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# THE CHINESE PUZZLE



*By*

MARIAN BOWER  
and LEON M. LION

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# THE CHINESE PUZZLE

## CHAPTER I

ROGER DE LA HAYE walked slowly out of the open door and down the steps of a certain club in Piccadilly, and then pulled up to look at the scene before him. He was conscious of the stream of human beings who jostled him—of the men who stepped out of his way—of the women who lifted their eyes and let their glances tell such a variety of tales.

Here and there he returned the look, but without receiving or conveying any individual impression, for his mind was so taken up with the scene that in one sense was so familiar, and in another so new.

It was London in mid June; London before the War was anything more than a possibility half believed in, half regarded as a guy to frighten the timorous.

In the next house along the street, the window boxes were filled with pink geraniums, their color bleached from them by the summer night and the blaze of electricity, until they wore a transparent, intangible air.

Across the road were the railings of the park, sticking up as if they were a series of lances, held by hands that were strong and yet not visible, and beyond them were clumps of trees, their leaves leaves no longer, but the pattern in a veil of mingled mist and light; after that there was the undulating stretch of grass, which had lost its green, and was now neutral-tinted and woolly with the moisture overlaying it, while everywhere were lights and again lights, until the farthest row merged themselves in the dip of the sky, of that British sky, which was soberly

purple and indigo, and had none of the garish effects of the Eastern one that Roger had left behind him.

To Roger de la Haye there was nothing ordinary in these lights, in these atmospheric effects. On the contrary, they held for him both the delight of rediscovery and of contrast.

Every man has a chord in his being that vibrates to one particular message sent through the perceptions. With some, it is the sight of a drop of dew on a flower, with others, the scent of a rose; again the glimmer of moonlight on water will make the lip of the hardest soldier twist. Napoleon, it was said, could never see a woman in white, walking between the trees in a green avenue, without feeling the throb of his remarkably steady pulse.

Women go less by phenomena than by association. The beauty of even the most glorious sunset is enhanced by proximity; the memory of a flower is less a thought for its color than of the hand which offered it. As for Roger, it was just that homely scent of moist earth that set his mind rejoicing now.

The smell carried him out of London to the quaint white house at Zouche de la Haye. It reminded him of all his boyish excitements, of going out to shoot a rabbit, of the tramp down the plow, of the misty October days, of the brown leaves curled up on the spikes of a hedgerow.

Latterly, since he had made up his mind to follow the same career as his father, and had set himself to understand the little a European may of the Oriental mind, he had been very rarely at Zouche. But he knew exactly how things were there. The next day he proposed to go home. The next evening, if the weather were kind, he and his mother would walk out of the long French windows across the terrace, down the steps into the garden. Lady de la Haye loved flowers. There were whole beds full of roses, red roses with a fragrance that scented a whole room, new since he was there. But the border under the Elizabethan brick wall round the bowling-green was quite unchanged, and at night the clumps of white

pinks would look like cushions for fairies to lay their heads on, just as they had done when he was seven years old and fairies were as real to him as Fido the retriever.

At this point Roger, coming back to the practical matters of the moment, began to think of what was immediately before him. It was something greater which had caused him to promise to put in an appearance at this particular dance than the mere desire of a man newly returned from distant lands for any amusement. Indeed, so little did the invitation concern him, as an invitation, that while he recollected the number of the house in Grosvenor Square, the name of his hostess had slipped from his mind.

The previous day when he had hurried to see his best friend, Paul Marketel, Paul, rather to his amusement had mentioned, with a twist about his strong mouth, that he was going to display his big person in this particular ball-room. Roger had started with the idea that he would like to go because Paul would be there, and then, as events, especially diplomatic events, have a way of doing, they took an unexpected turn, and Roger found that there would be convenience, as well as pleasure, in thus having an opportunity of seeing Paul, for he wanted to say a word or two to him on a weighty matter, under the disguise of frivolity.

Roger had returned from Peking in a leisurely fashion. He had spent as much time as he pleased at any place which interested him, and so when he eventually found himself in London, and reported himself to the Foreign Office, he learned that China had made one of those spasmodic moves which give indications from time to time of what she might be capable, should it ever seem good to her to modernize herself, in the Western acceptance of the term.

This particular move was the proposal for a loan for the purpose of building the nucleus of a Chinese navy. The British Government was approached, and timorous, as

usual, about hurting foreign susceptibilities was inclined to temporize. At this juncture Paul Marketel stepped in. He offered to take up the loan himself, provided the British Government would participate to the extent of a benevolent interest. The proposal was accepted, and it became evident at once that not only speed was necessary to carry through the affair, but secrecy as well. The German Intelligence Service has always been particularly well served in England, and Wilhelmstrasse immediately got a hint of what was in the wind. The Far East has always been a pressing concern of the German diplomatic mind, its unavowed aim to make the vast Chinese Empire into an exclusively Teutonic sphere of influence. Therefore this navy loan was doubly disconcerting. First, because Germany resented any display whatever of Chinese initiative, and secondly, because Chinese initiative backed by British support was especially distasteful.

A note was received by the Court of St. James suggesting an international conference, and Paul knew that the only way to circumvent that move was to oppose it with the *fait accompli* of a private loan, privately arranged. It was at this point that Roger came in. There were reasons why it was particularly suitable that he should represent the British Government in the matter. He was to play that rôle as unobtrusively as possible, and with no official standing, but the arrangements for meeting and discussion were left in his hands, and it was his intention to settle these with Paul in as casual a fashion as possible, in the interval between one dance and the next.

He crossed the road before St. George's Hospital, skirting in and out of the buses and traffic congregated there; and then, as an unwished-for reminder, there came to him the remembrance of the acrid Chinese smell; of that evil odor which every Celestial city—Pekin perhaps less than most—seems to gather up and blow in whiffs, in and out, between all the holes and corners of the native houses and their compounds, and then on through those straight streets of the European Settlement which, with

their order and regularity, are a perpetual marvel and an equal irritation to the Chinese.

The Far East came to Roger by inheritance. His father, Sir Arthur de la Haye, was so pre-eminently the authority on Celestial matters, that the whole of British diplomacy in China seemed to hang on his shoulders. England never lends her representatives one ounce of unnecessary strength. They have to impress out of their own personality. If they make bricks without straw when their confrères of Russia, or Germany, are provided with substantial sheaves, then they have done no more than their duty; if they fail, the difficulty of their situation provides no extenuating circumstance. Another man is sent, and then another, until one turns up with such a combination of the essential qualities, that he effects marvels as if they were commonplaces.

Sir Arthur de la Haye was such a man. The Chinese not only feared him, but they respected him, and the respect of a Chinaman means greater things than the casual Westerner is given to supposing. He was even friendly to a limited extent with many of the Chinese officials. One man, Chi Lung, the mandarin and viceroy, whom the Dowager Empress disgraced twice, and twice recalled, because no one else was so acceptable to the Western Powers, made no secret of both friendship and affection for Sir Arthur de la Haye.

Roger never had any other thought than to follow his father. The East runs in families. India has its soldiers who, generation after generation, look to the frontier as the most inspiring thing in life. The Chinese tradition is younger, but it is there, all the same.

Roger recalled these things with a curious sense of taking stock, as a man does before a life and death operation, or as a woman does before her baby is born, and later he was to remember this walk as the circumstance that marked the ending of the impersonal phase of his manhood.

Men go to their development by various ways. With some, ambition pushes to the front and dwarfs everything

else, for overweening ambition is a Juggernaut, which only arrives at its goal by rolling under its car not only sentiments but personalities. With other men it is a woman—and then everything depends on the lady. She either uplifts him or drags him down. Only one thing is certain. Love and a woman never leave a man where they found him. Ambition had so overtopped Roger's development, that hitherto women had played but a very secondary part in it. Chi Lung (who had watched over him since his father's death, displaying an interest and affection that had something paternal in them) never hesitated to say that this was the triumph of the Oriental education over the Western inheritance. The Celestial imagined—or chose to make himself think—that his teaching had relegated women in Roger's mind to the position of "honorable baggage,"—the accepted Chinese attitude.

Anyway, fancy-free, Roger turned out of Grosvenor Place, through the connecting streets and on to the great square. There the bustle, the lights, the music, the group, either side of the awning, of those poor souls who gather to catch what glimpse they may of a feast to which they will never be bidden, pointed out his destination. He pulled up a moment. The name of his hostess floated, hovered, near to his consciousness.

"Hip——" he murmured. "Hippeley——" Then he had it.

"Tippley-Smith."

He walked up the felt-carpeted steps, received the number for his hat, and began that work of time and difficulty—getting up the staircase in a crush.

The Tippley-Smiths had but lately arrived, by translation from Balham, to Grosvenor Square. An only child, and a successful patent for compressed turpentine, were responsible for the ascension, and now, since an income in five figures and judicious effacement could do most things, when humanity was filling up that measure of vulgarity which was to receive the purification of self-sacrifice only a year or two later, they were so far established in Society



that their guests for the most part looked at the girl, looked at the house, and forgot the father and mother. It was a bargain, and all bargains necessarily require one side to propose terms and the other to accept them.

Roger had just attained to the bend of the staircase, when he happened to look ahead. Already he had been greeted by several people who knew him, by more who made the "I knew your father, I knew your mother" their medium of introduction. He replied to them genially, and was not in the least taken in. Without actually formulating the thought in so many words, he was perfectly aware that Sir Roger de la Haye, young, rich, and a rising diplomat, was not an acquaintance to be neglected.

But as Roger lifted his eyes he forgot all social possibilities, noble or ignoble. A face arrested him. He looked again. He was still more interested. He saw a girl, who had yet something womanish in her finished pose, in the air of quiet but certain self-possession. The next moment one of those high head feathers, the fashion of the hour, got between him and the girl's face. He could only catch glimpses of a knot of golden hair, of the outline of an exceedingly white shoulder.

Impatiently Roger waited his turn to make his bow to his hostess, who stood just without the door of the ball-room. As impatiently, once within the long room, empty of furniture save for that row of benches close to the wall where the chaperons sat, looking for all the world (as a keen critic of human nature once said) like the vultures watching on the Towers of Silence—he gazed about for the one face he wished to study.

He found it, and noticed that the girl was accompanied by an exceedingly well-preserved woman, presumably her mother. His training, which had taught him that a trifle is often the surest indication of a wide-sweeping truth, caused him to remark the expression on that woman's face. It wore that eager, alert look of one who has not so many acquaintances that they can afford to let a single friendly individual go by. "New to London"—he said to himself.

None the less, though the mother and daughter might be just outside this particular ring—(factions herd, each in their own flock, as if they were sheep, expecting to be rounded up by a collie)—Roger knew that they were no strangers to Society.

The situation interested him less than the girl. He looked about for someone to introduce him. Several times he drifted away, more than once he came back to find only the mother there. At last his perseverance was rewarded, he found a mutual acquaintance, made his bow, and learned that this girl, who already intrigued him more than all the other girls in the room put together, was a certain Miss Melsham, Miss Naomi Melsham.

"I suppose," remarked Mrs. Melsham, as Roger lingered by her while another man claimed Naomi for a waltz, "that you are tired of hearing that people knew your father or mother."

Roger looked up with a half-laugh. This was the note of the evening, and it amused him to see that Mrs. Melsham was quick enough not to strike it, even by implication, without letting him know that she was aware he might think it was being played too often.

Roger murmured that he was only too pleased when people talked to him of his parents.

"Then," went on Mrs. Melsham, "you won't mind if I tell you that long ago my husband knew your father. He was in Peking, in the consular service. He didn't stay long, out in China. You know the climate there. I have often heard him talk of Sir Arthur de la Haye. Of course," and now the eyes looked up quickly, "that was before I married. My husband left the service and settled in Nice. We lived there until he died. Then my girl and I thought we would like to travel. I am afraid to say for how many years we have been vagabonds. This is the first time we have been in London for a season. It was suddenly borne in on me what a neglectful mother I was. Naomi has not even been presented."

Roger considered Mrs. Melsham more carefully. With

her regular features, she might be any age from forty to fifty. Her complexion was carefully but not blatantly improved. Her hair was dressed with an attention to detail that nine out of ten Englishwomen forget. To omit her diamonds would disturb the average British matron to the point of discomfort: purposeless wisps down the back of her neck leave her quite complacent.

Roger looked impatiently down the room. The women's dresses were making shifting, changing combinations of color, the breeze was coming in from the open window, and the hum of voices followed it from the balcony, yet, all at once, he became conscious of a feeling of hurry. It was as if he had been running hard and was out of breath.

There followed a sharp recoil, a sense of danger. He looked towards the door. There was an instant when he meditated leaving then and there.

"Here is my daughter," quickly remarked Mrs. Melsham at his elbow.

Roger started, he watched Naomi coming down the room, and his look was so earnest that Mrs. Melsham suppressed a peculiarly fine smile. Bending down, as if to put straight a fold of her gown, she edged away a pace. It was Roger, not she, who should receive Naomi from her last partner.

The girl came up. She looked sharply past Roger to her mother, and as she did that her face seemed to freeze, to grow old, with that age which is due, not to the passing of time, but to experience.

"Our dance, Miss Melsham," said Roger.

The music had begun, the room was filling anew. Naomi looked up. Roger understood that she was pleased to dance with him, and was filled with the marvel of it. There came to him that sense of wonder which is the first sign that the door of the heart is about to swing back. He felt that he had nothing to say, that the small talk, ordinarily appropriate to such occasions, was not only futile but ridiculous. There seemed to be great issues in the back of his consciousness, but when he asked himself what these

issues might be, a turn of his mind assured him that there were none there at all.

Naomi and he walked a few steps down the room. He was just about to put his arm round her waist, when a tall man came up to him.

"Hullo!" said Roger.

The big man nodded casually, but Roger asked Naomi's permission and stepped a pace away.

The two men said only a very few words to each other. Naomi did not intend to listen, and yet she was so interested she had to look that way.

"Better make it next Saturday," said Roger; "I've fixed up the other."

"Then I'll appear as the unexpected guest," the big man said.

"Capital," Roger returned, as this big man, with bulk as well as height, and a face which arrested attention by its air of strength and command, passed along.

It was evident that in some way he was a personage. An old woman, with three strings of diamonds on a lean neck, put out her hand and touched his arm with her fan.

"Who is he?" asked Naomi, as Roger came back to her.

"That's Paul Marketel. Don't you know him?"

Naomi shook her head.

"Most people know Paul, or know of him," continued Roger. "He is a great financier."

"Where money is there will the grabbing fingers be gathered together," said Naomi suddenly, sharply.

Roger answered quite seriously. It is perhaps inevitable that a diplomat who was at once so young and so successful should lose his lightness of touch. Only maturity can take cleverness with a shrug of the shoulders.

"No," Roger demurred, "Paul isn't that kind. His honesty is proverbial."

"And yet he is a financier," insisted Naomi.

"Because he is a financier," corrected Roger. "I once heard him say that honesty isn't only good policy, it's confidence lent out at compound interest."

Naomi's lips curled disdainfully.

"It's so easy to be honest on an income of five figures," she said.

Roger looked up sharply. He was unpleasantly conscious of some unexpressed implication. But, since that supposed disagreeable things, as he would have phrased it, he shut his mind to the impression. He forgot that if you want to arrive at the truth—cultivate a memory for trifles. It is the first article of a diplomat's creed.

"Paul was not always rich," he went on—"he has quite a history—and," he added, with that everlasting resentment of the male for a woman who does less than her duty to the young and defenseless—"a stepmother."

"A stepmother!" Naomi returned. "That rather sounds as if he had suffered at her hands."

"He did," answered Roger briefly.

"And now, when the tables are turned?" the girl went on.

"Paul is always kind—but he pleads a previous engagement as often as the dear lady wishes to see him."

Roger finished the sentence abruptly. He wondered what had made him so expansive about his friend's affairs.

"I think," exclaimed Naomi, breaking in on the misgiving of the man before her, "that I could bear anything better than contemptuous generosity. It would force one to be silent, and suffering for one's sins in silence must be almost as bad as being asked to kiss the rod with a smile.

She spoke hotly. Her voice vibrated. Afterwards—not once, but many times afterwards—she recollected what she had said: how she had defined the penalty of silence and marked out the torture of it.

As for Roger, the effect on him was immediate but evanescent.

He perceived that Naomi Melsham was evidently capable of thinking out certain problems—of facing certain eventualities. But again, he had noticed that her touch was curiously variable. Sometimes she betrayed all the sure-

ness of participation—sometimes a thing might have been remote from her—a theory, and the odd part was that it was just the meaner, less lovely aspects of Life which she approached as though she had a more complete knowledge of them.

## CHAPTER II

"You know," protested Roger, as he came out on to the steps of the Tippley-Smiths' house, "it is ever so early. We have hardly got halfway through the program and you promised me another dance at least."

"Mama thinks we must go," murmured Naomi vaguely.

"We must be going on," amended Mrs. Melsham. "I especially promised we would put in an appearance at an old friend's house."

She spoke both explicitly and with decision. But the truth was the other engagement was a creation of her own brain, and her early departure a sudden resolution born of the events of the evening. Roger was so evidently attracted, he had hovered so persistently round Naomi, that Mrs. Melsham deemed it wise to take her daughter away while the impression was both vivid and compelling. Over-emphasis, she held, especially in attraction, tends to a final blur.

She came out and stood at the head of the long flight of white steps, looking down in a leisurely fashion. Naomi and Roger were behind her, and she saw no reason either to curtail their leave-taking or to watch it with an openly observant eye.

A striped awning descended from the door to the pavement, and within that awning was a powerful electric bulb; therefore, as she moved well forward along the step, her face was very visible to that fringe of sad humanity still keeping vigil, one or two deep, on either side of the pavement.

"Please ask a policeman to call a taxi," she said over her shoulder.

Roger was a moment before he answered; then he came

to her side and looked down the steps. With his tall figure, and the contrasting black and white of his evening dress, he was even more noticeable than Mrs. Melsham herself.

No blue-coated representative of the law appeared to be in sight, and so a man detached himself from the crowd.

"'Ere!" he cried out, with a suspicion of a foreign accent in his raucous voice; "I'll get a taxi. What name, Sir?"

Mechanically, Roger gave his own, and the man, instead of turning immediately away, pushed himself on to the strip of red felt and looked up the steps. His first glance was for Roger, an appraising scrutiny, then the prominent eyes traveled onwards, and impelled by that force which makes one look back at a person staring hard, Mrs. Melsham's eyes went straight to meet the stare. She took in the outline of a heavy form, the unhealthy appearance of a large face, bloated, and yet whitened, as if it had been for months, possibly for years, shut up where there was a lack of sunshine. She remarked that the man was shabby, that he was unmistakably a foreigner, but she saw too that the eyes were as intelligent, as acute, as they were insolent and cruel.

She stepped back, swayed as if she were about to lose her foothold. She pushed so sharply against her daughter that her purpose might have been to hurry within the house and hide herself, and then she laughed uncertainly.

"Mama!" exclaimed Naomi. "What is it? You are not ill again."

Mrs. Melsham steadied herself. Naomi's exclamation told her that she was betraying her agitation, and then following that there came the impulse to push the question of her health angrily aside. She resented as much as the breath of a hint that physically she could be on the wane.

The woman whose charms have greatly attracted is scarcely ever a valetudinarian. It is only she who all her life long has been denied the thrill of admiration, who makes ill health the pathetic last bid for attention.

It was true, Mrs. Melsham had felt—well—not quite so



buoyant as usual,—it was true she had gone secretly to a physician, and had heard from him that nothing was organically wrong, only she would do well to live quietly for a time—the very last thing she ever intended to do—but now when she was about to tell Naomi, impatiently, to mind her own business, Roger's face checked her.

"Men," she reminded herself, "were all creatures with a blind belief in theory. They put their faith in formulae. One of these was what she called contemptuously "the dear daughter persuasion." So, now, if it pleased this infatuated young man to glow with approbation at Naomi's tactless remark, she was certainly not going to disturb his impression.

At that moment the shabby foreigner, with the collar of an ancient broadcloth coat turned up about his ears, until it half shadowed his face, came back hanging on the steps of the taxi. He held open the door, and there was just another moment before Mrs. Melsham could bring herself to go down the steps. As she stepped into the vehicle, she was careful not to look near the beggar.

Roger handed out a tip without a glance either, and for once Naomi had no attention to bestow on outside affairs.

"You will let me come and call on you tomorrow," murmured Roger, making his voice low, on purpose that the answer might come from her and not from her mother.

The girl hesitated. Roger looked at her in dismay. Was she going to refuse? Why should she refuse when she had been gracious to him all the evening?—and then she faltered that they were staying at the Cleveland Hotel.

A policeman came up, and showed symptoms of wishing to hurry them off. Roger put his head in at the window for a final good-by, and the taxi man gruffly suggested that he did not know his fare's destination.

"209 Parchester Terrace. Of course, how stupid of me!" said Mrs. Melsham.

It took the driver a moment longer to make sure of the exact lie of the address, and then Roger stood, bare-headed, out on the curb, until the taxi disappeared.

He had a feeling of being cut short; it was as if a shutter had come down and blocked out the sun, so that what, a moment before, had been a brilliantly lighted room was now a gloomy dungeon. He went up the steps, glancing at his watch. It was a little past one now; at the earliest he could not present himself at the Cleveland Hotel much before noon next day. The eleven hours between seemed endless, and then, as he reached the entrance, and so far recollected himself as to put his hand into his pocket for the ticket for his coat, Paul Marketel crossed him on the step.

It was perfectly natural that while Paul Marketel lighted his cigarette Roger should exchange a word with him. They did not say a single syllable the whole world might not have heard. They both of them knew their business too well to risk as much as a reference to Zouche in such a situation, but the alien, who had retired to his first position on the back fringe of the row, peered between two shabby shoulders to have a better view.

"There's two toffs for you if you like," he remarked.

"That's Marketel," his neighbor informed him in a grudging voice. "He could buy up half London they say, could Marketel."

"I haf seen him before," answered the alien dryly, and after that as if he had finished something, or accomplished something, he swung round and walked with an alert step, quite out of keeping with his ragged appearance, on the shadowy side of the square, until he came to the first turning out of it.

As for Mrs. Melsham, she only waited until they were safely out of the range of observation.

"My dear," she gasped, and she clutched Naomi's arm, "did you see that man?"

"What man?" inquired Naomi indifferently.

"The man of course who fetched the taxi."

"No," answered the girl, and pointedly she turned her face and looked out of the window. She wanted to be left alone with her thoughts. She wanted to look out on to

the streets and drink in the mysterious spirit of the night; to look at silent house after silent house, and to imagine all the warmth, all the glow of a romance that possibly was being lived in one if not in all of those high uniform dwellings. The very street lamps, casting their wedges of light across the road, had a beauty in her eyes which she had never seen before. The face of Roger de la Haye came flashing into her mind, then disappearing and flashing again, just as a revolving lantern turns facet after facet of brightness on to an expanse of ocean.

Naomi's experience of admiration had been by no means happy. Until she was nearly seventeen she had lived with an old aunt, her father's sister, in Lausanne. When this aunt died, Mrs. Melsham had no alternative but to take her daughter to live with her. This particular winter she rented a villa in Nice, and kept Naomi as much as she could in the background, until to her mingled dismay and satisfaction she found that there were certain possibilities of usefulness about a beautiful girl just passing from childhood to womanhood.

Naomi herself was bewildered. Everything was so utterly unlike the ordered life in Lausanne, then, for she was naturally quick, and Mrs. Melsham did not think it worth while to be guarded, she began to understand and to resent. But the outcome of her first revolt was a bitter sense of defeat. Mrs. Melsham told her she was both green and a fool, and openly parodied Naomi's scruples, for the entertainment of a group of her own best friends. The girl heard, and sat still, tingling in every vein. It seemed easier to acquiesce than to resent: besides, resentment was obviously so useless, so she drifted down the line of least resistance, until, one afternoon, an individual of nondescript nationality called Hermann Strum, and a very young Frenchman, who believed, when he entered the room, that Mrs. Melsham was a much maligned woman, came to play cards at the Villa.

What followed left an indelible impression on Naomi's mind. There had been an altercation at cards, and not

even Mrs. Melsham's aplomb could explain away certain discrepancies. Hermann Strum saw in the occasion an opportunity too good to be lost; he rose indignantly, and declared that he was out of pocket by at least a thousand francs.

Mrs. Melsham, shrill for once, denied that there was anything wrong at all, or if there had been—giving herself away—it was a matter of a single deal, and therefore of fifty francs at the most.

But Strum, banging his thick fist on the table (for a German always must be physically brutal), swore that if there were any haggling as to the figures, he would settle the whole question at the bar of local opinion. Or, since he was not what he himself would call an unreasonable man, and he said this with a cold sneer—if the cash were short, he was prepared to recollect that there was a daughter—a charming daughter.

He got no farther than that; the leer on his face—the white misery on Naomi's, forced Armand de Rochecorbon's chivalry.

At first he had been inclined to withdraw, to disassociate himself ostentatiously, from the whole unsavory atmosphere. Now, he pushed himself to the table; he flung his note case before Strum.

"I am satisfied that the mistake has nothing to do with Mademoiselle," he declared. "There are three thousand francs there," pointing to the case, "you shall have the other two tomorrow morning." And, in face of this diversion, Mrs. Melsham—alone equal to the occasion—thanked the little Frenchman for what she called "so opportune an advance"—and spoke airily of repayment.

Hermann Strum disappeared as suddenly as he came.

Since then, Naomi Melsham had never touched quite so low a depth, but again and again she had since realized that admiration, in the men she met, lacked the very quality which, secretly, she most longed for it to possess.

Now, the one thing her thoughts insisted on was that

there was no leer in Roger de la Haye's ardent glance, no reservation in his estimate of her.

Naomi Melsham made up her mind that there should be this one white flower in her garden of remembrance. If she and Roger met again a few times, if they danced together a few times more, he should take his leave believing the best of her. That was the utmost for which she hoped.

As for Mrs. Melsham, she contemplated the outline of Naomi's neck and the round of the well-dressed hair, with an enigmatical smile. Once she seemed about to speak, and then, with a shrug of her shoulders, she checked herself. What she had to say would not become less unwelcome if she blurted it out at once. On the other hand, Naomi might be more amenable if she was given time to estimate present possibilities and was then confronted with the sequel to past facts.

Mrs. Melsham waited until the taxi was halfway down Piccadilly, and then she let down the window. She put out her head.

"Drive to the Cleveland Hotel," she told the man; "I've changed my mind. It's too late to go on to Parchester Terrace tonight."

"I'll come into your room. I want to speak to you," said Mrs. Melsham, as she and her daughter stood on the narrow top landing of the big hotel.

Naomi held open the door, and her mother entered without taking any notice of the obvious unwillingness, sat down on the one cane chair with a careful thought to her dress, removed her gloves and smoothed them out finger by finger.

"I suppose they only put people's maids as a rule into such a room as this," she observed.

"We asked for the cheapest," Naomi murmured.

"And we have to go without lunch three days a week, and to pretend we are dining out two more, to live here at all," Mrs. Melsham amended.

"What can you have to say?" demanded the girl.

Mrs. Melsham rose and faced her daughter.

"Merely this," she said, "that if I had not known that Hermann Strum was dead, I would have sworn that he was the ragamuffin who fetched that taxi for us."

"Hermann Strum!" cried out Naomi. "It's like everything that has happened to me all my life, that *he* should reappear tonight."

"I don't suppose," suggested Mrs. Melsham tranquilly, "that whenever he turned up he'd be particularly welcome."

"Mama," said Naomi, with a catch in her voice, "tell me—what made us think that Hermann Strum was dead?"

"It was said all over Nice that he had been arrested as a spy, and you know what happens to spies."

"Then it was only a rumor that he was dead?" the girl asked.

"Everyone seemed sure that he was a spy," Mrs. Melsham went on. "Of course," she continued, blandly ignoring inconvenient facts, "had I known his *métier*, I should never have had him at the Villa."

"Then," summed up Naomi, "there was no real foundation for what you told me. When you assured me you knew Hermann Strum was dead—you were merely inventing."

"Not at all," retorted Mrs. Melsham, "I was repeating what people said. Besides, don't you think if he'd been alive he'd have tracked us down before now to see what he could get out of us?"

"Yes," said Naomi, amazed as she still was to find that her mother could make the most damaging admission with an air of injured tranquillity. "I suppose he would have come to blackmail."

"My dear," remonstrated Mrs. Melsham, "what a way to put it! Don't you think your habit of using big words about small occasions is a mistake? It might give people a false impression. A little altercation at cards does not

quite imply that an unprincipled man has the whip-hand of one."

"A little altercation at cards!" cried back Naomi. "You know what Hermann Strum called it. You know what Armand de Rochecorbon knew it to be. You know what Hermann Strum demanded as the price of his silence."

The girl covered her face with her hands. The humiliation, the pain, the very fear, had left one clear thing behind, and that was a great longing for the ordered, the open, in life.

Mrs. Melsham watched the shudder.

"You see," she said—"I was right. You will be wise if you take the good things which come your way. If the worst comes to the worst, and it is Hermann Strum, he is more likely to be reasonable if he sees we have some useful acquaintances."

"Mama," declared the girl, "if you say another word, I'll never see Roger de la Haye again."

"It would be rather like cutting off your nose to spite your own face," Mrs. Melsham retorted.

"Understand," said Naomi, "that if Sir Roger does come to call, if he does wish to pursue the acquaintance, you are to get nothing out of him."

"Hermann Strum is just the kind of man to be extortionate," Mrs. Melsham murmured.

"I don't care!" the girl cried back. "Neither Hermann Strum nor anyone else shall force me to be a cat's-paw again."

Mrs. Melsham always knew when she was worsted. She gave up the argument now, and abruptly said good-night. The morning, she thought, might bring Naomi to a more pliable frame of mind.

The girl passed a wretched night. She expected a visit from Hermann Strum before breakfast, then as the morning passed she began to wonder how much of the story Mrs. Melsham had invented. After all, when she came to examine the statements, her mother merely said that she

fancied she saw a resemblance between the beggar and this Hermann Strum.

"I believe mama wished to frighten me into doing what she wanted," Naomi told herself bitterly. She didn't quite see the usefulness of the move or its clear connection with any scheme of aggrandizement, but she had experience enough to know that Mrs. Melsham would travel down a very long road, the better to turn the corner of her particular scheme.

A little before midday came a telephone message from Roger, to inquire if Miss Melsham was rested, and if he might take her and her mother to lunch at Candidale's, the fashionable restaurant of the moment.

"That's six shillings off our weekly bill," remarked Mrs. Melsham, "and if you can engineer him into dinner tomorrow, I may get through this week without cashing another check."

Naomi looked at her mother. After all her passionate protests, Mrs. Melsham was calculating possible gains as calmly as if not a word had been said.

"Please remember," Naomi cried out now, "that if I did what I ought I should declare I was too tired to lunch today, and be out when Sir Roger calls tomorrow. But I want to see him again. It's so refreshing to be with someone who takes it for granted one is honest—really honest, I mean. I wish Sir Roger to go on thinking that, so please don't forget your purse. If you do, he won't pay for the taxi back for us, I can promise you, and it's no use seeing a pretty hat in any shop window, he won't go in with you to buy it."

"I think," murmured Mrs. Melsham, reduced to plain-tiveness, a rôle she very rarely played, "that you forget that men like, really like I mean, to pay for little things here and there."

"Not as you make them do it," the girl retorted.

She took a turn up and down the cramped little room.

"Oh!" she burst forth. "Do you think I haven't seen? If you don't care, I do. Men amuse themselves with you



and me. You are a good sort. I'm a fine girl. But they say we are on the make. Oh! it's intolerable to be treated so lightly."

"And why are we treated so lightly, as you call it?" Mrs. Melsham asked, then answering her own question, she added, "Because we are poor."

"No!" protested Naomi, "because we are mercenary."

Mrs. Melsham shrugged her shoulders and let the argument go by default. She played the charming mother all through lunch, and breathed more freely when the day went by and there was no sign of Hermann Strum.

As for Roger the negotiations for the Chinese loan provided him with a very good excuse for not leaving town, but he knew that had there been no Chinese *pourparlers* he would still have lingered. As it was, this very business set a term to his stay in London.

It was arranged that certain individuals should meet at Zouche, and continue their negotiations under the disguise of a week-end visit. But, as a precaution to insure secrecy, and the passing of the visitors as mere units in a social function, one or two friends were to be added to the party.

There, Roger determined, was his opportunity. He intended Naomi Melsham to be of that party. He knew he ought to include her mother, but even his prepossession could not blind him to the fact that his mother and Naomi's had nothing in common. Mrs. Melsham played her part skilfully, for Roger concluded she was rather silly, when, in truth, she was over-clever.

Love can be strangely blind. One hour of great passion is worth a procession of dull days, but the outcome of it is always a conspicuous success or an equally great failure. There's no middle term with anything that has so nearly touched the skies.

It was Mrs. Melsham herself who settled the difficulty. She hinted that the Tippley-Smiths had asked her to help them through their first country house parties, but that she was hesitating on Naomi's account.

"My daughter is fastidious," she said softly. "These Tippley-Smiths are rather blatantly new."

Roger sighed with relief, not at the Tippley-Smiths' lack of generation but because Mrs. Melsham was engaged, and she, who caught most side winds, probably heard him and understood.

He went to the telegraph office the moment he left the hotel. He had already told his mother about Naomi: when she received his telegram, she would send an invitation at once.

The invitation to Zouche was perhaps the last thing Naomi Melsham anticipated. For the first time she allowed herself really to think of the possibility of enduring relations. She had been conscious for days of a certain new warmth about her heart, but she had feared that if not tomorrow, then the day after, the glow would be extinguished. But, above all, she was grateful to Roger de la Haye. We like supremely the people who show us our best self, how much more did Naomi feel about the man who told her twenty times a day, by direct statement as well as by implication, that he took it for granted she could not have an unworthy side?

Mrs. Melsham's jubilation, of course, provided the recoil.

"There is sure to be a house party," she remarked. "I hope there'll be some 'names' among them. My people like 'names,' and it will do me good to include my daughter in the list."

Included among Mrs. Melsham's various expedients for adding to her income was what she called a certain amount of journalism. In reality it meant that she retailed gossip. At Nice, in the winter, certain people liked to see themselves in the "Doings of Our Compatriots"—so, for "considerations"—of varying kinds—Mrs. Melsham supplied the editor with descriptions of what these dear souls had on their backs, and at whose parties they were "remarked." As a rule she went on to some summer resort and repeated

the gossip there; this time she had sent what she called a "few pars" from London to a Paris paper.

"I am not sure that I shall go to Zouche," cried Naomi hotly, "if I can't go there without dragging business into it."

"Then, my dear," flashed back Mrs. Melsham, "I hope you'll find accommodation for yourself while I go and stay at the Tippley-Smiths'. You gave yourself such airs about their party at Aix that they don't want you again."

"You know," returned Naomi dully, "that I haven't a penny in my purse."

"Then earn a shilling or two by sending me something exciting from Zouche; besides," went on Mrs. Melsham, "you aren't a child. You must know that we have been spending much more than we could afford this last week. All in your interest. If we don't both of us get free board and lodging until I can recoup a bit, we shall have to sing in the streets for our supper."

Mrs. Melsham might have stated her financial position in highly colored terms, but what she said was substantially true. Nevertheless her lack of means did nothing to prevent her paying a visit to an expensive dressmaker as soon as Naomi was at liberty to accompany her.

The girl had given in. There was her heart to urge her, there was that convenient excuse—the force of driving circumstances. Besides she knew nothing of a conversation on the telephone between Madame Emilie Marie and her mother. Madame had said something about a long bill to pay, and Mrs. Melsham had not hesitated to declare that there was a very fair chance that her daughter's patronage in the future would be well worth a little elasticity in the present. "Let her get to Zouche, and then send in your account. It may be a useful reminder," Mrs. Melsham cynically advised.

For the rest, she spared neither time nor trouble. Mrs. Melsham's taste in dress was the only unimpeachable thing about her, and every garment she selected for Naomi struck just the right note.

The girl came very near to being softened by all this solicitude displayed for her, and then, just when nine mothers out of ten would have been reticent, Mrs. Melsham's levity overcame her.

"This looks like business," she remarked. "I hope you will remember, my dear, that where a man is concerned, it's pace that pays. Rush him and he'll adore you—at least, until after the wedding day,—give him time to think and he'll recollect another woman whose gowns fit better than yours do."

Naomi heard. She was in the taxi, her boxes were up before. She sat back white and cold, until she was out of sight, and then with a sob she put both her hands over her face.

"Give me a chance," she whispered, "and I'll play straight. Dear God!" she went on. "I ask nothing so much as to play straight."

### CHAPTER III

THE De la Hayes had been at Zouche for more than two hundred years.

There is a little ring of country in East Anglia which has twice received a distinct impression from France. Once, after the Edict of Nantes, when the Huguenots poured across the Channel, once when colonies of Royalist exiles lived in and about the little town of Bury St. Edmunds. There was a Flemish occupation too, then farther back a Danish, but it is the Gallic that remains an influencing factor even to this day.

The De la Hayes were Huguenots. They owed it to Madame de Maintenon and her proselytizing zeal that they became English.

A fortunate marriage with the last child of the old Zouche family brought the house and the surrounding estate into the hands of the exiles. There they held from father to son, always prudent, always astute, always careful to keep up the French tradition, until, when Sir Arthur was a young man, one of the beams in the wide hall chimney of the old oak and plaster house caught fire, and it was burnt to the ground.

Sir Arthur immediately set to work to build it up again, but in a fashion which local opinion decided to be "wonderful queer." He took for his model that château on the Loire from which his family sprang. So now the house consisted of a long white body, with a row of French windows opening on to a terrace, finished off at either end with round towers, each topped with a circular pointed roof. To either end was added a one-storied wing, and at the opposite side to the terrace was an entrance, led up to by a double flight of steps, protected by railings of wrought iron, of workmanship fine enough for *le Roi Soleil* himself.

Hardly a thing had been saved from the old house, so Sir Arthur brought over his collection of *chinoiserie*, and added to it as long as he lived. His was a many-sided nature. He was a fine musician; he had a considerable talent for sketching in water colors; his reputation as a judge of Chinese art was world-wide. It is only mediocrity that must concentrate to exclusion, since it has not strength enough to be at the same time pre-eminent and diffuse.

It was not until Zouche was habitable again that Sir Arthur married Amabelle Meddleton. Lady de la Haye was many years younger than her husband. She thought him the cleverest man in the world, and had no hesitation in saying so. Happily she could worship with a dimple on her cheek and a twinkle in her eye. Admiration without a sense of humor is provocative; admiration leavened with wit is infectious. She became hardly less of a power than her husband. Her fine touch soothed many an irritable diplomatic nerve. It was tacitly understood that certain people were to be turned over to her just because her hand was so light. Success never came near to spoiling her, because she never got over the wonder of it. It is only when one begins to take the praise of men as one's due that the world thinks of withholding it.

When Sir Arthur died, Amabelle returned to England. Hers was not a fashionable grief, so it did not require distraction. She did not even try to assemble those house parties which had been one of the brilliant features of Sir Arthur's rare holidays. Neither he nor his wife had ever thought themselves obliged to comply with the Pauline injunction to suffer fools gladly, but their guests had often been more than so many pleasant men and women come to eat and sleep and talk from Friday until Tuesday. They were often diplomats, glad of a friendly discussion on neutral ground.

A wit (cynical, perhaps, because he was not included) once said that at Zouche the first article of an international agreement came into being between two mouthfuls

of marmalade at breakfast. It was discussed in all its bearings, as Lady de la Haye called her guests' attention to her latest rose in the walled-in garden, and finally settled before midnight over a cigar in the Chinese writing-room.

But all this was in the former times, and Lady de la Haye had never been more sensible of that gulf fixed between the old and the new than she was on the day following Roger's return to Zouche. He had been in London rather more than a week. His mother had hurried up to greet him on his actual arrival, and as she waited to see him step out of the boat train at Victoria (for he had come overland from Marseilles), and caught a glimpse of his eager face, she told herself with a feeling of very great gladness that her boy was still her boy. The hours which followed were peculiarly impressed on Amabelle de la Haye's mind. The mother and son had been apart for five years, and manhood ripens and crystallizes between twenty-seven and thirty-three. But though she had schooled herself to accept it if it were there, there had been no reservation in his affection towards her. They talked of most things, of Zouche, of his work, of the East, even of their prejudices and their likings, but there had been no mention of a woman as a woman. Lady de la Haye understood Roger had come back, as he went, heart-whole.

The next morning she returned to Zouche, expecting Roger to join her the following day, and instead she received a telegram saying he was detained. At first, as she fluttered the pink sheet, she was so elated that she had hardly time for her own disappointment.

"The Foreign Office is keeping him," she said half aloud. "It shows he's indispensable. When a diplomat is indispensable, then his career is made."

All the rest of that day she had barricaded her heart against any feeling of loneliness with dreams of Roger's future, of his importance. She wanted no gratification of the man as an individual, she wished for appreciation as a

hall mark of competence. Sir Arthur had served his country selfishly, he had asked for abnegation from his wife where his official work was concerned, and Amabelle had learned her lesson well, for she had willingly, and with outward cheerfulness at least, sent her only child back to the compelling East, in the first devastation of her widowhood.

But when one day lengthened into two, and the days into a week, Amabelle had the feeling that something was hanging over her. She studied Roger's letters more for what they did not say than for what they said. They were brief, they were noncommittal. "He is holding something back," she said. Then following a brief telegram came one which was revealing. Roger begged his mother to ask the Miss Melsham whom he had mentioned more than once down to Zouche. She had done what he asked at once. It was elementary prudence to acquiesce, and when Roger arrived in person she had only said:

"I have asked this Miss Melsham, and as I didn't think she'd care to be the only girl in the party, I have wired for Victoria Cresswell."

Roger nodded, he made no reference to Victoria, but suddenly he crossed to his mother's side.

"Miss Melsham is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen," he said simply—he waited a few moments and then he added, "I hope you'll like her, Mother."

It was these few words, so bald, so restrained, yet so full of significance, that had been in Amabelle's mind ever since she heard them. None the less, she knew a little more about Naomi Melsham than these words revealed. All women can make judicious inquiries. Amabelle had put out feelers, and she had learned at least such outlines as that Naomi and her mother generally lived on the Continent, that they were not rich, and, a circumstance which weighed considerably with her, that the girl's father had been in the consular service in the East. She had spent the morning in a kind of feverish restlessness, and now, in the early afternoon, when Victoria was expected any



minute, and Naomi by a train only a very little later, she was so possessed with suspense, that it was impossible for her to sit still in the garden or in the house. Old wives say that when the birth of a man-child who will go far is imminent, the expectant mother walks from room to room, and that each peregrination foreshadows the upward incidents of her man-child's career.

Amabelle had been restless in just this way, and, after all, was it not a birth which was about to be accomplished? If what she feared—no, surmised; she did not allow herself to say feared—was correct, then was not something that had not been there before, coming into her life?

She paced up and down the big salon, looking at the familiar objects, with a spot in either cheek. Her husband seemed so near to her.

"If only you had been here to tell me what to do," she whispered.

She walked towards the window, listening for the first sound of a coming automobile, and, the better to hear, she drew aside one of the yellow silk curtains lightly worked with a flight of soft butterflies. As she stood there, the fold began to shake, until it seemed as if each butterfly was on the wing, yet, with that touch of humor which never deserted her, she said to herself, "Destiny comes in a Panhard nowadays, the chariot of Fate has lost its free wheel."

She had heard the car. It was coming up the drive—before she had time to get from the window to the fireplace it would have driven up to the entrance.

Yet the necessity to get to the fireplace presented itself as such an urgency that she almost ran across the room. She put out her hand, and grasped hard at the bow-shaped curve of the black marble mantelpiece.

She looked up at the window, placed above it French fashion, and her eyes stared through the glass, as if she must find help and strength on the other side of it.

Sir Arthur had copied this fireplace from a similar arrangement in the old chateau on the Loire. He had set

just that jubilant store by it that only a big man can afford to bestow on a small thing. He had so often drawn attention to it, that now Amabelle turned to it as the one thing which pre-eminently reminded her of him.

"The long view—that is the great thing," Sir Arthur had said to *terre à terre* neighbors who demurred about privacy.

Amabelle repeated his words now, and applied them to herself in quite another connection.

She must think of the long view, she reminded herself—of the ultimate gain, and not of the present dismay. She must school herself to fix her eyes on the future—on Roger's future—not her own.

The day had passed away from her—from her generation—it was with those coming on. "Le roi est mort—vive le roi," she summed up for herself.

She drew herself up. She was again herself, with that air of exquisite perfection that neither time nor sorrow had been able to dim.

She had caught the sound of steps. Littleport had thrown open the double doors. A guest was entering. Which guest?

Amabelle glanced down the long room, and then, with a sigh of relief, she hurried to meet the newcomer.

"You said you wanted me, and so I came at once," began Victoria Cresswell.

Amabelle nodded, and there was something in the way in which she drew up to this girl's side which seemed to intimate that here she knew she was close to a sympathetic personality.

Victoria looked at her hostess critically. She was about to say that Billy Hirst, the man to whom she had been engaged for years in a desultory fashion, had found himself unable to accompany her, but was assuredly going to join the party the following day, and then she said instead:

"Did you want me for anything very special?"

There were people who denied that Victoria Cresswell

had any claims to good looks, but most of them were ready enough to admit that hers was an unusually interesting face. Now, even in the midst of her perturbation, Lady de la Haye was conscious of an over-alert expression in the gray eyes.

"What is passing with Victoria?" she asked herself. The next moment she was inclined to take her own mind to task. "I am so overwrought," she murmured, "that I expect everyone else to be abnormal."

She motioned Victoria to one of the wide divans covered with a glorious stretch of Eastern embroidery, and taking the girl's hand she went straight to the point.

"My dear," she began, "the worst of being an independent woman is that one is always driven to depending on someone else when things go wrong."

"Has something gone wrong?" asked Victoria.

Amabelle considered a moment. She had sent for Victoria, and yet she did not know if she had the right to discuss Roger's affairs with her. She thought of the very little that had been said between her and her son, but if Roger revealed himself as freely to his friends as he had done to his mother, each member of the house party would have a suspicion of the trend of circumstances before he or she had been in his company five minutes.

Therefore, it seemed better, fairer, more loyal, to let the situation dawn on Victoria.

But if she could not mention Naomi, there were other developments she felt quite at liberty to reveal.

"You see," she began, with a wave of her hand towards the uncovered window over the mantelshelf.

"Have you opened the Chinese Room?" asked Victoria.

"For the first time since my husband's death."

"Then it is to be a diplomatic party?"

"Old Chi Lung is coming," Lady de la Haye went on.

"Your great China friend?"

"My husband's great friend," Amabelle added, "and Armand de Rochecorbon—you remember hearing of him?"

"He went out to Peking to shoot with Roger?"

"Yes. I knew his mother in the old days. He is Aimée's cousin, you know."

Victoria nodded.

"It will be quite like old times."

"My dear," remonstrated Lady de la Haye, and her tone was reproachful—"that's just what it will not be, nothing ever does come over again precisely as it was."

"That's the skeleton at the feast for most of us," suggested Victoria reflectively.

"For most of us who are not as young as we once were. Regret is so middle-aged—that, and finding one's self supplanted," amended Lady de la Haye.

She had struck a note which compelled Victoria's attention. The girl looked up with a question on her face, but Amabelle would not meet her eyes.

"We are growing quite dreary," she evaded, with a jerky manner unusual to her. "And, I'm forgetting I have not told you about Miss Melsham yet. You know, my dear," Amabelle went on, "I want you with me so often that I can afford to tell you that in this instance you were especially asked to balance Miss Melsham."

"Who is she?" asked Victoria slowly. She was beginning to see that there had been not only a point, but a special point, in her sudden invitation.

"Miss Melsham is very beautiful, I hear."

"Then you have not seen her?"

"No," said Amabelle—"it's—it's Roger who is enthusiastic about her."

"You are asking her on Roger's account—is she an old acquaintance of Pekin?"

"Oh dear, no," said Lady de la Haye. "Roger met her at a ball since he came home. But," she went on bravely, "it seems that her father was in the consular service. He knew my husband when they were both young men. I don't fancy this girl is well off. You know what struggles official people have, with practically no private means."

"I know," said Victoria warmly, "how your heart goes out to anything connected with the old China days,—and,

if they are poor in addition, there's no help for it, you have to befriend them."

Amabelle laughed almost guiltily. In this instance did poverty weigh? Did antecedents weigh? Did anything but Roger's words—"Mother, I hope you will like her"?

But at any rate she had been loyal. She had established a sympathetic atmosphere for this golden-haired girl, though not without an inner reservation of which she had given not the faintest hint.

Victoria sat back, waiting and quiet. She was so little at ease herself, there was such a tangle in her private affairs, that, in her turn, she asked herself if she was imagining a knot here, and then, a high voice broke on the stillness, and a slip of a girl with her thin shoulder-blades working her long arms, danced in at the window.

"You, Aimée!" exclaimed Victoria, springing up to meet her.

The girl laughed joyously.

"Yes, I!" she cried out. "Look at me—I'm a betwixt and between. I've banished schoolbooks, and I haven't put up my hair yet. I have said good-by to Paris, my sainted nuns and the convent, and I'm not out yet. I'm a kind of making the best of both worlds. But," she ran on, "I'm coming down to dinner tonight. My first real party."

She paused for sheer lack of breath, and slipped down by Lady de la Haye's side, curling herself up in a kittenish fashion.

She put up her cheek against Lady de la Haye's sleeve. It was as soft and as ripe-colored as a peach that had caught all the warmth from an old wall.

Aimée was never known to be still for ten minutes at a time. Once Roger offered her a penny for every five minutes she kept in one position. She worked out one copper, and then declared that the bargain would be dear if it were a case of guineas: so now, she had hardly nestled up to Lady de la Haye's side, than she sprang up again.

"Do you know, I'm excitement all through me," she began, and she clapped one hand against her chest and the other against her back.

"Is there any special cause for effervescence?" Victoria asked tolerantly.

"I should think there is—ask Auntie."

Victoria looked from the girl to Lady de la Haye. Then she had not fancied, she had felt the tension in the air. But she said nothing. If Amabelle wished her to know things, she would tell her of them. Victoria was very observant, and observant people, if they are of the nice kind, make it a rule not to force a confidence. It's only the inept and the blundering who are forever a-crying, "Tell me! Tell me!"

Yet, just because she would rather have avoided it, Amabelle de la Haye played to the child's cue.

"Where is Roger? Have you seen him?" she asked.

"I saw him go to the stable yard quite half an hour ago," Aimée rattled out. "He was fidgeting about there, as if no one had ever taken a car out to the station before, and now," she added, with a toss of her head and a flash of her eyes, "you can both of you guess the rest."

"I don't know that I can," answered Amabelle, in a reluctant voice.

"Auntie," retorted Aimée, "don't be diplomatic and know nothing. You know, and I know, that Roger himself has gone to meet someone, and that someone is the delectable she."

"My dear," reproved Amabelle, "what a way to put it! Moreover, it's never wise to jump to conclusions."

Aimée sighed drolly. "I didn't jump at conclusions, they jumped at me," she protested. "Has Roger ever wanted you to ask a girl before? Not just suggested her, as he'd say, 'Oh, ask Victoria'; or 'Ask Aimée,' if I didn't live here: but kept on at it, in a 'get-to-the-Equator-by-the-North-Pole' fashion."

Victoria looked at her hostess. This, then, accounted for that something suppressed in her dear friend's manner.

Amabelle had the quality of exciting not only friendship, but warm partisanship. Victoria's first thought, notwithstanding the everlasting attraction of youth to love, was for Amabelle's suffering.

"Men are so inconsiderate to their womenkind when they are in love," she said to herself. "I hope Roger hasn't hurt her more than necessary."

And then, as she formulated this thought to herself, there was heard the swift rush of an upcoming motor.

"It's she!" cried out Aimée. "Roger's she!"

Victoria saw Lady de la Haye's face.

"Be quiet, Aimée," she exclaimed, "and come with me." She put her arm through the girl's, and pulled her out of the window, and then, with a very tender look on her face, she stepped back, and softly drew the silk curtains together.

Amabelle heard Victoria go. She knew exactly why the girl had withdrawn herself, and yet so critical did the moment seem to her, that she all but called her back again. With a quivering lip she suppressed the inclination. Some women (and a woman only knows how it hurts) are doomed to face the crisis of life alone. One hopes the guardian angel hovers very close to them, yet, if it does, one wonders why the mercy of hearing the flutter of the white wings is denied to them.

As Amabelle had done before, so she would do again—it took her but a moment to master her weakness. She walked into the middle of the room, she drew herself to her full height, she faced the doors. Her heart was beating until the throb of it hurt in her throat. She saw those doors open, she waited it seemed an appreciable time for someone to pass through, and then she caught her first glimpse of Naomi Melsham.

To the last day of her life Amabelle remembered the breathlessness of that moment. The girl entered with a kind of shy elation, Roger was following her and she knew it. He was drawn after her, not because her hair was golden, not because her eyes were blue, not because of

certain graces, certain charms, but for the reason that went the deepest down into the heart of humanity, because she was the complement to his manhood, and he knew it.

Roger had said a good deal about his mother, he had made it plain how much they had been to each other, and Naomi knew that when Roger took to himself a wife, his mother would cease to be the mistress at Zouche and become a guest; therefore the gravity of Lady de la Haye's greeting amazed her. One does not examine carefully unless one admits that there is a possibility of acceptance.

"Why should she give me a chance?" Naomi asked herself quickly.

She had heard of mothers who put the happiness of their children before their ambition and their purse. It occurred to her that she might be face to face with such a one. Insensibly she was softened, for she would always take the good and leave the bad when an unfettered choice was offered to her. She put out her hand with an appealing gesture. She asked mutely for a suspension of judgment, for, as she would have put it herself, "her chance," she waited for the introduction with a mist overspreading her blue eyes.

"Mother, this is Miss Melsham," began Roger in the triumphant male voice.

"My son has told me a great deal about you," said Amabelle. "I am very glad to see you."

"It was kind of you to ask me to come," murmured Naomi.

"And I am very glad you could accept the invitation," said Lady de la Haye.

Then the two women looked at each other. The trivial sentences had just been to gain time on either side. An examination, an appraisal was bound to follow—and they both knew that, for good or for evil, their first conclusion would color their relationship to each other as long as not they themselves, but Roger, walked on this earth.



## CHAPTER IV

"If you please, my Lady."

It was Littleport who spoke, and the old servant's appearance, just within the double doors, broke in on a hesitation so momentous, that not only Naomi, but Lady de la Haye as well, gave a sigh—fluttering on the one hand, relieved on the other—at the postponement of what they both knew to be a great decision.

"Both motors *have* come back, Sir," said the old man, turning to Roger.

"Yes?" returned Roger apprehensively.

"Empty, Sir," went on Littleport, as he looked down with that fine 'I told you so' smile of the confidential servant.

"They must go to meet all the remaining trains," decided Lady de la Haye.

"That's what I told the men," Littleport answered. "I felt sure that his Excellency, being his Excellency, would have his old little ways."

Roger and his mother acquiesced, with no more than a simple assent.

It was Naomi who looked hard at the old man. Her first impulse had been to inquire as to the identity of this guest who was so important that two cars were kept running to look for him: the next moment, it was swept aside by another question.

The possessive note, the possessive air, were something new to her. Mrs. Melsham's series of *bonnes à tout-faire*, varied by an experiment who called herself "*dame à tout faire*," received as small a wage as they would put up with, and gave a grudging service, sometimes pointed by pertinent observations, in return. Here was a servant who took wages, but both gave and received precisely that which no

wage could buy. Naomi looked eagerly at the clean-shaven face and the light, benevolent eyes. Littleport seemed to furnish the clue to the whole position at Zouche, and she saw that he was glancing at her, with quite as questioning a look as she gave him. So, she not only came into the horizon of Roger and his mother, but into that of Littleport too. As she thought that, the old servant permitted himself to smile, that delightful smile of a fond nurse for a child.

"Oh!" breathed Naomi, and if she had obeyed her impulse, she would have hurried up to the old man, and then from him to Lady de la Haye, since he had done so much to explain Roger's mother to her.

But it was not her place to advance. She must wait until she was called. She looked across with an appeal in her eyes.

Mrs. Melsham once remarked disagreeably, that Naomi was capable of asking for the mustard with as much entreaty in her expression, as if she were begging for a ten pound note. Mrs. Melsham had complained, not of the gesture, but about wasting it on anything so unproductive as table condiments.

Now, the plaintiveness carried over to Lady de la Haye and arrested her. Amabelle was eminently a just woman, and it requires some imagination to be that. It is the individuals who pride themselves on their level dispositions who perpetrate more cruelties than a Spanish inquisitor. Roger's mother did not quite realize what had touched the golden-haired girl, but she was sure of the appeal.

"I like her, I know I shall like her," Amabelle said in her heart; and even though the words were but framed interiorly, there was a break in them, so great were the issues involved in the decision.

In common with most people who have lived a life where the just estimate of a fellow-creature may make all the difference, Lady de la Haye was never content merely to think a thing, she must always act on her reflections.

She walked across to Naomi, she stood before her, and

since she was a few inches the taller she smiled down on her. Naomi raised her eyes, and again Roger's mother translated their expression into words. "The girl cares for Roger," she told herself. "But there is some doubt troubling her. Is it that she thinks I shall make things unpleasant for her?"

The peculiar temptation of one who loves much swept down on Amabelle de la Haye. Could she kill her son's new interest? Could she turn Roger from this girl? Not of course by opposition,—crude denial always breeds obstinacy,—but by more subtle methods. Naomi had shown that her armor of assurance, the assurance of youth and beauty with its man to worship, had its weak joints. Should she discover where that weakness lay, make sure if it were merely shyness, or if there were a cause for it, if, for example, there was a mother not quite up to the Zouche standard—Roger had been so evasive about Mrs. Melsham—and then play to undo the girl?

The train of thought flashed point after point into Amabelle's mind, it stayed there but time enough to take shape.

"I am a horrid, jealous old woman," she told herself. "Haven't I said in my heart that I like the girl?"

She felt that it lay with her to make amends; and then Roger, seeing perhaps the touch of hesitation, put in a word.

"Mother," he began, "you know I have talked interminably to Miss Melsham about you and Zouche."

"But," carried on Naomi, requiring no further prompting, "I had heard previously about the *chinoiserie* Sir Arthur collected," she bent down and touched a scent burner of green Canton enamel. "I was prepared for wonderful things," she added, "but not for such wonderful things as these. I am very ignorant about them; will you teach me something?"

Lady de la Haye just glanced at Roger—and humor predominated in her look.

"My son knows my weakness," she said; "he knows I like to show my husband's treasures."

"My mother is inexhaustible on the subject," Roger amplified.

"And so," commented Amabelle inwardly, "you think to use that as the key to opening my heart," but aloud she said, "Look at this," and she took a rabbit, carved out of a single piece of amethyst, off the mantelshelf. "It is the *clou* of the collection."

"Tell Miss Melsham its history," put in Roger boyishly.

"My husband bought it, soon after he first went out to the East," Lady de la Haye explained. "One New Year's Eve he watched a young mandarin hurrying from street to street, offering a jewel to every passer-by, for sale.

"The treasure was apparently so valuable that, though several of his countrymen spoke to this young man with evident sympathy, none of them could spare the money.

"Happily, my husband had caught something of the spirit of the East. He knew that it is a point of honor with a high-minded Chinese to pay every penny he owes before the New Year dawns, and he guessed that it must be a matter of vital importance which would make this young man, who was evidently of mandarin rank, peddle his family possessions in the street.

"Sir Arthur went up to him. He offered to buy the amethyst rabbit, and then he found that the young man was on the point of fainting from hunger and exhaustion.

"The poor fellow had literally starved himself, hoping to scrape together a sum which would buy off an extortionate official who was threatening to foreclose for debt, and to seize the ground on which the family tombs were built—and demolish them. The rabbit he had kept until the last extremity, for it was a family treasure, and the Celestials set great store on their artistic possessions.

"Sir Arthur then helped this young mandarin to lay his cause before a powerful protector at Court. The rapacious official was removed—and the family tombs saved."

"The family tombs?" echoed Naomi.

"Each nationality has that which it supremely reverences, and that which most nearly touches its honor," Lady

de la Haye explained. "It is a point of honor to a Chinaman to pay every penny he owes before the New Year dawns, but the possession of the family tombs goes down to the very fundamentals of his religion."

"Why?" asked the girl.

"Because," answered Lady de la Haye, "ancestor worship and the offerings at the tombs of those ancestors are the supreme acts of devotion in a Celestial's life. That," she added, "is one of the reasons why sons are of such importance that if a man has not one he will buy a boy and adopt him."

"And daughters?" asked Naomi.

Lady de la Haye shook her head.

"That is a point on which it will take the East a long time to meet the West," she said. "'Though a woman has given you seven sons, do not trust her,' that is one of their proverbs, and as I have just told you how important sons are, you can estimate how low, theoretically at least, is their conception of woman."

"Theoretically," put in Roger. "In practice there has been more than one Empress Dowager. But then," he added, turning to Naomi with a smile which somehow transformed the general assertion into an individual compliment, "no nation is consistent where your sex is concerned."

"How strange it all seems, how far away," Naomi murmured.

"When you see Chi Lung," said Roger quickly, "you will find that one Chinaman at least is very near to my mother and me."

"Chi Lung," repeated Naomi.

"His Excellency, the Marquis Chi Lung," explained Lady de la Haye. "It is he who is expected this afternoon."

"And never comes," said Naomi quickly, venturing on a touch of lightness for the first time.

"He would say himself that time was made for coolies,"

Roger answered, but his mother looked from one to the other of them gravely.

She was always jealous for the honor of the Chinaman who had been so firm a friend to her husband. She was always careful that not even the shadow of disrespect should be cast over him. An unthinking boy, new to the East, had once referred, in her presence, to the old man as Number One Heathen Chinee, but he never did it again.

"The young mandarin whom my husband befriended was Chi Lung," she said now.

"And that was how they became such friends?" Naomi asked. "I don't wonder," she went on, "but I thought Chinamen never really liked us Westerners."

It was just a moment before Amabelle answered. Chi Lung was so coiled into her family circle, that she always found the intimacy difficult to explain to the average stay-at-home European. Besides, the old man had a strictly Oriental view on certain matters, and Roger's absorption in this golden-haired girl was by no means likely to please him.

Amabelle was not a woman for nothing. When you can't climb a wall, go round the field until you find a gap, is a precept the sex has laid fully to heart—and perhaps the mere acceptance of it tells how much woman has had to endure.

Amabelle knew she had no hope of moving Chi Lung directly, but it was possible she might do it through Naomi herself.

She decided to do all she could to arouse the girl's interest in the old man—her reverence for him.

"Things in China mostly go the reverse way to things European," she went on. "It is the drops which make the ocean, we say. They say, 'All or not at all.' The magnitude of the repayment must match the magnitude of the service, or the debt of gratitude had better be left to the next generation to discharge. So, because we have

been prosperous, and always happy as far as worldly circumstances could make us, Roger, I, and my husband, while he lived—Chi Lung hasn't mentioned the tombs for years."

"But if things were to go wrong, he'd come to the rescue at once," Naomi thrust in quickly.

Involuntarily Lady de la Haye made a movement of withdrawal, though this was exactly the point she wished to make. She recovered herself in a moment.

"Forgive me," she said, "but, you see, if Chi Lung ever thinks the occasion big enough to intervene, then either Roger or I will be in very serious trouble."

Naomi nodded silently. She stood a moment thinking over this story. Viewed by the light of her mother's pursuit of the immediately advantageous, it seemed almost fantastically far away and potential, and yet she had a perception that it implied a morality far deeper than the glibly convenient code of present-day manners. She put the thought away in her mind, determined to go back to it when she was alone, but she smiled happily. The higher appealed to her, whereas up to now she had always been dragged back to the lower. The good or the bad of a nature is really implied by what, left to itself, it would take or it would reject. Circumstances so often atrophy the finest endeavor, and the world, blinking with short-sighted eyes, never seems to realize that a losing fight against big odds can be a finer thing than victory over an equal opponent. Unbiased, Naomi would always rather climb than descend.

"Tell me," she began again, wanting to improve this hour when Roger's mother would be her friend, "may I see the Chinese Room, I have heard so much about it? Wasn't it there that——"

She stopped, warned by a glance from Roger.

Amabelle saw not only the look, but the understanding it implied. She had been going to finish Naomi's sentence, and say that in this Chinese Room, so celebrated for its treasures, had been signed the first treaty by Chi Lung and

her husband wherein the East deigned to borrow of the West: but, instead, she answered the inner spirit, and substituted: "I was going to keep a surprise for you, Roger, until Chi Lung came."

"For me?" Roger answered.

His mother nodded. There was such a lump in her throat that for a moment she could not speak.

"I was going to tell you then," she said, as she mastered herself, "that the door of the Chinese Room is unlocked."

"Unlocked!" cried back Roger, yet even at that moment he drew in Naomi also.

"The room has never been used since my father died," he said to her.

"Don't you see that I have just pulled back the curtains?" Amabelle asked, and she indicated the little green blinds which, years ago, had been the subject of a bantering difference of opinion between her and her husband.

Sir Arthur always declared that his wife made little silken curtains for the window over the fireplace in obedience to the British spirit of compromise, since, really, she resented the lack of privacy that window implied; while she retorted that it was consideration for him. She knew he would write a better dispatch if he were saved from the possibility of inquisitive glances over his shoulder.

Roger hurried across, he put his arm round her.

"Mother," he said, "you always think of me before yourself."

She pushed him just a little away—and even yesterday she would have clung to him.

"Yes," she answered tremulously. "You are going to use the room now. When Chi Lung comes you must take him in there——"

She stopped abruptly in her turn. She had said more than she meant. She was alluding to certain specific circumstances connected with the old Chinaman's visit, which were concealed behind an ordinary week-end party at a country house. Naomi only took it to mean that if one



has a friend, one sometimes talks alone with him. As for Roger his thought was limited to the personal aspect.

Men, with many opportunities of the universal in action, so often stay by the domestic hearth in thought, while women, who in the flesh may never go twenty miles from home, roam the continents in their dreams.

Now, Roger's eyes were already looking over his mother's shoulder, and that mother knew it. The woman came before the career; the new interest, before her who had hitherto held his confidence and his love. Only those who loving supremely are called on to abdicate—and are expected to behave as if they would rejoice at being supplanted—can estimate the suffering of such a moment. It is so easy to say youth goes to youth; but does that make it any more pleasant for maturity left out in the cold? Amabelle turned to Naomi.

There are various qualities in generosity; some of it is so grudging that it almost ceases to be generosity and becomes a provocation.

There was nothing so ungracious about Amabelle. She had decided on her part, and she would play it with all the grace at her command.

"You must see the Chinese Room," she said. "My son must show it to you," and she went and opened the double doors before either of them could answer her.

Amabelle de la Haye stood there, pushing back the quaintly inlaid panels, for these doors and the other two into the salon from the hall were pairs, and the four of them represented the four seasons. Roger was still a moment, and Naomi dropped her head, her face veiled with a new soft shyness. To each of them it was so much more than a mere passage of time—a mere gesture; Amabelle realized that she had given all she had, and could never take back the gift. Roger was jubilant. He felt exalted, physically, as well as mentally; with Naomi, the first flush of happiness passed into retrospect, and the looking back was bitter.

Love may be Lord of the human heart, but Cupid is both

the judge and the taskmaster. This girl, who had been touched by pitch, rather than had touched it herself, who had sometimes succumbed to unworthy shifts, but the next moment had always drawn herself up in protest against them, would have given several years of her life, now, never to have known how her mother eked out a precarious income, or some of the people she eked it out among.

She looked away from Roger's eager face, from Lady de la Haye's expectant attitude, and in her heart she was registering the resolve to walk as Roger would have her tread, and then, as he had done once before that day, Littleport entered, and the old man's arrival brought back the situation to the small happenings of everyday life.

"Tea is on the terrace, my Lady," he said.

Lady de la Haye moved from the door.

"Thank you," she said, and she went to the window. She looked back at Roger, but he had gone over to Naomi.

"Never mind about tea, come and see the Chinese Room first," he said, eagerly, to her. "You must see it now. I haven't been in it myself for five years." He made a step along. "Come," he said, "just think of seeing it for the first time with you."

Roger hurried Naomi Melsham through the door. It swung back until it was all but closed, but the eager voices floated into the salon.

"What is that?" Amabelle heard her son's voice say. "Why, that is my father's desk. Look."

She knew he was bending down to show all the quaintness of an Eastern design adapted to European purposes. Perhaps he would explain to Naomi how the spring of what Sir Arthur called the confidential dispatch drawer worked.

It had been a whim of Sir Arthur to keep the secret of this drawer. Besides him, only Amabelle herself and Chi Lung knew that it existed.

She made a hasty step towards the Chinese Room. Her first idea was that Roger must not tell Naomi, then she checked herself.

A man's wife must not only walk by his side, she must share his life—and his career, unless the marriage is to be a failure.

With a sigh and a little lifting of her graceful shoulders Amabelle pushed aside the yellow silk blinds and went out on to the terrace.

## CHAPTER V

TEA on the terrace at Zouche, if there were guests there, was one of those delightful breathing spaces when a number of pleasant people met together and felt that they had leisure to enjoy each other's society. But on this particular afternoon, as Lady de la Haye came through the window of the salon, she found no one there before her.

The terrace ran the whole length of the garden side of the house; it caught the afternoon sun aslant, so that there was always a shady corner as well as a warm one, and from either end two flights of steps led down, one on to the bowling-green, the other to a path which ended in an old gate-house (perhaps the marriage house of medieval days) looking on to the park.

The round table was pushed aside to avoid the glare. Littleport had seen to it that a hooded bench shut out the eye of the sun, an armchair, of what our fathers would have scoffed at as of the common Windsor variety, was drawn up before the tea tray. Lady de la Haye generally sat in it when she was on the terrace. She said it was a whim—and it was only those who knew her well who heard that it had been left to her by an old woman in the village.

Amabelle walked slowly up to the table. Somewhere in the garden she could hear Aimée laughing. She felt very much alone. She was possessed by that tired-in-every-limb feeling which so often follows a strain that apparently has been lived through triumphantly. But after a moment, impelled by the feeling that the daily round must go on, even if the skies threatened to fall, she took up the old tea caddy.

"One, two, three," she began counting the cups, and yet

laughing bitterly in her heart that she could be so earnest over anything so trivial, and then Littleport came to say that Mr. Marketel had just arrived.

"Mr. Marketel!" exclaimed Lady de la Haye.

"He drove up in his own car," the old man went on. "He asked if Sir Roger were here."

"He isn't in the list of guests," Amabelle put in quickly.

"Not as they were sent to the *Morning Post*," Littleport answered.

Amabelle half hesitated. She looked at the old man, and he met her glance with so careful a noncommittal air, that the pretty dimple which always showed at the corner of her mouth when she was very amused, puckered her lips with its coming and going.

"I see you have guessed," she said.

"Mr. Marketel said he was passing, my Lady," Littleport returned, with his shrewd smile. "He said he had stopped to ask if we could put him up over the week-end. Of course I didn't know he was invited, my Lady, seeing that you had said nothing about a room for him."

Amabelle laughed outright. She saw that Littleport was quite aware that Paul Marketel had come to meet Chi Lung,—but all she said was:

"I can trust to your discretion."

"Sir Arthur gave me his confidence for twenty years," Littleport told her proudly.

"I know," went on Amabelle, "and that is why I can speak freely to you now. This is a very important matter. It may be the turning-point in Sir Roger's career."

"I always do say he grows more like his father every day," Littleport put in, oblivious of the fact that there had been months, years even, when he had not seen him. "I'm glad Sir Roger is to have his chance, my Lady."

Amabelle smiled appreciatively. She recognized all the affection at the back of the old man's observation.

"We are forgetting Mr. Marketel!" she exclaimed. "Where is he?"

"I told Johnson to take him up to the second west

room," Littleport answered. "He said he was hot and dusty and wanted to change."

"The second west room," exclaimed Amabelle. "Why?"

Littleport answered with another of his fine smiles.

"His Excellency will have the first, and the dressing-room for his study. If Mr. Marketel is next-door, they may find it convenient to have a word here and there. Monsieur de Rochecorbon was to have had that room, but he can go one further down the corridor, though Diplomacy does go in to dinner before Finance."

Amabelle suppressed a smile of another kind this time. The old man's foible was etiquette.

"What I don't know about precedence Burke himself doesn't know," she had once heard him say as he tutored a raw footman.

"I meant to tell you later," Lady de la Haye went on, "that we should want you to help us."

Littleport bowed with his best air and waited.

"His Excellency and Mr. Marketel will meet in the Chinese Room," she said. "Sir Roger must join them unobserved—and secretly. You will order his little motor to come round, and then come and tell Sir Roger that it is at the door. He will get up, saying he has to go to Chipley Magna on business."

"Will he be driving himself?" Littleport asked.

"As far as the gate-house. He will leave the car there, come up the path, and go into the Chinese Room——"

"By the garden door at the side," finished Littleport.

"Just so," said Lady de la Haye.

"Then I'd better go and put the key in my pocket for him now," the old man remarked.

Amabelle lifted her hand. She was about to stop him—to say who was in the Chinese Room at that moment—and then a sudden shyness prevented her. Doubtless Littleport had already observed which way the stream was flowing. She watched the old man going to the open window, and her throat refused to make a sound, but suddenly he swerved and looked back at her.

"Mr. Marketel, I think, my Lady," he remarked.

He went along, and as he walked down the terrace Paul came on to it.

"I thought," Marketel began, advancing with his hand held out, "that I should find you here."

Amabelle turned to meet him, and it was possibly because he was in light flannels that it occurred to her that he had never looked so big. She said to herself, "He's like a colossus—he would override anybody or anything, if he thought it worth while." And then, with a touch of malice, she remarked aloud:

"It is delightful of you to chance in upon us in this way."

"I am come to throw myself on your kindness," he answered, in the same strain. The next moment he glanced quickly about him.

"Has Chi Lung come?" he demanded abruptly.

"Not yet."

"I thought he would have been here by now."

"He originally proposed himself for yesterday," Lady de la Haye answered, "then he put off his arrival until today, and even now he hasn't vouchsafed to tell us which train he is coming by, or if he means to come by road or by rail."

"Do you think that unpromising?" Paul asked, suddenly grave—anxious—for even to him, accustomed as he was to undertakings on a large scale, this loan from Britain for a Chinese navy was a very big thing.

"No," Amabelle assured him, "merely Celestial."

She waited a moment, and then looked up with that ingenuous manner which made her seem almost girlish.

"This is a great opportunity for Roger," she said softly.

"He deserves it," answered Paul. "He's done splendid work in the East. The Foreign Office think no end of him, that's why they have appointed him to watch these negotiations. It's the seal of his success. It has come young to him. I shouldn't wonder if he's a Plenipo. before he is forty, and has Paris before he retires. A great career."

"Yes," said Lady de la Haye, and then she added, "if nothing comes to spoil it," and the words slipped out as if someone else, not she herself, had said them.

Many men would have fenced. Paul faced the reservation squarely.

"Is something wrong?" he asked. "I fancied you looked troubled when I first saw you."

Amabelle held out both her hands.

"Help me, Paul," she besought.

"Help you," he returned, and there was a world of feeling in his tone. "Tell me exactly what is wrong."

"But I don't know that anything is," she answered, half laughing and half crying.

"Then," he retorted, "the trouble is connected with people, not things."

She nodded.

"But how did you guess it?"

"Things are expressed by facts," he answered, "and facts are definite—people are expressed by opinion, and there is nothing certain about opinion, excepting that it is mutable."

She looked at him and smiled wanly. There was something in her face which gave him a clue.

"Is it about Roger?" he asked.

"You have heard?" she blurted out.

"Nothing," he answered—"only, when a man's best friend is in Town and never at his club about one-thirty, one begins to wonder what woman he is taking out to lunch. Besides," he said, "I was at that dance."

"At the Tippley-Smiths?"

"Yes."

"They have moved into Grosvenor Gardens since I gave up going out."

Paul took a turn down the terrace.

"An unsuitable wife has been the grave of more than one diplomatic career," he said fiercely.

Amabelle followed him quickly.



"Don't," she cried out. "I'm giving you a wrong impression. Miss Melsham is here now. She is with Roger in there."

"In the Chinese Room?" Paul asked.

"Yes."

He gave a subdued breath through his teeth.

"I like her, Paul, I like her," Amabelle went on, "I know I do——"

"Well then?" he asked.

"It's the unexpectedness of it," she said. "It put me into a panic for fear she might not be quite—quite——"

She looked down and blushed hotly.

"When I heard she was coming," she confessed, "I did a mean thing—I sent for Victoria Cresswell."

The announcement had an effect that Lady de la Haye by no means anticipated.

"Victoria," echoed Paul, and he flung round with an abrupt movement. Amabelle caught a glimpse of his face, of its sudden lightening, and then its lowered brows.

"What is it?" she exclaimed.

"Tell me why you sent for Victoria," he asked curtly.

"You see," Roger's mother admitted tremulously, "I was afraid this girl might be one of those garish young women one does see going round Europe. The most fastidious men are the most unaccountably taken in at times. My experience of the Continental mothers and daughters led me to dread anything of the kind for Roger. Victoria represented the standard he had been used to. There is nothing more illuminating than contrast. If that contrast were to tell against—against——"

"I see," put in Paul.

"It was better he should observe it now than later."

"And how did the beautiful lady stand the test?" asked Paul, half amused, half dismayed at so feminine a manoeuvre.

Amabelle drew herself up, both dignified and loyal, if not exactly consistent.

"If you have seen Miss Melsham," she said, "you

must know that no one could take the smallest exception to her."

"What is it, then?" said Paul, still probing to get to the root of the trouble.

"Roger is so reticent about the mother," Amabelle returned. "I can't help thinking she must be rather foolish—or undignified."

"Isn't that better than being interfering?" said Paul lightly, but speaking out of a certain personal experience.

Amabelle began on a laugh, but it ended in a break.

"I have lost my bearings," she said piteously. "I feel as if all my old landmarks had gone. That's the worst of being an independent woman by nature. I always want to lean on a strong man when I find one."

But her weakness was over in a moment.

"The wise submit with a smile, even if it is a little awry," she summed up, "the foolish become mothers-in-law."

She rose as she said that, and looked at the tea table.

"Make tea, Paul," she said, with one of those confessions of femininity that she could make so delightful. "I've been so near to weeping that I'm sure my eyes are red. I'm going to powder my nose—and I'll tell you a secret. A woman's heart may be chipped, but it isn't absolutely broken as long as she can give a thought to her complexion."

Paul just laughed, and pulled aside the curtain into the salon for her, but he looked after her gravely.

"She's a brave woman," he told himself, as he took up the tea caddy. He made sure that the kettle was boiling, with that nice attention to detail a bachelor man does display in domestic matters, and then his quick ear caught the sound of voices talking together in the salon.

"Roger and——" he said to himself, and he smiled grimly.

The silence fell again. Roger and Naomi Melsham must both have gone into the hall.

Paul felt sure it was Naomi. He went on with the tea-

making. The meal was delightfully informal at Zouche, and so, for the benefit of any late comers, the tea was always made in one of the two big teapots, and then poured off into the other. Paul went on with what he called the decanting business, and when that was finished he took out a cigarette.

He glanced over the terrace, on to the bowling-green, he changed his position that he might look down the walk, and varied it yet again to watch for anyone coming through the door of the walled garden. Victoria was somewhere near. He checked the impulse to go and look for her. "She must know it is tea time," he told himself.

He took out his watch, glanced at it, and shut its case with an impatient snap, and then he heard the door from the hall on to the terrace, the one he had used himself, open.

Paul Marketel knew that someone feminine was coming towards him, but even before he looked he didn't make the mistake of thinking it was Victoria. Once at least in a lifetime, most men differentiate, where one woman is concerned, to the nicest degree.

He faced round, and before the figure in soft pink, with the touch of green round the slim waist, was halfway up the terrace he knew who it was.

He took a couple of quick strides forward and held out his hand.

"You must be Miss Melsham," he began.

"And I see you are Mr. Marketel," Naomi answered.

"That is nice of you to remember me," he went on heartily.

Naomi smiled at him with a kind of timid friendliness, as if feeling her way.

"I didn't know you were coming," she went on, "but then, of course, excepting the great Chinaman—I have just heard all about him and I do so want to see him—I don't know who is coming."

"I'm the unexpected pleasure," Paul answered, "or the bad penny always turning up."

"The former, of course," said Naomi. "A noted financier must not suggest anything commercially unsound."

She smiled appealingly at the big man as she made her little point. She wanted a favorable verdict, not for any ulterior reason, but just because Paul Marketel was Roger de la Haye's best friend. A woman always takes a definite line towards a man's friends from the very first moment that she admits her own interest in him. She either seeks to draw them nearer to her, or plays to antagonize them. The one is the outcome of a large outlook, the other of a narrow jealousy. Nine times out of ten they meet with their appropriate reward. The tenth, the man pays—and curses himself for a poor thing.

"Did you expect to find Lady de la Haye here?" Paul began. "She will be back in a moment."

Naomi nodded. In reality she had been shy about coming to meet Lady de la Haye with Roger behind her. So she made an excuse. The sun was hot. She would put on a garden hat.

She had seen Littleport stop Roger as she went up the stairs, and she had stolen down so cautiously, her cheeks a little the pinker for the precaution, just that she might get to Lady de la Haye alone.

She and Paul moved back to the tea table, but when he offered her a seat she shook her head.

"I want to look about me," she said, and her eagerness was almost childish. "I want to see everything."

Paul pointed out the gate-house, and told her its supposed history; he showed her the high wall of old red brick, inclosing a wonderful rose garden, he drew her attention to the sundial, set up on the ledge of the bowling-green, and told her how Sir Arthur had brought it from Peking.

"The Chinese," he said, "began to use astronomical instruments before the Europeans got farther than realizing that there was a sun and a moon. This dial is a copy of a primitive one which stood for ages on the great wall. The Germans carried off the original after the Boxer Riots."

"How interesting," Naomi murmured. She raised her

blue eyes. "I'm lost in admiration wherever I go," she said softly, "and yet there is nothing of the show place about Zouche. Tell me! how does it manage to be so wonderful and yet so homelike?"

"Isn't that the effect of individual temperament?" Paul rejoined. "I mean," he went on, feeling that it would be well to make this point very clear, "that Lady de la Haye would radiate happiness, and therefore warmth, wherever she went."

"Sir Roger evidently thinks there is no one like his mother," Naomi answered quickly.

"Do you wonder at that?" asked Paul. "I never knew my mother," he went on gravely. "I always feel that I have missed one of the greatest things in life."

There was no answering consent in Naomi's mind. Her mother represented a drawback, not an advantage. She looked up and met Paul Marketel's glance. It was so grave, yet so kindly, that it was possible she might have blurted out a part of the truth, if not the whole truth, and thereby altered the whole course of her life's history,—people so often did confide in Paul Marketel. But at that moment Roger came hurriedly on to the terrace.

"I thought I was never going to get away," he began. "Littleport got hold of me—he's full of arrangements." He pulled up. "You here, Paul," he said. "That's splendid."

"Come to throw myself on your mercy," Marketel answered.

Roger nodded. He didn't want to enlarge on the deception before Naomi. He looked ahead. "Why!" he exclaimed, "where is my mother?"

Amabelle might have heard the impatient voice, for at that very moment she came through the window of the salon.

"Ah!" she said lightly, "you here." She turned to the girl. "Have you seen all the treasures?" she asked.

"I think," began Naomi eagerly, "that the Chinese Room

is the most beautiful room I have ever seen. Even I should write good letters at that wonderful old desk."

"Mother," said Roger, "do you know the spring of the secret drawer failed to act? I opened the drawer, and then shut it in the usual way, but the spring hadn't caught. It would open again before I turned the key in the lock."

"It did that once before," Lady de la Haye answered.

"In my father's time?"

"Yes," said Amabelle.

"And how did he get it put right?" Roger asked.

"There's a master spring at the back—I'll show it to you," Amabelle said. She waited a moment.

"It seems foolish," she went on, "but don't mention this to Chi Lung. Chinamen go by omens more than one would think——"

"And the last time the drawer didn't catch——" put in Roger.

"The negotiations fell through."

"Then," announced Paul, "we must certainly none of us mention it now."

A glance from Lady de la Haye stopped him. She began to make the tea. She was just wondering aloud whether Aimée could have taken Victoria to the Rectory—did she see Paul Marketel's face suddenly go blank?—and then the girl herself ran up the steps from the bowling-green.

"Ursa Major," began Aimée, as Paul went along to meet her. She put her arm in his. "Victoria is coming presently," she remarked. "She suddenly turned tail and said——"

"What?" asked Paul sharply.

He was never answered. He and Aimée had reached the round table, Roger had risen.

"Aimée, I don't think you have met Miss Melsham," he began, and his tone was almost severe. It seemed to him odd at least—if not well on the way to being wrong—that anyone should claim attention before Naomi had been duly honored.

"I have always lived at Zouche," began Aimée, as she offered her hand. "Auntie says I might as well be her own daughter. Don't you, dear?" appealing to Lady de la Haye.

"You will always be my child to me," she said.

She understood. Aimée was being visited by a tinge of jealousy. Naomi heard the intonation too. She might not quite grasp the cause, but she was sure of the antagonism. It was the first warning of disapproval.

She moved her chair, so that Aimée must take the one by her. She looked down, and was just wondering which was the nearest road to the girl's heart, when a cynical comment of her mother's came into her mind.

"Never neglect the flapper," Mrs. Melsham once observed. "One day she may be a duchess."

Naomi returned hastily to her tea—silenced. Even from afar, Mrs. Melsham had the power to spoil things, to suggest sordid views and interested motives.

Yet, even as she made the bitter comment, this new softening that was wrapping itself, like a beautiful veil, around her mind, stopped her.

Here at least she would banish such thoughts.

She looked over to the heads of a row of poplars visible above the garden wall, as if their very uprightness and beauty were a protection. She bid herself take heed of the summer day, of the warmth and the light, as if telling herself that dark thoughts were an incongruity not to be admitted in such an environment; and so it fell out that she, alone, was looking straight down the terrace. She gave a start, uttered an exclamation of surprise.

A little old man appeared at the head of the steps, he pattered along with shuffling feet, as if he habitually wore loose soft boots, and then, when he saw the group by the tea table, he pulled up, as if it were for those there before him to come to him, and for him to wait to receive them.

Naomi but glanced at the quaint figure, at a curious mingling of the East and the West in the costume—and she knew before Roger whispered the name to her that it must be the little great man of China.

Lady de la Haye rose instantly.

"Your Excellency," she began as she hurried towards him. "You have walked, and we sent two cars to meet you."

The old man stood before her smiling blandly. There was something of the impish child in his expression. Chi Lung, the greatest power of his day in the East, the far-seeing diplomat, who linked his country to the West, with a foresight that may yet turn out to be one of the great features of the world's progress, wore exactly the smile of a clever child who knows that it has done something tiresome, but who is sure of commendation rather than of blame, because it has been tiresome in such an original manner.

"I bore myself on the vehicles of nature," the old man began, as he patted Lady de la Haye's hand. "The green and the refreshing shade remind me of the lotus and the bamboo of my own poor dwelling in the Ever Blessed Middle Kingdom."

Lady de la Haye laughed indulgently, but not quite easily, for she was not unmindful of the indications. The Marquis Chi Lung had various sides to his nature, and a manner appropriate to each one. When it pleased him he could turn himself into a very fair imitation of a European; when it pleased him he could be as Celestial as the most stay-at-home mandarin, and there were occasions when, of set purpose, he could be unpardonably rude. Just now, when she wished, for a particular reason, that he should view the situation from a Western standpoint, his freakish arrival pointed exactly the opposite way.

She glanced apprehensively at him. The long, oval face was impassive to stolidity, the oblique eyes blinked as if the mere act of vision irked them—Chi Lung seemed mostly occupied in stroking his beard.

"Why doesn't Roger come at once?" Amabelle asked herself. Roger knew all about Chinese standards. He knew exactly what Chi Lung would deem his due, and what the old man would resentfully consider less than his due, and



there was he, pausing but a moment it is true, yet still pausing, to turn the hooded bench, since the sun came straight into Naomi Melsham's face.

"Roger!" she called. "Roger!"

He came on the very sound of her voice, but Amabelle had no hope that the incident had escaped his Excellency, or that the old man, with his jealous affection, would fail to resent being kept waiting, even for a moment, for a woman, and, worse still, for a young and pretty one.

If Chi Lung did consider himself slighted, there was nothing to show it. He put one of his yellowed old hands, with every bony articulation showing through the skin, on either of Roger's shoulders.

"Behold!" his Excellency began, "the pear is off the same tree."

He looked long at the young clean-shaven face. "The look is the same as his father's, but the expression is different," he went on, noting a certain shy oversensitiveness in the young man's eyes. "It is as if both the gadfly and the housefly had power to sting him. My son," he continued, "it is written in our wisdom that the man who sees all white is as deceived as he who sees all yellow. The one gone to rest made few mistakes—he knew that gray was but white dust mixed with a handful of black mud, and orange but yellow clay mixed with a little red earth."

Roger laughed—but constrainedly. For one thing, he wondered how so florid a greeting would strike Naomi Melsham; for another, the old Chinaman had put his finger on a weak spot. Sir Arthur de la Haye possessed a mind of almost perfect balance. Amabelle's was so innately a sunny nature that it took a great deal to disturb her. By some odd turn of heredity Roger's disposition was inclined to oversensitiveness. It was only his frank acceptance of the fact which saved him from a meticulous conscience.

Then abruptly his Excellency pushed Roger away and pointed to Naomi.

"Behold, the hornet leaves the pumpkin aside and fastens on the golden plum," he exclaimed, and his tone was abrupt—fierce, even.

Lady de la Haye had no word for the sudden outburst. Her worst fears had been realized. Chi Lung had observed Roger's interest in this golden-haired girl, and evidently resented it.

It was Paul Marketel who saved the situation.

"You remember me, your Excellency?" he interposed quickly.

The Celestial put both his hands into his sleeves, and hunched his body over them.

"Behold!" he exclaimed, "it is the man of so much money that he lends of his superfluity to Princes and Powers. But money comes not of itself—it must be gathered—will he want to take from this inconsiderable one even the little that he has?"

He looked from face to face and laughed slyly at his own witticism.

"Your Excellency," put in Amabelle anxiously, for evidently her old friend was in a perverse mood, "you recall Monsieur de Villeseptier. He was with us in the days gone by at Peking. He was as a right hand to my husband, and you yourself accorded him the gift of friendship."

The old man nodded.

"He went to walk in the Eternal Shades before his time," he said gravely.

"He and his wife too," answered Lady de la Haye. She repressed a shudder. It was nearly eighteen years ago, and yet she could not think of that awful time when an outbreak of plague, laying low its thousands, robbed her of her two best friends in less than twelve hours.

"I have written him in the tablets of my memory," Chi Lung answered, and characteristically while he remembered the man he ignored the lovely girl, his wife.

"This is his child," Amabelle went on, drawing up Aimée. "She has lived with me ever since. She was called Ama-

belle after me, but we always call her Aimée. She is as dear as my own daughter to me."

"So," remarked his Excellency. "How old are you?" he asked, turning to Aimée, for he bestowed a certain amount of interest on her, seeing she was, as he would have put it, part of Roger's house.

"Seventeen," answered the girl, in quite a meek little voice.

His Excellency took out his snuff bottle, and carefully poured a little of the brown powder into his hand. Amabelle quailed inwardly. Her old friend was indeed minded to be aggressively Oriental this afternoon. She had not seen him take snuff in public since he put an insolent German in his place, quite ten years ago.

"It is time the rings were in her ears. You should buy a husband for her," he went on, after he had scooped the snuff into his nostrils with the tiny spoon attached to the stopper of his bottle—and he nodded towards Aimée. "She will make a useful help to Roger. Offer her to one that has the ear of the Yamen, but arrange quickly; the sweeter the perfume the uglier the flies which gather round the bottle."

There might have been an embarrassed pause after that candid appraisal, but Aimée broke in on it.

"Aunt Amabelle has told me," she said, "how your Excellency helped her that time when I was a tiny baby, and people were afraid of going into my father's because of the infection. I often think of it—and all you did for my father too."

Artlessly she had struck the right note.

"Gratitude is the lotus flower of the spirit," Chi Lung observed. "I will send you a roll of silk, Mademoiselle."

"For me!" Aimée exclaimed. She knew no greater compliment could have been paid her. "Oh, thank you," she ran on, "but I knew you were nice before you said that."

"I will send you two rolls of silk," Chi Lung announced. "You have inculcated the seven virtues, I see," he said, turning to Lady de la Haye. "That is well! The woman greeted with favor who refrains from importunity is as rare

as twin pearls in one oyster shell. None the less," added his Excellency, dry again in a flash, "when a woman's lips say it is enough she looks at you with her eyes and they say again," then he put out his hand, and caught Lady de la Hays by her sleeve.

"There is a jay chattering to the Hope of the House," he said.

"That is Miss Melsham," was all Amabelle could say.

"I was waiting until your Excellency had finished talking to Aimée," put in Roger. He passed the matter over to his mother with a wave of his hand.

"His Excellency the Marquis Chi Lung, Miss Melsham," Amabelle said.

The girl came smilingly forward. She had watched the old man with Aimée. She had come to the conclusion that under a somewhat redoubtable exterior, the Celestial had a very human heart. But there was nothing benevolent in the look bestowed on her. Naomi felt she must not fail where a schoolgirl had succeeded.

"Your Excellency," she began, "I have heard so much about you."

"Who has gossiped about old Chi Lung to a woman?" the old man demanded.

"Sir Roger," Naomi answered.

"So!" remarked his Excellency. "The son of my old friend makes stories for the house at the expense of this poor one."

"No! no!" expostulated Naomi—feeling that the interview was going all wrong. "He was only saying nice things."

"Nice?" asked the Celestial.

"He was telling me about the tombs of your ancestors."

"And what of my poor belongings?" the old man asked.

"That you cared so much for them."

"Cared," repeated his Excellency. "What is that?"

"Well," stammered the girl, "it—it is so wonderful——"

She began to flounder in her embarrassment.

Chi Lung watched her malevolently. Roger made a step

between them, and Amabelle felt so sure that she must intervene that she came out with the first thing she remembered.

"Another friend, but of Roger's days at Peking, this time, is coming," she said hurriedly. "Monsieur de Rochecorbon. Do you remember him?"

"Armand," exclaimed Marketel. "What's his latest craze this time? Last time I saw him——"

He was stopped by Naomi Melsham, her voice was so urgent.

"Who . . . who did you say?" she asked.

"Armand de Rochecorbon," Paul answered.

"My cousin," put in Aimée.

Naomi let her hands fall to her side with a helpless gesture—she stepped back, out of the circle, out of the sunlight.

"Do you know Monsieur de Rochecorbon?" Amabelle asked her.

The girl seemed to consider a moment. It flashed into Amabelle's mind that this might be a case of expediency, not of truth. The next instant a frank statement seemed to reprove her.

"We have met so many people," Naomi explained, "that it is difficult to say. Mama wanders so, that I can never be quite sure about anyone. We did meet a Monsieur de Rochecorbon—but that was years ago at Nice"—she raised her eyes and looked hard at Roger—"that was the year I went to live with mama," she told him. "The very first year," she insisted.

## CHAPTER VI

"YOUR Excellency," began Paul Marketel, about ten minutes later—that is as soon as he could disturb the party round the tea table and draw the old Chinaman aside—"we are to meet in the Chinese Room; I will join you there in half an hour."

"The sun is hot without," Chi Lung demurred, "but the blinds are drawn, and there is shade within the four walls of the house."

Paul shook his head.

"In half an hour, your Excellency," he maintained, and he had two reasons for his firmness. One was, the consideration that when you have something to sell it is never wise to appear too eager to meet the buyer, how much less if that buyer be an Oriental. The other, that he had a pressing personal affair to dispose of.

Victoria Cresswell had not appeared. It was possible that she was purposely going without tea to avoid him, and that seemed to him so intolerable that he determined to go in search of her.

"I want to find Miss Cresswell," he said to Lady de la Haye. "I must see her before I begin my letters." He paused and smiled dubiously. "It's about some business," he went on, with the awkwardness of an honest man telling but a part of the truth. "I have prevailed on Miss Cresswell to let me go into her affairs. Her investments were—er—unsuitable. She saw that herself as soon as I pointed it out. She has quite a gift for finance."

He turned away without waiting for a reply. People who have to fight for their own hand—and do it successfully—can usually dispense with the stimulus of approval. Perhaps, however, even he might have paused, had he caught

the look on Lady de la Haye's face. She was dismayed, but enlightened. Here was the clue to the something strange in Victoria, to the something unusual in Paul himself.

"Do you think I have forgotten when I began to find diplomacy interesting?" Amabelle murmured to herself. "Don't you understand," her mind ran on, with the pity of the perspicacious feminine for the masculine bat, "that there is no subject, from rag-picking to the differential calculus, a woman won't find absorbing, if the right man only explains it to her in the right way?"

She looked after the powerful frame going down towards the rose garden.

"Has he forgotten that Victoria has been engaged to Billy Hirst since she was eighteen?" she protested inwardly.

Perhaps her unspoken dismay communicated itself to Paul. He paused, with his hand on the latch of the old wooden door. For one moment he put this straight question to himself, "Have I the right to supplant?" No honest man can step into another man's shoes and not be visited by doubts. But, having weighed them, may it not be a finer virtue to go on than to go back?—for, recollect, such a decision affects two lives, not one;—only one must be very sure where the virtue comes in, and where the vice.

Paul rattled the handle of the door impatiently—and turned it.

He was right. Victoria was there. There was a fountain in the midst of the square, with four grass paths converging on it, and roses everywhere. He walked up to her, and as he approached, Victoria's face, which never had very much color in it, went a shade whiter. Her hands began to work nervously. She plucked a flower, and began to pull it to pieces.

Victoria was in that odd stage in feminine development when the more one longs for a thing the greater the precautions to turn from it.

Besides, she was, in a way, very like a boat without a rudder. Until she saw Paul, Victoria had lived singularly

aloof from men. Some girls are women before they leave off being children. Now and then a woman is totally uninfluenced by the masculine element until she meets the man who, whether it ever comes to fulfilment or not, is essentially her man. Everything about her had conspired to retard Victoria's development, just as everything had conspired to force Naomi Melsham's. Victoria's youth was passed in a remote village with a certain Aunt Martha, and this Aunt Martha had a talent for doing harm in the cause of righteousness. The old lady held that the rising generation stood in need of perpetual suppression, and that originality was rather more heinous than sin. It said much for the firmness of Victoria's fiber that she had any initiative left. As it was, no sooner was she released from Aunt Martha's tyranny than her whole being expanded with a bound. Aunt Martha, who had never allowed Victoria the smallest insight into her affairs, never troubled about the inconsistency of leaving, what the obituary notice called "the unsettled property," to Victoria absolutely. The girl was as bewildered as she was ignorant, and naturally she put her faith in the man who made Aunt Martha's will—Edward Buzby. He managed Billy Hirst's affairs too—and Victoria was engaged to Billy. That was another of Aunt Martha's arrangements, and, unfortunately, when the pious woman arranges the affairs of others in the way that is best for them—(or so it pleases her to think)—the harm she does has a way of persisting.

The landed estate devolved on Billy, so the old lady, who always quoted that money was the root of evil, juggled with two lives to keep the property together.

As for Victoria, while Aunt Martha lived, Billy was for her the only soul who pulled up, for even half an inch, the blind of the window looking on to the world.

Essentially, Billy Hirst was a very fine gentleman—Aunt Martha treated him shamelessly—and no one ever knew of his dismay when he realized that he was caught. He played his part so well that, even when Victoria came to see that Billy was grateful each time she relegated the wedding day



to a future occasion—she never realized that he would have been more grateful still, had she given him back the engagement ring.

Then, with Aunt Martha's death, came Victoria's emancipation, her eager look out on to the world—and Paul Marketel.

Paul came right up to her with a grim smile. Neither of them uttered a word of conventional greeting, but not a single symptom of her distress escaped him. It hurt him and yet it hardened him.

"I want my answer," he began. "I must have it. I never wanted anyone until——"

Just because Victoria knew how the abrupt, unadorned sentence would end, just because there was nothing she wanted more to hear, she interrupted hastily.

"Please, Paul. You—you have arrived so unexpectedly——"

She looked down. She clasped her hands nervously together, and that showed the ring, still on her third finger. Paul muttered a hard word.

"Look here," he began, "we can't go on like this. I'm not so young as I was, and at my age, when one gets things for the first time, one gets 'em badly. Have you told Billy?"

Victoria rose. She lifted her head and looked the big man in the face. It was these moments of swift resolution that particularly appealed to Paul.

"I have not told Billy," she answered. "I cannot tell him."

"But you promised."

"I know," Victoria answered—"but you must release me from that promise."

"Release you! Why?"

"Billy is in trouble."

"In trouble," reiterated Marketel.

"In serious trouble," Victoria answered.

Paul motioned her authoritatively to the seat. "Sit down," he said quietly, "and tell me exactly what has happened."

"You know Edward Buzby did Billy's business as well as mine," Victoria began.

"A pretentious fool," Marketel interpolated.

"Aunt Martha liked him," Victoria murmured.

"She would," Paul answered, and he laughed shortly. Then they were both suddenly silent. Without visible approach, they had never been closer, and the proximity made both of them breathless.

It was Victoria who recovered first.

"But for you," she said, looking steadily before her, "I should be where Billy is now."

And then, since she was not one of those irritating people who hover round an announcement, she went on—"Edward Buzby disappeared last Wednesday. He left his affairs in hopeless confusion. Billy is quite poor now, he's coming here this afternoon, just for a last fling, as he calls it. After that, he'll have to do something. He hasn't as many hundreds left as he had thousands."

Paul was silent for quite a long time. He looked up at a fussy little cloud racing over an expanse of blue. Apparently, his whole interest was taken up with its rate of progress, but in reality he was reflecting on the tricks and quips of Fate. Edward Buzby had impressed him so unfavorably the one time he had had an interview with him, that he had once thought of giving Billy a hint, but the "not-my-business" frame of mind prevailed—and now, the question of Buzby's honesty—or dishonesty—had coiled itself around the very framework of his own life.

The next moment, he left the question of correlative causes and came back to the practical aspect.

"I'm sorry for Billy," he said, "but how does his loss affect you and me?"

"Can't you see?" Victoria returned. "This has made all the difference. Billy is poor now."

"It is a question of affection, not of finance," muttered Paul.

"I know," the girl answered, "but look at it for your-

self. You ask me to break off my engagement, to go and tell Billy that—that——”

“I love you, and he doesn't, and that you don't love him——”

“I can't—I can't,” the girl faltered.

“Billy does not want you; I do,” Paul protested.

Victoria stood with her head cast down, but, as Paul knew all too well, unconvinced.

He walked to the edge of the stone basin, and stood with his hands in his pockets, his lower lip thrust out. He watched the drops from the fountain pattering on to a lily leaf, and as he watched, he debated. The very masterfulness of his own will handicapped him. He knew that he could rush Victoria, carry her off her feet perhaps, and force the conclusion he desired, before she had time to help herself. But there was afterwards—all the long years of afterwards.

Women weigh, as inevitably as men pursue. That's why it is unwise to treat them to evasions. They may look as if they accept them, but they are marked down, and recorded for ever against the offender.

It was some perception of this, or perhaps his own initial honesty, which made Paul fall back on bald statement again.

“I want you, my dear,” he said. “That's all I can think of. I wanted you the first moment I saw you. Every hour before I get you is an hour wasted. You have come into my life, and you will stop there. I'll make you happy, if anything I can do will bring happiness——”

He broke off, threw out one of his great arms—“Lord!—Victoria,” he said, “and you think I'm going to stand aside for a man who might have married you any time these last eight years, and hasn't?”

He laughed shortly.

The color came up on to Victoria Cresswell's face. The uncompromising statement hurt her, and hurt her all the more for being true.

No woman, even if she isn't in love with a man, can hear with equanimity that she is a negligible quantity to him.

With many a one, it would have served as a justification for taking the more enticing way, but Victoria shook her head.

"No, Paul," she said, "don't put it that way. Billy may be a casual soul, but that doesn't affect either you or me—I mean it doesn't affect what I should do."

She began to smile, and came a little nearer to him. "Let matters stay where they are," she entreated. "I shall go away. I shall not see you again until——"

"Until when?" thrust in Paul.

"Until Billy has got something to do," the girl answered. "Wait until he is busy, and happy in his own way. You know how his wanderings absorb him. When his mind is occupied—and his life is full of interest—then I can ask him to release me."

Paul smiled very grimly.

"Then my happiness," he remarked, "is contingent on Billy finding a congenial job?"

Victoria was not daunted. A big man hardly terrifies a woman—a little one sometimes does.

"How good you are," she murmured, with a typically feminine taking and leaving. "It's just like you to understand. We'll settle it so. Things go on as they are, and I'll go away. I can't leave Zouche tonight, everyone would wonder why I had broken up the party. But when I can get away, I'll travel. It's time I did. Why!" she said, "I have never seen Switzerland and all those places everyone has been to."

She turned from the fountain, and went along the grass path towards the garden door. "And now," she said, with that sweet decision of a woman who means to get her own way, "I think I'll stay here for a little."

"Which means you want me to go," Paul said quizzically.

The girl looked at him.

"All right," the big man answered. "I have letters to write. You have won this time, but recollect, it will be my turn next."

Paul Marketel pushed open the door. He walked down

the bowling-green and mounted the steps on to the terrace— (it was his quickest way to the Chinese Room), but, once there, he pulled up abruptly.

Lady de la Haye was still sitting by the tea table, though Roger and Naomi Melsham had disappeared, but with her was someone new. A single glance showed Paul that it was Billy Hirst, or rather, to give him his due title, the Honorable William Hirst.

As Paul approached, Billy's laugh rang out, and anything less like a man ruined suddenly can hardly be imagined.

Billy was one thing dominantly—and that thing was, an adventurer—in the Elizabethan sense of the word. A fighter, an explorer, a gentleman, he was born out of due time.

His skin was bronzed a permanent brown by many varieties of temperature, an overflowing eagerness quivered in every muscle. He was never really happy until he was hot and dirty, or cold and dirty, in one of the more inaccessible quarters of the globe.

"How did you get here?" asked Paul, as Billy sprang up with the information that it was ripping to see him.

"Motor-bike!" Billy explained—he laughed whimsically. "That's economy, you know," he ran on, "I shall have to sell my motor. The only wonder is it's left to me to sell. Oh!" he broke off, "but of course you don't know. I've just been telling Cousin Amabelle."

"Yes," said Lady de la Haye, but she looked at Paul—

"I do know," Marketel answered.

"You!" Billy exclaimed.

"Victoria has just been telling me."

"Victoria," Billy repeated.

"Yes," answered Paul Marketel.

Amabelle saw the big man's face. It was darkened, vindictive even. Billy's misfortune, then, touched him nearly. But how? Suddenly she saw down the range of this prosperous man's vision. The money aspect was as nothing. He had seen men shoeless today, and riding a thoroughbred on the morrow. It was something nearer—more personal. It

was something that he could influence—perhaps even change.

"I shall have to sing for my dinner, before I eat it, now," Billy went on. He looked into his cup, and leisurely drank off the tea remaining in it.

"I say," he asked, as he opened his cigarette case and offered it to Marketel, "is it true that you are going to send out an expedition to Thibet, to explore that ruby bearing district?"

"It is true," Paul admitted. "Why do you ask?"

He looked at the eager face, for even as he asked the question he knew what the answer would be, and he laughed with a note which made Amabelle shiver.

"What's up?" inquired Billy, for even he saw that things were not quite normal.

Marketel did not reply at once: when he did, he turned to his hostess.

"Do you know," he said, "there is a good deal of the primitive savage in us all. Veneer does nicely enough for the undisturbed conditions of life, but when it goes down to essentials, man is very much what he was when he lived in trees, and bit the end off the other primitive man's tail because it hung on to the particular bough he'd selected for himself."

He pulled up.

"I didn't know the Thibetan proposition was public property," he said to Billy.

"I am sorry I mentioned it," Billy answered.

"No! No!" Marketel returned, "I might have known that one never can keep that kind of thing to one's self."

"Then," said Billy, "when you fix your crowd, think of me. It's just my style of thing."

"It will be a beastly dangerous job," said Paul roughly.

"What of that?" returned Billy. "I'm not a mother's precious darling."

Marketel was perhaps going to say something that would have made clear the grudge in his mind, and then a motor hooted, as if it were going down by the side entrance.

"Who's coming now?" asked Billy.

Marketel and Lady de la Haye exchanged a glance of intelligence.

"I think," she said, "it must be Roger. He did say something about going to Chipley Magna, to see our man of business."

"What, as late as this?" said Billy.

"Late!" said Paul, and he glanced at his watch. "It's nearly five," he went on, "and I must write my letters."

He turned and went towards the window of the salon, but, as he heard voices in the room, he went along down the terrace. If Roger could return to the place of meeting by the garden door—so could he.

## CHAPTER VII

THERE are certain unmistakable milestones on the way to the *pays du tendre*.

One of the most explicit is the photograph. When a man asks a woman for her picture, then you may know that it is only a matter of time—and his feet will stray over the border into the delectable country.

The voices that Paul Marketel heard in the salon were those of Roger and Naomi.

Roger had arrived at exactly this development. He had mentioned the pictures of the room merely as a starting-point. His real objective was the girl herself.

"I know you are ever so clever with your camera," he said. "Didn't your mother show me those photographs you took at Aix?"

The words brought a shadow of doubt, of hesitation, into Naomi's face. Mrs. Melsham had insisted that her daughter's accomplishments should go farther than the complaisant snapshot of the amateur. Proficiency in this line was of a certain advantage in her own form of journalism, and it had flashed into the girl's mind that if she took these pictures, Mrs. Melsham, who scented out any sort of gain, as unerringly as a pursuing animal scents out its quarry—might get them from her and work up "pars" about them.

But Roger was insistent. She refused the offer to send a servant upstairs for the camera. Genteel poverty hides many a secret, odd or sorry, as you look at it, within a woman's trunk. Instead, she had gone herself, and when she returned, Roger met her with the information that Littleport had just been in to remind him that the car was round, waiting to take him to Chipley Magna.

"I must go," Roger told her, with genuine vexation, "but I shall not be any longer than I can help. I suppose," he



said reluctantly, "that we shall have to put off these photographs until tomorrow."

"Well, does it matter if we do?" she asked.

"I wanted to do them now," returned Roger impatiently.

"I don't think anything will have changed," the girl answered gaily—for how little we know what Fate has in store, "if we do wait twenty-four hours."

"Nothing?" he repeated meaningly, with the lover's facility for making something out of a trifle. The girl evaded his glance. She slipped a little way down the room and stood before the table, apparently quite absorbed in admiring a row of Chinese snuff bottles laid out on it.

In reality, she was putting up a screen between herself and her heart's desire. She wanted time—time, not for herself, but for Roger. She wanted him to plumb his own depths. She wanted him to be sure, not from anything her beauty might suggest, but from that inner necessity which, let it be driven off time and again, returns as often to the simple demand "I want you."

If Naomi had pushed Roger by as much as a look, let alone a word—he would have passed this point days ago. It was because of her own somber background that she hurt herself to deny him.

If only *chemin de fer* had never been played at the Villa Paul et Virginie, or she had cared a little less!

When Roger left, after another word or two about business which would admit of no delay, she stood silent in the big room.

It was the drowsiest hour of the day. The summer sun came in through the yellow curtains slantwise and hot, so that it bathed the whole room in a golden glow. Naomi stood with her head down, with her hands clasped. The beautiful things around her had no auction-room value for her, at this moment she neither appreciated their rarity nor their beauty. They presented themselves as symbols of the one thing her life had always lacked—stability. "This will never have to be sold because the tradesmen will not wait any longer," she murmured, as she put out a finger and ran

it round the rim of a little cup in Canton enamel. "These stay here always, no shop has sent them, on the sale or return system," she went on, counting the row of snuff bottles.

She walked on again. Silk that a Parisian dressmaker would have bought—as cheap as she could—and yet at two louis or more the yard, was used for curtains. It wasn't ostentation. Naomi had the sense to see that. It was the befitting thing in the appropriate place. "How good it all is," she was telling herself, "—how peaceful—how *assured*."

An excited voice, speaking rapidly in the hall, broke up her meditations. Naomi lifted her head, and a wave of red dyed her face right up to her temples, and then, receding, left her very white. There is a quality in a Gallic voice which is unmistakable.

Armand de Rochecorbon had arrived. A crisis was at hand—perhaps the crisis that might change everything. In two, three, four minutes, she would learn whether she would have to reckon with an enemy—or at least, a critic—capable of, and willing to do her much harm: or whether the same chivalry that had been meted out to her, when she was hardly more than a slip of a girl, was to be extended to her now. In other words, had Armand de Rochecorbon been infinitely kind to seventeen, or to Naomi Melsham because he really believed that she was innocent of any participation in her mother's ways? Since she had heard that Fate—as Fate has a way of doing—was about to cast up against her the one person she would prefer not to see, she had been asking herself, not what she would do, but what Armand de Rochecorbon would do. The first glance would decide it.

The double doors opened. She could not, she would not look round. Armand de Rochecorbon was talking in his voluble way to Littleport about his car. He was sure no other was so wonderful, or could run so many miles on the same amount of "essence," and then, as he bustled past Littleport, declaring that he was too old a friend to need announcement, there darted into Naomi's mind the certainty

that their first interview would take place without witnesses—a mercy for which she had never hoped.

He was halfway down the room before he saw her.

“Ah, pardon!” he began, thinking that he had a stranger before him, but on the second look he recognized her, her blue eyes, the willowy grace of her figure, and yet he could scarcely believe his own glance.

“Mademoiselle!” he exclaimed. “Mademoiselle—Miss Naomi Melsham. It is Mademoiselle?”

“Yes, Monsieur,” the girl answered. “You—you recognize me after all these years?”

“I could not forget you! Impossible! Ah! *Si j'étais libre*—” the young man began, and then something on the face turned to look up to him made him stop.

“*Voyons!*” he said to himself. He waited—he gave her back a look as searching as hers had been pleading. He had evidently come on something unexpected—he was as evidently wishful to take his bearings.

“Monsieur de Rochecorbon,” began the girl, for the same humorous twinkle in the sharp brown eyes she had seen in the old days, and a smile, as kind as it was quizzical, gave her a certain hope, “this is my first visit to Zouche.”

“And mine,” said the Frenchman, “since I married myself with my wife.”

“Madame has not accompanied you?” asked the girl.

“Madame,” returned Armand, “does not care for travel.”

Naomi heard a certain aloofness in the quick voice. It might mean either of two things. Armand de Rochecorbon might have one of Mrs. Melsham's sayings in mind. “A man,” she was wont to observe, “with a wife by his side is a masculine possibility spoiled.” Or, Armand's thoughts might be turned in on himself. Naomi knew that a good many things had happened since she had seen him last. She had heard of a matrimonial arrangement of convenience, rather than of predilection: she had a woman's quickness for guessing that the little man had had his dream. Frenchmen so often take their dream as the prelude to the book, not as the first chapter of it. She wondered—for when one

loves, love is the first concern—if he was happy with the unimaginative woman who had been chosen for him.

"I hope Madame is well," was all she could think of saying.

The Frenchman thanked her suitably, but Naomi's quickness made another point. De Rochecorbon might not be enthusiastic about his wife, but he was at least cordial, and a man who has a foundation of esteem for the woman nearest to him is rarely cynical to other women. It is the unhappily married man who says the whole sex was made for undoing. Women on the contrary seldom lump men into a bunch.

Suddenly she swept aside the search for an effective phrase, for a single sentence in which she could put her case in its best light.

"I did not know Lady de la Haye before I came here," she blurted out, "I had never seen her before."

Armand made a step of recoil. An Englishman might have murmured that he had forgotten his cigarette case, or that he had not seen his hostess—Armand was not Gallic for nothing. There was a snap about his mind, as well as about his speech. Besides, his Latin temperament found zest rather than embarrassment in what is called, dramatically, a situation.

"Mademoiselle," he asked, "you are telling me something?"

"Yes," said Naomi, almost breathlessly, "Sir Roger—he is an old friend of yours——"

"*Bien sûr*," admitted Armand, "we were together shooting the quail in Pekin—but I have not seen him since——" He paused.

"He has only just left me," broke in Naomi quickly. "We were going to photograph this room together," and she indicated the camera she was twisting nervously in her hands.

"*Hélas!*" exclaimed Armand, snatching tactfully at the change of subject. "Could I not help—I am, with the camera, *du première force*."

But the girl threw out both her hands. She came straight to her point. "Monsieur de Rochecorbon," she began, "you remember our last meeting—you remember the Villa Paul et Virginie? You remember that my mother had parties there to play *chemin de fer*—you remember— No!" she protested, as Armand de Rochecorbon put up a hand as if to stop her. "I must speak. You have not forgotten. No man could forget. I must ask—what are you going to do?"

"I am going to stay at Zouche with our good Roger for—is it not three days?" evaded De Rochecorbon.

"Please—please," Naomi cried out, "don't try to put me off. You were very kind once to my mother—to me too. Will you listen to me now? Did my mother ever pay you back that money?"

"It was so long ago."

"Then she did not," concluded the girl.

Her look was bitter—terribly bitter—for so young a face.

The little Frenchman gave a sympathetic shrug. "Mademoiselle, I am foolish perhaps," he protested, "but I have that fine memory for forgetting."

"You are very kind," Naomi faltered, "but I feel so ashamed. Monsieur de Rochecorbon," she went on, "I know how badly you must think of my mother, and—and of me. Can you believe—I beg you to believe—I have no evidence to offer but my word, but indeed it is true—that that terrible evening was a revelation. It was the first time I understood my mother's—difficulties."

If Armand had hesitated, if he had doubted, he was conquered. He was a man of more acumen, of finer intellect than either his manner or his occupations might suggest. In reality what a Frenchman would call his "*tic*"—and he had a fresh one every two years—first porcelain, then idols, now motors—was energy searching for an outlet. In common with so many men belonging to the old families of France, his connections, political and religious, prevented his participating in the business of his country.

"Écoutez, Mademoiselle," he exclaimed, "have I not said

it is forgotten? Your mother, she is well?" Armand went on quickly.

"Yes," said Naomi. "We are not much together now. Ever since that night I have had such a horror of cards, and——"

"*Mais, grand ciel!*" retorted Armand stoutly; "it was only the word of Hermann Strum, and who would believe him?"

She caught her breath—repressed a sob. "Many people would have believed his story," she retorted, "they are not all as generous as you, Monsieur de Rochecorbon. Think," she went on with an appealing helplessness, "think if it were known here—what would become of me?"

Armand drew back a step. He realized that in some way he was being asked for a pledge—a pledge which could surely be counted on without asking.

"Mademoiselle," he protested, "you give yourself an unhappiness. Why?"

"Because you do not yet understand, Monsieur," Naomi went on hastily. "You were surprised to meet me here—you know you were?"

"Oh, Mademoiselle!"

"Would you be more surprised if you were to hear that Roger wished to marry me?"

"Surprised?" ejaculated Armand, and indeed the news came to him with such a shock that he covered it diplomatically, and proceeded to lie with that aplomb which the male invariably enjoys when the said lie is concerned with the opposite sex. "Mademoiselle is very beautiful," he protested, and then with a humorous smile he tacked on his inevitable, "*Si j'étais libre——*"

Naomi interrupted his flow of evasions. "Oh, please, Monsieur de Rochecorbon, I am serious. I tried to take life as it came—but I reckoned without my heart." She gave a little bitter laugh. "And in every woman's life there comes a point where her heart comes in and wrecks the best calculated schemes."

Armand instantly became grave. The appeal in the girl's voice touched him.

"*Enfin!*" he answered quickly, "and the schemes of Mademoiselle that Cupid has wrecked?"

Naomi's head was bowed. She turned a little away—then the truth shot out bald and uncompromising. It came in jerking words—just the plain unadorned statement.

"I hoped to marry Roger de la Haye, not because it would be better to live in this beautiful house than in second-class lodgings, not because it is more to one's credit to be the wife of a baronet than the daughter of a mother who——" She struggled with her emotion, which overpowered her for the moment.

Armand came to her side—"C'est assez, Mademoiselle," he urged, "c'est assez."

With a great effort the girl went on—"I hope to marry him because I love him—because I'm another and a better woman when I'm with him."

Armand saw that he must let her have her way—that something vital was to come. "And you tell me this, Mademoiselle—why?" he said.

"Because you know the life we lived at Nice when you met us. I wasn't to blame—I didn't understand," cried Naomi, her voice rising to a clamor. "I was so young then—I didn't realize—until that dreadful Strum turned round on my mother and accused her—believe me I didn't realize it. But you *know* what people said about mama—perhaps about me too. If—if you were asked—could you forget that?"

For one moment the fear of being drawn into collusion with a scheming woman made Armand hesitate; this might be but an elaborately arranged trap. Then, as he hesitated, Naomi raised her eyes—they were blue,—so were those of his little son,—they were limpid,—so were those of Monsieur Bébé. The chance resemblance not only softened Armand's whole being, it endowed him with a sudden far-reaching vision.

This beautiful woman was imploring him to give her a

chance, not that she might attain to worldly advantage, but that she might reach up to a finer mental atmosphere.

As soon as he was sure of that—and Armand de Roche-corbon was swift to make a decision—he took an impulsive step nearer.

“Mademoiselle,” he went on quickly, “I have not told you yet. I have a little son. It is three years since I marry myself with my wife, and last year Monsieur Bébé he make his appearance, and papa—when papa has been très sage—veri good—and mama is content with him, papa wheels the perambulator—so,” and the little man made a gesture to match. “And ze Engleesh Miss,” he went on, “*ma foi!*—so severe, so hygienic, she permit me sometimes, this foolish papa, to hold the sunshade over ze tout petit bald head so pink and so tender—”

Naomi looked up at him in wonder. “I don’t quite understand,” she said very softly.

“Écoutez,” went on Armand gently, “a man with so sweet an interior himself—how can he be hard on those who are without?”

There was an instant’s pause. The girl’s look was eloquent—for that one moment she realized all that the little Frenchman implied. Not only pity, not only a desire to help, but that far greater thing—confidence in her—confidence that, given her chance, she would take the gold and reject the dross. But as this certainty came to her, words failed her, her attempt to speak ended in a gasping sob and she had to turn away.

“Calmez vous, Mademoiselle,” Armand repeated, as he followed her, “calmez vous. That papa he has so much in his mind that he can forget, how do you say it—altogether. And chatterbox as he is, there are *some* things his lips will refuse ever to say.”

Naomi heard the promise of silence. The tears came into her eyes. Her heart was beating. It seemed to her that the wheel of Destiny had begun to spin in a new direction. Until Roger came into her life, both people and events had conspired to drag her down, now they seemed to be helping to



fortify her, to strengthen her. She bent her head, her being filled with gratitude.

Armand was as silent as she was, but he was wondering if he dare risk a word of advice.

"You permit one tout petit mot?" he queried gently.

The girl nodded.

"Roger—he know nothing?" inquired Armand.

"How could he?" Naomi replied, "he has been seven years away from Europe—we have known each other less than a month."

"Then tell him—everything," urged Armand.

"Everything?" gasped Naomi, "that is impossible. You know Roger. He is an idealist—he has a fixed standard. He thinks a woman can't go beyond a certain point—can't touch life at its seamy edge, and yet be the woman he loves. He loves me now as he thinks I am—I love him just as he is—whatever he may be, and so I must wait until—until it is me he loves—the real me. Just Naomi, no matter what she is, no matter what she may have been."

Armand looked at her dubiously. "And then——"

"Then, I'll tell him everything and he will understand. Do you think I shan't long for that day? Do you think I shan't hasten it? Love isn't love until it understands as well as forgives——"

Armand nodded his head. "Alors! C'est fini!" he muttered. And then in a lighter tone, "*Voyons!* Let us now to the photographs. *Hein!*"

He took up the camera again, but Naomi stopped him with a little gesture of dismay. She had no mind that her engagement with Roger should be carried through by any proxy.

"Oh, not now," she protested, "besides," she added with an uncertain laugh as she saw the little man already moving over towards the fireplace, "you cannot start there, you know, you are in the wrong light."

Armand de Rochecorbon protested, and he bowed with a flourish—"Mademoiselle, a man is always in the wrong light when a pretty woman puts him there."

Naomi started. The Frenchman's happy *jeu d'esprit* was too apropos to the subject they had just left.

"Don't we all, sometimes, get into the wrong light, Monsieur de Rochecorbon?" she said wryly. But this time the Frenchman refused to follow her.

"De light! Bah! It is but a bagatelle," he retorted gaily, "it depends always on how you make your blinds." With a sweeping gesture he took in the windows of the room, but pulled round sharply as his eye caught the window over the fireplace. "*Tenez!*" he exclaimed. "What is going on there?"

Naomi followed his glance.

From the inner room, across the glass of the closed window, a man's hand and arm were distinctly to be seen drawing together the curtains that would shut in the Chinese Room. The rough gray Harris tweed was unmistakably the sleeve of Paul Marketel's coat, but even as he pulled to the blinds, Naomi caught a glimpse of another hand, long, lean and yellow, which drew the curtains together at the bottom in a claw-like grasp.

"*Sapristi!*" exclaimed Armand excitedly, "there is someone in the Chinese Room, then? *Dites-moi!* Who can it be?" for like every habitué at Zouche, he knew the history of the room and the significance of the meetings there. "Is it ce cher Roger, and whom has he for bon camarade?"

"No," said Naomi impulsively, "Roger has gone to Chipley Magna—I told you—he will be back directly. Wasn't that Mr. Marketel—and his Excellency?"

"*Ciel!*" ejaculated the little man, now on tiptoe with excitement, for a habit of diplomatic observation once acquired sticks to one all one's life—that's why the career holds a place apart for seventy odd—"Old Chi Lung and Marketel—together—in the Chinese Room? Oh! La, la, la! *Quelle affaire!*"

Naomi could not help smiling at him. "An affaire—here?" she laughed.

The little Frenchman nodded emphatically—"But yes—Zouche is old ground for affaires diplomatiques. In the

days of Sir Arthur I have known in that room——” he broke off sharply as a sudden illumination burst on him. Armand had never been within the inner ring of diplomacy. France’s fatal habit of thrusting out her best-born, because they are her best-born, had prevented that also, but his interest in national affairs was none the less as keen as any outsider’s could be. Therefore he had heard whispers—just that hint dropped by one expert to another—that China was making one of her periodical turns in her sleep—it required but Naomi’s chance words to show him which way the Celestial eyes were blinking.

“*Voyons!*” he continued, “Chi Lung and Paul Marketel! It is not for nothing they meet here! Is it possible that we are—how do you say it—in the pie? The lion and the lamb,” he ran on, mixing up his metaphors in his eagerness, “they do not lie down together for soft sleeping. *Tiens!* If I could only have ears long enough to hear what they are saying now.”

“Would it be so very interesting?” the girl smiled.

“All that is of the most interesting,” declared the Frenchman. He came closer, and in his excitement ran both his hands through his hair, cropped *à la brosse*, until it stood up like a thatch of stiff bristles. “*Écoutez, Mademoiselle,*” he went on, “even now in there, perhaps—the East and the West, *il s’arrangent*. It is an intrigue!”

Naomi drew back—“I am tired of intrigues,” she said passionately,—“I wish there were no such things as mysteries and concealments in the whole world.”

“But, dear lady,” Armand retorted, “what would the poor diplomats do then?” He waved an approving hand towards the Chinese Room. “*Allons!* Let them talk!” he ran on, “Mille blessings on them! As often as the Chinese and the British agree—the German goes to the wall. *Allez toujours,*” he muttered fiercely, “be first in the field for once if you can,” and then, as he saw Naomi staring at him he turned with a laugh again. “But come now—to the photographs!” he said, and he took up the camera again.

“*Enfin!*—but it is small—will it make good pictures?”

he inquired, as he moved across to the specimen table and took up a vase of priceless Canton enamel, with a representation of a mandarin and his suite, exquisite in design and execution, upon it.

"Oh, yes," said Naomi quickly, and she little thought the deep significance her careless words were to have later. "These No. 3 Kodaks are so good that even those little mountains on that enamel will come out quite distinctly." Then she turned sharply to find that Littleport was waiting by her side.

The old man was carrying a large round silver tray, and on it were arranged piles of letters. Lady de la Haye's were always placed above Sir Arthur's name (for it was a presentation piece of plate),—Roger's at the foot, those for the guests in order of precedence. Not for worlds would the old man have varied the details of the ceremony.

He had already pointed out her single envelope to Naomi and now he edged Armand's correspondence to him and was just leaving the room when a wedge of sunlight darted into his eyes. Now sunlight, in relation to upholstery, was an enemy against whom Littleport waged a ceaseless war, so he turned back abruptly and proceeded carefully and precisely to draw to the yellow silk curtains.

"You will excuse me, M'am," he said, "but the sun does fade our carpets so."

"Vous permettez?" began the Frenchman, after he had looked up to smile at Littleport's precaution, and he tore open an envelope directed in that spidery hand of the convent-educated Frenchwoman.

He glanced down the lines of close pale writing and then he flung up his head, his face working with excitement.

"Ze bébé!" he cried out, "ze excellent bébé—'e have a tooth. Ah! le brave bon homme! I must send a dépêche—a telegram. Ze congratulations of papa! Littleport! Littleport! Mon vieux! A telegram!"

He rushed out of the room, looking over his shoulder at Littleport following on, and repeated his demand for a telegraph form.

Naomi looked after him. Perhaps once this effusiveness would have amused her—now it touched her.

"You see," she told herself, "he cares too, now that he has someone to open out his heart."

It was a moment before she went back to her own letter. She had left it lying on the table and now she frowned on it distastefully. She knew the writing, as exaggerated as the unduly large cover.

She tore open the envelope. It was what she expected—a bill from the dressmaker.

To account rendered . . . . .	£97 - 11 - 2	she read—
Lavender Lawn Dress . . . . .	11 - 11 - 0	
Hat to match . . . . .	5 - 15 - 6	

## CHAPTER VIII

NAOMI MELSHAM stood with Madame Émilie's bill in her hand, and the further she read the more aghast she became. Mrs. Melsham was a past master in turning the screw at the appropriate moment, so Naomi instantly suspected that the bill had followed her to Zouche by her mother's orders, but that was not all. Her three new dresses were each put down at far more than she had been led to believe. As for the account rendered—that was for Mrs. Melsham's own dresses, and was supposed to have been liquidated by an article in a fashion paper, but Naomi knew, since the whole bill had come to her, that sooner or later she would have to pay it. But how?

She began to breathe hard. It was as if she had been climbing up to Heaven, and had been ruthlessly pulled back to Earth.

"Good resolutions," she whispered bitterly, "remove none of the difficulties of the straight path."

This beginning on other lines, which had seemed possible, easy even, an hour ago, a case of good will and pure intentions, was not to be, merely because, honestly, sincerely, she wished it. The past is the octopus of human experience, and where it does not strangle, it is always capable of dragging under.

For the first time, that hardest question that a woman can ask herself clamored for an answer.

"Would it be the surest proof of her love for Roger to leave him?"

The question with all it implied was still in her mind, when the double doors opened with the flourish that Naomi had already learned to connect with Littleport's announcement of a guest.

The girl heard the beginning of a name; she sprang to her feet, her whole being tingling with consternation.

"Mrs. Melsham to see Miss Melsham," announced Littleport.

"Mama," breathed Naomi.

The mother and daughter waited, one looking hard at the other, until they were alone. Naomi spoke first.

"Mama, what have you come for? Why are you here?"

She looked fearfully at the faultlessly dressed woman. It was often possible to gauge Mrs. Melsham's frame of mind by her attire—more especially by the supply of carmine on her cheeks. Mrs. Melsham had evidently come in a discreet mood, for the coloring was so skilfully applied that it was all but possible to put it down to the careful preservation of a good complexion. Her manner, too (for Naomi's mother could be indefinably light at times), bore out the same note.

"My love," she began, and she never prefaced her speech with an endearment unless there was something to be gained by it, "you don't seem pleased to see me."

Mechanically Naomi pulled up a chair. Mrs. Melsham took it, she looked at the tip of her neat *suède* shoe with a downcast air, and hoped, if she gave Naomi time, the girl would think she had been unfeeling.

Exactly that thought came into the girl's mind.

"Forgive me," she said penitently, "I didn't expect you. I was afraid——"

"Of what?" asked Mrs. Melsham.

"You see," said Naomi, "everything is so different here."

"You don't think I should fit in," mocked her mother.

"Things are so different here," answered Naomi, falling back on a lame repetition.

Mrs. Melsham looked up with a cold smile. She realized that Naomi was possessed with what she called one of her "goody-goody" fits, and for such a mood she had no toleration at all.

"I never knew a girl in love, who didn't compare her

'future's' family, to the disadvantage of her own," she observed. "After she is married, she generally learns that she has found a number of new relations who either snub her for not being as smart as themselves or detest her for being smarter."

After that trenchant epitome, she sat up straight and inquired, with her most business-like air, if Naomi had any interesting news for her.

"No," returned the girl shortly.

"I suppose Roger de la Haye is in love with you," Mrs. Melsham went on.

The girl colored a furious red.

"You stood the test of the home environment all right," the cold voice continued.

Naomi threw out her hands. Not a week ago she would have played off contempt against cynicism, and a battle of furious words would have ensued. Now she seemed as if she would push the stinging comments from her.

"Don't, Mama," she protested. "Don't say bitter things. I have learned such a lot since I came here. Let's begin again, you and I—we are always saying horrid things to each other——"

Mrs. Melsham laughed harshly.

"Do you want to reform me?" she asked. "My good child, you are making yourself ridiculous. I'm old enough to prefer caviare to ice pudding."

She rose, and frankly began to appraise the room: she observed that there were several things, to her mind, requiring modification.

"Keep your boudoir in your own hands," she suggested, "don't take it as a legacy, and insist from the first that it has a key to its lock. Above all, strike your own note. If I were you, I'd go in for yellows, just because everyone will expect purples from your hair and skin."

Naomi broke in on this pertinent advice with a sharp question.

"How did you get here? Where did you come from?" she asked.



"The Tippley-Smiths have taken a house at Coboldisham, only fifteen miles from here."

"Lady de la Haye has not called upon them."

Mrs. Melsham did not answer immediately. During the last two or three sentences, she had been wandering down the room, fingering the curios, now she pulled up before the little table and paused to examine the row of Chinese scent bottles upon it.

"Three, four, five—a whole dozen—no, thirteen!" she counted aloud. "How absurd! And how unlucky! What does one want with thirteen Chinese scent bottles?"

"I know," she remarked in another tone, taking up the conversation over her shoulder, while she picked up a tiny flat bottle, with a heavy inlay of gold—"I had rather a difficulty in reminding Ada Tippley-Smith that she couldn't make the first advance. I meant to come alone, and here I am."

She opened the black vanity bag, which hung by a large ring over her wrist, and took out her handkerchief.

Naomi looked up. There was an instant while a great horror kept the girl still, and then she sprang to her mother's side.

"Every item of this collection is catalogued and known to collectors all over the world. Not even the little dealers in the Quai Montmorency would buy a single thing, for they couldn't sell it again without being accused of theft," she exclaimed breathlessly.

Mrs. Melsham deliberately replaced the scent bottle in the middle of the long row.

"Isn't that rather conceited of the De la Hayes?" she remarked—"making such a fuss, as if no one else collected *chinoiserie*. I don't know that I admire Oriental art myself."

The mother and daughter faced each other. Once again Mrs. Melsham's airy disregard for the accepted honesties of existence baffled Naomi.

"What *have* you come for, Mama?" she demanded insistently.