

LIFT UP YOUR EYES



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# LIFT UP YOUR EYES

*By*

AMBROSE PRATT

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*To every heart that swells with pride  
To own a terrain rich and wide  
Where no poor brother may abide;*

*To every heart that sees with pain  
His neighbour reaping golden grain  
Where he had tilled and sown in vain;*

*To every heart that lusts for power  
To pluck and wear each perfect flower  
Though it should perish in an hour;*

*To every heart that makes of sloth  
A shield from service, deeply loth  
To aid one fellow creature's growth;*

*To every heart made desolate  
By foolish love or frantic hate —  
This book I humbly dedicate.*

—AMBROSE PRATT.



# LIFT UP YOUR EYES

## CHAPTER ONE

124732  
AS the *Nieuw Holland* slid into her berth at Victoria Dock, Peter Gaunt leaned over the upper-deck rail and scanned the upturned faces on the pier with an almost fierce intensity. Recognising none of them his attitude relaxed and he smiled faintly. He was still smiling when a fellow passenger thrust in beside him, saying in a loud voice:

"By Jove, Gaunt, it's good to see a real white woman again after the sallow ruins of Malaya—what! Look at that girl in green with the yellow sunshade, will you! Talk about complexion! Boy! if she isn't a stunner I'll tell the world."

"You are telling the world," rejoined Gaunt quietly. "Moderate your transports, Parish. I believe the young woman heard you."

"I hope she did, old kill-joy," cried the ardent Parish. "I'm going to know that beauty if I die for it!"

But Peter Gaunt had already turned away. He sauntered to his cabin and behind a bolted door he completed his preparations for disembarkation. The wardrobe mirror reflected the leisurely movements of a slenderly-built man of medium height and middle age, with a large head set firmly on a pair of rather powerful shoulders. The face had been tanned by



tropic suns to the hue of undressed leather. The deep-set, widely-separated eyes were of too pale a grey to blend with the darkness of his skin. But the countenance possessed no other oddities. The nose, although large, was not too big for the forehead; the mouth, with its straight secretive lines, and the firmly-moulded chin were in complete harmony. Peter Gaunt's *tout ensemble* was inconspicuous; even his thick crop of iron-grey hair failed somehow to distinguish him, and his eyes, alone, redeemed him from the commonplace.

An hour later, having passed his baggage through the Customs, Peter taxied along Collins Street to the "Windsor," noting with boyish eagerness the many changes which the flight of twenty-odd years had wrought in the structure of the city of his birth.

He booked a spacious apartment on the second floor, facing Spring Street, then lunched sparingly, and within an hour he quitted the hotel. Turning into Collins Street, he walked briskly west. As he approached the business quarter his pace slackened. The teeming density of the vehicular traffic, and the hastening streams of self-absorbed and indifferent people on the pavements, beggared his recollections and a little dismayed him.

"I have been giving myself unnecessary anxiety," he muttered. "The place has outgrown me."

Near the corner of Elizabeth Street he glanced casually upwards and was arrested by the silhouette of a tall and graceful building that towered above its fellows a block or two away. If an old and dear acquaintance had suddenly appeared with extended hand

and welcoming smile Peter would have greeted him composedly, but at the sight of that time-stained Gothic pile his eyes felt the prick of tears. "Sentimentalist!" was his inward sneer, and his lips set in a rigid line. Nevertheless he continued to examine his ancient friend for many moments. "It is not absurd to love buildings that are beautiful and kind," was his conclusion; and he pushed on his way. Peter Gaunt had an abiding faith in the kindness of beautiful things, but distrust of the kindness of man dwelt also in his heart and often troubled him.

There was no suspicion of softness in his eyes when he halted presently at the entrance of an alleyway to read the inscription on an immense brass plate set in the cornerstone of a building that fronted the main street:

LANDALE AND LANDALE,  
STOCK AND SHARE BROKERS.

Pushing through two narrow glass doors he strode down a long corridor to a high wooden counter behind which several male and female clerks perched on lofty stools were busily writing. Peter rapped softly on the counter, and one of the younger clerks slipped down from his stool and approached him, his face deferentially indicating a question.

"I should like to see Mr Landale, junior," said Peter, offering a card. The clerk stretched out his hand.

"There is only one Mr Landale now," he replied. "Have you an appointment?" He glanced at the card. "Oh, it's Mr Gaunt. Mr Mark is expecting you, sir—one moment, please."

But Peter stopped him with a gesture. "Only one Mr Landale," he repeated. "I have just landed from the East. Has there been a death in the Landale family?"

The clerk nodded. "Mr John—the senior partner, sir." He leaned across the counter and added confidentially: "He was badly injured in a motor accident and died soon afterwards. A shocking business. The driver of the other car was intoxicated. He got twelve months for manslaughter, but he should have got five years, in my opinion, and a lot think like me."

"When did it happen?"

"About two months ago. Very sudden at the end. The doctors thought he would recover, but his heart collapsed and he went out like a snuffed candle."

"Be good enough to take my card to Mr Mark Landale."

The clerk, who had been enjoying the effect first produced on the visitor by his revelations, was obviously affronted by Peter's unexpected and peremptory command. But a single glance at Peter's locked face sufficed to suppress his inclination to put his feelings into words. Huffily but silently withdrawing, he vanished through a baize curtain and within a few seconds reappeared at an alcove on Peter's side of the counter.

"This way, if you please, sir," he said with icy politeness, a malediction in every syllable.

Despite the perturbation of his own mind, Peter sensed the young man's indignation and fully sympathised with it. As the clerk held the door back for him to pass into the sanctuary beyond, he said with curious gentleness but distinctly enough for all the clerks to hear:

"When I was of your age and occupation I sometimes suffered from the rudeness of my employer's clients, so I know how you are feeling. I am sorry to have offended you."

As the door swung behind him, the clerk opened a flap in the counter and dazedly returned to his desk.

"What do you know about that?" he exploded.

The other clerks suspended work, with one accord, to debate the phenomenon effectively.

## CHAPTER TWO

MARK LANDALE, who had been advancing from his table to meet his visitor, was arrested in mid-floor by Peter's queer apology to the clerk. He was a tall man, portly, handsome and fashionably dressed. His clean-shaven face, which showed pale under the high roof-light, would have ensured the popularity of any prelate. It was typically ecclesiastical, and the mouth had an expression of great sweetness.

The pupils of his large brown eyes contracted and expanded nervously, and he kept touching his lips with the tip of his tongue. As Peter Gaunt stepped into the room Landale proved himself the possessor of a resonant and beautiful voice.

"My dear Peter," he said, "how good to see you again after all these years!"

Peter grasped the offered hand and led Landale to the window.

"Let me look at you in the daylight, Mark," he said, his voice not free from symptoms of emotion. Drawing back the curtain he dropped Landale's hand, and the two men gazed at each other searchingly.

"You have put on weight," decided Peter presently. "You look staid, maturer and more responsible. You have altered for the better. But you do not look a happy man. Has Mary ceased to care for you?"

Color flamed into Landale's cheeks. "No! — at least I think not," he said with a painful attempt to smile.

"Have you ceased to care for Mary?"

"You ought to know me better than to ask such a question!" Landale's voice was firmer now, and his tone expressed resentment.

Peter shrugged his shoulders. "Then what is the matter with you, Mark?"

"Why should you think? . . ."

Peter interrupted him. "There are lines in your face. There is a shadow in your eyes. Don't tell me that you suffer from dyspepsia. Out with it, Mark. I must know exactly how and where you stand."

"Sit down, Peter." Landale retreated to his office table, and sinking into the big swivel chair behind it he leaned forward, his elbows on the blotter, and cupped his chin in his palms.

"My letters must have told you something. I tried in them to tell you everything." He looked squarely into his friend's eyes.

"You were always a poor letter-writer," observed Peter, with a little sneer. "You were cleverer with your tongue."

Landale winced as from a blow. "You have learned to use yours like a riding-whip," he retorted, but the glint in his eyes immediately subsided and he added rather sadly, "I am not questioning your right to say what you like to me, Peter. But don't flick my raw spots more than you must, old man —

at least until I have accounted to you for my stewardship."

"I am waiting for that same accounting," said Peter acidly. "Must there be many more preliminaries? Can't you cut out the cackle and begin?"

Landale pushed a strip of paper across the desk.

"It is payable to bearer. At your leisure you can send me a receipt."

"Money," returned Peter, making no attempt to take the cheque, "is the least part of the business between us. Is your nature incurably evasive, Mark?"

Landale sprang to his feet and walked twice the full length of the room — a long and spacious apartment. Peter Gaunt attentively examined his fingernails. Having mastered himself, Landale returned to his chair and resumed his former attitude.

"The trouble," he began, "is with me, not with Mary. She regards me as a sort of tin god, immaculate, infallible. My father was as fond but not as foolish. I intended to confess to him before the end. I knew he would not live. But I left it too late: he went out suddenly like a snuffed candle."

Peter remembered that Landale's clerk had used the same expression, and he was stirred to the same sort of unreasoning anger that had been aroused in his heart in the outer office.

"It should have been impossible for John Landale's son to compare the death of such a noble gentleman with the snuffing of a candle," he said cuttingly.

Landale sighed. "You idealised my father, Peter. He was a grand old chap, undoubtedly, but very human and not the flawless figure you imagined. I am certain he knew — or guessed the truth — that I permitted you to bear the blame of my — defalcation." He whispered the final word.

"Nonsense!" said Peter roughly. "What gave you such a mad idea? Come — out with it!"

"He would never discuss you with me; but if your name was mentioned by a stranger he never failed to praise you. He would not have praised a man he believed to be a thief."

Peter shaded his face with his hand.

"Anything else?" he demanded.

"When your remittances arrived he invariably absented himself for a day or two from the office. Above all he left you £600 in his will. The amount is significant!"

There was a long silence. Finally, in a strangely quiet voice Peter asked, "Where is he buried, Mark?"

"In the Brighton Cemetery."

"I would have given much to have seen him once more, alive," said Peter dreamily.

"You gave more than much to save him from having to confess himself ashamed of his son," said Landale.

Peter Gaunt rose slowly to his feet.

"This is a more painful interview than I expected. Let's make short work of what remains. What is the trouble between you and Mary? There should be none if you love each other still."

"With Mary there is no trouble, Peter. When you meet her you will see a thoroughly contented woman."

"Take that sneer off your face, Mark, and explain yourself."

Peter's voice and manner were almost brutally truculent; but although Landale winced he answered promptly and with wonderful humility.

"All her geese are swans, Peter. Ninety per cent. of her placid happiness consists in her conviction that neither her husband nor her son nor her daughter could possibly be guilty of trespassing against the jumble of gentle bigotries she uses as a moral code. I worship her, Peter; I even bend the knee to her bigotries. But I am a whited sepulchre. If she knew what you know she would probably turn from me with loathing. Yet I am plagued with a constant impulse to make her see me straightly, to shrive myself, whatever the cost. After sixteen years of playing hypocrite the part should be easy. But it gets harder, Peter. Explain that if you can. I can't."

"So that is what has lined your face?"

"Nothing else, Peter."

"Good man! I had no idea you would ever find your burden troublesome."

"No! You thought me an utter rotter, didn't you?" Landale spoke as if simply stating a familiar fact, without the slightest rancour.

Peter eyed him doubtfully. "Not an utter rotter, Mark." Peter was frowning now. "Not really bad, even, but just as selfish and weak and covetous

as most men are. It seems I was mistaken. Either that, or you have developed character beyond my calculation."

"Don't judge me hastily again, Peter. I am not sure your first judgment erred. I am still as weak as water where Mary is concerned. I suggested just now that I wanted her to see me straightly. It was a lie. I'd be capable of murder to keep you or any man from opening her eyes."

"Fine!" said Peter. "Keep feeling like that and Mary's peace of mind will never be disturbed."

He walked over to the table and picked up the cheque. After a short scrutiny he began to fold the paper.

"This will not embarrass you?" he asked.

"No."

"You are prospering?"

"Incredibly. The firm has been coining money ever since the War. We've had to take in junior partners. I have grown almost vulgarly rich."

Peter put the cheque in his pocket.

"I should be moving on," he said. "No doubt you have plenty of important work to attend to."

"On the contrary, I've kept the whole day free for you. But for your wire I should have met the boat; Mary too. But I promised her to bring you home to dinner. She will give you a warm welcome."

Peter's pale eyes sparkled, but he lowered his lids and stared at the carpet.

"You frown easily," said Landale. "A new trick. It is obvious that I have disappointed you. I have kept our compact, loyally; but you remain bitter and

contemptuous. Would you have preferred to find me a defaulter?"

Peter gazed at Landale as though striving to read his soul.

"You suggest I am a Pharisee," he said, speaking slowly.

"My dear old chap, what could have put such an idea into your head?" Landale's tone was tinged with satire, but his eyes were understanding and affectionate.

"I am not a Pharisee," said Peter. "I am too conscious of my own shortcomings for that."

Landale smiled. "You have despised me steadily for thirty years," he declared.

Peter shook his head. "The right term is 'disregarded'," he contradicted firmly. "I have never despised you, Mark; I did not even judge you: I simply overlooked you. The fact is, I never intended to serve or save you. What I did was for Mary. I considered you merely as a pawn. Frankly, I am disconcerted to find the pawn become a knight—maybe a bishop. It is difficult to appreciate results derived from causes one has never taken into reckoning. I ought to be glad that you have come out of the crucible with credit. But I can't feel glad yet. I always liked you, Mark. But I never suspected you to possess — bigness. I am a bit resentful of your development. It has surprised me. ——— You've been wonderfully patient. You had nothing to fear at my hands, even if you were unable to produce a clean bill of health. But instead of out-facing me you were determinedly humble; you set

yourself out to convince me and appease me. At first, I suspected your sincerity. 'Ha! Ha!' I said, 'he has something to hide.' I began to bully you. No doubt I cut a ridiculous figure, but you did not once laugh at me. I am still unable to comprehend your forbearance. You used to flame if you were affronted — when we were boys."

"You are overlooking what I owe you," said Landale. His cheeks were flushed and his voice was not quite steady. "Besides," he went on presently, "I felt a need to win your respect and confidence — if I could. You see, only two people know my record truly, you and I. Other opinions, therefore, do not count. My opinion of myself for the better part of a quarter-century has been determined by my knowledge of your estimate of me. I am too old to change. If I am ever to recover some measure of real self respect it can only be through you. It's a nasty business living year after year with a self-contemptuous ego, Peter, swathed all the while with an affection won by fraud and maintained by false pretences."

"You did not win Mary by fraud, Mark. From the moment she met you her heart was in your keeping."

"She'd have cut her heart out rather than give it to a thief. But we've had my unfortunate soul on the slab too long. I can't stand any more of the scalpel today. Suspend judgment till you see Mary. It's nearly four o'clock. Let's go out and have a cup of tea at the Australia."

"No thanks, Mark. I shall leave you now. I am staying at the Windsor. Should I dress?"

"Just a dinner-jacket. My car will pick you up at six-thirty. We live at Bayton."

Both men stood up.

"I'd like you to know," said Peter rather stiltedly, "that I am very sure that seeing Mary will confirm the judgment I have already formed. I do not distrust you any longer."

Mark Landale took and pressed the other's hand.

"But you are still disappointed and resentful," he said, with a whimsical yet entirely mirthless smile.

"You have escaped me," explained Peter. "I still experience a sense of loss. I am a stupid fellow, Mark, and very slow to readjust my ideas to new facts."

Left alone, Mark Landale resumed his chair and lighted a cigarette. His hands were shaking nervously. The interview had excited and distressed him. He had tried to make Peter comprehend, but he believed he had at best only partially succeeded; and he felt that he had unduly stressed certain aspects of his own mental condition and his attitude to the world and to his wife. Reviewing his own limitations he realised that he would never again be able to open to any man's inspection the book which for a moment he had passionately wanted Peter to read and understand; and a dull conviction that his friend had acquired a false impression from the pages he had scanned awoke in him a sense of shame and frustration. He was especially humiliated to remember his repeated references to the crime he had

committed in his boyhood. How could Peter ever learn, now, that he felt no longer any remorse for a transgression long since expiated, one that he had come to regard as significant only in its consequences. He had stolen; but he was no more a thief than most men who had never stolen. The fact that he had once trespassed had not undermined his confidence in his own essential integrity. A boyish weakness, he assured himself, had calcified and become a source of strength in maturity. The memory of his misstep, moreover, had made him pitiful of all human frailty, and equipped him with a sense of proportion wherewith to judge fallible mankind which Peter would always lack. Peter suffered, undoubtedly, from a superiority complex, and looked down on his fellows from a lofty moral altitude. Landale wondered why he coveted Peter's sympathy so earnestly. Having appealed for it, as he thought, in vain, he endeavoured to convince himself that the grapes were sour, that he wanted something beyond the other's power to give. He reminded himself that Peter, the man, was merely Peter the boy, grown a little harder and narrower, perhaps, but unaltered in the fundamentals. Landale, however, was too fine-grained to derive any comfort from depreciating his friend. As his agitation subsided he became more and more the prey of melancholy; and in order to avoid the futile exercise of self-reviling — a too-constant occupation — he went to his cupboard and poured out a liberal dose of cognac.

"If Peter could see me now," he murmured,

with a twisted grin, as he held up the glass, "he would go to his grave blaming alcohol and alcohol only for the lines on my face."

The reflection, even more than the liquor, helped Landale, one of the most abstemious of men, to a brighter and more hopeful frame of mind.

It was his daily practice when returning home to leave his car about a mile from the house and walk the rest of the way, weaving fantastic and splendid day-dreams in which he played the part of a martyr or a paladin. The mood so induced helped him to withstand the eternal challenge of his wife's eyes — a challenge he knew to be an illusion, a mirage of his own creation, but which nevertheless enthralled him past escape. Tonight he dreamed himself a sailor on a drowning ship, pushing his friend into the last place in the lifeboat and waving gallantly as the lifeboat drew away. The friend he had saved bore a remarkable resemblance to Peter Gaunt.

Mary Landale's voice aroused him from his dream.

"Where is Peter? Is he not coming?"

"He'll be here by seven, Mary. The car has gone back for him."

Mrs Landale kissed her husband fondly.

## CHAPTER THREE

PETER had been prepared to be greeted kindly, but the unaffected warmth of his reception surprised and touched him. Mary Landale gave him both her hands and looked affectionately into his eyes, saying:

"Welcome home, Peter dear. And we mean that literally, Mark and I. We want you to look upon our home as yours. Mark will show you your room later. It was built for you; nobody else has ever used it. It will always be ready for you — whenever you may care to come."

Peter paid little heed to the words. He was drinking deeply of the sincerity and sweetness of her voice.

"It is very good — to be home again," he heard himself say; then with a queer feeling of acting under the impulsion of some alien force he bowed his head and kissed one of her hands.

The gesture of homage delighted Mary. She laughed prettily and cried, "You see, Clare and Alan! Was I not right? Did I not promise to show you the manners of a courtlier generation? Come, children, and be introduced. This is Clare, Peter, your very own godchild, and here is Alan."

Alan, a good looking but rather awkward young giant of sixteen, moved jerkily forward pushing his sister in front of him. He was understood to say he was "tremendously bucked to meet you, sir."

But Clare engrossed Peter's attention. He knew her to be still in her early twenties, but although as slender as a wand she conveyed a convincing illusion of advanced maturity.

"I think it is your duty as my godfather to kiss me, Peter. I hope you do not mind."

Her face was more piquant than beautiful, but her smile was a delight; her eyes were very kind and her voice was soft and musical. Peter was equally embarrassed and enchanted. He caught a glimpse of Mark, hovering in the background, and despite the confusion besetting him he noted that his friend's face wore an expression of amused expectancy. While he was still hesitating what to do, two warm lips brushed his own, then with a gay laugh Clare tucked her hand under his arm and pulled him forward.

"Come along, people," she cried. "It's Cooky's night out and the food won't be worth eating if we don't hurry!"

On the way to the dining room she whispered confidentially, "I believe Mother willed you to kiss her hand. Don't you dare to tell me that you're in the habit of behaving like a cavalier. You had no right to succumb so easily. The way she has bragged about you is completely shocking."

She raised her voice suddenly. "Sit here, Peter; Alan, you take the other side! Now, you are safe."

Peter was too dazed to reply, to do anything, indeed, save obey the imperious young voice. He awoke to a realisation that he was seated between the two youngsters at the wrong end of the table,

and that his host and hostess had apparently accepted the situation.

"Sorry to kidnap your boy friend, Mother," said Clare. "No soup for me, Mervin" — to the servant — "I'm dieting, Peter." Then to Mrs. Landale, "You need disciplining after all that bragging, Mother. Besides, I'll probably be wanting him myself. I like his colouring. . . ." She turned to Peter. "John and I have been sunbathing all summer, but our sun is useless. We're only brown in patches. Are you tanned all over and is it true you don't dine till 8.30 in Malaya, Peter?"

He was prevented from replying by a booming question shot at him from his other side:

"Does India really want to quit the Empire, sir?"

"Take no notice of Alan," commanded Clare. "He ought to be muzzled. He pretends he is passionately interested in politics but he knows nothing about them really. Poor lad! It's his way of camouflaging the perturbations of adolescent sex curiosity. Would you believe it, Peter, his latest girl friend is a married woman fully twice his age."

"She's not a day older than you, and there's no cat in her composition," boomed Alan.

"My sweet lamb, all women are cats," retorted Clare. "Ask Peter."

"Yes, ask Peter," put in Mrs. Landale, wickedly. "Are all women cats, Peter?"

Peter raised his glass to his hostess and bowed slightly.

"No," he answered.

Alan sniggered loudly, but Clare was in no wise disconcerted.

"There you are, Alan!" she exclaimed. "Let that be a lesson to you. In a single word — in one brief monosyllable, Peter has achieved the highest eloquence. You would rattle and prattle for an hour and not say half as much! Consider too the subtly complimentary implications of his laconical harangue! No! In that tiny fragment of sound Peter has told Mother better than could the copious verbosity of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* that she worked on his plastic imagination so cleverly — thirty years ago — that he still retains at least one beautiful illusion. Mother, I salute you! I drink to an artist!"

"A sculptor!" corrected Peter, for the first time finding his tongue.

"Why sculptor?"

"Your mother carved in stone, my dear."

Mary Landale sighed and smiled, and Mark laughed heartily; but the girl turned with a lovely flush to her companion and said, "Although you have rebuked me, I consider you rather a darling. All the same, it is time you grew up. I am determined, now, to take you in hand."

"Not if I can help it," said Mark. "I warn you, Peter, Clare is one of the most heartless little vamps in Melbourne."

"And the worst magpie and limelight-robber in the State," growled Alan. "It's only when she holds her breath from sheer exhaustion that one gets a chance to slip a word in edgeways."

"An outrageous libel," Clare exclaimed. "I've never been exhausted in my life. As for being a vamp I'm not pretty and I know it, so I have to go all out or no man would take a bit of notice of me. Tell me why you have never married, Peter. Aren't the women of Malaya even reasonably intelligent, or are you still writhing in Mother's claws? Don't look so shocked, dear man, we all know Father beat you to it, and already I'm beginning to wonder at Mother's taste. Father is more showy, perhaps, but he's an open book. I think you would keep a woman guessing. If ever I marry that's the sort of husband I want."

"Clare!" said Alan in a terrible voice. "You are positively indecent. You've made our parents blush! Leave the table!"

Clare cocked a laughing eye at her brother and said indifferently, "The putrid little rotter suggests that we change the conversation, Peter. Oh well, anything to oblige. What are your views on marriage, Peter? Do you hold it is better to marry than be damned, or are you set on remaining a bachelor? I'll have a second helping of curry, Mervin, please. I find it rather nice. The curry is a compliment to you, Peter. But perhaps there is not enough chilli in it to please your jaded Oriental palate. I'm showing you the worst side of me, Peter, so that I sha'n't win your love on false pretences. Underneath my surface scum of frivol and drivel there flows a deep current of serious purpose and philanthropic idealism. I am the secretary of two charitable institutions and I'll want a cheque

presently, from you, for each. But Father is dying to talk to you — so is Mother. They've been flagging me persistently for half an hour or so. Be easy, darlings, your turn is coming. I've got to run away to a meeting presently. I'll be using the Cadillac, Father, for I promised to pick up Mrs Sedgwick. But I'll send it back and Alan can call for me in the Buick. Don't be later than eleven, Alan. Great heaven! it's nearly half past eight. I'll have to fly!"

"Thank God!" growled Alan.

"Don't get up, Peter! Bye-bye!" She dropped a kiss on his forehead, waved airily to the others, and vanished in a swirl of fluffy draperies. Landale's eyes followed her lovingly. Mary Landale caught Peter's bewildered glance and smiled.

"We gave up the vain struggle long ago," she murmured. "She rules this household with a rod of iron."

"Selfish little beast!" growled Alan.

"Alan," observed Mary, "is beyond question her most abject and untiring slave. But he is no philosopher, and he eternally complains."

"Clare," said Mark, "offers you a flashlight education, Peter. She epitomises and explains the world's progress since we were boys. The fathers and mothers of today are the survivors of the fledgling generation. Our children are our tyrants. They are good enough to lend us their latchkeys at times. But they regulate our functioning and they have placed us definitely on the shelf. When Clare was fourteen she knew more about the realities of life

than Mary will ever learn if she lives to be a hundred. Alan is firmly resolved that I shall cast my vote at the forthcoming Federal election for a candidate I have every reason to believe is a worthless sycophant and time-server, and a Socialist to boot."

"The other fellow is a dangerous reactionary," boomed Alan. "It is to men of his cold and narrow type that we owe the spread of Communism."

"Thanks, Alan, but we'll continue the argument another time, old chap."

The boy winced and retired into a sulky silence. Peter noted his humiliation and exerted himself to cover up the incident, gratuitously relating stories of the Orient which he thought might interest Alan. He had not approved the snub so suddenly administered to the lad by Mark. He felt Mary might be hurt by it as well as Alan, although she had not seemed to notice. When he paused at length, Mark, who seemed to have been waiting for an opportunity to speak, remarked, "You were about to say something, Mary?"

"Only that coffee will be served in the library," replied Mary, and she gracefully rose. "Don't stay too long over the port, Mark. All our rooms are smoke-rooms, Peter."

As Peter held open the door she smiled at him very engagingly, but she half turned as she smiled and her glance travelled back to her husband. Peter returned to the table feeling oddly isolated. Alan excused himself and withdrew, throwing a rather surly look at his father. Landale refilled Peter's glass and both men lighted cigars.

"We've been lucky in our children," said Landale, presently. "Alan is, of course, an opinionated young ass, but fairly sound *au fond*; he is ambitious and diligent. His attachment to Clare will probably carry him to a clean manhood. I am happy to think so because the habits of the young folk today affect masculine morale more detrimentally than that of the weaker sex. Authentic love can restore an innately good woman's virginity of soul, but it cannot recreate a man's respect for women."

Peter looked interested.

"An iconoclastic theory," he observed, "and highly debatable, I think, although I am not competent to dispute it. I gather from your remarks that Melbourne has not escaped the plague which seems to have spread over most of the civilised earth."

Mark shrugged his shoulders. "Melbourne is no better and no worse than London."

"Clare bewildered me," confessed Peter.

Landale nodded.

"Clare," he said, "continues to bewilder me. She is one of those blessed creatures whom nothing can hurt or harden. The gods denied her beauty but gave her balance for her portion, the most precious treasure in their power to bestow. She has enough sentiment to preserve her from cynicism; she is too fastidious to be snared by passion; she is too clear-sighted and just to condemn any human weakness, and she has a sense of humour that can as easily find food for mirth in mice as men. I hope to die, Peter, without discovering that girl's true opinion

of her father. She has, by the way, taken a great fancy to you."

"To me!" gasped Peter. "She was merely ragging me."

"She is absolutely incapable of the faintest shadow of pretence. More port, Peter?"

"Not another drop. I belatedly begin to realise that you have given me a wonderful dinner and a lot of the best wines I've tasted in my life."

"Then let's rejoin Mary, and be sure to praise her coffee. She is an expert in blending, and her beans come from all over the globe."

Mrs Landale was standing beside an open window. She motioned Peter with a gracious little gesture to her side and showed him a scene of moonlit loveliness that made him catch his breath: a broad spread of old-world garden, flanked with massed rows of towering hollyhocks, which fell away in shadowy terraces and merged insensibly into the softly sparkling waters of a purple sea.

"Don't let your coffee get cold, Mary. I am going to leave you two for a few minutes. I have to see Sir James Maldon. He may return with me."

As Mary poured out his coffee Peter looked at her fully and directly for the first time. Her figure, he thought, had lost little or nothing of the elegant petiteness of her youth. The years had dealt kindly also with the distracting prettiness of her face. It seemed as smooth and fair as ever; and as a flower distils perfume she still radiated charm. Her bobbed hair seemed as golden as ever and as thick;

but remembering her once long and abundant tresses he surged with a sudden detestation of the fashion to which they had been sacrificed. As she handed him his cup, eyes bluer than the sea looked straightly into his and immediately she spoke he felt that her honeyed voice with its unforgettable edge of huskiness could never lose its power to stir his heart.

"You have scarcely changed, Peter. Your hair is a little greyer, that is all."

"It seems only yesterday," he answered tenderly.

"Yesterday!" she echoed. "It is a life-time since you left us. I shall be forty-six next month. But you will not leave us again, will you, Peter? You have come home to stay?"

"My plans are nebulous. I should like to spend the rest of my days in Melbourne, but I must find something to do."

"Surely that can be arranged. Mark is simply dying to have you back in the business. Why should that surprise you? But if he has not already told you, I ought not to give him away. What do you think of my two chicks?"

"It is impossible to believe they are yours. You are younger than either of them."

Mary smiled at the unstudied compliment and smoothed her skirt across her knees. So a swan might have preened its plumage before admiring eyes. It was pleasing to know that Peter's devotion was still hers, and to feel that despite her approach to middle age she mattered greatly to a man, not her husband, although he mattered nothing to her at all. In the twenty-five years of Peter's absence she

had not once thought of him with a twinge of pity or regret. If she pitied him vaguely now, it was because it was part of her nature to sympathise with anybody who wanted something he could not get; because he was close and a rather striking personality; and because she believed he meant something rather big in her husband's life. The fact that he loved her was not essentially troublesome. Mary's enemies (if she had any) might have pronounced her selfish and self-indulgent, but they would not have accused her of excessive vanity. Her friends were accustomed to describe her as the sweetest and most placid thing on earth. She was stirred with a gentle wonder to reflect that she had gained (she did not pretend to deserve it) the enduring love of two strangely different men, both of whom she believed to be unusually strong and good. Peter, she complacently decided, could not and would not disturb her. She felt safe with him, safe from him. And it was not her fault that he loved her. She must not permit herself, therefore, to be disturbed. She desired nothing more from Destiny than that her life should extend indefinitely before her with the uninterrupted tranquillity she had hitherto known, sheltered from every sort of stress and storm. Women who liked excitement had always been inexplicably mysterious to her. But after all, there was the question of duty. Must she not do something for Peter? She became suddenly conscious of a dim sense of obligation to him.

"I wish I could read your thoughts," said Peter.

She started. "I have been dreaming," she confessed.

"Happy dreams?"

"We must find you a wife," said Mary. "It is high time you married and settled down."

Peter schooled himself to toy with the idea, and they discussed it for an hour, during which he watched her narrowly. He was a man of sound intelligence, but when the evening had gone she remained as impenetrable a problem to him as she had always been.

When Mark returned Peter rose, and he refused his host's offer to drive him back to his hotel. Mark accompanied him through the garden, but not until they reached the gate, where a noisy taxi waited, did either speak.

"Shall I see you tomorrow?" asked Mark.

"I think so," answered Peter vaguely. He added that he might telephone. Mark walked to the house with the gait of a tired man.

## CHAPTER FOUR

PETER awoke next morning conscious of an imperative urge to find something to do. The prospect of idle weeks filled him with apprehension and disgust. He was already tired of his holiday, although it was the first in a decade. The voyage from Malaya had given him all the rest he desired — if not as much as his physician had prescribed. His lean frame had recovered its spring. He felt strong and restless and discontented. Returning from a brisk stroll in the Fitzroy Gardens he breakfasted with appetite and glanced through the morning papers. Only the foreign cables interested him. What a mess seemed brewing for the sick old world, he thought. He tossed the papers aside and sought the smoking room. At the end of his second pipe he had practically decided to catch the first boat back to the East. There he had at least a place, a mine of his own, a job of work, dependents to supervise. Here nobody needed him, nor was there any living being on whose self-sufficiency he had a shadow of authority to trespass. He was an interloper, a stranger, almost an alien. Mary Landale required no other champion than her husband. Mark had astonishingly developed into a fine citizen, a good husband, a kind, perhaps a too-indulgent, father; a thinker, a philosopher. True, Mark was not a happy man. But Peter inclined to regard the

melancholy he had noted in his friend as a due punishment and a light one.

"We all have to pay," he muttered. "Mark could not expect to escape scot free." In any case, Mark must dree his own weird. It was not his, Peter's, business to interfere.

"A lady to see you, sir," announced a waiter.

Peter, confident of a mistake, followed the man into the lounge, to be greeted rapturously by Clare Landale, smartly attired in a grey golfing suit and looking much more attractive, fresh and vigorous than Peter had thought possible. She gave him a hard hand-grip and instantly proceeded to rush him off his feet:

"Peter dear," she addressed him, "I woke up this morning with the managing side of me ascendant. The family calls me Mrs Manager and scurries into hiding when these moods take me. I said to my inner self, Peter must be at a loose end so I'll map his day for him. Listen, we'll toddle up to Sassafras for lunch. We'll scan the landscape, eat early, slide back and strike Marjory Pelham at three. It's bridge and cocktails and you won't like it, but the experience, not the conversation, will be good for you; and we'll break away by five-thirty at latest, for we are dining with Mother and Mrs Lefroy — Father can't come — at Menzies', and we'll both have to dress. Get your hat, Peter — you won't want a coat — and we'll start at once. I have taken all your expostulations and excuses as read. They were wholly unconvincing. I brushed them aside without an effort. Hurry!"

Peter did not open his lips, and within a hundred seconds he was sitting beside the girl in a powerful single-seater Cadillac, heading for the Dandenong Mountains. Clare drove through the seething traffic like a veteran; and her ceaseless babble of small talk, which asked for no response, gave him leisure to order his ideas and look about about him. Lord! how the city had grown! Stretching miles of houses, shops and factories covered a countryside which he had known as bushland when a boy and had often rambled over with the pioneer's adventurous expectancy. He looked for the hill at whose marshy foot he had once found a spur-winged plover's nest and on whose summit a mother magpie had attacked him. He found only a high skyline of bricks and mortar dented with an occasional fuming chimney. Loneliness descended on him like a pall. The world had outstripped and indifferently deserted him. A new generation had transformed the face of nature, and obliterated the landscape and landmarks of his youth. His own generation was passing and he was no longer in tune with or a part of it. Mary was absolutely contented with her lot. Mark was sad, but, all things remembered, he deserved to be; and, in any event, whatever the cause of his melancholy he had Mary always for his consolation. Peter had nobody — nothing. In the land of his birth he was a solitary ghost whose comings or goings were meaningless to the eyes that might casually observe them. Peter gazed steadily before him, but his sight was turned inward, and only when a small white-gloved hand fell, not without intention, on his knee, did he fight a way from his abstraction.

He became aware that trees, not houses, now lined the roadway, and that the blue haze at which he had been staring, without consciously seeing, masked the contours of a repeated line of noble hills. Clare had fallen silent. How long had she been silent, he wondered. He stole a glance at her profile and was surprised to note its stern composure. But how could an old fogey hope to entertain so young a girl? What on earth could he speak to her about? He must make an effort. It was not fair to requite her kindness and the sympathy he half-ashamedly sensed in her by sitting like a dummy. He was still searching for a subject when her voice came to him, soft but clear, and pitched in a tone he had not previously heard her use.

"No use grouching, Peter. It's a lovely old planet and man can never spoil more than a tiny part of it. And we are leaving man behind us. See those hills and how glad they are to greet us. They can't keep from smiling and winking at us through the mist. Mountains are my religion. I always take my troubles to the nearest highland, and when I reach the summit I haven't any left. It's funny, but I usually feel least lonely when I'm most alone, and it's then that I can most easily stop being sorry for myself — and other people. I suppose it's because when I am quite alone, physically alone I mean (one is never anything else in spirit, is one?), I find less difficulty in realising my enormous unimportance. You've no idea how comforting it is to me, Peter, to realise my stupendous unimportance. I giggle madly every time I make the discovery anew, and I believe that if ten other people were

to make the same discovery simultaneously we'd shake the world off its axis with our laughter."

"Did you say you are only twenty-four?" Peter asked with smiling irony, "or did your mother tell me?"

The girl threw him an exultant smile.

"That's the spirit!" she approved. "To return the compliment, let me tell you that your delicate and tactful snub has proved the infallibility of my special prescription for the blues, and incidentally, that you are a perfectly normal man. Normal means ordinary in my vocabulary. The dose of sentimentality I administered all but nauseated you, didn't it, my dear?"

Peter, at all times a man of few words, felt unequal to a prolonged combat with a glib-tongued young woman, whom he suspected of possessing a kind heart. He resented being mothered, but he answered quietly, "It was not in my mind to snub you, Clare. But I have no manners. Your mother, doubtless, warned you of that. As a young man I was a source of amusement to my friends for the unconsidered bluntness of my speech. Have I accomplished an acceptable apology?"

"None was needed," she assured him.

They had begun to ascend the mountain, and as they turned into the upper road Peter looked back into the valley and confessed its loveliness unspoiled. He saw more habitations than he remembered; and more numerous plantations of exotic trees; he noted, too, the excellent surface of a highway which had formerly presented grave difficulties to travellers;

but otherwise the gracious panorama was unchanged. When they had climbed about a thousand feet Clare swung into a side track that led through an avenue of eucalyptus, musk and tree-ferns to the crest of a spur that commanded a magnificent view of Melbourne, Port Phillip and the dim shore-lines of Westernport. Alighting from the car she took Peter to the highest platform of a Lookout Tower, and with a silent gesture invited him to gaze. For nearly half an hour the wondrous spectacle enchained them. Then the girl, growing restless, stole away from her unconscious companion and slipped into the Bush. Peter found her later seated in the car sorting into a bouquet a tangled mass of clematis and scarlet erica.

"It is for your bedroom," she informed him. "I have asked the flowers to tell you night and morning till they die that the best and only proper place an Australian can inhabit is Australia."

Peter eyed her thoughtfully. He might have known, he reflected, that Mary's daughter must have sweetness for her dower. But why not beauty too? Was Clare's comparative homeliness of face — of course she was lovely when she smiled — a disappointment to Mary, he wondered.

Mother-love, however, might blind a woman to her child's defects. He decided that, probably, it would. And, after all, Clare was not ugly. One might even grow to like the quaint irregularity of her features, in time; and that red-lipped mouth (probably painted), with its quirking quivering mobility and its attractive trick of seeming to caress the words it uttered, was quite interesting in its way.

"Not a bit like mother, am I, Peter?"

Peter started violently.

"No," he said. "No."

The decisiveness of his negation was eminently uncomplimentary, but Clare's expression was illegible to him. Her slim fingers were racing to complete their task. Peter, standing beside the car, watched them steadily. He was thinking that the girl appeared to have an uncanny gift of reading her neighbour's mind. Subconsciously he had noted it before.

Clare, having nobly suppressed an impulse to unrestrained laughter, tossed the debris of her bouquet aside.

"There, it's finished!" She placed the flowers in the boot behind her. "Get in, Peter, and we'll see how Sassafras can feed us."

As he slammed the door the car shot away. Entering an earth road it roared at high speed over the dividing spur, then dropped smoothly down to Sherbrooke Forest. Clare drew up before a little village road-house and they were presently discussing chicken salad in a room that overlooked a steep ravine, fledged charmingly with fleecy red-tipped eucalypts. It was almost a silent meal. Peter vainly sought for something worth saying, but he had a feeling that the girl found his dumbness not unpleasing; and as she seemed to have been caught by a musing mood he soon abandoned the quest. Immediately the homeward drive began, however, she demanded his attention.

"You won't lose your heart to any of the younger set you meet this afternoon," she told him. "But you ought to study them, Peter dear, and try to understand them. After all it's the set that will be running the world after you have gone. We may be despicable, and I know that it's your pose, and probably your sincere desire, to ignore us; but we are not negligible. We are your sole inheritors, you see; and however much we may shortcome your estimate of what we ought to be, are we more to blame for that than you — and your generation? We could argue that our nastiest faults, which you condemn so loftily, are the product of your indulgence and indifference and indolence. I guess you could have made a better job of us if you had really tried. Don't you think so, Peter dear?"

"No girl," responded Peter coldly, "with a moth — such parents as yours has any right to reflect on the generation to which I am not ashamed to belong."

"First blood!" cooed Clare. "But you forget that our mother — I mean our parents — " glancing at him wickedly, "let us run wild from the cradle. Are we, therefore, to be held solely responsible that we smoke like chimneys, drink like fishes, have the morals of rabbits albeit tempered with advanced views on birth-control, and do not hope to go to Heaven when we die because we think there is sure to be more amusing company in Hades?"

Peter flushed darkly under his tan.

"You are sketching real people, perhaps, but people you dislike as thoroughly as I could."

"You are acute — gallant too. I should be grateful to you for excluding me; but all the same, Peter, you are only partly right. I neither despise nor dislike my set, the generation to which I am not ashamed to belong" — her glance mocked him again — "because I understand them. I want you to understand them too."

"To what end, Clare?"

"Isn't understanding a necessary first step to friendly commerce with one's kind? How can you live happily in Australia — and you ought never to leave Australia again, Peter — without friends who, even if they aren't exactly angels, may be willing to like and cherish you? And how can you win friends if you declare half the adult population pariah and insult the older half by treating its beloved offspring with disdain? My parents may be foolish, Peter dear, but miraculous as it may seem to you, they take pride in me. And it's much the same with the parents of every member of — ahem! — the generation to which I am not ashamed to belong. With all our faults they love us still and they will assuredly detest you if you despise us!"

"Your logic is irresistible, my dear." Peter's eyes were twinkling. "I shall strive to be less bearish. Tell me something about your friends; the ones, I mean, we are to meet today."

Clare's brows puckered in a frown.

"You are not an easy person to manage, Peter. You have a nasty selfish sly evasive and secret sense of humour. You prefer to laugh up your sleeve, and rather at one than with one. When one imagines

you have been nicely and firmly pinned down you flirt your coat-tails and flutter safely out of reach. Never mind, laugh at me if it pleases you. Nothing can stop me from being your mentor. Obviously I have given you an opening for a soothing compliment."

"I like the way you taste your words, Clare. It's rather fascinating. Next to your eyes your mouth is your chiefest charm."

"How did you come to learn that deepest and most closely guarded secret of my sex?"

"What secret?"

"That no woman living would not rather be praised for the beauty of her body than for the beauty of her mind."

Peter did not reply.

"You derived your deadly wisdom from experimenting with my mother," accused the girl. "Or watching others experiment." She added, almost in a whisper, "Don't hate me for saying that, Peter. The imp in me came uppermost before I knew."

Peter hardened and softened in the drawing of a breath. "Well! what about these friends of yours?" he demanded.

Clare pursed up her lips and immediately began to hold forth — insensibly diminishing the speed of the car.

"We'll take Marjory first, as she's our hostess. She's twenty-four and a blonde; the bored beauty type, with the canker of an unfathomable sorrow slowly but surely eating up her heart. It's not indigestion, Peter, merely the correct attitude for a

girl who has felt obliged after less than two years of wedded bliss to divorce her husband in order to make an honest woman of her best friend. When she mislays her anguish she's rather a dear and she plays an AI game of bridge. Next comes Elinor Seaton. She is verging on thirty-four and confesses twenty-eight. She will roll her big black eyes at you and sum you up in half a second. She's extremely clever, a man-eater and a natural gambler, the sort that doubles an original three call as a matter of principle. She's a widow, rich and troublesome. She's at present in love with Jim Fortescue, and the betting is even money that she will land him before Christmas. Next, Claudia Kennedy. You'll probably like her, Peter. She is small and dainty and winsome, with lovely azure eyes. She's far and away the most vicious woman I know. Having gobbled up a perfectly good husband — who worships the ground she treads on — she is feeding at present on small boys. Alan is her victim of the moment. Next comes Peggy Blake. She is one of Melbourne's smartest girls, and I'll hand it to her, her taste in dress is flawless. But I don't like her. She has a sloping chin, and a loose tongue. The scandal she dispenses is not merely indecent, it's mean. Daisy Forrester — stand forward! Daisy is thirty-one; she has three children, and a house that is a real home. Her hair is brick-red. She has green eyes and she is heading straight for the divorce-court with Arthur Richards as co-re, which is a pity, for Arthur is a little toad, and Sam Forrester is a real man and Daisy loves him. But Sam, unfortunately, is a troglodyte who thinks no married woman can have a boy friend and keep

chaste, and, of course, Daisy won't stand for that. So she's hell bent on proving him right in order to preserve her dignity. Well, so much for the women. There will be only two men at the party, I believe. Jim Fortescue and Charlie Rogers. Jim, of course, will be escorted by Elinor Seaton, but she will drop him on the mat. He's a big-boned and rather pleasing youth with black hair, grey eyes and a profound conviction he was born to save Australia from the Bolshies. He's already had two unlucky shots at Parliament but expects his next candidature to be successful. When he first returned from Oxford I seriously contemplated leading him to the altar but backed out when I had tasted the texture of his self-esteem—an article, Peter, that might be used to advantage for armour-plating battleships but would be sure to spoil a honeymoon. Last and least comes Charlie Rogers — a rather nasty piece of work. He's a young old bachelor with a witty bitter tongue. No fashionable party is complete without him. He brings to each gathering the most outrageous gossip about those he has just left. Not that he ever says anything directly that is venomous. He relates odious circumstances in a smirking half-apologetic way, and by grinning villainously in the right places suggests without words that you draw his unexpressed conclusion. His method forbids him to complete a story. He leaves all his tales suspended in the air. A master of innuendo. We all pretend to adore the little sneak, but most of us are genuinely afraid of him. I must admit, though, I owe him some of the best laughs I have ever en-

joyed. Here endeth the first lesson! Bored, Peter?"

"No! — Are my clothes suitable for your party, Clare?"

"Absolutely! Mine, on the contrary, are all wrong. But I am cultivating a reputation for oddity. One must have a mask. We are almost there. Feeling nervous?"

"No."

"I should hate to dam the flood of your garrulity, old thing. But might I just slip in one tiny word of counsel, or perhaps I'd better call it entreaty, Peter dear?"

"Certainly." Their eyes met and they both smiled happily.

"I had intended," said Clare, "to beg you not to judge my pals too harshly. But that grin of yours proved an admonition needless. I begin to think that you'll enjoy them."

"You were not afraid that I might judge harshly—but that I might behave rudely. Be easy, little lady; I shall treat your friends like egg-shell porcelain."

Clare blushed. Next moment the car stopped in a garden drive before the porch of an unimposing and somewhat shabby-looking villa whose interior, nevertheless, proved pleasantly artistic. The people Clare had described were gathered in a large card-room; and one bridge four had already started business. The matter of Peter's presentation occupied a few seconds only, so airily did his mentor conduct the ceremony. He had a feeling that the

nods which greeted him were as casually indifferent as they seemed. Clare, however, was received warmly and everybody had a story to tell her that could hardly wait the telling. That she held an important place in the set was immediately obvious. Peter possessed a chameleon-like faculty of fitting unobtrusively into his surroundings. He identified himself with a huge high-backed chair and proceeded to study the company, sipping a cocktail with serene solemnity. Some of the ladies found his composure so enigmatic that they drew him into a rubber — for investigation. They discovered only that he called the full value of his hands, and that his finesses were unerring. Peter discovered that Clare had portrayed her friends with the unemotional accuracy of a camera. Except in speech (he hardly opened his lips), he made himself agreeable to all who noticed him by accepting every cocktail offered him, by nodding in the right place and by smiling intelligently at every witticism. When Clare was ready to depart, invitations were showered on her — and many included Peter.

In the car Clare said, "You made a hit, Peter, but I'm afraid it will cost you a headache. It's my fault. I overlooked telling you that we never count each other's cocktails."

"Apparently," he observed, "you made an exception in my favour. I am perfectly comfortable, thank you, Clare."

The girl dropped him at the Windsor and went to her club to dress. When she arrived at Menzies she found Peter in the lounge sipping a lonely cock-

tail. She smiled wickedly. "A proclamation of independence?" she asked, "Or a snub?"

The arrival of her mother saved him the need to reply. During the meal Clare contrived to make everybody sparkle, but at the theatre she permitted the flares she had lighted to perish unremarked. Peter was thus granted leisure to enjoy the restful placidity of Mary Landale. It pleased him to contrast her demeanour with that of every other woman he had known. More than ever the agelessness of Mary's physical beauty seemed to him to be the product of an angelic spiritual quietude. Merely to be near her was a balm to his sick and envious consciousness. He passed an evening that was almost happy, for none trespassed on his dreams.

Mary Landale was secretly designing a costume for a garden-party at which she desired to shine; and Mrs Lefroy, who had eaten a hearty dinner, was blissfully content to be ignored.

Clare stared across the footlights weaving new patterns of thought. The problem of Peter interested her more than that transacted on the stage, but the particular reason of her abstraction was that she had begun to suspect a problem in herself.

## CHAPTER FIVE

PETER fully expected Clare's interest in him to evaporate as speedily as it originated. He had few personal illusions and no vanity. None knew better than he that life had unfitted him to be a suitable playmate for such a pleasure-loving featherhead as he conceived the girl to be. The years he had spent among crude hard-working jungle-folk had taught him to think, but they had stripped him of the social graces and amenities. His proper place was the jungle. He would return to it, and the sooner the better. He made the decision at breakfast and found Clare awaiting him in the hotel lounge. As on the previous morning she took possession of him, rushed him off his feet, and ordered every moment of his time. Peter found her managing, proprietary and bullying methods surprisingly pleasant, and he offered only a pretence of resistance. There was after all no particular need to hurry back to Malaya. Clare would be sure to drop him very soon and he could then finalise his plans.

The girl's enthusiasm for mentorship, however, showed no signs of abating. She continued day after day to draw him into all her pastimes and engagements, and she contrived also to evoke in him a spirit of hospitality that found expression in a series of parties which she organised in his name and at which she presided.

As the weeks drifted by a curiously unbalanced relationship developed between the pair. Clare regarded him partly as a puzzle rather important to unravel, and partly as an adopted responsibility involving her in indefinable and vaguely troubling obligations. Peter regarded her quite simply as a capricious and precocious child, whom he must always placate because she was Mary Landale's daughter. After the first surprising excursion in her company he took her for granted and made no further effort to explore her mind. He assumed her pertinacious interest in him to be a pose — of which she would eventually tire. When she tired he would unobtrusively depart. She meant nothing to him, and he was quite incurious of her opinion of him. His attitude alternately amused and exasperated Clare, but she could not shake him out of it; and his meek reactions to her mockeries, his obtuseness and his many little gaucheries, began to excite her maternal instinct. Insensibly she slipped into a habit of protecting him — even from her own occasional inclination to shock or to abuse him.

Her friends for a time were less indulgent. Clare's constancy to the "Malayan bear" (a nickname they conferred on Peter at an early date) did not altogether please them, and he became the butt of their choicest witticisms. But Peter was proof against such attacks. He saw and smiled and retorted with a smiling silence that denoted self-control beyond their understanding. There is no profit in pelting shafts at a man who receives them without anger. When they realised that his indifference was sin-

cere and that he was incapable of malice, Peter began to acquire a sort of popularity — the sort that does not expand into affection but ensures tolerance. Clare's set ended by accepting him as a necessary adjunct to Clare and they treated him thenceforward as a negligible quantity.

The life into which Clare had whirled Peter was too hectic to please his taste, but it had the interest of novelty. While Clare intermittently studied and instructed him he assiduously studied her set and strove to understand them. One by one they passed through the crucible of his analysis and were critically examined, weighed and judged. Only one of them incurred his unmitigated condemnation — a modernist named Foley who painted strange pictures and wrote stranger verse. He was, probably, the most petted youth of his era and wielded a sway as wide as poisonous. Peter had learned by experience that hordes of brilliant and poisonous degenerates pervade the capitals of Europe and America. But in Melbourne Foley reigned alone. His vogue, therefore, was disproportionately exalted. Peter thought it had entangled Clare, for she talked of him frequently in terms of admiration and was eager for Peter to meet the prodigy. The encounter was deferred owing to Foley's absence on holiday; but one afternoon, arriving late at a party where they expected to be entertained at bridge, Clare and Peter found the entire company grouped around the figure of a fat young man, slopped drunkenly in a large armchair.

"Oh Peter!" Clare gasped excitedly. "It is Foley!"

Their hostess greeted them with marked coldness. "I was hoping you'd arrive early or stay away completely," she informed them. "You have broken his trance. He was destroying the devil!"

Clare whispered an abject apology while Peter surveyed the centre of attraction.

Foley seemed to be in a stupor. His beady little bloodshot eyes were dull and unintelligent. His thick lips were parted in a meaningless smile and he uttered queer slobbering noises — reminiscent to Peter, of a sty. But he was sufficiently alert and thirsty to absorb the cocktails handed to him in succession by his disciples; and it appeared that an addition to his audience could stimulate him, for presently he sat erect and fixed on Peter a frankly malevolent stare. There was a moment of breathless stillness and then the Oracle began to speak. In a singularly melodious voice he invited Peter to consider and confess the immeasurable obscenity of his immodesty in believing himself to be fit to breathe the same atmosphere as Foley. . . . His mind, however, wandered quickly to impersonal abstractions. He savored the word "immodesty"; and after repeating it many times he began to discourse on the "transcendental modesty" of man who humbly delights to call himself an insect but has, nevertheless, invented an Omnipotent God and an almost equally potent Devil to wage battle for his soul, which if won by God will be pampered through Eternity and if won by the Devil will be fed on brimstone and griddled on burning bricks for ever.

The harangue was never uninteresting and it was

occasionally punctuated with periods of polished eloquence. The disciples listened spellbound and entranced. Peter, however, was quickly nauseated, and observing that Foley had forgotten him he backed out of the circle and stole noiselessly away. When Clare, more than an hour later, rejoined him — he had waited in her car — he had surmounted his disgust and was ready to echo, in satiric vein, her plaudits of the monster. But the girl was in thoughtful mood and kept silent until they drew up before the Windsor, where Peter had to dress.

“You were silly to leave,” she said at last. “He was rather wonderful — after he had warmed up.”

“I thought he might be,” said Peter drily.

His tone irritated her. “I can see you disapprove of him, but you cannot deny his power. He is a pig no doubt — but a genius, too. One can't have everything.”

“If a genius — an evil genius, Clare. But I am not questioning your right to worship at his shrine.”

“I worship the intellect — not the man,” she declared with warmth. “We should take such gifts as he offers and disregard the source. I cannot alter facts. I cannot reform the world.”

“Is that a reason why you should countenance the deformation of the world?”

“Aren't you rather narrow, Peter?”

“Old fashioned, too,” he admitted gravely. “I believe in God, and because Foley is one of God's creatures I have tried to reconcile myself to his existence but without succeeding. Don't let us dis-

cuss him any further, Clare. I am incompetent to appreciate the qualities in him that you admire."

"You'd better hurry off and change or we'll be late for dinner." The girl smiled at him, but her anger was not appeased; and until Peter returned, her thoughts continued alternately to revile his limitations and to wonder why it always hurt her to be out of tune with a mind so inflexibly conservative.

Her mentorship suffered shipwreck in her father's house that evening and for a reason that Clare, if it had been predicted one hour earlier, would have derided as absurd. After dinner Mark and Peter had lingered at the table, and Clare, becoming impatient of her mother's unexciting conversation, had returned to the dining-room to detach them from their port. At the door Peter's voice arrested her. "I agree with your diagnosis," she heard him say, "But not with your conclusion. In my opinion the modern world is disordered rather than diseased, wanton rather than wicked, voluptuous rather than depraved. It has not condescended to worship false gods because it will not worship any gods. But its cynicism is an excuse for laziness. It yearns for wealth and shrinks from work. It is equally covetous and indolent. It is listless even in its lusts. It has no ardours, no passions, no enthusiasms. A sick world might be worth healing, Mark; a bad world might be worth beating. A degenerate world might be worth destroying. But what can be done with a world that is bored?"

Clare stepped into the room, the light of battle

smouldering in her eyes, but she merely reminded her father that Mrs Landale was alone. They trooped to the library and a maid followed with the coffee, which Mary dispensed with her usual air of a priestess performing a sacred rite. This ceremony over, Clare immediately attacked Peter.

"I overheard you denouncing the modern world to Father as not worth saving because it is bored."

Peter nodded indifferently, his eyes fixed on Mary who had begun to knit.

"Peter is not as pessimistic as he sounds," observed Mark. "Between ourselves I suspect him of an ambition to regenerate mankind."

Words trembled for utterance on Clare's lips, but Mary's soft sweet voice anticipated her.

"The world," she said oracularly, "has grown tired of Christ and the older prophets and is waiting restlessly, eagerly, but with increasing hopelessness for the apparition of a new Redeemer." She was about to add: "I read that the other day in an American magazine," but she caught Peter's glance and was astonished into silence.

His eyes had kindled to a blaze and he sprang up from his chair exclaiming, "You wonderful woman! You have solved the riddle of our age and generation!"

He strode to the fireplace and turned to face the others.

"Last year," he said, "I traversed Asia and Europe. In both continents hope in man or faith in God only fitfully survives. Economic conditions were universally deplorable and have not altered

for the better since. All over the world — the masses are disturbed, unhappy, cynical, steeped in sullen apathy and discontent — waiting, wanting, expecting they know not what. The poor are envious and morose. Pleasures too easily accessible, too wantonly indulged, have become spears to keep despair at bay. Gaiety has disappeared from the globe. Humour has become sardonic and diseased. Even in this isolated country things are much the same. Clare has shown me one side of your life — the best and perhaps the worst of it. Her most charming friends are thieves of time, pickpockets of eternity. Their hardest task is to consume the unappreciated hours. Their lives are spiritually purposeless. They marry but they beget no children. Your industrial population demands employment and high wages but scorns work. Thousands strike at shadowy provocation. Stupid and meaningless class-hatreds divide a community that is united only by a sense of frustration and loss. It is probable I exaggerate. Here as elsewhere there are, there must be, many kind and noble people of all classes who still converse with God. But here as elsewhere the unselfish are outnumbered by the hosts of greed. Happily the very greediest are sickening of their diet. Materialism ceases to content them. Their boredom is proof of it. Humanity is evidently ripening swiftly for tremendous change. In a little while — tomorrow, next month, next year — it will turn back at the bidding of some master spirit to the truths it has so long scoffed at and abjured — to the God it has dethroned." He flung out his hands with a sudden gesture of aban-

don. "Indeed we need a new Redeemer, Mary, but shall we recognise him when he comes?"

His volcanic outburst and the passionate question that formed its climax stirred his audience deeply. Each felt impelled to answer the challenge but shrank shyly from the effort, and a silence fell that was prolonged. Mary Landale stared dumbly at her idle knitting-needles. She was a little afraid of the unknown, unsuspected, being that Peter's vehemence had revealed. It would now be forever impossible to tell him that the world's need of a "new Redeemer" was not an original idea and certainly not one of her beliefs. The truth was, she found the world entirely satisfying. It had always given her what she required of it. If redemption implied change she did not wish mankind to be redeemed, and the notion that a change might be imminent dismayed her. Mark, who had followed Peter's fervent jerky speech with breathless interest, was transported by its concluding question into a rich realm of speculative thought. His constructive mind was already beginning to treat the problem as a practical equation, to arrange material and to consider ways and means.

Clare, alone, had divined the inspiring cause of Peter's eruption. Her mother all unwittingly had set a spark to powder long stored in Peter's mind. Clare had seen the fuse flash and flame and had anticipated an explosion; nevertheless the force and noise of it astonished her. Had Peter the stuff in him of a reformer, she wondered, or would the fire so quickly lighted as suddenly die down — leaving

him bereft of zeal, a little ashamed, secretly, of his emotionalism, the same enigmatic, dry and rather pathetic creature she had petted and mothered for so many weeks. She heard her father say, "You have given us a nut to crack, old man. I concur in every word you said. It wants thinking over, though. Perhaps there is something we could do."

She saw Peter's glance withdraw itself unwillingly from Mary's face (which reflected nothing of its owner's anxious thoughts) and heard him say, "There is always something can be done by men who see and have faith. Don't you think so, Mary?"

Some new quality had come into his voice which Clare tried vainly to define; eagerness perhaps — but eagerness tempered with a deep gravity.

Mrs Landale was secretly flustered by Peter's appeal. She caught at his words like a drowning swimmer but she echoed them like a Delphic priestess, and her lovely voice seemed to give them a cosmic meaning.

"Always — by men who see and have faith," she repeated, and to escape further embarrassing appeals she rose and, sweetly excusing herself, glided exquisitely from the room.

Clare also remembered presently that she had letters to write. She went straight to her mother's room. Mrs Landale had established herself in a comfortable lounge chair and to all appearances was knitting tranquilly. But Clare eyed her steadily, and at length, having dropped a stitch, she put down her work and looked up.

"You know I cannot bear you staring at me like that," she gently complained. "What is the matter with you, my dear?"

"Matter!" the girl echoed stormily. "Are you pretending you are unaware of having lighted a conflagration? Have you forgotten Father's theological obsessions? As for Peter Gaunt — he is worse than Father. When you gave him that stuff about the New Redeemer he shot off like a rocket, and Father went with him — up, up into the blue. They are probably planning a monster revivalist meeting at the moment."

"I am sure your fears are ungrounded, my dear," responded Mary. She added uneasily, "It might have been wiser in you to have remained with them, Clare."

Clare shrugged her shoulders. "I couldn't have kept my tongue still," she explained. "And any sort of opposition, even ridicule, would have merely fed the fire. We'll be lucky if we're not the laughing-stock of Bayton presently."

Mary's eyes were troubled but she resolutely shook her head. "You really ought to try to curb your imagination. You exaggerate terribly. Your molehills are always mountains. . . ." Unexpectedly the fight went out of her and her voice faded into plaintive diminuendo. "Who could have guessed that Peter was that kind of man? Truly, Clare, he frightened me. He looked — most unusual. I wonder could he be a little mental — do you think?" The last words were a whisper.

Clare ruled out the suggestion with scornful

emphasis. "The trouble with Peter," she declared, "is that he has in him a lot of the raw material of fanaticism; he is a man of absolutely one idea — you! He has set you up as an idol on Olympus. There you sit, lotus-crowned, forever enthroned in heavenly peace and majesty, divinely contemplative, completely unapproachable. Alas! Peter's idol came suddenly, gloriously alive tonight: only for thirty seconds or so, but long enough to teach him the meaning of the universe! How was he to know, poor single-minded idiot, that his heavenly messenger was just my dear pretty little mummie valiantly making conversation to please an honoured guest? By the way, dear, where did you get that New Redeemer stuff?"

"From the *Spirit Herald*, Clare. It's over there on the table. You'll find what I quoted to Peter in a panel on the front page. That's how I remembered it. I only bother with the insets as a rule. They are so nicely printed I can read them without glasses. And, after all, those insets always contain the choicest bits. Truly, Clare, I intended to tell him about the *Spirit Herald* — but there wasn't time. He was so quick and startling; and afterwards I simply didn't dare. His eyes were like — like — like swords," she concluded helplessly.

Clare had found the magazine and was reading it. When she had finished she tore out the front page and placed it, folded neatly, in her puff bag.

Mary glanced at her apprehensively. "If anybody does tell him, it should be I," she urged unsteadily.

Clare stooped down and kissed her mother on the cheek.

"Don't worry, Goosiekins; it would be useless for anybody to tell him anything — now," she said. "And perhaps, after all, nothing may come of it. Somehow, now that I have simmered down I can't see Peter or Father filling the role of a New Redeemer. Can you, Mother dear?"

Mary smiled charmingly. She was inexpressibly relieved that her daughter had "simmered down." She need no longer fear a restless night.

## CHAPTER SIX

LEFT to themselves the men lighted pipes and lounged in comfortable abandon. Occasionally they glanced at one another speculatively, each wondering quite how serious the purpose of the other might be. As Peter's normal calm returned he became conscious of a faint embarrassment, and began to wish himself away. But Mark was embarrassed, too, and the older man's self-consciousness was the more acute; it was he who broke the silence. He coughed nervously and said, "I wonder if it's the same with you as with me, Peter? I found nothing startling or even unfamiliar in what Mary said — although the subject has never been discussed between us. What I felt was that she had clarified and crystallised thoughts, authentically my own, which had previously been formless and confused."

"It's more than probable, Mark, that all three of us have been thinking along closely parallel lines for quite a time — half our lives, perhaps. And if we three, why not thousands of others?"

"Quite so. And if we were to seek out those thousands of others and bring them together, organise and harness them, we would have a machine capable of doing much."

"Precisely."

"It would cost a deal of money, Peter."

"How much?"

Mark was vague. "Thousands, I should think. No doubt we could make a start with a comparatively small amount."

"I have about £8,000 lying idle," remarked Peter.

"I could put up more than that," said Mark. "But before we resolve ourselves into a committee of ways and means we ought to think out and elaborate a sound and practical scheme. Define our objectives and all that sort of thing."

Peter smiled whimsically: "Draw up a prospectus, you mean?"

"And draft a constitution." Mark's eyes were full of laughter. "Since the world began, old man, did two company promoters ever before collaborate for a queerer flotation? How would this go? Mankind Redemption Syndicate. No liability. Capital, the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth, divided into 1,600,000,000 shares of one saved soul each. How would you assess the sterling value of a saved soul, Peter?"

Peter ignored the jesting query. "To accomplish redemption we should have a Redeemer," he said musingly.

"Only one, Peter? Christ had to work overtime two thousand years ago. The world's population has increased prodigiously since Calvary. To get results today we ought to have a dozen Redeemers at least. Hundreds would be better. Thousands, better still. Do I sound irreverent? You will not think so long if you care to listen."

"Fire ahead, Mark."

“At least once in the life of every normal decent man, too often only in his callow youth, he hears a call to serve and save humanity. You, I, all of us, have heard that call. While we were still able to hear it we dreamed many dear and noble dreams — dreams that made us yearn to endure, to suffer and to die, that others might laugh and love and live. Some do these lovely things; serve and give and suffer and even yield their lives. The many leave the call unanswered utterly until they lose the power to hear it and, even too, the power to dream. They are to be pitied, Peter, more than blamed, and they do not merit our disdain. We have laboured for a dozen centuries to make the pathway of idealism difficult to tread. The training that we give our children has no stronger purpose than to stifle altruism and to quench the glowing selfishness of youth. We teach them almost from the cradle that they must be hard and selfish to survive. Our industries are soul-consuming monsters. All commerce is a ruthless war. We fling our young into the vortex as soon as they are fledged. In that seething whirlpool they encounter many hands outstretched to clutch and strangle — few to save. Buffeted, bruised and beaten, compelled to fight or perish, they struggle to preserve themselves and they spend their days in cruel battle with the brothers they had formerly aspired to serve.”

“And your conclusion, Mark? What is your conclusion?”

“That men of our age, Peter, are not qualified to redeem mankind. The task belongs to youth, to

the flaming zeal, the radiant energy, the lustrous, single-minded faith of unspoiled youth."

"Where shall we find this unspoiled youth, my optimistic friend?"

"The raw material is omnipresent, but wherever we may look outside the creche and kindergarten we shall find it in various stages of corruption and decay. We ought to start from the beginning, Peter. Every babe is a potential redeemer. But as soon as our social system seizes him it commences to corrode his potency. One plan would be to rescue a number of carefully selected infants from the system and bring them to maturity rigidly defended from contact with the destroying acids of materialism. I'm inclined to believe, Peter, that if we could isolate a thousand boys and give them the right sort of training we should liberate a force competent to shatter the sordid basis of our so-called civilisation."

"Your plan would need a mint of money, Mark. The little bit of capital we could contribute would be a mere drop in the bucket."

"Yes," said Mark, in a discouraged tone. "It's quite unpractical, of course. We'd require about a million to give it a reasonable chance."

"And we should be doddering old men before we could hope to get results."

Peter was watching Mark intently now.

Mark shook his head. "Whatever scheme we finally hit on, Peter, will be sure to have that fault. The fact is we'd be foolish to tackle this job cherishing the faintest hope that we would live to gloat over its success."

Peter's eyes twinkled as he added, "Or to apologise for its collapse." He went on after a moment, "That aspect is rather attractive when one comes to think of it. To labour for the benefit of unborn generations, without prospect of reward or punishment, praise or blame. It would be apt to keep us in good conceit with ourselves, eh Mark? Stuff of heroes, what?"

"Men have died for less beautiful ideas," urged Mark defensively. He had a feeling he was being subtly mocked or challenged.

"But are we capable of devoting the rest of our lives to this one, Mark?" Peter yawned and stood up. "You are three years my senior — but I'm forty-seven and already I get rheumatic twinges now and then. . . . We want to be very sure of ourselves before we start burning our boats: you especially, for you have a family to consider. . . . Most people would regard us as a pair of lunatics, I suppose."

"They would," sighed Mark. "Confound them."

They walked in silence to the gate. Then Peter spoke again.

"We'd both have to work like tigers, Mark, and I should have to live on the smell of an oiled rag. Needs thinking over, doesn't it?"

"But there's no hurry, Peter. When we have threshed out a perfect plan it will be time enough to decide. And that will take a lot of doing, I'm afraid. We didn't get very far tonight."

"Not very far," assented Peter. "But we cleared some ground. Sweet dreams, old man!"

“Sweet dreams!” echoed Mark. He returned pensively to the house. Peter’s handclasp had been warm and firm, his tone almost affectionate in bidding him good-night. Why, then, did he feel as though his friend had judged him in the balance and found him wanting? He decided, on reflection, that his imagination had deceived him. His nerves must be out of order. To be depressed without reason indicated sickness of some sort. A man ought to be strong and vigorous — aye, and young, to undertake such a task as he and Peter contemplated. But probably nothing would come of it. He remembered that Peter had confessed to rheumatism. Was he providing himself with a line of retreat? A careful general should always have a line of retreat. The fancy eased his mental megrim and sent him smilingly to bed.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

ON the following day Clare informed her family that she needed a change, and went to Portsea with a girl friend for a fortnight. She did not bid Peter farewell. Without clearly understanding why, she felt at odds with Peter. He had surprised her and proved her estimate of him fallacious. Moreover she was tired of being treated as a wholly unimportant child by a man who apparently regarded her mother as a goddess and the fount of all wisdom. Her mother, of course, was the dearest thing in the world, the sweetest and the best; but, as everybody who really knew her realised, the darling was not exactly a miracle of intelligence, whereas Clare was conscious of possessing a first-class working brain. No use depreciating one's personal endowments in the privacy of one's own mind. Only a fool would do that.

She returned from Portsea to find that no member of the family had either seen or heard from Peter during her absence. Mary and Mark had telephoned the Windsor frequently, but Peter had not yet acknowledged their messages. They concluded, despite the hotel clerk's denial, that he must be out of town. Clare offered no comment. At dinner she casually inquired of her father if he was still interested in the World Redemption business and was severely snubbed for her pains. He had never known her meeker under reproof.

At nine o'clock next morning as Peter emerged from breakfast he came face to face with Clare in the hotel hall. His greeting took her breath away. She decided subsequently that her sudden appearance must have fitted with his thoughts.

"Have you your car?" he asked.

She nodded dumbly.

"I'll get my hat," he said, and hurried away.

"I must buy a car," he informed her as he stepped into her Cadillac. "But it will have to be a Ford."

"Where to?" she asked, her voice gruff with strangled laughter.

"Manuka," he replied. "It's somewhere in the Dandenongs. Don't you know it?"

"No."

"It used to be a reformatory school. I am told it's quite a big place — surely you must know it."

"Oh!" said Clare, "I believe I do. . . . It's about thirty miles away." She thought of the shopping she had meant to do, as she pressed the self-starter, and of various afternoon engagements as she put the car in gear. Peter made no remark. They traversed some miles in perfect silence, then Clare proffered brightly that she had spent a pleasant time at Portsea and asked Peter what had he been doing with himself.

"Working," he replied.

"May I know at what?"

He gave her an abstracted glance. "Reading and making money. Reading mostly." He returned to his thoughts.

Clare decided presently to put her foot down.

"Have you missed me, Peter?" she asked sweetly.

"Missed you?" Peter almost woke up. "I have been very busy," he volunteered.

"Reading and making money?"

"Er — yes — quite so." Peter woke up completely. "How did you know?"

"A little bird told me — an owl!"

"Bah," he scoffed. "I remember that I told you myself. An owl, am I?"

"They are supposed to be wise birds, Peter. You are right to object. I apologise and withdraw."

"You score," grinned Peter. "You often do at my expense. How is your Mother?"

"Fine and brawly, thanks. You've been neglecting her, I hear."

"She did not tell you that," he asserted confidently. "How have I offended you, Clare?"

All the waspiness in the girl rushed to her tongue.

"It's the self-centred cocksureness and smugness of you, Peter dear," she answered in a voice as smooth as honey. "You study people for a bit, always insufficiently did you but guess it, then you measure them up, classify them, label them, and ever afterwards expect them to act according to their tags. They don't, of course; but does that worry you? Not a scrap. You are so blissfully convinced of your infallibility that you treat all aberrations from the standard as negligible accidents and stick to your original judgments with the soulless pertinacity of cobbler's wax. For instance some time ago you pinned me down as a cross between a mischievous ape, an intelligent mosquito and an overgrown schoolgirl; and from that moment it

became impossible for you to regard me from any other point of view. Am I right, Peter, or am I right?"

Peter considered the indictment gravely for a while, but finding himself unable to contest it he bent his head and confessed with unassumed humility that he had often been mistaken in his first estimates of people, but had seldom found it worth while correcting them, for other people bothered much less about him than he about them, and his opinions, when erroneous, hurt nobody but himself. There had been a time, he explained, when as a matter of abstract justice he had abstained from hasty conclusions and endeavoured to understand his neighbours perfectly, but this had not assisted him in making friends.

Clare gathered alike from what he said and from what he left unsaid — his sentences were jerky and inconsecutive — that Peter's experience of life had not added to his self-esteem, and that he was sincerely astonished at having excited her resentment. A more futile or indefinite apology had never been addressed to her, but it touched the girl's heart. "It must be horrible," she reflected, "to give up wanting friends because one believes, with reason, that one's power to attract friendship is nil."

Pity tinged her voice as she said aloud, "Boiled down, Peter, you really paid me a compliment, for on rating me a negligible quantity you put me on the same level as your unimportant self."

But Peter shied violently from the implied invitation to be sentimental. "No doubt" he observed

drily, "I did you an injustice, Clare. I am still unaware, however, of its extent. I don't think I ever underrated your intelligence. You will assist me, perhaps, to pay appropriate homage to your character."

"There is no-one better qualified," she gaily assured him. "Have I the whole of your attention?"

"Yes."

"Then we shall put Clare Landale on the slab. Her dominating affectation, Peter, is to appear a perfectly natural, commonplace and typical young woman of the twentieth century, selfish, non-moral, pleasure-loving and avid of sensational experience; but invincibly resolved to retain a decent status in the social system till she dies. It is not difficult for her to wear this mask, for it does not irritate the spirit it protectively conceals. That spirit, Peter, is now laid bare for our examination. . . . Quite so; as you so justly observe, Peter, its essential resemblance to every other spirit you have hitherto dissected is as close as dammit; but kindly adjust your microscope. . . . So. No, a finer focus is required. One more half-turn to the right. Thank you, Peter dear. Now, there is nothing left to our imagination. You see that speck on the top left corner of the slide. There we have a differentiating and isolating peculiarity. It signifies an insatiably restless and relentless curiosity of mind. Rather ugly, you say? I freely concur — now tip the slide a little. Aha! As I thought, another speck! This one, Peter, as I need hardly inform so eminent a scientist,

signifies an abnormally rebellious and contentious disposition with an odious colouring of pride. But your eyes wander! That dull glow in the centre has grasped your attention. Perhaps you are right, Peter, to return to the one bright spot, small and inconspicuous as it is. That tiny bit of germinal incandescence, Peter dear, is Clare Landale's single hope of salvation, for it suggests rather than signifies (so feebly does it flicker) a desire to serve her fellow creatures and devote her useless life to some decent purpose. Bother! the light has faded. . . . The demonstration is over. . . . Never mind, Peter, the rest is not worth looking at. You've seen the worst and the best. . . . You must work out the average for yourself, but if I might venture a prayer — Let your summing-up be merciful."

Peter said instantly and very simply, "I have been a fool."

Five minutes later he spoke again: "I contemplate founding an educational institute with the object of persuading mankind to live as Christ wished them to live."

He made the announcement as unemotionally as though stating an intention to visit a theatre. Clare stole a glance at his grim profile and her impulse to smile was succeeded by a queer excitement.

"Yes," she murmured.

"I shall need, almost immediately, a confidential secretary," he proceeded after a measurable pause.

"Yes," whispered Clare; and almost unconsciously she brought the car to a stop in the shadow of an immense gum.

Peter did not notice. "If your self-analysis was sincere, as I am sure it was," he said, "you would suit very well, I fancy."

"When do you want me to start?"

"I have taken an office at the top of the National Building, but it will not be ready until the end of the week. Monday would do."

"The usual hours — nine-thirty till five, I presume?"

"I expect that would do," replied Peter vaguely, whereupon private thought absorbed him. His eyes remained open but he might as well have been asleep.

Clare studied him long enough to make certain his pre-occupation was ingenuous, then she started the car again. Peter never knew that it had stopped. The girl was not displeased to be forgotten. Her eager mind had already begun to revel in the amazement and amusement she was about to cause her friends. She pictured their dismayed, delighted or contemptuous faces, and she supplied them with appropriate exclamations.

"I always said the unhappy creature was a little touched!"

"Clare Landale is no more. Speak kindly of the dead!"

"Whoever would have imagined she would go dippy over a stick like Peter Gaunt — old enough to be her father too!"

"You forget, my dear, she has been out four seasons without a single offer."

"A really nice girl, darling, but why is it she is attractive only to women?"

The car lurched over a deep rut and cut her meditations short — also Peter's. They were running along a narrow earth road fledged on either side with tall timber and heavy underbrush.

"Where are we?" demanded Peter.

"In the heart of the ranges," said the girl. "I haven't been here for years and the road looks as if nobody else has, either. Hold on, Peter, a bad bump is coming."

She slid into low gear and the car toiled up a steep pinch, scored with foot-deep rain-courses. At the brow of the hill they entered a still denser forest and the road did not improve; but after a mile of heavy going they emerged suddenly upon an open sunlit plateau, forming the broad saddle of a ridge. From the edges north and south the land fell precipitously into misty valleys, but its eastern and western borders were walled with rugged mountain spurs. Two tiny streams debouched from the lifting rocks and met in the centre of the plain to form a rivulet which meandered south and cascaded into an invisible ravine. At the foot of the western mountain wall was perched a group of stone and wooden buildings, some lofty and imposing, some the reverse, all in a melancholy state of neglect and disrepair. As they approached the pile, labouring over a weed-carpeted track that had once been a metal road, they noted many broken windows in the three-storeyed central building, many, too, that were boarded up. Some of the lesser structures flaunted rent and gaping roofs. The drunken fences lacked gates but abounded in broken or rotting rails. Elo-

quent vestiges of an aforesaid terraced garden plantation survived; but the unkempt shrubberies were entangled with clematis and the lawns overrun with bracken and a welter of sickly-looking aloes. Bracken covered the entire estate, but occasional glimpses of furrow-lines vaguely defined a wide area of meadowland, now struggling to produce, as well as fern, a thickening crop of wattle, blackwood and callitris pines.

Clare brought the car to a halt before a flight of stone steps, many of which had been prized out of place by impudent and sturdy weeds. Descending, they climbed the steps and looked about them.

"What a scene of desolation!" cried the girl.

"What a chance!" said Peter. "The place has only one approach and it could be positively isolated from the world!"

They strolled to the arched doorway of the main building and Peter produced a large iron key. The door shrieked on rusty hinges and revealed a vast hall pierced with many formal openings, also a winding concrete staircase leading to the upper floors. There was no furniture, but there was no dust, and the sound of their footsteps was flung back at them in clear persistent echoes by interminable wastes of bare bleak walls. Passing from one storey to another they patiently traversed every corridor and peered into countless cell-like rooms. On the ground floor was a small chapel, a series of offices, a group of class-rooms, and one very large assembly-chamber. Peter's notebook was constantly in use. He made an entry concerning each damaged window or

warped piece of flooring they encountered. Of each storey he sketched a rough but serviceable plan.

At the end of an hour Clare left him and turned to the outer terrace. She had begun to feel the pangs of hunger, the afternoon was waning, and she had fasted since breakfast. But not until a second hour had almost gone did Peter reappear. He wore an air of subdued elation and his pale eyes were very bright. After locking the great door he stood for a moment gazing out across the tableland and inhaling deep draughts of the bush-perfumed and intoxicating mountain air. Clare, seated on a broken monolith, watched him narrowly. He did not surprise her when he said:—"We can buy Manuka for £8,000. It has been awaiting us nearly twenty years."

"I have been awaiting my lunch for the same number of centuries," announced the girl. She tossed away a half-finished cigarette and stood up. Peter set his foot on the smouldering scrap.

"Bushfires are caused that way," he explained. "When we take over there will be no smoking permitted in the grounds of Manuka."

"You have already made up your mind to buy the place?"

"Yes."

They sauntered thoughtfully to the car and found a back tyre flat. Peter changed the wheel like an expert, refusing any assistance, but he was not a speedy worker and the sun had dipped into the valley before their downward journey began. It was like driving through a tunnel to negotiate the mountain road, now that evening had fallen, but Clare

switched on her headlights and took the rough pass at reckless speed. Peter was careless of the bumps. His brain swarmed with calculations. His heart was filled with happiness. Clare was too hungry to converse and as soon as they reached the main highway, deserted at that hour, she accelerated to a mile a minute. Nevertheless they reached Melbourne without mishap and Peter was dragged into the Windsor grill-room as the clocks were chiming seven.

When coffee appeared, a surfeited and contented Clare addressed her host for the first time since the meal commenced.

"Are you proposing to consult Father, before buying Manuka?" she enquired.

"Why should I?"

"Have you given up the idea of taking him as a partner in the Redemption business, Peter?"

"His enthusiasm cools quickly, Clare."

"You are very penetrating," she said in a surprised tone. "Yes, Father is like that. And between ourselves, for many reasons I am glad that you have found it out. All the same I'd let him play some part in the scheme, were I you. Not an active part — Mother would prefer him to be altogether out of it, I fancy. But . . ."

Peter's astonished voice interrupted her. "But if your Mother would prefer him to be out of it, why do you suggest he be given any part at all?"

"Because as a sleeping partner he would be invaluable to you. He has a fine constructive imagination. You, I believe, have little or none. He is a dreamer, a weaver of ideas. You are a doer. Your

ability is chiefly executive — in my very humble opinion. Father is no good at that. He wearies easily. Details bore him and he loses interest. But in inventing and elaborating the mental images of practical schemes he is tireless, and he has a faculty of inspiring others to adopt and carry out his plans. Appoint him general adviser and critic, reserving to yourself complete responsibility plus authority, then you'll have the essential components of a sound team. Team-work is the thing, Peter. There must be a supreme head, naturally; but every captain needs his company. One-man shows get nowhere."

"You are right, of course," he admitted with reluctant wonder. "You seem to know my limitations better than I do. I must be an obvious person."

"Say rather," smiled Clare, "that I must be a wonderful woman."

"I have said it to myself more than once today," he frowningly confessed.

"You are almost human at times, Peter dear," cooed Clare. "I'll leave you now, as I am due at Fanny Irwin's. There'll be dancing. Care to come?"

"Good Lord, no! I have work to do."

"If you want me tomorrow, ring me before breakfast."

"I shall," said Peter.

He accompanied her to the street and watched, bare-headed, her departing car. "I did her an injustice. She has more of her mother in her than I thought," was his verdict.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

PETER called on Mark Landale next morning, and plunged into business without preamble. "You probably know that Clare drove me to Manuka yesterday. We had a look over the old Reformatory," he said.

"Clare mentioned it at breakfast," admitted Mark. "Also that you are thinking of buying the place."

"It is ideally suitable. Needs restoration, of course. But it has ample accommodation for two hundred beds, and this could be extended. It's a Gibraltar amplified with broad acres. Half a mile of brick wall would exclude mankind. I dare not let the chance pass. I shall sign the contract this afternoon. The purchase price is eight thousand pounds."

Mark's eyebrows lifted. He had not slept well and was feeling rather livery; and Peter's cocksureness irritated him. He thought, also, that Peter was rushing things, and assuming too much. All he said, however, was, "My half will be ready when you want it. Would you like a cheque now?"

"No," replied Peter. "I've been thinking over things. I propose to finance and run the show myself. . . . Fairer to you — and Mary too. You have children — plenty to do — a business. I have no ties at all. Moreover I fancy that Mary would

prefer you not to tie your hands. I want your help though, Mark."

"What help can I give you if you won't take my money?"

"Clare put it in a nutshell yesterday. You are a thinker. I am a doer. Truer words were never spoken. In point of fact the entire scheme up to date is yours. I want you to continue to do the thinking. Clare gave your job a name: General Adviser. She named my job, too: Supreme Executive. Your daughter has a brain, Mark. There's a lot of Mary in her; you too! She is clever and kind."

Mark smiled. He had been offered a post that fitted his temperament like a glove; power without responsibility; full scope to design, unburdened with any obligation to participate in the tedious work of building. Already he felt the glow of a renascent enthusiasm.

"All right," he said. "But I want you to know that my purse is at your disposal if ever you get stuck for cash, Peter. Don't think me inquisitive — but have you discovered a gold mine since last we met?"

"Something better, I hope. I shall be glad to tell you all about it some day, but I am not ready yet. You do not mind?"

"Of course not, old chap. What about dining with us tonight?"

"I'll be glad," said Peter, and he rose to go.

Five minutes later he was seated in another office

opposite a slim dark man of uncertain age who was obviously a Jew.

"I had expected to meet your father," said Peter. "I had a slight acquaintance with him more than twenty years ago. You are Mr Louis Levison, I suppose."

"My name is Charles," replied the other. "My elder brother, Louis, was killed at the War. Father did not long survive him. I am the only male member of the family left."

"Ah! I had not heard. I have been long absent from Australia. Evidently the business has not suffered in your control. The manager of my bank informed me that Levison and Co. are still the leading corn-brokers of Melbourne."

"We have that reputation, Mr Gaunt."

"You buy and sell futures in England and America, I understand?"

"Only as agents, Mr Gaunt. We are brokers, not speculators. We operate for clients in both hemispheres."

"Quite so." Peter took a Bank passbook from his inner breast pocket, and stretching forward placed it on Mr. Levison's blotting pad. "It is fair before proffering myself as a client, to acquaint you with my financial status. The credit balance, you will find in that book, was adjusted last evening. The account has not since been drawn upon. I am prepared to deposit with your firm, in trust, any sum we may mutually agree to provide reasonable cover for marginal risks, proportioned, of course, to the volume of business undertaken."

Mr Levison nodded and took up the book. After a brief glance within the covers he returned it to Peter with the remark, "All the grain markets have been very jumpy during the past week or so. I would not advise large operations, Mr Gaunt, until things settle down again."

"You mean that you would require substantial cover whether I operated as a buyer or a seller?"

Mr Levison smiled genially. Peter's downright-ness pleased him. "Well," he said, "take corn; it rose six points last week. It has fallen ten points since Monday. It looks cheap — dirt cheap at today's figures, but Liverpool cables that Chicago is heavily over-bought, so what is a man to do? It might slump again tomorrow. Yet a short seller might easily burn his fingers." He shook his head, and the brain behind his shrewd sad eyes decided that if he had never before met a natural "bear" one now confronted him. He felt so certain of it that he added, "Of course there is a lot too much grain in the world, Mr Gaunt. No doubt about that!"

Greatly to his surprise Peter did not rise at the bait. On the contrary, he gave an order. "I'd like you to buy me twenty loads of Liverpool wheat in the most advanced position, at not above yesterday's closing-price per cental," he said slowly. "Now, about cover, would £2,000 suffice you?"

"Provided you are agreeable to put in a stop loss order at six points down. I did not exaggerate the nervousness of the market, Mr Gaunt."

Peter made a rapid calculation. "I'll have forty

loads on those terms," he said. "If you'll lend me a pen I'll write you a cheque for £4,000."

Levison handed him a pen and Peter filled in a form and scrawled his name at the foot. The broker also did some writing. Presently they looked up and both smiled. Peter was suddenly aware of having taken a fancy to the man.

"Many new clients of mine have been lucky in their first transactions and I hope you will be," said Levison. "But what I told you just now was true — there is too much wheat in the world."

"If there be a surplus it is well taken care of; and the world is unfamiliar with conditions of superfluity as yet," responded Peter.

"Would you like to see the crop figures of the different producing countries, Mr Gaunt?"

"I have them all by heart — the statistics of consumption too."

"All the big operators on the other side know them as well as we do, Mr Gaunt."

Peter smiled faintly. "You are right to stick to your point, Mr Levison. But you take a longer view than the mob can or will. Don't imagine I am ignoring the surplus that impresses you so much. It is a fact; and I have a vast respect for all facts. I believe, nevertheless, that the fact in question cannot become a factor to wreck the existing price-level while the propagandists of depression continue to speak in whispering voices. When they acquire sufficient confidence to shout it will be time enough to oversell."

"It is true that the market has had a heavy fall," mused Levison. "Almost heavy enough, and certainly sudden enough, to warrant hope of a reaction. But we've got to set the overbought position against that possibility. At each recent decline the bulls loaded themselves to the eyes. If any further weakness develops, such as continuance of good weather in America, they might be forced to liquidate. I have been at this business all my life, Mr Gaunt. Experience has made me very shy of volunteering advice to my customers, but for two days past I have been warning them of the danger of going long. I shall be cabling a lot of selling-orders this afternoon."

Peter rose to his feet.

"Then it is possible I may get my wheat more cheaply than I had expected. Thanks for your counsel, Mr Levison. If I succeed in the face of it I'll not be less grateful for the kindness that prompted you to bestow it."

"Oh," said the broker, "it's not unlikely you will win. As many fortunes have been made in bucking the prophets as in backing them. It's a chancy game. Just now all the best tipsters are in line, which is why I felt obliged to sound a note of warning — but they may be wrong. For your sake I hope they are. I like pluck."

"Many men would have called me a stubborn fool," laughed Peter, "or something more unflattering." And he departed feeling he had made a friend.

Next morning while still seated at breakfast he was called to the telephone.

"Levison here." The broker's voice sounded excited. "Your hunch was right, Mr Gaunt. I got your wheat three points under the day's closing-price. The market opened weak but finished firm; and Chicago advanced four cents after Liverpool closed."

"Bad weather in America, I presume," suggested Peter.

"A blizzard in the Middle West and deficient snow cover in Ontario. Shall I see you this morning, Mr Gaunt?"

"I think not," replied Peter. "You might send the contracts to my hotel."

"We could close out tomorrow on a true seller's market, Mr Gaunt. A fine sure profit is in sight. Shall we take it?"

"Hold until you hear from me," said Peter firmly.

As he hung up the receiver he closed his eyes and breathed a little prayer of thanksgiving. His hands were trembling and his face was hot. He left the telephone-booth with unsteady steps, and, his unfinished breakfast quite forgotten, he sallied forth into the open air and made for the Fitzroy Gardens. During his ramble he passed many people carrying moist umbrellas. In a less exalted mood he would have wondered why they stared at him, but in a less exalted mood he would not have gone walking bareheaded in the rain.

## CHAPTER NINE

THE LAST of Clare Landale's earlier impressions of Peter Gaunt was shattered when she paid her first visit to his office. She went, prepared to discover a fitting habitation for the simple spartan she had imagined Peter to be. She found, on the contrary, a commodious suite of rooms, only one of which resembled a business man's place of business. This contained the customary accoutrement of a commercial house, desks, typewriting machines and so forth. The next room was smaller but furnished with a taste so light and elegant as to suggest its having been purposely designed to please a cultured idler. The inmost room (which communicated separately with the other two and possessed also a door opening on a rear corridor) was the largest of the suite and Peter's sanctum. Three walls were faced with crowded bookshelves; the fourth was heavily embossed with a tracery of imitation bronze and constituted the framing of a single picture, a copy in oils of Franchia's Forest Nymph. Transparent crimson curtains hung straightly from each tall Gothic window, and a rich but darkly coloured Oriental carpet hid the floor. A lacquered Cambodian table with richly gilt garuda legs was planted in the centre of the room, a stool of like character beside it, and four deep chairs upholstered in soft russet leather were grouped around the table. By virtue of this arrangement the room, an unusually

large one, looked immense. Along two walls there was space for three to stride abreast for nine or ten paces; yet the apartment did not seem inadequately furnished. To Clare's mind it shouted masculinity, but she thought it sexless too, and cold, despite the Forest Nymph.

"You do not like it," said Peter, who watched her intently. "It is too luxurious, perhaps?"

"It is queer," the girl replied. "I don't know whether I like it or not. If it expressed you faithfully, Peter, you must be an abominably self-sufficient person. Does it?"

Without awaiting an answer she wandered to the bookshelves and began to scan the tomes. "Heaven be good to a working girl!" she exclaimed presently. "I appear to have strayed into the library of a theologian. Am I dreaming, Peter? If so, be kind and wake me up!"

"It's a rather valuable collection, Clare. I brought it to Australia intending to present it to the National Library. But I have changed my mind."

The girl pursued her study of the books, or rather of the names inscribed upon their backs. "Not one religion missing," she murmured. "And each has about a thousand volumes to itself."

"More or less."

She turned and eyed him curiously. "Don't tell me you have read them, Peter?"

"One has so much leisure in the East, and I have always been interested in men's spiritual attitudes.

I appear to be defending myself," he concluded with a smile.

He led her into the smaller room and exhibited a large cupboard with an inside mirror cunningly concealed behind a curtain. "For your personal use, Clare. I may hope at least that you will like this room."

"It is charming, Peter. I shall call you 'Sir' — in the presence of visitors. Will you tell me my duties?"

"Your father told me that you graduated at a Commercial College. Have you kept up your shorthand?"

"I am slower than I used to be, but I shall engage to improve."

"Good! I'd like you to preside generally over the office. I have only one clerk yet, but we shall need more soon. I shall also want you to take all my purely personal correspondence and look after my private accounts, banking and so on. The books are in the safe; here are the keys. We shall not require an accountant until Manuka is cleared for action. We'll then open up a separate set of books, which the accountant will keep, subject to your audit. That's about all, Clare, except that when we get going at full swing I'll want you to protect me from self-interested callers. . . . It is not necessary to ask you to guard my secrets. I know you will do that."

Clare flushed with pleasure. "It's good to be thought trustworthy," she exclaimed.

"It's good, too, to feel that one can trust," said Peter. "Your salary will be four pounds a week."

"I won't take any salary," cried the girl. "Father makes me a most generous allowance. I want you to accept my service as a contribution to the cause."

"I shall pay you the salary stated," said Peter, a note of dry finality in his voice. "You are, of course, at liberty to do as you please with it—pay it back into the Manuka account or play it away at bridge. I can only give orders to people in my pay."

"I see your point," said Clare. "A matter of discipline. Have you any work for me this morning?"

"A few letters. . . . You will want to take off your hat. I shall ring when I am ready."

He retired to his sanctum, and Clare adopted his suggestion. Afterwards she went into the general office to extend her acquaintance with the solitary clerk, an impassive automaton of nineteen named Letitia Sanders, and to make arrangements for the service of her lunch.

Peter dictated enough correspondence during the succeeding hour to keep Clare busily typing the entire day. He provided other work for Miss Sanders and then disappeared. Early in the afternoon the first caller appeared in the person of Mr Levison. Informed that Peter was out he insisted on seeing Clare, and was shown into her room.

"You are Miss Landale, Mr Gaunt's confidential secretary?" he asked.

Clare, to whom he was a stranger, looked up absently to nod agreement.

Her attention, however, was caught instantly by the unconcealable excitement of her visitor.

"My name is Levison," he said, speaking very quickly. "As, of course, you know, I am doing business with Mr. Gaunt. He told me to communicate with you in the event of his absence. I have just received an urgent cable from Chicago which he ought to see at once. Can you get in touch with him?"

"No," said Clare.

"I cannot wait. I have other clients to warn. May I leave a message?"

"Of course."

"Tell him that Cheney of Chicago forecasts the announcement tomorrow of a five per cent. increase over all former American estimates — Got that?"

Clare finished scribbling and looked up. "Yes, sir."

"Tell him, next, that the blizzard damage was exaggerated and good weather is now reported over all Northern America."

"Yes, sir."

Levison frowned. "Only a maniac would hold in the face of that," he muttered musingly.

"Is that part of the message, sir?"

Levison started. "No!" he rapped out. He added almost violently, "If you have any influence with your employer, Miss Landale, induce him to sell. Good day." He swung on his heel and quickly vanished.

Twice again during the afternoon Mr Levison telephoned, but Peter had not returned. At five, Clare, who had begun to feel really worried, rang up

the Windsor Hotel without result. Miss Sanders departed at five-fifteen, leaving her quite alone. At five-thirty Clare put on her hat and anxiously paced the floor of the outer office. Ten minutes later the sound of eager footsteps drew her to the door. But it was Mr Levison, not Peter.

"Not back?" he cried.

"No. . . . I'm afraid he must have been called out of town or something," she responded helplessly.

"I must get my cables away before six," said Levison. "If he's not back in five minutes — I can only give him that — he will lose, lose thousands. He'll lose a lot in any case. My instructions to hold are rigid or I'd assume responsibility and sell. To make a pot by sheer accident, and then drop the lot! Maddening. . . ." He turned to the girl. "I suppose you can't help me, Miss Landale. If you authorise me to sell, I'll do it. You'd save Gaunt a serious loss."

"I haven't the authority you suggest that I should exercise."

Levison glanced at his watch. "Well, that's that!" he muttered savagely, and hurried off without another word and without remembering to raise his hat.

Clare waited another fifteen minutes, then she locked the office and departed, feeling really agitated and depressed. Had she failed Peter in an hour of need? Should she have assumed authority not hers and instructed Levison to sell? To sell what? Her instinct to believe in Levison was strong. It had been very difficult to resist his urgency and she felt

that his earnestness would have convinced Peter, could Peter have been reached by it.

She walked slowly to the garage where her Cadillac was parked and found Peter seated in the car calmly reading an evening paper. Amazement for a moment paralysed her tongue, and while she was still speechless Peter opened the door for her.

"Did a man named Levison call or telephone?" he enquired. "I left to avoid him. I can see by your face he did. I hope he did not trouble you."

"He made me nearly as anxious as himself," cried the girl. "He is mad for you to sell something he holds for you. Says you will lose thousands if you don't. He implored me to act in your stead and authorise him to sell. I all but succumbed — because I had a feeling he was honest and right. Is it too late, Peter? Oh! he gave me a message for you from a man named Cheney in Chicago — I left my notes in the office but I remember. . . ."

"Never mind the message, Clare. I had it from another broker. The fact is all the brokers received the same news as soon as Levison. He is a good fellow, Levison, but a trifle insistent — and he underrates my intelligence. It does not suit me to let him know all that I am doing. . . . I am going home with you to dinner. Your father asked me."

A little dazed, Clare got into the car, and started the engine. "Mr Levison is absolutely convinced that you will lose thousands," she said presently. "Will you, Peter?"

"It's almost certain that I shall — in my transactions with Levison," he replied. "You did well in

not yielding to his urgency, Clare. I allowed, perhaps led, him to suppose that you are privy to the whole of my affairs and might, at a pinch, assume authority to act in my stead. He is not to be blamed, therefore, for the suggestion he made to you."

"Were you testing me, Peter?"

"Not testing, relying on you, my dear — also saving myself a lot of pother. Levison takes his position very seriously, regards himself as a trustee for his clients. His pertinacity in endeavouring to save them from their own folly is almost terrifying."

"What does he hold for you, Peter? Shut me up if you want to. A confidential secretary ought not to be inquisitive, perhaps?"

"That's as may be," smiled Peter, "but a man ought not to mystify his confidential secretary, perhaps. Levison is a grain-broker, Clare. Through him I bought some time ago about 200,000 bushels of wheat in Liverpool. Since then the price of wheat has steadily advanced and he has become increasingly anxious for me to sell and take my profit, because in his judgment a rise is not economically justified and he believes the price will tumble at the first adverse news—news such as he received this morning."

"You do not agree with his opinion, Peter?"

"On the contrary, my dear, I do; and for that reason I have been selling through other brokers."

"But why not have sold what you had already bought through Mr Levison?"

"Because I need a larger profit than I am willing to confess to him and do not wish to risk a serious loss. The market may not fall, you see. It may even continue to rise. In that case the gains made and to be made on the Levison transaction will insure me against loss on my contracts with other brokers. You will understand that I did not begin to sell outside of Levison until I had accumulated a big credit margin on my original purchases."

Clare puckered her brows. "I gather," she said, "that you have sold more wheat through other brokers than you have bought through Mr Levison."

"A great deal more."

"So if the price falls you will gain more than you could possibly lose by holding the Levison wheat?"

"Exactly."

"You are really risking nothing, then?"

"Only profits already won. To make those profits I incurred a risk. I propose that it shall be the last. I am now using those profits as a working capital to extend my operations and make larger profits still. I may lose the working capital, but I stand fully protected by stop-loss orders from any other loss. If the worst happens I shall retire from the field in the same position as when I entered it."

"And if the worst does not happen?"

"Manuka will benefit, Clare. What I am doing is for Manuka."

"And mankind," said the girl.

Peter nodded. "Mankind, of course," he muttered absently.

"I have a feeling," said the girl, "that you will succeed — that you are destined to succeed."

"The issue," said Peter, "is in the hands of Providence. If Omnipotence desires Manuka to proceed as we have planned, a way will be cleared for us. I have seen a sign which I have taken for a star. A thought has come to me which I have followed as an inspiration. I may have dreamed a foolish dream. A rough awakening, perhaps, awaits me. But I have to go on. I have to go on. Faith grips me with tremendous force at times, and life looks at me with sparkling eyes. But reaction always comes — and I remember. . . ."

"What do you remember, Peter?" Clare believed that he had been uttering deeply private thoughts unconsciously aloud, and she put her question in a whisper lest she break the spell.

"My unworthiness," Peter answered clearly; and the girl knew that he had not been day-dreaming but had deliberately admitted her into his most intimate confidence.

For once her sense of humour deserted her. She did not like his confession, and for the moment she did not like Peter. She saw nothing laughable in his prostration and she thought his candour complimentary but contemptible. Men are indistinguishable from apes when they resign the erect posture. She had always despised the practices of self-depreciation. She experienced an overpowering desire to scratch, to hurt, to goad. "One ant," she said, "looks much like another in the sight of man, and I guess one man looks much like another in the sight

of God. . . . I wouldn't let a morbid sense of unworthiness trouble me, if I were you, Peter. . . . Good work can be done with bad tools — by a master. I watched an artist paint a really lovely picture with a moth-eaten brush. I'll show it to you some day in the Gallery. It isn't called 'Humility'."

But Peter had already repented his lapse from reticence. "I have seen it," he declared, a nasty inflection in his voice. "It is called 'The Toad Girl' if my memory is not at fault."

Peter's outburst of ill humour did more to win the respect of his confidential secretary than any finer quality he had exhibited.

Clare, of course, had the last word. "As I have told you before — you are almost human at times," she assured him.

## CHAPTER TEN

HALF A DOZEN people, strangers to Peter, dined with the Landales. Peter briefly studied all but was impressed by only one, Professor Sainton, a big and somewhat overbearing man with a small shrinking wife who appeared to live in adoring terror of her assertive and self-opinionated husband. Peter cherished a prejudice against that type, but Sainton was so obviously susceptible to Mary Landale's fascination that he decided the Professor must be a good fellow. Peter was always prepared to like men who liked Mary. He could have wished the whole world at her feet. He forgot Sainton in watching Mary dispense hospitality. When she played the chatelaine her sweetest qualities co-operated to enchant his mind. She conferred on each of her guests an exclusive brand of flattering attention. Her conversation, however trifling and impersonal, delighted by its artless confession of deference to opinions wiser than her own; and her manner was as bland as a caress.

Clare missed nothing of Peter's contemplation of her mother. Anxious to confer with her own thoughts she claimed the attention of the table and asked Professor Sainton to explain a scheme of monetary reform that he had recently invented. Clare appeared to give his discourse rapt consideration, but her mind was elsewhere. She was endeavouring to analyse her mother.

"Mother is, of course, a perfect hostess," she reflected, "and an absolute dear. There's nobody quite like her. . . . Her personality is extraordinarily gracious. She has a genius for making people feel contented and persuading them that strife is a waste of time and argument a folly. And she can do this without words. She is lovely, too; really lovely. She never grows fat and she never grows thin; her complexion owes almost everything to nature; and she walks like a sonata. Even sitting there, in that uncomfortable chair which I know she hates, grace simply oozes out of her."

These were all definite ideas, clear-cut judgments. Having registered them, Clare felt that her justice and generosity warranted the formulation of a balanced case for the other side.

"The things Peter doesn't know about Mother," she mused, "would fill a library. What would he say, I wonder, if he were told of her utter inability to show kindness to a fallen sister; of her bleak intolerance of any religious creed except her own; of her queer class-consciousness that prevents her recognising working people as authentic human beings unless they are poor and servile enough to sue for charity? That her tranquillity is the product of laziness? That her soft submissiveness masks an iron resolution not to be disturbed?"

Having put these questions to her inner consciousness, the spiritual irritation which had provoked them was suddenly submerged in a wave of penitence. How dared she entertain such treasonable thoughts about her darling little Mother! She

was cruel and wicked! Odiously unjust, too! For how could her mother help being indolent and narrowminded! She was as God made her; and without a single artificial affectation! Tenderness welled into the girl's heart — tenderness that was strangely mingled with pity and with pride. There must have been self-pity in the mixture, too, for on glancing with warm eyes at the pleasing picture her mother presented, listening with apparently breathless interest to the Professor (now in his exordium), Clare became aware of an almost poignant sorrow that she had inherited so meagre a share of her mother's physical beauty and troubling charm.

When the bridge tables had filled, Mary Landale drew Peter to the lawn. They sauntered slowly to the sea wall. Her hand rested ever so lightly on his arm, but it guided him unerringly to a vantage-point where, standing in a shaft of light for all in the card-room to see, they could watch the players if they pleased. The short stroll seemed already to have wearied Mary, for she leaned against the grey stone with a sigh.

"Let me fetch you a chair," said Peter, instantly solicitous.

But she denied him with a smile. "Standing is good for my figure," she confided. "I ought to take more exercise, the Doctor says; but walking always tires me dreadfully. You liked Professor Sainton, Peter?"

"He is didactic, but interesting. He knows his subject. He expounds it lucidly."

“Mark thinks a deal of him — but I did not bring you here to talk of the Professor. You have taken my girl from me, Peter. You will not rob me of my boy? Alan has failed in his honours examination. He is very depressed. He is crazy to follow Clare, to join you in your wonderful experiment. He is ambitious to serve mankind by abjuring the world, Peter. I want him to shine in it. He is sure to approach you. Perhaps he has already.”

Peter nodded: he was too surprised to speak.

“While you were drinking your port? I thought he might. He is very impulsive and impatient. What did you say to him?”

“I promised to think the matter over.”

“Never let him know that I spoke to you, Peter. He would be at me night and day. It’s hard to oppose one’s child — it tears at one’s heart.”

Peter ventured no remark.

It was characteristic of Mary that having stated a wish it never occurred to her to ask Peter would he comply with it. It was characteristic of Peter that having ascertained Mary’s will it did not occur to him either to combat it or seek an explanation.

Having finished her business Mary remembered other duties, and as gently and inexorably as she had brought Peter to the sea wall she led him back to the house. She informed him on the way that she was one of the treasurers of a hospital and that her accounts had mysteriously got into a tangle. It would be wonderful of Peter to help her unravel them. She would not trouble him only that she knew he disliked cards as much as she did.

Mary knitted. Peter worked. Eight people played bridge, often noisily, in the same room. Peter was oblivious of their existence. He was alone with Mary in the heart of an enchanted isle — dealing with columned rows of figures, the task he was best fitted to perform and therefore best liked. Once he glanced up to ask, quizzically yet tenderly, "If you add eleven and three, Mary, what do you get?"

"Fourteen," she answered, after a pause, during which she had counted secretly on her fingers. "What did I have?"

"Thirty-three," he replied.

"Oh." she cried softly. "I know how I did that. I nearly always multiply when a big figure is followed by a little one. Three elevens *are* thirty-three, aren't they, Peter? So I wasn't so very wrong after all."

Her artless stupidity wove a new bond round Peter's heart.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

PROFESSOR SAINTON insisted on driving Peter home. He had something to say: and as soon as they started he went straight to the point.

"They tell me you are turning the old Manuka Reformatory into a baby-farm;" he began. "I hear also that you propose to train the luckless infants as missionaries and moral reformers."

Peter felt an answer was expected, so he said, "Yes."

"You will bring them up as Christians, of course. But of what particular complexion?"

"My plans are quite nebulous, as yet, Professor."

"Does that mean you have not yet committed yourself to any Church?"

"Yes."

"I'm glad of that. I have a piece of advice for you, young man. If you had already tied yourself it would have been useless to offer it."

"You are kind to be interested, Professor."

"My advice is this. Keep your hands free of the whole kit and boiling of the creeds. You may fail if you do: you will assuredly fail if you don't. If you select one, the unpreferred pack will never cease hunting you down and endeavouring to destroy you. If you hold them all at arms' length all will be your enemies, censorious enemies at that. But they will

lack the incentive of jealousy to drive them to extremes. The sectarian bigot was not a tiger only in his previous incarnation. He can endure losing a kill but he cannot bear to see another tiger feeding on meat that might have been his. It would be safer to bring your babies up as Buddhists than as members of any special Christian sect."

"I hope you are wrong, Professor Sainton."

"I am right, Mr Gaunt. I never speak without the book. If you heed my warning you'll have a chance — slender no doubt — but a chance; if not — good-bye."

"I have long realised," said Peter, "that the institute I propose to establish has a purpose the mere profession of which tacitly reflects on all churches. To exempt one religion from the implied reproach, by adopting it, would naturally embitter the others."

"I said Tweedledum. You respond with Tweedledee. Why prolong the argument since we agree?"

"Mine is a slower brain than yours, sir. I thank you for your warning."

"You are welcome. . . . When you get on a bit, you'll need a council. It's not a one-man job you've taken on. All sorts of problems will be eternally cropping up. You ought to have all sorts of brains, at call, to cope with them."

"Could you be induced to join such a council, Professor?"

"Otherwise I would not have suggested it. My hobby is psychology. Your project appeals to me. As far as I know it is original. Your pedagogic predecessors have been content to develop minds.

Your aim is to develop souls. With the right training applied to sound material you might evolve a new Confucius, a Buddha, or a Christ. Or a dozen such! I am more than willing to co-operate in the experiment."

"I shall be very grateful for your help."

"Mrs. Sainton would help too. She has no children, but all children are her friends. I have a suspicion she would accept the post of Matron of your Institute if it were offered. Eh, Margaret?"

Mrs Sainton's voice, a deep and pleasing contralto, was heard by Peter for the first time.

"My husband is fond of jesting at my expense, Mr Gaunt; but he was right in saying we should both like to help. Some of our money might still be useful to you, Mr Gaunt, if you found us disappointing. We have more than we shall ever need."

"Which means, Gaunt," said the Professor, "that I have been fencing with you, and that Mrs Sainton and I are both genuinely keen to assist your enterprise. We don't expect an immediate answer. Think it over at your leisure and let us know if you can use us and, or, our money. My wife, by the way, is disgustingly rich; she inherited two fortunes. It would be doing her a positive kindness to raid her treasury."

Peter was conscious that the car had stopped before his hotel, and that a fine rain was falling. The Professor opened the door for him and he descended silently. For a moment he lingered by the



still open door searching for words, which at last came with a rush.

"I was once presumptuous enough," he said, "to imagine myself competent to do without help. . . . I have no right, I know it now, to try to work alone. The Siamese have a proverb: 'Aid that is offered unasked comes from God.' I dare not rebuff God's messengers — nor shall I try to thank you. We shall meet again."

"Well, what do you think of him?" asked the Professor of his wife.

Mrs Sainton shivered suddenly and drew her cloak about her. "He makes me sad; a little afraid too," she answered. "Not for us, Jim — for him. He has the aura of unhappiness. I have the feeling that a tragic fate awaits him. He is a good man. He may be a great one."

## CHAPTER TWELVE

IN the early forenoon of the following day Professor Sainton telephoned Peter to suggest one of his University colleagues, Dr Joel Leith (a biologist) as a member of the Manuka Council. Peter hung up the receiver, his head whirling with admonitions and commendations, feeling slightly overcome. He rang for Clare and, having detailed his conversation with the Professor, asked frankly for her advice.

"Jim Sainton," said the girl, "is a masterful sort of person with the energy of a steam hammer. You must watch your step or you will wake up one fine morning to find yourself relegated to the role of his second fiddle. I will admit, however, that he knows his job. He drives his classes like a muleteer, but his students collar more than a reasonable proportion of the valuable scholarships. He may be useful to you, Peter; but sooner or later he is sure to fight you for the captaincy."

"And what about his biologist friend, Dr Joel Leitch?"

"He has red hair, watery eyes and a bald patch on his crown. But that's the worst anyone can say against him. He is a high authority on infantile diseases. Sick children stop crying when he approaches. He'd be worth his weight in gold to Manuka."

"Sainton mentioned that he is an agnostic. Why did he think it necessary to tell me that?"

"He published a treatise on certain aspects of Biology — about two years ago — that gave umbrage to some of our ecclesiastics. They were daring enough to attack the book both on scientific and spiritual grounds. Dr Leitch (everybody calls him Dr Joel) hit back with more spirit than discretion. He tore them limb from limb, so they dubbed him atheist and tried to get the University to sack him. Professor Sainton is probably a bit apprehensive that the clerics might revive the agitation against Dr Joel if you attached him to Manuka. But you couldn't get a better man."

"Sainton used those very words. I don't want to quarrel with any of the Churches, Clare, but I shall need the services of able men, able medicoes especially. What age is Dr Joel?"

"Forty-six, I should think. You'll like him, Peter. When are you to meet him?"

"He's on his way here now. Why are you so confident I shall like him? Physical ugliness usually repels me."

"Because in so many things you are so terribly young, Peter; and Dr Joel attracts children."

The ringing of a bell called Clare to the outer office, and Peter was left to ponder a thrust that hurt his pride a little, though just why he could not tell. But he was speedily interrupted. Professor Sainton burst into the sanctum with the boisterous benignity of a mild gale of wind and he blew

before him like a leaf the timid and shrinking figure of a very slight and extremely homely little man.

"Here you are, Gaunt. This is Leitch — delivered as per telephone. Got to hurry back. Must deliver two lectures before lunch. . . . Meet you both later. Bye-bye."

His departure was irresistibly reminiscent of the changes produced by the sudden veering of a storm; its noise and bustle flickering into quietude. Peter and Dr Leitch looked at one another, and both smiled. As Clare had predicted, Peter was immediately attracted to the little man, whose shy but steady glance suggested wells of kindness and understanding.

"Sainton roused me at daylight to discuss the very interesting experiment you have in contemplation, Mr Gaunt," said Dr Leitch.

His voice was as pleasing as Clare had declared it to be. Peter was faintly embarrassed. He had the feeling of being caught in a snare — or a series of snares.

"Sainton evidently has the temperament of an enthusiast," he murmured.

"He thinks quickly and chafes at delays, but he is not usually precipitate in action," returned the other. "Personally, I dislike being hurried and I hardly know how or why I am here. I said something to Sainton and he insisted that I should repeat it to you forthwith. It can wait. . . . You may not deem it in the least important. You are probably busy."

"I am not busy, and you have made me curious, Dr Leitch. Please sit down. Will you smoke?"

Dr Leitch took a chair but refused a cigar. "I told Sainton," he began, "that your experiment is unlikely to succeed unless you devise a system of education competent to enfranchise your adopted children during infancy from the more devastating soul-deforming inhibitions which homo sapiens inherits from his bestial ancestors. The world has got into its present muddle by indulging and cultivating these inhibitions. Instincts, we call them. The cure is to subjugate them. Take the instinct of self-preservation. Most people still regard it as a sort of guardian angel to be revered and worshipped. In reality it is a blind unreasoning fear of death — the revolt of the tissues against the threat of dissolution. The terror it inspires drives man to the unregulated employment of every conceivable expedient to defer and defeat death. The accumulation of excessive riches, to take one extreme example, is a product of fear. . . . To the super-development of this inhibition we owe it that twentieth-century civilisation is dominated by selfish, cruel, avaricious and merciless creatures who are intent on prolonging their own lives at any cost to others. . . . We are merely animals that think, as yet. We cannot hope to become full-statured human beings until we have taught ourselves to regard death with indifference. Even then our task will have only begun. Having conquered and learned to control the instinct of self-preservation, we must subdue appetite. Fear and desire — they are the two

greatest forces of life. . . . One breeds ferocity, the other disease. One repels death, the other invites it. They are mutually necessary and complementary in the general design of nature; ensuring, as they do, the preservation and increase of the species, an average term of life for the individual, and a certainty of death. Instincts are our masters. We might live forever if we reduced them to the servitude of Reason. But you have another objective, I understand. Well, I think you might attain it. . . . Indeed I believe that you might easily produce a company of supermen, Mr Gaunt, if you train your babies properly and bring them to manhood fearing nought but God, desiring nought but good. . . . That's about all, I think."

Peter, who had listened movelessly, nodded his head. "Sainton intimated that you might be induced to join up with us," he said slowly. "I should like you to be a member of the proposed Manuka Council, Dr Leitch."

"I'll be glad to," returned the little doctor simply. He got to his feet as he spoke and moved towards the door. There however he lingered, and at last turned.

"Before positively committing yourself," he said, "I think you ought to know where I stand on the question of religion. You have probably been told I am an atheist?"

Peter inclined his head.

"I have never so described myself," declared the little doctor with a twisted smile. "The epithet was hurled at me some years ago following publication

of certain rather significant discoveries I had made concerning the functions of the endocrine glands. I was rash enough to retort on my assailants by exposing their ignorance of biology. They retired so precipitately from the controversy that I had no further chance to clear myself of their aspersions, and so the epithet stuck."

"Then you are not an atheist?" said Peter.

The doctor shrugged his shoulders:—"When I first learned that the psychological traits of man are largely determined by his internal secretions my faith in God was undermined. That magnificent phrase — 'The chemistry of the soul' caused me, and many others also, to forget that there cannot be chemistry without a Chemist. Eventually I remembered; but I had never paraded my aberration and I saw no reason to announce my return to sanity. You will now understand why some of my earlier critics continue to regard me as an atheist."

"You are an agnostic, perhaps?" persisted Peter.

"Some of us are blinded by light, some by darkness," replied the doctor. "A little new knowledge once almost made me an atheist. Having acquired a little more I became an agnostic; with still a little more I began to realise with Donnan that science is not the death but the birth of mystery and reverence. I have now a humbler faith in the Almighty than when I served daily as a childish acolyte at Mass. My sole present religious trouble is that I find myself unable to believe in the divinity of man."

"Notwithstanding Christ?"

The doctor shook his head. "Because of Christ," he answered slowly, "You see Mr Gaunt, I happen to believe that Christ and God are one."

Peter was silent for a moment, evidently musing. Then he said: "I want your help, Dr Leitch."

"You'll be able to pick and choose your helpers presently," replied the other. "There are hundreds of fine men, good men, able men, aye and women too — ready to rebel against the lunacy of mammon government; and they will flock to your standard when they know what you are doing or trying to do. I am only a biologist — and small beer at that — a dreamer rather than a doer. It would please me immensely to be found of use, but don't hesitate to drop me if and when I disappoint. You shouldn't cumber your team with passengers, Mr Gaunt, however well-meaning they may be. . . . I hope you don't mind my cheek in offering you such advice."

"I am grateful for it — your advice, I mean."

"A leader," said Dr Leitch musingly, "has to be lonely. He ought to be ruthless, too. You have a strong and quiet face. . . . You might do the trick."

Peter coloured hotly under his tan. He realised that Dr Leitch spoke quite impersonally, but he was unaccustomed to compliments, and he felt for a moment like a nervous schoolboy, praised before his class. While he still debated a reply the little doctor noiselessly retired; and when Peter looked up Mr. Levison was standing in the doorway.

"You were fortunate to liquidate your shorts, Mr Gaunt," said the broker. "Liverpool opened three pence up and Chicago rose four cents after Liver-

pool closed. It's gratifying to me that you profited — the first time you followed my advice. Thank goodness I have to give you a cheque instead of receiving one. Any orders?"

Peter smiled enigmatically, and the broker, seeing, laughed outright. "I'm not overlooking that the joke is still on me," he chuckled. "All the other times I was wrong and you profited by doing the very opposite of what I counselled you to do. Never mind, I am on my right leg at last. You can't keep a good girl down."

Peter's liking for the wheat-broker was not proof against the opportunity to administer a gentle drubbing.

"Once right in seven seems to me a poor average for a professional. But the amateur, of course, was favoured by fool's luck. What has the good girl to advise today?"

"Buy!" said Mr Levison.

"How much do I hold?"

"Forty loads in Liverpool, twenty in Chicago."

"A big holding, nevertheless you advise me to increase it?"

"All the American crop-news is bad, Mr Gaunt. I admit that the carry-over is large enough to care for any probable or possible harvest failures, but the whole world has known that for a year and more; known it and got used to it. It's a time-staled fact and it won't prevent the market rising sharply on a continuance of bad crop-news. If you'll excuse me for saying so, you attach too much importance to the carry-over, Mr Gaunt."

Peter shook his head. "I'd agree with you, if the wheat surplus stood alone. But it does not. Almost every other primary commodity is in a similar position — copper, spelter, tin, lead, steel, rubber, sugar, rice, and the rest. The statisticians record huge unsold balances of all — unconsumed and apparently unconsumable —, with production still increasing. This cannot go on for ever, Mr Levison. In my opinion it cannot go on for long."

Levison shrugged his shoulders but did not reply.

Peter studied his fingernails for a moment, then flicked a grain of dust from his cuff.

"Liverpool is pretty sure to open 'up' tomorrow?" he asked.

"Looks like it."

"My credit with you is for the moment what?"

Levison for answer handed Peter a cheque. Peter glanced at it and returned the document. "Keep it for another settlement."

"Ah! . . . You intend to buy then?" said the broker brightly.

Peter frowned. "Would you buy if you regarded the current crop-news as unreliable and exaggerated and if you profoundly believed that a financial crash affecting the entire world is both imminent and overdue?"

"Not if I believed that, Mr Gaunt. But I don't."

"I do."

"Then you are a seller?"

Peter nodded. "I want you to close out all my longs immediately and sell a hundred loads in Liver-

pool, a hundred in Chicago, and a third hundred in Winnipeg."

Levison blinked his eyes rapidly for a space of some seconds, then he collapsed into the nearest chair.

"Mister Gaunt!" he cried piteously.

"The cover you already have in hand," said Peter, "will be supplemented by the liquidation of my long account."

"It's not a question of cover," mumbled Levison. He began to mop his brow with a snowy handkerchief. "It's the thought of seeing all the good money you've made go west. . . . I oughtn't to take your order, Mr Gaunt. I really oughtn't. . . . It's terrible. . . . You ought to see a doctor. . . . Be a good fellow and sleep over it. I'll close out your longs, if you like, but let the rest wait till I call tomorrow morning. A day won't hurt, now will it?"

"I suppose not — but I like to act when my mind is resolved, Mr Levison. I am slower in arriving at determinations than you appear to suppose."

"But a day, just one day — that's all I ask. You'll be cheating yourself if you don't. The market is rising. It's not nearly at the top."

"I should not expect to get the top of the market. You have often warned me against that folly, Mr Levison. Yet you are committing it now on my account."

"And aren't you on your own account?" demanded the broker excitedly. "Be fair, Mr Gaunt, be fair! Isn't it your belief that you will get nearer

the top by selling today than tomorrow; and aren't you just staking your opinion against mine?"

Peter thought a moment, then nodded and smiled.

"It is true," he admitted. "I was doing just that — but unconsciously. You are acute."

"You've been often right but you can't always be right," urged Levison. "In the long run luck is always vanquished by experience. . . . Your fault is that you are apt to look too far ahead. The world may be in for the crash that you foresee, but it won't happen tomorrow, really it won't. What will happen tomorrow will be a big market rise and another the day after. The cards are all set for it. Honest to goodness I am buying wheat for myself tonight and that's a thing I haven't done for months. Now what about it, Mr Gaunt?"

Peter shrugged his shoulders. "Very well," he said ungraciously. "Have your way. Do nothing for me until we confer again. Let's hope you prove a sound prophet."

"It's a certainty," grinned the broker, and he hurried off, delighted with his victory.

Peter was less pleased with himself. He had vacillated and he was accustomed to regard vacillation as a folly. Self-love whispered that greater strength might be required to change than to stick to an unwise resolution, but the reflection was unsatisfying because it seemed to come from an interested source.

Architects and builders engrossed the rest of Peter's day, and by closing-time he was tired and

cross. Clare, whom he had driven relentlessly, remained unruffled, and when he pettishly refused her invitation to dine with the family she suggested a swim so sweetly that he felt ashamed and silently accompanied her to the car. They drove to Elwood, and were presently breasting the surf-crowned rollers that a rising southerly was pushing across the bay.

The buffeting waves quickly smoothed away Peter's ill-humour, and he apologised to the girl before they left the water. When they had dressed she turned the car in the direction of Bayton, and Peter seemed not to notice. His protest came as they swung into the gateway of her father's home.

"Dr Leitch was good enough to tell me that a strong man is needed for my job. He thinks I have a strong and quiet face," he muttered. "In reality I am made of putty. You have helped me to find it out."

There was misery in his tone, a spice of bitter humour too. Clare instantly stopped the car. They were still some distance from the house and hidden from it by the pines and ti-tree of the twisting avenue. The girl's action was unpremeditated and instinctive. Something had turned painfully in her heart. At any cost she must comfort him. As tenderly as a mother speaking to a sick babe she said to the middle-aged man beside her, "You are rarely blessed by God, Peter dear. You have been given strength without stubbornness. I become prouder of you day by day."

At the last word she threw in the gears with a crash and the car started with a violent jerk.

Both were laughing as they alighted. Peter, as usual, when he arrived unexpectedly, was almost rapturously welcomed by Mary and Mark. Clare slipped away and hastened to her room. Behind a locked door she stood before her mirror, every nerve at a high tension, every artery in her body throbbing. The greatest discovery a woman can make had come to her, realisation of the power to love another being, without selfishness and without reserve. In the darkened glass she saw not her own vivid and palpitating image but the shadowy figure of a man whose eyes were filled with hurtful doubt and self-depreciation.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

DESPITE her innate dislike of the indefinite, Clare made no immediate attempt to map a course or to look where she was going. She was content to brood happily over the formless but stupendous fact that her life was no longer an isolated and meaningless phenomenon. A free-lance yesterday without a comrade or a cause, she was now a proper member of a mighty army. She remained an inconspicuous atom still, but millions of sister units, equally inconspicuous, surrounded her — all servitors of love. She could feel their nearness though she could not see them. They were at one with her and she with them. Why bother to question whither the army marched while the intoxication of enlistment lasted? Her dominant instinct was to hide and hoard the secret of her emotional condition. Her office duties helped in this. The scope of Peter's business widened steadily. Clare became a willing slave to his affairs. So much of her work was mechanical and almost automatic that she could faithfully perform it while her spirit dreamed. No mask more effective than professed absorption in one's job.

Peter began to appreciate an ideal secretary — one who transcribed his innumerable dictations without an error, who literally carried out his directions, and who only spoke when he required an answer. It was the sort of service he valued above rubies. He

fixed a desk for Clare beside his elbow and she became a mute witness of all his interviews and business transactions — an unobtrusive and accurate recorder of all that passed.

Peter's callers came to regard her as a piece of office furniture — even Mr Levison, who fussily detested female clerks. Clare's abstracted mood lasted long; but the habit of silence it had engendered longer still. It helped her with her tasks that always grew in volume and complexity.

Peter drove her as a plantation-boss drives a cotton-picker. Absorbed and unsparing of himself, he never paused to measure the endurance of his minion. A procession of brokers, architects, lawyers, masons, merchants, landscape gardeners and traders of all sorts, passed daily through his sanctum, and each left tangled ends behind him for the girl to tie or straighten. Peter as an organiser was a ruthless tyrant; amazingly efficient but entirely heartless. Clare was often drooping with fatigue at the end of a day, but Peter showed her no consideration. He did not know she needed any. At closing hour when the staff departed, his most important task began. There were designs to scrutinise, faulty building or plantation plans to rectify; contracts to review, and above all, a network of grain-transactions to unravel and elaborate. Clare must ever be on hand to note down his decisions, to check his calculations and to edit his scrappy suggestions of direction for the next day's programme. Peter so frequently overlooked the business of dining that the girl's breakfast-appetite became a family jest.

Throughout those months of stress Clare was careless of the future and oblivious of the world. Nothing mattered but Peter and her work. She was too happy and occupied to read aright the signs of an approaching change. She observed without bothering to understand that Peter had amassed a lot of money in his speculations and that great progress was being made with the erection of Manuka; and in the back of her mind was an uncomfortable conviction that some day the feverish rush would end. But the end seemed aeons off and when it came she was caught entirely unprepared.

One morning Peter broke all rules by quitting the office at an early hour and not returning. Clare had plenty to do — the more, indeed, by reason of his absence —, and she hardly missed him until luncheon, which for the first time in many moons she was obliged to eat alone. By three o'clock all her work was finished and she had grown a little anxious. What on earth could have detained Peter so long? Had he been taken ill? Ought she to ring his rooms? Perhaps an accident? Suddenly Mr Levison appeared. The little broker looked exceedingly depressed, but anxious and excited too. He strode over to Clare's desk and said abruptly, "Why has he been dodging me, Miss Landale? I've rung half a dozen times. I know Gaites and Wickham have both seen him this morning — at their own offices, too. Has he lost confidence in me? If he has, he ought to tell me."

"Mr Gaunt has been absent since ten, Mr Levison; and where he is now, I cannot say. Probably on his way back."

"All the grain-brokers have seen him but me. He must have something against me, Miss Landale. Be a sport and put me wise."

Clare was not overfond of her visitor, but his frank distress awoke her sympathy.

"I am certain you are wrong," she assured him. "Mr Gaunt has a high regard for you."

"Then," cried Levison, "he's avoiding me because he knows that I am right. Look here, Miss Landale, whoever's been advising Gaunt the other way ought to be locked up in Mont Park. . . . I tell you it can't go on. It simply can't. Even a girl like you ought to be able to see that. You're a friend of his, aren't you? Then why don't you persuade him to close out and keep what he has won?"

Clare looked up from the mail that she was sorting.

"What can't go on, Mr Levison?" she asked.

"This slump," he replied. "Wheat has fallen three shillings a cental but Gaunt can't be induced to cover. He is three hundred short in Liverpool alone. For the last two nights I haven't slept a wink. I'll swoon if he tells me to sell again this evening. Can't you do something, anything, with him?"

Clare's brows drew together in a thoughtful frown. Peter rich or Peter poor mattered to her less than nothing. That Peter should succeed in the task that he had undertaken — and he seemed to be succeeding in an important preliminary part of it — she had always taken for granted. But suppose he failed. Suppose he lost everything and was

forced to abandon the Manuka project! The office walls suddenly became transparent. She saw the green slope of a wind-swept mountain and a great house with cracked and ravined walls, crumbling in decay. On a wide weed-grown terrace stood a familiar figure with pale grey eyes that stared at the ruin with the hopeless misery of a little boy irretrievably bereft of his most precious toy. She glanced at Levison and an anxious question rushed to her lips: "Is it certain the market will rise?"

The broker spread out his hands with a gesture of helplessness. "Stands to reason. It can't keep on falling for ever, can it? And hasn't he made enough to satisfy a pig? Pig's rough — but why mince matters? Nobody knows better than you the size of the pile he's stacked up since winter. The city is gossiping about it. . . . It's common talk that he has run into seven figures. I can vouch for sixes. . . . Of course he does business with other brokers, I know that as well as you do. He may have debits with some of them, but if he has, why would they be hiding it?"

Clare shook her head. "I don't know, I am sure," she replied. "Why would they, do you suppose?"

Peter's chuckle made them both start. He was standing in the doorway smiling amusedly. "Sheer waste of time trying to pump my secretary," he said, as he stepped forward. "But you were right" — his face grew serious — "to use the term 'pig'; I had begun to deserve it. The Siamese proverb, 'Who hath enough and covets more beckons death' fits my case. I have enough. You are at liberty to close me out."

Levison, whose face was very red, sighed ponderously. "I guess today loses me the biggest customer I ever had," he lamented. "And not because I tried to pump Miss Landale, either, now was it, Mr Gaunt? You'd made up your mind before you caught me acting the nanny."

Clare found herself waiting breathlessly for Peter's answer. When it came it surprised her. "I made up my mind last night. All morning I have been winding up. Your intuition, Mr Levison, has not deceived you. It's unlikely that I shall ever buy or sell wheat again, but that need not bring our association to an end. . . . You are aware of the work I am doing and planning to do — my 'baby-farming experiment,' as people are calling it. To succeed I must have help. I am forming an honorary advisory and consultative council. Mr Mark Landale, Professor Sainton, and Dr Joel Leitch have agreed to join. I want at least one more business man. You are a business man. May I nominate you as a member?"

"I am a Jew," said the broker after a startled pause.

"The founder of Christianity was a Jew," Peter reminded him.

"Well, sir, if being a Jew does not rule me out, you can count on me to serve you to the best of my ability — any hour of the day or night, and glad of the chance. You've paid me a big compliment, Mr Gaunt. You won't regret it. Good-bye. I must get to my office to telephone the wife. She will be as gratified as I am."

As he left the room Peter's eyes sought and questioned Clare's.

The girl nodded approvingly. "He will prove an excellent foil to Professor Sainton," she offered.

"I seem to be an open book to you," grumbled Peter. "That is exactly what I had in mind. You get your prescience from your Mother. When I was a boy she could tell my thoughts before I knew what they were myself."

Clare pondered that statement for the rest of the day. She did not believe her mother had ever been able to read Peter's thoughts, but knowing Peter incapable of untruth she concluded he had deceived himself. She had often felt vaguely troubled by his never-failing readiness to ascribe any merit he detected in her to the accident of her maternal inheritance; but there was nothing vague in her present irritation. It definitely angered her to realise that no living woman was her rival but an image of Peter's fabrication composed of all the qualities he considered admirable; to realise, too, that Peter sincerely believed the beautiful image he had constructed to be a grossly unworthy portrait of her mother — a very real woman whom he did not really know at all. Her sense of humour was alert to inform her of certain comic elements in the situation, but she had never found laughter less consoling. With a flesh-and-blood rival she felt competent to contend, but how might any girl cope successfully with an angelic phantom decked from head to foot with imaginary stars?

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SHORTLY after Levison's departure Peter left Clare in charge of his office and rode in a taxi to Wattle Park, where he soon found what he wanted — a shaded seat on the top of a pleasantly wooded hill, wide spaces around him and no human being in sight. He was very excited, and a morning spent in struggling to appear calm had made him nervous and a little sick. He must face up with himself without delay or he might become really ill. The medicine he needed was mental. He must make order of the turmoil in his mind. . . . The first part of his task had been accomplished. He had converted a small capital into a fund large enough to guarantee his experiment from failure through any cause connected with finance, and he had become the master (he thought of himself as the "shepherd") of considerable wealth. Pride swelled in his heart of which he was both fearful and ashamed. There must be something petty in him, he reflected, to feel excited because he had become rich. At all costs he must achieve humility of spirit. A searching examination of conscience was required: then a steady course of stern self-discipline. He forced himself to recall the genesis of his successful speculation. . . .

One midnight in his bedroom, when wearied of his futile efforts to discover a swift path to the fortune he needed for Manuka, he had resorted to the

practice of his long-dead mother when she sought guidance on a difficult occasion. Exactly imitating her remembered habit, he had kneeled and prayed long and earnestly for a sign. . . . Then he had opened the Bible — his mother's Bible — at random, and holding the book to his face he had peered through half-shut lids at the chance presented page; and the first three words he had seen he had resolutely accepted as a direction for deliverance from his problem. The words when divorced from their setting were destitute of any suggestion of command. They did not constitute a sentence and they did not contain a predicate. "Corn in Egypt." In some dim fashion, nevertheless, they seemed to fit his case. Just as famine-stricken Egypt once needed corn, he needed money for Manuka. "Corn in Egypt — corn in Egypt." It vexed him to remember the doubts that had beset him when his earlier attempts to comprehend the oracle bore no fruit. His faith had wavered more than once. More than once he had suffered reason to upbraid him as a superstitious fool. . . . But an indication had been vouchsafed him before his fortitude was quite worn out. Tired and baffled he had taken up a newspaper lying by hazard on his table and had read — not understandingly at once — an article that proclaimed the existence of a huge surplus of grain in the world and hinted at the imminent approach of conditions that might render it impossible for high current values to be maintained. . . .

What he thought of as "Light" had come to him very slowly, painfully. But he had followed it, once recognised, with unswerving pertinacity. He might

legitimately take pride in that. What — take pride in doing what he had felt to be his duty? An appointed instrument of Providence must strangle every secret inclination to be proud. Had he the right even to regard himself as a special instrument of Providence? Yet it could not be condemned in him as arrogance to give private expression to what he believed to be a fact; and deep in Peter's heart was a conviction that he had been born into the world to carry out a special work. There was evidence (to him all sufficing) that Providence had cleared a path for him. In nearly all his many market operations he had abandoned judgment and surrendered himself to impulse — conceiving impulse to be the vehicle of a supreme external Will. Not for the first time he assured himself that had he allowed his own finite reason to guide him he had long since become a beggar. But he had not. He had acted in swift and firm response to capricious, unexpected fancies; compelling himself, often with great difficulty, to disregard the objections of his startled intelligence. And because of all this Manuka was safe!

A whimsical smile curved his lips as he wondered what Mr. Levison would say could the broker learn the secret of his success as a speculator. None should ever learn that secret, Peter decided. It was not for him to publish the mysterious workings of Providence which he had been permitted to glimpse. He would commit a sin to suggest or to parade himself as a particular servant or protege of God. He must watch himself carefully and not suffer any seed of vanity to sprout in the garden of his spirit. Above

all he must constantly remember that he was a commonplace and homely little man who had been unable to win the love of the woman he loved; and every night and morning he must kneel by his bed and humbly thank the Omnipotent Designer for having kindly and mercifully selected one so imperfect and unworthy to implement some part, possibly infinitesimal and insignificant, of the Divine Purpose. The shadows of evening had begun to wrap a twilight cloak about the world when Peter arose, at length, refreshed and spiritually pacified.

His riches no longer either exalted or dismayed him. His nervous excitement had subsided. A quiet happiness possessed him. One chapter in his life had definitely closed and he felt that he could move forward firmly and tranquilly to his goal.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

PETER found Alan Landale waiting at his hotel. The boy was diffident but he soon proved that he could be pertinacious.

"You promised, sir, to think over the question of giving me a job at Manuka. I hate to worry you, sir, but that was nearly a month ago."

Peter answered bluntly: "My decision is no, Alan. Sorry!"

"It's a pill," said the boy. "I had hoped for another answer, especially as you've found Clare satisfactory. But perhaps you think you've got as many of my family in the ship as she can carry. What with Father on the Council, and Mother — a sort of patroness, isn't she?" He spoke bitterly.

"It is not that, Alan. It is your future I am considering. Your father has an old and important business. I am sure he expects you to carry it on when he is gone."

"He knows I will never be a broker, sir."

"You are very young, Alan — not eighteen yet, are you? You ought not to chose a profession before you leave the University at least. In the meanwhile your opinions may change. Do you really want to bury yourself in the bush and work for a pittance? Manuka offers no great career to any member of its staff; on the other hand it demands disciplined and unremitting service."

The boy's eyes sparkled. "I don't want a 'great career', sir. I want to do a decent job of work in the world, and for the world, and the less I get for it the better. I'm fed up of being a rich man's son, Mr Gaunt. It's all wrong, getting something for nothing. I'd prefer to give and keep on giving. Did you know," he proceeded inconsistently, "I won a scholarship at Christmas? My father said I shouldn't take it because he can pay my way, and there was a poorer chap who wanted it. It hurt rather. You see that scholarship was the only chance I've had to do something off my own bat."

Peter glanced uneasily at the glowing young face, with its eager and rebellious eyes, its generous and ardent mouth. "Mary's son!" he thought. "And how like her!" His heart beat less steadily as he replied, "Your parents expect big things of you, Alan. Have you the right to disappoint them?"

"Have they right to be disappointed in me if I choose to serve God rather than Mammon? . . . I shall join the Salvation Army if you don't take me, sir."

Peter was startled. "Would your mother approve of that, my boy?"

Alan shrugged an intolerant shoulder. "It's this way, sir." He spoke slowly, manifestly struggling for clear expression. "When I was a kid everybody kept on teaching me to live up to the Bible and be a real Christian. But now that I've nearly grown up everybody tries to stop me doing what they used to seem to want me to do. . . . I'm not so sore at them for fooling me, Mr Gaunt, as because I feel they were right then and wrong now."

Peter's secret thoughts were uncomplimentary to a system of education that by its very purposelessness could not fail to confuse and revolt minds as simple and as straight as Alan's. But Alan was Mary's son, and Mary wanted him to remain in the world.

"Look here, my boy," he ventured after a little thought. "I'll make a bargain with you. I shall have a talk with your parents, then if they are agreeable and you are willing to serve a reasonable apprenticeship at some good commercial school or University (I'll have no duds on my staff), I shall make a place for you at Manuka."

Alan nodded understandingly. "You expect me to switch during the proposed apprenticeship, and it's possible I may. But I don't think I shall, and I accept the bargain. You can be sure, sir, I'll hold you to it. When will you see my Mother? Would it suit you to dine with us tonight? She would love you to come, sir."

"Not tonight, Alan, thank you. By the way, is your Mother aware of your leaning towards Salvation — the Army, I mean?"

"Clare and I always tell Mum and Dad everything, sir — that is, as soon as we have made up our own minds."

"How did she — they take it?"

"Mother wept. Dad said that it seemed rather a caddish trick, to him, to break my way into Manuka by threatening a woman. Privately I thought the same thing, but I argued that as my threat wasn't an empty one I was justified in using it. Between

ourselves, sir, I admire the Salvation Army enormously. It's the only Christian Church that goes within cooe of practising the gospel of Christ. That's not mine, sir, I heard Professor Sainton say it more than a month ago."

"I begin to suspect that a horsewhipping might do you quite a lot of good," said Peter, with a scowl; but as Alan showed an eager readiness to debate the issue of corporal chastisement, he hurriedly made an excuse and retired to his room.

Peter laid the matter before Clare in the morning. She was more concerned at his anxiety to save her mother from vexation than at the problem presented by Alan's adolescent enthusiasm, which she believed to have been energised, if not inspired, by his latest divinity, a certain Freda Praed.

"Freda," Clare informed Peter, "is the sweetest thing, and a good influence as a rule for growing boys, but she follows a new will-o'-the-wisp every season and this year it happens to be the Light of Asia — the result of a trip to India. Alan is not the only manling she is tempting to eschew the world. Jack Pickburn only needs another push or two to don the yellow robe. Alan is jealous of Jack and he probably hopes to dazzle Freda by prompt action. He has more initiative than young Pickburn."

"Your father once told me that you have a great influence with Alan, Clare."

"'Had' would be correct, Peter. In Alan's firmament there is only one star today."

"Couldn't you make Mrs Praed see reason? You suggest her to be a good woman. She surely cannot

seriously wish to bring suffering into your mother's life?"

"The trouble is with Freda that she isn't amenable to reason while her obsessions last. Just now she is as rabid as a Dervish. She wants to save Alan's soul, and she believes there is no better way than her way. Perhaps there isn't."

"You can't help me, then?"

"I can't see why you shouldn't give Alan a chance at Manuka, Peter. It may be a passing whim with him to want to serve humanity — which will die a natural death when Freda is attracted by another ignis fatuus, or when his adoration wanes. On the other hand it may be the real thing. There's good stuff in Alan."

"I am thinking of your mother, Clare. Alan admitted that she wept on hearing his resolve."

Peter's tone suggested that he could not imagine a more tragic event nor a more callous ruffian than the person responsible for it. The girl bit back an exclamation "Mother weeps easily", and said instead, "I am sure that Mother would rather Alan join you than the Salvation Army. — What a nasty, hacking little cough you have, Peter. Are you taking something for it?"

"It's nothing," he replied indifferently. "A slight chill or too many cigarettes. It will go in a day or two."

"Are you sure you haven't a temperature?"

He laughed at her concern. "I want you to convene a first meeting of the Council for Wednesday night next; 8 p.m., unless you have an engagement for that evening. I can't do without my secretary."

"Very good, sir."

Peter showed her a troubled face. "I wonder if your mother could see me this afternoon. I can't let that affair of Alan's hang."

Clare picked up the telephone and was presently talking to Mary.

"Mother would like you to take tea with her at four."

"That is very kind of her. Will you say I shall be delighted."

"Peter will be delighted, Mother," said Clare through the 'phone and rang off. She took up her notebook — it was the hour when Peter dictated for the mail — and waited, pencil in hand, for him to begin. But Peter was restless and unready. He commenced to pace the floor, his hands thrust stiffly into his coat pockets, his brow puckered. Clare wondered how he could have gained the nickname "Poker Face" with a mouth so sensitive and delicate. Perhaps, however, he had worn a concealing moustache when he was young. She must ask Mary. Idly she wondered why his pale eyes perturbed her so much less than his mouth, at which she seldom glanced without being oddly moved. It must be because his eyes were nearly always eager and contentious, the eyes of a fighter, whereas his mouth was patient. A man must have been born to suffer, with a mouth like that.

She composed a letter of invitation to the members of the Manuka Council, then looked at Peter again. He stood before his precious Francia, his back to her, and his body shaking violently. Clare

stole to the outer office and dismissed some waiting visitors. She directed her assistant to admit no more and returned to find Peter reclined in the deepest armchair, fanning himself with a newspaper.

"I don't like your cough at all. You should see a doctor," she told him.

"It's just the fag end of a suppressed malaria attack." He took a phial from his pocket and swallowed some quinine, then leaned back and closed his eyes. "No need to be anxious, Clare," he murmured. "I shall be right in a few minutes." Almost immediately, however, he fell into a sleep.

Clare stole to his side. The pallor of his skin and the beads of sweat that had suddenly collected on his forehead did not reassure her, but he slept so sweetly that she fought back her panic inclination to summon a physician, and she was soon rewarded by seeing the colour return to his face. Guarded from interruption by Clare's dragon watch, Peter slept for several hours and woke refreshed and well. The necessity to visit his hotel and change made him late for his appointment with Mary Landale, whom he found in converse with a clergyman. The Rev. Mr. Tainsh professed himself honoured to meet Mr Gaunt. His fine bass voice intoned the words impressively. He was a large man, portly, bland and imposing, with wide brown eyes and a Shakespearean forehead. He was elegantly attired, and the long white fingers of his left hand pressed a black shovel hat to his breast.

"You can hardly be unaware," he said, "that the religious community is deeply interested in what you

are doing at Manuka, Mr Gaunt. May I venture to express the aspiration that the Most High will bless your labors, sir?"

"It was *so* fortunate that the Padre, — we always call Mr Tainsh the Padre, he served in the Great War you know, — called today. I have been *so* anxious for you to meet him, Peter. He is *so* kind and he could help you *so* much if he would; and I am sure he will."

Mary stressed her "so's" like popguns. Peter wondered at her nervousness, but he acknowledged that it enhanced her beauty, and in his greater wonder (Mary's loveliness always filled him with a sense of the miraculous) his less was quickly drowned. Peter's habitual slowness in conversational responses made the Churchman feel that he was being measured and judged. He was relieved to hear Peter say, "It is I who am honored, Mr Tainsh, and I thank you for your benevolent aspiration." Turning to Mary, he added, "Once again, Mary, you have put me in your debt."

The Minister was pleased. After all he had not struck a false note. He obliged Peter to use the chair he had been occupying, finding another, on the other side of Mary, for himself. Mary's nervousness evaporated and she began to pour the tea, at the same time artlessly pouring out her mind, as was her normal wont and the secret of much of her success as a hostess. It was her pet principle to do all the talking at the outset of a social debate and when her guests had settled down and found their feet, as it were, she would then assume the role of an intelligent and eager listener.

“I was assuring Mr Tainsh, just before your arrived, Peter, that you would gladly and gratefully welcome his co-operation. And I was telling him, too, how reluctant you are to ask help from anyone because of your diffidence. You see, Peter, I know how modest and diffident you are — and I don’t want him to misunderstand because I know how greatly he can help. — I’ve given you two lumps, Padre, is that right? I rarely forget the tastes of my friends. . . . Is it wrong to take pride in such little things? . . . You are laughing at me, I can see. But they are important to a woman. You men so monopolise the big functions of life that we women are condemned to elaborate and magnify the parts you graciously allot to us. And often we have to help you by stealth, positively by stealth, so proud and independent you are, so confident that you do not need it. Am I a silly woman to be giving away the secrets of my sex? But perhaps they are not secrets to wise and clever men like you. You must forgive my chattering, but I am so frightfully worried about Alan, Peter, I hardly know what I am doing. Mr Tainsh laughed when I told him about the Salvation Army. But Alan means it — and he’s such a stubborn boy. . . . Even when he was quite a baby he had a will of iron. But I must not bore you. . . . All I want you to know, Peter, is that Alan must be saved from that — whatever happens. I simply couldn’t bear that. It would be awful. So if he has to go to Manuka — he must. And Mr. Tainsh is so kind. He would help you with Alan as well as with your babes. He baptised Alan a week after he was born. Clare too — but that, of

course, was before Alan was born, she being the elder. . . . Another cup, Peter? You see how difficult my position is . . .” She smiled enchantingly. “I can smile today because I know you will help me, but last night I cried myself to sleep.” She subsided into silence.

Peter continued to gaze at her. The Churchman's eyes had for some time been fastened on Peter's face. He had scarcely glanced at Mary, whom he had known and studied from childhood. The transparency of Peter's devotion astonished him, and he took for granted Mary's intuitive understanding of her power to exploit it. He saw a fly caught in a spider's net; the spider intent on using the fly rather than devouring him; not merely unconscious of her cruelty but believing herself unselfishly considerate. Queer that the fly should also believe the spider disinterested and kind. Mr. Tainsh had been led to expect that he would find Peter a man of high intelligence, well balanced, sensitive and strongly self-controlled. How came eyes so spiritual, so penetrating, to be so blind! A head so finely shaped to house a mind befooled! Sex? Sex must be the explanation. A one-woman man and a youthful attachment concreted by time. He felt he should not judge Peter by his attitude to Mary Landale. He told himself, also, with a sigh, that he ought not to judge Mary as harshly as he felt inclined. People were as God made them, and the maternal instinct was a force the world could ill do without. Mr Tainsh had a vein of sentiment which continued at fifty-five to regard a woman suck-

ling a babe as the most beautiful of natural phenomena.

Peter's voice dispersed his meditations. "I had a talk with Alan yesterday. If you are willing for me to have him, Mary, the matter can be settled readily. He prefers Manuka to the Salvation Army."

Mary's face did not lighten at his words. She glanced appealingly at the Churchman.

Mr. Tainsh obediently responded to the cue. "Mrs Landale," his deep voice boomed, "has been disturbed by rumours, doubtless false, that the children you propose to care for at Manuka will be given a religious education such as the religious community of which she is a member might not be disposed to sanction. She would not like her son to participate in the propagation of unorthodox or pagan doctrine. May I be quite frank with you, Mr Gaunt? I confess to a similar prejudice and I conceive it to be my duty, as the pastor of this family, to support Mrs Landale's attitude. Candour induces me to add that I would feel it my bounden duty as a Minister of the Gospel to employ any legitimate means to thwart your plans should the rumours to which I have alluded have substance in them. On the other hand, if they are baseless (as I am very willing to believe) I would gladly labour in your vineyard and serve your purpose to the uttermost extent of my poor talent."

Peter unconsciously began to rub his wrists on which he already sensed the fret of gyves. He steadily evaded Mary's pleading eyes. "I am no

pagan," he said coldly. "My first meeting with Mrs Landale was at a Sunday School in this suburb. I am still an unworthy member of the congregation she adorns. I am too old, too much of a conservative to change. But at Manuka no creed will be dominant. Our children will be at liberty when they leave us to please themselves in the choice of a religion, but while they are with us their minds will be diligently cultivated to appreciate the truth and beauty of the life and works of Jesus Christ. Knowledge of the life and works of other great teachers, will not be withheld from them. If we can co-operate on this basis I shall be glad for you to join the Manuka Council, Mr Tainsh."

"An offer, sir, that I most warmly and gratefully accept," replied the other instantly.

Peter got up. One glance at Mary informed him she was still unsatisfied despite her pastor's prompt approval of the Manuka curriculum. But for the first time in his memory Peter was angry with Mary Landale, and he steeled his heart against her. He felt that she had failed in faith, in loyalty to him — or rather that she had doubted his faith and loyalty to her. She had fancied him capable of wooing her son to courses odious and hurtful to her conscience. And it was evident that she had conspired with another to secure a guarantee. In short, Peter felt that he had been used badly, without cause, by one whom he was incapable of using ill. He made curt adieux and he left the house filled with sorrowful bitterness.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THERE were no absentees; every member of the Council was punctual. Apparently, too, the Councillors were agreeable to one another. Peter had feared that Mr. Tainsh might be unwilling to collaborate with Dr Leitch, but they greeted like friends and selected adjoining seats. Peter took the chair without apology. The wheat-broker sat beside Clare. He wore swallow-tails and looked a little out of the picture. Conscious of this, he was acutely miserable until Peter, who divined his feelings, warmly thanked him for a suggested constitution which he had contributed the previous day. This was read to the gathering by Clare. It provided an inoffensive machinery for the conduct of business and the succession of administrative offices, and it was accepted after so trifling a debate that Mr Levison plucked up confidence to forget his sartorial singularity.

With the aid of a huge bundle of architectural drawings Peter explained his building-programme, which would be completed, he declared, within four weeks. Professor Sainton expressed great astonishment and impatiently demanded that the Council should be set some real work to do, forthwith. He appeared to resent the progress that Peter had achieved unaided. "What about selecting a staff?" he asked. "Or perhaps you have already seen to that?"

"I do not propose to bother the Council with domestic organisation at this stage, Professor," Peter returned. "An experienced Matron and a provisional staff are available. They will take possession and carry on under my personal supervision until the justification for permanent appointments has been demonstrated to the satisfaction of us all. There is something, however, that requires our united immediate consideration. It is necessary to define the ideals and objectives of the Institute and to formulate a policy for their attainment."

"Hear! hear!" said the wheat-broker.

The others nodded expectantly.

"There is nothing easier than to conceive or cherish an ideal," murmured Mark Landale. "Nothing more difficult than to express it perfectly — except to achieve it."

"It is probable," said Dr Leitch, "that every man here has a strikingly different mental image of the Manuka ideal; yet I suspect that if these images could be displayed they would all bear a strong family likeness."

"Then in God's name let us display them," urged Mr Tainsh.

"Would your Reverence give us a lead?" asked Mr Levison.

"I should prefer Mr Landale to do that, for he it was who first expounded to me our Chairman's design."

Mark rose to his feet. "My view," he said, "of the Manuka ideal is a world purged of the worship and practices of Mammon and sealed in the worship

and practices of Jesus. . . . The purpose of Manuka, I take it, is to prepare and send forth into the world an unceasing stream of ardent young missionaries who will labour by precept and example to propagate contempt for gross ambitions and to inspire men to cultivate their spiritual heritage by lives of selfless service and by deeds of loving kindness."

"You have described," said Dr Leitch, "the avowed ideal of the Christian religion and both the purpose and the practice of every Christian Church. Every ecclesiastical seminary in existence trains its missionaries and sends them forth to labour in the manner you have suggested. Their combined efforts have failed to stem the tide of materialism. Is it proposed to establish a new Christian sect at Manuka? If so, why should its missionaries be expected to triumph where their precursors of the older sects have not succeeded?"

Professor Sainton entered the breach: "The missionaries trained at Manuka should not be priests living by the gospel, but working men, professional men and business men earning their bread by the sweat of their brows; refusing to earn more than sufficient to satisfy their creature wants and living always in close contact with their kind. Christian priests of the past, through no fault of their own, have been professional preachers rather than voluntary exemplars. An ounce of gratuitous example is worth a ton of subsidised tuition."

"Those who preach the gospel should live by the gospel," Mr. Tainsh reminded them.

"A saying that must not be confused with any of the commands of Christ," retorted the Professor.

“The world needs a new Messiah,” struck in the Jewish broker unexpectedly, “and for my part I can’t imagine a better way to find him than to go out and look for him. And we’d do that best by bringing up a lot of healthy babies under the right sort of training. . . . It’s true that Jesus of Nazareth was born in a manger — but although we know very little of His education we can be sure it was the right sort. . . . I speak of Jesus reverently, Mr Chairman. As you reminded me a while ago, my race produced Him. I’ve always been proud of that fact, so I should not have needed to be reminded. What I’m coming to is this: there are plenty of mangers still left in Nazareth, in Melbourne too, although the motor car is pushing them into the background, a bit too fast perhaps. But can anybody tell me where a Messiah baby, born in a manger or born in a palace, has the smallest chance of getting the right sort of Messiah education, the sort Jesus must have had? In my opinion, Mr Chairman, thousands of Messiahs have been born into the world only to be blighted by bad training. I wouldn’t be surprised if one was born in every country every second day. But we don’t give them a chance. We turn them into big business organisers, ambitious Union secretaries, smart-Alec company promoters, or rabid Communistic demagogues. It’s our poisonous education that’s to blame. It presses all mankind through a single mould and the end of it is to make most of our brainy men believe it a sheer waste of time to concern themselves with anything but building up a bank-account.”

"There's much sense in what Mr Levison has said," remarked Professor Sainton. "Manuka ought to train its babies to think about other things than bank-accounts: to think originally, justly, and wisely."

"To think unselfishly," added Mr Tainsh. "And to feel unselfishly. Does thought precede sentiment — or result from it? History suggests that Messiahs are born, not made; but in my humble opinion Manuka will nobly justify itself if it infuses into the bloodstream of civilisation one new corpuscle armed with power, however limited, to induce recognition of eternal truth. But let us hitch our wagon to a star and hope that Manuka will produce many such."

"We must not stray too widely from our task of definition." The Professor was in full charge of the meeting, as Clare smiled secretly to note. "Is our ideal a socialised world? If so, we must teach our babies to preach the gospel of a voluntary pooling of all material possessions."

"Give all thou hast to the poor and follow me" murmured Landale.

"The work of the world will still have to be performed," objected Dr Leitch.

"Coalesce the trades-union idea of the right to work with the Christian idea of the duty to work and it would not be difficult to apportion a reasonable amount of toil and an abundance of leisure to every human being." The Professor was enjoying himself. "Of course," he added, "Manuka is only concerned with the promulgation of principles. It

is not our business to devise machinery to enforce their practice."

Peter's pale eyes had earnestly searched every speaker's face. He was struggling with a sense of defeat. He looked down the table at Clare and asked, "At what age should we admit babies to the Institute?"

Clare with a glance passed the obligation of reply to Dr Leitch, who responded, "I have given that problem a good deal of attention, and have prepared a detailed report which sets forth the arguments pro and con every age from one to seven. I am not suggesting it should be considered now."

"But we'd like your conclusion, Doctor." It was the Professor who spoke.

"I think we should not admit babies younger than two or older than four except in very special circumstances. A healthy child of two has an excellent expectation of attaining a healthy maturity. A healthy child of four has already become mentally susceptible of receiving more or less indelible impressions. There are other reasons, but those predominate."

"Thank you, Dr Leitch," said Peter, valiantly suppressing an irritating cough.

The Professor once more assumed control. "We may take it then that the education, that is the ethical education, of our babies should begin at four. That point settled, we come face to face with other questions, for instance the nature and scope of the religious instruction we shall impart, the method of

its administration and the qualifications of those entrusted with the duty of imparting it."

"Are we all agreed," asked Dr Leitch, "to dispense purely non-sectarian instruction?"

All eyes turned to Mr Tainsh, who shook his head. "I should be better able to answer that question with a syllabus of Mr Gaunt's ideas before us."

"I have no fixed views," said Peter. "I have been hoping that Mr Tainsh might be persuaded to draft a scheme for our consideration at a later meeting."

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure, Mr Chairman."

"Should the teachers be priests?" suddenly demanded Dr Leitch.

"Should priests be debarred?" countered the Padre. "And why?"

"A Catholic priest for example?" interpolated the Jewish broker with a hidden smile.

"Or a Rabbi — or a Buddhist?" asked Dr Leitch.

"It would scarcely be wise to entrust the exposition of Christian doctrine to an unbeliever," said Mr Tainsh with dignity. "A question has been raised that demands the gravest consideration. We are proposing to assume, gentlemen, a responsibility of great and even terrifying proportions, terrifying because it is impossible to measure them. It is apparently our common aim to bring up these babies as Christians, but not as members of any special sect. We must exercise, then, the most scrupulous care to avoid prejudicing their minds against, or in favour of, any Christian Church. Is any teacher competent

to be impartial who believes that all Christians, not members of his own congregation, are predestined to damnation?"

"Few moderns of any Church accept that tenet," observed Mark Landale. "The age of bigotry is dead, perhaps. But we shall always have to do with bigots."

"I but pointed out a single danger," said the Padre, "one of many that we must confront and patiently consider. Our task indeed, bristles with difficulties and is so beset with pitfalls that I venture to urge the Council to defer further attempts at the determination of a policy until I shall have drafted the scheme our Chairman has asked me to prepare. With a concrete plan before us we shall be better able to deal with the many complex issues that are involved."

"The trouble is," said Professor Sainton, "that time is the essence of the contract. Manuka will be ready for occupation shortly, and if we postpone our more important decisions we may be caught unprepared. However, I am willing that the question of teachers' qualifications be held over till next meeting."

Scarcely pausing for his companions to assent, he proceeded: "A matter that we cannot defer and which, indeed, might well have formed the starting-point of our deliberations, is the question of funds. We have been given to understand that our Chairman is willing to provide, out of his private purse, whatever money may be wanted to finance the Institute. I have endeavoured, with the aid of an

accountant, to form an approximately accurate estimate of Manuka's pecuniary requirements. I do not believe, gentlemen, that we can carry on in a satisfactory manner — assuming the adoption of fifty children and the payment of standard wages and salaries — at a less expenditure than £30,000 per annum. The extent of Mr Gaunt's fortune is unknown to me. His resources may exceed Manuka's needs, but I am extremely reluctant to accept the situation I have designated. I think we should all contribute according to our means and that the public should be invited to contribute too. I am empowered by my wife to offer immediately a donation of £10,000 to a general fund to be constituted in the usual way for the upkeep of the Institute, and I am further authorised to pledge a similar donation in five years' time. I have the honour to move for the appointment of a committee of finance whose business it will be to collect funds and to supervise the financial administration of the Institute. The smaller the committee the better, but we can hardly get along with less than three. I suggest — our Chairman, Mr Landale, and Mr Levison."

"I think you should take my place," said the broker quickly. "You deserve it. I am only a five hundred pounds man. I can't afford more than that, but you can have my cheque tonight if you want it."

"And you, Landale?"

"You may count on me for £2,000," answered Mark. "And I think that you should serve on the Committee, Sinton. By the way, I second your motion."

"I can fish up £200 at a pinch," said Dr Leitch. "With so much glib chatter of thousands in the air I begin to think we might start reforming the world by pooling the resources of this room. What do you say, Padre?"

Mr Tainsh was spared a reply by Peter, who had again been wrestling with his cough. He rose, now, his cheeks stained with an unusual crimson, a deprecating hand outstretched. "Gentlemen," he said, and his voice was notably hoarse, "I beg you not to proceed with Professor Sainton's motion. I ask him to withdraw it; for, indeed, I cannot accept it."

"Why?" The word, uttered by the Professor, rang out like a pistol-shot.

Peter steadied himself against the table, watched with increasing anxiety by Clare, who thought he looked extremely unwell.

"The pecuniary wants of Manuka," said Peter, "have been provided. I dreamed a dream; I made a prayer. The prayer was answered. The dream came true. Believing as I believe, I cannot share the obligation of stewardship. From my heart I thank you for your generosity. I shall always preciously esteem your help. I shall always humbly welcome your advice. There is so much you can do — that I cannot do, unaided. But while I live I will maintain Manuka, nor shall the Institute suffer when I die."

There followed a momentary silence, then in a harsh and angry voice Professor Sainton said:—"I have been misinformed. It seems you are a millionaire. I had been given to understand your means

were more moderate!" He glanced belligerently round the table as though charging his colleagues with having misled him and demanding from each and all an explanation.

The air immediately became electric. The seated members bent forward in their chairs. Peter's eyelids narrowed and his body stiffened. Clare began to breathe more quickly, thrilling to a sense of the sudden opening of a drama containing unpleasant possibilities, perhaps. She looked steadfastly at Peter, wondering in part of her mind, to see his face become composed and colorful, and every trace of sickness vanish. The rest of her mind coiled down like a spring to leap to Peter's aid, as might a tigress tense herself, preparing to defend her cub.

She heard her father say:—"I had no idea you could have become so well off so quickly, Peter. Rumours reached me I admit of your adventurings in grain but I disregard gossip about my friends." A trace of reproachful sarcasm crept into his voice. "Congratulations, of course!"

Peter made the gesture of one brushing away a fly. "My adventurings," he said evenly, "have provided fully for Manuka's needs. Do you require me to explain them? I am willing! I bought and sold large quantities of unseen wheat in the open markets of the older world. My transactions were successful." He looked the Padre in the eye. "You may possibly consider, Mr Tainsh, that I am building Manuka with tainted money — gambler's gold?"

"Bosh!" cut in the Professor rudely. "We are living in the twentieth century. In every species of

trade and commerce, as every modern school boy knows, there is an element of hazard. All business is a matter of buying and selling, alike in hope of gain and in fear of loss. There is not a shred of difference between buying and selling foreign wheat abroad and buying boots from a Collingwood factory to retail in a shop at Seymour."

"The Churches," observed Dr Leitch, "frown on gambling but they have never ventured to define the thing that they denounce. The lawyers have been more courageous."

Mr Levison shrugged his corpulent shoulders: "There's no more sin that I can see in one sort of gambling than another. It's the funniest fact I know that the ways permitted by the law are wider than the ways forbidden. But that's only one more proof that the law is an ass."

The Padre became conscious that all eyes were fixed on him expectantly. He leaned back and glanced up at Peter who continued to stand. "When I first met you, Mr Gaunt," he began, "I was already aware that you had profited by speculating in wheat and that you proposed to devote your profits to Manuka. Having been advised that you might invite me to join you I gave much consideration to the matter" . . . He paused a few seconds, then went on. "I readily convinced myself that such business as yours is fully sanctioned by the laws and customs of our country and does not lack for Biblical authority. We are told in Genesis that Joseph son of Jacob bought all the corn he could lay hands upon to sell again when famine visited the land of Pharaoh

and that his undertakings were blessed by God and vastly prospered him. In your case, then, I needed only to enquire if you had ever bought or sold more wheat than you could pay for had the market turned against you. I am a simple man, Mr Gaunt, and I have shown you my test of the sort of business operation that might yield 'tainted' gold. When I met you I found that I did not need to put the question."

"Your confidence greatly honours me," responded Peter slowly. "But I claim the right to answer your unput question now. My dealings were large and many. Had all or any gone against me no other man would have lost a farthing. I often risked all that I possessed — but never more."

"I was certain of it," said the Padre, smiling pleasantly.

"Discussion closed!" boomed the Professor. "What is the next item, Mr Chairman?"

Peter, however, instead of replying, stepped backwards towards the door, gasping painfully. Dr Leitch and Clare sprang afoot and rushed to aid him. They reached him together just before he swooned. Professor Sinton mastered the situation with a brief "Gentlemen, I declare this meeting adjourned to a date to be fixed." He drove his colleagues from the room and returned to fling the windows open. On retiring he found that none had awaited him.

Why are managing men — and women — disliked when they perform necessary and kindly offices? "It is because," decided the Professor,

"only they have the brains to perceive what ought to be done and the will and energy to do it."

Peter speedily recovered consciousness and was ashamed of the commotion he had caused. Dr Leitch accompanied him in a taxi to the Windsor and put him to bed, leaving some capsules to induce sleep if the cough should again prove troublesome.

The physician found Clare in the porch of the hotel.

"I had to know what is wrong with Mr Gaunt" she said simply.

"A stringy heart and a little bronchial congestion. He needs a rest. Persuade him to spend a fortnight in the mountains and he should be as good as new."

"Peter," said Clare, "imagines that he will not live very long. Has he reason?"

"Who over forty has not?" asked the physician drily. He went on in a kinder tone: "My examination revealed no cause for anxiety. It was too cursory to warrant a definite opinion. He would be wise to put himself in the hands of a heart and lung specialist."

Clare drove homewards in a thoughtful mood.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CLARE secured a comfortable lodging for Peter at Yamarta, a tiny farmhouse in the Dandenongs within walking-distance of Manuka, and she installed him there without delay, wringing from him a promise not to visit the city for at least ten days. It had proved less difficult to manage him than she had expected; for Peter was wearily sick and there was so much to do that in his alerter moments he passionately wanted to get well. For the most part, however, he was too tired and drowsy to want anything, and he felt no inclination to rise from his bed until the third morning after his arrival at Yamarta. By that time the pure mountain air had repaired his defective tissues. Aroused soon after dawn by the resonant mating-call of a love-sick menura that was singing near his bedroom window, he noted with delight that his interest in the world was once more vividly alive. He felt a little shaky as he donned a dressing-robe, but in the intensity of a suddenly born desire to see the still singing lyre bird, he forgot he had been ill. Stealing through the silent house to a porched verandah that overhung, on slender piles, a mighty gorge, he was halted spellbound by a spectacle of hardly believable loveliness. The deep valley that he knew to intervene between Yamarta and Manuka had wholly disappeared, yielding place to a milk-white lake whose surface was as smooth as frosted glass. Here and there the shapes of

sweetly rounded little trees climbed in soft masses above the snowy waters, forming pleasant islands; while rich green forests, rising steeply tier on tier to dizzy heights girdled and enclosed the lake. Peter's enchanted eyes had not yet grown accustomed to the picture when a jealous sea wind, sighing and sweeping up the gorge, suddenly destroyed its texture and dispersed the parts, scattering the mists that had been simulating waters like flocks of sheep, and revealing the islands that had graced the vanished lake to be the crested tops of forest monarchs growing grandly in the valley. But the real world now disclosed contained no disappointment. Less mysterious than the mirage, it surpassed the spectral scene it had supplanted with the variety of its allure and the spirit-satisfying quietude of its calm and serious beauty.

From boyhood Peter had loved the highlands of his native country with an almost passionate devotion. During his exile he had climbed many famous mountains in the older continents. He had often been enraptured by their grandeur, but he had found them always lacking in the subtly endearing characteristics of Australia's coastal ranges: the omnipresent underbrush with its hosts of shyly flowering shrubs; the fleecy gullies spangled with sassafras and fledged with starry tree-ferns; the purple shadows of the musks and myrtles; the scintillating glory of the wattles; the rounded graciousness of the melodiously sighing sheoaks; the velvety opulence of the callitris; the dominating splendour of the regnans—massive giants that benevolently shelter all the lesser growths

and never seek to crowd or to oppress their weaker brethren —; the peculiar, faintly pungent smell of the Bush, a single scent and unforgettably distinctive that is, nevertheless, compounded of a thousand perfumes; and, above all, and pervading all, the softly tinted blue-grey atmosphere which is nearly always positively visible although pellucidly transparent, and ever seems to fold the forest in a languorous embrace. The incomparable scene at which he gazed and the scented air he breathed so easily and deeply stirred Peter's senses into tumult and kindled yearning ardours in his breast. Never more would he leave this country that he loved so dearly. With the help of God he would labour to be worthy of the joy that it had brought into his narrow life, and he would see that when he died his outworn carcase should not join the useless litter of a graveyard but should mingle with a patch of mountain mould to fertilise the living body of some needy tree.

A sudden hush descending on the gorge made him cognisant of the cessation of a concert to which he had not given due attention. In the ensuing silence he remembered to have heard half consciously the warbling of a pair of magpies, the chiming of a bell-bird, and the fluty thrilling of a mountain thrush. Why this deep and solemn stillness? He had seen no bird fly, heard nought disturbing, and the breeze had died away. His question was answered by a shaft of sunlight that struck straight as a spear through the latticed branches of a blackwood and pointed a glinting finger full at a large cock lyre-bird that stood poised for action, with

tail erect and fan-spread, on a little mound of earth beneath the tree.

Peter caught his breath in a rushing ecstasy of wonder and delight. The menura was no more than fifteen paces from the balcony. The sunbeams framed him in a ring of liquid gold and made his long twin lyre plumes shine like burnished copper. The osprey tips that drooped above his proudly crested head glistened like a silver screen inlaid with diamonds. The faint, far fluting of a hen menura in the valley gave the bird his cue. He responded eagerly and instantly with the long sweet love-trill of his tribe, then waited in an attitude of tense expectancy. The answering call was long deferred, but when it came it sounded clearer, nearer, and the bird began immediately to court his sweetheart's admiration in the manner of his fathers since the world was very young. Advancing and retreating with rhythmically swaying movements and ever shivering plumes, and singing like a seraph, he executed with elaborate deliberation the entire ritual of a strangely lovely dance, weaving with his feet a mystic pattern on the mound. Always he executed three steps to each two beats of his elfin music; and when he brought the measure to an end, he issued two clanging bell-like notes that pealed an amorous challenge to the universe. How might any hen menura resist so sweet and confident a summons? But the lady remained obdurately silent. The ardent cockbird seemed dispirited and sad, and his splendid tail was lowered dolefully. But in a little while he plucked up heart and hope again. He could not only dance and sing. He was a great artist.

He would compel the lady to love him by displaying all his genius. Once more he reared and spread his gorgeous tail, then staring intently in the direction of his mate he addressed her with a hundred diverse thrilling voices. Peter, marbled with amazement, heard the warbling of magpies, the hilarious laughing of a kookaburra, the melodious piping of a thrush, the bell-bird's ringing chime, a whip-bird's lashing crack and the silvery whistle of a parrot. All the feathered denizens of the bushland seemed to have gathered in a glen to entreat one hen menura to be kind and gracious to her lord. And the wizard maestro often heightened the illusion by reproducing simultaneously the songs of many birds.

The slam of a door within the farmhouse brought the performance to an end. The menura vanished so swiftly and soundlessly that Peter could only guess at the direction of his stealthy flight; and he began to doubt if he had dreamed the whole experience.

Greatly daring, he bathed that morning in an icy rock pool; but his cough did not return, and after the midday meal he set off on the jungle track to Manuka. The path had long been untrodden and in places it was overgrown with bracken and prostanthera, and difficult to follow. But the gully was always there to guide him, and Peter counted his exertions well rewarded by the glimpses he obtained at intervals of many birds and beasts not often seen by casual rangers of the wild. When he reached the plateau he climbed a little rocky eminence and rested all his senses save his sight. He was still too far from the Institute for the noises

of the busy builders to be troublesome. In the middle distance men were ploughing fields, erecting fences, making roads, and planting hedges. One long avenue of young lindens and callitris (every tree enclosed with stakes) marked the line of the main highway to Melbourne and meandered charmingly across the wide plantation area. The terraces had all been cleared of scrub and freshly turfed; and on the highest tier many tiny figures were excavating a mammoth basin in the rock. A square clock-tower had been raised above the central pile of buildings, and long triple-storeyed wings — still wanting roofs — had been extended from the ancient flanks. South of the Institute the pillars of a small Doric fane gleamed amid the shells of half a dozen houses about which workmen swarmed like ants; and at the edge of the ravine there was set an isolated Gothic habitation that seemed to be complete.

It was a scene of spacious and vivid loveliness, rich in promise of beauty to come when the innumerable infant trees everywhere being planted, should acquire sufficient stature to harmonise such artificial shapes and contours as now appeared incongruous.

Peter's eyes blurred with tears he made no effort to repress, for he was weak from his sickness and he tasted a happiness that he doubted could endure. If he had a thought it was that it was good to be alone.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

TWO formal meetings of the Council were held under the direction of Professor Sainton during Peter's absence on the mountain. Clare believed that an earlier, informal conference between the Professor, Dr Leitch and Mr Tainsh must have preceded the formal meetings, so perfect seemed the understanding of this trio. The day following the second formal meeting she motored to Yamarta to tell Peter what had occurred. He listened patiently, not at all affected by the vague suspicions that she made no effort to conceal.

"Good work, Clare," he remarked when she had finished. "Apparently they have filled the gaps and knitted most of the loose ends of our first discussion, leaving only the matter of the syllabus at issue. I am particularly pleased at the programme they have arranged for the selection of our raw material. To have the run of all the Orphanage Institutions and Maternity Hospitals will suit us perfectly. You say Dr Leitch has fixed the matter with the Government. A feather in his cap! He has initiative, that man."

"Mr Tainsh helped him, Peter, but don't forget that the Government will require a bond for a large amount in respect of every child we adopt — to ensure its proper maintenance and education up to the age of sixteen."

"A very proper condition, my dear. We could hardly expect permission to adopt State wards and remain free of obligation to convert them into self-supporting citizens."

"But the Government also stipulates that its officers shall have the right to enter Manuka at all times and inspect the children in our care."

"Nothing could please me better — for this right, freely conceded to officers of the Crown, will both excuse and explain our exclusion of unauthorised visitors and defend us from busybodies. I feel greatly indebted to the — ahem! — conspirators, Clare."

The girl flushed and bit her lip, but smiled in spite of herself when she met his amused glance. "Laugh at me if it pleases you, Peter. But I don't like their ways. They are resolved to run Manuka — you too, if they can. I feel it in my bones. I wish I could make you see."

"I can see only the wonderful enthusiasm they are displaying, child — and I am humbly grateful for it. . . . They are good men — sincere men. They may be ambitious of control. But they seek the light. It would be strange if the qualities that combine to produce zeal were wholly divorced from the urges of self-worship."

"Peter — what a snakey thought!"

"A true thought! Be my confessor, Clare, and shrive me if you can when I tell you that after fighting myself night and day for months I have not yet ceased regarding Manuka as a personal monument."

"How shocking!" laughed the girl. "But my pagan heart rejoices to learn that you lost that battle with yourself. It is your imperfections that make you endurable, Peter, not your virtues or your shining aspirations. You'd be simply odious if you were all you seem to want to be."

He gave her a frowning look, then led the way to a garden seat that overlooked Manuka Gorge, and commanded a vista limited only by the distant waters of Port Phillip Bay. Pointing upwards, he said he had ordered the replanting of all the terraces and forest walls of Manuka with musk and dogwoods. Clare excitedly approved and begged for the exclusion of exotic pines. Her dislike of the *Insignis* amounted to an obsession and exaggerated her predilection for the native *callitris*. Peter liked the *callitris*, too, but he wanted variety and to divert the girl he told her of the lyre bird, pointing to its mound under the blackwood. Clare had lived most of her life within thirty miles of the spot, but she had never seen a *menura*. She listened in amazement, and when she learned that the bird appeared regularly every morning she was confirmed in a half-formed intention and promptly decided to spend the night at Yamarta. But she did not inform Peter until she had made arrangements with the farmer's wife and housed her car.

Peter's early-Victorian dismay gave the girl much mischievous delight and she chaffed him mercilessly; but she did not win that contest. Peter said little, but he packed a dressing-case and set off to seek another lodging for himself, and he could not be in-

duced to return until the girl earnestly assured him that her mother had suggested she should spend the week-end at Yamarta. Clare was tearful at the close of the argument. She had produced her Gladstone to convince the doubter. "Mother packed it for me herself," she sobbed. "You are living in the dark ages, Peter. It's hateful to be so old-fashioned and ill-minded. My generation is much nicer than yours."

She went to bathe her eyes and Peter returned to the garden vexed and grim. Nothing that Mary Landale countenanced could, of course, be wrong — or even debatable, indeed. But what a changed world! The world he knew as a boy, and in which he still dwelt, had been ruled by a number of simple conventions, some sweet, some senseless; but at least they told a man what to do. Rather hard to be dubbed ill-minded because he continued to serve them. He remembered a man who had felt in honour bound to marry a girl because forced by an accident to take shelter with her under an unconsecrated roof. Peter had never questioned the right of Mother Grundy to impose such obligations on afflicted innocence. And here was tutored worldliness, not ignorance, slapping Mother Grundy's face and laughing innocence to scorn — and claiming Mary Landale's sanction to restrain him from extricating Mary Landale's daughter from an old-fashioned false position in the good old-fashioned way. Peter savagely concluded that he must be a fatuous and fossilised old fool not to have realised ere this that Mary had advanced with the times and was not the woman he had known: aye, and that the

woman he still loved — was not Mary but a mist-upholstered memory. Then where had Mary gone? Had she ever existed? What is real in a mirage? — the trees one fancies that one sees or the man who fancies that he sees them? And what was he doing — building Manuka in secret honour of a being that had never lived except in dreams? His mind flashed backward down the years, a quarter century and more. He saw a trackless deeply-shadowed waste, lighted only by the faintly twinkling lamps of little deeds of kindness given and received. Ah! but a man must have something to cling to, something to guide him, something to do. The lamps consoled. He must light many more; he must keep on lighting little lamps until he died, and, perhaps, at last the plain would be illumined and enable him before the end to see his way, to find some firm and not entirely lonely road.

. . . . .

In the privacy of the cubicle the farmer's wife had put at her disposal Clare indulged a rare fit of temper. Peter, she told herself, was an old fogey and a damned prig. He had humiliated her unwarrantably and cruelly with his ridiculous assumption of a duty to defend her reputation, and still more had he offended by his instant if unwilling surrender (once he had been convinced of her veracity, which he had dared to doubt) to the magic of her mother's name. High time she recovered her senses and broke the spell of an idiotic sentiment. Peter belonged irretrievably to another generation. He was a stick-in-the-mud — a stupid and solitary survival of a school of thought and conduct of which the world

had very wisely rid itself. Let him wallow in the prehistoric mire he seemed to find agreeable. She was done with him. She would return to the set from which, for his sake, she had foolishly cut herself adrift. Why, she hadn't tasted a cocktail or played a game of bridge, or attended a race-meeting for five months — just worked and slaved and schemed and toiled to please an old fish who had ended by insulting her. Damn Peter! But, of course, she would not quit immediately. That would be giving him a victory. When the supper bell rang she dabbed a lot of powder on her nose and strode into the dining-room with the haughty mien of a Britomarte. Peter bowed in his old-world way and gravely set a chair for her, waiting until she was seated, — like a silly old butler, was her sneering thought. It was a silent meal. When it was over he formally invited her to the balcony, where he pointed out the lights of motor cars traversing the sea road, twenty miles away. After a prolonged silence he lighted a cigar and began speaking in a low voice about the life of the natives of Siam. They were all Buddhists, he said, and they had found a happiness he had not glimpsed in other lands because they obeyed the injunctions of Buddha and practised his teachings — which were very like the laws of the Nazarene who came when Buddha had already rested in his tomb five hundred years. The peasants of Siam, said Peter, did not covet wealth, and they unenvyingly allowed other races to monopolise the trade and commerce that produced riches, preferring to lead the hard and simple lives of husbandmen so that they might be free of

the fetters that bind men's spirits to self-service. He pictured their village life. The clustering palm-thatched houses raised on piles and nestling in the shade of gracious rain-trees. The men-folk spilling forth at dawn to tend their buffaloes and to labour in the rice-fields. The women busy with their babies and domestic offices throughout the day, always gossiping merrily as they worked, even when grinding the grain, their hardest toil. The older children trailing to the meeting-house to be welcomed by yellow-robed smiling priests and instructed of a morning in the simple arts and crafts, the literature and history of their nation; and in the afternoon, listening, a charmed circle, to endless stories of the the Buddha. The return of the husbandmen at dusk. The loving welcome by their wives and infants. The lighting of the tiny flickering lamps. The pleasant evening meal. The following hour of stillness when the mothers hush their little ones to sleep and the men gather in the village square to sit like statues on the grass, chewing betel-nut and thinking long deep thoughts. The later gathering of the women-folk, to sit in rings according to their age, within the circle of the men; the lighting of the flares 'mid shouts of glee and merry badinage: the appearance of the xylophones and drums and fiddles — then the long gay concert with its weird music and sweetly plaintive singing, often interrupted to permit the dancing of the youths and maidens on the beaten turf, or to hear a poem or a story of amazement, chantingly recited by some errant minstrel; and finally, the drifting of sleepy-heads to home and bed till none was left and silent darkness

wrapped the land. . . . Peter said that he had lived in many such villages, and had seldom seen a quarrel or heard an angry word. He said that there were no rich, no poor; that none hungered while a single man possessed a store of food. The land abounded in monasteries, he said, and every unit of the population spent at least one season of his youth in disciplined service to a temple sanctuary — testing his fitness for the priesthood. And those who passed the tests returned no more to village life except as priests and educators of the young. And the priests wrought without pay, it having been enjoined by Buddha that no coin should ever touch their hands, but that they should serve the people till they died, accepting nought by way of recompense but two simple meals of grain and fruit a day, from those alone who could afford. And he told of the people's love and veneration for these priests who burdened none but aided all; and how in the evening of most men's lives they donned the yellow robe and handed over their possessions to their sons and daughters and went forth on an endless pilgrimage from monastery to monastery seeking God with hands as empty as when they came into the world, and thus preparing with grand simplicity for death. And, at last, Peter told Clare of Buddha's five injunctions: not to kill any of God's creatures, not to lie, not to steal, not to be gluttonous, not to commit adultery: and he said that he could not doubt the Siamese peasantry knew happiness because they rarely trespassed these commands. . . . And because Clare asked no question but sat gravely silent in the darkness, Peter told her of his shame that western men

should press into that tranquil country in pursuit of gain, and carry with them there the sordid and distracting aims of an alien and unrestful civilisation to disturb and to corrupt the peace and quietude of soul that had been won by centuries of spiritual culture. . . . And in a voice scarce above a whisper he told her of his innermost ambition for Manuka; that it might become an instrument to turn the people of his native country from the worship of false gods and construct a new Australia animated by such a spirit as he had seen shining from the eyes of humble brown-skinned peasants in the land of Thai.

Still Clare did not speak, but her hand stole out of the shadows and found one of his and caressed it for a fleeting moment. Then after a long quivering silence she rose and passed close to him in the darkness; and as she flitted by, she breathed huskily, "Thank you. Good night and God bless you, Peter dear."

It is probable that Clare, if she could have heard the words Peter murmured when she left him, would not have cried herself to sleep that night. Peter said, "Mary, Mary — if you could know how lonely I am; how much I wish to talk to you and tell you all my dreams!"

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

A FEW SECONDS after Peter's tap Clare appeared on the balcony wearing a beach cloak over her pyjamas. Peter was fully dressed, having bathed and shaved by lamplight. But it was still too dark for the contrast in their costumes to be remarked by either. The morning was crisp and cold, with a tang of rain in the air, and the sky was heavily overcast. Many birds were calling in the valley, but the clarion cry of a menura dominated the orchestra.

"He is coming up the mountain rapidly," whispered Peter. "We had best be silent — and when he appears take care to stand statue-still. He sees everything, but is only alarmed by movement. He is very vain and delights to be admired, but he will not perform if his audience betrays the slightest restlessness."

Clare nodded, and fixed her eyes on a patch of shadow to which Peter's pointing hand directed her attention. In a little while the outlines of trees and boughs and bushes glimmered through the murk, and eventually it became light enough to locate the mound Peter had shown her the previous afternoon. Within a few seconds of her discovery she saw a large molish-coloured bird with a very long tail leap upon the mound. He immediately began to preen his feathers, drawing each plume separately through his beak from end to end, with patient care.

A fine rain presently began to fall, but the bird ignored it, and he continued to be occupied with his toilet for fully twenty minutes. Satisfied at length, he shook himself and peered briskly about, jerking his extended head from side to side with swift but graceful movements. It was inevitable that he should become aware of Peter and Clare but he seemed in nowise startled. With the utmost deliberation he confronted them, and his large jetty eyes studied them for several moments; then, apparently convinced of their friendly interest, he erected his tail and began to sing and dance for their enjoyment with the ardour and zealous concentration of an actor entertaining royalty. In the concert that ensued he imitated twenty forest warblers and so perfectly that Clare was kept on an almost painful strain to catch and savour to the full each lovely note. . . . Suddenly tiring of his human audience the menura slipped from his mound and glided through the bracken to a climbing terrace that led across the garden up the mountain side. Near the first row of steps a thrush and a rufus fantail squatted silently upon a wooden rail. They must have been awaiting the menura, for they did not stir when he approached and paused to genuflect before them; and when he spread his tail and danced and sang, always facing the two enchanted little birds, but always steadily retreating up the terrace, they followed in his train like courtiers. He passed slowly, thus attended, out of sight, a veritable prince of fays, singing and swaying, laughing and dancing to the end, and his departure made the pretty garden set-

ting he had graced so brilliantly seem an ugly void without him.

"What an exit! What an artist!" gasped Clare. "I could not have believed that the world held anything one half as wonderful."

"I hope you will not take cold, Clare. Your hair is streaming."

"You are fully dressed!" she returned accusingly, her face slowly reddening.

Her eyes were so distressful he was forced to speak. "Why yes — I woke very early. . . . I . . ."

"I woke early too — but I did not think to dress. . . . We typify two widely separated generations. Confronting yours, I ought to feel ashamed, perhaps."

She had never been more alluring than in her hurried negligee, her flushed indignation; never had she more nearly achieved the beauty that she coveted.

Peter thought her insistence rather tiresome. "It is evident that we subscribe to different codes, my dear, but I do not hold yours inferior, and you should be lenient with mine, since it forbade me to risk seeming to be lacking in respect to a wilful but very charming lady." He bowed to her with disarming humbleness.

"Oh! Peter," sighed Clare. "I'll never fight you again. You always beat me to the dust." And she fled into the house.

After breakfast they drove to Manuka, where Peter found cause to marvel at the immense progress of five days. There were no longer any partly

shaped or roofless buildings, and the sum of tiny fenced enclosures, denoting newly planted trees, had grown to thousands. Many huge vans were parked in front of the central pile, and the avenue was dotted with moving vehicles, some grossly laden. At Peter's request the girl drove to the gabled building at the edge of the southern gorge, and she ran the car into a garage that had been caverned out of the mountain granite. The house was crowded with men hanging curtains, laying carpets and placing furniture. A suave gentleman in a tailed coat received them and informed Peter that his new home would be ready for occupation that evening and that servants had arrived. These proved to be a pair of white-smocked Chinese "boys" who had already taken possession of the pantry. Clare left Peter in converse with them and wandered through the house, feeling much like Alice in Wonderland. She liked everything she saw, and the uncrowded spaciousness of the rooms decidedly appealed to her. But she was intensely curious and critical, for this was to be Peter's private home. Therefore she must question any novelty. Why, for example, so many independent, cloistered suites? She counted five and concluded that Peter must intend to be a frequent entertainer of guests whom he desired to honour as well as please. Emerging from the last suite she encountered him on the landing. He pointed through the doorway at which she had appeared. "Did you like the outlook from those windows, Clare?"

Remembering that they breasted the gorge she answered quickly, "Beyond words, Peter dear."

"I had your Mother in mind when I designed this place. Those will be her rooms if she should ever care to visit us — of course your Father's too."

Something twisted in Clare's heart, but she smiled and said, "And where will you bestow your new secretary? Is he chosen yet? And when am I to be dismissed?"

Peter eyed her inscrutably a moment. "I should miss you greatly," he confessed, adding almost in an underbreath: "If Alan only were a little older — a little wiser. I must place him somewhere. When he joins up he will stay with me, in any case, of course."

"Even your antediluvian code," murmured the girl, "might consider a brother's chaperonage competent to guard his sister's reputation — especially if the girl's parents were content."

"Do you really wish to carry on your job here?"

"Peter — when you appointed me your secretary you fell into the hands of the most ambitious and designing female in the Commonwealth. I instantly made up my mind to become indispensable to you as a first step to promotion as your coadjutor. . . . You might possibly have escaped having me as a house-mate if your evil genius had not prompted you to secure those two Oriental dears downstairs. But alas! for you, my revered boss, it happens that I have yearned all my days for a kitchen-load of Chinese servants. In this we see the hand of Destiny. There is left only to show me my room."

"The decision must rest with your Mother, Clare. She may have other views for you — probably has. Marriage, for example."

"Mother has long since despaired of finding me a husband. She knows that I am doomed to die a spinster, and is quite resigned. I'll bring you her consent in writing if you wish."

"She would be lonely without you," he objected doubtfully.

"Not when she knows of that lovely suite, Peter. I shouldn't wonder if she spends every other week-end here."

The artful suggestion conquered the last of Peter's hesitation. He turned away with veiled but lighted eyes, saying with assumed indifference, "Choose any suite you please except your Mother's. . . . I am going over to the Institute."

Within a week Peter closed his rooms in town and moved to his house at Manuka which he had called "The Lodge." Clare and Alan joined him a fortnight later. The boy was set to work as a clerk in the Commissariat department. He accepted the unimportant post with gratitude. A fine enthusiasm for the service of mankind still supported and inspired him.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

THERE was no formal opening of Manuka, but the day after the provisional staff took possession the Council paid a visit of inspection and were shown everything by Peter. During a subsequent conference it was arranged that the Council should assemble weekly at the Institute until all details of organisation and administration had been finally determined, and that, in the meantime, no children should be selected for adoption. Peter was opposed to any delay, but on finding that a majority led by Dr Leitch strongly objected to the matron he had selected (because of her identification with a system of infant feeding of which the British Medical Association disapproved), he reluctantly submitted. Better anything, he thought, than that the opening stages of the enterprise should be disfigured by dissensions. As it turned out, the lady of his choice cost a deal of trouble to remove and when she departed she took several nurses with her. The experience taught Peter a valuable lesson. Obligated to admit he had blundered, he realised the measure of his dependence on expert advice and acquired a greater respect for his colleagues; and after the new matron, sent by Dr Leitch, arrived, he quickly recognised the importance of their intervention. Miss Frances McNab was taller and bigger than most men and she fronted the world with the assurance of an Amazon. She wore competence like a cloak,

and her qualifications (which included membership of the Royal College of Physicians) were not less imposing than her person. Peter liked her because her eyes twinkled easily and seemed willing to be kind. Matron McNab lost no time in demonstrating her ability. Within an hour of her installation every member of the previously idle staff (idle because there seemed nothing to do) was busily and usefully employed; and before nightfall she had arranged a programme of lectures and entertainments that seemed destined to banish ennui from the Institute. Peter and Clare watched her progress fascinated by her efficiency and amazed at the swift and universal acceptance of her rule. In three days she reigned over Manuka like an Empress, and the Institute operated in all its parts with the noiseless precision of a perfectly co-ordinated machine.

Dr Leitch heard the good news at the opening of the next Council meeting without enthusiasm. "Good managers are always to be got," he said. "Miss McNab knows her business, and she will do for the present. But we must not look upon her as a fixture. I hear she is engaged to be married. . . . No need to be downcast, Mr Chairman. Able women differ little in essentials from their inefficient sisters." He grinned at Clare. "They are husband-hunters one and all. Fortunately they are as plentiful as blackberries, and I can promise to find you another McNab — when she quits us to nail her man. . . . We'll always have these troubles, Mr Gaunt, change, change, change. It's part of our job to be prepared for them."

Mr Tainsh laid his long-promised report upon the table and Clare was asked to read it to the group. She complied with an ever-growing sense of disappointment. Mr Tainsh had at great length prepared a thesis of the most elementary, innocuous and nebulous character. He had condensed the story of Jesus, as told in the four Gospels, by a painstaking process of elimination, and although the residuum contained no contentious matter it was almost equally innocent of inspiration. It presented Christ as a vague historic figure, who had done certain things, said certain things, and suffered in a certain manner for His words and deeds.

Clare was astonished, the long reading over, to observe the men sagely wag their heads. She thought the entire document beneath her contempt. She was to hear it praised.

"I am not proud of my performance," said Mr Tainsh. "But I think I may fairly claim that it is too colourless to offend the most bigoted member of any Christian sect. I took my cue from the text-books used by the State School system of New South Wales."

"It even avoids affirming or denying the divinity of Jesus," commented Mark Landale. "I think it excellent."

"I can find no fault with it," said Professor Sinton.

"Nor I," echoed Dr Leitch.

"I move it be adopted without amendment," said Mr Levison.

"I second that," said the Professor.

"Those in favour?" said Peter. "The ayes have

it." He held up a hand. "I think, gentlemen, we should also record a vote of thanks to Mr Tainsh."

The suggestion was adopted and the clergyman gravely bowed acknowledgment. Clare was so surprised that she entered her notes with difficulty. She heard Peter speaking and laid down her pen.

"We are safely over the first hurdle, gentlemen. Thanks to the careful and brilliant work of our friend Mr Tainsh, we have a curriculum that is evidently proof against public or private cavil. Our next task, however, is not less formidable and quite as vital, more vital indeed. It is to provide that the instruction permitted by the scheme we have adopted shall be imparted in such a way as to plant in baby hearts the seeds of a desire to follow in His footsteps."

Peter paused and heads once more wagged sagely.

"I cannot help feeling," he went on, "that the future of Manuka must depend on the measure of our accomplishment during the next four years. At the end of that time we should have in our charge approximately one hundred wards of the age of eight or thereabouts. Should we enforce a defective system now, it will fail irremediably at least as far as the first hundred children are concerned. And we should have to start anew with another system and fresh material. The years between four and eight are the most important in the life-history of a normal child. They are incomparably the most plastic years and therefore the most precious to the propagandist. As the twig is shaped, during that period, the tree will grow. Our job is not to straighten twisted trees but to ensure an upright growth for carefully

selected straight and healthy seedlings. We want our kiddies to worship Christ by loving each other and all created things with a sweet and tender human love. We want them to be convinced that the spirit of Christ lives in every one of God's creatures. We want them to identify themselves with Christ by loving all and by seeking the love of all with loving service. That is the teaching of Jesus. No curriculum contains or can contain it. We feel it in our hearts. By our hearts we can impart it. . . . Gentlemen, we need teachers who will love our babies, and serve them because they love them, because they love them. . . . Can we find the qualities we need in men? For my part I dare not look beyond the sex of our mothers. I have seen the capacity we seek shining in the eyes of many young women, even those who waste their lives in frivolous and foolish courses — but not yet have I seen it in the eyes of any man. We men are made of grosser stuff. But we excel in other provinces — the power to organise, direct and discipline. We want, we must have, a male tutorial director: and our director must be a man competent to inspire our women teachers, when we procure them, to train them, to guide and to control them. Our supreme need is for a man of God, farseeing, wise and kind, who will reside at Manuka and give his life to the cause. . . . There is one I know would suit us. He is a priest. I foresee a pertinent objection. We should give umbrage to rival creeds by choosing him. But can we find a Christian man of God without a creed? — The man I have in mind is magnanimous and tolerant. He has wrought long in the service

of his Church without offending other Ministries. He is well informed of our ambitions and intentions. None knows better than he that were he to promote them as I am suggesting it might be said that he implicitly admitted the failure of his own and other Churches to attain the ends of their establishment. He must expect calumnious aspersion and attack. But I think his spirit lives above the reach of such considerations. . . . My friends, the man I have in mind is sitting at our table. His name is Edward Tainsh. We want you. We need you, Edward Tainsh!"

Clare, who had been watching the flare in Peter's pale grey eyes, was quickened with a sudden understanding. "At last I know," she thought, "why he wins his way against odds. He sees in other men what he wants to see and nothing else. He appeals simply and straightly to what he sees and he is not afraid of ridicule because he is a fanatic. He is not a bit plausible, but he is convincing. The narrow earnestness of his faith acts like a sort of hydraulic monitor charged with the waters of hypnosis; it drenches other minds with his illusion. . . . But he will fail today. Edward Tainsh is a hard-head and a worldling."

The clergyman, the cynosure of eyes, arose slowly to his feet. His face was faintly flushed, and one of his long white hands plucked nervously at a button on his vest. "I am no longer young," he said, "and I have many ties — ties difficult to break," — he looked earnestly at Peter — "ties that I hoped might last unbroken till my death. I am very sure, Mr Gaunt, that you have rated me above my merit.

. . . But you have laid a charge upon me that I may not lightly put aside despite my knowledge of my own unworthiness. Therefore, sir, if it be your will and that of the Council, such as I am, I am at your service."

"Edward, Edward — have you counted the cost?" cried Mark Landale, in a startled voice. "Mr Chairman, I protest. . . . Mr Tainsh should have notice. We ought to give him time. He has a wife — a grown-up family to consider. It's not fair to him or to them. And then there is the Church. He holds a high office. Surely his colleagues have a right to be consulted."

"I am very willing," replied Peter, "that Mr Tainsh should have as much leisure for reflection as he may desire."

Mr Tainsh raised a firm hand. "Our good friend Mr Landale, Mr Chairman, out of the kindness that he bears to me and mine, would have us look upon my molehill as a mountain. A call to duty left unanswered for an instant is a call denied. I count myself fortunate that I have been summoned thus early in our great experiment to practise the principles that Manuka, when established, must profess and inculcate. Let me repeat: I am at the service of the Council."

Professor Sinton gave himself a little shake. "I never thought you had it in you, Tainsh. You're a fool, but you're fine." His voice was warm and vibrant.

"I'd like to shake your Reverence's hand," cried Mr Levison explosively. "You'll end by making me a Christian."

Dr Leitch frowned but offered no comment. Mark Landale glanced uneasily at his daughter, then arose from the table and walked towards the door. Presently, however, he hesitated, stopped and returned to his place. Whatever his intention it had faded out. His handsome face was curiously puckered. He stared at Peter as at an utter stranger.

Dr Leitch broke the tension with a dry little cough. "My interest in Manuka," he said, "is more concerned with physiology than sentiment. I submit that it's high time we settled the question of physical selection. We must catch our hares before we can cook them. First things first. Our starting-point is to collect a batch of lusty infants. I am qualified to help in choosing them and caring for their bodies and I'd like to get on with the job. I have jotted down a few essentials in the order of importance. They ought to be discussed immediately, Mr Chairman."

"Pray let us have your notes, Dr Leitch," said Peter.

Dr Leitch forthwith began to read aloud:

*One* — We should accept no child of bad or dubious heredity. It follows that the ancestral history of every candidate must be carefully examined.

*Two* — Standard weights and measurements. Candidates under scale to be rigidly excluded, over scale to be subject to special scrutiny.

*Three* — Good lung and stomach history indispensable.

*Four* — Blood tests: normal practice with, in every case, an independent check. I must emphasise the need of this precaution, Mr Chairman. We

couldn't hope for a reasonable death-rate without it.

*Five* — Other things being equal, candidates with regular features to be preferred. Experience has convinced me that marked facial asymmetry indicates an ill-balanced brain. — That is all I have to contribute for the present, Mr Chairman."

"An excellent set of rules," said Professor Sain-ton, "which appeal to common sense but are beyond my capacity to criticise. I move their adoption."

"Second," murmured Mr Levison.

"The ayes have it," declared Peter. "I move, now, that the entire business of selection be entrusted to Dr Leitch, with authority to employ assistants at the expense of the Institute, and to proceed forthwith, at his convenience, until all our cots are filled."

"Second," said the Professor, rising. "And since the resolution launches our ship on its career — let us carry it with acclamation. — Hip! Hip! —"

In a second the whole room was afoot and cheering. A lot of handshaking followed, but no more business. In the midst of the babel Mr Tainsh slipped away. Mark Landale caught him as he reached his car. "The Church will take this hardly, Edward."

Mr Tainsh gravely inclined his head. "I fear so, Mark."

"No one could blame you, Edward, for withdrawing from a position so impulsively assumed. Peter carried you off your feet — me too, for a moment. . . . He was theatrical — electrical. . . . Confound him! . . . Don't do anything decisive to-

day, Edward. Sleep over it. . . . Your wife has a right to be consulted."

"My decision stands, Mark." Mr Tainsh climbed into his car and stooped to unlock the gears.

Landale watched him with a puzzled frown. He ventured another protest. "Your career, your whole life will be uprooted, Edward, and who knows to what end?"

"God knows," replied the Padre softly. "We are in His hands. . . . Do not trouble on my account, old friend. I admit that I acted precipitately. I am human enough to be afraid of tongues. . . . But in the deeps of me there is gladness."

The car moved on and Mark turned back towards the Institute. Clare met him on the upper terrace.

"Peter would like you to stay to dinner, Dad," she said. "The others have gone."

"I promised to dine at home, my dear. . . . Your Mother will be upset at my news. Who could have believed it! A rock of Ages like Edward Tainsh to behave like an impulsive boy! There's a streak of the mule in him. I could not persuade him to retract."

"You are not angry with Peter, Dad?"

"Angry is not the word. I no longer understand him. He spoke and acted like a Mullah or a dancing Dervish! Shouldn't wonder if he is a little mad, but I wish he'd let my friends alone. Mrs Tainsh will be sure to blame me for this. Here comes the Buick. Bid Peter my adieux, Clare. No, I am not angry with him or anybody, just stunned. Good-bye, my dear."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

IT was a day of surprises for Clare. When she informed Alan of Mr Tainsh's response to Peter's call, he took it as a matter of course and was not in the least impressed by the clergyman's unworldliness. His only concern was a vague doubt as to whether Peter had done the right thing, for he regarded Mr Tainsh as "a rather fussy old codger" and "inclined to be officious". The boy's attitude simultaneously exasperated and amused Clare, but it helped her to a more balanced frame of mind. Peter was silent and depressed at dinner, and he appeared oblivious of the young people's chatter. He showed later, however, that he had not been as abstracted as they thought, for when the servant had retired he chided Alan rather sharply for an irreverent reference to Mr Tainsh. The boy flushed at the rebuke, and after an interval he apologised; but he was hurt, and he soon made an excuse to withdraw. Clare, who thought Peter had been unduly severe, punished him by playing a long and uninteresting score of Liszt which she knew Peter disliked. Peter responded eventually by putting a noisy record on the gramophone; and the concert ended in laughter. Their mirth, however, was short-lived. Clare cherished a grievance she was unable to define, and Peter was troubled by a problem he hankered to discuss but felt he should decide for himself.

"What is the matter, Peter?" asked the girl, after

a long pause. "You ought to be happy. You meet only with triumphs. But you are gloom personified."

"We move so slowly. There is so much to be done. We do so little. My time is short. What results can I hope to see — before I go?"

Of a sudden the flood-gates of his restraint opened and words poured forth. "You talk of my triumphs. . . . the world is teeming with men and women who are angel-kind. I did not find Professor Sainton or Dr Leitch or Mr Tainsh. They came to me. You have seen how they offered me money, which I refused. Now one of them has abandoned his career and given up his life to Manuka at a single summons. Who am I to lead these people, to impose my will on theirs? I have a vision — but it may be false. . . . Their dreams may soar nearer to the truth. But I am driven on. I dare not let go. I dare not ask their guidance, even, on an issue of really first importance. Am I guilty of deceiving them — in offering them little things to do and think about, pretending to believe the little big; pretending, also, to be as ignorant as they appear to be, that bigger things will come that must be shaped by the mind that sees them now? Am I bound to show them as I see it the end of the road we all are treading? They might desert me if they saw it with my eyes. Your Father, Sainton and Tainsh assume me a contented fellow-prisoner in the gaol of dry conventions they inhabit. Leitch and Levison aim at goals that are in sight and near the ground, and provided they attain them they are indifferent to all else. None of us wants to build

the same sort of heaven. Perhaps my heaven would seem more like a hell to some of them, and vice versa. What dog would exchange a bone in the valley for a golden temple on the hill? We are no longer dogs; we have left that stage behind us and we all yearn after golden temples, but alas! we still confuse our aspirations with our appetites. How may I surely know that my golden temple is not a bone and that in pursuing my ambition I shall not drop attainable substance for an empty shadow? . . . You see that I am made of poor stuff, Clare. My spirit is unstable, wavering and weak. One day I burn with hope and eager confidence, and freeze with fears and doubts the next. How shall I win the steady faith I need?"

"Tell me your dream, Peter." Clare's voice was very low. "The shell of it, I know already. Let me see the core."

In a similarly hushed tone Peter replied, "A world without politics. A world of friendly neighbours, each working for the good of all with hands and brains; equally skilful in conferring and receiving benefits, equally willing to serve and to be served. That is my ultimate aim, Clare. Immediately, I dream to build a tiny world, such as I have painted, within the big existing world — a little world of men and women who will live and teach exactly as Christ lived and taught, men and women without politics except the laws of conscience and without any capital except the system of life that Jesus planned. Sometimes, Clare, when I am not seedy and depressed I can see the borders of this

tiny world expand incessantly until they circumscribe the earth."

"A socialised earth," mused the girl. "Father would probably dub you a Bolshevik if you told him your dream, and drop Manuka like a hot potato. But he would be wrong. The Bolsheviks are no less anxious than yourself to socialise mankind, but they have abjured God and thus deprived themselves of recourse to the only cement that could hold a reconstructed world together. Moreover, force and fear are their chosen implements, while you rely exclusively on suasion and example. No, Peter, you are certainly not a Bolshevik, whatever you may be."

Peter nodded and his chin sank dejectedly upon his chest. His eyes were very weary. "It is in my mind," he muttered, "that my colleagues on the Council expect Manuka to produce missionaries who will labour only to make the poor contented with their lot. But the world's greater need is for missionaries who will labour chiefly to discontent the rich. The question is — ought I to accept help that might not be offered me if my purpose were more perfectly appreciated?"

"I don't think you should," said Clare decidedly.

Peter got to his feet. "In that case I ought to see Tainsh again before he burns his boats. Will you drive me to the city, Clare?"

"Yes," said Clare. "I'll go and get the car."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

IT was almost midnight when they reached their destination, but Mr Tainsh's house was lighted and three motor cars were parked before the gate. Clare recognised one of them and informed Peter that he might expect to meet one of her parents, possibly both. Tainsh himself opened to their ring. If he was surprised to see them he did not say so. He looked worried and rather grim, but he bade them welcome cordially enough, and without delay he ushered them into a drawing-room where a small and very serious company sat in conclave. Mrs Tainsh, — a tall, lean woman of uncertain age with bright black eyes and a straight-lipped mouth —, occupied a sort of throne chair at the head of the room. On either side of her were Mary and Mark Landale; and beside them, grouped to form a semi-circle, were John Tainsh, the clergyman's only son, a successful barrister; Mrs Fielding, Mr Tainsh's married daughter; and her husband, Merton Fielding, a wealthy city merchant. A tense unfriendly silence greeted the newcomers, and at least two pairs of eyes became frankly hostile when the clergyman, mentioning names, introduced Peter to his family. The men shook hands with Peter; the women bowed coldly. Clare was almost completely disregarded, even by her mother, whose sole preoccupation at the moment was to avoid Peter's wistful and embar-

rassed glance. Mrs Landale's lovely face was troubled; and a spot of crimson burned in either cheek.

"I feel that I need not name to you, my dear Mr Gaunt," the Padre's splendid voice boomed forth, "the subject which you have discovered me in the act of debating with my family and with my good friends and yours, Mr and Mrs Landale."

"Quite unnecessary," replied Peter. His tone aroused the lurking imp in Clare. She had to fight to suppress a wild desire to giggle.

"It is, perhaps, also needless to inform you," pursued Mr Tainsh, "that my decision has startled my wife and children: I might almost say, indeed, it has dismayed them."

Peter, whose face had become very pale, gripped with both hands the back of the chair that had been offered him, and, perfectly unaware of what he did, placed one of his dusty feet upon the heavily embroidered seat. The outrage, however, passed unremarked by all save Clare.

"I have come here," he said — staring into the pastor's eyes —, "to make a confession that may release you from your promise."

For some seconds an almost uncanny silence reigned, then Mr Tainsh said quietly, "Indeed!"

"It is a matter of conscience." Peter's voice was low and strained. "Thinking things over this evening it occurred to me to doubt if I have been as fully confident with you as I believe to be your due. You may possibly imagine it is my intention that the children we propose to train as missionaries

at Manuka should go forth as teachers only of the greater class, the people of small or no material possessions, the incompetent poor who are vainly covetous, the weak who are rebellious, the desperate who hate and would destroy. . . . That is but a part of my plan. I wish to reach, as well, the powerful, the competent, the rich; to fill the world with that special form of discontent which can only be pacified by abnegation; to breed so universal a disdain of selfishness, of private gain and of exclusive joys that poverty will genuinely pity wealth, and avarice will be compelled to seek applause by service and surrender. In one word, I want to drive out of the world the spirit that admires and envies riches. You have the right to retort that Christ was more tolerant. . . . In that event, Mr Tainsh — I shall humbly beg forgiveness for having misled you, and I shall look elsewhere for the tutorial director Manuka requires.”

Before the Churchman could collect himself to reply Mark Landale spoke. “Almost from the beginning, Peter,” he said quickly, “I felt you had something up your sleeve. . . . Very fine of you, old chap, to own up before any irreparable mischief was done, but what a pity it didn’t occur to you to come clean a little earlier. It would have saved Edward an avoidable indignity. He tendered his resignation from his Ministry this afternoon.”

“How fortunate that they refused to accept your resignation, Edward,” said Mrs Tainsh.

“A storm in a tea-cup after all,” observed Mr Fielding, rising as he spoke. He turned to his wife.

"I have, as you know, a most important board-meeting in the morning. I fancy we shall not be wanted any more — so if you will get your hat. . . ."

"One moment," replied the lady. "Father has not spoken yet. He has, perhaps, another pleasing surprise in store for us." Her voice, bitterly satirical, drew Peter's eyes to her face. Mrs Fielding, a rather pretty blonde and exquisitely gowned, was watching Mr Tainsh through narrowed lids, her red mouth twisted in a feline sneer. Peter shivered at the malignity of her expression and wondered at its cause. His heart warmed in sympathy for the Padre to have bred a daughter who could even for a single instant seem so cruel. He heard a strange voice speaking: "That's right, Miriam, always the sweet word in its proper season. Take no notice of her, Dad — and don't decide anything tonight unless you really feel you should. I am sure Mr Gaunt is in no hurry."

Turning his head Peter met the lawyer's eyes and bowed. He was strangely comforted by what he saw. John Tainsh was as unlike his sister as possible. He had a dark and rather rugged face and he smiled at Peter very kindly.

"You mean well, John," said the pastor suddenly and very gravely. "But your sister was right to goad me. All my life I have been too ready to postpone consideration of the problems that pertain to conscience. It's a coward's trait in me and if Miriam had been more often at my elbow I might have grown into a better man."

"What did I tell you?" snapped Mrs Fielding.

"Notwithstanding Mr Gaunt's confession Father intends to stick to his decision and to make the lot of us ridiculous. . . . He has put himself at Mr Gaunt's mercy too. He hasn't even stipulated for a decent salary."

"For goodness sake be quiet if you can't be decent, Miriam!" cried John. "It's no part —"

"Bosh!" she interrupted rudely. "It's not money I'm worrying about. It's Mother. She'll come to me, of course. But she'll fret her heart out if —"

Mrs Tainsh's shrill voice silenced her. "Edward!" cried the lady. "Don't dare to tell me that you won't withdraw. You've heard this gentleman admit he deceived you. How can you possibly put any faith in him again. It wasn't a call from God you heard, as you imagined. It was a call from that person — a self-confessed liar. Look at him! Is he more like Jesus, do you think, or Judas? Would Jesus separate a husband from his wife after thirty-two years of faithful wedded life with not a single day apart — except when I had tonsillitis last August and had to go to hospital for a fortnight. If you prefer him to me, Edward, you had best go with him tonight — for never, never will I live with you again, and if you think I would ever dream of staying even a week-end at Manuka, if that's the name of the awful place, you are very much mistaken. . . . And what you want to break an old woman's heart for, with two grown children and a grandchild expected, I am sure I don't know. . . ."

Mrs. Fielding flung Peter an evil glance and hurried to her agitated mother, but the pastor, without

appearing to move quickly, intercepted his daughter and led the sobbing woman from the room.

Mr and Mrs Fielding whispered for a moment, then beat a retreat, nodding farewells to the company. When they had gone Mary Landale stood up and imperiously beckoned Peter to her side. For the first time since his arrival he listened to the voice whose liquid music could always make his heart-strings quiver.

"I am terribly disappointed in you," he heard her say. "I thought you a good man, but you are wrecking a beautiful home and robbing us of a pastor we always loved and venerated — wrongly, as it now appears."

"I am sorry to disappoint you, Mary."

"I cannot let you have my children any longer, Peter. You must send them back to me."

"Why, Mary?"

"Because I do not think it right that I should permit them to associate with a wife-deserter, and a renegade minister of my church. I abstain from stating my opinion of yourself, Peter, but you will hardly need to be informed that I could not possibly overlook your responsibility for the sin that Mr Tainsh seems so appallingly determined to commit. — Mark!"

"Yes, my dear."

"I am ready to go home — Clare!"

"Yes, Mother."

"You will accompany us. Good-night, John; please say good-night to your Mother for me — poor thing! Come, Mark. Come, Clare."

She took her husband's arm and, ignoring Peter, sailed grandly from the room. Clare winked brazenly at John Tainsh, smiled at Peter, and meekly followed her parents.

John Tainsh moved to Peter's side. "The two lone survivors of that ghastly brawl really deserve a spot of whisky," he grinned. "But we won't get one here; what about toddling along to my shanty? It isn't far — and I have a bus outside."

"I think not, thank you, Mr Tainsh. I have a long drive before me. . . . I would like a last word with your Father, too."

After a moment's hesitation John confessed himself. "I'm definitely on your side, Gaunt. But I wish you were more sure of yourself. A lot of qualms in your make-up, what? One ought to stifle hesitation to carry through a job like yours. Are you certain you have the guts?"

"No," said Peter.

"Then you have. —Mind if I tender a word of counsel re the Dad?"

"I'd be glad."

"He's a thoroughbred but he's shy. If you ride him with a snaffle, he'll land the stakes all right. . . . You've given him the chance he's been yearning for his whole life long. He should never have married. An idealist. White all through. His pomposity is merely protective colouring. Give him all your confidence and you can trust him to the death. . . . Bye-bye, old chap, and the best of luck to you both."

At the end of half an hour the Padre reappeared, looking haggard but resolved. His eyes were

strangely peaceful. "You will forgive my wife and daughter. They do not understand. They mean well, perhaps. . . . You did not deceive me, Mr Gaunt. There was nothing new to me in what you told us tonight. My mind marches with yours; our aspirations are identified. Within a week I shall be ready to join you at Manuka."

"Your new home will be ready for you, Mr Tainsh. Your wife will find it sufficiently commodious if she should accompany you. . . . I could not rest till I was sure. . . . I have only to add that the question of finance need not trouble any member of your family. I'll not detain you any longer, now. Good-night."

"Good-night and bless you!" They shook hands earnestly, and again in embarrassed fashion at the outer door.

Clare, seated at the wheel, started her engine as soon as she heard Peter's step.

"You should not be here," said Peter sternly. "I thought I heard your mother demand your company."

"Get in, Peter — and don't fuss about Mother. She's well asleep by this."

"Have you quarrelled with her, Clare?"

The girl sighed. "We never argue with Mother when she flies the flag of bigotry. When I saw that the poor dear really thinks that Mr Tainsh has damned himself to Hell, I kissed and petted her till she cried, and then she told me to be a good girl and stay at Manuka and try to save him. She's fond of the Padre, Peter. Did you know?"

The world for a moment swung dizzily round Peter's head.

"Do you mean that — that — "

"Yes, Peter," said Clare.

He got into the car and leaned back from the light. "And I have destroyed her faith in him," he muttered tragically.

"One can't make omelettes without breaking eggs," declared the girl.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

WITH the advent of Edward Tainsh a blessed atmosphere of busy peace descended on the Institute. Each day produced a new record of achievement. Everybody co-operated without friction. As the babies arrived, at first singly or by twos and threes, later in more imposing batches, they were absorbed without pother or excitement; and when, at length, every cot was occupied, the big machine nowhere exhibited a sign of strain. New nurses and teachers appeared and disappeared with as little fuss as bubbles on a stream. The faces of the working staff seemed to Peter always to be changing, to be getting younger and prettier; but he noticed a gradual tendency to fixation, and a day came when he could positively remember having seen nearly all of them before.

His life settled gently into a series of pleasant grooves. Breakfast with Clare and Alan. A morning visit to the nurseries to make or to improve acquaintance with the children, and to watch them being softly disciplined at food and play. Lunch with the chiefs of staff. Afternoon conferences with the Director and the departmental heads. An hour in his office receiving and dealing with reports and attending to his correspondence. An hour on horseback. Two hours in his private garden — which he began to fill exclusively with native plants and

flowering shrubs. Dinner with Clare and Alan and the Padre. . . . Then conversation, music, a lecture or the pictures; a book; sometimes a game of cards or chess.

It was Peter's law that after dinner freedom should reign and the members of his household please themselves; and he had taken care that of recreative entertainment there should be no lack. Manuka had two theatres; one for amateur dramatic performances and lectures, and the other for the nightly exhibition of film plays and pictures secured from all parts of the world. A Swiss Gymnasium flanked the great swimming-bath on the central lawn, also several tennis-courts equipped for use as well by night as day. After the evening meal, if the weather permitted, crowds invariably assembled on the long brightly-illuminated terraces; nurses off duty, the outside staff, farm hands, the indoor servants; and much chatter and laughter could be heard until the theatre gongs sounded, when the groups would disperse and drift away to seek amusement or instruction.

Peter often moved among the throngs, but his habit of aloofness drew him to the outskirt darkness, and when the terraces emptied he paid his nightly visit to the dormitories where he always lingered, chained by the never-failing wonder and delight it gave him to watch the sleeping babies and to weave dreams about them while they slept.

As time proceeded the formal meetings of the Council were spaced at wider intervals. Mark Landale was a constant absentee, but he continued for-

mally to send apologies. Professor Sainton, Dr Leitch and Mr Levison came as often as they were summoned, but there was rarely much for them to do save listen to reports of even and uneventful progress. In view of the years that must elapse before a curriculum for eight-year-old children need become a burning question the Council had tacitly assented to the shelving of its big outstanding problem.

The excellent Chinese dinner that Peter customarily provided was probably no mean ingredient of the cement that bound the group together. Because Peter thought so he always took enormous pains in preparing the menu; and on each Meeting night he introduced his guests to some famous Oriental dish fresh to their experience. It was his nature to magnify the importance of an established association in proportion as it ceased to be important. Neither Professor Sainton nor Mr Levison had ever helped Manuka greatly. Dr Leitch had rendered invaluable aid, but with the cots all full and a complete and almost perfect staff, even his usefulness had come to a term. Peter, however, had no sooner realised that he could dispense with his Council without detriment to the Institute, and that he might disband it by the simple expedient of not convoking it, than he felt himself doubly pledged to maintain its integrity intact. The defection of Mark Landale hurt him rather keenly. Whenever Clare set off to visit her parents she carried a warm invitation to them to visit Manuka. When she returned she always bore a message of excuse. Peter waited for her with unflinching hopefulness. He never seemed

disappointed, but for a day or two afterwards he walked like an older man.

Amongst the first score of babies admitted to the Institute was a sturdy three-year-old named Matthew Lorme, the orphaned son of a Scottish immigrant couple who had been killed while helping each other to fell a great tree on a selection in Gippsland. Matthew Lorme possessed a beautifully shaped head and blue eyes that always seemed to sparkle with an inward merriment. He was never known to cry, and his nature was so affectionate and sweet that he quickly became the darling of the younger nurses. To the presence of this child Peter was drawn as by some deep compelling lure, whenever he felt unusually troubled or perplexed; and since nothing could disturb him more than repeated evidence of Mary Landale's obstinate displeasure, he paid a special visit to Matthew as often as Clare returned, empty-handed, from a visit to her home.

In the company of the tiny boy Peter discovered a mysterious source of comfort. Matthew soon divined that the grave-faced elderly man who looked at him with such strange wistfulness, and whom his nurses treated so respectfully, was a person of high authority who should therefore be cajoled, and one day he spontaneously offered Peter all his toys. For most of that night and many a night thereafter Peter lay awake thinking of the boy, planning a future for him and sometimes wondering dreamily if a Messiah had not been already found. But the stirrings of a love that was essentially paternal arrested his ambitious speculations. Time enough

to think of Matthew as a possible Messiah five years hence or ten perhaps. He was a baby now — a thing of soft endearing helplessness, a thing to cherish, to fondle, to surround with loving care. . . . But Peter was a conscientious dreamer, and one day he awoke to the fact that he had long been oppressed with a vague sense of guilt. He almost instantly discovered why. He had permitted himself to prefer one to all the children in his care. He had sinned against his own law. It did not console him to remember that the whole indoor staff had also fallen under Matthew's spell and that a favourite reigned in the nurseries. He must make order of that anomaly, of course. Favouritism was a flagrant violation of the code of Manuka. He must crush it under heel. But not yet; not yet! His infatuation acted as a drug to an old grief, and in the face of an uneasy consciousness of wrongdoing he hugged it to his heart — imagining that no other could guess that he weakly countenanced a fault in his subordinates because disinclined to correct it in himself.

But Clare saw, and the Padre saw; and each in a different way was affected and disturbed. Clare, at first, rejoiced at Peter's growing interest in the child, and she conceived a hope that it might bring a new and lasting happiness into his life. Little by little, however, as Peter's furtive joy in the babe expanded her attitude suffered change. She had once been jealous of her mother and after long struggling had contrived to put that stupid enemy to flight. To her dismay she found herself beginning to be



jealous of a child whom she herself loved as much as any of the nurses did — but not as much as she began to fear that Peter did.

Mr Tainsh's reaction was philosophic and impersonal. He had grown very fond of Peter and it pleased him to see so austere a man discover a new interest in life. On the other hand he was troubled at a development that might eventually provoke ill-will towards Matthew Lorme in the minds of less favoured children and at the same time excite feelings of pride and vanity in the favoured boy himself. Nature had endowed the Padre with many of the qualities of an ideally perfect pedagogue, and he had retained from boyhood a sympathetic understanding of the normal child's all-but-inevitable tendency to resent any treatment savouring of injustice. Already the nursing staff had begun to single out Matthew Lorme for special service and attention. They would soon plead Peter as their exemplar and excuse. It was his duty to root out a noxious weed before it became a tree. The pastor solved his problem by delivering a lecture to the nursing, teaching and administrative staffs which he contrived that Peter should attend. It was a good lecture, so full of clear-eyed wisdom and so packed with truth and kindness that none could fail to heed its warning and none could be offended. . . . At its close Peter invited the Padre to his home. Clare and Alan accompanied them to the door and would have slipped away but Peter forbade. Because he hated that any should witness the punishment he was resolved to inflict upon himself, witnesses he must have.

"Your lecture was addressed to me," he said.

"To you — to myself, to us all," replied Tainsh. "We have all evinced a need to steel ourselves against the attractiveness of a remarkable little boy. Did not you, too, Clare, feel that my lecture was addressed to you?"

"Yes, Padre."

"Me, too," confessed Alan. "A bonzer little chap, isn't he?"

"I am particularly blameworthy," declared Peter, "for I am head of the Institute. I have set a bad example. I have been conscious of error for some time. Thank you for correcting me, Padre. I regret that you found it necessary."

Alan was inclined to debate the matter. "One can't help one's likes and dislikes," he objected. "Why should it be wrong to show them? It would be pretending, not to, wouldn't it? Is it not acting a lie — to pretend? I guess I'd feel a bit mean to pass little Matthew by and pretend I thought no more of him than of the other kiddies. I like him better than the whole bunch."

"We are their fathers and their mothers," said the pastor. "In order to discipline them we must discipline ourselves. It is the duty of parents to administer affection evenly. It is not a question of pretending or of acting a lie. By all means let us love Matthew Lorme with all our hearts; but our love for him should be a standard, not a pinnacle. To love all the children with all our hearts: that is what we must aim at. It will help us to achieve our aim if we constrain ourselves to mete out no greater

kindness to one than we feel inclined to render to any of the babes; and no less."

"It will be difficult," said Clare. "But if we are genuine triers the greater fondness we feel spontaneously for one will help us at last to acquire a greater fondness for the rest — though not an equal fondness, perhaps."

"I wouldn't take on God's job for a million a minute," exclaimed Alan irreverently. "Fancy having to love a rotter the same as a blessed angel, just because you'd created both."

"But, my dear boy, can't you see that we have actually undertaken a tiny part of God's job, as you put it — here at Manuka?" said the Canon with a smile.

"Sounds blasphemous to me," murmured the boy. "What is our authority?"

The Padre put his hand on Alan's shoulder and led him to the window. The lights of the Institute confronted them across the dark spaciousness of lawns and shrubberies. "Do you imagine, Alan, that we could build and fill that pile without authority?"

"Or a beer saloon," suggested Clare, joining them. "It might have been a beer saloon, Alan; think of that!"

"And if it had been a beer saloon," said Mr Tainsh, "the answer to your question would have been the same. The proof of authority is the thing done, or its progress towards completion. Man cannot function without authority. And whether we

perform or shirk the tasks that we believe have been allotted us — we serve, we cannot help but serve. Our sole discretion is to do what we believe is right — or not."

At the sound of a closing door they turned to find that Peter had left them.

"You are right, I suppose," grumbled Alan. "But it's pretty hard on the Boss. He couldn't be fonder of that kid if it was his very own. And he just can't stop to order. — You mark my words. He will stop seeing little Matthew — and it will hurt him like the deuce. He's another man when he's playing with that youngster. I've watched him."

"We must all do our best to help him," said the Padre, "and each other."

"We all need help," sighed Clare.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

IT was not Peter's nature to do anything by halves, and, as Alan had surmised, his daily visits to the nurseries abruptly ceased. The reorganisation of his routine enlarged his solitude and provided him with time for much melancholy meditation. His friends watched him with growing solicitude, for he was obviously not a well man and yet they found it impossible to make him realise that any serious cause for their concern existed. He assured them that his health had never been sounder, as often as their enquiries broke through his dreams; but having answered he would retire into himself. Disinclination for work, long fits of abstraction, and distaste for social intercourse were the salient features of a malady which Clare and Mr Tainsh soon decided must be a sickness of the mind. The more the girl studied him the more anxious she became. The pastor, also, was increasingly perturbed. They compared notes often but to no purpose. Peter had travelled beyond their reach and they were helplessly constrained to wait till he came back to them. Peter was dimly aware that illness threatened him and that his condition had excited Clare's alarm, but he remained unwilling to make any effort to resume his normal attitude to life. . . . He felt that Fate had served him a shabby trick, and he brooded over it interminably. He was not resentful but he wished to understand the reason of it before sub-

mitting, and comprehension eluded him. His mind refused to do other work than magnify his misfortunes past and present. He took an unusual amount of exercise, but his long rambles only tired him. He often accused himself of behaving badly, but all desire to deserve the respect of his fellows seemed to have deserted him. . . . One evening he failed to appear at dinner, and Clare found him in the library sunk in a heavy sleep. On being aroused he upbraided her almost violently for her "officiousness" and retired to his own room. The girl was thankful for an excuse to be more officious still, and early next morning she telephoned Dr Gordon Browne, a famous nerve-specialist, and was so urgent in her entreaties that the physician agreed to come at once to Manuka. It was necessary to inform Peter lest he should go off on one of his long rambles. Clare feared, too, that he might even refuse to see the Doctor, but to her surprise Peter approved what she had done.

"There must be something wrong with me," he confessed pathetically. "I was rude to you last night, my dear, and I did not feel ashamed. That frightened me, but I soon fell asleep. And this morning my head aches vilely and will not stop."

Clare gave him some aspirin and persuaded him to lie down. Peter fell into a doze from which he awakened refreshed in body but filled with a sharp dread of the approaching interview. Minded to escape it he sprang up from his couch, but he had slept too long. The door opened as he arose and he was confronted with a quiet little elderly man

who had spent a lifetime in ministering to sick minds. For a moment Peter trembled on the verge of an irritable explosion, but the physician seemed to understand all about it and his magnetic and disarming personality filled the room with peace. Peter listened gravely to Clare's introduction and when the girl withdrew he returned unbidden to his couch. For the first time in many weeks he definitely wanted to get the better of his queer indisposition and he felt that here was one who might help.

At the end of forty minutes Dr Gordon Browne had penetrated all his patient's defences and was looking at an almost naked soul. But "almost naked" was not enough. He drew aside, as he thought, the last shred of covering with a knife-like question. "There has been no woman in your life — not even during the years in Malaya?"

Peter tried to avoid the Doctor's steady eyes, but could not. He shook his head.

"You must be quite frank with me before I can be of real service to you," said the physician.

As though hypnotised the sick man spoke. "It was sixteen years ago. She was an Englishwoman, an outcast. I found her in the native quarter of Taiping. She was said to be dying. None would help her so I took her from the hut in which she lay . . . to my bungalow in the jungle. I did not think she could recover. . . . My Chinese boy was very skilled in herbs. He nursed her and she lived. . . . Her gratitude was rather terrible. She would not leave me. . . . Always she longed to die. Death came to her at last."

"And since then you have been a celibate?"

"Yes."

"You should marry and beget children, Mr Gaunt. You are a normal man — you were not made or meant to live alone."

"I cannot have the woman I want, Dr Browne. I could not mate with any other. Once in the jungle — I attempted your prescription. It would be impossible again."

"Psychically impossible, perhaps — not physically. What is your spiritual inhibition?"

"A conviction that sexual contact without love is a breach of divine law that has overcrowded the world with defective bodies inhabited by stunted souls."

"I hold to some extent the same opinion, Mr Gaunt; but my business is with the present generation only, and I have to deal with facts, not theories, even though the theories may seem to fit into the facts. It is my duty to tell you, that if you took a wife you would assuredly become a healthier and probably a happier man. . . . The alternative course, repression and suppression, which you have been pursuing, may shorten your days, possibly affect your reason. You are involved in one of its reactions now. Your excessive fondness for an infant in no way related to you indicates the insurrection of a secondary instinct. Nature expects us to use our faculties. To disuse is often to abuse them. The penalty alike of abuse and disuse is disequilibrium, that is to say the condition of disease. The eternal problem of my profession is to equilibrate disor-

dered balances. . . . In your case the problem is complicated by an irrational contempt, probably of prenatal origin, for the grosser aspects of life, and a tendency to exaggerate æsthetic values. You have a strong will, a fairly sound body although you have maltreated it. You have been cultivating saintliness. Keep on and you will probably become a saint. But no saint ever 'got there' with his physical capital intact. As any alienist would tell you, all our famous Christian saints exhibited, if the records can be trusted, marked symptoms of hallucinational insanity."

Peter smiled. "You do not appear to hold them in much respect," he said.

"They all thought themselves so damnably important," responded the physician gravely. "Fortunately you are not without a sense of humour. Cherish it. Appeal to it as frequently as possible. Make it the judge of all your contemplated actions, small and great, mean and good. Especially appeal to it when you feel tempted to praise and to pity yourself."

"You've done me a lot of good," said Peter. "Already I am better. There must have been a bad kink in my brain. I can look back now without feeling myself sinking into a pit and forward without seeing a mountain impossible to climb."

"Strive constantly to remember," said the doctor, "that you are neither an angel nor an insect, but just an ordinary human being, one member of a living family numbering about 2,000,000,000 — and that at a rough guess at least 5,000,000 other

members of that family must be suffering the same sort of misery or experiencing the same sort of joy at any given moment as yourself; aye, and probably behaving just as well or ill. Few mental perturbations could plague us long were we less prone to forget that monumental fact. I can, perhaps, best help you to appreciate its vast significance, with an illustration — *ad hominem*. At this moment there cannot be fewer than 5,000,000 childless adults in the world, desperately yearning to pour out a flood of parental love on the heads of 5,000,000 little Matthew Lormes. . . . Do you follow me?"

"Yes, Doctor."

"Well then, since you are a man and have learned the nature of your trouble, either cure it or endure it. A complete change of scene would help to clear away your mental cobwebs. Try a sea voyage. I have no other prescription to offer you."

"I need no other, Doctor. Please tell me what I owe you."

"You are running a big establishment — you are probably a rich man. My fee for this visit is twenty guineas. If you send for me again it will be fifty. Good afternoon."

"I'll post you a cheque," said Peter meekly. As soon as the door closed behind the physician he left the couch and began to dress, often smiling in the process. He met Clare on the way to his garden and smiled at her surprise.

"Your doctor is a miracle-worker," he informed her. "I am going for a stroll to get an appetite for dinner."

He did not go far, however. Thoughts crowded his brain and he settled himself presently on a bench in the ravine to sort them out. Dr Browne had looked deep into his mind, had seen much and revealed much, but obscurities remained that must be clarified — and which he alone could clarify. No man can fully read another's soul. There are reticences which cannot be unlocked to alien examination; secrets that cannot be communicated; nuances of shame that cannot be confessed even to the closest friend. The star he had followed for so many years had led him from the region of firm ground. It still sparkled in the firmament, but of what use to one floundering in a morass the twinkling of a thousand stars? Peter wanted to attain the solid earth again. He had duties to discharge, duties he had too long left undone. To become fit to perform them he must adjust his disordered balances; but not as the physician had suggested. Peter shrank from that prescription with a sort of horror. Better to destroy a temple than defile it!

He must reconstruct the garden of his mind, pruning back the shrubs that he had pampered to afford the plants he had neglected room to grow. He must balance by elimination. A painful process; but Peter had always distrusted courses free from pain. That which tortures also tutors. He would go for a long sea voyage and fight his trouble to a finish. No-one could help him but himself.

He sailed for Malaya within the week.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

ONE of Peter's first acts on his return was to repair to the gorge and seat himself in the place where he had realised the need to close his private shrines and make the commonplace his goal. He had looked forward to that hour and feared it. But he had feared without cause. His fight had been fought and won. As he gazed across the misty valley, knowledge came to him that while he lived he would possess the power to function as a normal member of the human family.

Clare, with a rosy and excited face, met him on the topmost tier of the gully stairs. "Mother and Father have come to bid you welcome home," she cried. "They will dine with us and may stay the night."

"Splendid!" said Peter. He was pleased but not perturbed. The girl rushed back at top speed to the house. Peter's eyes followed her admiringly. She ran very gracefully, he thought — then he smiled to remember he was thinking of Mary's daughter and not of Mary who had driven thirty miles to visit him.

Mary Landale, however, had not motored to Manuka to bid a wanderer welcome home. She had been stirred by a newspaper paragraph to go forth and wage battle with the Devil. The paragraph in question had referred in a perfectly innocuous manner to the secular character of the moral

instruction at Manuka, and had mildly praised the Institute for indiscriminately adopting children of various denominations. The journalist author could not have foreseen the storm his colourless words would arouse in the breast of an unusually peaceful and contented woman. In the ears of Mary Landale they sounded a tocsin to save her children, who, poor fools, imagined they could serve God outside the creed to which she paid allegiance. One cannot touch pitch and not be defiled. Roman Catholics and others have a perfect right to live, of course, and to practise their peculiar rites. Some of them, no doubt, are good people; excellent citizens, indeed. In point of fact she knew and liked many Roman Catholics. So she could not be accused of bigotry. But it was one thing to know and like individual heretics, and quite another thing to assist in bringing up innocent and helpless children to be heretics. Mary Landale was not a learned woman nor a logician. The Church to which she belonged was to her the only true Church, because her Church. All other Churches were heretical and she regarded them as diabolical enigmas. She often wondered why the Almighty permitted them to exist. But it was His privilege to be mysterious if He willed. She supposed He acted mysteriously in order to test the mettle of the elect. But it was her business to be simple, and to perform the duties that belonged to her — one of which, very evidently, was to see to it that Clare and Alan should not augment the ranks of heresy. That Edward Tainsh should be engaged in so deplorable an enterprise was a dreadful thing to contemplate. For many

years she had invested him with every attribute of godliness, had humbly tried to follow his counsel, to think his thoughts. Then, quite suddenly, before her dismayed and doubting eyes, he had abandoned his office, deserted a devoted wife, and gone away into the Bush to teach a lot of hapless little babies that one creed was as good as another.

It proved the awful instability of human character. Of course, things might have turned out differently if Mrs Tainsh, poor thing, had been another sort of woman — more tranquil, less irritating in her insistence on unimportant personal prerogatives (they all said she was a nagger), and if she had been a better housekeeper, perhaps. But with all her faults she had not merited such chastisement as the Padre had meted out to her.

Mary was standing at the window of Clare's room looking out on a scene of incomparable loveliness as these troubling thoughts turned over in her mind. Gradually she became aware of a strange intoxicating perfume blowing from the gorge. Hearing footfalls behind her she demanded, "What is that unpleasant smell, Clare? — like nitrate of amyl; it makes my head ache."

Clare slipped an arm round her mother's waist. "Is it too strong for you, dear? It comes from the sambucus beds that we have planted on both sides of the ravine and also in Peter's garden. It is supposed to be the most delectable of nature's perfumes."

"I don't like it," said Mary, turning away. "What is your father doing?"

"Having a spot with Peter, I fancy. Peter is very bucked at your visitation. You'll please him greatly if you stay the night. He is dying to show you over the Institute. There goes the dinner-bell. We are expecting the Padre and Dr Hall. It will be quite a party, with you and Dad. You'll stay over tomorrow, won't you Mumsie?"

"I am not sure. It depends. . . . I must have a talk with Peter. . . . Is the Padre well?"

"Strong as a horse. The mountain air suits him. Peter is the problem. He seems better for his trip but he keeps his cough. Perhaps it's only nerves. He smokes too many cigarettes, I fancy; but it rather worries me. Was there any consumption in his family, Mother?"

"His father died of it," responded Mary casually — utterly unconscious of having thrust a knife into her daughter's heart. "Hadn't we better go down, Clare? I hate keeping people waiting."

Peter watched Mary descending the stairs half expecting to experience the old thrill. Queer that he should be a little disappointed when he found he did not. She had put on flesh, he thought. And he had noticed it! She was still extraordinarily beautiful, but he was able to confront her with senses unconfused by the glamour that had always hitherto affected them. Absence of emotion enabled him to cut a finer figure than his custom. He bowed over her hand, saying gracefully, "I have waited more than twelve months, Mary, to welcome you to my home. It delights me, very deeply, to see you here at last."

Mary had never heard Peter make such a courtly speech. It pleased her enormously, for it presaged success in her quest. Her power over him, evidently, was still supreme. She had only to state her will to be obeyed.

The Padre greeted her with proper warmth, but she avoided his eyes. No man had a right to look so well and vigorous after deserting an adoring congregation and a good if slightly exasperating wife. . . . The trouble with most wives — Mary's thoughts ran off at a tangent — was that they disdained to "run after the bus" once they had caught it. No one could accuse her of that stupidity. Even yet she was careful to study her husband's tastes, and she scrupulously abstained from doing or saying the things that irritated him. Nervy creatures, men, and so constituted that they can forgive a crime more easily than a curtain-lecture unnecessarily prolonged. Because Peter had pleased her and because Alan sat beside her and often surreptitiously fondled her hand, Mary exerted herself to be charming and the dinner passed brightly. Later they all trooped out on the terrace and watched the evening assembly wax and wane — a scene that impressed Mary more than anything she had witnessed at Manuka, it was so brilliant and the setting was so mysteriously dark and grand.

"What a perfect place for a costume ball!" was her comment. But she was not one to be diverted from her purpose, and before the clock chimed ten she got Peter to herself. She immediately confided to him the contents of the newspaper paragraph that

had disturbed her, and with transparent artfulness suggested that it might best be contradicted (for it must be contradicted at once) by formally announcing Manuka's allegiance to the Church, in whose fold, she reminded him, both she and Peter had been born and bred. She concluded with the somewhat fatuous remark, "In these days of loose thinking, one can hardly be too careful, can one, Peter?"

Peter felt a lively compassion for the twisted motives that urged this lovely woman to demand from a man she believed to love her, what she imagined to be the salvation of the man for whom she cared. But Peter felt compassion only, and no shade of weakness or irresolution curbed his thoughts. He realised, while he listened to her prattle (he called it that), that his emancipation had commenced the moment he knew that Mark no longer held first place in Mary Landale's heart. In early youth she had jilted him for Mark; but she had never really loved him, and Mark she had idolised. When had begun the process of jilting Mark? Poor Mark! Peter hoped that Mark would never learn her fickleness. But oh, the pity of it! Was there nothing in life but disintegration and change? "Change and decay in all around I see; oh! Thou, who changest not —"

With painful clarity he recognised that he himself was changing, had changed. Mary Landale was no longer his star. Her power to move his soul was gone. After six and twenty years of servitude he was free. There was no satisfaction in the knowledge, nothing but a sense of stretching emptiness

akin to desolation. So might feel an old and half-decrepit slave from whose limbs the shackles had been riven. And just as such a slave would linger impotently near his place of bondage, Peter found himself hovering in spirit over the desert space of his captivity, sighing after his irremediably lost illusions, fearful of the future and reluctant to move on.

"I was sure I could count on you," he heard Mary say. There was an unbelievable smugness in her tone. He listened to his own voice speaking as from afar off: "We know no creeds or Churches at Manuka, Mary. The children will be brought up simply in the lore and love of Jesus. When they leave us they will be at liberty to join any sect that may attract them, or to walk as the Master walked — free men serving God, each according to his conscience and the special limitations of his spirit."

He watched her face grow hard and cold. He heard her utter cruel words, words that stumbled at her mouth because of the intensity of bigotry that drove them forth. He bent his head in silence to the storm, wondering, if at anything, at the ingrained habit of decorum that kept her golden voice controlled from sounding harsh or shrill. He believed that none, watching them from a little distance, could have imagined that Mary was addressing him with searching threats and insults.

"You have asked me to spend the night in your fine home," was her final shaft. "Crafty hypocrite! Corrupter of youth! I would rather herd with candid ruffians in a prison. . . But I shall save my own babies from you — of that you can be sure!"

He watched her go off and speak with Mark, then collect Clare and Alan, and disappear within the house.

Mark came to him, very grave of face but with an eager friendly eye. "I judge that you have parted brass rags with Mary," he said, with a tight-lipped smile. "I suppose it had to come, Peter. I've had a rather raw time during the past few months myself, ever since you kidnapped the Padre, indeed. . . . Poor Mary! She means well; but she is as narrow as a knife-blade. Alan is very like her in essentials; he will follow her, I fancy; but she'll meet her Waterloo with Clare."

Peter mopped his forehead. He felt an urgent longing to be alone. "I have brought trouble to you, without wishing or knowing. To Mary too, poor soul. . . . But I must go on, I must go on."

"Of course!" agreed Mark. "You look seedy, old chap. Better slip up to your sanctum and avoid further possible unpleasantness. We'll meet again in a day or two. I am still with you," — he waved his hand widely to embrace the Institute — "but I have been caught in a cleft stick. . . . It won't hold me much longer. . . ."

Peter arose with an effort. "I'd have liked to say good-bye to Clare," he said. "And Alan," he added. "But I really feel I ought to lie down."

"You won't need to say good-bye to Clare, I think," said Mark with a wise smile.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

NEITHER Clare nor Alan made any difficulty about accompanying their parents to Bayton. They guessed from Mary's feverish manner that something vital had occurred, but they desired to avoid an argument at Manuka and they complied at once with her request. During the long drive home Mary slept, and the others, being unwilling to disturb her, did not converse. When they arrived, Mary was as fresh as a rose. Clare, fatigued, and tashed, would have postponed the colloquy she foresaw to be inevitable, but Mary would not hear of that. It was only a little past midnight, and how could she be expected to rest until her mind was eased and everything properly settled. They forebore to remind her that she had slumbered in the car. Mark mixed himself a drink, and lounged against the mantel. His family seated themselves about a table spread with eatables which nobody touched. Mary took off her hat and began to speak, becoming more and more excited as she proceeded. She painted Peter a dangerous iconoclast, a subtle schemer, a destroyer of established beliefs, a crafty enemy of the Church, a wolf in sheep's clothing, a Communist and an Anti-Christ. She, herself, had been utterly deceived by him, therefore she could not blame her children for succumbing to his evil influence. But it was her duty, now that her eyes had been opened — and so on. She finished by reminding them with hysterical

earnestness that she had been willing— had she not proved it indeed? — to give up her offspring to the service of God; but she called Heaven to witness — and her voice lost all its melody as she made the declaration — that she was not prepared to surrender them to Satan.

Mark and Clare endeavoured to soothe her while Alan sat in a stunned silence. But Mary refused to be pacified. She insisted that the issue should be decided there and then, and the increasing wildness of her demeanour speedily convinced Alan — the softest of her auditors — of a necessity to humour her demand. He told her sheepishly that he couldn't believe Peter Gaunt a bad man who would wilfully do a wrong to anybody or hurt a living soul; but that, of course, he, Alan, wasn't going to stick to Manuka if it would hurt his mother. He muttered something about blood being thicker than water and carefully avoided his sister's eyes.

Mark smiled cryptically and lighted a cigarette.

Mary firmly gripped her son's hand and turned her distraught face to Clare. "You must choose between Peter and your Mother, girl," she said.

"That is scarcely a fair proposition, Mary," intervened Mark. "Your case against Peter wouldn't hang a cat. You have really no quarrel with him except that his views on religious education do not coincide with yours. Out of the difference you have noted you have constructed a mountain of purely imaginary apostasy. The same spirit, a few centuries ago, created the Inquisition and deluged

Europe with blood. Clare has been working with Peter for more than two years with your complete approval. You have no right, now —”

“Silence, Mark!” interrupted Mary, with a frenzied air. “This is between my daughter and myself. I am waiting for her to speak.”

“Sorry, Mumsie,” said Clare, “but I’m not ready to answer you off-hand. I’m afraid you’ll have to give me time to think things out.”

“Now or never,” cried Mary furiously. “I shall not temporise with the devil for my daughter’s soul.”

Mark unexpectedly and swiftly crossed the room, and stooping down he lifted his wife to her feet. “This madness has gone far enough,” he thundered. “I shall not suffer any more of it. Come to bed at once!”

For a moment their eyes contended, but the man’s will, aroused for the first time in years to assert itself, proved much the stronger. The blazing temper of his glance beat down the fires that Mary’s bigotry had lighted, and quite suddenly her fortitude crumbled and she assumed the appearance of a frightened child.

“Mark!” she gasped. “Mark!” Then broke into a storm of weeping.

Alan hurried to support his mother, but Mark roughly brushed the boy aside, and picking Mary bodily up in his arms, strode heavily from the room. Alan, deeply upset and filled with unreasoning rage against his father and baseless fear for his mother, would have followed, but Clare forcibly interposed.

"Don't be stupid!" she panted, as she struggled with him. "Can't you see that Mother is ill? She's perfectly safe with Dad."

"He was brutal to her," objected the boy.

Clare noted her brother's clenched hands and frowning visage, and her understanding of the mischief that can be wrought by a thoroughly good but stupid woman was suffocatingly enlarged. Alan watched her suspiciously for a moment, but he could not doubt the reality of her emotion, and presently he melted and sidling up he put a hand on her shoulder.

"Buck up, Sis," he mumbled. "You haven't been hurt that I can see. Seems to me you've got clean out of the net. I'm the one that's stuck in it for keeps. . . . You know, as well as I do, she'll never tackle you again."

"She'll never be the same to me again," wept the girl. "I have lost her love tonight. She will give all she has to you. You did not fail her."

"But I failed Peter," he responded sadly. "And even yet I don't know what it's all about. I was afraid she'd break a blood-vessel or something if I did not do what she wanted. What is the trouble, Sis — or don't you know either? . . . She seemed to be out of her mind."

"The trouble is of our making, Alan: yours, Father's, mine. All our lives we have coddled Mother and given in and played up to her. She's so lovely and usually so reasonable that it delighted us to do it. But it wasn't kind to her. We have made her believe herself infallible and invested with a divine right to have her whims indulged. She

hasn't shown this often — only now and then when one of her funny little bigotries has been offended. But you'll remember that as often as that has happened we've had a frightful time. In this case one of her really deep prejudices has been inflamed. There isn't any reason in her attitude, only blind feeling and a passionate belief that she is right. With all her softness she has a streak of granite in her nature and a touch of fanaticism. Father frightened her just now. He did it deliberately. She was startled out of her frenzy and she broke down. She will cry herself to sleep tonight. But she will wake tomorrow as hard as rock, and unless I give in to her and desert Peter she will shut me out of her heart for ever."

"And you won't do that, Clare, will you?"

"I can't, Al."

"Do you care for him so much, Sis?"

Clare looked away and did not reply. After a while she said, "I want you to drive me up to Manuka at daylight — before Mother wakes. It will be best for us all. . . . It will give you an opportunity to collect your things."

"It sounds to me like breaking up the home," whispered Alan. His lips were trembling and tears were in his eyes.

"You'll have to be awful good to Mumsie," said Clare, frankly sobbing. "We've all of us got to remember it's a sort of sickness with her that we might have cured but we never tried, and it's too late now. Oh, Al dear, I'm so unhappy!"

"It's like the end of the world," said Alan.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

ON reaching Manuka Clare and Alan were greeted with a budget of bad tidings. Peter had been removed during the night, by Dr Hall's order, to the Infirmary. He was running a high temperature; pneumonia was feared, he was delirious and not to be seen. Measles had broken out in the nurseries and one of the dormitories had been quarantined. The Matron was also in hospital, having slipped on a piece of orange-peel and broken a femur. Finally, one of the nurses who had been on furlough and who should have reported for duty the previous day had telegraphed to say she was ill and that her return might be indefinitely delayed. Dr Hall confessed the staff to be seriously shorthanded, and as influenza was raging in the city he frankly despaired of getting the help he required.

Alan was overwhelmed by the accumulation of disasters, and he would have broken his promise to his mother and remained to give what aid he could, if he had been allowed. But Clare's spirit soared to the emergency. With gentle firmness she silenced her brother's protestations and packed him off to town. He had hardly departed before she had her belongings removed from Peter's house to the Institute, and took possession of the Matron's vacated rooms. She then sent for the Padre and Dr Hall and quietly announced her intention of acting as

Matron until Peter should be sufficiently recovered to make his own arrangements. Both gentlemen were secretly doubtful of the ability of so young a woman to cope with a responsibility so large, but in the face of her resolute self-assurance they did not voice their feelings, and before the day ended they were relieved to discover that she had not over-rated her capacity. Within a week she was the main-spring and driving force of the vast establishment; its unquestioned controller, arbiter and head. Although she moved seldom from the central office of administration, she pervaded the Institute. Her finger seemed to hover ceaselessly on every pulse of the machine. The smallest events were instantly made known to her. Her directions and decisions were swift and definite. The executives saw her at least twice daily, yet the corridors and passages ever seemed to be empty, the workers always at their tasks. She was never flurried. She never seemed anxious or confused. She issued her orders with a whispering softness that demanded strained attention and with an accompanying glance that ensured prompt if wondering compliance. It is possible that at a time of less abnormal urgency the authority Clare had assumed so readily and exercised with such quiet but unflagging energy might have been disputed, and cabals formed to oppose her. But it is equally to be doubted if any combination could have long prevailed against her rule. The girl was a born commander and she gave no clearer demonstration of her talent than in her insistent exploitation of the loyal sentiments of her subordinates which had been excited by the Institute's sudden

need of special service. Her success, however, was not wholly due to these simple and obvious causes. The unexpected call on her resources had revealed deeps in Clare previously unsuspected by herself, and had evoked from those deeps a spirit that influenced every consciousness in her environment. Her suddenly-acquired habit of a lowered voice, almost difficult to hear, was no trick or affectation. It was part and parcel of her developing personality which grew daily in strength and purposefulness and soon gained for her an indefinable ascendancy over every member of the staff. Mr Tainsh and Dr Hall were too busy in their own domains to note the steps and courses of her progress, but they gladly welcomed the results. At the outset of her regime they both exerted themselves to smooth her path. In a very little while they were taking their problems to her for elucidation or advice. The multiplication of her official tasks and duties kept one part of the girl's mind intensely occupied and therefore happy; but there was another compartment filled with torturing unease. Wavering images inhabited that place — images of her mother and Peter Gaunt, the two most important people in her life, bound so long by an attachment that seemed unbreakable, now so pitifully divided. The image she carried of her mother's face was distorted by anger, and Clare sought in vain to recreate its dear familiar placidity. Peter's was a deathmask — white and stern. What if Peter died? She thought it more than possible. A week had passed and she was still forbidden his bedside. Of all the specialists attending him, none proffered a word of hope.

From Dr Hall no information could be gleaned save that Peter was putting up a gallant fight. The Padre's resolutely composed face told her nothing. Clare wrote daily to her mother. Her letters were loving and dutiful, but brief and not self-revelant. They did not elicit a reply, but Alan telephoned each morning from his father's office for the latest bulletin of Peter and he gave her news of the Landale household; colorless but contenting. "Mother's absolutely O.K." "Everything has settled down." "Nothing ever happens here." "The pater's cold is better." "I'm taking Mother to the Capitol tonight."

The boy never confessed the state of his own feelings, but the assiduity of his attentions and his invariable last word, "I must see Peter as soon as he is well," told Clare much.

On the tenth day of his illness Peter suddenly began to mend. Next morning his recovery appeared certain and Dr Hall hurried to inform Clare. In his excitement he blurted out a secret. Peter had had double pneumonia, and his medical attendants, from the first, had not expected one "so badly gassed in the Great War" to survive.

Clare thus learned that Peter had participated in the War. She had never pictured him as a soldier, and had assumed from his silence that he had been obliged by sufficiently good reasons to find some other way of serving his country in the crisis of 1914-18. The knowledge that he had fought brought her a strong unreasoning elation; it enhanced his manhood in her esteem and mysteriously

confirmed her right to love him. He was not one of the shirkers. She had never thought him a shirker in point of fact; but others might, and now nobody could ever dare. But oh, what a close-mouthed darling fool to hide what any man might excusably parade! Her heart was so filled with pride that Dr Hall's good news became for the moment a secondary thing. Peter would recover. Had she ever doubted it? Of course he would recover. He had been gassed. Then obviously he must have served in Europe. A man who had fought in France and Flanders and come safely out of that Hell could not be killed before his time by a wretched pneumonia germ. Clare possessed a brain that could reason much more accurately, but it is difficult for a woman with a singing heart to be logical. Peter had fought for his country and Peter was getting better. What else in the wide world mattered? It seemed appropriate, inevitable, and not in the least surprising to Clare that the improvement in Peter's condition should synchronise with a marked abatement of the measles epidemic. There were three little graves on the hill she would never pass without a stab of pain, but the dread of more had already disappeared. Health steadily flowed back to the Institute. All the sick children were presently pronounced convalescent, and at length the shadow of the quarantine was lifted. That was on the day that Peter, in a rebellious mood, insisted he was well enough to receive visitors and sent Dr Hall, himself, for Clare.

"Five minutes, no more," the Doctor said impressively.

Clare hurried to the Infirmary. Peter seemed to consist of a pair of huge, pale, flaring eyes; eyes that simultaneously burned and smiled.

"I'll tell you a secret," his weak voice said. "I named you for administrative head in my will a year ago. They all tell me you have proved a perfect chief. They thought it would astonish me. Simpletons!"

"You are the devil and all of a clever fellow, Peter," Clare twinkled at him. "But don't be too enthusiastic or I'll make you double my salary. Feeling good? Pain all gone?"

"And in my right mind at last. How are your people?"

"Fine. I hear of them from Alan daily. Father has been out several times, but I've been too busy to see much of him. He always sends his love to you. . . . Mother has been elected President of her hospital committee. Alan has miraculously joined Father in the business. That's my entire budget."

"Your mother has not forgiven us?"

The "us" thrilled Manuka's acting Matron to the core of her being. Was Peter's long infatuation at an end? Clare dared not experiment. She answered softly, "She does not understand."

"We must never fail in kindness to your mother, Clare," said Peter urgently.

The girl caught her breath in an ecstasy of gratitude. Her heart was flooded with a sudden love for all mankind. Peter was cured! With a masterly effort she contrived to smile. She said, "Here

comes a Sister to push something into your tummy. No need to glare at me, Sister Linton. I'm on the point of going. Bye-bye, Peter, don't let them make you too fat. A bow window wouldn't suit your type of architecture. See you again tomorrow, no doubt."

Hours later one of the wardsmen had to repeat a simple message to Clare several times before she grasped its meaning, a phenomenon that became the talk of the Institute that night.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

THE ANNUAL Government inspection of Manuka took place while Peter was still confined to the Infirmary. Two elderly officials conducted the examination: and they did their work with exasperating thoroughness, prying into everything, refusing to accept any statement without exhaustive proof, and generally upsetting the order of the establishment. Clare had expected a formal investigation and was prepared to act the part of chatelaine. But she was brushed aside as a probably interested witness. The officers even declined her invitation to lunch, preferring the sandwiches they had brought with them. It relieved her to learn some days later, through the Press, that the Inspectors had reported to Parliament most favourably on the Institute and its management. The warmth of their approbation, however, provoked hostility in other quarters, and the day Peter was allowed to leave his bed was signalled by the appearance of two letters in the Press reflecting on the infantile death-rate of Manuka and challenging the right of the administration to educate its charges outside the fold of any established Christian Church. One writer flatly accused the Institute of pagan tendencies and another suggested that the sympathies of the founder, Mr Peter Gaunt, had been turned in the direction of Buddhism during his long residence in the Orient.

Peter convened the Council to consider these attacks, and for the first time in more than a year every member attended. It was a painful meeting. Mark Landale, whose reappearance was sincerely welcomed by his colleagues, opened the proceedings by announcing that his wife had inspired the calumnious letters and that she had provided certain persons, formerly friends and parishioners of Mr Tainsh but now enemies, with the material to compose them. "Mrs Landale," he concluded gravely, "conceives it to be her duty to oppose and thwart our purposes, which she has come to regard, for reasons best known to herself — I am unable to comprehend them —, as anti-Christian. I need hardly assure you, gentlemen, that I deplore her unfortunate activities. Since I am without power to control them I see no outcome from my personal dilemma except to tender you my resignation."

"Mother's sentimental fondness for the Padre," thought Clare, "has turned to hate." The girl bent her eyes on Peter's musing, mask-like face and she strove with all her might to read his mind. The others watched him, too, stirred and expectant. Peter's long devotion to Mary Landale was no secret to any member of the group, but Clare, only, knew of Mary's devotion to the Padre. Mark Landale for all his acumen had never suspected that.

Peter alone had evinced no sign of emotion at Mark's statement, but his lips quivered slightly as he prepared to speak. He had a feeling of climbing upwards from a pit of darkness in which he had lain through blind centuries, yet his brain was free from

vexing thought, and his heart, though sorrowful, was strangely at peace. "We shall not let you go, Mark," he said gently, "unless you wish to go and insist on leaving us. . . ." He paused, and looked deep into his old friend's eyes. "Have you or I or any of us the right to resent your wife's actions, Mark? Or to judge her? We know her for a good woman, one who has walked very near the angels. Has she caught, perhaps, a whisper from another sphere to assail us for our discipline, our betterment? We cannot tell. . . . We can be sure that conscience moves her in the direction she has taken. We, also, are moved by conscience, to take another road. It is sad to learn that the path we tread is odious to her; but should we deem her odious because she believes it her duty to oppose us? What any feels a duty is a duty."

"There can be no progress without strife," said Mr Levison sententiously.

Professor Sainton shook himself as a dog does coming from a bath. "We'd get smug without censure," he declared. "The path of the reformer ought to be hard and is hard because it ought to be. Mrs Landale has a perfect right to oppose us; no question about that. The only question before us is how to answer her attacks and any fresh attacks that may be made on us."

"I'd like my position dealt with first," objected Mark.

"Our trust in you is absolute," declared the Padre gravely.

"I move that Landale's resignation be not accepted," said Dr Leitch.

"I second," said Mr Levison.

"Those in favour. . . ." said Peter. "Carried unanimously. Well, Mark?"

"I stay of course," returned Landale, "and I thank you very humbly for your confidence."

"Now for the major question," cried the Professor. "I have always been a fighting man so you'll not be surprised to hear the motion I have been scribbling here." He held up a scrap of paper and began to read: "I move that we adopt the hardest fighting course open to our selection — silence; and that we accept any abuse or misrepresentation we may encounter as a call to pursue our ideals with added energy and labour to perfect the work that we are doing, by the fruits whereof alone in the final judgment we shall be acquitted or condemned."

It was immediately apparent that Sainton's motion had interpreted the temper of the Council. It was carried without discussion, and with many a quiet sigh of relief the visiting members began to disperse. They were to meet again at dinner, but each professed an anxiety to visit a different part of the Institute. Each, in truth, desired an interval for private meditation. Peter stood by the door watching Clare stroll off with her father. He had become greatly dependent on the girl and he wondered how she would react to her mother's frantic effort to injure Manuka — and, through Manuka, the Padre.

Presently a hand was laid upon his arm and he heard Mr Tainsh's voice. "You endured that blow

with admirable fortitude, my friend. God has blessed you with a firm and faithful spirit."

Peter shook his head. "You praise me too much, Edward. I have mysteriously changed. Mary has lost the power to hurt me. But I am so sorry for her that I could almost weep."

"I also grieve for her. Bigotry so violent is a heavy cross to bear."

Peter believed that Mary carried a heavier cross than bigotry, but he did not open the Padre's eyes. "Pray for her, Edward," was all he said, and turning away he sauntered slowly into his garden, taking instinctively the gully path. At the elbow of the covered walk where he had last seen little Matthew Lorme he paused and stared across the valley. A fleecy white cloud descended presently and all but blotted out the view. It touched his face with cold and humid fingers and it made him feel isolated from the world. On this spot the child had greeted him with a happy cry and kissed him lovingly. Dr Hall had broken the news to him that forenoon that Matthew had been the plague's first victim and was four weeks dead. Had Providence snatched away the beloved boy without a purpose? And, if not — what might the purpose be? Would Matthew still be living if Peter had not idolised him with such unreserved intensity? Must everything he loved be slain or spoiled? Mary Landale had become a stranger and an enemy. Matthew was sleeping on the hillside. Wherein had he deserved such bitter chastisement? He leaned his arms upon the parapet and closed his eyes. Intoxicating scents

ascended from a bank thickly sown with sambucus that was niched in the precipice five hundred feet below. He would plant a root from that bed some day on Matthew's grave, some day, when time would enable him to think about the little chap without feeling cold and sick. That he had been punished justly, Peter decided humbly not to doubt; but he wished that he could learn for which of his offences. It must be a spiritual sin, of course, for he had long been master of his body. Was it pride, he wondered, — the sin of Lucifer? He had certainly invested all his pride in Manuka. Must that be crushed? Must he school himself to look upon his fine creation as a mere machine, and to renounce the part that he had played in its establishment? Ought he, perhaps, to surrender its control to other hands? Was that what Providence demanded? And if he obeyed would he be allowed to care for some warm human creature and not see it consequently perish or decay? The knowledge came to Peter that his deepest need was of something vital to love and cherish without shame for ever. Also the knowledge came to him that he no longer loved Mary Landale. And finally he thought he learned from long staring into the mist that his duty lay in conquering his greatest need and devoting every atom of his strength to the development of Manuka.

At dinner his guests wondered at his smiling mien and steady gaiety. Peter was consciously imitating a Siamese actor who had been called from the death-bed of his daughter to entertain a Prince. He related some quaintly humorous stories of the peasants of Nakon, and frequently he made the table

rock with laughter. Clare alone divined his gladness when Dr Hall ordered him to bed immediately the feast was over.

Mr Levison and Professor Sainton, between whom a friendship was developing, returned to Melbourne in the latter's car. They discussed Peter on the way.

"I'm afraid Gaunt is not long for this world, Levison," said the Professor.

"What makes you think so, Professor? He looks frail, I grant you — but one would expect that. He's only just out of bed from a touch-and-go illness."

"Quite so: but it's not his appearance altogether that I go on. Something underneath and harder to explain. Every time I see him he gives me the same impression. I may be wrong. Hope I am. But there it is."

"It would be rotten luck for him to die before we got any results for all his work. Absolutely rotten. Wouldn't it?"

"Absolutely," agreed the Professor. "But isn't that the way of things in general? The builder builds and passes on. Others inherit and inhabit."

"Doesn't seem fair to me," sighed the broker.

"What do you make of Gaunt, Levison? Is he a big man or a little man with a big idea? I have mulled over that problem ever since I met him first. Haven't solved it yet."

"That's funny!" exclaimed the other. "I'm in the same boat and it's often been on the tip of my tongue to ask you to help me out."

"We may help each other out by comparing notes."

"Why not, Professor? It's worth trying anyway. One sure and certain thing is that he isn't ordinary. I meet lots of all sorts in my business, but none like him."

"What is it that distinguishes him from the mob — as far as you are specially concerned?"

The broker pondered a while, then somewhat uncertainly replied, "I think it's the feeling he gives one when he looks at you that he doesn't want anything you have but would just as soon push your barrow for you as not."

Sainton chuckled. "Best definition of a kind spirit I've ever heard," he said.

Levison caught at the word. "That's it," he cried. "He is kind. He means you well. He covered the first order he gave me with cash. I would not have asked for it though he may have thought I would. I had the idea he wrote the cheque to save me the need of reminding him. I did not know whether or not he could pay up if the deal went wrong."

"Why would you not have asked him for cover, Levison?"

"I'm hanged if I know, Professor. But I know I wouldn't have."

"Hmm. You trusted him at sight?"

"Seems like. Must have. Do still. Fact is we all do, don't we?"

The Professor chuckled again. "We are getting on, Levison. Kind and trustworthy. Two qualities of bigness, eh! What else?"

"He is the gamest speculator I ever knew, Professor. Make anything out of that?"

"I might if you tell me how he behaved in a crisis. There were crises? He did not win every bet, I suppose?"

"Most of them, Professor. But once or twice we were up against it good and hard and he stood to win or lose a fortune at the splitting of a hair."

"Well — did he blench and quiver?"

"Did you ever see a statue blench or quiver? I did all the blenching. He sat pat."

"We advance, Levison. Kind, trustworthy, self-controlled. These are all attributes of greatness. What else?"

"I've done my bit, Professor. I don't know anything more except what we all know. His weakness for Mrs Landale for instance. She was his sweetheart when a boy, they tell me, and he never married because of her. . . . Very romantic, I dare say. I don't set much store on that sort of thing, myself. I like a man to be independent of women."

"Every idol has a blemish, Levison, — some have feet of clay. Is a romantic disposition a disqualification for bigness? And what about constancy?"

"I guess it's your turn, Professor. My quiver is empty."

"Mine, too: for I have noted in him nothing that

you haven't seen. Except, perhaps, this — and yet you must have, for how else could you explain Manuka: he is a genuine philanthropist. He yearns to serve and save mankind. A fanatic? I wonder. If so — an uncommonly sane one. And not a bit assertive. As a fact he is shy, a bit secretive too, I should say. He likes the shadows; shrinks from publicity, seems to want nothing for himself. He knows his world, has a well informed mind. He understands the dismal science as well as I do. He sees the defects of the capitalist system but is indifferent to the damage they are causing. He thinks any old economic system would do if men's hearts were in the right place. I thought that an affectation for a bit, but I was wrong. He is too simple to be insincere. He hasn't a scrap of constructive imagination and he is seeking to construct a new spiritual world. He's an enigma all right, Levison. I have been inclining lately to the view — a medium-sized man fascinated by a big idea. But I can't be sure. What boggles me is that the limelight has no lure for him."

"What boggles me," said Levison, "is that he hasn't any knobs one can grip and sort of get together on. No common basis for Palship, so to speak. I always feel as if he was speaking to me from ten miles off."

"And yet you like him, Levison?"

"It's a fact, Professor. I do. Don't you?"

"Quite a lot, Levison. Quite a lot. But doesn't that suggest he has missed bigness. It's not easy for us little chaps to like big men, eh?"

"Unless they happen to be very big," said the broker quietly.

The Professor was surprised. "So you think Gaunt may be very big?" he asked.

"I don't know what to think. I reckon you don't either, in spite of what you said just now."

"So we wind up where we began," said Sainton.

"Maybe —" observed the broker after a pause, "maybe he's neither giant nor middle-size nor dwarf but just what he seems to be."

"And that is what?"

"A good man, Professor. A really good man."

The Professor did not reply.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

MARK lingered after the others had departed for a chat with Clare, who took him over to her official quarters at the Institute. "How long before the Matron dispossesses you?" he asked when he had properly admired the rooms.

"She is leaving us as soon as her leg is mended and will not return. She is shortly to be married," Clare replied. "I haven't spoken to Peter yet, but I shall probably be asked to stay on permanently in her place. Dr Hall won't hear of any further change."

"It's heavy work for a girl of your age, Clare."

"I love it, Dad. . . . My days are fully occupied. I often wonder what I did with my time before I took charge here."

Mark seated himself at a table opposite the girl and lighted a second cigar from the butt of his first — a familiar trick. Clare pushed him over an ash-tray and took a cigarette from her case. "Worried, Dad?" she asked, as she struck a match.

Mark sighed. "Bored, my dear. My interests seem to be narrowing, and my interest in my interests to be fading. I am a bit worried, though."

"Not about Alan, Dad?"

"No. He is shaping squarely to his job, and getting keener on it every day."

"It can't be over me?"

"You never gave me an hour's anxiety in your life. Child and woman, you've always been my sheet-anchor. You still are."

The girl flushed with pleasure, and stretching forward she patted her father's idle hand. "Then tell me about it, dear. I can see that something is vexing you. You'll feel ever so much better when you 'fess up."

"Life seems to have slipped out of gear somehow," he admitted, with a twisted smile. "Everything has got unstable, uncertain, queer. The wheels continue to revolve but their response to the controls isn't always normal and when they do act normally one feels surprised."

"The papers are talking of a slump, a world-wide trade depression. Is that what is bothering you, Dad?"

Landale frowned. "Don't pretend to be stupid, Clare. What do I care for slumps or world-wide depressions? I was talking about the important things of life, the real things,—the personal things."

"Mother," said the girl.

The man's frown deepened and in his eyes she glimpsed shadows of perplexity and pain. Next second, however, he was smiling; his irrepressible sense of humour had been tickled by a word.

"I used the plural, but I could not deceive you, could I, Clare?"

"Mother has always been a very important person to both of us," the girl said gently. "I've been

worrying about her too — more than I can say. I have a feeling she will never forgive me for sticking to Peter. How is she, Dad?"

Landale sighed again. He answered very seriously, "Quite well, and to all appearances as happy and placid as ever. But either she has radically changed in the essentials or I never understood her. She informed me about those wretched letters (Crawford and Sterling wrote them — canting worms) as casually as if speaking of the weather. I was rather bowled over and I'm afraid I lost my temper. But she wasn't in the least ruffled. She was politely sorry I felt aggrieved, but she must do her duty as she sees it. Not her judgment is at fault, but mine. Peter has bewitched the lot of us. She alone has withstood his evil influence. With God's help she will save us from him yet! Sweetness incarnate; and as hard as chilled steel. I was talking with a stranger from the world's end, entirely absorbed in her own ideas, entirely indifferent to mine. While I argued and protested she darned a pair of stockings. When I left her — both heels were neatly mended."

"Why don't you take her for a trip to England, Dad?"

"I suggested that a month ago, when I first began to get uneasy, and again only last week. She says her place is here. I can't imagine what has come over her. She was always a great churchwoman, of course, but . . ."

He did not complete the sentence, and they both smoked silently a while. Clare's thoughts were

busy. She believed that her mother's attitude could be explained by assuming her the victim of a perverse inclination to injure Edward Tainsh; but a sentiment compounded equally of sex-loyalty and daughterly solicitude kept her tongue-tied. She pitied her father profoundly, but his obtuseness irritated her a little. She was irritated also by her own inability to help him. "There doesn't seem to be anything you can do," she said at last. "Except wait until she gets more sensible. If I were in your place, Dad, I'd give her one more chance to accompany me to Europe and if she refused I'd go off by my lone. I'd stay away a full year too."

"I am too fond of her, child. . . ." he answered simply. "I must see her every day. Oh! well. . . ." He stood up and stretched out his arms. "It's not fair to fret you with my troubles. You must have plenty of your own."

Clare accompanied him to his car and watched the red tail-light fade into the gloom. Even before it had entirely disappeared her sympathy began to dwindle. After all, the woman her father loved was well and strong and would probably outlive the man she puzzled. Her own case was very different. The man she loved and whom *she* "must see every day", although he often puzzled her to the limit of endurance, was very fragile and he had a nagging little cough that sent a needle of fear and pain quivering through her heart every time she heard it.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

THE ATTACKS on Manuka by anonymous newspaper-correspondents continued intermittently for several weeks and then dispiritedly ceased. A little later a member of the Legislature tabled a question asking the Premier was it a fact as reported in the Press "that certain orphaned wards of the State, who have been committed to the charge of a privately-conducted asylum known as Manuka, are not being educated in accordance with Christian principles?"

To this the leader of the Government replied, "It is not a fact"; and he referred the questioner to the annual report of the Inspector of Asylums which had recently been presented to Parliament. Manuka thus scored a victory over its opponents without striking a blow. The incident, however, rankled in the minds of its administrators, and was responsible for a series of Council meetings held for the special purpose of clearly and positively defining the ultimate objectives of the Institute, and the most practical methods of attaining them. The debates were voluminous and for a long time inconclusive. Often they were acrid in tone and sometimes they exposed viewpoints that seemed permanently irreconcilable. Clare was condemned to transcribe numberless speeches which she considered futile, and which always secretly enraged her at the following meeting to recite. Peter made it a rule that at each fresh conference the entire proceedings of the last should

be read aloud. Clare thought it a frightful waste of time and trouble. But she was alone in her opinion. It flattered the self-love of the councillors to have their utterances recorded and repeated; and even Peter seemed to enjoy the recitation of his occasional flights of eloquence.

From the outset the girl's intensely practical nature had resented the Council's prolonged preoccupation with abstractions. The proceedings bored her more and more. She wanted the talk to be over and done with and real work to begin. But boredom changed to positive irritation when she discovered every member of the Council to be vain. Vanity, she thought, was the prerogative of women. Her estimate of the male animal steadily declined. However, Clare's perceptions were acute and before a month had passed she began to suspect a far-seeing policy in the rule that irked her. Men soon learn to curb their tongues when they know that they will be required to sit in judgment on their own utterances when the passion that dictated them has cooled. The debates continually improved in quality. The longer speeches furnished increasing evidence of studious preparation. Interjections became fewer and more courteous, the arguments less passionate and more profound. The debaters began to comport themselves at each meeting in such a fashion as to ensure cutting a decent figure at the next. And in proportion as they subdued their tempers their zeal became infused with a spirit of accommodation and compromise. Opinions, once apparently irreconcilable, mysteriously approximated. Mutual

good-will developed out of suppressed or conquered antagonisms. The business of the Council began to march. One evening, seated before her desk, Clare realised that the job was finished. On a single page of foolscap which she had just typed from a sheaf of notes, appeared a short group of guiding principles. She read:

*The Children of Manuka shall be induced by the tuition of constant iteration and example to believe that the diviner purposes of man's creation can be fulfilled only by a life of loving and unselfish service.*

*The Children of Manuka shall be taught to seek their happiness in giving, not in getting.*

*The Children of Manuka shall be protected from the curiosity that leads unsatisfied to prurience. The functions, the laws and the punishments of nature shall not be kept secret from them but shall be reverently explained. They shall be taught to revere the bodies that contain their souls.*

*The Children of Manuka shall be taught to worship chastity, to abhor incontinence, to honour women and to observe the Ten Commandments.*

*The Children of Manuka shall be taught to respect the Government of the country in which they live and to obey its laws.*

*The Children of Manuka shall be taught arts, sciences, and handicrafts wherewith to earn their livelihood and to support their de-*

pendents, but they shall simultaneously be taught to subdue their appetites, to abjure avarice and luxury, and to recognise a constant obligation to share their superfluity with those poorer than themselves.

The Children of Manuka shall be taught to delight in truth and beauty, to fear falsity, insincerity and vainglory, to shun self-righteousness, to dread pride, and to arm themselves against the enticements of envy and contempt.

The Children of Manuka shall be taught to be compassionate of all sin and suffering, to pardon without affectation all who may injure and abuse them, to treat their enemies with unflinching kindness and to cherish their friends.

The Children of Manuka shall be taught to abominate the false spirit that affects to regard Jesus as a theological abstraction and His Creed as a counsel of perfection, fit for the admiration but not suitable for the imitation of man. They shall be taught that He has proved His Creed to be a practical system of life, fit as well for the present age as for the past: fit for all conditions, all men, all times. They shall be taught that it is possible for the meanest creature to achieve greatness by following in His footsteps and that the greatest-seeming who for any reason will not, is, in essence, mean.

The Children of Manuka shall be taught to serve Jesus with as much gratitude as worship, and with firm and patient hearts, and taught

*that in no other way can man reciprocate the loving-kindness Jesus showed to man.*

*The Council of Manuka affirms for the guidance of all Manuka's administrators, that kindness is the nursery of love and that the practices of kindness, only, can teach men how to serve sincerely, how to give divinely. Charity that is not suffused with love may be a subtle form of selfishness which secretly expects a near or far reward. Love washes kindness clean of calculation and prepares the soul of man to pour forth perfect gifts. Love has no arithmetic. It does not measure out its benefactions. It offers all it has and is troubled only that its power is always less than its desire to serve and give.*

Peter entered the room while the girl was still musing over the type-written page. She did not hear him and he paused for a moment watching the shadows of unspoken reflections cross her face, quietly enjoying the abstraction of one usually a dynamo of energy. Suddenly her lips moved to form the words: "It could never have been done without Peter's rule to record verbatim and to make them listen afterwards in cold blood to their own vapourings. What a shrewd old bird he is!"

Peter laughed aloud.

Clare started and blushed. "Well, you are!" she declared defiantly, adding, "And many a listener has heard himself described less tactfully."

He advanced and took the sheet from her hand, then sought a comfortable chair. Clare watched him

without moving. Sickness had aged and refined Peter. He looked ethereal, and a furrow had been scored between his brows that created the illusion of a faint perpetual frown. When he glanced up, at last, the girl was smiling.

"Yes?" he asked expectantly.

"It is good," she replied.

"But you smiled?"

"Only at you, Peter. I was reading your thoughts. You turned to me for praise, did you not? — for your work — of course."

"Not mine, but our work, Clare; and not praise — appreciation. . . . Is that a quibble? I am very legible to you. . . . Yes, a quibble. . . . I apologise. I want praise and possibly a little admiration too."

"I am stuffed with both," solemnly declared the girl. "Bid me discourse, I will enchant thine ear. Here are a few adjectives to start with: excellent, splendid, magnificent, superb, colossal, tremendous. At adverbial commendation I am just as competent: egregiously, superbly, supremely, superlatively. . . ." She abruptly broke off, seeing that her persiflage was hurting him, and went on in an altered tone: "Honestly, Peter, it's good. But I had to chaff you. It's very difficult not to pull a leg that is always provocatively extended. Am I forgiven?"

"Then you really like — what we have done?"

"Yes. And you — are you satisfied with it, Peter?"

"Contented rather than satisfied, Clare. I despaired of unanimity at times on some of the graver

issues. We all had to make concessions to achieve concurrence. I felt like a shorn sheep more than once. I daresay my colleagues did too. We have not evolved a perfect code, but it is one that interlocks our individual convictions. It is, therefore, proof against betrayal or capricious change. I intend to incorporate it in my last will and testament — which, as you know, will found a Trust for the government of Manuka when I am dead. . . . I'd like you to ring up my lawyer, Morrison, and ask him to come out here tomorrow. These things are best done quickly."

"Very well, Peter. It's too late tonight, but I'll 'phone him in the morning."

"The earlier the better. I'd like the matter settled tomorrow, if possible."

"Aren't you feeling well, Peter?"

"Quite. Why do you ask?"

"I've noticed lately that your thoughts are much concerned with —" she paused — "the management of Manuka after you are gone."

"And you being young, my dear, shrink, very naturally no doubt, from the thought of death. You even baulk at uttering the word. I am not accusing you of cowardice, however. Do you accuse me of morbidity? You would be wrong. At your age I thought like you. At my present age . . ." he shrugged his shoulders.

"You are not old, Peter." There was a note of indignant protest in her voice. "Why talk like a Methusaleh? You are not even middle-aged."

"I am nearing the half century and have a hole in my lung."

"Dr Leitch said it had fibrosed splendidly, and that with care you may live to be a hundred."

Peter smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "What a fate! Don't wish it on me, Clare. You want the truth, do you not, my dear?"

The girl stiffened in her chair. "Of course," she said.

"The reason my thoughts hover upon, let us call it, the future management of Manuka, is that for a considerable time past I have felt the spurring of an inward urge to set my house in order."

"I knew it," breathed the girl.

Peter did not hear. He continued in an even voice: "It is sensible to be prepared for death. No man knows when he will be called. He knows, only, that the call will come one day and that he cannot help but answer it. . . . My inward monitor deserves my gratitude for having driven me to face, and for having aided me to overcome, an ancient enemy — dread of mortal dissolution. I no longer fear death, Clare. My flesh will shrink, perhaps, when the hour strikes, but I hope to make a tolerably decent exit." He smiled suddenly. "Isn't it funny! One inevitably becomes a bit theatrical when discussing one's departure from the planet, however distant it may seem to be. That's because some stupid instinct common to us all urges us to taboo death as a subject of polite conversation. It is even considered rather bad form to mention the hereafter in a drawing-room, except by way of jocularly."

Clare shivered. "Do you positively believe in an after life, Peter? That we are all immortal and will consciously survive?"

"Yes."

"I wish I could."

"What is your difficulty?"

"An inferiority complex, perhaps. I do not doubt that some people are worthy of eternal life; but I feel that I am not. That is why I dread death, I suppose. Couldn't you somehow spare me a spark of your faith? It would make such a tremendous difference to me. I do so want to believe, but always my intelligence demands a proof that I can never find."

"It is not a question of individual worthiness, Clare. Immortality belongs equally to the just and the unjust. It cannot be acquired, nor can it be relinquished or evaded. It is part of the natural order."

"If you could only give me a single proof I think I might believe at your bidding."

Peter looked at the girl compassionately, but he remained wholly oblivious of the significance of her unwitting confession, and of her rapt revealing gaze. "You ask for proof: I can only offer evidence, my dear. And it may not satisfy your reason although it has contented mine. Your brain is complex, swift and critical. Mine is much simpler and slower. Your father will tell you I was a hopeless duffer at school. I don't reach conclusions easily. I was a doubter once — as you are now.

It cost me years of patient thought to struggle clear, and attain a state of settled faith."

"Please tell me, Peter."

"Not of those stupid years, Clare. I try to forget them. But of my emergence from the quagmire of uncertainty — with pleasure, if you care to listen. My business in Malaya obliged me to make a study of chemistry and to become an assayer of metals; a metallurgist. The indestructibility of matter is probably a commonplace fact to you — a truth you gathered in your stride, together with all its scientific and philosophic implications. I sensed it very tardily and I had passed my fortieth milestone before I realised that if matter is imperishable it would be illogical to suppose that spirit, the master of matter, may be destroyed. . . . Then followed interminable questionings. The forms of matter may be varied infinitely. Any one existing form may be resolved into its elements to compose another form. Why not spirit too? Assuming spirit, like matter, to be indestructible, it seemed necessary to assume that spirit might also be resolved into elements, and by a kindred coalition with other immaterial elements compose diverse forms. The analogy seemed complete. It left, of course, the problem of the survival of individual consciousness quite unsolved. When I arrived at that stage I was a perplexed and miserable man. Reason told me that my spirit would live for ever, but reason also suggested that death would dissolve it into its elements and that my consciousness, my ego, would be obliterated. I would live for ever, but, perhaps,

never know that I lived. Something in me powerfully resented and determinedly opposed this conclusion; but it seemed unescapable, and after nearly twelve months of baffled thinking I was beginning to force myself to accept it, when I suddenly glimpsed the fallacy to which I had almost succumbed — the assumption that spirit is divisible. Thereupon I argued out the whole problem anew. Matter is indestructible. Spirit is indestructible. Nothing, in short, can be destroyed. Individual consciousness, therefore, cannot be destroyed. But, I said to myself, individual consciousness may be a compound of many elements, each of which may be essentially indestructible, and yet their varied forms produced by combination may be susceptible of change. Then came the crucial query: Is spirit divisible; is consciousness a compound or an element; an integer, or an illusion? That is a question, Clare, which every man must answer for himself according to the nature of his conception of God. It is the basic problem of human life. To myself I put the question — so: Am I, the spirit known as Peter Gaunt, an imperishable entity or an ephemeral combination of imperishable constituents? Searching down the grooves of time I saw that the two greatest minds the world has known each answered that question with grave and almost terrible deliberation. Each has had countless followers. Buddha said: 'My consciousness shall perish and my spirit shall eventually pass into the Nirvana of oblivion and merge into the spirit ocean of the Universe.' Jesus said: 'Our Father which art in heaven —' It was alike my nature and my inclination, Clare, to adopt

the answer of Jesus. — How bright your eyes are, child. . . . It must be very late. Has my story helped you — or simply vexed your doubts?"

The girl gave him a tremulous smile and got swiftly afoot. "I don't know what it has done to me," she said. "My mind is whirling. All I know at this moment is that you ought to be in bed."

Peter also arose. "You too," he said. . . . He went to the door and opened it, stepping aside for her to pass, and murmuring "Good-night."

But Clare paused on the threshold; her face had paled and in her eyes was the flame of a portentous resolution. "Peter," she said, a note of repressed wildness in her voice, "you don't imagine, do you, that you won't need looking after on the other side?"

He stared at her bewilderedly. "Need looking after . . ." he echoed, "where — what?"

"Wherever you go . . . when you die. You'd like to meet or welcome — someone you know, wouldn't you? Who would look after you?"

"Why, yes," he replied. He looked dazed.

"Then," Clare rushed on, a little breathless now, "you'd better tell me to believe as you believe, for I can see we've got little chance of going to the same place unless we believe alike."

"Tell you to believe —"

"Command me to believe."

"None could believe to order, Clare, — and least of all a woman with your logical and independent mind."

"You know nothing whatever about women, Peter. I've told you that a hundred times. Please don't argue, but do as I say. Unless, of course, you shrink from the idea of being in a sense responsible for me. I wouldn't like you to regard me as a burden."

Peter became aware of the tenseness of the girl's attitude, and a moment later his groping mind realised that she was consumed with some mysterious excitement. An instinct urged him to soothe and humour her — although understanding of her mood was quite beyond him.

"I'd like you to believe as I believe," he said.

"Please, Peter — I want to be commanded!" she persisted in a strident whisper. Her body had begun to quake and shiver. Her agitation frightened him.

"Yes, yes. Anything you wish," he said hurriedly, stupidly. "Whatever is the matter with you, my dear? You are not going to faint? Let me get you some water."

"No, no. I am quite all right. Just a foolish woman afraid of a current that she has to cross. You've been very kind. Good-night." And she vanished.

Peter turned back into the room shaking a sorely puzzled head. "Strange, strange girl," he thought. "Mary was never like that. In the old days, at all events, she seemed as simple and as sweet as sunlight. She has changed, alas! But who am I to judge her? . . . I wonder can Clare be truly well? We have been overworking her, I think. I must make

her take a holiday. But goodness me, how can I let her go unless I get a new matron — and that would break her heart. Humph! Humph! And how could we get along without her? Perhaps a good strong tonic is what she needs. I'll speak to Rupert Hall tomorrow. It looked like ague to me: and I'm much afraid she has a temperature. I wonder ought I to ring the Doctor now. I believe I shall."

On his way to the telephone, however, the bell rang, and Clare's voice greeted him through the receiver. "That you, Peter, dear? Listen, I'm not a scrap ill, so don't worry about me any more but go straight to bed and sleep soundly."

The line went dead, but Peter was too surprised to hang up immediately.

"She knew I was going to ring up the Doctor!" he muttered in amazement.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

PETER had no sooner settled the matter of his will than he began to worry about the safety of his investments. Nearly all the funds which were to provide for the future of Manuka — passing into the control of a Trust on his death — had been expended in the purchase of Commonwealth Bonds. Until recently, Peter had regarded these securities with perfect confidence, but the increasing instability of world finance, resulting from the pressure of high tariffs, War Reparations and the universal phenomenon of over-production, had provoked such minatory reactions in Australia that he felt impelled to view them with a measure of suspicion. The declining value of Australia's export staples in the world's markets had commenced to reduce the national income very seriously, and a Party Government was in power that openly confessed a larger concern for the interests of its special constituents than for the common welfare, and was endeavouring to obviate necessary economies by extorting loan accommodation from the Banks responsible for the care of the people's savings. Peter's absorbing ambition to safeguard Manuka against all previsible mishaps made him extremely sensitive to any developments likely to affect the solvency of the country in which his money was invested. He watched the course of political events for a term with growing anxiety, and on the first whisper of repudiation uttered in the State Parliament of New

South Wales he sent for Mark Landale and Mr Levison and laid his fears before them.

To both these gentlemen it seemed inconceivable that the people of Australia could ever be persuaded to depart from the strictest principles of financial rectitude. They admitted that an era of national penury was probably unavoidable, but they scoffed at the notion that the ability or will of the Commonwealth to meet its obligations might thereby be impaired. Both were candidly amused that a hard-head like Peter should have been scared by the mouthings of a handful of irresponsible demagogues, and their optimism made him feel momentarily ashamed. Next day, however, Peter's fears re-awakened. He began to sell his bonds forthwith, and before the month had ended the greater part of his fortune was transferred to London and invested in British Consolidated Stock. Clare was his only confidante in this transaction, and as its completion was almost immediately followed by sharply rising exchange-rates she was the sole independent witness of the resultant expansion of the revenues of Manuka; which presently enabled Peter to commence the construction and establishment of a new dormitory and staff-house.

Peter knew that an unworthy fear and distrust of his countrymen had inspired his success, but he tried vainly to convince Clare, who attributed it to prescience. The girl's own secret fears concerning Peter were presently lulled to sleep. With a mind at rest and pleasing work to do his health showed notable improvement. His body straightened and

his step acquired a spring. His cough all but disappeared. One afternoon Clare found him digging and singing in his garden, and she tasted happiness, for he looked brown and strong and of the earth, earthy. He leaned upon his spade as she drew near and regarded her with twinkling eyes: "No use scolding me, Mother Hubbard," he declared. "And I am going to finish this bed before I knock off."

Clare removed her grandmotherly sunbonnet and used it as a fan. "You look too well to scold," she responded with a smile. "But I'm afraid that bed will have to wait. Fact is you have two lady visitors, Peter."

"Lady visitors? Bother! What are they, Clare?"

"Two friends of my mother. Mrs Cuthbertson and Miss Wayne. I put them in your library. They are school-teachers, or rather, were. They refused to confide their business to me, but I expect that they want to see over the Institute. They have a note to you from Mother."

"A note from your Mother!" Peter flung down his spade and stepped on the path. "You'll come with me, Clare?"

"Can't, Peter. Have to do my rounds. The staff is waiting for me."

Peter nodded absently and set off towards The Lodge. He was presently bowing before a rather sweet-faced old lady whose hair was white and abundant, and a younger woman of uncertain age with a stern ascetic face.

"I am Mrs Cuthbertson," said the elder. "Mrs Landale was good enough to give me this letter of

introduction. This is my friend Miss Wayne — secretary of the Infant Protection League.”

“Mrs. Cuthbertson,” added Miss Wayne, “is President of the United Children’s Welfare Association. My league is affiliated with Mrs Cuthbertson’s Association, but, of course, we function independently.”

Peter bowed to both ladies and tore open Mary’s letter. *Dear Peter*, he read, *I shall be grateful if you will grant my dear friend, Mrs Cuthbertson, the bearer of this missive, the favour of an interview. Yours sincerely, Mary Landale.*

He rang for tea, and begged the ladies to be seated.

“Mrs Landale has not indicated the purpose of your visit,” he said politely. “But I am entirely at your service. You would like to see over the Institute, perhaps?”

Mrs Cuthbertson shook her head. “On some other occasion that would please me greatly, Mr Gaunt. Today I should prefer to spend all the time you may be kind enough to spare us in a little chat. . . . Miss Wayne and I are deeply interested, both personally and officially, in your wonderful Institute. What a beautiful location you have chosen — and how impressive are the buildings — and your wide and lovely grounds. As we drove up, I was lost in admiration. I could not help exclaiming to Miss Wayne — How fortunate the children privileged to live amid such charming, such truly exquisite surroundings!”

A servant entered with a tray, of which Miss Wayne immediately took charge. The man looked surprised, but at a nod from Peter he departed.

"I am glad you like Manuka," said Peter.

"In a few years when your trees have grown it should be one of the show places of Victoria," said Miss Wayne. "Do you take sugar, Mr Gaunt?"

"Two lumps, please."

He handed a cup to Mrs Cuthbertson, who smiled in his face and said: "We ought not to accept your hospitality before telling you that we are a couple of inquisitive women, Mr Gaunt, who have come here to ask a number of questions you may possibly consider impertinent."

"On behalf of a conjoint membership totalling six thousand adult individuals," supplemented Miss Wayne, "all of whom are pledged to defend the best and highest interests of the orphaned children of Victoria."

"I see," replied Peter. He sat down and began gravely to munch a biscuit, resolved to leave the development of the interview to his visitors. He rather liked Mrs Cuthbertson, but the belligerent attitude and the hard mouth of Miss Wayne did not attract him. The elder lady presently set down her cup, and brushed her lips with a microscopical square of lace.

"It is better, I fancy, not to beat about the bush," she said, again smiling pleasantly. (She smiled very easily, Peter thought.) "It has been reported to my Association that the children in your care are being brought up in an unorthodox fashion. I speak for

the moment of their religious education. Have we been correctly informed, Sir?"

"The educational system of Manuka," he replied gravely, "has a purely Christian purpose, but it does not seek to increase the membership of any special congregation. If it is unorthodox to be non-sectarian, you have been correctly informed, Madam."

"Then," said Miss Wayne, "you misled the public in appointing the Reverend Mr Tainsh your director. His appointment was naturally interpreted as an assurance that the children would be brought up in the doctrines of his Church."

"The appointment of a Presbyterian director would have been equally misleading, don't you think?"

"I am a Presbyterian," she answered coldly, "but I should prefer the children to be brought up as Roman Catholics to seeing them absolutely denied the benefits of any orthodox instruction."

"Your complaint, then, is that we are providing our children with non-sectarian instruction?"

Before Miss Wayne could reply, Mrs Cuthbertson interposed: "We have not come here to complain, Mr Gaunt, but to inform ourselves and to entreat you — to ask you, Sir, is it fair to deny helpless little ones the rights, the privileges, the protection that every established Christian Church affords? Is it fair that they should grow to manhood outcasts from every fold?"

"Jesus," Peter gravely reminded her, "was neither an Anglican, a Wesleyan, a Presbyterian,

nor a Roman Catholic. He was a Jew. After his death his followers reformed the Church of Abraham and gave the world a new religion which has since been split into a complex host of warring creeds. We propose to lead our children back from these mazes of confusion to the very fount and origin of Christianity and to teach them virtue in the simple words of Christ. Did He not say, 'Suffer the little children to come unto me'? Shall we wrong or injure or be unfair to them in literally obeying His command?"

Miss Wayne's thin mouth opened and shut. She eyed Peter with the awed hostility of a fanatic hearing the Devil quote Holy Writ, but she was momentarily nonplussed. Mrs Cuthbertson was equally disconcerted, but there was less of the fanatic in her structure and much more worldliness. She covered her defeat with a beaming smile and an affectation of assent.

"I felt sure that you would have a strong reason for adopting a policy that seemed dangerous to me — who am not a theologian," she said hastily. "May I pass on to my second question? It is this. — We are told that you intend to teach your children to abjure and despise the present order of society which sanctions and even encourages individuals to strive diligently for private gain. In that case, Mr Gaunt, it is clear that when they go out into the world they will be pariahs from their kind, and quite unfitted to engage in the ordinary battle of life. Now, Sir, — in all humility — I ask you, is it fair to condemn them to such a fate? They cannot

speaking for themselves. They are unable to contest your will. They have nobody to plead for them. By the unhappy accident of birth they are orphans and at your mercy. You have secured control over their destinies by relieving the State of the burden of their support. Assuming them to be normal beings it is certain that they would desire to lead normal lives. But you forbid! Standing *in loco parentis*, by virtue of possessing some of that very wealth you bid them despise, you arbitrarily compel them to be abnormal and sentence them to an existence of which few adult minds of the present day could regard without abhorrence. Where is your mandate to interfere thus despotically with other persons' lives and souls, and shape them according to your will, consulting them not at all? Are you not usurping functions that belong to God?"

Peter heard her to the end without a single change of expression. When she fell silent he sighed and answered simply: "My conscience has asked me each of those questions, very often, Madam, and many more. What can I say except that I believe I should not be permitted to do what I am doing were it not the will of God?"

Mrs Cuthbertson, gazing into his eyes, could not doubt his honesty. She, herself, had spoken with absolute sincerity. Her fervour had mounted as her appeal developed. Now, unexpectedly, her mind was swept clean of passion as by a strong wind, and she had a feeling that Peter was not an antagonist but might even be a friend. With a sensation of surprise she heard Miss Wayne say: "Might not

other people with equal authority believe they were carrying out the will of God in preventing you doing what you seek to do?"

Peter answered courteously: "Beyond doubt, Miss Wayne, and if they succeeded they would be proven right."

Mrs Cuthbertson rose to her feet: "We have been very trying and you have been very patient, Mr Gaunt."

As he too stood up she moved a pace nearer, and one of her hands crept up to press upon her heart. "But," she said, tremulously, "the most difficult part of my task remains."

"Indeed, Madam."

"Forgive an old woman for venturing to intrude on your personal affairs. It is because she feels she should and must — your own plea, Mr Gaunt."

His pale eyes hardened. So, there was more to come. Noting her agitation he suspected that the chief purpose of her visit was about to be disclosed.

"I feel it my duty as an old and intimate friend of the Landale family," — she paused and her face whitened visibly — "to question your attitude towards Clare." Again she paused a second, then taking courage from the sudden stiffening of Peter's slender body, she drove on relentlessly: "We do not live in a censorious age, but Clare's infatuation has excited comment that tends to become scandalous and is causing her mother the deepest possible distress. It is possible that you intend to marry her, Mr Gaunt. If not, I am impelled by conscience to warn you that her residence in your establishment

— to which her mother has long objected — should not be suffered to continue by a man of honour and a servant of God.”

The blow caught Peter entirely unprepared. He had become so accustomed to Clare's constant presence at Manuka that his old-fashioned original doubts as to the propriety of the arrangement had long since perished. To learn that others had always cherished the view he had outgrown, and that scandal — injurious to Clare — had grown out of their opinion, shocked him inexpressibly. The word “infatuation” revolved meaninglessly in his shaken mind, then slowly acquired significance. This old woman evidently thought Clare infatuated. With whom? But, of course, with him — for she had suggested that he, Peter Gaunt, ought either to marry Clare or send her away from Manuka. The slim capable figure of the girl suddenly arose before his mental vision, her piquant, confident and clever face. Why was she not here to deal with these busybodies, to rebut with scorn their sinister insinuations, and to scorch their evil thinking with her fiery ridicule? He did not feel fit to do any of these things. He was old and sick and tired. He had wanted Clare to be with him at this interview. Why had she let him down? It was not like her — who had ever been ready to take on any job, to relieve him of any burden. Sharp-tongued, caustic, laughing Clare, what a tower of strength he had found her. She had been more than a daughter to him. She had been a compound of tireless servant, constant friend, and devoted mother! And two strange

women had come to him and dared to tell him to his face he must send Clare away lest people should dub her his mistress! Those two women were still here — in this very room. They still awaited punishment for their diabolic calumny. At this thought the mists cleared away and his pale eyes saw them clearly. Both seemed greatly, even painfully, disturbed. The older woman held, and was chafing, one of his hands. The other, the younger, was trying to induce him to swallow some brandy. He realised that he was half-sitting, half-reclining on a couch. With an instinctive gesture of repulsion he pushed away and struggled to his feet. He could not have swooned, for he had never lost consciousness. How then had he come to be lying down? Puzzled and irritated by this trumpery problem he crossed the room and opened the door. "I feel sure," he said, turning to his visitors, "that you will excuse me from attending you to your car. For some reason or another I appear to be a little indisposed. Good-afternoon."

Mrs Cuthbertson made to speak, but after one look into his flaring eyes, her lips closed and she passed silently before him. Miss Wayne stolidly returned his glance, but not his cool contemptuous bow: and she, too, made a silent exit.

Peter took some of the brandy Miss Wayne had vainly offered him and set off for a stroll into the gorge. It seemed imperative to order his mind before again meeting Clare, and he knew he could do that best in the quietude of his beloved gully, amongst the ferns and sassafras.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

PETER did not pause until he reached his favourite nook at the angle of the mid-ravine. Straight before him and a thousand feet below, a broad expanse of forest stretched southwardly to distant Arthur's Seat, now bathed in yellow glory by the westering sun. The crests of all the intervening hills blazed and sparkled, but their eastward slopes were smudged with sable, and the bars of light that slanted through the slowly widening shadows lusted every patch of olive bushland that they touched with living gold. Peter's jangled nerves reacted swiftly and softly to the peace and beauty of that dear familiar scene. His indignation dwindled as he gazed — shamed, perhaps, by the immensity of the prospect and the majestic serenity of the ordered changes occurring before his eyes. Since day could yield his vast kingdom without anger and with sweet unhurried dignity to night, what right had any human atom to resent the trespass of an alien spirit on his microscopical domain? A couple of old women had harried him; he had all but lost his temper, had barely restrained himself from retorting with abuse. "Foul minds," he muttered; but remembering Mrs Cuthbertson's kind and anxious glance, his mind hovered over the expression and uneasily foresaw a duty to recant it. If only he could dispose of the problem his recent visitors presented by hurling them into the "Foul mind" category and locking the door upon their repellent

figures, all would be well and life might flow smoothly again. But he was not built like that. They had as good a right as he to be examined before sentence, and might possibly withstand examination better. That odious Miss Wayne! But he might seem as odious to her. His conscience struggled with the shackles of his vanity and, presently escaping, towered above him like a tyrant. It showed him two elderly women, one naturally gentle and mild, the other a little hard perhaps, but entirely honest, driven by a stern sense of duty to action requiring not less bravery than a soldier marching to battle. They had bearded an ogre in his den, daring insult and contumely — at the urge of an idea. A wrong idea, of course, — but not from their point of view. Narrow minds, for certain. Twisted minds, perhaps. But not foul minds.

Peter lifted his face to the sky and apologised to the universe. He added a handsome reparation with a whispered "gallant souls, maybe!"

The tinkling of a distant bell floated down the gorge, turning his thoughts to a more conscious contemplation of the darkening valley. The pleasing image of his library dressed with winter fire-light swam into his mind. The circumstances of his life had made him a wanderer, an ever-moving, ever-homeless drifter through strange places; an unstable guest of bungalows, hotels and boarding-houses. His lodge at Manuka was the only home that he had ever known. He loved it with an ardour beyond reason or calculation; he loved, too, every sod in the garden he had tilled that afternoon. These

things, his home and his garden, had become more important to him than meat or drink. But his home was the more important, that part of it, above all, where one retired after dinner to read, to chat, to dream. . . . His library — which his fancy always painted as firelit, even in the torrid season. Analysing now the charm it had for him, the eliminating process of his thoughts drove him inexorably to one conclusion. It consisted partly in the books that lined two walls, the picture of his darling nymph that framed a third; the deep restful chairs; the cavernous and splendid fireplace; but supremely it consisted in the quiet comradely companionship of the woman who for two years past had spent so many evenings with him in that room. And this comforting and satisfying essence which he had never valued sufficiently while he possessed it could be his no more; for, of course, Clare must go. Mary Landale demanded it; and Mary had issued her demand most potently in that she had merely condescended to address him through her friends. Mrs Cuthbertson and Miss Wayne were undoubtedly her agents. That they had not scrupled to malign by innuendo the good name of Mary's daughter evidenced the peremptory force of their instructions. That they had ventured to suggest an impossible marriage as an alternative to Clare's exclusion showed that Mary was determined not to be gainsaid. Their pretence of an infatuation entertained by Clare for him reawakened his bitterness as he recalled the words that Mrs Cuthbertson had used. But it soon died down again. The idea was too preposterous to merit wrath and he could not bring

himself to believe that its author had been inspired to voice it by Clare's mother. Mrs Cuthbertson had employed that weapon without authority. Possibly, indeed, unable to comprehend Clare's enthusiastic devotion to the Institute and to the cause of Manuka, she had coined an explanation according to her kind — and flung at him her sly invention as an argument to stress her point. Mary Landale would not stoop to lie. He no longer understood her in the least. He had never understood her, probably. But he could not think of her as mean or base. "I must get that spade I left in the garden this afternoon," he murmured as he rose to go, "or it will rust. There was a heavy dew last night and now it looks like rain."

He climbed the path and sought his garden, but he did not find the spade. Clare must have fetched it, he thought. He met her in the hallway of The Lodge a little later, and asked about the implement. The girl laughed and nodded: "I spend half my days picking up things that you drop," she said. "Fancy you remembering your old spade."

Peter went up to his bedroom conning the truth of her light statement. Indeed and indeed she spent her days as she had said — looking after him, coddling him, mothering him. And the time had come when he must forfeit this sweet and willing service, lose it forever. Peter began to dress. He felt more inclined to cry.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

THEY sat down to dinner a party of four, Dr Hall having been invited for a game of bridge. Peter, who had forgotten this engagement, found himself regarding the physician with unwonted cordiality, since his presence afforded an excuse to defer the hateful business he had in mind. The reprieve lifted his spirits and induced a sparkling mood; but the Doctor was called away to attend a case of sudden illness at Sassafras immediately they left the table. Clare was disappointed; she liked bridge and the Doctor was a keen player, but she forgot her annoyance in wondering at Peter's rueful face. He so seldom revealed his thoughts by his expression. She was not kept puzzled long. The Padre proposed a stroll or a three-handed game, but Peter replied that he had an urgent matter to lay before them, and as soon as they were served with coffee he baldly related his interview with Mrs Cuthbertson and Miss Wayne. He did not look at Clare during the recital. The Padre, also, after one brief glance kept his eyes from the absorbed and silent girl. He realised Peter's still unconfessed purpose, but he had a feeling that the room contained a mysterious little female dynamo who might wreck any plan.

"To me," Peter bluntly concluded, "there is only one thing to do. What is your opinion, Edward?"

Clare, waiting for Mr Tainsh to reply, smiled sweetly, for she knew that he had divined her at-

tachment to Peter, and she felt he sympathised with her. What a fanciful triangle, flashed her thoughts, was there ever an absurder situation? She was to be thrust out of Manuka not for loving Peter, but to appease her mother, who saw no other way of punishing the Padre for having unwittingly disappointed her in the conduct of his life, than by hurting Peter, who had loved her blindly for a quarter of a century, but now had ceased to care. And of the three present she, Clare, alone had the key of the riddle. For although Peter had learned through her of her mother's feeling for the Padre, the latter did not know. And although the Padre knew that Clare loved Peter, Peter did not know. She alone held all the strings, but she would hurt herself by pulling all or one of them. At all events, she reflected with a quirk of humour, the conversation which Peter had so harshly opened held promise of unusual interest. But the Padre had begun to speak and she must not miss a syllable. His big mellow voice was subdued almost to a toneless murmur. He displayed agitation, also, by twitching shoulders and restless hands. "I assume that you conceive it to be your duty to send Clare home to her people. We should miss her sorely at Manuka, Peter."

"None more than I — but can you show me any other course? It is evident that our enemies, having failed to injure us by frontal attack, are determined to make our lot as difficult as possible. My visitors this afternoon claimed authority to speak for six thousand persons — the members of their respective organisations. Clare's reputation

must be removed, at all cost, from the reach of such a multitude of busy tongues. I do not wish to slander them, however. Mrs Cuthbertson impressed me as an honest woman, kindly too. Miss Wayne has an unattractive personality, but I must confess she struck me as sincere."

"They are good and charitable women," said the Padre with a sigh. "I have known them for many, many years. I have never heard aught to the discredit of either — much and often to the advantage of both. It would be folly to disregard their warning. I am very sure they did not approach you before giving the matter long and grave deliberation. I feel their visit marks the culmination of a carefully considered plan which they have not consented to enforce until convinced it was an obligation laid by conscience on their shoulders."

"Their whole demeanour, Edward, testified the accuracy of your opinion. Mrs Cuthbertson, in particular, visibly disliked her job. My unfortunate physical weakness greatly distressed her. She was quite unable to address me when I showed her to the door. Miss Wayne, also, parted from me silently; but I think she was affronted by my manner. I strove not to be rude but, perhaps, I did not properly repress the anger that I could not help but feel."

The Padre bowed his head.

The two searched each other's eyes.

"We shall never get a better matron, or one half as good," said the Padre sadly. "Dr Hall will be disconsolate. But you will be the worst sufferer,

Peter. My wife has at length made up her mind to pay me an extended visit. I'll not be able to see as much of you as usual while she is here perhaps. Not that I could, in any case, compensate you for the loss of Clare's companionship. These sudden breaks in ordered lives are most distressing. You will be lonely, Peter."

"You agree with me, then, that Clare must leave us?"

"I hate putting it in words, but such is my opinion. I cannot see, indeed, that we have any choice."

As if by agreement they turned simultaneously to look at the quiet girl whose fate they had been arranging and whose presence they had seemed to ignore. Her eyes were very bright and a small red spot glowed in either of her cheeks, but otherwise she appeared composed and tranquilly indifferent. She glanced from the Padre to Peter with a faint smile.

"Am I expected to resign?" she asked softly. "Or am I receiving my dismissal? You have not suggested a term. I am legally entitled to a month's notice I fancy. Or do you wish me to pack my traps and go tomorrow? Do you think a more immediate exit might save some remnant tatter of my reputation? Don't forget that I have been here upwards of two years. Can I then have any reputation left—even one fluffy shred?"

Peter looked dumbly down at his feet. The Padre blew his nose, cleared his throat and said, "Ahem-m-m!"

Clare gazed steadily at Peter a moment, but receiving no reply to any of her questions she gave a merry little laugh and said, "Father told me that they used to call you 'Poker-face' at school, Peter, but I doubt you ever played a game of poker in your life. You are too easily bluffed."

"Bluffed?" echoed Peter, glancing up.

"Well, what do you call the Cuthbertson-Wayne challenge to which you two poor lugubrious old dears have so easily succumbed? They hinted to you that I am being talked about, and adroitly claimed to represent six thousand people. Click went the trap. You instantly assumed that six thousand people are busily scandalising me and that in a day or two my name will reek to the skies unless you do what they want you to do and expel me from Manuka. Mind you, I quite believe there may be half a dozen old cats in Bayton who think I'm an awful girl and that I couldn't possibly have buried myself in the bush without some thoroughly vicious reason — probably sexual. But six thousand! Oh dear no! Believe me, my solemn friends, the bulk of that six thousand have never even heard of my name and never will, for my importance in the world is a minus quantity or thereabouts. Why, the very closest of my oldest and best friends of two years ago have quite forgotten me. I haven't had a visit from one of them for more than six months. To be out of sight is to be as good as dead. Which brings me to the point I'm making for. There is scandal. I don't contest that for a moment. It is confined, however, to one small circle; and just now it is being

deliberately agitated within that circle for an immediate special purpose — to force me away from Manuka. Not my enemies but the enemies of Manuka are doing this. They seek less to hurt me than to irritate and hurt Manuka's governors. If you send me away, they will chortle but they will not be appeased. Don't imagine that, Peter. They would stop talking about me, perhaps, but they would not cease attacking you." She paused for a second, then added in an almost solemn tone. "Indeed I believe it more than likely that the agitators do not bear me any ill-will but want to save me from being implicated in some much more serious scandal they intend to launch against the Institute."

"If you are right in your last assumption, Clare," said Peter slowly, "and I think you may be, you have stated a new reason why I should not disregard your Mother's desire to have you home again."

Mr Tainsh shifted uneasily in his chair. "There is more in this than we perceive," he declared. "Your intuition, Clare, has illumined some of the dark places. But much of darkness remains. As to that, the future will enlighten us and we shall meet our troubles as they come. The question before us now, however, is not impervious to understanding. Your mother and some of her friends object to your living here. They have set up an idea (which I venture to describe as a wicked bogey) that you are madly infatuated with Peter and have simulated a zealous devotion to the Institute in order to be with him. Waving this bogey in our faces they have presented us with two alternatives: Peter must either

marry you or send you back to your people. They insist that in no other way can you be saved from injurious calumny."

"And," supplemented Peter, "they also insist that it is my duty to protect you from the occasion of calumnious attack. There, they have me on the hip. Questions of duty apart, your good name is very dear to me, my child."

"Not too much accent on the 'child,'" objected Clare with a flashing smile. "I am getting quite a big girl now, and I have the dignity of a fully-fledged matron to maintain. . . . To be serious, although I find it difficult to treat this ridiculous business seriously, the only aspect of the problem that really interests me is the possibility it involves of scandalous reactions on Manuka, if we should ignore the bogey and reject the ultimatum which you, Peter, received today. In view of that possibility I admit that a need has arisen to clarify my position; but let me say at once that I refuse to be frightened away from Manuka. I am a good matron, though I say it myself; and I am in possession. *J'y suis, j'y reste!* That disposes of one of the enemy alternatives. The other is that Peter marries me. It goes without saying, of course, that I am perfectly willing to marry him. Have you ever been proposed to in public before by an infatuated female, Peter dear? No! Then I am giving you a new experience, and not denying the infatuation either. Behold the line of least resistance. What could be easier? Uncle Edward is here and able to perform the ceremony. Ah! my poor Peter, you are no flatterer, whatever

you may be. . . . If ever I saw a badly scared man, you are he. . . . Be easy, there is a third alternative. And since I have rejected one of those the enemy offered us and you the other, I shall take the third, which is my own." She paused, and the two men waited—stilly, questioning her only with their eyes. "The dynamo in action," thought the Padre.

Peter was too distressed to think at all. There was nothing in his mind but dumb expectancy, and he had the same species of ache in his heart that kind men feel when for one reason or another they have let a fellow creature down.

Clare cruelly protracted the drama. In her heart, too, was an ache, and a rising, savage bitterness. Peter need not have looked so terrified. He should have known that she would protect him though the heavens fell. When finally she broke the silence her voice had a cutting edge that made her auditors aware of pain and passion in restraint.

"My alternative," she said, "will solve every difficulty, banish every doubt, and send the enemy scuttling to cover with a bruised back and a sore head. Above all it will for ever prevent my name being used as a stick to beat Manuka or to club Peter into matrimony. — But it's not fair to keep you darlings in suspense. . . ." She arose and moved a few paces towards the door, then turned to show them a face that radiated pride and resolution. "And," she said, "if I retire from the discussion after revealing my alternative, the absence of the author will better enable you to examine and appreciate its merits. . . . It is simply this: an immediate public announcement

of my engagement to marry Dr Rupert Hall, the medical superintendent of Manuka."

At the last words she swung on her heel and slipped with fluttering swiftness from the room. Neither Peter nor the Padre heard her gasping catch of breath as the door closed behind her. And how could they guess that even before she had gained the sanctuary of her bedchamber her breast was heaving with sobs and her eyes blind with tears?

The men looked at one another searchingly and away, then back again. Peter frowned.

The Padre pursed his lips. "Clare has often surprised me," he declared, "but never more than now. What a secretive puss! I had no suspicion that this was going on. Had you? Under our very noses, too! But a solution, Peter, undoubtedly a solution of our problem, don't you think?"

"One that disposes of the matter finally, I should imagine," replied Peter. His tone, however, suggested neither satisfaction nor relief. "I wonder," he muttered. "I wonder"; and his queer eyes began to smoulder at the stress of some inward vexation.

The Padre, who appeared unconscious of Peter's emotion, pursued the train of his own thoughts: "Mary Landale, and Mark too, should be glad, will be glad, I hope. . . . Young Rupert Hall is in every way eligible. A distinguished physician, a diligent worker, with a high character and pleasing manners; altogether a most presentable young man, and, I believe, not wholly dependent on his profession. His family is moderately wealthy. They have large pastoral holdings in the Western District, and in

the due course of time Rupert should inherit a substantial competence. . . . Peter, my dear friend, I think it would be in order to toast the young couple in the time-honoured way. Personally I do not care for effervescent wines, but on such an occasion as this I feel that a bottle of champagne ought to be broached."

Peter got up and rang the bell. The Padre rubbed his hands together, smiling in a manner that the other thought unnecessarily unctuous — fatuous indeed.

"A truly happy ending to a situation that at one time appeared rife with the elements of mischief," said the Padre. "The more one thinks of Clare's alternative, the more cause one finds in it for unqualified commendation."

Peter strolled over to the window and stared out across the gorge. When the servant arrived he ordered a bottle of Pommery without turning his head.

The Padre, who had been watching the stiff back of his friend with an illegible smile, rambled on: "We shall have to build a new house for them, Peter, eh? . . . And not too far from the Institute. . . . If you could bring yourself to spare the rocky triangle at the north end of your garden (it will never grow flowers, Peter), it would make an ideal site, and give them a frontage to the valley."

"Why should we assume that they will wish to remain here? Marriage may alter their views!" Peter's voice was tinged with impatient sarcasm; and he did not change his rigid posture.

The Padre sighed audibly. "True," he said. "True. I go too fast." His tone was mournful, but there was a positively wicked grin on his kind and portly face. "Ah!" he said more brightly, "here comes the wine."

Peter turned at last and moved over to the table to officiate. His eyes were smiling when he raised his glass.

"To Clare and Rupert!" he said. "May their days be long and happy in the land."

"God bless them both!" intoned the Padre earnestly.

"No heel-taps, Edward," admonished Peter, and he drank thirstily.

The Padre was conscious of a faint twinge of disappointment. But he too drained his glass.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

CLARE did not indulge in the luxury of a long weep. She had work to do. In a little while she bathed her eyes, donned a fresh uniform and went her customary rounds. When she had finished she returned to her office, leaving instructions with the doorkeeper that she wished to see Dr Hall as soon as he returned from Sassafras. Midnight was chiming when the physician tapped upon her door. He looked weary, but his eyes lighted as they encountered hers. He thought she looked unusually bright and charming.

"Nothing wrong, I hope?" he asked.

"No, Rupert. All is well with the Institute. I just wanted a word with you. But won't you first have a spot? You must be tired."

He accepted gratefully and poured himself a fairly stiff peg. "Are you joining me? No. Then here's happiness!"

Clare shivered as she watched him drink. As he set down the goblet she took a typewritten paper from her desk and handed it to him. "I'd like you to read that, Rupert."

This is what he read: "A marriage has been arranged and will shortly take place between Rupert Luke Hall, M.D., F.R.C.P., second son of Matilda Hall, relict of the late Richard Francis Hall of Wyrallah, Hamilton, Victoria, and Clare Marion Lan-

dale, only daughter of Mark Juvenal Landale and Mary Landale of Bendor, Bay Street, Bayton."

The young man glanced from the paper to the girl with a puzzled frown. "I wish you meant it," he said quietly. "What's the game, old lady?"

"Plot and counterplot, Rupert. Certain feline busybodies profess to believe that I am living in sin with Peter Gaunt. They have sent an ultimatum offering me a choice of two alternatives: either I must marry Peter or leave Manuka and return home forthwith. Obviously — by sending that announcement to the Press we dish them utterly. It's up to you, laddie. Do you mind being engaged to me for a few months?"

The young man grinned atrociously. "Er — er — this is rather sudden, Clare. Yours, my revered angel, is the first midnight proposal I have ever received." He stuck a finger in his mouth and coyly inclined his head. "To a naturally bashful chap like me such an experience is apt to be a trifle disconcerting. I — I — I hardly know what to say . . . I think, Ma'am, that perhaps you ought to see my mother."

"Quit rotting, Rupert. I'm deadly serious. Say 'yes' or 'no' or go to Ballyho."

"Thus," he murmured, "the modern maiden reveals the mild transports of her love to the sensitive and too reluctant object of her adoration. It's no use, Clare. I can't help putting the boot in. I'll never get a chance like this again if I live to be a hundred," he burst out laughing helplessly.

"You dirty little sneak!" cried Clare, and then of a sudden she fell laughing too.

Their mirth exhausted, they glanced at one another questingly.

Rupert's eyes quickly discovered all he sought. "You poor kid," he said. "You still love that wooden-headed old blighter."

"I always shall, I'm afraid."

"Does he know of this?" — he waved the paper that he still held.

"Yes — but not that it's a flam engagement."

"Won't it put the pot on — any chance — of? . . ."

"There never was a chance, Rupert."

"Well, well . . ." He took a pen from his pocket and signed his name on the paper. "You'll have to sign too, Clare; and we should send a signed copy to every paper. Best do the thing thoroughly while we are about it."

"I have all the copies ready here."

They drew their chairs together and did a lot of signing and stamping.

"I'll post them," said Rupert as he collected the envelopes. "You cut off to bed. You look —"

"A hag — if I look as I feel," the girl said bitterly.

He stood up and moved to the door. "Good-night, old thing, and er — you don't look a bit like a hag if you don't mind my contradicting you."

"You're rather a dear," muttered Clare. "Good-night and bless you!"

"Shucks!" he replied and slammed the door.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

EDWARD TAINSH did not believe in the validity of Clare's engagement to Dr Hall, because he knew the girl to be in love with Peter. The public announcement did not alter his opinion. He shrugged his shoulders when he saw it in the morning papers and paid ironical homage to Clare's audacious resourcefulness, but he continued to feel certain that the engagement was unreal and he continued to hope that Clare would eventually marry Peter.

In his heart he wanted Clare to marry Peter partly because he wished the girl to be happy and partly because he believed her capable of making Peter happy. He had become extraordinarily fond of Peter, and he had watched his friend's gradual emancipation from the thrall of his attachment to Mary Landale with much quiet pleasure. The Padre cherished few illusions about Mary. He was a man to whom physical beauty made small appeal unless accompanied with spiritual features of corresponding excellence. He had known Mary from childhood, and although fully conscious of her loveliness he had never succumbed to her charm. A careful study of her character had not won his admiration. He attributed her most attractive surface qualities to unusual powers of dissimulation, linked with a fund of natural indolence and an inveterate determination to be esteemed and applauded by those about her; and he believed her, *au fond*, to be

mean and selfish. He was, perhaps, the only living person who thought Clare a more beautiful woman, physically, than her mother. This was because he had studied Clare's character and found it sound and sweet, also because he was incapable of considering the casket of a pleasing mind unbeautiful. He often wished that Clare might have been his own daughter, and it was one of his secret joys that she usually addressed him as "Uncle Edward". The Padre became a conscious matchmaker the moment he saw Peter's involuntary wincing of the flesh when the girl so dramatically revealed her alternative to the Cuthbertson-Wayne ultimatum. When Clare vanished he had subtly "rubbed it in" to Peter, hoping to discover just how seriously his friend was affected. His explorations had not been wholly satisfying, but when at a very late hour he bade Peter good-night he carried away a more or less definite impression that things might possibly come right if a wise and friendly hand were to pull the strings. The Padre was not one to "barge in" anywhere. He seldom moved a step in any direction without a preliminary course of cogitation. It took him, in this case, a full week to resolve his doubts. Once having decided, however, that he would be justified, he did not let the grass grow under his feet. It was on a Saturday afternoon that he made his decision. He had just finished polishing a sermon he was to deliver next day. He put on his hat and sallied forth in search of Peter, whom he found at length watching the tail-end of a football match in company with some junior members of the teaching-staff. When the game was over the youngsters

hurried off to chaff the losing team, and the Padre and Peter turned homewards.

"I was thinking," said the Padre, "of giving a little dinner-party next week. My wife joins me tomorrow. A sort of welcome to her — and an opportunity also to honour Clare's engagement. Two birds with one stone. Mary and Mark would probably care to come."

Peter said he had been thinking of doing the same thing, and they wrangled pleasantly as to who should give the dinner. Finally the Padre surrendered his claim and it was agreed that Peter should be the host.

"I doubt, however, that we shall see Mary," Peter remarked. "She has not replied to my letter of congratulation. Her attitude to all of us is rather puzzling. As you know, I persuaded Clare to take her fiance to Bendor last Monday to present him to her parents. Mary received the young fellow civilly enough, but she declined to discuss the engagement with either of them. Clare thinks that she resents having been kept in the dark, but is too proud to confess it, and her revenge is to treat the matter as beneath her attention. When Clare pressed the subject in private Mary was rude and petulant. She told Clare not to bother her with any of her silly flirtations and assured the girl that she was doomed to die an old maid."

"I am not surprised," observed the Padre. "Few actresses can bring themselves to retire gracefully from the stage centre — even to make room for their own children. Mary has always monopolised the

limelight of her little family theatre. She will not resign it readily."

Peter sighed: "You appear able to see her clearly. To me she has always been a mystery and she becomes more enigmatical as time proceeds."

"You don't wish to see her or anyone clearly, Peter. That's a fault in you I have frequently deplored. You shrink from realising people. You prefer to regard them through a softening haze. Kindness, cowardice, or moral myopia — which?"

"A bit of all three, perhaps."

"It's an endearing fault," said the Padre, "but it can be irritating, too. It irritates me, for instance, to see it warping your judgment of a vital creature like Clare. I grant you she is a real woman, Peter, but she is far more fallible than you permit yourself to imagine."

Peter stopped and stared at his friend in sincere amazement. "I never thought to hear you depreciate her," he exclaimed. "Hitherto you have always sung her praises. What is the matter with Clare?"

"This business of her engagement to Rupert Hall," replied the Padre. "You don't suppose she is in love with him, do you? If you do you are woefully astray. This engagement of hers is nothing more or less than a counterplot to the Cuthbertson-Wayne conspiracy which she coined on the spur of the moment to make things comfortable for us and to regularise her life here in the estimation of the Bayton scandal-mongers. In other words it's a deception and a sham. That is to say — her part of it. Hall's part is not so obvious. He is a seri-

ous young fellow, and it is more than likely that he is genuinely in love with Clare. In that case if he cherishes any illusions about her feelings a great unhappiness is in store for him. — All this is bad enough for them, Peter. But what about you and me? In a very real sense we profit from Clare's mishandling of the truth. Indeed we have profited already."

Peter's face was devoid of all expression as he asked, "What makes you so very sure that Clare is not in love with Rupert Hall?"

"Do you think I have a normal amount of intelligence, Peter? Or that I am an unbalanced and imaginative old fool?"

"A strange question, Edward, and I cannot see its relevance. I certainly do not regard you as a fool."

"I," said the Padre, "regard myself as a sound specimen (mentally) of the genus *homo sapiens*; and it is my secret pride to believe I have a special talent for psychological analysis. It is very rarely that I am called upon to admit an error in my judgment of other people. I am very fond of Clare. During the last couple of years I have spent much time in endeavouring to understand her. If today I thought it possible for her to be in love with Rupert Hall I would write myself down an arrant simpleton."

"Why persist in being cryptic and presenting me with riddles, Edward? The simplest cross-word bothers me. You have made some very disturbing statements. I think you should explain them."

"I shall," replied the Padre. "Clare is not in love with Rupert for the good and sufficient reason

that she is and has long been sincerely and deeply attached to someone else."

"Steady, Edward," said Peter earnestly. "I know you must have authority for your opinion, but are you justified in exposing Clare? I would not care to pry into the secrets of any girl's heart — certainly not Clare's. Already I begin to regret this conversation. Shall we not end it — and endeavour to forget it?"

Mr Tainsh came near to losing his temper. His face flushed and his eyes sparkled as he struggled to subdue his irritation at Peter's rebuke. Succeeding presently, he uttered a chuckle and said, "What a nice old lady you would have made! And what a nasty interfering old woman you must think me! But I'm afraid we must carry our conversation to its logical conclusion, Peter, even if it hurts us both, for — unless I am greatly mistaken — each of us is conscious of a duty to protect Clare and to promote her happiness. And we cannot do either of these things by running away from the issue I have raised."

Peter's eyes were full of distress. "I am a coward," he admitted ruefully. "I have had so many shocks of late that I shrink instinctively from any revelations that may compel me to look on old friends in a new way. You were right to call me to order, Edward. Tell me all you think I ought to know."

They had resumed their stroll while talking, and were now arrived at the low wall of Peter's garden that coped the gorge. The Padre sat down on the parapet, turning his back to the view. Peter halted

beside him and stared unseeingly across the valley. He had a premonition of trouble and was nerving himself to face whatever might come.

"For the reason I have stated," said the Padre, "I am convinced that Clare has embarked on a course of fraud, which she no doubt considers innocent because it is intended to promote the convenience of us all. Granted these premises, certain questions arise that demand answer. For example: Has she deceived Rupert? Is he a consenting partner in her fraud? Does she seriously contemplate marrying him? Have you and I the right to look on unconcerned while these young people are disordering their lives, and largely for our benefit?"

"What can we do? Have we any right to interfere? You, Edward, have such a right — if Clare has given you her confidence about the other man. But why has she not engaged herself to him instead of Rupert? Is he not free? He does not care for her, perhaps? To me the whole problem seems to hinge on the other man."

"It does, Peter, it does."

"I am not seeking to discover his identity, Edward, but you might tell me this. Is there any valid reason why — why he should not have taken Rupert's place?"

"None that I know of. He is free and I believe he is extremely fond of Clare, but his regard for her is platonic and I doubt if the idea of marrying her has ever entered his head. This other man, indeed, is very like yourself, Peter — a confirmed old bachelor."

"Is he aware of the nature of Clare's affection for him?"

"No more than you are, Peter. Because he is nearly twice her age the blind bat takes it for granted that her affection is merely daughterly."

"Would it be of any use to open his eyes?"

"That is for you to say, Peter."

"For me — to say?"

Their glances met suddenly. Peter's face crimsoned under his tan, then slowly whitened. "Edward! Edward!" he cried, shakily. "Am I insane, or you?"

"Neither of us, I hope, Peter. But one of us is very dense and difficult to convince of a fact that has long been evident to many of his friends. . . . I intend now to leave you to your own reflections, but I have one more thing to say before I go. Clare proposed marriage to you the other night. I watched her. She did it deliberately, publicly, gallantly. You thought her jesting. She was in deadly earnest. It was a last despairing effort to win happiness for you both. When it failed she abandoned hope and instantaneously consecrated her life to service. Hence her engagement to Rupert Hall — which she invented on the spot to make it possible for her to continue serving you and mothering you here at Manuka. I never saw anything finer; but then — few finer spirits have ever lived than Clare Landale."

He got afoot and with a short but deeply sympathetic glance at his friend he sauntered slowly towards his own house.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

ALTHOUGH Peter had never permitted himself to imagine that Clare might care for him (had never thought it possible, indeed), the moment the idea was communicated to him by another he accepted it as truth. Modesty and vanity struggled in his heart a while, but both at last yielded to a sense of shame. Whatever was pleasing in the belief that Clare loved him — and no man can feel displeased at being loved by an intelligent and charming woman — was soon consumed in a rising tide of ironic self-contempt. He had worshipped Mary Landale for five and twenty years and now, having become an elderly person, more or less an invalid, and a mere shell of his former self, a sweeter, saner woman, kinder and better than Mary — albeit Mary's daughter — had given him her love unasked; and he was no more able to reciprocate Clare's feeling for him than had been Mary to reciprocate his love for Mary, now extinct. True enough he loved the girl, very deeply, very genuinely. But his love was destitute of passion or physical desire. He would like her always near him. A future removed from her assumed to his vision the stretching dreariness of a desert. But to be her husband! He shrank and shivered from the thought. His long thralldom to Mary was over, but the memory of it still had power to influence his fancy; and a sick fear assailed him that his marriage with Clare might assume the complexion of an in-

cestuous union — to her mother. For Clare might have been his child — would have been, perhaps, if he had not set Mary's happiness before his own. But he must not give way to morbid imaginings. He must face his problem straightly and find as quickly as he could the right solution. The Padre obviously believed he owed a duty to Clare, to give her the thing she wanted. But it was a husk, an illusion, the thing that Clare desired — himself. An ageing man, with a hole in his lung was no proper mate for a brilliant and vigorous young woman. It was pitiful that Clare should have set her heart on such a relic, but she would be more deserving of compassion were she to get what she coveted. An invalid's nurse! An old man's darling! — Confound the Padre's foolishness! To save Clare from a burden should have been his aim, not to fasten one upon her back, however willing. After all, too, the girl was still young. No reason existed to fear the blighting of her life by denying her a dream. She would recover; live to wonder at the snare into which she had blindly stumbled and to be thankful at her release. What a sentimental old idiot the Padre was! Infinitely kind of course, but how infinitely mistaken. Dear old chap, he meant well. He wanted to make him, Peter, happy — as well as Clare. As if he, Peter, could find happiness in cumbering the life of his darling Clare. As if Clare could find permanent happiness in being wife to a lunger — old enough to be her father! Clare, who deserved all the joys that life and love can give an ardent woman. Well, well, his duty to Clare

was plain enough, and he would do it. But would there be no cost to himself in doing it? It was Peter's nature to suspect the validity of a duty that involved no sacrifice. Here was another issue to look straight in the face. Would not Clare be lost to him as Rupert's wife? What had signified the sudden lightening of his spirit when Edward had assured him that Clare did not love Rupert Hall? Peter was tempted to withdraw from this investigation, but his conscience forced him to continue. In the depths of him did there dwell some dog-in-the-manger demon that grudged seeing Clare the wife of any other man? He was sufficiently answered by the flash of exultation that came in reconsidering the fact that Clare did not love Rupert Hall. He discovered, too, on further self-examination, that he could surrender her more easily to a man she did not love. But Clare might eventually grow to care for Rupert. The Doctor was a clean-minded wholesome fellow, not ill looking, a fine athlete, and a gentleman. Thrown constantly in his company by virtue of their engagement, she could hardly fail to become more and appreciative of his sterling qualities, more and more apt to recognise in him her proper mate. And as he, Peter, progressively aged and sickened (and with his infirm carcass he must expect henceforth to tread a sliding path), Clare's affection for him would naturally and inevitably become transmuted and refined, until, at last, it would be wholly spiritual. Few are the men who would not rather be loved for the beauty of their bodies than for the beauty of their minds. Peter



sorrowfully discovered he was not a member of that spartan company. The idea that Clare still found him physically attractive, when confronted with sincere attention extended a thrilling challenge to his manhood; he found too that he could not seriously contemplate the changes he had just now been predicting without a stabbing rankling pain. Evidently, then, he had erred in his first swift estimation of his sentiment for Clare. Recoiling from the sudden presentation of a situation that in essence was ridiculous and cruelly ironical he had missed or overshot the truth. What, then, was the truth? Was it that he loved Clare, had long loved her, perhaps, although not consciously, as men love women they aspire to wive? How else could he account for the mysterious revulsion he had experienced (he now classed it as jealousy) when Clare unexpectedly proclaimed her intention to marry Rupert Hall? How else explain his subsequent profound reluctance to meet the girl when unattended, and his increasing inclination to avoid her betrothed? It was dismaying to realise how completely he had misinterpreted his own emotions and reactions. Might there not be further disconcerting surprises yet in store for him? But he must not borrow trouble. He had sufficient to contend with. What a mess! A girl, young enough to be his daughter, cared for him — who had loved that girl's mother for a quarter-century and now had come to love the girl! Why should the memory of Mary irritate him so acutely? Why should it seem incongruous and absurd to skip from one generation to the next?

Age? — That might be the key. At forty-nine he should be proof against the yearning fevers that pertain to youth. It was not right, hardly decent, that he should entertain a wish to mate with any woman. He should long ere this have won his freedom from the slavery of sex. He had believed he had escaped. He had honestly regarded his affection for Clare as purely spiritual. To know it something else — was an intoxication to his senses, but a hair shirt to his mind. Peter's still unsubjected ego revolted at this point of his reflections. He had neither wished to love Clare nor sought to win her love. These things had happened without volition; had become accomplished facts before he glimpsed their possibility. His responsibility for them was nil. Why, then, should conscience upbraid and scourge him? He had committed no sin. His thoughts reeled, then steadied, and he saw presently that not really his conscience had flailed him — but a too-sensitive appreciation of the opinions of other men as fallible as himself who would surely smile and sneer to learn, if they could learn, of his predicament. The mating, even in spirit, of May with November invariably evoked scorn in the breast of June. Often justly, too, Peter was fain to admit. But he began to see his path more clearly now. And because it seemed a path of sacrifice it appealed to him with growing certainty as the path he ought to follow. May and November must not mate. May must never be allowed to guess the secret weakness of November's heart. Clare had already passed through her Gethsemane. With passing time its

bitterness would fade; new interests would invade her life and blur her faculty of painful recollection; and at length — after he had joined the great majority, perhaps, — she would look back on the travail of today with no sharper anguish than a smile could soften or a sigh subdue. As to the part that he must play (and Peter approached this aspect of the problem with a rising sense of satisfaction, so strongly was his stoic mind attracted by the idea of suffering), it involved, as far as he could see, no task beyond his powers. Before the Padre he must maintain an attitude of unbelief, and decline to enter into further correspondence with him on a question that he, Peter, alone possessed the right to open or to close. Edward would be a little hurt, perhaps, but time would quickly heal so slight a sore; and once convinced further agitation futile, he would turn to the consideration of less unmanageable concerns. Clare presented a more difficult equation. He had balked at her companionship of late, even shirked looking in her eyes when to avoid her was impossible. There must be no more pusillanimous evasions. He must school himself to treat her with consistent comradely affection as of old, and to emphasise the gap between them by ignoring it until she came to realise its unbridgeable immensity. A role fit for an artist, but not, he thought, beyond his scope; and he hugged himself to think that it might often hurt the player. Like Cranmer, but without Cranmer's justification, Peter wished to thrust his hand into a purifying flame. But of this he was abysmally unconscious; and also of the causes (pro-

bably prenatal) of the innate dim conviction of unworthiness that prompted him to mortify himself. Had he been born a Hindu Peter would assuredly have been a Fakir and have spent his days sitting in the shadow of some wayside shrine, beseeching the faithful to be penitent with the voiceless but dreadfully eloquent admonition of distorted and emaciated limbs. Peter had seen many Fakirs. He had seldom passed one without a sigh of sympathy.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

PETER dressed for dinner with unusual care. His mirror detained him long, although it failed to please his vanity. He had gained weight since his illness, but his clothes were still too big. Hollows lurked in his face. Shadows nestled beneath his eyes. His nose was too thin for symmetry; his jaw too grim. "A superannuated hawk would look more companionable," was his final judgment.

He found Clare mixing a cocktail in the hall. She informed him that they must dine *tete-a-tete* as the Canon had sent a late excuse.

"You should have brought Rupert," said Peter. "You must confirm what I have already assured him — that there is always a place for him at our table, and that he will always be a very welcome guest."

Clare smiled thanks and sipped at her aperitif. "Rupert will look in later, perhaps," she said. "He has some job of work in hand."

There was no further conversation between them until the meal was almost over. Constraint sat heavily upon both. Peter wanted to talk, but was too nervous to begin. Clare appeared preoccupied with private thoughts, but the only tenant of her mind was a profound concern that Peter looked ill and worried. This forced her at last to end the long silence.

"I really think, Peter, that you need a change," she said. "You hardly eat anything these days. You have turned from all your favourite dishes, and nothing seems able to tempt your silly old appetite. Have you weighed yourself this week?"

"Yes, and I was up two pounds," answered Peter, laughing. "Which disposes of the case for the prosecution. Don't trouble your busy little head about me, my dear. Like many another old dyspeptic from the East I do best when I eat least. The Padre and I agreed this afternoon that I should give a dinner-party at an early date to welcome Mrs Tainsh and honour your engagement. Killing two birds with one stone was his idea. He is becoming an economist. Do you think your mother would come?"

"No, Peter. I am sure she would not. The salvation of my moral reputation (and yours) at the hands of Rupert has earned her deep displeasure. Poor Mother! She has softly washed her hands of me. I doubt she will attend my wedding."

"Touching that important event," said Peter, "may I hope that you and Rupert will be patient and wait until we can build a fitting house for you? I propose to place my architect at the disposal of you both. It is very important to me that you, especially you, my dear, should be entirely satisfied. I believe that girls are wont to plan their future home-houses in their dreams. I'd like to make your dreams, in this respect at least, come true."

"That is most dear of you, Peter." The girl turned her face away. "But there is no cause to hurry. I'm a devout believer in long engagements."

She faced him again, smiling now. "Rupert, too, is very sensible. We've agreed not to talk of wedding-bells for another year — at least."

Peter addressed himself to the task of peeling a peach. "I confess," he said sedately, "that I prefer a single to a married adopted mother." His eyes twinkled at her suddenly. "A year will give me time to grow used to the idea of my eventual orphanhood."

"It's just as well you did not call me your adopted daughter," smiled the girl. "Really, Peter dear, I don't know how you would get along without me. You could not have taken your final dose of medicine last night. I measured the bottle today. I shall never bid you good-night again without seeing to that. You can be a frightful trial to me when you like! A body would think that you don't want to get yourself strong and fit. Shall we go to the library? I have been signalled that the coffee is waiting."

As they strolled down the passage Clare impulsively squeezed Peter's arm.

"It's great to have you alone again to scold you properly," she cried. "You need a scolding so often and so badly, and it seems impertinent somehow before outsiders."

Peter's senses quivered responsively to her touch, but he protested in his coldest manner.

"We should not class Edward and Rupert as outsiders, Clare."

"And we shouldn't be scared by meaningless names," she retorted gaily.

She poured out his coffee and gave him a cigarette; then obliged him to recline on a lounge, with a rug across his knees, for a nip had come into the air and the room was not yet warmed by the lately kindled fire.

"Look as glum as you please," she said. "You know that you love being fussed over by your nice young mother. Dare you deny it?"

"I am not quarrelling with my lot," he admitted gravely, and added softly and deliberately, "little daughter of my heart."

Tears swam into the girl's eyes which she bravely and quickly blinked away. "Mother, Peter," she corrected. "Mother, I insist. I will not be your daughter!"

Her tone was gay, but her heart knew the words a belated and ineffectual cry of despair.

Peter was staring at the tip of his cigarette. "While we are still alone, I have a thing to tell you."

"Yes, Peter, yes."

"Last night I did not sleep well, and this morning I got up and went for a ramble in the twilight. It was in my mind to watch the rising sun from the Temple rocks at the crest of the ravine. I am not a good climber, however, and the dawn had come before I reached the hill-top where the steps begin, so I turned into the path that skirts our little graveyard and I rested by that big round casuarina you like so much, the one that overhangs the precipice. The view was so wonderful that I lost myself in gazing — lost count of time as well. I must

have stood as motionless as the big tree itself, I think, or what followed could hardly have occurred. Disturbed by a sudden rustle I looked down, to see a splendid, full-grown lyre-bird emerge from the bracken at my very feet, and pause beside me on the knoll. Completely unaware of me he preened his feathers for some moments, often brushing my knees with his tail. Then he set off at a brisk unhurried run and disappeared among the ferns. A few seconds later I heard him sound his queer twin notes of challenge — always the prelude of a concert, which in fact almost immediately began. Wanting to see as well as hear I crept carefully in the direction of his music till I was brought up by the cemetery wall. My dear, he was singing like an angel and dancing like a fairy — on the grave of little Matthew Lorme!"

"Oh, Peter — how beautiful! How I wish I had been with you!"

"Your wish was mine. Indeed I was grieved I could not share with you the exquisite experience. You were fond of that little chap, my dear."

"He died in my arms," said Clare.

"Therefore you had a better right than I to see his resurrection symbolised so sweetly. You must not defer your marriage too long, Clare. I want to see you mothering children of your own before I go."

It was the hardest thing Peter Gaunt had ever said, and possibly the truest, in the last analysis. But it was beyond bearing by the girl, who made no answer save to turn her face away from him and

to get up and move slowly and uncertainly from the room.

Peter lay back on the couch and closed his eyes. For the moment he had eaten his fill of the bread of sacrifice. A coughing-fit aroused him, and the taste of blood in his mouth. He pressed his handkerchief to his lips and was not surprised to find it stained. His cough had been exceptionally troublesome at midday, although since then it had all but disappeared. Peter's conviction that he had chosen the right course strengthened notably.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

CLARE proved wrong about her mother. Mary Landale accepted Peter's invitation, and she was the first guest to arrive. Mark came later with Dr Leitch and Mr Levison, having accepted a lift in the latter's car. The key to the secret of Mary's sudden change of front was enshrined in the unexpected decision of Mrs Tainsh to rejoin her husband.

Even before she knew of this, Mary had begun to feel isolated and abandoned. Her failure to disturb the even tenor of Manuka by the libellous attacks she had inspired had not advanced her in the opinion of her tools. They blamed her, indeed, for the castigation their letters had received at the hands of the Government; and accused her of having misled them with distorted facts.

Mary was affronted by their attitude, which she considered hypocritical, for she had appealed to a bigotry in them as narrow as her own; and she had not wooed their aid with lies. She endured their defection easily. When, however, she found that many of her oldest women friends, including Mrs Cuthbertson and Miss Wayne, had been converted by Clare's engagement to cease regarding Peter Gaunt as an evil monster and were even beginning to suspect that he might be a prophet of good, she became seriously perturbed. The applausive appreciation of her environment was necessary to her

happiness. As a bereaved and martyred mother nobly bearing unmerited misfortune and struggling to save her daughter from a fiend, she had received praise and admiration in satisfying measure. But how much praise would be her portion if the idea gained ground (as seemed all too probable) that the fiend was in fact an innocent philanthropist, of whose character the errant daughter had been a better judge than the martyr mother? And then, in the midst of her simmering mental agitation, a bolt from the blue! Mrs Tainsh, her trustiest henchwoman, had suddenly resolved to pay a lengthy visit to the husband who had so callously deserted her — and had not breathed a word to Mary of her intent.

Mary was frightened. The rats were on the run. She felt that she must overtake them at once or be cast on a lee shore, a prisoner in a desolate stranded hulk. Peter's invitation came, therefore, as a Godsend, and she clutched it hungrily.

During the long drive to Manuka she diligently planned. She knew she was a stupid woman, but she had enough wit to perceive that the average person was as stupid as herself. She decided, therefore, she would not try to be clever, but just be natural. She would make peace with Clare and frankly apologise to Peter — who, of course, would be transported to the seventh heaven by such an act of condescension. As for the Padre — she would ask him to confess her. Being a priest he could not refuse. That would provide excuse for another visit to Manuka in the near future, and then! . . .

Delicious little shivers beset her as she planned her confession to her idol. She would, of course, open her soul to him and show him all its tender weaknesses, save one, and all its fragrant loveliness. Mary was quite honest. She had been too often assured of the loveliness of her spirit not to believe.

She found it surprisingly easy to carry out her programme. Clare, whom she saw first, responded instantly to her fond demeanour, and although the girl stiffened a little at the showering of praise upon her fiance, she became as wax when Mary humbly asked to be shown over the Institute. It was a triumphal march for Mary. Her beautiful face, her Parisian gown, her gracious bearing created a sensation. Sisters left their tasks to tip-toe in her train; many of the children thought her an angel and shyly asked her to bide with them. She carried a commotion into every corridor. Clare was too pleased to chide the babies or rebuke the staff. The mother she adored had returned to her. When Mary was sated with appreciation they sauntered over to The Lodge — arms twined around each other's waists.

Peter was a shade more difficult. He listened gravely to her stream of penitent self-abuse, and although some of her terms were quite extravagant (she decried herself, for instance, as a spiteful and jealous old hag) he did not venture on a contradiction. But when at length, imagining him really obdurate, she brought forth tears for his inspection, his fortitude dissolved into a state of almost horrified protest. Clare witnessed his subjugation, smil-

ing enigmatically. Having allowed herself to fall, however temporarily, under the domination of her mother's charm, she would have felt resentful if Peter had been able to stand firm. It was a question of the eternal war between the sexes, she imagined, — trying to explain her attitude; a feeling that no man should possess the power to withstand the might of perfect female beauty. Peter lacked that power. When Mary wept, her loveliness was irresistible to him. He could no longer reason. Her tears washed away, in one second, all his doubts of her integrity, all his knowledge of her infirmity and littleness of soul, all memories of her cruel and frantic bigotry. She was Mary Landale, an unjudgeable and elusive creature of the ether, by some miracle the mother of a real human woman, his dear companion — Clare.

The comedy lasted no longer than five minutes. The actors were presently absorbed by a herd of visitors noisily attuned to the gaiety of the occasion, all eager to eat, drink and make merry. Throughout the long and jocund evening Peter continued to wonder at the pull of Mary's charm. And not even when he overheard her make a whispered appointment for confession, with the Padre — although he intuitively knew that Mary was not truly contrite for aught that she had done — was he able to look at her with clear condemning eyes. It was inevitable that Clare should note his fascination and misinterpret it; that the old jealousy of her mother should revive in her heart. But her sense of humour preserved her from surrendering to pain. It very

pertinently reminded her that it was her engagement to Rupert they were met to celebrate. Her laughter tinkled more often than any in the hall. Balm was given her in two healing moments on the terrace when she and Peter had waved her parents farewell. As though resuming an interrupted conversation, Peter turned and said, "We must never again let ourselves be angry with your mother, Clare."

Her fiance came up before she could reply, but Peter's intimately smiling eyes responding to her eager glance told her that none was necessary, and she went off happily on Rupert's arm.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

EDWARD TAINSH was not a busybody. When he realised that he had failed to convince Peter of a duty to test the reality of Clare's engagement, he concluded that he had mistaken the nature of his friend's affection for the girl, and he regretfully decided not to interfere again. Perhaps, after all, he had deceived himself concerning Clare. That she had once loved Peter he could not doubt. But she might have changed. Well! . . . he had done what he could to serve his friends. His intervention had been futile but his purpose had been kind. Everything happens for the best. He brought the problem of his duty to an end by adding to his nightly prayers a special aspiration for Clare's and Peter's happiness. Since it was his lifelong habit to say his prayers aloud his wife heard the new invocation and wondered. Hearing it repeatedly, wonder turned to curiosity. She questioned her husband and gradually drew from him the story of his vain attempt to re-shape the courses of two lives.

The story deeply affected Mrs Tainsh. Her own life had been dull and prosy to a degree and she would not have had it otherwise, for her disposition was more timid than adventurous. But where other people were concerned she was incurably romantic. The idea that Peter's years of wasted worship at an empty shrine might possibly be rewarded by the love

of Clare appealed forcefully to her imagination. Even while she listened to the Padre's admonition to hold his confidence sacred, her brain was busily at work exploring means of playing Providence. Edward had tried and failed, but what else could have been expected? No job, this, for blundering masculinity! It required the delicate resourcefulness of female intuition. Might not a woman save Edward's airy castle from collapse, even yet? A woman of the right sort, of course; tactful, intelligent, and above all subtle; in short a woman like herself. There were few women simpler than Mrs Tainsh, but none less conscious of their limitations. She played with the temptation for several days, and the resistance offered by conscience steadily diminished. Why worry lest Edward should be angered if he discovered that she had interfered without success, when she knew how easily he would forgive her if she triumphed? Besides, even if she failed, Edward need not necessarily hear of it: and if she interfered she would not fail. While she still wavered, a trifle tipped the balance. She was crossing the quadrangle one morning when Dr Hall appeared, walking rapidly towards the gymnasium. He crossed her path at a little distance and she hailed him, being very willing for a gossip. He doffed his cap politely enough; waved his hand, too; but he neither stopped nor spoke. Mrs Tainsh was not accustomed to being treated cavalierly by young men. They usually answered her beck and call—as befitted her position — with a decent affectation of gratified humility. She immediately decided that Clare ought not to be thrown away on

such a boor. She had not always approved of Peter Gaunt and she had not yet wholly forgiven him for persuading the Padre to leave his comfortable cure at Bayton for service in the wilderness; but no one could deny that Peter's manners were charming. He stood up smartly and straightly like a soldier whenever a woman entered a room. He never addressed a lady without a courteous inclination of the head; and somehow he made one feel that he liked and respected one, and that one paid him a compliment by talking to him. And he had led such a sad and lonely life, poor man!

Good-natured stupidity can be more dangerous than wickedness. Mrs Tainsh began to resolve the innumerable love-stories she had read (she was a diligent student of the type of novel that weaves heart-breaking estrangements out of insensate misunderstandings) in search of a programme of reconciliation that might be applicable to the case in hand. It did not occur to her to doubt that Peter loved Clare or that Clare loved Peter. By all the laws of romance they ought to be in love with each other; therefore they were. Their situation ran too true to her favourite literature to be anything but real. It was obvious, however, that neither guessed the secret of the other's heart. Walls of reserve divided them and hid from each the other's secret suffering. These barriers must be broken down. In some novels, Providence performed the task. The familiar device of the accident in the hunting-field never staled to Mrs Tainsh. She could close her eyes at any moment and see Lord Ernest crash ter-

ribly at the sunken fence at the bottom of the middle pasture, and Lady Ermyntrude — mounted on Black Beauty — sail over his recumbent body like a bird, then slide to the ground and hasten white-faced and trembling, to pillow on her bosom the unconscious head of the man whose beloved image she had vainly vowed to cast out of her heart for ever. Then the fluttering of Lord Ernest's pulse as consciousness returned; and then — and then: . . . . revelation and mutual understanding as Lady Ermyntrude's violet eyes encountered the jetty brilliancy of Lord Ernest's rapt adoring gaze! The ideal plot, of course, but barred, alas! to Mrs Tainsh. There was no hunting at Manuka. Nevertheless, it might not be impossible to contrive some perfectly harmless mishap to one or other of her precious fools. Somehow the veil between them must be rent; the separating walls destroyed. An anonymous letter might work the miracle, but Mrs Tainsh shrank from a word that savoured of indecency. It would be much better to arrange for the arrest of one of the lovers on a false charge of murder. In books this expedient never failed to evoke an elucidatory outburst of indignation from the unarrested lover. But unfortunately some other person had first to be murdered. One by one all her devices proved worthless on investigation, but her scheming fancy continued to plague her impractical mind with the shadowy futilities that it evolved.

Had a plebiscite been taken to determine the least important person then living at Manuka, it is probable that every vote except her own would have been

cast for Mrs Tainsh, for this colourless and unobtrusive lady had long been unimportant even to her husband. Yet she was destined to play a part of devastating consequence to the leading figures on her little stage.

One afternoon, while knitting socks in her drawing-room and, as usual, plotting busily, her husband unexpectedly appeared and asked for tea. Mrs Tainsh arose and rang the bell. She thought her husband looked upset, but she was not one of those unquiet people who borrow trouble by asking unnecessary questions. She had discovered that trouble always declares itself soon enough, and one could always be voluble after the event. Mary Landale often reproached her with a nagging nature; unjustly, she believed. As she had expected, the Padre presently volunteered an explanation.

"I did not feel like taking my tea in the Institute this afternoon. A chandelier fell in the Assembly Hall while I was lecturing in an adjoining classroom. The children behaved beautifully. The crash startled me and I got something of a shock. I am not as young as I was."

"I trust that nobody was injured, Edward?"

"Clare happened to be passing almost directly underneath, and a heavy glass splinter struck her leg just above the ankle. A nasty cut, it appeared to me; but Hall says it is not serious. She will be laid up for a day or two, perhaps. After tea I must stroll over to The Lodge and tell Peter not to expect her to dinner."

"After your tea," said Mrs Tainsh firmly, "you will lie down for an hour and compose your nerves. I shall be your deputy to Mr Gaunt."

"That's very kind of you, my dear. You'll take care not to frighten him, I know. He is fond of Clare — and by no means in his best form yet. In fact he recovers from his last bad illness far too slowly to please me. I thought he looked very peaked this morning."

"I shall be careful," promised Mrs Tainsh. She left the house full of sympathy and good will, but she had not proceeded fifty paces before her romantic imagination informed her that here was a perfectly miraculous opportunity for a woman of subtlety and tact. Who knew what might develop out of this situation, skilfully handled? The desired denouement, perhaps. At any rate she should certainly be able to ascertain the exact state of Peter's feelings for Clare, and then . . .

Upborne by a confusion of pleasant dreams — in all of which she figured as a benignant disentangler of twisted lives, earning and deserving the gratitude of all concerned — she floated towards The Lodge without conscious sensation of physical effort.

It was Peter's hour for pottering about in his garden. She espied him while still some distance off and made for him direct. He was delving with a fork at the roots of a fleecy shrub. He stood erect as she approached, hat in hand.

"How nice of you to pay me a visit," he said genially. "You will join me at tea, of course? The bell went just now."

Mrs Tainsh remembered that she had a part to play. She assumed a lugubrious expression, and her voice, artistically hesitant, had a note of tragic seriousness as she replied, "I am afraid you must excuse me, Mr Gaunt. My husband is upset and I have persuaded him to lie down till I return. There has been an accident at the Institute. He entrusted me with the task of breaking the news to you. I am sorry to say . . . Clare has been — hurt."

It will be remarked that her statement was strictly accurate. Her tone and demeanour, however, were pregnant with suggestions of fatality, and her slight but dramatic pause before uttering the word "hurt" achieved an effect that Sara Bernhardt might have envied.

Peter's left hand clutched at his side, and his head tilted back with a quick jerk as though he had been struck a sharp blow on the forehead. For a second or two he stood tensely poised on the tips of his toes, gasping for breath, then an ugly gurgling sound issued from his throat; his body crumpled suddenly, and he fell, a limp mass, at her feet.

The appalling completeness of her success held the unfortunate lady spellbound for a moment, then bereft her of her senses. It chanced that a passing labourer observed her fall, and hurrying to the spot he found two bodies sprawled among the rhododendrons.

## CHAPTER FORTY

ALL MANUKA sympathised with Mrs Tainsh for the prostrating shock she had sustained, for none supposed her in any sense responsible for Peter's hæmorrhage. The Padre, it is true, was a little dubious at first, but when she explained that she had only delivered a part of his message when Peter so terrifyingly collapsed, he was smitten with contrition. It was the gnawing of remorseful dread rather than physical weakness that chained her to her bed. She feared Peter would die and thus condemn her to carry to her grave the knowledge that her diplomacy had killed him. When this apprehension faded, with encouraging reports of his condition, she feared that he might give an account of their encounter truer than her own. Time proved all her anxieties groundless, but did not allay her remorse. Conscience constantly upbraided her with having lied indirectly to Peter, and outright to her husband. Each day she became sicker and more afraid. To shift her spiritual burdens to other shoulders, by confession, was the only way she knew of winning back her peace of mind. She did not dare to confess to her husband, but confess to somebody she must — or she felt she would go mad. She had sunk into a really pitiable condition when it occurred to her to send for Clare. She was not afraid of Clare, whom she had dandled as a baby on her knees. Clare would be terribly angry of course

— but not as terrible as her husband. Clare, however, did not prove terrible at all. She listened to the story with understanding that excluded anger, and her impulse to resent impertinence was destroyed by the illuminating significance of what she heard.

“I knew he loved you,” wept the penitent lady, who, having completed her confession, was now anxious to exculpate herself. “But how was I to know he cared so much? I did so want to help you both. Truly, I did.”

Clare promised, unasked, to keep the secret, and soothed the invalid with tender words. But as soon as possible she withdrew from the confessional. It was no use pretending that Mrs Tainsh had drawn a wrong conclusion from Peter's sudden sickness. The girl's singing heart assured her to the contrary — assured her that Peter cared. And Peter was getting well! That very morning the specialists had pronounced him out of immediate danger and had guardedly promised his complete recovery. It was not difficult to pardon Mrs Tainsh, and she felt that when Peter was once more on his feet she might even come to regard the busybody with gratitude.

Peter, however, did not continue to make the progress the physicians had expected, and alarming symptoms recurred as often as he was allowed, experimentally, to undertake the slightest physical exertion. More experts were called in and, after each fresh examination, many solemn consultations were held. The patient did not endure this treatment gladly, and he began to insist with increasing urgency

that he should be removed from the Infirmary to his home. At the end of a month of hesitancy, a month of torturing anxiety to Clare, the specialists suddenly assented to the change. Peter seemed to improve immediately he was restored to his familiar environment, and Clare's hopes mounted high. Rupert Hall observed her jubilation with a sick heart.

One evening, after bidding Peter good-night, she found Rupert waiting in the library to escort her to the Institute. She was smiling as she entered, for Peter had been unusually bright and cheery. "Old thing," said Rupert, "what about a whisky and soda?"

"No, thanks, Rupert. I hate the stuff."

"I know — but I've got a nasty pill to give you. Got to give it to you, I'm afraid. And you'd be the better for a bracer first."

"Something about Peter?" she said, ignoring the proffered glass. "What is it, Rupert?" One hand crept to her throat and the colour ebbed slowly from her cheeks.

He stared miserably down at the goblet he still held outstretched. "You are thinking wrongly about Peter, dear."

"Do you mean that he — he is not getting well?"

Rupert nodded.

"That — he is — not going to get well?"

"Yes."

Clare turned her back to him, and for a moment Rupert, watching her swaying figure, thought that she would swoon. But he held himself in leash, and

presently she showed him a face which, though white, was quite expressionless.

"Tell me, please," she said; and her tone had even less expression than her face.

"The lung tissue is not mending, Clare. On the contrary, the recently re-opened lesions are extending. Blood tests still show negative reactions, but a malignant agency is obviously present. I need not tell you we have done, and are doing, everything possible. Sir William Jervois is coming from Sydney tomorrow. He may be able to suggest something that we have not tried. I don't think you should bank on it. Steady, girl, — steady."

She obeyed thankfully draining the glass. "How long?" she asked, her voice now perceptibly quavering.

"Three months; longer, perhaps — if we can avoid another hæmorrhage."

"Does — he — know?"

"It was necessary to tell him. He was growing impatient and taking foolish risks. Since he learned the naked truth he has behaved sensibly. He is anxious to live as long as possible — says he has important work to do; and as he wants to be fit to do it he has submitted to a programme of absolute physical passivity. That is why he has seemed to improve during the past few days. We had it out with him on Sunday."

"I thought he was getting well," she commented with a ghastly smile. "It was mean of you to let me deceive myself, Rupert. This is Wednesday.

I've wasted three precious days in a fool's paradise, and every second vital."

The young man winced under the attack, but did not answer.

"I don't think I shall ever be able to forgive you," pursued the girl, unhappiness driving her to cruelty. "Don't let me keep you any longer. I shall stay here tonight and I shall not leave The Lodge again while Peter lives. My things can come across tomorrow. You had better arrange for the head sister to take over the management; but please ask her not to bother me."

"I'll have your things sent over at once," he replied. "And I shall see that no-one worries you. I did not tell you sooner because, just because, I could not, Clare. I happen to be rather fond of you, and I'm not used to driving knives into loving hearts."

"I daresay you think me a monster of ingratitude," returned the girl with frosty gravity, "but you have done me a deadly wrong and I believe I shall hate you for it till I die. Good-night."

"One moment," said Rupert sternly. "There is still something you ought to know. I have disregarded Gaunt's very positive instructions in informing you of his condition. He wished to break the news to you himself — in his own good time, which, obviously, is not yet. If you decide to surprise his confidence please remember that he must be spared any emotional excitement. In your place I would endeavour to maintain an attitude of philosophic

resignation. But I am impertinent, perhaps, to volunteer advice."

"You are an angel," gasped the girl. She gazed at him in dry-eyed misery, valiantly striving to compose her shaking body. Presently her queer, noiseless sobbing ceased. "I had to rend somebody, and you were the nearest," she explained with a wintry smile.

"I understand perfectly," he muttered. "I'll send over a bromide with your things. You'll need all your strength in the next three months."

"Couldn't it be longer than three months, Rupert dear?" she whispered.

"It might," he said; but he did not meet her eyes, and Clare asked no more questions.

## CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

PETER'S couch commanded, from almost every angle, a wide view of Valley Gorge. The ever-open French windows of his spacious bedroom permitted him, throughout the day, to feast his gaze on mountain, plain and sea; and at night the twinkling of innumerable distant lamps offered stimulus for kindly human thoughts and a salve for loneliness. Peter was almost happy. The world was very lovely, but his work in it was nearly done. His call had come and he had been granted a rare privilege; time to frame a fitting exit, time to bid his friends farewell; time to forgive, and ask forgiveness from, his enemies. Clare would gladly help him with all these things — when she knew. But as yet she did not know. That was the drop of acid in his cup. He must tell Clare and teach her not to grieve, teach her to submit willingly to the order of the universe. He felt unequal to the task, and for three days he dallied with it. Waking in the small hours of the fourth he watched the fading of the stars and nerved himself for the encounter. When a man has three months to live, hours become important. Duties assume a tyrannical complexion. Peter's toilet that morning was a troublesome matter to his attendants. He must be shaved with special care; laved with a certain treasured soap; and arrayed in an Eastern dressing-robe, the gift of a Siamese noble, which

he had never thought to wear. And finally his simple bedspread must be replaced with a splendidly emblazoned quilt that had once adorned a rajah's couch, but had long reposed in one of Peter's trunks and proved difficult to find. His insurgent vanity amused him, but he made no effort to control its claims. If it wanted him to look his very best in the last little drama of his life, why should he refuse?

By ten o'clock all was ready and he sent for Clare. The promptness of her appearance surprised him more than her sparkling eyes and rouged cheeks, which, however, vaguely disturbed him.

"Did you fly over from the Institute?" he asked. "My messenger must have flown too."

"I am living with you again," she composedly informed him. "I moved in last night."

"Oh! They did not tell me." He gave a little frown.

"I thought it best to tell you myself. Heavens! how gorgeous you look with all that silk and gold. It's this way, Peter dear, my second in command came back from her vacation full of beans and she has been nagging at me ever since to take a man-sized holiday. Now, as everybody knows, the very best holiday a person can take is a change of occupation. So here I am, a highly competent stenographer, entirely at your service — for at least three months."

"Ah!" he said. "You know! They have told you — in spite of my instructions." He looked at

her searchingly, but his face quickly lightened and he gave a sigh of inexpressible relief.

"The poor dears had no confidence in your genius as a newsbreaker," the girl airily explained. "They also appear to have imagined that I'd dissolve under the blow and inundate the building. They were extremely loth to disobey you, but they recognised a higher duty — to preserve your bed-clothes from the risk of being dampened by my tears."

Peter smiled. "You don't look very lachrymose, my dear, thank God! How nice of you to wear that pretty frock. My favourite colour, too. I haven't seen it before, have I?"

"First time on; and it cost a young mint." She pirouetted before him. "How does it fit at the back?"

"Like a glove."

"Then it's worth the money. Want to do any work this morning, Peter?"

"No. A Sydney specialist is to run the rule over me this afternoon. Not my wish, but I could not well refuse. They are so anxious and have been so kind. . . . My thoughts will not organise in the face of an examination. But they've promised this shall be the last. I hope to make a serious start tomorrow. . . . It's wonderful to have you for my secretary again. Bring up that comfy chair, dear, and sit where I can see you, see all of you. I love you in that charming gown. Blue becomes you perfectly."

"What shall we talk about?" asked the girl, when she had complied.

"Whatever you prefer."

"I think you should choose the subject, Peter. Something cataclysmal has happened since our last heart-to-heart. It may have changed us both. I haven't fathomed myself yet. But you are the one to be considered. We should not talk of anything that might distress you."

"I can't think of anything that could," he answered quickly. "But I am anxious not to distress you."

"*Arcades ambo*," laughed the girl. "I vote we be natural and drop all subterfuge. Neither of us is a weakling. Are you on?"

"With all my heart." His eyes began to flare and sparkle. "But *place aux dames!* You begin, Miss Prescience."

"Right. What about this for a long shot, Peter. A pair of Dent's gloves to a blue bag you are burning to discuss the topic that engrosses both our minds: your death."

"The gloves are yours, Clare. But the question is — are you burning to discuss it, too?"

"I shan't know a single instant's peace of mind until we do, Peter. But you must do the talking. You've had days and nights to think it through and through and make discoveries; I, only one night. And I was a coward: I took a bromide to forget. There are a thousand things I want to know that only you can tell me. But I'm afraid to ask. . . . I have a silly feeling, I know it's silly, that you might be hurt; that we ought to be reticent. Tell

me I'm an idiot, Peter dear. Tell me everything. Treat me like a man. I won't cry, and I'll try my hardest not to flinch. I've got to go on living, you see, and I'll need a big store of memories, memories of utter confidence and perfect understanding."

Peter nodded. His eyes left the girl and swept across the Gorge, now bathed in sunshine, to the southern line of sea and sky. After a little silence he began to speak. His voice was dreamy, soothing and emotionless. "I had more than half expected it, but when I knew for certain that it had to be, I was stupidly surprised. I could not realise that it was I who had to die. Everything was unreal, visionary. I seemed to be mysteriously involved in the experience of another man. I felt a quake of sympathy for that other man but I was long unable to identify myself with him. When perfect comprehension came it invaded me with startling suddenness. There was a period of horrified illumination and shrinking, craven dread. Another period of frantic indignation and revolt. Then an age of numb reaction, with something stirring and groping in the depths, something that was part of me but had been imprisoned and suppressed throughout my life, something that could see in the darkness and be unafraid, and laugh. Its laughter was a comfort, Clare, — for it was not derisive; but compassionate and comradely, like the laughter of a man who loves a jest but is too merciful to mock the thing that has provoked his mirth, even though it were himself. And so I struggled up to reason and reality and resignation, and awoke one

day to find myself — what do you think, Clare — a bit of a hero, if you have to know, in the eyes of my self-love. . . . Of course that had to be dealt with —” he turned to her with twinkling eyes “— has yet to be dealt with, I ought to say; but I’m damned if I know how or when to do it, my dear. I keep putting the matter off — for a rainy day if it’s fine, and vice versa. Meanwhile I offer a sneaking sort of encouragement to fat thoughts. I’d be as smug as an alderman if I lived six months. . . . Now, now, Clare. No flinching! Repeat it after me. Three months, three months.”

“Three months!” whispered Clare.

“Louder, much louder, and put cheer into your tone. It’s not an eternity, but kingdoms have been won and lost in half that time. Again!”

“Three months,” said the girl, and her voice was firm and even.

“Fine,” commended Peter. “With a little practice you’ll get the hero feeling, too, and we’ll be both treading the same road to glory.”

“Oh Peter, if only we could! If only I might go with you!”

“Steady, girl, steady! You can’t hope to get the hero feeling without qualifying.”

“I’ll not offend again!” she promised — dashing the tears from her eyes as she spoke. “It was just a slip of the pen. I’ll qualify if it breaks me!”

“You’ll break if you don’t qualify,” he retorted sternly. “You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Am I the sick one, or you? Haven’t the doctors told you

that I am to be protected at all costs from the smallest emotional excitement?"

"Wretch! Beast! Hairy Dog!" cried Clare, and their laughter pealed in unison.

The day nurse entered with a puzzled and forbidding face, bearing a tray.

"More sops?" growled the patient. "What, gruel? May heaven pardon you, Sister; I won't."

"Good enough for you," said Clare impulsively. "I hope you have to lick the bowl. He has been behaving atrociously, Sister."

The nurse did not relax. She handed Peter a thermometer and turned grimly to Clare: "You will excuse me, Miss Landale. My patient must rest."

"Come again this evening, Clare," said Peter. "Bring your man if you like. In any case be sure to wear your nicest evening gown."

How strange that Peter should be so interested all of a sudden in her frocks! Clare donned hat and cloak, got out her car and drove at high speed to the city, where she spent some hours in the show-room of a fashionable modiste. She ordered a dozen expensive costumes, and most of them were blue. She then called at her father's office, but had to wait a minute in the vestibule till he was free. The clerks were discussing war-news from Shanghai and the latest Wall Street crash. Their conversation painted a tottering and crumbling world. Clare listened idly. Half her mind was designing a thirteenth frock.

Mark came out presently, and lovingly invited her into his sanctum, but she said she hadn't any time.

"Peter is dying," she said casually. "Ah! I can see you knew already. They only told me last night. I've been buying a lot of blue gowns. Is Mother well? Give her my love, dear." She pulled down his head and kissed him softly as a butterfly on his wrinkled brow. "Don't worry about me, darling," she whispered. "And don't let Mother, either. Your daughter will come through."

Mark watched her shimmering passage down the corridor against the light of day beyond. He thought of a piece of flying thistledown. It seemed to him an entirely useless cruelty to torture thistledown. There came a choking lump in his throat.

## CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

CLARE was not permitted to see Peter again until the following afternoon, as the physicians had wearied him with a long examination. He received her brightly and answered instantly the question in her eyes: "The Siamese have a proverb: 'What is cracked, must break.' And that is that, my dear. — I feel like doing a bit of work. The Doctors have granted me one hour a day. Have you your notebook, Clare?"

"Should you start today, Peter?"

"I dare not delay. My mind is still alert, its interests still external. . . . That will change. In a little while I'll be thinking mostly of myself, perhaps. No, no. There must be no procrastination."

Clare sat down beside and facing him, pencil in hand, a pad upon her lap.

"I have only one personal enemy," he said. "We shall give him pride of place. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"To His Highness, the Sultan of Sumara, Sumara, via Singapore. . . . Your Highness will regret to learn that our long controversy will be ended presently by my demise. My physicians fix the date at three months hence. I am not conscious of ever having fought unfairly, but that I often bruised your notions of the veneration due to your exalted rank I have too many proofs to doubt. It is a

humble person that now sues your magnanimity to let your hatred perish with his death. To pardon his transgressions will demonstrate your greatness. May the blessings of Allah, the All Wise, the All Merciful, attend you to your latest hour! Your Highness's most respectful and obedient servant, — Peter Gaunt."

"I'd like you to get that away by the first outgoing mail, Clare. If I know the old boy he will cable his reply. It might arrive in time."

"It shall be posted tomorrow."

"Good! We must concentrate now and henceforth on Manuka. . . . I'll want you to jot down rough ideas as they occur to me or develop while we talk. We can polish them — later. There's a lot to do. . . . My will is fairly comprehensive. It covers most of the ground, but there are gaps that we must fill. I had intended to thrash out all these matters with the Council, but that is no longer practicable. The Doctors forbid. The sole alternative is to elaborate a codicil embodying my views; not as directions, you understand, — it would not be fair to bind my survivors without consulting them — but as suggestions and records of my private aims and purposes, which I hope they may adopt but only if they conscientiously approve."

"Yes, Peter. I have that all down. I think I had better take a note of everything you say. We can sift the grain from the chaff — at leisure."

"As you like, my dear. But I'm afraid your notes will read disjointedly. The trouble is I so easily forget. Only last night I had a brain full of posi-

tively brilliant ideas. I spent hours in putting them in proper shape to dictate to you today. And now they have vanished, leaving not a trace."

"They will come back of themselves, Peter dear. Don't strain after them. Let's talk of something wholly different for a while. That might help. Or if you'd rather not talk, suppose I switch on the wireless?"

"Don't do that, Clare — they usually play jazz at this hour. Lord! how I detest that ragged music."

"Why do you hate jazz? Some of it is pretty awful, I admit, but —"

"It's the revenge of the negro on the white race. We transported him from freedom in Africa to slavery in America, and he has retorted by corrupting and debasing the musical tastes of civilised mankind. Take a note, Clare, that I wish the children of Manuka to hear none but good music and that I desire jazz to be banned from the Institute as rigidly as any other plague."

"Yes, Peter."

He watched her flying pencil frowningly, and when it paused he spoke again: "I simply can't recapture any of last night's ideas, but take this down: I want our children to be taught to love animals and birds, as well as trees and flowers. Everything that lives may have a soul. We know that animals have memories. Their memories of men should be memories of kindness. We are all passing on, passing on. When we go we leave nothing, we can leave nothing except memories. They should be pleasant

memories — memories of kindness. There is nothing more important in the world than kindness. We must teach our children to be kind."

After a long silence Clare mentioned that she had visited the city the previous day and had seen her father. She said that everybody seemed deeply concerned about the Chino-Japanese crisis, and at the general trade-depression which grew daily worse. Anxious to distract Peter's mind she unbridled her thoughts and hazarded the view that the economic order of civilisation had broken down. She asked him was there any remedy or must the world topple into chaos.

Peter shook his head. "There can be no remedy unless and until a thoroughly Christian spirit be renewed in the hearts of men."

The girl looked up from her writing to find him gravely and affectionately regarding her. "All my words are not worth recording, dear."

She smiled and countered, "Is there any connection between economics and Christian doctrine, Peter?"

"They have been divorced," he answered. "Swayed by materialism men have built up an economic system as heartless and insensate as the machines in their factories, which have created unemployment, penury and misery by substituting steel and brass for flesh and blood. Not until the world realises the necessity to re-marry economics and religion will men recapture the capacity to manage things that are inferior to themselves or to control

the instruments they have elaborated for their selfish private gain. Men have become the slaves of a monster which should be servant to them; to recover their supremacy they must first submit to the discipline of truth and justice and mercy — the discipline of Buddha, the discipline of Christ. The preservation, the very salvation of civilisation demands the exercise of a sublime unselfishness. This will come when men are taught from their cradles to seek their happiness in service. . . . How quickly you write, Clare: you have lost nothing of your speed. — Put this down, too. . . . I think our Council need not be concerned to teach the children of Manuka more about the dismal science than this basic truth; any economic system that can be devised by man must fail inevitably (just as our present order is inevitably failing now) unless its purpose be sincerely Christian and unless its practices accord completely with the will of Christ.”

“Bolshevism would seem to be doomed, then, Peter?”

“Unfortunate Russia!” sighed Peter. “The supreme madness of Bolshevism is to aspire to make men God-like while repudiating God. Man is so constituted that he will live and die for an idea — but not for an idea that he is authoritatively commanded to despise. Bolshevism has not yet collapsed because the hearts of the Russian people still, in secret, love Jesus and worship God.”

“Our hour is almost up, Peter. I can hear the nurse.” Rising swiftly she closed her note-book and slipped beside his couch. Stooping over him she

whispered, "Are you still sure — absolutely sure — that death is not the end?"

He gave her a steady thoughtful glance: "Surer than ever, Clare. — What is your problem, dear?"

"Whether — after you go — we shall meet again, or not."

"God is kind, and I believe. Try also to believe."

"I never stop trying. It is getting a little easier. . . . You help with your firm strong faith. I am yearning to believe. . . . That ought to help, too. Send for me if you should want me. I shall always be in call. . . . I have bought a lot of new frocks. I want you to see them."

"If you please, Miss Landale," said the Sister's cool unsympathetic voice.

Clare stood erect and glanced around. "Gruel, Peter. I hope it doesn't give you indigestion. Bye-bye, old thing. I'll type your letter to the Sultan now."

"I want to see those new frocks," said Peter. "Au revoir, my dear."

When she had gone Peter turned enquiringly to the nurse: "Why do you dislike Miss Landale, Sister Linton?" he asked.

"She rubs me the wrong way. She is jealous of me for nursing you. . . . I ought to be jealous of her too; but I am not."

"Why should you be jealous of her?"

"Put the thermometer under your tongue, please. She stole my man."

"She stole your man!" Peter echoed with a gasp.

"Well, not exactly stole. — We had quarrelled and were not speaking at the time of the engagement. But I looked on him as mine. You mustn't ask me any more questions, please."

"It's a tangled old world, Sister."

"Very."

Peter put the thermometer in his mouth and immediately took it out again. "Why aren't you jealous of her?" he asked.

"She does not care for him. Now, Mr Gaunt, I really must insist."

Peter gave her no further trouble.

## CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

ON the following morning Clare found Peter in an anxious and impatient mood. He wished to begin work immediately yet he seemed to have nothing to dictate, and her pencil was idle long. She kept as still as a mouse, her eyes fixed on her pad. When she occasionally stole a glance at him her heart ached to note the troubled intensity of his expression. When at length he began to speak his voice was hoarse and his words stumbled often.

“The world,” he said, “is in the throes of great upheavals, pregnant with possibilities of change. The political and economic systems of mankind have failed to keep pace with the progress of science and industry. Mechanised production has made shorter working-hours inevitable, and has offered all men the boon of a larger leisure. But the boon has been turned, for the moment, into a curse by reason of its inequitable distribution, which has caused widespread unemployment and destitution. So many millions of people consequently are suffering unmerited misery that violent methods of reorganisation may be attempted, and sudden and radical transformations of the social order may result. If, and when, any such change should come to pass, it is my earnest wish that Manuka should submissively accommodate itself to any new form of political government that may be established. It is my will, which I charge

upon the administrators of the Institute as an abiding trust, that our children shall be taught to abstain from entering into the bondage of any party ties or other political entanglements — recognising always that the only true way to approach the problem of political reform is to reform the hearts of men; and that in proportion as men become willing to live and work as Jesus lived and wrought the machinery of social government must necessarily improve and approximate perfection. . . .”

Peter closed his eyes: “The day will come, it is coming quickly, when it will only be necessary for any man to labour during a few of his waking hours to earn his living, and vast reaches of leisure will be at every man’s disposal. The proper use of leisure will then become the master problem of humanity. The masses still enslaved throughout the day by the industrial moloch must be educated in advance of their enfranchisement to spend their larger leisure wisely and not to imitate the foolish methods of the few who now monopolise the privilege. They must be taught to regard leisure as a God-given opportunity to cultivate their highest faculties, not as accidental treasure-trove that may excusably be squandered in a frantic search for profitless amusement. Every franchise involves a corresponding obligation of duty. Every hardly-won right carries a definite responsibility. The legion of unoccupied rich, the restless idlers of the world, have set a bad example to the fettered masses whose chains will presently be broken. Men must be taught to look that bad example squarely in the face and recognise

its tinselled falsity. They must be taught to think. When men have learned how to think toys will cease to attract them and they will seek their pleasures in the kingdom of the mind. It will not be easy to teach them. . . .”

“There are no short cuts to the millennium, Clare,” he presently resumed. “There is only one road. It is long and rough. Every inch of it must be plodded faithfully. Man must socialise himself before he can produce a perfect social system. Beliefs held in common by large numbers of people are the greatest of all social forces. False beliefs must be cast out and the world imbued with true beliefs. Our children, who are destined to be teachers of men, must be permeated with truths. Their minds must be kept simple, and defended from obscurities. Better a little learning than overmuch provided it be straight and limpid. Wisdom is not found in lexicons. It does not live in libraries. It is the product of clear thinking, calm judgment, and kind feeling; its home is in the heart. The wisest man who ever lived was Jesus. He knew little of the arts and sciences — nought of politics. His knowledge of the world was very limited. He knew no language except His own. But He was the greatest teacher since the dawn of time. I want the education of our children to resemble in essentials the education He received.”

“You are looking weary, Peter dear,” said Clare. “You should not tire your brain too much.”

“I have nearly finished my chores,” he answered. “But I have still something to say which I dare not

defer or I might forget. — I wish our children to be warned against the vanity of seeking to improve perfection, the vanity that might persuade them to found new sects, new creeds. We can best protect them from the subtlety of this temptation (which may too probably assail them) by training them to realise in all their sweet simplicity the facts of Jesus' life. He was no schismatic. He did not found a new religion. Jesus lived and died a Jew. His single contribution to theology was to add a new commandment to the Decalogue: 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.' He neither attempted nor aspired to wreck the Jewish Church. He sought only to strip it of the narrow and inhuman formalism that had crept into its practices. His noble hatred of hypocrisy affronted the vanity, not the bigotry, of the Jewish priesthood, and for that they nailed Him to the Cross. It is true that after His death, His disciples reared up a religion in His name. But the tremendous fact remains — Jesus never changed His cloth! Shall I tell you why? His concern was with realities, not rituals. He was a schoolmaster and His schoolhouse was the world. He laboured in the service of the whole human family. Jews, Gentiles, and pagans were equally the objects of His saving care. He loved all men equally. He was the Neighbour of all men. He lived and died for all."

When Clare looked up from her notes Peter appeared to be asleep. She waited till the working hour was nearly up and then stole softly from the room to anticipate the nurse and warn her from arousing him. . . . Clare had more faith in sleep

than food or medicine, and she still cherished a faint spark of hope that Peter would recover.

In the afternoon she went to him again. He smiled at her but did not speak. She sat down beside him and almost immediately he fell into a quiet slumber. Very content to be near him she rested tranquilly until he stirred. His eyes opened for a second, then closed again, but his right hand stretched towards her gropingly, and the girl clasped it softly in her own. His fingers so lovingly responded to her touch that a sudden rush of blood suffused her face and she bent her head to hide it — though none was there to see. With a dazing sensation of surprise she heard Peter's voice. She had been so sure he slept.

"It is sweet," he said, "to be sustained — by the hand of a friend at the brink of an abyss."

She looked up quickly and was thrown into panic by the bluish pallor of his face and the feverish brilliancy of his eyes. "Peter!" she cried. "What is it? Are you ill?"

"No," he said, "not ill. . . . but often lately when I wake from sleep I am afraid. . . . I awoke just now — to find my hand in yours. . . . Fear was there, but it has gone."

"Fear of what, Peter dear? Tell me and it may not visit you again. Is it of death?"

"Of the creeping darkness that may obliterate my mind while still I live. . . . Pray for a sudden death to end your days, my dear, and live to deserve it," — he smiled wistfully — "as I, it is very evident, did not."

"Peter," cried the girl, "the Doctors can refuse you nothing. Demand that I be allowed to stay with you constantly. I can at least defend you from one demon. Please, Peter, please!"

"I can still refuse the boon your kindness offers me. In a little while, who can say? I am already conscious of a gradual disintegration. It is often difficult to think connectedly. I am nearly always drowsy. I no longer suffer any real pain and my cough is seldom troublesome. The Doctors may be doping me, perhaps. Do you think so, Clare?"

The girl shook her head. "I'll ask Rupert; but I am certain they are not."

His brows knitted. "You should be kinder to Rupert, dear. He seems unhappy. He is very fond of you, poor boy."

"He is well and strong." There was a note of resentment in her voice. "He kicked five goals in the match against Clematis last Saturday."

Peter gently withdrew his hand and pushed back the heavy grey hair from his forehead. "I used to play football once upon a time." His eyes sought the open spaces, and fixed their gaze on the glinting summit of Mount Arthur.

Presently he smiled. "What problematic beings we are!" he murmured, half to himself. "I still take pride in remembering I was the best goal-kicker in my team. My body seemed good for a century then."

"Wretched things, our bodies!" said Clare. "A perfectly rotten bit of mechanics — in my opinion."

"Fortunately we are capable of appreciating that distressing fact — and laughing at it."

"Don't pretend we are modest, Peter. We are vainer of our bodies than our souls."

"But we are capable of appreciating that weakness too — and laughing at it."

"Incorrigible optimist!" The girl looked at him lovingly, but Peter was still staring at the Mount.

"An infinite faith is warranted in the perfectibility of man if only because he can laugh at himself," he declared. "Fight pessimism as you would leprosy, my dear."

A great yearning invaded Clare's heart to tell Peter that she loved him, and that she intended to live and die a virgin for his sake, and to extort from him a confession that he also cared. It would be something to remember through the years to come, a rock on which to lean when life seemed insupportable. But if she fed this craving of her spirit she might shatter the impersonal tranquillity that Peter had attained and in which he evidently found his strength. She might, indeed, precipitate the end — towards which he was too quickly drifting. And surely, were she patient, he would speak. He could not intend to embark upon his ultimate adventure without the parting all-revealing word she hungered for and utterly believed to be her due. It was not enough to know he loved her. It was her birthright as a woman to be verbally informed and fully reassured. Peter would not cheat her of that right nor deny her any consolation in his power to give, for Peter was supernally unselfish. But

men are mysterious creatures. They think so differently from women. Peter might have some queer notion that he would help her most and serve her best by setting forth in silence. His voice interrupted and broke through her painful musings:

"When you go — leave me a pad and a pencil — will you, Clare? I might jot down something — in the night."

"Of course." She got up swiftly. "Do you feel like sleeping now? Shall I send Sister to you?"

He gave her a long straight glance before replying. She thought he looked a little excited but extraordinarily well, and that his eyes were pools of kindness.

"I feel that I ought to order you to take a good brisk walk," he said. "You are paler than I am. Be off with you."

"Very well, Peter dear. I'll go for a walk if you think I should."

She lingered for a moment to place the pad and pencil in his reach; a moment more to smooth his coverlid. As she stooped to perform the latter office, he raised a hand as though to repel her — but it fell quickly and she saw him smile.

"What is it, Peter?" she asked on the instant. "Let me share it with you?"

"Dearness," he said softly, "do as you are bid."

He had never used the term to her before. Clare experienced a sudden shyness that prevented her from looking at his face again. But she left the room in a happy and exalted mood. It was only

five o'clock. Two hours before dinner. She donned a beret and set out at a swinging pace towards Sassafras.

Twenty minutes later as she turned an angle in the gully path she came face to face with Rupert Hall and Sister Linton. Their faces were set and hard. They were walking swiftly, as far apart as the track allowed, and they seemed to have been quarrelling. Clare noticed nothing of this. Her sole thought was that Peter might want Sister Linton who was here and not there. The nurse coloured hotly as she met the girl's accusing eyes — whose message, however, she completely misinterpreted.

"Of course," said Clare, "you left another Sister in charge of Mr Gaunt?"

"Naturally," replied the other. "Sister Manson was kind enough to relieve me." Her voice was sarcastic and belligerent. "I needed an outing. I met Dr Hall in the village — quite accidentally, I assure you. Pray don't let me detain you."

She slipped past and vanished swiftly round the turn. Clare stared after her uncertainly, puzzled at the woman's biting tone and hostile attitude. Unlike Peter she was unaware of Sister Linton's attachment for Rupert or of an old flirtation between them. At another time Rupert's miserable eyes would have apprised her of the secret, but her mind was engrossed with Peter, and it was easy to dismiss so small and alien a mystery as the behaviour of a subordinate who obviously disliked her.

"Rupert," she said suddenly, "I'm glad I met you. I'm worried about Peter. He is worrying too. He has the idea that you may be doping him. I fancy he hopes you have been. He is often sleepy; and he wakes afraid — afraid of creeping changes that may have occurred in his sleep. Disintegration of the brain. Is there anything in it?"

Rupert shook his head. "We have to keep his cough at bay," he answered, "but we are not doping him in the sense you suggest. . . . Leitch examined him again this morning. Did you know?"

"No. What does Dr Joel think?"

Rupert averted his gaze. "It will be sooner than we thought. . . . The disease is making rapid headway. We can do nothing to arrest it without putting a severer strain upon the tissues of the heart than they can bear. It's no longer a question of months, Clare."

"Of weeks, perhaps?" she asked composedly.

"Or days."

Clare took the blow without flinching. Something deep in her had been expecting it — had prepared her to receive it. She lifted her head and glanced at the fretted screen of leaf and twig that masked the sky. A flock of gang-gangs flew, screeching eerily, above the tree-tops. She saw them only for a second, a line of tiny flitting shadows, but she thought she would forget them never. They were mocking demons — carrying off her ravished hopes, jeering as they disappeared.

"Peter," she said, "was in full possession of his faculties this morning. He dictated for the best

part of an hour. There was a lot of wisdom in his stuff."

"A candle often flickers brightly just before it fades."

"I must get back and type my notes. They are for a codicil to add to his will. His whole thought is for Manuka . . . Manuka is his ruling passion," she added jealously.

They fell into step and until they emerged from the forest neither spoke.

Clare broke the silence as the now lighted Institute burst, twinkling, into view. "Did Dr Joel tell Peter?" she asked.

"No," said Rupert.

"Ought Peter not to know?"

"Leitch thinks so. He will be here again tomorrow or the day after — and we'll have a consultation to decide. . . . I wish I could tell you how I feel for you, old thing — and what a brick I think you. . . . I — I — wish I could bear it for you Clare."

"I don't want anyone to — to — bear it for me, Rupert." She clenched her hands suddenly and broke into a run. Rupert's instinct was to follow her, but he controlled it. Halting in his stride, he stopped and watched the hastening stumbling little figure out of sight.

"It isn't fair. It isn't fair," he said aloud.

## CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

ABOUT midnight Sister Linton went in search of Clare, whom she found seated at her work-table before a dying fire.

"Mr Gaunt has been asking for you, Miss Landa. He is a little delirious and Dr Hall thinks it may soothe him to see you. He seems to be anxious about some documents in your care that he wants to sign."

Clare gathered up her typescript and followed the nurse without replying. Peter looked even better than in the afternoon, but he was obviously excited. He greeted her with an eager request to recite her rendering of his dictations. He listened tensely and signed each sheet as it was read to him, asking Dr Hall and the nurse to sign too as witnesses. When all the papers were transcribed he sighed happily and closed his eyes. He lay so still and breathed so evenly that Clare, after a few moments, rose to go; but his voice arrested her. He spoke turgidly, and the girl could not follow or understand and she thought he must be wandering. Presently, however, the flow abated and his tone became dreamy, his speech a little stilted and staccato, as though he were reflectively debating a matter of interest with another whom he much desired to convince to his opinion. Clare looked a question at Dr Hall, who shook his head and put a finger to his lips. "Delirium," he whispered.

But Peter's words seemed very sensible to Clare, and delirium or not the girl's pencil was soon busily at work.

"Our children must be taught how to distinguish between the things that are important and the things that are vain," Peter said. "If I had learned this when I was young I think that I might be untroubled. I have grown wise too late and I think, I . . . Listen, Clare!"

"I am listening, Peter," said the girl.

"I am seeing clearly," Peter's voice went on. "The vain things and the important things are often hard to separate; their roots are intertwined. But they will always fall apart if we ask our hearts this simple question — What can we take with us from the world when we depart except the love we have deserved for the kindness we have shown and the love we have bestowed? Not our money nor our houses, Clare; all these things we must leave behind us. So that if we have not deserved love we shall face God naked and with empty hands. . . . There is no life except that of the spirit. The body festers when the spirit flies. . . . We come from God. We stay in the world a little while and we return to God. . . . Can you doubt we were sent here for a high purpose? What purpose, then, if not to leave the world better than we found it? And shall we do that by preoccupying our minds and energies with little things? Are you listening, Clare — and will you remember?"

"Every word, Peter dear."

"Clare, Clare. You have not gone?" Peter spoke urgently but his eyes remained closed, and save for the movement of his lips he seemed peacefully asleep.

"I am here, Peter. I shall stay until you cease

to want me!" The girl's voice throbbed with a note of passion only partially subdued.

"I have found some words of help," said Peter in a strangely level tone. "Listen closely, for I am seeing very clearly. No spark of intelligence can ever perish. No flicker of consciousness can ever fade. The very idlest fancies that we entertain or fabricate are indestructible, therefore it is imperative to think straightly and sweetly always. The air we breathe and the ether that surrounds the world are crowded with deathless thoughts that strive incessantly for our attention. Some are of angelic loveliness. Some are as dreadful and distorted as creatures of the ooze. But all alike are eternally and instantly available for the benefit and injury of man. The supreme duty of the spirit is to select and use and issue into currency thoughts that are beautiful and true. It is the function of the mind to question and to doubt the spirit's judgment. That is why mind and spirit are constantly at war. Because the mind is mortal it is proud and vain and scornfully resentful of control but it must be subjugated to the service of the spirit if progress on this planet is to be achieved. . . . Do not mourn when I have gone. My life is neither beginning nor ending. I am simply passing on. You will follow, Clare, — but, not yet. You have work to do. You must be faithful and strong and grief is a wasting force. Soon a large authority will be confided to your care. You will be assailed and censured in your task. Do not hurtfully retort! To have the power to punish, and to withhold punishment, is to imitate God, Whose chastisement is mercy and Whose vengeance is to pardon. Teach our babies to worship

and to practise mercy. Above all teach them this: —There is only one law, — it is to be kind. There is only one crime, — it is to be cruel.”

There ensued a prolonged silence, then with a suddenness that startled Clare Peter opened his eyes and stared at the girl surprisedly. “I am sleepy, but I cannot sleep,” he sighed. “Sister Linton read me a page of Ecclesiastes today. One of his sayings is very restless and tormenting. ‘Be not righteous overmuch nor make thyself overwise — for why shouldest thou destroy thyself?’ Across three thousand years he seemed to be addressing me! . . . Don’t let our children become over-righteous, Clare. It is a wrecking fault. Men will not listen to those who hold themselves superior. There is nothing more offensive to inferiority than condescension. The little-minded are many and they are always proud and sensitive. They are not contemptible, no human being is contemptible, but when they are made to feel contemptible they hate. They can only be placated by humility. They can only be enlightened and enlarged by love. The first duty of the magnanimous is to be meek, for magnanimity alone is capable of genuine humility. Men are not better or worse than other men. They are different, that is all. The wise know this; the ignorant, who do not, shun those who seem unlike them because they feel that what is different is dangerous and they yearn to make themselves secure. Teach our babies that to bring others to their opinions they must first become their lovers. Those who are loved are unafraid of those who love them, however different they may be. To love is to save. . . . All men are worth saving, Clare, equally the greatest and the

least. . . . Are you there? . . . The room is very dark. . . . I cannot see you. I am one big yawn. Ah! but I can see you now. You are going — but wait one second, Dearness. Did I tell you what old Ecclesiastes said — Sister Linton was very kind, — she — she — read me a page . . .”

But sleep did not allow Peter to complete the sentence.

“He will rest for some hours, now,” said Rupert Hall. “He has been fighting a sedative. . . . You will let me give you one, if you are wise, Clare.”

“I’ll bring it over to your room, Miss Landale,” whispered the nurse. The sight of Clare’s ravaged face had brought a note of sympathy into Miss Linton’s usually toneless voice. It was becoming clear to her that here was no rival but a woman with a heart sorer than her own.

“Is there any immediate danger?” asked Clare.

“None,” answered Rupert. “He may last for weeks.”

Reassured, Clare softly left the room and hurried to her own. In her absence the fire had been replenished, and seated before it was a quiet figure whose hands were diligently knitting. “Mother!” gasped Clare. The girl swayed and shook like a reed in a storm. She had been struggling against sobs in her passage from the sick room. They threatened to choke her now, but with a rending effort she suppressed the sick attack. Mary Landale dropped her needles and sprang up with a little cooing cry. Clare saw a face that only two had seen and none for years — but a face that ailing children always see when mothers bend over them.

“My Baby!” Mary crooned. “I came as soon as

I knew. But oh! if I had only known before. If I had only known!"

What she had learned was not revealed in words. But there seemed to be no need of words between them, and when Sister Linton came a little later with the bromide she had promised, Clare did not require it. She was sleeping peacefully in Mary Landale's arms.

Peter did not recognise his friends next day. He talked much, but nearly all he said was meaningless and incoherent. Towards evening he slumbered heavily, and through the night. The succeeding day dawned clear and cold. Peter awoke soon after sunrise and held long communion with his favourite view. His thoughts were as tranquil as the scene at which he gazed. He felt comfortably warm and well. His mood was languorous and dreamy. Neither the hammering of his pulse nor the Sister's irrepressible start when she took his temperature conveyed any message to his mind. He did not notice her prolonged absence from the room. The grateful odour of burning eucalyptus, wafted through the windows from some distant clearing, had touched an old chord in his memory. He was experiencing anew the inarticulate delight of vernal youth in nature and the vaguely mournful wonder of a boy that ruthless men should fell great living trees and that the trees when burned should smell so sweetly. In the fullness of time he became aware of familiar faces clustering about him, friendly but strangely set and solemn; and yet, as often as he looked straight and full at any face, it smiled. Every member of the Council had come to visit him. Not one

was missing. He was glad but not surprised or curious. A soft and pleasant gaiety possessed him and a wish to communicate his fluttering thoughts. He told them of the fragrant incense of the burning trees to which he had awakened, and of his subsequent reflections. His friends agreed — almost eagerly — that the destruction of Australia's virgin forests was a crime that must be stopped. He glanced from one to another inquiringly and wistfully. Their manner was unusual and not quite natural, he fancied. His eyes rested a moment on Mr Levison. Quaint that he had always thought of Levison as "Mr Levison". All laughed, save Clare, to hear of that. Because Clare did not laugh Peter was reminded that he had a special thing to say to her. It had to do with a command that she had once demanded. "Do people demand commands?" he questioned. But nobody appeared to understand and none could help him. He gave up trying to remember because an important thought had swum into his mind.

"We must see to it," he said, "that the children of Manuka when they go out into the world shall address themselves particularly to their own generation, because the future belongs to youth and young hearts are kind and comprehending and impressionable." Queer what a difficulty he experienced in uttering polysyllabic words. Queer too that his breathing had begun to trouble him. He was dimly conscious of a sudden bustle in the room. His friends were bidding him good-bye. Ah! well, they had been most kind to stay so long. He must not keep them. Why did they stare at him so sadly as

one by one they touched or pressed his hand? Peter was a little mystified; but he was growing weary; too weary to puzzle out why some withdrew immediately and some seemed loth to go, and why Edward Tainsh and Dr Leitch lingered at his bed foot with down-bent heads as though in prayer. He could forget these little problems, but one remained he could not possibly forget. Clare had vanished. Why had she deserted him? He must see her or he could not rest — though sleep was claiming him. He called her in an urgent gasping whisper: "Clare! Clare, Clare!"

Miraculously she was visible again and sweetly near, stooped above him motherwise and tightly holding both his hands. He should have known she would not leave him wanting her. But oh, the piteousness of her eyes! And she was speaking in a tone that struck into his heart: "Peter, Peter, could you call me 'Dearness' once again?"

Her voice quickened his memory and brought understanding to his ebbing soul. She was telling him that Death was close at hand. But Death must wait! He had a spirit call to answer that he had once avoided, a command to issue, help to give. His pale eyes flamed into a sudden radiance and he cried out strongly, "Dearness, you must — you shall believe!"

He had more to say to her, perhaps, but no more time in which to say it.

THE END





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