Hocking Joseph

The Everlasting Arms

Joseph Hocking
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Содержание

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PROLOGUE

CHAPTER I
A Woman's Face

"There may be a great deal in it."

"Undoubtedly there is. Imagination, superstition, credulity," said Dick Faversham a little cynically.

"Well, I can't dismiss it in that fashion," replied the other. "Where there's smoke there's fire, and you can't get men from various parts of the world testifying that they saw the Angels at Mons unless there is some foundation of truth in it."

"Again I say imagination. Imagination can do a great deal. Imagination can people a churchyard with ghosts; it can make dreams come true, and it can also make clever men foolish."

"Admit that. You still haven't got to the bottom of it. There's more than mere imagination in the stories of the Angels at Mons, and at other places. Less than three weeks ago I was at a hospital in London. I was talking with a wounded sergeant, and this man

told me in so many words that he saw the Angels. He said there were three of them, and that they remained visible for more than an hour. Not only did he see them, but others saw them. He also said that what appeared like a great calamity was averted by their appearance."

There was a silence after this somewhat lengthy speech, and something like an uncanny feeling possessed the listeners.

The conversation took place in the smoke-room of a steamship bound for Australia, and at least a dozen men were taking part in it. The subject of the discussion was the alleged appearance of the Angels at Mons, and at other places in France and Belgium, and although at least half of the little party was not convinced that those who accepted the stories had a good case, they could not help being affected by the numerous instances that were adduced of the actual appearance of spiritual visitants. The subject, as all the world knows, had been much discussed in England and elsewhere, and so it was not unnatural that it should form the topic of conversation in the smoke-room of the outgoing vessel.

One of the strongest opponents to the supernatural theory was a young man of perhaps twenty-seven years of age. From the first he had taken up an antagonistic attitude, and would not admit that the cases given proved anything.

"Excuse me," he urged, "but, really, it won't do. You see, the whole thing, if it is true, is miraculous, and miracles, according to Matthew Arnold, don't happen."

"And who is Matthew Arnold, or any other man, to say that what we called miracles don't happen?" urged Mr. Bennett, the clergyman, warmly. "In spite of Matthew Arnold and men of his school, the world still believes in the miracles of our Lord; why, then, should miracles happen in Palestine and not in France?"

"If they did happen," interpolated Faversham.

"Either they happened, or the greatest movement, the mightiest and noblest enthusiasms the world has ever known, were founded on a lie," said the clergyman solemnly.

"That may be," retorted Faversham, "but don't you see where you are leading us? If, as you say, we accept the New Testament stories, there is no reason why we may not accept the Angels at Mons and elsewhere. But that opens up all sorts of questions. The New Testament tells of people being possessed by devils; it tells of one at least being tempted by a personal devil. Would you assert that a personal devil tempts men to-day?"

"I believe that either the devil or his agents tempt men to-day," replied the clergyman.

"Then you would, I suppose, also assert that the old myth of guardian angels is also true."

"Accepting the New Testament, I do," replied Mr. Bennett.

Dick Faversham laughed rather uneasily.

"Think," went on the clergyman; "suppose someone who loved you very dearly in life died, and went into the great spirit world. Do you not think it natural that that person should seek to watch over you? Is it not natural that he or she who loved you in

life should love you after what we call death? A mother will give her life for her child in life. Why should she not seek to guard that same child even although she has gone to the world of spirits?"

"But the whole thing seems so unreal, so unnatural," urged Faversham.

"That is because we live in a materialistic age. The truth is, in giving up the idea of guardian angels and similar beliefs we have given up some of the greatest comforts in life. Because we have become so materialistic, we have lost that grand triumphant conviction that there is no death. Why – why – " – and Mr. Bennett rose to his feet excitedly – "there is not one of those splendid lads who has fallen in battle, who is dead. God still cares for them all, and not one is outside His protection. I can't explain it, but I *know*."

"You know?"

"Yes, I know. And I'll tell you why I know. My son Jack was killed at Mons, but he's near me even now. Say it's unreal if you like, say it's unnatural if you will, but it's one of the great glories of life to me."

"I don't like to cast a doubt upon a sacred conviction," ventured Faversham after a silence that was almost painful, "but is not this clearly a case of imagination? Mr. Bennett has lost a son in the war. We are all very sorry for him, and we are all glad that he gets comfort from the feeling that his son is near him. But even admitting the truth of this, admitting the doctrine that a man's spirit does not die because of the death of the body, you

have proved nothing. The appearance of the Angels in France and Belgium means something more than this. It declares that these spirits appear in visible, tangible forms; that they take an interest in our mundane doings; that they take sides; that they help some and hinder others."

"Exactly," assented Mr. Bennett.

"You believe that?"

"I believe it most fervently," was the clergyman's solemn answer. "I am anything but a spiritualist, as the word is usually understood; but I see no reason why my boy may not communicate with me, why he may not help me. I, of course, do not understand the mysterious ways of the Almighty, but I believe in the words of Holy Writ. 'Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?' says the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews. While our Lord Himself, when speaking of little children, said, 'I say unto you that their angels do always behold the face of My Father who is in heaven.'"

Again there was a silence which was again broken by Dick Faversham turning and speaking to a man who had not spoken during the whole discussion, but who, with a sardonic, cynical smile upon his face, had been listening intently.

"What is your opinion, Count Romanoff?" asked Faversham.

"I am afraid I must be ruled out of court," he replied. "These stories smack too much of the nursery."

"You believe that they are worn-out superstitions?"

"I should shock you all if I told you what I believe."

"Shock us by all means."

"No, I will spare you. I remember that we have a clergyman present."

"Pray do not mind me," urged Mr. Bennett eagerly.

"Then surely you do not accept the fables recorded in the New Testament?"

"I do not admit your description. What you call fables are the greatest power for righteousness the world has ever known. They have stood the test of ages, they have comforted and inspired millions of lives, they stand upon eternal truth."

Count Romanoff shrugged his shoulders, and a smile of derision and contempt passed over his features.

"All right," he replied, and again lapsed into silence.

The man had spoken only a very few commonplace words, and yet he had changed the atmosphere of the room. Perhaps this was because all felt him utterly antagonistic to the subject of discussion. He was different from Dick Faversham, who in a frank, schoolboy way had declared his scepticism. He had been a marked man ever since the boat had left England. There were several reasons for this. One was his personal appearance. He was an exceedingly handsome man of perhaps forty years of age, and yet there was something repellent in his features. He was greatly admired for his fine physique and courtly bearing, and yet but few sought his acquaintance. He looked as though he were the repository of dark secrets. His smile was cynical, and suggested

a kind of contemptuous pity for the person to whom he spoke. His eyes were deeply set, his mouth suggested cruelty.

And yet he could be fascinating. Dick Faversham, who had struck up an acquaintance with him, had found him vastly entertaining. He held unconventional ideas, and was widely read in the literature of more than one country. Moreover, he held strong views on men and movements, and his criticisms told of a man of more than ordinary intellectual acumen.

"You refuse to discuss the matter?"

"There is but little use for an astronomer to discuss the stars with an astrologer. A chemist would regard it as waste of time to discuss his science with an alchemist. The two live in different worlds, speak a different language, belong to different times."

"Of course, you will call me a fanatic," cried the clergyman; "but I believe. I believe in God, and in His Son Jesus Christ who died for our sins, and who rose from the dead. On that foundation I build all the rest."

A change passed over the Count's face. It might be a spasm of pain, and his somewhat pale face became paler; but he did not speak. For some seconds he seemed fighting with a strong emotion; then, conquering himself, his face resumed its former aspect, and a cynical smile again passed over his features.

"The gentleman is too earnest for me," he remarked, taking another cigar from his case.

Dick Faversham did not see the change that passed over the Count's face. Indeed, he had ceased to take interest in the

discussion. The truth was that the young man was startled by what was an unusual occurrence. The room, as may be imagined, bearing in mind that for a long time a number of men had been burning incense to My Lady Nicotine, was in a haze of tobacco smoke, and objects were not altogether clearly visible; but not far from the door he saw a woman standing. This would not have been remarkable had not the lady passengers, for some reason known to themselves, up to the present altogether avoided the smoke-room. More than this, Dick did not recognise her. He had met, or thought he had met during the voyage, every lady passenger on the boat; but certainly he had never seen this one before. He was perfectly sure of that, for her face was so remarkable that he knew he could not have forgotten her.

She was young, perhaps twenty-four. At first Dick thought of her as only a girl in her teens, but as, through the thick smoky haze he watched her face, he felt that she had passed her early girlhood. What struck him most forcibly were her wonderful eyes. It seemed to him as though, while they were large and piercing, they were at the same time melting with an infinite tenderness and pity.

Dick Faversham looked at her like a man entranced. In his interest in her he forgot the other occupants of the room, forgot the discussion, forgot everything. The yearning solicitude in the woman's eyes, the infinite pity on her face, chained him and drove all other thoughts away.

"I say, Faversham."

He came to himself at the mention of his name and turned to the speaker.

"Are you good for a stroll on deck for half an hour before turning in?"

It was the Count who spoke, and Dick noticed that nearly all the occupants of the room seemed on the point of leaving.

"Thank you," he replied, "but I think I'll turn in."

He looked again towards the door where he had seen the woman, but she was gone.

"By the way," and he touched the sleeve of a man's coat as he spoke, "who was that woman?"

"What woman?"

"The woman standing by the door."

"I saw no woman. There was none there."

"But there was, I tell you. I saw her plainly."

"You were wool-gathering, old man. I was sitting near the door and saw no one."

Dick was puzzled. He was certain as to what he had seen.

The smoke-room steward appeared at that moment, to whom he propounded the same question.

"There was no lady, sir."

"But – are you sure?"

"Certainly, sir. I've been here all the evening, and saw everyone who came in."

Dick made his way to his berth like a man in a dream. He was puzzled, bewildered.

"I am sure I saw a woman," he said to himself.

CHAPTER II
The Marconigram

He had barely reached his room when he heard a knock at the door.

"Yes; what is it?"

"You are Mr. Faversham, aren't you?"

"Yes; what do you want?"

"Wireless for you, sir. Just come through."

A few seconds later Dick was reading a message which promised to alter the whole course of his life:

> "*Your uncle, Charles Faversham, Wendover Park, Surrey, just died. Your immediate return essential. Report to us on arrival.* Bidlake & Bilton, *Lincoln's Inn*."

The words seemed to swim before his eyes. His uncle, Charles Faversham, dead! There was nothing wonderful about that, for Dick had heard quite recently that he was an ailing man, and not likely to live long. He was old, too, and in the course of nature could not live long. But what had Charles Faversham's death to do with him? It was true the deceased man was his father's stepbrother, but the two families had no associations, simply because no friendship existed between them.

Dick knew none of the other Favershams personally. His own father, who had died a few years before, had left him practically

penniless. His mother, whose memory his father adored, had died at his, Dick's, birth, and thus when he was a little over twenty he found himself alone in the world. Up to that time he had spent his life at school and at college. His father, who was a man of scholarly instincts, had made up his mind that his son should adopt one of the learned professions, although Dick's desires did not lean in that direction. At his father's death, therefore, he set to work to carve out a career for himself. He had good abilities, a determined nature, and great ambitions, but his training, which utterly unfitted him for the battle of life, handicapped him sorely. For three years nothing went well with him. He obtained situation after situation only to lose it. He was impatient of control, he lacked patience, and although he had boundless energies, he never found a true outlet for them.

At length fortune favoured him. He got a post under a company who did a large business in Austria and in the Balkan States, and he made himself so useful to his firm that his progress was phenomenal.

It was then that Dick began to think seriously of a great career. It was true he had only climbed a few steps on fortune's ladder, but his prospects for the future were alluring. He pictured himself becoming a power in the commercial world, and then, with larger wealth at his command, he saw himself entering Parliament and becoming a great figure in the life of the nation.

He had social ambitions too. Although he had had no serious love affairs, he dreamed of himself marrying into an old family,

by which means the doors of the greatest houses in the land would be open to him.

"Nothing shall stop me," he said to himself again and again; and the heads of his firm, realising his value to them, gave him more and more responsibility, and also pointed hints about his prospects.

At the end of 1913, however, Dick had a serious disagreement with his chiefs. He had given considerable attention to continental politics, and he believed that Germany would force war. Because of this he advocated a certain policy with regard to their business. To this his chiefs gave a deaf ear, and laughed at the idea of England being embroiled in any trouble with either Austria or the Balkan States. Of course, Dick was powerless. He had no capital in the firm, and as his schemes were rather revolutionary he was not in a position to press them.

On the outbreak of war in 1914 Dick's firm was ruined. What he had predicted had come to pass. Because they had not prepared for this possible contingency, and because large sums of money were owing them in Austria and Serbia, which they could not recover, all their energies were paralysed. Thus at twenty-seven years of age, with only a few hundreds of pounds in his possession, Dick had to begin at the bottom again.

At length a firm who knew something of his associations with his previous employers offered to send him to Australia to attend to matters in which they believed he could render valuable service, but payment for which would depend entirely on his own

success. Dick accepted this offer with avidity.

This in bare outline was his story up to the commencement of the history which finds him on his way to Australia with the momentous marconigram in his hands.

Again and again he read the wireless message which had been handed to him. It was so strange, so unexpected, so bewildering. He had never seen or spoken to his uncle, never expected to. He was further removed from this representative of his family than the Jews from the Samaritans. It is true he had seen Wendover Park from the distance. He remembered passing the lodge gates some year or two before when cycling through Surrey. From a neighbouring hill he had caught sight of the old house standing in its broad park-lands, and a pang of envy had shot through his heart as he reflected that although its owner and his father were stepbrothers he would never be admitted within its walls.

But this message had altered everything: "*Your uncle, Charles Faversham, Wendover Park, just died. Your immediate return essential. Report to us on arrival.*"

The words burnt like fire into his brain. A wireless message, sent to him in mid-ocean, must be of more than common purport. Men of Bidlake & Bilton's standing did not send such messages as a pastime. They would not urge his immediate return without serious reasons.

It must mean – it could only mean – one thing. He must in some way be interested in the huge fortune which Charles Faversham had left behind him. Perhaps, perhaps – and again he

considered the probable outcome of it all.

Hour after hour he sat thinking. Was his future, after all, to become great, not simply by his own energies, but because of a stroke of good fortune? Or, better still, was his uncle's death to be the means whereby he could climb to greatness and renown? After all he had not longed so much for money for its own sake, but as a means whereby he could get power, distinction, high position. With great wealth at his command he could – and again a fascinating future spread before him.

He could not sleep; of course, he couldn't! How could he sleep when his brain was on fire with wild imaginings and unknown possibilities?

He reflected on the course of his voyage, and considered where the vessel would first stop. Yes, he knew they were to call at Bombay, which was a great harbour from which ships were frequently returning to England. In three days they would be there, and then —

Should he take anyone into his confidence? Should he give reasons for leaving the ship? Oh, the wonder, the excitement of it all! The discussion about the Angels at Mons, and the talk about visitants from the spirit world caring for the people who lived on earth, scarcely entered his mind. What need had he for such things?

But who was that woman? For he was sure he had seen her. Tyler, to whom he had spoken, and the smoke-room steward might say that no woman was there, but he knew better. He could

believe his own eyes anyhow, and the wonderful yearning look in her eyes still haunted him in spite of the disturbing message.

It was not until towards morning that sleep came to him, and then he was haunted by dreams. Strange as it may seem, he did not dream of Bidlake & Bilton's message nor of his late uncle's mansion. He dreamt of his father and mother. He had never seen his mother; she had died at his birth. He had never seen a picture of her, indeed. He believed that his father possessed her portrait, but he had never shown it to him. His father seldom spoke of his mother, but when he did it was in tones of awe, almost of worship. She was like no other woman, he said – a woman with all the possible beauty and glory of womanhood stored in her heart.

And she was with his father in his dream. They stood by his bedside watching over him. His father's face he remembered perfectly. It was just as he had seen it when he was alive, except that there was an added something which he could not describe. His mother's face was strange to him. Yet not altogether so. He knew instinctively that she was his mother – knew it by the look on her almost luminous face, by the yearning tenderness of her eyes.

Neither of them spoke to him. They simply stood side by side and watched him. He wished they would speak; he felt as though he wanted guidance, advice, and each looked at him with infinite love in their eyes.

Where had he seen eyes like those of his mother before?

Where had he seen a face like the face in his dream? He remembered asking himself, but could recall no one.

"Mother, mother," he tried to say, but he could not speak. Then his mother placed her hand on his forehead, and her touch was like a benediction.

When he woke he wondered where he was; but as through the porthole he saw the sheen of the sea he remembered everything. Oh, the wonder of it all!

A knock came to the door. "Your bath is ready, sir," said a steward, and a minute later he felt the welcome sting of the cold salt water.

He scarcely spoke throughout breakfast; he did not feel like talking. He determined to find some lonely spot and reflect on what had taken place. When he reached the deck, however, the longing for loneliness left him. The sky was cloudless, and the sun poured its warm rays on the spotless boards. Under the awning, passengers had ensconced themselves in their chairs, and smoked, or talked, or read just as their fancy led them.

In spite of the heat the morning was pleasant. A fresh breeze swept across the sea, and the air was pure and sweet.

Acquaintances spoke to him pleasantly, for he had become fairly popular during the voyage.

"I wonder if they have heard of that wireless message?" he reflected. "Do they know I have received news of Charles Faversham's death, and that I am probably a rich man?"

"Holloa, Faversham."

He turned and saw Count Romanoff.

"You look rather pale this morning," went on the Count; "did you sleep well?"

"Not very well," replied Dick.

"Your mind exercised about the discussion, eh?"

"That and other things."

"It's the 'other things' that make the great interest of life," remarked the Count, looking at him intently.

"Yes, I suppose they do," was Dick's reply. He was thinking about the wireless message.

"Still," and the Count laughed, "the discussion got rather warm, didn't it? I'm afraid I offended our clerical friend. His nod was very cool just now. Of course, it's all rubbish. Years ago I was interested in such things. I took the trouble to inform myself of the best literature we have on the whole matter. As a youth I knew Madame Blavatsky. I have been to seances galore, but I cease to trouble now."

"Yes?" queried Dick.

"I found that the bottom was knocked out of all these so-called discoveries by the first touch of serious investigation and criticism. Nothing stood searching tests. Everything shrivelled at the first touch of the fire."

"This talk about angels, about a hereafter, is so much empty wind," went on the Count. "There is no hereafter. When we die there is a great black blank. That's all."

"Then life is a mockery."

"Is it? It all depends how you look at it. Personally I find it all right."

Dick Faversham looked at his companion's face intently. Yes, it was a handsome face – strong, determined, forceful. But it was not pleasant. Every movement of his features suggested mockery, cynicism, cruelty. And yet it was fascinating. Count Romanoff was not a man who could be passed by without a thought. There was a tremendous individuality behind his deep-set, dark eyes – a personality of great force suggested by the masterful, mobile features.

"You have nerves this morning, Faversham," went on the Count. "Something more than ordinary has happened to you."

"How do you know?"

"I feel it. I see it. No, I am not asking you to make a confidant of me. But you want a friend."

"Yes," cried Dick, speaking on impulse; "I do."

The other did not speak. He simply fixed his eyes on Faversham's face and waited.

CHAPTER III
The Shipwreck

For a moment Dick was strongly tempted to tell his companion about the wireless he had received. But something, he could not tell what, seemed to forbid him. In spite of the fact that he had spent a good deal of time with Count Romanoff he had given him no confidences. There was something in his presence, in spite of his fascination, that did not inspire confidence.

"By the way," ventured Dick, after an awkward silence, "I have often been on the point of asking you, but it felt like a liberty. Are you in any way connected with the great Russian family of your name?"

The Count hesitated before replying. "I do not often speak of it," he told him presently, "but I come of a Royal Family."

"The Romanoffs of Russia?"

The Count smiled.

"I do not imagine that they would admit me into their family circle," he replied. "I make no claims to it, but I have the right."

Dick was duly impressed.

"Then, of course, you are a Russian. You were born there?"

"A Russian!" sneered the other. "A vast conglomeration of savagery, superstition, and ignorance! I do not claim to be a Russian. I have estates there, but I am a citizen of the world. My sympathies are not national, insular, bounded by race, paltry

landmarks, languages. I live in a bigger world, my friend. Yes, I am a Romanoff, if you like, and I claim kinship with the greatest families of the Russian Empire – but la la, what is it? Thistledown, my friend, thistledown."

"But you were educated in Russia?" persisted Dick.

"Educated! What is it to be educated? From childhood I have been a wanderer. I have taken my degrees in the University of the world. I have travelled in China, Japan, Egypt, America, the Antipodes. In a few days we shall call at Bombay. If you will accompany me I will take you to people in that city, old Indian families whose language I know, whose so-called mysteries I have penetrated, and who call me friend. Ecco! I owe my education to all countries, all peoples."

He did not speak boastfully; there was no suggestion of the boaster, the braggadocio, in his tones; rather he spoke quietly, thoughtfully, almost sadly.

"Tell me this," asked Dick: "you, who I judge to be a rich man, do you find that riches bring happiness?"

"Yes – and no. With wealth you can buy all that this world can give you."

Dick wondered at the strange intonation of his voice.

"It is the only thing that can bring happiness," added Romanoff.

"I fancy our friend Mr. Bennett would not agree with you," laughed Dick. "He would say that a clear conscience meant happiness. He would tell you that a good life, a clean mind, and

a faith in God were the secrets of happiness."

Romanoff laughed.

"What makes a clear conscience? It is a feeling that you have done what is right. But what is right? What is right in China is wrong in England. What makes the Chinaman happy makes the Englishman miserable. But why should the Englishman be miserable because he does the thing that makes the Chinaman happy? No, no, it won't do. There is no right; there is no wrong. The Germans are wise there. What the world calls morality is a bogy to frighten foolish people. 'It is always right to do the thing you *can* do,' says Brother Fritz. Personally I believe it to be right to do what satisfies my desires. It is right because it brings happiness. After all, you haven't long to live. A few years and it is all over. A shot from a pistol and *voilà!* your brains are blown out – you are dead! Therefore, take all that life can give you – there is nothing else."

"I wonder?" said Dick.

"That is why money is all-powerful. First of all, get rid of conventional morality, rid your mind of all religious twaddle about another life, and then suck the orange of this life dry. You, now, you are keen, ardent, ambitious; you love beautiful things; you can enjoy to the full all that life can give you. Nature has endowed you with a healthy body, ardent desires, boundless ambitions – well, satisfy them all. You can buy them all."

"But I am not rich," interposed Dick.

"Aren't you?" queried the other. "Who knows? Anyhow, you

are young – make money. 'Money talks,' as the Americans say."

Again Dick was on the point of telling him about the wireless message, but again he refrained.

"By the way, Count Romanoff," he said, "did you see that woman in the smoke-room last night?"

"Woman! what woman?"

"I don't know. I never saw her before. But while you were talking I saw a woman's face through the haze of tobacco smoke. She was standing near the door. It was a wonderful face – and her eyes were beyond description. Great, pure, yearning, loving eyes they were, and they lit up the face which might have been – the face of an angel."

"You were dreaming, my friend. I have seen every woman on board, and not one of them possesses a face worth looking at twice."

"I asked another man," admitted Dick, "and he told me I was dreaming. He had been sitting near the door, he assured me, and he had seen no woman, while the smoke-room steward was just as certain."

"Of course there was no woman."

"And yet I saw a woman, unless – " He stopped suddenly.

"Unless what, my friend?"

"Unless it was a kind of rebuke to my scepticism last night; unless it was the face of an angel."

"An angel in mid-ocean!" Romanoff laughed. "An angel in the smoke-room of a P. & O. steamer! Faversham, you are an

example of your own arguments. Imagination can do anything."

"But it would be beautiful if it were so. Do you know, I'm only half a sceptic after all. I only half believe in what I said in the smoke-room last night."

"Perhaps I can say the same thing," said Romanoff, watching his face keenly.

"I say!" and Dick laughed.

"Yes, laugh if you will; but I told you just now that the world contained no mystery. I was wrong; it does. My residence in India has told me that. Do you know, Faversham, what has attracted me to you? – for I have been attracted, I can assure you."

"Flattered, I'm sure," murmured Dick.

"I was attracted, because the moment I saw your face I felt that your career would be out of the ordinary. I may be wrong, but I believe that great things are going to happen to you, that you are going to have a wonderful career. I felt it when I saw you come on deck a little while ago. If you are wise you are going to have a great future – a *great* future."

"Now you are laughing."

"No, I'm not. I'm in deadly earnest. I have something of the power of divination in me. I feel the future. Something's going to happen to you. I think great wealth's coming to you."

Dick was silent, and a far-away look came into his eyes. He was thinking of the wireless message, thinking whether he should tell Romanoff about it.

"I started out on this voyage – in the hope that – that I should

make money," he stammered.

"Where?"

"In Australia."

"You'll not go to Australia."

"No? Why?"

"I don't know – something's going to happen to you. I feel it."

Dick was again on the point of taking him into his confidence when two acquaintances came up and the conversation ended. But Dick felt that Romanoff knew his secret all the time.

The day passed away without further incident, but towards afternoon there was a distinct change in the weather. The sky became overclouded, and the gentle breeze which had blown in the morning strengthened into a strong, boisterous wind. The smooth sea roughened, and the passengers no longer sat on deck. The smoke-room was filled with bridge players, while other public rooms became the scenes of other amusements.

But Dick preferred being alone. He was still hugging his news to his heart, still reflecting on the appearance of the strange woman's face in the smoke-room, and all the time he was under the influence of Count Romanoff's conversation.

Perhaps the great, dark, heaving waste of waters excited his nerves and made him feel something of the mysterious and resistless forces around him. After all, he asked himself, how small the life of a man, or a hundred men, appeared to be amidst what seemed infinite wastes of ocean.

After dinner, in spite of the fact that the weather remained

boisterous, he again went on deck. The sky had somewhat cleared now, and although there were still great black angry clouds, spaces of blue could be seen between them. Here the stars appeared, and shone with great brilliancy. Then the moon rose serene, majestic. Now it was hidden by a great storm cloud, and again it showed its silvery face in the clear spaces.

"Great heavens!" cried Dick, "how little a man knows of the world in which he lives, and what rot we often talk. The air all around me may be crowded with visitants from the unseen world! My dream last night may have an objective reality. Perhaps my father and my mother were there watching over me! Why not?"

It is said that atheists are bred in slums, and amidst brick walls and unlovely surroundings. It is also said that there are few sailors but who are believers – that the grandeur of the seas, that the wonder of great star spaces create a kind of spiritual atmosphere which makes it impossible for them to be materialists. Whether that is so I will not argue. This I know: Dick Faversham felt very near the unseen world as he leaned over the deck railings that night and gazed across the turbulent waters.

But this also must be said. The unseen world seemed to him not good, but evil. He felt as though there were dark, sinister forces around him – forces which were inimical to what he conceived to be best in him.

Before midnight he turned in, and no sooner did he lay his head on his pillow than he felt himself falling asleep. How long he slept he did not know. As far as he remembered afterwards,

his sleep was dreamless. He only knew that he was awakened by a tremendous noise, and that the ship seemed to be crashing to pieces. Before he realised what had taken place he found himself thrown on the floor, while strange grating noises reached his ears. After that he heard wild shouts and despairing screams. Hastily putting on a coat over his night clothes, he rushed out to see what had happened; but all seemed darkness and confusion.

"What's the matter?" he cried, but received no answer.

Stumblingly he struggled towards the companion-way, where he saw a dark moving object.

"What's happened?" he gasped again.

"God only knows, except the vessel going down!"

"Vessel going down?"

"Yes; struck a mine or something!"

Even as the man spoke the ship seemed to be splitting asunder. Harsh, grating, bewildering noises were heard everywhere, while above the noises of timber and steel were to be faintly heard the cries of frantic women and excited men.

Then something struck him. He did not know what it was, but he felt a heavy blow on his head, and after that a great darkness fell upon him.

How long the darkness lasted he could not tell. It might have been minutes, it might have been hours; but he knew that he suddenly came to consciousness through the touch of icy-cold water. The cold seemed to pierce his very marrow, to sting him with exquisite pain. Then he was conscious that he was struggling

in the open sea.

He had been a strong swimmer from early boyhood, and he struck out now. He had no idea which way to swim, but swim he did, heedless of direction or purpose. A kind of instinct forced him to get as far away as possible from the spot where he came to consciousness.

There was still a heavy sea running. He found himself lifted on the crest of huge waves, and again sinking in the depths. But he held on. He had a kind of instinct that he was doing something to save his life.

Presently his mind became clear. The past came vividly before him – the talk in the smoke-room, the wireless message —

Yes, he must live! Life held out so much to him. His immediate return to England was essential. Bidlake & Bilton had told him so.

Where were the other passengers? He had heard women's cries, the wild shouts of men, the creaking of timbers, the grating of steel; he had felt that the great steamship was being torn to pieces. But now there was nothing of this. There was nothing but the roar of waters – great, heaving, turbulent waters.

He still struggled on, but he knew that his strength was going. It seemed to him, too, as though some power was paralysing his limbs, sapping his strength. He still had the desire to save himself, to live; but his will power was not equal to his desire.

Oh, the sea was cruel, cruel! Why could not the waves cease roaring and rolling if only for five minutes? He would have time

to rest then, to rest and regain his strength.

Still he struggled on. Again he felt himself carried on the crest of waves, and again almost submerged in the great troughs which seemed to be everywhere.

"O God, help me!" he thought at length. "My strength is nearly gone. I'm going to be drowned!"

A sinister power seemed to surround him – a power which took away hope, purpose, life. He thought of Count Romanoff, who had said there was nothing after death – that death was just a great black blank.

The thought was ghastly! To cease to be, to die there amidst the wild waste of the sea, on that lonely night! He could not bear the thought of it.

But his strength was ebbing away; his breath came in panting sobs; his heart found it difficult to beat. He was going to die.

Oh, if only something, someone would drive away the hateful presence which was following him, surrounding him! He could still struggle on then; he could live then. But no, a great black shadow was surrounding him, swallowing him up. Yes, and the ghastly thing was taking shape. He saw a face, something like the face of – no, he could liken it to no one he knew.

The waves still rolled on; but now he heard what seemed like wild, demoniacal laughter. Once, when a boy, he had seen Henry Irving in *Faust*; he saw the devils on the haunted mountain; he heard their hideous cries. And there was a ghastly, evil influence with him now. Did it mean that devils were there waiting to

snatch his soul directly it left his body?

Then he felt a change. Yes, it was distinct, definite. There was a light, too – a pale, indistinct light, but still real, and as his tired eyes lifted he saw what seemed to be a cross of light shining down upon him from the clouds. What could it mean?

It seemed to him that the sinister presence was somehow losing power, that there was something, someone in the light which grew stronger.

Then a face appeared above him. At first it was unreal, intangible, shadowy; but it grew clearer, clearer. Where had he seen it before? Those great, tender, yearning eyes – where had he seen them? Then the form of a woman became outlined – a woman with arms outstretched. Her face, her lips, her eyes seemed to bid him hope, and it felt to him as though arms were placed beneath him – arms which bore him up.

It was all unreal, as unreal as the baseless fabric of a dream; and yet it was real, wondrously real.

"Help me! Save me!" he tried to say, but whether he uttered the words he did not know. He felt that his grip on life became weaker and weaker – then a still, small voice seemed to whisper, "The Eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the Everlasting Arms."

The roar of the waves grew less, and he knew no more.

CHAPTER IV
"The Enemy of Your Soul"

When again Dick Faversham regained something like consciousness he had a sensation of choking, of a hard struggle to breathe, which ended in partial failure.

He did not know where he was, but he had a sense of warmth, of restfulness. He thought he heard the ripple of waves on a sunlit shore, and of wide-spreading trees which grew close to the edge of the sea.

But it was all indistinct, unreal, and he did not care very much. He was trying to breathe, trying to overcome the awful sense of choking, and after a while, dazed, bewildered though he was, he felt his breath come easier and the weight on his chest grow lighter. But he was terribly tired – so tired that he had no desire to struggle, so languid that his very efforts to breathe were the result not of his own will, but of some claims of nature over which he had no control. He was just a piece of machinery, and that was all.

He felt himself going to sleep, and he was glad. He had no curiosity as to where he was, no desire to know how he came to be there, no remembrance of the past; he only knew that warm air wrapped him like a garment, and that he was deliciously tired and sleepy.

How long he slept he did not know, but presently when he

woke he saw the sun setting in a blaze of glory. Scarcely a breath of wind stirred the warm, fragrant air, and all was silent save the lapping of the waves and the screaming of birds in the distance.

He sat up and looked around him. Great tropical trees grew in wild profusion, while gorgeous vegetation abounded. It was like some land of dreams.

Then suddenly memory asserted itself, and the past flashed before his mind. Everything became clear, vivid.

"I am saved! I am alive!" he exclaimed aloud.

Again he saw the wild upheaving sea; he felt himself struggling in the deep, while his strength, strength of body, of mind, and will were failing him. He recalled the dark, fearful presence that surrounded him, and then the coming of the light, and in the light the outline of a woman's form. Nothing would ever destroy that memory! The face, the lips, the eyes! No, he should never forget! And he had seen her arms outstretched, felt her arms placed beneath him – the arms that bore him up, brought him to safety.

"I was saved," he murmured – "saved by an angel!"

He was startled by the sound of a footstep, and, turning, he saw Romanoff, and with him came back something of the feeling that some evil presence surrounded him.

"That's right, Faversham. I was afraid, hours ago, that I should never bring you round, but at length you made good, and then, like a sensible fellow, went to sleep."

Romanoff spoke in the most matter-of-fact way possible, banishing the mere thought of angels or devils.

"Where are we? How did we get here?" gasped Faversham. Up to now he had not given a thought to the other passengers.

"Where are we? On an island in the Pacific, my dear fellow. How did we get here? After the accident – or whatever it was – the boats were lowered, and all hands were got away. I looked out for you, but could not find you. There was a great commotion, and it was easy to miss anyone in the darkness. I was among the last to leave the sinking vessel, and the boat was pretty full. We had got perhaps half a mile away from the scene of the wreck, when I saw someone struggling in the sea. It was by the purest chance possible that I saw. However, I managed to get hold of – what turned out to be you. You were nearly gone – I never thought you'd – live."

"But how did I get here?" asked Dick, "and – and where are the others?"

"It was this way," and Romanoff still continued to speak in the same matter-of-fact tones. "As I told you, the boat was jammed full – overweighted, in fact – so full that your weight was a bit of a danger. More than one said you were dead, and suggested that – that it was no use endangering the safety of the others. But I felt sure you were alive, so I held out against them."

"And then?" asked Dick. He was only giving half his mind to Romanoff's story; he was thinking of what he saw when he felt his strength leaving him.

"You see the bar out yonder?" and Romanoff pointed towards a ridge of foam some distance out at sea. "It's mighty rough there

– dangerous to cross even when the sea is smooth; when it is rough – you can guess. I was holding you in my arms in order to – give room. The oarsmen were making for land, of course; you see, we had been many hours in a mere cockleshell, and this island promised safety. But in crossing the bar we were nearly upset, and I suddenly found myself in the sea with you in my arms. It was fairly dark, and I could not see the boat, but I was fortunate in getting you here. That's all."

"That's all?"

"Yes; what should there be else?"

"But the others?"

"Oh, I expect they've landed somewhere else on the island – sure to, in fact. But I've not looked them up. You see, I did not want to leave you."

"Then you – you've saved me?"

"Oh, that's all right, my dear fellow. You are here, and you are looking better every minute; that's the great thing. See, I've brought you some food – fruit. Delicious stuff. I've tried it. Lucky for us we got to this place."

Dick ate almost mechanically. He was still wondering and trying to square Romanoff's story with his own experiences. Meanwhile, Romanoff sat near him and watched him as he ate.

"How long have we been here?"

"Ten hours at least. Look, my clothes are quite dry. By Jove, I was thankful for the hot sun."

"You saved me!" repeated Dick. "I owe my life to you, and

yet even now – "

"What, my dear fellow?"

"I thought I was saved in another way."

"Another way? How?"

Dick hesitated a few seconds, and then told him, while Romanoff listened with a mocking smile on his lips.

"Of course, you were delirious; it was pure hallucination."

"Was it? It was very real to me."

"Such things don't happen, my friend. After all, it was a very matter-of-fact, mundane affair. You were lucky, and I happened to see you – that's all – and if there was an angel – I'm it."

The laugh that followed was anything but angelic!

"I suppose that's it," and with a sigh Dick assented to Romanoff's explanation. Indeed, with this strange, matter-of-fact man by his side, he could not believe in anything miraculous. That smile on his face made it impossible.

"I don't know how to thank you," he said fervently. "You've done me the greatest service one man can do for another. I can't thank you enough, and I can never repay you, but if we ever get away from here, and I have an opportunity to serve you – all that I have shall be yours."

"I'll remember that," replied Romanoff quietly, "and I accept what you offer, my friend. Perhaps the time will come when I can take advantage of it."

"I hope you will – you must!" – Dick's mind had become excited – "and I want to tell you something," he continued, for

he was strangely drawn towards his deliverer. "I want to live. I want to get back to England," he went on. "I have not told you before, but I feel I must now."

Whereupon he told him the story of the wireless message and what it possibly might mean.

Romanoff listened gravely, and Dick once again experienced that uncanny feeling that he was telling the other a story he already knew.

"Didn't I tell you on the boat that something big was in store for you?" he said, after many questions were asked and answered. "I shall certainly look you up when I go to England again, and it may be I shall be able to render you some – further service."

Night came on, and Dick slept. He was calm now and hopeful for the future. Romanoff had told him that as the island was on the great trade route it was impossible for them to be left there long. Vessels were always passing. And Dick trusted Romanoff. He felt he could do no other. He was so strong, so wise, so confident.

For hours he slept dreamlessly, but towards morning he had a vivid dream, and in his dream he again saw the face of the angel, just as he had seen on the wild, heaving sea.

"Listen to me," she said to him. "That man Romanoff is your enemy – the enemy of your soul. Do you realise it? – your soul. He is an emissary of the Evil One, and you must fight him. You must not yield to him. You will be tempted, but you must fight. He will be constantly near you, tempting you. He is your enemy,

working for your downfall. If you give way to him you will be for ever lost!"

Dick heard her words quite plainly. He watched her face as she spoke, wondered at the yearning tenderness in her eyes.

"How can he be my enemy?" he asked. "He risked his life to save mine; he brought me to safety."

"No," she replied; "it was the arms of another that were placed beneath you, and bore you up. Don't you know whose arms? Don't you remember my face?"

"Who are you?" asked Dick.

Then, as it seemed to him in his dream, Romanoff came, and there was a battle between him and the angel, and he knew that they were fighting for him, for the possession of his soul.

He could see them plainly, and presently he saw the face of Romanoff gloat with a look of unholy joy. His form became more and more clearly outlined, while that of the angel became dimmer and dimmer. The evil power was triumphant. Then a change came. Above their heads he saw a luminous cross outlined, and he thought Romanoff's face and form became less and less distinct. But he was not sure, for they were drifting away from him farther and farther —

Again he saw the angel's face, and again she spoke. "You will be tempted – tempted," she said, "in many ways you will be tempted. But you will not be alone, for the angel of the Lord encampeth around them that fear Him. You will know me by the same sign. Always obey the angel."

He awoke. He was lying where he had gone to sleep hours before. He started to his feet and looked around him.

Near him, passing under the shadows of the great trees, he thought he saw a woman's face. It was the face he had seen on the outgoing vessel, the face he had seen when he was sinking in the deep waters, the face that had come to him in his dreams.

He was about to speak to her, to follow her, when he heard someone shouting.

"Faversham! Faversham!" It was Romanoff's voice. "Come quickly. We've hailed a vessel; our signal has been seen. Come to the other side of the island."

PART I. – THE FIRST TEMPTATION

CHAPTER V
The Only Surviving Relative

Dick Faversham made his way to the offices of Messrs. Bidlake & Bilton, Solicitors, Lincoln's Inn Fields, with a fast-beating heart. He felt like a man whose fortune depended on the turn of a die. If the lawyers had sent him a message for the purpose he hoped, all was well; if not – And for the hundredth time he considered the pros and cons of the matter.

His rescue from the island had turned out to be one of the prosiest matters imaginable. The captain of an English-bound steamer had seen the signals made from the island, and had sent boats. Thus Dick was saved without difficulty. There were others who had a similar fortune, but Dick had no chance to speak with them. No sooner did he reach the steamer than he was taken ill, and remained ill during the whole of the homeward voyage.

After he reached Plymouth he began to recover rapidly, but he found on making inquiries that all who were rescued from the island had disembarked at the western seaport. This was very disappointing to him, as he wanted to make inquiries concerning

the manner of their escape. Of Romanoff he neither heard nor saw anything. No one knew anything of him on the steamer, neither was he known to board it.

Dick was both glad and sorry because of this. Glad because, although Romanoff possessed a strange fascination for him, he had never been altogether comfortable in his presence. The man repelled him even while he fascinated him, and he felt relieved that he was not on board. On the other hand, he was sorry, because he had a feeling that this strange, saturnine man might have been a great help to him in his peculiar circumstances.

"It may be all a will-o'-the-wisp fancy," he reflected as he walked along Fleet Street towards the Law Courts, "and yet it must mean something."

His mind was in a whirl of bewilderment, for in spite of Romanoff's explanation he could not drive from his mind the belief that his experiences after the vessel was wrecked had been real. Indeed, there were times when he was *sure* that he had seen an angel's form hovering while he was struggling in the sea, sure that he felt strong arms upholding him.

"At any rate, this is real," he said to himself as he turned into Lincoln's Inn Fields. "I am here on dry land. I wear a suit of clothes which Captain Fraser gave me, and I have twenty-four shillings in my pocket. Whatever happens, I will at the first opportunity pay the captain for his kindness."

He entered the office and gave his name.

"Do you wish to see Mr. Bidlake or Mr. Bilton?" asked the

clerk.

"Either, or both," replied Dick.

"Would you state your business, please?" The clerk did not seem to be sure of him.

"I will state my business to your principals," replied Dick. "Please take in my name."

When the clerk returned his demeanour was changed. He was obsequious and anxious to serve.

"Will you come this way, please, sir?" he said. "Mr. Bilton is in Mr. Bidlake's room, and – "

He did not finish the sentence, for the door of an office opened and a man of about fifty years of age appeared.

"Come in, Mr. Faversham," he invited. "Do you know, I've been on tenterhooks for days about you."

"I landed at Tilbury only a few hours ago."

"Is that so? But it was this way: we, of course, heard that your boat had been mined, and we also heard that a number of the passengers and crew were rescued; but news about you was contradictory. In one list of the saved your name appeared, while in another you were not mentioned. Tell us all about it."

"Another time," replied Dick. He was in a fever to know why this very respectable firm of lawyers should have sent a wireless to him.

"Yes, yes, of course," assented Mr. Bidlake, leading the way to an inner room. "Bilton, you may as well come too. My word, Mr. Faversham, I *am* glad to see you."

Dick felt light-hearted. Mr. Bidlake would not receive him in this fashion had there not been important reasons for doing so.

"Well now, to come to business right away," said Mr. Bidlake the moment they were seated – "you got my message?"

"Twenty-four hours before I was wrecked," replied Dick.

"Just so. You'll tell us all about that presently. My word, you must have had a terrible time! But that's by the way. You got my message, and therefore you know that your uncle, Mr. Charles Faversham, is dead?"

Dick nodded. He tried to appear calm, but his heart was thumping like a sledge-hammer.

"Of course, you know that Mr. Charles Faversham was a bachelor, and – by the way, Mr. Bilton, will you find the Faversham papers? You've had them in hand."

"Yes, my uncle was a bachelor," repeated Dick as Mr. Bidlake hesitated.

"You've never had any communications with him?"

"Never."

"A peculiar man. A genius for business, but, all the same, a peculiar man. However, I think it's all plain enough."

"What is plain enough?"

"Have you the papers, Bilton? That's good. Yes, I have everything here. This is the last will of Mr. Faversham – a plain, straightforward will in many ways, although slightly involved in others. However – "

The lawyer untied some tape, and began scanning some

documents.

"However what?" asked Dick, who by this time was almost beside himself with impatience.

"By the way, you can easily put your hand on your birth certificate, as well as the death certificate of your father, I suppose?"

"Quite easily."

"Of course you can. The fact that I have known you for some time makes things far easier, far less – complicated. Otherwise a great many formalities would have to be gone into before – in short, Mr. Richard Faversham, I have great pleasure in congratulating you on being the heir to a fine fortune – a *very* fine fortune."

Mr. Bidlake smiled benignly.

"My uncle's fortune?"

"Your uncle's estate – yes. He was a very rich man."

"But – but – " stammered Dick.

"Yes, yes, of course, you wish for some details. This is the position. Your uncle made a will – a rather peculiar will in some ways."

"A peculiar will?" queried Dick.

"Yes – as you know, I did a great deal of work for him; but there were others. Triggs and Wilcox attended to some things, while Mortlake and Stenson also did odd jobs; but I have made all inquiries, and this is the last will he made. He wrote it himself, and it was duly witnessed. I myself have interviewed the

witnesses, and there is no flaw anywhere, although, of course, this document is by no means orthodox."

"Orthodox? I don't understand."

"I mean that it is not in legal form. As a matter of fact, it is utterly informal."

"You mean that there is some doubt about it?"

"On no, by no means. It would stand good in any court of law, but, of course, all such documents are loosely worded. In case of a lawsuit it would offer occasion for many wordy battles," and Mr. Bidlake smacked his lips as though he would enjoy such an experience. "But here is the will in a nutshell," he went on. "You see, his own brother died many years ago, while your father, his stepbrother, died – let me see – how long ago? But you know. I need not go into that. As you may have heard, his sister Helen married and had children; she was left a widow, and during her widowhood she kept house for your uncle; so far so good. This is the will: all his property, excepting some small sums which are plainly stated, was left equally to his sister Helen's children, and to their heirs on their decease."

"But where do I come in?" gasped Dick.

"Here, my dear sir. There is a clause in the will, which I'll read: 'Should not my sister Helen's children be alive at the time of my decease, all my property is to be equally divided between my nearest surviving relatives.' Now, here," went on the lawyer, "we see the foolishness of a man making his own will, especially a man with such vast properties as Mr. Charles Faversham had.

First of all, suppose his sister Helen's children married and had children who were alive at the time of Mr. Charles Faversham's death. These children might not inherit a penny if his sister's children had been dead. Again, take the term 'equally divided.' Don't you see what a bill of costs might be run up in settling that? What is an equal division? Who is to assess values on an estate that consists of shipping interests, lands, mines, and a host of other things? Still, we need not trouble about this as it happens. We have inquired into the matter, and we find that your Aunt Helen's children are dead, and that none of them was married."

"Then – then – "

"You are the nearest surviving relative, my dear sir, and not only that – you are the only surviving relative of the late Mr. Charles Faversham of Wendover Park, Surrey."

Dick Faversham still appeared outwardly calm, although his brain was whirling with excitement. The words, 'shipping interests, lands, mines, and a host of other things,' were singing in his ears. And he —*he* was heir to it all! But was there some doubt about it? Was everything so definite as the lawyer had stated?

"I believe my Aunt Helen had three children," Dick said after a silence – "two girls and a boy, or two boys and a girl, I have forgotten which. Do you mean to say they are all dead?"

"Certain. Directly on Mr. Faversham's death I went into the matter. Two of the children died in England. The third, a son, died in Australia. I was very anxious about that, and spent quite a little fortune in cablegrams. Still, I got everything cleared up

satisfactorily."

"Tell me how." Dick was very anxious about this. It seemed to him as the crux of the whole question.

"It was naturally a little difficult," and Mr. Bidlake smiled complacently. "Australia is some little distance away, eh? But I managed it. For one thing, an old articled clerk of mine went to Melbourne some years ago, and succeeded in getting a practice there. He was very anxious to oblige me, and got on the track almost immediately. Fortunately for us, the death of Mr. Anthony Riggleton was somewhat notorious."

"And Mr. Anthony Riggleton was my Aunt Helen's son?" asked Dick.

"Exactly. He was not a young man of high character, and I am given to understand that Mr. Charles Faversham threatened more than once, when he was in England, never to leave him a penny. However, he paid his debts, gave him a sum of money, and told him to go away and never to return again during his life. It seems, too, that Mr. Anthony Faversham Riggleton considerably reformed himself during the time he was in Australia, so much so that favourable reports were sent to his uncle concerning his conduct. That, I imagine, accounts for his inclusion in the will. Whether he went wild again, I don't know, but it is certain that he met his death in a very suspicious way. It seems that he and some other men met in a house of bad repute not far from Melbourne, and in a brawl of some sort he came to an untimely end. His body was found more than twenty-four hours after his death, in the

harbour at Melbourne. Evidently the affair was most unsavoury. His face was much bashed. A pistol-shot had passed through his brain, and there were some knife-stabs in his body."

"And his companions?" asked Dick.

"They had cleared out, and left no traces behind. You see, they had plenty of time to do so before the police were able to get to work. According to the latest reports I have heard, there is not the slightest chance of finding them."

"But the body – was it identified?"

"It was. Letters were found on the body addressed to Mr. Anthony Faversham Riggleton, and there were also private papers on his person which left no doubt. Added to this, the evidence of the cashier and of a clerk of the Bank of Australia was most explicit. You see, he had called at the bank on the morning of the night of the brawl, and drew what little money he had. When the body was brought to the mortuary, both the cashier and the clerk swore it was that of the man who had called for the money."

"That was settled definitely, then?"

"Just so. Oh, you can make your mind quite easy. Directly I got news of Mr. Charles Faversham's death I naturally took steps to deal with his estate, and I assured myself of your interest in the matter before seeking to communicate with you. I would not have sent you that wireless without practical certainty. Since then I have received newspapers from Melbourne giving details of the whole business."

"And my Aunt Helen?" asked Dick.

"She died before the will was made. I gather that her death caused him to make the new will – the one we are discussing – in a hurry."

"And my two other cousins?" Dick persisted. He wanted to assure himself that there could be no shadow of doubt.

The lawyer smiled. "Things do happen strangely sometimes," he said. "If anyone had told me at the time this will was made that you would come in for the whole estate, I should have laughed. There were three healthy people in your way. And yet, so it is. They are dead. There is not a shadow of doubt about it."

"But didn't my uncle know of their decease?"

"I can't tell you that. He was a strange man. As I have said, he had a regular genius for making money, and he lived for his business. He simply revelled in it; not because he cared about money as such, but because the accumulation of wealth fascinated him. He was, as you know, unmarried, and up to the time of his making this will, his sister, of whom he seemed to have been fond, kept house for him. But he would not have her children around him. He gave them large sums of money, but he had no personal knowledge of them. It is quite probable, therefore, that he, being in failing health for more than a year before his death, would have no knowledge that they died some time before he did. You would understand if you had known him. A most eccentric man."

Dick reflected a few seconds. The way seemed perfectly plain,

and yet everything seemed intangible, unreal.

"In proof of that," went on the lawyer, "he did not tell either Mr. Bilton or myself that he had made this will. He simply gave a letter to the housekeeper he had secured after his sister's death, and told her that this letter was to be given to me at his decease. That letter," went on Mr. Bidlake, "contained the key of a safe and instructions to me to deal with the contents of the safe immediately after his death. Of course, I opened the safe, and among the first things I found was this will. The rest I have explained to you."

"And you say I am very wealthy?" asked Dick almost fearfully. Even yet it seemed too good to be true.

"Wealthy!" and the lawyer smiled. "Wealthy, my dear sir! I cannot yet tell you *how* wealthy. But if a controlling interest in one of the most prosperous shipping companies in the world, if the principal holding in one of our great banks, if landed estates in more than three counties, if important mining interests, if hundreds of houses in London and hosts of other things mean great wealth – then I can truly say that you are a very wealthy man. Of course, I cannot as yet estimate the value of the whole estate, but the death duties will make a nice fortune – a *very* nice fortune. Still, if you decide to entrust your legal business to us, as we hope you will, we shall be able in a few weeks to give you an approximate idea of what you are worth."

"Of course I will do that," replied Dirk hastily; "naturally there is no question about the matter. That must be settled here and

now."

"Thank you," said Mr. Bidlake. "Naturally Mr. Bilton and myself appreciate this mark of your confidence. You may depend that neither of us will spare himself in order to serve you. Eh, Mr. Bilton?"

"Exactly," replied Mr. Bilton. It was the only word he had as yet spoken throughout the interview.

"And now," said Dick, "I want your advice."

"Our advice? Certainly. What about?"

"Well, owing to the wreck, I am at this moment in borrowed clothes. I have only a few shillings in my pocket – "

"My dear sir," interrupted the lawyer, "that presents no difficulties. Let me give you an open cheque for two hundred – five hundred – pounds right away. Naturally, too, you will want to get clothes. You lost everything in the – the wreck; naturally you did. I had almost forgotten such things in the – the bigger matter. But that's all right. I have a private sitting-room here, and my tailor would be only too glad to come here right away. A most capable man. He would rig you out, temporarily, in a few hours, and afterwards – "

"That's all right," interrupted Dick; "but what next?"

"Take possession at once, my dear sir – at once."

"But I don't want anything to get into the papers."

"Certainly not – if we can help it. And I think we can. Shall I ring up my tailors? Yes?" And Mr. Bidlake took a telephone receiver into his hand. "That's all right," he added two minutes

later. "Hucknell will be here in less than half an hour, and you can trust him to fix you up and tide you over the next few days. Yes, he will be glad to do so – very glad. Terrible business this industrial unrest, isn't it? I'm afraid it's going to take some settling. Of course, it's world wide, but I say, thank goodness our people have got more sense and more balance than those poor Russians."

The words were simple enough, and the expression was almost a commonplace, but Dick Faversham felt a sudden pain at his heart. He thought of the dark, mysterious man who claimed kinship with the great Russian House of Romanoff, and in a way he could not understand; the thought seemed to take away from the joyous excitement which filled his being at that moment. He wished he had never seen, never heard of Count Romanoff.

With an effort he shook off the cloud.

"You suggest that I go to Wendover Park at once?"

"Yes, say to-morrow morning. It is your right; in a way, it's your duty. The property is undeniably yours."

"Would – would you – could you go with me?" stammered Dick.

"I was on the point of suggesting it myself, my dear sir. Yes, I could go to-morrow morning."

"Are there any servants there, or is the house empty?" asked Dick. Again he had a sense of unreality.

"Most of the servants are there," replied the lawyer. "I thought it best to keep them. I am not sure about a chauffeur, though.

I have an idea I discharged him. But it can easily be managed. The housekeeper whom your uncle engaged on your aunt's death is there, and she, it appears, has a husband. Rather a capable man. He can get a chauffeur. I'll ring up right away, and give instructions. You don't mind, do you?"

"It's awfully good of you," Dick assured him. "I shall feel lost without you."

At half-past one Dick accompanied Mr. Bidlake to his club for lunch, attired in a not at all badly fitting ready-made suit of clothes, which Mr. Hucknell had secured for him, and spent the afternoon with the lawyer discussing the new situation.

"Nine-thirty-five Victoria," said Mr. Bidlake to him as he left him that night.

"I'll be there."

Dick went to his hotel like a man in a dream. Even yet everything was unreal to him. He had received assurances from one of the most trustworthy and respectable lawyers in London that his position was absolutely safe, and yet he felt no firm foundation under his feet.

"I expect it's because I've seen nothing yet," he reflected. "When I go down to-morrow and get installed as the owner of everything, I shall see things in a new light."

CHAPTER VI
Wendover Park

The end of April had now come, and a tinge of green had crept over what in many respects is one of the loveliest counties in England. The train in which Mr. Bidlake and Dick Faversham sat had left Redhill and was passing through a rich, undulating countryside.

"You feel a bit excited, I expect?" and Mr. Bidlake looked up from his copy of *The Times*.

"Just a bit."

"You'll soon get over your excitement, although, of course, you'll find the change very great. A rich man has many responsibilities."

"If I remember aright, there are several other big houses within a few miles of Wendover Park? Was my uncle on good terms with his neighbours?"

The lawyer coughed. "He did not go much into society. As I told you, he was a very eccentric man."

Dick was quick to notice the tone in which the other spoke. "You mean that he was not well received?"

"I mean that he lived his own life. Mr. Faversham was essentially a business man, and – and perhaps he could not understand the attitude of the old county families. Besides, feeling against him was rather strong when he bought Wendover

Park."

"Why?"

"I daresay you'll learn all about it in time. Enough to say now that Sir Guy Wendover, the previous owner, was in money difficulties, and the feeling was that your uncle took advantage of them in order to get hold of the place. Personally I don't pay much attention to such stories; but undoubtedly they affected your uncle's position. Possibly they may affect yours – for a time." The lawyer appeared to utter the last sentence as an afterthought.

Presently the train stopped at a wayside station, where the two alighted. The sun was now high in the heavens, and the birds were singing gaily. Wooded hills sloped up from the station, while westward was a vast panorama of hill and dale.

"I don't think you could find a fairer sight in all England," remarked Mr. Bidlake. "Ah, that's right. I see a motor-car is waiting for us."

Dick felt as thought a weight rolled from his shoulders the moment he stood beneath the open sky. Yes, this was glorious! The air was laden with the perfume of bursting life. The chorus of the birds exhilarated him; the sight of the rich loamy meadows, where lambkins sported and cows fed lazily, made him feel that he was not following some chimera of the mind, but tangible realities.

A chauffeur touched his cap. "Mr. Faversham and Mr. Bidlake, sir?" he inquired.

A few minutes later the car was moving swiftly along beautiful

country lanes, the like of which only a few English counties can show. Yes, Dick had to admit it. Beautiful as he thought the whole district to be when cycling through it years before, he had no idea it was like this. Every corner they turned revealed new loveliness. All nature seemed bent on giving him a great welcome to his new home.

They had covered perhaps half the journey between the station and the house when the chauffeur jammed his foot on the brake suddenly and brought the car to a standstill. In front of them stood a small two-seater, by the open bonnet of which stood a young lady with hand uplifted. Evidently something had gone wrong with her machine, and the lane at this point was not wide enough for them to pass.

Dick immediately alighted.

"I am awfully sorry to inconvenience you," protested the girl, "but my engine has stopped, and, try as I may, I can't get it to start again."

Her face was slightly flushed, partly with her endeavours to start the engine and partly with impatience; but this did not detract from her more than usually handsome appearance. For she was handsome; indeed, Dick thought he had never seen such a striking girl. And this was no wonder. It is only rare that nature produces such a perfect specimen of young womanhood as he saw that morning – perfect, that is, in face and form, perfect in colouring, in stature, in bearing. She was a brunette – great black flashing eyes, full red lips, raven-black hair, skin suffused with

the glow of buoyant health. More than ordinarily tall, she was shaped like a Juno, and moved with all the grace and freedom of an athlete.

"Help the lady, my man," said Mr. Bidlake to the chauffeur.

"Sorry, sir," replied the man, "but I don't know anything about engines. I've only just learnt to drive. You see, sir, Mrs. Winkley didn't quite know what to do when – "

"All right," interrupted Dick, with a laugh; "perhaps I can help you."

"If you only could," laughed the girl. "I haven't had the thing long, but it never went wrong until to-day. I know how to drive pretty well, but as for understanding the engine, I'm a mere baby."

She had a frank, pleasant voice, and laughed as she spoke, revealing perfect teeth.

Dick, who had quite a gift for mechanism, quickly found some tools, and commenced testing the sparking-plugs like a man conversant with his work.

"I'll have to take off my coat if you'll excuse me," he said presently. "I see you start the thing on a battery, and have no magneto. I'm sorry I don't know this class of car well, but I think I can see what's the matter."

"What is it? Do tell me," she cried, with an eager laugh. "I've been studying motor manuals and all that sort of thing ever since I commenced to drive, but diagrams always confuse me."

"The distributor seems to be wrong, and some wires have

become disconnected. Have you been held up long?"

"Oh, a quarter of an hour – more."

"And running the battery all the time?"

"I'm afraid so."

"You must be careful or your battery'll run out of electricity; that would mean your being hung up for two days."

"They told me that at the garage a little time ago. But what must I do?" and she laughed at him pleasantly.

"If she doesn't start at once, get someone to adjust the parts. There, I wonder if she'll go now."

He touched a switch, and the engine began to run.

"She seems all right," he said, after watching the moving mass of machinery for some seconds.

"Oh, you are good – and – thank you ever so much."

"It's been quite a pleasure," replied Dick, putting on his coat. "It was lucky I came by."

"It was indeed; but look at your hands. They are covered with oil. I *am* sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry for. Oil breaks no bones. Besides, I shall be able to wash them in a few minutes."

"You are not going far, then?"

"Only to Wendover Park. Do you know it?"

"Know it! Why – " She checked herself suddenly, and Dick thought she seemed a little confused. "But I must be going now. Thank you again."

She got into the car, and in a few seconds was out of sight.

"Remarkably handsome young lady, isn't she?" remarked Mr. Bidlake. "Do you know who she is?" he asked the chauffeur.

"Lady Blanche Huntingford, sir," replied the chauffeur.

"Whew!" whistled Mr. Bidlake.

"Anybody special?" asked Dick.

The lawyer smiled. "The incident is decidedly interesting," he replied. "First, she is cousin to Sir Guy Wendover who used to own Wendover Park, and second, she is the daughter of Lord Huntingford, the proudest and most exclusive aristocrat in Surrey."

"No? By Jove, she is handsome!"

"It is said that the Huntingfords rule Social Surrey. If they take you up, your social status is assured; if they boycott you – " and the lawyer shrugged his shoulders.

Dick was silent a few seconds. Evidently he was thinking deeply. "Isn't she glorious?" he cried presently. "I never saw such a dazzling girl. Did you notice her eyes – her complexion? I – I wouldn't have missed it for anything."

The lawyer did not reply. Perhaps he had reasons for his silence.

The car dashed on for another mile, and then Dick gave a cry of delight.

"That's it, isn't it?"

"Yes; that's it."

They were looking at a lovely old mansion which stood on the slope of a hill. Stretching away from it were fine park-lands, and

beyond these were wide-stretching woods. Looked at on that fair spring day, it was indeed a place to be proud of, to rejoice in.

"I never dreamt it was so fine!" gasped Dick.

"One of the finest places in England," was the lawyer's complacent reply.

Dick looked like one fascinated. It appealed to and satisfied him altogether.

"It's old, isn't it?"

"Three hundred years. It is said that the gardens are a wonder."

The car passed through some heavily wrought gates, and then rolled under an avenue of old trees. Dick could not speak; the thought of possessing such a place made him dumb. A few minutes later they drew up before the main entrance.

Dick was the first to leap out. He was eager to enter, to claim possession, to examine every nook and corner of his new home. He put his foot on the bottom step leading to the door, and then stopped suddenly. He felt himself rooted to the ground, felt afraid to move.

"I congratulate you again," said the lawyer. "I feel proud that I have the privilege to – "

"Don't you see? There! Don't you see?" gasped Dick.

"See?" repeated the lawyer. "Of course I see one of the most beautiful houses in England."

"Yes, but nothing else?" he asked excitedly.

"What do you mean?" queried the lawyer.

But Dick did not reply. Although the lawyer had seen nothing,

he saw in dim outline the face and form which had appeared to him when he was sinking in the turbulent waters of the Indian Ocean. Was this a warning that trouble was to overwhelm him again?

Dick Faversham had no doubts. Whatever he might think later, he was at that time certain of what he saw. The sun was shining brightly, and there was nothing in the various objects by which he was surrounded to suggest the supernatural, and yet he saw the face of the angel. She seemed to be hovering over the steps which led to the main entrance of the house, and for the moment she looked as though she would forbid his entrance. But only for the moment. Slowly she faded away, slowly he lost sight of her, and by the time the servant, who had evidently seen the approach of the car, had reached the door she had gone.

But he was sure he had seen her. The form he had seen hovering over him on the wild, turbulent sea was plainly visible to him at the door of this old Surrey mansion. The face, too, could not be mistaken. The same calm, benign expression, the same tender mouth. Goodness, purity, guardianship, all found their expression in those features. But there was something more. The eyes which had riveted his attention and haunted his memory for months seemed to convey something different to him now from what they had then. There was still the same yearning gaze, the same melting tenderness, but there was something more. They seemed to suggest fear, warning. Dick Faversham felt as though she wanted to tell him something, to warn him against

some unknown danger. It is true the feeling was indefinite and difficult to put into words; but it was there. She might, while not forbidding him to enter the house which had so unexpectedly come into his possession, be trying to tell him of dangers, of possible calamity.

"And do you say that you can see – that – that you saw nothing?" he almost gasped.

"I can see a great deal," replied Mr. Bidlake. "I can see one of the loveliest scenes in England. I can see you standing at the entrance of – but what do you mean? You look pale – frightened. Aren't you well?"

Dick opened his mouth to tell what he had seen, but he checked himself. Somehow the thought of opening his heart to this matter-of-fact lawyer seemed like sacrilege. He would not understand. He would tell him, just as Romanoff had told him weeks before, that his mind was unbalanced by the experiences through which he had passed, that the natural excitement caused by the news he had heard were too much for him, and caused him to lose his mental balance.

"Yes, I am quite well, thank you."

"Well, what do you mean? What do you think you saw?"

At that moment the door opened, and the housekeeper, who had hurried to meet them, appeared, and the lawyer did not listen to his stammering reply.

"Good-day, Mr. Bidlake," smiled the housekeeper. "I am glad you got here all right. Winkley had quite a difficulty in getting a

chauffeur. I hope the one provided was satisfactory?"

"It's all right, Mrs. Winkley," and the lawyer was very patronising as he spoke; "the man brought us here safely. This," and he turned towards Dick, "is Mr. Richard Faversham, the new owner of – hem – Wendover Park, and your new – master."

"Indeed, sir," and Mrs. Winkley turned and looked nervously towards Dick, "I hope you'll be very – happy here, sir. I bid you welcome, sir."

Dick smiled with frank pleasure and shook hands – a familiarity which pleased the housekeeper, but not the lawyer.

"You got my letter, Mrs. Winkley?" Mr. Bidlake said hurriedly.

"Yes, sir, also your telephone message yesterday. Wendover Park is a lovely place, Mr. Faversham."

"It is, indeed, Mrs. Winkley. This Surrey air has given me an appetite, too."

Dick was so nervous that he hardly knew what he was saying. As he glanced around the spacious hall and tried to realise that it was his own, and as he called to mind that for the last mile he had been passing through his own property, it seemed to be too wonderful to be true.

"Yes, the air is very good, and I am glad you are hungry. Lunch will be ready in half an hour. I have prepared a bedroom for you, Mr. Faversham. I have assumed you are – staying here?"

"Rather!" and Dick laughed as he spoke. "You must excuse me if I'm a little abrupt, Mrs. Winkley. You see, I imagine it

will take me some little time to settle down to the new order of things."

"I think I understand; it must be a wonderful experience for you. But I think you'll find everything all right. I have taken great care of everything since the late Mr. Faversham died. It's all just as he left it. No doubt you'll want to look over the house?"

"Presently, Mrs. Winkley; but, first of all, I want to come to an understanding with you. I am a bachelor, and I don't think I have a relation in the world, so, for a time, I – shall make no changes in the place at all. What I mean to say is, that I hope you'll continue to be my housekeeper, and – and look after me generally. Mr. Bidlake has said all sorts of good things about you, so much so that I shall regard myself very fortunate if – if you'll remain in your present position."

Dick didn't know at all why he said this, except that he had a feeling that something of the sort was expected from him.

"I'm sure it's very kind of you to say so, sir," and Mrs. Winkley smiled radiantly. "Of course I've been a little bit anxious, not knowing what kind of – of gentleman the new owner would be, or what plans he might have. But, if you think I'll suit you, sir, I'll do my utmost to make you comfortable and look after your interests. I was housekeeper to Dr. Bell of Guildford when the late Mr. Faversham's sister died, and – "

"Yes, I've heard about that," interrupted Dick. "I'm sure he was lucky to get you."

"I did my best for him, sir, and he never grumbled. I lived in

these parts as a girl, so I can get you plenty of references as to the respectability of my family."

"I'm sure you can," Dick assented. He was glad that Mrs. Winkley was of the superior servant order rather than some superior person who had pretensions to being a fine lady. "By the way, of course you know the house well?"

"Know the house well?" repeated Mrs. Winkley. She was not quite sure that she understood him.

"Yes; know all the rooms?" laughed Dick nervously.

"Why, certainly, sir. I know every room from the garret to the cellar," replied Mrs. Winkley wonderingly.

"And there are no ghosts, are there?"

"Ghosts, sir? Not that I ever heard of."

"I was only wondering. It's an old house, and I was thinking that there might be a family ghost."

Mrs. Winkley shook her head. "Nothing of the sort, sir, to my knowledge. Wait a minute, though; I did hear when I was a girl that the elm grove was haunted. There's a lake down there, and there was a story years ago that a servant who had drowned herself there used to wander up and down the grove wringing her hands on Michaelmas Eve."

"And where is the elm grove?"

"It's away towards the North Lodge. You wouldn't see it the way you came, and it's hidden from here."

"But the house? There's no legend that that has ever been haunted?"

"No, sir. I suppose some of the Wendovers were very wild generations ago, but I never heard that any of their spirits ever came back again."

Mrs. Winkley was pleased that her new master kept talking so long, although she came to the conclusion that he was somewhat eccentric.

"Of course, it was foolish of me to ask," Dick said somewhat awkwardly; "but the thought struck me. By the way, how long did you say it was to lunch-time?"

"Not quite half an hour, sir," replied Mrs. Winkley, looking at an old eight-day clock. "I'll speak to the cook and get it pushed forward as fast as possible. Perhaps you'd like a wash, sir? I'll show you to your room, if you would."

"Thank you. After that I – I think, Mr. Bidlake, I'd like to go into the gardens."

He was afraid he was making a bad impression upon his housekeeper, and he was angry with himself for not acting in a more natural manner. But he seemed to be under a strange influence. Although the thought of the supernatural had left him, his experience of a few minutes before doubtless coloured his mind.

A few minutes later they were out in the sunlight again, and they had scarcely reached the gardens when a man of about fifty years of age made his way towards them.

"Good morning, sir," he said, with a strong Scotch accent. "Have I the honour to speak to the new master?"

"Yes; my name is Faversham."

"I'm M'Neal, your second gardener, sir. I thought when I saw you I'd make bold to speak, sir. I've been here for thirty years, sir, and have always borne a good character."

"I've no doubt you have," laughed Dick. "You look it."

"Thank you, sir. I gave satisfaction to the late Mr. Faversham, and to Sir Guy Wendover before him, and I hope – "

"That we shall get on well together. Of course we shall. I like the look of you."

He felt better now. The sight of the broad expanse of the park and the smell of the sweet, pure air made him light-hearted again.

"Indeed," he continued, "I may as well tell you right away that I intend to keep everybody that was here in my uncle's days. You can tell the others that."

"Thank you, sir. But I'd like to remark that this war has made food dear."

"I'll bear that in mind; you'll not find me unjust. All who serve me shall be well paid."

"We've all done our best, sir," persisted M'Neal, who was somewhat of a character, "but I'll not deny that we shall all be the better for a master. Personally I'm not satisfied with the way things are looking."

"No? I thought they looked beautiful."

"Ah, but nothing to what they can look. We are, as you may say, in a kind of between time now. We've not planted out the beds, although we've prepared them. If you'll – "

"Of course I will," Dick interrupted him, with a laugh, "but you must give me time before making definite promises."

"If I might show you around," suggested M'Neal, "I think I could explain – "

"Later, later," laughed Dick, moving away. "Mr. Bidlake, will you come over here with me? I want to speak to you privately."

"Do you know," Mr. Bidlake told him, "that your uncle discharged M'Neal several times during the time he lived here?"

"Why?"

"Because he followed him like a dog whenever he came into the grounds, and insisted on talking to him. He said the fellow gave him no rest."

"But why did he take him on again?"

"He didn't. But M'Neal took no notice of the discharges. He always turned up on the following morning, and went on with his work as though nothing had happened."

"And my uncle paid him his wages?"

"Yes. You see, the fellow is as faithful as a dog, although he's a nuisance. My word, what a view!"

The lawyer made this exclamation as a turn in the path revealed a landscape they had not hitherto seen. It was one of those stretches of country peculiar to that part of Surrey, and as Dick looked he did not wonder at the lawyer's enthusiasm. Beyond the park, which was studded with giant oaks, he saw a rich, undulating country. Here and there were farmsteads nestling among the trees; again he saw stretches of woodland, while in the

distance rose fine commanding hills. The foliage had far from reached its glory, but the tinge of green which was creeping over every hedgerow and tree contained a promise, and a charm that no poet could describe. And the whole scene was all bathed in spring sunlight, which the birds, delighting in, made into a vast concert hall.

"My word, it is ripping!" cried Dick.

"It's glorious! it's sublime!" cried the lawyer. "You are a fortunate man, Mr. Richard Faversham. Do you know, sir, that all you can see is yours?"

"All mine?" Dick almost gasped.

"Yes, all this and much more."

For the first time Dick had a real feeling of possession, and something to which he had hitherto been a stranger entered his life. Up to now he had been poor. His life, ever since his father died, had been a struggle. He had dreamed dreams and seen visions, only to be disappointed. In spite of ambition, endeavour, determination, everything to which he had set his hand had failed him. But now, as if some fabled genii had come to his aid, fortune had suddenly poured her favours into his lap.

And here was the earnest of it!

This glorious countryside, containing farms, houses, villages, and wide-spreading lands, was his. All his! Gratified desire made his heart beat wildly. At last life was smiling and joyous. What a future he would have! With wealth like his, nothing would be impossible!

"Yes, and much more," repeated the lawyer. "On what chances a man's fortunes turn."

"What do you mean?" asked Dick, who scarce knew what he was saying.

"Only this," said Mr. Bidlake. "If that fellow had not been killed in a drunken brawl, none of this would be yours. As it is, you are one of the most fortunate men in England."

"Yes, by Jove, I am."

The lawyer looked at his watch. "Excuse me, Mr. Faversham, but it is lunch-time, and I must leave you at five o'clock."

"I'm sorry you can't stay a few days."

"Impossible, my dear sir, much as I'd like to. But I've made a little programme for you this afternoon, if it is quite convenient to you."

"Yes?" queried Dick.

"Yes; I've arranged for your steward, your head gamekeeper, and the other principal men on the estate to call here. I thought you might like to see them. There, I hear the lunch-gong."

Dick went back to the house like a man in a dream.

CHAPTER VII
Lady Blanche makes her Appearance

At six o'clock that evening Dick Faversham was alone. He had had interviews with his steward, his bailiff, his gamekeeper, his forester, his head gardener, and his head stableman, and now he was left to himself. Mr. Bidlake, after promising to come again in three days, had gone back to London, while the others had each gone to their respective homes to discuss the new master of Wendover Park and the changes which would probably take place.

Dick had also gone over the house, and had taken note of the many features of his new dwelling-place. He had examined the library, the billiard-room, the dancing-room, the minstrels' gallery, the banqueting hall, and the many other apartments belonging to this fine old mansion. Evidently many of the rooms had for years been unused, but, as Mrs. Winkley had said, everything was "in perfect condition."

His uncle belonged to that order of men who could not bear to let anything deteriorate for lack of attention, and he had spent his money freely. In a way, too, Charles Faversham had a sense of fitness. In all the improvements he had made, he saw to it that the character and spirit of the old place should in no way be disturbed. Thus, while every room was hygienic, and every fireplace fitted according to the most modern ideas, the

true character of everything was maintained. Electric light was installed, but not a single fitting was out of accord with the age of the building. Modern science had in everything been perfectly blended with the spirit of the men who had erected this grand old pile centuries before.

And Dick felt it all. He was enough of an artist to realise that nothing was out of place, that it was a home to rejoice in, to be proud of. If John Ruskin had been alive, and had accompanied him on his tour of inspection, there was little that the author of *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* would have found fault with.

Most of the furniture, too, was old, and had belonged to the Wendovers. When Mr. Charles Faversham had bought the estate, he had taken over everything practically as it stood. Pictures, tapestry, antique articles of furniture which had been in the house for centuries still remained.

"Everything has such a homely, cosy feeling!" he exclaimed to himself, again and again. "The place is not one of those great, giant, homeless barracks; it's just an ideal home. It's perfect!"

And it was all his! That was the thought that constantly came to his mind. This fact was especially made real to him during his interview with Mr. Boase, the steward. That worthy gentleman, a lawyer who lived in a little town, most of which belonged to the Wendover estate, made this abundantly plain by every word he spoke, by every intonation of his voice.

Mr. Boase unrolled maps and plans in abundance. He placed before him lists of tenants, with nature and condition of their

tenancy. He told him how much each farmer paid in rent, how much the house property was worth, what amount was spent each year in repairs, and finally the net amount of his rent-roll. And this was all apart from his investments elsewhere. It was simply fabulous. He who had always been poor, and had often been hard put to it to pay for food and clothes, found himself ridiculously wealthy. He had money to burn. Aladdin of romantic renown was not so much filled with wonder when the slave of the lamp appeared, ready to do his bidding, as was Dick as he realised his position.

And he revelled in thought of it all. He was not of a miserly nature, but he gloried in the influence of the power of wealth, and he painted glowing pictures of his future. He saw the doors of the rich and the great open to him; he saw himself courted by people possessing old names and a great ancestry; he fancied himself occupying positions of eminence in the life of the nation; he saw proud beauties smiling on him.

Nothing was impossible! He knew he had more than an average share of brains; his late employers had admitted as much to him. He also had the gift of oratory. On the few occasions he had attempted to address his fellows this had been abundantly proved. In the past he had been handicapped, but now —

After dinner that night he walked out alone. He wanted to see his possessions, to feel his own earth beneath his feet, to feast his eyes on the glorious countryside.

"It will take me a week," he reflected, "to get used to it all, to

fully realise that it is all mine. I want to feel my feet, to formulate my plans, to sketch my future. Of course, I shall be alone for a time, but in a few days the neighbours will be sure to call on me. After that I must give a ball. Of course, it is a bad time just now, and it is a nuisance that so many of the young fellows have been called into the Army; but I'll be able to manage it," and then he pictured the great ballroom filled with laughter and gaiety.

Then the memory of Lady Blanche Huntingford came to him. He saw her as she had appeared to him that morning. What a glorious creature she was! What great flashing eyes, what a complexion, what a figure! And she belonged to one of the oldest families in England. The Huntingfords were a great people before half the titled nobility of the present day were ever heard of.

He called to mind what Mr. Bidlake had told him. If the Huntingfords recognised him, his social position was assured, for Lord Huntingford was the social magnate of the county. He was almost half in love with her already. He remembered her silvery laugh, the gleaming whiteness of her teeth. What a mistress she would make for Wendover Park! And he could win her love! He was sure he could, and when he did —

He blessed the failure of her car to run that morning; blessed the knowledge he possessed whereby he had been able to render her a service. Of course, she would find out who he was, and then – yes, he would find the Open Sesame for every door.

For the next few days things happened as Dick expected. He was given time to view his possessions, to take stock of his new

position, and then the neighbours began to call. By this time Dick knew full particulars of all the old families in Surrey, and he was gratified at their appearance. Evidently he suffered from none of the antipathy which had been felt towards his uncle. He was young, he was good looking, he had the education and appearance of a gentleman, and people accepted him at his face value.

One day his heart gave a great bound, for a servant told him that Lord and Lady Huntingford, accompanied by Lady Blanche Huntingford, were in the drawing-room. He knew then that his position in the society of the county would be assured. It was true that Lord Huntingford was poor – true, too, that his uncle had practically ejected Sir Guy Wendover from his old home, and that Sir Guy was a relative of the Huntingfords. But that would count for nothing, and the Huntingfords were the Huntingfords!

"This is good of you, Lord Huntingford!" he cried, as he entered the room.

"I came to give you a welcome," said Lord Huntingford somewhat pompously. "I trust you will be very happy here."

"I'm sure I shall!" cried Dick, with the laugh of a boy. "Wendover Park feels like Paradise to me."

"I know the place well," said the peer. "My Cousin Guy, as you may have heard, used to live here."

"Yes, I have heard of it, and I'm afraid you must feel rather bitterly towards me as a consequence."

"Not at all," replied Huntingford. "Of course, it is all ancient

history now. We *did* feel cut up about it at the time, but – but I congratulate you on possessing such a fine old place."

"But for the fact that I so love it already," said Dick, "I should wish my uncle had secured some other place; but, for the life of me, I can't. It's too lovely. Anyhow, I'll try to be not an unworthy successor of Sir Guy. I hope you'll help me, Lord Huntingford, and you, Lady Huntingford and Lady Blanche. You see, I'm handicapped. I'm a bachelor, and I'm entirely ignorant of my duties. I shall look to you for help."

This was sound policy on Dick's part. Lord Huntingford was a vain man, and loved to patronise.

"You began all right," laughed Lady Blanche. "You helped a poor, forlorn, helpless motorist out of a difficulty."

"You recognise me, then?"

"Of course I do. I positively envied the way you tackled that engine of mine and put it right. Of course, I felt angry when I knew who you were. No, no, there was nothing personal about it. I only hated the thought that anyone other than a Wendover should live here. A family feeling, you know."

"All that Wendover Park has is yours to command!" and Dick looked very earnest as he spoke.

"Now, that's good of you. But don't be too liberal with your promises. I may take you at your word."

"Try me!" cried Dick. "I should like to do something to atone. Not that I can give it up," he added, with a laugh. "I simply couldn't, you know. But – but – "

"And how are you going to spend your time?" asked Lord Huntingford. "We are living in a critical age."

"I shall make something turn up!" Dick cried heartily, "as soon as I know where I am."

"And, meanwhile, I suppose you motor, ride, shoot, golf, and all the rest of it?" asked Lady Blanche.

"I have all the vices," Dick told her.

"You say you golf?"

"Yes, a little. Would you give me a match?" he ventured.

"I'd love to," and her eyes flashed into his.

The next afternoon Dick met Lady Blanche on the golf links, and before the match was over he believed that he was in love with her. Never before had he met such a glorious specimen of physical womanhood. To him her every movement was poetry, her lithe, graceful body a thing in which to rejoice.

After the match Dick motored her back to her home. He was in Arcadia as she sat by his side. The charm of her presence was to him like some fabled elixir. On their way they caught a glimpse of Wendover Park. The old house stood out boldly on the hillside, while the wide-stretching park-lands were plainly to be seen.

"It's a perfect place," said the girl. "It just wants nothing."

"Oh yes, it does," laughed Dick.

"What?" she asked.

"Can't you think? If you were a bachelor you would," and he watched her face closely as he spoke.

He was afraid lest he might offend her, and he wondered if

she saw his meaning. He thought he saw a flush surmount her face, but he was not sure. They were passing a cart just then, and he had to fix his attention on the steering-wheel.

"Do you know," he went on, "it's a bit lonely there. I haven't many friends. And then, being a bachelor, I find it difficult to entertain. Not but what I shall make a start soon," he added.

"I think you are to be envied," she remarked.

"Of course I am. I'm one of the luckiest fellows in the world. By the way, I want to give a dance or something of that sort as a kind of house-warming."

"How delightful."

"Is it? But then, you see, I'm so ignorant that I don't know how to start about it."

"Don't you? That's a pity. You must get help."

"I must. I say, will you help me? There is no one I'd so soon have."

He was sure this time. He saw the rosy tint on her face deepen. Perhaps she heard the tremor in his voice. But she did not answer him; instead, she looked away towards the distant landscape.

"Will you?" he persisted.

"What could I do?"

"Everything. You know the people, know who I should invite, and what I should do. You are accustomed to that kind of thing. I am not."

Still she was silent.

"Will you?" he asked again.

"Perhaps. If you really wish me to."

She almost whispered the words, but he heard her, and to him there was something caressing in her tone.

They passed up a long avenue of trees leading to her home, and a few seconds later the car stood at the door.

"You'll come in and have some tea, won't you?"

"May I?" he asked eagerly.

"Of course you may. Mother will be expecting you."

As he rode back to Wendover Park that evening Dick was in Paradise. Nothing but the most commonplace things had been said, but the girl had fascinated him. She had appealed to his ambition, to his pride, to his admiration for perfect, physical womanhood. She was not very clever, but she was handsome. She was instinct with redundant health; she was glorious in her youth and vitality.

"I'm in love," he said to himself more than once. "And she's wonderful – simply, gloriously wonderful. What eyes, what a complexion, what a magnificent figure! I wonder if – "

I am dwelling somewhat on this part of Dick Faversham's life because I wish the reader to understand the condition of his mind, to understand the forces at work. Uninteresting as it may be, it is still important. For Dick passed through some wonderful experiences soon after – experiences which shook the foundations of his life, and which will be more truly understood as we realise the thoughts and feelings which possessed him.

As I have said, he was in a state of bliss as he drove back to

Wendover Park that evening, but as he neared his lodge gates a curious feeling of depression possessed him. His heart became heavy, forebodings filled his mind. It seemed to him that he was on the edge of a dreadful calamity.

"What's the matter with me?" he asked himself again and again. "The sun is shining, the world is lovely, and I have all that heart can wish for."

Still the feeling possessed him. Something was going to happen – something awful. He could not explain it, or give any reason for it, but it was there.

Then suddenly his heart stood still. As the car drew up to his own door he again saw the face of the angel. She was hovering over the entrance just as he had seen her on the day he came to take possession. She seemed to dread something; there was pain almost amounting to agony in the look she gave him.

He had alighted from the car, and he had a dim idea that a man was approaching to take it to the garage, but he paid no attention to him; he stood like one transfixed, looking at the apparition. He was aware that the car had gone, and that he was alone. In a vague way he supposed that the chauffeur, like the lawyer, had seen nothing.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

The words escaped him almost in spite of himself.

But he heard no voice in reply. He thought he saw her lips trying to formulate words, but were not able.

"Tell me," he persisted – "tell me who you are, why you appear

to me. What do you want?"

Again the apparition seemed to be trying to become audible, only to fail. Then, although he could hear no distinct voice, her answer seemed to come to him.

"Fight, fight; pray, pray," she seemed to be saying. "Beware of the tempter. Fight, fight; pray, pray. Promise me."

He was not afraid, but it seemed to him that he was face to face with eternal realities. He knew then that there were depths of life and experience of which he was ignorant.

He heard steps in the hall, and then someone opened the door.

There stood, smiling, debonair, sardonic, and – yes – wicked, Count Romanoff.

CHAPTER VIII
Count Romanoff's Gospel

Count Romanoff!

A weight seemed to settle on Dick Faversham's heart as he saw the sinister face of his visitor. During the excitement of the last few days he had scarcely given him a thought. The dark, saturnine stranger had shrunk away into the background of his life, and no longer seemed of importance to him. It is true he had now and then wondered whether he should ever see him again, but as there seemed no present likelihood of his doing so, he had practically dismissed him from his mind.

His sudden appearance came to him like a shock. Besides, he was nervous, excited at what he had just experienced. Every nerve was tingling, every sense preternaturally awake. What did this apparition mean? Why should the same face and form appear to him again and again? – first in the smoke-room of the ship, then on the island, then as he first put foot into the new inheritance, and now again. What did it mean? Then during that awful struggle in the stormy sea.

"Ha, Faversham. You see, I have taken you at your word."

Dick's thoughts came to earth as the Count's voice reached him.

"I'm glad to see you," he said cordially, and as he led the way to the library he was all that a host should be.

"You see, I was in England, and, having a little spare time, I thought I would look you up. I hope I'm not taking too great a liberty?"

"Liberty, my dear fellow! I should be annoyed beyond words if you had not come to see me. I have hosts of things to discuss with you. Besides," and Dick spoke like one deeply moved, "I cannot help remembering that but for you it is not likely I should be here. I should have been lying somewhere at the bottom of the Indian Ocean."

"Oh, come now; let's have no more of that. Of course, I had the good luck to be of service to you, and jolly glad I am; no decent fellow could have done less than I did."

"All the same, I cannot forget that I owe my life to you," cried Dick fervently. "Do you know, I wondered no end what happened to you; tell me about it."

"Not until I hear about you. Of course, I can guess a great deal. The fact that you are here tells me that the wireless you got on the ship was not only *bona fide* but important. You are master here, eh?"

Dick nodded.

"I've been told that your uncle was a very rich man. Is that so?"

"Yes."

"And you are his heir?"

"Yes."

"I congratulate you. By Jove, it's a lovely place. I didn't know when I've seen anything I like so much. And I've seen a few

houses, I can tell you. But really, now, and I hope I'm not impertinent, do you mean to tell me that you have entered into all old Charles Faversham's wealth?"

"I suppose so."

"Shake hands on it. I can think of no one more fitted to own 'big money,' as the Americans say. I'm glad of the privilege of seeing you in possession."

It seemed to Dick that it was a new Romanoff that he saw. He was no longer pessimistic, cynical, saturnine. He looked younger, too, and no one could help admitting that he had that grand air that denotes birth and breeding.

"I only arrived in London last night," went on Romanoff. "I got into Tilbury late in the afternoon, and after I got fixed up at my hotel I began to wonder about you. Presently I called to mind what you told me, and – here I am."

"Of course you'll stay with me a bit?"

"May I?"

"May you? Why, of course you must, if you can. That goes without saying."

"I say, you are awfully good. I should love to stay a bit. This is one of the loveliest corners in the world at the loveliest time of the year. Surrey in May! What can be more attractive!"

"I'll have your room prepared at once, and, by the way, I'll send a man to London for your luggage."

"That is good of you, Faversham. I may as well confess it now. I did bring a suit-case with me in the hope that you could put me

up for the night, but of course – "

"You might have known that I'd want you for a long time," Dick interrupted.

A servant entered, and Dick gave his instructions. "Now tell me," he went on; "what did you do on leaving the island? I know practically nothing about anything. I was very ill, and got no better till the boat landed at Plymouth."

Romanoff hesitated for a few seconds, then he replied:

"Oh, I caught a boat bound for Australia."

"Australia, eh?"

"Yes. Our signals were seen by two vessels, one returning to England, and the other going to Australia, which, as luck would have it, stopped at Bombay for a few hours. So I took that."

"And you didn't stay long in the Antipodes?"

"No, I did not like the country, and I found it necessary to return to England."

"I'm jolly glad."

"Well, here I am anyhow. Isn't life a topsy-turvy business? Who would have thought when we exchanged commonplaces on that boat a short time ago we should forgather like this in a lovely old Surrey house? Facts beat fiction all to bits. Fiction is commonplace, tame, prosy; but facts – real life – are interesting. Now, tell me about your experiences."

"Not yet. It's nearly dinner-time. I suppose you brought no evening clothes?"

Romanoff laughed. "As a matter of fact, I did. Of course, I

was not sure you were here; but I thought you might be, so I took the liberty of – "

"Splendid," interrupted Dick. "There, the dressing-bell is ringing. I'll show you your room. My word, I'm awfully glad you've come. To tell you the truth, I was feeling a bit depressed."

"You depressed! I say! Fancy the heir of all this being depressed."

"But I was. The idea of spending the evening alone dismayed me. You see, a fellow can't be out every night, and – and there you are. But you've come."

"And no one will call to-night?"

"I don't expect so. Young Clavering, who is home on leave, might come over for a game of billiards, but I can't think of anyone else likely to turn up."

"Clavering – Clavering. I don't think I know the name."

"Oh, it is a good name in Surrey, I can assure you. It's a very old family, although I suppose it is frightfully poor. I've only met young Clavering once, but I liked him very much. Most of the young fellows around here are in the Army, and the older men are frightful old fossils. Here's your room. I hope you'll be comfortable."

Romanoff looked around the room with evident pleasure. He walked to the window and gazed steadily at the landscape; then he turned to Dick and gave him a keen, searching glance.

"You are a fortunate man, Faversham. Speaking as a Russian and also as one who has travelled all over the world, I say,

commend me to England for comfort. Yes, I'll be all right, my friend."

When Dick had gone Romanoff threw himself in a chair and gazed into vacancy. A change passed over his face. He was no longer cheerful and pleasant; the old sinister, threatening look had come into his eyes, while his mouth was cruel. Once an expression swept over his features which suggested a kind of mocking pity, but it was only for a moment.

During dinner he was in a gay humour. Evidently he had thrown care to the winds, and lived for the pleasure of the moment. Dick found him fascinating. He talked pleasantly – at times brilliantly. His conversation scintillated with sardonic humour. He told stories about many countries. He related anecdotes about the Imperial House of the Romanoffs, and described the influence which Rasputin had on the Tzar and the Tzarina.

"I cannot understand it," remarked Dick after one of these stories.

"Understand what?"

"How a man like the Tzar could allow a dirty charlatan like Rasputin to have such influence. After all, Nicholas was an educated man, and a gentleman."

Romanoff laughed.

"As well Rasputin as the others," he replied.

"What others?"

"The priests of the Holy Orthodox Church. Let me give you

a bit of advice, Faversham; keep clear of all this religious rot. It's true that you in England pretend to be more advanced than the poor Russians, but at bottom there's no difference. Wherever religion creeps in, it's the same story. Religion means credulity, and credulity means lies, oppression, cant, corruption."

"Did you meet Rasputin?"

"Oh yes," replied Romanoff, with a sigh of resignation. "On the whole, I admired him."

"I say, that's a bit too thick."

"Anyhow, the fellow was interesting. He had a philosophy of his own. He recognised the fact that the world was populated by fools, and he determined to make the most of his chances. He interpreted religion in a way that would give the greatest possible gratification to his senses. His policy was to suck the orange of the world dry. 'Salvation through sin,' eh?" and Romanoff laughed as he spoke. "Well, it's about the most sensible religion I ever heard of."

"It seems to me devilish and dirty," Dick spoke warmly.

"Nonsense, my dear fellow. Of course, all religion is foolishness – that is, religion as is usually understood. But if there is to be a religion at all, Rasputin got hold of the true one."

"You don't mean that?"

Romanoff looked at Dick steadily for a few seconds. He seemed to be thinking deeply as though he were trying to understand his man.

"Perhaps I don't," he admitted presently. "Sometimes one

exaggerates in order to convey what is actually true. Still, there is a substratum of truth in the dirty monk's philosophy, as you'll find out before you are much older. By the way, the evening has turned cold, hasn't it?"

"Do you find it so? The air of a night is often cold in the early summer. Have you finished? Then we'll go into my little den where I always have a fire of an evening."

A few minutes later Romanoff was sprawling in a large easy-chair with his feet close to the fire.

"How long have you been here?" he asked.

"Not quite a month."

"Been well received by your neighbours?"

"On the whole, yes."

Again Romanoff looked steadily at his companion. "Will you forgive me if I ask you a few questions?"

"Certainly. Go ahead."

"First, then, how do you like being a rich man?"

Dick glanced around the room, and then gave a look towards the wide-spreading park-lands.

"How can one help liking it?" he asked.

"Exactly. You do not find money to be the root of all evil, then?"

"Heavens, no!"

"You would not like to be a poor man again?"

"What in the world are you driving at? Of course, the very thought of it is horrible."

"Just so. I am in my way a student of human nature, and I was a bit curious. Now for a second question. Who is she?"

"Oh, I say."

"Of course she exists."

"How do you know?"

"In my way I have the power of divination. When I look at a man I know something, not much perhaps, but something of his hopes. I felt sure before I spoke that you were in love. You've been quick about it, my young friend."

"I don't know that I am in love."

"Of course you are. Who is she?"

"There's no one. At least not yet. I don't suppose she's given me a second's thought."

"But you do. Is she young, beautiful? Is she rich, well connected?"

"Young! beautiful!" laughed Dick.

"Ah, I see. Not a rustic beauty, by any chance?"

"Rustic beauty, eh? There's nothing rustic about Lady Blanche Huntingford."

"Huntingford! That's one of the best known names in England."

"Do you know it?"

"Who doesn't? It's the biggest name in Debrett. But the Huntingfords are as poor as church mice."

"What does that matter?"

"You have enough for both, eh? Of course, that's your hope."

"Why?" and Dick turned rather sharply on his interlocutor.

"Oh, nothing personal, my friend. I'm only speaking from a long experience. The Huntingfords are poor and proud. I do not know of a more unpleasant combination. I've heard of Lady Blanche – she is about twenty-four, a great beauty, and so far has not succeeded in the marriage market. She's had several seasons in London, but the rich aristocrat has not turned up. That's why she may smile on a commoner – a newcomer – providing he's rich enough."

"If you'd seen her, spoken with her, you would not talk like that."

"Shouldn't I? Who knows? But it's nothing to worry about, my dear fellow. All talk about the love of women goes for nothing. It doesn't exist. Of course, there is such a thing as sexual attraction, but nothing else."

"You are a terrible cynic, Romanoff."

"I'm a citizen of the world, and I've gone around the world with my eyes open. But, as I said, you can have an easy mind. The ball is at your feet, my dear fellow. Whatever you want you can have."

"Do be serious." Dick spoke lightly; all the same, he felt uneasy.

"I *am* serious," replied Romanoff. "With wealth like yours, you are master of the world; you can get all the world has to give."

"I wish I could."

"I tell you you can. Money is all-powerful. Just think, if you

were poor, not a hope, not an ambition could be realised."

"That won't do. Hosts of poor fellows have – "

"Risen to position and power. Just so; but it's been a terrible struggle, a ghastly grind. In most cases, too, men don't get money until they are too old to enjoy it. But you are young, and the world's at your feet. Do you want titles? You can buy them. Power? fame? Again you can get them. Beautiful women? Love? Yes, even love of a sort you can buy, if you have money. Poverty is hell; but what heaven there is in this world can be bought."

"Then you think the poor can't be happy?"

"Let me be careful in answering that. If a man has no ambitions, if he has no desire for power, then, in a negative way, he may be happy although he's poor. But to you, who are ambitious through and through – you, who see visions and dream dreams – poverty would be hell. That's why I congratulate you on all this. And my advice to you is, make the most of it. Live to enjoy, my dear fellow. Whatever your eyes desire, take it."

Dick realised that Romanoff was talking cheap cynicism, that, to use a journalistic term, it was "piffle" from thread to needle, and yet he was impressed. Again he felt the man's ascendancy over him, knew that he was swayed and moulded by a personality stronger than his own.

Dick did not try to answer him, for at that moment there was a knock at the door and a servant entered.

"Mr. and Miss Stanmore have called, sir."

"I do not think I know them, do I?" asked Dick.

"I don't know, sir. They live not far from the South Park gates. They are old residents, sir."

Whether there was something in the tone of the man's voice, or whether he desired company other than Romanoff's, I cannot tell. Certain it is that, acting on impulse and scarcely realising what he was doing, he said:

"Show them in here, Jenkins, will you?"

CHAPTER IX
Beatrice Stanmore

"You don't mind, do you?" asked Dick, turning to Romanoff when the man had left the room.

"Not at all, my dear fellow. Why should I?"

Again the servant returned and ushered in an old man and a young girl. The former was a striking-looking figure, and would be noticed in any crowd. Although old, he stood perfectly upright, and was evidently healthy and vigorous. His face was ruddy and almost unlined. His white beard and moustache were allowed to grow long, while his almost massive head was covered with a wealth of wavy white hair. Perhaps, too, his attire helped to make his appearance attractive, and his velvet dinner-jacket suggested the artist or the poet.

"I hope you'll forgive me calling, Mr. Faversham," he said, taking Dick's outstretched hand, "but I'm an old man, as well as a man of moods. I've thought several times of dropping in to see you, but refrained. I was afraid you would have no use for an old buffer such as I. But to-night I felt I must, and here I am. This is my granddaughter, Beatrice."

"It's awfully good of you to call, Mr. Stanmore, and you, too, Miss Stanmore."

Dick looked at the girl full in the face as he spoke, and then all further words were frozen on his lips. The sight of Beatrice

Stanmore caused his heart to beat wildly, and made him feel that a new influence had entered the room.

And yet, at first sight, there was nothing remarkable in her presence. Picture a fair-haired, blue-eyed girl of eighteen – a girl with a sweet, winsome, yet mischievous smile, and a perfect complexion; a girl with well-formed features and an evident sense of humour – and you see Beatrice Stanmore. And yet your picture would be incomplete. What I have said suggests a somewhat commonplace girl, such as can be seen by the score in any country town. But she was not commonplace. Her blue eyes were large and haunting; sometimes they were sad, and yet there was a world of mirth and gladness stored in their liquid depths. She was only eighteen or nineteen years of age, and she did not look older than her years; but, if you took a second look at her, you would know that her thoughts were not always a child's thoughts – that she had longings too deep for words.

She was dressed very simply. I cannot describe her apparel, but to Dick it was something light and diaphanous, which set oft a figure which was at once girlish and yet perfect in its proportions. I do not suppose that a connoisseur would call her beautiful, but she suggested health – health of body, of mind, of soul. It would be impossible to associate her with anything impure, rather a flash from her mirth-loving eyes would destroy all thought of such a thing.

"I've seen her before," thought Dick, "but where?"

No, it was only fancy. She was an utter stranger to him, and

yet he was haunted with the thought that somewhere, at some time, they had met and known each other, that she had been with him in some crisis.

"Please forgive us, Mr. Faversham," she said, with a laugh; "it's not my fault. I should never have had the courage to beard the lion in his den."

"What lion? What den?" asked Dick, as he looked into the girl's sunny face.

"Of course, you are the lion. You've been the talk of the countryside for weeks; and – and isn't this your den?"

She spoke with all the simplicity and frankness of a child, and seemed to be perfectly unimpressed by the fact that she was talking with one who was spoken of as one of the richest young men in England.

"It's I who am the culprit, Mr. Faversham," broke in the old man. "The impulse came upon me suddenly. I said to Beatrice, 'I am going to call on young Faversham,' and she jumped at the idea of a walk through the park, and that's why she's here with me. Please tell me if we are in the way."

"In the way? I'm just delighted. And – but let me introduce you to Count Romanoff."

Both Hugh Stanmore and his granddaughter looked towards Count Romanoff, who had risen to his feet. The light was shining fully upon his face, and Dick could not help feeling what a striking appearance he had. He half held out his hand to the newcomers and then suddenly withdrew it.

Old Hugh Stanmore looked at the Count steadily for a few seconds, and then bowed in silence. It might seem as though something had frozen his urbanity and cheerfulness. He did not appear to notice the half-outstretched hand, and Dick felt as though there was an instinctive antipathy between them. As for Beatrice, she gave the Count a cold nod, and then, with a perfunctory, "How d'ye do?" turned to Dick again.

"I'm so glad you've come here to live, Mr. Faversham," she said, with girlish enthusiasm.

"You can't be gladder than I," replied Dick; "but, is there a special reason for your gladness?"

"Of course there is. I've wanted for years to see the inside of this house, but I was frightfully afraid of your – your uncle. He always looked so stern, and so – so forbidding that I hadn't the courage to ask him. But you are different."

"Then why haven't you called before?" asked Dick. "I've been here nearly a month, and yet I've never seen you before."

"Of course, you must understand," and it was old Hugh Stanmore who replied, "that we are quite unimportant people. We live in that cottage not far from your South Lodge, and, not knowing you, we felt rather sensitive about calling."

"But your name seems familiar. I'm sure I've heard it somewhere."

"Not among the people around here, I imagine?"

"No, I think not; but I seem to have heard of it, or seen it, years ago."

"I fancy you are mistaken, although what you say is just possible. When I was at Cambridge I had tremendous ambitions, and, like thousands of other callow youths, I made up my mind to win fame. I was something of a linguist, and had a great longing to win renown as an Egyptologist and as an Assyrian scholar. However, I had no money to indulge in such luxuries, so on leaving Cambridge I looked to journalism for a living. I even wrote a novel," and he laughed merrily.

"Splendid!" cried Dick. "What was the title of the novel?"

"I won't tell you that," replied the old man. "I've drawn a very thick curtain over that effort. However, I might have done something if I'd persevered; but, luckily or unluckily for me, I had some money left to me. Not much, but enough to enable me to travel in the East."

"Yes, and then?"

"Oh, I'm afraid I did not shine as an Egyptologist, although I had some wonderful experiences and made some interesting acquaintances. I also contributed to that phase of literature."

"I never saw your name in that connection," Dick confessed.

"I expect not. You see, that was many years ago. Still, although my health would not stand the Eastern climate, I've kept up my interest in my early love. But I've been somewhat of a butterfly. On my return to England I conceived a passion for throwing paint in the eyes of the public, to quote John Ruskin. I even went so far as to get a few pictures hung in the Academy. But, in spite of that, I achieved no fame. Since then I've contributed occasional

articles to the reviews, while such papers as *The Spectator* and *The Times* have printed some effusions of mine which I in my vanity have called poetry. Please forgive me for talking about myself in this way. I know it is frightful egotism on my part, but, as I'm one of your nearest neighbours, I'm in a way introducing myself."

"It's awfully good of you," replied Dick. "I hope we shall see a good deal of each other."

"I hope we shall," replied Hugh Stanmore. "I may as well confess it, Mr. Faversham, that although I am an old man, I am a creature of impulses. I do things without being able to give a reason for them. I talk without knowing why. Do you know that I've never spoken so much about myself to anyone in this district as I have to-night, and I've lived here for eighteen years?"

"What – at the cottage you spoke of?"

"Yes, at the cottage. I took up my residence there when my son died. He was an artist who would have won fame if he had lived; but it pleased the good God to take him away. I determined that I would try to bring what comfort I could into the life of his young wife. But I was not with her long. She died at the birth of this little girl here, three months later."

A silence fell upon the little company.

"There, there," laughed Hugh Stanmore, "there's nothing to be sad about. This life is only a beginning. Actual life comes next, as Browning says. Besides, I've been very happy looking after my little maid here. It's rather hard on her, having to see so much of

an old man like myself. All the same, we've had a jolly time."

"Old man!" cried Beatrice indignantly. "I assure you, Mr. Faversham, he's the youngest man in Surrey. Sometimes I am quite ashamed of his frivolity. I'm quite a staid, elderly person compared to him."

"Anyhow," said the old man, rising, "we must be going now. But be assured of this, Mr. Faversham: no one wishes you joy in your new home more than I. We give you a glad welcome to the district, and if an old man's prayer and an old man's blessing are worth anything, you have them."

"But please don't go yet," cried Dick. "It's only a little after nine o'clock, and – and I'm so glad to have you here. You see, you've only just come."

"No, no, I know. But we'll be going now. Some other time, when you happen to be alone, I'll be glad to come and smoke a pipe with you – if I may?"

"May! Of course. Besides, Miss Stanmore said she wanted to look over the house. When will you come, Miss Stanmore?"

"I think it must be when you can let Granddad know that you are alone and have nothing to do," was the girl's reply. "I shall look forward to it tremendously."

"So shall I," cried Dick. Then, forgetful of Romanoff, he added, "And I can assure you, you won't have long to wait."

Throughout their conversation, only a part of which I have recorded, Romanoff had not spoken a word. Had Dick been watching him he would have seen that he was not at all pleased

at the presence of the visitors. There was a dark, lowering look in his eyes, and almost a scowl on his face. It was evident that a strong feeling of antagonism existed.

"Good-night, Mr. Faversham," said old Hugh Stanmore, holding out his hand; then, bowing gravely to Romanoff, he passed out of the room.

"Oh, but I'll see you to the door, if you *will* go," insisted Dick, as for a moment he held Beatrice Stanmore's hand in his. "Allow me."

He passed through the hall by her side and opened the door. As he did so, he could barely repress an exclamation of wonder and delight, while both the old man and the young girl stood as if spellbound.

It was one of those rare nights which constantly recur to one's remembrance in after days. It was now the end of May, and while the summer had not reached its full glory, the fullness of spring made the earth like a paradise. The sky was cloudless and the silver rays of a nearly full moon lit up the scene with an unearthly beauty. All around giant trees stood, while the flowers, which grew in rich profusion, were plainly to be seen. Away through the leafy trees could be seen the outline of the country. Here and there the birds, which had barely gone to rest, were chirping, while away in the distance a cuckoo proclaimed the advent of summer.

For a few seconds they stood in silence, then Hugh Stanmore said quietly, "One can understand Charles Kingsley's dying words

on such a night, Mr. Faversham."

"What did he say?" asked Dick.

"'How beautiful God must be,'" quoted Hugh Stanmore.

Just then a bird burst forth into song – rich-noted, mellow, triumphant.

"A nightingale!" cried the girl. "Look, Granddad, it is over on that tree." She went down the drive under the long avenue of trees as she spoke, leaving Hugh Stanmore and Dick together.

"They can't be far away on such a night as this," murmured the old man.

"Who can't be far away?"

"The angels. The heavens are full of them. Ah, if we could only see!"

"Do you believe in angels?"

"Do I believe in them? How can I help believing? It is nearly nineteen years ago since my boy and his wife died. But they didn't leave me altogether. They come to me."

"Have you seen them?" and Dick's eager question was uttered almost unconsciously.

"No, not with my natural eyes. Why? I wonder. But I have felt them near me. I know they are watching over me. You see, they did not cease to love us when God took them away for some higher service. Naturally, too, they watch over Beatrice. They could not help it."

He spoke quietly, and in an almost matter-of-fact way, yet with a suggestion of reverence in his tones.

"Who knows who is watching over us now?" continued the old man. "Ah, if we could only see! 'Are they not all ministering spirits sent to minister to those who are heirs of Salvation?'"

Dick felt a shiver pass through him. He reflected that on that very spot, only a few hours before, he had seen something, *something*– a luminous figure, a pale, sad face – sad almost to agony!

"Mr. Faversham," asked Hugh Stanmore suddenly, "who is Count Romanoff?"

"I don't know much about him," replied Dick. "He was a fellow-passenger on board the boat on which I was bound for Australia some time ago. Why do you ask?"

"You know nothing else? Excuse me."

"Only that he saved my life."

"Ah!"

"Why do you ask?"

"Nothing. Only he will have a great influence on your life."

"How do you know?" Dick was greatly excited.

"I have no reason to give you. I only know."

"Good or bad?" asked the young man eagerly.

"I don't know. But did you notice that Beatrice didn't like him? And I've never once known her wrong in her estimate of people. There, look at her now, amongst the moon's rays under the trees. Doesn't she look like an angel? Yes, and she *is* an angel – one of God's sweetest and purest and best. But as human as every woman ought to be. Good-night, Mr. Faversham. Yes, my

darling, I'm coming," and the old man went down the drive with the activity of a boy.

Dick watched them until they were out of sight. He was influenced more than he knew by their visit. Their presence, after Count Romanoff's cynicism, was like some sweet-scented balm; like a breeze from the mountains after the fetid atmosphere of a cavern.

"Well, what did you think of them?" he asked of Romanoff on his return.

The Count shrugged his shoulders. "There's not much to think, is there?" he asked.

"I think there is a great deal. I found the old man more interesting than almost any caller I have had."

"A dull, prosy, platitudinous old Polonius; as for the girl, she's just a badly behaved, unformed, bread-and-butter miss."

Dick did not speak. The Count's words grated on him.

"By the way," went on Romanoff, "I should like to meet Lady Blanche Huntingford. I think I knew the old Lord."

"I promised to call to-morrow afternoon," replied Dick. "I'll take you over." But he was not so enthusiastic as the Count expected.

After they had retired to their rooms that night, the Count sat long in soliloquy. Of what he was thinking it would be difficult to say. His face was like a mask.

When he rose from his chair, however, there was a look of decision in his eyes.

"The time has come sooner than I thought," he said aloud. "I must bring the matter to a head at once. Otherwise I shall lose him."

And then he laughed in his grim, sardonic way, as if something had made him merry.

CHAPTER X
Uncertainty

Dick rose early the following morning, and went for a walk in the park. When he returned he found the Count in the breakfast-room.

"Quite a pattern young countryman," he laughed. "I saw you reflecting on the beauties of your own domains. Did you sleep well?"

"Like a healthy dog. And you?"

"I never sleep. I dream sometimes – that's all."

"Still play-acting," laughed Dick.

"No, there's not a more serious man in England than I, as a rule; but I'm not going to be serious to-day while the sun shines. When the sun goes down I shall be tragic. There, Richard is himself again!"

He threw back his shoulders as he spoke, as though he would shift a weight from them. "I am hungry, Faversham," he laughed. "Let us eat. After breakfast I would love a ride. Have you a horse in your stables that you could lend me?"

"Of course I have."

"Good. Then we'll have a gallop till lunch. After that a-wooing we will go. I'm feverish to see the glorious Lady Blanche, the flower of the age, the beauty of the county. I say, Faversham, prepare to be jealous. I can be a most dangerous rival."

"I can't think of you as a marrying man, Count. Domesticity and you are oceans apart."

The Count laughed. "No, a man such as I never marries," he said. "Marriage! What an idiotic arrangement. But such things always follow religion. But for religion, humanity would be natural, happy."

"Come, now. That won't do."

"It is true, my friend. Ever and always the result of religion has been to raise unnatural barriers, to create sin. The man who founds a religion is an enemy to the race. The greatest enemy to the world's happiness was the Founder of Christianity."

"In Heaven's name, why?"

"Because He labelled natural actions as sins, because He was for ever emphasising a distinction between right and wrong. When there is no right, no wrong. The evolution of religion, and of so-called morality, is a crime, because it strikes at the root of human enjoyment. But, there, I'm getting serious, and I won't be serious. This is a day to laugh, to rejoice in, and I've an appetite like a hunter."

Throughout the morning they carried out the programme Romanoff had suggested. Two of the best horses in the stables were saddled, and they rode till noon. During all this time the Count was in high spirits, and seemed to revel in the brightness of the day and the glory of the scenery.

"After all, give me a living thing to deal with," he cried. "This craze for motor-cars is a sign of decadence. 'Enjoyment by

machinery' should be the motto of every motorist. But a horse is different. A horse is sentient, intelligent. He feels what his rider feels; he enters into the spirit of whatever is going on."

"But motoring can be jolly good sport," Dick rejoined.

"Of course it can. But a motor is impersonal; it is a thing, not a being. You cannot make it your slave. It is just a matter of steel, and petrol, and oil. It never becomes afraid of you."

"What of that?" asked Dick.

"Without fear there is no real mastery," replied Romanoff.

"But surely the mastery which is obtained through fear is an unsatisfactory sort of thing."

Romanoff looked at Dick as though on the point of replying, but he was silent.

"Anyhow, I love a horse," he ventured presently. "I love to feel his body alive beneath me, love to feel him spurn the ground beneath his feet."

"Yes; I, too, love a horse," replied Dick, "and do you know, although I've only been here a month, this chap loves me. He whines a welcome when I go to the stable, and he kind of cries when I leave."

"And he isn't afraid of you?" asked Romanoff.

"Afraid!" cried Dick. "I hope not. I should hate to feel that a thing I loved was afraid of me."

"Wait till you are married," laughed Romanoff.

"I don't see what that has to do with it."

"But it has everything to do with it. A wife should obey, and no

woman obeys unless she fears. The one thing man has to do when he marries is to demand obedience, and until he has mastered the woman he gets none."

"From the little experience I have, a woman is a difficult thing to master."

"Everything can be mastered," replied Romanoff. "It sometimes requires patience, I'll admit, but it can always be done. Besides, a woman never respects her husband until he's mastered her. Find me a man who has not mastered his wife, and I'll show you a man whose wife despises him. Of course, every woman strives for mastery, but in her heart of hearts she's sorry if she gets it. If I ever married – " He ceased speaking.

"Yes; if you married?"

"I'd have obedience, obedience, obedience," and Romanoff repeated the word with increasing emphasis. "As you say, it might be difficult, but it can always be obtained."

"How?"

"Of course, if you go among the lower orders of people, the man obtains his wife's obedience by brute force. If she opposes him he knocks her down, thrashes her. But as you rise in the scale of humanity, the methods are different. The educated, cultured man never loses his temper, seldom utters an angry word. He may be a little sarcastic, perhaps, but nothing more. But he never yields. The wife cries, pleads, protests, goes into hysterics perhaps, threatens, but he never yields. He is polite, cold, cruel if you like, but he never shows a sign of weakness, and in the end

he's master. And mastery is one of the great joys of life."

"You think so?"

"I'm sure of it."

Dick felt slightly uncomfortable. "You said you wouldn't be serious to-day, Romanoff," he laughed nervously, "and yet you talk as though something tragic were in the air."

"I can assure you I'm in one of my light moods," replied the Count. "After all, of what account is a woman in a man's life? A diversion if you like – a creature necessary to his pleasure, but nothing more. When a man regards a woman as indispensable to his happiness, he's lost. Always look on a woman, whoever she may be, as a diversion, my friend," and Romanoff laughed quietly.

After lunch, however, Romanoff's mood seemed changed. He spoke of his early days, and of his experiences in St. Petersburg and Moscow.

"People talk about Paris being the great centre of pleasure," he said a little indignantly, "but it is nothing compared with St. Petersburg, or Petrograd, as it is called now. Some day, my friend, I must take you there; I must show you the sights; I must take you behind the scenes. Oh, I envy you!"

"Why should you?" asked Dick.

"Because you are young, because you have the world at your feet."

"And haven't you?"

"Yes, I suppose so. But, then, you go to everything fresh. You

will drink the cup of life for the first time; you will drink deep and enjoy. But I can never again drink for the first time – there lies the difference."

"But if the cup of life is good and sweet, why may not one drink it again, and again, and still find enjoyment?"

Romanoff did not reply. He sat for a few seconds in silence, and then started up almost feverishly.

"Let us away, my friend," he cried. "I am longing to see Lady Blanche Huntingford. How did you describe her? Velvety black eyes, rosy lips, hair as black as the raven's wing, tall, stately, shaped like a Juno and a Venus combined – was that it? Please don't let's waste any time. I'm anxious to be off."

"Even although we are going in a motor."

"Motors are useful, my friend. I may not like them, but I use them. For the matter of that, I use everything. I discard nothing."

"Except religion," laughed Dick.

"Oh, I have my religion," replied Romanoff. "Some time I'll tell you about it, but not now. The sunlight is the time for adventure, for love, for happiness. Let us be off."

Evidently the Count was impressed by Lady Blanche. Directly he entered her presence he seemed to forget his cynicism, and to become light-hearted and gay.

"Do you know, Lady Blanche," he said, "that I had an idea I had seen you somewhere. Your name was familiar, and when Faversham spoke of you, I felt I should be renewing an old acquaintance. Of course, I was mistaken."

"Why 'of course'?"

"The true reply would be too obvious, wouldn't it? Besides, it would be as trite and as clumsy as the repartee of an Oxford undergraduate."

"You are beyond me," she sighed.

Romanoff smiled. "Of course, you are laughing at me; all the same. I'll say this: I shall have no doubt from this time on as to whether I've met you. Do you know who I regard as the most favoured man in England?"

She shook her head.

"My friend Faversham, of course," and Romanoff glanced towards Dick, who sat listening and looking with a kind of wonder at the face of the girl.

"Of course, Wendover is just lovely," she replied.

"And only a very short motor-run from here," remarked Romanoff.

The girl pouted as though she were vexed at his words, but it was easy to see she was not. There could be little doubt that she loved flattery, and although she felt slightly uncomfortable under the Count's ardent gaze, she was pleased at his admiration.

She was also bent on being agreeable, and Dick felt that surely no handsomer woman ever lived than this glorious creature with whom he chatted and laughed. More than once he felt his heart beating wildly as her eyes caught his, and while he wished that Romanoff was not there, he felt it to be one of the happiest days of his life.

"If Romanoff were not here I'd ask her to-day," he reflected. "It's true she's almost a stranger to me; but, after all, what does it matter? Love does not depend on a long acquaintance."

For Dick felt sure he was in love. It is true there seemed a kind of barrier between them, a certain something that kept them apart. But that he put down to their different upbringing. She was a patrician, the child of long generations of aristocratic associations, while he, although his father and mother were gentlefolk, was a commoner. All his life, too, he had been poor, while during the last few years he had had to struggle constantly with poverty. It was no wonder, therefore, that there should be a kind of barrier between them. But that would break down. Already he was feeling more as if "he belonged" to his new surroundings, while his neighbours had received him with the utmost kindness. It was only a matter of time before he would feel at one with them all. Meanwhile, Lady Blanche charmed him, fascinated him. She appealed to him as a glorious woman, regal in her carriage, wondrous in her youth and beauty.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.