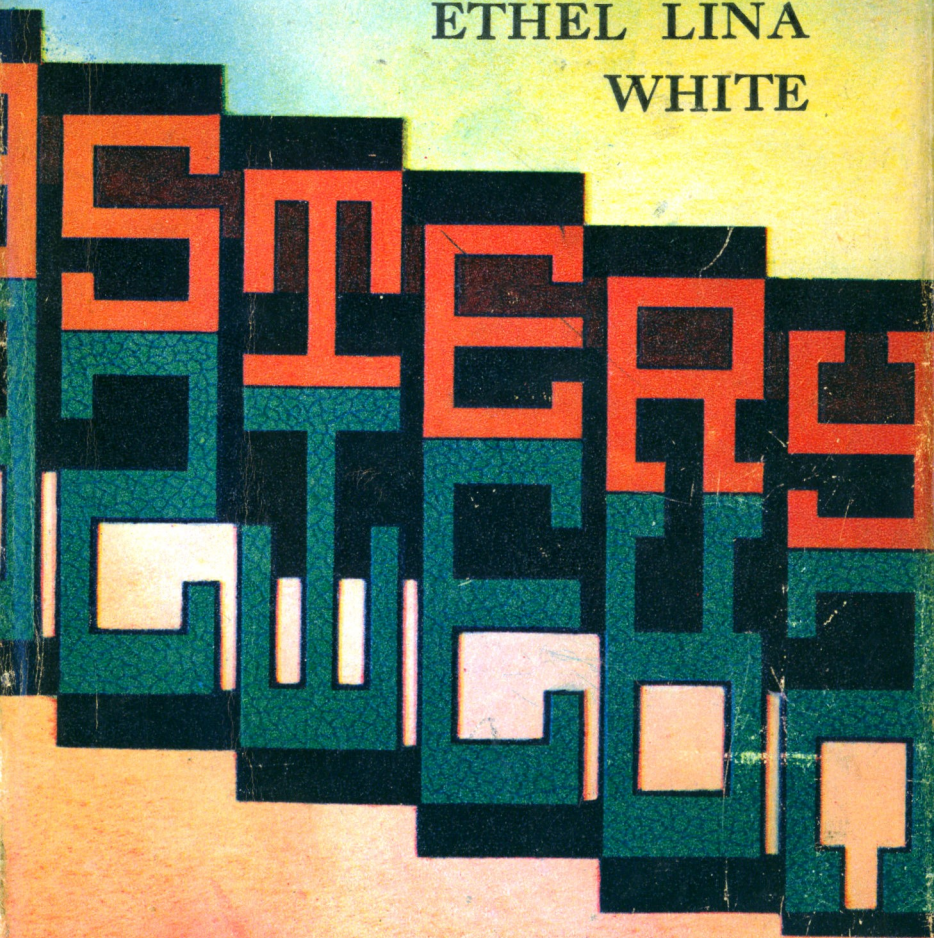


THE ETERNAL JOURNEY

ETHEL LINA
WHITE





THE ETERNAL JOURNEY

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE WISH-BONE.

“It is good to read something different from the eternal triangle drama. The Authoress is as original in her choice of plot as she is in her choice of names for her characters.”

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THE ETERNAL JOURNEY

BY
ETHEL LINA WHITE

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PART I	PAGE
I.	WAITING	9
II.	THE PERFECT CRIME	17
III.	THE MIRROR	24
IV.	FLIGHT	33
V.	THE WHITE HOUSE	42
PART II		
I.	DREAMS	51
II.	GILT DRAGONS	64
III.	CONFESSION	75
IV.	CURSED	87
V.	CHERRY	99
VI.	CONTACTS	109
VII.	THE BIRD AND THE BABY	120
VIII.	PENNY BUNS	131
IX.	THE WITCH	141
X.	THE FORTUNE	154
XI.	BARNEY .	166
XII.	THE POOL	177
XIII.	THE ENCHANTED GARDEN.	193
XIV.	THE CHURN HOUSE	207

CHAPTER		PAGE
XV.	FAIRIES	220
XVI.	THE SÉANCE	231
XVII.	GREETING AND FAREWELL	242
XVIII.	THE HOSPITAL	251
XIX.	BLUE FOR DANGER	266
XX.	FACES	282
XXI.	CURFEW	295
PART III		
I.	ONE MINUTE	307

PART I
ONE HOUR

1794

THE ETERNAL JOURNEY

CHAPTER I

WAITING

URSULA PIKE stared at her reflection in the mirror. Her heart was racing, but her brain was clear. With the modern passion for sensation, she wanted to study her reactions to her own deed.

She had committed murder.

In the next room Clemency lay dying. The tremendous drama was all but played out. For two days the servants had buzzed over the approach of death, like flies above a smear of blood.

They were clustered now on the square landing outside. Ursula could hear their excited whispers, and an occasional hysterical titter, as they awaited the death-rattle.

She, too, waited, trying to realise the moment.

For years she had despised love as weakness and a bar to mental progress. Ignoring her own beauty, she had striven to be only an intelligence. And then at first sight of Christopher, Nature had turned and rent her, so that she drooped through her days like a sleepwalker, in the apathy of awakening passion. Her ambition had soured on her—her energy died.

But while she dreamed of Christopher's dare-devil blue eyes and impudent grin, he was lightly attracted by Clemency, and she—after the fashion of the modern girl, met him more than half-way. Together, they had made a date for a wedding—something to be romped through with the casual ease of the Bright Young People.

Night had turned to a furnace, and day to a desert of dead ash, as Ursula brooded over her own frustration. At that time she sank to the level of any superstitious villager. She made a little waxen image of Clemency, which she maltreated, and roasted over the flame of a candle.

Of course, Clemency was not a whit the worse for the enchantment. On the contrary, she complained of increased weight, and talked of going on the new eighteen-day diet.

Bitterly ashamed of her lapse from sanity, Ursula tossed the scorched effigy into her grate, and deliberated, with ice-cold brain, how to murder Clemency.

Her crime was of experimental nature, so that throughout the course of Clemency's illness her interest had been detached and academic. She had no certainty of ultimate success. It was not until to-day, when she waited for Clemency's last gasp, that she realised the tremendous force which she had set in motion.

Nothing could stop the approach of death.

It was impossible to grip the horror on this day of brilliant summer. Her window framed a panel of vivid green countryside and blue-and-white sky. The orchard was thick with the snow of fruit-blossom. In the garden bees were humming over the beds of pansies and rhubarb-pie wallflowers, while—black

against the sky-line—she could distinguish the outline of a scarecrow, flapping over the sprouting crops.

The pageant of life was rolling gaily along.

Ursula's room, too, held light and colour. It was of the moment, and new to crudity. Walls and ceiling were panelled in light oak, and the suite was of pale canary satin-wood. Brilliant red and blue flowers sprigged the buff bed-hangings.

Mrs. Pike, who was romantic, deplored her eldest daughter's passion for modernity. Her own bedroom was of Tudor period, with mildewed tapestry and worm-eaten furniture, for she was uninfluenced by Ursula's bogy of germs. Indeed, her chief wish was to revive the fashions of the Stuart era, with their lace collars and flowing curls.

"Dress was becoming, *then*, my dear," she complained to her friends. "Is it any wonder that the men won't propose to-day? There's no sex-appeal about the modern girl."

Poor lady—she had grounds for complaint in her disappointment over her eldest girl. Ursula had cornered the family looks, only to slave all day, in her room, over her books. Worse than this, she was eccentric, and held revolutionary theories on such accepted subjects as birth and death, disease and health, diet and marriage.

She asked questions—not for the sake of hearing the answers, which she knew—but to test the inferiority of other intellects. She did not know that she was clever—which knowledge might have made her modest. She only discovered that she was cleverer than other people.

Worse—she opened her window at night, and did not believe in God.

Placid Mrs. Pike shrugged her fat shoulders and hoped that the phase would pass, or else that her daughter might develop creditable literary ambition and write memoirs, seasoned with wit and scandal, which was becoming quite smart, in these days when everybody wrote.

Meanwhile, she basked in the reflected limelight of her niece Clemency, and her two younger girls, and panted after them, in their craze for publicity.

Clemency was a live wire in the fellowship of the Bright Young People. Recently she had eclipsed all her former efforts to paint the town red, in her Revolution party.

It took place in her aunt's new house—formerly the Churn House, but now named the Court. A mock-trial had been held in the yellow drawing-room, and the guests had howled with laughter at the uncensored, scandalous evidence, manufactured by the wits against the victims, who were proud of their distinction.

Everyone drank and was merry. They wound up by dancing on the lawn, while they held wigs aloft, on tall canes, to represent heads on pikes. Later, these were fired, and the party ran about the garden, brandishing their torches, and screaming, while the villagers clustered at the gates, agape at the fun.

Goodness knows what they thought of it—had the lower orders been equipped, by Nature, to think.

The party had increased Clemency's prestige, especially as it had been hall-marked with success by the disapproval of pulpit and Press. It was followed by the usual crop of complaints, in which even Mrs. Pike had joined, much as she secretly enjoyed the limelight of her young folk.

She was, at heart, a kindly, hospitable soul, who knew a hundred recipes, and whose cowslip-wine and damson-cheese always took first prizes at horticultural shows. Life, to her, was one continual contest between the temptation of her recipes and the fashionable outline.

She declared that the Revolution party was a bit too raw. Bad taste, too, when one considered that, at this minute, in this Year of Grace, 1794, bleeding human heads were actually being spitted, on pikes, over in France.

Of course, while it was impossible to conceive that French people—who were too volatile to have deep feelings—could suffer as much as English, when one came to think of it, they must be having a thin time, with that horrible guillotine, and Society all shot to bits. Imagine the social fate of the debts of the year.

Moreover, Mrs. Pike had met, only last year, quite a charming French comtesse—a bride—who had worn a divine lavender sacque, and displayed her patches at a new and daring angle. She had taken tea at the Court, and spilt some cream on the yellow sofa. It gave Mrs. Pike quite a sinking feeling, to look at it, when she heard some perfectly poisonous details of her death.

That slight stain on the brocade really brought home the Revolution to Mrs. Pike.

What was most important was the fact that the terrible things over in France were happening to the Best People. Although the lower orders, in England, would never follow such a bad example, the Bright Young People's party might have planted some seed of unrest.

They might ask for an increase in wages. As it was, they were getting decidedly Socialistic. They actually wanted to rise in the world, and seemed to imagine that they had grievances and rights.

Recently Mrs. Pike had acquired a treasure of a housemaid, from London, who performed her duties with the precision of a chess-automaton. But, although she put the local servants to shame, Mrs. Pike inspired her with the absence of servility one would expect from a machine. She listened to orders with a graven face, and then performed them to perfection.

Maria had been accepted by Ursula, which was one blessing to Mrs. Pike. Although, viewed in the light of Ursula's own remote intellectuality, servants were some low form of pond-life, it was a relief to her to encounter one who did not blink a lash at her dissected reptiles, or flinch at her chemical stench.

Maria saw nothing—heard nothing—touched nothing.

Ursula vaguely wondered if Maria formed a part of the group of ghouls outside Clemency's room. As she strained to listen she caught faint fragments of their whispers.

“Dog howling . . . death-worm . . . winding-sheet in the candle . . . robin in the house . . . lights in the churchyard.”

The words thrummed like an undercurrent to her own racing thoughts. Clemency had been popular with the domestic staff. She might swear at them one moment—after the fashion of any well-bred Society girl—but she smiled directly afterwards. Besides, she was free with her money, and never noticed the loss of a pair of silk stockings.

Her looks, too, appealed to them, for she was a silver blonde, with cheeks of roses and snow, baby-blue eyes and infantile gaps between her teeth. And she was about to become a bride—a position which commanded their respect.

Ursula thought of her when she had last seen her, yesterday, her hair like dank dark seaweed and her lips tight and purple with fever. She picked at the sweaty blanket and babbled of Christopher and clothes.

The pungent sour-sweet air of the room made Ursula's head swim, for the windows had been sealed for days, although the nurse, according to her modern notions, had burned sticks of lavender to sweeten the atmosphere.

Looking down at the human wreckage on the pillow, Ursula had tried to reconstruct, from it, the hard, blonde beauty and red-lipped youth which had been Clemency.

And then Clemency asked for a mirror.

Before it was brought her eyes mercifully filmed. The Fourth Angel, standing at his appointed corner of the bed, stirred his wings, in readiness to bear away the Soul.

"The end," whispered the nurse.

But Clemency had died hard. For a whole twenty-four hours the household awaited the news. The servants declared that her bed was up against the grain of the boards, so that she could not go. But the trained nurse would not pander to the popular superstition and turn the heavy four-poster. She intended to keep her patient alive as long as possible, for the sake of her religion, and her fees.

Suddenly—a silence fell upon the air. The whispers ceased. Ursula heard the crack of wood as the nurse opened the door of the death-room.

The silence was broken by a loud wailing.

Ursula stared into the heart-shaped mirror of her toilet-table with unseeing eyes. She was on the brink of an unsavoured sensation. In spite of her self-control, she started at a tap on the door.

“Come in,” she said in an even voice.

Maria entered, her face composed and expressionless. In the same tone with which she announced a meal, she informed Ursula that Clemency was dead.

At that tense moment Ursula was grateful for the woman’s superior training.

With the respect due to herself, Maria shut the door and withdrew.

Outside the room her face changed. It became human, as the tense muscles flexed, and the rising tide of her anger flooded her cheeks with colour.

She drew something from the folds of her starched muslin fichu, and showed it to the wailing maids.

“Hush,” she commanded. “*Look.*”

They clustered round her, to gaze at the object on her palm. A filthy, smoked and partially-melted waxen image.

“I found it among the ashes in her grate.”

She jerked her thumb at Ursula’s door.

“Now, you know how *she* died.”

A gasp shuddered round the circle. The fire in Maria’s eyes was kindled in the faces round her, as she pointed to the dead girl’s room and spoke one word, in a husky whisper.

“*Bewitched.*”

CHAPTER II

THE PERFECT CRIME

CLEMENCY was dead.

The face in the heart-shaped mirror stared back at Ursula with hard hazel eyes, brilliant with intellect. There was no tinge of unusual colour on her petal-white skin, roughened by small-pox so that it resembled the inner rind of a lemon. Dark-red hair—unpowdered—fell over her shoulders, in heavy ringlets.

With the introspective urge of a modern, she tried to card-index her emotions. She noticed that her hand did not tremble and her lips were firm. Yet her pulse was racing. She was exultant—thrilled with pride at her own cleverness, so that she wished she could publish her deed to the world.

She had committed the perfect crime.

When the latest rag of the Christopher-Clemency engagement had been published in the Society papers, Ursula withdrew into the dark jungle of her poisoned brain, seeking a safe way to murder Clemency.

For she had no mind to swing for her cousin. She set a higher value on herself, because of the possibilities of a brain which was ferocious in its hunger for knowledge. While she gorged formulas and roots, her questing mind leaped far beyond the confines of dead languages—mathematics—chemistry. She felt she was fated for higher flights. Imagination soared to dimly-glimpsed possibilities, such as the practical

application of the electric forces of Nature, to work miracles.

Meanwhile, the abyssmal ignorance on all matters connected with hygiene was her chance. She knew that she was considered mental because she tested the tonic properties of sun and air. To the general scandal, she indulged in sun-bathing, and she went for walks, bare-legged and breeched. Her windows were always wide to admit the dangerous night-air, and she opened her pores to infection by washing away the protective grease in a daily bath.

She had traced the typhoid, which was epidemic in the village, to the drinking-water—a little, crystal-clear river, into whose upper reaches drained the seepage of many a farm.

The Pike family, which had its private well, was unaffected by the pollution. Even so, Ursula, who had proved, by experiment, the malignant life latent in stagnant water, insisted upon drinking boiled draughts in further proof of her eccentricity.

Her crime, therefore, was the vindication of her brain over the general ignorance. Clemency, who had acquired the fashionable accomplishment of drinking, was often thirsty at night.

She drank the infected brook-water, which had been procured, by Ursula, in secret. When the village was asleep she carried Clemency's pitcher to the river. Were she seen, the incident would pass without comment, for her nocturnal walks were a habit.

Clemency resisted the pollution for so long that Ursula became sceptical of the power of germ-life. But, presently, after a stiff week of dissipation, a mosquito-bite helped to generate the poison in her system.

She developed definite symptoms, and went to bed. The doctor pronounced her illness to be fever, and Mrs. Pike, in a panic, fled to Bath, with her two young. A professional nurse was installed, and Ursula remained at home for the sake of appearance.

From the first Clemency was doomed. In her fever she craved for water—water. Only Ursula knew that every draught multiplied the typhoid germs which swarmed in her blood. Her temperature continued to rise, until the doctor lost all hope.

But Clemency put up a mighty fight. She had youth on her side, and the will to live. The date for her wedding had been fixed for Midsummer Day, and her room was littered with a drift of finery for her trousseau.

In her delirium she babbled only of Christopher and clothes. She resented all efforts to shave her head. In lucid intervals she was her usual gay, fluid self, charming her nurse, even while she mercilessly overworked her with her whims.

She showed neither consciousness nor fear of the approach of death. Up to the moment when she sank into coma she saw herself as the central figure in her bridal drama.

Her head frothing with fashion and frills, she drifted out into the dark.

Ursula, watching from behind the bedpost, envied her for her lightness. Without purpose, like a gnat dancing in the sunshine of her single day, she had attracted the happiness which should have been hers. Here was a courage which eluded her.

Clemency treated Death as a bowing acquaintance whose name she had forgotten. Not in her circle.

She never even asked for Christopher, who was having a last bachelor burst somewhere on the Continent, and had not been notified.

Yet, in spite of the methods she had employed, Ursula's nature held no conscious cruelty. It was true that Clemency had suffered griping spasms, racking sickness, scorching fever—but these symptoms were incidental to her scheme. She did not want Clemency to suffer. She only wanted her annihilation.

As she sat before her mirror she could hear the sounds in the adjoining room, which told her that Clemency was being clad in her grave-clothes. Pennies for her eyes and a bandage for her jaws, instead of satin and bridal-veil.

Her deed. Again, she tried to savour this sensation. She had committed murder.

Someone tapped the door, and Maria entered with the decorum of the perfectly-trained servant. There was nothing to hint at her reversion to the primitive only a few minutes ago.

Ursula spoke to her, on her way to the window.

“What do you want?”

“I was going to put up the shutters.”

“Leave them.”

Ursula did not credit a servant with any mental process. Careless of the bombshell she flung, she gave her order.

“Open every window in the house, and let in the sunlight.”

Maria started slightly, but her eyes were veiled by her lids as she went out of the room.

Ursula looked around her. She was keyed up to unusual tension, which made her responsive to every

impression. She thrilled to the brilliant emerald of the beech-tree outside her window, and to the note of the thrush which fluted on a bough.

Her eyes roved over her gay room, which was bare of trifles and ornaments. She had learned the stimulating value of space. A pair of tall brass candlesticks stood on the mantel-shelf, and, in one corner, a brand-new clock—the same clock which fetched such a stiff price, as an antique, at a recent sale.

And then . . . without warning . . . she felt *afraid*.

She could not understand her fear. Even while her heart pounded and the palms of her hands grew clammy, her reason tried to locate its source.

She had no dread of that stiff white shape in the next room. Clemency could not harm her, and she had no superstitious terror of a returning spirit.

On the score of her crime she knew she was safe. There was nothing to connect her with it. It was a straight case of typhoid, and had been accepted as an Act of God.

As she looked around her, her eyes fell upon a rough piece of flint, placed, as a weight, over some loose papers on her bureau.

Instantly her heart quivered and gave a sharp double-knock.

She frowned, in perplexity, trying to trace the connection between a stone and danger to herself. After concentrating for a few minutes on the object, she let her brain relax. Instantly there slid before her eyes the mental picture of a great moon-face, slobbering lips, and a wet chin.

It was the face of the village idiot, who led a miserable life, neglected by his family and the butt of the

other children, although they were beginning to fear his abnormal strength.

To Ursula his mere existence was a terrible indictment on the civilisation of their day, which owed him the boon of release in as merciful a manner as possible. Very soon he would be a menace to the community. But since she was forbidden, by Law, to exterminate him, she saw in him a fit subject for experiment.

She was still only feebly groping in the dark. Her efforts to imprison sound-waves in a horn, had only resulted in releasing a string of gibberish, which had frightened a housemaid into a faint. Baulked in that direction, she had turned to hypnotism, to find herself hampered for lack of a subject.

Bribed by mint-rock, she lured the idiot to the wood, where she ordered him to stare at a bright metal object in her hand. Soon, to her thrilled wonder, he grew glassy-eyed and lifeless, yet responsive to her directions, like a galvanised corpse.

In the middle of her experiment she was disturbed by a scream. A woman—red-eyed with rage—burst into the clearing and seized the idiot by the lobe of his ear.

The spell snapped, he broke into noisy blubbing, for he had swallowed his mint-rock without tasting it.

Mindful of the future, Ursula offered the woman some money, as an advance for the services of her offspring in the cause of science. But the woman shook her head, plainly biting back complaints which she dared not utter to a social superior.

A little later, when Ursula returned through the village, a stone whizzed by her head.

In hot anger, she turned and looked around her. But the street was empty, and the cottage windows blank. Baffled by the withdrawn silence, she walked away.

That night she dreamed of the Revolution on the other side of the Channel. She thought she stood in a strange street, lit up by the red flicker of fire. Around her pressed a crowd of people, each brandishing a head spitted on a pike.

The faces came closer to her, so that she could see the blood-lust burning in their eyes. They mouthed at her, in dumb fury.

She knew that they ravened for her life, and was filled with such terror that she woke up, sweating and shaking.

To-day, far from France, in the security of an English room, with her windows open to the hawthorn-sweet air, she understood why she was afraid.

That stone was a symbol of the blind fury of mob-force.

She picked it up and crossed to the window. In spite of her exultation, reason warned her that she had still need of nerve and utmost vigilance, so as not to give herself away.

She was about to hurl away the pebble, when she recoiled a step in surprise.

Standing on the lawn—staring up at her room—was a villager.

CHAPTER III

THE MIRROR

URSULA held her breath, like a swimmer under water. There was something ominous about that motionless figure—a suspicion of a sentinel, posted on guard.

She had to make a positive effort to look closer.

It was a land-girl, smocked and bare-legged. Her broad face was burned strawberry-red, and her flaxen hair bleached to tow, by the sun. She stood stolidly gazing up at the window with unblinking eyes.

Ursula shook her head, and made a gesture of dismissal.

Obediently the girl turned away, and walked through the green wooden door set in the brick wall.

The tension snapped, Ursula laughed in her relief. In the face of the land-girl's retreat, it was difficult to realise her own stab of warning fear. One glance from her brilliant hazel eyes had made the rustic lower her own lids.

As she moved away from the window she suddenly felt drained and empty. To-day, when she needed every ounce of strength, the sleep-starved years of early youth were striking back at her.

Her sage-green frock seemed heavy and stifling. She took it off and sat—bare-legged like the rustic and clad in her slip—before the mirror.

Over the back of her chair hung a negligée with cherry ribbons. It was Clemency's gift—a trousseau garment which Ursula had casually admired.

At the sight of it, Ursula recalled Clemency as she had been, only three weeks ago, her silver-gold hair gleaming under its powder, and the fine grain of her skin triumphant over paint. Always bubbling with spirits, she was responsive to every change of mood as a bead of quicksilver.

Ursula had despised her as an empty-headed Society girl, without brains, ideals or restraint; but when she remembered her last phase—still parchment-hued clay—she regretted the vanished beauty and gaiety.

Some bit of vivid life had gone out of the world, and left it so much the greyer. At her best, Clemency had been a firefly gleaming in the eternal twilight.

The tears pricked under Ursula's lids. Although she tried to force them back, they rolled down her cheeks as she thought of the poor firefly whose light she had so ruthlessly quenched.

She would never have done so but for Christopher. Because of him the strength had gone out of her, leaving her defenceless to her emotions. Through the slow days of Clemency's illness she had been too engrossed in experiment to think of him, save as the beacon fire at the end of the dark road.

Now, with washed eyes, she saw him plainly—a light figure who would follow each fresh face, as the sunflower turns after the sun. Clemency had captured him simply because she did not care. Flicker had called to flicker. He had been just one of the crowd, to make a wedding date for Midsummer Day.

Suddenly Ursula was filled with great pity for Clemency, for herself, for the whole world.

She wished, with all her heart, that she had not killed Clemency. She told herself that crimes committed for passion, by clouded brains, should not be judged by the same standard as those of cool calculation. In the years to come, Justice would surely place them in a different category.

The years to come? She checked her sobs. She seemed suspended in a moment of the Present, when the Past lay behind her, wrapped in twilight, and the Future shone bright with the dawn of discoveries.

She tried to look ahead, but the road, winding on into the blue, seemed blocked by this prosperous Georgian house, with its up-to-date lighting, sanitation, decorations, and all the latest labour-saving devices. They seemed to have reached a peak in domestic architecture.

It was impossible to realise that the crude red-brick mansion would mellow to beauteous and gracious age—that other kings and queens would reign on the Throne of George III—that the pranks of the Bright Young People would be nothing but dried-up froth. Life would go on endlessly, piling up only to spill itself—after she had passed.

And yet—to herself—she seemed eternal. She looked down at her hand. A ring, with a large square emerald, gleamed on one finger. Her hand, surely, would go on with her for ever.

As she stared at it, she felt suspended on the lip of a great drop, so that she tried to hold on to the moment.

“I am *here*. There is *now*. I am *I*.”

Regret would not bring back Clemency. In a very short time it would not matter one whit that a fire-

fly's light died. . . . But she—Ursula—would go on for ever.

Suddenly she held her breath, as though she had stepped into vacancy, over the brink of a precipice. . . . Then she rubbed her eyes, to clear them of a flaw of vision.

The mirror into which she gazed, reflected a changed room. It was lit with a flood of white radiance, which made the brightest candlelight appear dark and dirty, by comparison. In place of the new oak panels, she saw walls of pale primrose, which shone like porcelain. The curtains, hanging at the window, were adorned with such realistic pink hollyhocks that she wondered if they were paintings.

Her own face, too, looking at her from the glass, had undergone transformation. The hazel eyes were bright with intellect, but they had lost their glare of starved intelligence. The dark-red hair was short, and fitted her head like a burnished cap. The skin was petal white and fine in texture.

The whole expression was finer, saner, clearer—so that she was reminded of some old portrait whose coating of grime had been removed by the renovator's art.

The girl was a stranger. And yet the girl was *herself*. She seemed excited and expectant—as though on the verge of discovery. As she parted her red lips, a cloud of smoke dimmed the glass.

When it cleared, Ursula looked, once more, into the familiar new bedroom, with its oak panelling, and saw her tear-blurred cheeks and miserable eyes gleaming from the mirror.

Her heart was leaping wildly, and she felt dazed and breathless, as though she had fallen an incredible

distance through space. When she tried to recapture her vision, the details had faded and she could only remember some glimpse of golden glow.

Rising wearily, she walked to the window.

Her face paled as she felt the jar of her nerves, like grinding machinery.

Where one rustic had stood on the daisied grass, there now stood four. They were planted in a row, and they stared, with impassive faces, up at her window.

She motioned to them to go away. But this time, to her surprise, they took no notice of her gesture.

Ursula's anger blazed up instantly. She had never before encountered such insolence from those of an inferior social grade. They might have been blind, or so ignorant as not to understand her signals.

Again she pointed to the door in the brick wall, frowning and shaking her head. But they stayed, stock-still, solid and immovable as dummies, but with horrible intelligence in their eyes.

Then she grew frightened. This was an experience outside her knowledge. It reminded her of a stone which had been thrown from the skies, and the hidden hostility which always flowed around her.

She had the feeling that they were put there on guard. She felt trapped, and a prisoner in her own house.

The idea was an absurdity, in the face of a large staff of servants. She determined to ring for Maria, whose starched decorum would restore her sense of values and slay any morbid suspicion.

To her surprise, no one answered the bell. She tugged the rope for a second time, and again waited in vain.

The sounds in the adjoining room had ceased. There was something almost alarming about the

unnatural silence. Her vague fear fighting her anger, Ursula went out to the square landing.

Rising from below was a hum of voices, like an overturned hive.

She walked to the well of the staircase and stood looking down into the hall. It was filled with an excited mob of servants. She could not hear what they said, but their constant mutter was stabbed by a recurrent word.

“*Witch.*”

It enlightened her as to the cause of the commotion. Some wretch in the village, who plied her cheating trade, was to meet with vengeance.

Ursula felt no pity for any witch. Superstition was the enemy of progress. Each victim smoked from her lair represented another victory over ignorance.

But she was annoyed, and vaguely alarmed, at this glimpse of overthrown authority. She was being treated as a mere cypher. Her bell had not been answered and the servants were plainly out of hand.

In her nervous state she thought, involuntarily, of the horrible scenes which—even now—were taking place all over France. For the first time in her life, she paid respect to Mrs. Pike as mistress of the house. She wished she was at home, with her big bunch of keys and rustling silk skirts. Clemency, too, could reduce any domestic to slavery by a curse or smile.

But her mother was in Bath, and Clemency was dead. She was alone in the house, save for the servants and the nurse.

The thought of the nurse was an inspiration. Opening the door of the death-room, she peeped

inside. As she crossed the threshold the reek of foul air—partially diluted with the perfume of flowers—made her gasp.

The shutters were up, so that she stood in darkness. But presently, her eyes, piercing the gloom, distinguished the outline of the dead girl, where she lay, under her sheet, awaiting Midsummer Day.

The absence of the nurse was a disquieting discovery. Her starched professional dignity would command respect. Meanwhile, her dignity dictated discreet withdrawal from a rebellion which she could not subdue.

Less than half a mile away were neighbours—a Mrs. Miles and her daughter—placid folk, who lived in a cream-washed manor called the White House.

Although her pride revolted at the thought of running away, she knew that they would understand her natural prejudice to pass the night under the same roof as a corpse.

Her futile excuse made her smile ironically. She—who feared the dead less than the living—knowing that the real enemies of mankind were superstition and germs—was pandering to the local humbug, at the urge of her nervous system.

Looking down at her bare legs under her short slip, she resolved to make her gesture. The underlings should not have it all their own way. She would order Maria to help her dress.

When she leaned over the balustrade the hall seemed to be more packed than before. She was too confused to pick out any face, but she vaguely recognised some of the domestic staff, and guessed that their numbers were augmented by villagers.

Although she shrank before a general impression of noise and intense personal fury, her voice rang out above the tumult.

“Maria.”

Instantly the faces looked upwards. Fingers stabbed the air, pointing in her direction. The throbbing savagery of the undernote swelled into a ravening howl.

“*The witch.*”

She stood, stunned with utter incredulity. They were shouting at *her*—the only person in the neighbourhood who was entirely untainted with the local superstition.

“*I?* You are mad,” she cried. “Maria.”

At her commanding note a flushed, dishevelled girl, whom, at first, she did not recognise, stepped forward. Automatically responsive to the call of her training, Maria was unconsciously stiffening into the perfect servant.

“What is the meaning of this insolence in your mistress’ absence?” demanded Ursula.

The growls died down to a murmur. Ursula noticed the weakened defiance, and was swift to follow up her advantage. Holding Maria with her brilliant hazel eyes, she gave a command.

“Send them all away. Immediately.”

Almost she won the day. But one of their number was a gentle, bent old laundress, with moist hands all red and ribbed from suds. She happened to be deaf, so did not fall under the general spell.

All she saw was a wanton in her shift—the incarnation of the unclean spirit which had drunk the blood of an innocent girl and dried up the marrow in her bones.

Many a time she had starched and ironed the fine lawns and lace of the fair bride-elect—with golden hair, too—who now lay stark on her bed. And she was a mother herself—fifteen, and buried eleven.

In the heat of her human indignation she hurled something at Ursula.

“*Witch,*” she screamed.

There was a pause—the prelude to the tempest. In the lull Ursula stared at the small object lying on the bottom stair.

It was a filthy waxen image—shaped in parody of the human form.

CHAPTER IV

FLIGHT

URSULA realised that she was caught in her own net—condemned by that futile emblem of her brief phase of madness. Involuntarily, she shrank back in terror, clutching her throat.

The mob saw her quail, and burst into a storm of accusation.

“She goes out at night, to bathe in the river. I seen her.”

“And she turns to an otter and eats all the fish.”

“She lies naked in the sun and sucks its fire.”

“She turned the idiot to a corpse.”

“And while he was dead, she made him dance to her will.”

“She keeps a devil in a horn. I heard it speak.”

“She’s a *witch*. Drown the *witch*.”

It was like the baying of hounds, pressing on the track of some hunted creature. Instinctively Ursula recognised the shrill note of the blood-lust. She knew that the moment for holding them in check had passed.

Had she appeared before them in the dignity of Miss Pike, of the Court, wearing her sage-green draperies, a gleam with dull gold thread—her face its usual mask of pallid wax—they might have responded to the call of authority.

But Miss Pike, of the Court, was sunk in this unfamiliar, distraught creature—half-naked according to their standard—with swollen eyes and tear-mottled cheeks.

They saw only the witch, who, by spells and sorcery, had done to death the sweet young bride-elect.

And, it may be, that some seed of floating madness had germinated in their brains when they watched a party of Bright Young People, who had screamed, like maniacs, as they brandished flaming torches.

Perhaps, Clemency—in her sheet, and listening for the thump-thump of her Wedding March—had struck back from her grave.

Even in her terror, Ursula's brain gripped the psychological aspect of the mob. It was a composite monster, welded together by communal fury, like an octopus with scores of tentacles.

Could she but wrench its members apart, she would find, each in itself, a simple, wholesome type. The still-room maid, with pert tongue and cherry ribbons in her cap. The housemaids, ungainly louts, freckled as cowslips, in lilac print frocks. The cook, fat, greasy, and cinnamon-scented—a martyr to rheumatism. The rabbit-toothed under-gardener, who pampered the cats so that they caught no garden pests. The land-girl who brought them extra milk.

All simple, kindly folk, they were infected with suggestion, and poisoned by each other's mania. It only needed the presence of an outsider to restore the values of employer and employee.

Even stupid Miss Miles, of the White House, with her rosy, pendulous cheeks and cotton gloves, could dismember this monster with one blink of her white lashes.

As Ursula tried to find one responsive face in the boil of humanity, her eyes fell upon a screaming, gesticulating fury.

It was the nurse, without the cap and apron of her profession.

She was the ringleader of the mob, urging it on. "Up, and get her. Drown the witch."

In vain Ursula tried to hold the crowd with the power of her eye. It was pressing slowly towards the staircase, like a sluggish drain of water. But she knew that, very soon, it would sweep forward like a tidal-wave.

As she watched it her brain foamed furiously, seeking some way of escape. Retreat to the White House was now an impossible dream. She was at bay, like a cornered fox, with no place to hide.

In her extremity, suddenly she thought of a refuge. Her room was a fragment of the original farm—the Churn House—on whose foundations the Court had been built. Hollowed into the side of its chimney was a tiny chamber, where refugees could hide at the time of the Stuart Rebellion.

She turned and rushed into her room, resisting her instinct to bar the door. Even in panic her reason prevailed, telling her that such an action would but betray her hiding-place.

But the White House still drew her as the place of ultimate safety. It had become an obsession. With some mad idea of climbing down the pillars of the porch, she bounded to the window.

To her dismay the four sentinels stood at their posts, in obedience to the orders of the upper servants. Even though they were missing all the fun, their faces were upturned, in vigil, like blank white moons.

Cut off in her retreat, she doubled back to the great open fireplace, and, unhampered by a skirt, she climbed up the chimney, the uneven brickwork affording her grip and foothold.

Blinded by soot and bewildered by the darkness, she was in a panic lest she should not find the cavity. She could not be quite certain on which side it lay, for she had not visited it since she was a child. It seemed to her that she had already gone too far up, and so missed it—forgetting that, fifteen years ago, she had been nimble as a squirrel.

She had worked herself into a fever of nervous dread when her groping hand found the opening. She drew herself up and crouched on the floor of the chamber, just as she heard the door of her room burst open.

Instantly there arose such a howl of baffled disappointment and rage that she shook with terror. The outburst was inhuman in its savagery. She heard trampling feet and voices shouting at each other. Someone rushed to the window and hailed the sentinels. Amid the confusion she recognised stray sentences.

“Not in here.”

“She’s flown away on her broomstick.”

“Search the house.”

The last command came from the diabolical nurse.

To her relief, Ursula heard the whole pack troop from the room. Presently only muffled sounds reached her, as she traced their progress down to the kitchens and up to the attics. At other times the voice of the hunt belled clear when they searched for her in the bedrooms and reception-rooms.

As the minutes passed her sense of security grew. She relaxed from her stiff posture and lay on the dusty floor, her head cradled on her arm. Her knees were

scraped and her hands skinned, but she felt rested and at peace.

Her reason told her that the madness would pass. The chiming of a clock, or some call to duty, would be like a douche of cold water on the villagers' hot heads, and remind them that they were not back in the Middle Ages, but living in the civilised Eighteenth Century.

Meantime, she was safe. She was positive that no one knew of the existence of the secret chamber. Presently, when the coast was clear, she would go to the White House. On her return her mother would dismiss the entire domestic staff, and not without consequences. Ursula promised herself that the new stocks on the village green would not lack patronage.

In the middle of her plans her heart gave a violent leap at the sound of voices, so distinct and near to her that they sounded as though the speakers were actually inside the chamber.

"She may be up the chimney."

"Go after her."

"Danged if I will. Not up there, with *her*. She'd bewitch me."

"Turn him into a bat or a owl."

Then the fiendish voice of the nurse issued an order.

"Light a fire and smoke her out."

As she heard the command Ursula thought desperately. She knew that there was a rough stair leading to an outlet, but she dared not risk a descent, lest the house should be surrounded. It was possible that she might be able to stifle any betraying cough.

But when the first coil of smoke swirled into the chamber she knew that this hope was vain. Although she clapped her hand to her mouth she soon experienced the agony of suffocation.

In that moment she hated her persecutors for violating the sanctuary of the hunted creature. So bitter was her fury that she was almost goaded to leap down upon the flames and fight them to her death.

But the will to live was stronger than her lust for revenge. Creeping on hands and knees, lest a rustle should confirm their suspicions, she found the stair. It was barely two feet wide and composed of steep, uneven steps, rough with rubble.

The smoke had penetrated even here, so that her lungs nearly cracked in her efforts to keep from coughing. The key in the door was so rusted from desuetude that she was afraid it would break in the lock. Tears streamed from her smarting eyes as she pulled and tugged.

At last, in response to a superhuman effort, it yielded. The door opened inwards, and she peered out into the choked green heart of an elder-bush which screened the outlet.

She realised that she was in an angle of the drying-lawn, which was speckled with daisies and strewn with bleaching linen. It opened out into the lane and was overlooked by a back window. But her case was so desperate that she had to risk discovery.

Forcing her way through the dusty heart of the foliage, she rushed across the open space of grass to the door.

The lane was shaded with over-arching elms, whose roots ribbed steep banks where the first white violets grew. Luckily, it sloped downhill, for, as she ran, she choked and coughed until her head swam. Her breathing grew easier towards its end, and she was conscious of the mosaic of blue sky through the flicker of leaves.

By the stile which led into the meadow she stopped, for a moment, to listen. There were no sounds of pursuit. The country seemed to stew in sunlight and rock in drowsy heat.

As she ran across the field the beauty of the buttercup pasture, which covered her bare feet with pollen, and the perfume of hawthorn, borne to her on the breeze, mocked her distress. Her powers were failing. She could feel her heart fluttering like a wounded bird, while patches of darkness floated before her eyes.

Before her stretched the sanctuary of the wood. It was all that lay between her and the White House. If she could gain its cover she had a chance of escape.

Foolishly she tried the old childish talisman of a bunch of grass held against her side. Her legs dragged stiffly over the ground, so that every movement required an effort almost beyond her strength. She had sunk to the stage of a hunted creature at its last gasp. Her tongue lolled and her breath came in sobbing pants.

Then the stile arose before her, and she fell over it, sinking back into the grassy ditch below. An earthy scent of moss and wild mint encircled her. The shadows, green and black, laid hold of her with mysterious fingers as the wood drew her to its heart.

She was safe at last. The hunt was far away—the mob-force harmlessly pulsing out its fury within the empty shell of the Court.

She wanted to linger, to enjoy the delight of her sanctuary. The young gold filagree of the oaks blended with the white foam of wild-plum. Under the beeches were copper carpets of fallen leaves, which tempted her to lie down and sleep.

In a grassy ride she met Clemency, who had been used to exercise her dogs in this wood. Clemency loved all animals, and only laughed when the puppies tore her lace flounces. She was laughing now, with her short impudent nose all wrinkled up, and her teeth flashing in the sunshine.

Although Ursula distinctly saw her, in her green velvet habit, she knew that she was only a phantom of delirium. When she looked at her more closely she saw only the budding trees.

Clemency was dead. She had murdered her.

But her mind had been overwound by tension, and it now slurred down, so that it could retain no fact. Her crime was too fantastic for acceptance. She felt that her identity was slipping away from her, and she spoke her name aloud, over and over again.

"I'm Ursula Pike, Ursula Pike, Ursula Pike."

After a while she lost the track, and had to follow the muddy ribbon of a trail which wound among brambles and boggy ground. She slipped on the plaster of embedded cones and tore her petticoat on the thorns.

The White House still drew her as a magnet. She thought of it as it appeared on her last formal visit, paid sorely against the grain. White, cool, dim, and smelling of cowslips. The strains of a minuet tinkled from a musical-box—Miss Miles' latest toy. And there had been Madeira and sponge-cake.

The trees thinned, and she saw fat wreaths of smoke rising from its chimneys and fading against the blue sky. At last, she was within sight of her goal. It looked but a biscuit-toss away.

The sight of it bridged the gap between nonentity and the social system. She became conscious of her

own appearance—tattered and torn, like some vagabond.

As she realised the absurdity of her story, she shrank from presenting herself to the decorous Miles family. Miss Miles was an authority on domestic science. How could she accept such an incredible tale of a chase by servants?

In France, perhaps. But not in a civilised country like England in this Year of Grace, 1794.

Not in her time. Heaven forbid. Thus—Miss Miles.

Ursula thought of her pear-shaped face, and her lip curled with scorn. Even though she wore a sack, why should she cringe to a creature of such negligible mentality?

At that moment she was, every inch, Miss Pike, of the Court.

Her courage flamed high as she climbed the fence. She was about to leap to the ground when she shrank back in horror.

The village green was sprinkled with excited groups of villagers.

CHAPTER V

THE WHITE HOUSE

URSULA understood. She had been watched from an upper window. They had played with her as a cat with a mouse. Instead of following her directly, they had taken the short way through the village, in order to head her off in that direction. Even now some of them were cutting off her retreat through the wood.

Fear sharpened her ears, so that she could faintly hear the cries of her pursuers as they drew the undergrowth for their quarry.

Meantime, she had not been observed, for they were still waiting for her to break cover. They stood, in groups—motionless, but instinct with the same horrible intelligence as the four dummy-sentinels—ready to pounce.

She licked her dry lips. It was torture to watch the smoke curling placidly from the chimneys of the White House. Their boldness in choosing such a public spot was significant of a wave of lunacy.

Suddenly she understood, and her spine grew iced. It was design which had drawn them there. While the ducks swam on the shallow pond in the centre of the common, in one corner was a deep sepia pool, where witches had been drowned.

The shouts in the wood were growing louder, so that she seemed pressed in on every side. There was

no way for her escape. She was hemmed in by the coppice, the green, and the little river which flowed on its southern side.

This was the infected source from which the villagers drank. Its banks were screened by willows, which inspired Ursula with a last desperate hope. It might be possible to reach the Norman church—whose flint tower reared itself against the sky, like a rock, by way of the brook.

Viewed from the green, it looked a beautiful rippling stream, but it was horrible when she had slipped into the water. It was so shallow that she had to bend double, as she crawled painfully along, in the shadow of the trees. The scum and water-insects caught by the branches formed a fringe around her neck, and the bottom was slimed and rough with stones and broken corks, which cut her feet.

Presently, however, she reached the plank which spanned the river by the gash of the steep lane leading up to the church. She was so exhausted as she toiled up the dark stony incline that she nearly sank down amid the rank growth of nettles and docks, on either bank.

She dared not wonder if the church door should be locked. As she dragged herself over the sunken graves in the churchyard she was almost at her last gasp. But, now that things were at their worst, it seemed that luck had turned.

Under the tower a small door stood ajar. Ursula pushed it gently, and stood, listening. The building held the usual mouldy odour of damp and decay. Its oak ceiling was ghostly and white with age. The windows were greened with clustering ivy, so that it seemed dark to her eyes, after the dazzle of the sun.

She heard footsteps ringing out over the flagstones of the nave. In a panic she slipped into the side-chapel. This was bare, save for an Altar and two tombs where a Crusader and his wife rested in the immortality of stone. A line of little knights on one side and a row of small ladies, on the other, represented their links with posterity.

For lack of another hiding-place, Ursula crept behind the Altar.

Utterly spent, she crouched on the dusty floor. In spite of the cold stone, her limbs relaxed and her lids fell. Although she had denied the existence of a God, she knew that the superstition of religion would keep out the rabble. They would not dare to violate this sanctuary.

"Safe," she sighed. "I'll stay here until everything is quiet, and then I'll go to the White House."

Very soon she felt herself swinging outwards on waves of sleep. She lost all sense of time and place in a period of blessed oblivion.

Suddenly she awoke, with a leaping heart.

The central door of the church grated noisily as it was pushed ajar. A clamour of voices broke the peace.

Ursula felt as though a rock had dissolved under her touch. She had trusted to the power of the Church, in vain.

Then a girl's clear voice was raised in accents of authority.

"What are you doing here? How dare you make such a noise? Go out at once."

Peering from her hiding-place, Ursula recognised the vicar's daughter. She had just finished her education and was working off her surplus energy in the work of the parish. Her complexion was fresh

and her figure pliant; but her brown eyes were frosty and her lips austere with the vested dignity of the Church.

For her father was not a mere theologian, or hard-working pauper priest, but a rich, hard-drinking, fox-hunting parson—one of the breed who commanded respect for his cloth.

Responsive to well-dressed authority, as a pimpernel to weather, the rustics retreated, in disorder. One spirit, bolder than the rest, dared to explain.

“We’re searching for the witch.”

“Witch?” Miss Vicar arched her brows. “Not in *here*. There is no witch in this holy place. I’m ashamed of you, Giles.”

“We seen her,” persisted the youth.

As she listened, Ursula’s fears died away. She knew that she was really safe at last. Only the other day the vicar’s daughter had called at the Court, and been impressed with the prosperous new red-brick house, the satin suite, the silver tea-service, and the many other proofs of wealth. It is true that Ursula had not condescended to help in her entertainment, but the social order stood.

The vicar’s daughter would intervene to protect her patroness.

As though to confirm her faith, the treble voice was again raised in peremptory dismissal.

“What are you gaping at? Take off your hats, all of you, and go out, at once, quietly and reverently.”

Ursula heard the coughs and shuffles as the crowd fell back, shamed by an Arctic stare and a crisp accent.

With a vase of flowers in either hand, the vicar’s daughter walked to the side-chapel. As she advanced her eye fell on a wet footmark on the aisle.

She stood still and stared at it—giving away the secret of Ursula's hiding-place.

The nearest youth followed the direction of her gaze. With a whoop of triumph, he pointed to a scratched foot which protruded from behind the altar.

“*Witch.*”

In another second the whole pack had fallen upon her, almost tearing her piecemeal, as they dragged her from her shelter. Too limp with exhaustion to resist, she sagged in their grip, like a bundle of filthy rags, but her heart felt no fear.

The Vicar's daughter would intervene.

But the Vicar's daughter only saw a ragged, half-clad vagrant, torn and mud-stained. Undoubtedly some low character whom the villagers would treat roughly. Probably she was due for a ducking, in which case she would be the cleaner for it.

There was nothing to connect the unlucky wretch with Miss Pike, of the Court, whom she had never met, but who would be, assuredly, a lady of the powder-and-peach-taffeta order.

Ursula did not believe in her fate as she was dragged down the lane and splashed through the river. Forgetful of soup-and-petticoat charity, the Catechism, and their duty to their betters, the rustics howled nearly as loudly as the Bright Young People on the night of the Revolution Party.

Ursula dimly noted that they were dragging her towards the pool. Like the Vicar's daughter, she believed that, at the most, she would suffer the indignity of a ducking.

A stone whizzed through the air and cut a triangle of flesh from her cheek. It was the signal for a shower

of missiles. She stood, utterly bewildered by the unexpected attack, and confused by the howling and buffeting.

Things were happening to her, but her mind could not register any separate assault. Through misted eyes, she saw a youth who swung a scythe. She realised, presently, that she was hurt, but she could not localise the pain.

When the brink of the pool was reached she knew that her ordeal would be soon over. Three times under, and their fury would be appeased. They would let her crawl out again—a target for their jeers.

She resolved to give them no satisfaction, but to take her punishment with locked lips. But she promised herself plenty of claimants for the new stocks.

She looked at them, in their pastoral setting, as one views a picture. A group of elms beside the village pond were in young green leaf. A family of ducklings was hurrying down to the water. In the distance, the wallflowers on the church tower were like dark splashes of wine.

It was a scene which never changes—rustic beauty and peace.

Suddenly she noticed an object which lay near, half hidden by a clump of grass. It looked like a glove, only it was solid, as though it were stuffed. On one finger glittered a square emerald set in a ring.

It seemed strangely familiar to her, for it was the facsimile of the one she wore. She glanced down at her hand, for comparison, and saw only a jet of blood spouting from a stump.

Horror gripped her, paralysing her with fear. For the first time she realised that she was doomed.

Her hand—that would go on with her, for ever and ever—lay, severed at her feet.

No one could save her now. She would never reach the White House. She was past feeling when she was swung off her feet and hurled into the pool.

The water closed over her head, but, instinctively, she beat up again through the darkness. As the light shone red through her closed lids a land-girl threw a stone, cutting her lip.

“The witch swims,” she yelled.

She was a good, bonny girl, flaxen-haired and very tender to the young animals she reared. Her heart was still heavy with pity for the poor young lady in her grave-clothes, who would never be a bride.

Ursula’s breath came in a bloody smother, as she glowered her hatred at her persecutors. It was useless to struggle any more. Again the glassy circle closed above her head.

In that moment she remembered Clemency, and recognised the rough justice of her death. A life called for a life. And yet her spirit cried out against her own extinction.

She wanted, passionately, to atone. This could not be the end.

All her heart went up in a voiceless prayer.

“Another life. Another chance.”

Someone threw a brick. . . . And presently her petal-white face floated under the weeds, like a water-logged lily.

Miss Miles’ fat coachman saw it when his mistress sent him to the pond to discover the cause of the disturbance. . . .

And so, at long last, she came to the White House, dripping from a hurdle.

PART II
ONE DAY

1930

CHAPTER I

DREAMS

THERE are three hundred and sixty-five ways of wooing sleep—one for each night of the year. The last, and worst, is a sleeping-draught.

Ursula Pyke had strongly objected to taking an opiate, for she resented any interference with her personal freedom. But her habit of waking before dawn was growing such deep roots, that, at last, for the sake of peace, she had yielded to her mother's entreaties.

Dr. Williams, who, after thirty-five years of general practice, was still trying to diagnose maladies by the aid of faulty symptoms, about which the patients invariably lied, appealed to Ursula's mother, for enlightenment.

"Indy?" he asked.

"No," replied Mrs. Pyke. "Her digestion's all right. It's worry."

"At her age? What about?"

"A young man, of course."

Dr. Williams thought it far more likely that a young man would lose his sleep over Ursula. But he duly entered her in his case-book, and wrote out a prescription, with some dignified Latin and a few mild drugs.

"This should meet the case," he observed.

In operation, however, the drug had not proved a success. It had merely induced a state of semi-

consciousness where Ursula was held as a fluttering hostage—unable to sleep properly, yet unable to wake, while the shadows of distorted dreams flitted across the screen of her mind.

At first these were mere impressions, as tenuous as skeleton leaves or the ash of burnt paper, where she groped in a fog of age-old memories. But she was acutely aware of having committed some sin, which laid upon her a burden of intolerable guilt and shame.

“This is horrible,” groaned Ursula. “I do wish I could wake up.”

In some corner of her mind she knew that she was lying in her own cheerful room, with its gilt-speckled sunlight paper and its buff and orange cretonnes. She strained every nerve to get back to it again.

She thought she had succeeded, for when she opened her eyes she found herself in bed. But the room was dim and mouldy, like some old church or medieval castle, with stone walls partially hung with tapestry, and a plaster saint grinning lewdly from a niche.

She knew that she was still being cheated by the miserable sleeping-draught.

“Never again,” she vowed.

And then she drifted into another dream, where she was in the middle of a crowd of people. Wherever she looked she was surrounded by a swarm of faces. They multiplied like the cells in a honeycomb, so that she was reminded of a Wembley Cup Final, on the Pictures.

Normally, Ursula had a dislike for numbers. It was a penance to sit in a theatre, unless she had a gangway seat. But it was not only the presence of so many people which filled her with horror.

She knew that this crowd was a hostile one, and instinct warned her that, unless she could escape it, this dream was but the prelude to a worse one, where she ran before the pursuit of an infuriated mob.

“I *must* wake up,” she cried in a panic.

Again she summoned her force of will, only to open her eyes in another strange bedroom. This time it was pleasant enough, but a quaint old-world apartment, panelled with new wood, while she was enclosed in a canopy of linen, crudely embroidered in gay threads.

Even as she stared at the red and yellow flowers of the design, she could hear her own casement window rattling in the wind. Before she went to sleep she had played with the idea of wedging it with a toothbrush, but had been too drowsy to get out of bed.

“Maddening,” she declared.

She tried desperately to break through to her own modern room—jerry-built, but—as her mother had once declared—held together with an excellent wallpaper. It was torture to be so near to it, and yet so hopelessly far away.

But even as she turned and tossed the twin devils of poppy and mandragora—or whatever the names of the doctor’s drugs—fell on her and dragged her right into the dreaded running dream.

At first she ran down endless flights of stairs, which spiralled from storey to storey, in the mad architecture of a Piranesi drawing. In her panic, she rushed at break-neck speed, jumping whole sequences of steps in a single bound. She knew that she was seeking some way of escape, and, presently, she found herself outside and running along the familiar road.

It was polished like a skating-rink and bristled with lamp-posts. On either side of it stretched a twilit common, where pollarded trees stood like sentries.

And then began the ultimate agony of the running dream, when her strength began to fail. Running, while the ground pulled against her, so that she felt the slackening of her pace. Running, while the trees and lamp-posts dipped and swooped by her side, keeping her company. Running, while the road flowed beneath her, jarring her feet, at every stride, like an escalator.

Slower and slower. The muscles of her legs twisted and her bones felt weak as melting candles. Slower and slower. She could not longer keep upright, but dropped to the ground, writhing along on hands and knees. Slower and slower, while the invisible crowd behind her, drew nearer.

"Oh, let me wake up. Please, let me *really* wake up," she pleaded.

Her prayer was granted. After an abortive awakening in a metallic bedroom, with a glass wall for window, which reminded her of a long-shot into the future or a scenic effect from "R.U.R.," she found herself in her own bed.

Her heart was pounding and her hands were sticky, while the window still rattled in the breeze.

"Thank you, Mrs. Richard Pyke," she said, laughing in her relief. "Thank you for pleasant dreams and sweet repose. And now, I'll pamper myself and stay awake."

She was quite content to lie still in the darkness which enclosed her in a warm cocoon of safety, and wait for the dawn.

"It's a new day," she thought. "I wonder what it holds for me."

May the fourteenth, 1931. It was there, on the calendar, hiding itself underneath the old leaf, with its appropriate quotation. Ursula always felt superstitious about its message, for she could not break herself of the habit of reading into it an omen for the next twenty-four hours.

"It's all stretching before me, at this moment," she mused. "I don't know anything that's coming to me, but by to-night I shall know all. Of course, I can make a vague general guess. Bath and breakfast are certainties. But I don't know exactly what I am going to have for breakfast, and I don't know if the water will be hot, or just luke. If it's just luke again I'll raise hell. Really, when one comes to think of it, life's great fun."

But some vague warning at the back of her mind checked her gurgle. As she remembered she gave a sigh.

"It's Barney's last day. Oh, dear. But I won't think of it."

Outside her window was Chaos. There was no form, no light. Land and water merged into one general vagueness. The World lay like some blind titan, with gigantic, upturned face, waiting for the first beams of dawn to strike its blank eye-sockets.

A milk-float, humming along the road like a dynamo, made the room vibrate, and gave Ursula some idea of the time.

"It must be about two. Still very dark. But I daren't risk going to sleep again, even if I could. Five hours of that sort of thing is more than enough."

She shivered slightly as she thought of her nightmares, which were periodic, so that she knew each one by heart. Dr. Williams' drugs had merely given her a concentrated dose, and made awakening more difficult.

"Why do I get these dreams?" she wondered. "Freud would put all sorts of loathsome constructions on them. But I haven't any inhibitions, or horrid things like that. I'm perfectly healthy and normal. It's not conceit. I can't help knowing it. I'm not like Cherry. . . . But I mustn't think of *her*."

But her thoughts had conjured up the face of a girl with silver-blond hair, short, impudent features, and rouged lips. It was so vivid that Ursula grimaced.

"Go away, Cherry. You spoil my days. You shan't spoil my nights. I'm going to think of myself. . . . Yes, I'm certainly normal. Of course, I've rather a brain bias. While I want to marry—marry Barney, of course—I want a career, as well, as an antidote to domesticity. And if I can't indulge in natural selection, then I'm willing to take Miles, and make a good job of it. That shows how sensible I am. Only, I *want* Barney. Oh, Barney, my dear, my very dear. . . . But I mustn't be a baby. The worst thing about me is my nerves. And I control those so they're not my fault. Probably mother let me in for them before I was born. They weren't too bright in Edwardian days. Pity I wasn't about, to tell her about the right thinking."

The room seemed to have grown darker, so that Ursula wondered if it were true that it is darkest just before it grows light. But there was an exciting quality

in the muffing blackness. Night was the time when things happened—when the dark hair turned grey, the bud burst into bloom, the scar healed the wound.

Dawn was near. There was a sense of mighty growth—of sap coursing and cells multiplying. The new day was about to burst through the sheath of the dead night.

And then, suddenly, Ursula felt unutterably wretched. For the minute had come when vitality is lowest, so that some who are ill, turn their faces to the wall, and some, who lie sleepless, fry in the hell of their own imagination.

It is in this hell which does not exist that men lose their jobs and women lose their lovers; where they forestall the ills which might occur and suffer those which probably never will; where they go nine-tenths of the way to meet old age and death.

Ursula found herself thinking of Cherry. She was the only daughter of a London stockbroker, and her family had but recently come to the neighbourhood. They were smart, pretentious people, with rather a brittle code of honesty with regard to the payment of tradespeople, but, for the moment, they were making a splash.

Ursula first met Cherry at a Bridge-afternoon. When they were introduced she was already seated at the table, letting the cards flutter through her small hands. She appeared to be only a little girl in her flowered frock—her silver-blonde hair almost hidden in the shade of her crinoline capeline. Her eyes were smoke-blue and shallow—her lips hard and red.

Ursula had been puzzled by her own reaction to the stranger. She usually greeted people with her own special radiance which shot from her like a flame. Life to her was so exciting, so full of enchanting possibilities, that she was always eager to round the next corner. Each fresh acquaintance was a source of interest.

Sir Miles Humber was in the room, and his eyes, which looked so expressionless—perhaps by reason of his monocle—were fixed, as usual, on Ursula's face.

He noticed her momentary start, her watchful expression, her almost imperceptible recoil.

Cherry, too, looked up with instinctive antipathy, as though she resented the fact that Ursula was prettier and better-dressed than herself.

It was like the meeting of two felines of the jungle, who recognised in each other a possible rival.

"Got each other's scent," reflected Sir Miles. "Girls don't like each other."

Ursula recovered herself immediately. Her smile was especially sweet, as though to atone for her momentary chill. She felt sorry when they cut to play against each other.

During the first rubber Ursula's partner pounced down upon Cherry as she scooped up a trick.

"I thought you discarded last round of diamonds?" she asked.

"Oh no. I played the nine."

Cherry was ready with her lie, but the inquest proved that she had revoked.

Ursula spoke impulsively as Cherry's infantile face, pink-and-white as apple-blossom, puckered up with dismay.

“Oh, we won't exact the penalty. It's only a friendly game.”

Her firmness had dominated the situation. But she could not understand her own attitude, for she was a good loser herself, and always insisted on the Sarah Battle standard in the conduct of the game.

Later on, she had discovered that her championship was unnecessary, for Cherry's eyes had grown up before the rest of her face, and she used them to excellent advantage in looking over the carelessly-held cards of Ursula's partner.

The scoring was heavy, but Ursula paid Cherry with a sense of relief. She told herself that the girl probably could not afford to lose, while she was the possessor of a small private income, left to her by her father.

But she recognised the undertow of a current which was drawing her to Cherry. There was some issue between them, which, one day, must be settled.

That was the beginning of Cherry. Although they met often in the social round, there was no intercourse. Ursula had too many mental interests, while Cherry obviously had no time to waste on girls. Lately, however, a personal element had entered their relationship, owing to their fusion on one common point.

That point—if a term of fixity could be applied to anyone so unstable and fluid—was Barney.

Suddenly Ursula felt on the point of tears.

“Barney's mine,” she cried. “It began ever so long ago. Long before Cherry. *Mine*. I don't know why I care so much. Miles is worth twenty of him. Only, if Cherry takes him from me I don't want to live. . . . But she can't. She *can't*.”

As she lay, the tears scalding her tired lids, the darkest minute passed. A wan medium—neither light nor darkness—filtered in through the window, so that the furniture became semi-visible as grotesque shapeless objects, products of no known Kingdom.

Ursula felt a sudden revival of her spirits.

“I’ll make tea,” she decided.

She jumped out of bed and lit the gas-fire. Slender as a reed, in her creamy silk sleeping-suit, she kneeled before it, watching the blisters of pure blue flame bubble up from the burners. Soon the asbestos glowed in cubes of red-hot heat. In spite of the glare, her face looked wan, with the elegant fragility of some old valentine, with its lacey border. Her greenish eyes showed flecks of brown, like mignonette, and her dark-red hair fell in elf-locks over her brow.

As she waited for the kettle to boil she walked across to the window. A slight fog blurred the landscape, so that the town, lying below in a huddle of buildings, looked like a charcoal drawing soaked in milk.

She lit a cigarette, and, after a few whiffs, her mind grew clearer.

“Things can’t go on like this,” she thought. “I’m letting Barney spoil my life. I’m drifting—getting nowhere. I wasn’t made for this. One must *do* something. With Miles, I could make something worth while. Together, we would leave things just a little better than we found them. That’s progress.”

The bubbling of the kettle-lid recalled her to the stove. She sat, cross-legged, before it, and pensively drank her tea, while she finished her cigarette.

A cock crowed somewhere in the darkness. The brave sound was a call to her courage, like the blowing of trumpets.

She accepted it as a challenge from the dawn.

“To-day shall be a turning-point in my life. Before Barney goes, I’ll force an issue. I’ll make him choose between Cherry and me.”

She knew that it would not be easy. To attempt to hold Barney was like trying to catch the west wind. He slipped away, like water, between one’s fingers.

“He’ll twist my words and try to laugh me off,” she prophesied. “But I’ll tie him down to a choice. And, whatever it is, I’ll stand by it. Barney or Miles? Which? I shall know when the day is over.”

The crowing of the cock was repeated and then echoed by a distant chanticleer—shrill heralds of the dawn.

“I love to hear the crowing of a cock,” reflected Ursula, as she climbed back to bed. “I certainly don’t belong to the clan of St. Peter, whoever I was in a past existence. . . . I wonder *who* I was. And when. . . . If Einstein’s right, I’m going on, at this very moment, in all my past lives. And my future lives, as well. . . . Perplexing. How could I be everywhere at once? No, it’s too complicated for me. I give it up. . . . Well, perhaps I’m being chased by a pre-historic monster, so it’s indicated that I should be comfortable in this phase.”

Propped up with pillows, she watched the first staggers of the dawn. The daylight blundered in through the window, like a blind man, touching each formless object and transforming it into homely chair or table.

There was no spectacular sunrise, because of the fog, but soon there was sufficient light for Ursula to gloat over her room which had eluded her during her dreams.

It always gave her pleasure, even though Mrs. Pyke compared it to a room built with a child's bricks.

"For all her brilliance, the poor darling has pathetic taste," she declared. "She finds the highest expression of art in a plate of oranges on a blue-checked table-cloth."

Ursula liked her surroundings to be bright and bare and new. There was little visible furniture, for the largest pieces were built into the walls and concealed behind doors. Hanging mirrors took the place of pictures, and the white paint was picked out with black beadings. Daffodils in green pottery, and cushions gay as a bed of Shirley poppies were touches of colour amid the prevailing neutral tint.

"Clean as a new whistle," said Ursula. "Nobody's lived or worked here, but myself. Nobody's died here. The only impression is my own."

Presently, familiar sounds about the house told her that the servants had come downstairs. She drew on her dressing-gown, in readiness for her journey to the bath-room, and then advanced to her calendar.

Her eyes were bright with interest as she peeled off the old leaf.

"I wonder what the quotation is," she thought. "Isn't it American mail-day. I'd forgotten all about it. Shall I get big news to-day?"

At that moment of renewed energy, her work loomed more important than complications of love. She had been told by her agent that her novel was under consideration by the Book Society.

It would be her first real success, if it were chosen.

The paper ripped off and displayed the date of a virgin day.

Ursula greeted it as a friend.

“Here you are. I’ve waited ages for you. Now, let me see what you hold for me.”

She burst into a peal of laughter as she read the quotation.

“PREPARE FOR THIS THY LAST AND LONGEST JOURNEY.”

CHAPTER II

GILT DRAGONS

MRS. PYKE was already seated at the breakfast-table when Ursula entered the morning-room. She was a lady of great vivacity, and very expressive in her movements. She talked with her shoulders, her hands and her eyebrows. These eyebrows were black, and very strongly marked. Allied with wavy white hair, the combination had fostered, in Mrs. Pyke, a fatal belief in her likeness to the Duchess of Devonshire.

That morning she looked rather like a parody of the famous picture, for she had bound her erection of curls with a pale-blue ribbon, and draped a lace fichu over her old-gold wrapper.

"Darling." Her white plump hands, gleaming with rings, ceased fluttering over the coffee-urn, to wave a butterfly kiss to her daughter. "What sort of a night?"

"Foul," replied Ursula.

"My sweet, you know how I hate that word."

"My sweet, you know how I hate it even more. That's why I used it. My night was *foul*."

Mrs. Pyke mobilised her eyebrows.

"Didn't you sleep, after all?"

"I did. Thanks to you and Dr. Williams. I'd like to slay you both. I had the most paralysing dreams."

Mrs. Pyke held up a hand in protest.

"Well, don't tell me about them, angel. If you do, I'll retaliate with my dream. It was about the War, and I warn you, it lasted for the duration."

Ursula laughed as she walked over to the window. The mist still hung on the air, investing it with a dim, opaline quality.

The morning-room faced east, and its view was blocked by a stone wall, at the foot of which stretched a narrow border of irises and London pride. To counteract its bleak character, Mrs. Pyke had introduced so much flame and gold into her colour-scheme that it resembled a Japanese sunrise.

"Any letters?" asked Ursula.

"No, but here's the paper. It's full of ladies of social importance who are going to have babies. Makes one rejoice for the freedom of the Press."

Ursula was not listening.

"Hasn't the postman come?" she inquired.

"Not yet. He's still thumping away in the distance."

"Then I breathe again. I'm expecting that American letter, about my novel. You remember?"

Mrs. Pyke looked graver. Fate seemed to have showered every gift upon her daughter; yet the fact remained that the child had no luck.

"I know," she murmured. "But they say that they never give awards to the best books. For goodness' sake, expect nothing. Then you won't be disappointed."

Ursula smiled bleakly, for she knew that her mother possessed the usual maternal scepticism as to her daughter's talent.

"You don't think I *can* write, do you, darling?" she asked.

"Of course, you can do the parsing part," conceded Mrs. Pyke. "But imagine *you* writing a novel, out of the depths of your abysmal ignorance. Now, if I wrote my philosophy of life, there'd be some sense."

"But you can't spell, my sweet. You always put two esses in 'disappointment.'"

"There are two esses, and one is always found at the end," replied Mrs. Pyke, arching her brows to point her sally.

"Am I one of your disappointments?" asked Ursula.

Mrs. Pyke lit the cigarette which was her prelude to breakfast.

"Well, naturally, I'd like to see you married," she said.

"Why?"

"Well—why not? They say in heaven there's no marriage or giving in marriage. Really, when I hear of some of the present day goings-on, I wonder if we've reached our equivalent to Heaven on Earth."

"Poor darling. You do want me to marry Miles. I can't think why."

"Because I don't want you to miss your Minute. I may be old-fashioned, but when you come down the aisle to the pealing of the Wedding March, you get a thrill which helps you to bear the subsequent disappointment."

Ursula knew that her own father had been one of Mrs. Pyke's disappointments. The comedian vein in her nature was the development of her courage in coping with the complications of a husband who was perfect in every respect, save one.

He could never remember which, among a company of charming ladies, was his lawful wife.

"Give him his due," she used to jeer, "he treats us all alike, and he's as sweet to me as to his concubines, which is more than many a wife can say."

As Ursula remained silent, Mrs. Pyke looked at her daughter. In spite of her pallor, her face was smooth as a creamy magnolia flower.

"You are marvellous," she said. "Now, if I stay awake, I look as dissipated as fruit that's been left on the table, all night."

"Don't stare," entreated Ursula. "You're prejudiced about my looks. But I always feel that people think I'm odd and feverish, because I've red hair. I wish I were pink-and-white and commonplace."

"Like that Cherry person?"

Ursula started at her mother's penetration.

"If you like," she replied carelessly. "Cherry's pretty."

"Too obvious. I hate obvious people and obvious things. It's like wearing violets with grey. Personally, I'd rather see a bunch of carrots. Better colour-scheme. . . . Tea or coffee?"

"Coffee, please." Ursula came to the table. "Why don't you insist on Mrs. Roper using a muslin bag to infuse the tea-leaves? That's the way to extract the theine—the stimulating essence, you know, without the tannin?"

"My educative daughter," murmured Mrs. Pyke ironically. "In my old age, I'm getting the advantages of a L.C.C. education."

As she watched Ursula help herself to a small portion of mushrooms, she reflected that she had some reason to feel resentful over her daughter's lost opportunities. Her latest venture in fiction-

writing was viewed coldly by her, since it was obvious that Ursula's real career needed the co-operation of Sir Miles Humber.

She wrinkled her own brow as she made her choice between three hot dishes. There were cold meats, besides, on the sideboard, for Mrs. Pyke had had three husbands, and, consequently, understood the value of food, if not of food-values.

"What was your dream about, Ursula?" she asked presently. "We'll borrow the housemaid's book of dreams, and have some fun finding out what it means."

"Running," replied Ursula briefly.

As she spoke, she sprang up to the sound of a double-knock.

"There's the post," she cried. "I can't wait. I'll fetch it."

When she returned, the radiance of her face was dimmed.

"Nothing from America," she announced. "Here's something for you."

Mrs. Pyke seized her letter eagerly.

"It's the Eighteen Days' Diet I wrote for," she explained. "Let's know the worst."

She groaned as she flipped over the typewritten pages.

"I wonder if it's worth it Half a grape-fruit. Half a head of lettuce. Half a——. No, it improves. A whole egg Pass me something solid, Ursula. Not a grape-fruit. I shall make faces at those for the rest of my natural life. But I'm determined my last breakfast shall be a memorable one."

She little knew—poor lady—that the next morning she would eat no breakfast at all, as she munched game-pie, in silence.

"Who's your serial from?" she asked presently.

Ursula looked up from her letter, her face vivid with interest.

"From Aunt Marion. You remember she's been hunting up our pedigree? Well, she's found out that our family lived at the Churn House, Mallow, about the eighteenth century, and she wants me to go over and try to explore the house. I'm going, this afternoon."

"But why this afternoon?"

Ursula drummed on the tablecloth.

"Oh, I can't wait."

"But Mallow is the other side of the county."

"I'll get Barney to run me over."

"Barney?" Mrs. Pyke grimaced. "Hum. It's Lady Piper's party."

"I'll fit it in." Ursula was breathless with excitement. "Do listen. This is really thrilling. Aunt Marion has discovered a real potent ancestress, tucked away among the tripe. Her name is the same as mine. Ursula Pike, spelt with an 'i'. I like the original spelling much better."

Mrs. Pyke made a dramatic gesture.

"Darling, don't try to take away my sole claim to distinction. When people look at me through a lorgnette, I always sustain myself by remembering my 'y'. . . . What are you grinning at now?"

"It grows better and better," gurgled Ursula. "It seems that this Ursula Pike was a clever woman, in advance of her time. Her line was languages and stinks. Like me again. And she was drowned, for a witch, on a charge of murdering a kinswoman by the art of sorcery."

"Unpleasant creature. Do you think she really did it?"

Ursula looked reflective.

"Probably not. A woman of her mentality would be clever enough to consume her own smoke. She wouldn't let herself be convicted. I expect she was a victim of local ignorance and prejudice."

"Well, personally, I'm ruthless. I'm in favour of drowning relatives," said Mrs. Pyke.

"But not *this* Ursula," objected her daughter. "I'm so sorry they drowned her. I feel an affinity with her. Perhaps, I'm her re-incarnation. I'm opposed to the idea of total extinction. The soul must go on."

"So clever of you, darling, to think out these things for yourself. They made things easier for us, in my young days. We got heaven and hell served out on two plates, hot and cold, like the meat and pudding plates for dinner. Which reminds me. Will you be in for lunch?"

"I must," replied Ursula. "I can't miss the mid-day post. Now, my sweet, don't look so tactful. Haven't I always been successful in everything? I've never sat twice for an exam, and I won the Gold Medal my first try."

"Ye-es. I suppose so."

Ursula knew what her mother's guarded admission meant. Mrs. Pyke had no opinion of her daughter's luck, which seemed to consist in getting everything, just to let it slip through her fingers.

At the doorway, she paused.

"Water hot this morning, darling?"

"Not particularly."

"Well, I hope you blew the servants up."

"I did not. It seems mean to abuse people who can't answer you back. Besides, they know that I

couldn't get a stove to go myself, so they'd only laugh at me in their sleeves."

Mrs. Pyke grew crimson with indignation.

"Really, Ursula, you play yourself too low. It's their job to light fires, and it requires no brain. However will you manage when you have your own staff?"

"Perhaps I shan't have any. Isn't it rather degrading for an able-bodied person to depend upon another able-bodied person?"

Mrs. Pyke restrained her impulse to shake her perverse child.

"Indeed?" she inquired. "May I remind my brilliant daughter that servants require to eat, like other people, and may prefer jobs to ethical justice? Now, you're laughing at me. Darling, do you mind if I interview Mrs. Roper?"

Lighting another cigarette, Mrs. Pyke strolled across the hall to the kitchen, which was a pleasant white-tiled room, with lilacs in bloom outside the window.

The cook—a spinster, who took on the official title of "Mrs. Roper", together with the situation—laid down her own cigarette, and stood at attention. She was a competent, ice-cold brunette, attired in a snowy overall. Her thin lips betrayed temper, and her greeting was restrained.

Smoothing her glossy permanent wave, she watched her mistress, as Mrs. Pyke walked across to the white-enamel cabinet and opened its glass doors.

"I'm always so fascinated by these canisters, Mrs. Roper," she explained. "There's actually sugar in the one marked 'SUGAR'. It's like seeing a laurel-bush in a house called 'The Laurels'. Something one never expects to find."

"It saves time to put things in their proper places," remarked Mrs. Roper.

"But it's too good to be true," persisted Mrs. Pyke. "I'm sure I never put my gloves in the thing that says 'GLOVES'."

Mrs. Roper looked out of the corners of her black almond eyes. She was rather sceptical of her mistress' innocence, for she remembered the steely glint in her eye on the occasion that she found soda in "COFFEE".

"What are you giving us for lunch?" asked Mrs. Pyke.

Mrs. Roper presented her tablet, and the menu was duly approved.

"Yes. Excellent, Mrs. Roper. Miss Ursula will have something on a tray, twelve, sharp. The usual rabbit-food. By the way, I hope you don't mind, but, after to-day, there won't be much cooking for the dining-room. But it won't be for long."

"No, Madam?" interrogated Mrs. Roper.

"I'm taking the eighteen-day diet. Heard of t?"

"Oh, yes, Madam. The kitchen went through it twice last year."

"Really? But what initiative and enterprise. Hum. I never noticed it on the books."

"It's not cheap, Madam."

"No? How mean of them to be always saying 'EAT MORE FRUIT', just to egg us on. Well, Mrs. Roper, I must tear myself away from your distracting cupboard. . . . I suppose that *is* salt, and not castor-sugar? Do you mind?"

Mrs. Pyke moistened the tip of her finger and sucked it delicately.

"No, salt. Everything in its proper place. That's why I find it difficult to understand why a tap labelled 'HOT' should run cold."

The kitchen staff exchanged glances.

"Really, Madam?" murmured the cook.

"Yes. Miss Ursula's bath was cold, this morning. *Again.* Well, that's all, Mrs. Roper. Your kedgereee was excellent. And your kitchen is charming."

"The missing Gainsborough," grinned the new kitchen-maid, as Mrs. Pyke swept her old-gold draperies through the door. "Doesn't she work her George Robeys when she talks?"

"You'll laugh the other side of your face if the water's cold to-morrow," said Mrs. Roper acidly. "That's all she came in for."

"But she got in one all right about your books," commented the housemaid.

Mrs. Roper looked sour, for she knew that, for the next fortnight, she must present a lower budget.

"Clean out your flues properly, to-night, or pack your box," she said to the kitchen-maid. "My word, the baker'll be here before we're ready for him. What's your fancy for the two-thirty, Maudie?"

"Jason's a hundred to eight, and he's a certainty on form," volunteered the kitchen-maid, who came from Epsom.

The mauve-and-white parlourmaid, who had just entered, frowned at her impertinence.

"The only certainty is what's in the stop-press, after the race," she remarked. "Read out the colours, Mrs. Roper, and see who's got yellow. I dreamt I was wearing a yellow dress, last night."

Through the open door of the morning-room, Ursula listened to the muted sounds of her mother's voice,

as she dreamily drank her coffee. This scene was so typical of routine that it was an antidote to the morbid fancies of the night. A ray of sunshine, breaking through the fog, shone through the window-curtain, making it glow like a prairie fire.

Ursula felt a flood of happiness for the familiar things of her life—the room of the Japanese sunrise, the haze of cigarette smoke, the gilt dragons which sprawled over the green china, clear honey in a glass jar. They were a few of the myriad infinitesimal filaments which bound her to the fabric of living.

The hands of the clock pointed to twenty-five minutes to nine. Before her stretched the new day, and every hour held its secret.

Her thoughts dwelt no longer in a songless cypress-grove, but winged free as gulls dipping over a sunlit sea.

“What are you smiling at?” asked Mrs. Pyke, returning to the morning-room.

For lack of an explanation, Ursula pointed to the tea-pot.

“I rather like those gilt dragons,” she said.

CHAPTER III

CONFESSION

URSULA was recalled from her reverie by the ringing of the telephone-bell.

"Barney," she thought, springing to her feet.

Whistling a fragment from Schubert's "Death and the Maiden," she strolled into the hall, which was a cheerful square, with a parquet floor, a chintz paper and a bowl of rose peonies on the oak sidetable.

To her disappointment, Mrs. Pyke had forestalled her, and was standing at the telephone with a grim expression on her face.

"Is the call for me?" asked Ursula eagerly.

"No. It's the fish, saying it's gone up in price again."

Ursula scarcely heard Mrs. Pyke's acid comments about the salmon which was on order. For the first time she was acutely conscious of a miracle which she had hitherto merely connected with Post Office service.

"Think of it. In another minute I shall hear Barney's voice as clearly as if he were in the same room. Yet he's miles away. . . . Whatever would Friend Ursula, of the Churn House, have thought of the telephone? If she were here now she'd think it magic, and regard me as a witch. . . . I wonder when they first played about with the idea. Long before Edison, probably. I must look it up in the *Britannica*."

"Well, at least I had the last word," said Mrs. Pyke, glaring at the instrument.

"After you, darling," remarked Ursula, taking the receiver from her.

Mrs. Pyke retired to the morning-room, where she could still listen-in to her daughter.

"Is that you, Barney?" Ursula's voice was vibrant with eagerness. "Yes, of course, I'm a darling, but it depends on which special darling you mean. . . . Now, you're hedging. You're afraid to commit yourself. You've admitted you are expecting to be called up. . . . Don't you recognise my voice? . . . Ah, you've got me, at last. . . . Very fit, thanks, and I want you to do something for me. . . . No, nothing much. Just to run me over to Mallow to-day. . . . *What engagement?*"

The sudden break in Ursula's voice reminded Mrs. Pyke of the drop of a lark in full song. She tapped her high heel in petulant sympathy with her daughter's disappointment.

"Well, can't you break it? . . . Oh, all right, it doesn't matter. . . . Get someone else to take me, of course. . . . Yes, I know you are. . . . I'll take all that for granted, if you don't mind. . . . I'm *not*. I don't care a bit. . . . Well, perhaps, a trifle dim. You see, it's your last day, and naturally. . . . Oh, Barney, you are a darling. Will you? . . . Any time will suit me. I'll fit Mallow in. . . . All right, eleven-forty-five, Castle Wall. . . . No, I promise you I won't be late. . . . You'll be there, for certain? . . . Now, that is really sweet of you."

"Very sweet of him," commented Mrs. Pyke, "only you practically put the words into his mouth. You little bungler."

A conspiratorial finger on her painted lip, she nodded her curls sagely as Ursula rang off and gave the Exchange another familiar number.

"Hello. Is that Humber Court? May I speak to Sir Miles? Miss Pyke speaking. . . . Oh, good morning, Miles, my dear." Her voice was sweet but casual. "I do hope I've not disturbed you at breakfast. . . . Of course, you do. Silly of me to forget. . . . Oh, Miles, I rather want to go to Mallow. . . . How charming of you. . . . Let me see. I've got to be back, by three-thirty, for a party. We must allow three hours. That makes it a twelve-thirty start, doesn't it? . . . Will you? Thanks ever so much. Good-bye."

"And not one thought of the poor man's lunch," murmured Mrs. Pyke to her Persian cat. "*You* understand the importance of food, don't you, Jupiter?"

Jupiter looked superior, as befitted an authority on the subject. Had he not followed his mistress out into the hall, in order to superintend the conversation about the fish?

Again whistling "Death and the Maiden," and making a joyous melody of it, Ursula entered the room.

"Barney taking you?" asked Mrs. Pyke.

"You know he's not. The hall is not exactly sound-proof."

"Well, you might allow me the usual fiction that no one ever overhears a telephone conversation. . . . I'm so glad you're going with Miles."

"Barney's a better driver."

"And takes his corners at sixty, in consequence."

Observant of the firm set of her daughter's lips, Mrs. Pyke changed the subject.

"Darling, I blew up the kitchen about your bath-water. It appears there's a new kitchen-maid—a little novelty of the season I'd forgotten."

The questioning expression, which Mrs. Pyke had grown to distrust, came into Ursula's eyes.

"Aren't four servants rather many to run a small labour-saving house?" she asked.

"A mob," was the cheerful reply. "But, if we managed with two they'd have to be composite creatures. A cook-general and a house-parlourmaid."

"Well, why not?" asked Ursula.

"Because, my poor ignorant child, each half always lays the blame on the other half. Scold the cook, and she'll tell you it's the fault of the general—and the parlourmaid says how can she help the table not being laid, mum, when the housemaid had to make the beds."

Ursula relapsed into silence. She knew that the house was absurdly overstaffed, and the fact rather fretted her in relation to her own sense of futility. On such a bright morning she would have welcomed some light domestic duty—dusting the drawing-room or washing china.

"The servant question always rather worries me," she said presently. "We've four women living under the same roof as ourselves, and we don't regard them as human beings."

"They're not," her mother assured her. "They're robots. Treat them like machines. Oil them, and don't overwind."

"But it sounds so heartless."

"It's the only way. Besides, don't I always keep my servants?"

"Yes," admitted Ursula. "All the same, I'd like to know what they really think of *us*."

She broke off, as the parlourmaid, with an ironed face, appeared at the door.

"The Reverend Marcus Lee would like to see you, madam," she said.

"At this time?" Mrs. Pyke looked helplessly at the clock. "What have you done with him, Coles?"

"He is in the drawing-room, madam."

Mrs. Pyke turned to her daughter.

"You know I have to stand, after meals, for the sake of my figure. Besides, I can't see him like this."

She tapped the wide area of powdered neck and chest revealed by the fichu.

"Altogether too exciting a toilette for a curate. He'll think he's little Joseph. Angel, see him for me."

"Oh, no," pleaded Ursula, in a panic. "He'll ask me to do something repulsive."

"Well, you can refuse."

"That's just it. You know I can't. I shall remember that someone's got to do these parochial jobs. I can't plead domestic pressure in this over-staffed house."

Mrs. Pyke shook her head at her.

"You're not a bit like a modern girl, Ursula. For pity's sake be ruthless, like the rest of your push."

Reluctantly Ursula walked into the drawing-room, which was a long narrow apartment, all grey and powder-blue, with gleams of ebony. It was equipped with panel-brackets—the glass shading from purple to palest azure, to give the effect of moonshine lighting.

Ursula was always vaguely reminded of a March landscape, with bleak white road and naked thorn hedge. To-day she added east wind and neuralgia to her mental inventory.

The curate arose with difficulty from the depths of a low padded chair. He was a thick-set young man,

with the shoulders of an athlete and the forehead of a student. Ursula could not help noticing that he was badly-groomed, for yesterday's mud had caked on his shoes and his hair was rough.

"My mother's so sorry she's engaged," she said, with the charm of manner which used to belong to a better-bred, if less-sincere, generation. "Shall I do instead?"

"It's awfully good of you." The curate looked pugilistic, in advance. "I know I'm an infernal nuisance calling so early. But someone's got to be my first victim."

Ursula's heart sank.

"I think it's so nice to choose us," she said faintly, and then waited for the ultimate disaster.

The curate shot her a covert glance, as though he was rather overawed by her wan beauty. She looked an exquisitely finished product of her generation, and had, in addition, the reputation of intellectual brilliance.

The curate thought nothing of that. He had coached too many clever girls for examinations to be impressed by Degrees. He summed her up in lightning items.

"Pale skin. Red lips. Don't think it's lip-stick. Eyes rather heavy. Probably liver. Pretty girl. Frock's got the new cape. Pity it's green. Unlucky. Here goes."

He fixed her with rather deep-set grey eyes.

"Goes without saying I'm begging. Bazaar. Will your mother take a stall?"

"Certainly," replied Ursula graciously. "She'll be thrilled. What kind of stall would you like her to provide?"

"Oh, I'll leave that to her. There'll be a meeting, of course, to decide policy and details. Do you think she'll attend?"

"I promise you that she shall be there."

The curate reflected that it was easier to interview daughters than parents. For all practical purposes his mission was successfully ended. But, in spite of Ursula's hopeful expression, he lingered in the interest of convention.

"You're sure your mother will be willing?" he asked, rather doubtfully.

"Why shouldn't she be? Giving a stall is only signing a cheque. But I was paralysed for fear you'd ask me to take a Sunday School class."

He looked at her, rather at a loss.

"I shouldn't dream of asking you to undertake such important work," he said, "unless I was first clear as to your religious views."

"I wish I were clear myself."

Ursula's voice was wistful, and she looked at the curate as though unconsciously craving some boon.

"Well, I doubt if many people are," he said. "Those who really think, I mean. Hum. Have I ever seen you at church?"

"No. But I'd come if it were empty. There are always so many people there."

"Well, you can hardly expect me to take your view about that, can you? But"—his eyes probed hers—"do you honestly feel you miss nothing?"

Ursula fingered her jade necklace absently.

"No."

"Well—perhaps not. The tragedy of religion is that, since it is the oldest Truth in the world, its

exponents will present it in stale phrases and threadbare similes, to correspond. Ever noticed our stock pulpit quotations? But it's so frightfully difficult to get a new line on it."

The young man's voice was so ingenuous as he puckered his brow that Ursula felt a sudden bond of sympathy.

"I'm missing *something*, all the same," she confided. "I—I feel I've gone wrong, somehow. But I don't know how."

The curate leaned forward, rumpling his hair.

"What's the trouble?" he asked abruptly.

"Oh, I don't know exactly. But—I'm such a failure."

"Surely not. From the accredited sources of gossip, I understand you're a blazing success."

"Me? I'm not. I'm *not*."

"Perhaps you've an inferiority complex?"

Ursula shook her head.

"I don't think so. If I think nothing of myself, I think less of others."

"Well, that's honest," said the curate. "Won't you unbottle a bit more? Self-expression's a fine vent. It doesn't do to talk to oneself, for fear of getting slightly mental, but have you ever tried talking to a child? It's a form of soliloquy in which a man can talk to his own soul and find it's only five years old. . . . Do go on."

His confidence had unlocked Ursula's lips. Her words rushed out.

"I seem to be up against a handicap. Things began so well with me. I was so confident and happy. I was considered clever, but I have the sort of mind which likes to collect facts. Although I've written

a novel, fiction does not appeal to me. I learn in my sleep. But, when it came to a career, I couldn't make the grade. People seemed hostile to me. I couldn't face their criticism. So dream after dream blew out. I'm such a disappointment to my mother. It worries me, because I've always this burden of responsibility."

"What do you feel responsible for?" asked the curate.

"I don't know. But I always feel that I have to make amends."

"What for?"

"For being alive, I suppose."

There was silence as the young man looked down the vista of the powder-blue room. He had paid this call on a rich widow and her daughter—who were representative of the fashionable section of his congregation—merely to extract their financial teeth. And, to his wonder, he had found an unexpected call to his ministration.

He was desperately afraid of making a false step, so he played for time.

"I feel a bit the same," he confided. "Especially when I'm in a theatre and there's a clergyman in the cast. I know then what to expect. My comic calling, you know. I'm supposed to be eternally hurling myself joyfully into drawing-rooms just about tea-time."

Ursula looked at the clock.

"Absolved," she said. Then her voice grew warm with sympathy.

"It's a shame. All the same, do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Do you really like tea?"

"I *do*. Properly made, you know. Plenty of tea and left to brew for a solid half-hour. But I enjoy a glass of beer even better."

They broke into simultaneous laughter. While the mutual glow was still warm, the curate spoke impulsively.

"I'm going to be John Blunt. But I want to make you understand the value of contact and the importance of the impression you make on others. Every day holds infinite possibilities and our words and actions go on spreading out indefinitely. Now, take yourself. Frankly, you are beautiful. And you're wearing a charming frock."

"But that's nothing to do with me," objected Ursula. "Looks are not personal."

"That's the first time I've heard of an impersonal appearance," remarked the curate. "But, seriously, you have no idea what a tonic you are to me, to start the day on. Now, I hate to say it, but I'm bound to meet, presently, a number of really splendid Christian women who'll depress me horribly by their mere appearance. Shiny noses, woolly stockings, dowdy clothes. See?"

Ursula repressed a smile as she glanced at his unbrushed coat. His criticism was so typical of masculine superiority.

Suddenly conscious of her need, she turned to him in appeal.

"Can't you give me religion in one word?"

"Sacrifice," he replied.

"Oh." Her face fell. "Should I have to sacrifice myself for someone I dislike?"

"Do you dislike anyone?"

"Yes. Very much."

"Well—do the best you can about it."

The curate rose to his feet.

"I must be pushing on," he said. "But, remember, *you've helped me.*"

"And you can't think how you've helped me." Ursula hesitated for a moment. "Won't you give me a—a formula for to-day? It's rather an important one for me."

"Well—treat it as if it were your last day upon earth."

Ursula remembered her tactless calendar, and gurgled again as she led him to the french window.

"This is your quickest way," she said.

As she watched his black figure tramp down the garden path her mind was filled with peace.

"For the first time in my life I've begun the day with confession," she thought.

Her mother's voice in the hall reminded her of the lavish promises she had made on her behalf.

"I'd better break it to her," she thought guiltily.

Mrs. Pyke was talking to Coles, and Ursula was struck by the gravity of their expressions. Coles' face was like a graven mask, and Mrs. Pyke's restless brows were still. They might have been two images exchanging stony thought.

She remembered her mother's words.

"They're only machines."

"It's awful," she thought. "Two human-beings, of probably the same standard of education, although Coles may be better-grounded. Can't they find one point of common interest?"

As she drew nearer she could distinguish her mother's words.

"You see my point, Coles?"

"Yes, Madam."

"But you haven't got my angle?"

"No, Madam. I agree he's attractive. But, to my mind, he can't be compared with Valentino."

"Ah, poor Valentino. When you mention *him*, Coles, I'm entirely with you."

"Which do you consider his best part, Madam?"

"Monsieur Beaucaire."

Coles' face stiffened and her voice grew more formal.

"Exactly, Madam. But he will always live in *my* memory as the Sheik."

CHAPTER IV

CURSED

MISTRESS and maid were too engrossed to notice Ursula, so she slipped through the side-door, into the garden.

"Machines?" she murmured ironically. "No wonder mother plays poker so well. She gives nothing away, even to me. Well, I expect the servants adore her—sisters-under-their-skin. But I wonder what they think of me."

Her thought was free from any craving for popularity, but born out of humility. She only felt she had failed in a human relationship.

As she walked over the flag-stones past the kitchen-window, she was noticed by the sharp eyes of the new kitchenmaid, who was melting a cube of port-wine jelly in boiling water. Mary, the housemaid, was hard at work watching her and answering her questions.

"Who's that?" asked the kitchenmaid.

"Miss Ursula."

"What's she like?"

"Oh, quite a lady. Never takes no notice of no-one and keeps herself to herself. No feelings, like all the gentry. Never wore black for her pa."

"Fancy."

"But she's clever. She can type as fast as a lady-clerk—and watch her walk. She could earn her living as a mannikin."

Both girls looked after Ursula with respectful admiration, as she passed from sight beyond the belt of lilacs.

On the front lawn Girdlestone, the gardener, was making a job for himself by walking over the severely-shorn grass and then rolling out his own footsteps.

He stopped gratefully as Ursula paused beside a bed of wallflowers and forget-me-nots.

"Just come to their prime," he remarked. "I'll have them all out to-morrow, for the summer bedding."

"Pity," said Ursula.

"Aye, but that's wot a garden is. You got to live always in the future with a garden. . . . Them wallflowers smell extry strong this year. That's because there's so many colours. It's the colour wot makes the smell."

"Do you know everything, Girdlestone?" asked Ursula.

"I know all wot counts with a garden. What's more, I got green fingers, so that wot I plants, *grows*."

Ursula laughed as she looked up at the sky, which was burning blue and lightly veined with white.

"Lucky it's turned out fine after the fog," she said. "I'm going over to Mallow, this afternoon."

The gardener looked up with interest, and then spat.

"Don't you trust the weather, Miss. To-day's a breeder."

"But there's not a cloud in the sky."

"They'll come and bring company with them."

"Well, I'm going, all the same, as far as the Churn House."

"The Churn House?" echoed Girdlestone. "Mr. Pool—the gentleman wot works for Humber—told me an odd thing about the garden there. . . . Seems

as there was a patch of turf wot had turned sour, so they spaded it up. And while it was lying fallow for a bit it sprouted all over with pansies. Old Martin—the man wot bought the Churn House—says as how the seed must have been near a hundred and fifty year old, for the lawn had been there for all that time.”

Girdlestone was gratified by the reception of his tale.

“That’s really marvellous. . . . Are the pansies still there?”

“Aye. They left them for the season, just for curiosity.”

“Oh, I *must* see them.”

“But they’re just plain purple, Miss, and middling small.”

“Yes. But it’s rather thrilling to see the same flowers that other people saw. I mean, the people who lived there, long ago.”

In her heart, Ursula was murmuring, “Probably Witch Ursula saw them. It’s a link.”

“Do you believe in witches, Girdlestone?” she asked suddenly.

He hurriedly felt in his trousers pocket, where he kept his charms. Ursula had been shown the grubby nutmeg which warded off lumbago, although she had been spared the sight of the triple strands of sewing-cotton which encircled his waist.

“Aye,” he nodded. “I *do*. Plenty of ’em about to-day. This ’ere Chancellor’s a wizard, and that’s a gentleman-witch. I seen it in the paper.”

“A wizard at figures, I suppose?”

“Aye, a wizard. Don’t have nothing to do with witches, Miss. ’Tain’t safe.”

"But I am only going to visit a witch's house. The witch, herself, has been dead for a very long time."

"Witches don't never die," grumbled Girdlestone.

He was still grumbling, and spitting his distrust, when Ursula flitted through the garden-gate, drawn by the sight of the Downs, lying green and misty in the distance.

The Pykes lived in the new residential quarter which was cropping up half-way up the hill-side. It consisted of modern residences, where the architect had let himself rip with beam and rough-cast, gable and lattice-window. These houses were in great demand, for they had every electric labour-saving device, besides garages, extra bathrooms and landscape-gardening.

Ursula admired the stately houses in Regency Square ; but she was too modern not to appreciate progress as expressed in domestic architecture. Her chief complaint was the Elizabethan inspiration of their design.

"Why go back?" she demanded. "I would prefer something futuristic, however ugly, without corners or chimneys, and shooting up, like a pointing finger."

The road, however, always delighted her by the trick it played. It began as a normal suburban road, polished as a skating-rink, and complete with green lamp-posts and a red pillar-box.

And then, suddenly, without warning, it swooped away from the houses and dipped down among the Downs, descending in such sharp zig-zags, that the chalky bones of the hill were visible, at every turn, where it had rubbed its grassy covering thread-bare.

Ursula was always reminded of those formal trees at Kew Gardens, which carry their visiting-cards, by

the sight of lamp-posts backed by hawthorn-trees and asphalt road coiling, like a black river, between banks of turf.

It led down to the sea-walls, where the sluggish tidal tail of the estuary flowed toward the town. But, when she was half-way down, Ursula branched off on to the grass, heading for the low white building of the golf-house, visible a mile away.

The Downs were not the flat levels they appeared from the hill-side. Her path led her over many a rise and hollow, where lingered pockets of chill air, left by the morning fog.

She walked along slowly and without spring. Usually her mind leaped ahead in joyous recognition of sight and sound. But to-day the sun, scorching from the cloudless sky, seemed to be drawing the trouble, which throbbed within her mind, to a head.

"Introspection's a murky thing," she thought. "It's like trying to see oneself in a distorting-mirror, all broad and short, or tall and thin. But it's no good—it's on my brain to-day. . . . I've gone wrong, and it must be my own fault. I do wish I could find out where I have failed."

Much money had been spent on her, for Mrs. Pyke was a woman with a modern outlook. Had she been born twenty years later she would have found another vent for her energy other than the collection of husbands. She would have run an hotel or a night-club—controlled a cinema or a shop.

Her daughter's talents delighted her no less than her beauty. While she considered that every woman should possess a husband, as a useful asset to fall back upon, she wanted Ursula to have a career, as well.

The child had an intelligence which was voracious, and she was crammed with education, like a Strasburg goose. Right up to the end of her college days, she breathed an atmosphere of success. Failure was a pallid spectre which faded in the glare of her perpetual sunlight. She was always happy and confident, and only the sweetness of her nature saved her from being cocksure.

The first breach in her armour was dented by a girl whom she met at her club, and of whom she made a friend. This girl possessed great enthusiasm and originality. She was a London B.A., and was then managing a branch-shop of a large dairy combine, with a view to working her way up to the testing and experimental departments.

"My life-job is to preserve the purity of the people's food," she announced.

"Enchanting," agreed Ursula. "My line is duller. It's administration and organisation. I'm entering Ramage's"—she mentioned a huge drapery store—"as an assistant. But, of course, I shall be rushed through the departments. Sir Felix McIver has promised me a billet at the top. He's a relative of mine."

Her friend regarded her with narrowed eyes.

"So you're going to be jockeyed into a big job? What a rotten shame."

"Why?" demanded Ursula. "I can hold it down, and Sir Felix knows it."

"All the same, it's rough on the other employees who have years of experience which they consider more valuable than any twopenny-farthing degree."

"I shall know how to deal with subordination of staff," said Ursula. "Opposition is stimulating."

Her friend's smile was acid.

"Oh, there'll be nothing like that. On the surface, everything'll be smooth as cream. You'll meet with respect, and even with servility from the lick-spittles who have an axe to grind. But you'll breathe in a constant atmosphere of suspicion and criticism. You'll probably be the best-hated woman in the place."

"I don't believe it," declared Ursula.

The words, however, were a subcutaneous injection which generated the first pangs of doubt. She strained her imagination to see herself in the eyes of those hypothetical shop-assistants, and succeeded only too well. Before long, she waved the Red Flag of rebellion against the system of capitalism.

"It's gross injustice to put me over the heads of more experienced people," she declared, "however qualified I may be by brain, just because I have influence."

It was on these grounds that she turned down Sir Felix' offer, rather to his relief. But, in her own heart, she knew she could never stand the strain.

To be always groping in a fog. Whispers and glances. The remark behind her back—the look she would never see.

Her refusal to go into Big Business was Mrs. Pyke's first disappointment.

She was more jubilant over the second venture, which was the stage. Everyone was agreed that Ursula had every qualification—appearance, grace of movement, good memory, clear diction, artistic temperament.

What was even more to the point, she had an excellent home at her back, where she could stay while "resting."

As usual, Ursula put her whole energy into her work. She was gluttonous in her zeal to qualify—slaving at elocution, singing, dancing and fencing, by day, and spending her evenings at the theatre.

Her progress delighted her coaches, and Mrs. Pyke lived on a pinnacle of ambitious hope for her wonderful daughter. It was only Ursula who recognised the fact that, as her talent developed, so her chief asset, her nerve, degenerated into nerves.

She slept badly and was plagued by a recurring dream. It was always about an audience. She saw faces—row upon row of staring, hostile faces.

Presently she began to notice the faces by day, as she grew acutely conscious of the presence of the other students. Hitherto she had accepted them as delightful companions, with whom she shared a common interest. Gradually they became revealed as spiteful critics.

She was appalled by the discovery of the vanity and jealousy which surrounded her. It may be that she struck a specially bad patch in human nature that session, or—what is more probable—that she imagined the greater part of it. But it was certain that she made no real friend.

At first she had been too engrossed in work and excitement to notice her isolation. She believed herself popular because she could always count on companionship for dinner and lunch, until it dawned upon her that she always paid the bill.

Her coaches noticed her increasing slackness and censured her. She resented their criticism. Just to pay them out, she went without her dinner. Did her work on tea, and felt the better for it. Lastly, was reduced to a state of nervous tension, when she shook at her own shadow.

She kept her fears bottled up, so that no one knew the agony she endured during the classes, or how her heart leaped like a wounded bird while she waited for her turn to mount the platform.

Dread of ridicule, and regret for her mother's disappointment, kept her going until the end of the term. In the first flush of her new venture, she had advertised her rejection of any influence to help her in her profession, and of her confidence to make good on her own merit.

Before the annual competition, she discovered a terrible test for her nerves. At the corner of a street, which she passed daily, was a hairdresser's shop. In its window a revolving waxen bust, which displayed the latest fashions in coiffures, was posed against a background of black velvet drapery.

Ursula used to glance daily at its golden hair, its glassy blue eyes and greasy crimson mouth. It gazed back at her with a dummy's blank stare. But she was tormented by the dread that, one day, it would recognise her.

It would have been easier and wiser to avoid passing the hairdresser's shop. But Ursula would never omit this voluntary ordeal. For, so long as the normal order persisted, she knew that all was still well with her.

The day of the awards there was a gale, which drove the dry leaves along the pavements, with the sound of skipping footsteps. A dozen times Ursula turned round in the street to see whether she was followed. As she drew near the hairdresser's shop the wind seemed to be blowing inside her head.

When she reached it, she forced herself to look at the window. The bust stared in front of it—a waxen dummy and no more.

But, even as Ursula half-sobbed in her relief, it slowly turned its head. Its glassy blue eyes split with a gleam of life, and its painted lips parted in a smile.

Ursula knew that no one else saw the transformation, and recognised that she was on the brink of a nervous breakdown.

She went through the test brilliantly, on the very edge of her nerves, and was awarded the gold medal for elocution. The same night she crashed, and went into a nursing-home.

When she was better Mrs. Pyke tried to prod her back into the profession.

"You'll make yourself a laughing stock, Ursula. Plenty of girls have nerves; but they turn them to account in their acting."

But Ursula resisted the goad.

"It's no good," she declared. "I made a mistake, and I must face it. I've got the wrong temperament for the stage."

The experience had done her no good. She became aloof, and shrank completely into her shell, until, bored by being shut up with herself, she began to write a novel.

Mrs. Pyke did not advertise the fact. She was conscious that Ursula's facile talents, by their diversity, were tending to make her ridiculous.

Each seemed but another short-cut to fresh failure.

"Is your daughter an artist, *too?*" was one tender inquiry.

"She paints everything but her face," snapped Mrs. Pyke, staring pointedly at the raddled face of the speaker.

In her own heart, she did not think the fiction venture worthy of consideration, and Ursula rarely

alluded to it. She was still sore with disappointment and only realised it as a safety-valve for emotion.

Already her joy of life was flooding back—her eager acceptance of each day as a treasury brimming with gifts.

And then arose the fresh complication of marriage. Mrs. Pyke wanted her daughter to marry Sir Miles Humber, and Ursula's instinct told her that the choice was wise.

Only—Barney stood in the way.

Ursula walked faster over the tufts of turf, where small blue butterflies were flitting.

"I know how mother feels about it," she thought. "She wrote 'Lady Humber' on a visiting-card, yesterday, to show me how dignified it looked. And she's right. Miles is a darling. I'd be safe with him."

One side of her nature yearned for him, and also for the security and prestige of her position as his wife. In comparison with Humber Court, the new house on the hill was but a gilded pillbox.

"It would be lovely to see mother's face when I told her," she exulted. "I'd be her white-headed girl again."

But her consideration of Sir Miles' wealth reproached her as disloyalty to Barney. She thought of his charm and sweetness—a sweetness which, unfortunately, was only too wholesale.

Yet, after each digression, he always returned to her.

"If I only could be sure that he really cared for me," she thought wistfully.

The whole affair seemed a maze of cross-roads and side-issues—shifting desires and conflicting purposes—complications and deadlock.

And she was imprisoned in the middle of it—struggling and perplexed.

“I cannot understand it,” she cried aloud. “I have everything—yet nothing. I seem to be under a Curse.”

A Curse, when everyone envied her her luck? She laughed at the bare idea.

“It’s because I care too much,” she thought. “People are always in my way, and I want to please them all. Mother, Miles, Barney. It’s a mistake to love intensely. No one can be great if they consider others. Oh, why was I born soft? Next time I hope I will be ruthless and trample people underfoot.”

She stooped to pick up a beetle which had turned-turtle on its back, and to remove it from the danger of the path.

CHAPTER V

CHERRY

THE soft turf under her foot hardened to grassy ruts, and Ursula realised that she had reached the entrance to the golf-house.

She frowned slightly, wondering why a sudden shadow had blown over the brightness of the day. Tracing it to its source, she found herself thinking of Cherry.

Cherry played an excellent game of golf, for her swing was clean and her eye true. Consequently, she was popular with the members of the Club, and Barney had partnered her in many a foursome.

It was true that he played sometimes with Ursula; but his manner was suggestive of a famous woman tennis champion, who keeps on her wrap to dispose of a negligible opponent. He gave the impression of playing with only a corner of his mind on his stroke.

Since Cherry had come to the town Ursula wished, for the first time, that she were better at games. They did not interest her and she considered them waste of time. As the links seemed deserted, she suddenly decided, for Barney's sake, to put in a little practice.

She turned the corner of the building, only to stop with the instinctive recoil and quickening of the breath which always assailed her at the sight of Cherry.

At the sound of her footsteps, Cherry turned her head. Her eyes narrowed with dislike and distrust. Ursula was hatless, and wore a wispy silk frock and thin shoes, as though in contempt of the convention of golf.

Cherry had no use for Ursula, who was a rabbit at games, and gave herself foul airs, just because she had the richest man in the county sitting in her pocket. Cherry would like to plunder Sir Miles herself but there was no earthly with Ursula blocking the suit. That was an expensive dress she was wearing, but, all the same, she looked scaly with her white face. Too superior to put on a spot of make-up. And what the hell was she doing here, at this time? Waiting for Sir Miles or poaching on Cherry's preserves.

She smiled at Ursula, who smiled back at her.

"Sweet frock," observed Cherry.

"I love yours," said Ursula.

The exchange of compliments was the salute before the duel. They crossed foils, even as they looked at each other.

Cherry was dressed rather like one of a sporting chorus of a Revue; she wore a brief white kilted skirt, with a scarlet handkerchief knotted over one shoulder and red socks rolled over her snowy buckskin shoes. The sun shone down upon her silver-blond hair, converting it to a glory of Nature, but, under the shadow of her eye-shade, her face was over-rouged to the hue of a carnation.

She remarked with satisfaction, that the strong light made Ursula look bleached as a wood-anemone.

"You look foul," she said. "Ill?"

"No, quite well. I expect it's the green."

"Yes, it's a perilous colour. You want a dairy-maid complexion, from contented cows, to wear that shade."

Ursula flinched before Cherry's merciless blue stare.

"I couldn't sleep last night," she explained.

"Rotten for you," murmured Cherry.

"It is rather. I—I get such horrible dreams."

"Do you. That's what comes of having a brain. *I* never dream at all."

"Then you're lucky." Ursula looked at Cherry wistfully. "Shall we play round together?" she asked, with a sudden urge for company.

She wanted to like Cherry. The younger girl was so pretty and healthy, with her short impudent nose and wide mouth that was made for laughter. A round of golf with her would blow away the cobwebs and put an end to her unworthy jealousy.

Cherry shook her head rather too quickly.

"Sorry—but I'm fixed up."

With whom? Ursula felt the quiver of her nerves, but dared ask no question.

"I'm just killing time, myself," she said. "So I thought I'd play a hole or two, for practice."

"Oh." Cherry raised her eyebrows. "Do you find that any good. *I* have to play regularly, or I lose my form."

"Yes? But golf's only a side-line with me."

Against her own will, Ursula tilted her chin with disdain. In return, Cherry let her see that she was making an effort to remember something.

"Ah, that reminds me. How's the famous book getting on?"

"Finished some time ago."

"Good. . . . I never understand why you *write*. So dull. I'd rather act."

"And yet you do neither. Pity."

The buttons were off the foils. Cherry's angry colour was high under her paint.

"My people wouldn't let me go on the Stage," she said. "But I could go on, to-morrow, if I wanted to. I can sing and dance. And I won the bronze medal for elocution at the Guildhall."

"Excellent. I got the gold. Rather pretty, aren't they?"

"Liar," said Cherry's blue eyes. "Then what made you chuck acting?" she asked.

"I'll show it you. Remind me some time." Ursula answered Cherry's eyes first.

But she felt cheapened by her own boast.

"Why do I always sink to her level?" she thought. "She brings out the worst in me."

"I gave up acting because I realised I hadn't the necessary nerve," she explained. "Feeble of me—but I couldn't stand the faces."

"What faces?"

"The audience?"

"That's a queer reason. Most actresses are afraid of empty stalls."

"I know. But writing's rather amusing. It's an outlet for my imagination. When I was a child, I used to be an awful little liar."

"Yes, we can all tell the tale. I say—you *did* win that medal? I mean—well, there's no need for you to go in for anything, is there?"

"Why not?" asked Ursula.

"Oh, you're one of the luckies. Everyone says you're going to marry Sir Miles Humber."

"I haven't said it, for one."

"We never do. Directly it's settled, we contradict it in the papers, just to confound the gossip-writers, and then send in the formal announcement for the next issue."

Ursula frowned.

"But I'm sincere. I'm not engaged—yet. Sometimes, I think I shall never marry."

Her eyes grew strained, as though she were trying to look into a misted future. But Cherry was not listening to her. Her face lit up, and her hard young lips softened into curves, as a school of Sealyham puppies came into sight, padding over the turf with their short legs, and keeping to heel of a tweed-clad girl.

Ursula recognised her as Enid Hill, the daughter of a retired colonel in the Indian Army. She was rarely at home, however, for she held down a position as private secretary in a Rubber Company.

She was small and slight, with enormous brown eyes. In spite of her appealing appearance, however, she was sharp as a needle in straightening out any business snag, and the most accomplished liar in London over the telephone.

Whatever she thought of the inequality of fate which tied her to a desk, when her own aim was a leisured life, she betrayed nothing of her feelings to the two idle girls, who were propping up the walls of the golf-house.

She greeted them with her unfailing smile, while Cherry held out her hands in invitation to the puppies.

"Oh, the angels. Come to me, sweets, come to mother. There, there, have a heart, darlings. Don't quite eat me up."

She was half-knocked over by the rush of small dogs, leaping at her, barking frantically, and licking her hands and face.

"Be careful," cried Ursula, "they'll tear your lace."

"My—*what?*" asked Cherry, staring at her.

Ursula looked at her with a dazed expression in her eyes.

"How curious," she said. "Do you know, for one moment I got the impression that you were dressed in a sort of Dorothy Vernon green riding-habit, with a lot of bunchy lace petticoats."

"Petticoats? Me?" Cherry spun round in her short skirt, revealing the shorts of sports convention. "Whatever made you imagine that?"

"I don't know."

Ursula coloured to her eyes.

"You must think I'm mental," she said. "I—I spoke without thinking."

Cherry dropped down to her knees again, to worship the puppies.

"Are they yours?" she asked of Enid.

"No. My sister breeds them, to make pocket-money, poor darling. They're a full-time job, so, as I'm home on holiday, I'm exercising them for her."

"I think that's sweet of you," said Ursula impulsively.

Enid took the compliment without enthusiasm.

"Don't *you* care for dogs?" she asked.

"Oh yes."

Ursula's voice was constrained. She was longing to caress those fat lumps of puppies, but experience had taught her that it would not be a success. Probably she infected animals with her own nerves,

for, although her nature was essentially gentle, they either shrank from her, or snapped.

"I adore them," said Cherry, picking up a double armful of dogs, and kissing their heads. "When I marry, this is the sort of family for me."

"Oh, I adore babies, too," put in Enid quickly.

"You may keep them," laughed Cherry. "Generous I am."

As she spoke, Ursula was rent with a pang of vision. Suddenly she felt sure that this would be also Barney's choice. She could not picture him in the meek shackles of domesticity. He and Cherry were matched. They would make the typical modern couple that romps together through life, until the crash, and then, as lightly, drifts apart. Without regrets.

"He belongs to her," she thought. "What am I doing with him? I'm outside."

"Well," remarked Enid, "speaking of marriage, there's only one serious proposition in this neighbourhood. And that's Sir Miles Humber."

Her soft brown eyes were unfriendly as they rested on Ursula.

"And he's yours, isn't he, darling?" asked Cherry.

"I've told you he's not."

Ursula spoke vehemently in her anxiety to clear the air. The other two girls were not only united over the puppies, but were solid in their resentment of herself.

But she was tired of admiration and of jealousy—of standing aloof on her pedestal, a target for their criticism. She only wanted to make one of three ordinary girls, laughing and chatting in the sunshine.

Enid changed the subject with a shrug.

"Who's going to Lady Piper's party?"

"Gosh, I'm not," declared Cherry. "Going to try out my new car."

"Lucky girl to have a car," sighed Enid. She turned to Ursula. "You?"

"Yes, if we get back from Mallow, in time."

"We?"

"Miles and I."

Ursula spoke without realising her admission, until she noticed the cloud on Cherry's face.

"You do get a good time, don't you?" she grumbled.

"Much the same as other girls," replied Ursula.

Enid shook her head as she whistled to the puppies.

"Ring me up, and I'll help you exercise them," called Cherry, as she glanced at her watch.

"Are you waiting for anyone?" asked Ursula.

"Yes. My boy."

"Your caddie?"

"No, Barney, blast him."

Ursula was frightened by her own rush of jealousy. She felt it physically as a hot thick taste in her mouth, like blood.

"Yours?" She made an effort to speak lightly. "I thought Barney was general property."

"Yes, he's rather wholesale," grinned Cherry. "But he has his points. Look at this. I won it from him, in a private match. I'm playing top of my form, just now, with all this practice."

She held out her wrist to display a minute platinum watch, with almost invisible figures, set in a bracelet.

Ursula forced herself to glance at it.

"Adorable. When are you expecting him?"

"He's overdue. Curse him, he's always late."

Ursula turned quickly away.

"I must go," she said.

"No, wait and see Barney. He loves an audience when he plays."

"But I'm meeting him later."

The words sprang to Ursula's lips, but she checked them.

"I can't trust Cherry," she thought. "If she knows, she'll keep him from me, on purpose. And if he goes away without seeing me, I—I can't go on."

Scarcely knowing what she did, she swung open the gate and hurried into the sanctuary of the lane.

"I can't stand it." The veins were beating in her temples. "He wouldn't take me to Mallow, because of *her*. I'd have broken a hundred engagements for him. He's been playing golf with her, all his time. She said so. 'All this practice.' That's why I've seen so little of him, of late."

Her head seemed bursting as she walked faster, her limbs mechanically responding to the spur of her thoughts.

"She doesn't care for Barney. She envies me, instead. She wants to get Miles, for his wealth. She's only a gold-digger. But what's the good of that to me? Barney will care all the more, just because she's indifferent. It's like me and Miles. He's mine, because I don't care if he comes, or goes. Poor Miles. Poor darling. You *can't* keep a man if you care."

There was a singing darkness in her brain that frightened her. Images and thoughts flocked through her mind, so that, to try to escape them, she began to run.

The lane led downhill, and was arched with tall elms, whose roots sprawled across the path, causing her to stumble. Stones slipped under her flying feet.

The thick hot rush in her throat choked her, like the pressure of a hand.

The incline grew steeper. The roofs of the town, lying below, were rushing up, to meet her.

Surely, yesterday—or a hundred years ago—she had run down just such a lane—choking and gasping for air. It had all happened before. There were familiar flashes of light before her eyes—followed by patches of darkness—distress-signals from her liver. A sharp pain screwed through her chest. Her lungs laboured as though they were waterlogged.

But she could not escape from Cherry.

“I hate her. I wish I could harm her. He’s with her now. They’re playing together. Laughing together. I wish I had the power to stop their game. Oh, let it rain. Let it pour down——”

Ursula stopped, as she passed the last elm and came out into the open.

The sky was no longer a fleckless azure plain, but was covered with thick white clouds, which split, momentarily, to reveal a fissure or pool of blue.

She stood for a second, gazing upwards fearfully, as though she doubted the evidence of her eyes.

Then she burst into a peal of healing laughter.

“It’s Girdlestone’s storm. He said to-day was a breeder, and he’s right. . . . Oh, what a *fool* to get worked up about nothing at all. Just a game of golf. . . . And I’ll see Barney very soon. It will all come right.”

CHAPTER VI

CONTACTS

WHEN town swallows country there remain undigested lumps of brick-field, allotment, or municipal rubbish-dump. Ursula walked quickly past these eyesores, and turned into a street where tall grey houses squeezed together in a row, giving the impression of worthy sanity unjustly laced into a strait-waistcoat of grimed bricks.

Magnolia Terrace was very respectable. The long flights of steps were freshly stoned to a yellow-ochre tint. There were clean Nottingham lace curtains at every window, and pots of Jewish geraniums. Although most of them were boarding-houses, not one displayed a card with "APARTMENTS," for Magnolia Terrace had the pride of better days.

It connected with Regency Square by a paved passage, guarded with posts at either end, and locally known as "Balaam's Passage."

There was an echo here; as Ursula walked down it, someone, in the distance, tapped along, on high heels, to meet her. She was too used to this invisible companion to notice it; but, to-day, it reminded her of the shadowy Ursula Pike of long ago.

"I can't believe she was a real girl," she reflected. "I wonder what she was like. What sort of things did she eat, and what clothes did she wear? Those old costumes in the Museums are usually too faded

to register much reality. I can never imagine people inside them. . . . Well, Ursula probably said her prayers every night, but I'm pretty sure she didn't brush her teeth, or take a bath more than twice a year."

Regency Square always delighted her with its stately houses of buff stucco—their long windows, pillared porches and delicate fanlights. There rentals were about half those of the new residential quarter on the hill, for there were no labour-saving appliances, and every kind of domestic drawback.

But in spite of basements-kitchens, which ate labour, and the Arctic cold in winter, some of the best families of the town were faithful to their glories of spacious room and crystal chandelier.

It was a place of echoes and memories—of dim elegance and formal tradition. Funerals and objectionable traffic were barred, and no barrel-organ might play in the square.

It was built around a green enclosure, shaded by horse-chestnuts, now bearing spikes of pink and white blossom. In the middle was an oval pond, with a cement bottom and opaque brown water, which gave a spurious impression of depth.

When she was two years old Ursula was nearly drowned in the pond, having fallen out of her perambulator when her nurse was pre-occupied with a novel about a sheik.

It was her earliest recollection, which she verified by her minute details of her rescue. Yet she and her mother always quarrelled about one point. Ursula vowed that she could distinctly remember being entangled in water-weeds, whereas, as Mrs. Pyke pointed out, the pond had never contained anything

more than a couple of goldfish and an ornamental fountain.

As she passed through the square, Ursula looked at the oval surface, sepia in the shadow of the trees.

"Mother's wrong," she thought. "I know the exact slimy feel of the long stems I gripped. . . . Yet she's right, too, about the pond. Nothing could ever grow there. It's very confusing."

Not far from Regency Square was the sea-wall, on the other side of which flowed the river. It was tidal, and usually thick with sediment from the estuary, which coloured its water to the hue of cocoa.

In the middle of the town it was spanned by a picturesque roofed wooden bridge. Ursula loved to lean over its parapet and watch the soupy current as it foamed over the weir.

This morning, as she hung over the rail, half-hypnotised by the glassy brown slide, she was recalled to her surroundings by a voice.

"I wonder what it feels like to be drowned."

She turned, and saw a tall, rather shambling youth, with a red cowlick of hair over his eyes and horn-rimmed glasses. He wore disreputable tweeds, and owned a battered motor-cycle, yet his accent was that which is usually connected with education at Oxford.

Her instinct was to walk away from the bridge, for she was only too accustomed to being asked the time by susceptible and hopeful strangers. But there was something so impersonal about the youth's tone that she was drawn to response.

"I never thought about it," she said reflectively.

"Hum. Shouldn't imagine it's too bad." The stranger sniffed the stale river-smell. "I believe, in

its penultimate stage, it is rather like taking chloroform."

"Aren't you rather morbid?" asked Ursula.

"Because I'm talking of death? We're both young, so we're too far away from it to find it anything but a topical and interesting subject. Controversial—but no one can contradict our theories."

"I hate the very thought of it." Ursula shuddered. "To be—nothing."

"That's because you've got the wrong type of mind," argued the stranger. "Death should present no terrors. Even at the end of life we're too close to it to be able to see it properly, like a cheap seat at the pictures. . . . By the way, how the talkies have pervaded our outlook, and similes."

"All the same, I'd sooner talk about life," persisted Ursula.

"Life? Well, I'll tell you all about that ninety years hence. Or rather, I would if I were vocal. And I've too much sense of the ridiculous to return to bang a blooming table."

"Do you mean we know nothing about life so long as we're alive?" asked Ursula.

"I do."

"Well, it's enough for me just to be alive." The glow returned to Ursula's eyes, lighting her face like a concealed torch. "I know of nothing more wonderful than a new day. . . . Someone was talking to me, only this morning, on the possibilities of every hour, and our influence on the people we meet. The—the things we say and do, and the infinite ramifications and complications. I—I can't explain."

"Don't try to. I can get your meaning at once

if you don't try to edit yourself. . . . Yes, I get you. . . . Where am I, though?"

The stranger drew a dirty map from his breast-pocket and unfolded it from its creases.

"Can I help?" asked Ursula. "I'm a native."

"Then you have my sympathy. Glad I'm just crashing through. This place positively reeks of the past."

Ursula loved Regency Square too well to defend it to a stranger.

"The tradespeople live on its historic interest," she informed him. "It draws tourists."

"Didn't draw me. The only past history that appeals to me is my own. I'm sufficient mystery to myself."

"Mystery? In what way?"

"Because I've forgotten most of the things which have happened to me. So have you. I'm a man of mystery and you're a woman of mystery. We're like icebergs—seven-eighths of us submerged in the past."

"But I can remember back to the time I was two," objected Ursula.

"You can't. You can only remember outstanding facts and unimportant trifles, which have stuck. But think of the vast bulk of forgotten incidents in your life, people you've met, short journeys, entertainments, illnesses of the cold-and-headache nature, conversations and so. . . . You've forgotten a lot of yesterday already."

"I've not."

"You have. Assuming you have a small social circle, you may imagine you can remember everybody you've met. But I bet you've forgotten the casual encounters, such as the postman or baker. And you couldn't give a complete sequence of every action or repeat the gist of a conversation."

"No . . . I suppose not."

"Well—there you are." The red cowlick waved on his brow, to register his triumph. "If a portion of yesterday is already washed away, what of last week, last month, or last year?"

Ursula felt the hot wood of the rail under her silken sleeve, as she floated outwards with the drift of the water.

"I rather like your idea," she said dreamily. "It might explain much in life that puzzles us. When we're up against some injustice, it may be the consequence of some forgotten action of our own."

"Quite. In fact, the only people with phenomenal memories are the witnesses in murder-trials. Nothing *they* forget, from the laundry-mark on a man's handkerchief to the exact tick of the clock, when they lightly swear away his life, in the glow of the lime-light."

The stranger ruffled his hair to a jagged flaming crest.

"Well, I think I have seen all I can, in this burg," he remarked. "The new reservoir is dam' good. And I should like to congratulate you on your sewage-farm."

Ursula laughed.

"So you're an engineer?"

"And proud of it. The engineer has got hold of the right end of the stick in the matter of the public health. We leave every place better than we find it—good water mains, drainage, and so on. But the doctor, poor devil, has to patch up evils which should not exist at all."

He broke off to groan.

"Lord, what will posterity think of the ghastly sewer of the twentieth century?"

He turned almost fiercely on Ursula, his snarl cutting into her laughter.

"Surely *you* don't imagine you are civilised?" he asked.

"I did. As a matter of fact, I was thinking, a little time ago, of a girl I know. At least, she lived in the eighteenth century. But I was wondering how on earth she got on without telephones or bath-salts."

"Just as some girl will be thinking of *you* a hundred years hence," jeered the stranger.

Ursula opened her eyes wider in her surprise.

"What's wrong with me?" she asked.

He looked at the fine grain of her petal-white skin, the fresh carmine of her lips, and the greeny silken frock. She presented a picture of modern fashion subdued to fastidious beauty.

"Nothing wrong that I can see," he replied, "except that you are contemporary with your age. Figuratively speaking, a girl from the future would consider you lousy."

As Ursula gasped, the youth enlarged his theme with relish.

"Posterity will view us as living in a cesspool of ignorance, vice and disease. Our societies for punishing cruelty to children and animals. Suicides of able-bodied men, unable to get work. Hospitals filled with disease engendered by such conditions as whole families living in one room. . . . And that's only a bit for you to bite on."

"Don't," pleaded Ursula. "Not—to-day."

But the youth was wound up. He pointed to a boy with a large, misshapen head, who was ambling along the bridge, smiling vacantly and dribbling.

"*That*, for instance. Why keep it alive, when we breed more than we can feed? That idiot's done some kid out of a square deal. His survival is a blot on our civilisation."

Ursula shrank from him, her eyes filled with pity.

"*Poor* little thing," she murmured. "It may be glad to be alive."

"We have no evidence as to his feelings. He'll probably grow into a criminal lunatic and murder some wretched child, before he's locked up, at enormous cost to the country."

"Yes, yes." Ursula's voice was petulant. "I know you are right. But, all the same, I hate your views. They are cruel."

The stranger merely smiled as he glanced at his watch.

"Well, we've had rather a decent chat. Odd that we don't speak to each other until we've been introduced. But this is the only real way to enjoy conversation. Mind just brushing mind. We're just contacts."

Ursula looked at him speculatively.

"If someone introduced you to me, what would you do?" she asked.

"Tilt my cap elegantly and scorch off like the devil."

"Flattering."

"Quite flattering. If I were going to meet you again my freedom of self-expression would be throttled. In general conversation with acquaintances we're so afraid of dropping a brick, or saying something which may be repeated in the wrong quarter."

"But don't you care to know people?" Ursula asked curiously.

"Barring the rare accident of a friend, no. . . . But, I must be pushing on, an explosive, offensive

atom, eating up the road, and one of the abuses of the twentieth century."

"Good luck," said Ursula. "I must be going, too."

"What are *you* doing to-day?" he asked.

"I'm going to look up that girl I told you of—or, rather, the house she lived in. I want to see if any witchcraft lingers in the rooms, and what she has left behind her. I believe in atmosphere, you know. She's some sort of ancestress of mine, so she might reveal herself to me. By the way, she was drowned as a witch."

The stranger pulled down his lip.

"Well, *she* could have told us what drowning feels like," he said, "Good-bye, Contact. I don't know your name and don't want to. So, to put a spice of interest into our conversation, you might tell me something personal and private about yourself. I'll respond in kind. It's not done, so let's do it."

Ursula's eyes shone in welcome of the unexpected element.

"Are you *sure* we'll never meet again?" she asked.

"Dead sure. You needn't look in the Agony Column for 'Will the young person in green who held a conversation with a handsome and distinguished stranger', and so on."

"Then, I'll tell you," said Ursula. "Because it's really strange that you've asked. But—to-day's a peak in my life. I have to make a decision which will decide my future."

"Two men?"

"How quick you are. . . . Yes. One is what people call 'no good to anyone'. But—he's all the meaning of life to me. All the same, I have to

recognise this fact. He's spoiling everything for me."

"Good chap. What about the other?"

"Oh, he's worth-while. I ought to marry him. But—it's the other I want."

"You would. Any complication?"

"Yes. Another girl."

"Hate her?"

"I do, in one way." Ursula frowned in doubt. "But, in another I don't want to hurt her. . . . Now, it's your turn."

The stranger straddled his motor-cycle.

"Well," he said, "I'm the sort of ass, who, when I was up at Oxford, with a lot of other chaps, thought and talked about every blessed subject until we boiled the bottom out of things. Nothing seemed worth while but new sensation. We grew to think both life and death cheap affairs. . . . Lately, things have gone a bit wrong, financially and otherwise. So, I came to the river, to find out, for myself, the truth about drowning."

Ursula's eyes were horrified.

"Suicide?" she whispered.

He nodded.

"Seemed rather a lark to me. Life has no special appeal. All the same, I was going to toss up for it, as I'm biased in favour of chance decisions. You get a kick out of the spin of a coin."

Ursula put her hand on his arm.

"But you won't, now?" she asked.

"No fear." The stranger laughed. "Wait and hear the rest. I came to the bridge, and saw you. Now, I can sum up types, and you are emphatically *not* the kind of girl that talks to strangers. So I thought

—‘I’ll speak to her. If she responds, it’s off. If she freezes me out, I’ll do it.’”

“But that wasn’t fair,” cried Ursula. “It was only by the hundredth chance I did not walk away.”

“I knew that. It was damned unfair. But—the fates were against me—or for me.”

His last words were lost in a roar, as, without parting salutation, he scorched explosively away.

Yet, even while the smile lingered on Ursula’s lip, he returned to the accompaniment of another thunderous snarl.

He read the disappointment in her eyes.

“It’s all right, Contact. I don’t want to know your name. I only wanted to wish you good luck.”

The next moment he was gone, leaving Ursula feeling limp in the vacuum caused by the withdrawal of an electric personality.

“I wonder if he spoke the truth,” she said, smiling at the thick brown water.

CHAPTER VII

THE BIRD AND THE BABY

URSULA was still smiling when she left the bridge. But, as she turned into the street which led up to the town, her face clouded at a perennial source of trouble—a caged wild bird.

It moped in a corner of a small wicker-work cage, which hung in the window of a general shop. She looked at it, and then quickly averted her eyes as she walked past.

“What’s the good? They’d only catch another. It’s like trying to stop the tide.”

A few yards farther, she hesitated, and finally retraced her steps.

“I’ll only be wretched if I don’t rescue it,” she decided. “That curious youth was right. We’re not civilised yet.”

As she entered the dark smelly shop, where cheese, soap, candles and cooked meats were piled together, she shuddered.

“Flies crawling over the people’s food. . . . Whatever’s that gristly stuff, I wonder?”

Engrossed in speculation, she pointed it out to the shopkeeper.

“What’s that?”

“Same to-day as it was yesterday,” he replied tartly, evidently suspecting her of a curious form of humour. “Tripe. How much d’you want?”

"Oh, none, thank you," said Ursula.

"Then what have you come in for? To know the time?"

"No. I want to buy that bird and cage."

Two minutes later Ursula went out of the shop, leaving her reputation for sanity behind her.

"Now, what shall I do with it?" she thought helplessly. "I feel like Rima, carrying this. . . . Oh, I know. The Gardens."

She followed the sea-wall, walking by the side of the thick, red-brown river, past wharves, lime-works, timber-yards and decrepit buildings. Fortunately, she met few people who took any interest in her; but she turned suddenly at the sound of footsteps pattering in her rear.

To her surprise she saw no one, although she thought she detected a movement behind some piled casks.

"Curious," she reflected. "I could have sworn someone was following me."

She broke off to whistle and chirp to the bird.

"Very soon, now. Sweet, sweet. You're going to fly again."

In imagination, she was inside the cage with the bird, feeling its little heart pant under its feathers, in a passion for the green tree-tops.

"You're frightened now," she told it. "But, very soon, it's going to be all right."

She passed a derelict ship, with slimed sides and rotting timbers, stranded high on a mud-bank. It had one of the old figure-heads—a majestic woman with calm dignified face, who stared down the river, as though she glimpsed, in the distance, the clean green breakers.

"She's hearing the wind and the scream of the gulls," thought Ursula. "I wish I could take her down to the sea again. Everything seems lost or stranded, to-day. All except myself. I don't want to go on. I want to stay here."

Presently the sheds no longer encroached on the road, and the bank rose sheer above her, covered with undergrowth and shaded with trees. At its top were railings which marked the boundary of a public park.

Ursula lowered the cage, but the bird remained huddled in its corner. She caught it gently, and held it fluttering within her hands.

There followed a moment of sharp ecstasy when she unlocked her fingers and the bird flew away to the trees.

"I wonder if the soul bursts free, like that," she thought.

Then she looked around her nervously. No one was in sight. But she could not rid herself of the feeling that someone was hidden in the bushes, watching her.

"I'm nervous to-day," she decided. "The next thing is to destroy this repulsive cage."

She was not a very resourceful person, for, all her life, she had been waited upon by others. While she was looking helplessly around her, her problem was solved by the appearance of two ragged boys, armed with thick sticks.

She called out to them.

"Will you smash this cage for a shilling?"

They stared at her and then nodded.

"Yes, mum."

Then they attacked it with such vigorous fury that made Ursula marvel at the destructive instinct of

mankind. Soon nothing was left of the cage but some shapeless strands of wicker.

"Did you like doing it?" asked Ursula.

"Yes, mum," replied the younger boy. "I bashed it proper."

Ursula produced the shilling.

"Lucky I met you with your big sticks, wasn't it?"

"Yes, mum. We're looking for the witch."

"Witch?" repeated Ursula.

It seemed strange that, after reading a page of bygone history, she should hear of a modern counterpart of her ancestress—Ursula Pike.

"Yes, mum," nodded the boy. "*You* know. The witch wot lives in the Rookery."

Ursula knew the Rookery only by repute. It had an unsavoury reputation, and consisted of a collection of tumbled down houses, clinging to a precipitous slide on the hill-side.

"Some poor eccentric creature, I suppose," she thought.

"I don't call that sporting," she said. "Two of you, with sticks, to come after one poor old woman."

"But she's a witch," repeated the shock-headed boy. "We copped 'er boning my mother's fowl. The gang's arter her."

"What will you do when you find her?" asked Ursula.

"Bash 'er."

He peered down the road.

"She come this way. We seen 'er dodging round them barrels."

Suddenly Ursula remembered the furtive footsteps which had dogged her, and the rustling of the bushes.

She felt positive that the witch lay hidden, only a few yards away.

"She's not here," she said firmly. "Now, why don't you go and spend your shilling?"

At the reminder of his wealth, the elder boy turned, at once, towards the town. But the younger boy was rent with a misplaced zeal for tidiness.

"Teacher says you mustn't never leave no litter, mum. Gimme the old cage and I'll tidy it in them bushes."

As he spoke, he seized the fragments and carried them towards a dusty elder-bush. To Ursula's fancy the twigs stirred slightly, as though a body were writhing underneath.

She thought rapidly.

"I can control two of them, but not a gang. They'll probably whistle them up."

"Stop," she commanded. "What's the witch like?"

The boys looked blankly at each other.

"Dunno," said the elder.

"We don't never look at her," volunteered the younger. "We cross our fingers. She could turn us into black-beetles."

"Her house is full of dead men's bones," gloated the other.

"An' she boils babies."

Ursula hastily produced a second shilling.

"Now you've one each," she told them. "Run off and spend them."

She stood and watched the feathers of dust rising from the scuffle of their broken boots. Then she turned to look at the elder bush.

It was perfectly still. But, again, she felt the scrutiny of invisible eyes.

"It's an uncanny feeling," she thought.

Suddenly she grew uneasy lest the witch should appear. It was possible that she had gained her title by physical deformity. She might even be some abortion of Nature; and Ursula always shrank from ugliness, even while she tried to make pity overcome repugnance.

Humming a tune, to prove her detachment, she toiled up the steep stone steps embedded in the bank, and entered, through an iron gate, the shabby shrubbery at the foot of the Gardens. A twig-littered path wound under the trees up to a playing-field. Birds were chirping in the branches overhead, causing her to look up.

"I wonder if my bird is singing to me. . . . That old witch saw me carrying it. That's why she followed me. She guessed I'd befriend her. But why should these unpleasant duties always come my way? It wouldn't happen to Cherry."

She turned round, but no old crone was hobbling in her rear. Relieved to find that she was accompanied by no double shadow, she walked to the ornamental part of the Gardens—past flower-beds filled with wall-flowers and forget-me-nots, and a fish-pond which lodged two ancient gold-fish—Darby and Joan.

The big gates opened directly to the town. High Street was a jumble of ancient and modern buildings. Following the trend of the other roads, it ran downhill, to the river. Old-fashioned shops, with corpulent bow-windows, rubbed shoulders with modern stores. A cream-and-gold Lyons', a scarlet Woolworth's, with many other branches of well-known firms were shuffled amid the pack of historic timbered buildings.

There was a marked preponderance of cafés, hinting at a feminine population. Artistic tea-shops, with curtains of delphinium-blue or orange and swinging posters announced rival teas—Real Devonshire, Yorkshire or Scottish. Oriental cafés advertised themselves with beaded screens, scarlet crescents and a pungent compound perfume of coffee and smoke.

The whole was a mixture, rather than a blend, but one of brightness and prosperity. One felt that the tradespeople lived well on the patronage of an affluent residential population.

Ursula's heart opened to the warmth and colour of life. She felt full of happiness at being swept along into the human current. Trifles gave her pleasure—the amusing display in a rubber-shop, swollen aquatic animals for sea-riding, and bathing-caps in apple-green, scarlet and yellow.

Through sheer contrast, her conscience began to prick her on behalf of the witch, probably still shaking in the shelter of the bushes.

“I'm a rotter. I've practically deserted her. She's got to get back to the Rookery, and that horrible gang will be out, looking for her. They would seem like a pack of wolves to a poor old woman.”

Then she shook off her uneasiness.

“But she can't be so feeble, for she stalked me cleverly enough. She can look after herself quite well.”

She walked along dreamily, feeling that she was swimming through a haze of sunshine. Sometimes she smiled at some vaguely familiar face, but, for the most part, she drifted by, unconscious of the other pedestrians and unresponsive to recognition.

Probably there was no one who laid herself open to the charge of snobbery more completely than Ursula, and no one more innocent of its spirit.

Heads were turned after her and judgment passed.

“Conceited.”

“Thinks herself Lady Humber already.”

“Ursula Pyke won’t get a chance to cut me twice.”

Serenely unaware, Ursula was thinking about the groups of well-dressed women, who gossiped in groups on the pavement, or round the café tables. She knew, by experience, that they would all be talking of the same things.

First, there were the current items. The weather, the price of food, servants, the length of the skirt. To this list each woman added a special subject, according to her humour—the murder on the front page of the papers, the political crisis, the latest Talking-Picture.

There would, also, be To-day’s Topic, which, on this especial morning, was Lady Piper’s party.

“And yet,” mused Ursula, “there’s the secret current of our thoughts flowing underneath all this chatter. The talk’s the froth. Each person has her own personal problem. And we all wonder about the real things—Origin, Fate, Existence.”

A smile flashed across her face, for she realised that, at the moment, her mind was dwelling solely on food.

With the discovery that she was hungry, she looked at the tempting displays in the café windows. But she turned away from whipped cream, icing and angelica. French pastries and chocolate éclairs made no appeal. The one thing she craved was a plum bun.

These were the speciality of an old-fashioned confectioner. They were diamond-shaped, spiced and sugar-frosted. True to tradition, they were still called penny buns, although their price was twopence-halfpenny.

Ursula began to hurry towards Buzrees', only pausing to admire the display of Cape fruit in a greengrocer's window. Peaches and grapes, whose price, in the case of the forced varieties, would be prohibitive, were brought into line with the purse of the average customer.

"Progress," exulted Ursula.

She started as her name was shouted in a girl's voice.

"Hulloa, Ursula."

Ursula turned, to see the town's youngest married mother.

Jane had been a fellow-pupil at the High School, but she had been in a lower Form and was unpopular by reason of her impudence. She forced herself into the society of the senior girls and could not be snubbed. While she was failing for her Senior Cambridge, she ran away to get married to an undergraduate from Oxford, and their union was speedily blessed with a daughter.

Jane took intense pride in her precocity. The passage of her perambulator through the town was slightly in the nature of a Royal progress—shop-assistants and matrons holding up the traffic as they crowded to admire the baby.

As Ursula looked at Jane she appeared little changed from the insolent child at the High School. Although fashion was already creeping back to Edwardian elaboration, she wore a short white frock, and

was bare-headed, bare-legged and bare-armed. Her chief charm was youth allied to very attractive sunburn.

"Isn't the fruit a criminal price?" she demanded.

"I was just thinking how cheap it was," said Ursula.

"To *you*, perhaps. Not to a matron with a house-keeping allowance? . . . Have you a cig.? I've just run out."

Ursula offered her case, and the youthful parent lit one expertly.

"Thanks. Do you mind if I take a few? . . . See any difference in Baby?"

"She's entirely beautiful," Ursula assured her.

"Positively gross," said Jane proudly. "Heaviest baby in the town. I have her weighed, at the clinic, every week. No beastly pride about me, where health is concerned."

Ursula gazed rather wistfully at the infant, who was of the comfortable sort, pink and bald, with blank blue eyes.

At that moment, she felt envious of Jane.

"I love her aloof expression," she said. "As if she'd been through everything and shed every illusion."

"After-bottle look," explained Jane. "She wants a banana, but I've no change. Can you lend me a tanner?"

Ursula produced a shilling, with a vague wonder why her purse-strings were so persistently unloosed by others.

"Just mind her pram, will you?" asked Jane. "Nothing like getting your hand in, you know."

With a laugh, she swung into the greengrocer's.

The baby accepted her mother's departure with her usual philosophy. She stared after her, evidently approving her errand, and then contentedly blew bubbles while she considered her new nurse.

Ursula smiled at her and spoke in low, tender tones, much as she had consoled the bird.

"Darling, mother's coming back. Very soon."

The baby stared at her more intently. To Ursula's dismay, her pink face grew red as she puckered up her eyes and burst into a loud wail.

The sound of her lamentations brought Jane from the shop in a rush.

"Mercy. What have you done to her?" she demanded.

"I think she was shy with a stranger," replied Ursula.

"My baby's never shy with strangers. I've brought her up to go to everyone." Jane's voice was indignant. "I've never known her to cry with anyone before. Never."

"Then I can only conclude she didn't like me," said Ursula, turning away. "Sorry."

"Oh, I'm not blaming you," conceded Jane. "I expect you were nervous and upset her. There, there, mother's precious."

As she rocked the perambulator, the baby's cries subsided to whimpers. Already a group of sympathisers had gathered around her, and Ursula overheard a strident whisper.

"They always know when people don't like them. *They know.*"

CHAPTER VIII

PENNY BUNS

URSULA'S face burned with anger as she walked blindly on. She was hot at the injustice of the charge, knowing how she had yearned over the baby.

Yet instinct told her that she fanned her indignation in order to distract her thoughts from a cold fear which lay coiled around her heart.

"Why did it cry?" she asked. "I'm not ugly, or noisy. Babies must know that I love them. Yet they always shrink from me."

She thought of the puppies and how she had longed to fondle those fat lumps. Yet she had not dared risk any overtures of friendship.

"Animals, too. Not even Cherry cares for them more than I do. But they hurled themselves on her. They were so eager that they tried to eat her. But if I'd stroked them, they'd have whimpered and run away with their tails between their legs. Why?"

Prudence reminded her that she must not question. It was wiser to rage.

"It's not fair. Cherry doesn't care for children. She doesn't want any. But she'd have tossed the baby into the air and it would have chuckled at her. Everything's easy for Cherry. At this minute she's with him."

She saw them, outlined between turf and sky—Barney with his shallow charm challenging Cherry's

careless response. A well-matched pair—two dragonflies darting in the brief sunlight. She heard their laughter, together with a mental picture of Cherry's flashing teeth and impudent, crinkled features.

It was mental torture which failed in its purpose. Against her will, her mind slid relentlessly back to her secret dread.

"Why are children and animals afraid of me? What is this hidden thing that they see? Am I different from others? Do I carry a mark—a brand?"

A collision with a corpulent matron, complete with market-basket, saved her from her morbid fancies. The woman was so good-natured and had such a jolly laugh over their mutual apologies.

"It's all my imagination," decided Ursula, as she turned into Buzrees', and seated herself in one of the wooden pews. It was a spacious shop, dark from old polished mahogany, with uneven floors and bow windows.

No charming girl in artistic pinafore and long bob came to take her order. A middle-aged woman, dressed in a servant's livery, plumped down a plate of the famous buns upon the table.

As Ursula looked at them the years fell from her, and she became a little long-legged schoolgirl, with flowing ringlets.

"Fuzzy and squashed flies, please," she ordered.

Without change of expression, the waitress nodded, and returned with lemonade and home-made Garibaldi biscuits.

Ursula looked around her as she ate. Buzrees had introduced no change into its confectionery since the shutters were first taken down, before Queen Victoria was born. It refused to admit that there

were such novelties as meringue and ice, and offered for sale queen-cakes, sponge-cakes, buns and jam-tarts.

Yet it never lacked patronage. Its pews were filled with boys from the Grammar School and girls from the High, besides a sprinkling of conservative souls drawn from the best families.

There was no orchestra and little chatter, for Buzree's wares required steady munching. Soothed by the dark security of her corner, Ursula gazed dreamily at the people passing by the bow windows.

"They never stop. They'd look like ants from above. That boy said the witch could turn him into a black-beetle. It must be thrilling to possess Power. To say the Word, and watch the person dwindle. No wonder those ancient people practised sorcery. Only, since the world began, it's only contained modern people. The first cave-woman was as modern in her period, as I am in mine."

Then she frowned slightly as a Rolls blocked her view and a very fashionable lady sailed into the pastry-cook's. It was Lady Piper—her hostess for the afternoon.

She was a personage in the town, by reason of her wealth and personality. Although she was credited with affairs, she entertained on sufficiently lavish scale to scotch any scandal.

Three nationalities had fused to make her beautiful. The frozen sunshine of the North was in her golden hair—while Southern midnights smouldered in her dark, passionate eyes. Lancashire held these two warring elements cannily together, and Paris supplied a coating of French polish.

In spite of her voluptuous appearance, she had the mind of any suburban or little-town woman;

in other words, she was practical, romantic, lawless, domestic, idealistic—an embryonic criminal, ruled by convention and restrained by duty.

As she looked around her—a complacent target for eyes—her glance fell on Ursula. Her beautiful scarlet lips curved in a radiant smile and she sailed towards her corner.

Ursula was surprised at the warmth of her greeting, for she measured herself only by her attainments, or failure, and had no idea of her own attraction. But, as Lady Piper seated herself at her side, she was suddenly aware of a sharp spasm of recoil.

She felt instinctively that Lady Piper was bringing her sorrow.

“Darling, you’re coming this afternoon to my house-warming party,” she cried.

“I couldn’t miss it,” Ursula assured her. “I’m longing to see your new house.”

“It will appeal to *you*. You love futuristic things. It’s better than up to date. It’s the day after tomorrow.”

She beckoned the waitress.

“Bring more buns. And I’ll take this.”

With a superb gesture, she picked up Ursula’s bill. Then she turned to her.

“What were we talking of? Oh, my house. I’ve slaved over it. Gone the round of every Home Exhibition and sucked the brains of architects and inventors. My dear, you should see my shower-bath. It’s Niagara in a scent-spray.”

“I suppose it’s entirely labour-saving?” asked Ursula.

“Yes, it’s run by robots. I don’t mean metal men. I mean we have every electric gadget. I anticipate

a wholesale massacre of servants by electrocution. In fact, I'm terrified myself, for I always press the wrong button."

Ursula's eyes glowed with interest.

"I should love it," she cried. "Have you many coming to the party?"

"As many as I can squeeze in. Not all local people, of course. My reputation is being pulled to shreds, this moment, by those who haven't been asked. Heard the latest about me and the Count? All lies, darling. He's the only one who believes the tale."

Lady Piper paused to bite her plum bun.

"You know, I'm looking forward to coming to your parties at Humber Court," she observed.

Ursula was too used to that kind of remark to protest.

"When Sir Miles marries," she said, "I am sure his wife will consider any party incomplete without you."

"Giving nothing away?" Lady Piper laughed. "Well, what have you been doing with yourself?"

"Making the babies cry."

"Why, don't you care for children?"

Lady Piper's question was an attempt to probe the deeps with the end of her cigarette-holder, only to feel it grate upon the shallows.

"I adore everything young, from new potatoes upwards," Ursula told her. "By the way, it was Jane's baby that objected to me."

"Jane?" Lady Piper grimaced. "Immoral little brute. How soon after did the baby come?"

Ursula made a gesture of impatience.

"What does that matter? She's married and has an adorable baby. I wanted to steal it."

"Why? You'll soon have a nursery of your own."

Ursula shook her head, even while she knew the prediction seemed a certainty. She was both eligible and desired.

Yet, even as she saw her future with Lady Piper's eyes, with the same sharp pang of prescience which rent her on the links, she knew that before her was—nothing

Lost ambitions, dead dreams, unfulfilled hopes—they beat around her, like moths at twilight. She saw little ghosts, like mists rising from sad Autumn fields, and heard their lament in the drag of an ebbing tide.

With a sigh of relief she broke free from the dark jungle of her mind back to the commonplace of the pastry-cook's shop and Lady Piper's voice.

"Darling, do you like my frock? Paris, of course. I flew there yesterday. It's too archaic to go by train. Puts you on a level with people who actually read papers instead of getting their news over the wireless."

"Don't you read?" asked Ursula.

"Heavens, no. And I flatter myself I'm better informed than most people. I collect facts. Travel is the only education. I've just returned from the States. The tenth time I've crossed. I love America. They're alive over there. We're all asleep here and nearly finished."

"Yes, they've been saying that for rather a long time," remarked Ursula. "But, perhaps, they may not last long enough to see the end of us."

"Darling, don't be so patriotic. It's so narrow and makes war. Besides, they gave me a magnificent time over there. Receptions, parties. Imagine it. I lectured to two thousand women on English Social Customs."

Ursula gazed at Lady Piper with wonder, as she remembered her own dread of an audience, which had ruined two careers.

"Weren't you nervous?" she inquired.

Lady Piper laughed heartily.

"Nervous? I? I simply loved it. I haven't a nerve in my body. I should thrive on a diet of publicity."

Ursula rose from her pew.

"You don't know how I envy you," she said. "I must run away now."

To her surprise, Lady Piper drew her back to her seat.

"No," she whispered. "Don't go just yet. Stand in front of me, and keep on talking."

A scared gleam had flickered into her limpid midnight eyes. It was so foreign to the expression of the august lady, who opened bazaars and presided at Committee meetings, that Ursula turned to see the cause.

A meagre elderly woman, with an intellectual forehead and thin lips, had entered the shop. She was dowdily dressed in black, and the finger-tips of her gloves were worn.

As her glinting grey eye fell on Lady Piper she nodded to her.

"How are you?" she asked, in crisp accents.

Lady Piper rose to her feet, shaking the table.

"I'm very well, thank you, Miss Briggs."

"And your husband?"

"He's very well, thank you, Miss Briggs."

The thin lady arched her brows.

"Indeed?" she queried. "I understood, from you, that he was under treatment for nephritis?"

"No, kidneys. I mean—Yes, so he is. But he's very well, otherwise, thank you," explained Lady Piper.

The curl of the elderly lady's lip was her comment on such confused thinking.

"Is your daughter well, too?" she inquired.

Scenting satire, Lady Piper grew scarlet under her rouge.

"Yes, thank you, Miss Briggs. She's coming out, this season, you know."

"No, I did *not* know. Isn't she rather young?"

"Oh, no," replied Lady Piper. "Seventeen-and-a-half."

"And she's finished her education?"

Lady Piper's confusion was pitiable.

"Yes," she stammered. "That is to say— Well, she'll go on with her studies, and all that, you know. But she's such a big girl for her age."

"Quite. Good morning."

Miss Briggs nodded curtly and spoke to the waitress.

"Half a pound of ginger biscuits, please."

Lady Piper continued to watch her out of the corner of a fascinated eye. She did not relax until the insignificant spinster had left the shop. Then she heaved a deep sigh as she drew out her puff and mirror.

"Heavens, I'm positively streaked. I felt my face leak. But she simply terrifies me."

"Who is she?" asked Ursula.

"My old head mistress at the high school," explained Lady Piper.

As she applied an expert lipstick she became confidential.

"She used to be sarcastic to me, in Form, because I was in trade. In those days, the only kind of money that was respectable was dead money—I mean inherited money. Living money, which your parents were making, was only fit to pay school-bills with. She was a snob because she is Canon Briggs' sister. She retired, ages ago, and she keeps house for him."

"And now you have everything and she has nothing," said Ursula. "Time's revenge."

Lady Piper shook her head.

"No, she still terrifies me, even after all these centuries. I'd run a mile rather than pass her in the street. Isn't it odd that one human being can lay such a spell upon another? It makes me almost believe in the old witches."

Her words recalled to Ursula's memory the old woman hidden among the bushes. As she still had time to kill, she resolved to walk to the end of the Gardens and investigate her hiding-place.

Lady Piper smiled at her repaired reflection in the mirror on the wall.

"Isn't life amusing?" she said. "Bye-bye, darling. See you this afternoon. I needn't tell you, Sir Miles is coming to-day. He accepted the instant he heard you were to be there. . . . I'm so glad you chucked that scamp, Barney. He and his intended are well matched."

Ursula felt as though every drop of blood were drained from her heart.

"His——?" she faltered.

"Yes." Lady Piper turned to go. "You know the girl, Cherry—I forget the other name."

Ursula managed to control her voice.

"Are they engaged?" she asked.

“Yes. Freddy brought it back from the club last night. . . . See you later.”

With a radiant smile Lady Piper swept out to her Rolls.

Ursula stood as though turned to stone. She started back to life as the waitress presented her with two bills—Lady Piper’s and her own.

CHAPTER IX

THE WITCH

URSULA passed through the bustle of High Street, numb to sensation.

"It's finished," she thought. "I'm dead."

Nothing seemed to matter. The tide of life which had flooded her heart at dawn, had sucked out again, leaving it empty.

It was impossible to conceive a future without Barney. He lived in all her yesterdays. Her first waking thought was always of him, followed by gratitude that the world held both him and herself.

Presently she discovered that her brain had fretted through its torpor and was stinging her heart back to feeling.

"You wanted to force a decision," it sneered. "You have it, without any effort on your part. Are you satisfied?"

Ursula felt the tears pricking her eyelids, and was glad to turn into the semi-privacy of the Gardens.

"I didn't know anything could hurt like this," she thought. "Barney brought me anxiety. He often made me cross and unhappy. But, at least, I was alive. I wasn't just a vegetable. Now, I don't want to live."

Like every girl who has been crossed in love, she mused on death. At the bottom of the Gardens lay

the sea-wall and the sluggish current of the tidal-river.

A fortnight ago a girl's body had been found in it, after a period in which she had been posted as missing. Ursula knew her by sight—a fluffy-haired girl who served in a boot-shop. She had often knelt at her feet, trying on shoes.

The tragedy had struck Ursula, not only as pitiful, but as criminal waste. The girl had been such a cheerful little soul, and the cause of her frenzy so inadequate—a prancing jazz-musician, with a curled pompadour.

The thought of the river was slain, even as it flashed through her mind. Suicide was the hole through which a coward crept out of life.

But she felt reckless, craving risks—a dash in a motor-boat at ninety miles an hour, or a spinning nose-dive in an airplane.

Her wish was nearly granted, for at that moment a cricket ball from the playing-ground grazed her forehead. She put out her hand, in an instinctive effort to shield herself, and brought off a sensational catch, to the admiration of the field.

Although her palm stung, the incident did her good. She began to review Lady Piper's report in fighting spirit.

"I won't believe. It's all lies. Cherry wouldn't have missed the chance to tell me, if it had been true."

She tried to remember their conversation about Barney, but, beyond the fact that Cherry had alluded to him in her usual proprietorial way, her memory was misty.

"Another hour and I shall see Barney. Until I have it from his lips I've not lost. I'm still where

I was when I woke up, this morning. . . . And now, I'll forget it, and find out what's become of the witch."

The iron gate which led to the steps was blocked by two youths, of Dole age. They were smoking fags—their backs turned to Ursula, so that she overheard their conversation.

"She can't git up them railings, or she'd be spiked. She *got* to come this way. It's a fair cop."

"Please," said Ursula, in a peremptory tone.

She took a dislike to the speaker because she guessed the reason of his exultation. They had got the unfortunate wretch trapped. Probably others, like himself, were searching amid the likely hiding-places along the sea-wall.

As she looked at his lumpish, unintelligent face, she realised that he would be controlled entirely by herd-instinct. He was the kind that instinctively joins in any hunt, provided that the quarry was sufficiently over-matched.

Ursula was in a mood to champion a lost cause. Hurt herself, she wanted to strike a blow for someone who also suffered.

"Cowards," she thought, "they will find they have me to reckon with, besides a harmless old woman."

Regardless of consequences, she walked down the steps and began to pull apart the dusty bushes.

"Come out," she invited softly. "It's all right. I'll see you through."

Her intention was to pilot the old woman past the youths, confident of quelling them by mention of the dread word—"Police." Once she had her charge in the town, she would convey her in safety to her home in the Rookery.

But no hunted creature crept timidly from her shelter, and Ursula knew she had drawn a blank, before the thickset youth at the gate shouted to her.

"Lost somefink, lady? We been through them bushes and we seen nothing."

Feeling the need of strategy, Ursula smiled up at him.

"Yes, I was looking for a—a parcel. But it doesn't matter."

"Can we find it for you, lady?" asked the youth, mindful of future reward.

Since the witch was gone, Ursula saw no need to draw them from their posts. She declined their offer and walked slowly by the sea-wall.

Her determination not to think about Barney was made easy, for her interest was, at once, attracted by a sense of underlying drama among the loungers by the wharves. They were supers, idle for the moment, but on the alert for their cue. Ursula thought she had rarely seen a rougher crowd. The unkempt women reminded her of rag-pickers, and the youths—for the men were all young—of confirmed loafers.

They hung together in knots, whispering to each other, and then stealing off, to disappear around some corner, or within a dilapidated building.

Ursula recognised the signs. They were drawing the coverts for the witch.

"Grant I find her first," she pleaded, without a thought of her own brittle code of convention.

The ordinary youthful rebellion against adult authority had been, in her case, only mental. She had never trespassed beyond the bounds, or translated freedom into terms of self-indulgence. She was

regarded as someone elegant and precious—a costly ornament shielded by a glass case. Her reputation of being superior had been acquired at the cost of popularity.

But she strolled on, ready for any adventure, her eyes scanning the striped sections of shade and sunlight in the jungle of the wharves in order to pick up some clue to the fugitive.

“If she’s hidden here she’s clever. One would believe that she really is a witch and can make herself invisible.”

She stopped by the old wreck, to gaze down the river, which was running in strongly from the sea, despite its deception of a sluggish flow. As she did so she again had the feeling that she was being watched.

She looked at the faded paint and gilding of the effigy, but its blank sockets stared only out to the distant sea.

Suddenly she started. Just above the side of the slanting wreck, almost hidden by the figure-head, she saw a girl’s face, vivid and peaked, with dark tousled hair and queer light eyes which glittered like white fire.

She spoke to Ursula in a thin metallic whisper.

“Are they gone?”

“No,” Ursula spoke softly. “They’re still hanging about.”

“Hell. The tide’s coming in and I can’t keep my grip on this blasted slime much longer.”

Ursula looked at the stretch of mud-bank which divided the wreck from the sea-wall.

“Can’t you jump it?” she asked.

The girl laughed noiselessly.

"Sure. And jump into an ants' nest; I don't think."

Ursula began to see daylight.

"Are these people after *you*?" she asked.

"Who else? *You*, angel-face?"

"But—what have you done?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all. But I'm against every man, and every man is against me."

Ursula gazed at her more fixedly, as her mental vision of a decrepit hag melted like wax in sunlight.

"Are you the—witch?" she whispered.

The girl hesitated before she replied.

"Some fools call me that. The women are jealous. They're afraid for their blighted husbands. And they set the lads on to bait me. I hate them. I hate them all."

She gnashed her teeth like an animal in a trap. Then her eyes met Ursula's in a hard stare.

"Are you married?" she asked.

"No," replied Ursula.

"Respectable, then?"

"Depends on your standard of respectability."

"Huh. Doesn't matter. I know you've a kind heart. I saw you with that blasted bird."

"You mean I'm a fool?" Ursula spoke calmly. "But I don't like to see anything in a trap. Or anyone."

"I get you," whispered the girl. "You're a sport. You're the first that's been on my side."

Her gratitude made Ursula feel happier.

"Can you hang on for fifteen minutes longer?" she asked.

"What are you going to do?"

"I shall come back with a policeman, or two, if necessary, to see you safely out of this mob."

Again the girl rocked with noiseless laughter.

"The police. My eye. There isn't a peeler in this burg that wouldn't pinch me as soon as look at me."

"Why—what have you done?" asked Ursula, slightly taken aback.

"Now I've put the wind up you," sneered the girl. "Better run home to ma."

"Don't be silly," said Ursula impatiently. "Have you any plan?"

The girl's eyes seemed to dart white fire. Ursula received the impression that she was trying to project hypnotic force. It amused her as a piece of sheer impudence. But, as the girl began to speak, in spurting whispers, she felt the instinctive response of metal to a magnet.

"It depends on *you*. Have you the nerve—the spunk? Do you like taking a chance? Do you love a thrill?"

"What do you want me to do?" asked Ursula.

"Draw off the scent."

Ursula paused to reflect. At that moment, she did not forget that she was Miss Ursula Pyke from the aristocratic residential quarter of the town. But her sympathy was inflamed by the plight of the unfortunate girl.

"Everyone's hounding her down," she thought. "Probably, she had never had a chance to rise. And she's outside the Law. She's no one to help her but myself."

As though she read her mind, the girl began to explain in a vibrant whisper.

"Send them away, so that I can hop off my perch. *You* know. Tell 'em the tale."

Ursula nodded, as she strolled away. She disliked the idea of a conspiratorial pact between this vagrant and herself. Judged by her own fastidious standard, she felt cheapened.

"If Miles could hear me now," she thought. "But Barney's to blame. Anything to forget."

She stopped to speak to a couple of women and a boy.

"Have you seen a girl without a hat?"

Swift glances of understanding passed between them. One woman handsome in a coarse way, with black hairs on her lip, spoke to a woman with gaps between her teeth.

"Seen a party with no 'at?"

"No, lady."

They waited, expectant of useful information, which Ursula, in her rôle of the perfect tool, supplied.

"She was rather like a gipsy. She begged off me, and as I had no coppers, I gave her half-a-crown and told her to bring back my change."

She could feel the derisive scorn of her audience like searing fire.

"'Tain't honest not to come back, when you *trusted* her, lady," sneered the lady with the defective teeth.

"And which way did you say she took, lady?"

Ursula pointed down the length of the sea-wall.

"She went round that corner. I suppose she was going to the town."

"Yes, lady."

"If you meet her," Ursula told them, "tell her I'm waiting here for my change."

It seemed almost too easy. She noticed that the boy had darted off and was whispering to the other

strollers. In an incredibly short space of time the sea-wall was deserted.

"She's got her chance now," thought Ursula, as she walked in the direction of the bridge. "I'm glad I told those lies."

Although curiosity urged her to go back to the wreck, she resolved to do nothing further in the matter. She had covered the witch's retreat. It was her own business how she would regain her lair.

But as she walked, Ursula again had the uncanny sensation of being followed. She felt positive that the girl was stalking her, under cover of the piled-up litter of the wharves.

It was evidence that she was not yet out of the wood, and so clung to the patronage of her protector.

This invisible espionage got on Ursula's nerves.

"I hate this hole-and-corner business. If only she'd come out into the open, and trust me, I'd soon send that rabble about their business."

As though she had uttered the words aloud, there was a movement by her side and the girl darted from behind a pile of empty cases.

"They're coming back," she panted. "They're after us. Quick. This way."

She pointed to a broken plank in the side of a long, low warehouse.

"Run for your life," she cried, gripping Ursula by the wrist and dragging her through the gap.

Panic fell on Ursula, a madness which paralysed her brain. She had no need of flight. But, as though the stranger had bewitched her in reality, she acted on blind impulse, fleeing before the pursuit of an enemy which had become her own.

There was a wild, seething excitement, which purged their retreat of its craven element and charged it with the high spirit of adventure. Ursula felt light and exultant, as she dashed the length of the dusky shed, criss-crossed with piles of timber, and swarmed up a ladder, which the girl kicked away immediately they had reached the higher storey.

Flinging herself flat on her face on the dusty floor, she drew Ursula down by her side.

"We'll lie doggo, here," she whispered.

As they peered through the opening of the trap at the warehouse below, Ursula felt as though she had lived this minute before.

Her sensations were as familiar as though she had actually entered into the body of some hunted witch. She was conscious of the smell of resin, glue and shavings, and of the gloom of cobwebbed windows, of dust, spiders and tarred sacks.

Yet her actual surroundings seemed shadowy, and she felt the suspense of the slow crawl through briars, the sharp odours of dust and nettles, the ruts of the sunbaked meadow under her bare soles, the ecstasy of sanctuary in a cool, mint-fragrant ditch.

Mud, heat, flies, thirst—the agony of failing muscles—the final spurt to safety and the thrill of victory—all these things were in the marrow of her bones.

Suddenly the girl stiffened.

"*Hush.* They're below."

As they listened to the low growl of voices and the stumble of footsteps, Ursula felt a sharp stab of terror. The tension grew too acute to be borne. She held her breath, fearing to breathe, lest a gasp should betray her to the enemy.

It seemed that they lay motionless on the dusty

floor for an eternity. Presently the girl wriggled on her stomach to the edge of the trap.

"They've gone," she whispered.

As she sat up, Ursula suddenly awoke to the trick her imagination had played upon her.

"This is really preposterous," she said. "Goodness knows why I am hiding here. I am going down at once."

"No, you don't." The girl's eyes shone in the gloom. "Too late now. You're in it up to the neck."

"What do you mean?"

"If you go down," explained the girl, "you'll give me away to them. They'll know where I am."

Ursula's heart sank as she realised that she was committed to this fantastic adventure. By yielding to her mad impulse of following the girl, she had identified herself with her. She could not break free without involving her companion in danger.

Even as she realised the fact, the adventure rushed at her again. They heard thin scraping sounds from below. The girl leaped up, her eyes luminous as a flicker of lightning.

"The ladder. They're coming up. Once they're up, we'll give them the slip. I know a way out."

She put her finger to her lip.

"Not a sound, on your life."

Ursula stole after her, over mounds of dusty sacks, coils of rope, bags of grain, down the dim vista of the warehouse. At its end a window overlooked a low sloping roof.

It was the work of two minutes to worm out and drop from the roof to the ground.

Then Ursula gave a cry of dismay. The warehouse ended on the side of a creek, formed by a small arm

of the river, which divided it from the main bank. It was bridged by a narrow plank which slanted at a perilous angle.

As Ursula stared at it, feeling as though she were in a bad dream, the girl pointed towards a part of the creek where it narrowed to a broad, foaming stream.

Through a grating under the warehouse a drain gushed out, thick with broken crockery, rusted tins and the body of a drowned dog.

"We can wade across there," said the girl.

Ursula drew back, shuddering.

"Not in that filthy water."

"Rats. What's a little muck? Come on, or they'll see us."

"Never," declared Ursula, turning towards the plank.

"Blasted fool," snarled the girl. "You'll drown."

"I can swim," retorted Ursula.

She saw the girl sink thigh-deep as she splashed through the defiled water. Without giving herself time to think, she began to cross the plank. It spanned the banks at the union of the river with the creek, so that one slip would send her down into deep mud-churned water.

In spite of her boast, Ursula knew that she would stand no chance against the suck of the current. She was not a strong swimmer, and her experience had been gained at bathing-pool parties.

"I wanted to risk my life," she thought, as she felt the plank swaying under her feet. "In another five minutes I shall be safe or drowned."

Towards the middle of the bridge, she had a terrible moment, when her head swam with giddiness and

her knees shook under her. Recovering her nerve with an effort, she balanced herself, with out-stretched arms, like a tight-rope walker. As every step took her nearer to the bank her confidence increased, and she covered the last two yards in a run.

The girl was waiting for her.

"Blasted swank," she said. "Quick. We've beat them to it."

She linked arms with Ursula, dragging her to the mouth of a steep lane. Ursula recognised it as the Rookery. The chase had ended in the safety of the den.

"I'll leave you now," she said.

"No," urged the girl. "They're just behind. If they catch you, they'll treat you rough."

Too spent to resist, Ursula allowed herself to be led up over the cobbled road. The girl stopped before a decrepit door, marked with a chalked cross. Unlocking it with a key she hooked up from her jersey, she kicked it open, and drew Ursula inside.

CHAPTER X

THE FORTUNE

AS the key grated in the lock Ursula had the sensation of being trapped in some foul den. The place was nearly dark, and stank abominably.

The strange girl raised the corner of a sack which covered the tiny window, only to drop it again.

"Too much blasted publicity for me," she said. "I'm one of the shrinking violets."

"Are they still waiting outside?" asked Ursula.

"Ja, but they'll soon hop it, before they get a pail of dirty water over them."

Ursula started, as the door shook under a violent kick.

"Won't they break in?"

"Naw." The girl laughed. "They'd be scared stiff to come inside."

"Why?"

"Me."

As she spoke, the girl struck a match and lit a tallow candle stuck in a bottle.

"Sorry the blasted electric light is out of order," she said. "Apologies of the very best. All my servants are out, too. But we'll run up the blooming flag. The queen is in residence."

Ursula successfully concealed her shudder as she looked around her. She was offended, not only by dirt and squalor, but by actual decay. The walls

were scaled as by some leprous growth, and festooned with peeling strips of mouldy paper. Rotting vegetable leaves and refuse littered the filthy floor. A few smoked pots and pans over the rusty grate were the sole signs that work was ever done, although a string of onions and a bucketful of potatoes were the only hints of food.

The bed was a pile of sacks, the furniture old packing-cases. A cord was stretched across the room, over which was hung a silk chemise, which had been displayed in a Bond Street shop-window, and a miraculously clean half-knitted yellow wool jersey.

Two drawings were pinned to the wall, together with a railway poster, representing a Surrey beauty-spot. It was a marvellously effective study in raw blue and green, and seemed to swim in sunshine.

The girl pointed to it.

"Like looking out of a window, at the country, isn't it? A two-colour process, blue and yaller. Better give the rest of my picture-gallery a miss. Rude."

Ursula turned, expectant of Paris postcards, or some similar abomination. To her surprise she saw a beautiful nude crayon sketch, and an Aubrey Beardsley reproduction.

Her curiosity thoroughly aroused, she studied her strange hostess. She was brown-skinned, with a thin face bitten red on the cheek-bones, and small, brilliant blue-green eyes. Her teeth protruded and her un-combed hair stuck out in a bushy mop. But, in spite of the fact that she did not possess one good feature, there was an odd attraction about her vivid irregular face.

Ursula noticed, too, that her dirty turquoise jersey exactly matched her eyes, although her skirt hung in tatters. There was something oddly familiar about the combination of poverty and taste, reminding her of a grimed caricature of a good picture.

"Have you ever lived in Chelsea?" she asked.

Her impulsive question struck her as sheer idiocy in connection with this hovel. To her surprise, however, the girl nodded.

"Chelsea? You can tell me nothing about that joint. Every blinking studio has seen the back of me, getting the d.k.o. Besides, I'm an artist myself."

"An artist?" repeated Ursula blankly.

"Ja. Pavement. I had a regular pitch on the King's Road, only I was warned off. I'm good at the job. Some bloke paid for me to go to the Poly."

Ursula glanced involuntarily at the drawing on the wall.

The girl laughed derisively as she shook her head.

"My work? No blinking fear. My line's commercial art. I draw lobsters and lettuces in coloured chalks. The poor devil that drew that, starved. Like it?"

"I think it's beautiful."

"Well, it's me. I'm a model, too, in winter-time, because of the stove."

Ursula gazed at her with incredulous eyes. Her bulky figure bore no resemblance to the slim outlines of the drawing.

The girl was sharp in reading expression. She burst into a fit of shrill laughter.

"Ja, I look one of the ruins Cromwell knocked about, but you've not seen me without my padding. I'm just two lines, one hiding behind the other. Thought I felt ticklish."

She thrust her hand inside her jersey and drew out a dead fowl, with a twisted neck.

"Well," gasped Ursula. "You had it all the time."

"Sure, angel-face. What d'you think I ran for?"

She scratched her back and shoulders vigorously, and then laughed at Ursula's fastidious lips.

"You needn't look so delicate," she said. "Chicken-fleas die on you at once."

Ursula suddenly remembered that she had championed a thief. It struck her as hard on the shock-headed youth whom she had helped to defraud.

"Why did you st-take it?" she asked.

"'Cause I fancied chicken-stew."

"But it belonged to that boy?" urged Ursula.

"It didn't. It's mine. Everything belongs to me. I've not got to put a penny in the slot to get the blasted sun, have I? I've not got to buy water cress and blackberries, nor pay a water-rate for a drink from the brook. The world was made for everybody, only I'm cheated out of my fair share. All right. My motto is 'Help yourself.'"

She stuck her hands on her hips and glared at Ursula.

"Do you blame me—swell?"

"No," replied Ursula, "I'm a socialist myself. But, all the same, I do blame you for something. Why did you pick on that poor boy instead of—say—myself?"

"Because I didn't know you kept fowls at Buckingham Palace, swell."

"If you want to call me names, call me 'Ursula.'"

"Ursula—what?"

"Just 'Ursula,' to my friends."

The girl responded to the overture with an impudent grin.

"Giving nothing away, are you? Well, I'm 'Annabel Lee.'"

"Yes? I've heard the name before."

The girl grinned as she drew out a packet of limp cigarettes.

"Aren't you Mother's smart girl?" she asked. "Have a fag?"

Only Ursula's innate courtesy compelled her to accept the gift.

"Let's hope the smoke is antiseptic," she thought.

Although she was attracted by the girl, as a human document, she began to crave fresh air again. The smell of the hovel was lethal—a compound of humanity, gas, mice, drains, and rotting food.

Annabel Lee seemed to have the uncanny gift of reading her thoughts, for she suddenly gulped a deep mouthful of the atmosphere, as though it were a delicious draught.

"Noticed the rare bouquet of my air?" she asked. "I *love* smells. They're warm, and rich, and human. You can tell people and places by their smells. Smell's an extra sense that fools leave to the animals. But I've got it. I'm Animal Lee."

The candle-flame lit queer blue sparks in her eyes as she leaned forward over the packing-case.

"Leastways, my name really is 'Lee.' I'm of gipsy blood, but not of the royal line. I come from a distant line of 'Lees.' That's why I can't settle to nothing, and why things stick to my fingers. I've filled all sorts of posts—some swagger, too—but I've always finished up in quod, because of my itching fingers. . . . But this isn't my real life. *You* know that."

"Why should I know?" asked Ursula.

"Don't pretend," said Annabel Lee. "You can't fool me. I knew you the instant I set eyes on you. Like calls to like."

Ursula looked at the filth and muddle of the den, contrasting it with the bright order of her own room.

"What makes you think we have kindred tastes?" she inquired.

"Because you have the same eyes as me. Hungry eyes. We want the same things. You starve still. But, even if I go short of bread, I *live*. Listen."

She gripped Ursula's wrist with her hot thin fingers.

"To-morrow, when the moon is high, I'm off on the trail again. Sleeping all day—hiking all night. Bathing naked in the pool, black as ink. Lying in the wood, watching. . . . Smelling the rich mud and earth and rot. Do you know that new life comes from decay?"

"Yes, the nitrogen is released that way," murmured Ursula.

Her brain remained cool before the gipsy's growing excitement. She suspected that the girl was deliberately dramatising herself and drawing on her imagination, in order to impress her.

Annabel Lee seemed to sense her scepticism.

"I know you," she repeated. "You can't fool me. Haven't you danced with the four winds for partners, and laid naked in the moonlight while it drew you up on its beams—and felt the sun scorching your bones and filling you with power?"

Ursula shook her head.

"My only experience of sun-bathing was unpleasant," she said. "It was on the Lido, and I got so badly burned that I spent the rest of my holiday in bed."

The girl narrowed her lids so that her eyes appeared blue slits.

"Lydo," she said derisively. "I've seen the pictures of the Society dames in their satin trousies. I was forgetting I had the honour of entertaining one of the ladies of the Court."

"Don't be silly, Annabel," said Ursula impatiently. "There's nothing to get cross about. I can't help it if you will insist in crediting me with qualities I don't possess."

"Then why did you stand by me, just now?" asked the girl.

"Because you were one against a crowd," replied Ursula.

The girl spat out the stump of her cigarette.

"But *you* don't know what it feels like to be hunted. All the world against you and your earth stopped. See that?" She pointed to the chemise on the line. "That came from a back-garden, to-day. Wherever I go, I'm always on the look-out to be pinched."

"It must be a ghastly sensation," shuddered Ursula.

"But *you* don't know," insisted the girl.

She hooked down the yellow jersey from the cord, and began to knit with bewildering rapidity. Ursula's eyes grew dazzled as she watched the flash of her needles.

"I shouldn't have thought knitting was your occupation," she remarked. "It seems so social and—and parochial."

"It's my living," the girl told her. "I charge market-price for the jersey and three times over for the spell."

"Spell?"

"Ja, I work them in, as I knit. The gentry know me, and they come to me, secret, for my jerseys with

the spell. They tell me what they want and they pay me well—once for my work, and once for not telling on them. I've a swell connection here. Know the lady from the corner grocery-shop—her with the sandy hair? Married years, and no family, and she's just christened her first. A boy, and *my* work. The barmaid at the Crown was mad for love of the Mayor. Well, he's keeping two houses now, and his old woman knows nothing of the one. . . . I done that. What are you smiling at? Don't you believe me?"

"I believe you are very clever," said Ursula. "Certainly, far cleverer than your clients. I expect you extract a lot of useful information from them and turn it to account. Unless I'm mistaken, the basis of your spells is suggestion."

The girl's eyes glinted.

"Clever?" she sneered. "Clever yourself, talking like a book. But I swear to you, I have the Power. Power over love, and life, and death. Power is my *real* life."

She dropped her voice to a hoarse whisper.

"I've killed from afar, many a time. There was a man set his dog at me. . . . Before sunset the dog was run over and killed by a motor-bike."

"Not much miracle in that, worse luck," remarked Ursula. "I think it was horrid of you, anyway. I love dogs."

"I hate them. They know me. They smell me out."

Suddenly, she pounced on Ursula.

"Love dogs, do you? Do they love *you*?"

Ursula shrank back before the glittering eyes.

"No-o. But I'm nervous of them. That's why."

"Yah, that's why. . . . And the babies yell when you pick them up. They know, too. Oh, you can't fool me."

Ursula rose from her packing-case and glanced at her wrist-watch. The girl watched her gesture.

"That's not half bad." Her voice was insolent. "Valuable?"

"Not specially. . . . I must go now."

"Let me tell you your fortune first."

Ursula hesitated.

"I hate to hurt your feelings, Annabel," she said. "But, honestly, I don't believe in palmistry."

"I'll make you believe," promised the girl.

Suddenly, Ursula thought of the day stretching before her. Her whole future depended on the issue of her meeting with Barney. She was rent with an uncontrollable desire to wrest its secret from the unborn hour.

"It's all nonsense," she thought. "But this girl is desperately poor. It'll be one way of giving her money."

"All right," she said aloud. "But, first, I must cross your palm with silver, mustn't I?"

"Cut out the gipsy stuff," sneered the girl. "You're my guest, and you done something for me. Besides, I don't except favours. Too blinking proud. I prefer to help myself. . . . Give me your left hand."

As Ursula placed her palm between the girl's clutching fingers, she was struck with the exquisite almond-shape of their filthy nails.

"There's blood in you," she decided, "besides the gipsy strain."

Annabel Lee's dark tousled head remained lowered over her hand, but she said nothing. Presently, Ursula found the silence oppressive.

"Well?" she asked.

"I can't see clearly," muttered the girl. "One line

cancels another. Besides, you're holding yourself back from me. Look at me, and keep on looking, and think of nothing."

Slightly bored, Ursula gazed languidly into the girl's eyes. The candle-light glinted in them like blue-green tongues of fire.

She knew that the gipsy was trying to hypnotise her, and felt faintly amused at her impudence. Annabel Lee's mentality was of poorer calibre than she had supposed, if she imagined that her visitor was to be snared like her other gulls.

Apparently her scepticism was reflected in the cool mockery of her eyes, for the girl shook her head.

"It's will pulling will. I'll get nothing that way. . . . Now, let me tell you what I see written in your palm. It's the luckiest hand I've ever read. I see a surprise, and a letter, and a legacy, and a rich handsome lover, and a grand wedding, and a marriage-bed, and a long family—six sons and four daughters—and big houses, and carriages, and jewels, and journeys by land and by sea, and a peaceful death-bed, surrounded by your sorrowing grand-children and great-grand-children."

Ursula sprang to her feet, laughing.

"Thank you, Annabel. That's perfectly sweet of you. But, seriously, my dear, you should bring your patter up-to-date. Motor-cars, instead of carriages, and journeys by air, instead of land and water. Long families, too, aren't done now. . . . But it's a lovely fortune, and I'll treasure it up. It's really worth something. . . . Do."

She opened her bag, but the girl shook her head.

"Nothing from you. . . . Will you listen to a warning?"

"That depends."

"It's quite easy. Stay at home, to-day."

Ursula shook her head.

"I'm afraid that's impossible. I'm going to a party, and also out into the country."

"Then you'll get caught in the storm. I smell thunder. . . . And there's danger. Danger out of the blue. . . . Remember, 'Blue for danger'."

"Thank you frightfully," Ursula spoke lightly. "I'll remember."

The girl unlocked the door and peered out.

"They've all gone," she whispered. "Coast's clear. Cut."

"I'm not afraid of anybody," Ursula assured her as she stepped out into the blinding sunshine. "And, Annabel, if anyone asks me about a—fowl, I've seen nothing, heard nothing."

The girl looked at her with a curious smile hiding under her lids.

"I'm not afraid of you," she said coolly. "You'll have your work cut out, to-day, saving your own skin. . . . Besides, dog does not eat dog."

As she spoke, she slammed the door in Ursula's face.

"Courteous gesture," reflected Ursula. "I suppose she wants to cook that fowl. Probably half-starved. Really, she's proved a most thrilling episode. I'd like to know something of her pedigree."

Absorbed in her thoughts, she toiled to the top of the precipitous alley, scarcely conscious of the dilapidated hovels, the garbage-tins and the smells. Although this was the first time she had ventured into the Rookery, she knew that it was quite close to Wine Street, a poor but respectable thoroughfare—which led through to Regency Square.

"I wonder what time it is," she thought, glancing at her wrist, only to find it bare.

Her watch had been stolen.

In a flash she remembered the girl's strategy in pretending to hypnotise her. Although she was the victim, she saw the humour of the situation.

"All the time I thought her a fool, she was just stringing me along. Delicate touch. I never felt a thing. And that was why she rattled off that silly fortune, at the end, just to distract my attention. Friend Annabel Lee, I played you too low. . . . Question is—what am I to do?"

As though in response to her thought, a policeman stopped her at the head of the alley.

"Excuse me, Miss," he said, "but that's a very rough neighbourhood. You'd better not go there alone, or you'll be missing something."

It was her opportunity. But, even as the impulse flashed through her mind, she remembered something else.

Annabel Lee—if such were her name—had thrown herself on her generosity. She had confessed to her thefts, and laid every card upon the table. Ursula thought of her—hiding by day, shrinking through the night, driven from pillar to post.

To give her up to the policeman would be like betraying the sanctuary of some hunted creature to the hounds.

She smiled at the policeman.

"Thank you," she said. "It's all right. I've only been visiting a—a friend."

As she turned away the girl's words flashed across her brain.

"Dog does not eat dog."

CHAPTER XI

BARNEY

THE Town Hall clock, striking the quarter past eleven, made Ursula look at her bare wrist, and smile.

“What did she mean? ‘Dog does not eat dog!’ And she knew my real future. What she told me was pretence. I wonder—*what?* But that’s only nonsense and superstition. Life’s exciting—and not knowing the future is best of all.”

Then her face clouded. The next hour held almost too poignant interest. She felt strung up at the thought of her meeting with Barney.

“I don’t believe Lady Piper. I won’t believe. . . . But, all the same, I’m rather afraid. Cherry always means bad luck for me.”

Too impatient to linger in the High Street, she felt that the mere act of walking to the Castle Wall would bring her nearer to her fate. Turning down a side-street, she strolled beside a stream which lapped a row of small mean houses—running clear and dark in the shadow under the stone slabs which spanned it at each door.

Very soon the road became semi-countrified, with a field where horses grazed lying on one side of a low stone wall. The stream, too, became emancipated, and left its bed to cross the King’s highway.

Ursula followed the narrow brick coping, built for

foot-passengers. Below her, the water-splash had overflowed through openings on to the meadow. It fascinated her to linger, and watch the blades of grass bending under the crystal spill. To her right, rising from the huddle of the town, she could just see the church-tower of old St. Giles.

Its hands stood at twenty minutes past eleven.

"It won't take me ten minutes to walk up the hill to the Castle," she thought, as she gazed dreamily at the water-splash. "I've still time to kill."

Suddenly the water stopped flowing, as though frozen, and she slipped out over the green-veined flood, like a floating feather. On she drifted, until she was jerked up by a sudden stoppage, as of an invisible ice-jam. As she became stationary, the current again spread slowly over the meadow.

"I love the sensation of motion, when all the time I'm really standing still," she thought. "It's true illusion—only illusion cannot be true. Like me and Barney—going with the tide."

The shadow again swept over her face. She was not even drifting with Barney, for she reached neither harbour, nor the rocks. She was merely static, while life itself flowed by her.

It made her feel almost desperate to think of such waste—such utter loss—while she was vital and eager for experience.

"It's a terrible responsibility to force a decision," she reflected. "Am I wise? It means my whole life, and I may be making a false step."

Again she floated with the current over the grass.

"Eight years of my life lost. I was only fourteen, when we began—Barney and I. I wasn't a yearning schoolgirl, either. At that age, I was all chin, and

much keener on my work than on him. I was a stronger character then. I've grown fluid, worse luck. . . . What's the time?"

She turned round to look at St. Giles' tower. To her horror, the hands of the clock still pointed to twenty minutes past eleven.

Probably, it was permanently out of order, for the church was old and neglected. But even that most harmless of objects—a stopped clock—has its minutes of malignant power. Twice daily, it can counterfeit activity, in order to wreck destinies.

Ursula's heart leaped as she hurried up the hill. A belt of elms stood between her and the Town Hall, so that she could only guess at the time.

"It struck the quarter past when I was in the High Street. Goodness knows how long I've stayed dreaming by the water-splash. Suppose I'm late, and he's not waited for me."

In a panic, she started to run up the stony hill. Little composite shops displayed their wares—sweets mixed with newspapers, fish with greengrocery. She vaguely noticed yellow heads of cauliflower and glass jars of raspberry drops, as her brain began to race.

"I know what it will be. He'll go away without seeing me. And I must see him—I *must*. It's my future. I'll ring him up and keep on just missing him. He won't care enough to say 'Good-bye'."

Suddenly she felt that eternity itself depended on their meeting. The threat of Cherry overhung her like a shadow. She and Barney had spent the morning together.

"He'll go with her this afternoon. She'll lead him on. They'll get engaged. And I shan't have had a chance to put up a fight."

It struck her as strange that she should have dreamed of running. It must have been an omen. For the second time, she was undergoing the too-familiar ordeal, sharpening to the final agony of overstrained heart and breath.

She could see the old gateway of the castle before her. The building was a partial ruin, and used as a municipal pleasure-ground, where a band played every evening. When she reached the top of the hill, she was almost afraid to look around her.

The first person she saw was Barney, cool and imperturbable, in grey plus-fours, with his cap tilted over his eyes. Propped against an ivied wall, he smoked a pipe with lazy enjoyment.

At the sight of him, Ursula's self possession returned. She struggled to regain her composure as he came to meet her.

"Not a word about Cherry." Her brain took command. "It'll only betray jealousy and do no good. Men hate to be reproached."

Barney greeted her with his slanting smile. It flickered in his eyes, which were blue-black as Arctic seas.

"Why the hurry?" he asked.

"Late," she panted.

"What of it? Darling, you're winded. You shouldn't rush like that, or you'll get B.D.V., or V.D.H., or whatever's the thing that sounds like a tobacco."

Ursula looked into his eyes. In spite of their charm, they always impressed her as soulless. She was reminded of a Harlequin, with a paste-board heart, leaping and laughing and making conquests, merely to impress poor tragic Pierrot.

Love to him was nothing but a game. He was Cherry's playmate.

Against her judgment, the words rushed to her lips.

"Enjoyed your golf?"

She saw her mistake. At the first hint of criticism he slipped away.

"What golf?" he repeated vaguely.

"Your game with Cherry."

"Oh—that. . . . Well, what of it?"

"Nothing. Only, you wouldn't take me to Mallow, because of her."

"Darling, be reasonable. I played with Cherry for about an hour. It would have taken the bally morning to go right over to Mallow."

Ursula saw that he was in his most evasive mood. Already, he seemed to have receded miles away from her. Her heart sank at the thought of a final separation.

Life without Barney. She saw herself lost in the darkness, groping, and clutching a shadow—calling into the silence, and hearing only an echo.

"I suppose you're right," she said dully. "Only, if it had been the other way round I wouldn't have refused to go with you."

Her judgment reproached her for a second mistake. Barney took her tribute too lightly.

"Women are proverbially unselfish," he remarked.

"Selfish, you mean. Don't you understand, Barney? I *want* to be with you."

"So do I, darling." His voice was too smooth. "You know that. But it's my last day."

She felt a pang at his reminder.

"That's just why," she cried. "We shall not see each other again for ever so long."

"Cheer up. I'll be back, only too soon."

He laughed recklessly, for his change of occupation was periodic. One of Mrs. Pyke's reasons for her disapproval of Barney was the fact that he stuck at nothing long enough to make money.

Ursula viewed him as a son of progress, drawn by each new phase of enterprise. In turn, he had been interested in aviation, broadcasting and wireless. His latest venture was to direct a talking-picture.

Mrs. Pyke was positive that there would be something wrong with that picture, from the Box-office point of view; a touch of genius, if nothing worse.

"But, don't you see?" Ursula's voice broke. "You're going away now. And--when you come back--it may be too late."

"Too late for what?"

Her brain stung like a mosquito. She tried to think of Miles, but failed. The world held only Barney.

"You may find changes," she said, and waited for him to help her.

"Then I hope yours will be a change for the better," he laughed.

Ursula turned to him, her eyes desperate with despair.

"Barney, do you *want* to see me changed?"

"Rather. I'd change you now, darling, for two hoots. I don't like that frown. I don't like those tragic eyes. I don't like your frock. Green's a foul colour and it doesn't suit you. Too dim."

His words stung, for they reminded her of Cherry's verdict.

"Would you change me for Cherry?" she asked.

He was instantly on guard.

"What has Cherry to do with it?"

"You've been different ever since she came. She's kept you from me."

"Bilge."

"But others have noticed it, too. I heard, only this morning, that you—that you were engaged to her."

She tried to read his eyes, but they were veiled by the flicker of his smile.

"That's rather a good one," he said. "I must tell that to Cherry. She'll love it."

"But is it true?"

It struck her that he was rather too engrossed in re-lighting his pipe.

"My hat, no," he said at last. "Cherry's not a fool."

"You do like her?" she persisted.

"Of course. She's good fun."

"And she's new." Ursula's voice was bitter. "But you're used to me. You go away, and come back, and always find me here, just the same. But, Barney"—she moistened her lips nervously, as she took the plunge—"suppose, next time you came back, you found me married?"

He started slightly.

"I should say, 'Jolly good luck, darling and many of them,' and all that sort of bilge. . . . Are you going to be married?"

"Perhaps."

To Ursula's dismay, he accepted her news with a grin.

"Humber, I suppose? I admire your sagacity."

"Sagacity? I've only ever heard that word applied to St. Bernard dogs," said Ursula.

As she spoke, she wondered if flippancy was the inevitable accompaniment to a bruised heart.

"Foresight," explained Barney. "Prudence. Money-sense. Humber's a rich man, I suppose."

"I should not marry him for his money," said Ursula.

"No? What else? The chap's asleep."

"Perhaps I shall wake him up."

Barney burst into a shout of laughter.

"Give it up, Ursula. You're not that special kind."

"Is Cherry?" she flashed.

"Cherry?" Barney laughed again. "She can certainly make things hum. But you need a stick of dynamite yourself."

Ursula looked at the coarse dusty ivy on the wall, and the spread of young tendrils over a bare stone. Among the rank grass at her feet was a root of dandelions, and a crop of toad-stools.

"I shall always remember these," she thought. Then she took hold of her courage.

"Barney, you laugh at everything. You are making it very difficult for me. But there's something that *must* be said, to-day."

She saw him flinch. The part of Harlequin was to leap through hoops and wave a silver wand. He resented this intrusion of flesh-and-blood drama.

"Well—what's this important thing?" he asked lightly.

"It's——. Barney, we've known each other for eight years."

"And you don't look a day older, darling."

"Barney, don't. Eight years is a long time. I'm twenty-two, and I've done nothing with my life. That's why I have to—to consider Miles."

"Then it appears Humber's affair, not mine."

"No." Ursula made her last throw. "Those eight years meant a lot to me. Everything. Oh, Barney, you *know*. If it meant you or him, I'd never think of him again."

Barney avoided meeting her eyes.

"You'd better think of him," he said. "Darling, you know I'm frightfully fond of you. But I'm in debt all over the place. In fact, I'm waiting for a rich girl who'll love me for myself."

Ursula's pride, which she thought dead, began to revive.

"Then it's as well we had this talk. It's cleared the air. Good-bye, Barney. I shall look out for your picture. Good luck."

"Oh, I'll see you later."

"Good-bye."

She turned away and left him leaning against the wall. On the brow of the hill, she looked back. He was in the act of re-filling his pipe.

It was the gesture of a man who has just finished an unpleasant episode. She tried to be equally philosophical, but her heart felt heavy as lead.

"Hundreds of girls have gone through this before. No one marries their first love. Yes, mother did. And what came of it? Ladies. Barney would be the same. I couldn't laugh, like her, and pretend not to see. No, it would be a break. Better now, before it has begun. I've done a wise thing."

But the wise thing had brought a lump to her throat.

"I'd like to cry in my room for the rest of the day," she thought. "The Churn House doesn't matter any more. Ursula can go hang. But I can't break my

engagement. Miles will expect me, and I won't let him down. . . . I wonder if that other Ursula knew what it was to love. I expect so, for she seems to have been unlucky, like me. I feel there's a link between us, only I know of her, and she never knew of me. I'd like to see her, face to face."

Her feet dragged, so that she longed for wings. She realised that she was very tired and had to descend the steep hill, only to toil up the other, on which her house was built.

At last, she swung open the garden gate, and saw the beds of wallflowers—wine, rose, flame, gold, amber, mauve—blent together in a pageant of scent and colour. She remembered that she had gone out, with a light heart, laughing at old Girdlestone.

"It seems hundreds of years ago," she reflected. "And some things have happened that I never expected. I'm glad we don't know the future."

As she walked slowly up the path, she thought of the American mail.

"I wonder if there's anything for me? But it doesn't matter now. All the money in the world won't make up to me for losing Barney."

Mrs. Pyke met her at the open door. She was dressed in black-and-white, finished with demure muslin collar and cuffs, like a schoolgirl.

She held a buff envelope, which she waved in greeting.

"A cablegram for you, with 'Western Union' on it."

Ursula tore it open and then stared at the printed slips.

"*Well*," she gasped.

"What, darling?" asked Mrs. Pyke.

"My novel has been chosen by the Book Society."

Mrs. Pyke's face showed that her opinion of her daughter's talent had undergone a lightning change. She threw her arms around Ursula.

"My darling, I'm thrilled. Delighted. I've simply got to kiss you, for luck."

Then she arched her brows interrogatively.

"Much money, my sweet?"

"Several thousands, I believe."

Mrs. Pyke drew herself up with pride.

"It *deserved* it. It was a splendid novel. Haven't I always said there's plenty of room at the top? Aren't you enchanted?"

"Yes, I am rather pleased."

Suddenly Ursula's depression fell away from her. Success was tonic. Mrs. Pyke's face, beaming with pleasure, solaced her for many a memory of maternal disappointment.

Her mother rattled on.

"To think of you making it so easily, Ursula. No knowledge of human nature, no real experience of men. Clicking it out, on only a cheap little portable. It's marvellous."

"Isn't it?" agreed Ursula.

Already she had confused the issues, so that the news of the novel seemed a good omen for the future. On the ruins of the morning, she began to build a new castle in Spain.

"I've so often said it's all over between Barney and me, and then things gave a twist, and he began all over again. There can never be an end between us. Besides, so little of the day has gone. I don't know the rest yet. Perhaps everything is going to end all right."

CHAPTER XII

THE POOL

MRS. PYKE followed Ursula to the dining-room, "Lady Piper's party is opportune," she said. "Your success shall be advertised."

"Oh, Mother, *no*," protested Ursula.

"No press-cuttings by request?" Mrs. Pyke's voice was ironic. "But, darling, don't you owe me something? I've had to take something in the raw. How many of my dear friends believed that Sir Felix ever made you that administrative offer? . . . And now, I'm so proud."

Ursula heaved a sigh of resignation, as she sat down at the table.

"All right, my sweet. Be as proud as you like. . . . How long have I before Miles comes?"

Mrs. Pyke made a grimace at the small egg-salad and plate of fruit.

"Five minutes for that, even if you eat Gladstone's way. Another five to change your frock."

"I'm not going to change."

"Ursula, you really can't treat an important man like Sir Miles as if he was one of the boys you play about with; like that Barney person."

The reserve of her daughter's face warned her that she had made a false step.

"But I want to talk over the novel," she said. "You must begin another, at once."

"Must I?"

"Yes. To-morrow. Have you thought of a title?"

"Yes." Ursula smiled faintly. "'To-morrow never comes'."

Mrs. Pyke stared at her daughter, aghast.

"Sarah Ursula Marchmont Pyke," she declaimed. "Don't tell me that you are going to throw away another chance of fame?"

"Fame, my dear? I'm not even within sight of it."

"But you will be. This is only the beginning. Think of all the Rights. Dramatic, film, serial, translations, seconds. Oh, I must be your agent, and work the business end. But, Ursula—you must go on, and keep going on and on."

Ursula pushed back her chair, to show that she had finished her meal by the expedient of leaving most of it.

"I don't blame you for losing faith in me," she said. "I seem to lack continuity."

She broke, at the hoot of a horn.

"Is that Miles? Perhaps, I will bring you back a plot from the Churn House."

Mrs. Pyke met Sir Miles Humber on the garden-path. He was tall, lean and monocled, with the expressionless face and toneless accent of a traditional type. His distinctive feature was a nose which had been in his family for centuries and was still none the worse for wear.

"Is Ursula ready?" he asked.

"Just coming," beamed Mrs. Pyke. "She has great news for you."

"Engaged?" asked Sir Miles.

The rigidity of his face betrayed the fact that he was concealing strong emotion.

"Of course not." Mrs. Pyke spoke quickly. "Something far more specialised. But she'll tell you, herself."

She stopped as Ursula sauntered down the path. She was hatless, and wore the same thin green frock. Coles followed, a yard behind her, carrying a tweed coat.

Mrs. Pyke conveyed a telegraphic warning, by means of her eyebrows.

"Difficult, to-day," they said.

"Anything wrong?" asked Sir Miles, in a low voice.

"Oh, just atmospheric."

Ursula smiled wanly at Sir Miles.

"I want to go to the Churn House, Mallow," she said. "And I have to be back here by three-thirty. Is it possible?"

"If we start at once."

Mrs. Pyke remained in the garden, with Coles a yard behind her, watching the departure of the Mercedes.

"What's your opinion, Coles?" she asked.

"An ideal pair, madam," replied Coles. "He has the right reserve. I did admire the way he helped on her coat. Just as if he was cold fish and she was a coat-hanger."

"True aristocratic style," sighed Mrs. Pyke.

"Oh, no, madam. Pardon me. But aristocrats aren't like that."

"Of course, I forgot. You're experienced. The Duchess. It was thoughtful of you to remember the coat, Coles."

"Not at all, madam."

Mrs. Pyke walked slowly back to the house, with Coles in the rear.

"Coles," she asked suddenly. "What's the kitchen betting on the match?"

Coles looked discreet.

"Madam?" she asked.

"I understand. Sorry, Coles. Tell Mrs. Roper to send in my lunch at once."

Sir Miles did not speak to Ursula until they had reached the arterial road.

"I'll let the car out now."

Ursula sat back listlessly watching the telegraph skim by. Their struts told her that they were going towards London. Except for the varnished green of May, the countryside was uninteresting. They rushed past bald grazing-fields, poultry-farms, petrol stations, and an occasional new brick house.

After they had cleared the market-town of Puckfield, Sir Miles turned from the broad tarred thoroughfare into a narrow road, lined with elms.

"What a relief," sighed Ursula. "I love going into the 'backs. It's like the gardens lying behind the shops, in a town. Something so unexpected."

Then she broke into a laugh.

"Miles, you are patient. All this time, you are wondering why I want to go to the Churn House. I'll tell you now. For no reason at all. A whim."

Sir Miles thought regretfully of his lunch as he listened to her animated story of her ancestress.

"But why this race against time?" he objected. "If you had waited until to-morrow, we could have made a picnic-day of it."

Ursula shook her hair impatiently.

"Oh, I can never wait. Can you?"

"I spend my life waiting."

Ursula's face clouded at the intrusion of the personal element. She was pledged to definite choice by her own decision, made in the pre-natal obscurity of dawn. But, as she looked at Sir Miles, and noticed the tension of his lips, she grew afraid.

"You've not said one word about my novel," she reminded him.

"Congratulations."

"I see. Nothing wonderful about it."

"Not so marvellous to me. The most uninteresting woman I know is a novelist, who writes far better than you ever could. To my mind, you did something far more wonderful, when you managed to be yourself."

"You think too much of me, Miles," said Ursula, looking down the long aisles of smooth tree-trunks. The road was cutting through a beech-wood, so that they were plunged into the gloom of a leafy tunnel. In spite of the overcast heat, Ursula shivered slightly. Rotting earthy odours, as of mildew and ferns clung on the sunless air. The car swerved to avoid an adder which writhed across the road.

She felt restless and on edge. At the back of her mind, was a question she feared to ask.

"Miles." She spoke with an effort. "What's the latest engagement?"

"Authentic?" Sir Miles shrugged. "The Club's always stiff with rumours."

"Well? The latest rumour?"

"I can't vouch for it. But you know the girl. Cherry something or other."

Ursula felt the sickening drop of her heart.

"Oh, Cherry and Barney. I've heard that one too. It is true?"

"You know as much as I do."

They came out of the wood into a forbidding landscape, thickly sown with groves of trees. Overhead, the sky hung, dark and purple as an over-ripe fig.

Sir Miles glanced at the clock.

"Mallow's just round the bend. Pity it's overcast. The country's fine here."

"What you would call 'bosky'," murmured Ursula.

He noticed the flatness of her voice.

"I never take notice of Club rumours, myself," he said quickly.

"But I rather think this special one is true." Ursula spoke bitterly. "You see, when I—I congratulated him, he denied it."

Sir Miles looked thoughtful. Presently he raised his head with a gesture of determination.

"Ever noticed my chin, Ursula?"

"I could draw it in the dark. It's too long."

"Obstinate. When I make up my mind to anything, I stick, and there's no moving me."

"Like a limpet, darling. And that's pretty low down in the scale."

"I claim no merit. I only state the fact. But this is preamble, Ursula. How many times have I asked you to marry me?"

Ursula looked startled.

"Don't go into that now, Miles," she said.

"How many times?"

"Four."

"Wrong. Six. Seventh time lucky. So I am going to ask you again. But—it's for the last time."

Ursula remained silent, staring in front of her. Used to the knowledge that Sir Miles was always in her background, she had grown to regard him as her ultimate shelter.

Yet, although she was terrified by the finality, she recognised its fitness.

"I must make my choice and stand by it. It's not fair to have alternatives. It looks as if I had already lost Barney. But the day's not over yet."

In spite of every warning of prudence, she persisted in clinging to the hope of a last unexpected twist.

She shook her head.

"I'm sorry, Miles. It's useless."

He took her answer with a calm which showed that he was prepared for it.

"I couldn't expect anything else. Afraid I've been a nuisance, but you are to blame for that. You've been too sweet, my dear . . . Well, that's over."

"Oh, Miles." Ursula looked utterly wretched. "Will it make much difference to you?"

"A little," he replied. "I shall go out of England for a bit."

"Where?"

"Somewhere off the map—and do the usual thing."

"You mean—shoot big game?"

"No. Photograph them."

Ursula's face grew pinched with anxiety. Her voice failed when she tried to ask another question.

"And—if—they——?"

"In that case, they—photograph me. It's all right. What do you think of Mallow?"

Before them stretched the straggle of the village street, cobbled and winding. Not a soul seemed astir. There was no sign of life in the old thatched cottages, sunk in gardens, choked with herbs and flowers.

"Place seems asleep," remarked Sir Miles. "It's probably their dinner-time. There's sure to be some

sort of pub. We'll stop there for petrol, and ask for directions to the Churn House."

A faint enthusiasm glimmered through his non-chalance.

"This seems a forgotten scrap of Old England. Heaven knows how it's managed to escape the tourist. Look, Ursula. Tudor cottages."

"They don't appeal to me," said Ursula. "Sorry. They must be terrible to live in, with those tiny windows. Stuffy and germey."

She had regained her tranquility. Sir Miles' manner was so utterly divorced from that of a distracted lover that it was impossible to keep on a high emotional level.

Sir Miles laughed.

"You've no right to look so poetical," he declared. "You've the mind of a plumber."

"Oh, I could admire it on a picture post-card. But it's against progress. For the sake of the villagers I'd rather see a line of red-brick atrocities, with a proper water-supply."

"I expect these people will live longer than we shall," observed Sir Miles. "They thrive on the primitive conditions of their forefathers."

Ursula shook her head petulantly.

"We shall never meet, Miles. You are pre-historic. I was in tune with that young engineer, this morning."

"Engineer? What name?"

"I don't know."

"But he probably knows yours."

"He didn't want to know it. You see, Miles, there are some things in life that you will never understand. This engineer was a stranger. We drifted together. We talked on the bridge about interesting things. Then—we drifted apart."

Sir Miles' face looked ironed. He changed the subject pointedly, as he stopped the car beside a cottage garden.

"Do you see that clump of flowers, rather like purple pinks? That's a very old-fashioned variety. I doubt if there are many roots in England. Not worth preserving."

Ursula took no notice of the interruption.

"Listen, Miles. I'm glad the engineer cropped up. Doesn't it show you that I'm right? We're too far apart."

Sir Miles looked obstinate.

"I'm not convinced. This sort of thing—talking to strangers—is not *you*, Ursula. You're essentially fine in grain—delicately remote. Yet you deliberately try to violate your type."

"My type? I'm vulgar and alive. I'm not posing. I hate conventions and superstitions, and everything old. I love anything that goes on and on. I belong to the future."

Sir Miles made no reply. He drove in silence until they reached a lath-and-plaster inn, above which swung the faded old portrait of a monarch.

"'The King of Prussia.' The people here haven't let the War upset their sense of proportion. If you don't mind waiting, I'll make some inquiries."

It seemed very silent when Sir Miles had disappeared inside the inn. Ursula had the feeling that she had reached the end of the world—a stagnant corner where all the dead leaves drifted and the winds blew themselves out. An old sea-timber settle, for the accommodation of patrons stood under an ash-tree, but only a tortoise-shell cat lay curled upon it. The cooing of doves thrummed with a crooning note. Under the

leaden sky, the new foliage of the trees appeared a metallic green. The thatched cottages in the village street were humped together like bee-hives.

Over all hung a crawling, pervading heat. Ursula felt depressed and vaguely apprehensive. The village seemed to lie under a spell—dead and muffled, as though it were spun, from end to end, with invisible cob-webs.

She was glad of the sight of Sir Miles' tall grey figure at the inn door. He shook his head, but she knew that his regret was assumed.

"Bad news, I'm afraid," he said. "You've had your journey for nothing. I'm told the owner of the Churn House has gone abroad, and put in a caretaker."

"But can't she show us over?"

"I doubt if she will have the authority."

Sir Miles crossed to the car.

"Will you have something before we go back?" he asked. "We shan't have to rush so much now."

Ursula looked mutinous.

"I came to see the Churn House," she said. "I don't give up so easily."

The landlord, a smart young man, of ex-officer type, joined them.

"Topping car," he said. "I had a motor-business, myself, after the War, but it bust. Out of juice?"

Ursula smiled up at him.

"I'd like to see the outside of the Churn House, even if I can't go over it," she said. "My family lived there, once."

"That explains your interest," remarked the landlord. "I'm potty on old houses, myself. This place

of mine is built of fragments of genuine fourteenth century barns. But I'm not struck on the Churn House. It's only Georgian. And it's got the name of being unlucky."

"Is it far?" asked Ursula.

"No, you can see it from the green. But it's off the main road, so you'll have to walk."

Ursula sprang from the car.

"Which way?" she asked.

"Go up the street to the village green," directed the landlord. "You'll see a little wood at one corner. Follow the path through it, and go straight on, through some buttercup-fields, until you tap a lane which leads you round to the back of the house. The front entrance is some way round. There used to be a short cut to the village but the right-of-way was allowed to lapse."

Ursula threw her coat back into the car.

"Too hot to walk in this," she remarked. "Coming?"

Sir Miles frowned up at the sky.

"I think we'd better go back, Ursula. It looks very threatening."

"Yes, we're going to have the grandfather of a storm," prophesied the landlord. "Won't you wait for it to break, and have tea? We've a fine bowling-green at the back."

Ursula smiled at the landlord and Sir Miles, as she flitted into the road, like a transparent green butterfly.

"I'd love it," she called over her shoulder. "But I have an engagement, miles away, for four o'clock."

Sir Miles followed her reluctantly.

"We'll be back for the car in half an hour," he told the landlord.

He had difficulty in keeping up with Ursula, who ran, in her excitement.

"Miles, aren't you loving this? I feel as though we were on the threshold of adventure."

He wished he could enter into her joyous spirit. But he was plagued with a sense of uneasiness. He was powerless to control Ursula, and he could tell that she was in her most whimsical and exacting mood.

She might involve them in social unpleasantness. And, although he had to follow, whenever she called, he dreaded any breach of the conventions.

He was conscious, too, of something worse—a throbbing presentiment of disaster and loss. Even while he walked by her side, he felt a fleeting quality in their contact, as though she was beginning to lose reality.

She was here, to-day; to-morrow, she might be gone.

The last cottage was passed, and they reached the village green. Ursula looked about her for landmarks. She caught the crystal gleam of a narrow river, shielded by willows, which flowed below the steep rise, topped by the tower of a Norman church. On the other side stretched the belt of woods, in young tender leaf. The ground sloped upwards, so that she could see, far beyond, the gleam of golden buttercup pasture, and rising from the trees, the chimneys of a house.

She clutched Sir Miles' arm and pointed to them.

"The Churn House."

"Looks a long way off," he grumbled. "Darling, give it up. You've been on your feet all the morning, and you look fagged out."

"No, it's only the heat. Isn't it all still?"

The common stretched before them, like a green painted cloth. Not a blade of grass stirred, or a leaf waved. The duck-pond gleamed like a sheet of polished metal.

"I shall turn to stone if I stand and watch it," said Ursula.

Then her face lit up with interest, as she spun round on her heel. At their back, its garden breasting the green, rose a dim, white, Tudor house, very tender in the dignity of age.

The pillars of its gates were crowned only with weather-corroded stone balls. There were no prancing dragons, to proclaim the pomp of pedigree. Ursula felt, instinctively, that this house had always been the abode of simple, unpretentious folk.

In the middle of the shaven lawn was a heart-shaped flower-bed, where grew pansies and stocks. A peacock trailed his painted tail over the grass. In the distance arose the spray from a small fountain.

Ursula drew a deep breath of longing.

"I *like* it. It's a friendly house. I want to live here."

Sir Miles raised his brows in surprise.

"But I thought you hated all old houses?"

"I do. But this one's different. It—it seems to draw me. I feel, somehow, that it is offering me shelter. Nothing can harm me there. It's absurd, but I fancy I know what it's like inside. All cool and polished, and smelling like an old work-box, of sandal-wood and dried rose-leaves. I'm sure, too, that there's a tall cabinet with glass doors, filled with curios from the old John Company India. And we eat preserved ginger and drink Madeira."

"You're an amazing person," said Sir Miles.

His face grew sad as he rejected a mental picture of Ursula and himself, happy in the security and peace of the White House. But for his vow of finality, he would have offered it her, as a bribe.

"We're wasting time," said Ursula, reluctantly turning away from the gate. She could see the fat coils of white smoke curling up against the sky. They hinted at the hospitality of the spread table and the aired bed.

The next second, she forgot all about the White House.

"Why, the green's come to life," she cried.

In the far corner, a number of women were clustered in a group. The path to the wood led in that direction, so that, as they drew nearer, Ursula could see that they were of all ages and types. They were gathered around a girl, who wore a tussore silk frock and a shady hat. She had a button of a mouth, fair curling hair, and blue eyes shielded by rimless glasses.

"What is it?" whispered Sir Miles.

"Obvious," replied Ursula. "It's a Mothers' Meeting Outing, and that's the vicar's daughter, doing the honours."

The girl pointed to a deep sepia pool, shadowed by hawthorn-trees loaded with bloom. Her voice had a penetrating pitch, which reached Ursula and Sir Miles.

"This is the pond where they used to drown the witches."

The mothers all pressed forward to gaze at the weedy water. They clicked and murmured with horror. One mother, whose Thermos had not contained tea, asked "Which?" and her wit was rewarded with a noisy burst of laughter.

The pool, and its associations, meant nothing to them. They only connected it with their annual outing to the country, in a brake. Their thoughts were dwelling on the hot lunch which awaited them at the Vicarage. They knew, from precedent, that it would be roast fore-quarter of lamb, followed by rhubarb pie, with real country cream.

With one accord, they turned from the vicar's daughter, to stare at a land-girl, who was crossing the green, with a brace of milk-pails yoked to her broad shoulders. She was a bonny girl in breeches, with fair, bobbed hair and strawberry-red cheeks.

She stopped by the pool and shouted to the vicar's daughter.

"Been setting up all night, with one of my calves. I can't abear to see a poor dumb critter suffer. If I knew *who'd* put the evil eye on her, I'd chuck her in the pond myself."

The vicar's daughter shook her head, in reproof, and the glasses slipped down her small authoritative nose. She turned to answer the question of one of her mothers, who plucked at her sleeve.

She was a neurotic little dressmaker, black as a crow, and with a sympathetic imagination. She sat up in bed, at nights, reading novels from the Free Library, her candle stuck in a basin of water.

She looked at the powder-green of the elms and the stocks mouldering on the daisied grass.

"Just like a lovely picture, isn't it, Miss? Would it look like this when those drownings took place?"

"I don't suppose the green has changed much in the course of history," replied the vicar's daughter.

"The last witch was drowned in 1840. It's in the Records."

The little dark mother shivered.

“One can't believe that such things really happened,” she said. “But I expect it was real to *them* poor souls.”

She broke off, to criticize the cut of Ursula's green dress, with a professional eye.

Her words were true. When it happened, long ago, it was real mercilessly real—to Ursula Pike.

Ursula scarcely glanced at the shadowed pool. Conscious of wasted time, she was fretting with eagerness to reach the Churn House.

She overheard the dressmaker's remark, with no memory of a green glassy circle—closing—closing . . .

As she passed, a fresh consignment of mothers straggled on to the green, and the clear voice of the vicar's daughter floated on the air.

“This is the pool where they used to drown the witches.”

CHAPTER XIII

THE ENCHANTED GARDEN

ACTING on impulse, Ursula turned back and spoke to the vicar's daughter.

"I overheard what you said, and I'm wondering if an ancestress of mine was drowned here. My name is Ursula Pyke."

Sir Miles noticed how the eager friendliness with which she used to greet strangers was tempered with the touch of new shyness. Since her London experiences, Ursula had grown to question the response of others.

The face of the vicarage girl grew bright with pleasure.

"Ursula Pike," she repeated. "Of course, I've dug *her* up. I'm frightfully keen on the past. She belonged to a prominent local family, although they left the neighbourhood almost immediately afterwards. You know, she was convicted for a witch. The affair made a frightful boil and scandal. She lived at the Churn House."

Ursula nodded.

"I'm on my way there now," she said.

"Yes, you must see it. Pity the Martins are abroad, although it would madden you to see the way they've ruined the place. A fine Georgian house, and the living-rooms and staircase are grand. But they've removed the old panelling from the bedrooms and

completely modernised them, besides wiring the house for electric light. It's pathetic. They should use wax-candles."

"But those don't give much light," objected Ursula.

"The less light, the better, to my mind." The vicar's daughter warmed visibly to her subject. "They mixed tasteless modern furniture with a glorious old suite in the drawing-room. They've taken out all the old fireplaces and put in radiators and modern stoves. The dining-room's not been altered much, and they've got an old portrait, but it's a wretched daub, by some obscure painter."

She paused for breath, while the neglected mothers stared at the pool.

"There's one old bedroom which is part of the original farm," continued the girl. "It had an enormous grate, which led to a secret chamber in the chimney. Imagine it. They've entirely re-built it, and bricked up the door leading out into the garden."

"Oh, no, not that." Ursula gave a faint wail of despair. "It would be terrible. One would try to escape—try, and find it blocked."

As the others gazed at her in surprise, she bit her lip.

"That's the second time to-day I've lost myself," she said, with a shamed air.

"But I understand," the vicar's daughter assured her. "I'm just the same over the past. I get so worked up that I can fancy myself back in it. . . . Oh, what a pity I'm engaged now." She glanced at the ring of mothers. "I would have loved you to come to lunch, and then we could have had a real talk about the Churn House."

Sir Miles smiled faintly, for the vicar's daughter had entirely overlooked him.

"Ursula," he said, "we haven't much time."

"You won't be able to go over the house," the vicar's daughter warned him. "Mr. Martin is a stickler for privacy. He won't allow any Societies or antiquarians to view the place."

When they entered the wood, Ursula looked back to the group beside the pool.

"Wasn't she friendly to want me to come to lunch?" Her voice was wistful. "Cherry and Enid were gargoyles, when I day-dreamed, this morning. They stared stonily and petrified me. But I don't like making these stupid slips. It must be the result of my dreams."

"What dreams?"

But Ursula had forgotten them in a fresh rapture. The wood—stippled with tassels of faint green and laced with the foam of wild-plum berries—held blue pools of wild hyacinths. Carpets of brown leaves lay under the beeches and soft tussocks of moss grew between the roots of friendly oaks.

"Look," invited Ursula. "Green cushions, for first-class passengers, like you and me, to sit down on."

He dragged her on, protesting.

"No time to stop for anything, Ursula."

A broad grassy path led them through the centre of the little wood. It was gloomy under the trees, but Sir Miles could imagine the effect of slanting sunshine, peopling the grove with shifting lights and shadows.

"What are you looking at?" he asked, as Ursula paused before an oak sapling.

"A tree." Her voice held surprise. "Why?"

"You looked as though you expected to see something different."

Her eyes crinkled up with laughter.

"Why, what should I see, except a tree? It's no use trying to impress me, Miles. You'll never make me believe you have any imagination."

He said nothing, glad of the screen of impassive features. In spite of her facile fancies and lightning changes of mood, Ursula's emotions were trivial compared with his sensitised perceptions. To-day, he seemed an instrument attuned to every vibration of nervous energy. His nerves tingled and his skin felt rasped.

"Thunder in the air," he said. "Hurry, Ursula."

When they reached the stile, Ursula turned and looked back regretfully into the blue heart of the wild hyacinth glades.

"I'm sorry to leave this wood," she said. "It reminds me, somehow, of Masefield's poem of Reynard. It must be terrible to be hunted. Hiding in peace in this lovely spot, and then bayed out into the open, with everyone against you."

"You may escape," Sir Miles reminded her. "Think of the thrill when you're safe back in your den again. Outrun and outwitted them all."

The lost look flickered into her eyes.

"No," she said. "They stop up your earth. You *never* escape."

Then she looked at him, over her shoulder.

"Let's see how fast we can run now."

They spurted up the slope of the buttercup-fields, which gleamed rustily, like tarnished metal, in the unnatural light. When they reached the lane, Ursula stopped, gasping for breath.

"I've run and run," she declared. "And I ran, all night. . . Well, this really is the house, at last. But I can't see it properly, because of the trees."

"We'll follow the lane round to the front entrance," Sir Miles promised her.

He felt that even Ursula could not linger indefinitely staring at the outside of an empty house. Very soon they would be on the road again, their backs turned on an adventure which had not proved to his liking. It had been doubly unlucky for him, for he had yielded to the impulse of a last throw, and had lost.

Looking up at the dark purple sky, and feeling, rather than hearing, the mutter of the storm, he grew heavy with a foreboding of even deeper loss.

Ursula, however, seemed to have shed her dejection completely. Her eyes glinted with mischief, as she pointed to a wooden door set in the wall.

"I wonder if it's locked," she said.

Before he could stop her, she had turned the handle, and pushed it open.

Before them lay a small daisied lawn, which was overlooked by the back of the house.

"There's nothing to see," he objected. "Come away."

She shook her head.

"But it's one way in," she said.

Sir Miles gazed at her in horror.

"But that would be trespassing. You remember what that good parsonage lady told you about the owner's prejudices?"

Ursula looked mutinous.

"Have you any money, Miles?" she asked.

"Of course."

"Good. That's all we want. The sight of a note will soon make that caretaker forget his instructions about strangers."

"But darling, that sort of thing's not done."

"It's done by me."

"Very well." He shrugged his shoulders. "Try."

Ursula slipped her arm through his.

"Darling, we'll go to the front door and ring the bell properly. It shall all be done with due regard to convention. Come inside, Miles. It's quicker than following the lane round."

Reluctantly he entered, carefully closing the little door in the wall.

The action committed him to what amounted, in his eyes, to a breach of convention. In addition, he violated his own code of the rights of ownership. His face was grim as Ursula tugged at his arm.

"Look."

She pointed to a patch of raw bricks amid the faded rose of the wall of the house.

"It's the outline of a door," she declared. "It must be the outlet to the secret chamber. No good now. What a shame."

"You're being false to your own creed of modernity," he reminded her. "That passage must be full of rats and rubble."

Ursula continued to stare at the wall.

"How did they hide the door?" she asked.

"Probably there were bushes," Sir Miles answered. "Come, this looks the way."

He walked quickly towards a recently-erected pergola, already covered with spouting trails of rambler-roses.

The Churn House had neither terrace nor steps. It stood flush with the stone flags which divided it from the sweep of the gravel drive. It was a solid erection of mellow plum-red brick, with long windows and pillars on either side of the front door.

Before it lay a lawn, with borders gay with Darwin tulips, wallflowers and aubretia. Their bright colours were toned down by the sullen sky, as though handfuls of soot were sifting down impalpably upon them.

Ursula pointed to a bed of faded pink and white wallflowers.

"The old-fashioned rhubarb-pie variety," she said.

Then she pressed her finger to the electric-bell.

They heard it tinkle, while Miles waited, in faint uneasiness, for the caretaker. He had no liking for this storming of another man's citadel.

But, as they stood listening, trepidation began to percolate through his self-consciousness. His strained ear seemed to detect curious sounds from within the house—rustlings, as of dried leaves, chuckles, whispers, foot-falls.

Ursula tapped her foot impatiently.

"That caretaker must be deaf. He shall have something to *hear* this time."

She kept her finger on the button for so long that Miles was moved to remonstrate.

"Ursula, *please*, remember, we've no business here."

"I know." She looked contrite. "But I do so want to see the house."

Then she smiled freakishly.

"I wonder if Ursula will answer the door to me."

At that moment, in the unnatural stillness and gloom, Sir Miles felt expectant of anything. But nothing happened. Once again they waited in vain.

With a shrug of his shoulders, Sir Miles turned on his heel.

"You see? No one is at home. Come, Ursula, I've made my contract."

"I'm not so sure," she objected. "The caretaker may be at the back."

Sir Miles felt acutely uncomfortable, as he realised that his premonitions were correct. Ursula was obsessed with the idea of exploring the Churn House, and she would not abandon it without a struggle.

As he followed her, past the long row of windows, he had the sensation of being watched. The light slanted on their blank surfaces, so that he could not see within; but he could not rid himself of the feeling of withdrawn faces peering at them. He was grateful when they turned the corner of the house and were out of range.

She led him a dance along worn brick-paved passages until they came to a straggle of back-premises. Grains of corn lay on the cobbles and flower-pots with dead plants.

Ursula rapped at the door repeatedly, without getting any response. She grew flushed and impatient with her exertions.

"Either they're out, or they have instructions not to answer the door," remarked Sir Miles. "Give it up, Ursula."

She shook her head.

"Perhaps someone's in the kitchen," she said.

The windows were set high up, while leggy geraniums obstructed any view of the interior. Reluctantly, Ursula turned away.

Instead, however, of retracting her steps, she

swung open a rustic door which led to the kitchen-garden. The next instant, she uttered a cry.

"Come here, Miles."

A little way in front of them, was spread what appeared to be a solid purple carpet. As they approached it, they could see that the roots were more sparsely spaced and that the flowers were pansies, of the size of large violets.

Ursula was flushed with excitement as she told Sir Miles the story of the broken-up lawn.

"Imagine it," she said. "My ancestress must have seen what I'm looking at, now."

Then she linked her arm in his.

"The caretaker's in the garden, I expect."

Sir Miles abandoned himself to his fate. He realised that his efforts to put an end to an intolerable situation were only prolonging it.

As they passed between hedges of rose-briar, he spoke.

"Aren't you outraging the 'Courtesy of the Thorn?'"

"Whatever's that?" she asked.

"When you've been walking through a meadow, haven't you sometimes noticed small cuttings from the hedge lain on either side of the path? They are a mute appeal not to trespass on to the grass. Well, Ursula, anyone could kick those thorns aside. But every decent person heeds their request."

"Of course," agreed Ursula. "It is rather nice to feel that we do."

"I'm glad you see my point."

"What point?"

"That there are rules and courtesies in life which cannot be enforced, but which are accepted by people with any standard. Otherwise, Society would fall to bits."

Ursula withdrew her arm.

"Am I doing such a terrible thing?" she asked. "Isn't it only natural, after coming so far, to want to see an old family house? It's only a question of finding the caretaker. If he refuses to be approached, then I shall go back, at once. You can trust me not to try and force an entrance."

"For which small relief, much thanks."

They walked in silence, past beds of vegetables and patches of currant-bushes. The garden, apparently, covered several acres, but the standard fruit-trees obstructed any clear view. Apple-blossom hung pallid waxen petals against the leaden sky. In spite of the flower-borders, the old-fashioned charm of the garden was submerged, so that they seemed to wander in an uncanny alien dimension.

"It's getting dark as a London fog," said Sir Miles. "Do turn back."

"But look at the excellent order. They must keep a lot of gardeners. We're bound to run across one, any moment, who will tell us where to find the caretaker," she objected.

"I doubt it. They're all at their dinner, like the rest of the village."

"But they ought to return soon."

"My dear Ursula, you may take my word for it, that it will be a very protracted dinner-hour. Remember, the master's away."

Ursula passed her hand over her eyes.

"It seems strange meeting no one," she said. "I've got the feeling that this place is laid under a spell. As if it were all enclosed within an invisible glass case."

"That's the effect of the weather," Sir Miles told

her. "You will come to your senses when you're soaked."

"Hush," said Ursula.

She drew him back and pointed to two small sprays of apple-blossom. By some freak of air-current, they were swaying in alternate directions, although the surrounding foliage hung in perfect stillness.

Ursula spoke in a whisper.

"Fairies."

Sir Miles drew out his watch desperately, and showed it to her. But she only laughed.

"That's all right. 'What's time'? said Browning. I shall find out now if you can drive as well as Barney."

"You mean as fast." Sir Miles's voice lost its habitual suavity. "Any road-hog can scorch."

"Put it whichever way you like. But it's up to you to get me home, in time."

Then she turned and spoke in a gentler tone.

"Miles, you're hating all this. You shan't be sacrificed any longer. Suppose you wait for me at the inn. I won't be long."

He shook his head.

"I'm not going to lose sight of you, Ursula. And this is my last protest. My chin, again."

He kept his word, and followed her, as though in a bad dream, past the preliminary frames and forcing-bells to the hot-houses. Through the steamy glass, they could see the fine haze of greenery, transparent as smoke, and the fragile beauty of forced roses and orchids. Rows of strawberries ripened in pots.

He held his breath, lest she should trespass in the conservatories, but she still respected some reserves and restrained her curiosity.

Instead, she raised her voice in a shout.

"Is anyone here?"

The silence that followed was intense. There was not an echo, or the chirp of a bird, to shatter the stillness.

Ursula looked at Sir Miles, who merely shrugged.

"You poor victim," she laughed. "It's nearly over."

He nodded. Like an automatic figure, he threaded, with her, the twilight of a filbert-plantation.

"You bury the nuts in the ground, in jars," explained Ursula. "But—how did I know that?"

They came out into a neglected corner of the garden, the apex of a triangle formed by the union of two of the weathered brick walls. Ursula paused amid the rhubarb-stalks and seemed absorbed in a ladybird which crawled over her hand.

She started at the sound of a distant rumble.

"Miles," she said. "I'm sorry. I've been selfish and horrid. Let me confess. At the beginning, I controlled the adventure. Afterwards, it controlled me. I *couldn't* stop. . . . And now, it's going to rain. Once again we must run for it."

Afterwards he was sorry that he let her lead the way. But he had been a sprinter in his College days, and was afraid of unconsciously forcing the pace. Grateful to be returning to the car, he pounded in the rear of her flying heels.

The storm hung over them, with the threat of throbbing sky and titanic mutters. There were flickers and sputters, as of a match which would not strike. Faint frightened twitters from the trees told of hidden bird-life. Then the darkness rushed down on them, so that they could not see far ahead.

They pushed their way through the filbert-grove, and raced down endless box-bordered paths, past green-houses, vegetables, and fruit-bushes.

Every yard they covered brought relief to Sir Miles. As he ran, he divided the distance to be covered, into stages.

"The lane and fields slope down-hill, so we'll soon eat them up. Hope the storm won't break in the wood. Once we're through that, there's only the green to cross."

He shouted in encouragement to Ursula.

"We're racing the storm. Stick to it."

"Fun," she called back. "We'll—beat—it."

They were drawing near to the back of the house, when Sir Miles noticed a line of bleached bee-hives, looking ghostly in the murk. He was sure that they had not passed them previously.

"It's the other side round," he shouted.

But Ursula had already sped around the corner, so that he had to follow.

With a sharp shock of repugnance, he realised that they were before the front of the house and that they would have to face the ordeal of those long lines of windows. He knew that his distaste was but the electric feelers from the storm, plucking at his nerves.

But, once again, he was acutely conscious of white blurred faces—mere featureless suggestions—watching them. They filled him with an overpowering horror of the empty house.

As they ran, the sky seemed suddenly rent open in a flash of blinding light. A crack of thunder exploded like a mine and went on rumbling in lumpy detonations, as the rain dashed down in a deluge.

"We must get out of this," cried Ursula.

She rushed to the shallow porch, but it afforded no shelter from the downpour. Sir Miles saw that her thin silken frock was already mottled with dark blotches.

“You were right,” she said. “In two minutes we shall be drenched.”

As she spoke, her fingers instinctively sought the door-handle.

“It’s unlocked,” she cried, as the door swung slowly open.

Sir Miles realised that Ursula was fated to have her wish. With a pang at his heart, he saw her cross the threshold, laughing in her triumph.

CHAPTER XIV

THE CHURN HOUSE

SIR MILES reluctantly followed her into the Churn House.

"Don't shut the door," he urged, "and stand only just inside. That will make our position sounder."

"You speak as though we were housebreakers," objected Ursula, "and not perfectly respectable people, caught in a thunderstorm."

Commonsense told him that she was in the right, as she proceeded to define their situation.

"Listen, granpapa. I'm on a pious pilgrimage to the house of my ancestors, when I hear that the occupiers are abroad. Naturally, I ring, to find out whether the caretaker has authority to show visitors over the house. As I do so the storm breaks, and—naturally again—I take shelter, just inside. My dear Miles, we have as many legs to stand upon as a centipede."

Her last words were lost in a second peal of thunder which seemed to awaken the echoes of the empty house. People stamped overhead, and rolled the furniture about.

As Sir Miles looked distastefully into the dark cavern behind them, a violent gale sprang up, which drove the rain into the doorway.

"It's torrential rain," said Ursula. "The carpet will be soaked. Don't you think you'd better shut the door?"

The wind saved him the trouble, for it slammed it to violently, leaving them stranded in the gloom of the hall.

Ursula laughed gleefully.

"Now we're really in the soup," she gurgled. "What had we better do? Go and look for the caretaker in the kitchen?"

Sir Miles thought desperately.

"I think he had better find us here. That is, if he's in."

"Oh." Ursula's face fell. "It would be more amusing to track him down."

"No, we mustn't stir from here. Besides, I don't think he is in the house. He—or she, as the case may be—has probably gone to the village. Slack not to lock up, but they grow careless about that, in the country."

"It was Fate," declared Ursula.

She peered into the shadows and threw back her head, as though listening.

"I think you are right," she said. "The house *feels* empty."

Sir Miles wished he could share her conviction. While Ursula seemed immune from the germ of hysteria, he had fallen a prey to atmospheric pressure. Every cell in his body seemed to be doubly alive and reaching out to hidden life.

He felt that the house was full of movement and sound—that shadows were stirring and secrets whispered.

Furious with himself for his weakness, he spoke coldly.

"I cannot understand your feeling in this matter. The date of this house is 1790, and as your people

went away directly after the—the tragedy, they can have lived here barely five years. In our family we should regard their residence here as a five-minute call.”

“But, Miles darling, you’re so permanent,” said Ursula. “I think you’ve lived too long in one place and grown root-bound.”

Sir Miles strained his eyes to see her in the dim light. In spite of her charge, he was only conscious of impermanence, and of love and beauty which sifted through his fingers. He had loved someone warm and full of colour—a creature spun of roses and the west wind. But he had never held her with his arms. Even now, she was drifting back again to the shadows. To-day, she stood by his side, pulsing with excitement—responsive to the pull of adventure. But already she had slipped some distance away, as though the past had reached out its arms and was dragging her into the darkness.

He tried, in vain, to fight his morbid obsession, while the storm increased in intensity. The hall rose and fell in flickers of violet light, so that they could see intermittently, the flight of broad shallow stairs, and count the doors leading to the sitting-rooms.

“That nice girl was right,” whispered Ursula. “The Martins have slaughtered the place. A red and blue Turkey carpet, like a club smoking-room, and a hall-stand that’s homesick for Tottenham Court Road. . . . Tired. I suppose I may sample one of their chairs?”

Sir Miles felt that this was a pretext for wandering further from their base. He shook his head.

“We’re intruders here. Somehow, I don’t like the idea of sitting down without an invitation. After all, we wait for that, in everyday life.”

He was struck by the absurdity of his words. He seemed to be a dual personality—one half alarmed by any trespass against decorum, and the other half palpitating with submerged elemental fear.

Ursula sighed and spoke in a small pathetic voice.

“I *am* tired. May I sit on the floor?”

“Good idea.” Sir Miles dropped down to a cross-leg posture. “Prop up against me. Lucky the carpet is thick, after all.”

“Yes.” She laid her head on his shoulder—though she was miles away. “Miles, have you your card-case?”

“I might find a card, if that’s what you mean.”

“Then we’re whitewashed. “Sir Miles Humber, Baronet, J.P., C.C., M.C.””

“Not quite all that. But enough to prove our bona-fides.”

He hoped desperately that the caretaker was taking shelter in the village, for he could not trust Ursula to be prudent, in her present mood.

“So long as we stay here, just inside the door, I think it is all right,” he insisted. “But, Ursula, if you try to explore—and I know what’s at the back of your mind—remember we should not have a leg to stand on, if we were caught.”

As he spoke, the hall shook in a blue brilliance, which revealed the grain of the dark panelling of the walls. The thunder followed the flash so quickly that they seemed simultaneous.

Through the booming roar, they could distinguish other sounds, as though the house had suddenly come to life—crashes and thuds, like mailed men in conflict.

Ursula clutched Sir Miles as the darkness swallowed up the hall.

"Oh, what is it? Who is it?"

"Nothing at all." His calm reassured her. "I rather fancy a window has blown open."

"Where?"

"The noise comes from the left. But I can't locate the room."

Ursula sprang to her feet.

"We must find out, and shut it, at once," she said.

Sir Miles felt trapped. The conspiracy against him was too strong, for Fate itself was fighting for Ursula.

They felt their way through the gloom to the nearest ponderous door. Sir Miles pushed it open with reluctance, as though he feared what may lie on the other side.

The room possessed no sinister feature, even though it were tenebrous, by reason of the leaden sky. Vast and empty, with carved walnut chairs arranged around a massive polished table, it presented a depressing spectacle, with sombre panelled walls and ceiling. Through the streaming window-panes, they could dimly see the soaked greenery of the garden.

"Everything's all right here," said Sir Miles. "Come away, Ursula, quickly."

To his dismay, she had darted to the fireplace, above which hung an oil painting.

It represented a young girl with the egg-shaped face, full eyes, arched brows and ringlets of conventional art. Her dress seemed to be sage-green in colour, and her hair dark-red, but the light was too bad to determine. The portrait was in bad preservation and the face looked flat and lifeless under its cracked yellow varnish.

Ursula pointed to the name, painted in black Gothic letter, on the tarnished gilt frame.

'Ursula Pike. Aet. 21 years''.

"It's *her*," she cried. "I can make out the date in the corner of the canvas. It's 1793."

She screwed her eyes as she peered up at the picture.

"It's just like any old portrait. Not like a real person, at all. Do you think that it resembles me?"

Sir Miles shook his head.

"I doubt if it even resembled her. It's a wretched daub and ought to be destroyed. . . . Come away."

He wrenched her from the fireplace, protesting.

"You might let me stay. Sometimes a portrait grows on you if you stare at it long enough. . . . I'm terribly disappointed. I expected, somehow, that Ursula would resemble me. You see, I claimed her as an affinity. But that bit of canvas on the wall was never alive."

The hall seemed doubly dark after the dining-room, and the carpet rose and fell, like a deck at sea. Sir Miles had to exert force to open the next door, which crashed to behind them, leaving them in the sheeted gloom of the salon.

It was of vast proportions, with a dim painted ceiling of blue sky and rose-wreathed cupids, and panels of faded brocade upon the walls. All the furniture was shrouded with dust-covers.

Everything that could move was in motion, pictures swaying, mirrors sliding, curtains blowing. The fire-dogs had crashed upon the grate, and the air was filled with the surge of a stormy sea.

The great windows which looked out upon the front, were secure under the lashing of the rain; but a casement-window, set in a side wall, had burst open and was banging to and fro.

Sir Miles was hurrying towards it, when he was arrested by an exclamation from Ursula. She had whipped up a corner of a dust-sheet, and exposed a settee in a loose cover of purple-pink satin damask.

"The Martin taste," she cried, "and it's positively septic. But the nice girl said that the original suite was still here. . . . Yes, here it is. Oh, do look. It's like a Museum bit. It must have been yellow when it was new."

Sir Miles cast a glance at the stained brocade, faded to the hue of stale mustard, as he wrestled with the window.

The wooden frame was swollen, so that it was difficult to get it to close properly. It was obvious that it had not been properly fastened for some time. He had to open it repeatedly and bang it to again before he could force the hasp into the socket.

"I've fixed it," he said. "Can you tear yourself away from that suite, Ursula?"

There was no reply. He turned round, to find the room empty.

Hurrying into the dimness of the hall, he called her name aloud. But there was no reply. In a sudden panic, he opened the other doors, only to find himself in dismal twilight rooms—dismantled and forlorn—with dripping window-panes.

The adventure began to affect him like a nightmare, as the lightning flickered and the thunder growled incessantly. He felt that he had lost Ursula for ever—that, for the rest of his life, he would chase a shadow that slipped always before him.

It was in vain that commonsense reminded him that he was feeling the aftermath of his war experience which always lay in wait, ready to grip him during

a thunderstorm. There was ice around his heart as he rushed down the long crooked passages which led to the rambling domestic-quarters.

"Ursula. Ursula."

Upstairs, Ursula heard him call, and stifled her laughter. Untouched by his own inhibitions, she viewed the deserted house as a happy hunting-ground of thrills. She was animated by the same childish spirit which lured the little bride to play "Hide-and-seek," in the legend of the Mistletoe Bough.

She peeped through the rails of the gallery, watching Sir Miles as he searched for her in the hall. When he disappeared through a green baize door at its far end, she started on her tour of exploration.

The broad gallery leading from the square landing had been maltreated in the same modern spirit as the hall; up-to-date sporting prints were hung upon the panelled walls and the waxed oak floor was covered with a thick red Turkey carpet. At one end, a mirror in a tarnished frame, twelve feet high, threw back a dim reflection, which advanced to meet her, making her shrink back, with a cry.

"I should say it's Regency period," she reflected. "Later than Ursula. She could never have seen herself in this glass."

Lost to decency, now that Sir Miles' restraining influence was removed, she peeped into the bedrooms, none of which had any distinctive feature of age, but appeared merely dismantled for cleaning.

Shrugging her shoulders, she lit a cigarette, and prepared to go down the stairs to hunt for Sir Miles.

"I think the storm is passing over," she thought. "We'd better start, or we'll be impossibly late."

Her hand was on the rail, when she noticed a small door in the corner of the landing. It looked older than the others, while she could feel that the boards were uneven under the carpet, as though they had sunk during centuries of use.

Instantly her eyes grew bright.

"I believe that's the original fragment," she thought. "I'll just peep inside."

The room was almost dark, by reason of the screen of ivy which hung over the windows. Without reflection, Ursula snapped on the electric-light, and looked around her.

"It grows worse and worse," she decided. "No historic flavour here."

The walls were painted with glossy primrose and the ceiling tinted to match. There was a small modern grate, radiators, and window-curtains of cretonne, patterned with gay pink hollyhocks.

Ursula looked through the small leaded panes and then returned to the fireplace.

"This really must be the room with the secret chamber," she decided. "It would lead down to the small lawn. But it's impossible to realise that it is still there. In fact, the whole affair's hopeless. Not a single thrill. . . . I really must collect Miles."

On her way to the door, however, she paused, arrested by the one piece of interesting furniture. It was a bureau of canary satin-wood, with a swinging heart-shaped mirror.

"That looks an antique," she thought. "Perhaps, it really did belong to Ursula. . . . I love looking into old mirrors, and thinking of the other faces that once were there."

Cigarette between her fingers, she crossed over to the bureau, and gazed into the dim glass. . . . It threw back the reflection of her bright eager face and the gleaming yellow walls. . . . Suddenly, she gasped and blinked her lids. . . . She was still looking into her own hazel eyes and the room lit with electric-light.

Her heart was leaping furiously, as though she had dropped over the lip of a precipice, down into vacancy.

"What—happened?" she asked. "I wish—I *wish* I could remember."

Already her memory was blurred and she tried, in vain, to recapture the vision, seen between two breaths. Although she had forgotten, it seemed to her, in that moment, that she stared into a strange room, with raw new panels of wood, bright with sunshine, while her gaze had met the gleam of tear-dimmed eyes.

She had shrunk back before the reflection of her own face—pocked, distorted, and wretched in the utter desolation of grief.

Even as it came, it passed. Ursula snapped off the light casually, and lingered on the threshold, looking into the darkness. A flash of lightning seemed to cut it asunder, darting, like a blue blade, on the heart-shaped mirror.

Suddenly, she felt overwhelmed by a wave of suggestion, as though the old room had discharged its secrets in a cloud of poison-gas. She knew that someone had suffered intensely here. Someone had sinned. The fever-blast of frustrate passion still smouldered under the burnt-out ashes of an ancient crime.

Instinctively, she cowered back, as though to repel an invasion of the past. Then she heard Miles' voice, down in the hall below.

"Ursula. Ursula."

She turned and rushed down the shallow stairs in frantic flight, hurling herself into his arms.

"Oh, Miles, let's get away. At once."

At the sight of her emotion, he regained his own calm.

"Good idea. It's hardly raining now. Don't run. There's no hurry."

He looked around him, to see that they had left no traces of their visit, to perplex the caretaker. Linking his arm in hers, he opened the front door.

The storm had nearly passed and a strong wind was shaking the drops from the trees. It was almost overpowering relief to feel the air upon their faces. Great pools lay on the ground and they had to wade through swamped gravel back to the small lawn.

In spite of the sheltering elms, the lane was a fair imitation of a running brook, while they had to run the gauntlet of a perpetual shower-bath from the drenched foliage. But, when they reached the meadow, a shaft of sun lit the waterlogged buttercups with a gleam of gold.

"Oh," cried Ursula, "the sun. Everything seems different now. I always love to watch the dawn."

Arm in arm, they walked over the warm bogged grass. It was not until they reached the wood, where the sun was throwing searchlights through the wet branches, that Sir Miles broke the silence.

"What frightened you, Ursula?"

She frowned in perplexity.

"Nothing."

"Then why did you rush down the stairs?"

"I don't know. But nothing happened. I just went into a room, switched on the light, and looked

around. It was completely modernised. No one could react to it. . . . All the same, I *was* frightened."

"Why?" he insisted.

"It was simply an impression. Sometimes I get horrible dreams, when I feel guilty and ashamed, although I cannot remember doing anything to account for it in my life. No credit to me, for things have come my way. But, in that room I suddenly felt that I was on the verge of remembering something lost—which cried out to me—to atone. . . . I think it must have been the atmosphere. That landlord said the house was unlucky. . . . But I have the feeling that, later, and at the right moment, I shall *remember*, because I know it, inside my brain."

"Forget it," said Sir Miles. "Here's the green, so wake up."

There was no sign of the Mothers' Meeting, for the storm had driven them to the shelter of the Vicarage. The witch's pool gloomed and sulked in the dark corner, forgotten. Ursula never even glanced in its direction.

But Sir Miles noticed that she turned back to wave to the White House, flashing him a quick glance, as though ashamed of her gesture.

He was glad that the landlord was inside the inn, playing host to other guests, so that he was able to pay for his petrol without inquiries as to where they had taken shelter.

When they had left Mallow behind them—a cluster of mushrooms sunken among the trees—Sir Miles breathed more freely. He turned to Ursula.

"Shall we see what the car can do? She's never been really extended."

"Oh, let's."

His strategy was successful, for the thrill of the homeward drive shook Ursula out of her reverie. Although he took no real risks, upon a clear road he reached sensational speed, Ursula perched by his side, like the Spirit of Motion, the wind tangling her hair to elf-locks and her eyes bright with excitement.

The sky, too, was in anarchy—half cloud, half sun. Storms kept sweeping over it during the afternoon. Although they escaped a second deluge, they could see the slant of the rain in the distance, like fine black wires. The hedges flashed by at their side, like wet green enamel.

When they slowed their pace to enter the town Ursula turned to Miles.

"Fine, I loved it. . . . Miles, you said you were never going to ask me to marry you again. But—I can ask you."

He turned and looked at her in stunned surprise.

"But—Ursula, you don't care for me."

"I'm always fond of you," she said. "We'd be happy, and I'd be safe. . . . One can want something—or someone—too much. One can love, in a wrong confused way and lose oneself. It only leads to danger and misery. . . . Our way is best. Miles?"

He stared in front of him in silence. After a while, he spoke.

"You don't know what this means to me. For that reason, I am not going to take advantage of what you are saying now. You're still upset and overwrought. And you'd never go back on your promise. . . . But—we will talk of this to-morrow."

"Why, that's the title of my new novel," laughed Ursula. "*To-morrow never comes.*"

CHAPTER XV

FAIRIES

COLES awaited Ursula with the information that Mrs. Pyke had already left for Lady Piper's house-warming.

"The mistress thought you would be too late," she said.

"No." Ursula glanced at the grandfather's clock in the hall. "It's an expanding party—one that goes on and on."

The sight of the black rings around her eyes made Coles betray her training.

"Won't you rest, Miss Ursula. "You look so tired."

"Yes, I am tired," agreed Ursula. "But I don't want to miss anything."

Coles stiffened back to Robotism.

"Shall I lay out your new chiffon, Miss?"

"Yes, please. Wait. What is my mother wearing?"

"Floral chiffon."

"Then put out my old draped frock, or we shall look like a pair of china ornaments."

A vision of Mrs. Pyke, flounced, rouged and overblown as a huge pink rose, passed before her eyes. But she was disappointed at being cheated out of her finery, not knowing that she was yet to hail the fact as her salvation.

When she greeted her room she was welcomed by a flood of light, for the sun had, temporarily,

driven the usurper from his throne. As she looked around her she felt as though she had returned from a long journey.

The Churn House at Mallow seemed unreal as a bad dream. She thought of it as a mildewed haunt of perpetual twilight, buried amid trees, on which dripped eternal rain.

It was joy to return to her own place, where she felt safe and happy. Her room was her refuge from the past, where she was enclosed in to-day. Its economy of space and clean gay tints delighted her. Looking at a deep-blue bowl of orange marigolds, and listening, the while, to the splash of water, her spirits rose.

"Everything's weather," she reflected. "If I'd seen the Churn House on a bright day I should have raved over it as picturesque.

She felt surrounded by comfort and cheerful ministrations, in which all the servants shared. The housemaid drew her bath while Coles waited upon her. Mrs. Roper brought up a cup of Bovril, and the kitchenmaid presumed to telephone for a taxi, which everyone else had forgotten.

As Ursula was stepping into it she spoke to Coles.

"If a telephone message comes for me, ask them to wait while you ring me up. You'd better look up Lady Piper's number."

"Yes, Miss."

"And tell the others, too, in case one of them should take the call. It's very important."

Again Coles slipped from her pedestal of perfection.

"Am I to disturb you for any call, Miss, or for a special person?"

Ursula smiled faintly.

"It applies only to Mr. Barney Rudd," she said.

Within twenty minutes, she had reached Lady Piper's house of the future. Viewed from the outside, it suggested a cross between a watch-tower and a factory—a disappointment which was not dispelled by the interior. Ursula vaguely realised that many metals had been employed in its construction—chromium plate, monel metal, stainless steel—besides a quantity of plate-glass. Owing to the gloom, the effect was cold and cheerless. The large drawing-room was filled with a chattering crowd, sustained by curiosity and cocktails.

Lady Piper gave her an effusive welcome.

"Darling, I was afraid you were not coming—and I knew that my new house would appeal to *you*. Of course, you can get no idea of it to-day. The lighting and the domestic gadgets would thrill you. . . . But I haven't congratulated you. Your mother tells me you've won a book society, so clever."

Ursula repressed a shiver as she realised that her advance press agent had been at work. She looked around for refuge, but saw that Sir Miles was Enid's captive. But, in spite of the appeal of enormous soft brown eyes and the shell-pink frills of an ultra-feminine frock, he gazed at Ursula like a man who sees a mirage in a thirst-smitten desert.

His look was observed by the brain-specialist, Sir Harris Tite. He was a massive, fleshy man—clean-shaven and knife-featured—with steel-grey eyes and hair.

Little escaped his observation.

He noticed that the paper jacket which enclosed his petit fours had been used before, and he gave the cook a bad mark.

He noticed that the pretty widow of twenty-five, at his side, would never see forty again, and he gave her another husband, at least.

He noticed that his hostess, Lady Piper, wore tight stays combined with a weak heart, and he gave her another year, at most.

He noticed that the soft little brown-eyed girl had matrimonial designs upon his old friend, Sir Miles Humber, and he gave her credit for the fact. He had been married himself, not altogether spontaneously, before the days of his prosperity, and he knew that if his wife did not spend his money, some other woman would.

Above all, he had his friend, Sir Miles, under observation, for the bond which united these two men was that which passeth the love of women. While he had enriched his life, at every point, with fresh relationships, his friend had remained celibate and recluse.

He knew the reason when he saw the sudden spark kindle in Sir Miles' eyes. Instantly, he turned to study Ursula.

His reaction was antipathetic, for hipless, boneless women made no appeal to him. Ursula had that skinned appearance to which he objected. Her neutral-tinted frock was tightly swathed around her reed-like figure, and her hair was completely covered by a close cap.

He studied her pale oval face, red lips and long green-brown eyes. Then he noticed her start and sudden flush at the distant ringing of a telephone-bell.

"Neurotic," he decided. "No stamina. Expecting a call from her lover. Out for affairs, not for matrimony."

In one respect, his diagnosis was correct. The faint shrilling note made Ursula's thoughts fly to Barney.

She appealed to Lady Piper.

"I'm expecting a telephone-message. Will your man let me know?"

The footman advanced, as she spoke. But the call was for the pretty widow of twenty-five.

Number three awaited her at the end of the wire.

Sir Harris' eyes continued to bore Ursula's face. He was surprised by the sweetness of her smile, which transformed her whole expression, when her glance fell on Sir Miles.

That smile confirmed Sir Harris in his fears.

"Hopeless," he decided. "The dear, damned old fool."

It was typical of Sir Miles to neglect the little feminine charmer, who sat—so to speak—on his doorstep, in order to heliograph his affection to the moon.

Looking up, Ursula caught the glitter of Sir Harris' steely eye. Sensitive of meeting acquaintances, now that her mother had done her worst, she sought the neutrality of strangers.

But she was vaguely frightened by Sir Harris. His eyes were too merciless to others—his lips too merciful to himself. She picked, at random, on a younger man, who sat, with folded arms, surveying the scene.

"He looks nice," she said vaguely.

Lady Piper shook her head.

"No good," she whispered. "But have a try."

She clutched the young man, led him to Ursula, gabbled something and left them.

Ursula found the company of the young man essentially soothing. After his smile of greeting, he made no remark. They sat and thought together, in mutual sympathy.

After a while she began to notice his silence. It piqued her to study him more closely.

He was tall and graceful, with an ivory complexion, a faultless profile, and compelling, slate-hued eyes. To her mind, he had the air of a youth who had lived too much with his seniors.

Her intuition was correct; for he passed his time in the company of those who were older than himself, by hundreds of years.

In other words, he fraternised with ghosts.

Ursula was tempted to try to break down his reserve.

"I didn't catch your name," she said softly.

"Primrose," he replied. "Charles, Edward."

She noticed that he did not inquire her own name.

"I'm fated to be anonymous to-day," she thought.

Presently, he seemed to recognise a sympathetic contact, for he spoke.

"You have no idea of the relief of this new house. Antiseptic, sterile, clean as a whistle. I'm letting the atmosphere soak in. It's like a megaphone, shouting into space—calling to futurity."

Ursula suddenly realised the attraction of the new house. It linked her with the future.

"As I sit here," continued Primrose, "I feel as though I'd got into a bone-dry change, after rotting in sodden garments."

Ursula was moved to confidence.

"I understand what you mean," she said. "When I came here, I had the impression of being steeped in

blue-mould. The effect of wandering through an old house."

"Old?" His eyes became searchlights. "What date?"

"End of Eighteenth Century."

"Oh, about the day before yesterday."

His laugh made her understand that she had trespassed upon his special domain.

"What do you call old?" she asked.

He lowered his voice.

"I've just returned from a fortnight spent in an ancient manor, built on the shell of a Norman castle. It had been the scene of wholesale slaughter and many a crime. Its walls were soaked in blood. . . . An Influence lurked there, which, during the course of centuries, had grown so strong that it was a menace to humanity."

"A ghost?" asked Ursula.

He shook his head impatiently.

"Not in your sense. *You* would see nothing—hear nothing. It was an emanation of cruelty, treachery and lust. For weeks I stalked it, through that rat-riddled place, with shadows, like giants, thrown on the high walls. In turn—it stalked me. . . . The hunter was hunted."

He wiped his brow with his handkerchief.

"Eventually, I laid it. . . . Otherwise, I should not be here with you."

Ursula considered him with the scepticism of youth.

"Is he a fraud?" she wondered. "Or is he a victim to self-suggestion?"

"It must be a lonely life," she said.

"The loneliness is freezing," he told her. "No one knows the utter isolation. When I'm on a quest

I lose touch with humanity. I am outside my own period. I wander in no-man's land, between the present and the past."

Ursula remarked that he reeled off his sentences with the fluency of an oft-quoted formula.

"It's a pose," she decided.

She noticed that his nails were varnished red, when he waved his hand in the direction of the guests.

"There are women here," he said, "some young and charming. Girls refresh me with their youth and beauty, like the fragrance of a bunch of country flowers. But they mean nothing at all to me. Not a thing."

"That puts me in my place," laughed Ursula.

"You?" He professed to start. "Sorry. I didn't mean to be personal. But—frankly—you are nothing to me but a gentle voice and a sympathetic atmosphere."

"Hush," murmured Ursula, glad of a chance to retaliate. "Madame Borghesi is going to sing."

His lip curled.

"Quite. This is a rich woman's party. I notice she has invited the usual number of professionals, who will be induced to sing for their cocktail. . . . Thank the gods, she can't ask me to hold a séance."

"Why not?" inquired Ursula, interested in the sudden briskness of his manner.

"Conditions would be impossible. Otherwise she'd try and rope me in, to entertain her guests. Something for nothing. You see, I work on a cash basis."

"Naturally," murmured Ursula.

"I guarantee results, and exact payment. Otherwise, the bottom would fall out of the investigation business."

"Business?"

"Why, of course, it's a business, as much as selling sides of bacon."

Ursula realised that her fatal sympathy had betrayed the young man. His profile and his detachment were only parts of his stock-in-trade.

Oddly enough, she liked him better for the exposure. She sank back in her chair, with a feeling of ease after strain, as a woman's contralto voice rang through the room.

"A merciful let-off," she thought. "I shan't have to bore any wretched person with my novel. It's a comfort to meet anyone so self-engrossed as Charles Edward Primrose. But he's a waste. He's got a sonorous voice and he'd photograph well. He ought to work for the Films. I wonder if Barney could use him. . . . Oh, Barney, have you forgotten me?"

Her heart sank as she looked at the clock. She knew that Barney intended to motor up to town. Very soon, he would have left. And still no message had come.

The music plunged her into profound melancholy.

"How can one live without love?" she thought.

And then her eyes met Sir Miles' beseeching gaze. Her answer lay there.

The contralto got back some of her own, for her song was a mere phrase, and the polite applause could not be construed as an encore, by the most ardent hostess.

Under its cover, Mrs. Pyke—flounced and garlanded as a shepherdess, in her floral chiffon—crossed the room.

She clutched her daughter.

"Darling, a most delightful woman *craving* to meet you, and hear all about the novel."

"Oh no, she's not," said Ursula quickly. "Mother, this is Mr. Primrose. He's psychic."

"Psychic?" Mrs. Pyke dropped into a chair. "I'm psychic myself. I always have a presentiment before any important event. I could have told the War Office all about the War. I used to wander about the house, saying to myself, 'England. My England'."

"But it wasn't only England," said Ursula.

Mrs. Pyke swept aside the interruption.

"Mr. Primrose, *you* will understand when I say I can smell joy and sorrow. When I woke this morning I knew that good fortune was hanging over me. And then we got the good news about my daughter's novel. She's told you, of course?"

Ursula turned to Primrose.

"When did you first discover that you had psychic powers?" she asked.

"When I was twelve. I was walking through a wood, and I saw a fairy, in a foxglove."

Mrs. Pyke arched her eyebrows.

"Oh? You actually see fairies? By night or by day?"

"By night and by day. I see them everywhere. . . . I can see one, at this moment, in the garden."

"Where?"

He pointed through the open window, to a distant bed of tulips.

"Do you see that tall red one, that's swaying to and fro? That's because a fairy is swinging from it."

Mrs. Pyke tried to appear impressed.

"Marvellous," she said politely. "I am afraid I can't see, without my long-distance spectacles. But you must have excellent eyesight."

"It would be invisible to *you*, even with the aid of glasses," the spiritualist told her. "It is a matter of clairvoyance, my dear lady."

Ursula remained silent. She, alone, had seen the tiny bird perched on the stem of the tulip, and half-hidden by its cup, from the base of which it was picking green fly.

As she noticed the signs of myopia in Primroses's pin-prick pupils and thick lashes, she tried to save the situation from her mother's too-evident scepticism.

"What's the fairy like?"

"Like an infinitesimal human, about an inch in height, exquisitely perfect and dainty, dressed in flower-petals."

"Male or female?" demanded Mrs. Pyke.

"It is dressed like a woman."

"I know. Ballet-skirts instead of bathing-drawers."

Primrose shrugged slightly and folded his arms, as he stiffened to his former immobility.

As Mrs. Pyke looked at him, a light suddenly gleamed in her eye.

"Oh, Mr. Primrose," she cried, "won't you turn a table?"

CHAPTER XVI

THE SÉANCE

HER words were the signal for a general attack. Almost immediately, Primrose was surrounded by a group of excited Society women. As he looked around him, with protesting eyes, Ursula was reminded of a stag at bay.

"It's impossible." He appealed to Lady Piper. "My dear lady, the house is entirely too new."

"But you'll *try*?" she urged. "Come, Mr. Primrose, you're English, and you won't recognise defeat."

He was outnumbered, overcalled. His arguments were mown down by shrill feminine voices. Ursula felt quite sorry for him when he was led, captive, to an inner room.

Sir Miles took advantage of the confusion to escape from Enid. The steel-grey eye of Sir Harris Tite followed him as he sought Ursula's side.

"I noticed that you accomplished the feat of making the Seer talk," he remarked.

"I did, worse luck," she said. "He rather gave himself away. Don't breathe it to anyone else, but he's a fraud."

"Hardly that. Fifty-fifty," amended Sir Miles. "He really does possess psychic force. I happen to know that he had amazing success, recently, over a poltergeist."

"I expect he introduced it to a fairy," gurgled Ursula. "The room is not so full. I suppose the party's nearly over?"

"Yes. You were very late. Have you signed yet? No? Then come and do your duty."

As he led her to the end of the room, he explained.

"Lady Piper wants the signature of every guest, on a cloth, for a souvenir of her house-warming. The pencil-marks will be retraced in permanent ink and the whole covered with glass. The idea is to preserve it as a memento of to-day, in perpetuity."

Ursula's fastidious lips betrayed her at the sight of the bureau on which the linen was stretched. It was inlaid with a mosaic of crude, vividly tinted woods, with intersections of gilt, and backed with a mirror, framed in similar style.

"This is a manifestation of impressionist furniture, according to Lady Piper," explained Sir Miles. "Pretty sinister, and rather hard on posterity. But, one day, it'll tone down to an antique."

As Ursula signed her name, her thoughts flashed to her novel.

"I wonder if this signature will, one day, be famous."

The reflection was responsible for the unusual size and boldness of her writing.

"You're in a lavish mood," commented Sir Miles. "Yours stands out from the rest."

Ursula rose and stood looking down at the table.

"It's rather a thrill to feel *that* will be here when I'm gone," she said.

"That's just how I feel about the future," chimed in the pretty widow who was peeping over her shoulder. "Sometimes I wonder what I shall be doing when I'm forty."

"Nothing that you've not done before," observed Sir Harris Tite, altogether too blandly.

"I suppose not," she agreed quickly. "Fashion goes in cycles."

Rather a strained silence followed. All turned, in relief, at the approach of Lady Piper, who literally charged into the group, in her distraction.

"SOS," she cried. "Stand by and help. We're holding a séance and I want you all to sit. Oh, do. Primrose is too tiresome, throwing every possible objection. He says we want all the available force, and that, when we get it, we shan't have results. But the Countess is mad on spiritualism, so we mustn't give in."

She laid her hand on Ursula's arm.

"Darling, you must come. Your mother's frivolous, and she's making us laugh."

Reluctantly, Ursula followed her to the music-salon. The curtains were drawn over the window, so that it was in semi-darkness. In the dim light which filtered through the doorway, Ursula saw unfamiliar dusky figures, seated, like statues, around a polished oval table.

"Here they are," whispered Lady Piper.

As they slipped into the empty chairs she shut the door and the room was blotted out in darkness.

At first, it seemed to envelop Ursula, like a pall—thick, heavy, almost tangible. She thought of the total eclipse of the grave, and felt afraid.

A hand which sought her own, as though he interpreted her shiver, made her realise that Sir Miles was by her side. As her eyes grew accustomed to the density, she realised that it was only relative. She could distinguish pallid patches of faces and the gleam of a mirror.

The silence was even less complete. It was broken by whispers, rustling and suppressed laughter. A deep voice uttered a command.

“Concentrate.”

Ursula realised that Primrose was speaking. There were no longer people seated around the table. There were only voices.

The appeal was followed by the sound of heavy breathing. Presently, a shrill soprano, in which Ursula recognised her mother, made a request.

“Oh, Mr. Primrose, could we have music? I keep trying to breath in time with Sir Harris, and I’m syncopated, so it’s a devastating discord.”

“Hush,” hissed a tense contralto.

“Shall I put on the gramophone?” asked a tenor.

“Yes.” The bass took control. “Put on something soft, with continuity of rhythm.”

“There’s a record ready,” volunteered a baritone, who was self-evidently a member of Lady Piper’s house-party.

He adjusted the needle with the merest flicker of a match, but Lady Piper took advantage of the interlude to appeal to her guests.

“This isn’t a game. It’s a wonderful opportunity for some of us, and we want to take advantage of it, to get some message from the Unseen. Do, please, be silent and concentrate, or we shall never get results.”

“It’s a foregone fiasco,” boomed the deep voice. “My dear lady, I wish I could persuade you that this séance is nothing but a farce. This house is barren of associations. It’s hardly been lived in. How can it attract any visitant from the past?”

“I know of one who might pop in,” said the soprano. “My daughter was calling on her to-day, so it’s only

ordinary politeness for her to return the call. Her name is Ursula Pike. No, not the famous novelist, but an ancestress who was drowned as a witch."

"Oh, mother, *don't*."

Ursula's voice was so vibrant in its appeal, that it had the effect of silencing Mrs. Pyke. A new spirit crept into the séance. Each person sat taut and resolute, intent on controlling their straying thoughts.

But their minds kept wandering beyond the radius of their wills.

"We are pouring out our electric force into the æther," thought the Countess. "Trying to tune in with the Infinite. Calling to—what? Awe-inspiring. . . . What time did I order dinner?"

"I'm near *her*," thought Sir Miles. "Enough for me."

"I'm near *him*," thought Enid. "I wonder if he's conscious of the contact of my finger. . . . I'm sure he pressed back."

"How did that horrible man guess my age?" thought the pretty widow. "Am I losing my eye? I must try to tempt John to a séance. Pressing hands in the dark is quite a useful idea."

"Bally rot," thought Primrose. "I could do with a smoke. Wonder how soon I can decently call this off."

"Will it never end?" thought Ursula. "This terrible darkness. It's strangling me. I'm sure something passed me. . . . Suppose Barney's rung up, and they don't like to disturb us. Suppose he's waiting to hear from me now, at this minute. Suppose he goes away, without seeing me. . . . Oh dear, oh dear, I can't bear it much longer. I shall scream."

She had to endure it for only a few more moments. Suddenly, the silence was broken by a sharp rap.

"What's that?" asked Primrose automatically. "Who's there?"

"Me," replied Mrs. Pyke. "Sorry, but my hand went to sleep, and side-slipped."

Lady Piper realised her duty as a hostess. She rose from her place and drew back the purple curtains, revealing the soaked greenery of the garden and a section of leaden sky.

"I'm sure we all feel most grateful to Mr. Primrose," she said. "But we mustn't take advantage of his kindness. While some of us have been regarding this as a joke, he has been draining himself of his vital force, and must be exhausted. . . . What about a blue ruin? . . . Speaking of blue reminds me. You've not seen my moonlight."

She pressed a switch, and, immediately, the garden outside the window was illuminated in a soft milky glow—every leaf standing out, as though wrought in jade.

"Beautiful," cried Ursula. "Do leave it on."

The pretty widow, who was uncertain of the light's revelations, made a protest.

"Oh, it's *sinful* to shut out the blessed daylight."

Lady Piper snapped off the current, and the radiance was replaced by the gloom of the overcast sky.

Ursula sank back, listening dreamily, as though drugged, to the latest dance-music. She felt sorry that she had refused a cocktail, but was too inert to ask for one. Her body seemed a log—her mind a stagnant pool.

Facing her was the glass on the wall. She saw reflected in it the mirror over the bureau, where she

had written her signature. In turn, it reproduced the original.

She felt confused at the multiplicity of images, as though she were looking down an avenue of illusion, where reality shifted to the glamour of mirage.

Near her Enid had started a discussion. Secure in the charm of her shell-pink frock, she made herself a centre of attraction.

"Sir Miles, I read, the other day, that the future is only the past, entered by a different door. What does it mean?"

Sir Miles made an obvious effort.

"I suppose the idea is that the soul, in its successive journeys, reaps, in each fresh life, what it has sown in a past existence."

"I see. If we're lucky it's because we've deserved it. . . . I wonder what I've done that I'm doomed to hammer a miserable type writer."

Sir Harris smiled down at her. She was a type that he thoroughly understood, and approved.

"Probably, you were too good," he said. "I expect you were that misguided female—a nun. To make up, you will have two husbands in this life. . . . By the way, how did you discover that men are susceptible to pink?"

"It's called 'Old maid's last chance'" she told him, conscious of her own youth, and glancing at Sir Miles out of the tail of her eye.

But he was watching Ursula, noting the complete detachment of her face and the whiteness of a neck that he had never kissed.

Mrs. Pyke thought of her three husbands, and grimaced.

"One life's enough for me," she said cheerfully. "At times, it's been too much. Lots of fun, and then a good long by-by, is my wish. I don't want to go on and on, like a recurring decimal."

"Your wish will probably be granted," observed Sir Harris, who was a professed materialist. "Make the most of this life. Do your damndest. Remember, 'I shall not pass this way twice'."

Enid laughed in complete enjoyment of a new frock and masculine notice. Confident in her own supremacy, she challenged Ursula.

"Ursula, do you believe the soul goes on?"

"Yes." Ursula's lips moved mechanically. "It goes on. Another life. Another chance."

No one listened to her, for the party had reached its penultimate stage of general conversation and continual departures.

The gramophone record slurred to an end. The music stopped, and Ursula came out of her apathy, with a start. As she looked around the room with its black glass walls and groups of fashionably dressed people, she realised acute disappointment and distaste.

She felt cheated, as though she had awakened from a winter's dream of the ecstasy of summer—of sunlight, the scent of young larch, the gleam of daffodil gold—to find herself imprisoned in a cellar.

She tried to trace back her thoughts to their source, but failed.

"What made me feel so utterly and completely happy? I cannot remember. I only know I don't want to come back—to *this*."

But she smiled as she met Sir Miles' gaze. Tomorrow he would re-open the old question. Although

she felt tepid over the prospect, she knew that a night's sleep might alter her perspective.

Then she became suddenly alert at the sight of the footman advancing in her direction. She held her breath, feeling electric and eager, as though the dead cells of her brain had become quick. At the same time, she was vaguely aware of Primrose, who was in the act of swallowing a cocktail, and she was struck by the startling pallor of his face.

"Perhaps he really does work himself up to believe," she thought, as she sprang up, before the footman could speak.

"Am I wanted on the 'phone?" she asked.

She followed him, walking like one who treads on air. When she returned, her eyes were shining, as though lit by an inner glow.

Sir Harris noticed her sketchy farewell to Lady Piper and how she shook her head at some appeal from her mother.

"No, I can't wait for you. See you later."

She nodded in casual greeting, but Mrs. Pyke had already turned away, and presented only a gesticulating floral back.

That was their parting. It was only Sir Miles who watched her cross the room. His eyes dwelt on her, as though etching every line upon his memory. When she passed through the door, his face dulled, like one who has lost something of great price.

He started, when Sir Harris spoke.

"So that's Ursula Pyke?"

"Yes. I've wanted you to meet her."

Sir Harris waited, expectant of the inevitable question. To his relief, however, Sir Miles did not ask for his opinion, for Ursula had struck him as poor material.

"I take it she's the girl?" he asked presently.

"Yes. She's the girl."

"Good. Better late than never. Am I to congratulate you?"

Sir Miles shook his head.

"Not yet. We've met too soon—or too late."

His sad gaze seemed to bridge the gulf of centuries.

"It will come right in the end," he said. "I can wait."

He roused himself with an effort.

"Don't forget you're dining with me. Shall we find the car?"

As the men walked through the front door they noticed that Primrose was standing outside, on the drive, peering up at the house, with a puzzled expression in his eyes.

Sir Harris threw him a quick glance, grinned, and spoke to him.

"Curious style of building, isn't it?" he remarked. "Is it the architect's idea of futuristic?"

The spiritualist suddenly rapped his brow.

"Bonehead. Of course—the future. That accounts for it. . . . The new house trapped it. . . . I felt, all along, that, somehow, the blinking house was to blame."

Both men stared at him for he had shed his armour of fastidious reserve. His face was flushed and he spoke thickly.

"You must excuse me. I—I can't pull myself together. . . . A terrible shock. . . . You understand, don't you? I don't know fear. I'm used to the supernatural. I can fight the devil in his own hell, and pluck him by the beard. I'm not afraid. . . . But *this* is outside Nature. You understand?"

His glance was so wild that Sir Miles felt uncomfortable.

"Quite," he said. "It was rather rough on you, to be forced to waste your time and—and talent, for no result."

Primrose laughed on a high note.

"Oh, there was a result. I got something, all right. Rather more than I bargained for. . . . Now, I want to get back. Back to London."

"Can I give you a lift to the station?" asked Sir Miles.

"No, I want to try and walk it off." As he turned and faced them they noticed that his pupils were almost invisible, and that his lips were shaking. "Think of it," he whispered. "A shrinking soul, torn from unborn centuries, out of her time—out of her place. . . . And it happened to *me*. . . . I—I've glimpsed eternity."

As he staggered towards the gate Sir Miles turned to his friend.

"Slightly mental, I suppose?"

The brain-specialist laughed.

"No. Too many cocktails. He's drunk."

CHAPTER XVII

GREETING AND FAREWELL

THE New House was built outside the town, and the road rose sharply to the sky-line, in a short hill. The world seemed to stop there, in a doorstep to a view—sea or moorland, or anything but the reality.

As Ursula waited for Barney, it seemed to her that he would never come. She felt like one who watched for a pioneer airman, staring with almost blinded eyes up at the empty sky, lest the thrill of wings triumphant should be missed.

The blood drummed in her temples as she worked herself up to a fever of expectancy. He might be on the other side of the hill, only a second away—or he might be far distant, and the road empty. For she had no certainty that he would obey her summons. After she had given her message to Coles, she had been too excited to tell her to telephone his reply, but had rushed back to the drawing-room, afire to get her order of release.

It seemed to her that she waited by the roadside for a long time. Departing guests looked curiously at her pensive figure, and she declined offers of a lift, even while she wondered if she would have to walk home eventually.

Just as she despaired of seeing it, Barney's shabby Austin suddenly appeared on the crest of the rise.

"At last," she cried. "What an age you've been."

"I like that," he said. "I've extended the old bus for more than she was worth, and nearly slain a bobby. . . . Now, what's the big idea?"

Ursula did not reply, as she gazed fixedly at his handsome fluid face.

"Where did you telephone from?" she asked.

"Crown. Jones has a binge on."

"And you rang me up—from there—to say 'Good-bye'?"

"I did. Anything wrong in that?"

"No. Charming of you to remember me."

It seemed to her that she was looking at the face of a dead person. Although she had known, all day, that Barney was lost to her, for the first time the truth bit home.

Apart from him, she had buoyed herself up with the thought that there could be no end for her and Barney. Always the re-shuffle or the twist. But, as she realised his smiling indifference—a casual farewell rattled from the bar of a public-house—she recognised finality.

Two shadows stood between them—Cherry and Miles.

She set her lips at the thought of Miles.

"To-morrow," she thought. "I won't fail him again."

The sound of Barney's voice recalled her.

"Do you want me to run you home?"

She looked at the suitcases in the back seat.

"Are you going up to London?" she asked.

"Directly I've parked you."

"Then I'll come back with you, as far as the second milestone."

"How will you get back?" he objected.

"Over the Downs. It's not more than half a mile."

"Good-a-lay. Hop in."

"Drive very slowly," said Ursula, as he restarted the car.

Although he obeyed, it seemed to her that they flashed by the sordid outskirts and small shops to the crowded heart of the town. She wanted their last ride to endure for ever.

It was a strain to put the usual casual questions.

"Was it a nice party?" she asked.

"Foul," grumbled Barney. "The drinks were quantity, not quality. No one tight, though everyone was trying hard. That will tell you all you want to know."

"Cherry still there?"

"She didn't come."

Ursula looked at the front-windows of a long line of small red-brick houses. Each had its distinctive decoration—small vases of flowers, in one—plaster busts in another.

"Where was she?" she asked.

"How should I know? I'm not her nurse. I believe she said something about trying out a car."

Ursula noticed that he frowned at her insistence and he shrugged as he changed the conversation.

"What sort of a show did Lady P. put up?"

"Very sumptuous, I expect," she replied. "I only came in for the end."

"How was that?"

"I was so late getting back from Mallow."

Barney threw her a swift glance.

"So you did go, after all. Never knew such a girl to plug. Humber take you?"

"Of course."

"Accounts for your being late, if he drove himself."

Ursula watched the last lamp-post flash by. They had passed the town's boundaries and were speeding on the high road to London, which twisted, like a black shiny serpent, at the foot of the sweeping green mound of the Downs.

"Very soon we shall have parted for ever," she thought.

She became aware that Barney was speaking in a wheedling voice.

"Cheer up, Ursula. I shall soon be back again."

As she made no comment, he continued, in tones smooth as honey.

"Next time we've got to see more of each other. I've hardly run across you, this leave."

"Whose fault?"

"Oh, my dear girl, don't let's go into that."

"I'm not going to. It's finished."

As Ursula spoke, she looked up at the sky, to see deep fissures of blue amid the leaden sea of clouds, cracked with an occasional gleam of sunshine.

"I believe it's going to clear," she cried. "I especially wanted a bright end to the day. It's been eventful."

"Why, what's happened?" he asked carelessly.

Ursula thought of her misery on the Castle Wall.

"More than I can tell you," she replied.

Then she pointed to a white gate, at the side of the road.

"That path leads up to the Downs," she said.

"Please stop."

He shut off the engine and lit a cigarette.

"This is really the end," she thought.

She steadied her voice by an effort of will, for the flood of memories sweeping over her, almost overwhelmed her.

"Good-bye, Barney."

"Good-bye, Ursula. Good luck, and all the rest."

As she rose, blindly, he pulled her back to her seat.

"What's all this about Humber?" he asked roughly.

"Are you going to marry him?"

"I think so," she replied, staring at the milestone.

"Then it's not settled?"

"It will be to-morrow."

He bent his head, trying to meet her eyes.

"But, darling, you can't marry him. What about me?"

She turned and looked at him.

"What am I to you?" she asked.

"You know perfectly well. You know you are the only girl that's ever counted with me."

Although the words filled her with triumph, her eyes remained dark with doubt.

"What about Cherry?" she asked.

"Cherry? She doesn't mean a thing to me. Or I to her."

"That's rather difficult to believe. You've spent all your time with her."

He made a gesture of impatience.

"That's nothing. . . . Look here, Ursula, we've played about too long. . . . What about getting married?"

Ursula's brain reeled.

"All my life," she thought, "I've waited for this moment. And it's come—like *this*."

She had pictured their souls rushing together like twin flames, in a mist of moonlight and roses, while

the nightingale tore the heart of the night with her song of eternal love and sorrow.

That was the dream. In the reality, they sat hunched in a battered Austin, not a hundred yards from the arterial road, in an explosive welter of passing cars, hooting of horns, reek of petrol.

And then, suddenly, she was caught up in wonder of a dream come true. She had wanted Barney passionately, and now, he was hers. The tarred road, the naked telegraph-poles, the whirl of machinery—all became transfigured in her eyes.

“This is progress,” she thought. “The spirit of the present. I’ve had a modern proposal. Barney’s only being true to type—true to his generation. If he talked like a page of Byron he wouldn’t be Barney at all.”

As he watched her face, trying to read its expression, his careless lips were unusually tense. Then, as though confident of her answer, they relaxed in a smile.

“I won’t rush you,” he said. “It only takes a second to say ‘yes,’ and you’ll probably regret it, for the rest of your life.”

Ursula remained silent, as she thought of Miles. At that moment she realised the generosity of spirit which would not take advantage of an emotional aftermath—together with the sacrifice which it entailed.

To-morrow would bring him yet another disappointment—the more bitter because he had glimpsed a mirage of happiness.

Even while she responded to the glamour of Barney’s personality and the magnetism of his smiling eyes, she was conscious of a sense of loss at renunciation.

"I'm making the wrong choice," she thought. "But, perhaps, we rank happiness and safety too high. All that matters is—life."

She looked at Barney.

"I'll risk it," she said.

He drew a deep breath, as of relief.

"Then, that's settled. Darling, shall we keep this to ourselves?"

His voice was so winning that it put her on her guard.

"No. I want everyone to know."

He was swift to reassure her.

"So do I. Naturally, with the most wonderful girl in the world. Only, I thought women loved a secret."

Ursula smiled faintly.

"Your wings aren't really clipped," she said. "You'll find plenty of girls who'll flirt with an engaged man."

"Don't be fatuous. . . . Who'll stick this in the papers—you or I?"

"Mother will. She's my Press-agent. Oh, of course, you don't know."

She was surprised at his interest, when she told him about the novel.

"Holy smoke, you've certainly brought home the bacon this time. Looks as though my wish about a rich girl was coming true. . . . Question is—do you love me for myself?"

He was so confident of her answer that he was momentarily abashed before her remote gaze—as though some stranger weighed him in the balance.

"No, Barney, I love you in spite of yourself."

"That's a nasty knock," he laughed. "Look here, this ought to be celebrated. The binge is still on. Shall we buzz back to the Crown?"

She gave a sharp cry of protest.

"No."

"Perhaps you're right. They're only waiting for the party to get properly lit, to work off their cheapest brands. My last drink tasted like horse-medicine. . . . Well, what next? We can't park here for ever."

"I wish we could," said Ursula.

"So do I. But what about my masterpiece that's waiting for me at the studio?"

Ursula looked down the stretch of tarred road, dark in the shade of the horse-chestnuts.

"I never *have* you, Barney," she said. "I've waited so long, for this. And, now that you belong to me, you're going away again. When you turn that corner it will seem as if I'd lost you, for ever."

"I'm not so easily lost," he told her. "Especially by a best-seller. Your stock's booming with me."

She laughed with him.

"The novel will be fun. You might write a scenario round it."

"I will, if it'll screen," he promised her. "Personally, I prefer a plot with whiskers. Safety first."

Then he glanced at his watch.

"Hell, I'll have to step on the gas. . . . Well, darling, we've started something this evening. I wish, for your sake—— No, hang it, I don't. You want *me*. Would you care for me if I were like—Humber?"

"No. Not in the same way."

"That's good enough for me. But don't blame me for being myself. . . . Anyone looking?"

He gave her a hasty kiss. A minute later she stood, by the side of the road, watching the car, as it turned the corner and disappeared.

"He never looked back," she thought. "But he wouldn't think of that. He's right. I can't have it both ways."

She emerged from the shade of the trees into sunlight. The clouds had rolled away, revealing a clear, stainless blue sky. Her spirits rose at the sight.

"It will be a fine sunset. My day is going to end beautifully. And it's been a wonderful day. It's brought me all I most wanted. I am the happiest girl in the world."

She had to remind herself of the fact, for, already, the sadness of curfew was stealing over her mind.

Although she would not admit it, she knew that her present bliss was anti-climax. It paled before that memory of forgotten happiness, which she could only gauge by her misery at its loss.

"What made me so happy?" she wondered. "Where did I go to? When I looked around that crowded room it was like coming out of the sunlight into a dark forest."

She opened the gate which led to the Downs. They rose in a swelling, dark green hump, streaked with the white threads of many a path worn in pursuit of short cuts.

As she lingered, the snarl of an engine grated on the air, and a low, lemon-coloured car entered the straight.

Its shade gave her the clue to the reckless driver.
"It's Cherry."

Suddenly, she was conscious of a burst of human exultation, as she realised that she no longer feared Cherry.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE HOSPITAL

CHERRY had seen Ursula, for she stopped the car. "Oh, Ursula," she cried.

Ursula looked at her in surprise, wondering why she had troubled to pull up. She was dressed as though for a garden-party, in floral chiffon and a huge picture hat. Her face, no longer rouged, was deep shell-pink in colour, and her eyes looked very blue and big, with a blank, infantile expression.

"What a colour you've got," observed Ursula.

"Yes," said Cherry brightly. "I've been sick."

As she spoke she stared at Ursula with an uncertain smile.

"Quite sick," she repeated.

Suddenly Ursula realised that Cherry's smile was a form of nerves, akin to a grimace, for her hands—in spite of their grip of the steering-wheel—were shaking.

"Is anything wrong?" she asked.

Cherry continued to smile vaguely.

"Darling, a perfectly petrifying thing has happened," she said.

"What?"

Cherry moistened her lips.

"I—I've just run over a child."

"A child?" Ursula screened her eyes with her hand, but she could only see an empty stretch of road.

"Where?"

Cherry shook her head helplessly.

"I don't know."

"But you must."

"I tell you I don't. Somewhere behind. I was so scared I accelerated for all I was worth. Then I had to stop to be sick."

As she broke into noisy sobs Ursula looked at her in incredulous dismay.

"You drove off, without seeing if it was hurt? Cherry—you *couldn't*."

"I've just told you I *did*." Cherry's voice cracked ominously. "My nerve crashed. Hell, woman, can't you *understand*?"

"Of course," said Ursula quietly. "That's all right, Cherry. But we're wasting time. You must go back at once."

"I can't" declared Cherry. "I—I'm afraid."

"But Cherry, you know you must."

"I know. But not alone. Darling, come with me. Do."

Ursula tried to keep steady before the appeal of swimming blue eyes and tremulous lips. She realised the need of a cool head to neutralise the protective urge which swelled in her heart.

It was the same instinct which had led her to defend Cherry at their first meeting, when she had revoked at cards.

At the time she had been confounded by her own impulse towards an attractive stranger. Since then Cherry had proved definitely antagonistic, and merited no consideration from herself.

Yet she could not rid herself of a perplexing sense of responsibility.

"Why?" she questioned. "Do I owe her something for hating her so?"

The lengthening shadows told her that her day was drawing towards its close. She wondered if she were reverting to the old nursery superstition, which decreed that all quarrels must be made up before the setting of the sun.

She moved towards the car, and then, instinctively, drew back, so strong was her sense of impending crisis.

There was a warning whisper within her brain.

"I'm Ursula Pyke. I have everything—love, success, life. Cherry is nothing to me. She has no claim. Our paths fork here. Let her go alone. She means danger. She is drowning in deep water, and she'll drag me down with her."

"Come with me, darling," repeated Cherry.

Ursula shook her head.

"But it's nothing to do with me. I hate to remind you, but we're not even friends."

As she spoke she conjured up a picture of Cherry on the links, that morning, repulsing her own overtures with the hard indifference of confident youth. She remembered her refusal to play with one whom she deemed a rabbit, and her tacit partnership with Enid, to keep her out in the cold.

"Why should I come with you?" she asked.

Cherry bit her lip and blinked away her tears.

"Oh, all right, if it's like that. Only, I didn't think you'd let me down."

Her eyes were reproachful as a child's, as she started the engine.

Against her will, Ursula called to her.

"Stop. I'll come."

She opened the door of the car with the feeling that she pulled a lever which set into motion the mechanism of vast machinery.

"You're upset," she said. "Shall I drive?"

"No," replied Cherry. "If I don't do something I'll go mad."

The car started, and Ursula again felt the grinding of unseen rollers. Nothing now could save her from her fate.

Cherry's steering was so erratic, at first, that Ursula sat, tense and watchful, ready to take the wheel in case of emergency. The tarred road unrolled before them like a shiny black ribbon, reflecting the green of the over-arching chestnut-trees, like pools of lake-water.

Presently Cherry spoke.

"I'm driving better now, I think. It's the only thing to do after a smash, or—or anything like that. If you don't drive, at once, your nerve goes. Pedestrians don't realise the terrible strain they put on motorists. One's jarred, for days, after an accident. And we're always to blame, of course."

"Would you call a child a pedestrian?" asked Ursula coldly.

"Not exactly. But they're terribly careless the way they play in the road."

"Perhaps they've nowhere else to play," said Ursula.

Then she nerved herself to ask a question.

"What happened—exactly?"

Cherry shuddered slightly.

"Really, I don't know. The road seemed clear, so I was letting the car out. By the way, you've not noticed my new car. She was doing more than sixty, I should say, when the child ran in front. I hadn't the ghost of a chance to avoid it. It wasn't my fault."

"Whereabouts?" asked Ursula, staring at the road.

"We haven't come to the place yet. It was by some cottages, near the end of the town."

Ursula's heart began to beat irregularly. She found that she was dreading each fresh turn of the road. The mere fact of being in the car seemed to identify her with Cherry, so that she could not shake off a sense of guilt.

As fields gave way to market-gardens and the first straggle of cottages, Cherry began to whistle.

She broke off, to look defiantly at Ursula.

"I know what you're thinking. But it won't help for me to come all unstuck. It's easy for you to look sad and scared. It's not your funeral."

She dropped her voice.

"Ursula, I'm in hell."

Her last sentence did not sound quite genuine. Ursula suspected that she was dramatising the situation. The next second, however, her suspicion was swept away in a shock of horror.

"Stop," she cried.

As Cherry slammed on the brakes, Ursula sprang from the car. In the gutter lay what appeared to be a small bundle of clothes. When Ursula came closer to it she saw that it was baby-boy, dressed in the suit of an older child. The grubby, pale-blue woollen trousers dropped below the ankles and the jersey was pinned to the shoulders, for support.

She felt an intense rush of pity as she picked it up. It was so light that she was reminded of the fluttering bird she had released that morning. Its head wobbled weakly from its tiny neck, and fell across her shoulder.

"Dead?" gasped Cherry.

"I don't think so."

"Thank Heaven. Perhaps it's not badly hurt after all. Children are like puppies. They've gristle instead of bones. You can run over them and they're not a penny the worse."

Then she broke off with a cry.

"*Oh!* There's blood on the road."

"Pull yourself together and drive to the hospital," commanded Ursula.

"But blood always bowls me over. Oh. I'm going to be sick."

Ursula was started by the savagery of her hatred.

"*Be* sick then," she said sharply. "But you've *got* to drive to the hospital."

"All right." The rush of colour to Cherry's face testified to her effort. "I'll manage it, somehow."

As the car started, Ursula was aware of a toneless voice, repeating one word, over and over again.

"Maggie," it croaked. "Maggie. Maggie."

She looked in the direction of the sound. Seated in a chair, in a shabby patch of garden, was a crippled woman. She was middle-aged and dark, with a smudge of moustache and a skin like yellow flannel.

No one took any notice of her appeal. Maggie was either deaf or absent. Not even a child was playing in the street.

But, as they passed through it, Ursula was dimly conscious of an invisible audience, beginning to flicker to life—of faces, like white blurs, behind the lace curtains and pots of geraniums—and of figures running into the road, behind them.

It was as though they were stirring up a street of vengeance.

Ursula looked down at the child. Its face was sunken and a tiny trickle of blood oozed from the corner of its

mouth. She noticed the bunched veins on its temples and the long lashes, often symptomatic of rickets.

"Drive as gently as you can," she said. "But you must hurry, or we may not be in time."

Cherry nodded as the car climbed a steep corkscrew lane. Against her will, Ursula had to admire the dexterity with which she changed gears. At the top, they spun past small back-gardens where columbines and sweet Williams grew, and back-yards which only cultivated dustbins.

An old archway led into a quiet residential street, where houses stood flush with the pavement, their windows shielded by wire blinds. The end was blocked by the bleak stone pile of the hospital.

A porter opened the door and looked inquiringly at Ursula and her burden.

Suddenly she realised that she was feeling faint. It had been a strenuous day, saturated with emotional strain. She had been on her feet for most of the time and had scarcely eaten anything.

Her knees shook and a mist clouded her sight.

"An accident," she quavered. "Child—run over by a motor-car."

Then things grew confused. A nurse in glasses took the child from her arms, and she realised vaguely that they were conducted to seats, and told to wait.

Presently Cherry's sighs and mutters aroused her to a sense of her surroundings. They were in a large room, furnished with a long table and benches of light varnished wood. A bald-faced clock ticked upon the wall, which bore copies of printed regulations.

To Ursula the whole place seemed typical of an Institution, governed by a Committee and starved on enforced economy decreed by charitable deficit.

In spite of the season, the air of the room was chill and held the odour of unwashed flesh and clothing. It made Ursula aware of the other people who kept them company on the benches.

At first she was struck by the uniform tint of their faces—a putty hue, like nibbled mushrooms. She was reminded of some growth spawned in cellars, or forced inside hermetically sealed windows.

Then she realised that the majority of those present were patients, and that the prevailing pallor was the result of ill-health. Many of them had bandages or dressings, or some visible disability. Most of these sat with vacant faces, awaiting their turn, with Oriental patience.

A few, however, were exchanging grim confidences. Ursula caught loathsome snatches of their conversation—details of cancer, skin-disease and parasite.

Suddenly she was rent with a passion of longing for her own home. She thought of its cleanliness, its order and luxury; the dim coolness of the powder-blue drawing-room and the gay cheer of the Japanese sunrise.

This dreary place was like one of her own nightmares from which she could not awake. They all sat in semi-obscurity and squalor, waiting for something to happen.

But it seemed that nothing would ever happen. The clock ticked on the wall. The ghastly recital of death and disease droned on incessantly.

“Gosh,” muttered Cherry. “This is foul.”

“Hush!” warned Ursula.

She noticed the suspicious glances in their direction, as though the patients scented a personal allusion. It was obvious that the two fashionable girls were resented as intruders.

One young woman, with a blue-black fringe, cut in Anna May Wong fashion, and a debased face, murmured in derision:

"All fine above and ragged below."

Ursula looked at the hostile faces, and home grew more remote.

"A nightmare," she thought. "I have Cherry to thank for this."

Then hope shot up, as a door at the far end of the room was opened, to admit a prim-faced, middle-aged woman, in a print uniform.

Cherry rushed towards her, only to be waved back.

"Not you. Keep your turn," she said severely.

She called a name, and a man with a bulbous swelling on the end of his nose passed through the door, which was closed behind him.

As Cherry, abashed by the unexpected repulse, returned to her place, a murmur arose from the benches.

"Pushing themselves before others."

"What they doing here, at all, dressed up like that?"

"Taking our Insurance wot *we* pay for."

The girl with the black fringe looked malignant. Her eyes were fine and dark, and her lips fresh, but they were divided by a long, crooked nose.

Ursula was reminded of the reflection of a comely face, distorted by a crack in the mirror. Nothing was wholesome or normal. The sense of being in a bad dream deepened, and she grew desperate with longing to escape.

The homesick feeling increased to panic.

"I don't believe I'll ever see home again," she thought. "It's gone."

Cherry began to whisper in her ear.

"Ursula, what's happened to it? Is it dead?"

She turned and looked at Cherry, who was shredding her handkerchief to strips, in the grip of nervous tension.

Stung with remorse, Ursula realised that she had forgotten all about the child.

"I'll try and find out something," she said.

Outside the room stretched a long corridor, with polished boards, and fire-extinguishers at either end. No one was in sight. She summoned up courage to open a door, but saw only the long table and chairs of an empty Board-room.

She ventured to explore farther, and, at the corner of the passage, collided with a young nurse, who was walking with express speed, her mouth pursed with importance.

Ursula tried to stop her.

"Oh, can you tell me——"

The girl pushed her aside with the impersonal impetus of a machine.

"I'm in a hurry," she snapped.

Ursula followed her, appealing to her blue cotton back.

"Oh, please, I want to find out——"

The probationer half turned her head, and shot out something which sounded like "Enquiry Office," as she whisked through a door.

Reluctant to leave Cherry alone for too long, Ursula returned to the waiting-room.

"No good," she said.

Then she noticed that Cherry's face had grown ominously pink.

"Sick?" she whispered.

Cherry nodded.

"It's this foul air. I can't stand it much longer. Can't we cut and go?"

"No," decided Ursula. "We've got to first find out about that child."

"All right. We're for it."

Cherry stoically pulled out her cigarette-case. But as she struck a match, the general outcry made her blow it out again.

"Smoking's agin the Rules."

"Calls herself a lady," muttered the girl with the fringe.

Ursula tried to be philosophical and console herself by thinking of her home.

"In half an hour I'll be back. No time at all. I'll have a hot bath, and get Coles to bring me something on a tray."

It soothed her to think of primrose tiles—steaming perfumed water—the cool slip of silken boudoir-pyjamas. She wanted the promise of luxurious ease to help her to forget her surroundings.

An elderly woman fingered her dress.

"Blood," she observed, pointing to the stains where the child's head had rested. "Accident, dearie?"

"Yes," nodded Ursula.

The woman, who was friendly, recognised the common bond. In return, she offered to show Ursula her leg.

As she was unwinding the grubby top-bandages, a rosy-faced nurse came out of the inner room.

In desperation, Ursula clung to her arm.

"Listen!" Her voice was dramatic. "I want to find out about a child."

"What number?" asked the nurse.

"I don't know."

"Name, then?"

"I don't know either. But it was run over by a car and I brought it here. My name is Miss Pyke. Oh, for Heaven's sake, tell someone I'm here."

The rosy nurse nodded as she vanished through the door.

They settled down again, waiting for something to happen. But nothing happened. The air seemed to curdle with breath and poisons. Ursula saw the faces quivering through a miasma of faintness. The friendly woman reached the last fold of her bandage.

"Look at me ulster, dearie," she urged.

As Ursula nerved herself to respond to the invitation, Cherry caught her arm.

"At last," she cried. "We're wanted."

A porter beckoned to them from the door, and told them to follow him to the Matron's room.

It was a refreshing change, with its grey paper and mauve curtains. The window looked out upon the shaven lawn at the back, which was mottled with evening sunlight. Over the fireplace hung a large engraving of the Sistine Madonna. Other framed photographs of masterpieces of art and views of scenery were obvious souvenirs of the Matron's annual Continental holiday. Tall vases of purple irises stood on the mantelpiece.

"Coo," whispered Cherry derisively. "Chaste."

The Matron was seated at her desk, writing. She had a frost-bitten, lined face, with intensely blue eyes, which, when she smiled, beautified her whole face.

"Miss Pyke?" she inquired.

A remembrance of her mother's hospital activities gave Ursula confidence.

"Yes," she replied. "We wanted to know about the child we brought here."

"The motor-car casualty?"

"Yes."

"He's in the theatre now. A rush operation."

Ursula felt Cherry's grip on her hand.

"Will he live?" she asked.

"I'll tell you presently. Please sit down."

They sat on the edge of chairs upholstered in prim mauve-and-white cretonne, and stared at the Madonna. The Matron went on writing. Once again they were forgotten lumber in the Institution.

Presently, at the sound of a muffled ring, the Matron picked up the house-telephone.

They watched her face anxiously, but could learn nothing.

"Yes," she said. "Yes. . . . Yes. . . . Yes."

Then she put down the receiver and turned to Ursula.

"The child died under the anæsthetic. But it was practically hopeless from the first."

Ursula felt a sharp shock of horror, followed by a rush of relief that the tension of their ordeal was over.

"I shall be terribly sorry for the poor darling later on," she thought. "It's hair was just like fair down. But, at present, I can't seem to feel any more. I only want to go home. Oh, my dear heart, I *want* to go home."

Cherry, too, seemed only to realise their release.

"I suppose we can go now?" she asked.

"One minute," said the Matron. "If you don't mind waiting a little longer."

As she paused a man's voice was heard in the corridor. They caught the end of his sentence.

"Pegged out on the table. Playful little prank of some of your Bright Young People."

It was obvious that he did not know that his voice had carried, for he entered the Matron's room with no trace of embarrassment.

Ursula was vaguely aware of a short, thickset young man, in a white coat. She had also an impression of dark eyes shielded by large glasses.

Taking no notice of the girls, he spoke to the Matron.

"Do they know?"

"Yes."

He turned and looked at them.

"You understand there will be an inquest?"

Ursula glanced involuntarily at Cherry, who was gazing fixedly at the vases of iris. She waited, in vain, for her to reply. When it was obvious that Cherry was determined to remain silent, she answered reluctantly.

"No. I hadn't thought about it."

"Hum." His keen eyes flickered from one face to the other. "Who was driving at the time of the accident?"

There was another long pause. Then, to her astonishment, Ursula saw that Cherry's blue eyes were gazing at her, as though in accusation.

She felt a rush of indignation. While her pride kept her silent for the time, she was furious at being drawn into this tacit partnership with Cherry.

Her face burned with the shame of it, giving her the appearance of guilt.

Cherry turned to the doctor.

"It was my *car*," she explained.

"But you are not clear which of you was driving?"

He paused. "Well, it doesn't matter to me, of course. If there'd been a peeler about he'd have taken down the details. As he wasn't there, you will call at the Police Station and report the accident."

Turning on his heel, he left the room.

Ursula spoke to the Matron.

"What about the mother? We saw no one about, and we haven't the faintest idea of her name. But, of course, we know where she lives. Ought we to go and break the news to her?"

Her lips quivered as she spoke. Home still seemed a very long way off.

"That won't be necessary," replied the Matron. "When the police have the particulars, they will notify the relatives."

At that moment, the house-surgeon returned with a small glass in his hand. He presented it to Cherry.

"Drink this," he said. "I can see you have had a shock."

Ursula half smiled at his gesture of sympathy. In her flowered frock, Cherry looked little more than a pretty child, with her appeal of silver-gold curls and limpid blue eyes.

She played up beautifully to the young doctor.

"Thank you frightfully. I've got to drive home again. It's terribly silly of me, but my nerve is all shot to bits."

"I'll drive," said Ursula quickly.

"Oh, no, thanks." Cherry's refusal to trust her life to Ursula was marked. "I can manage all right, now."

Pride alone kept Ursula's lips set. She walked to the door, as Cherry returned the glass to the doctor.

"That's done me a heap of good." Her smile was bewitching. "I really needed it."

"I saw you did," said the doctor. "You're bound to feel frayed after killing a child."

CHAPTER XIX

BLUE FOR DANGER

CHERRY did not speak until they were reseated in the car.

"Why did he say that?" she demanded. "How did he know it was me?"

"Not from you," replied Ursula.

Cherry's expression grew grim. As she stared in front of her, her childish face seemed years older.

"You don't understand the position," she said. "And, anyway, I hate all doctors. They vivisect dogs. I'd rather die in a drain, than go to them."

She drove slowly down the quiet residential street. Near its end, she stopped the car.

"We'll park here for a bit," she said. "I want to talk. . . . Ursula, my back's to the wall."

"I know," said Ursula. "Really, I'm sorry."

"No good to me. I want more than that."

"What."

"Help."

Ursula looked up quickly, and noticed hard little lines of strain around Cherry's mouth.

"Do you want me to come with you to the Police Station?" she asked.

"Darling I cannot do without you."

"Then of course I'll come."

Ursula's decision was made partly in self-defence. With all her heart she longed to go home. But, after

her experience at the hospital, she was determined that there should be no ambiguity about the proceedings at the Police Station.

Cherry fumbled helplessly in her bag.

"Have you a cigarette?" she asked.

She lit it with a casual air, but it was plain that she was ill at ease.

"Ursula," she jerked out, between puffs, "That child's—dead."

"I know."

"Of course you know. But—have you realised what it will mean for me?"

Ursula started at her words, for she had not realised the gravity of the situation.

"I'll be had up for manslaughter," went on Cherry.

Ursula tried to console her.

"You'll probably get off with a fine. You're young and attractive, and Juries are so susceptible." Her lip curled slightly. "Oh, those people in the waiting-room knew. We get such a pull when we're pretty and well-dressed. That's why they hated us so."

Cherry continued to stare ahead with stony blue eyes.

"Yes, I'd probably get off, if it was like that. Only—it's not the first time."

She moistened her lips nervously.

"You'd better know exactly where I stand, Ursula. I—I've had two previous convictions."

As Ursula looked at her, aghast, she broke into a vehement tirade.

"I've had damnable luck. Others can scorch to hell, and get off with a free hair-singe. But I always crash. . . . First time I—I went too fast I did get

off, just as you say. My lawyer put me wise. I wore white, and hung my head, and looked small and pathetic. But the second time—my gosh—was touch and go. It was in the same town—Harrogate. The woman I bowled over had to have her leg off.”

Ursula bit off her exclamation, but Cherry heard it.

“Oh, you needn’t pity her. She got heavy damages. Oh, *she* did all right out of it, thank you very much. . . . But it was a foul experience for me. Luckily, the witnesses were so jolly sporting that I got off with a heavy fine. It cost no end, squaring them, and all that. You’d have thought I’d paid enough. . . . And now, *this*.”

As Ursula remained silent, she turned on her, fiercely on the defensive.

“Well—say it.”

“There’s nothing to say, is there?”

“But you think I ought to have given up driving?”

“I think, in the circumstances, you must have excellent nerves.”

“What rot.” Cherry’s voice was derisive. “We live in a mechanical age, and must lump the consequences. When I walk, I take just the same risks as the other pedestrians. One would think I had wheels, instead of legs.”

Ursula was not listening. Her brain was at work, grappling with the problem.

“I wonder what we had better do,” she said.

“Ought we to waste no time in reporting the accident? Or, would it be wiser to go first to a lawyer and get his advice?”

“We must go to the Police Station,” said Cherry quickly. “But what we have to do first is to settle on our tale.”

She laid her hand on Ursula's arm, with her most trustful smile.

"Darling, I want you to say *you* were driving the car."

Ursula felt grateful that the matter was out of her hands.

"You forget there was a witness?" she said. "That cripple saw the accident."

"Oh, we'd square her. Easy. And I'm banking on *you*."

Ursula looked at Cherry in bewilderment. She made her request as though she had a claim on Ursula.

Her confidence touched her own sense of dormant responsibility, like fingers on a chord which still faintly vibrates. Once again, she felt the undertow of some dark issue between herself and Cherry.

She struggled against her obsession.

"I'm outside all this," she thought. "What's Cherry to me? I've never really liked her. And she'd sacrifice me to save her own skin."

Cherry was watching her face intently.

"I'm asking you to do this out of common humanity," she said. "Don't you see you're the only one in it, besides myself."

"But you can't expect me to have mud slung at me for nothing?" cried Ursula.

"It's not nothing." Cherry's voice was passionate. "If I am convicted of manslaughter I'll be sent to prison. Prison for *me*. Locked up, cleaning out my cell, horrible food, terrible clothes."

She threw away her cigarette and began to sob.

"I'll put my head in the gas-oven first."

"Oh, stop crying," said Ursula wearily. "Tears have no effect on me."

Cherry stopped crying with an abruptness which proved her perfect control over the lachrymal duct.

With complete composure, she made her ultimatum.

"I won't go to prison."

"But you propose a course of imprisonment for me?" asked Ursula.

"No. That's my whole point. Don't you see, darling? You are safe to get off, scot-free. You've got a clean record. Everyone knows you're a careful driver. And you're so popular. They're sure to bring it in as an accident."

Against her own will, Ursula had to admit the force of Cherry's argument.

"She's right," she thought. "It will probably be a manslaughter verdict for her. In my case, it may mean, perhaps, a very bad quarter of an hour."

The mere fact that she was comparing the two issues reminded her of her own danger. She did not feel quite so secure in her determination not to sacrifice herself for Cherry.

There was a long pause, while she looked at a large yellow cat, which was lying on a window-box of mignonette, flattening out the plants beneath its weight. The window was covered with very fine net the colour of dirty rain-water.

She noticed every detail—the dust which had drifted from the street into the corners of the doorstep and the nut-cracker face of the old brazen knocker—with the concentration which accompanies any crucial moment of destiny.

"I wonder if anyone is looking at us from inside the room," she thought idly.

"Well?" asked Cherry impatiently. "Will you do it?"

Ursula shook her head.

"No. This does not affect only myself. There's mother. She'd feel the odium keenly. Goodness knows I've disappointed her enough. . . . And there's something else. I'm going to be married. It wouldn't be fair to the man. I simply couldn't take the blame for you. It's such a terrible thing to kill a child."

"You've killed *me*," said Cherry.

She sat, staring in front of her, for a moment. Then her expression changed. An impudent smile played around her lips. Whistling with bravado, she drew out her lip-stick and powder-puff.

"Let me be beautiful," she said. "The beautiful and damned."

"You're hating me now," remarked Ursula.

"On the contrary, darling, I love you the more—for your filial piety and purity of heart, and spiritual uplift, and all the bally rest."

Lighting another cigarette, she restarted the car.

"Which way?" she inquired.

"Where?"

"Hell. I mean, the Police Station."

"It's close to George Street."

"Good. You can direct me. Unless you're leaving the bus here."

Ursula hesitated. She wanted to jump at the chance of escape. At the end of a clear pathway she could now see the refuge of home. On the other hand, she dared not trust Cherry's version of the accident. The smile which lurked around her lips hinted that she had not played her last card.

"Go on," jeered Cherry. "Jump. Always leave the sinking ship. Safety first."

Ursula coloured.

"I'll come with you, if you want me."

Betrayed by her pride, she had no knowledge that she had just made a fateful decision.

Cherry drove away from the quiet place of the conference into the bustle of High Street. She steered through the traffic with her usual confidence and dash, taking risks, as though the memory of the accident had passed from her mind.

Ursula was compelled to unwilling admiration. Cherry was playing a part—but she played it well.

"Oh, by the way," she said, "didn't you say something about getting married? I was so selfishly absorbed in my own little affairs that I hardly noticed your joyous news. Congratulations."

"Thank you," said Ursula.

"No need to ask who it is. Lucky girl."

Ursula saw that she had accepted the obvious inference that she was engaged to Sir Miles Humber.

She was about to mention Barney's name when caution made her pause. In spite of his denials, she knew that Cherry had a strong attraction for him. She might exert her influence to make mischief between them, out of revenge.

"She will have to hear later," she thought. "But not now, while the bloom's still on it. I can hardly believe it myself. I shall grow used to it soon. It won't seem so wonderful, later on. I can hold my own with her, then."

But her face was troubled as she realised the frailty of her trust in Barney. How could there be future security or happiness on a basis of so little faith?

High Street was unusually crowded and lively. The sun poured down on the flower-stalls, gay with tall

May tulips, rose, mauve and golden. A fragrant odour of coffee drifted from the Mecca Café. Strains of music blared from the loud-speaker of a wireless shop.

"You see," remarked Cherry, "it all goes on, in spite of poor me."

Ursula felt a pang of conscience.

"Cherry, indeed I'm sorry."

"No good to me, darling. I once had a Welsh nurse, who used to say, 'pity without relief is mustard without beef.' She drank like a fish, but I never gave her away. In the end, she nearly burned the house down, and me in it. Still, I'm glad I was a good sport. I'd like to see that written on my tomb-stone—'A damned sinner, but a good sport.'"

Ursula knew that she was reproaching her, and she set her lips tighter.

"She shan't bluff me into giving way," she decided.

A group of festive youths and girls in smart finery, were clustered on the porch of the principal hotel, their yells and laughter drowning the blasts of the loud-speaker.

"Gosh," said Cherry. "It's Tubby Jones' cocktail-binge. Pity I refused. But I wanted to blight Fatty's young dream of love. Too fatuous, darling. And three chins are one beyond the limit. . . . Do you believe in warnings?"

Ursula thought of her shrinking from Cherry's own adventure. Warning? Even now voices were whispering within her brain.

"I do," she replied.

"Well, I don't," said Cherry. "I'm not psychic. I never can foretell when something important's going to bust in the street. Do I look all right? Normal, and all that? Nose shiny?"

"You look charming," replied Ursula.

With a whoop, Cherry stopped the car before the porch of the Crown. In an instant she was surrounded with a noisy section of the cocktail party.

"Hello," yelled Cherry. "Anyone want a lift to the Police Station?"

"No. Hell's my destination," declared a very fat youth. "I 'd like to go there with you."

It was obvious that he had been drinking heavily, but Cherry did not seem to mind. She talked and laughed as loudly as though she had not a care in the world. Someone brought cocktails for the two girls, manfully elbowing an elderly lady into the gutter, through sheer unconsciousness of her presence.

They wanted to drag Cherry in to the party—which they explained, was "non-stop," but were restrained by Ursula's disdainful face. Her aloof air dissociated her from the noisy gang.

"Can't stop any longer," announced Cherry. "Like my new car, Tubby?"

"She's a wiz," said the host politely.

"Well, you can drive her, when I'm in quod."

"Bon. I say, where *are* you going on to?"

"Police. We're giving ourselves up to justice. I've just slain a child."

A shout of laughter greeted her wit.

"Good for you. Stick to it, and we'll bail you out."

Cherry drove off, followed by the advice of her friends.

"Keep clear of the Police Station, darling. They might pinch you."

"If you see three roads, Cherry, choose the middle one."

When they were out of ear-shot, Cherry looked sideways, at Ursula.

"Carried it off all right, didn't I? Well, I feel better for that cocktail. Got more kick than the doctor's stinking draught. Glad I met the push. They thought I was pulling their leg. Rather amusing.

But you're looking rather green. Why?"

Ursula fought the nausea which gripped her as they turned into a squalid street.

"You wouldn't believe me, if I told you," she said. "But, we are getting near. And I'm having nerves for *you*."

Cherry drove more slowly. Presently, she spoke in a low voice.

"You said, just now, we were nothing to each other. In a way, you're right. I expect, I'm merely any sort of girl to you. But you're different to me."

Ursula's heart beat quicker, as she steeled herself to resist the appeal of Cherry's flower-like face.

"The moment I saw you," went on Cherry, "it was at some card-party—I knew you were not just like all the others. I—I can't explain what I mean. But I had the feeling that if I was ever up against it you'd stand by, and wouldn't let me down."

"But why?" asked Ursula desperately. "Why should it be *I*?"

"I don't know. I only feel it was *ordained*."

Ursula started at Cherry's choice of word. Then her heart dropped a beat at the sight of a grey stone building. Although it was much smaller than the Hospital, it bore the same brand of "Institution."

Cherry pointed it out to Ursula.

"This looks like it. At least, it's not a Cinema, neither is it a church. Seems the sort of friendly

place where they chuck free food and lodgings at you, doesn't it?"

She stopped the car.

"Darling," she said, "I'm not going to open my mouth. I'm leaving it all to you."

Ursula knew what her words implied. Cherry was building on her generosity.

As they entered the Police Station, she looked up at the dark blue lamp.

"Why blue?" she thought. "It should be red for 'danger'."

She knew there was danger for herself. As she crossed the threshold she had a vivid mental picture, such as rises before one who is drowning.

She saw the garden with the beds of wallflowers steeped in the evening sunlight and the sharp drop of the road to the green misted Downs—jade, as milk spilt on an emerald.

"I want to see mother again," she thought. "I want to walk up the path. I want Coles to open the door to me. Oh, I *want* to go home."

The red-haired policeman seemed to regard them as rather a joke.

"May we see someone in authority?" asked Ursula, ignorant of official titles.

"Is it important, Miss?" he asked.

"Very important," replied Ursula gravely.

The policeman did not hide his smile as he led them to an ante-chamber at the back of the building. It was smaller and bleaker than the Outpatients' Waiting-room at the Hospital, but they were granted one boon.

It was empty.

"Smells of people," groaned Cherry. "How long? Oh, my gosh, how long?"

"The ladies are always so impatient," remarked the policeman, reappearing in the doorway. "Will you come this way, please?"

Authority was a burly gentleman, with a cleft chin and bushy eyebrows. Like the Matron, he was seated before a desk which was littered with official-looking papers. Two sides of the small room were covered with pigeon-holes, stuffed with dusty documents.

"Sit down, ladies," he said, waving them to two hard chairs, with shiny black leather seats.

Like the other policeman, he appeared to find humour in their presence. His lips twitched in a smile.

"Well, ladies, I suppose you've lost your little dog?"

Cherry looked expectantly at Ursula. She was an incongruous figure in the official room, bringing into it the fragrance of Summer and the perfume of roses. Her frock, of palest blue, was patterned with scarlet poppies and moon-daisies. Red-lipped and golden-haired, she repeated the gay tint of the flowers.

Ursula thought desperately. Both the Superintendent and Cherry were waiting for her to speak. But she had no idea what she was going to say.

Blue for danger. The voice in her brain was louder clearer.

"It's your life."

She opened her lips.

"My friend, Miss Turner"—she turned her head towards Cherry, but did not look at her," was driving her car, this afternoon, in Paradise Row, where she ran down a child. We took it to the Hospital, but it died. They told us to report to you."

She was aware of a pent-up breath which broke through the room, like a sob. It was her own sigh, as she realised that nothing now could undo the consequences of her words.

The matter was out of her hand.

She could not look at Cherry, so she stared at the policeman.

"Were you in the car?" he asked.

"No."

"Were you a witness of the accident?"

"No."

"Then I must trouble Miss Turner for the details."

He swept Ursula off the board. She noticed the change in his manner. The genial eyes were steely and his voice brisk and non-committal. He rapped out his inquiries, and took down Cherry's halting replies, like a Robot.

Ursula scarcely heard what passed, so deeply sunken was she in a sense of shame. Although she was justified by her commonsense, she could not shake off the reproach of having betrayed a trust.

Presently she found herself listening to the dialogue.

"What was your speed at the time of the accident?" asked the Superintendent.

"Oh, well under twenty. About fifteen, I should say. You see, I was still in the town."

"You couldn't pull up to avoid the child?"

"No. It ran right in front of the car. It was too young to be out alone. It should have been in its perambulator."

"Quite. Was there any witness of your speed?"

"Yes. There was a cripple in a garden. She can tell you how slowly and carefully I was driving."

Ursula started slightly. Cherry's voice was infantile, and her eyes limpid with truth.

"And you stopped the car immediately?" asked the Superintendent.

"Just as soon as I could. I skidded a little, when I put on the brakes."

"Thank you. That will be all. You understand that you will be called upon to give evidence at the inquest. So you won't leave home?"

"No. I promise you I won't go away."

The Superintendent laid down his pen, to signify the interview was over. Cherry smiled at him and walked briskly out of the room.

But Ursula lingered in the doorway.

"We've forgotten something," she said. "When we picked up the child, we didn't stop, but rushed it to the Hospital. They told us there that you'd find out where the mother lived at Paradise Row, and notify her of the accident."

The Superintendent looked at her closely.

"When did you first come into this?" he asked.

"I met Miss Turner at Hopton's Farm and came back in the car, with her."

She did not realise the significance of her admission, until she caught the Superintendent's comment.

"A mile's a good long skid."

Cherry gave no sign of having heard. But when they reached the car, she appealed to Ursula.

"Drive—will you?"

Ursula saw that her lips were white and shaking.

"You'll go straight home, I suppose?" she asked.

"Home? Good gosh, no. There's work ahead of us, my good woman."

As Ursula stared in surprise, she spoke rapidly.

"We've got to square that cripple, and see she gets her tale pat. If she backs me up that I was driving slowly, it will make a lot of difference to me."

"Oh, no, Cherry. Don't go *there*," cried Ursula.

She recoiled at a recollection of a deserted street stirring with invisible, sinister life.

"Got to," said Cherry shortly. "Step on the gas, for pity's sake."

Ursula continued to drive slowly.

"We'd better look at both sides," she said. "Probably, by now, there's strong feeling over this, in the street. The people will know of the accident, but they won't understand the—the circumstances—I think you'd be far wiser to let the Police prepare the way for you."

"But, if they get there first, it's no bally use to me," snapped Cherry. "Do you *want* to see me in quod?"

"I don't want to see you in worse trouble," persisted Ursula. "You'd far better let them get over the first shock. Besides, the policeman will probably just look up the relatives. I don't suppose he'll take statements, to-day."

"I can't chance that." Cherry tried to take the wheel. "Here let me drive."

"No, I'll carry on. I don't wonder you can't trust me, though. I've let you down enough already, haven't I?"

To her surprise, Ursula saw that Cherry bore her no grudge.

"No, you've been quite decent," she said. "And no one would take my blame, except an almighty mug."

Her tribute was so genuine that it called to Ursula for response. She reminded herself that Cherry was in desperate trouble, so must take desperate risks.

"All right, we'll chance it," she said.

Then she laughed.

"What's the joke?" asked Cherry bleakly.

"I've just remembered we've a new kitchen-maid, and I don't even know her name. I seem to fail in every human relationship. But—I promise you, I won't fail you again."

CHAPTER XX

FACES

“I’M safe,” thought Ursula, as the car rolled past the little gardens, which grew Sweet Williams or dustbins.

She recognised the fact that the enemy was within. Cherry could not compromise her against her will. She feared only herself, and her risk of betrayal by her own impulses.

With her statement at the Police Station she had clearly defined the situation, and the danger was over.

To her disappointment, however, she felt no sense of exhilaration. An unpleasant episode was nearly over, yet she had lost her rapture at the thought of release.

Instead, she felt depressed, and vaguely cheated, as though an avenue of promise had led to a dead end.

“It’s just anti-climax,” she thought. “But I feel as though I had missed another chance.”

She did not care to look at Cherry, as she drove carefully down the steep lane which corkscrewed to Paradise Row. In spite of commonsense, her conscience pricked her for her desertion.

Cherry sat slumped down in the seat, in a pose of utter dejection. It was not until they had reached the last bend, that she spoke.

“Unless we have luck with that blighted cripple, I’m for it. Oh, hurry, woman. Drive like hell.”

Ursula accelerated as they rounded the corner and reached the level. Then she slowed down again, appalled at her first glimpse of Paradise Row.

When they had last passed through it, it had been a pock-marked area of desolation, bleak and blasted as a burnt-out planet. Now, it was a centre of activity and communal life. There was a constant stir of movement—a press of people—a babel of voices.

Women dominated the scene. They were everywhere—sweeping the scale of vocal excitement. They thrust their heads out of windows, shouting to their neighbours. They gossiped on their doorsteps, in every stage of undress. They stood in groups on the road.

A handful of men was sprinkled among the crowd—each a self-constituted orator—laying down the law to the accompaniment of shaken fists and groans.

“Gosh,” muttered Cherry. “Quarter Sessions, with a vengeance.”

As Ursula looked at her fair daintiness, she found herself thinking, inconsequently, of the French Revolution. Those painted and powdered victims must have presented much the same air of indifferent elegance before they were broken by the violence of the mob.

Cherry did not seem in the least afraid. But Ursula’s heart was already thumping, although not for fear of her own safety. She knew that Cherry would be a target for the general hostility.

“I think we’d better turn back,” she suggested.

“Turn?” echoed Cherry. “If I don’t see that cripple my number’s up.”

“But—you’re running a risk.”

"Well, that's all we're in the world for—to take risks."

As Ursula still hesitated, she tried to take the wheel.

"Here, I'll drive myself."

"No." Ursula pushed her back, for she feared Cherry's tactics in her present mood. She was desperate, and would probably charge the crowd.

As they paused, a small boy, whose mouth was outlined with bread-crumbs and dripping, turned and saw the lemon car.

He started to scream in a shrill voice.

"Yi, Yi. Year's the car wot killed our Bert. Car wot killed our Bert."

The effect of his outcry was electric. All the women seemed to rush together to the middle of the road, barring the way. Ursula had a blurred impression of strident voices and angry faces which screened a reserve of latent, and more deadly, hostility.

Cherry laughed defiantly.

"Gosh. We've run into something."

Ursula started to reverse the car, preparatory to turn.

"The sooner we're out of this, the better," she said firmly.

To her dismay, Cherry again fought for possession of the wheel.

"We've got to make it. That cripple lives only a few doors farther down."

"But, Cherry, the crowd looks ugly," protested Ursula.

"Rot. It's only their idea of a little quiet talk."

"No. They're mad. They know the child is dead."

"But, my dear innocent, these people insure their children on purpose to get the burial money. They bank on death. . . . Sound the hooter and *rush* them."

Against her will, Ursula drove slowly forward. But, instead of melting before them, the crowd held its ground. Stray sentences fell on Ursula's ears.

"Sixty mile an hour."

"'er with the red rowses and big yat."

"Scorched off, and never stopped to pick him up."

"Come back ony to pick up her yat."

"Took her number, Ann did."

"Yaller car. Aye, that's the blasted car."

The words were like jets of venom, poisoning the air. Ursula felt the hatred of the crowd, as though it were tangible as spray from an advancing wave.

Then she noticed a movement in the heart of the throng, like the whirlpool around which the rapids revolve. A dishevelled woman, with a mop of short, iron-grey hair, and wearing a dirty pink jersey which strained over a massive figure, fought her way to the front.

With her great hands planted on her hips, and her legs astride, she stood in the path of the car.

"Come on," she yelled. "Try and run *me* down, you dirty child-killer."

Ursula whispered to Cherry.

"It must be the mother."

"Come on," shouted the woman. "I'm waiting for yer. Come on, and get wot's coming to you from our Bert."

Ursula cast a swift glance behind her.

"What shall I do?" she asked. "There's no room to turn now."

To her relief, Cherry, at last, seemed to have grasped her danger.

"Back quickly," she said, "and then turn into Wine Street."

Ursula nodded. Wine Street led to Magnolia Terrace from one end of which they could reach the safety of the open country.

At the back of her mind, however, there lurked a fear. She wondered if the mob possessed a man or woman with the brain of a leader. Such a person would foresee their line of retreat, and would be able to head them off by a rush through the by-pass alley which tapped Magnolia Terrace at its lower end.

To her relief, however, the crowd remained passive in its fury. It seemed muscle-bound—as though unable to move by reason of its overgrown size. The women jostled each other, jumping up in the air in their eagerness not to miss the drama of the distracted mother, who held the centre of the stage.

"Dirty coward," she yelled. "Blasted murderer."

Under cover of the confusion, Ursula had backed the car to the corner of Wine Street. As she turned into it, the crowd gave a yell of derision, as though its honour had been satisfied by the retreat.

Wine Street, which was a short grey slum, seemed a haven of quiet after the din of Paradise Row. It harboured only garbage and a few respectable-looking cats, who gave themselves the airs of landed gentry.

Cherry looked behind her with a sigh of relief.

"They're not following, thanks be. Well, that was a nice little bit of Community-talking. I don't mind confessing I'm not sorry to be out of it."

Although she drew out her cigarette-case with her

usual air of bravado, she kept turning her head, as though nervous of pursuit.

"I don't think they really loved us," she said. "Gosh. *You're green.*"

"I thought they were going to rush the car," admitted Ursula.

"I didn't," said Cherry confidently. "Those people aren't like us—trained to take our fences. They funk. They huddle together, like sheep, and bleat."

"Bleat?" murmured Ursula, in whose ear-drums the howls of the crowd seemed still to beat.

Cherry managed to light her cigarette.

"Why the hell didn't our fat policeman show up, just when he'd have been useful?" she asked. "Here were we, breaking our necks to be there before him, and he's a non-starter. Rather amusing. Isn't it just like the police? Don't you hate them?"

"Who?" asked Ursula vaguely, her thoughts rushing ahead to the gaping mouth of the alley.

"The police?"

"No. Why should I hate them? They exercise a necessary function. If one does wrong, one ought to be punished."

"Cat."

"No, Cherry, I wasn't thinking of you. Honestly, I wasn't. As usual, I was thinking of myself. If ever I committed a crime, I would rather pay the penalty. It's only fair."

Then she drew a deep breath, for she could see the tall, respectable house of Magnolia Terrace. If they could only reach the end of the street, in time, the adventure would recede to a mere daylight nightmare.

Cherry looked at her wrist-watch.

"Well, I hope the binge is really non-stop. I'm going straight back to the Crown, to join Tubby's little lot. I've earned a drink, if ever a good girl has."

Then her smile glazed to a grimace as the car shot into Magnolia Terrace.

"*Look,*" she cried.

Ursula had already seen them—a straggle of dark forms, rushing out of the mouth of the alley, like flies issuing from a bottle.

For the first time, Cherry was really afraid. Her face was white as ashes as she clutched Ursula's arm.

"My god. They're after me."

Ursula nodded.

"I know. . . . Wait. Let me think."

Her mind worked at furious pressure, but it seemed only to churn up a riot of disconnected thought.

"I've let Cherry down. Let me think. . . . They'll block the car, this end. Shall I turn back into Wine Street? No good, they will attack from Paradise Row. We're bottled up here, in a trap. . . . Oh, let me *think*. I must save Cherry. . . . I am a fool. There's Balaam's passage."

As the thought flashed through her mind, she drove swiftly to the far end of Magnolia Terrace, until she was stopped by the posts which guarded the paved passage.

"Quick, Cherry," she cried. "Run to Regency Square and ask them to take you in, at the very first house."

Cherry nodded and slid from the car in the same moment.

"Right. . . . Coming, too?"

"No. They'll follow, if I do. Besides, I'm safe enough. They're after you."

As she waited, she could hear the echo of Cherry's footsteps clattering over the flag-stones, to meet her. Then they died away.

Ursula felt easier in her mind. She had drawn up the car, so that its off-side was flush with the posts. She was sure that no one in the road had noticed her strategy.

Then she turned her attention to her own situation.

The far end of Magnolia Terrace was blocked by a menacing group prepared to give the car rough treatment, should it try to force a passage. Ursula could distinguish the pink jersey and iron-grey shock of hair of the bereaved mother. She gesticulated like a fury, as she urged her followers to an offensive, with a torrent of profanity and threats.

As Ursula listened, she shivered at the thought of her baffled rage when their trick was discovered.

"I'll stay here until I'm sure that Cherry is safely inside," she thought. "Directly they see I'm alone they'll be sure to storm the passage. Lucky I didn't lose my head and go with her. I'm like a cat that's cornered by a dog—safe, so long as I face it. But, if I ran, too, the next second it would be hell let loose."

She waited until she saw the first signs that the pursuit was impatient of inaction. The grey-haired woman began to advance in the direction of the car, followed by some of the rabble.

"Now for it," said Ursula, turning the car so that it faced them.

She had nearly reached the corner of Wine Street when a yell of fury told her that Cherry's flight was known. It was a long-drawn howl of inhuman savagery, like the slaughter-call of the jungle, beast rending beast.

Ursula felt profoundly grateful that Cherry was in the safety of one of the stately homes of Regency Square, whose hospitality she had stormed. The description flashed through her mind—'Red rowses and a big yat.' In her poppy-printed frock, Cherry was marked down as shark-bait.

At that moment she felt grateful for her own neutral-tinted frock and close turban-cap. There could be no possible question of mistaken identity. Already she could hear snatches which confirmed her belief.

"Gorn clean away."

"Been and 'ooked it down Balaam's passage."

"Wot's the ruddy use to foller there?"

"Break the blasted car."

The command came from the grey-haired woman, and was followed by a rousing yell of approval.

Ursula set her lips at this fresh threat of opposition. She had hoped that there would be no further complications. But, instead of clear sailing, she glimpsed sunken rocks ahead.

"If I try to get past them, they'll wreck Cherry's new car," she thought. "I'm responsible for it. But it doesn't end there. Once they begin, they might lose their heads and attack me. . . . I hate running away. But it's only prudence."

She thought, not of Barney but of her mother, with her foolish parody of beauty and her extravagant devotion, as she steered into Wine Street.

To her joy, it was deserted as when she and Cherry had driven through it a few minutes before. But there was nothing sinister in its withdrawn appearance—no suggestion of hooded life, coiled up in the shadow, waiting to strike—like the desolation of Paradise Row.

It was merely a quiet squalid street, much patronised by cats. The car purred along it, and Ursula's tension relaxed.

"I won't attempt to go near Paradise Row," she decided. "I'll cut up the corkscrew lane, and get back that way."

Then she frowned slightly, conscious of a low hum, like the snarl of a distant aeroplane. It rose and fell, but every second it grew louder. With each yard she covered it lost its semblance to machinery and became more menacing.

It was the noise of human voices. As she neared the corner of the street she caught fragmentary spatters, like a sound-wave that has been shattered into atoms.

Prepared as she was for a hostile demonstration, she had no pre-vision of the new change in Paradise Row. It was now packed with a denser crowd than the original gathering.

When she heard the savage roar which greeted the lemon car, her heart began to race.

"Thank Heaven Cherry is safe out of this," she thought. "They would tear her to bits."

It was her first experience of the snowball formation of a mob. Every person who ran and shouted, collected another, who also ran and shouted something different. Rumours flew around, inflaming the senses. A whisper sped on its way. A hunt was afoot, and everyone joined in the chase.

Although she was appalled by the ferocity of the crowd, it never occurred to Ursula that she was in danger. The first threat came in the repetition of three words.

"Killed—a—child. Killed—a—child."

Her face whitened as she began to understand. The original centre of unrest had shifted with the distracted mother and her adherents, and was now in Magnolia Terrace. This crowd had no knowledge of the motor-accident, or the identity of a careless driver "with red rowses" printed on her frock.

But the whisper had gone round that a child had been murdered by a woman in a yellow car. Probably they pictured her caught red-handed in the deed—wringing its neck like a chicken—slitting its throat with a knife—holding down its head in a pail of water. The atmosphere was saturated with ghastly details, working up the mob to a fever-heat of vengeance.

Ursula shrank before its fury, like a hot blast on her face. But her nerves were too tense to feel fear. With the instinct of the hunted when hard-pressed, she turned the car towards the corkscrewing lane.

Suddenly she experienced the palsied terror of the quarry whose earth has been stopped. A horse-van had been drawn right across the narrow lane, and left there by a careless driver.

Her brain reeled.

"Which way? Wine Street again? But I shall only run into the others. The lane's blocked. . . . Thank Heaven, Cherry's not here. *Ah*. I might make the Rookery."

The precipitous slide of the unsavoury alley led down from Paradise Row, on its right-hand side. Without pausing to think, she steered to its mouth.

The mob missed her by inches, as it surged forward, to cut her off. But a stone—one of a shower—found its billet. She felt the blood trickling down her forehead, with a puzzling sense of familiarity, just as her eye caught a bill pasted on the wall.

It announced a Sale, and she saw its date, through a red mist. "May the fourteenth."

Her thoughts flew to her awakening and the virgin page on the calendar.

"It was all before me then. I never guessed at this. . . . Oh, well, life's fun. I'll be glad of it, if I come out. It's all adventure."

That was her dominant sensation—sheer exhilaration of excitement.

The Rookery was a break-neck drop right down to the sea-wall, with a sensational gradient. To keep her head and steer straight required a tremendous effort of will-power. If once her nerve failed, or her muscles slacked, she faced catastrophe.

The strain on the brakes was terrific as the car gained impetus. She felt as though she were sliding down a mountain-side which crumbled away under her wheels. She could see nothing clearly, but she felt the jar of the cobbles and the teasing trickle of blood, coursing down her cheek. She heard, too, the yell of the hunt behind, and the trampling of feet.

Half-way down, was a hair-pin bend, and it was towards this death-trap that her thoughts were whirling. She went round the corner, spinning on two wheels, expectant of the inevitable crash.

Then she realised that she had miraculously made the straight, and that the slope was not quite so steep. She had gone more than half the distance to safety.

"I've a sporting chance now," she thought exultantly.

But, even in her triumph, the end came. From one of the hovels, which she sensed, rather than saw, a baby staggered into the lane.

In the same second, Ursula wrenched the car round, so that its bonnet crashed into one wall, while its wheels revolved madly against the opposite cottage.

As the child was snatched up by a slatternly girl, Ursula turned to look back. The mob was pouring round the corner. It caught sight of the jammed car—stopped—and then seemed to pile itself up in a sea of faces.

Faces. They floated before her, like moons.

A pallid face with sunken cheeks. A florid face with protruding teeth. A girl's face, fresh as a cherry. A blotched face disfigured with passion. A drunkard's face with purple veiny patches. A cruel face with bitten lips. A grotesque face with a wart on its nose. A foolish face with flashing teeth. A fleshy face with bulbous nose. A youthful face with rounded forehead. An animal face with hairy nostrils. A cunning face with slitted eyes. A weak face with curling mouth.

They rose into the air, thicker and thicker. Faster and faster, they flashed before her, until they blended into each other, feature interlocking with feature.

Then they stiffened together in a solid wedge, and toppled over, like a disrupted wall before a battering-ram.

Ursula awaited the shock with a calm heart. She was only conscious of a sense of liberation. She felt light as air, and free, as though she had suddenly shed a centuries-old burden of shame and sin.

CHAPTER XXI

CURFEW

WHEN Ursula recovered consciousness, in the private ward of the hospital, it was evening. A window framed a patch of pale green sky, where a faint star trembled.

She opened her eyes and stared at a buff distempered wall. On a side-table were vases of flowers, put together ready for removal—wine-dark wall-flowers, purple and white lilac, lilies-of-the-valley.

There was the clean, thin smell of floor polish and the blurred odours of drugs. She also vaguely realised the presence of two persons in the room.

At first, they seemed dim shadows—a tangible part of the bleak antiseptic atmosphere which surrounded her. But, presently, as her brain cleared, the doctor became revealed as an entity.

He was young, thick-set, and black as Spades, with dark enthusiastic eyes gleaming behind huge glasses, and a jutting chin.

He approached the bed, and laid his hand gently on hers.

“Any pain?”

She shook her head. Her only feeling was one of impermanence. Yet she was conscious of extreme pressure around her body, and of bandages which swathed her head and neck.

“I’m stiff,” she said.

"Yes, we've packed you up in plaster of Paris. Must keep that slim boyish figure, you know."

The nurse looked rather shocked at the doctor's mild joke. But Ursula smiled back at him, grateful to him for his lightness of touch.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Just a little accident. You mustn't think about it now."

It was the nurse who spoke. Ursula turned and saw a woman with a heart-shaped face and kind eyes. She was fair as Diamonds to the young doctor's Spades, and, by the Law of Contrast, felt drawn by his attraction. The wave of her hair was proof that the sterile atmosphere could harbour the germ of love, and her hopes rode high, even though she was the doctor's senior.

She reminded Ursula of Enid in her advertisement of the womanly essence. Faintly repelled, she turned from her, to the doctor.

"What happened?" she repeated.

"Oh, a bit of a rough-house."

At his words, the doors of memory were unlocked. She remembered the motor-accident—the dying child—Cherry—the violence of the mob.

And how she faced them, alone.

"I remember, now," she said. "It was a mistake. They—thought I was—Cherry."

"I know."

"She killed a child. Accident, of course."

"At sixty miles an hour," muttered the doctor.

The nurse gazed intently at Ursula, as though trying to read her eyes, and forestall any wish.

"Your mother's coming, very soon," she said.

"Mother? Hasn't she been here?"

"Not yet."

Ursula pondered the fact. It was broad daylight when she had been attacked, but her mother had waited to have dinner before visiting the hospital. It seemed proof to her that her injuries must be slight.

"Am I hurt much?" she asked.

"Just a bit damaged," replied the doctor. "But we'll soon have you all right. 'Ship-shape and Bristol fashion'."

Ursula smiled at him again. Things were coming back to her—rolling in, one after another, like stations on the wireless. She knew that she had been wondrously happy, just before they met the mob. Her book—and Barney. She had drifted back to the fulfilment of her dreams.

She was engaged to Barney. Instantly her thoughts flew to her face, and her fingers began to pick at her bandages.

"Am I disfigured?"

"Not a bit," the doctor assured her.

"I want to see for myself."

The doctor and nurse exchanged compassionate glances.

"To-morrow," promised the nurse.

"No. *Now*."

"But you mustn't tire yourself."

Ursula's eyes filled with suspicion.

"You're keeping something back," she insisted.

"Bring me a mirror."

The doctor turned to the nurse.

"Nurse, fetch a hand-glass, at once."

His voice was peremptory, but the nurse's questioning eye caught the almost imperceptible shake of

his head. She went obediently from the room, and lingered in the corridor.

As Ursula waited for the mirror which would never be brought, she spoke to the doctor.

"Do people know about me?"

"Gosh, yes. It's all over the town. They all think you splendid."

He could not explain that they were worried to death about the non-arrival of Mrs. Pyke. Earlier in the evening, she had gone out, and left no message. Used to her erratic ways, the servants had telephoned to every house at which she might be staying for dinner. Drawing a blank, they had since enlisted the aid of friends, so that cars were scorching along the roads to outlying residences, which were not linked up by telephone.

An S O S had also been sent to the B.B.C., but it was too soon to hope for results from that.

"We're expecting your mother any moment now," he assured Ursula.

"Yes, but I want to see Barney first."

"Barney?"

"Barnard Rudd. Does he know?"

"Ought he to know?" asked the doctor.

Ursula smiled faintly.

"I'm going to marry him," she said.

"Splendid."

"You're the very first to know, doctor."

"Then I'll be the first to congratulate you."

"Thank you. Send for him."

"I will."

The doctor smiled down at her. But his eyes were altogether too kind. They told Ursula the truth.

Suddenly she realised the reason why she felt no pain, in spite of her injuries. She had passed beyond physical suffering to the numb region of utter exhaustion.

She stared at the doctor.

"Am I dying?" she asked.

The usual lie was on his lip, but he did not utter it. He recognised in the dying girl an ice-cold logic which would not accept any compromise of false sentiment.

She must have the truth.

"You know it," he said.

She accepted the fact without any shock of surprise, so far had her spirit slipped away from her shattered body. But, as she lay and stared at the green glimmer of sky, she felt a sudden rush of resentment.

She had sacrificed her life for Cherry.

It seemed, to her, not only unfair, but senseless altruism. She had not killed a child. Elementary justice demanded that Cherry should pay the penalty of her own deed.

Besides, life was suddenly charged with promise. She stood on the threshold, holding out both hands to the future.

And Cherry had come through the doorway and taken her happiness away.

It had always been Cherry who clutched at her dreams, with hot, greedy hands, like a child that tears off a butterfly's wings for sport.

The doctor saw the tears gather in her eyes. He bent over the bed.

"Yes?" he asked.

"It isn't fair," she whispered.

"I know. I know. Damned rough luck."

"I don't want to die for *her*."

She muttered something else, of which he caught but one word.

"Futile."

Outside in the corridor the telephone-bell rang. He heard a nurse answering it, and using the accepted hospital formula.

"I'm sorry. We can answer no inquiries. But she's fairly comfortable."

Comfortable? It seemed a mockery to the doctor, who was a rash young man, of red-hot impulses. A materialist, concerned only with the cure of bodies, he always strove to secure an easy passing for the soul that he might not arrest.

As the tears began to roll slowly down Ursula's cheeks he wiped them away.

"Not for *her*," she repeated.

"Of course not. It's an infernal mess-up. But it'll straighten out, somewhere else. This isn't the end. You must think of life as a journey, that goes on and on. You've caught an earlier stage, and you're on the way, just a bit sooner."

He did not believe one word that he uttered. But he was sore, with the same savage sense of futility which always assailed him at the death of a newly-born infant.

There had never been a chance of putting up a fight for Ursula's life. He was the more furious because of his own distant admiration of this special girl.

They had both been at the Hospital Ball, last New Year's Eve, and, at the stroke of midnight, had stood, side by side, while they linked hands and

sang "Auld Lang Syne," after the fashion of total strangers.

And then they had wished each other a "happy new year."

The incident had slipped from Ursula's memory. But he remembered her distinctly—the luminous quality, which was her marked characteristic, shining from her, like a flame. She wore a green frock and amber necklace, so that he was reminded of a spotted orchid.

The doctor cursed the contrast, as he looked down at the bandaged head on the pillow. It was just as well we none of us knew what was coming to us.

But there was one last thing he could do for her. He could grant her the gift of oblivion.

As she was in no pain, he had intended to keep her conscious until her mother's arrival. He had the deepest sympathy for those frantic-eyed relatives who rushed to the Hospital with one sentence only on their lips.

"Am I in time?"

But Ursula was in obvious trouble of mind. Her lips quivered and her eyes burned with rebellion.

She was deeply resentful of her fate. She thought of her awakening, that morning, and knew that she had seen her last dawn. Cherry had plucked the sun from the sky. Through the day everything seemed to have led up to this, forcing her to her climax.

And yet, the final sacrifice was voluntary. She remembered her own sense of liberation—the exaltation with which she faced the mob.

At that moment no one could have held her back.

She tried to understand, but her mind was beginning to cloud. Had she been a victim of hysteria—tricked by her own illusion?

“*Why?*” she questioned.

The doctor bent over her.

“Anything you want?”

“I—don’t—understand,” she told him.

“You will—very next stop.”

The nurse, entering at that moment, stared at him in surprise. She took the handkerchief from him, and wiped the bruised cheeks with infinite compassion.

“Mother’s coming,” she said.

Then she drew the doctor aside.

“She’s a child again. She wants her mother.”

“Mother be blowed,” growled the doctor. “She wants her man, like all of you. Here, try and get the blighter on the ‘phone.”

“Who?” asked the nurse, thrilled in spite of the gathering shadow.

“Young Rudd. If he’s not at home, try the Crown. He rooked me of ten bob at pool, last night. . . . And hurry. I’m going to give her an injection soon.”

He broke off at the sounds of a girl’s voice, shrill with emotion and petulance.

“I must see her. I tell you, I *must*.”

Grave professional tones rebuked her hysteria.

“You really must be quiet. And you can’t go in. Only her mother is to be admitted.”

“But she’ll see *me*. It’s different for me. She saved my life. I must see her. I want to thank her.”

Her voice broke in a sob.

As though admitting the special circumstance, the fair nurse, with the heart-shaped face, whispered to the doctor.

"May she come in for just a minute? It's Miss Turner."

He glanced at Ursula, and noticed, gratefully, that her lips were grey.

"Do you want to see her?" he asked.

"No." Ursula tried to shake her head. "Not her."

"Keep her out," commanded the doctor. "Hell."

He swallowed the last word, as Cherry rushed into the room.

She was dressed for the evening, in gauzy laburnum-yellow, like a dragon-fly's wings quivering in the sunlight, which seemed to bring the last rays of day into the twilight room. Pearls gleamed around her milk-white neck, and her eyes were brilliant as blue fire.

The doctor was struck by her beauty, even as he resented her presence.

She took a step forward and then recoiled at the sight of the bandaged face.

"Will she know me?" she whispered.

"Yes," replied the doctor. "She's conscious."

Ursula heard nothing, because of the singing of water in her ears. But she knew that Cherry was there, and she kept her eyes tightly closed. She did not want to see her. The score between them was too heavy to be wiped out in a tearful kiss.

Cherry advanced to the bed.

"Ursula," she cried. "It's I. Don't you know me?"

In spite of the sea which roared in her head, the voice was familiar to Ursula. It seemed a very long time since she had last heard it.

She opened her lids and saw Cherry's silver-gold curls and tear-filmed blue eyes, through a hazed mist, like the glassy circle of a pond.

In that moment, understanding was granted to her, so that she died filled with a great peace. Her face lit up with a glow of recognition, and she held out her hands with a joyous cry.

"Clemency."

PART III
ONE MINUTE
2331

CHAPTER I

ONE MINUTE

THERE are three hundred and sixty-five ways of trying to get to sleep—one for each night of the year. The last, and worst, is a sleeping-draught.

Ursula Pyke had been persuaded to take one the night before her wedding. Of late she had been wakeful, through sheer happiness. It seemed waste of time to sleep when she wanted to retrace every step of the journey, from her first meeting with Miles.

It had been a perfect thing—free from the complications and misunderstandings which used to be considered the accompaniment of true love. With the divine egotism of lovers, she and Miles had re-discovered themselves, in their flattering reflections in each other's mind.

As she lay in bed she could see the shimmering outlines of her wedding-finery—the white satin gown, lace veil and orange-blossom wreath, of immemorial custom. She had been also faithful to the old superstition.

“Something old and something new,
Something borrowed, something blue.”

The eternal subject of luck had cropped up at her farewell spinster party, that afternoon.

“But, Ursula,” argued a bridesmaid, “it's nothing but superstition. Everything is cause and effect.”

"I know. We control our own destinies. All the same," she amended, "I am lucky. I might never have met Miles. Besides, I've been lucky all my life. Touch wood."

She stooped and rapped the carved cigarette-box on the floor, for inflammable material was but occasional in the house.

Mrs. Pyke, too, had propitiated the Goddess that night, after she had induced her daughter to swallow the sleeping-draught. She brought with her a huge horse-shoe of white heather, which she hung over the bed.

"Wrong way up, or the luck will run out of the ends," she remarked. "Not that I'm superstitious. I always regard Friday as my lucky day."

She turned to admire a present which had just arrived from Miles—an antique table and mirror, inlaid with a mosaic of faded woods. It had a needle-work top—yellowed linen, shielded with plate glass.

"Adorable," she cried. "Where did Miles pick this up?"

"At Christie's. It's rather difficult to decipher the inscription at the top, but he thinks it is a list of guests at a house-warming. A sort of memento."

Mrs. Pyke hung over the table.

"Yes, I can see the date. 'May—something—1930. New House.' How feeble. Didn't it occur to them that, very soon, it would be old? It's probably been condemned, and demolished, hundreds of years ago. . . . Oh."

She gave a faint scream.

"There's *your* name, standing out from the rest."

"Of course. That's why Miles bought it. He was struck by the coincidence."

Ursula got out of bed and crossed over to the bureau.

"It gives me a thrill to look at it," she said. "'Ursula Pyke.' I wonder what she was like, and if she was lucky like me. Poor wretch, it's all over for her. And it's all beginning for me."

Mrs. Pyke sighed enviously.

"I'm smitten by this bureau. It's a museum-bit. I adore to look into the old mirror, and think of all the faces that were once reflected there. Don't you love it?"

"No," confessed Ursula, "I hate it. It's ugly and mouldy."

"But it's a relic of the Past." Mrs. Pyke sighed again. "I only wish I was back again in the romantic days of 1930, with peace and privacy, and dear human servants. Life held space and dignity then. No rush. Time for culture, for reflection, for religion. Time for everything."

"I don't," said Ursula. "I'm only envious of future girls. In fact, I'd like to be born to-morrow—only I'd have missed Miles."

Mrs. Pyke tore herself away from the mirror.

"Sleep well," she said.

Ursula laughed as she shook her head.

"I shan't, in spite of your miserable draught. I'm entirely too happy. I seem to have reached the peak."

"Not you. Wait till you come down the aisle of the church, to-morrow, a bride. The children strewing rose-petals, the air full of wedding-bells, the organ pealing. Rum-tum-ti-tum. *That's* every woman's moment."

"But, supposing she marries the wrong man?"

"Well, she'd soon find that out, and put things right again. Remember, Ursula, it's not for life."

Ursula's face grew yearning.

"No. I almost wish it were 'till death us do part,' like the Ancient Marriage Service."

In spite of her passion for the Past, Mrs. Pyke grimaced.

"Yes, my child, very pretty and poetic. All the same, I'd like to have the unvarnished views of a few of those flawless and sorely-trying wives of long ago. Remember, the Marriage Laws were not changed in a night, and English people take as much stirring up as Christmas pudding. . . . Do you really hate this bureau?"

"I do, indeed," Ursula assured her. "I dislike the thought of sleeping with it in the same room. Ugly, dirty, germy. . . . Say nothing to Miles, but forget to send it up to London with the rest of my things."

"You angel. . . . Feeling sleepy?"

"A bit."

"Good night. Pleasant dreams."

After her mother had left her, Ursula stayed awake for hours, staring into the darkness, at the illuminated clock of St. Bernard's Church. It was not until the birds began to chirp that her lids grew heavy, and her thoughts dulled, as the drugs overcame them.

Their victory, however, was not complete. She could not yield up herself to utter torpor. An active cone of her brain resented temporary annihilation, and kept dipping her into broken dreams.

Strange things happened, even while she knew that she was in bed, but she accepted them as the work of the drugs. At first she kept her sensations separate,

in water-tight compartments, but, gradually, she crossed the border-line and reality merged into phantasy.

She thought that she got out of bed and put on a trousseau garment—an Oriental wrapper of white satin, embroidered in golden thread. Flooding the room with light, she crossed over to the arrangement of multi-mirrors.

They reflected her from every angle, a slim figure, with petal-white face, brilliant hazel eyes and dark-red hair. They also threw back the beauty and brilliancy of her room. It was the last word in modernity and she loved it because it represented her own taste.

“It’s so new,” she said aloud. “It’s progressive. There’s only one false note. That old table.”

She thought that she crossed the room in her dream, and seated herself before the bureau. Cupping her chin in her palms, she gazed into the dim grey glass.

To her surprise, it did not reflect the gleaming metal and frosted glass of her own period, flooded with diffused light. Instead, she looked into a different room, dark and dingy, filled with strange, alien people.

As she peered at it, with the interest with which one examines an old print, noticing the historical details, her eyes fell on an object which struck her as faintly familiar. It was a bureau, painfully new and garnished, with a theatrical mosaic of violent primary colours, allied with gilding. Its mirror reflected a cloth of white linen, covered with pencil signatures.

“It’s my bureau,” cried Ursula.

She turned to compare the two. To her dismay, however, her bright room had flickered out completely, like a blown candle-flame, and she was stranded in the strange apartment.

“What a vivid dream,” she thought.

At first she was confused and appalled by the darkness. Through the slitted windows she could see sections of sky, the colour of an over-ripe fig, and the continual quiver of sheet-lightning.

With a thrill of wonder, she realised that it was actually before the era of artificial sunlight.

“It’s terrible,” she thought. “However did they manage to keep well and bright on dull, dark days? They must have been half-starved. Didn’t they know that light is as essential as food? No wonder so many wretched people took advantage of the Right to Exit.”

She tried to remember her last History Course at College, when she had skimmed this period.

“No, I believe, suicide was a penal offence then. Let me see. I *think* this must be about Dickens’ time, judging by the awful light, for I remember his description of a fog. They must have been far tougher, then, to stand up to such conditions. We’ve grown so flabby to-day.”

As she looked about her, she noticed that the room and its furniture were new ; but everything was so crude and grotesque—so utterly barbaric in comparison with the modern standard of comfort and taste, that she grew depressed. The black glass walls absorbed the little light and the ventilation offended her sense of hygiene.

As her eyes fell on a tray of glasses, she sighed with envy.

“Genuine cocktail glasses. What a marvellous collection. Far better than my wedding-present set. I’d help myself, only I know this is only a dream, and, when I wake up, they will be gone.”

A primitive form of canned music, which floated from a horn, also charmed her with its simplicity, and the old-world flavour of the tunes. But as she listened to the tinny sounds, she felt sad, as though she was groping in some old twilit lumber-room.

"I'm so lonely," she thought.

She wanted the assurance of young life—of company, warmth, and laughter.

Her spirits rose at the sight of a large Persian tabby-cat, which was curled up amid the cushions of a chair. It reminded her of her beloved Jupiter, and she leaned over it, to stroke its soft fur.

The cat looked at her with large emerald eyes. It was speculative, and interested in her; but it would not respond to her caresses.

She had the uncanny feeling that they were separated by an invisible glass barrier.

"I want to wake up and speak to my own friendly cat," she thought.

The sound of a clock chiming from its corner, made her start, for, above the silvery tinkle, she could hear the great booming notes of St. Bernard's clock, which were audible when the wind blew from the south.

"It's my wedding-day," she exulted. "And it's going to be fine."

At the familiar trumpet-call of a cock, she tried to wake; but instead of the transparent wall of her own room, she still peered, through slits, into a dark soaked garden.

"The wretched draught," she groaned.

For the first time, she began to notice the people in the room. As she looked at them, her depression deepened to horror. Their faces seemed either unhealthy or unhappy, and not one appeared really alive. To her

mind, they presented, in the main, a low type of mentality, although there were exceptions.

One man drew her because he had a nose exactly like that of Miles. He wore an expression of muffling composure, like a death-mask; but, even through this screen, she could trace both intellect and spirituality.

"That man has a soul," she declared. "He will go on."

But he looked so bleached, so starved, so hollow, that she was reminded of a fly that had been sucked by a spider.

Some of the women's faces were terrible to her; they had smothered their natural pallor with coloured chalks, until they resembled painted corpses.

What appalled her was the acceptance, not only of disease, but of physical infirmity. Corpulency, baldness and artificial aids to sight seemed commonplace in the company. She even detected the glitter of those museum relics—false teeth. One tall man, with steel-grey hair and eyes, possessed a swollen figure which betrayed either gross ignorance of food-values or over-indulgence.

But, instead of showing shame, it was obvious that he had a high opinion of himself, as though he was big in more than the physical sense.

Ursula noted that his head was well-shaped and his brow denoted intellect; but she was repelled by his rank and blatant materialism. His eyes bored right through her, but it was plain that he could not see her.

She was relieved to know that she was invisible, for she felt that, even in a dream, she could not bear intercourse with such alien humans.

Suddenly, she began to feel very cold—as though from intense inward chill—and very frightened.

Although she knew that she was really asleep—for she could distinctly hear the chirps of the awakening birds in the garden, she was terrified of these people, because of their reality.

They were solid and corporeal, more like beings of flesh and blood, rather than shadows. If they saw her, she knew that she would be overcome with confusion at her intrusion in a party to which she had not been invited. She had stormed the hospitality of the house.

“What’s wrong with them?” she wondered. “They’re certainly dirty, for their clothes are too old, and don’t appear to be cleaned daily. But it’s something far worse.”

She looked at two of the girls, hoping to find some link in their common youth. One was pretty, with soft pink cheeks and big brown eyes; and she wore an attractive frock of faint rose. But she appealed to Ursula as a mere blob of animalism—a compound of salts and water.

This girl opened her mouth, revealing the blemish of a front tooth which had been stopped with gold.

“Ursula,” she said, “do you believe that the soul goes on?”

Ursula started and was about to speak, when, to her surprise, another girl answered for her.

“Yes, on and on. Another life—another chance.”

Her accents were toneless; it was plain that only the girl’s body sat in the chair, while her eyes stared into the mirror. The vital part of her was far away.

Ursula gazed at her with an intensity of feeling. She reminded her of someone she knew well. The dark-red hair, petal-white skin, and long hazel eyes were strangely familiar. She seemed, also to recognise the eager coursing spirit, which would quest the happiness just

around the next corner, and which she would never find.

This girl drew her ; she felt so sorry for her, because of the hunger of her mouth, the unrest of her eyes.

And, then—suddenly—she realised what was wrong with all these people.

They were afraid.

Each feared something. There was no security in their lives. They feared illness, or poverty, or lack of employment. They were so pitifully dependent—each on the other—or else on circumstances.

She realised that this was before the pooling of the World's resources, and before the era of universal insurance, which anticipated every ill which could befall man and so robbed him of most of his fears, although he remained the puppet of the gods of Chance.

Again Ursula tried to remember what she had learned of the Twentieth Century. It was far better than the darker Ages, when people starved in winter, and died of plague, in summer. But, in spite of the dawn of Invention, these people were still groping in the darkness of ignorance, fearful to take the next step, lest they should plunge into the abyss.

Suddenly Ursula hated the room and the people. She wanted frantically, to break back to the light, like a fly imprisoned in a bottle.

But she felt far away—utterly stranded and lost—in a freezing loneliness of the spirit.

The cold was intense. She was alone—a shrinking soul, torn from her century—out of her time, out of her place.

“Oh, let me wake.”

Even as she agonised, she realised, with a sharp shock of horror, that someone was looking at her. He

was young and handsome, with a pallid skin, a faultless profile and strange light eyes.

They gazed at each other, while waves of terror passed between them, like lightning tossed from peak back to peak. Each was mad with fear of the other.

Each knew that this moment of recognition was out of nature. It was abnormal—repellent.

Ursula looked around at the dark room, its uncouth barbarism, and the alien people. She hated them with all the force of her soul.

Before her was the fantastic bureau, with its strip of linen reflected in its mirror. Dully, she sought her own signature.

It was there—but the bold letters were now traced in faded ink and shielded with glass. The cloth was yellow. . . .

She blinked, for the glare of light almost blinded her. She was back again in her own room, with the radiance of a diamond-bright summer day streaming through the frosted and transparent glass walls.

To her amazement, she was no longer in bed, but was seated before the mirror of the old bureau.

“I’ve never walked in my sleep before,” she thought. “It must have been the draught.”

Suddenly she burst into tears.

“Oh, thank God I’m back in my own time,” she cried.

“What, crying on your wedding morning?” It was her mother’s voice. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” replied Ursula. “Everything is right. These tears are purely physical—the last dregs of that draught. It gave me the maddest dream.”

“Don’t tell me now,” protested Mrs. Pyke. “You’ve got to dress at once.”

Ursula had fixed on Mallow as the scene of her wedding, because Miles' aunt lived at the show house of the neighbourhood. It was at the White House that he proposed, and she loved it for its association.

Mallow, itself, was one of the beauty spots of England—a jealously preserved relic of the past. It was a real Tudor village, with no building of later period than the sixteenth century, although antiquarians disputed over the date of the old inn.

The housing and sanitation were such to make the Medical-officer shudder, although the villagers, miraculously, lived to a green old age; for Mallow inhabitants resisted every threat of change. It was their boast that they preserved the spirit of Merrie England, when the sun always shone, and the hawthorne always flowered, and golden girls and boys danced round a maypole to the lively lilt of a fiddle.

It was true Elizabethan sunshine—despite Shakespeare's exposure of the weather in a *Midsummer Night's Dream*—which shone down on the villagers gathered in the churchyard, in the hope of seeing the bride on her way out. Ursula's wedding was a strictly private affair, and, since the parking of planes were prohibited in Marlow, the bridal party had walked from the White house.

The pealing of the Wedding March through the open doors of the church told the sightseers that they had not much longer to wait. They pressed forward, propelled by the throng behind.

A girl uttered a protest.

“Oh, don't push. I'm standing on a grave.”

Looking down at the ancient stone, she read the inscription, for the lettering of the Mallow monuments were constantly renewed.

“To ye sacred memory of Ursula Pike,
of ye Churn House, Mallow,
who departed this life, May 14th, 1794. Aet. 22.
‘For so He giveth His beloved sleepe.’”

The girl called her neighbour's attention to it.

“Look. The same name as the bride.”

Her neighbour nodded. She was a hearty woman, dressed in the uniform of a maternity nurse, and had been on her feet all night. But she sacrificed sleep rather than miss the excitement of a wedding.

“How they stuck everyone on the Lord, in those days,” she commented. “Aged twenty-two. I call that a crime. Far more likely to be the brook-water.”

“Well, it doesn't matter now, how she died,” said the girl. “It's all over for her.”

“Over? Don't be too sure of that. If you'd helped as many babies into the world as I have, and seen how the same nose keeps cropping up in families, you'd understand that there's precious little that does finish.”

“Pity,” remarked the girl.

The sun beat down on her head and the ringing of the bells seemed to be inside her head.

“Are you a friend of the bride?” asked the nurse.

“No. I came just out of curiosity. But we were at College together. . . . But she had all the luck. I worked harder than she did, but, at the Examinations, they always asked her what she knew, and what I did *not* know. She did nothing to deserve her success. Pure luck.”

The nurse cut into her lament.

“Here she comes.”

Ursula stood in the open doorway by the side of Miles. Her petal-white face had the bloom of perfect

health, and her hazel eyes shone with deep happiness. From the chill gloom of the Norman Church she came out into a glow of light and colour—the milky-blue of sky, the green of beech, the gold of buttercup. The bells clanged, and the sun streamed down on her, as a child stepped forward to strew rose-leaves on the path.

It was her minute. . . . The first step on the new journey.

“Why should she have too much while others starve?” muttered the girl.

She walked back, alone, to the village green which was speckled with returning villagers. In a shaded corner, the vicar’s daughter was standing beside a dark sinister-looking pool. As she pointed it out to a group of school-children, her voice floated on the air:

“This is the pond where they used to drown the witches.”

THE END

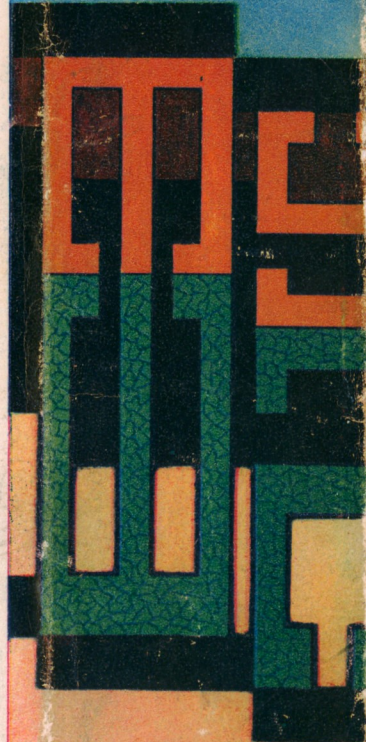
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264