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THE PURPLE PEARL

ANTHONY PRYDE

R. K. WEEKES

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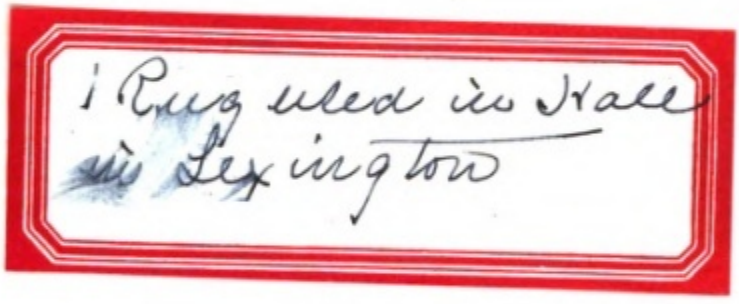

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BY

ANTHONY PRYDE

AUTHOR OF "MARQUERAY'S DUEL," "NIGHTFALL," ETC.

AND

R. K. WEEKES

AUTHOR OF "THE LAURENSONS," ETC.

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TO

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THE PURPLE PEARL

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CHAPTER I

MARTIN MEREWORTH at twenty-seven was still young enough to like dances and dancing, but when one is home on sick leave from the Front one is obliged to forswear the attractions of the foxtrot. It was hard on him, because he was very fond indeed of dancing with his cousin Violet, and though there was no definite understanding between them he had reached the stage when he did not particularly like watching her dance with anybody else. Least of all with a fellow he had never seen before, one of Mrs. Adeane's crowd, a big man whose evening dress Martin would have set down as ready made if it had been possible to believe that any shop would consider him stock size, and whose deliberate movements suggested to Martin that he had acquired the art in the suburbs at six lessons for half a guinea.

And out of three months' leave Martin had only three hours left. He had fibbed his way through a Medical Board and was going direct to France, though a disinclination to stand long and the almost constant pressure of one hand on his knee

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when he sat down betrayed him when he was off his guard. Men who were willing to go back found little difficulty in doing so in June, 1918. He leaned against a doorway and followed his pretty cousin with his eyes. Other people were doing so, too, for every one knew Violet Mereworth and no one knew her partner, and the gossips of a London ballroom were asking who he was. Martin himself, the least curious of men, felt faintly inquisitive. He had noticed Mrs. Adeane talking to her new acquisition and had been struck by the warmth of her manner; Mrs. Adeane was bent on marrying her niece well; here perhaps was a fresh candidate.

"Who's the backwoodsman, Martin?"

"Haven't a notion. Never saw the fellow before."

"Some one told me just now that he was a Birmingham motor firm with pots of money and that he was going to marry your cousin."

"Really?" Martin laughed. He was hard hit but he gave no sign of it. "I dare say that was only premature. A conscientious fairy, isn't he? I hope he won't let Violet down—ah!"

It really was not the backwoodsman's fault, except that another man might have been quicker to see what was going to happen, and he behaved very well; he made no effort to save himself, but released Violet so swiftly and lightly that her balance was not even imperilled; and of the three persons involved in the crash he was the first on his feet

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again. Still it was a regrettable incident, and Violet betrayed an inclination to remain where she was, clinging to Martin's arm, instead of returning to the elder man. Miss Mereworth was not accustomed to collisions.

"Oh, thank you, Martin! I—I think I won't dance any more." She turned rather timidly to her late partner. "I should like to sit down for a minute."

"Will you trust me as far as the balcony? I'll promise not to go down again."

"I'll take my cousin to Mrs. Adeane, sir." Martin's tone was by many shades more polite and less easy than usual.

He had no intention of taking Violet to Mrs. Adeane; he had marked down a nook in the garden where one could enjoy quite a quiet tête-à-tête; but Mrs. Adeane equally had no intention of letting Violet sit out this or any other dance with her cousin, who was not a marriageable man from Mrs. Adeane's peculiar point of view, and a great deal too attractive. When he turned with Violet on his arm Mrs. Adeane was at his elbow, and a moment later he was angrily watching Violet's disconsolate retreat. "My dear, come with me," were Mrs. Adeane's orders, "you have torn your flounce, you must let me pin it up." Violet thought she could have sat out a dance with Martin very happily, flounce and all, and tried to say so, but she was not equal to fighting her own battles, and the regret

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in her violet eyes was all that was left to console Martin when she was borne away. He glanced at his wrist watch. Was he to go back to France without even saying good-bye?

Turning away, he was not pleased to find the backwoodsman in his path, watching him with an unwarrantably friendly smile. "Excuse me"—the accent was not quite that of the easy London speech Martin was accustomed to hear—"but you said you were Miss Mereworth's cousin—are you Martin Mereworth?"

Martin looked him up and down before replying —a brief but comprehensive glance. He certainly was not "Martin Mereworth" for this occasion.

"Yes."

"I'm Bernard."

"Really?"

"Bernard Mereworth—the Birmingham lot, you know. But perhaps you aren't interested in the family history?"

"Oh!" Light dawned on Martin. So that was why Mrs. Adeane had taken the fellow up! "My second cousin, aren't you?" He felt no inclination to claim kinship with the Birmingham Mereworths, but for decency's sake one must be civil to the fellow. "So sorry I didn't identify you at first, but I believe we've never met before. Come and sit down somewhere out of this crush, won't you? We might go and have a drink."

Bernard, following his cousin's lead, sat down

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gingerly as if he were afraid of breaking the springs of the sofa on which Martin dropped with his light, easy movement. For cousins they were rather remarkably unlike: Bernard well over six feet and massively built, his handsome fair head overtopping almost every other in the room, Martin slight and dark with pleasantly irregular features: Bernard carelessly dressed in new clothes that were at once too loose and too tight for him, Martin very quietly and expensively point device from head to heel. The difference extended to their manners, for Bernard's expression was friendly and his observation of his cousin was frank and a trifle amused, while Martin was extremely polite, cool and on his guard.

Martin could see a great deal out of his sleepy dark eyes without looking at it. He noted Bernard's hands, large and strong and blunted by work, but well formed, and free of any inclination to fidget; his own hands were small and exquisitely kept, but not better shaped. Martin was the finelier finished of the two men; but Bernard, allowance made for his clothes, was by far the finer physical machine. Martin's brows drew together in a faint frown. It was the summer of 1918, and in that room Bernard was almost the only man of his age and physique not in uniform. Martin himself was another, but that was only because Martin was exercising the Guards' privilege of wearing mufti. In a poor relation Martin would have forgiven the manner and the accent—such as they

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were, it was no great matter—and even the disposition to come too quickly to familiar terms; it was at the civilian dress and the "pots of money" that he drew the line.

"Are you staying in town?—Bring me two cocktails, please."

"Not for me."

"What will you have, then?"

"Nothing, thanks. I'm a teetotaller. You see, my grandfather Mereworth died of D.T. Always best to be on the safe side, what?"

He smiled cheerfully into Martin's faintly astonished eyes.

"Oh?—Two cups of coffee, please. And don't you smoke, either?" Martin held out his case.

"Yes, thanks, I find a cigar no end soothing in a tight place." He lit up and settled himself cautiously against the cushions. "I always expect to go through these things on the floor. I did once, and there was the divvle to pay. Nearly upset a promising deal—but that isn't your line, of course. Yes, I'm in town for a spell. Putting up at a temperance pub in the Euston Road. I thought I should certainly get robbed if I went to one of your big London places, but a temperance hotel is so respectable. I'm very green."

Martin, apparently studying his own instep, was afraid his cousin would find Euston a long way off. If he could be of any service—

"Oh, I couldn't put your kindness to such a

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strain," was the cheerfully ambiguous reply. "Seriously, though, I'm very glad to have run across you. The fact is, I came to town expressly to look up my relations."

"You're lucky to be able to get away when you like."

"I can't. I haven't had a holiday since 1915. But they've recently sent me back my right-hand man—he got smashed in a flying accident and invalided out—so I thought I'd take a spell and see what you people down south were like. I couldn't call on you because I hadn't your address I did call on Mrs. Adeane. She seems extremely—hospitable." The small hesitation might have meant simply that he was searching for a word, or it might not. "And my cousin Violet—Miss Mereworth—is extremely pretty."

He admired her, did he? Mrs. Adeane would see to it that he had every chance of admiring her. "Ye-es," said Martin, drawling, "she is considered so."

"Why does she stay with Mrs. Adeane? She doesn't seem to have much of a time."

"Mrs. Adeane," Martin's accent was polite to the verge of ineptitude, "is her aunt, you know."

"Yes, that had dawned on my intelligence. She's not by any chance engaged, is she? Unofficially, I mean."

Well: one cannot hit one's relation in a supper room. Martin, in self-defence, fell back on levity.

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"If you're thinking of Mrs. Adeane, I'm afraid she's already booked. Violet is still open to an offer—from a gilt-edged security."

"Sorry if I seem to catechize you, but there's literally no one else to go to. I can't ask Mrs. Adeane these things. After all, we're kith and kin, and I'm interested."

"Oh, not at all."

A pause ensued. Bernard glanced once or twice t his cousin's carefully inexpressive profile. Perhaps he found conversation difficult. It was intended to be so. "You're home on sick leave, aren't you?" he tried again. "I saw your name among the March casualties. When are you due back?"

"To-night."

"To-night?"

"Cinderella. I vanish on the stroke of twelve."

"Oh, hard luck! I suppose you hate going?"

What a question! It was one which poor Martin had carefully refrained from putting to himself. He shifted on his cushions and shook the ash from his cigar. "Oh, I've rather an amusing job at present. I'm at the base, well out of harm's way, and within easy reach of a bath. Couldn't be safer if I were in B—London."

Bernard stared, then he smiled: the smile of a man quick to see a joke against himself, entirely sweet-tempered, not without a trace of regret. "That must be no end jolly," he assented. He emp-

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tied his cup, set it down, and was on his feet in a moment with an easy swing of his big frame.

"Well, I'll be pushing on. Good-night, Captain Mereworth; sorry I don't pass muster," he said, and was gone.

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CHAPTER II

"MARTIN!"

Martin was on his feet, looking after Bernard Mereworth, the colour which his cousin's Parthian shot had called up still warm in his cheeks. He had never been made to feel such a fool in his life, and his instinct was to race after Bernard with some disarmingly warm and youthful apology. But here was Violet, adorably flushed, half shy, half eager, and at sight of her he forgot everything else on earth.

"I've run away from Tony Fleet. He went to get me an ice, and I saw you across the room, and Oh, Martin, I *couldn't* let you go without saying a good-bye! Do you mind?"

His chance at last! "The garden," said Martin.

It was a grey night, warm and quiet. On the turf under the elm trees, except for the glow thrown up over the clouds and the distant lulling murmur of traffic, London might have been a hundred miles away. There were no lamps, and not many people, for supper was going on within doors, and in the shade of great shrubs of lilac and yew, centuries old, ran winding walks which gave a certain amount of privacy. At the far end, in a sheltered and solitary alley, Martin dropped Violet's arm

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and stood before her with bent head, slipping his hands into his pockets.

"I say, I want to ask you to marry me. Will you?"

"Oh!" said Violet.

"I'm sorry to be so abrupt, but I shouldn't think you were altogether taken by surprise. You must have seen that I love you. I'd like to tell you so more—more fluently, but I haven't much time, and circumstances aren't propitious. It wouldn't be pleasant for either of us, would it, if I were discovered on my knees?"

Violet would not have cared if he had been discovered on his knees in the ballroom. Had she seen that he loved her? She had had a thousand hopes and fears; most of all she had dreaded that he would go away this time, as he had gone before, without letting her know what was in her mind. And now—"If you're sure you really want me, Martin—" she murmured meekly. "You know I'd always do anything you want."

"Thank you," said Martin. After a moment he added, "Then I may—may I?"

Violet was wearing a posy of her name-flowers tucked into her dress. Delicately, with the tips of his fingers, Martin disengaged three or four of the dark, long-stemmed, fragrant English violets (it was characteristic of him that he did not take the whole bunch), touched them with his lips, and slipped them into the pocket of his coat.

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"If these come back to you, Violet, you'll know I've gone where I can't take any sort of violet." Violet made a quick movement. "That settles that, then, and did you think I was such a sentimental fellow?" He laughed down at her, reverting to his lightest tone. "Come and sit down on the bank; the grass is dry, and that lilac dress of yours looks what the fair Bernard would call 'no end jolly' against this hedge of honeysuckle. Yes, I do mean Bernard Mereworth. What made you give the fellow three dances? Three—I counted them."

"I couldn't help it, Martin. I didn't want to! I hate dancing with him—I don't like being thrown down in the middle of the room for every one to laugh at." This was not strictly fair to Bernard, but Miss Mereworth had her excuses. "If I'm not nice to him Aunt Helena does scold me so. She flings him at my head morning, noon, and night!"

"Do you mean she wants you to marry him?"

Violet nodded resignedly. "Last year it was Lord Ingres, now it's Bernard Mereworth, and worse than ever. You see, I'm twenty-four, and she thinks it's time I was off her hands. Oh, Martin, why can't she like you instead of him? You're both my cousins—she might just as well!"

"I can't think why, unless it's because he's rolling in money and I haven't a farthing. But why don't you like the fair Bernard? Taken out of his clothes he would be a handsome man, and he's a bit of a sportsman in his way."

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"I can't *bear* him," said Violet quite fiercely—Violet, who was sweetness itself. "He is a boor. He never knows when he isn't wanted. Besides, I hate to see him in those civilian things—I always want to ask him why he isn't at the Front."

"He knows a trick worth two of that." Martin's tone was unexpectedly bitter. "He's one of the heroes that are going to win the war in the workshop. So when I'm back in the trenches he'll still be available to dance with you."

"I will try not to let him. I will do my very best. But he—he does persecute me, and Aunt Helena scolds and scolds—"

"And I'm in France. What hard lines, isn't it?" Martin crossed his knees and lit a cigarette. Violet watched him wistfully; was he really sorry for her and did he really care? And was this to be all? Well, whatever Martin did was right in Violet's eyes. "Ah! well, I owe Bernard an apology. But I shan't pay it. He has all the luck."

"It's all my own silly fault, because I can't stand up to people. Oh, Martin, why am I such a little duffer? I haven't any sense at all. I don't wonder your stepmother thinks I'm not good enough for you. But tell me, are you going to say anything to her before you go? Won't she be very cross?"

Violet spoke in all good faith; she thought very humbly of herself; yet she had more excuse for vanity than most women. She was very lovely;

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slight as a lily and lily-fair, with dark hair and long dark lashes curling back from eyes that matched the flowers of her name. Sweet eyes, a little wistful, a little pathetic; when she raised them in their appealing softness, Martin found it hard to keep the self-denying ordinance he had imposed upon them both. He seized her hand; but at that moment a red-faced young man and a lady in pink wandered into the lilac alley and sat down on a bench, and he was obliged to drop it again. "Dash it all, this is a rotten way to get engaged!" he said piteously. "My stepmother? Yes, I spoke to her this morning, and she absolutely forbade me to marry you."

"Martin, you don't mean it?"

He nodded, twisting his little dark moustache. "It's this rotten old family feud. She was most frightfully angry and said that if I was going to unite myself to your branch of the family I could choose between you and her. And do you know I haven't a penny beyond what she allows me? My father ran through every farthing of his own money at the gaming tables. It was in his blood and he couldn't stop himself. No one knew it, but he was out and out ruined when Lady Grace married him. She paid his debts and my school bills, and when I grew up she sent me into the Guards. There's plenty going as long as I behave myself, but if I do anything her ladyship doesn't like—!" He shrugged his shoulders as if the world were too

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much for him. "Did you ever hear of a more exasperating position? Here am I, a strong, healthy fellow of seven and twenty in a crack regiment, and I can't marry the woman I love because I can't afford to keep a wife!"

The world had always been too much for Martin Mereworth: a young Guardsman well supplied with money, popular wherever he went, heir to the family property and the title that went with it, many a working man at Castle Mereworth had more personal liberty than he. His mother, whom he dearly loved, had died when he was sixteen, and the rapid re-marriage of his father, an ill-tempered man with a cutting tongue, was a great distress to Martin. His stepmother liked him, but Martin kept his distance till Julian Mereworth interfered. "Be civil to your mother, Martin." Martin, wincing, said that Lady Grace was not his mother. "She pays for you," said Mr. Mereworth. "She pays for your food and your clothes. She runs this house. I haven't any money. You're entirely dependent on her and so am I. So be civil to her, understand?" He had not to speak twice.

It is hard to break the thousand and one cobweb filaments of association and suggestion. Martin's tastes were bookish, but he hunted and shot because territorial heirs are expected to hunt and shoot. He had a secret passion for the sea, but his nomination for the Guards had been promised to him in his cradle, and in the end he found him-

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self in the army as a matter of course. It wearied him to such an extent that he was making tentative efforts to escape when war broke out and escape ceased to be imaginable. And he had gone on doggedly against the grain through four years of dirt and discomfort, hating it steadily from end to end. He never told any one that he hated it. He had fibbed to the Medical Board because his battalion were short of officers. He knew that if he had put in for an extension of leave he could have got it. He was a stoic in his way, Martin Mereworth: something of an ascetic too, as Violet Mereworth was finding out to her cost.

He pulled down a sprig of honeysuckle to inhale the scent, then slipped his hand back between his crossed knees. "How sweet this place smells!"

"Martin, is your knee hurting?" asked Violet timidly.

"No, thanks. So you see I'm afraid it means a row with Lady Grace."

"Shall you mind?"

"Not much. It was bound to come. I owe her a great deal and I shall never quarrel with her, but she can't captain the ship and she wouldn't like it if she could. She always wants her own way but she doesn't think much of you if you let her get it. She enjoys scrapping. That's why she married my father. I call it deuced uncomfortable myself."

"We really aren't a very loving family," said

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Violet. "Aunt Helena hates your stepmother, too, and as for Grandfather, I don't know what he'd say if he knew about—if he knew we'd made friends, you and I. Martin, why is it? Why should they all quarrel so?"

"It's the old trouble. They simply don't seem able to forget." Martin laughed, moving restlessly in search of the ease which was not often granted to him. He had sprained his knee in an ugly fall among barbed wire and was reaping an aftermath of mild neuritis. Violet was certain she could have stroked away the pain with her soft hand, but she dared not touch him, and she dared not question him. "I believe the only thing that would heal the feud would be for one of us to find the family treasure."

"What treasure?"

"Old Monte Carlo Mereworth's treasure—the Purple Pearl."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, my darling girl, you don't mean to say you never heard of the Purple Pearl?"

"No, I never did. Tell me about it."

"Quite right—it *is* much nicer on the lawn," was the seemingly irrelevant reply. The pink lady and her escort had moved away. "Violet—now those two charmers have gone, couldn't you let me hold your hand?—Thank you. Because I shall be in France in twenty-four hours and then I shan't have anybody's hand to hold." Violet's fingers curled

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up very contentedly inside his light warm clasp. It was better than nothing. "I never wanted anything so badly in my life as I want to kiss you, Violet, but I won't. Not now. Let's see, what was I saying? You scatter all my ideas. Oh, the Purple Pearl! Well, once upon a time—it was in the spring of 1870, to be precise—"

"Never mind the date, it doesn't matter when it was!"

"Yes, it does, it matters most awfully. In 1870, darling Violet, you may remember that our great-grandfather, the famous Monte Carlo Mereworth, died. He had played hard all his life and before giving up the ghost he determined to have a final flutter. He called his three sons to his dying bed: that was your grandfather, the eldest son and heir: my grandfather: and the grandfather of the aforesaid Bernard of Birmingham whom you're going to marry after I've been blown up by a Hun—"

"Martin, don't!"

"I'm sorry, dearest darling.—So the old sport said to them, 'I hate you all equally and I don't want to leave my money to any of you. Rollo'—that's your grandfather, sweetheart—'will get Castle Mereworth because it's entailed. But I've turned all the loose cash into jewels and hidden them in the Castle, and the fellow that first finds them can collar the lot. Here are three envelopes. Take them away but swear not to open them till I'm dead.' So they all swore on a Bible which

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had to be borrowed from the butler because there wasn't one in the family. 'In these three envelopes," said our ancestor, 'you will find three clues to the hiding-place of the treasure. None of them is any good without the others. If you have any common sense you will pool your information and divide the jewels. If you haven't, and I don't believe you have, you will fight like cats and dogs, and my one regret is that I shan't live to see it.' Then the footman bowed them out and three days later the old fellow died."

"And did they quarrel?"

Martin laughed. "I believe the scene that followed was indescribable. When my grandfather opened his paper he found one word of four letters, perfectly unintelligible. He sent it to every cryptographer in London but none of them could make head or tail of it. Your grandfather had the same experience. After six futile weeks they agreed to a compromise, but when they approached the other fellow, the youngest brother, they had the most painful surprise of their lives. Bernard Senior —they're all Bernards in that branch—said he should love to come into the ring but it was out of his power. His envelope had been stolen from him by his German valet before he opened it. It appears that Bernard Senior was the gayest of the trio, and he had been—er—unduly communicative after supper. Otto Heinz put two and two together and took the paper out of his master's pocket

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when Bernard Senior wasn't in a position to protest."

"But why didn't they catch the valet?"

"Because, darling, it was 1870, as I said before, and Otto Heinz had been mobilized back to the Fatherland. And whether or not he died before the walls of Paris no man knows because he was never heard of again. But the fat was in the fire because not one of the brothers was going to reveal his word unless he could get both the others in exchange. There was, in short, the most tremendous family row. Your grandfather and my grandfather refused to believe in Otto. They said he was a myth and that Bernard Senior had the paper up his own sleeve all the time. They were deadly polite to each other but deadly uncivil to Bernard, and they turned the Castle upside down looking for the Pearl, but they never found it. There was a clause providing that the younger brothers were to have right of access, but Bernard was out of that because on his own showing he hadn't any clue at all. Bernard was dead cuts with the rest of the family and went into trade, where he acquired much money, of which your future husband reaps the benefit; your branch and my branch settled down in gentlemanly idleness. But they quarrelled, too; they were always accusing each other of getting up early to scout the Pearl; if it weren't for my mother," Martin's voice softened suddenly, "I should never have set foot inside the Castle.

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She kept a truce of God all round. She even clung to the Birmingham Mereworths; there was talk of young Bernard's coming to stay with us once, but the pater stopped that. You remember her?"

"I remember her," said Violet softly. "I loved your mother."

"Yes: well, when she died and Lady Grace came on the scenes, the truce of God dissolved rather rapidly. Within six months no two of us were on speaking terms. That's why I can't marry you. Quaint, isn't it? Old Monte Carlo Mereworth must be chuckling over his little joke."

"Does anybody know any of the words now?"

"I know mine because my father gave me the piece of paper when he was dying, and your grandfather presumably knows his, and either young Bernard knows his or some young Otto Heinz does —unless Heinz was shot before he had time to pass it on. I'll tell you mine if you like. It's dine."

"What?"

"D-I-N-E. At the Ritz or anywhere you like. No, not romantic, is it? Not much to go on, either; one can't call it anything really helpful in the way of a clue."

"Martin, do you believe this story?"

"On my honour, I don't know," said Martin more seriously. "It sounds like purple moonshine, doesn't it? But the fact remains that old Monty Mereworth did buy the Purple Pearl, not to speak of quite forty thousand pounds' worth of other

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jewels which have vanished off the face of the earth. Otto could have sold those abroad but he couldn't have sold the P.P. anywhere without a hue and cry. It was a historic jewel and had belonged to a Ranee of Bengal, and it was an extraordinary colour, said to be unique. Otto may have kept it in his breeches' pocket or it may still be hidden in one of the Mereworth coal-scuttles, but this much is certain, that it was bought by our great-grandfather in 1868 and has never come into the world's markets since."

"Dear! I shall now go straight home and look for it," said Violet. "Or turn Winnie on; she's very good at puzzles and things. It's something like a treasure!"

"Forty thousand pounds. A modest competence: yes, when the war's over we might get along on that without selling the P.P."

"I shouldn't think of selling the Pearl," Violet declared. "It ought to be a family heirloom—oh, Martin, don't look at your watch! Oh, it isn't time already, is it?"

Midnight was striking from all the chimes of London. Martin stood up. He was still smiling, but he was very pale; it was no more than thousands of others had to go through, but that reflection, though fortifying, was not consolatory. He was distressed and anxious for Violet. She was sweet and gentle, and he loved her for it, but it made him cruelly anxious. What would happen if

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Mrs. Adeane put the screw on? And what about Bernard Mereworth? Martin's cheeks still burnt when he remembered his conversation with Bernard; he felt that Bernard had come out of it better than himself. On second thoughts and in cold blood he rather liked what he had seen of Bernard —his cousin after all; the tie of kinship counted for a great deal with Martin Mereworth; but that again was no consolation. A thorough bully might have roused in Violet some sort of fighting spirit, but when she got to know him better would she be able to stand up against a man of Bernard's quality—certainly strong and persistent, probably gentle, and backed by all the resources that money gives? Handsome, too, in his way: Martin recalled his rival's fair profile with a spice of the family rancour. Except for the family trait of fine eyes under black eyelashes, his own pleasant dark features laid no claim to beauty.

"Yes, I must be off," he said. "I shall only just have time to change and catch my train. Never mind, darling, the war will be over before long, and then if my stepmother remains obdurate I'll chuck up my commission and go into the city and marry you."

He held out his hand to say good-bye. Violet, cruelly disappointed, but submissive, gave him her own, smiling at him bravely. She was unconscious of the appeal in her fawn-soft eyes, but it took Martin's breath away and carried him off his feet.

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He could deny himself but he could not deny Violet, though nothing would have made him believe that his self-repression was as hard on her as it was on him. "Oh! I can't stand this, I must have one kiss," he murmured, and took it, and then drew back, his dark face working. "I didn't mean to do this, Violet. It isn't fair. I shall only hurt you all the more."

"I wish—I wish you had married me before you went."

"Hush, you don't know what you're saying." He drew her into his arms again and leaned his cheek against hers. "Don't tempt me. I should have deserved to be shot if I had. You're so young, Violet. Do you love me? I could have made you love me a great deal more. More, more than you've any idea of. Oh, my God, why didn't I marry you before I went out? But no, if I do get killed it will be better for you to be free. Only you won't let them marry you to any one else, will you, so long as I'm alive?" Insensibly she was drawn closer and closer till she could feel his heart beating against her own. "You're so young, my sweet. That's what frightens me. I can understand well enough why men desert, now." He was struggling to keep his ordinary voice and manner, but with imperfect success. Violet had never seen his gay reserve broken down before. "Violet, I—I love you so, you will be true to me?"

"Oh! do men never understand? Never mind."

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She turned her lips to his. "Yes, I love you, Martin. You don't half know how I love you. And no, I will never marry any other man so long as you're alive. Never, never. Indeed you can trust me. But oh! my dearest, don't, don't get killed. You're all my strength. If you die, I—can't—"

"Rubbish! I'm not going to die!" He fought his way back to self-command, but it was, visibly, a hard fight. "Don't cry, my sweet one. We're all in it together." Docile, Violet repressed her tears. They could wait till Martin was gone. "My batman's worse off than I am."

"Why?"

"He's engaged to three girls," Martin explained, carefully drying Violet's eyes with his own handkerchief. "One's more than enough for me."

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CHAPTER III

CASTLE Mereworth stood on one of the southernmost spurs of the Sussex downs, overlooking the grey spire of Chichester and the silver water channels of the lowlands stretching away to the sea: an imposing quadrangle, a harmonious medley of a dozen different types of architecture. The west front and main entrance were modern, having been rebuilt in the sixties to please the fantastic taste of the fifth Lord Mereworth, who had made of them a thing of beauty surprising for its date, or indeed for any date. The east wing was Jacobean, the north Georgian; elsewhere there were Elizabethan mullions, and Lancastrian roses, and a thirteenth century chapel, fragments representing the growth of its long life and the whims of its successive owners; for the Mereworths were all artists, and among less creditable interests they all kept a passion for building and a love for their beautiful home.

The oldest part of the Castle, however, was detached from the main building. Uncompromisingly Norman, a round squat keep of solid stone, loopholed for arrows, the East Tower, as it was called, stood well away from the end of the terrace, frowning over the park. It dated from the

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days when Rollo Mereworth had taken French leave of King Stephen to build himself an eyrie and harry the countryside. Tradition said that Queen Bess had slept in its one habitable room. Tradition also said that other ladies equally fair and frail had occasionally been put up in it even within living memory; but it was empty now, and likely to remain so for many a year to come.

A few weeks after Martin left for the front, the setting sun was streaming into the room where his grandfather Rollo, sixth Baron Mereworth, lay dying in an immense Jacobean bed. Lord Mereworth had been and still was a very handsome man. Wrapped in a Chinese dressing-gown, he lay propped on pillows, staring out of the open window towards the sea. He was dying, but he still had zest to appreciate that view, and also the beauty of his granddaughter Violet, who sat sewing in a low chair beside his bed. The Mereworths as a family were not virtuous; frequently they were not even respectable. Of the three brothers who had quarrelled over the Pearl, the youngest drank, the second played, while the eldest had been a connoisseur of many things, but principally of women.

Lord Mereworth lay watching his granddaughter with half-shut eyes, admiring her beauty as if she were a picture. Violet could never make up her mind which she liked less, the scoldings of her aunt or the compliments of her grandfather. But she had her harbour of refuge, the secret door

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