

Mitford Bertram

The Red Derelict



Bertram Mitford

The Red Derelict

«Public Domain»

Mitford B.

The Red Derelict / B. Mitford — «Public Domain»,

© Mitford B.

© Public Domain

Содержание

Chapter One.	5
Chapter Two.	8
Chapter Three.	12
Chapter Four.	15
Chapter Five.	19
Chapter Six.	23
Chapter Seven.	29
Chapter Eight.	33
Chapter Nine.	37
Chapter Ten.	40
Chapter Eleven.	43
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	45

Mitford Bertram

The Red Derelict

Chapter One.

The Episode of the Brindled Gnu

“Mine!”

The word was breathed rather than uttered, and its intonation conveyed a sense of the most perfect, even ecstatic, contentment. The vivid green of early summer woods piled as it were in great cloud masses to the clear, unbroken blue, rolling up from the sheen and glory of golden seas of buttercups which flooded every rich meadow surface. Hawthorn hedges distilled their sweetness from snowy clusters crowding each other in their profusion, a busy working ground for myriad bees whose murmur made music in low waves of tone upon the sweet evening glow. And yonder, behind him who is contemplating all this, the slant of the westering sun touches the tall chimney stalks of the old house, just visible among masses of feathery elms loud with cawing clamour from black armies of homing rooks. Again the glance swept round upon this wealth of English summer loveliness and again the uttered thought, with all its original exaltation, escaped the lips.

“Mine!”

Wagram Gerard Wagram strolled leisurely on, drinking in the golden glory of the surroundings as though suffering it to saturate his whole being. As for the second time he half-unconsciously enunciated that single possessive it was with almost a misgiving, an uncomfortable stirring as of unreality. Would he awaken directly, as he had more than once awakened before, to find this vision of Paradise, as it were, dispelled in the cold and sunless grey of a mere existence, blank alike of aim or prospect – illusions dead, life all behind, in front – nothing?

With these conditions he was well acquainted – only too well. The seamy side of life had indeed been his – failure, straitened means, disappointment in every form, and worse. Years of bitter and heart-wearing experiences had planted the iron in his soul – but this was all over now, never to return. To him, suddenly, startling in its unexpectedness, had come the change, and with it, peace.

A perfect chorus of bird harmony filled the air. Thrushes innumerable poured forth their song, whose sweet and liquid notes gurgled upon the ear as though through organ pipes. Robins, too, and blackbirds were not slow to join in, and then the soft amorous coo of wood-pigeons, and through all – thrown as it were from copse to copse – the blithe and gladsome shout of answering cuckoos.

Wagram opened a gate noiselessly, and with equally noiseless tread moved along one of the “rides” of a wood. On his shoulder was a rabbit rifle – one of some power and driving capacity – with which he was wont to practise long shots at outlying but uncommonly suspicious and wideawake Bunny. Things rustled in the undergrowth and brambles on either side, as though stealthily creeping away. A slight stirring of the grass caught his eye, and, as he bent over it, an adder contracted itself into a letter S, with its heart-shaped head somewhat lifted, alert, defensive. He raised the rifle so as to bring down the butt upon the snake – then seemed to think better of it.

“Poor little brute. The chances are ten thousand to one against it ever damaging anybody in a place like this, and those chances it can have the benefit of.”

He touched it with the muzzle of the gun, amused by the impotent wrath wherewith the small reptile struck at the cold iron. Then he went on his way.

He reached a gate and peered over. Two or three rabbits were out feeding, but they darted like lightning into cover before he had time so much as to raise the piece. Passing out of the gate he crossed the open meadow.

In front a gleam of water, and beyond it the skipping forms of young lambs, whose shrill bleat harmonised with the multitudinous bird voices, and the green loveliness of the picture. Leaning lazily on the parapet of an old stone bridge which spanned the river, Wagram watched the ripple here and there of a rising trout, or the perky flirtings of a pair of water-ouzes, whose nest clung, excrescence-like, against one of the stone piers. Away down stream the roof of a picturesque old mill, its wheel for the nonce still and silent, and beyond, pointing above more woods, the spire of a distant church.

Again that well-nigh ecstatic sense of possession – of ownership – came over him, and now, giving himself up to it, he fairly revelled in it. The utter solitude of the spot constituted, in his eyes, one of its greatest charms. He could wander at will without meeting a human being, and though here the bridge carried on a public thoroughfare it was a lonely road at any time. But one side of such solitude was that thoughts of the past would arise, would obtrude, and such he steadily put from him. For he hated the past. Not one day of it would he willingly live over again – to no single incident of it would he willingly let his mind revert. It was a very nightmare.

Leaving the bridge he strolled up the tree-shaded road intending to return home. But no chances did he get of practising marksmanship, for the rabbits seemed unaccountably shy. Ah – at last. There was one. Nearly a hundred yards' range, too. Yes, it would do.

But before he could draw trigger he lowered the piece and threw up his head listening. A sound – a strange sound – had caught his ear. Yet it was not so much the nature of the sound, as the quarter from which it came that had startled him. No further thought of the rabbit now, as he listened for its repetition.

It came – louder, nearer, this time – a strange, harsh, raucous bellow. Again and again he heard it, each time nearer still. And with it now blended another sound – a loud shrill scream for help.

Wagram's blood thrilled as already he foresaw a tragedy. It happened that a portion of the park was set apart for several varieties of the larger African antelopes, which they were trying to acclimatise, and one of these must, by some means or other, have escaped from its paddock.

It is a fact that the shyest and wariest of wild creatures in their natural state, when captured and placed in confinement, as they become accustomed to the sight of the human form divine, soon develop an aggressive ferocity in exactly opposite proportion to their former shyness. No better instance is furnished of familiarity thus breeding contempt than in the case of the male ostrich. In his wild state the sky-line is hardly a sufficiently respectable distance for him to keep between you and him – incidentally he never does hide his head in the sand, a ridiculous fable probably originating with the old Portuguese explorers, in whom the waggishly disposed natives would find fair game. "Camped off" or enclosed, there is no limit to his absolutely fearless truculence. Even the graceful little springbok, half tamed, and shut up alone in a paddock, we have known to give a full-grown man all the rough and tumble he wants before getting out of that paddock unscathed. And these, we repeat, were of the largest variety of antelope, and now here was one of them at large and pursuing somebody – from the scream, evidently a woman.

Even while thinking, Wagram was at the same time acting, for he had rushed forward and literally torn himself through a high thick hedge which interposed between himself and what was transpiring. And this is what he saw.

A girl on a bicycle was skimming the broad white road which banded the level sward. Close in pursuit coursed a strange looking beast, utterly out of keeping with the peaceful and conventional beauty of an English park – a slate-coloured beast, with the head of an exaggerated he-goat, and bearded withal; the horns of a miniature buffalo, the mane of a horse and almost the tail of one. It was in fact a fair specimen of the brindled gnu, commonly known as the blue wildebeeste.

Fortunately the creature did not seem able to make up its mind to charge; for now it would range up alongside of the bicycle and its rider, prancing and whisking around, and uttering its raucous bellow, then it would drop back, and rush forward again with horns lowered, to pull up and proceed to play the fool as before. All this Wagram took in, as he hurried up, and, taking it in, knew the peril

to be great and dual. If the beast were to charge home, why then – those meat-hook like horns would do their deadly work in a moment. If the rider kept up, or increased her pace any further to speak of, why then this road ended in a gate giving admission to the high road, and this gate was shut. There was only one thing to be done, and he did it.

He rushed towards this strange chase, shouting furiously, even grotesquely, anything to draw the attention of the dangerous brute. But at that moment, whether the girl had lost her head, or was as startled at this new diversion as her pursuer ought to have been, the bicycle wheel managed to get into a dry rut, skidded, and shot the rider clean off on to the turf. A half-strangled scream went up, and she lay still.

It is possible that the accident saved the situation so far as she was concerned, for the gnu held straight on and, lowering his head, with a savage drive sent his horns clean through the fabric of the machine lying in the road, then throwing up his head flung the shattered fragments of metal whirling about in every direction, but the remainder, entangled in the horns, still hung about his forehead and eyes.

Wagram summed up the peril in a flash. There lay the girl, helpless if not unconscious, the gate a quarter of a mile away – even the hedge he had come through considerably over a hundred yards. Not so much as a tree was there to dodge behind, and there was the infuriated beast shaking its head and bellowing savagely in frantic attempts to disengage itself of the clinging remains of the bicycle. The rifle, he decided, was of no use; the bullet, too diminutive to kill or disable, would only avail to madden the animal still more. And even then it succeeded in flinging the last remnant of the shattered machine from its horns. It stood for a second, staring, snorting, stamping its hoofs, then charged.

Wagram levelled the piece and pressed the trigger. The hammer fell with a mere click, and as he remembered how he had fired in the air while rushing to the rescue, in the hope that the report might scare the beast, the shock of the onrush sent him to earth, knocking the weapon from his grasp.

For a second he lay, half stunned. Fortunately, he had managed to dodge partially aside so as to escape the full shock, and the impetus had carried his assailant on a little way. Would the brute leave them, he wondered, if they both lay still. But no. It faced round, stamped, shook its head, bellowed, then came on again – this time straight for the prostrate girl.

Wagram rose to his feet with a shout – a loud, pealing, quavering shout. He had no clear idea as to what he was going to do, but the first thing was to get between the maddened beast and its intended victim.

Even at that moment, so strange are the workings of the human mind, there flashed across Wagram's brain the irony of it all. The ecstasy of possession had culminated thus: that a sudden and violent death should overtake him in the midst of his possessions, and through the agency of one of them. The gnu, diverted from its original purpose, or preferring an erect enemy to a recumbent one, once more charged him. Then he literally "took the bull by the horns" and gripped them as in a vice. Throwing up its head the struggling, pushing beast strove to tear itself free, but those sinewy hands held on. Then it reared on its hind legs, and tall man as he was, Wagram felt himself pulled off the ground. Though considerably past his first youth, he was wiry and hard of condition, and still he held on, but it could not continue. He must relax his grip, then he would be gored, trampled, mangled out of all recognition. Already one of the pointed hoofs, pawing wildly downward, had ripped his waistcoat open, gashing the skin, when – he was somersaulting through the air, to fall heavily half-a-dozen yards away, at the same time that the sharp crack of firearms almost at his very ear seemed to point to a miracle in his swiftly revolving brain.

He raised his head. His late enemy was lying on the turf, a faint quiver shuddering through its frame, and, standing contemplating it, erect, unhurt, the form of her he had nearly lost his life to rescue, and in her hand, the smoke still curling from the muzzle, a rifle – his rifle.

Chapter Two.

Afterwards

“How did you do it?” he asked, panting violently after his recent exertion and shock. “How?”

“I saw the cartridges fall out of your pocket while you fought the brute,” she answered. “That suggested it. I put one in the rifle and aimed just behind the shoulder, as I had read of people doing when shooting things of that sort. Thank Heaven it was the right aim. Do you know, I felt it would be – knew it somehow.”

She spoke quickly, excitedly, her breast heaving, and the colour mantling in her cheeks, as she turned her large eyes upon his face.

“It was splendid – splendid,” he repeated, rising, though somewhat stiffly, for he was very bruised and shaken.

“I don’t know about that,” she answered with a laugh. “I expect the old Squire will be of a different opinion. Why I – I mean you and I between us – have killed one of his African animals. And they say he’s no end proud of them.”

“Yes, and you have saved my life.”

“Have I? I rather think the boot’s on the wrong foot,” she answered. “Where would I have been with that beast chevying me if you hadn’t come on the scene. But – oh, Mr Wagram, are you much hurt? I was forgetting.”

“No, I am not hurt, beyond a bit of a shaking-up. And you?”

“Same here. I suppose the excitement and unexpectedness of the toss saved me. I was in an awful funk, though – er – I mean I was awfully scared. You see it was all so unexpected. I didn’t know these things ever attacked people.”

“They are apt to be dangerous in a half-tame condition, but ours are shut up in a separate part of the park. I have yet to find out how this one got loose.”

“What would I have done if you hadn’t come up?” she repeated. “I should certainly have been killed.”

Wagram thought that such would very likely have been the case, but he answered:

“I think you might have been considerably injured. You see, when you got to the gate over there, you would have had to slow down and jump off.”

“Rather. And – oh, my poor bike! It’s past praying for, utterly.”

“Well, it’s past mending, that’s certain. But – er – of course, you must allow us to make good the loss. As a matter of hard law you need have no scruple about this. It was destroyed on our property by an animal belonging to us, and on a public road.”

“A public road!” she echoed. “Then I was not trespassing?”

“No. This is a right-of-way, though I don’t mind admitting that we have often wished it wasn’t,” he added with a smile.

Inwardly he was puzzling as to who this girl could be. She was aware of his own identity, for she had addressed him by name; but he was absolutely convinced he had never seen her before. She was a handsome girl, too, very handsome. She had a clear, brunette skin, through which the colour would mantle as she grew animated, fine eyes of a light hazel, and an exceedingly attractive smile. In build she was square shouldered and of full outline, and though not exactly tall was of a good height for a woman. She was plainly dressed, but well, in a light blouse and grey bicycle skirt, and her manner was natural and unaffected. Yet with all these attractions Wagram decided that she was just not quite in the same social scale. Who could she be?

“Oh, but, Mr Wagram, I’m sure you must be hurt,” she broke in, as he rose from dusting down her bicycle skirt – she had sustained wonderfully little damage, even outwardly, from her fall. “Why,

what is this?” catching sight of his ripped waistcoat. “Blood, too! Good heavens! Did it strike you with its horns? Oh, you must get it seen to at once. I have read somewhere that the wound from an animal’s horn is frightfully dangerous.”

“Well, it wasn’t the horn this time, it was the hoof. But I assure you the thing is a mere scratch; I daresay it might have been worse but for the waistcoat. As it is, it’s nothing.”

“Really? Seriously, mind?”

“Seriously. But if you always turn your reading to such practical account as you did just now, it’ll be good for other people all along the line. It was even better than plucky, for it showed a quickness and readiness of resource rare among women, and by no means so widely distributed among men as we like to imagine.”

“How good of you to say so,” she answered, colouring up with pleasure. “But – oh, what a pity to have had to kill such a curious animal. Will the old Squire be very angry, do you think, Mr Wagram?”

“He will be sorry; but you must credit him with a higher estimate of the sanctity of human life for anger to enter his mind in this connection. I am sure he will feel only too thankful that a most disastrous accident has been averted.”

“Oh, I am relieved. Poor thing,” she broke off, standing over the dead gnu with a little shudder at the pool of blood which had trickled from the small hole made by the bullet. “It is very ugly, though.”

“Yes; it’s a sort of combination of goat and buffalo, and horse and donkey, to all outward appearance. Ah, here’s someone at last,” as two men approached. “Here, Perrin,” to the foremost, “how on earth did this fellow break out of the west park? Are the palings broken down anywhere?”

“Not as I knows on, sir,” replied the man, who was an under keeper. “I was round there myself this morning, and ’twas all right then. Reckon he must ha’ jumped. Them things do jump terrible high at times. Be you hurt, sir?” with a look at the other’s torn clothing.

“No; only a scratch. But this young lady might have been killed. You’d better go to the village at once and let Bowles know there’s a butchering job here for him, and the sooner he sets about it the better, or the light won’t last. Oh, and on the way tell Hood to go over now and make sure there are no gaps or weak places in the palings, or we shall have more of the things getting out I should never have believed one would have taken that leap.”

“Very good, sir,” replied the keeper, turning away to carry out his orders.

The girl, meanwhile, was watching Wagram with a whole-souled but half-furtive admiration, not undashed with a little awe. The fact of her rescue by this man in a moment of ghastly peril, and at considerable risk to himself, appealed to her less than did the cool, matter-of-fact way in which he stood there issuing his orders, as though no life-and-death struggle between himself and a powerful and infuriated animal had just taken place. Moreover, there was something in the way in which he gave his orders – as it were, the way of one to whom such direction was bound as by right to belong – that impressed her, and that vividly. Perhaps, too, the unconscious refinement of the man – a natural refinement characterising not only his appearance, but his manner, the tone of his voice, his every word – came especially home to her, possibly by virtue of contrast. Anyhow, it was there, and she hardly had time to disguise the growing admiration in her eyes as he turned to her again.

“Will you walk on with me to the Court and have a rest and some tea? We can send you home in the brougham.”

For a moment she hesitated. The invitation was wholly alluring, but to herself a perfectly unaccountable resolve came over her to decline it. It is just possible that the one word “send” had turned the scale. Had he offered to accompany her home she would probably have accepted with an alacrity needing some disguise.

“Oh no, thanks; I could not think of intruding upon you like that,” she answered. “I live just outside Bassingham, and a mere three-mile walk is nothing on a lovely evening like this.”

“Are you sure you are doing what you would prefer?” he urged.

“Quite. Oh, Mr Wagram, how can I thank you enough? Why, but for you I should be in as many pieces as my poor bicycle.”

“And but for you, possibly, so should I,” he laughed.

“Yes; only you would not have been there at all but for me, so that I am still all on the debtor’s side,” she rejoined, flashing up at him a very winning smile.

“Will you favour me with your address – here,” holding out a pocket-book open at a blank leaf.

“And – er – you seem to have the advantage of me as to name.”

“Have I? Why, so I have,” (writing). Then handing it back he read:

“Delia Calmour, Siege House, Bassingham.”

“Oh, you live in Bassingham, then?” he said, in a tone which seemed to her to express surprise at never having seen her before.

“Yes; but I have been away for two years,” she answered in implied explanation which was certainly not accidental. “I have only just come home.”

She hoped he would question her further; but he did not.

“Good-bye, Mr Wagram,” putting forth her hand with a bright smile. “I shall return by the main road. It’s much shorter – besides, I’ve had enough adventure for one afternoon.”

“Well, if you won’t reconsider my suggestion.”

“Thanks, no; I had really better get back.”

“And,” he supplemented, “again let me remind you that the utter wreck of your bicycle is our affair. Oh, and by the way – er – in case you are put out by the want of it even for a day or two in this splendid weather, Warren, in Bassingham, keeps very good machines on hire – you understand, our affair of course. I will send him in word the first thing in the morning.”

“Now, Mr Wagram, you are really too good,” she protested with real warmth. “I don’t know whether I ought even to think of taking you at your word.”

“Ought? But of course you must. It’s a matter, as I said before, of hard, dry law, and damage. Good-bye.”

They had reached the gate by this time, and closing it behind her, Wagram raised his hat and turned back to where lay the dead gnu. Then, as the men he had sent for had arrived, and he had given directions as to the careful preserving of the head, he moved homeward.

The air seemed positively to thrill with the gush of bird-song as the last rays of dazzling gold swept over the vivid greenery, ere the final set of sun. Passing the chapel, a Gothic gem, set in an embowering of foliage, Wagram espied the family chaplain seated in front of his rose-grown cottage, reading.

“Evening, Father,” he called out.

The priest jumped up and came to the gate. He was a man about Wagram’s own age, or a shade older, a cultured man, and possessed of a fund of strong practical common sense, together with a keen sense of humour. The two were great friends.

“Come in, come in, and help a lonely man through a lonely half hour, or as many half-hours as you can spare; though I suppose it’s getting too near your dinner time for that.”

“Why don’t you stroll up with me and join us?” said Wagram, subsiding into a cane chair.

“Thanks, but I can’t to-night, and that for more reasons than one. Now, what’ll you be taking?”

“Nothing, thanks, just now,” answered Wagram, filling his pipe. “I’ve got a mighty unpleasant job sticking out if ever there was one. Went out to knock over a rabbit or two, and knocked over one of the blue wildebeeste instead. How’s that?”

The priest gave a whistle.

“I wouldn’t like to be the man to break the news to the old Squire,” he said, “unless the man happened to be yourself. Did you kill it?”

“Dead as a herring, or rather, the girl did.”

“The girl did! What girl?”

“Why, the one the brute was chevying. Of course I had to get between, don’t you see?”

“I don’t. You omitted the trifling detail that the said brute was chevying anybody. Now, begin at the beginning.”

Wagram laughed. This sort of banter was frequent between the two. The priest reached down for the half-smoked pipe he had let fall, relit it, and listened as Wagram gave him the narrative, concise to baldness.

“Who was the girl?” he said, when Wagram had done.

“That’s just the point. First of all, do you know any people in Bassingham named Calmour?”

“M’yes. That is to say, I know *of* them.”

“What do they consist of?”

“One parent – male. I believe three daughters. Sons unlimited.”

“What sort of people are they?”

“Ask the old Squire.”

“That’s good enough answer,” laughed Wagram. “You’re not going to give them a bad character, so you won’t give them any. All right. I’ll go and ask him now, and, by Jove,” looking at his watch, “it’s time I did. Good-night.”

Father Gayle returned from the wicket, thinking.

“So that was the girl!” he said to himself. “The eldest, from the description. I hope she won’t make trouble.”

For, as it happened, he had heard rather more about Delia Calmour and her powers of attractiveness than Wagram had; moreover, he knew that men, even those above the average, were very human. Wagram, in his opinion, was very much above the average, yet he did not want to foresee any entanglement or complication that could not but be disastrous – absolutely and irrevocably disastrous.

Chapter Three.

Father and Son

The exclamation possessive which had escaped Wagram as he contemplated Hilversea Court and its fair and goodly appurtenances, was, as a matter of hard fact, somewhat “previous,” in that these enviable belongings would not be actually and entirely his until the death of his father; an eventuality which he devoutly hoped might be delayed for many and many a long year. Yet, practically, the place might as well have been his own; for since the motor car accident which had, comparatively speaking, recently cut short the life of his elder brother, and he had taken up his quarters at Hilversea, the old Squire had turned over to him the whole management, even to the smallest detail. And he had grown to love the place with a love that was well-nigh ecstatic. Every stick and stone upon it, every leaf and blade of grass seemed different somehow to the like products as existing beyond the boundary; and there were times when the bare consciousness that he was destined to pass the remaining half of his life here, was intoxicating, stupefying – too good indeed to last. It seemed too much happiness for a world whose joys are notoriously fleeting.

While hurriedly dressing for dinner Wagram’s mind reverted to the recent adventure. The old Squire had procured the African antelopes at considerable trouble and expense; in fact, had made a hobby of it. He would certainly not be pleased at the outcome of the said adventure; and the duty of breaking distasteful news to anybody was not a palatable one to himself. And the girl? She seemed a nice enough girl, and unmistakably an attractive one; and at the thought of her Wagram got out a telegraph form and indited a hasty “wire” to the London agency of a well-known cycle firm. Then he went down, a little late, to find his father ready and waiting.

The old Squire was a tall man of very refined appearance, and carried his stature, in spite of his fourscore years, without stoop or bend, and this, with his iron-grey moustache, would cause strangers to set him down as a fine specimen of an old soldier – which was incorrect, for he had spent the working period of his life in the Diplomatic Service.

“Well, Wagram, and what have you been doing with yourself?” he said, as they passed into a gem of a panelled room looking out upon a lovely picture of smooth sward and feathery elms. It was the smaller dining-room, always used when father and son were alone together.

“Oh, I crept around with the rabbit rifle – a sort of combination of keeping my hand in, and at the same time admiring the evening effects.”

“Did you get any good shots?”

“H’m, rather,” thought Wagram to himself drily. Then aloud, “Do you know anybody in Bassingham, father, by name Calmour?”

“Calmour? Calmour?” repeated the old man dubiously. “I seem to know the name too, but for the life of me I can’t fit it with an owner. Rundle,” as the butler entered, “do I know any Calmour in Bassingham?”

“Well, sir, it’s Major Calmour. Lives at Siege House, just this side of the bridge, sir.” And Wagram thought to detect a subtle grin drooping the corners of the man’s well-trained mouth as he filled the Squire’s glass.

“To be sure, to be sure. Now it all comes back. Major Calmour! Ho – ho – ho! Wagram, that’s the man right enough. Why? Has he been writing to you about anything?”

“No. But – who is he, anyway?”

“He is a retired army veterinary surgeon, addicted to strong drink, and a wholly unnecessarily lurid way of expressing himself.”

“I know the species. What sort of a crowd are his descendants?”

“His descendants? I believe they are many. Their female parent was, they say, even more partial to *aqua vita* than their male; indeed, report sayeth that she died thereof. One, by the way, obtained large damages from Vance’s eldest fool in an action for breach of promise. I believe the family has been living on it ever since.”

“Which of them was that?” said Wagram carelessly, wondering if it was the heroine of the afternoon’s adventure.

“I don’t remember. Which of them was it, Rundle?”

“I believe it was the second of the young ladies, sir,” supplied the butler, who, being an old and privileged and, withal, discreet family servant, was often consulted by the Squire as to local and personal matters when memory proved defective. The answer, no name having been mentioned, of course conveyed no information to Wagram. So the heroine of the adventure was the daughter of a tipling and disreputable ex-Army vet. Well, she was not lacking in pluck and readiness of resource, at any rate.

“I made the acquaintance of one of the girls this afternoon, father, and that in rather a queer way,” he said.

“Ah, really; and how was that?”

Then Wagram told the story, told it graphically, too. The Squire, listening, was taken quite out of himself.

“Why didn’t you shoot the brute, Wagram? You had the rifle.”

“Oh, I didn’t want to do that as long as it could possibly be avoided. It couldn’t in the long run. But the girl shot him instead. Had to.”

“The girl shot him?”

“Yes! I’m coming to that.” And then as he narrated the progress of his hand-to-hand struggle, and the relief just in the nick of time, the Squire burst forth with:

“Splendid! Splendid! There’s nerve for you. You’d certainly have been killed Wagram. Why, man, did you think you were a match for the beast by sheer force of strength? Why, you might as well have tried the same thing on with a bull. Ah well, it’s a pity, but it’s lucky it was no worse. Lucky too, you were about, or that poor girl would have been killed or, at best, seriously injured. But how did the thing get out? This is within Hood’s responsibility.”

“I sent him at once to see,” answered Wagram. “Perrin opined that it jumped the palisade, and that’s not impossible. I gave them particular instructions about the head. It’s worth keeping. We’d better send it to Rowland Ward’s to be set up.”

“Yes.” And then the old squire became rather grave and absent-minded, and both men ate their dinner for a while in silence. In the mind of the elder was running the thought of what an awful thing had been avoided. His son might easily have met his death – this son from whom he had been estranged for years, and from whom now, he wondered how he could have spent those years of his old age apart. His glance wandered furtively to a portrait upon the wall. It was that of another son – a younger one – Wagram’s half-brother; a handsome, reckless face, but there was a shifty look in the narrowness between the eyes, that even the travesty of the portrait painter’s art could not altogether hide. For years past this one’s whereabouts had been a mystery; even his fate – even were he alive or dead. He had left home in a hurry and in anger, had left perforce to avoid a great scandal and disgrace, wherein, moreover, a question of felony was involved. This had befallen more than ten years earlier, and almost ever since nothing had been heard of the exile. When last heard of he was in Australia, then to all inquiries there was a blank, and as time went on, more and more did those he had left assume that he was dead.

For the wanderer’s own sake, the old squire in his heart of hearts could almost have brought himself to hope so. For of Everard Wagram the best description had been “a bad lot” – an all round bad lot, and for years his father and brother had lived in secret dread of any day hearing he had come to a bad end. Now gazing at the portrait, the old man was furtively making comparison between its

original and Wagram; wondering, too, for the hundredth time, not that there should be any difference between them, but that their characters should be so entirely and completely divergent. But they were of different mothers, and behind this fact lay a good deal. They had both had the same chances, but different mothers, and the younger man had gone utterly to the bad.

“Did you say the young lady’s bicycle was smashed, Wagram?” said the Squire at last, reverting to the adventure.

“All to smithereens. But I’ve drawn up a wire to Gee and Vincent to send her the latest thing up to date, and that sharp. I’ve also written Warren to let her have one on hire until it comes.”

“Yes, that’s quite right. But I doubt if it’ll end there. Calmour’s quite capable of threatening an action for damages with a view to compromise. He’s a most astonishing cad, and chronically hard up.”

“Poor devil. In the latter line he has my sympathy,” said Wagram. “But it wasn’t he who got damaged, it was the girl.”

“That’s just it, and that’s where he’ll score. If she’s put in the box, from your description of her the conscientious and respectable British jury that won’t give her damages doesn’t exist.”

“I can hardly think she’d be a party to anything of that sort,” rejoined Wagram. “She seemed to me a nice sort of a girl; too nice, in fact, to lend herself to that kind of thing.”

The Squire’s head shot up quickly, and for a moment he looked at his son with grave concern. The two were alone together now.

“Don’t you know lovely woman better than that even by this time, Wagram?” he said.

“Well, I ought to,” was the answer, beneath the tone of which lurked a bitterness of rancour, such as seldom indeed escaped this man, normally so equable and self-possessed with regard to the things, so tolerant and considerate towards the persons, about him.

“I should say so,” assented the Squire; “and I’ll bet you five guineas your acquaintance with this one doesn’t end where it begun.”

“I don’t see how it can. If it hadn’t been for her I should almost certainly have lost my life.”

“If it hadn’t been for her your life would not have been in danger, so the situation is even all round.”

Wagram laughed.

“There’s something in that, father. But you say these are absolutely impossible people?”

“Absolutely and entirely – dangerous as well. Didn’t I tell you just now about one of them and Vance’s eldest idiot? Why, for all we know, it may have been your heroine of to-day.”

“It may, of course. Still I have an instinct that it was probably one of the others. Wouldn’t it be the right thing if I were to call and inquire after the girl, make sure she’s none the worse for her spill. It would be only civil, you know.”

“Civil but risky. If you did that it wouldn’t be long before Calmour and some of them returned it. They’d jump at the opportunity. A Calmour at Hilversea! Phew! It would be about as much in place as a cow in a church.”

“That makes it awkward certainly.”

“Doesn’t it? Besides, I don’t see that what you suggest is in the least necessary. The girl on your own showing, wasn’t hurt. Her bicycle got smashed, and we are sending her a new one, probably ten times as good as the one she had before. Moreover we’ve lost one of our African antelopes. Upon my word I think the house of Calmour is far more indebted to us than we are to it. Just shut that window, Wagram. It’s beginning to get a little chilly.”

The sweet, distilling air of meadow and closing flower greeted Wagram’s nostrils as he lingered while obeying, and from the gloaming woodlands came the weird, musical hooting of owls, and again he felt that intense, ecstatic thrill of possession sweep through his being. And as he turned from the window, he heard the Squire repeat, this time half to himself:

“A Calmour at Hilversea! Pho!”

Chapter Four.

Siege House and its Ways

“Oh, what a perfect beauty! Look, Bob. Free wheel, Bowden brakes, everything.”

The hall of Siege House was littered with wrappings and twine, in the midst of which stood Delia Calmour, in a fervour of delight and admiration, while her brother Bob extracted from its crate a brand new bicycle which had just been delivered by railway van.

“Rather! Gee and Vincent, tip-top maker,” pronounced the said Bob, wheeling her machine clear of the litter and surveying it critically. “You’re in luck’s way this time, Delia. First chop new bike for a beginning, and now what about the damages? I’m only wondering whether five hundred would be starting too low.”

“Damages! What are you talking about?” said Delia shortly.

“Why, you got a toss, didn’t you – a bad one too – and owing to Wagram’s wild beast. There you are. First-rate grounds for action. Damages a dead cert. The only question is how much.”

“Oh Bob, don’t be such a beastly young cad,” retorted Delia, with a heightened colour and a flash in her eyes, plain speaking being the custom at Siege House. “But then I forgot,” she continued, coldly ironical. “It’s your trade to scent out plunder, or will be when you’ve learnt it. Good boy, Bob. Stick to biz, and never miss a chance.”

The point of which remark was that its object was in the employ of a firm of solicitors. Incidentally, he was a loose hung, pale faced youth, who was won’t to turn on an exaggerated raffishness out of office hours, under the impression that it was sporting.

“I should think not,” retorted Bob angrily. “And I don’t see any sense in jumping down my throat because I want to do you a good turn.”

“What are you kicking up such a row about Bob, and how the devil am I going to get through my typing in the middle of all this jaw?”

The above, uttered in a sweet and fluty voice, proceeded from an exceedingly handsome girl who now appeared from an adjoining door. She had straight regular features of the classical order, and a pair of large limpid blue eyes, the soulful innocence of whose expression imparted an air of spirituality to the whole face. Yet never was expression more entirely deceptive.

“Oh, keep your hair on, Clytie. I’m only telling Delia how to get five hundred damages out of Wagram. You’d never have got your cool thou, out of Vance if it hadn’t been for me. It’s her turn now,” sneered Bob.

“You mean I’d never have got what your precious firm chose to pass on to me out of it,” retorted the girl serenely. Her brother grinned.

“Biz is biz and costs are costs. We don’t want work for nothing in the law,” he added.

“We! M’yes. Grandiloquent, very. So that’s the new bike?” going over to examine it. “It is a ripper. D’you think there are any more African wild beasts loose at Hilversea, Delia? I could do with a new bike myself.”

Delia, listening, was simply incapable of reply lest she should reveal the lurid anger which was simmering beneath. Her long absence from home and its incidents had gone far towards refining away the cynical vulgarity of mind and speech which was the prevailing tone in her family circle, from her father downwards. Not this alone, however, was at the back of her present indignation. A week had elapsed since her adventure, and the recollection of the acquaintanceship to which it had led – matter of a few minutes as such had been – glowed fresh in her mind, as indeed it had done ever since; though not for worlds would she have let drop word or hint to those about her that such was the case. She was by no means deficient in assurance and self-esteem, yet that day in the presence of Wagram she had felt inferior. He had seemed to her as a different order of being, this man whose prompt courage

and readiness, and the exercise thereof, had glided so naturally into the calm considerate kindness whose first thought had been to make good her loss. The refinement of his aspect and manner, the utter absence of even any passing instinct to improve the situation, so different to those among whom she lived and moved, had completed the spell of magnetism he had all unconsciously cast over her, and in that short space her mind had undergone a complete transformation. Had the case been put before her as that of somebody else, Delia would unhesitatingly have pronounced it as one of falling over head and ears in love. Being her own it took on the aspect of a conversion to a sublime and compelling creed, the deity whereof was Wagram. And this was the man against whom her brother was suggesting a low and vulgar scheme of plunder – legal plunder, it was true, but still plunder.

“Bob,” she said at last. “If ever you propose such a thing again, from that moment you and I are no longer on speaking terms. I never heard a more unutterably caddish suggestion, and I’ve heard more than one as you know,” she added witheringly.

“Don’t see it at all. Damage to person pursuing lawful way along a public road – dangerous animal – property of ‘coiny’ swells. Coiny swells able to pay. Make ’em. What’s the law for, I’d like to know?”

“To swindle and fleece respectable people. To fatten a pack of bloodsucking thieves,” answered Delia, with trembling lips and flashing eyes. “In this instance I’d rather hang myself than have anything to do with it. Law, indeed!”

“Would you?” growled Bob. “Well, then, you won’t get any choice, because the old man’ll take it up, and then you’ll have to come forward. And he’ll collar the damages instead of you.”

“He’ll get none. I’ll refuse to appear.”

“Ha – ha. You’ll have to. You’ll be subpoenaed.”

“See here, my sucking Blackstone,” struck in Clytie, answering for her sister. “You remind one of the old chestnut about the judge who was nicknamed Necessity, because he knew no law. You haven’t even begun to know any. Delia’s of full age, and therefore no one could sue but her. The old man’s counted out.”

“You seemed to know more than enough that time you were under cross-examination,” jeered the exasperated Bob.

“Yes, I didn’t do badly,” acquiesced Clytie, her serenity quite unruffled. “But you know, Bob, you’re an awful juggins – yes, an out and out juggins.”

“I suppose so. May I ask why?”

“Certainly. Here you are putting Delia up to a scheme which is like being content with one silver spoon when you could collar the whole swag.” (The speaker was in course of typing a detective story.) “Now – d’you see?”

“Hanged if I do,” snorted Bob. “There’s nothing in it either. These Wagrams are rolling in coin, but you mustn’t pitch your claim too high. There’s such a thing as ‘excessive’ damages, appeal, and so forth. How’s that, old female Solomon? You see I do know a little about things after all.”

“Not anything – not anything,” came the reply, sweetly smiling. “Who’s talking about damages? That’s not the plum at all.”

“What is, then?”

“Capture the man. See? It’s quite simple. Capture the man. Yes? Does that make your chin rap the toes of your boots?”

For Bob was standing open-mouthed. The cool audacity of the scheme had struck him dazed, breathless.

“Fudge!” he snorted. “It can’t be done.”

“Why not?”

“Why not? Because these Wagrams are tip-top swells – regular high flyers. I don’t mean only that they’ve got pots of money, and just about everything else. But, hang it all, look at them, look at us! No fear. That cock won’t fight, I tell you – no, not for half-an-hour.”

“Not, eh? Bob, as I said before, you’re a juggins; a juggins of the first water,” retorted Clytie, sweetly. “A man is always – a man. No matter how tip-top, and so forth, he may be, there’s no getting away from that.”

“Bosh! You’ve been reading too many of these high-falutin’ novels they give you to type. That sort of thing doesn’t happen in real life, I tell you.”

“Your knowledge and experience of real life being exhaustive,” was the unruffled reply. “Let me tell you that sort of thing does happen in real life, happens every day. It only wants working.”

“Does it? I say, Clytie, why don’t you take on the job yourself, as Delia doesn’t seem over sweet on it?” said Bob, with a guffaw. “That heavenly expression of yours ought to carry all before it. It only wants working. Ha – ha!”

“I’m scratched for that running,” she answered serenely. “It’s not for nothing all the surrounding whelps – of your kidney, Bob, and others – have labelled me ‘Damages.’ But Delia – well she’s, so to say, fresh on the scene, and then, the adventure business gives her a first-rate send off. I think this job might be worked. Now, Delia, let’s have your opinion on it for a change. I’m tired of Bob’s.”

“My opinion is that never in my life have I wasted half-an-hour listening to such perfectly unutterable bosh as you two have been talking – no, never,” was the reply, short and emphatic; “and I don’t want to hear any more of it.”

Clytie pursed up her very pretty lips and whistled meditatively. The while she eyed her sister narrowly and read her like a book. As a matter of fact the latter had not been so indifferent to their conversation as she would have had them believe. Listening, her heart had thrilled to a strange, wild venture of a hope, only to drop it, a dead weight, as she thought of her relatives. Had they but met in a new country far away from all such associations – well, who knew. To do her justice, it was of the man she thought, the man entirely, and apart from his circumstances and surroundings; indeed, she almost hated these, as constituting an insurmountable barrier.

“As for saying ‘look at them and look at us,’” pursued Clytie, “why, from all accounts, Mrs Wagram Wagram Number One was no very great shakes.”

“All the more reason why the said W.W. isn’t going to be such a fool as to repeat the experiment,” said Bob. “By the way, didn’t she shoot herself in mistake for him, or something?”

“No; took too much morphia by mistake, and died. It was the only good thing she ever did for him, for she used to lead him the very devil of a life. She was a holy terror, from all accounts.”

“And so you think he’ll be such an ass as to risk it again, do you?”

“Certainly, my dear Bob. As I said before, a man is always – a man – otherwise an ass. The thing stares you in the face every day.”

“P’raps it does. Well, chip in, Delia. Chip in for all you know how. We’ll help you for all we do. By George, though, you’ll have to begin by turning Papist!”

“Hilversea Court’s worth turning anything for,” murmured Clytie.

“Oh, and there’s the ready-made step-son,” went on the odious Bob. “We’re forgetting him. How old is the young ’un, Clytie? About twelve, isn’t he?”

The query ended *staccato*. The ways of Siege House were strange and summary, wherefore Delia, exasperated beyond endurance, had picked up a heavy rubber golosh, one of a pair that stood in the hall, and had launched it full and straight at the head of the offending youth, who barely escaped by a prompt dive. In the midst of which sounded a ring of the front gate bell.

“Now, who the very deuce can that be?” remarked Clytie.

“Maybe the old man’s come in ‘fresh,’ and can’t fit his key,” jeered Bob.

“Tisn’t him. He wouldn’t ring, he’d batter – especially if he’s ‘full,’” rejoined Clytie, whose knowledge of the paternal habits was exhaustive. “One of us’ll have to go to the door. Emily’s out. Wait; let’s make sure first who it is.”

She passed into a room whose windows afforded a view of the front gate, only to reappear immediately in a state of suppressed excitement, a very unusual thing for her.

“Talk of the devil,” she quoted. “Why, it’s him.”

“Who? The devil?” said Bob.

“No, you ass; Wagram Wagram himself! Now, Delia, you and I’ll worry out this tangle. Go in there,” pushing her through a door. “And you, Bob, make yourself scarce. You’re not to appear, see?”

“Why not? Where do I come in?”

“Nowhere. We don’t want you at all. You’d give away the whole show. Come, git!”

Grumbling, Bob “got.” He could not afford to run direct contrary to his sisters’ wishes when decidedly expressed; he was too much dependent on their good offices in more ways than one. In abolishing him on this occasion Clytie’s judgment was sound. The descendants male of the ex-army vet were a great deal less presentable than the descendants female – and this she knew.

Chapter Five. A Surprise Visit

Clytie opened the gate with the little half-startled look of astonishment in her face which she had so quickly yet carefully planned. The countenance of the visitor, on the other hand, was not free from a reciprocating surprise. He had not bargained on this admission at the hands of one of the daughters of the house – and an uncommonly attractive looking one at that.

“Er – my name is Wagram,” he began, raising his hat. “One of your sisters met with something of an accident on our place a few days back, and I thought it would be a satisfaction to know she was none the worse for it. Is Major Calmour at home?”

The semi-puzzled look which had rested on Clytie’s face during this speech gave way to a carefully planned light up at its conclusion.

“Oh, yes, of course. We heard about that, and your part in it, Mr Wagram. But won’t you come in? My father is somewhere at the back, and will be delighted to thank you in person.” And having uttered this shocking tarradiddle, she ushered him into the drawing-room.

Delia rose as he entered, having spent the intervening period in making superhuman efforts to recover her wonted composure. A volume of effusive thanks on the subject of the bicycle aided her efforts still further.

“Oh, Mr Wagram, what a lovely machine it is!” she began. “Why, it’s simply perfection. A free wheel, too. I’ve always longed for a free wheel. No, it’s too lovely. When we unpacked it just now, why, I thought I must be dreaming.”

“Just now,” she had said. Wagram looked up astonished, and feeling somewhat uncomfortable, fearing lest his arrival at that inopportune moment should wear an appearance as though he had come to be thanked.

“Has it only just come?” he said. “Why, it ought to have been delivered nearly a week ago. Gee and Vincent are not usually such dilatory people. I must row them up over it.”

“Oh, please don’t,” said Delia. “Why should you take any further trouble about it? You have been too kind already.”

“No, no,” he laughed. “By the way, it was just as Perrin said. The gnu must have jumped the palings of the west park. There was no gap or breakdown anywhere.”

“Really? But – tell me. Was the Squire very angry?”

“Not he. He was relieved to hear you had escaped uninjured. You are none the worse, are you? It was to ascertain that that I took the liberty of calling.”

“How kind of you again,” she answered, with a lustrous softness in her eyes that was not studied, and wonderfully attractive. “No; I am not one atom the worse.”

“Another thing has been on my conscience ever since, Miss Calmour; and that is, that I should have allowed you to walk all that way home. I ought to have insisted upon your coming on to the Court with me and driving back.”

“Oh, but you did try and persuade me, remember; it wasn’t your fault at all. Shall I tell you something, Mr Wagram? I believe the secret of my holding out was that I was more than a little afraid to face the Squire after what had happened.”

As a matter of fact, Delia had repented her refusal ever since. Such an opportunity might never recur; and, apart from that, it would have been so much more time to look back to and dwell upon.

“You needn’t have been. It was a pity,” he answered.

“Yes. And I hear you have some beautiful things at the Court, Mr Wagram – pictures and old relics and all that,” she added half shyly, as the consciousness flashed in upon her that he would take her remark as a direct “fishing” for an invite to come and see them – a misgiving which would not have

afflicted her in the slightest degree had he been anybody else in the world. But at that moment the door opened, admitting Clytie, who had returned from a fictitious search for her parent, combined with a renewed command to the retired Bob on no account to show himself, on pain of such disabilities as it was within her power to place him under.

"I can't find father anywhere," she said. "He must have gone out without telling us. But he may be back any moment now. Oh, that's my typing work, Mr Wagram," following his glance. "I'm afraid you'll think us very untidy. It really has no business littering about in here, but I brought it in because the light is better."

As a matter of fact, she had hurriedly brought it in before going to answer his ring – and that with a purpose.

"Ah yes. Ladies have taken to that sort of thing a good deal, I'm told. Do you do much of it?"

"Not so much as I should like; only as much as I can get," laughed Clytie. "We have to do these things – and it all helps."

"And very right and plucky it is of you to do it," he answered.

"That sounds nice. Oh, and, Mr Wagram, if you should know of anybody who wants anything done in that line you might mention me. There are so many people in these days who write, or try to. And, as I said before, it all helps."

Wagram, of course, promised accordingly, at the same time thinking it would be hard if he could not put something in her way. He had known straitened circumstances himself, and the fact of this girl turning her hand to a means of adding to a small income sent her up in his opinion, as she had guessed it would. But Clytie was honestly scheming for Delia this time, and for her she judged it the moment to put in a word.

"But Delia is the one who works the hardest," she said. "My typing is mere child's play compared with all she does. She has been away a couple of years, and had to come home for a rest."

"Really?" he answered, turning to Delia. "Well, that is plucky of you, Miss Calmour." And both thought to read in the high approval expressed in his look and tone a shade of regret that she should be exposed to the necessity of being overworked at all.

They talked on, and soon their visitor became acquainted with all the family doings – of the third sister, who was away also working; of Bob and another brother in Canada, and three more at school; then of other things, and Wagram was surprised to note how well they talked. He had made up his mind to pay this call from a sense of duty, and had approached it with considerable misgiving. One girl he had already seen, and she had impressed him favourably, yet how would she show up under the circumstances of a surprise visit? For the others he had expected to find very second-rate types, possibly overdressed, certainly underbred; forward and gushing or awkwardly shy. But in these two, each more than ordinarily attractive after her different type, he had found nothing of the kind. There was an ease of manner and entire freedom from affectation about them that fairly astonished him, remembering the repute in which the family was apparently held; and, realising it, they went up in his estimation accordingly. Both were at their best, and knew it.

But through it all came the recollection of that action for breach of promise. Which of them was concerned in it, he wondered; or was it the absent one? Well, there was no finding out now. Yet somehow, he did not think it could be Delia. If it were either of these two he would rather think it was Clytie; and then, suddenly, it occurred to him to wonder why on earth he was troubling his head about it at all. He had paid his duty call, and there was an end of the whole matter. But – was there?

"So sorry father was out, Mr Wagram," said Clytie as he rose to take his leave, "and so will he be. But, perhaps, if you are in Bassingham again and are inclined to drop in for a cup of tea, I know he'll be delighted."

Wagram, as in duty bound, declared that the pleasure would be mutual. It was strange, he said, that he did not even know Major Calmour by sight; but he was so seldom in Bassingham, and had not been very long at the Court, for the matter of that.

“We pulled that off well, Delia,” said Clytie as they returned from seeing their visitor to the gate. “He’s gone away thinking no small beer of us. He had heard all sorts of beastly things said about us, and came to see if they were true, and has come to the conclusion they are not.”

“Why do you think that?”

Clytie smiled pityingly.

“My dear child, I never saw the man yet I couldn’t read like a book, even in matters far more complicated than that, and not often a woman. Never mind. I’ll back you up all I know how if you’ll go on playing up to me as you did just now. Oh, good Lord! there’s the old man, and – he’s ‘fresh.’”

For a volley of raucous profanity had swamped her last words, and over the top of the front gate a face was visible – a very red face indeed, surmounted by a hat awry. The profanity was evoked by its utterer’s natural inability to open a locked gate by the simple process of pushing and battering against the same. Delia looked troubled.

“Do you think *he* saw him?” she said. “He’s only just this second gone out.”

“Depends which way the old man came. But ‘he’, if you remember, said he’d never set eyes on him.”

“Yes; but that’s not to say he never will. And then, on top of that recognition, he’ll be in no lively hurry to wend our way again.”

“Leave all that to the future, and chance,” returned Clytie. “Oh, bother! The old man’s blaring away like a calf that has lost its cow. We’d better let him in sharp or he’ll draw a crowd.”

The two walked leisurely back to the gate, against which their parent was raining kicks – and curses.

“Go easy, dad,” said Clytie. “How the deuce can a fellow open the gate from this side what time you’re banging it in from that? There! Now, come along.”

“How the deuce? Look here, you minx, that’s nice sort of feminine language to use to your father, isn’t it? Or to anyone,” he repeated as he walked stiffly and with an ominous swaying gait up the garden path.

“And that’s nice sort of masculine language to use to your daughters – and the gate, and things in general, as you were doing just now, isn’t it?” laughed Clytie serenely. “Unless you can plead, with the proverbial Scotchman, that you were only swearing ‘at large.’”

“Ha-ha! What a girl it is!” chuckled the old man, with the suspicion of a hiccough. “You ought to go on the stage, dear; you’d make your fortune.”

“No doubt. But I’ve got to get there first. I say, dad, who d’you think has just gone?”

“Dunno, don’t care; only that I’m devilish glad they have gone. Now I can have a ‘peg.’”

“No, you can’t.”

“Can’t! What the devil do you mean, Clytie?”

“What I say. You’ve had enough of a ‘peg’ to last you till to-night. What you want now is some strong coffee, so come right in and have it.”

He grumbled something about not being master in his own house, and a good deal more. But in the end he submitted; for Clytie was the one who ruled him, and, to do her justice, ruled him tactfully and for his good, so far as it lay within her power; whereas Delia was somewhat intolerant of this phase of her parent’s weakness, and adopted towards it a scornful attitude.

“Well, dad, you haven’t guessed who has just gone,” went on Clytie.

“How the blazes should I know – or care?” snapped the old man. “Some spark of yours, I suppose.”

“Haven’t got any just now. Everyone seems ‘off’ me. Delia’s putting my nose clean out of joint,” was the placid reply. “Well, what d’you think of Wagram?”

“What?” roared old Calmour, who was just in the quarrelsome stage and was glad of an object whereon to vent it. “He? If I’d been here I’d have kicked him out of the house.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” said Delia quickly. “You couldn’t, to begin with.”

“What the – what the – ?” And as the old man, purple with rage, let off a string of unstudied profanity, both girls put their fingers to their ears.

“Let’s know when you’ve blown off steam, dad,” said Clytie, “then we’ll listen to you again.”

At last old Calmour, seeing no fun in cursing without an audience, and being, moreover, quite blown, desisted, the resumed thread of his wrath taking the shape of rumbling growls. He would teach that blanked, stuck-up jackanapes – keeping wild beasts to attack his girls on a public road. He didn’t care this or that for any blanked Wagram, even if they owned half the county. He’d knock a thousand pounds damages out of them for that little job. He’d put it in his solicitors’ hands at once, he would, by so and so.

“You’ll do nothing of the sort, dad,” said Clytie. “We’ve got a much better plan than that.”

“Oh, you have, have you? And what is it?”

“Not going to tell you – not yet. Leave it to me, and – keep quiet.”

Again he grumbled and swore, but Clytie’s equanimity was proof against such little amenities. She was not going to let her father into their scheme only to have him giving it away in his cups, in this or that saloon bar about the place, not she. At last, drowsy with the combined warmth of the day, his own vehemence, and, incidentally, the liquor he had imbibed, he subsided on a sofa, and snored.

He did not look lovely as he lay there, open-mouthed and breathing stertorously, his grey hair all touzled about his red and bloated face. It was hard to realise that he could be the father of these two very attractive girls, yet in his younger days he had been a good-looking man enough. But the effects of poverty and domestic worry, and drink taken to drown the care inseparable therefrom, had made him – well, what he was.

Chapter Six.

A Solemnity

The chapel belonging to Hilversea Court stood a little back from the main avenue, and was so embowered in fine old trees as to be invisible in summer-time from the main road which skirted the park wall on the outside.

From the west front of it, at right angles to the main avenue, there opened out a second avenue, of a good width, and shaded by rows of tall limes extending some four hundred yards, and terminating in a sculptured stone Calvary of sufficient size and proportions as to be plainly discernible even at a distance. This avenue was known as the Priest's Walk.

The origin of the name was by no means clear. Some said it was because successive family chaplains for generations had been in the habit of pacing this avenue while saying their office, or for purposes of combining exercise with meditation; others that tradition had it that in the reign of Elizabeth a refugee priest was arrested there, and being, of course, subsequently martyred, was said to revisit the scene at midnight on the anniversary of his martyrdom, and pace up and down – incidentally, headless. None, however, could say for certain. But the name had stuck – had been there, indeed, beyond the memory of the grandfather of the oldest inhabitant.

On this cloudless June afternoon, however, there was nothing reminiscent of tragedy or special manifestation. Quite a throng of people lined the avenue on either side, quiet and expectant, talking but little, and then in subdued tones. Overhead, at intervals, drapings of crimson and white and gold spanned the avenue, as though for the passage of royalty; for it was the octave day of the Feast of Corpus Christi, and the procession customary on that solemnity was about to take place.

The occasion was a gala one at Hilversea. As far as possible the day was observed on the estate as a general holiday, and so great was the popularity of the old Squire and his son that even those among their tenants who differed with them in creed would willingly meet their wishes in this respect. Moreover, there was an abundant spread laid out in several large marquees, to which all belonging to the place were welcome, whether they attended the religious observances or not; and this held good of a sprinkling of people from outside, even though drawn thither by no more exalted a motive than that of witnessing a picturesque sight.

That it was all this there could be no room for two opinions as the chapel doors were thrown wide and the procession emerged. Headed by the cross-bearer and acolytes came a long double file of white-clothed children wearing veil and wreath, girls from a neighbouring convent school, and a number of choir boys in lace-trimmed cottas and scarlet cassocks, which showed in bright contrast to the more sober black ones of the lay singers; several priests in cassock and cotta, all holding lighted candles; then, preceded by torch-bearers and thurifers, and walking beneath a golden canopy, came the celebrant bearing the Sacred Host in a gleaming sun-shaped monstrance, and attended by deacon and subdeacon, all three richly vested. Several banners, borne aloft at intervals, added a final stroke of picturesqueness to the moving pageant.

The demeanour of the onlookers varied only in degrees of reverence, for of the opposite there was none. Headed by the old Squire and such of the house party not officially assisting in the ceremony many fell in behind and followed on. So still was the summer air that the flame of the numerous tapers burned without a flicker, and when a pause occurred in the chanting a perfect chorus of thrush-song from the adjoining woods mingled with the musical clash of censer chains and the tinkle of the canopy bells.

Wagram, in cassock and cotta, was acting as master of ceremonies, keeping a careful eye on the line of march with a view to rectifying any tendency to crowding up on the one hand or “gappiness” on the other.

“A little quicker, please,” he whispered to a tall, beautiful girl of sixteen, with hair that shone like a flowing golden mantle over her white dress. She was supporting a large banner, and was flanked by two wee tots, similarly attired, holding the tassels. With a nod of the head she complied, and then Wagram, stepping back a pace or two to beckon the others on, brushed against somebody kneeling. Turning to offer a whispered apology he beheld Delia Calmour, who, giving him a little smile and reassuring nod, was occupied in resettling her hat. For a moment he found himself wondering that she should be there at all, then the discharge of his duties drove all thought of her out of his mind.

At the far end of the avenue a *reposoir* had been erected – a temporary throne, abundantly decked with lights and flowers – and here all knelt while the *Tantum ergo* was sung; and the white Host, framed in the flashing sun rays of the jewelled monstrance, gleamed on high as Benediction was given. Then, reforming, the procession, returning, moved forward once more upon its rose-strewn way, singing now the Litany of Loreto, which, being, of course, well known to most of those present, was taken up on all sides, and chorused forth in one great and hearty volume of rhythm.

Delia Calmour rose from her knees and joined the increased numbers of those who were following. What had moved her she could not for the life of her have told, but she had found herself bowing down in reverence as low as those around her as the Sacred Host was borne past. Now she followed with the rest. She could not get into the chapel, but in this she fared no worse than nine-tenths of those in whose midst she was. But through the open doors she could distinguish the starry glitter of many lights on or about the high altar, as, in a dead hush, between thunderous waves of organ and chant, the final Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament was given.

The throng outside began to break up and those from within to come out. The convent children were marshalled forth, two by two, in charge of their attendant nuns, and still Delia lingered. She longed for an opportunity of having a little talk with Wagram, if it were only for a few minutes. She went into the chapel, thick and fragrant with incense. Two acolytes were extinguishing the numerous candles, and her pulse quickened as she saw Wagram, now divested of his cassock and cotta, standing by the sacristy door, pointing out the architectural and ornamental beauties of the interior to a couple of priests, presumably strangers. It was of no use, she decided, and, going outside, she wandered up the decorated avenue again. But before she had gone far she stopped short, striving to curb the thrill of her pulses, to repress the tell-tale rush of colour to her cheeks. A step behind her – and a voice. That was all.

“How do you do, Miss Calmour? How quickly you walk. So you have found your way over to our solemnity?”

Delia turned at the voice. As they clasped hands she was conscious of an utterly unwonted trepidation. She had just given up all hope of speaking with him. He would be too busy with other things and people to trouble to find her out, even if he had remembered noticing her among the attendance at all, she argued.

“Yes; but I had to screw up my courage very considerably to do so,” she returned, flashing up at him a very winning smile. “You see, I had heard that anybody might come.”

“Of course. But what were you afraid of? That you would be spirited away and privately burnt at the stake? Or only thumb-screwed?”

“No, no – of course not. Don’t chaff me, Mr Wagram; it’s unkind. You ought rather to pity my ignorance. Do you often have a ceremony like that?”

“Only once a year hitherto. This ought, strictly speaking, to have been held last Thursday, or Sunday, but we couldn’t make it anything like as imposing on either day. We couldn’t have got the convent school for one thing, nor such a muster of clergy. They can’t conveniently leave their own missions on those days. Now come up to the house. There’s ‘cup’ and all sorts of things going; tea, too, if you prefer it – and I can’t allow you to break away as you did last time. Where did you leave your bicycle?” – with a glance at her skirt.

“I stood it against the chapel railing. Will it be safe there?”

“We’d better take it along to make sure.”

She would not let him get it for her. Someone might detain him if once he left her side. Indeed, she could hardly realise that she was awake and not dreaming. In saying that she had screwed up her courage to come she was speaking the literal truth, and even then would have given up at the last moment but for Clytie, whom, feebly, she had besought to accompany her.

“Not I, my dear child,” had been the decisive response. “If I were to get into that crowd some kind soul would be safe to pass the word: ‘Hullo! There’s Damages.’ Then what sort of show would Damages’ little sister have? No, no; you must play this innings off your own bat.”

But Delia, to do her justice, had resolved in no way to second her sister’s great and audacious scheme. It made her feel mean to realise that she had even heard it mooted. Her presence there to-day was not due to any wish to further it, but to a legitimate desire not to let slip so good an opportunity of furthering the acquaintance so strangely begun.

“I have never seen a more picturesque sight,” she went on as they walked towards the house. “The effect was perfect – the procession moving between these great tree trunks – the avenue all strewn with roses – and all that flash as of gold here and there, and the scarlet and white of the choir boys. And how well they seemed to do it – no fuss or blundering. Did you organise it all, Mr Wagram? You seemed here, there, and everywhere at once.”

“I generally do master of ceremonies – a very much needed official, I assure you, on these occasions.”

“So I should imagine. And all those little tots in muslin and white wreaths – even the plainest of them looked pretty. Tell me, Mr Wagram, who was that lovely girl who carried one of the banners? She didn’t look as if she belonged to that convent school.”

“Yvonne Haldane. No, she doesn’t.”

“Is she French?”

“There’s nothing French about her but her name, unless that she speaks it uncommonly well. She’s staying with us – she and her father. The peculiarity about them is that they are rarely seen apart.”

“Really? How nice. You don’t often find that.” And the speaker’s thoughts reverted to another sort of parent, abusive or maudlin, red-faced, and semi or wholly intoxicated. “But, Mr Wagram, who is the priest who seemed to do all the principal part? Such a fine-looking old man!”

“Monsignor Culham. He and my father have known each other all their lives. Ah, here they all are,” as the tall forms of the prelate and his host appeared round the end of the house. With them was a sprinkling of black coats.

“I believe I’m a little afraid,” said Delia hesitatingly.

“You needn’t be. They are very good-natured men. They wouldn’t wish to burn you for the world. They prefer the ‘Stakes of Smithfield’ with the ‘e’ transposed.”

“Now you’re chaffing me again. But, really, I’m always a little shy of ‘the cloth.’ I never know what to talk about.”

“Make your mind easy. We shall find the lay element abundantly represented on the lawn, never fear. But first come and say a word or two to my father.”

Remembering the episode of the gnu, Delia was a little shy of meeting the old Squire. But she need not have been, for his denunciation of the house of Calmour notwithstanding, his greeting of this scion thereof was all that was kind and cordial.

“So this is the famous big game slayer?” he said after a word or two of welcome. “What do you think of that, Monsignor? You don’t meet every day with a young lady who can boast of having shot big game – dropped a fine specimen of the brindled gnu dead in his tracks.”

“No, indeed. In South Africa, I suppose?”

“South Africa? No. Here – right here. But it was to save someone from being badly gored.”

“Which is one more instance to show that pluck and readiness of resource are not prerogatives of our sex entirely,” said the prelate, quick to notice the look of embarrassment which had come over the girl’s face.

It was even as Wagram had said, the lay element was represented on the lawn, as a fair sprinkling of sunshades and vari-coloured light summer dresses and hats bore token. Likewise refreshment, and while in process of procuring some for his charge Wagram felt a pull at his sleeve.

“Who’s that you’ve got there, Wagram? Is Damages here too?”

“Eh? Oh, by the way, Haldane, which of them is Damages?”

“Not this one; a sister; the tall one: Clytie, I think they call her.”

“Oh! Well, this one isn’t responsible for her sister, and she’s a very nice sort of girl. She’s the heroine of the gnu adventure, you know, and I want Yvonne to go and talk to her a little.”

“Of course I will,” said Yvonne, moving off with that intent.

“Look at her!” exclaimed Haldane as they watched this tall child cross the lawn; straight, erect, gait utterly free and unstudied, the great golden mantle of her hair rippling below her waist. “Just look at her, Wagram! Did you ever see such a child in your life? And they talk about ‘the awkward age.’ Yvonne never had an awkward age.”

“I should think not,” assented Wagram, who ran her father very close in his admiration for the beautiful child.

“How many girls of her age,” went on Haldane, “would unhesitatingly go and talk to an entire stranger like that? They’d kick against it, object that they didn’t know what to say, that someone else had better undertake the job, and so on. Yet look at her; she’s as self-possessed as a woman of fifty, and as devoid of self-consciousness as a savage, and she’s talking to the other girl as if she’s known her all her life.”

And such, indeed, was the case. So entranced was Delia with the charm of this child-woman that she almost forgot to do justice to the strawberries and champagne cup which Wagram had procured for her, almost forgot furtively to watch Wagram himself as he moved here and there attending to other guests; forgot entirely any little *gêne* she might have felt, remembering that, after all, this was not her world, that she was in a sort of fish-out-of-water state. They talked of bicycling, then of post-card collecting, then of the solemnity they had just witnessed, and here especially the blue eyes would kindle and the whole face light up, and Yvonne would describe graphically and well other and similar ceremonies she had witnessed in some of the great cathedrals of the world. Her listener thought she could have sat there for ever in that atmosphere of refinement and ease; and this lovely child, who had drawn her with such a magnetic fascination – they would probably never hold converse together again. How could they, belonging as they did to different worlds, and in this connection the thought of the atmosphere of Siege House caused her very much of a mental shudder.

“Has this little girl been boring you a lot, Miss Calmour?” And Haldane laid an arm round the sunny tresses upon his child’s shoulders.

“Boring me! Why, I never was so interested in my life! You and your daughter seem to have been everywhere, Mr Haldane. Boring me!” And with a little, instinctively affectionate impulse she dropped her hand on to that of Yvonne, as though to plead: “Don’t leave me yet.”

“We’ve been having a post-card discussion, father; Miss Calmour has a splendid collection. But she holds that post-cards are no good unless they’ve been through the post. I hold they’re no good if they have, because the picture is all spoilt.”

“Why not cut the knot of the difficulty by collecting both?” suggested Delia.

“Don’t you give her any such pernicious advice, Miss Calmour,” laughed Haldane. “The craze is quite ruinous enough to me as it is. I find myself gently but firmly impelled within a post-card shop every other day or so – sort of metaphorically taken by the ear, don’t you know – on the ground that just one or two are wanted to fill up a vacant space in the corner of a given page. But seldom, if ever, do I quit that shop without becoming liable for one or two dozen.”

Delia laughed at this, but Yvonne merely smiled complacently, as though to convey that her parent might think himself lucky at being let down so easily. The latter went on:

“Now you are inducing her to do that which makes me fairly quake, for if she adopts the course you recommend she’ll buy the cards at a greater rate than before, and ruin me in postage over and above for the purpose of posting them to herself.”

“All safe, father; all safe this time. I wouldn’t have them if they had been through the post.”

“Would you care to bring your collection over and compare notes with Yvonne, Miss Calmour? Let me see, we are going back home on Monday. Why not come over to lunch on Tuesday? You have a bicycle – but I forgot, you can hardly carry a lot of post-card books on a bicycle.”

“Easily. I have a carrier on the back wheel which has often held a far greater weight,” answered the girl, hardly able to conceal her delight.

“Very well, then, that’s settled. But – don’t stop to shoot any more blue wildebeeste on the way.”

“Oh, that wretched creature! Am I never to hear the last of it?” laughed Delia, merrily rueful.

Two considerations had moved Haldane in the issuing of this invitation – the spontaneous and whole-souled admiration evinced by this girl for Yvonne, and the wistful look on the face of the latter at the propinquity of a good post-card collection which she might not see. He prided himself upon his knowledge of character, too, and watching Delia closely was inclined to endorse Wagram’s opinion. The house of Calmour was manifestly and flagrantly impossible; but this seemed a nice sort of girl, entirely different to the others. Moreover, Yvonne seemed to like her, and Yvonne’s instincts were singularly accurate for her age.

“Well, I must be moving,” said Delia, with something like a sinking of the heart. Wagram had disappeared for some time, and the groups on the lawn were thinning out fast. “But I don’t see Mr Wagram anywhere.”

“He’s probably in the big tent making them a speech or something,” said Haldane. “There, I thought so,” as a sound of lusty cheering arose at no great distance. “He’s sure to be there. Yvonne will pilot you there if you want to find him. It’s an institution I fight rather shy of,” he added, with a laugh.

But a strange repugnance to mingling in a crowd took hold of Delia just then. Would Mr Haldane kindly make her adieux for her? And then, having taken leave of them, she went round to where she had left her bicycle, and was in the act of mounting when —

“Hallo, Miss Calmour, are you off already? I’ve been rather remiss, I fear, but you’ve no notion how one gets pulled this way and that way on an occasion of this kind. I hope Yvonne took care of you.”

“She did indeed, Mr Wagram. What a perfectly sweet child she is! Do you know, I am to lunch there next week, and compare post-card collections.”

“That’ll be very jolly.”

“Won’t it? Well now, Mr Wagram, I don’t know when I have enjoyed myself so much. Oh, but there is one thing I wanted to ask you,” relapsing into shyness. “Might I – er – are people allowed – to attend your chapel here on Sundays? Now and then, I mean.”

“Certainly, if there’s room for them,” he answered, looking rather astonished. “It won’t hold a great many, as you might have seen to-day – oh, and, of course, you won’t see anything like the ceremonial you saw to-day.”

“I know. Still, I should like to attend occasionally. Then – I may?”

“Why, of course. Meanwhile I must look out a pair of thumbscrews that’s likely to fit you. Good-bye.”

In the midst of the mutual laugh evoked by this parting jest Delia mounted her bicycle and glided away. She passed groups in the avenue, some, like herself, awheel. Gaining the high road, there was the white gate opening on to the by-road through the park, the scene of the gnu adventure. Then, as by sudden magic, the spell of serenity and peace which had been upon her was removed. She felt restlessly unhappy, in tumultuous revolt. She thought of home, when she should get there; of

Bob's vulgarity, of Clytie's soft-toned and brutal cynicisms, of her father, thick-voiced and reeling. Worse still, she would probably find him in an even further advanced stage of intoxication, and more or less foul of speech in consequence, and – this is exactly what she eventually did find.

Chapter Seven. Concerning a Derelict

“So that was your heroine of the adventure, Wagram?” said the old Squire as they sat at breakfast the following morning.

“Yes. What did you think of her?”

“Poor girl.”

“Poor girl? Why?” asked Monsignor Culham.

“Spells Calmour.”

There was a laugh at this.

“He is a holy terror, Monsignor,” explained Haldane. “Sort of paints the town red at intervals. The whole lot of them are impossible, yet this girl seems an exception. She’s been away from home a long time, I believe, and, of course, that may account for it.”

“Possibly,” said the prelate. “I noticed her yesterday, and she seemed very devout. Are these people Catholics?”

“Not they. I don’t suppose they’re anything at all,” answered Haldane.

“Old Calmour was very ‘sky blue’ that day I called there,” said Wagram. “He groped right past me, and I was thankful he didn’t know me from Adam. He was certainly ‘talking’ when he couldn’t batter his own gate in.”

“They say the girls have to stop their ears tight when he’s ‘fresh,’” said Haldane; “and yet Damages can do a little ‘talking’ off her own from all accounts.”

“You wouldn’t think it to look at her,” said Wagram.

“That’s just it. But I believe it’s a fact, all the same.”

“Well, then, what about this other one?” pursued Wagram mischievously. “She may be just as deceptive, and yet you’ve booked her to lunch at your place next week.”

“I rather pride myself on being a student of character,” said Haldane, “and I don’t, somehow, think this case will prove me wrong.”

“No; I don’t think so either,” assented Wagram.

“I formed a favourable impression of her, too – the mere glimpse I had of her when we met,” said Monsignor Culham. “She certainly is a very pretty girl, and I should think a good one. It might even be that in the fulness of time she should prove the means of salvaging the rest of the family.”

“Her brother Bob would take a great deal of salvaging,” said Haldane drily. “Hallo, the child’s late,” he added, with a glance at the clock. “Said she’d be in before this.”

“In! Why, I thought she might be sleeping off the effects of her efforts yesterday,” said the Squire.

“Not she. She’s adding to them. She’s gone down with Hood to try and capture an early trout.”

“Really!” exclaimed Monsignor. “Is she generally successful, Mr Haldane?”

“She’s a very fair hand at throwing a fly. Really, though, Monsignor, I’m afraid you’ll think me a doting sort of a driveller on that subject. The fact is, we all spoil her shockingly among us. Wagram doesn’t come far behind me in that line, and the Squire too.”

“I’m not surprised,” answered the prelate. “I think she is without exception the dearest child I have ever seen, and the proof of it is she remains unspoiled through it all. Why, there she is.”

On the lawn she was standing, just handing her trout rod to the old head keeper, who could not refrain from turning his head with a smile of admiration as he walked away. Then she danced up to the window, the pink flush of health in her cheeks, the blue eyes alight with a mischievous challenge.

“Well? What luck, Sunbeam?” said Haldane, who was already at the open window.

“Ah – ah! I wasn’t to get any, was I?” she cried ostentatiously, holding down the lid of her creel. “Well – look.”

She exhibited a brace of beautiful trout, each something over a pound, but in first-rate condition.

“Did you get them yourself?” said Wagram, who liked to tease her occasionally.

“Mr Wagram! I shall not speak to you for the whole of to-day – no – half of it.”

“I thought possibly Hood might have captured them,” he explained. “Did you say one or both?”

“Now it will be the whole of the day.”

“Well done, little one. Did they fight much?” said Haldane. “You shall tell us about it presently. Cut away now and titivate, because Wagram was threatening to polish off all the strawberries if you weren’t soon in, and I want you to have some.”

“He’d better; that’s all,” was the answer as she danced away, knowing perfectly well that the offender designate would get through the intervening time picking out all the largest and most faultless – looking for her especial delectation. Whereby it is manifest that her father had stated no more than bare fact in asserting that they all combined to spoil her. Equally true, it should be added, was Monsignor Culham’s dictum that they had not succeeded.

“Are my censures removed?” said Wagram as Yvonne entered. “Look at all I have been doing for you,” holding up the plate of strawberries.

“I don’t know. Perhaps they ought to be. I said I wouldn’t speak to you for the whole day. Well, we’ll make it half the day. I’ll begin at lunch-time.”

“Then we’ll say half the strawberries. You shall have the other half at lunch-time.”

“Look at that!” she cried. “Claiming pardon by a threat! You can’t do that, can he, Monsignor?”

“Certainly not,” answered the prelate, entering thoroughly into the fun of the thing; “not for a moment.”

“*Roma locuta – causa finita*,” pronounced Wagram with mock solemnity, handing her the plate. “Of course, I bow.”

“In that case I must treat you with generosity, and will talk to you now, especially as you are dying to know where and how I got my trout. I got them both, then, within fifty yards of each other; one in the hole below Syndham Bridge, the other at the tail of the hole; one with a Wickham’s Fancy, the other with a small Zulu – ”

“Didn’t Hood play them for – ?”

“Ssh-h-h! You’ll get into trouble again,” interrupted Yvonne. “You’re repeating the offence, mind.”

“*Peccavi*.”

“I’ll forgive you again on one condition: I’m just spoiling for a bicycle ride. You shall take me for one this afternoon.”

“Won’t the whole day be enough for you?”

“Not quite. The afternoon will, though.”

“Well, that’ll suit me to a hair. We’ll make a round, and I’ll look in at Pritchett’s farm; I want to see him about something. What do you think, Haldane? Are you on?”

“Very much off, I’m afraid. I sent my machine in to Warren’s to be overhauled. He promised it for yesterday morning, but the traditions of the great British tradesman must be kept up. Wherefore it is not yet here. But you take the child all the same.”

At first Yvonne declared she didn’t want to go under the circumstances, but was overruled.

“I’ve got to go into Fulkston on business, Sunbeam,” said her father, “so I shall be out of mischief, anyhow. I’ll borrow one of the Squire’s gees, if I may.”

“Why, of course,” said the Squire. “You know them all, Haldane. Tell Thompson which you’d rather ride.”

Then the conversation turned to matters ecclesiastical, also, as between the two old gentlemen, reminiscent. They had been schoolfellows in their boyhood, but the clean-shaven, clear-cut face of Monsignor Culham, and the white hair, worn rather long, gave him a much older look than the other; yet there was hardly a year's difference between them. Both had in common the same tall, straight figure, together with the same kindly geniality of expression.

"I think I shall invite myself this time next year, Grantley," said the prelate. "It is really a privilege to take part in such a solemnity as we held yesterday. It makes one anticipate time – very much time, I fear – when such is more the rule throughout the country than an isolated and, of course, doubly valued privilege."

"My dear old friend, I hope you will. Only you must pardon my reminding you that it is for no want of asking on my part that ages have elapsed since you were here. And they have."

"Well, it certainly wasn't yesterday, and I concede being in the wrong," rejoined Monsignor Culham. "But I have been in more than one cathedral church where the solemnities were nothing like so carefully and accurately performed. It was a rare pleasure to take part in these."

"Here, Wagram, get up and return thanks," laughed Haldane. "If it weren't breakfast-time one would have said that Monsignor was proposing your health."

"The lion's share of the kudos is due to Father Gayle," said Wagram. "He and I between us managed to knock together a fairly decent choir for a country place, which includes Haldane, a host in himself, and, incidentally, Yvonne. The rest is easy."

"Incidentally Yvonne!" repeated that young person with mock resentment.

"I don't know about easy," declared Monsignor Culham. "The fact remains you had got together an outside crowd who weren't accustomed to singing with each other – over and above your own people."

"Yes; but we sent word to the convent asking them to practise their children in what we were going to sing – and to practise them out of doors, too. For the rest of those who helped us we trusted to their intuitive gumption."

"Ah, that's a good plan," said the prelate; "there's too little care given to that sort of thing. Singers on such an occasion are left to sort themselves. Result: discord – hitches innumerable."

"I know," said Haldane. "I was on the sanctuary once in a strange church. They were going to have the *Te Deum* solemnly sung for an occasion. I asked for a book with the square notation score. They had no such thing in their possession, and the consequence was everyone was dividing up the syllables at his own sweet will. It was neither harmonious nor jubilant."

"I should think not," assented Wagram emphatically. "Now, there is hardly an outdoor function I have been present at which hasn't represented to my mind everything that outdoor singing ought not to be. Unaccompanied singing is too apt to sound thin, and if backed up with brass instruments it sounds thinner still. So we dispense with them here, and our oft-repeated and especially final injunction to all hands is: 'Sing up!'"

"Well, it certainly was effective with your singers, Wagram," pronounced Monsignor Culham, "and I shall cite it as an instance whenever opportunity offers."

"That's good, Monsignor," returned Wagram. "We want all round to make everything as solemn and dignified and attractive as possible, as far as our opportunities here allow, especially to those outside; and we have reason to know that good results have followed."

"In conversions?"

"Yes. We throw open the grounds to all comers on these occasions, and in the result some who come merely to see a picturesque pageant are impressed, and – inquire further."

"I wonder what proportion of the said 'all comers' confine their sense of the picturesque to the tables in the marquee," remarked Haldane, who was of a cynical bent.

"Well, you know the old saying, Haldane – that one of the ways to reach a man's soul is through his stomach," laughed the Squire. "Anything in that paper, by the way?"

“N-no,” answered Haldane, who had been skimming the local morning paper, while keeping one ear open for the general conversation. “Wait, though – yes, this is rather interesting – if only that it reminds me of a bad quarter of an hour once owing to a similar cause. Listen to this: ‘The R.M.S. *Rhodesian*, which arrived at Southampton yesterday evening, reports passing a derelict in latitude 10 degrees 5 minutes north, longitude 16 degrees 36 minutes West. The hull was a dull rusty red, and apparently of about 900 or 1000 tons burthen. The vessel was partly submerged, the forecastle and poop being above water. About eight feet of iron foremast was standing, and rather more of mizzen-mast, with some rigging trailing from it. No name was visible, and the hulk, which had apparently been a long time in the water, was lying dangerously in the track of steamers to and from the Cape.’ I should think so indeed,” continued Haldane with some warmth. “It was just such a derelict that scraped past us one black night when I was coming home in the *Manchurian* on that very line. It was about midnight, and everybody had turned in, but the skipper and I were having a parting yarn on the hurricane deck. We were so close to the thing that the flare of our lights showed it up barely ten yards from us; then it was gone. I asked the skipper what would have happened if we’d hit it straight and square, and he said he was no good at conundrums, but would almost rather have run full speed on against the face of a cliff.”

“I suppose there was great excitement in the morning?” said the Squire.

“Not any; for the simple reason that nobody knew anything about it. The occurrence was logged, of course, but the skipper asked me not to blab, and I didn’t. Most of the passengers were scary enough over the risks they knew about, he said, and if you told them a lot more that they didn’t many of them would die.”

“They oughtn’t to leave a thing like that,” said Wagram. “Why didn’t your captain stop and blow it up, Haldane?”

“I asked him, and he said his company didn’t contract for hulk-hunting on dark nights; it contracted to carry Her Majesty’s mails. Probably the skipper of the *Rhodesian* reasoned in exactly the same way about this one.”

“It’s as bad as an infernal machine.”

“It *is* an infernal machine,” said Haldane.

Chapter Eight.

Retribution – Sharp and Sore

“Now I’ll race you, Mr Wagram.”

“You’ll do nothing of the sort. When I consented to take charge of you – a weighty responsibility in itself – I did so on condition that it was at your own risk. In short, the average railway company couldn’t have contracted itself out of its liabilities more completely.”

They were skimming along at the rate of about ten miles an hour, and that on an ideal road, smooth, dustless, and shaded by overhanging woods. Yvonne was trying how far she could ride with both hands off the handlebars, and performing various reckless feats, to the no small anxiety of her escort.

“Slow down here,” said the latter. “This pace isn’t safe; too many rabbits.”

“Too many rabbits?” echoed the girl. Then she gave forth a peal of laughter.

“Yes; it’s a screaming joke, isn’t it? But it may surprise you to hear that I’ve known of more than one bad spill caused by a fool of a rabbit dodging under the wheel, especially at night.”

“Really? You’re not stuffing me?”

“Well, can’t you see for yourself how easily the thing might happen? They’re crossing the road in gangs in both directions, and a rabbit is sometimes as great a fool as a human being in crossing a road, in that it is liable to change its mind and run back again. Result in either case, a bad spill for the bicyclist. You needn’t go far for an instance. Saunders, the chemist’s assistant in Bassingham, was nearly killed that way. He was coasting down Swanton Hill in the moonlight, and a rabbit ran under his wheel. He was chucked off, and got concussion of the brain.”

“Fancy being killed by a rabbit!”

“Yes. Sounds funny, doesn’t it? Here’s Pritchett’s.”

They had emerged from the woods into an open road, beside which stood a large farmhouse. The farmer was somewhere about the place; he couldn’t be very far off, they were informed. His wife was away, but might be back any minute. Should Mr Pritchett be sent for?

“No, no,” said Wagram; “just find a boy to show me where he is. I’ll go to him. Yvonne, you’d better wait here for me; a rest will do you no harm.”

“All safe. Don’t be longer than you can help.”

But Yvonne could not sit still for long, being of a restless temperament. She was soon outside again, and, promptly tiring of the ducks and fowls, she wandered down the shady road they had just come along.

Not far along this she came to a five-barred gate, opening into a broad green lane with high hedges, leading into the wood at right angles to the main road. In these hedges several whitish objects caught her glance.

“Honeysuckles,” she said to herself. “Beauties, too, if only I can reach them.”

In a moment she had opened the gate and was in the lane. But the coveted blossoms grew high, badly needing the aid of a hooked stick. She looked around for something approximating to one and found it. Then followed a good deal of scrambling, and at last, hot and flushed and a little scratched, Yvonne made her way back to the gate, trying to reduce into portable size and shape the redundant stems of the fragrant creeper. Being thus intent she did not look up until she had reached the gate, and then with a slight start, for she discovered that she was no longer alone.

Standing on the other side of the gate, but facing her, with both elbows lounged over the top bar, was a pasty-faced, loosely-hung youth, clad in a bicycle suit of cheap build and loud design. This precious product nodded to her with a familiar grin but made no attempt to move.

“Will you make way for me, please? I wish to pass,” she said crisply.

This time the fellow winked.

“Not until you’ve paid toll, dear,” he said, with nauseous significance.

It was well for him that Yvonne’s hands held nothing more formidable than a couple of bunches of honeysuckle. Had they held a whip or a switch it is possible that the pasty face of this cowardly cur might have been wealed in such wise as to last him for quite an indefinite time.

“Will you stand away from that gate, please? I repeat that I want to pass,” she said in even more staccato tone than before. Her blue eyes had grown steely, and there was a red flush in the centre of each cheek. She glanced furtively on the ground; if even she could find a stone for a weapon of defence; but the lane was soft and grassy, and stones there were none. But all the fellow did was to drop his elbows farther down over the top bar, so as to hold the gate more effectually.

“Not until you’ve paid toll, dear,” he repeated. “Come, now, don’t be disagreeable. It’s the rule of the road to take toll of a pretty girl when you let her through a gate. You’re only a kid, too, and I won’t give it away. Ooh – hah – hah!”

It would be impossible to convey an idea of the combined terror and anguish conveyed in the above shout. Equally impossible would it be, we fear, to convey the attitude struck, in sudden and swift transition, by him who uttered it. He bounded back from the gate like an india-rubber ball thrown against it, and with like velocity, for a tough and supple ground-ash stick had descended upon that part of his person which his forward lounge over the gate had left peculiarly suggestive of the purpose; and with lightning-like swiftness again the stick came down, conveying to the recipient some such sensation as that of being cut in half by a red-hot bar. One appalled glimpse of Wagram’s face, blazing with white wrath above him, and the terrified bounder, ducking just in time to avoid being seized by the collar, turned and fled down the road, quite regardless, in his blind panic, of abandoning his bicycle, which leaned against the hedge a few yards from the gate.

But for himself no more disastrous plan could he have conceived. Wagram had no intention of letting him down so easily, and sprang in pursuit, with the result that in about a moment he was flogging his victim along the road at the best pace that either could by any possibility put forward. At last the fellow lay down, and howled for mercy.

Giving him one final, pitiless, cutting “swish” as he rolled over, Wagram ceased.

“You crawling cur,” he said, still white with anger, and rather breathless with his exertion, “I won’t even give you the privilege of apologising. That is one reserved for some slight semblance of a man; but for a thing like you – Faugh!”

The thought seemed to sting him to such a degree of renewed ferocity that his face changed again. Fearing a renewal of the chastisement the cringing one fairly whimpered.

“You’ve nearly killed me,” he groaned. “I didn’t mean any harm, sir; it was only a bit of fun.”

“Fun!” Wagram turned away. He could not trust himself until he had put a dozen yards between them. Then he turned again.

“Get your bicycle, and take yourself off,” he said – “if you *can* still sit on it, that is.” Then he returned to Yvonne.

“I am not pleased with you,” he said. “You should not have gone wandering off on your own account like that. And I’m responsible for you to your father. What’ll he say? The only bright side to it is that I was in time to thrash that unutterable young brute within an inch of his life. No, though; I didn’t give him half enough,” with a vicious swish of the ground-ash through the air.

“Don’t be angry with me, Mr Wagram,” she answered, and the sweet, fearless blue eyes were wet as she slipped her hand pleadingly through his arm; “I’m so sorry.”

There was no resisting this, and he thawed at once.

“Well, we’ll think no more about it, dear. There, now, don’t cry.”

“No, I won’t.” She dashed away her tears with a smile. She thought so much of Wagram that a displeased word from him was more to this happy, sunny-hearted, spirited child than the occasion seemed to warrant. Then a shout behind caused them both to turn.

They had strolled about a hundred yards from the gate, and now they saw that the fellow had regained his bicycle. He was standing in the middle of the road ready to mount, but at a safe distance.

"I'll have the law of you for this," he shouted, "you great, bullying coward. I'd like to see you hit a man your own size. I'll have a thousand pounds out of you for this job. You've committed a savage assault on me, and you shall pay for it, by God! I know who you are, my fine fellow, and you'll hear more about this; no blooming fear!"

"Oh, you haven't had enough?" called out Wagram. "All right. My bike's just close by; I'll get it and come after you, then you shall have some more," holding up the ground-ash. "Go on; I'll soon catch you up."

This was a new aspect of the affair. The fellow seemed cowed, for he forthwith mounted his machine with some alacrity, and made off at a pace which must have caused him agonies in the light of the raw state to which his seating properties had just been reduced.

This is how the situation had come about. When Wagram returned to the house with the farmer he found that Yvonne, tired of waiting, had strolled off down the road, intending to pick wild flowers, or otherwise amuse herself. Without a thought of anything untoward he had followed her. The gate at which the affair began stood back from the road, and was concealed by the jutting of the hedge from anyone approaching. But the girl's indignant voice, clear as a bell, fell upon his ear, and simultaneously he had caught sight of the objectionable cad's nether extremities, as their owner, leaned over the gate. The idea suggested, to open his knife, and in a couple of quick, noiseless slashes to cut one of the fine, serviceable ground-ash plants growing on the bank, was the work of a moment. It was the work of another moment to step noiselessly behind the fellow just as he was delivering himself of his second insult. The rest we know.

"Well, child, we shall have a lovely ride back," he said. "I believe Mrs Pritchett has got some rather good strawberries and cream for you before we start, to say nothing of some very inviting-looking home-made bread and butter. She has come in, you know."

They had reached the farmhouse by now, and the farmer and his wife were waiting for them in the porch.

"Come in miss, do," said the latter. "I know you'll like this." And she beamed proudly, with a look at the spotless white tablecloth, and the set-out of blushing strawberries and snowy cream, and the thin, tempting slices of brown bread and butter. "I've made you a nice cup of tea, too, Mr Wagram, sir. I don't know that you'll take a fancy to such things," added the good dame ruefully.

"I'll take an immense fancy to a glass or two of your husband's excellent home-brewed, Mrs Pritchett. Why, you're forgetting how I've enjoyed it before to-day."

"Why, of course I am, sir," was the reply, immensely pleased; and in a trice the farmer returned with a foam-capped jug and a glass.

"What's this?" said Wagram, with reference to the latter. "Why, certainly you're going to keep me company, Pritchett."

"Well, sir, I shall be proud," was the answer, and the omission was promptly rectified.

"Here are your healths," said Wagram, raising his glass. "I didn't see you yesterday, Mrs Pritchett. Weren't you able to get over? Of course, I don't mean necessarily for the service," he added quickly; "but you ought to know by this time that all our friends are heartily welcome, irrespective of their creed."

"Well, sir, you see it was this way," began the good woman with some slight embarrassment.

"That's all right," interrupted Wagram genially. "Well, you'll know it next time, I'm sure."

"That I shall, sir."

After a little more pleasant conversation they shook hands heartily with the worthy couple and took their leave.

Just before the dressing-bell rang Haldane burst in upon Wagram in a wholly unwonted state of excitement.

“What’s this my little girl has been telling me, Wagram?” he said. “I must go and kill the scoundrel at once. I’ll borrow the Squire’s biggest hunting-crop.”

“You can’t, Haldane, if only that we haven’t the remotest idea who the said scoundrel is. It’s probably some miserable counter-jumper doing a bike round. But, sit tight; he’s got enough to last him for many a long day.”

“Did you cut him to ribbons? Did you?”

“I cut his small-clothes to ribbons. By George, he’ll have to launch out in a new biking suit. No; great as the offence was, even I think he got something like adequate compensation for it,” added Wagram grimly, as he called to mind the fellow’s insults – and their object.

And with this assurance Haldane had perforce to remain satisfied.

Chapter Nine.

“We Get No Show.”

“Great Scott!” exclaimed Clytie Calmour as a vehement ring sounded at the front gate, obviously produced by the owner of the large red head which surmounted that portal. “Great Scott! but whoever called this shebang Siege House named it well. Here’s our last butcher pestering for his account for the seventh time. Now, dad, shell out.”

“Don’t talk rot, Clytie. You know I haven’t got a stiver. He’ll have to wait till next quarter-day. Tell him that, and let him go to the devil.”

“Yes, yes; that’s all right. But meanwhile we shall have to be vegetarians.”

“This infernal dunning gets on a man’s nerves. It oughtn’t to be allowed,” grumbled old Calmour, who, it being only breakfast-time, was not sufficiently drunk to philosophise.

“No, it oughtn’t,” cut in Bob; “but this time tell him we’ll square with him next week to a dead cert, Clytie, and deal with him ever after. You know, dad. You were forgetting,” with a significant wink.

“I wonder what nefarious plan you’re hatching between you,” said Delia. “But I’d be sorry for Wells if he depended upon it for getting his money.”

“Oh, shut up,” snarled Bob. “You weren’t so blazing straight-laced and sanctimonious until you got taken up by the nobs, either. By Jove, I believe Clytie’s got round him after all. What a girl she is!”

For the exasperated tradesman, who had been delivering himself of all sorts of uncomplimentary sayings, on the appearance of Clytie on the scene had evidently thawed with a suddenness which was quite miraculous, and was seen to salute quite respectfully as he turned away.

“I’ve fixed him,” she said serenely as she entered. “He’ll send round. We shan’t have to vegetate to-day.”

This sort of incident was common at Siege House, which, by the way, had really been so named by a former owner who had taken part in the siege of Delhi. Indeed, it was a mystery how they lived. Old Calmour’s pension was not large, and generally forestalled, yet somehow they managed to rub along.

“When are you going to start for Haldane’s, Delia?” went on Bob, who was inclined to make himself disagreeable.

“Soon.”

“Soon? Can’t be too soon, eh? It’s surprising how these old widowers freeze on to you. First Wagram, now Haldane,” jeered Bob.

But there came a look into the face of his would-be victim that he did not like. Delia had a temper, both quick and hot when roused, as he had more than once had reason to know, wherefore now his asinine guffaw seemed to dwindle. Clytie intervened.

“Shut your head, Bob,” she said decisively. “You open it a great deal too much, and generally at the wrong time. Likewise clear; we’ve had enough of you. Besides, you’re late. Pownall and Skreet must be absolutely languishing for you and your valuable services. Do you hear? Clear.”

Whatever hold the speaker had upon Bob it was obviously a tight one, for he never failed in his obedience. Such was rendered grumblingly, indeed, but rendered it was. Now he retreated to the door, grunting a surly “All right.”

“What are those two up to, do you think, Clytie?” said Delia. “The old man’s going to Pownall and Skreet’s as well as Bob.”

The last named at this juncture put his head in at the door to shout out:

“Which is the one, Delia? Wagram or Haldane?” and withdrew it in a hurry lest a well-aimed missile might considerably damage it – for of such were the ways of Siege House.

“I don’t know. There may be a judgment summons out against him that we know nothing about – or anything,” answered Clytie with a tinge of anxiety.

“You don’t think they’re up to any mischief with regard to that wretched gnu affair?” said Delia anxiously.

“No – no; I’ve put my foot on that. And Pownall and Skreet are infernal thieves. Look how they fleeced me. They couldn’t let Charlie Vance’s thousand pass through their hands without sticking to a lot of it. Called it costs! Why, they ought to have got those from the other side. Well, that’s all gone, and I don’t know how we’re going to raise the wind. A cool thou, wouldn’t come in badly just now. By the way, Delia, supposing my scheme fell through, how would it be to bring off something of that kind – on the principle of ‘half-an-egg’? And it would be a dashed sight more than a cool thou, this time, for the Wagrams are Croesus compared with the Vances.”

“Oh, that’ll do, Clytie. I suppose, as Bob says, I must have become straitlaced and sanctimonious; but I hate to look upon it in that light. I’m not meaning to reflect on you, mind; but, rather than do the other thing, I’d starve.”

“So might we. Oh, I don’t mind,” was the serene answer. “Only, look here, Delia, and see where we come in. It’s like having first-rate teeth but nothing to eat with them. Here we are, two devilish good-looking girls, each in our own way, yet we get no show. What’s the use of our looks if they’re to be nothing more than an instrument for cajoling a red-headed butcher into giving us further ‘tick’ – as in the present case?”

“What’s the use? None at all,” said Delia bitterly – “nor ever will be. We don’t seem to ‘get there,’ and it’s my belief we never shall.”

“We’ve a margin left yet, thank the Lord; and you never know your luck. Well, Delia, you’ve a ripping day before you, at any rate. If I were you I should start early and ride slow. You never look your best coming in hot and blown. And make all you can and half as much again of your chances, for, as I said, you never know your luck.”

What Clytie had stated, in her characteristically slangy way, was rather under the truth. These two, possessed of exceptional powers of attractiveness, had, as she put it, “no show.” Nor did their relative attractions clash. The one, with her limpid blue eyes, Grecian profile, and tall serenity of carriage, made an effective contrast to the rounder, more voluptuous outlines of the other, with her dark, clear skin and mantling complexion, bright hazel eyes and full, ruddy lips. But their circumstances and surroundings were all against them; and, handicapped by tipling, disreputable old Calmour as a parent, those they would have had to do with fought shy of them, and those they would not – well, they would not.

“There’s the second post,” said Delia with a sigh. “More duns, I suppose.”

She went to the door just as the postman rapped his double knock, and returned immediately with two letters.

“Both for me, but – I don’t know the first at all.”

“It’s Haldane, putting you off, of course.”

“Oh, Clytie, don’t,” quickly answered Delia, to whom such an eventuality would have constituted the keenest of disappointments. “No; it’s all right,” tremulously tearing open both envelopes. “But – they’re not for me at all, they’re for you. They’re about typing, but they’re both directed ‘Miss Calmour.’”

“Let’s see.” Then reading: “Madam, – you have been mentioned to me by Mr Wagram Wagram – ‘Ah, that’s all right.’ And she went on with the letter, which ran to the effect that the writer wanted the MS of a novel of 80,000 words typed, asking her terms, and throwing out a promise that, if such were satisfactory, he would be happy to entrust her with all his work. The name was a fairly well-known one.

“Now, what shall I ask him? If I say a shilling a thousand, there’s a four-pound job. But, then, he may answer he can get it done for tenpence, which is quite true. If he had *seen* me I’d ask him fifteen pence.”

“Do it anyhow. You can always come down.”

“No fear; not through the post. Well, I’ll ask him a bob, and chance it.”

“He could well afford it. He must be making pots of money, according to the newspapers.”

“M – yes – according to the newspapers. Now, then, Delia, here we are. ‘Mr Wagram Wagram’ again. It’s a she this time, and starts on tenpence. Knows her way about evidently; hints at ninepence because of the inconvenience of postage, and it’s only two short stories of 4000 apiece. Well, I’ll take her on, too, at tenpence. You can’t haggle up our own sweet sex. Well done, Wagram Wagram. It’s brickish of him; and I’d just begun to think he’d forgotten what he said, or had only said it for something to say. Four quid, and a trifle over; that’ll help stave off Wells. Just in the nick of time too.”

“Yes; isn’t it good of him?”

“Who? Wells? Oh, Wagram. Yes. Quite so. It is rather. Good job you went over to Hilversea the other day, Delia; it may have reminded him.”

“I don’t think he’d ever have forgotten. Oh, but it was lovely there – the whole thing. It was like being in another atmosphere, another world.”

Clytie, the shrewd, the practical, put her head a little to one side as she scrutinised her sister.

“Make it one then, dear; make it yours. You’ve got some sort of show at last, if you only work it right. I’m sorry, though, we let Bob into the scheme. What asses we were, or rather I was. One oughtn’t so much as to have mentioned a thing of that sort in his hearing.”

“No, indeed. But the idea is too ridiculous for anything.”

“Because he is Wagram Wagram of Hilversea. Supposing he were Wagram Wagram of nowhere? What then, Delia?”

“Ah!”

Clytie shook her pretty head slightly and smiled to herself. The quick eagerness of the exclamation, the soft look that came into her sister’s eyes, told her all there was to tell.

“You’re handicapped,” she said. “You can’t play the part. You’re handicapped by genuineness. Never mind; even that may count as an advantage.”

Chapter Ten. At Haldane's

Delia was a quick and graceful cyclist, and now on her beautiful new machine she seemed to fly as she skimmed the level and well-kept roads; and although she covered the eleven miles intervening between Bassingham and Haldane's house – a pleasant country box – in a little over the hour she was neither hot nor blown. Yvonne was strolling on the lawn, and greeted her with great cordiality.

"Is that your post-card collection?" she said as she helped to unstrap three large albums from the carrier. "Why, it must be as big as mine. I am longing to see it. We'll overhaul it after lunch down there," indicating a spreading tree by the stream which gave forth abundant shade.

"What a lovely kitten," cried Delia.

"Isn't it?" said Yvonne, picking it up. "Only it isn't a kitten; it's full-grown. It's a kind that never grows large – do you, Poogie?" she added lovingly, stroking the beautiful little animal, which nestled to her, purring contentedly. It was of the Angora type, with small, lynxlike ears, thick, rich fur with regular markings, and a spreading tail. "We got it in Switzerland. I wasn't going to lose the chance. You might go all your life and never see another like it, so I made father buy it for me. It follows me like a dog. If I walk up and down it walks up and down with me. Look."

"How sweet," said Delia, watching the little creature as, with tail erect, it paced daintily beside them. "I do love them like that."

"So do I, and so does father. I believe if anything happened to Poogie he'd be as sick about it as I would."

"I don't wonder." And, all unconsciously, the speaker had more completely won Yvonne's heart.

Even the shyest – and Delia was not addicted to shyness – would have felt at ease as they sat down, a party of three. Haldane had a frank, easy way with him towards those he did not dislike, calculated to make them feel at home, especially in the case of a bright, pretty, and intelligent girl, and soon all three were chatting and laughing as if they had known each other all their lives. Delia was at her best, and talked intelligently and well, as she could do when temporarily emancipated from the depressing atmosphere of Siege House.

"What a beautiful place Hilversea Court is, Mr Haldane," she said presently.

"Yes. Too big for me. Very good as a show place; but for living in give me a box like this."

The said "box" at that moment looked out upon a wondrously lovely bit of summer landscape – great clouds of vivid foliage against the blue sky; intervening seas of meadow, golden with spangling buttercups; and in the immediate foreground a stretch of green lawn, flower-bedded, and tuneful with the murmur of bees, blending with the plash of the stream beyond. Within, all was correspondingly bright and cheerful.

"Father says Hilversea Court exists for the sole purpose of framing old Mr Wagram," said Yvonne. "That Grandisonian, old-world look about him wouldn't be in keeping with anything more modern."

"No, it wouldn't," assented Haldane. "But, as I said before – never to the Wagrams, though – the place is much too big to live in."

"I suppose they are passionately attached to it?" asked Delia.

"That's the word. If they have a weakness it is a conviction that the world revolves round Hilversea, and this conviction Wagram holds, if possible, a trifle more firmly than the old Squire."

"Really?"

"Yes; but he acts in keeping with the idea. There isn't a better looked after place – well, in the world, I may safely say. All the people on it simply idolise him, especially since the old Squire turned over the whole management to him."

"How perfectly delightful," pronounced Delia. "I can well imagine it, for a more kind and considerate man can hardly exist. Fancy, that splendid new bicycle I'm riding he insisted on sending me in place of mine that got smashed up by the gnu – an old rattle-trap of a thing that would hardly have fetched its value in old iron."

"Yes; that's just the sort of thing he would do," said Yvonne.

Then Delia went on to tell about the typewriting work he had been instrumental in procuring for her sister; and they talked Wagram for some time longer, in such wise as should have put the heir-apparent of Hilversea to the painful blush could he have overheard them.

"What I object to about him, though," said Haldane, "is that he shirks his duties on the Bench. I suppose if it weren't that he can hardly help being on the commission of the peace he'd resign."

"I'm sure he would," declared Yvonne. "You know, Miss Calmour, he says it doesn't seem his mission to to be punishing other people."

"Ho – ho – ho!" laughed Haldane. "Decidedly, then, he had forgotten that principle when he caned that cad for you the other day, Sunbeam. He seems to have waled the fellow within an inch of his life."

"Why? What was that?" asked Delia, looking up with quick interest. And then the story came out.

"The brute deserved all he got," she exclaimed with heat, and there was something like adoration in the glance she sent at Yvonne. This lovely child-woman, in her exquisite refinement, to be insulted by a common or roadside cad!

"And he deserved all he's going to get if ever I have the pleasure of beholding him," supplemented Haldane grimly.

"No, he isn't, father, for I don't believe I should know him again from Adam, in the first place. In the second, I shouldn't point him out to you if I did. Thirdly and lastly, I think the poor beast got quite enough that day."

"He couldn't. Don't you agree with me, Miss Calmour?"

"Most decidedly," said Delia, looking again at Yvonne. The latter laughed.

"The thing isn't worth making any more fuss about," she said, with a shake of her golden head. "And, if we have all done, it's time to look at the post-cards; I'm longing to see them."

Now, through all this conversation Delia was conscious that she had never enjoyed a more excellent lunch. Haldane was fond of the good things of life, and his Moselle was irreproachable – so, too, was Yvonne as a hostess – and, being gifted with a fine, healthy appetite, begotten of youth and a bicycle ride, their guest was in a position to appreciate it nicely.

The two girls adjourned to the shade of the big tree that Yvonne had pointed out, and there for long did they compare notes and look over each other's collections.

Delia had been on the point of selling hers – everything was considered in the light of an asset at Siege House – and had only refrained by reason of the inadequacy of the offers made. Now she rejoiced that she had not since it constituted the peg whereon hung the initiation of this acquaintance. Yet she wished she had thought of weeding it a little, for some of the specimens, looked at in recent lights, struck her as tawdry and vulgar. Yvonne's collection, on the other hand, seemed to represent every town, village, cathedral, and picturesque spot in Europe, with famed works of art and a sprinkling of celebrities.

"Why, what's this?" cried Delia as several loose cards fluttered out of the books. "It's yourself!"

"Yes. Father had it done to send to people as a Christmas card."

"But you must let me have one of these. Why, they are charming portraits. Do! Will you?"

"Certainly, if you care about it. Shall I post it to you?"

"Not for the world. They'd stamp it all over, perhaps right across the face."

"Ah – ah!" mischievously. "Now you see why I don't like them through the post. All these places are like portraits to me; they remind me of good times."

"They must indeed," said the other, thinking under what glowing circumstances this happy child's life had been passed.

"Here's one of Pogie. I had that done. Would you like it too? Come here, Pogie, and strike the same attitude, and let's see if it's good."

"I should rather think I would like it," answered Delia, who was stroking the beautiful little creature. And so the afternoon fled, for one of them only too quickly; and presently Haldane joined them, smoking a pipe, and they strolled about a little till it was time for the inevitable tea, and soon after for a homeward move.

"You must come and see us again, Miss Calmour, if you have not found it too slow," Haldane said as they exchanged farewells.

"Slow! Why, Mr Haldane, I have never enjoyed myself so much in my life."

"I'm so glad," Yvonne interposed in her frank, sunny way. Then they had parted.

"She seems a nice, pleasant, straightforward sort of girl, with no nonsense about her," was Haldane's comment as they strolled back from the gate. "Pity she comes of that rotten brood. I wouldn't have one of the others inside my door on any account. But I've always stood out against holding the individual responsible for the defects of its relatives, and here, I fancy, is a case in point. Let's go and try for a trout, Sunbeam."

Their late guest, speeding along in the sweet June sunshine was going over the day's events in her mind, and into the same there shot a sudden idea. If only she could be wanted as "companion" for Yvonne. She had held a post of the kind before, and had found it, not through her own fault, intolerable. But here it would be like Paradise, such was the spell this sunny child-woman, with the pretty little foreign ways contracted during a large Continental experience, had woven upon her. It needed Clytie to point out to her that a hale, middle-aged man such as Haldane, if in want of that functionary at all, must perforce employ a very Gorgon, which, of course, he could never dream of doing; and her musings kept her so busy that she nearly dropped off her bicycle in the start she gave on finding herself almost face to face with Wagram.

He was advancing towards her, evidently making for a gate that led into the ride of a wood. He had a rabbit rifle in his hand, the same weapon that had figured in the adventure. She was on her feet in a moment.

"Oh, Mr Wagram, how good of you!" she began in her impulsive way. "Clytie has just had two orders – both through your recommendation."

"I am always pleased to be of use to anybody when it is within my power."

What was this? Had the very heavens fallen? His tone was icy. He had just formally touched her outstretched hand – no more than the barest courtesy demanded.

"It was very, very good of you all the same," she pursued lamely.

"Pray don't mention it," he replied, lifting his hat with a movement as though to resume his way, which she could not ignore.

She remounted her bicycle, and well, indeed, was it for her that the road was clear, as she whirled along mechanically with pale face and choking a sob in her throat. What did it mean? What had she done? What could she have done? The god at whose shrine she worshipped was displeased – sorely and grievously displeased. Yet why, why? To this she could find no answer – no, none.

And the sunshine had gone out of the day.

Chapter Eleven. Concerning Two Claims

“God bless my soul!” ejaculated the old Squire in a startled tone. Then relapsing into mirth: “Is it meant for a joke?”

“What?” asked Wagram, who was engaged in the same occupation – investigating letters which had just come by the afternoon post.

“This,” said the Squire, handing across the letter he had been reading. “Why, it’s too comical. I never heard of such preposterous impudence in my life.” And he began to pace up and down the hall.

Wagram took the letter, and the first glance down it was enough to make him thoroughly agree with his father, except that he felt moved to even greater anger. For the heading showed that it emanated from the office of Pownall and Skreet, Solicitors, Bassingham, and its burden was to claim the sum of one thousand pounds damages “on behalf of our client, Miss Delia Calmour, by reason of certain severe bodily injuries received by her from a certain ferocious and dangerous animal, your property, suffered to be at large at such and such a time and place, the latter a public highway.” And so on.

“Is it a joke, Wagram?” repeated the old Squire.

“If so, it’s an uncommonly bad one,” was the answer; “in fact, rotten. No, I wouldn’t have believed it of the girl – really, I wouldn’t.”

His father smiled slightly, but refrained from retorting: “What did I tell you?”

“And yet the other day,” he pursued, “she came in among us all, and we treated her as one of ourselves. Yet all the time she was scheming a plan of vulgar and most outrageous blackmail.”

“That’s the worst part of it,” said Wagram with some bitterness. “See what comes of thinking oneself too knowing. I could have sworn the girl was a good girl and honest; she had honest eyes.”

“Honest! You can’t mention the word in connection with that low-down, scheming, blackmailing brood.”

“Well, there you have me, father, I admit,” answered Wagram. “You advised me against them, and I took my own line. I sing small.”

“Oh, that’s no matter. The question is: What are we going to do? Take no notice?”

“I should send her the money.”

“What! Why, Wagram, it’s preposterous. Why, on your own showing the girl wasn’t hurt at all. A thousand pounds?”

“Still, I should send it. We shouldn’t feel it. I expect these people are in desperate straits, and I’ve known that enviable condition myself.”

“Send it? Great heavens, Wagram! A thousand pounds for that old sot to soak on?”

“No, no. Send it so that nobody has the handling of it but the girl herself. She behaved very pluckily, remember. I’m almost sure she saved my life.”

“Yes; but if you hadn’t come to her rescue it wouldn’t have been in danger, as I said before,” replied the Squire somewhat testily.

“Well, perhaps not; but the situation was inevitable. I couldn’t slink away and leave her to be hacked to death by the brute.”

“All right. I’ll leave it to you, Wagram. Do as you think fit.”

“Very well,” was the answer as he busied himself again with his letters. Then he repressed a quick whistle of astonishment.

“Pownall and Skreet again. Another thousand pounds!” he mentally ejaculated. And, in fact, it was just that; and this time the claim was made on himself on behalf of “our client, Mr Robert

Calmour, by reason of injuries sustained in the unprovoked savage and brutal assault committed by you upon him, on the public highway,” at such and such a time and place.

“Pownall and Skreet are having a merry innings,” he thought to himself; and then he laughed, for a recollection of the said Mr Robert Calmour’s frantic rebound from the gate when that worthy first came in contact with the ground-ash rushed overwhelmingly upon him. But astonishment underlay. So that was the identity of the fellow he had thrashed! Could it be Delia’s brother? Why, it must be; and then he remembered the running epitome as to their family and its habits which Clytie had given him on the occasion of his call at Siege House. Well, the Calmours were on the war-path this time, and no mistake.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.