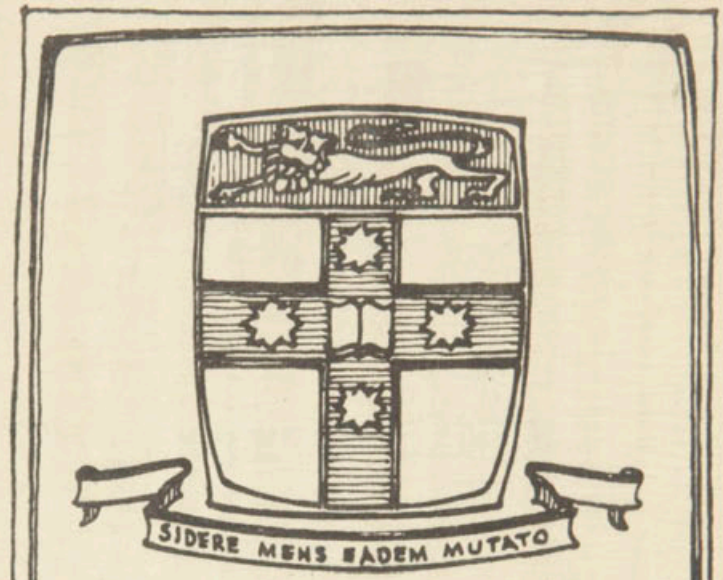
Hortense

A STUDY OF THE FUTURE.

—— A ROMANCE ——

.. BY ..

LANCELOT LANCE.



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CONTENTS.

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CHAPTER I.

On this opening morning of our story, the Edgecumbes, two brothers and a sister, were standing on the river bank fronting their house, looking across a narrow waterway shut in by precipitous mountains whose lower richly-wooded slopes ended at the water brink.

On the point of one of these slopes was Deepwater, their home, a low wooden structure sheltered on two sides by an orchard: a large clearing ran up the back; and the space in front devoted to a flower garden, had a narrow path zig-zagging down a steep bank to a boat-house built on piles over the water. Deepwater was a comfortable cheery little place, and several similar clearings could be seen scattered along the shores of the waterway.

The Edgecumbes made an interesting group —two stalwart brothers, and a sister *petite* and pretty.

John Edgecumbe, the elder brother, was essentially of the sturdy yeoman type, florid and healthy looking; the younger, Alan, the hero of this story, was tall like his brother, but of slenderer build.

His face was long and oval, neither dark nor fair, though bronzed by exposure to sun and weather. With a forehead rather high than broad; a sensitive mouth, half hidden by a dark moustache; an aquiline nose; a chin not too firm; dark brown hair, worn rather long; brows pencilled like a woman's, and eyes—his best feature—of a dark blue, deep and steadfast.

It was an interesting, thoughtful face, and you judged the man to possess an interesting personality. He was, no doubt, a reversion to a former type—to some unknown ancestor, for he was unlike either brother or sister or any known Edgecumbe.

Mabel Edgecumbe was a slight fair girl, just out of her teens, bright-faced and wholesome looking.

Of the brothers, John was twenty-eight, Alan three years his junior. All three were roughly but comfortably clad.

The Edgecumbes were expecting a visit from Mary Hodges, the only daughter of a near and intimate neighbour, who had promised to spend the day with Mabel. They had now been watching for some time to see her put off in her boat.

"Let's go over and see what's keeping her," said Mabel Edgecumbe presently, turning to her younger brother; "Mrs. Hodges may be ill." "All right," he replied, "but get your hat first," and, stooping, he carelessly picked up a pebble and sent it skimming along the smooth surface of the water.

"I shan't be a minute," she cried, and ran off. But she had scarce gone a dozen paces when she came to an abrupt halt. "What's that?" she exclaimed, pointing to a strange object soaring in the sky above the western cliffs.

They all looked, and waited in wonder and hushed expectancy to see what it was. It was a large object, and when the sun struck it, it blazed like a living flame. And presently, as it neared them — for it was approaching rapidly—Alan cried out, "Why, it's an airship!" And so it proved.

It had a large, shining, cigar-shaped body, aeroplane wings, and something like a screw or fan revolving in the rear.

Within a few minutes of its first appearance, everyone on the island, young and old, had viewed it. Never had the islanders beheld anything so wonderful. But where would it descend? With the ease and swiftness of a bird, the air-ship suddenly swooped down and settled on a patch of green sward not thirty yards from where the Edgecumbes stood.

A door opened in the side, a man stepped out, and, looking over at the Edgecumbes, advanced towards them.

He was a slight, dark, clean-shaven man of from thirty-five to forty, and he wore a grey tweed suit and a soft felt hat.

As he approached, the stranger lifted his hat and bowed courteously. "I suppose you are astonished to see me," he began; "but not more than I am to see you. Whom have I the pleasure of addressing?"

"Our name is Edgecumbe," replied the younger brother.

"And mine, Howard," bowed the stranger.

After an interchange of warm greetings, the stranger, Howard, said—

"I should very much like to know something of your history. You have evidently been here a long time unknown to the rest of the world."

A few hours later Howard sent the following message, accompanied by flashed photo-

graphs of the island, to a friend in Sydney. The message appeared in all the chief newspapers throughout the world on the following morning:—

"Startling discovery! I have found the interior of Lava Island—an elongated amphitheatre with a central waterway—to be inhabited by people of European descent, the survivors and descendants of emigrants who left 'Frisco in the year 1902 in the ship *Nemesis,* chartered by a wealthy Bostonian to convey a select party of emigrants to New Arcadia.

"The ship struck this rock on a dark night, lost her masts, and finally was sucked by the inflowing tide through a narrow and dangerous tunnel connecting with this interior waterway. The survivors saved almost their entire outfit, and within a short time had made for themselves fairly comfortable homes. Now that communications are opened with the outside world, some, no doubt, will leave at the first opportunity; others will elect to remain permanently here. All attempts made — and there were several—to regain civilization have ended in disastrous failure and sad loss of valuable lives. (Private and confidential)—Congratulate me, old man! I shall gain *kudos* over this affair."

CHAPTER II.

HOMFRAY HOWARD, the honoured guest of the Edgecumbes, as he leant back in his chair that night and puffed at a huge cigar, thought contentedly over the events of the past day. "Yes, it had been a great day," he mused. And now that it was over it was pleasant thus to lie back and to contemplate at his leisure in their humble surroundings, the family group that had so interested him on his first arrival. "How simple and unaffected they were, a natural simplicity, that one generally associates with assured position allied to culture! And what a distinguished looking man the younger brother is! Where can they have got this breeding and distinction? he puzzled.

Was it due to heredity? It was more than probable that their father, the pioneer of the family, whose picture hung on the wall before him, had been a man of some culture; otherwise how account for the extensive and well chosen library that he saw ranged in faded bindings on the shelves? He had satisfied himself as to the literary value of the collection; moreover, he had noted marginal pencillings

in many of the scientific and psychological works, that betokened the hand of a scholar. From his demeanour and speech, it must be the younger brother undoubtedly who was the student of this family.

Then curiously, Homfray's thoughts, turning inward, began to range insensibly along a fresh line of thought. For Fate, sphinx like and irrevocable, hovering over this simple child of Destiny, out of the curling rings of smoke presently evolved something at first elusive, that gradually took shape and finally assumed the guise of a bright and winsome face — that of his young hostess. Then grimly, too, a spectre appeared to mock him, a door in the corridor of time unlocked and opened behind him, and he caught a glimpse of the past, a page of his life's history that fain for ever he would have blotted out, but could not. It had all happened years ago, when only one woman existed in the world for him. But she had proved false. The old wound still rankled. Deluded fool that he had been, existing in a fool's paradise! She had led him on and on, until one day, looking into those starlit eyes and taking her hand, he had told her that he loved her and asked for her love in return, feeling a glad assurance of the answer. Then those eyes had grown

insolent and cold. She had actually laughed in his face. The barb once more turned in the wound; he shrank from recalling the dead and bitter past with its cruel memories.

And yet, what if he had vowed himself to a life of celibacy! Was he not as other men? Others, he knew, had changed their minds, and many were the instances of second love resulting in happy marriage. And why not so for him? As for his former experience; the type of women in the class to which he belonged (although he had long since forsworn society), as a rule regarded the man as only a secondary feature in the marriage contract. They contracted for liberty, but only liberty for themselves at the expense of the man; to mate with such, men were chary.

But, as he triumphantly reasoned with himself, this was a different type of woman, a more lovable type; one reared in a different school. Having led the simpler life, naturally she possessed the simpler virtues. Such a woman as this would love and cherish a man; she would consider it her highest ambition to make him happy. His eyes involuntarily softened and grew tender as he watched the trim little figure of his hostess flitting here and there. "How well she does everything," he thought. "What a domesticated little

woman!" and loverlike he dwelt on her manifold perfections.

It was a poor little room and very humbly furnished, and Mabel Edgecumbe, unconscious of her admirer's thoughts, but by the beating of her heart only too conscious of his presence, was arranging and attending to the table and displaying all her household treasures, heirlooms for the most part, that seldom saw the light of day; portions of a tea and breakfast service, knives with blades worn to shadows, silver forks and spoons, a cracked flower epergne, and two drinking glasses.

From the kitchen she presently brought cold mutton and salad, home made bread and scones, fresh butter and cream, preserves and honey, a plate of strawberries, and tea and the whitest of crystal sugar, the two latter provided from Mr. Howard's stores. Island tea, compounded of the leaves of a native shrub mixed with dried lemon blossom, was, as he afterwards found, extremely palatable.

Mabel was delighted when her visitor praised her scones and preserves; in fact, he praised everything, and cemented the good impression that his entertainers had first formed of him. When, after tea, they were all gathered together sociably in the little parlour, he recounted for them the stirring

events of history that had occurred within his memory—everything, in fact, that he thought might interest them.

He brought vividly before them the men and women of his world and the manner of their lives. He showed them, too—and here they were greatly excited — presentments of cities with living, moving throngs; they heard the wonderful sounds of the streets, the voices of living men and women—they saw the actual doings of that busy life from which they were excluded.

Then for Mabel's special gratification he described, so far as a man can, the present style and materials of women's dress, and he watched the girl's face glow; and in anticipation he pictured that bright young face alight with love and gratitude turned on the man who placed within her reach the means of gratifying that very natural desire for dress, for life, and love.

It was close on midnight when Mr. Howard indulged in his fourth cigar, which he felt had been justly earned. He puffed away in silence for some moments and then he began to wonder what the whispered colloquy between the brothers meant, and whether it bore any relation to domestic arrangements concerned with their guest. Presently he saw

the younger brother leave the room and return with a small, rather dirty, canvas bag, which he deposited on the table, and then looked over at him.

"Mr. Howard," the young man somewhat excitedly began, "our father was a mining engineer in Australia, and later at the Cape, where he lost most of his money in a diamond venture. From there he went to California and joined the expedition that was wrecked on this island. Nearly all his spare time he spent hunting after minerals, and the stones in this bag he always said were similar to those he had seen in their rough state at Kimberley. Would you mind looking at them and advising us?"

Mr. Howard looked grave. He saw the excitement in their faces, and he plainly foresaw a disappointment. As he well knew (for was he not the sleeping partner in the great firm of Howard, Moreing & Co., gem merchants, with agencies throughout the world), many persons unacquainted with precious stones were continually making collections that afterwards turned out to be worthless, or comparatively so; and, no doubt, this was a case in point.

He rose from his seat, and, without removing the cigar from his mouth, approached

the table, took up the bag, carefully untied it, and then as carefully poured a portion of the contents into a plate.

For a few moments he looked at the heap of crystals in silence; then he took up first one and then a second of the larger stones, and with an instrument which he produced from his pocket, subjected them to microscopic examination. And all the while his face was impassive; but his thoughts ran as he sifted others from the bag: "What a magnificent collection! A king's ransom!" Then he turned to the eager and expectant faces around him. "They are diamonds," he said quietly, "and many of them are of first quality! Where were they found?"

"I can take you to the exact spot to-morrow," replied the younger brother.

On the morrow, accompanied by the two young men, Homfray Howard proceeded to the locality where the diamonds had been found. There was a formation certainly, but only a patch that had been completely worked out, and probably owing to the peculiar configuration of the country no others existed.

[Letter.]

Homfray Howard to John Travers, Bell's Chambers, Pitt Street, Sydney.

Dear Travers,

I once had flashed through my receiver an important and strictly private item of news not intended

for my eyes; so in these days of tapping messages, whenever I wish to ensure privacy, and when the matter is not urgent, I resort to the old-fashioned method of writing my news, so this I send by a private aerial leaving Lava Island to-day.

When I made the great discovery here, I had been, as you know, orchid hunting in some islands to the north, and seeing this small speck marked on my chart as a barren and precipitous volcanic rock rising sheer from the water, and dangerous to shipping owing to the trend of the currents in the vicinity, I at once made up my mind, though I can't say exactly why, to look it up. In approaching it I saw that the chart description was correct, but soaring above the rim of what I supposed to be an extinct crater, you can imagine my surprise when far below me I saw a central lake and wooded slopes overhung by a steep escarpment.

At first I did not observe the clearings—for of course I never dreamt of the place being inhabited—but when I did, I knew at once I had made no ordinary discovery. I have had, and still am receiving, a big sheaf of congratulations, not only from friends, including yourself, but from many outside persons of distinction in all parts of the world. A good many visitors have called lately—among them Price, who gave me your message. To satisfy your curiosity as to the cause of my long detention here, I may as well say at once that I am engaged to Miss Edgecumbe. Of course you know I am staying with them, and I won't weary you by a lengthy catalogue of the perfections of the lady, for you will shortly be in a position to judge for yourself, as the family intend settling in Sydney. Knowing my former—I will allow somewhat pronounced—views on matrimony, I can picture your amazement at my engagement; but wait a bit! Pay me a visit here before I leave, and I will introduce you to a charming girl who possibly may induce you also to change *your* views. She is a Miss Hodges, the only surviving child of the original Bostonian who promoted the New Arcadia settlement wrecked here. He is an eccentric but interesting old fellow, and he and I have frequent chats together. I am given to understand that he has property and interests in

the United States, which no doubt he will have difficulty in recovering, everything long since having passed into other hands. Now, here is a chance for the employment of your legal skill on behalf of the father, with frequent opportunities of ingratiating yourself with the daughter, though from sundry little observations I would back the chances of my prospective younger brother-in-law, were he to enter the lists against you. But pluck up heart, old chap, for faint heart never won fair lady; so come along with a clear field before you. Tell me if this prospect is sufficiently enticing!

I start for home in a fortnight's time, accompanied by the younger of my prospective brothers-in-law, and we shall probably take New Zealand on the way.

I see by the papers that I am credited with the discovery of a huge quartz dyke traversing this island, with payable gold prospects. It is quite true, and as my interest in it as its discoverer will naturally be large, I may have a proposal bearing on this to make to you on my return—that is, if you don't turn up here in the meantime. By the way, if your younger brother, George, is still out of a billet, ask him to call on me on my return, I may be able to put something good in his way, but particulars will keep until you and I have had our conference together.

CHAPTER III.

FILMY mists were lifting and dissolving on the hills. The bright sunlight dancing and playing on the water was reflecting countless tremulous ripples on the banks and overhanging foliage. It was a morning when Nature seemed to be in her fairest mood. It was the morning of the day that would witness the departure of Alan Edgecumbe from Lava Island.

The young man as he walked down that zig-zag track leading to the boat-house where was stored the frail craft in which now, perhaps for the last time, he was to revisit old scenes and nooks familiar from his boyhood, was conscious of a strange feeling of exaltation.

Towering above him were cliffs with steep bare faces viewed through a tinted mist; below were the wooded slopes so often climbed, and before him was the sparkling sheet of water, the scene of many sculling triumphs. In that mood of exaltation that was upon him, never had he thought his island home so beautiful as now, and yet that day he knew he must leave it, perhaps never to see it again.

Pushing off his boat, he pulled with strong and steady strokes until he had passed several small bays with white, sandy beaches, where tourists' tents and aerials stood; and he saw that several of the occupants were amusing themselves fishing and sailing in boats borrowed from the settlers.

He presently turned his boat shoreward, heading for a small cove on the further side of a high, jutting, wooded promontory that faced the entrance of the tunnel, through which the late turbulent rush of the inflowing tide was subsiding into a calm. He had intended to land on the near side of this headland, but had observed an aerial there that by certain familiar signs he judged was about to leave the island.

He could not explain the feeling, but he had an intense desire to be near that aerial, though he knew the people were strangers to him; like others, doubtless, on a visit of a day or two, and now on the point of departure. Yet the feeling was so overpowering that he resolved to land on the further side of the promontory, climb the hill at the back, and then make the descent on this side, which would take him directly past the aerial, so that he might see to whom it belonged.

Rounding the point and pulling hard for

the shore, he presently ran his boat high upon the narrow strip of beach, for it was full tide, then tying the painter to a projecting tree root, he plunged into the surrounding bush and rapidly made his way up the hill, and gaining the summit a little breathless from his efforts, from thence through a narrow slit in the foliage, looking down he saw that the aerial was still there. And now, for the first time, he faltered in his resolve to go down, for, if the truth be told, he felt just a little ashamed of himself. It was not in his nature to use a subterfuge. "Why, then, had he not pulled openly into the bay instead of sneaking round and dropping upon these people from behind?" he asked, regarding himself the while with scorn. "It was not yet too late to turn back! Should he do so?" It was a matter that was not to be decided off hand, and for some moments he stood irresolute.

"No, he would not turn back!" he resolved at length; "after all the trouble he had taken, after coming so far, he would see the thing through! Yes, he would go down! Why not?" Again he peeped at the aerial below, but without any satisfaction, for he saw no one. And again and yet again irresolution took possession of him.

"After all, was it worth while to go down?

If he did, what would probably happen? He would, perhaps, see a couple of tourists, exchange good day with them, possibly have a chat, and then he would have to walk all the way round the headland to get to his boat, and this was an awkward matter at high tide, for he would have to leave the beach and take a roundabout track over steep scrubby knolls and rocks more fit for goats than a human being; and, besides, as he knew well, he would have to take the risk of a slip, which would land him in the water below.

"What folly was this that had come over him to-day?" he asked of himself over and over again. He was behaving more like an idiot than a rational being, and yet at the same time he had to confess to himself that never before had he experienced so strange a sensation connected with an aerial (and he had seen dozens within the past week). "Yes, he must somehow view it, and see who owned it!"

An uncontrollable impulse kept urging him to go down, though he could not satisfactorily explain to himself why he had the feeling; the feeling was there, and that was all he knew. At length, resolutely making up his mind, he followed the beaten track that led down the hill, and shortly after emerging from the dense bush that clothed the slope and the small flat

at the bottom, he came suddenly upon the aerial, also, upon a lady.

When first he saw her, she was stooping, apparently in the act of strapping a rug, but, hearing his footsteps, she straightened herself, and their glances met.

As he raised his hat, but without stopping to speak, for he was too shy and embarrassed to do that, on the lady's face came a look of puzzled scrutiny and wonderment, as if, perchance, his features recalled some face forgotten.

He knew as he moved on that he had met the one woman in the wide world, who, whether she were for him or not, he would yet seek out, and love and serve until the end of time. Instinctively he felt that; and dimly present too, in his mind, was the consciousness that from henceforth the whole outlook of life for him had changed—changed, too, by the mere sight of a strange woman's face.

"What was this overpowering emotion?" He did not think of calling it love, yet he knew all the same that if she were but to lift a finger and say, "Come!" he would gladly follow her to the end of the world. But a curious fancy crept likewise into his brain, and he put this question to himself: "Would he be ready at her bidding to do some base deed?" And yet

in scorn he laughed aloud at the very thought. Why, he would answer for her with his life. Such a thought should never have entered his head! It was the thought and the question of a pessimist! He was not a pessimist! rather the contrary! What then was he? He was a dreamer! that and nothing more! His brother John was a thousand times a better man than he—for (scornfully)—John never complained, although he did more than his proper share of the farm work; while for himself, he hated farm work! He hated the Island! He hated his life on it! And now his whole life was centred on this woman whom he had just passed, and who, had he been asked to describe her, he would have remained silent, for describe her he could not; yet she had graven her image on his mind for ever.

And then, all in a moment, too, he realised that he might never see her again. And he vowed that, come what might, he would see her again, yes, even had he to venture into the bottomless pit in search of her.

There were possibilities hidden in the nature of this young man that even he probably had never as yet fully realised to himself.

When he reached his boat, unheeding a bleeding cut on his ankle sustained through slipping on a rock, he hurriedly pushed off,

jumped in, took up the sculls, and pulled mighty strokes, only to find that, to his vexation, his painter was still fast to the bank — a thing that had never happened to him before. Muttering (was it a blessing on himself for his stupidity?), he remedied this, and then once more stepping into his boat, he sculled out so far into the fairway as would enable him to look into that bay.

As he looked, he saw the aerial rise, at first slowly, until it had attained a certain height above the Island, then rapidly it started on its flight to some unknown destination, and he watched it until it had disappeared beyond the Western cliffs. And though he did not know her name, her nationality, nor where she lived, he had an inward conviction that he and that woman would meet again; something told him that they would. And he hugged this consolation to himself; yes, they would meet again!

Fate plays curious pranks with mere mortals at times; to some alloting long periods of a dull monotony, when life is viewed as stagnant and unprofitable; then possibly relenting, she suddenly overwhelms them with stirring incident, pleasurable or painful as the case may be, but always profitable.

Destiny held in her hands that morning two

interwoven threads of Alan Edgecumbe's life, and at the end of each thread was a woman; contact with the one awakening in his nature the strongest emotion of human life; a passion at once the purest and the loftiest.

With his thoughts still following that unknown woman in the aerial, the young Islander turned for home. When within a mile of Deepwater, happening to glance over his shoulder, he saw lying directly in his track, and not a hundred yards from him, a boat. A second glance assured him that the occupant was a woman, one sculling so carelessly along as to suggest that she had no other purpose in view than the enjoyment of a beautiful and balmy morning, spent idling on the water—water so transparent that in its calm depths you could plainly descry objects on the white sandy bottom.

He recognised the skiff, for it belonged to a neighbour; and judging from a recent experience, the action of the lady excited just a little suspicion in his mind as to her purpose. For it was only yesterday that two fair oarswomen, with mischievous glances and smiles and by significant act, had provoked him to a contest, and accepting, with much apparent show of effort, he had let them win. Only one woman, however, could interest him to-day; he did not

feel inclined for further fooling, and if this lady thought to repeat the tactics of yesterday, she would—well, she would meet with a surprise! For it was in his mind, now that he suspected her, to pull steadily for a while until he was almost abreast of her, then putting on full speed, to fly past like a rocket, leaving the bewildered young woman and her boat as if stationary on the water. That was the surprise that awaited this enterprising young woman, and grimly he smiled to himself as he thought of her discomfiture.

The lady on her part took no notice of him; she quietly paddled along, until such time as he had caught her up and was sculling his best; then she, too, suddenly put out her full strength, and neck and neck they raced for perhaps three-quarters of a mile without advantage on either side, until finally, by a supreme effort, by a short burst of speed, he just managed to land a winner close to the opposite bank by the narrow margin of less than half a boat's length. It was the hardest race he had ever rowed in his life—he, the acknowledged champion sculler of the Island!

For a moment he rested on his sculls and stared over at her, then becoming aware of the discourtesy, he lifted his hat. The lady was backing water at the time, but noting his

action, she in her turn bowed, and that bow seemed to say that she was pleased graciously to accept this present defeat at his hands; then with a parting smile, full of mockery, she unconcernedly sculled out into mid-stream.

Glancing at the far shore where his friends the Hodges lived, he saw that Mr. Hodges and Mary had been interested spectators of the struggle. He had spent the previous evening at their house, so merely waving a parting farewell, he turned and made for Deepwater.

* * * * *

The shades of night drew on, and from his elevated perch in Homfray Howard's aerial, Alan Edgecumbe saw Lava Island, like seagull's wing in distant view, fade and disappear. All around was space; above him, one by one, came out the starry orbs. Below was the illimitable ocean. . . Alan Edgecumbe had begun his journey towards that new world which held his destiny.

CHAPTER IV.

Travelling at a high rate of speed, the friction of the atmosphere against the burnished body of the aerial made so appalling an uproar that until he became accustomed to it, Alan Edgecumbe had difficulty in understanding what his companion said to him. Homfray had frequently to shout. Then again, as from time to time he glanced through the enveloping metal transparency at the pall of night surrounding them, it seemed to him that they were racing with the stars bound to some unknown destination; and once, what he judged to be a bright meteor flashing by, Homfray said was the searchlight of an aerial bound for Lava Island. Ever before them was a brilliant track of light created by their own.

About midnight Alan turned into his bunk, but to sleep was impossible; his brain was in a whirl of conflicting emotions as he rehearsed again and again the strange experiences of the day just closed! And as he lay back, listening sometimes with almost bated breath, it seemed that with the shrieking and moaning of the atmosphere outside, voices were mingled whispering laments and warnings which, in some

mysterious way, he felt were connected with his destiny, and fraught always with mysterious and romantic possibilities.

By nature, naturally emotional and imaginative, the psychic element, always strong within him, had full play that night. At last he became lulled into a state of dreamy trance, in which his whole life passed in review before him. Once more he was a boy.

First appeared that dear mother, so gentle and patient, to whom he had always flown with his childish troubles. How plainly he saw her; how well he recalled all her stratagems to lure him to his lessons. Once (he could never forget the incident) she told him, as a spur to his ambition, "that some day when she took him to a great country, a thousand times bigger than their Island, she would be ashamed of him; for all the little boys and girls would point the finger of scorn at her and say: 'There is the woman with a little dunce of a boy!'" This hurt his pride—the thought of little boys and girls jeering at him.

From that time there was no need of further stimulus, at least so far as reading was concerned. Very soon "Jack the Giant Killer," "The Arabian Nights," "Robinson Crusoe," "Treasure Island," and a host of other books so fascinated his imagination, that frequently

he would steal out of the house, find some secure nook, and there read on and on until he forgot the whole world in the thrilling tale. Often it would be dark when he would creep home, peering behind bushes, and at every step expecting strange adventures. Then his mother would scold him for staying out so late.

What a time, too, that was, when he played Robinson Crusoe, and stole away at daylight with a loaf of bread, some cheese, a fishing line, and a spear. He was away for two whole days, and wasn't he glad when they found him. The life wasn't half so grand after all. To sleep on the cold ground, under the shelter of a rock, fearing every moment that a black man or a cannibal would seize and fatten him up for a banquet was not so pleasant an experience as he had anticipated. Sometimes, too, he would wake in the night and think of his snug little bed at home, of his mother coming into the room and kissing him good night.

When he got home his mother didn't even scold him; and weren't the hot scones and tea nice after bread and cheese, with only cold water to drink; for he didn't spear any animals or catch any fish, nor did he rescue a man Friday to live with and serve him.

His mother asked him what he did all the

time, and when he told her, she glanced at his father, and they both smiled. That was his first and last attempt at playing Robinson Crusoe.

Sometimes when his father found him reading by himself, he would smile, and pat him on the head and say: "Well, my boy! we'll never make a farmer of you!"

What a grand day, too, that was, pig hunting with Walter? Walter coaxed their mother to let him go, and Rover soon bailed up a big boar. It took them some time to get to it, for they had to scramble up a steep ravine through thick scrub and lawyer vines which tore his clothes and scratched his face and hands. After all, Walter's gun missed fire. Then came the excitement, for Walter, in getting away from the pig, tripped on a log, and the brute rushed at him. Rover got the boar by the ear, and he ran up and drove his spear—the one Walter made for him—into the boar's back, and left it sticking there, for the brute turned on him, and it was as much as he could do to jump aside, and had not Walter stuck his knife into the boar's ribs, he would have been ripped. Walter said it was a narrow escape. And when they dragged the boar home in triumph, and their mother heard about it, she scolded Walter, but did not scold him;

she only put her arms round him, and called him her darling boy. But he mustn't go pig hunting again until he was older.

Another day, when he and Walter were fishing close to the mouth of the tunnel, they saw the fin of a great shark making straight for the boat, and following them. He wanted to spear it, but Walter said "No"; it would only provoke the shark to attack the boat, so they pulled for the shore as hard as they could, the shark circling round them all the time. Once, indeed, it dashed for the boat, but Walter splashed with the paddles, and it drew off. When they reached shallow water and were safe, Walter said that he had known a shark sweep a man out of a boat with his tail. They did no more fishing that day.

Then how many years ago was it since his father and Walter, with seven others, sailed away never to be heard of again? It was nine long years! Nearly everyone on the Island had followed their boat to the mouth of the tunnel, and the last he had seen of them was Walter and his chum, Tom Hodges, waving their hands to him. He would have gone, too, had his father not called him aside one day and said that he and John must look after mother while he was away. But he never returned, and their mother grew paler and feebler and

more silent day by day, until one night (it seemed but yesterday, and yet it was four years ago), she called him to her bed-side and said she was going to father and Walter. Ever since, he and John and Mabel had lived together alone.

Many of the books he read—and he had read every book in their library—inspired thoughts of a wider life, and he had conceived a dislike to the dull routine of farming. Frequently he would climb the hills overlooking their home, and for hours at a stretch would dream of a possible new life.

And now his dreams were on the point of being realised! He was at the portal of a new life! He had left for ever the Island and a life he detested!

Above all, he had seen the woman of his dreams—he had looked into her face! She was no illusion. She was a creature of flesh and blood, who now dominated every thought of his life. In this wider life opening out before him he would find her.

And, comforting himself thus, he slumbered.

At nine o'clock that morning, in the far distance, above a billowing sea of white mist, loomed mountain peaks. In half an hour or more the mist had dissolved, and for the first time in his life, Alan Edgecumbe viewed a city

— a large and picturesque city, lying at the head of a noble gulf studded with islands.

Spread over a low isthmus, Auckland faced two oceans, and pretty wooded volcanic cones peeping up here and there throughout the city and its environs, gave it a very charming appearance. Though in after years he wandered in many a clime, yet he never saw a fairer city.

About four miles from Auckland, and almost blocking the fairway of its inner harbour, rises the lofty volcanic island of Rangitoto, and it was here that Homfray proposed to surprise an old college chum who was in charge of the island. Utilised as a National Park and Zoological Gardens, Rangitoto Island contained within its mazy recesses of low forest growth perhaps the finest collection of wild animals in the Southern Hemisphere. Hundreds of acres of jungle were entirely devoted to the larger species of carnivora.

When the two travellers called at his residence, Homfray's friend was absent on a day's leave. It was, perhaps, fortunate for Alan Edgecumbe that the day was a holiday and the island a favourite resort of the inhabitants of Auckland, for it afforded him an opportunity of seeing and studying people in the mass. Whereas, on Lava Island, as a matter of course, visitors had been comparatively few,

and that only of late, and had belonged, as a rule, to the wealthy and therefore leisured class. Here all classes seemed intermingled, and it struck him as peculiar that the average woman, on the whole, was taller than the average man. In all the histories he had read, men had always been taller than women; and it was so in his island. This new feature of civilization he did not then, nor did he ever comprehend.

Occasionally in the passing and repassing throngs, he saw faces that, though strictly speaking not handsome, he yet liked. There was a fascination in the simplicity and dignity of their bearing that impressed him and won his respect. He felt sure they were noble and cultured women whom it would be a pleasure and an honour to know. And their clothes seemed to be in harmony with and to form a part of themselves!

The best and nicest women he met were always simply dressed. In a crowd, though their faces were strange, you could pick them out by this simple mark of distinction. Others he saw more richly dressed, but somehow they were different!

Many of the faces, too, were decidedly pretty, but were not otherwise highly attractive to him, though if glances and smiles conveyed

anything, they conveyed the implication that their fair owners would not be offended if he accosted them.

An instinct of his nature, however, prompted him to lightly regard women who held their smiles and glances cheap, for he could not help observing that they did the same with other men.

As a matter of course he saw no one that day who could be compared for one moment with his unknown Princess!

And he glanced into many a fair face on the chance of finding her.

A high wall, constructed of cemented lava blocks, surrounded the tiger jungle, and, above this, light trellis work, supported on slender columns, penetrated the area from several points, forming commanding positions whence to view the animals in a wild state below. The travellers from Lava Island found their way here, but not seeing any of the carnivora, they were about to turn away and resume their journey when a friendly visitor assured them that the feeding hour was in twenty minutes time, when they would see the tigers emerge from their hiding places.

It was a sultry morning, with thunder threatening, and the sea breeze, heretofore light, was momentarily increasing in force.

Presently an eddy came swirling through the tree tops, caught a lady's sunshade — a brilliant phantasy in red — wrenched it from her bewildered grasp, and sent it fluttering like a gaudily plumaged bird across the area, finally depositing it, a conspicuous object, in the spreading branches of a pohutakawa tree, covered with crimson blossoms, that grew about one hundred yards from the platform.

No doubt the keepers, later on, would have rescued the pretty gew-gaw and restored it to its fair owner; but none happened to be about at this particular juncture, and this was the cause of Alan Edgecumbe embarking on a foolish and dangerous enterprise.

Only a week before a man had fallen from the platform and had been devoured by the tigers; but Alan did not know this until afterwards.

Some few of the visitors appeared immensely amused at the spectacle of a lady gazing blankly after a lost sunshade that had sought affinity in a like colour to itself; but a thrill of genuine excitement passed through them when they saw a man clamber over the railing and coolly proceed to slide down one of the supporting columns.

It was the act of a madman, and a crowd gathered as if by magic.

The moment he touched the ground, Alan Edgecumbe knew that he had committed a foolish act. He could not turn back for the sufficient reason that the column was too smooth for climbing up, and he had come down much quicker than he expected.

He glanced quickly around him, and the only tree of sufficient dimensions to afford refuge from a marauding tiger was the pohutakawa, and for this he at once started at top speed. When he had covered about forty yards of the intervening space, "Look out for the tiger," was shouted in many voices from the platform. Turning his head to look over his shoulder as he ran, he saw, to his dismay, a huge tiger bounding in his track, and not twenty yards from him.

"Quick! quick!" they cried, as if exclamations could possibly hasten his movements. "It's too late!" some one frantically shouted. Indeed, many of the spectators closed their eyes to shut out what appeared to them inevitable—the spectacle of a brave man mangled by a wild beast.

As he neared the tree, Alan Edgecumbe knew that the brute was close upon him; he even fancied he could feel its hot breath; so without halting in his stride he made a desperate leap into the thickest part of the

foliage, and fortunately struck a branch, to which he clung for dear life.

The tiger made his spring almost at the same moment, landed in the tree, missed his victim, and came crashing through to the ground, bringing upon himself a shower of branches and twigs laden with bright flowers; while from above, disturbed by the shaking of the tree, came fluttering down the innocent cause of all this commotion.

Homfray Howard all this time had been watching his friend's movements in breathless suspense. It had all come about so quickly that Alan was over the railing and sliding down the column before he thought of remonstrating or of taking action. And then, of course, it was too late. The tiger would probably have again attempted a spring, for his prey was in sight and well within striking distance. Fortunately assistance now arrived.

Several aerials, attracted to the scene, hailed the crowd on the platform to inquire the cause of the excitement. But before any of them could act, a lady suddenly swooped down in a splendidly equipped car which, after a little skilful manœuvring, she so placed that by a moderate leap the young Islander could gain safety.

By this daring act she endangered her own

life, for the tiger, diverted from his first victim, was preparing to spring upon her. "Quick, jump!" she cried imperiously, and in an instant he was by her side, and up rose the aerial.

Now that all danger was over, several keepers appeared on the scene, but the baffled tiger had slunk into an adjacent thicket. As they grounded on the platform, Alan Edgecumbe stepped out. But when he was about to express his gratitude to his preserver, to his surprise, she bent towards him, and whispering, "Alan Edgecumbe, you and I have met before, and we shall meet again," suddenly vanished from his bewildered gaze amidst a host of aerials that were circling round the platform.

CHAPTER V.

THE aerial with the two friends sped on its way across the Tasman Sea. Alan Edgecumbe fell asleep and dreamed. He dreamt that he was walking by the shores of a winding and romantic stream, and with him was the lady of the red sunshade.

They halted before a Park gate, and were about to enter, when a light tap fell on his shoulder, and turning to see who it was, a charming face looked into his—the face of the unknown woman who had rescued him from that perilous position in the tree top, and whose strange words at parting had so mystified him.

She was standing by the side of an aerial which pointing to she desired him to enter. What was he to do? One fair lady stood within the Park gate, pouting; this other, infinitely more charming and imperious, claimed his presence elsewhere.

And then the fabric of his dream vanished.

He was now in a great pine forest, with swirling snowdrifts impeding his every movement, and wolves howling around him.

He could see them behind him, he could see them on either side and in front of him, and

from dark recesses of the woods their eyes glared at him.

He heard rifle shots ahead, and whipping up his tired steed he suddenly came upon an open space, where, on an upturned vehicle, he saw a woman heroically defending her life against a ravening horde that had dragged down and were devouring the horses of her drosky.

Crack! crack! went his rifle. Crack! crack! crack! and yet again. The great fanged wolves upreared and fell around him.

The woman called to him for help, and seizing a huntsman's axe, he hewed his way to her. He cleared a space around them. His blade drank blood at every stroke. Soon before his uplifted arm the cowardly pack recoiled.

And lo! it was his Princess who had called to him.

Again the fabric of his dream vanished; he woke with a start. Homfray was standing over him, shouting "Wake up, Alan! wake up! we are home!"

When he looked around him, it was night, and yet not night, although a few pale stars were shining overhead. Their aerial had alighted in a garden, on a lawn of closely clipped sward.

In the space around were flower beds and

shrubs and gravelled walks. Facing and looking down upon them, was a house with a pillared portico, approached by a flight of steps.

It was Idamount, Homfray's home! Outside the enclosure of garden and house were countless lights. On his ears fell the ceaseless roar of a great city.

This was indeed civilisation!

Meanwhile two servants hurrying up busied themselves carrying the luggage into the house.

"Come along, Alan!" cried Homfray at length somewhat impatiently; and crossing the lawn, the two friends mounted the steps together and entered the house. A coloured servant relieved Alan of his hand-bag, and preceding him along a passage, opened a door on the right, which was his bedchamber. It was a moderately large room, comfortably but not luxuriously furnished, and was lighted from the roof.

He hurried through his toilet, for he knew how tired Homfray was, and then made his way to the dining-room. This was a very large and lofty room, with ceilings and walls covered with frescoes and paintings. It was lighted by two magnificent uranium glass globes mounted on cupid pedestals of exquisite design shedding a soft glow around. The

furniture was in harmony with the room, and the table to which they speedily drew their chairs was lavishly furnished with fruits and flowers.

Whenever an order was given for a certain dish, a Japanese attendant repeated it on one of several metal buttons studding the rim of a small table set in a recess; and when the dish made its appearance, it did so exactly in the centre—the table itself being shaped and coloured to represent an open pearl shell.

Rising from table at the conclusion of the meal, as the evening was still young, Homfray Howard, mindful of the natural desire of his companion to see something of the city, said, as he stretched out his arms to their full extent and gave vent to a huge yawn (for he was very tired and sleepy, poor fellow): "If you care to take a run into town for an hour or two, Ulu here" (indicating a Japanese attendant) "can go with you. I am too dog-tired myself! but you can't lose yourself, for the trams run everywhere. The one at the back of the house runs every five minutes. All you've got to do is to look at the notice boards; every tram has one showing its destination. So put on your hat and I'll go with you as far as the street."

Alan disliked the idea of a servant accompanying him as if he were a child needing

guidance, besides to go alone would be more in the nature of an adventure.

"If you don't mind, Homfray, I'd rather go by myself," he answered. "All right, old fellow, please yourself," assented his friend, and making their way through the house, Homfray opened a door at the back, and a tram approaching, he saw Alan safely in and away. "Don't be late," was his parting admonition, to which Alan responded by a wave of the hand.

As he turned into his bed to enjoy a well-earned rest, Homfray Howard experienced a slight qualm of uneasiness as he thought of his inexperienced friend wandering alone about the city. There were parts, as he well knew, into which if a stranger ventured after dark the odds were that he wouldn't get out without trouble. "It's scarcely likely he'd get into any of those places," he muttered drowsily to himself, as he adjusted his head to the pillow. "But then, he's such an impulsive and romantic beggar! However, it can't be helped now. I suppose he'll turn up all right!" and consoling himself with this reflection, Homfray Howard fell asleep.

What were the sensations of the young Islander as, swiftly borne into the heart of this great city, he viewed its vastness, its

teeming life, its complexity and yet its beautiful adjustment of traffic, radiating everywhere, and ceaselessly whirling thousands of human lives to unknown destinations?

"This is a world in itself," he thought, getting down from the car and walking on and on through seemingly never-ending streets. The streets were crowded, yet not one in all the crowd regarded or paid the slightest attention to him.

Yes, once or twice bold-faced women smiled and would have accosted him, but though he had never seen such women before, he had read of them; and soon he was able to decipher such faces in a crowd, for an index was plainly written on each.

At a late hour of that night he wandered into a Park, and curious to read the inscription on the granite plinth of a weather-beaten statue, he stopped for a moment in front of it; and he found that the statue had been erected during the previous century in honour of the illustrious navigator, Captain James Cook.

"But for that man," he thought, as he moved on, not caring whence or in what direction he strayed, "this great land of Australia would now be a French possession."

"What would have happened to me in that case?

"Should I be in existence at all?"

And there stirred in his brain thoughts that have taxed the minds of unnumbered millions before him: "The mystery of human life."

Coming to a secluded part of what he took to be the Public Gardens, he sat down, with lights gleaming through the trees in front of him on the water of a beautiful cove of the harbour.

"All rational beings," he mused, "are agreed upon one point: that our bodies are only shells of matter, the constituent elements of which are unstable, and have belonged to other bodies in the past; that it is the invisible Ego, the Self, the Directing Intelligence, the Thinker that is the real person. Then, as the real person is never seen, it follows that the Invisible is the Real. But why, as invisible beings do we inhabit these shells of matter? and why do we quit them at such short notice?

"The span of a single life in Time," he thought, "can scarcely bear the same relative position that a grain of sand does to a sea beach.

"We must reason from the visible to comprehend the invisible.

"Then, what great law do we find in universal operation in the evolution of life and form throughout the universe?

"Do we not find the Law of Sacrifice imposed everywhere, and on all things? Life leaves the lower perishing form only to take birth in the higher. The mineral is disintegrated and sacrificed to the vegetable, which incorporates the nutritive constituents into its own substance—a sacrifice.

"The vegetable, in its turn, is sacrificed to the animal, that it may build up its body; and at the apex of the animal kingdom we find Man developing 'self-consciousness.'

"Man, the Vice-regent of the Logos upon Earth, responsible for its good government and order.

"What, then, is Man to sacrifice? Man, that apex of the sacrifice of a world?

"He must sacrifice the transient to the permanent, his lower animal nature to the higher spiritual nature—that spark of the Divine within him that confers Immortality.

"For it is by sacrifice alone, by self denial, by keeping our ideals pure, that we can hope to mount the ladder that is stretched down to us.

"The beautiful words of Carlyle recurred to his mind: 'It is only with renunciation that life properly speaking can be said to begin. . . There is in Man something higher than love of happiness. He can do without happiness, and instead have blessedness.'

"Might it not be," he thought, "that in the great scheme of Evolution (the evolving and perfecting of a Universe) we, child-souls or spirits—the children of a Great Mind — are the outbreathing of a sacrifice?

"And as child-souls awaiting development, it is first necessary for us to gain knowledge and wisdom on the lowest plane of dense matter —our Earth— (the Universe being the veil of Manifestation of the Logos) by contact with matter in body after body, assimilating the experiences drawn from each closed earth-life, and thus gradually acquiring a knowledge of higher planes of existence.

"Man in becoming self-conscious becomes conscious as well of a discriminating free-will; he can by his own choice either hasten or retard his evolution. Retard it by allowing the lower animal nature to prevail over the higher and more spiritual part of him (that spark of the Divine within him that is always seeking to uplift).

"As we are," he reasoned, "we are incomplete; and in no one life can a man rid himself of all his faults. He can see others so far ahead of him in goodness and wisdom that with his present faculties he knows it will be impossible for him to overtake them in one lifetime; and doubtless many an erring and

despairing creature sinks lower in consequence.

"Death of itself is the greatest of earth's illusions. There is no such thing as death. That which we call death is but a change in life's condition, a birth into a wider life, an escape from a prison house. Death, which is merely an incident in life, cannot alter a man's mental and moral character. That must be carried on with him to the next stage of rebirth, wherever that may be. Why not rebirth to a world where the Ego has not mastered all life's conditions; for in a single life no child-soul can acquire all the knowledge and wisdom that this earth can teach. It would take many repeated lifetimes to fit it to lead an entirely spiritual life.

"And would it not be an absurdity to suppose that the Directing Mind of the Universe —whose children we are, whose chastisements (our bitter experiences) at some period or other of our lives we must all admit are salutary, Who has implanted within us these high ideals, the forerunner of a Higher Wisdom— should cry halt to incompleteness? Impossible! Unthinkable!"

As silent and absorbed in thought, Alan Edgecumbe sat in that beautiful Australian garden at the midnight hour of this his first

night in civilisation, suddenly a cry for help rang out on the stillness of the night.

For the moment, startled and uncertain what to do, he looked about him. Then, with the knowledge that a human life might be at stake, he sprang to his feet and ran at full speed in the direction of the cry, until he neared a palm grove, where, on a narrow by-path, he saw four men seemingly engaged in a life and death struggle, while a fifth man apparently looked on.

When he appeared on the scene, this man swiftly advanced to intercept him; and as they met struck what no doubt he intended to be a crushing and decisive blow. Fortunately for Alan, he saw the blow coming, and turning quickly the blow missed him; then closing with his assailant he struck him with the full force of his right arm, delivering the blow just under the jaw where it joins the neck. The man fell like a log.

Two of the others now made for him, one some distance in advance of his comrade. Closing with the leader, and having the advantage of reach, Alan Edgecumbe suddenly caught him by the throat and forced him back; then, half lifting, half dragging him, ran full tilt at his companion.

The force of the impact was terrific; both

men staggered for a moment and then dropped heavily to the ground, and there they stayed. The fourth man, seeing how matters fared with his companions, at once took to his heels, leaving the victim of the outrage on the ground.

Alan helped him to his feet and inquired if he were hurt. "No," he answered, in a half-dazed voice; and muttering, "The scoundrels tried to rob me," he wanted at once to summon the police. But Alan said "No, let them alone; they've had their lesson already." And taking the stranger by the arm, he hurried him away.

As they moved off, he saw that two of his late assailants were showing signs of coming to, so he felt no manner of concern on their account; judging that probably in a short time they would get up and scurry off.

The stranger whom he had rescued from the footpads was a very tall spare man, with a foreign accent, and as he judged, from sixty to sixty-five years of age.

He thanked his rescuer most feelingly for the service he had rendered him, which he said he would never forget; and, to Alan Edgecumbe's surprise, he gave his name as Admiral Hung Chang, Commander-in-Chief of the Chinese fleet, the lights of which, as they

mounted the slope of the gardens, he pointed out shining not far off in the harbour.

Admiral Hung Chang did not part from his companion until he had exacted a promise that he would pay him a visit on the following morning, when a launch would be at the man-o'-war steps to convey him to the flagship.

CHAPTER VI.

ALAN did not again see Homfray that night, but at the breakfast table next morning he recounted his fight with the garotters and his rescue of Admiral Hung Chang from their clutches.

"Well, Alan," said Homfray, shaking his head, but breaking into a smile as he looked into his friend's rather serious face, "you certainly have a happy knack of meeting with adventures; the marvel to me is, how you manage to come out of them so well; any other man in your place would have had his head cracked or worse last night, for these gentry are not particular as to their manner of hitting a man. Yes, by all means keep your appointment with Admiral Hung Chang. He is a most distinguished man. You will have a very good friend in him. What time did you say your appointment was for?"

"Ten. Well, that will suit me very well. I shall be very busy this morning, but to-morrow we'll have a good look round together. You'll enjoy your morning with the Admiral, I haven't the slightest doubt of that, and I shan't expect you home to lunch."

Alan decided on this occasion that it would be more pleasant to walk than to take the tram; and indeed he found the walk most interesting. Everything appeared different from last night. The crowds were bigger, the buildings wore new aspects, and here and there he had lovely peeps of the harbour. It was the most interesting walk, barring that of last night, that he had ever had in his life. At every step he took there was something fresh to be seen, and by making an occasional inquiry of a passer-by, he readily found his way.

He arrived at the man-o'-war steps some minutes before the appointed time; and he was pleased that he had, for before him was presented the grandest spectacle he had ever looked upon. It seemed to him that the entire water space, from shore to shore, was taken up with war vessels, flying the flags of different nationalities.

His heart awoke to a new emotion, and swelled with pride of race, when, for the first time, he saw the dear old Union Jack flying from the ships of the nearest war fleet.

That flag recalled Nelson and the heroes of the past, and the dear old Motherland—England, the cradle of his race, of which he had so often dreamt—the little islet set amidst foggy seas that colonists call Home. And

was not he, too, a part of the Great Empire of which that flag was the emblem!

Presently a small speck detached itself from the maze of vessels, and as it neared, he saw the Dragon flag of China drooping from the stern. The launch ran into a small cove or recess at his feet where steps led down to the water. The boat bumped, the men stood at attention, an officer jumped out, ran up the steps, and, saluting him, inquired if he were Mr. Edgecumbe; and on his replying in the affirmative, courteously informed him that the launch was at his service to take him to the flagship.

They chatted for some moments, then, stepping on board, away sped the launch.

It was an inspiriting sight as they raced along, to view ship after ship, all armed with heavy guns pointing in every direction, until they reached the Chinese fleet, when the launch eased off speed and presently glided to the side of a magnificent battleship, the *Yan-foo,* the flagship of Admiral Hung Chang. She was the most formidable looking and the largest war vessel he had yet seen, with the exception of one, and that flew the "Stars and Stripes," he remembered seeing and admiring it as they passed through the American fleet.

The gangway of the *Yan-foo* was down; he

was received by an officer at the side, who courteously apologised for not taking him at once to the Admiral, who, he explained, was at that moment engaged on important despatches that required his immediate attention; but begged him in the meantime to inspect the ship.

Accompanying this officer, Alan Edgecumbe was greatly interested in all he saw. The ease and celerity with which the great guns were moved and pointed in any desired direction appeared to him to border on the marvellous.

He was introduced to several officers, and he found them both agreeable and highly intelligent. They seemed to take the greatest pride in their ship and their profession, and most of them spoke very good English; but the main thing that struck him was their thinly-veiled hostility to the Americans. "They liked the English," they said, "but the Americans—they hoped he didn't like them!"

An officer presently appeared, and, saluting, said that the Admiral was now disengaged, if he would be pleased to follow him. He was ushered into a state cabin, and the door was closed behind him.

At a table littered with papers sat the man whose acquaintance he had made in so strange

a fashion the previous night. He was in uniform, and looked every inch an Admiral.

"Welcome, most welcome! Mr. Edgecumbe," cried Admiral Hung Chang, starting up from his chair and reaching out both hands to Alan. "I am indeed delighted to see you! Pray be seated!" and he almost forced him into a chair. "I was indeed sorry not to see you before," the Admiral explained, "but one's country's business, you know, Mr. Edgecumbe — you understand!"

He touched an electric bell and a servant entered with a tray. "You will have a glass of wine with me," said the Admiral, as the man opened a bottle of champagne and filled two peculiarly-shaped glasses with the sparkling and effervescing liquor.

As they drank their wine together, Admiral Hung Chang intimated that he would like to hear something of his young friend's history.

"I am very much interested in you, Mr. Edgecumbe," said the Admiral earnestly, "not altogether for the service you rendered me last night, but, apart from that, I have conceived a great and sudden liking for you." He listened with deep and absorbed attention whilst Alan modestly gave a brief *resumé* of his life.

"Ah! so you do not belong to Australia, then," he cried half jubilantly. "You will be

my son, Mr. Edgecumbe? See, that was my son!" and he opened out and handed him a miniature. It was the portrait of a fine-looking young man in Chinese naval uniform. "He is dead," said the Admiral, in a low voice, and a great sadness came into his face. "I am alone in the world, Mr. Edgecumbe. I will tell you all some day"; and Admiral Hung Chang covered his face with his hands, for the recollection of his loss had for the moment unnerved him.

Alan Edgecumbe felt that he was placed in an awkward position. The Admiral was evidently sincere in his offer; and he was pondering how best he might convey a refusal without hurting his feelings, when a notification by voice-tube "that important and urgent despatches required the Admiral's instant attention," gave him the opportunity of rising to take his leave without committing himself in any way.

"Good-bye, Mr. Edgecumbe," said Admiral Hung Chang with visible emotion. "Yet, no, it is not good-bye. You will come and see me again. You must promise that; and you will think over what I have said"; and he pressed a jewel case into his visitor's hand. "It is an heirloom of my family, Mr. Edgecumbe; you will accept it for my sake."

He pressed a button; an officer appeared, saluted, and then accompanied Alan Edgecumbe to the launch. Again they passed through those formidable lines of battleships and cruisers; and as he looked up and scanned each individual ship, he thought, "What a magnificent sight a great naval battle must be"; and little did he dream when they came opposite to the stately *Massachusetts,* the flagship of the American fleet, that within the brief space of a few months, she and the *Yan-foo,* after engaging in mortal combat, would both be reposing on the bed of the ocean.

In a few minutes he was landed on the steps; the officer saluted, away flew the launch, and he stood there watching it until it was lost to sight.

Then, following the curve of the shore, he presently found himself in the Botanic Gardens. "What a beautiful place," he thought, looking about him, "and I have the day all to myself." He wandered along the winding paths, noting rare trees and plants. Sometimes he crossed green swards, decked with statues and fountains, and parterres of flowers in figured patterns, and ponds where aquatic birds preened themselves.

Everywhere in this fairest of gardens were well-dressed and for the most part happy-

looking people, who seemed not to have a care. Once, indeed, he saw a face that painfully impressed him. It seemed to him that behind that mask of face, a tragedy lay concealed—that the man as he saw him was probably oblivious of his present surroundings, walking as it were in a dream.

In later years Alan Edgecumbe realised that every life has more or less its background of tragedy.

And sometimes he dropped haphazard upon lovers. At his approach, the man would drop his arm from the girl's waist, or drop her hand if he held it. That was how he knew they were lovers.

And again he would see others converge from different points, and meet, and meet without surprise. It was quite a pleasant distraction to come suddenly upon them, without appearing to see them.

Then all at once he saw the very seat he had occupied last night; and—yes, "that was the palm grove, and this the path, and here the very spot where he had encountered the garotters."

But no longer was it the scene of a life and death struggle, for standing there in pathetic attitude was a little girl, weeping and forlorn. She was the first child he had seen that day who was not daintily clad and happy

faced. Indeed it is doubtful if a pawnbroker would have advanced a shilling on her clothing.

Advancing, he asked, "What is the matter, little girl?" She looked up into his face, and reassured by what she saw there, half sobbingly replied: "Janey run away, and I can't find the wishing tree."

"Janey run away, and you can't find the wishing tree," he repeated, soothingly. "Well, don't cry, and we'll see if we can't find Janey and the wishing tree."

She allowed him to take her hand; but they did not long prosecute their search, for he saw a refreshment kiosk, and they turned into that. He and Molly sat down together at a little table. "Now, Molly," he urged, "have a good look round; you can have anything you like," and he anticipated some pleasure in watching Molly's performance—for himself he had a cup of tea and a sandwich.

Molly used discrimination in her choice of a feast. She was not easily pleased. She had her fancies. She knew this coloured dainty from that, and what was fresh and nicest. She did not take what was pressed on her, but chose for herself. Feasts, alas! do not last for ever; even Molly was at length satisfied, and as he paid the charge, he asked the lady: "Is there a wishing tree?" "Oh, yes," said she, smilingly,

as she looked from the well-dressed man to the shabbily clad little girl by his side. "If you follow that path it will take you there; it's not far away." Possibly she may have wondered at their relationship; probably she hazarded a correct guess. At all events she stood and watched them until other customers claimed her attention.

At last Alan Edgecumbe and Molly found the wishing tree — a magnificent specimen of the pine family, of great height and of enormous girth. Around it was a circular track, worn by the feet of devotees and probably of doubters as well. It so happened that none were about when they reached it. "Now, Molly," said he, "there's your wishing tree. Why don't you wish?" "You must go round three times," replied little Molly, nodding her head at him to emphasise her statement.

"I suppose, Molly, I can come with you and have a wish, too?" "You must come," said Molly, tightening her grip of his hand by foreclosing on it with her other. Molly did not intend that he should lose her.

They walked round once; they walked round twice; and the third time, he wished and Molly wished.

"Now, Molly," he said, when they had

finished the third round, "What did you wish?" He did not tell her what he wished. "I wished what you wished," said innocent Molly.

"But that can't be, Molly," he said, shaking his head at her, and trying to frown, but only making Molly laugh the more. "You don't know what I wished." "I wish come true what you wish," Molly explained, again nodding her head and smiling up at him. "I trust your wish will bring me good luck, Molly," and there was an inflection in his voice which Molly caught, for she looked sharply up into his face. And though she made no wish for herself, Molly never had cause to regret that act of self sacrifice for her friend.

It was not long after that when they found Janey, and Janey was very pleasingly engaged.

Before Alan Edgecumbe said "good-bye" to Molly, he wrote on a slip of paper his name and address. "This is where I live, Molly," he said, giving it to her, "and I want you to come and see me very soon." Molly, of course, gladly promised to come, and then with a silver coin as well as the paper in her hand, she ran off to tell Janey her great news.

CHAPTER VII.

HOMFRAY was out when Alan returned to Idamount, but had left word that he would be back by six.

It was a scorchingly hot afternoon, without the usual sea breeze, and Alan felt tired and languid through the excessive heat. First of all he had an iced drink, and then he went out into the garden and threw himself full length on the grass under a tree.

After a short period of luxurious rest, with his face upturned to the sky he began to curiously watch through the openings in the branches for the occasional aerials that came sailing by; and suddenly the thought suggested itself: "How cool and pleasant it must be up there." With him, to think was generally to act, where to act was possible.

So borrowing Homfray's aerial, it was not long before he was aloft, enjoying a lighter and cooler atmosphere, bracing alike to body and mind. It was simply delightful after the close muggy heat below. And not the least part of his enjoyment was the mingling with his fellow creatures, for as the afternoon

advanced, there were constant accessions to the ranks of aerials. Many a bright face flitting by him made him think of his unknown Princess, and of the possibility of finding her.

"She must be somewhere," he thought; "possibly she may be near me at the present moment"; for had he not watched her aerial leave Lava Island, and take a direction that, if continued, would most certainly land her somewhere in Australia.

What more probable than that her home was in a big city like Sydney. In any case he would search for her, and he would never relinquish that search, even should it carry him to the other end of the world.

When John and Mabel came over and were thoroughly settled down, that would release him, and then he would start a real hunt for her. "She was somewhere, and that somewhere he had to find."

Presently he became interested in watching several aeronauts practising difficult and complicated manœuvres—one, figure cutting, at length so took his fancy, that, somewhat rashly no doubt, he resolved to try his prentice hand at the game. He did not consider himself altogether a novice. He had had occasional lessons from Homfray on Lava Island, but he knew that only by constant and steady practice

could he hope to emulate the confidence and skill that these men possessed.

He made a start. At first, in the simpler figures, he was successful beyond his anticipations; then growing bolder, he ventured on a more intricate movement. And this, but for his proverbial good luck, had well nigh brought disaster on himself and on others as well.

At a critical moment, suddenly he had to give way to an aerial so erratically steered that it led him afterwards to think the man must have been under a vinous influence. But at that moment there was no time to think, for swerving to his right at a very sharp angle, before he could check the speed of his car, he was within an ace of crashing into an aerial in which two ladies and a gentleman were seated. In skimming past them, the man jumped to his feet, and then as suddenly sat down again. In that brief glance Alan caught of them, he saw that the man's face was white as death, that he was simply paralysed with fear; and the man, too, knew that his terror had been observed. He particularly noticed the man because he was on the side nearest to him, but having all his work cut out to avoid a collision, he just noticed that there were ladies in the car as well, and that was all.

So soon as he could turn, he brought his car parallel with theirs; and they, probably judging by his action that he wished to speak and offer an explanation, slackened the speed of their aerial, so that the two cars were presently floating side by side.

"I am very sorry, ladies, that I alarmed you," he said, apologetically, lifting his hat and bowing low to them. "I trust you will accept my apology; I assure you it was quite an accident."

The man glared at him for a moment, then sneered in his face, and abruptly turned to address a remark to one of the ladies. Alan caught the name—"Miss Colonna"—but that was all, though he divined that the remark was uncomplimentary to himself.

For their part, the ladies, however, paid not the slightest attention to their companion. They had evidently quite recovered from their fright, and both smilingly acknowledged the bow of the stranger.

"We knew it was an accident," said the lady to whom the uncomplimentary remark had been addressed, "for I saw the man get in your way, Mr. Edgecumbe."

He did not think it strange at the time that she knew his name. Afterwards he wondered how she knew it, and though he wondered, yet he was none the less pleased.

His apology and explanation being so courteously accepted by the ladies (the man for his discourtesy he simply ignored), Alan Edgecumbe judged that he had sufficiently intruded. "You are very generous, ladies," he said, lifting his hat and preparing to turn away.

His bow was most graciously returned, but a scowl still puckered the brow of the man. He had made an enemy of that man, he knew, but he didn't care a snap; why should he?

What mattered anything now? he had found his unknown Princess; she it was who had addressed him by name.

* * * * *

It was in the smoking-room that night, and he had replied to several of Homfray's inquiries regarding his visit to the Chinese flagship and his interview with Admiral Hung Chang.

"Do you know a Miss Colonna, Homfray?" he suddenly broke in at the close of a remark made by his companion.

He spoke lightly, and as if the inquiry were of no special importance. If he thought to deceive Homfray, he failed, for that astute person felt at once suspicious. "What," he wondered, "is he up to now? I shouldn't be surprised if he has fallen in love; but where can he have met the lady?"

"Do I know a Miss Colonna?" he repeated, thoughtfully blowing a ring of smoke toward the ceiling. And then, after a pause, "Why do you ask?"

To avoid an explanation was impossible, so Alan related the incident of the afternoon, but did not deem it at all necessary to inform Homfray that he had previously seen Miss Colonna on Lava Island.

Homfray Howard placidly smoked as he listened. "Now that you recall the name Colonna," he began, "I remember many years back, when I was a very young man, hearing a romantic story in connection with Miss Colonna's mother. She was a beauty and an heiress; I think she is dead now. Of course she had many admirers. Among the most favoured of her suitors were a Captain Grey and the present Mr. Colonna.

"So far as I remember, they fought a duel over her, and Grey wounded Colonna in the right forearm; whereupon the plucky fellow shifted his sword to his left hand, and Grey, magnanimously doing the same, Colonna met with a second reverse.

"Now comes the strangest part of the story. The lady, contrary to precedent in such cases, chose the defeated and wounded suitor for a husband, although Grey had previously been considered the more favoured of the two.

"Grey and Colonna have maintained an unbroken friendship ever since, and Grey at the present time is the Admiral of the American squadron in these waters, and his flagship, *The Massachusetts,* is one of two vessels about which much newspaper controversy is taking place just now. She is certainly a very fine battleship, but many experts maintain that the *Yan-foo,* which you visited this morning, is her superior in armament and protection, if not in speed.

"To return to Miss Colonna: I know her by sight, and that is all. The man with her, from your description, must be Piper, a millionaire, whose name generally heads most of the 'Charity Subscription Lists.' I know the man slightly, but from one or two little things I've heard about him, I should not feel honoured by a nearer acquaintance. Miss Colonna, by the way, has a brother—a great crony of Piper's—which may account for the millionaire being so frequently seen in her society. If you're struck in that quarter, Alan, I wouldn't give much for your chances, for they're very swell people, the Colonnas; and besides you're not likely to meet her again."

With this preliminary caution, the conversation came round to Molly; and on Alan stating that he would be responsible for her education

and a start in life, Homfray said he knew a lady interested in waif children, and that he would consult with her and let him know what she considered best to be done in the case.

[Letter.]

Alan Edgecumbe to John Edgecumbe, Lava Island.

Dear old Jack,

I am in Homfray's library and have just laid down a magazine and taken up a pen, and now am leaning back in my chair thinking of what I can say to you. No doubt, you may think it an easy matter for me, after being here a week to-night, to write a long letter giving plenty of news. I don't find it so. I have plenty of news, of a sort, to send you, but I haven't the faintest idea how to begin. . . . Stop! Jack, you have given me an idea! I can hear you say: "Well, why not make a start from the beginning of your journey—from the time you left here!" You are right, so here goes!

Well, that first night was a long night to both of us; Homfray, poor beggar, never had the chance to sleep, although I offered my valuable services. He declined with thanks, and said that at the high rate of speed we were travelling, and on so dark a night, with the off chance, too, of meeting an aerial bound for Lava Island, the risk was too great.

Indeed, we did meet an aerial, although to me it seemed more like a shooting star than anything else. Of course, it was their search light we saw, and ours must have presented just such an appearance to them. Bear in mind too, that all this time we were almost hermetically sealed inside the car with not a breath of fresh air, and the uproar going on outside was dreadful, so it was scarcely surprising that I did not get a wink of sleep. We had to shout whenever we wished to speak to each other. Had we opened the top at the terrific pace we were going, we should have had our heads blown off, or our heads would have lost us (whichever way you like)!

I can hear you say: "Stop your confounded fooling, Alan! You're only humbugging, so as to make your sentence

stretch over an entire page, and this you call news." Why, you must know, Jack, this is the art of modern letter writing, and surely you won't begrudge me being in the fashion.

And now about the noise outside! So terrific was it, that you could fancy all the demons in the universe were let loose, and in impotent rage, because they couldn't get at us, were moaning a sort of dirge, telling what was to happen to us later. It was most uncanny, I can assure you, but you will know all about it when your turn comes to cross, and then you'll think of my description. Our Willy Willys, when a howling north-westerly is blowing down that wooded gorge at the back of the house, are a fool to it.

Well, we sighted New Zealand about 9 o'clock next morning, and you can imagine how pleased I was when Homfray slackened off speed, and we were able to get a whiff of fresh air and a look round. We had a good view of Auckland, which looks a beautiful place, for although we didn't call there, it was not more than a mile or so away, and later when we resumed our journey to Sydney we passed directly over it.

Naturally, I was disappointed that we didn't call there, for we dropped on to an island at the mouth of the harbour where Homfray expected to see an old friend. However, he was not in when we called. I shall never forget our visit to Rangitoto Island, for according to Homfray, I made a jackass of myself, and I'm afraid I did. It happened in this way:

There are very fine zoological gardens with tigers running about in a wild state. You look down upon them from overhead platforms, and it was while Homfray and I were standing on one of these, with not a brute visible anywhere, that a lady's sunshade blew away, and, like a fool, I got down to get it for her.

It was sticking in a tree about a hundred yards from where I got down, and it was only when I got down that I thought about the tigers. You can guess that I made a quick bolt for that tree, the only one, as it happened, that would answer my purpose in case of need.

I never ran faster in my life, I know, and never shall

again. How would you have felt, Jack, had you looked over your shoulder, as I did, with only about a quarter of the distance covered, and caught sight of a huge brute of a tiger (as big as our red poley heifer), making for you at full speed, and gaining on you at every stride? I was not exactly frightened, though I can scarcely describe how I felt. Every nerve seemed to be braced to meet the danger. I felt that I was racing with death, and that I would do my best to win.

It was a near thing, too, for with that lovely creature at my heels, I just managed to jump into the lower branches of the tree in time. The tiger sprang after me, smashed the branches right and left, but fortunately missed me. It was a stroke of good luck that I shouldn't care to take the chance of repeating.

The tiger, now that I have time to think and reflect over the matter, wore a disappointed look, particularly about the lower jaw, that is, after he had missed me and had come with a sort of somersault on the ground, for though I am not what you might call fat, he didn't know that.

While the tiger was speculating whether he could reach me by a second jump, a lady in a car suddenly swooped down to the rescue, almost on top of me. And thereby hangs a tale, Jack, which must keep until I see you again.

It is altogether a most mysterious affair, but some fine night, when you're smoking one of those huge cigars of Homfray's, or rather one out of the box I'm sending you by an aerial to-morrow, I'll tell you all about it. So you see I'm keeping some interesting news in reserve for you.

By the way, when you get the box of cigars, see that Mabel gets the small parcel that I have directed to her; I hope she will like the contents.

We had a quick run across to Sydney, though I don't recollect much about it, for I was asleep the latter part of the journey, and only awoke when Homfray aroused me and said we were at home.

You have always thought me an imaginative sort of fellow, Jack, and you may remember I once said that to me it seemed quite possible that "life after all may be only a dream, and that the awakening from that dream may come at the moment of death."

You scoffed at the idea, and said that it was impossible that a long life filled with incident could be a dream.

I replied that a dream seemed just as long, as real, and as full of incident, and I instanced the case of certain insects whose birth and death fall within the brief space of an hour. To the insects that hour is a long lifetime filled with incident. Time, I reminded you, is, after all, only space filled with incident; mankind measure time by reckoning from incident to incident. I am not at all sure, even at the present moment, that life is not a dream!

Well, when Homfray roused me, I awoke from a dream. I was in a new world. Everywhere about me I saw lights. The very air seemed to vibrate with a peculiar noise, something like the beat of the surf upon a beach when you are lying down and listening to it; of course, I knew that it proceeded from the traffic of the City, for I had read of the wonderful roar of London heard from Hyde Park.

Idamount, with its pillared portico and broad flight of steps leading up from the garden where we had just alighted, seemed a large and beautiful place, though I have seen many larger and finer places since.

After a warm bath and something to eat, I ran down to the town for an hour or two to see the sights. But Homfray did not accompany me. Poor fellow, he was quite knocked up; he had not had a wink of sleep from the time we left the Island.

I met with an adventure down town that night, but it must keep with the other matter, for of course you want to know all about Australia and the Australians, and how I like them.

Well, I like Australia and the Australians, so far, though of Australia I have seen nothing as yet, except a few square miles of this city, and even that would take a month to explore.

The Botanic Gardens are perhaps the nicest place to visit in Sydney. You catch pretty glimpses of the Harbour and the war fleets.

When tired of rambling about, there is a fine Art Gallery where you can spend hours inspecting the pictures and statuary.

Tired of pictures and statuary, there is the Wishing

Tree in the Lower Gardens. You walk three times round the tree, and at the end of the third time round you make a wish.

On one occasion I did so, and my wish came true, though in a sense it was a double wish. It is not everybody that can get a double wish fulfilled, but I'll leave you befogged over the matter. You'll see that tree when you come up, for one of our first walks will be to the Gardens, and I anticipate much pleasure, old Sobersides, in showing you about.

Australia, they say, is at the present time on a wave of great prosperity, due in a measure to the wise legislation of what was once termed the Labour Party, who triumphantly swept the elections, both State and Federal, many years back, and have remained in power ever since. Taking New Zealand as their model State, they have adapted its legislation to Australian needs. Hence the present prosperity.

The bogey of Australia is the Yellow Peril. Yesterday, on board the Manly Beach ferry boat, a young American naval officer stated in conversation that China, now a leading World Power, would long since have seized Australia but for the prestige of the British fleet, or rather, I should say, of the Empire's fleet, for the Colonies, including the Commonwealth, now all contribute largely to its maintenance.

We are on the eve of a Great War, he said, in which China and America will first confront each other; then, if China wins, and fixes her covetous eyes on the Pacific, it will be Australia's turn to bear the brunt.

The great topic of conversation everywhere just now is the carnival to be held here in a few months time. I should have liked to have entered for the chief event, the sculling contest for the Emblazoned Shield, but the entries closed just a fortnight before we landed here. They say a woman, a Miss Pelham, has entered for this race, and that her sculling is simply phenomenal. She is keeping very quiet, and no one seems to know where she holds her practice trials.

You might ask Mrs. Jones for me, who it was that borrowed her boat on the day I left. I saw a lady in it

who handled her sculls remarkably well; I have since wondered if this might not turn out to be the wonderful Miss Pelham. If so, you will be up in time to see her row.

I understand Homfray has written to you about the sale of the diamonds. We are wealthy men now, Jack, even after taking out Mabel's share. I think I have given you all the news.

Oh, by the way, I directed a parcel to Mrs. Hodges, I hope the old man got his pipe; it was the best I could get in Sydney. Remember me kindly to them, and tell Hodges that I shall write to him shortly. Down goes the pen, Jack, for I am sleepy. Good night!

[Letter.]

John Edgecumbe to Alan Edgecumbe, Idamount, Edgecliffe Road, Woollahra, Sydney.

Dear Alan,

Your letter, the box of cigars, also Mabel's parcel, duly to hand yesterday. The cigars are excellent, and I hope to have a few left to smoke on the journey up, for I suppose you and Homfray will very soon have a house ready for us.

When Mabel opened her parcel, she was in raptures over the necklet and pendant. It is certainly very handsome, and must have cost a lot of money. I told her I was writing to you, and she asked me to thank you and to say that she would write herself very soon. She also called you "a love of a duck"—those were her words—but what she exactly meant I don't know; it's some new fangled expression she has picked up from one of the modern young women who drop in pretty frequently now to see her.

Mabel seems to me to be clean off her head since these new comers have taken her up, for she talks of little else but dress and the opera and what she intends to do when she gets to Sydney, and all that sort of thing. Your parcel was not the only one she got yesterday. There were no less than four others delivered to her, and she, with two of those young women visitors, were for hours last night

trying on dresses and togging up in all sorts of falderals; and talking! well I never heard such talking in my life, so I cleared off early to bed.

Then what do you think Mabel said to me this morning: "That it was very rude of me not to stay up and see her visitors safely home!"

My advice to you, Alan, is to be careful of yourself with these modern young women. I had one up here the other day, and I quite thought I had made an impression, for it was Mr. Edgecumbe this, and Mr. Edgecumbe that, until before I knew where I was, your sobersides of a brother Jack was off his head, showing her about, and explaining the whole place to her. Then the way she looked up into my face, made me feel—well, I can hardly say how I felt. I really thought, as I have said, that I had made an impression.

I promised to take her out in the boat the following afternoon, and after decorating myself for the occasion, I pulled down to their camp in Four Fathom Bay (for there was a party of them), but lo and behold! the birds were flown, carrying my charmer with them. No more modern women for me.

If you should meet that particular young woman (she was crossing over to Sydney to stay with some friends)—well, look out for squalls, for she is a regular high stepper, who will turn you inside out before you know where you are. When she looks at you from under those long curved lashes of hers, be very careful what you're about. Don't fall into the delusion that you're the only young man in the universe.

As to the sculling young lady, I asked this morning about her. Mrs. Jones says she has lent her boat to several people, but she thinks she remembers the lady you mention, for she borrowed the boat and kept it for two days, returning it on the day you left.

She was a very tall, fine looking woman, Mrs. Jones says, but didn't give her name. She had a black boy with her, a servant, who looked after the aerial and the tent while his mistress was away in the boat amusing herself.

Their camp was pitched in the little bay on the other side of the point.

I'm glad we shall be in Sydney in time for the Carnival, for now that I know it's coming off, I shouldn't care to miss it.

I am looking forward to seeing that wonderful Miss Pelham of yours row. Personally, I don't approve of women competing in such things—but what will not your modern young woman do?

Look out that you don't get a proposal from one of them some of these fine days, for you're just the sort of young man on whom they'd be delighted to try the experiment—if only out of pure devilment.

That reminds me, I had forgotten that part of your letter about the tiger. It was certainly a most extraordinary thing you did, and I wonder Homfray didn't tell Mabel about it; however, I agree with him that you made a fool of yourself. I could understand your action had the lady fallen into the enclosure, but even then I think I should have hung back and let some other fellow do the risky business. I fully expected, however, knowing you as I do, with your high-flown ideals about women and that sort of thing, that before I saw you again, you would have got into trouble over "petticoats," and you see I'm right.

As for that wonderful Wishing Tree and your double wish, I think it all tomfoolery, but I'm open to wager a box of cigars (though, by the way, you don't smoke), that the wish you made had something to do with a petticoat, or else that you had a petticoat with you, and perhaps I'm right in both surmises.

In case I win the double event, you can have the cigars ready by the time I arrive.

Everything here is going on just as when you left.

Bill Jones will take charge of Deepwater when we leave, for I fully expect to return now and then to have a look at the old place. An idle life won't suit me, so I expect after a time I will do a little farming in Australia, of course keeping this place on as well.

Now you've got all my news, at least all I can think of, so take care of yourself until we come over, and remember me to Homfray. Keep clear of the petticoats, Alan! Don't forget that if you want to keep out of trouble.

P.S.—I quite forgot to mention that poor old Johnson

kicked the bucket last night. I was with him when he died. He spoke most kindly of you, and strange to say had something of that idea of yours in his mind at the last about "life possibly being only a dream," for he said to me just a few minutes before the end, "When I look back upon my life, John, it seems only a passing dream. I see all the events of a lifetime before me in a flash.

"But what is the use of life," I said, "if life is only a dream?"

"It may be," he answered, "that we are here as a punishment," his voice was very weak as he spoke, "and that the dream is the punishment; for now I see myself as I am. Perhaps that is the punishment, designed to teach me to know myself, to teach me humility and charity. God knows, the lesson was needed."

He seemed perfectly resigned to go, and if all deaths were like his, I can't see what there is to be frightened at in death. It seems to me to be as easy as shelling peas.

CHAPTER VIII.

Alan Edgecumbe saw a good deal of city life during those first few weeks. He was made an honorary member of Homfray's club. He visited picture galleries and museums, took trams to the suburbs, made excursions on the harbour, and in a measure became familiarised with his surroundings.

But although he looked for her everywhere, and haunted every possible place where he thought she might be found, he did not again see Miss Colonna.

Every day he set out from Idamount hoping and half expecting to meet her, and every day he returned disappointed.

After the lapse of a fortnight of fruitless seeking, he grew a little despondent. "In this Modern Babylon," he reflected, "there was about as much chance of meeting with her, and of making her acquaintance, as if he lived in Timbuctoo!"

Moreover, if he did happen to meet her, say, in the street, or in an aerial, what would happen? She might possibly bow to him, but even that courtesy was uncertain, for he was

neither a friend nor an acquaintance, and although he had met her by a lucky (she might term it unlucky) chance, it did not follow that if she saw him again she would take any notice of him.

For one who was her social inferior (and so he judged himself to be) Society had rigid laws that forbade him to seek her out in her own home. The initiative must, he knew, first come from her.

Action on his part would probably be deemed an impertinence.

What was he to do then? The only thing, he reasoned with himself, was to be patient and to await events. Something unforeseen would happen to bring them together. Patience, however, did not happen to be in the category of his virtues.

A house on Darling Point that Homfray judged would just suit the Edgecumbes as a residence, was now vacant. So one fine afternoon, after first interviewing the agent, and obtaining the keys, they went out and inspected it.

Elmswood was a large and roomy house, not too large, but comfortable and convenient. The grounds were spacious and private. Above all, there was an incomparable view. The place took Alan's fancy from the first; and

as the rent was moderate, it was decided that they should take it on a long lease.

The next consideration was the furniture. After much visiting and inspecting of warehouses, Homfray finally decided to place the entire order with a large upholstering firm, who, for a certain sum, contracted to furnish throughout, sending their own workmen, and making all necessary arrangements.

Homfray was fortunate also in finding a lady—a Miss Blakeney—very highly recommended, who, for the very liberal salary offered, was willing to undertake not only the chaperonage of Mabel, but also the entire management of the Edgecumbe household.

Mabel Edgecumbe, with whom Homfray was in daily communication, now urged her lover to hasten his preparations, and to come down to the island without delay, so that they might return with him.

Alan, it had previously been arranged, was to remain in Sydney.

The morning of the day on which he was to leave for Lava Island found Homfray still very busy over his preparations, and as he was not to leave until the evening, Alan decided, on the spur of the moment, as he had nothing else to do, to take a trip to the Blue Mountains, returning of course in time to see his friend off.

It was a typical summer morning, warm, but with a cool breeze, and as he was in no particular hurry, instead of taking the usual direct route, he made a detour by way of Windsor, Richmond, and the Kurrajong. Then following the windings of a deep valley among the mountains, he climbed at length above their encircling walls and alighted at Govett's Leap.

"Who was this Govett, and what had caused his terrible leap into eternity?" he wondered, as stepping to the edge of the precipice, he gazed down into the beautiful gorge. "It had a faint resemblance," he thought, "to some of the ravines of Lava Island, but without the water view."

A few feet from where he stood a mountain rivulet leaped from the cliffs, and falling perpendicularly some hundreds of feet, assumed in the final stage the semblance of snowflakes, a phenomenon he remembered to have witnessed in several of the minor cascades of Lava Island.

There were a fair sprinkling of visitors amusing themselves as best they might. Imagining himself to be an object of curiosity, he moved on a few steps and then sat down on a fragment of rock, so that he might take in at his leisure a comprehensive view of this noted beauty spot.

"Is it not beautiful?" presently came a voice from behind him. The owner of the voice, a lady, smiled at the start she had caused, for her approach had been noiseless, and his thoughts were far away. He had been thinking of Miss Colonna, and wondering whether he should return to Sydney and make a further search for her. He had just made up his mind that he would.

"Yes, it is very fine," he returned, rising to his feet and lifting his hat.

The lady was not exactly handsome, he thought at the first glance, and her age might be anything between thirty and forty, nearer probably the latter than the former; but still there was something engaging and pleasant about her that quickly set him at his ease.

"And how strangely those crags shine through the tinted mist?" she continued. "One could almost imagine the atmosphere instinct with subtle forms of life, though I have been told this appearance is due to the presence of minute oil-globules — exhalations from the eucalyptus tree."

"It is certainly a pleasant change from the coast," he remarked. "I find the air much lighter and drier here. It is like champagne."

"I frequently come here," said the lady, "but very soon I hope to be viewing a still lovelier

spot — Lava Island — which perhaps you know?" Her smile and manner convinced him that she identified him with his birthplace.

"Yes, I should know something of it," he returned, with a smile; "but how did you guess that?" He looked curiously and inquiringly at her.

"Why, I recognised you a hundred yards away," the lady laughingly replied; and, noting his puzzled expression (for it was far from clear to him how people whom he had never met or spoken to frequently recognised him), she added, "and it was not due to any air of rusticity."

"Confound her," he thought, "she's laughing at me"; so he turned the conversation.

"I don't think any view complete without water," he began. "To my mind, to make this scenery complete there should be a lake yonder."

"I quite agree with you," answered the lady; "it is the great lack of Australian scenery. But, Mr. Edgecumbe, you will excuse my curiosity." Here she paused with a quizzical smile, for at the mention of his name he shot a quick glance of interrogation at her. "But really, Mr. Edgecumbe," she went on, "I should very much like to know what you think of us—in fact, how our modern civilisation impresses you.

"Of course everything must be so new and strange to you."

"Well, not exactly," he answered thoughtfully, "in this way it is not." He was saved further explanation, for at that moment someone called out: "Lunch is ready, Clara! bring your friend with you."

About fifty yards from where they stood a picnicking party, scattered in various attitudes round a white table-cloth spread on the ground, were impatiently awaiting the arrival of Clara before commencing operations; indeed, some had already done so.

He plainly saw that he and his companion were the subject of merriment, so courteously declining Clara's pressing invitation to lunch, on the plea of an appointment in town, in a few minutes he was speeding on the return journey.

When close to the outskirts of the metropolis, with the greater portion of the afternoon still before him, he began his quest. Beautiful faces, and faces likewise made beautiful by art, constantly flashed by, and he was the recipient of many a swift glance and flattering compliment, for to these fair daughters of Eve this stranger had about him an air of aloofness and indifference to their charms that excited interest and curiosity.

But nowhere, wander where he might, could

he distinguish the object of his search. Once he thought he had found her, and following in pursuit was led a pretty dance of several miles, only to meet with a rebuff, for the lady becoming conscious of a follower, suddenly turned in her car, gave him a haughty glance, and then continued on her course.

After more than one discouragement of a like nature, he began to slacken the ardour of his search; and while in this careless mood a car which he had not taken particularly into account, took an upward flight and passing overhead, the lady in the car, bouquet in hand, with most adroit skill, by a throw beautifully timed, sent the bouquet fairly into his lap.

For the moment he was so taken aback that he allowed the flowers to roll on the floor of the car, and by the time he had picked them up and glanced around, the only aerial from which he judged the bouquet could have been thrown, was sinking with incredible rapidity towards a clump of pines on a terrace to his right, finally disappearing in its midst.

"Could it be Miss Colonna?" For the moment there was rapture in the thought. But no! on closer examination of the bouquet, a note that hitherto had been concealed in its heart fluttered to his feet. Snatching eagerly at the scented missive and opening it, he read

these words: *"Soon shalt thou meet whom Fate hath so decreed!"* There was no signature—simply that one line.

"What a strange message!" he thought, "who could have sent it?" And then all at once there dawned on him the solution of the mystery. This strange message agreed with the mysterious words uttered by the beautiful unknown who had rescued him from the tiger in Rangitoto Gardens, New Zealand.

"But why," he puzzled himself, "this attempted concealment of her identity?" Therein lay the puzzle, and one to which his brain could find no solution.

It was Hospital Saturday, and finding in his pocket a ticket that entitled him to attend a mid-air fête, to be held that afternoon, somewhere in the vicinity of the Parramatta River, he directed his aerial towards this famous pleasaunce, resolving that if he still met with non-success, he would relinquish a search that every moment appeared more quixotic.

It was crowded when he arrived, and the first thing that struck him and drew his interest was a very pretty sight—a mimic combat with flowers used as missiles; and though at first restricted to a series of single combats, others joining in, the whole presently assumed the proportions of a pitched battle between lines of opposing skirmishers.

The fun waxed fast and furious, and suddenly Alan found himself singled out and assailed from several points, and compelled, against his better judgment, to join in the bloodless fray.

But he was no match for his fair assailants, so many of whom apparently had entered into a conspiracy against him, and pelted him so unmercifully that soon he found his car filled with flowers; and then, amid the loud plaudits of the numerous spectators, and to their great delight, whilst endeavouring to beat a retreat, he was headed off and ignominiously driven back into the fighting ranks.

To visitors unused to such scenes, this aerial amphitheatre of spectators above, and the ever-changing kaleidoscopic mingling of contestants below, must have presented a unique appearance.

In contests of this nature, waged with light missiles whose specific gravity is not great, the advantage rests with the skilled aeronaut who can so manœuvre as to place himself at an angle above, or directly above, the adversary; it then becomes a comparatively easy task to hurl or simply drop the projectile into the opposing car, or (supreme test of skill) to hit the driver.

Alan Edgecumbe, at first constantly worsted, gradually became familiarized with the intri-

cacies of the game; and gaining confidence with each encounter, to his unbounded gratification, at length succeeded in fairly hitting with his missile a certain fashionable dame of ample proportions who throughout had been his most persistent and bitter antagonist.

And now happened an extraordinary thing.

The lady hitherto so aggressive in movement and action, instead of, as he naturally expected, delivering a counter stroke (the retort courteous), to his intense surprise suddenly turned and fled from the scene, followed by a host of combatants and onlookers.

"What did it all mean?" Whilst gazing in bewilderment at these panic-struck, fleeing aeronauts, a large dark body, like a bolt from the blue, suddenly dropped from aloft, narrowly missed his car, and fell hissing to the ground, whence a few seconds later there floated up a crashing sound.

There had occurred one of those appalling collisions so frequent, alas, in aerial navigation.

He had scarcely time to breathe or even to glance around him, for as yet he had not fully realised the terrible nature of what had occurred, when a second aerial, its machinery crippled, came sailing or rather wobbling by. And, oh! horror, in the lady standing up in the car, with her mute appealing face turned to him, he recognised Miss Colonna.

He could scarcely define how he knew this, but somehow he was aware that she recognised him, although she made no sign; but in her silent regard of him, he felt that to him alone, in the whole wide world, she looked for succour.

And she did not appeal in vain.

Without a moment's hesitation he dashed after her, and quickly coming up with her car, he boldly attempted to take her off. He made more than one attempt, but each effort ended in failure, for his own aerial was rapidly becoming crippled; and once in stretching out to grasp her so that he might drag her into his own car, he overbalanced and nearly lost his life.

Meanwhile, the swaying, zig-zagging motion of the crippled aerial was slackening; the downward momentum, unfortunately, was fast increasing.

A few moments would witness the end, and such an end! Half despairing, and grown desperate at the thought of her danger, he made a supreme and final effort; he forced his car under hers (with no small risk of being crushed between the two), and then he attempted to bear it up.

But the united burden was too great; the interlocked cars hung for a moment swaying in space, then, with slowly sinking movement, splashed into the water, that immediately engulphed them.

CHAPTER IX.

When Alan Edgecumbe came back to consciousness, his mind was in that peculiar state of torpor in which it is unwilling to work actively; so that it was not strange that he should imagine himself to be in his own room at Deepwater, and suppose the occasional sound of a light footfall to be his sister's. He was in a measure dimly conscious, too, after a certain lapse of time, of a gentle presence hovering over him, of a subtle scent of violets, and—yes, of the lingering pressure of warm lips upon his forehead.

"Could it be that he was dreaming?" he thought, when light footsteps again approaching, halted by his bedside. "What did it all mean?" Slowly unclosing his lids, he saw bent over from behind the pillow and looking down upon him, the anxious face of his friend, Homfray Howard.

"Is that you, Homfray? Why, what is the matter?" he asked, struggling to sit up, but finding himself unaccountably weak.

"It's all right, old man!" replied his friend, soothingly. "Drink this; it will do you good. I'll tell you everything in the morning."

The invalid obediently drank what was offered—a cooling beverage—and settling himself comfortably back on the pillow, shortly afterwards sank into a deep refreshing sleep.

When next he awoke it was morning, with the dancing sunlight flickering warm beams across his face and flooding the room with brightness.

"Where was he?" He looked about him curiously.

The bed was strange, and the room more richly furnished than his chamber at Idamount; and through the open casement of a deep bow-window he saw in the distance below a fine sheet of water, on which presently a ferry-boat laden with passengers swiftly crossed his line of vision.

Recollection suddenly returned to him. He remembered all that had occurred yesterday; events in quick succession passed through his mind.

He saw himself again and again baffled in his efforts to save her. At length he succeeded in forcing his car under hers, but was unable to rise, for the cars commenced to sink.

As he tried to climb into her aerial, and escape being crushed between the two cars when they struck the water, she had given him her hand.

After that was a blank.

"He must have been carried into this house," he reflected, although he didn't remember anything about it. And putting his hand to his head he felt a freshly-stitched wound. The other aerial must have struck him then.

But what about Miss Colonna? Was it possible that something had happened to her?

At the bare thought a chill seemed to strike to his heart. Jumping out of bed, a temporary giddiness made him hold fast to the bed-post to steady himself; but for this and for a slight soreness near the wound he felt himself again.

Here were all his things from Idamount; his trunks, too, open. Homfray must have heard of the accident and sent them. At all events he would dress and see what had happened.

He was fast getting into his clothes when Homfray Howard opened the door and stood there staring in surprise. "Hello! old man," he cried, "is that how you feel? I'm glad to see you looking so well. See what I've brought you. Aren't they beauties? Guess who sent them?" and he held something tantalisingly aloft.

It was a beautiful bouquet of choice rosebuds intermixed with Parma violets, with the dew still clinging, to show that they had been freshly gathered.

By a sudden movement, Alan snatched them from his hand, and first crushing them to his face, he carefully placed them on his dressing table. "She had sent them. She was safe. He would see her again; perhaps even within the next few minutes." New life entered into him. How joyous and happy he felt all at once.

Homfray, with a peculiar expression on his face, took a seat on the bed, then pulling out his cigar case, he lit a choice Manilla, and between the puffs watched his friend dressing, which he proceeded to do with more than usual attention to details.

"Whose house is this, Homfray?" asked Alan presently, elevating his chin while trying to fasten a stiff collar that apparently had a fractious stud-hole. "And how did I get here?" He paused, waiting for Homfray's reply. All the same, he had a shrewd idea where he was, but he wanted Homfray to definitely supply the information.

"Well, if you'll restrain your impatience for just two seconds, I'll tell you all I know," answered Homfray, throwing away his cigar which drew badly, and deliberately lighting a fresh one.

"You know I expected you home about five? Well, I had everything ready to make a

start after tea, and I was getting just a bit impatient, when to my surprise Mr. Colonna sent me word that you were at his house, that you had met with an accident—nothing very serious—but he would like me to come out all the same." Puff, puff, puff, and Homfray blew three curling rings of smoke towards the ceiling.

"Well, on my way here, I heard the newsboys shouting particulars of the accident, so I bought a paper. That was a very plucky act of yours, Alan, getting under her car and trying to hold it up. The papers give you great praise for that, and for your coolness and presence of mind."

At this point Homfray again paused to blow fresh rings of smoke, and to consider what next he had to say. "Yes, and Miss Colonna showed great pluck, too, for that matter," he resumed. "Very few men would have stuck to you throughout as she did, for you were unconscious all the time, and they say half full of salt water into the bargain.

"Now you see the advantage, Alan, of what I have always maintained" (Homfray was on one of his pet fads) "that all young girls should be taught to swim.

"But that's by the way. Well, when I got out here, Mr. Colonna of course at once took

me to your room — this room — and you were lying on the bed there with the doctor sewing up the cut on your head. It's lucky for you it wasn't a quarter of an inch deeper.

"You were half conscious, I thought, but you didn't seem to recognise me. The doctor, however, said you were getting on famously, that you might perhaps be a little weak or giddy in the morning when you first got up, but there was nothing to prevent your getting up, provided you kept yourself quiet during the day.

"Well, here you are, old man, as jolly as a sandboy, I'm glad to say, though why sandboys should be so particularly jolly I don't know, and never heard of anyone who did.

"By the way, Miss Colonna took it in turns with me to sit up with you during the night. You don't remember that. Perhaps you remember the draught I gave you? You slept like a top afterwards, and never moved until about an hour ago, when Miss Colonna roused me.

"I was lying down in the next room, and she seemed very anxious for me to go to you. She said you were restless, and she thought you were about to wake.

"I expect she was a little bashful after what had taken place, and didn't want you to see her,

or perhaps she remembered that ladies, as a rule, don't look their best after being up all night.

"At all events she seemed in a great hurry to scuttle off. I wonder did she give you a kiss?

"Oh! you needn't blush and look so indignant. I don't suppose she did anything of the kind. But if she did on the sly, who's to blame her? You deserved it, and she deserved it; and no one a bit the wiser.

"Oh! indignant again? What? about to throw your host's brushes, when you've got your own?

"Really, Alan, joking apart, you've got a very bad temper. It's fortunate that mine's so good.

"Ha! so you've broken your sleeve link? That's the penalty one pays for losing one's temper.

"Now, let me see," and Homfray paused meditatively. "Yes, all sorts of inquiries were made after you during the night, and I was sorry that I couldn't let your old friend Admiral Hung Chang see you. He seemed in a great way about you. But the doctor's orders were imperative; no one was to be admitted into your room but Miss Colonna and myself."

"Weren't there some people killed, Homfray?" asked Alan, having replaced the broken sleeve link with a fresh one from his trunk.

"Yes, there were two women killed, and it's a wonder there were not more.

"No blame, however, attaches to Miss Colonna. Something went wrong with their steering gear; and the crowd was so thick they could not help running into somebody.

"And now, young man, you've had my budget, and it's about time you were finished dressing. What does all the elaborate titivating this morning mean?

"Come on! I'm almost famished, and I think breakfast's not far off.

"Oh, by the way, I half promised Mr. Colonna that you'd stay here for the week I was away.

"When I explained that I was going down to Lava Island and returning in about a week's time with your sister and brother, he positively insisted on your staying here; said that he'd keep you for a month if he could.

"He'll be offended, I know, if you refuse.

"Well, that's settled; and now all you've got to do is to call a few times at Elmwood and see how Miss Blakeney is getting on.

"She's engaging servants just now, but will be a fixture herself in the house from to-morrow.

"It won't take you many minutes to go out and return, and I know she'd like it. So come along."

Outside, the servants were arranging the breakfast table under a shade tree on the lawn, for Mr. Colonna had a fancy for having his meals in the open in the hot summer weather.

The old gentleman met the two friends as they were emerging from the house. He was a fine-looking, white-haired, clean-shaven man of between sixty and sixty-five.

He received Alan Edgecumbe most impressively. "Nothing that I can ever do, Mr. Edgecumbe," he said, speaking in his most courtly accents, as he led his visitors apart, "no thanks that I can convey to you, will ever wipe from my remembrance the service you have rendered me and mine.

"My house and any influence that I may command are from this moment at your disposal.

"I beg that you will not pain me by refusing to remain my guest for the brief space of time your friend, Mr. Howard, has so kindly promised to spare you to us."

"You are most kind, Mr. Colonna," replied Alan, greatly touched, "and for my part I beg that you will not again allude to the matter of obligation. Any slight service I may have had

the good fortune to render your daughter has already been more than amply repaid."

Alan Edgecumbe could not altogether repress just a slight feeling of nervousness at the thought of the impending interview with the lady of the house.

For one thing, he had never been properly introduced to her, and then there was this dreadful accident in which he had tried to save her life; all this made the position an awkward one for him. She would shortly appear—in fact, she might be here at any moment he thought, glancing towards the house almost apprehensively.

And what should he do when he first saw her? Should he advance to meet her, or wait until she came up to him?

All at once the flutter of white garments issuing from a glass door opening on to the lawn put an end to further self-questioning.

Miss Colonna wore a blush rose in the bosom of her dress. That was about all that Alan Edgecumbe could remember afterwards of her dress, for his heart started beating so rapidly as he watched that graceful white-robed form coming towards him that he fancied he could hear it.

The lady walked very slowly at first as if she too participated in Alan's nervous and self-

questioning mood; but as she neared the group she advanced more quickly.

Alan Edgecumbe instinctively moved forward to meet her, and they met some distance apart from the others.

She gave him her hand, and there was a deep flush on her face, as she said: "Oh, Mr. Edgecumbe, I'm so glad to see you up again, and looking so much better. And I," and with lowered eyes and sinking voice, "Oh, how can I ever thank you for what you did for me yesterday?"

"Miss Colonna," he interrupted, with deep emotion, "I hope this will be the last occasion for any allusion on either side to the matter of obligation. Please understand me clearly. I claim not the faintest merit for what I did or for what I attempted to do yesterday. I simply did what any man would have done under similar circumstances.

"And if it comes to a question of obligation, my friend, Mr. Howard, has only just now assured me that you saved me from drowning. Miss Colonna, will you not be generous and let us cry quits? Shall it be a bargain between us?"

"On one condition alone, Mr. Edgecumbe," said the lady, looking up at him with tears in her eyes. Alan, too, was afraid that she might see the moisture in his.

"Well, what is the condition, Miss Colonna? Whatever it is I agree to it."

"That you will be my friend, my true friend, Mr. Edgecumbe"; and she looked straight into his eyes.

"Miss Colonna," he said, after a pause of silence, for he was deeply moved, "you have conferred the very highest honour on me." And now he relinquished her hand that, without knowing it, he had been holding all the time.

The interview between Alan Edgecumbe and Viola Colonna afforded to the observant Homfray the highest gratification. "Ah!" muttered that gentleman, sententiously, to himself, "We shall see what we shall see. Altogether a very pretty little romance."

CHAPTER X.

It was breaking dawn. Alan Edgecumbe turning restlessly over on his right side exposed his face to the light stealing in through his chamber window. He opened his eyes. The grey dawn, like a ghostly mist, filled the room. He could just make out the shadowy outlines of objects. He lay back there resting, but thinking, thinking all the time.

So this was his last day; absolutely his last day! It had come to that—his very last day! And harking back, he mentally recalled every incident of the past few days.

Had they been happy days? Yes! the happiest he ever remembered. And did he love her as much as ever?

Was she still his lode-star as always she had been in his dreams? Yes, and more!

"How quickly, too, time has flown," he thought.

"John and Mabel will be up to-morrow, and to-morrow morning I shall have to say good-bye to her."

It seemed scarcely possible that a week had flown by since that morning in the garden when she asked him to be her friend.

And yet somehow it had passed, and now it seemed, too, as if he had always known her, as if always she had been a part of his life. He could not picture his life complete without her.

What delightful *camaraderie* had been established between them. Of course she called it friendship. And those walks and those talks in the garden.

He accompanied her every morning on her rounds when she fed her numerous family of feathered pets. What a sweet intimacy this privilege of friendship conferred upon him! She had asked him all about his life, his thoughts, and what he did. Had he never longed for a different life?

And he had tried his best to open out his inmost self to her; and he knew she listened sympathetically.

But one thing he had not told her. He had not told her that he loved her. That he dared not do as yet. . . .

And she, too, had given him a part outline of her life—and, yes, it was only yesterday morning (how proud and happy he had felt!), they were sitting in the little summer house, when she said that he was her only friend—at least her only man friend. He was glad of that. Had she admitted any other man to her confidence, how should he have felt?

There was another man—that fellow, Piper. But he did not regard him seriously, for she disliked him.

She had told him so in confidence.

And yet the beggar was always here; and her father and her brother encouraged his visits. The fellow was handsome, too, in a way; and no doubt very rich. But she didn't care for that; she preferred his society to Piper's.

And Piper knew it and was jealous, and hated him in consequence. He could see that from the first.

For his own part he couldn't understand how a man could hang about a woman annoying her with his attentions when she gave him plainly to understand she didn't want him.

Had he been so treated, he would have gone right away and never come back again. The fellow wanted kicking.

At first he had looked forward to the evenings that were to be spent with her. Now the evenings he liked least of all, for they brought hosts of visitors, and it was hard to get in a word edgeways with her; it took all her time attending to them. Besides some of her lady friends always fastened on to him. One or two of them were certainly very nice, particularly Miss Irene Blakeney, the younger sister of the Miss Blakeney who was now in charge of Elmswood.

But he didn't see so much of her as he did of Miss Keene. Miss Colonna, he felt sure, tried to bring Miss Keene and him together.

It was really too bad of her.

Why, it was only last night she purposely brought her over to where he sat, and then left them together, looking back with a mischievous smile when she had got some distance away, as much as to say: "Consider yourself a very lucky fellow. There is a nice girl I've brought to talk to you. You ought to be very happy."

It was really too bad of her.

Miss Keene, after all, wasn't a bad sort of girl. She knew all about Lava Island. But where the dickens could she have learnt so much about him?

She could tell him things that he thought were only known to himself.

And Mary Hodges, too. Whoever could have put her up to teasing him about Mary?

Only last night she said positively that she had seen him somewhere before; but where she wouldn't say. He didn't remember ever seeing her before.

And now, about the picnic to-day. One blessing, Mr. Piper wouldn't be at it; in fact, he hadn't been asked. How the beggar would grind his teeth when he found he'd been left out in the cold.

What a day, too, it would be if he could only get Miss Colonna all to himself. After all, it could be managed. Just a little skilful manœuvring, that was all.

He would take jolly good care a hundred Miss Keenes didn't keep him from Miss Colonna on this his last day. No more *tête-à-têtes* between himself and Miss Keene.

A clock striking somewhere in the house suddenly broke in upon his musing. One—two—three—four—five—six. By George, it was getting late. He jumped out of bed and proceeded hurriedly to dress himself, for they were to have an early breakfast and make an early start.

In the small but select party gathered for a picnic on the Como lawn that morning, the sexes were about equally balanced.

As he took his seat by Miss Colonna in a compartment of the Como aerial, which they would have all to themselves, Alan Edgecumbe had cause to congratulate himself on his skilful manœuvring, for he had stalled off more than one competitor for this very seat.

Success produced in his mind an outward as well as an inward satisfaction that betrayed itself by a tendency to view all mankind benevolently. But this benevolent mood unfortunately did not last long.

Almost on the point of starting he remembered something. In excursions of this kind, in the hurry and bustle of departure, it frequently happens that some trifle is forgotten which might have contributed materially to the comfort of some of the party.

He suddenly remembered that he had promised Miss Colonna to take a certain book with them, and that the book was now lying on his dressing-table, where he had put it last night so that he should not forget it.

What a confounded idiot! Was there ever such a blockhead? These were only a few of the many objurgations that he made against himself. Then he thought for a moment. Yes, he must get it; she might ask for it.

"Excuse me, Miss Colonna," he said, hastily jumping down from the car; "I shall be back in a moment."

But that moment was pregnant with fate for him. He found the book, but lost his seat.

During the brief interval of his absence, a young and distinguished naval attaché of a foreign Embassy, seeing the vacant place at once took possession, and now from the coveted seat of honour beamed complacently down upon him. Alan wished he could have strangled that attaché. What impudence in

the fellow! It wouldn't do, however, to make an unseemly altercation. That would be rudeness to his hostess, who had organised the picnic solely on his account—in honour of his last day.

Whether the new adjustment of seats met with Miss Colonna's approval or not, he hadn't time to judge, he was so angry and put out; besides her car almost immediately rose and commenced to wing its flight.

"Quick, Mr. Edgecumbe," called out a tall, fair girl, standing up and beckoning to him from the second car; "quick, or we shall be late."

There was no help for it; he hastily scrambled in. The car rose and followed in the wake of its leader.

The tall fair girl who had hailed him was Miss Keene. "Now, this is certainly most delightful," said she, settling herself in a cosy nook apart from the others, and sweeping her gown aside with a triumphant movement so that he might sit beside her. "I shall have you all to myself, and you can tell me more about that lovely island of yours, Mr. Edgecumbe. I am dying to know all about it. Isn't it nice to be here all to ourselves?" She was hardly aware that his delight scarcely equalled her own.

Their acquaintance, though not of long date,

had ripened, on the lady's side, into something more. With her it was a case of "love at first sight"; an absorbing passion that thrilled through every fibre of her being.

From the first moment of their meeting her heart had gone out to this romantic, true-hearted young man. She knew he was all that; and she was now resolved to bestow on him both herself and her fortune.

She knew she could make him happy, as well as being happy herself. It delighted her to think of the happiness she could bestow on him. He was a little shy and diffident at present, no doubt, but then she would rather have that than the self-assurance she saw in other young men.

"Now, let me see," she continued, puckering her pretty brows, but glancing demurely up at him from beneath long-curved lashes, "we were interrupted last night" (yes, he remembered it very well, for he had made an unsuccessful effort to escape and join Miss Colonna) "just as you were telling me of that accident.

"You were picnicking, you know, and your boat capsized close to the mouth of that horrid tunnel. Oh, how frightened I should have been for your safety, had I been there."

She was naturally interested in all his movements, and in all that concerned his former life.

By her ready tact and sympathetic attitude

she had, from time to time, drawn from him incidents of his career. Carefully piecing these together, with the private information she already possessed, she became confirmed in the favourable judgment that she had formed of the character of the man to whom she intended to intrust her future happiness.

"There is here, at least, no shameful past," she thought, "no previous love affair."

She did not altogether approve, however, of the relationship between him and Mary Hodges. They had grown up together these two, she reflected, and the girl was undeniably pretty—that she had gathered, not from him, but from private sources of information.

But there could not possibly be any formidable rivalry between them, she mused to herself; and a wave of delicious emotion surged through the heart of this romantic young woman as she thought of the possible phases of felicity there must be in a union with the man one loved.

It was the *Ultima Thule* of life. Love culminating in marriage. The only happiness possible. It was real life. All else was simply anticipation or contemplation.

They were passing over the Blue Mountains, travelling parallel with the railroad. Presently below him Alan Edgecumbe beheld "Govett's

Leap." That small dazzling streak of white, set amidst picturesque surroundings, and viewed from aloft, with the sunlight striking full upon it, looked very charming this morning, he thought.

He had good cause to remember the day when first he saw it, and all that had happened to him on the return journey. That day and that tiny silver thread of water would always be linked in his mind with her.

Speeding on in continuation of their journey, they were soon beyond the influence of the mountains, and looking down upon vast plains, with fields of ripening wheat; upon orchards and vineyards surrounding numberless homesteads that dotted the landscape as far as the eye could reach.

It was a rich scene of plenty—Australia, as all her well-wishers would see her.

Through these cultivated plains wound tiny, sparkling threads of water, supplied by numerous bores and dams, fed from subterannean sources. New and extensive areas besides were in process of being cleared, subdivided, and planted; and our young islander could not but note that in the majority of the lesser areas, grain, fruit, and vine culture predominated.

"Our paternal Government allows the

workers employed on these new areas the first choice of settling on them," remarked Miss Keene, noticing his interest in all he saw; "that is how we interest labour in the soil, Mr. Edgecumbe, and prevent its congestion in the large centres of population."

Acting on the suggestion of a member of the party, the picnickers descended on a well-known sheep station, "Avoca," where, after witnessing various phases of station life, they accepted the warmly proffered hospitality of the proprietors, and it was with regret that good-byes were said and the return journey commenced.

Nothing noteworthy occurred until, when once more over the Blue Mountains, Alan Edgecumbe caught sight of the sea. All his life had been spent close to the salt water, and he now hailed it with delight. "I should feel quite lost if I lived far from the sea," he said, pointing to the now rapidly expanding blue streak before them, and at the same time inadvertently placing his disengaged hand upon Miss Keene's as it rested on the seat beside him. For a moment he was quite unconscious that he had done so.

It was most extraordinary the effect this simple act of forgetfulness on his part produced on the lady. A quiver ran through her,

her face flushed and paled by turns, she drew a deep breath, her lips moved, and she appeared to be on the point of broaching some subject that was near her heart. But that irresolution, that hesitancy on her part, lost her the opportunity, for suddenly becoming aware of his mistake he hurriedly apologised and released from its enforced but willing imprisonment the pretty fluttering white hand.

A shade of intense disappointment passed over Miss Keene's face. To-day, and this was foreign to her wont, she had been singularly thoughtful and abstracted, and yet not unhappy. She could never be unhappy with him, she thought. . . And yet . . and yet.

"The sea," she said at length, turning to him after a long pause of silence and reflection, "always exercises a strange influence over me, Mr. Edgecumbe. Its calm and its restlessness somehow remind me of human life. I think there must be in all of us a deep-seated restlessness—at least I have it—an impulse ever urging us on towards change; a desire to penetrate that which lies beyond. And who can say where life, where destiny will lead him? . . . And yet, perhaps, it is best that we should not know what the future holds in store for us." Her voice, low and vibrant, thrilled strangely through the rarefied atmosphere.

He was silent, for his thoughts had been elsewhere; but now he roused himself to listen to her.

"What would you do, Mr. Edgecumbe," she presently resumed, "if at the present moment you had a sealed book before you, and by the simple act of opening it, you could read your destiny; would you open it?" She paused, with some anxiety, waiting for his reply.

"That would require some reflection, Miss Keene," he replied, thoughtfully. "I think my first impulse would be to open it, but if I had time to reflect, I don't know that I should.

"What would you do under the circumstances, Miss Keene?"

"I know I should long to," she answered softly, "but"—a little pause—"but I don't know that I should dare to after all. For, Mr. Edgecumbe"—here she glanced timidly at him—"if perchance I were to discover there a revelation of future happiness, I should still be restless until that happiness were attained; whereas if it were ill fortune that threatened me, its anticipation alone would serve to embitter the joys of the present.

"Life, after all," she continued, "is at best a period of waiting and hoping, of striving and struggling to attain a happiness that may never come. . .

"And yet I know there must be—there is—great happiness—there could be great happiness for me if only I were sure that—that"—She abruptly paused, glanced tenderly into his face, and the sentence remained uncompleted.

CHAPTER XI.

Como, the hospitable mansion of the Colonnas, was brilliantly lighted. The guests scattered throughout the large reception room (formed by throwing two apartments into one) were, as well as thousands elsewhere, in other drawing-rooms, witnessing the closing act of a drama at that moment being performed on the boards of a fashionable Opera House in Sydney.

Many of the guests, doubtless already familiar with this particular scene, were holding little whispered conversations under cover of fan and programme. But Alan Edgecumbe, to whom everything was new and piquant, sat with his whole mind absorbed and concentrated upon the stage, lost to all outside influences, including the lady by his side.

She, for her part, found her inclination more directed to the study of the absorbed individual than to the course of the play, for, while the play was commonplace and familiar, the individual represented to her a new type, unlike that of the ordinary young man of the period with which she was familiar.

She had as well a natural desire to penetrate the personality of a member of the family in whose daily circle her elder sister was about to occupy a prominent position.

She had met this young man on three separate occasions this week at her hostess's house, and again to-day with the picnicking party that had visited the western plains.

So far as her limited opportunities had admitted, she had judged him to be not exactly practical in the everyday affairs of life, to be rather a dreamer of dreams.

Possibly he was not even a man of average culture, for how could he be under the peculiar conditions of his birth, and after passing his life amidst the wilds of a solitary and almost unknown island?

And yet, withal, he had attracted her strangely from the first. She was conscious of the charm of a distinct and vivid personality. He had the merit and the novelty in her eyes of an unread book, that possibly might prove to be the masterpiece, alike desired by publishers and readers.

Irene Blakeney was a rising painter, whose latest picture, accepted by the Royal Academy, had been pronounced by leading art critics to be the greatest painting of the year. Indeed this very evening before leaving home, a message

had been handed to her from London announcing that her picture had been purchased by the Trustees of the National Gallery, on behalf of the nation. Although no longer in her first youth, she was perhaps the most distinguished-looking of all the guests gathered that night within the precincts of the Como mansion.

Her charm lay not so much in beauty of face and form as in that of expression. You judged from the face that this was a noble and a cultured woman. She had many admirers, so said those of her friends who knew her best, and could have married well. Why she refrained from marriage no one could tell, and she was not a woman to be questioned.

She and her sister, left penniless and poor at an early age, had fought their way through long years of poverty, until now, speaking comparatively, they were in safe waters—the one with Fame fluttering its wings before her, the other about to occupy a responsible and honourable position in the Edgecumbe household.

At the close of the play, Alan Edgecumbe turned to Miss Blakeney, but he did not speak, for he saw that she was listening to the conversation of some young women graduates of the University, who had selected as a subject

for discussion one in which they might easily range beyond their depth.

"God is the Universe," he heard one say (quoting Hegel); "God is everything, and moves and is revealed in all existing things, yet is never seen; God is the Absolute Ideal of the Absolute Spirit which in eternal self-movement proceeds from Itself and becomes Nature; and then again, reverting to Itself, becomes a self-conscious Spirit."

Another (quoting Spinoza) expressed her belief in the existence of an unconditioned Essence, Eternal and Self-subsisting, which forms the groundwork of everything else.

After much mutual play of words (chiefly quotation), a third broke in to relate a curious experience:

"You know Flora Hayes?" she asked, looking from one to the other.

"Yes," assented the first speaker, a tall girl with a broad low forehead, flaxen hair, and large, bright blue eyes. "You mean the rich Miss Hayes, who devotes all her wealth to charity, and whose one servant sits at the table with her."

"Yes," and she's an old friend of mother's. You know how faddy mother is. Were it not for father and the rest of us, she'd give everything she has away, too. Well, mother often

visits Miss Hayes, and declares she possesses some occult power. She can throw herself, it appears, into a state of dreamy trance, and while in that state, lying back in her chair with the window open, she can describe the *aura* or invisble body of every person passing along the street.

"The *aura* of a human being," she says, "is like an oval-shaped luminous cloud through which you can see the dense body, and that on this *aura* the thoughts and emotions and the character of the person are impressed. Its size, beauty, and luminosity depend entirely upon the stage of evolution attained by the individual.

"It is large and magnificently radiant in those whose mental and moral character is highly developed, but small and coarse and irregular of outline, and dull of colour, in those of a lower stage of evolution. Every thought of the individual reflects the image of that thought in his *aura,* so that you can at once read the character of the person.

"Into this *aura* or invisible body of man's own making, his consciousness escapes at death. And this thought-body resulting from the past life persists, undergoes certain purificatory changes, and then becomes, as it were, the mould for the new personality presently to be born into earth life.

"Thus man by his thoughts and desires in one life builds for himself the new body that will represent his characteristics in the next."

"After all," interrupted the second speaker, "one's real life is lived in thought; one's mental and moral character, whether noble or ignoble, is evolved by thought. It is the predominant thoughts of a lifetime which shape the character that is carried on by the Ego to its next re-birth. The difficulty with most thinkers is where that re-birth takes place."

"As to that thought-body you speak of," remarked a fourth, a thoughtful-looking, dark-featured girl, beautifully dressed, "everyone knows we are surrounded by a vast atmosphere of elemental essence; call it ether if you will. This possesses a peculiar vitality, and has the power of responding to and taking shape under the impulse of thought vibrations, just as figures are shaped by sound vibrations.

"Clear, precise thoughts have each their own definite shapes, and can be directed at will towards any person we desire to reach. A thought of sustained anger or hatred will project a barbed flash of red; whilst love, according to its quality, assumes the most beautiful forms and colours.

"A loving mother's prayers hover like guardian angels around her child. So that we

are ever sending out angels or devils into space. In fact, we crowd our world with them.

"Science," she went on, "has long been aware of a magnetic atmosphere or *aura* radiating from the human body, and what is termed the health *aura* extends only a few inches from the body when vitality is low."

And so the conversation or discussion was carried on; Alan Edgecumbe listening all the while with the greatest absorption of interest.

Presently he turned to his companion. "Do you believe, Miss Blakeney," he asked, earnestly, "in thought-forms and re-birth, and that our character is imaged in an *aura* or invisible body?

"You heard that lady say just now that the 'innate quality,' the mental and moral characteristic with which a child is born into the world, is the indubitable proof of past struggles, of past triumphs, or of past failures.* This means, of course, that we are re-born time after time, and that the predominating desires and thoughts of one lifetime shape for the individual his mental and moral characteristic in the next."

"Have you read," Miss Blakeney replied, "Edward Carpenter in *Towards Democracy*,

* *Reincarnation*, p. 39. A. Besant.

in the 'Secret of Time and Satan'? No! well tell me what you think of this."

"The art of creation, like every other art, has to be learned;

"Slowly, slowly, through many years thou buildest up thy body.

"And the power that thou hast (such as it is) to build up this present body, thou hast acquired in the past in other bodies;

"So in the future shalt thou use again the power that thou now acquirest.

"But the power to build up the body includes all powers."

* * * * * *

"Beware how thou seekest this for thyself and that for thyself. I do not say, Seek not; but, Beware how thou seekest.

"For a soldier who is going a campaign does not seek what fresh furniture he can carry on his back, but rather what he may leave behind;

"Knowing well that every additional thing which he cannot freely use and handle is an impediment to him.

"So if thou seekest fame, or ease, or pleasure, or aught for thyself, the image of that thing which thou seekest will come and cling to thee—and thou wilt have to carry it about.

"And the images and powers which thou hast thus evoked will gather round and form for thee a new body—clamouring for sustenance and satisfaction.

"And if thou art not able to discard this image now, thou wilt not be able to discard that body then; but will have to carry it about.

"Beware, then, lest it become thy grave and thy prison, instead of thy winged abode and palace of joy."

* * * * * *

"And seest thou not that except for Death thou couldst never overcome Death?

"For since by being a slave to things of sense thou hast clothed thyself with a body which thou art not master of, thou wert condemned to a living tomb were that body not

to be destroyed. But now through pain and suffering, out of this tomb shalt thou come; and through the experience thou hast acquired shalt build thyself a new and better body.

"And so on many times, till thou spreadest wings and hast all powers diabolic and angelic concentrated in thy flesh."

* * * * * *

"And the bodies which I took on yielded before him, and were like cinctures of flame upon me, but I flung them aside;

"And the pains which I endured in one body were powers which I wielded in the next."*

"They are wonderful words," he said, "the most wonderful I have ever heard. But you, yourself, Miss Blakeney, how do you regard life and religion, and the part we play therein?"

"Your question is a difficult one, Mr. Edgecumbe," responded the lady. "We all have individual beliefs, and sometimes only a hope inspired by a lifetime of thought and experience. How then is it possible to place in a convincing form our beliefs and hopes before those who have not had the same thoughts and experiences?

"I may say, however, that I believe in the continuity of life, and I believe that man is continually drawn to earth-life by desires, but at length is set free by knowledge and sacrifice.

* *Reincarnation*, p. 39-40. A. Besant.

"I believe that true religion spells love; and that love entails the sacrifice of self for the best needs of others.

"I believe that through this love we gradually gain a knowledge of a higher love, boundless and all embracing, into which we shall finally become merged, but each with his own separate thread of memory.

"We are slowly climbing an evolutionary ladder, each rung of ascent being won by a sacrifice. But the sacrifice does not necessarily involve pain.

"The higher natures, conscious of an uplifting force, ever seek to uplift—to uplift the lower.

"It is in this uplifting that we find the secret of the Universe.

"The sacrifice of the *Logos* for the emanation of the Universe must mean the uplifting of all; hence the tendency of the highest natures to self-sacrifice, for by sacrifice the Universe is maintained, and by sacrifice man reaches perfection.

"And now let me cite you from the new sayings of Jesus:

" 'The Kingdom of Heaven is within you; and whosoever shall know himself shall find it. Strive therefore to know yourselves, and ye shall be aware that ye are the sons of the

Almighty Father, and ye shall know that ye are in the city of God.

And ye are the City. Love is religion—everything. Love which seeketh not its own. Love that beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Love never faileth. Now abideth faith, love, but the greatest of these is love.' "

"And how if we regard life as a dream whence death is the awakening?" he ventured to ask, "for who can tell if it be not so?"

"Even were it so," she replied gently, "all the more reason why we should lead our lives aright, and guard and guide our thoughts in that dream of life. Think, Mr. Edgecumbe, of the awakening—of the knowledge of self—viewed in the light of the 'might have been?' "

"It might well make even an angel weep," he answered, with a grave smile.

Just then there was a transformation scene. Signora La Rocco, the Hungarian Nightingale (singing from the boards of an Opera House in London) appeared on the stage before them. Though at that moment thousands of miles away, the singer entranced them with her wonderful voice; and the words of her ballad were so clearly intoned that it was hard to believe that the celebrated *cantatrice* was not herself present in the flesh.

CHAPTER XII.

In the large assemblage of society people gathered that evening in the Colonna mansion, so prominent an individual as Alan Edgecumbe could not fail to attract observation and criticism.

In fact, he was much observed and discussed.

This no doubt was due in part to his connection with the romantic island so lately discovered in the South Pacific, but chiefly to his daring rescue of their hostess of that evening.

The story was so thrilling and romantic, the meeting in mid-air, after an appalling aerial collision, of a man and a woman, both young and personally attractive, one playing the part of rescuer, the other that of the rescued. The world in such cases naturally expects a romantic sequel. Lives thus strangely brought together should be linked indissolubly.

Yet strange to say, in the case under review, Miss Colonna's name had not so far been connected in the good old-fashioned way with her rescuer's. This was very simply accounted for.

Throughout the period of his stay at Como,

numerous visitors had called on his lovely hostess to offer their congratulations on her miraculous escape from a terrible death.

The Colonnas entertained largely, and as it so happened, on the very first evening of his convalescence, Miss Keene, a friend of the family, had displayed a marked predilection for the society of the chief actor in the drama; so much so indeed as to leave no manner of doubt in the minds of most as to her ultimate intentions.

Up to the present time it was well known that Miss Keene had constantly and openly expressed her detestation of the gilded youth who surrounded her, and carrying precept into practice, had unmercifully snubbed the inferior sex on all possible occasions—at least all those who dared openly either to express their admiration, or to desire closer intimacy with the heiress of Tiverton, for Tiverton was the name of the ancestral home where she lived, unvexed by guardians or by trustees.

Thus it came to be recognised as a logical sequence that a match was on the tapis, and that in due course of time the fair heiress of Tiverton would lead to Hymen's altar the stalwart hero of the aerial catastrophe.

As for the idea being entertained that a young man in his position would refuse so

advantageous a match, if mooted at all, the opinion was scouted as preposterous.

Many therefore were the meaning glances and whisperings exchanged when it was seen that the fascinating Miss Blakeney had him under her spell, and that for two whole hours at least to-night they had sat together seemingly engrossed in each other.

It was the more surprising, too, for never previously had Miss Blakeney displayed anything beyond the mildest interest in young men.

What did it all mean? Something must surely be the matter. Miss Keene and he must have had a misunderstanding. Of course it had occurred at the picnic to-day.

This was the universal comment.

"How painful it must be to that poor girl over there," whispered a dowager to a friend, glancing first at Miss Keene and then meaningly over at the two on the couch. "You take my word for it, Betty, this will bring things to a crisis to-night; mark my words if it doesn't."

The situation was undoubtedly painful to Miss Keene, for she could not but be aware by many significant signs that her name and his were being freely bandied about. And more painful still, he appeared to be happy and

absorbed in the society of another woman, whom she had to admit was personally more gifted than herself.

A pang shot through her heart—the deepest pang that a woman can feel—to find herself scorned by the man to whom she has betrayed her woman's weakness.

"To-night," she vowed, "she would end all uncertainty. . . . To-night she would make an opportunity and disclose her love. She would then know the worst."

As good fortune would have it, the opportunity came without any effort on her part. Her hostess asked her to convey a message to Miss Blakeney to the effect that the song to which her name was attached was now due.

Miss Blakeney, on receipt of the message, at once rose, and Miss Keene with a half sigh of happiness dropped into the vacant seat.

For some moments Alan Edgecumbe watched the tall, lissome form of Miss Blakeney gracefully wending its way through the crowded room to where Miss Colonna sat, the centre of an animated group.

He was, however, quickly recalled to himself by the voice of his fair companion. "I am beginning to think, Mr. Edgecumbe," she said, half playfully, but with an undercurrent of seriousness, "that you are fickle and capable

of basely deserting old friends. For two whole hours to-night you have not so much as glanced my way, or any way for that matter.

"How deeply and pleasantly you must have been engaged."

"Ah, but you know, Miss Keene," he replied, with a smile, "religion is an inexhaustible topic."

"Oh, so religion was the subject of your conversation. . . ."

Yet how relieved she felt; an added lustre came to her eyes, a touch of carmine to the pale cheeks.

"I thought perhaps" (and she threw a meaning glance at him) "that it was on a more mundane, a more interesting subject."

Yes, there was hope for her. There was distinct hope for her.

"How close it is to-night, Mr. Edgecumbe," she said, fanning herself with unnecessary violence. "I feel almost stifled here; let us go out on the terrace for a few minutes."

He at once rose to accompany her.

As they made their way through the crowded rooms, many were the curious glances cast at them, for it was now generally accepted that a duel was in progress between the two ladies concerned.

Most hoped that Miss Keene would win, for

she was a favourite with her own sex, whereas mingled with their admiration of Miss Blakeney was not a little awe, and perhaps some jealousy as well.

"Did I not tell you so, Betty?" triumphantly whispered the dowager.

"She's going to bring him to book outside.

"I'll make a wager that she proposes to him to-night."

Miss Keene, as if fully aware of the attention they had drawn on themselves, as if conscious that her choice was under review, quietly linked her arm through his, and with head erect and defiant eyes, moved away with the stately bearing of a queen.

The night was balmy and the sea breeze cool and refreshing as they emerged on the terrace, and for some time they paced to and fro in silence; Miss Keene the while clinging confidingly to his arm.

Presently, and perhaps in unconscious response to her thoughts, he halted, and the lady, unlocking her arm from his, stood facing him.

"Do you know why I have brought you out here to-night, Mr. Edgecumbe?

"I have brought you here"—her voice was low and tremulous with emotion—"so that we might be away from prying eyes and listening

ears, for I have something to say to you—something that, perhaps, you have already guessed."

He did not speak, but looked at her in deepest surprise.

Since their entry upon the terrace he had been turning over in his mind the peculiar position in which he stood with regard to Miss Colonna.

He had not thought at all of the lady clinging to his arm, but of that other with whom during the evening he had scarcely exchanged a dozen words.

The withdrawal of Miss Keene's arm, her strange manner, and still stranger words, suddenly brought him to his senses.

"Mr. Edgecumbe, since first we met," she continued, "I have not in any way tried to conceal the nature of my feelings towards you. I know"—here he moved as if to interrupt her —"that from your standpoint a woman's affection, her love for a man, is something to be borne in silence, to be jealously guarded, to be unrevealed until he chooses first to speak.

"But, Mr. Edgecumbe, we live in a progressive age, where there is equality between the sexes, and it matters not who shall first speak.

"There is no reason why a woman should conceal her preference. . . .

"Mr. Edgecumbe — Alan!" — she lingered softly on his name — "I have not concealed mine.

"You must know I love you. I loved you the first moment I saw you.

"If not just yet," she pleaded (for he was again interrupting in the hope of sparing her), "can I not hope that when you learn to know me better, a time may come when my love, my steadfast devotion, will, if not wholly, in part at least, win its recompense?"

She was greatly agitated, tears stood in her eyes, and with clasped hands she gazed appealingly up into his face.

He felt the awkwardness of the position. Unwittingly he had led this woman to imagine that he was free. How could he spare her? How could he spare her pride? How could he spare her pain? Oh, what a blind idiot he had been!

"Miss Keene," he replied, with troubled voice, "I was quite unaware of this.

"I have always thought of you as a dear friend, and I shall always regard you with the feelings that one true friend has for another.

"Let us forget what has passed between us to-night, and in its place"—and he took her

unresisting hand in his — "let us pledge a friendship that shall survive all time."

He waited for her answering pressure. . .

And at last it came.

* * * * *

A few days later the intelligence reached him that she had left for Europe.

It was years before they again met.

And shortly after their next meeting she married John Edgecumbe.

CHAPTER XIII.

Our present chapter opens on a fine clear morning about two months after the arrival and settlement of the Edgecumbes in Australia.

A stranger to Sydney on this particular morning, standing on the South Head just as the rays of the sun were peeping over the ramparts that form Sydney's eastern boundary, and watching the reflections of golden light as they played on the ripples of the waterway within, would no doubt have wondered to himself at the meaning of the strange spectacle there presented.

From Watson's Bay—following the curves of the shore line to the entrance of the Parramatta River, and thence continuing along the northern foreshores of the harbour—a line of craft, both large and small, stately liners, launches, yachts, houseboats, and tiny skiffs, made a continuous fringe; while abreast of Lady Macquarie's Chair and Garden Island a noble line of battleships and cruisers—the naval squadrons of the powers—lay peacefully anchored; the most powerful in point of

numbers and armament were those of China and America.

As the morning advanced, song and laughter rang across the waters. Hundreds of happy expectant groups were discussing breakfast, *al fresco*; while the many floating restaurants had much ado to satisfy the needs of the thousands of hungry, clamouring, and impatient customers that besieged them.

Landward, the electric roadways—surface, underground, and overhead — were pouring thousands and tens of thousands of visitors into the city.

The embankments that ran along the foreshore, as well as the immense bridge structure spanning the waterway, were soon thronged with dense masses.

From every point of view, passenger aerials, laden with human freight, were converging on Sydney. By noon it was estimated that over one million of visitors were within the boundaries of the city. . .

It was the third and closing day of the World's great International Carnival.

These carnivals, annual in their occurrence, were held alternately on the territory of one or other of the Powers, and were becoming increasingly popular with the general public who flocked to them in great numbers.

The convincing ground for the present year happened to be Australia, and great was the excitement among Antipodeans when it became known that for the first time in two decades they would have a champion to represent them in the final heat for the great Emblazoned Shield—a trophy, the contest for which was the most important event of the Carnival.

Out of nine competing nationalities, four—China, America, England, and Australia — had representatives in the final heat for the Shield. The fact that Australia's representative was a woman, gave additional interest to the event.

This was Miss Pelham, a lady as distinguished in science circles as in the athletic world. It was she who had rescued Alan Edgecumbe, and who by her strange subsequent proceedings had so deeply stirred his imagination.

Betting on the race ran high. China and America in particular were backing heavily their respective champions.

Each of these Powers had so far secured an equal number of wins. The fine form of their scullers for many years past had virtually left the race between them.

China, moreover, had won the Shield last year in her own waters. This had occasioned

much heartburning. America's representative would undoubtedly have been victor had it not been for a foul, which America's partisans declared to be intentional on the part of Ah Sing, China's great champion sculler; but the umpire disallowed their protests.

At this stage, it may be of interest, in the light of subsequent events, to remark that for many years past exceedingly embittered relations had existed between the two Powers, China and America.

The ill-feeling was caused in the first instance by America prohibiting Chinese subjects from entering and settling in American territory. Celestial retaliation was at first confined to the boycotting of American goods, but later, when she felt herself strong enough, China, in retaliation, enacted very stringent immigration restriction laws, directed against American subjects.

Both Powers claimed World supremacy; each feared to attack the other.

Matters, however, had advanced to a stage when neither Power could retreat from its position. It was felt that, at no distant date, the arbitrament of the sword must be appealed to.

Indeed a spark at any moment might kindle a conflagration that would be far reaching in

its effects, and probably involve other Powers in the struggle—a struggle that could only end in the complete subjugation of one or other of the principal combatants.

As an illustration showing how far racial hatred had gone, it will be sufficient to mention that the presence of an American at any time was offensive to a Celestial.

The attitude, moreover, of the Chinese during the carnival did not tend to improve a situation already embittered.

Above the waterway, under a canopy of Dragon flags, and guarded by a file of winged Celestial warriors, flaunted the Emblazoned Shield. This, in itself, was not a matter of offence, though possibly an infringement of good taste.

The chief trouble lay in the offensive bearing not alone of the soldiery guarding the trophy, but of the vast masses of the lower classes of Chinese citizens and visitors. Of these, probably more than a quarter of a million were present. Whenever an American drew near, the Shield was pointed to, and remarks were made in an audible and jeering tone, not flattering to American patriotism and prowess.

As a natural consequence, there were several severe conflicts between parties of sailors belonging to the Chinese and American fleets in Port Jackson.

These conflicts were only prevented from assuming alarming proportions by the presence of the military, aided by officers in uniform from the fleets.

Little, indeed, did the brave men of either nationality, as they glared defiantly at one another, think that the morrow would witness a bloody termination to an ancient feud, and that for many the light of day would be for ever quenched.

* * * * *

Here we must digress. Mabel Edgecumbe's wedding was shortly to take place.

Irene and Adele Blakeney—the latter now an indispensable adjunct of the Edgecumbe household—were to act as her bridesmaids.

A meeting between Alan Edgecumbe and Miss Pelham was brought about through the kind offices of a friend, Admiral Hung Chang. It happened in this wise:

One evening on his return to Elmswood from a visit to his friends at Como, Alan Edgecumbe found a note from the Admiral, asking him to call at the flagship on the following afternoon.

On his arrival on board the *Yan-foo,* he found the Admiral pacing the quarter-deck with a lady in whom he recognised the charming

incognita, the heroine of his tiger adventure. Of course an introduction followed.

This meeting with Miss Pelham, Alan Edgecumbe ascribed to chance, but the lady did not so regard it.

Events now moved quickly with them.

Within a week of his introduction, he became so interested in Miss Pelham's training for the great Shield Race, that he accompanied her on several of her practice trials on the Parramatta River, and she complimented him by saying that he was the best oarsman she had ever met.

* * * * *

The hour for the starting of the Shield Race drew nigh. The Edgecumbe party, grouped on a platform commanding a view of the course, looked down with amazement at the surging mass of human life around them.

It was with a feeling of almost awe that they listened to the deep muffled roar — the commingling of tens of thousands of human voices.

Cheers, volleying and swelling like peals of musketry, along the shores of the estuary, greeted the start of the great Shield Race. All eyes were directed towards the same point. When the scullers appeared in sight, at first a mere jumble of boats and men, cries were heard: "America leads! Go it, Stars and Stripes!" Later a veritable babel of Chinese

acclamations told how the Yankee champion, who had got first to the front, had been overhauled and passed by China's representative.

As the scullers neared the platform on which the Edgecumbes stood, Alan recognised the well-known form of the Australian oarswoman, slightly in rear of the two leading scullers, for now there were only three left in the race. The English representative had been obliged to abandon the contest. By a deplorable accident his boat had been swamped.

Miss Pelham, though rowing a superb stroke, was not spurting as were the others. To those in the secret of her trial form, it was manifest that she was husbanding her powers.

The mile post—it was a three mile course—was quickly passed. The scullers appeared to be maintaining about the same relative positions—the Celestial leading the Yankee, and Miss Pelham less than a boat's length in rear of the latter. The two former were rowing thirty-nine to the minute. The Australian oarswoman, though rowing only thirty-two, was still holding her own without apparent effort.

Her easy confident bearing (for now and again she glanced over her shoulder at the leaders, as if to gauge their powers), coupled

with the almost ridiculous ease with which she had disposed of her opponents in the opening heats, inspired her supporters with the utmost confidence.

The odds freely laid against her were as eagerly accepted.

The mile and a half post was gained. Then came about a sudden and unexpected reversal of positions. Amidst frantic applause from tens of thousands of Antipodean throats — cheering that was echoed and re-echoed from point to point throughout the city, and thence far into the country — the Australian oarswoman, by a masterpiece of sculling, by a magnificent rush, drew level with and passed the Yankee. Then she challenged the leader, caught him up, shot to the front, gave him her wash, and then calmly settled down again to her former stroke of thirty-two to the minute.

The Yankee sculler on his part, in response to the shouts of his countrymen, replied with a determined spurt. He caught and passed Ah Sing, but was unable to make any impression on the leader, who momentarily quickened her stroke to meet his onrush. Bar accidents, she had the race well in hand.

But a race is not won until it is lost.

An entirely unforeseen and most mysterious influence suddenly came into play that completely upset all calculations.

It all happened within the space of a minute.

There was Ah Sing (he already led the Yankee) gaining on Miss Pelham at every stroke, notwithstanding her utmost efforts. Soon he had forced his boat on an equality, and amidst a silence, broken only by his countrymen, assumed the lead.

It is not too much to say that a chill of most profound disappointment settled on at least three-fourths of the assembled multitude. No one could account for the seeming collapse of the Australian oarswoman, or for her complete loss of previous form.

What did it all mean?

And yet brooding in the very atmosphere was a hushed expectancy as of something further to follow.

Suddenly loud yells and cries of terror directed all eyes to a band of winged Celestials who had been observed following the boats, ostensibly for the purpose of shouting encouragement to their countrymen.

They were seen to be in headlong flight.

Grown desperate at the prospect of Ah Sing's defeat, the Chinese had been directing air currents from their enormous wing-attachments upon the leading boats, causing them to hang in the water, and of course materially checking their speed.

But keen eyes had observed their movements, and a jet of corrosive fluid spurted amongst them accounted for their cries and for their rapid disappearance from the scene.

The all-absorbing question now was: "Could Miss Pelham recover the lost lead?"

Some of the fainthearted among her supporters affirmed that after her great efforts they could plainly detect signs of exhaustion.

But how fared it with Ah Sing?

Whether it was that in the late spurt he had exhausted his powers, shot his last bolt, or that the sight of his redoubtable foe creeping up caused his heart to fail; be that as it may, he momentarily faltered in his stroke, and for ever lost his chance of the "Yellow Jacket" with which had he proved victorious he would have been invested on his return to his beloved China.

Inch by inch, foot by foot, Miss Pelham doggedly fought her way. The interval between boat and boat gradually lessened. The advancing prows were once more on a level. Presently the nose of one pushed in front and then drew rapidly away.

The Yankee sculler, aware of the dastardly trick played upon him, redoubled his efforts, quickly caught up Ah Sing, and assumed second position.

In this order was the race concluded, and a mighty shout acclaimed the winner of the "Great Emblazoned Shield."

There was an instant rush made by her supporters. The Australian oarswoman was uplifted, boat and all, on a dozen stalwart shoulders and borne to the Governor General's marquee, where in the name of the Commonwealth of Australia, she was congratulated on her splendid triumph. Her brows were encircled by the crown of victory, a work of art encrusted with brilliants.

The Silver Sculls was the closing event of the day, and was won by the ladies' eight of England, with the American crew a good second. In connection with this race, of which the two premier positions were secured by the ladies' eight of England and America respectively, it was decided after consultation between these two crews that this sculling contest should become an annual affair between them.

Thus further was cemented the good relations already existing between the two great branches of the Anglo-Saxon family.

CHAPTER XIV.

On a silken couch, in the boudoir of her floating palace, *The Osiris,* in an attitude of repose that ill concealed the beauty of her form, lay the stalwart oarswoman, the heroine of the "Great Emblazoned Shield Race."

Grown weary at length of congratulations, and of the sycophancy of her numerous admirers, she had betaken herself to her house-boat, with strict orders that no one should be admitted. Here, restored to her usual physical vigour by a warm bath and change of clothing, in meditation free, she calmly reviewed the situation.

Presently she rose and stood before a full-length mirror let into a panel of the cabin wall. The mirror revealed a peerless form, tall, but with beautifully-proportioned limbs; a classic profile; a broad white brow, from which the dark chestnut hair was gathered back in a simple knot behind; a full white throat, and swelling bust. As she moved, her easy gliding motion displayed a grace, a harmony of parts, most pleasing, most alluring to the eye; whilst her robust vitality bespoke a modern Juno.

Strong in her passions, calm in repose, unscrupulous where necessary to the attainment of her ends, she was yet generous withal.

With her, to love was to love passionately—to demand return. She scorned all conventionality, all the narrow bounds of custom.

But while prepared to surrender all, she would exact all.

Such a woman was not lightly to be encountered, nor when encountered easily to be put aside.

As calmly she contemplated herself, the thought of her late triumph brought a flush to her brow, an added brightness to her eyes. How those eyes gleamed, those inscrutable eyes of violet grey!

How splendid in its noble proportions the queenly form!

Then her mood softened as her mind recurred to an incident in the contest; when on nearing the two mile post her eyes, ranging the crowd, had momentarily caught a glimpse of him, of the one being whom in the wide world she loved better than herself, and for whom, willingly, nay glorying in the act, she would have laid down her life.

"And what is the good of it all?" mused she, half aloud, while a shade passed across her face, "if I am denied the one thing I want — the

one thing that alone could make me entirely happy?"

She turned, and hastily seating herself, rapidly wrote a note, and sealing it, struck a silver gong.

A swarthy page, in quiet livery, entered and silently stood before her. "For whom is this, Jumoo?" She poised the note on her finger tips and eyed him steadily.

"Massa Edgecumbe," returned the page, grinning from ear to ear. "I just see him; he with gen'man, lady; he not see me!"

Jumoo was accustomed to carry notes, and from his mistress' face correctly divined its destination.

"Now take this to him, wait for a reply, and mind you hasten back." Jumoo bowed, took the note, and quickly disappeared.

When he had vanished, she rose, threw herself full length on a lounge, and strove to calm her now excited feelings. She keenly felt his neglect. Had he cared for her, he would voluntarily have come to her.

And in this hour of her triumph, too, why had he not come?

There was humiliation in the very thought of his forgetfulness of her.

Jumoo returned breathless. Knowing full well by experience his mistress' moods, he had

acquitted himself well. He had not loitered by the way, although, with Alan Edgecumbe's half-a-crown clasped tightly in his pocket, there was much to tempt him. He had been sternly faithful to duty, and now anxiously awaited his dismissal.

"Well, Jumoo, what message have you?" asked his impatient mistress.

"Massa Edgecumbe, he read letter, he say come at once," answered the lad, drawing a deep breath.

"You are a good boy," she said, kindly patting him on the head. "You can go now; I shall not want you further."

Jumoo's face beamed with smiles at his mistress' praise, and bowing low, he left the cabin.

Presently a bell tinkled; a visitor entered the ante-chamber, and pausing a moment, tapped lightly on the door.

"Come in," she cried, softly.

The door opened and Alan Edgecumbe entered the cabin.

"Oh, you've come at last!" and with a charming pout, but without rising, she carelessly extended a hand in welcome.

"I really couldn't get to you before, there was such a crowd," he began deprecatingly, as he bowed over and warmly pressed her hand,

but did not take the position that the sudden swishing aside of her skirts assigned him.

"I was just on the point of coming to see you," he went on, "when I saw Jumoo."

"Oh!" she cried, looking up at him with a most peculiar intentness of gaze. "Is that quite true?"

"Yes, it's quite true," he returned, laughingly.

"And now let me congratulate you on your magnificent race—against treachery, too.

"I heard competent judges say" (he had not dropped her hand, so he must have felt sure of a pardon for late omissions) "that it was the finest exhibition of scientific sculling they had ever witnessed. A triumph of which you can be justly proud.

"And think what you've done for Australia! The crowds simply went mad.

"When I saw the form in which you were sculling, I said to myself: 'What sort of show should I make against her to-day?'

"You could have given me a couple of lengths at least, and then beaten me."

This was in allusion to their practice trials together, when as often as not he defeated her.

She was manifestly highly gratified at his praise, for she now sat up with animation, and smiled graciously upon him.

"Nonsense," she protested, magnanimously, "you could defeat me at any time.

"But" (with a deprecating and mocking smile) "why are you standing on ceremony, to-day?

"Aren't you going to sit down and have a chat?"

"I really can't stay a moment," he protested.

"I have an old friend outside who is dining with us to-night; besides," looking down upon her, with a half smile, "you need a rest! Good-bye! I'll see you again very soon."

She made no further effort to detain him.

He pressed her hand and left her.

Hortense Pelham, for fully an hour after he had left her, never stirred from that couch; she stared blankly at the wall before her.

And it had come to this! All her scheming, all her plans, had resulted in what?

In nothing! absolutely nothing!

He did not love her! she felt assured of that. He loved that other woman!

And it had come about through her own folly. She had held aloof, thinking to spur his curiosity and interest in her. And the other woman had simply stepped in and taken her place. It was hard, very hard; it was more than hard! And now what was before her? Absolutely nothing. Life was a perfect blank!

And then her anger stirred. She would prevent that marriage! Ah, but could she do so? Long she cogitated, and presently the faint flicker of a smile stole over her face. Yes . . . there were means!

And there she sat, thinking and thinking, but strive as she might, her mind would drift back to the past. Old memories came crowding themselves before her.

She had always desired to be great. She was now great.

She had wished for power. She now held it.

She had wished men to love her; and men had loved her, and committed follies for her sake.

But she herself had never loved. The charm had ever been in the pursuit, and her object once attained, she no longer cared. The realisation of her ambitions had brought her neither happiness nor content.

And now the one thing she craved for, the one thing that was absolutely necessary for her happiness, was denied her. The one man, to win whose love she would have dared a thousand deaths, loved another woman.

It was bitter, very bitter. Why was it so? Why did she love him? She could not tell. It was fate. It was the happening of the inevitable.

Why was she born? She was born to love,

for love to her was the "elixir" of life. Without love, life was barren.

And was she to tamely submit to be passed by? to have her rightful place usurped by another?

And now long-forgotten words—the words of that mystic—occurred to her. Was it possible that they might come true after all? those words that, at the time, she had regarded merely as the offspring of a disordered imagination—the hallucinations of a good man who was a fanatic.

She had sought him out in the wilds of a far country. She had passed a whole fortnight at the foot of that mountain, day by day, being denied to him. He would not see, he sent her word, one who came out of idle curiosity.

Then she bribed his servants, through whose urging he at length relented.

"Could it possibly be true what he had said:

"That in a remote Past, she, then in high position, had loved a man who was bound to another woman. That she had gratified her desire by the committal of a great wrong. She had tortured the other woman, and had heaped benefits upon him she loved.

"And still she had not won his love.

"And now in this present cycle of her life," he had said (although she might not know it), "she

would again meet the man she had loved, and would again be subjected to temptation; but it would be within her power," he told her, "to make expiation for that former wrong by devoting herself, her wealth, and her high talents to the uplifting of humanity, the uplifting of her fallen, weaker, and erring brothers and sisters.

"In this self-sacrifice for the good of others, this putting away of selfishness," he assured her, "not only would she find her true happiness, but she would hasten on her own evolution as well—the evolution of her true self."

Hortense Pelham rose slowly to her feet, and gazed long and earnestly into the depths of her mirror.

CHAPTER XV.

A GARDEN fête, in honour of Mr. Colonna's friend, Admiral Grey, Commander in Chief of the American fleet rendezvousing at Sydney, was in progress in the spacious grounds of Como. A brilliant group of guests was gathered on the terraced front. Foreign visitors of distinction mingled with the *élite* of Sydney. The navies of the Powers were represented by officers in gorgeous uniforms, adding picturesqueness to the scene; those of America were conspicuous alike in point of numbers and by the splendour of their dress.

The only Power unrepresented was China. It was taken as a matter of course that the two must not meet, must not be invited to the same entertainments.

The Americans, as especial favourites, were in danger of being spoiled by the multiplicity of attentions showered upon them. They were the lions of the hour, and no one grudged them this distinction, for it was felt that they would first face the common enemy, whom all alike feared.

Antipodeans would acclaim the victory

should the arms of their trans-oceanic cousins prevail in the impending conflict with China.

That conflict could not now be long delayed.

International complications had reached a stage whence there was no retreat save by recourse to the sword.

The evening papers, just to hand, contained authoritative information of the withdrawal of the Chinese Ambassador from the United States. War, it was said, would probably be declared on the morrow. Everywhere throughout the world was to be heard the din of warlike preparations.

Which Power would take the initiative? Which Power would strike the first blow?

The consensus of opinion favoured China, for it was well known that her armaments were perfected, that her mood was aggressive.

Apparently the most unconcerned of all the guests to-night were the Americans. The officers, cigar in mouth, moved carelessly about the terrace, listening to the strains of a concealed band, chatting, laughing, flirting; discussing every topic but the one that most vitally concerned them.

They were fully conscious, however, that on their heads would, almost to a certainty, first break the storm of war. The struggle in which they must shortly engage would be fought

against overwhelming odds. In the harbour, that gleamed so brightly from the terrace, there floated forces that were numerically superior to their own, and that grew in numbers every hour.

In a large marquee on the lawn, Alan Edgecumbe found himself fraternising with a young American naval officer, to whom he had been introduced.

This was Lieutenant Garfield, a slender man of middle height, and of a pronounced American type, with clear cut incisive face, and eyes that looked straight into yours, as if to read your thoughts.

He was the inventor of a new type of war-aerial, a form of burning lens that projected a beam of light of such intensity that it was said to shrivel and burn up everything in its path. Detractors there were—men high up in the service—who prophesied of its future, "that if employed in actual warfare it was likely to prove more destructive to friend than to foe."

The American naval authorities, however, had hastily despatched Lieutenant Garfield in his experimental ship, ironically termed the "Cigar Lighter," to strengthen their forces in Australia.

"To our next merry meeting, Mr. Edge-

cumbe," said the Lieutenant, presently, lifting to his lips the glass of wine, with which for some time past he had been toying, and tossing it off. Before, however, replacing the empty glass on the table, he gave his companion a searching look, and added: "If the dream I had last night comes true, our futures, Mr. Edgecumbe, will in some way be connected.

"Do you believe in dreams? Mine was a very strange one. I'll tell you of it later."

"I can't say that I do," returned Alan Edgecumbe, "though no doubt some dreams do come true. For myself, I dream every night, I think, but then I forget what I dreamt in the morning. My dreams, I know, are generally a good deal jumbled. At one moment I am in one place; the next I am somewhere else. Nearly always I am seeking something or somebody, or taking part in something connected with my waking life. I frequently find myself in most ridiculous and impossible positions, as if I had a second self, or double. I have sometimes wondered if we have not really a double self, that while we are sleeping tries its hand at the game of life, and makes just as great a hash of it as we do."

"You mean," said the Lieutenant, laughing, "that the one chap, which is you, runs the day, and the other fellow the night. I have,

however, heard it declared by highly cultured men and women that we have a double or astral self into which consciousness escapes during sleep. Well, in my dream it must have been the other fellow that was playing the game.

"It was in connection with this very ring, at which I have seen you looking curiously more than once to-night." He glanced thoughtfully and even lovingly, so Alan thought, at a beautiful ring fashioned of several filaments of gold, set with diamonds and opals, looped in the form of two separate initials, that sparkled on the engagement finger of his right hand.

"Of course you guess, Mr. Edgecumbe," went on the Lieutenant, "that I am engaged. Well, this ring that concerns my dream my fiancée placed on my finger less than a week ago in 'the States.'

"First, I dreamed that I saw Ella, seemingly under the influence of some silent grief, and when I pressed her to tell me the cause, she never answered, or even appeared conscious of my presence. Then somehow she vanished, and I saw you with my ring in your hands. You were examining it, and when I asked you how you became possessed of it, you also disappeared. Then I awoke.

"That was the night before last.

"Last night the dream recurred, with this difference that Ella had the ring. On her face was still the same sad expression that I had observed before, and again when I attempted to address her there was no response.

"Then I grew angry, and chid her for concealing her sorrow from me, and suddenly she burst into tears and vanished. I awoke with the most peculiar sensation, and a feeling that I had really seen her.

"I don't know why I should confide in you, Mr. Edgecumbe, but somehow this dream has affected me more than I care to think about."

That night Alan Edgecumbe dreamed, and in his dream Miss Colonna, Miss Pelham, the Lieutenant, his betrothed, and the ring were all inextricably mingled.

CHAPTER XVI.

THERE was great excitement at the Elmswood breakfast table next morning when Alan rushed into the room holding a paper aloft. "War!" he cried excitedly. "China has declared war against the United States! Great battle expected off the Heads!"

There was an instant rush from the table to see who could first reach the lawn, which commanded a view of the hostile fleets. John Edgecumbe and Miss Blakeney arrived there first, for Mabel, realising that she would be outpaced by her long-legged brothers, clung to Alan's coat-tails, and thus they lagged behind and brought up the rear.

It was a perfectly still morning, and the harbour was alive with boats filled with sightseers, and dense masses of people thronged the points and vantage positions abutting on the harbour. Procession after procession of the larger craft were wending their way leisurely down the thoroughfare, making for a point outside the Heads, whilst overhead the atmosphere was thick with aerials waiting for a movement of the fleets below, for all were bent on witnessing the expected battle off Port Jackson.

A noble sight the two fleets presented. Huge battleships and formidable-looking cruisers floated peacefully side by side, their decks and turrets bristling with monster ordnance and quick-firing guns, and everything on board as spick-and-span as human art could make.

Soon, a stately line of fourteen magnificent ships—America's war fleet—got under weigh, and, led by the armoured cruiser, *New York,* with the *Massachusetts* battleship, flying an Admiral's pennon, in the centre, proceeded at slow speed down the harbour. Overhead was an attendant flotilla of nineteen war-aerials, among which, owing to its novel construction, the "Cigar Lighter" was clearly distinguishable.

Twenty minutes had scarcely elapsed from the departure of the American fleet, when the Chinese array of twenty-three battleships and cruisers, led by the flagship *Yan-foo* (said to be the most powerful warship in the world), followed in wake of their redoubtable foes, whilst overhead and preceding the naval vessels, floated an exceedingly powerful flotilla of forty-seven war aerials.

Now was noticeable the disparity of forces between the belligerents, and many hearts grew heavy with dread at the thought of the approaching conflict, and many a prayer was

offered up for the triumph of our Yankee cousins.

The inspiriting strains of "Yankee Doodle," however, and the cheering of the sailors on board, told with what confidence the Americans themselves anticipated the issue of the impending struggle.

To retrogress, it may be mentioned that in aerial warfare many early-century misconceptions had been removed. When first introduced, it was a matter of common statement that naval warfare would be a thing of the past, and the fleets obsolete. To theorists it appeared an easy task to destroy ships by simply dropping charges of high explosives on their decks. In practice, however, it was found to be no such easy matter.

In actual warfare, ships, capable of manœuvring at forty knots speed, were armed with special guns to cope with these midgets of the air; and shells that maintained velocity and direction in the upper strata of the atmosphere were no light foes to be encountered.

More often than not, it was the aerials that were worsted, for they carried but few and light guns, and their sides were easily penetrable. Besides, their delicate machinery was liable to be disabled by the smallest projectile.

All war fleets, moreover, had attendant air

flotillas, so that one of these, before it could hope to come to the assistance of a naval ally, would have to encounter and overcome a like antagonist to itself.

It will, perhaps, be thought strange, that on the eve of war, a great Power like America should allow its fleet in the waters of a neutral, to be outmatched by the forces of a probable foe.

In the present instance, however, owing to the strategy of the Chinese, it so happened that up to within a few days of the Declaration of War, the naval and aerial fleets of combatants in Australia had been almost on an equality—China, perhaps, slightly superior.

During the morning and night, however, antecedent to the Declaration, a formidable addition of naval, and particularly of aerial, war vessels had dropped one by one into Port Jackson, until by the morrow—the day of the conflict—the Celestials were in overwhelming force.

Admiral Grey was about the last man to be daunted by the superior strength of an enemy. In fact, under any other conditions, the interest for him would have vanished from the approaching fight. A victory under present conditions would, indeed, be glorious.

When the hostile fleets had attained an offing of about twelve miles from Port Jackson Heads, a sharp skirmish occurred between aerial outposts. The main bodies advancing in support, when within striking distance, charged through the opposing lines. The naval squadrons, meanwhile, were manœuvring for position.

To the spectators, the aerial onset was a horrible mingling and clashing of flame-lit objects—objects breathing fire, and shaking the air with their terrific explosions. But, saddest sight of all, amidst the *debris* falling and splashing into the ocean below, were human bodies—or what once bore humanity's semblance; some in the last agonies of dissolution; others disembowelled, or hurled in fragments far and wide. Indeed, ghastly trophies of the fight were, on more than one occasion, projected on to neutral vessels.

When struck by a high explosive shell, an air-ship would present an aspect similar to that of a fireball, or sheet of flame, from which shot out in all directions, innumerable tiny specks—fragments of men and material; thence would ensue the usual finale; first, a splash on the broad bosom of the ocean, followed, at intervals, by others, singly and in showers.

Absorbed in watching the interesting

spectacle before them, and mechanically preserving a prescribed distance from the combatants, the spectators, of whom many thousands were present, had hitherto escaped the unpleasant consequences sometimes attendant on the position of neutrals who follow closely the details of a battle. Shells had certainly passed shrieking through their ranks, and many narrow escapes had been recorded, but what of that? No one would retire while his fellow stayed, for, had he done so, everywhere, after the battle, he would have been unmercifully chaffed for his pusillanimity.

Suddenly a mass of flame leaped forth from where the throng was densest. . . . A deafening explosion, like a thunder clap, rang through the rarefied atmosphere. When the smoke had cleared away, that, which all feared, was seen to have resulted. A terrible disaster had occurred. Two aerials were missing, blown to atoms, whilst a number of others bore unmistakable traces of serious injury, and their occupants, at least those not mortally injured, were shrieking wildly for help. Before assistance could be rendered one air-ship at least was seen to plunge bodily into the ocean, where it was immediately engulphed.

Meanwhile, on both sides, the aerial fight was being hotly contested. Time and again,

the combatants returned to the charge; on each occasion, alas! with sadly diminished numbers. But soon it was seen that the fight was nearly ended; the last scene of the drama in process of enactment.

China had lost the day aloft. Of forty-seven war-aerials brought into action, only seven survived.

The Chinese Admiral met an honourable and heroic death, facing the hated foe. Signalling to his shattered array, he executed a last, brilliant, but hopeless charge into the enemy's ranks.

The battle raged afresh. Soon not a Celestial aerial remained on the field of conflict. All had been annihilated save one, and that one, in rapid flight, had pursuers on its track.

The "Cigar Lighter," Lieutenant Garfield in command, had been particularly prominent during the action, and had covered itself with glory. Nothing could resist its attack. Wherever its burning beams were focussed, there perished an unhappy foe shrivelled and burnt beyond recognition. During the hottest period of the fighting, an American cruiser was destroyed by its agency. Such are the incidents of modern warfare.

The American loss in this memorable engagement aloft was heavy. Out of a total of nineteen war-aerials, nine were utterly destroyed, and three were put out of action, besides many casualties among the remainder.

Meanwhile, the naval forces had been engaged fighting to a conclusion, as desperate an engagement as any placed on record. The hostile cruisers came first into collision, and the cuirassed battleships joining in, there was presented to the onlookers a spectacle of unrivalled magnificence.

The air was filled with the deep boom of artillery, whilst, added to showers of bursting shells, the ocean between the fleets was torn and flung upwards by the meeting of surface and underwater networks of advancing torpedoes.

The gun fire became incessant and deadly. Soon the superstructures of vessels commenced to show abundant signs of the terrific nature of modern shell fire. Armoured sides, decks, and shields afforded scarcely any protection against the larger shell.

In many instances, guns, mountings, and shields were driven as shrapnel through the ships, creating fearful carnage.

The decks became human shambles. Fragments of men and material soaked in human blood were strewn everywhere. The very scuppers ran blood.

As fast as one gun detachment was destroyed, another took its place. Now and again, a big ship, struck by several torpedoes, would suddenly disappear, whilst others would drift out of action, battered beyond recognition of nationality. Those of their crew still alive were probably too stupefied by the fumes of exploded shells to hoist distinguishing colours.

Presently the fight assumed a new aspect. Several linked torpedoes of the largest pattern, dodging the defending torpedoes, found a weak spot below the armoured underwater deck of the American flagship, *Massachusetts*.

For several moments it was thought that this fine ship was destroyed. However, on the subsidence of the cataract of water that was upheaved several hundreds of feet into the atmosphere, it was seen that she still floated.

But her hull was strained, and many of her bulkheads and hull sub-divisions destroyed, so that the interior of the ship speedily became flooded with water, and it seemed probable that in a few minutes this costly battleship would go to the bottom.

Admiral Grey, however, was equal to the emergency. Calmly flashing orders to his consort battleships to co-operate in the movement, he suddenly launched his ship at full speed at the *Yan-foo,* as she passed broadside

on. This movement drew such a fierce and concentrated fire upon the *Massachusetts* that it was a matter of wonderment that anything above the water line remained intact.

As it was, the destruction on board was appalling; hardly a man between decks survived.

Fortunately the conning tower, from which the ship was fought, remained comparatively uninjured. Here, Admiral Grey was at his post, wounded sorely, yet every faculty on the alert.

Swiftly and in silence, save for the rush of water at her prow, the gallant ship neared her prey.

The *Yan-foo,* too late, attempted a turning movement.

With a crash, and rending sound, like that of a melting glacier sliding down an Alpine valley, the *Massachusetts* struck her opponent amidships.

The force of the impact was so terrific that it carried her right through the *Yan-foo* — literally cut her in two. The severed halves fell asunder, capsized, and sank.

But the prayer of the dying Chinese Admiral was granted. He did not die unavenged.

The *Massachusetts'* last moment had come. On the very spot where her victim had sunk, her

stern suddenly uplifted, and, with a last cheer from her crew, the stately battleship plunged to the bottom of the ocean, carrying with her America's greatest Admiral—the Nelson of the twentieth century.

The day was virtually won. The Chinese line was in confusion. The ram, torpedo, and shell, at close range, played fearful havoc on all sides. In vain the Chinese ships eluded the powerful beaks of their opponents. The action closed with the surrender of seven Celestial ships. Two fast cruisers alone attempted to escape. Their destruction by the aerial squadron was the closing event of the day.

Obeying the signal of his naval superior to chase, and if possible destroy the escaping enemy, the American Aerial Commander started in pursuit—the "Cigar Lighter" leading. Coming well within range, and disregarding the heavy fire opened upon him, Lieutenant Garfield succeeded in focussing a beam upon the leading cruiser. The line of hissing flame was indicated by the boiling and agitation of the water, until the ship came within its influence, when she at once caught fire and blew up. Almost at the same moment a shell from the second cruiser struck and destroyed the "Cigar Lighter."

A strange incident occurred in connection with the lamented death of Lieutenant Garfield. Alan Edgecumbe throughout had been an absorbed spectator of the fight. He was deeply moved on witnessing the tragic fate of his new made friend. The dream narrated by the Lieutenant the previous night at once recurred to his memory.

He witnessed the destruction of the "Cigar Lighter"; he saw the vivid flash, and heard the tremendous explosion that followed; and whilst mournfully watching the splashing of fragments, many of them at great distances apart, into the ocean around him, he suddenly heard the ping of a small piece of metal that struck and rebounding from the car, fell at his feet.

It was still hot, but picking it up, with a start, in the scorched and blackened fragment he recognised the fatal ring round which had clustered Lieutenant Garfield's dreams.

Some months afterwards, whilst in the United States, he searched for and found the betrothed of Lieutenant Garfield. She was a Miss Roosefelt, and was in deep mourning. He reverently placed in her hands the sad relic of her late lover.

CHAPTER XVII.

Alan Edgecumbe did not usually take himself seriously to task; but to-day he felt he must do so. He felt the nearness of a crisis in his life, and he made up his mind resolutely to face it. This impending crisis had not taken him altogether unawares. He had seen it coming for some time, but had put the thought aside as something unpleasant, that would probably adjust itself.

With him it had been a case of dallying without action. But now he must both think and act. And it was time, too, that he did act, for all the thinking in the world without action would scarcely get him out of the predicament he had got into. It required action, and very decided action too. And he was about to take that action.

Alan had greatly loved his mother, and probably through his love for her had come that natural veneration which he entertained for all women.

Personally, he had never wronged a woman; he would spare a woman's feelings at any cost. He would rather a thousand times a woman

hurt him than he her. Hitherto he had refused to formulate a position where he could hurt a woman. But now he had to face a position where it was necessary to hurt a woman—that is to say, not by bodily wound, but through her feelings; to wound her *amour propre*. It was not a pleasant task; and was made the more unpleasant by the fact that she was his friend and benefactress—one who had heaped favours upon him, who had singled him out and distinguished him from other men, who had overwhelmed him with kindness upon kindness.

And holding that vantage position over him, why, he kept asking himself, had she forced him, against his inclination and judgment, into the impossible position of her lover, or rather placed him in situations that bore out this public view of their intimacy? Whereas she knew as well as he that the only ties which bound him to her were those of gratitude and friendship. Why had she done this? Being unable to peer into the lady's mind, no explanation of her action was forthcoming.

And now, after all her kindness to him, he had to act harshly towards her. It was very unpleasant. But it must be done, and quickly, too, or he would be irretrievably compromised with her; and then "good-bye" to Miss Colonna. It was absolutely necessary that he should free

himself from Hortense Pelham, and now was the time to make a start. . . . And here was the chance before him. Here on his dressing table was her invitation to a picnic somewhere in the country. He knew what that meant. It meant that she would monopolise him all day—and all day with her meant every day. . . .

Yes, he must do it. He would refuse this invitation, and in the future, no matter if she thought him ungrateful, he would hold himself aloof from her—he would just see her occasionally in a friendly way; that was all. . . .

"Now, if a man loves a woman," he further reasoned to himself, "the least he can do is to be loyal to her. . . ." And he was loyal to Miss Colonna; yet somehow he had let himself drift into a position that looked like disloyalty; and yet was not exactly disloyalty.

But then he alone knew that. The outside world no doubt judged differently, seeing them so much together. Besides, people could not help remarking how others at once gave place, seemed to melt away from her, whenever he appeared on the scene.

That was the worst part of it. It was just as if he had a right to the monopoly of her society. She, too, publicly treated him as if he had that right.

Was ever man placed in so awkward a position?

Then he wondered if she had heard these rumours, linking his name with Miss Pelham's. If she had, apparently she paid no heed. She was not a woman to listen to idle gossip. . . She would not be the first to break that bond of friendship between them unless he proved unworthy. She had never changed to him. She made him welcome at all times, and quietly ignored the cold politeness of the others.

The studied courtesy of her father and brother, so different from the old free cordiality simply meant, so he took it, their endurance of an obligation that was distasteful to them.

This changed demeanour of theirs he credited to Piper. That scoundrel was still always at the house, nominally to see her father and brother.

But he knew better. It was in the hope of seeing her, and forcing his society on her. She was barely civil to him, and, thank goodness, it was not from her side of the house he was made welcome. . . .

And now, what was his best plan of action? Should be go to her this morning and tell her that he loved her?

It would perhaps be best. Yes, he would go. It would end this present intolerable position.

If she accepted him (which was very improbable), that would free him from Miss Pelham.

If she refused him (which was almost a certainty), that also would free him, for he would go straight away, and, perhaps, never come back.

Yes, it was about the best thing he could do. He would summon all his courage and tell her everything.

No doubt she would refuse him, and she would be vexed as well; but surely she would not deny him the old time sweet privilege of her friendship because he loved her and dared to tell her so. Surely she could never be so ungenerous. Whatever fate befel him, he would be honest and tell her everything.

Meanwhile it may be wondered what the lady of Como was doing on this particular morning, and whither her thoughts tended?

She was engaged in the flower decoration of her rooms—a daily task of love. And now, that task completed, from the window of her sitting-room she was looking up and down the sunlit river, and beyond to the great city where he lived.

"I wonder if he will come to-day?" she mused, and as she mused she heard his footsteps entering the house.

How well he knew where to find her, she thought, as, opening the door, he stood on the threshold for a moment. Turning, she looked at him, and read his face. Her woman's instinct told her why he had come.

"Oh, Mr. Edgecumbe," she cried, as she came forward to meet him, and gave him her hand. "I'm so glad you've come. I've got something very particular to show you this morning—a strange plant from Africa, sent by a dear friend on the Lualaba. It is now in full bloom."

"How kind of fortune," he thought, "this was just the opportunity he sought. In the garden, among her flowers, among her birds and pets, somehow she always seemed nearer to him, seemed to take him into her confidence —in fact, be all to him that he could wish. If only he were sure she loved him!"

From the house they passed into the terraced garden, following a winding shelly path until they came to the wondrous African plant that was ablaze with brilliant scarlet blossoms.

"These," said Miss Colonna, bending over the shrub and lovingly touching the blooms, "will have changed to pink by noon; by nightfall to black; at midnight they will be pearly white. But the strangest thing about them,

Mr. Edgecumbe, is that each colour alteration is accompanied by a change of perfume."

"How wonderful!" he exclaimed. He more admired, however, the beautiful woman bending over the flowers than he did the blooms, but he was not yet rash enough to tell her so, though he longed to.

"How lovely she is," he thought to himself, noting the while the perfect curve of the side face, the rounded arm, the well formed shoulder, the swelling bust. How was he to broach the subject of his love? And it perplexed him that she was always so open with him, that, as a matter of course, she turned to him for the numberless little attentions that it was his pride and delight to render. But she took it all in the way of friendship.

They wandered on, now looking at this, again at that, admiring many things, discussing many topics, but avoiding one; at least she did, for whenever he ventured to change the conversation, to pave the fairway to his confession, always with charming adroitness she foiled his efforts by starting some new discussion, or appealing to his judgment.

He brought himself to task several times, and mentally asked this question of himself: "Was it through a desire to spare his feelings that she so delicately put aside any allusion that

might bring about an avowal of his love?" She liked him; yes, there was no question of that. It was a question of how much? Now, what topic could he start that would give him an opening?

Presently he spoke of his approaching departure, and while doing so, she came to a halt beside a rose bush.

"And when do you leave?" she asked, bending to pick a bud.

"To-morrow, or the next day, I'm not quite sure," he replied. "I've delayed longer than was my intention."

"I think everyone should travel who can afford to do so," she said, breaking off the bud. "World travelling, Mr. Edgecumbe, is an education in itself. Contact with new peoples, the contemplation of Old World monuments, of new civilizations, broadens, enlarges one's views of life."

It had been her intention to offer him the bud she had just plucked, but apparently she changed her mind, for she proceeded to pick others—sufficient, in fact, to fill a vase. Her floral gathering complete, as they walked slowly along she arranged her bouquet.

"If one could only tell what was ahead," he said, seizing, as he thought, an opportunity. "If I could only foresee, Miss Colonna, what

even the next few minutes hold for me." His voice was low, and it was also tender. He strove to peer into her face, that as it so happened was bent tantalisingly over her task—a task that seemed well nigh interminable, for she pulled the flowers asunder and re-arranged them many times, but seemingly never to her complete satisfaction.

Once she glanced up swiftly, and that glance sent the most delicious sensation imaginable through him. Only a flash, but what encouragement! But he lost the opportunity, for his courage failed him at the critical moment.

They walked on now for some time in silence, and then she abruptly halted. On the bank above them, but out of reach, grew a cluster of "forget-me-nots." Before he could offer to get them for her, Miss Colonna had clambered up the bank; her hand touched the flowers; the next moment he just managed to catch her in his arms. Her foot had slipped, and but for his timely aid she would probably have sustained a severe if not dangerous fall.

"Oh, Alan," she cried, struggling to free herself, but something in her voice, something in the flushed pleading face, reassured him, and he did not release her. He was master of the situation, and his courage returned to him.

"Miss Colonna! Viola! you know I love you! Is there any hope for me?" he pleaded, striving to look into her now averted face, that she held away from him. . . . No answer.

Then all at once she turned in his arms, blushing divinely. She drew herself back. "Now listen," she said very softly, placing a hand on each of his shoulders, and looking up into his face with those steadfast eyes of hers. "Alan, do you remember our first meeting? You do, I know. Well, I thought then that I should like to know you. Do you recollect our second meeting, when you so nearly ran us down? Well, I felt then and afterwards that there was more than mere coincidence in that meeting. When next I saw you I was too terrified to think, yet somehow I had a feeling that you would save me. And you did save me, dearest. Again, the night I watched you lying back so white and still, I knew I loved you. Shall I make a little confession? That night I kissed you. You don't remember that. . . . Now, sir, you may kiss me."

CHAPTER XVIII.

It was close on Miss Colonna's luncheon hour when the betrothed lovers parted that morning. It was arranged between them that he was to call in the evening to interview her father, whom, in the meantime, she would have prepared for the reception of his news.

And, oh, the rapture of that first parting, for was there not mingling with it the knowledge that very soon they would meet again. And might it not be true, as pessimists maintain: "That first kisses and first caresses are always the sweetest?" But why should it be so? Let readers of this romance judge from their own experience; no doubt among them there are pessimists.

Elate with joy, intoxicated with happiness, he left her, but where his footsteps led him he neither knew nor cared. One thing alone possessed him; he was conscious of but one fact —She loved him! She loved him!

At a late period of the afternoon he found himself on one of the harbour bridges; thence, making his way into the city, he became merged in its busy life. Everywhere around him was

rush and hurry. It was the closing hour of shops and offices, and he experienced some difficulty in forcing a passage through the crowded thoroughfares.

In this wonderful hive of human life, he could but note that "purpose" was written on almost every face. What were they all thinking of? he wondered. Some, no doubt, had the worries and anxieties of business still in their thoughts, but the majority must surely be thinking of home. Many, doubtless, had happy homes and a loved one awaiting their coming. And how much a real home must mean! He, too, one day would have a home. . . . And then he suddenly came to a full stop.

A flower girl, pale and careworn, half child, half woman, intent on her purpose, suddenly crossed the street, and thrusting her flowers almost into his face, pressed him to buy a "button-hole." She had singled him out from the crowd. Her unerring vision, her woman's intuition, had read his type of face. In imagination she saw an opened purse, with probably no demand for change. Would she prove right? She saw him smile as he glanced down at her. He asked her to choose a bouquet for him. She looked up and down, and afterwards wondered at her

own shyness. She was not usually shy. And for the first time in her life she felt a difficulty in choosing a flower. Ah, but she would choose him the best. At last she picked out one and handed it to him. Again he smiled down at her; then pressing a sovereign into her hand, he darted away before she had opportunity for speech.

That poor girl had not had much happiness in her life, he thought. And so far, he was correct, for her life had not been a bed of roses. Yet, notwithstanding a hard life, led amidst sordid surroundings, it was not all sordid with her. For when he left her, deep down in the undying soul of the girl-woman stirred faint promptings of the mysterious and the unknown.

There awoke in her nature a dim comprehension that life possibly after all might not be the base and sordid thing that she had judged it; that there might be even for her a life, were fate only kind, that might have in it the true and beautiful. And momentarily the craving possessed her for such an ideal life.

What she craved for was impossible. She craved for love. How she could love that man! she thought. Love, alas, was not for her. He was not for her. Why was it so?

Yet she knew—she knew only too well—that

were he to come back, and did he so desire, what would she not do for him? He passed on, and it might be thought that he had passed out of her life for ever.

But it was not so, for that night the thought of him came suddenly upon her in a moment of weakness that was fraught with doubt and peril —peril to her undying soul. This brought her strength. And ever after, the thought of him recurred, and served to keep her pure amidst surroundings only too vile and sordid.

And passing on, how was he to know that he had influenced her life; that by a trivial act of kindness—it could hardly be defined a kindness—he had saved her undying soul from becoming smirched that very night? How was he to know when only dimly he comprehended that there were invisible forces concealed within a mystery influencing the pulsating life around him.

At the intersection of two streets, a poorly dressed child—a little mite—pressed an evening paper into his hand, and was rewarded like the flower girl. She was richer that day than ever before in her life. Someone else was made happy, he thought.

Then followed a period of careless wandering, with further attempts at giving happiness, until at length feeling the needs of the body he

entered a restaurant and satisfied the cravings of hunger. Regaining the pavement, he suddenly bethought himself of the Public Gardens. It was quiet there. He wanted to be alone with his thoughts. He had some little difficulty in finding the entrance gates, but once within, the rush and swirl of the city was behind him.

The dusk of evening was closing in, a thin veil of mist dimmed the further view; there was mystery and enchantment in this wonderful garden. And it chanced that as he crossed over to a fountain he involuntarily shivered, why he could not tell; and the old foolish saying crossed his mind: "Someone is walking over your grave." And yet, what a ridiculous fancy. How had it originated? and who had ever proved it true? Was it possible, however, that ill fortune was about to befal him? He could not quite rid himself of the thought, though he knew it to be foolish.

So absurd, too, was the thought of ill on this the happiest day of his life. Why, it was not so many hours back that she had promised to be his for all time. She had said, with her hand clasped in his: "That come what might her love could never change; that in the Maelstrom of Time, of Ages rushing by, in the Spirit World, they should still be linked."

What then need he fear? And soon from the pleasure he derived in walking through the mazy retreats of this delightful pleasaunce, he forgot the thought.

Presently, finding a convenient seat whence he could observe the movements around him, he sat down. Some of these movements were by now familiar to him, for he had been frequently here.

It was a favoured haunt of lovers, and naturally he had sympathy with all lovers. It was pleasant for an onlooker to watch them.

He had not long to wait.

From opposite directions he saw a couple meet — the girl apparently of the poorer respectable class, but dressed with taste; the young fellow, probably a clerk. First, there was a short pause for greeting and for mutual inquiries; then they turned into a secluded path.

Within a few minutes he saw another couple. This was a bold wooer, for he held her arm, and when they turned a corner of the shrubbery, there followed a more endearing movement. They imagined, no doubt, they were unobserved.

And finally, for the garden was thinning now, he saw another phase of lovers; the woman with upturned, pleading face, the man stern

and cold. They parted almost at once; the girl with tears, the man almost insultingly repellent. He felt inclined to get up and kick him. What did it all mean? Had they quarrelled? . . Possibly there was tragedy in it.

And then he got up to leave the grounds, and as he walked along he passed the place now so familiar to him, where first he had met his old friend Admiral Hung Chang. He paused for a moment and looked about him, and thought of that kind friend and of his tragic end. That other and nearer friend, Lieutenant Garfield, too, was in his mind, whose mutilated ring he had promised himself that he would restore some day to the poor girl in "the States." It would not be difficult to find her, he thought, for Lieutenant Garfield's name would be known far and wide, and Ella—he called her by that name—would also be widely known because she had been his betrothed wife.

Then with the stars tremulous in the dark blue vault above him, and ghostly shadows among the trees, he left that garden; and it was long ere he saw it again.

A swift launch, hired and taken from the Circular Quay, soon landed him on Como embankment. He took the nearest upward path leading through the grounds to the house.

Presently above him, showing but dimly in the semi-darkness, he caught the glimmer of a white dress coming down the path.

She was coming to meet him.

He walked more slowly now, purposely to lengthen out this new and delightful feeling of anticipation. And yet, within a brief period he had to ask himself the question, Why it was he lingered? Had there been a thousand demons, or a sea of fire between them, he knew full well that he would have rushed to meet her. Why then did he linger?

Nearer and yet nearer approached that white-robed figure. . . . They met; and with his arms around her, and her lips pressed to his, anticipation became merged in reality. And what a reality! It was the culmination of all that life could offer. It was a supreme moment—a landmark in a lifetime.

And then, suddenly, with his kisses still on her lips, he became aware that she had been weeping.

"Why, what is the matter, my own?" he asked, with soothing tenderness in his voice, and his face pressed close to hers.

She did not reply, but after a while quietly withdrew from his arms, and they stood facing each other.

"Dearest," she breathed, "did I not say I

loved you; and yet we must part, part perhaps for ever, and this very night, too. And you must not press me for an explanation. There is a cloud over my life, dearest, and I only knew it since you left me."

He stood dumbfounded before her, his whole being in throes of sudden disruption. "You surely cannot mean that, Viola," he cried out in an agony. "Part! part perhaps for ever!"

"Dearest," she breathed again, "I have been sorely tried. Do not make it harder for me. I know that you suffer"—she almost broke down at this point—"but remember that I shall always love you. Now, say 'good-bye,' and leave me; I can bear no more." He caught her in his arms, wildly murmuring her name.

And these two fond lovers, united by a mutual confession of love, for a brief period clung to one another, and kissed each other again and again; then he left her.

She stood on that spot for some time after he had gone, and then, with a sigh, turned to walk back to the house. As her white-robed figure crossed the lawn, a face that had been peering out into the blackness of the night was suddenly withdrawn from an upper window.

CHAPTER XIX.

With a mind bordering on distraction, Alan Edgecumbe said "good-bye" to Miss Colonna that night, and on the way home to Elmswood, he strove to reflect on what might be the cause of their separation. The more he pondered, the longer he reflected and turned the matter over from every point of view, the deeper grew the mystery.

Without an explanation from her, there was no solution. Why had she asked him not to press her for an explanation, when a few simple words from her as to the nature of her trouble would at once have placed him in the position of knowing, and trying to combat it? That was his difficulty; he knew nothing, absolutely nothing; and his honour, to which she had appealed, forbade him pressing her for an explanation she had denied him voluntarily.

Whatever the nature of the trouble, there must be some way out of it, he reasoned. There was Piper, of course; he had thought of him at once; but Piper she had always professed to despise. As regards pressure brought to bear by her father and brother, from what he

knew of her character and disposition, she was about the last woman in the world to allow a father, or in fact anyone, to dictate to her in the choice of a lover or a husband.

Again, so far as he knew, Piper was the only enemy he had in the world, and she had never shown him the slightest favour. Nor could he imagine any position where Piper could so dominate her as to cause her to break off her engagement with him.

And yet, notwithstanding everything, and while still professing to love him, she had parted from him without pretext or visible cause.

It was most extraordinary. It was altogether a mystery. During the interval between their meeting of that morning and to-night something had occurred to separate them.

What was it? All he could gather from her was, "that a shadow had fallen on her life since she had seen him in the morning." That was what she had said. But there was no clue in that towards solving the mystery. And the worst of it was, he could do nothing; absolutely nothing. . . .

Yes, he could do something. He could go right away. And he would go, too, this very night. Probably before long she would send

for him; and in the meantime, travel would improve his mind and help him to forget his trouble.

Yes, that was what he would do. Had she not herself said that world travelling was an education in itself? And he desired to be more worthy of her than now he felt himself to be. Yes, he would start to-night. And how fortunate, too, he further reflected, that Mabel and Homfray were away on their honeymoon in New Zealand, and that John was paying a short visit to Lava Island, for it left him free. He was eager now to get away.

On his arrival at Elmswood, he at once started operations, and soon had completed all necessary preparations for a hurried departure.

His aerial, by a famous maker, stood packed and ready on the lawn, and he was about to give final directions to the servant in charge of the house, when a note was handed to him. It was from Miss Pelham. "Would he call that evening *without fail.*"

What should he do? Should he go or not? . . . After all, she had been good and kind to him. Why shouldn't he go and say "good-bye" to her? She had always been his friend; he had never had a harsh word from her, and above all, he must never forget that to her he

owed his life. It would be the basest ingratitude on his part to leave without saying "good-bye" to her.

Yet, somehow the feeling clung to him all the time that it would be unwise to go near her.

Yet he decided to go.

His mind was still in a turmoil; he could not forget the agony of that parting. He felt he needed distraction. Yes, he would go, for evidently she wanted to see him particularly; but he would only stay just a few minutes, then make some excuse, say "good-bye," and continue his journey. Of course she wouldn't be pleased, but he couldn't help that.

Within ten minutes from the receipt of her note, he was admitted into the Pelham mansion —a massive pile overlooking the city and the sea, with a dome-shaped structure rising in the centre. It had been built by her father, the leading electrician of his day, whose many unfinished inventions, his distinguished pupil and daughter had brought to completion, with great profit resulting to herself. She was reputed to be immensely wealthy, and rumour credited her with being eccentric as well.

He had scarcely glanced round the noble room into which he was ushered, when Jumoo appeared; and Jumoo's face wore that expansive smile with which he always greeted his

friend, Massa Edgecumbe. He brought a message from his mistress. "She was busy in the laboratory, would Mr. Edgecumbe kindly go to her there?"

He had never before been asked into the laboratory, and his curiosity had been excited, for on the occasion of one of her entertainments, a young guest, a slight acquaintance, had whispered to him "that queer things happened in that laboratory"; but what the queer things were he did not say, probably he only repeated current gossip.

And now, with Jumoo ushering him into the laboratory, we take our leave of Jumoo; but before he disappeared to an unknown fate, at some hour of that night—or rather, was it not early the following morning?—he performed an act of service to Alan Edgecumbe that the young Islander never forgot, and would have rewarded later. . . But where was Jumoo?

CHAPTER XX.

He looked around him. The laboratory was not, as he had always supposed, one large chamber, but was subdivided. The part into which Jumoo led him was situated about the centre of the building. Scattered about the room, which was very large and lofty, was a multiplicity of scientific apparatus. But comfort was likewise studied, for there were luxurious lounges, and a table littered with magazines and the current papers of the day.

Never perhaps had Miss Pelham appeared to greater advantage than she did that night. Nearly as tall as he, she was yet so beautifully proportioned that you only saw the grandeur of the woman.

She was dressed as if for a full reception. Diamonds blazed in her hair, sparkled on marble neck, glittered on rounded tapering arm, flashed on sandalled feet, and shone resplendent on the low-draped full white bosom.

Her draperies, following the curves of her unequalled figure, fell in folds to the floor, rustling as she moved.

"I shall be free in about two minutes," she

said, as they exchanged the usual warm greetings. Then, motioning him to a lounge, she busied herself for a short time attending to several tubes that she explained were employed by her in compressing certain gases into solids, and *vice versa.*

He listened for a while in dull wonderment to the muffled sounds of swiftly revolving machinery proceeding from a near room, with occasional blasts as from fierce roaring flames. They must come from her electric furnace, he thought.

"And what do you think of my 'Holy of Holies'?" said she presently, smiling across the room at him. He felt grateful to her, for, so far, she had not alluded to his absence from the picnic that morning.

"It is a fitting abode for a magician," he laughingly remarked, directing his gaze upward to where a mystic, pale blue flame burned, apparently unsupported, in space; then watching her narrowly he saw her touch the cog-wheel of a small motor.

Instantly part of the wall before them sank out of sight, disclosing an oval space or small chamber entirely devoid of furniture, but with a peculiar cavity or opening in the centre of the massive flooring.

As curiously he gazed, from this cavity

suddenly shot up so appalling a flame that for the moment he experienced a sensation of fear.

Curling and hissing, it leaped round and round the narrow chamber, licking the walls, and even the atmosphere as if fed from gaseous elements; opalescent, blue, and several shades of red showed in that terrible glare. But the roar, the indescribable atmospheric vibration that accompanied the flame and appeared to shake the whole structure, was like nothing he had ever heard or dreamt of. It was a veritable Inferno.

Then presently the wall of the chamber slid back into its old position. "When I desire death—annihilation—that is the instrument I shall employ," said Miss Pelham, glancing over at him; "or else this," and she held up a small piece of light coloured cord, and crossing over, gave it to him. Knowing nothing of its nature, he examined it and returned it to her in silence.

"For all that it looks so harmless," said she, "it is the most powerful explosive in existence. To my mind, future warfare will be revolutionised by it, and the Power first utilising it will reap an immense advantage. I could have sold the secret of its manufacture to the Chinese Government for an immense sum," she went on, "but as it would have been employed against our friends the Americans, I

refused to treat with them until the close of the present war."

Every now and again, and yet always with an inclination that way, he found his eyes involuntarily wandering to the table whereon rested a peculiar-looking crystal wand, set in a superbly chased handle, fashioned of the alloys of several metals, with cabalistic devices engraved upon it.

The fascination of the thing grew upon him, and he felt his gaze returning again and again to it. And every time he looked it scintillated in so peculiar a fashion that in his mind it was as if something diabolic possessed it. He could not help fancying that a word was gradually forming in its depths. When first it blazed, he was sure he saw the capital letter D form; then at intervals other letters, until finally the complete word "Destiny" was spelled out. It was most uncanny, and the thing seemed to glare malignantly at him.

Miss Pelham, who meanwhile had been quietly observing him, now said, half smilingly, "I see you are interested in 'Destiny,' Mr. Edgecumbe. Are you not curious regarding your own?"

"It can only be a matter of speculation," he answered, with his gaze still fixed upon the crystal.

"Why not try a little experiment?" she suggested. "Take up the crystal. Don't be afraid of it. It won't hurt you," with a half scornful, half playful smile.

He did so, yet with a show of reluctance, for he still had some uncanny feeling regarding it. "Now concentrate your mind upon some familiar place or scene," she said, reassuringly. He thought of a certain place, and yet was aware all the time that perhaps some trickery was intended. To his profound amazement the wand at once broke into brilliant illumination, glowed with prismatic colours dazzling to his vision.

Then, after an interval of time that he could not judge, he found himself enveloped in a sea of whirling mist, through which in vain he tried to battle his way. . . .

Suddenly the mists dissolved, and . . . yes, there was Lava Island—there was his old home, Deepwater. It was night, with a beautiful moon shining overhead; lights gleamed here and there throughout the settlement. He heard the barking of dogs, he even recognised the familiar baying of a favourite hound that he had given to Mr. Hodges. And he heard, too, the strains of dance music proceeding from Mr. Hodge's house across the water. . . .

Now, he was standing quite close to it, and

dancing was going on in the front parlour, which was decorated with tree ferns and greenery; and there was his brother John among the dancers.

Presently he saw Mr. Hodges step from the doorway into the garden, feel in his waistcoat pocket for his pipe (a meerschaum he had sent him as a present, he recognised it by the shape), then tapping it smartly several times on the fence to expel the ashes, he refilled it, lit a match, and began to smoke.

Alan Edgecumbe now remembered an unanswered letter, the last Mr. Hodges had written to him. He had not answered it, for the sufficient reason that in it Mr. Hodges appeared to assume that he was fond of Mary, and urged him to return to Lava Island as his guest.

"Mary," he said, "was acting in a way he didn't like with a young stranger. If you'll come back quickly, Alan," ran the postscript, "you'll soon put his nose out of joint."

How was it possible to answer that letter without offending and hurting the feelings of his old friend? and therefore, although it pained him to do so he had let it remain unanswered.

Through the open doorway he saw Mary Hodges sitting in a corner with a stranger whose face he rather liked. The young man

—for he was not yet thirty, he judged—was fanning her, and must have made some request that she refused, for he got up apparently in a huff and left the room. Mary's face somehow seemed changed, he thought; she was paler and not looking bright.

His old playmate (yes, and at one time half sweetheart as well) had usually been so light-hearted. Was she in love with this stranger, and unhappy because her father objected to him? What possible objection could Mr. Hodges have to him? He seemed a very respectable and nice young fellow.

For his own part, he didn't feel a bit jealous. He would like to see Mary happy. Mary meanwhile, thinking herself secure from observation, presently thrust her hand into the bosom of her dress, and still watching her, he saw her draw forth an amulet attached to a slender golden chain that he had sent her as a birthday gift.

Mary glanced apprehensively around and then pressed his token to her lips.

Alan Edgecumbe's conscience pricked him.

. . . And now, where was he? . . . He was looking into the reception room at Como, ablaze with lights and thronged with guests. But where was she? Ah, there she was; sitting on that low couch, and almost

hidden by a group of guests. . . . But—he drew a deep breath and drew himself up as well—who was that bending over her? It was Piper! The wand dropped from his hand.

When next he looked around him he was still in the laboratory; Miss Pelham was seated close by him on the couch and smiling at him, while he was shaking all over. And the wand; it lay just where it had dropped from his hand on the table, and he half drew back from it with a sudden aversion.

"Drink this," said the lady, with tender solicitude, holding out a glass of wine to him. "You are not quite yourself to-night. This will put you right."

He drank; his blood became fired. It ran merry riot through his veins. He was himself again. His self-possession and his courage returned to him.

"Try a final venture, and this time surely you'll find happiness," she said, half-playfully, and stretching out an arm she lifted and returned the wand to him. But she did not quickly recall her arm, it lingered for a while on his shoulder. That arm, exposed to his gaze, from shoulder to tapering fingers, was, as she well knew, faultless. And she remarked, too, that his gaze lingered on the arm, and from thence wandered to the snowy shoulder.

Who could fathom her thoughts?

Happiness; that word seemed to ring through his brain, as for the last time he glanced into the fatal crystal. . . . And as before, whilst gazing into its depths, his vision became blurred. Again he was struggling in that whirling sea of mist. Suddenly, as before, it dissolved.

And what was this? It resembled a beautiful scene he had viewed a few nights back at the opera. And who were these two, quite close to him, seated in an aerial that was sailing over a charming landscape?

They must be lovers, possibly they were married, he thought, for she leant back on him in a fond manner, and he, while one arm encircled her, with the other, from time to time, would point out objects of interest. He could not see their faces, for their backs were turned to him, and yet there was something familiar about them.

In the far view rose lofty snow-clad mountains, with glistening summits under the bright morning sunshine; below gleamed two tinted lakes.

He saw, too, the purple sea that laves Italian shores, while in line, Etna, Stromboli, and Vesuvius blew out darkening clouds of smoke into the sparkling atmosphere.

Who can these lovers be? he wondered, as presently they turned their faces to him. And then for the second time that night he dropped the wand, for in those two he had recognised himself and the voluptuous beauty by his side.

The light in the laboratory waxed dim; her perfumed breath swept his cheek. . . And all in a moment she was in his arms, whispering, "You are free; you are free; you are mine." Yielding at first, he returned her caresses. But suddenly disengaging himself from her clinging arms, he sprang to his feet and glared wildly around him.

Mechanically he put up his hand to his fevered, throbbing forehead. . . Was he dreaming? . . A gentle voice had called "Alan! Alan!" He had heard his name distinctly called twice. And her face—Viola's face—so vaguely outlined as he had seen it in that ghostly flame, had been sad beyond expression.

What did it all mean? Was he going mad?

Could it be true, after all, that she was not false. Yes, his Viola was still true to him.

It was this crystal that was false. And this woman, too, beside him, was false. She had simply been tricking him all along, and he had been her dupe.

Miss Pelham sat there, without movement, silently regarding him. What were her thoughts? Did she know them herself?

"Hortense" (she had asked him to call her thus), he cried hoarsely, turning to her; "it's all a mistake." He held out his hand to say good-bye to her, resolved never again to go near her. She made no response to the proffered hand, and had he been wise, had he not been half dazed, her attitude, as well as that fixed inscrutable gaze of hers, might have warned him that she was in a dangerous mood. But simply recognising that she would not say good-bye to him, on the impulse of the moment, he rashly ventured to touch her hand; that was all he remembered.

* * * * *

Stars were paling in their radiance, and a tender glow suffused the eastern sky, when Alan Edgecumbe, speeding on his journey, paused for a moment over the Blue Mountains to glance back at the city that held all that was dear to him on earth. And as he looked, a sudden flash of flame shot up, as he imagined, from some point near the city, followed by a rushing swaying cloud of white vapour that ascended into the heavens and there dissolved. Shortly after, there was the sound of a heavy

explosion, but paying no further heed, he continued on his journey.

* * * * *

Early that morning a fearful explosion, followed by the rocking of houses, the trembling of the earth, brought thousands of the inhabitants of Sydney from their beds into the streets. The wildest rumours became current. But soon the truth leaked out. The splendid mansion of Miss Pelham had blown up, involving in its destruction its hapless mistress — the splendid athlete — the great woman scientist of Australasia.

Not a trace, not a fragment of human remains, was ever found, and gradually the mystery surrounding her death became forgotten. A great war was in progress, and popular excitement ran high. Every day came the news of American victories over China. The war, it was said, would soon be prosecuted on Chinese territory; soon that arrogant Power would be humbled and brought to its knees, and an indemnity exacted that would cripple China for half a century at least.

CHAPTER XXI.

After a period of restless wandering in many lands, Alan Edgecumbe at length found himself in the great Motherland, in the heart of the city that is the metropolis of an Empire, the greatest the world has ever seen, upon which the sun never sets.

Strolling idly one morning through Trafalgar Square, he casually bethought himself of the National Gallery. He could at least spend an hour or two profitably there.

Entering the building, and viewing with interest this picture and that, he at length came to an abrupt halt before one which excited his interest and curiosity, and before which he made a lengthened pause. The longer he gazed upon it, the deeper grew the mystery and fascination of the picture.

Its inner meaning somehow appealed to him. It set his imagination to work. He felt oddly drawn to it. It held him spellbound before it. It brought vividly before him the most beautiful episode in his life. It recalled that brief but pitiful love dream in the garden of Como.

Had not he, too, drunk from the Fount of Happiness? Should he ever again drink from

it? he wondered. Should he ever again be happy? It was not likely. It was now nearly twelve long months from their parting, and neither line nor message had he received from her. He was a wanderer on the face of the earth. All savour had vanished from life. The bitter memory of that parting was still with him; it was like a nightmare vision that might never leave him.

And yet, had he not been selfish in his suffering? he asked himself. She, too, must have suffered; of that there could be no doubt. Had he acted wisely in leaving her? Why had he left her? He left her because she bade him.

And all this time she had borne her suffering alone. She might have needed him, and he, many thousands of miles from her, had not even taken the common precaution of leaving an address by which she could communicate with him. Oh, fool! What a fool he had been!

And now this very picture seemed to plead for her. An inner compulsion urged: Why not return? Why not? He felt himself yielding; he fixed a wavering resolve. . . . Yes, he would go back. He would start this very day; nay, within this very hour.

And the picture that had wrought this transformation, though he knew it not, was the work of his friend, Irene Blakeney. It never

occurred to him to look for the name of the artist, but before he paid his next visit he knew without looking.

The Blakeneys left Australia shortly after his departure, and had made their home in London. Irene had always had the conviction that the true field for her talent lay in the great metropolis of the Empire.

And fame had come to her.

In that one picture lay fame. But she would never paint another, for as he stood before it, she, Irene Blakeney, helpless and pain-stricken, was lying on her bed, with eyes fixed towards the Beyond where fame is not.

With the crowd surging and pressing upon him, he turned away from the picture, and was moving towards the door of the Gallery, when a light touch fell on his arm. Turning to see who it was, he found himself face to face with Adele Blakeney, his sister's one-time companion and friend.

"Oh, Mr. Edgecumbe," she said, hurriedly, as they shook hands, "you are the very person I wished to see. My sister, Irene, is very ill; indeed, I'm afraid she's dying. She has mentioned your name several times. I'm sure it would relieve her to see you. Will you return with me now? it may be too late otherwise."

It came as a great shock to Alan Edgecumbe, the sad news of his friend, Irene Blakeney. Her friendship at all times had been at his service, and had materially helped him in many ways. It had been a beautiful friendship that between them, based on mutual affinity and esteem for each other. The element of jealousy had not entered in, had not touched it. It was human love without the mingling of personal desire; each esteeming the other, desired alone the welfare of the other. They had, for the time being, drifted apart, but only under the compulsion of circumstances for which neither was responsible.

"Her sister," explained Miss Blakeney, as they hurried from the building, "had caught her illness through nursing a sick girl friend." Miss Blakeney, he thought, looked far from strong herself; doubtless she had been nursing her sister. Hailing a disengaged motor cab, and helping his companion in, she gave the requisite directions — a number somewhere in Chelsea—and they were soon bowling along with smooth and rapid motion.

The cab came to a full stop in a side street, opposite the gate of an old-fashioned garden, behind which was a red brick house with high gabled roof. He helped his companion to alight, and dismissing the cabman, he followed

her up the gravelled path that led to the front of the house.

They entered without knocking, and from the entrance-hall proceeded up a stairway to a landing where Miss Blakeney, opening a side door, ushered him into a sparsely-furnished room lit from the roof — evidently Irene's studio, for on an easel he saw an unfinished picture.

Miss Blakeney crossed to an opposite door, opened it noiselessly, and held a whispered conversation with the nurse, then she beckoned to him to enter.

Alan Edgecumbe entered that chamber reverently, and stood by the bedside of his dying friend. She was lying back on her pillow with her eyes closed, and her unbound wealth of dark hair silhouetted her face—the beautiful face that he remembered so well. The full realisation, however, came to him at that moment, that he was looking upon one not long for this world.

As he bent over her, her eyes opened and she looked at him; and gradually a sweet recognition and a smile dawned in her face. She feebly disengaged a thin hand from under the bedclothes, gave it to him, and glanced at her sister. The mute appeal was understood,

Adele and the nurse at once left the room, closing the door softly behind them.

Clasping hands and gazing each into the other's eyes, these two both realised that it was their last meeting on earth.

"Yes, I wanted to see you, dear friend," she breathed, in a very low voice. "It's such a long time since I saw you. But I shall be better able to speak presently," and she raised her head so that he might readjust her pillows and give her some of the restorative that was on a small table by the bedside. He filled a wine glass with the cordial and held it to her lips. She slowly drank, and then settled herself back again upon the pillow.

"Remember, dearest friend," she continued, and her voice was now much stronger, "I guessed your secret long ago. You love her, and she loves you. But you are parted and you are unhappy. Is it not so?" She paused, with a gentle glance of deprecation. He simply pressed her hand.

"I want you both made happy again," she went on. "Now listen!" He bent still nearer. "I think all will come right if you have patience. You have a bitter and unscrupulous enemy in Mr. Piper. It is he who parted you. Up to the day I left Australia, I kept my eyes and ears open, for you and Viola were my friends,

and I desired your happiness. Being constantly with her, I soon saw that she was very unhappy. I found, too, that your name was tabooed in that house; and I guessed the cause.

"I suspected Mr. Piper. I made a point of studying that man, and I made a few inquiries as well. It was he who planned those disastrous speculations that nearly ruined Mr. Colonna. And I'm afraid, too, he holds some dreadful threat over the brother—some shameful disclosure. You know how dearly Viola loves Conrad. Mr. Piper loves Viola—if such a man can be said to love—and he hates you.

"I had that to work on. Now, if that man could put pressure on both father and son, was it not extremely probable that through them he would bring pressure to bear upon poor Viola?

"That is how I reasoned. That is what I suspect. Now, you are wealthy, dear friend. Can you not use your wealth so as not to alarm their pride?

"Any trustworthy firm of solicitors could arrange that part for you. Some remote Italian ancestress could leave Viola money; that is merely a suggestion; you may find a better way. I'm sure that finally all will come right.

"And now I feel so relieved. I did want to

see you again. I'm happy, very happy; but oh, so tired."

She suddenly fell back on the pillow, looking very wan and still. The effort to speak had been too much for her.

She was evidently passing quickly away, so he thought. He looked down at her with a great pity and tenderness. The very depths of his nature were stirred to compassion for her.

She, this dear friend, had done all this for him. She possibly had restored his darling to him. It might be that through her he should again win happiness. And it would all be due to her. And there she lay dying before his eyes, and he could do nothing for her.

In the overwhelming pity and gratitude of his heart, he bent over and kissed her, and let his kiss linger on her cheek. It was the act of a devotee to a saint.

Was it the purely human element, the woman within her, that responded to that kiss? Who can tell?

In that death hour; nay, in that her death minute, with his kiss upon her cheek, she came back from the portal of Death; a new light in her eyes; a wonderful radiance on her face; a sigh escaped her lips, as she murmured: "So happy! Good-bye!"

Then she seemed to catch her breath, and he

was glad that at that moment her sister returned to the room. Her hand he had retained all the time in his, for she seemed happiest so; but now it gave a little flutter; she smiled up at him; and then, with a choking sigh . . . that was the end.

Alan Edgecumbe held himself in hand, and tried to preserve at least an outward composure as he left that room, but when he reached the garden he covered his face with his hands and cried like a child.

CHAPTER XXII.

ACTING on the suggestion made to him by Irene Blakeney on her death bed, Alan Edgecumbe had placed the prosecution of the affair in the hands of an eminent firm of London solicitors. At first they demurred.

It was a transaction involving the transfer of a very large sum of money under peculiar and difficult circumstances, and required very delicate handling; yet possibly stirred to help him by the touch of romance in the affair, they finally consented to act, and hoped to bring matters to a successful issue without exciting the slightest suspicion on Miss Colonna's part as to the *bona fides* of the fortune left her.

Then had come the crucial test of the venture. What if after all she made no sign? he asked himself over and over again. He tried to comfort himself with the reflection that she was no longer in poverty, but independent of her father and of any pressure he might bring

to bear upon her through his financial embarrassments. But a considerable period had now elapsed, and she made no sign; and the waiting period dragged heavily.

Then he began to doubt her loyalty; and doubting, in a weak moment he sought distraction in pleasure. Pleasure scarcely needed the seeking, for everywhere, in varied hue, but always in attractive guise, it flaunted itself across his path. And though at first lightly stepping on the brink of pleasure, soon he was well nigh drawn into its vortex. A great temptation befel him.

A beautiful society woman, herself possibly seeking distraction, became enamoured of him, or imagined that she was. He was flattered by her distinction of him, and presently they found themselves looking over the verge of a precipice.

But he drew back. The memory of two women who believed in him nerved him to draw back. And drawing back, he likewise drew her back, angry and mortified; but the day came when she blessed him.

He left London, and making his way to the fair capital of the north, to the capital of the race which has ever proved itself to be as the stiffening in the backbone of Empire; there he

remained until one morning he received two letters. That night he left for Australia.

[Letter.]

Homfray Howard to Alan Edgecumbe, Hotel Cecil, London.

By ordinary pneumatic tube express I am sending you to-day a letter which some correspondent, not favoured with your address, has forwarded to Idamount, care of your humble and esteemed brother-in-law.

The caligraphy of the address, evidently feminine, greatly exercised Mabel's curiosity, and she questioned me very closely as to any knowledge I possessed of the identity of your fair correspondent. To tell the truth, dear old boy, I had seen similar handwriting before, but you may rest assured that I carefully suppressed the fact from my sterner—I was about to say weaker—half, but alas! the golden age has flown, never to return, when a man could so designate his wife.

If at any time, dear comrade, you should contemplate entering into the holy estate of matrimony, as a benedict of standing, one of vast experience, I am in a position to give sound, wholesome advice on the subject. Notwithstanding the fact that advice is never followed unless it agrees with one's inclinations, I will yet offer mine.

By all means, before the fatal day arrives, have a covenant legally drawn up and executed by the lady, granting you permission to retain at stated times possession of your own thoughts, and at least one room in the house that you can call your own—your sanctum, in fact, where, when world-worn or harassed by the cares and responsibilities inseparable from running in "double harness," you can retire to study, or, mayhap, to contemplate at your leisure, world problems as presented to man previous to, and subsequent to, marriage; or, tell it not in Gath! to smoke.

Talking of smoking, I have to do mine surreptitiously, for Mabel has placed a ban on the gentle weed. At intervals, however, which I may remark are not infrequent, by

locking doors, opening ventilators, sprinkling perfumes (on which, by the way, I spend a small fortune), and by the literary aspect of a few half-opened books and periodicals on the table, I manage to convey the impression that I have been intellectually engaged. Several times of late, however, I have been on the verge of being discovered.

"I want you, Homfray!" suddenly calls a voice from outside the door, and instant admittance is demanded. Then follows a most significant sniffing (your humble servant all the while trembling in his boots), and remarks are made on my predilection for a certain perfume. Our cards, too, are now printed: Mrs. Mabel Edgcumbe Howard! Joking apart, dear comrade, I am very happy, although at times I miss you sadly.

You will not, perhaps, be surprised to hear of an interesting event to shortly happen in the Howard household, and, mind you, we fully expect you to be here for the christening. I shall, in truth, need your support under the somewhat trying ordeal of family responsibilities. We should be greatly relieved, however, if we could only forecast the sex of the expected stranger.

What a wild field of inquiry this opens out to scientists? It would be much more practical and beneficent than telling us the age of the stars or predicting the date of the final catastrophe that will hurl us into the never-never. For instance, exact information on this point would have prevented several little jars between Mabel and myself over the nomenclature of your coming nephew or niece. In the long run, of course, I had to surrender on all points. And now to other matters.

We see very little of John since he's taken to experimental farming on an estate he has bought somewhere in the western country; and, when we do get a glimpse of him, it's all fertilizers and irrigation. I shall be glad when you come back, and won't we have some rare old chats together. Mind, I expect to hear all sorts of news, and of adventures as well; for as adventures are to the adventurous, and as I know of old, both your happy knack of meeting with

them and your remarkable facility for getting out of them with a whole skin, I anticipate with much pleasure their recital.

Mabel sends lots of love, and this is her exact message to you: "Tell Alan he's been away twelve months now, and I say he's to come back at once!" I re-echo her sentiments.

CHAPTER XXIII.

ALL round him he saw a vast glaring waste of sand, with here and there an oasis of date palms. He was passing over the great desert zone of Northern Africa. He was returning to Australia.

And then, for perhaps the twentieth time that day, he took out her letter, pressed it to his lips, and read it. In it she urged him to return to her at once. "The shadow that had darkened her life and which had parted them had lifted," she said. "She would explain all when they met; she was his; she had always been his," she wrote.

And now he was hastening to her side; and never again would he leave her. He built many beautiful "castles in Spain" that day, but never in his experience had the speed of his aerial seemed so slow to him.

The afternoon advanced, and presently a great chain of mountains loomed in the furthest distance. He looked out from the car and scanned the plain in front and below him. Ha! What was that? It looked like a dead camel. But there was a second object lying close to the larger. Was it a body? Yes, and a woman's body, too; he could tell it by the dress.

He brought the car to a halt, and almost before it had touched the ground he had leaped out and was bending over the apparently lifeless body of a young Arab girl, lying with her face pressed into the sand. Was she dead? He did not think so, judging from her appearance; she had probably swooned from thirst, he thought, or possibly from that and hunger combined.

He lifted her up very gently, shielding the poor face from the scorching sun and then he felt her pulse. There was just the faintest movement. Carrying her to the aerial, he placed her on his own bed. Her face was drawn with suffering and the jaws clenched, and it was with difficulty that he forced them open; then down that parched and blackened throat he poured drop by drop from the contents of a flask he carried with him.

A little shiver presently ran through her, and repeating the stimulant—Yes, she was reviving. She opened her eyes and momentarily gazed in a bewildered and frightened manner about her. He spoke gently to her, and suddenly looking up into his face she became reassured; she knew then that he would not harm her.

Her recovery was rapid, and presently she strove to express her gratitude to him. She touched his sleeve; "Arab! English! brothers!"

she said in broken English, with a pathetic little attempt at a smile. "English and Arabs! brothers!" he smilingly repeated after her, touching her sleeve in turn.

Thus was the *entente cordiale* established between them. Then he placed grapes and food before her; and whilst she eagerly devoured the former, he busied himself collecting her scattered belongings, for humanity dictated that he should convey the maiden to the tents of her people.

His task completed, in reply to his inquiry as to where she lived, she pointed in the direction of the mountains that he had viewed from aloft, but which were invisible from the low level of the ground.

They started on what proved to be the most momentous journey of his life. From Zillah's disjointed statements he gathered, that she and her father, returning from a distant village to their home beyond the mountains, had been attacked by robbers, and that her father had been killed whilst defending his goods. The camel she rode, being very swift, had outpaced the pursuing band, until after travelling for three days and nights without water, all at once it succumbed. How long she had lain there, she did not know.

It was late that afternoon when they arrived

at her home, an Arab encampment lying in a deep valley surrounded by lofty hills. Through the gathering gloom he could just discern at the further end of the gorge the dome of a palace-like structure, which Zillah said was the abode of the sorceress of the tribe—a beautiful princess, who by her incantations wrought most astounding magic. She further informed him that since the princess had taken up her abode among them, her tribe had waxed very powerful; they had conquered other tribes; and amassed huge quantities of spoil in goods and cattle.

"She was sought," continued Zillah, "in marriage by their chief, Abdullam, a great warrior, famed for his strength and skill in arms."

Alan Edgecumbe was most hospitably received, and as a storm threatened, he was pressed to stay the night. "Their Chief," said his entertainers, "was expected every hour from a successful foray, and if His Highness would only consent to delay his departure until the morning, he would then be received in a manner befitting his high rank"; for in the eyes of these "Children of the Desert" the stranger's stature and bearing, combined with so well furnished an equipage, surely bespoke him a chieftain of note.

The storm quickly broke, and raged with extreme violence for several hours; lightnings and thunderings were incessant, the earth trembled, and rain descended in torrents. During its height, a messenger arrived from the castle with a peremptory order from the magician for him to visit her without fail the following morning, when she would suitably reward him for the service he had rendered to a member of the tribe.

Excusing himself on the plea of haste in resuming his journey, and sending a costly present with the messenger, he retired to rest, with the firm determination to push on at break of day, when no doubt the weather would have moderated.

In the middle of the night he was pounced upon, and that so suddenly, that before he could make any effective resistance he found himself a captive, and his limbs bound tightly with cords. Despite his struggles and threats, he was uplifted in the arms of several stalwart tribesmen and deposited in a rough mountain cart that immediately set off at a rapid jolting pace down the valley in the direction of the castle of the sorceress.

To his repeated questioning as to their motive in capturing him, his guards for some time made no reply, but at length the offer of a large

ransom should they release him at once, brought out the gruff, but not unkindly response: "That it was by order of the Princess, though in opposition to the wishes of their Chief, who," they said, "had protested in vain against this breach of hospitality to a stranger, one, moreover, who had not only broken bread with them, but had rendered a service to a member of the tribe."

Whilst anathematising his bad luck, and mentally picturing the consternation his non-arrival in Australia at the hour and date flashed by him, would occasion to those he loved, Alan Edgecumbe was fain to console himself with the reflection that after all his detention would be brief; for cupidity alone, he judged, was the sole cause of his seizure and present detention by the magician. No doubt on payment of a large ransom he would be immediately released. That could easily be arranged; and yet all the while he had an uneasy feeling, which in vain he tried to combat, that ransom was not alone the cause of his seizure.

His reflections, however, on this point were suddenly cut short by the halting of the cart before the massive pile which had so excited his curiosity in the gloaming of the previous evening.

The gate flew open and the cart rolled into

a paved courtyard. The cords which bound his limbs were cut, and under the escort of two armed tribesmen, he passed up a flight of steps, and thence into a sleeping apartment. The door was shut and barred from without, and he found himself alone, the victim of a strange adventure. As he glanced round the luxuriously-furnished chamber, a strange feeling crept over him; and he felt that no ordinary experience was about to befal him.

First of all he closely examined the outlets of the room. A window looked out on the courtyard, but it was strongly barred, and peering through, he saw an armed sentry pacing below. The other outlet was by the door. He might possibly batter that down; but then the noise was sure to attract the attention of the guard, and what could he, an unarmed man, do against so many? It thus seemed as if escape were impossible. Listening, he could not detect a sound. What had he best do? he pondered. Again, he wondered, why had the sorceress caused him to be seized against the wishes of the tribe? There must be some strong underlying motive that impelled her thus to act contrary to the tribal wish. And yet, what besides plunder and ransom could be her motive? Altogether he felt very uneasy; for the thought kept obtruding, though he did his

best to put it from him: "What if she were to detain him at her court?"

The love, the loyalty, the purity, the devotion, and other noble qualites that formerly he had attributed in the abstract to all womanhood, did not, he found after a very limited experience of the concrete, extend to all the sex. In fact, at the present moment, he was strongly inclined to deny the sorceress the possession of any feminine virtue. He had a presentiment that the coming interview with her would not be a very pleasant one for either of them. Presently he looked at his watch. In two hours it would be dawn. What should he do? Should he keep awake or try to get a little rest? She may be near me now, he thought; but surely she must be asleep.

Again he listened; and again not a sound. This, added to his own inclinations, decided the matter. He threw himself, dressed as he was, full length on the bed, and after a time, hearing nothing to distract him, he fell asleep.

But even in his dreams the sorceress was a cause of anxiety. For he dreamt that he was being dragged before her, that he defied her, and dared her to do her worst; while she, threatening him with death, ordered him to be loaded with chains and thrown into a loathsome dungeon; where nightly

she visited him to gloat over his sufferings. . . . And now came the dream beautiful. He was in Australia. He was stealing unawares upon his dear love, Viola Colonna. She, on suddenly beholding him, gave first a quick little start of surprise, and then, with a glad cry of welcome, flew into his arms.

CHAPTER XXIV.

His dream was rudely dispelled. He awoke with a start; a rough hand was on his shoulder. The thought of violence at once occurred to him, and with one bound he leaped from the bed to the floor and grappled with the intruder.

A brief but furious struggle ensued. The follower of Allah—the stalwart warrior—the skilled man-at-arms—in vain endeavoured to throw his antagonist, to shake off that grip which, fastened on his throat, caused his tongue to protrude and his eyes to start from their sockets. All his efforts were useless; he found himself borne backward, and with terrific violence hurled to the floor, where gasping for breath he yet glowered unflinchingly on the foeman whose prowess he had just experienced.

"By Allah, Infidel!" he muttered, when he had regained sufficient breath to sit up, "thou art a strong man, meet to be a warrior of the Prophet. See! I was but wakening thee to partake of food," and he pointed to a table spread with choice viands. But apparently he was still suffering from the effects of the fall,

for he passed his hand several times over his eyes and brows, as if he were in pain.

Alan now felt ashamed of his hasty action, for, he reflected, had the man intended to do him an injury he could quite easily have despatched him whilst he was sleeping. He might need a friend at the court of this mysterious magician; and probably the warrior before him—a man of rank by his address and clothing—was turned from a possible friend into a bitter enemy.

But there was little time for reflection, for suddenly he bent forward and listened. What was that noise? It was the rush of armed men and the clank of steel upon the flight of steps.

Was he about to be murdered? Then in a moment, with brandished weapons, there came a rush of men into the room.

Looking about him for a weapon with which to defend himself, Alan hastily snatched up a heavy chair, and was backing towards the wall prepared to sell his life dearly, when the thought suggested itself, that by a determined rush he might win the door, for amid the jumble of men closing round him there was no room for the free play of their arms.

Instantly he sprang forward and dealt the leading man, whose sword-point was already dipping to the level of his throat, a crushing

blow. The man toppled backward, and his weapon, driven from his grasp, rebounded from the opposite wall, and clanged to the floor. Another, but this time a back-handed, sweeping stroke, made a second man recoil against his fellows; but that blow deprived Alan of his only means of defence, for he now held only the fragment of the chair in his hands. His intent, too, to make for the door, and thus effect his escape, had been foreseen and frustrated. Half a dozen tribesmen blocked the entry of the room, while others, menacing him from either flank, enabled one of their number to dash behind him. Thus he was completely surrounded; in fact, caught in a trap. For a moment, with sword points—a glittering circle—closing round him, his life hung in the balance.

"Back!" was suddenly shouted in the peremptory voice of his first acquaintance, who, meanwhile having risen to his feet (and if the truth be told, had rather enjoyed the fracas of the past few moments), pointed to the door.

The effect of this stern monosyllable and corresponding gesture was magical. Instantly weapons were lowered, and visages that a moment before had been stamped with fierce passions—the overpowering lust to shed blood—were subdued to a sullen submission to

authority. The Chief again gave the word of command; the disappointed warriors, facing about, trooped from the room.

A Believer's sword would not this day drink the blood of an Unbeliever. It was the will of Allah! Allah must be obeyed!

Abdullam — for it was that renowned warrior—now came up to his late antagonist, and offering his hand in token of good will, gazed for some moments admiringly at his stalwart frame and powerful limbs. "I have seen many Infidels," he exclaimed, "but never one with thy strength and stature. She—our Prophetess—will convert thee to the true faith, and thou shalt have high rank and an abode in Paradise. Allah needs men like thee!"

So far from having made an enemy, the young Islander had gained a friend; for what these brave and hardy warriors most admire in man is strength, combined with high courage and personal prowess. This Infidel had not only conquered him—Abdullam—the strongest and most renowned of his tribe, but, with only a chair for a weapon, had held in check a dozen of his followers; indeed, had disabled two of them, who had to be helped from the room.

Abdullam informed his new-made friend that his instructions were to bring him into the

presence of the sorceress, but that he had plenty of time to refresh himself, and need not hurry. So while the Infidel breakfasted, to impress him with a sense of the power and importance of the sorceress, the Arab entertained him by recounting several of her most notable achievements.

On one occasion, he said, a powerful neighbouring tribe had committed depredations and carried off several of their women. He, Abdullam, had headed the punitive expedition, but, falling into an ambuscade, had lost a number of his men. The enemy pursued them, and pressed closely on their heels until they gained a defile which guarded the valley in which stood the castle of the sorceress. Here the Princess met them. She had drawn a line across the narrowest part; they passed safely over, but the foe pressing on met with an unaccountable reverse. One by one, as they touched the line, they fell dead, until their bodies were piled several deep. The remnant, dismayed by the fate of their companions, called a parley, and sued humbly for peace. They could not face her magic, they said. It was too strong for them. They would restore the captives and pay an indemnity in goods and cattle.

This tribe, said Abdullam, afterwards

became incorporated with theirs, and ever after were the staunchest supporters of the sorceress.

"On one occasion," he said, "several of the incorporated tribes plotted to murder the Princess, hoping by so doing to regain their independence.

"A band of five hundred warriors, armed to the teeth, broke into the courtyard of the palace at dead of night, whilst all approaches were guarded to prevent escape or help arriving from outside.

"Immediately on entry of the storming party, a wonderful light flashed, and through the shattered gateway the conspirators in the open saw the charred and blackened remains of their late companions strewing the stones of the courtyard. Not one survived to narrate the manner of their death.

"The Princess herself shortly after appeared on the battlement with lightnings playing round her head, and in an imperative voice commanded them to remove the bodies of their late brethren. From that hour," said Abdullam, "none questioned her authority."

Alan Edgecumbe shrewdly suspected from these accounts of Abdullam's, that the sorceress must be some clever European adventuress, who, for purposes of her own, utilised an extensive knowledge of electricity to overawe

these descendants of Ishmael, who still, in many respects, followed the primitive lives of their forefathers.

Abdullam now thanked him for his kindness to the Arab maiden, and on his refusal to accept high rank under him, promised his good offices with the Princess should she wish to detain him at her court.

But Alan saw plainly that for some cause the Arab was uneasy over the coming interview, but whether on his, Alan's, account or for some private reason of his own, he was unable to judge, and he did not think it wise to question him on the subject.

Breakfast despatched, Abdullam called his attention to his dilapidated garments, which had almost been torn off him in the struggle, and the Arab, pointing with a smile to a curtained recess, said there were garments there ready for use.

Costumed in the flowing habiliments of a chieftain of rank, Alan's appearance met with his new friend's heartiest approval.

Following Abdullam from the room, he had scarcely gone a dozen paces when the Arab abruptly halted. They were in a long corridor with doors opening on either side.

"Hist! Infidel!" he muttered, with a warning gesture, and fierce suspicious eyes, "before we

go further: Hast thou a wife or maiden whom thou lovest in that distant land whither thou was hastening?"

"Yes," replied Alan, "a maiden whom I love is even now awaiting my coming; she will grieve should I not quickly return."

"Ugh! that is well!" returned the Arab, significantly, "thou shalt be free this night! By Allah I swear it! Come!"

Passing through several richly-furnished apartments, they at length entered a chamber where, in obedience to a secret signal, Abdullam left him.

CHAPTER XXV.

It was most strange. Not the absence of the sorceress—his first glance round the room had convinced him of that—but the room itself.

Again there crept over him the same uneasy feeling he had experienced the night before. This room recalled Miss Pelham's laboratory as he had last seen it on that eventful night, now twelve long months past. A dawning suspicion awoke in him. Hortense Pelham and this mysterious sorceress; was it possible there could be any connection between the two? Were they one and the same person?

Was he fated to meet her again? Surely not. It could not be. He had read the published accounts of her death. Yet, now he remembered, there had always lingered in his mind a doubt or suspicion as to the cause, but never as to the actual fact of the death itself.

With so much explosive on hand he had thought it possible that her death was accidental, but then with the memory of certain events that still rankled in his mind, he had had a strong suspicion that it was premeditated.

What if she were not really dead after all? What if this sorceress, whose prisoner he was, turned out to be Hortense Pelham? How could he meet her after what had occurred between them? How, too, dared she meet him?

As to the blowing up of her house, was it not, from his knowledge of her, just what the haughty beauty might have done in one of her eccentric moods or in a fit of anger (and he could imagine she had been very angry), with some ulterior purpose in view?

And that purpose, could it in any way be connected with him? Was not his capture last night and present detention, against the declared wishes of Abdullam and his tribe, strong evidence connecting Hortense Pelham with this African Princess and sorceress?

And if it so happened that she were alive, what could she want with him?

A flush of anger and of another emotion burned on his cheek. But (drawing himself up) he knew how he would act in case she sprang this possible surprise upon him.

He would know how to meet her. He now knew her character; he knew her for what she was; he knew her to be an extremely dangerous and unscrupulous woman, who would stick at nothing so that she might gain her ends.

He would have none of her. He would

hold no parley whatever with her; their old-time friendship was a thing of the past, it could never be resuscitated. It closed that night when she gulled his senses, and by a yet more dastardly trick, for ever lost his respect. He steeled himself against her.

And now in the midst of his reflections, an almost imperceptible swaying of a screen facing him drew his attention, and he wondered if he were under observation from behind it.

As curiously he gazed, a jewelled arm was suddenly thrust through, and—significant fact, confirming his suspicions—on one finger was a valuable ring that he remembered presenting to Miss Pelham as a token of gratitude for the great service she had rendered him in Rangitoto Gardens, New Zealand.

Whilst reflecting on the part he might shortly be called upon to play in the drama that he felt was impending, the screen was pushed aside, and, veiled as a Turkish woman, the sorceress stepped forth. When within a few paces of him, she flung aside part of her disguise, and they were face to face.

It was Hortense Pelham who stood before him; lovely and imperious as of yore.

"You," he could not help exclaiming, as their eyes met. Involuntarily he drew back a step.

"Yes, me," half mockingly, and with an arch

smile at his visible discomposure. "And have you no welcome for Hortense Pelham, whom you thought dead?"

Although in part prepared to see her, he yet in vain strove to conceal the emotion occasioned by this strange meeting with one whom he vaguely felt to be the "evil star" of his destiny. This smiling beauty, this attractive personality, was more like the Hortense Pelham of old, the sympathising friend, the loving alluring Hortense, whom, when she chose, no man living could long resist; against whom no man's anger could long hold out.

The memory, however, of that long past night; the thought of what had occurred that could never be revealed to human soul; the memory, too, of her he loved, to whom his loyalty was pledged, served to steel him against her. He felt his anger stirring—"shameless that she was!"

"It is indeed a fitting time and place for an explanation between us," he coldy replied. "Let us go back to that night when, under the guise of friendship, you played with, and used as your tool, the inexperienced but trusting friend who believed in your friendship, who would have gone through fire and water to serve you, but whose dream of friendship you so rudely dispelled by your despicable act.

Hortense Pelham, I now as heartily despise you as once I honoured you. In my eyes you are a disgrace to your sex; and my greatest regret is that we ever met; willingly I will never look upon your face again."

She drew herself up with superb scorn, looking him full in the face. He, forgetting that he was under detention as her prisoner, turned and made as if to leave the room; but an invisible barrier, cold as death, interposed, between him and the door. His limbs turned cold and rigid. He could not move a step; he stood motionless as a statue.

The sorceress approached him, and he saw her raise her arm. He caught the glitter of a jewel in her hand. She looked straight into his eyes. "You did not mean those words?" she asked, peremptorily.

"I did not mean those words," he repeated.

"You do care for me then?"

"I do care for you."

Then she touched his forehead. Instantly the tension of his limbs relaxed. A delicious sensation crept over him; he was gazing into a sea of whirling mist; he was wandering he knew not where . . . in reality he was following her.

* * * * *

"Hist! Infidel! waken!"

Alan Edgecumbe awoke in pitch darkness, with these words whispered into his ears, and at the same time conscious of the grip of a hand on his shoulder.

"What is it? Who are you?" he gasped.

"It is I, Abdullam!" came in the same hushed voice. "Hist! rise, but speak not!"

Striving to collect his scattered senses, Alan was yet aware that he was in danger, and that Abdullam was here to aid him to escape. With the Arab's firm grip on his arm, he rose from the couch whereon he lay, and together they groped their way from the room; then along a corridor, and thence from chamber to chamber. . . They made but one halt, and that for a brief second, and his heart stood still, for he heard the regular breathing of a sleeper. But at last they gained the courtyard of the castle in safety, and instantly a sentry challenged.

Abdullam gave the countersign; the ponderous gate swung back; and with the pure fresh air of Heaven on his face, Alan Edgecumbe realised that once more he was free.

By daylight they had gained a mountain defile, and here, masked by a thicket, was his aerial, and Zillah, the Arab maiden, whose life he had saved, in charge of it.

The Arab helped him into the car, and then grasped his hand. "Abdullam hath kept faith

with thee. Depart in peace, Infidel!" he cried; "yet sometimes call to thy recollection thy friend, Abdullam, the Arab! Bismillah! Peace be with thee!"

"Farewell, Abdullam! Farewell, Zillah!" and there were tears in his eyes as he bade these true friends "good-bye," for he knew that in all human probability he should never see them again.

The maiden gazed up at him with moistened, grateful eyes, and as the aerial rose, "Bismillah!" she cried, "May Allah keep thee and speed thee on thy way!'

A minute later, as they gazed aloft, the Arab and the maiden saw a shaft of sunlight strike a dark object that, high in the heavens, was winging its flight with inconceivable swiftness towards the now glowing east.

* * * * *

Above the broad bosom of the Indian Ocean, in the growing twilight of the closing day, glimmered an aerial. Like an aerolite it cleft the ambient ether; and seated in it was Alan Edgecumbe, his face pale but calm.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Across the southern slopes of lofty mountains, beyond the confines of New Italy and the wastes of the Great Sahara, the pitiless sun beat fiercely down upon that far-off African valley, upon the castle of Hortense Pelham, bathing its battlemented towers in a deep blood-red glow.

The escape of Alan Edgecumbe fell like a thunderbolt upon the sorceress. At first came a sense of stupefaction, that was quickly succeeded by a burning, fierce desire for vengeance.

Abdullam was not to be found. Fearing the anger of the sorceress, he had retired to a remote mountain fastness, there to await the abatement of her wrath; and thus, perforce, she had to start alone in pursuit of her recreant lover. But pursuit under the circumstances was hopeless, and this she realised after two days and two nights' flight through space.

So when midway over the Indian Ocean, she turned, and regaining her castle, buried herself in her chamber, where for nigh the space of a week, she abandoned herself to the wildest paroxysms of grief and remorse.

Her past life; its fleeting triumphs, bitter heart-burnings, its many tragic incidents, and stupendous closing failure, passed in panoramic procession before her. Now to the agonising full she realised how great was that moral lapse which had poisoned her life.

And how could she face the future? But would she face it? Victim of a misplaced attachment, had she not by her own act, with her own hands, heaped coals of fire upon her own head? Had she not by giving reins to her ungovernable passion, lost that self-respect which is the true bloom of womanhood? And now, perforce, she must needs lie in the bed which she herself had made.

She groaned aloud, and clenched her hands in the excess of mental and physical anguish. Only those who have suffered, those who have seen their most cherished hopes and ambitions fade one by one, and melt away, can—and that but faintly—understand how this woman, with her peculiar organisation, felt amid the wreck of all her hopes. How intense the agony of self-abasement. And oh, the utter barrenness of life!

With many, alas! the hastening of the end which, perchance, may give rest and peace, is the only recourse.

It is the closing scene of Hortense Pelham's brilliant, but, alas, misdirected career, that we now introduce to our readers.

It was early morning. The sorceress was in her laboratory. Overhead burned the mystic, pale blue flame, whose everlasting fuel was supplied by the oxygen of the atmosphere. Around her were grouped the paraphernalia of modern science; besides her own patented and unpatented inventions.

One of these, still in an unfinished state, was to have made man practically independent of flying machines. She left this to posterity to complete; all details were given, and it required but a touch here and there. Her days of scientific investigation were closed. She, herself, perchance, might need all her powers in that new life which was soon to come; whence none has ever yet returned to tell us what is there.

Ever and anon from that chamber—so soon to prove her death-chamber—leaped forth the hissing flame that had proved so terrifying to Alan Edgecumbe. In such a flame, death, to human beings desiring death, was instantaneous. No feeling of pain was experienced; no residue of ashes remained; for in the thousandth fraction of a second the body was reduced to its constituent atoms, and the residue, if any,

sent, a whirling impalpable powder, into the wide spaces of heaven.

The sorceress had resolved on her own death. She had prepared herself to face unflinchingly the Great Hereafter. Her shroud would be the crackling flame; her funeral *cortége* the four winds of heaven.

She was seated at a table engaged in transmitting her last message on earth. She had ascertained the exact position of Alan Edgecumbe's chamber in Elmswood, Darling Point, Sydney. She had calculated to the minutest fraction the distance separating the two rooms, and, now, on his wave-machine that stood in its nook so many thousands of miles away, she was recording her last farewell to him on earth.

She had settled in her own mind that on his return to-night from visiting his dear love, Viola Colonna, he would receive it. She may, perchance, even have thought that, disembodied and hovering near, she would note its effect on him. Her appointed task came to an end. With a deep sigh she withdrew her finger from the transmitting button, and with a wan smile, rose and gazed around.

"Alan" (thus ran her message), "how sweet still sounds that name to Hortense Pelham. When you read this message to-night, the

sender will be no more. She has doomed herself to die. Her last thought will be of you; her last wish that her spirit may be nigh you as you read; her last hope that, as you read this story of her life, you . . you . . will forgive. Make sign that you forgive!"

HER STORY.

As a child, I had lofty ambitions: I felt that I was different to others. I felt that mentally and physically I was born to rule; that all others must give place; that I must be first in all things — first in beauty, first in physical and intellectual achievements. Thus I grew up, flattered and pampered by the world; my beauty a theme, my intellect acclaimed.

I was the only child of a distinguished and wealthy *savant*—one who had made and left his mark on science. My mother, alas! died whilst I was yet an infant. Had she lived, or had I had a brother, or even a sister, my life must have been different; I might have been a good woman.

At an early age I became interested in my father's experiments. He took me into his confidence, taught me all he knew, and soon my fame was world wide. And, yet, voluntarily, I now close my life; and why?

With man's coarser nature it is hard to explain a woman's why. Love is mostly a woman's why. It is mine.

Men (all men but you), I have despised. Men are but pitiful creatures at the best. To a woman of assured position, of acknowledged beauty, with abilities—and I had all these—the world is at her feet. It requires but a *soupçon* of flattery, a little seeming devotion, and men are but as puppets, as wax, in her hands. With them, through them, she can rule.

I have ruled, and but for you, would have forced my way still higher up the ladder-rungs of Fame. I should have been a power in the land, and if denied dominion in my own, then in that other where you found me.

But . . . you came into my life. It was destiny, and destiny we cannot control.

Love. Men speak of love; but what is man's love compared with woman's? Before we met I had never really loved; I had simply dreamed of love; responsive love that fired my blood, that thrilled my being through, filling it with strange ecstasy.

In my dreams I wove fancies, even fashioned you, and in my waking moments wondered if we—my love and I—should ever meet.

Sometimes in night visions I seemed to have harked back to another life—to have met and

loved a real person. The night before we met, I dreamed of you; I even saw you in the very spot where afterwards I found you.

Can you not guess the rest? Can you not guess what followed to a woman of strong uncurbed passions; she whom you called shameless? Had you loved me, Alan, I should have been a great woman (I have always felt that I could be a great woman); I should have had a great career, and you would have been proud of me. But you did not love me; and I—I was mad, Alan! mad for love of you!

Your indifference goaded me beyond endurance. The thought that another woman would possess you set my brain on fire. I saw that I would lose you; that you would marry that other woman unless . . (here part of the message was blurred) . . When on that fateful morn I found you gone, I vowed to be revenged. I formulated a plan. That plan was this: In my many vagaries, in my many wanderings, I once had saved an Arab force—the weaker side—from annihilation.

To cut my story short, I was entreated to become their Princess, their magician. It suited my adventurous mood, my love of power, to fall in with their wishes. I became a queen, and ruled my subjects with a rod of iron, spending a portion of each year with them. I

built this stately pile; I enlarged my kingdom; made my power felt.

To go back: It was my hand fired the train, flashed the current that destroyed my house, and caused my death to become bruited abroad.

It amused me to read the obituary notices of my own death. It suited my purpose.

I came here; I vowed that I would wait; that I should yet strike a blow that would bring you to my feet. But destiny was again too strong for me.

I have always fought with destiny in the belief that destiny was against me.

Some strange chance—call it what you will —directed you into my kingdom. Failing other measures, I gave orders for your detention.

Shall I go on? Shall I unveil what further passed? Shame on me, I cannot. (Here again a portion of the message was blurred).

Alan, with my last breath I bless you! In this my last hour on earth, I repent . . . bitterly repent!

A few minutes later, Hortense Pelham paused before a small electrical motor that regulated the furnace and pressed a button. Then with firm, calm tread she entered the death chamber. She came to a halt close to

the cavity or opening in the centre. And as she did so there came a strange trembling of the massive flooring, a vibration of the surrounding walls. Instinctively she drew herself together. The tension of the atmosphere grew insupportable, the roaring of pent-up flames filled her ears.

Hortense Pelham proudly raised her head aloft. "Alan! forgive! forgive!" she cried. "I come! . . . I co . . . !" With that bitter cry still on her lips, in that awful swirl of flame, she passed away.

CHAPTER XXVII.

After his adventures in Africa, and his escape from Hortense and her magic, Alan's voyage proved uneventful. He naturally suffered somewhat from the strain he had undergone, and was looking worn and anxious. It was with pleasurable anticipations, however, that he alighted one morning from his aerial on the lawn in front of the Colonnas' house, in Sydney. It was a beautiful morning in spring, and his heart was beating fast as he hastily leapt from his car and crossed the lawn.

Alan was tolerably well acquainted with the ways of the household, for he had passed a week there once in familiar intimacy after his accident with Viola in the aerial.

He hoped to give Viola a pleasant surprise. Surely Piper must ere this have abandoned his suit as hopeless.

As he hastened on to the terrace he might well have wondered that no one was astir on such a lovely morning; not even a gardener was to be seen trimming the lawn.

He was too preoccupied with his thoughts, however, to notice this, or to see that the windows were shuttered, and it was only after he had rung the bell that the unusual aspect of the place began to strike him. The bell, too, he then thought, sounded in the strange way that is supposed to betoken an untenanted house.

After an interval, during which his impatience rose, he heard the unusual sound of bolts being withdrawn.

It was not the Colonnas' butler or any other familiar face that greeted him when the door at length was opened. His impatient request to see Miss Colonna was met by a stony stare. Was Mr. Colonna not at home then?

The man, who was quite obviously not a domestic servant, but who had the air of a waiter or a clerk out of employment, replied that the house was unoccupied, and that he had only been sent out the day before as caretaker.

What could have happened? Where were the Colonnas? Alan could extract no information from the man; either he knew nothing or would tell nothing.

There was no help for it, he must seek information elsewhere. So leaving his car in charge of the man, he took the first tram into

Sydney in search of news. He might catch Homfray at his office and learn from him the explanation of the mystery.

As he turned into the suite of offices occupied by Homfray's firm, his brother-in-law met him.

"Hullo! Alan," he cried, "I saw the number of your aerial posted this morning among the arrivals, and was just starting to look you up.

"It's deuced hard luck on you, old man, for of course you've heard the bad news."

"In heaven's name, Homfray, don't keep me in suspense. Let me have the worst.

"Don't tell me—Viola can't have married Piper."

"Well, not so bad as that quite, but bad enough."

Taking Alan into his private office, he locked the door, and this was the story he had to tell.

Shortly after Alan's departure, and while Homfray himself was away at Lava Island, the blow had fallen.

Piper had put on the screw, and Colonna was ruined.

The shock was more than the old man could bear; to be disgraced at the close of a long and honourable life was too much.

The morning after Piper foreclosed, Mr. Colonna was missed at breakfast, and when his room was visited he was found lying on the floor unconscious, and, but for a slight twitching of the limbs, devoid of all outward signs of life.

Forty-eight hours later life was extinct; the shock had proved too great.

On the old man's seizure, search was made for the son; he was found to be missing. Piper, it was believed, had a strong hold on him. He had left Sydney suddenly and mysteriously.

After the funeral, for which Homfray arrived only just in time, Viola went to stay with some friends at their country house near Sydney. But the strain had been too much for her also. She was now lying in a private hospital to which she had been taken, and was in a most critical condition.

Her life was almost despaired of. There was just one hope left. In her delirium, Alan's name was always on her lips. His presence might serve to turn the tide.

Such was the bitter news Alan had to hear as he sat with bowed head and features tense and drawn.

"Why was I not told of this before, Homfray?" he cried at length, in a voice strangely hoarse.

"You must remember, Alan, that I only returned to Sydney ten days ago, and, on inquiring for you, we found you had left London, bound, it was believed, for Sydney. No further news could be heard of you. You evidently did not come straight on; we could not make you out.

"Thank God, old chap, you are here at last. Not a moment is to be lost; we must go and see Viola. In her delirium she asks for you incessantly.

"You must pull yourself together; you will find her much changed, and you must be prepared for a great shock."

As they rode to the hospital in Homfray's motor, Alan broke the silence with but a single question.

Rousing himself at length, as from a stupor, he asked Homfray if the Colonnas had heard nothing of a bequest to Viola of a large sum from Italy?

"Yes, that is the pity of it all, Alan.

"I was just going to tell you. A few days after Colonna's funeral, and just after Viola was seized with brain fever, the family solicitors received advices that Viola was the heiress of a rich uncle who had just died in Italy, and that considerable sums of money were at her immediate disposal—enough, they say, to have satisfied all Piper's demands.

"Since then, of course, everything has been in a muddle. Piper had the impudence to go to the hospital and inquire for Viola. Luckily I met the brute on the steps, and had the satisfaction of relieving my feelings a little. I don't think he is likely to show up again. I asked if his work of ruin was not yet complete? He had killed the father, I told him, and ruined the son, and for the life of the daughter, now at death's door, he was answerable. Did he dare, I asked him, to follow her to her very death bed with his persecutions? He made no sign of answering me, but slunk away like a beaten hound. No, I don't think Piper will give any more trouble.

"But here we are. Now, Alan, you must pull yourself together; remember everything yet may go well."

When the nurses were told that it was Miss Colonna's *fiancé* who asked to see her, they said he might go in. It was just possible that his presence might have some effect upon her wandering brain. It was scarcely likely, but it was worth trying.

So Alan Edgecumbe was ushered in to the sick room by one of the nurses.

Tenderly Alan bent over the poor face of her he loved, so wasted and flushed by fever. Her eyes, bright and restless, were turned

upon him, yet knew him not. Her arms were tossing impatiently from side to side. Ever at short intervals there broke from her lips pitiful and agonizing cries of distress, "No, father, I can't do it! Will no one tell Alan to come? Alan! Where is Alan? Why doesn't he come?"

Gently he imprisoned one of the truant hands and held it in his firm, cool grasp. Yet there came no recognition, no answering pressure.

At intervals the same despairing cries assailed his ears, "Send him away, father, send him away! Alan! Where is Alan?"

Still he clasped her hand, now less unyielding, and presently he spoke to her in soft and tender words of love.

But the eyes gave no response, the fingers as before returned no answering pressure. Yet she was becoming calmer; her hand seemed to rest more passively in his.

Now, gently, with the hand that was free, he stroked her burning forehead. This seemed to soothe and give her rest. Her cries ceased. Once only she murmured softly her lover's name, but still without recognition.

Was it from the effect of a lover's voice and touch, or was it because the fever was abating —had almost run its course? However that

may be, at length the tide had turned; her poor bewildered brain grew calm, her limbs relaxed, her fingers lay motionless in his; her eyes, too, ceased to wander, and presently the eyelids gently closed. Like a child, she was asleep.

The nurse stole softly towards the bed and beckoned Alan from the room.

From that day Viola began to mend, but her recovery was a slow one. It was many days before Alan was admitted to see her; many, many days, nay, weeks, before she could leave her room. Slowly, very slowly, her strength returned, and it was not till the summer was nearly over that she could be moved.

Then the family doctor sought out Alan.

"In this case, Mr. Edgecumbe, or rather Dr. Edgecumbe, I should say, you can do more than all the College of Physicians. You saved Viola when we all failed. Love no doubt plays the deuce with us poor mortals, but love after all is the Master Physician, and you have proved it; I leave the case in your hands.

"A change of scene is all that Viola wants. Take her with you to your Pacific island, Lava Island don't you call it? The muggy weather will be over down there now. It will be the very place for you both.

"I see you are looking serious. Is it Mrs. Grundy you are thinking of? A marriage so soon after a funeral might, you think, be too much for a young lady's nerves.

"Well, I shall have to speak to Viola very seriously. I shall tell her that she has to get away at once, and that I trust her only to your hands. So you may get the license, Edgecumbe, without delay."

* * * * *

Here our story closes. As the good doctor had urged, there was a wedding. One sunny morning in autumn, Alan and Viola were quietly married, and later the same day they left in an aerial, bound on their honeymoon for Lava Island.

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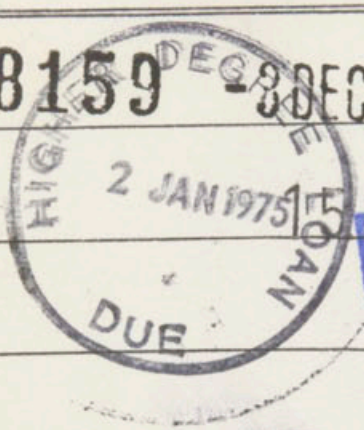

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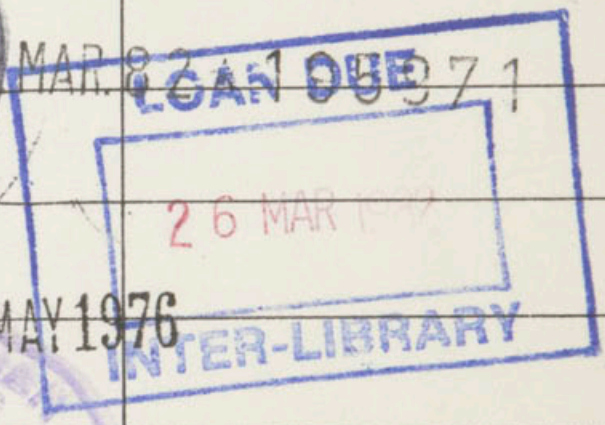

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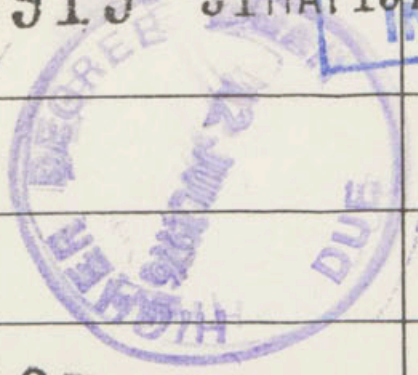

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