SUCCESS

UNA L. SILBERRAD

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BY
UNA L. SILBERRAD

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CHAPTER I

MICHAEL ANNARLY was talking to Lady Sibyl Carson. He had been dining with the Carsons, and he was staying on after the other guests, deep in talk with his hostess. He was the last to move, excepting, of course, those who were staying in the house. These were all men; Carson did not encourage the idea of women visitors in case they should want to go out with the guns, and Lady Sibyl had few friends of her own sex for whom she cared enough to insist on inviting. The men lounged by the fire in the room, part hall, part billiard-room, to which the company had retired when the more formal guests departed. Lady Sibyl and Annarly were some distance from the others, she in a deep-seated chair which toned in colour with the golden russet of her dress and hair and eyes. Annarly sat beside her in earnest talk, as he had sat ever since their coming into the hall; since then neither had conceded even a pretence of recognising the existence of other people. When the one or two local guests, who had lingered on, came to take leave of their hostess, she for the moment waked to a recollection of their existence, made a few remarks in a charming manner, and then obviously went back in mind to where she was before. Annarly, who in spite of his thirty years was

not really well versed in the ways of the world, certainly not of this world, did not acquit himself even so well as that. He remained completely absorbed until a rather pronounced yawn from one of the group by the fireplace arrested his attention and reminded him of the lateness of the hour and the way he had outstayed other people. He rose to say good-bye.

Lady Sibyl rose too; her eyes were shining and the whole of her beautiful face was alive with the excitement and admiration which some women feel for success.

“Good-bye,” she said, and her voice thrilled with a note of pride as well as sympathy, “good-bye—and thank you! Thank you, for telling me. I am proud that you should have thought it worth while to tell me. I need not say that I am proud that you have accomplished it—I always knew you would! All the same”—she offered him her hand, and her voice dropped half a tone softer—“I’m glad.”

He took the hand, his unusually sensitive and telepathetic fingers gripping hers closely. She did not resent it, she was moved out of herself by what he had that evening told her.

“I may come on Saturday and tell you what they say?” he asked.

She nodded. “I shall be very impatient till then. I only hope they will treat you well, what I call well; I have bigger ideas than you, you know. When you give me leave to speak, I think I shall see if I cannot influence them. A woman can help sometimes.”

“Sometimes?” Their eyes met, and for the moment she had the feeling, perhaps he had too, that she had been half the inspiration of his work, or at least that

her sympathy and interest had helped through the hardest places.

Carson broke in here. “You off, Annarly?” he said, quite unconscious of any thing he might be interrupting, and went on to speak of the state of the roads and the peculiarities of Annarly’s car.

“Who’s that chap?” Dawling, one of the men by the fire, asked, when he had gone.

“Annarly?” Carson said; “oh, he’s at Galhardy’s.”

Most of those present were that in a sense, or at least had some interest or nominal connection with the great foundries; one of the great foundries of Europe which, a town in itself, lay not far distant and was of more vital interest to the surrounding country than the British Constitution or any other human institution. Dawling himself had little interest in it, but, from intimate conversation with those who had, most of the more important names were familiar to him; Annarly’s he could not place among them: also, though not very acute, he had a vague consciousness that the man was not one of themselves.

“What is he?” he asked, “I don’t seem to have heard of him.”

“That’s because you’ve been out of England the last three years,” Brett, a smallish man in the corner, said. “Had you been here, you’d have known—from his own demonstration, if nothing else—that he is the greatest genius of modern times. I don’t quite know what one should call him: engineer, mathematician, electrician, mechanic, or Jack-of-all-trades, but it’s quite certain he’s a marvel.”

The sarcasm of the tone was so obvious that it was easy to see Brett, secretary to the board and private

secretary to the chairman of directors of Galhardy's, did not love this talented acquisition of the great firm. Even the unobservant Dawling saw that, and Lady Sibyl, who had gone to a bureau at the far end of the room, caught the intonation though not the words. She closed the bureau and came to the group by the fire.

"Are you talking of Mr. Annarly?" she said. "He is an extraordinary person, extraordinarily clever; much, much more able, I think, than any of you yet realise."

She stood looking down at the blaze a moment, her eyes reflecting the flickering lights, and a thoughtful smile curving her lips.

Her husband grunted; he was not in the least jealous, it never occurred to him to be jealous of any poet, musician, scientist, or other man of brains with whom his wife chose to beguile her otherwise tedious intellectual solitude. It certainly did not occur to him to be jealous of Annarly. Though he was quite unlike all who had gone before him in favour, and was also possessed of tangible abilities which Carson himself could value, if not understand, he was no more one of themselves than the others were; no more one in ordinary life, the life of the house and the coverts, and so on.

Brett, from beyond his host, moved a little impatiently. "I am afraid you are too generous, Lady Sibyl," he said. "I don't think you'll find it wise to accept Annarly entirely on his own valuation."

"I don't," she answered, "I estimate him a great deal higher than that. Oh"—as she saw Brett's expression —"I know some people think him conceited, but he is not. It is true he can do and understand things few

others can, and he knows it; but he does not think highly of himself on that account—though perhaps rather poorly of those who can't. That, with his way of refusing to comply with old ways that he sees no use for, might make him unpopular. But he does not overestimate his own ability; I think you will say that yourself soon."

"I may," Brett conceded, but his tone did not suggest conviction.

"He's all right," Carson said carelessly; "a bit short of the sense of proportion, thinks nothing on earth matters but his own job, and don't always see straight about that, otherwise not bad."

"Isn't he?" said Brett, with a vindictive flicker of the eyelids. But he said it quietly, and as Lady Sibyl was then saying good night, no one paid any particular attention.

When she had gone Dawling observed, "The genius seems to know something about the gentle art of making enemies."

"Annarly?" Carson said. "He's all right, a bit big for his boots, but a clever devil."

"How did he get in?"

It was a question of some interest; to get into Galhardy's, with any prospect of achieving a position or income worth the having, was a more than difficult thing unless one were born to it, or acquired it by great influence, income, or marriage. It was quite evident from the attitude of all present that Annarly had not done it in any of these ways. Brett answered now, and his tone was sarcastic.

"By merit," he said; "he got in by his own merit and singular genius some three years ago, and by that

alone has risen to what he is. And contrived to get more rope, more power, and more money to fool with than any other man, though he might be ten years his senior and the nephew of a director. He is the pet of half the board—a pretty expensive pet, I should be sorry to say what he and his experiments have cost the firm—and the bane of the other half, and most other men in authority too."

"H'm," Dawling said; then asked, "Who put him in in the first instance?"

"It's reported," Carson answered, "that some woman brought him to the notice of one of the directors, old Joe, in fact, wasn't it? At all events, he always says now that he found him himself, was struck of a heap by some invention he submitted, or something. Anyway, he was found, and found, or thought to be, the man for the aerial torpedo problem."

"Is that his line?" Dawling asked, interested.

"That's it. Not but what he's reported to do plenty else beside—weaned on ballistics, I believe, and knows all that's worth knowing about steel and guns —though he can't hit a bunny at twenty yards. But it's the torpedo business that he depends on; the directors expect him not only to perfect the means of discharging torpedoes at airships, but also to give them a suitable torpedo-head too. They've been expecting it some time, and he keeps 'em expecting; he's a clever chap."

"Krupps also expect it of him," Lee-Brendon, an older man who had not heretofore spoken, observed. "So, I believe, do the other great firms."

"Oh, I didn't mean there's nothing in it," Carson explained, "he'll get it all right, not much doubt about that; our directors don't make mistakes where

their own interests are concerned. They must have pretty good grounds for their faith in Annarly to let him have his head as they do. Not the least clever thing about him is that he's been able to get it; 'tisn't every man with no more than brains to back him, who could: I admire the chap for that, though it has made him, as I say, a bit big for his boots."

He knocked the ashes out of his pipe as he spoke, as a signal that he at least was ready for bed.

And Michael Annarly?

He drove home through the soft darkness of a late September night, thinking no more of the night than of the car he drove (and could not really afford). Neither was he, and this was rarer with him, thinking of the difficulties of his work and the jealousies and obstacles which met, and must meet and often thwart, a brilliant young outsider in an old, close preserve. To-night he was not thinking of them or of ways to deal with, dodge, or surmount them; he was done with that now, clear of them, free of them and the need to consider them. He was thinking of a woman whose gown repeated the russet of the bracken-clad hills at this season of the year, and whose eyes, a tone darker, looked glowingly into his when she had bade him come again, and said she would be impatient till his coming. A woman whose voice had quivered with enthusiasm and given the commendation to be coveted when he had brought her, first of all people, word of the completion of his achievement. Through all his pulses ran the thrill of victory; not over her, though perhaps he believed in a tenderness for himself, but over fate and

circumstances. She and her glowing sympathy were but as a crown set on the other achievement; but one that, for the first time, made him realise that it was victory. Before it was work—good work—not perfect to his ideal standard, but good, what he had looked to do and believed, although he as no other knew the enormous difficulties, that he would do. But it was no more than that till her kindling eyes and thrilling voice had shown it as victory. No longer only a sober, if important achievement of great mechanical skill and mathematical ability; no longer even an overcoming of obstacles, an outwitting of enemies, and surmounting of difficulties, but Success, Victory, the rare, heady thing.

That night was a memorable one for Michael Annarly. Some at least are allowed one such. A night when there is little looking before or after, little consciousness of any but the moment, no formed consciousness of that, only a living it in every nerve and every fibre to the very full. The Zenith, though a man at the time does not know it—knows nothing but he is he, and the world, all that is not he, is his for the grasping. Divine delusion which comes near to fulfilling itself by the strength of its conviction! Divine moment when the long fight is almost won and victory, showing clear, is upon the threshold, and the Fates, won as women by success, offer to add other gifts—all other gifts, everything, the whole world to be had for the asking! Divine arrogance when a man, realising himself a self-existing unit and feeling his power, approaches to the Divinity! A moment such as that in which Nebuchadnezzar, struck with the sudden realisation of his own ability and the greatness to which it had achieved, cried, “Behold this great Babylon which I have builded!”

It was late by the time Michael Annarly reached his rooms; by then he was thinking quite soberly of the immediate future and of the directors of Galhardy's, before whom he should put the final designs for the aerial torpedo. They knew it was completed, he himself had told them so in answer to the last of their many inquiries; not set out clear and in the superfine form presented to boards, but all there, all the real work done. It was a great admission for him, the first time in all the while he had worked at the problem, that he owned himself satisfied; the directors, well aware that his standard would not be below theirs, were dignifiedly excited. They requested that he would have the final designs ready to put before them at the next board meeting. He had undertaken to do so, not omitting to mention that it would be as much as he could do to be ready, although he had all the notes, statistics, and details of experiments collected and on the way to be reduced to order.

It is possible, had he not himself felt some youthful impatience to demonstrate what he had done, they might have had to wait longer for the result. He was young enough to have enjoyed inventing some fictitious reason for delay, by way of reprisal for what he had suffered in the past from their impatience and from various of their methods and those that obtained in the great firm. Other men might think he enjoyed a most unusual, unwise, and unprecedented liberty of action in Galhardy's; he himself held no such opinion. He had rebelled much against what he considered the lack of it, and against the red-tape which ruled here only less than in a great Government department. The work had been

done in half the time, so he told Lady Sibyl more than once, had they given him a definite sum of money, the control of a certain number of men, and the power to get what he wanted made in other parts of the foundry, and asked no questions and received no reports till all was finished.

They had, not unnaturally, done no such thing, though by degrees they allowed him more freedom than had ever been given before. With the result that, with doubt and hesitation on their part, and fretting against obstacles and going round them on his, he had worked at a pace never before approached in Galhardy's; making many enemies among superiors, many admirers among inferiors, entirely unconscious of both; turning out the most astonishing quantity of work, although privately holding that he was terribly wasting his time. There had been other aerial torpedoes, and other torpedo-heads of his designing before this last one, which was to combine the excellencies of all others. Before now the directors would have been satisfied with the results that he could have put before them. One of the manifestations of their impatience to which he most objected was that which made them ready to be satisfied with a good deal less than perfection in their anxiety to be first in solving the world's new problem of warfare. They aimed at making money, as they would by being first; he aimed at perfection of work and, where work was concerned, was arrogantly contemptuous of their aims; so far it was he who had carried the day. But all that was over now, the work was complete. That evening he had told Lady Sibyl about it, and received her sympathy and applause; shortly it would be formally put before the directors, and thereafter would come other, more prosaic though possibly more tangible, applause.

He was rather late leaving his rooms the next morning. Said rooms were situated on the outskirts of the town which, though it bears another geographical name on the map, might really be called Galhardy's. Living in that part of the town was disproportionately expensive; men of a certain standing, younger sons of good families and protégés of the directors put into the great firm, had their rooms there; as they were of one class (often of one family) and that a class which is expected to pay disproportionately—and not look at the change—prices ranged high. Annarly was not of that class, and his original instinct, inherited from respectable, but by no means wealthy, city people, was not to pay outrageously for what was not worth it, and to look at the change. Nevertheless, he lived in the approved precincts and paid the demanded price with the best grace; he reckoned he got something for it—he was counted in as one of the others.

When he left his rooms that morning, the other men, though not all strikingly punctual, were already gone about what they were pleased to call their work. It was decidedly late, but he had not felt inclined to get up; he had hardly slept at all till after other people were well astir. He often did not at that time; the fury with which he habitually worked, taken in conjunction with the nervous fret of much of his present life, was beginning to tell on him. A man cannot work ceaselessly at advanced brain-work all day and wear himself to pieces all night rebelling against the impediments in his path and devising ways of surmounting them, without having to pay for it. The moment of victory and cessation is liable to be the one when Nature begins to think of sending in her bill.

Not that it mattered Annarly being late; no one concerned with time-keeping at Galhardy's would have ventured to comment on the fact at this stage of his career, whatever might have been the inclination earlier. With no more than a careless nod to those he chanced to meet, he walked into his own room. He had his own room now, and had had it some time; he said he could do double the work if he were secured solitude and freedom from interruption. It had taken six months' persistent argument, application, and persuasion to win the concession; no one of his standing in the firm had had it before; but in the end it was won—with the ill-will of several, and he did double the work and was satisfied. To-day, when he went in, he found several letters and papers waiting for him; there was only one of interest, a little note from Lady Sibyl; a few words of rejoicing in the success, rather warmer and more unguarded than those spoken last night. It had been written almost directly after he had left, while the glow of enthusiasm was still on her. More than once before, after they had spent an evening together, he had received such a note from her, one which, as it were, carried on the talk just a point further, and said just a little more than she herself ventured to say. Not of matters of heart; rather those intimacies of soul and mind and the confidences of sympathy and sentiment which give the fascination to friendship between men and women, and sometimes land it elsewhere. Annarly had the letters, some half dozen of them. He meant to destroy them, not that there was anything incriminating in them, but they seemed to him too delicately private to be fairly kept. As yet he had not done so; he had the writer's permission to keep them till the end of the year, on the condition that all were burnt then.

For a minute or two he looked over some of the past ones, standing by the fire to do it. He sometimes, as to-day, wasted nearly half an hour before he began work, and some of his compeers in the great firm knew it. It is true he usually worked one, two, or three hours after they left off, frequently forgot the existence of lunch, and always did in a day three times as much as they could at the best. In a vague way some of them knew that too, but the half hour in the morning made more impression. At length, however, he put the letters away; he had the not uncommon habit of keeping private papers among business ones, though in this case they, in a long envelope, were put in a drawer by themselves. Or, rather, with no other company than the pistol he had taken to carrying last winter, when he was working late and coming home by lonely ways at a time that he had been threatened by some workmen whose dismissal he had procured for incompetency.

The letters locked up, he set seriously to work.

He had not been at it much more than half an hour, and had not got beyond the stage of finding it acutely distasteful and being fully persuaded that he was physically and mentally incapable of doing it, when an interruption occurred. He looked round impatiently: in spite of his conviction that he did not want to work, he did not herald the momentary respite with pleasure. The impatience was considerably mixed with surprise when the boy who had knocked announced, “Sir James Shannon.”

Sir James was one of the younger directors, a very rich, a very able and, in private life, a haughtily exclusive man. He was the one of the whole body most inimical to Annarly; indeed, it was only his clear perception of the importance of keeping

abilities which rival firms were only too ready to buy which prevented him from open condemnation of the man and all his works. That Sir James should come thus was unprecedented; he had no social dealings with him, and, unlike some other of the directors, never asked for unofficial (and unremunerated) opinions on scientific or technical matters in which he was interested. Any other reason for his coming was difficult to imagine; Annarly was at a loss to understand it. The reason why Brett, secretary to the board, should accompany him was equally difficult to guess. Something warned him that it was not favourable, and instinctively he received the visitor with a little less deference and a little more assurance than he usually kept for this one of the directors.

The reception was not without effect; Sir James, who had ignored the greeting on entering and shown a very marked and considerable distance of manner, altered a little.

“Mr. Annarly,” he said coldly, but with courtesy, “I regret that a very unpleasant business brings me here this morning. There are some questions I am compelled to put to you; I must ask you to answer them fully and plainly.”

“If I can,” Annarly said, and swiftly reviewed the different matters which, from time to time, he had not communicated to the directors. And again instinct and Brett’s hardly veiled satisfaction warned him that the thing was serious.

He pushed forward a wide-seated chair and invited Sir James to be seated, more as if he were receiving a friend at home than as if he were face to face with a difficult situation.

Sir James sat, but it was his only concession. Brett, ignored, and resenting it, took a small chair beyond his chief and watched silently.

"It has come to the knowledge of the directors," Sir James began, "that you have recently entered into negotiations with certain foreign firms for the sale to them of inventions worked out here, and consequently the property of this firm."

Annarly lifted his head quickly. "Seeing that the directors——" he began.

"Precisely," Sir James interrupted, "seeing that the directors, contrary to the opinion of at least some, were persuaded to agree to allow you such powers—the power to sell foreign rights in some one or two of the inventions worked out by you for which the firm had no use—subject to certain conditions."

"—The condition that I should have designed a satisfactory torpedo and torpedo-head for aerial warfare. I have done so. You know it, everyone knows it. There hasn't been a full report yet, I know, but it is done—it is here." He indicated the desk with a sweep of the hand. "You all know that. Surely, even if I had been a little previous——"

"A little previous?" Sir James's tone was scathing. "You consider you have been that?"

"Perhaps—yes," Annarly admitted.

"Ah? I may understand, then, that you admit to the negotiations?"

"I admit that, when an opportunity occurred, I let certain people know that I might have something to offer them by and by. It was previous, as I have said; I should not have sought the opportunity, but, since

it offered, I took it, though, strictly speaking, I suppose I ought not. But I have told them nothing, given them nothing, and received from them nothing."

"I trust," Sir James said coldly, "that may prove to be the case. But even if it does, and I hope for your sake it may, though you are cleared of the felonious act, you are not, and cannot, by your own confession, be cleared of the intent."

"The intent?"

"Certainly, the intent. Really, Mr. Annarly, your attitude in the circumstances is impertinent! You must be perfectly well aware that you have transgressed, not only the first rule of the firm and all other firms, but also one of the first rules of honour. You have no right to open these negotiations now or at any other time; you have not and never will have anything to dispose of—honestly."

"What do you mean?" Annarly asked sharply. "I fear I don't understand you."

Sir James grew impatient. "Have you forgotten," he said, "that when these unprecedented and, in my opinion, highly improper concessions were discussed, Sir Joseph Harte, the chairman, was not present at the board meeting? And that it was finally agreed to grant them to you only subject to his concurrence?"

"Certainly," Annarly answered, "I never forgot that for a moment; in fact, I went to see Sir Joseph on the subject as soon after the board meeting as he was well enough to see me. I put the matter before him then and there. I had spoken of it before to him, as to most of you—and he raised no further objection, indeed, gave a full consent. Afterwards I had a letter from him confirming the talk."

He handed a letter to Sir James. “Brett wrote it,” he said, with a glance which, for the first time, included the secretary in the conversation—“he could have told you what was in it.”

Sir James took the letter, but did not read it. “Yes,” he said, and the frigidity of his manner was unmistakable, “Mr. Brett did write it, and, in Sir Joseph’s then indisposed condition, signed it.”

Annarly looked up, a sudden fear flashing across him —such a letter, so signed, could and might be repudiated. But the thought found no utterance, it was too gross.

“Mr. Brett is here now,” Sir James said, “and so can tell you, though I should think it hardly necessary, that he made a very serious mistake in that letter.”

“A mistake?” Annarly’s voice sank just a little and his assurance for the first time wavered. The feeling began to come upon him that he was fighting; not answering charges or facing a difficult situation, but fighting a deadly and unrecognisable enemy, and with tied hands. Brett was not the enemy exactly, he was an instrument, a manifestation only; a willing instrument and a venomous manifestation, but insignificant without the power behind. Shannon was not it exactly; he was coldly antipathetic and coldly and contemptuously angry; but he was not the enemy, only a part, perhaps an impersonal part, of a great and relentless power. He drew a slow breath, and his eyes narrowed as some men’s do when they fight, but he moistened his lips ever so little; he was afraid.

“Well?” he said to Brett curtly, and without any pretence of politeness.

“I made a mistake in that letter,” Brett answered.

“Sir Joseph was not at all well when he dictated the letters that day; a pretty sharp attack of pain came on before he had finished; in fact, while he was dictating that one, which was the last. I had some difficulty in making out quite what he meant once or twice, and I entirely mistook what he intended to convey in that letter.”

“Ah?” Annarly said quietly, and then, “What did he intend to convey?”

“That, on thinking over his recent conversation with you, he felt he could not give consent to your request without further consideration and discussion with his co-directors.”

“Ah?” Annarly said again, and again he said it quietly, though this information and reversion of the chairman’s consent meant, not only the loss of the concession for which he had fought so hard and reckoned of such great value, but also some justification for Sir James’s attitude and charges.

He turned to Sir James, ignoring the secretary.

“It is certainly unfortunate, sir,” he said, “that Mr. Brett should make such mistakes. Still, I can hardly imagine the directors will hold me guilty on account of Mr. Brett and his mistakes.”

Brett flushed. “I rectified it the next day,” he said.

“What!” Annarly’s tone was nearly an insult.

“I rectified it,” Brett maintained, wincing a little. “Sir Joseph asked me about it the next day, he knows that when he is in pain he does not always make himself clear; he thought I might have made a mistake in some of the letters, so he asked me, and when I told him what I had said to you he told me to write at once and contradict it.”

“And you did?”

“Yes, I did.”

“You liar!”

Brett sprang to his feet, his face very white.

Sir James interrupted quickly. “Mr. Annarly, you forget yourself!” he said.

Annarly turned. “Yes,” he said, with his back to Brett, “I do; I beg your pardon, Sir James.”

Sir James frowned, Annarly’s attitude was not helpful. “You forget,” he said with hauteur, “that it is Sir Joseph’s word we have for the mistake and correction. Mr. Brett merely acted upon instructions in the second letter and misunderstanding in the first.”

“I received no second letter,” Annarly said; but the feeling of the tied hands and the vast proportions of the unrecognised foe were growing upon him.

“That is unfortunate,” Sir James said coldly.

“You don’t believe me?”

“I should wish to be able to do so, but in the circumstances I fear I must suspend judgment. And in the circumstances, and seeing the very grave nature of the case, I must, on behalf of the directors, ask for your papers.”

“My papers?”

“Yes, your papers; all papers here.”

“The notes on the torpedo? The statistics and tables? Does the board not want them reported upon?”

“The board will not trouble you to report upon them; indeed, it is the desire of the directors that you will

consider you have leave of absence until the matter is settled. They desire that you will neither come here nor hold communication with persons coming here, pending that time. Mr. Brett, kindly collect the papers."

He turned away as he spoke; he had risen and stood with his shoulder towards Annarly, as if the matter concerned him no longer. Brett rose too, and went, with hardly concealed alacrity, to the desk.

But Annarly did not move; he understood at last, and the understanding struck him speechless; he sat staring as one half stunned, even now hardly able to believe the incredible.

The foe was declared now, and it was the whole board of directors, the whole personnel of Galhardy's, the very shareholders, the vested interest, the unaltering custom, the relentless, omnivorous power of a great firm against which he, in his arrogance, had pitted his puny strength. The recognition was overwhelming—none the less so because it came when victory was so nearly assured, and when nerves and brain and mind, worn to the finest by past work, were strung to breaking. The shock was stunning; for a little he could neither feel nor think, but sat motionless, watching with incurious eyes Brett systematically ransacking the desk.

Neatly the papers were collected: letters, diagrams, notes, long table of figures, all the record of the now completed work, and other varied and only less splendid work which had gone before. One by one, as they were taken out, he recognised them, and the recognition brought a faint, inarticulate pain. They were very much to him; more, far more, than anyone knew, more than he himself could have told; they

were, as it were, part of him, his very life. As Brett took them from their familiar places—from his presence altogether—it was as if part of himself went; something he could never recover. The directors took more than they knew when they took these; so much that, in his present state, it came so near to seeming all as to be dangerous.

A drawer-handle jerked sharply, the drawer, securely locked, refused to open. “The key of this?” Brett said in a businesslike tone.

Annarly looked up.

All the drawers and pigeon-holes of the desk were empty now, excepting this last, which was locked with a separate key. He glanced towards it dully, trying to remember where the key was, and what the drawer contained. For a moment he could not; then both recurred to him together: the key was on the floor where it had fallen just before the interruption occurred, the drawer contained Lady Sibyl’s letters. Both things seemed curiously remote and far away, as if they had to do with another person in another life, singularly trivial.

“The key?” Brett spoke impatiently, and held his hand for it.

Annarly roused himself. “There are none but private letters in that drawer,” he said, without moving.

“It does not matter what they are, I must have them.”

Brett spoke authoritatively, perhaps a little intoxicated with the position.

“You?” Annarly inquired contemptuously.

Sir James interposed. “We must have the key, Mr.

Annarly," he said. "Do not make this unpleasant business more unpleasant by foolish and perfectly useless resistance to authority. All papers here are the property of the firm, as you know; you have neither legal nor moral right to withhold them when they are demanded."

"The papers in that drawer are private letters," Annarly repeated. His stunned faculties were beginning to stir a little—he was of that sort which, in animals, is by far the most dangerous after being left to all seeming dead. "Nothing there is written on the firm's paper, or with the firm's ink, which, I believe, constitutes the basis of the legal claim; nor is it about the firm's concerns, which, I suppose, you would say constitutes a moral one. They are private letters only; you have no right to them."

"In that case they will be returned to you so soon as we are satisfied on the point. Unfasten the drawer, please. Remember, to force it offers little difficulty; it is merely for your own sake that I ask for the key."

Annarly hesitated a moment, or seemed to, then he rose, found the key, and went to the desk.

Brett moved back in obedience to a nod from his chief, who was not quite sure that Annarly would deliver up the letters to the subordinate. Both, thus, were close together to the left of the desk, while Annarly, the drawer being in the extreme right, was that side, the side which was towards the fire.

He unlocked the drawer and took out the letters, shaking them out of the covering envelope, which fell empty to the floor, so that it was seen they were what he had said.

"You see," he said, "they are letters"—he told them over counting them, then turned to the drawer, as if

to feel for more—“only letters——”

“Yes,” Sir James said impatiently, “they will be returned to you as soon as we are assured——”

“Oh, no, they won’t,” Annarly said, and his tone was quiet and confident. “They will never be returned to me by you, for you’ll be dead before you get them.”

He swung round as he spoke, and Sir James found himself looking down the barrel of a revolver.

He stepped back a pace: he was not a coward, but the thing was unexpected and unpleasantly close. Brett stepped back too; he was very near his chief, and, owing to the giving back and the position of the furniture, quite unable to move away.

“Don’t be a fool, Annarly!” Sir James said sharply. “Put that down. You’ll gain nothing by such folly.”

“Nor lose anything, either,” Annarly answered; “I’ve already done that; I’ve not much more to lose.”

And therein, if it were true, lay the danger, and Sir James knew it. For a second or two he did not move, nor did Annarly; they looked at one another, seeing not much but the revolver between.

“I don’t want to make a scene,” Sir James said. “I have done what I can to spare your feelings and avoid publicity, but if you compel me to it, I shall have to have recourse to personal violence—we are two to one, I may point out, and there are men within call.”

“Call them,” Annarly answered. “Though it will hardly be necessary, the report should do it. I shall have time to get in two shots, one for you and one for me, between the calling and the coming, and before Mr. Brett becomes very violent.”

Brett's white face reddened faintly; but if he had any thought of retaliation the big bulk of his chief effectually prevented. Sir James was no fool; he recognised the seriousness of the situation, and he was not likely to allow matters to be fatally precipitated by Brett.

"You are hopelessly blackening yourself by this folly," he warned Annarly. "What is the object of it?"

Annarly looked grim. "Is there any blackening left for me to do?" he asked. "The object? The letters. They are private letters, I have said it, in no way concerning the firm; I'll burn them, if you like you can see them burnt, but I will not give them up."

For an almost imperceptible second Sir James hesitated, then he said, "Do you swear that those are private letters and nothing but private letters, in no way concerned with the foreign negotiations, or anything connected with them? On your honour, you swear it?"

"On my honour."

"Burn them."

They were thrown in the fire. But though Annarly had magnanimously forborne to put the interrogative stress the situation warranted on promising on his honour, he did not magnanimously lower the revolver. He might trust Sir James, but he did not trust Brett; so while the flames caught the papers no one of the three moved. Indeed, it is doubtful if any one of them watched the burning of Lady Sibyl's sympathetic and emotional words, in themselves a matter of curiously little real moment to all. It was only by the increasing and dwindling of the light that the destruction was observed.

When the flames had died down, Annarly's arm dropped; he turned away as if vitality had suddenly gone out of him. Sir James moved towards the door; Brett, carrying the confiscated papers, followed, eyeing the pistol.

"It's not loaded," Annarly roused himself to say, and threw it on the empty desk.

For half a second Sir James paused, a flush coming under his skin; then he went out, and Brett went with him. Annarly was left alone.

CHAPTER II

NAN BARMISTER lived in Soho; a part of Soho which is now pulled down, though, from a point of view of beauty, the warehouses which have taken the place of the sombre eighteenth-century houses are scarcely an improvement. When Nan lived there, there were no real warehouses in the quiet street which led to nowhere. It was quite a short street, with a blank wall at the end, and a piece more wall, enclosing a timber-yard, on the right-hand side. The rest of the right side was taken up with a couple of the old houses; one unoccupied, the other—to judge by the number of plates on the door and railings—very much occupied, and by people who were also much occupied, a surprising number of professions being set forth—machine kilting, feather curling, and agencies for all manner of things.

On the left-hand side Nan lived. The houses on that side had an even more sombre look: two were shut up, the charwomen of the neighbourhood said on account of some lawsuit; the other two were the property of Robert Barmister, Nan's father. By the door-lintel of one was a rubbed brass plate, bearing his name in faint letters, and on the wire blind of the window nearest the door the same name appeared in still fainter letters. There was nothing to say what he did, nor why he was to be found there; but in daylight, if one looked up at the higher windows, one could see through the dusty panes the corners of wonderful cabinets and the graceful backs of chairs made when the making of chairs was a fine art.

Robert Barmister used his two houses as warehouses, and people in the second-hand furniture trade knew it without his advertising the fact. They and others, whether interested in buying or selling, knew that one of the finest judges of the antique, and one of the truest connoisseurs and shrewdest dealers and matchers of old with old or new, was to be found in the room behind the wire blind.

It was a good-sized room, with a painted ceiling, mellowed past recognition by years of smoke, and a chimney-piece, ornamented with dolphins in relief, for which a considerable sum had been offered. In this room, on a gloomy first of October, Nan sat, rather inadequately filling Robert Barmister's desk-chair. She looked younger than her five-and-twenty years; her slight figure and earnest eyes gave an impression almost of childishness. But in some respects, at least, she was not childish; the Jew dealers, who came there to buy and sell, knew that, and any one of them would have dealt with her as with her father—with a bias in favour of extra honesty for her. And any one of them would have taken her opinion against most others on an article of virtu, for she had not only inherited her father's judgment and grown up under his tuition, but also had unerring instincts of her own.

It was on some such business she had been fetched to the office that afternoon: she was seldom to be found there unless fetched. Barmister did not care to actually associate her with himself in his trade, though he valued her opinion. Josiah Foregood, clerk, foreman, and general factotum, valued it still more. It was he who fetched her that afternoon, for Barmister was out, and a man had called with a chest to sell.

The man, a voluble, weakly individual, was in the office now, expatiating on the beauties of the chest and, seeing he had a woman to deal with, the hardships of his own situation. Josiah, at his desk behind a partition, heard all that he said, and knew that it was wasted breath. He could, by leaning forward, see Nan's face, and he knew that, whether she was really listening or not—and there was some doubt about that—she would form her own judgment of man and article entirely apart from anything she heard. She rose at length, and came to look at the chest. It was small, and of metal, with a wonderful complication of locks in the lid: inside it was divided into several compartments, and outside ornamented with fine wrought work and some curious little paintings on the panels in between.

"It is an Armada treasure-chest," the vendor announced; "it has been in my family for generations. I'm a Cornishman."

"Ah?" Nan examined the box: she examined with her hands, which were rather large, and as sensitive as a blind person's.

"It is of Dutch workmanship," she said at length, and somewhat as if the man had not spoken, "made under the Spanish influence probably fifty years after the Armada, I cannot be sure of the exact date. I should say it was made for a burgomaster: one who had trade with India. The shape and size of it, and of the compartments inside, suggest it was meant more for the reception of unset jewels than for papers or any other form of treasure. If it has been in the possession of your family for generations, your family should be of Dutch extraction."

The man stared; he was of the constitutionally inefficient, and such are easily upset by the efficient,

even when the latter have no thought of doing so.

“Do you think I did not come by it honestly?” he demanded, between bluster and affront.

Nan looked up in surprise. “Why should I?” she said, and clearly no such idea had occurred to her. “I should rather like to know how you did come by it, though,” she said, “only out of curiosity; these things do not very often come to England.”

“It belonged to a lodger me and my wife had,” the vendor admitted rather sulkily; “he was a Dutchman, an oldish man, and he died while he was with us. We didn’t know anything about his people, and we haven’t been able to hear anything; and as he died a bit in our debt, and didn’t leave much, we thought we might as well take what there was: I don’t know who’s a better right to it than us.”

“No,” Nan agreed, whereupon he went on to explain again the badness of times.

She listened, or appeared to: at the end she said, “The chest is not really worth much, that is, you could not anywhere get much for it. Such things are of no actual use now, and not much ornament; they are little more than curiosities, and they do not happen to be the fashion. It would be almost impossible to sell it to a collector, or amateur, at any price, consequently, a dealer would not be likely to give you anything worth having for it. Were my father here, I think it is very doubtful if he would buy it; but personally I like it, and, as you say you are in need of money, I will give you three pounds for it, if you care to sell it for that.”

He did not—if he could get any more—though he was satisfied with it when he was convinced more was not to be got. It took a little while to convince

him; which was, perhaps, not surprising, seeing that it took other, and more experienced, people a little while to realise that Nan's first price was her last one, both in buying and selling, and that in such matters, as well as others, she simply said what she meant and no more. But after a time he did realise it, took the money, and departed, leaving the chest behind.

When he was gone, Josiah came from behind his partition to look at the purchase. He had worked with Robert Barmister from the early days and the small beginnings, and he loved the work with the whole-hearted completeness that Barmister did, and Barmister himself, as that shrewd dealer loved no one, and Nan, better still. He came now to look at the newly made purchase, and to shake his head over it.

"He won't be pleased," he said.

Nan was obliged to agree. "If he does not approve, I can pay for it myself," she said.

At that moment Barmister came in, and almost instantly his eye fell on the chest.

"What is that?" he asked.

"I have just bought it," Nan answered.

"For how much?"

She told him.

"What!" he said, and his tone conveyed his opinion.

But she stood her ground: she ventured to do far more on her own authority than ever Josiah did, perhaps because she did not act unless she was sure; and when she was sure, she was sure indeed. She was sure now that the price she had paid for the

chest was a fair one.

“If it is not sold well and reasonably soon,” she said, “I can buy it in myself. Or you can give it me on my birthday, if you like; my birthday is at the beginning of next month, you know, and you always give me what I choose then; you can give me this.”

Her father grunted. “I can give it to the dustman and it would not break me,” he said, “nor yet alter the fact that you’ve bought like a fool, which is a thing I didn’t expect of you.”

She said she was sorry she had annoyed him, and then slipped away, leaving him arranging affairs with Josiah, previous to starting on a business journey which would take him away until to-morrow.

She went by a door in the far corner of the room; it was a narrow door set in the panelling, so that one hardly noticed it: her own movements were so quiet and light that one hardly noticed her coming and going either. The old house was curiously quiet, in spite of being in the heart of London: quiet and brown; in a way, one found her quiet and brown, too, fitted to the surroundings—or the surroundings fitted to her—as a mouse to its hole in the wainscot.

She had not, since she could remember, lived in any other place than this, with her father and the work. They had come there when her mother died, which was when she was very young, and had been there ever since. There were people who said that the necessity to combine office, and dwelling-house, and warehouse under one roof was as far from Barmister now as were the pinched early days when he and his wife had apartments in Bayswater. These people said he could have afforded to take a house at

Blackheath, or Surbiton, or some other suburb, and come to and fro to his work like other men. They also said, among themselves, not to him, that he ought to do it for the sake of his daughter, if for nothing else. But he did not; so Nan had no chance of associating with girls of her own age, or spending a pleasant, leisurely youth cultivating a taste for literature, and dancing and playing, with the probability of finally marrying a nice, wholesome young man with a satisfactory position in the City, and in her turn founding a family of useful, wholesome people to do the same all over again. She had no chance of this, and, possibly through ignorance of what she missed, no regrets about it.

That day, when she had left the office, and her condemned purchase, she went back to her usual avocations: a few household duties in the roomy basement, where reigned Mrs. Bidden, who had grown grey in the same service; later to the sitting-room upstairs to needlework and books—books on rather unusual subjects which sometimes sent their reader, with her slow-moving, but curiously accurate, mind, to odd places to verify facts. They sent her no further that day than to one of the warehouse rooms, there to search out on a pear-wood pix for some detail of carving which would fix the date when a certain form of lance was used in Flanders. She could trust herself as to the date of the Flemish pix, but, without guarantee, she could not trust the author who made statements lightly and unsupported about the lances used in Flanders. So she went in search of assurance to one of the long-windowed rooms which, from childhood, had been her favourite haunt.

She could not remember the time when she had not

been familiar with the smell of wood and the dust which distils from old tapestry, nor when there had not been for her a fascination in the big rooms with their dust-dimmed, painted tables, their inlaid cabinets, and mirrors filmy in the London air. Almost her clearest early recollection was in connection with one of these rooms. To herself she called it “the beginning of seeing things,” and to this day she remembered it and its thrill of revelation, as a few people remember the moment when they first found they were able to read or do some one of the few things which open the doors of the world. It was many years ago, she must have been very small at the time, for the cabinets had towered so tall to her, when, in an October dusk, she had come suddenly upon a little tulip-wood secretaire. Whether it had not been there when she last came, or whether she had passed it by unheeded, she did not know: only knew that now she saw it, and saw it perfect. Not that her ignorance called it so, or really realised its beauty; yet it filled her suddenly with a strange sense of completeness and utter satisfaction: a curious, almost physical, feeling, mixed with the subconscious mental one. She never forgot the sensation, though she never attempted to explain it: she thought for many years that it was a common experience, and came to everyone at some time; it was, to this day, a bewildering puzzle to her how any could fail to feel perfection when it was there. The tulip-wood secretaire was in her own room now; her father had given it to her. He had come upon her that day, years ago, while she still stood before it, and, though not a sympathetic man, had divined what was waking in her, as possibly another would not. When later, in answer to his question as to what he should give her on her birthday, she, ignorant of

its value, had asked for the secretaire, he immediately gave it.

It stood in the corner of her room now, and she looked at it thoughtfully when, later that afternoon, she went to get her hat, recalling the occasion of its giving, and debating whether this year she should ask for the iron chest. Her father never refused her birthday request; he would not now though, if it were for the chest, he would not approve it. But, as it happened, she did not ask for it, something occurred that afternoon which supplied her with quite another request.

She went that afternoon to see Miss Janet Foregood, the one member of her own sex with whom she was at all intimate. A client had sent a present of a hamper of pears, and she, remembering Miss Janet's liking for them, took a basketful to her.

The Foregoods lived in Bayswater, not far from where Robert Barmister and his young wife had lodged in the early days. The house was very small, and rather grimy and dull-looking outside; inside such things were impossible where Miss Janet lived. A little brisk woman she was, some years younger, many sizes smaller and much quicker than her brother Josiah. She was busy upholstering the seats of her best-room chairs when Nan arrived, having bought some odd pieces of material for the purpose.

"Travellers' samples," she explained. "I picked them out from several dozen; no two alike, and some regular trash."

The ones she had bought were not trash; she was a better judge of fabrics in the dark than many women in the daylight; but they certainly were not alike, she had been more particular to secure quality than any

near approach to uniformity of pattern. Nan admired the texture, as she truthfully could, and said nothing about the design; then she presented the pears, which were duly appreciated.

“I shall bake those big ones,” Miss Janet said; “though I say it myself, I can bake a pear with anyone.” She could cook anything with anyone, and she knew it. “Your poor dear mother loved a baked pear, though she had no more idea how to do one than to fly! She was as sweet a soul as ever lived, but as ignorant as a baby of how to do most things. I remember the first time I saw her she was trying to cook a bit of a chop for herself on the sitting-room fire in the rooms she and your father used to have just round the corner from here. Dear! I never saw anything so unhandy!”

“Perhaps she had never been taught,” Nan suggested.

Miss Janet was contemptuous of such an explanation. “You can’t teach some people to cook,” she said, “and real cooking can’t be taught anybody; your true cook’s born, not made, same as your true anything else.”

She filled her mouth with little nails here, and proceeded to take them out one by one to use. “The funny thing is,” she said, when nearly all were used, “no one knows why they’re born so; there’s a great deal of talk made about heredity, I know: all I say is —h’m!”

Nan suggested there was something besides immediate ancestry to be reckoned with.

“There had need be,” Miss Janet retorted, “and even then you can’t account for it, not for real, natural ability, what I call ability, not mere handiness; it’s just an accident, a Divine accident. Take your cousin,

Michael Annarly, for instance—how do you account for him?"

Nan did not attempt to; indeed, she knew little of him personally.

"If all that is said of Michael Annarly is true," Miss Janet said, arranging a piece of trimming round her chair. "I don't suppose it is myself, seeing it's said by a relation who thinks she glorifies herself that way. Still, if half or a quarter is true, there's enough to show he must be a very remarkable person, such a one as doesn't occur many times in a generation. You're not going to account for that by parents and grandparents. His father—tea trade, with a hobby for tools and messing about with machinery and gas-fitting in his young days, plumbing you might call it, but I suppose you'd better say engineering. His mother—your mother's sister, and not at all unlike her, poor dear, only prettier. I only saw her once, but I saw the resemblance straight away—dreamy, imaginative, sensitive; big eyes like pools of water full of reflections, delicate hands alive to the last inch of skin; married young, younger than your mother, because she was prettier; died young, quite strong physically, but too fine for this world: that's what Michael Annarly's parents were."

Nan did not contradict, Miss Janet was probably correct in her statements, she generally was. On this matter at least she knew more than Nan, whose sole source of information was the little lady herself, and who saw a great deal less of the Annarlys than Miss Foregood did of Mrs. Barker, a connection of theirs, distant certainly, but proud of the relationship.

"To hear her talk," Miss Foregood said, "one would think she was responsible for Michael Annarly, instead of a second cousin of his father's and a poor

one at that. He's done well, I grant it to her, but I don't see what that's to do with her, any more than his brains, which do seem to be worth talking about. Just hold up that end of the trimming, my dear, I want to see if there's enough."

Nan did so, and there was found to be exactly enough, which might have been foretold, seeing that Miss Janet herself had measured it. Being satisfied, she resumed her hammering and talking. "No," she said emphatically, "you can't account for that kind of ability. It is like old Moss's cat. Moss was an old man down in the country where I lived when I was a little girl; he had a white cat with a yellow tail. That cat was what you might call a Divine accident; you might breed hundreds and thousands of cats and not get another. The chances of getting one would be greater if you bred from a yellow father and a white mother, but the chances of getting the yellow and the white mixed just that way aren't worth reckoning; it was, as I say without disrespect, a Divine accident. And that's the way with real born ability; you can't account for it, it's an accident."

She knocked in her last nail as she spoke, and then rose to inspect her handiwork.

"I think it looks very well," she said; she seldom scrupled to say what she really thought about her own doings, or other people's.

"It looks very well indeed," Nan agreed. She rose too, and said she must go.

Miss Janet came with her to the front door, stopping on the way to put the finished chair in its place.

"It is safer there than in the kitchen," she said, though it was difficult to think of any harm that

could befall it in that spotless room.

Nan went home by train, only a few minutes' journey, getting out at Tottenham Court Road Station, from whence she had not far to walk. By the time she alighted twilight was falling, and a fine rain with it; there had been some rain earlier in the day, and a good deal during the night; the roads were in a bad state, and the air damp and raw. Just as she was about to leave the station she caught sight of a figure in the distance, one she recognised. For a second she hardly thought she had seen aright, rather that her own thoughts had become visualised, which was almost as probable as that Michael Annarly should be here in the flesh. Next moment she knew him real, and drew back to the station doorway, with a sensitive plain woman's instinct not to court recognition. It was easy to avoid it, it is always easy for insignificant women, it is one of the few compensations allowed them that they can usually see so much quicker than they are seen. She had recognised Michael Annarly at some distance, and without really seeing his face; he would not recognise her until he was close upon her. She knew the sort of recognition, the momentary blank ignorance of identity, to be perceived by quick faculties under automatic courtesy, the swiftly following but entirely vague remembrance of someone seen somewhere, and then, when she had almost passed, a recollection of her, and sometimes perhaps, when she had quite passed, a momentary regret that recognition had not been quicker and fuller. She knew the sort of thing, and a mixture of sensitive vanity and shyness prompted her to avoid it; so she stood within the station doorway, screened by a stout old gentleman, until Michael should have passed.

Just as he was level with her he turned a little, and for the first time she saw his face fully. Owing to some shifting of the passers-by she saw the whole of him—sodden, muddied boots, the boots of one who has been walking long in bad weather; creased, splashed clothes, the clothes of one who has worn them many hours; grey, drawn face, white about the pinched nostrils, dark about the eyes, which looked forth without seeing, which had seen one thing and could see nothing else. Not Michael Annarly the successful, and so remote, kinsman she had sometimes met; but a man on the edge of some abyss.

She slipped from behind the old gentleman, and went swiftly down the street after him.

CHAPTER III

THE directors of Galhardy's were important men. Some of them lived comparatively near to the great foundries, within eight or twenty-eight miles of them; but all had other places of residence and other interests. A person who was bent on seeing any of them was liable to have to cover much ground, and, unless he had an appointment, waste much time too. More especially was this the case with the chairman, Sir Joseph Harte, a busy man with many schemes, and one who never felt compelled to keep an engagement which second thoughts showed likely to prove inconvenient or embarrassing.

It was very unlikely that the man who was seeking him that gloomy first of October would have found him had not Fate and a desperate patience helped. Three times that day he had been to Sir Joseph's town house, having in the previous two days been to each of his far-separated country houses in consequence of information first that he was at one and then at the other of these. On each of his three visits to the town house he had found Sir Joseph out or engaged. On each of the first two he had said he would wait, on the first with the ready acquiescence of the servant, on the second in the face of advice to the contrary and some suspicion, and on both without result. On the third application he was frankly refused admission, and told Sir Joseph could not see him that day, and the door shut before he had turned to go.

He went down the steps again; he had no alternative. But he did not go away. For forty-eight hours in fact or in thought—when trains did not fit or arrived in the useless small hours compelling delay—he had sought an interview with Sir Joseph; he would not let this last chance slip, he would wait outside if he could not in. Rain was beginning to fall, but he did not notice it; rain had fallen a good deal at intervals during the past two days, but he had hardly known it; he had no consciousness of such things, he had temporarily lost touch with them. In a way he had lost realisation of time itself, more than once only coming to a consciousness of its passing or of the lateness of the hour by the impossibility of getting a train, or the darkness of a sleeping place he had approached.

A by-street joined the main one beside Sir Joseph's house; he went a few yards down it and waited. Before very long a powerful car came past from some garage at the back; it turned into the main street and drew up before the house. He followed, and stood at the corner: in a few minutes the house door was opened and the chairman of Galhardy's, in a travelling-coat, came out.

"Sir Joseph! I must speak to you."

Sir Joseph started. "Mr. Annarly?" he said, and drew back a little. "This is very——"

He may have meant to say "extraordinary," or perhaps "unwarrantable." But Annarly did not wait to hear. "I have been trying to see you all day," he said, "and the day before——"

"Indeed?" Sir Joseph spoke more pleasantly; he seldom spoke other than suavely. "That is unfortunate, more especially as it is impossible for

you to see me now. I have only just time to catch my train at St. Pancras."

"I can drive with you."

Sir Joseph hesitated; then made a virtue of necessity and they both got into the waiting car which went swiftly away.

"It is about that cancelling letter, sir," Annarly began; "I never received it."

He spoke without preamble and without the diffidence of inferior to superior; he had forgotten that with the rest in the one idea that filled his horizon, and had filled it to the exclusion of everything else for something over fifty hours.

Sir Joseph's horizon held many other ideas and many other schemes, and he had not forgotten the relationship, but he spoke patiently: "I am given to understand that is the line of defence you propose to take up," he said.

"Don't you believe it?"

Sir Joseph showed surprise. "Really," he said, "your question, your behaviour altogether is extraordinary, and I must say unwarrantable. How can I possibly answer such a query when I have not yet thoroughly sifted the matter? A matter of such very grave importance that the fullest and closest inquiry is absolutely necessary. There is to be a board meeting to-morrow; I am leaving town now on purpose to be present at it, the discussion of this very regrettable situation will take place then; before that I cannot possibly go into the case with you."

"Afterwards it will be of no use," Annarly said grimly.

“What do you mean by that?”

Annarly stood his ground, he was too desperate to be politic. “If it is not true that I am condemned beforehand,” he asked, “why am I not heard in my own defence? Why does the board ‘not desire my presence at the meeting,’ or at any time during the meeting? Why am I not required at the Foundries, and, so far as it can be prevented, am not to hold communication with anyone who does go there? Why are all the directors, including yourself, so difficult to be seen these three days?”

“I should think,” Sir Joseph said tartly, “because their servants thought your manner too peculiar to warrant them in admitting you, if you talked to them as you are talking to me.”

Annarly with an effort controlled himself. “I am sorry, sir,” he said. “I am afraid I am forgetting myself; of course it was accident merely that you could not see me before, I know that; your time is very fully occupied I know, and—and——. You have always been very good to me. It is partly because of that, because I cannot stand that you should think your belief misplaced, that I have come to you. I did not receive that cancelling letter, on my soul, I did not!”

He spoke with a desperate earnestness. The elder man stroked his heavy white moustache thoughtfully. “That is a very extraordinary thing,” he said, “a very extraordinary thing. Letters do not often miscarry; indeed, they very, very seldom do.”

“I am not sure that this one did. I have a suspicion that it was never sent.”

“What!” Sir Joseph turned sharply. “Explain yourself, please!”

"I am convinced that Brett lied about it," Annarly said. "I saw it in his eyes when he spoke; the fellow's a coward; he flinched when it came to the lie direct —like the cur he is, he'd rather do something meaner."

He spoke with the bitterness of undisguised contempt and dislike; but it was a mistake and he realised it. "I am forgetting to be moderate again," he said, "I know, but it's hard to remember when one speaks of —that. But I'll try. Of course Brett would have told you the letter was sent, if you asked him about it. I don't know if it was actually dictated and signed by you, or only written to your order, but that would have made no difference; he could have suppressed it either way."

"Indeed!" The word snapped incredulous. "Is that the line of defence you think of taking? It is? You surprise me!" In the dim interior of the car the chairman's face was not very plain to see, but there was no mistaking the hostility of his tone. "If you are advised by me," he said, "you will think twice before you take it. It is unworthy of you, unworthy and cowardly, and crassly idiotic too, discreditable alike to your intelligence and to your honour to attempt to clear yourself by bringing such a charge against any person. Are you aware of what you are accusing Mr. Brett, of what gross breach of trust? It is an unheard-of thing—a blatantly foolish thing too, when there is no motive—what motive can be ascribed, even if he were capable, as I have every reason to know he is not, of such a dishonourable action?"

Annarly's hand went to his collar; the sensation of the overwhelming, all-pervading force arrayed against him, which had pressed down on him in his room at Galhardy's, was coming again. It was all

dark, all obscure: he could see nothing clearly, think of nothing coherently; even his own case refused to hold together, and his brain, with its faultless logic and keen perceptions, refused to work.

“Brett hates me,” he said weakly.

“Hates you?” Sir Joseph repeated. “Nonsense! You are talking nonsense, and you know it. You may have had differences of opinion with him; you very likely did; you did with a good many people; your methods were not always either popular or conciliatory—we condoned a good deal in you; I fear, I begin to fear, too much.”

“Do you mean you think me guilty?” Annarly said, clinging to the one idea.

“I have already told you I do not feel justified in giving an opinion at present,” Sir Joseph answered. “But I will advise you”—he spoke more kindly—“I can, and do, advise you—not as the chairman of Galhardy’s, but as one who has always wished you well and taken an interest in you—my advice is that you offer no such unworthy and unwise defence as the one you gave to me: you will do best to offer none at all; you will leave yourself in the hands of the directors.”

Annarly nodded: the sense of the end, of the drawn net, the ultimate blackness and extinction of the last glimmer of hope, was closing upon him. “The others will believe me guilty, if you do,” he said wearily. “Do you believe me guilty?”

Sir Joseph signed to the chauffeur to stop. “I have already said all I have to say on the subject,” he said.

The car stopped, and Annarly got automatically to his feet. A last protest stirred in the overwhelming

darkness and defeat. “My papers?” he said. “My invention?”

“I fear I can do nothing for you in that matter. Good afternoon. You must make up time, Rumbolt, we are late.”

Annarly stumbled out, the door was shut, and the car glided quickly away. He was left on the muddy pavement.

He began to walk: it was automatic, like much else; he did not know he walked; he did not know where he went, nor whom he passed; he did not know if people looked at him or if they did not. Likely they did not: after all, a grey, drawn face is no unprecedented thing; and there is not one person in a thousand who, looking through the eyes, gets a glimpse of the soul behind. The rain was falling faster now, but he did not turn up the collar of his coat, he was not aware of it; not really aware of the jostle of the foot-passengers and the noise of the traffic, though both, subconsciously, pressed painfully on his nerves. His lips moved once to repeat some words—“My inventions,” and “I fear I can do nothing for you in that matter”—his mind, oblivious of all else, labouring round in one restricted circle.

Someone touched him. He stopped dead, like a vibrating balance arrested by a sudden hand. A girl was at his elbow; a girl who looked up with shy, comprehending eyes.

“Michael,” she said. “Cousin Michael, won’t you come home and have tea with me?”

He heard her, and by an effort brought his mind to focus so that he compelled himself to understand the drift of the words. “I am afraid,” he said politely,

with an odd patient politeness, “I cannot—I’m so busy.”

She nodded, but—“It’s not far,” she said reassuringly, and rather as if he had consented.

She had touched his arm when she first spoke to him, and she had not let go; now, in the obscurity where they stood, some distance from a light, she slipped her hand down till it touched his ungloved one. Hers was ungloved too, and her fingers closed on his with a compelling touch.

“It is not far,” she said, and led the way to a side street, narrower and quieter than the main one.

He came. It was automatic almost, as his former actions had been, though with a difference; he had this much consciousness, he was aware that the streets were quieter and less lighted, and there was relief in it. She knew the neighbourhood well, leading the way by by-streets, and he accepted her and her leading. They came to a short street where there were tall old houses, but little lighted, and no foot-passengers about; a momentary feeling passed over him as of an animal that has escaped noisy pursuers, and is at the entrance of its hole.

She opened a door in one of the dark houses, and led the way in: across a dusky hall, into a large, dim room, where a shaded light burned, and a shadow moved above a desk screened from view. There was the sound of faint scratching, pen on paper, nothing else, and no one looked out as they entered. She crossed the room, and at the far side opened a small door set in the panelling. Beyond, was a narrow staircase, lighted only by a candle, set in an angle where stairs went up. She lifted it down, and the door fell to behind.

"This way," she said, and led up the stairs.

At the top, another door, masked as the first, in the woodwork, gave on to the room above. This room, lighted only by firelight, was also large and dim, and pervaded with an almost tangible sense of quiet; the falling to of the door behind them seemed to shut out the world.

The girl crossed the room to the fireplace, where a kettle, ready to boil, stood on the old-fashioned hob. "I'll make the tea in a moment," she said. "Sit down."

He sat, and she made tea.

It is uncertain when he had had his last meal; when he had it it was only a sandwich in a refreshment-room, or lunch on a train, not a human meal, with human companionship. No relation to this tea with the girl, who spoke and was silent by turns harmoniously, making no demand on him, yet allowing no obvious silence to call for explanation or speech.

After a time, food and quiet and the curious influence there was present had so far restored balance, that he was consciously aware that his hostess was Nan Barmister, a cousin with whom he had been so little intimate in the past that his coming to her home, to which he had never been before, must seem odd. It crossed his mind, as he turned from the table, that his acceptance of the invitation, his presence at all in town, needed explaining to her. The wounded animal's instinct to hide, one of the first of the natural instincts to reassert itself, inclined him to explain as it inclined him to conceal his sodden and muddied boots. But even as he pushed his feet into the greater darkness under his chair, he felt her eye on them.

“One might think I had been on the tramp,” he apologised, with a flickering effort to recover his ordinary manner.

“No,” she said; then added, “I don’t think that: I think the bottom of the world has blown out.”

He looked at her, but hardly with surprise. When the horizon holds one thing only, it is not surprising for others to know it; and, in spite of some feeble stirrings of pride towards concealment, it does not seem to matter much, amidst the general ruin, that they should.

She had knelt to rearrange the fire; she did not get up, but sat back on her feet on the hearthrug, her face towards the blaze. “I think,” she said, without looking round, “when that happens one does not notice things; they aren’t really there; there is nothing there but the one thing—I think that is Chaos.”

“How do you know?” he put the question faintly curious.

She moved her shoulders. “I don’t know,” she said, and she did not. She did not know that the great knowledge—the knowledge that matters—is divined, not known, of inspiration rather than experience.

“I suppose,” she said, still looking into the fire, and speaking slowly—“I suppose when that happens—Chaos, I mean—after a great while one touches solid again, something takes shape——”

“There is nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing,” he repeated.

His hands hung on either side of his chair, there was

a slackness, a relaxing about his whole figure. It was as if the collapse, which had approached before and had been staved off by will, by a despairing flicker of hope and the frenzied chase of it, and later by the automatic capacity in man to go on a while even after the final stroke—as if it had come at last. Strength, even the strength to resent or conceal, was gone.

"They have taken everything," he said apathetically, "my reputation, my good name, my daily work and daily bread, and"—his voice quivered a little—"my invention."

She nodded; she was not looking at him now; she looked away just before his voice quivered for the invention. She knelt, staring at the fire again a long time without speaking. At last she said, though more as if addressing herself, "Don't you think sometimes, after a long time, something takes shape where nothing, less than nothing, has been left?"

"You do not understand," he said wearily; "you do not know what I am up against."

"No," she admitted, "that is true. But"—she turned earnest eyes on him—"surely there is something?"

"No." He spoke indifferently, with the indifference of a brain beyond feeling or caring, one to which nothing matters.

Nevertheless, in a while he began to talk fitfully, induced thereto one does not know by what, possibly by something in the girl who crouched dark and inconspicuous by the fire and watched him covertly.

He did not rehearse facts straightly, or speak at all as to one who knew little of his life and nothing of what had happened; he forgot his listener was in that case,

he forgot her actual physical personality altogether. It was no narrative of the catastrophe he made, nor of what, so far as he knew, had led up to it; it was not even a plain statement of his losses; certainly no clear account of the last two days. Much that had occurred in them, much altogether was temporarily, at least, blotted from the shaken brain. Yet what he did say, with its omissions and reiterations, its harping on unessential detail and curious, and seemingly reasonless, digressions gave the kernel of the matter. Gave it, perhaps more completely, and presented a truer and clearer picture of the real soul of the thing to this listener than any mere statement of facts.

At half-past eight someone opened the door at the far end of the room. It was a heavy door of old mahogany, and gave on to the landing and beautiful main staircase of the house. An old woman in a large white apron and black cap pushed it open now and came in, exclaiming about the darkness. The room was still only lighted by the fire; the windows had long been a dim blur, beyond the old woman the landing and staircase, poorly lit though they were, showed brightly illuminated by contrast.

“Why, you haven’t got a light!” she said, setting a tray on the corner of the table.

“No,” Nan answered, “we didn’t want one.”

The old woman said something about spoiling the eyesight, and proceeded to light candles in curiously wrought silver candlesticks. Then she quickly collected the tea-things—she must have been out all the evening, or they would have been collected before—and set a simple supper in their place.

It was a very simple meal, cold meat and cheese, the

remains of a tart, little more. It was set for one only, but Nan took it as a matter of course that Michael would remain and share it with her.

He hesitated, then accepted, and soon they sat down together.

“My father is out,” she explained; “he won’t be back to-night. He had to go out of town to see a customer who has a very precious chair she wants matched. She would not send it here to be looked at, so he had to go to see it. When he has to go any distance he usually travels one way by night; it saves time.”

Michael said “Yes,” and recollected that he himself must spend the night somewhere.

She appeared to remember it too. “Are you going to Hurstbury?” she asked.

A vision of Hurstbury, the substantial suburban villa there, and of his father and stepmother and the family flashed up into his mind. “No,” he said, “they don’t know I’m in town.”

There was much else they did not know; some they would have to know sooner or later, the realisation came with a jar; some they would never, could never know, that realisation would come later with a grim bitterness of perception. For the present one thing was enough, they knew nothing of what had overwhelmed him, and in his present state he could not face their ignorance or their inquiries.

“I shall go to an hotel,” he said.

Nan acquiesced, as if it were the best thing. “Unless you stayed here?” she suggested tentatively. “I suppose you would not stay? I would be rather glad if you did; a little Italian casket has come to-day; it is small and very valuable, and it is known that my

father has bought it. There is no one in the house but Mrs. Bidden and me, few but old caretakers in any house in the street."

It did not occur to him to question if this ostensive reason were the real one for the invitation; he did not think about it. He was easily persuaded to stay, utter exhaustion gave him curiously little inclination to resist any proposal she made, even while it almost instantly effaced impressions not connected with the one great matter on his mind. He forgot about the casket almost so soon as he heard of it; though, by some chance, he recalled it, or that there was something he ought to do, about bedtime.

"That thing you spoke of," he said vaguely, "shall I take it with me?"

"The casket? No, it is as well where it is."

"I'll take it, if you like, I am not in the least likely to sleep. It really hardly seems worth going to bed."

Nevertheless, he did sleep; gradually exhaustion overcame him and stupefaction stole upon his brain. The endless, hopeless thinking and planning, asking questions of the past, contriving wild plans for the future, grew dimmer. Dimmer the scene at Galhardy's which he had reacted again and again, so that, without volition but with an indescribable plainness, he had lived it in railway trains, on station platforms, in London streets, a hundred times and then a hundred more. It grew dim and blurred; from being beyond control it grew beyond distinctness, it merged in the brown twilight of a quiet room; it grew dark. Darkness spread over the brain, the blank darkness of utter exhaustion, but repose.

CHAPTER IV

ROBERT BARMISTER was in one of the large upper rooms examining chairs. To him, busy with a beautiful specimen of eighteenth-century craftsmanship, came Nan.

He looked round as she entered, and asked her if it was the only one of that particular pattern they had at present.

She nodded, and then inquired if he had been asked to make yesterday's journey merely to see and match such a chair.

"No," he answered, "I also saw a fool—a fool with a 1760 chair, patched by a mid-Victorian hand, and who must have another precisely like it, patch and all. She is sure there must have been more than one originally made to the design. So'm I; but I'm not so sure the Victorian nincompoop had the mauling of more than one, and I'm very sure there is no human chance of coming on it if he did. But since she does not admit the patching—persists in thinking it part of the original design—she doesn't admit that difficulty either."

Nan laughed. "What are you going to do?" she asked.

"Patch her one, to be sure."

"Patch such a chair!"

"No, stupid, have one made patched, of course; what do you suppose?"

One supposes, since the master craftsman responsible

for the original chair had been dead these many years, some modern was to copy his design (with the mid-Victorian addition), and Robert Barmister was to receive the price a rich amateur must expect to pay for a rare antique which has needed much finding.

Nan knew this, having lived with the trade. She accepted the first part as entirely justifiable; to alter a perfect article, or to patch a master's design to anyone's orders, seemed to her a sacrilege most unjustifiable. Personally, she would not have sold the copy as anything but a copy, and at a good copy's price; but then money and money-making had small attraction for her: she did not think of calling her father into judgment for it, if they had for him.

She began to speak of the matter which had really brought her to him that morning. "Michael Annarly is here," she said; "did Josiah tell you?"

He had not, he had something else to do, Barmister said; then asked what Annarly was doing, and why he was there.

"I met him yesterday," Nan answered, "when I was coming back from Miss Janet's, and I asked him to come."

Barmister frowned. "What for?" he said. "The Annarlys don't put themselves out of the way to be civil to you; you don't go there twice a year, and you don't like it when you do: why should you ask one of them here?"

"I don't exactly know why I did it," she said doubtfully; "it just came to me that I would when I saw him yesterday, so I did."

Her father grunted. "And it just came to him, I suppose, that he would come to see what sort of a

place it was."

"I don't think that was the reason why he came."

"Well, I don't see what else it was," Barmister said; "the whole family think they do a considerable kindness if they step out of the way to come here and see you; at least, they would if they did it, which they don't—thank goodness! He must feel very patronising, I should think, since he's their best piece. By the way, I thought he was away somewhere usually, in the North or the Midlands making a name and a fortune. What's he in town for?"

"I believe he came to see people on business; he is in some sort of trouble, I think."

"Under a cloud?" Barmister asked, though without the slight instinctive withdrawing of the majority of men from one so labelled. "Is it that, hey?"

"I should not say so," Nan answered. She would not; the words were so totally, so almost grotesquely, inadequate. "Should you mind if he stayed here a day or two?"

Barmister turned round at that, his keen eyes on her: the discussed guest was a man, a young one, who might, perhaps, show attractions for an utterly inexperienced girl, without himself so much as giving a condescending thought to her. "Are you going to fall in love with him?" he demanded.

"In love!" The idea was ludicrous, almost pathetically ludicrous. "No," Nan said, "not that; it isn't that way I'd think of him. All the same, I'd like him to stop a few days, if you don't mind."

"H'm," her father said doubtfully, but afterwards consented. If Nan wanted to have the man for a day or two, let her; there was no reason why she should

not, she was not a fool; and if he wanted to stop for a day or two, why, let him. Of course, he must have some reason; one which did not appear on the surface, but which could be found out, Barmister had no doubt of himself there; and no doubt but that he would send the guest packing if he did not approve the reason.

But he did not find it out, although he was soon persuaded that his first suspicion was correct: Michael was in a difficulty of some kind. Its nature he did not discover; but he guessed it to take its rise from ambition rather than any of the more venial (and to him less forgivable) sins of youth, and with that he was content. Of the extent, he had no idea; after a night's rest Michael was sufficiently controlled to appear normal to one who knew nothing of him, more especially when there was Nan, who understood, to come between.

On the first day, the day when the directors of Galhardy's were to meet, Nan suggested he should draw up a memorial of all that had happened: the accusation and defence, his real offence, and what justification he had to offer for it.

"What is the use?" he said apathetically. "They will decide to-day before ever they can get it."

"But they could redecide after, I suppose?" she urged. "And even if they did not, if it made no difference, it surely would be worth doing: if they decide in your favour they would be glad to be able to see plainly that they were right, and if they decide otherwise—it is certainly as well to raise a protest."

"I don't think it is worth while," he said. "I did all I could in the last two days, trying to get at various of the directors, and it came to nothing. When I saw

Harte yesterday I could see it had come to nothing."

Nevertheless, when she again urged it, he consented; to begin to write were a less effort than to withstand her.

"I will copy it when it is done," she said; "there is an old typewriter downstairs which is seldom wanted, I will bring it up. I don't do it very well, but I can manage if I go slowly."

She fetched the machine, and early perceived that it would be necessary to make several drafts before the final copy, for he was one of those who reconstruct and rearrange every argument a dozen times before passing it on paper; and to whom every written word, and the placing of every one, are important. Characteristics which overwork, and the ample assistance he had been granted in clerical matters, had increased of late. Before long, the habit asserted itself, and he was writing and rewriting, constructing and reconstructing, elaborating arguments, cutting down phrases, and explaining facts with an extraordinary regard for detail and accuracy of expression which not only brought self-conviction by its logic, but also temporarily diverted the mind from its one idea and the stupor following upon it. It also used much paper—sheets begun and cast aside, sheets on which side issues were worked out, or solitary notes or paragraphs to be reduced to single sentences jotted down; a scatter of very indecipherable papers all about. There are minds to whom papers are as clothes, and as the very expression of themselves almost; their thoughts cannot become articulate, or even concrete, without paper, they must be written down (or expressed in curves or diagrams) before they are really thoughts. Take such visible expressions of himself; such

visualised thoughts—notably when they are of abstruse and very-well loved matters—from a man, and you have taken much. Strip them all away, when from overwork and nervous strain he is least fit for the shock, and you leave him an inarticulate, shivering thing, naked, dumb, and confounded. Michael had been bereft of every visible expression of himself: all his papers, diagrams, and notes on everything that really mattered to him were in the hands of the directors. He had not so much as a pencilling in a pocketbook left when Nan induced him to begin a statement of what had happened, and to express outside himself that which had ground round and round in his head these last days.

The greater part of the day they worked at the memorial; she, in the copying and recopying, becoming much more fully acquainted with the facts. Towards dusk they were more or less finished; that is, copies of the statement in the last and most satisfactory form were completed and posted separately to the directors. Michael was not really contented with it; he never had been for long with anything he had written, nor with anything he had decided, always, sooner or later, seeing some possibility beyond: but the exigencies of posting had compelled the passing of this at last. For a little after it was done he went over what had been written, discovering where it might have been improved, and debating whether the small variations of phrasing which had been made in each copy were the ones best suited to each recipient; entirely forgetting that he had said, and thought the whole useless. But after a while he seemed to remember that, and with a collapse of interest collected the loose sheets and came to the fire in silence.

Nan was silent too; but she was thinking of the matter itself, not the statement of it. At length she spoke, and she did not attempt to speak of anything else: there are times when to attempt what is called "diverting the mind" is an imbecility bordering on an insult.

"They absolutely promised you these foreign rights?" she asked. "I mean the rights in these inventions of yours which they were not going to use?"

He told her "yes" briefly, and lapsed into silence again. But in a little while something roused him to speak of the matter and the struggle which had gone before.

"I had a fight for them," he said. "I have been months getting the concession, but I did get it in the end—subject to the consent of Sir Joseph Harte. Afterwards—almost immediately afterwards—I got that, verbally first and very fully, later a letter confirming it."

"But not the second letter cancelling it?"

"That letter was never sent."

He spoke with unshakable conviction, though he had no evidence—there can be little of a negative.

Nan saw that plainly, though she did not say so; she turned it in her mind a while, but when she did speak it was to ask another question. "What is it that they actually bring against you? Is it that they say you acted on this permission, and began to negotiate about the rights before you ought?"

He nodded, and she asked, "Did you?"

Again he nodded, and again after a pause was moved to speak. "Yes, I did, but there was no harm in it; I

committed myself to nothing and told nothing. Technically, of course, I was wrong; I had no business to answer the inquiries made by the French people, as I did; but actually it was the natural way to do it. Anyone would have done the same, half of them gone much further if they had had the chance."

"I suppose," she said, "it would not have mattered, if the permission had not been withdrawn?"

"No, though I should still, technically, have exceeded my powers."

"As it is?"

He shrugged his shoulders, as one beyond caring.

"Is it actionable?" she inquired, after a while. "I mean, if you had had the cancelling letter and they could prove it, would they be able to prosecute you?"

"I suppose so. I don't see that it matters. Certainly the fact that I did not have the letter, and that they can't prove it, does not; if they want a case against me, I dare say they can get that or make it—they can make a good many things at Galhardy's. I don't much care if they do; they may as well do one thing as another, at least I should have an opportunity of speaking then. Not that that would really be worth anything either; they're too big."

Nan said nothing; she knew it did matter. She had the woman's eye for the driftwood after the wreck, and for the fragments that remain; and she saw that prosecution, though it might give an opportunity to use the fragments as missiles, must inevitably scatter them past recovery, and leave the scatterer bare. She did not urge this, however, but sat a little looking into the blaze, thinking.

“Tell me,” she said at length, “why did you want these foreign rights? Were they really worth so much to you?”

“They should have been worth somewhere about fifty thousand pounds,” he answered.

The estimate may have been incorrect, though he certainly believed in it himself; she saw that, but was not greatly impressed by the magnitude of the loss. Money as money did not appeal to her.

Nor perhaps entirely to him either: at all events he went on to advance another reason for his efforts, and in a tone which suggested how much it weighed with him. “I had a claim to them,” he said; “the things were mine, and they were useless to Galhardy’s. Why shouldn’t I have had them? Of course, it was argued that no one had been granted such rights before, but then no one before had done quite what I had for the firm. Already I had saved them a great deal; in a year or two my inventions will bring in eight or ten thousand a year to them. And what did I get? A wretched seven hundred, rising perhaps to eight hundred.”

It sounded a good deal to her, though, of course, small in proportion to the greater sum. To him it was nothing.

“It was hardly enough to live on,” he said. “Everyone there has a private income. I was the only one in anything approaching that position without. It was impossible to make both ends meet. I had to do what the others did.”

Nan’s ignorance of the world was such that she knew nothing for or against this, but intuitively she did know that there is a wonderful mixture of the small and the great in most men: in this one perhaps the

contrast was rather more crude than in most.

“Would they really have given you no more?” she asked. “Surely they would——”

“They always advised me to ‘leave myself in the hands of the directors’; that is the stereotyped advice when one says anything about recognition. Usually men do leave themselves in the directors’ hands, having no choice—and stop there. There are plenty of instances of it in most firms, big and little.”

He began to speak of them, for a while forgetting his own affairs in citing the hard cases of others. But soon the one central thought returned, overwhelming others.

“I don’t mean that the directors of Galhardy’s would have treated me so badly as that; they wouldn’t—one thing, I doubt if they could, and, anyhow, they wouldn’t. But I should not have got anything worth having out of the aerial torpedo, or the new steel I perfected for them either. I did not try much for the steel; I let it pass without much protest, and put everything on the torpedo; but the way they behaved over the one showed what was to be expected in the other case, if it was left in their hands. It is true, of course, that what one does while one is with a firm is the property of the firm, that is understood and reasonable enough. But when one does a thing of any size, a thing that is going to be worth a fortune to them, and which they have not been able to get elsewhere, one might expect something: I mean something considerable. I dare say, though I don’t know, I might have got something small, but not in any way commensurate.”

Nan nodded, and sat thinking a little. “I wonder,” she said, “why they promised those rights you wanted?

They were not actually bound to give anything, you say, and it is not their custom to give much? What they promised amounted to a great deal, and was a most unprecedented thing. Why did they do it?"

"Because they came to the conclusion they would not get the aerial torpedo, the real perfect thing, without," he answered, and for a moment the flickering, fighting smile, which had been gone from him these days, lurked in his eyes. It died almost as it came, but it suggested that considerable skill, as well as other less admirable qualities, must have been needed in the late handling of Galhardy's genius.

"Have they got all they want now?" Nan asked, and the cloud descended almost visibly upon him.

"Everything," he answered. "They have my papers." There was a level hopelessness in the voice which told of utter loss. "It is all there; it was all ready to be drafted out. They knew, I told them I had all the work completed, and all the data collected ready to draw up the report, before they made the swoop. They waited for that."

"The report was not made? What they have is only in notes and drawings, and so on? Isn't there a chance they won't be able to make it out and find what they want?"

There was not in his opinion. "They can't help it," he said. "I tell you, it's all there; the veriest fool who knew even the alphabet of the subject could not fail. Besides, the thing's been made, different parts of it and the filling for the heads too. Oh, not all by one man—by different men and at different times. I was not going to have anyone able to report on it before I was ready. But they could find all out, if they tried, and put it together for themselves practically, if there

were any need; but there won't be, for they have it on paper almost plain enough for a child to understand. No, they have all: the torpedo and the torpedo-head, everything, as completely as they have the steel I reported on months ago. They have all; there is nothing left."

His voice dropped, and his whole body seemed to sink. Nan said nothing; there seemed nothing to say. She sat in the low firelight, very quiet.

The next day the directors' decision would be known; not till late in the evening, however, for, though she had telegraphed Michael's present address to his rooms, a letter forwarded from there would not be delivered in Soho till the last post. She was busy during part of the day making drawings of chair backs and other details for her father. She asked Michael, who was a clever draughtsman, to help her; but though he tried, he failed. He seemed utterly unable to keep his attention fixed on the unfamiliar work; he took up and put down pencils and india-rubber, set down lines and rubbed them out without any perception of what he did. But when, led thereto by some question or suggestion of hers, he tried to make drawings of aerial propellers and kindred things he succeeded even worse, for, added to inability to fix attention, there was vague fear—the fear of a man who feels slipping the sheet-anchor of loved work which has never failed him before.

Nan saw that for that day of waiting there was nothing to be done; so she attempted nothing, only stayed in all day. A quiet, inconspicuous presence, physically almost as easy to overlook as the shadows in the old house, but spiritually perhaps otherwise.

In the afternoon she wrote some letters; as she began the first, she glanced up at the date. "Let me see,"

she said; “it’s the third, isn’t it? Saturday?”

“Saturday?” Michael repeated the word as one recollecting.

“Yes. Had you an appointment?”

“No,” he answered, “at least, yes. But it does not matter. I was to have gone to the Carsons’ this afternoon, to tell Lady Sibyl how the aerial torpedo was received at the board meeting.”

He had forgotten it till this moment. Strange how completely he had forgotten it; Lady Sibyl and all that she stood for—and she had stood for much—had been utterly blotted from his mind. He had saved her letters in the general crash, but neither then nor after did he know why. It was, incomprehensible as it may seem, in a way an automatic act, one without reasoned volition. The woman herself had no place in the crisis; she had none in the days which had ensued. He had forgotten her as completely as he had forgotten all other outside things.

But now he remembered. In a wave, with a sensation which was almost like an audible *swish*, recollection flowed back. He would have been at the Carsons’ now, in the small drawing-room. She would have been there, in the deep chair half turned from the light. He could see her in his mind’s eye, the glow that lurked in her hair and the gown she would wear. He could see her white hands, tapering and pink-tipped, could feel their softness as they touched his in greeting, or in some accident of service as handing cups and placing cushions. He saw all, saw the kindling in her eyes as he spoke, heard the thrill in her low voice as she answered—as one sees a lighted room when standing without in the dark.

“Ought you to have written to say you could not

come?"

Nan's voice recalled him abruptly.

"No," he answered. "It's of no consequence." He spoke indifferently, with a hardness in the indifference. "She will have heard before this, and if she hasn't, she will soon enough. It doesn't matter. I shall never see her again."

Nan returned to her writing. Among the medley of half-told and retold facts which had been given to her there had once been mention of some private papers burned, instead of delivered to the directors. There had been no account of how they were saved from the fate of the rest, nor why; neither had borne on the one matter of moment, so both had been passed over. But now she guessed that the papers saved and personally destroyed concerned Lady Sibyl. And "it didn't matter," for he would "never see her again!" Pity crept up in her heart; he had lost this too, this woman, whatever she was to him, in addition to all the rest.

In the evening came the letter. Barmister, who since the closing of his office had been out all the afternoon on such business as was possible to be done on a Saturday, was home now and sitting with them. Nan fetched the letters herself; there were three for her father, one, the expected one, for Michael. She gave them out, then sat down again to her needlework, watching neither. Barmister read his through and grunted over them; they were business ones, and one of them annoyed him. Michael read his, and, slowly refolding it, put it into a pocket. She had a glimpse of his face, though she avoided looking at it. It was grave and quiet, but expressed nothing. The mental crisis was past; he could take the good or the bad now without disorder or

outward expression.

Barmister crushed the typewritten sheets of one of his letters together, and with a muttered malediction on the folly of his correspondent got to his feet. He asked Nan about some book of reference.

It was downstairs in the office, and she offered to fetch it.

"No," he said, "I'll go myself. I want to look up something in the day-book too."

He went, and she continued stitching.

"Well," Michael said at last, and as the sound of feet descended the little stair—"they have settled it."

She looked up. "Dismissal?" she said, though she guessed already.

He nodded, and handed her the letter.

GALHARDY & COMPANY, LIMITED.

Secretary's Department.

Sir,

I am instructed to inform you that the Board of Directors have considered the information concerning you which has been duly laid before them.

This information shows that very grave irregularities have been going on for some considerable period. I am therefore directed to inform you that the Board have decided to terminate your appointment at once.

The character of the information is such that the Board are giving their

very earnest consideration as to what course it is their duty, in the interests of the firm, to adopt: in any case, I am directed to remind you that, under your original contract, the divulgence of anything of a confidential nature, at any time, will render you liable to prosecution for breach of the said contract.

I am, Sir,
Your obedient servant,
Cecil Brett, Secretary.

So Nan read and then read again. Not that in her own mind she did not understand; she did, the whole case, with a curious plainness. She understood that much which at first glance appeared important was really not so, merely detail—the unreceived letter, the antagonistic secretary who might or might not be responsible, the difficulty of securing a hearing, even the justice or injustice of the whole proceeding—none complicated the case or truly influenced judgment on it. It was perfectly simple and inevitable really, turning on the old and quite natural law of might is right. Briefly it amounted to this—there was one who had what the great firm of Galhardy's wanted, and had a species of right to, and he would not part with it at their standard price: it had been taken from him without price, that was all. How, did not matter; it had simply been done, as inevitably it must have been. That dismissal should be a part of it was his own fault and the consequence of what their past experience of him had taught them: his probable future use to them was more than outweighed by the certain irritation of his future proceedings. The firm naturally discarded the thing which hampered or

annoyed when the reason of its existence (so far as they were concerned) had been achieved. The cost and consequence to the thing, equally naturally, did not come into consideration; it did not exist for a firm, which of necessity labours under the notorious disabilities of a corporation; that which is without soul to be saved, or body to be kicked, can take cognisance of no such trifles.

Nan dimly realised it, but she did not put it into words; she returned the letter with other comments than that. Soon after, Barmister came back with the book he had been for, and orders that she should find something for him. She found it, and the short remainder of the evening was spent without any reference to the directors' decision.

But as they parted for the night, Michael said, "I must go home to-morrow, and tell my father."

She nodded: that was inevitable now, and a thing so difficult that comment was superfluous, even banal.

"Yes," she said, "you must go," and she gave him a hand-grasp for good night.

CHAPTER V

THE Annarlys lived at Hurstbury, a suburb some little way from London. They had lived there a long while, and occupied the comfortable position that the well-to-do with handsome daughters come to occupy in the course of time in the older and more distant suburbs. There were three daughters: Constance, the eldest; Rosalind second, not long engaged to be married; and Mabel, only recently free of the schoolroom. There were two brothers younger than Mabel, but neither was at home just now: Giles was back at school after the summer holidays, and Jack, a year or two his senior, had remained in France for some final studies when the family came through on their way home from Switzerland.

They had not been home long by the first Sunday in October, but they had already settled to their usual ways and occupations. Rosalind, as her custom was, spent the afternoon in company with her fiancé, Dick Wharton, in the small room at the back of the house. In the drawing-room Mrs. Annarly, a slender and still young-looking woman, wrote letters. She wrote at a small table, protesting mildly at the inconvenience, but doing nothing else to oust Mabel, who, at her mother's escritoire, wrote hockey notices with her mother's favourite pen on her mother's paper. Mabel at that time was much addicted to hockey; later in the year she added dancing and skating to her enthusiasms. She was a healthy young animal, with a young animal's unconsciousness of its body and, sometimes, other people's bodies too. Constance, the

eldest sister, was really the most like her mother: one saw a strong facial resemblance as she sat now reading; and there was some resemblance in character, too, though she was more definite and cleverer, or, perhaps, better educated and more highly developed than was customary for girls in her mother's day. What was customary, and the nice, right, and proper thing to do, was what Constance would intuitively do in all the circumstances of life, almost without knowing there was an alternative—there was no alternative to her.

To the mother and daughters there entered that Sunday afternoon Michael, just come from Soho.

They were surprised to see him, for he did not often come home; and, usually, when he did, remembered to telegraph first. Still, that he should appear thus was not unprecedented, and Mabel merely looked up from her notices as he entered and nodded an informal welcome, while Constance smiled a pleasant greeting.

"My dear boy!" Mrs. Annarly exclaimed, "why didn't you let us know you were coming?"

"He didn't know himself, I expect, mother," Constance said; "busy people never do seem to forecast their movements long in advance; indeed, nobody does now, do they?"

Michael said he supposed not, and when Mrs. Annarly said she hoped he was going to stay some few days, answered that he expected so. Both answers were, perhaps, a little automatic, though no one noticed: conversation never really lagged where Constance and Mrs. Annarly were, because the one had a well-bred way of filling pauses, and the other frequently asked a second question before her first

had been answered, so providing the person addressed with a choice of two to answer.

She did this when she inquired about Michael's journey. "Did you travel all the way to-day?" she asked, and then went on to speak of the inconvenience of Sunday travelling, and to inquire if he had not found the trains very slow.

He answered some part of the composite question, and then inquired for his father.

Mr. Annarly was in the dining-room taking a nap, but it was near his time for waking. He usually woke some half hour before tea-time, and either walked round the garden, or went to his long-disused workshop, according to the weather and time of year.

Michael would go to him.

He was not gainsaid. He seldom was at home in these days, though it had not always been so. Far from it; he was essentially not one of them, and all had been aware of the fact, and let him be aware of it in the past. The present privileges and indulgences dated from the time of his success, and were owing to the fact that shortcomings are excusable in a brilliant and overtired brainworker, which are not in an unimportant and struggling engineer. He left the drawing-room now, and went to look for his father, a full ten minutes earlier than anyone else would have been allowed to do it.

For a little after he left, the mother and eldest daughter made a few desultory remarks about his return and about the probable length of his stay; then Constance returned to her book and Mrs. Annarly to her letter. When she had finished it she began another; but she did not finish that. Before

long she put down her pen, and went to see if the servants had Michael's room ready. Constance did not approve of going to see if the servants had done things; in her household it would never have been necessary. But she did not say so, she seldom said unpleasant things; she merely glanced up as her mother left the room.

Mabel, who had finished her last notice, saw the look, and smiled a little. "Poor old mater," she said, "she's always on the fidget."

Constance did not reply; her habit of not saying unpleasant things was continued behind people's backs as well as before their faces.

The younger sister, meeting with no response, yawned, stretched herself, and sauntered down the room to the further window, which looked out towards the back. For a minute she stood without speaking, then suddenly she leaned forward with interest.

"Hulloah!" she exclaimed. "What can be the matter with the governor?"

Constance glanced up. "What?" she said.

"He's standing outside the workshop," Mabel reported, "talking hard, and with no hat on! He must be excited about something! I suppose Michael's there, though I can't see him. There—now he's going in; father, I mean. I wish he'd turn; I can't see his face to see if it's good or bad business. I wonder what's up?"

"Perhaps nothing," Constance suggested in her unruffled way, and returned to her book.

But a little later, when the gong brought the father

and son, as well as the lovers, to tea, she was obliged to admit that Mabel might be right; something, apparently, had occurred, something unpleasant. Michael himself betrayed nothing in look or manner (all that was past for him; he was down at the bottom now, on the level, and he had got his bearings, to a certain extent). He behaved much as usual; perhaps a little more courteously, quicker to see others' wants, less ready to take service as a matter of course, and showing some patient interest in the remarks Dick ventured on subjects which he, good fellow, believed most deserving of the attention of his brother-in-law elect.

After tea, Dick had to go home: some relation of weight was spending the week-end with his family, and it was thought politic that he should devote Sunday evening to his company. So, after a rather lingering farewell, he departed. Rosalind saw him off, and did not hasten his departure; she thought it very dull that he should go. When he was gone she came back to the drawing-room. The housemaid had just taken away the tea-things, leaving Constance and Mabel alone.

"Well, what did I tell you?" Mabel was saying as Rosalind entered. "There is something up; father's in a regular taking."

"What a nuisance," Rosalind said. "I hope he'll get over it soon; I want a cheque for my trousseau, and a big one."

She went to the glass over the mantelpiece and arranged her necklet, debating, one might fancy from her expression, the comparative becomingness of green and blue, or some kindred subject interesting to a fair beauty. But Constance's voice made her look

over her shoulder.

“Yes, I am afraid you are right,” the eldest sister said; “it does look as if something has happened to upset father: I am afraid Michael must have told him some bad news.”

“Michael?” Rosalind exclaimed. “What a shame! He has no business to come here and upset the poor old boy, especially just now when I want him to be in an extra good temper for my trousseau cheque.”

“I do wonder what it is,” Mabel speculated, frankly consumed with curiosity: “I guess mother’s hearing about it now. She’s sure to tell us as soon as she comes back; I wish she’d hurry up.”

She had not long to wait. Before a great while Mrs. Annarly came in, and, as her daughters had foreseen, immediately told all she knew. She invariably did tell them all she knew, heard, or thought, quite without realising that sometimes it was a breach of confidence to do so. What she had to tell now was not confidential; nor was it very clear either. She had but a vague idea herself of what had really occurred to Michael: what she told her daughters was mixed and obscure and hardly enough to justify the sense of disaster in her tone and manner.

“Is that all?” Mabel said. “Michael has just got himself into a bother with the Galhardy people; nothing more than that?”

“All!” Mrs. Annarly said. “I don’t know how much more you want! I am sure it is bad enough: they have dismissed him, discharged him, whatever you call it.”

“I dare say it won’t turn out to be so bad as it sounds,” Rosalind looked up from a fashion paper to

say comfortably. “I dare say it will soon blow over. Sit down and tell us all about it, mother dear. Mab, pull that chair up for her.”

Mrs. Annarly sat down, though not much encouraged by the reassuring words. Rosalind’s reassuring words did not always carry weight, she rather taking after the people in the Bible who found solace for their momentary discomfort at a disturbing sight in saying, “Be ye clothed and fed,” whether or no there was much chance of the agreeable consummation taking place.

“I really don’t understand about it,” Mrs. Annarly said. “I saw the letter from the Galhardy people, and it seemed final: but perhaps you are right; perhaps they mean to reconsider it later on.” (She had done similar things herself in domestic difficulties.) “But even if they do, I don’t see how Michael is to be any real use to Giles.”

Giles, it had been recently decided, was to follow his stepbrother’s profession—for which he had little taste—largely on account of the influence that brother should have been able to exert on his behalf. The recent affair at Galhardy’s would make a considerable difference; in all probability make the idea of Giles entering the engineering profession unwise, if not out of the question altogether.

“Your father has definitely refused Giles,” Mrs. Annarly complained, now referring, not to her son, but to her bachelor brother, that son’s godfather, who, before the recent plan, had been looked to place his nephew advantageously in the City.

“I suppose he can get back?” Mabel suggested. “The governor, I mean; he can get back with Uncle G., if he wants to?”

“I don’t know,” Mrs. Annarly said. “It was about the time of the Budget: he was so angry that he declared he would never speak to him again. So was Giles. I am sure I don’t know what is to be done.” She was a little obscure, but very distressed. She dabbed her eyes once or twice before she went on.

“Your father seems to think very seriously of what Michael has done. I am quite certain he does not for a moment think he will ever be able to go back; neither does Michael himself. Your father says he may think himself lucky to get off without prosecution——”

“Prosecution?”

All three sisters sat up startled. It was something which had not occurred to them, and which struck sharply. Prosecution, trial, reports in the newspapers; friends and acquaintances reading, recognising the name, looking or expressing sympathy; servants even talking about it, and other people—the people one did not know—chattering and possibly enjoying the scandal!

“How awful!” Constance exclaimed. “It won’t, it surely won’t come to that!”

“Just when we are beginning to think about my wedding,” Rosalind cried. “What would the Whartons say!”

“Michael would have to emigrate afterwards,” Mabel said decidedly; “there’d be nothing else for it, and it would be bad enough then in all conscience.”

They spent a very distressing evening together, talking over the affair and all likely and unlikely contingencies arising therefrom. Each in turn suggested fresh possibilities and followed them and

their consequences into depressing ramifications, as remote as the question whether Mary, the parlour-maid, would stop, if Michael came to live at home, and so made one more in family; and the unpleasantness of explaining his return to the select, and slightly curious, bridge club which Constance had recently joined.

They did not, however, say anything of this to Michael when they met him at the supper-table. The Annarlys dined in the middle of the day on Sundays, and had cold supper at eight; a rather depressing meal usually, partly because the one servant remaining in, having spent the evening in repose, had not sufficiently woke up to set the table properly; and partly because the family, having had too little to do and too much of each other's society, were rather poor company by that time. This particular Sunday supper was worse than usual. It is true no one mentioned the matter in everyone's mind, but spoke, when they did speak, of indifferent topics, as if strangers had been present. But there was a feeling of gloom, which, while being general, somehow seemed to centre round Michael and point him out as being the cause of it. No one was sorry when the meal was over, no one was sorry when it was bedtime; they went to bed rather earlier than usual, Rosalind went almost directly after supper.

Hurstbury was one of those places where, during the waking hours of five and a half days of the week, practically no men are to be seen. The doctor, the clergyman, and the policeman were occasionally to be met with in pursuit of their several avocations,

but one regards them more as local institutions than mere men: tradesmen, coachmen, and gardeners might also be discovered, if sought for in their proper places, but they, again, seem rather fixtures or accessories. Men proper, that is, belonging to the women who lived in the houses fronting the well-kept roads, were invisible for those hours of the five and a half days. They were not to be seen issuing from the houses to go to the shops, even the tobacconist's or newspaper shop; they were not to be met on the roads, or even on the nearest golf course. Except for a week or two in holiday time, when schoolboys and college boys came home, the visible male population of the place consisted in the daytime of infants, invalids, and the aged; the rest having all gone to the City. An able-bodied man, unless a corner loafer, who was at large in Hurstbury during the hours of the working day, seemed almost misplaced, and quite as much an object of observation as one who has strayed into a baby-linen shop.

There are houses, there were in Hurstbury, where something the same feeling reigns; where a man, between the ages of, say, twenty and sixty, seems a little out of place in the daytime, excepting, of course, holidays. The Annarlys' house was like that. Directly after breakfast, Mr. Annarly left for the City, and Mrs. Annarly went to superintend the management of her household. Constance went to her desk to write letters, cast up accounts, and give attention to the affairs of the various societies, charitable and otherwise, in which she was interested. Mabel arranged the flowers and took the dogs for a run, and Rosalind, having walked to the station with her father, if the day was fine, retired to manicure her nails or practise, if she was in the

mood to sing. There was no place for a man in any of these occupations, and nothing for him to do. Later, Mrs. Annarly might turn out a cupboard, or mend a stocking; Constance might go to the shops or on some errand, social or charitable; Rosalind might go to the dressmaker's, and Mabel might spend an hour pottering in the conservatory or gossiping with a girl friend. Again there was no room for a man, and nothing for him to do. In the afternoon the mother and daughters visited or were visited, played hockey or bridge, read or did fancy work, according to age and tastes. One way and another time was fully occupied until Mr. Annarly, with the other able-bodied male inhabitants of the place, came back from the City.

It was to Hurstbury, and to this house there, that Michael came home that October. Not but what he was made welcome; he was, or, at least, not unwelcome. The mother and daughters were really very nice to him considering how his downfall necessarily touched them; how the collapse of his future entailed the collapse of that planned for Giles; how his loss of income lessened the amount his father felt able to spend on them; and how their position and prestige were slightly, and might be seriously, affected by what had deprived him of his. They were, in spite of all, quite nice, saying little about the situation, and behaving, so far as possible, as if nothing had happened; but they naturally could not make ordinary days holidays, or alter the whole routine and tenor of already full lives on his account. And as it was likely he might be at home some time, they naturally expected him to conform to the ways of the household; to be punctual at meals, not to smoke in the house before lunch, to use only such sitting-rooms as were customarily used, and to

discreetly disappear if friends, social engagements, or other of their affairs occupied the rooms.

They did not mention any of these things; they took it as a matter of course that he would do them. And he did them. On the whole, as Mrs. Annarly said, they really got through the first month better than she expected.

CHAPTER VI

ON the last Thursday in October, Nan Barmister came to Hurstbury. The Annarlys usually asked her to lunch about that time; they might have done so this year, though possibly not as the invaluable Mary had given notice, and Michael was at home. Michael had never mentioned his brief sojourn in Soho; there had been no necessity, and somehow it had not occurred to him to do it, so the family concluded Nan knew nothing of his being home, when she proposed to come and see them. They had often told her to write and propose coming when she was able, but she had never done it before; to tell the truth, they were not very pleased that she did now; they felt it to be an ill-chosen time. However, they decided that it would not be kind to refuse her, although all three sisters had engagements of some sort for the afternoon.

"Michael can entertain her," Mabel said; "he and mother can look after her for the afternoon. We shall all be in to lunch, and some of us to tea, if she stops till then. After all, she is his relation really, not ours."

Constance hesitated. "Wouldn't it be too tiresome for him?" she said.

Rosalind was of opinion it would. "It really isn't fair to ask him," she said; "he'd simply be bored to death. She'll be all right with mother, and mother doesn't mind; she will be able to tell her all about Mary's delinquencies. They really get on awfully well alone together, better than if we are there. I am sure Nan

likes it better."

It is a great help towards comfort and well-being to be able to be sure that what you wish is so by the mere fact of saying it; quite a number of people have this creative faculty—where the tastes of others are concerned. Rosalind had largely; her sisters may not have entirely believed in it, but they did not contradict her now. The question of who was to entertain Nan was left unsettled, but she herself was informed they would be pleased to see her on the suggested Thursday. And on that day she came.

The Annarlys' drawing-room was a nice-sized room, with a thick pale green carpet and rosewood cabinets, where Worcester china and Venetian glass stood in well-kept array. There were polished tables with books and photographs and magazines on them, quantities of fresh flowers everywhere, and many brocade upholstered chairs—mostly looking too large and stuffed for Nan. The whole room looked, if not that, in some way incongruous with her. Even the recently lit fire, lit thus early on her account, seemed to emphasise the fact that she was out of place. And Constance, the only member of the family ready to receive her when she arrived, did not dispel the feeling. At least, she did not for Nan, though she was unaware of it herself, and was as agreeable as she always was, talking pleasantly till the others came in just as lunch was announced.

The dining-room was a nice-sized room too; it, like the drawing-room and the three good-looking, well-dressed sisters, looked its largest and best kept when Nan was there. She had a way of slipping quietly into a place, of keeping so still when she was there, and, whether she talked or was silent, of being so inconspicuous that everything in the Annarlys' house

stood out in contrast with her; one found oneself wondering how much it cost at Warings' or Shoolbreds', and how many years ago it was bought.

Mrs. Annarly said afterwards that Nan was not so shy that day as she sometimes was. There is a degree in shyness, as there is in fear, which gets beyond itself and produces something which, in its outward results, is akin to courage. Some such thing, aroused on behalf of another, had helped Nan to invite herself to the house of these overwhelming connections—whose house, persons, and invitations she avoided and looked upon with dread as a rule—and helped her through with the much worse ordeal of being there. It did not prevent her from perceiving, as other of their friends and relatives would not, that they rather wondered why she had come, and rather looked upon her coming as a nuisance; but then nothing could have prevented that; like many of the shy, she had abnormal powers of perception. It did, however, help her to behave as though she did not perceive it, and to talk and answer questions with a greater fluency and readiness than she had ever before developed in their company. There was not a great deal of opportunity given her; the sisters, and Mrs. Annarly too, found it easier to talk about their affairs than hers, and to each other than her. A few kind questions about her father and her health exhausted what there was to ask her. A few cultivated comments on pictures now on view, which as a dweller in town she might have, though had not, seen, and on concerts recently given which similarly she might have, though had not, heard, exhausted what there was of general interest to say to her. After that they spoke of their own concerns—to her principally, though with

divergencies to each other. They told her of lectures on Renaissance art now being given locally; and she did not tell them that the man who gave them had also written a book in which he made mistakes about the date of Flemish weapons. They told her of a Spode dessert-service promised to Rosalind for a wedding-present; and she did not tell them that, if their description was correct, the designation was not. She did not think of mentioning those things, so they naturally could not know that she knew them, and knew with an accuracy with which they knew nothing. Rosalind spoke a good deal about her trousseau, she did on most occasions just now, and Nan listened with interest; when Rosalind said she must promise to come to the wedding, she answered that she hoped she should, probably with less sincerity than Rosalind said what she did. Rosalind always meant pleasant things at the moment she said them; Nan did not, unless she also meant them before and afterwards too.

Michael had small share in the conversation at lunch. In Hurstbury it was essentially the woman's meal on weekdays, a man had little part in what was discussed, he was there—as a permanent adjunct—rather by courtesy only. Nan, a listener, and, occasionally, answerer of questions, did nothing to alter the usual conditions. But after lunch Michael did not attempt a retreat, as the sisters half expected he would—as they would have wished had the guest been one of their own choosing. He followed them into the drawing-room, and so saved Mabel the trouble, she certainly would otherwise have taken, of going to fetch him to do his share in entertaining his cousin when she and the others left for their different engagements.

She glanced behind her at the clock; she was standing on the sheepskin rug before the fire, her large well-shaped feet planted far apart.

"I shall have to be off in a minute," she said. "We are playing away to-day. You don't play hockey, do you, Nan? You should; rippin' game. It'd be awfully good for you, take you out a bit. You must have rather a mouldy time, I should think." She looked round at the clock again. "I must go; only twelve minutes for the train. Don't bother about tea for me, mother; I'll get a drink somewhere. Good-bye, Nan, I'm afraid I shan't see you when I get back. Take my tip about the hockey; I dare say I could get you into some club that plays near town."

And she swung across the room and went out, rather noisily.

"What energy!" Rosalind said. "Isn't it wonderful? And it's really quite warm to-day, you know."

"Yes," Nan answered, she was sitting by the back window, "it is a nice day. May I go into the garden?"

Michael rose, though neither Constance nor Rosalind thought he was the person addressed; they knew of no other methods of address than speech, or the direct and obvious glance.

"Oh, yes, of course, if you care to," Constance said. "I am afraid it's rather damp." She moved towards the window as she spoke. "There are some quite nice chrysanthemums left; you must have some to take home."

She led the way to the garden door, as if she were going out too; but if that was her intention the sight of the wet grass, or the voluntary presence of Michael, remitted her sense of duty; she contented

herself with telling him which were the best chrysanthemums. Having done that and having stood a minute on the top of the steps to say a few words, she went in, feeling free to attend her committee meeting without any discourtesy to the guest, undue taxing of her mother, or asking a favour of Michael. Things often befell thus with her, and she usually deserved it. So she went to her engagement and Rosalind to hers, and Mrs. Annarly dropped asleep over a book, until the coming of a visitor aroused her and also put Nan out of her head.

But in spite of Constance's thoughtful orders, Nan did not get many chrysanthemums. Michael began cutting at the first group of plants, while his half-sister still stood on the steps.

"I didn't know you were coming," he said. "I had no idea you were here till lunch time."

"No," Nan answered, "I know."

"There are some better ones lower down," Constance called; "those have been frost-bitten."

Michael moved obediently. "It's awfully decent of you to come," he said. "You must hate it so."

"Be sure he cuts you nice ones," Constance's pleasant voice cried, "and plenty; as many as ever you can carry."

"Yes," Nan answered, "yes; thank you."

The face she turned in the direction of the speaker, who could not see her now by reason of screening shrubs, was grateful. "It's kind of her," she said to Michael, as if explaining.

"Is it?" he answered harshly; though afterwards he said, "I suppose that is what she is; what they all are

—kind."

Nan ignored the words, and turned to the subject which was really uppermost. "Did you write to Sir Joseph Harte?" she asked.

"About that statement we sent to the directors from town? Yes, I wrote and asked him if he had received it."

"What did he say?"

Michael felt in his pockets, and found a letter which he handed to her.

It was in the crabbed handwriting of Sir Joseph himself, and it was marked *confidential*.

> DEAR MR. ANNARLY (it ran),
>
> *I have carefully considered your letters of the 2nd and 20th, and the statement enclosed in the former. I find nothing in them to alter the conclusion I had come to in this deplorable matter; nor do I find anything which would warrant me in asking my co-directors to reopen, or reconsider, your case. I am, however, able to tell you that we have now decided to take no further steps. Out of consideration for the work you did while with us, and the temptations to which you appear to have been subjected, the other members of the Board have consented to abandon any idea of prosecution.*
>
> *Speaking personally, I much regret the unhappy termination of your connection with Galhardy's—a*

connection which promised to be useful to us and brilliant for you. But I still hope that, warned by this lesson, and saved by the generosity of the directors from the full penalty of publicity, you may yet use your gifts to do valuable work in some other branch of your profession.

I am,
Yours sincerely,
Joseph P. Harte.

So she read, Michael mechanically cutting chrysanthemums the while.

“I suppose it is as much as one could expect,” he said when she had finished; “at least, he writes himself, and he writes kindly, one could hardly look for more if he believes the tale—as he certainly does.”

“Yes,” Nan said, although she did not herself quite like the letter; she did not know why, unless, perhaps, it was that she had a feeling it did not ring true. But it was only a feeling, and possibly groundless; certainly not a thing to mention to Michael, whose present attitude of spiritless acquiescence was the best in the circumstances.

“What are you going to do?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he answered indifferently.

They moved on slowly, stopping by a few of the chrysanthemums as they went. Nan noticed how tired and ill he looked, and with what patient inattention he cut the flowers, obeying Constance’s orders, but automatically, and without observing what he did.

“I don’t want any more,” she said, and led the way down a damp path away from the plants.

“I suppose,” she said, “since the directors have decided not to prosecute, you will be able to get some similar work in time?”

He shook his head. “As easily get back to Galhardy’s as get into any similar work. There are only a few of those firms in existence, and they’re a close ring in some respects: the word has gone round about me long before this; not one of them would have me at any price.”

“But surely it would be to their interest to do so?” she protested. “They would never act against their own interests to please Galhardy’s? They must know that you can do work which no one else can, and which they want.”

“And,” he said, “when it was done, have Galhardy’s claim it, and say it was what I had already done for them, or based on it, or near enough to be reckoned the same!”

“But it would not be; you surely have not done for them all there is to do?”

“All?” he laughed. “No! nor a tithe, nor a hundredth! But that would not make any difference. If it was worth having, Galhardy’s would claim it, and the other people would have to fight them for it, and there’s few who could afford to fight Galhardy’s like that.”

“What an iniquitous thing!”

“There’s plenty of it in the world,” he said indifferently. “There are some big firms that have a fund on purpose for that sort of thing and for fighting patents—not defending their own patents,

but defending themselves when they are had up for infringing other people's. Galhardy's can knock most others out, if it comes to law, they are so rich; no one could afford to fight them—or to employ me to any purpose."

They had come to the end of the path now, and reached the old workshop. The door stood ajar, so that one saw the neglected interior and a single garden-chair drawn up to the burnt-out stove; Nan half stopped.

"Will you come in?" Michael asked. "It's rather damp inside, I'm afraid, though drier than out."

They went in. The place smelt mouldy and smoky too, and struck chilly with the chill of disuse. There were a lathe and a certain number of tools in racks and on shelves, but most damaged or obsolete, and all red with rust. A few odd bits of metal work and turning lay about, of amateur workmanship and no meaning or use now that even the long-forgotten design of their making was gone. The place spoke aloud of a dead hobby, a pastime that was outlived. To one who was an engineer, in the first and last meaning of the elastic word, and who was used to working on abstruse problems and seeing his theories put into practice by the best appliances that could be evolved, it might speak with a grimly pathetic voice.

Nan crossed the little untidy place to the cold stove.

"May I light a fire?" she asked.

"I'll light it," Michael said; "it's a brute of a stove; half the time it won't light, and if there's any wind it smokes furiously."

There was no wind that day, and the stove lit comparatively easily; Nan lighted it, Michael

bringing coke from the stokehole.

"I don't often have it," he explained; "it hasn't been very cold yet. When it is, I expect I shall still do without. After all, the fire isn't much loss as a rule, and there would be trouble about the coke if I had it often."

Nan looked up with inquiry, and he explained. "The coke for the hot-water boiler and the conservatory stove is allowanced; a load is reckoned to last so many weeks; if I take it, it won't."

At Galhardy's the directors had been induced to supply a private room with an open grate for their genius, because a steam-heated atmosphere tried his head. If Michael remembered this, he did not compare it with the present situation. He accepted that as he accepted all the other things just now.

Nan drew up to the stove when she had the fire alight. "What are you going to do?" she asked again.

"You had better say, 'What can I do?'" he answered. "Oh, yes, there are other branches of engineering, I know that, and know something about some of them. It was only by chance I stumbled into this one. I was not trained to it specially."

He spoke as if the astonishing ability, which showed rare proficiency and original genius in several widely different branches of one of the widest sciences, were an ordinary and not remarkable thing. It was not remarkable to him, it was a matter-of-course fact of existence, and one which he supposed, if he ever thought about it, he shared with others—only, perhaps, most of those he had come across were too idle or too stupid to use the powers which they, no doubt, possessed in common with himself. That

would have been his view had he ever evolved one.

But the fact, so far as it concerned himself, was of no particular value now. “I have got no reputation in any but the one line,” he said; “naturally, with the choice of applicants for any job there is, the preference is given to a man with a reputation on that subject. That militates against me for a post of any size in any but the now closed branch; and for a small one, the circumstances that I have had a good thing in one line, and am now offering for a small one in another, tells quite as much. Not to mention that I have been at Galhardy’s, and left for no explained reason, which would pretty well prevent me getting anything anywhere.”

“Have you tried?”

He had, his experience, though small, had been bitter. “It is true I have only been home three weeks,” he said, “and so you may say have not had the chance of making many attempts. But one can learn a good deal in a short time, especially of that sort of thing.”

They had taken much, these directors of Galhardy’s. They may have been entitled to it, Nan did not know, and she did not concern herself to think or concern herself to condone or to justify either them or the sufferer; the bare facts were enough. And the facts, as they stood now, were that they had the man’s invention and the results of some years of his best work; and in taking them they had, incidentally, also taken his reputation and his nerve, and, at one time it seemed, possibly his balance of mind too. The last danger was past, but another loss was made plainer than it had been before—they had, also no doubt incidentally, taken his chance of earning a living in any other way. They certainly had much

and had left little.

“Surely,” she protested aloud, “surely there is something!”

“What?”

“I don’t know,” she was obliged to answer, and again sat staring into the little open doorway of the stove. There must be something! He was in collapse now: nerve gone, energy gone, ability in eclipse, the whole immaterial man shattered; but there was still something there; she felt it. She knew nothing of technical facts, little by practical experience of him; but she knew, with the unerring knowledge of women (some women), that there was still something there, and believed it with that faith which not merely removes mountains, but sometimes makes men. So long as there was something in him there was still something which could be done, though it might take long to find out what it was, and how to do it.

“They have not taken your brains,” she ventured at last.

“My brains are not much use,” he answered. But he spoke gently, his brains were at a discount now, their existence as an asset and a marketable commodity was even in some doubt; he was grateful for the assumption of them and their value.

“They are not really of much value,” he told her. “Even if I could still deal with problems—we’ll say I could, if you like, though I am not at all sure of it myself, I don’t think I shall ever do anything again. If I could, what better off am I, if no one wants their problems dealt with by me? One can’t set up as a consulting engineer without capital or reputation. My reputation would blast the best capitalised

concern, and my capital would not float the best reputation, for it is non-existent."

"Have you no money at all?" she asked.

"None. No doubt I ought to have saved, but I didn't; it cost me a good lot to live, and I didn't bother; also, no doubt, I was a fool. I have managed to clear up what was owing, but that is all, and I should not have been able to do that, if I hadn't had an offer for my car just before—just before this all happened. At present, I have a five-pound note and"—he put his hand in his pocket and took out some coins—"about enough to pay my fare to town third class another six times. Those are my assets, and my prospects—*nil*. I have hardly enough to buy a plumber's outfit or the wherewithal to start the hawking of tools in the Whitechapel Road."

The position did not show hopefully, Nan saw that; nevertheless, she led him to talk of the work and chances of consulting engineers, and other freelances of the profession.

But what he said did not show the prospect any brighter. For success in such ways business ability of the highest order was the first and last requisite: that and the capacity to live on little and wait, and, incidentally, the little to live on while waiting. For a man to work out his own inventions and profitably dispose of them much more was needed: much capital, much space, much plant, and, if he was to make even the barest margin of profit, the rare fortune to light upon a moderate proportion of honest men.

"Unless one has enough money not to need to make more, one can hardly make it by working out inventions or any of the problems which want

working out," so he said.

Yet, either because of her silent attention, or because the thing was so strong in him, in a little he began to talk of some of the problems. They were always floating about at the back of his mind, complex and simple, of practical importance and theoretical interest, equally dear to him, and ready under normal conditions to come to the forefront of consideration at the provocation of a word. Of late, they, like everything else, had been in abeyance; it was only for a minute or two the old passion reasserted itself now; in a little the interest was gone.

"What I have to consider," he said "is, not what might be worked out, but how to get a living, and there doesn't seem much prospect of my being able to do that, for I can't do anything but this one sort of thing."

"You can draw," Nan suggested; "can't you do something with that?"

"Be a draughtsman?"

The idea of following that branch of his profession had no more occurred to him than the idea of being a plumber; his tone showed it, but after a second he said quietly, "Yes, I suppose I could do that; I could draw out other people's designs, and work out things for contractors—if I could get the work."

"Would you do it? Would you, if you could get it?"

He considered a moment, and the pause more than words showed the gulf for him between the past and the present. "Yes," he said slowly, "I think so; I think I would. After all, one thing is much the same as another now. I could do that, I suppose I should, if I could get it. I dare say it might come to it that I

should be thankful to get it."

"Could you?"

"I should say not."

"Why?"

"Because after what has happened no one would trust me to work out his design, for fear I should steal the idea. Oh, I don't mean that would be said exactly, or that anything definite will ever be reported against me, nothing so clearly to be met as that; but there will be a feeling, a sort of doubt, and that is enough, more than enough. Why should confidential work be given to a man with a doubt about him, when there are plenty without able to do it?"

Nan realised the difficulty. "And the other work you spoke of?" she said. "The contractors; you said draughtsmen did things for them. Would the doubt tell there?"

"Probably not; the work they want is not confidential; it is merely drawings to meet technical difficulties in putting up plant on a large scale. But most contractors have their own draughtsman, or the one to whom they always go; it is difficult for an outsider to get the work."

"Still, possible, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, in time, quite possible."

"And some, once got, would lead to more?"

"It might—probably would."

"Would that eventually lead to the other kind—the better kind? I suppose in that sort of work, as in everything else, there are degrees of proficiency, and the man who can do the best in the best way is rare.

So rare that once found he must be employed in spite of his drawbacks?"

Michael admitted it was so; he had had enough experience in employing draughtsmen to know it true. It did not occur to him to deny that he could do work of such quality; he could do it, it was the quality of all his work. He did not himself think of it exactly as such; he had no standard of best or worst in work; one did what one wanted, or what was wanted; there was nothing less, nothing more. Some men, of course, did not do what was wanted; again it was not a question of best or worst, it was not anything; if it was not done, it was nothing. One did not criticise it, one mentally called them wasters, and took the work away and did it oneself. (It is possible to see that such an attitude of mind might make more enemies than any realisation of superior personal ability or human conceit about it.)

The afternoon was gloomy and overcast, the gleam of sunshine which had brightened the garden when Nan first proposed going out had long vanished. By mid-afternoon it was grey without and greyer still in the small shed; the discarded tools and scraps of metal which littered it, became mere lumps, with here and there one standing out with the unnatural distinctness things assume in half lights. Nan noticed them; she had an eye for such details even when preoccupied. Michael did not, perhaps, because all, actual and spiritual, was, as it were, of a piece to him. They drew up closer to the stove, talking fitfully now of the possibilities of draughtsman's work and its difficulties and drawbacks. And though they spoke of the obvious drawback, that it was out of the question for one without a connection to expect to make even pocket-money out of it for some time,

they did not speak of the utter distastefulness of such work to a man of Michael's calibre. Nor yet did they speak of the bitterness for such a one having to solicit as a favour work inferior to the crudest of that which he used to delegate to subordinates. Such things were too personal to be spoken of and too obvious. Besides, the other drawback was enough: the fact that it was impossible to expect to make a living at it for long.

"My father is not a rich man," Michael said, towards the end of the afternoon. "He had losses last year, and he pretty well lives up to his income, I believe; he naturally looks to provide for his daughters too, so far as he can; I can expect nothing from him. Theoretically, I imagine, I am at liberty to live here until I get something to do——"

"But practically you can't do it," she concluded for him. "You can't do it for long. No, I know."

Unconsciously, as she spoke, she glanced over her shoulder to where, through the smeary little window, one could see the house, the curtained drawing-room window and the corner of the conservatory. The tea-gong sounded as she looked. She rose instantly, the idea of not obeying a summons to meals here, or venturing to keep anyone waiting, never occurred to her. It apparently did not occur to Michael either; he rose too, and they went into the drawing-room.

A second visitor had taken the place of the first, her presence, and the recent return of Constance, and later return of Rosalind, prevented any comment on their long absence; indeed, probably no one had noticed it at the time or thought of it now. Tea, with sweet cakes and talk, filled the short time before Nan left; and if she herself contributed little to the conversation, little was expected of her, and nothing

of Michael, except to hand cups and plates.

Almost directly after tea Nan left. Michael walked to the station with her; so did Constance, who said they seemed to have seen so little of her this time. During the walk the small bunch of chrysanthemums, which were fetched in at the last minute, was criticised; Constance told Michael he should have cut more, and Nan that she should have helped herself, if he was too lazy. She also said kindly that Nan must come again soon, some day when they were all at home. Nan answered rather shyly, Constance made her shyer than any of the Annarlys, and more aware of her own deficiencies in comparison with so many social gifts. Michael also said little; he really knew nothing of the topics discoursed upon, but apparently he was not expected to; he was there for form's sake merely, and to put Nan into the train.

CHAPTER VII

ON the day before her birthday, Nan reminded her father of that anniversary.

“It’s to-morrow,” she said; “have you forgotten?”

“No,” he answered, “nor have you. What do you want? Since you have not spoken before, I suppose it is nothing I have to buy: something in the house, is it?”

She shook her head, and he seemed pleased.

“That’s as well; I’d been ashamed of your taste if you had asked for that iron chest.”

And he would too, though he would have given it, if she had asked for it. As it was, he was so pleased she had not chosen it that he was ready to grant a large demand, should she make one. For a moment she hesitated. She had never come to him with any such request as she had to make this year, and she did not know how to sum it in one word.

“I want you to give me Michael Annarly,” she said at length.

“What!” he exclaimed. “What on earth do you mean?”

“I’ll try to explain. You know I told you he had got into difficulties with the people he worked with?”

He did: he probably knew quite as much about that as his brother-in-law at Hurstbury; possibly more, for Nan had told him, and she knew better how to

convey things to her father than Michael did to his. He nodded now.

“What’s that got to do with it?” he asked.

“I’ll tell you. It’s like this, Michael cannot get any sort of post at present——”

“Naturally not; shouldn’t think he’d ever get one in his own line again, not one worth having, and I don’t suppose he’s much good for anything else. Go on.”

“That is where the present comes in,” Nan explained. “He can make drawings. I suppose it is mostly machine-drawings and things like that which he has done heretofore, but he could do details of furniture to scale and all that extremely well. I don’t mean he would be worth anything much to you on that account; but he could do it, and he could write letters and do some of what Josiah now does, and so leave him freer for other things, as you have often said lately you wished. What I want, is that you will let Michael have this work, and that you will let him live here to do it. That is what I want you to give me this birthday.”

“Oh?” said Barmister. “Oh, indeed, is it?”

It was an unexpected request, as unexpected as the one which had inaugurated the birthday custom, the desire of a child for a perfect specimen of old French cabinet work. He received it in much the same way that he had received the one of long ago, principally by looking sharply at the maker to gauge, if possible, what, consciously and unconsciously, prompted the asking. For a moment he sat thoughtful: not refusing, as a good business man should; nor conceding, as an indulgent father might. Now, as long ago, he paid his daughter the compliment of doing neither hastily;

not regarding her choice as a passing whim. If he gave, or if he refused, he would do it with reason, or, at least, because he saw she had what she deemed reason for her request.

“Is this your idea, or his?” he asked at length.

“Mine; he knows nothing about it. I do not even know if he will agree to it.”

“H’m.” Barmister bit his finger thoughtfully. “Where does it lead to, and what is it for?” he asked.

“It will give him an opportunity of getting and doing other work after a time,” she said: “draughtsman’s work, the only thing allied to his original profession, there is a chance of his getting at present. He couldn’t get enough of that to live on for some while; but he could get some and do it out of work-hours if he had something to do to keep going on meanwhile. From that, other things would arise and develop in time.”

“I see,” Barmister said, and sat thoughtful again.

After a time he looked up. “Where do you come in?” he asked abruptly.

“I want it,” she answered: “I want that—what I have indicated—to happen.”

“Why? It’s no concern of yours.”

She was obliged to admit that, though it seemed a new idea to her. “I suppose it isn’t,” she said slowly; “but it somehow seems as if it were. You see, I happened to be the person there at the moment, that rainy afternoon when I first brought him here. I happened to be there when someone was wanted, as one might happen to be the person at hand in an accident. When that occurs, it seems as if the job

were one's own, don't you think? It really is, too. Anyhow, I feel as if this were mine, and I were concerned in it."

"H'm," he said again, and no more.

For some time he sat considering, turning the matter in his mind. At length he spoke. "You can have it, if you like. Mind you, that's not saying I think it sensible, or that what you've asked for is going to get you what you want, if that's the reinstating of Michael Annarly. I have my doubts if anything would do that, after what has happened. I should say he has about done for his career. He's been a fool, and if there's one thing Nature abhors more than a vacuum, it's a fool: Nature and Fate and everything else have a deal more use for knaves than fools, and let them off a deal cheaper. It'll take a better man than you, or me, or him either to get over that business. Still, that's neither here nor there: you aren't asking me to make a job of Michael Annarly for a birthday present, and you aren't asking me to think what you have asked for worth the having."

"No," Nan agreed, "I'm asking you to let Michael come here to work for a while, and to live with us while he does it."

"You shall have it. On the understanding that I can take it back again if I want to, and when I want to, if I think it's interfering with business—that's to be understood."

She said it was, and thanked him, and he dismissed her, saying he would to-morrow give her a letter to Michael offering him such a situation as she had described—unless he saw reason to change his mind during the night.

He did not change his mind. The next morning at

breakfast she found the letter lying on her plate. It was a brief, businesslike letter, offering the specified employment on the condition that the recipient lived in the house so as to be there to do extra work at extra times when necessary. The terms were fair, but not liberal; and the method of expression formal. The offer was business, not philanthropy. But Nan was satisfied when she read it; it was what she wanted. During the morning she wrote to Michael, and enclosed the letter with her own. He might refuse or accept without damage to his self-respect, and without having to consider any damage to hers or her feelings. She was merely the medium in the matter. He could judge of the offer on its own merits, and see it fairly, and without any personal bias or glossing.

Seen so it must have shown extraordinarily bare to one who had done some of the finest work on one of the most complex subjects known to man; one who had been a recognised authority to be consulted and respected by persons of position and intelligence; one who, in spite of many jars and difficulties, had been considered and courted, as are few of his age, by important men, and still more by their subordinates. One, too, who, though always convinced of poverty, had come to look upon many luxuries as necessaries, and as such had them; and who, though not quite at one with it, had mixed as equal and as welcome guest in a well-bred society that accepted him as it found him. The offer was only to be inferior clerk and handy-man to a dealer in second-hand furniture; with the ultimate hope, by using all spare time, and, if Fate proved kind, of becoming a draughtsman, and doing the worst drudgery of the profession in which former pre-eminence had been won. The pay was

small, the work was worth no more, and the society was *nil*: there was none in the old house in Soho. All these things must have been plain to Michael: he must have seen what was offered quite as it was. Yet he accepted it. The Monday after Nan's twenty-sixth birthday found him in Soho.

Robert Barmister was not the easiest man to work for; he cared for nothing but work, and he dealt much with Jews, who also exalted it to the same place: his standards and demands on others, consequently, were high and exacting. Theoretically, he expected little of Michael, seeing the circumstances in which he employed him: practically, though he was not aware of it himself, he expected a great deal more than most would have expected of other and more qualified persons. He was a man of few words; he spared little speech to make his instructions clear; he had that impatience of ignorance which will not waste time explaining, and so demands unusual intelligence when comprehension is desirable. This did not matter with Josiah who had worked with him so long and so closely as to be almost a second, and gentler, self. But it did not make things easy for Michael, although, it must be owned, he himself used to evince some of the same unconscious intolerance in dealing with others. At Galhardy's it had been to a good many people's interest to understand what Michael Annarly meant, and to carry out his lightly indicated instructions—or to get someone more initiated to interpret them without disturbing him for explanation. Here the positions were reversed, and, in spite of the help of Josiah and Nan, he was often humiliatingly at sea until such time as native intelligence enabled him to understand the trivial but unfamiliar details.

In the main the work he had to do was trivial and mechanical; so narrow in circumstance, and so totally unsuited to him as might seem a lamentable waste of time and ability. He did not think of it that way: he did not think of it at all; he simply did what was before him without looking before or after. At least, it was much better than doing nothing at Hurstbury; and he could do it, which was something —there were moments when he doubted if he could do anything else, if he could ever do anything at all again. So he plodded with the unfamiliar tasks, giving exact attention to the careful drawing of chair-backs and kindred things, and learning what Robert Barmister's brief orders and instructions meant in the course of the monotonous days. Once or twice he went to museums to make drawings of some specimen of furniture or detail of ornament which was to be reproduced. Once or twice he went to the warehouse of a fat Jew dealer for some similar purpose. The last was unpleasant: he was not used to being treated as an inferior by men of the Jew's stamp, and every nerve in his body resented it; even while he was forced to admit himself inferior, not only in present position, but also in the special knowledge which alone was valued here. In the main, however, he had nothing acutely distasteful to do; there was nothing acute in any way.

Only once was he told to do that from which he shrank as impossible. It was on a Saturday afternoon. Nan had gone with him to one of the warehouse rooms to help him look for a Florentine mirror, concerning which her father had given instructions too slight for him to recognise it. She found the mirror, and observed, just below it, the iron chest she had bought the day she met him.

"It's not sold yet, I see," she said.

"What is not?" he asked.

She pointed it out to him; he had not seen it before.

"Why!" he exclaimed, "it's like one the Carsons have."

He had spoken before he was aware: had he been aware he would hardly have said it; he had a distaste for even so much as in any way referring to the past in these days. But the sight of the chest unexpectedly recalled the facsimile in the hall at Redstoke. He moved a little nearer as if to examine it, but really to recover himself. He was much more plainly seeing the other chest and the room; half hall, half billiard-room, where it stood—where he had told Lady Sibyl of his achievement that last night.

"They thought theirs the only one in England," he said for the sake of saying something, and to cover, even from himself, how much the memory hurt. "They wanted another, but they have never been able to get one."

"Who wants?" Barmister's voice asked quickly. He was at the far end of the room, and had not been noticed by the other two; had hardly noticed them either until Michael's words touched the mainspring of his interest. "Who is it wants a chest? Write and tell 'em I've got one. Write to-night to them, whoever they are."

He moved away without waiting for an answer, which was perhaps as well, as Michael did not speak. The thing was impossible: he could not write to Lady Sibyl!

"I will write that letter," Nan said quietly.

For a moment he felt relieved; next minute, however, he said, “Why should you? It’s good of you to bother, but it doesn’t matter; I am what I am, I should do the work of it. It is of no consequence really that it should happen to be these people, I have done with them—with all that. I shall never come across them again.”

“It matters in that it would make it more difficult for them to deal about the chest,” Nan answered. “Many people find it difficult to buy or sell when a friend or acquaintance is concerned in it. I bought the chest; I would like it sold well, and I think that is more probable if the writing of the letter was not recognised. Make a drawing, and I will write the letter.”

And she did, though whether her motive was the business one she alleged is open to doubt: this, at least, is certain, a service is often doubled by not seeming to be one.

So the letter was written; and, as a consequence, the chest was eventually dispatched to Redstoke. And Nan wrote the address-label for the packing-case, and the letter of advice of its dispatch, and everything else in connection with it. And in spite of what he had said, it did matter to Michael; for days after the chance recall of Lady Sibyl and the past there was an additional greyness in the world, an additional bitterness in failure and in Fate. But he lived it down; gradually it died again to apathy and patient acquiescence; but he avoided all mention of the Carsons’ name, all reference to the chest, and the price (a high one) for which it was sold.

The price for which Barmister sold things was always high; his profits may not have been quick, but they were usually large; he seldom made a mistake in

what he bought, and never in what he sold. He was clearsighted and careful; in some respects careful to meanness; he never used a penny stamp where a halfpenny would do, or a whole sheet of paper where a half would serve. He had a way of trimming off the edges, a hole-and-corner manner of conducting his business very much at variance with the polished mahogany and plate-glass methods which obtained in all with which Michael had been concerned heretofore. In curious contrast too with the large, almost daring quality which characterised his dealing in some other ways. Probably, like his choice of living over his work, it was a survival from older times, when merchants wrote out their own bills, saved wax and firing, and ventured their thousands in hazards which would make their descendants tremble.

In several respects the life in the old house was related to that past time; dinner was at two there on Saturdays and Sundays, at half-past one, the nearest the exigencies of modern working hours would allow, on other days. There was cold supper late in the evening, often set at one end of a table—of great beauty—so as not to interrupt what might be doing at the other end. There was usually something doing, the polite art of doing nothing was unknown to the father and daughter, and they had practically no visitors to help them to it. Sometimes Barmister was busy with books or papers, or examining recently purchased treasures; sometimes he was at work downstairs in the room with the dolphin mantelpiece. Usually Nan sewed of an evening, not fancy work with clicking of pins or twitchings of silks and examining stitches, but plain sewing; a continuous, complete sort of occupation which yet allowed of talk when talk was pleasing, very

tranquil.

Once only in the time before Christmas did an interruption occur to the daily order of things, and that was not unexpected, for it was a yearly happening. Every year on the 5th December, the anniversary of the day that Josiah first entered the business, the father and daughter went to spend the evening at the Foregoods. The custom had been begun long ago, in the time of the young wife, when the means of all were so straitened that a supper out was a real economy to the guests, and the getting of anything adequate to their hospitable instincts a real problem to the host and hostess.

This year Michael was invited to be of the party, and he accepted, though he did not want to. The last time he had been out by invitation was when he dined at Redstoke. If no recollection of that had occurred to incline him against this he would still have had a distaste for it; he shrank from meeting his fellow-creatures in any but business relations. He felt at first that he could not go. But he did, for Josiah asked him personally, and so tentatively that he did not know how to refuse without hurting. So he accepted, and Josiah's simple and evident satisfaction made him feel a little ashamed.

"My brother, George, will be with us," Josiah told him. "He's a clever man, my brother, but I'm afraid you won't quite like him."

"Why not?" Michael asked. "I expect I shall."

"I don't think you will. He's raspy, that is what he is; he has had a lot of trouble, and it has soured him. I dare say it would have soured me, if I had had it, I expect it would, it certainly has him."

“Yes?” Michael said.

He did not feel particularly interested to hear of what sort the trouble was till Josiah said, “He’s a failure, you see.”

At that his attention was caught.

“I dare say I should have been a failure too,” Josiah went on. “I am sure I should if it had not been for Mr. Barmister; the males in our family are that kind, they haven’t much gumption, Janet says, and I think she’s right. I haven’t much, I know; and I don’t think George can have, though he has grit, plenty of grit, but he’s cantankerous with it. That is how the trouble began years ago; he fell out with his employers.”

“What was he by profession?” Michael asked.

“He was at some dye works originally,” his brother answered; “he was foreman-mechanic—he’s clever in a way—very clever. We both of us had rather a taste for machinery when we were boys: mine was nothing, only an interest in wheels and so on; it all went off in clocks.” His eyes wandered to the works of an old French clock which lay near him; clocks were his hobby. What he did not know of horology, ancient and modern, was little worth knowing; he fingered the French clock tenderly now. “George was not like me,” he said; “much cleverer. He had, I believe he still has, real ability. He invented an apparatus for ‘dyeing in the sliver,’ I think they call it, which was a very good thing; a lot of money has been made out of it.”

“Not by him, I suppose,” Michael said.

“No, that is what he quarrelled with his employers over. They gave him a five-pound note for his

invention. Of course, they weren't bound to give him anything, since he was their man, and the thing was done in their time, but it was likely to be worth a great deal to them, so he naturally expected something. Five pounds wasn't much, certainly; still, I think myself George did the wrong thing about it. He tore it in half and threw it in the senior partner's face, telling him what he thought of him. George uses rather strong language sometimes."

"That must have been a surprise for the senior partner," Michael observed. "What did he do?"

"Dismissed George on the spot," Josiah answered, and probably would have gone on to give some further details of the inventor's history had not an interruption occurred here.

On the 5th December, Michael had the opportunity of seeing the man himself. On that evening he and Nan and her father went to Bayswater. Nan wore her Sunday dress, a dark-coloured stuff dress, inconspicuous as usual—one never noticed what she wore or thought about her appearance at all. It was as well, perhaps, that her clothes were not fragile on this occasion, for it rained when they left the station, and Barmister did not take a cab. He never thought of indulging in such luxuries, and Nan accepted the doing without as a matter of course, nothing else had ever come her way.

The Foregoods' house was very small, and always seemed smaller on these annual occasions, because the hall was so narrow that when Nan and her father were both in it there was little room for Josiah, who opened the door and had to squeeze himself behind it. This evening, Michael, being an extra person, had to stand on the doorstep until Nan had gone part of the way upstairs in answer to Miss Janet's beckoning.

Miss Janet wore a dark green *moiré* dress, which had graced many similar occasions, and was brought up to the requirements of a figure bigger than the one from whom it was inherited by inlets, in unexpected places, of a younger silk of a different shade. Not that anyone of taste would have quarrelled with the costume, it was so essentially suited to the wearer. Certainly, no one would have quarrelled with her as a hostess; she had the hospitality which is the prerogative of the good housewife, proudly giving of her best, and conscious that of its kind it is excellent. Excellent it certainly was: a simple supper, but in its way perfect, each article personally selected by one who thoroughly understood the subject and personally prepared with the same understanding. Miss Janet was frankly proud of it, although, as she herself was aware, the present company were not gourmets enough to appreciate it at its true worth.

“I don’t suppose you can tell me what we had this time last year,” she said; “not Mr. Barmister, nor Nan, nor Josiah, any more than Mr. Annarly and George, who weren’t here—though they wouldn’t know any better if they had been.”

Nobody could tell her, and Michael said, “I’m afraid I should only have remembered that it was very good; when things are that one does not recollect anything else, unless one is the maker and has been through the details and difficulties of manufacture—outsiders only enjoy and forget, which seems unfair.”

“If there wasn’t anything unfairer than that in the world, there wouldn’t be much to complain of,” George said gruffly, and without raising his fierce eyes. They were fierce eyes, and distrustful too; those of one foredoomed by Nature to fight on the losing side, but a person most would not seek to fight or

contradict unnecessarily. Miss Janet had no such scruples: the man was yet to be found concerning whom she did have them, if she thought the occasion demanded contradiction or correction.

“Don’t be grumpy, George,” she said. “It isn’t unfairness people complain of principally; that’s not at the bottom of most people’s grumbling, though they may think it is, it’s their own temper and stupidity generally. Half the time when one’s food disagrees with one, it’s because one brings a sour stomach and a grievance to table.”

Having announced which, she returned to her original subject, and recalled other celebrations of the anniversary; not omitting the first of all, at which Nan, being too small, had not been present.

“I was left at home in charge of the landlady’s daughter,” Nan explained to Michael. “I remember she put me to bed, and I think she must have put me wrong, for I woke up after a little while and was frightened because I thought I heard someone scream downstairs. I screamed then in good earnest, and she had to leave her friend, the policeman, to come up and comfort me.”

“Serve her right,” was Miss Janet’s comment. “I have no doubt it was her giggling and squealing with him that woke you, poor child.”

“Maybe,” Nan said, “but I don’t think she wasted much time; I can remember being down in the kitchen after that, so I suppose she took me there. I wonder if I was much in the way of the courtship?”

“Not a bit,” said Miss Janet decidedly; “why, you wouldn’t be in the way now! In a very little you’d find them going on just as if you weren’t there.”

This may have been true, though perhaps not altogether flattering. Nan did not contradict it, and conversation went other ways, only returning to the subject of the anniversary when supper was over and a bottle of choice wine was put on the table. It was the annual custom to drink to the success of the business in the best that Josiah's resources could afford; better than he could afford without deprivation in the early days. This year it was a port worth mention, and the toast was drunk with a very real meaning on the part of most. Afterwards, George Foregood, who had made no pretence of sharing the sentiment, proposed an addition.

"Better drink success to me too," he said, "and damnation to Blackwell and Blackwell."

Josiah lowered the glass he had raised. "Success, if you like," he said, "not damnation."

"Same thing," his brother returned; "their damnation is my success: there isn't another I care for."

Josiah shook his head. "Pity," he said. "It's a pity. There isn't much good trying to get even with people; it's 'spending your substance for nought, and your money for that which profiteth not.' Besides, you never succeed in doing it really."

"Depends on who you are," George said shortly, and Nan pondered the subject.

"Perhaps a little on how much you are prepared to pay?" she suggested. "It might be like Samson and the Philistines: he pulled the house down on them, certainly, but on himself too. I suppose it was worth while to him?"

Josiah looked doubtful. "Perhaps so," he said, "perhaps so. You always do have to pull down to get

even with people; them down and often yourself down to the same level of dirty tricks, or injustice, or bad feeling, or something: it hardly seems worth it. You vindicate yourself that way, certainly, or you may—but it doesn't seem much—just be able to stick out your chest and say, 'You see, I'm right after all.'"

George did not agree, and said so emphatically. Barmister, who had been talking to Miss Janet, turned to give his curt, and a trifle contemptuous, opinion of those who ever allowed a score to accumulate to need avenging. Miss Janet and Nan left him doing so when they retired to the other room, where the re-covered chairs stood in a row, and the clocks of Josiah's collecting ticked softly from brackets and shelves.

Nothing more was heard of George's enterprise that night, though it was obvious, from what he had said, that he had an ambition set before himself which he hoped soon to accomplish. Michael rather wondered what it was: for the first time since the happenings at Galhardy's he felt some small interest in a fellow-creature. On the next day, a Sunday, when he was out with Nan, he asked her about the man.

"George Foregood?" she said. "He hopes to ruin or, at all events, seriously damage the trade of his old employers. He has invented another apparatus, or else much improved the one he invented before, and it is so much better than the first that he believes the dyers who have it will easily get all the trade of those using the first. He has been years perfecting it. All the spare money he had has gone that way, and some of Josiah's too, and what little he got with his wife. She is dead now, which is perhaps as well. I believe she was an unsatisfactory wife, and I'm sure he must have been a still more unsatisfactory

husband."

It was easy to believe this, Michael said; then asked, "Has he really perfected his invention now?"

"He thinks so," Nan answered; "and done it with his own time and own money, so there can be no dispute about ownership. Now he is looking out for someone who will float it for him. He wants to make money out of it; but he is set, above all things, on his old employers suffering through it."

"One can understand that," Michael said.

Nan agreed, but added: "I'm not sure it's wise. I don't believe it's really the best thing: rather grasping the shadow, don't you think?"

She stopped by a stile as she spoke, and turned to him, though she was questioning herself more than him. They had taken the train a little way out of London, and were spending the short day in walking out into the country. They sometimes made such excursions on a Sunday. Rather bare excursions, perhaps; they had never enough money for any but third-class travelling, and never lunch at country inns, only sandwiches provided from home, and eaten under a southern hedge, or among trees; any shelter from the weather which could be found. But there was something in the expeditions: something akin to the quiet brown land and low sky, in a way tranquil and apart from ordinary life.

The landscape that day was soft-toned. Nan, leaning against the stile, looked out across bare fields, green and brown with a film of mist on them. Even the sun was meek, only a white shining in the higher haze. "I wonder," she speculated, her eyes on a little copse, where some belated leaves still lingered—"I wonder

if George will find it worth while?"

"To wipe off his score with those people?" Michael said. "I suppose so."

"He will have given a good deal for it," she said: "all his life; not only work, and time, and money, but most other things too. I doubt if it is worth it."

"Nothing is," Michael said wearily. "I sometimes doubt if anything is worth while."

He offered a hand to help her over the stile as he spoke, and they went on together in silence.

It was one of her distinctive characteristics, her capacity for companionable silence: Michael came to value it a good deal on those Sunday excursions. There was usually an excursion on a Sunday. When, as sometimes, they could not afford the railway to the country, they went somewhere in town. Nan knew the City and its purlieus as few Londoners did, and they wandered down the deserted streets and into old forgotten corners, finding places little known and beauties not often recognised. Attending quiet City churches: old churches with their glories half obscured in the dim light of leaded windows and overshadowing buildings. Places where worshippers were few, and that few half lost in high, dark pews; and the clergy and sweet-voiced choir held the service, as of old, more for the glory of God than the edification of man. Strange, peaceful places, where a man may seek and, perhaps, find for himself something of the Mystery which lies behind the Universe.

CHAPTER VIII

EVERY profession and most trades, except perhaps a few humble female ones, such as that of washerwoman, have their societies: some have only trade unions, but many have more or less social and club-like ones as well. So vast and wide a profession as engineering, stretching from the construction of the Assouan Dam to the nice adjustment of a waste-pipe, naturally has many societies in connection with it. Michael Annarly was a member of several; also of several others of a more generally scientific or quasi-scientific nature. It cannot be said that he had very often attended the meetings of any, or found them of great interest when he did; he was essentially of the unco-operative sort, in his work independent of ordinary methods, indifferent to accepted opinions, and a little impatient of them and of the people dealing in them. Still, partly from policy, and partly from a rather pathetic effort to be in union with his kind, he had occasionally attended various meetings. The opportunities naturally had not been numerous during the time he was at Galhardy's, but he had taken them when they came. He had occasionally read a paper or contributed to a discussion: always to the advancement of knowledge, both of the subject and his hearers; though not always to the advancement of the self-esteem of former reputed authorities, of which he had not always thought to be tender. Such a thing is not forgotten, notably by the sufferer; indeed, it is very liable to be remembered, especially when the man who

committed the offence has come to grief. There are some, then, who see in his downfall the consequence of his dangerously unconstitutional mind and methods, and some who perceive a just retribution on one who has caught them (the authorities) tripping, and frankly said so. Such things would be remembered against Michael now; and those who had no personal reasons against him would look upon him with curiosity or perhaps pity, or the shrugged shoulders of superior wisdom. In the circumstances, it is not surprising that he had no inclination to attend the meetings of any society that autumn and winter, although doing so was his sole chance of meeting men of kindred tastes.

"You don't know what they are," he told Nan once; "you would not have thought I and my affairs could interest them or matter to them, but I can tell you they do, a deal more than any of the subjects they are supposed to care for. I have seen a deal more eagerness and enthusiasm over the question of who is going to get the chair of engineering at Muddleborough-cum-Pudley than over a discussion on the effect of torque on the structure of metals. That was the subject, by the way, on which old B —— got so angry with me. He was wrong, and he didn't forgive me for showing it. My observations have since received practical application, when, I understand, he fathered the theories he condemned when they were mine; but he has not forgiven me any the more for that. Nor has he forgiven me Galhardy's; he had a nephew there, rather a waster, a junior and always will be, but the old man was awfully proud of it. He did not like my situation there. He will like my present situation; and, owing to the nephew, and other circumstances, he and all his friends, following and satellites, will have known

all there is to know about it, and a good deal more besides, almost as soon as you did."

"That is one of the reasons why you should go to meetings where you will see him and his friends," Nan said. "They cannot know the truth, no one knows that wholly, and if you are never seen they will think you are ashamed to show yourself because the worst they imagine is true."

"I don't care what they think."

"Then go," she urged. "If they and their opinion don't matter, why mind going among them?"

"Because they are a lot of rule-of-thumb, time-serving place-hunters, and their ceaseless talk about nothing wearies me."

"They can't all be that," she protested; "there must be some who are worth meeting."

He admitted there were. "There are some men worth going a long way to meet," he admitted; "they are not the ones who talk much, or who are there often; still, usually one happens on one of them."

"Then for their sake it is worth going."

"Why? I don't want to hear about the work that is worth while; I don't want to hear what other men are doing, or what there is to be done. I have nothing to do with it now; I have done with it, or, rather, it with me."

"Perhaps so," she agreed, and then began to ask about the chances of picking up draughtsman's work at the meetings of any of the societies.

He said it might happen, more likely at the technical, though possibly even at the purely learned or academic ones. She did not in so many words urge

him to go on that account, but he saw the connection.

“You want me to take up this work, if I can get it?” he said. He did not want it himself; how little he wanted no one knew. It had always seemed to him the veriest threads and remnants of his profession, a dreary monotony that led nowhere, more utterly distasteful even than the drawing of chair-backs and writing Robert Barmister’s letters. But Nan wished it; she, in her ignorance, seemed to think something of it, and she had been good to him—so good that he had not the heart to disappoint her by telling her how poor and meagre it really was.

“Very well,” he said, “I’ll go to-night. Perhaps I shall be able to pick up a job.”

And he went. And though he did not pick up a job, Nan was satisfied, for when he came back he told her of a discussion there had been in which it was clear he had taken a part, forgetting, in his anxiety to establish a point, his own equivocal position. No doubt he had remembered it before and afterwards; no doubt some present had helped him to do so; and no doubt the position had been trying enough (in spite of his declaration of indifference) to one of his acutely perceptive temperament and overstrained nerves. But the stirring of former interests, and the response to the appeal of familiar terms, were equally real. The next time Nan suggested he should go to a meeting, he went with less urging.

That time it happened he met Johnson, a member of the firm of patent agents employed by Galhardy’s. He had come across him a good deal during the latter part of the time he was at the great foundries, having more than once given advice, unofficially, on technical subjects in connection with patents.

Possibly Johnson remembered this now; possibly, also, he knew enough of the methods of the firm to suspend judgment on Michael's affairs. At all events he showed no inclination to avoid his company.

"What are you doing now?" he asked casually in the course of talk.

"For a living? Making drawings of chair-backs for a relative."

The tone was careless, and Johnson thought it a jest; but Michael assured him to the contrary.

"Fact," he said, still speaking lightly. "Don't you believe I can do it? I can; I draw rather well."

"Yes," Johnson said—he had suddenly seen the speaker's eyes, and saw that in them at utter variance with the light tone and manner.

"Why chair-backs?" he asked. "Why not something more in line with your previous work?"

"Because they offered first," Michael answered truthfully, but still so carelessly as to almost leave a doubt about the truth. "I'm not particular, anything that offers will do for me. I'd do chair-legs, if they were wanted, or geometrical patterns for linoleum, or machine drawings, anything."

"Is that a fact?" Johnson said, and then added, with just a trace of hesitancy, "would you do our drawings?"

For half a second Michael shrank; the instinct to decline, to turn from this contact with the work of the past, still more from the proffered help of a man from it, was tremendous. But swiftly came the thought of Nan, who expected him to get it, who expected something to come of it.

"Certainly, if you'll give me any," he said, and was grateful that the other kindly refrained from apologising for the nature of the work, and the poverty of the pay.

In that way Michael received his first draughtsman's work. It was poorly paid, but, as a compensation, there was a good deal of it, and always likely to be. The Patent Office requires that all drawings of machinery and processes for which a patent is applied for should be of a certain size and fineness, and on a particular kind of paper. It is the patent agents' business to get such made from the original drawings of the patentee, naturally employing whom they think fit to do it, and paying him a much smaller sum than their client pays them. Such drawing is very monotonous, and in a sense mechanical; demanding the nicest accuracy and attention to detail, without allowing any scope for individuality. It was particularly distasteful to one of Michael's nature. Nevertheless, he did it when he could get it. If he saw little chance of arriving at anything better that way, it might at least ultimately be a method of earning a living. The principal difficulty he found in connection with it, was to refrain from pointing out to the patentee the technical flaws which he sometimes perceived in the invention thus brought to his notice.

Nan once asked him why he did not point them out.

"It wouldn't be fair to Johnson," he said. "The clients might resent their drawings being sent to a man who was able to find out the faults, and, consequently, they would judge, able to annex valuable ideas if he had a mind to—especially a man with a reputation like mine. Besides, what does it matter? It doesn't matter to me if they are wrong."

"No," Nan said, but she thought that it did; that underneath there would always be something in him to which error of that sort mattered, and problems appealed. And probably she was right; at all events, in a little he glanced up from the drawing he was at work upon. It was one for an invention which would be rendered valueless by such a flaw—the result, most likely, of the inventor's ignorance of a small and obscure law.

"I tell you what I might do here," he said; "I might write out that law, put it so that anyone could apply it for himself to this invention, and send a copy of it to the patentee anonymously. If he is any good, he will at once see what he has done, and set it right before it is too late. I think I'll do that."

He did: but since it was done anonymously he naturally did not hear the result; and, his interest having suddenly burnt out, he never troubled to inquire if the specification was altered, or the application for the patent withdrawn.

This was in February. He had been more than three months in Soho then, and seemed, so far as one could judge, likely to be many more; working for Barmister in the day and drawing out other men's inventions at night. Almost, it seemed, as if he had sunk into obscurity never to reappear; certainly to be as far as ever from any return to his old life and work. Towards the end of the month, it is true, he came into something like momentary touch with it. It was when he met Blake, of Blake and Kingswell.

Blake and Kingswell were the people who supplied oil to Galhardy's: Michael had seen a certain amount of the junior partner during the last part of his time with the firm. The new steel process he had worked out was for an oil-hardened metal, and as a

consequence he had had several interviews with Blake; when, besides discussing qualities of oil and kindred business details, they had talked of enough other things to form a favourable opinion of each other. But when he caught sight of the man in the City, where he had gone on some business for Barmister, his instinct was to avoid him. However, as it chanced, he was recognised before he more than thought of doing it.

“Hullo!” Blake said. “You in town? What are you doing?”

“I live in town,” Michael answered—he had no inclination to speak of the chair-backs.

“Consulting work?” Blake asked. “Very wise; much better worth your while than anything else. I always thought you were rather wasted at Galhardy’s.”

Michael said nothing. There were draughtsmen who called themselves consulting engineers, and he had a sudden distaste to owning himself a complete failure to this man who still thought him otherwise.

They walked on together for a while, speaking of various technicalities in connection with Blake’s business, notably some trouble there was with the filter presses in the oil works.

As Michael listened, the old instinct stirred. At first he only listened, but soon it was more; the familiar names and turns of thought called up the old attention. Without being aware of it, he was making inquiries and suggestions with the absorbed attention and keen insight he always had for such things.

At the corner of the street Blake said, “Couldn’t you manage to come down and have a look at the presses? Our works aren’t very far from town. We

must have an expert opinion. I'd sooner have yours than any man's I know. Can you do it?"

Again, as when Johnson offered him the draughtsman's work, Michael hesitated. He could not himself have told why: not from any doubt of his ability to do what was required, or any dislike of it, nor yet from any uncertainty as to payment. He had none of these. Yet for the second he drew back from the idea; from embarking on anything, taking any step, however sure and desirable, out of the humble, present way. The sensation was mastered almost as quickly as it arose; he said he should be glad to give an opinion, and fixed a time for the visit of inspection when his absence was least likely to inconvenience Barmister.

It was a small matter really, this visit to the oil works; little more than an hour spent in the familiar atmosphere of machines, with the smell of oil and the sound of wheels, the semi-living company of force housed and harnessed in iron. But to Michael it was not only like the smell of the sea to the sailor, and the sound of guns to the old campaigner, but something more. It is something to be back again with what you can do supremely well; with instant and complete mastery to grip a problem and solve a difficulty, even if it is a small one; when for months your meat and drink has been, and you have lain down and risen up with one thought only—failure, complete failure, and a sense of your own utter inadequacy. Such a thing is something. The visit to the oil works stood out for Michael a peak in the grey level of that time; and though he said nothing of it to Nan—such things do not express themselves readily, even when one is fully conscious of them—it is possible she understood. Though they said

nothing, they celebrated the occasion together, spending part of the fee he obtained in going far enough into the country to see the first stirrings of spring under the dun skin of winter.

It sometimes happens that one man's difficulty satisfactorily dealt with leads to other men offering others for solution. It may have been the case with Michael; at all events, after a time a second piece of consulting work was offered to him. It was merely to give an opinion on a machine for heating houses by a process, and with substances hitherto undreamed of —and entirely impracticable for that purpose. He went into the matter carefully and exhaustively. He did not see a thing as ridiculous or fraudulent nearly so quickly as many less well-informed: there were such infinite possibilities in his universe that he always began by regarding as possible what was seriously brought before him, even if it at first sight transgressed laws as he knew them. This time it took him some time to discover that the whole process and machine for carrying it out were utterly ridiculous and impracticable. When he did come to this conclusion, and proved it beyond doubt, he wrote a report in accordance—for which he received nothing at all. It is impossible to raise money or float a company on the report of an expert who condemns the whole scheme as unsound; in such circumstances, if he is of no very high standing, or not in the position to receive (a much smaller) fee beforehand, he can hardly be surprised if payment is a part of the affair overlooked.

The next consultation on which Michael was called was also unremunerative. It was a "friendly" one. That is, he spent a Saturday afternoon discussing technicalities and details with a man whom he had

met once before, and who suddenly revived, or discovered, a friendship for him. The man in question learnt what he wanted to know, and was able afterwards to put it into practice, at the slight cost of a whisky and soda and a cigarette or two. Being naturally satisfied with such a result, and feeling very friendly towards Michael, the active factor in it, he shortly afterwards introduced another man. The second also was “friendly”; but, as Michael was not inclined to give away another Saturday afternoon, the second spent no more than ten minutes or so in his company, and gained only one piece of information worth having for nothing.

Towards the end of March, Michael received another application for information, but of a different sort. This time it was a letter from a General Wallaby (retired) requesting him to give an opinion on an automatic brake for high-speed motor engines. The General did not mention how he had come to hear of him, and Michael never knew whether it was from some former acquaintance, or from one of the very few who had employed him, or by some chance talk overheard. He rather inclined to the latter view, for the letter, written in the third person, was couched in terms rather suggestive of a communication to a firm of house-decorators about the heating apparatus, or a summons to a good mechanic to come and overhaul the car. But, as Nan pointed out, the writer “concluded the fee would be the usual one of £2 2s. 0d. (two guineas),” and that, at least, was something to the point.

“After all,” she said, “two guineas is two guineas; indeed, rather more than less, these times.”

Michael did not agree; he disliked the idea of the guineas more than the work. “I don’t mind

overhauling the old fellow's car," he said, "and putting his automatic brake idea in going order—if that's possible, which I rather expect it's not. I have done that sort of thing for different people lots of times when I was at Galhardy's, but I can't exactly take a fee for it."

"Why not?"

He did not seem able to quite say. "It's rather like when one has set the bathroom taps right for somebody, if he offered one eightpence an hour, or whatever it is plumbers get."

"I suppose it is," Nan admitted. "Still, if the person thought you a plumber, and would not have asked you to set the taps right otherwise? It would be rather embarrassing for him if you didn't take the eightpence, and so showed he'd made that sort of mistake."

"People have no business to make that sort of mistake," Michael said, "they would not, if they gave themselves the trouble to think. Why should this General Wallaby think me a mechanic, in the first instance, or go on thinking me one in the second?"

Nan could not tell him. "It never seems to me to much matter what people think," she owned. "I suppose it comes of being the kind of person no one notices or really thinks about, anyway; but, to me, it never seems important what one is thought, it does not alter what one really is. Of course, for anyone to apply to you to give an opinion on motor brakes and such is a little like sending for a great surgeon to tie up a cut finger, an egregious waste. Though on the whole, perhaps, hardly so much of a waste, so far as you are concerned, as copying machine drawings for patent agents, if for no other reason than that it is

better paid."

Michael laughed a little. "I wonder," he said, "whether you judge very much truer, or very much less true than most people? Certainly, you don't judge like them."

But he took her advice and went to see General Wallaby and the brakes, which had been made to his design.

He found them as impractical as he had expected, and quite beyond any improving into usefulness. However, he was able to do something for his money, for there were other home-invented adjuncts affixed to the car; the General spent his retirement and the surplus of a comfortable income on such things. Michael was able to make suggestions and alterations by which some of the earlier ones might be rendered serviceable. Gibbs, the chauffeur—no mean mechanic, it was necessary for the safety of the General that he should be highly competent—looked on, at first with distrust, for he immediately perceived that the stranger was not of the fraternity, afterwards with puzzled interest, and finally with awed admiration. General Wallaby also looked on and offered remarks and explanations from time to time, all of which were received with respectful attention and interest.

"Seemed to understand his business," the General remarked to Gibbs afterwards.

"Yes, sir," said Gibbs, saluting.

"Quite an intelligent person; not so abominably conceited as most of these engineers; able to take another man's idea and allow there's something in it. He was quite struck with that last one of mine."

“Yes, sir,” said Gibbs. “He might well be that, sir.”

The General walked round his car radiating approval. He stopped to handle his last but one improvement. The recently departed expert had done the same, and the General recalled his hands—wonderful, sensitive hands with broad palms and curiously slim, alive fingers, very well kept.

“Gibbs,” the General said, he sometimes unbent to Gibbs, who was a very superior man as well as a good mechanic—“Gibbs, what class do those sort of people belong to?”

“Couldn’t say, sir. You see, there isn’t many of them, sir, they’d hardly be a class, they’re so very, very few.”

There are not few who call themselves consulting engineers, there are a good many of them. But there are few men of great ability and inborn comprehension in that or any other profession: genius is rare, and not always to be classed when met. Still one—certainly not the General—need not conclude that was what Gibbs meant. Though, it must be admitted, when he let the expert out by the back gate, which was the nearest way to the station, he did say with some eagerness, “Sir, if you ever want a mechanic, if you ever want one for anything, will you think of me? I’d be proud to work under you in any capacity!”

And it is possible that Michael, travelling back to town, thought more of those words than of the two guineas which, enclosed in an envelope, General Wallaby had put into his hand.

After General Wallaby no one asked his services for anything, not even for a “friendly” conference.

It seemed as if he were back again where he was before the chance meeting with Blake, no more than Barmister's not very efficient clerk and handy-man, and, in his spare time, occasional draughtsman to patent agents, and curiously patient, almost apathetic, at being so.

But in the middle of April there came a touch from what had been lost. He received a letter from an important steamship company who, like others, were very interested in the problem of the application of internal combustion engines to large ships. They had, it appeared, a design for such an engine under consideration now; but, for some reason, they had begun to doubt its real practicability. They wrote asking Michael if he would examine and advise upon it, and, possibly, undertake its perfecting.

It was a difficult subject, involving problems which one would hardly expect to take to a man whose best work was done on aerial torpedoes and steel. Michael guessed how it was that it had come to him.

"Blake's father-in-law is one of the directors of the company," he said. "I remember his mentioning it one day at Galhardy's; we had been talking about internal combustion engines for big ships, a subject that always interested me."

Nan by this time knew something of the subjects that interested him. Their name was legion, and any and every one introduced to his notice was able to exclusively occupy his attention and give rise to whole trains of new, and, to the initiated, illuminating ideas.

"I suppose," she suggested, "those steamship people would not find it easy to get a man to do what it is they want done?"

Michael admitted that possibility. “The ones best qualified are a bit too big,” he said. “You see, it would probably entail six months’ or so close work in the works. It wouldn’t be worth a big man’s while to take it up, or worth the company’s while to pay the exorbitant price they would have to, if one could be persuaded to do it.”

Nan nodded; it seemed that this time the circumstances, which heretofore had told against him, now told in his favour; inasmuch as they made him, a man in the first rank of ability, glad to accept work beyond the attainments of most of those whose attention it was not beneath.

“Will it take six months?” she asked.

“Very likely. Of course, one might not make a success of it in that time, but it should be possible to find out, if one could. If one could, it might mean a pretty good thing, very likely fifteen hundred pounds a year ultimately. I think one should manage to get that, and with that——”

The old lights flickered in his eyes for a minute; in mind he saw again a possibility of something akin to the old position, of a return to work with scope in it, and, consequently, liberty, power, and all that which, for him, it entailed.

“I should have that man of Wallaby’s, if I ever did get in,” he said. “I don’t suppose he knows anything about marine engines, but that doesn’t matter, he’s a good man; I don’t think much of specialised knowledge *per se*; after all, it’s less what a man knows that matters in real problems, than how he sets about dealing with what he doesn’t know.”

Nan agreed and said nothing about air-castles and the previousness of arranging the staff of them before

the first brick is laid; she knew that that childish faculty sometimes goes with the constructive mathematical mind.

But the enthusiasm did not remain with the builder now. “I don’t know that we need spend time talking of what I’ll do if I do make a success of it,” he said, “quite likely I shan’t make anything of the kind.”

But she did not believe that; nor did he really, although at times he insisted on it, speaking of the enormous difficulties of the hitherto unsolved problem presented by the big engines.

That same day he wrote to the steamship company, saying he was willing to undertake their work, suggesting terms and other arrangements. He did not mention the matter to Barmister; although he and Nan thought a great deal about it, neither mentioned it to her father, there would be time enough for that when all was settled.

And as it happened events justified this reticence. Two days later there came another letter from the company. Michael’s reply had been received, but after further consideration, the board had decided not to proceed on the lines originally indicated. Their own engineers hoped to be equal to doing all that was necessary, so they would not trouble him further in the matter.

“Are they equal to it?” Nan asked. “How can they be now if they weren’t four days ago?”

Michael shrugged his shoulders. “They may have hit on something,” he said, “though I hardly think so.”

“Nor do I,” she said significantly.

He took the blow, and blow it certainly was, very quietly. “After all,” he said, “it’s not really surprising;

it's only what we might have expected. The wonder is, not that they have backed out now, but that they appealed to me in the first instance. Most of the directors of this are in two or three kindred companies and thoroughly mixed in that lot; if they don't absolutely know any of Galhardy's directors personally they do indirectly; they must have known something about that affair."

"Of course," Nan said, "they would hardly have applied to you if they had not; it's only because of that that you are free and willing to do what they wanted, and they know it; besides, if, as you say, it was through Mr. Blake they did apply to you, he would probably have said something about it to them, very likely not to your discredit."

"Blake's a good sort," Michael said; "he'd have made the best tale he could; he believes the best, I think; he was awfully decent to me."

His face brightened for a moment, as he recalled the afternoon with the oil presses.

"What has caused this change, then?" Nan asked. "Why have they altered their minds now?"

Michael did not know. "Possibly," he suggested, "one director, more nervous or more suspicious or more punctilious than the rest, who was not there at the first discussion, came along afterwards and upset the others. Or perhaps some one of them has heard a fresh yarn about me. Or it might even be that someone in Galhardy's, hearing there was a chance of me getting in there, has taken the trouble to talk to them. I don't know how much interest Galhardy's take in me and my proceedings, I should hardly have thought so much as that, still they may; they had a rather exalted opinion of the work I might do for

other people, and the consequent damage to them. Anyway, I don't see that it matters how it happened; it has happened, as it was likely to, and there's an end."

Nan nodded: there was an end, there was nothing to be gained by speculating on the reason or the manner of it.

"And after all," he said, "perhaps it's just as well. I dare say I shouldn't have done any good with the thing, if I had had the chance; it's a subject on which I have worked very little; probably I should have made a muddle of it. And working for people like that again—working that way——"

He did not finish the sentence, but it was plain that he shrank from the idea as he had before welcomed it, doubting his own ability and everything else.

CHAPTER IX

ROSALIND ANNARLY was to be married just after Easter: the wedding, which was to have taken place in the winter, was postponed until then on account of a death in the Wharton family—not in the immediate family circle, but since the deceased was the only daughter of the weighty relative from whom Dick had expectations, it was thought advisable to pay proper respect.

"Besides," so Rosalind said, "I hate a wedding with one family in mourning or half mourning. And, after all, April is a much better time to get frocks than the winter, and a new house, and curtains, and everything look nicer then."

So she supported the postponement with equanimity. She was very comfortable at home; her father's favourite, and an acknowledged beauty, which, in connection with her satisfactory engagement, gave her some prestige and even more liberty to have what she liked than would otherwise have fallen to her share. If Dick was more impatient for a change of condition, and had no sartorial consolations to pass the time, he could at least reflect that the postponement was his doing, or rather his relatives', and dictated by wisdom if not by feeling. But in the spring there was a period put to the time of waiting; the date for the wedding was fixed, and the business of preparation went forward with enthusiasm.

Michael, naturally, was expected to be home for the wedding. He had been home very little during the

winter and spring; he had really no time for it. The family at Hurstbury were sorry, of course; but, since he had never been there much, they cannot be said to have missed him. For the wedding, however, they expected him: there is a definite part allotted to the bride's brothers on such occasions; Michael would come and fill it. Constance wrote and told him so.

"What a pity he isn't as good-looking as Jack," Rosalind said. Jack was home now, and a really satisfactory brother the sisters found: tall, good-looking, and sociable—a masculine edition of themselves.

"Michael is nothing like Jack," Rosalind said, thinking of her bridal procession; "it's rather a pity."

"I don't think that matters," Mabel said. "The sort of thing I should have thought a pity would have been if he had not been able to keep Mr. Barmister away."

"Mabel!" Constance protested. "How can you say such a thing? I am sure he had nothing to do with Mr. Barmister stopping away."

But Mabel thought he had. "The Barmisters would expect him to look after them," she said. "They wouldn't know anyone else here, and they'd stick to him. I guess he felt two of them would be too much for him, and so persuaded Nan to accept without her father."

Constance did not think so. "At all events," she said, "I am glad Nan is coming; she is a good little thing and must have a dull time. I should have been pleased if her father had come with her."

Mabel was sceptical. "He might have been all right," she said; "on the other hand, he might have worn a three-foot gold watch-chain and five diamond rings,

and gone round valuing the wedding presents in the hearing of the givers."

"Mabel!" Constance said, shocked; but Rosalind laughed, though she reminded her sister that Barmister was not a pawnbroker.

"No," Mabel agreed, "he might have given you something good from among the pledges, if he were."

Rosalind laughed again, and the subject was dropped in favour of the more interesting one of wedding presents—who had given them; who was yet to give; who had shown themselves more generous than was to be expected, and who less; not omitting the irritating question of duplicates, and what was to be done with them.

"Three half-dozens of afternoon tea-knives!" Rosalind said with a little grimace.

"You'll have to exchange some," was Mabel's opinion; "though you won't get much for them: they are as thin as paper, and really no use to anyone—except to give away. Shall you keep all the salt-cellars?"

Rosalind could not make up her mind, and Constance said she was rather surprised Uncle Giles chose those articles for his present.

"He ought to have sent a cheque, and a big one," Mabel said, more outspokenly. "I dare say he would if he and father had not fallen out over the Budget."

Rosalind observed pathetically that she had nothing to do with the Budget, and did not see why, since she knew nothing about it, Uncle Giles should have been mean to her. After that she was called away to speak

to her sisters-in-law-elect, and left Constance and Mabel to finish setting out the wedding presents without her.

“There certainly are rather many tea-knives,” Constance regretted, as she arranged the cases on the dining-room table.

“Even more teaspoons,” Mabel said; “though I should think we might reckon them all in by now: there can’t be much more to come, so late as this.”

The wedding itself was to-morrow. The house by this time was in something of a flutter. For days past there had been a growing excitement and tendency to disruption of ordinary life; now, almost all pretence of routine had gone. People ran up and down stairs constantly, friends and acquaintances looked in at all manner of times, the dressmaker was interviewed in the drawing-room, meals were unpunctual, the servants could be sent to the post at any hour, and anyone could have a cup of tea whenever she wanted it. A wedding, like spring-cleaning, brings maids and mistresses to the level of mere women, and deranges the whole domestic organisation. Jack went to see friends a good deal at that time, bestowing, however, a certain amount of patronising interest on the presents between whiles. Mr. Annarly retired as much as possible to the little room at the back. It had of late been much littered with paper, and string, and milliners’ boxes, and parcels of things sent on approval, or ready to return for alterations to shops and dressmakers. But they were gone now. Constance, an orderly spirit, comparatively little affected by the general excitement, had seen to that. It was she who had arranged that the boxes and parcels should all find their way there, so keeping the house clear, and

things where they could be found, as long as possible. It was she who saw that they were removed this morning, so as to be ready for the furniture from the drawing-room, which was to be put there.

The drawing-room was cleared of all superfluous chairs and small tables; everything which could increase the difficulty of getting three times as many people into it as it would naturally be expected to hold. Mrs. Annarly went round the denuded room, while Rosalind, assisted by her sisters-in-law-elect, was arranging flowers on a table, belonging somewhere else, placed temporarily in the centre. Everyone in Hurstbury had some flowers in bloom at this time, and everyone acquainted with the Annarlys seemed to have sent some for the occasion: it looked as if it would be impossible for the girls to deal with all the choice ones, let alone the masses of daffodils, and primroses, and violets that were piled about them. Fortunately, the recalcitrant Mary, who had returned for a day or two to oblige her former mistress at the interesting time, was clever with flowers—as she was with most other things. She took the work over when the girls grew tired of it.

“I think things are nicely forward,” Mrs. Annarly said with self-congratulation when later she sat down to tea at the stranger-table, now cleared of flowers by the efficient Mary; “though I can’t help rather wishing your dress were coming to-night, Rosalind. I know it’s not customary, and of course we can depend on Madame Elaine; but I do wish it were coming to-night, and that Michael was. Supposing he is late to-morrow, or tries to come by some other train than we told him? How awkward!”

Her daughters assured her there was no need for uneasiness on either account, and as it was

Constance who said it, giving excellent reasons, she settled into satisfaction again. Everything really was satisfactory, and every minute of time too fully occupied to admit of unnecessary troubling over trifles; what with the arrival of belated presents, notes to be written, and orders to be given, the remainder of the day was more than taken up.

The next morning was fine, which, besides being pleasing to the bride, was fortunate for Mr. Annarly, and, later on, for the wearers of light dresses and thin shoes. Had it not been fine it is difficult to see quite what Mr. Annarly would have done with himself for the long morning; that is, after he had superintended the placing of the champagne in the refreshment tent. As it was, he went into the garden and devoted himself to tying up hyacinth flowers. He put a small mat on the path, and knelt on it before the flowers—stooping did not suit his figure—and tied them to neat new sticks; giving himself to the work absorbedly, and as if the general success of the wedding would be considerably marred if the hyacinth blooms were not all standing in a military row. It is possible that he did, subconsciously, hold this opinion while he was engaged in his task; at all events, he resented it as a waste of time when the caterers' men required his presence and opinion on some matter in connection with the tent on the lawn.

Jack, of course, was at home that day, and enjoyed it much more than his father. For one reason, going to the City had not been a custom so long established with him as to make him feel being at home on a weekday, which was not a bank holiday, somewhat like finding oneself at the breakfast-table in pyjamas. For another, he was not yet sufficiently used to being the object of consideration to the womenkind when

at home to miss that attention now that they were otherwise engaged and themselves the centre of everything. He enjoyed himself thoroughly; he had quite got over the slight masculine superiority he had thought proper to show toward the bustle of the last few days, and was here, there, and everywhere with almost as much enthusiasm as any of the servants. He hurried down to the telephone-office to inquire about the bouquets; he went once to the church to see that the awning was being fixed; and he carried a perfectly unimportant message to Dick Wharton, and brought him back to answer it in person at a great pace. Dick was still answering it in person to Rosalind when the dressmaker and the dress arrived, and, though it wanted two hours and more before the ceremony, Rosalind retired from the eye of man for the rite of dressing.

The women of the household, from Mrs. Annarly to the cook, and the brusque Mabel to the romantic young housemaid, appreciated the occasion thoroughly. They did not, as the father and son did, resent the unpunctual breakfast, they hardly noticed that it was unpunctual; they preferred a light lunch on trays in their bedrooms, and had it: Mr. Annarly did not, and was provided with a more proper meal in the little room at the back, where a space was found by the invaluable Mary for him and the lunch. The same capable young woman arranged a substantial meal for Jack in the pantry—and enlivened it for him with her company, looking to the buttons of Mr. Annarly's gloves the while. She looked to the fastenings of everyone's gloves, and found everything which was mislaid; she really was a treasure, as Mrs. Annarly said. She dressed Mrs. Annarly that day; while the parlourmaid, who had taken her place, dressed the bridesmaid sisters, and

the dressmaker attended on the bride and saw that the creation of her art was put on as it should be—which must be almost as much satisfaction to a dressmaker as it is to a poet to recite his own verses.

The wedding-dress was exquisite, everyone (every woman who saw it) agreed about that. The trimming alone had cost more than Rosalind had ever spent on a whole dress before—or would be able to again, unless Dick came most unexpectedly and largely into money. There was a full Court-train which Rosalind managed as if to the manner born, and which well became her beauty and her height. It is true Uncle Giles said, “Why not have given her a bead petticoat and a nose-ring while you’re about it? She’s quite as likely to go to the Pacific Islands and want that suit as to Court and want the other.” But then, he was annoyed with the whole family just then, and as he did not make the remark to Rosalind, it did not matter. She was entirely happy in the possession of a dress which fulfilled her ideal and fully set off her beauty, the central figure of the occasion, the chosen of the man she had chosen, and about to be united to him.

Everything went precisely as it ought, nobody was late, nothing was forgotten; when the Annarlys did things they usually did them rather well, all their friends and acquaintances agreed about that. The wedding was a case in point, and in every way satisfactory. There were a great many people there; it was wonderful how many managed to get into the house afterwards. Not all in one room at once, that would have been impossible, but divided and with the overflow in the garden, it was quite comfortable. They did not all know each other, but most of them did, for they were mostly local people. The few

strangers present were relatives of the two families, unknown to each other and the rest of the company.

Nan was in this position; she knew hardly anyone, and the few she did know by sight, from chance meetings on her occasional visits to Hurstbury, did not remember her. She made little impression on them then, and was entirely inconspicuous now in spite of her expensive dress. It was an expensive dress and an unbecoming. Her father had told her to get herself something fine for the occasion, as good as or better than anything the Annarlys would have, he had said, and given her ample money to get it. She had obeyed him, though the sense of rivalry with them, which at times gleamed jealously in him, was entirely left out of her. The result of the purchase was not very satisfactory; she really knew nothing of the fashions, and was, moreover, a person for whom even a talented costumier could not have done much. The fashionable dress and Paris hat she had been persuaded to buy by expert saleswomen were not suited to her; her sense of fitness, the single things approaching a dress instinct which she possessed, rebelled at them even when she put them on.

But after a time they caught the attention and raised the admiration of an unimportant spinster relative of the Whartons. At least, one concludes it was the impression caused by the dress rather than the wearer, which made her speak so diffidently. She wanted a piece of the cake which was on the plate at Nan's elbow, and asked her for it with a bashful timidity new in Nan's experience of the addresses of her fellow-creatures. Nan passed the plate, and afterwards they talked a little, Miss Wharton making the correct series of remarks on the delights of the weather, the beauty of the bride, the charmingness of

Mrs. Annarly, the prettiness of the bridesmaids, and the general attraction and worth of the bridegroom. Nan listened; she had spoken to too few people that day to have heard all these before, and she really did quite agree with them; it did all seem to her much what Miss Wharton said: a pretty wedding, very nice, so suitable, exactly what one would wish. The last, of course, must be interpreted—"wish to look at"—so far as Nan was concerned; considered from any other points of view it did not even enter her judgment. Had it done so, it would have given rise to quite another opinion to the one with which she concurred.

The fingers of wedding-cake being finished, she and Miss Wharton went to look at the wedding presents together. Nan had seen them already, but Miss Wharton had not, and being, it seemed, incurably shy, entreated Nan to come with her.

"It looks so odd going about alone and speaking to no one," she said naively, "do come with me, if you don't mind. I quite thought my old friend, Jenny Matthews, would be here; she told me she was coming, and somebody told me she was here, but I haven't seen her yet."

As it happened, however, she met Miss Matthews in the dining-room, and, after greeting her, entered into a duet of admiration of the presents in which Nan was not asked to bear much share.

"What lovely spoons!" said one.

"Such an uncommon pattern!" the other.

"Oh, here are some more!" exclaimed the first. "The same, aren't they?"

"No, not quite the same, even prettier——"

“Yes, really prettier.”

And so on, Nan behind them listening attentively till someone accosted her.

It was Michael. “What time are you going?” he asked in the brief way of one who, for a moment, speaks to an intimate.

She answered in the same way, mentioning a train. “Rosalind will be gone by that,” she said. “But you won’t be able to leave then; they will expect you to stop to dinner perhaps.”

“I think not,” he said. “I hardly think I need to do that.”

But she did. “It’s no use doing this sort of thing unless one does it well,” she urged; “one isn’t doing it really, unless one does it whole, and seems to like doing it.”

He gave way. “I suppose so,” he said, and turned away, two girls and their mother claiming his attention.

As he turned, an automatic courtesy slipped over him as completely as a domino. For the moment when he had spoken to Nan it had not been there; for that moment, when they stood close together and thought of the same thing, there had been a curious passing resemblance between them. They were not alike, but they had something in common, both faces were thinner than those around, the eyes of both more earnest and watchful; in expression they were, for the moment when they spoke together, curiously unlike other people and curiously like each other.

“What’s your name?”

The question was put abruptly to Nan by an elderly

gentleman wearing a short coat and a red tie. Mr. Giles Cordover, Mrs. Annarly's only brother, was an advanced Liberal in his political opinions and some part of the creed, as he held it, would seem to have required him to attend his niece's wedding with these articles of attire, though he would not have dreamed of going either to church or to the City so dressed.

Nan looked up. "Nan Barmister," she answered. She had no idea who her interlocutor was, but she did not resent the abrupt inquiry.

"Barmister," he repeated, and his eyes, which had gone from Michael to her before he spoke, followed Michael now.

"You're related, aren't you?" he said, nodding in the direction.

"Cousins," she said.

"He's with you now, with your father or something? He took him on when he was returned empty?"

She nodded. "Though that's not why they returned him," she said, smiling a little.

"Oh? That your notion? Do you still hold to the family fancy that he's a genius?"

"Is that a fancy of the Annarlys?" Nan asked. "I didn't know they still held to it."

Mr. Cordover's face relaxed a little. "Well, no, perhaps they don't," he admitted; "they've changed their tune of late, I will say that for them. But you would seem to still hold to it—he's going to set the Thames on fire and make a fortune and all the rest?"

"I hardly think I should say that," Nan said slowly. She had a habit of speaking rather slowly; it came of

her way of thinking before she spoke, and meaning literally what she said, really giving her considered judgment in small matters as well as great. The result was unsatisfactory in ordinary social intercourse, where it was naturally misunderstood; but to some people it gave a weight to her words which made them worth answering: Mr. Cordover, apparently, was of these.

“You don’t think he’s going to make his fortune?” he said. “Only a second-class genius after all?”

“I didn’t say that,” Nan reminded him.

“What then?”

“That I think it very likely he won’t make a fortune. I said that, and I think it, though of course he may. But as to a genius—he is, you know.”

Mr. Cordover did not know, but Nan spoke as if she did; not as if she were giving an opinion, rather stating a simple fact. Mr. Cordover did not contradict her; not because he was not contradictory, he was, very; nor because he did not disagree with her, for he did. Perhaps because he vaguely felt that though she would have given his opinion courteous attention, it would have made no difference to her. It does make no difference if, when you know that a Rembrandt is a Rembrandt, someone, who has had no opportunity of studying the subject, says in casual conversation that it is a Phil May. Mr. Cordover may not have grasped this rather arrogant attitude, which Nan unconsciously held towards the few subjects she understood, but he did not contradict her. He glanced across at the person under discussion, who was now at the other side of the table, listening with polite interest to what the mother was telling him, while her two daughters stood behind, examining

turquoise hat-pins and silver butter-dishes.

Miss Wharton and her friend were just beyond Nan, and having been absorbed in their chat had not noticed that anyone else had spoken to her; now, recollecting her, they turned to her in enthusiastic admiration of everything.

“Isn’t it an exquisite sideboard!” Miss Wharton exclaimed, standing before a small modern copy of a Sheraton model, for which space had, with difficulty, been made at the end of the room. “What a handsome present! I do think they are lucky young people, don’t you? Don’t you think it’s a sweet design?”

“Yes,” Nan answered; “I like it very much.”

“H’m!” Mr. Cordover said gruffly. “Gimcrack!”

“Not altogether, do you think?” she asked. “It’s a good copy and well made on the whole; the drawers are not air-tight, certainly, but perhaps one would hardly expect that.”

She spoke again with the unconscious assurance of one who knows; Mr. Cordover observed it, and was a little surprised.

“Sort of notion of a sideboard a girl like Rosalind would have!” he said.

“Perhaps so,” she agreed, “if she had a notion apart from the fashion. Do you think she would have?” She put the question speculatively. “Of course, there are some designs she could never choose. I don’t suppose she would ever choose a massive one—solid Honduras mahogany, almost purple, with drawers that slide noiselessly and fruit carved over the top, beautiful pears you can put your finger under, and a

pineapple in the centre."

Mr. Cordover snorted. "So," he said, "my nieces have been making game of me and my things, have they!"

"Of you?" Nan asked. "Of course not. I am sure they wouldn't do anything of the kind. They have not mentioned you to me that I know of. I'm afraid I must say I don't know who you are. If you think they or someone told me that you have a sideboard like that, no one has; though I naturally know you would be likely to have, if you could have afforded it when you were furnishing, and were uninfluenced by other people at the time."

Mr. Cordover stared at her half sceptically. "How do you know?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," she answered, "unless it is because my father deals in furniture and talks to me about it. I sometimes see people he deals with, and get to know the sort of things which belong to different sorts of persons. One gets to know that way."

"H'm!" Mr. Cordover said.

At that moment Constance, who had brought some solitary relative and tactfully introduced her to Miss Wharton, approached her uncle with a pleasant remark.

Mr. Cordover answered gruffly, and Nan withdrew a pace, instantly reduced to speechless shyness by the presence of Constance.

"Oh, there you are!" Constance said, when she became aware of her. "I was wondering where you had hidden yourself. I'm afraid we've neglected you dreadfully, but we're trusting to you to look after yourself. Do go and have an ice; I've heard Mabel say they're very good."

Nan answered shyly, “Thank you,” and looked round, as if preparing to obediently go or otherwise make her escape.

But Mr. Cordover’s bulky figure was in the way. “If she wants an ice,” he said, “I’ll see she has one; you need not give yourself any further trouble about her.”

“That young lady has about as much reality as a daddy-long-legs has inside,” he announced, when Constance, rather curtly dismissed, had gone on to other social duties. “She’s all shell, that’s what she is; and her words are shells with nothing in them. She couldn’t even get decently angry about anything—it’d take her hair out of curl.”

“Her hair curls naturally,” Nan protested, shy no longer. “I admire it and her; she is always kind and pleasant.”

“You didn’t seem to have much to say to her,” Mr. Cordover retorted, “though you don’t appear to mind setting me to rights.”

“I’m sorry,” Nan said, flushing, and then explained, “I don’t see people very often, I mean socially, and I always feel, though they are kind, they can’t really want to talk to me. I don’t know anything about the things that interest them or that they talk about.”

“Oh?” Mr. Cordover said gruffly. “As I said before, that didn’t make you bashful in giving your opinion to me.”

“It was about things I understand,” she pleaded.

“Oh?” he said again. “Michael Annarly and furniture, that’s what you understand, is it?”

“Yes,” she said, laughing, “I think I do a little.”

"Well, I don't pretend to understand either," Mr. Cordover said, "but I do understand I'm to get you an ice to satisfy my niece's sense of duty."

"And my wish for one," she told him, and they went to the refreshment tent where he personally selected an ice of enormous size.

She was still eating it when those guests, desirous of the best view of the departure of the bride, began to move towards the front of the house.

Rosalind left early. The Annarlys did not make the mistake of unduly retarding her departure, tiring their guests of each other's company, and wearing out their interest in the chief person and the occasion. In good time the carriage, which was to take the pair to the station, came round. The Annarlys privately thought it would have been appropriate if Uncle Giles had offered to lend his car for that purpose; it could easily have taken them to the station and been back before he was ready to leave. But Uncle Giles did not offer it; he did not think Dick Wharton justified in giving such a tip as he would feel adequate to the occasion. And, so he said tartly to his sister, "he did not see much sense in a girl starting off in a sort of party dress and somebody else's motor, when she was coming back to live in a forty pound a year house, and clean her own silver, or, at all events ought to clean it, if she didn't." In consequence of these opinions, it was only a hired brougham, though a very nice one, with white horses and a coachman in livery, which came to the door. Some time before it came most of the guests were assembled in the hall, the front garden, and about the steps. There was scarcely room for them all, some of the younger ones were obliged to go almost to the roadway, where the nursemaids and

school children stood.

Rosalind looked radiantly happy when she came down, and very pretty in a gigantic hat and a dress which Mary, who had helped put it on, described as “very chic and just the thing for garden-parties afterwards.” She kissed her mother at the foot of the stairs, the hat getting somewhat in the way; embraced her father by the steps, squeezing him a little when she saw a tear trickling down the side of his nose.

“Dear old dad!” she said. “Don’t do that! You ought to be glad I’m so happy.”

“I am, I am,” he said unsteadily, and squeezed back, her left hand, leaving some crackling bank-notes in it.

Then Constance, who gracefully played the second part, picked up the ends of the feather scarf, which had fallen from her sister’s neck, and followed her towards the carriage. All the friends and relatives followed so far as they could, closing round. There were kissing and handshaking, handfuls of confetti and rose petals, laughing faces, good wishes, a struggle to get through to the carriage.

They were away at last, the last good wishes shouted, the last flutter of the scarf Rosalind waved from the window gone. The best man, who had been busy to the last with travelling-coats and orders, suddenly remembered that he was standing hatless in the middle of the road in broad daylight; he pulled down his waistcoat, and wondered whether it was his own hat or the bridegroom’s which he had crammed into the hat-box among the luggage. The bridesmaids who had collected, a laughing group, for the departure, turned about, putting into

inconspicuous places in breast or belt the drooping pieces of the bride's bouquet, for which they had gaily struggled a little while back. The guests, shaking the confetti and rose leaves from their clothing, with one accord made for Mrs. Annarly, all at once aware that they were staid English people, and, for that or some other reason, anxious to hasten away from the scene of their late momentary abandonment.

"Good-bye, good-bye," was heard on every side. "Such a charming wedding——" "She looked perfectly sweet——" "Heartiest congratulations——" and so on.

Constance, standing by her mother, helped her to answer the complimentary remarks, and always remembered to say she was glad the maker had been able to come, or sorry some relative had not, with appropriateness. Which, like all graciousness, is worth something, in spite of what Uncle Giles and similar people say to the contrary.

Mabel was in the front garden, she and Jack chattering with Muriel and Godfrey Wharton and a few others about plans for the evening. They paid little attention to the departing guests, merely responding when definitely taken leave of by some persistent person. Nan did not interrupt them for that purpose, although she was by; Uncle Giles, however, was less considerate.

"Good-bye, niece and nephew," he called in his rather grim way.

"Good-bye," Mabel returned carelessly. He was a disagreeable person, who had behaved disagreeably to them all for a year past, and she, not only was not going to put herself out for him, but she was rather

pleased with the opportunity of showing her indifference.

Jack made half a step forward. “Good-bye, sir,” he said, a trifle embarrassed. “Shall I call your—shall I see if your——”

“No, thank you,” his uncle replied, “I can do my own seeing.”

And he went away, carrying Nan with him.

“I have to pass the end of Tottenham Court Road,” he said to her. “I can drop you there; it will be quicker for you than going by train.” And he settled it without waiting for her acceptance or refusal, putting her into the car almost as he spoke of it.

Michael saw her start, though the rest of the family, having no interest in her, did not. He was near the doorway, giving attention to the discovery of mislaid wraps, and escorting elderly ladies to their carriages. He passed near his father once or twice and noticed the round wet mark on his white waistcoat, where a tear had fallen. Mr. Annarly was shaking hands with the departing guests; he did not know above half of them even by sight, and it was easy to perceive it now. He looked rather bewildered and melancholy; there were two long lines running vertically down his full face, giving it an almost comically depressed expression. He shook hands warmly with the people he did know, and pressed the one or two of his old friends who were there to stay a little and come and have a whisky and soda with him. He glanced in the direction of the little room at the back as he said it, as if he thought, rather wistfully as well as hospitably, of its furniture-crowded seclusion.

But no one accepted his invitation, the old friends were carried away by their wives or daughters—the

last of them went.

Constance began taking off her long gloves; Mrs. Annarly thought of the caterers' men and orders to be given; Mr. Annarly stood looking down the confetti-strewn path, the vertical lines deeper on his face, his white waistcoat creased by the droop of his figure.

Michael touched his arm. "Can't we get a whisky and soda, sir?" he said. "I haven't had time to get anything to eat since breakfast, and I expect you haven't had much either."

CHAPTER X

THE Carsons rebuilt the east wing of Redstoke that winter. It had been destroyed by fire in the last owner's time, and only patched up, the house being really large enough without it. But to rebuild it to the original design had always been a fancy of Lady Sibyl's; and that year she was able to indulge it, owing to the fact that she rather unexpectedly inherited money. The actual building went on while she was wintering in Egypt; but it was done by the time she was back in the early spring, and ready for her to devote herself to the considerations of decorations and the choice of furniture. To choose these satisfactorily was not very easy: the old plans had been followed accurately, with the result that some of the rooms, by their shape, style, and lighting, demanded furniture and fittings of a date and sort not easy to get.

But Lady Sibyl, who had the advantage not possessed by many of knowing what she wanted, and also being able to pay for it, fortunately found the right person to help her. In the autumn someone, on behalf of a Robert Barmister, had written offering to sell her an iron chest of Dutch workmanship. And when the purchase had been arranged, and the chest, a rather finer specimen than the one at Redstoke, had been approved, the same person (by order of Robert Barmister) had offered, if at any time she wanted a special piece of furniture or similar article matched, found, or procured, to undertake the work. She recalled this when she began to go into the

decorating and furnishing of the east wing. Being in town, she wrote and requested Robert Barmister to call upon her, at the same time giving him an indication of the nature of her requirements. He replied that he would wait upon her when and where she wished, but suggested she might possibly find it more satisfactory to come to him, as there was a likelihood he could at once show her some of the things she wanted.

She came and spent an interesting hour seeing rare and beautiful things in an environment which appealed to her sense of fitness, exhibited under Barmister's orders by one (Josiah Foregood) not unsuited to the work and surroundings—so well suited, that she felt it would have sorted even better with the long, old rooms and his gentle, dignified courtesy had he been dressed in snuff-coloured coat and knee-breeches. She appreciated him much, and talked to him a good deal, though the business of the interview was carried on by his master: each in a different way pleased her. She would like to have had several things she saw that day, the dolphin mantelpiece and the dim, painted ceiling of the office among them. Neither of these two was obtainable; the one because it was not for sale, the other because it would not move. But other things that she admired were; and she selected several, and gave orders for others to be obtained, and for drawings of yet others, discussed and described, to be made and submitted to her. She was a customer after Robert Barmister's heart: a person of means and taste, able to really appreciate the best of what was good, and ready to pay for it without cavilling about the price. One to please Josiah too. He felt things would have a good home with her, and be suitably placed as background to a grace and elegance which was worthy of them.

Among the articles discussed was a certain oak panelling. The one room in the old wing at Redstoke which had not been entirely burnt was panelled in oak. The woodwork had been much damaged by fire: some entirely destroyed, and the remainder a good deal injured; but what remained was of such fine workmanship, and so uncommon a design that Lady Sibyl was anxious to have it repaired and fitted to the new room, if it were possible to replace the missing panels with anything which at all matched. Barmister assured her this should be quite possible, and undertook to go into the matter. Accordingly, the old panelling, which had been carefully removed at the time of the building, was sent to him for repair, with exact measurements of the new room, so that he might know what more would be required; and after examination, he had the work put in hand.

Michael had a certain amount of drawing to do in connection with the work. Nan also was called into council. Her father wanted her opinion as to how far it was desirable to supplement the Redstoke panelling with other somewhat dissimilar, though of the same date, and how closely the new, when any was necessary, should copy the old. They both spent some time planning and piecing out this chief ornament for Lady Sibyl's new boudoir. They did not speak of her; they never did, they had hardly really mentioned her name, even when she came to Soho—when neither saw her. They did not speak of her now; only of the work. If one of them mentally saw her in the panelled room when it should be done, with the low light of a wood fire flickering over her and the background, he said nothing about it. He would never see it really. It would be for another that the fire would bring the beauty of her colouring from the shadows; for another that her voice would

thrill with the remembered note of sympathy as she talked intimately in the twilight. In the face of such things there is nothing to be said. And Nan, whatever she thought, said nothing. Merciful people who say nothing.

But when the supplementary panelling was complete, and the whole ready to put in place, she was obliged to say something. This was in April, about the time of Rosalind Annarly's wedding.

It had been arranged that Josiah should go to Redstoke to see the woodwork put up; not to do anything himself—he was no practical carpenter or cabinet-maker—but to superintend those who did, and see that they did not damage or remove any of the precious carving. But the day before he should have gone he was taken ill with influenza. Really ill, with a bad attack; no mild one would have kept him from work. Nan knew that when she left home to go to the wedding.

She was obliged to leave Soho before one o'clock so as to reach Hurstbury in time. Michael had left even earlier, and would return later. She determined to go to Bayswater as soon as she got back and hear how Josiah was, and what were the chances of his being able to travel to Redstoke to-morrow. Owing to Mr. Cordover's bringing her to town in his car she was able to do this both more quickly and more comfortably than she expected, and to return home in fair time.

Michael was already back when she came in. The Annarlys had not insisted on his staying to dine; the Whartons and one or two others were coming, and the party was complete without him. No doubt they would have been pleased if he had stayed, but they had not expected or said anything about it. So he had

come back, and was at work on the patent drawings when Nan came in with news of Josiah.

“I’m afraid he’s rather bad,” she said, unpinning her hat.

Michael said he was sorry, and inquired details.

She gave what she had learned in a brief interview with Miss Janet; then went to the window, ruffling her hair, pressed down by the weighty millinery.

“He won’t be able to go to-morrow,” she said, expressing what they were both thinking.

“No,” Michael said, without glancing up from his drawing, “I suppose not.”

She stood looking out a minute, back to him. Someone must go to see the panelling put up to-morrow; in the absence of Josiah, it should naturally devolve on Michael. Barmister knew of no reason against it, and would not easily admit one: none had ever been specifically spoken of between them either.

“I can do it, if you like,” she offered, rather as if the subject had been discussed aloud, instead of thought of in silence. “As Josiah can’t, if you were not here, I probably should; and as it is, I can induce father to send me in preference to you. I can go, if you like—but,” she turned half round, “I think almost it would be better not.”

Michael’s pencil ceased a moment. “No,” he agreed, “of course not,” and the pencil went on as before.

She watched him a moment. She knew he was not really drawing, only imperceptibly touching lines already made; and she knew also that, though he had agreed with her as if it were some unimportant

thing, it was really otherwise. Yet she did not withdraw her words; she had a feeling it were better he should go. Not because she could not do what was wanted, and would not have infinitely preferred doing it to sending him, nor yet because her father could not be induced by her to quite approve of her doing so; she could not have given her reason, only she felt in herself that it were better—better for him to go.

“Will you?” she said.

“Of course,” he answered; “there’s nothing else to be done.”

The next day he went to Redstoke.

It was seven months since the evening when he dined there; seven months since he had come into personal touch with any of the people, or the interests of that life. Above all things, he hoped not to come into personal touch with them now. Not that he was ashamed of his present work and situation; he would as soon have met Carson while among Barmister’s workmen as any other way; but infinitely sooner not have met him at all. He did not want to meet anyone belonging to that time, neither friend nor foe. He had done with that life: he could never go back to it; even if such an impossibility happened as that he was reinstated at Galhardy’s, with all cleared up, and everything on the best of footings; still he could not truly go back. Something had gone from him in the past months—or come to him—it could never be the same again; he realised it when he went to Redstoke.

Lady Sibyl was in London. There was only a housekeeper to be consulted with, should consultation be necessary, which was unlikely. She

was a person Michael had never seen in the old days. The butler, who had been there when he used to come to and fro, had gone; his place was filled by another. The gardeners at work among the flower-beds no doubt were the same, but they probably did not know him by sight then, and certainly did not recognise him now. No one recognised him; no one inquired his name. He was merely the furniture people's man come to see to the putting up of the panelling; a person who came with the workmen, and disappeared again when they did.

Things went smoothly on the first day; there was no interruption of any sort. The workmen did well: there were several of them, experienced men who understood their work; they would be finished probably by to-morrow evening. There had been one mistake made: it was remediable, but, since it might entail delay, it was annoying. The panel which fitted over the chimney-piece had not been sent. It was part of the original woodwork, but had been so badly damaged that little beyond the centre coat of arms remained intact. Its repairing and restoration to something like the former condition was the work of an artist in the trade, who had taken his time over it, and, apparently, neglected to send it back by the stipulated date. At all events, it had not come to Redstoke with the rest. When, late in the afternoon, Michael discovered the fact, he telegraphed to Barmister to have it sent by messenger. It could not arrive until the mid-day train to-morrow; it might not till late in the afternoon, according as to whether or no the artist was ready to let it go. Still, even if it did not come until the late train, there would be time to complete the work. It could be put up last of all; the rest finished, or nearly, before it came.

Michael stayed at the small inn not far from Redstoke; he chose it as much because he had never entered it before as because it was near to the house. He avoided speaking more than was necessary to anyone there; he shrank from any sort of mental contact with people, as raw flesh shrinks from touch. One could not speak, hardly look, in this neighbourhood without coming into some contact, near or remote, with Galhardy's, where everyone worked, or their relations worked; from whence arose the daily bread, the daily occupation, almost in some form or other the common interests and topics of conversation of two-thirds of the population. It was from some director of Galhardy's that the young hounds in the stables came; it was for the workmen of Galhardy's that the line of a new tram ran through an aggrieved suburb; it was through them really that political changes were felt as affecting the demand for guns and munitions of war, taxing coal, or helping or hindering foreign rivalry. One could not get away from sight and sound of the great firm here, except by shutting the door and thinking of something else. Michael shut the door, and thought of the joiners and carpenters, and once, rather late, of how curiously outside this once-familiar world he seemed. A full, stirring world-in-itself, whose cross currents and by-plays mattered much, everything, to those who lived there—as they once had to him, but mattered nothing now. A thought, this, producing a feeling as of one dead, who, disembodied, revisits the earth to play no part there.

The disembodied must feel cold revisiting the earth without their earth-clothes of flesh, and lonely without any share in the matters of the world. It and its interests may seem remote; yet they, while perhaps wanting no part, must feel lonely without it,

and long to be away again to the land of shades. Michael longed to be back in the old house in Soho. He longed more the second day than the first. He felt then more acutely that he did not belong here; he shrank even more from any chance of contact with those who did. As the day wore on he found himself waiting and listening for such: for a familiar face or a familiar step, in a way which was morbidly ridiculous perhaps, but almost unendurable.

The panel did not come by the mid-day train. It was not really surprising that it should not. Yesterday Michael was prepared for such a contingency; but to-day, though he assured himself and the workmen that he hardly expected it, its non-arrival worried him. He arranged and rearranged the scheme of work in his own mind—he had the wisdom to keep it there, and not to speak of it to the men. He kept his nerves entirely to himself, with shame recognising them as nerves, but not getting the better of them on that account. As the time of the afternoon train approached he made plans as to what should be done if the panel did not come. Of course, it would come; Barmister would have telegraphed if, for any reason, he had been unable to send it, unless he were hoping up to the last minute to get it from the repairer. Such men, the real artists at their work, were difficult to deal with; often addicted to drink, or temper, or other failings which interfered with their carrying out contracts, even when they were inclined to do so. If the panel did not come, the work could not be finished that day: it could not, anyhow, be finished in time for him to return to London to-night; though, if the missing part arrived to-day, it should be possible to finish late and return first thing to-morrow morning without coming again to Redstoke. Michael made up his mind to return then. Panel or

no panel, he would leave the house to-night, and come back no more; the head joiner could wait, if waiting there must be, and fix it without him. He would not stay longer than this evening—it seemed too long to wait for that, although the afternoon was far advanced. He looked at his watch: he had looked at it several times in the last few minutes, for the messenger, had one come by the later train, was due now—rather overdue, in fact; either the train was late, or he was not coming.

The door opened quietly, and Nan, carrying a heavy parcel, came into the room.

“Father has caught influenza from Josiah,” she explained. “He is not bad, but he cannot see after things, so, as I knew no one to send, I fetched the parcel and brought it myself.”

Michael took the parcel, for a moment too relieved for speech, though not really surprised. It was not surprising that Nan should come; indeed, now she was here it seemed so much the one thing likely to happen—and the one satisfactory thing—that he thought no more about it or any of his previous feelings. He uncovered the panel, and superintended its placing without any haste, or anxiety, or recollection of his desire to be finished and gone.

Nan stayed some time, making a few comments and suggestions, and examining the work critically. She left when it was nearly done to go and make arrangements for staying at the inn, as it was impossible for her to return to town that evening. There was really no need she should, Mrs. Bidden was well able to look after her father; she and Michael would go back together first thing to-morrow morning. She left him now to see the last of the work done, and then to follow her to the inn.

But as it happened he did not follow. Just before he was ready to go a car stopped before the house. He hardly noticed it, he was absorbed in the work in hand, and, since Nan's coming, had lost the sense of watch for someone which had grown on him during the day. He heard the noise of the engine, the car stop, turn and go away again, but only vaguely, and without thinking of them in connection with himself. He certainly did not think of them in connection with the Carsons; he did not think of them at all until, looking round at some new sound, he saw Carson himself standing in the doorway.

"Hullo!" Carson exclaimed in surprise. "You here! Where on earth have you dropped from?"

He spoke much as he had spoken when Michael last saw him seven months ago, except, perhaps, that there was something of greater geniality in the tone; more of the camaraderie he had for men of his own sort, and never had quite had for Galhardy's genius.

"I came to see the panelling put up," Michael answered. "It's my uncle's affair; I mean, he's the man that supplied the pieces that were missing, and all that."

"Did he, by Jove?" Carson said, coming into the room and looking interestedly round. "He must be a bit of a conjurer! I told Sibyl I didn't believe she'd ever get the old tinder put together. Looks jolly well, doesn't it?"

Michael said he thought it was satisfactory on the whole, then went round the room with Carson, answering any questions he asked.

"What an extraordinary fellow you are!" Carson exclaimed. "I had no idea you knew anything about

this sort of thing."

"I don't," Michael answered, "I'm merely here as a kind of foreman on behalf of the man who supplied it; I really know nothing about it."

Carson laughed. "Oh, I know what it means when you know nothing of a subject," he said. "I was once let in for holding forth on one in the innocent belief that you wouldn't be able to catch me tripping. Never again, not on panels nor piston-rods either. By the way, have you deserted them for this, chucked engineering for good and all?"

"Not altogether," Michael answered, "I occasionally do a little consulting work, nothing to speak of; usually I am at the furniture place, clerk and that sort of thing."

He spoke casually, as if there were nothing in the admission. Carson made no remark upon it—no doubt partly from delicacy, though it is also possible that, to one entirely without personal acquaintance with work in any of its grades, the contrast did not stand out in all its crudity.

"Sibyl did not tell me you were in that furniture concern," he said; "she might have let me know you were coming here."

"Lady Sibyl did not know herself," Michael said. "She does not know I have anything to do with this; I did not see her when she came to my uncle's about the furniture and panelling; she knows nothing about me."

"No," Carson said, "now you come to mention it, I don't know how she should. Nor how anyone should either; you didn't bother to leave an address when you departed in fire and brimstone last autumn. I

believe Sibyl was a good deal affronted at the time; she said you had made some arrangement to come and see her, and neither turned up nor wrote; and when she wrote to you she got no answer, only, after a time, her letter returned through the post office."

"I'm sorry," Michael said. "I did not think she would expect me; I thought she would understand. Of course, she did understand, I know that. It's very good of you——"

"Oh, bosh!" Carson said. "That's rot! Where are you staying? At the pub? What on earth for? It's a beastly little hole; I'll send for your belongings."

But Michael declined. He keenly appreciated the suggestion and Carson's whole attitude. He understood, as only could one who knew the inner workings of the great corporation, how rare it must be to find one in any way connected with Galhardy's, who either could or would so treat him. Carson might be a man who would allow no one to dictate to him as to friends, acquaintances, or proceedings; but he was also one who, by the very class peculiarities which gave that quality, was liable to have little sympathy with Michael and an enormous contempt for that of which he was accused. Michael realised enough of this to much appreciate the invitation, but he refused it none the less; to do anything else would have been an effort beyond him, he felt he could not face it.

"Well, stay and dine," Carson urged, "you might do that, anyway. You'll have to, you won't be able to dine there. Why, it killed one of the pups last year, nothing but the feed down there."

Michael stayed to dine; but it was not the thought of the dinner which induced him, it was steel. Some

chance words Carson spoke caught his attention; only a few words, spoken inadvertently, not finished and only not recalled because they could not be, but enough for Michael. The old watchful observation by which in the time at Galhardy's he had come to divine what most men meant by what they did not say, sprang to life again and helped him here. It was his steel that Carson had referred to thus by accident, the new steel he had worked out for the great firm some time ago, and which he thought he had left ready for manufacture on a large scale seven months back. More than once he had wondered if they were manufacturing, and, when careful inquiries in likely places tended to show that they were not, why they were not. But they were now he knew, not from Carson's words, rather in spite of them, as women know things when they love, a subtle instinct hardly possible except to love. Galhardy's were making his steel, and there was something curious about it, or about their not having done so earlier. He stayed to dine with Carson. For love a man will do harder things than dine where he would much rather not, though perhaps it is not every man who can love a new process for making oil-cooled steel, the child of his brain.

One of the carpenters brought a message to Nan at the inn. It was written on a scrap of paper, and ran, "*Am dining with Carson; don't wait.*" Nan accordingly had supper alone, and afterwards read by the fire, until she fell asleep. She was aroused by Michael's return.

Directly he entered she saw that something was the

matter, but she did not remark on it, and he came to the fire, saying something about the night having turned colder.

She agreed, though she fancied the cold must be in himself and the lowered vitality which comes to some in utter depression, for the night was warm with a strong south wind blowing.

“I did not know Mr. Carson was expected back,” she said casually.

“He was not,” Michael answered, “he turned up unexpectedly, soon after you left.”

He stirred the fire and sat staring into it for a while. “Carson’s a good sort,” he said at length, the gloom in his eyes lightening for a moment. “There’s not another man connected with Galhardy’s, from Sir Joseph to the least of the greasers, who would have behaved to me as he did to-day.”

“I’m glad!” Nan said. There were not very many people who had gone out of their way to be pleasant to him. “You always liked him, didn’t you?”

“I hardly knew him really; I knew Lady Sibyl better. She was not there this evening, he was alone.”

Nan nodded. Lady Sibyl, she perceived, was not the cause of the depression, he spoke her name too carelessly, hardly aware of it; the trouble must be in connection with work and the loved invention.

“Are Galhardy’s making your torpedo?” she asked.

“I don’t know, I have not heard. Of course, they must be; the thing was all worked out when I left, all on paper, anyway; they could not fail to get it. They would not have kicked me out till they were sure; I told you that before.”

He had, over and over again. “Still,” she suggested, “they don’t seem to be making it; surely if they were some news of it would have leaked out and reached you? Even if there were no little paragraphs in the papers, saying that Messrs. Galhardy had successfully overcome the great difficulty of modern warfare and that sort of thing, you would have heard something of it somewhere.”

“I don’t know, I might; though quite likely not. How should I unless by chance at some society’s meeting? I don’t have much to do with those sort of people and things now. I have given up scientific work, or, rather, it has given me up, I think we may take it, for good and all.”

She did not reply; she did not believe it was for good and all, though she could not deny that it almost began to look like it.

“I wonder,” she speculated, “why they are not making the torpedo, if they are really not making it?”

“Perhaps they cannot agree as to who’s to have the honour of ‘inventing’ it,” he said.

“Inventing it?” she asked.

But he did not explain, and she pressed for no information, coming to sit on the hearthrug in silence.

For a little neither spoke; at length he said abruptly, “You know my steel?”

She nodded; but he did not go on, the mention of the steel had recalled the process to the momentary exclusion of other thoughts.

“It was a process for oil-hardened steel,” he said,

forgetting he had told her this before. “A good thing; the elongation was extraordinary for so high a tensile strength. I imagined when I left Galhardy’s they would apply it on a large scale almost at once.”

“Didn’t they?”

“No—I don’t know why. The first big lot is being made now; in fact, they are going to quench some thirty tons to-night.”

“Are they? How I should like to see it!”

“There’s not much to see; it is only lowering a hot ingot of steel into a big tank of oil, and leaving it there till it is cold, the ordinary oil-hardened process. The improvement I made is before that, in the steel itself, not the hardening.”

“Will they call it after you?”

He said not. “Processes are numbered, not named, in a firm like Galhardy’s, nothing else is practical.”

“Still,” she said, “I imagine they all know it’s yours? It’ll be good for them to think of that and to remember what you could do when they get stuck with other things.”

A curious expression came over his face. “The steel is not mine; it is Brett’s,” he said.

“What!”

“Brett’s. Yes, that is it; he has taken it.”

“But how could he? How could he! They all know it’s yours, all the directors, some of the workmen even must know it. How could it ever pass for his?”

“He will have made some slight alteration in my process; he would have had the going over of my papers, and so could have done so; something small,

enough to give appearance to his claim, but not enough to spoil the process. I hope to Heaven it is small! There is no room for messing about in that! A little might be done without spoiling to any great extent, but not much; if he has done anything much he will have ruined it. I've half a mind to write and tell him the only change they can make without detriment to the result."

He rose as he spoke, the passion for the perfection of work, and the fear that it should be spoiled, eclipsing for the moment everything else. But he did not write, Nan advised him against it; though afterwards, when she realised, as he never did, what sentiments such a letter would arouse in the recipient, she was almost sorry she did. The argument she used was consideration for Carson who, no doubt, ought not to have given the information.

Michael was obliged to admit this. "Though," he explained, "he didn't exactly give it, I found it out. I don't suppose he knows how much he did let me know."

"Does he know this is your steel?"

"He knows it was: it is Brett's now. The man who makes the last alteration has the final claim; he has made it; no one can say anything against that."

"It is stealing!"

"It is not illegal; if the alteration were a real improvement, not a thing of straw, it would be fair."

"But it is not!" she protested. "You know it is not, they know it is not. Why are they doing it? Why is Brett doing it? He must know no one will really think it his. It can't be for the credit of invention."

Michael shrugged his shoulders. "I gather he is to

have a commission on the steel turned out."

"Is he?" Nan said, and sat thinking.

So the directors of Galhardy's, or at least some of them, were paying Brett? That was what it amounted to; the "improvement" to the process was no blind to them, they would know all about that; but the improver was to be given commission none the less. And since it was not Galhardy's way to give anything for nothing, it was given for something which was not steel. Hush money? Nan wondered about it, and wondered what Brett had done to oblige in the affair of last September; and what some other bigger man had done that he thought it advisable to pay for. She glanced across at Michael; he had risen and was standing by the table absently fingering the lamp. He roused himself, and suggested going to bed.

She acquiesced, and watched while, as he lowered the light, the last glow momentarily lit his face. He was thinking of his steel again, she knew, and again fearing lest it should have been spoiled to make some cover of decency for the theft. A sudden wave of anger swept over her, anger and pity too. They might have left him that! They had taken so much and he, now at least, asked so little! He would have ignored the theft, he would not have given the lie to any who said in his presence that the process was another's, could he have been sure that way, or any other, of keeping it unspoiled. She could have wept for the injustice of it all.

"Oh!" she said suddenly. "I hope they will fail! I hope they will fail horribly!"

He turned at the words; she was kneeling upright on the rug now, her face towards the dying fire, her eyes gleaming in the glow.

“I would like them to fail when they try to make the steel!” she said. “I would like their oil-tank to fire. It would be the justice of God!” She stretched clenched hands out suddenly. “I would like it to fire to-night!”

On the words, almost as they were spoken, there came a light. No spurt from the dying embers, no chance rekindling of the extinguished lamp, but a great light; bright almost as a suddenly come dawn, but redder, a fierce orange glow which revealed everything in the room with a terrible plainness and the faces of the two to one another grimly.

Michael jerked the curtain back from the window, and Nan, rising swiftly, came to look out. Away eastward a sheet of flame lit the heavens, a tongue full a hundred and fifty feet high which leapt skywards, turning the night to a new and terrifying day; a great orange-red flame which lit luridly the whole dark landscape and the volume of smoke that, even here, could be seen to roll about it.

For a second they stood looking, then their eyes met.

“Galhardy’s,” he said. “The oil-tank.”

She nodded, her breath coming a little short. “Yes,” she said, “the justice of God.”

CHAPTER XI

THE fire at Galhardy's made a good deal of talk; even the London papers mentioned it, and in the immediate neighbourhood of the foundries it was naturally the sole subject of conversation. It was the largest fire they had had there for a very long time, and, though nothing approaching the whole of the works was destroyed, the damage was estimated at something like ten thousand pounds. As Galhardy's took their own insurance, the directors felt it.

The immediate cause was the firing of the oil-tank, a great receptacle, containing at the time at least eight thousand gallons of oil. Such an accident may happen when an ingot of steel is being lowered to be quenched, for the question of temperature then is a nice one: let it be too low, the steel is spoiled; let it be too high, ignition is a serious danger. But as to precisely how it occurred on this occasion, there was a little uncertainty. Brett, now recognised as the perfecter of the new process, and personally interested in the steel, was standing on the crane at the time of the accident. He had been in the works for some little while previous. An ingot of steel has no idea of schedule time and anyone's convenience; it is ready when it is ready, and can neither be hastened nor hindered. This one was late, so Brett had to wait some little while in the works, closed—so far as they ever were closed—for the night.

The firing of an oil-tank is a startling sight to a man who has never seen it before, even if it begins

modestly with the springing up of little, licking flames along the surface of the liquid as the ingot first touches it. Whether they arise from the contact of overheated metal or from another more obscure cause, the effect is the same to the man who knows there are eight thousand gallons of oil below the lighting surface, and that he is standing just above it. Once, when such a thing happened at Galhardy's, a man standing watching had the ingot lowered steadily and swiftly to the tank, in spite of the wind which drove the smoke and flames right into the crane, and the lid on, and the fire choked for want of air before it was fairly under way. The man's name was reputed to have been Michael Annarly, but no one really knew anything about it, for he was not on the spot in an official capacity, merely looking on. There were only a couple of workmen there at the time, and as there was no disaster there was no talk.

Certainly, the man's name was not Cecil Brett. The proceeding would not have struck Brett as very safe, had he thought of it. It is true his proceeding might not have struck the other as very safe either; but it was not unnatural. To seize the cranesman's arm at the first alarming manifestation may be called foolish; but it was natural. Who was to foresee that so doing would make him lose his grip and release the lever so that the thirty-five-ton ingot plunged all at once, and uncontrolled, into the tank? And even then, who is to say that it was that which made the firing of the oil so swift, so complete, and so disastrous? No one did say it, for no one knew much about it. Brett himself certainly did not dogmatise on the subject; he was sure the completeness and swiftness of the firing would have been the same in any circumstances. Of course, the rush of the plunge accounted for the terrible up-spurt of burning oil

that, leaping out of the tank as the ingot splashed in, fell right and left on sheds and buildings, setting them in a blaze. But they would probably have kindled anyhow. There was a strong wind blowing at the time, and the flames from such a fire were of so tremendous a size, and so beyond control, that they must have carried destruction far; indeed, it was very generally believed to have been carried that way.

The wind, which was not toward the crane this time, saved Brett and the cranesman. They had time to escape, and did so. No lives were lost in the fire, owing to the wind, and the hour, and situation of the outbreak. Although it assumed considerable size before it was got under control, no one was seriously hurt. And, what perhaps was a more curious chance, few men were long thrown out of work as a consequence. In many respects it might have been called a directors' fire, so singularly was the resulting loss restricted in its effects. It might almost have been the work of an enemy.

There were some who perceived this, Brett among them. He perceived it all the more plainly when he heard from someone, who happened to recognise Michael Annarly at the station on the morning following, that he had been in the neighbourhood at the time of the fire.

"Odd thing Annarly happened to be in the district then," he observed to several. Among others, he observed it to Carson, who was one of the very few who were aware of it before.

"Think so?" Carson said carelessly. "It didn't strike me. He was dining with me that evening."

"Dining with you?"

Sir James Shannon, who was present at the time,

repeated the words with an intonation which roused in Carson those sentiments Englishmen feel when they consider their divine right to do what they please, and know whom they please, is being questioned.

“Yes,” he answered, “he was here all the afternoon, too” (he did not say for what purpose). “Queer chap, extraordinarily clever, always worth talking to.”

Sir James acquiesced coldly. “I believe his ability was never called into question,” he said.

It must be remembered that there was the incident of the revolver which was not loaded, behind Sir James, and that Brett, who was now present, had been a listener as well as a participator in it. It would not, of course, have made a man so honourable condemn one whom he believed not guilty; but it would not help him to give the benefit of the doubt, or to find extenuating circumstances for weaknesses which he naturally abhorred in one whom he had never approved.

He dropped the subject of Michael Annarly now with the conclusiveness of extreme dislike. The others did not pursue it in his presence. But later they did, for Brett wanted to know several things. What time Michael left Carson, how it tallied with the hour of the outbreak of fire, and one or two other particulars. He did not exactly suspect him of complicity, he had neither seen nor heard anything on which to found such a suspicion during his wait in the works. He also knew the great difficulties in the way; it would have been wellnigh impossible for anyone, no matter how well acquainted with the foundry and with the work itself, to have got in, or to have brought about just such a fire when in. On the face of it the thing was scarcely possible.

Nevertheless, there were one or two who paid Michael the compliment of, for a time at least, harbouring a suspicion of him—which suggests an instructively high estimate both of his ability and his malignity towards themselves. But Carson was able to set at rest any question of that sort.

"That's all rot, you know," he said, when he perceived the trend of Brett's inquiries. "Annarly was here till a quarter to eleven, and from here he went to the pub down the road, where he stayed till he left for town the next morning. He had a woman of some sort there; I saw her standing with him at a window when I went by in the car to the fire, and she went up to town with him next morning, so I suppose she could prove his alibi. I don't know who she was; he didn't mention her to me, but I dare say you could find out and collect her evidence. Though, how on earth he, or anyone else, is to have got from here to the works between a quarter to eleven and the time of the firing of the tank, not to mention got that complicated job under way in that time, or any other, I don't see. The thing's not possible for sheer hourage, if for nothing else."

"No," Brett said. "No, of course not; I never really thought it. There's no need to be annoyed about it; I am not for a moment suspecting you were entertaining an incendiary awares or unawares, or anything of that sort. But you must confess Annarly's being here at the time is a curious coincidence. I should hardly be doing my duty to the directors, if I did not inquire into it."

"Rats!" Carson retorted flippantly, and added something ribald about Brett's duty. When men have known each other more or less all their lives, and their fathers before them, the mildly official tone is

apt to produce that effect. Brett dropped it.

“Anyhow, seeing what we have against him——” he excused himself.

“Haven’t seen,” Carson said; “you great men of the board kept it to yourselves.”

“I had to,” Brett answered with a slight return to the official. “Annarly, of course, is in a different position. I suppose he justified himself when he dined with you?”

“Justified his grandmother!” Carson retorted. “Why should you expect him to squeal any more than anyone else?”

Brett did not say. “I didn’t know,” he said, perhaps just a trifle relieved. “I suppose he would not say anything, now one comes to think of it.”

“Of course not,” Carson said contemptuously, and not perceiving the relief.

“I tell you what it is,” he observed. “I don’t know what the fellow did or didn’t do, but I wouldn’t mind betting it wasn’t half so dirty as is done at Galhardy’s every day in the week. And, dirty or clean, I’ve a notion old Joe and the rest of them made a bit of a mistake when they chucked him out; he’s the only man of first-class brains they’ve ever lit on between them.”

“I don’t agree with you,” Brett said stiffly.

Carson laughed. “That’s quite likely,” he said. “And the fact itself don’t agree with old Joe either; just try the words ‘aerial torpedo’ on Sir Joseph Harte, J.P., M.S.A., etc., with a few kind inquiries as to when that problem of modern warfare is to be solved, if you want to see an old gentleman upset in his inside.

Bretty, my son, it suggests itself to the common or garden man, not a director or secretary, just the ordinary blockhead—that Galhardy's were a little too previous that time—they aren't often, but it looks as if they were then. They kicked their genius out a little too soon. They've got his torpedo no doubt, but it rather looks as if without him they can't get the beastly thing to torp. Awful bore for them, Bretty."

Brett declined to discuss the subject, which was no more than his duty. Instead he set himself to find out what Michael was doing at the present time. Had he asked plainly he would, no doubt, have heard at once whatever Carson knew. But he was not aware of that and so cleverly tried more indirectly for information, with the result that he carried away nothing but a vague and rather exalted idea of Michael's work and position, far from correct. Almost the only definite piece of information he gained was that his informant was inclined to put some work in Michael's way himself.

"I wonder if he'd be able to do anything with Jeffersons'?" Carson speculated. "They haven't paid a dividend worth the name for no end of a time; in justice to the shareholders something ought to be done. I think I'll write him about it. Spinning machinery isn't much in his line, I suppose—or wasn't—but he's the kind of clever devil that can do most things he tries. I think I'll write him and ask if he'd be willing to look into the matter, if I arranged it."

Jeffersons' was a firm of cotton-spinners in which Carson had considerable interest—in name and monetarily, that is; in fact, he knew nothing about the business. From time to time he had reports, which he did not read or did not trouble to

understand, if he did. From time to time he met some better-informed among the directors, and, between discussion of the shooting prospects and the weight of salmon taken, heard something of mechanical difficulties, financial difficulties, and disputes with operatives. On the most recent of these occasions he had heard so much of the oft-repeated tale of increasing expenses and falling profits that the vague impression he had had of late that something ought to be done was a good deal strengthened.

It occurred to him now, when he thought of Michael Annarly, that a man with an original way of overhauling machinery or utilising power or doing something, might help them. This man might not have done any work on spinning machinery, probably had not; but that did not matter; if an ordinary expert on the subject could have helped Jeffersons' he would have been engaged there doing it before this. It was evidently not a case for such a one, rather for the sort of man who can do things, just things. Carson had rather the idea of Michael and his ability that the mayor and corporation of Hamelin had of the Pied Piper—one put him in and the rats, or other troubles, came out.

"I dare say he'd take the job on," he said. He had no very clear idea of Michael's present position and occupation, beyond that he had said he was with his uncle, the furniture man, but he did not fancy it was very prosperous. "I'll go along with him myself," he decided, with a burst of business energy; "there's pretty good trout fishing; I always promised Winder I'd have a day or so with him."

He wrote to Winder, another and more energetic director of Jeffersons', who dwelt more upon the spot. He also wrote to Michael, making the proposal

to him: a business proposal, but with the suggestion of a day or two at Redstoke on the way there or back, and a few days—as long as he wanted to look at things—with Winder; time to be divided between the fish and the mill.

Lady Sibyl wrote at the same time. She was home again now and had heard all that had happened, Michael's coming and going, the fire at Galhardy's and other matters. She was deeply interested in all, but more especially the rediscovery of Michael in the unlikely circumstances. She had been very sorry to lose sight of him as she had done, it had troubled her a good deal; one does lose sight of people, of course, it is bound to happen by a natural process of dropping out or by their going to the further ends of the earth; but she had never before lost sight of anyone abruptly and completely like this, while interest was still keen and feeling warm. The interest may have been a little overlaid by fresh ones arising in the months which had elapsed since he went without a word of good-bye or explanation, but it revived again now. She had never believed the charges she had heard made or hinted against him; she had contradicted them, when she had nothing whatever to go on but her own conviction. She looked forward now to seeing him again and hearing him explain the whole to her, as in the past he used to explain his work and difficulties and ambitions. She would then be able to contradict emphatically; perhaps to help him a little towards vindication. She wrote warmly, saying how glad she was to have heard of him again, and seconding the invitation to come to Redstoke.

"If he does not come on the way, bring him with you when you come back," she said to her husband, and

he said he would.

Michael did not come on the way there, he could not get away in time; Carson met him somewhere on the journey, and they went straight to Winder's together.

The fishing was very good that year, Carson had some excellent luck. He felt it a pity not to be able to give more time to it; still, as he had come on business, he did it. He did quite a lot, standing in the whir of machinery, and sitting in offices listening to accounts and statements, when outside there were soft skies and brown streams with the spotted fish lying in hollows under tree-roots. Michael did not fish; Winder thought it rather odd, so did Carson, though he remembered that Michael did not do anything.

"You haven't reformed, then?" he said, "Pity; better for you if you did."

Winder suggested that he must find it a little slow, and time a little heavy on his hands.

Carson laughed. "'Ware that subject!" he said. "Annarly always wanted to get a syndicate, Father Time as partner, to buy up the hours that fellows like you and I waste—then, with that addition to his own life, he'd be able to 'get a little decent work done.' That's the expression, isn't it?"

"I dare say it used to be," Michael admitted. "I don't remember, it's a long time ago." (It was nine months, but time is not hours only.)

"But you know," he said, "there really is no time to spare now if I'm to go into the matter of your spinning-mill, and report on it in the few days I can be here."

"All right," Carson said, "all right; you shall go into it up to the neck, and stop there all day, if you like. Winder and I'll take a plunge with you now and then, and retire to get our breath and watch your exploits from a distance between whiles."

On some such principle the inspection was made, Michael devoting himself to it with the intense application and energy that were well remembered at Galhardy's: mastering every detail, inquiring into every corner, and observing all things accurately and minutely. The other two accompanied him at times, and when they did not, managers and other gentlemanly and not very well-informed persons attended on him alone—completely perplexed by his methods and a little bewildered by the pace, reduced though it was by the dead weight of their own leisurely amiability.

Mrs. Winder liked the visitor. He took more trouble to be agreeable to her than did most of the men of her acquaintance, interesting himself in her subjects, instead of expecting her to take interest in his; paying her the compliment of assuming her knowledge on any technical or intellectual matter touched on to equal, if not excel his own. It did not occur to her that there may have been in this something of that which makes a foreigner, who is a good linguist, sometimes speak a language more accurately and perfectly than a native—it is foreign, and he has learnt it, not been born to it, and is taking pains with it. That certainly did not occur to any of them any more than it occurred to them that this might be the first time Michael had worn dress-clothes since he left Galhardy's; the first time since then he had spent leisurely evenings with cards, and music, and idle talk that tended nowhere.

“Clever chap,” Carson summed him up; “always was a bit odd, and a regular devil for work. He’ll make some of them skip if he takes over the job of working up this show.”

“I hope he may do it,” Winder said, though it is probable he did not at all realise what it was he expressed a hope for.

On the sixth day Michael was ready with his report. Winder was out at the time he produced it, but he seemed to prefer giving it to Carson alone.

“Why?” Carson asked. “Winder’ll be back this evening, it can wait till then, can’t it?”

“It can wait,” Michael said, “but there’s no object in its doing so; there’s nothing to discuss, there’s nothing to be done.”

“Nothing?”

Carson was rather taken aback; but next minute he had recovered his hopefulness. “Oh,” he said, “that’s just your way of putting it; they always said at Galhardy’s you thought the world was coming to an end when you first found one of your screws working loose—and saw a way of turning it into a propeller or something worth a hundred thousand to the firm before anyone else had discovered what it was you were knocked over about.”

Michael laughed. “I dare say I was ass enough,” he said. “But I am afraid this is not such a case: it is the plain truth; there is nothing here that I can do. Your machinery is up to date—of course, there is a thing or two which might be altered or improved; a little adjustment here and there which, with a small outlay, might save a certain amount. I’ll give you a detailed account of that by and by—but it is

nothing."

"Not your work? I thought that was the sort of thing you did—saw after those affairs for people?"

"I could, of course," Michael said, "but it would be sheer waste to pay me to do it; your own people can do it for you, if they're told. Besides, as I say, it amounts to really nothing; there's no real leakage there."

"Where then?"

Michael hesitated. "I came to look at the machinery," he said. "I really don't understand anything else; I'm merely an engineer."

"Get out!" Carson said derisively. "If you were that you'd be at Galhardy's now—if you'd ever got there on such slight qualifications. You came here to find out what was the matter, and, if we could come to terms, take over the job of setting it right. What is the matter? You know fast enough."

"Yes, I do," Michael admitted.

"Good! What'll you take to set it right?"

"I can't do it."

"Bosh again. Why not?"

"None of the directors would allow it."

Carson laughed. "Why, man," he said, "we're prepared to pay rather handsomely for it! Is it beneath your dignity?"

Michael thought of General Wallaby's motor, and the machine-drawings done in the room over Robert Barmister's office, and the small wage paid to him at Nan's request for inefficiently done clerk's work. "No," he said quietly.

"All right then. What is the objection? Do you reckon it impossible?"

Michael considered a moment. "No," he said slowly. "I should say it could be done. I believe in two years Jeffersons' might be made to pay, at all events, nearly as well as it used, if a man were given a free hand—and did not come to a sudden end first."

Carson looked up quickly. "What do you mean?" he asked.

Michael did not answer. "Have you ever been over a Government concern," he inquired, "a big old one—factory, or works, or something of that sort? Of course, they mayn't all be alike; but the ones I have come across are. Has it ever struck you how they are overstaffed, especially in the managerial department? They swarm with well-bred, pleasant, gentlemanly persons who, knowing nothing really of the job, depend on the foremen for everything, make the neatest and most voluminous reports to head-quarters—and the most astounding mistakes. Does it occur to you what such an overstaffing means in waste? Not in salaries only—that's the smallest item—but in men's time, in reporting and waiting about, getting orders, giving orders, regiving them, misunderstanding them, restating mistaken ones—in all-round inefficiency, in fact."

"H'm," Carson said. "That's how Jeffersons' strikes you, is it?"

"Well——" Michael halted rather awkwardly, "I don't mean it is as bad as all that. Of course, it isn't like some government concerns—no private one could be and live, unless it were enormously wealthy. But old firms, where the control has been pretty much among families of position, the same

families for a long time, and where the profits have been considerable, have rather a tendency to that sort of thing."

"I see," Carson said, and sat thoughtful. "What is it you advise?" he asked at length.

"Nothing," Michael answered. "I told you it was not within my scope."

"You said that, given that a man had a free hand, you believed Jeffersons' could be made to pay. What's the man with a free hand to do?"

"Insure that everyone earns his wages," Michael said; "see they all did, from highest to lowest—or went. As, at least, half of those there with salaries above two hundred and fifty a year neither would nor could really earn it, the wage-bill would be somewhat reduced; also the amount of time at present spent in telling them what they don't understand, and hearing from them what must be restated before it can be carried out, at what time they shall chance to look in at the mill."

"H'm," Carson said again, and sucked at his pipe in silence.

"Of course, one might pension some of them off," Michael suggested, warming to the work of construction as he always did, whether laying out plans for the heating apparatus of a linen cupboard or the complicated mechanism for some dream invention. "It would be cheaper for the firm to pay some of them a hundred a year not to come than two hundred and fifty to come. But the real way to do it would be to make the position impossible—it soon would be when the thing was running as it ought. A certain number of foremen and operatives would go too. Men who've worked under a slack system don't

all of them take kindly to working under an efficient; but most would stop, and the others could be replaced. There wouldn't be much trouble with the men."

"H'm," said Carson for the third time, and he looked long and rather curiously at Michael. "Let's have more details."

He had them: they spent some time going into the matter fairly thoroughly; at the end of the time he had a much clearer idea of the ways and workings of a spinning-mill than he had had before, and a very fair idea of the conditions that obtained at Jeffersons'. He sat awhile in thought, turning things in his mind; at length he said:

"Supposing the directors were convinced that what you say is correct, and were to consent to give you the free hand, would you undertake this reorganisation? I don't say they would do it, but if they would, would you undertake it?"

"No."

"Why not? Afraid of the vengeance of offended parties?"

Michael was not; he had made enemies before.

"Then why? I take it you do not doubt your own ability, it's pretty obvious that you both could do it and know you could. Do you doubt the free hand? For the sake of argument let's call that granted. What's the objection? I think you owe it to me to say."

"I suppose so," Michael said. "Yes, I know I do; you've been very good to me. Well, then, it's my position. After that affair at Galhardy's, which is not

cleared up and never will be cleared up, I believe, I'm a speckled bird, marked if not absolutely branded. A man to do such a thing as we have been discussing has got to be above suspicion. He can't do it properly otherwise; there must be plenty of people, who, in the nature of things, must distrust him, suspect him of playing his own game and the rest. It would be extremely difficult for anyone to come in and do this work, even with a spotless reputation and friends at court; without them about impossible. For a rank outsider, with a scarred reputation, it is not to be thought of. The directors themselves could not help going back on such a one after a time, no matter how they started; it isn't in reason that they should be unimpressed by all that would be brought up against him by men they knew and liked when he had really set to work and was making enemies with both hands. There obviously would be chances for a man to feather his own nest and play his own game in the unique position they had put him in. They could not help realising it, and after a bit, they would not like it in the light of Galhardy's; and, what's more, they would not go on with it, no matter how they started, their faith would not be robust enough. Your own would not be."

"Oh?" Carson said. "You think that? Though I did not think you a blackguard at the time of the Galhardy business, I should when the racket began? I didn't myself know I was in the habit of changing my mind so easily."

"No," Michael protested, "it isn't that! I don't think you would change your mind, or ever go back on me about that. I know that and——. Well, I don't suppose you know quite what it's worth to me. It's not that which would make the difference to you,

though it would to others; but it would, through others and the general talk and publicity and row there would be, make the need for more faith in me than—than it is reasonable to expect you to have."

"Look here"—he leaned forward and spoke earnestly—"I'm not one of you, not really, and I never have been and never will be, whatever I may have pretended or persuaded myself or played at. I don't belong, and, inside, vaguely you know it; I have different standards, I do some things you wouldn't, probably won't do some things you do—have not just your code; and when I was in that position you could not help remembering it. You would be justified, for it would come into play and worry you. You see, in that position I should be your man; in a very little while they would be all against me and the whole thing; you, who first introduced me, would be the only one for me, and you would have to be for me in no common manner to make the position workable. And you couldn't be; however honest you might think me in the main, you could not forget about the other things, the different standpoint and code, and so on. It is not possible."

"Only possible to let Jeffersons' peter out to respectable bankruptcy, paying twenty shillings in the pound?"

"It won't do that. You can do something yourself: see no more of these wasters get in, pension a few of them off on some excuse, and make the improvements in machinery, I spoke of. That's quite possible; but the other——"

"You won't undertake it?"

"No."

Carson's eyes had narrowed a little, they were rather

small eyes, but set far apart and very honest. “You aren’t right,” he began obstinately, then he got up. “Oh, damn it all!” he said; he knew that he was right.

“There’s one thing I can’t stand about Annarly,” he said afterwards to Lady Sibyl, “that is his infernal logic and clearsightedness! It isn’t decent to see so far into a thing. He’s not content with knowing why he does what he does himself, which is bad enough; but he knows why other fellows do a sight more clearly than they do themselves—till he tells them, which is beastly.”

“Why didn’t he come back with you?” Lady Sibyl asked.

“Got to be in town.”

“On Saturday?”

“Well, he said so; I suppose he works on Sunday, I don’t know; anyhow, he wouldn’t come, though, when we first got to Winder’s, he said he would. I don’t know why he changed his mind, but he did.”

“We must ask him again later on,” Lady Sibyl said.

“He won’t come,” her husband told her. “Bet you what you like, he won’t.”

Lady Sibyl looked surprised. “Why not?” she asked.

“Don’t know.” Carson did not know why he did things, or why other people did, and could not have expressed it if he had. “Something to do with his view of himself and us, perhaps. Awfully queer. But I believe he was right in a way. I believe I would have come to think like that of him. Fact I do now, I

believe. Give you my word, Sib, I never felt such a sweep in my life, but he was right, and he was right not to take that job."

CHAPTER XII

NAN sat by the window of the brown upper room; from it she commanded a view of little beyond the quiet street into which people seldom entered. Few people did that afternoon, although it was a fine Saturday; after a time, however, she saw someone, Michael carrying his bag, on his way home after the visit of inspection to the cotton-mill. He looked up as he reached the house, and she smiled to him, trying to learn from his face if any good had resulted from the visit. She did not succeed, she must wait till he came in. Till after he had been in some time very likely, for she seldom asked questions, it seemed to her intrusive to do so, usually waiting till information should be volunteered.

To-day it happened that she did not have to wait long; soon Michael joined her at the window and began almost at once to speak of the events of the last few days and the work at Jeffersons'.

"I am not going to take it up," he said.

"Not? Did not Mr. Carson want you to?"

"I suppose I might have had it, but it wouldn't have answered."

She asked what it would have been worth; he did not know, but he guessed a liberal salary. She guessed so too, and also that it would have entailed something like the possibility of a return to a life and position not dissimilar from the one he had lost. Yet he had said it would not answer for him to take it.

"You see," he explained, "it was not the machinery which was wrong; there were other things." He went on to tell her about them in the intermittent way in which he used, going into some things with unnecessary minuteness, forgetting others altogether, misstating and twisting some, conveying to most people a very inaccurate idea of facts, but to Nan a most accurate one of the way in which he personally saw them, and the mental and spiritual process which underlay it.

"So I told Carson I wouldn't do it," he concluded, "and here I am again, where I was last October."

"Not quite where you were," she corrected; "that time the thing, work and position and all the rest, was taken from you; this time you have declined it."

"I had no choice."

She held that he had. "But even supposing you had not, there is still a great difference between then and now. There seem to me to be three ways of taking it when a thing is forced upon you—to resist, to submit doggedly, or to accept and forward the end yourself. And the last—to will what the gods will—always seems to give one the strong place, to make one no longer the victim, but almost the equal and fellow-worker with them."

Such an idea had not occurred to Michael, it interested him a good deal on the theoretical side though——

"Practically," he said, "it doesn't apply in this case. I'm not a victim; in fact, it was Carson who felt bad about the decision, not I."

Nan forbore to point out that his own words might be thought a confirmation of her theory. She pursued

the subject no further, but mentioned instead more mundane matters.

“Miss Foregood and George are coming to tea,” she said. “Father and Josiah have gone to look at a lot of furniture which is for sale at a big house in Warwickshire, so Miss Janet is coming to tea with me to hear about Rosalind’s wedding. What with Josiah being ill and then father we have not had a chance of talking about it before. George wants to speak to you about some warp-winding machinery, so, when I heard you would be home to-day, I said he had better come too.”

Soon after the visitors arrived; the one shabbier and rather more gloomy than when Michael had last seen him, but not less dogged by reason of six months more failure; the other, Miss Janet, as cheerful as ever. It required more than the illness of herself and Josiah—she had been through both lately—or even the undiluted company of George to reduce Miss Janet.

“He is a damper,” she owned at tea—in his presence —“but damp things don’t bother me. I hang ’em to the fire and let ’em steam; if they don’t do much good drying, why, they don’t; I’ve something else to do than to mind that. Now tell me about the wedding. You needn’t listen, George, if it’s too cheerful and trivial for you. He went out when Mrs. Barker came to talk about it. Not that I blame him for that, if ever there was a stupid woman on this earth! She was simply full of how much a yard they paid for the trimming of Rosalind’s dress, and how many dozen teaspoons she had, as proud as a peacock. I’ve no patience with her; one’d think, to hear her talk that day, she’d made the Annarlys, not God Almighty and the dressmaker.”

Nan and Michael both laughed, and, tea being finished, Nan proposed Miss Janet should come to her room to see the dress which she had had for the wedding.

“Mrs. Barker was very nice to me that day,” she said, as she led the way.

“So she told me,” Miss Foregood answered. “She was nice to Michael too, I understand; she prides herself on not giving the cold shoulder to those in misfortune. To do her justice, she doesn’t either, though she hasn’t much gumption in her way of not doing it. It was a good thing for her it was Michael and not George she ‘was going out of her way to be nice to because he was down on his luck’—that’s what she calls it. George would have helped her into the way again with a flea in the ear. Is this the dress?”

Nan said it was, and Miss Janet examined it critically and without entire approval: the breadths were too scanty, and the material too unsubstantial to justify the price, in her opinion. After the examination they talked of the wedding, remaining in the bedroom to do it, so that George’s conversation on warp-winding might be undisturbed. Nan did not add much to what her visitor had already heard, although she described from rather a different point of view. There was, however, one fact she mentioned which Mrs. Barker had not—for the good reason that she was not aware of it—her own acquaintance with Mr. Giles Cordover.

“He brought me back in his car,” she said; “that’s how it was I got to your house so soon after the wedding. I didn’t tell you, did I?”

“No, you didn’t—you didn’t tell me anything then,

and I didn't ask either, there was something else to think about. So Mr. Cordover brought you back in his motor-car, did he?"

"Yes, and he said he would come and fetch me some fine Saturday and take me to his house."

"What for?"

"I don't quite know"—Nan had evidently considered the question herself—"unless, perhaps, it is for me to see his furniture—we talked about that, you know—and possibly, just a little, to annoy the Annarlys. He is out of humour with them I fancy just now, and he may think it would annoy them if he took me in the car to his house, though, of course, it wouldn't really."

Miss Janet rubbed her nose with the end of her pince-nez, a habit she had when considering. "I don't know so much about that," she said. "Anyhow, you'd better go, if he does come, which he very likely won't."

"I think he will," Nan said, "and if he does, I shall go, if I can—not because of annoying the Annarlys, I'm sure it wouldn't do that—but because I rather liked him. I think oldish men are easier to get on with than most other kinds of people, don't you? One understands quicker what they mean, and what they like."

"They aren't often backward in telling you, if you don't," Miss Janet said; "at all events in telling you what they don't like; certainly George isn't. By the way, talking of George, you'd better be careful about Michael's going into anything with any friends of his, for it won't pay him. Everyone George knows is either a thief or a victim, or both, none of 'em good folk to deal with. According to him all the world's

the same—which is stuff and nonsense, just like saying all butchers are liars because some of them cheat over the weights, if you don't keep an eye on them. What I say is, if you go to a thieving neighbourhood, you must expect to be cheated; but if you don't, you needn't. And as for always expecting to be cheated, that's ridiculous, and very effectively prevents you from getting on with anything. Why, George has not managed to do anything with his invention yet, and principally, I believe, because he's so suspicious that he can't deal with anyone."

Nan suggested that Miss Janet was showing herself a little suspicious too, at all events, of George's friends.

"That's because I know the sort," Miss Janet answered; "there's nothing to be made out of any of them, you'd better tell Michael so."

Nan said she would; and, in pursuance of the promise, inquired about George and what he had been saying when the brother and sister had gone.

"It was about a man he knows who wants an alteration made to some winding gear," Michael said; "a small thing, but rather interesting."

Nan, remembering Miss Janet's warning, inquired, "Is there any money in it?"

Michael thought not. "The man's a warp dyer," he said; "that's a trade which is very seriously cut now, and he appears to be a poor member of it."

"Shall you do what he wants?"

"I can't without going to see the machines. I don't know that I could then; it is a pretty complicated bit of machinery."

"You can go if you want to."

“I can’t. How can I? I have just been away a week. This certainly would be only a matter of a day or two, Friday night to Sunday night would do it, but I can’t expect your father to let me go again.”

“You can,” Nan said. “It was part of the bargain you were to go when necessary; you have been less than he expected.”

“Yes,” Michael said doubtfully. “Whose bargain? Yours. I know perfectly well it is a favour you ask and obtain for me, what I receive from your father, all of it is.”

“There is no favour,” Nan said; “the bargain was made at the outset, and father would not only expect but want to abide by it. And I don’t fancy he feels cheated over it; you know him by this time, do you take him for a man who would make a bad bargain and be content with it? I don’t.”

Michael saw there was some truth in that, and, if not entirely convinced, was partly satisfied. Nan did not think it necessary to mention the birthday-present incident: she did not consider that in the light of a favour; nor did her father, she was right there.

It was settled between them that Michael should go to the warp dyer if he could come to any satisfactory arrangement with him. Nan had a private conviction that he would go even if the arrangement were not very profitable, the problem put to him by George had caught his attention.

And she was right: the arrangement when made was not very satisfactory, quite likely would work out to be little more than his expenses; still, he agreed. With Barmister’s consent he undertook to go to the dyeing works the first Friday evening that he could get away.

Among the many industries which at the present time are not flourishing, the one, little known except in the circle of allied trades, of warp dyeing ranks high in misfortune. No doubt there are warp dyers who do well, and there were in the days when George Foregood knew Milligen and Freegarten; but Milligen and Freegarten were not among them now. There had been a time when they, shrewd, hard-dealing workmen who had risen, had made good profits; when they had saved some money and spent more, and their families had blossomed forth as a consequence. But that was past: the profits were gone and the families too largely; perhaps the latter had blossomed too quickly to make strong roots. Freegarten was dead; his interest in the concern was represented by a widow suffering from asthma and a conviction that she did not get what she ought—both complaints chronic. Milligen still lived, an old man rather wedded to old ways, but too doggedly devoted to his business to let it die if a new one would save it —provided the new one could be applied as a patch, not as regeneration and reconstruction.

The works were situated in one of the small Midland towns, on the edge which was least prosperous, and from which richer works and factories had migrated. There were several sites and buildings to let in the immediate neighbourhood, possibly owing to the fact that a certain amount of coal had been taken out in the last century, and the shallow, disused pits were thought to make the erection of heavy factories in their vicinity unwise. The only prosperous-looking building near the dye works was the town council's power station. That abutted on to Milligen's, and, by its size and general appearance of opulence and conformity to all the latest regulations, made the dyeing works look older and shabbier than ever.

Inside the place was such as Michael had never come across: many of the arrangements make-shift and almost amateurish; the plant largely such as could have been collected from Galhardy's scrap heap and put up by a working foreman and a couple of fitters. Old Milligen himself was responsible for some of the work and much of the patching; he stopped once on his way through with Michael to calk an especially big leak in one of the tanks. Michael did not mind that; indeed, he himself stopped to tighten a steam joint. He could not help it; he could no more comfortably pass a leaky tap which did not concern him than omit to work out a problem in ballistics which was not his affair, if either happened to attract his attention. Possibly it was as a consequence of this characteristic that he did not think much about the poverty of the works or the inadequacy of the materials at hand; he was too interested in the problems there presented. It is true he offered advice in passing on ways to reduce work in pumping and any other small matter he observed, much as he would on the faulty draught in a kitchen-stove, otherwise he did not notice. Without knowing it, he won old Milligen's respect as a first-class workman; this before he entered into the matter he had come to consider.

The matter was to alter the winding machinery so as to enable longer warps to be dealt with than heretofore; a thing which, if it could be done, might enable the dyer to hold on and just work at a profit, which was not possible now. It sounded a small problem, simpler a good deal than it really was, at least, to the uninitiated; but Michael was aware there might be considerable difficulties in the way, at all events, of effecting any great improvement without an outlay beyond Milligen's inclination and means.

He spent all Saturday in the works, mastering present methods and working out various ideas for improvement as they came to him. After mid-day he had the place very much to himself, which really suited him better. Old Milligen had to go to a neighbouring town to a funeral, a solemn social ceremony such as are still sometimes to be met with in the Midlands, and which, with the return journey, would occupy him till far into the evening. The workmen had left at the half day, all except one, a little misshapen handy man called Billy, who followed Michael about, found bits of scrap when he wanted them, and made rough contrivances to his direction. In the days at Galhardy's some of the finest workmen in that half of England carried out the designs or variations of designs that the directors' genius was pleased to suggest, with the finest materials, and in the shortest time. No recollection of that occurred to Michael now, he was too absorbed in the present work to have thoughts for anything else; the which, perhaps, is one of the most unqualifiedly happy attributes of genius.

But Billy, the handy man, thought of other things; he thought of tea among them.

"I'd better knock off a minute and see after tea, mister," he said, when six was more than past.

And Michael assenting, he disappeared for a little while. When he returned, it was in a rather breathless state. Michael had a way of inspiring people who worked with him with a feeling that there was not a minute to spare.

"It's a step to the Co-op," Billy said, as he deposited crusty bread and stringy ham on an improvised table. "I reckon I've done it three minutes quicker this time

’n it’s been done yet, there and back.”

He rummaged in a cupboard and brought out a black teapot and a still blacker saucepan and set about boiling water for tea.

“—It’s down beyond the power station,” he explained with some pride.

“The power station?” Michael asked, then inquired casually, “Why did they put the station out here? I should have thought the other side of the town would have answered better, and saved something in wiring.”

“Cheaper here,” Billy told him; “got the land for next to nothing. They put the value down themselves by all their talk of old pits when someone else was thinkin’ of takin’ over that bit. Not that they’re so sure to make so much savin’ on it after all; their chimbley’s saggin’ and may cost ’em a bit to shore it up yet.”

Michael had noticed that the chimney was out of the straight. “Rather seriously too,” he said. “I should have thought it was hardly safe.”

“So’d the council, if it didn’t happen to be their’n,” Billy answered, grinning; “but they aren’t condemmin’ theirselves, not much—what d’ye take ’em for?”

“Fools,” Michael said, “if they let it come down; they will find that a deal more expensive than repairing, or rebuilding either.”

Billy agreed, but from politeness not conviction: in his opinion buildings and other things were condemned, not because they were unsafe, but because they did not conform to the council’s by-laws: could those be avoided the buildings might be

expected to stand; when the council itself was concerned they would naturally be in abeyance.

“That chimbley ain’t comin’ down,” he said, peering into the teapot. “Why should it?”

“Because it is about seven or eight degrees out of the perpendicular,” Michael answered.

Billy did not appreciate that as sound reason, but forbore to say so, merely admitting that Brassey, the head engineer, had his doubts. “He’s in a bit of a takin’ about it,” he said. “It’s sottled some more lately on the hither side they do say, and he’s fetched the manager back from the seaside to have a look at it; a chap as works there was tellin’ me yesterday. He was comin’ for a pow-wow to-day, Brassey would have him though it is Saturday. But what’s the good o’ that, I’m askin’? It ’on’t do nothin’; it’s them old pits as does it, and who’s going to account for them?”

“Why build on an old pit?” Michael asked. “It seems a little idiotic to attempt to save money that way.”

“They didn’t go to do it,” Billy told him. “They suspicioned there was pits hereabouts, but they didn’t reckon to hit one for their chimbley.”

“Surely they have a map of the district?”

Billy shook his head. “Old pits ain’t mapped, not the very old ’uns. They hadn’t no councils those days, all the better for them! Parties howked out the coal where they found it, and shut down when there warn’t no more worth gettin’, with no by your leave and notifyin’ the town surveyor or dustman or anybody else. You never know when you’re over a pit some parts—till you’re in it, and not often then. I mean, the chances are you won’t get in, if you’re on

one; it's just bad luck if you do, and the damn settlin' of the ground which happens now and then, the Lord knows why, and no 'un can allow for."

He gave the teapot a final shake as he explained these points of local interest, and then announced that tea was ready.

It was very black indeed, almost as black as the teapot and saucepan, and it was drunk with tinned milk and brown sugar, and the bread and stringy ham was eaten with pocket-knives; there was nothing else. But Michael did not notice, he was absorbed again in the work, and thinking of that only. He had speedily forgotten the difficulties of the council's head engineer, the state of their chimney, and the opinions of Billy on pits and by-laws; none of them had really interested him. He was occupied solely with devising a means to enable Milligen's winding machines to wind long lengths of warp instead of short.

Through the slow-closing spring evening he gave himself up to the problem. The patient Billy attending, puzzled and half fascinated by this new phenomenon among masters and workmen; this courteous person who always spoke politely, almost diffidently; who looked at things doubtfully, as if he hardly understood them, and touched them tentatively, as if he were afraid of breaking them. And, by some magic unexplained, brought forth more ideas of worth and simple yet perfect devices in these hours than all others had brought forth in all the years of the little man's experience. Darkness closed in, and the neighbouring power station supplied light to the works and all the town. No one, not even the two in the warp dyer's, gave a thought to the supply, or to the anxious engineer even now

waiting, grim-faced, for his manager.

Michael was standing by the largest winding machine, a big tank of blue dye below and the warp threads, to be passed through it on Monday, in great balls beside. From a more distant part of the building came the sound of hammering on metal, Billy busy with some fitting of his own contrivance or Michael's. Nearer at hand there was only the regular but muffled noise of the engines in the power station beyond the party wall. Michael had just leaned across the corner of the dye-tank to place, in imagination, some modification on the machine when there was a terrific crash. A deafening noise, as if the whole structure were coming about his ears, a shock that shook the building to its foundations; then a roar as of a cascade of falling masonry, a very chaos of sound, and then darkness. Dye sprang from the tanks and fell again like rain, with bricks and dust and broken timbers; the air was choked with refuse and vibrant with the noise of displaced machinery; this for a minute, then the whole pandemonium was swallowed in one tremendous roar.

"Boilers!" The thought leapt up in Michael's mind, and he fled.

Through the darkness, stumbling among bricks and broken roofing, avoiding by a miracle the still falling masonry; making by instinct, more than knowledge, for the nearest way out and the power station.

There is a workman who still tells how a dyed man came to the power station that night. Through choking dust and smoke and steam he came: out of darkness, now beginning to be lit with fire-gleams, and chaos and deafening turmoil. He came straight and swift, halting for nothing, seeing nothing it

seemed, speeding for the centre of the catastrophe as others sped from it. He went past the bedazed man without even seeing him, running at top speed to the dynamo-room.

There was a range of six dynamos down the centre of the building, the switch-board at one end. Across that end, right across the switch-board, cutting all connection and destroying all control, the sagging chimney had fallen. Tons of brickwork lay there: under them, somewhere under, buried in the ruin, was the head engineer and with him the manager he had insisted on calling to council, neither the one nor the other ever to give counsel again. Others may have been buried in the overthrow; if so, they had never a chance, for, to add to the general confusion, fire was breaking out at the spot. Michael did not stop for that, he went by as a man who has one idea only. He had one, to shut off steam from the dynamos. He knew that they must be shut off; he knew it to the exclusion of everything else; it was the one essential. Because it was, and because he knew it, and knew it even when the first roar of the bursting boilers shook the air, he took control. He saw no one to help him, he thought of no one, he only thought of the dynamos and the one thing to be done. Swiftly he seized the wheel by the first, screwing it down hard and shutting off steam—then the next, and the next. It was not to be done in a moment: done as quickly as might be, in an incredibly short time as time really is, it was not possible to shut off all. The end ones were bound to fuse before he was through with the others, even if their proximity to the fire, now beginning to get a hold, had not by then prevented any approach to them.

With the shutting off of the first dynamo the deafening sound of escaping steam was added to the other confusion. By the time three were done the uproar was such that nothing could have been heard above it; when one would have the attention of another he must touch him. One did touch Michael, a dazed workman, with blood running down his face. Michael did not notice the blood, he merely saw an assistant. He gave him an order, somehow conveyed it by dumb show or force of will. It was to draw the fires.

The fires were drawn, and though it seemed impossible to add more smoke and fume to the already nearly unbreathable air, it grew yet thicker in consequence.

By this time the fire at the end of the building was the most pressing danger: the last of the dynamos, probably by this time fused as well as beyond reach, was left, and all attention given to getting the fire under control. It was useless to think of the fire brigade, there was no way left of communicating with them except by foot-messenger; and even were a message got to them, they, but too surely, would be more wanted elsewhere. There must be more fires than this in the town by now, many fuses would have gone when the accident happened with disastrous results somewhere; the sudden darkness, which had fallen when the chimney fell, would by now be lit by as many fires as the brigade could deal with. Michael had out the hydrants belonging to the station and organised what men were at hand. By this time there were more to obey orders; not the full night-shift: one or two had run for their lives, one or two, no doubt, were killed, blown to pieces by the bursting boilers, or crushed under masonry and

wreckage. But enough were left to carry out orders, and they carried them out, never asking who it was that gave them.

Mr. William Heath, clerk of the council, did not ask either; it did not occur to him at first, and afterwards it was too late. He was the first person from outside who appeared on the scene. Those who at this hour were near enough to have come sooner, had not. There were not many of them, and they were not of the sort to come; they had made off in the opposite direction as hard as they could, feeling, no doubt, that the accident was no affair of theirs and the safety of their lives, for which they had not unreasonable fears, was. But Mr. Heath came. He came in a borrowed car when he realised that it was from the power station had arisen the accident which had plunged the town in darkness, stayed the trams in progress, held up cranes late loading by the river, stopped alike the electric theatre and the doctors' work, turning the busy Saturday night town into a nightmare of arrested life. It had taken time to realise this, such a reversal of all ordinary experience arrests more than the actual physical thing it controls, mental processes are arrested too. On the whole, Mr. Heath felt, he recovered himself and recognised the seat of trouble in a creditably short time. When he realised it, and when afterwards he perceived by obvious demonstration, that it was a trouble which was not going to immediately right itself, he set off for the power station. Someone in authority should be there, he felt, and there at once.

Others were making for the station besides himself by this time, the wives of those employed among them, for the news of the catastrophe was abroad by now. Through these people, at rather reckless pace,

the borrowed car went, outdistancing them and reaching the scene first.

Mr. Heath meant well; indeed, he had done well; the council afterwards congratulated him on the promptness, decision, and courage he had shown in the emergency. That he did not take command when he arrived on the scene was not his fault; he would have done so had it been possible; he was, no doubt, prepared to do so. But there was another man already there: a slight, youngish man, with nothing conspicuous or individual about him, except, perhaps, a greater share of dirt and grime than anyone else. Mr. Heath had no idea who he was; he had never seen him before, and, as has been said, it did not occur to him to ask when he first saw him giving orders and dealing with the situation. Afterwards when it did occur to him it was too late.

It occurred when the man gave him orders. This he did when Mr. Heath came in his way.

Mr. Heath, stumbling over pipes, and hydrants, and fallen brickwork, much distressed for the woeful destruction of council property, hastened here and there on the outskirts of the fire. He was shrill with excitement: asking what was being done, who was doing it, and where was the engineer, whom he held responsible. “What has become of Brassey?” he demanded. “Why is he not here?”

“He’s dead,” one of the men answered briefly.

“—No, we haven’t got him out yet, but he’s dead sure enough, the chimney’s on him.”

He shook himself free, Mr. Heath had grasped him by the arm to pour out incoherent questions, and went on with his work.

“Dead!” Mr. Heath said, grasping his handkerchief and gazing about in horror. “This is awful—awful!”

He made an effort and mastered himself. “Something must be done,” he said energetically. “The work of rescue must be undertaken!”

He hurried to another point, and tripped over a hydrant, jerking it from the grasp of the man who held it—to his own detriment and the confusion of several.

“I must have volunteers!” he said authoritatively. “We must turn our attention to saving life.” He took hold of the nearest man. “Where are the fire brigade?” he asked. “They should be doing this, you are wanted elsewhere. Why were they not called in? Why is this in the hands of amateurs?” He chanced to turn to Michael himself now. “The council——”

“Do you represent the council? Go and see about having the road up.”

Mr. Heath stared.

“Have it up just outside here,” Michael said, unaware even of his astonishment, “and waste no time about it. We must take up the electric mains, and we can’t do it from inside; the pit where they are will be full of water—even if it weren’t impossible to get at it for the fire. We must get at them from the outside. Have the road up where they come in. As quick as possible, please; I can’t spare any men to do it, but there are plenty outside by this time, set them on it, and tell them to work like the devil!”

Mr. Heath swallowed something; but he went. Afterwards he took some pains to explain to himself and others how it happened in the confusion and stress of circumstances that he did go. Though, had

he only known it, he need not have been ashamed; it was the one really wise thing he did that night.

They had the road up, working by hastily procured flares and the light of the now lessening fire; men vigorously plying picks, most of them hardly knowing for what purpose except vaguely that they were looking for electric mains for someone. Inside, Michael left others to finish dealing with the fire. It was under control now, and there were things elsewhere demanding his attention; the steam mains to be looked to and a temporary switch-board to be made and put up if the place were to be got going again. Nothing but getting it going occurred to him as possible, seeing the complete paralysis of life otherwise entailed. He set men, as soon as any could be spared from the fire, to repair the steam mains or to cut off the parts damaged beyond repair by the bursting of the group of boilers attached to the fallen chimney. He himself attended to the switch-board. There were materials at hand, and he went to work at once to make an efficient, if rather rough, substitute for the one which had been destroyed. A junior electrician stood by to help him and carry out orders.

To them thus occupied came Mr. Heath, insistent on the subject of rescue, somewhat incensed and very important.

“It is a positive disgrace!” he said. “Nothing being done for any of the poor fellows! Precious lives may be lost by this delay. I insist on the work being undertaken at once; I insist on my orders being obeyed!”

Michael glanced round. “Mind the wire,” he warned.

Mr. Heath minded in so far as to become entangled.

"I insist!" he repeated, extricating himself. "These poor fellows, pinned down by masonry——"

Michael gave an order to the man at his elbow, who stood watchful for a word from him, stolidly indifferent to anything else. "Pick up those wires," he said, and the man did. Together they executed some deft piece of manipulation with them.

"Have you got any ambulances and things outside?" he inquired of Mr. Heath without looking round. "No? Go and see about getting them then; I'll have some pieces collected for you by the time they are here."

"Sir?" Mr. Heath could say no more; this was the most unseemly jest and the most ill-timed impertinence he had ever heard of.

It did not occur to him, nor could it ever have been realised by him, that it was neither jest nor impertinence; merely a simple statement of a simple fact by a man who was simply dealing with things as they were in a great emergency.

And Michael never knew Mr. Heath's view either—how should he? He was making a switch-board in the great emergency: a man has only a given amount of brain-energy to expend at one time.

In a little while the ambulances came and the pieces were collected. As Michael had foreseen, there was, and could be, nothing more to put in them: the men in charge of the burst boilers were blown to atoms at the first explosion; the two who had stood at the base of the chimney were crushed out of recognition. There was no work of rescue to do, only recovery, and recovery of that which could only be identified by those who knew what to look for. Heart-broken women were admitted for the purpose, and Michael

left the switch-board to help them through the painful work, and gently lead them away afterwards. Mr. Heath did not see that, or if he did, did not observe. At any rate, it did not erase the earlier impression nor yet the later one of Michael returning quickly to work and suggesting politely but firmly that he, clerk to the council, and all other outsiders were better and safer off the premises and out of the way.

Mr. Heath went; he realised that he had something to do outside. With the concurrence of others of the council, he telephoned for someone to come and take charge of the power station in place of the engineer who was dead. The reason why this had not been done before was, firstly, that up till now no one had thought of it; and, secondly, when they did think they could not immediately agree as to whose nephew to send for. When that matter was settled, he was summoned by telephone.

And in the station, through the remaining hours of the night, Michael worked, getting the place into going order again. The switch-board was made, the electric mains outside found and connected up with the leads from the extemporised board. Afterwards the sound dynamos were switched in; one after another they were connected, and the fires relighted. Once more the impressive noise of them began to be heard in the long building; at first a little jerkily as the first great engine got to work, afterwards deepening to the strong, steady hum which was their usual voice. By degrees things began to come alive again, beyond the station as well as inside it; soon after dawn trams and engines, cranes and lights, most of that which had been paralysed through the night, began to feel the power.

Soon after dawn, too, came the new engineer. It must be remembered that Mr. Heath had telephoned for him, impressing upon him urgency and the need for speedy coming; not omitting to mention, among other reasons, that an impertinent person, unknown, was at the station giving orders and taking none. To the dynamo-room came the new engineer, and found the person at work on the last sound dynamo. To him he announced himself, his name, occupation, and reason for being there.

“Ah?” Michael said without ceasing from what he was doing, which was at a critical point. “Hand me that spanner.” This to the man close under the dynamo.

It was handed, and for a moment he worked concentratedly.

The new-comer watched, casting a critical glance at the work, and also at the pools of blackened water, charred framework, twisted pipes, tangled wires, and general confusion and destruction all round. He himself, naturally, presented a contrast; he looked very clean beside the grimy men here, more especially beside the one in command. In the cold morning light that one showed a haggard, unkempt person, dye-stained, oil-stained, torn and smoke-blackened, disreputable, and unimpressive. Careless, too—the new-comer noticed a loose bolt when the work was apparently regarded as done.

He pointed it out to one of the workmen.

The man looked at it stolidly. He had been many hours on duty, and no ordinary duty, and his enthusiasm for bolts and casual words of casual comers was at a low ebb.

“You might tighten that down,” Michael said, and he

obeyed.

The new-comer stiffened just a little. Michael turned to go.

The other looked him over. “Are you an electrician?” he said.

“No,” Michael answered, “only the man who dealt with the situation.”

CHAPTER XIII

ON Saturday afternoon Mr. Giles Cordover came to fetch Nan. As Michael was away she was rather busy; by this time he had become more useful than he himself realised, and, in his absence, she tried to make up to her father for the temporary loss. On this occasion, however, Barmister would not let her stay; she could finish the work when she got back, or on Sunday, he said, or any time. So she accepted the invitation, and within ten minutes of Mr. Cordover's coming went away with him.

Mr. Cordover lived some way out of town, in an old-fashioned suburb not much built over as yet, and served by so bad a train service that its chances of becoming popular were not great. The house itself was a substantial red-brick one; the original structure some hundred and fifty years old, the bay windows and other additions much more modern and agreeing no better with the rest than did the elaborate conservatory and weather-vane. But Nan, who could have told to a year the date of the original building, thought them quite suitable; they fitted with Mr. Cordover, if not with the house, and, after all, a man —a real man—is more than a house. Inside, everything fitted with Mr. Cordover—the sideboard with the carving of fruit, the solid chairs ranged in a straight row and polished to perfection, the pier glasses in the drawing-room, the curtains of green silk damask, so green and such silk that they had defied sun and time and were as green as ever. Everything was as Nan had expected, even the

servants—they were not permitted to wear caps or address their master as “sir” on account of his political views of equality—but they were of the kind, lineal descendants of the old retainers, who no more thought of leaving, except for death or marriage, than a man’s own hands do.

“Well,” Mr. Cordover said, when he had shown the house and its inmates, “there it is, the whole of it, sideboard and all; solid stuff as you said, make fun of it, if you like.”

Nan looked up. “I know too much about the workmanship for that,” she said, “also——”

“Also what?” he demanded, as she paused. “Isn’t it quite what you thought?”

“I hadn’t thought about some of it before,” she confessed.

Her eyes went to an old setter lying on a cushion in the sunny window. He was very old, paralysed in his hind-quarters, only able to move with trailing limbs: an ugly thing, but free of pain, quite happy, more especially when able to show slobbering love to his master. Near by stood a chair, one of the beautifully kept chairs polished like the others, but with the leather torn and scarred by the claws of a one-eyed cat, rescued from tormenting boys (they were prosecuted for cruelty at the police court), and incurable as all the feline tribe with regard to the destruction of chair-seats. A parrot hung in a cage, an irascible parrot that bit itself when it had no one else to bite, the property formerly of an old clerk, now dead. Night and morning the master, gloved for the purpose, took the bird from its cage, talked to it, and let it walk round the room for exercise, as the former owner had done. Nan’s eyes went to these

creatures, and at the same time her ears caught the sound of a crutch, the crutch of a little lame old lady to whom she had already been introduced: a distant cousin of Mr. Cordover's, nominally presiding over the house. A frail little thing of timid ways and aristocratic prejudices, who knew little of Mr. Cordover's politics and less of his angles—they never showed to her—but who lived like a delicate plant in this sheltered nook provided by his bounty. There was another woman upstairs, Nan had been introduced to her too, she was still frailer than this one, though younger; not to be much longer for this world, Nan had judged, when she looked into the dreamy eyes from which the mind was half fled, and to which peace had nearly come. A widow she was, with a name unfamiliar to the girl and a tragic story of loss and suffering; that Nan had heard, but she did not hear the other story of generous love unrequited, but living on to give asylum at the last. There was no need to speak of that; it softened Mr. Cordover's face as he stooped to the frail creature whom he had brought home to die, and kindled his eyes to pathetic pride as he saw a beauty long gone for all others.

Nan, having seen these people and these things, as well as the house and furniture, hesitated when Mr. Cordover asked her if all was not as she had expected.

"All that I had thought about is," she said, "the body is, but the soul"—her voice grew soft and shy—"I had not before thought about the soul."

"Oh, the soul," Mr. Cordover said. "Do you take stock in souls?" He turned abruptly. "Come and see the polyanthuses, they're the finest you've ever seen."

She went, slipping her hand in his arm as she did so;

he kept it there, squeezing it a little.

Nan enjoyed every minute of her visit, the house and garden, the little lame old lady who presided at a tea as dainty as herself, and as pleasing as the mid-Victorian china in which it was served. Nan and the old lady became good friends.

"My dear," she said at parting, "I hope you will come and see us again; it will be a great pleasure to me if you will. You remind me of the girls of my own young days, if I may say it; you don't mind me saying it? You are so much quieter—you fill the room so much less than the girls of to-day. You will forgive me for making the personal remark?"

Nan assured her that she would, and said she would be very pleased to come again, if she might.

Mr. Cordover sent her back to town in the car, with strict injunctions not to tip the chauffeur.

"I pay my servants half as much again as other people," he said, "on the understanding that they take tips from nobody. They'd get the sack if they did, so they don't, and it's just as well to know that beforehand, for if it's something to be ashamed of to give a tip which is taken—as it seems to be, seeing the way most men do it—it's twenty times worse when it's not taken."

Nan said she would remember, and held out her hand for good-bye.

Mr. Cordover tucked the rug round her, "I'll fetch you again some day soon," he said. "Will you come?"

"If I may."

"All right, that's a bargain." He gave a final tuck. "You and I'll be friends before we've done, I foresee,"

he said.

She thanked him with smiling eyes; she had not many friends; and the car went away.

She looked back once at the square house, and the thought of the inmates made the smile in her eyes misty. She looked back again when they slowed near the top of a steep rise further along the road. An old house stood on the left of the way here, a long, low house deep bowered in trees. The hill was so steep that the pace had slackened considerably; she was able to see it well, to observe the sense of peace and space that seemed to cling about it in the evening light, even to read the board by the wall, which notified that it was to let.

“I should like to live there,” she thought.

And when she reached home, so much was the fancy in her mind that she told her father she had seen the house she wanted to live in.

“Oh?” he said. “Maybe you will one day—if you really want to. It’s my experience that one pretty much gets what one wants, if one does really want it —and’s prepared to pay.”

Nan suggested that it was not the usual opinion.

“I dare say not,” he answered dryly, “plenty of people can neither really want nor are really willing to pay, though they wouldn’t believe it if you told them so. Folks make about as many mistakes in estimating their powers that way as they do in valuing their antiques. Show me a man who wants a thing all the time, and keeps on wanting it and is prepared to sacrifice to get it, and I’ll show you one that’s going to get it.”

“I don’t know if I want my house all that,” Nan said,

“perhaps I don’t; perhaps I’m one of those who can’t really want.”

“Then you aren’t my daughter,” her father retorted. “I know what I want and always have. I want to live and die here in this place and at this work, and I shall be very surprised if I don’t do it. Now go and get your hat off; are you too tired to do a bit of work to-night?”

She was not, and came quickly and spent the rest of the evening at work. And not being finished then, went to it again on Sunday morning.

By the afternoon she had done, and when Michael, having travelled by a tediously slow Sunday train, returned she was sitting alone reading. Barmister was downstairs in the room with the dolphin mantelpiece; he usually spent Sunday afternoons there, more often in looking at past records of work than actually at work, enjoying the companionship of its near presence, much as a book-lover imbibes joy from the presence of his books and the mere sight and smell of them.

Nan and Michael had an undisturbed hour upstairs, and in it Nan heard about the warp-winding machinery and the accident at the power station. It was characteristic of Michael that he told her of the winding machinery first; it had been in his mind since the other, and was to him the more interesting of the two.

“I believe I have solved that problem,” he said.

And when she asked if he had found it as difficult as he had expected, he answered:

“In a way, yes. The real difficulty was the poverty of the land; the principal problem was to get a

satisfactory improvement which would not cost too much."

"Have you done that?"

"I think so: I got at something more or less satisfactory on Saturday evening. I was half inclined to let it go at that, though I knew there must be something better, if I could hit on it. In the small hours this morning I did hit on it. Funny how things come to you sometimes! I hadn't been thinking of the winding machines at all—couldn't, my hands were too full then: all of a sudden they came back to me, when I was busy with the dynamos, and I saw right away at once what it was I wanted and had really been trying to get at all the time. The extraordinary thing is that I didn't see before; it's so perfectly obvious."

Nan, by this time, knew something about this kind of obviousness and its liability to show extremely abstruse to the lay mind. She asked about the idea now, and he explained with notes and diagrams made on pieces of paper in the train.

"I worked it out on the way down," he said; "it's a bit indistinct in places, I got sleepy before I was through. I slept most of the rest of the way. There was a fool of a commercial traveller in the carriage, a chatty chap who would talk about screws and bolts and boiler-joints. I told him they didn't interest me, I didn't know one end of a screw from another, except by sitting on it, and then I went to sleep."

Nan laughed. "Dull for him," she said.

"He got somebody else to talk to pretty soon. At all events, there was somebody else in the carriage when I woke, and they were talking away like

anything. I roused just as we were running through Enfield, or some such place, and heard them at it. They were talking about a reversible turbine, a thing that's badly wanted, but about as likely to be accomplished as thought transference by Act of Parliament; theirs, the turbine they were speaking of, I mean, was the purest bunkum."

"Did you tell them so?" Nan asked.

"Not in so many words; I asked them about it, and afterwards we talked about turbines in general."

"Did they mind?"

"Oh, no, they were quite pleased; in fact, rather grateful—seemed to look upon me as a mine of useful information at the end. One of them gave me his card."

He pulled it out, but the name was quite indecipherable.

"Oh, those are some notes I made in the Tube on an automatic switch for alternating currents. I don't know if anything could be done in that way. It would be a good thing if it could; it might have been a help in such a smash as last night's."

And from that he went on to speak of the accident at the power station, and to tell her about it.

She listened with the greatest interest and a certain thrill of satisfaction, asking questions now and then. Among them was one which he had not asked himself.

"What will they give you for this?"

"I don't know; I hadn't thought of that."

"You saved them a great deal in money, perhaps in life too."

“Maybe. Yes, I suppose so; but if it hadn’t been me it would have been someone else; I just happened to be there at the moment.”

She said “Yes,” though she may not have entirely agreed. “I suppose you rather put their backs up,” she remarked. He had told her of Mr. Heath and his own answer to the inquiry of the new engineer, and various other incidents; also she knew something of his fatal gift for making enemies. “Still, even if you did do that, even if you made them feel very foolish, the fact remains, you saved them. They must make some recognition of it.”

“What? A column in the local newspaper saying that, as a consequence of the council neglecting to repair their chimney, which any decent bricklayer would have condemned, there had been a disaster; scope and size of which were minimised by the action of an interfering stranger, name unknown. No one but Milligen knew who I was, and he was out of the way. That would be recognition, wouldn’t it?”

“I didn’t mean that sort, you know I didn’t. I never see that fame, even real fame, is worth much, though it might be a little helpful to you now; that sort of thing, of course, is nothing at all. I was thinking of money, rather; they must give you something, I should think.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Overtime pay?” he suggested. “They might, but there is no must about it that I see; a certain amount of doubt, rather.”

And it seemed almost as if Michael were right, for, as time went on, nothing was heard of the council one way or the other. There was, no doubt, some report of the affair in the local newspapers, but he did not see them; and in them the part he played, reported

on by the incoming engineer, whose business it was to please the council and not emphasise the extent of the disaster, was hardly likely to be made too glowing. The matter slipped from his mind and Nan's too, and life went on much as before. The usual routine of daily work, the drawings for the patent agent, the occasional times of quiet companionship, and the occasional times—growing rarer—of fretting against the monotony of it all. So through the summer, with little or no change except that sometimes, more often than he used, he went to Hurstbury to see his father.

"I believe the poor old chap begins to feel a little left," he once explained to Nan. "It never struck me before, but after that wedding it did; he seems somehow to be rather out of it, to be getting old. I don't suppose it's any particular pleasure to him to see me, I don't see how it can be, considering what a mess I have made of things, and that we haven't a point in common; but I think I'll go. He's on the shady side now—so am I, another way. It gives one a sort of fellow feeling; there may be some comfort in that."

So he went when he could spare the time, though going meant sacrificing a scanty leisure, and when he was there he was able to do little besides sit and smoke with his father and rather laboriously make conversation. How laborious it was the father never knew; he thought the son enjoyed the talks, and looked forward to the visits—as he himself did, saving up little bits of information and little pieces of work over against Michael's coming and for his delectation. One Sunday afternoon they overhauled the garden water-supply system; Mr. Annarly used to be fond of doing such things. That afternoon they

made several alterations, Michael standing by handing the tools. Another Sunday, when the servants were all out, they examined a defective flue in the kitchener, and Michael, working under his father's directions, made it worse than it was before. A third they spent in the old workshop, Mr. Annarly explaining various of his former contrivances to his son. At parting, he pressed some of the remaining tools on him, with an entirely erroneous idea of their value.

"You take them, my boy," he said with the awkwardness of a man giving a considerable present. "Take them—here, take this too—I don't suppose I shall ever use them again, I haven't the fancy for things that I had. It's a pity they should lie here; they'll be useful to you."

Michael took them: he carried them back to town with him in an unwieldy parcel, and put them carefully away. He never spoke of them to anyone, but he would not have parted with them for a good deal.

Towards the end of July it happened that he was able to tell his father a piece of news which gave the elder man great satisfaction. He hesitated some time before telling it on account of that very satisfaction; he knew that, say what he would, his father would estimate it very differently from what he himself did, and far above what he knew it to be really worth. However, at length he told it; he must, if for no other reason than that it would prevent his visits home, since it would take him away from London. It was a definite offer of engineering work definitely accepted at a salary of five hundred pounds a year.

The offer was made by the same great steamship company who had approached him in the spring and

afterwards had withdrawn—he very well knew why. He knew why they approached him again now. The question of internal combustion engines for use on big ships was as important as ever to them, more important rather than less. And the difficulty of finding any man equal to such work as they wanted in connection with it, and also willing to undertake it, was as great. It was something more than a difficulty, it was very like an impossibility; men of that experience and with brains of such calibre are not to be hired like journeymen. Michael was to be hired. Michael, it was pretty generally suspected in some well-informed quarters, had the required brains. He had also a damaged reputation and a very ugly suspicion against him—if he had not, he would not have been for hire. The one thing weighed with the other: no doubt the directors weighed them very carefully; and, having spent much, and advanced no whit with the engine problem, they came to the conclusion that the lesser evil was to employ a man who could help them, even at the risk of having valuable processes and inventions stolen. At all events, the secretary wrote to Michael, saying the directors were again considering the matter of internal combustion engines, and would be glad, if he were of the same mind as earlier, if he would call at the offices of the company.

Michael called. He did not want to; he and Nan talked it over some time first. He realised the situation perfectly, the reasons which lay behind this letter as well as those which lay behind the others; and human nature, mere ordinary pride, prompted a curt refusal. But common sense and wisdom prompted otherwise; here, surely, was the chance of retrieving something of his name, and establishing his reputation. To refuse curtly because of a former,

not unexpected, slight were mere childish vanity, even though accepting would entail unpleasant things, besides pocketing pride. He saw this last as plainly as the first; so did Nan, but she reminded him that he was in a position to make some sort of terms.

He called at the offices as requested, and once again found himself in the palatial quarters of a great firm: a place of polished mahogany and many well-dressed clerks; of complicated inter-telephone system and quiet, luxurious private rooms, where keen-eyed men with suave manners complimented those received with a few minutes' exclusive attention, and afterwards dismissed them as cabinet ministers might. Michael received very undivided attention, and more of it than fell to the lot of some people. The coming to terms took time, for if he laboured under a disadvantage, so did the company, the disadvantage of finding it very difficult to get anyone else: and he knew their situation fully as well as they did his; and at the game of steadfastly keeping such things in mind whilst diplomatically omitting them in speech and dealing accordingly, he was bad to beat. Nevertheless, he came away from the interview depressed. The familiarity of the atmosphere affected him, in part with a morbid shrinking, as a burnt animal from the fire; in part with a sort of homesick sense of what was lost. He came away with a feeling of weariness and age, and a renewed recognition of the great gap set between himself and not only his former place but his former self too.

"I have agreed to go," he said to Nan when he got back. "Oh, yes, I couldn't do anything else; it would have been sheer folly to refuse, I know that, I never seriously thought of it, but I don't know how it will work out. I'm to have five hundred a year, more

when I make a success—that last is only a verbal promise, and they may slip out of it, or try to, though I shall do what I can to safeguard myself ——" The old gleam shot up for a moment here, and the old fighting set, which had made so much difficulty for Galhardy's, came about his jaw.

Nan saw it, and saw it go again. "That is not bad," she said.

"No," he answered. "It's less, of course, than it's worth, but more a good deal than they need have paid me. But I am not at all sure how the arrangement will answer; they won't give me anything like a free hand. I could not nail them down to anything: they would only say they should wish for very full reports; that one of the directors, Mr. McFarline, had the keenest interest in the subject, and would look forward to following my work with great attention."

"That means?"

"It means they won't trust me an inch—I suppose one can hardly blame them—and will want everything reported, and signed, and countersigned; and every scrap of work done under somebody's eye and recorded in somebody's notes. I am not at all sure it will be possible to work that way."

"Perhaps not. Still you can try, and if you can't, you can't. At the worst, you can always come back here."

"No, I can't. If I go, I can't come creeping back to you and your father."

"You can always come," she said. "You must always come. Promise me you will. But you need not, I know you will without that; there is always the mouse-hole here and me, the mouse, inside it. You

must always come when you want to."

Michael said "no," and meant it; nevertheless, they were good words to carry with him when he went to the Clyde on a doubtful venture.

CHAPTER XIV

OLD Milligen had the gout: not suppressed gout, or gouty indigestion, or any of the forms which are fashionable to-day, but the old original complaint, such as Chatham and the great men of his time knew. Like them Milligen had it, and like theirs his temper suffered; also his wife—he had no family at home to suffer, his daughters being married and his sons dead. The gout, while it was at its acutest, prevented him from attending to anything much besides itself; when it lessened a little he attended, so far as he was able, to his own business. Later he attended to that of the town council. He was still more or less of a prisoner to the house; indeed, he had only got so far as his own works once or twice, and with great difficulty, much bad language, and, the doctor said, some risk. Consequently, even when he turned his attention to the council, he was not able to go personally to the offices, nor yet to the private residences or business premises of any of the members. He was consequently driven to writing to the body, although pen and ink were not the medium in which he felt at home.

His letter, which began "*Dear Misters*," and concluded "*and may the devil take the lot of you for scabs.—Yours obedtly, James Milligen*," contained matter which, in some parts of England, would have been considered more than grounds for a libel action. In this town such a remedy occurred to no one; town councillors, and old Milligen too, were not far enough removed from the time when such

differences were settled with coats off in the yard—a simpler, and, on the whole, pleasanter as well as cheaper remedy. One cannot, of course, settle it in that way with a man suffering from gout; nor can one with credit do it if one is a town councillor. Those concerned laboured under this disadvantage, also they were rather too old and too well-to-do; they merely replied in kind, abused Milligen roundly to all who would carry word back to him, and, unofficially, to himself too, and officially wrote and advised him, in polite language, to mind his own business.

"My business!" he roared when he read it. He did not mind the abuse at all, but he did object to the official advice, also his foot gave him a sudden twinge at the moment. "I'll see to the business, my lads! I'll make your ears tingle for as mean a set of scrogs as ever built shoddy and winked at it! Maria! Maria, woman! D'ye hear! Fetch me that paper!"

Maria fetched it, a newspaper of large local circulation: an issue now some weeks old, which contained a report of the affair at the council power station. Old Milligen had been taken ill the day the account appeared, and so had not read it till some time after, and had not been well enough to take any steps in the matter for some time after that; and when he had written the council had not been in any hurry to acknowledge his letter. What with one thing and another the matter was already a thing of the past in local interest. Not so in Milligen's. He read the report all over again, flushing as he did so, and rolling a sentence on his tongue now and again—"An unforeseen accident," "providentially, the damage was comparatively small, the matter never assuming alarming proportions," "the council's employees,

ably directed by Mr. William Heath, rose splendidly to the occasion: the thanks of the community are due to them and to a gentleman from a neighbouring factory, who, with considerable presence of mind, turned off the dynamos."

"'Due to 'em!' Due to Willy Heath! Yes, and there's something else due to you, Willy, and that's a piece of my mind, and you'll have it, my lad, when I'm about again! 'A gentleman from a neighbouring factory'! Maria, tell Turner to look in this evening, I'd like another chat with Turner; he'll be pleased with these ——'s letter."

"Yes," Maria said, although she knew another chat with Turner would further excite the gout and her irascible lord. But she never attempted to interfere with him in what she deemed men's matters; and he never thought of interfering in what was reckoned women's. When their interests were mutual and clashed, as had sometimes happened when the children were at home, they settled it in a verbal bout slightly reminiscent of the backyard days.

Turner came that evening and read the council's letter, and told again, as he had told before, what had happened at the power station on the night the chimney fell. As he was himself employed there: indeed, was almost the first man to recover his presence of mind on that eventful night, he was in a position to do so, and to give a further and fuller account of Michael's share than the paper did. It is true he repeated on this occasion, as on others when he talked to old Milligen, that no use was to be made of what he said; it was all in confidence, and he could not afford to lose his job. But that did not matter; there were too many men in the station that night, most of them more or less acquainted with

Milligen, for information to be traced to one particularly; besides, plenty of others outside possessed it in some form now; the thing was not done in a hole and corner, as Milligen said to Turner. And said again when later he called at the council offices.

When he did call there the members of the council expressed themselves glad to see him about again. They were too, he was a fellow-townsman with mutual interests, one of themselves, as it were; they thought no more of his letter than they would of an explosion of abuse from one of their own body in the heat of passing argument. He did not either; he might have called them names, all the same they were his very good friends, always were, and always would be, even though he had come about the original subject now.

“About that business up at the station,” he began.

“Ah, yes, Mr. Milligen,” the chairman said, “The question of compensation, of course——”

“Compensation be damned,” Milligen said benevolently. “What’s that between friends? We can settle that any time to the satisfaction of all parties. I see your fellers have already put me up a tidy little bit o’ wall.” (They had, a wall eighteen inches thick of the best blue acid-proof bricks, at the town’s expense, Milligen saw to that.) “It’s ‘the gentleman from the neighbouring factory’ I’ve come to talk about. What about compensating him?”

“Did he lose anything?” inquired Mr. Heath.

“Did you, Willy?” Milligen asked. “What, not the toe o’ your boot when you tripped over the hydrant?”

The council laughed here, and afterwards called

themselves to order and suggested that Mr. Milligen should state his business. Accordingly he did: it was to give the name and address of the gentleman from the neighbouring factory, so that the council should be able to forward him some suitable reward and recognition of his invaluable services on the disastrous night. So Milligen said in quite a fine speech, obviously prepared beforehand, though concluded with a sentence which was not. “He saved the whole blamed thing from going to kingdom come, and you from being hauled up before the Local Government Board, if not the beaks—and you know it. Now, what’re you going to do?”

“Are you acting for him?” inquired Mr. Heath.

“No, I ain’t,” the other retorted; “he was acting for me that night, looking at my winding gear. And he did it to rights too! I’ve got something now that’ll wipe the eye of some folks before we’re much older. Lord! But it was a treat to see him touch a machine or handle a tool! He touched ’em as if he loved ’em, his fingers, the very skin of his fingers, was all alive to ’em! My old engines knew him for all the world like horses, they behaved sweetly!”

Mr. Heath cleared his throat and said it was interesting. He personally had seen this magician at work, and though he knew nothing of machinery, could have certified him capable—also disrespectful, and entirely unwilling to take orders. He did not say so, however; he glanced from the subject rather quickly, and brought forward another for consideration. He said, since Mr. Milligen was now here, it was a good opportunity to discuss with him, in a friendly way, a complaint which had been recently brought against him, or rather against the drainage of his dyeing works.

"Our men, when putting up the wall," he said, "complained a good deal of smells; it might perhaps be in the interest of public health if our inspector were to come——"

"And put his head in one o' my dye-vats?" Milligen interrupted. "Now, look you here, Willy, my drains are as right as yours any day. If there's a stink up at my place, there's a stink. Who's having dye without it? It's none of the council's business. You aren't the father and mother of every evil in this town, and I've told you so before. You let them alone that don't concern you. I don't know as I should be in a hurry to adopt every orphan ill about, if I was you, seeing the hefty little family of your own you have, with a factory chimney for a fine upstanding eldest daughter—at least, she didn't stand up, she sat down on a man or so."

"Come, come, Mr. Milligen," the chairman said pacifically, "don't let's be unneighbourly, on your first coming down town again too. Let's come to business in a friendly spirit."

They came, for they really understood one another on the whole, and the chairman and a few members of the council already shared Milligen's opinion, in a more moderate form, that there should be some recognition of the man who had rendered them such great service. These were in the minority certainly, and they were not very strong in their views, and since the man had not come forward or in any way obtruded himself upon public notice, they had not troubled in the matter. The financial condition of the council in the face of the costly disaster was not such as to induce them to spend money unnecessarily. Also, since all were concerned in minimising the seriousness of the affair, none were concerned in

emphasising the magnitude of the service rendered. But Milligen's coming put rather a different complexion on things; he stood out for a reward, and he stood obstinately, showing every sign of making a considerable talk not only to the council itself. In the end most of the councillors came to be of his way of thinking; at all events, the discussion, which had begun rather acrimoniously, ended in a friendly talk as to what form the recognition should take. It was finally agreed, after much debate then and later, that a medal and a cheque for fifty pounds should be forwarded. Milligen wanted an illuminated address of thanks as well, but there was no support for that idea, so he expressed himself content without.

However, it befell that Michael did not after all receive quite what was decided upon. It happened one day that Mr. Heath mentioned the proposed reward to his nephew, the present head engineer at the power station; he also by chance mentioned the name of the man who was to receive it, and which the head engineer had not heard before.

He looked up now quickly. "Michael Annarly?" he said. "Is that who it is?"

"Why, do you know him?" the uncle inquired.

"I know of him."

"What? What do you know? Old Milligen talked a deal of his doings; he's worked him out something or other that's going to put the old man on his legs again he believes."

"Very likely," the words were spoken dryly, "he's said—by some—to be about the first engineer in England at the present time, and one of the best all round ones."

Mr. Heath stared; his nephew was not habitually lavish in his praise of other men's abilities or achievements, and though his tone was peculiar now it did not suggest sarcasm. "What was he doing at old Milligen's shanty?" he asked.

"That's just it," the other answered; "what was he?" A large stretch of land and a complicated railway journey lay between the town and the great Galhardy foundries, which were not even in the same county: the head engineer's home, which was situated between the two, was not either. But it was near enough for him to know some of the talk of Galhardy's: every engineering centre in the country knew some of the talk of it, for all sent students and apprentices there, and most men of any standing in the profession, and many of none, knew of the talk that clung about the name of Michael Annarly, his striking ability, his early brilliant success, and his sudden dropping out. Mr. Heath's nephew did not know much; but he knew some, and he readily undertook to find out more. He would have done so, apart from obliging his uncle, for he was not unnaturally curious himself.

The consequence of what he found and passed on to the council was that that respectable body came to the conclusion fifty pounds and a medal were an unsuitable reward, much beyond the requirements of the case.

It is true the man had served them well, but he had done it on his own initiative and to please himself; he expected nothing, for he had not even left his name with the engineer. He had good reason not to do so, and not to be proud of it, or anxious for it to get into the papers, even in a creditable connection. They felt it was not for them, as honest traders and

works owners or managers, to countenance in any way one who had transgressed the first principle of the code of such institutions. They argued the matter a good deal, wrangled over it considerably, for there were some who still felt he ought to have something, and there was Milligen who thought he ought to have a good deal, and who, as he said, did not care a damn for Galhardy's or any of the other aristocrats of commerce. The subject of the reward was a standing dish at the council meetings all the summer, and a favourite topic of discussion when members of the council and intimates came together at Masonic meetings and other friendly occasions. At last, in September, the matter was settled, probably a little for the same reason that the Unjust Judge settled the matter of the widow who cried continually before him—old Milligen playing the part of the widow. In full meeting it was voted that a cheque for twenty-five pounds should be sent to Mr. Michael Annarly in recognition of useful service rendered to the council on the 26th May last. And in due course the clerk of the council forwarded the cheque, requesting a receipt in the course of post.

The letter, addressed to Michael in London, was sent on by Nan to him, at work now for the steamship company on the Clyde. With it there came another letter, enclosing in a large envelope a printed card. The card had, at the first glance, some resemblance to a memorial card of the old-fashioned type; indeed, it was of the sort which are designed for that purpose, and which can be ordered blank through the undertaker and filled in with name, date, and text to suit the case. It is the cheapest way of getting an effective commemorative card, the reason, no doubt, why old Milligen selected it, though he probably considered it suitable too; the mourning

figures embossed upon the surface might be regarded as lamenting the meanness of the town council, and the urn upon which they leaned as containing the ashes of the portion of the power station and employees destroyed. Upon the card was printed:

To Michael Annarly, Esq., Engineer

In Memoriam

(these were the Gothic letters of the original lithography)

of May 26th and an act of signal courage and Common Sense

"*Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might.*"

Michael did not laugh when he read it through, his lips twitched, and the corners of his eyes crinkled a little; there was another feeling mixed with the amusement, and one stronger than it, the card touched him curiously. After all, it was recognition of sorts, the best sort that the old man could compass; a rather fine sort in his estimation, no doubt; he would be quite proud of it and very serious about it—one reckons motives in estimating values—at least, one does when one is no longer very young. Michael was not young; he had travelled a long way from the man who thought a handsome income and a seat on the advisory board of Galhardy's small recognition to ask for unique work done. He looked long at the card now, and put it away carefully, rather glad to have it. When he wrote to acknowledge it to Milligen he pleased him by asking him to send another. Nan might like one, she would

understand as he did, and the old man evidently hoped he would ask for another.

> *I have had two or three taken off*, he wrote in the letter which accompanied the card, *so, besides one which I am keeping myself, I can let you have another or so for any lady friend you might fancy to forward it to. My own is framed and hung up, so that any of those Scrogs of the Council who happen to look in for a pipe and a glass can't fail to see it. If it don't make them feel ashamed, it ought.*
>
> *I am pleased to say the work you did for me is better than you promised; I can now deal with endless yarns, as no other man in the trade can. I am proud to have met you, and now conclude by saying that if there is anything in the small way I can do for you at any time, please command*
>
> *Yours obediently,*
> JAMES MILLIGEN.

"At least, I have satisfied one man," Michael thought as he put the letter down, and he was glad of it. The more glad, perhaps, because the piece of work, unimportant though it was, was a good piece of work —a neat and complicated adjustment, very perfectly conceived, which satisfied his own critical faculty too.

He turned to the other letter and was astonished to find, after Milligen's slighting reference to the council, the cheque it contained. He did not feel

himself insulted by it, nor did any question of inadequacy trouble him; it would see him through at least the preliminary stages of patenting his automatic switch for alternating currents; that mattered so much more than anything else to him now that he never gave anything else a thought.

The working out and perfecting the automatic switch invention had been the one tolerable thing since he had been on the Clyde. It had been done in spare hours, and was almost purely theoretical, to work at it practically had been extremely difficult. Still, the mere fact of being again among machines, in well-appointed shops and great engine-rooms, was very stimulating to him. His mind, long fallow, responded eagerly to the stimulant, and many possibilities and ideas were generating and evolving besides the one of the switch which was already near perfection. Possibly the company for which he worked, had they been consulted, would have said he had no business to develop any ideas but theirs and those connected with their work. But it would have been quite useless for either he or they to try and limit thus; placed in such circumstances and surroundings the conception and evolution of ideas were as inevitable with him as the inhaling and exhaling of breath in the air. And after all, the company had little to complain of; they had bought him very considerably: bought him body and soul, it seemed to him, and every bit of liberty too.

The position was all he had foreseen and worse, though less, perhaps, because it was different from what he had anticipated than because he had not quite realised what it would be in the working out. He said little about it; he had no one at hand to say anything to, for he lived an absolutely isolated life,

associating with no one and working ceaselessly, in season and out of season, in the old insatiable way—with an additional touch of that desperation which tradition ascribes to the damned, who strive so to keep the devils at bay. He wrote to Nan occasionally: always about the work, the mechanical and constructive difficulties, the ideas in connection with them, and other ideas which came to him. Principally he wrote of the last, it was the realm of faerie to him, the dream-world wherein the artist-souled, even mathematical and machine artists, comfort themselves for the hardness of the way. And when he wrote of these his letters, quite impersonal, sometimes mere engineering treatises, were happy. But in spite of these and in spite of the tone of his other letters and all that was left out of them, Nan had more than an idea of the situation and the almost unendurable fret of it. She did not refer to it in her replies, she never touched on what he did not tell her; but she did her best to infuse into her letters some little of the patience and courage which might make the position tenable. And in a measure she succeeded; he told her so when in September he came to London on business for the firm.

It was only a flying visit, with no more than an hour or two in Soho, but during the time the truth was out. It was bound to be; Nan would have divined it, if he had said nothing; and, for the life of him, he could not have helped saying something.

“It doesn’t matter talking to you,” he said; “it doesn’t seem like whining. I suppose I ought not to whine; I suppose I knew what was coming, but—sometimes I think I can’t stand it!”

Nan nodded. “Does Mr. McFarline take the interest in the work that was threatened?” she asked.

"McFarline? Oh, yes. He's a small part though; he and his interest were a mere figure of speech. He does take an interest, intelligent on the whole; he's a man of sense and ability, though Scotch of the Scotch. You know what that is to work with—or, perhaps, you don't; it's the devil if you are a Southerner and the work is such as calls for a margin to handle efficiently. But McFarline's nothing, little more than the name they put on the whole system."

"And that is——?"

"Report, report, report. Suspected, watched at every turn. Oh, not obviously; they are decent about it on the whole, all the bosses pretend there is no suspecting; they are quite gentlemen; all the underlings, having less manners and nothing to gain by me being there, make it perfectly obvious. Why, sometimes I doubt if a greaser would trust me with his pocket-knife!"

Nan could guess how he felt, how such morbid imaginings must arise. "Isn't that last just a little unfair to the men?" she suggested.

"I suppose it is," he answered. "Of course it is really. But the whole thing gets on my nerves when I sit alone and stew and stew over it; I don't see it fairly. I am a silly ass, I know that. But it is pretty awful."

She knew that it must be, and led him to talk of it.

"It doesn't sound much reduced to words," he told her, "you can't tell from that quite how it works out; the whole atmosphere and feeling is no mean part of it. Of course, it is frightfully hampering—and humiliating too—to have to supply duplicate copies of all notes, drawings, designs, and everything else to the chief draughtsman. I have to do that; and he has to, or thinks he has to, go into them all and try and

understand the why and the wherefore. He can't, and he gets huffy about it, and I get so exasperated that I feel I shall murder him one day. Then, all orders for plant have to be put through the superintendent of shops, with detailed drawings of every one. That, you know, is hopeless. If you give a man any sort of position you ought not to expect that; still, I must own the superintendent is pretty decent. I couldn't have gone on at all, if he hadn't been. But perhaps the thing I most mind, over and above the general feeling, is the weekly report. I have to supply a full report of everything done, thought of, about to be done or thought of, and the rest to the secretary every week. And he——. Well, he's not a supercilious sneak like Brett certainly, but he's a fish—a sort of machine that registers things by ticks, observes the omission of a comma, and must have everything foursquare, reduced to set terms, and pigeon-holed for reference. Think of it when it's ideas, when it's inventions, possibilities, nebulous things that may never become facts! Think of subtracting last week's work from this, dividing the result by the week before, and giving the answer in pounds sterling!"

Nan could think of it, but could think of little to say to mitigate it.

"You see," he admitted later on, "I was used to having a freer hand than many people; I know now that I had it at Galhardy's, though I used to go on about their red-tape. I don't seem as if I could work without freedom. After all, if one does work that others don't, if one is expected to turn out higher-class work and more than the average, one ought not to be tied down to average conditions. That is what I used to think—what I still think. But now I haven't even average conditions, or anything approaching

them."

Again Nan could only sympathise, and afterwards induce him to talk of the inventions and ideas which were his consolation. He responded to the sympathy, and told her about them so long as time held: explained how he had taken out a provisional patent for the automatic switch, and what must be done next, and might be done eventually. It was not till just as he was going that they referred again to his present situation; then Nan put the question plainly:

"Shall you stop?"

"I mayn't have the chance," he answered. "Brett is staying with McFarline now; I didn't know till lately that he knew the little beast. I don't think he does know him well, or see him often."

"Will it make a difference?"

"May. He'll clear me out, if he can. One thing, I don't much care if he does. It would settle the question of whether or not I could go on with it, wouldn't it? I shouldn't care if it were not for——"

He broke off, he was standing on the doorstep when he spoke, and he glanced up at the old house.

She followed the direction of his thought. "If it were not for coming back here?" she said. "You remember what I said about that? There is always a place for you here; you must always come. Besides, I believe my father would be glad. I think he misses you."

He looked at her a little incredulously. "It's good of you to say it," he said.

"I would not, if I did not think it true," she answered.

And he knew it, and found it rather comforting.

He found it comforting in the time which followed, when, it must be owned, he stood in some need of comfort. If the situation was difficult before, it became a hundred times worse now. He wrote of it fairly frankly to her, after their talk it was only natural, also it was some relief, though he did not tell her all or nearly all of the fresh troubles and humiliations which beset him. Brett, though he had not convinced all the directors that they were better without the services of Michael Annarly, had succeeded in inducing so great a degree of uneasiness and suspicion on their part that the position was almost untenable. What little Michael's personality may have done to mitigate former suspicions, and what beneficial influence the already obvious value of his work may have had, were a great deal more than done away with by the warnings given (and very likely at least partly believed) by Brett during his Scotch visit. The opinion held after that was such that, had it been held earlier, Michael would as soon have been offered the Chancellorship of the Exchequer as employment with the company. As it was though, in the face of what he clearly could do for them, some were in favour of a continuation, others were for a termination of his services on any terms, and all were for a policy of such care that the conditions were about unendurable, and with most men would have had the same result as dismissal.

Still Michael remained, doggedly remained, only telling Nan a part of the bitterness of his soul. And she, by inference and deduction as much as anything, divined the rest, and hesitated whether to advise him to hold on or to give up. At last she wrote, "*Why not come back? I do not believe you will be able to work out anything worth having under the present conditions.*

Perhaps by and by you may be able to do the engine for these people or some others, but now it seems as if it were impossible, only a waste of time to try. Come back here."

CHAPTER XV

IT was the evening of Nan's birthday, and she and her father sat together by the fire in the companionable silence possible to people who are good friends. Good friends they were: understanding each other unusually well for parent and child, and, more unusual still, realising and being content to take on trust the great deal that could not be understood. That evening, however, there was a question in the mind of one concerning the other. Barmister, absorbed though he appeared to be in his paper, let his eyes wander now and again to Nan, quietly sewing. He was thinking of her birthday last year, or, rather, of that which she had asked of him then. It was the one request she had made of him which he thought foolish, so far as she herself was concerned. He had thought so at the time, though he granted it; he thought so now. But he was by no means sure she was yet convinced she had asked for what was valueless to her; it crossed his mind that it might be he who had made the mistake in granting it. He rather wished he knew what she really did think about it.

"Are you satisfied?" he asked suddenly.—"Satisfied with the present you asked for last year, or are you disappointed?"

She looked up. "No," she said, "I'm not disappointed at all."

He returned to his paper, but over it he continued to watch her as she went on with her needlework.

"You haven't made much of a job of Michael yet," he observed at length.

She laughed. "In twelve months? Why, it takes Fate, with all the powers of circumstance and providence at command, three score years and ten to do that for most people!"

"H'm!" he said, and frowned thoughtfully. "I understood that was what you wanted to do; I thought it was."

"I know you did, though I never said so. I'm not sure that it was myself. I'm not really sure what making a job of a person would be, or if anyone could do it; I almost think not."

"I certainly think not," he said emphatically, "and I've always thought not. But I thought you were bent on it—making a success of him, getting him back to the position he slipped from, and all that. He don't seem to have got far on the journey."

"Not very," she admitted.

Barmister regarded her from under bent brows. "Don't you want him to get back?" he asked. "If you don't, why did you send him off on the steamship business? And if you do, why did you have him back again? What do you want?"

"I want him to do what will turn out best," she answered, ignoring the influence assigned to her, and which in a way was correct. In a sense, she had sent Michael, and had recalled him, though not by conscious exertion of power, only by seeing it wisest and showing him it was so.

"Do you mind him being here again?" she asked, looking up from her work. "I thought you did not

mind. I thought, when we talked about it before he definitely gave up with the shipping people, you were rather glad than not to have him come back."

"Oh, that's all right," Barmister said, "it suits me well enough. I've nothing against him; he's useful to me, in fact, he got to be a deal more useful before he went than I knew or should have believed if anyone had told me. So far as I'm concerned, it's all right to have him back; he's settled in just as before, no swelled head from his late flutter. I dare say there wasn't so much to swell it, if the truth was known. The thing that beats me is where you come in. If you are satisfied, I suppose you've got something out of it, though it certainly isn't the satisfaction of making a job of him, for that's not done. What is it you do want? Him to do what's best, you say—but why? Where do you personally come in?"

She considered a moment, then she said, "I don't quite know. I just want it, that's all, I think."

Barmister said "Humph," and returned to his paper; but he was not entirely satisfied. Not dissatisfied as to her honesty, he knew she was speaking the truth; she always did, her words coincided with her thoughts and opinions as nearly as she could make them, so nearly that strangers, used to the less accuracy of ordinary speech, sometimes mistook them. Barmister recognised that she meant what she said, no more and no less; she really did not know why she wanted this thing, but, he felt, that need not prevent the existence of a reason, unrecognised by her, of which he should not approve. He had a high opinion of her judgment, unusually high in one of the older generation for one of the younger. But she was a woman, and a young one, and in one particular the judgment of such is not to be relied on;

while the quiet persistence of this one was a fact on which he, at least, could rely. In the past, it is true, he had usually allowed her to choose for herself, and it had usually answered; she had chosen wisely or else, when very occasionally she had not, had gained as much in wisdom learnt. But this case was different: if a mistake were made here, it was one without remedy, and in the deciding there was a personal influence to remember, another person concerned—a person with brains but no money, with abilities and, presumably, ambitions, and moods. An utterly incalculable person to Barmister: one whose actions and decisions he could not foresee, but against whom he felt there might be need to guard. And if guard, then at once. Death is an event the date of which no man can foretell, but the nature of it in his own case this one could very well. It would be such, his doctor had warned him, as would give time for no last words or death-bed arrangements; in ordinary health one minute, the weakened heart slowing down for death the next.

“Fetch me my pen,” he said, breaking a long silence, “I want to write a letter. I’ve half a mind to alter my will.”

Nan fetched it, and the letter was written without further remark from either of them. Afterwards they talked of other things, business and their usual interests, until Michael came in.

Michael had been to Hurstbury. He would not have chosen to go, seeing it was Nan’s birthday, but his father had not been well, and he felt that he ought. Going home was not especially agreeable since his return from the Clyde, for that return had been a considerable disappointment to the Annarlys. Since it they had come to definitely accept him as one of

those—to be found here and there in families—concerning whom the tactful do not inquire; men of some brilliancy and no staying power, who promise much at the beginning but in the end have to be kept or frequently propped up by the more solid members. They did not express these sentiments to Michael, but he was aware of them, and went to Hurstbury now only when he thought his father was dull, or not well, or for some reason in need of his company. In all other respects things were somewhat as they were before he went away. He had less drawing to do for the patent agents. During his absence the work had been given to someone else, and could not on his return be immediately given to him again. On the other hand, he was called on consultations more than he had been during the barren months of the spring and summer; not very frequently certainly, and the occasions were neither important nor lucrative, still they occurred now and again. For the rest he was Barmister's man as before.

"—I'm your father's clerk," he said to Nan; "a tolerable one by this time, I hope—it isn't a waste if I am; as well to do one thing as another, if one does it well. Really I think I'd as soon do this as anything—which, perhaps, is a good thing, since there seems no competition to ask me to do anything else."

But, as it happened, in the course of time he was asked to do something else. It was not a great nor specially suitable offer; one which, in earlier days, no one would have ventured to make to him, and which, even quite recently, he would hardly have seriously considered. It came from old Milligen.

Milligen came to London on business for a few days that winter. Coming to London was an event in his life, and one which, in spite of age and infirmities, he

made the most of: transacting business, buying a present for his wife, and going to a music-hall in company with George Foregood with the serious attention of a man who has a good deal to get through.

Part of Milligen's business lay with George: that part was transacted in Miss Janet's sitting-room—not the best room, there was no fire there except on state occasions; also, Miss Foregood would not have admitted George and a business friend, no matter if he had been a member of the house of Rothschild, to that apartment for commercial purposes. She let them have what she called the sitting-room and betook herself to the kitchen, where she was quite happy and very busy; taking care, however, before she left, to remove the plush table-cloth from the centre dining-table. This removal did not offend Mr. Milligen, he preferred the cloth off; less because he felt more at liberty in dropping ash and setting down a damp glass on the American cloth under-cover than because he found a comfortable homeliness in it, as he did in the horsehair arm-chair in which he sat. He was at home with these things, and much preferred Miss Janet's house to his hotel. Some other people might also; it was cleaner, if nothing else. But he would have preferred it to any hotel: the Carlton, Claridge's, or any other. He could almost fancy himself at home as he and George sat here and smoked, their glasses beside them, their papers before them, the air hazy with tobacco, and the window tight shut. It was exactly the atmosphere in which to talk business, slowly, with opportunity for digressions and wary goings about the subject, and long tales of past deals, full savouring it as old men, whose business is their pleasure—love.

George understood the methods; indeed, he really preferred them to any others. He had some points in common with old Milligen, at all events, more than he had with any of the other men with whom he had tried to deal about his invention. If the old man had the money and enterprise necessary there was a greater chance of George coming to terms with him than there was with any of the financiers and wealthy directors with whom he had, from time to time, been in negotiation.

But only a part of Milligen's business lay directly with George; another part lay indirectly, and it was that which touched Michael. George had, in the first instance, introduced Michael to the warp dyer; it was he now who was requested to bring him to an interview. The interview took place in the evening, Michael could not get away before, and in Miss Janet's sitting-room, by choice of all parties.

Michael, not aware that the lady of the house, in company with Josiah and a clock he was anxious to take to pieces, had retired to the kitchen, presented himself at the appointed time. The small room was by that time sufficiently suffocating, and he chose a seat as near the window as he could, hoping that, tight shut though it was, enough draught would creep through to keep him awake. The two elder men, quite unaffected by the atmosphere, drew up to the fire and filled their pipes and their glasses, remarking that the night was raw cold.

When these and various courteous preliminaries were over and the pipes were alight, Milligen observed, as if now opening the business of the evening, "I'm an old man, Mr. Annarly——"

"Oldish," corrected George, who was a year older.

"Old," repeated Milligen decidedly, "and not getting younger. I'm not what I used to be, Mr. Annarly; this deuced gout plays Old Harry with a man, and doctor says—and I don't suppose he's lying this time—it's goin' to do it more, a deal more, unless I take care. Well, I don't mind telling you, takin' care isn't in my line; I shouldn't bother about it, not me—but there's the missus to reckon with. You don't know my missus?"

Michael said he had not the pleasure. George snorted; not that he had anything against Mrs. Milligen, whom he only knew slightly, but he held the whole genus "missus" in a contempt almost equalled by that which he had for those who talk of pleasure in connection with them.

Milligen paid him no attention. "You'd like her," he said to Michael; "she's the right sort. But that's neither here nor there; the thing is, what's going to be done about me?"

Michael, though he was a little mystified by the question, gave it consideration; he always gave matters brought to his notice grave, careful, and painstaking attention, even when to most people they were manifestly absurd or quite beyond his scope. It is true, when he found them so himself, which he did occasionally when others would not, he sometimes dismissed them with a curtness humiliating to those who presented them. At the present moment he considered Milligen's situation as if it had been his own, and as such began mentally to devise schemes for dealing with it.

The old man interrupted before he had developed one far enough to speak of it.

"It was all right before Cooper died," he said, "or,

maybe, not so wrong. He was a sharp lad, though groovy. He was my foreman—he'd been with me more'n twenty years; you saw him when you came to my place—had a red beard and a slight cast in one eye. He died this autumn: pneumonia, taken off all in a pop; he's a serious loss to me."

He sucked at his pipe sadly, and George sucked in sympathy; appreciation of and regret for a foreman was a sentiment he approved. But he did not expect Michael to appreciate it from the same point of view; he never made the mistake of ranking him with himself nor yet with old Milligen. By some deduction of his own he classed him among the aristocrats (there are other aristocracies besides those of birth or money), and he knew such did not look at things as he did. Also, his experience was that they, whether patient or impatient according to nature and circumstances, did not understand or appreciate long digressions.

"Get on, old cock," he admonished his friend, "get it out."

"I'll get it out my own way," Milligen replied shortly, then, turning to Michael, he continued with increased sadness, "I've no son, and my sons-in-law are pudding heads. I'm not going to put money into the pockets of any sons-in-law, not much! Have them round my works—not me! Besides, they don't know anything about dyeing. But I want someone, that's the point. I want a partner. Not a partner in the ordinary sense of the word, one that puts a deal o' money in and wants a deal more out, and fools round and wants all his own new-fangled way. But a youngish man with guts and gumption; one that's content to work the old ways, and at the same time keeps his eye open for the new and puts in a thing

here and a thing there, as means and opportunity allow. That place is lookin' up, the bit of work you did for me has made a new man of it; we're going to do something yet. But I'm not what I was, and I'm goin' to be less, and I can't do it single-handed."

His voice dropped over the last, and he turned to his glass for consolation. George looked sideways at Michael; his face was not less surly than usual, but his fierce eyes showed a little anxiety. He was not moved by pathos; there was only one thing he cared for in the world, that was his invention; an acute observer might have fancied now Michael was in some way connected with it and its chance of success.

"He's thinking of taking it on," he could not refrain from saying, nodding towards Milligen as he did so; "my invention, you know."

"I'm thinking of taking on dyeing in the sliver," Milligen corroborated. "That is, if we can come to an arrangement. You'll say it's a funny thing for a man that's got more'n he can manage as it is to go out and get more, but there it is. I always had a fancy for breakin' out that way; it goes as naturally with warp dyeing as bread with cheese. The chance has come; you've helped to put me on my legs again; George here's got the dodge that's wanted, I'm not goin' to turn my back on it. Blessed if I am, gout or no gout!"

Michael agreed heartily, and congratulated George on being near to making satisfactory terms for his invention.

"You know all about it?" Milligen asked. "What d'you think of it? I'll want you to give me a report by'n-by, if you will, two guinea job. I'm not taking a pig in a poke."

Michael, a little embarrassed by the presence of his first acquaintance, the inventor, replied that he would, of course, be pleased to report, if it were agreeable to both. However, as he soon saw, there was no need for him to feel any embarrassment, both were quite comfortable about it.

“You’d better hear what we’re thinkin’ of,” old Milligen said; “you’d best hear the whole. I’m not buying this thing of George; I’ve not got the money for that, I’m no syndicate—and it isn’t royalties and all that. The notion is, he should work it with me, the sliver dyeing to be worked in along with the warp dyeing, profits on the whole to be shared, proportions not agreed upon yet, but they will be to the satisfaction of all parties.”

“I see,” Michael said, “Mr. Foregood will be a sort of junior partner, the man you were looking for?”

He privately thought George was not the man he would himself have looked for in that situation. Apart from his age, he had many disqualifications, not least among them his obstinate and difficult temper, and the distrustful temperament which made him very unfit to deal with either new ideas or his fellow-men.

Possibly old Milligen shared these sentiments. “No,” he said bluntly, and somewhat as if the person mentioned had not been present, “he’s not the man I’m lookin’ for. He’s the man that’s got the apparatus for dyeing in the sliver, and a good enough apparatus too, if I know anything about it. And he’s the man that’s goin’ to look after it, if I branch out that way, as I’m thinkin’ of doin’, and if we can come to terms; and he’s the man that’s goin’ to take a share of the profits by way of payment. But he’s not the man I’m

lookin' for to work in under me, and make something of the old place. You're that."

"I!"

Milligen nodded.

"It isn't your line; I know that, nor yet your class either; but it's my idea all the same." He turned to George for corroboration, and George assented gruffly.

"I've talked it over with George here," he said, "up and down, for and against, likelys and unlikelys; and that's what it comes to, that's the notion. Take it or leave it, and no offence either way: an offer never hurt anyone, whether it was up to their size or not, and a refusal hurts no one either among friends."

"It's awfully good of you," Michael said. "I'm very flattered you should think of me that way; I'm afraid, though, it is little use. I doubt if I should be much good to you. I know nothing whatever about dyeing; I am an engineer pure and simple; almost any man who had had a technical education and a little factory experience would be as well qualified for your purpose; better, if he had studied chemistry, or spent six months at a dyer's."

"Maybe," Milligen said. "My experience, Mr. Annarly, is that there's two kinds of men in this world, the men that can do things and the men that can't—what things not particularly mattering, it's the can that matters. I rather think I know which is which of those two kinds when I meet 'em."

Michael laughed. "You think I can?" he said. "I'm much complimented, though I'm not so sure myself. And have you ever thought of the drawbacks of the men who can? They have an abominable way of

working their own way and nobody else's; they may mean to take orders and properly fill a subordinate position in a subordinate way, but more than half the time it doesn't come off. They're the devil to drive; and when they're doing the driving you find yourself getting to places you never thought of. They are always going off their own way almost without knowing it, and unless they have any amount of rope they don't seem as if they could do anything worth the having."

"Size too big," George said gruffly; "don't fit the harness. We know that fast enough. The job's not up to you, the old man said that, didn't he? We know it, but we thought——. Well, we thought perhaps——"

He stopped awkwardly; he had himself in his way been through the odium of evil report and the downfall consequent upon falling foul, justly or otherwise, of a large commercial body.

Michael took the words up for him. "You thought," he suggested, "that I might not despise such an offer? You are quite right, I never should have despised it ——" He turned to Milligen. "Very far from it, sir, I much appreciate it; whether I am suitable or unsuitable, it is a compliment you have paid me. For that reason, if for no other, I must ask if you really know my present situation, when you make it. If you know what there is against me."

"I've heard plenty," Milligen said, "and"—putting his finger on the side of his nose—"I believe what I do believe. I mayn't have had what you call a first-class education, Mr. Annarly, or be precisely a genius, still I'm not a born fool. I'm not great on recommends and characters. When I think of the recommends I've had, and given, and I wouldn't have trusted the chaps, half of 'em, with an old boot! I like my own

judgment best. I don't care if you have done Galhardy's—small blame to you, I dare say I'd have done it myself, if I'd had the brain—you won't do me, I know that. I like you, that's the truth; I did from the first. It did my heart good to see you handle the engines, not to speak of anything else. Your spunk about that power station—that was a spry bit of work—and all the rest. I know my concern's not your class, I said that before, and it's true; and I'm not your class either, nor's George. But I've a notion we could work together, and a notion there's something in that work that's not beneath you and your brains. At all events, there it is. There's the offer."

The offer required very much more discussion, explanation, and stating than this. Milligen and his friend were prepared to spend the whole evening over it. George had told Miss Janet she need not sit up to turn the gas out when they had finished, as they should be very late. The evening was young yet, and, with the minuteness of those with time on their hands, they went into details with Michael: details of the work, of George's apparatus, of future prospects and probabilities; questions of Michael's possible position, of the capital he could raise—which was not more than a hundred pounds, the fruits of a year's work and careful saving, and which, even if he felt minded to invest in the little dyeing business, could hardly be expected to purchase a junior partnership. In the end nothing definite was arrived at; it was not to be expected there would be, unless it was a definite refusal.

"You think it over, Mr. Annarly," old Milligen said at parting. "I'll be in town a day longer, and if you can't make up your mind by then, why, there's always the

post—though not so satisfactory. You think it over."

Michael thanked him, and said he would, then took his leave.

George glowered after his departing figure. "Pity you couldn't nail him to anything," he said; "he'll go back and talk it over with the girl."

"What girl?" Milligen had a considerable opinion of feminine intelligence, but no opinion of its being exerted in the sphere of a man's business. "His young lady, do you mean? Is she a high-flyer?"

"No," George said, "and she's not his young lady either; she's just Nan Barmister, where Josiah works, but he'll talk to her."

He did. Therein George's instinct, sharpened by anxiety for the welfare of his apparatus which he believed to be bound up in Michael's decision, was not at fault. But beyond that he could not go; he could not predict either what Nan would say or how much or little Michael would be influenced by it.

No one seeing Nan at the time of the telling would have been able to forecast either. She listened with attention to the account of the interview and offer: sitting, elbows on the table, chin propped on hands, listening, and saying almost nothing till Michael had finished.

"Well," he said when he had done, "shall I take it, or shall I not?"

She sat silent a minute, her eyes cloudy with thought, then—"Yes," she said slowly. "I think I would take it."

"Do you mean that?" He had put his question half jestingly. In spite of what he had said, it is doubtful

how far he himself seriously regarded the offer yet. That she should do so, and come to an early, but evidently considered, decision in favour of it astonished him.

“Why do you say that?” he asked. “What’s your reason?”

“I hardly know,” she answered thoughtfully. “I have one, I suppose, though it won’t put itself into words. It seems somehow as if the time had come to do something; it has seemed so a little while, now this has come along. I have a feeling—though it may be wrong, probably it is if you feel against it—that this may be the thing to do.”

He did not say he felt against it. He looked doubtful—not sceptical—such reasons and influences had more weight for him than for many lesser brains; he never scouted them.

“It isn’t a great thing, this offer,” he warned her; “boiled down it amounts to little more than foreman in a small dyeing works in a small Midland town among small people.”

“I know,” she agreed: “it doesn’t sound much, it isn’t either; but I’m not sure that matters—are you?”

“I suppose not,” he said. “No, I don’t think I care much what the kind of life is really, but the kind of work there wouldn’t be much either. There would be to see George Foregood’s invention put on a working basis, and to superintend the warp dyeing, no more than that.”

“I know,” she said again; “still, I almost think it is worth while.”

“I wonder?” he said. “After all, it is a definite place in the world, a definite piece of work—not that

which I was trained for and thought I was cut out for; I may as well give up the last ghost of any thought of that—still, something. A couple of old men, one pig-headed, the other soured and cross-grained, a dilapidated collection of buildings, plant that is a good deal scrap, no capital to speak of, and a job and process of which I know little and care less. It doesn't look much; yet, I own, in a way, the place attracted me when I first went there. I dare say it sounds silly—not to you, things don't to you—but the ramshackle place and the pottery, shrewd old man did attract me at the first. I had a sort of feeling one might make something of it."

She nodded. "That is it," she said. "I think that's what I feel."

Whereupon he naturally swung back to the opposite view and protested that there could not really be anything made of it. "A small living," he said, "in a small way perhaps, and a comfortable end for the old boy. Though, after all, I suppose, that is something. —Do you know, I have half a mind to go into it!"

For a little he turned the matter, weighing its pros and cons, speaking them aloud, but without seeking any answer or comment; really putting them to himself, not her. In the end the balance was in favour.

"—Though," so he said, "it is useless to have any delusion about it; there are no possibilities in the concern."

"No," she agreed, "not in the concern; that's why smallness, or largeness, or anything else does not really matter. The possibilities are not in it, they are in you."

CHAPTER XVI

CERTAIN of the directors of Galhardy's were met in Sir Joseph Harte's library. It was only an informal assembly after dinner, but, as there were none but directors present, the affairs of the firm were naturally the topic of conversation. The more so since at this time there were affairs of some importance and anxiety to be discussed. There was word abroad of an aerial torpedo perfected in Germany. The news was well about now, most of the halfpenny papers had had leading articles on it, and some of the smaller scientific journals had given suggestions, if not statements, of its form, mechanism, and the filling of the heads. By this time its existence was known to the man in the street and to all the other people whom it did not concern. The directors of Galhardy's, whom it did concern, had naturally known of it some while ago; by now they possessed considerably more knowledge, and possessed it with some certainty.

"It is similar, but by no means identical, with ours," Casterman, the scientific member of the board, said.

"With Annarly's?" somebody inquired, and Casterman nodded.

Theirs was Annarly's; that is, it was the one he had finally worked out for them and left, when he left, in a state which admitted of no mistake in the production. At least so he had thought; but as he had left more than a year, and as yet they had produced no aerial torpedo, it would seem they had found it

otherwise. One of the directors suggested, rather sarcastically, that it was a pity they had not been so rapid and successful in mastering the details of their own torpedo as they had been in learning those of the German one which had forestalled them.

“I don’t see that is a point of importance now,” Sir James Shannon said. “The important question, to my mind, is to decide how far Annarly is concerned in this German one.”

“How does it help us, if we do?” the objector asked. “It won’t give us priority, nor any very great benefit that I see, even if we can and do prosecute Annarly.”

“Prosecution, I always held, ought to have taken place before,” Shannon said. “Seeing what has now occurred others will probably agree with me now.”

He spoke with severity; but it was no more than he felt, a man of rigorous code and unimpeachable integrity, he had always held that honour, as well as justice, demanded the pushing home of the charge against Michael Annarly. He believed him guilty of a grave offence—the directors to this day were divided as to the gravity and extent of the offence. Shannon believed the worst, and had always considered that, in justice to the shareholders and the trust reposed in the directors, the full legal penalties should have been exacted. Sir Joseph Harte, who, perhaps better than any, knew the ins and outs of the case, had inclined to a milder course; he spoke now with his usual suavity.

“We have no proof that Annarly is concerned in this German torpedo,” he said; “indeed, everything goes to show the contrary. As you know, I have had the most exhaustive inquiries made, and there is nothing whatever to connect him with it, nothing of any sort

against him. You have seen the earlier reports of our agents; I have the final one here: it is the same, they find no trace of suspicion against him in the matter."

He selected a paper from those before him, and handed it to Shannon, who read it and passed it on. It told what previous reports, read at board meetings and discussed there or in private afterwards, had told —that the able detectives employed had discovered nothing to connect Michael Annarly with the German torpedo; nothing whatever of a suspicious nature about him or any of his doings. It was a very full report, a full and minute record of Michael's doings, comings and goings since he left Galhardy's; neither time, trouble, nor expense had been spared, and more had been discovered about his daily life, even the most trivial details of it, than he himself would have believed possible. The record read humble enough: an uneventful, lower, middle-class life, a harmless, monotonous existence at the furniture warehouse in Soho, punctuated very occasionally by attendance at some scientific society's meeting, or, more occasionally still, by a rare journey on some consulting work, or on business for the furniture man. There were no friends, suspicious or otherwise, to chronicle; no social engagements, unless one could so call periodic visits to Hurstbury. Even during the short time spent on the Clyde, a time very closely inquired into, there were none. Indeed, the single incident of any interest in the time under investigation was the accident at the power station, and that was so only as being characteristic of the man as Galhardy's knew him, not because there was anything suspicious in it. Annarly had chanced to be there when the accident happened, and had dealt with the situation, that was all. He had lately gone

back again to the same district, but to work with a small warp dyer, an even more unimportant person than himself, in no way connected with big ventures, not even an engineer at all. If ever a man had dropped out, Michael Annarly, by the showing of really able detectives, was that one. Everything about him was merely negative: he had no friends, no letters to speak of, no communication with the outside world except one or two purely business or family ones, and those such as could be fully investigated, and were demonstrated perfectly harmless and commonplace. He would even seem to have no intimates among his own people, unless a cousin, Nan Barmister, listed among the inmates of the Soho house, could be regarded as such.

"Who and what is she?" someone queried, perhaps with a hazy recollection of *cherchez la femme*.

"Nothing," Sir Joseph answered, "that has been looked into. I have a report here, but it is hardly worth your reading; she is entirely unimportant; she need not be considered in the matter."

He was a wise man, a very wise, some said a very wily; he had lived a long time and seen a great deal, and he fully realised the part women play in the affairs of men, even sometimes those that do not touch them. But he made the mistake of overlooking —as may be safely overlooked nine hundred and ninety-nine times out of every thousand—the insignificant woman. The women men love or sin for, whom they hate or serve or worship, who are beautiful or brilliant or clever or detestable—something at least that for a moment impresses, are reckoned with by an old and able man, even when he feels none of the glamour himself. But the insignificant and plain woman, the mere mouse who

slips by, filling her allotted place, doing her allotted work, noticed by no one, hardly seen and never remembered—even the wisest man reckons her of no account and may usually safely so reckon. If Sir Joseph made a mistake in his reckoning now one cannot blame him, this woman's importance was so indirect, so difficult to realise or appreciate, that it was impossible to guard against, impossible for him to be really aware of even in the end.

This evening her name was dismissed without further comment, the report of her uneventful life, so far as it had been learned by the detectives, hardly glanced at by the men who turned again to that of Michael.

"Doesn't sound like Annarly," someone remarked.

"That's precisely what it does to me," Casterman said. "He's so damned clever."

"You don't believe it?"

"I believe it so far as it goes. I also believe that no one will go any farther. But as for there being no farther to go, that hardly strikes me as likely."

This opinion was held by some others; they could not reconcile the report with the man they had known, nor accept it as a complete account of his present life. They had no real idea of his unimportance apart from his great mental ability, no idea of the wreck, almost annihilation, they had themselves produced for him. Realising his ability, surmising his resentment, they suspected him of being a dangerous person, and they found it hard to believe that this record of an entirely unimportant humble life was the full, true, and whole account of his doings. As to whether or no he had a share in the German aerial torpedo was another matter; there was no proof of it, nothing suspicious even that anyone could hear of,

and there should have been something if he had played any part. Also, of course, they were not quite sure of the construction and constitution of the torpedo and its resemblance to their own; information on such matters, obtained the way theirs had to be, is not always reliable. In the end they inclined to exonerate Annarly from suspicion; it seemed really impossible, whatever his inclinations, that he should have been able to enter into any negotiations unknown to them or their agents. Convinced of this they dropped the subject and fell to discussing one more important at the present time, the coming trial of their own torpedo.

This, the first great trial, was timed to take place within a few days. After months of patient work, wading through papers, going over notes and diagrams, and reconstructing experiments, they had, they believed, mastered the details of the design left them. The original intention had been to produce the perfected torpedo in the spring, but the unexpected appearance of the German one altered their plans. The German torpedo was a considerable blow to them; priority was a thing they had aimed at, and, in spite of this year's delay, expected to have. To be forestalled by a few months was extremely bitter. But so it was, and nothing could alter it; there was nothing for them to do but push on the work with all speed and produce their torpedo as little after the rival nation as might be. With such success had this been done that the first trial of the finished and perfected thing was arranged to take place on the following Wednesday morning. And on its successful issue much depended, not only money, but reputation too, and, incidentally, though this was a small thing beside such important issues, justification of the summary dismissal of Michael Annarly.

Late on Wednesday afternoon some of the directors met in Sir Joseph's private room at the foundries. One or two showed traces of some disorder, Casterman's hair was badly singed, and the smell of smoke clung about several of them although visible traces had been washed away. The faces of all were very grave. Brett, sitting inconspicuously at a desk in the corner, looked pinched and white: he was not a man who could identify himself with large interests in which he was not concerned; he was not personally concerned in the events of that day, but he was subdued and shocked; he had been rather badly frightened, for a minute or two at least he had been too close to sudden death, in an ugly noisy form, to quickly recover from it.

The long-promised aerial torpedo had failed, and failed signally. It, after behaving on the whole satisfactorily in preliminary and flight trials, had, on this first great and complete test, failed signally. And in doing so, had blown half a dozen men to unrecognisable fragments and caused destruction unparalleled in the history of torpedoes.

It is one thing to make trial of new torpedoes in the water, where the dangerous consequences of failure and accident are to a large extent nullified by the medium in which they are made. It is quite another to hold trials in the air: a lack of control, a fault in the sighting, a miscalculation in the curve of projection, or a determination on the part of the projectile to take the earth at once and drop vertically regardless of where, is liable to be attended with great disaster. The Galhardy torpedo had thus disastrously failed.

The reason why had already been discussed plentifully; all the experts in the works had talked of

it, and were talking of it, all the workmen too. The directors and important persons had touched on it as they travelled back from the open country where the trial had been made. The Home Office officials, no doubt, would discuss it, probably *ad nauseam*, when they came to hold an inquiry—as, no doubt, they would since one cannot kill six workmen with a new explosive and a new arm without someone wanting to know how and why. Now, in Sir Joseph's room, those assembled were not discussing the reason of the failure, though the knowledge that others did and would no doubt lent additional gravity to their already grave looks. It was of the situation they spoke, and they spoke freely.

"It seems to me the time has come for us to face matters, and own we have made a mistake."

It was John Duncan who spoke, the oldest of the directors; a little frail old man, too old and frail and occupied to take much part in their deliberations usually, but whose voice, rarely heard, carried weight and stood for a spirit perhaps not otherwise present among them. He had been silent a long time now, listening to what others said with as much attention as Brett, and with a more open mind. Now, when he spoke, the others turned to him.

"—The mistake," he said, "of trying to make the torpedo without the man who designed it."

"We had all the designs," someone objected.

"We never perfectly comprehended them," Casterman reminded them. "I think that is generally, if not publicly, recognised now."

Duncan did not know that, but it did not alter his contention. "I am not sure that it would have made a great difference if we had," he said. "We had all the

particulars of his steel process, I understood; but the steel turned out since he left has not been the same. No doubt Mr. Brett did his best"—Brett moved uneasily here—"and interpreted the work to the best of his ability, but the steel is not quite the earlier steel. The torpedo is a very much greater matter still. I do not suggest that Mr. Annarly took the secret with him, I am sure he did not; if you will permit me an expression which may sound superstitious, I would say rather he took the spirit."

No one contradicted. One cannot contradict a man of such age and standing, even if he says strange things. "You surely don't think it a mistake to have dismissed Annarly?" Sir James Shannon objected.

"I never had all the evidence before me," the other answered. "I was, unfortunately, ill at the time, and for long after, so ill that I fear I did not trouble much with the affairs of this world. My good friend here"—he looked towards Sir Joseph—"has since said he would let me have the papers, if I cared to go into them; but somehow or other it has not occurred. We are old, and we are busy, and I fear we—at least, I—hardly give the attention I ought to things. I feel I have been remiss in the matter, and it is rather late now."

Sir Joseph assured him he had not been remiss; it was the last accusation anyone would think of bringing against him. The question of Annarly and his dismissal was a trifle with which they had no business to allow him to be troubled; the directors, who had thoroughly gone into the matter at the time, were satisfied that they had followed the mildest possible—in fact, the only—course: he must not blame himself about it. Sir Joseph spoke in his usual pleasant way, touched with an even greater

courtesy; John Duncan's personality inspired courtesy, and his position a desire with most men to stand well with him.

He acquiesced now to the decision more than a year old. "No doubt, no doubt," he said; "you would have decided justly, in the only possible way. The mistake, I think, we have made is in trying to keep the man's torpedo when we had been obliged to send him away. Surely we should have done better, instead of taking up his design and trying to make it our own, to have gone further back in our work? Oh, technically his is ours, I know it, I don't deny it—but the spirit of the thing? At least, it has turned out a failure."

The directors could not go with him here; they submitted to the words out of deference to his age, but as men of the world and men of business they could not agree. A little later, however, Casterman made a suggestion equally, if not more, startling.

"It occurred to me some time ago," he said, "that we might do worse than have Annarly back."

"Annarly back!"

There was a general exclamation. Brett, at the desk, looked up quickly and observed, or thought he did, that Sir Joseph looked down.

"Yes," Casterman said, "he's out and away the best man we ever had, the best man in England I, personally, should say. We want him, and we want him pretty badly, there can be no two opinions about that; and considering what has gone before, we ought to be able to get him on fairly satisfactory terms."

"No terms would be satisfactory," Sir James Shannon

pronounced. “I, for one, would never give my consent to such a thing.”

Sir Joseph’s opinion wavered, but rather tended the same way. He expressed himself far more mildly, almost deprecatingly; he allowed now, as earlier, many extenuating circumstances to the transgressor, but he could not honestly recommend his reinstating.

But Casterman stood his ground. “Let’s state the case,” he said, “briefly as you like, but without varnish; we can, we are unofficial. In plain terms, what did Annarly do? Opened negotiations with sundry people for the sale of sundry processes which he had worked out for us, and for which we had no use. Well, of course, it was wrong, illegal, if you like. But, observe, no absolute harm was done. He had not divulged anything or received any money when caught; he had not actively opened negotiations himself, merely replied to those who approached him, unwisely replied, if you like, but not feloniously. The offence, when we got wind of it, though serious, can hardly be regarded as having arrived at the heinous stage, more especially in his peculiar circumstances. You will remember, you no doubt do remember, the fight he made to induce us to concede the right of disposing of these processes. By Jove, what a fighter he was! His persistence was astounding!—He was difficult to work with, but what work! Still, that’s neither here nor there now; what I’m getting at is the question of his excuse—if there was one. His defence, you remember—he never made it in person to the full board, we never had him before us, I don’t now remember why. But you all know his defence was that he understood we had conceded the right; and, though he was aware he had a little forestalled official permission, he

believed he had done nothing worse, and not transgressed our intention. It was a mistake which might have occurred, seeing how we argued over the subject; I think there were several of us who did not know what was or was not agreed to in the end."

"Annarly knew; he had Sir Joseph's letter cancelling any former concession," Shannon said.

"I know," Casterman agreed. "The real case against him largely turned on that letter, the second one, in which Sir Joseph corrected the first; wherein, by a regrettable but quite understandable mistake, permission had actually been given. That second letter, you remember, Annarly always swore he had not received."

"I wish it were possible to trace that letter," John Duncan said. "I know comparatively little of the case, I am afraid, but the point of the letter always troubled me. I have always felt I should much like to be able to trace that missing letter."

Sir Joseph sympathised with the wish; it was his own, he said so now, though he feared there was little chance of its ever being fulfilled.

Casterman agreed. "I am afraid we shall never know more than that you dictated it, and that Brett wrote and posted it. There is nothing to show that Annarly did or did not receive it. But"—he turned to them generally—"even supposing he did receive it, and suppressed it, and acted in defiance of it. Well, it was wrong, of course, unscrupulous, dishonest, what you will; but—hang it all! Let's look at the thing squarely—there was temptation, and to spare! He was young, poor, ambitious; he was dead set on that concession, he believed he had a moral right to it—that weighed with him, mind; he had some weird ideas, one must

not forget that. He also thought he had won his point —most of us had at one time agreed to it, and he had had it confirmed once. To get a letter cancelling it at the last minute might well make him furious and determined, being a young fool, to have it in spite of us."

"It is quite easy to understand how it happened," Sir Joseph said; "I have always felt sorry for Annarly, he was in a position to which he was not really suited, somewhat beyond his strength. The temptations were too great for one of his experience."

"He has had some more experience since then," Casterman urged; "he'll have learnt a thing or two by now. It would be safe enough to have him back, I believe, even if the worst alleged against him were true—and we have no conclusive proof that it is. Why not give him another chance? It would pay us; we want him badly enough."

The suggestion thus seriously made was surprising to most of them; but, unexpected though it was, it was discussed for a while. The position was something too grave for the directors to be able to afford to dismiss, without consideration, anything which might help to improve it. The torpedo accident that day had brought home to them, as nothing else could, the loss Galhardy's had sustained when Michael Annarly was dismissed; they did not fail to realise that his return might be of great value now. So, in spite of the unexpected nature of Casterman's suggestion and its distastefulness to some of them, they discussed it for a considerable time. But in the end they decided against it; more were opposed to it than approved it, and they were a section which could not be won over. Shannon never swerved from his strong objection; even the influence of Duncan,

who was in favour of it, did not alter him. He maintained that they had proved Annarly to be a man capable of great unscrupulousness when driven into a corner; he himself held him one not to be trusted, in any sense of the word. It was not fair, he said, to themselves, to other employees, even to the man himself, to reinstate him unless he could be fully cleared—as he never could be. There were others who held this opinion, though less strongly; and others who thought with Casterman that the uncleared, but unproved, charge against him did not matter, or at least that they would be well advised to risk the consequences of his return. Sir Joseph swayed now one way now the other, anxious to do what was benevolent to the man, but having the welfare of Galhardy's much at heart; that welfare, it finally seemed to him, would be best served if the genius were not reinstated.

"If he could be really cleared," he said reluctantly, as the others were going, "if only that were possible."

"It's impossible," Casterman said; "if we wait for that we'll never have him."

"If only we could trace that letter," John Duncan said; "that letter troubles me, so much hangs on it."

"It does, it does," Sir Joseph agreed, and shook him by the hand.

He went to the door with him, an honour he paid no one else, inquiring for his health, and thanking him for coming.

Brett, by the desk, watched. Watched him close the door after the last of the directors and come back towards his desk.

"That letter seems to trouble Mr. Duncan, sir," he

observed.

“Yes,” Sir Joseph answered. “A fine old man, a wonderful man still. Always a dreamer and an enthusiast.”

Brett looked down at the papers before him. “He does not seem satisfied with my steel,” he said. “Nor”—he raised his eyes a second, and the look in them if nervous was disagreeable—“nor am I.”

“Nor are you?” Sir Joseph repeated pleasantly. “I am sorry to hear that. What’s the matter? But perhaps you had better reserve it for another time; it is already late; we have a good deal to get through.”

Brett did not begin work. “I understood that I was to have commission on that steel,” he said, with another flicker of the eyelids.

“Did you?” Sir Joseph spoke affably, but absently.

“Yes—and I have received none yet.”

“Dear me. How remiss; the matter must be looked to—if you really were to receive it. I have no clear remembrance of any such arrangement; no doubt the other directors will recollect the board meeting at which it was discussed.”

“It was not discussed at a board meeting; the arrangement was privately made between you and me only; but other people know about it, some people not on the board.”

“That is indiscreet,” Sir Joseph reproved. “I am surprised that you should have talked of affairs of the firm outside. I always thought your discretion could be relied on.”

“I know you did,” Brett retorted with spite, though afterwards he coloured nervously. “I mean—I believe

I am usually discreet. I do not consider I have been indiscreet now. I have said nothing that matters, only mentioned to Carson and a few friends like him that I had worked up Annarly's steel and was to receive commission on it."

"Ah, I see." Sir Joseph still spoke pleasantly, but there was a look in his eyes which Brett, who knew better than most what his suave manner was worth, understood. "Do you know," he said, and Brett was not surprised to hear him say it, "I have no recollection at all of any such arrangement being definitely made? And I hardly think my directors would quite approve it. You heard some of them to-day express an opinion that you had not improved on Annarly's work. I doubt if they would think you were entitled to the considerable sum which we may hope the commission should amount to."

"Oh?" Brett said. He drove his pencil into the paper before him rather unsteadily, but he kept to his point; the eyes, which he was afraid to raise, were very venomous in expression now.

"I half thought you might have forgotten, sir," he said, "although, I think, if you look you will find it has been put on record. What made me think you might not recollect, is that I don't recollect your dictating that letter to Annarly, that second letter."

He raised his eyes now, and met the other's fully. For an almost imperceptible fraction of time they looked at one another, then:

"That's unfortunate, though hardly important," Sir Joseph said, "since, at the time the matter came up for discussion, you gave me and others the hour at which you both wrote and posted the letter."

"I know I did," Brett answered; "if I remember

rightly, you yourself suggested—I mean ‘reminded’ me of the exact hour.”

“Did I? It is unlike you to need reminding of such things; usually your memory is good.”

“Yours, if I may say so, sir, is not.”

Sir Joseph ignored the words; he may not have heard them, they were not very audible; he dismissed the subject curtly, as done with, saying there was nothing to be gained by discussing it further, and that work must be attended to now.

Brett took up his pen; his hands were twitching a little; he realised that he had done a dangerous thing and that he might be thankful to have come off as well as he had. But he was not thankful, he was bitterly angry and humiliated too. It had been a great effort to him, and the result had been far other than he had anticipated; he would not give in without another struggle, he would not be treated thus contemptuously, as not worth answering; he was dangerous, and Sir Joseph should at least know it.

“There are two things of which I should like to remind you, sir,” he said; “one is that on the afternoon you dictated the first letter to Annarly, you saw Mrs. Carr-Harris and also dictated a long report; the one before Annarly’s letter, the other after, and at neither time was there any symptom of pain or uncertainty as to your words—such as is alleged to have given rise to the mistake in that letter to Annarly. Indeed, I never remember to have heard you speak more clearly and definitely than when you instructed me to write and confirm the consent you had verbally given him.”

“Is that so? Then I can only recommend you to be

careful to whom you mention it, as it is not to your credit; in the face of exceptional clearness, such a mistake as you made in an important letter is very remiss."

"Mistake!"

"Certainly. Your next point? You said there were two things of which you wished to remind me; please to be quick. I am willing to bear with you so far as possible, but my patience is becoming exhausted."

Brett swallowed; for the moment he found it a little hard to speak. Sir Joseph's methods were something of a revelation to him, and although he had worked with him some years and knew him pretty well, they were a shock too. To his sense of rectitude as well as other things; some men's sense of rectitude can be shocked by such revelations when they affect themselves, even though they do not realise them when they affect others.

"The other point," he said, feeling it of small avail, "was the coming of Sir James Shannon. He came one evening after that first letter was written, and told you what representatives of those French people had said casually to him and others about their firm being very interested in Annarly, and expecting to get something good from him. He had taken fright at it, and came to you to put a stop to the whole business. There was no talk of the second letter until after that. I don't know if you told Sir James you had already refused your consent to Annarly, you did not tell me until after he had gone."

"Did I not?" Sir Joseph's voice was quiet, but ominous. "I should like you to be quite sure on that point, for, so you said at the time of the inquiry, the second letter had already been dictated and posted

then. Either you were not speaking the truth then, or you are not now."

Brett flushed faintly, and shifted under the other's eyes, "Supposing I made a mistake then?" he muttered. "Supposing I remembered now that I had been wrong about that date, and felt it my duty to—to tell people?"

"Ah? Supposing you did, if you felt it your duty. By the way, whom should you think suitable to tell?"

"There's Annarly."

"Annarly? Yes, just so. Have you his address? I believe he is foreman in some small works in the Midlands. Curious how he has sunk; I suppose back to his original level. Of course, your communication might interest him, though I should hardly imagine so; he would not regard it as important. I do not regard him as important either——"

"Not where he is, possibly," Brett suggested, "but perhaps elsewhere?"

"Perhaps," Sir Joseph agreed, "though I hardly think so. I can hardly imagine him a person of any importance anywhere again."

And Brett felt it to be true; this suave, cool-headed old man would take care the man he had been driven by circumstances to wrong should never achieve to a position dangerous to himself. It was useless to think of Annarly as of value; useless really to think of anyone, he knew it, and knew now that he himself was valueless, merely a cat's-paw; still, he made one last effort. "Mr. Duncan was always troubled about that second letter," he said; "he might think it important that I had made a mistake about the date, about having written it at all."

"No doubt," Sir Joseph answered. "I think it rather important myself, or at least regrettable, very regrettable, indeed; temporary loss of memory in a man of your age is to be regretted. I suppose we must ascribe it to that? There is no other explanation, unless it is that I made a mistake, and"—he put a wrinkled finger on the other's arm —"I never make mistakes. Understand, I never make mistakes."

He had made no mistake in Brett. There was really no need for him to say, as he did when they parted that evening, "There are two essential qualities in a secretary, the one is memory, and the other discretion. In both you have shown yourself lamentably deficient to-day; don't let it occur again. I believe it is the first time; it must be the last, else"—he glanced with meaning towards the door—"there is no alternative."

CHAPTER XVII

ON the last Saturday in March Nan went to see Mr. Cordover. He had not himself been to the City that day, but sent the car for her in good time in the morning with the promise that she should be back by dark. As her father often worked all Saturday afternoons and did not really want her until the evening, she thought she might as well go. Accordingly she went, and much enjoyed the drive out through the bare country; and, as usual, very much enjoyed her visit when she got there.

She was a welcome and familiar guest by now in Mr. Cordover's house; the little lame old lady, the old setter, the one-eyed cat, and all the other inmates of the house looked upon her as a friend, and one they were pleased to see. They seemed to regard her as something young and bright, a sort of glimmer of gentle sunshine, and in their company she developed something of the quality, and for that reason, or perhaps by contrast with them, seemed younger here than anywhere else. Mr. Cordover himself was her chief friend, they were on excellent terms; she made fun of him sometimes and contradicted him sometimes, and though he retorted on her gruffly, he really liked it. He made a point of grumbling to her about everything, largely, one suspected, for the satisfaction of having her disagree. He grumbled to her that Saturday as he hunted about for dead flowers in the spotlessly kept conservatory. The cause of complaint was the negligence of gardeners, and, as it was obviously and entirely without

foundation, Nan sympathised gravely and then concluded by saying:

“They ought to leave you something to do, it’s too bad of them; I would if I were your gardener, I’d leave a lot of dead flowers for you to cut off.”

“You’d get the sack, if you did,” he told her.

She laughed, she knew better.

“You don’t believe anything I say,” he complained, “but it’s true all the same; I’d give you notice to quit fast enough. Talking of that, has your father been able to fix up anything about his notice to quit?”

He had not; Nan said so with a clouded face, for the subject was one much on her mind just now. More still on her father’s, for he was attached to the two houses in Soho with an attachment that is rare; and it had been decided by the County Council, or the Local Government Board, or some other body concerned with the improvement of London, that they must come down. They were safe and they were sanitary, but, either to widen the street, or to bring it into uniformity with others, or to make way for some improvement, they were condemned. It was useless to appeal or protest, he had done that to the last limit; but it was of no avail. He might be compensated; he might, very likely would, have new and more commodious warehouses rebuilt on the spot; but the old houses where he had lived and worked so long must go, and he felt it with an acuteness few besides Nan could realise.

One would have expected Mr. Cordover to have regarded the attitude as ridiculous; with his reforming principles he was likely to have held that a new warehouse was infinitely preferable to an eighteenth-century house built for another purpose.

Very likely he did think so; but then he also held that for any council, board, or body to compel a man to vacate or pull down a house at their orders was tyranny and bureaucracy in its worst form. This opinion modified the other, and, probably assisted by personal bias, made him as warm a sympathiser as Nan could wish. He sympathised afresh this day, abusing the authorities whole-heartedly; finally telling Nan that, if nothing could be done, and tyranny had its way, she had better make her father come and live somewhere in this neighbourhood, where he would guarantee there should be no nonsense with councils or anybody else.

“Your house is not let,” he said; “you had better make him take that.”

They had come to call the long house embowered in trees Nan’s. It was still empty, as it had been on the day of her first visit when she had seen and admired it. She had often looked at the outside, and once at the in.

“The garden’s gone to rack and ruin,” Mr. Cordover said, “and the trees shut out every bit of daylight now; still, a couple of men with axes and scythes could do something towards putting that to rights.”

“Or wrong—” Nan said. “We’re not going to cut down the trees about my house. Though,” she added, “I don’t know that we need arrange that, as it’s never likely to be mine; I am sure father could not afford such a big house, not nearly so big, I should think. Besides, he would not be happy so far from his work.”

“Bosh!” Mr. Cordover said. “A man’s better away from his work.”

“Not all men,” Nan said; “he wouldn’t be. He always

wanted to live and die with it; he thought he would too—in that house."

"We most of us don't do what we think we will—and all the better for us."

"It wouldn't be the better for him," Nan persisted; "his plans have nearly always been fulfilled, I think."

"Then he's luckier than most—or more moderate in what he sets out to get. Other folks aren't so successful. Look at the Annarlys, for instance—do their plans ever come off?"

"Some," said Nan; "at least, I should think so."

"H'm, some!" Mr. Cordover said contemptuously. "Not half, nor a quarter! And a good thing too! Fool plans and fool planning; and no work, no beef, or sticking to it put into bringing them off either. Look at them. They were going to make an engineer of Master Giles (might as well have set out to make a ballet-dancer), and all they did was to think how useful his step-brother would be. Then, before he had learnt the hind end of an engine from the fore, they had changed all that and were going to make a Rothschild of him. And all they did towards that was to remind me I was his uncle; and before he had learnt to add two and two and on which side his bread was buttered, that idea was done with. As for Michael, I don't know what he wasn't going to do, according to their plans—set the Thames on fire, and receive a baronetcy from a grateful country for having found out a more effective—and expensive—way of annihilating other nations than anyone before him—and what's that all come to?"

"You can't blame them because Michael has not done what they expected," Nan protested.

Mr. Cordover could blame them for expecting the impossible. “And what’s more,” he said, “I can blame them for being ashamed of him and what he’s doing now.”

“I don’t think they are ashamed,” Nan said; “they are bitterly disappointed; they think him such a failure.”

“Well, he’s earning an honest living, anyway,” Mr. Cordover said, “and that’s something, even if he is a foreman or works manager of one dye-vat, one man and a boy. He’s just as much use to the community dyeing wool as inventing new arms, more—I disapprove of all this rivalry of armaments.”

Nan knew that, and did not enter upon the political question; instead, she said, “I don’t think Michael a failure myself.”

Mr. Cordover turned on her at that. “Not a failure? How do you make that out? Oh, I see, you still think he’s going to pick up, make a name and secure general recognition, and all the rest of it some day?”

“I’m not at all sure,” she said. “I’m not sure, either, that it really matters.”

“What does then? If that doesn’t constitute success and doesn’t matter, I should like to know what does.”

“I don’t know,” she said slowly, “I can’t exactly explain, but to me it seems the important thing is the being able to do things, not the having it known that you have done them.”

“H’m.” Mr. Cordover was rather sceptical. “To me it seems reputation is a somewhat important thing likewise. Pray, do you think it unimportant whether or not that scandal about Michael at Galhardy’s is cleared up?”

"I used to want that it should be," Nan admitted, "but I think more from a sense of its injustice than anything else. I don't much fancy it ever will be, anyhow, not for a long time, and if it ever is, I doubt if it will make much difference; after a time things don't, do they? One has got used to them, or found out how to do without them, or bear them, as the case may be. Do you know, I don't believe it is a thing itself, however evil, that really matters, it's the way one takes it; if one has found out that and found out how to stand the strain of it, it does not really much matter if, after a long while, it is taken away. It makes very little difference; one hardly notices, for one could keep on standing it for ever."

"Oh?" Mr. Cordover said. "That's your opinion, is it? Well, it's mine that a man's reputation counts a good deal, and his loss of his good name makes a considerable difference."

"In his work, yes," Nan admitted—"until a new name is made; after that one would not mind about the old; in other things I'm not sure that one would mind at all."

"You're a bit of a girl who knows nothing of the world," Mr. Cordover told her, "and a dreamer into the bargain."

"Am I?" she said. "Then I believe Michael's a dreamer too."

"Stuff!" Mr. Cordover retorted. "He's got brains, and he had a career, and he knows it, and knows it's done for."

"I suppose it is, in a way," she said. "But somehow a career, that sort of career, doesn't seem to be everything. It always seems to me to be a bit like ornament, I mean ornament as applied to cabinet

work, furniture, the only thing I understand. Sometimes you see a piece of furniture in which the symmetry of the design has been sacrificed to the ornament—a wonderful ornament, exquisite, the work of an artist, but which has so possessed the man that he has lost the true proportion of the whole in developing it. The really great artist, having the whole design in mind, sacrifices beautiful parts of the beautiful ornament, so as to bring the whole into perfect proportion."

"H'm," Mr. Cordover said. "We don't get much perfection in this world, I'm hanged if we do; and if we are to buy it at the price of the sort of cropper your friend Michael came there won't be a rush of customers for it."

Nan laughed. "Oh, one is not a voluntary customer," she said, "one doesn't choose such things, they are forced upon one; but sometimes, after a while, one may begin to a little understand how they work out, don't you think?"

"Depends who one is," Mr. Cordover said. "I suppose if one is Nan one does—or thinks so—and if one is Michael——"

He recalled the curious momentary resemblance he had seen between the two on the day when he first met Nan—a resemblance of expression rather than features, the look of persons who have some mutual experience or attitude in common. He glanced sharply at her, the thought coming into his mind which had crossed Robert Barmister's some months earlier—Would she marry Michael? And he disapproved it as Barmister had.

"Too much alike," was his opinion, "and not enough wholesome flesh and blood in the business."

Aloud he said, “Come along in and get a cup of tea before you start; you’ve none too much time, if you want to get home by dark.”

They went in, and soon afterwards Nan left.

Even then, and even by going at a considerable pace, the car did not reach Soho before dusk. The streets were already lighted as it came through, though the old houses in the cul-de-sac were not as yet. Nan noticed the dark windows as she said good evening to the chauffeur; Mrs. Bidden was probably out, she often was at that hour on a Saturday, and Barmister was probably finishing some work by the lingering daylight in the upper room where the light lasted longest.

She fitted her key into the lock and let herself in. The wide hall was dim, but she knew it so well, and knew all the obstacles of old and recent importation, that that was no trouble to her, even when she had shut the outer door, and so shut out what light there was in the street. The house was very quiet; the steady but indistinct noise of London was not close enough to be more than an accompaniment, and one to which she was so used that it did not break the sense of silence. She went up the broad, uncarpeted stairs, her footfall hardly breaking the silence either. On the landing there was more light, the grey twilight of March, lingering on some point of carving above the door-frames and falling on some spot on the floor, where the dust lay thick and undisturbed. She crossed the landing, and opened the door of the living-room.

There was no one there: orderliness, silence, and the curious feeling of a just-departed presence, as of the vanishing skirts of the ghost-people, that one surprises on quietly opening some old rooms at

twilight.

“Father must be downstairs, after all,” she thought, “unless he is out.”

There was a feeling about the house as if it were empty; she realised it now, and decided that her second thought must be the correct one: her father must have gone out to see some friend. She took off her hat and jacket, and went to get a light.

She went by the little masked stair by which she had first brought Michael, meaning to go to the kitchen for matches. As she opened the door, she was struck afresh with the silence and the feeling of the emptiness of the house—a feeling less unfriendly than remote, and in no way concerned with things human. Instinctively she moved more quietly and sought the most shadowed side of the stair, as if unconsciously seeking to identify herself with it and lose herself in the dusk which was in possession here.

The staircase led straight into the dolphin room. Here the light was dimmer than above, only the dolphins on the mantelpiece started out starkly from an unseen background, and across a stretch of boards that gleamed pale in the dusk the two desks loomed dark and indistinct. For a moment she paused in the stair-doorway; then her eyes, more used to the gloom, descried to her surprise a figure by one of the desks.

“Father!” she said in astonishment.

He did not answer nor turn. He was sitting in his desk-chair, a little bent forward, papers spread before him.

“Father——” she said again; and then no more, for suddenly she knew.

It was not that he did not answer, or that he sat so still, or that the house was quiet with that all-pervading quiet emptiness of something gone. It was all of these, and more than these. She knew it suddenly; she knew before she crossed the room or touched him—he was dead.

He had died there alone in the quiet old house, swiftly, painlessly, from some sudden heart attack—as he had always hoped to die, sitting at his desk in the dolphin room, busy to the last with the work he loved. One breath, an absorbed, active man with all his faculties; the next, gone elsewhere, with no one by to tell the moment or make trouble at the passing.

For a long minute Nan stood looking at him, her comprehension of the end and its perfection such that for the moment she had no other feeling. He had gone as he would have chosen, from where he would have chosen, and no one had seen him go. He had laid down his pen, and the twilight had fallen—the long, grey, twilight of spring.

Mrs. Bidden had been out that evening. There was no reason why she should not; she felt no guiltiness about it, nor any need to excuse herself when she met Nan on the doorstep.

Nan had a telegram-form in her hand. “Will you take this to the post office for me?” she said.

She spoke so quietly that the old servant felt no alarm; it was only when at the post office a young clerk required her to read the message that she began to be uneasy. The telegram was to Josiah requesting him to come at once, and was signed by

Nan, not by her father—as it would have been in the unusual contingency of Mr. Foregood being wanted for business reasons on a Saturday evening. Mrs. Bidden puzzled over the fact uneasily as she hurried back again.

“Is anything the matter?” she asked, before she was fairly in the house.

“Yes,” Nan said. “Come in, and shut the door.”

After that the quietness, the solitary dignity was broken; other things crowded in, other feelings rose up, other realisations. No human incident or emotion is single celled; no matter how great or complete or overwhelming it is after the first the components of it, or the components which go to make complex humanity, will begin to separate out and give rise to separate things. In the silent, shadowy house there was now the sound of grief and surprise; the loud weeping of an old and faithful servant for a lost master and for a left mistress. One grieved for death, Nan remembered, one was left alone by him who had thus gone without farewell. Soon a doctor came, fetched in nervous haste; some conventional thing, a child of civilisation, required feverishly to be told, in spite of unerring instinct handed down through the ages, that life was really extinct. Then the dead man was moved from his favourite place in his favourite room. The dead lie upstairs on beds. How heavy they are. What a good thing the old stairs were so shallow and wide, since it was necessary to move him! There were other necessities: lighting candles and dissipating the company of shadows, putting away the papers on the desk—they might be private, or important; they would certainly be blown away in the cross-draughts from the open doors.

Josiah came as soon as it was possible to do so, and

with him Miss Janet.

“I’m coming,” she announced, when she read the telegram; “there is something the matter, I know it. If there isn’t, I can go back.”

So she came, and immediately and at once took the situation under her charge. From the moment that she was admitted by Mrs. Bidden, swollen-faced and tear-stained, she assumed command, to the advantage of everyone, and to the relief of the doctor. Not that she had it all her own way; for instance, she decided that Nan had better come back with her to Bayswater, and Josiah remain here for the night. But Nan decided otherwise, and carried her point; Miss Janet had not directed as long as she had without learning when she must give way.

“Very well, dear,” she said, “just as you like; I’ll stay with you here. Josiah can do for himself to-morrow morning. It’ll do him good.”

Nan said she hoped Miss Janet would not stay, if it was inconvenient, adding an assurance that she did not mind being alone.

Miss Foregood put that aside emphatically. “It will do him good to get his own breakfast,” she said. “No, Josiah”—this to her brother, who had a vague feeling that he was the more suitable person to stay with his old master and Nan—“you must go back; the cat’s shut in the house, and the kitchen fire’s not raked out. You go back, there’s nothing more for you to do here now; you can come in good time to-morrow morning.”

She followed him to the door and gave him directions in a lower voice about sundry articles to be brought for herself. “My black alpaca,” was the end of the list; “the second peg from the window in

the cupboard in my room. Don't fold it worse than you can help. I don't know why I came away in this blue gown; but there, we didn't stop for anything."

Josiah made an entry of the alpaca in his notebook, and then went away, still half feeling that he should have been the one to stay. The old master dead upstairs, the old house with the long rooms and the stored treasures that the dead man had loved, and little Nan, still little Nan to him—he would like to have stayed with them. But Janet decreed otherwise and Janet knew; no doubt Nan was better with one of her own sex, and Janet was a capable, comfortable person, who could do things, who always did do them. So he went away, and Nan and Miss Foregood spent the rest of the evening together, the latter in writing several letters.

Nan had not thought of them; she had few thoughts of the outside world. But Miss Janet, with a perception of the proper thing, proceeded to write to Mr. Annarly and to some little-known relations on the Barmister side. Nan did not see that they were more concerned with her father dead than they had been with him living, but to notify them of the event seemed customary, at least Miss Janet said so, and it was done.

"What about Michael?" she asked suddenly. "Have you telegraphed to him?"

"No," Nan answered, then said, "I'll write; I think it would be better. I can explain, and tell him to come, if he can and when it is convenient."

Miss Janet did not quite approve, not yet did she quite understand the point of view; convenience was scarcely a thing to be considered on an occasion of this sort. Still, she did not say so, and Nan wrote her

letter, which was posted with the others. Soon afterwards she went to bed faintly surprised to find that by the clock it was still early, although the afternoon seemed so incredibly long ago.

Early the next morning, Josiah came again, bringing the alpaca, very badly folded. He stayed all day. It was a curiously long day though, unlike the last, long in passing rather than in retrospect. Out of doors it was fine, a bright pale sunlight, which cast sharp shadows and was hot by contrast with the cutting wind which lurked at corners. The sun came but shadedly to the darkened house, and the noises of the district came but indistinctly too, never drawing very near. Few people on Sunday entered even the beginning of the street which led nowhere, unless they wanted to settle an argument or keep an assignation, and then they soon went away again.

It was not exactly an unhappy day, though strange. The Foregoods talked a good deal of the past early struggling times, the long-dead young mother, the business of then and of to-day. Nan listened, and asked them questions now and then, feeling, as they talked, her father curiously close, and yet at the same time curiously removed. Towards evening a restlessness came upon her. The bells of a neighbouring church beginning to ring for evening service suggested to her to go to church. Miss Janet did not at first quite approve in her heart, though she raised no audible objection; afterwards she thought better of it, and took herself to task. “After all,” as she said to Josiah, “why not go to church, if she wants to? Why stick fast within doors because custom says you should—in a neighbourhood where you are totally unknown—or any other neighbourhood either?”

So Nan went to church, and went alone since she wished it. Not to the one the bells of which she had heard, but to one further in the City to which she had before been with Michael. A church with a very small congregation, and light so obscured by stained glass and encircling buildings that nothing within was plain: carving and gilding and stonework all indistinct as the purpose and meaning of life—though perhaps not less beautiful for that.

Monday was another long day. Josiah again arrived early and stayed late. Other people came during the day: Mr. Annarly came to offer condolences and his services, if they were required. He brought kind messages from the family and a little note from Mrs. Annarly asking if there was anything they could do. He delivered these to Nan, and then was at a loss as to what to say to her. He was very solemn and a little awkward, anxious to say the right thing in the sad circumstances of bereavement, but rather embarrassed as to what it was. He made the same inquiries two or three times over, and found his chief relief in talking across Nan of her and her loss to Miss Foregood, in a voice lowered, as if in the presence of serious illness. He did not stay long, and his going was almost as much relief to Nan as it was to him. No one else inquired for her during the day; the Barmister relations did not live in London, so they did not come; one or two trade friends did and the dead man's lawyer. They saw Josiah and merely asked after her, if they knew her.

She spent a quiet time indoors. Miss Janet was there all day, except when she went out to buy mourning; she was a good and economical buyer, and the purchases she made were not extensive. She carried some of them back with her, and she and Nan spent

a long, undisturbed time altering the ready-made clothes to fit more or less. Towards twilight Nan wearied of the work; she did not say so, however, but kept on quietly stitching as regularly as ever. After a time Miss Janet sent her to her room to fetch an old skirt. She went at once and meant to come back at once. She found the skirt in the cupboard where it hung, and, unhooking it, threw it over her arm. But as she turned to fasten the door her eye fell on her tulip-wood secretaire—her father's first birthday present to her, the beginning of that unspoken, undemonstrative, yet curiously close understanding there had been between them. She and her father together through so many years in the old house, in the dim rooms among the dusty treasures, in quiet companionship. And he was gone, and she was alone!

For a moment she stood quite still, the skirt slipping unheeded from her arm; then she turned and fled. She ran up the dusty stairs to the long warehouse-room where her father had surprised her before the secretaire long ago. There she crouched down among the cabinets and chairs, and, pressing her head back against some one of them, sat so, with hands clasped hard and wide dry eyes.

There was a sound without, a step on the stairs. She did not hear it, she had heard nothing for a long time; she was not aware of any approach until someone came between her and what light there was. Then she looked up.

"Michael!" she exclaimed, and without warning broke down into tears.

He put an arm about her. “Nan,” he said, and held her comfortingly.

For a little neither said more, there was no need; she sobbed unrestrainedly, and he did not attempt to stop her, only let her feel his sympathy by the touch of his hand.

But in a while she recovered herself. “I am so sorry,” she said unsteadily; “I don’t know why I gave way like that, I haven’t done it before. I didn’t mean to bother you; and there’s nothing to cry about—it’s all as he would have wished it, as he would have chosen.”

“As he would, perhaps,” Michael said, “but what about you? May one not think of you?”

Her breath caught a little. “I’m all right,” she said; “I don’t know why I cried. It’s—it’s only the twilight, I think—the long, haunting twilight—and being lonely.”

“You’re not lonely now I have come.”

“No,” she said, and the arm he had put about her tightened almost as if he were protecting her from something.

For a little they sat so, they two alone, among the shadows in the darkening, dusty room. “Nan,” he said at last, “what are we going to do? I have nothing much, and you have nothing either, I suppose—but there’s only you and I. Neither of us has anyone else in the world who counts, and we seem to need each other pretty badly. Dare you risk it? Will you, Nan?”

She drew a long breath, a hesitating breath, while one might count twenty; and while she felt anew the warmth of his protecting arm—“Yes,” she said softly,

“I think so.”

CHAPTER XVIII

NAN lay on her back, staring up at the ceiling above her. She had been in bed two hours and more, but still she was awake, broad awake. That evening she had promised to marry Michael, and now she lay thinking about it. A clock away outside had struck one long ago, it struck two now; but she did not hear it, any more than did her father lying dead in the room across the landing. No thoughts of that father occurred to her now; it certainly did not occur to her as disloyalty or disrespect to him that she had planned a future with Michael before he was buried. It was not. There was no disloyalty or disrespect in her feelings for him; there could be none in her actions.

Her thoughts centred round what she had that evening undertaken. Had she done well to say she would marry Michael? Was it really the thing to do? It was the simplest thing, certainly, and, at the first glance, the one which appeared to offer the nearest to a continuance of life as it had been—which is what human nature, especially when suffering from shock, instinctively inclines towards. They could be married easily: asking no one, telling no one; it was their concern solely. They could go to one of those City churches which she loved, where they were nothing and no one, chance comers borne in for a minute on the tide of life. A little minute in the dim place, a little pause with just themselves and God; and then out again into the streets with their passing and repassing life, and then home to the old house.

Without thinking, she found herself picturing the going back to the old house, the old ways, the day's work, and the day's burden, and the evening's rest; it seemed part of the inevitable scheme of things. But in fact it was not so; she remembered that. The old house was coming down, the old life was at an end; the work would pass to strangers. She did not know a great deal about her father's monetary affairs, nothing really; but she did not expect there would be much for her. The business, she imagined, would be sold for what it would fetch, along with the treasures in the upper rooms. She felt a pang for both, she had lived so long and so closely with them; but she concluded they would have to go so that affairs might be wound up and liabilities met, and even then she expected to be but scantily provided for. Michael, she knew, expected there to be even less for her; she had perceived that in the talk of the evening. In his scheme, the marriage was somewhat as it was in hers, a matter that concerned none but themselves; a momentary stepping aside to make the contract, and then a going on again much as before, only they were to go on in the small Midland town where he had lived for the last four months.

And, of course, he was right; Nan knew it as she lay watching the alternating light and darkness as the moon passed in and out of clouds. That was what it would be. Were Michael some other kind of man they might perhaps have made shift to carry on her father's business between them, and made a small living out of it. Being the kind he was it was impossible; he was made for other things, and he must do them whether he would or no. He had got to work out his life another way; she realised that, and it no more occurred to her to seek to change it than to change the seasons of the year. But it did occur to

her to ask whether the marriage was really the best thing.

Her knowledge of love and lovers, even in fiction, was very limited, she knew almost nothing of the subject; but she knew that she and Michael were not lovers. He had in some fashion loved Lady Sibyl Carson; she knew that, though it had never been spoken of between them. It had not been, perhaps, the strongest passion, not the sort that had figured in the few novels she had read. She more than suspected his passion, whatever it was, had been submerged in the wreck which had broken his career; the lost love taking a second place to the lost work, the memory of it surviving only with other tide wrack. But such as it was, it was love; and she instinctively knew it to be something quite different from his feeling for herself. She was friend and sister to him, the quiet, comprehending companion, the one who understood even better than he did himself; but the bond between them was not love; he did not love her as men love women when they eagerly seek them in marriage.

And she herself? She considered the question fairly, her rather slow, but unusually accurate, mind weighing it almost as if it concerned another. Not quite perhaps, even thus to herself alone there were points at which the spirit shrank from the mind's clear-sighted probe; yet in the main fairly and very searchingly, seeking, with a truth few women practise with themselves, not only what Michael was to her, but also what in her inmost soul she held of those unknowns—love and life.

Suddenly she sat up in bed. "No!" she said almost aloud. "It is not that! He is not that to me. He is not the man—if there ever could be one!"

She put back her hair and looked out at the cloudy sky where the moon was going down behind chimney stacks. She realised that, whatever was or was not cloudy in her mind, one thing at least was clear, neither she nor Michael were really thinking of marriage at all. “It is not to be married we want,” she thought, “but to go on with life as it was. We could do that better without, I believe, whether we were separate or together all the time. Marriage would not help; there would be something wrong with it.”

But she did not say anything of her thoughts the next day, she was not yet quite sure enough of her own conclusions. The coming of day brought rather a revulsion of feeling and a perception afresh of the easiness, at all events, in the initial stages, of abiding by the decision of yesterday. Still, though she said nothing of her doubts to Michael, she arranged with him that no mention should be made to the Foregoods of any understanding between them.

Possibly the brother and sister had some suspicions; the long absence in the warehouse-room might have justified such in people who rather hopefully looked for it.

“It would be the best thing possible,” Miss Janet observed in private. “It’s very likely to come sooner or later, and the sooner the better, I say; I see no reason to wait about. We’re not the Annarlys to be obliged to inconvenience ourselves and everyone else by delaying to speak for fear the neighbours should think it odd.”

And Josiah agreed. “Yes,” he said, “yes, if she wants to, if he’ll make her happy.”

“Make her happy!” Miss Janet said scornfully. “Of

course he will. He takes half as much looking after as a baby, and that's what most women want. What she'll be happy to do till she gets a real baby, when he'll have to look after himself and her too, and they'll both be as proud as they are surprised to find he can do it. They'll think when they've found it out, and got to the common-sense place of commonplace happiness, that they're the only ones who've ever got there, and have made the greatest discovery of the age. And so they will have too. God bless the nonsense!" and she wiped her eyes unashamed.

But the same evening that she said it—it was the evening before the funeral—Nan gave the first warning of doubt to Michael.

They had been talking of his work and some of the difficulties of it, and the circumstances she would be called upon to share.

"Things are better than they were," he said. "I don't mean they are magnificent, or ever will be; the place will never be more than a little one-horse affair, a dyer's on the smallest scale. But I have a liking for it, and I think you will have, although I don't suppose I shall ever make money of it, certainly never make engineering shops—that isn't everything, is it? George is rather a nuisance, I must own; he and Milligen are about as easy to move as a couple of pigs, but as they usually pull opposite ways, I sometimes come in. You'll understand when you come to live near them."

"—If I do," she said.

"If you do? You will when we are married."

"Yes—" she hesitated. "I'm not quite sure about that marriage, not perfectly certain—are you?"

“Of course,” he answered; then, struck by her manner, asked, “Are not you? You were. Have you changed your mind?”

“I don’t know it’s that exactly,” she said. “I’m not sure I knew my mind. Are you sure? I don’t mean were you that evening, but are you quite sure now that it would be best for us to be married?”

“Why, certainly! If it was best then, it is now—nothing has happened to alter it.”

“No,” she agreed, “that’s so; but we may have made a mistake then? We have had more time to think about it, and, after thinking, I am not sure that to be married is what we really want; indeed, I am nearly sure it is not. You think about it.”

“You had better tell me what you think,” he said.

She would much rather he had arrived at his own conclusions by himself, but she did her best, trying to speak as impersonally as possible, to state the matter in the unbiassed way they talked of most things. On the whole she succeeded wonderfully well, seeing the nature of the subject, curiously well; so well that in itself it was something of an argument of the truth of what she said. People who could so logically investigate feeling and impersonally weigh situations were hardly in the normal condition of those contemplating the marriage of choice.

But if Michael began to suspect that he did not say so then, Miss Janet came in before Nan had much more than stated her views, and before he had had a chance to refute or consider them. But that was no disadvantage in Nan’s eyes; she would rather he thought over what she had said alone. “You think about it,” she said later. “We must each think about it; we must each be quite sure, and I’m not—or,

rather, I'm nearly sure it had better not be."

The next day was the funeral, and so no opportunity during the earlier part of the day for any private talk.

Mr. Annarly came to the funeral; also one of the Barmister relations, and two of the business friends, the others were Jews and so debarred by religion. To Mr. Annarly's surprise his brother-in-law, Mr. Giles Cordover, was present. He remembered to have heard his wife or daughters remark that Uncle Giles had taken Nan Barmister for a motor ride; beyond that nothing had ever been said, or known, of any acquaintance between them. It was odd Giles should be at the funeral, Mr. Annarly thought, though, when one came to think of it, perhaps not odder than plenty of other things he did. Mr. Annarly did not get any speech with him; he did not come with the funeral party, nor did he leave with them; he said a few words to Nan at the graveside, squeezed her hand hard, and went about his business.

It is quite possible Mr. Annarly would like to have gone about his too; he was rather busy just now; also not at all at ease in scenes of family emotion: weddings, funerals, or similar times when the tenor of ordinary life and feeling is broken. But he did not go; Nan was his dead wife's niece and a lonely girl, so far as relatives were concerned; he must return to the house with her, he was too kind-hearted to think of anything else. So he went with the Foregoods and Michael.

Robert Barmister's will was read to this small party in the brown upper room. It was commendably brief, and contained little or no indication of the amount, small or otherwise, of property to be disposed of; but it rather surprised Mr. Annarly. He had always heard the women of his household speak, kindly but

condescendingly, of Nan as a person of very modest attainments, and by this will Robert Barmister, a shrewd man, bequeathed to her the management of his beloved business! Josiah Foregood was to have a third share, she to have the other two-thirds and the control, also everything else of which the testator stood possessed, with a very free hand in the management of it. There was, however, a condition attached; or, rather, as the lawyer explained, it was an expressed wish, not a legal restraint, for it was contained in a private letter to Nan and not in the will itself, and so not legally binding upon her.

“My late client,” the lawyer said, “wished to include this private condition in the will, embodying it in a codicil while keeping its nature private. But, as I pointed out to him, it was impossible to make it legally binding without publishing its nature; on that he decided to leave the will as it originally stood, expressing his wishes respecting the condition to the inheritrix, and leaving her to carry them out as her conscience should direct.”

“Most extraordinary,” Mr. Annarly said, “most extraordinary!” He meant the disposal of the business quite as much as the unknown condition. “Of course, it’s not like a City concern, anything big; it’s only trade certainly, and smallish at that, but it’s one that wants technical knowledge, I should have thought, and proper handling.”

The lawyer, to whom these remarks were addressed in a decorously lowered voice, bowed, but answered in the same. “I believe Miss Barmister is considered, by those who know, a finer expert in this particular business and a truer virtuoso than her father.”

“You don’t say so?” Mr. Annarly said, and looked in some bewilderment towards Nan, who now rose

from where she sat at the far end of the room and came towards them.

“Have you the letter for me?” she asked the lawyer.

He produced it. “You will perceive,” he said, “that it was your father’s wish you should open and read it when you were alone.”

She glanced at the sealed envelope and saw that instruction written upon it. “He knew it would be easiest for me,” she said. “I think so slowly and never at all properly, if there are people talking; I could not really make up my mind, if I were not quiet and alone.”

“I hope,” the lawyer spoke impressively, “you will not do anything rashly or hastily. Since it was your father’s desire, I took charge of the letter, and told you his original instructions in the matter, but it was under protest; I could not personally approve an effort—as this was—to give a private and personal expression the force of law. No doubt you will wish to carry out your father’s instructions, no doubt they are such as can with ease and propriety be carried out; but it is my duty to tell you, as I told him, that you are not legally compelled to do so. You inherit in any case.”

“Thank you,” Nan said. “Yes, I understand. I don’t think father would have wanted me to do what he thought wrong or impossible. And I expect he knew that I would not do it, if I thought it so, no matter what depended on it. We were very good friends, you know, we understood——”

Her eyes filled with tears as she spoke. Mr. Annarly’s grew misty too; he patted her arm kindly. “You must come down to Hurstbury,” he said, “the girls will be pleased to have you; you must come and stay a long

time."

She thanked him, and then slipped away to read her letter.

"A good girl," he said to the lawyer, "an affectionate daughter. I suppose there won't be much for her, poor thing, when all's said and done?"

The lawyer looked surprised. "She inherits a two-thirds interest in the business, and all that her father had saved," he said.

"Yes, yes, so I understood—but what's that? Not much I'm afraid. Enough to live on in a small way, if they manage the business properly, and with Foregood, who knows it through and through, interested one may reckon on that. There will be enough to keep her from want, I suppose, but not much more—though that's more than I anticipated. Fact, I was prepared to have to do something for her myself. She was my dead wife's niece, you know; I shouldn't like her to want."

The lawyer applauded such generous intentions, but said there was no need to anticipate any necessity for them. "I cannot," he said, "speak with perfect accuracy on the subject, but I believe I may safely say that Miss Barmister's income will be very much nearer two thousand a year than one."

"What!" Mr. Annarly exclaimed. "You don't mean it! You can't mean it!"

He looked round the room and, very incorrectly, appraised the things in it. "I should never have thought it!" he said. "I had no notion. Why, he didn't live at the rate of three hundred a year!"

He repeated it once or twice to himself; he could not get used to the idea at all. He spoke of it to Michael,

to whom it was as much news as it was to him; also to Josiah Foregood, who was not very surprised.

"Yes," the latter said in his gentle way, "he made a good deal of late years; he was a clever man, a very shrewd man. It's wonderful he should have left me a share in the business; a great honour, I feel it, a responsibility too. I hope I'll prove worthy."

He accompanied Mr. Annarly and the lawyer to the door, and then went to the dolphin room to look rather wistfully at the dead man's desk, and try to realise his own new position. Miss Janet, in the meantime, went to superintend domestic affairs. The fact that Nan had inherited more than anyone anticipated did not make any difference to her, or prevent her from going to see that the wine and cake were properly disposed of. Michael was left alone when he had said good-bye to his father. He hesitated a moment in the hall, then went slowly upstairs. The fact of Nan's inheritance did make some difference to him. Nan with two thousand a year and her father's business to manage was a different person from Nan penniless and homeless, crying alone in the twilight; at least, different in so far that he would not have proposed marriage to her. Of course, Nan was Nan, whatever she had or whatever she was; and she would always be Nan, a thing apart, one to come back to, less a person than a comfort and a sense of rest, from which one drew support and found the best of oneself and things. But it was not for that reason he had proposed marriage to her, marriage had nothing to do with that, nor that with marriage. He had proposed it to her because she was crying alone in the twilight. She had divined it quicker than he had, and divined too that the other, that which they really were to each other,

did not depend on it, would exist without it, possibly better without it. She had doubted yesterday whether they were right to marry; he doubted now that he knew she was to have two thousand a year and her father's business.

Nan was standing by the window in the upper room when he came in. She held her father's letter open in her hand, and though she turned as he entered, he could not tell from her face how the contents had affected her.

"Do you know you will be a comparatively rich woman?" he said, suddenly remembering that she was the only person with whom the amount of the inheritance had not been discussed.

"Shall I?" she said. "I rather fancied from the letter there must be more than we thought, a good deal more."

"It is a good deal," he said, and told her.

"As much as that?" she asked, but without excitement.

She took the letter from its envelope. "I want you to read it," she said.

"Are you sure?" he hesitated. "Is it what he wished?"

"I am sure it is what I do," she answered, "and in this case I am the best judge; he generally trusted me to decide what concerned me. Read it; it touches you as well as me."

He unfolded it and read:

> DEAR NAN,
>
> *I am told that I cannot legally limit my bequests to you by any conditions not*

made public. As I do not choose to have your affairs and my actions talked over by those not concerned, to the possible bringing about of what I want to avoid, I do not make this condition public, but I expect you to act as if it were legally binding, none the less.

The condition on which I leave you practically all I have—and you will find it a good deal more than you expect—is that you do not marry Michael Annarly. Should you do so, I wish everything to go to Josiah Foregood.

Your affectionate father,
ROBERT BARMISTER.

So Barmister had foreseen the position and determined to decide it for them; at least, so it seemed to Michael as he read the letter. Not very flattering to him himself, perhaps, but none the less a wise decision, the one they must inevitably have come to. He felt it, and felt it so completely fitted in with the thoughts which had occupied him as he came upstairs that he found himself saying, "That settles it," as if he had already discussed them aloud.

"Settles what?" Nan asked.

"The question of our marrying or not."

"Does it?"

"Certainly. I could not marry you in the face of that."

"You could."

"I couldn't. I couldn't very well, seeing I am

practically a penniless failure, if you had the money; how much less since you are to lose if I do."

"It would not make any difference if we cared," she said. "If you cared—like that—you would hardly know whether I had money or had not; it would not hurt your pride that I should have it, or your generosity that I should lose it. And the same with me—it would not embarrass me to have when you had not, or trouble me to lose on account of you; nothing in the world would matter so long as we had each other—if we cared—that way."

"I think it would," he said.

But she persisted. "No," she said, "I am sure of it. If we loved, nothing else would matter; we should hardly know anything else."

"I rather fancy we should," he said, "and anyhow—I can't take this sacrifice of you. Before ever I read the letter I felt that. Why should you give up this life and work for mine—as you would have to if we married —even if you could keep the money?"

"It would be nothing if one loved," she said. "Why, if one loved a tinker one would put down one's coronet or career—whichever one had—and go out joyfully and tramp to the world's end after him! And if one loved a duke one would gladly learn the ways and conventions of his class, though it would be a lot harder, and thankfully share them with him. There isn't any giving up to love or any forgiving or giving either, it's—just love."

She spoke with absolute certainty, and though Michael would not agree, she held to it.

"You should know," she said, "for you love your work; you do not sacrifice to that, for there is no

sacrifice in giving everything to it. There is never any choice to you whether you shall or shan't; what it needs it must have, without counting the cost—there is no cost. That is love."

"How do you know?"

"I'm not sure, but I do know. It has never come my way, perhaps never will, but I know it; and knowing —I am not going to marry on less."

CHAPTER XIX

FIVE years after Michael Annarly left the great firm of Galhardy's, the designs for an aerial torpedo were offered to the British Government. A good many designs had been put forward during those years; a good many torpedoes, to meet the demand of the altered conditions of warfare, had been invented, manufactured, modified, improved, discarded in favour of others. It was no new thing for governments to be offered one; but this was a new thing; it was not merely a torpedo, it was *the* torpedo —that for which all the civilised nations had been looking, the perfect thing. As was that of Galhardy's disaster to that originally designed for them by Michael Annarly, so was this to Michael Annarly's design. There was no doubt about it, no room for two opinions, it was perfect. Not closely related to any which had been produced before, probably worked out from first principles by one who had not kept in touch with the course of development in this branch of arms. But none the worse for that; better perhaps, since it was the design of a master unhampered by the convention of other men's ideas—one who, by rare insight, much work and the knowledge and application of obscure and complicated laws, had arrived at a result simple in its completeness, however complex in its origin—and fulfilling all requirements.

This torpedo, protected by a provisional patent, was offered to the British Government; that is to say, the English rights were offered to them, the inventor

reserving to himself the liberty to sell the foreign rights elsewhere, if he chose.

The offer was considered by the War Office, no doubt carefully considered, since some time elapsed before an answer was returned. Indeed, the time of protection allowed a patentee under a provisional patent was almost expired before the reply was given. When it was, it was to the effect that the Government could not entertain the inventor's suggestion that they should buy the English rights only. They would give him one thousand pounds for all rights, English and foreign, they could not consider any other terms.

The proportion of the sum to the magnitude of the invention was rather interesting—to those who think the sciences lucrative professions and governments good paymasters. It did not interest the inventor, he had no such delusions, nor yet much surprise him. He declined the offer, withdrew his design, and for a little was heard of no more. When the time arrived to file a complete patent for the torpedo and the heads for it he filed one; or, rather, a very comprehensive and expressive series of patents, in which, as law required, every detail of the invention and manufacture was fully described and made plain. Then he approached the Government again, this time with another suggestion—that he should give them the right to use his invention; license them to manufacture in England and the Colonies, subject to no royalty to him, no fees or restrictions whatever; he himself retaining, as he naturally would retain until he agreed to part with it, the right to sell or give licences elsewhere, at home and abroad.

The offer was perhaps a little bald; it might have been kinder to the dignity of a Government

department if he had asked a nominal hundred or two for the invaluable concession. But he did not think of that, he made his offer simply and baldly. And after a decent interval, as short as decency allowed, it was accepted. Polite things were said about generous patriotism, and nothing whatever about the copy of the specification of the complete patent, giving the details of manufacture, which lay in the official desk at the time. There was no need to talk of that, the inventor knew it might be expected to be there; he had had some experience of the world, and also knew that governments, being tender of the taxpayers' money, naturally take what they can get free, the brains of inventors among other things. And the official knew that he knew—else he would not have given what, though nominally protected from them as from others, they could have taken free and unmolested, except by an action which he could not have afforded to bring, and would not have won if he had. Nothing was said of that, the relative positions, though perfectly understood, were decently handled, courteous things were said, and the matter settled; the Government received free licence to manufacture the matchless torpedo, and the inventor received nothing and was satisfied.

Next, he turned his attention to foreign patents and foreign rights, a costly and tedious business. He borrowed the money from Nan Barmister for it, and devoted as much time and energy to the work as he could spare. After a while, he got it settled; and, after a greater while, began to get some returns, enough to feel satisfied that he would be able to repay the money within a reasonable time. Beyond that he did nothing; there was really nothing to do. It did not occur to him to read a paper on aerial torpedoes, or

to speak of them to anyone, or in any way to lay claim to having solved that problem of modern warfare. He did not desire a paragraph in the papers, nor yet, even if it were attainable and the war party in the ascendant, knighthood or an honorary degree; he wanted to make the torpedo, to finish the work he had begun long ago. He had always wanted to do it, the problem had fascinated him long before that day five years ago when he told Lady Sibyl Carson he had solved it. He believed then that he had. He had learnt a good deal since of obscure laws and abstruse physical things, also something of psychical values too. He had only solved the problem up to a point then, by no means produced the perfect torpedo, though no one since had produced a better. He had long ago recognised the limit to which he had then attained, and at the back of his mind there had always been a something which worked upon the problem in season and out of season, a species of mental discomfort which would never quite rest until it was done. It was done now: that was all. The life of a creator is in creating, not in making a fortune or securing a peerage; those are by-products that occur to few and extinguish some who, dazzled, lose their way there.

Thus it happened that the great invention was produced without noise or acclaim; the newspapers did not hear of it, the Government made no talk about it, there was no object in their doing so, and the inventor made none either. Certain people, of course, got to know about it, people whose business it was. Some of them got to know the name of the inventor, for it appeared on his patent, and there were those who mastered every detail of the patent very thoroughly—and those who infringed it where they dared. The remedy for infringing a patent is an

action at law, a costly proceeding, also not one to be embarked upon until it is possible to show that the infringer has made profit by his use of the patentee's invention. Profit is not made from the manufacture of aerial torpedoes in a month; it takes time to make the plant, and time to make the torpedoes, even when both are done with speed and effrontery, and an open, if quiet, disregard for the patents protecting them. Further, it takes much money to prosecute firms rich enough to do such things. Michael had not the money. Also, he was deeply interested in the problem, one which had fascinated him for long, of large scale internal combustion engines, and he had not enough leisure of body or mind to divide between two interests.

He lived quietly in the small Midland town, superintending the warp dyeing works for old Milligen. For four years and more he had done that, first working under the old man, then with him and George Foregood; later they had worked with him, finally under him, though none of the three quite realised that. George was dead now, old Milligen hopelessly crippled with gout, Michael was more obviously in command. The dyeing works, under his control, were not; perhaps, quite like any others in the country, but they were on the whole profitable. George's invention had not ruined his old employers, they had one nearly as good evolved out of his earlier apparatus—the fact, when he came to realise it, was a blow he never got over. Still, the apparatus set up at Milligen's was a good one, really the best, and it and Michael's improvements and general management, aided by the start given by the handsome compensation received from the council for the power station accident, made the old place more prosperous than it had been for long. It was

still a warp dyer's; Michael, with the vein of conservative solidity inherited from his City forebears, never thought of making it into anything else, even if old Milligen had been willing. In some respects it was much as it had always been; the buildings still looked in serious need of repair—except the over-magnificent new ones put up by the council. Dyeing was still considered to be the sole industry, and if in the course of time Michael had accumulated machines strange and unexpected at a small dyer's (he generally borrowed money from Nan to get them), he honestly believed of each one as he imported it that it was in some way connected with the work. Milligen believed it too, and George when he was alive; they had wonderful flights of fancy occasionally, both of them, though few of their ideas were practicable, and none of them were ever put into practice. Michael's ideas were different, they were all practicable, though few were put to profitable practice—only those that were expressed in advice or comment to men who showed him new machines or old processes, and profited by what he said. The rest were seldom spoken of; occasionally to Milligen, more often to Nan, always to Nan when he happened to see her.

Thus, one understands, the fame of the torpedo designer did not spread, and the man himself troubled no whit about it.

But after two years something happened. It was in September, two full years after His Majesty's Government had accepted the free licence to manufacture the perfect torpedo. It befell on a certain Sunday, late in the month. Michael usually spent Sunday evenings with Mr. and Mrs. Milligen; he had grown to be something like a son to them,

more to them, perhaps, than any son of their own could have been, for he had quicker perceptions and a gentler tolerance and patience, begotten maybe of the years. He spent that Sunday evening with them, having tea and supper, and hearing the tale of the week's doings—difficulties, work, and jests, and after supper listening to the prayers the old man insisted on reading, though he could hardly see now.

That evening he chose to read, as the lesson before the prayer, the part of the book of Daniel which describes Nebuchadnezzar's dream and its fulfilment. Michael listened intermittently, his own thoughts coming here and there between the words and obscuring sentences and passages: "I saw in the visions of my head upon my bed, and, behold, a Watcher and an holy one came down from heaven; he cried aloud, and said thus, Hew down the tree, and cut off his branches, shake off his leaves, and scatter his fruit ... nevertheless leave the stump of his roots in the earth, even with a band of iron and brass, in the tender grass of the field.... Let seven times pass over him.... To the intent that the living may know that the Most High ruleth in the kingdom of men."

A strange old story, Michael found himself thinking —"Seven times?" What were the seven times that passed over the dethroned king before he came again to his kingdom, and the knowledge of Who ruleth in the kingdom of men? Seven years, perhaps? It was just seven years since he himself left Galhardy's. The thought recurred to him for a moment as it seldom did now; but it passed quickly again, it never troubled, and he thought of Nebuchadnezzar until the reading was finished.

When prayers were over he went to the sideboard to

mix whisky and water for himself and his host. While they drank it, Mr. Milligen spoke of local matters and the question of a new sewer; it was a question he felt strongly upon, as he did on all local matters. Michael, on his way home, thought about it, though principally about the here approved method of trapping, which he considered more costly and less efficient than it need be. He tried to think out an improvement as he walked along, stopping once to make a note on the subject.

Arrived at his rooms—he lodged, as he had done ever since leaving town, at the house of a respectable foreman not very far from the works—there he found a letter waiting for him. There was no Sunday delivery in the town, but, by applying at the post office, it was possible to obtain letters which would otherwise be delivered on Monday morning. The foreman, it would seem, had applied on his own behalf, and also thought to ask on his lodger's too.

The letter, Michael saw, was from Nan, and he guessed its contents before opening it. It could tell of nothing but the death of Mr. Cordover; he had been ill some while, and Nan's last letter spoke of the approaching end. Michael was sorry; he knew she would miss the old man, almost her closest friend, as well as her nearest neighbour—she lived with Miss Janet and Josiah in the long house embowered in trees.

The letter proved to be as he thought. Nan wrote to say Mr. Cordover was dead after so painful an illness that she could hardly wish it otherwise. But she also gave another piece of news, a very surprising one.

"*The day before he died,*" she wrote, "*he sent for me and told me he had left me nothing but the sideboard with the fruit carved on it because he thought I had*

enough money for a woman. I have, too much, I said so, I said I did not want money or anything. Whereupon he told me to stop talking and listen, he was going to do what he liked with his own, in just the old way, so I took his hand and told him to go on. Then he said, 'I have left nothing to you, but I have left something for you—a chance of having Michael Annarly's name cleared. In spite of all the rubbish you've talked about it's not mattering, I don't believe but what you really wanted it all the time, and you shall have it if it can be got. I've left Michael ten thousand pounds to spend on clearing himself, reinstating himself, making his name somehow. It's down in my will, but you tell him about it too, and see he does it.'"

So Michael read, and sat staring. Ten thousand pounds to be spent on clearing his name, reinstating himself somehow!

Reinstating himself after seven years? To be again what he had been. To have the same situation, the same hopes and ambitions. To go back seven years in time, unmake the torpedo, which was the accomplishment of the hopes and ambitions; unlearn what he had learnt of the relative values and importance of things; be once more Galhardy's insatiable genius demanding all the kingdoms of the earth and the empiry of sense, and believing himself equal to dealing with them and but inadequately rewarded by attaining them! Buy back the reputation of being the great firm's promising and trusted engineer for the man who might have had—had he thought it worth the taking—the reputation of the inventor of the perfect torpedo! One wonders if Nebuchadnezzar, when he came back to his palace, found the walls a little narrow and the roof a little low after the stretching earth and the canopy of stars

that housed him what time he was wet with the dew of Heaven.

But the ten thousand pounds had to be spent, and on a given object; as much was indicated in Mr. Cordover's will, though not in detail. That was supplied by Nan, and she and Michael held consultations over it, in some considerable difficulty as to how to spend the money so as to accomplish the testator's wish.

"I might bring an action against Galhardy's for infringing my torpedo patent," Michael suggested doubtfully. "I am not at all sure that would do the business, but it might, I can't think of anything better."

"Have you a case against them?" Nan asked.

"Oh, yes, they infringed that patent almost from the first; they are manufacturing from it pretty largely and quite deliberately now. They know it's mine, and that I couldn't afford to fight them, even if I wanted to; there's case enough. Of course, I might not win; though with ten thousand pounds to spend I might, especially as the Government, having a free licence of their own, would not back Galhardy's up. That possible advantage occurred to me at the time I gave the licence, though I didn't suppose it would ever really come to it. There's good enough ground for an action; though, whether by bringing one I should be fulfilling the terms of the will, is another matter."

"You would be establishing your reputation, in a way," Nan said. "I mean your reputation for ability, since everyone would then know you had invented the torpedo."

"That's so," he admitted; "and I dare say one could arrange to drag in the old affair if one wanted to,

and have it more or less thrashed out in court—if it is possible to thrash it, which I rather doubt, after all this time."

"Perhaps Galhardy's would drag it in themselves," Nan suggested, "to discredit you and prove you an untrustworthy person, and your invention likely to be really theirs. Don't you think there's a chance of their laying some sort of claim to your torpedo?"

"They can't. I had left them five years before I put it forward; they have no claim whatever after five years. Moreover, it is perfectly obvious to everyone that my torpedo is a different one and on different lines from any they had, either before or since I left them. That will be all right; still, of course, they may drag in the old affair for some purpose. It's to be hoped they will, else there is hardly justification for spending the money this way—though I can't think of another that would better meet the requirements, can you?"

Nan could not; indeed, this way commended itself to her, it seemed suitable and fitting. "I think it is the best we shall devise," she said. "I believe we had better decide on it."

So they decided.

It was in this way that there arose one of the most famous patent infringement cases in modern times. Famous not so much on the technical and legal side or on account of great scientific complications, as on account of the popular interest felt in the comparatively new arm, and in the hitherto unknown man who had perfected it. Also on account of the wealth and importance of the firm attacked by an insignificant individual, labouring under the further disadvantage of being a dismissed employee

of theirs.

That fact, by the way, was one he seemed quite as anxious to bring to notice as ever they were. Several rather surprising things were brought to notice before judgment was given, after a comparatively short hearing. Seeing that the actual case was decided as quickly as it was the expenses of both sides were heavy; the prosecution must have spent the better part of ten thousand pounds, the defence very much more. Indeed, that side must have drawn heavily on the reserve fund the firm kept to meet such contingencies. And to no purpose, for judgment was given against them, with heavy damages for the prosecution and some rather scathing remarks from the judge.

"Well, what do you think of it?" Carson nodded towards the morning's sheet of *The Times*, where a report of the case and judgment was given.

Lee-Brendon, he who had been at Redstoke the night long ago when Michael Annarly had dined there, folded his glasses slowly.

"It's rather hard to know what to think," he said. In that corner of England and that company it was difficult to regard Galhardy's quite as one would anything else; it was too much part of the general life to be judged dispassionately on abstract moral grounds.

But one man present had less connection with it than the rest, a man, Dawling, who had also been there that night seven and a half years ago. He spoke more frankly now.

"They've come out of it pretty rottenly," he said, "hanged if they haven't! Annarly must be a queer chap to have held his tongue all this time, I wouldn't! Though I suppose it'd have done no good to speak. What brains and what persistence too! Seven years and more. A bit uncanny—what?"

"He was always rather queer," Lee-Brendon recalled.

"Queer?" Carson said. "That's your estimate? Mine is that he's a different size to the rest of us, and some of us tried to measure him up in our little pint pots, and got rather badly left in the process." He glanced towards the door which Casterman, the scientific member of Galhardy's board of directors, was holding open for Lady Sibyl. "Not that he's to blame for what happened," he added in an undertone, nodding towards the director; "he always stood to it they ought to have kept Annarly at any price. He's the only man in this part of the country who had any real understanding of what they'd got."

Casterman came back towards the fire; he had not heard what was said, but his face was thoughtful. He was the only one present who had not been there that night seven and a half years ago, when Annarly had been discussed after dining there. There was one absent who had then been present: that one was Brett. The little party now gathered studiously avoided speaking of Brett; his part in the long-past transaction had not been made quite plain, certainly not in the newspaper reports; still, they instinctively avoided speaking of him; they would always have to; it did not seem quite decent.

"This business will kill Sir Joseph," Lee-Brendon observed—Sir Joseph's part had been made plain —"he is an old man for such a thing; I doubt if he will get over it."

"That'll be satisfaction for Annarly, anyway," Carson said.

"What will?" Casterman asked. "That Sir Joseph won't get over this affair? He won't, that's true. I saw his face after the judgment yesterday; I don't give him a month. But that won't be any satisfaction to Annarly—or any dissatisfaction either, it's"—he laughed rather grimly—"a by-product."

"A by-product?"

He nodded. "Do you think it was any satisfaction to Darwin that the Mosaic Cosmography fell to pieces when he proved the theory of evolution? I don't think it was, nor yet any dissatisfaction either; he was possibly sorry to flutter the theological dove-cotes, but it didn't concern him, it was a by-result, an accident which might happen to anyone out looking for truth in a world where things aren't all based on truth. Annarly was out for truth, or, rather, out to establish a few things; certainly not for vengeance or to get Sir Joseph. Good Lord! he was probably the man in court with the highest opinion of the old gentleman when he started! It's no satisfaction to him that Sir Joseph came down, possibly he's a little sorry, but it's no concern of his—a by-product of the proving business, that's all."

Dawling looked sceptical. "He must be a good deal more indifferent than most of us, that's all I can say."

"He has a different standard of what's important," Casterman said. "Also, he remembers different things and forgets different. Reece spoke to him in court yesterday—you know Reece, one of the steamship Reeces, Annarly was with them on the Clyde for a short time after he left Galhardy's. I don't know what Reece said to him, something congratulatory about

winning the case and clearing himself, possibly something graceful about their own treatment of him —it wasn't first-class, I believe. Annarly looked at him as if he had never seen him before, and had no idea what he was talking about. Then suddenly something must have tied the man up with steamships in his mind. 'Oh, yes,' he said, 'I remember, you were interested in internal combustion engines for big liners. I have done a certain amount of work on that problem during the last two years; I think I have solved it.' He spoke much as if he were saying he had tried a certain brand of cigarettes. Reece simply collapsed; I nearly laughed outright."

Dawling looked puzzled. "Brag or bravado?" he asked.

"Neither," Casterman answered, "simply the one fact that occurred to him in connection with the man. I have very little doubt but what it is a fact too; in all probability he has worked out that gigantic problem, if he says he has; though whether or not he'll do anything with it is another matter."

"Of course he will," Dawling said. "Why not? He can't muck things now, if he tried. I wish I'd half his chance! He'll fairly race ahead, he can't help it, with the start he's got."

"He may," Casterman said, "but I'm not sure. You don't understand—we none of us understood when he was here, that that's not what he really cares for; it's doing the thing he cares about, not what comes next; the importance of a thing should be stated for him in terms of interest and difficulty, not money value and what we call success. Oh, yes, I know he made a fight for reward and recognition those years ago when he was here; but I believe it was more

from some queer sense of justice than ordinary ambition, a youthful exuberance long gone. Even then, had we understood, I believe we could have dealt with it; we both overrated and underrated him in those days."

Carson nodded. "I believe you are right," he said. "I believe you are. Where is he now?"

Casterman did not know. "I never got to speak to him while the case was on," he said, "though I tried several times; he always disappeared at lunchtime. Somebody told me he was seen once or twice with an insignificant-looking woman. There's a story that he and she used to get food somewhere and then wander away to one or other of the City churches. I don't know if it's true, but when the court rose yesterday and he had got through with congratulations and all that, I did see some such person with him. They passed close to me, and I heard her say, 'Are you satisfied with the judgment?' And he answered, 'Yes,' and then, 'It, the whole business, rather makes one think of that fellow Nebuchadnezzar and his finding out that all the inhabitants of the earth are as nothing; things are a bit small, aren't they?—including oneself.' Next minute he pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket. 'I believe it should be possible to make a reversible turbine,' he said. 'It's always bothered me, but I believe I saw a way to do it in court to-day. To think I was ever such an ass as to say it couldn't be done!'"

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