

Williamson Charles Norris, Williamson Alice
Muriel

The Brightener



Charles Williamson

The Brightener

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C. N. Williamson, A. M. Williamson

The Brightener

PREFACE

To the Kind People Who Read Our Books:

I want to explain to you, in case it may interest you a little, why it is that I want to keep the "firm name" (as we used to call it) of "C. N. & A. M. Williamson," although my husband has gone out of this world.

It is because I feel very strongly that he helps me with the work even more than he was able to do in this world. I always had his advice, and when we took motor tours he gave me his notes to use as well as my own. But now there is far more help than that. I cannot explain in words: I can only feel. And because of that feeling, I could not bear to have the "C. N." disappear from the title page.

Dear People who may read this, I hope that you will wish to see the initials "C. N." with those of

A. M. Williamson

BOOK I

THE YACHT

CHAPTER I

DOWN AND OUT

"I wonder who will tell her," I heard somebody say, just outside the arbour.

The somebody was a woman; and the somebody else who answered was a man. "Glad it won't be me!" he replied, ungrammatically.

I didn't know who these somebodies were, and I didn't much care. For the first instant the one thing I did care about was, that they should remain outside my arbour, instead of finding their way in. Then, the next words waked my interest. They sounded mysterious, and I loved mysteries —*then*.

"It's an awful thing to happen – a double blow, in the same moment!" exclaimed the woman.

They had come to a standstill, close to the arbour; but there was hope that they mightn't discover it, because it wasn't an ordinary arbour. It was really a deep, sweet-scented hollow scooped out of an immense *arbor vitae* tree, camouflaged to look like its sister trees in a group beside the path. The hollow contained an old marble seat, on which I was sitting, but the low entrance could only be reached by one who knew of its existence, passing between those other trees.

I felt suddenly rather curious about the person struck by a "double blow," for a "fellow feeling makes one wondrous kind"; and at that moment I was a sort of modern, female Damocles myself. In fact, I had got the Marchese d'Ardini to bring me away from the ball-room to hide in this secret arbour of his old Roman garden, because my mood was out of tune for dancing. I hadn't wished to come to the ball, but Grandmother had insisted. Now I had made an excuse of wanting an ice, to get rid of my dear old friend the Marchese for a few minutes.

"She couldn't have cared about the poor chap," said the man in a hard voice, with a slight American accent, "or she wouldn't be here to-night."

My heart missed a beat.

"They say," explained the woman, "that her grandmother practically forced her to marry the prince, and arranged it at a time when he'd have to go back to the Front an hour after the wedding, so they shouldn't be *really* married, if anything happened to him. I don't know whether that's true or not!"

But I knew! I knew that it was true, because they were talking about me. In an instant – before I'd decided whether to rush out or sit still – I knew something more.

"*You* ought to be well informed, though," the woman's voice continued. "You're a distant cousin, aren't you?"

"'Distant' is the word! About forty-fourth cousin, four times removed," the man laughed with frank bitterness. (No wonder, as he'd unsuccessfully claimed the right to our family estate, to hitch on to his silly old, dug-up title!) Not only did I know, now, of whom they were talking, but I knew one of those who talked: a red-headed giant of a man I'd seen to-night for the first time, though he had annoyed Grandmother and me from a distance, for years. In fact, we'd left home and taken up the Red Cross industry in Rome, because of him. Indirectly it was his fault that I was married, since, if it hadn't been for him, I shouldn't have come to Italy or met Prince di Miramare. I did not stop, however, to think of all this. It just flashed through my subconscious mind, while I asked myself, "What has happened to Paolo? Has he been killed, or only wounded? And what do the brutes mean by a 'double blow'?"

I had no longer the impulse to rush out. I waited, with hushed breath. I didn't care whether it were nice or not to eavesdrop. All I thought of was my intense desire to hear what those two would say next.

"Like grandmother, like grand-daughter, I suppose," went on the ex-cowboy baronet, James Courtenaye. "A hard-hearted lot my only surviving female relatives seem to be! Her husband at the Front, liable to die at any minute; her grandmother dying at home, and our fair young Princess dances gaily to celebrate a small Italian victory!"

"You forget what's happened to-night, Sir Jim, when you speak of your '*surviving*' female relatives," said the woman.

"By George, yes! I've got but one left now. And I expect, from what I hear, I shall be called upon to support her!"

Then Grandmother was dead! – wonderful, indomitable Grandmother, who, only three hours ago, had said, "You *must* go to this dance, Elizabeth. I wish it!" Grandmother, whose last words had been, "You are worthy to be what I've made you: a Princess. You are exactly what I was at your age."

Poor, magnificent Grandmother! She had often told me that she was the greatest beauty of her day. She had sent me away from her to-night, so that she might die alone. Or – had the news of the *other* blow come while I was gone, and killed her?

Dazedly I stumbled to my feet, and in a second I should have pushed past the pair; but, just at this moment, footsteps came hurrying along the path. Those two moved out of the way with some murmured words I didn't catch: and then, the Marchese was with me again. I saw his plump figure silhouetted on the silvered blue dusk of moonlight. He had brought no ice! He flung out empty hands in a despairing gesture which told that he also *knew*.

"My dear child – my poor little Princess – " he began in Italian; but I cut him short.

"I've heard some people talking. Grandmother is dead. And – Paolo?"

"His plane crashed. It was instant death – not painful. Alas, the telegram came to your hotel, and the Signora, your grandmother, opened it. Her maid found it in her hand. The brave spirit had fled! Mr. Carstairs, her solicitor, and his kind American wife came here at once. How fortunate was the business which brought him to Rome just now, looking after your interests! A search-party was seeking me, while I sought a mere ice! And now the Carstairs wait to take you to your hotel. I cannot leave our guests, or I would go with you, too."

He got me back to the old palazzo by a side door, and guided me to a quiet room where the Carstairs sat. They were not alone. An American friend of the ex-cowboy was with them – (another self-made millionaire, but a *much* better made one, of the name of Roger Fane) – and with him a school friend of mine he was in love with, Lady Shelagh Leigh. Shelagh ran to me with her arms out, but I pushed her aside. A darling girl, and I wouldn't have done it for the world, if I had been myself!

She shrank away, hurt; and vaguely I was conscious that the dark man with the tragic eyes – Roger Fane – was coaxing her out of the room. Then I forgot them both as I turned to the Carstairs for news. I little guessed how soon and strangely my life and Shelagh's and Roger Fane's would twine together in a Gordian knot of trouble!

I don't remember much of what followed, except that a taxi rushed us – the Carstairs and me – to the Grand Hotel, as fast as it could go through streets filled with crowds shouting over one of those October victories. Mrs. Carstairs – a mouse of a woman in person, a benevolent Machiavelli in brain – held my hand gently, and said nothing, while her clever old husband tried to cheer me with words. Afterward I learned that she spent those minutes in mapping out my whole future!

You see, *she* knew what I didn't know at the time: that I hadn't enough money in the world to pay for Grandmother's funeral, not to mention our hotel bills!

A clock, when you come to think of it, is a fortunate animal.

When it runs down, it can just comfortably stop. No one expects it to do anything else. No one accuses it of weakness or lack of backbone because it doesn't struggle nobly to go on ticking

and striking. It is not sternly commanded to wind itself. Unless somebody takes that trouble off its hands, it stays stopped. Whereas, if a girl or a young, able-bodied woman runs down (that is, comes suddenly to the end of everything, including resources), she mayn't give up ticking for a single second. *She* must wind herself, and this is really quite as difficult for her to do as for a clock, unless she is abnormally instructed and accomplished.

I am neither. The principal things I know how to do are, to look pretty, and be nice to people, so that when they are with me they feel purry and pleasant. With this stock-in-trade I had a perfectly gorgeous time in life, until – Fate stuck a finger into my mechanism and upset the working of my pendulum.

I ought to have realized that the gorgeousness would some time come to a bad and sudden end. But I was trained to put off what wasn't delightful to do or think of to-day, until to-morrow; because to-morrow could take care of itself and droves of shorn lambs as well.

Grandmother and I had been pals since I was five, when my father (her son) and my mother quietly died of diphtheria, and left me – her namesake – to her. We lived at adorable Courtenaye Abbey on the Devonshire Coast, where furniture, portraits, silver, and china fit for a museum were common, every-day objects to my childish eyes. None of these things could be sold – or the Abbey – for they were all heirlooms (of *our* branch of the Courtenayes, not the Americanized ex-cowboy's insignificant branch, be it understood!). But the place could be let, with everything in it; and when Mr. Carstairs was first engaged to unravel Grandmother's financial tangles, he implored her permission to find a tenant. That was before the war, when I was seventeen; and Grandmother refused.

"What," she cried (I was in the room, all ears), "would you have me advertise the fact that we're reduced to beggary, just as the time has come to present Elizabeth? I'll do nothing of the kind. You must stave off the smash. That's your business. Then Elizabeth will marry a title with money, or an American millionaire or someone, and prevent it from *ever* coming."

This thrilled me, and I felt like a Joan of Arc out to save her family, not by capturing a foe, but a husband.

Mr. Carstairs did stave off the smash, Heaven or its opposite alone knows how, and Grandmother spent about half a future millionaire husband's possible income in taking a town house, with a train of servants; renting a Rolls-Royce, and buying for us both the most divine clothes imaginable. I was long and leggy, and thin as a young colt; but my face was all right, because it was a replica of Grandmother's at seventeen. My eyes and dimples were said to be Something to Dream About, even then (I often dreamed of them myself, after much flattery at balls!), and already my yellow-brown braids measured off at a yard and a half. Besides, I had Grandmother's Early Manner (as one says of an artist: and really she *was* one), so, naturally, I received proposals: *lots* of proposals. But – they were the wrong lots!

All the good-looking young men who wanted to marry me had never a penny to do it on. All the rich ones were so old and appalling that even Grandmother hadn't the heart to order me to the altar. So there it *was*! Then Jim Courtenaye came over from America, where, after an adventurous life (or worse), he'd made pots of money by hook or by crook, probably the latter. He stirred up, from the mud of the past, a trumpery baronetcy bestowed by stodgy King George the Third upon an ancestor in that younger, less important branch of the Courtenayes. Also did he strive expensively to prove a right to Courtenaye Abbey as well, though not one of *his* Courtenayes had ever put a nose inside it and I was the next heir, after Grandmother. He didn't fight (he kindly explained to Mr. Carstairs) to snatch the property out of our mouths. If he got it, we might go on living there till the end of our days. All he wanted was to *own* the place, and have the right to keep it up decently, as we'd never been able to do.

Well, he had to be satisfied with his title and without the Abbey; which was luck for us. But there our luck ended. Not only did the war break out before I had a single proposal worth accepting, but an awful thing happened at the Abbey.

Grandmother had to keep on the rented town house, for patriotic motives, no matter *what* the expense, because she had turned it into an *ouvroir* for the making of hospital supplies. She directed the work herself, and I and Shelagh Leigh (Shelagh was just out of the schoolroom then) and lots of other girls slaved seven hours a day. Suddenly, just when we'd had a big "hurry order" for pneumonia jackets, there was a shortage of material. But Grandmother wasn't a woman to be conquered by shortages! She remembered a hundred yards of bargain stuff she'd bought to be used for new dust-sheets at the Abbey; and as all the servants but two were discharged when we left for town, the sheets had never been made up.

She could not be spared for a day, but I could. By this time I was nineteen, and felt fifty in wisdom, as all girls do, since the war. Grandmother was old-fashioned in some ways, but new-fashioned in others, so she ordered me off to Courtenaye Abbey by myself to unlock the room where the bundle had been put. Train service was not good, and I would have to stay the night; but she wired to old Barlow and his wife – once lodge-keepers, now trusted guardians of the house. She told Mrs. Barlow (a pretty old Devonshire Thing, like peaches and cream, called by me "Barley") to get my old room ready; and Barlow was to meet me at the train. At the last moment, however, Shelagh Leigh decided to go with me; and if we had guessed it, this was to turn out one of the most important decisions of her life. Barlow met us, of course; and how he had changed since last I'd seen his comfortable face! I expected him to be charmed with the sight of me, if not of Shelagh, for I was always a favourite with Barl and Barley; but the poor man was absent-minded and queer. When a stuffy station-cab from Courtenaye Coombe had rattled us to the shut-up Abbey, I went at once to the housekeeper's room and had a heart-to-heart talk with the Barlows. It seemed that the police had been to the house and "run all through it," because of reports that lights had flashed from the upper windows out to sea at night – "*signals to submarines!*"

Nothing suspicious was found, however, and the police made it clear that they considered the Barlows themselves above reproach. Good people, they were, with twin nephews from Australia fighting in the war! Indeed, an inspector had actually apologized for the visit, saying that the police had pooh-poohed the reports at first. They had paid no attention until "the story was all over the village"; and there are not enough miles between Courtenaye Abbey and Plymouth Dockyard for even the rankest rumours to be disregarded long.

Barley was convinced that one of our ghosts had been waked up by the war – the ghost of a young girl burned to death, who now and then rushes like a column of fire through the front rooms of the second floor in the west wing; but the old pet hoped I wouldn't let this idea of hers keep me awake. The ghost of a nice English young lady was preferable in her opinion to a German spy in the flesh! I agreed, but I was not keen on seeing either. My nerves had been jumpy since the last air-raid over London, consequently I lay awake hour after hour, though Shelagh was in Grandmother's room adjoining mine, with the door ajar between.

When I did sleep, I must have slept heavily. I dreamed that I was a prisoner on a German submarine, and that signals from Courtenaye Abbey flashed straight into my face. They flashed so brightly that they set me on fire; and with the knowledge that, if I couldn't escape at once, I should become a Family Ghost, I wrenched myself awake with a start.

Yes, I *was* awake; though what I saw was so astonishing that I thought it must be another nightmare. There really was a strong light pouring into my eyes. What it came from I don't know to this day, but probably an electric torch. Anyhow, the ray was so powerful that, though directed upon my face, it faintly lit another face close to mine, as I suddenly sat up in bed.

Instantly that face drew back, and then – as if on a second thought, after a surprise – out went the light. By contrast, the darkness was black as a bath of ink, though I'd pulled back the curtains before going to bed, and the sky was sequined with stars. But on my retina was photographed a pale, illumined circle with a face looking out of it – looking straight at me. You know how quickly these light-pictures begin to fade, but, before this dimmed I had time to verify my first waking impression.

The face was a woman's face – beautiful and hideous at the same time, like Medusa. It was young, yet old. It had deep-set, long eyes that slanted slightly up to the corners. It was thin and hollow-cheeked, with a pointed chin cleft in the middle; and was framed with bright auburn hair of a curiously *unreal* colour.

When the blackness closed in, and I heard in the dark scrambling sounds like a rat running amok in the wainscot, I gave a cry. In my horror and bewilderment I wasn't sure yet whether I were awake or asleep; but someone answered. Dazed as I was, I recognized Shelagh's sweet young voice, and at the same instant her electric bed-lamp was switched on in the next room. "Coming! – coming!" she cried, and appeared in the doorway, her hair gold against the light.

By this time I had the sense to switch on my own lamp, and, comforted by it and my pal's presence, I told Shelagh in a few words what had happened. "Why, how weird! I dreamed the same dream!" she broke in. "At least, I dreamed about a light, and a face."

Hastily we compared notes, and realized that Shelagh had not dreamed: that the woman of mystery had visited us both; only, she had gone to Shelagh first, and had not been scared away as by me, because Shelagh hadn't thoroughly waked up.

We decided that our vision was no ghost, but that, for once, rumour was right. In some amazing way a spy had concealed herself in the rambling old Abbey (the house has several secret rooms of which we know; and there might be others, long forgotten), and probably she had been signalling until warned of danger by that visit from the police. We resolved to rise at daybreak, and walk to Courtenay Coombe to let the police know what had happened to us; but, as it turned out, a great deal more was to happen before dawn.

We felt pretty sure that the spy would cease her activities for the night, after the shock of finding our rooms occupied. Still it would be cowardly – we thought – to lie in bed. We slipped on dressing-gowns, therefore, and with candles (only our wing was furnished with electric light, for which dear Grandmother had never paid) we descended fearsomely to the Barlows' quarters. Having roused the old couple and got them to put on some clothes, a search-party of four perambulated the house. So far as we could see, however, the place was innocent of spies; and at length we crept into bed again.

We didn't mean or expect to sleep, of course, but we must all have "dropped off," otherwise we should have smelt the smoke long before we did smell it. As it was, the great hall slowly burned until Barlow's usual getting-up hour. Shelagh and I knew nothing until Barl came pounding at my door. Then the stinging of our nostrils and eyelids was a fire alarm!

It's wonderful how quickly you can do things when you have to! Ten minutes later I was running as fast as I could go to the village, and might have earned a prize for a two-mile sprint if I hadn't raced alone. By the time the fire-engines reached the Abbey it was too late to save a whole side of the glorious old "linen fold" panelling of the hall. The celebrated staircase was injured, too, and several suits of historic armour, as well as a number of antique weapons.

Fortunately the portraits were all in the picture gallery, and the fire was stopped before it had swept beyond the hall. Where it had started was soon learned, but "*how*" remained a mystery, for shavings and oil-tins had apparently been stuffed behind the panelling. The theory of the police was, that the spy (no one doubted the spy's existence now!) had seen that the "game was up," since the place would be strictly watched from that night on. Out of sheer spite, the female Hun had attempted to burn down the famous old house before she lost her chance; or had perhaps already made preparations to destroy it when her other work should be ended.

There was a hue and cry over the county in pursuit of the fugitive, which echoed as far as London; but the woman had escaped, and not even a trace of her was found.

Grandmother openly claimed that her inspiration in sending for some dust-sheets had not only saved the Abbey, but England. It was most agreeable to bask in self-respect and the praise of friends. When, however, we were bombarded by newspaper men, who took revenge for Grandmother's snubs

by publishing interviews with Sir "Jim" (by this time Major Courtenaye, D. S. O., M. C., unluckily at home with a "Blighty" wound), the haughty lady lost her temper.

It was bad enough, she complained, to have the Abbey turned prematurely into a ruin, but for That Fellow to proclaim that it wouldn't have happened had *he* been the owner was *too* much! The democratic and socialist papers ("rags," according to Grandmother) stood up for the self-made cowboy baronet, and blamed the great lady who had "thrown away in selfish extravagance" what should have paid the upkeep of an historic monument. This, to a woman who directed the most patriotic *ouvroir* in London! And to pile Ossa on Pelion, our Grosvenor Square landlord was cad enough to tell his friends (who told theirs, etc., etc.) that he had never received his rent! Which statement, by the way, was all the more of a libel because it was true.

Now you understand how Sir James Courtenaye was responsible for driving us to Italy, and indirectly bringing about my marriage; for Grandmother wiped the dust of Grosvenor Square from our feet with Italian passports, and swept me off to new activities in Rome.

Here was Mr. Carstairs' moment to say, "I told you so! If only you had left the Abbey when I advised you that it was best, all would have been well. Now, with the central hall in ruins, nobody would be found dead in the place, not even a munition millionaire." But being a particularly kind man he said nothing of the sort. He merely implored Grandmother to live economically in Rome: and of course (being Grandmother!) she did nothing of the sort.

We lived at the most expensive hotel, and whenever we had any money, gave it to the Croce Rossa, running up bills for ourselves. But we mixed much joy with a little charity, and my descriptive letters to Shelagh were so attractive that she persuaded Mr. and Mrs. Pollen, her guardians (uncle and aunt; sickening snobs!), to bring her to Rome; pretext, Red Cross work, which covered so much frivolling in the war! Then, not long after, the cowboy's friend, Roger Fane, appeared on the scene, in the American Expeditionary Force; a thrilling, handsome, and mysteriously tragic person. James Courtenaye also turned up, having been ordered to the Italian Front; but Grandmother and I contrived never to meet him. And when our financial affairs began to rumble like an earthquake, Mr. Carstairs decided to see Grandmother in person.

It was when she received his telegram, "Coming at once," that she decided I must accept Prince di Miramare. She had wanted an Englishman for me; but a Prince is a Prince, and though Paolo was far from rich at the moment, he had the prospect of an immediate million – liras, alas! not pounds. An enormously rich Greek offered him that sum for the fourteenth-century Castello di Miramare on a mountain all its own, some miles from Rome. In consideration of a large sum paid to Paolo's younger brother Carlo, the two Miramare princes would break the entail; and this quick solution of our difficulties was to be a surprise for Mr. Carstairs.

Paolo and I were married as hastily as such matters can be arranged abroad, between persons of different nations; and it was true (as those cynics outside the harbour said) that my soldier prince went back to the Front an hour after the wedding. It was just after we were safely spliced that Grandmother ceased to fight a temperature of a hundred and three, and gave up to an attack of 'flu. She gave up quite quietly, for she thought that, whatever happened, I would be rich, because she had browbeaten lazy, unbusinesslike Paolo into making a will in my favour. The one flaw in this calculation was, his concealing from her the fact that the entail was not yet legally broken. No contract between him and the Greek could be signed while the entail existed; therefore Paolo's will gave me only his personal possessions. These were not much; for I doubt if even the poor boy's uniforms were paid for. But I am thankful that Grandmother died without realizing her failure; and I hope that her spirit was far away before the ex-cowboy began making overtures.

If it had not been for Mrs. Carstairs' inspiration, I don't know what would have become of me!

CHAPTER II

UP AND IN

You may remember what Jim Courtenaye said in the garden: that he would probably have to support me.

Well, he dared to offer, through Mr. Carstairs, to do that very thing, "for the family's sake." At least, he proposed to pay off all our debts and allow me an income of four hundred a year, if it turned out that my inheritance from Paolo was nil.

When Mr. Carstairs passed on the offer to me, as he was bound to do, I said what I felt dear Grandmother would have wished me to say: "I'll see him d – d first!" And I added, "I hope you'll repeat that to the *Person*."

I think from later developments that Mr. Carstairs cannot have repeated my reply verbatim. But I have not yet quite come to the part about those developments. After the funeral, when I knew the worst about the entail, and that Paolo's brother Carlo was breaking it wholly for his *own* benefit, and not at all for mine, Mrs. Carstairs asked sympathetically if I had thought what I should like to do.

"Like to do?" I echoed, bitterly. "I should like to go home to the dear old Abbey, and restore the place as it ought to be restored, and have plenty of money, without lifting a finger to get it. What I *must* do is a different question."

"Well, then, my dear, supposing we put it in that brutal way. Have you thought – er – "

"I've done nothing except think. But I've been brought up with about as much earning capacity as a mechanical doll. The only thing I have the slightest talent for being, is – a detective!"

"Good gracious!" was Mrs. Carstairs' comment on that.

"I've felt ever since spy night at the Abbey that I had it in me to make a good detective," I modestly explained.

"'Princess di Miramare, Private Detective,' would be a distinctly original sign-board over an office door," the old lady reflected. "But I believe *I've* evolved something more practical, considering your name – and your age – (twenty-one, isn't it?) – and your *looks*. Not that detective talent mayn't come in handy even in the profession I'm going to suggest. Very likely it will – among other things. It's a profession that'll call for all the talents you can get hold of."

"Do you by chance mean marriage?" I inquired, coldly. "I've never been a wife. But I suppose I *am* a sort of widow."

"If you weren't a sort of widow you couldn't cope with the profession I've – er – invented. You wouldn't be independent enough."

"Invented? Then you *don't* mean marriage! And not even the stage. I warn you that I solemnly promised Grandmother never to go on the stage."

"I know, my child. She mentioned that to Henry – my husband – when they were discussing your future, before you both left London. My idea is *much* more original than marriage, or even the stage. It popped into my mind the night Mrs. Courtenaye died, while we were in a taxi between the Palazzo Ardini and this hotel. I said to myself, 'Dear Elizabeth shall be a Brightener!'"

"A Brightener?" I repeated, with a vague vision of polishing windows or brasses. "I don't – "

"You wouldn't! I told you I'd invented the profession expressly for you. Now I'm going to tell you what it is. I felt that you'd not care to be a tame companion, even to the most gilded millionairess, or a social secretary to a – "

"Horror! – no, I couldn't be a tame anything."

"That's why brightening is your line. A Brightener couldn't *be* a Brightener and tame. She must be brilliant – winged – soaring above the plane of those she brightens; expensive, to make herself appreciated; capable of taking the lead in social direction. Why, my dear, people will fight to get you – pay any price to secure you! *Now* do you understand?"

I didn't. So she explained. After that dazzling preface, the explanation seemed rather an anti-climax. Still, I saw that there might be something in the plan – if it could be worked. And Mrs. Carstairs guaranteed to work it.

My widowhood (save the mark!) qualified me to become a chaperon. And my Princesshood would make me a gilded one. Chaperonage, at its best, might be amusing. But chaperonage was far from the whole destiny of a Brightener. A Brightener need not confine herself to female society, as a mere Companion must. A young woman, even though a widow and a Princess, could not "companion" a person of the opposite sex, even if he were a *hundred*. But she might, from a discreet distance, be his Brightener. That is, she might brighten a lonely man's life without tarnishing her own reputation.

"After all," Mrs. Carstairs went on, "in spite of what's said against him, Man *is* a Fellow Being. If a cat may look at a King, Man may look at a Princess. And unless he's in her set, he can be made to pay for the privilege. Think of a lonely button or boot-maker! What would he give for the honour of invitations to tea, with introductions and social advice, from the popular Princess di Miramare? He might have a wife or daughters, or both, who needed a leg up. *They* would come extra! He might be a widower – in fact, I've caught the first widower for you already. But unluckily you can't use him yet."

"Ugh!" I shuddered. "Sounds as if he were a fish – wriggling on a hook till I'm ready to tear it out of his gills!"

"He is a fish – a big fish. In fact, I may as well break it to you that he is Roger Fane."

"Good heavens!" I cried. "It would take more electricity than I'm fitted with to brighten his tragic and mysterious gloom!"

"Not at all. In fact, you are the only one who can brighten it."

"What are you driving at? He's dead in love with Shelagh Leigh."

"That's just *it*. As things are, he has no hope of marrying Shelagh. She likes him, as you probably know better than I do, for you're her best pal, although she's a year or so younger than you – "

"Two years."

"Well, as I was going to say, in many ways she's a child compared to you. She's as beautiful as one of those cut-off cherubs in the prayer-books, and as old-fashioned as an early Victorian sampler. These blonde Dreams with naturally waving golden hair and rosebud mouths, and eyes big as half-crowns, *have* that drawback, as I've discovered since I came to live in England. In *my* country we don't grow early Victorian buds. You know perfectly well that those detestable snobs, the Pollens, don't think Fane good enough for Shelagh in spite of his money. Money's the *one* nice thing they've got themselves, which they can pass on to Shelagh. Probably they forced the wretched Miss Pollen, who was the male snob's sister, to marry the old Marquis of Leigh just as they wish to *compel* Shelagh to marry some other wreck of his sort – and die young, as her mother did. The girl's a dear – a perfect *lamb*! – but lambs can't stand up against lions. They generally lie down inside them. But with *you* at the helm, the Pollen lions could be forced – "

"Not if they knew it!" I cut in.

"They wouldn't know it. Did *you* know that you were being forced to marry that poor young prince of yours?"

"I wasn't forced. I was persuaded."

"We won't argue the point! Anyhow, the subject doesn't press. The scheme I have in my head for you to launch Fane on the social sea (the *sea* in every sense of the word, as you'll learn by and by) can't come off till you're out of your deepest mourning. I'll find you a quieter line of goods to begin on than the Fane-Leigh business if you agree to take up Brightening. The question is, *do* you agree?"

"I do," I said more earnestly than I had said "I will" as I stood at Paolo's side in church. For life hadn't been very earnest then. Now it was.

"Good!" exclaimed Mrs. Carstairs. "Then that's *that*! The next thing is to furnish you a charming flat in the same house with us. You must have a background of your own."

"You forget – I haven't a farthing!" I fiercely reminded her. "But Mr. Carstairs won't forget! I've made him too much trouble. The best Brightening won't run to *half* a Background in Berkeley Square."

"Wait," Mrs. Carstairs calmed me. "I haven't finished the whole proposition yet. In America, when we run up a sky-scraper, we don't begin at the bottom, in any old, commonplace way. We stick a few steel girders into the earth; then we start at the top and work down. That's what I've been doing with my plan. It's perfect. Only you've got to support it with something."

"What is it you're trying to break to me?" I demanded.

The dear old lady swallowed heavily. (It must be something pretty awful if it daunted *her*!)

"You like Roger Fane," she began.

"Yes, I admire him. He's handsome and interesting, though a little too mysterious and tragic to live with for my taste."

"He's not mysterious at all!" she defended Fane. "His tragedy – for there *was* a tragedy! – is no secret in America. I often met him before the war, when I ran over to pay visits in New York, though he was far from being in the Four Hundred. But at the moment I've no more to say about Roger Fane. I've been using him for a handle to brandish a friend of his in front of your eyes."

My blood grew hot. "*Not* the ex-cowboy?"

"That's no way to speak of Sir James Courtenaye."

"Then *he's* what you want to break to me?"

"I want – I mean, I'm *requested*! – to inform you of a way he proposes out of the woods for you – at least, the darkest part of the woods."

"I told Mr. Carstairs I'd see James Courtenaye d – d rather than –"

"*This* is a different affair entirely. You must listen, my dear, unless I'm to wash my hands of you! What I have to describe is the foundation for the Brightening."

I swallowed some more of Grandmother's expressions which occurred to me, and listened.

Sir James Courtenaye's second proposition was not an offer of charity. He suggested that I let Courtenaye Abbey to him for a term of years, for the sum of one thousand five hundred pounds per annum, the first three years to be paid in advance. (This clause, Mrs. Carstairs hinted, would enable me to dole out crumbs here and there for the quieting of Grandmother's creditors.) Sir James's intention was, not to use the Abbey as a residence, but to make of it a show place for the public during the term of his lease. In order to do this, the hall must be restored and the once-famous gardens beautified. This expense he would undertake, carrying the work quickly to completion, and would reimburse himself by means of the fees – a shilling a head – charged for viewing the house and its historic treasures.

When I had heard all this, I hesitated what to answer, thinking of Grandmother, and wondering what she would have said had she been in my shoes. But as this thought flitted into my mind, it was followed by another. One of Grandmother's few old-fashioned fads was her style of shoe: pattern 1875. The shoes I stood in, at this moment, were pattern 1918. In *my* shoes Grandmother would simply scream! And I wouldn't be at my best in hers. This was the parable which commonsense put to me, and Mrs. Carstairs cleverly offering no word of advice, I paused no longer than five minutes before I snapped out, "Yes! The horrid brute can have the darling place till I get rich."

"How sweet of you to consent so *graciously*, darling!" purred Mrs. Carstairs. Then we both laughed. After which I fell into her arms, and cried.

For fear I might change my mind, Mr. Carstairs got me to sign some dull-looking documents that very day, and the oddness of their being all ready to hand didn't strike me till the ink was dry.

"Henry had them prepared because he knew how *sensible* you are at heart – I mean *at head*," his wife explained. "Indeed, it is a compliment to your intelligence."

Anyhow, it gave me a wherewithal to throw sops to a whole Zooful of Cerberuses, and still keep enough to take that flat in the Carstairs' house in Berkeley Square. Of course to do all this

meant leaving Italy for good and going back to England. But there was little to hold me in Rome. My inheritance from my husband-of-an-hour could be packed in a suitcase! Shelagh and her snobs travelled with us. And as soon as they were demobilized, Roger Fane and James Courtenaye followed, if not us, at least in our direction.

I don't think that Aladdin's Lamp builders "had anything on" Sir Jim's (as he himself said), judging by the way the restorations simply flew. From what I heard of the sums he spent, it would take the shillings of all England and America as sightseers to put him in pocket. But as Mr. Carstairs pointed out, that was *his* business.

Mine was to gird my loins at Lucille's and Redfern's, in order to become a Brightener. For my pendulum was ticking regularly now. I was no longer down and out. I was up and in. Elizabeth, Princess di Miramare, was spoiling for her first job.

CHAPTER III

THUNDERBOLT SIX

Looking back through my twenty-one-and-three-quarter years, I divide my life, up to date, into thunderbolts.

Thunderbolt One: Death of my Father and Mother.

Thunderbolt Two: Spy Night at the Abbey.

Thunderbolt Three: My Marriage to Paolo di Miramare.

Thunderbolt Four: The "Double Blow."

Thunderbolt Five: Beggary!

Which brings me along the road to Thunderbolt Six.

Mrs. Percy-Hogge was, and is, exactly what you would think from her name; which is why I don't care to dwell at length on the few months I spent brightening her at Bath. It was bad enough *living* them!

Now, if I were a Hogge instead of a Courtenaye, plus Miramare, I would *be* one, plain, unadulterated, and unadorned. *She* adulterated her Hogg with an "e," and adorned it with a "Percy," her late husband's Christian name. He being in heaven or somewhere, the hyphen couldn't hurt him; and with it, and his money, *and* Me, she began at Bath the attempt to live down the past of a mere margarine-making Hogg. Whole bunches of Grandmother's friends were in the Bath zone just then, which is why I chose it, and they were so touched by my widow's weeds that they were charming to Mrs. P. – H. in order to please me. As most of them – though stuffy – were titled, and there were two Marchionesses and one Duchess, the result for Mrs. Percy-Hogge was brilliant. She, who had never before known any one above a knight-ess, was in Paradise. She had taken a fine old Georgian house, furnished from basement to attic by Mallet, and had launched invitations for a dinner-party "to meet the Dowager-Duchess of Stoke," when – bang fell Thunderbolt Six!

Naturally it fell on me, not her, as thunderbolts have no affinity for Hoggs. It fell in the shape of a telegram from Mrs. Carstairs.

She wired:

Come London immediately, for consultation. Terrible theft at Abbey. Barlows drugged and bound by burglars. Both prostrated. Affair serious. Let me know train. Will meet. Love.

Caroline Carstairs.

I wired in return that I would catch the first train, and caught it. The old lady kept her word also, and met me. Before her car had whirled us to Berkeley Square I had got the whole story out of her; which was well, as an ordeal awaited me, and I needed time to camouflage my feelings.

I had been sent for in haste because the news of the burglary was not to leak into the papers until, as Mrs. Carstairs expressed it, "those most concerned had come to some sort of understanding." "You see," she added, "this isn't an ordinary theft. There are wheels within wheels, and the insurance people will kick up a row rather than pay. That's why we must talk everything over; you, and Sir James, and Henry – and Henry is never *quite* complete without me, so I intend to be in the offing."

I knew she wouldn't stay there; but that was a detail!

The robbery had taken place the night before, and Sir James himself had been the one to discover it. Complication number one (as you'll see in a minute).

He, being now "demobbed" and a man of leisure, instead of reopening his flat in town, had taken up quarters at Courtenaye Coombe to superintend the repairs at the Abbey. His ex-cowboy

habits being energetic, he usually walked the two miles from the village, and appeared on the scene ahead of the workmen.

This morning he arrived before seven o'clock, and went, according to custom, to beg a cup of coffee from Mrs. Barlow. She and her husband occupied the bedroom and sitting room which had been the housekeeper's; but at that hour the two were invariably in the kitchen. Sir Jim let himself in with his key, and marched straight to that part of the house. He was surprised to find the kitchen shutters closed and the range fireless. Suspecting something wrong, he went to the bedroom door and knocked. He got no answer; but a second, harder rap produced a muffled moan. The door was not locked. He opened it, and was horrified at what he saw: Mrs. Barlow, on the bed, gagged and bound; her husband in the same condition, but lying on the floor; and the atmosphere of the closed room heavy with the fumes of chloroform.

It was Mrs. Barlow who managed to answer the knock with a moan. Barlow was deeper under the spell of the drug than she, and – it appeared afterward – in a more serious condition of collapse.

The old couple had no story to tell, for they recalled nothing of what had happened. They had made the rounds of the house as usual at night, and had then gone to bed. Barlow did not wake from his stupor until the village doctor came to revive him with stimulants, and Mrs. Barlow's first gleam of consciousness was when she dimly heard Sir James knocking. She strove to call out, felt aware of illness, realized with terror that her mouth was distended with a gag, and struggled to utter the faint groan which reached his ears.

As soon as Sir Jim had attended to the sufferers, he hurried out, and, finding that the workmen had arrived, rushed one of them back to Courtenaye Coombe for the doctor and the village nurse. The moment he (Sir Jim) was free to do so, he started on a voyage of discovery round the house, and soon learned that a big haul had been brought off. The things taken were small in size but in value immense, and circumstantial evidence suggested that the thief or thieves knew precisely what they wanted as well as where to get it.

In the picture gallery a portrait of King Charles I (given by himself to a General Courtenaye of the day) had been cleverly cut out of its frame, also a sketch of the Long Water at Hampton Court, painted and signed by King Charles. The green drawing room was deprived of its chief treasure, a quaint sampler embroidered by the hand of Mary Queen of Scots for her "faithful John Courtenaye." From the Chinese boudoir a Buddha of the Ming period was gone, and a jewel box of marvellous red lacquer presented by Li Hung Chang to my grandmother. The silver cabinet in the oak dining room had been broken open, and a teapot, sugar bowl, and cream-jug, given by Queen Anne to an ancestress, were absent. The China cabinet in the same room was bared of a set of green-and-gold coffee cups presented by Napoleon I to a French great-great-grandmother of mine; and from the big dining hall adjoining, a Gobelin panel, woven for the Empress Josephine, after the wedding picture by David, had vanished.

A few *bibelots* were missing also, here and there; snuff boxes of Beau Nash and Beau Brummel; miniatures, old paste brooches and buckles reminiscent of Courtenaye beauties; and a fat watch that had belonged to George IV.

"All my pet things!" I mourned.

"Don't say that to any one except me," advised Mrs. Carstairs. "My dear, *bits of a letter torn into tiny pieces – a letter from you – were found in the Chinese Room*, and the Insurance people will be hatefully inquisitive!"

"You don't mean to insinuate that they'll suspect me?" I blazed at her.

"Not of stealing the things with your own hands; and if they did, you could easily prove an alibi, I suppose. Still, they're bound to follow up every clue, and bits of paper with your writing on them, apparently dropped by the thieves, *do* form a tempting clue. You can't help admitting it."

I did not admit it in the least, for at first glance I couldn't see where the "temptation" lay to steal one's own belongings. But Mrs. Carstairs soon made me see. Though the things were mine in a way,

in another way they were not mine. Being heirlooms, I could not profit by them financially, in the open. Yet if I could cause them to disappear, without being detected, I should receive the insurance money with one hand, and rake in with the other a large bribe from some supposititious purchaser.

"On the contrary, why shouldn't our brave Bart be suspected of precisely the same fraud, and more of it?" I inquired. "If I could steal the things, so could he. If they're my pets, they may be his. And he was on the spot, with a lot of workmen in his pay! Surely such circumstantial evidence against him weighs more heavily in the scales than a mere scrap of paper against me? I've written Sir Jim once or twice, by the way, on business about the Abbey since I've been in Bath. All he'd have to do would be to tear a letter up small enough, so it couldn't be pieced together and make sense – "

"Nobody's weighing anything in scales against either of you – yet," soothed Mrs. Carstairs, "unless you're doing it against each other! But we don't know what may happen. That's why it seemed best for you and Sir James to come together and exchange blows – I mean, *views!* – at once. He called my husband up by long-distance telephone early this morning, told him what had happened, and had a pow-wow on ways and means. They decided not to inform the police, but to save publicity and engage a private detective. In fact, Sir J – asked Henry to send a good man to the Abbey by the quickest train. He went – the man, I mean, not Henry; and the head of his firm ought to arrive at our flat in a few minutes now, to meet you and Sir James."

"Sir James! Even a galloping cowboy can't be in London and Devonshire at the same moment."

"Oh, I forgot to mention, he must have travelled up by *your* train. I suppose you didn't see him?"

"I did not!"

"He was probably in a smoking carriage. Well, anyhow, he'll soon be with us."

"Stop the taxi!" I broke in; and stopped it myself by tapping on the window behind the chauffeur.

"Good heavens! what's the matter?" gasped my companion.

"Nothing. I want to inquire the name of that firm of private detectives Sir James Courtenaye got Mr. Carstairs to engage."

"Pemberton. You must have seen it advertised. But why stop the taxi to ask that?"

"I stopped the taxi to get out, and let you run home alone while I find another cab to take me to another detective. You see, I didn't want to go to the same firm."

"Isn't one firm of detectives enough at one time, on one job?"

"It isn't one job. You're the shrewdest woman I know. You *must* see that James Courtenaye has engaged *his* detective to spy upon me – to dog my footsteps – to discover if I suddenly blossom out into untold magnificence on ill-got gains. I intend to turn the tables on him, and when I come back to your flat, it will be in the company of my very own little pet detective."

Mrs. Carstairs broke into adjurations and arguments. According to her, I misjudged my cousin's motives; and if I brought a detective, it would be an insult. But I checked her by explaining that my man would not give himself away – he would pose as a friend of mine. I would select a suitable person for the part. With that I jumped out of the taxi, and the dear old lady was too wise to argue. She drove sadly home, and I went into the nearest shop which looked likely to own a directory. In that volume I found another firm of detectives with an equally celebrated name. I taxied to their office, explained something of my business, and picked out a person who might pass for a pal of a (socialist) princess. He and I then repaired to Berkeley Square, and Sir James and the Pemberton person (also Mr. Carstairs) had not been waiting *much* more than half an hour when we arrived.

I don't know what my "forty-fourth cousin four times removed" thought about my dashing in with a strange Mr. Smith who apparently had nothing to do with the case. And I didn't care. No, not even if he imagined the square-jawed bull-dog creature to be a choice specimen of my circle at Bath. In any case, my Mr. Smith was a dream compared with his Pemberton. As to himself, however – Sir Jim – I had to acknowledge that he was far from insignificant in personality. If there were to be any battle of wits or manners between us, I couldn't afford to despise him.

When I had met him before, I was too utterly overwhelmed to study, or even to notice him much, except to see that he was a big, red-headed fellow, who loomed unnaturally large when viewed against the light. Now I classified him as resembling a more-than-life-size statue – done in pale bronze – of a Red Indian, or a soldier of Ancient Rome. The only flaws in the statue were the red hair and the fiery blackness of the eyes.

My Mr. Smith, as I have explained, wasn't posing as a detective, but he was engaged to stop, look, listen, for all he was worth, and tell me his impressions afterward – just as, no doubt, Mr. Pemberton was to tell Sir James *his*.

We talked over the robbery in conclave; we amateurs suggesting theories, the professionals committing themselves to nothing so premature. Why, it was too early to form judgments, since the detective on the spot had not yet been able to report upon fingerprints or other clues! The sole decision arrived at, and agreed to by all, was to keep the affair among ourselves for the present. This could be managed if none but private detectives were employed and the police not brought into the case. When the meeting broke up and I was able to question Mr. Smith, I was disappointed in him. I had hoped and expected (having led up to it by hints) that he would say: "Sir James Courtenaye is in this." On the contrary, he tactlessly advised me to "put that idea out of my head. There was nothing in it." (I hope he meant the idea, not the head!)

"I should say, speaking in the air," he remarked, "that the caretakers are the guilty parties, or at least have had some hand in the business. Though of course I might change my mind if I were on the spot."

I assured him fiercely that any one possessed of a mind at all would change it at sight of dear old Barl and Barley. Nothing on earth would make me believe anything against them. Why, if they didn't have Almost-Haloes and Wings, Sir James and the insurance people would have objected to them as guardians. The very fact that they had been kept on without a word of protest from any one, when Courtenaye Abbey was let to Sir James was, I argued, the best of testimonials to the Barlows' character. Nevertheless, my orders were that Mr. Smith should go to Devonshire and take a room at the Courtenaye Arms, dressed and painted to represent a landscape artist. "The Abbey is to be opened to the public in a few days, in spite of the best small show-things being lost," I reminded him, from what we had heard Sir Jim say. "You can see the Barlows, and judge of them. But what is *much* more important, you'll also see Sir James Courtenaye, who lodges in the inn, and can judge of *him*. In my opinion he has revenged himself for losing his suit to grab the Abbey and everything in it, by taking what he could lay his hands on without being suspected."

"But you do suspect him?" said Mr. Smith.

"For that matter, so does he suspect me," I retorted.

"You *think* so," the detective amended.

"Don't you?"

"No, Princess, I do not."

"What *do* you think, then? Or don't you think *anything*?"

"I do think something." He tried to justify his earning capacity.

"What, if I may ask?"

He – a Smith, a mere Smith! – dared to grin.

"Of course you may ask, Princess," he replied. "But it's too early yet for me to answer your question in fairness to myself. About the theft I have not formed a firm theory, but I have about Sir James Courtenaye. I would not have ventured even to mention it, however, if you had not drawn me out, for it is indirectly concerned with the case."

"Directly or indirectly, I wish to know it," I insisted. "And as you're in my employ, I think I have the right."

"Very well, madam, you shall know it – later," he said.

CHAPTER IV

THE BLACK THING IN THE SEA

I went back to Bath, and Mrs. Percy-Hogge; but I no longer felt that I was enjoying a rest cure. Right or wrong, I had the impression of being *watched*. I was sure that Sir James Courtenaye had put detectives "on my track," in the hope that I might be caught communicating with my hired bravos or the wicked receiver of my stolen goods. In other days when a man stared or turned to gaze after me, I had attributed the attention to my looks; now I jumped to the conviction that he was a detective. And in fact, I began to jump at anything – or nothing.

It was vain for Mrs. Carstairs (who ran down to Bath, after I'd written her a wild letter) to guarantee that even an enemy – (which she vowed Sir James *wasn't!*) – could rake up no shred of evidence against me, with the exception of the torn letter. She couldn't deny that, materially speaking, it *would* be a "good haul" for me to sell the heirlooms, and obtain also the insurance money. But then, I hadn't done it, and nobody could accuse me of doing it, because no one knew the things were gone. Oh, well, *yes!* Some detectives knew; and the poor old Barlows had bitter cause to know. A few others, too, including Sir James Courtenaye. None of them *counted*, however, because none of them would talk.

Mrs. Carstairs said it was absurd of me to imagine that Sir James was having me watched. But imagination and not advice had the upper hand of my nerves; and, seeing this, she prescribed a change of air.

"I meant Mrs. Percy-Hogge only for a stop-gap," she explained. "You've squeezed her into Society now; and for yourself, you've come to the time when you can lighten your mourning. I've waited for that, to start you on your new job. You'll go what my cook calls 'balmy on the crumpet' if you keep fancying every queer human being you meet in Milsom Street a detective on your track. The best thing for you is, not to *have* a track! And the way to manage that, is to be at *sea*."

I was at sea – figuratively – till Mrs. Carstairs explained more. She recalled to my mind what she had said in our first chat about Brightening: how she had suggested my "taking the helm," to steer Roger Fane into the Social Sea.

"I think I mentioned then that I referred to the sea, in the literal sense of the word," she went on. "I promised to tell you what I meant, when the right moment came, and now it has come. I haven't been idle meanwhile, I assure you, for I like Roger Fane as much as *you* like Shelagh Leigh. And between us two, we'll marry them over the Pollens' snobby heads."

In short, Mr. Carstairs had a client who had a yacht at Plymouth. The client's name was Lord Verrington. The yacht's name was *Naiad*, and Lord Verrington wished to let her for an absurdly large sum. Roger Fane didn't mind paying this sum. It was the right time of year for a yachting trip. If I would lend *éclat* to such a trip by Brightening it, the Pollens would permit their precious Shelagh to go. Mr. Pollen (whom Grandmother had refused to know) would even join the party himself. Indeed, no one would refuse if asked by me, and the Pollens would be so dazzled by Roger Fane's sudden social success that their consent to the engagement was a foregone conclusion.

I snapped at the chance of escape. To be sure, it was a temporary escape, as the guests were invited for a week only; still, lots of things may happen in a week. Why look beyond seven perfectly good days? Besides, I was to be given a huge "bonus" for my services, enough to pay the rent of my expensive flat for a year. But I wasn't entirely selfish in accepting. I've never half described to you the odd, reserved charm of that mysterious millionaire, Roger Fane, whose one fault was his close friendship with Sir James Courtenaye. And for his sake, as well as dear little Shelagh's, I would gladly have done all I could to bring the two together.

Knowing that titles impressed the Pollens, I secured several: one earl with countess attached (legally, at all events), a pretty sister of the latter; a bachelor marquis, and ditto viscount. These, with Shelagh, myself, Roger Fane, and Mr. Pollen, would constitute the party, should all accept.

They all did, partly for me, perhaps, and partly for each other, but largely from curiosity, as the *Naiad* had the reputation of being the most luxuriously appointed small steam yacht in British waters, (She had been "interned" in Spain during the war!) Also, Roger had secured as *chef* a famous Frenchman, just demobilized. Altogether, the prospect offered attractions. The start was to be made from Plymouth on a summer afternoon. We were to cruise along the coast, and eventually make for Jersey and Guernsey, where none of the party had ever been. My things were packed, and I was ready to take a morning train for Plymouth – a train by which all those of us in town would travel – when a letter arrived for me. It was from Mrs. Barlow, announcing the sudden death of her husband, from heart failure. He had never recovered the shock of the robbery, or the heavy dose of chloroform which the thieves had administered. And this, Barley added, as if in reproach, was not all Barlow had been forced to endure. It had been a cruel blow to find himself supplanted as guardian at the Abbey. The excuse for thus superseding him and his wife was, of course, the state of their health after the ordeal through which they had passed. Nevertheless, Barlow felt (said his wife) that they were no longer trusted. They had loved the lodge, which was home to them in old days; but they had been promoted from lodge-keeping to caretaking, and it was humiliating to be sent back while strangers usurped their place at the Abbey. This grievance (in Barley's opinion) had killed her husband. As for her, she would follow him into the grave, were it not for the loving care of Barlow's nephews from Australia, the brave twin soldier boys she had often mentioned to me. They were with her now, and would take her to the old family home close to Dudworth Cove, which the boys had bought back from the late owner. Barlow's body would go with them, and be buried in the graveyard where generations of Barlows slept.

It was a blow to hear of the old man's death, and to learn that I was blamed for heartlessness by Barley. Of course I had nothing to do with the affair. The Barlows were not really suspected, and had in truth been removed for their own health's sake to the lodge where their possessions were. The new caretakers had been engaged by Sir James, in consultation, I believed, with the insurance people: and my secret conviction was, that they had been supplied by Pemberton's Agency of Private Detectives. My impulse was to rush to the Abbey and comfort Mrs. Barlow, even at the risk of meeting my tenant engaged in the same task. But to do this would have meant delaying the trip, and disappointing everyone, most of all Shelagh and Roger Fane; so, advised by Mrs. Carstairs, I sent a telegram instead, picked up Shelagh and her uncle, and took the Plymouth train. This was the easier to do, because the wonderful old lady offered to go herself to the Abbey on a mission of consolation. She promised to send a telegram to our first port, saying how Barley was, and everything else I wished to know.

Shelagh was so happy, so excited, that I was glad I'd listened to reason and kept the tryst. Never had I seen her as pretty as she looked on that journey to Devon: her eyes blue stars, her cheeks pink roses. But when the skies began to darken her eyes darkened, too. Had she been a barometer she could not have responded more sensitively to the storm; for a storm we had, cats and dogs pelting down on the roof of the train.

"I was sure something horrid would happen!" she whispered. "It was too good to be true that Roger and I should have a whole, heavenly week together on board a yacht. Now we shall have to wait till the weather clears. Or else be sea-sick. I don't know which is worse!"

Roger met us, in torrents of rain and gusts of wind, at Plymouth. But things were not so black as they looked. He had engaged rooms for everyone, and a private salon for us all, at the best hotel. We would stay the night and have a dance, with a band of our own. By the next day the sea would have calmed down enough to please the worst of sailors, and we would start. Perhaps we could even get off in the morning.

This prophecy was rather too optimistic, for we didn't get off till afternoon; but by that time the water was flat as a floor, and one was tempted to forget there had ever been a storm. We were not to forget it for long, alas! Brief as it had been, that storm was to leave its lasting influence upon our fate: Roger Fane's, Shelagh Leigh's, and mine.

By four-thirty, the day after the downpour, we had all come on board the lovely *Naiad*, had "settled" into our cabins, and were on deck – the girls in white serge or linen, the men in flannels – ready for tea.

If it had arrived, and we had been looking into our tea cups instead of at the seascape, the whole of Roger Fane's and Shelagh's life might have been different – mine, too, perhaps! But as it was, Shelagh and Roger were leaning on the rail together, and her gaze was fixed upon the blue water, because somehow she couldn't meet Roger's just then. What he had said to her I don't know; but more to avoid giving an answer than because she was wildly interested, the girl exclaimed: "What can that dark thing be, drifting – and bobbing up and down in the waves? I suppose it couldn't be a dead *shark*?"

"Hardly in these waters," said Roger Fane. "Besides, a dead shark floats wrong side up, and his wrong side is white. This thing looks black."

In ordinary circumstances I wouldn't have broken in on a *tête-à-tête*, but others were extricating themselves from their deck chairs, so I thought there was no harm in my being the first.

"More like a coffin than a shark," I said, with my elbows beside Shelagh's on the rail.

At that the whole party hurled itself in our direction, and the nearer the *Naiad* brought us to the floating object, the more like a coffin it became to our eyes. At last it was so much like, that Roger decided to stop the yacht and examine the thing, which might even be an odd-shaped small boat, overturned. He went off, therefore, to speak with the captain, leaving us in quite a state of excitement.

Almost before we'd thought the order given, the *Naiad* slowed down, and came to rest like a great Lohengrin swan in the clear azure wavelets. A boat was quickly lowered, and we saw that Roger himself accompanied the two rowers.

A few moments before he had looked so happy, so at peace with the world, that the tragic shadow in his eyes had actually vanished. His whole expression and bearing had been different, and he had seemed years younger – almost boyish, in his dark, shy, reserved way. But as he went down in the boat, he was again the Roger Fane I had known and wondered about.

"If he's superstitious, this will seem a bad omen," I thought. "That is, if the thing *does* turn out to be a coffin."

None of us remembered the tea we'd been pining for, though a white-clad steward was hovering with trays of cakes, cream, and strawberries. We could do nothing but hang over the rail and watch the *Naiad's* boat. We saw it reach the Thing, in whose neighbourhood it paused with lifted oars, while a discussion went on between Roger and the rowers. Apparently they argued, with due respect, against the carrying out of some order or suggestion. He was not a man to be disobeyed, however. After a moment or two, the work of taking the black thing in tow was begun.

We were very near now, and could plainly see all that went on. Coffin or not, the mysterious object was a long, narrow box of some sort (the men's reluctance to pick it up pretty well proved *what* sort, to my mind), and curiously enough a rope was tied round it. There appeared to be a lump of knots on top, and a loose end trailing like seaweed, which made the task of taking the derelict in tow an easy one. To this broken rope Roger deftly attached the rope carried in the boat, and it was not long before the rescue party started to return.

"Is it a coffin or a treasure chest?" girls and men eagerly called down to Roger. Everyone screamed some question – except Shelagh and me. We were silent, and Shelagh's colour had faded. She edged closer to me, until our shoulders touched. Hers felt cold to my warm flesh.

"Why, you're shivering, dear!" I said. "You're not *afraid* of that wretched thing – whatever it is?"

"We both *know* what it is, without telling, don't we?" she replied, in a half whisper. "I'm not *afraid* of it, of course. But – it's awful that we should come across a coffin floating in the sea, on our first day out. I feel as if it meant bad luck for Roger and me. How can they all squeal and chatter so? I suppose Roger is bound to bring the dreadful thing on board. It wouldn't be decent not to. But I wish he needn't."

I rather wished the same, partly because I knew how superstitious sailors were about such matters, and how they would hate to have a coffin – presumably containing a dead body – on board the *Naiad*. It really wasn't a gay yachting companion! However, I tried to cheer Shelagh. It would take more than this to bring her bad luck *now*, I said, when things had gone so far; and she might have more trust in me, whom she had lately named her *mascotte*.

All the men frankly desired to see the *trouvaille* at close quarters, and most of the women wanted a peep, though they weren't brutally open about it. If there had been any doubt, it would have vanished as the Thing was being hauled on board by grave-faced, suddenly sullen sailors. It was a "sure enough" coffin, and – it seemed – an unusually large one!

It had to be placed on deck, for the moment, but Roger had the dark shape instantly covered with tarpaulins; and an appeal from his clouded eyes made me suggest adjourning indoors for tea. We could have it in the saloon, which was decorated like a boudoir, and full of lilies and roses – Shelagh's favourite flowers.

"Let's not talk any more about the business!" Roger exclaimed, when Shelagh's uncle seemed inclined to mix the subject with food. "I wish it hadn't happened, as the men are foolishly upset. But it can't be helped, and we must do our best. The – er – it sha'n't stop on deck. That would be to keep Jonah under our eyes. I've thought of a place where we can ignore it till to-morrow, when we'll land it as early as we can at St. Heliers. I'm afraid the local authorities will want to tie us up in a lot of red tape. But the worst will be to catechize us as if we were witnesses in court. Meanwhile, let's forget the whole affair."

"Righto!" promptly exclaimed all three of the younger guests; but Mr. Pollen was not thus to be deprived of his morbid morsel.

"Certainly," he agreed. "But before the subject is shelved, *where* is the 'place' you speak of? I mean, where is the coffin to rest throughout the night?"

Roger gave a grim laugh, and looked obstinate. "I'll tell you this much," he said. "None of you'll have it for a near neighbour, so none of you need worry."

After that, even Mr. Pollen could not persist. We disposed of an enormous tea, after the excitement, and then some of us played bridge. When we separated, however, to pace the deck – two by two, for a "constitutional" before dinner – one could see by the absorbed expression on faces, and guess by the low-toned voices, what each pair discussed.

My companion, Lord Glencathra, thought that Somebody must have died on Some Ship, and been thrown overboard. But I argued that this could hardly be, because – surely – bodies buried at sea were not put into coffins, were they? I had heard that the custom was to sew them up in sailcloth or something, and weight them well. Besides, there was the broken rope tied round the coffin, which seemed to show that it had been tethered, and got loose – in the storm, perhaps. How did Lord Glencathra account for that fact? He couldn't account for it. Nor could any one else.

CHAPTER V

WHAT I FOUND IN MY CABIN

I did all I could to make dinner a lively meal, and with iced Pommery of a particularly good year as my aide-de-camp, superficially at least I succeeded. But whenever there was an instant's lull in the conversation, I felt that everyone was asking him or herself, "*Where is the coffin?*"

The plan had been to have a little moonlight fox-trotting and jazzing on deck; but with that Black Thing hidden somewhere on board, we confined ourselves to more bridge and star-gazing, according to taste. I, as professional Brightener, nobly kept Mr. Pollen out of everybody's way by annexing him for a stroll. This deserved the name of a double brightening act, for I brightened the lives of his fellow guests by saving them from him; and I brightened his by encouraging him to talk of Well-Connected People.

"Who *was* she before she married Lord Thingum-bob?" ... or, "Yes, she was Miss So-and-So, a cousin of the Duke of Dinkum," might have been heard issuing sapiently from our lips, had any one been mentally destitute enough to eavesdrop. But I had my reward. Dear little Shelagh Leigh and Roger Fane seemed to have cheered each other. I left them standing together, elbows on the rail, as they had stood before the affair of the afternoon. The moonlight was shining full upon Shelagh's bright hair and pearl-white face, as she looked up, eager-eyed, at Roger; and *he* looked – at least, his *back* looked! – as if there were nobody on land or sea except one Girl.

Having lured Mr. Pollen to make a fourth at a bridge table where the players were too polite to kill him, I ventured to vanish. There being no one on board with whom I wished to flirt, my one desire after two hard hours of Brightening was to curl up in my cabin with a nice book. I quite looked forward to the moment for shutting myself cosily in, for the cabin was a delicious pink-and-white nest – the biggest room on board, as a tribute to my princesshood.

Hardly had I opened the door, however, when my dream-bubble broke. A very odd and repellent odour greeted me, and seemed almost to push me back across the threshold. I held my ground, however, and sniffed with curiosity and disgust.

Somebody had been at my perfume – my expensive pet perfume, made especially for me in Rome (one drop exquisite; two, oppressive), and must have spilt the lot. But worse than this, the heavy fragrance was mingled with a reek of stale brandy.

Anger flashed in me, like a match set to gun-cotton. Some impertinent person had sneaked into my stateroom and played a stupid practical joke. Or, if not that, one of the pleasantly prim, immaculate women (a cross between the stewardess and ladies'-maid type) engaged to hook up our frocks and make up our cabins, was secretly a confirmed —*ROTTER!*

I switched on the light, shut the door smartly without locking it, and flung a furious glance around. The creature had actually dared to place a brandy bottle conspicuously upon my dressing table, among gold-handled brushes and silver gilt boxes, and, as a crowning impertinence, had left a tumbler beside the bottle, a quarter full of strong-smelling brown stuff. Close by lay my lovely crystal flask of "Campagna Violets," empty. I could get no more anywhere, and it had cost five pounds! I could hardly breathe in the room. Oh, evidently a stewardess must have gone stark mad, or else some practical joker had waited to play the *coup* until the stewardesses were in bed!

As I thought this, my eyes as well as my nostrils warned me of something strange. The rose-coloured silk curtains which, when I went to dinner, had been gracefully looped back at head and foot of my pretty bed (a real bed, not a mere berth!) were now closely drawn with a secretive air. This made me imagine that it was a practical joke I had to deal with, and my fancy flew to all sorts of weird surprises, any one of which I might find hidden behind the draperies.

I trust that I have a sense of humour, and I can laugh at a jest against myself as well as any woman, perhaps better than most. But to-night I was in no mood to laugh at jests, and I wondered

how anybody had the heart (not to mention the *cheek*!) to perpetrate one after the shock we had experienced. Besides, I couldn't think of a person likely to play a trick on me. Certainly my host wouldn't do so. Shelagh, my best and most intimate pal, was far too gentle and sensitive-minded. As for the other guests, none were of the noisy, bounding type who take liberties even with distant acquaintances, for fun.

All this ran through my mind, as a cinema "cut-in" flashes across the screen; and it wasn't until I'd passed in review the characters of my fellow guests that I summoned courage to pull back the bed-curtains. When I did so, I gave a jerk that slipped them along the rod as far as they would go. And then – I saw the last thing in the world I could have pictured.

A woman, fully dressed, was stretched on the pink silk coverlet fast asleep, her head deep sunk in the embroidered pillow.

It was all I could do to keep back a cry – for this was no woman I had seen on board, not even a drunken or sleep-walking stewardess. Yet her face was not strange to me. That was the most horrible, the most mysterious part! There was no mistake, for the face was impossible to forget. As I stared, almost believing that I dreamed, another scene rose between my eyes and the dainty little cabin of the *Naiad*.

It also was a scene in a dream. I knew it was a dream, but it was torturingly vivid. I was a prisoner on a German submarine, in war-time, and signals from my own old home – Courtenaye Abbey – flashed into my eyes. They flashed so brightly that they set me on fire. I wakened from the nightmare with a start. A strong light dazzled me, and, striking my face, lit up another face as well. Just for an instant I saw it; then the revealing ray died into darkness. But on my retina was photographed those features, in a pale, illumined circle.

A second sufficed to bring back to my brain this old dream and the waking reality which followed, that night at the Abbey, long ago – the night which Shelagh and I called "Spy Night." For here, in my cabin on the yacht *Naiad*, on the crushed pillow of my bed, was that face.

As I realized this, without benefit of any doubt, a faint sickness swept over me. It was partly horror of the past; partly physical disgust of the brandy-reek – stronger than ever now – hanging like an unseen canopy over the bed; and partly cold fear of a terrifying Presence.

There she lay, sunk in drugged and drunken sleep, the Woman of Mystery, in whose existence no one but Shelagh and I had ever quite believed: the woman who had visited us in our sleep, and who – almost certainly – had fired the Abbey, hoping that we and the Barlows might suffocate in our beds.

The face was just the same as it had been then: "beautiful and hideous at the same time, like Medusa," I had described it; only now it was older, and though still beautiful, somehow *ravaged*. The hair still glowed with the vivid auburn colour which I had thought "unreal looking"; but now it was tumbled and unkempt. Loose locks strayed over the dainty pillow, and at the bottom of the bed, pushed tightly against the footboard by a pair of untidy, high-heeled shoes, was a dusty black toque half covered with a very thick motor-veil of gray tissue. There was a gray cloak, too, in a tumbled mass on the pink coverlet, and a pair of soiled gloves. Everything about the sleeper was sordid and repulsive, a shuddering contrast to the exquisite freshness of the bed and room – everything, that is, except the face. Its half-wrecked beauty was still supreme, and even in the ruin drink or drugs had wrought, it forced admiration.

"A German spy – here in my cabin – on board Roger Fane's yacht!" I said the words slowly in my mind, not with my tongue. Not a sound, not the faintest whisper, passed my lips. Yet suddenly the long, dark lashes on bruise-blue lids began to quiver. It was as if my *thought* had shaken the woman by the shoulder, and roused what was left of her soul.

I should have liked to dash out of the room and with a shriek bring everyone on board to my cabin. But I stood motionless, concentrating my gaze on those trembling eyelids. Something inside me seemed to say: "Don't be a coward, Elizabeth Courtenaye!" It was exactly like Grandmother's

voice. I had a conviction that *she* wanted me to see this thing through as a Courtenaye should, shirking no responsibility, and solving the mystery of past and present without bleating for help.

The fringed lids parted, shut, quivered again, and flashed wide open. A pair of pale eyes stared into mine – wicked eyes, cruel eyes, green as a cat's. Like a cat, too, the creature gathered herself together as if for a spring. Her muscles rippled and jerked. She sat up, and in chilled surprise I thought I saw recognition in her stare.

CHAPTER VI

THE WOMAN OF THE PAST

"Oh, you've come at last!" she rasped, in a harsh, throaty voice roughened by drink. "I know you. I – "

"And I know you!" I cut her short, to show that I was not cowed.

Sitting up in bed, hugging her knees, she started at my words so that the springs shook. Whatever it was she had meant to say, she forgot it for the moment, and challenged me: "That's a lie!" she snapped. "You *don't* know me yet – but you soon will."

"I've known you since you came into my room at Courtenaye Abbey the night you tried to burn down the house," I said. "You were spying for the Germans in the war. Heaven knows all the harm you may have done. I can't imagine for whom you're spying now. Anyhow, you can't frighten me again. The war's over, but I'll have you arrested for what you did when it was on."

The woman scowled and laughed, more Medusa-like than ever. I really felt as if she might turn me to stone. But she shouldn't guess her power.

"Pooh!" she said, showing tobacco-stained teeth. "You won't want to arrest me when you hear who I am, Lady Shelagh Leigh!"

"Lady Shelagh Leigh!" It was on my lips to cry, "I'm not Shelagh Leigh!" But I stopped in time. The less I let her find out about me, and the more I could find out about her before rousing the yacht, the better. I spoke not a word, but waited for her to go on – which she did in a few seconds.

"That makes you sit up, doesn't it?" she sneered. "That hits you where you *live*! Why did you think I chose your cabin? I didn't select it by chance. I confess I was taken back at your remembering. I thought I hadn't given you time for much study of my features that other night. But it doesn't matter. You can't do anything to me. I'll soon prove *that*! But I had a good look at *you*, there in your friend's old Devonshire rat-trap. I knew who you both were. It was easy to find out! And the other day, when I heard that Lady Shelagh Leigh was likely to marry Roger Fane, I said to myself, 'Gosh! One of the girls I saw at the darned old Abbey!'"

"Oh, you said *that* to yourself!" I echoed. And, though my knees failed, I kept to my feet. To stand towering above the squatting figure on the bed seemed to give me moral as well as physical advantage. "How did you know, pray, which girl I was?"

"I knew, 'pray,'" she mocked, "because you've got the best room on this yacht. Roger'd be sure to give that to his best girl. Which is how I'm sure you're not Elizabeth Courtenaye."

"How clever you are!" I said.

"Yes – I'm clever – when I'm not a fool. Don't think, anyhow, that you can beat me in a battle of brains. I've come on board this boat to succeed, and I *will* succeed in one of two ways, I don't care a hang which. But nothing on God's earth can hold me back from one or the other – least of all, can *you*. Why, you can ask any question you please, and I'll answer. I'll tell the truth, too – for the more I say, and the more you're shocked, the more helpless you are – do you see?"

"No, I don't see," I drew her on.

"Don't you guess yet who I am?"

"I've guessed what you *were* – a German spy."

"That's ancient history. One must live – and one must have money – plenty of money. I must! And I've had it. But it's gone from me – like most good things. Now I must have more – a lot more. Or else I must die. I don't care which. But *others* will care. I'll make them."

Looking at her, I doubted if she had the power; though she must have had it in lost days of gorgeous youth. Yet again I remained silent. I saw that she was leading up to something in particular, and I let her go on.

"You're not much of a guesser," she said, "so I'll introduce myself. Lady-who-thinks-she's-going-to-marry Roger Fane, let me make known to you the lady who *has* married him – Mrs. Fane, *née* Linda Lehmann. I've changed my name since, more than once. At present I'm Katherine Nelson. But Linda Lehmann is the name that matters to Roger. You're nothing in looks, by the by, to what I was at your age. *Nothing!*"

If my knees had been weak before, they now felt as if struck with a mallet! She might be lying, but something within me was horribly sure that she spoke the truth. I'd never heard full details of Roger Fane's "tragedy," but Mrs. Carstairs had dropped a few hints which, without asking questions, I'd patched together. I had gleaned that he'd married (when almost a boy) an actress much older than himself; and that, till her sudden and violent death after many years – nine or ten at least – his life had been a martyrdom. How the woman contrived to be alive I couldn't see. But such things happened – to people one didn't know! The worst of it was that *I did* know Roger Fane, and liked him. Besides, I loved Shelagh, whose happiness was bound up with Roger's. It seemed as if I couldn't bear to have those two torn apart by this cruel creature – this drunkard – this *spy*! Yet – what could I do?

At the moment I could think of nothing useful, because, if she was Roger's wife, her boast was justified: for his sake and Shelagh's she mustn't be handed over to the police, to answer for any political crime I might prove against her – or even for trying to burn down the Abbey. Oh, this business was beyond what I bargained for when I engaged to "brighten" the trip on board the *Naiad*! Still, all the spirit in me rallied to work for Roger Fane – even to work out his salvation if that could be. And I was glad I'd let the woman believe I was Shelagh Leigh.

"Roger's wife died five years ago, just before the war began," I said. "She was killed in a railway accident – an awful one, where she and a company of actors she was travelling with were burned to death."

The creature laughed. "Have you never been to a movie show, and seen how easy it is to die in a railway accident? – to *stay* dead to those you're tired of, and to be alive in some other part of this old world, where you think there's more fun going on? It's been done on the screen a hundred times – and off it, too. I was sick to death of Roger. I'd never have married a stick like him – always preaching! – if I hadn't been down and out. When I met him, it was in a beastly one-horse town where I was stranded. The show had chucked me – gone off and left me without a cent. I was sick – too big a dose of dope, if you want to know. But *Roger* didn't know – you can bet. Not then! I took jolly good care to toe the mark, till he'd married me all right. He *was* a sucker! I suppose he was twenty-two and over, but Peter Pan wasn't in it with him in some ways. He kept me off the stage – and tried to keep me off everything else worth doing for five years. Then I left him, for my health and looks had come back, and I got a fair part in a play on tour. There I met a countryman of mine – oh! don't be encouraged to hope! I never gave Roger any cause to divorce me; and if I had, I'd have done it so he couldn't prove a thing!"

"When you say the man was your countryman, I suppose you mean a German," I said.

"Well, yes," she replied, with the flaunting frankness she affected in these revelations. "German-American he was. I'm German by birth, and grew up in America. I've been back often and long since then. But this man had a scheme. He wanted me to go into it with him. I didn't see my way at first though there was big money, so he left the show before the accident. When I found myself alive and kicking among the dead that day, however, I saw my chance. I left a ring and a few things to identify me with a woman who was killed, and I lit out. It was in the dead of night, so luck was on my side for once. I wrote my friend, and it wasn't long before I was at work with him for the German Government. The Abbey affair was after he'd got out of England and into Germany through Switzerland. He was a sailor, and had been given command of a big new submarine. If it hadn't been for the row you and your pal kicked up, we – he on the water and I on land – might have brought off one of the big stunts of the war. You tore it – after I'd been mewed up in the old rat-warren for a week, and everything was working just right! I wish to goodness the whole house had burned, and I did wish *you'd* burned

with it. But I don't know if to-night isn't going to pay me – and you – just as well. There's a lot owing from you to me. I haven't told you all yet. My friend's submarine was caught, and he went down with her. I blame that to you. If I hadn't failed him with the signals, he might be alive now."

"I was more patriotic than I knew!" I flung back. "As you're so confidential, tell me how you got into the Abbey, and where you hid."

She shook her dyed and tousled head. "That's where I draw the line," she said. "I've told you what I have told to please myself, not you. You can't profit by a word of it. That's where my fun comes in! If I split about the Abbey, you might profit somehow – or your friend the Courtenaye girl would. I want to punish her, too."

I shrugged my shoulders. "Perhaps in that case you won't care to explain how you came on board the *Naiad*?"

"I don't mind that," the ex-spy made concession. "I went out of England after the Abbey affair – friends helped me away – and I worked in New York till things grew too hot. Then I came over as a Red Cross nurse, got into France, and stopped till the other day. I'd be there still if I hadn't picked up a weekly London gossip-rag, and seen a paragraph about a certain rumoured engagement! You can guess *whose*! It called Roger —*my* Roger, mind you! – a 'millionaire.' He never was poor, even in my day; he'd made a lucky strike before we met, with an invention. I said to myself: 'Linda, my girl, 'twould be tempting Providence to lie low and let another woman spend his money.' I started as soon as I could, but missed him in London, and hurried on to Plymouth. If it hadn't been for that bally storm I shouldn't have caught him up! The yacht would have sailed. As it was, before you came on board this afternoon I presented myself, thickly veiled. I had a card from a London newspaper, and an old card of Roger's which was among a few things of his I'd kept for emergencies. I can copy his handwriting well enough not to be suspected, except by an intimate friend of his, so I scribbled on the card an order to view the yacht. I got on all right, and wandered about with a notebook and a stylo. I soon found the right place to hide – in the storeroom, behind some barrels. But I had to make everyone who'd seen me think I'd gone on shore. That was easy! I told a sailor fellow by the gang plank I was going, and said I'd mislaid an envelope in which I'd slipped a tip for him and another man. I thought I'd left it on a table in the dining saloon, and he'd better look for it, or it might be picked up by somebody. He went before I could say 'knife!' and the envelope really *was* there, so he didn't have to hurry back. Two minutes later I was in the storeroom, and no one the wiser. Lord! but I got the jumps waiting for the stewardesses to be safe in bed before I could creep out to pay your cabin a call!"

"So, to cure the 'jumps' you annexed a whole bottle of brandy," I said.

"I did – for that and another reason you may find out by and by. But I'm hanged if you're not a cool hand, for a young girl who has just heard her lover's a married man. I thought by this time you'd be in hysterics."

"Girls of *my* generation don't have hysterics," I taunted her. By the dyed hair and vestiges of rouge and powder which streaked the battered face I guessed that a sneer at her age would sting like a wasp. I wanted to rouse the woman's temper. If she lost her head, she might show her hand!

"You'll have worse than hysterics, you fool, before I finish," she snapped. "I'm going to make Roger Fane acknowledge me as his wife and give me everything I want – money, and motor cars, and pearls – and, best of all, a *position in society*. I'm tired of being a free lance."

"He won't do it!" I cried.

"He'll have to – when he hears what will happen if he doesn't. If I can't live a life worth living, I'll die. Roger Fane will go off this yacht under arrest as my murderer."

"You deserve that he should kill you, but he will not," I said.

"He'll *hang* for killing me, anyhow. You see, the more *motive* he has to destroy me, the more impossible for him – or you – to prove his innocence. Do you think I'd have told you all this, if any one was likely to believe such a cock-and-bull story as the truth would sound to a jury? But I'm through now! I've said what I came to say. I'm ready to act. Do you want a row, or will you go quietly to the

door of Roger's cabin (he must be there by this time) and tell him that his wife, Linda Lehmann, is waiting for him in your stateroom? *That'll* fetch him!"

I had no doubt it would. My only doubt was what to do! But if I refused, the woman was sure to keep her word, and rouse the yacht by screams. That would be the worst thing possible for Shelagh and Roger. I decided to go, and break to him the news with merciful swiftness.

If I could, I would have turned a key upon the creature, but the doors of the *Naiad's* cabins were furnished only with bolts. My one hope, that she'd keep to my room, owed itself to the fact that she was too drunk to move comfortably, and that, despite her bluff, the best trump she had was quiet diplomacy with Roger.

Softly I closed the door, and tiptoed to his, three staterooms distant from mine. My tap was so light that, if he had gone to sleep, I should have had to knock again. But he opened the door at once. He was fully dressed, and had a book in his hand.

"Something has happened," I whispered in answer to his amazed look. "Let me come in and explain. I can't talk out here."

He stood aside in silence, and I stepped in. Then I motioned him to shut the door.

CHAPTER VII

THE SECRET BEHIND THE SILENCE

This was the first time I'd seen Roger's cabin, and I had no eyes now for its charm of decoration; but I saw that it was large, and divided by a curtained arch into a bedroom and a tiny yet complete study fitted with bookshelves and a desk.

"You're pale as death!" He lowered his voice cautiously. "Sit down in this chair." As he spoke he led me through the bedroom part of the cabin to the study, and there I sank gratefully into the depths of a big chair, where, no doubt, he had sat reading under the light of a shaded lamp.

"Now what is it?" he asked, bending over me. As I stammered out my story, for a few seconds I forgot the fear of being followed. Our backs were turned to the door. But I had not got far in the tale when I felt that *she* had come into the room. I glanced over my shoulder, and saw her – a shabby, sinister figure – hanging on to the curtain that draped the archway.

Roger's start and stifled exclamation proved that, whatever else she might be, the woman was no imposter.

"You devil!" he gasped.

"Your wife!" she retorted.

"Hush," I whispered. "For every sake let's keep this quiet!"

"I'll be quiet for my own sake, if he accepts my terms," said the woman. "If not, the whole yacht –"

"Be silent!" Roger commanded. "Princess, I've got to see this through. You'd better go now, and leave me alone with her."

He was right. My presence would hinder rather than help. I saw the greenish eyes dart from his face to mine when he called me "Princess"; but she must have fancied it a pet name, for no question flashed from her lips as I tiptoed across the room.

When I got back to my own quarters, I noticed at once that the brandy bottle and the tumbler which had accompanied it were gone from my dressing table. Nor were they to be found in the cabin. The woman must have taken them to Roger's room, and placed them somewhere before I saw her. "Disgusting!" I murmured, for my thought was that the debased wretch had clung lovingly to the drink. Even though I'd sharpened my wits to search all her motives, I failed over that simple-seeming act.

"Oh, poor Roger!" I said to myself. "And poor Shelagh!"

I sat miserably on the window seat (for the rumpled bed was now abhorrent), and wondered what would happen next. But I had not long to wait. A few moments passed – how many I don't know – and the crystalline silence of the gliding *Naiad* was splintered by a scream.

'Scream' is the word one must use for a cry of pain or fear. Yet it isn't the right word for the sound that snatched me to my feet. It was not shrill, it was not loud. What might have ended in a shriek subsided to a choked breath, a gurgle. My heart's pounding seemed louder as I listened. My ears expected a following cry, but it did not come. Two or three doors gently opened, that was all. Again dead silence fell; and I felt in it that others listened, fearing to speak lest the sound had been no more than a moan in a dream. Presently the doors closed again, each listener afraid of disturbing a neighbour. And even I, who knew the secret behind the silence, prayed that the choked scream might have come when it did as a mere coincidence. Someone might really have had nightmare!

As time passed, I almost persuaded myself that it was so, and that, at worst, there would be no crime to mark this night with crimson on the calendar. But the next quarter hour was the *deadest* time I'd ever known. I felt like one entombed alive, praying to be liberated from a vault. Then, at last – when those who'd waked slept again – came a faint knock at my door.

I flew to slip back the bolt, and pulled Roger Fane into the room. One would not have believed a face so brown could bleach so white!

For an instant we stared into each other's eyes. When I could speak, I stammered a question – I don't know what, and I don't think he understood. But the spell broke.

"You *heard*?" he faltered.

"The cry? Yes. It was – "

"She's dead."

"*Dead!* You killed her?"

"My God, no! But if you think that, what will —*others* think?"

"If you had killed her, you couldn't be blamed," I tried to encourage him. "Only – "

"Didn't she make some threat to you? I hoped she had. She told me – "

"Yes, there was something – I hardly remember what. It was like drunkenness. She said – I think – that if you wouldn't take her back, you'd be arrested – as her murderer."

"That was it – her ultimatum. She must have been mad. I offered a big allowance, if she'd go away and not make a scandal. I'd have to give up Shelagh, of course, but I wanted to save my poor little love from gossip. That devil would have no compromise. It should be all or nothing. I must swear to acknowledge her as my wife on board this yacht – to-morrow morning – before Shelagh – before you all. If I wouldn't promise that, she'd kill herself at once, in a way to throw the guilt on me. She'd do it so that I couldn't clear myself or be cleared. I wouldn't promise, of course. I hoped, anyhow, that she was bluffing. But I didn't know her! When nothing would change me, she showed a tiny phial she had in her hand, and said she'd drink the stuff in it before I could touch her. It was prussic acid, she told me – and already she'd poured enough to kill ten men into a tumbler she'd stolen from my cabin on purpose. She'd mixed the poison with brandy from the storeroom. Even if I threw the tumbler through the porthole, mine would be missing. There's one to match each room, you see. A small detail, but important.

"Now will you promise?" she repeated. I couldn't – for I should not have kept my word. She looked at me a second. I saw in her eyes that she was going to do the thing, and I jumped at her – but I was too late. She nearly drained the phial. And she'd hardly flung it away before she was dead – with an awful, twisted face – and that cry. If I hadn't caught her, she'd have fallen with a crash. This is the end of things for me."

"Oh, no – don't say that!" I begged.

"What else is there to say? There she lies, dead in my cabin. There's prussic acid on the floor – and the phial broken. The room reeks of bitter almonds. No one but you will believe I didn't kill her – perhaps not even Shelagh. Just because the woman made my past life horrible – and I had a chance of happiness – the temptation would be irresistible."

"Let me think. Do let me think!" I persisted. "Surely there's a way out of the trap."

"I don't *see* one," said Roger. "Throwing a body overboard is the obvious thing. But it would be worse than – "

"Wait!" I cut him short. "I've thought of another thing —*not* obvious. But it's hard to do – and hateful. The only help I could lend you is – a hint. The rest would depend on yourself. If you were strong enough – brave enough – it might give you Shelagh."

"I'm strong enough for anything with the remotest hope of Shelagh, and – I trust – brave enough, too. Tell me your plan."

I had to draw a long breath before I could answer. I needed air! "You're right," I said. "To give the body to the sea would make things worse. You couldn't be sure it would not be found, and the woman traced by the police. If they discovered who she was – that she'd been your wife – you would be suspected even if nothing were proved through those who saw a veiled woman come on board."

"That's what I meant. Yet you must see that even with your testimony, my innocence can't be proved if the story of this night has to be told."

"I do see. You might not be proved guilty, but you'd be under a cloud. Shelagh would still want to marry you. But she's very young, and easy to break as a butterfly. The Pollens – "

"I wouldn't accept such a sacrifice even if they'd let her make it. Yet you speak of hope! – "

"I do – a desperate hope. Can you open that coffin you brought on board to-day, take out – whatever is in it – and – and – "

"My God!"

"I warned you the plan was terrible. I hardly thought you would – "

"I would – for Shelagh. But you don't understand. That coffin will be opened by the police at St. Heliers to-morrow, and – "

"I do understand. It's you who do not. Everyone on board knows that the coffin was floating in the sea – that we came on it by accident. You could have had nothing to do with its being where it was. If you had, you wouldn't have taken it on board! The body found in that coffin to-morrow won't be associated with you. *She*– must have altered horribly since old days. And she has changed her name many times. The initials on her linen won't be L.L. There'll be a nine-days' wonder over the mystery. But *you* won't be concerned in it. As for what's in the coffin now, *that* can safely be given to the sea. Whatever it may be, and whenever or wherever it's found, it won't be connected with the name of Roger Fane. If there's the name of the maker on the coffin, it must come off. Oh, don't think I do not realize the full horror of the thing. I do! But between two evils one must choose the less, if it hurts no one. It seems to me it is so with this. Why should Shelagh's life and yours be spoiled by a cruel woman – a criminal – whose last act was to try to ruin the man she'd injured, sinned against for years? As for —*the other*– the unknown one – if the spirit can see, surely it would be glad to help in such a cause? What you would have to do, you'd do reverently. There must be tarpaulin on board, or canvas coverings that wouldn't be looked for, or missed. There must be a screw-driver – and things like that. The great danger is, if the coffin's in plain sight anywhere, and a man on watch – "

"There's no danger of that kind. The coffin is in the bathroom adjoining my cabin."

"Then – doesn't it seem that Fate bade you put it there?"

For a moment Roger covered his face with his hands. I saw him shudder. But he flung back his head and looked me in the eyes. "I'll go on obeying Fate's orders," he said.

Without another word between us, he left me. The door shut, and I sat staring at it, as if I could see beyond.

I had spoken only the truth. There was no sin against living or dead in what I had urged Roger to do. Yet the bare thought of it was so grim that I felt like an up-to-date Lady Macbeth.

I had forgotten to beg that he would come back and tell of his success or – failure. But I was sure he would come, sooner or later, whatever happened, and I sat quite still – waiting. I kept my eyes on the door, to see the handle turn, or gazed at my little travelling clock to watch the dragging moments. I longed for news. Yet I was glad when time went on without a sign. The quick coming back of Roger would have meant that he had failed – that all hope was ended.

Twenty minutes; thirty; forty; fifty, passed, seeming endless. But when with the sixtieth minute came the faint tap I awaited, down sank my heart. Roger could not have finished his double task in an hour!

I dashed to the door, and the light from my cabin showed the man's face, ashy pale. Yet I did not read despair on it.

Without a word I dragged him into the room once more; and only when the door was closed did I dare to whisper "*Well?*"

CHAPTER VIII

THE GREAT SURPRISE

"*There was no body in the coffin*," Roger said.

"Empty?" I gasped.

"Not empty. No. There was something there. Will you come to my cabin and see what it was? Don't look frightened. There's nothing to alarm you. And – Princess, the rest of the plan you gave me has been —*carried out*. Thanks to your woman's wit, I believe that my future and Shelagh's is clear. And, before Heaven, my conscience is clear, too."

"Oh, Roger, it's thanks to your own courage more than to me. Is – is all *safe*?"

"The coffin – isn't empty now. It is fastened up, just as it was. The broken rope is round it again. It's covered with the tarpaulin as before. No one outside the secret would guess it had been disturbed. There's no maker's mark to trace it by. I owe more than my life – I owe my very *soul* – to you. For I haven't much fear of what may come at St. Heliers to-morrow or after."

"Nor I. Oh, I am *thankful*, for Shelagh's sake even more than yours, if possible. Her heart would have broken. Now she need never know."

"She must know – and choose. I shall tell her – everything I did. Only I need not bring you into it."

"If you tell her about yourself, you must tell her about me," I said. "I'd like to be with you when you speak to her – if you think you must speak."

"I'm sure I must. If all goes well to-morrow, she can marry me without fear of scandal – if she's willing to marry me, after what I've done to-night."

"She will be. And she shall hear from me that this woman who killed herself and our spy of the Abbey were one. As for to-morrow – all *must* go well! But – the thing you found – in the coffin. You'll have to dispose of it somehow."

"It's for *you* to decide about that – I think."

"For me? What can it have to do with me?"

"You'll see – in my cabin. If you'll trust me and come."

I went with him, my heart pounding as I entered the room. It seemed as if some visible trace of tragedy must remain. But there was nothing. All was in order. The brandy bottle had disappeared – into the sea, no doubt. The tumbler so cleverly taken from this cabin was clean, and in its place. There were no bits of broken glass from the phial to be seen. And the odour of bitter almonds with which the place had reeked was no longer very strong. The salt breeze blowing through two wide-open portholes would kill it before dawn.

"But where is the *thing*?" I asked.

"In the study," Roger answered. He motioned me to pass through the curtained archway, as I had passed before; and there I had to cover my lips with my hand to press back a cry. The desk, the big chair I had sat in, and a sofa were covered with objects familiar to me as my own face in a looking-glass. There was Queen Anne's silver tea-service and Napoleon's green-and-gold coffee cups. There were Li Hung Chang's box of red lacquer and the wondrous Buddha; there were the snuff-boxes, the miniatures, the buckles and brooches; the fat watch of George the Fourth; half unrolled lay Charles the First's portrait and sketch, and the Gobelin panel which had been the Empress Josephine's. In fact, all the treasures stolen from Courtenaye Abbey! Here they were in Roger Fane's cabin on board the *Naiad*, and they had come out of a coffin found floating in the sea!

When I could think at all, I tried to think the puzzle out, and I tried to do it alone, for Roger was in no state to bend his mind to trifles. But, in his almost pathetic gratitude, he wished to help me; and when we had locked up the things in three drawers of his desk, we sat together discussing theories. Something must be planned, something settled, before day!

It was Roger who unfolded the whole affair before my eyes, unfolded it so clearly that I could not doubt he was right. My trust – everyone's trust – in the Barlows had been misplaced. They were the guilty ones! If they had not organized the plot, they had helped to carry it through as nobody else could have carried it through.

I told Roger of the two demobilized nephews about whom – if he had heard – he had forgotten. I explained that they were twin sons of a brother of old Barlow's, who had taken them to Australia years ago when they were children. Vaguely I recalled that, when I was very young, Barlow had worried over news from Australia: his nephews had been in trouble of some sort. I fancied they had got in with a bad set. But that was ancient history! The twins had evidently "made good." They had fought in the war, and had done well. They must have saved money, or they could not have bought the old house on the Dorset coast which had belonged to the Barlows for generations. It was at this point, however, that Roger stopped me. *Had* the boys "saved" money, or – had they got it in a way less meritorious? Had they needed, for pressing reasons of their own, to possess that place on the coast? The very question called up a picture – no, a series of pictures – before my eyes. I saw, or Roger made me see, almost against my will, how the scheme might have been worked —*must* have been worked! – from beginning to end; and how at last it had most strangely failed. Again, the Fate that had sailed on the Storm! For an hour we talked, and made our plan almost as intricately as the thieves or their backers had made theirs. Then, as dawn paled the sky framed by the open portholes, I slipped off to my own cabin. I did not go to bed (I could not, where *she* had lain!) and I didn't sleep. But I curled up on the long window seat, with cushions under my head, and thought. I thought of a thousand things: of Roger's plan and mine, of how I could return the heirlooms yet keep the secret; of what Sir Jim would say when he learned of their reappearance; and, above all, I thought of what our discovery in the coffin would mean for Roger Fane.

Yes, that was far more important to him even than to me! For the fact that the coffin had been the property of thieves meant that no claim would ever be made to it. The mystery of its present occupant would therefore remain a mystery till the end of time, and – Roger was safe!

The next day we reached St. Heliers, after a quick voyage through blue, untroubled waters; and there we came in for all the red tape that Roger had foreseen, if not more. But how inoffensive, even pleasing, is red tape to a man saved from handcuffs and a prison cell!

The body of an unknown woman in a coffin picked up at sea gave the chance for a dramatic "story" to flash over the wires from Jersey to London; and the evident fact that death had been caused by poison added an extra thrill. Every soul on board the *Naiad* was questioned, down to the *chef's* assistant; but the same tale was told by all. The coffin had first been sighted at a good distance, and mistaken for a dead shark or a small, overturned boat. The whole party were agreed that it must be brought on board, though no one had wanted it for a travelling companion, and the sailors especially had objected. (Now, by the way, they were revelling in reflected glory. They would not have missed this experience for the world!) I quaked inwardly, fearing that someone might mention the veiled female journalist who had arrived before the start, with an order to view the *Naiad*. But so completely was her departure from the yacht taken for granted, that none who had seen her recalled the incident.

There was no suspicion of Roger Fane, nor of any one else on board, for there was no reason to suppose that any of us had been acquainted with the dead.

The description wired to London was of "a woman unknown; probable age between forty and fifty; hair dyed auburn; features distorted by effect of poison; hands well shaped, badly kept; figure medium; black serge dress; underclothing plain and much torn, without initials or laundry-marks; no shoes."

It was unlikely that landlords or chance acquaintances should identify the woman newly arrived from France with the woman picked up in a coffin at sea. And the gray-veiled motor toque, the gray cloak worn by the "journalist," and even the battered boots, with high, broken heels, were safely hidden with the heirlooms from the Abbey.

All through the week of our trip the three drawers in Roger's desk remained locked, the little Yale key hanging on Roger's key ring. And all that week (there was no excuse to make for home before the appointed time) our Plan had to lie in abeyance. I was impatient. Roger was not. With Shelagh by his side – and very often in his arms – the incentive for haste was all mine. But I was happy in their happiness, wondering only whether Roger would not be tempting Providence if he told the truth to Shelagh.

Nothing, however, would move the man from his resolution. The one point he would yield was to postpone the confession (if "confession" is a fair word) until the last day, in order not to disturb Shelagh's pleasure in the trip. She was to hear the story the night before we landed; and I begged once more that I might be present to help plead his cause. But Roger wanted no help. And he wanted Shelagh to decide for herself. He would state the case plainly, for and against. Hearing him, the girl would know what was for her own happiness.

"At worst I shall have these wonderful days with her to remember," he said to me. "Nothing can rob me of them. And they are a thousand times the best of my life so far."

I believed that, equally, nothing could rob him of Shelagh! But – I wasn't quite sure. And the difference between just "believing" and being "quite sure" is the difference between mental peace and mental storm. I had gone through so much with Roger, and for him, that by this time I loved the man as I might love a brother – a dear and somewhat trying brother. As for Shelagh, I would have given one of my favourite fingers or toes to buy her happiness. Consequently, the hour of revelation was a bad hour for me.

I knew that, till it was over, I should be incapable of Brightening. Lest I should be called upon in any such capacity, therefore, I went to bed after dinner with an official headache.

"Now he must be telling her," I groaned to my pillow.

"Now he must have told!"

"Now she must be making up her mind!"

"Now it must be *made* up. She'll be giving her answer. And if it's 'no,' he won't by a word or look plead his own cause. *Hang* the fool! And bless him!"

Then followed a blank interval when I couldn't at all guess what might be happening. I no longer speculated on the chances. My brain became a blank. And my pillow was a furnace.

I was striving in vain to read a book whose pages I scarcely saw, and whose name I've forgotten, when a tap came at the door. Shelagh Leigh burst in before I could answer.

"Oh, *Elizabeth*!" she gasped, and fell into my arms.

I held the girl tight for an instant, her beating heart against mine. Then I inquired: "What does 'Oh, Elizabeth!' mean precisely?"

"It means, of course, that I'm going to marry poor, darling Roger as soon as I possibly can, to comfort him all the rest of his life. And that you'll be my 'Matron of Honour,' American fashion," she explained. "Roger is a hero, and you are a heroine."

"No, a Brightener," I corrected. But Shelagh didn't understand. And it didn't matter that she did not.

CHAPTER IX

THE GAME OF BLUFF

When the trip finished where it had begun, instead of travelling up to London with most of my friends, I stopped behind in Plymouth. If any one fancied I was going to Courtenaye Abbey to wail at the shrine of lost treasures, why, I had never said (in words) that such was my intention. In fact, it was not.

What I did, as soon as backs were turned, was to make straight for Dudworth Cove, on the rocky Dorset Coast. I went by motor car with Roger Fane as chauffeur; and by aid of a road map and a few questions we drove to the old farmhouse which the Barlow boys had lately bought.

Of course it was possible that Mrs. Barlow and the two Australian nephews had departed in haste, after their loss. They might or might not have read in the papers about the coffin containing the body of a woman picked up at sea by a yacht. Probably they had read of it, since the word "coffin" at the head of a column would be apt to catch their guilty eyes. But even so, they would hardly expect that this coffin, containing a corpse, and a certain other coffin, with very different contents, were one and the same. In any case, they need not greatly fear suspicion falling upon them, and Roger and I thought they would remain at the farm engaged in eager, secret search. As for Barlow, for whom the coffin had doubtless been made, he, too, might be there; or he might have left the Abbey at night, about the time of his "death," to wait in some agreed-upon hiding place.

The house was visible from the road; rather a nice old house, built of stone, with a lichened roof and friendly windows. It had a lived-in air, and a thin wreath of smoke floated above the kitchen chimney. There were two gates, and both were padlocked, so the car had to stop in the road. I refused Roger's companionship, however. The fact that he was close by and knew where I was seemed sufficient safeguard. I climbed over the fence with no more ado than in pre-flapper days, and walked across the weedy grass to the house. No one answered a knock at the front door, so I went to the back, and caught "Barley" feeding a group of chickens.

The treacherous old thing was in deep mourning, with a widow's cap, and her dress of black bombazine (or some equally awful stuff) was pinned up under a big apron. At sight of me she jumped, and almost dropped a pan of meal; but even the most innocent person is entitled to jump! She recovered herself quickly, and called up the ghost of a welcoming smile – such a smile as may decently decorate the face of a newly made widow.

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