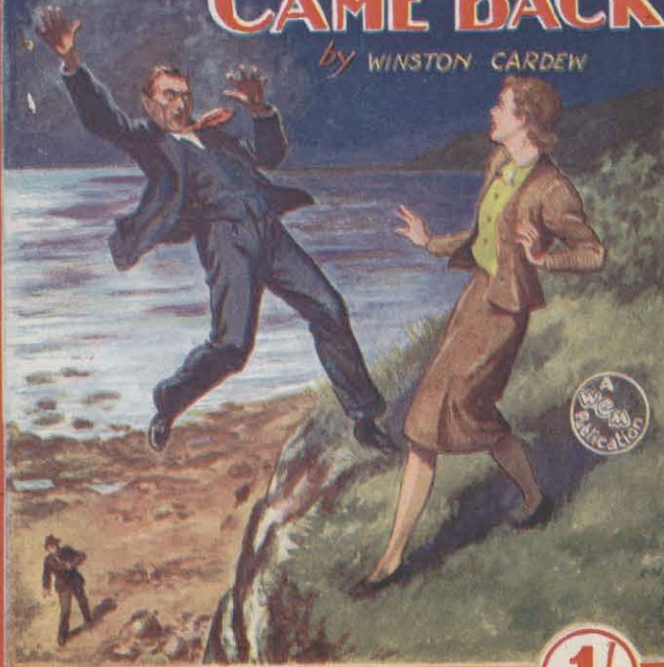


ROMANCE SERIES No 2

The MAN WHO CAME BACK

by WINSTON CARDEW



"For one terrible moment Jude Brent seemed to hang suspended in space. Then—"

1/-

The Man Who Came Back

By WINSTON CARDEW

CHAPTER THE FIRST

NO—OR YES!

"NO!" said Paula, slowly.

"Yes!" said Michael.

"I can't!"

"You can!"

"It's impossible!"

"Not at all! On the contrary, quite easy!"

Paula Brent could not help smiling. In her most serious moods, Michael could always make her smile. Michael was seldom serious. He seemed rather to take life as a joke. But if he could not be serious, he could be stubborn. He was quite determined that he was going to marry Paula Brent.

They were in the drawing-room at Cedar Court. Paula had been playing—now she had turned on the music-stool to look at Michael, whose long legs stretched from the easiest of easy chairs, whose curly hair was untidy, and who looked more like a big schoolboy than anything else, with all his twenty-seven years. She wanted to be very serious—but she smiled. He smiled back.

"You exaggerate the difficulties in this trifling matter!" explained Michael. "It's as easy as falling out of a window—though, of course, much more agreeable. True, I haven't been through it before—"

"I have!" said Paula, very quietly.

He made an involuntary grimace.

"Yes! I know! Shall we forget that?"

"If I could . . .!" she sighed.

"I'll make you!" assured Michael. "Bank on that! As I said, I've had no experience personally; but I've seen other fellows turned off. I can go through it without turning a hair. So can you."

"Be serious, Michael."

"Sober as a judge!" said Michael. "I'm only explaining how easy it is. First of all, I say, 'Will you marry me, Paula?' You say, 'Yes!' I say, 'Darling!' Pretty simple so far, isn't it?"

He beamed on her from the armchair.

"Next item in the programme, I produce a ring—I've had it ready in my waistcoat pocket for dog's ages—and slip it on your finger. See?"

"Michael!"

"Then we're engaged!" explained Michael. "The engagement leads, in due course, to a wedding. I rather believe in short engagements. What do you think?"

"Do be serious."

"Make it short," said Michael. "The shorter the better, really. Shakespeare says that brevity is the soul of wit. I'm sure it's the soul of an engagement. Well, after this brief engagement . . ."

"We're not engaged yet!" said Paula, trying not to laugh.

"That's all right—we're going to be. After this brief engagement, you stand by my side and answer, 'I will,' when you're asked if you'll take that rather attractive fellow, Michael Heathcote, for your husband. Having said 'I will'—well, that does it! You'll be Mrs. Heathcote instead of Mrs. Brent. Sounds rather nicer, don't you think?"

"Much!" agreed Paula. "But . . ."

"Next," said Michael, "comes the honeymoon. I believe it's often enjoyable. I haven't had one, yet—but I've heard that

they're rather good."

Paula laughed.

"And then, to end this strange eventful history, we settle down as a jolly old married couple," said Michael. "We'll live wherever you like—here at your lovely old house, or at my flat in town, or in a tent on Hounslow Heath if you choose. I'm accommodating. You'll try to be patient while I'm writing a play, and shut your ears if I curse when I can't think of an idea . . ."

"Do you ever, Michael?"

"Often! You should hear my language, sometimes. Lurid! Unnerving! On the other hand, I shall be patient when you stay out late at dances, leaving your poor old husband tearing his hair over the last act that won't go right! We've both got our faults . . ."

"I know I have!" sighed Paula.

"Not so many as I have!" said Michael. "I've got lots. And lots! But the secret of successful married life, Paula, is to love one another for one another's faults. See? I've thought it all out—you can regard me as an expert. I shall continue to love you, even if you chuck a hassock at my head . . ."

"Oh, Michael!"

"And you will continue to love me in the same circumstances. Not that I shall ever chuck a hassock at you, Paula. It is highly improbable. Still, you never know! In any case, you go on loving me."

"You seem to take it for granted that I have begun."

Michael gave a little jump, and his boyish face grew dismayed.

"Oh, I say! You do, don't you?" he exclaimed, in alarm.

"Of course, there's no reason why you should, I'm not very lovable, I know. Nothing much in me. But I certainly did think . . ."

"I do—I do!" murmured Paula.

"I thought so!" said Michael. "If you didn't, Paula, you'd be the beastliest little coquette I've ever struck. But it seems that you do?"

"Yes, Michael! But . . .!"

"Buts, in such circumstances, are inadmissible. We're past buts!" said Michael. "Now it's all settled, isn't it?"

"No! No! No!"

"Not now I've explained how easy it all is? Shall I tell you over again? First of all I say, 'Will you marry me, Paula?' You say, 'Yes' . . .!"

"Oh, Michael."

"Then I say, 'Darling!'"

"Michael, you must be serious!" said Paula Brent. "I—I can't! You tell me that you could make me forget my first marriage—a year, Michael, of hell on earth. It's burned into my memory, Michael. That man, Jude Brent . . .!" she shuddered.

His face clouded.

"Was he such a brute?" he muttered.

"I must not speak of him," she said, her voice trembling. "A brute—a coward—a villain—a common swindler! You know that he is dead, Michael—that he died three years ago. But I never told you how. It was—was—suicide! If he had not leaped from the steamer into the sea, Michael, he would have been—arrested! I should have been a convict's wife."

"You poor little thing!" breathed Michael. "Oh, Paula, won't you let me try to make it up to you?"

"I can't forget, Michael. I can't! Oh!" She clasped her hands. "If I could! If memory could only be erased! That man—that man—. He had spent all my money in that year, Michael, and I was left penniless—if my uncle had not offered me a home here, heaven knows what would have become of me."

That man has left a scar on my mind, Michael, that can never be healed. I—I dare not marry again! I—I can't, Michael."

He rose from the chair, and his arm slipped round her shoulders.

"That," said Michael, "is all rot! You've got to banish it all from your mind, and I shall help you. You poor little thing, you need to be loved and cared for—and I'm going to love and care for you. Paula! You don't think your second husband would turn out like your first, surely?"

"No! No! No! But . . ."

"Not very flattering, if you did!" said Michael, with a grimace. "I'm not a bad chap, Paula! Quite decent, in my way. The best of men isn't much to write home about, I'm afraid. But we're not all tarred with the same brush, Paula. If that's what you've got in your mind. . . ."

"No! No!"

"Then the best thing you can do is to make a clean break with the past," said Michael. "You love me, Paula?"

"Yes; but . . ."

"Love spells trust!"

"Yes—but—!"

With one arm round Paula, Michael Heathcote felt in his pocket with his free hand.

"Now, where's that ring?"

"Michael! No! We can be friends!" pleaded Paula.

"Of course we can," he agreed. "Lots of married folk are friends—quite good friends. Oh, here it is! Now, then, the third finger, isn't it?"

There was a flash of precious stones. Before Paula Brent quite knew what was happening, there was a ring on her finger. She stared at it, and Michael grinned at her.

"That does it!" he said.

"But—but . . .!" stammered Paula.

"You'll marry me, Paula?" For once, Michael's boyish face was serious. "Darling! The past is washed out—dead and done with. We've got the future—we two together, Paula! Oh, Paula, Paula, you're to marry me, aren't you?"

For a second she did not speak. The next, she was in his arms.

Suddenly, she hardly knew how, her mind was made up. It was a sudden flash of resolve. Why should the past haunt her—why should the vision of Jude Brent's sardonic face come always between her and the chance of happiness? The past was dead—dead—let it be buried also, and let her look to the future—only the future: with Michael! Why should she not be happy?

"We two together!" she whispered. "Yes! Yes! Yes! Just us two—and everything else forgotten!"

But later, when Michael was gone, Paula Brent wondered. The man who had made her suffer so much—the man she hated, whose memory she loathed—could she get rid of him so easily? Could she drive that handsome, sardonic, wicked face from her mind—the hateful face that seemed to haunt her like a material presence? With Michael's help, perhaps, she could. At all events her word was given now, and with it her fixed resolve—and she would think only of the future, and forget the miserable wretch who had gone to his death deep in the stormy waters of the Bay of Biscay.

CHAPTER THE SECOND

THE MAN WHO WAS AMUSED

"**F**OOL!" shouted Dr. Calcroft.

It was a shout of angry alarm. His heart was in his mouth—-he had come within an ace of killing a man.

Only by a sudden wrench round of the car, spinning it on the

grass verge under the high fence of Cedar Court, did he save that man's life.

A moment before, the chubby, cheery Medwood doctor had been bowling along the leafy lane. It happened suddenly. He had noticed, without much heeding, the figure in advance the man's back was to him—slouching along, close by the wood that bordered the lane on the right. On the left ran the high park fence, and in that fence was a little wicket gate. Dr. Calcroft had almost overtaken the man who was slouching ahead, and would have passed him in another second—but in that second, the man suddenly plunged across the road, apparently heading for the wicket in the park fence.

He did not even glance round—he had not, seemingly, heard the car—he made across the lane as if traffic did not exist; and Dr. Calcroft had barely time to swing the car aside before it struck him. As it was, a mudguard grazed the man, and he fell into the dust.

But Peter Calcroft could not heed him for the next few moments. The car rocked on the grass verge under the park wall, and almost overturned. Very nearly it crashed into the fence. The universe was dancing round the doctor for a few moments: then he got the car to a standstill, wondering that he was still alive.

"Fool!" he repeated.

The man still lay where he had fallen in the dust. Peter Calcroft had come near killing him—and come near killing himself in saving him. What sort of an idiot was it that plunged blindly across a road without a look round, right under the wheels of a car? Dr. Calcroft breathed hard and deep, as he gave the prone figure a glare. Serve him right if he was hurt!

That was his first thought. His second was that he was a doctor, and that a man lay helpless in the road. He descended from the Austin, and stepped across to the prostrate man. If the man had been touched, it was the merest graze—and could hardly have hurt him much. Yet he did not move.

The doctor bent over him.

"Hurt?" he asked, gruffly.

Then he gave an angry sniff. The cause of the man's carelessness was explained as he bent over him. He reeked with the fumes of drink. It was an intoxicated man who had nearly stepped under his car.

But he was conscious. His eyes, with the glaze of drink in them, glared at Peter Calcroft.

"You knocked me over!" he muttered.

"You knocked yourself over!" snapped Peter. "You're drunk."

The man, at last, made an effort to rise. Dr. Calcroft gave him a helping hand. He was on his feet at last—swaying. The doctor looked at him curiously—a stranger in the vicinity of Medwood—Dr. Calcroft knew all the inhabitants for many a mile round. He was well-dressed—or had been well-dressed—his clothes were good, though shabby. A man once in a good position, who had gone down hill—very far down hill, and was now pretty near the end of his tether—that was how Peter summed him up. He did not look older than the doctor himself—hardly over thirty. Some slight feeling of compassion mingled with the doctor's contempt.

"All right now?" he asked.

"I'm all right! No business of yours if I'm not—after knocking me down with your infernal car!" snarled the man, savagely. "And I'm not drunk—only in my legs, anyhow. No concern of yours."

"My concern, if you step under my wheels, and I have to attend an inquest!" snapped Peter Calcroft. "Why the dickens did you lurch across the road suddenly like that?"

"Find out!"

Peter Calcroft glanced round at the wicket in the park fence. That wicket gave access to Cedar Court—for people belonging to the place: the big gates were much further on. The man had cut across directly towards that gate—surely he could not have been going into the Cedar Court grounds? No one at Cedar Court, from the widow who was its mistress, to the humblest person in her service, could be supposed to have any connection with a man like this.

The man leaned heavily on a trunk, on the woodland side of the lane. He was not hurt, but he had had a shock, and it added to the effect of the liquor that had dulled his mind and unsteadied his limbs. He slid down into a sitting position, his back resting against the trunk of the tree. His eyes, bloodshot, glistened inimically at the doctor standing in the lane.

Calcroft turned to his car. But again compassion overcame contempt, and he turned back towards the man staring at him.

"Anything more I can do?" he asked.

"Only leave me alone."

"You're not fit to be left alone. If the Medwood policeman came along, ten to one he would run you in."

"Go to blazes!"

"Look here," said Peter, gruffly, "I'm going to pay a call, but it's not a professional one: and I can spare a few minutes. If you live anywhere about here I'll run you home, if you like."

"I don't!"

"You were going somewhere, I suppose?" snapped Peter.

"Nowhere where I want to arrive in a car, at all events," answered the man, with a sardonic grin. "I'll walk—when I get a little steadier. You are a doctor, I take it? Well, you've nearly killed me—now go and get on with killing your patients—and leave me alone."

Peter Calcroft breathed hard through a chubby nose.

"If you were sober, my man, I'd kick you!" he said. And with that, he turned to his car, taking no further notice of the sneering, malevolent figure sitting in the grass, leaning on the tree-trunk.

Luckily, the Austin had not suffered. Peter toiled it off the grass verge into the road, and was about to resume his interrupted way, when the wicket gate in the park wall opened, and a young man came out.

"Hallo, Peter!"

"Hallo, Michael."

Dr. Calcroft did not drive on. He eyed Michael Heathcote rather curiously and warily, as he stopped beside the car.

"You've been at Cedar Court?" he asked.

"Just left."

"And I'm just going there."

"Not on the same errand, I hope!" grinned Michael.

"That depends." Dr. Calcroft looked at him very keenly. There was a buoyant vivacity in Michael's look and manner which indicated an inward satisfaction and happiness: and for a moment the young doctor's face clouded. Not that it made much difference to him, if it had come to pass—a doctor with a poor scattered rural practice could hardly hope that a time would ever come when he could ask the mistress of Cedar Court to marry him. But what he seemed to read in Michael's face gave him a pang.

"Congratulate me, Peter!" said Michael.

"On what?"

"Guess."

"I'd rather you told me!" said Peter drily.

"I'm engaged."

"To whom?"

"To whom?" repeated Michael. "You meet me coming away

from Cedar Court, and I tell you I'm engaged, and you ask me to whom? Well, not to the gardener's daughter, nor the upper housemaid, nor the parlour-maid, nor yet Mrs. Brent's maid, Davison." He chuckled. "Now think it out, old man."

"Mrs. Brent?" asked Peter, quietly.

"Right in one! I've proposed seven times. Number seven was my lucky number. Six noes, and a yes. One yes washes out half-a-dozen noes, leaving not a wrack behind. Peter, old man, I'm going to marry Paula! It sounds too good to be true, I know—but it's true!"

"Congratulations!" said Peter, dully.

"Thanks, old man! I . . . What the dence . . .!" Michael broke off, and stared round, as the sound of a laugh startled him. He had not observed the man under the tree across the narrow lane; and Dr. Calcroft had forgotten him. Both of them stared across at him.

"Who's that?" asked Michael, his eyes glinting.

"A drunken fool who nearly stepped under my car," answered Peter. "I don't know why he's amused—unless it's the drink in his head."

Michael knitted his brows, and stepped across the lane. He stood looking down at the slumped figure under the tree, anger and scorn mingled in his face. The man stared up at him with sardonic defiance.

"So you're amused, are you!" said Michael. "You listen to what's not intended for your ears, and think it good manners to display your amusement? People have been kicked for less than that, my man."

"So you're going to marry Paula Brent?" The man gave a husky chuckle. "You're going to marry Paula Brent? Why shouldn't I be amused?"

"Don't speak that name again," said Michael, his eyes gleaming. "I don't want to handle a drunken man, but if you let that name pass your foul lips again, I'll thrash you within an inch of your life."

"Steady the Buffs!" Peter Calcroft caught him by the arm. "The man's drunk—probably doesn't know what he's saying. Can I give you a lift to the station?"

"But you're going to Cedar Court."

"I was—but I've changed my mind. Jump in."

"O.K.," said Michael.

The slumped man under the tree stared after the car, as it went in a cloud of dust. The sardonic face that had once been handsome was full of an evil merriment. He dragged himself to his feet at last. The fumes of liquor were clearing from his brain, though his limbs were still unsteady. With a lurching gait, he crossed the lane to the park fence, pushed open the little gate by which Michael had come out, and disappeared into the grounds of Cedar Court.

CHAPTER THE THIRD A FACE FROM THE PAST

"MILDRED!"

"Yes, Paula."

"I'm engaged!"

Mildred Wylie turned from her easel, brush in hand. Mildred was fair and thirty, her hair a little untidy, and there was a spot of paint on her rather sharp chin, another on her rather pointed nose. Her pale-blue eyes stared at Paula Brent: her thinnish lips compressed.

Paula coloured under her gaze. She had wondered a little how Mildred would take it: hardly, on reflection, expecting Mildred to be pleased. Miss Wylie was a distant relative, a cousin two or three times removed, who had lived for many years at Cedar Court in old Mr. Bellingham's time, and had re-

mained there after old Mr. Bellingham had died and left Cedar Court to his niece. Mildred had a small income of her own, which at Cedar Court she hardly needed to draw upon: she had ambitions as a painter, which were never likely to be realised: she was "arty" and a little bitter, and she might have inherited Cedar Court from the childless old man had Paula never existed. Paula, who felt for her, had begged her to stay on: and Mildred had stayed on—with mental reservations, as it were. Whether Mildred actually disliked her Paula did not know: Mildred was an adept at concealing her feelings, if she had any.

Now, for once, Mildred was not quite so careful. That compression of her lips, that glint in the pale-blue eyes, told of suppressed feeling—not wholly suppressed. But her voice was calm and casual when she spoke.

"I'm not surprised!"

"I am," said Paula, smiling a little tremulously, "I had made up my mind never—never—never . . .!"

"It was inevitable," said Mildred, indifferently. "Let me see—you are twenty-four—you married at twenty—you have had three years of widowhood—quite long enough to forget what men are like with power in their hands." Mildred's lip curled. She did not trust men: and her own freedom was dear to her. It was true that no man, so far, had sought to deprive her of it.

"Men are not all alike," said Paula, in a low voice.

"Much of a muchness," said Mildred, with a shrug of thin shoulders. "You had a fortune once, and a man ran through it. Now you have another fortune, and another man is going to run through it. Congratulations!"

Paula bit her lip. She knew Mildred's opinion on this subject, and did not expect approval. But this was not pleasant hearing, all the same.

But she wanted to be nice to Mildred. She had a feeling that Mildred had some cause for displeasure. Mildred had known her resolve never to marry again—a resolve that had been fixed, determined, she believed unalterable—though probably Mildred had not believed it unalterable. Jude Brent had made her feel that she hated men, and hated marriage—that she only wanted to be left alone for the rest of her life. Even Michael, for more than a year, had pleaded in vain—though she had known him in childhood, and liked him then—known him as a schoolboy, and liked him—and now, loved him with her whole heart. Now, at last, that fixed resolution had melted away, like ice in the sunshine—she was going to marry Michael. But Mildred, perhaps, had counted on that resolution: and now there would be a big difference.

"But who is the happy man?" went on Mildred, in the same indifferent tone. "Not Captain Arlington?"

"No! No!" almost snapped Paula.

"Dr. Calcroft?" asked Mildred.

"Certainly not!" This was a sharp snap.

"Mr Heathcote?"

"Yes."

"Best of the bunch, perhaps," said Mildred. "You must forgive me, Paula, but there have been so many flies round the honey, that . . ."

"I have never given a single thought to any man but Michael," said Paula. "And even Michael . . ." She paused. "You like Michael, Mildred?"

"One cannot help liking a big foolish schoolboy," said Mildred. "Yes, I like him. Not that my likes or dislikes will make any difference. I shall not even offer you any advice. You have lost your head again, and will take the consequences as before. When would you like me to go?"

Paula breathed hard.

"I do not want you to go at all, Mildred. Surely you know

that. I—we—shall live here part of the time. Cedar Court is large enough . . .”

“Thank you,” said Mildred. “But I should be in the way. Also I should not like it. I have thought several times of joining Janeth Wood in Wales—one can paint there. I will write to Janeth. Sorry, Paula! You know that I think you’re doing a silly thing. But I hope I’m wrong—I hope you will be happy.”

“Thank you, Mildred!” murmured Paula; and she went to the window, and stood looking out over the sunlit gardens of Cedar Court, that stretched away to the chalk cliffs and the sea—a lovely corner of Kent.

Mildred Wylie, standing by the easel, looked at her. Her face hardened. Many men came to Cedar Court—flies round the honey, as Mildred had expressed it. They had eyes only for Paula—and, as Mildred bitterly reflected, for Cedar Court. Paula was pretty—she grudgingly admitted that Paula was beautiful—but Mildred did not doubt that all of them, even Michael Heathcote, had an eye on the main chance. The little fool had been through it once—her money thrown to the winds by a dissipated drunken brute who would have ended in prison if he had not drowned himself.

Now she was going to repeat her folly: and, incidentally, Mildred had to look for another home. And that lovely house would have been hers—the old man had had no relatives in the world but herself and Paula—it would have been her own and her home, if Paula had never come back. Mildred had never liked Paula—but when she thought of that, she felt that she hated her. Paula had been a nearer relative of old Mr. Bellingham, it was true—but she had left him to marry that worthless profligate Brent, while Mildred had stayed—but it was the returned prodigal who had inherited, not the faithful one who had stayed at home. Not, as Mildred admitted to herself, that she had stayed for the old man’s sake—it had suited her, or she would not have done it. Nevertheless, if Paula had not come back . . .!

“Oh!” exclaimed Paula, suddenly, and Mildred stared. At the window, Mrs. Brent gave a sudden start, staring across the gardens. Her face was wildly startled. In astonishment, Mildred Wylie stepped to her side at the window.

At a distance, in the direction of the park that bordered Medwood Lane, two figures were visible. One was Jenkins, the gardener. But the other—Mildred’s own eyes widened as she stared at the other.

He had come through the little park—apparently by way of the wicket gate on Medwood Lane. Even at the distance it could be seen that he had been drinking. His face was flushed, his gait unsteady, his hat aslant on an untidy head, his clothes dusty as if he had fallen on the road. No wonder Jenkins, seeing such a character emerge from the trees into the trim gardens of Cedar Court, had borne down on him promptly. Voices could not be heard, at the distance, but the gardener’s gestures showed that he was ordering the man off.

Mildred Wylie stared at the strange scene with cold disapproval. But Paula’s face was white as chalk. She grasped Mildred’s arm, with a convulsive grasp that made her utter a cry.

“Mildred! Who is that man?” panted Paula.

“You are hurting my arm, Paula.”

“Who is that man?”

“How should I know who he is?” exclaimed Mildred, impatiently. “Some stranger—you can see that he is intoxicated—he has entered the wrong place for that reason, I suppose—Jenkins will turn him out.” She gave the agitated girl a glance of unconcealed contempt. “There’s nothing to be frightened about Paula. The wretched man will do no harm.”

Paula released her arm, and went closer to the window. Leaning on the sill, she fixed her eyes on the two figures in the

distance, as if they would start from her head.

Was she going mad, she asked herself. Did she see some fleeting resemblance in that face, to a face that had always haunted her—a face which she had resolved, that very day, to drive from her recollection for ever! Was it a mad fancy that she saw in that flushed face, coarsened by drink, a trace of the sardonic handsomeness of Jude Brent?

Why was the man there? And why did Jenkins not turn him out? Obviously that had been his intention. Now he was, apparently, arguing with him. Why did not the gardener take him by the shoulder and turn the drunken brute out, as it was his duty to do? What was the man saying to him? Was he saying that he had a right to come? Paula's heart almost died within her.

But Jude Brent was dead—dead—a drowned man at the bottom of the Bay of Biscay. It was the maddest of fears! She was haunted by his wicked face—that was all. Mildred had known Jude—and she did not see anything—that was plain. Paula stole a look at Mildred's grim face.

"You've never seen that man before, Mildred?"

"No."

"But why—why . . .?" Paula faltered. "How did he come . . ."

"He is drunk," said Mildred, contemptuously. "Perhaps he found the wicket open, and strayed in. There is nothing to be alarmed about. What is the matter with you, Paula?" Then, as her sharp eyes fixed on Paula's white face, her lip curled. "Do you think you know the man? Some acquaintance made when you were abroad with Jude Brent? He looks like the kind of friend Jude might have had!"

Paula did not speak. It was a mad fancy—if that horrible man had been like Jude, surely Mildred must have noticed it. And yet—yet . . .!

"Jenkins does not seem able to deal with him," added Mildred, scornfully. "I will go out to them if you like. If you are frightened, stay here."

"No! No!" panted Paula. If there was anything real in that terrible fear that gripped her heart, Mildred must not see the man more closely. "I—I will go . . . I—I . . . No! Leave it to Jenkins."

"Jenkins is coming here," said Mildred.

Leaving the man where he stood, Jenkins, with a puzzled ruddy face, came towards the house. As he caught sight of the two ladies looking from the window of Mildred's studio room, Jenkins changed his course, and headed for that window. He stopped under it, touching his hat.

"Beg your pardon, ma'am," said the gardener. "That man yonder . . ."

"Who is he?" breathed Paula.

"He ain't given any name, ma'am. But—but he says . . ." Jenkins hesitated, and stammered. "He says as how he knowed Mr. Brent, ma'am, and has come on business connected with the late Mr. Brent, ma'am, and—and can he speak to you, ma'am?"

"I should advise telephoning to Medwood for a constable," said Mildred, coldly, as Paula seemed unable to speak.

"But—but—if—if—it is possible—perhaps I had better hear what he has to say!" stammered Paula. "Jenkins! Is the man—is—is he sober?"

"A bit unsteady, ma'am, but he's got his wits about him," said Jenkins. "And—and I think he must have knowed Mr. Brent, ma'am, because he knows this place all right, and he knowed my name—he called me Tom Jenkins."

Paula's heart missed a beat.

"I will see the man," she said. "Take him into the library, Jenkins—by the French windows from the lawn."

"Very good, ma'am."

Jenkins tramped back across the gardens to the stranger. Paula, hardly daring to meet Mildred Wylie's glance, hurried from the room.

Mildred remained at the window, staring out, with a bitter look. Some friend of Jude Brent's—and Paula knew him—she had no doubt of it. What an acquaintance to turn up from Paula's past—a half-intoxicated man reeling across the trim lawns, whom Paula, only too clearly, dared not refuse to see!

Jenkins, and the man with him, disappeared round an angle of the house. Mildred Wylie, with bitter scorn in her face, went back to her easel and her brushes.

CHAPTER THE FOURTH THE MAN WHO CAME BACK!

HE sat slumped in a deep leather chair, his hat on the floor beside him, his hair untidy against the dark leather, his legs sprawling, his down-at-heel boots thick with dust, a half-smoked cigarette hanging from a loose lip. Jenkins stood looking at him, with mingled curiosity and disgust. He looked a blotch on the quiet shady room—utterly incongruous and out of place in Cedar Court. But as Paula came in by the door, Jenkins touched his forelock and retreated by the French windows, leaving the mistress of Cedar Court alone with that strange, unkempt visitor.

The man glanced up at Paula, and grinned. He was not intoxicated now—his mind was clear enough, though his hands shook, and his eyes were bloodshot. They watched the graceful figure stealthily—and the grin on the face was evil and malicious.

She stood and looked at him. He made as if to rise from the chair, with some remembrance of the manners of former times, but slumped back again, watching her—warily, suspiciously, evilly.

"I've come back!" he said.

She knew him. There was no doubt now. Little resemblance as he now bore to the handsome Jude Brent of five years ago, she knew him. She did not need his words to tell her who he was.

Long she stood there, looking at him; and as she stood and looked, her hands clenched till the nails dug into the palms, and her face hardened and hardened till it seemed carved in stone.

She was quite calm. Her calmness surprised herself. But she had known—she realised that she had known who he was—ever since her eyes had first fallen on him from Mildred's window. This was her husband—alive! Her husband, who had cheated her in everything else, and cheated her even into a belief in his death: and he had come back.

Was it only a few hours, or was it ages and ages, since she had yielded, at last, to Michael's persuasion, and promised to marry him? It seemed to her that she had grown years older since she had seen Michael! She could not marry Michael now—she was married already—to this! It had always seemed to her that Jude Brent's evil face stood between her and happiness—and her instinct had been true. He had come back to blast her life. But the woman to whom he had come back was not the girl he had cheated, ill-used, and abandoned. If he fancied so he would soon find out his mistake.

"So that was a lie, too?" said Paula, breaking the silence. "You had lied to me about everything else—and even your last act was a lie. You did not go down in the Bay of Biscay. It was a trick—one of your treacherous tricks."

He gave a husky chuckle.

"The only way, my dear—the only way, as the fellow says in the play. They'd have had me if I'd gone on in the steamer—radio, you know. They were waiting for me at the port."

"And you let me believe . . . ?"
"I had to! You'd have talked!" said Jude Brent, still grinning. "I'd fixed it all up. A Spanish fishing boat was waiting to pick me up—I had a quarter of a mile to swim—it went like clockwork. I read of my suicide in the papers a day or two later."

"And you've let me believe, for three years . . . ?"
"Did you miss me?" he grinned. "Did you mourn?"
"I might have married again."
"Very likely," he agreed. "Why not? I was dead—I'm going on being dead—why shouldn't you?"

If she had loathed him before, she was sick with loathing now. He had never cared for her, even in the early days: it had only been her money that he wanted, and he had had it, spent it; and he had left her without a twinge of remorse or regret, leaving her to believe him dead—till it sulted him to undeceive her. And if she had married again in the meantime, he would not have cared even for that—that would have amused him! It would have strengthened his hold on her. For she knew, without being told, why he had come.

"You rascal!" she said, quietly. "You rascal!"

He blinked at her with a little surprise.

"You've grown a sharper tongue than you used to have, Paula!" he said. "You never called me pretty names like that in the old days."

"I've changed in many ways," said Paula. "You will find that out, Jude. Why have you come here?" She knew, but she asked.

He gave her a stealthy, searching look. She could read in his cunning face the thought in his mind—was it any use lying to her, appealing to her woman's vanity, to any rag that might be left of her old regard for him—or should he state the brutal truth?

A hard laugh fell from her.

"Speak plain English," she said. "You cannot delude me now. You are false to the very core of your heart—if you have a heart. But your lying is useless now—speak plainly."

"By Gad, you've changed!" he said. "You wish I'd gone down in the sea, when I jumped from the steamer—and stayed there."

"Of course I do!"

"Well—I didn't!" he said, sullenly. "I've come back! Look here, Paula—I—I was a brute—I own it—but—I—I wanted to see you again, old girl—I did really! I wanted . . ."

She raised her hand.

"Cut out the lies, Jude. You'd never have given me another thought if I'd remained as poor as when you deserted me. You've heard that my uncle left me Cedar Court—that's why you've come."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Have it your own way!" he sneered. "Anyhow, I've come! And I'm your husband, remember that! You can't marry Michael—I don't know his other name—while I'm alive—unless I choose!" he added, mockingly.

She caught her breath.

"So you know about—Michael?"

"Only a few words I caught an hour or two ago. Enough to tell me what was going on," said Jude Brent, coolly. "Is that Michael's ring you've got on your finger, Paula?" He chuckled.

She started a little, and glanced down at her hand. Swiftly she slipped off the ring Michael had placed on her finger, and held it in her palm. Michael's ring—poor old Michael! Would he feel as she did, when he knew that all was over?

"You came here," she said. "You dared to come here in that condition—where you might have been known."

"Dutch courage," said Jude Brent. "I had a few too many, perhaps—but it needed some nerve, Paula, to come where a dozen people had known me by sight. I've changed in four years—especially the last three—but—there was risk!" Then, as if impatient with his own excuses, he broke out, "I'll do as I choose! I knew that nobody would recognise me—especially as I'm dead—dead for three years past. A man doesn't need to screw up his courage to call on his own wife."

"If you were known . . . !"

"I shan't be known," he said. "Jenkins never knew me—never dreamed he'd seen me before." He glanced round, "You've got the telephone here. You can ring up the police, if you like, and tell them that Jude Brent is in their hands if they choose to come and take him."

She stood looking at him, thoughtfully, icily. The silence was so long that the man stirred uneasily, something like fear in his face.

"What are you thinking, Paula?" he asked at last.

"I'm considering!" she said slowly.

"What?"

"Whether to do as you've said—ring up the police, and hand a swindler and thief over to the law."

He sat bolt upright in the chair.

"So you hate me as much as that?" he breathed.

"Yes; as much as that—and more."

"But you won't do it," he said. "You dare not! You couldn't face it! Paula Brent, the rich widow—Paula Brent, the wife of a convict in Dartmoor! No! You couldn't face that, Paula. And Michael—what would Michael think?" he added, sardonically. "What a shock for Michael."

She nodded, quietly. She could not face that—she knew it, and he knew it. Not, at all events, unless she were driven to desperation.

"Why have you come?"

"Why does a man, down on his uppers, not a shot left in the locker, come to a rich wife in a handsome country house?" he asked. "Easily answered."

"You spent all I had—once."

"I'll go easier this time," he said, grinning. "You've got cards in your hand this time, Paula. You could always hand me over. I'd have come before if—if—I had no idea the old man would leave you the place after all. He always liked you—but when you married me . . ."

"He knew you were a scoundrel. I did not."

"But he came round, it seems—I fancied that it would all go to Mildred—must have put that cat's nose out of joint when it came to you, after all. Is she still here?"

"Mildred Wylie is still here."

He shifted uneasily in the chair.

"If that cat sees me, there's danger. She's sharp as a fox. If . . ."

"She saw you from her window, with Jenkins," said Paula, "and never even dreamed who you were. How could she—when you've been dead for three years!"

"I don't trust her!" he muttered. "She hates me—and you."

"She need not see you. In fact, she shall not. Tell me what you want," said Paula, sharply.

"Money!" he answered, laconically.

Again she looked at him thoughtfully. She knew it, of course. He did not want her—he wanted money. So long as she kept his secret—and she must keep his secret—he would want money—and more money—money to spend on drink, and gaming, and worse—more and more. She knew it, and she knew him,

She could get rid of him by giving him money—but when the money was gone, he would come back—and again come back—till he had drained Cedar Court dry—till he had made her penniless as he had done before. And there was no help!—unless in herself.

"How much?" Her calm voice was like ice.

"Old Bellingham left you well fixed, Paula. I know what he was worth. You can afford a few thousands for the partner of your joys and sorrows."

She smiled bitterly.

"It is not worth that!" she said. "I am not now the young and simple girl you robbed once, Jude. Listen! You will go—as you came! You will send me an address, to which I shall write. I shall send you what I think fit. You will never come here again. You will be satisfied with what I send you—at least you will be silent. That is all. Now go!"

He gave her a stare in which all the evil of his nature was concentrated.

"That won't do, Paula."

"That's my last word. If you enter this house again, I hand you over."

"I'm your husband . . ."

"Will you go now?"

"No!" He spat out a savage oath. "I won't!"

"Very well!" said Paula Brent, between compressed lips. She crossed over to the telephone, and began to dial.

Jude Brent started from the chair.

"What's that number you're calling?" he snarled.

"Medwood 22," answered Paula. "The police station! I recommend you to go, Jude—you've not much time to lose."

He gave her an unbelieving glare—then, as he read the cold, fixed determination in her face, he rushed across the room, and grasped her arm. The receiver was wrenched from her hand.

"You jade!" he breathed. "You'd dare . . .!"

"Let go my arm!" said Paula, in an even voice. "I will call for help if you do not—and you will lose what chance you have before the police come."

He gave her a look of hate.

"I'll go!" he muttered.

"You had better."

He tramped to the French windows. There he turned, and looked back at her with burning eyes. She still stood by the telephone; but she had replaced the receiver. But as he stopped, she stretched her hand to it again. Breathing a bitter oath, Jude Brent tramped out—and was gone.

Paula Brent stood, motionless, for long minutes after he had gone—staring with almost vacant eyes at the open French window. She had gone through that ordeal calmly, with self-possession—an unnatural calm, and an unnatural self-possession. Now the reaction came—and it came suddenly. Her strength seemed suddenly to leave her, and she burst into a torrent of wild weeping.

CHAPTER THE FIFTH

"I WILL MARRY YOU!"

"DARLING!"

"Don't!"

"But—Paula!"

"Don't!"

Michael looked at her in amazement, and in deep concern. It was but two days since he had left Cedar Court walking on air, and had told Peter Calcroft his good news like a happy schoolboy. Now he had come—to find a changed Paula. He came to her with open arms—and she retreated from him—her

face white, almost frightened, her hands held up as if to ward off his caress.

"Paula! What is the matter?"

"I should have written!" she said. "I—I began to write—but—but. Sit down, Michael. There is something I must tell you. No—don't touch me—don't!"

"Has anything happened?"

"Yes! No! I—I've changed my mind, Michael. I—I can't marry you."

"You've changed your mind?" he repeated. "You can't marry me, Paula! You don't expect me to take that, do you?"

"You must, Michael! And—you must never come to see me again."

He stared at her. For a moment his brows knitted grimly. But he could not be angry with Paula.

"You don't want me?" he asked, very quietly.

"No!" she breathed. "I—I want you to take back your ring, Michael! It—it was all a mistake."

"It wasn't," said Michael, his eyes on her face. "Something's happened. What is it? Aren't you going to explain before you throw me over?"

"It—it—it's nothing, but—but I've—I've thought it over, and—and I—I've changed my mind." The words came with difficulty.

"That's rot, Paula. You look ill! I've never seen you look ill before—but you look ill now. In heaven's name what is it?"

"Nothing."

"You ought to see Calcroft—he's a good doctor, and a good chap."

"I'm not ill, Michael! Perhaps I have a—a headache. I tell you it was a mistake—a mistake! Michael, don't make it harder for me. I—I should have written . . ."

"That wouldn't have helped," said Michael. "If you'd told me this by letter, Paula, it would simply have made me break speed limits right and left to get to you. I should have come all the same—all the more! Tell me what you mean."

"I've told you!"

"I mean, tell me the truth. You're the feeblest fibber I've ever struck, Paula—it's not in your line at all. Something's happened. What is it?"

"Nothing."

"Rot!" said Michael, tersely.

She sat silent, looking at him. Should she—could she—tell him? She shrank from the thought—she could not tell him. But he did not understand—he could not understand. And he loved her—and she loved him. If only the Bay of Biscay had closed for ever above that wicked face!

"You don't love me any more?" said Michael, with a whimsical smile.

"No!" she said, faintly.

"I'm not really a conceited chap," said Michael. "But I flatter myself that you do, Paula. Anyhow, I love you enough for two. See? We'll get married all the same, and I'll put in all the loving that's required for a happy married life. In the course of time you may grow to like me a little better. You might even fall in love with me in the long run. How's that?"

"Oh, Michael!" She could not help a smile. "If you would only be serious."

"I'm going to be." With a sudden movement, he caught her in his arms. She made a feeble resistance, but two strong arms enfolded her—and then she rested on his breast, unresisting. With Michael's arms round her, his boyish face smiling down at her, she could forget, for a moment, the evil face of Jude Brent—forget the bar between them. Only for a moment—but it was wildly sweet while it lasted.

"Now," said Michael. He kissed her. "Now, Paula, in my arms, and looking me in the eyes, have you the nerve to say again that you don't love me?"

"No!" she breathed.

"You do love me, Paula?"

"Yes! You know I do! I can't help it, Michael. I do! I do!"

"Open confession is good for the soul," said Michael, with a cheery grin. "By a happy coincidence, I love you, too, Paula—I do! I do! No—I'm not going to let you go!"

"You must!" She remembered. "Michael, you must!"

"On the other hand, I mustn't," said Michael, coolly. "We're going to have this out, Paula, and in our present position, which, incidentally, is very pleasant, we get nearer to the facts. You love me, Paula—say it again. You can't say it too often. Say, 'I love you, Michael!'"

"I love you, Michael! Now let me go."

"I love you, Paula—and I won't let you go. Something's happened since I saw you last. Spill it."

"No . . . yes . . ."

"Something that seems to come between us?"

"Yes."

"We're getting on," said Michael. "Tell me what it is."

"I can't!"

"We'll have a guessing game, then. Has Miss Wylie been advising you that men were deceivers ever, and that the less you have to do with them the better?"

"Mildred has nothing to do with it."

"Has Captain Arlington carried you off your feet with his dashing cavalry swagger?"

"Michael!"

"Well, I'm trying to guess. Has somebody pointed out to you that the mistress of Cedar Court is throwing herself away on a poor devil who writes plays?"

"Don't be absurd, Michael."

"If so, I may point out that Michael Heathcote is a rising playwright," said Michael. "The critics treat him very nicely as a coming man. He is begged to broadcast. He does very well at present, and has a reasonable expectation of doing better in the future. From a financial point of view, he is not at all a bad match."

"Oh, Michael!"

"In case of doubt," continued Michael, with dignity, "he is prepared to give a banker's reference. Can I say more?"

"Oh, Michael, why will you make me laugh when I am so miserable?" wailed Paula. "Every silly thing you say makes me love you more, and feel that I cannot give you up."

"Good!" said Michael. "No wonder Shakespeare told us that wisdom cries out in the streets, and no man regards it, if saying silly things has such a desirable effect. You're not going to give me up, Paula! I'm not an insoluble cross-word puzzle, and I'm not to be given up."

"I—I must, Michael! Oh, I must."

"You mustn't, Paula. Oh, you mustn't! If you do, look out for a breach-of-promise suit. I have a jolly good case, I can tell you. Rich widow breaks engagement with promising young playwright! Beware, Paula! Now you're laughing! Good! Let's laugh it all off, shall we?"

Paula was laughing—but it was a rather hysterical laugh. She found it hard to choke back a sob.

Should she tell him?

She knew that she could not. She could not marry him, now! But she could not tell him of the evil, wicked man who stood between them. She could not tell him that she was still tied to a villain—that Jude Brent, whose evil face had haunted

her, had come back from the dead to shadow her life, and shut out the happiness that, only a few days ago, had seemed possible. She could not tell him of the shame and misery that had suddenly come back into her life: and she dreaded, too, what Michael might do, if he knew. Michael took life easily and lightly; but with all his careless banter, there was a depth in his character that she knew—and now feared. What might happen between those two, if Michael knew that a drunken, dissolute villain was blackmailing her?

She rested in his arms—she could not repulse him again. Those strong arms held her, protected her. But it must end.

He was looking down at her with a whimsical smile.

"All my guesses wrong?" he asked.

"Oh, Michael!"

"Well, I'm at the end of my tether," he said. "I just can't imagine what you fancy has come between us."

"It is not a fancy, Michael."

"Then what is it?"

"I—I can't tell you. I can't."

"Why not?"

"I can't!"

"Well, if you can't you shan't!" he said. "I'm not frightfully inquisitive. I'm only going to ask you one little thing."

"What is that, Michael?"

"To forget all about it—just chuck it out of your mind, dear. That's not a lot to ask, is it?" He smiled.

"Oh, Michael—Michael!"

"That's a go?" he asked. "Now, Paula, let's come down to brass tacks. I believe in short engagements. What about naming the great day?"

"No! No! You don't understand!" wailed Paula.

His face became more serious.

"I understand this much," he said, quietly, "something's happened—I can't guess what—that's frightened you. Isn't that so?"

"Yes!" she breathed.

"I won't ask you any more to tell me. But you've got to give me the right, and the power, to protect you, Paula. Why not get married at once? Cut the cackle and come to the hosses, what? Once you're my wife—Paula dear, how lovely that word sounds—once you're my wife, darling . . ."

If only it had been possible! For a moment she gave herself up to a dream. Michael's wife—the unhappy past blotted out—that boyish, loving face always with her—those strong arms always her protection! If only it had been possible. But the evil face of Jude Brent came back.

"Michael! You must—must leave me."

"I'll leave you," he agreed. "I can see you're upset, and I'm not going to be a worry to you. But before I leave you, just repeat this lesson. Say after me, 'I love you, Michael.'"

"I love you, Michael!" she murmured submissively.

"Next, 'I will marry you, Michael!'"

"I—I . . ." She stammered helplessly.

"I'm not going to let you go, till you've said it," he explained. "For both our sakes, darling, we've got to get this settled."

"Michael! Let me go."

"When you've said it, dear!"

"I—I—Yes!" she said, desperately, "I—I will marry you, Michael!" She could not help it. His will was hers.

"Good!" said Michael. "That's O.K. Paula! Stick to that! We're going to be very happy, Paula. I shall try hard to make you forget what it is better for you not to remember—I'll try hard to make you happy, dearest. Incidentally, you will make me happy—if that counts for anything."

"Oh, Michael!"

"And I think," he said, very grave now, "I think I can really guess what has been troubling you, Paula." She gave him an almost wild look. Did he guess? "I think I can, Paula! You cannot get that man out of your memory! It is that accursed Jude Brent that haunts you. Paula, you must not think of him. When you do, he is in my mind, also, and I hate him, dead as he is. If he were living..." His voice and look changed, and she clung to him in terror.

"Michael, don't look like that—you frighten me!"

"Dearest!" He kissed her. "Drive him out of your thoughts—and out of mine. If he were living now, I believe I should kill him."

"Oh, my dear, I'm sorry!" he said, remorsefully. "But—but—Paula, dear, let the dead past bury its dead! We're going to look to the future, my love. Once you're my wife, you will forget, and I will forget, that that brute ever contaminated the earth. No more of that! Kiss me, Paula—we've got our love, and what can the past matter to either of us?"

When he left her, he went with a light step. He did not know that he left behind him a stricken, desperate woman, thinking, thinking, with her hands pressed to a throbbing head—what could she do? What could she do?

CHAPTER THE SIXTH

HARD PRESSED!

BUZZZ!

Mildred Wylie snapped her thin lips with vexation. She had sat down to the telephone in the library at Cedar Court, to call up Janeth Wood, in Wales, and was about to dial TRU when the bell rang. She snapped the receiver off the hooks, to get rid of the caller before she asked for her trunk call.

"Well?" she rapped.

If she had thought for a moment of telling him the bitter truth, she would have held it back now. Her heart almost ceased to beat.

"Is that Paula?" came a thick voice: a voice that, few as the words were, seemed to Mildred's ears to have a familiar ring. It was not Michael's voice, or anything like it. Who else, Mildred wondered sourly, called her relative "Paula"?

"No! Miss Wylie speaking! Who is it?" she snapped.

"Mildred Wylie! Oh!"

Whoever he was, he knew her name: and again she was struck by something familiar in the voice. Where had she heard it before?

"Who is speaking?" she asked, impatiently.

"I want to speak to Mrs. Brent."

"What name?"

There was a pause. It seemed that the unknown caller was unwilling to give his name. But it came, after a pause.

"Tell her it is Mr. Deadman on the telephone, please."

It was a singular name—a real name, certainly, but a very uncommon one. Mildred suspected that it was not the caller's real name, however, or why the long hesitation in giving it? She shrugged her gaunt shoulders, with a sneer on her face.

"I will call Mrs. Brent," she said. "Hold on."

Leaving the receiver off, Mildred left the library. She could have sent a maid with a message to Mrs. Brent, but she chose to carry the message herself. She was curious, and vaguely suspicious. She found Paula Brent in the drawing-room, standing at the open windows, gazing across the gardens, bright in the sunshine, towards the rugged chalk cliffs that gave on the beach below. Paula did not hear her enter, and did not turn her head—there was something strange and concentrated in her

gaze, and Mildred gave her a sharp look. What was she thinking of as she gazed at that distant cliff!

"Paula!"

Mrs. Brent started at her voice, and turned. Her look was so strange, that Mildred's became sharper and more curious.

"What is the matter, Paula?" she asked.

"Nothing! I was thinking . . ." Paula seemed to be gathering thoughts that were wandering far away. "I—I was looking at the Lover's Leap—you know the story, Mildred—a man threw himself from that cliff once, and was killed by the fall on the beach. A man in love . . ."

"Poor fool!" said Mildred, contemptuously. "Mad, I suppose."

"Perhaps!" said Paula, "or perhaps—if he found life too involved, it was a way out—a cutting of the Gordian knot—an end to all problems. There are some problems in life that have no answer—and that was an answer."

"What nonsense!" said Mildred. "More likely he was drunk, or in debt—men don't do such things for love. Women might be silly enough."

"Yes," said Paula, slowly. "A woman might!"

"I came to tell you that you are wanted on the phone." Mildred's eyes were very sharp as she spoke. "A man wants to speak to you." Her lip curved, as the colour came into Paula's pale face. "Not Mr. Heathcote—a man who gave the name of Mr. Deadman."

Paula gave a start.

"Mr. Deadman!" she repeated. She was pale again now.

"That was the name he gave. I said I would tell you. If you do not want to take the call, I will tell him so. I was going to phone Janeth."

"No! No! I will take the call!" exclaimed Paula, hurriedly. She did not need telling who "Mr. Deadman" was. Jude Brent had dared to ring her up.

She went quickly to the library, Mildred's eyes on her as she went. In a few moments the receiver was at her ear.

"Is that you?" she breathed into the transmitter.

A husky chuckle came back. It almost seemed to Paula that the fumes of liquor reached her along the wires. The man had been drinking.

"It's Jude! Your dear husband, my darling!"

"Stop that!" Paula's voice was like a razor-edge. "Another word of that and I will cut off."

"You'd give me the trouble of ringing again. I want to speak to you, Paula. I had your letter—what use do you think fifty is to me?"

"Take it or leave it."

"Curse your parsimony!"

"Is that all?"

"No!" came Jude Brent's voice, savagely. "That isn't all. Look here, Paula, this won't do! Look here, I've been thinking it over. I've seen some old friends since I've come back. Matters aren't so bad as they might have been. I've had some advice—from a legal man I know—a clever man, too. Paula, that old affair might be fixed up."

"What do you mean?"

"They wanted me once—but it was three years ago, Paula," came Jude's husky voice. "It's still over my head—but it could be squared. It only needs money! If the amount I had could be repaid—and it could, Paula—a certain cheque that is now in existence might be destroyed—and—and—Paula, I should be a free man. I tell you, it can be wangled. Three thousand pounds would do it."

"And then?" said Paula, between set lips.

"Why shouldn't we have another try, Paula?" The voice on the telephone was eager now, eager and persuasive. "I own up that I was to blame for most of the trouble—I can't do more than that. I was fond of you, Paula—and you can't have forgotten entirely that you were fond of me once. Paula—darling—why shouldn't we try it again? I swear I will go straight this time."

She almost smiled. Her scorn and loathing of the man were beyond words. He could not understand how she had changed—how a year of married life with Jude Brent had changed her. He could not understand that all his old fascination was gone—that any woman could cease wholly to care for him. The vanity of the man was not less than his unscrupulous wickedness. He still thought that he could draw her back to him—fool as well as dastard!

"We'll make a go of it, Paula." He seemed encouraged by her silence. "I'll pull up—swear off the drink, I promise that." His voice was husky with drink, as he was speaking. "I'll make a creditable master of Cedar Court, Paula! I'll make you proud of your husband! I've sown my wild oats, Paula—I'm through. Dammy, Paula, you don't want to waste your life like that sour Mildred—you're only twenty-four. You can't marry anyone else while I'm alive."

"No!" she breathed.

"I'm not jealous of Michael—whoever Michael is!" He chuckled. "I won't be a bad, jealous husband, Paula. If you want your fling, I'll keep my eyes shut."

She almost trembled with hatred and loathing.

"We'll hit it off—we'll hold up our heads in the county—a widow is always in rather a false position, Paula—you want a husband to stand by you. I'll leave you free—free as air! Let's try again, Paula, what? What do you say?"

"No!" said Paula. "Say no more about that. Never! Is that plain enough?"

A husky oath answered her.

"If you've anything else to say before I cut off . . ."

"By Gad I have! I'm coming to see you! We've got to discuss this, and other things. Don't tell me that you'll ring up the police if I come! That chicken won't fight twice! I'll let them take me—at Cedar Court! The whole county shall ring with it. You'll never hold up your head again. I'm coming! Now, then, my lady, what do you say to that?"

She said nothing.

"You've got to see me through, Paula! I can't live like this—in fear of a policeman's hand dropping on my shoulder. The matter can be squared, and it's got to be squared. I'm in danger, Paula! Some men I used to know, know me again—and there's a woman—you can't trust women! You've got to see me safe—I tell you it can be fixed—it only means money."

"Yes," she said, "and what then?"

"I'm your husband! You're my wife! But—but . . ." She knew that he suddenly realised that he had to be wary. "But—it should be as you like, Paula! I'll leave you alone, if you prefer it! I swear that."

Her lip curled with bitter scorn. He was ready to swear that, or anything else, to gain his point. But when he was free of fear, when he dared to call himself by his own name—then he would claim his wife, and all she had—false promises cost him nothing.

"I'll satisfy you, Paula! I swear that!" His voice ran on eagerly. "But you've got to help me! I tell you, Paula, I'm desperate! I've got to see you. Paula! If you won't see me, I'll come to Cedar Court, and the police shall take me there—fighting! But if you'll see me, I'll keep clear of the house. I'd rather keep clear of that cat Wylie's sharp eyes, if you come to that!"

Somewhere in the grounds, if you like—one of the romantic spots where we used to meet in the old days, Paula."

His voice softened, cunningly. He fancied that the reminder would move her. He could not understand that it made her shudder.

"I'm coming, Paula! This evening! Is it to be at the house or outside? That's your choice! Take it or leave it."

She tried to think.

"What about the Lover's Leap, Paula? That's far enough from the house for safety. You remember, Paula—that climb up from the beach, when I helped you—you remember!"

"Be silent!" she breathed.

"You can walk down to the chalk cliff, as late as you like, I'll be there. What about it, Paula? I'm being reasonable. Nobody shall see me—only yourself! But I've got to see you, Paula—you've got to see me safe! I tell you, I'm in danger—you've got to help me. Will you be at the Lover's Leap to-night?"

"Yes," she said, at last, desperately, "I will come."

"The hour?"

"Midnight," breathed Paula, "Midnight—at the Lover's Leap."

"Later than in the old days, but even more romantic," came his chuckle. "I'll be there, Paula, bank on that. And—bring another fifty with you, Paula! I must have money! Au revoir—Darling!" There was a world of triumph, mockery, sardonic amusement in the last word: and he rang off.

Paula replaced the receiver. She had yielded—she was to see him. What could she do? She had little doubt that part, at least, of what Jude had said, was true—in his old disgraceful haunts, old acquaintances had recognised him—he was in danger, unless—and until—he could "square" that old affair. That might be true, or it might be a falsehood to get money. But if he was in danger, perhaps he would go—leave the country—she would be generous, if only he would place the sea between him and her. Only too well she knew the malicious evil of his nature—if he was to be taken, he would be taken in her house—in her home—he would make it as bitter and shameful for her as he could. She had to see him—to prevail on him, if she could, to cross the sea again—he could at least be moved by the consideration of his own safety. She rose from the telephone at last, and went out of the library.

As the door closed on her, the French window, which had been ajar, opened. Mildred Wylie came in. Her face was dark, bitter, scornful. She had never liked Paula—she had hated her when Cedar Court became hers—and every favour received at her hands had stung like a serpent. There was scorn mingled with her cold, silent hatred now. This woman, engaged to that handsome boy, Michael Heathcote, had made a midnight assignation with the man on the telephone—someone of her former husband's disreputable friends, of course! This was the woman who had cheated her of Cedar Court—whose marriage was to drive her out of what had been her home for so many years.

Yet she was puzzled.

Outside the French window, she had heard what Paula had said—of what had been said at the other end she had, of course, heard nothing. It must be a love affair—or was it blackmail? What was Paula's secret?

Mildred Wylie did not know. But she was going to know. It was some time before the dark-browed, bitter woman sat down to the telephone to ask for her trunk call—and when it came through, her talk was not of coming to Wales—it was to tell Janeth that there might, after all, be a change in her plans, and that she might not come. Jude Brent's was not the only malicious mind that could brood on blackmail!

CHAPTER THE SEVENTH

WHAT PETER SAW!

DR. CALCROFT leaned on the great rock, his hands in his pockets, looking out over the moonlit sea. He was tired—dog-tired—he needed a rest before he clambered up the winding path on the steep cliff.

The summer night was very still. At a distance, the waves curled on the shelving beach, glimmering in the moon. Behind him, was the dark mass of chalk cliffs, rising seventy feet above the beach. High above, the gardens of Cedar Court ran to the very edge of the cliffs: the great rock, bulging almost directly above the doctor's head, was the Lovers' Leap—where he stood was within a few yards of the spot where a man once had crashed to death. But Dr. Calcroft was not thinking of that—he was thinking that he was very tired, that a country doctor's life with a widely-scattered practice was a tough proposition: and that he would be glad to be home, to smoke the pipe of peace before he turned in—at midnight or later, only to turn out again at an early hour.

He had saved a life that night—that was something. At the fisherman's cottage, a mile along the beach, he had fought with death and won—a poor man's wife would live and not die—that was something! Long hours—anxious and painful hours—coming on top of a long day—and then the walk home, for the cottage was inaccessible to any kind of vehicle. But the walk along the moonlit beach had refreshed him—and there was a short cut back to Medwood by climbing the cliff path, and cutting across that remote corner of the Cedar Court grounds. But he was tired—tired out—and he had to wait a little before he tackled that steep winding path.

Leaning on the rock, he stared out to sea, calmed by the peace and stillness of the lovely night. Inevitably, thinking of his empty bachelor home, his thoughts turned to Paula Brent—mistress of the mansion beyond the cliff. But he shrugged his shoulders impatiently. She was going to marry Michael—even if he could ever have hoped, there was no hope now: she was going to marry Michael Heathcote.

"God bless her and make her happy!" he said half-aloud. She deserved some happiness—after what he knew of her first marriage. He did not know the whole story, but he knew that that blackguard, Jude Brent, had made her suffer. If Michael could make her happy, God bless them both.

The beach was lonely—seldom trodden at night. But a zig-zagging shadow in the moonlight, at a distance, suddenly caught his eye.

"Fool!" muttered Peter Calcroft.

No doubt some late roisterer from the "Lobster Smack"—the inn on the shore. Whoever the man was, he had been drinking—the way he weaved along the beach indicated as much. The moonlight fell clearly on him—and, as he came nearer, recognition came into the doctor's eyes. He had seen the man before—it was the man who had almost gone under his car a few days since—the man who had laughed when Michael spoke of his engagement to Paula. He looked different—he was wearing better clothes, that was the difference—but it was the same man.

Frowning, Peter Calcroft stood watching him, expecting him to pass. But the man did not pass.

As he came opposite the spot where the doctor stood, he swung in towards the cliff. He was familiar with the ground, though hitherto Peter had supposed him a stranger in the neighbourhood. He knew that winding path up the cliff to the Lover's Leap—he was going up that path. Peter's frown grew darker. Who was this man—and what did he want in the grounds of

Cedar Court? He was not seeking a short cut to Medwood—like Peter. From his direction, as he came, he was coming away from Medwood. As the man, stumbling a little over shingle, and cursing as he stumbled, reached the foot of the path up the cliff, Dr. Calcroft stepped out from the rock, directly in his way.

"Stop!" he said, curtly.

The man stopped, starting back, with an oath, evidently startled by Peter's sudden appearance, in that lonely spot at so late an hour.

He stood staring and peering at the young doctor in the moonlight. In his turn he recognized him.

"You!" he snapped. "The village sawbones, what? Get out of my way. What are you stopping me for, confound you?"

"What do you want at Cedar Court?"

"Find out!"

"I'm going to find out before you take a step up that cliff!" said the doctor, coolly. "You seem to know your way—you're no stranger here, as I supposed. This is a private path to Cedar Court—it leads nowhere else. What do you want at Cedar Court, at half-past eleven at night?"

Jude Brent eyed him evilly.

"That's my business, my meddling medical friend. Get out of my way before I knock you out of it."

Peter Calcroft laughed.

"Try that on, my man!" he said.

It seemed, for a moment, that Jude would "try it on." But though he had been drinking, he was master of himself—he knew that it would be futile. The flabby shaking man would have gone down helplessly—a single jolt from the young doctor's strong arm would have been enough.

"I'm going up that path!" muttered Jude.

"Not unless you can satisfy me first!" said Peter. "This isn't an hour for calling—even if you could imaginably be admitted to such a house. If it's burglary, my friend, you can wash it out here and now."

Jude laughed savagely.

"Do I look like a burglar?" he snarled.

"You look like every kind of crook and scoundrel!" answered Peter, with cool contempt, "and you will not take a step into Mrs. Brent's grounds. And unless you can satisfy me, I'll walk you away to Medwood Police Station, with my hand on your collar, to give an account of yourself there. You can explain to them what you wanted in the grounds of Cedar Court close on midnight."

"You fool!" breathed Jude.

"Thanks. I'm waiting to hear what you have to say."

Jude Brent restrained his temper. He was not dealing with a woman now—but with a strong stocky young man, who could have felled him with a blow. His eyes gleamed with evil fury, but he answered quietly—as quietly as he could.

"If you're so curious——!"

"I'm not curious! I'm telling you to account for yourself."

"If you must know, it's a date!" sneered Jude. "Understand that? Someone's waiting for me on top of the cliff—she came one way, and I another. And now I've told you, let me pass."

"Not too fast!" said Dr. Calcroft. "If you're meeting a woman on the cliff, as you say, it must be a member of Mrs. Brent's household—and unknown to her! What are you grinning at?"

"Never mind that—let me pass!"

"Not yet—if at all! I've very little doubt you're lying to me. I'm acquainted with every member of that household, as a doctor; and there is not one who would come out close on midnight to meet a man of your stamp."

"A man of my stamp, confound your impudence!" Jude Brent clenched his hands. "You're asking for it."

"Carry on!" said Peter, coolly.

Jude did not carry on. He stood glaring at the stocky figure that barred his way. The moonlight was full on his face, and the doctor watched him, curiously, suspiciously, wondering who the man was, and what he wanted. That he was up to no good was a foregone conclusion. And now that he watched that face, close at hand, clear in the bright moon, with attention, something struck Peter, that had not struck him at the previous meeting. He had seen that face before somewhere—or a face strangely like it. But where?

"Who are you?" he rapped, suddenly.

"That's my business."

"I've seen you before——!"

"Yes—you tried to kill me with your car a few days ago——"

"Before that!" said Dr. Calcroft. "I don't know where or when. But I've seen you somewhere. Now listen to me, my man. Mrs. Brent is a friend of mine—but if she were not, it would make no difference—I should stop you just the same. Will you give me your name?"

"No!" snarled Jude.

"Then you will give it at Medwood Police Station!" said Dr. Calcroft, grimly. "And I shall take you there. We'll walk along the beach—it's a longer way round, but——!"

He broke off, as the man made a sudden rush. He was not taken off his guard—and he handed that rush easily. In a moment, Jude Brent had a grip of iron on his collar. He struggled, fiercely, for a few moments—then he ceased to struggle, and sagged helplessly.

"You fool!" His voice came hoarse with fury. "Will you let me go?"

"No! Come with me."

"Where do you want me to come?"

"I've told you."

"You fool! Fool!" Jude panted. "Listen to me. You said you're a friend of Mrs. Brent—and I remember her speaking of you, in the old days. Fool! It's Mrs. Brent who's waiting for me on the cliff. Now let me go."

"You lying hound!" Dr. Calcroft shook the sagging wretch like a rat. "That does it! Come with me—a police-cell is the place for you."

Jude panted for breath.

"You fool! You fool! I'm her husband."

"What?"

The doctor held him at arm's length—staring at him. For a moment he felt only angry unbelief. Then he knew.

"Jude Brent!" he muttered. "Jude Brent—alive!"

"Jude Brent!" sneered the other. "Shout it out, if you wish to make Mrs. Brent's name the talk of the county! Shout it from the house-tops."

The doctor's grasp fell from his collar. He did not speak, but he stepped aside, and the man, with a last stare of hate, slunk past him, clambered up the winding path, and disappeared.

Dr. Calcroft stood motionless. He seemed stunned. Jude Brent—living! That poor woman at Cedar Court! And Michael! That blackguard had come back—come back from the dead—and she—poor Paula!

The sound of the man clambering up the steep path died away. Still the doctor stood there—how long he did not know: his mind in a whirl. But he stirred at last, and stepped away from the cliff. He was not going up the path now—not with that man—and Paula—on the cliff above. She was meeting him,

in secret—to buy him off, perhaps—Peter could guess! Poor little woman.

He glanced up at the cliff: the Lovers' Leap, a great precipitous mass against the moonlight. He started, at the sight of two figures on the summit—dangerously near the edge—a man and a woman!

They were struggling—and his heart stood still! Even as he stared up, even as a cry of alarm burst from his lips, the struggling figures parted, and one—the man's—reeled on the very edge of the cliff—reeled, staggered, clutching at space—and then—!

Dr. Calcroft saw a white face—staring at the man as he fell—then it vanished. The crash on the beach, almost at his feet, came a second later.

Dr. Calcroft wiped the clammy sweat from his brow. He stared up—but the woman was not to be seen. All was silent again—all was still. Then he stepped to the crushed, huddled form that lay on the rocks. One glance was sufficient. It was a dead man who lay crushed at the foot of Lovers' Leap.

CHAPTER THE EIGHTH

THE SPY

MILDRED WYLIE listened.

The voices that spoke, on the summit of the Lovers' Leap, were low—but they were close at hand and every syllable came clearly—so close at hand, that she dreaded that some slight movement or sound might betray her. She was very, very still.

"Midnight—at the Lovers' Leap!" Paula had said on the telephone; and long before midnight, Mildred Wylie had stolen silently from the house, hurried through the shadowy gardens, and reached the cliff. The summit was irregular, with great chalk boulders, and in one spot was a deep dark cavity, where one great rock leaned on another. Moonlight streamed on the cliff, but in the recess under the leaning rock, all was black—and in that recess, the woman crouched—to watch and listen.

It was much later, when shuffling footsteps came to her ears, and a figure appeared in the moonlight. She saw the man clearly: it was the man whom Jenkins had stopped, in the grounds, a few days before—the man with whom Paula had had that mysterious interview, which had excited her curiosity and suspicion. So he was the man who had telephoned—some disreputable associate of Jude Brent. The man came on directly towards the leaning rock—and her heart beat faster, at the fear that he knew someone was there. But he stopped, and stood leaning his shoulders on the rock, and she heard a match scratch. He had lighted a cigarette. She hardly breathed. By stretching out her hand, she could have touched him.

He finished his cigarette, threw away the stump, and muttered a curse. Then she heard him exclaim.

"Paula! You've come."

Paula Brent joined him. Mildred Wylie's eyes gleamed like a cat's in the dark.

Whatever the secret was—intrigue or blackmail, whatever it was—she was going to learn now. And when she knew, the mistress of Cedar Court would not, perhaps, be able to hold her head so high—that interloper, who had ousted her from the old man's will, and granted her bitter favours—!

"I told you I should come, Jude!" said Paula, quietly.

Jude! That name was enough!

Like a lightning-flash, it illuminated everything for the woman who crouched hidden in the darkness under the leaning rock.

Jude! Jude Brent! It was all that Mildred Wylie could do to restrain a cry of astonishment. Jude Brent—Paula's husband! So that was it! He was not dead—he had come back! Jude Brent!

"I'm here, Paula! You've said nothing——"

"Was I likely to?"

"I'm afraid, Paula!" His voice was muttering and husky. "I—I'm in danger. If that woman Wylie suspected anything——"

"How could she?"

"She's sharp! I was a fool to come here, as I did, the other day—— But —— If that woman suspected anything, I should be lost. She always hated me, almost as much as she hated you."

"She did not hate me."

"Oh, you're a fool!" he said, contemptuously. "She was after the old man's money—and he knew it, and she never had a dog's chance of getting it. I never saw much of either of them, in the old days—but I saw that—I've got eyes. When you enraged him by running off with me, she must have counted on Cedar Court as a cert—what do you think she felt like, when you came back, and old Bellingham took you into favour again—and left you all he had? She's acid all through—a dangerous woman, Paula! I tell you, if she knew, she'd hand me over—if only to shame you and feed her old grudges."

"She knows nothing!"

"I'm in danger, Paula. I'm known," he muttered. "You've got to see me through, Paula. Three thousand would do it—it can be fixed. But I've got to keep doggo till it's through. If they once got me, it would be too late."

"You must go, Jude. You must have been mad to come back to this country at all. Leave the country at once——"

"Yes—you'd like that!" he jeered. "Out of sight, out of mind, what? You'd like the sea between us! Not good enough, Paula. I've told you what I'm going to do. If you let me down, I'm done—but I swear that if they get me, they shall get me at Cedar Court—in your house——"

"I will save you if I can," said Paula. "You are my husband, God help me. But I shall not trust you."

"Paula, I swear——"

"Stop that, Jude! You do not expect me to believe you!" exclaimed Paula, passionately. "I have come here to see you for the last time—the last time, Jude. Whether a sum of money would save you from the law, I do not know—I cannot trust or believe you. But if it did—if it did, Jude Brent, you would break every promise you made, and walk into Cedar Court—as its master. Do you think I do not know you by this time?"

"I swear, Paula——"

"No more of that." She interrupted him sharply. "Listen to me. I am not the girl you fooled and deserted—I am a woman, able to deal with you. Go abroad—if you are telling me the truth for once, that is your only way of safety—go, and I will send you money—so long as you stay on the other side of the sea. If you return to England again, I will have nothing to do with you, and you will take your chance."

He spat out an oath.

"If that's your last word, Paula——"

"That is my last word."

"You jade!" His voice came shrill with hatred. "Then here's mine! I'll come back to your house with you—now! I'll stay! The police will find me there—and the whole county will get a sensation—the merry widow's husband turned up, and arrested under her roof. If that's what you want, Paula, you can have it."

She stood looking at him, her face white in the moonlight. But her white face was firm. She could not—she dared not—trust him. If it had to come, it had to come—as well soon as

late. She spoke at last.

"You mean that, Jude?"

"I mean it—every word," he snarled.

"Then come!" said Paula, quietly. "This must end! Go to any place abroad, and send me your address, and you shall receive money—more than you need, if not so much as you want. Remain here, and be taken by the police—and let justice have its way! If it must come, it must come! I am waiting, Jude!"

He did not stir.

"A thousand curses!" he muttered. "Oh, you jade! You jade!"

Paula drew a long, long breath. It was but a threat—he dared not do as he had threatened. She knew him! If he could not get what he demanded, he would take what he could get—and hate her for it.

"I'll go!" he breathed. "I'll go! But I'll remember this, Paula—I'll remember it, and you shall remember it, some day! I'll make you suffer for it—some day—somehow! I'll go, curse you—you've got the whip-hand now! But if my turn ever comes——!" His malice seemed to choke him, and he broke off with an oath.

"That will do, Jude!" said Paula, icily. "We are finished. I will keep my word to you—though you have never kept your word, you know that you can trust mine. That is all."

"Paula—stop——!"

But she was gone.

Jude Brent stared after the light figure that flitted away through the shadows. She was gone—and there was nothing for him to do but to go. He stood in the moonlight, muttered curses falling from his lips; and the woman under the leaning rock, as she saw his face, distorted with rage, in the gleam of the moon, trembled. He was standing away from the rock now, but still within a yard of her—if he had seen her——!

He fumbled for a cigarette at last, and struck a match. In the flicker of the match, close at hand, Mildred Wylie saw a startling change come over his face—for a second she did not know what it meant: then she realised that, in the light of the match, he had glimpsed her under the leaning rock.

A cry of terror left her lips, as she realised it—the next instant, his grasp was on her, and she was dragged out into the moonlight.

"You!" He panted with rage. "Mildred Wylie—spying! You knew—you spying hell-cat——"

She screamed with fear.

In his rage he seemed to have lost his senses—he was dragging her to the edge of the cliff. She struggled madly.

He was a lost man if she betrayed him—and he knew that she would. Between rage, and terror, and the fumes of drink in his brain, it was a madman's face that glared at her as he dragged her to the precipice. On the very verge, she wrenched with all her strength, and tore herself away from him, and, as he grasped at her again, she drove both hands against his chest, and pushed him back with all her force. He reeled—and fell.

For one fearful instant, he seemed to hang suspended over space—grasping at the air. Then he was gone. And a white-faced woman, sick with terror, was fleeing through the night: she who had spied out the secrets of others, had now a secret—a terrible secret—to keep!

CHAPTER THE NINTH

THE UPPER HAND!

"A SHOCK for you, my poor darling!" said Michael, tenderly,

"Yes!" whispered Paula.

"You mustn't think about it. After all, the man was a stranger—nothing to you or to anyone you know. It was a ter-

rible death, but—these things do happen, Paula. Put it out of your mind."

Michael was a little puzzled. Paula, he knew, had a kind and tender heart—and the death of the unknown man found on the beach below the Lovers' Leap had been a terrible one. Yet it seemed to affect her more than could have been expected. After all, he was nothing to her—she could never even have seen him! A stranger who had clambered on the cliffs by night and fallen—it was a terrible happening, but such things did happen. Not a pleasant sort of character, either. The medical evidence at the inquest had told that he was under the influence of drink at the time—no doubt that accounted for his fall from the Lovers' Leap. The deep pallor in Paula's face, the trembling of her lip, when the subject was mentioned, perplexed Michael.

Michael was lunching at Cedar Court—the inquest on the unknown man had been held that morning. It was Mildred Wylie who mentioned the matter. She seemed curious to hear details, and Michael had seen Dr. Calcroft, on his way to Cedar Court. Peter Calcroft had been at the inquest.

"Did the man's name transpire, Mr. Heathcote?" asked Mildred Wylie.

"I understand not," answered Michael. "No papers were found on him. Some of his linen was marked 'J.B.'—John Brown, perhaps! Several people witnessed that they had seen him about the neighbourhood, but nobody knew his business here—some wandering excursionist, I suppose."

"And the coroner's verdict—?"

"'Accidental death,' of course. It was plain that the man had been on the cliff after having taken too much to drink. The last person to see him alive was the landlord of the 'Lobster Smack'—nearly a mile from here, Medwood way—he stopped there to take several drinks that night, and left going in the direction of the Lovers' Leap."

"And—and no one saw him later?" faltered Paula.

"No one—till he was found in the morning by Staines, the fisherman, lying on the rocks at the foot of the cliff."

"The coroner's jury had no doubt that it was an accident?" asked Mildred.

Michael, who was looking at Paula, stared round at Miss Wylie.

"Why should they?" he asked. "It was plainly an accidental fall. The return half of a ticket from Charing Cross was found on him. A man would hardly take a return ticket if he came such a distance to commit suicide."

"I was thinking of—murder!" said Mildred, quietly.

Michael gave her a look, trying—not very successfully—to keep the distaste out of his face. He saw Paula shiver. He had never liked Mildred Wylie—now he felt like loathing her. What sort of a woman was she, to get such nasty fantastic ideas into her head?

"Rubbish!" said Michael, with more vigour than politeness. "A man does not travel a hundred miles to be murdered. And there was no robbery—money was found on him: several bank-notes, as well as other money. What a very extraordinary idea, Miss Wylie."

"Perhaps!" said Miss Wylie.

"Anyhow, the verdict of the coroner's jury was 'Accidental death,'" said Michael, sharply. "Paula, dear, you are looking quite ill."

"I—I— No!" said Paula, with dry lips. She rose unsteadily from the table. "I—I wish you had not made such a suggestion, Mildred. What could possibly make you think of such a thing?"

"My thoughts are my own!" said Mildred, composedly. "I may, I suppose, think what I like—and utter my thoughts, too—"

even in your house, Paula?"

Paula looked at her. She was always kind, always considerate, to Mildred, making every allowance, in view of her relative's position in the house she had once hoped to possess. But Mildred Wylie's words now brought a flush to her pale cheek.

"Mildred!" she said, quietly.

Miss Wylie gave her a hard look.

"Well?" she said. "Am I bidden to hold my tongue?"

Paula's colour deepened.

"I think we had better say no more, Mildred," she said.

"No doubt you are upset, as I am, by that——"

"I am not in the least upset, and I fail to see why you should be!" retorted Mildred Wylie. "What was the man to either of us?"

Michael, standing, glanced from one to the other. This looked like the beginning of a quarrel: tempers were on edge. It was awkward for a man in the presence of hostile women. He hoped from the bottom of his heart that Mildred Wylie would not continue to live at Cedar Court after he was married to Paula.

"I think I will go to my room for a while," said Paula, very quietly. "You must excuse me, Michael—I have a little headache."

Michael went with Paula as far as the foot of the staircase. He was left in the hall, fumbling with a cigarette. He frowned a little as Mildred Wylie came out of the dining-room. Paula was upset: and that shrew made it worse. But he contrived to un wrinkle his brows as Mildred spoke.

"I am afraid that my thoughtless remark upset Paula a little, Mr. Heathcote. I must go to her."

Then Michael gave his boyish smile! After all, she was not such a bad sort—though she did get queer fantastic ideas into her head.

"Tell her that her faithful knight is hanging about in a state of solitary sadness, Miss Wylie!" he said, lightly.

Mildred nodded and smiled, and went up the staircase. But the smile was not on her face as she tapped at Paula's door.

Paula was seated by the open window, gazing across the sunlit gardens towards the cliffs. She glanced round at Mildred's face at the door.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I should like to speak to you."

"I have a little headache——"

"That will do for Mr. Heathcote," said Miss Wylie, coolly.

"But it is of no use to me, Paula."

She came into the room and shut the door.

Paula rose to her feet, staring at her blankly. At lunch that day, and once or twice earlier, she had noticed a change in Mildred's usual manner—a strange hint of a hard mockery and defiance. But this——!

She did not want to wound her relative. But she was mistress of Cedar Court.

"I would rather be alone now, Mildred!" she said, pointedly.

"Ten minutes' talk will not hurt you—upset as you are by the death of a totally unknown stranger," said Mildred, satirically. She sat down.

"I think you forget yourself, Mildred."

"Not in the least! I do not forget my place in this house—or yours! Neither do I forget that the house and the estate would have been mine, if you had not come back fawning on a senile old fool after your husband let you down."

Paula caught her breath.

"Are you mad, Mildred?"

"Far from it. The position in this house has changed," said Mildred Wylie, "and the sooner that is made clear, the

better. You did not attend the inquest, Paula."

"Why should I?" asked Paula, staring.

"You could have explained to the coroner what name was indicated by the initials 'J.B.' Not John Brown, I think," said Mildred, with a sneer.

Paula gave a little cry. Every vestige of colour fled from her face.

"Good heavens! Then—you know?" she breathed.

"Yes, I know! Do not be alarmed—it is not my intention to proclaim it from the house-tops—unless you wish! But if the coroner's jury had known that the dead man was Jude Brent, and that he had met his wife that night on the summit of the Lovers' Leap——"

"Oh, heavens!"

"In that case," said Mildred Wylie, "I do not think that the verdict would have been 'Accidental death.' Do you?"

"You—you knew——!"

"I knew more than enough." The thin lips were venomous. "I heard you tell the man on the telephone that you would meet him at midnight on the Lovers' Leap——"

"You—you listened——?"

"I did! That was all I knew—till I heard the news that a fisherman had found a dead body under the cliff. Did Jude Brent fall from that cliff, Paula?"

"He did—he did—he must have——"

"While you were with him?"

"No!" panted Paula. "No! Mildred, can you imagine—can you believe—are you mad! He was alive and well when I left him——"

Mildred Wylie shrugged her thin shoulders.

"The coroner's jury might or might not have believed that!" she said.

"Mildred! You believe it?"

"Never mind what I believe. The man is dead—his name unknown—whatever may have happened on the cliff that night, the world may remain in ignorance of it—if I say nothing. But if I feel that it is my duty to reveal that the man was your husband—and that you went to meet him at midnight on that cliff—people will want to know whether he fell, or whether——"

"Mildred!"

"That is what I came to say to you, Paula Brent." Mildred gave a harsh laugh. "What is the use of playing the innocent, with me? Jude Brent was pushed over the edge of that cliff——"

"No! No! Mildred, you cannot believe——"

"What will Michael Heathcote believe? And everyone else?"

Paula buried her face in her hands.

The death of Jude Brent, when she learned it, had been a shock to her—a terrible shock. Yet amid the horror at his dreadful fate, and her pity for the wretch, relief had been mingled. She was free—free from that burden—free from that spectre of the past. And now——!

Mildred looked at her with cold, ruthless eyes. The bitter antipathy of long years need not be hidden now! She had the upper hand at last.

"Mildred!" Paula's voice came in a moan. "I swear to you——"

"I am not your judge!" sneered Mildred Wylie. "I am only the poor relation—who would have been the rich relation but for your wiles. I am only the dependant of Cedar Court—which should have been mine. I stayed with the old man when you left him for a blackguard—yet it all came to you, not to me. That is going to be altered now, Paula Brent."

"What—what do you mean?"

"I mean that you will set right the wrong you have done me——"

"I have done you no wrong."

"Not by taking away what should have been my inheritance—what the old man would have left me if you had not come fawning back—"

Paula raised her face, her eyes flashing.

"That is false, Mildred. My uncle could not endure you—you and your stealthy ways. Only his kind heart made him give a home to a relation he disliked. I have never told you so before—but it is the truth."

The gaunt woman's eyes blazed.

"That is enough, Paula Brent! Right or wrong, I shall be the mistress of Cedar Court. You can keep the rest—this house is mine. You may transfer it to me by legal deed—a gift from an affectionate relation." Mildred laughed bitterly, "or you can go to justice for the murder of Jude Brent—"

"You are mad!" panted Paula.

Mildred Wylie rose.

"Think it over! Take my terms or leave them. You killed Jude Brent on the Lovers' Leap—"

"Oh, God! I did not! I did not!"

"You may tell that to a judge and jury, if you choose. And unless I become mistress of Cedar Court, you will have no choice. That is all I had to say—I have said it, and I will go."

The door closed on Mildred Wylie.

Paula remained where she was—without emotion, her face colourless, her heart like ice. Jude Brent had fallen from that cliff—he must have fallen—yet even before this, she had wondered why he had gone near the perilous edge. Others would wonder—if they knew that he had met his wronged wife on that cliff—that he had blackmailed her—that he, the husband supposed dead, had come back to find her engaged to another man—no—no, they would not wonder—they would believe as Mildred Wylie said she believed—that a desperate woman had met him in that lonely perilous place to free herself from him— Paula cried out in sheer horror, as she realised it. And she had dreamed that she was free—and that Michael—

Michael! Would he believe it—could he help believing it? Her sense swam. When her maid, Davison, came to the room, a little later, she was startled to see Paula Brent lying back in her chair, white as death, insensible. The strain of the past days had been terrible, and the climax had been too much for her. And even Mildred Wylie, perhaps, felt a twinge of remorse, when she learned that Paula was ill, and that the doctor had been called.

CHAPTER THE TENTH

DOCTOR AND PATIENT!

"PETER, old man! What—what—?"

Michael was still at Cedar Court. He could not leave—not while he was wildly anxious about Paula. He was striding up and down the library, an unlighted cigarette in his mouth, restless, anxious, puzzled. It seemed to him that he had been waiting for hours and hours, when the door opened at last, and Dr. Calcroft came in, quietly and gravely.

Michael strode at him, and grasped him by the arm.

"Peter, what is it? She's ill—she never was ill! What is it now? I can't understand it—"

"Yes," said Peter, quietly. "She's ill. But she's in good hands, Michael."

"I know that! But what is it—?"

"Shock and strain—"

"But I don't understand," said Michael, helplessly. "That man's death on the rocks the other day might give her a shock—do you mean that?"

Peter looked at him.

Michael did not know—no one knew—that Peter Calcroft had met the dead man that fatal night, at the foot of the Lovers' Leap, before he made the ascent of the path. No one knew that he had seen him fall—that he had seen a woman's face, white with horror, staring as the doomed man went down to his death. Peter Calcroft had kept his own counsel. He had attended the inquest—as a medical man, not as a witness. He had known nothing! The body had not been discovered till after dawn—by a passing fisherman. No one, so far, knew that Peter Calcroft had passed that way on the night of the "accident."

And Peter did not intend to speak. The man was dead—and he was nameless. That poor little woman at Cedar Court had enough to bear, without the name of her blackguard husband dragged up to shame her, filling the newspapers with sensation. The man was dead—there was no deception this time. The less said the better. Peter had said nothing—and he did not intend to say anything now.

"It was a bad business," said Michael. "The man was drunk, and fell over the cliff. But why should it affect Paula, who had never even seen him! I mean, it would be a shock, of course. But—"

"Quite!" said Dr. Calcroft. "But one never knows exactly how a sensitive woman will take a shock. But you have no cause for alarm, Michael. Mrs. Brent is ill—but she is sound and healthy, and in good hands. She will be about again in a few days. As well as ever."

"As well as ever—sure of that?"

"She has a very good doctor!" said Peter, gravely.

Michael smiled. But his face clouded again at once.

"I can't help feeling anxious," he said. "You know how I feel, Peter—you're a bit of a dry old stick, and you've never been in love, but—but you can understand."

Peter gave him a curious look. But he nodded as he answered:

"I can understand, Michael. Even without having been in love, one is able to understand. But you can take my word, both as a friend and professionally, that you have no cause for anxiety. You won't be able to see Mrs. Brent for a few days—but you will then see her again well and strong. Davison is with her now—devoted, and the best of nurses. I shall look in again in the morning. Now, can I give you a lift?"

Michael went by his train, comforted. But Peter Calcroft's brow was dark with troubled thought after Michael was gone.

Michael did not know, and did not understand. But Peter knew that Mrs. Brent was aware of the dead man's identity—knew that he was her husband. He knew, or as good as knew, that the blackguard who had come back from death had been on his way to see Paula, the day he had been knocked over by the doctor's car. He had laughed when Michael said that he was going to marry Paula Brent—the sardonic hound. Peter could have found it in his heart to wish that he had not swerved the car in time and saved that worthless life. But the man was dead now—her burden was gone for ever. She did not know what the doctor had seen from the foot of the cliff that night. Why, then, was the man's death such a shock to her—why was it she lay with white face and staring eyes, like one haunted by a spectre of horror? Peter, like Michael, was puzzled.

And he was puzzled the next morning when he called to see his patient. Paula was pale, quiet, but her eyes were staring, and—the doctor was sure of it—frightened. What was her fear? She might have feared Jude Brent alive—but dead, why should she fear?

Davison was tired. But when the doctor, speaking to her aside before he left, suggested that Miss Wylie might relieve her at the patient's bedside, Davison shook her head.

"Miss Wylie has offered, sir, more than once. But the mistress will not have her in the room. I thought she was going to faint, when Miss Wylie just looked in at the door for a minute. She does not seem able to bear the sight of her face."

And Dr. Calcroft went his way a still more puzzled man. He 'phoned to Michael that there was no cause for uneasiness: but in his heart of hearts he did not feel so sure himself. What was it that was weighing on his patient's mind—what was it that brought that fear into her eyes?

But on the fourth day, Paula was downstairs when the doctor called. She was still very pale, and her eyes still held that look that perplexed and haunted the doctor. But she met him with a faint smile.

"I am better, doctor."

"Yes," said Peter, as he sat down facing her. "You are better, Mrs. Brent. I shall be able to tell Michael so. May I tell him also that he may come—"

"Oh! No! No!" It was a panting cry. "Not Michael!"

"He has been very anxious, Mrs. Brent."

"I know! I know! Poor Michael! But—but—"

"You must not agitate yourself. Say no more about it," said Dr. Calcroft. "But—Mrs. Brent—I am not only your medical attendant. We used to be friends, too."

"Aren't we friends now?" asked Paula, smiling faintly.

"I hope so! May I ask you, both as a medical man and as a friend, to confide in me!" said Peter, quietly. "A medical man's lips are sealed, as you know—whatever you tell him is a dead secret. And a friend might help."

"There is nothing—nothing—only—"

"You do not trust me?"

"Yes! Yes! Yes! But—" Paula clasped her hands. She could not tell Michael. But could she not tell her doctor—a doctor's lips were sealed, as he said—and he had always been her friend—quiet and unobtrusive, but a good friend. And perhaps he could help her—and heaven knew she needed help.

Her words came with a sudden rush.

"You'll believe me? Mildred does not believe me! But—doctor, that—that man—the man who was found under the cliff—he was—was— Oh, I cannot tell you."

"You need not tell me," said Peter. "I know."

She gave him a startled look.

"You knew?"

"I had seen him—and recognized him," said Peter, briefly.

"And you said nothing?"

"Silence is sometimes golden," said Dr. Calcroft.

"Oh!" breathed Paula. "You knew! That makes it easier! Doctor, I met him—that night—on the cliff-top! But—he was alive—he was as usual—when I left him— Oh, doctor, you believe that? Say you believe it?"

"Of course I believe every word you tell me, Mrs. Brent."

"God bless you for that! But—but Mildred does not believe it!" breathed Paula.

Peter Calcroft started violently.

"Miss Wylie! What has she to do with it?" he exclaimed.

"She knew!" muttered Paula. "She—she overheard—she knew I was going there that night—and—and she believes— Oh, the horror of it—she believes that I—that I—that it was not an accident—that I— God help me!"

She broke off, startled by the doctor's look. His face had become so grim that it almost frightened her.

"So that is it?" Peter Calcroft breathed hard. "That woman—she pretends to believe that you—"

"Oh, she believes it!" moaned Paula. "And—and what will others believe? I was there—I cannot deny that I was there! He was my husband—back from the dead! And—and——"

"And he was blackmailing you? I understand."

"And—and they will all believe as Mildred believes—I was there—no one else was there—and—and——"

"No one else?" said Peter Calcroft, grimly. "And has that woman asked a price for her silence?"

"Cedar Court!" said Paula, faintly. "But—but that is not the worst. To be under this fear—this haunting terror——"

"Mrs. Brent, I am glad that you have trusted me with this story. I have something to tell you in my turn—something that I never dreamed, till now, would ever pass my lips!" said Dr. Calcroft, "and when I have told you, all your fears will be gone—and, like Macbeth, we'll throw physic to the dogs and have none of it." He smiled. "You will not need me again, and I shall lose a patient—but I shall keep my friend! Listen to me, Mrs. Brent— Listen!"

And Paula listened.

CHAPTER THE ELEVENTH

AFTER DARKNESS, LIGHT!

MILDRED WYLIE fixed her cold eyes on the stocky figure of the doctor, as she came into the library. He bowed politely and handed her a chair.

"You wished to speak to me?" she asked. "About Paula, I suppose? She seems very much better."

"She is indeed very much better, Miss Wylie," said Dr. Calcroft. "I have no doubt that we shall now see a swift and complete recovery."

"That is good news!" said Mildred.

"But she will not be able to say good-bye to you before you leave, Miss Wylie."

"Before I leave? I don't understand. I am not leaving, Dr. Calcroft!"

"I understand there was some intention of going to reside in Wales——"

"I have changed that intention"

"I recommend a change back!" said Dr. Calcroft, "and an immediate departure. Not later than this afternoon."

"You have not taken leave of your senses, by any chance?" asked Mildred Wylie, contemptuously.

"Not at all! Perhaps I should explain that Mrs. Brent has explained to me the trouble that was weighing on her mind, and was the cause of her illness."

Mildred's thin lips set hard.

"What has she told you, doctor?"

"That you have accused her of causing the death of her late husband, Jude Brent, by a fall from the Lovers' Leap. And that you have modestly asked for Cedar Court as the price of your silence—a somewhat high price, don't you think, Miss Wylie?"

Mildred's hard face did not falter.

"If she is fool enough to tell you, let it be so!" she said, calmly. "I imagine that you will keep her secret. It is not, I believe, the duty of a medical man to put the noose round the neck of his patient."

"It might be his duty to put it round another neck!" said Peter Calcroft. "I was on the beach below the Lovers' Leap that night, Miss Wylie."

She started.

"I met Jude Brent, and talked with him, before he ascended the cliff path," went on Dr. Calcroft, quietly. "I saw the struggle on the cliff— All was quite clear and plain, Miss Wylie, in the moonlight——"

"You—saw——?"

"I saw Jude Brent come crashing down. I saw the face of the woman who had hurled him to his death. And I am prepared, if necessary, to swear to what I saw, in a court before a judge and jury," said Dr. Calcroft, crisply. "I have said nothing, Miss Wylie, for reasons you may be able to understand. The man was a brute and a blackguard—you may have acted in self-defence——"

"I did! I did!" Mildred's face was colourless now. "The ruffian—he found me where I was hidden—he knew I knew him—he dragged me to the edge of the cliff—you know it, if you saw what you say you saw——"

"I guessed it," said Peter Calcroft. "You were spying—and he found you—and you acted in self-defence. The jury may call it manslaughter. You chose to call it murder when you blackmailed Mrs. Brent."

Mildred Wylie clenched her hands.

"You have told her this?"

"I have told her."

Mildred glanced at her wrist-watch.

"I shall need a trunk call to Wales," she said. "There is a train, I believe, at four o'clock—London to-night, Wales to-morrow. Is there anything more you wish to say to me before I go and pack, Dr. Calcroft?"

He gave her an almost admiring look.

"Only that I shall say nothing, so long as you keep at a good distance from Cedar Court," he said. "But you have guessed that. It is an unsavoury story, and the less said about it, the better."

"I understand that, of course," said Mildred Wylie.

"And you have no regrets?" he asked, curiously.

"None! Except one——"

"And that——?"

"That my act has made it possible for Paula Brent to marry Michael Heathcote. But even that has its compensation," added Mildred, venomously. "I am not blind, Dr. Calcroft—and I know that when another man takes Paula Brent, it will be the hardest blow you have ever had. That is a consolation."

The door closed on her. He stood, for a long minute, gazing at the door.

"What a woman!" he said, at last.

"PAULA!"

"Yes, Michael!"

"This is jolly!"

Paula smiled. They were seated in the grass, like a couple of children, and as happy as children, in the sunlight filtering through the shady branches overhead.

"I've been holding your hand," said Michael, "for ten minutes."

"Have you timed it?"

"Yes: by my wrist-watch."

"And you're not tired yet?"

"No! It is a very nice little hand, and I love holding it. But I can think of an improvement," said Michael. He shifted a little nearer, and passed his arm round Paula. "Is that better, worse, or just the same?"

Paula laughed.

"I like to hear you laugh," said Michael. "We're going to laugh our way through life, Paula."

"Boy!"

"Girl!" retorted Michael. "Aren't we happy?"

"I am!" said Paula.

"Same here! Life is a jolly old proposition," said Michael. "We're going to enjoy every minute of it. But I shan't feel quite safe till the fatal words are pronounced—not till you're my wife, Paula. You're a bit changeable."

"Oh, Michael!"

"Weren't you going to throw me over once?" he demanded. "And didn't I have to hold you in my arms, and refuse to let you go, till you promised again to marry me after all?"

"Yes!" said Paula, looking at him. Michael knew nothing of what she had gone through—and never would know.

"If you begin that game again," said Michael, "I shall deal with you in the same manner, madam! I don't mind, really—I rather like holding you in my arms. Still, you musn't have any more of these fancies, darling."

"I won't!" said Paula.

"That's right! Still, we needn't waste time, now that everything's so happily settled," said Michael. "What about to-morrow?"

"Oh, Michael."

"Well, the next day, then?"

"Next month, if you like!" said Paula.

"If that's the best you can do for me, Paula——"

"The very best."

"Then I'll have fifty thousand million kisses to go on with!" said Michael, "and after that——"

"That will take some time," said Paula, "so what after that?"

"Fifty thousand million more."

And they laughed together.

THE END