Marsh Richard

A Woman Perfected

Richard Marsh

A Woman Perfected

Marsh R.

A Woman Perfected / R. Marsh — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

Marsh Richard
A Woman Perfected

CHAPTER I
STRICKEN

Donald Lindsay was prostrated by a stroke of apoplexy on Thursday, April 3. It was surmised that the immediate cause was mental. He arrived home apparently physically well, but in a state of what, for him, was a state of unusual agitation. As a rule he was a dour man; much given to silence; self-contained. At that time there was staying at Cloverlea, with his daughter Nora, a school-friend, Elaine Harding. During lunch both girls were struck by his unusual talkativeness. Often during a meal he would hardly open his lips for any other purpose except eating and drinking. That morning he talked volubly to both girls on all sorts of subjects. After lunch Nora said laughingly to Elaine-

"I wonder what's the matter with papa. I don't know when I remember him so conversational."

He put in no appearance at tea; but as that was a common occurrence his absence went unnoticed. When, however, the gong having sounded for dinner, the girls were waiting for him in the drawing-room, and still he did not come, Nora sent a servant to his dressing-room to inquire if he would be long. The man returned to say that his master was neither in his dressing-room nor his bedroom; that he had spent the afternoon in his study, from which no one had seen him issue; that the study door was locked, and knockings went unheeded. Nora, opening a French window in the drawing-room, went along the terrace towards the study.

The study opened on to the terrace. It had two long windows. At neither of them were the blinds down or the curtains drawn. It was elicited afterwards that the servant whose duty it was to attend to such matters had knocked at the door when the shadows lowered. On turning the handle, he found that it was locked; Mr. Lindsay informed him from within that he would draw the blinds himself. It seemed that he had not done so. The room was in darkness, with the exception of the flicker of the firelight. Nora said to Miss Harding, who had followed at her heels-

"Whatever does papa want with a fire on a day like this?" All that week the weather had been not only warm, but positively hot. There had been one of those hot spells which we sometimes get in April; and, as frequently, have to do without in August. Save in the evenings and early mornings fires had remained unlit in all the living rooms. That Thursday had been the hottest day of all. Mr. Lindsay was one of those persons who seldom felt the cold, but quickly suffered from the heat. He preferred to be without a fire in his own apartments when the rest of the establishment was glad enough to be within reach of a cheerful blaze. That there should be one in his study on such a day as that struck his daughter as strange. She stood close up to the window, her friend at her side. "The room seems empty."

"It is empty," said Miss Harding. Nora knocked, without result. "What's the use of knocking? There's no one there." Nora tried the handle first of one window, then of the other; both were fastened. "What's the use?" asked Miss Harding. "Any one can see that the room is empty. There's light enough for that."

At that moment the fire flared up in such a way that all the room within was lit by its radiance; so clearly lit as to make it plain that it had no occupant.

"But," observed Nora, "if it's empty why should the door be locked? Papa never leaves it locked when he's not inside."

Two figures approached through the darkness. In front was the housekeeper, Mrs. Steele.

"Miss Nora," she began, "you'd better go indoors. I'm afraid there's something wrong."

"Why should I go indoors?" the girl demanded. "And what can be wrong? We can see all over the room; we saw plainly just now, didn't we, Elaine? There's no one there."

"Your father's there," said Mrs. Steele.

Her tone was grim. Before Nora could ask how she knew that, there was a crash of glass. Looking round with a start she found that Stephen Morgan, the butler, had broken a pane in the other window.

"Morgan," she cried, "what are you doing?"

"This is the shortest way in," he answered.

He thrust his arm through the broken pane; lifted the hasp; the window was open. He went through it. Nora was following when she was checked by Mrs. Steele.

"Miss Nora," she persisted, "you had better go indoors."

"I am going indoors; isn't this indoors? If, as you put it, there is something wrong, who is more concerned than I?" All four entered. Morgan, who had passed round to the other side of the large writing-table, which was in the centre of the room, gave a sudden exclamation. Nora hurried round to where he was. Some one was lying huddled up on the floor; as if, slipping awkwardly out of his chair, he had lain helplessly where he had fallen. Nora dropped on her knees by his side. "Papa!" she cried. "Father!"

No one answered. Morgan lit the lamp which always stood on Mr. Lindsay's writing-table. In the days which followed Nora often had occasion to ask herself what, exactly, happened next. She was conscious that in the room there was a strong smell of burnt paper; always, afterwards, when her nostrils were visited by the odour of charred paper that scene came back to her. The cause of the smell was not far to seek; the hearth was full of ashes. Evidently Mr. Lindsay had been burning papers on a wholesale scale; apparently for that reason he had had a fire; Nora had a vague impression-which recurred to her, later, again and again-that many of the papers were only partially consumed. The room was littered with papers; they were all over the table; on chairs, on the floor; drawers stood open, papers peeped out of them; which was the more remarkable since Mr. Lindsay was the soul of neatness. Plainly the finger of God had touched him when he was still in the midst of the task which he had set himself. There came a time when Nora had reason to wish that she had retained her self-possession sufficiently to give instructions that all papers, both burnt and unburnt, were to be left exactly as they were; and had taken steps to ensure those instructions being carried out. But at the moment all she thought of was her father. He was not dead; his stertorous breathing was proof of that. They carried him up-stairs; undressed him, put him to bed, who an hour or two before had been the hale, strong man; who had never known what it was to be sick; who had so loved to do everything for himself.

Apoplexy was Dr. Banyard's pronouncement, when he appeared upon the scene; though there were features about the case which induced him to fall in readily with Nora's suggestion that a specialist should be sent for from town. The great man arrived in the middle of the night. When he saw Nora he was sententious but vague, as great doctors are apt to be; the girl gathered from his manner that the worst was to be feared.

On the following day, the Friday, towards evening, Mr. Lindsay partially regained consciousness-that is, he opened his eyes, and when his child leaned over him it was plain he knew her, though he got no further than the mere recognition. He could neither speak, nor move, nor do anything for himself at all. That night Nora dreamed a dream. She dreamed that her father came into her room in his night-shirt, and leaned over her, and whispered that he had something to say to her-which he must say to her; but which was for her ear alone-he was just about to tell her what it was when she woke up. So strong had the conviction of his actual presence been that for some moments she could not believe that it was a dream; she started up in bed fully expecting to find him standing by her side. When she found that he was not close enough to touch she leaned out of bed, murmuring-

"Father! father!"

It was only after she had lit a candle that she was constrained to the belief that it was a dream. Even then she was incredulous. She actually carried her candle to the door, and looked out into the passage, half expecting to see him passing along it. When she returned into her room she was in a curious condition, both mentally and bodily. She trembled so that she had to sink on to a chair. Then she did what she had not done for years-she cried. If she had had to say what prompted her tears, her explanation would have been a curious one; she would have had to say that she cried because of her father's grief; that it was his anguish which moved her to tears. Dream or no dream, what had struck her about him, as he leaned over her as she lay in bed, was his agony. In all the years she had known him she had never known him show signs of emotion; yet, as he leant over her she had felt, even in her sleep, that he was under the stress of some terrible trouble; that he wished to say to her what he had to say so much that his anxiety to say it was tearing at the very roots of his being. It was some minutes before she regained her self-control; when she did she slipped on a dressing-gown and went to her father's room. The night nurse answered her unspoken question by informing her that no change had taken place; that the sick man was just as he had been. Nora moved to his bed. There he lay, on his back, exactly as before. She had the feeling strong upon her that he had heard her coming; that, in some strange fashion, he was glad to see her; though, when she stood beside him, he looked up at her with such agony in his eyes that the sight of it brought tears to hers. Again there came to her that odd conviction which had possessed her when she woke out of sleep, that there was something which he strenuously wished to say to her; that he was torn by the desire to relieve himself of a burden which was on his mind.

On the Saturday his condition remained the same; he was conscious but motionless, helpless, and, above all, speechless. So convinced was she that if he could only speak, if only some means could be found by which he could convey his thoughts to her, that he would be more at his ease, that she appealed to Dr. Banyard.

"Can nothing be done to restore to him the power of speech, if only for a few minutes?"

"I believe that I am doing all that medicine can do; you heard Sir Masterman say that he could do no more."

"Can you think of no way in which he can convey to us his meaning? I believe that he has something which he wishes very much to say-something on his mind; and that if he could only say it-get it off his mind-he would at least be happier."

The doctor eyed her shrewdly.

"Have you any notion what it is?"

"Not the slightest. If I had I might prompt him, and get at it that way. But my father has never been very communicative with me; I know nothing of his private affairs-absolutely nothing; I only know that he is my father."

"Have you any other relations?"

"So far as I know only an aunt, his sister. I have never seen her-I don't think they have been on good terms; I don't know her address; I believe she lives abroad."

"Had your mother no relations?"

"I cannot tell you; I know nothing of my mother-she died when I was born. I have been wondering if what he wishes to say is that, if-if the worst comes, he would like to be buried in her grave. I don't know where her grave is; he has never spoken of her to me."

The doctor continued to eye her intently. He had a clever face, with a whimsical mouth, which seemed to be a little on one side; his eyes were deep-set, and were surrounded by a thick thatch of iron-grey hair.

"How old are you?"

"I shall be twenty in June."

"That's a ripe age."

She sighed.

"I feel as if I were a hundred."

"You don't look it; however, that's by the way. At such a time as this, Miss Lindsay, you ought not to be alone in this great house, with all the weight upon your shoulders."

"I'm not alone; Elaine is with me."

"Yes; and she-is even older than you."

"Elaine is twenty-four."

"I don't doubt it. If you're a hundred I should say that she is a thousand."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing." But she felt that he had meant something; she wondered what. He went on. "What I intended to remark was that I think you ought to have some one with you who would give proper attention to your interests. As it is, you are practically at the mercy of a lot of servants and-and others. Hasn't your father an old friend, in whom you yourself have confidence-a business friend? By the way, who is his man of business-his lawyer?"

She shook her head.

"If father has any friends I don't know them. He has never been very sociable with anybody about here; I can't say what old acquaintances he may have had elsewhere. As you are probably aware, he was frequently away."

"Did you never go with him?"

"Never-never once. I have never been with my father anywhere out of this immediate neighbourhood, except when I first went to school, when he escorted me."

"But you always knew where he was?"

"Sometimes; not always."

"Had he an address in town?"

"Only his club, so far as I know."

"Which was his club?"

"The Carlton."

"That sounds good enough. Did you use to write to him there?"

"Not often; he only liked me to write to him when I had something of importance to say. He cared neither for reading nor for writing letters. He once told me that there were a lot of women who seemed to have nothing better to do than waste their own and other people's time by scribbling a lot of nonsense, which they cut up into lengths, sent through the post, and called letters. He hoped I should never become one of them. I remembered what he said, and never troubled him with one of the 'lengths' called letters if I could help it."

Both of them smiled; only the doctor's was a whimsical smile, and hers was hardly suggestive of mirth.

"You haven't told me who his lawyer is."

"The only lawyer I ever heard him mention was Mr. Nash."

"Nash? He only employed him in little local jobs; in no sense was he his man of business; I've reasons for knowing that his opinion of Herbert Nash's legal ability is not an unduly high one."

As before, Nora shook her head.

"He is the only lawyer I ever heard papa mention."

"But, my dear Miss Lindsay, your father is a man of affairs-of wealth; he lives here at the rate of I don't know how many thousand pounds a year, and has never owed a man a penny; you must know something of his affairs."

"All I know is that he has always given me all the money I wanted, and not seldom more than I wanted; I have never had to ask him for any; but beyond that I know nothing."

When Dr. Banyard got home he said to his wife-

"Helen, if I had to define a male criminal lunatic, I am inclined to think that I should say it was a man who brought up his women-folk in the lap of luxury without giving them the faintest inkling as to where the wherewithal to pay for that luxury came from."

His wife said mischievously-

"It is at least something for women-folk, as you so gracefully describe the salt of the earth, to be brought up in the lap of luxury; please remember that, sir. And pray what prompts this last illustration of the wisdom of the modern Solomon?"

"That man Lindsay; you know how he's been a mystery to all the country-side; the hints which have been dropped; the guesses which have been made; the clues which the curious have followed, ending in nothing; the positive libels which have been uttered. It turns out that he's as much a mystery to his own daughter as he is to anybody else; I've just had it from her own lips. The man lies dying, leaving her in complete ignorance of everything she ought to know-at the mercy, not impossibly, of those who do know. Just as God is calling him home he wants to tell her; I can see it in his eyes, and so can she; but he is dumb. Unless a miracle is worked he'll die silent, longing to tell her what he ought to have told her years ago."

CHAPTER II
THE OPEN WINDOW

On the Sunday Donald Lindsay died, in the afternoon, about half-past four; probably about the time, Dr. Banyard said, when he had first been stricken. Although, apparently, conscious to the last, he died speechless, without being able to do anything to relieve himself of the burden which lay upon his mind; a burden which, it seemed not improbable, had been the first cause of the fate which had so suddenly overtaken him. To Nora the blow was, of course, a bad one; when she realized that her father was dead it seemed as if all the light had gone out of the world for her. And yet, in the nature of things, it was impossible that she should feel for him the affection which sometimes associates the parent with the child. He himself had scoffed at love; sentiment, he had repeatedly told her, was the thing in life which was to be most avoided; he had illustrated his meaning in his own practice. He had never been unkind, but he had certainly never been tender; so far as she was aware he had never kissed her in his life; on those rare occasions on which she had ventured to kiss him he had brushed her aside as if she had been guilty of some folly. His attitude towards her was one of more or less genial indifference. He had provided her with a beautiful home; he had bought Cloverlea, as he was careful to inform her, for her, and in it he left her very much alone. He supplied her liberally with money, and there he seemed to think his duty towards her ended. She was welcome to have any companions she chose; he asked no questions about her comings and her goings; took no sort of interest in the young women of her own age whom, at rare intervals, she induced to stay with her. He made no attempt whatever to find for her a place in local, or any other, society; yet, unaided, she began, by degrees, to occupy a somewhat prominent place on the local horizon.

Living in one of the finest places in the neighbourhood, with horses and carriages at her disposal, and even, latterly, motor cars; possessed of a sufficiency of ready money, it was hardly likely that she should remain unnoticed; her father's peculiarities threw her, if anything, into bolder relief. There was not a house for miles in which she was not a welcome visitor, and for this she had, largely, to thank herself. Not only was she good to look at, she was good to be with; she had that indefinable thing, charm. Not all the pens which ever wrote could make clear to Us the secret of a young girl's charm. Whilst she was still the mistress of Cloverlea her father seemed to be the only living creature who remained impervious to its magic influence; afterwards-that influence waned. On the Sunday on which her father died she was left alone with her grief; but on the Monday morning Dr. Banyard called and insisted on her seeing him. His manner, while it was brusque, was sympathetic.

"Now, my dear young lady," he began, almost as soon as she was in the room, "what you have first of all to remember is that you, at any rate, are still alive, and likely, in all human probability, to remain so for some considerable time to come; your first duty therefore, towards yourself, and towards your father, is to see that your interests are properly safeguarded."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Then I will endeavour to make myself clear. I believe you are engaged to be married."

"You know I am."

"Where, at the present moment, is Mr. Spencer?"

"He is on his way home from Cairo, where he has been staying with his aunt, Lady Jane Carruthers, who is ill."

"Does he know what has happened?"

"I don't quite know where he is. When he last wrote he told me that he was going to take what he called an 'after-cure' in Italy " – she smiled, as if at some thought of her own-"but he entered into no particulars, and until I hear from him again I don't quite know where he's to be found; all I do know is that he's to be home before the first of May."

"As things stand, that's some distance ahead. I believe that his father and mother, the Earl and Countess, are also absent." She nodded. "You say you don't know who was your father's man of business; then who is there to whom you feel yourself entitled to turn for the kind of assistance of which you stand in such imperative need, at once; certainly in the course of to-day?"

"There's Elaine."

"You mean Miss Harding?" It was his turn to smile. "I'm afraid she's not the kind of person I'm thinking of; though I do not for a moment doubt her cleverness. She suffers from one disqualification; she's not a man. What you want is a dependable, and thoroughly capable lawyer."

"There's Mr. Nash."

"Mr. Nash is, again, hardly the sort of person you're in want of. To begin with, he's too young, has too little experience; it was only the other day he qualified-with difficulty."

"He has been qualified more than three years; he did a good many things for papa."

"Yes, but what kind of things? Not the kind which will have to be done for you; and I happen to know that what he did he bungled."

"I believe he's coming here to-day."

"Have you sent for him?"

"I haven't; but Elaine came into my room this morning and asked if she should, and I believe she has."

"Miss Harding sent for him?" The doctor eyed her intently for a moment; then, turning, he went to the window and looked out; presently he spoke to her from there. "And do you propose to give Herbert Nash the run of your father's papers?"

"I don't know what I propose to do; I haven't thought about it at all; I want him to do what he can to help me; I don't feel as if I could do very much to help myself."

"Is it any use my saying that I can give you the name of a well-known firm of family lawyers; and that you have only to send them a wire, and before the day is over you'll have one of the best men in England-in every sense-on the premises, making your interests his own?"

"Elaine seemed to think that Mr. Nash has only to glance through some of my father's papers to discover who my father's man of business really was, and that then all we shall have to do will be to communicate with him."

"I see; there's something in that-Miss Harding has her wits about her. Do you know what time Mr. Nash is coming?"

"I don't-Elaine sent the message, if one was sent, and of that I'm not certain; anyhow I don't know what arrangements she has made."

"Would you mind inquiring?"

"I'll ask her to come here, then you can inquire yourself."

The bell was rung, and presently Miss Harding appeared. She was short and slight; with dark hair, big dark eyes, a dainty little mouth, and very red lips. She made at once for Nora, ignoring the doctor, who was still standing by the window.

"They tell me that you want me."

"It isn't I, it's Dr. Banyard; he wants to know if you have sent to Mr. Nash; and, if so, at what time he's coming."

Miss Harding opened her big eyes wider, which was a trick she had.

"Dr. Banyard wants to know? – why does Dr. Banyard want to know?"

"That I cannot tell you; you had better ask him; here he is. Is Mr. Nash coming?"

"Of course he's coming, but he doesn't seem to know quite when; it seems he has some sort of case on at the police court."

"I know; he's defending that young scoundrel, Gus Peters, who's been robbing his master."

This was the doctor; Miss Harding turned to him.

"Is the gentleman you call Gus Peters a scoundrel?"

"Isn't a fellow who robs his master a scoundrel?"

"Has it been proved that he robbed his master?"

"It's a matter of common notoriety."

"Common notoriety is not infrequently a liar. However, that's not the point; I suppose Mr. Nash will do his duty to his client in any case, and he'll come here as soon as he's done it."

"I'd wait for him if I could, but I have to go my round; I'll look in afterwards on the off-chance of finding him; there's something I particularly wish to say to him. I fancy the magistrates, in spite of Mr. Nash, will make short work of Mr. Peters."

After the doctor had gone Miss Harding said to Miss Lindsay,

"Nora, dear, don't you think that Dr. Banyard is inclined to be a little interfering?"

"It has never struck me that he was."

"It has struck me, more than once. But then I think that G.P.s are apt to be interfering; they hope, by having a finger in everybody's pie, to get a plum out of each. Dr. Banyard doesn't like Mr. Nash, does he?"

"He has never told me that he doesn't."

"Has he never breathed words to the same effect?"

"He has certainly hinted that he doesn't think much of Mr. Nash's legal abilities; but then who does?"

"I do."

"Really, Elaine?"

"Really, Nora. I believe that if he's truly interested in a person he can do as much for that person as anybody else-perhaps more."

"Possibly; but is he ever truly interested in anybody but himself?"

Miss Harding was silent for an instant; then she smiled rather oddly.

"Entirely between ourselves, Nora, that's what I wonder."

She had cause to.

It happened on the Thursday evening on which Mr. Lindsay was taken ill, that Elaine Harding was left with nothing to do, and no one to do it with. It is true that, had she insisted, she might have made herself of use in some way; but, as she herself admitted, she was no good when there was illness about. Indeed, she was one of those persons-though this she kept to herself-who shrunk from suffering in any form with a sort of instinctive physical repugnance. She only needed half-a-hint to the effect that her services were not required, and she was ready to give the sick-room as wide a berth as any one could possibly require. To be plain, she was disposed to regard Mr. Lindsay's attack almost as if it had been an injury to herself. Had she been perfectly free, she would have packed up her boxes and left the house within the hour; it would have been better for her if she had. The idea of having to remain under the same roof with a man who was suffering from an apoplectic stroke was horrid; but, at the same time, there were reasons, of divers sorts, why she should not flee from the dearest friend she had in the world at the first sign of trouble.

Instead of packing up her boxes she dined alone, off food which had been ruined by being kept waiting. That was another grievance. She did like good food, perfectly cooked. She was conscious that the servants were regarding her askance, as if they were surprised that she should dine at all; that also was annoying. When she rose from table she was in quite a bad temper-what Mr. Lindsay meant by falling ill when she was in the house she could not imagine. The solitude of the empty drawing-room was appalling. The French window still stood open; better the solitude of the grounds than that great bare chamber. She went out on to the terrace. It was a lovely night, warmer than many nights in June. There was not a cloud in the sky. A moon, almost at the full, lighted the world with her silver glory. She looked about her. Suddenly she perceived that a light was shining out upon the terrace from what was evidently an uncurtained window. She remembered; no doubt it was the lamp in Mr. Lindsay's study, the lamp which Morgan had lit; in that case the window must still be open. She went

to see; her slight form moved along the terrace with something stealthy in its movements, as if she was ashamed of what she was doing. She reached the study; it was as she supposed; the lamp was lit, the window was open, the room was empty. She was seized by what she would afterwards have described as a sudden access of curiosity. She glanced over her shoulder, to left and right; there was no one in sight; not a sound. She put her dainty head inside the window, to indulge herself with just one peep; after all, there is very little harm in innocent peeping; then she passed into the room.

CHAPTER III
LITTLE BY LITTLE

It was just as it was when its owner had been stricken down; in the same state of disorder. Cupboards yawned; drawers were open; letters and papers were everywhere; a fire still smouldered in the grate; the hearth was littered with the ashes of burned and half-burned papers; everywhere were indications that Mr. Lindsay had been interrupted, possibly just as he was setting his house in order. Glancing round her Elaine perceived that the door which led into the passage was open, though only an inch or two; probably it had been left unlatched when they bore the master through it. Moving lightly, on tiptoe, she shut it, noiselessly; but she made sure she had shut it fast. She even laid her small fingers about the handle of the key, seeming to hesitate whether or not to turn it; then, smiling, as if at the absurdity of the notion, she returned towards the centre of the room; standing for some seconds glancing about her in all directions, as if in search of something which it might be worth her while to look at; a pretty, dainty, girlish figure, herself the one thing in the whole room which was best worth looking at.

By degrees her quick, bright eyes, roving hither and thither, reached the writing-table in the centre, by which its owner had been sitting when he had slipped from off his chair; instantly they noted something which gleamed amid the litter of papers with which it was covered. Moving a little towards it she saw that there were coins on a little oasis about the centre; quite a heap of them-gold coins. On the top of them was half-a-sheet of note-paper. Going close to the table she picked this half-sheet up, gingerly, as if it were dangerous to touch. As a matter of fact to her, at that moment, a dynamite bomb could not have been more charged with peril. On the piece of paper were some figures-"£127" – nothing more. She knew that the writing was Mr. Lindsay's. Evidently he had been counting the coins, and had made a note upon that slip of paper of the value they represented; there were one hundred and twenty-seven pounds in gold.

Elaine Harding was poor. Her father was the vicar of a parish in the West of England. His parish was large; his family was large; but his income was small. His wife had died some three years ago, worn out by her efforts to make a pound do the work of at least thirty shillings. Elaine had been sent to an expensive school by a relation; there she had met Nora Lindsay. Just as the time came for her to be leaving school the relation died. It had been expected that he would have done something to establish her in life; had he lived he probably would have done; as it was he left her nothing. So he had done her harm instead of good; that expensive school filled her with notions which might never have got into her head had it not been for him; a fashionable boarding-school is a bad school for a poor man's daughter. Ever since she had left it she had been discontented, inwardly if not outwardly, for nature had made her one of those persons who always, if they can, show a smiling face to the world. Nora Lindsay had been her chief solace. She never refused Nora's invitations to pay her a visit, and when at Cloverlea stayed as long as she could; indeed, she had been there so much just lately, during Mr. Lindsay's almost continual absences, that she knew the people round about almost as well as Nora did herself. She allowed Nora to make her presents; she would have been hard put to it if Nora had not had promptings in that direction. And then the girl had such a pretty way of giving, as if she were receiving a favour instead of bestowing one, that Elaine had no difficulty in preserving her dignity in face of the most delicate donations. Yet in spite of Nora's generosity she was always in need of money; there were special reasons why she was very much in need of it just now. Only the night before she had spent nearly an hour on her knees praying to God to show her some way to the cash she stood so much in want of; and now here were one hundred and twenty-seven pounds in gold at her finger-tips.

It could hardly be called an answer to her prayer. It is said that prayers are heard in two places, in heaven and in hell; Elaine realized with a sudden, shrinking terror that this answer must have come from hell. The owner of that money was up-stairs, dying; she believed that he was dying, speechless; she thought it possible that he might never be able to speak again, this side the grave. The chances were that he was the only person living who knew that that money was where it was. It was hardly likely that he would ever again be able to refer to its existence; she might, therefore, safely regard it as-what? Say, treasure-trove; it was a convenient word, treasure-trove; especially as she was placed. One hundred and twenty-seven pounds! in gold! no one would ever be able to trace it! ever!

Her eyes, which had opened wider and wider, having in them a very singular look, a look which would have startled her had they suddenly glared back at her from a mirror, wandered from the heap of gold coins to a bag, a canvas bag-a good-sized canvas bag, stuffed, apparently, to repletion, tied round the top with red tape; the kind of bag, she was aware, which is used by bankers to contain coin. She touched it, lightly, with her finger-tips; there were coins inside, undoubtedly; she could see them bulging through the canvas. She picked it up, again gingerly, as if, if she did not observe great care, it might explode in her hand; it had been better for her, perhaps, if it had. It was heavy, heavier than she had expected; wedged full of money. Beneath it there was another half-sheet of writing-paper; on it, in Donald Lindsay's writing, was what was probably a statement of what the bag contained-"£500." Five hundred pounds! obviously again in gold! She could feel the sovereigns! and the one person who knew of its existence dumb and dying!

What was the matter with Elaine? The sheet of paper fell from her hand. She reeled as if attacked by sudden vertigo; she leaned against the table as if to save herself from falling; she went quite white; she stared about her as if afraid. Six hundred and twenty-seven pounds in gold! ownerless! practically ownerless, for how could it be said to have an owner when the only creature who knew of its existence was dumb and dying? Six hundred and twenty-seven pounds! what might not that money mean to her? – and-and to some one else who had grown of late to be almost more to her than herself? She turned again to clutch at it; when she saw that on the writing-table there still was something else; a roll of notes, enclosed in a rubber band; banknotes, if she could believe her eyes. She picked them up, to make sure; heedlessly, fearlessly this time; the other things had proved so innocuous that, already, she had grown careless. They were bank-notes, unmistakably; and beneath them, was the inevitable half-sheet of paper. This time it was covered with quite an array of figures, in Donald Lindsay's neat handwriting. Seemingly, according to those figures, the roll of notes contained forty at £5, fifty at £10, twenty-five at £20, six at £50, ten at £100; in all one hundred and twenty-one notes of the value of £2500. The numbers were given of every note of each denomination; Elaine's quick eyes perceived that the numbers were by no means consecutive, from which she deduced that they had not been issued from a bank all at one time, but had come together at different dates, from various quarters.

She perceived on the instant that the discovery of that roll gave the situation quite a different character; she herself was conscious of being surprised at the rapidity with which her brain was working. One hundred and twenty pounds, even six hundred and twenty pounds in gold, was one thing; two thousand five hundred pounds in notes was quite another; the one might provide for her immediate necessities, with the other she might be secure for life. Properly invested the whole sum ought to bring her in three pounds a week-for ever; she believed she knew of an investment in which it might bring her more than that; much more. The point was, would it be safe to treat that as-treasure-trove? She was inclined to think it would. Probably the existence of the entire amount was known only to the dying man, if he was dying. There was, of course, the risk that he might come back to life again, in which case it might be awkward. But some ghoul-like intuition told her that she might dismiss that possibility from her mind; some dreadful voice within proclaimed that he was as good as dead already; in some horrible way she was sure of it. It was a heterogeneous gathering, that roll of notes; probably their owner himself could not have told how most of them came into his possession. The only record of their identity was on that sheet of paper; if that vanished there was nothing by

which they could be identified; that seemed pretty obvious. The devil whispered that it would be just as safe to take the notes as to take the gold; and she knew that she would run no risk by taking that.

There was still one point to be considered; she was clear-sighted and logical enough to be aware of that. If Donald Lindsay was dying then this money was, in all human probability, his child's, who was the dearest friend she had in the world, Nora. She loved Nora, really loved her; she was always telling herself that she really loved her. Then Nora had done her nothing but kindnesses; how great some of those kindnesses were only she and Nora knew. The idea that she would allow any one to rob Nora was monstrous; that she should rob her herself was inconceivable. Had any one accused her of being capable of such base ingratitude even then she would have repudiated the charge with honest indignation; nothing would ever induce her to do anything which could injure Nora. She knew herself well enough to be assured of that. And then she glozed the thing over with one of those patent glosses which the devil provides when the occasion needs them.

She argued this way; if her father died then Nora would be a rich woman, immensely rich; rich, possibly, beyond the dreams of avarice. She would never miss such a detail as, say, three thousand pounds; such a sum would be a trifle to her, a nothing; especially if she never knew that the sum had ever existed. There was that to be borne in mind; we do not miss what we never had, especially if we do not know it ever was. And in the case of a rich woman like Nora, with twenty, thirty, forty, perhaps fifty thousand pounds a year, perhaps even more, in such an income there were bound to be leakages; through one of them such a drop in the ocean as three thousand pounds might easily slip, and no one even be aware of it, least of all would the knowledge ever come to Nora, or touch her in any way. No; certainly darling Nora would suffer no injury if what was on the writing-table was regarded as treasure-trove.

At the same time far be it from her-Elaine-to do anything which could be regarded by any one as in the slightest degree unworthy. She was seized with a sudden access of virtue. Take the money-she! Sully her fingers by even touching it! who dare hint that she could do a thing like that! The idea was really too ridiculous; it was not to be taken seriously. It only showed what notions came to people when money was left about. She had always maintained that it was wrong to leave money about. Mr. Lindsay ought to have known better, putting temptation in some weak-minded person's way; she did not stop to consider that for that he could hardly be held responsible. What she had to do was to see that temptation was removed; some servant might stray into the room, and then what might not happen? The least she could do was to see that the money was put out of sight, in a drawer, or anywhere. She glanced about her, and was struck by a rather curious notion. The door of a bookcase stood wide open. A book had obviously been taken down from one of the shelves; a large volume, one of a set; there it lay by her elbow on the table. She looked at it, without clearly apprehending what the title was; she had a vague idea that in it was something about law. Here was the very hiding-place she wanted; no thief would be tempted to take money which was snugly hidden behind a great book like that, if only for the simple reason that he would never know that it was there. She slipped the loose gold into a big blue envelope; then she placed it, and the canvas bag, and the roll of notes, on that shelf in the bookcase. It so chanced that while the backs of the set of books were plumb with the front of the shelf they did not go right against the wall, so that there was space enough behind them to enable her, after a little manipulation, to do what she desired. When the volume had been returned to its place there was nothing whatever to show that behind it were more than three thousand pounds in notes and gold. She surveyed this result with satisfaction.

"Now," she told herself, "I've removed temptation from everybody's way."

The three half-sheets of paper on which Mr. Lindsay had noted the several amounts she folded up together and thrust into the bodice of her dress; possibly she thought that they would be out of harm's way there. She had just done this, and had shut the bookcase door, when, in the silence which prevailed, she distinctly heard the footsteps of some one moving in the grounds without. Instantly she blew the lamp out, and went fluttering through the open window. So soon as she was on the terrace

she stood still to listen. Her ear had not deceived her. Some one, not far off, was moving along a gravel path; apparently the sound proceeded from the other side of the house. Either her perceptions must have been very keen, or there was something unusual about the step; though it is strange how quick the ear is to recognize a step with which one is familiar.

"I do believe," she told herself, "that it's his step." She ran along to the end of the terrace; then stopped again. "It is!" she said. With lifted skirts she tiptoed round the side of the house till she came to where a path branched off among the trees, then, drawing herself under their shadow, she stood and waited, smiling. The steps came nearer, close to where she was. She moved out from under the shadow. "Herbert!" she said.

The man-it was a man-was evidently taken by surprise; he stepped back so quickly that he almost stumbled.

"By George!" he exclaimed, "what a start you gave me!"

She laughed, half to herself.

"Did she frighten him, the poor thing! I heard you coming ever so far off; I knew it was you. And pray what are you doing here at this time of night?"

"I came upon the off-chance of getting a word with you."

"With me-at this hour!"

"Well, I've found you, and that's what I wanted."

"Herbert!" She went still closer, almost as if expecting a caress; but when he showed no inclination to take advantage of his opportunities, she saw from his face, in the moonlight, that there was something wrong. "My lord, what ails you?"

"Everything; I've come up to tell you that what we were talking about yesterday is clean off."

"And of what were we talking-yesterday?"

"Why, about our marriage, and all that kind of thing. I can't marry; I don't suppose I ever shall be able to; you'd better give me the mitten right away. To begin with, I've found out-or, rather, I've had the fact forced upon me, that I'm in a mess."

"What kind of mess?"

"Money, of course; what else counts?"

"How much?"

"If I don't get two hundred pounds-and where am I going to get two hundred pounds? why, I haven't as many shillings-and get it pretty soon, I shall have to-"

"What?"

He had left his sentence unfinished; he gave it a conclusion which one felt had not been originally intended.

"Well, I shall be in Queer Street."

He paused, and she was silent; she was thinking.

CHAPTER IV
THE AVERNIAN SLOPE

When she spoke again a quick observer might have noticed that in her voice there was a new intonation.

"Two hundred pounds is not such a very large sum."

"Isn't it? I'm glad you think so. It's a large sum to me; a lot too large. I've about as much chance of getting it as I have of getting the moon. And if I did get it I shouldn't be much forwarder so far as marriage is concerned. What's the use of my talking of marrying when I hardly earn enough to buy myself bread and cheese? and it's as certain as anything can be that in this place I never shall earn enough."

"Why not?"

"For one reason, if for no other, because in this place there's only room for one solicitor; and old Dawson's that one. He's got all the business that's worth having; and, what's more, he'll keep it. Now if I could buy old Dawson out-I happen to know that he's made what he considers pile enough for him, and would be quite willing to retire; or even if I could buy a share in his business, he might be willing to sell that; then it might be a case of talking; but as it is, so far as I'm concerned, marriage is off."

"How much would be wanted?"

"If I could lay my hands on a thousand, or fifteen hundred pounds in cash, then I might go to Dawson and make a proposal; but as I never shall be able to lay my hands on it, it would be better for both of us if we talked sense; that's what I've come for, to talk sense."

"Does all this mean that you've found out that you made a mistake when you told me that you loved me?"

"It means the exact opposite; I've found out that I love you a good deal more than I thought I did. If I didn't love you I might be disposed to behave like a cad, and marry you out of hand; but as I do love you I'm not taking any chances."

"I don't quite follow your reasoning."

"Don't you? It's clear enough to me. I'm in a hole, and because I love you I'm not going to drag you in as well."

"But suppose I should like to be dragged?"

"You don't understand, or you wouldn't talk like that."

"Shouldn't I? Don't be too certain. You are sure you love me?"

"I love you more than I thought I could love any one, and that's the mischief."

"Is it? I don't agree; because, you see, I love you."

"It's no good; I wish you didn't."

"Do you? Then I don't. If you wanted me to, I'd marry you to-morrow."

"Elaine!" Then he did take her in his arms, and he kissed her. And she kissed him. Suddenly he put her from him. "Don't! for God's sake, don't! Elaine, don't you tempt me! I'm not much of a chap, and I'm not much of a hand at resisting temptation-there's frankness for you! – and I want to keep straight where you're concerned. I'll make a clean breast of it; the only way I can see out of the mess I'm in is to make a bolt for it, and I'm going to bolt; there you have it. I've come up here to say good-bye."

"Good-bye?"

Her voice was tremulous.

"If ever I come to any good, which isn't very probable, you'll hear from me; you'll never hear from me if I don't; so I'm afraid that this is going to be very near a case of farewell for ever."

"You say two hundred pounds will get you out of that mess you're in?"

"About that; I dare say I could manage with less if it was ready money. But what's the use of talking? I don't propose to rob a bank, and that's the only way I ever could get it."

"And if you had fifteen hundred to offer Mr. Dawson, what then?"

"What then? Elaine, you're hard on me."

"How hard? I don't mean to be."

"To dangle before my face the things which I most want when you know they're not for me! Why, if I had fifteen hundred pounds, and could go to Dawson with a really serious proposition, the world would become another place; I should see my way to some sort of a career. I'd begin by earning a decent living; in no time I'd be getting together a home; in a year we might be married."

"A year? That's a long time."

He laughed.

"If I were Dawson's partner, with a really substantial share, we might be married right away."

"How soon, from now?"

"Elaine, what are you driving at? what is the use of our deceiving ourselves? I shall become Dawson's partner when pigs have wings, not before. What I have to do is bolt, while there still is time."

There was an interval of silence. They were standing very close together; but he kept his hands in his jacket pockets, as if he were resolved that he would not take her in his arms; while she stood, with downcast eyes, picking at the hem of her dress. When she spoke again it was almost in a whisper.

"Suppose I were able to find you the money?"

He smiled a smile of utter incredulity, as if her words were not worth considering.

"Suppose you were able to buy me the earth? Yesterday you told me that you had not enough money to buy yourself a pair of shoes; in fact, you said that your whole worldly wealth was represented by less than five shillings."

Once more she was still-oddly still.

"Herbert!"

The name was rather sighed than spoken. He saw that she was trembling. The appeal was irresistible. Again he put his arms about her and held her fast.

"Little lady, you've troubles enough of your own without worrying yourself about mine. You'll easily find better men than I am who'll be glad enough to worship the ground on which you stand, and then you'll recognize how much you owe me for running away, and leaving you an open field. The best thing that can happen to you is that I should go."

"I don't think so. I-I don't want you to go."

There was a catching in her breath.

"I don't want to go, but-I might find it awkward if I stayed."

"Herbert, I-I want to tell you something."

"What is it? By the sound of you it must be something very tremendous."

Her manner certainly was strange. As a rule she was a most self-possessed young woman; now she seemed to be able to do nothing but shiver and stammer. Not only was she hardly audible, but her words came from her one by one, as if she found it difficult to speak at all.

"What I-said to you-yesterday-wasn't true; I-said it to try you."

"What did you say to try me? Elaine, you're what I never thought you would be-you're mysterious."

"Suppose-you had fifteen hundred pounds-are you sure Mr. Dawson would make you a partner?"

"Well, I've never asked him, but I'm betting twopence."

"What would your income be if he did? You're not to laugh-answer my questions."

"Oh, I'll answer them; although, as I've already remarked, I've not the faintest notion what you're driving at; and that particular question is rather a wide one. If I were to buy a share I should try to do it on the understanding that some day I was to have the lot. I should probably commence

with an income of between three and four hundred, which would become more later on; I dare say old Dawson is making a good thousand a year."

"A thousand? We might live on that."

"I should think we might; we might start on three hundred; I should like to have the chance."

"I'd be willing. And how much would it cost to furnish a house?"

"I've a few sticks in those rooms of mine."

"I know; I also know what kind of sticks they are-we shouldn't want them."

"There at last we are agreed. I suppose that to furnish the kind of house we should want to start with would make a hole in a couple of hundred-you probably know more about that sort of thing than I do. But, my dear Elaine, what is the use of our playing at fairy tales? You haven't five shillings in the world, and I've only just enough to take me clear away, and to keep the breath in my body while I have one look round."

Again there was an interval of silence, which was broken by her in a scarcely audible whisper.

"That-that was what I was trying to explain; what-I said to you yesterday was-to prove you."

"What particular thing did you say? I haven't a notion what you mean."

"Every girl likes to be-wooed for herself alone."

"Of course she does, and it's dead certain you'll never be wooed for anything but your own sweet self; I've known you, and all about you, long enough to be aware that you're no heiress."

"That's-that's where you're wrong."

"Wrong! Elaine, where's the joke?"

"I-I am an heiress; of course, in a very moderate way."

"What do you call an heiress? when yesterday you told me that you didn't possess five shillings!"

"That was said to try you."

Raising her eyes she looked him boldly in the face; there in the bright moonlight they could see each other almost as clearly as if it had been high noon.

"To try me? You're beyond me altogether; Elaine, are you pulling my leg?"

"I have about two thousand pounds."

"Two thousand pounds! Great Scott! where did you get it from? I didn't know there was so much money in all your family."

"There, again, you were mistaken. I got it from an aunt who died-not long ago."

"When did she die?"

"Oh, about six months ago."

"What was her name?"

"The same as mine-Harding."

"Was she an aunt by marriage?"

"She was my father's sister."

"A spinster? But I thought you told me that none of your father's relatives had two pennies to rub together."

"So I thought; but I was wrong. At any rate, when she died she left me about two thousand pounds."

"You've kept it pretty dark."

He was staring at her as if altogether amazed; she smiled at him as if amused by his surprise.

"I have; I've told nobody-not even Nora."

"Doesn't Miss Lindsay know?"

"She doesn't. Nobody knows-except you; and I shall be obliged by your respecting my confidence."

"I'll respect your confidence; but-of all the queer starts! What fibs you've told!"

"I know I've told some; in a position like mine, one had to. But I'd made up my mind that you shouldn't know I had money, and-you didn't know."

"I certainly did not; I scarcely realize it now; I wonder if you're joking."

"No, I'm not joking."

She shook her pretty head, with a grave little smile. Her face looked white in the moonshine.

"Can you touch the capital? Is it in the hands of trustees? Or do you only have the income?"

"It is not in the hands of trustees; it is entirely at my own disposal; I can get it when I want."

"All of it?"

"All of it."

He drew a long breath, as if moved by some new and sudden strength of feeling.

"Can you-can you get two hundred pounds before next Tuesday?"

"I can, and I will-if you want it. You are sure you want it?"

"Elaine, if-if you will I'll-I'll never forget it."

"You shall have it on Monday if you like." He covered his face with his hands, seeming to be shaken by the stress of a great emotion. She drew closer to him, as if frightened; her voice trembled. "Herbert, what-what is wrong?"

Uncovering his face, clenching his fists, he stared straight in front of him, resolution in his eyes.

"Nothing now-nothing! – and there never shall be anything again! – thank-God. Thank God! Considering what sort of mess it was that I was in, I didn't dare to ask God to help me out of it; but He's done it without my asking Him. Elaine, upon my word I believe it's true that God moves in a mysterious way." Elaine, hiding her face against his shoulder, burst into tears, which surprised him more than anything which had gone before. She was not a girl who cries easily, yet now she was shaken by her sobs. Putting his arms about her, he strove to comfort her, showering on her endearing epithets. "My sweet, my dear, my darling, what troubles you? Don't you-don't you want me to have the money? You have only to say so; I shan't mind."

"Of course I want you to have it! I only want it for you! – you know I only want it for you! Herbert, are you-are you sure you love me? Tell me-tell me quite truly."

"I am as sure as that there is the moon above us; and now I dare to tell you so; no man ever loved a woman better than I love you. I know I am unworthy; I know how, in all essentials, you are infinitely above me-"

"I'm not-I'm not!"

"But it shall be my constant endeavour to raise myself to your level-"

"Don't! – you don't know what you're saying! Don't!"

"I do know what I'm saying, and I mean it; if God gives me strength I hope, before I've finished, to prove myself worthy of the wife I've won. You hear? Then make a note of it."

Then there were divers passages.

"Herbert, I want you to go to Mr. Dawson tomorrow, and arrange about that partnership. I'll find the fifteen hundred pounds."

"Sweetheart, you've turned all my sorrow into joy."

"And-this, sir, is supposed to be spoken in the faintest whisper-I-I think I'd like to be married pretty soon."

"As soon as it is legally possible, madam, you shall be married, if you choose to say the word."

"I don't want it in quite such a hurry as that; but-you know what I mean! – I don't want to have to wait a horrid year." Presently she asked, "Do you know that Mr. Lindsay's very ill?"

"I heard it as I came along."

"I think he's dying. I suppose Nora'll be very rich if he does."

"Let's hope that he'll not die."

"Not die?"

She looked at him with such a strange expression on her face that he smiled.

"Why, girlie, you don't want the father to die to make the daughter rich!"

"No; of course not."

But, afterwards, she was not the same; it was as if he had struck some jarring note. When they parted she went round to the back of the house, along the terrace, towards the study window, which still stood open. She paused upon the threshold.

"Suppose he were not to die? suppose he doesn't?"

The problem the supposition presented to her mind seemed to cause her no slight disturbance; still she passed into the room.

Which explains why, when Nora said she doubted if Mr. Nash was ever really interested in anybody but himself, Elaine Harding had good cause to wonder if the thing was true.</[>

CHAPTER V
PETER PIPER'S POPULAR PILLS

On the Monday, after Dr. Banyard had been gone perhaps a couple of hours, Mr. Nash drove up to Cloverlea in a dogcart. Miss Harding met him in the drive. At sight of her the gentleman descended; the cart went on up to the house, to wait for him. So soon as it was out of sight the lady, taking a packet from the bodice of her dress, gave it to her lover.

"That's the two hundred; put it in your pocket; I want you to promise that you'll not breathe a word to any one about the money having come from me."

"I promise readily."

"Nor about any other money which-I may find. I want you to keep your own counsel; I want people to suppose that the money is your own; I don't want them to think I'm buying a husband."

"I certainly will neither do nor say anything to make them think so. All the same, darling, I don't know how to thank you; you don't know what this means to me. It seems to be all in gold?"

He was fingering the parcel in his jacket pocket.

"It is; I thought you might find it more convenient."

"I think it's possible you're right; I believe you always are."

As he had been coming along in the dogcart he had not seemed to be in the best of spirits; now he was unmistakably cheerful; that package had made a difference. A question, however, which she asked seemed to annoy him more than, on the surface, it need have done.

"What became of Mr. Peters?"

"They gave him six months-confound the idiots?"

"Why confound them?"

The smile with which he accompanied his reply seemed forced.

"A lawyer likes his client to be acquitted."

"But Dr. Banyard says that he's a scoundrel."

"Dr. Banyard! You can tell Dr. Banyard, with my compliments, that he's a Pharisee."

"I think nothing of the man; I think he's an interfering prig. I don't like him, and he doesn't like me."

"Which shows that he must be all kinds of a fool."

"I don't know about that; but I do know that I don't like him. By the way, I suppose you understand what you're coming for. Everything here is at sixes and sevens. Nora knows absolutely nothing about her father's business affairs; he never told her anything; he kept his own counsel with a vengeance."

"So I gathered from your note."

"She doesn't even know who his man of business was. She wants you to find out; she thinks that if you look through his papers you will."

"There should be no difficulty about that. If I have access to his papers I ought to find that out inside ten minutes."

"I suppose so. But even if you do find out I don't see why you shouldn't keep the conduct of her affairs as much as possible in your hands; I think it might be done; you'll have my influence upon your side. You needn't say anything about there being an understanding between us; we can't keep people from guessing; but don't let them know-till it suits us."

He saw something in her eyes which caused him to pay her what some people would have regarded as an ambiguous compliment.

"By George, you're a clever one; you're the sort of girl I like!"

"I'm glad of that; because you happen to be the sort of man I like."

He laughed.

"I'd like to kiss you!"

"Quite impossible, here. You see, it might be rather a good thing for you to have the management of Nora's estate."

"True, oh queen!"

"Then why shouldn't you have it?"

"I know of no reason."

"There is no reason, if you take proper advantage of the fact that you're first on the field." They had entered the house and were standing outside the study door. She produced a key. "Nora's not appearing; poor dear, she's more distressed than I ever thought she would have been! so, on this occasion only, I am doing the honours. We've kept this room locked up since the day on which Mr. Lindsay was taken ill; no one has crossed the threshold; you'll find everything in the same condition in which he left it." They entered the room. So soon as they were in he kissed her, and she kissed him, though she protested. "Hush! Nora's waiting for me! Remember what I told you; there's no reason why you shouldn't have the management of everything-if you like."

He communed with himself when she had left him.

"I wonder what she means, exactly; she's careful not to dot her i's. She's the dearest girl in the world, even dearer than I thought. This is something like a windfall." He took out the packet, fingering it, smilingly, with the fingers of both hands. Then, replacing it in his pocket, glancing round the room, he was struck by the state of disorder it was in. "It's as well they kept the door locked; everything seems to have been left about for the first comer to admire. Lindsay must have been having a regular turn-out when he was taken ill; I wonder why." On the writing-table the first thing which caught his eye were some slips of blue paper secured by a rubber band. He snatched them up. They were four promissory notes, payable at various dates; they all bore the same signature, Herbert Nash. He chuckled. "We'll consider those as paid, until they prove the contrary; which they'll find it hard to do." He slipped them into his breast pocket. Settling himself on the chair on which Mr. Lindsay had been seated when death first touched him on the shoulder, he began to go methodically through the papers which were about him, practically, on all sides. He came on one, the contents of which seemed to occasion him profound surprise. "What on earth is this? what the dickens does it mean?" There was not a great deal on the paper; what there was he read again and again, as if he found its meaning curiously obscure. "This is queerish; I'd give a trifle to know what it does mean; it might be worth one's while to inquire."

Folding up the paper he placed it in his breast pocket, with the promissory notes. Hardly had he done so than the door was opened, without any warning, and Dr. Banyard came into the room.

"Hallo, Nash! have you found anything? have you found out who his man of business was?"

Mr. Nash glanced up from the papers he was studying; if he was a little startled by the doctor's unheralded appearance he gave no sign of it.

"I haven't discovered his man of business; but I have found something."

"You haven't come upon anything which shows who it was he generally employed; I understand you've been here some time."

Mr. Nash shook his head.

"I don't know how long I have been here, but I've come on nothing which shows that he ever employed any one at all."

"He must have employed some one."

The other shrugged his shoulders.

"I've gone through a good many of his papers; I've not hit on one which suggests it."

"You said you'd found something; what is it?"

"His will; or, rather, a will."

"That is something."

"Especially as, beyond a shadow of doubt, it's the last will he ever made. It was drawn up on the third, last Thursday, probably just before he was taken ill. It's in his own writing, brief, and to the point, and apparently quite in order, since it was witnessed by Morgan, the butler here, and Mrs. Steele the housekeeper."

"Let's have a look at it."

"Here it is, in the envelope in which I found it."

The doctor examined the paper which he took out of the envelope; it seemed that its contents gave him satisfaction.

"I see that, by this, he's left everything to his daughter unconditionally."

"That is so, the intention's unmistakable."

"Then she's safe; that's all right. It ought to be something handsome; I wonder how much it is."

"That's the question."

"I suppose you've come across something which gives you, at any rate, some vague notion."

"I haven't, that's the odd part of it."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I'm glad you've come."

"Why? what's up? Found the job too big to tackle single-handed? I thought you would."

"You're mistaken; that is not what I mean. I've gone through-hurriedly, but still thoroughly enough to have a pretty good idea of what it is that they contain-all the available books and papers; and, as you see, most of them seem available, everything seems open; and I've not found anything which even hints that he died the possessor of any property at all; with two exceptions. There is his pass-book at the local bank, showing a balance of about a hundred pounds, which may have been drawn on since; and there are the Cloverlea title-deeds, there, in that deed-box."

"That only shows that everything essential is in the hands of his London lawyer."

"You seem to take the existence of such a person very much for granted. He told me himself he hadn't one."

"Told you? when?"

"Not long ago there was a little difficulty about a right of way; I don't know if you heard of it. He came to me about it; I then asked him who acted for him in town; he said no one."

"You are sure?"

"I am; for a man in his position it struck me as odd."

"He must have had a man in town, you misunderstood him. You haven't gone through all the papers?"

"Not all."

"Then we shall come upon it; I'll help you with the rest. There are no doubt papers elsewhere; probably in his bedroom, or at his rooms in town. Have you found out what was his London address?"

"I have found nothing which shows that he had one."

"But he must have had a London address; why, he spent quite a large part of the year in town."

"I happen to know that the only London address Miss Lindsay ever had was the Carlton Club; they may be able to tell us there."

"Of course they'll be able to tell us. Found any cash?"

"Not a penny."

"Anything which stands for cash?"

"Nothing; except what I have told you."

He had said nothing about what was in his breast-pocket.

"Lindsay was a man of secretive habits; if he could help it he never let his left hand know what his right hand was doing. When you come to deal with the affairs of a man like that you're handicapped; but there can be no sort of doubt that he was a man of considerable means. It must

have cost him something to live here; where did the money to do that come from? It must have come from somewhere."

"It seems that there are a good many debts; as you are possibly aware, there is a good deal owing round here."

"He was a man who hated paying."

Suddenly the doctor glanced up from the papers he was examining to glare at his companion.

"Look here, Nash, what are you hinting at?"

"I am merely answering your questions."

"Yes, but you're answering them in a way I don't like."

The younger man smiled.

"I am afraid that I didn't realize that my answers had to be to your liking, whatever the facts might be."

The doctor returned to the papers; he looked as if he could have said something vigorous, but refrained. After a while he had to admit that his researches, so far, had been without result.

"Well, there seems to be nothing here, and that's a fact. These papers seem to contain material for a history of the Cloverlea estate since it came into Lindsay's possession; and that's all. Now for the safe."

"I've gone through that."

"I'll go through it also; though from the look of it, it doesn't seem as if there were much to go through." He pulled out one of the small drawers at the bottom. "Hallo, what have we here?" He took out an oblong wooden box. "What's this on the lid? 'Peter Piper's Popular Pills.'"

"What!"

The exclamation came from Nash.

"Here it is, large as life, in good bold letters; there ought to be something valuable in here." He opened the lid. "An envelope with papers in it; what's this writing on it? 'Analyses of the constituent parts of Peter Piper's Popular Pills by leading analytical chemists.' What fools those fellows are! Lindsay's writing; he doesn't seem to have had a high opinion of some one; let's hope there's nothing libellous. What's here besides? A bottle purporting to contain Peter Piper's Popular Pills; the man seems to have had them on the brain. And-other bottles containing the ingredients of which they're made; so it says outside them; as I'm alive! and the man kept this stuff inside his safe! Nash, why are you looking at me like that?"

Mr. Nash was regarding the doctor with a somewhat singular expression on his face; when the doctor put the question to him he started, as if taken by surprise.

"Looking at you? was I looking at you?"

"Glaring was the better word."

"It was unconscious. Are you-are you sure that they are Peter Piper's Popular Pills in that box?"

"Sure? As if I could be sure about a thing like that! what do I know about such filth? look for yourself."

Mr. Nash examined the box with a show of interest which its contents scarcely seemed to warrant.

"How extremely-curious."

"Fancy a man like Lindsay harbouring such stuff as that! I should think it was curious!"

Though both men used the same adjective one felt that each read into it a different meaning.

When Mr. Nash started to leave the house he found that the dogcart, which he supposed was still in waiting, had disappeared. He asked no questions, but drew his own conclusions. As he passed down the avenue, and perceived that Miss Harding was strolling among the trees, he smiled. So soon as the lady saw him she began to ply him with questions.

"Well, what's happened?"

"One thing's happened, you've sent away my dogcart."

She looked at him with mischief in her eyes.

"Walking will do you more good than driving; and it will cost you less. Besides, it will give you an opportunity of exchanging a few words with me. I hope you don't mind."

"On the contrary, I'm delighted."

"What have you found?"

"I've found his will; he's left his daughter everything."

"Everything! How splendid! I'm so glad he's left her everything!"

Miss Harding's face could not have been more radiant had she received a personal benefit.

"I shouldn't be over hasty in offering her your congratulations if I were you; it's quite possible that everything won't amount to very much."

She seemed struck by his tone even more than by his words.

"Herbert! What do you mean?"

Mr. Nash kicked a pebble with his toe; then he whistled to himself; then he said, just as her patience was at an end-

"It's a bit awkward to explain, but it's this way; Banyard and I have been going through his books and papers, and everything there was to go through; and there was a good deal, as you know; and we haven't come on anything which points to money or money's worth. I've been putting two and two together, and I rather think I understand the situation; when all's over and settled I shouldn't be surprised if Miss Lindsay would be very glad indeed to have your little fortune."

"My-my little fortune?"

"I'm alluding to the snug little legacy left you by your venerated aunt."

"It's-it's impossible!"

"More impossible things have happened; and I think I'm almost inclined to bet twopence that her fortune's nearer two thousand shillings than two thousand pounds."

"Herbert! Herbert!"

"What's the matter? Why, little girl, you mustn't take on like that; what a sensitive little thing it is! it'll be through no fault of yours if she's left penniless! She's never been over nice to me, and I'm sure I shan't worry myself into an early grave if she is."

"You don't understand!" she wailed. "You don't understand."

By the domestic hearth that evening Dr. Banyard addressed to his wife some more or less sententious remarks, as he puffed at his pipe.

"There's something wrong up at Cloverlea, confoundedly wrong. I don't understand what it is, and I don't like what I do understand. There's a riddle somewhere, and I'm half afraid we're not going to find the answer. Mind you, I've actually no grounds to go upon, but I don't trust that man, Nash; I've all sorts of doubts about the fellow."

Mrs. Banyard looked up from her sewing, and smiled; as is the way with wives of some years' standing she did not always take her husband so seriously as she might have done.

"Poor Mr. Nash! you never do like good-looking men."

"It isn't only that."

"No; but it's partly that. You funny old man! It doesn't follow because you're ugly yourself that all good-looking men are necessarily worthless."

"Generally speaking, a certain type of good-looking man is worth nothing."

"And Mr. Nash represents the type? And do you represent Christian charity? What do you suspect him of now? of having the answer to that mysterious riddle?"

"I don't know; that's just it, I don't know; but I doubt him all the same."

CHAPTER VI
HER LOVE STORY

That night Nora dreamed again-the same dream. It was more real even than before. She was lying in bed-she knew she was in bed, and her father came in at the door. In some strange fashion she had expected him; it was not that she heard him moving along the passage, yet, somehow, she knew that he was there, that he was coming. And, before he actually appeared, she knew that he was in great trouble; when he opened the door, so noiselessly, and without a sound came in, and closed the door again, also without a sound, she knew it even better than before, and his trouble communicated itself to her. In such trouble was he that he was even afraid of her. He remained close to the door, looking timidly towards her as she lay in bed, not daring to approach. So moved was she by his strange timidity that she sat up, and held out her arms to him, calling-

"Father!" She was sure she called, because she heard her own voice quite clearly; not as it mostly is in dreams, when one hears nothing. But yet he came no closer. Then she saw that he was crying. She called to him again, more eagerly. Then he went, step by step, timidly towards her; until she had her arms about him, and whispered, "Father, tell me what it is that troubles you." And he tried to tell her, but he could not; he was speechless, and to him his speechlessness was agony. If he only could speak she felt that all might be well with him-and with her; but he was tongue-tied. She tried to think of what it could be that he wished to say to her, and to prompt him; whispering into his ear first this, then that; but it was plain that none of her hints had anything to do with what was in his mind, though once she thought that she might not be far off. When she whispered, "Is it about what I am to do in the future?" his face changed; a sort of convulsion passed all over him; he drew himself away from her, and stood up, raising his arms, seeming to make a frenzied effort to achieve articulation; it even seemed that speech had come to him at last, when, just as words were already almost issuing from his lips, he vanished, and she was alone in the darkness.

Not the least strange part of it was that she was wide awake, having no consciousness of being roused out of sleep; she was sitting up in bed, the tears were streaming down her cheeks, her arms were held out, with about them the oddest feeling of somebody having just been in them. Indeed for a moment or two she could not believe that there was not some one in them still. When she did realize that they were empty she threw herself face downwards in the bed, crying as if her heart would break, because of her father's woe.

Donald Lindsay was buried on the Thursday-exactly a week after he had been stricken with his death. On the Tuesday and Wednesday she had variations of the same dream, and on the Thursday, the day of the funeral, it was so terrible a dream that the agony of it remained with her until the morning. For a long time afterwards some form of that dream would come to her at intervals. She said nothing of it to any one, though there was a moment when she was on the point of speaking of it to Elaine Harding; but she had it sometimes even in her waking thoughts. The course of events induced in her a kind of dormant conviction not only that the dream was sent to her for some special purpose, and that it had a meaning; but, also, that some day both the purpose and the meaning would be made clear. She knew that it is written that, of old, God spake to men in dreams; she believed it to be possible that, in a dream, God might speak to her. The dream always ended at the same point: just as her father, after an agonizing effort, seemed to be about to speak. She fancied that, some night, it might go on further, and that he might speak to her in his dream, and that with his speaking the purpose and the meaning of it all would be discovered.

On the morning of the funeral, among the other letters, Mrs. Steele, the housekeeper, called her attention to one in particular. No doubt she was aware that, during the last few days, either letters

had been left unopened, or the task of opening them relegated to Elaine Harding, who communicated their contents if she pleased.

"Miss Nora," she said, "this is a letter from Mr. Spencer."

The girl caught eagerly at it; it was the first sign of eagerness she had lately shown. So soon as Mrs. Steele had gone she opened it. It was from her lover, Robert Spencer; a long letter, on three closely written sheets of foreign note-paper. He was in Sicily; had sent her a gossipy narrative of his wanderings among its ancient places, and among its scenes of beauty. It was full of love, and life, and high spirits; the sort of letter which makes a girl's heart beat happily; which she cherishes amid her most precious possessions. He told her how he wished that she was with him; that she at least was close at hand, that they might see and enjoy, together, what was so much worth seeing, and enjoying. In mischievous mood he added that when the great day came, on which the sun would rise in their sky for ever, and they were married, he humbly ventured to suggest that part of their honeymoon might be spent where he was then-"that would be to invest Taormina, which is already nearly all halos, with another, the brightest and the best."

To a girl's thinking there could be no pleasanter reading than such a letter; she could desire nothing better of the future than that its savour might remain unchanged, and that, throughout the years which were to come, the love of which it was a sign might walk always by her side.

So great was its power that, for a moment, it charmed her to forgetfulness. She saw in it her lover's face, and looked into his eyes; his voice spoke to her from the pages, and sounded sweetly in her ears. When he wrote of honeymooning the blood came to her cheeks; her lips were parted by a smile; her heart seemed speaking unto his. Even when she remembered, and recalled what day it was, and what shortly was about to happen, the light did not quite fade from her eyes, and the world was not all darkness. The match had been one of the few things respecting which her father had expressed to her his audible satisfaction. It was tacitly understood that the marriage was to take place during the current year. Both lovers were young-Robert Spencer had only just turned twenty-four. The only thing which could be said against him was his lack of means. He had done well both at school and at the university. Without being the least bit of a prig, he was exempt from those vices which the facile standard of the world in which he lived associates with youth. He was tall and strong and handsome; easy-mannered, more than is apt to be the case with the young Englishman of twenty-four; of fluent speech-he had been, in his time, one of the stars of the Union; there was no apparent reason why he should not make for himself, among the men of his own generation, a great name for good. The chief obstacle with which he would have to contend might be, as has been said, the eternal question of pence.

He was the fourth, and youngest, son of the Earl of Mountdennis. Everybody knows that his lordship had more children than money; four sons and five daughters is a liberal allowance for any man; the Earl and the Countess have that number living, and three of their children are dead. At the period of which we are writing all the five daughters were married, though by no means, from their mother's point of view, all satisfactorily married. The Countess never attempted to conceal the fact that only the first and third had done really well for themselves. According to the same authority, the boys had not done all that they might have done; the heir, Lord Cookham, in particular, had been a bitter disappointment, having been-his mother called it-wicked enough to marry a girl who had no money, and, practically, no family, merely because he loved her. He had been perfectly well aware that, in his case, marriage must mean money; it had been drummed into his ears from his earliest childhood; – family was of no consequence; he had family enough of his own. The one thing wanted was money-sacks full. And the thing was made more cruel by the fact that he might have had any amount of money, had he chosen. He might have had an English girl with a hundred thousand a year, to say nothing of several Americans with a great deal more; instead of which he married a young woman whom he met, as the Countess put it, at "some horrid foreign place," whose only qualification was that she was generally admitted, by some excellent judges, to be delightful. What,

as the Countess pungently inquired, was the use of being delightful if she and her husband had not enough money between them to pay off the family debts, to say nothing of keeping up the family seats. And then they actually started by having three children in less than six years-all girls. It was too perfectly ridiculously absurd!

Montagu, the second son, had refused to marry at all, so his mother said; though it was not known that any girls had ever actually asked him. It was understood that he had made money in Africa, though he showed not the slightest inclination to squander it among his relatives; he had even declined to what his mother termed "lend" her five thousand pounds to be spent on "doing up" Holtye, which was the seat the Earl and the Countess principally favoured. Such conduct, she declared, was inhuman, but "so like Montagu." Arthur, the third son, had done best for himself from at least a financial point of view. He had married Mrs. Parkes-Peters, the widow of the contractor who left three millions. It was true that nasty things had been said of some of his most successful contracts; but, after all, the man was dead. It was also true that no one knew who, or what, his widow was before he married her; it was, if possible, even more true that she was older than her second husband. She herself admitted that she was his senior by ten years-the world said it ought to be twenty. But as she proved to be an ideal wife from the point of view of the man who marries for money, such trifles could hardly be said to count. Their friends asserted that she gave him a thousand pounds every time he kissed her-really no husband could want more.

And yet both his parents were aware that one need not be hypercritical to be able to see objections even against Arthur's wife. There remained, therefore, to them but one hope-their fourth son, Robert. Theirs must have been a sanguine temperament-when one knew them one felt as if they had only one between them-because, after all their disappointments, they still built on him a castle in Spain, of their own design. It really seemed as if that castle was to be actually reared. Robert had set his affections on Miss Lindsay, and that without the least prompting from either of them; as they knew, from painful experience, in such cases one sometimes had to do such a lot of prompting. They frankly admitted that, looking at the matter as a whole, he could hardly have been expected to do better-to begin with. Cloverlea was quite a nice place, and, as it were, next door to Holtye; there were only nine miles between them. It was kept up in excellent style; the Earl, who was supposed to know something about such things, assured his wife that it probably cost Donald Lindsay at least ten thousand a-year. It was true that its owner was by way of being a curiosity; but then his eccentricities-if they could be called eccentricities-were not of a kind which would be likely to injure his daughter. And she was his only child. In her capacity of young woman nothing whatever could be urged against her; the Earl and Countess were entirely at one in agreeing with Robert that, in that respect, she was all that there was of the most charming. Obviously, when her father died, she would be more than comfortably off. The only thing to be considered was, what would she have until he died-in case she took unto herself a husband. On this point, also, everything was as it should be.

The Earl rode over to Cloverlea one day, when its master happened to be at home, and had a talk with him-than which nothing could be more satisfactory. Lindsay told his visitor, in that plain outspoken way of his, that he was satisfied with the result of inquiries he had been making about the Hon. Robert, and that, in consequence, five thousand a year would be settled on Nora if he married her. Besides this, he would present her, as a wedding gift, with a suitable house in town, and all the furniture. He added, with one of his rare, grim smiles, which the earl interpreted in a fashion of his own, that it was possible that one day she would be much richer than people thought.

The Earl told the Countess, on his return to Holtye, that he should not be surprised if the man was a millionaire. Anyhow his offer was most generous; especially as Robert was the youngest of nine, and had, literally, nothing but himself and his family to bring his wife. The Countess wondered vaguely if, on the strength of the matrimonial alliance which was to unite the two families, Mr. Lindsay might not be induced to advance what she described as "something decent" in order that something might be done to Holtye, which was falling to pieces, and where the furniture was in a

scandalous condition. The Earl, who knew that his wife had been searching for years for some one who would play the part of fairy prince towards their family domain, merely remarked that it would be time enough to think of all that kind of thing when the pair were married.

Nora had not been actually informed of the arrangements which had been made for the commercial success of her love-match, but she knew quite well that it never would have entered the domain of practical politics if they had not been satisfactory. Robert was perfectly frank upon the point; he was frank with her about everything; it was his nature to be frank. He told her that he had not a shilling of his own, and never had.

"My aunt paid for me at Eton, and, afterwards, at the 'Varsity; so far as I know, she's paid for me ever since I was born; I believe she's even bought my clothes. I don't know why, because we're not a bit in sympathy; though she's a dear, on lines of her own, which are peculiar. She's only just on speaking terms with my mother, who's her own sister; and the things she says of my father are dreadful-he's really the most inoffensive of men. She has never lived in England since I can remember; she says she can't afford it. The truth is, she's never happy except in pursuit of her health; she passes from one 'cure' place to another, in possession of a number of complaints which nobody understands, but which suit her constitution admirably. She has about two thousand a year of her own, and spends most of it on doctors; though she declares, to their faces, that she never met one yet who knew what he is talking about. Out of what is left after the doctors are paid she is at present allowing me three hundred pounds a year, which is very good of her; especially considering two facts, the one being that I really have no claim on her at all, and the other that the three hundred is sometimes nearly four; for instance, last year she gave me fifty pounds as a birthday present, and twenty-five as a Christmas-box. So you see that I really am a pauper, living upon charity, and that I never ought to have dared to love you at all; only I couldn't help it-who could?"

She had laughed at him.

"Lots of people. Of course, it's very sad that you should be so poor; but I dare say, if we are careful, we can manage; and you know there is such a thing as love in a cottage-would the prospect of such a fate as that seem to you so very frightful?"

"Frightful! I wouldn't mind it a bit; would you?"

"I dare say I could put up with it for a time."

"It should only be for a time, I promise you. I'm handicapped by being who I am, but I don't think I'm an utter fool. I've always taken it for granted that I should have to make my own way, and, to the best of my ability, I've provided myself with the necessary tools; I believe that I could make my own way in the world as well as another man. You have only to say the word, and I'll make it first and woo you afterwards."

"Thank you; I'm content with things as they are; I'm sorry you're not."

This was said with a twinkle in her eyes which was meant to provoke him to warmth, and it did.

"Nora! do you wish me to-shake you?"

"I don't mind."

He did do something to her; but she was not shaken.

CHAPTER VII
THE PUZZLE WHICH DONALD LINDSAY LEFT BEHIND HIM

Donald Lindsay was buried on a glorious afternoon, when all the world seemed at its best and brightest. Carriages from all parts of the district represented their absent owners, but only four mourners were actually present. Nora and Elaine stood together on one side of the grave, confronting Dr. Banyard and Mr. Nash. Afterwards the four were again together in the room at Cloverlea which Nora regarded as in an especial sense her own. The blinds at last were drawn; the windows stood wide open; the April sun, warm enough for June, came streaming in, but it brought no brightness to those within. Each of the quartette seemed to be singularly ill at ease. It was not strange that such should have been the case with Nora; it was her hour of trial. But why Elaine Harding should have been unlike her usual self was not so obvious. An impartial observer, knowing her well, would have said that she had never appeared to such little advantage. Black never became her; either because she was physically unwell, or for some more obscure reason, that afternoon, in her mourning, she looked almost hideous. Had she been at liberty to choose, she would have been present neither at the funeral nor afterwards in Nora's room; but she had not seen her way to refuse compliance with Nora's positive request. Since Mr. Nash had told her of his, and Dr. Banyard's, failure to find among the dead man's papers anything to show that he had left any real provision for his daughter at all, she had been living in what seemed to her to be a continual nightmare. Day and night she was haunted by the three thousand one hundred and twenty-seven pounds which she had regarded as treasure-trove. Had she not taken it for granted that Nora would be a rich woman she would not have touched a farthing; of that she was certain. It was the conviction that such a sum would mean nothing to Nora which had been the irresistible temptation. Had it been in her power she would have replaced the money even then, and would have been only too glad to do it, though it left her penniless. But she had learnt what has to be learnt by all of us, how much easier it is to do than to undo. Any attempt in the direction of restitution would mean not only exposure, but ruin. Herbert Nash had to be considered. He had had two hundred pounds of the money; what he had done with it he alone knew. Then he had swallowed the tale of her aunt's legacy; she was perfectly well aware that if it had not been for that supposititious two thousand pounds she would never have been his promised wife. Was she to tell him now that she had lied? What explanation was she to offer him if she did? Would he not be entitled to regard her as some unspeakable thing? She did not doubt that his love would turn to scorn; that he would cast her from him with loathing and disgust.

No; anything rather than that; for she loved him.

On the other hand, if it was true that Nora had been left a pauper? and she had robbed her of her all! Would that fact not be shouted at her from out of the flaming sky for ever and for aye? would not the face of God be turned from her through all eternity? And how often, and how fervently, she had prayed that God might guide and bless her. She dared not think of the punishment which must inevitably crown so great a sin. She racked her brain to find some way out of the peril which threatened her on every hand; if only she could light on some plausible compromise. And at last she thought-she hoped-that she had discovered something which would relieve the situation at the point of its greatest strain. Three thousand one hundred and twenty-seven pounds she had-found; she had told Mr. Nash that her aunt had left two thousand. Her idea had been that she would have a good, round sum in hand, unknown to him, which, in case of need, would be of service in a tight place. What was to prevent her, should the tale of Nora's impoverishment turn out to be correct, disclosing the existence of that balance of over a thousand pounds; her fertile brain would easily invent some reasonable explanation; though that tale of the legacy would not do for Nora, who knew too much

of her family affairs. Then she might insist on Nora accepting it as-what should she call it? a gift? a loan? It did not matter what she called it so long as Nora took the money; and she would have to take it. In that case Nora would regard her as her benefactor, instead of-what she was.

It is wonderful with what ointments we try to salve our consciences. At intervals Elaine was almost pleased with herself as she thought of how, if the worst came to the worst, she was going to present Nora with more than a thousand pounds. Yet that afternoon, in that pleasant room, in which she and her friend had spent so many happy hours, she was as one who knew not peace.

Nor did it seem to be peace with Mr. Nash. If one might judge from his physiognomy he did not appear to be at all inclined to congratulate himself on the position which it seemed likely he would occupy, of administrator of the dead man's estate. Such a position would mean something for him, if it meant nothing for anybody else; in such a case a lawyer always esteems himself worthy of his hire; and he sees that he gets it. Yet he looked as if he would have preferred to have been almost anywhere else rather than where he was.

The same remark applied to Dr. Banyard; though even a superficial observer might have guessed that the two men were troubled because of different things. A keen judge of human nature might have perceived that the doctor was troubled because of Nora; Herbert Nash because of himself.

The order of the proceedings was singular; it required pressure to induce Nora to sit down.

"I would much rather stand," she said. "I don't know what you have to say to me; but I hope that, whatever it is, it won't take long; I feel as if I can't sit; I would much sooner listen standing if you don't mind."

But the doctor did mind; he would not have it; he made her sit. Then nothing would satisfy her but that Elaine should sit by her; which was agony to Miss Harding, who was in the condition which is known as being all over pins and needles; it would have been a relief to have been able to scream.

"Now, Nash," inquired the doctor, when the two young women, looking, in their several ways, pictures of misery, were seated on adjacent chairs, "where are those papers? Let's get to business; and be as brief and as clear as you can."

Nash, with what was almost a hang-dog air, took some papers out of a black leather bag. Untying the tape which bound them together he began. His tale was neither very brief nor very clear; though his meaning was plain enough when it was ended. The dead man had left everything to his daughter; but he had nothing to leave; that was what it came to. There was less than a hundred pounds at the bank; and there was Cloverlea and the contents of the house. On the debit side there were debts amounting, so far as could be ascertained, to several thousand pounds; claims had come in from wholly unexpected quarters for large sums. If they had to be paid at once that would involve a forced sale of Cloverlea, and that would probably mean that very little would be left for Nora.

The faces of the two girls, as this state of affairs was being unfolded, were studies. On Miss Harding's face there came, by degrees, an expression of actual agony, as if her lover was playing the part of a torturer, whose every word was a fresh turn of the rack, or of the thumbscrew. Nora's face, on the other hand, as she began to perceive the point at which Mr. Nash was aiming, suggested anger rather than pain; the same suggestion was in her voice, as she addressed a question to him, so soon as he showed signs of having finished.

"Do you wish me to understand that my father has left no money?"

Mr. Nash looked down, as if unwilling to meet her eyes.

"Neither Dr. Banyard nor I have been able to find anything which points to money, I am sorry to say."

"You needn't be sorry." She turned to Dr. Banyard; with, as she did so, something in her manner which was hardly flattering to Mr. Nash. "If my father has left no money on what have we been living? Does Mr. Nash mean that my father spent all his money before he died? because, if he does, I tell him, quite plainly, that I don't believe it."

The doctor got up. It was a peculiarity of his that, while he was always anxious that others should sit still, he never could do so himself when he was moved. Thrusting his hands into his trousers pockets he began to fidget about the room.

"That's the point," he exclaimed. "It's a pity, my dear Miss Lindsay, that your father didn't take you more into his confidence."

"He was entitled to do as he pleased."

"Precisely! and he did as he pleased! and this is the result! that you know nothing; that we know nothing; and, apparently, that we can find out nothing. We have been in communication with his London club; they tell us that he was an occasional attendant; that, so far as they know, this was his only address; that sometimes, but not often, letters came for him; but there are none awaiting him at present; they can give us no further information, and we have not the dimmest notion who can. Let me add a sort of postscript to what Mr. Nash has told you, which will shed another sidelight on the position. It is now about five years since your father bought Cloverlea. Ever since he bought it he has paid three thousand pounds into the local bank four times each year, always in notes and gold, which, as you are possibly aware, is not a form in which such payments are usually made. His next payment, if he intended to follow his usual rule, was due last week, to be exact, last Friday; for four years in succession he has paid in three thousand pounds, in notes and gold, on the first Friday in April. He was taken ill, as you know, on Thursday; if he had intended to make his usual payment on the following day the money would have been in his possession; we should have found it; we have found nothing."

Although no one seemed to notice it, Miss Harding looked as if she were trembling on the verge of a serious attack of illness. Her face was white and drawn, her eyes were half closed, her mouth was tightly shut, her hand was pressed against her side, as if compelled to that position by sudden pain. The doctor, oblivious of the fact that it looked as if his services would presently be required, went remorselessly on.

"The only possible alternative is that the money was stolen, and that after he was taken ill; you know what likelihood there is of that. But in order to leave no room for doubt we have questioned every one connected with the household; I am bound to say that we have discovered nothing in the least suspicious."

"Of course not; I wish I had known what you were doing, I would have stopped it. The idea of supposing that any one here would rob me; there is not a creature about the place I would not trust with my life."

This was Nora; her words were like poisoned darts to at least one of her hearers. The doctor continued.

"Just so; but allow me to point out, Miss Lindsay, the inference which may be drawn from what we have been able to learn of your father's methods. He has paid twelve thousand pounds a year into the local bank, invariably in notes and gold, never a cheque among the lot; does not this suggest that he wished to conceal, even from his bankers, the source from which the money came?"

"I don't see why you say that."

"If their ledgers contained the record of his having paid in even so much as a single cheque we might have been able to trace the history of that cheque, and in so doing might have lighted upon something which would have served as the key to the whole puzzle; if, that is, we could discover some one who ever paid him anything we might find out why he paid, and so might chance upon a clue which in the end might show us where his income came from. As it is we have nothing to go upon; and I can't help thinking that he meant his bankers should have nothing to go upon; whether he intended that you should be in the same position is another question. The consequence is, as matters stand, I am bound to say so, my dear Miss Nora, it is no use blinking the truth-"

"Please tell me what you believe to be the truth; pray don't what you call blink it."

"It is a perfectly fair deduction to draw that he had come to the end of his resources, whatever they may have been; quite conceivably the immediate cause of his illness was the consciousness that

it was so; I am free to confess that, in this connection, the absence of the three thousand pounds, his usual quarterly payment into the bank, and, indeed, of any cash, is significant. I can only hope, Miss Nora, that you know something which will place the matter in quite a different aspect."

When the doctor ceased there was silence. Mr. Nash, fidgeting with his papers, seemed disposed to let his eyes rest anywhere rather than on the faces of his companions. Miss Harding, judging from her appearance, continually hovered on the verge of collapse; that no one noticed her condition showed how the others were preoccupied. Of the four Nora still bore herself as the one who was most at ease. She sat up straight; well back on her chair; her hands lying idle on her lap; a look upon her face which suggested an assurance which nothing they might say to her could touch; when she spoke she held her head a little back, with, in her wide-open eyes, what was almost the glint of a smile.

"I don't know what you call knowledge. I can only say that I am sure that you have not yet got to the root of the matter; that there is still something to be explained; because I am convinced that my father has left behind him a great deal of money."

"It is more than probable you are right; nothing will surprise me more than to learn that he hasn't; all that is wanted is a clue. Tell us on what you found your conviction."

"It is not altogether easy, but I'll try." The faintest touch of colour tinged her cheeks. "You know I am engaged to be married. My father, in congratulating me, said that the fact that Mr. Spencer had no money wouldn't matter, because I should have enough for both. I am sure he would not have said that had it not been true; I know my father."

"In other words, he practically told you that, after he was gone, he would leave you well provided for."

"That was what it amounted to, yes."

"He said nothing about the quarter from which the provision was to come?"

"He said nothing except what I have told you; but, for me, that is enough."

"No doubt, Miss Nora, but what we want is something which will tell us where the money which he spoke of is to be found."

"It will be found."

"Where? how? when? These questions must be answered."

"They will be answered, in God's good time."

The doctor gave an impatient gesture.

"I wish to say nothing in the least impious; but if it is to be in good time the answer must come now; before Cloverlea is sold, and you are homeless."

"Cloverlea-sold?" The notion seemed to startle her. "Who talks of selling Cloverlea?"

"My dear young lady, here's a creditor for over four thousand pounds, who writes to say that if his claim is not settled at once proceedings will immediately be taken against your father's estate-"

"Four thousand pounds! To whom did my father owe four thousand pounds?"

"That's the worst of it; it's a money-lender."

"A money-lender?"

"The fellow holds your father's paper-promissory notes-to the amount of nearly four thousand five hundred pounds, which is now overdue; and he says he has other paper, which will mature shortly, to the extent of another five thousand pounds. And he is not the only one; claims have been raining in from similar gentry. It actually appears that your father owed them at least thirty thousand pounds."

"I don't believe it."

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

"I found it hard to credit; but-there are the bills, accepted by your father; what do you suggest? that they are forgeries?"

"At present I suggest nothing; what can I suggest? But I do not believe that my father ever borrowed money from a usurer."

"I am afraid that this is not a matter with which we can deal as a question of belief; do you propose to contest these claims? If so, notice must be given at once; you must clearly understand what that would mean; you would have to prove that the signatures upon these bills, which purport to be your father's, are forgeries; I don't know in which event the consequences would be more serious, if you proved it or if you failed to prove it."

"How do the people who hold these bills pretend they got them?"

"Guldenheim, who is the chief holder, is, in his way, a perfectly respectable man, and enormously rich. I called on him yesterday to put that question. He looked me up and down; and then observed that if payment was not made this week he should commence proceedings, when he would supply the Court with all the necessary information; then he asked his clerk to show me to the door. I am afraid there was something in the manner in which I asked the question which he resented, and perhaps was entitled to resent."

"What will be the result if he does take proceedings?"

"Probably in a short time you'll have the sheriff's officers in the house, and, perhaps before you've had time to turn round, you'll be left without a roof to cover you. Whatever happens we must avoid that."

"How are we going to avoid it? How are we going to find money with which to pay these men?"

"My proposal is that the creditors should be called together all of them; we will explain to them exactly how matters stand; and then I think, for their own sakes, they will join with us in making the best of what your father has left."

"As you say that Cloverlea is all that my father has left I presume that means that, in any case, Cloverlea will have to be sold, that we, my home and I, are at the mercy of a gang of usurers."

"I am afraid I don't see what else is to be done."

"Thank you; that is all I wish to know." She stood up, very erect; on her face there was still no sign of bitterness, only a quiet calmness, which was in strange contrast with the conspicuous lack of ease which marked the bearing of the others. "Do not suppose," she said, in a voice which was very soft and gentle, "that I am not grateful to you both for all that you have done for me. I had thought it possible, Mr. Nash, that the share you were taking in straightening out my small affairs might be of permanent use to you; I hoped you would allow me to retain you as my lawyer; but it seems that's not to be, that I'm not likely to want a lawyer very long. I'm sorry for both our sakes. For the trouble you have taken, doctor, no words of mine can thank you; because you-you're my very dear friend, and I fear you'll insist on making my sorrows your own, and-and that mustn't be." She stopped, as if, for the moment, she was unable to continue; and then added, "I'll think over all that you have said."

Without another word she left the room. The trio neither moved nor spoke some seconds after she had gone. Then Elaine Harding started to her feet with what sounded like a sob of passion.

"It's cruel!" she cried. "Cruel! I don't believe it's so bad as you make it out to be, I won't believe it! If Mr. Lindsay were still alive you wouldn't accuse him of the dreadful things you now pretend he's done, you wouldn't dare to do it!"

She rushed away in what seemed an agony of tears. The doctor stared at the door through which she had vanished; then he turned and stared at Nash; then he laughed queerly.

"Well! who'd have thought she'd such a temper! I like her better for it, the little whirlwind! She might as well have accused us of conspiracy to defraud Miss Lindsay; what do you think of that?"

"Women," observed Mr. Nash, with downcast eyes, and a wry smile, "are capable of anything."

CHAPTER VIII
A PHILANTHROPIST

Nora went to her bedroom. It was a pleasant room; as it was then it was practically her own creation; it represented her ideal of what her sleeping chamber ought to be. She had even invested it with an air of romance, as girls, when they are at the most romantic period of their lives, sometimes will do. There are girls who regard their bedrooms as if they were parts of themselves. Nora was one of them; she regarded her bedroom as if it were part of herself.

As she entered it that afternoon, it seemed to her that there was something strange about it, as if something had come into the atmosphere which was not present when she was in it last. It disturbed her, until she understood that the change was in her; that she had already unconsciously realized that this room, which had meant to her so many things, which she supposed would be hers for ever, might, probably, soon be hers no longer. With that feeling in her mind the room could never again be to her what it had been before; she felt almost as if she were a stranger in it then. Seating herself at her writing-table, she took the Bible which lay on the little shelf in front, and read in it, trying her hardest to concentrate her attention on its pages; but it was not easy, even the sacred words came to her through a mist. But when she closed the book, and went and knelt beside the bed, pillowing her face on the coverlet, as she had done again and again, times without number; alike in her infrequent moments of sorrow-she knew then what pigmy things those sorrows had been! and in her abounding hours of joy; – it was almost with a sense of terror that it was borne in upon her what great happiness she in truth had known-there came to her, as she continued to kneel, that peace which she so earnestly desired; so that she arose from prayer refreshed, and with that courage in her heart which refreshment brings. Placing herself on the armchair which stood by the open window, resting her arms on the sill, looking at the green world, perhaps without seeing how green and beautiful it was, so far as she could, she thought it all out.

And the more she thought the more clearly she apprehended that life for her-life as she hitherto had understood it-was at an end already, before it had scarcely begun, if the things which she had heard were true. She must depart from Cloverlea, and all that it stood for, and go out into a world, of which she knew nothing, to earn her own bread; she wondered, with an odd little smile, how she was going to set about it; if the picture was as black as it had just been painted. But was it? In her heart of hearts she doubted. Although she had been in such slight communion with her father; although his attitude towards her had been, in many respects, so unfatherlike; she believed that she had understood him, and that they had had much more in common than he had chosen to let it appear; – it would require a great deal to convince her that she was wrong.

She was fortified in her belief by a curious idea which, almost in spite of herself, obsessed her more and more; that she understood him better now that he was dead than she had done when he was living; that she was closer to him now than she had been then; that she saw more clearly into his very heart, and knew what manner of man he really was; and she knew that he was not the kind of man he must have been if the things which she had heard were true. He was incapable of falsehood; in small things, as in large, the soul of honour; he had not lied when he had told her that there would be enough for Robert as well as for her. Even then she had gathered more from what he said than his actual words; and she had understood that he had meant that she should gather more. She believed that he had wished her to know that in the future she would be a rich woman, and that his brief speech had been intended to convey that meaning; she was persuaded that he would not have meant it if it had not been true.

Yet, how was she to reconcile these things with the facts as they appeared at present? What explanation would make them harmonize? She did not know; she admitted to herself that she did

not know; still she was convinced that, when everything was known, her father's truth would be established.

While Nora thought and thought; in the pretty bedchamber which had been assigned to her as an honoured guest, Elaine Harding was wrestling with troubles of her own, and her troubles were worse than Nora's. In her dressing-case, under a false bottom, were nearly three thousand pounds which did not belong to her; the dressing-case itself had been a gift from Nora, who had shown her the false bottom with glee, pointing out what a safe hiding-place it would be for any special treasures she might desire to keep from prying eyes. Almost the first use she had made of it had been to conceal the huge sum of which she had robbed the giver.

How she hated herself for what she had done! how gladly she would have restored the money to its place upon the dead man's table! She understood now what it had been doing there; doubtless it was the amount which it was his custom to pay into the bank each quarter, which it had been his intention to deliver on the morrow. God had intervened on the one hand, the devil on the other; she had played the devil's game; – fool! idiot! wretch that she had been! She realized quite clearly that that money would never bring any good to her; that it would lie like some obscene incubus on her whole life; even if she bought a husband with the proceeds of her stealing, how could she expect that such a marriage would be blest? The dressing-case itself had become a sort of monomania; not only did she keep it locked, but she hid it in her trunk and kept that locked; even then she was continually haunted by fears that some one was taking liberties with her property, as she had done with that of others. Suppose, by some mischance, the secret of that false bottom was discovered, what would happen then? She did not dare to think. What a fool she had been to tell Herbert Nash that tale about the legacy. It was not only a gratuitous, it was a foolish lie; she had seen that for herself almost as soon as it was told. He had only to make the most superficial inquiries, the falsehood would be discovered. She felt like biting her tongue out every time she thought of it. Her only excuse was that she had done it on the spur of the moment, without thinking; yielding to a temptation which was stronger than her. If only she did not love him! with so strange and violent a love that she had been willing to do what she had done rather than that he should not love her, rather than that she should not win him for her own! If, now, he were to find her out-what she had done-for his sake, what would he think of her then? But he should not find out; she would take care that he did not find out; rather than he should find out she would continue as she had begun, at whatever cost to herself, and to others.

Therefore it seemed to her disordered, tortured, twisted brain, that there was only one thing to be done, to make amends, to wipe off some of the blackness from her sin. She had told him that her aunt had left two thousand pounds. Well, he should have it. He had already had two hundred; there would be fifteen hundred for a share in Mr. Dawson's practice; the rest would be required to furnish a house, so that they might be married at once-on that point she was resolved, that there should be no delay about their being married; after what had happened she would be in constant agony till she had become his wife, and, so far, safe. He could not put his wife from him, even if he did find out. She was inclined to make it a condition that he should marry her before she gave him another farthing; in that way she would make sure of him. Even then, after the whole of the two thousand had been expended, more than a thousand pounds would still remain. It looked as if a thousand pounds would be a fortune to Nora Lindsay; a windfall from the skies; manna from heaven, which would at least preserve her from starvation. Nora should have the superfluous thousand; she would insist on it. It was true that such a sum would be most useful to a young couple, just married; but what did that matter, in face of Nora's pressing need? It was only too probable that they would be occasionally pinched; Herbert had explained that his income from a share of Mr. Dawson's practice would not, at the beginning, be large; there were eventualities for which they ought to be prepared; but such considerations were as nothing when one thought of Nora. She must be considered before anything else; she who had been such a faithful, such a generous friend; the whole of that thousand pounds should be hers.

By the time that Miss Harding had finally decided that this should be so she had nearly worked herself into a consciousness of virtue. When you looked facts in the face, from one point of view, it was generous to give away such a sum as that, especially when you remembered how much she stood in need of it herself; beyond a doubt that was how it would appear to Nora. Nora would appreciate her beneficence; would realize that this was the result of being kind to her humble friend in the days of her prosperity; the knowledge that the bread which she had cast upon the waters had returned to her after many days ought to make her-well, it ought to make her more contented with the measure which had been meted out to her; Elaine felt that it ought.

What Miss Harding had to do next was to invent some plausible explanation of how the money had come into her hands, and she was aware that that was not easy. So hard, indeed, was it to find that explanation that, in her despair, she nearly decided, after all, to relinquish her philanthropic scheme. But she would not do that-she could not do it; she had said that Nora should have the money, and she should. The misfortune was that Nora knew so much about her; it would be impossible to produce an aunt for her; Nora would refuse to swallow that aunt. Being intimately acquainted with the family history, she was pretty well aware that all the members of the Harding family would not be able to produce a thousand pounds between them. And then-there were other things. Only a short time ago Nora had "obliged" her, as Elaine phrased it, with the "loan" of a ten-pound note; if Miss Harding had had a thousand pounds laid by she would hardly have wanted those ten sovereigns.

So elusive did that explanation seem, so persistently did it refuse to come at her bidding, that Elaine brushed back her pretty hair with her pretty hands with what she intended to be a frenzied gesture, which was certainly not unbecoming, and at that moment she formed a resolution. She would go to Nora there and then, straight off, and approach the subject gently, trusting to the inspiration of the moment to provide her with the lie which would sound like truth, which it was so necessary that she should find to aid her in her beneficent purpose. No one knew better than she did how quickly her wits could come to her assistance at a pinch; with characteristic courage she took it for granted that they would not fail her when she was alone with Nora, and heart was speaking unto heart. In so doing she overlooked one factor-the unexpected. Experience had taught her that when she was hard pressed her wits could be relied upon, but hitherto she had always found herself in situations for which she was more or less prepared. The immediate future had something in store for her which was wholly unexpected.

CHAPTER IX
THE BUTLER

Elaine's room was at some distance from Nora's; they were in different wings. Miss Harding, whose habits were, in some respects, peculiar, always preferred that her room should not be too close to her friend's; though Nora herself would have liked to have had her nearer. To reach Miss Lindsay Elaine had to traverse a lengthy passage, which was divided in the centre by a square opening, which was used sometimes as a lounge. As Miss Harding moved along some one came out of this recess, and addressed her. It was Morgan, the butler.

Mr. Morgan was tall and fair-very fair. His face and eyebrows, and eyelashes, and hair were all of the same colour; it had rather an odd effect, which some people thought unpleasant. Many persons have an uncomfortable habit of never looking you in the face; he had what some felt was a nearly equally uncomfortable habit of never looking away from your face; he regarded any one with whom he might be talking with a fixed, impassive stare, which never faltered; there was a quality in his light greyish-blue eyes which, under such circumstances, was occasionally disconcerting. Miss Harding, who, in her way, was shrewd enough, had never known what to make of him; more than once, during her visits to Cloverlea, she had had a vague feeling that his demeanour towards her was not quite all that it ought to have been; the feeling came to her with unpleasant force as he stood before her then. Yet nothing could have been more decorous than his bearing; while he spoke with the softly modulated voice with which a well-trained servant ought to speak.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Harding, but can I speak to you for a moment?"

She said him neither yea nor nay, but put to him a question in return.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.