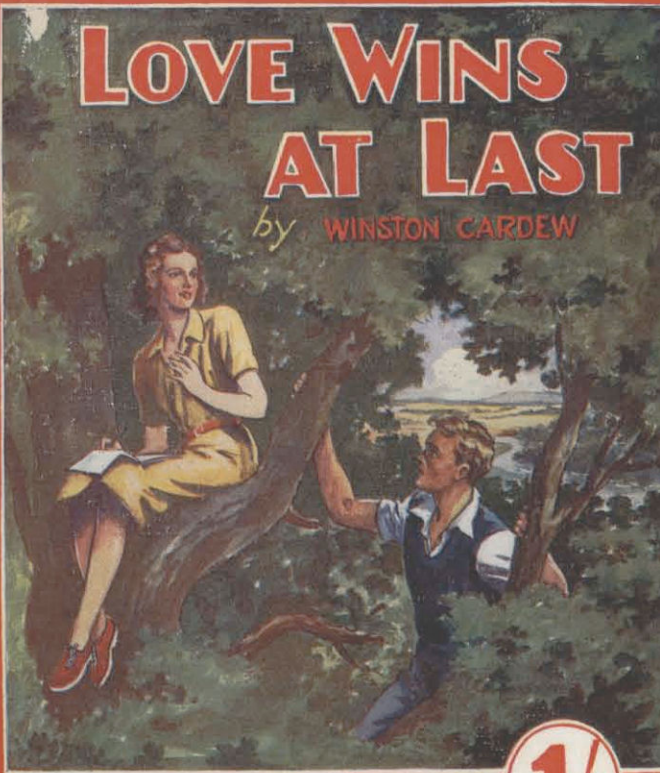


ROMANCE SERIES No. 3

LOVE WINS AT LAST

by WINSTON CARDEW



AN UNEXPECTED MEETING

1/-



LOVE WINS AT LAST

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CHAPTER THE FIRST

TWO IN A TREE!

"HA, ha, ha!"

It was a trill of merry laughter.

Cynthia could not help it. The young man looked so very astonished!

He was slim, but looked strong; he had a tanned, good-tempered face, and a tangle of fair hair that blew out in the wind—he wore no hat. Moor Hill was steep, but he came up the rugged path with a springy step, and reached the summit, where the great oak grew.

He did not see Cynthia Caryl, for the simple reason that she was seated in the oak's thick branches, fifteen feet up. Naturally, the young man supposed that he was alone on the hill-top.

Cynthia saw no reason why she should enlighten him.

He was welcome to pause on the summit of Moor Hill, admire the widespread view of fields and woods and shining river, and then pass on his way. Moreover, Cynthia had other and more urgent matters to think of. Wedged securely in a forked branch, she had a writing-pad on her knee, a fountain-pen in her hand, and she was writing a letter—which consisted, so far, of the words "Dear Michael."

Further than that she had not been able to get, during the half-hour she had sat perched in the oak. She wrinkled her pretty brows, and rubbed her nose, in vain—what she wanted to write, just would not come!

It was not, in fact, easy to write to the man to whom she was engaged, and tell him that she had decided not to marry him!

Such a letter required thought—and tact. Indeed Cynthia wondered whether she would ever get it written at all.

The young man stood under the tree, just below. He did not look up, but she could see part of his face. It amused her to see that he fancied he was there in utter solitude; while all the time there she was, perched over his unconscious head.

Certainly, it was not a sort of thing for a girl of nineteen to perch in a tree, like a schoolgirl tomboy.

But Cynthia had not expected company on that lonely hill-top, that bright sunny morning. And it was very shady and comfortable in the tree. And she had always liked climbing trees, ever since she was a little kid.

She supposed that the fair-haired young man would walk on. But he didn't—he just stood there, gazing at the widespread scene. And Cynthia, disregarding him, turned to her unwritten letter again.

She had to write to Michael Trent. She had come out that morning determined to write to him, and post the letter at the village post-office as she went back to lunch.

So, heedless of the young man below, she began again, and the fountain-pen scratched on the paper—but the ink had failed!

When the ink fails in a fountain-pen, a shake will often restore the circulation. So Cynthia shook the pen.

Evidently there was still ink in it; for the shake scattered a shower! And there was a sudden, startled exclamation from below!

It was then that Cynthia laughed. Three or four ink-drops

from the shaken fountain-pen had fallen on the young man standing below. One landed on his nose, and in great surprise, he dabbed it with his hand, changing a blot into a smear!

His expression of astonishment, as he gazed at inky fingers, was really almost idiotic. Never had a man been so utterly taken by surprise. A sudden fall of rain-drops would have been surprising, on that fine, cloudless morning. But a sudden shower of ink was absolutely inexplicable. It was really no wonder that Dick Forrester was astonished.

"Ha, ha, ha!" came in a musical trill from the thick foliage high over his head: and the fair-haired young man gave quite a jump, and stared up.

As his face was upturned, Cynthia had a full view of the smear across his nose, and she laughed again. She, if not he, could see how comic it was.

"Is there somebody up that tree?" called out the young man sharply. He could not see Cynthia. She could see him through an interstice in the thick foliage: but if that little opening had caught Dick's eye, he would have seen nothing but a small section of a laughing face. He seemed a little angry; evidently under the impression that some practical joker hidden in the tree had been playing tricks on him.

"Hi! Who's up there?" exclaimed the fair-haired young man, as Cynthia did not answer. "What the dickens do you mean by hiding in a tree and chucking ink about, you young rascal? Come down and have your ears boxed."

Cynthia gurgled with merriment. Obviously, the fair-haired young man supposed that it was a boy in the tree—some skylarking schoolboy.

"Funny, is it?" went on the young man, as that gurgle reached his ears, "It may seem funny to you, you young scamp. It won't seem so funny when I boot you for your silly tricks."

Dick Forrester paused, like Brutus, for a reply. But like Brutus he paused in vain. There was no reply from the oak tree. Cynthia laughed again—that was all the reply the young man received.

"Will you come down?" he shouted.

No reply.

"If you don't, I'll come up, and smack your head."

"Ha, ha, ha!" shrieked Cynthia.

She could not quite see that nice-looking young man smacking a girl's head. But of course he did not know that it was a girl in the tree—obviously never dreaming of anything of the kind.

"By gad!" Dick Forrester was a good-tempered young man. Among his friends his good temper was a proverb. But he was angry now. His face was smeared with ink, and the young scamp who had done it was merely laughing at him. That young scamp needed a lesson on the subject of playing tricks on unwary strangers, in Dick's opinion. "Mind! I mean it! I'll come up after you, if you don't come down and take your gruel, you unmanly young sweep."

Cynthia opened her red lips to speak—but closed them again. She was getting quite interested now—wondering what the fair-haired young man would do, if he did climb the tree, and found—not a skylarking schoolboy—but a young lady of nineteen perched therein. She remained silent, and gave him his head, as it were.

He was in earnest. As there came no reply, he turned to the gnarled old trunk of the big oak, and grasped it with supple hands, and clambered. This took him out of Cynthia Caryl's line of vision: but she could hear the scraping and rustling as he climbed into the oak, actively and swiftly.

Her heart beat a little faster, as the foliage swayed and rustled round her.

He looked, undoubtedly, a nice young man—but suppose that he was not so nice as he looked—and it was plain that he was angry! She had been giddy and thoughtless—Uncle George was

quite right in saying that she never could be serious. She decided to call out apologetically to the angry young man.

But it was too late. A hatless head came up through thick oak foliage, and two startled eyes stared at her. Dick Forrester almost lost his grasp on the branches in his amazement. His eyes popped, and his mouth was open—he fairly gaped at Cynthia Caryl.

"Oh!" he gasped.

One look at his amazed and dismayed face, at close range, was enough to reassure Cynthia. There was no harm in that young man. All his anger had vanished, giving place to dismay and confusion.

"Sorry!" said Cynthia politely. "It was quite an accident, spilling ink over you. I just shook my pen to see if there was any ink in it, and it happened. I'm awfully sorry."

She did not look awfully sorry. She was no longer laughing, but her dark eyes danced with merriment. The young man's crimson confusion was even funnier than the smear of ink on his nose.

"I—I—I—I!" stammered Dick. "I—I never knew—I—I supposed it was some silly schoolboy larking—why didn't you answer? then I should have known——" His face was burning. "You ought to have answered me, you know."

"Of course!" agreed Cynthia. "But I never do as I ought. It was so amusing to see you in a temper."

"Was I in a temper?"

"You looked infuriated."

"Oh, come, not so bad as that," remonstrated Dick Forrester. "Perhaps I was a little annoyed."

"Are you going to smack my head?" asked Cynthia, demurely.

Dick was already crimson. Now he grew, if possible, a little redder.

"Please excuse me," he stammered. "If I'd known—— But how was I to guess that a young lady was fifteen feet up in an oak tree?"

"You couldn't!" assented Cynthia, "especially as it's so unladylike to climb trees. Are you fond of tree-climbing?"

"Well, I was once," admitted Dick. "I rather chucked it after my schooldays, though. Is it your favourite amusement?"

"Not exactly. But there was nobody here, and I wanted a comfortable seat to write my letter. I've got a wretched letter to write, and it just won't come," said Cynthia, confidentially. "I just can't think of a word."

Dick smiled. He was recovering a little now from the shock.

"Perhaps I could help you?" he suggested.

He drew himself on a branch, and took a comfortable seat, smiling from green foliage. He was not aware that he looked in the girl's eyes, boyishly handsome! but he was very keenly aware that this unknown nymph of the oak tree was amazingly, entrancingly pretty.

A few minutes ago he had never seen her, or known that she existed: now it seemed to him that the light of the sun would fade for him, if he took his eyes from that bewitching little face. Never, in all his twenty-three years, had Dick Forrester's eyes lingered long on a woman's face. But it comes to all at last: and it had come to him.

Cynthia shook her head. The incident of the young man had been amusing: but she realised that she did not know him, that she had never seen him before, and that this would never do. What, for instance, would Uncle George have said? She could imagine Colonel Caryl's looks—and words!

"Thank you," she said. She could not help smiling.

"But——"

"I'm pretty good at letter-writing," said Dick. "At school, I often wrote the letters home for other fellows."

"But I don't know you," said Cynthia, shaking her head.
"That's easily remedied. I'm Dick Forrester. Nobody in particular—but nearly related to a baronet, if that counts for anything."

Cynthia laughed.

"Late of the Loamshire Fusillers, demobbed six months after the end of the picnic," added Dick. "A very respectable, and indeed estimable, young man, brought up very carefully by a good aunt."

She laughed again. The fair-haired young man was amusing—apart from the smear of ink on his nose.

"And you—to complete the introduction, and put everything on a perfectly proper footing——!" said Dick.

She hardly knew why she answered, but she did.

"Cynthia Caryl!" she said.

"What a lovely name!" said Dick Forrester. "Now we know one another quite well. May I remain a little longer in your tree, to improve the acquaintance?"

"If you don't fall!" answered Cynthia. She became a little grave. "I oughtn't to be talking to a stranger like this——"

"But I'm not a stranger now that we've been introduced," urged Dick.

"Nonsense!" said Cynthia, decisively. "But after all, we shall never see one another again, so what does it matter? You will forget my existence, and I shall forget yours, in a few hours' time."

"Will you?" asked Dick, and he was grave too.

"Of course," she answered, indifferently. "Why not? But I've told you that I've got a letter to write—it's frightfully difficult, and I'm determined to write it before I go back to Holly to lunch——"

"And I've told you that I am going to help you."

"Bosh!" said Cynthia.

"Try me!" urged Dick. "If the trouble's spelling, I'm a whale on spelling, and can tell you how many K's there are in cat at the first shot."

"It isn't! I've a good mind to tell you," said Cynthia, looking at him meditatively from her branch. "I can't ask Uncle George, for he would only fly into a fearful temper at the idea of it. I can't ask anybody else, for it's a very delicate matter. Why not ask a stranger whom I shall never see again? Of course, I shall tell you no names, so you'll be none the wiser." She paused a moment, and her cheeks dimpled, her eyes dancing. "Yes, I'll tell you, and you shall help me write the letter—if you know how. It's not easy."

"I'll make the grade!" assured Dick. "What's it about?"

Again she paused, and a spot of colour came into her cheeks. For a long moment her hesitation lasted. Then, her eyes dancing again, she said:

"How would you write to a man—supposing you were a girl and were engaged to him—telling him that you want him to break it off?"

CHAPTER THE SECOND

THE COMPLETE LETTER-WRITER!

DICK FORRESTER gave a jump. The branch upon which he was seated swayed, and the oak leaves rustled. He stared blankly at Cynthia.

"Engaged!" he ejaculated.

He glanced at the slim hand that held the blotting-pad on her knee. There was no ring on it. Then he looked at her face again.

He hardly knew why the word "engaged" had come as a shock to him. But it had. Was there anything in the stuff he had read in romances about love at first sight? If not, why did it matter a boiled bean to him whether this slip of a girl was

engaged or not? Dick Forrester hardly knew; but he knew that the word had given him an unpleasant jolt, relieved only by the added words that she wanted the man, whoever he was, to break it off. He was conscious of a fervent wish that the man would do so.

"Engaged—yes!" She nodded. "Have you ever been engaged?"

"No!" said Dick.

"You're older than I am," she said, regarding him critically. "You've had lots of time. Why haven't you?"

"Never even thought of it. Not in my line at all," he answered. "You speak as if you've made a habit of it. How often have you been engaged?"

"Only once," said Cynthia, laughing. "But once is enough—and a little too much. I'm fed up—after only a week of it, too!"

Dick Forrester was glad to hear it. He did not dare to say so. The girl seemed quite at her ease, singular as the situation was—both of them sitting on branches in a massive old tree, far above the ground. She talked to him as simply as if she had known him for ages, with the calm innocence almost of childhood.

Yet—little as he knew of women—he could see, without a doubt, that there was a shy reserve in her—that a single word or gesture of familiarity would scare her away from him like a frightened bird. He dared not even let her know how lovely he thought she looked framed in the foliage. Some time—later—when he knew her better—and he was resolved that he was going to know her better—he would tell her how she had taken him by storm almost at sight. But his cue now was friendliness restrained by respect—not a word, or a glance, that might awaken her distrust.

"You don't seem very prompt with advice," said Cynthia.

"I've got as far as 'Dear Michael'—"

"Michael!" repeated Dick. "That's rather a nice name—I've got a cousin named Michael, a splendid chap."

Cynthia gave a little shrug of shapely shoulders.

"My Michael's not a splendid chap—or if he is, I've never noticed it," she answered. "He makes me tired."

"Yet you're engaged to him!" said Dick, puzzled.

"Oh, lots of reasons for that!" said Cynthia, lightly. "Uncle George was the chief reason. He practically settled it. He will be as mad as a hatter when I break it off. In fact, I dare not break it off. I couldn't face Uncle George if I did. I want Michael to break it off."

"Well, if he's a decent chap, and knows how you feel about it, he will do that fast enough," said Dick.

"He is a most frightfully decent chap," said Cynthia. "I've no doubt whatever that he's too good for me—much too good. But—a little dense. Men are often dense, as I dare say you may have noticed."

"Often and often!" said Dick, gravely.

"I've given him hints on the subject," said Cynthia, wrinkling her brows. "He seems rather to take Uncle George's view that I am a silly kid. I'm nineteen!" added Cynthia with dignity.

"A serious and sedate age!" agreed Dick. "Almost venerable, in fact."

"Old enough to know my own mind, at all events," said Cynthia. "But I can see that you don't know how to put it to Michael, any more than I do."

"Oh, yes, I do!" declared Dick. "What about this—'Dear Michael'—"

"I've got that already!"

"Give a fellow time to speak!" remonstrated Dick. "'Dear Michael, I am sorry to have to tell you that, thinking over our engagement, I have been forced to realise that it is a mistake.'"

Cynthia's face brightened.

"Good," she exclaimed. The fountain-pen scratched, but

again the ink failed. "Look out!" she added, as she shook the pen. Dick grinned, and rubbed the smear on his nose. Cynthia wrote down the sentence.

"That sounds all right!" she said, with satisfaction. "What next? Mind, I don't want to hurt his feelings. I believe he is quite fond of me, and he is very good. I'd rather marry him than hurt him—almost! At the same time I don't want to, and I want him to manage it without Uncle George getting into one of his tantrums. You see?"

"I see!" agreed Dick.

He wrinkled his brows in thought. There was no doubt that his heart was in the task. Michael—whoever Michael was—simply had to go—the nymph of the oak tree was not for Michael—she was for Dick Forrester, when in the fullness of time he might woo and win.

"Well?" said Cynthia, poised the pen.

"Carry on," said Dick. "'I sincerely hope that this will not give you pain'—"

"I sincerely hope that this will not give you pain," repeated Cynthia, writing it down.

"But it is better to be frank before it is too late," continued Dick.

"But it is better to be frank before it is too late," continued Cynthia, over the fountain-pen.

"So please, Michael, let our engagement come to an end," went on Dick Forrester. "'We shall always be friends.' I suppose that's right?" he added, looking at her. "It rather softens the blow."

"Yes, that's all right," said Cynthia. "I want to keep friends with poor old Michael, only I don't want to marry him. That's the limit. Wait a minute till I've written it down. Now carry on!" She looked at him. "Something about making it happen so that Uncle won't go off at the deep end."

Dick ruminated.

"Well," he said, dubiously. "You can't put a man in the position of breaking off an engagement. A man can't do that."

"I suppose he can't!" admitted Cynthia. "But if Uncle George knows I did it, he will raise Cain."

"I should be inclined to tell Uncle George where he got off!" said Dick, already feeling a keen dislike for that unknown old gentleman.

"You wouldn't if you knew him," said Cynthia. "He's fierce. He's my guardian as well as my uncle. And he wants a rich nephew-in-law."

"Does he?" said Dick, grimly. It came into his mind that he, Dick Forrester, might very probably not prove "persona grata" in the estimation of Uncle George, when the time came. "Unpleasant old sweep, what?"

"Very!" said Cynthia, calmly. "It would be almost worth while marrying Michael to get away from Uncle George. Still, he worships the ground Michael walks on—a word from Michael would keep him in order. He loves rich people."

"Is Michael very good-natured?" asked Dick.

"Oh, yes, quite a duck."

"Well, then, put in something like this!" said Dick, thoughtfully. "'I am afraid that Uncle will be displeased when he hears that our engagement has been broken off. Will you be so good and so kind as to tell him'—"

"Wait a minute till I get all that down!" said Cynthia. The fountain-pen scribbled rapidly. "Now! Go on from 'tell him'—"

"—'that having realised that I do not care for you as an engaged girl should, you have offered me my freedom, which I have accepted,' continued Dick.

"Splendid!" exclaimed Cynthia. And the pen scribbled again. "Any more after that, teacher?"

Dick chuckled.

"Well, something nice to wind up with," he said. "After all, the poor chap's losing you, you know."

"Not much loss, if he only knew it," said Cynthia. "But I'd like to make it as nice as possible. I believe he's quite fond of me, in his solemn way."

"Well, how about this?" asked Dick. He was really feeling quite sorry for the unknown Michael, who was to lose that enchanting nymph, whose mere vicinity made his own pulses beat. "If you will do this, Michael, I shall always remember it with gratitude, and be assured that I shall always, always value your friendship."

"Fine!" said Cynthia.

She read the letter through when it was completed, and nodded with satisfaction. Then she appended her signature, folded the letter, and placed it in an envelope.

Dick turned his face away. It was understood that he was to know no names, beyond the "Michael" which might have been anybody's name. He heard the scratch of the pen, and knew that the envelope was addressed.

"I think I've a stamp," said Cynthia. "Yes, here it is! Now, that's done." She slipped the letter into her hand-bag. "I'm ever so much obliged to you, Mr. Forrester."

He looked at her again.

"Not at all," he said. "Glad to be of use."

"I shall drop it in at the village post-office as I go home," said Cynthia. She stirred in the forked branch. "I'm really obliged. I was simply beaten by that wretched letter—and now it's done, and I can go home."

"Oh!" said Dick, dismayed. "Any hurry!"

"I'm not staying in this tree for ever," she answered. "Don't you stir—if you like trees. Good-bye. I want to catch the early post for London."

"But—I—say—!"

"Thanks again," said Cynthia. "You've been a real help. I'm glad you came along—and sorry I dropped the ink on your nose." She laughed, "Good-bye."

Before he could speak again, she swung lightly down the tree, and dropped on her feet. Dick Forrester was hardly a second after her. But Cynthia was already walking down the hill. He hurried to rejoin her.

"May I—?" he began.

She paused, and looked at him grimly.

"We part here," she said. "Good-bye."

Her tone was pleasant, but very firm. The episode in the oak tree was over—it had been an amusing interlude—now it was finished: and Miss Caryl had no intention of walking into the village in company with a strange young man. Dick sought for words, but they did not come—and Cynthia, with a nod, turned and ran down the hill.

"Cynthia!" he whispered. She was far out of hearing. "Cynthia! I love you, Cynthia—I love you, my dear: and some day I'll tell you so. Cynthia!"

He watched her, till the slim, graceful figure disappeared among high hedges. But long after she had disappeared, he still stood there, staring—perhaps in the hope of catching another glimpse of the nymph of the oak tree who had so suddenly and completely won his heart. But he did not see her again, and at length he turned away.

CHAPTER THE THIRD

HOME!

"MASTER Dick!"

"Is Sir Michael at home, Peele?"

"No, Master Dick, he is still in London."

"Oh!" said Dick Forrester, a little disconcerted.

Old Peele, the butler at Oak Court, brightened when he let in the fair-haired young man. Dick's boyhood had been spent at Oak Court, in the old days when his cousin Michael's father was living: a kind uncle and a kinder aunt had made his youthful days happy, and Michael had always been his best chum.

That Michael was heir to the baronetcy and a great estate, while Dick was the son of a man who had left little when he died in an air accident, made no difference to the two boys—the old baronet had treated them alike.

It was only in later years that the difference became apparent, and then it made no change in their friendship.

Oak Court was always Dick Forrester's home when he chose to make it so. The old baronet was gone: his sister, Dick's mother, was gone; but there was no change in the welcome Dick Forrester received when he came back to his old home—Sir Michael Trent was undemonstrative, but he was always glad to see his cousin. Dick had always been a favourite there; more popular in the household, perhaps, than his graver cousin, Michael. He did not need telling that old Peele was glad to see him—the butler's plump face was beaming.

Yet, happy as he had been at Oak Court, home as he called it and thought it, Dick Forrester had hesitated to come on this occasion. He had had a couple of years in the war, and peace had left him at a loose end. He was twenty-three—his military days were over—and kind as Michael was, generous as he was, more like an elder brother than a cousin, Dick could not think of living on at his old home as a dependent. There had to be a break—he hated the thought of it, and he knew that Michael would hate it; but it had to be.

He had a few hundred pounds in the world. An old comrade-in-arms who had gone out to South Africa had asked him to join him out there on a plantation, and prospects seemed good. It meant a complete break with all that he had known—worst of all, with the best friend he had ever had—yet what else was he to do—a man had to make his own way in the world, and stand upon his own feet.

But it was a painful business, and Dick had put it off from day to day—now, at last, he had come. Even when he had arrived at Oakwood station that morning, he had not come on directly to the Court; he had left his bags at the station, and rambled for hours in the countryside, seeing old familiar places of boyhood—clambering to the top of Moor Hill to survey the old familiar scenes—a last survey of the smiling, pleasant Sussex country before he left it for ever. Thus it was that he had fallen in with the nymph of the oak tree—adding a new complication, as he very well realised, to his problems.

"Is Sir Michael likely to be away very long, Peele?"

"A few days only, I think, Master Dick. We expect the master back by the end of the week."

Dick Forrester pursed his lips. Michael was a stay-at-home man—he seldom left his Sussex estate; he found the management of it quite enough to fill up his time. Once a year, perhaps, he had two or three weeks in London. Dick had expected to find him at home, and had not written to say he was coming. Now, if he was to see his cousin, it meant waiting for several days at Oak Court. He had meant to "grasp the nettle," to stay only one night, and be gone the following day; it was less painful to make a sharp break than to linger it out. But he had to see Michael before he went—that was certain.

It was disconcerting; yet to his own surprise, he found that there was also something of relief—of pleasure. That enforced delay would keep him in the neighbourhood of Moor Hill—where he had met the nymph of the oak. Obviously she must be living somewhere in the vicinity, and he knew her name. He felt his heart beat at the thought of another meeting. Why not?

"Your room's ready, Master Dick." Dick's room at Oak Court was always ready. "You'll be staying, sir?"

"Until my cousin returns, at all events," answered Dick. He gave Peele a thoughtful glance. Peele knew all the gossip of the neighbourhood. "Any changes since I was here last year? New neighbours, and so on?"

"There's the Caryls, sir!" said Peele.

"The Caryls?" repeated Dick, as if he had never heard the name before.

"At Holly, sir—the old house near the village. Colonel Caryl, sir—and of course, his niece, Miss Cynthia," said Peele, smiling. Why Peele smiled at the mention of Miss Cynthia, Dick did not know—yet!

He remembered that Cynthia had mentioned "Holly"; and he recalled, now, that there was an old house of that name close by Oakwood village—less than a mile from the Court. So the Caryls were quite near neighbours—he might encounter Cynthia any day in his walks abroad, while he was waiting for Sir Michael's return from London.

After all, it would be pleasant to spend a few days in his old haunts. What might not come of it?

"I think I'll go to my room, Peele. Dinner at seven, I suppose, as usual."

"Yes, sir," said Peele.

Peele fussed considerably over Master Dick and his baggage, but at length he was left alone in his room—the old familiar room that had been his ever since he could remember. He stood at the window, looking out over wood and field and river in the setting sun.

Outside the window was a balcony, with steps down to the garden—how often had he come and gone by that old stone stair in the old days between the two wars! Looking towards the village, he tried to recall what he remembered of Holly, and even fancied that he could pick out its old red roof between the tree-tops. Cynthia, near at hand—Cynthia, whom he had never seen before that day; whom he had known only for a brief half-hour, but to whom the love of his life was given!

His, perhaps, for the wooing and winning! She had been engaged—but the letter to his cousin's namesake settled that—she was free now. What if he saw her again—once, twice, many times—why should she not care? She was heart-free! And if she did care—his heart beat thickly. Her home was not a happy one, he already knew that; she might not be unwilling to try fortune in a new country, if she came to care for him.

How he would work on that South African plantation, building up a home for Cynthia to join him there—if she cared, and if she would come. He would see her again—he must see her again—and he would try his luck—he would sail for South Africa with a light heart, if he carried with him Cynthia's promise.

He stood day-dreaming at the window, looking out into the sunset; that bewitching little face in the oak tree, with its dancing eyes, haunting his thoughts. A tap at the door roused him from his deep reverie, and he looked round to see Peele. He had forgotten dinner, and forgotten to change—he fancied that the butler had come to remind him.

"By gad, is it seven already, Peele?" he exclaimed.

"No, sir! I came to tell you that the master has telephoned that he will be back this evening, sir."

"Oh!" ejaculated Dick.

"Something must have occurred to change Sir Michael's plans, Master Dick. We were told to expect him back at the end of the week. I mentioned that you were here, sir, and the master wishes you to go to the telephone—"

Dick brushed past him without waiting for him to finish. In less than half a minute he was in the hall, the receiver in his hand.

"Hallo, is that you, old Mike? Dick speaking."

"Dick, old fellow," Sir Michael's deep voice came through, "I was more glad than I can say, when Peele told me you'd come home—I want to see you, Dick. I want you to advise me, old man."

"I advise you?" Dick laughed. "You were always the adviser of us two, Mike."

"It's serious, Dick! I've had a blow——"

"Michael!"

"A—a letter—it was delivered only a few minutes ago—but—but it's changed everything. I've thrown everything aside to get back. Dick, old man, I'm in trouble, and perhaps you can help me."

"My dear old chap." Dick Forrester's voice was serious enough now. "Rely on me, if I can do anything. There's not much I wouldn't do for you, Mike, old man. But what's the trouble?"

"I'll tell you when I see you. I've got to get my train now. Thank heaven you're at home, Dick—you're the one man in the world I feel that I can turn to now. You're more a man of the world than I am, Dick—you've knocked about a lot more—you understand women, I dare say, better than I do——"

"Women!" repeated Dick, blankly. "Is it a woman, Mike? Is that the trouble?"

"Yes, yes," came the shaken voice over the wires. "No more now—I must rush for my train. Thank heavens you'll be there when I come."

Dick stood staring at the telephone, when his cousin, at the other end, had rung off. Michael—solemn old Mike—and a woman! It was the surprise of his life to Dick Forrester. Mike and a woman—and trouble! What on earth could have happened since he had last seen old Mike?

Dick Forrester ate his dinner that evening in absolute silence. Peele could not draw a syllable from him. His face was clouded, and his thoughts busy—but he was not thinking now of Cynthia Caryl—even the nymph of the oak on Moor Hill had been banished, by news that his cousin, his best friend, the chum of his schooldays, the friend of his manhood, was in trouble—deep trouble. Mike—quiet, solemn, kind, generous old Mike—was in deep waters, and Dick Forrester, for the time at least, could think of nothing else.

CHAPTER THE FOURTH

THE BLOW FALLS!

"MICHAEL, old man!"

"Dick! I'm glad you're here."

That was all—and a grasp of the hand. Then Sir Michael Trent stepped into the car, and Dick toiled it out of the village street, into the dusky road to Oak Court.

Dick drove in silence, but every now and then he glanced at the grave face of the baronet, feeling a pang as he read therein the signs of the trouble that weighed on Michael's mind.

Dick had not seen him for many months—he had been, as Michael had expressed it, knocking about the world, since he had doffed the King's uniform. Now he could see easily enough that there was a change in Michael—who had never seemed to change. Old Mike in love—in deep trouble over some woman—it was hard for Dick to realise that it was so. But all the more because that very day his own heart had been given wholly and utterly away, he could feel for Mike in his trouble.

Michael sat silent, grave, hardly stirring—but he made a movement as the car glided by a long fence, beyond which could be seen the glimmering lights of a house set well back from the

road. His eyes fixed on the glimmering windows, and Dick, following his glance, realised that they were passing the old house called Holly, where the Caryls lived; and his heart beat.

"That's Holly, Mike," he remarked. "I'd forgotten it—but I was reminded of it to-day. Old Peele told me you had some new neighbours there."

"Was that all he told you?" asked Michael. "Didn't Peele tell you—!" He paused.

"Only that the new neighbours were a Colonel Caryl and his niece," said Dick. "I suppose you know them, Mike."

"Yes," said Michael, in a low voice. "I——" He paused. "I've a lot to tell you when we get in, Dick."

"Only a few minutes now, old man."

The car ran lightly on to the gates of Oak Court, and up the drive. Dick left it for the chauffeur to take round to the garage, and went into the house with his cousin. Old Peele was in the hall, anxious to know whether Sir Michael had dined. A look of impatience crossed Michael's face—to Dick's surprise. But in a moment the master of Oak Court was his usual courteous self again.

"Thank you, Peele, I had a snack on the train," he said. "I shall want nothing. Come into the smoke room, Dick."

In a deep leather chair, with a cigarette between his fingers, Dick Forrester watched his cousin's face, and waited for him to speak. Michael had lighted a cigar, but it went out unheeded. There were deep lines in his handsome face.

"Give it a name, old man!" said Dick, at last, breaking the silence as his cousin did not speak. "I came down here to tell you something—but that can wait. We always used to share our troubles, Mike—let me share this one, and perhaps I can help."

"I don't know," said Michael, restlessly. "Actually, I suppose, there's nothing to be done. But—but if she means it——" He checked himself, breathing hard. "Dick, if she throws me over, it's like blotting out my life. Perhaps you can advise—or help—I don't know! Dick, old man, I can't lose her."

Forrester whistled softly.

Old Mike was hard hit—that was plain. But what woman, in her senses, could think of throwing over a splendid fellow like Mike—kind and good, titled and wealthy, handsome, courtly—all that a woman could desire in a lover, surely.

"I'm engaged!" said Michael, abruptly.

"I never knew——"

"It's little more than a week old. I should have written, of course. Little more than a week—a week of heaven—followed by—this!"

"But what's happened?"

"I said I'm engaged! I should have said, I was engaged!" said Michael, bitterly. "I had a letter to-day, breaking it off." He felt in his pocket. "I've got the letter here—read it, and tell me whether you think there's any hope left for me, Dick."

"You feel it as much as that, old chap?" asked Dick, softly.

"As much as that—and more!" said Michael, quietly. "I've never bothered about women, as you know, Dick—I used to think that I should die an old bachelor, and that Oak Court would come to you and your children—some day. Better, perhaps, if I'd kept to that——"

"Rot!" said Dick, tersely.

"But, when I saw her, the game was up for me," went on Michael, "and—and when I proposed—hardly more than a week ago—I could hardly believe that she'd really said yes. But—but she did, Dick. And now—now it's all off, for no reason that I can understand."

"Very likely a misunderstanding—a mere trifle!" urged Dick. "'La donna è mobile,' as the song says—but why should she change her mind like that? If she cared for you a week ago, she cares now."

"Yes, yes." Michael's dark face lighted a little. "She must have cared—or how could she have taken me, Dick?"

Dick Forrester did not answer that.

He was young, and he was far from cynical; but he knew there were many reasons why a handsome and rich baronet might be accepted—without love! Yet if some woman had taken him for his title and fortune, why should she throw him over?

"Read her letter, Dick! Read it, and tell me what you think."

He threw the letter to Dick Forrester, and rose from his chair, to pace the room restlessly while Dick was reading.

Perhaps it was as well that his eyes were no longer on Forrester. He did not see that Dick's hand shook as with palsy as he held the letter—that his face had become as white as death.

Dick sat very still.

For a moment or two he could not believe it. Fate could not play such cruel tricks—such devilish tricks. Surely his eyes were deceiving him—it was some madness that made him fancy that he was reading the letter that he had himself dictated to the nymph in the oak tree in the early sunny morning that very day. For this is what Dick Forrester read:

Dear Michael,

I am sorry to have to tell you that, thinking over our engagement, I have been forced to realise that it is a mistake. I sincerely hope that this will not give you pain, but it is better to be frank before it is too late.

So please, Michael, let our engagement come to an end. We shall always be friends.

I am afraid that Uncle will be displeased when he hears that our engagement has been broken off. Will you be so good and so kind as to tell him that having realised that I do not care for you as an engaged girl should, you have offered me my freedom, which I have accepted? If you will do this, Michael, I shall always remember it with gratitude, and be assured that I shall always, always value your friendship.

CYNTHIA.

The words danced before Dick's eyes.

Half in earnest, half in jest, he had dictated that letter to the nymph in the oak tree—that letter to Michael.

And the "Michael" to whom that letter was written, was his own cousin Michael—Sir Michael Trent of Oak Court!

How could he have guessed that—how could he even have dreamed of it? There were many Michaels—hundreds, thousands of Michaels—but it had to be this one Michael, his cousin, his school chum, his friend closer than a brother. Could it be true—could this horrid thing be true—or were his senses failing him?

It was true. He remembered old Peele's plump smile when he had mentioned Colonel Caryl's niece—Poole, of course, knew—everybody knew excepting Dick.

The engagement of Sir Michael Trent of Oak Court would be the talk of the countryside. Dick had not heard—but he would have heard soon, in a letter from Mike; and had he received the news in London or elsewhere, before that morning on Moor Hill, the name of Cynthia would have meant nothing to him. But now—now—

"Dick!"

Michael had glanced at him, and now he came quickly towards him, concern and alarm in his face.

Dick did not know that his face was white as driven snow, his eyes dazed under his wrinkled brow. But he knew that his senses seemed to be reeling. He stared stupidly at Michael.

"You're ill, Dick! You're white as a sheet! My dear chap, what's the matter?" exclaimed Michael. "Is it that old wound?"

I never quite believed that it was only the scratch you made it out to be. Dick—"

Dick Forrester made a tremendous effort. One thing was clear and decided in his dizzy brain. Michael must never know!

The woman to whom Mike was—or had been—engaged, was Cynthia Caryl, the nymph of the oak tree on Moor Hill. Michael loved her—and even his love seemed like treachery to his friend. He had no right—Michael had the right. Somehow, at whatever cost, he had to drive that haunting, bewitching image from his mind—he had to be loyal to Mike. And Michael must never know—never dream of the truth.

"Dick—!"

"O.K.," said Dick Forrester, speaking with a lightness that astonished himself. "Just a twinge, where the Boche bullet grazed—that's all! Did I look sick?"

"You looked fearfully sick," said Michael.

"It's passed," said Dick Forrester. "It was only a twinge, I tell you." He braced himself, and laughed up into Michael's anxious face. "Pass the smokes, old man—another cigarette will do me good."

His hand was firm as he lighted the cigarette. The colour came back to his face. He blew out a little spiral of smoke, and watched it float away.

"O.K.," he repeated, "let's get back to the matter in hand, Mike. When did you get this letter?"

"Only ten minutes before I phoned Peele that I was returning this evening. It must have been written to-day, and posted in the village."

Dick Forrester was only too well aware of that. But he had himself quite under control now, and his face gave no sign.

"Cynthia—!" he said. "The niece of the new tenant of Holly?"

"Yes. Colonel Caryl!" said Sir Michael. "You've not seen them, Dick—your last spell at home was before they came. I'm not sure that Cynthia is very happy with her guardian—but—that couldn't be the reason why she—why she—" He broke off.

"Oh, no," said Dick, reassuringly. "You don't seem to be aware of it, Mike, but you're rather an attractive chap. Many a glad eye has been cast in your direction, and you've never noticed it."

Michael smiled faintly.

"You've read that letter, Dick?"

"Yes, I've read it."

"What do you think? Is it final—or is it only the doubt that any young girl might feel—engaged to a man she's known only for a short time—a doubt that time might remove?"

Dick gave him an affectionate glance.

Old Mike was catching at straws. He could not see—what almost any man could have seen—what the letter revealed—that Cynthia's uncle and guardian was the cause of that engagement—that his influence over the girl had been too strong for her to refuse. What she had said in the oak tree made that clear enough to Dick—but even the letter did not make it clear to Michael.

The Caryls, probably, were not very well off; taking that old house, Holly, did not look like wealth; and she had said that "Uncle George" liked rich men. Forrester had little doubt, or rather none, that George Caryl had dictated his niece's acceptance of the wealthy baronet—perhaps from a genuine desire to see her well settled in life, perhaps for more selfish reasons. But Michael did not know, and Forrester was not likely to tell him. Somehow, this matter had to be set right—and when he sailed for South Africa, he would leave old Mike happy, even if his own heart were aching. Why, after all, should she not care for Mike—learn to care for him, if she did not already?

"You've not known her long, Mike." Dick Forrester spoke

slowly. "You must give her time to get used to the idea. If she's worth anything, old chap, she's worth patience."

"She's worth the whole world," said Michael, simply. "Dick! You—you really think I shouldn't take that letter too seriously?"

"I shouldn't!" said Dick. "Faint heart never won fair lady. If—if you're quite sure of your own feelings——"

"No doubt about that."

"Then it boils down to this—that your wooing is not yet over, as you supposed," said Dick, lightly. "Don't claim too much in a hurry, Mike—give her time. 'No' to-day may be 'yes' to-morrow."

Sir Michael drew a deep, deep breath. It was plain that his friend's words gave him comfort.

"You've made me feel better, Dick," he said. "I—I felt as if my whole world had been knocked to pieces, when I read that letter. But—but you think there's room for hope, old man?"

"Yes!" said Dick. He paused, and then went on quietly. "More than that. It's a little cloud that will pass, Mike—bank on that. Ten to one when you see Cynthia—Miss Caryl—she'll be willing to wash out that letter and forget all about it."

"Oh, Dick, old man! If only you're right! You've given me new life, anyway," said Michael. His face was bright, and his eyes sparkling. "What a pal you've always been—and more than ever now. What luck that you came to-day."

Dick Forrester was not so sure of that himself. If he had not come that day, there would never have been that strange meeting with the nymph of the oak tree. Late that night, after the rest of the household had been long asleep, Dick Forrester was standing at his window, watching in the moonlight, fancying that he glimpsed an old red roof in the distance—with a clouded face and a heavy heart.

He was loyal to Michael—loyalty to Michael came first—but his heart ached for the bewitching face that had smiled at him among the oak leaves.

CHAPTER THE FIFTH

TO BE OR NOT TO BE!

"**A**RE you mad, Cynthia?"

It was a harsh, angry voice.

Cynthia Caryl drew a long, tremulous breath.

Colonel Caryl's voice was raised in anger—he did not seem to care if it was heard outside the room. Not that there were many ears to hear. Holly was a large old place, but only part of it was inhabited by the Caryls, and a village girl from Oakwood was all the service they had.

Cynthia was always well dressed. Few, to look at her, would have guessed that the Caryls were poor. Neither need a state of "genteel poverty" have pressed so hard, had a small income been more carefully administered. But George Caryl had expensive tastes—in clothes, in cigars, in all things, and he never denied himself anything that he had money to buy. Nor did he grudge his ward money for clothes—when money was available. Since the girl had grown to young womanhood, with a bewitching beauty that turned men's heads, George Caryl had banked on his niece to retrieve his fallen fortunes. And his grim old face had been kinder, his harsh voice less harsh, since the engagement with the master of Oak Court. It had been a great catch for Cynthia—as good a catch as her uncle could have hoped and planned for—and George Caryl saw in it the happy prospect of comfortable circumstances for the rest of his days. That was why he was bursting out now in savage anger.

Cynthia stood in the french window looking out into the sunny garden. When Sir Michael Trent came, he usually came that way—but this morning she was not expecting to see him—

he was in London, where he must have received her letter, and she knew nothing of his hurried return home after the receipt of that letter. Colonel Caryl turned in his armchair to stare at her, taking the half-smoked cigar from his lips.

"Are you mad?" he repeated. "Mad, Cynthia? What do you mean? You are engaged to Sir Michael Trent. You are no longer a child—I suppose you know that an engagement results in marriage. Yet when I ask you why you are not wearing his ring, you say—what did you say?"

"That I may not marry him," answered Cynthia.

"And what do you mean by that, miss?" thundered Uncle George. "Are you thinking of throwing over the best catch in the county of Sussex?"

"No! But——!" She faltered.

She dared not tell him of the letter she had written. Nor was she thinking of "throwing over" Michael. If he held her to her word, she had to stand by it. But she relied upon him to make it easier for her.

"You do not fancy that he will throw you over?" sneered Caryl. "If ever a man was head over ears in love, it is Michael Trent. It was the greatest stroke of good fortune that we came here. You must know that."

"I don't want to marry him," blurted out Cynthia. "I—I like him! But—I don't really care for him, Uncle."

Snort, from the old colonel.

"And what does that matter? Are we in a position for you to indulge whims and fancies? You must marry some day—and where will you find a better match than Sir Michael Trent?"

Cynthia bit her lip.

To Colonel Caryl, it was all plain sailing—she was marrying Sir Michael because he was a good catch, better indeed than a girl in her circumstances could have expected. Crudely put, she was marrying him for his position, his title, and his money—and she was lucky to get the chance. Colonel Caryl was never likely to look at it as she did. Between nineteen and fifty-five there was a great gulf fixed. The cynical, selfish man of the world was never likely to take account of schoolgirl notions of romance.

He stared at her—or rather glared at her.

"You've not seen somebody else——?" he began.

The colour crept into Cynthia's cheeks, and she kept her face turned from him.

Before she had ever seen Dick Forrester, she had made up her mind that she would not marry Michael Trent—if she could help it. But since, it had grown into an almost passionate determination. A good-tempered, tanned face, with a smear of ink on the nose, was before her eyes—the face of the man she did not know, whom she had seen only once, and was never likely to see again. Yet that face came between her and Michael Trent like an impassable barrier.

"Is that it?" snapped Colonel Caryl. "Let us be frank, Cynthia. We came to this wretched old house, lost in the wilds of Sussex, to save money—you know that that means that capital has been growing less and less. We are within measurable distance of a crash—nothing but a good marriage for you can keep our heads above water. You know that as well as I can tell you. We live cheaply here, barely keeping up respectable appearances—but our next move must be to much poorer quarters—we have been going downhill financially for years. Yet you think of turning up your foolish nose at the man who can save us both."

The girl winced.

"Let us be poor—let us go where we must!" she exclaimed, passionately. "I won't marry Michael Trent for his money."

Colonel Caryl rose from his chair. He threw away the stump of his cigar. His face had lost its accustomed red, and was pale with anger.

"By Gad!" he breathed. "So it has come to this! You'd like to live in a cottage perhaps, and wash up dishes, like Susan in the kitchen."

"I'd rather wash dishes than marry Michael Trent."

"You'd rather wash dishes, than be mistress of Oak Court? You'd rather keep chickens in a cottage backyard, than keep a Rolls-Royce? And what is to become of me?" He choked with anger. "Am I to go to a village pub instead of my club? Am I to smoke Woodbine cigarettes? Am I to drink beer with carters at the Red Lion? You're mad, Cynthia. I tell you, the money is running out—I've placed all my dependence on you, and now—now——!" He choked, and fell back into his chair gasping for breath.

"Uncle." Cynthia turned to him quickly. "Calm yourself—what is the use? I—I haven't made up my mind——"

"You'd better make it up," said Colonel Caryl, thickly. "I can tell you this, you young fool—only your engagement to Sir Michael Trent has staved off my creditors—it came just in time. Break it off, and they will be upon me like a pack of wolves—it will not only be ruin, it may be a debtors' prison—I have cared for you since your father left you on my hands—who else was there to stand by you? Now you throw me over—ruin yourself and me at the same time—for a whim—a childish schoolgirl whim——" He choked again.

Cynthia stood pale and still.

Suddenly she gave a start, at the sight of a well-known figure on the garden path, under the old beeches. She had supposed that Michael was still in London. She stared blankly as he came up the path from the river.

"Have your way!" snarled the man in the armchair. "Indulge your fancies—and leave me to rot among debtors. Sir Michael——"

"Hush, hush!" breathed Cynthia. "He is coming."

"Sir Michael?"

"Yes."

"Go and meet him—and—and think better of it, Cynthia. Don't throw your chances away—and don't be a fool." The Colonel's voice was not angry now, it was pleading. "Think of me, if you will not think of yourself——"

She gave a brief nod, and stepped out into the garden. Was she, as that worldly man said, a fool, to think of throwing her chances away? Sir Michael Trent was good and kind, and she knew that he loved her dearly—and she cared for no other man. Was she a fool, to be thinking of a tanned face, with an absurd smear of ink—the face of a stranger she would never see again?

She was touched, too, as she joined Michael in the garden—the lines in his face told their own story. He had a letter in his hand—she knew what letter it was. That letter had hurt him—hurt him hard. He looked like a man who had come to learn his fate—and instinctively flinched from it.

"Cynthia!" His voice was unsteady. "Dear! This letter—you wrote it yesterday—I hurried home as soon as I received it—Cynthia, I hope that it was written in haste—that you do not mean——"

Back into her mind came the boyish laughing face of the fair-haired young man who had helped her write that letter. She coloured unconsciously.

"Dear Cynthia, if you mean it—if you have thought over it seriously and don't want me, I'll go. But—you know how I love you—I've tried to make you know—dear, isn't there a chance for me?"

He held out both his hands to her.

"Cynthia!" he whispered, as she did not speak.

For a second she was quite still. Then she allowed him to take her hands.

She liked him, she hated to give him pain. And there was

no one else—no one else! Why not? His hands closed on hers, and the dark shadow was gone from his face. The letter, which Forrester had helped her to write in the oak tree on Moor Hill, fluttered into the grass unheeded.

Colonel Caryl looked from the French window. A cynical smile crossed his hard mastiff face. The girl was not such a fool, after all—she knew on which side her bread was buttered. All was going well—a wealthy home was safe for him—he would not have to exchange his club for a village "pub." With the sneering smile lingering on his face, he lighted another cigar—luckily, in spite of countless creditors, he could afford expensive and excellent cigars!

CHAPTER THE SIXTH

THE MEETING

"YOU!"

Cynthia stopped, as if she had been struck.

Her lips parted, her eyes widened, her heart gave a great leap, at the sight of him—the man with the untidy fair hair and the tanned face; the man to whom she had talked in the oak tree, and whom she had never thought to see again.

The colour came into her face with a rush. Then it ebbed and left her pale. Dick Forrester raised his hat.

They met in the woodland path, on which the garden gate of Holly opened. A few minutes more, and Forrester would have reached that gate; but he stopped as he saw the girl coming under the trees.

He had to see Cynthia. Michael had returned to Oak Court happy and reassured. For an hour or more he had tortured Dick Forrester with talk of Cynthia—whom Dick, he insisted, was to meet that day. That they had already met he did not know, and was never to know. As soon as he could escape from Sir Michael, Dick Forrester left Oak Court, to walk over to Holly. So far, Cynthia knew nothing of the strange complication that had arisen—and the sooner she knew that the man of Moor Hill was Michael's cousin, the better. She did not care, of course; to her it was only an amusing interlude; but it was for her to decide whether Michael should know of that meeting on Moor Hill. As Dick had not mentioned it in the first place, it would be awkward to tell him now. Certainly he must never know of Dick's hand in the letter that had given him so terrible a shock.

Forrester was glad to see her on the path under the spreading beeches. Not only because the sight of her was delight to his eyes; but he was glad of the chance to see her alone, for the explanation he had to make.

"You!" repeated Cynthia, mechanically.

Forrester smiled. He had himself well in hand. Cynthia, no more than Sir Michael, was to know what was in his heart and his thoughts. That was buried deep—and the secret of it was to be carried with him to South Africa—as soon as he could get away. His cue with Cynthia was a boyish, brotherly friendliness.

"Little me!" he said. "You did not expect to see me again so soon, Miss Caryl. But the fact is—"

"No—no!" She spoke tremulously. "I—I thought you were a stranger in this neighbourhood—I—never thought—do you belong here, then?"

"More or less," said Dick. "I've been away a long time—the war, you know, and other things afterwards—but I came home yesterday. Oak Court is what I call home."

"Oak Court!" repeated Cynthia.

"Yes. Do you remember that I told you I was a cousin to a baronet—in enumerating my claim to respectability?" He laughed.

Cynthia gave a start.

"Not—not—!" she began breathlessly.

"Yes—Sir Michael Trent," said Dick.

"Oh!" panted Cynthia.

"I was rambling about the old spots, when I climbed Moor Hill yesterday," explained Dick. "I had not heard of my cousin's engagement then. I never dreamed—"

"No!" said Cynthia, confusedly. "No!" She stood looking at him, the colour wavering in her face.

"I was coming over to call and introduce myself, Miss Caryl," said Dick, easily. "I was—was taken by surprise when Mike told me about you last evening, and I did not mention the incident of Moor Hill. Michael doesn't know that I met you by chance yesterday. It's a bit awkward—about that letter. Of course, if I'd dreamed that your Michael was my Michael, it would never have happened. But who could have guessed that one?"

She stood looking at him, without speaking.

"In the circumstances, especially considering that awkward letter, I don't see that Moor Hill need be mentioned at all," said Dick. "We know one another now—on a more formal footing. But it's just as you decide, of course."

Still she did not speak.

"I hope we are going to be friends, Miss Caryl. I am glad—so glad—that that little spot of trouble has blown over. Poor old Mike had rather a hard knock, I fancy, over that letter. But he looked a new man when he came back from Holly this morning." His face softened. "Mike's a splendid fellow, Miss Caryl—as I remember I told you in the oak tree. I hope with all my heart that you will be very happy."

"Happy?" repeated Cynthia.

Something in her tone made him look at her very closely.

"Both of you should be very happy," he said. "It will be pleasant for me to think—when I am gone."

"You are going away?"

"Oh, yes, in a few days," he said, smiling. "I'm rather a bird of passage—here to-day, gone to-morrow."

"But you said that Oak Court was your home."

"Since I was a little kid. But I'm not a little kid now."

He laughed. "One has to make one's way, and I have been offered a chance in South Africa."

"South Africa!" repeated Cynthia, her heart like lead.

"Yes—an old school chum on an orange plantation there has offered me a partnership. It looks good to me, and of course a fellow must do something—now the jolly old war's over. I was taking a last look at the old spots yesterday—when someone shook ink over me from the branches of an oak," said Dick, laughing.

"Will you be away long?"

"Naturally. Years at least—in fact, I may never come back to the old country. I've no ties here—excepting, of course, old Mike. It will be a bit of a wrench parting with old Mike. But needs must."

"No ties!" said Cynthia. "No! You are going to be a planter in South Africa—and I am going to be Lady Trent of Oak Court. And we'll both forget that we ever met, like our primeval ancestors, in the branches of a tree." She laughed a little unsteadily. "It was rather a lark, wasn't it?"

"It was!" agreed Dick. He laughed too, but he watched her uneasily. She had put out a hand to the gnarled trunk of a beech beside the path, as if she felt the need of support, unconscious of the action. What was the matter with her!

"But you overlook one thing," said Cynthia.

"What's that?" asked Dick, in surprise.

"You're the complete letter-writer! Suppose I want your assistance in writing another letter—and you're all the way off in

South Africa." Her mood seemed to change, and she gave him a hard, steely look. "To tell you the truth, Mr. Forrester, I have a letter to write now, and I want your help."

"Shall we walk on to your house, then, Miss Caryl?" asked Forrester, scarcely knowing what to say.

"Oh! No! Perhaps an oral message will serve the purpose—you could repeat a message, word for word, to Sir Michael Trent?"

"Another for Michael?" asked Dick.

"Precisely."

"I'll be glad to take any message, of course."

"Very well," said Cynthia. "This is the message. 'Dear Michael—you can remember that?'"

"Easily," said Dick, wincing.

"'I can't marry you—'"

"What?" ejaculated Forrester.

"That's the message. 'I can't marry you, because I've seen someone else I like better,'" said Cynthia, deliberately. "Repeat that word for word to Sir Michael Trent, will you, Mr. Forrester?"

"But——!" stammered Dick. "Miss Caryl—you can't mean this."

"I do."

"It will be a fearful shock to Michael——"

"Sorry!" said Cynthia, politely.

"I can't take such a message," he exclaimed. "If you want to give old Mike a blow like that, Miss Caryl, you must write. I can't——"

"You're very fond of old Mike, aren't you?" asked Cynthia, her lip curling.

"Very!" said Dick. "If you knew him as I do, Miss Caryl, you wouldn't wonder at that. A man never had a friend like Mike."

"I'm sure that he's the just man made perfect, if you say so. But I meant every word I said in the oak tree—and more than ever now," said Cynthia, coolly. "Take my message as I've given it."

"But you must be jesting," exclaimed Dick.

"I assure you I'm quite in earnest. Yesterday I wanted Michael to set me free, simply because I wasn't in love with him. But to-day——"

"How can there be any difference in twenty-four hours?"

"How indeed!" said Cynthia. "Poor dear Michael—I'm sure you feel for him. Your friend—a man's friend comes before everything else. You'd like to see him happily married before you sail for South Africa. I quite understand. But I happen to have seen someone else I like better."

"Nonsense," said Dick, abruptly.

"Thank you! It happens to be true. Take my message to Sir Michael Trent, and then—then go to South Africa as soon as you like."

With that, Cynthia turned swiftly, and walked back to the gate of Holly. Dick stood staring after her blankly.

What did she mean? Was this some childish jest at his expense, or had she, indeed, seen someone, in that short space of time, who had touched her heart, and made it seem impossible to marry Michael? Dick set his teeth at the thought. Jealousy of Michael he could not and would not feel; but of any other— But her words were idle—she could not mean what she said. At all events, he assuredly was not going to deliver that message to Michael. She could not really mean him to do so—it was some foolish jest or whim.

But he would not have thought that Cynthia Caryl was in a jesting mood, if he could have seen her, ten minutes later, in her room at Holly—her face buried in her hands, crying as if her heart would break.

CHAPTER THE SEVENTH
A MOMENT OF MADNESS?

"UTTER rot!" said Sir Michael Trent.

"I've got to go, Mike."
"I don't see it! There are nearer places than South Africa. But if you're determined on it, you can't go yet, Dick. You've got to see me through."

"But——!" muttered Forrester.
"In the first place, you're going to be best man at my wedding. You're not going to let me down in that, Dick."

Forrester breathed hard.
"I can't stay on for the—the wedding, old man! I—I really can't! I've told old Transom I'll join him in South Africa, and——and——"

"Transom can wait," said Michael. "The oranges can wait. It's not only that, either, Dick. I want you to stand by me now."

"But——!" mumbled Dick.
He eyed the baronet of Oak Court, over his cigarette, curiously. Was it really possible that Michael could see nothing—suspect nothing? Obviously so. Yet it seemed to Dick that he must have betrayed himself a dozen times over.

He longed to get away. He had been more than a week at Oak Court now—and he had intended to go in a day, or a couple of days. How could he rush away—seeing Michael for perhaps the last time, after not having seen him for long, long months? But every day at Oak Court was a torment to him. He was madly in love with his cousin's fiancée—that was what it came to. It was disloyal to his best friend, his near relative, and he could not help it. The only thing was, to go—put distance, and the wide sea, between himself and the girl whose face had bewitched him. But Michael would not let him go.

More than once, Dick had dreaded that an incautious word, or look, might escape him. Indeed it seemed to him inexplicable that Michael could not see—that all the world could not see. If Michael stumbled on the truth, what would come of that? He had to go.

"It's rot," said Michael. "I don't want to lose you, Dick—and I fancied that you'd not want to lose me. Why shouldn't Oak Court continue to be your home? My marriage will make no difference. Cynthia likes you."

"No difference!" muttered Dick.
"Why should it?" argued Michael. "But if you're determined on going, you can't desert me now, Dick. What's the fearful hurry, anyhow?"

Dick did not answer that. There was no hurry, except that he had to put the sea between himself and the future Lady Trent. But he could not tell Sir Michael Trent that.

"I'm of no use here, old fellow," said Forrester, lamely.
"You're a lot of use, Dick. You may not have noticed it, but Cynthia thinks a lot of you——"

"What rot!"
"She does," said Michael, seriously, "and you seem to have an influence over her, Dick—more than I have, I am sorry to say."

"You're talking out of your hat, Mike."
"She needs you more than she does me," said Michael.
"Dick, I love her, it seems to me, more than any woman was loved before. She must care for me—a little, at least, or she wouldn't be marrying me. But—not as I care for her, Dick. Every day I'm afraid of something—something like that letter——"

Dick Forester lighted another cigarette. What would have happened, had he delivered the message Cynthia had given him on the path in the wood by the river!

He had not, of course, delivered it. Neither had Cynthia referred to it again.

Matters had gone on as before—the engagement still stood; Michael's ring gleamed on her finger. But the girl was strangely restless—strangely wilful. Sometimes she was kind to Michael, as if his devotion touched her in spite of herself—lifting him to the seventh heaven, and satisfying the suspicious, watchful old Colonel. At other times she was wilful, impatient, filling him with doubts and fears, and alarming Colonel Caryl with dread that he might, after all, lose the comfortable provision he had planned for his old age.

The engagement irked her—she did not want to marry Michael. Yet she was going to marry him—in spite of what she had said on the woodland path.

But Michael realised that he held his happiness on a very precarious tenure—he longed for the day that would set at rest all doubts and fears. But on that point Cynthia was quite intractable. Neither Michael's pleading, nor the harsh arguments of the old Colonel at Holly, could move her to name the day.

"I'm afraid!" Michael was going on, slowly. "It's too much happiness for me, Dick, and I'm afraid. I'm not good enough for her, I know that."

"Rot!" muttered Dick.

"There's no one else—that's the only security I have," said Michael, with a sigh. Dick remembered what Cynthia had said in the wood, but he did not speak. She could not have meant that in earnest—surely not.

"But, as I was saying, you seem to be a good influence, Dick. You've seen a good deal of Cynthia during the past week. And I've noticed——" Michael paused.

Dick's lips set on his cigarette.

"You've noticed—what?" he asked, evenly.

"I've noticed that she seems to heed what you say—and to lose a great deal of her wilfulness when you are present. She likes you, Dick. Old fellow, if you'd chuck this South African project, what a happy family we might make here—the three of us."

Forrester laughed. He could not help it. He liked old Mike for his unsuspectingness; but sometimes it seemed to him to amount to obtuseness. The three of them—a happy family; when he loved the girl his cousin was to marry, and the accidental touch of her hand set his pulses racing!

"My dear old Mike, you'll be better without a relation in the house, when you settle down," he said. "And—I've got to go."

"Not till after the wedding," said Michael, firmly.

Dick writhed in his chair.

"I think I'll finish my cigarette out of doors," he said. "I've got to think things over, Mike."

He left his cousin rather abruptly. He could endure—he had to endure—but if Michael persisted in talking about the wedding, he could not stand it. Better, perhaps, if Mike knew the truth—he would let him go then! But Michael must not know—must not know.

He did not finish the cigarette—he threw away the stump, once he was out of the house, and tramped away hardly heeding where he was going. The river rolled bright in the afternoon sunshine, and Dick, with his hands driven deep into his pockets, tramped along the grassy bank, between the shining water and the beech wood. Then suddenly he saw her.

"Cynthia!" he breathed.

A high grassy bluff overhung the river, that flowed deep and swift fifteen or sixteen feet below. She was sitting on the edge of it, her feet dangling over the water; a precarious position, reminding him of the first time he had seen her, perched in the branches of the oak on Moor Hill. The slightest careless move-

ment must have caused her to slip from her seat—and deep water was below.

Her back was to him—she did not see him. He stopped, his eyes fixed on the graceful figure. Better not to speak—better to pass on—he longed for the sight of her face, the music of her voice; but it was better not. Then, suddenly, he realised that she was crying. He did not think again—he hurried towards her.

"Cynthia!"

His voice startled her—more than he could have imagined. He did not know that he was in her thoughts—that he was the cause of her tears. She gave a violent start, and turned her head—her face was pale, and wet with tears—but it flushed a deep crimson as she saw him. But it was only for a split second that he saw that burning face—for even as she turned, she slipped—and the next instant she was gone.

"Cynthia!" he shrieked.

A splash sounded below the grassy bluff—a cry! He bounded madly to the edge, and the next moment was in the water. His grasp was upon her, and bore her up.

Her eyes were wide open, looking at him wildly. Then they closed in a waxen face. The rush of the water swept them far beyond the bluff, Dick Forrester swimming strongly. Many a time, as a boy, had he swam in those deep, swift waters, with Michael as his companion. Then it had been easy, though not without danger—but now, his soaked clothes dragging him down, the girl a helpless burden, it was far from easy—it was difficult and dangerous.

Luckily, she made no movement—it seemed that she had fainted—almost that it was a lifeless form in his grasp. Every ounce of his strength was needed to reach the bank; and he was panting, almost exhausted, when at length he grasped a branch of a low willow, and dragged himself and his burden to the shore.

Dripping with water, panting for breath, he bore her through the willows. She lay silent in his arms as he held her—her face waxen, her eyes closed, scarcely breathing. His arms were round her—he hardly knew that he was pressing her to his heart—he had forgotten everything, but that he loved her, and that she had been so near death. He did not know that he was speaking, as the burning words streamed from his lips; it was a moment of madness.

"Cynthia! My darling! My lovely darling——" He checked himself, suddenly, as her eyes opened. He remembered.

Slowly, the pale face crimsoned. Like a blow came the knowledge that she had heard his mad words. He stood dumb, the girl still in his arms. Slowly, a tremulous smile came on her face.

"Dick," she whispered.

He pulled himself together. She had heard him—she knew now! And she was not angry—she seemed content to rest in his arms, close to his breast. She seemed like a tired bird that had found, at last, a resting-place.

The blood raced in his veins. But he mastered himself. He could not let her go—she would have fallen. He tried to speak calmly.

"I'm sorry, Miss Caryl——"

"I'm not!"

He affected not to hear.

"I'm sorry—I rather lost my head, seeing you in danger. You shouldn't take such risks, my child. I must get you home—quick—you'll catch cold."

"I don't care."

"I do!" he said, almost roughly. "Can you walk?"

"No!" said Cynthia.

She knew now—she knew that he did, and did not, want to release her—she could feel the wild beating of his heart. He wanted to release her, because she was Michael's fiancée; he

wanted to hold her in his arms, because he loved her; she knew. And deliberately she refused to let him let her go.

"Sure!" he muttered, thickly.

"Quite!"

"Then I must carry you."

"Do!"

It was not far to Holly. Colonel Caryl, leaning on the gate smoking a cigar, stared at them blankly as they came.

"What the dooce——!" ejaculated Uncle George.

"Your niece had a fall in the river—luckily I fished her out, sir!" said Dick. "None the worse, I hope, except for a ducking."

Unwillingly, yet with relief, he relinquished his burden to the Colonel. But the avuncular aid seemed not to be needed.

"I'm better now," said Cynthia, "I can walk!"

"Get in at once, child!" grunted the Colonel. "You'll catch your death of cold—you're dripping."

"I must thank Mr. Forrester for saving me," said Cynthia. Her eyes danced at Dick. "Thank you so much, Mr. Forrester—you must have found me very heavy and troublesome to carry from the river—I can only apologise. And—do you remember a message I gave you for Michael, more than a week ago? I think you never delivered it—will you oblige me by delivering it as soon as you see him!"

She ran up the path to the house—gone before Dick could think of an answer.

Colonel Caryl stared hard at Dick, and then, with a grim expression on his mastiff face, followed his niece. But Dick did not heed the grim, suspicious face of the old Colonel. He tramped away in the direction of Oak Court—forgetful that he was drenched to the skin; his pulses beating wildly, his brain in a whirl.

CHAPTER THE EIGHTH

LOVE!

"I MIGHT have lost her—Dick! Oh, Dick, old man." Sir Michael Trent's voice was shaking, his lips trembling. Never had Dick Forrester seen him so deeply disturbed—not even on the night when he had rushed back from London, after receiving the letter that had been written in the oak tree on Moor Hill. Cynthia's danger, though it was over and little harm done, had shaken him to the very soul.

Forrester was in his room. The ducking in the river had done him no harm—he had changed, and felt none the worse for it. He sat by the open window, smoking a cigarette, and looking out over green woods, and a river that gleamed among the trees, when Sir Michael burst in.

The baronet had been out when Dick came back. Forrester could guess that he called at Holly, as it was evident that he knew what had happened.

He came across to Dick, and grasped his hand, and wrung it. Seldom or never was old Mike demonstrative. But he was quite shaken out of his usual grave calm now. Dick could see that tears were very near his eyes, and his own heart smote him with a sudden bitter pang.

He had been thinking of Cynthia as he sat there—dreaming of her. She had nestled in his arms—she had smiled at the wild words he had so madly uttered. It was with mingled delight and dread that he realised what it meant.

Had she not told him, more than a week ago, that she could not marry Michael, because she had seen someone she liked better? He had not understood then. But could he fail to understand now?

But as Michael grasped his hand, he could feel nothing but shame and remorse. He felt like a traitor. He loved Cynthia—he could not help that; his heart had gone out to her, before he had ever known that she even knew Mike. But if she cared for him—and what else could it mean—what was to come of that? Love is strong as death; but loyalty to his friend came before all.

"Dick! I've just been at Holly—oh Dick, old fellow! If I'd lost her—you saved her, Dick! You saved her life—Cynthia's life!"

"Lucky I was taking a trot by the river, Mike," said Dick, lightly. "I hope Miss Caryl is none the worse."

"I've not seen her—only her uncle—he told me! Cynthia's in her room—a slight chill, that's all, so the Colonel said. Thank heaven it's no worse. Dick, if I'd lost her——" His voice broke, and he turned away from Forrester, to stare from the window.

"All right now, Mike," said Dick. "I'm afraid it was partly my fault—and I think I startled her a little, and she was sitting on the edge of the high bluff down the river. You ought to lecture Miss Caryl, Mike, on taking such risks. I advise giving her a royal jaw."

Michael smiled.

"Not much use lecturing Cynthia," he said. "But look here, Dick, I hate to hear you speak of her as Miss Caryl. She's going to be practically a sister to you, and I want you to call her Cynthia."

Dick gave him a curious look.

"Yes, I suppose I shall be a sort of bachelor brother," he drawled.

"Until you meet your fate as I did!" smiled Michael. "I wonder sometimes that you've never fallen in love, Dick. It will come to you some day, unexpectedly, just as it did to me."

"Not likely!" said Forrester, shaking his head. "I shall be too busy planting oranges, to bother my head about women, for a good many years to come. Perhaps in twenty years or so, I may come home with a plump wife and a large family, and crowd you out of house and home for a time. But I rather think that I shall plough a lonely furrow."

"I wish you'd see some girl like Cynthia——"

"Like Cynthia?"

"Yes, and settle down at home, and chuck up this South African project," said Michael. "Cynthia would like you to stay."

"Why should she?" muttered Dick.

"She likes you, old man. When I was speaking to her the other day of you, she looked quite downcast. She said, 'Don't let him go!'"

"Did she?"

"You haven't known her long, Dick—but she will miss you—not like I shall, of course, but I am sure she will miss you. You've never had a sister, Dick—you'll find one in Cynthia. Colonel Caryl is to live at Oak Court, later, when we settle down after the honeymoon—what's the matter Dick? Have you caught a chill in the water?"

"No!" Dick breathed hard. "Only a twinge—I've had it before."

"You looked quite sick for a moment," said Michael, anxiously.

"I'm all right, old man. So Colonel Caryl is going to live here after the—honeymoon." Dick forced out the word.

"Yes; and why shouldn't you?" said Michael.

"Lots of reasons why not, Mike. I can't live for ever on a few hundreds, and I'm not going to sponge on even the best friend a man ever had."

"That's a rotten word to use, between us, Dick," exclaimed Michael, warmly. "Especially when you've just saved for me

the only thing I really value in the world. Look here, Dick, if you put it like that, we're going to have a row."

Dick laughed.

"Then I won't put it like that, Mike," he said. "We're certainly not going to have a row. But I'm going out to South Africa. Look here, Mike, what's the good of lingering it out—it's painful on both sides. I'll pack to-day——"

"You won't!" said Michael. "You can't let me down over my wedding, Dick, and you know it."

"But——!"

"That's that!" said Michael. "I'll leave you to rest, old chap—you're looking quite worn. Take care of yourself, Dick—we can't have you ill, you know, when I want you to play up as my best man."

Dick stared after him, as he went, and then turned his gloomy gaze to the window, and a distant red roof over the tree-tops.

How unsuspecting and trusting old Mike was. Cynthia had said, in the oak tree on Moor Hill, that he was a little dense. That was cruel; he was not dense, only utterly incapable of suspicion. He believed without doubt that a woman could not and would not accept a man's offer of marriage unless she cared for him—he could not see that a scheming old man had as good as bullied the poor girl into it, and that she strove to escape like a bird caught in a net.

Yet surely she would be happy with Mike—the best fellow that ever breathed. Anyway, it was not for Dick Forrester to intervene—he could picture the incredulous horror in old Mike's face, if he ever knew the truth—supplanted by the man he trusted; his life-long friend and comrade. Forrester shuddered at the thought. He had to go—even at the cost of angry words with Mike, he had to go, before bad became worse.

And a little later, when Michael had gone out, he sat at the telephone, making several calls. One was to book a passage on the "Orient Star," which sailed from Southampton the following week—there was no earlier booking to be had. But the last few days he would spend in London—after all, he had to make some preparations for a journey to a tropical country. And that very night he would pack, and leave by the early train in the morning—even if a quarrel with Mike came of it. Better to quarrel with even old Mike, than to hang on, day after day, in torment—dreading that his secret might come to light—almost hating his best friend because he was going to marry Cynthia. His mind was made up.

After dinner that evening Sir Michael proposed a stroll over to Holly. He wanted to ask about Cynthia—to see her, if possible. Dick shook his head with a forced grin.

"Two's company—three's a crowd," he said. "Carry on, Mike—I'd rather smoke my cigar here."

"Rot!" said Michael, but he went. Dick did not finish his cigar after his cousin was gone; he went up to his room to pack, glad that the baronet was off the scene.

He was strapping a bag when a discreet tap came at the door.

"You're wanted on the telephone, Master Dick." It was Peele.

Forrester made an irritable gesture.

"Who the dickens is it, Peele! I'm busy."

Peele coughed.

"Miss Caryl, sir."

"Miss Caryl!" repeated Dick, blankly.

"Yes, sir! Miss Caryl is holding the line," said Peele.

Dick Forrester went down to the telephone. Cynthia had rung him up from Holly—while Mike was on his way there! Possibly that "chill" was nothing more than an excuse for not seeing Michael! But what had she to say to him!

He was very careful to ascertain that no ears were within hearing, as he took up the receiver.

"Dick Forrester speaking!"

"That you, Dick?"

He started, his heart thumping. "Dick" in a soft voice that breathed like music over that dull, prosaic instrument! Cynthia's voice, low and soft and sweet, with a tone in it that he had not heard before. He felt the blood mount to his temples, his heart give a great throb. If Cynthia Caryl had ever spoken to Michael in that tone, old Mike would have been the happiest man on earth. But Forrester knew that she never had.

He could not answer for a moment or two. His blood was racing. He forced himself to speak calmly, quietly; but his voice was husky.

"Is that Miss Caryl speaking?" he asked. He almost choked over the name.

"It's Cynthia!" came softly back.

"What's wanted?" He tried, in vain, to speak on a matter-of-fact tone. "I hope you're not feeling any ill-effects, Miss Caryl, from that ducking. I—I've told Mike that he must lecture you about taking such risks. You really shouldn't do it, you know."

"Did you say 'Miss Caryl,' Dick?"

"I—I—I—Yes, of—of course——!" He stammered.

He heard a low laugh.

"What? I—I don't understand——"

"Don't you?" The soft silvery laugh came again. "Dear old Dick, how dense you are! Does it run in the family?"

"Cynthia—Miss Caryl——"

"You old goose! Do you think I don't know—after to-day?"

He sat staring at the telephone, wordless. She knew—he knew that she knew. But it must not be put into words! It must not—it must not!

Loyalty to Michael—he had to be loyal to Michael! It must never be put into words. But Cynthia was putting it into words!

"Am I a darling, Dick?" There was a mocking note in her voice. "Am I really a darling, Dick?"

"Cynthia!"

"You said so, Dick! By the river to-day! Don't you remember? Did you think I didn't hear? Oh, Dick! Am I a darling?"

"I—I was mad," he said hoarsely, "I—I lost my head! I—I—Cynthia, I was mad at the moment—I—I'd lost my head——"

"I know! I'm glad you lost it, Dick! I might never have known, if you hadn't lost your head, Dick! I've lost mine, too!"

"Cynthia—Miss Caryl!"

"Cynthia to you, Dick." She laughed again. "Are you going to pretend that you don't care for the girl you met in the oak tree, Dick? I know you do! Did you care for me that very day, Dick?"

He could not answer. He could only stare at the dull instrument, from which that sweet alluring voice came, with haggard eyes.

"Did you, Dick? I—I think I did! How funny you looked with that smear of ink on your dear old nose! And you wouldn't go, would you, Dick, when you should have gone, you know. Why wouldn't you go, Dick?"

She laughed again, as he sat silent, unanswering.

"Dick! You're not going to pretend that you don't care, are you? What's the use—now? I care, Dick! Don't you?"

"If I do, I'm a traitor, a villain, a false friend!" he groaned into the transmitter. "Cynthia—say nothing more—not a word."

"Why not, Dick?"

"Not a word more! Think of Michael—think of him—even now he is on his way to see you—"

"I can't! I'm thinking of you—and of me! It can't go on, Dick."

"It must! It must!"

"You know it can't! I might have gone through with it, if I hadn't cared—and you hadn't. What would it have mattered—what would anything have mattered? Now I can't! Dick, are you going to South Africa?"

"Yes, yes, yes! I'm leaving here by the first train in the morning," he exclaimed, desperately. "I must say good-bye now—good-bye for the last time. As—as you've rung up, we can say good-bye—here and now—"

"Are you going to South Africa alone, Dick?"

He started, puzzled by the question.

"Alone?" he repeated. "Of course."

"You wouldn't like me to come?"

"Cynthia!"

"Dick! Don't be a fool! You care—and I care! What does anything else matter to us?"

"Anything else?" he muttered. "My friend—the man who trusts me—the man I've let down." He groaned aloud.

"Does friendship come before love, Dick?"

"Faith and honour come before love, Cynthia. They must."

"You're a fool, Dick."

"I know!"

"It's no good! Dick, can't you be serious?"

"Serious!" he gasped.

"Yes—you're a man, but try, for a minute, to be as serious as a woman! Have a little sense, Dick. Is this a time to be giving me 'I could not love thee, dear, so much, loved I not honour more?' Be serious."

A sharper note had crept into the sweet soft voice. He realised that Cynthia was losing patience with him. Of course, he couldn't understand—women never understood men, any more than men understood women.

"I've said you're a fool, Dick!"

"I know I'm a knave!" he said, bitterly. "I know I despise myself, and hate myself, and wish that the bullet that grazed me two years ago had gone through my heart."

"Do you love me so much as that, Dick?" The voice on the telephone was sweet and caressing again.

"Yes! I—I love you like—like hell!" he said, savagely. "Is that good enough for you, Cynthia? You've made me tell you—well, now I'm telling you. I love you—love you—love you." He panted.

"Dick!"

"And now—good-bye!" He pulled himself together. "Good-bye, Cynthia—for ever. I go early in the morning. I shall never see you again, nor you me. Wash me out of your life—I'm not worth remembering. Good-bye, Cynthia."

"Dick! Listen—Oh!" Her voice broke off sharply. It was a sudden interruption at the Holly end.

Another voice crashed it; a loud harsh voice, so near the telephone, that it came through clearly to Dick Forrester at Oak Court.

"You little minx! So that's the game, is it? I've suspected it more than once—By gad! I—I—I'll—" It was the voice of Colonel Caryl. "You little jade! Go to your room! Do you hear me? Go to your room at once—by Gad! Go to your room, Cynthia!"

Sudden silence.

Dick listened—minute after minute. But there was no sound again on the telephone. Colonel Caryl was taking care of that.

He rose, at last, with a damp and haggard brow.

What was to happen now?

SIR MICHAEL TRENT halted, dead in his tracks. In the deep dusk, he was coming up the garden path at Holly, from the wood. Dick—unromantic old Dick!—was finishing an unromantic cigar at Oak Court!—while Michael walked over to Holly, eager for a word from the woman he loved, hoping for a glimpse of the sweet bewitching face. He was accustomed to coming in by the garden, and tapping at the french window. If Cynthia was down from her room, he would see her—more likely, he would see her uncle, and at least get word to her. Michael was hardly conscious that he did not like Colonel Caryl. Everything about Cynthia seemed good in his eyes—even the hard, grim old Colonel with his mastiff face. Yet at the bottom of his heart he did not like the man; and if there was one cloud on his marriage prospects, it was the knowledge that that mastiff face would be perpetually at his fireside after Cynthia became his wife.

It was the Colonel's voice that made him halt.

Once or twice, in spite of his blindness to what others could see, Michael had doubted whether Cynthia was happy in her home. But "Uncle George" played his part well, in the presence of the bird he was bent on netting. Never had Michael heard his voice raised in anger to his niece. Neither would he have heard it now, if Colonel Caryl had known, or even dreamed, that he was within hearing.

The french windows stood open in the summer dusk. The room was lighted—Michael could see two figures. He stood in the dark, rooted, thunderstruck, as the loud harsh voice boomed out to his ears.

"You treacherous little cat! I've suspected—I've seen it in that puppy's face—I've guessed! By Gad, if you dare carry it on—by Gad!" The harsh voice choked with anger.

Michael could see Cynthia. She stood by the telephone, on the further side of the room. The receiver was in her uncle's hand—it looked as if he had snatched it from her. He jammed it back on the hooks, as Michael stared, with a crash that made the instrument rock.

She faced him. The look on her face was one that Michael had never seen before. She was a little pale—her eyes were flashing—she stood firm, defiant, scornful—bitter contempt in every line of her lovely face.

A happy home? Hardly that! The old man glared at her as at an enemy—and she defied him as an enemy. Michael could only gaze—stunned.

"Engaged to one man—philandering on the telephone with another!" roared the Colonel, purple with rage. "I've suspected it—and that noodle at Oak Court would have suspected it, if he had the brains of a rabbit."

Michael could not stir. He was rooted.

He almost wondered whether he was dreaming this horror. He was the "noodle" at Oak Court—that was the true reading of Colonel Caryl's almost fawning friendliness. But Cynthia "philandering"—was the old man mad?

Her answer came cool and clear.

"That will do, Uncle George! You may shout from the roof-top, if you like, but it will make no difference. I will not marry Michael Trent."

"You shall marry him, by Gad!—you shall marry him, if I have to drag you to it with my own hands!" said Colonel Caryl, hoarsely, savagely. "And as for that interfering young puppy, I'll horsewhip him. By Gad, I'll thrash him within an inch of his life for trifling with my niece—making love, by gad, to an engaged girl—the scoundrel."

Cynthia winced.

"That is false!" she said. She was quite calm. "He has done nothing of the kind. He would not—even now he has said that it is good-bye for ever. That was his last word on the telephone before you snatched it from me."

"If it was only a silly flirtation—!" muttered the old man. "Haven't you sense? Haven't you tact? What do you think that solemn prig would think, if he knew?"

Her lip curled in contempt.

"It was nothing of the kind! But you would not understand! He has said that it was good-bye for ever—but it shall not be! He loves me—and I—I love him."

"You dare—"

"Oh, you cannot frighten me with your loud voice, Uncle George. I'm past that. You've planned a rich marriage—for me! You've planned a rich nephew—for yourself! You knew that I did not want to be engaged to Sir Michael Trent—you drove me into it. Even before I saw the man I love, I wanted to escape. But now—now—shout as much as you like—rave if you like—but I will die before I will marry Michael."

The old man was spluttering with rage.

On the garden path, Michael stood, as if turned to stone, with every word from the open french window ringing in his ears—every word going into his heart like a stab. It did not even occur to him that he was listening unseen—he could not think—he could not stir. He could only stand rooted, and suffer, while his world fell to pieces round him.

"It's not fair to Michael, if there were nothing else," went on Cynthia. "He is good and kind—it is shameful to deceive him."

"You fool! He asked you to marry him—if he chose to fancy you in love with him, and you accepted him, and marry him you shall, by gad."

"Never!" said Cynthia, quietly. "I might have married him—liking and respecting him—if there had been no one else. But to marry him when I love another man would be deceiving him—wronging him."

"Don't talk romantic nonsense to me!" roared Colonel Caryl.

She gave a shrug of her slim shoulders.

"No—you wouldn't understand," she said bitterly. "You're thinking of his title, and his estate, and his money. You're thinking of a wealthy home—of someone to stand between you and your creditors. You've wasted your own money—you've wasted mine—we're next door to beggars—and Sir Michael Trent was to carry the burden of it all—that's what you're thinking of. You must find someone else to bear your burdens, Uncle George—Michael Trent will never bear them, as my husband—for I will never marry him. I will marry the man I love."

"And what has he?" snarled the Colonel. "A beggarly hanger-on with nothing a year. No doubt he had good reasons for saying good-bye for ever—what does he want with a wife?"

She flushed crimson. The brutal words struck her silent. He hurried on, pushing his advantage, as he thought it.

"Will he ask you to marry him, if you throw over the baronet? Answer me that, you little fool."

"If he does not, I shall ask him," said Cynthia, coolly.

"What?" roared the Colonel, hardly able to believe his ears. She laughed.

"I shall ask him, Uncle George. He won't refuse."

"I'm dreaming this!" muttered the old man, staring at her. "Is this the child I've cared for, planned for, done everything for—?"

"And sacrificed to your own comfort?" said Cynthia. "Cards on the table now, Uncle George. I'm not a child now—I'm a woman. I have my own life to live—and I'm going to live it."

You've spent what my father left—you've spent all you had—you'd sell me at auction to stave off your creditors. If Michael knew you as you are, he'd never step into this house again—if he knew you had bullied me into accepting his offer, he'd withdraw—he would never marry me, or any woman on such terms, if he knew it."

"The fool knows nothing——"

"Fool or not, he will know soon enough that I will not marry him. He will know that I am going to marry another man. And I will hear nothing more on the subject, Uncle George."

"You will not hear?" he repeated, almost dazedly. "Do you know to whom you are speaking, impertinent minx? Who is master in this house?"

"The bailiff will be master soon, I've no doubt!" retorted Cynthia.

"What—what——!" George Caryl glared and panted.

"Now that Sir Michael Trent's money is out of your reach," Cynthia's voice was bitter with scorn. "Make up your mind to it, Uncle George. You are not dealing with a child now—a child you can bully. You are dealing with a woman who does not care a snap of the fingers for your temper or your loud voice."

"Gad!" breathed the Colonel. "Gad!"

"Make up your mind to it! You've made me go your way—so far! Now I am going my own way!" said Cynthia.

"And I——!" spluttered Colonel Caryl.

"You don't matter?" said Cynthia, coolly.

"I don't matter!" He seemed hardly able to articulate.

"Not the least little bit in the world! You don't matter at all, Uncle George. You are a hard, cold, selfish man, Colonel Caryl—and you don't matter."

He gazed at her—goggled at her. Was this Cynthia—the Cynthia he knew—the child who had been almost as wax in his calculating hands? It seemed a new Cynthia—one he did not know. He did not matter—he, Colonel Caryl, who mattered more than the rest of the whole universe in his own estimation—he did not matter! He felt dizzily that it was time for the skies to fall!

She looked at him—coolly, contemptuously. She was not afraid of him now. The angry brow, the angry bull-voice, no longer had any terrors for her. She wondered that she ever had been afraid of the selfish, calculating old man, his impotent rage was nothing to her. As she had said, he did not matter!

"Cynthia!" He gasped, choking. "You can't—you shan't——!"

She laughed.

"I can—and shall!" she said, deliberately. "I am not going to marry Michael Trent. I am going to marry the man I love! If he will not ask me, I will ask him—I am going to marry him, Uncle George. That's that!"

And with that, Cynthia Caryl was gone from the room, the door shutting sharply after her as she went.

The old Colonel stood staring with dazed eyes at the shut door. He seemed unable to grasp what had happened.

"Gad!" He muttered and mumbled, "I don't matter? Gad! The world's going mad, I think. Uncle and guardian, and I don't matter! Gad!"

A sound from the garden caused him to glance round quickly at the open french window.

It was a sound that startled him; a deep sigh, almost a groan. A sudden, almost terrifying thought shot into his mind. He strode to the french window and stared out into the deep summer dusk.

For a second, he caught a glimpse of a white face in the gloom; a face pale as death, pale and stricken. It was gone in another moment, but Colonel Caryl had recognised it.

He stood staring, stupidly; knowing, at last, that his house of cards had fallen to pieces round him; knowing that, even if

Cynthia, that new and strange Cynthia, bent to his will, she never would or could marry the master of Oak Court now!

CHAPTER THE TENTH

MICHAEL'S LAST WORD

"MIKE, old man! What——?"

Dick Forrester panted out the words. Old Peele, in the hall when Sir Michael Trent came in, gave his master a startled, concerned look.

Dick caught him by the arm.

"Mike—what——?" His voice trailed away. Something had happened—at Holly! What had happened? Did Michael know? Was that what that look on his face meant?

Peele discreetly retired. The two men were left alone, facing one another in the old hall of Oak Court—Dick's eyes on his cousin's stricken face—his hands half-clenched.

If Michael knew—and what else could that look on his face mean——? What was coming now?

Words of anger—contempt—scorn—the bitter end of a life's friendship? Dick Forrester's heart was sick within him. At that moment, he could have cursed the day when he had seen that bewitching nymph of the oak tree. His friend—friend closer than a brother—the man who trusted him, who would have trusted him with life and fortune; the man to whom he would have been loyal, to whom he had been determined to be loyal—was he about to overwhelm him with bitter scorn and reproaches to which there was no answer?

But there was nothing of that in Michael's look, as he very soon realised. Nothing of anger—nothing of scorn—no hint of reproach—only pain; bitter pain. If he knew, he did not know all. His voice came huskily.

"It's over, Dick."

"What's over?"

Forrester asked the question, but he knew. He hated himself for the leap his heart gave, which he could not help. His heart leaped—yet he would have sacrificed his love—his and Cynthia's—to drive that look from Michael's face—if only he could!

"What's over, Mike?" he repeated, stupidly.

"I've heard something—never mind what—it's all over." Michael tried to pull himself together. "I've got to stand it, Dick!"

"But what——?"

"I've taken the knock, old man. I've got to stand it! I understand now what I never understood before. I'm dull, I suppose. I never understood. Poor child—poor child!"

"Cynthia?" muttered Dick.

"I know now." Michael's voice was a husky whisper. "I never dreamed before—never dreamed of it—or anything like it. She never cared—she never wanted me, Dick—she was driven to it—I know now. And—there's somebody else, Dick—she cares for somebody else."

"Somebody else, Mike? But—but—you're sure?" He hardly knew what he was saying; but he had to say something.

"Yes."

"But—but who——?" stammered Dick. He felt like a hypocrite—he loathed himself. But Michael must never know!

"I don't know whom—I don't want to know." Michael's voice was steeper. "I know that much—no more. Her uncle knows—or suspects—I don't want to know. I must give her her freedom, poor child. I don't know who the man is—but I hope he will make her happy."

"Mike!"

"God knows I'd have tried to do so. But—that's all over. I've got to pull through it somehow, Dick. I—I think I'll go away for a time—a year or two—away from everything associated with her. But I must send over a word at once—at once—a word to give her her freedom, poor child, poor little thing, and to let her know that I shall never trouble her again."

Dick Forrester hated himself for the almost fierce joy that surged into his heart. It was only for an instant—he crushed it down. Mike, his friend—loyalty to his friend came first! Even before love—even before Cynthia's love. She had called him a fool—perhaps he was a fool. But a man could not let his friend down, even for a woman's love.

He put his hand on Michael's arm.

"Mike! Don't give up hope!" He was amazed that he could speak so calmly, quietly. "This will pass, old fellow. Whoever the man is, he can't come between engaged people—if he has a rag of honour, he can't—Mike, stick to it, and don't give up hope."

Michael did not know, and could never know, what those words cost Dick Forrester. He shook his head, with a faint smile.

"It's over, Dick! Never mind details—I've learned enough to know that it's over—finished—!"

"But—!"

"From her own lips, Dick—she never dreamed that I heard her, poor child—but thank heaven I did, before it was too late." Sir Michael Trent drew a deep, deep breath. "Leave it at that, Dick! Now I've got to get a note written, and sent across—it will relieve her mind to know that I have set her free."

He went into the library; the door closed on him. Dick Forrester stood alone in the hall.

His brain was in a whirl; but he tried to calm himself, to think. Michael knew the truth—but not the whole truth. What would he have said, had he known that the man who had come between him and his love, was the friend he trusted—the cousin who was a brother—that the man for whom Cynthia cared was Dick Forrester? Dick clenched his hands till the nails dug into the palms. Old Mike should never know that at least.

What was he doing there—false to Michael, false to himself? If he had gone sooner—

It was too late to think of that. But it was not too late to make what amends he could. No further delay—no further indecision—he had to go, and might note matters yet come round—might not Cynthia turn to Michael again, when he was gone—gone for ever!

Old Peele crossed the hall, from the service door, with his silent step. Michael, in the library, had rung—and Dick saw the old butler come away from the library, a minute later, with a note—he guessed what note it was. That note was to be sent across to Holly, at once—to give Cynthia her freedom! Dick watched the butler stupidly till he was gone.

Then he opened the library door.

"Mike—!"

Sir Michael Trent was pacing the room. His face was pale, but it was calm; he had pulled himself together. He glanced round at Dick.

"Mike, old man." Dick's voice was earnest. "There may be a chance yet—things may come right—don't knock it on the head with your own hand. That note—"

"It's over, Dick. It's settled—now."

"My dear old chap—"

"That's that." Michael smiled faintly. "Leave it at that, Dick. And—and leave me alone for a bit, old fellow—I'm better alone, till I get my bearings a bit."

Dick shut the library door. Michael Trent was left alone—alone with what he had to face. Dick Forrester went up to his room.

He did not see Michael again that night. Neither, he was determined, would he see him in the morning; in the morning he would be gone, gone from Oak Court for ever, with a lonely heart and a hopeless love; but hoping that things might yet mend for Michael when he was no longer in the way.

CHAPTER THE ELEVENTH

ALL THE WAY!

DICK FORRESTER tramped the platform at the little country station of Oakwood, in the early sunny morning.

Even Peele had not been up, when he had quietly let himself out of the house in the glimmering dawn; leaving a note in his room for Michael; a hurried note of farewell.

What Mike would think, he did not know—and hardly cared. He had to go, while there was yet time; that was all he knew.

With a bag in his hand, he walked away quickly down the drive—on the long walk to the station. But he was too early for the train. He had an hour to wait—but he was safe away from Oak Court; safe away from Cynthia—safe away from temptation that he was not strong enough to resist. He paced and paced, trying not to think of the bewitching face of the nymph of the oak tree on Moor Hill, that he was never to see again—and failing, for the face was before his eyes, and hardly for a moment could he dismiss it. But he was going—he would soon be distant; and there was safety in distance.

A few days in London; then the steamer; a new country, and a new life; and perhaps, amid strange scenes, he might forget that face that haunted him; the bitter pain might grow less bitter. But his brow was dark with misery as he paced. Would the train never come in?

He glanced at his watch. Still another quarter of an hour! There was not a single other passenger on the long, lonely platform of the country station.

He paced once more to the end, and turned to pace back—and then he saw that there was another figure on the platform; a girl, with a bag in her hand; another passenger just arrived! Was it Cynthia, or was he dreaming dreams?

He remembered—he had told her over the telephone that he was leaving by the early morning train. Had she come to say good-bye! It was madness—yet he was glad.

Her face was pale; set. But it lighted as she saw him. She was coming towards him—he stopped, mechanically raising his hat.

"Dick!"

"Cynthia!" he muttered.

"You didn't expect to see me here?"

"No!"

"You're sorry to see me?" Her eyes danced as she asked.

"Sorry and sad to see me here, Dick?"

"No! Yes! Yes!" he said, desperately. "Cynthia, can't you forget what I said—what I was mad enough, rotter enough, to say?"

"No!" she answered.

"Yes, yes, Cynthia! You're engaged to Michael——"

"No!" she repeated.

"Yes!" he insisted.

"No, Dick. Michael knows—not about you—but he gives me my freedom. I haven't had to ask for it, Dick—he knows, and he's given it."

"He loves you, Cynthia!" said Dick, miserably.

"I know!" she said, softly, "and he is good Dick—good and kind, and generous. But it's all over, Dick—that's all over."

He stood wretchedly silent. She glanced at her little wrist-watch.

"You're going by the early train, Dick—as you said?"

"Yes!"

"To get out of the way?" She smiled.

"Yes!" he muttered.

"You're a man's man, aren't you, Dick? A true pal—but a pretty poor lover." She smiled again. "You're going to South Africa?"

"Yes," he said, dully, "to South Africa."

"Shall I come?"

"Cynthia!"

"I've left Holly! I've finished with Uncle George! I'm not going back! I'm through, Dick."

"Cynthia!" he muttered, huskily.

She looked at him curiously.

"You love me, don't you?" she said.

"You know I do. You know I can't help it."

"And I love you, Dick—I don't know why, but I do. I'd like to kiss you—but still more, I think, I'd like to box your ears," said Cynthia. "Do you think the porter would stare, Dick, if a young lady boxed your ears on the platform?"

He stared at her, dumb.

"I'm going by the train, when it comes in," said Cynthia.

"So are you, Dick. How far are we going together?"

"We can't," he muttered.

"Why not?"

"Michael——!"

"Poor Michael!" said Cynthia. "But I'm thinking of you now, Dick—and of me! Mustn't I think of poor little me? Here comes the train. Are we going all the way, Dick?"

"Won't you go back, Cynthia?"

"Poor fool!" said Cynthia, coolly. "I'm very fond of you, Dick; but you make me tired. Will you put me in my carriage—a last attention to the girl you met in the branches of the oak tree? If we're going all the way together, Dick, get into the same carriage. If not——!" She shrugged her shoulders with cool scorn.

The train stopped. Cynthia looked at him, with a cool challenge in her look. He put her into an empty carriage, and stood at the open door, his face haggard.

"My bag!" said Cynthia.

He put it on the rack.

"And your own?"

He did not move or speak.

She shrugged her shoulders again.

"Then it's good-bye," she said. "Thank you for seeing me off, Mr. Forrester. Good-bye, and good luck in South Africa!" She turned her head away indifferently.

A door slammed—the train was beginning to move. Still Dick Forrester stood there, his eyes on the averted face within. She did not look round at him—her profile expressed nothing. A porter hurried up.

"Now, sir, if you're going——!"

Cynthia gave a little gasp, as a bag was hurled in, and Dick Forrester stumbled in after it. The porter slammed the door—the train gathered speed. Cynthia looked at Forrester, and her eyes danced.

"Together, Dick——"

"Together—yes!"

"And where are we going, Dick?"

"To South Africa," said Dick Forrester. "All the way, Cynthia—together, my dear—all the way!"

* * *

IT was months later that Sir Michael Trent, back from a long sea voyage, found a letter that had waited for him at Oak Court. It was a letter with a South African post-mark. There were some lines in it that Michael Trent read over and over again.

"Believe me, Mike, I never knew. I'd seen her before you told me anything—before I knew that you'd ever met her—I loved her as you loved her, Mike. Believe me, I tried to play the game, when you told me—if you remember, Mike, you'll know I did. It was hell for me, Mike— Try to forgive us both—"

Long Michael Trent sat staring at that letter. Far away in South Africa, his answer came in a telegram:

"God bless you both!"

Blessings, perhaps, were not to be expected from the old Colonel—compelled at long last, to exchange his club for a "pub." But Mike's blessing was enough for Dick Forrester and his wife.

THE END.