groped for her hand in the darkness, and, bending, kissed it passionately.

A moment later he had stepped back and shut the door.

He stood looking after the cab till it vanished round a corner, then he went back to the theatre for his hat and coat, and set off again down the road.

He was not conscious of any real emotion; but he walked swiftly as a man does who has a set purpose, and he did not stop till he found himself outside the Ashtons’ house.

It was not far off midnight, but lights burned in many of the windows, and after a swift glance at the face of the house he went up the steps and rang the bell.

It was some moments before the door was opened by a mildly amazed-looking servant; Micky asked for Mr. Ashton.

“My name is Mellowes,” he said, as she obviously hesitated. “If you tell him my name he will see me. I know he is in, I saw him at the Comedy Theatre to-night.”

He stepped past the girl into the hall, and after a slightly scared glance at him she shut the door and departed upstairs.

A moment later Micky heard Ashton’s voice.

“You old night-bird! What an ungodly hour to call on any one! I was just going

to bed; come in.”

He spoke easily, but there was a slightly anxious look in his eyes; he led the way into the library.

The fire was nearly out there and the room felt chilly; he shivered, and, stooping, tried to rake the cinders into a blaze.

Micky watched him silently; after a moment Ashton turned.

“Lord, man! what’s the matter? You look as cheerful as Doomsday.”

Micky was standing stiffly against the table.

“I saw you in the theatre to-night,” he began without preamble. “I was with Miss Shepstone, and she saw you, too—at least she believes it was you, and I am going to tell her that she was mistaken. How soon can you get out of town and back to Paris?”

Ashton stared; the colour had rushed to his face; after a moment his eyes fell.

“I don’t know what the devil you’re driving at,” he said irritably. “I suppose I can come to London without asking you first, can’t I? And, as for Lallie”—he grinned nervously—“well, you know as well as I do that that’s all been off for weeks.”

Micky stood immovable.

“You haven’t answered my question,” he said flintily. “How soon can you get out of London?”

Ashton swore under his breath.

“I’m dashed if I know what you’re driving at,” he said sulkily. “If you like to take Lallie to theatres, that’s your business; she’s a nice little girl, I admit, but——”

Micky took a step forward.

“If you want to make me forget that this is your mother’s house, you’re going the right way to do it,” he said between his teeth. “And I don’t want any of your bluff. Miss Shepstone thinks she saw you at the Comedy to-night; she’ll probably write to you or try to see you in the morning, and you’ve got to be out of London by then—do you hear?”

Ashton laughed; he shrugged his shoulders.

“Must?” he said nastily. “How long have you been Lallie’s champion?... Oh, all

right, all right," he broke off hurriedly, as he saw the ugly light in Micky's eyes. "But it's a bit thick, you know," he resumed injuredly. "I've done with her; you know that. You sent my letter on to her yourself. It's absurd if I can't come back home for a few days in case she should see me and get upset. I'm sorry if she's still fond of me, but, dash it all——"

"You haven't answered my question," said Micky again.

He was controlling himself with a mighty effort, but the veins stood out like cords on his forehead and his hands were clenched.

The two men looked at one another, and it was Ashton's eyes that fell.

"If you're going to bullyrag me...." he began blusteringly, "I may as well tell you that I'm not going back to Paris till I please, and——"

"Very well," said Micky. He turned on his heel.

Raymond watched him cross the room anxiously. When he reached the door he called to him——

"Micky! What the devil are you going to do?"

And Micky answered without turning——

"I'm going to tell Mrs. Clare the way you've treated Miss Shepstone, and if she's half the decent sort I think she is she'll throw you overboard as you've thrown scores of others...."

Ashton followed and clutched his arm. "Come back; don't be such a firebrand! I'll go—I'll clear out by the first train to-morrow.... I'm sorry if Esther was upset, but...."

Micky cut him short. "The first train leaves Victoria at 9.40; I'll be there to see you off."

Ashton scowled. "It's a nice way to treat a friend," he grumbled. "If there's really anything up with Lallie ..."

Micky stood like a statue.

"It's decent of you to take her out," Ashton went on uneasily. "I'm much obliged to you, I'm sure. She's never had much of a time. If I'd had any money...."

Micky broke out then. "Oh, hold your infernal tongue," he said furiously.

He walked out of the room, shutting the door hard behind him. He passed the astonished maid in the hall and let himself out into the night. The blood was

pounding in his veins, he felt in actual need of physical violence; he did not know how he had managed to keep his hands off Raymond. He walked on at a furious pace; presently he laughed with a sort of self-pity.

What was the good of what he had done after all? At best he had only succeeded in staving off the inevitable for a little while; Esther would have to know sooner or later.

Such wasted love it was! All for a man who was not worth one thought, or even a tear!

When he got back to his rooms he told Driver to call him early, as he was going to see somebody off by train. He was at Victoria long before Ashton; the greeting between the two men was constrained.

"I was going back to-day, anyway," Ashton said jauntily. "I'm going to be married the day after to-morrow—" He looked at Micky with triumphant eyes. "To Mrs. Clare," he added.

When Micky got back to his rooms, Driver met him; Driver with a spark of unwonted animation in his dull eyes, and who closed the sitting-room door mysteriously behind him as he came forward.

"If you please, sir—there is a lady to see you."

"A lady!" said Micky blankly; then he laughed. "Rubbish! You're dreaming, man."

"No sir," said Driver stolidly.

Micky stared at him for a moment, then he passed him, and threw open the door of the sitting-room.

It was Esther who rose from a chair by the fire as he entered.

For an instant Micky was unable to believe his own eyes, then he shut the door and took a step forward.

"You!" he said. "I never thought...."

She broke in agitatedly.

"Oh, I know; I suppose I shouldn't have come; I don't know what June would say if she knew; but—but there wasn't anybody else I could come to, and you said ... you said...." She flushed up nervously. "Oh, you did say you would be a friend to me, didn't you?"

“Yes,” said Micky.

He might have reminded her that she had declined his friendship; he might have reminded her of all the not very kind things which she had said to him, but it was such happiness to see her here in his room that he was in no mood to be critical.

“Do sit down ... there’s no hurry, is there?” He wanted to put her at her ease; he did not like to see the nervous agitation in her face; but she shook her head.

“I’m not going to stay, only ... only I...” Her voice changed suddenly. “Oh, Mr. Mellows, will you tell me how I can get to Paris?”

“Paris!” Micky echoed the word helplessly. “Paris!” he said again. For the moment he stared at her with blank eyes.

She rushed on impetuously.

“I have a friend there—some one I ... some one I ... oh, it’s the man I’m engaged to, and I want to see him—I must see him! I’ve got the money to get there. I hope you don’t think I was going to ask you to lend me that...” she added in distress.

“Miss Shepstone ... I—I...” Micky was horribly upset. “I never thought anything of the sort. And—and even if you were going to ask me, you know quite well that anything I have, anything...”

She stopped him hurriedly.

“Oh, I know, it’s very kind of you.” Her blue eyes sought his face with a sort of abasement. “I don’t think I’ve ever really realised how kind you’ve been to me,” she said. “But ... but I’ve been so worried and unhappy ... I—I do hope you’ll forgive me if I was rude or unkind.”

Micky did not answer; so it had come at last, the explanations which he had always dreaded; he racked his brains in vain to think of a way out of it—to make out the best story he could.

She seemed to realise his perturbation, she came a step nearer to him.

“Mr. Mellows,” she said earnestly, “will you tell me something?”

“Yes,” said Micky inaudibly, but he did not look at her.

She looked up at him, trying to see his face before she asked her question.

“Do you—do you know who the man is that I am going to marry?”

In the silence that followed her timid question, Micky felt that he lived through

years. Should he tell her the truth, or should he not? Ashton was out of London by this time; in another forty-eight hours he would be married to another woman; he raised his head with a sort of desperation. "No," he said.

He tried to comfort himself with the knowledge that at least it was substantially the truth; she was not going to marry Ashton—she never could marry him now.

He heard the sigh of relief she gave.

"I'm glad," she said. "Somehow, lately, I have thought that you did know. Mr. Mellows ... last night ... I thought I saw him in the theatre last night. I know now that I was mistaken." She paused a moment and looked past him to the window and the cold grey street outside. "I couldn't have seen him," she said again, as if to convince herself rather than him. "Because he is in Paris—I found out this morning that he is still in Paris."

"Yes," said Micky. His voice sounded choked. "And so—so you want to go out there to him, is that it?"

Her face brightened.

"Yes. I should have told June only—only she isn't very sympathetic. You see"—she smiled faintly—"she hates my 'phantom lover,' as she calls him, and so—so I know she would only do her best to keep me from going to him; but you—"

"I am afraid," said Micky quietly, "that I shall try and do the same thing."

He turned and looked at her squarely.

"You've never been to Paris," he said, "and probably you can't speak a word of French. You've probably never travelled any distance alone. Miss Shepstone, it's impossible for you to go. I am only advising you for your own good. Why not write to—to—your fiancé and ask him to make arrangements for you?"

He broke off helplessly. The poor little letter in which she had already done so lay in his pocket at that moment.

It turned him sick to think of the tissue of lies and deceit his own actions were forcing upon him.

"I—I have asked him," she said almost in a whisper, "but he said he couldn't have me—then! But that's quite a long time ago," she added hopefully. "And I thought if he saw me—if I got there and surprised him—"

Micky turned away. He could imagine so well what would happen if indeed she found Ashton. He walked over to the window and stood looking into the street

with unseeing eyes.

“Have a little patience,” he said presently. “Take my advice and stay here. If he—if he can, he will send for you, I am sure.” She looked up quickly, a spark of anger in her eyes.

“You sound as if you think that will never be,” she said sharply.

Micky met her gaze unflinchingly.

“I don’t think anything of the sort. I know—I know if I were in his place, whoever he is—I should be counting the moments till I could ... could have you with me.” He smothered the momentary seriousness of his words with a little laugh. “And now, after that pretty compliment, aren’t you going to reward me by taking my most excellent advice?”

The ghost of a smile crossed her face.

“I wanted you to say something so different,” she told him wistfully.

“I know—but I’m not going to. Any one would advise you as I have. It isn’t ... it isn’t that I’m prejudiced, or anything like that. I would give a great deal to see you happy. I hope you believe me.”

She sat twisting her hands together nervously. After a moment she looked up at him.

“Thank you,” she said.

She rose and began to pull on her gloves.

“I hope you don’t think it’s very dreadful of me to have come,” she said deprecatingly. “But ... but this morning, somehow, I felt I must have someone to talk to—some one to advise me....”

“I am honoured that you came,” said Micky gravely. Her eyes fell before his.

“And—and you won’t tell June?” she appealed.

He smiled rather sadly.

“I am not likely ever to tell any one,” he said.

“No, I know. Mr. Mellowes”—she held out her hand to him suddenly, her fair face flushing—“I should like to take back something I said to you one day. Perhaps you don’t remember, but I do, and lately—especially since last night, when you were so kind—I’ve felt that I wasn’t just to you; and so ... if you will forgive me, I should like to be friends with you after all.”

She was crimson by the time she had finished, but Micky took her hand without answering, held it for a moment, then let it go.

“I suppose I mustn’t offer you anything?” he said with forced lightness. “No coffee—or tea? It’s cold out this morning. If you would care for anything, my man would bring it at once.”

She laughed and shook her head.

“I don’t want anything, thank you.” She looked round at Micky’s luxuriously furnished room. “Isn’t it beautiful?” she asked him.

He smiled. “Do you like it? I am glad.”

“I think it’s lovely.” She looked up at him. “I seem to have been climbing a ladder lately,” she said. “Since I left that awful place in the Brixton Road—where I am now is heaps better than that was, but this—”

Micky was silent. It trembled on his lips to say that everything he had in the world was hers if only she would take it, but he knew the utter futility of it. Money and possessions counted very little with her. She would not have minded the house in the Brixton Road at all with the man she loved.

He went downstairs with her.

“So we’re really friends now?” he said when he bade her good-bye. “And you’ll promise to let me advise you again when you’re not quite sure what you ought to do?” There was a note of anxiety in his voice.

She flushed nervously.

“It’s kind of you to be interested.” It seemed strange to her that after all that had happened they should have so easily got back to their old footing of friendliness. But Micky was not at all happy. When she had gone he stood for a long time at the window staring moodily out.

When Driver brought lunch, he found Micky poring over a Bradshaw; he spoke to the man with elaborate carelessness.

“You’ll have to take another trip to Paris—to-morrow will do.”

“Yes sir.” Driver smoothed a crease in the cloth. “To post another letter, sir?” he asked expressionlessly.

Micky looked up sharply, but Driver met his eyes innocently.

Micky coloured.

“No; it isn’t a letter this time,” he said. “It’s to buy a fur coat.”

CHAPTER XXI

“The phantom lover,” said June Mason lugubriously, “is certainly turning up trumps.”

It was a week later, and she was giving Micky tea.

Esther was out. She knew now that it was to see Esther he came. She was quite reconciled to the fact, and had got over her first pang of jealousy, but Esther’s indifference to him enraged her.

“Can’t the girl see what she’s throwing away?” she asked herself furiously. “What on earth is she made of that she can’t see what’s waiting for her to take? If Micky had adored me as he adores her ... well—my name wouldn’t have been June Mason to-day.”

But she kept such thoughts to herself and treated Micky very much the same as usual, though unconsciously there was a slight restraint in her manner, especially when Esther was present.

“I’m beginning to think that I’ve misjudged our Raymond,” she went on laughingly. “Perhaps some one has converted him. Anyway, he’s treating Esther handsomely. First the money, and last week the fur coat....” Micky looked up with sudden interest.

“Oh, it’s come, then, has it!” he said eagerly.

“Come! It’s been here two days. How did you know?” she asked with sudden suspicion.

“I heard you talking about it. Wasn’t it you? No? Then it must have been Miss Shepstone.”

“I dare say,” said June easily. “I never saw any one so delighted with a thing as she was with that coat. And it is a beauty, Micky. I only hope it’s paid for,” she added practically.

“Why shouldn’t it be paid for?” Micky said.

She made a little grimace.

“Because Raymond Ashton never paid for things if he could help it; and you know he didn’t,” she told him. “However, as he seems to be a reformed character, we’ll give him the benefit of the doubt.” Suddenly she began to laugh. “And that isn’t all,” she said again. “This morning a collar arrived for that blessed cat——” She indicated Charlie sleeping peacefully on the rug. “A silver collar, too my boy, with Esther’s name on it....”

Micky stooped to examine the collar; his face was red when, after a moment, he looked up again.

“Esther declares she never told him we’d got a cat,” June told him doubtfully. “But, of course, she must have done so or else the man’s got second sight.”

Micky was drinking his tea; he choked suddenly.

A feeling of panic closed upon him. Never told him she’d got a cat! of course she hadn’t! What a fool he had been to make such a blunder—what an utter blockhead.

“I expect she did tell him,” he managed to say.

“Yes, that’s what I think.” June lit a cigarette and passed the lighted match over to Micky.

“Anyway, Esther goes about the place singing all day,” she added drily. “There’s no doubt at all that she’s up in the seventh heaven of happiness. Reams of letters the man writes her. Perhaps, as the novels tell us, love is a wonderful thing——” She looked at Micky with a comical expression in her queer eyes. “I should say it must be if it’s reformed that man,” she added cynically.

Micky said nothing. He had been very uncomfortable about things during the last few days. As far as he could find out, Ashton had not yet been married. Supposing it had all been bluff when he said he was going to be married—supposing he turned up again in London?

Micky stayed as long as he could in case Esther came in; it was only when he began to feel sure that June knew why he was dragging his visit to such a length that he said he ought to be going.

“There’s no hurry,” she said kindly. “Why not wait till Esther comes in?”

Micky shook his head; he said he couldn’t spare the time, but in his heart he knew quite well that he intended to wait.

“I suppose she—er—she never talks any more about taking a job now, eh?” he asked after a moment.

“No, I don’t think so; that man’s word is law to her, you know. I believe if he said ‘Come out here and marry me at once,’ she’d fly off by the next train. As a matter of fact, I’m expecting something of the sort almost daily.”

“I don’t think she’ll do that,” Micky said. He stood back to the fire, with his hands in his pockets, staring up at the ceiling.

“No!” June watched him quizzically. “Do you know, Micky,” she said at last, “that I consider you’ve altered a lot lately?”

He swung round at once, and scrutinised himself in the glass over the mantelshelf.

“For the worse, or the better?” he asked anxiously. “I know I never was exactly an Adonis.”

She laughed merrily.

“I don’t mean your face, stupid, but yourself. You’re quieter, you don’t go about so much; in fact”—she challenged him deliberately—“I believe you’re in love.”

“So I am,” said Micky stolidly.

She pretended not to take him seriously.

“It’s no joking matter—I mean what I say.”

“So do I,” said Micky. He laughed. He came over to where she was sitting, and stood behind her chair so that she could not see his face. “I’ve tried to make up my mind to tell you lots of times,” he said. “But I thought perhaps you’d have guessed before now....” He stopped and moved away restlessly.

June sat very still; presently—

“It’s Esther,” she said quietly.

“Yes.”

“Poor old Micky!...”

“You needn’t be sorry for me; I walked into it with my eyes wide open. I knew she was engaged—I knew it all the time.”

“And Esther ... does she know? Have you told her?”

“Yes.... She took it as an insult. Perhaps it was; I don’t know. You see, I knew

she was engaged to that other fellow.”

“An outsider! who isn’t worth a thought,” June cried indignantly. “Micky, however could she have refused you?”

He laughed. He looked down at her with a comical expression in his eyes.

“She’s not the first woman who’s done that,” he reminded her.

She sat up with sudden haste.

“That wasn’t anything, but this....”

“This,” said Micky, “isn’t anything either, except on my side. You always told me that some day I shouldn’t be able to have what I wanted. You were right.”

“I should like to slap her!” said June viciously.

He laughed outright.

“If you did I should slap you, my dear.” He went back to his chair by the fire.

“It’s only between ourselves, June,” he said.

“Of course ... and, Micky—do you think she will marry Ashton?”

Micky did not answer for a moment.

“No,” he said at last. “I don’t think so.”

June stared at him.

“Then—then do you mean——” But he would not tell her anything.

“You’ve heard quite enough for one day,” he said teasingly. “Don’t worry your head about me. I don’t know why I told you—somehow I thought you’d guessed.”

June threw her cigarette into the fire.

“I did. I’ll be honest—I did guess,” she broke off. “Here is Esther,” she added.

She got up and opened the door.

“The lady with the fur coat,” she announced drily. “Pray come in, madame!”

“June,” said Esther protestingly.

She seemed to guess who was there. She looked past her friend at once to Micky.

She coloured faintly as he rose to greet her.

He had not seen her in the fur coat before. The dark fur suited her fairness

admirably; the heavy folds hung gracefully about her slim figure; her face rose like a flower from the big, upstanding collar.

“And where have you been all the afternoon?” June demanded. “We waited tea for you till nearly five.”

Esther made a little grimace. “I’ve had my tea out—with Mr. Harley.”

“Harley?” said Micky sharply.

June laughed.

“He’s one of the tribe who live here,” she explained. “He’s a great admirer of Esther’s. And he’s quite a nice boy too, isn’t he?” she appealed to her friend.

“Very nice,” Esther agreed. “I met him quite by chance, and so we went and had some tea.”

Micky was frowning; it was odd that he felt more jealous of this man whom he had never seen than he had ever done of Ashton. He hated to feel that Esther had gone out with him wearing her new coat.

He stood by silently while the two girls chattered together; he felt very much out of it and unwanted.

“I’m glad everybody likes my coat,” Esther said. She had taken it off and was holding it at arm’s length, admiring its beauty.

“It was a lovely present, wasn’t it?” She appealed to Micky.

“Yes,” he said.

She laid her cheek to the big, soft collar.

“It’s something I have wanted all my life,” she told him.

Micky put out his hand and took it from her. He hated to see her standing there looking so happy because she believed it had come from Ashton; he threw it down on the couch.

“I shall have to be going,” he said abruptly. He shook hands with June, but he walked out of the room without speaking to Esther.

“I don’t want any dinner,” he told Driver when he got in. “I’m going to bed.”

Driver opened his mouth to say something and closed it again; he brought the evening papers and his master’s slippers and turned to leave the room. At the door he stopped and looked back.

“Have you seen the evening paper, sir?” he asked deprecatingly.

“No,” said Micky. Something in the man’s voice arrested his attention; he turned in his chair. “Why?” he asked curtly.

Driver came back a step.

“There’s a notice of Mr. Ashton’s marriage in it, that’s all, sir,” he said woodenly. “I thought that you’d be interested.”

CHAPTER XXII

So it had come at last. Micky sat staring down at the small paragraph which briefly announced the marriage of Tubby Clare's wealthy widow to Mr. Raymond Ashton.

The ceremony, so the paper declared, which had taken place quietly in Paris would be a complete surprise to everybody. Mrs. Clare, as all the world knew, inherited something like £90,000 under the will of her late husband.

Micky whistled softly. Raymond had done well for himself. He would be able to live in luxury for the rest of his life; to discharge all his debts, if his wife chose to allow him to do so; all but one debt—the greatest of them all, and one which he could never hope to liquidate—a woman's broken heart.

Esther—what would she say if she knew? And supposing she knew now—! It was quite likely that a copy of this same paper had fallen into her hands. The thought turned Micky cold; he looked up hurriedly at the clock—not yet eight! On what pretext could he go back to Elphinstone Road?

He threw the paper down and rose to his feet. His gloves! He would make them the excuse—he could go back for his gloves. He taxied down the whole way; he sent his name up to June and waited in the hall. After a moment she came flying down the stairs.

“Micky! Is anything the matter? What in the world....”

He explained in stammering haste.

“Have you seen the evening paper? No, well, take care not to let Miss Shepstone see it. I had to come back and tell you. Ashton—the damned outsider....” He ground his teeth.

“Not dead!” said June with a gasp.

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“No—he was married yesterday in Paris.”

June sat down on the bottom stair; she felt as if all the strength had gone out of her.

“It can’t be true,” she said at last. “Why, she had a letter from him only yesterday. Are you sure? It must be another Ashton.”

“It isn’t—I knew it was coming. He’s married Tubby Clare’s widow—for her money, of course. If Esther knows....”

“It will break her heart,” said June.

There were footsteps on the landing above; Micky glanced up hurriedly.

“Can’t we go somewhere and talk? Everybody will hear if we stay here. Where is Miss Shepstone?”

“She’s in my room; she’s writing to him at this minute——” She broke off, drawing in her breath hard. “Oh, Micky, are you quite, quite sure? I can’t believe it.” She stared at him for a moment, then she laughed incredulously. “Why, it’s only three days ago he sent her that fur coat—and the collar for Charlie. Oh, I’m sure it’s a mistake!”

“It’s not a mistake,” said Micky fiercely; he looked away from her. “Confound it, isn’t there a room where we can go and talk?” he broke out again.

She got up from the stairs and led the way across the hall.

“There’s the drawing-room. Nobody uses it now because it’s so cold.” She opened the door and peeped in. “There’s nobody there.”

Micky followed her, shutting the door behind him. The room was chilly and uninviting, with a lofty ceiling and a hideous wallpaper. There was a gas stove at the far end of the room, turned very low, and hissing softly as if in protest.

June knelt down and turned the tap on to its fullest extent.

“The thing is,” Micky said hurriedly, “what are we going to do? If she stays in London, she’s bound to hear about it. All the papers will be full of it to-morrow. They’ll probably publish his confounded portrait. Can’t you get her out of London? We’ve got to do something.”

June did not look at him. The odd little twinge of jealousy tore her heart again. Even though she did not love Micky, she quite realised what she was losing. After all it must be a very beautiful thing to be cared for as Micky cared for Esther.

She raised her eyes with a little ghost of a smile.

“I’ll do anything I can, Micky. If you’ve got anything to suggest——”

“I thought out crowds of plans coming along in the cab, but they’re all rotten,” Micky admitted dolefully. “I thought you’d be able to help me. Can’t you be called off to a relative in the country or something, and ask Miss Shepstone to go with you?”

June started up.

“Of course I can. I’ve got an aunt down at Enmore. She’s always asking me to go and see her. I’ll send her a wire. It’s too late to-night, but in the morning....”

Micky felt in his pocket for a pencil.

“Give me the address and I’ll send it first thing.” He paused. “Supposing Miss Shepstone won’t go, though?”

“Oh, she’ll go,” said June quickly. “I’ll tell her it means business for me. I’ll do the pathetic. I wonder what time there’s a train.”

“I’ll look up all the trains, and arrange everything. Does Miss Shepstone know I’m here now?”

“No——”

“Very well, tell her one of your business agents called, and that you’ve got to go off early to-morrow. You can write me a note and post it to-night, asking me to see you off. It’s quite a usual thing for you to do, you know——”

June smiled rather sadly.

“Poor old Micky!” she said.

Micky frowned.

“Don’t talk rubbish,” he said rather shortly. “I’d do the same for any one.”

June knew it would be useless to contradict.

“If you can keep her out of town for a week it may all have blown over,” he went on. “I’ll run down and see you if I may——”

“You know you may; but, Micky—don’t you think all this is rather mistaken kindness? She’ll have to know sooner or later; why not tell her at once? When the letters stop coming she’ll begin to worry, and then——”

Micky shook his head obstinately.

“I’ve my own reasons; be a pal and help me, June.”

“Very well, old boy.”

She gave him her hand.

“I think you’re making a mistake, but I suppose you know your own business best. At any rate, I’ve warned you.”

“You’re a dear,” said Micky gratefully.

June went to the front door with him; in spite of her promise she was not feeling happy. Esther would have to know. She went slowly back up the stairs.

“It’s a mistake,” she told herself again, with a sense of foreboding. “Micky’s making a mistake.”

But she determined to act up to her part. She ran up the last flight of stairs with a great noise and show of excitement. She burst into their sitting-room breathless.

“Such news, Esther! Are you game for a dash down into the wilds of nowhere? I’ve got to go off on business. One of my agents has just been here. He’s made a mess of things, as usual, and I’ve got to go down and put things right. Oh, it’s quite country! I don’t know if you like the country. I adore it myself. A place called Enmore. I’ve got an antediluvian aunt who lives there, and we’ll go and foist ourselves on her. She’s always asking me to go and see her, so she’ll be delighted. Well, what do you say?”

“You haven’t given me a chance to say anything,” Esther protested laughing. “You’re like a whirlwind, sweeping every one off their feet. Where is Enmore to start with? And how can I go? Your aunt doesn’t know me.”

“She’ll love you because I do,” said June promptly. “Now don’t spoil everything. The greatest fun of it all is rushing off at a moment’s notice. I shall send Micky a note to-night and tell him to look up trains for us and come and see us off. Micky’s always to be relied on. If I look trains up myself I always go by the wrong ones and never get there.” She was sitting down to her desk as she spoke; she looked across at Esther, pen in hand. “Well?” she queried.

Esther looked down at Charlie sprawling in the firelight.

“What’s going to become of Charlie?” she asked.

“Lydia will look after him,” June said promptly. “She adores cats. That’s one excuse surmounted. Any more?”

Esther laughed.

“I should like to come, but——”

“Then that’s settled. We’ll stay a week if we’re not bored to death. It’s a desolate

spot—just a handful of houses and a haystack and a few things like that, but if you like the country we ought to have a good time. I wish I'd got a car....”

“Isn't it rather a funny place to go to for business?” Esther asked innocently.

“Not in the least,” June declared. “All the ingredients for my skin food came from the country—herbs and attar of flowers and all the rest of it. Besides”—she swallowed hard before uttering the biggest fib of all—“my agent lives down there, you see.”

“Oh!” said Esther. She was rather pleased at the idea of a change.

“I suppose we can have letters sent on?” she asked after a moment.

June's scratching pen stopped for a moment; then flew on again faster than before.

“Oh, of course!” she said airily.

Her kind heart gave a little throb of pity as she realised that there would never be any letters to send on—not any, at least, of which Esther was thinking.

The phantom lover had gone for ever.

She looked round at the girl pityingly. She looked so happy and unconscious sitting there in the firelight, and all the time if she knew what had just happened over in Paris her heart would surely break.

“Beast!” said June under her breath.

Esther turned.

“What did you say?” she asked.

“I was only talking to the pen,” June answered irascibly.

CHAPTER XXIII

Micky turned up at Paddington the following morning laden with papers and chocolates.

“Any one would think we were going to the other side of the world,” June told him. “Do you know, my good man, that it’s only a couple of hours’ run to Enmore?”

“Is it?” said Micky guilelessly. “Well, any way, I’m sure you won’t be able to get De Bry’s chocolates down there, so they’ll come in useful.” He looked at Esther. She was wearing the fur coat and a bunch of violets.

“I think it’s awfully exciting,” she said, meeting his eyes. “We never thought about going till quite late last night, did we, June?”

“Things done in a hurry are almost the most enjoyable,” June answered sententiously. “I’m quite bucked at the idea of living the simple life for a few days.”

“Pity you haven’t got a car down there,” Micky said. “There ought to be some fine runs round about.”

“So there are,” said June promptly. Her queer eyes twinkled as she looked at him. “Micky, would you like to be a perfect dear and come down in yours, and take us out? You can stay at the local inn and play the heavy swell——”

Micky flushed eagerly.

“That’s a ripping idea,” he said. He turned to Esther: “I’ll come like a shot if I shan’t be in the way,” he added.

Esther smiled; she was surprised to find that the idea was not at all distasteful to her.

“Oh yes; do come!” she said.

June had got into the carriage, and was busy arranging her various possessions.

“You’ll be left behind, Esther,” she said warningly.

Esther turned at once.

“Good-bye, Mr. Mellowes.”

Micky took her hand in a hard grip.

“Good-bye—but only till to-morrow....”

He stood back as the train started; the last glimpse the two girls had of him was his radiantly smiling face.

“Do you know,” said June, settling herself in a corner, “I believe I’m half in love with that man, after all. Isn’t he just a dear?”

“He’s awfully kind,” Esther agreed.

When the train drew into the little station at Enmore June looked at Esther with a sort of apprehension.

“It’s a most awful one-eyed hole, you know,” she said. “I do hope you won’t be bored to death. It won’t be so bad if Micky keeps his promise and comes down, but if he doesn’t....”

“Don’t you think he will?” Esther asked quickly.

“Oh, I dare say he will. I hope he will, I’m sure; somebody has got to amuse you while I go and see to my business.”

“I can amuse myself.”

June sniffed.

“Can you? Well, it’s more than I could when I used to stay down here. There’s only a church and a village inn and a handful of cottages. My aunt has by far the most distinguished-looking house in the village, and I dare say you won’t think much of that.”

They were on the platform now, and June eyed their two suit-cases ruefully.

“We shall have to carry them,” she said. “No porters or taxicabs here, my dear. Come along.”

She grabbed her own, and Esther followed her out into the road.

It was cold but sunny, and the fresh air of the country was something quite different from the chilly, damp atmosphere they had left behind in London.

Esther drew a deep breath.

“It’s lovely,” she said. “Do you know”—she looked ahead of her down the winding road with a little frown—“I’ve got the sort of feeling that something is going to happen to me here.”

“Goodness!” said June. “Don’t you start having instincts too! It’s bad enough for me to have them. What can happen to you, pray, unless you get melancholia or something?”

Esther laughed.

It was only a little way into the village; as soon as they came in sight of it June pointed excitedly to a red gabled house just visible through the trees.

“That’s where my aunt lives. She’s an old maid, you know, and incidentally she thinks I’m a most heaven-born genius. She’s nearly sixty, but I’ll bet anything you like she uses June Mason’s Skin Beautifier.”

She paused to open the iron gate of the little garden, but before there was time to ring the bell the door opened and a little lady with grey hair and a wonderful complexion very much like June’s stood there with outstretched hands.

“My dears! I never was so delighted! June—after all these months you really have come to see me.”

She kissed June heartily and turned to Esther. June introduced them.

“My friend, Esther Shepstone—my aunt, Miss Dearling. I don’t know what you think of us for arriving on top of our wire like this,” she said, laughing. “But I like to do things in a hurry—so here we are, and we’re just starving.”

They followed Miss Dearling into a quaint little square room, where the table was laid for lunch. June talked away all the time.

“There’s another member of the party coming down to-morrow,” she said. “No; a man this time—Micky Mellowes! You remember him? Yes; I thought you would.” She flushed a little. “He’s going to bring his car down and take us all out for rides; so we’re in for a good time.”

“I remember Mr. Mellowes quite well,” Miss Dearling said. When she was alone with Esther for a moment she whispered to her—

“We all hoped June meant to marry him, you know, my dear. Perhaps she has changed her mind, as she is allowing him to come down. Such a very charming man—have you seen him?—and so rich.”

“Yes, I’ve seen him,” Esther said. “He is nice—very!”

“It would be the dream of my life fulfilled if I could see June married to him,” the old lady went on. “June wants a firm hand. She is wonderfully high-spirited and clever, you know, but I always feel that she would be so much happier with some one to look after her, and he is just the man to take care of a woman.”

“Yes,” said Esther.

She felt Miss Darling glance at her hands.

“Are you—are you engaged to be married?” she asked, after a moment. “Please forgive my curiosity, but I am always so interested in young people’s love-affairs....”

Esther coloured.

“Yes, I am engaged,” she said. “But he is away just now—abroad. I hope we shall be married as soon as he comes home again.”

Miss Darling said that she hoped so, too; later, when she got a moment alone with June she asked interestedly about the man to whom Esther was engaged.

“I do hope he is nice,” she said anxiously. “Such a very charming girl! such a sweet-looking girl! Is he nice, my dear?”

June crossed the room and shut the door; then she turned round with a little grimace.

“He’s a pig!” she said.

Miss Darling screamed.

“Oh, my dear!”

“He is,” June maintained stoutly. “She doesn’t think so, of course, but he is, all the same.” She broke off as Esther came back.

Esther woke in the morning with a pleasurable sense of something going to happen. She lay still for a moment looking round her at the heavy, old fashioned furniture and flowered chintz curtains.

Miss Darling’s house was essentially Early Victorian, from its wool mats and stuffed birds in the sitting-room to the high four-posted bedsteads and faded Brussels carpets.

But there was something very old-world and charming about it too, in spite of rather ugly furniture, and Esther was just admiring the dressing-table, with its petticoat of spotted muslin and pink ribbons, when the door opened and June

thrust her head round.

“Can I come in?” She did not wait for an answer, but came in, her long mauve silk kimono making a little rustling sound as she walked.

“I’m really dressed,” she explained, sitting down on Esther’s bed. “All but my frock, at least, and as the post has just come, and a letter from Micky, I thought I’d come and tell you that he’ll be down to-day—after lunch, and he wants us to meet him. I can’t go, as I’ve got a business appointment at three, so you must. He’s going to drive up to the station and wait there for one of us to come and show him where we live.”

There was a little silence. Esther flushed beneath the elder girl’s shrewd gaze.

“I should have thought he could have found out where we live,” she said rather awkwardly. “And it’s such a little way—”

June rose with a great show of dignity.

“Oh, very well, if you don’t want to be obliging, but I do think you might....”

“Silly—of course I will.” Esther caught her hand. “I’ll go; the station at three o’clock, and then what am I to do? Bring him here, or what?”

“Do what you like, my child—I shan’t be in till five. Don’t let him be bored, that’s all, or he’ll go back to town—the one thing Micky cannot stand is being bored.”

Esther made a little grimace.

She felt nervous when at five minutes to three exactly she walked down the winding road to the station.

June ought to have come herself, she argued; it was a most silly thing to send her—she hoped he would not come at all; but all the time she was listening for the sound of a car or a motor-horn. The sleepy-eyed factotum of the station walked up and stared at her curiously. After a few turns he ventured to ask if she wanted to go by train.

“No, I’m waiting for a gentleman—I—oh, here he is.”

“’Twas her young gentleman for sure,” the sleepy-eyed one told his colleague afterwards. “She blushed up like a rose when she saw him.”

Micky noticed that blush, too, as he turned the car with a fine sweep and came to a standstill.

Esther greeted him with a torrent of explanation.

“June couldn’t come, so she made me—she had to go out on business. She would make me come!”

“It’s very kind,” Micky said. “I’m later than I expected—the roads are bad down in this part of the world. Well, and how do you like Enmore?”

“It’s very quiet, but I like it for a change, and June’s aunt is ever so kind.”

“Yes, a dear old lady; I know her well. Did you tell her I was coming?”

“June did....”

His eyes swept her face anxiously. No trace of tears or sadness to-day, at all events.

“Are we supposed to go straight home?” he asked after a moment. “Because, if not, what do you say to a run round first?”

Esther’s eyes sparkled.

“I should love it!” She got in beside him, and the car started away.

“I only brought the two-seater,” Micky explained audaciously. “I hate a crowd. This will take three at a pinch, but it’s much more comfortable for two.”

“It’s lovely!” Esther agreed.

She leaned back luxuriously.

“It must be splendid to be able to have a car like this of your very own,” she said suddenly.

Micky laughed rather ruefully.

“There are other things I would far rather have,” he said.

“Are there?” She looked up at him innocently. “What things?” she asked.

Micky’s hands tightened over the wheel.

“Am I really to answer that question?” he asked.

“No,” said Esther hurriedly.

She could not think why she had been so stupid as to say such a thing. She felt very vexed.

They went some way in silence. Esther glanced at the man beside her timidly.

Would he end up by some day marrying June? she wondered. Lucky June, if he did—lucky ... she checked the thought with a little sense of shame. Only a few days ago she had declared that she disliked him. Perhaps it was the car that made her feel so suddenly envious of the woman who would one day be this man's wife.

Micky glanced down at her.

"Are you cold?" he asked.

"I am a little"—she smiled up at him—"in spite of my new coat," she said. "I think we had better go home."

June came to the door to meet them.

"I got home earlier than I thought," she told Esther. "Well, Micky?"

"Are there any letters?" Esther asked. She felt a swift feeling of envy as she looked at these two, so openly and unfeignedly glad to see one another. "I suppose it's expecting too much though," she added with a sigh.

June did not answer, and Esther went on and up the stairs.

"There is one for her," June said in an undertone to Micky as soon as she had gone. "And one from Paris, too—from that man! Micky, are you sure it isn't all a mistake about him being married?"

"Sure," said Micky stolidly.

"Then shall I—what shall I do about that letter—it was sent on from London. Ought I to let her have it?"

Micky was taking off his coat, his back was turned.

"Oh, let her have it," he said casually. "It may be the last she'll ever get."

He turned swiftly. "Let me look at it."

June took it from her dress and handed it to him.

He glanced at the writing and gave it back to her.

"Oh yes, I should let her have it," he said again.

But June still hesitated.

"Micky—supposing it's to tell her about—you know ... about this marriage?"

There was a moment's silence.

“Oh, it would hardly be that,” Micky said positively. “At least—well, if it is, we must chance it.” But his voice did not sound as if he were at all anxious.

CHAPTER XXIV

June raked up another appointment for the following day. "I'm behaving like an angel to you," she told Micky. "Yesterday I tramped about the fields till I was worn out so that I should be out of the way and Esther could meet you. Oh, she didn't want to go at all," she hastened to add as she saw the look of pleasure that filled his eyes. "I had to make her go."

"Yes, I quite believe that," Micky said.

He was standing beside the car at Miss Darling's gate, and Esther was upstairs putting on her hat. She had protested twenty times that she did not really want to go; she had begged June to take her place; she had implored Micky to take June instead; but they had both refused.

"I'm not keen on motoring when it's cold," June declared. "Besides, I've got my business to see to, and I don't want Micky. You go, Esther, and amuse the poor soul!—just to please me."

Esther said "Very well," and tried to look as if she were not anxious at all, but she was really looking forward to another drive.

"Didn't you really want to come?" Micky asked as they drove away.

Esther laughed. "Of course I did; I wanted to come so badly I had to pretend that I didn't just for decency's sake."

There was a little silence.

"Did you have good news from Paris yesterday?" he asked deliberately.

He felt as if he must speak of Ashton to in some way check the wave of joy that had filled his heart at her words; it was not to be with him that she had wished to come, but for the drive and the comfort of the car.

He saw how her face clouded at his question.

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"Yes, thank you," she said, but her voice did not sound very enthusiastic. Presently: "Mr. Mellows," she said suddenly, "do you know that I have always

been sorry that I did not go to Paris that day when I wanted to?—I wish I had now.”

“Why now?” Micky asked.

She gave a little troubled laugh.

“I don’t know. I really can’t explain.” She did not understand herself what she really meant, but last night when she had read Raymond’s letter, it had suddenly come over her with a sickening feeling of dismay that in some indefinite way he was really getting to be what June had always called him—a phantom lover! It seemed so long since she had seen him. After all, what were letters and words? But she could not explain this to Micky.

“I think I know what you mean,” he said after a moment. “You are getting tired of this separation. Is that it? Letters are all very well, but they are not enough....”

She looked up at him in surprise.

“Why, that is just what I do mean? How did you know?”

He laughed rather ruefully.

“Perhaps I’ve felt like it myself,” he said.

“Have you?” There was a little note of wonderment in her voice.

“I said ‘perhaps,’” he reminded her.

She changed the subject; she drew his attention to the country through which they were passing. It was bare and wind-swept, but there was a sort of rugged picturesqueness about it that appealed to Esther.

“I believe I should like to live in the country, after all,” she said suddenly. “You seem to be able to really breathe down here; it’s not shut in like London is.”

“Dear old London,” Micky said. “We all run it down, but we’re all glad to get back there when we’ve been away for more than a few days.” He leaned forward, wrapping the rug more closely round her. “Where do you think you will live when you are married?” he asked.

The hot colour flooded her face; she looked up at him in a scared sort of way.

“What a question! How do I know? I’ve never even thought about it.”

“Haven’t you?” said Micky. “I have, crowds of times. I’ve worked it all out to a nicety. I shall have a house in London and a place in the country as well, so that if my wife doesn’t like town we can divide our time and stay six months at

each.”

“We are not all rich like you are, you know,” Esther said drily. “I dare say when I get married—if I ever do—I shall just have a little flat somewhere and stay there for the rest of my life, and be very happy too,” she added with a sort of defiance.

“Yes,” said Micky after a moment. “I think I could be very happy in a flat, too, for the rest of my life—with the right woman.” He looked down at her, smiling thoughtfully “The only trouble is, that I shall probably have to marry the wrong one.”

“If you do, it will be your own fault, I should think,” said Esther, laughing. She could not quite understand this man. Had he ever really loved her, or had it all just been a pretence?

“No,” said Micky promptly. “I think it will be your fault.”

Esther raised her eyes slowly. Micky was smiling.

“Yes, I mean it,” he said seriously. “The first time I ever saw you I thought to myself, ‘Here she is! That right woman I’ve been waiting for all my life’—but, of course, you didn’t think I was the right man, and so that ended it,” he added philosophically.

Esther did not like to hear him speak so lightly. She would have been surprised if she could have known the desperate unhappiness in his heart, the bitterness that drove him to speak so flippantly of all that he held best and dearest.

She made no attempt to answer him, and presently he said again with change of voice—

“Are you hungry, I wonder? Because I am! And I’ve got a firm conviction that we’re coming to a wayside inn. Do you see the chimneys through the trees?...”

He slowed the car a little.

“There’s another car outside—what do you say? Shall we risk it?”

“It would be rather nice,” Esther admitted. She was feeling cold; she was rather glad when the car stopped and Micky gave her his hand.

“They’ve got a fire anyway,” he said cheerily. “I saw it through the window, and we’ll ask for some coffee.”

He led the way into the parlour. Two men wrapped in heavy coats stood by the fire; they moved to make way for Esther. After a moment they went out of the room, and she saw them in the road bending over the car next to Micky’s.

“We can have coffee and buns,” Micky said, coming back after a moment. “I don’t know what they’ll be like, but—”

“I shall enjoy them anyway,” she told him. “I really am hungry.”

He pulled off his gloves and dragged a chair up to the fire for her.

“This is fine,” he said. “Have you ever thought what a novelty a honeymoon would be touring through villages like this? I should like to just start away and go on driving for miles and miles, just staying anywhere and getting meals anyhow.”

Esther laughed. “I should have thought it was just the sort of thing you would hate,” she said.

“That’s where you’re mistaken,” he told her. “I live in town and in the way I do because people expect it of me, and I’m too lazy to bother to change. It’s not a bit the life I should choose if I had my way. I hate dressing for dinner, and wading through six or seven courses, and being bored stiff half the time by some dressed-up woman beside me....”

He looked at her with a comical expression.

Esther leaned her chin in her hand and raised serious eyes to his face.

“Well, how would you really like to live, then?” she asked.

Micky sat down on the edge of the table and stuck his long legs out before him. He kept his eyes fixed on his boots as he answered—

“Well, I should like a place in the country, as I said, and a garden—a ripping garden, with lots of roses and grass—walks like you see in old-fashioned pictures, and a high box hedge—that’s one of the things I simply must have! Have you ever smelt a box hedge after a hot sun has been on it? No? well, you ought to; it’s fine!”

He paused reflectively.

“I should like to look after the roses myself, I think,” he went on presently. “I dare say I should make a mess of it, but I should like to have a try, anyway. And I should like to keep lots of animals, horses and dogs and chickens. Do you know”—he half turned to her—“I’ve always had a fancy for great Danes—you can’t keep ’em in town, only in the country. Some people I once stayed with down in Lincoln had a couple—ripping dogs they were—almost as big as ponies, and they used to let the kids play with them and pull them about. Old

Lancing had a boy, you know—a ripping little kid of five—a real sport he was, too—Uncle Micky he used to call me.” Micky chuckled reminiscently. “It must be jolly fine to have a youngster of your own like that,” he added.

This was a new Micky, indeed! Esther watched him with fascinated eyes. She had not known that he was fond of children; she had taken it for granted that men hardly ever were. She supposed drearily that she had got that idea from Raymond. He had always said he would not stand “kids.” It was odd that, though Micky had used the same word, it had sounded somehow quite different when he said it.

Micky raised his eyes suddenly. “What are you thinking about?” he asked.

She shook her head; her lip quivered a little.

Micky half rose to go to her, when the two men who owned the second car came back into the room again. Micky turned on his heel.

“I suppose we ought to be getting on,” he said constrainedly. “I’ll go and start up; you stay here.”

He went out, leaving Esther by the fire.

Her thoughts were a little confused. What had he been going to say, she wondered. It seemed hardly possible that she had really had that little glimpse of the other Micky whom she had never seen before; the Micky who was not at all a man about town, but just an ordinary person who thought it must be fine to have a home in the country and lots of roses and a little son of his own.

The two men behind her were talking together; one of them was laughing a good deal in a sneering way.

“She must be a fool, you know,” he said drily. “I’m surprised at any woman being caught like that. It was only her money he was after, of course.”

“I’ve never seen her myself,” the other said disinterestedly—he sounded rather bored—“and I only know him slightly. You met them in Paris, you say?”

“Yes—last week.” There was the sound of a match being struck and a little pause while he puffed at a cigarette.

Esther turned in her chair; it was odd how the mention of Paris always seemed to grip her heart. She looked at the two men, but they were both strangers to her.

“Perhaps he won’t really marry her,” the elder one said yawning. “There’s many a slip you know, and from what I know of Raymond Ashton——” He shrugged his shoulders eloquently.

The girl by the fire sat very still. She was staring at the two men with piteous grey eyes; she felt as if all the blood in her body had ebbed to her heart, where it was hammering enough to kill her.

Like some one in a dream she heard the laugh the other man gave——

“Not marry her! My dear boy, he must! It’s his last chance, and he knows it! He’s up to his neck in debt and borrowed money. As a matter of fact, I shouldn’t be at all surprised if Tubby Clare’s little widow hasn’t already changed her name for Raymond Ashton’s.”

CHAPTER XXV

Outside in the road Micky suddenly started up the engine of his car. The dull throb, throb, came faintly to Esther as she sat there as motionless as if she had been carved in stone.

The little vibrant noise sounded like the beating of some one's heart, she thought dully; she found herself listening to it subconsciously.

The two men behind her had moved out to the doorway; she could still hear them talking and laughing together. Something within her urged her to get up and follow them to tell them that she had heard what they said, to tell them that it was all a lie—a shameful lie. But she could not move.

She told herself that if she kept quite still for a few moments she would wake and find that she had just dreamed it all. She stared hard into the glowing fire, trying to believe that it was all part of her dream, that it was not real warmth which she felt on her face at all, that those leaping flames were only pictures of her imagination, that even if she thrust her hand into them they would not burn her, but would just melt away into the silence around like phantoms.

The phantom lover! June's half-mocking words beat dully against her brain. June had always hated Raymond; she would be glad if this thing were true.

She suddenly realised that she was shivering in every limb. With an effort she dragged her chair closer to the fire. She put out her hands to the flames....

"Good heavens! what are you doing?" said Micky's voice at her shoulder. She had not heard him come into the room; it was only when he bent and caught her hand back from the flames that she realised what she had been going to do. She looked up at him with a sick smile.

"I thought it wouldn't burn," she said stupidly.

A flash of alarm crept into his eyes; she looked so white.

He kept her hand in his holding it firmly.

"What's the matter?" he asked gently.

There was something so kind in his voice that for a moment she felt as if she would have given her soul to have been able to lean her head against his shoulder and sob out the truth; all she had just heard and all the miserable hope and fear that had tortured her for the past few weeks.

“What is it?” Micky said again anxiously.

She dragged her hand free of his; she remembered that he, too, had hated Raymond, that he, too, would be glad when he knew of this nightmare that had suddenly swooped down upon her.

She rose to her feet, holding fast to the chair-back to steady herself.

“There isn’t anything the matter; but I should like to go home—I’m tired, that’s all; I’m only tired.”

She moved away to the door. The cold air beating on her face gave her a grip of herself again. She stood for a moment looking down the deserted street, her hands clenched.

It was only for a little while, just until they got back to Enmore, that she had got to keep up appearances, and then—then....

A sudden wave of tragedy swept through her soul; oh, it could not be true! It was some other man of whom they had been speaking, some other Raymond!

She heard Micky laughing with the landlady as he paid for the coffee and buns, and she felt that she hated him for not guessing how she suffered. She walked down to where the little car stood waiting. If only he would be quick and take her back; she could do nothing till she got back to Enmore, and each moment was so precious.

It seemed an eternity until Micky joined her. He avoided looking at her, though he bent and wrapped the rug carefully over her knees before he took his seat.

The other car with its two occupants had vanished down the road some minutes since; only a small cloud of grey dust on the horizon showed which way they had gone.

Micky drove back faster than he had come. Once or twice he looked down at Esther with an anxious pucker between his eyes.

What had happened in those few minutes to make this sudden change? he wondered.

She had been happy and smiling enough this morning; now all that he could see

of her face, half hidden in the big upstand collar of the coat he had given her, were two piteous blue eyes staring steadily ahead of her down the road.

They had gone some miles almost silently when he felt that he could bear it no longer. He stopped the car almost savagely and turned in his seat.

“What’s the matter? What have I done now?” he asked roughly. “You weren’t like this when we came out. If I’ve done anything to annoy you...”

She forced herself to laugh. It would be the last straw if she broke down now.

“How absurd!” she said in a high-pitched voice. “Nothing is the matter. I’m tired, that’s all; I shall be glad to get home.”

He was not satisfied.

“You’re not telling me the truth,” he said. His mind searched anxiously back to the short time they had stayed in the inn. What could have happened? They had seen nobody there except the two men with the racing car.

“Those two fellows who came in—they didn’t annoy you, or anything like that, when I was out of the room?”

She shook her head.

“Of course not; they never spoke to me.”

“If you won’t tell me what I’ve done, how can I hope to put things right?” he said.

It was always like this, he told himself savagely; one little step onward and a dozen back. He did not speak again till they got home.

Esther got out of the car without waiting for him, and went on into the house.

After a moment Micky followed.

Esther was in the hall; she turned to him impatiently.

“Every one is out,” she said. “Miss Dearling and June are both out.”

There was a sort of strain in her voice which Micky could not understand. She looked as if she had had some bad shock, and yet what could have happened? He had not left her for more than a few minutes.

“Very well, I won’t wait,” he said formally. He spoke curtly; he felt sore enough; he raised his hat stiffly and turned away.

He looked back once at the little house. He thought perhaps Esther might be

standing at the door in case he should turn, but the door was shut, and it was impossible for him to guess that upstairs in the room over the porch Esther had shut and locked the door and was pacing up and down the room, her hands pressed hard against her eyes, sobbing—great tearless sobs that seemed to rend her very heart.

“It’s not true—it’s not true,” she said over and over again under her breath. “It’s not true—it’s not true....”

The striking of a church clock in the village seemed to rouse her. June would be back soon, and Miss Dearling.

She dabbed her eyes with her handkerchief; they felt hot and burning. She looked at herself anxiously in the little mirror—such a white face; she turned away impatiently.

Twelve o’clock; there was a train up to town at half-past, she knew. The confusion in her brain seemed to have passed all at once; she felt quite calm and clear.

She would go to Paris—she would see Raymond, and hear from his own lips what a lie it was. She ought to have gone before. She had been a fool to listen to Micky; of course he would not wish her to go.

She put a few things into a bag. She took the last letter she had had from Raymond, and kissed it before thrusting it back into her dress; she scribbled a pencil note to June and fastened it to the pincushion.

With the little suit-case in her hand she went downstairs and out into the street.

There was nobody about, and she almost ran to the station. The porter who had witnessed her meeting yesterday with Micky stared at her wonderingly.

The London train was due now, he told her. She’d have to hurry.... She was gone before he finished his slow speech.

She found an empty carriage and got in, sitting as far away from the door as possible in case any one should come along the platform and recognize her. It was only when the train started away that she leaned back and closed her eyes.

“I am going to Paris; I can’t live without him any longer. Please don’t worry.” Over and over she found herself repeating these words in her brain. She wondered where she had heard them and what they really meant.

“I am going to Paris; I can’t live without him any longer.”

They were true anyway. She was going to Paris because she felt she could no longer live without Raymond.

She opened her eyes with a little gasp; they were her own words. She remembered that she had written them in the note she had left on the pincushion for June.

Poor June! She would be angry. And Micky.... A little throb touched her heart. She had not been very kind to Micky. She hoped he would soon forget her. Her eyes closed again.

How long did it take to get to Paris? She had not the least idea. She had not got much money with her; she tried to remember how much, but somehow her brain refused to act; she took out her purse and tipped its contents into her lap. She started to count it, but after a moment she gave it up with a helpless feeling and put it all back again.

“Tubby Clare’s little widow....” Who was Tubby Clare? she wondered. She laughed foolishly. What a name!

But he had left his widow a great deal of money, and money was everything nowadays. Nobody could be happy without money; Raymond had told her that months ago; a man with money has the whole world at his feet, so he had said.

She thought of Micky—he was one of the richest men in London, and yet he was not happy. She had never thought that he looked happy; she wondered if it was really because he loved her.

She wished she could stop thinking. She was so tired, she wanted to sleep; but the wheel of thought went on and on in her brain.

The miles seemed to crawl by. Soon the fields and open country were left behind; the houses were closer together; presently they crowded one another, almost jostling each other out of the way, it seemed.

What an ugly place London was. She sat up with a little shiver. Strange how cold she felt, and yet her head was burning hot.

Would this journey never end? Surely they had been travelling for days and days already.

The train stopped with a jerk.

“Paddington ... all change—all change....”

Esther stumbled to her feet.

CHAPTER XXVI

Micky had just reached the unpretentious inn in the village where he had taken a room, when he was hailed from across the road by June; a very cheerful looking June, in a business-like coat and skirt of rough tweed, and carrying a walking-stick, which she proceeded to wave at him vigorously.

“Back so soon!” She came across to where he stood by the car, and looked at his despondent face. “Not another row?” she demanded tersely.

Micky frowned.

“No—merely a sort of frigid silence this time,” he said savagely, then he laughed. “It’s no use, June, I may as well throw up the sponge. I seem to put my foot in it whatever I do.”

June drew a pattern in the mud at her feet.

“Well, what have you done?” she asked. “Esther was all right this morning, and quite pleased to be going with you. I certainly never expected to see either of you till this afternoon. Where did you go?”

Micky shrugged his shoulders.

“Oh, some little one-eyed place. We stopped at an inn and had some coffee, and that seemed to finish it.”

“What, the coffee?” asked June with a twinkle.

Micky turned away.

“If you’re going to make a joke of everything——” he said with dignity.

She laid her hand on his arm.

“I’m sorry, old boy. But you do explain things so badly, you know. You had coffee at the inn, yes—and then——”

“I went outside to start up the engine, and when I came back she seemed to have utterly changed. She even looked different and she hardly spoke all the way

home.”

“It must be your imagination.”

He shook his head.

“No, it isn’t; and when we got home she went indoors without even saying good-bye—confound her!” he added in savage parenthesis.

“Oh, Micky!” said June reproachfully.

He coloured.

“I didn’t mean that, but I’m so fed-up with everything——” He leaned his elbow on the side of the car and looked away from her down the road. “I think I’ll get back to town this afternoon,” he said after a moment. “I was a fool to come at all.”

June looked at him silently.

“Well, what are you thinking?” he asked.

She roused herself and answered briskly.

“I think you want your lunch, that’s what I think, and I’m going to take you back with me to have some. Aunt Mary is expecting you——” Her queer eyes twinkled. “Micky, she’s quite made up her mind that you’ve come down here after me.”

Micky laughed ruefully.

“It would be a dashed sight better for me if I had,” he said.

He moved to the door of the car.

“Jump in, and I’ll drive you back. I’m not sure that I shall stay to lunch, though——” he added darkly.

“Oh yes, you will,” June said. “And when you see Esther you’ll find that it was just imagination on your part—why, only coming down in the train the other morning she agreed with me that you were a perfect darling—she did, on my word of honour!”

When they reached the house Micky meekly followed June into the hall.

“The table’s laid,” she informed him. “I’ll just go and take off my hat and find Esther and Aunt Mary. Go in, Micky.”

Micky took off his hat and coat and obeyed.

He looked several sizes too large for the little dining-room as he walked over to the fire and stood with his back to it; he looked round the room appreciatively.

This was a real home, he thought with sudden wistfulness in spite of its small rooms and general atmosphere of a bygone decade; a man could be very happy here with a woman he cared for.

“Micky—Micky—” called June urgently. She came clattering down the stairs anyhow—she burst into the room, she thrust a scrap of paper into his hand.

“She’s gone—she’s gone! Oh, what fools we’ve been! I told you what it would be. I knew she’d find out sooner or later. Oh, why didn’t you let me tell her?—I begged you to let me. It’s not my fault. I warned you what it would be—oh dear! oh dear!” and June fell into a sobbing heap on the uncomfortable horsehair couch behind her.

Micky stood clutching the paper and staring at her; it was some minutes before he could find his voice, then he went over to where she lay, put his hand on her shoulder, and shook her almost roughly.

“What are you talking about, June? For heaven’s sake sit up and behave like a rational woman. Who’s gone? What do you mean?”

She raised her tear-stained face.

“Read it! read it! Oh, Micky, you have been a fool!” she said furiously. “It’s all your fault. I knew what would happen—”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake shut up,” said Micky.

He had unfolded the paper, and there was a moment’s tragic silence as he read the three lines Esther had scribbled.

“I have gone to Paris; I can’t live without him any longer. Please don’t worry about me....”

Twice his lips moved, but no words would come, then he broke out in a strangled voice—

“It’s a joke—of course it is. She’s done it to frighten us. Why, I—I only left her here half-an-hour ago—it can’t be more. It’s a joke—of—of course it is ... June....”

“A queer sort of joke,” said June sobbing. “Poor darling! and a nice sort of reception she’ll get when she reaches Paris with that cad there....”

“She’ll never find him; she doesn’t know where he is,” Micky said hoarsely.

There was a stunned look in his eyes—he took a step towards the door and came back again as if he did not know what to do.

June was drying her eyes and shedding more tears and drying them again; she looked at Micky angrily.

“Of course she’ll find him,” she said tartly. “She knows his address; the brute’s written to her dozens of times, and she’s written to him as well....” Her eyes searched his face with a sort of contempt.

“Well, what are you going to do now you’ve made such a glorious hash of everything?” she demanded.

Micky passed a hand across his eyes.

“I don’t know. I’m trying to think. She can’t have been gone long. She may still be in the village.” He dragged out his watch. “There may not have been a train up to London—”

“Yes, there was; the twelve-twenty—” The eyes of both of them turned to the clock, and Micky gave a smothered groan.

“She must have gone by that. I must follow her, of course.”

June bounced up.

“I’ll come with you; I’ll put on my hat again—” She made a dive for the door, but Micky caught her arm and stopped her.

“You can’t; I can’t take you with me. Be sensible, June—I’ll find her and bring her back—”

She looked up at him stormily.

“She’s my friend, and it’s all your fault she’s got into this mess. I told you not to interfere, and you wouldn’t listen—”

It was a woman all over to rave at him now, but Micky took it patiently.

“Very well, it’s my fault, and as it’s my fault it’s up to me to try and put things right. Don’t waste time arguing—if I’m to catch her before she leaves England....”

June burst into fresh tears and sobs.

“You won’t be able to; she’ll get over there and have to bear it all alone.... Oh, Micky, I almost hate you when I think what we’ve done....”

Micky went out of the room; he went down to the road and mechanically started up the car; he was getting into his seat when June followed and called to him—

“You haven’t got your coat or cap, Micky.”

He came back; he hoisted himself into his coat, and turned away again; June caught his hand.

“I didn’t mean to be a beast, Micky—”

He gave her fingers a squeeze.

“I know; it’s all right; but don’t keep me, there’s a dear.”

But she still clung to him.

“You’ll bring her back safely, Micky—promise.”

Micky turned away without answering.

“... I can’t live without him any longer...”

In spite of everything, that was how she still felt about the brute.

When he got to the station he found there was no train to town for a couple of hours; he asked a sleepy porter an agitated question.

“Did you see a young lady go by the twelve-twenty—one of the young ladies staying with Miss Darling. Oh, for heaven’s sake hurry up and answer, man!”

The man scratched an unshaven chin with irritating consideration.

“Yes, I seen her,” he said at last. “She came in running—caught the train to London—she...”

But Micky had gone; he would have to drive to town, he decided. If Esther had got to know the truth, better hear it from him than from that brute.

He drove off at breakneck speed. It seemed miles and miles to London; no matter how much of the winding road he covered, it unfolded again before his eyes, and mercilessly again.

He went straight to Charing Cross; he left the car in the yard and dashed in to inquire about trains; he searched a time-table; 12.59—3 o’clock—4.5 ... he looked up at the clock—three minutes past four now. Micky dashed across the big hall to a gate where a signboard said “Dover Express”; he had no ticket; he pushed by the protesting inspector; the guard was waving his flag; some one grabbed at Micky and missed as he flung himself breathless and panting into the

last coach of the moving train.

CHAPTER XXVII

Micky sat for a few moments breathless and exhausted before he pulled himself together, and taking off his hat wiped his hot forehead.

The train was gathering speed; he let down the window with a run and looked out; the station was out of sight altogether; they were crossing the bridge under which the silent Thames flowed sluggishly.

A breath of cold air touched his hot face and he shivered suddenly and drew the window up once more.

Something had driven his thoughts back to his first meeting with Esther, to the cold silence of the night, and the hard desperation of her voice as she said—

“I didn’t mean to go home any more—I shouldn’t have ever gone home again if I hadn’t met you....”

If she got to Paris before he saw her she would feel like this again. Micky groaned.

Fortunately he had the carriage to himself, but it was a third-class compartment, and not a corridor carriage. He cursed his luck here; if there had been a corridor he could have gone the length of the train and seen if Esther were on it. As it was, he would have to wait till they reached Dover, and even then perhaps he would never find her.

He tried to calm himself with the conviction that everything would be all right, but in his heart he was despairing; if he found Esther and brought her back she would hate him for the rest of his life.

What had happened to make her rush off like this? He could not imagine. She had seemed so happy only that morning. What could account for the tragedy that seemed to breathe in every word of that little note she had left for June?

He took it from his pocket and read it again. It gave no hint of what ²¹⁶had prompted this sudden flight. He wrote out a couple of telegrams to dispatch from Dover—one for June, and another for Driver.

He wished he had got Driver with him. There was a sort of security in the man's stolidness.

He realised that he was without luggage, and that he had not much money. Supposing he had to go on to Paris, what the dickens was he going to do?

When the train ran into Dover he got to his feet with a sigh of relief. Quickly as he was out of the train a great many passengers had left it before him. He started at a run down the platform. He stared at every woman he met, hoping it would be Esther. The crowd was getting thick; he had to push his way unceremoniously past people; porters with luggage trucks jostled him; he began to lose his temper—he was just answering with great heat a man who had cynically asked “who he was shoving,” when some one touched his arm.

“Micky....”

For a moment Micky's heart beat up in his throat; he turned quickly and found himself looking down into the brown eyes of Marie Deland.

If she had hoped for anything better, it must have been a shock to her to see the bitter disappointment in Micky's face. He stammered out that he had not expected to see her, that he was in a deuce of a hurry; he hoped she would forgive him, but—

“Micky, by all that's wonderful!” said another voice, and there was Marie's father, the good-natured old man who had pretended to agree with his wife when she raved against Micky for the cavalier way in which he had treated his daughter, but who in his heart had indulged in a quiet chuckle, thinking that Micky had been rather clever to escape from the toils at the eleventh hour.

He shook hands with Micky heartily enough; he, at any rate, had no grudge against him. He asked Micky a hundred questions.

“Are you going over, my boy? Come with us. I've got a reserved carriage on the Paris express. Delighted to see you. Marie and I are just off for a little holiday by ourselves.”

He touched his daughter's arm. “Ask him to join us, my dear.”

Micky did his best to answer civilly; he was in the deuce of a hurry, he said again; he had got to meet a friend but had missed her in the crowd.

“I came off in the deuce of a hurry,” he said. He was chafing bitterly at this enforced delay; each moment was so precious.

Marie touched her father's arm.

"We are only keeping Mr. Mellowes, Daddy...." Something in her voice made Micky's eyes smart. It was hard luck that for the second time he was forced to humiliate her. He stammered out incoherently that he hoped they would forgive him, but he was in such a deuce of a hurry.... He went off abruptly.

Everybody was off the train now, and many people were already on the boat. Micky remembered that he had no ticket; he entered into a hot argument with an official, who listened to him skeptically, and took as long as possible to make out the ticket; even when Micky had paid he still looked suspicious.

The gangway was still down; Micky went on board and stood as close to it as he could, scanning the face of each passer.

Esther was not amongst them.

"Stand away there—stand away...."

Micky was pushed aside, and a couple of brawny seamen hauled the gangway on to the harbour. The gap of green water was widening slowly between the pier and the ship's side. Micky felt as if he were being exiled. Supposing she was not on the boat?

He turned away and searched the crowded deck. The boat was full, and most of the people were women, but there was nobody who looked in the very least like Esther.

She would be wearing the fur coat, he was sure—the coat he had given her!

One or two people stared at him curiously. Once he came across Marie and her father on the leeward side of the boat. For decency's sake he had to stop. He made an inane remark on the weather and said he thought they were going to have a smooth crossing.

Marie's brown eyes lifted to his.

"You haven't met your friend?" she said quietly.

Micky had a horrible conviction that she had not believed that he had any one to meet. He coloured in confusion as he answered—

"No—no. I'm sorry to say I haven't."

She moved away leaving him with her father. The old man slipped a hand through Micky's arm.

“Don’t notice her, my boy; women are queer cattle—and I expect she’s a little sore with you still.”

Micky wished it was possible to jump overboard. He found the old man’s friendliness more insufferable than the look of reproach in Marie’s eyes. As soon as he could he got away; he went down the companion-way and wandered round despondently.

If Esther were on the boat she must have seen him and was deliberately keeping out of his way; he glanced in at the open door of the ladies’ cabin as he passed.

Several pessimistic souls who had already made up their minds to be ill, although the sea was like a mill-pond, had arranged themselves on the couches, with pillows under their heads; as Micky passed the cabin some one slammed the door smartly in his face.

He went upon deck again and stood looking out to sea, with the wind stinging his face.

It was getting dark rapidly; the lights of Dover twinkled through the greyness. Micky stood and watched till they could no longer be seen. He was chilled to the bone in spite of his warm coat; he turned the collar up round his throat and thrust his hands deeply into his pockets.

His fingers came in contact with the telegrams he had written in the train and forgotten to send. He swore under his breath.

He kept out of the Delands’ way when they reached Calais; he was first off the boat; he stood in the darkness trembling with excitement.

There were all sorts of people pouring past him—men, women, and children. They all seemed happy and eager—a couple of Frenchmen standing near him chattered incessantly; Micky moistened his dry lips; there was a little nerve throbbing in his temple.

Supposing he never saw her again! His hands clenched deep in his pockets ... supposing he never met the half-shy glance of her grey eyes—supposing he never heard her voice any more—or her laugh....

The sweat broke out on his forehead. For a moment he closed his eyes with a sick feeling of hopelessness, and when he opened them again he saw Esther standing there not half a dozen paces from him.

The glare from a huge arc lamp shone full on her slim figure and golden hair.

She was looking round her in a scared, apprehensive way as if not knowing where to go.

A wave of such utter relief swept through Micky's very soul that for a moment it almost turned him faint.

She was quite alone, but as Micky watched her he saw a French porter in a blue blouse go up to her and start chattering away, pointing to the small suit-case she carried and gesticulating violently. Esther shook her head—Micky remembered that she knew no French—but the man persisted, and she shook her head again in a frightened sort of way.

Micky covered the distance between them in a couple of strides.

"Esther..." he said, in a queer, choked sort of voice.

She turned with a stifled scream, and a most unwilling relief swept her face.

"Oh, Micky!" she said breathlessly. She put out her hand as if to grip his arm, then drew it away, moving back.

"How did you come here ... oh, how dare you follow me...?" she said passionately.

Micky took her arm very gently.

"We found your note," he said. "I had to come ... June said..." Then suddenly his calmness broke "Oh, thank God I found you—thank God!" he said hoarsely.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Esther seemed arrested by the emotion in Micky's voice.

She stood looking up at him with wide eyes and parted lips, then suddenly she broke out again—

“I don't know what you mean. I'll never forgive June if she sent you after me. I'm going to Paris. I'm not a child to be followed and looked after like this.... Let me go.”

Micky released her arm at once. When he spoke his voice was quiet and rather stern.

“Please don't make a scene. I have followed you for your own sake. I know I can't stop you from going to Paris. I'm not going to try. All I do ask you is that you will let me speak to you. If what I have to say is useless, I give you my word of honour that I will leave you here and let you go on to Paris alone.”

She looked at him with stormy eyes.

“I don't believe it—it isn't the first time you've lied to me....” she broke off breathlessly. Micky turned pale, but he answered evenly enough—

“You're quite justified in saying that; I'm not going to try and deny it. But we can't stand here all night—people are beginning to stare at us....”

“I don't care——” but she dropped her voice a little, and when Micky made a slight movement forward she followed.

It was cold on the quay—there was a fresh wind blowing, and Esther shivered.

“There's a restaurant place here,” Micky said. “I want a meal if you don't; I haven't had anything since breakfast.”

He found a table and ordered a meal, but he knew he should not be able to eat a thing.

“I don't want anything to eat,” Esther said. She sat sideways in her chair away from the table; there was a pitiable look of strain in her face; she still gripped her

suit-case tightly. When Micky asked her to be allowed to put it down for her she turned on him almost fiercely.

“Leave me alone—oh, leave me alone!”

The French garcon eyed them both interestedly. Any one far less keen of perception than he was could have seen that there was tragedy of some kind between this pretty, frail-looking girl and the tall man in the big coat.

“You said you were hungry, but you’re not eating anything,” Esther broke out irritably. “How much longer are you going to make me sit here? I want to catch a train to Paris to-night.”

“There are no trains, except slow ones,” Micky told her; “the express has gone half an hour ago. I can find you rooms in a hotel close by for the night....” His eyes met hers across the table, and he broke out, “Esther, for God’s sake let me explain things to you. You’ve all your life before you; to-morrow, if you wish it, I’ll go away and never see you again. But I can’t let you go now without telling you the truth. I ought to have told you before—it was for your own sake I tried to keep it back....”

Her grey eyes searched his face disbelievingly.

“If you’ve anything to say against Mr. Ashton,” she said, “I refuse to listen. I shouldn’t believe anything you say, for one thing. Why, you don’t even know his name—unless June has told you,” she added breathlessly.

“June has told me nothing, but I know, all the same. I knew the first night I ever met you—when I left you and went back to my rooms, he was there waiting for me....”

She half turned, leaning across the table, and her eyes were like fire.

“He was there—who was there?” she asked shrilly.

“Ashton—Raymond Ashton,” Micky answered.

There was a tragic silence, then Esther rose to her feet; she stood looking dazedly round her in a helpless sort of way.

Micky called for the bill—without waiting for his change he followed Esther out into the darkness. She offered no resistance when he drew her hand through his arm. He did not know what on earth to do with her; if he took her to an hotel it would mean leaving her, and she would probably go away in the night. They went back to the station, and Micky found a waiting-room with a roaring fire; he

dragged one of the uncomfortable wooden benches close to it and made Esther sit down; he closed the door and came back to her.

There was so much he wanted to say, and for the life of him he did not know how to begin. She sat there so silently; she seemed to have forgotten his presence altogether.

Micky looked at her, and suddenly he broke out—

“Esther, speak to me—say something—for heaven’s sake——”

She moved in a curiously heavy sort of way, as if it were an effort; she raised her eyes to his agitated face.

“This morning—was it only this morning?—it seems so long ago.” She stopped for a moment, then went on again slowly. “When we were at that inn in the village—those men with the car—I heard them talking....” She stopped again.

“Yes,” said Micky.

She frowned as if his monosyllable had interrupted her train of thought. She went on presently—

“They were talking about Paris—and Raymond.” And now she raised her eyes. “If you say that it was true what I heard them say, I will kill you,” she said with sudden passion. “It’s a lie—just a lie to hurt me, to hurt me more than I’ve been hurt already.” She stopped, panting. “It’s a lie—say it’s a lie,” she drove the words at him.

Micky sat down beside her.

“If they said that Ashton had been married in Paris to Mrs. Clare it was the truth,” he said.

He marvelled at the steadiness of his voice. He felt sick with shame at the part he was having to play. He went on incoherently—

“I knew it before you ever went to Enmore—it was in the London papers. I was afraid you would see it. I persuaded June to get you down into the country. I suppose I was a fool. I ought to have known it was only putting things off.”

He looked at her and quickly away again.

“Forget him, Esther, for God’s sake. He never cared for you; he isn’t worth a thought.”

She rose to her feet, pushing the hair back from her face as if she were

distraught.

“How dare you say such things to me?” she said in an odd, choked voice. “You always hated him—you and June. Do you think I’m going to believe you? Do you think I could believe you for a moment when I have his letters—when he has shown me in so many ways how he cares?... I don’t care what you say—I don’t care if the whole world were to tell me it was true—I’ll never believe it till he tells me himself....” Her breath came gaspingly; she looked at Micky’s white face with passionate hatred in her eyes.

“How do I know it isn’t all a made-up story?” she asked him hoarsely.

She hardly knew what she was saying; she leaned her arms on the mantelshelf and hid her face in them.

Micky let her alone; he got up and began pacing up and down the room.

He deserved everything she had said; it was all his fault that she had got this to bear. With the best intentions in the world he had proved himself a blundering fool.

Esther raised her head; she had not shed a tear, but her face was white and desolate.

She walked past him to the door.

“I’m going on to Paris to-night,” she said. “Nothing you can say will stop me—nothing.”

“Very well, then I will come with you.”

She did not answer; she fumbled helplessly with the door handle. Micky came forward to open it for her, and their hands touched. A little flame of red rushed to his face; he put his shoulders to the door.

“You can’t go like this,” he said stammering. “How can I let you go like this? Whatever I’ve done, I haven’t deserved that you should think as badly of me as you do. It was because I cared for you so much—I tried to save you pain ... perhaps it isn’t any excuse, but it’s the truth.... I’d give my very soul if I could undo what’s gone, if I could save you from this.”

She was not looking at him, but the cold contempt in her face stung him.

“You may despise me,” he broke out again jaggedly. “But it’s the truth I’ve told you.... Ashton never cared for you; that night at my rooms....” He stopped, he did not want to tell her, but somehow there was a compelling force within him that

drove the words to his lips.

“He told me he’d had to break with you—that he was going away from London because of you. He said he must marry a woman with money—it’s the truth, if I never speak again. He never cared for you, Esther—he was never fit to kiss the ground you walk on. He wanted to be rid of you—he——”

Micky stopped; Esther had given a little strangled cry, half-sob, half-moan, like some animal in mortal pain; for the moment she saw the world red; hardly knowing what she did, she lifted her hand and struck Micky across his white face.

“Oh, you liar—you liar,” she said. The words were a hoarse whisper, her voice was almost gone.

She fell away from him, shaking in every limb; she dropped into a chair hiding her face.

Micky stood like a man turned to stone. She had not hurt him physically, though there was a red flush where she had struck him, but he felt as if the blow had fallen on his aching heart and his love for her.

It seemed a long time before either of them moved or spoke, then Esther dragged herself to her feet.

“Please let me pass,” she said in a whisper, and Micky stood aside without a word.

He followed her out and inquired for a train; there was a slow one at ten-fifty they told him. He put Esther into a carriage and got a rug for her and a cushion. He knew she had had nothing to eat, and he ordered a basket to be made up at the refreshment-room. When he came back she was sitting in a corner with her eyes closed. She had taken off her hat, and her golden hair was tumbled about her face. She took no notice when he put the rug over her; she did not even open her eyes when the train started.

Micky sat down in the opposite corner. He felt more tired than he had ever done in all his life, and yet he knew that he could not sleep; his brain seemed as if it would never rest again. He sat with face averted from the girl in the corner, looking out into the darkness.

It seemed strange to realise that he had made this same journey dozens of times before. He felt that it was all strange and distasteful to him. The chattering voices of the French porters and the whistle of the engines sounded new and quaint as if he had never heard them before. It seemed an eternity before the train started slowly away.

He leaned back and closed his eyes; his head was splitting, and he was cold and hungry.

He must have dozed for a few minutes, for he was roused by a little choking sound of sobbing. He opened his eyes—he was awake at once—he looked across at Esther. She was lying huddled up, with her face turned against the dirty cushions of the carriage, sobbing her heart out.

Micky looked at her in miserable indecision. Then he got up impulsively, and sat down opposite to where Esther was huddled.

He stretched out his hand and took hers.

“Don’t cry—don’t; I can’t bear it,” he said hoarsely. He raised her hand to his lips. She had taken off her gloves and her fingers felt like ice. He chafed them gently between his own. She still wore the cheap little ring which Ashton had given her months ago.

She let her hand lie passively in his. Perhaps she was too miserable to remember that it was Micky, and only realised that there was something kind and comforting in his touch. Presently her sobs quieted. She wiped the tears from her face and brushed back her disordered hair.

Micky got up and took down the supper basket he had managed to get at the station. There was a small thermos of hot coffee. He poured some out and made her drink it. If he had expected her to refuse he was agreeably disappointed. She obeyed apathetically; she even ate some sandwiches.

Micky was ravenous himself, but he would not touch a thing till she had finished.

“You’d be much more comfortable if you put your feet up on the seat and tried to sleep,” he said presently. “You can have my coat as well as the rug. Your hands are like ice.”

He took off his coat as he spoke and laid it over her.

“I’m afraid we’ve got a long journey yet,” he said ruefully. “If you could get some sleep.”

She turned her head away and closed her eyes.

She looked very young and appealing in the depressing light of the carriage.

Micky sat looking at her in silence. She cared so little for him that she had even forgotten her anger against him; nothing he could do or say really mattered to her, she was not sufficiently interested in him to even trouble to hate him for long.

He wondered what June was thinking, and Miss Dearling! He wished from the depths of his soul that he had remembered to send those wires. There was his car, too—he had left that in the yard at Charing Cross—what the dickens would become of it?—not that it mattered much, he was too miserable to be seriously concerned about anything.

Some minutes passed, but Esther did not move. Micky spoke her name once softly—

“Esther....” But she did not answer; he leaned over and touched her hand, but she did not stir; in spite of what she had said she was asleep.

Micky gave a sigh of relief. He drew his coat and the rug more closely around her; he was very cold himself, but that did not trouble him; he finished the contents of the supper basket before he went back to his own corner.

The train rumbled on through the night; it dragged into many little stations and stopped jerkily, but Esther did not wake.

Once when she moved and the rug slipped, Micky rose and quietly replaced it. He was very tired himself, but his brain would not allow him to sleep; he felt as if he were living through years during these long hours.

He sat looking at Esther with wistful eyes. Why was it that people never fell in love with the right people? he asked himself vaguely. He could have made her so happy.

He closed his eyes for a moment, then dragged them open again. He must not go to sleep, whatever happened. He sat up stiffly.

Presently he lifted a corner of the blind. The sky looked a little lighter, as if dawn were not far away. He looked at his watch. Nearly two!

A sudden impulse came to him to wake Esther and make her listen now to what he had to say. The time was getting short, and there was so much to tell her and explain.

He rose and bent over her, but she did not move, and he went back again to his corner.

He let the window down a little way, hoping the cold night air would help to keep him awake. The minutes seemed to drag, though in reality only a quarter of an hour had passed when Esther woke with a little smothered cry.

Micky was on his feet in an instant.

“It’s all right—there’s nothing to be afraid of—you’ve been asleep.”

She rubbed her eyes childishly with her knuckles; she stared at him for a moment unrecognisingly, then, as memory returned, she shrank back into her corner.

Micky picked up the rug and coat that had slithered to the floor; he waited a few moments till he saw that she was quite awake before he spoke, then he said gently—

“I hope you feel better. We shall soon be in now. Are you warm enough?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“We shall be into Paris very soon,” he said again; “and there is a great deal I want to say to you first. Will you listen to me if I try to explain?”

She met his eyes unflinchingly.

“There is only one man who can possibly explain anything to me,” she said then, “and he is not you.”

Micky lost his temper; he was cold and tired and hungry, and at that moment she seemed the most unreasonable of mortals.

“I shall not allow you to see Ashton, if you mean Ashton,” he said roughly. “The man isn’t fit for you to think about. He’s married, you know that ... Esther, for your own sake——”

She had turned her face away and was looking out into the darkness; she seemed not to be listening.

Micky went on urgently.

“I blame myself. I always meant to tell you before things had gone as far as this. I shall never forgive myself for not having done so. I’ve behaved like a cad, but my only excuse is that I loved you; I wanted to spare you unnecessary pain——” He was no longer stammering and self-conscious, his voice was firm and steady. “I suppose I was a fool to imagine that I could ever make you care for me; I suppose it was conceit that led me to think I could ever cut out this ... this phantom lover of yours——” He laughed mirthlessly.

“Esther, let me take you back home; it’s no use seeing Ashton—it only means humiliation and pain for you.”

Her lips moved, but no words came.

“Let me take you home to June,” he went on. “She will tell you that what I say is only the truth. She knows him—she....”

She spoke then.

“She always hated him; it isn’t likely she would wish me to marry him.” She bit her lip. “Oh, it’s no use saying any more,” she broke out wildly after a moment. “I’m going to see him—I can’t bear it if I don’t see him—just once! I’ve got to hear the truth——”

“I’ve told you the truth,” he repeated doggedly. “It’s no interest to me to try and prevent you from seeing him. I know I’ve done for whatever chance I had with you. Oh, for heaven’s sake believe that it’s only for your sake I want to take you back!”

She shook her head.

In her heart she found it impossible to believe him; she thought of the letters she had received from Raymond, the money—the presents—why even this coat she wore had come from him; she felt that she could laugh at this man opposite to her. A little smile curved her lips; a contemptuous smile it seemed to Micky.

For the first time the injustice of it all seemed to strike him; for him who had done his best she had nothing but dislike and contempt, but for the man who had left her with a brutal letter of farewell, who had thrown her over because she had no money, she had endless faith and trust, and love!

He broke out in his agitation.

“I’ve tried to spare you—I’ve done my best, but you won’t let me ... I’ve kept back the truth, but now you’ll have to hear it if nothing else will keep you from him. He’s never given you a thought since he left London—he imagines that you’ve forgotten him. It was he you saw at the Comedy Theatre that night when June and I were with you. He didn’t even trouble to let you know that he was in London—that’s how he cares for you—this man you refuse to believe one word against ...” His eyes flamed as they met hers.

She was staring at him now; her face was white and incredulous.

“If you—if you think I’m going to believe that—” she began, in a high, unnatural voice. She stopped; she seemed to realise all at once that he was speaking the truth. She leaned towards him. Her breath came in broken gasps.

“Those letters!” she said shrilly. “Whose letters? They were from him—they were from him—weren’t they from him?” she asked hoarsely.

“No,” said Micky doggedly.

Better to hurt her now, he told himself, than to let her go on to worse pain and humiliation.

There was a tragic silence; then she asked again, in a whisper—

“Then who—who wrote them?”

A wave of crimson flooded Micky’s white face. He dropped his head in his

hands as if he could not bear to meet her eyes.

“I did,” he said brokenly.

CHAPTER XXIX

A long moment of silence followed Micky's broken confession. He dared not look at Esther, though she was staring at him, staring hard, with a curious sort of wonderment in her grey eyes. Then all at once she began to laugh, a laugh which held no real mirth, only incredulity.

Micky raised his head sharply.

For a second they stared at one another; then Micky said hoarsely—

“You don't believe me”; and then again, more slowly: “You mean that you—don't believe—me?”

He half rose to his feet.

“Esther, I implore you.”

She moved back from him.

“It was clever of you—to think of such an excuse,” she said unevenly.

“It's the truth; I swear it if I never speak again. I know now that I must have been out of my mind to attempt such a thing, but it has only seemed impossible since you showed me how little you thought of me. I wrote those letters—every one of them. I——”

In the excitement of the moment neither of them had noticed that the train had reached its destination and was slowly stopping.

A voluble porter had already wrenched open the door and was imploring monsieur to accept his services; it was impossible to say any more to Esther.

Micky followed her out on to the platform; he felt that the last shred of his patience and tenderness had been killed.

She did not believe him—whatever he said she would never believe him; it was useless to waste his breath; he might as well give up and let her go her own way; perhaps a sharp lesson would teach her better and more quickly than all his love had been able to do.

He was dispirited and hungry, and hunger alone makes a man angry. He looked at the girl for whose sake he had raced all these miles of wild-goose chase, and a boorish longing to hurt her, to let her suffer rose in his heart.

Let her go to Ashton and see for herself the sort of man he was.

He spoke with savage impulse.

“I won’t bother you with my unwelcome company any longer. You will be able to get breakfast in the restaurant, and you will find that most people here understand English.... Good-bye——”

Esther gave a little gasp—

“You’re not going to leave me?”

The hardness of his eyes did not soften.

“You are not trying to tell me that you wish me to stay, surely?” he submitted drily.

She raised her head.

“Certainly not; after all, it’s your own fault you came.”

He did not answer, perhaps he could not trust himself; he raised his hat and turned away unseeingly, and Esther clutched her suit-case tightly and walked away with her head in the air, trying to look as if she knew every inch of the Gare St. Lazare and had been there thousands of times before.

But her heart was beating up in her throat, and she would have given a great deal, had it been compatible with dignity, to rush after him and beg him to stay.

She wandered out of the station, not knowing where to go, Raymond seemed to have faded into the background; she only thought of him subconsciously; it was the figure of Micky Mellows that worried her—she could not forget him.

Supposing he had really written those letters? “But he didn’t,” she told herself in an agony. “I know he didn’t.”

She took one of the letters from her suit-case and stared at the handwriting—Raymond’s writing. The whole thing was too preposterous.

She did not know what she meant to do, or where she meant to go; it no longer seemed that she had come here for any specific purpose.

The early morning greyness and chilliness had faded; the sun had risen and cleared away the mists.

She found herself in some gardens where an elderly man was feeding sparrows; she sat down on a bench and watched him.

It seemed years ago that she went down to Enmore with June—since she sat in the little inn with Micky and heard those two men talking.

The hot blood beat into her cheeks as she remembered something that for the moment she had forgotten—that Raymond Ashton was married!

The man gave the sparrows his last crumbs and went away. The little brown birds came hopping to Esther's feet, looking up at her with bright, eager eyes, as if expecting her to supply a further meal.

The sun faded and went in, and a few drops of rain came pattering down. She rose and began to walk on slowly. The light suit-case seemed to have grown heavy since yesterday.

At the back of her mind was the frightened knowledge that she was alone in Paris; that she had nobody to turn to now that Micky had deserted her; but as yet it was only in the background. Raymond was somewhere, perhaps quite close; but she no longer felt that she wanted to go to him.

Further on she found another bench sheltered under some trees and sat down again; she opened the suit-case and took out a bundle of Micky's letters ... Micky's! No, Raymond's.... Oh, whose letters were they?

She opened the one that had been written from the hotel in Paris. Its fond words seemed to take on a new meaning....

"Some day, if all that I wish for comes true, I will tell you the many things you would not let me say when we were last together...."

The one sentence caught her eye. She wondered that she had never before thought how unlike Raymond this was. Why was it she had not realised before that Raymond could never have written this?

Somewhere in the distance a church clock chimed; Esther found herself mechanically counting the bells—nine, ten, eleven! All those hours since Micky had left her at the station.

She was cold and hungry, but it did not seem to matter; she felt there was a great, unanswered question in her mind which she must settle.

She rose and walked on again; she turned out of the gardens and found herself in a street of shops. People looked at her curiously.

Hardly knowing that she did so, she stopped and looked in at a jeweller's window; there were trays of precious stones. She felt her own ring beneath the glove—she had worn it so long now, she wondered how she would feel when she had to take it off. Of course, she could not go on wearing it if Raymond was really married.

Micky had once gone into a pond on a bitter night to save a kitten from drowning; she wondered what made her remember that.

The man who could save a drowning kitten would never hurt a woman so that she could hardly think or feel; June had claimed for Micky that he was the best man in the world.

“But I don't believe in him—I don't believe anything he says,” Esther told herself feverishly; she moved on again away from the trays of flashing diamonds.

Two girls passing her were chattering in French—Esther looked after them vaguely.

This was really Paris—this rather noisy, confusing place; the Paris she had longed to see.

A man passing stared at her, half stopped, went on again, then turned, paused irresolutely, and finally came back.

He walked quickly till he drew abreast with her, and there was a curious eagerness in his face as he stooped a little to look down at hers; then he gave an exclamation of sheer amazement.

“Lallie! Good heavens! What in the world are you doing here?”

It was Raymond Ashton.

CHAPTER XXX

And so the dream had come true after all, and she and Raymond were together in Paris.

As she looked up into his handsome face it seemed to Esther that all the past hours of grief were as if they had never really existed; he was smiling down at her in the same old way; the very tone of his voice awoke forgotten memories in her heart; she felt as if a gnawing pain which had allowed her no rest had suddenly been lulled to sleep.

“I thought it must be you,” Raymond was saying nervously. “And yet I could not be sure. Somehow I never thought of you and Paris as being in any way compatible, and yet——” He broke off; it had been on the tip of his tongue to say that she had never looked sweeter or more desirable.

His overwhelming conceit suddenly woke the wish in his heart to know if she still cared, or if she had forgotten him, and a little flush crossed his face and his eyes grew tender as they met the tragedy of hers; he looked hastily round.

“We can’t talk here. Will you come to a café? There is so much I should like to say to you. When did you come over? What are you doing here?”

They were walking slowly along, the man’s head bent ardently towards her.

He had once told Micky that this girl was the only woman he had ever loved, and perhaps it was right—as he accounted love.

He took her to a café—one where there would be nobody likely to recognise him; he ordered coffee and biscuits.

“Now we can talk undisturbed,” he said; he moved his chair closer to Esther’s—²⁸ he laid his hand on hers.

She did not move or try to evade his touch; she just looked down at his hand for a moment and then up at the handsome face which had for so long meant all the world to her.

“I never thought we should meet again here of all places,” he said in his soft

voice. "How long ago does it seem to you since we said good-bye?"

She could not answer, but the thought floated through her mind that they never had said good-bye, that he had just walked out of her life and stayed away until this moment, when fate had thrown them together.

"If you knew how often I have thought about you," he said.

"Did you get my letter, Lallie? The one I wrote on New Year's Eve—and the money? I sent you some money."

A swift flush dyed her cheeks; she raised her eyes.

That had been his letter then, after all—Micky had lied to her; she caught her breath on a little gasp.

"Yes," she said faintly. "Yes—yes, I got it—thank you."

"I've often thought since that I might have written you a kinder letter," he said after a moment. "But everything had gone wrong then—the mater cut up rough—and I was up to my eyes in debt. It was the best thing for both of us to put an end to it, don't you think it was? You used to say that you wouldn't mind being poor, but in the end you'd have hated it as much as I should." He paused as if expecting her to speak, but she was plucking at the blue-and-white fringe of the tablecloth with nervous fingers.

What did he mean—that he might have written her a kinder letter—when she always remembered it as one of the dearest she had ever received?

He went on again—

"It hurt me more than you'll ever know." There was a sort of self-satisfaction in his voice. "It took me a long time to forget you, Lallie, and then, just as I was beginning, I saw you at the theatre—in the stalls ... with Mellowes." His brows met above his handsome eyes. "Mellowes wasn't long picking you up," he added jealously.

Her lip quivered, but she did not raise her eyes.

"You saw me, too, didn't you?" he persisted. "I know you did, because Mellowes came round afterwards and cursed me to all eternity." He laughed. "I should have made a point of seeing you the next day if it hadn't been for his confounded interference," he went on. "He told me to get out of London and leave you alone." He bent towards her a little. "What is Mellowes to you?" he asked her deliberately.

She raised her eyes now, and somehow it seemed as if, in the last few moments, the man she had known and loved had changed into a stranger—some one whom she had never seen before, whom she hoped never to see again.

She forced her lips to smile; she felt at that moment she would die rather than let him see how she was suffering, or guess how she had suffered in the past.

“He’s been kind to me,” she said voicelessly. “That’s all.”

Raymond made a little, inarticulate sound.

“He’s got me to thank for ever getting to know you,” he said. “I gave him your address and asked him to take you out a bit if he fancied it.... I asked him to be kind to you.”

The hands in her lap twitched convulsively.

“If I’d had one tenth of his beastly money,” Raymond said then savagely, “we shouldn’t be sitting here now as if we were strangers—as if ... Lallie—do you remember the good time we used to have——”

“I remember everything.” He bent closer.

“I never cared for any woman in all my life but you. It’s cursed hard luck.” He sighed. “You know I’m married?” he asked abruptly.

“Oh yes!” The words came stiffly.

His eyes searched her white face jealously.

“You don’t seem to care. I’ve often wondered if you knew—and if you minded!” He sat staring before him, and there was a little smile in his eyes. “We do things in style now, I can tell you,” he said with sudden change of voice. “She’s as rich as you please, and she likes to spend her money.” Another silence.

“I hope you’ll be happy,” Esther said faintly.

Afterwards she wondered what made her say it, seeing that she did not care in the very least if he were happy or not; why should she care? This man was a stranger to her.

He laughed ruefully.

“Oh, I suppose we shall,” he said. “She’s not a bad sort, and she lets me alone....” He roused himself suddenly and bent closer to her. “Lallie—you’ll let me see you again. There’s no reason why we can’t be—friends—just because I’m married——” He tried to take her hand, but now she repulsed him, though

very gently.

“You’re not going to be a little prude?” he said in a whisper. “I can give you the time of your life if you’ll let me. I’ve plenty of money now——”

“Your wife’s money,” said Esther with stiff lips.

He looked annoyed.

“If you like to put it that way—but she doesn’t mind—she’s too fond of me to mind how much I spend ... Lallie——” She hated to hear that name, because once she had loved it.

She closed her eyes for a moment with a little sick shudder.

“Are you faint?” he asked anxiously. “I suppose it is warm in here. Take your coat off! Jove! that’s a fine coat——” He ran an appreciative hand down the soft fur sleeve; a sudden suspicion crept into his eyes. “Who gave you that?” he asked sharply. “Not Mellowes——?”

“No—at least...” She could not go on. Micky had given it to her, she knew, but she would have bitten her tongue through rather than have told this man.

It had been Micky all the time—Micky....

She thrust the thought of him from her; she did not want to think of him now. There would be plenty of time later on; plenty of time when she had shaken off the last rag of the past.

“It cost a pretty penny, whoever bought it,” he said sulkily. “What else has he given you? If you can take presents from him you can’t refuse to let me see you sometimes, and after all—you did love me once.... Esther, do you remember the way you cried that last day?”

“Yes,” she said mechanically, “I remember; I remember everything.”

“You loved me well enough then,” he reminded her moodily. “You didn’t behave like an iceberg then, Lallie, and I’m not really changed; I’m the same man I was—I care for you just as much——”

“You’re married!” she said.

She felt as if she had so much time mapped out before her during which she must put up with this man’s society; as if each moment were another inch torn in the rags of disillusionment which had got to be destroyed thoroughly before she could ever hope to gather up the broken threads of her life again.

He laughed at her reminder.

“I’m not the only married man who sometimes forgets that he is no longer a bachelor,” he said detestably.

He laid an arm familiarly along the back of her chair. He touched her chin with his fingers.

She moved back, the hot blood rushing riotously over her face. She was white no longer; she looked like a marble Galatea suddenly brought to life.

Raymond Ashton laughed, well pleased. He was confident that he had not lost his power over her. For the moment his appalling vanity blinded him to the fact that it was not love in her eyes, but scorn.

“What are you thinking, Lallie?” he asked her.

She sat very straight and stiff in her chair.

“I am thinking,” she said, “how impossible it seems that I can ever have thought that I cared for you.” Her voice was low but very clear, and he heard each word distinctly. “I am thinking that you are the most contemptible thing I have ever met in my life—I am thinking how sorry I am for the woman who is your wife.”

She pushed back her chair and rose.

“Would you like to hear any more of my thoughts?” she asked.

Ashton had risen too; there was a look of bewildered amazement in his face; he tried to laugh. Even now he thought she was joking.

“Lallie—” he said hoarsely. He half held his hand to her. “Lallie—” he said again—but the cold contempt of her face struck the appeal from her lips.

He drew himself up with a poor attempt at dignity.

“So virtue is to be the order of the day, is it?” he said sneeringly. “Very well—” His eyes flamed as they rested on her face. “It makes one wonder why you are here—in Paris—alone!” he said insultingly—“If you are alone.”

There was a little point of silence. For a moment Esther scanned his handsome face as if she were trying to remember what it was she had ever loved in him—his eyes!—but they were so cruel and insolent—his lips ... she shuddered, realising that in all her life she could never undo the memory of his kisses—then she pulled herself together with a great effort and turned away.

He followed. His amazement had gone now—he was merely furiously angry—

his face was crimson—he caught her arm in a grip that hurt.

“My God, you’re not going like this,” he said furiously. “It’s only a few weeks ago that you were crying round my neck and begging me not to throw you over. Oh, that hurts, does it?” he said as she winced. “I dare say you’d like all that wiped out and forgotten. But I’ve got a few letters to remember you by—a few letters that would hardly make pleasant reading for the next man who is fool enough to waste his time on you—and I promise you I’ll send them along if it’s Mellowes or any other man——”

She raised triumphant eyes to his face.

“He wouldn’t read them,” she said passionately. “Send them if you like; but he wouldn’t read them——” She was not conscious of the admission in her words—she only knew that the knowledge that Micky was there somewhere in the background gave her the strength to defy Ashton.

She saw the sudden fury that filled his eyes.

“Then—then you admit that it’s Mellowes,” he stammered. “That it’s he who has taken my place—who has cut me out——” His voice changed to a sort of threat.

“I might have know what he meant to do. I might have guessed. Wait till I see him—wait till I get back to London.”

Esther smiled—a little smile of security and confidence.

“There is no need to wait,” she said quietly. “Mr. Mellowes is here in Paris with me, if you wish to see him.”

CHAPTER XXXI

Ashton echoed Esther's words hoarsely.

"Here! With you! in Paris!... Micky——"

A wave of bitterest jealousy surged through him. He fell back a step, struck dumb by the force of his emotions, and Esther fled away from him down the street.

She seemed to have awakened all at once to her true position. She was alone, with only a few shillings in her pocket and in a strange city.

She was tired to death. She felt as if her limbs would give way beneath her. The driver of a fiacre looked at her and drew his horse to the kerb.

Esther nodded; she threw her suit-case on to the seat and clambered in after it.

But where to go? The old blinding fear of her loneliness rushed back. Where could she go?

Then she suddenly remembered the hotel from which Micky had written to her. She would go there. It would be somewhere at least to sleep and rest.

It was only a little drive to the hotel; she wished it had been longer.

A commissionaire came forward, and said something in French. She looked up at him, but his face seemed all indistinct and unreal. She tried to answer, but her own voice sounded as if it were miles away.

They were in the small, rather dreary lounge. Esther passed a hand across her eyes. She must conquer this absurd weakness. She forced herself to remember that she was alone, but she felt as if she had no will-power left.

A door in front of her opened suddenly, and a man came into the lounge.

When he saw Esther he stopped. The hot colour rushed to his face. He seemed to be waiting for some sign from her. For a moment their eyes met; then, hardly knowing what she did, Esther held out her hand.

“Oh, please,” she said faintly, “oh, please tell me—what I am to do?”

But for the next few minutes she was past remembering anything, though she never really lost consciousness. She only knew that everything was all right now Micky was here—and the sheer relief the knowledge brought with it for the time threw her into a sort of apathy.

Some one took off her hat and the big fur coat that had grown so heavy; some one had bathed her face and unlaced her shoes, and now Micky stood there looking down at her with eyes that hurt, though they smiled.

“I’ve told them to bring lunch in here,” he went on. “You’ll like it better than the public room—and I haven’t had mine yet.”

Esther looked up at him.

“And can we—can we go back to London to-day?” she asked.

“We can go any time you like,” he said.

He felt he had aged years during that morning. No sooner had Esther got out of his sight at the station than he was beside himself with remorse for having allowed her to go; he had spent the whole morning wandering about looking for her. He had been to this hotel a dozen times; he had only just come in again when she followed.

The relief of having her safely in his charge once more was almost more than he could bear. He walked over to the door, then stopped and looked back at her.

“You won’t ... you won’t run away from me again, will you?” he asked. For the first time there was real emotion in his voice.

Esther had been sitting looking into the fire; she raised her head now.

“Don’t go,” she said tremulously. “Please don’t go. I want to speak to you.”

He flushed crimson, he tried to make some excuse.

“Another time.... You’re tired. I’ll come back presently. You ought to get some rest if we’re to go back to-night.”

“No,” she said. “It must be now.”

He shut the door, but he kept as far away from her as possible, standing over by the window that looked into the dreary winter garden.

There was something implacable about his tall figure.

“Oh, won’t you come here?” she said.

He obeyed at once. He rested an elbow on the mantelshelf and kept his eyes fixed on the fire.

There was a little silence, then Esther said, almost in a whisper:

“I want to beg your pardon. I hope you will—will try and forgive me.”

Micky did not move.

She struggled on:

“I’ve seen ... Mr. Ashton.” Somehow she could not bring herself to speak of him by his Christian name.

“And I know—I know—that I’ve been—been a fool.”

Her voice broke. She gripped the arms of the chair hard to keep herself from breaking down.

Micky forced himself to speak.

“I’m glad you’ve seen him—as you wished it,” he said jerkily. “But as hoping I will forgive you, there’s nothing to forgive—it’s all the other way on. I behaved like—like a cad—it’s for you to forgive me.”

He smiled faintly.

“And now we’ve both said the right thing I’ll go and see about that train,” he said.

But again she stopped him.

“I don’t want you to go—I want to talk to you. I want ... oh, I don’t know what I do want!” she finished, with a sob.

“You’re tired out,” Micky said calmly, though he looked anything but calm, “and I’m going to bully you and insist that you rest. I’ll come back presently....”

He went away quickly, as if he were afraid of being kept against his will but outside the door he stood still for a moment with his hand over his eyes before he pulled himself together and went on.

Esther listened to his departing steps with a sinking at her heart.

What had she hoped for? She hardly knew, but she felt as if she had made an overture of friendship that had been kindly but decidedly refused.

Her cheeks burned. It was not what she had expected.

It seemed an eternity till Micky came back again.

“There’s a train in half an hour,” he told her. “We can get back to town very comfortably. I’ve wired to June to meet us. She probably came up from Enmore yesterday.”

June! Esther had almost forgotten June.

“You ought to be getting ready if we are to catch that train,” Micky said. “Would you rather stay till to-morrow? I’m afraid the journey will tire you dreadfully.”

She rose hurriedly.

“No, no—oh no, I’d much rather go!”

Micky had reserved a carriage.

“I think I will go in a smoker,” he said. He put some magazines and a box of chocolates on the seat; he avoided looking at her. “It’s a corridor train so I’ll come and see that you are all right occasionally—if I may.”

She did not answer; she felt a little chill of disappointment. He had not asked a single question about Raymond, and now he was suggesting that they travel the long journey separately.

He hesitated.

“Will you be all right?” he asked awkwardly.

“Yes, thank you.”

He went away, and presently the train started. Esther looked out of the window and watched the city as it was rapidly left behind.

“I never want to see it again,” was the thought in her heart. “I wish I never had seen it.”

She felt like a naughty child who has run away from home and is being ignominiously brought back.

Last night seemed like some fevered dream; Raymond Ashton some man of whom she had read in a book or seen in a play.

A phantom lover!—he had not even been that, and once she had wished to die because she had got to be separated from him.

Her eyes fell on her hand—she still wore his ring.

With sudden passion she dragged it from her finger; she let the window down with a run and flung the ring far out into the grey evening. It was the end of a dream; the final uprooting of an illusion.

CHAPTER XXXII

Esther slept through the long journey fitfully—she was mentally and physically exhausted. She was only thoroughly aroused by people out in the corridor moving about collecting bags and baggage.

She opened her eyes with a confused feeling—the train was slackening speed, and Micky stood in the doorway.

“We are nearly in,” he said.

The train was almost at a standstill.

“Calais! Calais!”

Esther rose to her feet—her limbs were trembling, and her head ached dully.

Micky took her suit-case from the rack.

“You’d better fasten your coat,” he said casually. “It will be cold on the boat.”

She looked at him half fearfully. Was this the same man who had followed her from Enmore with such passionate haste and eagerness? He was perfectly undisturbed now at all events, he seemed even to avoid looking at her.

When they got on board he found her a chair on the leese of the boat.

“Are you a good sailor?” he asked.

“I don’t know. I’ve never been any distance until yesterday.”

“You’d better stay here; it’s preferable to that stuffy cabin.”

But he left her alone almost the whole time, though she knew that he walked up and down close to where she sat. She could see the glow of his cigar through the darkness and hear the slow sound of his steps.

She tried to think things over quietly as she sat there, but everything seemed so unreal, and most of all the fact that Micky had once professed to love her.

In the train he left her to herself till they reached London. He was sure she “did

not want to be bothered,” he said, and he was going to smoke.

Esther felt a little pang of disappointment. It seemed a long time till the train steamed fussily into Charing Cross; and the old weary feeling of loneliness had settled again upon her heart by the time Micky came to the door of the carriage.

“June is sure to be somewhere about,” he said laconically. “Will you stay here while I see if I can find her?”

She took a hurried step forward.

“No, I’ll come with you.”

She felt afraid of June’s kindly quizzical eyes; June who knew why she had run away to Paris, and what had been awaiting her there.

She touched Micky’s arm—the eyes she raised to his face were troubled.

“When shall I see you again?” she asked falteringly.

He half smiled.

“Why do you want to see me again?” he questioned gravely. “You can have no use for me—after this!”

Esther flushed painfully. Through the crowd she saw June pushing towards them. This was the last moment she would have with Micky, she knew, and in a flash something seemed to tell her what this man had meant to her during the last two terrible days.

“Oh,” she said tremblingly, “if you only would let me thank you.”

Micky laughed harshly—

“I hate thanks,” he said.

June was upon them; she seized Esther and kissed her rapturously.

“You darling! You’ll never know how glad I am to see you. I’ve been here for hours. Aren’t you dead tired? Micky, she looks worn out.”

“Does she?” said Micky.

He was dead beat himself; he looked round vacantly.

“I wired Driver—I thought he’d be here....”

“Here, sir,” said a voice at his elbow, and there was Driver, stolid and impenetrable as ever.

Micky was unfeignedly glad to see the little man; for almost the first time in his life he realised that sometimes dullness and short-sightedness are a blessing in disguise. Apparently to Driver there was nothing odd in this mad rush over to Paris; his expressionless eyes saw the untidiness of his master's toilet without changing.

"I've brought the car, sir," he said.

"Good man; get me a taxi, then. You must take the car down to your rooms," Micky said to June. "No, don't argue; I insist——"

He put the two girls into the car; he did not look at Esther, though he squeezed June's hand when he said good-bye.

"Let me know if you get back all right; I shall see you soon."

He raised his hat, stood aside, and the car started forward.

June looked at Esther with a sort of shyness. It seemed as if years must have passed since they were down at Enmore.

The car had rolled out of the station and into the heart of London before either of them spoke; then Esther said, stiltedly:

"It was kind of you to come."

June flushed.

"It wasn't kind at all," she said bluntly. "You're my friends, or, at least, you were, and, as for Micky—well, I love him."

There was a sort of defiance in her voice. She had seen the tired, strained look in Micky's face, and she was nearer being angry with Esther than she had ever been, but she turned and took her hand.

"Somehow I never thought I should see you again," she said, with real emotion. "I haven't slept a wink since you went away."

"You're much too good to me," Esther said. "Everyone is much too good to me."

"I think Micky is, certainly," June agreed exasperatedly. "The man's a perfect fool to run about like he does after a woman who doesn't care two hoots about him.... There! now I oughtn't to have said that. Esther, if you're crying...."

Esther had covered her face with her hands.

"I'm not crying," she said in a stifled voice. "But I'm so ashamed. I don't know what you must think of me—it's so—so humiliating."

“It’s nothing of the kind,” June declared. “The only mistake you’ve made is to put your money on the wrong man, if you’ll excuse the expression. Raymond Ashton was always an outsider.... There! I won’t say another word. You’ve come home, and that’s all that matters.”

It was only when they were safely up in the room with the mauve cushions that she flung her hat down on the sofa and drew a long breath.

“Well, I never thought we should be here together again,” she said tragically. “It seemed like the end of everything when I found your note on the pincushion. I don’t know what I should have done if it hadn’t been for Micky.”

“I don’t know what I should have done either,” Esther said. She met June’s eyes and flushed crimson. “I’ve been horrid about him, I know,” she added bravely. “And now I’m sorry.”

June said “Humph.” She sat for a moment staring at the floor, then she got up and searched for the inevitable cigarettes.

“You ought to go to bed,” she said in her most matter-of-fact tone. “Where did you sleep last night?”

“Nowhere—at least—we were in the train all night. I did sleep a little, but....”

June took her by the shoulders.

“Off you go to bed, and don’t argue. I’ve had a fire put in your room, and Charlie is there with a new bow on. I’ll come and tuck you up when you’re ready, and....”

But Esther refused to move.

“I couldn’t sleep if I went to bed. I want to tell you about—about what’s happened....” She paused breathlessly, but June was not going to help her.

“I don’t want to hear anything,” she said flatly. She looked at Esther and saw the tears in the younger girl’s eyes. She put an arm round her, drawing her down to the sofa.

“Tell me all about it, then,” she said. “I’m just—just longing to know.”

“But there isn’t much to tell, except—” Esther held out her left hand. “I’m not engaged any more,” she said with a faint attempt to laugh. “He—Mr. Ashton—is married....”

“I know—Micky told me before we went to Enmore. I hope he’s married a vixen who’ll lead him an awful dance. It would serve her right to let her know the sort

of man he is—to let her know the sort of letters he’s been writing to you—to show him up properly.”

Esther hid her face in the mauve cushions.

“Oh, but he has never written to me,” she said chokingly. “I’ve never had a letter from him since he went away, and that was on New Year’s Eve. It’s all been a mistake—a sham ... he never cared for me—he never really wanted me....”

June threw away the cigarette and tried to raise Esther.

“What are you talking about? He did write to you—you told me yourself that he wrote beautiful letters—he sent you that money—Esther! what do you mean?”

Esther looked up; for a moment June caught a glimpse of misty, shamed eyes.

“They weren’t from him: those letters—the money never came from him,” she said in a stifled voice.

“What! My good child, have you gone out of your mind?”

June was a hundred miles from guessing the truth. “If he didn’t write them, then who in the world did?” she demanded crisply. “And if he didn’t send the money, who in the wide world....”

She caught her breath on a sudden illuminating thought.

“Esther ... not—not—Micky!”

“Yes.” It was the smallest whisper, and it was followed by a tragic silence; then June got up and began walking aimlessly about the room; she felt as if she had been robbed of all breath.

Twice she turned and looked at Esther’s huddled figure, then she went back, laid a hand on her arm and said in an odd, gentle voice that was strangely unlike her own brisk tones:

“And do you mean to say that you don’t just think him the finest man in all the world?”

Esther sat up with sudden passion.

“I didn’t think of him at all—it was like having a knife turned in my heart when I knew,” she said wildly. “Oh, you can’t understand if you’ve never cared for anybody what it feels like to know that you’ve been made a fool of. When he told me I felt that I hated him—there didn’t seem anything fine or good in what he had done; I only knew that I’d been played with, made fun of....” She

stopped, sobbing desperately, but for once June attempted no consolation. She was looking at Micky's portrait on the shelf, and there was a wonderful tenderness in her queer eyes.

"Who told you?" she asked then. "Who told you that it was Micky?"

"He did—he only told me when he knew why I was going to Paris—he told me in the train. It's been from Mr. Mellowes all along—the money I've had every week—my clothes—this coat ... he's been paying for my food, and for me to live here...." She raised her eyes to June's face. "Did you know?" she asked shakily. "He said you didn't, but somehow...."

June rounded on her angrily.

"If Micky said that I didn't, that ought to be good enough," she said curtly. "And of course, I didn't know—if I had, I should have told him that he was a fool to waste his time and money on a girl who thought nothing of him," she added flatly. Her voice changed all at once. "Oh, isn't he just splendid!" she said emotionally. "I don't understand it in the very least, why he has done it, or how he managed it, or anything, but I think it's the finest thing in all the world—" Esther turned away.

"I knew him before we met here—he wanted to tell you, but I asked him not to—" She stopped and dragged on again.

"I met him on New Year's Eve—I was so miserable—there seemed nothing to live for, and he was kind and so ... so ... I told him a little of what was wrong, and I suppose he guessed the rest."

"And when he went to Paris that time it was all for your sake, and it was for your sake he kept coming here—oh!"—June rose to her feet with a gesture of intolerance—"if you don't just adore the ground he walks on," she said, "you ought to, and that's all I've got to say."

Esther made no answer; she was looking into the fire with eyes that as yet saw only the ruins of a dream that had been so beautiful, the rapidly receding shadow of the man whom she had once made a giant figure in her life.

"I never want to care for any one again," she said presently in a hard voice. "You told me once that people were happier if they didn't love, and I think you were right."

"I was an idiot to ever say such a thing," June cried in a rage. "And you're a bigger idiot if you pretend to think I was right. There's nothing better in the

whole world than being loved——” Her face flushed like a rose. “If Micky had cared for me even a quarter as well as he does for you I would have married him, and that’s the truth,” she declared. “It was only because I knew he hadn’t anything except friendship to offer me that I knew it wasn’t fair...” She tried to cover the seriousness of her words with a laugh. She lit another cigarette. “And now, having got rid of my heroics, let’s talk sense,” she added more calmly. “But you ought to go to bed. You look worn out. You’ll be a wreck in the morning.”

“I don’t want to go to bed. I have such a lot to tell you. I shall have to leave here, of course; I haven’t got any money. I must try and find a post. I thought of asking Eldred’s to take me back; there might be a vacancy now....” But her voice sounded weary and hopeless.

June swooped down on her.

“You poor tired baby, come along to bed and don’t worry any more. You’ve got me whatever happens, and if the worst comes to the worst there’s always June Mason’s wonderful skin food for both of us to live on.”

They went upstairs together.

“There’s nothing like sunshine to put you on good terms with yourself,” she said philosophically. “Whenever I’m in the dumps or feel that I’m looking particularly plain, I put on my best hat and go out in the sunshine, and I assure you I’m a good-looking woman when I come home again.”

“You’re always better than good-looking,” Esther told her.

CHAPTER XXXIII

June tucked Esther up in bed and replenished the fire. She turned out the gas, leaving the room fire-lit.

“June,” Esther said timidly. “What did your aunt think? What did she say—when—when——”

“She said we must go back and finish our visit another time—she took a great fancy to you.”

“You’re saying that to please me.”

“I’m not! honest Injun!” June heard the tears in Esther’s voice; she bent and kissed her gently.

“Now, not another word! I refuse to answer another question! Pleasant dreams—or better still, no dreams at all.” She went away, and shut her door behind her.

Esther lay awake for a long time watching the firelight on the walls and ceiling, and thinking of what had happened.

It seemed impossible that she had even really seen and spoken to Raymond Ashton; impossible that instead of loving him desperately, she could only shudder at the memory of him.

The tears forced their way to her eyes, and scorched her cheeks. But for Micky, where might she not have been now?—and he had refused to even let her thank him. Her heart was filled with a new humility. At best her words would be so poor—like beggars in the palace of his generosity.

But she would see him again soon—she comforted herself with the assurance. In spite of his changed manner and apparent indifference, she was sure she would see him again. Micky—as June had said of him—never failed!

It was her last thought as she fell asleep, that she would surely see him the next day.

But Micky did not come!

Esther rested till lunch time, after which June insisted on a walk.

“The sun’s shining, and it’s wicked to stay indoors,” she declared; she marched Esther about for half an hour.

Esther had been so sure that Micky would come. She glanced up at the clock, and then at Micky’s photograph—but to-day he seemed to be looking past her into the room to where June was bustling about, and she gave a little sigh.

The evening dragged away.

“What are you thinking about?” June asked once abruptly. “You look so sad, don’t look sad, my dear! there’s lots of happy days to come yet—happier days than you’ve ever had.”

Esther was only half listening. It was too late for Micky to come now was the thought in her mind. Supposing he never came again?

She cried herself to sleep that night. When she woke it was late in the morning, and June had had her breakfast and gone out.

She came in while Esther was dressing. She looked very pleased and alert.

“Business, my child!” she said enthusiastically. “Such a duck of an American! and Micky’s introduction! Mr. George P. Rochester!—isn’t it a lovely name? He’s going to establish me firmly in little old New York, as he calls it, and make my fortune. I’m going out to lunch with him at one o’clock, and you’re coming too!—Oh, yes you *are*!” as Esther shook her head. “I’ve told him all about you already.” Esther laughed.

“You must have got on very fast,” she said. “And anyway I’m not going to play odd-man-out.”

June made a little grimace.

“I telephoned Micky and asked him to come and make a fourth,” she admitted.

Esther flushed. She looked up eagerly:

“And—and is he coming?”

June shook her head.

“No, he isn’t,” she said with overdone indifference. “He said he’d got an engagement already, but between you and me and the doorpost,” she added darkly, “I don’t believe it! I think he just didn’t *want* to come.”

“Oh,” said Esther faintly. “I expect he has a good many engagements,” she

added after a moment.

June said “Humph!” She recalled the curt manner of Micky’s refusal, and wondered if there had been a more serious rupture between himself and Esther than she was ever likely to hear about.

“So we shall have to make up our minds to enjoy ourselves without his distinguished company,” she said airily. “I dare say we shall be able to manage quite nicely. Esther, aren’t you going to wear your fur coat?”

“My fur coat!” said Esther rather unsteadily. “It’s not mine.”

She was taking from the wardrobe the shabby jacket she had worn the first night she met Micky; it looked more shabby and unsmart than ever, but she was going to wear it whatever happened.

She was smarting with humiliation. She had offered Micky her little olive branch when they parted two days ago at Charing Cross, and this is how he had accepted it!

“If he’s trying to pay me out, I suppose it’s only what I deserve,” she thought miserably, and yet it did not seem like Micky to deliberately try or wish to hurt or humiliate any one.

She did her best to push the shadow aside. She tried to laugh and talk with June as they went off to meet Mr. George P. Rochester.

He was a big, bluff man, with a hand-clasp like the grip of a bear, and a twang that could be cut with a knife.

They lunched at a restaurant which she had never even heard of, though June seemed quite at home. There were several people at other tables, whom June knew, and Esther felt very out of it all, and unhappy.

It was a good thing she had refused to marry Micky, she thought with a sort of anger. She knew none of his friends and nothing of the life to which he had always been accustomed. She did not realise that it was the knowledge of her shabby coat that was affecting her spirits more keenly than anything.

June’s clothes were not new, but they had an unmistakable “cut” about them, and Rochester was exceedingly well dressed.

He talked to June a great deal. Once or twice he tried to draw Esther into the conversation, but, seeing that she wished to be let alone, he soon gave up the attempt.

He was certainly a most friendly person—one would have thought that he and June had known one another for years. Before lunch was ended he had invited himself to tea for the following afternoon.

“That’s Yankee push if you like!” June said when he had gone. “Give me a Yankee every time to make things go!” She looked at Esther excitedly. “Do you know,” she said, “I’ve a great mind to try and persuade that man to come into partnership with me.”

Esther laughed.

“I should say he’d suggest it himself if you give him another day or two,” she said drily. She wandered listlessly round the room.

“I shall have to leave here at the end of the week,” she said suddenly. “It’s impossible to go on living here, and letting you pay my rent and my food bill. I owe you more than I can ever repay already.”

“If you talk like that I’ll—I’ll kill you!” said June in a rage. “You don’t understand what friendship means. Micky had tried to teach you, and so have I, and all you do is to throw it back in our faces.... O Esther, don’t!...”

Esther had turned away and covered her face with her hands.

“I know you think I’m ungrateful and horrid,” she said brokenly. “But how would you like to be in my position? I haven’t a shilling of my own in the world—the things I’ve been wearing since I came here are paid for by ... by ... oh, you know! I hate to look at that fur coat and my new frock. You talk to me about being proud and obstinate; well, I can’t help it, you must go on thinking it, that’s all; I’d rather die than take anything more from any one. I kept myself before, and I will again....”

“I didn’t mean to hurt you—I’m a perfect beast,” June declared in remorse. “But it does seem such a shame.”

Esther raised a flushed face.

“We can’t all have money and be independent,” she said hardily. “But I think you might try and understand how I feel about it.”

“I only know that I’m dying to help you, and you won’t let me,” June said grumpily. “Lord! where is my cigarette case? I shall swear or do something worse if I can’t smoke.”

She went out of the room, and Esther heard her go clattering up the stairs. There

were tears in her eyes now, but she brushed them angrily away; after all, what was there to cry for! It was only that she had got to go back to where she had left off that New Year's Eve when she first met Micky; everything was just as it had been then, save that she was the poorer now by the loss of a dream.

CHAPTER XXXIV

June's friendship with Mr. George P. Rochester grew apace.

"Micky's introductions are *always* a success," she told Esther. "And Micky likes him too—awfully! Mr. Rochester is round at Micky's rooms nearly every night. They're *ever* such pals!"

"Are they?" said Esther. The mention of Micky's name always seemed to make her heart quiver. She wondered if June knew why he never came to the house now, and what she thought about it all.

In her own mind she was sure that Micky had cast her off, and the knowledge left her with a sense of desolation.

She never spoke of him unless June did so first, and she tried never to think of him. But Micky was a personality not to be lightly dismissed from memory, and he haunted her thoughts waking and sleeping.

"If I could only get some work," she told herself, "it would be better. It's so dreadful having nothing to do."

She had applied to Eldred's unsuccessfully—she had climbed the narrow stairs of the agency a dozen times only to be met with rebuff.

"You refused an excellent post I offered to you," she was told icily. "I am not likely to be able to find you such another."

June coaxed her into helping with the "swindle."

"If you don't I'll have to pay some one else to do it," she declared. "And oh, Esther, *don't* be so proud!"

So Esther gave in. She filled the little mauve pots with the profound skin food and fastened on lids and labels till her head swam.

Sometimes Mr. George P. Rochester came to help—at least he called it "help"—but he did very little actual work, as he was always too busy looking at June and talking to her.

“Has he suggested the partnership yet?” Esther asked one night.

June flushed rosily.

“Don’t be absurd,” she answered, and something in her voice woke a little note of fear in Esther’s heart.

Was she to lose June too? Was there to be nothing left to her in all the world? Her hands shook as she went on mechanically filling the row of little mauve pots.

“Esther,” said June suddenly, “how long is it since you saw Micky?”

There was a little pause, then Esther said constrainedly. “I’ve never seen him since—since we came back from Paris.”

She waited a moment.

“Why?” she asked with an effort.

June kept her eyes bent on her work.

“Because I haven’t seen him myself for nearly a week,” she said slowly. “And I hear—I hear that he’s running round with that Deland girl again.”

She did not dare to look up as she spoke, and she went on quickly, “Of course it may only be gossip—but George—Mr. Rochester—” she hurriedly corrected herself, “tells me that Micky took him to their house to dinner last night.”

Silence. June filled pots at random, wildly, then Esther spoke.

“I’ve done eight dozen,” she said. “Do you think that is enough to go on with?”

June raised her eyes guiltily, then suddenly she pushed the laden tray from her and ran round to Esther.

“Oh,” she said impulsively, “if only—only you could have made yourself care for him.”

She put her arms round the younger girl’s unresponsive figure.

“I want you to be happy too, so badly,” she went on earnestly. “I didn’t mean to tell you yet, but I must somehow. George—Mr. Rochester—” she broke off, laughing and crying together.

“The man’s a perfect disgrace,” she protested, “I told him so, too! I’ve only known him three weeks, and—and—” she raised tear-drowned eyes to Esther’s face. “What can you do when a man that size kisses you?” she demanded.

Esther had to laugh.

“Why, do what you did,” she said. “Kiss him in return.”

June wiped her eyes and laughed, and shed more tears.

“I never meant to marry any one,” she said angrily. “But the dreadful creature seems to want me so desperately badly. I’m really utterly miserable, only——”

“O June!” said Esther.

“So I am! At least!”—June looked up and suddenly laughed. “I’m not,” she said. “I’m a wicked liar! but oh, such a gloriously happy, wicked liar!”

“And it’s all entirely due to me,” Micky said when June rang him up the following morning to tell him the news.

“I introduced you! What do I get out of it all I should like to know?”

His voice was playful, but June took him seriously.

“O Micky! if you could only be as happy as I am,” she said eagerly.

Micky laughed.

“If wishes were horses, my dear——” he said sententiously. “But don’t worry about me, I’m all right.”

“Then, will you come to dinner to-night? No, *not* at the boarding house! We’ll go to the Savoy—just to celebrate! We four!”

“We *four!*” said Micky sharply.

“Yes—I shall bring Esther, of course.”

There was the smallest possible pause, then Micky said:

“I’m sorry, but I’ve another engagement. I promised the Delands to go with them to the Hoopers’ dance.”

June said “*Hang* the Delands,” and rang off in a huff.

Micky hung up the receiver and turned away. He was sorry to disappoint June, and yet he had no smallest intention of meeting Esther. If she had wanted him she would have sent a note or a message—but she did not want him! More than once she had said that she hated him—it was time to learn that she meant what she said. Micky’s pride had got the upper hand at last, and he would rather have died now than make the smallest overture to the girl at whose feet he had once

been willing to grovel.

Driver came to the door:

“A parcel, sir. Shall I bring it in?”

Micky answered absently:

“All right.”

Driver went out of the room. After a moment he came back with a square box which he set down on the table.

“Shall I open it, sir?” he asked, as Micky did not speak.

Micky started.

“Yes; oh, yes—open it. What the dickens is it? I haven’t ordered anything.”

Driver said that he did not know—that it had been left by a messenger. He untied the knotted string with neat precision, and rolled it into a ball before he removed the paper.

Micky walked up to the table and lifted the lid with faint curiosity.

“A fur coat,” he said blankly. “A fur——” He stopped. For a moment he stood staring down into the box, then he let the lid fall over it again.

“All right—you can go,” he said.

Driver walked to the door stoically, and Micky went back to the fire.

So she would not even keep the fur coat! She cared so little for him that she must needs send back his paltry gifts. What a fool he was to care—what a fool!

Driver, coming back for a moment, stopped petrified in the doorway. Micky was standing by the mantelpiece with his face buried in his arms.

CHAPTER XXXV

It was late that night when Micky turned up at the Delands'. He had taken extravagant pains with his toilet, lingering over it as long as possible. Ever since the arrival of that parcel from Esther, he had been trying to make up his mind to take the irrevocable step, and ask Marie Deland to be his wife. He was miserably sure that she would accept him, miserably sure that he was already forgiven for the past.

He kept on persuading himself that it was the one and only thing left to him to do. He tried to believe that once the affair was settled, he would find some sort of happiness. After all, what did it matter whom he married if it could not be Esther?

He looked pale but determined when he walked into the Delands' drawing-room and found Marie there alone. She turned to greet him with a little eager movement that was somehow comforting.

Here, at any rate, was some one who really cared for him and was glad to see him. He took the hand she held out and, bending, kissed it.

She caught her breath on a little sound that was almost a sob, but she checked it instantly and tried to laugh.

"This is almost like old times," she said.

"Quite like old times," Micky answered recklessly. "We've just turned the pages back again and gone on where we left off, that's all."

He looked at her and tried to forget everything else. She was pretty and dainty enough to satisfy the most exciting man, and she loved him! To a man who is disappointed and unhappy there is great consolation in the knowledge that to one person at least he counts before anything else in the world.

She looked up at him, and impulsively he took a step towards her; another moment and Micky would have sealed his fate, had not Mrs. Deland pushed open the door and walked into the room.

It had not been any effort for her to forgive Micky for his cavalier treatment of her daughter. For the last week she had been busy telling every one that Marie and Micky had made up their quarrel—"entirely Marie's fault it was, you know," and so on.

"You are going to give me half your dances at least," Micky said, when they reached the Hoopers'. He took the card from Marie's hand and filled in his own initials recklessly against the numbers.

She laughed tremulously; she was too happy to think of anything but the present; she had got Micky again, and that was all she cared about.

"Good-evening!" said a voice at her side, and, turning, she found Raymond Ashton at her elbow.

Marie did not care particularly for Ashton. She greeted him rather coldly.

"So you're back in town," she said. "And your wife?"

"Not here to-night," he answered. "She has a bad cold, so I persuaded her to stay at home. May I have a dance?"

She gave him her card reluctantly. She would have liked to have refused, but she thought Micky would be annoyed; she did not know that he and this man were friends no longer.

She saw him glance at Micky's many initials on her card, saw the half ironical smile he gave as he looked at her.

"Mellowes is back, then?" he said.

"Yes—he came with us to-night."

"Really! I thought—" he paused eloquently.

Marie flushed, she knew quite well what he meant; that he must have known how Micky had once deserted her.

"I understood that Mellowes was in Paris."

Ashton went on calmly.

"At least I was told so by an ... acquaintance of mine—who was staying there with him."

Marie's eyes dilated.

"Father and I crossed by the same boat as he did," she said with an effort. "He

was alone then——”

Ashton laughed detestably. “Ah, but not afterwards,” he said—then checked himself. “But I forgot. I must not tell tales out of school, only as every one seems to have learned of his *penchant* for the little lady from Eldred’s”——he laughed lightly.

Marie stood staring down the long ballroom. The colour slowly faded from her cheeks, leaving her as white as her frock. She looked at Ashton, intent on a crease in his glove, and she broke out stammering:

“How dare you say such a thing! I don’t believe you—in Paris—Micky——”

He raised his brows with assumed surprise.

“I’m sorry—perhaps I should not have spoken—but I thought every one knew——”

She shrugged her shoulders. “Of course it may be a mistake, but I happen to know the lady in question slightly—through Mellowes—and it was she who told me.... I am sorry if my carelessness has pained you—excuse me, I am engaged for this dance.”

He bowed and left her standing there, white and dazed.

“I don’t believe it! I don’t,” she told herself despairingly, and yet in her heart something told her that, for once at least, Ashton had spoken the truth.

“Our dance, I think,” said Micky beside her.

She laid her hand on his arm mechanically; they went the round of the room once, then Micky, glancing down, saw how white she was and how her head drooped towards his shoulder.

He tightened his arm a little—he swept her skilfully out of the crowd and into a small anteroom; he put her into a chair and bent over her in concern.

“You are not well—what can I do? Can I get you anything?”

For a moment she did not speak, then all at once she rose to her feet; she clutched Micky by both arms; he could feel how her hands shook; there was heartbroken tragedy in her brown eyes as she looked into his face. For once she had forgotten her pride and the indifference into which she had been drilled for twenty years; she was no longer Marie Deland, a sought-after and courted beauty; she was just an unhappy, jealous woman.

“It isn’t true, Micky, is it?” she entreated him; her voice was only a broken

whisper. “Tell me—oh, please, please, tell me. You don’t care for her, do you?—it isn’t true, is it?”

She forgot that he did not know of what she was speaking; it seemed as if everybody in the world must know of this tragedy that had desolated her life.

“I can’t bear it any longer—it’s no use.... I’ve borne all I can.... O Micky ... Micky.”

He forced her hands from his arms; he put her back into the chair and sat beside her; he hated to see the white despair of her face.

“You’re ill—upset.... It’s all right—everything is all right. You’re not to worry any more.... Everything is all right.”

At that moment he would have given his soul could he have truthfully said that he wanted her for his wife. He cursed himself for a cur and a coward, but somehow he could not force the words to his lips.

She lay back against the cushions, hiding her face.

There was a tragic moment of silence. Out in the ballroom a noisy one-step was in boisterous progress; there was a great deal of laughter and chattering; the little anteroom seemed as if it must be in another world.

Micky got up. He walked across the room and shut the door. There was a hard look about his mouth. For an instant he stood staring down at the floor irresolutely, then he came back to Marie. He bent over her, but he did not touch her.

He spoke her name gently.

“Marie.”

She did not raise her head.

“I want to speak to you,” he said huskily.

She looked up then. Her face was flashed and quivering, and the brown eyes that for a moment met his own were full of an unutterable grief and shame.

“Oh,” she said in a broken whisper. “If you’d just go away—and leave me to myself.”

Micky did not answer. The impossibility of ever going back now struck him to the soul. This was the end, the very end—he had burned his boats and bidden good-bye to the woman he loved for ever.

Then all his natural chivalry rose in his heart. Hitherto it had been only of himself that he had thought, but now ... his eyes softened as they rested on the girl's bowed head; he stooped and took her hand, held it fast in his steady grip.

"Will you marry me?" he said very gently.

And, oh, the long time before she answered! It seemed to Micky that he lived through years as he stood there with the rattling tune of the one-step in his ears and Marie's tragic figure before his eyes. Was she never going to speak?

Then she sat up very stiff and straight—there were tears scorching her flushed cheeks, and her eyes seemed to burn.

"Will I—will I—marry you?" she echoed, as if not understanding.

Her voice rose a little.

"Then it isn't true ... it can't be true—what he said?"

"What did he say? Who are you talking about? What do you mean?"

She began to sob; quiet, tearless sobs that seemed to bring no relief with them.

“Raymond Ashton—he told me—here! just now—that you...” She stopped, catching her breath at the change in Micky’s face; it no longer looked tender—his eyes were fierce.

“Ashton! What has he said?” His voice was roughly insistent.

“He told me that you—you were in Paris—a week or two ago—with a girl from Eldred’s.”

“It’s a lie!” The words escaped Micky before he could check them; his first thought was to defend Esther. “It’s an infernal lie!” he said again violently.

It turned him cold to think of all that the brute must have implied.

The tears were frozen on Marie’s cheeks—her hands were clasped together in her lap.

When at last she found her voice it was strained and cracked.

“... that she told him you were there with her...” Her brown eyes searched his face as if they were trying to read his very soul. “If it’s a lie,” she said shrilly, “it’s she who is lying—she told Raymond Ashton that she was there with you.”

“She told him...”

For a moment Micky stood like a man turned to stone. Was this the truth?—that Esther had told Ashton....

He looked again at Marie.

“When did Ashton tell you this?”

“To-night—not a moment ago—he is here.”

“Here!” Then to how many more people had he told the same distorted story?

The blood beat into Micky’s face; it seemed to hammer maddeningly against his temples. Nothing counted but the fact that Esther’s name was being bandied about on the lips of the creature. To stop him—to stop his lying tongue was the one thought in Micky’s mind; he saw the whole world red as he tore open the door of the silent room and strode out into the corridor.

The noisy ragtime had ceased, but a storm of deafening applause and cries of “Encore!” filled the ballroom.

An elderly man cannoned into Micky, and stopped short with a laughing apology.

“Hullo, Mellows—not dancing—what the deuce is the matter?” he asked with sudden change of voice.

Micky passed a shaking hand across his mouth—

“Nothing ... where’s Ashton—have you seen Ashton?”

“I’ve just left him; he isn’t dancing either. Can’t think what’s happened to you youngsters to-day. When I was your age....” He broke off, realising that Micky was not listening. “Ashton’s in the smoking-room,” he said uneasily.

Micky went on; his hands were clenched, his teeth set.

The smoking-room door was half ajar; he could see that there were several men there. There was a clink of glasses and the sound of voices talking in a rather subdued way.

Micky paused. He knew that if Ashton were there it would mean a scene, and a scene in any one else’s house.... The thought snapped at the sound of his own name.

“Mellows! Well, you do surprise me.” There was a chuckle. “Always thought he was one of the good boys.... It just shows that you never know a man till you find him out. Rather an error of judgment to choose Paris, eh? Who did you say she was?”

“A girl from Eldred’s—pretty little thing. I knew her before he did. As a matter of fact, it was only when I cooled off....”

That was Ashton’s voice; Micky could not see him, but he could picture vividly the eloquent shrug, the meaning smile with which he finished his incomplete sentence.

The hot blood died down, leaving him cool and alert. He pushed the door wide and walked into the room.

The group of men by the fireplace scattered; some one coughed deprecatingly; some one else seized upon a siphon and began filling an already full glass recklessly.

Nobody spoke.

Micky kicked the door to behind him, shutting it with a slam.

His eyes went straight to Ashton—a pale Ashton, trying to smile unconcernedly and brazen the situation out.

“I’ll give you two minutes in which to apologise,” Micky said in a voice of steel. “Two minutes in which to retract the damned lies you’ve just been saying in this room—or—or I’ll thrash you within an inch of your life.”

In the silence following one could have heard a pin drop. Every one looked at Ashton. Micky took out his watch.

It seemed an eternity before Ashton spoke.

“If you’ve been listening——” he began blustering.

He moistened his dry lips.

“What I said is the truth,” he broke out spluttering. “You were in Paris with....” But the name was never spoken—Micky’s clenched fist shot out and struck him right in the mouth.

In a moment the room was in an uproar; half a dozen men rushed at Micky and pinned his arms.

“Mellowes—for God’s sake—if Hooper comes in....”

Ashton had staggered back against the wall; his mouth was cut and bleeding; he was swearing horribly.

Micky was crimson in the face; the veins stood out like cords on his forehead; he was straining every nerve to free himself from his captors.

“Apologise!” he gasped. “Apologise, you dammed cad!”

Ashton laughed savagely.

“Apologise! What for? It’s the truth, and you know it. Apologise! I’ll repeat it.... I say that you were in Paris three weeks ago with Esther Shepstone, one of the girls from Eldred’s....”

Micky suddenly stopped struggling, but his breath came in deep gasps as he spoke. He looked round at the faces of the other men.

“I know most of you—here,” he said in a laboured voice. “And most of you know me—and you know that I’m not a damned liar like Ashton; and I know that you’ll believe me—believe me—when I tell you that the lady who was with me in—in Paris—three weeks ago—is my wife ... we’ve been married some time—and it is solely by her wish that it has been kept a secret.”

If Micky had dropped a bomb in the room it could hardly have created more consternation. The incredulity on the faces of the men around him would have

been amusing to an onlooker, but to Micky the whole thing was tragedy.

He had brought Esther to this with his blundering quixotism; he was nearly beside himself with remorse.

If he had been free he would have half killed Ashton. His hands ached to get at him; to take him by his lying throat and choke the breath from his body.

He looked at the men around him with passionate eyes.

“I’ve never given any of you cause to doubt my word yet,” he said hoarsely. “And I’m sure you’ll agree with me that this man should be made to retract what he said and apologise.”

“Certainly—he ought to apologise. It’s disgraceful—infernally disgraceful,” said a man who had been listening to Ashton’s story eagerly enough a moment ago.

“What do you say, gentlemen?”

There was a chorus of assent. The men who had been holding Micky’s arms let him go.

Ashton backed a step away.

His face was livid, his eyes furious, but he knew that there was no other course open to him; nobody in the room had any sympathy with him now.

“I apologise,” he said savagely. “I didn’t know that—the—lady—Mellowes had married—the lady.”

His tone added that even now he did not believe it; he edged away to the door and disappeared.

Micky dropped into a chair; he looked thoroughly done up. Some one pushed a glass of whisky across to him. There was an uncomfortable silence. Perhaps they were all feeling guilty; perhaps they all remembered with what relish they had listened to this spicy bit of scandal.

“Never could stand Ashton,” some one said presently, in gruff abasement. “Worm—the man is!—perfect outsider!”

There were several grunts of assent; the sympathy was decidedly with Micky.

After a moment he rose to his feet.

“I suppose an apology is due from me too,” he said; he spoke with difficulty. “But I think any of you—in the same circumstances——”

He waited a moment.

“Quite right—certainly.... Should have done the same myself.”

Micky smiled faintly.

“And I am sure you won’t let this go any further—for—for my wife’s sake,” he added.

They pressed round him, shaking him by the hand and reassuring him. Micky took it for what it was worth. He knew that those of them who were married men would go straight home and tell their wives of the scene at Hoopers’, and he knew how speedily the story would spread.

He got away as soon as he could and left the house.

He never gave Marie another thought, till he found himself out in the street and walking away through the fresh spring night.

He took off his hat and let the air blow on his hot forehead; his hand still trembled with excitement.

He tried to think, but his thoughts would not come clearly. When he got back to his rooms he asked Driver for a stiff brandy. The man looked at his master diffidently, and asked if anything were the matter.

Micky laughed.

“Why? Do I look as if there is?” He glanced at himself in the mirror. His face was very white.

“No, there’s nothing the matter. I’m tired, that’s all.”

Driver turned to the door, but Micky called him back.

“You’ve been with me a good many years, Driver,” he said.

“Yes, sir.”

“And you’ve been a faithful servant.”

“Thank you, sir.”

The man’s stolidness did not change a fraction.

Micky took a gulp at the brandy.

“If you were to hear that I’m married, you wouldn’t be surprised, would you?” he asked with a rush.

Driver stood immovable.

“Not in the least, sir.”

“You would even say that you knew that I’ve been married some weeks, wouldn’t you?”

“I should, sir.”

“Good—you may go.”

“Thank you, sir, and good-night.”

“Good-night,” said Micky.

And now, what was to be done now?

When he left this room three hours ago it had been with the determination to put the past behind him for ever, and what had he done? Only walked more deeply into his quixotism and seriously compromised the woman he loved.

He had said that she was his wife. It gave him a little thrill to remember that a dozen of his acquaintances had heard him say it, and were probably even now spreading the story of his marriage far and wide.

He paced up and down the room. He had failed all round; even love and desperate desire had not been able to help him.

He thought suddenly of June; June who, with all her bluntness, had a great heart and a deep understanding.

She would not want explanations; she would know why he had done it, and sympathise.

But June was obviously not the one concerned. It was not to June that he must confess.

The clock in his room struck twelve; too late to do anything to-night. The memory of Marie returned—Marie as she had looked when he found her in the drawing-room that night; as she had looked when he had left her in the little anteroom at the Hoopers’ and gone out with murder in his heart to find Ashton.

He stopped dead in his pacing.

“Oh, you cad—you cad!” he said with a groan.

Life was an intolerable, purposeless thing. He sat down at his desk and leaned his head in his hands. His whole life seemed to spell failure. With sudden

impulse he seized a pen and began to write.

For the first few moments he hardly knew what he wrote. It was only when he reached the end of the first page that he seemed to realise with a start what he had done. He looked back at the written lines with something of a shock. There was no beginning to the letter, no date or address; it simply started off as if the pen had been guided by some influence outside himself, some desperate need.

“I don’t know what you will think when you get this letter. I am writing it because to-night I think I am half mad. I love you so much; there seems nothing in the whole world that counts any more now that I am beginning to understand that I can never have you. Esther, I ask you on my knees to listen to what I have to say. I have tried to keep away from you, to forget you; I’ve tried to put you out of my heart and persuade myself that I do not care—but it’s no use. I love you; I know you care something for me, but I shall love you always. To-night I have done an unpardonable thing for your sake. I explain things so badly. I can only hope that you will understand and try to make some excuse for me. Some one knows we were together in Paris—I need not tell you who. To-night, at a house where I was, he had told several people that you and I had been to Paris together....”

Micky had gone on writing rapidly—he seemed to have lost himself in a sea of eloquence; his heart was pleading with the woman he loved through the poor medium of a sheet of unaddressed paper.

“It nearly drove me mad to hear you spoken of by him. There was a scene, and I knocked him down ... you will hate me for this, but I would have killed him if they had let me. I told them afterwards that you were my wife—try and understand how I have suffered all these weeks—I told them that we had been married some time, and that it had been kept secret by your own wish. It’s only now, when I am more alone and can think clearly, that I see what I have done. You don’t care for me, and I have compromised you even more than that man did by his lying insinuations. Tell me what I am to do—anything, anything in the world. My whole life is yours to do with as you will. Be my wife, dear, be my wife....”

For a moment the pen faltered, but Micky went on again with an effort.

“I will stay in London twenty-four hours for your answer, and then, if I

don't hear....”

The pen faltered again, and this time finally stopped.

CHAPTER XXXVI

“The question is,” said June critically, looking out of the window to the street where a fine drizzle of rain was falling, “does one, or does one not, wear one’s best hat to go out and meet the one and only man one has ever loved?” She turned round and looked at Esther with a little nod. “That’s grammar, though you may not think it, my dear,” she said.

Esther laughed.

“I should say one does wear one’s best hat,” she said decidedly. “Especially seeing what a very charming hat it is.”

She leaned her elbows on the table and looked at June admiringly. “How long is it since you saw the great and only?” she asked.

June did some rapid counting on her white fingers.

“Nineteen hours exactly,” she said. “But it seems like ninety! I nearly died with joy when his note came at breakfast time——” She looked at Esther wistfully. “You don’t know how lovely it is to have some one of your very own,” she said with unwonted sentimentality.

Esther averted her eyes.

“I envy you,” she said quietly. “But you’ll be late if you stand rhapsodising here—be off!”

June bent and kissed her.

“I shan’t be long—he’s only asked me for lunch....”

Esther smiled.

“I have known lunches that lasted till tea-time,” she said. “When there has been a great deal to talk about.”

June went downstairs singing. During the last few days she had, as she would have expressed it, begun to discover herself all over again. Certainly the world had utterly changed, and was more like a fairy city than a place where it rained a

great deal and where buses and taxicabs splashed pedestrians with mud.

Lydia met her at the foot of the stairs; she smiled at sight of the new hat.

“I was just coming up, Miss June,” she said. “There’s a letter for Miss Shepstone.”

June held out her hand.

“I’ll take it, and save you the trouble——” She became conscious all at once of the girl’s admiring eyes, and blushed.

“Do you like my hat, Lydia?” She turned round for inspection.

Lydia admired enthusiastically, as she admired everything of June’s, and forgetful of everything but the moment, June thrust the letter for Esther into her coat pocket and went out blissfully into the rain to meet George Rochester.

George was ardent; he went into rhapsodies over the hat; he forgot to eat his most excellent lunch, and hardly took his eyes off June.

“It’s all so much waste of time this being engaged,” he said with pretended annoyance. “Why don’t we do the trick and get married? What are we waiting for? I’ll take you to the States for a wedding trip.”

June laughed, and protested blushing that it was much too soon.

“I haven’t thought about it,” she declared, not quite truthfully. “There’s tons of things to see to first. What about my business and Esther?”

“Leave the one to look after the other,” he said promptly.

She shook her head.

“I couldn’t—I should hate to leave Esther alone; if only she could be married too?”

“Well—find her a husband. What about Mellows?” he suggested jokingly.

June’s face sobered.

“Oh—Micky!” she said. She was not sure if she was justified in telling Rochester that Micky had once cared for Esther. “I thought he was practically engaged to Marie Deland,” she said doubtfully.

Rochester gave an exclamation.

“That reminds me,” he said. “There seems to have been a bit of a row at the Hoopers’ dance last night.... I wasn’t there—but I heard some fellows at the club

talking it over just now. Do you know a man named Ashton?"

June sniffed inelegantly.

"Do I not!"

"Well, if you don't like him, you'll be pleased to hear that Micky knocked him into the middle of next week," Rochester said calmly.

June's eyes gleamed.

"Never! Well, I'm delighted to hear it! What was it about?"

Rochester shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, they were gossiping about some woman, as far as I could make out—a woman Micky had been rather friendly with, from what I gathered—they didn't mention her name, but—" he hesitated. "They spoke of her as a girl from ... I've forgotten the name, but I think it was a petticoat shop—"

"Eldred's?" said June sharply.

"Yes, that was it! What do you know about it?"

"Nothing—go on! What were they saying?"

"That she'd been to Paris with Mellowes, and Mellowes overheard it, and there was a bit of a fight, and Mellowes said that the girl was his wife..."

June gasped.

"*What!*"

Rochester looked rather uncomfortable.

"It's only club talk," he said deprecatingly. "Dare say it's all lies."

June pushed back her chair; her brain was in a whirl; she stared at Rochester with dazed eyes.

"Of course you're mad, quite mad," she said calmly.

"Or I am! which is it?... My dear man, the girl Micky went to Paris with was Esther! *my* Esther Shepstone! and here you are trying to tell me that she and Micky are *married!*" She burst into hysterical laughter.

"I'm not trying to tell you," he protested injuredly. "It's only what I heard; and any way, if Mellowes went to Paris with Miss Shepstone—"

He broke off before the anger in June's eyes.

“If you speak about Esther in that tone of voice again, I shall hate you for ever,” she said furiously. “If you must know the truth, I’ll tell it to you, and another time just don’t judge people till you’ve heard both sides of the question,” and she promptly proceeded to tell him the whole story of her meeting with Esther, and all that had happened since.

Rochester listened quietly, but when she had finished, he said—

“Micky ought to have finished that skunk last night. If he cares for Miss Shepstone....”

“Oh but I don’t think he does now,” June struck in sadly. “He hasn’t been near her since they came back from Paris, and every one says that Marie Deland——” she broke off.

“And when Miss Shepstone gets to hear what happened last night?” Rochester asked drily.

“Oh, but she won’t—she doesn’t know anybody who would tell her except you or me,” June said positively. “And of course she must *never* know. She never liked Micky, though *why!*...” She shrugged her shoulders. “Have you seen him to-day?” she asked.

“No—I’m going to this evening.”

“But you won’t let him know what I’ve told you? promise me!”

“Is it likely that I should? Men don’t gossip.”

“Oh, don’t they?” June answered tartly. “I wouldn’t trust one of them, not even you,” she added with a melting smile.

In spite of her promise to Esther, it was past tea-time when she got back home; she threw her hat and coat down anywhere and poked up the fire.

“Haven’t you had tea? What have you been doing all day?” she demanded crisply. “You *haven’t* had tea!—Good gracious, I’ll make some at once; I had some with George, but I’m quite ready for some more. My word! what a difference a man can make in one’s life,” she said, suddenly grave. “And to think that I ever talked piffle about not wanting to get married.”

She bustled round the room singing blithely; she was brimful of happiness. “You needn’t be surprised to hear that I’m going to be married quite soon,” she said with elaborate carelessness. “Lord! won’t people have forty fits? Except for Micky, my crowd don’t know I’m engaged yet. I’m going to take George home

to see them on Sunday. I've discovered that he's fourth cousin, about ninety times removed, to a baronet, so, perhaps, that will put them all in a good temper with him. My people do love titles! Give them a lord, or something, and it doesn't matter what else he is, or isn't.... You're not listening, Esther."

"I am. I heard every word you said."

Esther was sitting by the fire with Charlie curled up in her lap; her face looked very sad and thoughtful. So she was to lose June quite soon!—her lips trembled; what was there left for her in all the world? It almost seemed as if time had stood still for a moment, and then suddenly rushed her back again with breathless speed, to leave her bereft of hope and happiness, as she had been before she met Micky.

Charlie had been her only friend then. Was he all that was to remain to her now?

June watched her across the room.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked suddenly; but Esther only shook her head.

For two days Micky Mellows never left his rooms, and hardly ate a thing, and for once in his life Driver permitted a spark of anxiety to creep into his dull eyes. He was sure that his master was ill; he tried tempting dishes and alluring cocktails, but Micky refused them all.

"My good man, I'm not an invalid," he protested irritably.

He hated it, because he knew his agitation was apparent; he tried to settle to read, but whenever a bell rang through the house he started up with racing pulses.

She must have got his letter, he knew. If there was any hope for him at all she would write at once or send for him. His nerves began to wear to rags.

Sometimes his hopes soared to the skies, to drop to zero again. Once in a fit of despondency he told Driver to pack his bag, as they would be leaving early in the morning.

"Yes, sir—where shall we be going, sir?" Driver asked stoically.

Micky swore.

"You do ask such damned silly questions," he complained irritably.

An hour later, when he found Driver packing, he called him a fool, and told him

to unpack at once.

And so the days dragged away.

“Any more posts to-night?” Micky asked jerkily, on the second day.

Driver eyed the clock.

“There should be one at nine, sir.”

But nine came, and half-past, and no post.

“Is it too late for the post now, Driver?” Micky asked feverishly, when it was nearly ten.

“The post went by, sir,” was the answer. “I was down at the door and saw the postman pass.”

Micky went back to his chair. It was all he could expect, he told himself—there had been no answer to his letter: there never would be an answer now.

When Driver came into the room again, Micky said without looking up—

“Pack that bag again, there’s a good fellow, will you?”

“Yes, sir,” said Driver imperturbably.

He hesitated, then asked—

“And—er—where did you say we should be going, sir?”

“I didn’t say,” said Micky. “And I don’t care—on the Continent—anywhere you like—look up some hotels....”

One place was as good as another, he argued, as he sat and watched Driver pack. Wherever he went he was going to be infernally miserable, so what did it matter?

When Driver stoically inquired how long he expected to be away, Micky answered violently that he was never coming back if he could help it; he said he hated London—he said he was sick to death of his flat and wanted a change.

“I shan’t come back till the autumn anyway,” he declared recklessly.

“Very good, sir,” was the stolid reply. Driver knew his master; he could remember another occasion when Micky had left London in a rage never to return, and ten days had seen him back again.

Certainly this was rather a different case from that other; this time there was a

woman behind it. Driver knew this perfectly well, though beyond the posting of letters and the buying of the fur coat he had had no firsthand evidence.

But he kept his thoughts to himself and packed shirts and socks and coats by the score, as if to keep up the belief that they were really going for months, instead of the day which were the limit he prescribed in his own mind.

When Rochester called later on in the evening, Micky was almost rude to him. The American looked so unfeignedly happy that it got on Micky's nerves; but George P. Rochester was difficult to snub; he looked on at the packing with childlike amazement.

"It's a sudden idea of yours, this flitting!" he submitted mildly. Micky did not answer.

"Hope you'll be back in time for my wedding, Sonnie," Rochester said again.

Micky flushed crimson; there was something rather pathetic about him at that moment.

"Oh, I'll be back all right," he said shortly.

Rochester laughed.

"You won't have to stay away long then," he said significantly.

CHAPTER XXXVII

Esther woke from a troubled sleep that night, to find June standing beside her. Pale moonlight shone into the room from half-drawn blinds, filling it with an eerie light, as Esther started up trembling and frightened.

“What is it? is anything the matter? Oh, I thought you were a ghost!” She clutched at June with both hands. “Oh, is anything the matter?” she asked again.

June laughed nervously; she found matches and lit a candle, then she came back to Esther and thrust something into her hands.

“You’ll never forgive me,” she said. “But I’ve had it in my coat pocket for two days....” She pushed her dark hair back from her forehead tragically. “Lydia gave it to me for you the day I went out in my best hat to meet George, and I was such a selfish, conceited pig that he put everything else out of my head, and I forgot all about it till just now, when I was lying awake thinking ... and then ... oh, Esther, it’s from Micky!”

Esther looked down at the crumpled envelope—

“From—Micky?...” she said. She was only half awake; she made a very fair picture there with her long hair tumbling about her shoulders, and her face a little flushed and startled.

June turned to the door.

“I’ll go away—you don’t want me.... I’ll go——” but Esther caught her hand.

“No—no.... Wait! please wait!”

“Very well—but I’m half frozen....” June looked plaintively at Esther, but Esther had forgotten her, and she dragged the quilt from the bed, and wrapped it round her small figure till she looked like a mummy.

There was a long silence, then Esther raised her eyes to June’s anxious face.

Her own was quite colourless, and her grey eyes looked dazed.

“Will you—will you—read it?” she said faintly. “Please—I want you to—I ...

somehow I feel as if I'm dreaming."

But June at any rate was wide awake. It only took her two minutes to read Micky's passionate appeal; the next she was laughing and crying together, and hugging Esther boisterously.

"Oh, isn't he the most wonderful man? Don't you love him? Don't you just adore him? Oh, if you're going to break his heart after all this, I'll *never* forgive you!... Why, my George isn't in it with Micky, poor darling!"—she shook Esther in her excitement—"What are you made of, that you can't see what a king he is? I don't believe there's any blood in your veins at all," she declared indignantly. "You haven't got a heart.... Oh, Esther darling! I didn't mean it—I—oh, I'm such an idiot!..."

And the two girls clasped each other and cried together.

"And now if this ridiculous midnight scene is ended," June said presently, sniffing her tears away, "let's talk sense. I'll go and see Micky in the morning and explain everything. He knows what I am—he won't be at all surprised—oh, I'm so glad—so more than glad.... Oh, Esther, *why* do you hide your face?"

"Because I'm so ashamed," Esther said in a stifled voice. "I'm not worth loving—I've ... oh, you don't *know* how I've treated him!"

June was silent for a minute, then she said gently—

"But Micky will forget all that—Micky never remembered a mean thing against anybody in his life." She forced Esther to look at her. "Tell me one thing, and then I'll go and leave you in peace," she coaxed. "Do you—do you ... *you* know?"

But in this instance, at least, a verbal answer was not necessary.

June kissed her rapturously.

"Oh, you darling," she said. She blew out the candle, and sped down to her own room again like a ghost in the moonlight.

"Was there anything else you was wanting, sir?" Driver inquired stolidly. He stood on the platform looking in at the first-class compartment where Micky sat alone in durance vile, waiting for the train to start.

He frowned, and pulled his soft hat further down over his eyes as he answered—

"No, nothing.... I'll see you at Dover."

There were many people on the platform; in the next carriage a pretty girl was seeing a man off—looking up at him as he stood on the footboard with eyes that told their story eloquently.

Micky looked at her enviously. He would have given his right hand if there had been some one there to see him off with just that expression in her eyes—the right some one, of course. He turned away from the window with an uncomfortable lump in his throat.

He had nothing in the world but his confounded money, and a lot of good that was to him! It could not buy happiness.

The guard came down the platform—

“Take your seats—take your seats....”

A girl and a man pushed past him. The girl was staring eagerly in at all the windows as she passed. When she saw Micky she gave a little cry of relief.

“Here he is—Micky! Micky!”

Micky started to his feet.

“June!” he said. For a moment he thought something must have happened—something was wrong—Esther!... her name was trembling on his lips, but June rushed on impetuously before he had time to speak it.

“We thought we’d come and see you off—George told me you were going, and I guessed you’d be on this train.... I’m so glad we found you—it’s rotten seeing oneself off, isn’t it?...”

Rochester came up laughing and red in the face; he took off his hat and mopped his hot forehead.

“I can’t keep pace with her, she’s like a whirlwind,” he said whimsically. “She raced me off here before I could say a word.”

“It’s kind of you to come,” Micky said.

He was pleased to see them; he felt decidedly less ill-tempered than he had done a moment ago. He looked down at June’s radiant face, and a little doubt went through his heart.

He was in that dangerous state through which so many men have to pass when the woman they love will have none of them. If Marie Deland had happened to turn up then, he would have asked for forgiveness and have married her offhand and regretted it the next day; and now, as he looked at June, he wondered if he

had been a fool not to properly appreciate her. He felt a vague twinge of jealousy, realising that the days were gone for ever when he had been the most wonderful man in all the world to her.

He had never loved her save in a brotherly way, and he did not love her now, but at heart men are all dogs in the manger, and it was some such feeling that filled Micky's heart as he leaned out of the window and looked at this girl.

"I hope you'll have a good time," she said cheerily. "Have you got anything to read?"

"I shan't want anything—I'm not in a reading mood."

Micky was longing to ask about Esther, but pride prevented him.

The guard was blowing his whistle; doors were slamming; June gripped Micky's hand.

"Be a good boy, and have a good time," she said. There was a furious excitement in her eyes.

He made a grimace.

"I'm not expecting to have a good time," he answered.

The train was slowly moving; June ran a few steps to keep up with it. Micky blurted out his question at last—

"Miss Shepstone ... Esther ... is she all right, June?"

June smiled.

"Oh, she's first rate," she said airily. "She's gone away for a holiday.... Good-bye." She fell back laughing and waving her hand.

Micky kept his head out of the window till a cloud of smoke from the engine blown backwards shut out all sight of her, then he drew in, dragging the window up with a slam.

Gone away for a holiday, had she?—well—it was nothing to him. He turned round to go back to his seat in the corner then stopping dead, staring as if he had seen a ghost; for Esther was sitting there just behind him, looking up at him with scared eyes.

For a moment Micky did not move; he was like a man turned to stone. Then the blood rushed to his face in a crimson tide; he broke out into stammering speech—

“You ... you ... what ... what ... I thought....” He swayed forward a little and caught her hands. “You are real—I thought ... I thought I was just imagining it all; I thought.... Oh, wait a moment...” He sat down and leaned his head in his hands.

He felt sure that he must be mad or dreaming—the world had turned upside down and pitched his thoughts into chaos; he was sure that when next he looked Esther would no longer be there—he dreaded having to raise his eyes.

Esther stretched a timid hand to him; her voice shook as she said—

“Oh, I thought ... I thought perhaps you’d be glad to see me—just ... just a little—glad....”

“Glad!” Micky echoed the word with almost a shout. He got up and went over to her; he looked down at her with an agony of doubt and fear in his eyes.

“Why have you come?” he asked hoarsely. “If this is only a joke—if it’s any nonsense of June’s ... by God, it’s the cruellest joke you could have played on me.... I—I....”

Esther covered her face with her hands.

“If that’s all you’ve got to say to me,” she began tremblingly.

“Esther....”

He drew her hands down; he forced her to look at him; for a long moment his eyes searched her face disbelievingly, not daring to hope....

Her cheeks flamed, but she met his eyes bravely.

Micky drew a long breath; he passed a hand across his eyes as if to waken himself.

Then all at once he seemed to realise that this was in very truth the woman he wanted sitting beside him; that she was here and for his sake; that he was alone and unhappy no longer; and that after all the weeks of hunger and restlessness he had got his heart’s desire.

He looked down at her tremulous face with eyes of passionate tenderness.

“Is this my wife?” he asked hoarsely, and Esther answered—

“If you still want me.”

“Want you!” Micky caught her to him. “Haven’t I always wanted you?...”

Fortunately the train was not very full, and the corridor immediately outside their carriage was deserted, or somebody might have had a very interesting demonstration of how to kiss a woman who had refused for months to be kissed.

Micky was like a boy in his happiness. He looked years younger than the gloomy man who had dismissed Driver ten minutes since. He could not take his eyes from Esther—he could not believe in his own happiness even while he was engulfed in it. His arm was round her, regardless of chance wanderers in the corridor—he held her hand to his lips and kissed it passionately.

“What have you done with ... that other ring you used to wear?” he asked jealously.

She turned her face away.

“I threw it out of the window when we came back from Paris,” she told him.

“I’ll give you another. I’m going to give you everything you want now.”

“You’ve been too good to me already,” she said. “I can never repay you.”

“You’ve given me yourself. There is nothing else in the world that I want.”

He laughed happily.

He bent his head towards her.

“Esther ... when did you ... when did you first ... think that you liked me ... just a little?”

Her head dropped; he could not see her face.

“I don’t know,” she said in a whisper.

“In Paris,” he urged, “or before? Tell me.”

“I think it was in Paris—after ... after I saw ... Raymond! You were so kind ... so different.”

He laughed ruefully.

“I was nearer hating you then than ever in my life.”

He saw the colour creep into her face. “You’ve told me ever so many times that you hated me,” he went on quickly, “but you never told me that you ... loved me, Esther!”

He waited, but she did not look at him.

Then suddenly she took his hand in both of hers; she bent her head and kissed it with a sort of passionate gratitude that brought a mist to Micky's eyes. He seemed to see her all at once as he had first seen her that New Year's Eve; alone, unhappy—with nobody to care what she did, or what became of her.

"You're so much, much too good for me," she said brokenly. "You've done everything for me, and I've done nothing for you—I haven't even been ... nice! I can't tell you what I feel about it all—I only know that—just lately—you've—you've made everything seem so different—since you wrote me that letter—it makes me feel in my heart that it's always really been you—always you, and never ... never any one else."

"Darling," said Micky huskily. "And perhaps—some day—do you ... do you ... think ... you could ever care for me more than ... than you cared for ... that other fellow, confound him!" he added fiercely.

She looked up at him and smiled.

"I think," she said slowly, "that I only ... only really began to care for—him—when he went away—and when those letters began to come; and so you see—it was always you, because it was you who wrote them."

"It was a rotten thing to do, but I wanted to help you."

"You did help me ... and—Micky...."

"Darling...."

"My fur coat ... can I—will you give it back to me?"

"I'll give you everything in the world if you'll say you love me...."

"I do—I...."

"Say it then," he urged gently.

For a moment she did not answer; she was still a little afraid of him; she still felt something of pride and constraint between them; though she knew it was for her to sweep away the last barrier.

She looked up at him, the sensitive colour rushing to her face.

"I love you," she said softly. "Oh, Micky, some one will see—"

But Micky only laughed.

The train was running on to Dover Harbour before Micky realised it; he looked at Esther with pretended dismay in his happy eyes.

“And pray, what am I to do with you, madame? Do you realise that I’m going to Paris?”

“I know—” She laughed. “I’m going there too—of course, if you’d like to travel in a different train to me....”

She was a very different Esther from the pale, frightened-looking girl who had said good-bye to June at Victoria. Her eyes were dancing now, and her face was radiant. Micky regarded her with proud satisfaction.

“You look years younger and prettier already,” he said. “And that’s after only an hour or two of my wonderful society; so what you’ll look like when we’ve been married for years and years....”

He stopped, and a sudden emotion filled his face.

“What shall we do, love of mine?” he asked tenderly, “Shall we go on, or shall we go back?”

She shook her head.

“I don’t mind—either way, I’m afraid you’ll have to pay for me,” she told him saucily. “June rushed me off so, I forgot my purse—Mr. Rochester got me a ticket, but....”

“We’ll go on,” said Micky hurriedly. The train was almost at a standstill. “You said you hated Paris—but you won’t hate it with me. We’ll get married as soon as we get there—I’ll take you everywhere.”

Her eyes fell.

“I haven’t any nice clothes—I only brought a small case; I never thought you ... you....” She stopped, stammering.

“Paris is full of clothes,” he told her. “We’ll stay just long enough to buy what you want, and then we’ll go south. Esther, you’ve never seen the south of France in springtime, have you? I’ll take you there for our honeymoon.”

She drew back a little.

“But, Micky—there’s June—what will she say—what will she think?”

“She’ll think that you’ve behaved sensibly—at last!” he answered audaciously. “June knew she wouldn’t see either of us again for some time when we left her at Victoria—June is a most discerning woman.”

“She’s a dear,” said Esther warmly. “I owe all my happiness to her.”

Micky pretended to look offended.

“I was under the delusion that you owed it to me,” he said with dignity.

“To you!” Her face changed wonderfully; she bent her head and kissed the sleeve of his coat.

“I can’t talk about what I owe you—it’s just—everything!”

Micky drew himself up a dignified inch.

“I’m beginning to think I’m a very wonderful man, do you know?” he said, addressing some imaginary person.

Driver appeared at the door. He hesitated for just the faintest possible moment when he saw Esther, but his face was as stolid as ever.

Micky rose to the occasion, though he turned rather red.

“Driver,” he said, “let me introduce you to my wife——”

Driver touched a respectful forelock; if he felt surprise he did not show it.

He took Esther’s suit-case down from the rack.

“Was you—was you wanting to send a wire, sir?” he asked stolidly.

Micky looked at the girl beside him.

“Send June one from Paris,” she said. “I don’t know what she’ll say——”

But June might have been expecting the wire, judging from the calm way in which she received it; she showed it to Rochester as if it were nothing out of the way; she looked over his shoulder as he read it.

“Married in Paris this morning. Love from Mr. and Mrs. Micky.”

She laughed and met Rochester’s eyes; there seemed to be an inquiry in his. June hesitated a moment, then she nodded.

And forty-eight hours later Micky and Esther read her reply just as they were leaving for the flower-fields of France—

“Married in London this morning—June and George.”

“Some people have no originality,” Micky complained in pretended disgust.

“But if they’re half as happy as we are,” Esther said shyly.

Micky looked scornfully sceptical.

“Oh well! if you’re going to expect the impossible....” he submitted.

THE END

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