Marsh Richard

Miss Arnott's Marriage

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
ROBERT CHAMPION'S WIFE

"Robert Champion, you are sentenced to twelve months' hard labour."

As the chairman of the Sessions Court pronounced the words, the prisoner turned right round in the dock, and glanced towards where he knew his wife was standing. He caught her eye, and smiled. What meaning, if any, the smile conveyed, he perhaps knew. She could only guess. It was possibly intended to be a more careless, a more light-hearted smile than it in reality appeared. Robert Champion had probably not such complete control over his facial muscles as he would have desired. There was a hunted, anxious look about the eyes, a suggestion of uncomfortable pallor about the whole countenance which rather detracted from the impression which she had no doubt that he had intended to make. She knew the man well enough to be aware that nothing would please him better than that she should suppose that he regarded the whole proceedings with gay bravado, with complete indifference, both for the powers that were and for the punishment which they had meted out to him. But even if the expression on his face had not shown that the cur in the man had, for the moment, the upper hand, the unceremonious fashion in which the warders bundled him down the staircase, and out of sight, would have been sufficient to prevent any impression being left behind that he had departed from the scene in a halo of dignity.

As regards his wife, the effect made upon her by the whole proceedings was an overwhelming consciousness of unbearable shame. When the man with the cheap good looks was hustled away, as if he were some inferior thing, the realisation that this was indeed her husband, was more than she could endure. She reached out with her hand, as if in search of some support, and, finding none, sank to the floor of the court in a swoon.

"Poor dear!" said a woman, standing near. "I expect she's something to do with that scamp of a fellow-maybe she's his wife."

"This sort of thing often is hardest on those who are left behind," chimed in a man. "Sometimes it isn't those who are in prison who suffer most; it's those who are outside."

When, having regained some of her senses, Violet Champion found herself in the street, she was inclined to call herself hard names for having gone near the court at all. She had only gone because she feared that if she stayed away she might not have learned how the thing had ended. This crime of which Robert Champion had been guilty was such a petty, such a paltry thing, that, so far as she knew, the earlier stages of the case had not been reported at all. One or other of the few score journals which London issues might have noticed it at some time, somewhere. If so, it had escaped her observation. Her knowledge of London papers was limited. They contained little which was likely to be of interest to her. She hardly knew where to look for such comments. The idea was not to be borne that she should be left in ignorance as to how the case had gone, as to what had become of Robert Champion. Anything rather than that. Her want of knowledge would have been to her as a perpetual nightmare. She would have scarcely dared to show herself in the streets for fear of encountering him.

Yet, now that it was all over, and she knew the worst- or best-her disposition was to blame herself for having strayed within the tainted purlieus of that crime-haunted court. She felt as if the atmosphere of the place had infected her with some loathsome bacillus. She also thought it possible that he might have misconstrued the meaning of her presence. He was in error if he had supposed that it was intended as a mark of sympathy. In her complete ignorance of such matters she had no notion

as to the nature of the punishment to which he had rendered himself liable. If he were sentenced to a long term of penal servitude she simply wished to know it, that was all. In such a situation any sort of certainty was better than none. But sympathy! If he had been sentenced to be hung, her dominant sensation would have been one of relief. The gallows would have been a way of escape.

No one seeing the tall, handsome girl strolling listlessly along the street would have connected her with such a sordid tragedy. But it seemed to her that the stigma of Robert Champion's shame was branded large all over her, that passers-by had only to glance at her to perceive at once the depths into which she had fallen.

And they were depths. Only just turned twenty-one; still a girl, and already a wife who was no wife. For what sort of wife can she be called who is mated to a convicted felon? And Robert Champion was one of nature's felons; a rogue who preferred to be a rogue, who loved crooked ways because of their crookedness, who would not run straight though the chance were offered him. He was a man who, to the end of his life, though he might manage to keep his carcase out of the actual hands of the law, would render himself continually liable to its penalties. Twelve months ago he was still a stranger. The next twelve months he was to spend in gaol. When his term of imprisonment was completed would their acquaintance be recommenced?

At the thought of such a prospect the dizziness which had prostrated her in court returned. At present she dared not dwell on it.

She came at last to the house in Percy Street in which she had hired a lodging. A single room, at the top of the house, the rent of which, little though it was, was already proving a severe drain on her limited resources. From the moment in which, at an early hour in the morning, her husband had been dragged out of bed by policemen, she had relinquished his name. There was nothing else of his she could relinquish. The rent for the rooms they occupied was in arrears; debts were due on every side. Broadly speaking, they owed for everything-always had done since the day they were married. There were a few articles of dress, and of personal adornment, which she felt that she was reasonably justified in considering her own. Most of these she had turned into cash, and had been living-or starving-on the proceeds ever since. The occupant of the "top floor back" was known as Miss Arnott. She had returned to her maiden name. She paid six shillings a week for the accommodation she received, which consisted of the bare lodging, and what-ironically- was called "attendance." Her rent had been settled up to yesterday, and she was still in possession of twenty-seven shillings.

When she reached her room she became conscious that she was hungry-which was not strange, since she had eaten nothing since breakfast, which had consisted of a cup of tea and some bread and butter. But of late she had been nearly always hungry. Exhausted, mentally and bodily, she sank on to the side of the bed, which made a more comfortable seat than the only chair which the room contained; and thought and thought and thought. If only certain puzzles could be solved by dint of sheer hard thinking! But her brain was in such a state of chaos that she could only think confusedly, in a vicious circle, from which her mind was incapable of escaping. To only one conclusion could she arrive-that it would be a very good thing if she might be permitted to lie down on the bed, just as she was, and stay there till she was dead. For her life was at an end already at twenty-one. She had put a period to it when she had suffered herself to become that man's wife.

She was still vaguely wondering if it might not be possible for her to take advantage of some such means of escape when she was startled by a sudden knocking at the door. Taken unawares, she sprang up from the bed, and, without pausing to consider who might be there, she cried, -

"Come in!"

Her invitation was accepted just as she was beginning to realise that it had been precipitately made. The door was opened; a voice-a masculine voice-inquired, -

"May I see Miss Arnott?"

The speaker remained on the other side of the open door, in such a position that, from where she was, he was still invisible.

"What do you want? Who are you?" she demanded.

"My name is Gardner-Edward Gardner. I occupy the dining-room. If you will allow me to come in I will explain the reason of my intrusion. I think you will find my explanation a sufficient one."

She hesitated. The fact that the speaker was a man made her at once distrustful. Since her marriage day she had been developing a continually increasing distaste for everything masculine-seeing in every male creature a possible replica of her husband. The moment, too, was unpropitious. Yet, since the stranger was already partly in the room, she saw no alternative to letting him come a little farther.

"Come in," she repeated.

There entered an undersized, sparely-built man, probably between forty and fifty years of age. He was clean-shaven, nearly bald-what little hair he had was iron grey-and was plainly but neatly dressed in black. He spoke with an air of nervous deprecation, as if conscious that he was taking what might be regarded as a liberty, and was anxious to show cause why it should not be resented.

"As I said just now, I occupy the dining-rooms and my name is Gardner. I am a solicitor's clerk. My employers are Messrs Stacey, Morris & Binns, of Bedford Row. Perhaps you are acquainted with the firm?"

He paused as if for a reply. She was still wondering more and more what the man could possibly be wanting; oppressed by the foreboding, as he mentioned that he was a solicitor's clerk, that he was a harbinger of further trouble. With her law and trouble were synonyms. He went on, his nervousness visibly increasing. He was rendered uneasy by the statuesque immobility of her attitude, by the strange fashion in which she kept her eyes fixed on his face. It was also almost with a sense of shock that he perceived how young she was, and how beautiful.

"It is only within the last few minutes that I learned, from the landlady, that your name was Arnott. It is a somewhat unusual name; and, as my employers have been for some time searching for a person bearing it, I beg that you will allow me to ask you one or two questions. Of course, I understand that my errand will quite probably prove to be a futile one; but, at the same time, let me assure you that any information you may give will only be used for your advantage; and should you, by a strange coincidence, turn out to be a member of the family for whom search has been made, you will benefit by the discovery of the fact. May I ask if, to your knowledge, you ever had a relation named Septimus Arnott?"

"He was my uncle. My father's name was Sextus Arnott. My grandfather had seven sons and no daughters. He was an eccentric man, I believe-I never saw him; and he called them all by Latin numerals. My father was the sixth son, Sextus; the brother to whom you refer, the seventh and youngest, Septimus."

"Dear, dear! how extraordinary! almost wonderful!"

"I don't know why you should call it wonderful. It was perhaps curious; but, in this world, people do curious things."

"Quite so! – exactly! – not a doubt of it! It was the coincidence which I was speaking of as almost wonderful, not your grandfather's method of naming his sons; I should not presume so far. And where, may I further be allowed to ask, is your father now, and his brothers?"

"They are all dead."

"All dead! Dear! dear!"

"My father's brothers all died when they were young men. My father himself died three years ago-at Scarsdale, in Cumberland. My mother died twelve months afterwards. I am their only child."

"Their only child! You must suffer me to say, Miss Arnott, that it almost seems as if the hand of God had brought you to this house and moved me to intrude myself upon you. I take it that you can furnish proofs of the correctness of what you say?"

"Of course I can prove who I am, and who my father was, and his father."

"Just so; that is precisely what I mean-exactly. Miss Arnott, Mr Stacey, the senior partner in our firm, resides in Pembridge Gardens, Bayswater. I have reason to believe that, if I go at once, I shall find him at home. When I tell him what I have learnt I am sure that he will come to you at once. May I ask you to await his arrival? I think I can assure you that you shall not be kept waiting more than an hour."

"What can the person of whom you speak have to say to me?"

"As I have told you, I am only a servant. It is not for me to betray my employer's confidence; but so much I may tell you-if you are the niece of the Septimus Arnott for whom we are acting you are a very fortunate young lady. And, in any case, I do assure you that you will not regret affording Mr Stacey an opportunity of an immediate interview."

Mr Gardner went; the girl consented to await his return. Almost as soon as he was gone the landlady-Mrs Sayers-paid her a visit. It soon appeared that she had been prompted by the solicitor's clerk.

"I understand, Miss Arnott, from Mr Gardner, who has had my dining-room now going on for five years, that his chief governor, Mr Stacey, is coming to call on you, as it were, at any moment. If you'd like to receive him in my sitting-room, I'm sure you're very welcome; and you shall be as private as you please."

The girl eyed the speaker. Hitherto civility had not been her strongest point. Her sudden friendly impulse could only have been induced by some very sufficient reason of her own. The girl declined her offer. Mrs Sayers became effusive, almost insistent.

"I am sure, my dear, that you will see for yourself that it's not quite the thing for a young lady to receive a gentleman, and maybe two, in a room like this, which she uses for sleeping. You're perfectly welcome to my little sitting-room for half an hour, or even more, where you'll be most snug and comfortable; and as for making you a charge, or anything of that sort, I shouldn't think of it, so don't let yourself be influenced by any fears of that kind."

But the girl would have nothing to do with Mrs Sayers' sitting-room. This woman had regarded her askance ever since she had entered the house, had treated her with something worse than incivility. Miss Arnott was not disposed, even in so trifling a matter, to place herself under an obligation to her now. Mrs Sayers was difficult to convince; but the girl was rid of her at last, and was alone to ask herself what this new turn of fortune's wheel might portend. On this already sufficiently eventful day, of what new experiment was she to be made the subject? What was this stranger coming to tell her about Septimus Arnott-the uncle from whom her father had differed, as he himself was wont to phrase it, on eleven points out of ten? She was, it appeared, to be asked certain questions. Good; she would be prepared to answer them, up to a certain point. But where, exactly, was that point? And what would happen after it was reached?

She was ready and willing to give a full and detailed account of all that had ever happened to her-up to the time of her coming to London. And how much afterwards? She did not, at present, know how it could be done; but if, by any means whatever, the thing were possible, she meant to conceal-from the whole world! – the shameful fact that she was Robert Champion's wife. Nothing, save the direst unescapable pressure, should ever induce her to even admit that she had known the man. That entire episode should be erased from her life, as if it had never been, if it were feasible. And she would make it feasible.

The matter she had at present to consider was, how much-or how little-she should tell her coming visitors.

CHAPTER II
THE WOMAN ON THE PAVEMENT

Mr Stacey was a tall, portly gentleman, quite an accepted type of family lawyer. He was white-headed and inclined to be red-faced. He carried a pair of nose glasses, which were as often between his fingers as on his nose. His manner was urbane, with a tendency towards pomposity; and when he smiled, which was often, he showed a set of teeth which were as white and regular as the dentist could make them. He was followed into the room by Mr Gardner; and when the apartment contained three persons it was filled to overflowing.

"Miss Arnott, my excellent friend, Mr Gardner here, has brought me most important news-most important. He actually tells me that you are-eh-the Miss Arnott for whom we have been so long in search."

"I am Miss Arnott. I am not aware, however, that anyone has searched for me. I don't know why they should."

Mr Gardner, who had been showing a vivid consciousness of scanty space, proffered a suggestion.

"If I might make so bold, sir, as to ask Miss Arnott to honour me by stepping down to my poor parlour, we should, at least, have a little more room to move."

"Mrs Sayers has already made me a similar proposal. I declined it, as I decline yours. What you wish to say to me you will be so good as to say to me here. This room, such as it is, is at anyrate my own-for the present."

"For the present; quite so! – quite so! A fine spirit of independence-a fine spirit. I think, Miss Arnott, that before long you will have other rooms of your own, where you will be able to be independent in another sense. I understand that you claim to be the only surviving relative of Septimus Arnott, of Exham Park, Hampshire."

"You understand quite wrongly; I claim nothing. I merely say that I am the only child of Sextus Arnott, and that I had an uncle whose name was Septimus. When they were young men my father and his brother were both artists. But, after a time, Uncle Septimus came to the conclusion that there was not much money to be made out of painting. He wanted my father to give it up. My father, who loved painting better than anything else in the world" – the words were uttered with more than a shade of bitterness-"wouldn't. They quarrelled and parted. My father never saw his brother again, and I have never seen him at all."

"You don't know, then, that he is dead?"

"I know nothing except what my father has told me. He remained what he called 'true to his art' to the end of his life, and never forgave his brother for turning his back on it."

"Pardon my putting to you a somewhat delicate question. Did your father make much money by his painting?"

"Much money!" The girl's lip curled. "When he died there was just enough left to keep my mother till she died."

"And then?"

"I came to London in search of fortune."

"And found it?"

"Do I look as if I had-in this attic, which contains all that I have in the world? No; fortune does not come to such as I am. I should be tolerably content if I were sure of daily bread. But why do you ask such questions? Why do you pry into my private affairs? I am not conscious of a desire to thrust them on your notice-or on anyone's."

"Miss Arnott, I beg that you will not suppose that I am actuated by common curiosity. Let me explain the situation in half-a-dozen words. Your Uncle Septimus, after he left your father, went to South America. There, after divers adventures, he went in for cattle breeding. In that pursuit he amassed one of those large fortunes which are characteristic of modern times. Eventually he came to England, bought a property, settled himself on it, and there died. We acted as his legal advisers. He left his whole property to his brother Sextus; or, in the event of his brother predeceasing him, to his brother's children. You must understand that he himself lived and died a bachelor. His own death occurred three years ago."

"My father also died three years ago-on the 18th of March."

"This is very remarkable, Miss Arnott; they must have died on the same day!"

"My father died at five minutes to six in the evening. His last words were, 'Well, Septimus.' My mother and I, who were at his bedside, wondered why he had said it- which he did so plainly that we both turned round to see if anyone had come into the room. Until then he had not mentioned his brother's name for a long time."

"Miss Arnott, this is more and more remarkable; quite apart from any legal proof there can be no sort of doubt that you are the person we are seeking. It happened that I was present at your uncle's deathbed-partly as a friend and partly as his professional adviser. For I should tell you that he was a very lonely man. He seemed to have no friends, and was chary of making acquaintances; in that great house he lived the life of a lonely recluse. He died just as the clock was striking six; and just before he died he sat up in bed, held out his hand, and exclaimed in quite his old, hearty voice, 'Hullo, Sextus.' No one there knew to what the reference was made; but from what you say it would almost appear as if their spirits were already meeting." Mr Stacey blew his nose as if all at once conscious that they were touching a subject which was not strictly professional. "Before entering further into matters, I presume that-merely for form's sake-you are in a position to prove, Miss Arnott, that you are you."

"Certainly, I can do that, to some extent, at once." She took an envelope from a shabby old handbag; from the envelope some papers. "This is my mother's marriage certificate; this is the certificate of my own birth; this-" the paper of which she had taken hold chanced to be a copy of the document which certified that a marriage had taken place between Robert Champion, bachelor, and Violet Arnott, spinster. For the moment she had forgotten its existence. When she recognised what it was her heart seemed to sink in her bosom; her voice trembled; it was only with an effort that she was able to keep herself from handing it to the man of law in front of her. "No," she stammered, "that's the wrong paper." Just in time she drew it back. If he had only had one glance at it the whole course of her life would have been different. She went on, with as complete a show of calmness as she was capable of, "This is the paper I meant to give you-it is a copy of the certificate of my father's death; and this is a copy of my mother's. They are both buried in the same grave in the cemetery at Scarsdale."

He took the papers she passed to him, seemingly unconscious that there was anything curious in her manner. That other paper, crumpling it up, she slipped between the buttons of her bodice. He looked through the documents she had given him.

"They appear to be perfectly in order-perfectly in order, and I have no doubt that on investigation they will be ascertained to be. By the way, Miss Arnott, I notice that you were born just one-and-twenty years ago."

"Yes; my twenty-first birthday was on the 9th of last month-five weeks ago."

She did not think it necessary to mention that the memory of it would be with her for ever, since it had been celebrated by the arrest of her husband.

"Five weeks ago? A pity that it couldn't have been next month instead of last; then the date of your coming of age might have been made a great occasion. However, it shall still be to you a memorable year. You will, of course, understand that there are certain forms which must be gone through; but I don't think I am premature in expressing to you my personal conviction that you are the person who is intended to benefit under the will of the late Mr Septimus Arnott. Your uncle was

one of our multi-millionaires. I cannot, at this moment, state the exact value of his estate; but this I can inform you-that your income will be considerably over one hundred thousand pounds a year."

"One hundred thousand pounds a year!" She gripped, with her right hand, the back of the room's one chair. "Do you mean it?"

"Beyond the shadow of a doubt. I am free to admit that I am fond of a jest; but a fortune of that magnitude is not a fit subject for a joke. Believe me, you will find it a serious matter when you come to be directly responsible for its administration."

"It seems a large sum of money."

He observed her a little curiously; she showed so few signs of emotion, none of elation. In her position, at her age, on receipt of such news, one would have looked for her cheeks to flush, for her lips to be parted by a smile, for a new brightness to come into her eyes-for these things at least. So far as he was able to perceive, not the slightest change took place in her bearing, her manner, her appearance; except that perhaps she became a little paler. The communication he had just made might have been of interest to a third party, but of none to her, so striking was the suggestion of indifference which her demeanour conveyed.

He decided that the explanation was that as yet she was incapable of realising her own good fortune.

"Seems a large sum? It is a large sum! How large I lack words to enable you to clearly comprehend. When we talk of millions we speak of figures anything like the full meaning of which the ordinary imagination is altogether incapable to grasp. I think, Miss Arnott, that some time will probably elapse vast is the responsibility which is about to be placed upon you. In the meantime I would make two remarks-first, that until matters are placed in regular order I shall be happy to place at your disposition any amount of ready cash you may require; and second, that until everything is arranged, Mrs Stacey and myself will be only too glad to extend to you our hospitality at Pembridge Gardens."

"I think, if you don't mind, I should like to remain here at anyrate to-night. I shall have a great many things to consider; I should prefer to do so alone. If you wish it I will call on you in the morning at your offices, and then we will go into everything more fully."

"Very good. As you choose, Miss Arnott. It is for you to command, for me to obey. You are your own mistress in a sense, and to a degree which I fancy you don't at present understand. I took the precaution to provide myself, before leaving home, with a certain amount of ready money. Permit me to place at your service this hundred pounds; you will find that there are twenty five-pound notes. I need scarcely add that the money is your own property. Now as to to-morrow. We have had so much difficulty in finding you, and it is by such a seeming miracle that we have lighted on you at last, that I am reluctant to lose sight of you even for a single night-until, that is, everything is in due order, and you have happily released us from the great weight of responsibility which has lain so long upon us. May I take it that we shall certainly see you to-morrow at our offices at noon?"

"Yes; I will be with you to-morrow at noon." It was on that understanding they parted. Before he left the house Mr Stacey said to his clerk, -

"Gardner, that's a singular young woman. So young, so beautiful, and yet so cold, so frigid, so-stolid. She didn't even thank me for bringing her the good news, neither by a word nor look did she so much as hint that the news had gratified her; indeed, I am not at all sure that she thinks it is good news. In one so young, so charming-because, so far as looks are concerned, she is charming, and she will be particularly so when she is well dressed-it isn't natural, Gardner, it isn't natural."

In the top floor back the girl was contemplating the twenty five-pound notes. She had never before been the owner of so much money, or anything like so much. Had she been the possessor of such a fortune when she came to town she might never have become a "model" in the costume department of the world-famed Messrs Glover & Silk, she might never have made the acquaintance of Robert Champion, she would certainly never have become his wife. The glamour which had seemed

to surround him had been the result of the circumstances in which she had first encountered him. Had her own position not been such a pitiable one she would never have been duped by him, by his impudent assurance, his brazen lies, his reckless promises. She had seen that clearly, long ago.

A hundred pounds! Why, the fraud for which, at that moment, he was in gaol had had for its objective a sum of less than twenty pounds. She writhed as she thought of it. Was he already in prisoner's clothes, marked with the broad arrow? Was he thinking of her in his felon's cell? She tried to put the vision from her, as one too horrible for contemplation. Would it persistently recur to her, in season and out, her whole life long? God forbid! Rather than that, better death, despite her uncle's fortune.

In any case she could at least afford to treat herself to a sufficient meal. She went to a quiet restaurant in Oxford Street, and there fared sumptuously-that is, sumptuously in comparison to the fashion in which she had fared this many and many a day. Afterwards, she strolled along the now lamp-lit street. As she went she met a girl of about her own age who was decked out in tawdry splendours. They had nearly passed before they knew each other. Then recognition came. The other girl stopped and turned.

"Why, Vi!" she exclaimed. "Who'd have dreamt of seeing you?"

The girl addressed did not attempt to return the greeting. She did not even acknowledge it. Instead she rushed off the pavement into a "crawling" hansom, saying to the driver as she entered his vehicle, -

"Drive me to the city-anywhere; only be quick and get away from here!"

When she concluded that she was well out of that other girl's sight she instructed the man to drive her to Percy Street. At the corner of the street she alighted. Once more in her attic she did as she had done on her previous return to it-she sank down on to the side of the bed, trembling from head to foot.

The woman who had spoken to her in Oxford Street was Sarah Stevens, who had been a fellow employee at Messrs Glover & Silk's. It was she who had introduced her to Robert Champion. It was largely owing to the tales she had told of him, and to her eager advocacy of his suit, that she had been jockeyed into becoming his wife. It was only afterwards, when it was too late, that she had learnt that the girl was as bad as-if not worse than-the man to whom she had betrayed her. From the beginning the pair had been co-conspirators; Violet Arnott had been their victim.

Was she to be haunted always by the fear of such encounters? Rather than run that risk she would never again set foot in London. Certainly, the sooner she was out of it the better.

CHAPTER III
HE HEIRESS ENTERS INTO HER OWN

During the days and weeks which followed it was as though she were the chief personage in a strange, continuous dream. Always she expected an awakening-of a kind of which she did not dare to think. But the dream continued. All at once her path was strewn with roses; up to then she had seemed to have to pick her way, barefooted, amid stones and thistles. No obstacle of any kind arose. Everything was smooth and easy. Her claim to be her uncle's niece was admitted as soon as it was made. Under her uncle's will Mr Stacey was the sole trustee. To all intents and purposes his trusteeship was at an end when she was found. She was of age; the property was hers to do with exactly as she would. By no conditions was she bound. She was her own mistress; in sole control of that great fortune. It was a singular position for a young girl to find herself suddenly occupying.

She was glad enough to leave her affairs in the hands of Messrs Stacey, Morris & Binns. In those early days the mere attempt to understand them was beyond her power. They were anxious enough to place before her an exact statement of the position she had now to occupy. To some extent she grasped its meaning. But the details she insisted on being allowed to assimilate by degrees.

"If I know pretty well what I have and what I haven't, what I can do and what I can't, and what my duties and responsibilities are, say, in three, or even six months' time, I'll be content. In the meanwhile you must continue to do precisely what you have been doing during the time in which I was still not found. I understand sufficiently to know that you have managed all things better than I am ever likely to."

She provided herself with what she deemed an ample, and, indeed, extravagant supply of clothing at Mrs Stacey's urgent request. That lady's ideas, however, were much more gorgeous than her own. The solicitor's wife insisted that it was only right and proper that she should have a wardrobe which, as she put it, "was suitable to her position." That meant, apparently, that, in the way of wearing apparel, she should supply herself with the contents of a good-sized London shop. To that Miss Arnott objected.

"What do you suppose I shall do with all those things?" she demanded. "I am going into the country to stay there. I am going to live all alone, as my uncle did. I sha'n't see a creature from week's end to week's end-a heap of new dresses won't be wanted for that. They'll all be out of fashion long before I have a chance of wearing them."

Mrs Stacey smiled; she was a lady of ample proportions, who had herself a taste for sumptuous raiment.

"I fancy, dear Miss Arnott, that even now you don't realise your own situation. Do you really suppose that-as you suggest-you will be allowed to live all alone at Exham Park, without seeing a creature from week's end to week's end?"

"Who is going to prevent me?"

"Dear Miss Arnott, you are positively amusing. Before you have been there a fortnight the whole county, at least, will have been inside your doors."

"I hope not."

The look of distress on the young lady's countenance was almost comical.

"You speak, I think, without reflection. I, personally, should be both grieved and disappointed if anything else were to happen."

"You would be grieved and disappointed? Good gracious! Mrs Stacey, why?"

"It is only in accordance with the requirements of common decency that a person in your position should receive adequate recognition. If everyone did not call on you you would be subjected to an injurious slight."

"Certainly that point of view did not occur to me. Up to now no one worth speaking of has recognised my existence in the slightest degree. The idea, therefore, that it has suddenly become everyone's duty to do so is, to say the least, a novel one.

"So I imagined. It is, however, as I say; you see, circumstances are altered. Quite apart from the period when you will possess a town residence-"

"That period will be never."

"Never is a long while-a very long while. I say, quite apart from that period, what I cannot but call your unique position will certainly entitle you to act as one of the leaders of county society."

"How dreadful! I'm beginning to wish my position wasn't so unique."

"You speak, if you will forgive my saying so, as a child. Providence has seen fit to place you in a position in which you will be an object of universal admiration. With your youth, your appearance, your fortune, not only all Hampshire, but all England, will be at your feet.

"All England! Mrs Stacey, isn't that just a little exaggerated?"

"Not in the least. On the contrary, my language, if anything, errs on the side of being too guarded. A beautiful young girl of twenty-one, all alone in the world, with more than a hundred thousand pounds a year entirely under her own control-princes from all parts of the world will tumble over each other in their desire to find favour in your eyes."

"Then princes must be much more foolish persons than I supposed."

"My dear, of that we will say nothing. Don't let us speak evil of dignitaries. I was always brought up to think of them with respect. To return to the subject of your wardrobe. I have merely made these few remarks in order to point out to you how essential it is that you should be furnished, at the outset, with a wardrobe likely to prove equal to all the demands which are certain to be made on one in your position."

"All the same, I won't have five hundred dresses. Position or no position, I know I shall be much happier with five."

It is an undoubted fact that the young lady's equipment of costumes extended to more than five, though it stopped far short of the number which her feminine mentor considered adequate. Indeed, Mrs Stacey made no secret of her opinion that, from the social point of view, her arrangements were scarcely decent.

"At the very first serious call which is made upon your resources, you will find yourself absolutely without a thing to wear. Then you'll have to rush up to town and have clothes made for you in red-hot haste, than which nothing can be more unsatisfactory."

"I shall have to chance that. I hate shops and I hate shopping."

"My dear!"

"I do. I don't care how it is with other girls, it's like that with me. I've already had more than enough of dressmakers; for ever so long I promise you that I won't go near one for another single thing. I'm going to the country, and I'm going to live a country life; and for the kind of country life I mean to live you don't want frocks."

Mrs Stacey lifted up her hands and sighed. To her such sentiments seemed almost improper. It was obvious that Miss Arnott meant to be her own mistress in something more than name. On one question, however, she was over-ruled. That was on the question of a companion.

It was perfectly clear, both to her legal advisers and to the senior partner's wife, that it was altogether impossible for her to live at Exham Park entirely companionless.

"What harm will there be?" she demanded. "I shall be quite alone."

"My dear," returned Mrs Stacey, "you won't understand. It is precisely that which is impossible-you must not be quite alone; a young girl, a mere child like you. People will not only think things, they will say them- and they will be right in doing so. The idea is monstrous, not to be entertained for a moment. You must have some sort of a companion."

Miss Arnott emitted a sound which might have been meant for a groan.

"Very well then, if I must I must-but she shall be younger than I am; or, at anyrate, not much older."

Mrs Stacey looked as if the suggestion had rendered her temporarily speechless.

"My dear," she finally gasped, "that would be worse than ever. Two young girls alone together in such a house-what a scandal there would be!"

"Why should there be any scandal?"

Miss Arnott's manner was a little defiant.

"If you cannot see for yourself I would rather you did not force me to explain. I can only assure you that if you are not extremely careful your innocence of evil will lead you into very great difficulties. What you want is a woman of mature age, of wide knowledge of the world; above all, of impregnable respectability. One who will, in a sense, fill the place of a mother, officiate-nominally-as the head of your household, who will help you in entertaining visitors-"

"There will be no visitors to entertain."

The elder lady indulged in what she intended for an enigmatic smile.

"When you have been at Exham Park for six months you will blush at the recollection of your own simplicity. At present I can only ask you to take my word for it that there will be shoals of visitors."

"Then that companion of mine will have to entertain them, that's all. One thing I stipulate: you will have to discover her, I sha'n't."

To this Mrs Stacey willingly acceded. The companion was discovered. She was a Mrs Plummer; of whom her discoverer spoke in tones of chastened solemnity.

"Mrs Plummer is a distant connection of Mr Stacey. As such, he has known her all his life; and can therefore vouch for her in every respect. She has known trouble; and, as trouble always does, it has left its impress upon her. But she is a true woman, with a great heart and a beautiful nature. She is devoted to young people. You will find in her a firm friend, one who will make your interests her own, and who will be able and willing to give you sound advice on all occasions in which you find yourself in difficulty. I am convinced that you will become greatly attached to her; you will find her such a very present help in all times of trouble."

When, a few days before they went down together to Exham Park, Miss Arnott was introduced to Mrs Plummer in Mrs Stacey's drawing-room, in some way, which the young lady would have found it hard to define, she did not accord with her patroness's description. As her custom sometimes was, Miss Arnott plunged headforemost into the midst of things.

"I am told that you are to be my companion. I am very sorry for you, because I am not at all a companionable sort of creature."

"You need not be sorry. I think you will find that I understand the situation. Convention declines to allow a young woman to live alone in her own house; I shall be the necessary figurehead which the proprieties require. I shall never intrude myself. I shall be always in the background-except on occasions when I perceive that you would sooner occupy that place yourself. I shall be quick to see when those occasions arise; and, believe me, they will be more frequent than you may at this moment suspect. As for freedom-you will have more freedom under the ægis of my wing, which will be purely an affair of the imagination, than without it; since, under its imaginary shelter, you will be able to do all manner of things which, otherwise, you would hardly be able to do unchallenged. In fact, with me as cover, you will be able to do exactly as you please; and still remain in the inner sanctuary of Mrs Grundy."

Mrs Plummer spoke with a degree of frankness for which Miss Arnott was unprepared. She looked at her more closely, to find that she was a little woman, apparently younger than she had expected. Her dark brown hair was just beginning to turn grey. She was by no means ugly; the prominent characteristic of her face being the smallness of the features. She had a small mouth, thinly lipped, which, when it was closed, was tightly closed. She had a small, slenderly-fashioned

aquiline nose, the nostrils of which were very fine and delicate. Her eyes were small and somewhat prominent, of a curious shade in blue, having about them a quality which suggested that, while they saw everything which was taking place around her, they served as masks which prevented you seeing anything which was transpiring at the back of them. She was dressed like a lady; she spoke like a lady; she looked a lady. Miss Arnott had not been long in her society before she perceived, though perhaps a little dimly, what Mrs Stacey had meant by saying that trouble had left its impress on her. There was in her voice, her face, her bearing, her manner, a something which spoke of habitual self-repression, which was quite possibly the outcome of some season of disaster which, for her, had changed the whole aspect of the world.

The day arrived, at last, when the heiress made her first appearance at Exham Park. The house had been shut up, and practically dismantled, for so long, that the task of putting it in order, collecting an adequate staff of servants, and getting it generally ready for its new mistress, occupied some time. Miss Arnott journeyed with Mrs Plummer; it was the first occasion on which they had been companions. The young lady's sensations, as the train bore her through the sunlit country, were of a very singular nature; the little woman in the opposite corner of the compartment had not the faintest notion how singular.

Mr Stacey met the travellers at the station, ushering them into a landau, the door of which was held open by a gigantic footman in powdered hair and silk stockings. Soon after they had started, Miss Arnott asked a question, -

"Is this my carriage?"

The gentleman replied, with some show of pomposity, -

"It is one of them, Miss Arnott, one of them. You will find, in your coach-houses, a variety of vehicles; but, of course, I do not for a moment pretend that you will find there every kind of conveyance you require. Indeed, the idea has rather been that you should fill the inevitable vacancies in accordance with the dictates of your own taste."

"Whose idea is the flour and the silk stockings?"

She was looking up at the coachman and footman on the box.

"The-eh? – oh, I perceive; you allude to the men's liveries. The liveries, Miss Arnott, were chosen by your late uncle; I think you will admit that they are very handsome ones. It has been felt that, in deference to him, they should be continued, until you thought proper to rule otherwise."

"Then I'm afraid that they won't be continued much longer. In such matters my uncle's tastes were-I hope it isn't treason to say so-perhaps a trifle florid. Mine are all the other way. I don't like floured heads, silk stockings, or crimson velvet breeches; I like everything about me to be plain to the verge of severity. My father's ideal millionaire was mine; shall I tell you what that was?"

"If you will be so good."

"He held that a man with five thousand a year, if he were really a gentleman, would do his best not to allow it to be obvious to the man who only had five hundred that he had more than he had."

"There is something to be said for that point of view; on the other hand, there is a great deal to be said for the other side."

"No doubt. There is always a great deal to be said for the other side. I am only hinting at the one towards which I personally incline." Presently they were passing along an avenue of trees. "Where are we now?"

"We are on your property-this is the drive to the house."

"There seems to be a good deal of it."

"It is rather more than three miles long; there are lodge gates at either end; the house stands almost in the centre."

"It seems rather pretty."

"Pretty! Exham Park is one of the finest seats in the country. That is why your uncle purchased it."

After a while they came in sight of the house.

"Is that the house? It looks more like a palace. Fancy my living all alone in a place like that! Now I understand why a companion was an absolute necessity. It strikes me, Mrs Plummer, that you will want a companion as much as I shall. What shall we two lone, lorn women do in that magnificent abode?"

As they stepped in front of the splendid portico there came down the steps a man who held his hat in his hand, with whom Mr Stacey at once went through the ceremony of introduction.

"Miss Arnott, this is Mr Arthur Cavanagh, your steward."

She found herself confronted by a person who was apparently not much more than thirty years of age; erect, well-built, with short, curly hair, inclined to be ruddy, a huge moustache, and a pair of the merriest blue eyes she had ever seen. When they were in the house, and Mr Stacey was again alone with the two ladies, he observed, with something which approximated to an air of mystery, -

"You must understand, Miss Arnott, that, as regards Mr Cavanagh, we-my partners and myself-have been in a delicate position. He was your uncle's particular *protégé*. I have reason to know that he came to England at his express request. We have hardly seen our way-acting merely on our own initiative-to displace him."

"Displace him? Why should he be displaced? Isn't he a good steward?"

"As regards that, good stewards are not difficult to find. Under the circumstances, the drawbacks in his case are, I may almost say, notorious. He is young, even absurdly young; he is not ill-looking, and he is unmarried."

Miss Arnott smiled, as if Mr Stacey had been guilty of perpetrating a joke.

"It's not his fault that he is young; it's not my fault that I am young. It's nice not to be ill-looking, and- I rather fancy-it's nice to be unmarried." She said to Mrs Plummer as, a little later, they were going upstairs together, side by side, "What odd things Mr Stacey does say. Fancy regarding them as drawbacks being young, good-looking and unmarried. What can he be thinking of?"

"I must refer you to him. It is one of the many questions to which I am unable to supply an answer of my own."

When she was in her own room, two faces persisted in getting in front of Miss Arnott's eyes. One was the face of Mr Arthur Cavanagh, the other was that of the man who was serving a term of twelve months' hard labour, and which was always getting, as it were, between her and the daylight.

CHAPTER IV
THE EARL OF PECKHAM'S PROPOSAL

Miss Arnott soon realised what Mrs Stacey had meant by insisting on the impossibility of her living a solitary life. So soon as she arrived upon the scene, visitors began to appear at Exham Park in a constant stream. The day after she came calls were made by two detachments of the clergy, and by the representatives of three medical men. But, as Mrs Plummer somewhat unkindly put it, these might be regarded as professional calls; or, in other words, requests for custom.

"Since you are the patron of these livings, their present holders were bound to haste and make obeisance-though it would seem that, in that respect, one of them is still a defaulter. The way in which those two doctors and their wives, who happened to come together, glowered at each other was beautiful. One quite expected to see them lapse into mutual charges of unprofessional conduct. Which of the three do you propose to favour?"

"Mr Cavanagh says that uncle used to patronise all three. He had one for the servants on the estate one for the indoor servants, and one for himself."

"And which of the three was it who killed him?"

"There came a time when all three were called together to consult upon his case. That finished uncle at once. He died within four-and-twenty hours. So Mr Cavanagh says."

"I suppose Mr Cavanagh is able to supply you with little interesting details on all sorts of recondite subjects?"

"Oh yes; he is like a walking encyclopedia of information on all matters connected with the estate. Whenever I want to know anything I simply go to him; he always knows. It is most convenient."

"And I presume that he is always willing to tell you what you want to know."

"Most willing. I never met a more obliging person. And so good-humoured. Have you noticed his smile?"

"I can't say that I have paid particular attention to his smile."

"It's wonderful; it lights up all his face and makes him positively handsome. I think he's a most delightful person, and so clever. I'm sure he's immensely popular with everyone; not at all like the hard-as-nails stewards one reads about. I can't imagine what Mr Stacey meant by almost expressing a regret that he had not displaced him, can you?"

"Some people sometimes say such extraordinary things that it's no use trying to imagine what they mean."

The answer was a trifle vague; but it seemed to satisfy Miss Arnott. Neither of the ladies looked to see if the other was smiling.

Mrs Stacey's sibylline utterance was prophetic; in a fortnight the whole county had called-that is, so much of it as was within anything like calling distance, and in the country in these days "calling distance" is a term which covers a considerable expanse of ground. Practically the only abstentions were caused by people's absence from home. It was said that some came purposely from London, and even farther, so that they might not lose an opportunity of making Miss Arnott's acquaintance.

For instance, there was the case of the Dowager Countess of Peckham. It happened that the old lady's dower house was at Stevening, some fourteen or fifteen miles from Exham Park. Since she had never occupied it since the time it came into her possession, having always preferred to let it furnished to whoever might come along, one would scarcely have supposed that she would have called herself Miss Arnott's neighbour. When, however, a little bird whispered in her ear what a very charming millionairess was in practically solitary occupation of Exham Park, it chanced that, for the moment, her own house was untenanted, and, within four-and-twenty hours of the receipt of that whispered communication, for the first time in her life she was under its roof. On the following day she covered

the fourteen miles which lay between her and Exham Park in a hired fly, was so fortunate as to find Miss Arnott at home, and was so agreeably impressed by the lady herself, by her surroundings, and by all that she heard of her, that she stopped at the village post office on her homeward journey to send a peremptory telegram to her son to come at once. The Earl of Peckham came. He had nothing particular to do just then; or, at least, nothing which he could not easily shirk. He might as well run down to his mother. So he ran down on his automobile. Immediately on his arrival she favoured him with a few home truths; as she had done on many previous occasions, and peremptorily bundled him over to Exham Park.

"Mind! you now have a chance such as you never had before; and such as you certainly will never have again. The girl has untold wealth absolutely at her own command; she hasn't a relation in the world; she is alone with a woman who is perfectly ready to be hoodwinked; she knows nobody worth speaking of. You will have her all to yourself, it will be your own fault if she's not engaged to you in a fortnight, and your wife within six weeks. Think of it, a quarter of a million a year, not as representing her capital, you understand, but a year! and absolutely no relations. None of that crowd of miserable hangers-on which so often represents the mushroom millionaire's family connections. If you don't take advantage of this heaven-sent opportunity, Peckham, you are past praying for-that's all I can say."

Peckham sighed. According to her that always was all she could say, and she had said it so many times. He motored over to Exham Park in a frame of mind which was not in keeping with the character of a light-hearted wooer. He had wanted his mother to accompany him. But she had a conservative objection to motor cars, nothing would induce her to trust herself on one. So, reluctantly enough, he went alone.

"You ask Miss Arnott to lunch to-morrow; you can go over yourself and bring her on your car, it will be an excellent opening. And when she is here I will do the honours. But I have no intention of risking my own life on one of those horrible machines."

As he reached the bottom of a rather steep slope, his lordship met a lady and a gentleman, who were strolling side by side. Stopping, he addressed the gentleman, -

"I beg your pardon, but can you tell me if I am going right for Exham Park? There were crossroads some way back, at the top of the hill, but I was going so fast that I couldn't see what was on the direction posts. I mean Miss Arnott's."

"You will find the lodge gate on your right, about half a mile further on." The speaker hesitated, then added, "This is Miss Arnott."

Off came his lordship's hat again.

"I am very fortunate. I am Peckham-I mean the Earl of Peckham. My mother has sent me with a message."

The lady was regarding the car with interested eyes.

"I never have been on a motor car, but if you could find room for me on yours, you might take me up to the house, and-give me the message."

In a trice the mechanician was in the tonneau, and the lady by his lordship's side. As Mr Cavanagh, left alone, gazed after the retreating car, it was not the good-humoured expression of his countenance which would have struck Miss Arnott most.

The young lady's tastes were plainly altogether different from the old one's-at anyrate, so far as motor cars were concerned. Obviously she did not consider them to be horrible machines. She showed the liveliest interest in this, the first one of which she had had any actual experience. They went for quite a lengthy drive together, three times up and down the drive, which meant nearly nine miles. Once, at the lady's request, the driver showed what his car could do. As it was a machine of the highest grade, and of twenty-four horse power, it could do a good deal. Miss Arnott expressed her approbation of the performance.

"How splendid! I could go on like that for ever; it blows one about a bit, but if one were sensibly dressed that wouldn't matter. How fast were we going?"

"Oh, somewhere about fifty miles an hour. It's all right in a place like this; but, the worst of it is, there are such a lot of beastly policemen about. It's no fun having always to pay fines for excessive speed, and damages for running over people, and that kind of thing."

"I should think not, indeed. Have you ever run over anyone?"

"Well, not exactly; only, accidents will happen, you know."

As she observed that young man's face, a suspicion dawned upon her mind, that-when he was driving-they occasionally would.

Ere she descended she received some elementary lessons in the art of controlling a motor car. And, altogether, by the time they reached the house, and the message was delivered, they were on terms of considerable intimacy.

The acquaintance, thus auspiciously begun, rapidly ripened. The Earl did not find the business on which he was engaged anything like such a nuisance as he had feared; on the contrary, he found it an agreeable occupation. He was of opinion that the girl was not half a bad sort; that, in fact, she was a very good sort indeed. He actually decided that she would have been eligible for a place in the portrait gallery of the Countesses of Peckham even if she had not been set in such a desirable frame. That motor car was a great aid to intimacy. He drove her; and he taught her to drive him. Sometimes, the chauffeur being left behind, they had the car to themselves. It was on such an occasion, when their acquaintance hardly extended beyond his mother's suggested fortnight, that he made her an offer of his hand and heart. She was driving at the time, and going at a pretty good pace, which was possibly on the wrong side of the legal limit; but when she began to have an inkling of what he was talking about, she instantly put on the brakes, and pulled up dead. She was so taken by surprise, and her own hideous position was so continually present to her mind's eye, that it was some seconds before she perceived that the young man at her side must, of necessity, be completely unconscious of the monstrous nature of his proposal. She was silent for several moments, then she answered, while the car was still at a standstill in the middle of the road, -

"Thank you. No doubt your offer is not meant unkindly; but acceptance on my part is altogether out of the question."

"Why?"

"Why? Because it is. I am sorry you should have spoken like this, because I was beginning to like you."

"Isn't that a reason why I should speak? If you are beginning to like me, by degrees you may get to like me more and more."

"I think not. Because this little *contretemps* will necessarily put a period to our acquaintance."

"Oh, rats! that isn't fair! If I'd thought it would worry you I wouldn't have said a word. Only-I should like to ask if there is anybody else."

"Do you mean, is there anyone else to whom I am engaged to be married? There is not-and there never will be."

"I say, Miss Arnott! Every man in England-who can get within reach of you-will have tried his luck before the end of the season. You will have to take one of them, to save yourself from being bothered."

"Shall I? You think so? You are wrong. If you don't mind, I will turn the car round, and take it to the lodge gate; then I will get out, and walk home. Only there must be no more conversation of this sort on the way, or I shall get out at once."

"You need not fear that I shall offend again; put her round."

She "put her round." They gained the lodge gate. The lady descended.

"Good-bye, Lord Peckham. I have to thank you for some very pleasant rides, and for much valuable instruction. I'm sorry I couldn't do what you wanted, but-it's impossible."

"I sha'n't forget the jolly time I've had with you, and shall hope to meet you again when you come to town. You are inclined to treat me with severity, but I assure you that if you intend to treat every man severely, merely because he proposes, you have set yourself a task which would have been too much for the strength of Hercules."

His lordship returned then and there to London. On the road he sent a telegram to his mother which contained these two words only: "Been refused."

On her part, Miss Arnott did not at once return to the house. She chose instead a winding path which led to a certain woodland glade which she had already learned to love. There, amidst the trees, the bushes, the gorse, the wild flowers, the tall grasses and the bracken, she could enjoy solitary communion with her own thoughts. Just then she had plenty to think about. There was not only Lord Peckham's strange conduct, there was also his parting words.

Her knowledge of the world was very scanty, especially of that sort of world in which she so suddenly found herself. But she was a girl of quick intuitions; and already she had noticed a something in the demeanour of some of the masculine acquaintances she had made which she had not altogether relished. Could what Lord Peckham had said be true? Would every man who came within reach of her try his luck-in a certain sense? If so, a most unpleasant prospect was in store for her. There was one way out of the difficulty. She had only to announce that she was a married woman and that sort of persecution would cease at once. She doubted, however, if the remedy would not be worse than the disease. She had grown to regard her matrimonial fetters with such loathing, that, rather than acknowledge, voluntarily, that she was bound about by them, and admit that her husband was an unspeakable creature in a felon's cell, she believed that she was ready to endure anything. Certainly she would sooner reject a dozen men a day.

She came to the woodland glade she sought. It so chanced that the particular nook which she had learned, from experience, was the best to recline in was just on the other side of a rough fence. She crossed the fence, reclined at her ease on the mossy bank; and thought, and thought, and thought. On a sudden she was roused from her deepest day-dream by a voice which addressed to her an inquiry from above, -

"Are you trespassing-or am I?"

CHAPTER V
TRESPASSING

She looked up with a start-to find that a man was observing her who seemed to be unusually tall. She lay in a hollow, he stood on the top of the bank; so that perhaps their relative positions tended to exaggerate his apparent inches. But that he was tall was beyond a doubt. He was also broad. Her first feeling was, that she had never seen a man who was at once so tall and so broad across the shoulders. He was rather untidily dressed-in a grey tweed knickerbocker suit, with a Norfolk jacket, and a huge cap which was crammed right down on his head. He wore a flannel shirt, and a dark blue knitted tie, which was tied in a scrambling sailor's knot. Both hands were in the pockets of his jacket, which was wide open; and, altogether, the impression was conveyed to her, as she lay so far beneath him, that he was of a monstrous size.

It struck her that his being where he was was an impertinence, which was rendered much greater by his venturing to address her; especially with such an inquiry. Merely raising herself on her elbow, she favoured him with a glance which was intended to crush him.

"There can be no doubt as to who is trespassing as you must be perfectly well aware-you are."

"I quite agree with you in thinking that there can be no doubt as to who is trespassing; but there, unfortunately, our agreement ends, because, as it happens, you are."

"Do you suppose that I don't know which is my own property? I am Miss Arnott, of Exham Park-this is part of my ground."

"I fancy, with all possible deference, that I know which is my property better than you appear to know which is yours. I am Hugh Morice, of Oak Dene, and, beyond the slightest shadow of a doubt, the ground on which we both are is mine."

She rose to her feet a little hurriedly.

"What authority have you for what you say? Are you trying to amuse yourself at my expense?"

"Allow me to explain. You see that fence, which is in rather a doddering condition-it forms the boundary line between Exham Park and Oak Dene, a fact which I have a particular reason to remember. Once, before this was my ground, I was shooting in these woods. My bird- it was only a pigeon-dropped on the other side of that fence. I was no better acquainted with the landmarks then than you appear to be now. Not aware that there was any difference between this side and that, I was scrambling over the fence to retrieve my pigeon when I was pulled up short by some very plain words, pronounced in a very plain tone of voice. I won't tell you what the words were, because you might like them even less than I did. I looked up; and there was an old gentleman, who was flanked by two persons who were evidently keepers. He was one of the most eloquent old gentlemen I had ever met. He commenced by wanting to know what I meant by being about to defile his ground by the intrusion of my person. I replied that I wasn't aware that it was his ground, and that I wanted my pigeon. He asked me who I was. When I told him he informed me that he was Septimus Arnott, and desired me to inform all persons bearing my name what he thought of them. He thought a good deal-in a sense. He wound up by remarking that he would instruct his keepers, if ever they caught me on the wrong side of that fence, to put a charge of lead into me at sight. Towards the end of the interview I was as genially disposed as he was; so I retorted by assuring him that if ever I caught anyone from Exham Park on this side, I'd do the honours with a charge of lead. This is the exact spot on which that interview took place-he was there and I here. But the circumstances have changed-it is Exham Park who is now the trespasser. Shall I put a charge of lead into you?"

"By all means-if you wish to."

"I am not quite sure that I do wish to."

"If you have the slightest inclination in that direction, pray don't hesitate."

"You mightn't like it."

"Don't consider my feelings, I beg. In such a matter surely you wouldn't allow my feelings to count."

"No? You think not? I don't know. Perhaps you're right; but, you see, I haven't a gun. I can't put charges of lead into anything, or anyone, without one.

"Pray don't let any trifling obstacle of that kind stand in your way. Permit me to send for one."

"Would you? You're very good. Who would you send?"

"Of course I would myself fetch you the indispensable weapon."

"And how long would you be, do you imagine? Should I have time to smoke a pipe while you were going there and back?"

Suddenly the lady drew herself up with a gesture which was possibly meant to be expressive of a judicious mingling of scorn with hauteur.

"It is possible, if you prefer it. I will admit that it is probable that my uncle was rude to you. Do you intend to continue the tradition, and be rude to me?"

"I was simply telling you a little anecdote, Miss Arnott."

"I am obliged to you for taking so much trouble. Now, with your permission, I will return to what you state to be my side of the fence."

"I state? Don't you state that that side of the fence is yours?"

"My impression was that both sides were mine. I will have the matter carefully inquired into. If your statement proves to be correct I will see that a communication is sent to you, conveying my apologies for having been an unwitting trespasser on your estate."

"Thank you. Can I lift you over?"

"Lift me over!"

The air of red-hot indignation with which his proposition was declined ought to have scorched him. It seemed, however, to have no effect on him of any sort. He continued to regard her from the top of the bank, with an air of indolent nonchalance, which was rapidly driving her to the conclusion that he was the most insolent person she had ever encountered. With a view, possibly, of showing the full absurdity of his offer of assistance, she placed both hands on the top of the fence, with the intention of vaulting over it. The intention was only partially fulfilled. During her wanderings with her father among their Cumberland hills she had become skilled in all manner of athletic exercises. Ordinarily she would have thought nothing of vaulting-or, for the matter of that, jumping-an insignificant fence. Perhaps her nervous system was more disorganised than she imagined. She caught her knee against the bar, and, instead of alighting gracefully on her feet, she rolled ignominiously over. She was up almost as soon as she was down, but not before he had cleared the fence at a bound, and was standing at her side. She exhibited no sign of gratitude for the rapidity with which he had come to her assistance. She merely put to him an icy question, -

"Was it necessary that you should trespass also?"

"Are you sure that you are not hurt? ankle not twisted, or anything of that kind?"

"Quite sure. Be so good as to return to your own side."

As he seemed to hesitate, a voice exclaimed, in husky tones, -

"By-, I've a mind to shoot you now."

He turned to see a man, between forty and fifty years of age, in the unmistakable habiliments of a gamekeeper, standing some twenty feet off, holding a gun in a fashion which suggested that it would need very little to induce him to put it to his shoulder and pull the trigger. Hugh Morice greeted him as if he were an old acquaintance.

"Hullo, Jim Baker! So you're still in the land of the living?"

Mr Baker displayed something more than surliness in his reply.

"So are you, worse luck! What are you doing here? Didn't Mr Arnott tell me if I saw you on our land to let fly, and pepper you?"

"I was just telling Miss Arnott the story. Odd that you should come upon the scene as corroborating evidence."

"For two pins I'd let fly!"

"Now, Baker, don't be an idiot. Take care how you handle that gun, or there'll be trouble; your hands don't seem too steady. You don't want me to give you another thrashing, do you? Have you forgotten the last one I gave you?"

"Have I forgotten?" The man cursed his questioner with a vigour which was startling. "I'll never forget-trust me. I'll be even with you yet, trust me. By – if you say another word about it I'll let fly at you now!"

Up went the stock of the gun to the speaker's shoulder, the muzzle pointing direct at Mr Morice. That gentleman neither moved nor spoke; Miss Arnott did both.

"Baker, are you mad? Put down that gun. How dare you so misbehave yourself?"

The gun was lowered with evident reluctance.

"Mr Arnott, he told me to shoot him if ever I see him this side the fence."

"I am mistress here now. You may think yourself fortunate if you're not presently introduced to a policeman."

"I was only obeying orders, that's all I was doing."

"Orders! How long ago is it since the orders to which you refer were given you?"

Mr Morice interposed an answer, -

"It's more than four years since I was near the place."

The keeper turned towards him with a vindictive snarl.

"Four years! what's four years? An order's an order if it's four years or forty. How was I to know that things are different, and that now you're to come poaching and trespassing whenever you please?"

Miss Arnott was very stern.

"Baker, take yourself away from here at once. You will hear of this again. Do you hear me? Go! without a word!"

Mr Baker went, but as he went he delivered himself of several words. They were uttered to himself rather than to the general public, but they were pretty audible all the same. When he was out of sight and sound, the lady put a question to the gentleman, -

"Do you think it possible that he could have been in earnest, and that he would have shot you?"

"I daresay. I suspect that few things would have pleased him better. Why not? He would only have been carrying out instructions received."

"But-Mr Morice, I wish you would not jest on such a subject! Has he a personal grudge against you?"

"It depends upon what you call a grudge; you heard what he said. He used to live in that cottage near the gravel pits; and may do so still for all I know. Once, when I was passing, I heard a terrible hullabaloo. I invited myself inside to find that Mr Baker was correcting Mrs Baker with what seemed to me such unnecessary vigour that-I corrected him. The incident seems to linger in his memory, in spite of the passage of the years; and I shouldn't be at all surprised if, in his turn, he is still quite willing to correct me, with the aid of a few pellets of lead."

"But he must be a dangerous character."

"He's a character, at anyrate. I've always felt he was a little mad; when he's drunk he's stark mad. He's perhaps been having half a gallon now. Let me hasten to assure you that, I fancy, Baker's qualities were regarded by Mr Septimus Arnott, in the main, as virtues. Mr Arnott was himself a character; if I may be excused for saying so."

"I never saw my uncle in his life, and knew absolutely nothing about him, except what my father used to tell me of the days when they were boys together."

"If, in those days, he was anything like what he was afterwards, he must have been a curiosity. To make the whole position clear to you I should mention that my uncle was also a character. I am not

sure that, taking him altogether, he was not the more remarkable character of the two. The Morices, of course, have been here since the flood. But when your uncle came my uncle detected in him a kindred spirit. They became intimates; inseparable chums, and a pair of curios I promise you they were, until they quarrelled-over a game of chess."

"Of chess?"

"Of chess. They used to play together three or four times a week-tremendous games. Until one evening my uncle insisted that your uncle had taken his hand off a piece, and wouldn't allow him to withdraw his move. Then the fur flew. Each called the other everything he could think of, and both had an extensive répertoire. The war which followed raged unceasingly; it's a mystery to me how they both managed to die in their beds."

"And all because of a dispute over a game of chess?"

"My uncle could quarrel about a less serious matter than a game of chess; he was a master of the art. He quarrelled with me-but that's another story; since when I've been in the out-of-the-way-corners of the world. I was in Northern Rhodesia when I heard that he was dead, and had left me Oak Dene. I don't know why- except that there has always been a Morice at Oak Dene, and that I am the only remaining specimen of the breed."

"How strange. It is only recently that I learned-to my complete surprise-that Exham Park was mine."

"It seems that we are both of us indebted to our uncles, dead; though apparently we neither of us owed much to them while they still were living. Well, are the orders to be perpetuated that I'm to be shot when seen on this side of the fence?"

"I do not myself practise such methods."

"They are drastic; though there are occasions on which drastic methods are the kindest. Since I only arrived yesterday I take it that I am the latest comer. It is your duty, therefore, to call on me. Do you propose to do your duty?"

"I certainly do not propose to call on you, if that's what you mean."

"Good. Then I'll call on you. I shall have the pleasure, Miss Arnott, of waiting on you, on this side of the fence, at a very early date. Do you keep a shot gun in the hall?"

"Do you consider it good taste to persist in harping on a subject which you must perceive is distasteful?"

"My taste was always bad."

"That I can easily imagine."

"There is something which I also can easily imagine."

"Indeed?"

"I can imagine that your uncle left you something besides Exham Park."

"What is that?"

"A little of his temper."

"Mr Morice! I have no wish to exchange retorts with you, but, from what you say, it is quite obvious that your uncle left you all his manners."

"Thank you. Anything else?"

"Yes, Mr Morice, there is something else. It is not my fault that we are neighbours."

"Don't say that it's my misfortune."

"And since you must have left many inconsolable friends behind you in Rhodesia there is no reason why we should continue to be neighbours."

"Quite so."

"Of course, whether you return to Rhodesia or remain here is a matter of complete indifference to me."

"Precisely."

"But, should you elect to stay, you will be so good as to understand that, if you do call at Exham Park, you will be told that I am not at home. Good afternoon, Mr Morice, and good-bye."

"Good-bye, Miss Arnott. I had a sort of premonition that those orders would be re-issued, and that I should be shot if I was seen this side."

She had already gone some distance; but, on hearing this, stopping, she turned towards him again.

"Possibly if we raise the fence to a sufficient height, that will keep you out."

"Oh, I can scale any fence. No fence was ever constructed that I couldn't negotiate. You'll have to shoot."

"Shall we? We shall see."

"We shall-Miss Arnott?"

She stopped again.

"What is it you wish to say to me?"

"Merely that I have in my mind some half-formed intention to call on you to-morrow."

"You dare!"

"You have no notion what I do dare."

This time she was not tempted to a further rejoinder. He watched her as, straight as a dart, her head in the air, striding along the winding path, she vanished among the trees. He ruminated after she had gone, -

"She's splendid! she magnificent! How she holds herself, and how she looks at you, and what eyes they are with which to look. I never saw anything like her, and I hope, for her own sake, she never saw anything like me. What a brute she must think me, and what a brute I am. I don't care; there's something about her which sets all my blood on fire, which rouses in me the instinct of the hunter. I wish old Baker would come along just now; gun or no gun, we'd have a pretty little argument. It might do me good. There's no doubt that what I said was true-the girl has her uncle's temper, if I've my uncle's manners; as I'm a sinful man I've as good as half a mind to marry her."

The lady was unconscious of the compliments which, mentally, the gentleman was paying her. When, returning home, she entered the apartment where Mrs Plummer, apparently just roused from a peaceful doze, was waiting for her tea, she was in a flame of passion.

"I have just left the most unendurable person I ever yet encountered, the most ill-mannered, the most clumsy, the most cowardly, the most stupid, the most absurd, the most unspeakable!"

"My dear! who is this very superlative individual? what is his delightful name?"

"His name!" For some occult reason Mrs Plummer's, under the circumstances, mild request, seemed to cause her passion to flame up higher. "What do I care what his name is? So far as I am concerned such a creature has no name!"

CHAPTER VI
AN AUTHORITY ON THE LAW OF MARRIAGE

The next day Mr Hugh Morice fulfilled his threat-he paid his ceremonial call at Exham Park. The word "ceremonial" is used advisedly, since nothing could have been more formal and decorous than his demeanour throughout.

Miss Arnott and Mrs Plummer happened to be entertaining four or five people that afternoon, among them a Mr Pyecroft, a curate attached to one of Miss Arnott's three livings. He was favouring that lady with a graphic account of the difficulties encountered in endeavouring, in a country place, to arouse interest on any subject whatever, and was illustrating the position by describing the disappointments he had met with in the course of an attempt he had made to organise a series of local entertainments in aid of a new church organ, when his listener suddenly became conscious that a person had just entered the room, who, if she could believe her eyes, was none other than the unspeakable individual of the previous day. Not only was it unmistakably he, but he was actually-with an air of complete self-possession-marching straight across the room towards her. When he stood in front of her, he bowed and said, -

"Permit me, Miss Arnott, to introduce myself to you. I am Hugh Morice, of Oak Dene, which, as you are probably aware, adjoins Exham Park. I only arrived two days ago, and, so soon as I learned that I was honoured by having you as a neighbour, I ventured to lose no time in-with your permission-making myself known to you."

Miss Arnott looked at him with an expression on her countenance which was hardly encouraging. His own assurance was so perfect that it deprived her, for the moment, of her presence of mind. He wore a suit of dark blue serge, which made him seem huger even than he had done the day before. In the presence of Mr Pyecroft, and of the other people, she could scarcely assail this smiling giant, and remind him, pointedly, that she had forbidden him to call. Some sort of explanation would have to be forthcoming, and it was exactly an explanation which she desired to avoid. Observing that she seemed tongue-tied, the visitor continued, -

"I have been so long a wanderer among savages that I have almost forgotten the teachings of my guide to good manners. I am quite unaware, for example, what, as regards calling, is the correct etiquette on an occasion when an unmarried man finds himself the next-door neighbour to an unmarried lady. As I could hardly expect you to call upon me I dared to take the initiative. What I feared most was that I might not find you in."

The invitation was so obvious that the lady at once accepted it.

"It is only by the merest accident that you have done so."

Mr Morice was equal to the occasion. "I fancy, Miss Arnott, that for some of the happiest hours of our lives we are indebted to accidents. Ah, Pyecroft, so you have not deserted us."

Mr Morice shook hands with Mr Pyecroft-Miss Arnott thought they looked a most incongruous couple-with an air of old comradeship, and presently was exchanging greetings with others of those present with a degree of heartiness which, to his hostess, made it seem impossible that she should have him shown the door. When all the other visitors had gone-including the unspeakable man-she found, to her amazement, that he had made a most favourable impression on Mrs Plummer. That lady began almost as soon as his back was turned.

"What a delightful person Mr Morice is." Miss Arnott was so taken by surprise that she could do nothing but stare. Mrs Plummer went placidly on, "It is nice to be able just to look at him, the mere sight of him's a satisfaction. To a little woman the idea of a man of his size is such a comfort."

The young lady's manner was not effusive.

"We're not all of us fond of monstrosities."

"Monstrosities! my dear! He's not a monstrosity, he's a perfect figure of a man, magnificently proportioned. You must admit that."

"I don't."

"And then his manners are so charming."

"They never struck me like that."

"No? I suppose one judges people as one finds them. I know he was particularly nice to me. By the way, that dreadful person you spoke of yesterday, you might tell me what his name is, so that I might be on my guard against him, should our paths happen to cross."

"I repeat what I have already told you that, so far as I am concerned, he has no name; and anyhow, you wouldn't recognise him from my description if you did meet."

It was odd, considering how much Miss Arnott disliked Mr Morice, how frequently he was destined to come, at anyrate, within her line of vision. And yet, perhaps, it was natural-because, although their houses were a couple of miles apart, their estates joined-they were neighbours. And then Miss Arnott was inclined to suspect that the gentleman went out of his way to bring about a meeting. Situated as they were, it was not a difficult thing to do.

To a certain extent, the lady had accepted the position. That is, she had allowed the acquaintance to continue; being, indeed, more than half disposed to fear that she might not find it easy to refuse to know him altogether. But she had been careful to avoid any reference to that curious first encounter. He, on his part, had shown no disposition to allude to it. So there grew up between them a sort of casual intimacy. They saw each other often. When he spoke to her she spoke to him, though never at any greater length than, as it seemed to her, she could help.

With the lessons she had received from the Earl of Peckham still fresh in her mind she bought herself a motor car; almost simultaneously with its appearance on the scene her relations with Hugh Morice began to be on a friendlier footing. She was sitting in it one day, talking to the lodge-keeper, when Mr Morice came striding by. At sight of it he at once approached.

"That's a strange beast."

She had become somewhat accustomed to his odd tricks of speech, and merely smiled a wintry smile.

"You think so?"

"It's not only a strange, it's a wonderful beast, since it holds in its hands no small portion of the future history of the world."

"Are you referring to this particular machine?"

"I am referring to all the machines of which that one's a type. They're going to repeat the performance of Puffing' Billy-produce a revolution. I wish you'd give me a ride."

"I was just thinking of going in."

"Put off going in for a few minutes-take me for a run."

She looked at the chauffeur, who was quick to take the hint. Presently they were bowling along between the hedgerows, she conscious that his eyes were paying more attention to her than she quite relished. A fact of which his words immediately gave evidence.

"You like it. This feeling of flight through the air, which you can command by touching a handle, supplies you with an evanescent interest in life which, in ordinary, everyday existence you find lacking."

"What do you mean?"

"Is it necessary that I should tell you? Do you wish me to?"

"Do you mean that, as a general rule, I don't take an interest in things?"

"Do you? At your age, in your position, you ought to take an interest in everything. But the impression you convey to my mind is that you don't, that you take an interest in nothing. You try to, sometimes, pretty hard. But you never quite succeed. I don't know why. You remind me, in some

odd way, of the impersonal attitude of a spectator who looks on at something with which he never expects to have any personal concern."

"I don't know what you're talking about, I don't believe you do either. You say the strangest things."

"You don't find them strange, you understand them better than I do. I am many years older than you-ye Goths, how many! I am tolerably *blasé*, as befits my age. But you, you are tired-mortally tired-of everything already. I've not yet reached that stage. You don't know what keenness means; thank goodness there are still a good many things which I am keen about. Just as something turns up for which you're on the point of really caring, a shadow steps from the back of your mind to the front, and stops you. I don't know what it is, but I know it's there."

"I'm going back."

As this man spoke something tugged at her heartstrings which filled her with a sort of terror. If he was beginning to regard her attitude towards life-of which she herself was only too hideously conscious-as a problem, the solution of which he had set himself to find out, what might the consequences not be? Then she could not stop to think. She swung the car round towards home. As if in obedience to her unspoken hint he changed the subject, speaking with that calm assumption of authority which galled her the more because she found herself so frequently compelled to submission.

"You must teach me to drive this machine of yours."

"My mechanician will be able to do that better than I can, I am myself only a tyro."

"Thank you, I prefer that you should teach me. Which handle do you move to stop?" She showed him. "And which to start?" She showed him again.

Before they parted, she had put him, however unwillingly, through quite a small course of elementary instruction. In consequence of which she had a bad quarter of an hour, when, later, she was in her own sitting-room, alone.

"He frightens me! He makes me do things I don't want to do; and then-he seems to know me better than I know myself. Is it so obvious that I find it difficult to take a real interest in things? or has he a preternaturally keen sense of perception? Either way it isn't nice for me. It's true enough; nothing does interest me. How should it? What does money, and all that matter; when there's that-shadow-in the prison, coming closer to me, day by day? I believe that being where I am-Miss Arnott of Exham Park-makes it worse, because if it weren't for the shadow, it would be so different-so different!"

That night she dreamed of Hugh Morice. She and he were on the motor car together, flying through the sunshine, on and on and on, happy as the day was bright, and the road was fair. Suddenly the sun became obscured, all the world was dark; they were approaching a chasm. Although it was so dark she knew that it was there. In a wild frenzy of fear she tried to stop the car, to find, all at once, that it had no brake. She made to leap out on to the road, but Mr Morice seized her round the waist and held her. In another moment they were dashing over the edge of an abyss, into the nameless horrors which lay below.

It was not a pleasant dream, it did not leave an agreeable impression on her mind after she was awake. But dreams are only dreams. Sensible people pay no heed to them. Miss Arnott proved herself to be sensible at least in that respect. She did not, ever afterwards, refuse him a seat in her car, because she had once, in a nightmare, come to grief in his society. On the contrary, she not only took him for other drives, but- imitating her own experience with the Earl of Peckham, when, after a while-it was a very little while-he had attained to a certain degree of proficiency, she suffered him to drive her. And, as she had done, he liked driving so much that, before long, he also had an automobile of his own.

Then a new phase of the affair commenced. It was, of course, necessary that-with a view of extending her experience, and increasing her knowledge of motor cars-she should try her hand at driving his. She tried her hand, a first and a second time, perhaps a third. She admitted that his car was not a bad one. It had its points-but slight vibration, little noise, scarcely any smell. It ran sweetly, was a good climber, easy to steer. Certainly a capital car. So much she was ready to allow. But, at

the same time, she could not but express her opinion that, on the whole, hers was a better one. There they joined issue. At first, Mr Morice was disposed to doubt, he was inclined to think that perhaps, for certain reasons, the lady's car might be a shade the superior. But, by degrees, as he became more accustomed to his new possession, he changed his mind. He was moved to state his conviction that, as a matter of fact, the superiority lay with his own car.

Whereupon both parties proceeded to demonstrate with which of the pair the palm of merit really lay. They ran all sorts of trials together-trials which sometimes resulted in extremely warm arguments; and by which, somehow, very little was proved. At anyrate, each party was always ready to discount the value of the conclusion at which the other had arrived.

One fact was noticeable-as evidence of the keen spirit of emulation. Wherever one car was the other was nearly sure to be somewhere near at hand.

Mrs Plummer, who had a gift of silence, said little. But one remark she made did strike Miss Arnott as peculiar.

"Mr Morice doesn't seem to have so many friends, or even acquaintances, as I should have expected in a man in his position."

"How do you know he hasn't?"

"I say he doesn't seem to have. He never has anyone at his own house, and he never goes to anyone else's. He always seems to be alone."

Miss Arnott was still. Mrs Plummer had not accentuated it in the slightest degree; yet the young lady wondered in what sense-in that construction-she had used the word "alone."

One day, when she was in town, Miss Arnott did a singular thing. Having deposited Mrs Plummer in a large drapery establishment, with peremptory instructions to make certain considerable purchases, she went off in a hansom by herself to an address in the Temple. Having arrived, she perceived in the hall of the house she had entered a board, on which were painted a number of names. Her glance rested on one-First floor, Mr Whitcomb. Without hesitation she ascended to the first floor, until she found herself confronted by a door on which that name appeared in black letters. She knocked; the door was opened by a very young gentleman.

"Can I see Mr Whitcomb?" she inquired.

"What name? Have you an appointment?"

"I have not an appointment, and my name is of no consequence. I wish to see Mr Whitcomb on very particular business."

The young gentleman looked at her askance, as if he was of opinion-which he emphatically was-that she was not at all the sort of person he was accustomed to see outside that door.

"Mr Whitcomb doesn't generally see people without an appointment, especially if he doesn't know their names; but if you'll step inside, I'll see if he's engaged."

She stepped inside to find herself in an apartment in which there were several other young gentlemen, of somewhat riper years; one and all of whom, she immediately became conscious, began to take the liveliest interest in her. Soon there appeared a grey-haired man, who held a pair of spectacles between the fingers of his right hand.

"May I ask what your name is? and what is the nature of the business on which you wish to see Mr Whitcomb?"

"I have already explained that my name doesn't matter. And I can only state my business to Mr Whitcomb himself." Then she added, as if struck by the look of doubt in the grey-haired man's face, "Pray don't imagine that I am here to beg for subscriptions to a charity or any nonsense of that kind. I wish to see Mr Whitcomb about something very important."

The grey-headed man smiled faintly, apparently amused by something in the caller's manner, or appearance. Departing whence he came he almost immediately reappeared, and beckoned to her with his hand.

"Mr Whitcomb is very much engaged, but he will manage to spare you five minutes."

"I daresay I sha'n't want to keep him longer."

She found herself in a spacious room, which was principally furnished, as it seemed to her, with books. At a table, which was almost entirely covered with books, both open and shut, stood a tall man, with snow-white hair, who bowed to her as she entered.

"You wish to see me?"

"You are Mr Whitcomb?"

"That is my name. How can I serve you?"

She seated herself on the chair towards which he pointed. Each looked at the other for some seconds, in silence. Then she spoke.

"I want you to tell me on what grounds a wife can obtain a divorce from her husband."

Mr Whitcomb raised his eyebrows and smiled.

"I think, madam, that it may have been a solicitor you wanted. I, unfortunately, am only a barrister. I fear you have made a mistake."

"I have not made a mistake; how have I made a mistake? I saw in a paper the other day that you were the greatest living authority on the law of marriage."

"It was very good of the paper to say so. Since I am indebted for your presence here to so handsome a compliment, I will waive the point of etiquette and inform you-of what you, surely, must be already aware-that the grounds on which a divorce may be obtained are various."

"I know that; that isn't what I mean. What I specially want to know is this-can a woman get a divorce from her husband because he gets sent to prison?"

"Because he gets sent to prison? For doing what?"

"For-for swindling; because he's a scoundrel."

Mr Whitcomb's eyebrows went up again.

"The idea that a marriage may be dissolved because one of the parties is guilty of felony, and is consequently sentenced to a term of imprisonment, is a novel one to me."

"Not if a girl finds out that the man who has married her is a villain and a thief? A thief, mind."

He shook his head.

"I find that that would be no ground for dissolution."

"Are you sure?"

"My dear young lady, you were good enough to say that some paper or other credited me with a knowledge of the laws dealing with the subject of marriage. I can assure you that on that point there is no doubt whatever."

"Is that so?" The girl's lips were tightly compressed, her brows knit. "Then there are no means whatever by which a wife can be rid of a husband whom she discovers to be a rogue and a rascal?"

"Not merely because he is a rogue and a rascal; except by the act of God."

"What do you mean by the act of God?"

"If, for example, he should die."

"If he should die? I see! There is no way by which she can be released from him except by-death. Thank you, that is all I wanted to know."

She laid on his table what, to his surprise, he perceived to be a twenty-pound note.

"My dear young lady, what is this?"

"That is your fee. I don't want to occupy your time or obtain information from you for nothing."

"But you have done neither. Permit me to return you this. That is not the way in which I do business; in this instance, the honour of having been consulted by you is a sufficient payment. Before you go, however, let me give a piece of really valuable advice. If you have a friend who is in any matrimonial trouble, persuade her to see a respectable solicitor at once, and to place the whole facts before him unreservedly. He may be able to show her a way out of her difficulty which would never have occurred to her."

He commented-inwardly-on his visitor, after her departure.

"That's either a very simple-minded young woman or a most unusual character. Fancy her coming to me with such an inquiry! She has got herself into some matrimonial mess, most probably, without the cognisance of her friends. Unless I am mistaken she is the kind of young woman who, if she has made up her mind to get out of it, will get out of it; if not by fair means, then- though I hope not! – by foul."

CHAPTER VII
MR MORICE PRESUMES

One day a desire seized Miss Arnott to revisit the place where she had first met Mr Morice. She had not been there since. That memorable encounter had spoilt it for her. It had been her custom to wander there nearly every fine day. But, since it had been defiled by such a memory, for her, its charm had fled.

Still, as the weeks went by, it dawned upon her by degrees, that, after all, there was no substantial reason why she should turn her back on it for ever. It was a delightful spot; so secluded, so suited to solitary meditation.

"I certainly do not intend," she told herself, "to allow that man" – with an accent on the "that" – "to prevent my occasionally visiting one of the prettiest parts of my own property. It would be mere affectation on my part to pretend that the place will ever be to me the same again; but that is no reason why I should never take a walk in that direction."

It was pleasant weather, sunny, not too warm and little wind. Just the weather for a woodland stroll, and, also, just the weather for a motor ride. That latter fact was particularly present to her mind, because she happened to be undergoing one of those little experiences which temper an automobilist's joys. The machine was in hospital. She had intended to go for a long run to-day, but yesterday something had all at once gone wrong with the differential, the clutch, the bevel gear or something or other. She herself did not quite know what, or, apparently, anyone else either. As a result, the car, instead of flying with her over the sun-lit roads, was being overhauled by the nearest local experts.

That was bad enough. But what almost made it worse was the additional fact that Hugh Morice's car was flying over the aforesaid country roads with him. That her car should have broken down, though ever so slightly, and his should not-that altogether inferior article, of which he was continually boasting in the most absurd manner-was gall and wormwood.

The accident, which had rendered her own car for the moment unavailable, had something to do with her stroll; the consciousness that "that man" was miles away on his had more.

"At anyrate I sha'n't run the risk of any more impertinent interferences with my privacy. Fortunately, so far as I know, there is no one else in the neighbourhood who behaves quite as he does. So, as he is risking his life on that noisy machine of his, I am safe. I only hope he won't break his neck on it; there never was such a reckless driver."

This pious wish of hers was destined to receive an instant answer. Hardly had the words been uttered, than, emerging from the narrow path, winding among the trees and bushes, along which she had been wandering, she received ample proof that Mr Morice's neck still remained unbroken. The gentleman himself was standing not fifty paces from where she was. So disagreeably was she taken by surprise that she would have immediately withdrawn, and returned at the top of her speed by the way she had come, had it not been for two things. One was that he saw her as soon as she saw him; and the other that she also saw something else, the sight of which filled her with amazement.

The first reason would not have been sufficient to detain her; although, so soon as he caught sight of her, he hailed her in his usual hearty tones. The terms of courtesy-or rather of discourtesy-on which these two stood towards each other were of such a nature that she held herself at liberty wholly to ignore him whenever she felt inclined. More than once when they had parted they had been on something less than speaking terms. For days together she had done her very best to cut him dead. Then, when at last, owing to his calm persistency, the acquaintance was renewed, he evinced not the slightest consciousness of its having ever been interrupted. Therefore she would not have hesitated to have turned on her heels, and walked away without a word-in spite of his salutation, had it not been for the something which amazed her.

The fence had been moved!

At first she thought that her eyes, or her senses, were playing her a trick. But a moment's inspection showed her that the thing was so. The old wooden, lichen-covered rails had been taken away for a space of sixty or seventy feet; and, instead, a little distance farther back, on the Oak Dene land, a solid, brand-new fence had been erected; standing in a position which conveyed the impression that the sheltered nook to which-in her ignorance of boundaries-Miss Arnott had been so attached, and in which Mr Morice first discovered her, was part and parcel of Exham Park instead of Oak Dene.

It was some seconds before the lady realised exactly what had happened. When she did, she burst out on Mr Morice with a question.

"Who has done this?"

The gentleman, who stood with his back against a huge beech tree, took his pipe from between his lips, and smiled.

"The fairies."

"Then the fairies will soon be introduced to a policeman. You did it."

"Not with my own hands, I assure you. At my time of life I am beyond that sort of thing."

"How dare you cause my fence to be removed?"

"Your fence? I was not aware it was your fence."

"You said it was my fence."

"Pardon me-never. I could not be guilty of such a perversion of the truth."

"Then whose fence was it?"

"It was mine. That is, it was my uncle's, and so, in the natural course of things, it became mine. It was like this. At one time, hereabouts, there was no visible boundary line between the two properties. I fancy it was a question of who should be at the expense of erecting one. Finally, my uncle loosed his purse-strings. He built this fence, with the wood out of his own plantations-even your friend Mr Baker will be able to tell you so much-the object being to keep out trespassers from Exham Park."

"Then, as you have removed your fence, I shall have to put up one of my own. I have no intention of allowing innocent persons, connected with Exham Park, to trespass-unconsciously-on land belonging to Oak Dene."

"Miss Arnott, permit your servant to present a humble petition."

He held his cap in his hands, suggesting deference; but in the eyes was that continual suspicion of laughter which made it difficult to tell when he was serious. It annoyed Miss Arnott to find that whenever she encountered that glimmer of merriment she found it so difficult to preserve the rigidity of decorum which she so ardently desired. Now, although she meant to be angry, and was angry, when she encountered that peculiar quality in his glance, it was really hard to be as angry as she wished.

"What objectionable remark have you to make now?"

"This-your servant desires to be forgiven."

"If the fence was yours, you were at liberty to do what you liked with it. You don't want to be forgiven for doing what you choose with your own. You can pull down all the fence for all I care."

"Exactly; that is very good of you. It is not precisely for that I craved forgiveness. Your servant has ventured to do a bold thing."

"Please don't call yourself my servant. If there is a ridiculous thing which you can say it seems as if you were bound to say it. Nothing you can do would surprise me. Pray, what particular thing have you been doing now? I thought you were going to Southampton on your car?"

"The car's in trouble."

"What's the matter with it?"

"One man says one thing; another says another. I say- since this is the second time it's been in trouble this week-the thing's only fit for a rummage sale."

"I have never concealed my opinion from you."

"You haven't. Your opinion, being unbiassed by facts, is always the same; mine-depends. What, by the way, is just now your opinion of your own one? Lately it never seems to be in going order."

"That's preposterous nonsense, as you are perfectly well aware. But I don't mean to be drawn into a senseless wrangle. I came here hoping to escape that sort of thing."

"And you found me, which is tragic. However, we are wandering from the subject on to breezy heights. As I previously remarked, I have ventured to do a bold thing."

"And I have already inquired, what unusually bold thing is it you have done?"

"This."

They were at some little distance from each other; he on one side of the newly-made fence, she, where freshly-turned sods showed that the old fence used to be. He took a paper from his pocket, and, going close up to his side of the fence, held it out to her in his outstretched hand. She, afar off, observed both it and him distrustfully.

"What is it?"

"This? It's a paper with something written on it. We'll call it a document. Come and look at it. It's harmless. It's not a pistol-or a gun."

"I doubt if it contains anything which is likely to be of the slightest interest to me. Read what is on it."

"I would rather you read it yourself. Come and take it, if you please."

He spoke in that tone of calm assurance which was wont to affect her in a fashion which she herself was at a loss to understand. She resented bitterly its suggestion of authority; yet, before she was able to give adequate expression to her resentment, she was apt to find herself yielding entire obedience, as on the present occasion. In her indignation at the thought that he should issue his orders to her, as if she were his servant, she was more than half disposed to pick up a clod of earth, or a stone, and, like some street boy, hurl it at him and run away. She refrained from doing this, being aware that such a proceeding would not increase her dignity; and, also, because she did what he told her. She marched up to the fence and took the paper from his hand.

"I don't want it; you needn't suppose so. I've not the faintest desire to know what's on it." He simply looked at her with a glint of laughter in his big grey eyes. "I've half a mind to tear it in half and return it to you."

"You won't do that."

"Then I'll take it with me and look at it when I get home, if I look at it at all."

"Read it now."

She opened and read it; or tried to. "I don't understand what it's about; it seems to be so much gibberish. What is the thing?"

"It's a conveyance."

"A conveyance? What do you mean?"

"Being interpreted, it's a legal instrument which conveys to you and to your heirs for ever the fee-simple of-that."

"That?"

"That." He was pointing to the piece of land which lay within the confines of the newly-made fence. "That nook-that dell-that haven in which I saw you first, because you were under the impression it was yours. I was idiot enough to disabuse your mind, not being conscious, then, of what a fool I was. My idiocy has rankled ever since. However, it may have been of aforetime your lying there, cradled on that turf, has made of it consecrated ground. I guessed it then; I know it now. Then you fancied it was your own; now it assuredly is, you hold the conveyance in your hand."

"Mr Morice, what are you talking about? I don't in the least understand.'

"I was only endeavouring to explain what is the nature of the document you hold. Henceforward that rood of land-or thereabouts-is yours. If I set foot on it, you will be entitled to put into me a charge of lead."

"Do you mean to say that you have given it me? Do you expect me to accept a gift-"

"Miss Arnott, the time for saying things is past. The transaction is concluded-past redemption. That land is yours as certainly as you are now standing on it; nothing you can say or do can alter that well-established fact by so much as one jot or tittle. The matter is signed, sealed and settled; entered in the archives of the law. Protest from you will be a mere waste of time."

"I don't believe it."

"As you please. Take that document to your lawyer; lay it before him; he will soon tell you whether or not I speak the truth. By the way, I will take advantage of this opportunity to make a few remarks to you upon another subject. Miss Arnott, I object to you for one reason."

"For one reason only? That is very good of you. I thought you objected to me for a thousand reasons."

"Your irony is justified. Then we will put it that I object to you for one reason chiefly."

"Mr Morice, do you imagine that I care why you object to me? Aren't you aware that you are paying me the highest compliment within your power by letting me know that you do object to me? Do you suppose that, in any case, I will stand here and listen to your impertinent attempts at personal criticism?"

"You will stand there, and you will listen; but I don't propose to criticise you, either impertinently or otherwise, but you will stand and listen to what I have to say." Such a sudden flame came into Mr Hugh Morice's eyes that the girl, half frightened, half she knew not what, remained speechless there in front of him. He seemed all at once to have grown taller, and to be towering above her like some giant against whose irresistible force it was vain to try and struggle. "The chief reason why I object to you, Miss Arnott, is because you are so rich."

"Mr Morice!"

"In my small way, I'm well to do. I can afford to buy myself a motor. I can even afford to pay for its repairs; and, in the case of a car like mine, that means something."

"I can believe that, easily."

"Of course you can. But, relatively, compared to you, I'm a pauper, and I don't like it."

"And yet you think that I'll accept gifts from you- valuable gifts?"

"What I would like is, that a flaw should be found in your uncle's will; or the rightful heir turn up; or something happen which would entail your losing every penny you have in the world."

"What delightful things you say."

"Then, if you were actually and literally a pauper I might feel that you were more on an equality with me.

"Why should you wish to be on an equality with me?"

"Why? Don't you know?" On a sudden she began to tremble so that she could scarcely stand. "I see that you do know. I see it by the way the blood comes and goes in your cheeks; by the light which shines out of your eyes; by the fashion in which, as you see what is in mine, you stand shivering there. You know that I would like to be on an equality with you because I love you; and because it isn't flattering to my pride to know that, in every respect, you are so transcendently above me, and that, compared to you, I am altogether such a thing of clay. I don't want to receive everything and to give nothing. I am one of those sordid animals who like to think that their wives-who-are-to-be will be indebted to them for something besides their bare affection."

"How dare you talk to me like this?"

She felt as if she would have given anything to have been able to turn and flee, instead of seeming to stultify herself by so halting a rejoinder; but her feet were as if they were rooted to the ground.

"Do you mean, how dare I tell you that I love you? Why, I'd dare to tell you if you were a queen upon your throne and I your most insignificant subject. I'd dare to tell you if I knew that the telling would bring the heavens down. I'd dare to tell you if all the gamekeepers on your estate were

behind you there, pointing their guns at me, and I was assured they'd pull their triggers the instant I had told. Why should I not dare to tell you that I love you? I'm a man; and, after all, you're but a woman, though so rare an one. I dare to tell you more. I dare to tell you that the first time I saw you lying there, on that grassy cushion, I began to love you then. And it has grown since, until now, it consumes me as with fire. It has grown to be so great, that, mysterious and strange-and indeed, incredible though it seems-I've a sort of inkling somewhere in my bosom, that one day yet I'll win you for my wife. What do you say to that?"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.