The

FOOT OF TIME

BY

ALEC BEER

DEATON & SPENCER

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A NOVEL OF AUSTRALIA AND THE SOUTH SEAS

By ALEC BEER

AUSTRALIA:
DEATON & SPENCER
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Too late I stayed—forgive the crime—
Unheeded flew the hours;
How noiseless falls the foot of time,
That only treads on flowers.

(*Lines to Lady A. Hamilton.*)

WILLIAM ROBERT SPENCER.

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CHAPTER I.

THE TEA GARDEN.

CLARE ARBUTHNOT had been sitting on the verandah with a book, but the sheer fascination of watching the coolie girls plucking the tea-leaves had outspanned her reading.

"Two leaves and a bud," "two leaves and a bud." Long, dextrous, brown fingers, "pink-tipped," gradually filled their baskets, suspended, part resting upon the swaying, sensuous hips of their owners.

Abdul—the Mahomedan "Boy"—had pulled up one of the green blinds the better to enable his Mem-Sahib to watch the girls. By three o'clock the pluckers had reached the bushes directly in front of Clare. Lady Arbuthnot noticed one girl in particular; she was somewhat more mature than the rest, though still young. Young even from Eastern standards. It came to the English girl with surprised wonder how extraordinarily graceful was this young daughter of the East, moving rythmically to her work.

Then Clare's train of thoughts were interrupted by the silent, almost noiseless approach of their "Bearer." The Arbuthnots shared the barefooted

boy between them to save unnecessary expense. There was no need to exercise economy, but Goombah Tea Garden was run on sound business lines. Sir Bruce Arbuthnot, Bart., did not employ two boys where one would serve!

"Mem-Sahib take tea?"

Clare scarcely heard him at first, but Abdul repeated his question. "Mem-Sahib char mangta? Mem-Sahib take tea?"

The musical tinkle of the thin teacups brought her out of her reverie. "Char Mem-Sahib, Mem-Sahib take tea?"

Clare was particular about her tea. She liked it rather strong, but poured off the leaf before even the prescribed four minutes were up. Bruce, her great husband, had suggested her using the best Broken Orange Pekoe of his manufacture. This particular sieving gave the best self-drinking liquor the Estate exported, possessing also a light, bright, coppery infusion. Lady Arbuthnot kept to this grade, using a small silver strainer picked up in the Bazaar down in Darjeeling a few miles away.

The Garden lay a couple of thousand feet above the town, with a clear view of Kunchinjunga directly in front of their bedroom window. The mountain was visible in the very early mornings, at this season of the year—fifty miles away.

Drinking her tea, Clare's thoughts went back to the morning upon which she had first seen Kunchinjunga bathed in sunshine—the day after her arrival—a young bride: now twelve months ago.

Bruce had ordered Abdul to put down the tea-tray, roll up their mosquito curtain, and leave them. Clare remembered how powerful Bruce had looked, springing out of bed, standing there at the open window. Their blinds had been up all night—the blinds and the windows. It was too cold for snakes—at any rate, they hoped it was!

She remembered Bruce saying he wanted to see as much of her as the stars disclosed, and so left the blinds as they were. Clare was glad of the friendly verandah roof, the clear darkness of the night, the absence of the moon. It was not good for a man to see in the eyes of his bride quite how much she loved him. And then that following morning he had turned to her.

"Clare, look! I've another wedding present for you to see."

She had jumped out of bed, and standing in front of him, caught her first glimpse of the eternal snows. It brought a gasp of wonder to her lips. Then the cold early morning air catching her thin gown, a slight shiver escaped her. Standing behind her, Bruce made it an excuse to fold her in his great arms. Clare bent back her head. In that position her lovely dark hair brushed his broad shoulder. The early morning light lit up his curly hair, sent flashes through it as he bent down and kissed her—kissed her with as much reverence as love, with as much abiding worship as physical passion. Clare would have lingered, but her great husband caught her up bodily.

"Come and finish your tea," he ordered, and

carried her willy-nilly to their bed. His bed and her bed. How she loved him!

Then they talked tea. Bruce talked, Clare listened, till Abdul made entry, announcing that his Sahib's hot bath was ready, and she lay there absorbed in the whole atmosphere of it. The Darjeeling tea was delicious. China seed nurtured in the Himalayan mountain soil. Clare thought she would try the Orange Pekoe Fannings grade, even though it necessitated the schooling of her native staff to well cover the canister against draughts. Fannings was so easily blown about. Clare reflected what a lot of hot water Abdul would need to carry to cover her enormous husband. How heavy he was, and how secure to her! Secure against any wind blowing him about like the Tea Fannings! Blowing him away from her side! A slight shiver shook her, an instantaneous depression—it came and left her again, left her with lightning speed. Intuitive. Ridiculous; yet it had come. The renewal of splashing sounds dispelled the passing cloud. Happy again, she had fallen asleep, till fresh from his bath and exercises, her husband's kiss awoke her.

"Wake up, sweetheart; your bath will be getting cold," he had said. Then with no necessity for it, unless perhaps, by way of excuse to kiss her again: "Welcome to Goombah!" This, failing to wake Clare to his satisfaction, he had picked her up bodily again, lifted her from the bed, and so carried her before she was completely aware of it, kissing her as he strode along. In the bathroom Bruce set his

wife on her feet, bestowed a look that she long after remembered, and so left her.

Bathing, she had watched a lizard disporting itself up and down the wall. The little creature ran right across the ceiling on top of her. How its equilibrium was preserved passed comprehension. Outside, Abdul could be heard laying the breakfast. The sizzling of bacon, the smell, the suggestion of it came to her through the high-cut bathroom door. Bruce delivering his orders, kindly yet firmly. How those boys worshipped their great Sahib! Bruce never gave an order twice. There was no need to. Clare loved it all, fitted into it, became part of it. A year had gone by—the happiest she had ever experienced.

Sir Bruce Arbuthnot, Baronet, was managing owner not only of Goombah, but also of all the other gardens comprised in the Arbuthnot Tea Estate Company Limited. Each garden carried its own manager. Some gardens required the further addition of one or more assistants. No, there was certainly no financial need for the sharing of but one bearer between them, and now Clare's thoughts came back to the immediate present as the "boy" put the tea-tray down by her side. He had to slide the tray along the table to avoid the book which she had been trying to read.

The coolie girl who had so especially caught Clare's attention was now working round to the side of the tea bush, thus presenting her alluring beauty in profile. Lithe fingers nipped off the green leaf according to the orders ruling for the

day. The orders of Bruce Arbuthnot which were a law unto themselves. Two young tea leaves to each bud of a leaf, dropped with astonishing rapidity into the large basket suspended there at the coolie girl's back. The receptacle was now over half full. Clare turned to Abdul.

"Do you know any of these garden girls, Boy?"

Clare did not know why she asked the question, but it came out, forced itself out, carried itself out whether the utterer of it wished to give expression to it or otherwise!

And that was a very curious thing. There are many curious things in life. More things in heaven and earth, Clare Arbuthnot, than are dreamt of in your philosophy!

Did Abdul know any of the coolie girls on the estate? Well, why on earth shouldn't he know scores of them, perhaps be the husband of a few of them? He looked sleek enough, innocent enough for anything, be it harem-keeping or imperturbable expression masking. Why shouldn't he know? Why shouldn't Clare ask so perfectly ordinary, perfectly innocent a question? Yet somehow something outside herself had prompted that most trivial remark, so trivial that Abdul, the bearer of Lord Bruce Burra-Sahib, and the Estate Mem-Sahib, paled under his brown skin as he heard it.

And that was strange, too!

Clare's question appeared to surprise the boy.

"Hah, Mem-Sahib," he replied, hesitatingly. "Beshak, Mem-Sahib. Abdul know e'some, not

others, Mem-Sahib. One coolie girl stay long time, others not stay. Soon leave."

Clare studied him. She felt her splendid heart beat ever so little, ever so curiously faster, as she sensed rather than noticed the boy's discomfort.

"Why do some girls only remain on the Estate a short time, Boy?" she heard herself saying.

"Not like work, Mem-Sahib."

Clare picked up her book, turned it over idly, playing with it.

"Are you married, Boy?" she said suddenly.

Abdul appeared uneasy. He gave the impression that this channel of conversation was out of the ordinary. Not entirely her affair. His hesitation was apparent. Clare noticed it, and wondered at the cause of it. The boy, as a rule, was so open.

"Hah, Mem-Sahib," he let out suddenly with a burst, "plenty much married!"

He grinned, showing his teeth, then abruptly left her, leaving a curious indefinable impression behind him. Something intangible, not appertaining to him, yet involving him in danger.

Clare put her book down, laying it on the verandah floor. She picked up her teacup slowly, wonderingly. She liked her tea sweet. The spoon made a tinkle against the saucer as she finished stirring the brew. The sound of it caught the ear of the nearby coolie girl.

Slowly Clare began to drink, appraising the characteristic flavour of the hill-grown leaf, then looking over the brim of the cup, met the eyes of the coolie, busy upon her task of plucking the green

tea leaves. Clare was struck by the signal beauty of the girl's dark eyes, yet not so struck as she was by the expression in them as they met hers.

Lady Arbuthnot always prided herself upon an invariable avoidance of snobbishness, autocracy, patronisation in any form. Seeing those dark almond eyes full stare upon her, she gave the girl a quick smile. It was in the nature of a telepathetic message of sympathetic understanding—understanding of their mutual womanhood and all that it stood for.

But the effect upon the girl was curiously marked. She failed to smile back. She failed to register appreciation of the kindly look. She but included in the movement of her work a semblance of a salaam, dropped lovely eyes speedily to her task, and continued with ever-increasing rapidity her plucking of the tea leaves.

Then Clare noticed the girl's bosom rise and fall again, wondered at the fullness of it, then pondered why she, a woman herself, had so wondered. Why she had so much as observed it.

Abdul returned to remove the tea things.

An intuitive disquiet fell upon the bride of a year, reasonless, rhymless. Speaking with slight tenseness she enquired:

"Do you know that girl, Boy?"

The Mahomedan shot a quick glance towards the tea-bush.

"Not know, Mem-Sahib. New coolie girl. Never seen before."

But even as he spoke Clare knew that the boy lied.

"What is her name, Abdul?" she asked, for the boy's obstinacy of manner astonished his mistress almost as much as her own curiosity surprised herself. Some insistent call urged her to probe him. Why she knew not; yet there it was.

"Go and bring me my cigarette case, Abdul," she ordered him, and seemingly glad to leave her the servant ran to do her bidding. Upon his return the boy attempted to hand her the case and make himself scarce without loss of further time, but Lady Arbuthnot stopped him. Leisurely putting a match to her cigarette she ordered him to remain.

"What is the matter with you, Boy? Have you been thieving?" she enquired. A lightning flash of pleasurable relief shot across the boy's face. Here was something easily tackled. What if he had been thieving? It was a safer sin than discussing coolie girls with the Mem-Sahib.

"I not at all thief, Mem-Sahib," he assured her, feigning great anger. "Not thief-man at all, Mem-Sahib. Mem-Sahib is my father, my mother. I very poor man, Mem-Sahib. I not at all thief-man!" The boy rolled his eyes in indignant protest, but Clare felt him to be bluffing. Playing the humbug; not over the question of thieving—was not every son of his mother a thief by birth, hereditary, environment, inclination?—but to put her off a greater issue.

And Clare knew that Abdul was pleased to be thought a thief for once. She knew that the ques-

tioning had pleased her servant, and an increasing sense of disquiet pervaded her. Why should the bearer find enquiry concerning his integrity relieving? Why so fearful of questions about his private life; knowledge of the coolie girls?

Clare stared at him. The harder she gazed the more uncomfortable he grew. She wanted him to feel uncomfortable, that she might, perhaps, the more readily trap him.

"What are you frightened about, Abdul?" Lady Arbuthnot asked at length, then noticed the poor fellow actually moistened dry lips before replying.

"Not frightened at all, Mem-Sahib," he burst out with great vehemence. "Abdul not thief, not frightened at all of lady of Lord Bruce Arbuthnot Burra Sahib Baronet!"

The manner in which the boy rolled off the name, the awful altered tone of it, gripped her.

Diverting the conversation, Clare asked: "Do all the coolie girls earn the same pay, Boy?"

"Not at all same pice, Mem-Sahib. Suppose pick slow, not get much; suppose pick much, earn plenty rupee, Mem-Sahib."

Clare indicated the coolie girl opposite to them. "Does that girl there earn much?"

"Hah, Mem-Sahib, most quick girl on Sahib's Estate."

"I thought you told me that you had never seen her before. Why are you lying to me?"

Abdul turned a sickly hue under his swarthy skin.

"Mem-Sahib excuse," he muttered hoarsely.

"Must brush Sahib clothes, polish boot; much have do, Mem-Sahib."

He waited for no permission but fled as though the devil were after him, as, maybe, perhaps he was.

Clare glanced across at the coolie girl. She was still there, but having finished the bush immediately opposite the garden bungalow, was now working upon the one next to it. Clare noticed that the plucker commenced on the side furthest away from the house—a procedure she had not followed before—thus putting herself in a position to watch the homestead should she have a mind to do so.

The girl did indeed glance up at frequent intervals, but carefully avoided again meeting the magic eyes of the English girl—watching her with a curiosity for which she could not account.

"How perfectly ridiculous I am," Clare thought. "The girl is probably Abdul's wife—one of his wives!"

She looked across at the snows. They were hidden in the clouds, covered in by them, and by their eternal mantle of white. Twenty-nine thousand feet above the level of the sea.

And now it was growing late. It was time Bruce came in. Perhaps down there in the factory they were sieving out the smaller grades—the Orange Pekoe Fannings, which blew about so terribly. Unless he arrived soon there would be little enough time for tennis before they had to change for dinner. People always changed for dinner in the East.

Even if a man were utterly alone, still the inevitable cloak of Western respectability must be donned lest one lose one's self-respect and caste with the natives. Those brown-eyed observers of everything and a bit over! Lest one lost some measure of the awe in which they held the whites. Yet Sir Bruce, had he the wish, could have donned anything with impunity. A compelling personality—a strong man. Arrogant in his own supreme self-confidence, yet not arrogant with it. He had to be but himself, and it sufficed to extract service from all around him. Service given unsought. The perfect example of an indomitable inflexible will, superb health, complete manhood. A law unto himself in all things, Sir Bruce had no need to act manager on one of his own gardens, but he preferred to live this life. He preferred to do a man's work, even crediting himself with an ordinary manager's pay. It pleased his pride to do so. He put unnecessary duties upon himself, worked hard, and expected all under him to follow suit. He was in no wise cruel. If sickness struck down any of his staff, be they white, brown or black, their employer was their best friend. But he was strict to a degree, without need to be, though any man could obtain his ear and speak out his mind without fear if he so wished. Sir Bruce had a partiality for the Scotch as garden managers, though thoroughly English himself. He respected their thoroughness. A few of them were capable of speaking out their minds to him with dangerous bluntness. They knew their man! If what they uttered were true, if what they occasionally candidly told him was an honest expression of their own ideas upon any theme, Sir Bruce at least respected it as such. They might fail to convince him at times, fail to move him, but they lost nothing on that account. The Arbuthnot Estate was the most efficiently run tea concern in all India.

And now Clare sat there on her balcony thinking about the man. When didn't she think about him? Wealthy, powerful, titled, yet choosing to live a man's life out here in the open air. Loving her! He could have led a butterfly life in England; racing, polo, dancing, the theatre. It came to her how utterly, how unspeakably, she loved him, would always love him. Love him through thin and through thick, even though the heavens fell. Her great man, who had never loved another—or so he had told her—had never so much as thought about any girl but herself! It seemed too wonderful to be true, and yet here she was, out in Tibet. His wife! How happy she ought to be. Why had she thought *ought* to be? She was happy—utterly happy. She always would be happy. How could she be anything else?

And then her heart gave a great bound as she heard his heavy, confident tread. He was coming along the garden path, approaching the bungalow verandah. Sir Bruce came into view. Clare caught the shadow of the coolie girl moving away to the factory to have her pluckings weighed and her day's pay appraised; and then her husband came up to her. Their eyes met, and if ever a girl saw love for her in a man's eyes, Clare saw it then in his.

"You most lovely thing," he said, and crushed her to him.

But Clare was all nerves to-day. She clung to him. Some awful, terrible intuition of impending disaster was upon the bride of a year.

"I had hoped you would have been free to come in sooner, my husband," she said. "Busy old thing, aren't you?"

Clare was in the habit of hiding her overwhelming love for him by prosaic remarks of that nature, for if once she became sentimental she might give herself away *too* much. There were other occasions for that.

"We have been busy in the factory, sweetheart," he told her, "sieving out the different grades. I'm shipping home the most flavoury lot of Fannings London has tasted for many a day. It should catch the next Clan boat."

And then for no reason Clare gave a slight shiver.

"Bruce, darling," she said, "promise me you'll never let anything blow you away from me. Promise me."

"Why, Clare," he said, "you poor little darling. Why, you're a bundle of nerves. What a brute I am. You must have a change. I must send you away to new sights. Now, what about a couple of weeks at Simla, or down to the plains? How about a trip to Calcutta, Clare?"

"I couldn't bear it, Bruce," she told him, "not unless you could get away, too."

"I can't do that just at the moment, my dear."

Clare clung to him. Told him that nothing

would make her leave him, even for a single moment.

"That's all right, then," he assured her. "You gave me quite a scare, Clare. Thought you might have a touch of fever coming on."

"Oh, no, Bruce. I'm quite all right. Really I am."

"That's good, then," he said. "I'm sure I should be wretched without you." Then, following his tireless habit, Bruce picked Clare up like any baby, and kissing her softly as he walked, carried her unprotesting into their home.

And so to dinner, with Abdul resplendently arrayed in an enormous white turban standing quietly at the back of them, anticipating their every wish.

CHAPTER II.

TWO GARDEN MANAGERS.

THE following days had been cold and foggy, but Lady Arbuthnot's fit of depression was a thing forgotten, blown away like Broken Orange Pekoe Fannings under the endearments and care of her husband. It was early Autumn, the season when Goombah manufactured her superb Autumnal flavoured tea, and Lady Arbuthnot came in from her verandah calling Abdul to her.

"I will take tea in here to-day, Boy," she ordered. "Your master will be in, too. Bring me two cups and the cake."

Abdul made an obeisance. "Bahut achcha, Mem-Sahib," he replied, then went noiselessly out to do her bidding.

Clare heard her husband's step. He was walking outside with Ian Mackenzie, one of the managers in the Arbuthnot group of tea gardens, and Lady Arbuthnot found herself wondering whether Mackenzie was in one of his fighting moods. She was interested in "Mac" and his blunt candour, and yet somehow frightened of it. Why, Clare knew not, yet there it was. Mackenzie was responsible for Publoo, a much larger garden than Goombah, and about 3,000 feet below it. Publoo carried two

European assistants besides the manager, each junior taking turn to be invited to tennis and dinner at the bungalow of their chief up at Goombah.

Lady Arbuthnot could now hear the voices of the two men. They were talking with unusual heat, not apparently against each other, but rather of some occurrence upon which they did not see eye to eye.

"On no account must Ranee be allowed to leave Publoo, Mackenzie," Clare heard Bruce say. "If I want her I shall know where to find the girl. She is to keep to her own garden. Definitely understand me. I need not repeat it. Ranee remains on your pay roll!"

Mackenzie's voice came to Lady Arbuthnot through the rarified mountain air.

"I'll do my utmost to keep her to the garden, Sir. You can rest assured upon that." Their voices died away for a time as the owner showed his garden to the Scotchman, then they came towards the bungalow again, and Clare could hear their conversation. Mackenzie certainly appeared to be in one of his fighting moods. His voice shook with passion—a passion held in leash through discipline for his senior, safety for his post, and perhaps more than either through the instinct of human inferiority which the overwhelming personality of the baronet brought to all with whom he came in contact. There it was, however bitterly men might at times desire otherwise. However greatly they might wish to dispute this, or dispute that with him. Hedged round with natural armour, it

carried Bruce where lesser mortals would fear to tread, until relying upon it to carry no possible flaw, it brought about his own destruction.

That is, if men of the calibre of Bruce Arbuthnot can be destroyed: in any worldly sense: this side of the grave.

And now that fearless, stocky, little Scotchman was speaking out his mind:

"I don't like it, mon, and I don't fear to tell ye so," Clare heard him say, and wondered at the tone of it.

Clare liked Mackenzie. Strong, fearless, honest, efficient. You knew where you were with a man of that type. No shilly-shally, no beating about the bush. His garden was as well run as Goombah. It was not better run, for that would have been impossible, but while the owner got there by one method (mainly the method of his own personal magnetism, coupled with that of knowing the task he had allotted himself) the Scotchman reached it by another.

Clare caught a few words from her husband. They were coming quite close. Perhaps Sir Bruce was going to ask Publoo's manager in to tea. They were walking past the tea-bush but recently plucked by the swiftest plucker in all the Arbuthnot Estate. Sir Bruce appeared to be conciliating Mackenzie. Kindly, tactfully, even sympathetically, yet firmly. It was no easy matter. It rarely is with those hardy sons of the North. They know their own minds. Bruce seemed to be sticking doggedly to his point against the opinion of the junior man. But the employee had the last word.

"But for Mrs. Mackenzie away yonder, Sir, I'd hand you my resignation. I've said my say, spoken for us all, and it's finished. I've no alternative—you know that. I've my living to make. Your blood be upon your own head, mon. I'll bid you good-night, Sir. But hark ye to me, mon, I'm telling you. You'll rue it!"

An intangible impression of the owner clapping his hand smilingly to the other's left shoulder the while his right hand sought, found, then shook that of the Scotchman, came to Lady Arbuthnot. How splendidly tactful her great man was! They would do anything for him. She wondered what her husband was likely to rue, wondered whether she dare ask him. Better not. It was no concern of hers.

Then she heard her husband speaking again. He was making some enquiry. Enquiry concerning sickness and trouble of some kind or another down in the compound.

"See that they have everything they need, Mac. Hold on; here, take this. I won't have any misery on Arbuthnot that human agency can alleviate."

Clare heard the clink of silver, its rustle against paper.

"It's too much, Sir," she heard Mackenzie protest.

"Tut, man!" ordered the baronet. "Use as much of it as you think right—don't stint, mind. I won't have stint in these matters. Give the poor devils all they need. *All*, mind. Do you understand me?

Then if there *is* anything over—well, damn it, you have an Emergency Account, haven't you, man?"

Apparently there was such an account upon Publoo, as also upon every garden in the group, even though in other directions there was no unnecessary duplication of personal servants or waste of good money in superfluities.

Clare heard Mackenzie say, "That's extremely generous of you, Sir Bruce. The Lord put a kind heart into your sinful soul, and I'd cut off my right hand for you; but oh, mon, when I think of your lovely——."

Clare thought Mackenzie was going to say wife, and her heart missed a beat. She regretted this unavoidable eavesdropping, but it had all happened so quickly. She had not intended to overhear anything. Then the crunch of their riding boots on the gravel path drowned further audibility. The heavy crunch, crunch, then the sharp slap of the baronet's riding crop against the side of his long boot as he mounted the steps of the verandah. The self-confident tread dispelled doubts, leaving but the knowledge of her great man's nobility of character. Eagerly Clare looked up as her husband's form filled the doorway, then jumping to her feet she ran to him.

Poor, poor Clare! May "the foot of time" in its inexorable merciless march recompense you if recompense be needed, and if the gates of hell be loosened upon you and yours, may you learn in the fullness of time through adversity the greatest happiness that human life can hold.

CHAPTER III.

THE GATES OF HELL.

DINNER was over, and Sir Bruce and his wife lay luxuriously in long deck chairs smoking. Outside the room the stars twinkled clearly through the mountain night. Arbuthnot's long black Burmese cheroot glowed in the dim light of their room. Clare affected mild Virginian cigarettes, but there was nothing of affectation about her restricted smoking. She really enjoyed her indulgence, and the quality of her brand, obtained from the Army and Navy Stores down in Calcutta, soothed her. There were times when, for reasons more intuitive than tangible, some degree of appeasement was fraught with the reverse of harm.

So they rested after their meal, quietly talking to each other. Bruce Arbuthnot, the seventh baronet, was more silent than was usual with him. Through the open folding glass doors the murmur of tropical insects, the hoot of an owl, and mysterious rustlings came to them.

"Do owls kill snakes, Bruce?" Clare asked, breaking a long silence. The question awoke his reverie.

"I shouldn't wonder, darling: really don't know —yes, probably they would—small ones; the small snakes, I mean."

"Babies?"

The man gave a slight imperceptible start.

"Baby snakes, Bruce?"

"Yes, the young 'uns, you know—little fellows."

Clare toyed with her cigarette. Her great boy was out of sorts to-night—not in a mood to be questioned.

Abdul brought them a small peg of whisky and soda, left them as silently as he had entered, glided out wraith-like. Bruce placed his glass through the aperture made for it in the arm-rest of his long deck chair. His wife left hers on the table. Clare liked to do one thing at a time; she enjoyed a slow pulse. Smoking and drinking did not go well together with her. She smoked about three cigarettes daily. Some women she knew smoked thirty-three. She drank just enough to disqualify her from the pledge. Just enough to escape eligibility by a short head. Bruce could have done without alcohol altogether, being too strong to need it. It was the same to him whether he drank much or nothing, but the East is not a white man's country, and statistics, which are stubborn mules against which to argue, definitely prove that aerated or non-aerated soft drinks incline to flabbiness East of Suez. But not such softness as over-indulgence the other way.

The snake-like movements of Abdul brought Clare's thoughts travelling in his direction. She began to wonder how many wives he kept. Presently: "Bruce! Abdul *has* been odd lately," she opened out. She had been wanting to say it for some

while, but somehow or another could not bring herself to begin.

"Odd?" rejoined Arbuthnot with a burst. "How do you mean odd?"

"He seems to have a secret up his sleeve."

Bruce let out a laugh. "Oh, they often appear that way," he said.

"No—really—he—he seems quite frightened of me."

"Nonsense, dear, nonsense!"

"It isn't nonsense, Barty. A few days ago I was watching some girls working on the bushes directly in front of the bungalow, particularly one of them —a really wonderfully pretty girl. She so interested me that I questioned the boy about her. He told me that she was quite new to the garden—said, indeed, he had never seen her before. Then, shortly after, having my suspicions about him——"

"Suspicions?"

"Well, I mean he seemed so funny," Clare broke off. "You know what we women are?" she laughed.

"Not I," Sir Bruce ejaculated tersely.

"Oh, you—you great man's man. I really believe you scarcely knew the world contained women until you met——"

"You?" Bruce finished for her, interrogatively.

"Yes. Till you found one in me, Bruce."

Sir Bruce Arbuthnot, the seventh Baronet of the line, took a long, lazy pull at his glowing cheroot. He watched the blue smoke reflectively as it blended with the air. It had completed its sphere of usefulness in the order of things: served its day,

if only in helping to aid his self possession. The man lit a cigarette from the smouldering end. With strong lungs he blew away the white ash, the better to give his cigarette a clear start in sacrificing itself to its soothing duty. Then he flung the cheroot stump far out into the night. Into the garden, towards the tea-bush where the beautiful coolie had lacked appreciation of the Mem-Sahib's kindly smile of sympathy some time before. The glowing stump landed beyond the wide verandah, half-way across the path, being damp and heavy with nicotine. Clare could just discern a spot of red where it had fallen. Bruce put a thick cloud of light cigarette smoke through his shapely nose, having first inhaled it through lungs which boasted a great expansion.

"Well, what of Abdul?" he asked.

It seemed that the baronet found the line of conversation fraught with the same danger that Abdul himself had found in it. It appeared as though Sir Bruce, strong though he was, must give himself time to battle carefully and tactfully with the type of enquiry towards which they were heading.

"I caught him deceiving me." Clare drew herself up on the long chair, curled her shapely legs under her. She leant forward. Her pretty hands played with each other caressingly; she moved them, locked them together, illustrating her points. "I was asking him whether all the girls earned the same amount of money."

"But you know they don't," her husband interrupted her. "You have seen them having their baskets weighed each evening."

"Of course, silly, I know. Don't you see? I was just trying to draw him out."

"Oh, yes; go on."

"Abdul got most hopelessly tied up. In one breath he told me that the girl I was especially asking about was new to the garden. He said he had never seen her before, and the very next moment he told me she was the fastest plucker on the whole Estate."

"The fastest plucker upon the Estate?" Sir Bruce uncrossed his long legs then crossed them again. He turned, looked at his wife—looked at her intently, very slightly paled. He resumed his smoking.

"Yes, that is what he said. Why—why ever did he so contradict himself?"

"Well, and what else?"

"That's all. Funny, wasn't it? Oh, yes, of course, I remember more now. The boy made a futile excuse about brushing your clothes, then abruptly left me just when I was asking him questions."

Bruce laughed. It was a forced laugh, no ring, no depth to it. The laugh went as far as his throat. Stopped there!

"One of his wives, I expect, my darling," he said.

Outside a rustle sounded. It was quite distinct. Both heard it. The cheroot end had not ceased to glow out there on the garden path. Then something eclipsed it—passed between it and the house. But for that blotting out of the tiny red glow Clare

could not have been certain anyone was there. The rustle might have been anything.

"Bruce, what was that? There is someone there. I saw somebody!"

The man pulled his legs out of the chair. "I'll go and see," he said, and moved to the open glass door. Then something stayed him. Clare heard him catch his breath. She sat up and turned to the door.

Into the room glided the most alluring coolie girl. She was even more beautiful than "the fastest picker on the estate." Further, in her eyes was that intangible heavenly expression of quiet fulfilment of her destiny which mothers carry. In her arms she carried a young baby. It appeared about three weeks old, gurgling health and contentment snuggled against its mother's breast.

But it was singularly pale skinned!

The young mother moved gracefully across to Arbuthnot, seventh Baronet of his line.

"Sahib like see?" she began, then caught sight of the Mem-Sahib.

"What a little darling. May I hold it?" Clare began. But the expression upon the eyes of the coolie froze the words on her lips.

"Not know Mem-Sahib here," the Asiatic woman muttered as Bruce gripped her gently but firmly by the arm—gripped her as though to hold her back from his wife.

"Hamko mut pukkaro," the girl said quietly (do not hold me). "Think Sahib alone." She passed swiftly out through the door.

Both turned to watch her. She reached the

verandah step. A shadow passed between her and the watchers. They discerned a raised arm. The light from their open window caught the flash of bright steel. Bruce leapt outside. A piercing shriek rent the air, then shriek after shriek after shriek. Rushing, naked footsteps. The echo of the cries came back fainter and fainter. The night closed down upon it. Then silence—a silence which could be felt. Yet through it Clare could hear her heart beats thumping against her chest.

Bruce Arbuthnot came back into the room—his room and hers!

In that period Clare lived a lifetime, as though the curtain had gone up upon the drama—all revealing. She understood it all. The tragedy was a detail, perhaps even helpful in dulling her mind from the greater issue. Her subconscious mind had already grasped the entire situation in all its awfulness.

CHAPTER IV.

THE END OF THE BEGINNING.

ARBUTHNOT grasped the back of his long chair. Clare saw his knuckles go white under his grip. His face was ashen; set lips, stern-eyed, strong—a complete man. Only the colour of his face denoted what he was enduring. He picked up his glass, emptied it, set it down again. Never once did he look at his wife. His hand as he lifted the glass never so much as trembled. Mackenzie was right; one can be too confident and overlook the human element. And now Bruce Arbuthnot would lose the thing he prized beyond all else—the thing he valued beyond any other earthly possession—his Clare!

And now at last he looked at her.

She met his look. "Bruce, tell me—what is it? What has happened? Say something. Oh, my God! Bruce, don't stand there—say something!"

She flung herself upon him, beat his great body faintly with soft fists, scarce knowing what she did. "Bruce! Oh, dear God! What has happened—what has happened?"

He put his great arms round her. "Steady, sweetheart, steady," he said. Then: "The babe is dead—stabbed."

"Oh!" Clare buried her face in her hands, sunk it in her arms. Dropping them suddenly, "Bruce," she said, "it's awful. How? Why? Who did it?"

"Jealousy, darling. It was jealousy that was the cause of it."

"Why? Who killed it? Oh, God, it's too awful. Who was jealous? Why was she jealous?"

"It was the coolie you were enquiring about. Damned little vixen. Ranee, the best plucker on the Estate."

Stunned, Clare looked at him. Her subconscious mind already knew all. She but questioned him mechanically. She felt that she must talk or go mad. Then she took courage in both hands. She must know everything—hear it from his own lips. She must know the worst. Anything was better than this suspense.

"Bruce! It can't be. Don't tell me that you—you——" Her questions came in gasps. "Why did the other girl—the mother—bring her baby to show you?"

Bruce answered her no word, only held her tight—held her lest he lose her for good; for good and for all. She broke away from him.

"My husband. Tell, me, can't you? Don't stand there looking at me." She stamped her foot. "Do you hear me? Don't stand there like a great stuffed image! Speak. Say something. Oh, my God, can't you speak. Tell me, why—why, Bruce? Oh, I think I shall go mad," the poor girl finished. But she was wrong there. Women of the calibre of Clare Arbuthnot do not go mad. They may col-

lapse under it, they may die from it, but they retain their reason. They even rise above it. Bruce knew it, and though he knew that as surely as he had gone just one step too far in his egotistical conceit, he had thrown away the greatest happiness he possessed, so surely did he know that the blow would not be a fatal one. No blow could be a mortal one to such a superb woman as the girl who had conquered him—conquered him to a greater extent than he had ever before been subjugated.

Clare searched his face with hungry, frightened eyes. Searched his face as though she would read his very soul.

"Bruce, tell me—I can bear it—tell me. Were you its father?"

One great sob in his throat shook him. Then he recovered himself. Slowly he bent his head, nodding an affirmative.

Clare's self-possession astonished herself. There are times when human emotion is so strong that it reacts upon itself. Like an overdose of poison it fails to act: brings about a lull portending the inevitable storm to follow. A storm, tempestuous in its severity, all the greater for being at first pent up.

Lady Arbuthnot sank down into a chair at the table. She rested her head upon her arms. Gazed intently at him—waited. "Tell me everything. Do you hear? Everything! Here, and now!" Clare spoke with steady voice. She had recovered full control of herself. "I insist. I order you to lay your wicked soul bare to me. I am your wife—I

have a right to demand the most complete explanation. I can bear it. Leave nothing out."

"You are a woman," he began, "you wouldn't understand——"

"Leave that to me," she answered him bitterly.

"Very well, Clare, I will," he said.

The man drew another of their dining-room chairs to the table. He sat down. Bruce Arbuthnot took long stock of himself, then began.

CHAPTER V.

THE CAUSE OF THE DECREE.

"EXCEPT as a purely artificial convention to cope with the even greater artificiality of civilisation, I have never believed in marriage, Clare."

"Then why did you marry me?"

"Because I loved you—loved you with all my soul, as I always shall."

"You never presumed to inflict any of your hideous views upon me—you never dared to suggest the other alternative."

"I'm not quite a fool, Clare. Of course I knew it would be no good."

"Had I been a rank Bohemian, free thinker, unconventional autocrat like you"—Clare spoke with great bitterness—"would you in that case have asked me to be your mistress?"

Bruce thought rather seriously before replying, then, "No," he said at length. "You see, there is the title. I had hoped——" The words stuck in his throat. "I've been a fool, my dear——"

"Don't call me your dear—your dear, indeed! Hateful Mormon!"

"My orders have been so strict, Clare, I am so used to being obeyed in all things that I had reckoned without the human factor. My private life would have remained hidden from you indefinitely

but for the mischance of Putali's child. Ranee must have left her garden—she works under Mackenzie on Publoo—and joined the pluckers here."

"But, why?"

"Jealousy, my—jealousy, Clare. She must have known about Putali. Wanted to spy on her—damned little vixen!"

"Well, go on."

"I never intended to marry, never wished to marry, loathed the very idea of the mutual servitude of marriage. I was fully resolved to retain my complete freedom. I needed marriage neither in the one way nor the other. I have my work—it is everything to me."

"I know," Clare interrupted him, with some measure of sympathy for his love of work as a life interest.

"My work appeals to me as an attainment not altogether covered by sport alone. I have my name, my position, wealth. Humans, you know, Clare, humans of both sexes vary in many respects. A question of glands, the physiologists tell us. There are men, you know, more feminine than women, and there are women more masculine than men, physiologically speaking. One day the scientists may prolong our span of life through glandular means to a couple of hundred years or so."

"You're welcome to them," Clare put in scornfully.

"You feel like that now, but—well, to continue, I lived here and worked. Whenever the mood took me I could take a run home, indulge myself in

wild game hunting, mountaineering, either in India or out of it. I was happy. I wanted for nothing." Sir Bruce paused. He looked at his wife tenderly, hungrily. "Then," he continued, "on my last trip home, a little over a year ago, I saw you. You were typing in a London office. The world would have seen in you my social inferior. I recognised in you my affinity—sensed it the very instant I saw you. Very curious, but there it was. Nothing in all my life has so surprised me as that instinct of knowing you before I had so much as heard you speak. The instant I saw you I knew. I loved you!"

"And all the time you loved another girl—a nigger!"

"To which one are you referring, Clare?"

Aghast she stared at him. Yet she must have realised it all along. "Bruce! Bruce—don't tell me there is more than one!"

He did not answer her. What a fool he was! He thought she must have known at once. Why should Ranee be jealous of Putali—so jealous as to kill her baby. He must be more on his guard. Bad enough to do her bidding and tell her everything as she had demanded. Still, there were limits to the extent of his confession. She would have to know about Ranee, however—just Ranee and Putali. That would be quite enough to go on with —more than enough!

Clare took a stronger hold on herself; she could do it now. Afterwards she knew she must weaken. Outside in the far distance a great commotion came faintly through the night air. Cries, lamentations, then silence. Then faintly again, a renewal of the turmoil.

"You haven't answered my question."

Looking at her, Arbuthnot was moved to his soul with admiration. Her pluck and fortitude were wonderful. Realising all too well what lay before him, the man's heart was heavy within him. He had been too confident. Physically a perfect animal, his constitution a machine, he had one weakness, one besetting sin, judged solely, however, by Western standards. One of the worst, yet the most natural. Apart from it, this descendant of a soldier high up in the King's favour (and not without cause) was white, inside and out. Arbuthnot never let a man down, even though he had now let his wife down; he never lied, he was never guilty of a mean action. In other matters he thought ahead, planned against every eventuality. He was even planning ahead now—far, far ahead, but not so far as the destiny which was shaping his end. The human element has a habit of coming home to roost. It is a factor which will not be gainsaid. Even the Arbuthnots of this world are not proof against it. The baronet in his strength had spurned it, and now it would take toll of him in consequence. His supreme disdain of the human element would even rob him of his dearest possession. It was in the air. He felt it, braced himself to meet it. His personality, his strength of will would avail him nothing; he had done for himself, and he knew it.

With sarcastic frigidity Clare said, "I begin to

think there are many of them. Quite a harem! Will you please tell your wife precisely how many concubines you do keep?"

Still he didn't answer, only looked at her and looked.

"And so," Clare continued, failing to get a word out of him, "when you married me in England you loved one, or perhaps it is two, other girls?"

"Good God, Clare!" her husband suddenly let out, "you don't suppose I love them, do you?"

"I really don't know what you call love—Soloman," she told him with bitter irony.

"You are a woman, and cannot understand, Clare."

"Oh, no, of course not. Women never do understand anything, do they? We're just chattels. Oh, no, I don't understand. How should I?"

"Love is mental, not physical, Clare. Oh, yes, I know it must, in the nature of things, lead to the other, but primarily, I mean, in the first place, love—I mean real love, Clare, dear—is as far removed from mere desire as——"

"And so you want to ask me to believe that you never really loved this—*these*—Bruce, how many girls were there?"

The man looked at her gravely. He could scarcely tell her that if on very rare occasions some new girl greatly attracted him an affluent pension came unwittingly to another.

"Whatever difference can it make?"

"I must know. Tell me."

"My dear, I warned you that as a European

woman you would never understand. Whether you like it or not, and every woman born knows it in her soul, man is a polygamous animal. Every natural law under the sun proves it. One should bow to convention. I fully agree that marriage is without question the best, indeed, the only scheme to dovetail in with present-day Western civilisation. But as to its being natural—well, my dear, it simply isn't, that's all!"

"You great beast! Oh, how I hate you! Repulsive brute!"

Ignoring her, Bruce continued: "Speaking physically, only women are expected by nature to mother one man's children. Once that law is broken you know as well as I do what results. Everything goes wrong. Contrarily, a male can support as many wives as—as he likes, and no harm results."

"And so—so—you keep an Eastern harem?"

"It's quite a recognised Eastern custom, Clare."

Horror in her eyes, she stared at him. "And—and the children, Bruce?"

"Oh, no, Clare. There are no children. The mischance which has just occurred is totally out of the ordinary. I have no children. I only learned of this from Mackenzie recently. Good fellow, Mackenzie—think no end of him. Down on me like a ton of bricks. Don't blame him, either! You know where you are with men of his stamp. I'm English myself, and proud of it; wouldn't be anything else for all you could give me, but there is a lot to be said for our hardy friends up North. They're clever, too——"

"I am in no mood to listen to your dissertations on nationalities," Clare snubbed him. "Just keep to the point of issue, will you?"

"There is nothing more to be said," Bruce rejoined.

"Oh, isn't there? I haven't began on you yet." Clare passed her thin handkerchief across her forehead. "And so, ever since I have been here you have been supporting one or two girls?"

"Better men than I do it in this part of the world, my dear."

"Don't call me 'my dear.' I hate you. Do you understand? Hate and detest you! Asiatics do it, not Britishers!"

Bruce wilted under that thrust. He was conscious of a growing admiration for her, if such were possible. "I'm damn sorry, Clare," he began. "Could you possibly forgive me? I've acted like a damned fool. I'll give all that sort of thing up. Let's forget it. I—I couldn't possibly get on without you, Clare. I—you are everything to me."

"Forget it?" Clare thundered, her passion rising. "Forget it? Are you mad? Look what you have done. That baby—murdered. Oh, it's too hateful—and—and I loved you, loved you more than—— Oh, Bruce, you have broken my heart." She broke down and began to weep bitterly, then as quickly recovered herself. She looked up, eyes dim with tears. "Before I leave you, leave you and your Eastern customs for good—for good and for all—I want you to tell me this, on your word of honour, mind."

Her husband waited.

"Had it been possible for me to have known all this before I made the ghastly mistake of marrying you, had you made a clean breast of it to me, would you have been prepared to give it all up for me? I mean, supposing if such a thing were possible; supposing I could have overlooked it and married you. Tell me that, Bruce. Tell it me on your sacred oath. Would you—would you?"

"On my word of honour, yes. Most definitely and truthfully, my dear. I love you. I always shall love you—would to God I didn't. I've been overconfident. My marriage must have unsettled the girls. They are usually so docile. I never dreamed that my orders would be flouted. Mackenzie warned me—stout fellow, Mac; I like him immensely. I was a fool not to be guided by him. Too late now. What you told me about Abdul made it clear. Ranee had been spying, working herself up. Never for an instant did I dream that you would learn of it. Dreadful—dreadful!"

A mighty sob shook the man, then: "I must go out now and attend to matters," he said. He rose and crossed the room to her, put his great hand on her shoulder. Clare suffered it. "Please believe," he said hoarsely. "Please know that I love you with all my heart. Only you, my dear. Nothing can ever alter that. You must do what you think best. I ask you to remain, overlook it, and I swear I will give up the East and take to convention and the West. If you elect otherwise, you will be well provided for."

The baronet left her with firm, rapid, long strides, unfaltering. He went out into the night to "attend to matters"—there were a good many that needed his attention just then—went out of her room, out of her life, but not out of her heart.

Locked in her bedroom, Clare threw herself upon her bed. Her pent-up emotion found solace in bitter weeping. She cried her eyes out—cried herself to sleep. It was as well; a safety valve, not vouchsafed to her husband!

Out on the Estate Sir Bruce did all a man could to straighten out the tragedy. He also took steps to prevent any possibility of a recurrence. Arrived back at the bungalow, instructions were given that the Mem-Sahib's wishes were to be carried out in all things. When awake, everything was to be done for her as usual. Another servant was specially detailed to wait on her.

For the remainder of the night he sat quietly smoking. No drink passed his lips. Arbuthnot could fight it out with himself unaided. At six in the morning he resumed his work after the regular hot bath. The morning tub is taken hot in the East. It is more refreshing. Like hot tea, it has a tendency to open the pores of the skin, and that is more cooling than the nerve tonic of the cold dip. The East is not the West. It is far, far more different to the West, than Westerners, if untravelled, realise. No one looking at the Burra-Sahib could have told what he was enduring. His will and constitution were of iron.

CHAPTER VI.

THE YOUNG AUSTRALIAN.

THE news of the approaching divorce of Sir Bruce Arbuthnot furnished London with its proverbial nine days' wonder. The period might have been extended but for the facts that the baronet was never at home, and that he had married a girl out of his own class. The class to which she had belonged society considered lower than that of her husband in view of Clare having typed in a London office while her husband carried a title about with him. To Bruce, however, she came of a higher class, because he loved her, looked up to her, knew her to be a better woman—as standards are reckoned—than he was a man, and because she preferred work to leisure. Clare's father was a country solicitor whose direct taxation was conspicuously low. The man's life and banking account tended to totally disprove the opinion that lawyers overcharge. So Clare sought her bread and butter up in town, which proved the beginning of the end for Sir Bruce. And now she had rejected him as a thing soiled beyond her power of cleansing and sued instantly for a divorce.

"She doesn't know which side her bread is buttered," said some, but that was before they heard

the extent of the settlement. The case was uncontested. Before ever it came up for hearing, Clare's husband settled a cool eighty thousand pounds upon her. The munificence of the sum staggered the recipient. It brought home to her more clearly than she already knew it the fact that Sir Bruce Arbuthnot's love for her was unchanged, as it was unchangeable.

And that was a factor which affected Clare's after life more than the source of her income. It was a factor which has to be reckoned with and remembered in the chronicling of her life. Her husband loved her. Through thick and through thin—and it was to be thin. Nothing could alter that. Even after renouncing him legally and literally, still the man refused to hate her, refused to alter to her, refused to stop loving her.

Clare's one desire was to get away, to hide her unhappy head, to seek seclusion where no one knew her, knew of her, or cared. And so, without a moment's delay, she left her affairs with lawyers, took passage for Sydney, and started life all over again. Commenced again under new conditions, new surroundings, and new friends.

Anticipating her coming divorce, Clare went back to her old maiden name of Swinton, and having lived during her comparatively short spell in India in the "Hills," no one on the R.M.T.S.S. *Ormon* recognised in young Mrs. Swinton the Lady Arbuthnot seeking freedom from marriage.

During the voyage south, Clare's mind was be-

numbed with misery. The time when the stark reality of her loss would come home to her and reaction set in was not just yet. She went ashore at Colombo to effect a few purchases, and as though in a dream entered into the inevitable bargaining with the Cingalee hawkers, not entirely without some small measure of enjoyment.

Towards Sydney Heads the leviathan ran into the Australian fleet at their manœuvres. It was commanded by a diminutive officer bearing on his breast about as many medals as were ever conferred upon any one man. Medals to mark service, decorations to reward bravery, insignias to record scholastic attainment, exploration, self-sacrifice. As perfect and as efficient a gentleman in the true meaning of the word as ever came out of the old country. A great heart and a big brain tucked into a small body. His chief duty, perhaps, lay in him being on the spot. Given just that, and the machine which is called the Navy would work like a well-timed clock. A willing horse serving under a real man, whether commanding a small "Brooke" or an entire fleet.

Sydney Heads opened up in the early morning haze. There away on the *Orman's* starboard bow lay Manly with its Catholic college, its priceless beaches, its famous Norfolk pines. Opposite, ambitious Balmoral lay tucked snugly away inside its own proud heads. Heads inside heads! Little wonder it felt proud. The leviathan turned south towards Rose Bay, and passing the suburb of Vaucluse on its port bow, Clifton Gardens opened

up on its starboard quarter. Soon with another bend to starboard she passed the Taronga Park Zoo, and so past Garden Island to Sydney.

Clare decided upon searching the Blue Mountains for the seclusion which she sought, and lost little time in setting about it. Taking train from the Central Railway Station, she ran through the suburbs of the southern capital, past the city of Parramatta sweltering in its low level, along to Penrith at the foot of the range—little better in point of heat—and so with much snorting of resentment, made amends for by the engine's really melodious whistle, up the mountains. Springwood, at twelve hundred feet, invited by its cooler clear air and pretty views, but Clare wished to live at least two thousand feet up, and alighted at Hazelbrook.

On a spur with a beautiful view facing east and south, Mrs. Swinton found the very thing she sought. A cottage with two bedrooms, kitchen, sitting room, and with a wide verandah all round, the "Queensland" type bungalow. There being no water supply laid to her particular mountain spur, a light petrol engine drawing from a small road-fed dam to two elevated tanks supplied the needful. Otherwise, the cottage which was on offer at a ridiculously low figure, "walk in, walk out," as the owners, acting without an agent, put it: appeared particularly civilised if quiet to a degree. But Clare was in no mood to mind solitude. The snug little home boasted a baby grand piano from Brinsmead, London, an up-

to-date all-electric wireless set and electric points at every conceivable vantage spot, even including four on the prettily shaded verandahs.

The garden affected roses as the *piece de resistance*, a few vegetables, and last but not least, an interesting view Sydneywards. Brought up in old England, and in contrast to the fogs of Darjeeling, the wonderful Australian visibility was a revelation to Clare.

She decided upon the cottage, paid down the sum asked with alacrity, and took prompt possession, staying indeed as the guest of the owners for a week to give them time to pack up.

Clare had decided to do without a maid, at first at any rate, but man proposes in this sphere, while even in independent Australia the disposition is still left in other hands.

Still but a matter of weeks (which seemed years) from the time Clare rushed heart-broken from Darjeeling to her lawyers in Calcutta, sailing immediately afterwards for Sydney, nausea in the early mornings brought a great wonder to Mrs. Swinton. A suspicion that her trouble had upset her might have a different explanation.

The totally unusual symptom of sickness was followed after a few weeks by the most extraordinary feeling of physical well-being that Clare had ever experienced; and physical well-being was the rule rather than the exception with her.

Before very long she knew for certain. Sir Bruce, without knowing it, was to be a father; the father of her boy! She was as certain that it would

be a boy as she knew she lived, and a great joy took hold of her and held her; held her till her boy was born, kicking, fighting, bellowing; curly, copper-headed at birth, a mite to be reckoned with.

Maybe you will have to reckon with him, too, Sir Bruce, so better watch your step, even now. Maybe he won't take you lying down, great tea planter. He is a chip of the old block, and you know yourself all too well what that means. If you don't, you ought to!

Clare's few friends all united in telling her that the babe's copper hair would all fall off, but the Arbuthnots do not give up their possessions so readily. The hair never came off; it but grew with the boy. Ere ever he was a day old, his lilliputian fingers curled themselves round any part of his mother that invited contact. He went for her fair bosom with surprising greed and enterprise. His cries and lamentations at being brought unasked into a sinful world, an Australian with an English father and mother, would have awakened the neighbours and kept them awake had there been any neighbours to disturb. But the lusty little lungs had to waste their power on thin air; but it was good air—eucalyptus-laden. The air was pure to a degree and, judging by the look of Bruce Arbuthnot the lesser, it agreed with him.

It may here be said that he in turn agreed with his mother. The little fellow took her clean out of hell with one bound, and kept her out of it. It's a pity you let them go, Sir Bruce, for you might well be proud of them, as they one day will be

ashamed of you. Sorry for you, pitiful for you, yet not proud. And yet—now what shall she tell him about you? Later on; and how much later on? What do you think about it yourself, perched up there on the spur which is called Darjeeling, underneath Mount Everest, twenty-nine thousand feet on top of the earth?

CHAPTER VII.

SIR BRUCE THE LESSER.

THE bath was a favourite period of the day with Bruce. He always smelt so nice, and seemed to know it. "His mother keeps him so beautifully" is how the neighbours described it. Lying upon his strong little back, on Clare's apron-covered knees, he laughed with glee as the violet powder was applied, the while she prattled to him like a great baby herself. "Was it 'ooues mummie's ikle man, then?" she enquired, and the boy answered appropriately enough. Then she would tickle his softness with her powder-puff till he laughed and kicked with the fun of it. The young mother would have more serious moods when she would bury her sweet face against the boy's little tummy —a tear would escape her. "You are all I have left of him, darling," Clare would muse, and then catch him up to her and kiss him in as many places as came within the orbit of her lips.

When he could toddle about, the boy would come naturally up to his mother's knee, as she sat quietly sewing some garment or another of his, look into her face, and carry on a long conversation with her. What he said no one but himself knew, but whatever it was he was mighty earnest about it.

Clare would bend down and try to teach him to say Mummy, at which he invariably got highly excited, chattering away to her like any monkey. Perhaps he was telling her that he had said Mummy, not once, but forty times, if only she had the intelligence to understand him! One day, in a weak, unguarded moment, Clare began to frame the word Daddy to him, and the effect upon little Bruce was rather curious. He remained extraordinarily quiet. Perhaps some thought transference from his mother to him accounted for it. Be that as it may, the boy listened with rapt attention. He gave the impression that he felt the word might be an easier one to copy than Mummy. Pulling herself together, and regretting that she had been so weak, Clare turned to other channels of learning.

It was two days later, in the early morning, when taking the boy from his cot into her own bed, he gave Clare her first shock—gave her back as good as she had given him!

The boy was thinking deeply, in the curious way babies will. Suddenly his little memory, storing up this and that, let open the memory cell he was trying to conjure up.

"Dad, Dad, Dad, Dad, Dad!" he yelled; and then, growing more confident that he had at last got it—indeed, got something to which he could give his tongue better than that mumbling sort of word Mummy—nothing would stop him. He roared it out, chuckling, then laughed gaily. His strong baby voice carried through the open window and amused two kookaburras perched on the

garden fence. They put their spear-beaked heads on one side to take it in. They liked the sound of it, almost as much as did the brawler, and joined in. The kingfisher's maniacal shrieks of laughter rose into the air, crescendo fashion. It set other kookies, those darling pets of the Southern Continent, joining in, and the row put a check upon young Bruce, greatly to his mother's relief. Sincerely wishing she had never taught him to say the word, Clare endeavoured to undo the harm. It was rough luck on the youngster, but he had yet to learn that this world is not all joy, and he tasted his first instance of real, right-down, true-to-God injustice when, succeeding again in repeating the word Daddy, he was told "Naughty, naughty; baby not say Daddy!" This led in course of time to him giving out "naught-Daddy," and so later still to "naughty Daddy"; the very last thing which poor Clare had intended to teach him to say.

She put him to school at five, to keep him out of mischief and give him amusement. The kindergarten was all play, except that in playing the youngsters were cleverly taught to learn unconsciously, and Bruce loved every minute of it. The school, being but a few hundred yards away from his mountain home, with wide gates kept open, the boy rode bareback there each day on a diminutive pony. He fell completely in love with his tall, soft-eyed mistress, but forgot her when at dinner time, he returned to his mother, at half past twelve, his lessons over for the day.

His first fight took place when he was eight,

having been at the school for three years. By this time the baronet's son no longer carried coppery hair; it had turned an attractive dark auburn. He could never abide carroty boys. Having so nearly been one himself, they irritated him. Fights were forever near the surface in his dealings with them, there being too little contrast in their characters to blend. Now Bruce Swinton was known to have an English mother, and that led to all the trouble.

"You're no Aussie; you're English," a young freckled-face one day accused Bruce.

"You're a smug-nosed liar!" responded Bruce, with great heat and indignation. "I'm Australian!"

"Garn!" gibed the other. "Look! Your mother's English, so you must be English, too!"

"I'm not; I'm Australian, I tell you. Say I'm English again and I'll knock your block off!"

"Where was you born, Swinton?" interposed another young hopeful.

"Yes," chimed in other voices, "where were you born? If you're born in Australia you're Australian."

"I was born in Australia," Bruce asserted stoutly, "and I'm Australian, and if anybody says I'm not, look out for yourselves!"

"What was your father, then?" asked a voice.

Bruce was silent. The subject still puzzled him.

"That's not fair," one of the bigger lads put in. "Swinton hasn't got a father; you don't say anything to boys about their fathers if they're dead!"

"When did he die?" Bruce was asked.

"I don't know; I never saw him," answered the

lad, and the line of conversation stopped the argument for the time.

Later, however, Bruce enquired of his mother more about it.

"Mother," he opened up, "some of the boys at school say I'm English because you're English. Why are you English, Mummie?"

"Because I was born in England, sonny. Whatever country you are born in, that is what you are."

"There! I said it all along. I'm Australian, aren't I?"

"Yes, undoubtedly you are, darling."

"Then they asked about my father. One boy thought he was dead, because I haven't got one, and—and—"

"And what did you say to that, Bruce?"

"I didn't know what to say, Mother. You never tell me about that. Mother, why haven't I got a father like all the other boys?"

And so it had come out at last. Clare knew it must; had intended forestalling enquiry, telling her boy what to say if questioned, but left it a trifle too late.

"Some of the other boys haven't got fathers, Bruce," she first countered. "There is little Hardacre, for instance."

"Oh! Hardacre's father was killed in the war, Mummie. Mother, was my Daddy killed in the war? I should like that. I should like a Daddy who was dead in the war."

"Yes, I thought you would like that sort of a Daddy," Clare said; then, finding she had left a

wrong but happy impression on her child's mind, had not the heart to undo it. It afforded a good solution of the problem.

"I'm glad my Daddy was a soldier," Bruce began, and Clare seized upon the opportunity offered, for Sir Bruce was indeed a soldier, of sorts. He held an honorary Colonelcy in the Calcutta Light Horse.

"Yes, your Daddy was a soldier, Bruce, and so now you know all about him, don't you?"

"I shall tell the boys at school," announced the boy. "I shall tell them that he was a soldier, and that the horrid Germans killed him in the war after he had killed thousands of them."

"I'm glad you like having a father who is a soldier," Clare remarked, scarce knowing what she was saying.

The boy looked at her sharply. "How funnily you said that, Mother!" he demanded. "You spoke just as though you hadn't told me my Daddy was killed in the war!"

"Did I, dear? How silly of me, wasn't it?"

"Yes, Mummie, wasn't it? What was he like? I should like him to have been a great big man. I'm going to be big when I grow up. Big and just like him—only," he added wistfully, "I'd rather there wasn't any war to kill me."

"Please, God, there won't be, my little boy," breathed Clare, and that ended the conversation for the time being.

The following day Bruce announced at school that his father had been a brave soldier, who had been killed in the war.

"Why didn't you tell us so before?" jeered his late antagonist.

"You shut your mug!" responded the other.

"A fight, a fight!" yelled the little boys, and before the combatants had so much as decided upon it, it had been decided for them.

Bruce's opponent was fully three years older than him, and considerably taller.

"Look here, Swinton," he addressed Bruce, "I don't want to hurt you, but you're English. Own up to it and I'll let you off!"

"I'm not English; I wouldn't be English!" Bruce let out for answer. "So take that—" and landed a heavy punch. But the other boy jumped nimbly to one side, and Swinton's blow landed on thin air. Then they set to, when Bruce's agility to reach the other's face, well out of his easy reach, proved too much for him, and he went sprawling.

"Now you've got him!" one young bully roared, but Sinclair stood back.

"Let him get up first," he said, "then I can finish him." But the fight came to a sudden termination with the advent of the tall, quiet-eyed mistress.

"What are you fighting about, boys?" she asked.

"Please, Miss," explained the biggest boy present, "Sinclair makes out that Swinton is English because his mother is English and because his father was an English soldier, who was killed in the war!"

"I didn't know your father was killed in the war, Bruce," the Principal remarked, and she looked very curiously at the boy, about whom she knew everything. Clare liked her, and had thought it best to take her into her confidence.

"Bruce Swinton is Australian," she gave judgment. "It doesn't matter what his father or his mother are—were; he was born in Australia, and that is what makes an Australian."

"Hurrah!" shouted the boys. "Apologise, Sinclair! Swinton's an Aussie. Good old Aussie!"

The boy Sinclair came forward. "We'll say no more about it," he made amends. "I'm jolly glad you are Australian, that's all. I've nothing to say against the English. My grand-dad was English, or Scotch or something; anyhow, if you're Australian we can be friends."

"Shake hands, boys!" they were ordered.

"Now listen, boys," the girl instructed them. "You are quite right to be proud of your beautiful country. I'm glad you are proud of being Australians, but you must remember this: All of you are English really. I mean, either your fathers were, or perhaps your grandfathers, or, in a few cases, your great grandfathers."

"I go further back than that, please, Miss," one youngster told her.

"Oh! you are an old gum tree, Ross," she replied. "Anyhow, listen! You must be proud also of Great Britain, because while other nations found Australia, it was the British who thought such a lot of it that they started making it into the great country it is to-day. Remember that! Your language is the English language, and you must be proud that you come from the most influential country which the world has ever known. Your language will carry you almost all over the world. Even the American people speak it! Why?"

"Because they jolly well have to!" suggested one young patriot.

"Quite right, Brown. Because even the Americans are British, too, only they sometimes forget it. They are just your first cousins, and," she added, "first cousins ought to be jolly good friends, you know."

The boys looked at her.

"Now what would you say if an English lady invited you all to a jolly party? She is very rich, too, and will give you a good one, if I know anything about her. Would you like to go? Mind, she's English!"

There was a chorus of ayes. The ayes had it—had it every time.

"Very well, then, it's Bruce Swinton's mother. She is having the biggest Christmas tree you ever saw in your lives. It is to be on Christmas Eve! It will be all covered in imitation snow, like the trees in her country. There will be lovely presents on it for all of you—and—and she has invited me, too. Now, what do you say?"

"Three cheers for Bruce's English mother!" ordered the dux of the school, a promising young fellow aged ten.

And after the cheers had died away, and Bruce was racing home on his pony to chip his mother about keeping the secret from him, the boys sped him on his way with another cheer because he was a true Aussie after all. An Aussie, even if his mother was from the Old Country, and his father, a factor, right out of the picture.

CHAPTER VIII.

CUPID'S ARROW.

BRUCE SWINTON *saw her first at Palm Beach.*

He was twenty at the time; through his "Intermediate," with honours in maths. and engineering; through his Leaving, in which he matriculated, with special mention again, in the faculty of engineering, and all its branches. He attended Sydney University, returning nightly to Clare's home in Vaucluse, on the eastern side of that southern pearl known as Sydney Harbour. But why "harbour" is difficult to know. Perhaps only because (with Hobart) it was comfortably installed in the front row when they gave harbours out! The dangerous inclusion of Hobart may be permitted, since it is a trifle unusual to be able to run the mightiest leviathans afloat (if they would honour Aussie) right up, practically touching the G.P.O. Martin place, Sydney, has much to recommend it—very much—but you really can't run battleships into it by any stretch of the imagination! With this exception, there is nothing that you cannot do with Sydney Harbour, unless it be to rid it of sharks.

The previous day had been cyclonic, and the mighty Pacific rollers, with no harbour to protect them, came tumbling in, curling high up the firm

sand of Palm Beach with a fury not yet entirely spent. The girl sat on the rocks, her legs dangling in the swimming pool.

Her father and mother sat in their car, on the road, at the end of the splendid firm sand, as near the pool as the car could aspire. They were preparing lunch against the time their one-and-only chose to leave the enticing water.

The tide was nearly full, and Bruce noticed a treacherous channel forming near the water's-edge. He was taking his swim from the beach, and though conversant with the difficult, but not impossible, negotiation of currents, kept carefully clear of the channel. It ran parallel to the shore for a short distance, then curled south and east, heading straight out to sea. Its direction took the smooth, innocent, light-hued line of death past the swimming pool.

Something about Edith Burne caught the attention of the boy, if boy this enormous young fellow may be called. It wasn't prettiness; the girl was too pale to be noticeably attractive, but her sweet, coquettish, smiling eyes, well-shaped features, good figure, and clear skin made Edith what the world calls a good-looking girl; so very often better than being pretty. The girl also carried with her an awareness of her sex, which at nineteen, as at any age, is not without allure.

Swimming lazily near the shore, Bruce was looking at her. It was not lost upon Edith. She perched herself upon a rock, waited an unconscionable time, then took a rather particularly well-schooled

header into the pool. The girl swam to the other side, the side where the rollers were curling over the top, the tide by this time being nearly in. Then following supposed precedent, a seventh wave, nearly twice the size of the six which had gone before it, rolled into the pool and out again. But on its bosom it carried Edith with it.

Bruce heard her give a waterlogged shout of amusement, then, swimming cleverly to get clear of the rocks, she headed for the shore. But the current had her in its relentless hold, and instead of progressing shorewards the girl was carried straight out to the shark-infested sea.

For a few moments Edith failed to realise her peril; then, swimming, as she thought, shorewards, the girl noticed that, though making pace relatively, the rocks were passing her, or she them, *in the wrong direction!*

As though promenading along a vessel's upper deck at four miles an hour sternwards, the vessel, covering full twenty nautical knots, is yet bearing you onwards at greater speed. The tide carried Edith out at one rate while she battled against it at another. The tide's pace was the greater, and—*and the sea was winning!*

A scream of mortal fear mingled itself with the roar of the surf, but here again the elements held the upper hand, for no one could possibly hear it.

Bruce the lesser was, however, gazing at Edith Burne, and that was fortunate for Edith; fortunate for the nonce at any rate.

Swimming with a long, sweeping, arm over arm,

rapid "crawl," within a couple of minutes the rescuer came to the victim's side.

"It is all right. You are quite safe!" he shrieked to her, lying in his teeth reassuringly, and something in the sure tone of it caught the girl. "Can you swim as I instruct you?"

"Yes, yes!" the girl gasped. "Oh! I'm so frightened—the sharks."

"It is far too rough for sharks to-day; nothing to be frightened about," a determined, young voice told her, and there was a measure of truth in the assertion. Sharks are cowards—a splash scares and frightens them, but their fears can be countered by appetite: a voracious, never-satisfied urge to eat.

"Do as I tell you!" Bruce ordered the girl. "Follow me. We have to swim *across* the current, not against it!"

The while he was holding and instructing her, they were being carried further out to sea. Bruce now let her go, and close together the two swam slightly with the current, yet bearing across it to its edge, parallel to the shore. Before long the boy had her, much exhausted, out of the stream.

Treading water with him, the couple now awaited a roller, which the experienced eye of Bruce would recognise as suitable to take them back again. At last a smaller wave than the majority pleased Bruce, and, acting on his word at the precise moment, just before it quite reached them, they raced it. They were overtaken, and carried at express speed on its foaming crest right on, full a quarter of a mile, to the shimmering, hot sand.

Breathless with suspense, a crowd had by this time collected on the shore. The onlookers raised a mighty cheer as the rescuer walked out of the sea, part supporting his fatigued companion.

In the forefront stalked Edith's sturdy father, a successful farmer from Orange, beyond the Blue Mountains, Justice of the Peace, Elder (very much elder) of his non-conformist church, Vicar's Warden, People's Warden, Sidesman, Councillor, and many more things of a like nature rolled into one. His deep, confident, self-assertive voice bellowed out a welcome: roared out his thanks to God, as was the wont of William Burne. When Big Bill, as the local farmers dubbed him behind his back (and it was always very much behind his back), opened his mouth, other lesser tongues generally found solace in retirement.

"Where's my own lassie? Where's our Edith? Now, praise be—praise His Holy Name! Edith—my own little girl——." For about the first time in his history the honest fellow was quite overcome. He took his daughter to him in a bear-like hug, leaving Mrs. Burne, a sweet-faced woman, to play second fiddle and await her turn in the background.

"Your mother and me thought you was a-gone, my girlie," Mr. Burne remarked at length, and then: "Here, go and kiss your Ma; she will be needing some of it, too."

So Edith kissed her Ma while Bruce looked on, wondering where he came in.

He was soon to know. Surrounded by an excited

crowd of questioners, farmer Burne thrust his strong, portly frame through them as a scythe goes through hay.

"Where's that there boy?" he roared. "Where's the boy, sent by the Almighty to save my darling from a watery grave? Where's that lad? Show me him. Let me just get at him!"

"'Ere you are, Boss, here he is, Sir. Let the gent. pass now," and scattering quickly, lest they fall ninepin fashion before his vigorous onslaught, the crowd opened up a passage.

And thus it was that Bruce first came to meet Edith's father. Bruce, the son of a free liver, the son of a man who feared neither God or devil; the son of a man who believed in neither Heaven nor Hell; and Burne, the narrow, egotistical, ultra-religionist. An instinct of difference, of inferiority, appeared to seize the elder man, for he stood stockily on his feet regarding Bruce, saying nothing, just taking the lad in.

"And so," he said at last, "so this is the laddie what saved my darling. This is the boy, sent by the Almighty to bring my own girlie back to us. Well, boy, had I met you in the streets of Orange I should not 'ave fancied the look of you overwell. You're one of they 'andsome sort! That's what you be; but seeing isn't everything! No, not by a long chalk, seeing isn't everything! Do you know what you've been and done? Proved yourself! That's what you've done! Proved you carry a man's heart, laddie. Boy——." Burne dropped his voice to an impressive quietness. The spellbound

crowd could have heard a pin drop, even on the sand. "Young sir, I do thank you with all my heart, that I do. And I thank the Almighty what sent you to us. What might your name be?" He took the younger man's hand in his, and, strong though Bruce was, the pressure made the young fellow wince.

"I'm Bruce Swinton," replied that young worthy, as though anyone must know that. Truth to tell, many did, some even in that heterogeneous assembly.

A look of surprised pleasure came over the swarthy features of the farmer. "Bruce Swinton, eh?" he reflected. "Well, lad, you don't look it. Not by a long chalk, you don't! I'm a judge of men, and I was a-feared you might tell me your name was Montmorency de Lampoodle, Arbuthing hyphen Beecham, or some such. I'm real glad it's an honest-to-God, quiet-sounding name, like what mine is—nought high-fangled!"

Under his tan, Bruce paled. By this time he knew all about his father; knew that possibly, or probably (though he and his mother were doubtful how the law stood), that possibly his name wasn't Swinton at all, but something more pretentious—the heir to a baronetcy, and, perhaps, to enormous wealth.

"Looking at you with new eyes, as you might say, Mr. Swinton, I could do with a son like you. I wish you were son of mine, boy, that I do. Your father's a lucky man, that he is."

"I have no father, sir," Bruce replied.

Burne looked up sharply. "No father. Come now, that's bad; very bad, that it is. Look! I'll father you—father and mother, too."

It was at this juncture that Clare came forward.

"Let me introduce my mother to you, Mr.—Mr.?"

"Burnes' my name, Mr. Swinton. William Burne, of Orange. Came out here from Devonshire, in the Old Country, nigh forty years agone. Now Edith, she's Australian, born and bred, and——." He turned to Clare. "An honour to meet you, Mam. I thank the good God that brought your son to us this blessed day. Praise be!"

Mrs. Swinton greeted him with quiet dignity, a slight fear clutching at her heart. Another curious intuition of impending danger—rocks ahead.

"Won't you join us at lunch?" she invited him.

"You'll have it with us, Mam," bellowed Burne. "Mother," he called to his wife. "The—Mr. Swinton and his Ma will eat with us." Turning again to Mrs. Swinton, he said: "The missus and me won't take any refusal, Mam."

Edith appeared, affecting a serviceable bathing cloak. The life-saving local branch had administered stimulants, and she appeared little the worse for her ordeal, other than a slight addition to her naturally pale complexion.

And so the five of them sat down by the side of their cars and ate, or tried to eat, the over-generous lunch provided—a lunch grown, almost to the plates, on the three hundred acres estate of William Burne, J.P., of Orange.

Clare, somehow, felt a trifle out of it, though Bruce totally prevented that from quite happening, but he looked so often at Edith—and Edith at him. The girl spoke well, with a cultured Sydney 'Varsity accent. The idiosyncrasies of Edinburgh, Cambridge, Melbourne, Sydney, etc., are very subtle, but they are there. After it was all over, they left for the West, but Clare knew that Bruce wanted Edith in their car. She didn't know how she knew it, but it was patent to a mother's eyes. The families kept, however, to their own cars, travelling as near together as traffic conditions allowed. Over the Fig Tree Bridge, where they bid *au revoir* to Sydney Harbour (that glorious stretch of water was still Sydney Harbour, so many miles from the Heads), a harbour, a haven of beauty, and a joy forever. And so on through Parramatta, to Penrith, and Emu Plains, of evil repute in the centuries which have come, and which have well gone, to the Blue Mountains, rising abruptly, like the hand of a London peeler holding back the traffic.

At Hazelbrook, where the cottage now did duty as an occasional, but only occasional, week-end home, they alighted to say good-bye and make arrangements for an early meeting at Orange.

Afterwards Clare and her son turned off the main Western Road to "View Cottage," while the other car sped on, at great pace, to Katoomba, where the night was to be spent before continuing to Orange the following morning.

At parting, Edith held out her hand to Bruce.

"Shall I thank you again, Mr.——?" she began.

"My name is Bruce," he replied under his breath.

"Thank you again, then—Bruce," Edith agreed quietly, while Burne's thunderous bellowing drowned their low tones.

And then Edith shook hands with her new friend, and he made another of those wonderful discoveries about her. Edith Burne could shake hands. A firm, sisterly, comradely grip, firm, yet not too firm; lingering, yet not lingering at all; clean, wholesome, for Edith possessed shapely, pretty hands. Unclassical, well-proportioned, well-kept. Her sweet eyes lit up with that sex conscious smile in them. They smiled on their own account, without sanction from the other features of her face.

And it was a thoughtful Bruce who inserted the little Yale key into their front door, but an even more thoughtful Clare, whose thoughts were so busy that evening.

About eleven Bruce went off to his bed.

"Well, Bruce," his mother remarked with assumed gaiety, "And what do you think about it all?"

The boy was long in answering; then, impulsively, enthusiastically, he suggested:

"Mother—Mother, isn't she frightfully attractive?"

"Who?" feigned Clare with raised eyebrows.

Bruce went over to her, hugged her. "You sweetest old thing," he gave her, laughing. "Well, sleep well!"

"Good-night, darling," she said. But when he had gone and she closed the windows for the night, Clare sighed—sighed because her thoughts so exactly coincided with those of her boy. Edith Burne was certainly attractive, but what of her father—and the father of her boy?

CHAPTER IX.

SYDNEY'S LUNCH HOUR.

AT the period of the bathing episode which so nearly found a tragic ending at Palm Beach, Bruce and Edith both attended the University in Sydney. The girl stayed with her mother's only sister, Florence Tooth, who resided at Manly, across the Harbour, returning to her parents' home in Orange each week-end, while Bruce travelled daily to and from Vaucluse—a shorter trip—in one of the harbour ferries.

Thus it came about that the pair began to meet for lunch increasingly often as time went on. They would take a table well back on the left-hand recess of Thorne's, in Castlereagh Street, and hope against hope that the other would turn up. No definite arrangement was made to meet, but the number of circumstances which brought one or the other of them to the lower end of that lengthy city thoroughfare was amazing.

Commencing years before with a gift of a Meccano set on one of Clare's Christmas trees, Bruce had evinced a definite proclivity towards engineering. His branch was ship-building, in which vast study he was arousing much speculative interest with some of the professors, who prophesied a future for him. Edith aroused no interest with

anyone, in the scholastic sense, being simply an average all-round student. Edith would never have matriculated but for the determination of character which she inherited from her rough diamond of a father.

A dogged persistence won through, however, and now she was studying at things she would never need, learning "they new-fangled notions," as her dad put it—and lunching with Bruce.

Be it said, here and now, for there is no gainsaying the fact that Bruce was in love with Edith and Edith——? Edith loved him.

Be it also said that neither Bruce, on his part, nor Edith, on hers, was a type of individual who took this infectious complaint lightly. Neither were they of those who, sensing it coming, succumb to it without a struggle, nor were they of a nature to throw over the condition once properly acquired.

But while Bruce had a speciality, Edith had a craze. Her craze was aeronautics. She possessed an air sense, and was mad to fly, not for a name, but for flying's sake. Now airplanes and all their seaplane brothers and sisters were the pet abomination of William Burne. His bigoted animosity to them was a factor with which Edith would have to reckon, and so the girl had perforce to carry out her studies—and her practice—in secret.

"I've no patience with they things," her father would declare. "A sin they be in the eyes of the Almighty. Poaching on his preserves, as you might say. The air's for the winged creatures who praise Him and magnify Him for ever. The land's good

enough for me. It's a mortal sin in the eyes of Heaven to get took into the air. A mortal sin it is, and God's judgment ag'in they as does it. No good won't come of it."

Edith inherited her father's strong will, but the inheritance of one characteristic does not necessarily embrace another. The girl was determined to fly, and when the only child of William Burne set her heart upon a thing, by one means or another she generally obtained it.

Near Sydney lies a place named Mascot. Perhaps it is named after its adherants' love of carrying such talismans of good fortune into the ether with them. Be that as it may, Edith Burne was often there during her lunch hour, or in the early evening. And the person who financed her discouraged hobby, was her darling villainous old aunt, Miss Tooth.

Aunt Florence Tooth was a character. For one thing she loathed, hated and detested her brother-in-law. For another, sad to relate, she was scarcely religious, and to sum all, her religion was a contempt of men as such, an "*idée fixe*" that women were better men than the sterner sex, and a putting into practice of her suffragist views on every conceivable occasion. A love disappointment had started it, and the advent into her family of the well-meaning, kind-hearted, bombastic and narrow-minded William had finished it.

Yet Alice Burne, her sister, loved her husband with a dog-like docility, which fact, aided particularly by its full justification, incensed Miss Florence beyond the power of speech. No sooner

did she learn that her darling Edith had more than a hankering to fly, than Florence preened up her feathers, got out her cheque-book, and took Edith forthwith to Mascot.

Arrived there, nothing would satisfy her but that the two of them should be taken up together then and there. Taken up, sun or fog, suitable or risky. Fortunately, Sydney was behaving itself in its comparatively usual, exemplary manner, and up the two went. The young Australian who took them would have graced any plane, and so the seal was set on Edith's wish to fly, which, now aided by Miss Tooth, became an obsession.

Came the day when, in a curious fit of humour, Edith, seated in a dual control monoplane, and up for a long cruise, persuaded her instructor to run out West as far as Orange and back, skim low over her father's property, and so back to Mascot again. Well advanced in her new art, the girl took the joy-stick when well over Orange, and had the double thrill of seeing her home from the air and picturing her dad's righteous indignation afterwards.

The girl was too much taken up with the controls to see it, but actually while over her home acres, William Burne shook his fist at the unconscious plane. "May the Almighty teach you the error of your ways," he prayed; but the plane flew on unheeding. Soon it was lost to sight in the dim blue haze of the dividing line between coastal plains and the "outback."

The delight of Florence when she heard of the

episode prompted her to forget her hatred of men, and instruct Edith to invite her male friend, Bruce Swinton, over to Manly.

Now Florence Tooth was at this time a well-preserved spinster of sixty. Being particular as to details, she would have described herself as "sixty winters and a summer throw-in, my dear." Miss Tooth possessed a charming and somewhat pretentious home at Bower Street, facing and overlooking pretty Fairy Bower. Fronted by the blue Pacific, lay one of the world's grandest stretches of coastline, upon whose shimmering, firm sand the surf thundered in, wasting its energy untapped.

Back of the sand cool green Norfolk pines gave shade, imported and planted by a far-seeing council. All along, right away to the hill beyond which lies Queenscliffe (ambitious like all Australia), rough tables under the pines invited picnickers. The invitations were not issued unavailingly. Entire joints of meat, jars of pickles, and all the paraphernalia and appurtenances of a well-appointed dining room table saw the light of day there. From copious cars of every hue and shade, families poured out their teams of children, games and refreshments. But though the number of the children, packed well nigh to the roof of many an automobile, was of surprising magnitude, the quantity of viands in the so-called "refreshments" surpassed them. Looking out of the vantage point of her high balcony window, Miss Tooth would discern and chuckle with mirth at what her powerful telescope, tripod-mounted, disclosed to

her eagle eye. No wonder many a picnicker went home with burning ears (and wondered why) at the things Miss Tooth muttered to herself about them if the telescope brought light upon banana-skin, orange peel, or paper. But, taken as a whole, the crowd behaved itself none too badly. Australia is a long cry from ancient Europe; it has sprung up like a mushroom in the night, but it's devilish civilised when all is said and done. The trouble is that in some respects it is not only keeping pace with the times, but going too fast for them. Europe tries to call a halt to curb too youthful an ambition, but youth had ever a hard mouth, delights always in lack of decorous convention, tolerates any type of curb bit with but ill grace. And who can blame it when the reason lays primarily at the door of the vitality preserved for things young and virile?

To the home, then, of Florence Tooth, bitter of tongue, but soft of heart, came Bruce Arbuthnot—Bruce Swinton—or Bruce whatever you like to dub him. Best dub him Arbuthnot and have done with it, for blood will out, and men of his father's type, away out there under the shade of the eternal snows, hand on an hereditary which is like to out, too.

Edith was there to greet him. The girl met him walking up the road from the jetty, and her sweet face lit up.

"I'm glad you were able to come, Bruce," she said, giving him that splendid little handshake of hers, and then, the road being steep—steep and

quiet—there appeared some measure of justification for Bruce to take her arm. He had never done so previously, but—well, Bower Street has an upward incline.

The couple took their love-making rather as a matter of course, partly because a city restaurant is not precisely an ideal spot for romance, and, secondly, in view of the young people being in their different ways of a rather unusual degree of independence of character.

But already the short route to the house of Florence Tooth gave promise of surroundings more amenable to the atmosphere of romance. Each felt it. There was a slight restraint between them—the lull before the storms of love and all that it stands for.

Florence sat in frozen dignity busily plying her spy-glass. It afforded a good medium to disguise some flutterings inside her apron, her bombastic exterior being merely a cloak to hide a degree of weakness within, the existence of which was known to but one person.

Edith's aunt greeted Bruce with characteristic abruptness.

"Well, Mr. Swinton," she began, "so you've come. I thought you would. Edith would have it that it wasn't certain you would be able to get away. I knew better. Don't tell me. I've been young myself. Come and see my bay."

Florence Tooth always referred to everything appertaining to Manly as hers, and she certainly had a finger in every pie ever baked there.

Engineering the young fellow to herself, Florence informed him: "I gather from my niece that you are in love with her. If you aren't, then you ought to be—especially since you saved her life. That was very noble of you, boy."

"We are very good friends," the boy replied, non-commitantly.

"Friends!" ejaculated Edith's aunt. "Fiddlesticks! Stuff and rubbish! Don't tell me. You're in love with her. Edith's the dearest girl God ever made, always supposing there is such a person. Of course you love her! Why shouldn't you? Tell me that."

Bruce Arbuthnot looked at Florence with toleration—toleration and amusement. "Excuse me, Miss Tooth," he suggested, "but I didn't come here—I mean I didn't accept your very kind invitation to discuss Miss Edith."

Florence looked a trifle taken aback. She wasn't used to being snubbed, particularly in her own preserves. All Manly bent the knee to her. Well, her cheque-book knew it. Her brother-in-law out at Orange was the only person who never failed to call a spade a spade, and commit her to the fury of the fires which burn for ever.

"Very smart, Mr. Swinton, very smart, but you don't fool me, my boy. Look! I know what you young men are. I was young myself once. I won't have my niece played fast and loose with. If you love her, tell her so."

"May I suggest," Bruce replied with suppressed anger, "may I suggest that it is just possible I have

already done so. Miss Burne would scarcely repeat everything I say to you. In no case does the matter concern anybody but ourselves. Unless the subject can be dropped, and dropped immediately, I must really catch the next ferry back to Sydney."

"Hoity toity! Ruffled feathers, eh? Well, well! Have it your own way, Mr. Swinton, but you will find my esteemed brother-in-law will prove a harder nut to crack than I am."

"The old fool's probably half dotty," Bruce ruminated. "I suppose she means well, though. Best to humour them, they say." Turning to her he indicated the view through her telescope.

"What a priceless panorama you have here, Miss Tooth," he suggested.

"Isn't my beach wonderful, Mr. Swinton?" the old lady agreed, presuming possession of it in her usual manner. "But one of these fine days I'll change this glass for a Gatling gun and train it on some of those careless picnickers, that I will! How would you like your sea-front littered up with paper and fruit skins?"

Bruce suggested he had always understood, and even noticed, that, taken as a whole, the crowd were fairly careful with their refuse.

"Stuff and nonsense! Don't tell me. Mark my words, one of these fine days I'll pick 'em out, and anyone I see leaving paper about will get a charge of grape shot!"

The excited old dear so evidently meant it, that Bruce made excuse to get her inside the house, where, under the influence of Edith, whose effect

upon her aunt was wonderful, Florence became her curious, good-hearted old self again.

Then they went down to bathe—at least, Bruce and Edith did, and their general deportment, seen through the telescope giving no cause for criticism, the lovers returned to a perfectly normal hostess for tea.

During the repast, with startling suddenness Miss Tooth enquired:

"Have you met Edith's father yet, Mr. Swinton?"

"He is coming down next week-end, aren't you, Bruce?" Edith interjected.

"I'll be there, too, to see the fun," Florence announced, without waiting to hear whether such was indeed Bruce's intention. "William's a tartar, a sheer——"

"I have already met him, Miss Tooth," Bruce reminded her. "Mr. Burne was at Palm Beach when your niece and I first met."

"First met! What do you mean, first met? When you saved her life, you mean? Of course, William would be there—when isn't he where he isn't wanted? Tell me that."

"Auntie, don't run Daddy down, especially before Mr. Swinton. Dad's a dear. You don't understand him."

"I understand him too well, Edith; that's all there is to it. What did he mean by stealing your mother's heart? What did he mean by marrying her against my advice to her? What good has come of it? Tell me that."

Bruce looked curiously at Florence Tooth. "The old girl's going off the deep end again," he thought to himself. "It's odd how she changes when she gets excited."

"I think I can tell you something good—something very good that came of it," he put in.

Florence darted a look at him, suspicious. The boy was likely to prove one too many for her, trying to trip her up.

"Oh, dear me, no; you can't," she contradicted, shaking her finger at him. "I'm not saying that my sister is unhappy, poor long-suffering fool. She'd tolerate anything. She'd be happy living in a den with a panther. No good came of her marrying that—that——"

"You are forgetting Miss Edith, I think."

Florence Tooth sat bolt upright in her chair—if any improvement in the erect posture she invariably affected were possible. Then she clapped her hands. "Boy," she said, "I begin to like you. Yes, I really begin to like him, Edith." And then to the boy's surprise she jumped out of her chair, took his loved one into her old arms, and fairly hugged her.

"Oh, my darling," she cried, "don't take any notice of your cranky old aunt who loves you. You lovely girl! The boy's right, but for your bumptious old Dad I wouldn't have you. Oh, my darling, my darling!"

Edith took it all as it came, but the boy noticed that she was not unresponsive to her eccentric old relative's genuine love for her, which she shared.

"You are a funny old darling, Auntie," the girl

told her. "I can't help rather loving you. But you really are an old duffer now, aren't you?"

Florence Tooth's excitability ended in a mood of emotionalism. Nothing would satisfy her but that she must bestow a kiss upon a bewildered Bruce, after which, having worked off various phases of her moods, she calmed down and disclosed to the couple a side to her complex character which made it easy for Bruce to understand Edith's fondness for the old lady.

The meal continued, conversation went on smoothly and easily, and might have continued till it was time for Bruce to take his departure had not another disturbing element intruded itself. It came in the form of some boisterous shouting down below them on the beach at Fairy Bower. Florence rushed to her telescope, slurred it round to the offending noise, focussed it upon the holiday-makers, and demanded to be told what cause or just impediment there might be against her obtaining permission to erect a machine-gun alongside her telescope.

Bruce was persuaded nothing pleased her better than to have excuse to rush to the sighting instrument, and to see through its exaggerating eye justification for tirades against her fellow man. Yet in all Manly no bureau gave forth its cheque-book so speedily or so generously as did that of Florence Tooth when trouble in the homes of the poor warranted it. It was said of her that she barked worse than she bit, to which the better-informed added, "always supposing that she possesses a bite at all."

CHAPTER X.

THE CITY OF ORANGE.

"GLAD to meet you again, Mr. Swinton."

William Burne took Bruce by the hand. "Come and see Mother," he added, propelling the boy along, willy-nilly. "Mother, here's young Bruce Swinton, the lad that saved our Edith, praise be. Kiss her lad, kiss her; she won't bite you."

So Bruce kissed her and thought of Florence, her sister, strutting about among the hens outside. What a contrast!

Alice Burne had been very pretty as a girl, and time had but mellowed it. If ever a woman looked happily married she did, in spite of Florence's opinion. Bruce couldn't help liking her. Edith inherited her mother's womanliness and good features. The girl had lost nothing by possessing for a mother this amiable, sweet-tempered woman.

"I hear you have been down to Manly, Mr. Swinton," Mrs. Burne remarked with a tolerant smile. "I expect you have heard all about the brutal way my awful tartar of a husband treats me," she laughed gaily. "Oh, it's no secret; Bill knows how much Florence loves him. It's fifty-fifty, as they say. The two of them are always at each other's throats. And how has the world been treating you,

Mr. Swinton? Edith tells me you are determined to build enormous ships later on. I hope they won't be battleships, that's all."

"I can ease your mind on that score, Mrs. Burne," Bruce assured her. "My leviathans are predestined to carry oil and wool to Europe and bring back the manufactured article. Oil, and another surprise bumper of gold."

William rolled in: "What's the boy say, Mother? Oil? God love you, boy! Put it there; them's my sentiments. I believe we have enough oil in Australia to drown out all Yankee-doodle Land, that I do. As to gold, we've mountains of it somewhere or other."

Bruce, for his sins, had to "put it there," and for the second time within five minutes his hand felt like crushed oats. But a fear was at his heart. How long would Edith's father tolerate him when his history came out. What would he say when Bruce took his daughter from him—took her whether he liked it or not? Took her, if to effect it, Edith had to take him. Carry themselves off in her plane to build the monster merchant vessels of which he dreamed in yards far away in old Devon. Why Devon he know not, but some heredity call was at him. His father owned land there—owned miles of sea coast, deep water, hard foreshores. He dreamed of shipyards springing up in south-west England competing with Ulster, trying to compete with the Scotch. What an insane ambition competing with the Scotch, as virile a nation of intellectuals and world-renowned shipwrights the mod-

ern world knows! Then the Australian in him saw his ships filling their bunkers, filling every conceivable inch of themselves with Australian raw commodities; filling their cabins with Aussies homeward bound to the land of their distant fathers for a *spello*. He visualised the voyage occupying twenty days. Then he cut that down even further by including in his day-dream line of Arbuthnot boats, a landing deck for airplanes. The mails and a few Aussie passengers would climb into them at Marseilles, or earlier, to be shot catapult fashion into the ether and reach London a few hours later. And here he was at Orange in the State of New South Wales, and Edith was approaching to take him out of his reverie. Through the air came the sounds of quarrelling. William and Florence were at it again.

"Avast there, woman! The Almighty forgive your evil tongue!"

"Stuff and nonsense! Don't tell me——." The voices faded away. Then they could be heard again, still at it.

"It's a sin in the eyes of the Almighty. The air's the Lord's preserve. Minister was only saying last Sabbath——"

"Don't prattle to me about your church, man."

"The next one of they planes what flies low over my acres gets a charge of duck shot into it."

Edith paled slightly. She had reached Bruce's side and gave his arm a slight squeeze, then quickly released it.

"Let's go into the bush together, shall we?" Swinton suggested.

"Wouldn't it be lovely?" the girl replied, and the two left the house party and wandered off into the mountain-bush. The time had arrived when Bruce had decided to tell Edith how much she was to him. To tell her just so much as it appeared necessary for her to know of his history—the history of his house and the history of his father.

They followed a mountain bush track cut between eternal gum-trees, the everlasting leaf-covered inhabitants of the Australian continent. Black and white magpies threw their hollow-sounding, flute-like cries at them. Kookaburras laughed uproariously down to them from dead tree branches. Crickets and grasshoppers hopped away as the lovers' feet rustled dead leaves on their track. A flat-tailed lizard disdained to move from its sun-basking, and had to be stepped over or walked round. Christmas bush—forbidden plunder—invited by its delicate pretty coloured flower, but the Government, wishful to retain to bushland the exceptionally few colours it holds, put the plucking of it out of bounds.

Said the boy: "Edith, there is something I want to talk to you about."

"Is there, Bruce?"

"Yes. I hardly know how to begin—how to tell you."

"It shouldn't be so difficult," the girl replied, "especially as——"

"Especially as what?"

"Since I know what you want to tell me."

"Oh, no you don't, Edith. It is something rather awful."

"How tragic we are, Bruce."

The boy put his arm through hers, propelled her slightly off the track. "Shall we go in here—in case anyone comes along?" he asked.

"No, Bruce. It's dangerous to leave the tracks. One can get lost as easy as easy."

"Surely not. It must only be a question of keeping one's sense of direction."

"Quite, Bruce; only that. I should have thought you would have known by instinct how careful one has to be."

"I bet I should take some losing."

"Don't ever risk it, dear. You might learn you were mistaken. I should say you were about the poorest bushman, you funny old engineer"—Edith squeezed his arm—"that was ever born. I believe you would lose yourself frightfully easily."

"I should like to be lost—with you."

"Why—why, Bruce?"

"Because I love you."

"Oh! Do you really? Really and truly?"

"More than I can possibly tell you. I simply can't put it into words."

"I wonder why you love me, Bruce?" Edith questioned. "What is there about me that makes you feel—feel like that? I'm not pretty, or——"

"Oh, yes, you are, you darling. I simply worship you. Will you marry me?"

"One day I should love to, but——" The girl gave a happy laugh, her lovely eyes were alight, with a soft warm glow. Her lips were rather more parted than usual; her whole body, in some indescribable way, appeared to have found itself. Edith Burne certainly looked pretty just now, listening to her lover's broken avowal of love for her.

"But," she went on, "we are hardly in a position to talk much about it yet, are we? I mean undergraduate-ness,"—she chuckled at the word—"is a difficult time to set up housekeeping, isn't it?"

"Will you promise that you will wait for me? Will you promise that nothing, absolutely nothing, will make you change your mind?"

"I think I am safe to say yes to that, darling," Edith assured him. Yet, even as she uttered it, something about him set her wondering.

But Bruce took her to him. "You lovely, beautiful thing!" he muttered, then put his lips to hers. She answered him kiss for kiss—then they recovered themselves.

"There is something I ought to have told you first, Edith," Bruce commenced, releasing her. "I ought to have told you first—it's something about my history, something rather dreadful, or so some people would think."

"I don't expect I'm one of those kind of people, boy."

"It's something about my father."

"Whatever does it matter since he's dead?"

"That's just it. He isn't!"

"Really? Oh, I see. He doesn't live with Mrs. Swinton any more?"

"No. Mother divorced him, Edith."

"Good gracious! I suppose he was one of those naughty men." Edith threw off her manner of slight banter. She grew more serious. "How terribly sad for your mother, though," she said. "She is such a dear. I love her. Oh, so that's what makes her manner so—so—not exactly sad but—well, I can't explain it, but now I can understand it better."

A fit of sudden passionate temper swept over the boy. "My father was a swine and a blackguard," he declared. "Sometimes I think I could kill him. Perhaps one of these days I will."

"Perhaps if you met him he might prove one too many for you, Bruce. I don't mean physically, but, in spite of yourself, you might love him—have to love him—like I have to love stupid, common, old Daddy. What is your father like—to look at, I mean?"

"I have never seen him."

"Oh!"

"Mother sued for a divorce in India, then came post haste to Australia."

"Yes?" said Edith eagerly. The story was intriguing her interest. "Tell me all about it, Bruce."

"It was only after she reached Australia, you see, that she knew."

"Knew she was going to have a baby, Bruce?"

The mention of the word sent a wave of passion through him. He drew the girl to him

again and kissed her passionately. "Oh, you darling!" he said. "How you understand!"

But Edith Burne pushed Bruce gently from her. Everything in its proper order. This was story-telling time, not meant for love-making of that kind.

Something inside him told the boy that he had made a psychological mistake in kissing her again just then. He must be careful, he mustn't be too sure of her.

"Go on, Bruce; I'm listening."

"Father doesn't know—doesn't know of my existence."

"Good Heavens, Bruce! Whatever would he say, I wonder, if he knew? But I suppose he never will know."

"That's the point. That is what I wanted to tell you about. He—you see, my father is a baronet. I am his only son. He's frightfully, vulgarly wealthy, and—and——"

"And what, Bruce?"

"Mother still loves him, Edith."

"Yes, I think I can understand that."

"There, I knew you would understand."

"Yes—wait a minute, though. It does complicate things rather, doesn't it? But—isn't your name Swinton, then?"

"Mother and I don't know."

"Who is your father, then?"

The boy told her who his father was, told her a little more of the story. How, even while his mother was living a bride in Darjeeling Sir Bruce

must have been unfaithful to her. The Indian child, the murder, the awful circumstances which had brought the revelation.

"Whatever will father say?" Edith mused, more to herself than to him.

"I ought to have told you before I asked you to marry me," Bruce confessed, a great fear at his heart.

But Edith's reply put fresh heart into him on that score.

"I'm glad you didn't, Bruce."

"Are you?"

"Yes. You see, after all, you are you, aren't you? I haven't been asked to marry your sinful parent. It's Mrs. Swinton I feel so sorry for."

"Yes; and, Edith, I hardly know how to tell you, but Mother feels deep inside her. Something seems to tell her that we haven't seen the end of it all yet. Men like father take more than divorce to put aside. You see, he accepted the inevitable at the time, and I expect he thought well into it before he did, because he probably felt it unavoidable, but——"

"Do you mean your mother thinks one day he will turn up again?"

"Just that. No day ever goes by without her being in some curious way ready for him—expecting him, even. If he knew he had me, mother knows he would roll in like—like an overwhelming avalanche."

"But why, Bruce?"

"Because mother knows he loves her with all his

lack of convention, and that nothing on this earth will ever take that away from him, and she feels the same about him."

"He's been a long time coming back, Bruce."

"I know, but he's coming. It's in the air. Even I feel it. It gives me the creeps. You see, I have never seen him. It must feel odd to see your father for the first time when you are grown up."

"Do you know what he looks like?"

"Mother won't let me see any photo of him—I don't know why. Perhaps she fears I may meet and kill him. You see, he has almost ruined mother's life. But I know what he looks like. Mother says he is the most magnificent looking man ever put into an unhappy, sinful world."

Edith looked at her lover. "Yes, I can understand that, Bruce," she said.

"Then—you will marry me—you still love me—you do not mind?"

"Of course I mind, silly; but—well, I gave you my promise, didn't I? I never break promises. Besides, I couldn't in this case even if I wanted to. Perhaps you are like your wicked dad. People have to love you even if they hate you."

The boy wondered whether he might kiss her again yet.

"Bruce," Edith suddenly ejaculated, paling somewhat, "you don't think—I mean, that sort of awfulness doesn't—isn't hereditary, is it? Tell me it doesn't run in families. If you had that sort of free thought in your blood handed on to you by

Sir Bruce, then I might have to reconsider even a promise."

"But however could I with you waiting for me?"

"I shouldn't think you could, dear, but do you mind if I confide everything you have told me to someone?"

"Must you?"

"Only one person."

"Whoever is it?"

"Aunt Florence."

"Great God, Edith! Why, the woman's mad!"

"Oh, dear no, she isn't, darling. Auntie is as sane as your father. More so, in fact. She is eccentric, but I promise you she is far, very far, from being mad. Perhaps one day you will have reason to think so, too. Auntie is a particularly clever woman. May I confide it to her?"

"If you really want to," the boy agreed, slightly irritably, "I do wish you needn't, though."

"Something makes me want to. You see, I feel I must whisper it to someone or I'll burst. I can't tell father. Bruce, father must never know. He would never—do you hear?—never agree to my marrying you, I am as certain of it as I breathe. Also, I cannot tell mother, as she tells dad everything. So I may tell Aunt Florence, mayn't I?"

"Very well."

After that they wended their way slowly back. But there was a tension in the air born of something outside themselves, outside Bruce's fear of the attitude of Florence Tooth, outside the shock which

the revelation had brought the girl. It hung in the air, and would not be dispelled.

At one stage Edith, feeling the depression, asked:

"Do you think it possible your father may be dead, Bruce, and if there is anything at all in spiritualism it's that which you and your mother feel?"

"I asked mother that, Ede, and she said spiritualism, so far as she was concerned, was mostly a delusion and a snare; that if father were dead she is certain his influence would leave her; that she would know if he were dead. As a matter of fact, too, we know he isn't. You see, he's a frightfully important man. His death would be in all the papers—like Birkenheads—and we see now and again some mention of him: big game hunting. Now that you know about him you may do so also."

"Perhaps I shall see a notice that he is outward bound for Australia."

"He wouldn't look for mother in Australia; he would look her up in Devonshire. You see, he doesn't know she ever came here, doesn't know about me, and—and Edith!" The boy looked so tragic Edith gasped at him.

"Whatever now?"

"Mother has always said eventually she wants to return home—to Devonshire, you know. That's what makes me think about putting down shipyards there, I expect."

"Well?"

"I believe she is beginning to prepare to return soon. I don't mean actually, you know, but in her heart. I believe we are at the eve of great happenings, and—I had to be sure of you because I love you. I must marry you; I will, I will! I don't care what happens, you shall marry me!"

"Yes, dear, it means everything to me, too, so——"

And then he did kiss his betrothed again, and found that no psychological mistake had been committed this time, and so home—home to William Burne, elder of the church, loving husband, adoring father, stout friend, narrow bigot, prejudiced psalmodist!

An impossibly difficult father-in-law for a baronet's heir, however ethical the family record might be. A man who would see to it that he was never called upon to accept such a relationship. An escutcheon with a blot upon it!

CHAPTER XI.

PLAN FORMING.

"WHAT plans are you making for the vacation, Swinton?"

Pinkerton helped himself to a cigarette from a tin lying on Bruce's study table. Lighting it with lazy insolidity of manner from a lighter which responded with a touch, he applied it to the other's "cigarro," then drawing a voluminous cloud, he expelled it high in the air, awaiting answer to his enquiry.

Bruce didn't like Pinkerton over well, but he was useful. The undergraduate was clever, albeit he knew it. He was entertaining, and the extent to which he knew his way about town could at times prove too serviceable to be disregarded.

Without appearing to do so, Pinkerton cultivated Swinton. Bruce would have discouraged his friend's attentions but for the entertainments to which Pinkerton's suggestions invariably led. If Pinkerton said, "What are you doing to-night, Swinton?" depend upon it Bruce didn't know; wished he had got some dissipation (as a safety-valve to the day's intense study), and was ready to fall in with anything reasonably attractive offering.

Sitting on the small study table, Pinkerton swung his long, athletic legs backwards and forwards. Glancing at his handsome dark face reflected in Bruce's mirror, the boy smoothed down thick black hair. It was parted in the middle, but the strong features managed to carry off that style without any suggestion of effeminacy.

"I've nothing special on—er—as a matter of fact, I'm engaged to be married, so as you can imagine, time is scarcely likely to hang on my hands."

"Good Lord, Swinton! You don't mean to say you've tied yourself up before you've had any sort of fling—before you've seen or done any damn thing? Engaged! Why, hang it all, man, how the devil can you be engaged before you've so much as graduated? What did her old man say? Hardly fair on a girl to keep her waiting indefinitely, and all that sort of thing. No offence, old boy; no business of mine, but——"

"Here, pull up, Pinko. You're going ahead a bit fast for me. You enquired what I intended doing during vacation, and I tell you I have a girl—that's about all there is to it. Of course we are not officially engaged. I mean, there is no engagement ring or anything of that sort. An understanding, you know, and all that kind of thing. Enough to keep me cheery between terms, don't you think?"

"Lord, Swinton," mused the other, "you gave me quite a scare. I've a girl myself for that matter—two, to be exact," the boy laughed. "Your lady

friend won't expect you to tie your ruddy self to her apron strings—or her pa, either."

"What were you thinking of?"

"To tell you the truth, old boy, I'm off to the cutest little Pacific island ever. Know the place well. Priceless climate, *sans* fever, surfing safe as eggs, the reef keeping out sharks. An octopus here and there in the deep holes; have to keep a lookout for those gentry or your number's up. The thrill of adventure. Dusky maidens, top-notch dancers, you know, and all that. Frightfully cheap living. Gorgeous mountain climbs, fishing, canoeing on good days. Absolutely it, old man! Was going to suggest you rolled along with me. The governor'll finance me."

Bruce Swinton sat up in his chair—sat up very much.

"You certainly paint a rosy picture, Pinko," he agreed. "I—upon my word, it really would be a bit of a beano. As you say, there's plenty of time for married life later on, and——"

"Think over the idea, old boy. Don't let me hurry you. Sleep on it. But I want a pal, and between ourselves—I don't want to blither—but you're the only fellow I'd go with, and—well, there you see how it is."

Bruce was but human—human and very young. Blood ran in his veins. His life had been a quiet one on account of his having been brought up solely by his mother. The prospect was alluring. As Pinkerton suggested, he might not always be free to have an unfettered bachelor holi-

day of this sort. He had always wanted to see something of the Islands. He had been resolved to do so, but lately, with his mother's growing restlessness and the swift progress he was making, it seemed as though he might leave Australia for an apprenticeship in some Clyde shipbuilding yard sooner than he had ever dreamed. The only chance to visit those Islands was now. Edith wouldn't mind, because after all he could not possibly see much of her during vacation. He couldn't see so much of her in point of actual fact, as during term, when they could at least meet at lunch. Edith, too, would be away from Manly living far away at Orange. It might be impossible to see her at all. And now this offer. His mind was already made up, but he would not tell Pinkerton so just yet. He must not cheapen himself.

"It's jolly nice of you, Pinko, old bean," he said. "I'll certainly think it over. As you say, I'm still a free agent. Must be, I suppose, at twenty. May not have another opportunity. Well, I'll decide soon one way or the other and let you know."

"Good egg, Swinton!" Pinkerton said with warmth. "That's right; take your own time. I thought you were the sort of chap to have the guts to entertain the idea. Wouldn't have considered anyone else."

Clare wasn't too keen upon it, but blamed herself for trying to molly-coddle her son, and accordingly told him to please himself about the matter. She would not stand in his way.

Then, before seeing Edith again, he told Pinkerton he would be very pleased to put in two months with him on Tuamonti, the Garden of Eden in the French group, so well known by the University undergraduate.

Afterwards Bruce met Edith and told her of his intention. The girl took it as a matter of course. She had not expected to see very much of her lover during the holidays. Circumstances were too impossibly difficult to arrange many meetings. Their official engagement was about as far off as their marriage, if this ever became possible. Young men of her acquaintance were always going away together. The girl was sorry he was going so far, urged him to take care of his dear self. The time came to wish him good-bye.

Edith had intended to see him off by his vessel, the *Wotangee,* but circumstances prevented her. Then Clare was to have done so, but at the last moment thought he might dislike looking a baby before his friend, so bade him God-speed at Vaucluse instead. As the *Wotangee* steamed proudly past her house, outward bound for the Heads, Clare waved to him from an upper window. Bruce saw his mother through Pinkerton's strong binoculars, and, as previously agreed between them, he waved back. Clare could just distinguish her son through her glasses, and the worst foreboding she had ever previously experienced came to her as the huge vessel rounded East for the open sea. The woman's depression eclipsed even the intuitive fear—for she knew not what—which she had felt in Darjeeling, now twenty years ago. A violent shudder shook

her. Then she threw off her mood, blamed herself for a fool, and completely recovered went over to Manly to call upon Florence Tooth, of all people.

Why she decided to call on that worthy, whom she had met but once at Orange, she could not herself have told you. Perhaps it was on account of little nothings which had leaked through to her from Edith via Bruce. Perhaps something in the personality of Florence had got beneath her armour. Be that as it may, nothing would do but that Clare must take ferry back to Sydney to catch the *Curl Curl* leaving Circular Quay at two o'clock p.m.

Little did Clare know as the ferry churned up the waters of the harbour Manlywards that Miss Florence was in possession of secrets which would have turned Clare's hair green. Confidence poured into her secretive, understanding ears which made mention of Sir Bruce Arbuthnot, umteenth baronet and multitudinous villain.

For, with all her eccentricity, Florence was one of those excitable women who completely lose all such peculiarities when concerned with the troubles of other people. No cobweb covered safe buried family secrets so safely as could Florence, and Edith knew it. Knew it as surely as she drew breath.

Under the role of Father Confessor, Miss Tooth was apt to find herself. Under it there was no need to give vent to her insufficient energy outlet and freedom of thought by training Gatling guns on an inoffensive picnic crowd. Sitting, metaphorically

speaking, in her confessional box, Florence Tooth became a real woman, a whole woman, and a woman of the world, whose broad-minded judgment was of some moment. Excitability completely left her.

Edith had confessed to her unasked, and now Clare was about to do so. Each woman had felt in danger of bursting if she did not open up to some sympathetic brain. And no finer nerve tonic in this world could be given to Florence than to minister and give carefully thought-out counsel to her fellow mortals.

There are many Florence Tooths in this world; they are generally unmarried, and their state of single bliss is a definite loss to some poor fools of men who should have seized them by the scalp and married them, failing their securing them by simpler means. And if such spinsters be "old maids," then, thank God for old maids! The term takes on a softer tone by its association with some of the dearest women born.

CHAPTER XII.

FLORENCE TOOTH.

"STUFF and nonsense! Don't tell me!"

Miss Tooth flounced round at her maid of all work. "Look at them, girl! Come and look at them yourself. Paper to the right of them, orange peel to the left of them, banana peel all around them. I'd pick them off with a machine gun if I had my way. Stuff and nonsense! Don't tell me!"

"Please, Mum, I'm glad you haven't. I was a'there myself a week ago come Sunday. Me and my young man, just having a bite of tea, innocent like."

"Bah! Young man, indeed! What does a young girl like you want with a young man I should like to know? Tell me that."

"My Bill's one of the few, Miss, as you might say, keeps straight and 'olds of 'is job, as the saying is."

"Bah! There's no such saying. How often do I tell you not to keep on reiterating 'as the saying is'? Don't do it. Do you hear me—don't say it!"

"No, lady. No offence, I'm sure, Mum."

"There, there! Don't take too much notice of what I say, child. Now get off to your tea, do. Help yourself to some of that cake and jam in

the cupboard, and then lay tea for two. I'm expecting Miss Edith by the five o'clock boat."

"Yes, my lady," answered the girl brightly. She liked Miss Edith in the house. It soothed her mistress's temper.

"Auntie— Auntie, darling, I want to have an extra special talk to you."

"Do you, child? Come, sit yourself down, there's a dear pet, and tell your old Aunt what it is all about."

"Bruce Swinton has asked me to marry him, Aunt Floss."

Edith appeared to think this a staggerer, but the effect upon Florence Tooth was scarcely electrical.

"Of course, Edith. I could have told you that myself," she gave her quietly.

"How ever did you know, Auntie?"

"It's written there in your face, my dear. Upon my soul, I never saw anything written so plainly in my life! But what is all the trouble associated with it? You're looking ill with worry."

"Auntie, there is a brick wall between us as thick—as thick——"

"As the walls of China. Yes, go on, child."

"There are millions of things between us. It seems impossible that we can ever marry."

"Stuff and nonsense, child! Don't tell me. People with chins on them like that young cub of yours, and with little devils in them like——" Florence bent her old head down and kissed the girl. Edith was sitting on the floor at her feet, resting her elbow

on the old lady's knee, gazing into the fire-place, unfolding her confession. "You'll marry him all right, darling. I'm as certain of it as that your father will have to be tackled by me with a broom handle first."

"Auntie, would you help us if you could?"

"Would I help you? Listen to the child! Would I—look, Edith, I wish you had dropped a putty bomb on your father when you flew over the station in your plane the other day. Is that the difficulty, darling?"

"Oh, something much, much worse. It isn't one thing, it's everything."

"Do you love him, child?"

"Oh, Auntie, I simply——"

"Yes, yes; cut out all the trimmings, pet. Tell me, would you marry him if you found him down and out; would you still love him if you learnt he was an imposter, a loose liver, a——"

"Auntie, why do you say all that? Do you—I mean, has anyone told you? Oh, dear, what am I saying?"

"Nobody has breathed a word to me, Edith, but your old Aunt isn't quite a dotard. Bruce Swinton is an aristocrat. He looks as much like Bruce Swinton to me as I look like a grasshopper. I wouldn't be surprised at anything I heard about him. But I like the young fellow, like him immensely. If you told me you had found he was bold and bad, provided you added honest and truthful, I would believe you. Bruce Swinton, in my opinion, is equal to anything, good or bad; bad,

but never evil. Naughty, perhaps, but human. Your old Aunt knows nothing whatever about him, but I can read the boy, and what he needs and what he will get, if Florence Tooth knows anything about it, is you, my dear. You, to keep the devil out of him. I don't know where he gets it from, but there it is. I can see a perfect devil in young Bruce, Edith. It worries me a bit, child. Am I right?"

"Oh, Auntie, whatever makes you think Bruce could be—could be——"

"Human, child," replied Miss Tooth, supplying the rest. "I don't know, but I feel it. I don't know where he inherits it from: always supposing I'm right: perhaps it's from his late father. It certainly isn't from his mother, for a sweeter woman I never met. I like Clare Swinton more than I can possibly tell you. She had a long chat with me while you and Bruce were philandering in the bush together down at Orange. Is that when he told you he loved you, child?"

"Yes, Auntie."

"Shows his good sense!" Miss Tooth ejaculated. "He shall marry you, child, if I have to carry him into the church to you, though I prefer a registry office. It might keep your father outside, though God forgive me for saying it."

"Oh, Auntie, I do love you."

"Stuff and nonsense, Edith! Don't tell me!"

"It was about Bruce's heredity that I was going to speak to you."

Florence Tooth sat bolt upright in her chair.

"Don't worry your little head about it, child. Your children will come in for all that. So! Didn't I guess it? I told my cat Felix. 'Felix,' I said, 'depend upon it that angel face, Clare Swinton, has a skeleton in her cupboard.' Well, pet, what did the old boy die of—drink?"

"Bruce's father is still alive, Auntie—very much alive. He is Sir Bruce Arbuthnot. He's a baronet."

Florence clapped her hands. "Good for you, Flossie," she said. "Didn't you guess it was something like that?"

"And, Auntie, Mrs. Swinton divorced him!"

"Poor, poor Clare," said Florence Tooth, and sat quiet, thinking—thinking. Outside, the hall clock chimed the hour, deep, resonous. Bruce's father resting out East until his youth was spent, and then——.

"That is really all there is to tell you, Auntie. You see everything now, don't you? Bruce is only studying so far. There is father, and Bruce may possibly be a baronet one day."

"Great God, child! That angel doesn't expect the monster to try to get her back, does she?"

"I don't know, Aunt Floss; the only thing that is absolutely certain is that the divorce made not the smallest difference to Mrs. Swinton's undying love for Bruce's awful father, and that Mrs. Swinton knows to the very fibre of her being that Sir Bruce will always love her."

"What type of woman came between them, child?"

"I don't know that either, Auntie. I gathered

that the baronet was an out and outer. The Eastern potentate and free thinker, you know. Anyhow, Mrs. Swinton had clear grounds for divorce—the rotter was evidently too awful to live with."

"So!"

Aunt Florence Tooth went into a quiet reverie. So this was the type of family tradition into which her best beloved was going to marry. Should she endeavour to stop it? Not if the Heavens tumbled into the sea. Stop it! Not Florence Tooth. Of course the boy would sow his wild oats. Miss Tooth sincerely hoped he would. They would be safer sown before marriage, then—and probably then only—would he settle down. So that was what she had sensed underlying that sweet Clare's reserve and unnaturally quiet manner. Clare had not always been sad. "Florence," the old lady said to herself, "you will be wanted in this affair as sure as your name's Tooth. You'll have to bite on it, old thing, starting on William, the psalmodist. You have something to live for now, Florence, so buckle on your old armour for the fray. Who would have thought it? And yet you did think it. Florence, my dear, you're a marvel! Pull those darlings through and you can die in peace."

"Well, Auntie?"

"Your boy has gone off on a sight-seeing trip, you tell me?"

"Not yet. He is starting next Thursday. Why—why, Auntie? You don't think I ought to have tried to stop him, do you?"

"God forbid, my dear. You couldn't stop Bruce at anything to which he set his mind if you tried. Let him have a free rein, child. The more you try to hold him in, the harder he'll pull. Don't I know 'em! Do you think he really loves you?"

"I'm sure of it, Auntie."

"So'm I, my pet. If I wasn't, nothing would stop me from getting between you. As it is——"

"Yes, Aunt Floss?"

"As it is, you shall marry the boy if—if—there, you leave it to me, child. If things go awry, come to your old Aunt. Look up Florence Tooth. You'll marry him all right, my love, never fear; but don't be in a hurry. You must be patient. I entirely disagree with long engagements, but exceptions prove the rule. Don't get engaged, just wait for the boy. Do you understand me? Wait for him. If you find he isn't the saint you think him, ask yourself, 'Will he stick to *me*? Will he prove himself a better man than his father, and put aside indiscretion with marriage?' If your heart tells you he will, go ahead, my pet, and marry the young devil. After you are married, let him have his own way. He won't want it then. He'll love curbing. Don't think marriage finishes it, it only starts it. After you are married you have to keep him. That's the hardest part, my dear. Don't I know. Keep your sweet self attractive for him. Be far more particular in this after your marriage than before. That's where some of you girls display such ignorance. Feed the brutes, Edith; feed them *and fascinate them*. Don't I know 'em."

"You don't think very well of men, Auntie, do you?"

"Yes and no, child. There is as much similarity between men and women as between a sparrow and a cat. They're all brutes, every mother-son of them. Don't tell me. What you have to do is to choose a clear-minded brute."

"But you trust Bruce, don't you, Aunt?"

" 'Mm!" replied Florence Tooth. "I would trust him with my dearest secret. I would consign my last penny in his care, otherwise, my dear, young Bruce Swinton, or whatever his name is, happens to be a man. Also, he has a tainted family record. Stick to him, my darling, and wait for him. That's your old Aunt's advice to you. I think you are going to have a steep climb. You are likely to find obstacles in your way that appear insurmountable. You'll get over them. I'm certain of it. I know it as surely as I live. Your secret is safe with me, pet. You know that without my saying it. You've found your mate, Edith; I feel it. Stick to him through everything. The boy's sound; he rings true, my dear. Don't be too squeamish over morals this side of your marriage. Time enough for that afterwards. Don't ask him difficult questions. Trust him and all will be well."

"Oh, Auntie, you are a darling! I do love you so awfully much."

"Fiddlesticks, child!" said Florence Tooth. "Don't tell me."

* * * * *

"Mrs. Swinton to see you, if you please, Mum."

Florence looked up sharply. "Mrs. who?"

"Swinton, please, Mum."

"Well, I'm— Here, don't stand there looking at me, show her in. Show her in, do you hear me?"

"Yes, lady."

Clare entered the balcony room. She had to circumnavigate the telescope which took up half the glassed-in room. She held out her hand to Miss Tooth. "What a lovely view you have from here," she suggested, to open the conversation. "I was feeling a bit lonely to-day. My boy has just gone off on a voyage, you know, so I thought I would come along and have a chat with Edith's aunt."

The two women were holding each other's hands, each taking the other in appraisingly. Something brought a lump to Florence's throat. She pulled the younger woman to her. Then, to Clare's no little surprise, implanted on her cheeks two of the soundest kisses in her memory.

"You couldn't possibly have chosen a house where you were more welcome, my dear," Florence Tooth said. "Sit yourself down. It does my old heart good to see you, that it does."

"It's sweet of you to be so friendly," Clare began, but Florence cut her short.

"Friendly, my dear; why shoudn't I be friendly. Tell me that? I'm delighted to see you, delighted. There, make yourself at home, do." Lifting up her voice, Miss Tooth called, "Bridget! Bridget! Do you hear me? Bring me in some tea—two cups. Come now, hurry those stumps of yours, or it will be the worse for you!"

'I was already a'making of it," came back the voice of the maid of all work.

"A great youngster that," Florence told Clare. "I'll bribe to keep her from marrying till she'll wonder which she prefers—servitude with me or slavery with a husband? Then if she prefers slavery she shall have it, but I'll give her a wedding present which will kill off her walker-out with apoplexy."

Clare laughed. "Then she'll return to you," she suggested.

"Stuff and nonsense!" replied Florence. "There's no gratitude in 'em. Don't tell me. Don't I know 'em!"

It appeared so evident that Florence, the philanthropist, did indeed know them, that Clare had no contradiction to offer. Had she been in a mood for argument, however, more than one case of definite gratitude from old retainers to her late husband came to her mind. Perhaps the particular type of personality of Sir Bruce partly accounted for that.

"So the boy's left you for a spell," remarked Florence, searching her visitor surreptitiously.

"Yes. I suppose your niece told you?"

"Edith and I are fairly confidential friends, Mrs. Swinton. Any affairs of hers which she chooses to confide to me are safe."

"Yes. I am assured of that. I expect you know——"

"My dear, I know nothing—nothing of everything." Florence laughed. "It's a regular business with me to know nothing about anything."

"Bruce tells me that Edith is awfully fond of you."

"Fond of me? Fond of me? My dear Mrs. Swinton, there's positively nothing human I wouldn't do for the child. I couldn't possibly love any child of my own better—or so much. A child of my own would remind me too much of its father. I'm not overpartial to fathers, my dear—I know 'em!"

Florence looked archly at Clare while she said this. Perhaps she was trying to draw her out, perhaps—but no one ever knew precisely what was hidden in the heart of Miss Tooth. The only thing you could really rely upon was kindness and loyalty hidden and camouflaged beneath a frosty exterior.

"Bruce wants to marry Edith," Clare said at length. "My boy loves her."

"Really, my dear?" replied Florence, feigning a surprise which would have deceived anyone. But Clare more than guessed that Edith would have told her Aunt of Bruce's proposal. "I like your boy," came from Edith's Aunt, "but if I may say so, he'll be more than lucky if he gets Edith, for of all the sweet things an all-seeing Providence (in whom, my dear, I don't believe) ever brought into this world to cheer an old fool's heart, my niece is that girl."

"You and your unbeliefs!" mocked Clare. "Why, I believe you are more religious than I am."

"Fiddlesticks!" uttered Florence Tooth. "Don't tell me!" But her denial brought little conviction.

"What a really lovely view this is," reiterated

Mrs. Swinton, changing the trend of the conversation.

"My dear," replied Florence, "we were discussing religion, not the view. We'll keep the view out of the argument if—you—please. Especially as when I regard my panorama from here, positively I think there may be more than something in all that jargon after all."

Clare clapped her hands mincingly. "There," she laughed, "didn't I say it? Why, you're more religious than I am."

"Stuff and—well, my dear, if I am—*if* I said—then I can practise it without the hateful, detestable, atrocious, hypocritical, canting, bigoted, self-satisfaction of my brother-in-law, for all of the——"

The old lady's growing rage seemed like to overcome her, so Clare diverted the channel of their talk.

"We were talking of Edith—Edith and Bruce, you know."

"Quite right, my dear. Pull me up if I go off the deep end over that man, for your boy is like to go off many deep ends before he has done with him, you mark my words. Is your son a fighter, Mam?"

Clare smiled. If he takes after his father he is likely to prove so," she said.

"Ah! Your late husband had character, had he, Mrs. Swinton?"

"I apprehended you had known, Miss Tooth. I divorced my late husband."

"My dear," replied Florence, "I have already told

you I never know anything—anything about anything."

But this time Clare knew that Edith had been confiding in her Aunt. The knowledge gave her confidence to open out her poor heart. She was in good mood for it.

"Do you approve of your niece marrying my son?" she enquired, by way of a beginning.

"Your boy is a long way off Edith yet, Mam," was Florence's non-commitant reply.

"I asked you whether you approved of the match?"

Florence took some while to answer this sally. Presently she said:

"Mrs. Swinton, my niece loves him. That is good enough for me. I have implicit confidence in her judgment. Bruce isn't the first boy to fall in love with her, not by a very long way, Mrs. Swinton. Edith never encourages them, but there it is. The child isn't exactly pretty, but she has a way with her. She is ultra feminine. Boys go mad about her. Why shouldn't they, tell me that? Edith has given her heart to your boy. I have to admit it. I must concede it to you. Her mother is the simplest baby ever born. My sister isn't in this picture. On the other hand, I am. If William gets in the way of those two babies, then, Mam, God help him, for he's going to have Florence Tooth to deal with, and Florence Tooth can bite when she has a mind to."

"How perfectly splendid of you," said Clare. I am afraid Mr. Burne will be—be difficult."

"Difficult! Bless the woman! Hear her? Difficult! My brother-in-law will be *impossible*, Mam, take that from me. Nothing will move him. He'll move heaven and hell to stop such a match. Once William knows who—what your husband is, a divorced free thinker, and his door will shut against your house as securely as a vault in the Bank of England."

"Do you know who my husband is?"

"No," lied Florence with a snap, "and I don't want to."

"He carries a title, which, for all I know, passes to Bruce. Honestly, I don't know whether it does or not."

"Neither do I," replied Miss Tooth. "The law, Mam, if you will pardon me, is a damned ass."

Clare laughed at that. She felt better already. Florence did her good, and the old lady was on their side. Her aid might prove useful, one never knew. Edith's mother appeared a very sweet angelic woman, but was entirely under the thumb of her husband. Her influence would probably be negligible.

"Do you like Bruce, Miss Tooth.

"Decidedly so, Mrs. Swinton; but I don't like his hereditary. Blood will out. The boy seems straight enough. He is an extraordinary clever engineer, very sure of himself. I think he may go a long way. Edith will help him, too, mark my word upon that. She won't push him, she'll encourage and spur him mentally. I see a great future for Bruce. The boy's clever, clever and strong. The only thing that I am afraid of is——"

"What?" Clare spoke tersely, feverishly. It was as though some echo of her own fear was on the mind of Edith's Aunt. "What are you afraid of?"

"Blood outing, my dear, just that. Now, don't go fretting your pretty self. Boys will be boys. At least, some of them will. Your boy has had a bad start—hereditary, Mrs. Swinton. I'm an old fool to say so, but I'm only outing my views in case—just in case. To be forewarned is to be forearmed. You've broken your heart once, don't go and break it again. Let the boy have a good fling, I say. Don't hurry matters. Then he will settle down all the better."

"But he is as straight, as straight, Miss Tooth."

"I didn't suggest the boy wasn't, my dear. He's gone off to the Island, and with Pinkerton, I think you said."

"Yes. I didn't say who his friend was, though."

"Ever met Pinkerton?"

"No."

"I have, my dear, that's all. I have. But Edith doesn't know it. A fine, handsome young fellow. Too handsome by half, Mrs. Swinton—much too handsome. Pity Bruce didn't choose someone else. Still, perhaps it's as well. He'll work between traces all the better later on. Don't hurry the marriage, my dear, that's my last word except one other. It's this: encourage them; they'll need it. See if they don't. Be ready for anything."

"I am," said Clare—and she meant it.

CHAPTER XIII.

WILLIAM BURNE AND COMPANY.

"DARTER seems sweet on this young Bruce Swinton cove, Mother."

Mr. Burne was sitting in the old kitchen parlour of the farm homestead, smoking his pipe after the mid-day meal. The temperature registered 90 degrees, though the elevation of Orange was very nearly three thousand feet above sea-level. One of Australia's dry spells was ruling. Bush and grass fires abounded. The grass was brown and withered, the water dams nearly dry. All the farm animals came up to the outhouses to be fed, finding no grazing outside. But the crops of Burne's farm looked healthy in spite of it. Cultivating, the hoe and much labour retained moisture in the splendid soil, and in spite of drought, all was well with the farm.

"I'm sure he is a very nice young man, Daddy. Don't you think so?"

"I've nought ag'in him, Mother. Leastways, nought as I know on. He isn't one of our church, but there, I pride myself I ain't no bigot. If so be, he's a God-fearing boy, and makes good with his shipbuilding ideas, I shan't stand in our darling's way. Bless her lovely 'eart. I'm that there proud of our gal, Mother, that there——" Mr. Burne

wiped his perspiring brow, words being beyond him. The man had three passions in life. Edith came first, his church second, while the farm romped in a good third, there being but a hair's breadth between the three of them.

And at that moment the object of his great pride quietly entered the room. When Edith Burne entered a room she moved so quietly that one rarely heard her, but there was no need to do so, one knew she was there without that. Upon her father she had a curious influence. In her presence the man would imperceptibly speak better, and this without effort, or, at any rate, without sensible exertion. Mr. Burne was so fully alive to the vast gulf that separated them, was so fond of the girl, so alive to her fascination, culture and strength of character, that he was at his best when she was present. But his pride in Edith was going to make it all the more difficult, all the more impossible for Bruce when William Burne knew all he was later bound to know.

"Your Ma and I were just speaking of you, Edie, my pet," began Edith's father.

"Were you, Daddy?" rejoined Edith brightly. "Let's hope it was something good."

"It's always good about you, lassie, isn't it, Ma?"

"Now, William," reproved Mrs. Burne jokingly, "you're for ever flattering and praising the girl till —there, she'll be growing too big for herself if you don't tone it down."

"Edith get conceited!" thundered Mr. Burne. "Never a bit of it, Ma. Our gal wouldn't get took

that way not if—not if she went and married a lord. Would you, my gal?"

Edith didn't like the last touch of the conversation. Whatever would her father say if he knew she was resolved to marry above her station socially, but below it in everything else?

"Why, of course not, Daddy," she replied, and was engulfed into his mighty arms as a reward.

"Why, what's this now a'bulging out of my pocket?" enquired William Burne, following a custom of his when the girl was a tiny tot, and her ever generous father had surreptitiously bought something or other for his darling in the flourishing township of Orange.

"I'm sure I can't think, Daddy. What is it?"

"Why, blow me if it isn't a little pocket Kodak!" exclaimed the farmer. "Now, however did that get there? Wasn't you saying you extra specially wanted a camera, my gal?"

It was in point of fact the very thing Edith wanted most. Her father was always doing those kind of acts for her. She would express some desire before him, the man would take not the smallest notice, at times deliberately leave the room by way of adding pretence that he had not heard. The next chapter of the proceedings would be the old trick of accidentally finding "the very thing she wanted" totally by accident in his extraordinary voluminous farming coat pocket. If it were winter time—and Orange can be bracing in the winter—Mr. Burne affected a brown velvet coat. The pockets of this particular article of attire, so Edith

would have it, would have pretty nearly held her.

"Daddy, you darling! I really want a camera terribly."

"Now, hark to that! Now, isn't that just lucky! Here are you wanting to take photographs and I find the thing that snaps them right here. How it got there beats me, that it does. Howsomever, here it is, Edith my darling, and your old Dad's love with it, also your Ma's with it likewise. So take it while the going's good, as they say, before we finds who left it here."

"Why, you bought it and put it there yourself, Daddy. You know you did."

"I did no such thing!" exclaimed William Burne in assumed resentment. May I fall down and never rise again if I know how it got in my pocket!"

It was the usual family old-time joke. Mr. Burne had commissioned his wife to buy the camera, and then either get the maid or one of the farm hands to secret it in their master's coat to enable him to tell the white lie with an easy conscience. It had been enacted so often before. It was the forestalling of her wishes that so touched the girl. Florence Tooth might have her intensely bitter prejudiced animosity to her temperamentally opposed brother-in-law, but there were the best of reasons why Mrs. Burne bore that look of quiet contentment; there were the best of reasons why Edith also, in her way, loved her father. But Florence knew her subject, and when William Burne chose to refuse to see eye to eye with another, the man could rouse the very devil in those opposed to him. William Burne wasn't bad. He was "difficult," and when his particular religious denomination came into opposition with anything opposed to the principle of its teaching, then his bigoted obstinacy knew no bounds.

So Edith thanked her father, prettily, and quite to his inward satisfaction, though he continued to protest the while as he had been wont to do when she was young. Edith took her camera and went out to the farm to put it into immediate service.

"How's that, Ma?" enquired her husband. "Now, did you mark how pleased our gal was at that little nothing at all?"

"It was very generous of you, William, dear. Edith's a good girl, and deserves all you do for her, but my! You *do* spoil her."

"Why shouldn't I spoil the darling? She's all we have, isn't she? Why didn't you go and give me a son to carry on with on the farm, that's what I ask, Mother?"

"Perhaps you'll be having a big one in young Bruce one of these days, Dad."

But William shook his great head. "Not this journey, Ma. Now, I won't say that I didn't entertain hopes that Edie might strike up with a boy from the farming classes, but there—wasn't to be. I saw from the first that our gal was meant for a lady. Cut out for it, as you might say. So off we sent her to the 'Varsity, and now she's took up with young Bruce Swinton, there's no knowing where she'll end."

William was right there. There certainly was no knowing upon that score—no knowing at all.

CHAPTER XIV.

AN ISLAND IN THE PACIFIC.

THE peaks of Tuamonti, rearing themselves five thousand feet above the level of the blue Pacific, came hazily into the horizon.

The air was very still and hot. Even the twenty knots of the R.M.T.S.S. *Wotangee* seemed unable to make a breeze. If breeze there was, it brought no relief to the limpid passengers lounging idly about the decks, too languid to play games.

There were only two passengers due to disembark at the next port of call, and they were busy below putting the final touches to their packing. Their destination was Fungi, a small trading station a few miles from the island of Tuamonti. They would need to charter a small launch at the port to take them across to the island of their dream—to Tuamonti, the "Garden of Eden." No trading took place on Tuamonti, there being nothing with which to trade. The island paradise was self-supporting. It boasted but twelve miles by four. The population was pure native, speaking a curious pigeon French with their Polynesian. Sufficient fruit to keep the natives in luxurious affluence and laziness grew indigenously. No attempt at cultivation was made, nor was there any need for such. The fruit and

the fish provided everything. Being mountainous, Tuamonti was singularly well served with water.

The French who administered the island—and administered it splendidly, if easily—sent their emissary on periodical visits of inspection, otherwise the place was left gloriously to itself. The Polynesian inhabitants were of superb physique, partly owing to the healthy cold breezes coming down by night from the mountains. They would have overpopulated themselves speedily but for the toll of the sea fishing, and the occasional absolute scourge of tropical influenza which swept the island. Otherwise the health of the islanders was superb. The men tall and strong, the women who matured at eleven or twelve, and aged at twenty, comely, graceful and alluring to a degree.

But one tribe lived there. They were ruled under the sovereignty of France by a local chieftain, whose jurisdiction was ordered and controlled by the European administrator.

One might say that France was the War Office Regulations and the Chieftain on the spot, the Officer Commanding (O.C.).

The Polynesians numbered a few hundreds, but when the comparatively huge acreage involved by the mountains covering but a few square miles is taken into account, it will be seen that the natives were not cramped.

The rocky hills lent themselves to the production of but sufficient for local needs, and the hard nature of the ground ruled out any question of increasing production by cultivation. Every available

inch of soil furnished its own natural crop, and artificial handling did nothing, was, indeed, incapable of doing anything to increase it.

So Tuamonti remained unspoiled. Remained true Polynesian. Under slight regulation love was as free as the crops, trial marriage with easy cleavage being the wisdom of the rule. It did utterly no harm, except in the mind of fatuous bigotry and untravelled ignorance.

Drink, other than the Creator's hydrogen *cum* oxygen gift was unknown, as also was vice in any form. Pinkerton's name of "Garden of Eden" for the spot was appropriate, for tins of bully found no place on Tuamonti, nor any boric treated artificiality of diet.

Influenza was either an accident sent from Russia or maybe a dispensation to keep down the surplus population. What happened before the advent of the scourge about 1850 is unknown, but it was surmised that prior to that date the paradise remained undiscovered.

And so Bruce and Pinkerton took launch, hired at the trading island for a couple of months, churned over to their holiday sphere, and were welcomed by the natives. Pinkerton they knew. He was not unpopular. Polynesia is no more a white man's country with white man's necessary codes than is the East the West. And this was the spot chosen in all innocence by the Sydney undergraduate to bring Bruce, the son of his father. Can one wonder at the perfectly natural outcome of it?

Now Bruce had very definite views of his own

upon all moral, psychological and physiological ethics. The bulk of present-day advanced students have, and they are without the remotest regard to the views of their predecessors. The modern student may agree with them, or he and she may not; but they are not influenced by them. They think for themselves.

Taken as a whole, the opinions of Bruce Swinton were inclined towards convention, but convention spelled with a particularly small C. Free love, trial marriages, and such like, were matters upon which his healthy young mind rarely dwelt. He regarded it as delving into detail for which he had little time. His thoughts were almost entirely concentrated upon his passion for ship building, and all the branches of science involved in it. At the same time, he presumed to hold opinions on other subjects, and they were not lacking in strength however little sleep they lost him.

Except to administer wiser laws than they could frame and uphold for themselves, and to continue the splendid medical help so bravely and unselfishly dealt out by missionaries, Bruce believed in leaving colour to look after itself. The interference of the white man, in his view, brought more harm in its train than good. When a people had no religion he thought it sounded feasible enough to endeavour to give them one. Contrarily, when a race was found whose religious beliefs were beyond any parallel with the white races, he considered the totally vain effort of trying to eradicate this real thing, and then presume to think you could replace

it with something different, a form of conceit which was astonishing in its presumption. In effect, he didn't believe it could be done. Of course, a people, more particularly a subject people, would take advantage of any benefits offering to simulate a so-called conversion; but whether an X-ray exposure of their inner being would confirm it, Bruce had more than grave doubts, to which had to be added the unspeakable evils arising from such grave unsettling—drink, disease, harmful clothing, breeders of colds, fevers and death never previously known. Mock modesty and fatuous ignorance.

Bruce had no time for whites who interfered with blacks, other than to really and honestly help them, and the white who indulged himself with the fairer daughters of the natives was, in his view, a rather contemptible being.

And then he went to Tuamonti, where every prospect pleased and not even the inhabitants were vile.

The hired launch ran over a submerged coral reef, through a clear water lagoon, and headed straight for a hard, sandy beach. Underneath them the friends could discern huge fish, rainbow coloured coral, myriads of small vertebrates. Sharks were but little feared off the coast of Tuamonti. Whether it was that the ebony pigmentation of the inhabitants offered little encouragement to their culinary department, or, what was more likely, that the sea provided for them with such generosity that the monsters never felt hungry, was not known.

The fact, however, remained; but the same cannot be said of the enormous octopii.

These dreadful, eight-armed devil-fish lurked in deep waterpools, pools dark and eerie. Woe betide the unwary who ventured inadvertently near one, or who swam over such a fearsome spot! The cuttle-fish rarely came out. They lived and moved and had their being in these holes, living upon anything which came within reach of their vacuum suckers. The victim, if a native, would be drawn under water, then, ere the wretch was drowned, that frightful parrot-like beak commenced upon its fearsome meal. Death at the hands of a shark was considered almost a joke in comparison, but the octopus holes were well known and avoided accordingly. Greater dangers lay in blood poisoning from the coral (a mere scratch from which invariably festered, remaining so for months on end if worse, indeed, did not befall); and the deadly, poisonous sea snakes. The latter hydrophidæ accounted for more deaths on Tuamonti than any other cause, excepting only the periodical epidemics of Russian influenza, the country which exports so much that is unwelcome.

"Slow her down a jiffy, Bruce," Pinkerton cried, "then we'll rush in on top of the next big roller."

The little engine was momentarily throttled down, then opened up full, and the little craft, churning the water in her wake into white foam, rushed headlong to the beach, up the sand high and dry, where it took over a precarious list to starboard. The boys jumped out, to be greeted by wild

yells, dancing gyrations, whoops of excited joy, and all the pandemonia of Polynesia.

Acting on Brian Pinkerton's instructions, given out in a tolerant, kindly, pigeon French, the natives man-hauled the launch to the extent of the sand, where it was made fast—tethered to coconut trees growing right down near the seashore. The sand was first cut away, bath shape, to accommodate the little vessel vertically, upon the satisfactory conclusion of which the two men were able to look about them.

Standing back from the horde of islanders were two girls. Beside them, the chieftain, Mangani. The younger of them left the side of the others and came gracefully forward to greet Brian Pinkerton. She showed her ivory teeth, smiling a welcome, and it seemed that the chieftain's niece, Tamli, knew the young fellow particularly well.

Bruce noticed that Mangani smiled broadly as the two kissed in salutation. The relationship evidently met with his complete approval.

The other girl, Molota, his daughter, hung back in her beauty, her pride, and her need of some type of introduction.

And it was her father, Mangani, the chief, who took her forward by the hand, and enquiring first of Brian who this curly-headed young white-skinned giant might be, effected the preliminaries.

After that Mangani stood back with absorbed interest to note his daughter's demeanour.

Now Molota was at this time just seventeen years of age, and that was a great age—a great age for

a virgin on Tuamonti. It was unheard of, rather improper, and certainly not by any means to the liking of the chieftain, who had wanted her married long since. Of course there had been trial marriages, but Molota was difficult to please. She would have none of them, and the trial marriage had ended in but a trial engagement, the prospective Tuamontian being sent about his business with the proverbial flea in his ear.

In her curious pigeon French, impossible of translation, Molota repeatedly told her father: "Molota marry nevairre ma pere, only if she find ze man of 'er dreams, n-est-ce-pas!"

And her father, very wrathful and disappointed in her totally unusual Tuamontian behaviour, would reply:

"Mon petite, nevairre will you find such man. 'Ee is not. Your example, it is not good. All our girls, they give to the island our petites. How can we go on if there is not much of baby? We have the sickness, the poison of the sea worm. It is not good, mon petite, Molota. For you I am sad, for you should take a man and give us the future Chief of the Tuamontians."

"Also, I vish much, my father," the girl was for ever telling him, "but first I must my man find. 'Ee must be big, 'ee must be strong, but, above all, my man for me, 'ee must be white! It is not good that I take a Tuamontian, for then we stop comca. My 'usband, 'ee must be white, so I give ze little baby to you, ma pere, a child comme-ca Monsieur Brian Pinkerton, who love my cousin Tamli."

And now Molota regarded Bruce, standing there with the sun trying to find traces of his curly, auburn hair under the rim of his enormous solar topee; standing there, tall, strong, and fair to a degree, regarding her with his quiet, deep-thinking, clever eyes. And Molota, the chieftain's daughter, felt her heart stir beneath her in a manner never previously known. The girl's native heart went out to the boy, in its own natural fashion, then and there; went out to him to a degree which would take no gainsaying, would accept no substitutionary. Here before her was the father of the future Chieftain of Tuamonti, and her lovely, adorable eyes lit up, transfiguring her ivory brown skin, as she regarded him.

The effect upon Mangani was electrical. Rapid orders poured from his mouth. Those ordered glanced at Bruce—at Bruce and Molata. The commands had some bearing upon those two standing there, each regarding the other. They ran off to do the Chieftain's bidding. Mangani looked a new man. Authoritative, commanding, he appeared to have added a foot to his stature. His daughter's vocation was at long last to be fulfilled. The man could see it; see it there in his daughter's eyes. And then into his instinctive intelligence, schooled in the world of intuitive, superstitious insight, came the knowledge that Bruce Swinton was tottering, falling from his code, changing his view of the West, suffering disputed conversion to those of the East. Heredity added its quota, but little help were needed to open a man's eyes to the

alluring, seductive, maddening attraction of this vivid, languid, gloriously beautiful daughter of Polynesia.

Following a particularly long, appraising scrutiny, Mangani's daughter spoke.

"Molota is var glad that you come, Monsieur—var glad."

"Thank you," Bruce rejoined, rather taken aback. "I'm glad to be here, too."

"It is most good. Long I have waited for you."

"Why?" enquired the young Australian, surprisedly. "My friend, Mr. Pinkerton, didn't write to say we were coming, did he?"

" 'Ere we have of letters no got, Monsieur," the girl answered him, "but Molota know. 'Ere, Monsieur; my heart, it tell me that one day you come!" Molata patted her bosom, over her heart, to indicate the spot where intuitive knowledge came to tell her things unknown to others.

"I see," said Bruce, somewhat embarrassed and mystified.

"Molota tink you see not, Monsieur," she told him, "but me, I open your eyes, Mister, so wide that then you see."

"What shall I see?" asked the white man in all innocence.

"You see me!" the girl finished, and gracefully left his side; but even in walking away, back to her father, her every step was for him. Every turn of her body, every swaying movement of her hips, for him to notice and admire.

Arrived back at Mangani's side, his daughter announced:

"At last, my father, my man 'ee 'as come. For him I marry. Molota is much content. Our beautiful island will 'ave the most splendid white man for chieftain after you, my great noble father. It is good, isn't it?"

And Mangani, her father, agreed with her that it was indeed good, and in his rejoicing he had word passed round to the entire tribe of what was to befall. Brian Pinkerton heard of it through Tamli, but he was too pre-occupied with his own affairs just then to take much heed.

Tamli thereupon impressed Brian with the importance of the marriage that was to be prepared, to which at last the boy replied:

"Really, by jove! Good egg, what?"

"Egg!" exclaimed his comely companion. "Say not egg, Monsieur; it is not proper to talk so in Tuamonti. Our new petite chieftain-to-be will be born, not at all an egg, but the finest of little white boys. It was pre-ordained, for Molota, my cousin, wait and wait for your great friend till we think she find him nevairre. Molota most clever girl; she *know,* Monsieur, and so she wait, and now he come. With you, my uncle, he is most pleased. Give you anytink you ask, Monsieur."

"I only want you, ma cherie," replied Brian shamefacedly; "that was the sole reason for my coming here again. Kiss me!"

So Tamli kissed him, and thereafter they forgot everything but themselves. Forgot even the banquet, which, following South Sea custom, was already being prepared, forgot to worry over the slight possibility of Bruce having something to say on the matter first, something that might imperil the lives of them all.

Down on the beach the launch was being carried away, taken beyond power of recovery, though it took two hundred stalwarts to effect it. The next visit of the French administrator was six weeks off, and marriages of chieftains' daughters can be effected, if not by hook, then by crook, well inside that time.

For another thing that the all-understanding heart of Molota had already told her, was that though she had found her soul mate, it did not necessarily follow that he would recognise the affinity himself. Even if he did, it was by no means certain that he would follow it. White men were curious animals. Quite mad, of course, and yet—well, they carried with them a quality of madness that appealed to the heart of Molota, always had appealed to her; and her son should be one of them if it brought a warship from Woolloomooloo as punishment for it.

And so the launch was hidden in the virgin bush, the scene was set, and the banquet was ordered, as many a poor fish speared under the torchlight that night could testify.

CHAPTER XV.

BRUCE AND MOLOTA.

A TWO-ROOMED palm leaf hut was made for the white men, being actually ready for use within a few hours of their arrival. Mud walls dried and set hard under the tropical sun. For beds, grass, a type of bracken, young palm and banana leaves, were placed in mud-walled bedstead. These proved entirely comfortable, sleep-inviting.

Brian Pinkerton made it clear to the chieftain that payment would be made for services rendered to them, and two boys were delegated to fish, cook, and wait upon them. The visitors were invited to partake of a meal at the chief's hut the first evening, and great was their astonishment when, proceeding to it from their own quarters, they found their hired launch high and dry in the bush.

Over the fish and fruit repast Mangani explained that the island was visited by severe hurricanes, and he had ordered that their launch should be safeguarded, as far as was humanely possible, by shifting it away from the beach. The reason appeared feasible enough, and the boys thanked him for his foresight. Little did they realise that the sole reason for the forest docking of their boat was to prevent any possibility of their leaving, until such

time as Molota advised her father that she was now content—happy in her expectations.

It may be taken as an axiom that while the Eastern races as a whole look with little favour upon the half-caste, such is not the case throughout Polynesia. There are numerous islands in the South Seas where children with a semblance of the white-skinned races in them are regarded as people of a higher order, and are much coveted by their mothers in consequence. Whites are at times implored to inter-marry for the sole purpose of introducing their colour to the islands, and marriage being an elastic term—to cover nothing but a temporary period—Molota must not be regarded as fantastic and unreal. The girl was absolutely true to type. True to the type ruling in many islands of the Pacific south of the equator. And being a chieftain's only daughter, and the pre-destined mother of the future reigning head, Molota was in a better position to force the issue and attain her life's desire.

There was nothing unusually sensual about the girl; she was absolutely normal. Her wish for temporary marriage to a white man was solely a means to an end. It was as natural as life itself. It is not fiction, it is fact; and the opinion of every ecclesiastic under the sun cannot alter it. A pity they cannot. Half-castes have an uncanny habit of acquiring the vices of both sides of their parentage and retaining the virtues of neither. But there it is; and in telling the part played by Molota, the chieftain's daughter, it must be understood that she re-

presented the school of thought of some considerable portion of the inhabitants of this world.

Further, it may be taken as yet another axiom that the detailed methods adopted as a last resort (or as a first) by daughters of the portions of the South Seas affecting this curious ambition are actual, are usual. They are less revolting than the negroid dances copied and named by civilisation after negroes. The dance Blackbottom and its name is more immoral, is more deliberately suggestive, openly unclean, unashamedly insinuating than the free, natural love ruling in parts of the Pacific. The most degraded human minds existing to-day dwell in skins which are white, in people who should know better. There should be time to commence the presumptious conversion of so-called heathen after we have put our own infinitely worse house in order; cleaned up our own wickedness, which, with less excuse, exceeds that of our poor victims. It is a curious anomaly for whites, who are comparatively of the least religious of humanity, to go out to teach religion to the greatest believers in some higher power. Your Buddist, Mahomedan, Brahmin, Parsee and all the rest of them *really* believe and carry out the tenets of their faiths. We pretend, try to, endeavour to believe under instruction from a house ever divided against itself. Not only divided under different methods, but the teachers of the same system fighting one against the other as to the precise detail imperative, without which we are lost. The layman sits upon the fence looking on in growing wonder. One wonders what

London, or Chicago, would think at being inundated by Parsee missionaries trying to convert us from lethargy to real faith in God. The beliefs of the late emigrants from Persia are by no means incompatible with Christianity; but your Parsi *really* believes his tenets. If Chicago tolerated invasion from Mahomedan she might learn much that would improve her. Perhaps every inhabited planet had its visitation. Why should we alone have enjoyed such favour? The visiting of Mars to inform them that their teaching was nothing and ours everything would be somewhat presumptious. In many respects Eastern faiths contradict each other, and gainsay Eastern beliefs, *less* than Western denominations of the same faith dissent each from the other. Let us exchange pulpits and take heart, take lesson from the East and leave their *real* belief in God alone—they are nearer Heaven than we are.

But there is another field. There are races who, unlike the East, *are* without intelligent belief. All right. Visit them, tell them something helpful, intellectual, feasible. Cut out their canker of absurdity, superstitious cruelty, and ignorance. Put medicine and hygiene in Africa and you have the men, the *real* men, who are doing it. Encore! There is nothing wrong with the individual, the missionary. To the contrary, they are amongst the flowers of mankind, brave, educated. There is much for them to do where religious help is indicated with skins that are coal black; much hygienic instruction for them to teach in skins that are brown,

black, smoked-ivory, and white, too; but don't endeavour to upset faiths which at least are real, to take such from them, and have the presumption to think that, having smashed something absolute, you can replace it with something else. You are strong, indeed, if you can effect that double deed and leave the building bereft of its original foundation (at the outset a stronger one than you enjoy), replaced with yours, as rigid as it was until your disturbance. Remembering, too, that the foundation you smash is little different to your own, of less variation than your own squabbles, and that in no case can you do it. You think you can, but you are wrong, for behind is left something shaky in place of concrete, a concrete which, if your faith be true, will be accepted. In effect, you can give something where there is nothing, but you cannot take away and replace it with something else. But let no stone be flung at missionaries individually. Their hygienic teaching alone is yeoman service.

But their work needs variation according to the field in which they are administering it, lest the last state of the house upset become worse by far than its first. Where there is *no* religion—but only then—give Christianity. It is beyond all else the most perfect code. A pagan earth turned humane by the revolution of faultless teaching.

For immorality look west, not east nor south. In the unspoiled portions of the Pacific you will find Nature, not vice.

The meal at the chieftain's hut that first night turned out to be a regular banquet, but not so big

as the feast under preparation for a few nights later. After the function terminated Bruce and Brian repaired back to the new hut made ready for them. About 9 p.m. Brian, who had been reclining on his bed-couch, got up and stretched himself.

The two had partaken of a meal which left them drowsy; the effects were indeed only just beginning to wear off. Said Pinkerton:

"Well, Bruce, old top, between ourselves, I have a date, as you probably guess. See you to-morrow morning at breakfast, old man. Sleep well."

Without waiting for any rejoinder, he left the hut. "Slightly embarrassed," Bruce thought. "Thinks conversation futile." And then, as though Brian's going had furnished the signal for which the cousin of the girl he was meeting awaited, Bruce, reclining there on his fern bed, heard a rustle outside the hut.

He sat up, all his senses alert. That he was to be the object of feminine overture was too evident. It was in the very atmosphere of the island. The talk over the late feast had illustrated it. Outside, the warm night air held scented intercourse with the tropical foliage. There was a strange, sensual calm about the whole place. One could feel it in the very air. Slight rustlings, whisperings, movements. A cricket would be heard, then the low chirping of a bird, the rustle of light wings. In the distance the surf, its force broken by the coral reef outside the lagoon, could be faintly heard. It mingled itself with the sounds of distant dancing.

Then, nearer, could be heard the rhythmic knocking of wood on bamboo cane, singing, chanting, then an ukulele with its tinkling vibrations. Occasionally, for a few brief moments, a breeze would spring up from the sea, suggestive of the all-destroying hurricanes possible from it. The cocoanut trees felt it, growing out there in statuesque array near the seafront. The sound of the tall tree-tops, bowing their hard pericarps, nut and milk enclosing, came through the air. The rustlings outside became more audible, close at hand, right upon the hut.

A plaited leaf curtain hanging over the entrance was drawn softly aside. Vivid in her languid beauty, Molota stepped into the hut. Her adorable eyes lit up with a soft, tender light as they rested upon the object of her instinctive affection. She made a low obeisance, then very conscious of herself, very aware of her power, the girl reclined herself upon Bruce's bed, idly moving her arms above her head in the manner so characteristic of young feminity in the South Seas.

"I tink," Molota drawled in a low, soft, appealing tone. "Molota tink Monsieur Bruce per'aps a little lonely to-night. No friend, no anytink. Molota stay and talk wiz Monsieur, eh?"

"It's very nice of you," Bruce told her in as near an imitation of her curious, pretty pigeon French as he could put together. "But I'm most awfully tired to-night, and—I was just going to turn in."

"Molota also var tired," the girl responded. "Much tire; like much lie down, too."

"I'll see you safely home," Bruce suggested gallantly, suiting the action to the word.

A sudden blaze of anger came into the girl's lovely face. It was so marked that, struck by the fierce beauty of her, Bruce gazed, slightly spellbound. He must be careful; this was no ordinary girl to be lightly put aside. He was reminded of a new Bengal tiger recently imported into the Taronga Park Zoo, off Sydney Harbour. Untameable. Never so beautiful as when it glared defiance and hatred at its beholders and its captors. The flash of murderous anger quickly passed. "Molota tink Monsieur per'aps not understand Tuamonti custom?" she suggested. "I teach you. If not to-night, well, soon again I come, Monsieur, and then I teach you great Australian how to love me, eh?"

Hardly knowing what he was saying, anxious only to be rid of her—rid of her before he lose control of himself—the boy, rather husky, his breath acting strangely, agreed.

"Yes, some other time—not to-night. I—I'm so jolly tired—we've had a full day, you know, and——"

"Monsieur Pinkerton not so jolly tired," Molota mocked him, imitating the way he had said it. "Molota tink he not sleep all night. Tamli not sleep either——." She gave him a roguish look. "Soon again I come, Monsieur Bruce, den I 'ope I not find you so jolly tired. Suppose you still 'fatigue,' den per'aps Molota know 'ow to wake

you great man up. Too much tired not good in Tuamonti."

She was gone, and Bruce heaved a sigh of relief.

Already he feared for himself. The South Seas are not Sydney. It isn't a question of mere custom; it is in the very air breathed. Bruce feared for himself—for himself and for Edith, whom, now that he was slipping from her, he felt he loved more than his life. He wondered how a man could feel like that when in dire peril of throwing away the very thing he most wished to retain. "Funny animals, men," he soliloquised. "Perhaps it's because Nature made us polygamous and civilisation monagamous. Lord! How I wish I had never come to these damned islands! You're for it, Bruce, old boy. It's written in the sands. Gee! What a—a——." He threw himself down on his bed and fell speedily into sound sleep, nor did he wake till the footfall of Pinkerton—a tired-looking Pinkerton—roused him to the fact that fried fish awaited him—fish, fruit, and milk.

During the day that followed Bruce found that their Garden of Eden contained subtle dangers like its namesake. To start with, the friends (if friends they could be called) went into the surf together, where they were shortly joined by Tamli and, to Bruce's chagrin, her cousin, Molota. The chieftain's daughter took little direct notice of Bruce. It was a deliberate move on her part to put him more at his ease with her: to enable him (as she in her wisdom knew) to unobtrusively notice her more than he would otherwise have done.

The boys had brought bathing costumes away with them from Sydney, but, following South Sea custom, the girls dispensed with half the cause of immorality. Far from drawing attention to themselves, the reverse was the case, as invariably happens. A detail so little understood by fatuous ignorance—mock modesty, narrow bigotry.

Clothing, one of the first fruits given to pure-minded human beings by the impure-minded white races, is invariably followed by a disposition for pneumonia—a disease never before known. It tends to immorality and its attendant horrors, and skin diseases never previously contracted.

The inhabitants of the South Seas wore no clothing, oh! prudes, until your besmirched, unnatural minds ordered them to do so; or, perchance, by visiting them your altogether lower code of morals found place in their previously comparatively clean lives. Teach them this and teach them that, but as you love reason, don't teach them to copy you. Rather take a copy out of their book—you could with safety take several—and, in exchange, remove but the superstitions which breed cruelty and add the hygiene which centuries of evolution have taught you.

So the four surfed together, Bruce and Brian robed, and the girls fashioned as they were made, in a manner which made the boys totally disregard them, except, and only, as objects of interest from a swimming point of view. Curiosity, suggestion, and all the rest of them were non-existent, as they

invariably are, the closer you get down to Mother Nature.

Had those pure Polynesians travelled to countries where other climates, other conditions prevailed, then let them follow the dictates of Rome. Rome probably had the best of good reasons for the slow evolution of them. But under their own conditions don't dare to presume to pollute their habits with yours, for of the two (in more cases than half) their usages are preferable and more natural than are your artificial ones.

The Pacific rollers came in with easy indifference. The protecting coral reef, extending in a huge semi-circle (like any shark-proof net) a few hundred yards out, breaking their anger, acclimatised them to the unpleasant fact that they had come up against the habitation of man. Their day as waves was done, their power spent. But the rollers gathered their fragments together, after pounding lazily up the golden brown sand, and returned to the ocean that sent them. Returned, to come again another day, in a different mood, supported by cyclonic wind, tearing up trees, bowling over huts like ninepins, then rushing inland as tidal waves, all-enveloping.

But a more present subtle danger in this supposed Eden came in the form of scratches from coral. It looked innocent enough, pretty to a degree, sparkling, rainbow-hued with the wet of the salt water and the glittering lights of the sun. But it was septic. Everything is in those lands, and every scratch meant weeks, or more likely months, of

obstinate, never-healing sores. One should wear shoes in Polynesia, in season and out of it—shoes and a hat.

Then there were the sea snakes. You simply had to risk them. Brian warned Bruce that there was always just the chance, and if one did inadvertently bite you—well, say fifteen minutes, Edith Burne, and there will be no longer cause for worry as *to* the surmounting of obstacles to your marriage.

The sea scorpions, again, might taste well, cooked for breakfast—they did—but it's not pleasant to be touched by one in the surf. But it is perhaps better to be sent west by the bite of an invariably fatal sea snake than to be caught in the tentacles of a South Sea octopus.

Bruce was swimming lazily to the left of the others, near some rocks. He should have avoided attractive-looking rocks; they give deep water diving (if foot-protected from the coral), but to dive into the deep, dark pools inhabited by the most unspeakable terror of the Southern Seas is beyond imagination, a habit best broken. Bruce climbed out of the water, grazing his shin as he did so—a detail he was to remember long afterwards—and was about to take a header.

The boy was fond of diving, prided himself upon it, and not without reason. He poised for the dive; perhaps he waited a moment or two longer than usual, feeling the eyes of the others upon him. Underneath two enormous eyes watched unmoving. Just as the boy was about to dive, the

cuttle-fish, awaiting the most succulent meal it had ever known—a white man—squirted a black, inky fluid round about the pool. The discoloration spread with astonishing rapidity. It also stank, in spite of its dilution with so much water, and Bruce gave pause, gazing spellbound to ascertain the cause of it. The cause of it was hidden, eclipsed in its own fog, specially expelled to blind its victim and make capture more certain.

Molota, watching, saw Bruce hesitate, sensed the possibilities of the spot, saw a mighty tentacle nine feet long, sucker-covered, rear itself into the air, blindly feeling round. An awful screech rent the air, and perhaps the scream saved Bruce's life. He might conceivably have dived—over the inky patch, away from it. He knew nothing of the length of tentacles possessed by these inhabitants of Eden, where only man is vile; knew nothing of the fact that man and the scenery were probably the only things there which were not vile. But Molota's scream gave him pause. He walked round the rocks instead (as the soles of his feet, though doctored by Molota, for long afterwards could testify), and was spared the most appalling of speedy deaths it is probably possible for a man to die. And many Edenites go out that way, though they live in envied Eden. The octopii drown them, or almost drown them, first, but it's scarcely comfortable being held under water by vacuum saucers, drawing your skin off you in the death hold, being pulled closer, ever closer, to that parrot beak between those frightful eyes. Eden? One wonders.

Well, Eden held a serpent, too, or so the lovely fantasy has it.

The dire peril from which Bruce had escaped brought Molota out of her reserve. The episode had been somewhat lost upon Brian; his own affairs sufficed as a rule to keep that worthy occupied. The four made an end to their swim for the day, and while Bruce made ready to return to his hut Pinkerton and Tamli went off together, wandering up the nearest mountain side.

Culinary preparations were totally unnecessary on the island, where indigenous fruits and mountain streams offered as much as picnickers needed in that hot, sultry climate. With the evening the inevitable fish meals afforded the fuller nutriment—the "piece de resistance" for the day.

It appeared evident to Bruce that he would be thrown almost entirely upon his own resources during his stay upon Tuamonti, and he felt doubly glad that he had brought away text-books upon shipbuilding and other mathematical works bearing upon his particular line of study.

He had intended walking to the extent of the confines of Tuamonti and scaling one of the peaks, but the want of companionship, coupled with the humid temperature, damped down his enthusiasm in this ambition. Accordingly, he wended his way back to the hut to spend the day at study.

But while Bruce proposed, Molota disposed. The girl put in an appearance shortly after he had commenced study, proposing to act as escort, pilot, and guide up the mountains, round the shore, or

in any other direction which took his fancy. She recommended the climb, however, to which, nothing loath, the boy agreed. His attempts at French greatly amused Molota, though it was a purer brand and certainly more grammatical than her own. Failing inspiration in other subjects, the girl would make this an excuse to chat gaily on, showing her beautiful, pearly teeth as her dainty, vivid little mouth opened in her merriment.

Bruce could not but enjoy the novelty of her company. They traversed mountain tracks together, passing through fresh, green, ferny groves, waterfalls, hidden silvery pools of water, astonishingly cold as against the temperature of the sea. In some of these Molota would discard her native "paren"—the coloured loin cloth worn on Tuamonti—and without a word of warning take a header in spots well known to her, bidding the boy follow. Bruce was in a taciturn mood, however, a sense of impending calamity weighing him down. He contemplated leaving, but it was all too evident this would prove impossible. The launch was high and dry, a fifty-man task to move it. Upon Brian he could scarcely reckon, or rather, he could reckon upon him, but in a negative sense. Then he thought of letting himself go, getting all the fun, and all the adventure possible, out of the visit. The very thought of so regarding it stirred him so greatly that the boy felt scared. But for the memory of his Edith, now so far away, he would have thrown resistance to the winds, but the memory was there, not easily to be dispelled.

The two climbers emerged from the mountain forest at last, reaching the open rocky top of Mount Tuamonti, which gave the island its name. The view was gorgeous in the extreme. Across the seas, in almost every direction, other islands, atolls, and reefs became visible. There, just across to the east, lay Fungi, the trading port of call of the Australian and American lines. Bruce wondered what the owner of the launch would think were he to see his little craft high and dry, tethered like any goat, deep in the forest far below them.

They retracted their steps, eating bananas and breadfruit and drinking from the streams of cold spring water passed on the way. Arrived back at the hut, Molota enquired:

"Monsieur like Molota come again to-night?"

"Not to-night," Bruce told her. "I must read, study——."

Again that flash of furious anger came over the girl's lovely face. "Monsieur most stupid boy," she said. " 'Ave much to learn. I tink I marry you!"

"Oh! no, you couldn't do that," began Bruce. "You see, I——."

"Couldn't, heh? Per'aps we shall see. Molota like beautiful baby comme-ca white man."

It takes the average white man about thirty minutes by the clock, after arrival at some of the isles of the Pacific, to realise that there is but one want on the part of its femininity, and that want is not a vicious one by any manner of means. It is but the perfectly natural wish to add their quota

towards keeping up the surplus population of the island. A real need, seeing the awful depredations to which the Edens are subjected. It was clear to Bruce from the outset that in favouring him with her glances Molota simply wanted a child. No more and no less. And that was all which she, and some others of her type, did want. She was a natural, healthy animal, affectionate, and without vice, according to her code. The fact that for all she knew or cared Bruce had already his quota of white wives in other parts of the world weighed with her not one iota. It was, of course, the full realisation of this which gave Bruce so much cause for trepidation. Particularly, too, as the boy was fully alive to Molota's charms and to her determination to have her wish. Still, there was the instinctive urge to fight the issue, particularly as he was in horrified agreement with it. That he must lose, his every instinct told him. Half his consciousness wanted Molota's victory: the other half would have sold his soul to avoid it.

"It's this way, Molota," he told her as best he could in pigeon French. "I'm already married!"

"Ah! oui, Monsieur. But of course. You are a man, not a lump of ice. 'Ow many wife you keep, Monsieur?"

"Oh, go to hell!" spluttered Bruce in a rage, and took himself off to his studies.

Later in the day Brian Pinkerton looked in to join Bruce at their fish tea. He announced that he was not to be expected in again, and shortly

afterwards the night took him, and Bruce was left to himself.

And now the devil began to get hold of the boy. He wanted Molota as much, perhaps more, than she wanted him. The girl wanted a baby, but Bruce wanted Molota. His restlessness grew; reading and study became impossible, and then, just as he was tempted to go out and try to find her, Molota came in, radiant in her beauty, vivid, languid, maddening.

At sight of her all Bruce's desires left him in the curious way common with mortals. Seeing her was enough. He got hold of himself, became strong again, and in this mood actually ordered her to leave him. But Molota displayed no sign of anger at this affront. She was pleased. Intuition told her all she needed to know. The boy was afraid of her, afraid of her charms. Ordering her out was the best sign she could possibly get, but as yet she did not know the son of Sir Bruce Arbuthnot. The boy may, or quite conceivably may not, have inherited a devil in him, but he had also inherited a fiercely strong will. He was a complete man, but no simpleton. He could fight—fight on any issue. It is doubtful whether heredity played any part at all in the period of his life spent on Tuamonti. He might have acted as he did whoever his parents had happened to be. And now he ordered Molota to leave lest he beat her like any child and throw her out. For one instantaneous flash the latter order angered the girl, but she disregarded it, knowing words to be futile things;

things expelled like ink from a tropical squid to hide something deeper. Futile words, camouflaging the reverse of triviality of thoughts beneath.

"Molota var tired," she confessed, and threw herself down on the grass mats covering the mud floor.

"So am I." Bruce fought hard with himself. "I'm damn tired, too, Molota. It's this devilish heat. I'll turn in. Good-night. Will you go now?"

"Ma poor Monsieur Bruce," the girl replied, then got up, moved over to him, and sat down at his feet.

CHAPTER XVI.

WITCHERY.

"MOLOTA love you, Monsieur Bruce."

Bruce set his jaw, stared straight in front of him; his restlessness left him. The man grew singularly calm, soothed by the girl's contact. It was as though he had been living out of his element, unnaturally; but now the unnatural condition had gone, leaving him just himself again.

Bruce recognised it; knew all too well why Molota was here—why she had come. How hard it would be to gainsay her and turn her out. If she would but suffer him to kiss her, make an end, and go. Without thinking what he was doing, the man put out his left arm, rested his hand upon her dark hair. The other hand lay idly upon his lap. Molota bent her head from the weight of his great hand.

Resting upon it, her lips brushed his hand; she kissed it caressingly, then left her soft cheek pillowed against it. Molota raised her head, her adorable eyes met and held his, and something the man saw in them began to work his final undoing.

And now Molota put forth all her powers.

But the son of Sir Bruce Arbuthnot inherited his father's will and his mother's temperament.

With a great effort of will he roughly pushed the girl from him.

"You must go now, Molota," he ordered. "Go at once, please!"

The girl lay prone a few yards from him. Her dark hair came loose, lying across her shapely shoulder. She ran her fingers languidly through it, comb fashion, and on the instant Bruce became unaccountably conscious of increased self-control. Molota, by overdoing things, failing to keep a sufficiency of good cards up her sleeve in reserve, had lessened her mystery and consequently her power.

Now completely master of himself, Bruce said:

"Do you hear what I say? Go at once! I've a white girl across the sea, and—and you must go!"

The chieftain's daughter looked softly at him. "But, of course, Monsieur," she responded. "Molota tink you 'ave many wife. This not white man country. This is Tuamonti. Later you go away. Molota know very well."

Then the girl began languidly to play with her hands, stroking her body as though massaging it. She looked towards Bruce's couch, then, glancing coyly at him, dropped her eyes to herself, indicating her own beauty in silent pantomime.

"Molota very tired, Bruce." The girl got up, moved with easy grace to his bed, and softly lay down upon it.

A vision of Edith came to him. Mental love versus mere physical passion. He went outside the hut, cut down a pliant cane with his penknife, and came back into the hut.

"Get up and dress, then clear out!" he ordered. Bruce brought the stick sharply down on to his boot. Gazing deep into his eyes, Molota knew that he meant it. For the present she had lost. She could hardly credit it. A surging wave of fierce, furious, anger assailed the girl. She rose, and muttering something unintelligible went out into the night.

Outside curious quiet reigned. Then the sound of drum-beating came through the night air, rapid, then an unnatural silence, then the beating again, quicker, angrier, more menacing.

The boy threw himself down upon his bed, but no sleep came to him. In all his life he had never before felt so profoundly exhausted. The mental fight which he had been waging had taken it out of him—exhausted him more than the wildest indulgence. But later, when he thought over his victory —the victory of mind over matter—reaction would set in, then he would feel as mentally strong as he now felt physically weak. He tried to sleep, but lay tossing till daylight came in—daylight, but no Pinkerton. A note was brought to him later. He tore it open; it was from Brian written under difficulties. It read:

"What in Heaven's name have you done? I'm a prisoner, a hostage for your good conduct. Blast you and your tom-fool prudery! They threaten to torture me in a day or two. They are coming; can't write more. For God's sake look to it that you get me out of this—and soon!"

So! His friend was to be tortured, perhaps

killed, if he did not take the native girl; and all the time one half of him wanted nothing better. The idea infuriated him. The natives shouldn't have it all their own way. He would threaten them—they were under French rule—this was an age of civilisation. If they did not give Brian up at once they would suffer for it. He went outside to interview the chief, but six stalwarts barred his passage. This was too much for Bruce. He made one wild rush at the whole six of them. There they stood, powerful enough, but enjoying a huge joke—forcing a reluctant bridegroom to his bride. Bruce noticed their vivid teeth. He caught the first of them unexpectedly. The man went down nursing his jaw. Another fared worse. Bruce caught him right on the point, putting him out for several counts. The remaining four took the matter as a joke. Even the discomforture of their comrades failed to disturb their good temper. But they had evidently had their orders, and must give effect to them. The tallest Tuamontian sprang at Bruce, clasped his neck with both hands, and had his two thumbs on the boy's windpipe. The Australian passed his right arm between those of the native stretched out there choking him, raised his left, clasped his hands firmly together, then curled the fingers of one hand inside those of the other. This put his left arm over the Tuamontian's right from the outside. Then bearing down heavily with his left arm, Bruce pressed up sharply with his right. The leverage broke the stranglehold. The native then lunged wildly with his right arm, and Bruce

saw at once that the native did not know the very first thing about boxing or wrestling. It was a comparatively easy thing to knock aside the blow, grasp the man's wrist firmly. Bruce then swung his right hand to his adversary's left shoulder, stepped forward with his right foot, and placed it behind the man's right leg. By thus gripping the native's right arm and pressing across his body with Bruce's other arm (the right), the white man bore him backwards across his right leg, got him off his balance. The Australian then threw his adversary heavily—threw him with all his force. The man fell on his head with sufficient force to split the skull of the average white man, but to Swinton's surprise the fellow sprang to his feet, shook himself like any terrier coming out of the water, and with a laughing word to the others the whole six of them made off into the dense bush. The sound of their ribald laughter came back to the boy as they scurried off. Evidently an enormous joke. But Bruce failed to see it.

Swinton strode rapidly across the intervening space separating his hut from that of the chief, but before he reached it another surprise met him. Through the foliage of some nearby bush, who should he espy but Brian Pinkerton, busy at his island love-making! He gave a shout, and Brian left Tamli and came running towards him.

"They're making a fool of you, old bean," he began.

"Making a fool of me? I like that! What about

your note—your tragic S.O.S.? And now I find you out-of-doors a free man and spooning with your blasted dusky maiden!"

"I won't vouch for her maidenhood," rejoined Pinkerton with asperity of tone, "but I wish to Heaven you'd learn horse-sense and conform to custom here."

"Conform to hell!" answered Bruce. "What on earth possessed you to write me that note?"

"All bluff, old boy. Bluff on their part, I mean. The blighters captured me for the space of about ten minutes, furnished me with pencil and paper, threatened me with battle, murder, and sudden death, and let me go."

"But—but I don't understand."

"A put-up job to get me to write you. I imagined they would put restraint on your movements, prevent me seeing you, and leave you guessing, to extract obedience and all that sort of tripe."

"They did," Bruce told him, "but I got away."

Pinkerton gave out a hollow laugh. "Better come off your bloody perch, old bean," he advised. If you take my advice I'd sink your old womanish ideas and take less water with it; then, perhaps, you'd see sense. God, damn it, man!" Brian suddenly shot out, losing his temper, "She's pretty enough, isn't she?"

"Oh, go to hell!" Bruce said, and returned to his quarters.

All that day Swinton was left religiously alone but for the attention of his servant. He spent the day studying, in which he became so immersed that

at nightfall he failed to hear the approaching footsteps of Molota.

She came softly up behind him, put her soft hand on his shoulder.

"Molota 'ope you quite well to-night, Monsieur Bruce. You great strong bully, breaking my pauve Tuamontian 'eads," the girl remarked, then went into peals of laughter.

Her victim jumped up, furious with anger. "You little devil, you!" he began, then seized hold of her. What his intention was he had no idea, but a vague urge to beat her came to him. Ere he could lay his hands upon anything with which to chastise the vixen she gave him a reproving box on his ear. It was an extremely light blow, if blow at all; still, there it was, and the affront further angered the man.

"I'll teach you," he began, and took her more roughly to do it.

Crushed in his arms, Molota looked up at him. "Oui, beat me, please, Monsieur Bruce," she urged. "From you, Molota like much, such rough 'ouse!" Her soft, little mouth was raised to his, unresisting. Something snapped in Bruce. He gazed at her loveliness, wondering how to deal with her. Her lovely mouth seemed to tell him, and the morning sun peeping through a cranny in the hut found him asleep in her arms—his auburn, curly head was pillowed against her soft breast; her cheek was against it.

CHAPTER XVII.

HURRICANE.

Mangani had a larger and more pretentious hut built for his daughter and Bruce, into which they moved two days after their unceremonious marriage. Time sped, day following day with monotonous but blissful regularity. In the early mornings the lovers would go surfing together, then after breakfast in their hut they would ramble in shady walks, idling the time away in happy servitude to each other. The thought of Edith became a distant dream, unreal. Yet behind it all Bruce felt that he was passing through a chimera which must pass in time, leaving him all the happier for the memory of it. Yet coupled with this was a haunting fear—consternation of the resulting issue.

Molota's mind revealed undreamt-of depths, a never-ending source of wonder and revelation to her friend. He found the native girl remarkably intelligent, and, contrary to his anticipation, far purer-minded than modern girls of his own race. Even her moral views he found would bear easy comparison, perhaps go one better than those of many of the white races. The whole dissimilarity lay in a different school of thought, and in Molota's

case a line of reasoning which fitted with her surroundings. Bruce taught her some English, in which she proved an apt pupil, while she, in turn, taught him to spear sharks; showed her lover which fruits, roots, and leaves were edible, and also which of the many fish they caught had to be avoided like the plague.

The girl delighted in him, and made no secret of the fact, and putting aside all thoughts of the future—the foot of time—trod with winged feet upon a flowered pathway for both Bruce and the future mother of his child.

Molota evinced great interest and wonder in some of her lover's pocket possessions. A self-generating electric flash lamp was regarded as being little short of a god, while a rather expensive pocket barometer given Bruce by his mother Molota felt must surely be alive.

One morning, shortly before the University vacation terminated and the marooned undergrads were due to return to Sydney, Bruce glanced at his small barometer with which Molota toyed. The reading amazed him. The atmospheric pressure was but 28.80.

"Why, what is eet, darlinggee?" Molota enquired. "You look just as eef you 'ad seen one ghost devil!"

Bruce told her that they were in for some rough weather.

"How can you know eet?" asked Molota. "You must be devil man, my 'usband."

"This little thing has told me so." Bruce indicated his pocket barometer.

"Ah! la, la, oh! la, la! Did I not say eet? Eet is alive, it lives. It is a devil. Throw eet away, Bruce. It frighten me!"

Even as Molota spoke, an unusually loud surf could be heard pounding over the atoll into the lagoon. There was no wind to account for it, and both listened.

"The sea, it am angry, for why? Eet is not windy!"

"We shall get the wind soon enough," Bruce prophesied. Listen!"

Even as he spoke a prodigous wall of water, miles in length, struck the outer reef, and then from the north-east a gentle breeze sprang up, then grew. Bruce glanced at his pocket barometer. It read 28.65, and falling.

"By gee! I believe we are in for it, Molota," he warned her. "You'd better go quickly and warn your people. Tell them I know by my magic." The boy laughed, but it was a hollow laugh, no depth in it, for the little clock face fell back as though it had been shaken—28.27. "Tell the natives to get back from the sea and shelter themselves. Say it's going to blow hell soon!"

"Oui, Monsieur, I got vite, den I come back to be with you, my own darlinggee." The girl disappeared, and soon the wailing of the women could be heard. They evidently believed Bruce's warning; had experienced it before, and now recognised the symptoms, even without the white man's prognostication.

By the time Molota had returned, the little pocket

barometer read 28.4, and Bruce knew that the island was in for a most furious hurricane—a hurricane which would sweep away homes, fell trees, and probably drown scores of them.

Mountainous seas were now roaring in, and the wind's rising velocity drowned all other sounds. Their door crashed to, then came down with a smash at their feet.

"Come," said Bruce. "We will find a cave; it's about the only thing to shelter us from the wind." He put his arm about the girl, and together they staggered further back into the bush away from the sea. They were ascending the foothills of Tuamonti; the mountain sheltered them from the north-east gale. In the distance they looked down to the beach. Some of the natives were taking to the cocoanut trees, lashing themselves to them with bits of rope.

"Why the devil don't they come back—away from the sea under the rocks?" Bruce asked Molota as best he could speak or even breathe for the lung-splitting gale.

"Too much frightened of rocks fall," the girl told him. "We 'ave 'ad such beefore. Natives buried alive in rock fall. Ugh!" Molota shivered at the very recollection of the horror. "Me, I frightened, too, of such rock, but with you, my 'usband, me, I not fear anytink at alls now."

They reached the cave which Bruce had in mind. It faced south-west. The wind was behind them, entirely cut off by the mountain. From this point of vantage they could see everything—see more

than they cared to witness. And then the sun went out like a snuffed candle, and still the wind increased, until it became a thing unlike air at all. A tree down below was uprooted, coconuts were falling like hail. The power of the wind was amazing. It broke down the doors of huts, went inside them, then, failing to find an exit and the opposite wall offering a stout resistance, the wind lifted the whole hut bodily and sailed away with it; carried it to sea, where it fell in the lagoon with a crash which would have been sickening had they been able to hear it.

More natives were seen taking to the trees, walking up them.

Suddenly Molota let out a shriek. "Bruce, look! It is Tamli—Tamli, my cousin, and Monsieur Brian Pinkerton, your good friend."

Frozen with horror, Bruce saw Tamli tie her feet together. Then she doubled her body grasped the tree, pressed the soles of her feet to it, and began to walk up the trunk. She had urged Brian to follow her, and now they saw a great hulk of a fellow sling Brian across his body, and, supporting the boy, carry him willy-nilly after his adopted wife. The tree was fully fifty-five feet from the ground. The three reached the top and sat, held to it by the force of the wind. The coconuts had all fallen long before. The trunk swayed sickeningly. Then the wind, rising even more, forced the tree over at an incline of half a right angle and more, and *kept it there*. The trunk could not get back, but vibrated with frightful shuddering. As Bruce and Molota watched it and scores of others like it, to their horror the tree came clean out of the ground near the shore. An awful wave came up from the lagoon, woolly white with foam. High up the beach and beyond it to the trees it carried, caught up the fallen tree and its late occupants and carried them back. They saw a brown arm wave, then a lighter head appear, then the sea took them, and Bruce knew he was the only white man left alive on Tuamonti.

Another treetop snapped off short with its human load. The wind took it, carried it through the air far out into the water; carried it like an inside-out umbrella, and all aboard with it. The sea devoured them and came up for more.

Huts were going down like ninepins, going down, and then going up again upside down. The wind still increased. Never in his wildest imaginings could Bruce have realised air in motion to be like this unspeakably appalling, living scythe. People were lifted up and borne high in the air, then dropped into the sea. The splashes from the sea smashed faces like an open palm. Breathing became impossible. Hundreds died down there, drowned, mangled, choked. From high above them a prodigious rock, lately exposed to the wind, fell off the mountain side. The noise it made actually got through the unspeakable screeching howl of the hurricane. Molota shivered and clung to Bruce, moaning.

The wind was like water—solid. Bruce caught a brief sample of it—an eddy; it seemed to strangle

him. He couldn't breathe it; it felt as though it would blow him out and burst him. It was now almost dark. Little could be seen below, but too much could be imagined. Then, with amazing suddenness, the sun came to life again. The wind began to drop. It fell to gale force, to half gale force, to a still breeze, then stopped—stopped dead like a thing worked out, and only the terrible noise of the mountainous seas filled the air.

The lagoon was studded with debris—and with corpses, with a heterogeneous collection of any household utensils which could float. Beneath the waves, invisible, the sharks made merry—the sharks and an occasional octopus. Then the sea, disdainful of so much plunder, gave back part of its dead, and among them were a few living. But of Pinkerton and his treeload no more was ever seen. As the sea began with rapidity to calm, the sharks grew bolder. They came to the surface, tearing and devouring the corpses of those whose homes had been in the "Garden of Eden." What a price some of them had paid for life in a beauty spot!

Every house exposed had gone. The fresh water streams ran salt from spray carried miles inland. Broken coconuts were everywhere, and in a dream some of those alive set about eating them. Bruce and Molota came out of their cave. Dazed, they repaired back down the mountain. The sight which met their eyes haunted Bruce to his dying day. Their hut simply wasn't, nor the remotest trace that it had ever existed at all, while the launch was smashed beyond any possibility of repair.

"I can't get back in time now in any case," Bruce mused. "The hurricane has burnt some of my boats and I've burnt the rest. God, what a business! What a damned mess-up—of everything!

"What now, Bruce? Oh! my 'usband, what ees it we do now?"

"You and me," Bruce told her. "I can't leave you now; just you and me, that is what now."

He took her in his arms. All round, the Tuamontians, phlegmatic, stunned, trance-like, were already at work cutting down the wherewithal to make fresh huts.

Mangani, the chieftain, was alive and unhurt. He had done sterling work, but had been caught unawares. Bruce's barometer had come into its own but fifteen minutes before the trouble was there to be recognised, before the horror could be anticipated by those experienced in Eden's type of "merrymaking."

Another hut was erected for the chief's daughter. It was made larger than before, not without the best of reasons, and peace came down again on the afflicted and upon the bereaved. Tuamonti looked even lovelier than before to those who visited and knew not the very first thing about it.

Their surplus population did not go up, even though their marriage customs differed from those of the white man. Perhaps it was primarily owing to the untoward depredations of life that these habits originated.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BRUCE OVERSTAYS HIS LEAVE.

So resigned was Bruce to being sent down from the University, disgraced, that he gave himself up to the present, and during the long period that followed both he and Molota lived and trod on flowers.

The sole method of communication with the neighbouring island of Fungi, where the cross Pacific vessels called, was by canoe from Tuamonti. Bruce knew well enough that, apart from the dangers attendant upon such a hazardous crossing, his entertainers would put every conceivable difficulty in the way of his carrying out such a project. He could neither write nor cable home, and believed at the best his mother and his sweetheart would read of the severity of the hurricane and consider him dead. At the worst they would fear that, not for the first time, one of the fair daughters of the South Seas had caught a white man in the toils of her net, and his social disgrace would follow. Had Bruce been older other explanations would have occurred to him, but Bruce's conscience lay heavy upon him. He made no excuse for himself. The idea that he had become more the fate of circumstance than ensnared through his own fault never entered his head. Most men would have found

reason enough to explain away and lift the mental load lying heavy upon them. Bruce was not built that way. He had sinned—at least, he thought he had—was living in sin: at least, he thought he was: and that was that. All right, Molota was the most priceless little love of a girl for which any man could wish. He would take all life had to offer him and leave the rest to Providence.

But one detail from his past life he found impossible to neglect—his passion for engineering as applied to ship construction. He designed for fun a stout craft from undressed timber on the island, but it got no further than the design stage, for not one man would put foot to ground to do anything towards getting him off the island. At the same time, the chief, Mangani, was careful to make it appear that Bruce was as free as the air, and if he could leave—well, by all means let him do so. It wasn't their fault that the hired launch had come to an ignoble end. They had done their part to safeguard it. The hauling of the boat into the jungle was explained as having been effected in the interest of the two Australians, and Bruce quickly came to realise that he had a losing case in any retaliatory action against the island. Particularly, too, since he was Australian and not French. In any court of French law he was likely to find prejudice in opposition to him. The French were ever most jealous of their rights and possessions, and the fact that he and Pinkerton had, to an extent, unearthed this jewel of the Republic, would be misconstrued till it might appear that the

two men had lorded it like Kings of Canoodledum there, and overstayed their welcome as well as their leave. To this could be added that Bruce had taken the chieftain's daughter to wife, and was to leave his heir to follow in Mangani's stead when that worthy had been gathered to his fathers in the ordinary course of things. Bruce felt his plight to be hopeless. He could but wait until, with the expected arrival of the French Consul, he could make his case clear enough to get away. What would happen then Bruce hardly dare think.

But time went on, and no representative of France arrived. And that was a strange thing, but not so strange after all, since the governmental launch foundered with all hands in the storm which swept Tuamonti while engaged in visiting other islands in the group. The disorganisation consequent upon the tragedy left, indeed, a twelve months' gap between visits. The owner of the launch hired by Bruce and his late friend was a junior official who travelled round with Monsieur Le Temps, and suffered a like fate with him in the disaster.

Bruce thus lived in a happy dream; the type common to mankind in which the sleeper dimly knows himself to be asleep—luxuriates in the drugged bliss of some inordinately thrilling dream, and prays against waking. At any rate, against waking too soon. And in such dreams the real life —the waking life—is in no way altered. Bruce loved Edith all the time, yet revelled in the entrancing joy of Molota.

In a sense, Bruce's passionate attachment for the Polynesian girl strengthened his purer, deeper love for Edith. The two could not run together, but the one could follow upon it. Of course, Edith would never think so, peradventure they ever met again.

Further, if Bruce could ever get to Edith again, if he could ever get her to overlook such a happening, then, indeed (having passed and been seared in the fire), would he be safer to her. For all time, and, maybe, for all eternity.

For the present, so far as he was able (and he succeeded with tolerable success), he put Edith right behind him, lived in the present and, it has to be confessed, was utterly happy.

CHAPTER XIX.

AUNT FLORENCE SUSTAINS CONSULTATION.

"AUNTIE, whatever shall I do? Bruce hasn't returned!"

Florence Tooth shot upright in her chair.

Not by the flicker of an eyebrow could Edith detect what her Aunt was feeling, what she was suffering, in anticipation of the outcome of the intelligence.

"Of course he hasn't come back! Two months—two months in the South Sea Islands! Why, child, it isn't long enough in which to eat a mango! Stuff and nonsense! Don't tell me! Eight weeks, and some of them lopped off by the voyage there and back! There, child, don't go and fret yourself. He'll come back all in good time. They all do. Don't I know, 'em!"

"Yes; but, Auntie, it's—it's most awfully serious. The 'Varsity, yon know, and—and—why, he might be 'sent down'!"

"Sent down fiddlesticks, Edith! Young men of the promise of Master Bruce (whatever his other name is) don't get thrown out of Universities because they turn up a bit late to prayers. Stuff and nons——"

"But, Auntie, I'm so frightfully worried—that

awful cyclone, you know. He might be hurt—sick. Auntie, Bruce may be dead!"

"There, lovely, don't fret yourself. I'm as certain your boy is alive as I'm certain I am."

"Oh, it does do me good just to hear you say that, you darling old thing! Do you really think—think it will all end up——"

"It will all end up for the best, my dear—of that I'm certain, and," the old lady added to herself, "and it had to come. Florence, my dear, you always said so. What did you say? Let the boy have his fling, but for the Lord's sake, let it be a real fling while he is about it! No half larks—a real out and outer! Let him throw off all those oat crops before he takes my darling, or he'll throw 'em off afterwards. Don't you know 'em, Florence, my dear? Stuff and nonsense! Didn't you expect it? Didn't you see it coming? Of course you did! And now, my dear, you've got to get 'em out of it; God pity you! Well, it will be practice for the bigger issue, when old chapel Bill gets busy with his niggardly, heavenly opinions. Well, if he's bound there, it's no odds. You won't meet him, my dear." So ran the thoughts of Florence, the while her personality dominated Edith. The girl sensed that her Aunt was hopeful of the nett result of this most awful and unaccountable absence, and that fact in itself cheered her no end.

"Have you told your father? Have you told William the——"

"Now, Auntie, I won't have you run Daddy down. You know that."

"Run her Daddy down, indeed!" Florence mimicked. "As if I would think of such a wickedness! Why, he's the——"

"Yes. Well never mind about Daddy, Auntie Floss. You asked me whether I had told him. No. You see, I can't tell Dad exactly everything, can I? And——"

"No, you certainly cannot, my dear, and if you will allow me to say so——"

"I know what you're doing, Aunt. You are just talking about Dad to get me off thinking about Bruce. I know you."

Which, as it happened, was precisely what Miss Tooth was doing. Trying to divert Edith's mind from this terrible worry about the boy till Florence knew the first word what to do, what to say, for Florence regarded the matter most gravely, and was alarmed beyond measure. It would have worried her not an iota had Bruce gone down in hundreds of fathoms in all the cyclones which ever blew, but this was another matter.

"What does Mrs. Swinton say about it all, darling?"

"She's most frightfully worried, Auntie, and in a dreadful way, but takes it so terribly calmly. I think she feels it the more for bottling up her feelings in the way she does."

"Tut, tut, child! What does Mrs. Swinton say about it? Heaven love you, child! Of course the poor lady is upset; so'm I. At least," she corrected herself quickly, "I would be if I did not know the

boy was all right. But what does Mrs. Swinton say?"

"Auntie, she's frightened of something—something awful. She begins to wonder whether Bruce could possibly be like his father. Isn't it all frightful? Oh, I'm so unhappy!" The girl broke down, and wise old Florence Tooth did nothing to hinder the consolation of tears. "Didn't she know. Let the darling cry and then she'd feel all the better for it. It's a pity you can't cry yourself, Florence," she told herself, "but you can't do it, so it's no use trying."

Presently, more composed again, Edith asked: "What can we do, Aunt Floss? It's so awful being impotent. Bruce may be ill or hurt, or something equally dreadful."

"Are you sure you know where Mr. Swinton and young Pinkerton were bound for, my dear?"

"Oh, yes," Edith told her. "Bruce told me all their plans. They were going as far as the trading port of Fungi in the *Wontangee*. Then they intended hiring a launch from an official in the French Consular service who was well known to Mr. Pinkerton——"

"Had that young—young Brian Pinkerton visited there before, my dear?"

"Oh, yes. He knew the part particularly well."

"Umph!" snapped Florence Tooth. Then, "Go on, child."

"Then they were going to cross to another island not many miles away called Tuamonti, and——"

"Wait a moment, dear. Do I understand that

there is no connection, no telegraph or regular cross service between Tuamongoli, or whatever its heathen name is, and Tamli?"

"Bruce told me that Tuamonti was entirely unspoiled—that is how he put it, Auntie—that no white men lived there, and that the place was only visited a few times a year by the representative of the French Government. That was the attraction, you see—the unspoilt charm of the place."

"Umph!" said Miss Tooth. "Unimproved, I should call it. However——"

"And since then, you see, we have read of the awful havoc at Fungi, the loss of the French officials, and it is known that some of the neighbouring islands suffered terribly."

"Yes, child; I must admit you have cause for anxiety."

"What would you do—what can we do, Auntie? You are so clever. Think of something. You are the only person I feel that I can really rely upon."

"Stuff and nonsense, child! Don't tell me! What does Mrs. Swinton intend doing?"

"I think she is waiting a little longer, and then if nothing transpires she will—there, I don't think I know what she intends doing. Of course, she has written the authorities giving the full facts."

"Very sound, too, my dear. That woman has sense. Doesn't lose her head; character. I like Clare Swinton. Stick to her, Edith. You won't go *far* wrong with Mrs. Swinton."

"And what would you do, Auntie?"

"I'm already doing it, pet."

"Doing it! Doing what?"

"Doing what! Hear the child! What should I be doing? Do you suppose for a moment, you sweet love, that Florence would allow your boy to be eaten alive by any of those uncivilised savages?" Miss Tooth burst out in a rage. "Do you think I will sit down to it, or to anything? I'm making my plans, dear, depend upon it. While you were talking I was thinking. My mind is already made up. I give Bruce Swinton one more month—no, I shall make it two so as to allow time for news to reach me from the authorities——"

"But, Auntie, you haven't even written them yet."

"Oh! Haven't I, my dear? That's all you know about it. I shall wait until I receive a reply, then Florence Tooth, you will treat yourself to the pleasure of a sea voyage."

"A sea voyage! What can you mean, Aunt Floss? Why, you are much too——"

"Oh, dear me, no! I'm not too old, my dear. Either I hear Bruce is beyond our help or I go and fetch him."

"*Auntie!*" Then, "May I come with you?" Edith asked.

Miss Tooth became somewhat grave at that. "No, Edith," she decided. "I had thought of that possibility, but I prefer to go alone."

"But why? Surely it's my place to go with you? I could get leave from Sydney. I'm one of the rottenest students in any case."

"My dear," finalised Florence Tooth, "my mind

is made up. I won't have you cheapen yourself. Besides, have you thought out what your father would say to your gallivanting off to the South Seas? Why, he'd turn down the idea every time, darling —particularly if you proposed going with me."

Edith's expression conveyed all too clearly her agreement with the truth of her aunt's view. "Of course father would turn it down, Auntie, as you say," she said. "I never entertained any such idea until you suggested going, but——"

"I shall go, child, and I'll bring your Bruce back to you if I have to drag him by the scruff of his neck. Now, all you have to do is to do all you possibly can not to worry your dear self. Let me know if anything transpires and I will do the same for you."

But it was many months before Florence was able to carry out her project. Visiting some poor people in Manly, bent upon administering advice, reprimands and largess with her invariable and bountiful generosity, she contracted illness which laid her low for many a month. She was only actually ill for a few weeks, but her fiery temperamentalism chafing at being ordered about by others, she proved one of the worst patients imaginable. Her convalescence was a drawn-out affair, but the day came when, thoroughly fit again, and with no satisfactory reply to her letter to the French authorities in the Society Group, and no tidings whatsoever of Bruce, she made ready to "fetch him home."

Her preliminary shopping in Sydney was of an

unusual order, or, to be more exact, she included in it purchases which would have opened the eyes of her friends with amazement had they witnessed her outfit. The old lady evidently thought that Bruce might be badly off for clothes, for her shopping included visits to men's as well as lady's departments. She also visited a large toy department, where her purchases (which ran into many pounds) included flags of several nations and mixed imaginary heraldry, wigs, beard, face masks, balls, bats, fishing gear, butterfly nets, etc. Altogether, a curious assortment for an elderly spinster to take upon a few months' cruise by herself in the South Seas. But, judging by the business-like manner in which she set about it, Florence evidently knew her own mind, had carefully planned out in advance what she was likely to need, and obtained it in the shortest possible time.

And then, and not until then, it being another University vacation period and Edith at home with her family at Orange, Florence, with the briefest of notes to Edith, disappeared—unheralded and unsung. Her vessel steamed through the Heads of Sydney and headed up north-east with never the flutter of a handkerchief to bid her god-speed. But she had that in the heart of her beloved niece, Edith Burne, away there at Orange. Her niece followed every report of the boat which appeared in the shipping intelligence, and pleased her father not a little by her rather exceptional interest in attendance at his chapel.

"The lassie's heart's in the right place, Ma,"

opined Mr. Burne to his second and smaller half. "I sometimes tremble for the effect of that there 'Varsity upon our little girl. But it'll take mor'n Sydney and its wicked ways to push the truth out of our gal, Mother. Praise His Holy Word! Hallelujah!" "Amen to that, William, dear," finished his spouse, that being the formulæ expected of her.

And so Florence sped upon her way with never a thought of seasickness, unless possibly one kept very much to herself. She gave every man and woman her ear, but few her voice, and passed with inconspicuous tolerance. "Rather a dear, I should think, if you know her, but she'd take a devil of a lot of knowing," about summed up the general consensus of considered opinion on board where Florence was concerned.

The vessel made Fungi in good time, where the old lady disembarked. Here Florence gave a greater number of people her ear and fewer her tongue, got out her toys, hired a fair-sized launch, and leaving definite instructions behind her that if not returned within two weeks the launch was to be sent for, she departed from Fungi for Tuamonti.

Away upon the island, if Bruce did not feel his ears burning, then the supposition is without veracity.

As to Florence, she had never been so tickled in all her life. Somewhat eased in mind by the tidings which Fungi's native bazaars had indirectly whispered to her, she had no anticipation of finding the runaway anything but alive. Probably very much so. The future could take care of itself. She was

here to get Bruce by the scruff of his neck and take him home. A fiery fixed determination carried her on.

And so while Edith Burne in New South Wales attended her father's chapel at Orange, while Clare Swinton wonderingly (knowing much and suspecting more) looked on, Florence Tooth stepped ashore upon the firm sand of Tuamonti to interview the renegade.

CHAPTER XX.

THE MACKENZIES AT GOOMBAH.

SIR BRUCE ARBUTHNOT thumped Mackenzie on his broad back.

"You damned Scotchmen are all alike, Mac," he said. "I'll say this for you: if it's good, sound, sterling sense I'm requiring—well, I know where to look for it. I wouldn't have been without you all these years, man, for all you could have given me, and you can take that home to your missus with my salaams."

"I'll do that, Sir," replied Mac; but aye, mon, there's one thing I would have liked to have preserved for you, but you would have none of it. But 'am thinking, Sir—yes, 'am thinking there's no harm in a thought, Sir Bruce."

"And what the hell might you have been thinking, old man?" enquired the owner, but suspecting all the time.

"'Am thinking—the Scotchman considered—"'am thinking," he burst out suddenly as an inspiration struck him, "that your main fault, Sir, is that you weren't born North of Tweed. It might have settled you down to some horse sense, 'am thinking."

The baronet looked suitably impressed—tolerantly lenient at his junior's candour.

"You haven't told me what it was you would have liked to have given me, Mac," he suggested, with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Presairved for you, Sir."

"Preserved for me, then?"

Mackenzie regarded him. Loved him, loathed him, reverenced him. Embarrassed, he sought evasion. He had as good as said it already. The Northerner could read it there in his chief's eyes—the chief who loved him as one loves a son.

"Come, out with it man! What the devil do you wish you could have preserved for me?"

Sir Bruce wanted him to say it, but Mackenzie couldn't bring himself to it.

"A straight waistcoat, Sir," he replied, and took himself off.

Sir Bruce watched him go, strutting stockily down the garden path.

"We English have our uses," he soliloquised to himself sadly. At least, I suppose some of us have. But I couldn't run this place without a Scotchman. I shall miss him—still, there are trains out of Euston. He'll retire one day—I'll force him to. I wonder——" He heaved a profound sigh, turned and strode with firm, confident tread to his bungalow—his bungalow and hers that had been. What a fool he was! He wondered what part of England she lived in, whether she had gone back to her people. He reached his house. Abdul, rather grey

about the beard, greeted him with profound salaam.

"Dinner ready soon, Sahib. Sahib hot bath ready. Master dinner e'suit laid out on Sahib bed. Sahib fever got? Sub achcha hai, Sahib?" (Is all well, Sir?). "Khana tyar hai." (Dinner is ready.) "Sahib achcha hai?"

"Beshak, boy," Bruce reassured the boy. "Kuch nahin ha." (It is nothing.)

Abdul's face cleared. "Achcha, Sahib," he said.

Sir Bruce kicked off his long riding boots.

"I'm damn lonely, boy," he volunteered.

"Ah! Sahib, Abdul know. Not good for Sahib send away Ranee, Nah——"

"That'll do, boy. Get that bath ready, juldi, now!"

"Ah! Sahib, Abdul get."

Now, of all those living on the Arbuthnot Tea Estates, the one who went least in awe of the owner was the wife of the manager of Publoo. Jean Mackenzie would have none of him. Yet, despite this fact, no two people entertained a more profound respect for the qualities of the other than did Mrs. Ian Mackenzie and Sir Bruce.

Mac's wife was a typical, florid, strong, capable Scotch woman. Highly intelligent, well educated, she was forever adding to her store of learning. The Mackenzies had not been blessed with children. As so often happens—so curious are the ways of Providence—those best fitted to add sterling stock to the country were the ones singled out to be childless. Jean Mackenzie was highly religious, proper without being narrow, and worth her weight in gold, with a touch of platinum thrown in. She refused point blank to meet her husband's employer (since Clare had divorced him), of whom she highly disapproved. Should they inadvertently run into each other owing to the comparatively near proximity of Goombah with Publoo, then a frigid politeness on her part and a grave courtesy upon his marked their outward attitude to each other. It would be scarcely true to say that Mrs. Ian Mackenzie "wore the breeks," but the couple ran well in harness together, each controlling their own department with exactness and precision. Mackenzie's regard for Jean was the man's main religion. Her influence over him would have been absolute had he required any influence, but since quite definitely he did not, the love of Jean and Ian was absolute.

For two years following Clare's divorce of Sir Bruce, the baronet had concentrated on his self-imposed work. Mrs. Mackenzie would have counselled her husband to resign from his management of Publoo, but she knew that the more the owner's affairs turned again him, and the worse Mackenzie thought of him; so much the faster would he hold to the man. Perhaps Mackenzie felt that Sir Bruce required looking after, needed the influence of Mac to keep the man from sinking further. Be that as it may, nothing would shift the little Scotchman—and that was good for Publoo as it was good (as Mac rightly conjectured) for Sir Bruce Arbuthnot.

And now five years had gone by, and Ian told his wife that the governor was through with all his fast living—through with it for good and for all. With every year that Mac—in his rather heavy way—made the announcement, his wife relented more and more to the lonely baronet.

"The Lord's got into the poor mon's hairt, Mac," Mrs. Mackenzie opinionated.

"Ay!" agreed her husband non-committantly. "The Lord and time. Sir Bruce is getting on, sweetheart. 'Am thinking he is but biding his time. She's never out of his mind, sleeping or waking. 'Am thinking we'll see some drama before long now, ay! The mon's ain restless, the good God pity him!"

"You think too highly of him, Ian, I'm telling you. He's but to look at you, ye ken, and he'd turn you round his finger."

"Ay, sweetheart. I love the man, sinner though he be."

"You're ever overforgiving, Mac, I'm telling you. Let him set foot in this house, that's all—jest let him try it!"

"It must be over twenty years since he——"

"Ay, Ian; I'm too hard, maybe. The Lord's got into his hairt, and it isn't for me to say onything."

"Sir Bruce would invite us to dinner, ye ken, Jean—if he thought you would consider it."

"Set foot! There, Ian. No!"

Righteous indignation flared out of Mrs. Mackenzie's eyes, but her husband who knew her saw that she was unbending.

It was at this moment that a peon brought a note

by hand from Goombah. Mackenzie leisurely opened it.

"It's from the Governor, Jean," he said. "I'll read it to you." Mackenzie thereupon began to read:

"*Dear Mac,*

"*Dinner to-night, eight o'clock. May I hope that my altered habits of the last five years might conceivably reconcile Mrs. Mackenzie to accompany you.*

"*P.S.—Otherwise I've nothing on to-night. R.S.V.P.*"

The couple pondered upon this for a longish spell. Neither spoke, but it was Mrs. Mackenzie who broke the long silence.

"The mon knows all too well, Ian, that nothing would persuade me to enter his late abode of hell. Many a bachelor dinner you two have taken there together, and no harm done, but it is no place for your wife, when all is said and done."

"Ay!" responded her husband, guessing (and he hoped he was right) what was coming.

"But, Ian, dear, the mon's aye a repentant sinner. Five years you were telling me, and the laddie's lonely. It's not for me to judge, Mac. If you wish it, ask him to eat here with us. My hairt gangs oot to the puir mon."

"Aye, darling. You were ever forgiving. 'Am no saying but what 'am with ye."

And thus it came about that the peon took the following reply back to Sir Bruce at Goombah:

"*Mrs. Mackenzie bids me say, in view of you*

being disengaged for the evening, she has peculiar pleasure in requesting the pleasure of your company to dinner HERE, at 7 p.m. R.S.V.P."

The peon had yet another long run across the mountain track which separated Goombah and Publoo to convey Sir Bruce's reply. This read:

"With you both 7 p.m. Arbuthnot."

Sir Bruce turned up to time, as was his invariable wont, and was treated with the true Scotch cordiality given to friends who have passed their difficult rubicon. There was nothing to indicate in the manner adopted by Mr. and Mrs. Mackenzie that they were entertaining their employer, and nothing in Sir Bruce's mien to them to suggest that the Mackenzies were anything but independent host and hostess. If anything, Sir Bruce might almost have appeared to be deferring to his hosts. Almost, but not quite, for the magnetic personality of the owner was overwhelming. It grew upon Mrs. Mackenzie more and more as the evening progressed, till she came to forget his past life, forget everything but an absorbed interest in the man himself.

It was after dinner, when sitting out in long deck chairs, the men regaling themselves with cheroots, and Mrs. Mackenzie—who was never idle for one minute from the time she rose until the time she retired—busy at her knitting, that Sir Bruce opened up the subject matter which had led him to sent out his invitation.

"I'm a wealthy man, Mackenzie," he remarked, throwing out a cloud of blue-grey tobacco smoke, and watching it mingle with the cool night air.

"Ay!" agreed the Scotchman. "'Am thinking you're recht there, Sir Bruce. 'Am not in queer streets mysel', ye ken."

Sir Bruce Arbuthnot stifled a quiet smile at the merited boast. "You will have saved, thanks to the help of Mrs. Mackenzie here, I make no doubt, Mackenzie?"

"I hae that, mon," the Scotchman agreed, his rugged face alight with the tactful drawing-in of his wife's hand in the matter. "Mrs. Mackenzie is ay the best womman the Almighty ever sent into a mortal, sinful worrlld. We've all three thousand pounds saved up, and lying at this minute on deposit in the Scottish Bank."

"Why, that's splendid, Mac!"

"Ay, mon, it is that," agreed the planter.

"May I congratulate you, Mrs. Mackenzie?" requested Sir Bruce.

Mrs. Mackenzie told him that he might. She added that they had to admit the little nest egg would have been less had the Almighty blessed them with children, and much to the same effect. When Mrs. Mac spoke, her husband, never a talkative man, held his peace. All he could have said was so well delivered by his spouse that it appeared in his judgment unnecessary for him to waste futile words by way of repetition.

Sir Bruce went on to talk about himself. "I've a notion to take a long spell at home," he told them. "It's long since I took a real holiday, and I feel I'm due for a change."

"Ay, mon, a change," remarked Mackenzie, and

he looked at Jean with a curious expression. "A change, that's what you'll be wanting the nou, I ken. A change, aye. You'll be finding it lonesome all by yourself, Sare—lonesome."

"And so, Mackenzie," the owner took up the discussion, "I thought it a propitious occasion to talk over that little nest-egg of yours." He indicated Mrs. Mackenzie as being part owner of it. "Maybe you would both welcome a substantial addition to it."

"You mean, Sir?"

"That there is always just the possibility that I may not be returning, except as a visitor, shall we say? And so in case such an eventuality should happen, I should like to go fully with you both into the question of my successor in the estate management."

"Ay, Sir," agreed Mackenzie. "But the gardens will take some looking after with you gone. We'll be missing you sarely."

"I think I am safe in leaving the sole management in your husband's capable hands, Mrs. Mackenzie. What do you say?"

"It's a great responsibility," Mrs. Mackenzie told him, "but my man will rise to it. Never fear of that, Sir Bruce."

"Then I may take it as settled, without the details: settled in principle, eh?"

"Ay, Sir Bruce. 'Am not saying but what it is a responsibility and a duty, Sir, after my ain hairt. With the help of Mrs. Mackenzie and the grace of God, 'am ready to agree with you that 'am competent to undertake it. As to the tearms—weel, we can agree finely upon them, 'am confeedent, Sir Bruce."

Arbuthnot could not but notice that his submanager, while ready to concede some reliability upon his Maker for the unknown future, still put his wife first. It secretly amused the elderly baronet, but suited his book completely. The tea gardens, all carrying their own managers and assistants, could not have a more reliable senior manager than his true old friend, supported by this strong opinioned. capable and clever wife.

And so they came down to details, came down to the discussion of terms and agreements, and the outcome justified the Mackenzies in feeling confident that within a few years—if tea kept anywhere near its present high value—they would emerge really well to do people, able, if they chose, to retire to old Scotland with a well-feathered nest.

When all details were finalised, and only the signing of new agreements before their legal adviser down in Darjeeling remained to be concluded, Mrs. Mackenzie, with characteristic caution, enquired, "Nothing has been arranged, Sir Bruce, against the definite possibility of your return. You remain sole owner, but you might be disappointed by retired life at home, or even by the travel which you speak about."

"Madam," Sir Bruce reassured her, "I'm a difficult man to gainsay when once my mind is fully made up on any point. I don't think you will be seeing me back, other than as visiting owner. If you do,

rest assured you will have nothing financial to complain of. But I anticipate no such contingency. Perhaps I'm over confident—it's been my besetting sin in the past—but—well, Madam, I think you will find that my valued old friend here will be left in undisputed command of the field."

And the Mackenzies looked at each other very curiously again. Mrs. Mac drew a long-drawn, relieved sounding sigh. Her generous bosom rose gently; she was about to say something, perhaps to suggest that over-confidence had not been the baronet's only besetting sin. If so, it never came out. It stuck in her throat. A single tear came into her reposeful, lovable eyes. Without embarrassment, without shame, and without disguise she solemnly wiped it away on her spotless home laundered handkerchief.

"Please God you are right, Sir," she said, and soon afterwards Sir Bruce mounted his mare and made tracks back to his bungalow, the house which for a brief year had held the most coveted and prized possession he ever owned; the thing he most missed, most wanted. As the years passed his want of her became an absorbing passion. His mare, responding with the intuition of her kind to the will of the man who so gently yet so confidently sat her, picked graceful, careful steps through the darkness along the mountain track.

Sir Bruce came to the house, gave his mount over to the syce, went inside, then to his room. From a drawer between articles of clothing he took a photo. It was of Clare, taken just prior to their

marriage some twenty years before. The man gazed long at it. "Dear God, how I love her!" he whispered quietly to himself, then, great man though he was, a stifled, choked cry caught him unawares. He kissed the glass frame just over her mouth like any boy, and so to his bed and to sleep.

A thin line of light coming through a kink with the dawn, showing up his closed mouth, and set, determined jaw so reposeful in slumber, might well have persuaded Jean Mackenzie that their employer was indeed "a difficult man to gainsay when once his mind was made up," and brought her to say—as indeed she did—"Mark me well, Ian, my husband, there'll be great doings come oot of this before long, and I ken the Almighty will take a hand in them."

And Mackenzie's reply: "Ay, Jean. 'Am thinking I agree with you. The mon's got a way with him. 'Am thinking you're reecht. They should have had a bairn, lass. *We* can gang along weel enou' withoot, but a bairn noo with *them,* and 'am thinking the whole situation would have been defferent."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE VISIT OF THE FRENCH SUB-CONSUL.

Upon leaving the trading port of Fungi, Florence repaired down to the solitary cabin of which the launch boasted to make her toilet. Her small crew had been carefully chosen, the golden key of money unlocking every door in her path. The crew had received their instructions. A speedy return was anticipated, and the pay—the principal feature of which lay in the generous bonus due upon a safe and satisfactory return—settled. The longer they remained upon Tuamonti, the less would be their drawing at the conclusion of the cruise.

Great excitement prevailed at the island as the small craft, with the tricolour flying gallantly at the single mast, drew near. Another highly coloured ensign flew at the stern. The Consul evidently affected his own house flag.

The French official proved himself a dapper little figure. Tight-waisted, as became a well-dressed official, well-trimmed of black beard, somewhat heavy black eyebrows, and a great propensity to take advantage of the custom to retain uniform hats on all occasions other than those of church and bed.

His French was evidently too scholarly for the ears of but pigeon-speaking dark men; at any rate, no little difficulty was experienced in making out what the little official said. He was evidently an administrator of importance, though he made it plain at the outset (as plain as it was possible to do under the circumstances) that the visit was but a preliminary to the real official call of his senior, who was due shortly. The man's importance, however, could easily be gauged by the launch bearing the representative carrying his own flag, the high tones of which impressed the natives more than any prosaic white ensign of the British Navy, or any such lesser looking contraption.

Also, the man carried himself with as great an air as had ever hitherto been known. The officials to which they were used were of a somewhat fussy nature.

But the crowning seal to his greatness was, perhaps afforded by the small ship carrying a devil devil in the shape of a small gun mounted on the poop. True, it was but a toy in the world of guns, but, as was proven later, its fifteen pounds' cost could be put to some practical use by those on board. The brass barrel glittered in the tropical sun, and the first voice from it (sent out, one supposes, by way of salutation) being the very first report of that nature ever heard on Tuamonti, sent the natives into raptures of excited wonder. A stray island dog, very much the worse for wear, offered an attractive target to those behind the aforementioned gun, and considering it true game for

the purpose of *morale,* they trained a charge of small shot upon it. Unhappily for the pariah, it wandered too close to the water's edge to be resisted, and went up in a cloud of smoke, metaphorically speaking, to the accompaniment of a report which appeared all the more devastating by virtue of this better justification for it. Yes, the sub-consul was all too evidently "great medicine." What he said would have to go (as our neighbours across the Pacific so aptly put it). But a greater devil devil was promised for the evening, a devil devil which would be spoken of with bated breath until the crack of doom.

"Take me instantly to your chief," snapped the dapper official, as much resembling Captain Kettle as the blackness of his moustache would allow. And it was so.

"I'm not your official Consul," the man delivered himself; "he will be here later. I have come to take back the two white men whose immediate presence to answer for their long absence without leave is awaited by my Government."

But of course he should take back the white men, or should if they were alive to be taken back. But, alas! only one was alive; the other had gone out with the hurricane of late tragic memory. The chief would have had this white inhabitant transported to Fungi himself if they had any canoe large enough to risk so terrible a crossing, but such was not the case. Also the white men's launch had gone out with the tide; had succumbed with so

many of them, and much to like purpose. The Sub-Consul cut the chief short.

"Which white man remains alive—what name did he go by?"

"Monsieur very great medicine man, father of new chief to be. Married to my daughter, Molota, the most wonderful, greatest——"

"Stop all that senseless chatter. Tell me his name —do you hear me? Answer me now, quickly. What is the name of the husband of your excommunicatable daughter?"

"Monsieur Bruce," replied the chief, with a justifiable air of pride.

The prim hand of the official shook. "Take me to him instantly. Do you hear me? This very instant, lest my gun bark down your hut and set it afire."

So the acting Consul was taken, not without speed, to the commodious hut occupied by Bruce and his lovely Molota, and obeying instructions, left there alone. It was not far from the village and beach, which were in full view of the launch lying anchored in the lagoon, just out of the atoll-calmed surf. Not far from the devil devil gun, either.

The hut, after the manner of South Sea huts, was doorless and open. Visitors were expected to shout a warning to those within in lieu of bells or knockers lest peradventure those inside, alleviating as best they could the humid heat of the equatorial zone, were found incontinently as they were born.

But this Consul was of no preliminary shouting order. He walked slap in, passed through two outer partitioned rooms and into the inner chamber.

Before him, completely absorbed in ship designing, sat Bruce. He did not so much as look up as the official entered. A great ship was taking shape in new yards off Devon. A rough idea in the background of high, red, perilous cliffs, deep water fringed, gave atmosphere to the new docks and its leviathan, which was predestined to bring grist to the mill of one of the fairest counties in all England. Why Devon, no one knew, least of all himself. But there it was. Perhaps his father was dreaming of Devon from away back there in Tibet. Perhaps the personality of such a degree of magnetism as that could carry willy-nilly across the far seas and lodge in young Bruce's brain. Be that as it may, there was Devon right enough; there the new industry which should send it (all in its own good time) in friendly competition with grimy, industrious, world-renowned old Glasgow—Glasgow, with its teeming thousands of ill-booted youngsters. Its parks, Sauchiehall's thoroughfare, St. Vincent Crescent: whose cupboards hide beds, and where lakes spring up artificially. Where priceless scenery can be had for a song (or, say, a song and a half), and where by passing those superbly brainy ship-creating yards, and passing on to the mound which is Dunoon, to Rothesay with its pointing porters, one reaches the matchless beauty of The Kyles of Bute, the glory of which

equalises that of the South Seas and costs the majority of us less to attain.

There lay the early plans of Bruce Arbuthnot, the future rival of Belfast, which probably inherits its constructive brains, in virtue of the fact that its people are really Scotch, whether they own to it or not.

Surely, thought Bruce, the sailors of old England could do their own dirty work. Wasn't it up to Devon (who could navigate the world with the best, and go one better) to lay down the keels in which to do it. Of course it was!

They should, and they would, if he had to beg, borrow or steal every penny first to start matters.

The young man was deep in his study, and but looked up when the Consul's sharp, dictatorial voice broke rudely upon his reverie.

Near him, squatting gracefully upon the matted floor, as only the dark races can, the visitor beheld the most lovely girl he had ever seen. We will except the whites, since they are at the moment out of the picture. At her breast lay a babe. He was singularly light hued. His coppery, dark hair showed up against the smoked ivory of his mother's clear skin. Molota opened wide her adorable eyes at sight of the spruce little man, but remained unmoved and unmoving in her languorous serenity of mind and beauty of person.

"How much longer are you going to stick here, I should like to know?" snapped the Consul, and Bruce spun round at the sound, clutched the sides of his native-made chair, and stared at the intruder

as though the official were an apparition from the nether regions.

Molota saw her man catch his breath, his mouth harden, his square chin set itself rock fashion. She saw his nostrils distend, as drawing deep breaths, the organ had to do double duty unaided.

"Do you hear what I say?" rasped out the visitor. "Don't sit there like a stuffed image. I've come to take you back home. What do you mean by it, absenting yourself in this disgraceful fashion. Living like a native! You ought to be ashamed of yourself. How dare you! Why haven't you returned? Tell me that."

The official's black beard fairly shook in the agitation of his bitter vituperation.

"For the simple reason that I can't, Sir," replied Bruce quietly. You see, our launch was smashed beyond repair. Poor old Brian—my Sydney friend, you know—was killed, and with no possible means of communication between here and the nearest civilisation"—he gave a hollow laugh—"well, you must see how it is, Sir. I'm practically marooned."

"Do you mean to tell me the black heathen are holding you. Why, I'll have the island set afire from top to toe!"

"I shouldn't like you to hurt them, Sir," replied Bruce, "but——"

"But," finished the other for him, "you return with me to Fungi, and thence home. Do you hear me, Sir? Home, by Thursday's boat!"

The boy sprang to his feet, grasped capable hands in his. "Do you mean you can really get me

out of this hole? Are you sure you're not pulling my leg. Oh, dear God! it sounds too good to be true, Sir!"

"Don't maul me, young man," came from the other. "Pack! Do you hear me? Pack! We leave to-morrow morning, and for good."

Bruce turned to his native wife. "Leave us, Molota. I'll tell you when I want you again."

"Oui, Monsieur 'usband," said Molota obediently, her eyes all for her babe rather than for him. "I go, Monsieur."

The Consul turned to Bruce. "Not content with lying down to it, making ineffectual effort to force your will"—he sniffed contemptuously—"your will, I repeat, upon these ignorant weak heathen infidels, you must needs take one of them to wife and give her your wretched babe——"

"Pardon me, Sir," said Bruce, putting restraining hands upon the other, "but we'll leave the girl out of it. Also the child. He's a fine youngster, damn you, and I'm proud of him!"

"You needn't," retorted the official, "I'm damned enough already without your proffered help, young man," and Bruce stared at him in wonder.

"It's curious, damn curious," Bruce let out, "but I seem to have met you somewhere." He passed the back of his hand across his forehead. His manner seemed dreamy, as though the long drawn-out native life and sojourn in the tropics had bemused his brain.

"You remind me of someone I once knew,"

Bruce remarked. "What did you say your name was?"

"I'm only the acting Consul," the visitor replied, "commissioned to give you a safe passage home. When I say home, I mean home, not as far as the Consulate at Fungi. You're not to be trusted out, young man. I'll see you as far as Sydney, and then, God help you! I'll leave you to the tender mercies of Miss Edith and your mother, Mrs. Swinton."

"God!" ejaculated Bruce, "you know of them. How are they? He seized the other. "Tell me, how are they? How is my mother? How are *they*?"

"Perfectly well, no thanks to you. Well, and so far as I know, happy. I conjecture that Miss Burne may quite conceivably be all the happier by ridding herself of such an outpaced rotter as you have proved herself. Marrying a black! Ugh!"

Bruce regarded him wonderingly. Strange! Was his mind going—all these months—a year—the Consul was speaking:

"Forcing your unwelcome attentions on the girl. I expect you seduced her. Did you? Tell me that. I have my own reasons for wishing to know."

"Perhaps, perhaps," the boy replied. I won't have the girl brought into it. The fault, if fault there be, is mine."

At this the visitor studied Bruce anew.

"I wonder if you're lying to me," he said. Then: "You are practically without means, I take it?"

"True for you, Sir," Bruce replied. "I'm broke to the wide. On that account alone I could not

have returned too easily. During the hurricane, which killed my friend and so many here, Molota and I took shelter in a cave. My hut and most of its contents were washed ignominously away. Luckily I didn't trust my books to any native hut. I buried 'em, Sir. Kept them in a lined hole deep under the ground. But for these friends of mine"—Bruce tapped the pile of books lying on his rude table—"verily, I sometimes think I might have lost my reason."

"Not you," replied the acting Consul. "You may take leave of your senses, as you have taken leave of absence, but your head's glued on all right, boy, otherwise I shouldn't be here."

How strangely the Frenchy talked! Now he came to think of it, there wasn't much French about him other than his appearance. Impulsively the boy came forward.

"I can't express how grateful I am to you, Sir, for coming across to get me out of it. It was devilish good of you. I do thank you, really I do."

"Stuff and nonsense!" snapped Florence Tooth. "Don't tell me!"

"God in Heaven! You're Miss Tooth!"

"And who do you suppose I'd be?" enquired that worthy. "Do you suppose for a single instant, young man, that I'd see my darling Edith breaking her pretty heart at home for you? Or your priceless mother—what a character!—dying by slow inches? No, Bruce. Florence Tooth doesn't sit down to that sort of avoidable rattle-trap."

"Avoidable, Miss Tooth? Avoidable?" Bruce

seized on the word as drowning man to straw, "but —but I'm done for—done for, I mean, so far as Miss Edith is concerned. She will never look at me again when once she knows. Mother, of course"—Bruce became wistful—"Mother will always be Mother. She alone will understand."

"Your mother is the most peerless woman who ever lived, boy, let me tell you that. You may thank your God—if you have one—for her. As to Edith——"

"When she knows, I'm done," said Bruce.

"Do you still want her, then, renegade?"

"Want her! Want her!"

"Then she'll never know, Bruce. Never from me. Of course, if you're damn fool enough to blurt out your miserable sins to the darling—well, your blood be upon your own head."

"What a priceless old bean you are!" quoth Bruce, uncomplimentarily. "I can understand Edith's blind adoration for you now——"

"It's by no means blind, let me remind you, young man. My niece is very much awake, believe me, as you are likely to find."

"But she will never look at me again, Miss Tooth."

"If she doesn't, then I shall make her," came the electrifying reply.

"Am I dreaming?" asked the boy. You mean to tell me that not satisfied with as good as saving my life, after all you know, after all you have seen, you would——"

"I'll talk things over with your 'wife' first, Bruce," Florence said. "Afterwards I shall be in a better position to frame my future course of action. First of all, listen! I want your help to-night. Partly to amuse myself (life rather bores me at times, Bruce) and partly to make our get-away to-morrow morning more certain, I have staged an affair for to-night to impress the ignorant savage—to instil fear as well as respect into him, so that there may be no possibility of your return being delayed another day. I can read through the lines—see how matters stand. Florence Tooth wasn't born yesterday, boy. Young people, you know, have an ignorant habit of *thinking* old people fools, but old people *know* that young ones are. I am well provided not only with gifts for the natives, but even to toys for the children. And, young man, I included you in my reckoning there. Florence Tooth knows life—your precious son will have something to keep his Dad out of his mind for many a long day, believe me—and his mother, too. She's distinctly beautiful, boy—in her way. I'm making every allowance for you I can. But to continue, I have on board an assortment of some of the best fireworks ever turned out by Payne and Brocks. Thank heaven I was never short of cash—thanks to my father's foresight in buying useless fields just where Australian cities were likely to grow—and to-night, boy, will be a scream. Put the fear of God into 'em, Bruce, well spiced with enjoyment. Now pack. Do you hear me? Pack! We sail the first thing to-morrow morning. But

first, take me to your mistress, I would talk with her."

Molota was called in, the while Bruce went into his sleeping apartment to commence what frugal packing he had to do.

"How do you do, my dear," began Florence, in as near a simple French as she could command. "I want to see your boy."

"But oui, Monsieur," agreed the radiant mother.

"Monsieur Bruce has to return to his white man business, Molota," Florence got hold of her name. "You will miss him, my dear."

"Ah! oui, Monsieur," replied the mother, eyeing her visitor's moustache and beard waggling so excitedly as she talked. "Mais, I have known soon my 'usband 'ee must go. Eet is sad, but it is not all. I 'ave zee boy. For 'im alone I marry ze white lord."

"Oh! so *you* married him, did you. Come now, he didn't tell me that. He said *he* married you."

"Oh, la la! Oh, la la!" laughed Molota at the mere recollection. Non, non! 'Ee not marry I, me marry 'im. Monsieur Bruce fight like cat to get away from me. But Molota want heir, for one day new chief Tuamonti, Monsieur."

"Ah! I see. So you vamped the poor baby, did you?"

Joy unspeakable radiated from the bearded face of the visiting and acting sub-consul. "Didn't I know it?" she said to herself. "The boy's all right. Florence, you old darling, couldn't I love you if you weren't yourself?"

"It's this way, Monsieur. Monsieur Bruce cold like hailstone. So me, I come to 'im late in ze night, and I jest lay down and say, 'Molota fatigue, so fatigue.' Monsieur 'as been young himself, you know, Monsieur, n-est-ce-pas?"

"Oh, yes, I know," said Miss Tooth. "Well, Molota, your boy shall be fitted out as befits a chieftain's heir, and as to his mother, you are to come along with me now to my launch, where I have some pretty pretties for you, too." Saying which, Florence extracted (not without difficulty) an enormous Waterbury watch suspended by the most gaudy chain which, labelled Lucerne, ever came out of Germany. The nine and sixpenny watch affected animals for figures, each higher coloured than that preceding it, but it was the overloud ticking which first caught the babe's ear, the mite being over-young for aught else. By the time Molota was decked out as befitted a dowager mother to the chieftain, and the babe snowed under with toys, it has with regret to be recorded that the near approach of the permanent departure of the fond father was a thing well night forgotten. He had fulfilled his destiny in the nature of things, which was all that really mattered.

The night came, and with it the fireworks display, and to this day the few natives who survived the appalling influenza scourge which swept all the islands in those parts six months later, talk of it. The pneumonic plague, which totally annihilated the inhabitants of some, and left Tuamonti without any reigning head, heir, or anything else. A

handful alone of Tuamontians remained, from which (with their freedom of marriage restrictions) to re-people that supposed Eden.

The display started off with a twenty-eight shilling rocket, fired by Bruce himself from the deck of the launch.

Florence sat with the chief, Mangani, and his family, and, in conjunction with Bruce (who held a duplicated programme with her), Miss Tooth not only prophesied what next would follow, but even went so far as to order it! The effect upon the credulous minds of the natives was absolute. Pointing skywards, Florence, in solemn tones, would command fire to rise to heaven and descend in a shower of golden, fiery rain. And it was so. But what perhaps made their departure the following morning more secure, was effected with the moral help of a twenty shilling firework "bomb." It resembled a cricket ball, and was lit on shore by the medium of a three-foot fuse. All the natives were enjoined to stand away from it. The appalling detonation seemed to shake the very earth, and this was followed by the sailors and Bruce igniting near the natives, squatting on their haunches on the seashore, fully thirty squibs. The devil devils did not belie their name. Run where they might, be sure some devil or another would send out one of its explosions near them, before, with the concussion, hurling itself on to other victims. And the climax. A hut composed of dry fern growth had been erected near the sea front, to which the devil devil ship's cannon would "speak." The natives were informed that so it would befall every hut on every island in the South Seas if the will of the white man be not obeyed. That the range of the little brass god was more than restricted never entered their heads. The gun, previously tested with blank, was primed with an incendiary miniature shell. Bruce fired it. The shell hit the improvised hut, which burst into flames. So ended the proceedings. Dancing followed all night. The natives never tired till the streaks of dawn gave them excuse for cessation. The parting of Bruce from Molota and her babe was not marked by grief on either side. Molota just held the child up to him to be admired for the last time. A very last time, as it turned out, so unspeakably and so frightfully can influenza scourge the fair islands of the South Seas. The launch set course for Fungi.

"So," remarked Florence to Bruce. "So! You lied to me, young man. You were forced into your disastrous marriage, forced against your will, forced against your intention. You shielded the girl. Don't tell me. I know everything."

"Anyhow, I fell, Miss Tooth."

"Don't call me Miss Tooth; I'm your Aunt."

"I wish to God you were!" said the boy.

"Come, now, that's better, boy. Of course you fell. Fell, fiddlesticks! What do you call yourself? A half-baked Chinese doll? Heavens, boy, the girl was downright lovely!"

"Yes, Aunt," replied the penitent.

"There, boy. It was noble of you not to excuse yourself. You had every excuse. Do you hear me?

I tell you there was every excuse. You couldn't help yourself, unless, indeed, you had been born but half a man. *You* fell, indeed! Don't you ever let me hear you say that again. Do you hear me? If you ever dare to tell my niece that you fell—fell, indeed! I'll tell her you didn't."

"I shall tell her everything, Aunt Florence. I'm made that way. If she can't understand——"

"Can't understand? Why, of course she won't understand! You'll lose her if you make her your father confessor. No girl born of woman could stand it, Bruce."

"You have stood it."

"That's another matter. I'm not a woman—not a real woman, I mean. I'm only a cranky old maid."

"I think you're the dearest woman God ever made, except mother!" ejaculated Bruce.

"Stuff and nonsense! Don't tell me," said Florence. But she hid her old face from the boy afterwards lest he might read too much in it concerning the womanly qualities reposing in the virginal breasts of old maids.

CHAPTER XXII.

CLOSING IN.

Upon arrival at Sydney, Bruce went straight to his mother. He did not expect recriminations from her, but anticipated she would leave it to him to tell her as much or as little as he felt good for her to know. In this he was not disappointed until he came to the part Molota had played. Then his mother seemed to freeze. She said very little, but that little was enough.

"It's beyond me I'm afraid to understand it, Bruce," she told him. All your life, married or single, you will be haunted by the thought of the moral responsibilities you have left behind you. I think it's awful."

"I wish I had a father to talk things over with," Bruce then said. "He would know how to advise me."

"I wonder?" Clare replied, then did a most unusual thing. She broke down and wept unrestrainedly. The sight of her in that condition sent Bruce nearly frantic. The outburst did Clare good.

But soon after, Clare being outwardly composed again, who should walk in but Miss Florence Tooth. The old lady (if old lady she can be called) was in one of her strong moods. Probably some pic-

nickers had been making too free with their banana and orange skins to please her. "She'd show them."

"I've just had a good cry," Clare told her. "Bruce has told me everything."

"I wish I could, my dear," replied Florence. "I envy you. After sleep it's the best antidote possible. Never could cry myself; often wanted to, but nothing doing."

This brought a smile to the harassed mother.

"There you are, you see," Florence pointed out. "What did I tell you? Here am I longing to squinney and can't, while you are feeling better already."

"It isn't the cry which has done me good," contradicted Mrs. Swinton.

"Then what the hades is it, my dear?"

"Seeing you."

"Fiddlesticks!" said Miss Tooth. "Stuff and nonsense! Don't you start that sort of talk with me, my dear. You and I know better."

"Oh, you old darling!" cried Clare, throwing her arms impulsively round the old lady and recommencing her outward and visible sign of emotion.

"There, there, then!" Have your cry out, dearie. God knows you've suffered enough to make you." Sitting herself down in a chair, Florence petted Clare like any baby. Petted her and stayed with her till she was quite herself again.

"You mustn't judge your boy too badly, my dear," she counselled her. "You think you know the whole story, but you don't know one-half of it, and you probably understand less. Bruce was more sinned against than sinning. The boy couldn't

help himself. Flesh and blood wouldn't stand what that boy had up against him. It had to come sooner or later. Oh, yes, I know. I've no doubt he has painted himself in the blackest terms to you. Young fool! He needn't even have told you. Do you realise that, Mam?"

"Bruce would always tell me everything, Aunt Florence."

"There you are, you see. What do I tell you? The boy's white. Clean white all through. Why the devil shouldn't he sow his wild oats? They all do. At least, I'll admit we Australians are among the cleanest livers on earth, but——"

"But it's the child. That's the awful part!"

"Umm!" said Florence. "Yes, a pity; but—well, anyhow the main thing is that your boy's white. Now, if he had forged a cheque and had been partaking of free board and lodging in Long Bay; but this other thing, Clare, my dear. Boys will be boys if too badly put up against it. Understand me well. I made it my personal business to look into everything. Do you understand? Everything. Bruce was forced into it. You know what life is—or, rather, what it can be, given the circumstances." And then she told Clare of her interview with Molota and every detail of her visit to the island.

When Florence went she left behind her a more reconciled Clare, but she felt she would have to exercise care where Edith was concerned. She thought it would be best to leave things alone in that quarter. Wait until matters developed. The boy was likely to keep away from the girl at first.

His principal interest just now appeared to be his study. Florence felt she had interfered sufficiently for the moment, and accordingly sunk herself back into Manly and her multitudinous interests there.

Within two months of his arrival home, Bruce sat for an examination, then entered some ship-building yards on the harbour. Here he was engaged for long hours unpaid, in the yards and inside, at planning, designing, the commercial side and all the rest of it. Later he would put in a couple of years on the Clyde, near Glasgow, and then, if his ambitions materialised, nothing less would satisfy his burning ambition than to start on his own in Devonshire with some of his mother's capital, and compete against them all.

The boy kept away from Edith, but visited Florence when he thought her niece would be away, and from Miss Tooth he heard all the family news.

But the day came when he visited Manly simultaneously with Edith being there. Miss Tooth was out. Edith had only just arrived, and was awaiting her Aunt, whom the little maid of all work assured her would not be over long.

In complete ignorance of the strained condition of things, the maid showed Bruce into the room where the girl sat. Edith was keeping the devil out of herself at the grand piano which Florence affected. Miss Tooth could not play a note herself, and scarcely knew "Advance Australia Fair" from Oswald Anderson's "You Lovely Thing."

Edith was rather giving it to the instrument just then, lost in some of Chopin's harmonious chords.

The girl did not hear her lover's step till he was right in the room, then she sprang up from the music stool and faced him.

But Edith spoke no word, only gazed at him and gazed. She noticed an altered look about him—intangible, indefinite. He hadn't exactly altered, and yet he was different. The boy had matured. Actually he had improved, and improved definitely, however much his soul may (or may not) have gone to pieces. The Bruce who confronted her was a magnificent specimen of a man, and the girl's heart leapt within her at sight of him. Her breath came faster after a painful pause. She wished he would speak, but, like herself, words appeared too futile to convey one millionth of what each felt.

His gaze upon her was a very quiet one, unstaring. In his eyes she saw at last what she wondered. Did he still love her? Yes, God was right in her world so far as that went. At last she could bear the suspense no longer.

"Why haven't you been to see me?" she enquired, and waited for his answer. Edith made no mention of his long absence—it was a lesser matter. First, why being able to see her, had he avoided her?

"Because I'm not fit for you," said Bruce.

"Do you mean—the South Seas and all that that can mean?"

"Yes. Only worse than that."

"Oh! What do you mean worse? How could anything be worse?"

"It's too bad to tell you. Ask your Aunt."

Edith stamped her foot. "I won't do anything of the kind. What has it to do with Auntie? It concerns me. Why did you stay away for over a year and never even write?"

"As to that, I was practically marooned. The island was uninhabited by whites—no means of communication whatsoever. I suppose you have heard Pinkerton was killed in a huricane, our boat smashed, preventing me from getting away——"

"Oh, you poor thing! But—but that isn't disgraceful. Why—oh, yes, I see now."

"It's worse than that. It would take more than that to have kept me away from you—you know that—you must know it. What the devil do I care for idiotic convention. It's this way—I don't know how to tell you."

"You haven't a child by any chance, have you?" Edith asked bitterly.

"Just that," admitted Bruce gravely.

"Bruce! Oh! I don't want to see any more of you. You'd better go. Oh! I hate you. Repulsive man! Go! Do you hear? Don't come near me, I can't bear it. Leave me; I hate you!"

The boy looked calmly at her. He had better leave her now. How magnificent she looked! Like a tiger at bay, her lovely eyes flashed anger at him. A mad desire to take her to him, to crush the words from her mouth with his kisses, came to him, to be as speedily put aside. The time was not yet. But if ever Bruce had any doubt about his intention to eventually fight again and win her, the scruple disappeared now.

"Before I go, Edith, I just want to tell you this. You cannot, of course, understand——"

"No, I certainly cannot," Edith interrupted him.

"I suppose no girl could, but nothing can alter my love for you——"

"Love! You don't know what the word means."

"Nothing can alter it," Bruce repeated, disregarding her interruption. "Please know that, now and always."

"I hate you! Go!" And Edith stamped her foot in her burning indignation.

So Bruce turned, and without another word passed out, jumped aboard the *Curl Curl* at the jetty, and later returned to his engineering study with renewed eagerness and ambition. That tigerish outburst on the part of Edith was just what he wanted. You knew where you were when a woman went off the deep end like that. He'd marry the darling yet. But, like his father, young Bruce suffered with no inferiority complex. Edith Burne was further from him, irrespective of her father's certain opposition, than he realised. Your Edith Burnes' do not succumb easily. Perhaps never, unless the unexpected happens and fate takes a hand in the game.

Florence Tooth returned from her visiting, found Edith a distraught figure, tragic in her vexation. A child! The sheer horror of the thing. Nothing could get over that. It would constitute a lifetime nightmare. Then the girl's thoughts came to considering the slight possibility of the child dying.

She asked herself whether that would make any difference. This led to her hoping it might die, then blaming herself sorely for such a base hope.

"Bruce has been here," she opened up to Florence. I saw him. I—we talked to each other."

"How wonderful and awful," snapped Florence, a bit overwhelmed at the intelligence, biding her time.

"Don't laugh at me, Aunt. I don't like it. I feel awful."

"I suppose the young fool has been pouring his confessions into you, half of 'em untrue. Don't I know him!"

"Don't run him down, Aunt. I expect there are two sides to every question."

"Not to this question, child," responded Florence, sensing which way the wind was likely to blow. "A shameful young scamp. Don't tell me! All men are alike. Stumping round the earth like lords of creation, forcing their unwelcome attentions where they are not wanted."

"Auntie, you shan't talk about him like that."

A violent fit of coughing, or maybe sneezing, or maybe anything, shook the old dear. At any rate, her handkerchief came into considerable prominence. It's size hardly sufficed to cope with the trouble. She turned her face from Edith, as politeness dictates.

"Auntie, darling, are you ill?" asked her niece.

"Ill? Fiddlesticks! I'm never ill. What did you say to the boy, eh? Come, tell me that, my pet."

"I told him I hated him, Auntie, and I do! I do!"

"Of course you do, my dear; of course you do." Florence got out her handkerchief, feeling another attack coming on. How deliciously lovely! Her darling hated him, so there was hope for the boy after all. Nothing like good, downright solid hate, provided there be nothing lukewarm about it. Indifference now, that might have been fatal. She must fan this hate till it burst itself. She'd fan it until it turned against herself.

"Hate, indeed, hate! Disgustful, loathing, low down, swashbuckling, canting hypocritical young rotter! Hate! Ugh! My poor darling, leave it to your old Aunt, she'll right you. She'll teach him. Coming here, indeed! I suppose he knew you were here and I was out. What did he say to you? What impertinence did he dare offer you, sweetest?"

"He—Bruce told me that he still loves me, Auntie."

"Good Lord! He what—he—Heavens, Edith!"

Florence flopped down in a heap into the nearest armchair. The shock had been too much for her. Almost, but not quite.

"Well, of all the—— And what, in Providence's name, did you say to that, my dear?"

For answer, Edith flung herself down beside the old lady, buried her head in her lap, "Auntie," she sobbed, "Auntie, I love him! I love him!" And over her bowed head Miss Tooth smiled quietly to herself. "Florence, my dear," she soliloquised, "I almost begin to like you."

* * * * *

And while these happenings took place, Sir

Bruce the greater was homeward bound to England to meet his late wife. Of Australia and all who lived there he knew nothing. In London he sought his lawyers, who knew extremely little, but knew of others who might know more. These others suggested more channels of possible enlightenment, and so at long last Arbuthnot got upon the track of she whom he sought. He learned that Clare had settled in Australia. It was a long cry, but he would have journeyed to Heaven, or the other sphere, and still not given up the quest. What part of Australia? The country which is not a country at all but a collection of huge countries forming one vast continent so prodigious that if all Europe could be dumped down in its centre, it would still leave a vast coast-line country sufficiently deep to carry all the population already there. And then he learned that Clare resided in New South Wales, and felt that he was narrowing down his line of investigation.

Clare's people were a closed book to him, but Arbuthnot obtained her address at last. When it did come, it seemed so simple he wondered that he had not come upon it the first day he arrived. She lived at Vaucluse, a polished suburb on Sydney's world-renowned harbour. The baronet had always wanted to visit Australia, but the totally unnecessary length of the passage prevented. There are a few people on earth who cherish similar ambitions. Suppose we put it at millions of billions. Some carry yellow faces, others more yellow still. Then again, there are the whites, the blacks, and

more besides. Sir Bruce was not alone in his wish, and now they were to be fulfilled. Mrs.—whatever her name was—had lived at some mountain resort, but was now living near Sydney. No, they did not know why she had gone down to the capital to live. Perhaps she found the mountains lonely. How could he find out her name? Well, his lawyers soon obtained that also. Most simple again when once you knew where to look for it. And so before he had learned too much—before he learnt more than was good for him—like any impulsive boy the great man took ship. Yes, there he stood, grim and determined, looking ever forward. The passengers went a bit in awe of the man. He was pleasant enough, but not over sociable. "Pre-occupied," they called him. "But what a chin, my dear! Phew, I shouldn't care to cross that handsome fellow!"

* * * * *

At Orange drama came into its own. Mr. Burne had learnt who Mrs. Swinton's husband had been. It's all he did learn, but it was enough. Of the South Seas he but knew that young Bruce had been unavoidably detained. He didn't know why —he didn't care; it was no business of his. But this other! The boy who had looked at his lovely Edith was the son of a divorced swine. He was the son of a rotten aristocrat, and Mr. Burne was in time to save his daughter from him. The farmer sent for her—sent for her kindly but firmly. The man was night bursting with righteous indignation. He, one of God's elect, and this—this——

He commenced kindly enough, holding himself in.

"Look, Edie, my little girl, it's just been brought to me, as news travels, that the antecedents of young Bruce ain't what they ought to be. Understand me, Ede, I have nothing agin the lad hisself. It's no fault of his'n, but its been brought to me that his father is an out-paced rascal, a sinner in the eyes of the Almighty, and what makes it for being worse, without excuse, seeing that the villain's a aristocrat."

"Really, father!"

"It's too awful to put it to you, my own lassie, but"—Mr. Burne sunk his voice to a whisper in case anyone might inadvertently hear—"Mrs. Swinton divorced young Bruce's father, Edie, for the devil's own sin of adultery!"

William Burne stood back to note the overwhelming effect this would unquestionably have upon his beloved daughter, but Edith only eyed him gravely, her temper rising.

"If it means anything to you, lass, no one is more sorry than your old Dad, but never again must so much as the shadow of Bruce Swinton darken these doors. I forbid you to speak to him, know him, or think about him. He's evil in the sight of the Almighty, born even after his father wasn't his father any longer, as the saying is."

"You don't know what you are talking about, Daddy," said Edith. "In fact, you are talking sheer nonsense."

"What's that I hear?" thundered Burne. "Do I 'ear aright?" The man's anger dropped from him.

"Edith, my little daughter, what I am telling you is true—true as I stand here. May I drop down dead if it isn't true!"

"Whatever has that got to do with me, Dad? I don't care a rap who or what Mr. Swinton's father was or does, or anything else."

"But, Edie, darling, listen to your old Dad who loves every hair of your pretty head. Don't you see, pretty, you can't ever think of marrying the boy?"

"I haven't the slightest intention of marrying him, father."

A look of profound relief passed over Burne's rugged features. "Spoken like my own girlee," he said. "Spoken like our dear lassie. I knew you would listen to your old Dad. I said to your Ma, darling. 'Our Edie, Mother,' I said, 'is a strong-minded girl—as strong as she is good. But always will she heed the dictates of her own father—always'——"

"It's nothing whatever to do with that, Daddy. I'm not dreaming of marrying Mr. Swinton because—well, just because I'm not. I don't want to, that's all. As to his family history, whatever business is that of ours?"

"Ah! girlie, we'll say no more about it, then. It's not for us to judge. The Almighty will deal with 'im."

"I should take care he doesn't deal with you, Dad," replied the girl, losing her temper completely. "It's beastly of you dragging other people's affairs in the mud like you do. I hate it! Do you hear? I loathe it!"

"Well, I'm flambusted!" gasped Burne, wiping his brow in perplexity. "Now, if anyone had told me that a child of mine would have had the wicked audacity to speak to me like what you have, Edith, I'd—there, if you'd been a son, now, damme, I'd chastise you for it!"

"Oh, dear no, you wouldn't, Dad," the girl defied him. "If I had a brother he'd have knocked your bigotry down your throat."

"Now, hark to the like of that, Ma!" Burne addressed his wife, who, hearing the raised voices, had quietly entered the room. "Did ever you hear the like of that, now?"

"The girl's distraught, William, what with one thing and what with another. Why must you be forever judging others?"

"Well, if I won't for to be flambusted!—the two of you'se agin me now."

"I'm not against you at all, Bill; you know that. I agree with every word you say, but don't rub it in, man. Our Edie'll obey your wishes in all things without that, won't you, darling?"

"I won't have Dad run down any of my friends —my old friends, that's all," Edith told her Mother rebelliously. "If I wanted to marry Bruce Swinton I'd marry him. But I don't. I don't care what his father is—he's nothing to do with me. Dad's a darling when he is sensible, but when he gets on to his pharisee stunt I loathe it, that's all."

"Well, if I won't be flambusted!" repeated Burne. "Jest hark to the like of that, now!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

WILLIAM BURNE SPEAKS OUT.

SOME months had passed since Bruce had arrived back from Tuamonti. Things had gone the fairly even tenor of their way, when tidings came to Florence from the Consulate at Fungi concerning those on the island across the stretch of the Pacific separating the trading port from the Eden which was called Tuamonti. Again the beautiful spot had been smitten tooth and thigh. An appalling visitation of virulent pneumonic influenza, sweeping down from insanitary Russia, had devastated many an island.

While some had been completely depopulated, others had shared all too badly, if in a lesser degree. The French official visiting Tuamonti had found but a handful of natives alive to tell of the plague. Their chieftain and all his family had gone. One of the last to contract the visitation was the half-caste baby. In better hands the child would have won through, but from the first he had no chance, and died in his sleep, so the Consul was told, after a long and painless period of unconsciousness.

Upon receipt of the news, Florence's first thought was for Edith. The news was like to have a

far-reaching effect upon her feminine psychological mentality. Miss Tooth believed the news would sow a seed which, left alone and given time, would undoubtedly give account of itself.

Accordingly, Florence sent for her niece.

"Another dreadful calamity has befallen Tuamonti, the island on which Bruce spent a year," she told the girl after they had partaken of a somewhat silent tea together. "Pneumonic influenza, my dear. Another of Russia's cheap exports. They give that commodity away free."

"Really, Auntie," replied Edith listlessly. Then, with increased animation as a sudden thought struck her, "However did you know?"

"However did I know? Listen to the child! How should I know? How does Florence Tooth know anything?"

"Yes. But, Auntie"—Edith was growing slightly excited—"why should they write and tell you that? I suppose you are keeping in touch with someone. What does it matter unless——"

"Just that, darling—unless!"

"You mean?"

"Scarcely a soul left alive on the island, my dear. There was a chieftain there—dead. He had a daughter—dead."

"Auntie! And—and all the poor little children?"

"There's not a child left alive on the little hell. Eden, indeed! Eden fiddlesticks! All stuff and rubbish—except the scenery!"

"Did many escape, Aunt Flossie—I mean, didn't the islanders get some of their children away before it was too late?"

"It's always too late with Island 'flu, Edie, darling."

"Are you sure—positively, absolutely, true to God positively certain?"

"Am I certain? Would I send for you and tell you on the word of any one despicable he-man? Don't I know 'em! Yes, my dear, your old Aunt Florence is certain—as certain as that you sit there. I've made it my business to be certain. Letters, cables, telephone, Edith, my dear. Dead—dead! They are dead, Edith—all of them! That chapter is finished, and I would to God it had never begun—and yet?"

"Good heavens!" Edith Burne went white as a sheet. Trembling hands hid themselves. There was no need. Florence had espied some more infamous picnickers, or, at any rate, she pretended she had, which was practically as good.

"I'm sure I don't know why I should inflict all this news that has no interest to you in this way, my dear," Florence turned and remarked after a suitable interval, to allow the full import of the tidings to sink in. "Anyhow, I felt that any time you might by chance tumble across Mr. Swinton you could, if you feel inclined to condescend to speak to such a—a bounder, just tell him. Er—tell him in passing, as it were, my dear. He might—I said might—have some sneaking regard for a few of the poor late wretches."

For a long space Edith was silent. The seed was germinating; very slowly, yet as slow things can

germinate, lastingly. Presently she got up, turned impulsively to her old friend:

"Oh! you most sweetest old thing!" she said. "How I do simply adore you!"

"Stuff and nonsense, child! There." Florence gave the girl a peck by way of a kiss on the tip of her shapely nose, then a sample of the real thing on the proper place to follow it.

"Run along, child," she said. "I know you have to get back. Your old Aunt thought you would like to know."

Edith's career at the University had terminated; she had graduated by the very skin of her teeth, and her studies were supposed to be over. They would have been over but for her passion for flying. Her father's allowance, aided by gifts from her Aunt, enabled her to study both sides of aviation—the practical and theoretical. Edith Burne obtained her pilot's certificate about the time Florence was journeying back from Tuamonti with her captive. Edith was said to possess "hands," possibly partly acquired through a lifetime experience of riding in her parents' farm life out at Orange beyond the Blue Mountains. The joy-stick responded to her lightest touch, her only difficulty being with the engine, with which she had no ability. Here her study came in, and the girl would spend long hours —tedious hours—trying, without much success, to master the intricacies of aero engines in general.

After leaving her Aunt at Manly, Edith crossed over to Circular Quay and thence took tram to Mascot Aerodrome. A great independence of spirit

was upon her. The tidings from Florence gave her the feeling that she was in a strong position. It left her free—freer than she otherwise could ever have been—to do as she pleased. Bruce still wanted to marry her. She didn't want to marry him, but disliked the restriction involved by the appalling complications left behind from his sojourn in the South Seas. Now she was free. Of course her father had to be reckoned with, and it presented a most formidable obstacle, but perhaps not an insurmountable one. It would, she felt, be awful to marry Bruce without her parents' consent—to run away with him. She didn't think she could ever be brought to do it. Still, her father could be fought. At least, she thought he could, for youth is ever confident. Quite definitely William Burne could not be fought. He would let his beloved girl (and, as has been said, the man's first passion was his one child)—he would see her die of grief before he would give way. It touched his religious beliefs, and that was the insurmountable bigoted barrier.

But Edith Burne, with much of her father's strength, came away from Manly in a stronger mood than she had ever before known. Had Bruce approached her then, had he so much as met her accidentally in the streets of the city, his reception would have been colder than at any time in his experience of the girl he loved. Psychological effect of this last happening was very marked upon Edith Burne. She could now earn her own living without help from others.

Edith Burne loved Bruce, but since his return

from abroad the girl had lost her wish to marry him. Now more than ever did the consciousness of this curious change take possession of her. The girl hated herself for still loving him, and fought against it, but found from the experiment that the subject were best forgotten. The more it was fought, the greater was the memory of it retained, and so to the utmost of her ability Edith put it from her.

But now pity, which is akin to the deeper sentiment, were less needed in that the results of her lover's indiscretions had been swept away. A strong, self-reliant Edith Burne took the air at Mascot that afternoon and flew better than ever before. In the higher atmosphere the exhilaration of her mood was so absolute that, strapped in as she was, the girl contemplated looping the loop. With the idea came a feeling that though she was in what she was pleased to call one of her strong moods, yet it was by no manner of means a happy strength. After all, what did it matter—what did anything matter? Edith swung the joy-stick over and kept it there—kept it there till in a haze she was upside down and climbing up the air hill, and so back again. It was almost too easy. The only difficulty was knowing when she was right again. The air seemed to have no top and no bottom. If relatively upside down to Mascot, she might be "set" so far as Mars was concerned. The idea made her light-headed, and to the amazement of those watching her below, she looped again, and then volplaned down at all too steep an angle. However, she

straightened up well enough and made a perfect landing, to the unqualified praise of the authorities whose plane she had hired.

To the plaudits Edith returned but a perfunctory acknowledgment. She told herself that she was a silly, reckless girl; that she had not been clever at all, and that it was a wonder she hadn't killed herself. "I think I'm miserable," she mused, yet returned to her parents' home at Orange stronger than ever, primed with self-confidence.

And there Bruce, choosing the very worst moment it was possible for him to choose, totally oblivious of the fact that his mistress and child had gone the way of all flesh—been gathered to their fathers in the South Sea scourge—went down to see her. Inconsolable, the poor young fool determined he could wait no longer. He must see her, must repeat his declaration of unrequited love for her, must know one way or the other how matters stood for him.

The journey from the Central Station, Sydney, to Orange had been a particularly tedious one the previous afternoon. A long wait at Katoomba, the mountain city perched three thousand odd feet above the level of Sydney Harbour, had not helped matters, and Edith was feeling overwrought.

Burne was in one of his most difficult moods—out with his daughter, yet pleased with her, too; chock-full and brimming over with his own self-righteousness—a difficult man to handle.

Bruce was shown into the drawing room, a commodious apartment rarely used by the family. The place savoured of the glass case. There was no romance about that room, and the boy felt it.

At Edith's entry he plunged straight at the matter in hand.

"I can't stand this any longer," he blurted out. "It's awful! Can't I make you understand? I lo——"

"You needn't say any more, thank you, Mr. Swinton," replied Edith, cutting him short. "I like you awfully—at least, I used to—until—— I can't marry you, now or ever. It's no use talking about it; you're only making yourself miserable. I don't love you any more—I never could again, and I simply couldn't possibly bring myself to marry you—I simply can't, that's all. You had better go now. I'm very sorry, but it's finished."

"Edith!"

"Do please go. Go back to the South Seas if you like, only leave me and go. I can't bear it."

Edith was leaving the room, had indeed reached the door, passed just through it into the hall, when William Burne, hearing the voices, strode in. The man's face was purple with passion.

"What's all this I 'ear on?" he shouted. " 'Avn't I given orders that this son of a reprobate ain't allowed in?"

"Don't get so excited, Dad," Edith reproved him. "Mr. Swinton only called, not knowing of any orders you may have given Lizzie, and he is leaving immediately."

"What for did he come—that's what I'm arsking, Edie? I'll see you righted, my love. Presumption, that's what it is! I've nothing agin the young fellow, nothing at all. The boy can't 'elp it, but

it's his father—his flambusted, loose-living, titled father! I'd title 'im, not 'arf I wouldn't! Why, the poor young fellow's practically a bastard! What did 'ee come here for, anyhow?"

A strong, determined young voice came from the drawing-room:

"I came to ask your daughter to do me the honour of becoming my wife," it said, "but she has refused me—refused me so positively that I'll be going. There's no more for me to say. As to my being a bastard, Mr. Burne, if I meet you alone outside I'll damn well make you eat your own words!"

"You will, will you? Why, lad, it would be a shame to kill you. You ain't fit to die, you ain't!" roared Burne. "Heaven wouldn't 'old the likes of men of your breeding!"

"If you're there I'll be in better company in the other place, Mr. Burne," replied Bruce, and prepared to go.

Burne turned to his daughter who was preparing to leave them. "So 'ee did 'ave the impertinence to ask you to marry 'im, did he, Ede?"

"I've already told you I did, haven't I?" interposed Bruce. "Miss Burne has definitely told me she won't, so there's no more to be said on the matter."

"Spoken like my own dear gal, Edie. I told your Ma as 'ow you'd do what your old father told you, that I did!"

"It's nothing whatever to do with what you told

me, Dad," Edith informed him. "I don't want to marry him, that's all."

"Hoity-toity! Just listen to the likes of that, now!" a much mollified William Burne retorted. "Well, well! I can make allowances. We all say things we don't rightly mean when we're put out, as the saying is. All right, lassie, I won't be hard on 'im. You can leave us now, my girlie, and I'll show the young fellow out. He saved of your life; I'm not forgetting of it. The boy's good enough—it's his breeding—his dreadful, awful, atrocious breeding!"

Burne stood aside for Bruce to pass out through their front door. Edith left them and went right away—out of the house in the opposite direction to that Bruce was bound to take to the railway station. Burne and Bruce were left alone together.

"Before you go, Mr. Swinton, let's 'ave this out straight and true, man to man. We've both said more than what we mean, I make no doubt, in the 'eat of anger, like. I'm not a 'ard man, I 'ope—leastways, I try to be a decent Christian. It's this way. Don't think I feel any the worse towards you because you threaten to konk me one on the point, so to put it—I don't, far from it, laddie. If I was young as you, nothing would give me greater pleasure than to 'put 'em up' to you. You speak like a man. Also, when you saved my little Edie, sonny, damme, you acted like one! I think more of that little 'un, boy, than what it is possible for you to imagine. I wouldn't have a hair of her pretty 'ead hurt—that I wouldn't. It's because I love 'er so

that makes me particular—if so be as I am particular—so wishful to see her marry good. Now, when I see you was getting soft-like on her, I says to myself, 'All right, let 'em 'ave a good spin together. I like the boy,' I thinks to myself, 'I likes him grand.' Why, damme, young Bruce, when you went for to fetch our gal out of the sea I wished you was our own boy, and so I told the missus. Then you went away, I don't know for why, and I don't care. 'Tisn't ony business of mine. I expect you was studying—travelling to complete your education, like. Anyhow, when you comes back the missus and I could see that there was something amiss, and when the news got to me (as news always does, given time) that your Ma had gone and divorced your father, then, of course, the thing was clear as paint. 'Tain't no fault of yourn, boy. I like you, I own I do. Damme, Swinton, you're a man after my own heart, and I do 'ear as how your engineering work is real good-oh. Well, boy, I wish you well of it. No one don't wish you weller of it than what I do. If Missus was home—but she's gone to Sydney for the day—she'd say the same. She's real proud to know you. But when it comes to marrying—well, it's over, so there's no call for me to rake it up again."

"None at all, Mr. Burne," Bruce put in.

"But, boy, listen to my final words. I know life—I'm no green 'orn. Girls 'ave been known to change their minds. You're a boy among boys—I mean to say, you ain't a boy amongst boys, you stand head and shoulders above most of them. And

that's saying some, for a finer, better-looking, cleaner-living nation of young man'ood as there is in this country"—Mr. Burne's eloquence was beginning to prove beyond his powers—"well, there isn't any better. It isn't me as is saying it—it's recognised, the world admits it—admits it grudgingly at times, but facts is stubborn as asses. You're an Aussie yourself, you ought to know. What gave you your upstanding figure of young manhood, I should like to ask—what gave it you?"

"Australia!" replied Bruce, and the boy flushed as he said it.

"Why, damme, Bruce! Look, lad, I could love you, swop me! But it goes hard to me to see things turn this way, but it 'ad to be. The Almighty planned it all for the best."

"Oh, cut the cant, Sir!"

"Look, boy, in case of accidents—just in case of 'em, understand this: Never again darken these doors. I don't trust you. You're too darned 'andsome by 'arf. Never come here again till the day you can come honourably married in the face of man and God. Then I'll know Edith's safe from you. Never come 'ere again, then, till you can walk in married and till, on top of that, you can tell me, man to man, that I've been informed wrong—that your father is as honourably married to your Ma as what I am to the missus. If you could be in a position to tell me that (whether so be as you did tell me or didn't, so long as you could do so), that day I even give you my sanction for you to take

our Edie. We'll part friends, I 'ope, for I've nothing agin you, boy. I've said it. Haven't I said it?"

"You have, Mr. Burne."

"Well, then, that's understood. The day can't never come—the Almighty pity you!—but if so be it could; if so be as you could tell me on your 'Alfred-David' that you had a honourable father and mother rightly married to each other, that day, without so much as telling me, you may marry Edith if she'll take you. Contrawise, you can come 'ere as a guest and bring your wife with you, to introduce her, like. Why, damme, I'd let you bolt with our gal if only your father's besmudged besmudgment wasn't besmudged! Now, good-bye to you laddie. Thank you again more than I can say for what you did for our dear girl, and give me your promise, like a good man, that you won't never come here again unless you come honourably married to some gal or other and in a position to assure me that you are as honourable a man in the sight of God and Heaven as what I am."

"I see your point, Mr. Burne," replied Bruce Swinton, "and I give you my word of honour I never will."

"Spoken like a man!" ejaculated Burne with a burst, relieved beyond measure that his natural fear that Edith might yet be carried away by the attractions of her lover were at last dispelled. "If only your name could be cleared, boy—but there, it's no use wishing it; it never can, so what's the use of talking? If it could, I'd like you to marry

Edith more'n I can say, and so would the missus. And I've your solemn 'Alfred-David'?"

"You have, Sir."

"Then here's my hand to you, my boy, if so be as you'll take it, and I wish to—I wish I could give you Edith with it."

CHAPTER XXIV.

BUSHED.

BRUCE turned quietly and left him. He went out disconsolate. The boy turned, half unthinkingly, towards the bush where he and Edith had wandered off that day, now so very long ago—the day he told her of his love, and asked her to wait for him. He found the track along which they had wandered, and wistful to see the spot so sacred to him, strolled listlessly on and on. The bush had suffered a bushfire since that day, and the undergrowth was replaced by new growth. Bruce came at length to the spot which most resembled it. His shoe lace had come undone, and he glanced round to find a tree stump upon which to rest his foot the better to adjust the fastening. That one might serve. No, it was alive with ants. He turned three-quarters round. What about that one? No. it was unsteady. Another part turn. Yes, that one had a flat top. He stooped and re-tied the lace, then erect again he stepped forward to return. Funny! North, south, east and west were precisely similar. Which direction was which? Ridiculously simple. Why, he was within ten yards of where he was walking!

And now Bruce was lost. He didn't know it yet, but he would. Oh, yes, he would know it, and so

would the septic crows! He stepped out with quiet confidence following the instinct of direction. But the instinct of direction reposes in animals but in few mortals. All think they possess it—all *feel* they possess it, but they are mistaken in their view.

If your angle be but one degree out, you are not far from home in five minutes. But carry the line on a mile, then measure your distance between the extreme points of the arms of your angle. Bruce wasn't far out, but he was far enough, and before very long he was as hopelessly, as fatally lost as though he had been plumped down into the middle of the Pacific, for it matters nothing whether you be twenty yards from shore or twenty miles, if none are near, and you be no swimmer and the water beyond your depth, you are finished, as Bruce was.

The time came when, following habits of all mankind, Bruce grew panicky, and that began to exhaust him, mentally as well as bodily, for now he was running, stumbling, falling. The time came when a more complete realisation of the real seriousness of his situation asserted itself—his manhood came to his help. He stopped and thought matters out. Making one of many fatal mistakes, his instinct was to mount, mount. Anything but go down. But upwards gets nowhere, whereas down hill, which looks so awful and so dark, so menacing, bog-strewn and hidden, may, perchance, lead somewhere. It may lead to a stream, and streams lead to the inhabitants of man, but mountain heights lead nowhere. So Bruce tramped and tramped, and being right-handed—

or, if you will have it, left-handed—the leg most used (in his case it was the right) strode ever so slightly the longest. And so the fatally bushed victim was making a gigantic left-handed circle. He thought he was walking dead straight—they always do, but never are.

And at night, utterly spent, he fell in his tracks and lay in the thick mountain bush but semi-conscious. At daybreak, refreshed, he was up and on again. He couldn't keep still—had to keep on moving.

No food passed his lips, utterly nothing, and, what was nine hundred and ninety times worse, no water.

About noon on the day following—that is, nearly forty hours since leaving Mr. Burne's home at Orange, and many hours had elapsed between his visit to Edith and his previous meal—Bruce reached an open plateau.

There are many such on the mountains of New South Wales, waterless, shadeless. The spot commanded a superb view, but the man couldn't live on views. He should never have reached there, but he *would* tramp uphill in wide, unconscious circles, away from water, away from rivers, and away from man.

High overhead an eagle saw him and wondered. Lower down several eagle hawks also looked on anticipatory. But lower still the crows began to arrive out of nowhere! They cawed in glee—they were in time. Their victim was still alive. One bolder and heavier than the rest noticed the man

stumbling with weakness as he tried to stagger on —ever on. Good enough! He swooped, but Bruce's sweeping arm caught him. The carrion, of course, had made for Bruce's eyes. Bruce's arm had lost its power, but a human arm is heavy. It caught that crow across its Plimsoll mark and broke its spine, which gave pause to the others. The sight of their leader going back to hell from whence he came was discouraging and disheartening. The crows paused; there was plenty of time. The eagle was a nuisance, he might interfere. They looked up at him. He had been poised, mighty wings outspread, motionless relatively to the earth, but not motionless in air speed. The air currents passing under past him were acting precisely as flying at low speed. At every lull the creature was compelled to change position, to drop, swoop a trifle, to steal from gravity pace, then utilise that pace to ascend, until with the return of the ten-mile breeze he was given a relative ten-mile air speed with which to retain his earth position.

But the bird was acting strangely and uneasily . . . . as though in fear.

CHAPTER XXV.

"PITY IS AKIN TO LOVE."

EARLY on the morning following Bruce Swinton's visit to Orange, and while he was struggling aimlessly through the mountain bush, Edith took train and went down to see her Aunt Florence Tooth at Manly. But first the girl crossed from Circular Quay, Sydney, to Vaucluse, for she had a mind to pay a brief visit to Clare. Edith wanted to unburden herself—to explain, devoid of all detail, her decision not to marry Bruce.

Clare, fortunately, was at home—Clare and her great hound Bruno, the barometer of the household so far as visitors were concerned. Now Bruno was a singularly good judge of character, too dignified and stately to demean himself by attack, but a character worthy of respect for all that. At the worst, Bruno would curl one lip, teeth revealing; it was more than enough, particularly since it was accompanied by a roll of distant thunder—menacing. Unwelcome tramps made speedy exit unharmed except in morale, while tradesmen would deferentially and smilingly hand the monster their basket of fruit, flesh or fowl, which Bruno—if in the mood—would transport inside. If unwilling to act porter, no harm was done. The hound knew an

honest man when he smelt one, and took no stock of clothing. Be the beggar ever so ragged, if his soul was right within him, the dog intuitively appeared to sense it, while the most polished Agency sharper invariably found he had made a mistake in the address. In time the hound Bruno had become a well known character in Vaucluse, and no house was so carefully considered by prospective callers.

Bruno's reception of Edith on the occasion in question was eloquent. It seemed to say, "I know how you feel, young lady. Poor old stick-in-the-mud, then!" and the brute walked by her side with stately introduction to his mistress. It was a moot point with Edith Burne which was her greatest passion—dogs or horses? And now aeroplanes had stepped into the picture. When asked, the girl gave the palm to dogs every time, though one might have been tempted to think otherwise in her father's paddocks.

"Dogs, of course!" Edith would answer any such enquiry. "Why?" "Oh, of course, because they are not only much the most intelligent, but principally because dogs are so unselfish. Horses have great intelligence of instinct, but it's all tummy." She would laugh at this, apologising for her way of putting it. "Look at a cat, now," Edith would go on. "Why does it rub against one? Simply, or at any rate, mainly because it likes the feeling of rubbing. Dogs, on the other hand, are really and honestly fond of you. They love you undeserved, for yourself alone, don't they, Bruno, old boy?"

And if Bruno were present, he would say as plainly as ever dog spake that he was certainly of one mind with her.

Seated in Clare's little library, Edith unbosomed herself.

"Dear Mrs. Swinton," she began, "I felt I had to tell you. Bruce came down to see me at Orange yesterday. You can guess what for, but somehow I can't do it. I can't explain why, you know what we women are, and——"

"I think I understand, dear," Clare said simply. "I'd rather you didn't try to go into explanations. You must do what you feel deep inside you to be best."

"It is sweet of you to take it like that, I——"

"I think it was nice of you to come to me like this, Edith," Clare interrupted. "But are you sure you quite understand my boy? I mean, you are very young yet, you might alter your mind."

Edith turned very pale. "Oh, no, Mrs. Swinton, I don't think—I mean, it's quite final. You see—"

"Yes, I can easily realise how you feel, Edith, but perhaps you don't quite know Bruce. I wouldn't be quite too certain of yourself if I were you, dear."

"But you see, in any case, I mean even if I felt differently about it. Father would always prevent me from marrying Bruce because of his father, you know, Mrs. Swinton."

"Thank you for coming and telling me, my dear," Clare said, "and now there is something I want to ask you. You are the very person, curiously, that I wanted most to see to-day. Your com-

ing in was most opportune. Bruce told me he was going down to Orange. Old people are not blind, you know, my dear, though you younger people so often seem to think we are. But I quite expected Bruce back late last night. In fact, he told me most definitely he would be back unless he telephoned me to the contrary. I've seen and heard nothing of him, and I am beginning to feel quite alarmed. One reads such terrible accounts of things in the papers."

Edith had regained her colour, but now began to lose it again. "How extraordinary!" she said. And Clare noticed the girl sink her head in intense concentration of thought.

"What time did Bruce leave your house, Edith?"

"There was an awful row—it was horrid—but father came in. Then when I thought it was all finished, I went out—right out of the house. I felt I couldn't stand it, so I walked down the road away from the railway station so that Bruce would not run into me again when he left. Then ever so long afterwards, to my horror, because, you see, I thought it would be wiser not to meet again just then——"

"Yes, I see. Go on."

"I saw Bruce coming towards me—away from the railway station, and then he——"

Intent on Edith's face, Clare suddenly stared excitedly at her. She had turned positively green.

"Great God in Heaven! Oh! Oh! Oh!"

"Edith! What is it? Tell me, quick! What is it? Tell me!"

"He's bushed! Do you hear? Bushed! It's fatal! Oh, God!—and all through me. Heavens! what can I do? Oh, God, Bruce! Oh, my own darling!"

Edith flung herself out of her chair. Frigid in her horror she stared into space, thinking—thinking.

Clare stood beside her, a tragic figure, shaking with the horror of it. "Quick, Edith!" she said. "We must 'phone the police at Orange."

"Utterly hopeless—useless. Best fellows anywhere, but you don't realise what you are saying. Yes, we must do it, of course, but it's useless, I tell you—useless. It would take twenty thousand of them to find him in time, and then they couldn't. Black trackers might help, but time! time! time! Oh! it's going so fast!"

Suddenly, dramatically, Edith seized Clare by the shoulder. A loud shriek went out from her, hysterical yet sanguine.

"Habeo, habeo? Oh, God, I have it!" the girl almost shrieked. "Quick, where's your telephone, I want Mascot!"

"Mascot?" Clare stared at her aghast, fearing for her reason.

"Don't stand staring at me there like a stuck boar!" she shouted, scarce knowing what she said, "Mascot, I tell you, Mascot! 'Phone Mascot. I can fly—I'll get him or die! I want your dog. Give me Bruno, Mrs. Swinton. Come with me instantly; bring Bruno. When's the next boat—I must get to Mascot instantly? I'll find him if it kills me. Bruce,

my darling, I loved you all along! Get Mascot, I tell you!"

So Clare got on to Mascot and Edith flung herself at the instrument like one possessed.

"Are you there?" The girl with astonishing suddenness became completely composed. She was Australian—a product of the phlegmatic British race; the most pig-headed lot of never-know-when-they-are-defeated race this world has ever known. All hysteria left her—left her with action. It was thought that killed and action killed thought.

In a quick, clear, calm voice she asked for Captain Hargreaves. "Are you there? Is that Mascot Aerodrome? Miss Edith Burne speaking. I want to speak to Captain Hargreaves or the officer on duty instantly. It's vitally urgent—do you get that? Look, in case we are cut off, my number's—what's your number, Mrs. Swinton? Quick, please!" Clare was at her elbow.

"Vaucluse 25."

"Vaucluse 25 . . . . Is that you, Captain Hargreaves? Miss Edith Burne speaking. Look, I'm on my way to the aerodrome—it's vitally urgent. I want Gipsy Moth 224I got ready without one single second's delay. Is that clear? Yes, I'll be along. What's that? Oh, damn the mechanic, I'll hop off without one; can't possibly wait, my dear chap! Jump to it, now. I'll be over in no time."

Edith turned to Clare. "Never mind about the Orange people; 'phone them after you get back. Come with me, quick, and bring Bruno. He won't come without you—I want him. He'll scent his

master out, and, if we die, at least we'll go together —all three of us."

But it was too late to start that day. Mascot did the impossible, but it was hopeless. Clare returned to Vaucluse, but telephoned first to Orange on her way—to do this and to do that, while Edith lay —and being the creature she was, slept—in an office chair at the aerodrome.

As daylight began to creep in they woke her; pushed breakfast into her under the excuse that the plane would be ready in one hour. Actually it was ready then. Bruno, amazed out of himself, was put aboard with the refreshments—beef tea (fatless), water, and again water—oceans of it!

No mechanics were available under any circumstances. They started her engine, and Edith Burne took the air and headed straight for the Blue Mountains. There they lay, visible from Mascot fifty odd miles away, and Bruno, seasick behind, wished he had never started—wished he had never been born.

The plane lapped up the miles. They were over the mountains and beyond them to others—Edith and Bruno, her lover's dog!

"You love him, you little fool!" she shouted into the screeching wind. But the roar of the engine drowned her voice. She headed dead for her father's home, dropped low to danger point—cool, collected, searching, searching. At times she circled in great spirals, ever searching. But Edith Burne was no fool, she looked ever up as well as down.

The girl was country-bred—she was Australian—she knew her bush.

And then she saw him—saw that eagle for which mainly she had been searching, and made for him as bullet makes for target. The enormous bird of prey felt the pulsations of the plane in the air before he noticed it. A greater than he was on wing. and it behoved him to leave the booty while the going was good. The eagle hawks saw him go in a thunder of steel-strong wings. It was ominous, and like one man they left the field with him. The crows were last to leave, only because their intelligences were slower in the uptake than those of the eagle family. Then they left, and the earth breathed anew.

And now Edith was near the spot, but she saw no Bruce. The eagle had flown off rather soon, leaving his hoped-for victim difficult to find. The plane circled round and round, cleverly covering new fields of vision with each section traversed, and all the time Edith was looking for any possible landing place which gave encouragement as a possibility for taking off again. At last she found it—bumpy, hilly, but cleared. It was some distance from the place in which the girl imagined Bruce to be, and the only possible take-off again would need to be of a totally unusual character, and a more than hazardous one. The aeronaut would need to approach a precipice drop of full three thousand feet at whatever lifting speed the comparatively short run permitted—go right over the precipice, angling volplane fashion, thereby hoping to acquire from

gravity more flying speed wherewith to straighten up and climb before the crash. It was neck or nothing, and Edith, with a prayer on her lips, took the chance offered and landed. Bruno, an airsick animal, was disembarked with difficulty, and instructed to "seek him out, boy! Find him, then."

The huge animal, much below the weather, sat on its haunches gazing at the girl, so peremptorily ordering him about. Most unusual and improper! Bruno cocked one ear up, leant his massive head over sideways in a most comical manner, trying to grasp what the trouble was all about. From the pocket of her leather flying coat, Edith extracted an old cap belonging to the hound's master, which she had snatched up in her tempestuous exit from the house at Vaucluse. She gave it to Bruno to smell. "Fetch him out, then. Good boy! Seek him. Find him, Bruno," she enjoined. At this Bruno became intensely excited. Standing upright he let out a series of deep-throated baying, long drawn-out barks, then setting nose to ground he began to grasp the import of the situation. "Oh! you lovely great monster, Bruno! Seek him, pup; find your master, boy; seek him, boy!"

Then Bruno put nose to air, sniffing the ether. A slight breeze passed them, a few feet from the ground—a typical mountain eddy. The dog grew frantic with excitement, then leapt high in the air to catch it. The monster had imagined he detected in it some semblance of the owner of the cap, but fell to earth again disappointed. Then he recommenced his air sniffing. The ground he evidently

regarded useless from the canine angle. Presently the great hound twisted round then held his nose extended in the air parallel to the ground, pointer fashion. His ears became erect; he was listening. But it was not for his master that he was listening; his keen senses had felt rather than heard in the air the whirring of wings, or something dangerously like it. Then an ear-splitting roar went up from him, and nose to ground he made off at incredible speed in exactly the opposite direction to that which Edith had thought Bruce to be lying.

The girl followed him as best she could, but travelling fully a quarter of a mile through bush and bare mountain top, Bruno disappeared from sight.

The dog burst through some wild wattle bushes, gum suckers and bracken. Lying on the ground, face to sky, Bruce was fighting off two prodigious black crows attacking his eyes. One arm was held rigid covering his face, while the man blindly hammered the air with the other. The game amused the vermin beyond measure. They cawed with chuckling glee at their victim's losing battle, dodging his blind strokes with derision. So intent were they with their sport, that completely hidden in the surrounding bushes they neither saw nor heard Bruno. A violent stroke jerked Bruce's arm away from his face as a massive form hurtled through the air right over him. There was a crunch of steel trap jaws, and one crow went back to hell, while the other, hit a stunning blow by the

passing body, limped off to die sorely broken, and Bruno hoped his death might be a slow one.

Perfectly conscious, Bruce was weak to a degree. Vaguely he imagined a miracle had happened, but through it all a great wonder came to him. The sight of Bruno brought to his hazy consciousness a pulsating sound which the air had held, it seemed to him, from the beginning of time. He put two and two together, and a glimmering of the truth forced itself upon the boy, the while Bruno had seized him by the coat and was deliberately dragging him, and succeeding, with the dead weight, towards the open. "Let go, boy," Bruce faintly ordered the dog. Then, "Speak, boy, speak!" he said.

Now that was a very old trick, nothing clever in it at all! This was no time for parlour games, stern business was afoot. Bruno's whole instinct was to drag the man as far as Edith. He felt her competent to deal with the situation from then onwards. However, men were strange creatures. There was generally method in their madness, which time invariably disclosed—a hidden bone, or an evil character; to account for being ordered here, there and everywhere. So Bruno did as he was ordered, and the mountains echoed with his deep-mouthed baying.

And so Edith came to Bruce whom she loved, and Bruno took a back seat on his haunches and looked on, somewhat disgusted. "Sloppy," that is what Bruno thought it.

And now his master, lying on his back, his head

in the girl's lap which supported it, was sipping some brown concoction. It smelled good—beefy, fatless. Bruno loathed fat, as all sensible dogs do. Ugh! a beastly smell smote his sensitive nasal organ. It came from that thimbleful of light brown rubbish. What filth humans drank when they were ill! Bruno remembered a certain tramp, so offending him by the smell of it, that, noticing the fellow needed support, he gave it him with a flying push right down the hill. The evil smeller never passed their way again. Now that was better. Water. Bruno knew water—knew it by name, too. He had been airsick and was thirsty. He could do with some, too. So he let out a request, and Bruce told Edith what the animal wanted. Bruno was given some. He drank it from Bruce's cap, but had to hurry, the drinking fountain being porous.

"Why didn't you leave me here to die?" enquired a muffled voice.

"Darling, I couldn't. I love you. I want you, my dearest. I've been horrid—I see it all now, Bruce dear. My husband, I want you."

It was really getting too bad, no respectable hound could be expected to take all this sitting down. The dog gave a low murmur. "That means he's hungry. Can you give him anything?"

Newspaper covering a juicy bone saw the light of day. This was Clare's doing, smuggled into the suggestive pockets of the flying coat. "You'll need that, old boy," Edith told him. "You've got some work to do, the stoutest job to which you ever put that back of yours." Then she kissed him on

the top of his head, just like Clare, his mistress, did. Well, now they were beginning to talk sense. No they couldn't keep sane for two consecutive minutes together—they were at it again. Bruno yawned.

Bruce was whispering something to the girl, but his voice was growing in strength all the time. "Darling, I've another confession to make to you. Perhaps when you know it you'll leave me here."

"Oh, dear!" mocked Edith. "Well, and what have you been doing now, sweetheart mine?"

"I never gave you up for a single moment," Bruce told her. "I gave your funny old stick-in-the-mud Dad a promise, and I make it a practice never to break those sort of things, but I was resolved to find some way round the corner. Nothing could ever stop me marrying you. I was meant to from the beginning, though I really thought I was through yesterday and to-day."

Bruno turned his head away in disgust. Utterly hopeless! He was growing disappointed in his master. He thought men were made of sterner stuff, but Edith's curt command as he moved off gave him no reason to change his mind where women were concerned, at any rate. Bruno supposed it was a case of the modern girl again.

"Bruno, come here. Do you hear me? Come here at once!"

Well, there was some sense, some character behind that tone. It reminded him of the old woman whose clothes carried the same smell as this girl's.

She sometimes came to see Clare. He liked her—strong, but devilish unsilent!

"Now, Bruno," the girl was ordering, "You have to carry your master pick-a-back fashion. Heaven knows how you will do it, but you have got to, and so that's all about it. I won't have him dragged, you have got to carry him, and, please God, you can, because my bus won't run in bushes, pup! Do you get that?"

Bruno intimated that he did, but the intimation took on a louder tone when the full weight of his master pressed upon him. The animal had to carry Bruce all the way, with frequent pauses for rest, while Edith held her lover's hand to support and balance him. There must have been something in the mental support, also, because at each halt Bruce set feet to ground, easing his weight from the dog's back. As men go, Bruce was enormous, but being young, there were quite definite limits to his weight. Bruno, on the other hand, was a giant among dogs, and being now full seven years old, there was scarcely any limit to his strength. Further, carrying Bruce (had Edith only known it) had been an occasional trick a la St. Bernard (as Clare called it) ever since they bought him, a fluffy ball of canine sagacity, jumping up to a string-supported bone in a George Street shop window. "What is he—a mastiff?" Clare had enquired of the man. "Well, Mum, he is and he isn't, as the saying is," the man had told her. "'Ere's of 'is pedigree, and the lowest price I can take for that there pup is twenty pounds. Seems a lot. Seems

ridiculous, but wait till you see him develop. Why, 'eed carry you, Mum, that dog would, when 'ee's full grown."

Bruno had licked Clare's hand (the one with the glove off), following which two ten pound notes changed hands.

"I expect you saw me coming," Clare told the man with a smile, "but the pup's a darling, and I must have him whatever he costs."

And now Bruno earned the dividend on the outlay, for ahead of them lay the plane.

But Edith, who didn't know the first thing about engines, and never would, despite all her study, couldn't start it, and that was a serious matter. Particularly serious, since it was incapable of starting until someone who did possess the mechanical bump got inside it with easy familiarity.

The extent of the refreshment which Mascot had smuggled into that small bus was amazing. Perhaps they were thinking of Kingsford Smith and Ulm. Be that as it may, no young girl should leave Mascot in a rush, unaccompanied, without her lifeboat, if Captain Hargreaves knew it. A reconnoitering patrol (furnished by the nose of Bruno) brought to earth many hidden treasures in the food and drink direction when it became realised that they were there for the night. The nourishment and rest would give Bruce time to recover sufficient strength by the following morning to look inside the engine, and, if possible, mend it. But the couple were not over worried, because if Edith's plane failed to return, Mascot would want to know

the reason why, and would take steps (with more voluntary help than they could very well cope with and organise) before you could say knife, or any other short word, to find them. To-morrow morning was good enough. With food aboard and the night being warm, the three of them lay out under the stars, and breathed the gum-tree infected clear Australian mountain air than which this earth contains nothing better. By morning Bruce rose like a giant refreshed. Indeed, Edith had to call Bruno to her aid to restrain him from over exertion. He located the trouble—a most grave one. He had to unscrew a small jet and blow through it. Bruno could have done it—even Edith could, if given accurate diagnosis. Where engines were concerned the girl was no doctor.

But when Bruce saw the precipice drop right in their path and reflected upon the value to him of the pilot, his nerves began to fail him, so Edith lied to him beyond hope of forgiveness, lied concerning the number of yards necessary to acquire lifting speed, and upon precipices as applied to aeronautics in general. To hear her talk one would have thought this take-off was the normal. She practically said it was, but she lied in her pretty teeth. So they got Bruce and Bruno aboard, started the double-bladed propellor, dropped at an alarming angle down the precipice, swooped up again near the bottom, carrying away both wheels, together with the top of a fair-sized gum-tree, before the upward rush. Relieved of the weight of the wheels, the plane made good going. Sydney's skyscrapers,

came into the horizon, and then Mascot, and the extra special edition of the mid-day papers did a roaring trade, for Bruno had become a public character, the adored of all fair Aussie, as he well deserved to be. The plane had landed safely, if heavily, upon its spring skids.

It's difficult to believe, but the stubborness of facts can be accepted as a maxim. William Burne, at Orange, never read anything. He had no time for "that tosh." Enough to do to manage his farm. What was in the papers? Politics, and again politics, and naught else. In any case, no mid-day shockers came to outlying farms near Orange, and his wife, being easily pledged to secrecy, Edith's father remained happy in his ignorance.

But of all the things of which William knew least was that under the stars that night Edith had pledged herself to marry Bruce without her father's consent so soon as it was reasonably possible for them to do so. It might be a year, or it might be two, but her father, at least, should not come between them any longer. She would run away with Bruce if necessary, for he assured her that his promise but prevented him from visiting her at Orange, "setting foot in her house," or facing William until he could, if ever, do so unashamed.

CHAPTER XXVI.

"THE UNCONQUERABLE WILL."

It was summer, and to escape the humid heat of Vaucluse, Clare was putting in three months at her week-end home at Hazelbrook in the Blue Mountains. Bruce had been home with her for Christmas, but had now returned to his bachelor flat in the heart of the city, leaving her alone with Bruno. Between his work in the shipyards and study in his flat, Bruce paid occasional visits to Manly, where, through the sympathetic contrivances of Florence Tooth, the lovers, at all too irregular intervals, could meet.

Clare had been tending her pretty mountain garden, and had gone inside, leaving Bruno out. Picking up an old dated newspaper, with which to cover some flowers, intended evidently for a friend, a piece of shipping intelligence caught her eye. It appeared to vex, and also greatly agitate her. Bruno came inside, and with the intuition of his race, rubbed his nose against her. Something had upset his mistress. The monstrous brute sat down on his haunches and pawed the air invitingly. "Dear old boy, then!" said Clare. "You know how I feel, don't you?" Clare then proceeded to kiss the top of the great head, which, being to

Bruno's mind sufficient consolation for any mortal, he stepped majestically across the little room and out again into the garden.

Presently he cocked up one ear. A huge car was softly purring its way down the lane, the driver occupant on the lookout for some house so far unknown to him.

The car drew up at View Cottage, and Bruno let out a low, deep growl, then stood erect across the path, barring the way. The traveller got down from his car, opened the gate, and with firm, confident tread and the assurance of a demi-god, walked up to the hound. Bruno could have given the *coup-de-grace* to two of him, big though he was. The visitor put out his hand, inviting its prompt amputation, passed the palm of it on to the great lion-like head, and had the audacious effrontery to keep it there. The indifferent fearlessness of it "took the wind out of Bruno's sails," and kept it out.

"Now, you're what I call a dog," boomed a deep, reverberating voice, "there are no half-larks about you. How do you do, old fellow? Glad to meet you."

Bruno recognised a master when he met one, a curious droop of his tail indicated acknowledgment. Slipping his hand down to the animal's neck and exerting a slight forward pressure, Bruno received dumb command that he was expected to do the honours, and effect the introduction. Curious thing, but the feel of this man's heavy hand reminded him of his young master.

Now this was the way of it.

Clare had heard the car draw up at the gate. She had seen whom her visitor was. She had been half prepared for it all these years—at least, she thought she had, but "the best laid schemes o' mice and men gang aft a-gley." Clare saw her hound meet the intruder and deliberately left him to handle the situation as he thought best. The hound's mistress had a high regard for Bruno's psychology, his divination of character.

An awful primeval instinct that Bruno might tear the man limb from limb assailed her, *for females are the most cruel of all the species.* But Bruno wasn't female, and Bruno knew a man's man when he met one, and so the visitor came in unscathed, as unafraid.

Trembling violently, her heart pounding against her side, Clare steadied herself by gripping the back of a chair. The man came slowly up to her, looked deeply, gravely into her eyes.

"I have left India," he said, and waited.

Clare moistened her lips, cleared her throat, swallowed.

"I don't understand what you mean."

"I have left India—for good—for good and for all."

"What is that to me? I fail to understand you."

"I want you—I need you. I have come for you."

"Do you mean——"

"I find it impossible to live without you."

Increasing strength was returning to Clare, the consciousness of it added further to it. "You appear to have succeeded in doing so," she retorted bitterly.

"Clare," the man said, "I don't want to blither. You must put me out of my misery, I have been punished enough. You must marry me again—must! I love you."

He spoke quietly, authoritively. His strong, resonant voice held no tremor. Clare studied him gravely. Yes, it was splendid; she was growing stronger and stronger. Soon she would be strong enough to send him packing, as she had been schooling herself for years to do. Of course he had returned. Clare always knew he must. Men like Sir Bruce Arbuthnot have to be reckoned with always, especially after the manner in which he had wooed her. You can't kill that sort of thing; you can legislate against it, but to legislate is not to immolate—at any rate, it does not necessarily kill. Even if you can, a resurrection is possible, even though it takes a long time in coming.

"Many years ago, Clare," the man went on, "you asked me whether I would have given up my way of living on Goombah for you had it been possible for me to acquaint you concerning it before our marriage. Well, I have given it up—years and years ago, indeed."

"Am I to understand that this is the reformation of the Eastern potentate?" she enquired witheringly.

"You can put it that way if you wish."

"If I cared to consider myself free to re-marry you——"

"There is no 'if' in question. You *must* marry me. I love you so completely that no other alternative is possible."

"You seem very sure of yourself."

"Yes. It's a characteristic fault of mine."

This had gone on long enough. Clare had purposely put that grain of hope that her *coup-de-grace* would sting all the more fatally. No good purpose would be served by prolonging the interview. To do so might spell danger.

"When will you marry me?"

The audacity of the man was becoming unbearable, it was certainly time she made an end.

"Marry you!" Clare said, "marry you! Are you mad? I wouldn't marry you nor any man born of woman again. You see, 'experentia docit'," Clare added with biting scorn. "I know something of men now. I thought them, in my fatuous ignorance, to be decent creatures—worthy a woman's love."

This wouldn't do, she was weakening, verging upon the hysterical. No use trying to make a long speech, a lengthy dissertation upon the male species. She must end it, and end it quickly. But he was speaking again, that strong, self-confident voice was sending out its hypnotic repercussions. It was maddening, awful. She couldn't stand much more of it. Weakening, that was it, giving way. "I love you." "I need you." "You have punished me enough." "Put me out of my misery." Flesh and blood couldn't stand up against it. She was flesh and also blood. He was the father of her splendid, her

naughty boy—and he didn't know it. Dear God! what would he be like when he did know it if he started off like this? Why wouldn't he look away from her? His gaze had nothing ungentle in it, nothing hypnotic; his voice had always held that without outside interference or help. She must look away from those eyes she knew so well—they hadn't altered like his curly hair, now tinged with grey in which the evening lights were already playing. A sudden mad obsession shook her. She wanted to run her fingers through it, comb fashion!

"I love you!" He had said it again, apropos of nothing.

How extraordinarily, exceptionally handsome he was!

Clare took a last hold on herself—it was now or never. "Nothing would ever bring me to marry you again—nothing. Good-bye." Her lips framed and uttered it. Was he deaf? Her decision fell on an empty air, toneless. Was she inaudible? Her refusal had been without effect! What was coming over her—after all her resolutions?

He was speaking again, and now his voice was lower, quieter, but it lost nothing on that account.

"Let this magnificent beast speak for me. What do you call him?"

Now that *coup d'etat* was totally unfair, hitting below the belt. There was Bruno speaking all the time—talking with action, eyes, ears, mouth and tail, completely expressive as only dogs can talk.

"His name is Bruno. I'm rather vexed with him —going over to the enemy like that. I purposely

left him alone when you came in. Bruno is a better judge of character than I am. I—I wanted to see whether he would kill you."

Sir Bruce let out a lion roar of laughter. "Well, ask him now," he said.

The better to cover a growing embarrassment, she did so ask him. "Bruno, what do you think about it all? Tell him we are quite happy and can get along without him—as we always have done."

But the hound was already giving his answer—had, indeed, been giving it all along, and it wasn't what his mistress was instructing him to say. His cool, wet nose was even then boring its exorable way through the tightly clenched fist hanging down there at the man's side. Bruno won through at last, forcing upon himself a caress on the top of his massive head, on the spot which Clare so often kissed.

"There's his answer," remarked Sir Bruce laconically.

Clare glanced down at Bruno and trembled.

"I'm not free to give you my love again, Bruce. I—I have given it to another—another man."

That struck him. He searched her face. Didn't believe it. Sudden enlightenment came to him. The man let out another mighty roar of laughter. "By God! but you gave me a scare, Clare! Of course—the dog. Well, I'll share him with you. We'll hit it admirably, eh, old boy?" He stroked Bruno's responsive nose.

Then he turned to her. "Clare," he said in low caressing tone, "Clare!" His voice now held a quiver—a hoarseness in it. "Darling—my darling, I love you—utterly!" Gently, possessively, without passion but with reverence, he took her into his great arms, looked down into her lovely face, radiant now, turned up to him. "Tell me you will be mine again."

"I can't," said Clare, but no sound came. "No." But her head had gone wrong—it wouldn't shake, her words froze on her lips. She tried again, shook her head violently, but all her muscles seemed gone dumb—numbed. Bruce lowered his mouth over hers, without force. Her eyes closed to his gaze, then her lips came slightly open, and time stood still.

It was at this stage that Bruno, bored to distraction, strolled majestically outside. He went to the car. The smell of it reminded him of his young master away in Sydney. So with a mighty bound he jumped into the limousine. Daylight began to go. Inside he could still discern the figures of his mistress and that other. He yawned, not once, but many times. The conqueror was sitting in an arm chair. Bruno's mistress, her dignity gone to the far winds, sat upon his knee, and then at last they appeared to have arranged all necessary, for she got down and he commenced to say good-bye to her. Many more yawns went the way of the others ere they came together to the door. Clare saw her divorced husband into his car just vacated by the bored hound, and the monster accompanied her back into the house. The man had seemed in a trance, yet did not forget to pat an adieu to Clare's

guardian. "Take good care of her, Bruno," he had ordered, "until I take over from you."

Inside, Clare sat down, took the great head into both her arms, hugging him till he well-nigh choked, then she cried a little, yet smiled through it all. "What will he say when he knows, Bruno?" Clare enquired of the dog, and then half-crying, and half Bruno didn't know what, hugged him again.

"Queer things, women," the dog mused.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE SECOND KNOT.

PURRING its tortuous way up the short Manly hill, a heavy car stopped outside the home of Florence Tooth. She had expected and looked for its coming, having been apprised by Clare to do so, and to keep a silent tongue. The back seat was occupied by Bruno, erect, all important. No one attempted to start that limousine while the two other occupants were out of it, but at this particular house only Sir Bruce alighted.

"Go in alone, darling, and then tell me all about it afterwards," Clare had enjoined him, "and mind you hurry back to me. I'll turn the car to be ready to get way the very second it's over."

The man rang an electric bell, was shown in by Bridget, the maid of all work—sticking, for a wonder, to Florence leech fashion. Florence Tooth came in—grim, tight-lipped, dour.

"How do you do, Mam? I'm Bruce Arbuthnot. Possibly my presence will not be welcome——"

"The fact that you are here is good enough for me, Sir Bruce," retorted Florence. "She has had a rough spin—very rough. I make little doubt you're aware of it, and will make up some lost ground."

"I've been miserable, too, Miss Tooth—wretched. I hope we may both make up the lee-way."

"You are just off to your wedding?"

"That is so; we are due at the registrar's in fifteen minutes. Afterwards we shall put in a few days at Palm Beach. Pretty spot, they tell me."

"Palm Beach?" Florence looked scared. Suppose he ran into his son there—met his own son and didn't know him, nor even that there was such a person! Clare hadn't planned for them to meet in such circumstances at Palm Beach. Bruce often went there.

"You don't look impressed with the place."

"Oh, yes; it's lovely—a recent drowning case there—horrid channel currents—you know the risks—respect them."

"I shan't be surfing," Arbuthnot reassured her. "A little golf, perhaps, to keep ourselves fit. I'm tired, mentally tired. No, I shall keep away from the sharks this holiday, Miss Tooth."

Florence looked relieved. The chances of father and son tumbling into each other were less likely. Young Bruce simply rushed down in his low, sporty two-seater, took his dip, and back again. He might not even visit Palm Beach during the next week or two.

"I'm a blunt man, Miss Tooth. You and I, Mam, do not need to indulge in high-sounding platitudes. I came in to thank you with all my heart for what you have done for me and for mine."

Again Florence looked startled. Had Clare, then, told him?

The baronet gave a laugh. "To tell you the truth, I'm not conversant with what it may be you have done, other than to befriend my first wife, but I understand you have, at personal risk, done her one especial service that she will remember all her life. I do thank you on her behalf, and, therefore, now on mine; with all my heart. If you can stoop to honour so depraved a character as myself, Mam, I came in specially to ask, to urge you to visit us; to consider our front door wide open to you always. We shall be returning home. I'm an Englishman, as you doubtless notice. I'm planning to return to my native country, Devonshire, in the course of a couple of months. Runs up to Scotland. I cherish a most profound admiration for the Scotch, Miss Tooth. Invariably had one or another of them on every garden I ever owned. I've friends up North, as Clare has friends down here. I expect we shall always be rovers. Take a trip home and live with us for awhile. Six months in Devon would, I think, please you."

Florence promised that she would and her visitor left her.

* * * * *

The Registrar's door opened. There entered a man of about fifty-five, together with a lady companion. No uncommon sight for Mr. Registrar. Their car outside was guarded by a massive hound. Many people on The Corso glanced at the car, and many more regarded the hound—but that is as far as they got. The official rubbed bony hands together, scenting business.

The lady might have passed forty, actually she was rather more.

"A singularly handsome pair," thought the Registrar. The official took off his pince-nez, large, hideous, black. The man held them in the air, appraising the pair. They looked good for a substantial gratuity.

The official was not above gratuities. His home held many rising young hopefuls, and Manly breeds healthy appetite.

And then the most authoritative voice to which that Registrar had ever listened—even including a late sergeant-major in the Ypres salient so many years ago — came at him with its definite instruction.

"I want you to marry us."

Well, the official could do that for them; none better, unless it was a church—the new one with the organ bequeathed by a great lover of music raising its proud head in the centre of the Corso, its music a religion to itself. Someone was even now playing it, improvising up and down the keyboards on a theme reminiscent of the lives of these two. Quiet harmony, melodious, beautiful in the centre keyboard, the while a background, now sun-filled, now dark, thunderous and menacing, ran up and down behind them. The theme seemed like this couple, for once it parted against itself to take on two forms, separate yet not unlike, and between them crashed the thunder discordant in its tortuous agony. And then they came together, while in the background the

running notes suggested sun—Australian sun than which the earth holds none better.

"I want you to marry us."

There was good humour in the terse command, vitality of an unusual order came from every pore of him. The official brightened.

"I can do that for you, Sir."

"How soon can you fix us up?"

"Regarding your length of residence."

All such details had been ascertained beforehand and complied with. The matter in hand could be commenced right away. The applicant handed something over. "May I ask you to accept something—your private gratuity—with the fee in advance?"

"My *dear* Sir! My very dear Sir! Really, too magnanimous. Thank you, really—unnecessarily liberal."

The official waited, pen poised. "Now, Sir, may I have your name, please?"

"Sir Bruce Marley James Logan Arbuthnot, Baronet."

The Registrar wrote it down; he wrote it all down, and his hand shook. What a tale to take home to his wife, plus that new carpet they wanted so badly! He wondered whether it would run to the fur coat for his better half in addition. No, hardly that, unless she would rather have one of those coats selling off at the sales in lieu of the carpets under similar discount.

"Age, Sir Bruce?"

"I'm fifty-five."

"My dear Sir, never! You carry your age remarkably well, Sir Bruce."

"Go on, man!" ordered the baronet. "We want to get this over."

Snubbed, the pince-nez were replaced.

The lady's turn came. "Your name and age, Madam?"

Clare told him.

"Spinster?" queried the official.

"Her first husband is dead," interrupted Sir Bruce tersely; "dead and buried. Died a natural death out in India."

The official gasped astonishment. The baronet, now smiling, possessed dry humour.

"Widow? But you said, Miss—er—what name was it now?" Shakily he referred to his entries and notes.

The lady turned to her companion. "Whatever am I, darling?" she enquired.

The Registrar put down his pen. He wiped agitated glasses. The gratuity had been unnecessarily generous, and now this! Was there some irregularity? He hoped that carpet wouldn't have to be forfeited. He could pass no irregularity, neither for baronets, nor for earls, for that matter.

"It's this way, you see," Sir Bruce began. "The lady's first husband is dead."

"Widow," the official began to write.

"Do please explain it to him, Solomon, dear," Clare said.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE MAJOR AND THE MINOR.

THEIR second honeymoon was over. To be exact, it was just beginning, because some moons refuse to wane. Clare and her second husband—the husband who so resembled her first—had repaired to their country home at Hazelbrook—her home and his—which Sir Bruce preferred to Vaucluse. Passing through Sydney on their way up from Palm Beach, Clare announced that she had an important appointment, and leaving Bruce in the room of the Overseas League, she met Bruce the lesser. He agreed to come up and see his father at the time his mother named, and the stage was accordingly set for the meeting.

Sir Bruce was standing with his back to the empty open fireplace, watching Clare and Bruno in her garden. Clare appeared to be apologising to her flowers for her short absence from them, when the sound of a powerful sporting two-seater was heard approaching. Clare disappeared from sight, and he could just hear her voice speaking to the driver, who had pulled up opposite View Cottage. He distinctly heard his wife say, "Will you?" and then, "You darling!"

With quick, athletic tread a very tall and

powerful young fellow came directly into him. He strode straight up to his father, for all the world as though he meant to kill him. For a fleeting instant Sir Bruce thought the intruder intended striking him. Looking the senior man fiercely in the face, the younger measured him. Sir Bruce's hands remained tucked away cosily in his trouser pockets. Ever so slight a suggestion of an astonished amusement played about his lips as he answered the boy's look with a quiet gaze of incredulous wonder.

Then the younger man's eyes softened, changed in spite of themselves. A most curious look of some degree of yearning came into them.

"How do you do, Sir?" he said. Bruce spoke as though some inner instinct compelled him to do so—forced it out of him, willy-nilly.

"I'm afraid you have the advantage of me," the father replied, and the two men stood gazing each at the other.

"Who are you, anyhow?" enquired Sir Bruce at length.

"My name's Bruce."

"Now, that's odd; so is mine."

"I know."

"You appear very much at home here, if I may say so."

Bruce laughed. "Exactly what I was thinking about you," he replied. Too astonished for words, Sir Bruce let out:

"I don't know who the hell you are, but I must own I like the look of you, my boy." The baronet held out his hand which his son took, and so for

the first time the two shook hands, and the baronet, who took great stock of people's idiosyncrasies in hand shaking, noticed that the boy adopted his own method of action in that direction.

"I like your handshake, and I like the look of you," Sir Bruce began, but the boy cut him short.

"It's more than I can say for you," he threw back with undisguised anger. But he didn't mean it, he was a damned young liar; he liked the look of him, the way he shook hands, and every conceivable thing about him. It was evident that he did; it came out in his eyes. He liked the man—liked him damnably, couldn't help himself, and Sir Bruce Arbuthnot, baronet, knew that he did. It was odd, very odd. The boy was so angry with him that he could well nigh kill him, yet he liked him, too. Sir Bruce wasn't sure the young fellow didn't actually love him. Curious—very, very curious.

"What is your surname, Bruce?"

"I don't know," came from the future baronet. Then, "Ask your wife."

Sir Bruce gazed at him amazed. Then he shot out his arm and clapped his hand on his son's shoulder. The boy followed suit, hypnotised into it. They were well matched, alike as two peas in a pod; the elder like a broad old oak, the younger lithe and willowy. Yet a tension was in the air—the younger man was spoiling for a fight. All the pent-up emotion of years of disadvantage, handicap brought about solely by the other's misdeeds, gripped him. He wanted to lash out at the other,

smash him up, spoil his good looks. A step sounded behind them, his darling mother. What an unhappy life had befallen her lot! Bruce sprang away. He dropped his young arms to his sides, clenched his capable hands into two balls of hate. His face became suddenly suffused with passion, and Sir Bruce's son was dangerous at that moment.

He stepped forward, threateningly. "For two pins I'd knock your bloody head off!" the boy let out.

But no one appeared ready to put up the stakes —there were no pins forthcoming to offer. Bruno, indeed, put his head in at the door but thought better of it, and disliking a scene, backed majestically out again. The head of Sir Bruce remained very much in place. Then, with a great wonder, he let out a mighty, deep-throated roar of laughter. It went out by the window and hit some kookaburras squatting up there upon the dead branch of an Australian eucalyptus gum-tree. It was an infectious laugh, and those darlings of Aussie melted into it. They took it up, yelling it crescendo, with quaverings which carried to others further off, to be copied by them. Evidently there was great fun in the air somewhere or other. The kingfishers laughed, till needing fresh inspiration from their conductor they stopped and listened, as is at times their wont, but all was now silent from the window, so instead they busied themselves with watching closely a new patch of recent digging in Clare's garden.

But the laugh found no response in young

Bruce. Still, something in it caught him—caught him by the throat, as it were. He turned, saw his mother, and his face lit up. He was good to look at like that, and Sir Bruce was alive to it—had been alive to it from the very first instant he had first set eyes upon him.

Clare came forward, her eyes alight.

The boy held out both arms to her; he even took her into them, and then he bent down and kissed her.

A bellowing roar went up from the fireplace.

"Who the hell are you, anyhow?" it enquired.

"Tell the rotter, sweetest," Bruce said, then left them together. But Sir Bruce Arbuthnot needed no telling—he knew. You could see that he knew. There it was, writ plainly upon his face, transfigured with a joy immeasurable. And the man was good to look at then—very, very good.

"And so that is my heir," he said. "That is what has kept you young all these years. By heaven, what a boy! It's as well for you I didn't know before; you would not have been left in such undisputed possession of him." Sudden passion shook the giant. "Dear God, how I love you!" he said, and with more reverence than force crushed Clare to him.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE END IS BUT THE BEGINNING

An invitation reached Edith at Orange to run down to Manly and put in three weeks with her old Aunt. The least surprised person at the length of the proposed stay was Edith herself. This is not to be wondered at, in view of the letter having been carefully dictated to Florence beforehand by both the lovers in unison standing, hands locked, behind her chair.

It was one thing to marry clandestinely, but quite another to cause any real anxiety to her parents concerning their daughter's whereabouts, and at the time of the letter's dictation, two tickets for passage to Hobart by the s.s. *Zealandia* reposed in young Bruce's voluminous pocket case; the first covered that for himself and wife, and the other for his car.

And then, the plan of campaign being set, Bruce took car for the coast. He was accompanied by Edith, whom he had picked up outside Orange railway station, where her taxi had put her down.

And upon the following morning, at the fine new church in The Corso, boasting its splendid organ, Bruce took Edith for better or for

worse. Only Florence looked on, but her benign benevolence of expression made amends for that.

It was after they had been touring the island State for two and a half weeks, and were about due to leave for home again, that Bruce asked his young wife:

"Darling, do you regret having taken the step and marrying me against your people's permission?"

"Why, no, goose," Edith assured him. "You know I don't. Of course, I am awfully sad you couldn't get Daddy's sanction, but as you couldn't, well——"

"And if you had your choice over again you would do the same?"

Edith kissed him by way of answer to that. Then, with feigned wistfulness, she enquired: "But why do you ask, husband? You know, don't you?"

"I wanted to put you to the trial," Bruce told her, "before I told you. We have not married against your old man's permission at all; I obtained it."

"Bruce! Why, you clever old darling! However did you do it?"

And then for the first time he told her—told her all about his father's return and everything connected with it. And the country lane being empty of anything but themselves, Bruce had, perforce, to draw in to the side of the road lest his wife's reception of the news spelled mishap to their car.

"Father wishes me to take him and Mother to see your people directly we return," he told her.

"He says it is only right that he should meet your parents before we sail for England."

"Scotland, you mean," she said, giving his arm a squeeze. "I wonder what Glasgow will be like? Do you know, I'm looking forward most to the time when your two years on the Clyde are up, and with your father's financial interest behind you, you——"

"Get the British mails out to Aussie in three weeks," he interrupted her with a laugh.

And an attractive old English type inn offering hospitality nearby, they elected to travel no further that day, and were soon chatting gaily, between mouthfuls, of the "scream" of the coming visit to Orange.

CHAPTER XXX.

ORANGE BLOSSOM

MR. AND MRS. WILLIAM BURNE were seated in their drawing-room discussing the early return of Edith from her three weeks' stay at Manly when the visitors were announced.

Into the room, like an overwhelming avalanche, filed Bruce and Edith, followed by Sir Bruce, Clare, and, to guard against any untoward contingency, Bruno—a stately figure arrayed in a new collar, brass studded, for the auspicious occasion, in the background.

Burne sprang to his feet.

"Well, of all the——" he began, but Bruce's strong young voice cut in:

"I took the liberty to act upon your permission, Sir," he began, "and having as honourably married a father and mother as Edith, to marry her."

"You what?" Burne screamed. "What's all this I'm listening to, Mother?"

"Really, William, dear," Mrs. Burne replied, "I think you might give the boy time to explain."

Burne looked up at Sir Bruce. Never had he seen such a man! "Well," he said, grudgingly, "I'll say this, they breed men where you come from, Sir, whoever you may be."

And Sir Bruce looked down on him with a tolerant smile of good humoured amusement, but said no word.

"Allow me to introduce my parents to you, Mr. Burne. You have already met my mother; this is my father, Sir Bruce Arbuthnot."

"But—but you ain't married, that what you're not."

"Oh, dear me, yes he is," came Clare's voice from the background. "Aren't you, darling?"

"You'll find there is no doubt about that, Mr. Burne," the baronet assured him.

"But—but——"

"But, Daddy," came from Edith, "perhaps, dear —I only say perhaps, you know—you may have been listening to a lot of idle gossip that didn't concern you?"

"Well, so I may, Edie, my girl; so I may. Dang it, I always liked the lad!"

"And we may shake hands, may we, Burne?" enquired Sir Bruce.

For one moment the farmer hesitated, then his whole instinct (always going out to a real man when he met one) melted like snow under a Darjeeling sun.

"The Lord's name be praised!" he said. "Glad, I could cry with it. Shake? Too true I'll shake, Sir Bruce, and here's my hand upon it!"

It was at this juncture that Florence Tooth elected to make her appearance.

"So you're wrong again William, eh?" she rasped out. "Confess it and make amends."

"Ah! Florence," he said, "and glad to be wrong at that. You're in this or I'm a Dutchman. Well, girl, it's good enough to quit hating on, this is. Who'd 'ave thought it now? The boy's got a decent father and mother—parents to be proud on. Why, Florence, my gal, I could hug you this blessed minute, that could I!"

Her feelings worked up, slightly emotional, Florence Tooth volunteered:

"You can kiss me if you like, William."

"Well, I'll be flambusted!" ejaculated that worthy. "Mother, did you hear that, now?"

"Go on, William, kiss your sister-in-law, do!" said Mrs. William Burne.

EPILOGUE.

A LONG, low, powerful car purred its tortuous way up the red Devonian lane. At the right sat a youngish man at the wheel, by his side a curly-headed youngster of about six. The dicky seat at the back was occupied by a lady to whom the boy in front bore unmistakable resemblance, and a girl about two years the boy's junior. The girl resembled her father almost as much as the boy took after his mother.

The sports model overtook a party of yokels returning, like the car, from the seafront—a portion of coast occupied with much hammering and clatter. The car slowed down to the merest crawl, giving elbow room to the yokels. All doffed their caps, and, judging from the expression upon their rugged, sun-tanned faces, the car's answering salutation was all that they could wish, while concerning the looks upon the faces of those being carried, they were good—they were very good to see.

Coming towards them a heavy limousine drew up, exchanging conversation with those within the racer. Some agreement having been satisfactorily settled between them, both the children jumped down, then joined an enormous hound in the back

seat. The animal had been sitting erect there, "lord of all he surveyed."

The lady in the sporting car took the front seat vacated by the boy, and with a wave to the children the car resumed its way.

"We'll bring them back before six," the yokels heard their "lady of the manor" promise, and the limousine purred past them seawards. At its wheel sat the squire, a giant of a man. The yokels eyed him with adoration as he accompanied his wife's nod and smile with a sympathetic toss of his great head. He couldn't raise his hat, since like his Australian son and British grandson, he rarely affected one.

The yokels exchanged glances. Said one:

"What's squire been up to down village?"

"They do say as 'ow Jarge 'ad 'is boat a'stoved in," another suggested, by way of likely explanation.

"Stoved in! Why, dang it, weren't it knocked to smithereens?"

"Noa, but so be Jarge can't use un, 'e'll get another. There be no call to waste pity on Jarge."

"What takes my lady up village?" yet another countryman made enquiry.

"They do say as 'ow farmer Jinks' missus was took sudden't. That'll make twelve!"

"Ay! Squire do say if so be my missus beat 'er, 'e'll pay I fiver."

This brought forth a roar of laughter.

"When's christening day?" enquired a rising young hopeful, referring this time to the shipping

yards, but reminded of it by the turn of the conversation.

"Toosday. A waste o' good wine, so it be!"

"Orstralia in three weeks. If so be she does it, young squire 'e'll give I a tanner."

"Tanner's safe, Ben. Three weeks. Corse Arbuth II. 'll do it!"

"Ay, so will she. Southampton to the 'arbour in twenty-one days!"

"What's latest tag down village, Jarge?"

"They do say as 'ow sight of my lady's face 'ud drive rheumatiz out o' Biddecombe."

"Ay, so would it. Dang it, 'ud turn us into a blinkin' spa!"

"Without the water. Ha! ha! But we 'ave the inn."

" 'As onyone 'eard latest tag 'bout squire?"

"Cough it up, Biddy."

"They do say as 'ow th' hexpression on squire's mug 'ud drive devil out o' 'ell. So they do."

"Ay, so would it," chorused the Devonian yokels, "und keep of 'im out."

* * * * *

Walking with lithe, brisk, self-confident stride, an alert figure came rapidly down the arrival platform at Biddecombe. Indicating her bulky suitcase, the weight of which the incomer made vain attempts to hide, a porter deferentially touched his hat.

"Fiddlsticks!" ejaculated the passenger with a burst, then made to pass on. Scrutinising the man's astonished face, she enquired sharply:

"How many children have you? Tell me that!"

The porter beamed. "Ten come Sunday last, lady," he gave her.

"Poor, long-suffering fools," the traveller muttered quietly to herself, then on louder note: "Here, don't stand there gaping. Take hold, then get me a taxi immediately. I want to get out to the Arbuthnots and surprise 'em."

Very good'm. The Baronet's 'all, lady?"

"Bless and save the man! No. Mrs. Bruce Arbuthnot's house. What should I want with the other. Tell me that!"

In the distance a house showed up, and looking from her taxi's window the voyager espied a figure. Suddenly she drew out a handkerchief, carefully applied it to the corner of one eye, viewed the effect upon her silk, then sniffed angrily.

"Florence," she said, "you're a fool!"

At the gate an enormous hound strode majestically forward: sniffed her, appraised her, remembered her. A capable, prim, gloved hand passed understandingly over the massive head, then softly caressed a silky ear.

"What are you doing here, anyhow, Bruno," the animal heard. "This is no place for you, my dear. You're an Aussie like me. For two pins I'd take you back with me to Manly."

Bruno—on a day's visit from Clare's house—looked suitably impressed.

There came a rush of children's feet, then busy at her orders with the contents of a heavy suitcase, they left her in other hands.

Disengaging her embrace with Edith, the Australian held out her hand to a tall young man who now came forward.

"I never thought your wife exactly pretty," came crisply from his guest, "but I'm bound to confess I'll have to concede you an alteration in my late view. How do you do, Boy? I hear you're doing wonders."

Holding her later in her embrace, Edith felt a sob escape the alert body.

"Why, Auntie," she said, holding her at arms' length, the better to view her, "You're—you are *almost*——"

"Stuff and nonsense!" exploded the guest. "Rubbish, Edith! Fiddlesticks! Don't tell me!"

THE END.

Alec A Deer
1st August '33.

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