RESTLESS EARTH

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GRAEME·HOLDER

Restless earth

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This volume is dedicated

TO THE PURCHASER

as a small acknowledgment of valuable assistance in making possible that which many have said to be impossible—the successful exploitation of New Zealand literary talent.

"For Luck"—and in defiance of those who are inclined to belittle their own country's artistic resources—we have chosen a story with a New Zealand setting for our initial publication.

We do not claim that this story is a masterpiece. Only the public voice of generations is qualified to pronounce full judgment upon any work.

We do claim, however, that "REST-LESS EARTH," by the direct simplicity of its action, its exposition of human failings, human aspirations, and the inherent nobility of self-sacrifice which lifts mankind above the beasts, will not leave the reader who possesses the common human sympathies entirely unmoved.

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Restless Earth

W. GRAEME-HOLDER

Author of "THE DECKER," etc.

The Chesterfield Novels

1933

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. . . . . .

The characters in this story are entirely imaginary.

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CHAPTER I.

JAMES HARLEY dropped his pen, sighed heavily, placed his elbows upon the table, clasped his hands and gnawed his thumbnails as he gazed through the open window at the roof of the bungalow on the opposite side of the gully.

Heat-waves shimmered upon the red-painted roof, giving a semblance of dancing life to the background of pines in the park beyond. The high tecoma hedge which concealed the back of the bungalow was a black inviting shadow outlined in glittering silver where the sunlight struck its polished foliage. Cicadas chirred in the gully, setting up an atmospheric vibration which harmonised with the heat-waves upon the roof. There was no wind. There was only light — hot light flooding this green suburb of a New Zealand port.

It was a perfect February morning; but Harley could not appreciate its serenity in the turbulence of his thoughts. He was looking at the morrow when the little woman who was his wife should receive the letter he had just finished at his fifth attempt. He saw her standing motionless in a small hotel bedroom, letter in hand, gazing blankly at the wall with hopeless eyes while Jean, their daughter of four and a-half years, tugged at her skirts and imperiously demanded to know what had made her mother cry.

Harley stared at the shimmering roof for some minutes, then he threw out his hands in a gesture of despair.

"Why, in the name of God, did this have to happen to me?" he demanded in low tones.

He picked up the letter and read it again. He knew himself to be procrastinating. The letter had to be posted—it just had to be!—but it wasn't going

to be easy. Writing it had been difficult enough —posting it would be yet more difficult. And yet there was no other way, no other honorable way.

Perhaps, when he had rid himself of the thing he would feel better. The irrevocable step would have been taken. . . .

February 3rd, 1931.

" Dear Grace,

I have tried—God knows I have tried—to tear Pat from my thoughts and from my heart. In these lonely weeks I have fought desperately to recapture the contentment which I have known so long; and now I know the fight is hopeless. I don't know what has become . . . ."

A strange nausea seized him when he had read so far. The letter fluttered from his fingers. He leaned forward and covered his eyes with his hands. He felt himself swaying in his chair. His heart seemed to shudder and rise into his throat. His brain seemed to swim with a curious rotary movement.

He diagnosed the trouble, and smiled grimly.

"Starvation. No regular meals since Grace left."

The nausea and the swaying increased, and it flashed across Harley's mind that he might die of starvation if the present state of affairs continued.

"Might be the best way out," he muttered.

The crash of breaking crockery in the kitchenette caused him to raise his head, and the explanation of his nausea became instantly apparent.

The pine trees in the park were swaying, the power lines and telephone wires on the posts in the roadway were swinging—and there was no wind.

Earthquake!

As he scrambled to his feet a number of books fell from the shelves in the corner of the room and a metal vase clanged upon the hearth-tiles.

The earth movement increased steadily. The house protested in a hundred creaks and rattles.

Harley momentarily expected the chimney to come crashing through the roof as he made his way hurriedly to the door. The instinct to live was strong within him. He ran through the hall.

He caught a glimpse of Ginger, the cat, bounding from the gully to the higher land. He followed the example of the animal and bounded over the porch-railing into a neglected flower bed, then raced for the higher ground behind the house. If the house should slide into the gully he would be above it, instead of underneath it.

He fancied he heard muffled subterranean rumblings, and his fancy lent him speed. He vaulted a wire fence, partially concealed by a healthy growth of eleagnis, and landed in the four-acre pasture upon which his affluent neighbour kept two house cows. It was only by chance that he did not land upon the recumbent form of the labourer whom the affluent neighbour was employing to repair the wire fence.

"Hello," the labourer greeted him cheerfully. "Nice morning for exercise."

"Er—yes," agreed Harley lamely, smiling rather shamefacedly as he realised that the earth tremor had subsided to the faintest vibration. "Quite."

"Bit 'ot, though."

The labourer rolled over and elevated himself upon one elbow. He became alert. He stared at the ground.

"What's that?" he demanded. "Earthquake?"

"Yes. Didn't you feel it?"

The labourer sat up.

"No. There ain't been no shake up 'ere," he answered positively. "I've been 'ere all the morning."

He rose to his feet, and Harley offered him a cigarette.

The labourer yawned, accepted the cigarette with a muttered word of thanks, and became informative.

"These little shakes I never feel nowadays. Used to be a time when any little bit of a bump would get me winging, but since the Murchison shake, year

before last, it's got to be a good heavy shake to make me notice it. I was in Westport when that one happened—just outside the Post Office. I feels the thing coming—I can always feel a shake coming: sort of second-sight, you know—and I hops it into the middle of the street, quick and busy. There was a little bit of a bump and then the ground heaved up like as though it was alive, and the Post Office tower split. You could see the ground waving, and——"

He became silent abruptly as the earth tremor increased slightly. His eyes widened and stark fear petrified him for a second.

"She's still going," observed Harley unnecessarily, looking at the swinging wires in the roadway. "Must be a pretty fierce shake somewhere. Perhaps Murchison is getting it again."

The labourer leaned against the fence and the cigarette trembled in his fingers.

Harley glanced at him and smiled.

"Sorry, old man," he said, as he climbed back over the fence. "You might have slept through it if I hadn't charged over."

"Such damned uncanny things!" growled the labourer. "Never twice alike. I don't mind the sharp bumps, but these corkscrew things turn my stomach."

Harley descended to the patch of tall grass, which had been a lawn a few weeks since. He felt vastly superior. He excused his own momentary panic, but he could find no toleration for the other's obvious funk. He smoked his cigarette to the end, imagining the earth still shook long after it had ceased to do so. He swayed upon his feet with a curious enjoyment until his gaze again rested upon the telephone wires. He laughed as he observed that they no longer moved.

When he tossed his cigarette-end into the vegetable garden he was almost cheerful with the exhilaration which comes of a knowledge of peril survived.

He returned to the house, glancing around the hall curiously as he entered. No damage there. In the

breakfast-room a combined bridge-marker and ash-tray lay broken upon the hearth-rug. The clock on the mantel had stopped. Not much damage there. The floor of the kitchenette was sprinkled with salt and the remains of a number of cups and saucers and a plate or two. A peculiar smell filled the tiny room, and Harley remembered that he had not turned out the gas under the kettle at breakfast time. He hastened to turn it out now.

Two soiled cups were perched upon the very edge of the sink-board. He moved them to a safer position. He eyed the pile of dishes in the sink and on the board. They seemed intact. He pushed back a small pile of plates which had slithered forward on a shelf above the sink. The movement caused a jelly jar to topple. It fell upon his scalp and then into the sink, breaking a small jug and a plate.

Harley returned to the small drawing-room, and much of his cheerfulness had departed. Nevertheless he sat down and dashed off a postscript:

"P.S. A slight earthquake has just occurred, and you will have no difficulty in picturing my dignified scramble for the wide-open spaces. Hope you didn't feel it in Napier, knowing how you feel about shakes. That horrible bridge-scorer of yours is now deceased, as, also, are numerous platters which were piled on the sink-board (so many less for me to wash). Ginger has taken to the bush again, and one of your jelly jars almost brained me. I hopped over Clarge's fence and woke the energetic Henry, who talked very bravely about the shakes he had met. He doesn't lie so well as he sleeps. I wonder Clarge keeps him on. . . .

The incongruity of such a postscript struck him and he ceased writing. It read as though Grace were merely taking a holiday instead of — of what was happening actually.

The last glow of his new-born cheerfulness faded.

His heart was sick as he continued to read the letter itself.

" . . . now I know the fight is hopeless. I don't know what has become of my sense of duty, my sense of decency, my sense of the fitness of things. My love for Pat makes me hate myself; it makes me unjust; it makes me believe that you and I were never really happy; it makes me lie to myself. I wallow in the mire and I like it, God help me!

Try to forget me, Grace. I am not worthy of remembrance. I am a weakling. Try not to hate me. Think of me as one dead, upon whom love, pity, jealousy and hate are alike wasted. Teach Joan to forget me—she will forget me so much more easily than I shall forget her. You will both find happiness somewhere. I know it.

Any legal steps I can take for your comfort shall be taken. Anything I can do to secure your freedom shall be done—if you so desire.

There is nothing left to say but
Good-bye.

Jimmy."

He glanced through the postscript and tore it off with a fierce gesture upon the edge of the table. For a second he contemplated re-writing the letter, then he folded it into its envelope quickly, knowing that he had not the courage.

The letter should catch Grace at the Masonic Hotel, Napier. He addressed it so, and, as a precaution, added: '*Please forward. In case of non-delivery return to J. Harley, Plover Street, New Plymouth.*'

The thought that the Dead Letter Office might open it made him shudder.

He looked out of the window and saw the head of Mrs. Percival Quesne Langham thrust above the tecoma hedge which concealed the back of the bungalow on the opposite side of the gully. The lady was

taking her noon observation of the Harley bungalow.

"Prying old hen!" muttered Harley as he rose and closed the window pointedly.

CHAPTER II.

Harley continued to stall for time. He changed his mind about posting the letter before lunch. He argued that any time before midnight would do. Besides, the Langham woman was watching, and he would feel like a murderer running the gauntlet of suspicious eyes. After all, what else did it amount to but murder—murder of a woman's happiness and faith? The letter would strike to the heart as surely as a knife.

He wandered into the bedroom before he remembered that he had decided to lunch. He seemed to have developed a habit of wandering aimlessly about the house of late. Lunch. He would have lunch.

Lunch was a miserable affair.

Even before the earthquake the kitchenette had been hard to endure; now, with broken crockery and salt superimposed upon the stale breadcrumbs on the floor, the place was positively repulsive. Soiled saucepans and a frying-pan half-filled with congealed fat occupied the top of the gas stove in company with the ruined kettle. A three-weeks-old sheet of newspaper did duty as a table cover upon which had rested for days a pot of jam with its paper cover hanging in tatters from its rim, a bread board, three butter dishes, a tin of condensed milk and an accumulation of crumbs.

Cupboard doors were half-open, the dust of weeks throwing their panelling into bold relief; the dishes in the sink and on the board were an unlovely sight; the cleanliness of the tea-towels hanging on the rail behind the door was a reproach; and the lingering

odour of the burnt kettle, added to the mingled odours of stale and forgotten viands, strangled appetite.

Harley sniffed disgustedly as he entered the room. It had been a picture of white neatness when Grace had worked here; now it was a hole. Time it was cleaned up.

He had grown accustomed to the absence of clean cups. He rinsed his breakfast cup beneath the tap, scuffling the broken crockery aside with his feet. The tea-pot had not been emptied since breakfast, and he scuffled the broken crockery in other directions as he made his way to the back door. It did not occur to him to use a broom.

He used four matches in lighting the gas-jet beneath the kettle, and swore whole-heartedly when the kettle leaked as he attempted to fill it. He was compelled to rinse a saucepan, and he handled the dishcloth with a respect engendered by its age. When he had set the water to boil he sorted out the least stale half-loaf in the bread-bin, and carved a thick slice which he coated liberally with butter and jam.

When the saucepan commenced to hiss Harley commenced to search for tea. When the water had been boiling for three minutes Harley was convinced that there was no tea in the house. He had used the last of it for breakfast. He scuffled salt and crockery under the stove as he turned out the gas. The bread-and-jam was dotted with enthusiastic house-flies, while a swarm of others hovered above it. Harley's appetite departed utterly.

He threw the slice of bread-and-jam into the long grass of the back lawn.

Lunch was finished.

"What an unholy mess!" he exclaimed aloud as he poured some of the hot water into his shaving-mug.

With the steaming mug in his hand he stood and surveyed the kitchenette.

No good. A man could not continue to live like this. No real or regular meals, no order, no anything. Every bed in the house unmade and unaired. Dust everywhere.

Something would have to be done.

One o'clock, and he had not shaved! Two days' growth, too—or was it three? Not a clean collar in the place! He couldn't remember to get the things from the laundry now that Grace was not here to jog his memory. And the bulges in the knees of his trousers! Terrible! How many more clean shirts were left in the drawer? One, or two? Or none?

Something would have to be done — now that Grace would not be coming back.

Grace not coming back! Why the devil couldn't he be pleased about it, instead of wanting to howl? Idiot! He didn't know his own mind!

As he made his way to the bathroom he planned to boil a copperful of water that very evening and make a clean-up of all the crockery. Perhaps he might wash a few sheets and things, too. The obvious thing to do was to look round for diggings. No sense in keeping a whole house for himself. Better to let it, or sell it. The place was too full with memories. He could never work here again.

* * * *

He dropped the letter into the post-box which hung upon a telegraph-pole at the corner of the street. He heard it fall, and for a moment felt a violent desire to recall it.

"Don't be a fool, Harley," he admonished himself, and blushed as he realised that loneliness had bred a habit of speaking aloud to himself. He felt extremely foolish as he walked away, although he was alone in the street.

It was done. His decision was made irrevocably. He had chosen Patricia Weybourn and had discarded the little woman whom he had sworn to love and cherish and who was the mother of his child.

He was free to go to Patricia, free to take what

he wanted so passionately. He should be happy. Why wasn't he?

Why wasn't he?

"Because it is a vile thing to do, James Harley," he answered himself aloud. "You have cast off the little woman who has been unswervingly faithful to you—the woman whose every desire has been for your happiness—the woman who has made you what you are; who made you 'James Harley, author of this, that, and the other,'—who put you on the literary map. Where would you have been without her?—you, with plenty of language and not a damn plot in the whole of your miserable carcase? Where are you going to be now that you have ditched her? Ass! Idiot! There are not enough epithets in the language to adequately describe you! What is the matter with you? Throwing away a wife and child, a career, a home, everything! For whom? For a woman of whom the whole town speaks uncleanly! For a— a— Oh, hell!"

A doctor, strolling across the footpath to his car after paying a professional visit, failed to recognise James Harley, the gifted writer of scented romances in many journals, in the man who hurried past with hands thrust deep into his pockets, shoulders hunched, hair long and untidy, clothes hanging baggily upon him, and who talked loudly to himself.

The James Harley whom the doctor knew—the man with whom the doctor had played bridge only six weeks since—was a tall man with a fine breadth of shoulder and a deep chest; a man with an easy carriage and a refined taste in clothes; a handsome man whom the gods had designed in the mould of a hero and to whom they had given the gift of tongues; a man destined to go far in his career as a writer of love-stories, but who could whack a golf-ball and put the gloves on with any man in the district.

"Great fellow, Harley!" was the doctor's way of describing him to his acquaintances. "Heaven alone

knows how he manages to think of all the rubbish he writes. Must be money in it, or such a man wouldn't write it."

James Harley was thirty-two. The doctor casually judged the hurrying man who talked to himself to be in his forties.

The doctor stepped into his car and drove away.

James Harley did not see him or the car which almost ran him down at the next street-intersection. James Harley had too much to say to himself to bother about his friends at the moment. He was going over all the old arguments, reviewing the whole position for the thousandth time, searching, searching for self-justification and failing to find it.

* * * *

Harley had been interested when Grace had first mentioned that Patricia Weybourn had arrived in New Plymouth to establish a branch of Picotarde's, the Auckland modistes, and had been curious to see the girl of whom Grace spoke so warmly.

"You'll like her, Jimmy," Grace had said. "All men do—and so do most women, when they know her. I warn you, she's a flirt of the first water, but she has a heart of gold. There is no real harm in her. Pat, Buzzy Tennyson, Vera Lucas and I were known as the Live Wire quartette in Auckland in our young and giddy days——'

"You're growing so old, aren't you?" Harley had laughed. "But I can't imagine you a Live Wire."

"Why not? Am I so domesticated and subdued? Jimmy, one of these days I'll break out and surprise you. Wait until you see Pat! 'Birds of a feather,' you know."

"I know all about you, young lady. You're such a fast young thing; and if this Pat of yours is of your feather I can hardly wait to see her. When is she coming up?"

"I've asked her to dinner on Thursday."

"Fine! I must climb into a dinner suit for the occasion."

He had climbed into the dinner suit, and when he had first seen Patricia Weybourn he had felt that the effort of dressing had been wasted. He had expected to see a laughing-eyed, flirtatious tom-boy at whom he could talk after the manner of an eminent author; not the sleek, graceful, blonde mannequin, who flowed rather than walked, and whose artificially-beautiful eyes insolently expressed cold surprise that such an obvious man's man should demean himself by writing ridiculous love-stories for silly women.

That first evening had not been a success for him. Grace and her visitor had occupied the chesterfield all the evening and had apparently forgotten him in their mutual reminiscences; so that he had had plenty of opportunity to compare the "birds of a feather." He had found the descriptive phrase inapposite, for the two women were of strikingly dissimilar feather, and his fancy then had been for the quieter plumage of Grace.

Then he had seen Grace as *petite*, neat and eminently lovable. The mother-light had given her a beauty which the other woman, for all her physical perfection, had lacked. A softness in her eyes and voice, the winning tact and practical sense of which he knew her possessed, her imagination, everything—created to make and grace a real home for a lucky man. He had known himself for that lucky man and had loved her whole-heartedly then.

Patricia Weybourn he had mentally labelled '*ultra*'—ultra-smart in attire, ultra-blonde, ultra-languid, ultra-graceful, ultra-beautiful in a hard fashion, ultra-surprised and disappointed that her friend should have married a man who would have made a sword appear mightier than a pen. Ultra-uninteresting he had found her when he escorted her to the tramcar at the corner of the next street, and he had considered the tales of her conquests to be fairy tales, or her victims half-wits. He would have

been ashamed to have been seen abroad in her company then.

"How do you like her?" Grace had asked him later in the evening.

"Not my style, sweetheart," he had replied, somewhat loftily. "Too much polish and not enough brains."

"Didn't she take enough interest in your work, Jimmy."

"It's not that—not at all. Why should she? It's just that—that—well, it's another of these natural antipathies, I suppose."

"Oh, I think she likes you, Jimmy, although she did seem rather more stand-offish than I ever remember her with a strange man. Perhaps she is determined to take no risks with my handsome husband."

He had grinned at that.

"A lot she knows about love," he had scoffed. "That sort of woman doesn't know the meaning of the word."

"Perhaps she thinks similarly about you, Jimmy. After all, you only write about it."

"Is that so? Come here, young lady, and I'll show you whether I only write about it. Come over here."

She had come to him obediently; and in neither of their hearts had there been any fear that any person on earth could ever alter the course of their love.

For some time after that he had excused himself on the plea of work whenever Patricia Weybourn called to spend an evening, and had listened to the two women in the next room chattering like magpies as he smoked and made leisurely notes for further love-stories.

"It's rude to run away every time Pat comes," Grace had protested one afternoon.

"I know. It's how she makes me feel."

"But you mustn't offend her, for my sake, Jimmy."

"Can't offend that sort of woman, my dear. Besides, I'm out of danger when I'm alone. You don't want me to fall in love with this blonde siren?"

"She's too much of a sportswoman to allow you to do that. I'd trust Pat with you anywhere."

"Is that meant as a compliment to her or to me?"

"To both of you. Jimmy, please be nice to her."

"I am nice to her."

"I mean, come and be sociable. She is coming this evening, and I want you to play for her. She sings very well."

"Don't you think she despises me enough now? What will she think when she knows that, besides writing love-stories, I tinkle the piano?"

"Do you care?"

"Eh? Not a bit!"

"Then why argue about it? Promise me, Jimmy, you'll have no urgent work to do this evening?"

"I can't do that——"

"You can!"

"I can't."

"You can!"

Grace had taken advantage of his sitting position to throw her arms tightly about his neck from behind and had fastened her teeth in his right ear.

"Promise?" she had growled ferociously. "Promise?"

He yelled in mock dismay.

"Let go!"

"Promise, you big bully?"

"I promise."

She had released him then. They had been very happy.

"Next time I'll take a piece right out of you, young man," she had threatened laughingly.

"I'll be good," he had replied. "But, if I fall in love with this svelte vampire of yours, remember you will have brought it on yourself."

"I'll remember to be sorry for you if you do, my dear."

Grace had remembered. That was one of the worst features of the whole business. And he remembered that he had warned her—that was another.

CHAPTER III.

He had kept his promise. He had made himself sociable, and had played Patricia Weybourn's accompaniments with more pleasure and less self-consciousness than he had believed possible. The woman, for all the ultra-coldness of her attitude towards her accompanist, had sung with real feeling, and her voice had proved ultra-pleasant to listen to.

That had been the first of many pleasant musical evenings; and Harley, who was a desultory composer, wrote two songs especially for Patricia Weybourn.

Grace had remarked on this.

"Love songs, Jimmy!" she had teased him. "Remember, I warned you. You're falling in love with her."

"Nonsense," he had answered with an irritability which surprised himself. "I'm willing to admit that my first impression of the girl was a little wide of the mark, but this continual harping on the danger of my falling in love with her is a little wearing."

"Jimmy!"

"Can't you think of something else to say?"

He had stalked out of the room with dignity, and with a queer sense of guilt. He had not been willing to admit that his opinion of Patricia Weybourn had changed altogether.

Why his opinion had so changed he could not have explained. Patricia continued to treat him with the curious pitying condescension with which she had greeted him at their first meeting. She had been no less ultra in her implied assumption that he should consider himself extremely fortunate in

having married a friend of hers. As a man and possible victim she had continued to ignore him.

She had not changed an iota, yet he had seen her differently. He had found her creeping into his love-stories in heroine rôles, ousting the long line of heroines which he had founded upon the characteristics of Grace. His heroines had imperceptibly developed into wonderful blondes who queened it over his heroes and married them more for their titles than their homes. When an editor had dared to say that he preferred the smaller, clinging type of heroine, Harley had dared to suggest that the public was growing tired of the dowdy women who could do nothing for themselves.

Just about this time he had noticed a dowdiness in Grace of which he had not previously been aware. Grace lacked Patricia's smartness and sense of style. "Old-fashioned" was how he had described one of her gowns.

"But you have always said you loved me best in dove-grey, Jimmy," Grace had protested.

"Oh, the colour's all right, but what's wrong with the style?"

"This is the latest fashion, Jimmy."

"Is it? Then it must be the way you wear it. You used to be as smart as they made 'em, Grace, but lately you seem to be slipping. Better get Pat to fit you out with something."

"As a matter of fact this gown came from Picotarde's, my dear, and everyone admires it but you."

He had changed the subject abruptly.

"Can't you stop Joan playing right underneath my window?" he had asked peevishly. "How am I to get any work done?"

"Why, you've never complained of the child before, Jimmy! You've often said you liked to hear her there. What is the matter?"

"Nothing's the matter, except that I can't concentrate while Joan is talking to herself or her dolls."

Grace had looked at him steadily for some moments, and he had stared at her with something like defiance.

"Jimmy," Grace had said quietly, "I think I had better ask Pat not to come here again."

"Don't be silly," he had retorted roughly. "Because I dare to complain of something once in ten years, you immediately assume another woman. If you want to know my honest opinion of your friend Patricia, I think she's next door to impossible. Regards me as though I were a little off mental balance. Her conceit of herself makes me sick!"

Afterwards he had realised, with something of a shock, that he had committed perjury in order to escape his conscience and the pain in the eyes of Grace.

* * * *

On each of her ensuing visits it seemed that Patricia had taken from him a little more of the contentment which had been his, leaving in its place an increase in restlessness and the tendency to make carping criticism of his home, his wife and his child.

His work began to worry him at this time. He had complained that the fount of inspiration in Grace was running dry. He had accused her of using the same old plots, and had quarrelled with her when she had suggested that his treatment of his themes had become neither one thing nor the other—neither men's stories nor women's.

He had begun to resent the smell of cooking in the house.

"How can I write romance when the place reeks of boiling cabbage?" he had demanded of Grace on one occasion.

"Don't be silly," Grace had retorted, sharply for her. "The cabbage must be cooked. You must eat."

"Surely there's no necessity to feed me cabbage every day."

"We haven't had cabbage for over a week, Jimmy. I think you want a holiday, young man."

"Rot! I want a little consideration, that's all. You seem to take a delight, lately, in doing everything you can to interrupt my work. If it isn't cabbage it's some other beastly smell; or you sing some idiotic endless tune as you bang into things when you're sweeping the place. I can't understand what's come over you."

Grace had walked into the hall then and had returned with his hat.

"Go and walk yourself into a better temper, my dear," was all she said; and he had slammed the back door as he took her at her word.

Shortly after the cabbage episode he had begun to realise that Patricia Weybourn was less ultra- than charmingly-smart; but just when he awoke to the fact that he had fallen in love with his wife's friend he had never discovered. The awakening had been gradual and painful, for he had fought his conscience every moment of the time. He had known that in Grace he had the well-nigh perfect wife; and, in Joan, such a child as the most fastidious parent might pray for; and he had fought back at the insidious adventuring of his heart.

One evening, when they had had friends for bridge he had drawn Patricia as partner. On that occasion he played in a masterly manner; and Patricia had been pleased to smile upon him and inform their opponents that it was something of a surprise to her to find that authors might be the possessors of reasoning minds, after all.

He had laughed at the time, but later, when he had accompanied her to the tram-car, he had taken the matter up with her seriously.

"Why should it surprise you to find that authors have reasoning minds?"

"Well, for one thing, inspiration is supposed to be the source of all good stories."

"Thanks for the compliment. I was under the impression that you considered all my stories futile trash."

"To be perfectly frank, I have read only one of your stories and have only the haziest recollection of the plot. Something about a girl who fell off the pillion saddle of a motor-cycle and was picked up by a real hero in a sports roadster. There were roses and several cups of afternoon-tea in it, too."

"And is it because of that early effort of mine that you look down on me?"

"I do not look down on you."

"You certainly do not look up at me."

"Conceit! I have yet to meet a man worth looking up at—or to. I look at you with level gaze, James Harley, and I think I see you better than you see yourself."

"But you don't think much of me?"

"Don't I?"

There had been something in her non-committal question, some nuance in her tones, which had caused Harley's heart to skip a beat. He had looked sharply at her, but the darkness had hidden the expression in her eyes.

He had been silent until they reached the tram-stop and the tram was slowing to a halt.

"When shall we see you again?" he had asked then.

"When I am invited?"

"We keep open house to you."

"Thanks. Shall we say Wednesday week?"

"That's a very distant date."

"It's the best I can do, I'm afraid. Good-night."

She had smiled and waved to him as the tram moved off. It was the first time she had done so, and he had walked home with a smile on his lips—the smile of a conqueror.

"Pat catch the tram all right?" Grace had asked as soon as he had closed the front door on his return.

"Yes," he had answered shortly.

"What do you two find to talk about on these moonlight walks?"

"Love," he had answered ironically. "What else would you expect a woman like that to talk about?"

The note of relief in Grace's answering laugh had made him feel like a conspirator.

* * * *

It was five weeks later when Patricia again visited the Harleys, and in the interval James Harley had found it increasingly difficult to suppress his repugnance for the caresses which his happy years with Grace had made habitual. There had been moments when he could not bear her lightest touch upon his sleeve; and the obvious effort with which she had maintained a cheerful attitude in the face of his increasing gruffness had exasperated and shamed him.

"What's happened to the Weybourn woman?" he has asked at last. "I thought she said she was coming up two weeks ago last Wednesday?"

"Did she say she was coming then?" Grace had asked in surprise. "You never told me."

"Didn't I? I must have forgotten it. Wasn't important, anyhow. I have other things to think about."

"Have you finished that story for the Australian Journal?"

"No."

"They'll be wanting it, Jimmy."

"Let 'em want. I'm not going to send them a story which doesn't satisfy me; and this one is anything but satisfactory. I don't seem to be able to get it right."

"Can I help?"

"Oh, I'll manage it in time. It's only a question of waiting for the inspiration. By-the-way, I see you're allowing Joan to play under my window again. Do something about that, will you?"

When Patricia arrived at the end of the five weeks Grace could not have failed to perceive the true state of affairs in so far as her husband was concerned. In Patricia's company he had become again the James

Harley whom she had married and with whom she had spent ten happy years. He had been full of light-hearted gaiety, playfully reproaching the visitor for her desertion and protesting that the house seemed like a morgue without her.

"That doesn't say much for Grace," Patricia had remarked.

"Oh, Grace understands me," Harley had cried, throwing himself down beside his wife on the chesterfield and hugging her with real affection. "Don't you, sweetheart?"

"Yes," Grace had answered with quiet gravity.

Patricia had eyed them quizzically for a moment, then had turned abruptly to the piano.

Harley had looked at his wife with a puzzled air.

"What's the matter, dear?" he had asked.

"Nothing, Jimmy."

"Sure?"

"Yes."

"Well, come and help us sing a few songs. I have another I want Pat to sing."

He had lifted Grace to her feet and escorted her to the piano with an arm around her waist, and had wondered why she seemed reluctant to be released.

His easy assumption that the curious emotional disturbance engendered by the proximity of Patricia was merely the faintest stirring of the eternal Adam —too faint to be concerned about—was destroyed on that evening at a point in the road to the tram-stop where the full moon cast the shadow of tall pines.

"Don't come any further, please," Patricia had begged. "I'll be quite all right."

He had not taken her seriously.

"Too late to argue the matter now, Miss Weybourn. My orders are to see you to the tram. Come along, we'll miss it if we do not hurry."

"Please, Mr. Harley, I want to be alone."

"But you can't wander these streets alone at this time of night! And—and Grace is sure to ask me

whether you caught the tram; and what am I to say? Come along."

"Please!"

His eyes had widened at the almost desperate appeal in the monosyllable. He had stared at her in astonishment, a wild hope surging within him. He had laughed rather uncertainly.

"I know my duty as an escort——"

She had turned and hurried away, and he had followed apologetically, almost running to overtake her. Just as he had been about to speak again she stopped and flared at him.

"Go away! Go home, you fool! Oh——!" She had beaten her clenched hands together in passionate anger. "For God's sake, go home!"

Then the wild hope in him had become certainty, and the certainty had brought a sensation of largeness. He had felt himself dilate with a knowledge of his hitherto unsuspected power over this woman. He had realised for the first time that he had been on his knees to her and that she had spurned him for her own protection and not for his hurt.

He had taken her by the elbows then and had swung her round so that the light of the moon shone full upon her upturned face. She had struggled in vain to free herself, tearfully demanding that he let her go.

"So that's how it is, eh?" he had breathed triumphantly.

"Let me go! Let me go, Jimmy! I was a fool ever to have come near you again. But this is the last time. This is good-bye. Let me go!"

"Good-bye, is it?"

"Yes!"

"Because Grace is an old friend, of course? *Her* husband shall be sacred. Why struggle, my dear? I could hold you like this for a week if necessary."

"You beast—Jimmy!"

"I've heard many tales of your conquests, my dear, and I've never believed them until now. Now

I know your tactics. This time the conquered is going to be hard to lose. You knew you'd catch me at last, didn't you?"

"I haven't caught you! I haven't!" she cried passionately. "I don't want you! I hate you! Go back home, you fool!"

He had stifled her cries by crushing her in his arms and smothering her lips with kisses—wild, animal caresses. He had lifted his head to laugh at the moonlit sky, and had felt her go limp in his arms and violent sobs shake her.

She had wept bitterly and he had abased himself to comfort her, becoming convinced in the process that he had been unjust; that, in justice to Grace, she had fought and almost conquered a genuine love for him, and had been betrayed by his presence and the moon.

"So that was why you were so distant with me?" he had asked after a long silence following their mutual confession of vain battle with instinctive attraction.

Midnight had passed, and they had sat together upon a sand-dune on the foreshore, close together, submerged in a sea of self-condemnation — yet strangely happy; reluctant to go their separate ways, gazing sentimentally at the moon-path upon the water crossed by moving black shadows where the surf broke with a chill thunder, wishing time might stand still for ever, dreading the morning, telling and re-telling their hopeless loves, pitying themselves and the woman who was the man's lawful wedded wife.

"When first I saw you, Jimmy, I realised that you were the only man—the only man. If I had had the smallest grain of sense or honour I would have fled from your home on that first night. But I thought I was strong enough to resist——"

Again he had silenced her with a kiss.

"Poor little Grace!" he had murmured. "What a mess! What are we going to do?"

For answer she had lain in his arms, pulling his head down until their lips met again.

* * * *

The clock in the breakfast-room struck three as he had opened the front door carrying his shoes in his hand. He had returned home guiltily and with a heavy heart.

He had switched on the shaded light in the bedroom cautiously and had looked at Grace for some minutes with grave pity. Grace slept, or pretended to sleep, and he had seen that her pillow was damp. One hand, flung upon the pillow above her head, held a sodden, crumpled handkerchief.

He had been tempted to stoop and kiss her that he might see her smile in her sleep, as she had smiled many times when he had kissed her after working into the morning hours and she had retired early, but he had lacked the courage. He had lacked the courage to soil her. That was how he had felt about so small a thing.

With infinite caution, that he might not disturb her, he had taken his pyjamas from beneath his pillow, and had made his way to the single bed in the spare room, stealthily.

His heart had jumped painfully when he thought he caught the sound of a sob as he turned out his light.

CHAPTER IV.

On the following morning he had lain abed, afraid.

He had heard Grace rise and go out to the kitchenette, observing the morning routine as though nothing were altered. He had heard the familiar clatter of cooking utensils and the sizzling of the breakfast bacon, and a momentary hope had been born in him that she had found an excuse for his tardy return—the possible missing of the last tramcar to town and

the necessity for him to have seen Patricia home. Then he remembered that he was self-condemned by his action of sleeping apart.

There had come the sound of pattering, exploring footsteps; his door had been pushed open cautiously, and little Joan had stood upon the threshold regarding him with grave concern.

"Hello, Daddy! What are you doing in here all by yourself? Are you sick?"

"Not very well, Joan," he had lied, failing to achieve a smile. "Daddy has a bad headache. Must sleep it off."

Joan had edged into the room sympathetically.

"Does Mummy know?"

"I think so, dear."

At that moment he had heard Grace's footsteps in the passage.

"Go away, Joan," he had commanded harshly, in an effort to stem his panic. "And shut the door."

Before the child could recover from her hurt astonishment at his sudden anger, Grace had entered the room quietly, smiling at the child as lovingly as ever. She had run her fingers through Joan's hair and had stooped to kiss her.

"Run along now, dear," she had said. "Go and dress. I want to talk with daddy."

His heart had shrunk at the final words and he had kept his gaze upon the embroidered apron which Grace wore, not daring to look into her face.

When she had closed the door upon the child Grace stood with her back to it gazing inscrutably at him for interminable seconds; then she had crossed the room slowly and sat upon his bed. He had drawn up his knees that he might not be guilty of touching her. His gaze remained fixed and he looked at the lower panels of the door, fearfully apprehensive of her first words.

"Jimmy," she had said, sitting with her hands folded in her lap, "have you anything to tell me?"

The words, uttered softly and gently, had surprised him. He had expected condemnation unheard; and that Grace had failed to be so unjust roused a curious resentment in him.

"What do you expect me to tell you?" he had countered sullenly.

"That which you think I should be told, Jimmy."

There had been silence in the room then for a long time. He had lain still, staring unseeingly at the door panels, flushing hotly under his wife's steady gaze.

"Nothing, Jimmy?" she had pleaded softly.

He had remained silent, sullen.

At last Grace had risen suddenly, lifting her shoulders and spreading her hands in a pitiful gesture of resignation as she had crossed to the door again. She turned upon the threshold and he had looked up into her eyes for the first time. Her eyes were red-rimmed, her gaze steady and resolute. She had fought her battle in the lonely night and her soft mouth had firmed in defeat.

"Breakfast will be ready in five minutes," she had said in the same quiet tone. "Please do not get up. I will bring yours here. I am lunching with Mrs. Warden to-day, so perhaps you had better lunch in town; unless you would prefer that I leave something in the oven for you. I doubt if I shall be home before five. I have some shopping to do this afternoon, and I have to arrange for a carter. It may be as well if I get the tickets to-day, too. It will save a rush in the morning."

He had risen upon his elbow at that.

"Tickets? What tickets?"

"Our rail tickets—mine and Joan's. We are leaving by the mail for Wanganui to-morrow. I planned our—our holiday during the night. A fortnight in Wanganui, then a fortnight in Napier, and after that I—I suppose it doesn't matter where we go. Joan will be of school age next year, and I may as well see as much of the country as possible before then."

She had spoken in a curiously flat, lifeless tone, without hesitation, as though she had learned the words by rote; but there had been that in her voice which told him that she had made her unalterable decision, that she was convinced of his guilt.

Resentment had surged in him, a resentment which he had striven to justify by the thought that he had unnecessarily sent Patricia from him for a month—a month of love probation.

"Do you realise what you are saying, Grace?" he had asked sharply, sitting up in bed and clasping his knees.

"Perfectly."

"And what if I forbid you to go?"

"It will make no atom of difference, Jimmy."

Her lifeless tone had given place to a rising passion; her eyes had glistened with brimming tears.

"We can't go on living as we have been living lately, Jimmy. We can't! We can't! Don't let us argue about it. I am going away. It is the only thing I can do for the sake of your happiness—and for mine. I have been a fool. I have thought you stronger than you are. I have been conceited enough to think that I held all the love of which you were capable. I have allowed you to run into temptation, believing that Pat remembered our old friendship and would respect my happiness——"

"She has remembered it, Grace. We shall see her no more for a month——"

"Am I to suffer another month such as this last, Jimmy? We? *I* shall never see her again! I am going away. What is a month, a year, of separation to either of you now? What is it but a period of mad longing which will make your inevitable reunion an event which will destroy all remembrance of our happiness together—an event which will make of me a cast-off mistress?"

"Grace!" he had protested vehemently, shocked to realise that the truth of her words at once exalted and shamed him.

"You know it is true! I know it is true! And so I am going away now, Jimmy, while you can still remember that you have loved me—and before your coldness turns my heart to ice."

He had been about to speak and she had read his words before he could utter them.

"Don't lie to me!" she had cried fiercely. "Don't! You have lied enough to yourself for months—don't lie to me! You want Pat—you don't want me! And it's my fault! My fault! I did wrong to expose you to the gaze of a natural man-hunter. I should have killed her rather than kill you. For that's what I've done! Killed you! You wrote of passionate love when you knew nothing of it — now you will be ashamed to write of it. It—it's beastly!"

At the last bitter words she had fled from the room, leaving him sitting there staring at the door-panels, his thoughts whirling around one heavy immovable emotion—a vast self-pity.

A few minutes later she returned, bearing his breakfast tray, and had found him lying down with the sheet drawn over his head. She had regained command of herself; and, after placing the tray on a chair at his bedside, had leaned over the bed to place a gentle, pitying hand upon his head.

"Jimmy," she had said softly, "always remember that I don't blame you. You are caught in the torrent of which you have written so often but of whose strength you have actually known nothing. You have struggled, and are struggling, against it to the best of your ability; but you are not a god that you may order the elements."

The yearning compassion in her voice had caused him to bury his head a little deeper in the pillow. Her hand had moved upon his hair as lightly as a fallen leaf moved by a zephyr.

"You want to do right, Jimmy—to behave towards me as you have promised before God to behave. That is the civilised conscience in you. You crave for Pat, and dare not contemplate life apart from

her. That is the god in you, the driving force of your man's nature. I am, as you have so often told me, such a little bit of a woman. I am no fitting mate for a man fashioned like an epic hero. I understand —fully. I captured you before you had grown to a knowledge of yourself, and I have been foolish to think that I could hold you captive indefinitely with —with Joan. This thing had to be. But I want you to remember this, also, Jimmy—I want you as you want Pat. I have always wanted you that way—I will aways want you that way. Oh, Jimmy—I'll always want you any way! Always, Jimmy, no matter what happens! Always!"

The last words had been a tremulous whisper, and he could not have replied then, for his throat had been full.

The silence which followed had been long and oppressive, and her hand had moved upon his hair in a continuous caress. Then she had risen swiftly and had left the room, turning in the doorway to say, in matter-of-fact tones,

"You had better eat your breakfast before it is cold, Jimmy. Whatever else you do, my dear, don't starve yourself."

He had heard the door close, and had felt an urge to spring from the bed and beg Grace's forgiveness on his knees; to tell her that he had never ceased to love her; that his passion for Pat was but a transient blindness. Instead of obeying the urge, he had merely moved his head a little, because the pillow beneath his face had become uncomfortably damp, and had sniffed like a chastised schoolboy. The feeling of injustice had completely evaporated and he had seen himself as an abject, traitorous hound, unworthy even of pity.

It had been afternoon when he had risen, and he had left the house without thought of the breakfast tray, nor, indeed, of food in any form. He had made his way in self-abasement to the beach by an un-

accustomed route, lest he should meet Grace returning from town.

Unshaven; hungry and unconscious of the fact, he had paced the deserted beach beyond Fitzroy until darkness fell, his thoughts jumbled, his mind a misery. He had spent the whole night among the sandhills—sandhills which had become transformed from the setting of a scented dream into the trappings of a nightmare within a short twenty-four hours—sheltering himself from the chill westerly wind more by instinct than from conscious discomfort. The roar of the surf had supplied the uniform bass upon which he had built shrieking discords of unhappy thoughts. He had thrown himself down on the sand; he had risen; he had walked aimlessly all through that night; and when the south-bound mail train had thundered over the Te Henui viaduct in the morning he had regained enough of his sanity to recognise himself as the prince of all fools, and to tell himself as much in a loud voice.

He had returned home an hour later to find the place spotless. The beds had been made with fresh linen, the windows had been open, there had been no soiled dishes in the sink, everything had been in its place—the perfect setting for the perfect housewife. He had found the table in the kitchenette laid for his breakfast, and propped against the toast-rack he had found a note from Grace:

"Just in case you should need me, Jimmy, we shall be at Braemar, Wanganui, until the 21st of the month, and at the Masonic Hotel, Napier, for a fortnight or so after that.

Good-bye,

Grace.

There is baked blue cod in the oven for your breakfast, and some cold meat in the safe for your lunch. I hope the cod will be warm when you come in. Joan leaves you these kisses. x x x x."

The note had broken him utterly. Worn out with two sleepless nights, a conscience that raked him with barbs, and a sense of abject shame that he had allowed the faithful wife and lover of years to go out of his life without a word of farewell, he had sprawled upon the table and wept.

Had there been a revolver ready to his hand he would have shot himself; but he had not then, or later, reached to such a depth that any less sudden method of self-destruction appealed to him.

When the noon whistles had sounded in the town he had roused himself sufficiently to offer a fervent prayer to his nebulous God for the happiness of Grace and Joan, and to stoop to stroke Ginger who rubbed against his leg and miaowed for food.

The blue cod had been quite cold when he had taken it from the oven.

* * * *

And this was the end of it.

After weeks of loneliness, weeks of mental torture, weeks spent in weighing Grace's wifely virtues against the primordial attraction of Patricia Weybourn—an operation in which it shamed him to realise that little Joan added not a pennyweight to disturb the scales in favour of his remembrance of his nuptial promises—weeks in which literary labour and sleep had alike been almost impossible, he had made his decision.

He had chosen 'the other woman,' and the knowledge increased his wretchedness.

What had happened to his old love for Joan during this emotional upheaval? According to the rules governing these affairs, rules to which he had slavishly subscribed in his stories, the parents' mutual love of their children was a dispensation of Heaven to seal the bonds forged at the altar. What had happened?

He was actually relieved to be rid of the child. Could it be that, after all, men were but mating animals, and, like the animals, easily forgetful of their

progeny? Was this passion for Patricia but a transient mating call? He could not believe it. It was too terrific to be that. It was the attraction of like to like, the hand of the Creator repairing His shattered handiwork, the adjusting of an eternal pattern of perfection.

His marriage with Grace had been a mistake. She had, indeed, caught him before his eyes had been fully open. She had but herself to blame——

Oh, hell! Where was the sense in seeking justification for the mistakes of a power beyond mortal control?

The letter was posted. The thing was settled. Let the world say he had chosen wrongly—what did it matter? What comprised his world, after all? A thin circle of friends, consciously righteous, and a handful of editors who would shake their heads at his 'folly' and welcome the publicity. What did he care for it?

Nothing.

Pat was his Heaven. He was going to her. The world could go to perdition for all he cared.

CHAPTER V.

For a man *en route* to Heaven, James Harley was singularly lacking in appreciation of his path. His gaze was upon infinity beneath the ground upon which he walked, and he saw nothing of the sun-splashed suburban houses on either hand, nor of the blue of the sky, nor of the sheen of the Tasman Sea visible between the trees straight ahead, nor of anything which was really worth looking at on this delightful summer afternoon, until he reached the junction of the road with the main thoroughfare to town.

There a voice greeted him with a low, "Jimmy!" and he raised his head incredulously, the blood suffusing his drawn features.

The voice belonged to Patricia Weybourn. She was standing in the shade of the "tram-shelter," her hands clasped tightly upon a fashionable hand-bag, pale of face, her lips parted in a nervous smile. Exquisitely attired, she was thinner than when he had last seen her, and her glorious eyes seemed larger than formerly. The flush which stained her cheeks could not long disguise the palor which had grown upon them in the suspense of the weeks since their last devastating meeting.

Harley stared at her stupidly for a few moments, then he laughed uncertainly. His heart was pounding madly.

"Well, well!" he exclaimed, for the benefit of two elderly intending passengers who were looking at him, frankly surprised that such a fashionable young lady should have such a disreputable acquaintance. "What brings you to this part of the world?"

"Business," Patricia answered, aping his attitude, and looking up the street at the approaching tram-car.

"Business good?"

"We mustn't complain. We are getting our share."

"That's good news."

"Great weather."

"Delightful. This gentle westerly on such a day makes life worth living."

"Yes."

The tram-car ground noisily to a stop. The two elderly passengers bustled to board it. Neither Patricia nor Harley moved. The tram-conductor looked at them expectantly, then twitched the bell-cord irritably, as though he were being cheated. The tram moved off down the hill.

They watched it go.

"Aren't you going into town?" Harley asked, when the silence became unendurable.

"Presently. I have an hour or so to spare. I thought I might take a stroll along the beach."

Harley looked hard at the shimmering tram-rails

and shuffled uncomfortably on his feet. He could feel the blood rising again in his face.

"Mind if I come with you?" he managed at last.

Patricia touched his sleeve, and her voice was not entirely under control.

"We can't stand here like fools, Jimmy. Let's go where we can talk. Come along."

Harley crossed the road by her side with eager alacrity, upright of carriage, confident, transformed; but this moment recognising the possibility that Patricia might have changed her mind about him, as she had reputedly changed it about many other men. If she had, he would soon prove to her that she erred.

"Feel the earthquake?" he asked conversationally, as they took the winding path across the river flats to the beach.

"Yes. Fairly severe one, wasn't it?"

"It wouldn't surprise me to hear that the West Coast has had another shaking up. Let us hope it isn't a disaster like the last one. Can you imagine what a disaster that Murchison shake would have been had the district been thickly populated—if there had been cities for those hills to explode on instead of farms?"

"It is hardly likely that another shake will have occurred in the same district, surely?"

"Earthquakes obey no laws, apparently. They bob up whenever and wherever it suits them. Where were you when this one happened?"

"At Mrs. Langham's, fitting her for an evening gown."

"Good Lord! Just across the gully? Did you see me dashing for the high country?"

"No," Patricia laughed. "Did you?"

"I did. I take no chances with those things. I pictured the house sliding into the gully."

"That's what I thought might happen to the Langham's place. Mrs. Langham and I dashed out into the road."

Harley grinned.

"I'd hate to meet Mrs. Percival Quesne Langham at the bottom of the gully, or anywhere else, for the matter of that. I detest the woman."

"So do I," replied Patricia viciously. "She's poisonous! It's one of the burdens I must bear for my sins that I have to be nice to the spiteful, gossiping snob. But there, business is business."

"Is she a good customer?"

"Her husband must think so, if he judges by the bills I send him. I think she's one of our worst. The figure of a draught-horse, and the taste of one! Presumes on her status in this small-town society to play the grand dame when she comes into the shop; and of course, we charge her accordingly."

"She seems to spend a lot of her time lately in quizzing our place. I've suspected her of examining me through binoculars, as though I were an animal at the zoo."

The fact did not seem to concern him vitally. He spoke with tolerant amusement, but Patricia saw nothing amusing in Mrs. Langham.

"I have an idea that the fitting of the evening gown was merely an excuse to get me alone so that she might pump me about you and—and Grace," she said. "But she got nothing but a few jabs with pins for it if she did. Oh, I hate that woman! I'd dearly love the opportunity to topple her from her society perch. Good earth-dust is the only thing which will stop her mouth and blind her eyes!"

"Patricia! Temper!" chided Harley, possessing himself of her elbow and chuckling. "Tell me, what has she been saying about us to so upset you?"

"Lot's of things," exploded Patricia, and then became obstinately deaf to all his further questioning on the subject.

"Let us talk of something else, Jimmy," she begged at last, turning her most radiant smile upon him and completely subjugating him. "The day is too wonderful to waste on unpleasant subjects."

"I agree with you there. Let's talk about you."

At that moment they opened out the long sweep of beach to the north, and Harley took a deep, satisfying breath of sea-air into his starved lungs, exhaling in a sigh of deep contentment.

Patricia looked at him with understanding.

"The beach is your battle-ground, isn't it, Jimmy?" she smiled.

"Why do you say that?"

"It is here you fight your emotional battles—where you are not hemmed in by houses and curious people. Don't be silly and ask me how I know. Have I not assisted in one?"

Harley looked out to sea and shook his head slowly.

"That was a wonderful night, Pat," he murmured. "The most wonderful night in my life."

"And in mine, Jimmy."

He turned upon her swiftly, eagerly.

"Was it? Honestly?"

Patricia did not answer directly. She in turn looked out to sea, and he, in his turn, gazed wistfully at the profile of the adored.

"I love the beach, too," she said softly. "I come here to—to breathe, very often."

"And you have seen me here?"

"Often."

"Then why, for pity's sake, Pat, did you not speak to me and help me?"

"Because it would have been definitely outside the letter and spirit of our contract, Jimmy," she answered, looking into his eyes. "One month, was it not? One month apart. One month in which to learn whether our bad luck was due to a full moon or to Destiny—God. The month is not ended until to-morrow——"

"And have you found out?" he asked eagerly, capturing her hands. "Have you?"

Patricia smiled enigmatically, and looked at him keenly.

"Mrs. Langham is right in one thing, Jimmy," she countered. "You've let yourself go. You look half-starved——"

"Oh, hang Mrs. Langham!"

"—your clothes are creased in the wrong places—your hair is too long. You look gaunt and almost disreputable."

He smiled.

"Merely following my own literary conception of how a man in my position should look, Pat."

Patricia snatched her hands away and spoke sharply.

"Don't play with me, Jimmy!" she cried. "I have suffered enough in this last month. Mrs. Langham is right. I should have remembered you as I saw you watching the train which took Grace away. You are breaking your heart for her."

"For whom?" asked Harley, wilfully dense. "Mrs. Langham?"

"For Grace! Grace! Oh, I've been a beast, Jimmy. I have thought you wanted *me*. I've seen you suffering, and I've crowed while I've cried over you, Jimmy. I've been a conceited beast, Jimmy, and this serves me right. But I couldn't resist the temptation to talk to you just once more. Now I'm going away for good. I'm leaving New Plymouth—"

She turned and moved away, and Harley overtook her in two swift strides. He seized her by the elbows as he had seized her a month previously.

"Pat, you've got it all wrong. Grace is never coming back. Everything between us is finished. I've written and told her so. Mrs. Langham is wrong once again. Grace is not the woman I have been breaking my heart for."

She freed herself with a sudden movement and stamped her foot at him.

"No! No, Jimmy! You mustn't do it. No man in his right senses would seriously prefer a woman like me to a woman like Grace. I'm hard, sophisticated, painted; and men say things of me—truly.

I appeal to your baser nature—and that only when I am near you. I should not have spoken this afternoon—I should never have come into your home."

"Pat—"

"I am adept at seducing men," she continued defiantly, "but I cannot hold them. Perhaps I have not tried seriously—and I am not going to try now. I am rotten in heart and habit, and I'm going away. I am easily forgotten. If you do not believe that, ask the men who have known me. Well, I've got what I deserved. I'm not going to cry about it. I'm only sorry for Grace. Tell her that, will you? I'm going to the other end of the world to try to forget—both of you."

Again she turned away, and this time he had to run to overtake her. He seized her roughly, and crushed her in his arms.

"No, you don't," he growled through his clenched teeth. "You belong to me, and I'm going to keep you! I don't care a damn how many men you have hunted and caught! You were merely hunting for a man who could catch you, and you've found him! You're mine! Mine! And God help anyone who tries to take you from me!"

His eyes flamed as he crushed her lips with his. Superbly arrogant, his brutal strength, roused by overmastering passion, bruised her body and delighted her soul. She gave him kiss for kiss, clinging to him, murmuring softly in the ecstasy of complete surrender.

Becoming conscious of the amused regard of bathers some distance away, Harley released his woman, frowned upon his audience, and, with a gesture of authority, bade her precede him to the concealment of the sand-dunes.

"Jimmy! Jimmy! You poor, blind fool!" she breathed shakily as she sank down by his side upon the warm black sand.

CHAPTER VI.

At the end of a wonderful hour Patricia sat up, stretched her arms to remove a slight cramp in them, reached for the hat which she had discarded, and, with constant reference to the small mirror attached to the flap of her handbag, drew it over the gleaming hair which she contrived to pat into some order.

The clear-cut lines of her face seemed softened, and unwonted colour heightened her beauty. She sighed happily.

"Having decided to postpone my departure from your charming town, Mr. Harley," she said lightly, "it behoves me to look into the modiste's business, which, of late, I have somewhat neglected."

James Harley, lying stretched at full length upon the sand, his head pillowed upon his folded hands, looked lazily at her lithe, stooping back with indulgent amusement.

"Having languished so long, the business will stand another brief hour of neglect, surely?" he protested.

"It's not so much the business as my conscience, Jimmy. I haven't earned my salary for a month past; and I feel sure the girls are chafing under the strain. Besides, I feel in the mood to design things —evening ensembles and things like that. My fancy has become exuberant and the world a wonderful place to play in. I feel clever, silly, and joyful. That's the sort of fool I am!"

"I understand. I feel inspired, too."

"To write a real love story?" she asked, glancing at him mischievously.

"No, to lie here and enjoy myself."

"Lazy!"

"Pat, you look wonderful to-day. Green suits you."

"Perhaps. But this dress is blue."

"Is it? So it is. Must be the light which gives it that green tinge. Doesn't crease easily—that's one

good thing about it. But, it isn't absolutely essential that you go back to town to-day?"

"I must, Jimmy. I have to attend to the Langham woman's fittings."

"Confound the Langham woman! Let her wait. She has interfered in our affairs long enough."

"I really must go——"

"But what am I to do with the remainder of this glorious afternoon?"

"Lie in the sun and dream, or wander these stretching miles of wind-swept beach in an agony of delicious loneliness," she smiled.

Harley shook his head slowly.

"My wandering is finished," he said softly.

Patricia leaned over him impulsively and kissed his ready lips.

"I hope it is, Jimmy. I hope it is."

Her mood changed. She sat back upon her heels and looked at him with a slight frown.

"But, remember, I gave you your chance, Jimmy," she said, her tones sharpened and her mouth firm.

He looked up at her gravely.

"I will remember," he replied; "and I will remember that I took my chance, and be grateful all the days of my life."

"You know I didn't mean that, Jimmy——"

"Dear heart, the day is too precious to waste in vain argument," he protested with a smile. "I'll remember all you tell me. I'll remember you were ready and willing to sacrifice yourself if it would have meant happiness for Grace and for me. Grace will remember, also."

"Grace?"

"I intend to write and tell her all that has happened in this hour——"

"All?"

"All. Everything. It will be there in writing for her—a confession which will give her freedom."

Patricia caught her breath sharply.

"It is only right, Pat," he insisted apologetically,

raising himself upon one elbow. "It is all I—we—can do for her. That, and pray that she find happiness somewhere."

They were silent for some seconds, looking steadily into each other's eyes and the future.

"But, what will people say?" she asked at last.

Harley smiled.

"Pat, I expected something more original from you," he said in mild reproach.

"Don't you care what they say?"

"No. Not a scrap."

"But this is such a small town, Jimmy. Everybody knows you."

"This is a small town, and nobody knows me," he corrected. "I haven't known myself until this last month. Heavens, woman! I am not ashamed! I'm proud! That for our local society!" He snapped his fingers. "How can its censure affect me? Am I dependent upon local society for my bread? And while I have you and bread, what else is there left for me to desire?"

"'A book of verse, a jug of wine——'" Patricia suggested laughingly.

"Not at all. You are the book of verse and the jug of wine—and I'll wager that old Omar said the same thing to his woman. Bah! Local society!"

He checked a forcible expression with difficulty.

"Say it," urged Patricia, amused.

"I've said it—under my breath. Thank God, I'm independent of local society. Australia, England, America—I am paid for my work by every country but my own; and I care as much for local society as local society cares for my work. Let it say what it pleases as far as I am concerned. But you, Pat? Local society will be all for Grace. It will tear you to pieces."

He sat up and took her hands, looking into her face anxiously.

Patricia squeezed his fingers lightly and smiled defiantly.

"There is very little of me left that it has not already torn, my dear," she smiled. "I am hardened against its teeth. Of course, it may affect the business——"

"I'm not worrying about the business, sweetheart. It's you. You'll not be in the business very long now——"

She rose to her feet as though his words were a sharp reminder of present neglect.

Harley did not release her hands. He twisted himself to his knees and remained thus, looking up into her face with an adoration which approached idolatry.

"Pat," he breathed, "I have never loved anyone like this. I've been terribly ignorant of the meaning of the word——"

She smiled down upon him compassionately.

"Poor old Jimmy," she said unsteadily. "The gods have dealt you a poor hand, I'm afraid."

"I'm holding the Queen of Hearts," he smiled in return, "and with that I can play the other cards to win."

"Oh! Who dares accuse me of lack of originality?" she cried teasingly.

"Why? Has any other man dared to call you that?"

"Hundreds!"

He groaned in mock dismay, kissed her fingers lightly and released them.

"This evening?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Where?"

"I'll ring you about seven o'clock, if necessary."

"Why 'if necessary'?"

"I may see you before then. My work may take me in your direction——"

"Here? On the beach?"

"Of course—I forgot. You are going to be lazy. All right. I must fly."

"Sure you wouldn't like me to come to town with you?"

"Silly! Do you want me to turn upon you suddenly and kiss you in the middle of the street?"

"Certainly. I daresay the worthy citizens would appreciate it, too."

He half rose, but she toppled him over with a sharp push and hurried away laughing.

Harley, upon his knees, watched her with kindled eyes until she was hidden by intervening sand-dunes, then he sank forward, dropping his head upon his folded arms and stretching his long legs until he lay luxuriously comfortable. He closed his eyes and dreamed of Heaven—a heaven which Patricia filled to the exclusion of all else. Grace and Joan were entirely forgotten.

A sand-dune sheltered him from the rising westerly breeze; stout marram grass intercepted the lifting sand-grains which might have annoyed him; the sun shone warmly upon his broad back; a delightful lassitude enveloped him, and presently he slept.

* * * *

Patricia entered the main street at a point where a number of shops broke the long line of residences, and immediately became aware that stirring tidings were abroad.

Shop-keepers were standing upon the side-walk conversing with each other and passers-by. Four men were eagerly discussing the contents of the afternoon daily paper which they held spread before them. Several women were looking at each other in awe and speaking in whispers as they crossed the street.

As she climbed into the waiting tram-car the motorman greeted her with the grave respect of one speaking to a person bereaved.

There were only four other passengers in the

car—three men and a woman. They were separated from each other by expanses of vacant seats; they were evidently strangers to each other, yet they conversed freely.

"Must have been awful," the woman was saying, as Patricia entered and took a seat near the front. "I've never seen the place—but I can imagine—"

"I have," interrupted one of the men, evidently a commercial traveller—for whom Patricia had a discerning eye—"many a time. I was over there only last week, and it's only by chance that I'm not there this week."

The other two men and the woman eyed him with envy.

"Are you 'on the road'?" asked one of the men, whose clothing was that of a labourer and whose moustache was stained yellow at the lower edge.

"Yes. I do all that district. I'll have to rush over and see what's left of our business there. Not much, by all accounts."

"I can't believe it yet," stated the woman in shocked tones. "Thank Heaven, I have nobody over there."

"It's the best thing that ever happened to that town, in a way," proceeded the commercial traveller judicially.

"How can you say such a thing?" demanded the woman. "With all those lives lost! You ought to be locked up!"

The traveller smiled at the men, who looked at him with disapproval.

"I mean, for the town itself," he hastened to explain. "Of course, the loss of life is a terrible thing. Doesn't bear thinking about. But it was time something happened to those narrow streets——"

"You wouldn't say that if you owned property there, young man," put in the third man, with a sourness which matched his appearance.

"I don't know," disagreed the traveller with a smile; "if the insurances were right I might."

The tramcar moved townwards, and Patricia could contain her curiosity no longer. She rose and spoke to the motorman.

"Excuse me."

"Yes, Miss Weybourn?"

Patricia was well-known on the single tram-route. Her business took her to the suburbs often, and it was part of the motormen's unwritten duty to know and be polite to all passengers. Patricia had not proved hard to know or remember, and her smile was a valued perquisite in the service.

"What has happened?"

The motorman looked his surprise.

"Haven't you heard?"

"I've been out here all day. Is it this morning's earthquake?"

"Yes. Napier and Hastings have been destroyed."

Patricia blanched. She clutched at a stanchion to save herself from falling.

"Is that true?" she gasped.

"It came over the wireless, and the paper is full of it. The shake came without warning, and in five seconds the places were in ruins."

The car stopped to pick up more passengers, and Patricia staggered weakly to her seat.

The car filled gradually on its journey to town, and the sole topic of conversation was the earthquake. Passengers described their sensations and predictions when the shake had come that morning, and all had supposed the tremor to have originated on the West Coast of the South Island. Not a single one had dreamed of associating it with the East Coast of the North Island. That region had never, in the memory of the white man, experienced more than an occasional gentle vibration. It was staggering, incredible. Strangers exchanged reminiscences of shakes experienced. One man, a known liar, professed to have been in the Murchison district and witnessed the actual subsidence of the hill which buried a valley farm completely.

"——and as I come round the corner the whole hillside lifted up in the air and spread out like a fan. I saw the woman come running out the front door with a couple of kiddies after her; then all that rock come down on 'em—millions of tons of it—and buried 'em, house and all. I saw it—and I'll never forget it as long as I live!"

The only inaccurate detail of the story was that the narrator had not witnessed the terrible incident, but the other passengers did not question anything. All were avid for earthquake horrors, and the wildest tales were given credence.

There was a strange hush in the town. Business was at a standstill. Motor-cars were parked thickly on each side of the single shopping street in defiance of all traffic bye-laws. People stood in groups upon the side-walks and in the roadway, discussing, conjecturing, arguing in subdued tones. The two paper offices were besieged by orderly, silent crowds awaiting the scant news.

It was a moment of national disaster.

* * * *

Patricia did not alight in the town. She continued on to her flat.

She packed a portmanteau and a small cabin trunk. Her face was set in grim determination, her lips a thin line, her brows drawn down, her cheeks colourless, her eyes glittering with an emotion sternly suppressed.

Grace was in Napier. Jimmy had told her so.

It was the moment for action.

CHAPTER VII.

It was after six o'clock when James Harley rolled over and sat up. He struggled to complete wakefulness with an effort, conscious that he had made some sort of an appointment with somebody. When he remembered with whom the appointment had been made he yanked out his watch in mild panic. He

sighed in great relief when he saw that it still wanted over thirty minutes to seven o'clock.

He stretched, and yawned noisily, luxuriating in a restored sense of freedom, then rose to his feet and gazed at the beach and the leagues of sea with a sense of ownership. He grinned as he admitted to himself that there was something in the song which he remembered his mother singing in the "middle ages," after all. Pat loved him and the world was his!

He remembered his hat, and laughed when he discovered that he had been lying on it. He recovered the wreck, punched it into wearable shape, and set it upon his head carelessly.

He talked to himself light-heartedly as he made his way in the direction of the road.

"Item, in the new expenses schedule, one hat, forty-five shillings—or less. James, make a note of that and call my attention to it first thing to-morrow morning. Oh, and James—better mention a new suit, too, while you're about it. We must look after ourselves, James. And don't forget that we must have our hair cut. It is too long altogether. We will overlook it this time, James, because the length of it has undoubtedly saved us from sunstroke this afternoon, but don't let it occur again. And, just one other thing, James, you really must shed that habit of talking to yourself. Look at those children staring at you open-mouthed. Try whistling for a change."

He was whistling blithely as he turned into Plover Street. Mrs. Langham was crossing the sidewalk to her car as he passed her house. He interrupted his whistling to raise his battered hat, smile politely upon her and ask her how she did. She replied with one withering glance and a turning of her ample back.

"Delightful evening, isn't it?" he ventured unabashed.

Mrs. Langham expressed no agreement. She

climbed into her car as regally as she could at a moment's notice and banged the door shut with a violence which rocked the vehicle. She clashed her gears badly as she moved away.

"Pointed, James; decidedly pointed," Harley murmured as he continued on his path. "'We have done those things which we ought not to have done.' But, for a sinner, we are not unduly miserable, James. Whistle, you ass!"

He was whistling when he reached his gate, which he slammed behind him with an exuberant gesture. In little but the clothes he wore did he resemble the man who had shut it listlessly a few hours earlier. He was now vigorously alive. No signs of mental travail showed in his expression. His eyes sparkled, he walked upright, swinging his arms with the joy of living. His firmly-planted boots raised little explosions of dust as he marched around the house to the back door; and when Ginger miaowed hungrily at him and stood in his path he was filled with a vast sympathy for the animal. He lifted the cat in his arms—a liberty which Ginger resented.

"What's the matter with the old man?" he asked, caressing the struggling animal. "Not afraid of me, surely? What do you say to a nice piece of meat? A piece of steak, or perhaps a fried chop?"

It was only when he had mentioned a 'fried chop' that he realised he could smell a frying mutton chop. Moreover, he could hear the chop frying.

He lifted his head and stared at the closed back door of the house in puzzled speculation. Ginger took advantage of his wandering attention to scramble from his arms and dart under the hedge.

"Somebody in the house, James," muttered Harley. "Somebody cooking chops on our stove."

He thought of tramps, he thought of compassionate friends, he thought of Grace!

Grace returned!

His exaltation crashed; and a moment of panic,

in which he almost turned tip-toe away from the house, was succeeded by a wave of unreasoning anger.

By what right did she return like this, unheralded? She had deliberately run away from him, and if she thought she could return just when it pleased her——! No, by God!

He strode forward, turned the handle, and flung the door open with his shoulder.

"Well?" he demanded savagely.

Then he gasped in amazement, and coloured furiously.

Patricia Weybourn stood confronting him as she calmly wiped the last of the dishes which had been piled upon the sink board. She wore one of Grace's gingham aprons over her stylish afternoon frock. Her hands and wrists were damp and unusually pink.

The air was full of the odour of soapy water and frying chops.

"Do you usually charge in like this?" asked the girl calmly.

James Harley stared at her foolishly, his mouth agape, entirely unbelieving.

"Am I not welcome?" she asked, tossing her head coquettishly as she turned to place the wiped dish with the others which gleamed freshly upon the shelves.

"Pat!" he managed to gasp.

Patricia laughed mirthfully and continued her task.

Harley crossed the room and leaned upon the edge of the table, his gaze wandering here and there, noting the return of the old order, then settling upon the girl's back as she scrubbed the sink-board vigorously. His thoughts struggled for coherency, and he noted subconsciously that Pat's hair brushed the lowest shelf above the sink as she bent forward. Grace had come short of that shelf by a good four inches.

"Say something, Jimmy," commanded Patricia, turning upon him suddenly.

"Wh—what are you doing here, Pat?" he stuttered, his eyes still wide with amazement.

"As you see, restoring order in the kitchen and cooking the evening meal," she answered easily.

"But—but—" he began helplessly, spreading his hands protestingly.

"Do you like living on husks in a stye, Jimmy?"

"No, of course not! But, my dear girl, you mustn't——"

"Don't ask me what the neighbours will think," she interrupted, with a cold smile, "because you should know that I don't care what they think. At this moment Mrs. Langham is spreading the glad news that I have proved myself an abandoned hussy, I dare say. She was vastly interested when I shook the bedroom rugs over the verandah rail an hour ago. I made plenty of noise over it especially for her edification."

He shook his head in bewilderment.

Patricia read reproof in the action and came close to him, her shapely jaw set challengingly. She looked steadily into his eyes.

"Have you finally decided that you do care what local society thinks of you?" she asked, a suggestion of contempt in her tones.

Harley returned her gaze as he straightened slowly. A possessive smile curved his lips and deepened the lines at their corners. His eyelids drooped slightly as his gaze kindled. With a sudden, fierce movement he seized her in his arms and crushed her to him.

"The neighbours and local society can go to the devil!" he answered. "I wish I could keep you here."

Patricia found the wet dish-cloth she held rather difficult in his close embrace, but she refrained from mentioning it. Harley had not noticed it.

"Do you? Really?" she asked.

"You know I do, Pat."

He kissed her hair, the blonde hair which he had once thought *ultra*, but which he now knew to be "angel gold."

"Jimmy, you're—awfully satisfying," she breathed happily.

They were still for enchanted seconds, then she tore herself free.

"The chops!" she cried.

"Confound the chops!" he exclaimed fervently.

He watched her in admiration as she turned the chops in the pan dexterously; and when she stooped to lower the flame beneath them he stooped swiftly and kissed the back of her neck.

The gas went out with a plop.

"Damn!" said the girl.

Harley hastened to re-kindle the flame.

"A good cook never swears, my dear," he admonished her.

"But I'm not a good cook," she defended herself. "You'll find that out."

"To tell you the truth, Pat, I am surprised to find that you can cook at all."

"Indeed? I'm rather too decorative for the kitchen?"

He laughed softly and placed an arm about her shoulders.

"Well—you're not the kitchen type, sweetheart. You know what I mean. It ought never to be necessary for you to have to cook. You were designed to grace dinners, not to cook 'em."

"Exactly. Too decorative."

"Not 'too,' Pat. I'll never agree to that."

"Good appetite cares little about decoration in any degree, Jimmy."

Patricia reached for the dish of tomatoes upon the table.

"Fried tomatoes?" she asked.

"My favourite dish," he replied; and became grave as an unwelcome vision of Grace slicing tomatoes into the pan obtruded itself.

"We'll see if I cook them as well as Grace does," Patricia said, reading his thoughts in one swift glance.

She smiled enigmatically, and he looked at her profile suspiciously.

"Why did you say that?" he asked quietly.

"Why do I say anything?" she countered lightly, as she sliced the tomatoes skilfully. "Good heavens, man!" she added, turning to him sharply. "You don't suppose I'm so hardened that I can stand here in Grace's place and not think of her?"

Harley turned to the door with a weary movement.

"Please, Pat! We've done all the necessary thinking about Grace. She wasn't compelled to go. She went of her own free will. You have every right to be here if you want to be here. How long before those things are cooked?"

"About five minutes. You had better furbish up a little."

Harley felt his spirits rise immediately at the proprietory command.

"A good idea," he agreed. "Could I have, say, ten minutes?"

"Yes. But no longer."

"Ten will be long enough."

As he entered the breakfast-room its cleanliness seemed to hit him painfully. He crossed to the mantelpiece and drummed upon it with his fingers as he gazed around. Fresh blooms had replaced the dead stalks in the vases on the tables and the mantel; the dust had vanished from the furniture and the door ledges; the clean smell of floor polish insisted on being noticed. Everything as it had been with Grace.

He wondered what Grace was doing at the moment. Having dinner at the Masonic in Napier, he supposed.

Oh, well——!

He went into the bedroom—the room he had occupied with Grace, but which he had lately de-

serted in favour of the spare bedroom whose single bed required less attention.

Here again was a reminder of Grace's handiwork. The bed was freshly made; the breeze blew cleanly through the room as it had not done since Grace left, for the very good reason that he had not bothered to open the windows. The order upon the dressing table—his erstwhile vanished studs standing in a neat row before his pot of hair-dressing; his brushes and the various odds and ends in their rightful places—evidence that Pat had keenly observed their disposition in other days—distressed him.

His slippers placed neatly beside the easy chair in the corner; his dressing-gown depending from the hook behind the door; the tidiness of the books on the small bedside table, assisted his recurring doubt.

Had not Patricia been guilty of something in the nature of mild sacrilege in thus assuming the offices of a housewife unasked—the offices of Grace? Would not delicacy have dictated another arrangement of these intimate things, at least? Would it not have been better if the things on the dressing-table, for instance, were otherwise arranged, and his slippers somewhere else?

Then his gaze rested upon the bed, and his scruples were forgotten.

From beneath the pillow near the wall a narrow, pale-blue ribbon trailed across the tangerine silk of the bed-spread!

Harley stared at it incredulously for a moment, then he leaned over the bed and rolled the pillow aside.

He stood perfectly still. The blood mounted in his cheeks slowly.

"Pat, you're a great girl!" he exclaimed softly, at last, as he lifted the delicate sheer-silk pyjamas—the dainty night-attire of the modern fashionable young lady. "A great girl!"

He replaced the pyjamas beneath the pillow reverently. No thought of the shameless defiance

of the laws of conventional decency which they argued, lying thus beneath the pillow which was Grace's by right of law and his oath, crossed his mind. He looked at the pillow, he saw it in imagination dinted by a glorious golden head, and nothing else mattered.

"Whistle, you lucky blighter!" he laughed.

He whistled in the bedroom, he sang in the bathroom. He was gloriously uplifted, gloriously happy.

Patricia's frocks hanging in the wardrobe, and her portmanteau and cabin trunk beneath the bed, occasioned him no further surprise. He would have been surprised had they not been there. They were where they should be.

"What a girl!" he apostrophised his reflection in the mirror. "No foolish nonsense about her. As great in courage as beauty, God bless her! James, you don't deserve her! No man could deserve her! And if you dare to ask me if I am the first, James, I'll break your neck!"

* * * *

Patricia, sliding the chops and tomatoes into a dish, heard Harley singing in the bathroom. She shook her head rather sadly and smiled a one-sided, pitying smile.

The evening paper, still in its wrapper as it had been delivered, lay upon the table. Harley had rested his hand upon it and had not noticed it. Patricia gazed at it resentfully, hesitatingly.

Should she take the chance—take the brief happiness? What matter if he saw it now, or in the morning? He could think no worse of her?

She would let chance decide.

She replaced the pan upon the stove, caught up the folded paper, and, going into the breakfast-room, hurled it through the open window. The paper twirled in the air and came to rest in the tecoma hedge which shut out the road. Its whiteness was plainly visible in the dark foliage.

Patricia sighed and closed the window.

"I must be naturally bad," she reproached herself, as she went back to the chops and tomatoes.

When Harley entered the breakfast-room she was putting unnecessary finishing touches to the table arrangement. She did not turn. He stood with his back against the closed door, his hands behind him. He had changed his attire and was strikingly handsome. His eyes were sparkling; his lips were smiling, revealing a narrow line of white teeth; his dark brown hair gleamed in natural short waves; his pallor gave him an appearance of refinement which was the antithesis of his thoughts.

Patricia felt his hungry gaze upon her and coloured slowly.

"Pat!"

She turned slowly and looked at him.

"What are we having for breakfast?" he asked softly.

"Chops and tomatoes," she answered unsteadily. "That's all we have in the house."

CHAPTER VIII.

The *tete-a-tete* meal in the gently deepening twilight of that perfect summer day was a rather hysterical affair. The world-defying lovers laughed self-consciously at small mishaps and childish innuendo, and professed to doubt each other's love because of the rapid disappearance of the chops and tomatoes. They passed viands to each other with exaggerated courtesy, and found unflagging amusement in addressing each other by their surnames. When he spilled a little salt upon the tablecloth she insisted that he throw a little over his left shoulder to appease the god of luck. He charged her with ignoring the butter-knife on two occasions. They repeatedly told each other that this was the most satisfying meal of their whole lives.

They quarrelled laughingly over the number of

cups of tea he had drunk. He said two—she insisted it was three.

"We'll split the difference," he said at last, passing his empty cup. "Fill it again and we'll call it two-and-a-half."

As she refilled the cup he said gravely—

"Do you know that Grace and I never quarrelled?"

"I can quite believe it, Jimmy," she answered evenly. "It's a pity you didn't. Both of you have a lot to learn."

"You think quarrels are necessary to married happiness?"

"I know they are," she answered with decision, looking straightly at him as she passed his cup. "Do you know of anything more soul-shattering, more deadly, than monotony? Monotony is the worst punishment we have been able to devise for our most hardened criminals. It's worse than death by hanging. What chance has connubial bliss against such a thing? A good quarrel between a man and his wife is as beneficial to their marriage system as an occasional pill is to their physical system."

"That's not a very romantic simile," he smiled.

"We're not discussing romance, my dear, but marriage."

"Might not the two be synonymous occasionally?"

"Adam propounded that question after he had lost Eden. What makes you think that I am the first with sufficient wisdom to answer it? You have made a business of writing about these things—what do you think?"

Harley studied her gravely for a moment.

"My case—our case—is rather an exception, don't you think?" he retorted.

Patricia laughed shortly.

"We musn't let our conceit blind us to the fact that all this—our love, our eating together here, everything about the present situation—is just another of those illicit love-affairs which sound so

sordid when told in a divorce court. This is romance only to us, Jimmy."

"And we are all who matter," he replied stoutly.

"At the moment," she agreed.

He reached across the table and squeezed her hand, and she smiled wistfully.

"Let's change the subject. Can you darn socks?" he asked.

"Romance, as we understand it, can never be synonymous with marriage," she went on, ignoring his persiflage.

"So you really have the wisdom to answer Adam's question?" he laughed. "And how do we understand romance?"

"How?" she asked, with quaint bitterness. "As a thrilling whirlpool of hopes, longings, difficulties, theatrical posturings and a persistent belief in earth-bound angels. Hm! Hymeneal propinquity would strip the wings from the noblest angel in all the Heavens!"

"You don't believe in marriage, then?"

"For sane people, for those who are content to realise that Love's chrysanthemum is merely a glorified daisy, I think marriage the ideal state. But for half-tamed animals, like you and me, I think it is hell."

"Pat!"

"What else are we?" she insisted. "You may write of soul-mates, Divine purpose, the Great Ultimate, the fulfilment of the ages; but in your heart of hearts you know, and I know, that all this—this *tete-a-tete*, my paraphernalia in the other room—are the results of a naked physical attraction—the identical motive which actuated Adam and Eve and all their ancestors. At this very moment we are regretting Eden and looking forward, with idiotic avidity, to the difficulties of to-morrow and all the other to-morrows. We are fools, Jimmy—just Nature's fools!"

He smiled at her indulgently as he stirred his

tea. Never had he seen her so beautiful as now, when passionate self-analysis laid bare her soul.

"I have sinned with Eve and have left the Garden of Eden in company with Lilith, my rightful mate," he said softly.

"With no regret for Eve or the Garden of Eden?" she asked.

"None," he declared with conviction.

Patricia softened. She smiled at him tenderly.

"You're a liar, Jimmy," she said gently, "and I love you because of it."

Harley leaned forward eagerly, his elbows upon the table and his hands reaching for hers.

"But you will marry me—eventually?" he asked earnestly.

Her answer was prompt and decided.

"If I cannot hold a man without the assistance of the law, Jimmy, it is because he doesn't want me. That is a very good reason why I should not be held."

"But the marriage laws are the woman's protection, Pat."

"Such a poor weak thing has woman become since God first gave her the shackles wherewith to make man captive!" she replied with a mild sneer. "Don't be foolish, Jimmy," she added, patting his cheek. If —and when—you desire to protect me no longer, be assured that I shall desire no further protection. I am different from Grace. What I lose I forget."

She rose and commenced to clear the table. Harley swallowed his tea and rose to assist her.

"By the way," she said, as she shook the tablecloth beside the back-door, "what are you doing about Grace—financially, Jimmy?"

"Grace is all right," he answered shortly, piling the crockery neatly on the sink-board. "She has money of her own. And, of course, I'll do my duty by her in that direction."

"You will make her an allowance?"

"Alimony? Yes, if she'll take it—which I doubt."

"You must make her take it, Jimmy; if not for herself, for Joan."

"Just as you say, sweetheart. But Grace can be wonderfully obstinate——"

"It isn't just as *I* say. You'll do it because it is the right thing to do."

"I being such a righteous person," he mocked.

"Being that pitiful anomaly, a primitive man with a modern conscience," she corrected him.

He watched her as she prepared to wash up with the natural economy of effort of the experienced housewife. He wondered where she had learned all these wifely tricks.

"But, sweetheart," he baited her, "I have to support you now."

"Who said so?" she flung at him.

"Well—it's the usual thing," he pointed out.

"Well, forget it, Jimmy. I will support me, and I shall pay my fair share of the—the alimony."

"Nonsense!" he exploded.

"Is it?" she asked defiantly. "Why are you so arrogant that you assume all credit and responsibility for this situation, Jimmy?"

"If I do," he answered, taking her by the shoulders and jutting his handsome head at her, "it's proof that I am a man, anyhow. Make your mind easy about Grace. I'll pay the alimony for the hurt I have done her in mistaking my liking for her for love. Some submerged part of me is bitterly ashamed that the rest of me should rejoice to see you here in her place. That is something in the nature of soul-alimony which I must pay until the end of things——"

He shook his head angrily as though to shake off useless thought. He gathered her in his arms.

"Girl, I've searched for you subconsciously since first I realised that women were women; and now that I've found you I refuse to believe that I would have been happier had I not. What is past is past. Let us forget it. Let's forget everything but our happiness——"

"And when we part——?" she asked softly, with something of mild derision in her voice,

"It will be at death——"

"Or when we recover sufficiently to be able to see each other clearly."

"Pat! Please!"

She wriggled from his arms and laughed.

"One of us must remain with feet upon the ground," she said. "There is the washing-up to be done, and Romance scorns such a humble task."

Harley sighed comically and reached for a clean tea-towel.

"We must educate Romance," he said.

* * * *

When the dishes had been washed and put away, James Harley seated himself at the window of the breakfast-room and gazed at the slate-grey mass of Mount Egmont, rearing itself into the darkening sky, visible through a gap in the row of stately pohutukawas which sheltered the old-fashioned house on the sloping ground to the south. Patricia Weybourn silently swept up the few crumbs which had fallen upon the floor, and arranged the bowl of flowers upon the table.

It was the hour of dusk; the quiet hour when birds and little children fall asleep; and the ghostly presence of Grace and Joan in this, their proper environment, imposed an awkward silence upon the lovers. Both had expected such a moment, knowing that it must pass with the coming of darkness.

It passed more quickly than either had dared to hope.

A motor-cycle roared past the house.

"The paper-boy's late to-night," said Harley, rising by force of habit at the sound. Then he laughed. "But, of course, you wouldn't know that."

He went out by the back door to search for the paper. Patricia made no move to stop him. She shrugged her shoulders and sighed as she watched him glance over the unkempt front lawn and move

towards the hedge. Unwittingly she had thrown the paper where most often it was to be found after delivery by the boy who roared past on six evenings of the week.

"Perhaps we had better have a light," Harley said, as he re-entered the room.

"Excellent idea," agreed the girl, as he depressed the switch. "This room is haunted, and I'm as nervous as a cat."

Harley looked at her keenly as she pretended to be absorbed in adjusting the angle of the clock on the mantel. He saw the blood's swift ebb and flow under the velvety skin of her throat and cheek. He saw that she was trembling, and his sympathy was quickened.

"Pat," he said softly, moving close to her as she bowed her head upon the mantel with overmastering emotion, "this is a pretty fierce business altogether. Say the word, and I'll get your things. You don't have to go in deeper, my dear. Perhaps to-morrow may ——."

She flung up her head and turned upon him swiftly.

"I've seen too many to-morrows, Jimmy," she cried passionately, "and none ever proved as exciting as the to-days. To-morrow I may be afflicted with cowardice or another outbreak of self-sacrifice. To-day I don't care what happens. I don't care if the ghosts of forty Graces plead with me in this room to go and leave you in peace. I'm staying!"

She left the room swiftly, leaving him standing there exultant. He did not follow her to the drawing-room, as she half hoped he would. The paper-reading habit of years, and a sudden shyness which he told himself was "delicacy," held him where he was.

He was mildly surprised when he heard her throw back the key-fall of the piano. He had not expected her to go to the drawing-room.

Mechanically removing the wrapping from the paper he held, he listened to the music which leaped under the girl's inspired fingers. It was her own peculiar rendering of one of Ring's African Dances, and reflected her mood, the pulsating bass movement becoming ever faster until it reminded him of weird tales of Voodoo drums. The beat of it stirred his blood strangely. His eyes narrowed cunningly, and his smile was not pleasant. He glanced at the clock lustfully.

As mechanically as he had removed its wrapping, he opened the paper at the "cable" page, doubling it back with a shake for ease of perusal, his thoughts still upon the girl and the music.

TREMENDOUS EARTHQUAKE.
NAPIER DESTROYED.

He read the huge headlines twice before he realised their import, then all thoughts of the girl and the music fled. He stiffened in horror.

"God!" he whispered.

He scanned the crowded columns rapidly, appalled by their tale of disaster and death. And somewhere in Napier—Grace and Joan!

Grace and Joan!

The drumming of the African Dance, frenzied and insistent, forced itself upon his staggering mind. It roused him to fury.

"Pat!" he yelled.

The music ceased instantly.

"Pat!"

"Yes?"

"Come here, for God's sake!"

He heard her coming through the hall without haste.

"Come here!"

She opened the door and entered with deliberation. She was steeled against his disillusionment and regarded him calmly.

"What is it, Jimmy?"

"Look!" he cried, holding the paper towards her with shaking hands. "Look! The earthquake! Napier and Hastings have been shaken down and burned!"

Patricia raised her pencilled brows in cleverly-assumed surprise.

"Well?" she asked. Then she smiled and affected to understand. "No, that's too transparent, Jimmy. I refuse to be saved from myself at this late hour."

Harley stared at her wildly.

"Napier and Hastings — shaken down and burned!" he repeated. "Can't you understand? That earthquake——"

Patricia became grave.

"Didn't you know?" she asked, frowning at him with feigned incredulity.

"Didn't I know?" he echoed, looking at her as though she were bereft of her senses. "Didn't I know?"

"I thought we were tacitly agreed not to mention it—to-night, Jimmy. I thought you knew——" she lied.

Harley caught his breath. Horrified amazement drove him back a pace.

"Pat!" he gasped. "You can't think like that? You can't think that I would have allowed this—this——" he swept his arms wide to include the house and all that it held, "if I had known? If I had known that Grace was — lying over there — dead?"

She moved towards him, her hands held before her in pleading, her eyes tender.

"When a man is in love, Jimmy ——" she began.

Harley backed away from her, staring wildly, striking the reaching hands from him with sudden loathing.

"Don't touch me!" he snarled, realising the degradation she imputed to him and instantly crediting the unpleasant tales he had heard about this

physically-glorious and morally-rotten woman. "Don't touch me!"

Patricia smiled.

"Don't be an ass, Jimmy," she begged. "What difference can it make to us if half the country is shaken to pieces?"

"But Grace—Grace is in Napier! Can't you understand?" he raved.

Patricia pretended to an unwelcome conviction that he really had not known of the disaster until now. Her lip curled in a slow sneer.

"So you are making this an excuse to back out?" she asked coldly. "You've decided to make this a plausible excuse to go back to Grace? You're afraid."

"Oh, for God's sake, be decent!"

"What has decency to do with it?" she flared. "Grace left you to me. Talk to her of decency."

"Think! Think!" he cried, in impassioned self-reproach, ignoring her taunt. "Grace, and little Joan, crushed!—buried!—burned! And you—we—behaving like animals! Like beasts!"

"And when you and I are both dead people will still behave like animals, Jimmy. What else are we? Five minutes ago you hoped never to see Grace and Joan again. They were then, as they are now,—crushed, buried and burned."

"But, I didn't know! I didn't know!"

Again Patricia became the softly pleading, seductive woman.

"What does it matter, Jimmy?" she asked approaching him where he stood with his back to the wall and placing her hands timidly upon his breast. "Have they not been dead to you for weeks? Have you not hated them, deep in your heart, because they stood in the path to your real happiness, your path to me? Have you not felt unclean in the caresses you gave to Grace since you knew that they were rightly mine? And if Grace is dead, do

you think she minds my being here? Wouldn't she want you to be happy? Jimmy! Kiss me!"

She held up her lips invitingly and leaned against him. One hand crept slowly around his neck. She pressed her body against his, her eyes luminous with promise of surrender.

Harley looked into her upturned face, fascinated, seeing her clearly for the first time, revolted that he could ever have loved this courtesan. Slow fury kindled in his face.

He stiffened, and struck her cheek with his open hand viciously, calling her a vile name.

Patricia reeled against the wall with the force of the blow, and the frame of a small etching cut her lip slightly. As she pressed the back of her hand to the hurt she heard the front door slam.

Harley had fled the house.

She looked at the smear of blood on her hand with whimsical philosophy, and smiled rather wistfully.

"And that's that," she said to the clock on the mantel. "If he had kissed me, instead of doing what he did, I might have strangled him."

She went into the bedroom in search of a handkerchief; and, having found one, she dabbed her lip in the intervals between the packing of her gowns into the portmanteau and the cabin trunk. She laughed as she packed the pyjamas.

"Crushed! Buried! Burned!" she said, kneeling on the trunk in order to fasten it. "His imagination is still sound. Please God he finds the little things alive and unhurt. If he doesn't—well, we shall see; although I doubt his stomach will endure me after this exhibition."

She adjusted her hat carefully at the mirror, and smoothed her collar with light, deft touches. A close examination of her injured lip assured her that the hurt was negligible. A few expert dabs with the tiny puff from her bag and it was invisible. She took a final look around the room to make sure that

she had overlooked nothing, and her gaze rested upon a framed photograph of Grace and Joan which hung near the door.

"Well, Grace," she said, "I've done my best to give him back to you. It's up to you, now. I never meant to take him, old thing. The whole business was the sheerest accident. The full moon and everything combined. You're a lucky girl. He's no hero. my dear; he's just a man—the sort of man I've never found for myself. Mine have all been heroes, damn 'em!"

She shook her head, and her eyes were wet.

"And, if you're dead, old thing, put in a word with God for me. I'm going to need it."

She carried the portmanteau and the cabin trunk out on to the verandah where the carter would see them. She locked the front door carefully and placed the key under the mat.

When she went down the path she was sobbing, thankful for the darkness.

CHAPTER IX.

A silent crowd of people, completely blocking the side-walk and overflowing into the roadway, swayed ceaselessly in front of the offices of the *Taranaki Herald*. James Harley elbowed his way into it without apology, unaware of the roughness with which he thrust men and women alike from his path, intent only on reading the scribbled bulletins from the earthquake area which were pinned upon a felted board in a small lighted window.

Those whom he elbowed took little notice of him beyond snapped words of instinctive remonstrance. They had no capacity for resentment in this tragic hour. Like Harley, most of them were wrapped in their anxiety for friends and relatives; for in this thinly-populated country families drift widely apart —but seldom out of ken—intermingling and marry-

ing, submerging brogue, lilt, dialect and accent in one common speech, levelling class distinctions, attaining a homogeneity impossible in older and more crowded communities.

In its power to shock, the disaster assumed the aspect of an overwhelming family catastrophe in these first few hours.

From Pandora in the north, from The Bluff a thousand miles to the south, and from every town and city in the length and breadth of the country between, Napier and Hastings had attracted native sons and daughters to build their rapidly-increasing populations. The prosperity of the district, its reputation for sunshine and its natural attractions, had been lodestones to draw and hold the ambitious and the pleasure-loving, who had built these towns, towns which had given promises of rivalling the cities in commercial importance.

And on this night every town and city, every hamlet and *pah*, in the length and breadth of the country, was astir—and would be astir during all the hours of darkness—awaiting the fragmentary tidings of death and destruction broadcasted by nameless heroes beneath whose feet the restless earth still quivered, grumbled and shook.

Harley scanned the brief list of names of the identified dead. He experienced no sense of relief when he saw that the names of his wife and child were not mentioned. These were Hastings' dead. Grace and Joan were in Napier, fifteen miles north of Hastings, in the very centre of the earthquake area, and the crowd about him whispered that the death-roll in Napier already exceeded five hundred; that the town was utterly destroyed; that fire had rendered it for ever impossible to calculate the loss of life accurately; that the majority of the dead would never be found, being reduced to unrecognisable ashes; that the death-roll would eventually run into thousands!

The whisperings filled Harley with a desire to fight the rumours with his hands.

"Stop it, for God's sake!" he snarled, turning upon a lank individual in flannels who stood at his elbow.

The lank individual, under the impression that Harley thus vehemently expressed his abhorrence of the gum-chewing habit, ceased his noisy mastication to remark that he presumed the country to be a free one.

Harley muttered under his breath and returned to his reading of the bulletins. The lank individual masticated defiantly, and edged out of the crowd prudently.

H.M.S. Veronica, Napier Wharf: 2.35: Much medical assistance required. Town wrecked and fires raging.

As he read, Harley's every hurrying heartbeat cried the name of the little woman whom he loved better than he knew. Grace! Grace! Grace! . .

H.M.S. Diomede and H.M.S. Dunedin are ordered to proceed immediately from Auckland with stores and medical supplies, and are expected to reach Napier to-morrow.

Harley pictured the two cruisers racing at their highest speed; black, flattened smoke streaming aft; roaring walls of water rising at the impact of knife-like bows; officers, grim-lipped, snapping orders; physicians, vested with brief power, giving instructions to nurses and bluejackets alike.

The Navy was out! Harley thanked God for so much. Already the *Veronica*, by a lucky chance, tied to the Napier Wharf only a few minutes before the shake, was rendering valuable assistance to the injured and the homeless, and to-morrow the whole area would be under efficient control.

The Veronica reported about 3 o'clock that the damage was so great that they could not give any idea of the damage.

The Veronica has rushed parties ashore with medical supplies.

The motor-vessel Taranaki, which was at anchor in the roadstead, reports that the Bluff at Napier has carried away. There are clouds of landslides all around the bay.

The Bluff carried away! Exactly what was meant by that? The whole of the scant bulletin was so carelessly worded that it might mean anything.

The Bluff—the rising headland thrusting out to sea; the remnant of a range of hills, such as edged the bay to the west and north, its seaward face a sheer cliff, at the foot of which jutted wharves. Upon its heights and upon its landward slopes the homes of the moneyed and the elite. The residential suburb. The Botanical Gardens spreading themselves over its choicest undulations. God's acre rearing its monuments upon it. The Public Hospital capturing its topmost breezes. . . .

The Hospital and the Nurses Home have collapsed. It is feared the death-roll is heavy.

The Bluff carried away! The Hospital and the Nurses' Home collapsed! God! It must be frightful! If the Bluff had flattened out, like the Murchison Hills in '29, then fully half of Napier must be buried!

Harley groaned aloud.

"Grace! Grace! Grace! . . . " in every heartbeat! Strangely, no beat for Joan. Joan was merged in Grace. Where Grace was there Joan would be—both dead or alive. He did not then think they might be merely injured. There were no half-measures with him at this moment, either in his newly-awakened love or shame.

Anyone who was at the war, said an eye-witness of the disaster, will know what it felt like to be in

Napier. Two-storey buildings came down like a pack of cards, and in one of the streets the two sides met, burying a whole row of taxi-cabs with their drivers.

Harley was familiar with the narrow streets of Napier's business area. Uninspiring streets of brick buildings, shops, warehouses and offices; streets of architecturally repellent, cramped, often mean, buildings bedaubed with advertisements or bleakly bare; clean streets which appeared to be dirty because of their lack of breathing space; streets lined with shop verandahs, beneath which one sweltered in summer and shivered in winter; streets strangely old in so young a country.

Death-traps in an earthquake!

Clouds of dust enveloped the whole place . . . people were rushing out screaming . . . thousands rushed to the beach; they thought it was the safest place.

People were lying dead in the streets . . . women rushed about in an hysterical condition.

The biggest fire destroyed the Masonic Hotel. It was burned to the ground. . .

Harley read no further. With an inarticulate cry he turned about and literally clawed himself free from the crowd, and ran.

A short, thick-set man, with a flattened nose and curious ears, who had been toppled into the gutter, bounced to his feet, raced after Harley, and pulled him to a halt with a strong hand upon his shoulder.

Harley spun round and snarled:

"Keep your hands off me!"

"You may be in a 'ell of a hurry, cobber," said the broken-nosed one grimly, "but that ain't no excuse for knocking a man into the gutter. What 'a' y'got t'say about it?"

"Nothing," snapped Harley, pointing to the lighted window of the *Herald* office with a shaking

hand, "except that my wife and child are somewhere in the ruins of the Masonic in Napier!"

He swung away sharply and continued on his way at a rapid walk. He was sobbing, and was unaware of it.

The strong hand touched his shoulder again, but it made no attempt to stay him. The broken-nosed one fell into step beside him.

"Sorry, cobber."

"That's all right," grunted Harley, looking blindly ahead.

"How do you know your wife and kid is in the Masonic?" asked the broken-nosed one.

"That's where they were staying."

"That ain't no reason for believin' they was in the pub at the time of the shake. They might have been anywhere. I'll betcha they was on the beach —the beach is only just across the Parade. I wouldn't believe nothin' until I was sure, if I was you, cobber. No good looking for the worst ——"

Harley interrupted the well-intentioned phrases by halting suddenly, turning upon his unwelcome visitor, and thrusting his face forward belligerently while he clenched his fists in threat.

"Leave me alone!" he cried. "Leave me alone!"

The broken-nosed one looked hurt for a moment, then his mouth twisted in a one-sided sneer.

"Awright, cobber, awright. I don't want to push in where I ain't wanted. Just thought you might like somebody to talk to ——," ....

"I don't. I want to be alone."

"Yeh. I can see that."

The broken-nosed one moved away a pace, then turned.

"You never want to wave them flippers of yours like that, cobber, when you meet a bloke with a nose and ears like mine," he said significantly. "Cheerio!"

He waved a hand in farewell and walked into a

shop-doorway, where he pretended to be interested in a display of bath-towels.

Harley hurried on, muttering to himself.

A lone taxi stood in Brougham Street. Its owner-driver, a stockily-built, happy-go-lucky individual, known to the town at large familiarly as "Roy," upon whose head the conventional visored cap sat ridiculously, upon whose face shrapnel had designed a perpetual smile, and who earned a tenuous living because of his reputation for reckless driving. leaned against a verandah-post and conversed with a constable and a youth who straddled a bicycle.

His eyes lighted as he noted Harley's approach.

"Here's a chap who isn't afraid to ride with me," he said confidently. "My one reliable customer. What's the betting?"

"I'd ride with you, Roy, if I had the chance," declared the constable enviously.

"And pinch me for speeding—like you did before."

Harley strode to the car and opened a door before the driver could reach it.

"Thank God, it's you, Roy!" he said, as Roy hurried to his seat behind the wheel. "Napier! And burn the tyres off her!"

Roy waved a triumphant and somewhat derisive hand to the constable and released the brakes. The car slid down the hill, jerking forward as the engine started.

"Going over for one of the papers, Mr. Harley?"

"No."

"Just going for some real atmosphere for another story?"

"No."

Harley passed a shaking hand over his eyes as though to shut out the illumination on the dash.

Roy saw the action.

"Somebody over there?" he asked with quick sympathy.

Harley nodded.

"Wife?"

For a moment Harley sat bolt upright, staring wildly ahead and beating his breast with clenched hands.

"I ought never to have let her go!" he cried. "Oh, what a damned fool a man can be! What a damned fool!"

His head fell forward upon his clenched fingers and he slumped in his seat.

Roy became intent on his driving. The low whine of the engine rose in pitch and volume until it became a subdued shriek—a shriek which drowned the distressing sound of a grown man's sobbing.

* * * *

CHAPTER X.

On the morning of this tragic February day, at the moment when her husband ceased pacing the drawing-room in New Plymouth and sat to write the first abortive attempt at the letter which was to shut her out of his life, Grace Harley stood at the window of her room on the first floor of the Masonic Hotel in Napier.

She was dressed for the street in a neat summer frock which emphasised the daintiness of her small figure; her fingers were mechanically adjusting her georgette collar; her gaze was upon the glass-calm blue of the sea which showed between the tall Norfolk Island pines of the Marine Parade.

It was a glorious morning, and she was thinking how happy she had been during the glorious mornings of her honeymoon, when her every action and mood had found immediate reflection in the man who had been her willing slave. Now, the shimmering glory of the day added to her loneliness.

She sighed unhappily.

"My dear! My dear!" protested the little old lady who sat upon the bed, where she assisted Joan in the toilet of a large sleeping doll. "You mustn't

sigh like that on a day like this. God's good sunshine is made to laugh in."

Grace turned listlessly.

"I can't help it, Miss Whipple. I try not to, but——"

She walked to the dressing-table, leaving the sentence unfinished. She surveyed her appearance in the mirror, thrusting a wisp of hair beneath her hat-brim with unsteady fingers.

Miss Whipple's shrewd, darting, black eyes narrowed, and she regarded the back of Grace with her head held upon one side. She mumbled her thin lips between her toothless jaws for a few moments, then nodded her head slowly.

"You're lonely!" she snapped.

Grace started and flushed, but made no denial.

"Mm—yes, I knew it. I knew it," declared Miss Whipple, smiling at her own perspicacity. "The very moment I first set eyes on you, down there in the dining-room, I said to myself, 'That young woman is lonely.' And that's the reason, my dear, why I made myself known to you. I know what loneliness is. I've had over fifty years of it."

She rose to her feet with an audible effort and crossed the room to stand beside Grace. Her thin arm went round the younger woman's shoulders, and the two gazed at each other's reflection in the mirror.

"Yes, I am lonely," admitted Grace slowly.

Her head drooped and she made a pretence of setting the dressing-table in order.

"But I have Joan," she added, lifting her head again, and attempting to smile, "so perhaps I am not really as lonely as I feel. Perhaps the weather is affecting me. The days are very hot——"

"Of course the weather is affecting you," declared Miss Whipple with emphasis. "You're in love; and no person in love can enjoy such weather as this unless the other party is present. You're wondering what he's doing on this beautiful day. You imagine

he's thoroughly enjoying himself and sparing no thought for you. No doubt he's thinking and behaving in a similar manner—making himself thoroughly miserable. Of course, it may be raining where he is," she added hopefully.

Grace smiled ruefully into the wrinkled face of Miss Whipple.

"You would be a great comfort to me if things were as you suppose them to be," she said. "As it is, you make me want to cry."

Miss Whipple, the compleat angler of domestic secrets, was gratified by the progress made in the short time of her acquaintance with Mrs. Harley. She felt justified in using the gaff to land the inside story of this affair.

"You are in love?"

Grace nodded.

"With your husband?"

Grace nodded and blushed.

Miss Whipple turned to look at the child, who was too busy with her doll to care for the foolish talk of her elders.

"And you've been married about—six years," judged the old lady.

"Ten," corrected Grace quietly.

"Ten!" . .

Miss Whipple looked from the child to her mother with frank incredulity.

"Ten!" she repeated. "I have heard of such a thing, but I have hesitated to believe it. Ten years, and still in love! Dear me! Why, I had forgotten the man who broke my young heart within two years."

"Had you married him it would have been different, perhaps," hazarded Grace, smiling her sympathy.

"It most certainly would have been!" agreed the old lady, with decision. "I'd have killed the brute! Distance lends no enchantment to some views, my dear; it just gives them the correct perspective without atmospherics. Perhaps you'll find that out."

"No! No!"

Grace shook her head in vigorous protest, and moved to the window again. Miss Whipple followed her.

"It—it's all finished."

"What's all finished?" demanded Miss Whipple.

"My—our happiness. But I'll never do other than love him. I can't."

"Then he can't have hurt you very badly, my dear. Dogs are the only things which go on loving the men who ill-treat them."

The shrewd old lady spoke softly, and with infinite understanding, close to Grace's ear, while her old hand stole caressingly around the younger woman's waist.

"I'm not going to ask you for your confidence, my dear—although it does one good sometimes to spread one's troubles a little; makes them look a lot thinner—but I'd like to tell you this: if your husband ever loved you he'll never forget you. I've studied my own sex for many long years—more years than I care to talk about—and I know the kind of women men love and the kind they think they love. If I were you, I'd have faith in the future, my dear. I take it he has gone crazy over some other woman?"

The abrupt question startled Grace.

"Please! Please!" she protested tearfully, clasping her hands tightly together and turning to face the old lady.

Miss Whipple smiled gently and patted the trembling hands.

"I thought so," she said. "He's been pretty tardy over the matter. This is the first time, of course?"

Grace looked despairingly into the little black eyes which looked at her so keenly, then she sobbed—and the black-clothed shoulder of the little old lady absorbed the tears which had been held back too long.

"There, there, my dear," murmured Miss Whipple, her thin fingers gently stroking Grace's bowed

neck. "You've done the right thing, I'm sure."

She waited, expecting a question; then, as Grace remained silent, she went on:

"You've left him. That was a wise thing to do. It was the right thing to do. You've always done the right thing, because right is instinctive in you. If I can recognise that, how much more clearly will he recognise it, now that he has had time to think? His recognition, and his recollection, will poison his love for the other woman."

Grace lifted her head.

"But you don't understand," she cried brokenly. "He let me go——"

"Which proves his manhood, my dear. He would have been only half a man had he lied to keep you, or ordered you to stay. He knows you are the injured party, and he accepts your judgment of the case. You've taken the child from him. Do you think he is glad of that, too?"

"I don't know; I don't know. When a man is infatuated with a woman he is blind to everything else——"

"But he's not deaf, my dear. When a child's voice has sounded in a home an echo is left there. I imagine James Harley to be peculiarly sensitive to echoes."

"You know my husband?" asked Grace in surprise, as she dried her eyes.

"I've never met him, but I've seen his photograph often, and, of course, I've read his stories. Everybody takes an interest in writers, no one more than Mrs. Grundy. Mrs. Grundy noticed in the papers that you were staying in Napier, and she promptly whispered her opinion as to why you were here without your husband. And she's not far wrong, it seems."

"Do they say I've left him because of some other woman?"

"It's true, isn't it?"

Grace straightened angrily and her eyes flashed.

"I won't have it!" she cried. "What right has anyone to talk of him? Is it anyone's business but ours?"

"Somebody remarked that all the world loves a lover, my dear, but that's only true of the lover who runs off the rails," returned Miss Whipple, shaking her white head wisely. "Ordinarily, the world envies a lover, but sneers at him for a fool. You must expect the world to show its love for you by pitying you both."

Grace turned away, dabbing her cheeks as she peered uncertainly into the brilliant sunshine.

"You think he—he will change his mind?" she asked.

"The most comforting thing in a home is the fire which burns on the hearth," answered Miss Whipple gently. "A man merely gets a lot of excitement out of a fire which starts in somebody else's bedroom. When that goes out, he shivers to death, unless his own hearth fire——"

"His own hearth-fire must go out if it is too long neglected."

"Then he must re-kindle it—if he can. But James Harley's hearth-fire hasn't gone out, and very soon he will realise how lucky he is in that respect."

Grace shook her head sadly, as though she doubted.

There was a pause in the conversation, during which Grace gazed out to sea, her thoughts upon the home she had left, perhaps for ever. Her eyes were dry now, but her breath still caught in her throat occasionally—faint echoes of her sobs. Miss Whipple stood beside her, meditatively fingering her old-fashioned jade necklace and sighing enviously at intervals. Joan whispered to her doll childishly.

"What would you advise me to do?" asked Grace at last.

"I?" exclaimed Miss Whipple, smiling. "Why, my dear, I've never been married."

"But it is evident that you have studied people—married people."

Miss Whipple laughed shortly in a high key.

"Oh, of course, I've done that. Most old maids study married people. It's their greatest joy in life. They like to convince themselves they've missed very little by staying single. But, as for advice——"

"Should I go back to him? I've had a miserable month. Sometimes I think I've been a fool—and a coward—to leave him alone to fight the other woman."

Miss Whipple pursed her lips and considered the question gravely.

"No," she answered slowly, "I wouldn't do that, if I were you. No man cares to know that he is being hunted. He likes to believe that he is the hunter. That's elementary. And you must remember that he doesn't think he's 'fighting' the other woman. He thinks he's fighting himself; and when a man's fighting himself it is as well to leave him a clear space in which to do it."

"But she's not leaving him a clear space," said Grace bitterly. "She isn't the type."

"She's a huntress, eh?"

"She cannot help herself."

"Then she's liable to come off second best, my dear," decided Miss Whipple positively. "No. I wouldn't go back, if I were you."

"But I can't stand it much longer," cried Grace, wringing her hands. "I can't! I can't!"

"Now, now, my dear!" Miss Whipple hurried to comfort her. "Everything will happen for the best. I'm sure it will all come right. Go and do your shopping, my dear. You'll feel much better. I think you're very wise in telling me all about it. Two heads are better than one, even in these matters, and while you're away I will think of a plan. I think old Catherine Whipple may be useful, despite her years and her rheumatism."

Miss Whipple laughed complacently as she eyed

Grace's appearance with maternal criticism, smoothing a wrinkle in Grace's frock here and there with deft touches.

"I'm glad I had the courage to speak to you down in the dining-room," she added, "although it was terribly presumptuous of me. But you did look as though you needed a friend. You will believe I'm your friend?"

Grace did believe it, and said so gratefully.

"That's all right, then," said the old lady, fussily urging Grace to the door. "Now, run along and do your shopping, and if you're not back for lunch——"

"I'll be back for lunch," Grace assured her. "I'll catch the twelve o'clock bus from Hastings. I couldn't think of foisting Joan upon you all day. It's awfully kind of you to——"

"Not a bit of it, my dear. I'd be delighted to look after the child. You mustn't hurry on my account. Joan will be quite happy with me. Won't you, dear?" she added, turning to run her fingers through Joan's curls.

"No," answered Joan, bluntly, shaking her head irritably at the old lady's touch.

"Joan!" expostulated Grace.

"Why not?" asked Miss Whipple, smiling in amusement.

"I don't like you," answered Joan promptly. "You're all wrinkled and funny, and you made my mummy cry."

"My dear child——"

"So you did. I haven't been listening to you—it's rude to listen—but I've been looking at you."

Grace lifted the child in her arms and laughed rather shakily.

"Joan, dear, you mustn't speak to Miss Whipple like that. She won't love you."

"Well, I don't love her," replied Joan sullenly. "And she is all wrinkled and funny."

"Joan!"

"Of course, I am," agreed Miss Whipple heartily. "But I'm just like you inside, dear."

"No, you're not," disagreed Joan, frowning. "You've got no teeth."

Grace slapped the child gently upon the arm.

"You're a naughty, rude girl, Joan," she chided. "I'm afraid you're becoming spoiled."

"A little spoiling is good for a child sometimes," smiled Miss Whipple. "Now, you run along, my dear, and I'll make my peace with Joan.

"You must let Miss Whipple mind you, Joan," ordered Grace, as she set the child upon her feet again. "And mind, no mischief, young lady."

"Can't I go with you, mummy?" pleaded the child, clinging to her mother's skirts. "I'm afraid."

Grace frowned and Miss Whipple raised her eyebrows.

"Afraid?" asked Grace.

"I won't hurt you, child," declared Miss Whipple. "I won't eat you."

"I'm not afraid of you," Joan told the old lady contemptuously. "You're too old."

"Then of what are you afraid, dear?" asked Grace in quick concern, going down upon one knee to hold the child by her elbows and look into her troubled eyes.

"I don't know, mummy. It's something here, I think."

Joan spoke very softly and placed both hands upon her pinafore.

"A pain, dear?" asked Grace, covering both small hands with one of hers.

"No—no, mummy. Just a sort of—shaky feeling."

"You haven't been eating something you shouldn't?"

"No, mummy."

Grace studied the child's face for a moment.

"Let me see your tongue?"

The tongue was a healthy pink. Grace shook her head doubtfully.

"I'm not sick, mummy," protested the child. "I'm just—just frightened."

Grace rose to her feet slowly, Joan clinging to her skirt.

"Perhaps I had better not go," she said to Miss Whipple. "I've never known Joan to say she was frightened before. Perhaps she is sickening for something."

"Nonsense, my dear, nonsense," replied Miss Whipple impatiently. "The child is probably hungry. She has a little sinking feeling, that's all. Go and do your shopping. Nothing can happen in the little while you'll be away."

"Do you think you will be all right until I come back, Joan?" asked Grace anxiously.

"I—I think so, mummy. But I'd rather go with you."

Joan looked pleadingly into her mother's eyes, and Grace was about to give way to the child when Miss Whipple intervened. The old lady pounced upon Joan and held her to her bosom so tightly that the jade necklace pressed painfully upon the child's cheek. Joan protested noisily.

"There's nothing wrong with the child," insisted the old lady as Joan fought to free herself. "Run along, do. You have two minutes to catch the bus. You'll miss it if you don't hurry."

Grace kissed the angry Joan, exhorted her to behave, and hurried from the room with a word of farewell to Miss Whipple.

"You're a nasty old woman!" she heard Joan shriek as she hurried along the passage to the stairs. "I don't want you! I want mummy!"

Grace hesitated at the head of the stairs.. She turned to retrace her steps. Then she remembered the purpose of her errand, and, with an insistent honking of a motor-horn to support her resolution, she hastened down the stairs and into the sunshine.

Miss Whipple pacified the child with wheedling words and a new shilling; but, wheedled she never so skilfully, she could win no retraction of Joan's dislike. The child remained obstinately sullen, whispering to her doll her opinion of her guardian, refusing to be drawn into a discussion of the wonderful things a new shilling would buy.

The old lady lapsed into silence after a few minutes of fruitless cajolling. She sat on the bed and looked at the uninspiring wall before her, shaking her head from time to time. She was thinking of " a plan."

Catherine Whipple was filled with good intentions. All her life she had been thus. She lived to do good to others, especially to those others whose domestic affairs had gone awry. To her a broken romance was as pitiable as an injured animal, and as deserving of charitable aid. Life had denied her a husband and had given her riches. It had made of her a dangerous busybody, perverting her maternal instincts to a mothering of the entire human race. She made it her business to get to the "heart of the trouble" in any matrimonial muddle which came within her ken, and did her best to "smooth things out" with an entire disregard for the wishes of the parties most concerned. On one or two occasions she had been harshly rebuffed, but her maternal bosom bore the blows unharmed.

The case of the Harleys aroused all her compassion. When Grace Harley had walked shyly into the dining-room some ten days before, Catherine Whipple had immediately discerned upon her face the infallible signs of domestic unhappiness. The old lady shied at the term "conjugal infelicity"—"domestic unhappiness" was infinitely more respectable.

She had lost no time in making the young woman's acquaintance, and now she was experiencing a warm feeling of self-satisfaction. She had read the signs aright, and now she had her reward. Would it not be the crowning achievement of a worthy life,

she asked herself, if she, Catherine Whipple, were directly instrumental in bringing about the reconciliation of that delightful author, James Harley, with his equally delightful wife? Might she not thus save a genius from disaster?

Sitting upon the bed she decided that it would, and that she might.

Her active old mind, as mischievous as a child's, conceived a plan. She rose, and, with an injunction to Joan to play nicely for a little while, she went to her own room, which adjoined Grace Harley's.

There, with an air of a conspirator, behind a locked door, she wrote a message to *James Harley, Author, New Plymouth*, upon the hotel stationery, signing herself *"A Sincere Friend,"* and fully believing it to be true.

She stole from the hotel to post it, walking on tiptoes to the stairs lest Joan should hear her.

She was away for over half-an-hour, for she held exaggerated ideas on the penalty which she would suffer were she detected in the act of posting an anyonymous letter, and it was some time before she had found a sufficiently deserted letter-box.

Joan met her on the stairs. The long silence had puzzled the child, who, failing to find her temporary guardian in her proper place, was descending to make enquiries.

"Where have you been?" demanded Joan, halting on the stairs and regarding Miss Whipple with suspicion.

The old lady felt and looked uncomfortably guilty.

"Just out for a breath of fresh air," she lied, as she continued to mount the stairs slowly.

"What do you want fresh air for?"

Miss Whipple had not time in which to think of another lie, for at that moment the earth shook.

The huge building lifted bodily, as though some giant shoulder beneath it had given a violent heave, then it sank as suddenly; and the roar of falling masonry drowned the shriek with which Miss Whipple made her entry into the eternal shadows.

CHAPTER XI.

A sense of utter loneliness possessed Grace Harley as she took her seat in the Hastings 'bus.

Never before had she left Joan to the care of a stranger, even for two hours, and every dire possibility raced through her mind, temporarily obscuring the aching suspense which had been hers for a month past. Some of the child's fear had communicated itself to her, and she had difficulty in restraining an impulse to leap from the 'bus as the vehicle moved off noisily.

When they were lumbering through the outskirts of the town the conviction came to her that something was going to happen to Joan—something terrible. She caught her breath as her heart leapt in strange dread. She rose to her feet swiftly; but the curious glances of her fellow passengers, and the driver's attitude of calm meditation as he gazed at the road ahead, revived her self-consciousness, and she sat down again, ashamed.

Nothing could possibly happen to Joan, she argued silently. Miss Whipple was one of those dear souls who delight in children, having been denied children of her own, and Joan was perfectly safe with her. Joan had all a child's natural artfulness —"cunning" was too trenchant a word—and the "fear" and "shakiness" were doubtless artifices directed at her mother's design of going to Hastings alone. The child loved riding in 'buses, and was naturally disappointed.

But no argument could shake off the presentiment of tragedy, and her reasoning brought Grace Harley no real peace of mind. Her fingers drummed restlessly on her handbag as he gazed through the rattling glass at the moving panorama of sun-browned pastures backed by sweeping hills.

A passionate longing for the evergreen countryside of Taranaki, for the little house upon the brink of the grass-clothed gully, for the purring of a

tabby-cat upon a verandah-rail, for the salt westerly breeze, for the sound of the tapping of a man's pipe against the bathroom window-sill and his soft whistling as he returned from town, for the arms that had held her and the lips that had caressed her, swept over her.

She rested her elbow upon the window-ledge of the lunging 'bus, and shielded her eyes with her hand as though to shut out the glare of the sunlight; but her shoulders were eloquent, and those who watched her knew that she wept. They wondered, and were silent.

The tyres whistled upon the concrete road. The driver dreamed contentedly in the warmth and monotony of the level miles.

* * * *

Hastings.

The prosperous town set in the midst of fertile plains. Narrow streets which contrive to give an impression of breadth—streets laid out with uninteresting symmetry—clean streets. A town upon which the sun shines without let or hindrance; a town upon which there falls no shadow of the hills. An open-faced and open-handed town; the dreaded business rival of Napier. A town possessing, in common with the majority of New Zealand's provincial towns, an appearance of transience due to the amount of timber used in its construction—a deceptive appearance. A town in whose parks the exile may commune with the ghost of England. A town which seems to breathe deeply and laugh.

As the 'bus slowed to a stop in Heretaunga Street, Grace remembered her errand and looked up in surprise as she realised that the journey was ended.

"At what time does the next 'bus leave for Napier?" she asked, as she alighted.

"Eleven o'clock, miss," answered the driver, "from opposite the Post Office."

"Thank you."

Grace had become used to being addressed as

"miss" in the past month. The "compliment" no longer annoyed her.

The driver looked after her with interest. Grace was unusually attractive, and he was an impressionable man married to a woman of strong character.

"Who is that?" he asked of a constable who had sauntered up.

"Who's who?"

"The little woman with the green hand-bag."

The constable peered under the visor of his shako at Grace's back.

"Stranger to me," he answered shortly. "What's she done?"

"Nothing. But I was getting a look at her occasionally in the mirror on the way over, and she was crying about something."

"Women usually are crying about something, aren't they? I should have thought you had trouble enough without worrying about other people's."

"Yeah? But when women cry like that they're breaking their hearts."

"Well, it's none of our business. Ted. How's the old 'bus running?"

"Fair. Coughs a bit on this second-grade juice. I wonder if somebody's dead in her family?"

"Somebody'll be dead in your family if your wife finds you taking an interest in other women, old man."

The constable chuckled at his own wit as he moved away. The 'bus-driver glared after him and made a derisive noise with his lips against the base of his thumb.

Despite his assertion that it was none of his business, the constable kept Grace in sight. He approved her figure and her lack of stature; he liked the way she wore her clothes; and he was moved to look upon her face. The tale of tears interested him. Perhaps, if she saw him, she would ask his help or advice. Accordingly, he increased the length of his

stride and overtook her just as she turned and entered a larger corner store.

She paused just inside the door to examine her appearance in a convenient mirror. The constable caught a glimpse of her profile as she dabbed her cheeks furtively with a handkerchief. He exercised his prerogative to linger upon the kerb in the hope that she would turn and afford him an opportunity to judge her quiet beauty full-face. He was disappointed; for she turned her back upon him and disappeared into the store.

"Lost," he told himself, nodding his head very slightly, and looking wise with the wisdom which his profession had bred in him. "She's at a loose end and doesn't know where to go next. I wonder what the row was all about?"

He likened her to a child he had once found sitting beneath a hedge, hopelessly lost. The child had been pale, with big brown eyes which stared into the darkening night as though the end of the world were at hand and tears no longer availing, and had been overjoyed to see him.

He waited hopefully upon the kerb. His mission in life was to be of use. Women often consulted him in their difficulties—especially their marital ones—when he happened to be handy, but his luck did not often run to women like Grace. He realised that a man of his years should have outgrown these foolish sympathies—this desire to be a sort of spiritual father to ill-used wives—but, wherein was the use of living if one did not do his best to make the wheels run easily for the unfortunate? He admitted that, had he been less free with his advice and more ready with the power which the law gave him, his hair might not have greyed while still he lacked chevrons upon his sleeve; but that was a matter for small regret when even the most hardened sinners in the town knew him by his first name.

The day was very hot, so hot that even the measured pace of a policeman was rendered laborious,

and he was glad of the slight pretext of chivalrous curiosity which moulded his duty to standing still upon this pleasant corner. He could wait for an hour, if necessary.

Grace's business this morning was the purchase of a middy suit for Joan. Joan had been envious of a middy suit worn by a playmate of a day, who had appeared at breakfast at the hotel one morning and had departed the same evening in an opulent limousine driven by a fat man whose neck bulged over his collar.

Joan had been vociferous in her desire for a middy suit, and Grace, fighting her desire to spoil the child utterly, had refused her. Joan had sulked for a day, then, child-like, had forgotten—or had pretended to forget. Motherlike, Grace had then commenced a surreptitious search of the Napier shops, but such a middy suit as she desired was not to be found in the town. Miss Whipple, whom Grace had taken into her confidence, pointed out an advertisement of such suits which might be had in Hastings, and Grace had decided to go and look at them before capitulating to her desire to give the child a pleasant surprise.

She was looking at them when the earth shook.

The shop-assistant, a girl with blonde hair and friendly eyes, who knew instinctively that her customer was one of those rare creatures who know exactly what they want, was unfolding a suit upon the counter.

"These are only just in," she was saying. "They are the very latest in style, and are excellent wearing. The sleeves——"

She ceased speaking abruptly, her mouth held open. Her eyes widened and she stared into the distance. The colour drained rapidly from her face.

"What's the matter?" asked Grace in quick concern. "Are you ill?"

Like a terror-stricken animal, the girl glanced

wildly to right and left, and scrambled upon the counter.

Grace stepped back, under the impression that the girl had become demented. The movement saved her life.

Before she could cry out, before she could take another step backwards, the floor beneath her leapt and sank. She had not felt the slight preliminary tremor which had warned the girl upon the counter of imminent danger, and the ghastly sensation sickened her and filled her with a terrible fear.

She staggered and turned wildly towards the door.

The huge building rocked for a few moments, then crumbled.

Grace glimpsed a mighty concreted girder descending upon her, and she knew there was no escape. She cried out and crouched, throwing herself backwards against the counter. She saw the girder fall across a show-case, crushing it to matchwood. Splintered glass was thrown in her face, causing her a moment of intense agony before a blow from above rendered her unconscious.

She sank to the floor; and the girder, supported by the stout timber of the counter and the crushed body of the blonde girl with friendly eyes, sheltered her from the tons of debris which thundered down.

* * * *

The constable found her two hours later.

The violent earth shock had roused him from a reverie induced by the sun's warmth and thoughts of the little lost woman, and had sent him running into the middle of the street in company with a crowd of excited people, where he stood and awaited events.

Following a moment of intense silence, such as he had known between the striking of a high-explosive shell and its devastating burst, had come the catastrophe. The drapery store had buckled, twisted and crumbled with a roar, shooting dense volumes of dust into the sky.

Screams were heard above the thunder of falling masonry — the screams of the trapped, and the screams of those who fled in every direction.

For a brief moment panic seized him, then he remembered his uniform and his mission in life. While shop verandahs still crashed upon the pavements, while fragments of masonry still bounced into the roadway shedding dust like smoke, he was shouting orders and directing the work of rescue.

When he found Grace he was tattered, black with dust and sweat, and bruised in many places. He had crawled upon his stomach beneath a chaos of shattered masonry and twisted girders interlaced with streaming dress materials, through which light percolated thinly, and his lungs ached with the continual coughing which the eternal dust induced.

He swore softly when he found her, for her clothing was wet with blood, and he thought her dead. In the dim light he could just make out her crouching form. He wormed his way into the wider space which she occupied and rose to his knees, stooping his head beneath the hanging girder. Very gently he felt for her heart-beats.

"Over here!" he yelled, twisting his head and shouting into the debris above him. "Over here, some of you."

A muffled response came immediately.

"Where?"

"Over here!"

There was a short silence, then the enquiring voice sounded a little louder.

"Where are you?"

"Over here!" he yelled.

After a little while there came the sound of sliding debris, and a shower of dust set him spluttering as it fell full upon his upturned face.

"Here?" asked the muffled voice.

"You're right!" shouted the constable. "Carefully, now! This one's badly injured, I think."

"Hang on! We're coming!"

There were sounds of furious activity overhead, and the shouting grew ever more distinct as the self-appointed ganger directed the operations of the rescuers. The thudding of thrown fragments of concrete, the ring of axes, the splintering of timber, the clanging of roofing-iron, the rending of dress-fabrics, sounded continuously. Dust fell in a never-ending stream.

Presently it grew lighter, and the constable was able to see the little lost woman distinctly. There was no beauty in the face now. It was black with dust and streaked with blood — it was hideous, ghastly.

The constable swore a little louder and leaned over her to blow some of the dust away. The action revealed the extent of the facial injuries. He shuddered, and his heart was filled with a great pity.

"Easy, up there!" he snarled, as the dust-stream widened and re-covered the little woman's disfigurement.

He turned in the cramped space in search of something with which to cover her face. He grasped a length of fabric which hung from the counter upon which it was fastened by the fallen girder. He twisted his face upwards as he pulled cautiously, and looked into the dead eyes of the blonde girl.

He did not start. He was becoming inured to horrors. He desisted from his effort to secure the fabric, crossed himself reverently, and, leaning above the living woman, offered his body for her shelter. He was just in time, for a heavy fragment of concrete fell upon his shoulder and crushed him down.

"Carefully!" he yelled angrily. "You're nearly through."

He tried to rise, but his left arm was broken. He bared his teeth in a snarl of pain, and muttered blasphemously. With his sound arm he eased his considerable weight from the unconscious woman beneath him, but he kept his body interposed

between her and the irony of possible death at the hands of the rescuers.

Extreme caution now marked the labours of those above. The surrounding debris was carefully tested before the removal of any obstruction lest a cave-in should defeat their efforts. Their caution galled the injured man beneath.

"Come on, for God's sake!" he growled.

At that moment a beam of dusty sunlight fell upon the back of his head.

"You all right?" asked a husky voice.

"Me? Yes," he answered, leaning on his sound elbow and looking upward with a faint smile. "I'm all right, except that I'm going to faint like a schoolgirl."

"You'd better save it until we get you out."

"I can't."

He could not.

They lifted him out carefully and with effort, for he was a man of girth.

"God only knows how he got under that far," remarked one of his rescuers as they carried him to the middle of the street.

"His heart's as big as his frame, that's why," replied the self-appointed ganger. "Lend a hand here, some of you. Two women here. One of 'em dead, I'm thinking. Two of you on those bars over there. When I give you the word, heave up gently and we'll see if we can get 'em out."

* * * *

CHAPTER XII.

To James Harley, slumped in the front seat of the taxi, the night was a delirium of whistling wheels, blazing headlights, red tail-lights, blaring motor-horns, violent swerves which threw him from side to side, wakeful towns, shouting people, unwinding black roads and white roads, trees, hedgerows

and bridges seen but for a flash, and whirling thoughts which were a never-ceasing agony.

Crushed! Buried! Burned!

He had sent his wife and child to a horrible death — sacrificed them upon the altar of a brief passion—upon the altar of a tinsel goddess, a creature without heart or sense of decency!

All through the night, overprinted upon every flitting scene, woven into the fabric of this appalling darkness, the terrible, accusing words screamed into his brain—

Crushed! Buried! Burned!

* * * *

"Hey!"

The first hail from a would-be passenger came before the car had left the suburbs of New Plymouth.

A tall man, in a weatherproof coat, leapt into the glare of the headlights and gesticulated furiously.

Roy swerved skilfully, missing the tall man by inches, and the vigorous hail was submerged in the shriek of skidding tyres.

"Nearly got that one," he grinned.

Harley made no comment.

In the next ten miles as many people signalled the car hopefully, risking their lives on the chance of obtaining a passage to Hawke's Bay. The avoiding of the curious, the anxious, the occasional Samaritan, who darted into the track of the racing car foolhardily and waved sticks, hats, or newspapers in the hope of a "lift," became more of a strain than a sport.

Roy's grin changed slowly to a frown.

"Get off the road!" he shouted angrily at a woman standing in the centre of the road outside Eltham, a woman who braved violent death and diverted the speeding traffic as effectively as a traffic-constable.

The woman screamed at him in return, but the epithet was lost in the roar of the engine.

"Run the fools down!" flared Harley. "What do they think this is? An excursion?"

"We'll be darned lucky if we get through without killing somebody," returned Roy grimly. "Did you ever see such a lot of road-hoppers? And the roads alive with traffic! Everything that will run seems to be out, and every fool who can walk! Country's gone crazy!"

The whole country had gone crazy indeed—crazy with anxiety and morbid curiosity.

The greater part of the population of the North Island seemed to be moving in a mad rush to the earthquake area.

From every town and hamlet in the North Island they came.

From every by-road, swelling the stream of traffic which flowed ever in one direction upon the main highways, came luxurious limousines; tradesmen's vans; sports cars; lumbering tourers and miniature cars; smart demonstration cars and nondescript, dilapidated vehicles borrowed or resurrected for the occasion; all loaded to capacity and overloaded. A stream of traffic fed by numberless tributaries and flecking the land with moving light from one end to the other.

Here and there a truck, hastily-commissioned and laden with necessities gathered by generous and practical people, held the road steadily and proceeded in conscious virtue, unperturbed by the frantic honkings of impatient holiday-makers who sought to pass.

Motor-cycles, bearing one or more pillion riders, roared past the slower traffic, taking advantage of every opening which offered, speeding around corners and ignoring all traffic regulations, piloted with the audacity which belongs to youth.

Here and there a doctor, accompanied by nurses, drove in silence to the field of new endeavour, where

the work would be arduous and the reward the lip-service of a nation momentarily grateful.

Here and there travelled people who spoke together in low tones, people who drove their cars to the limit of speed and who dreaded their arrival at what they feared would prove the death-places of their loved ones.

But the principal motive power which moved the stream of hastening humanity on this night had its spring in the primitive—in morbid curiosity, the love of tragic spectacle.

From the moment when the terrible tidings had been flung upon the air, an endless stream of sight-seers had descended upon the shattered towns—like flies gathering upon a carcase.

Heedless of danger, careless that they obstructed the work of rescue, intent only on feasting their eyes upon a ravaged countryside and the spectacle of mangled human remains disentombed, they came in their thousands by day and by night.

It was such a mobilisation as might have rejoiced the heart of Nero.

* * * *

Midnight had passed when the car pulled into a filling station in Palmerston North. Extra bowser attendants worked the pumps diligently. The town was as wide awake as it had been at noon.

"How long before we get there?" asked Harley, speaking for the first time in a hundred-and-fifty miles.

"Not before half-past three, at any rate," answered Roy shortly. "Too many schoolboy drivers on the road to-night. It's about time the driving tests were put through the mangle. Somebody's going to crash me before I get to Hastings, or I'm a rotten guesser."

Harley grunted, frowning impatiently at the delay caused by their necessary stop.

He felt for his pipe mechanically and placed it between his teeth. The pungent smell and taste of

the briar revolted him. He tossed it through the open window at his side with a petulant gesture. It struck an elderly man, who, with two companions, was approaching the car with some diffidence.

Harley apologised shortly.

"It's quite all right, sir," the elderly man assured him, hooking his angular fingers over the window frame and peering into the back of the car. "Are you going—over there, sir, by any chance?"

"Yes," Harley answered the timid questioner curtly. "But we are not taking any sight-seeing parties."

"Would you mind giving us a lift, sir?" pleaded the other, apparently unaware of the rebuff. "Just my wife and daughter and myself? I will pay all expenses of the journey willingly. We really must get to Napier to-night. We must!"

His voice shook, and his eyes reflected the bright lights of the pumps in a curious manner.

Harley found that he had no sympathy with another's trouble.

"Sorry," he growled, turning to look in another direction. "Afraid we can do nothing for you."

The old man sighed and removed his fingers from the window frame slowly. The younger of the two women sank down upon the low brick curbing of the station and sobbed silently, while her mother leaned above her and whispered comforting words.

Roy saw the latter movement. He turned and leaned over across Harley's back, and, with something of a flourish, threw open the car door.

"Hop in, dad," he invited heartily, pointedly avoiding Harley's frowning glance. "Plenty of room for all of you. We need something to hold the car down at the back; but I'm warning you, you'll be taking risks. We're in a hurry."

The elderly man thanked him in a stifled voice and hurried away to apprise the women of his good fortune.

"What's the idea?" demanded Harley in a low

voice, ashamed of his lack of charity and striving to hide it with fictitious fury.

"Too dangerous, travelling light at the speed we're doing," lied Roy, preparing to move forward at the wave of a bowser attendant. "Must have somebody, or something, in the back."

"I'm paying you for this trip——."

"I know you are, Mr. Harley, but you haven't bought the car!"

The car moved forward to the pump.

"Besides, if you don't mind me saying so," continued Roy, placatingly, "it's not good for a man to sit and imagine things ——."

"How many?" demanded the bowser attendant.

"Fill her up," ordered Roy, fumbling in his pocket for money. "And have a look at the oil, will you?"

"Right-o."

"—— that haven't happened, ten to one," Roy continued, as though no interruption had occurred. "No sense in it, at all. There's more than a chance that Mrs. Harley is quite all right ——."

"There's no chance, Roy. I know it. I feel it."

"Oh, rats! You don't know anything. Nobody knows anything. Wait and see. That's my advice."

"I ought never to have let her go."

"That's what we all reckoned," agreed Roy unguardedly.

Harley stiffened.

"We?" he questioned sharply.

"You've been a damn fool, you know," was the blunt answer. "Any man is who plays around with a woman like Pat Weybourn."

The man who had so recently expressed his scorn of the opinions of local society experienced an odd sense of dismay. For a moment he was taken aback by the condemnation in the frank words, then a defensive anger surged over him.

"What do you know of Pat Weybourn?" he demanded harshly. "What have my private affairs to do with you?"

Before Roy could reply the elderly man and the two women appeared at the open door of the car.

"This is most kind of you, gentlemen. Most kind," quavered the elderly man, as he helped his wife and daughter into the car. "We had almost given up hope ——."

"Mind the handle on that side," Roy warned, cutting short the thanks decisively. "It's a bit loose."

He turned to the elder of the two women.

"Not afraid of a bit of fast going, madam?" he asked, with a smile.

The younger woman answered him.

"You cannot go too fast for us," she said, in a low, strained tone, as she sank back in the seat between her parents.

Roy nodded appreciatively and looked at her with frank admiration.

"That suits me," he said, then turned about in embarrassment as her head dropped upon her breast.

Harley curbed his anger with the greatest difficulty. He felt that he was being deliberately cheated by the driver: and the thought that Patricia should be the subject of ribald comment in the idle moments of taxi-drivers infuriated him. The knowledge that his domestic affairs were the common property of the town filled him with a desire to murder.

"O.K.!" said the bowser-hand, as Roy paid him. "Keep a sharp look-out this side of Waipukurau. The road begins to break somewhere on the hill, I believe."

"Thanks," replied Roy.

He started the engine and let in the clutch.

"What do you know of Pat Weybourn?" Harley demanded again, as the car swung out of the Square.

He spoke in a low, tense voice. Roy pretended that he had not heard, and continued to drive with his gaze fixed upon the road ahead. Harley repeated the question a little louder.

"Only what all New Plymouth knows about her," answered the driver coldly.

"And what's that?"

The other ignored the question.

"What's that?" Harley asked again, when the car had travelled another mile.

"Nothing," admitted Roy. "But it says a lot."

"What does it say of her?"

"Calls her names."

"What names?"

"'A good sport,' is the best of 'em. You can guess the worst."

There was another lengthy silence, then Roy, chafed by the strain of the awkward pause, sought to excuse his attitude.

"Only know her by sight, myself," he said.

"What do you say of her?" was the sharp demand.

Roy considered for a moment before he answered.

"Me? Well—if she were my girl, I'd be everlastingly afraid of the other fellow. All the same, I'd be glad to take the risk. But she's got more brains than to pick on a taxi-driver. She doesn't have to, anyhow."

Harley gripped his clenched fist between his knees.

"Everybody talks about her, eh?" he asked savagely. "Every Tom, Dick and Harry, eh?"

Roy shrugged.

"Ever know a woman of that type who wasn't talked about by everybody?" he asked, smiling apologetically.

Harley turned his head to look at Roy. His face was white, and his eyes glinted dangerously.

"A woman of what type?"

The other answered nothing.

Harley released his fists.

"A woman of what type?" he repeated.

"Oh, for the love of Mike!" snapped Roy in disgust. "Talk of something else."

It is difficult to surmise what form Harley's fury might have taken had not he been checked by a burst of unrestrained sobbing behind him. Roy looked at him in a natural embarrassment at the sound, and instinctively lessened the speed of the car.

Harley's fury vanished. He sat back in his seat and stared into the blackness outside the range of the headlights.

"There, there, my dear," they heard the mother murmuring softly. "Don't take on so. It is the will of God, my dear. He takes what is His. My dear, my dear ——."

"It isn't right! It isn't fair!" moaned the daughter. "What are we to do?"

"Hush, my dear. You know everything will be all right with father and me. Don't take on so."

"Let her have her cry out, mother," put in the elderly man gently. "She'll be better for it afterwards."

"Oh, daddy, what am I going to do?" came the despairing cry of the young woman.

"Hush, Grace, my lass," begged the elderly man softly. "You just have your cry out on my shoulder. We will speak about it afterwards."

Roy pursed his lips and frowned in concentration upon his task, the light from the dash revealing the embarrassed colour in his hardened features.

Harley slumped in his seat afresh.

The coincidence in names struck him with the force of a blow, making him ashamed of his untimely desire to defend the woman who had robbed him of all honour.

He insisted to himself that he hated Patricia Weybourn, and despised himself utterly that he could have fallen victim to her obvious blandishments.

He was awake now—but he had awakened too late.

Grace and Joan were lying somewhere ahead—crushed, buried, burned—small heaps of scattered

ashes beneath some ghastly heap of smouldering wreckage.

His mind refused to entertain the hope that they had survived the disaster. He was convinced that they were no more. He knew he would never see them again. He had bidden them farewell in his heart, and already he pictured the grave in which their ashes should lie—if they were found—a grave upon which Grace's favourite roses should bloom in due season.

His abasement was abject.

He had sinned, and could never atone; but the grave of his loved ones should be the shrine to which his repentant feet should beat a path all the days of his life.

Not again for him were the temptations of the flesh. He would live alone. His work should reflect the deeper knowledge of life born of his association with tragedy. He would write, and the world would weep.

Even in this hour of anguish the ego of the writer was not silenced.

For many miles there was silence in the racing car. The sobs of the young woman were hushed. Oppressive thoughts filled the small enclosed space as with something substantial, tangible.

Through small towns, widely spaced over the undulating country, the car roared, following the procession of tail-lights, and urged forward by the glaring head-lights and honking horns behind—hurrying upon a mortal inferno.

They were nearing the hill of which they had been warned when Harley lifted his head.

"How much for the trip?" he asked coldly.

Roy started.

"Eh? Oh, we can settle that when we get back, Mr. Harley."

"I may not be going back ——."

The elderly man, who had overheard, hastened to speak.

"You must allow me to pay, sir," he begged.

Harley ignored him.

"How much?"

The driver seemed to be figuring out the mileage, when the elderly man tapped him upon the shoulder.

"Really, I insist, sir. It is very kind of you ——."

Harley interrupted him.

"Please. I have already arranged to pay for the car, and it is a privilege to give you and—and your people a lift, sir."

"That is very kind of you, sir," persisted the elderly man, "but, if you will not allow me to pay all, at least a share ——."

"Hang on!" cried Roy, on a note of excitement. "We're coming to it!"

The car immediately ahead slowed suddenly, and a collision was avoided only by a swift application of the brakes, which threw all the passengers from their seats.

The interruption effectually checked the friendly dispute, which was not opened again.

Following the now creeping car ahead, Roy negotiated a wide crack in the road with extreme caution.

"If that's a sample," he remarked softly, when the danger was past, "what's the rest of it like?"

None answered him.

Harley was barely interested. The elderly man had braced himself in his seat and was pretending to be unafraid. His wife clung to the window frame and prayed silently that the car be not swallowed in the yard-wide crack which, in her imagination, had assumed the dimensions of a yawning chasm and the character of snapping jaws. The daughter prayed for just such a calamity.

But at the top of the hill Harley saw that which claimed his interest and tore his heart afresh.

The sky to the north was red!

Swelling and waning in mighty billows above the outline of far black hills and the clustered lights

in the valley immediately below, a dull red glow threw the scattered clouds into relief.

Napier and Hastings were burning!

Harley shuddered.

"Ashes! Black ashes, smooth to the touch! Horrible!"

The words broke from his white lips in a groan. He covered his face with his hands and leaned forward.

Roy glanced at him quickly, reached out and extinguished the light on the dash.

"Want all the light on the road now," he explained.

The others were silent.

CHAPTER XIII.

The car was passing through Waipawa when the driver spoke again.

The principal street of the small town bore evidence of the severity of the shake. Splintered glass and tumbled wreckage, which yesterday morning were neat shop-fronts, littered the roadway and imposed caution and low speed.

"We won't be in Hastings before daylight, at this rate," he growled. "Look at that!" he added in awe.

The extensive concrete parapet of a building lay shattered in the roadway. A group of men stood regarding it in silence. They stood with their hands in their pockets, for the morning breeze was chill, and seemed to wait for something. They did not look up as the car passed.

Many people stood in the roadway in groups; men, women and children, moving reluctantly or resentfully to allow the travellers passage. All seemed silent; even the sleepy children who clung to the hands of their parents. The whole town was awake, desirous of sleep, but lacking the courage

to retire, fearful of a repetition of the shake which would completely destroy the town — as report stated Hastings and Napier had been destroyed.

"Windy!" commented the driver, referring to the state of mind of the inhabitants. "And I don't blame 'em. We must be well into the outside ripples of the shake now. This place seems to have got it much worse than Waipukurau."

Waipukurau, the town through which they had passed a few minutes before, had, indeed, suffered less; or so it seemed in the darkness. There the people had seemed less fearful, having courage to walk upon the pavements and beneath shop-verandahs. Here the people seemed afraid to leave the centre of the road.

"Dear me!" muttered the elderly man in shocked tones. "Dear me!"

Roy, lacking encouragement, discontinued his efforts to be interesting. He stepped upon the accelerator as the car swung clear of the town. For the best part of a mile the road lay straight before him, and the car immediately ahead was drawing away rapidly. Professional pride demanded that he reduce the distance between with all possible speed.

Consequently the car was travelling too fast to be effectually braked before it hurdled a long, low mound of broken earth which crossed the road diagonally, a wrinkle in the earth's crust which extended for more than two miles across country—a frozen ripple of the earthquake—and Harley was thrown against the windscreen with a force which dazed him and cracked the glass.

The car screeched to a stop.

"Anybody hurt?" asked Roy anxiously, turning in his seat.

The elderly man rubbed his bruised knees and ejaculated "Dear me!" several times. His wife, crumpled upon the floor of the car, hunched her shoulders in anticipation of immediate death, and was silent. The daughter slid back into her seat and

stared at the driver in a dazed manner, as though her memory had gone astray.

Harley allowed his head to drop backwards for a few moments, then he turned upon the driver in mild anger.

"What are we waiting for?" he asked.

Roy alighted and opened the back door to assist the elderly woman to her seat. When he had satisfied himself that she was frightened rather than hurt, he walked around the car, examining the tyres and testing the springs.

"Still all in one piece," he announced cheerfully, as he climbed behind the wheel again. "We're lucky. She might have rolled over on us."

"Let's get on!" snapped Harley irritably. "What are we wasting time for?"

As Roy good-humouredly pressed the starter button, a gleaming limousine snored past and raced ahead. From its crowded interior sounded shrill peals of excited laughter.

"Evidently this buck-jumping business appeals to that crowd," he said, ignoring Harley's question. "Hope they break their blooming necks."

As though in answer to his pious wish, the limousine swerved, skidded violently, and came to a stop at an acute angle in the ditch at the side of the road. A small crowd of terrified girls and youths scrambled from it into the roadway.

The oncoming taxi honked imperiously and sped by, profiting by the limousine's swerve and avoiding the small patch of shattered macadam which had ditched it.

"Let 'em walk," grinned Roy, ignoring the cries for assistance. "Do 'em good, even if it doesn't teach 'em manners."

Presently the car drew in behind the long line of vehicles moving across the country with the caution of traffic in a city street which bears the warning "Road Up." The hills on either side were cracked, and the cracks extended across the road in places,

compelling a more seemly advance upon the wasted towns.

Harley chafed in spirit, and occasionally muttered in his impatience. For him the slower speed had become a sluggish crawl. He longed for wings that he might fly swiftly—to what? To a small heap of black ashes? The ashes would not depart before he arrived, no matter how slow his speed. Could it be that he had hope that Grace and Joan lived?

He laughed aloud, bitterly.

Roy shot him a rapid glance of suspicion.

"Take a grip on yourself, Mr. Harley," he advised. "You've got too much imagination."

"Can't we go faster?" asked Harley, ignoring the advice. "We're simply crawling."

"We could, but I'm not anxious to land in a hole and wreck the bus. We'll just take it easy and tail along behind."

They "tailed along behind" for many miles, studiously following the car ahead, dropping to a lower gear to negotiate the more frequent fractures in the road surface; making small detours to avoid those places where the road had subsided dangerously, and assisting to make new traffic-ruts where it had been pushed out of alignment.

Infreqently they passed cars ditched or disabled, their occupants taking advantage of every passing headlight to effect manoeuvres or repairs. None offered assistance. On this night car-drivers were independent of necessity. If they fell out of the pleasure-seeking procession they expected no sympathy, as they expended none. The show was on, and it was everyone for himself if he would obtain a good view of it. Who knew how long the show would be accessible or free?

"This is where it catches 'em," Roy remarked, with a self-satisfied smirk, as they passed a number of cars stranded in soft clay beside the uncertain road. "They're all right while the going is good,

but they haven't learned how to dodge shell-holes. I served my time behind the wheel of an ambulance in France. That was the place for rough going. This is nothing. Over there we didn't give two hoots what happened to the bus so long as the wheels would go round. Hang on!"

The car bumped over another mound of rubble, then picked up a little speed as the car ahead drew away again.

On this final thirty miles of road the southward traffic became more frequent. A hospital ambulance came around the bend ahead and passed with fiercely-gleaming lights and ringing bell. Harley caught a glimpse of grey blankets and a woman's stooping back in the lighted interior.

"He's moving," remarked Roy admiringly.

"Why can't we?" asked Harley in a high-pitched voice. "The road must be fairly safe."

"For those who know it, perhaps. That ambulance has travelled this road a lot during the last twelve hours, I'll bet. Knows all the good patches. We'll get there, all in good time."

Harley beat his hands upon his knees in his agitation.

"Oh, this is hell!" he muttered. "Just plain hell!"

Roy nodded in agreement.

The red glow in the sky was brighter now, two distinct clouds of angry colour, the more distant showing where Napier burned more fiercely than Hastings. The colour flickered like an aurora, its dull red flaming to brilliant orange, then fading almost completely, only to flame again as the morning breeze fanned the conflagration.

It was a wonderful spectacle for pleasure-seekers, and a living horror for the stunned inhabitants of the stricken towns, and for those who rushed to their relief.

In the slow dawn telegraph poles leaned at

grotesque angles or lay prostrate beside the uncertain road. On the left, the travellers discerned a large isolated building partially collapsed. Broken masonry and up-jutting, ragged timber; roofs which sprawled upon the ground or straddled the walls which had supported them; goods trucks, on a private siding, half-buried in debris which had fallen from the sheds beside them, combined to make a picture of utter desolation. It gave the impression that destruction had come from above instead of from the earth.

The railway track, which here ran beside the road, was twisted and useless. Weird bends and waves in the rails defied man's most ingenious locomotive to negotiate them. A railway bridge was in a dangerous state of collapse.

The ominous clouds ahead changed slowly from red to black, from black to grey, as the sun came up. Rolling grey billows which rose heavily and spread like a pall over the burning towns. The air was charged with choking dust, an eerie fog which veiled the terrible brown gashes in the distant hills.

The car moved ever more slowly now—riding uneasily over a road which had become dangerous,—a single link in a chain which jerked and rattled northwards, swept by slowly drifting banks of fog and fouled with dust and smoke.

Ever more frequent were the southward-bound vehicles; and when the light had fairly come they formed a procession almost as continuous as that which proceeded north. Refugees fleeing from the place of death in fear; tourists, thankful for their preservation, moving to the next town in their itinerary days ahead of their schedule; commercial travellers abroad at an unearthly hour in the course of duty; crippled humans, making their way in agony to the nearest hospital.

Also, were many afoot. Men pushing wheelbarrows laden with household goods; women pushing perambulators in which delighted children laughed.

Men, women and children. Whole families walking southward.

Many of these latter would not go far afield as yet. The fear would die in their hearts to-morrow, as the earth remained comparatively still, and they would return to their homes with shame-faced smiles for their neighbours; but, at this moment of panic they made such a picture as did Belgian refugees fleeing before the German invasion.

This, however, was but momentary panic on the part of the few. The vast majority in the stricken towns had risen to the emergency, and now laboured without rest to succour those buried in the ruins. These were the weak—these wanderers—or those whose maternal instincts encompassed only their own brood.

"Looks like another war," remarked Roy, voicing the thoughts of many.

"Dear me! Dear me!" breathed the elderly man.

The women and Harley stared out of the windows, fascinated, horrified, silent.

CHAPTER XIV.

Hastings.

The town which had turned a cheerful face to the skies but a few hours since, whose streets had been animated with the characteristic leisurely bustle of the smaller towns—streets upon which the sun had shone benignly—now lay with its heart shattered and smoking in its wrenched and twisted body.

Its commercial area had collapsed, and the once clean streets were foul with wreckage, and spotted with grim stains, hastily covered with dust, where frantic rescuers had laid broken bodies.

The leisurely bustle of its streets had given place to intent labour, as of the ants which burrow in the ruins of their demolished habitation heedless of the

careless foot which may be lifted to make the destruction more complete.

Human ants tunnelled beneath mounds of tumbled roofing iron, timbers, bricks and fractured concrete, smashed household furniture, splintered glass —a chaos which had been an orderly array of shops and dwellings only yesterday. They tunnelled ceaselessly, forcing their ways to where helpless fellows cried wildly for succour, or moaned and wept in terror or unbearable pain.

Some worked in purposeful silence, their gleaming, sweating bodies almost bare, their mouths agape and parched with the heat and the everlasting dust, their muscles aching with long-sustained effort, contemptuous of the death which hovered as they tore a path through the trembling wreckage. Others worked timidly, delving downwards and throwing the debris well clear, terrified at every faint tremor and prepared to leap to safety at the first renewed growling of the unquiet earth.

Surely these latter possessed fined courage, dreading yet daring?

At one spot a crowd of people stood silent and helpless, watching thick, flame-shot smoke belching from the ruins of a corner store. Silent, save for an occasional hysterical sob or a savage oath, when childish voices screamed in terror as the flames ate their way inexorably to where a number of children were imprisoned beneath the fallen verandah. Near the burning mass were men in partial uniform, firemen deprived of their principal weapon by the breaking of the water-mains, shielding their faces with uplifted arms and making futile dashes into the flames in an attempt at rescue.

The fire roared at them derisively, played with them. It allowed them to wrench up a corner of a sheet of the iron which roofed the fallen verandah, it allowed them to see the children pinned down upon the pavement, then it threw them back with a scorching tongue. The iron clanged down again.

Presently it curled as it became-red-hot, and roaring flames sprang aloft through the reopened hole. A child screamed for its mother—the mother lying dead beneath the blazing pile—then the glowing iron buckled, twisted, and fell with a crash, sending a fountain of sparks into the sky — fiery escorts of young souls torn from a world which has been a paradise for them.

Horror walked abroad in this terrible dawn. It laid its paralysing hand upon Harley's heart as the car, forced to a halt by a traffic block, drew up beside an improvised ambulance in a suburban street.

Several men were engaged in carrying bandaged and moaning bodies from the wide porch of a private residence and placing them on oddly-assorted mattresses spread upon the floor of the ambulance which, in normal times, was a furniture van. They carried their burdens with excessive care, for these were the badly injured who must be rushed to hospital in Waipukurau or Palmerston North.

Eight, Harley counted mechanically; five men and three youths, or women. He could not be certain about the latter, for two had their heads concealed in bandages, brown-stained and horrible, while the other's refined, waxen features might have belonged to either sex.

Harley shuddered and closed his eyes. He opened them again as a man spoke close beside the car.

The speaker, one of the volunteer stretcher-bearers, was fastening the tail-board of the ambulance as silently as he could.

"That's the lot, Harry. The doctor says to go easy round the bends, but you can hit it up on the straights. He says to tell you to be careful of the woman we've just put aboard. If she should roll on her side, she won't last the distance."

"Right, I'll watch it," replied the ambulance-driver in a subdued tone. "They tell me they've dug out Jerry Wade," he added. "Got him about half-an-hour ago."

"Hurt?"

"Lost one hand. He was about all in, but as cheerful as though he'd won a double. All he seemed to be worrying about was whether the Grand Hotel had gone.'

"Which hand?"

"They didn't say. It's going to be pretty hard for him, whichever it is. I've only met one hairdresser with one hand, and he lost his other as a kid. Jerry's too old to learn new tricks."

"He'll have to concentrate on the book. Bookmakers don't need two hands."

"Except in the silly season. Am I to go straight through to Palmerston?"

"Expect you'll have to. Waipuk. is overcrowded now. Here's the doctor's report on your cases. The woman I told you about was hauled out of Roach's. She's——"

Harley heard no more, for the two moved away to the front of the ambulance conversing in a lower tone. He saw that the driver was moved by the other's information, for he shook his head pityingly as he climbed into his seat.

The ambulance lumbered away, operated with a care to which it was completely unused.

There had been silence in the car since it had halted, save for the unobtrusive ticking of the idling engine. Roy had watched the operations of the stretcher-bearers with half-closed eyes, his stubby fingers drumming silently on the wheel the while, his lips pursed. His thoughts were back in France, where he had often sat at a wheel, waiting while hospital orderlies dumped "blightys" into his rattling ambulance. He had worn a steel helmet then—a helmet which had been very useful for boiling eggs or to sit on in the mud—and none had thought to tell him to be careful on the bends.

The background of shattered walls, visible between the slightly-battered and chimneyless suburban houses, aided the illusion of war, and, when

Harley spoke, he was smiling inwardly at the recollection of a happy evening—one of many—when he had parked his cargo of suffering men just within the fringe of a copse while he had made merry with little Minette. "Half-a-minute" he had called her. He was wondering where she was now. Grown old and fat, most likely, and married to a farmer who gave her second place in his heart to the heap of manure in the front-garden. "Half-a-minute." The "blightys" were not to know that it was a girl's name and not a promise. They——

"What are we waiting for this time?"

Roy started.

"Dreaming," he admitted, noting with surprise that nothing prevented him from proceeding. "Just about asleep, I suppose. These all-night tours are pretty wearing."

He yawned widely and loudly as he engaged the gears and let in the clutch. Harley and the elderly man yawned also, although sleep had no place in their thoughts or desires.

The car had proceeded only a few yards when Harley clutched Roy's arm.

"Pull up!" he ordered sharply.

The car came to a sudden stand, jerking a frightened ejaculation from the elder woman and causing her daughter to stare wildly.

Harley opened the door by his side with a hurried movement and sprang into the road. For a moment it seemed that he would set out afoot in pursuit of the disappearing ambulance; then, as it rounded a a corner and vanished he shook his head in a confused manner and climbed back into the car slowly.

Roy, who had watched this manœuvre in surprise, stared enquiringly as Harley seated himself with a sigh and pulled the door close.

"What is it, Mr. Harley?" he asked in concern.

"Eh? Oh, nothing—nothing," mumbled Harley, shuddering as though with cold, and wiping a sudden sweat from his forehead with his palm. "I merely

had an uncanny feeling that we were going in the wrong direction, that's all. Napier is ahead, isn't it?"

"Dead ahead. We turn to the right at the next corner and then to the left, and we're on the main road."

"That's all right, then. Go ahead. I suppose I'm suffering from loss of sleep, too."

"Feeling all right, now?" asked Roy anxiously.

"Quite all right, thanks."

The driver seemed doubtful on the point. He let in his clutch with a thoughtful expression, and several times during the remainder of the journey shot watchful glances at the overwrought man beside him.

Harley sat as still as he might in the swaying car, his thoughts upon death. He had forgotten the perfumed romances which were his livelihood. He had forgotten the "voice of the soul," the "call of like to like, though seas divide"; all the poetic phrases in which he had described telepathy—the "thought transference" of which he had written so much and in which he had no faith.

He did not recognise, in the impulse which had lifted him from the car and had urged his feet to take the southern road, the call of the woman whose soul walked in the blackness of delirium, the soul which cried in the darkness for the man beloved above everything which moved upon the earth or in the heavens above the earth.

The woman lay upon a narrow mattress, her head swathed in brown-stained bandages, while the ambulance which bore her southwards rounded the bends with care and sped along the straights.

CHAPTER XV.

The morning of February 4th, 1932, saw the greatest aggregation of motor vehicles in one spot in the history of the country.

Seen from the relief 'plane, which descended upon Napier in this early hour, they swarmed like flies; and, as far as the eye could reach, the black dots moved in continuous processions northwards and southwards. That which moved southwards had lengthy gaps in it, but the northering one formed a continuous wavering line. The environs of the wrecked towns were alive with the black dots, weaving in and out in sluggish, nauseating fashion in the narrow streets.

Taxi-cabs; lorries; tradesmen's vans; pleasure cars; borrowed cars; stolen cars — every type of vehicle known to Customs and police regulations— were assembled here; and the thousands of sight-seers which they had brought walked about the devastated towns, thrilled by the havoc, warmed by the morning sun and the fires which consumed wreckage and human victims, awed by the evidences of mighty force, shocked by a conviction of man's insecurity, yet increasingly conscious of mortal needs.

Here, where the main stores of foodstuffs had been utterly destroyed by earthquake and fire, wandered hordes of idle people, expecting to be fed; people who complained because their silver could not purchase breakfast; people who felt cheated of one of the greatest pleasures of a holiday; people who expected hospitality in a homeless community.

Some there were who had had the forethought to bring provisions, and who sat comfortably in their cars, or upon the running boards, while they consumed dainties from paper bags and hot liquids from vacuum flasks, as they watched with interest the arrival of ever more visitors and the frequent bursts of smoke and flame in the ruins.

Some there were who had had the foresight to bring with them all the provisions upon which they could lay hasty hands. These moved among the dishevelled refugees, upon the foreshore and in the

open fields, distributing bread to hungry children and their reluctant, grateful parents.

Here, too, moved the representatives of many charitable organisations and religious bodies, working without rest for the comfort of the homeless.

Like life-giving rafts borne on a destroying torrent, trucks, loaded with clothing, blankets and food supplies, dotted the stream of cars from the south, piloted by capable, curious and kindly men and women—Samaritans with healing oil—the sympathetic leaven which redeemed this conflux from the stigma of pharisaism.

Death brooded over the countryside on this sunny morning; but the cries of those whom He chose made little volume of sound in the excited chatter of Roman holiday-makers.

* * * *

James Harley's first glimpse of Napier brought him a sense of relief which was almost painful.

The Bluff still stood against the sky!

It had not been levelled. In the distance it appeared as it had always done, save for the heavy smoke which veiled it, and a slight alteration in contour on the seaward face where landslides had buried the road at the foot of the cliffs. The summit and the landward slopes were still green with trees, amidst which stood the dwellings of the fortunate.

Distance obscured the damage to these dwellings, obscured the piles of broken masonry which had been the Public Hospital and the Nurses' Home, obscured the frantic activity of the hundreds who toiled to improvise a hospital camp in the Botanical Gardens.

However, the Bluff still stood against the sky!

This evidence of exaggeration in the first reports of the disaster induced the first recognisable gleam of hope which James Harley had experienced since he had read those ghastly headlines.

Napier had not been wiped from the map. The evidence was before his eyes. Annihilation was far

from complete! Only a section of the town burned. He could see a church spire standing where it had always stood. Save that all the houses were minus their chimneys, the suburbs appeared little changed. The dignified row of Norfolk Island pines still rose in perfect alignment along the Marine Parade.

Harley sat up alertly, and chafed audibly at the low speed of the car.

There was a chance that Grace and Joan had survived, after all. There was a chance that the broken-nosed fellow had guessed correctly—that Grace and Joan were out on the beach at the time of the 'shake.

"Step on it!" he snapped at Roy.

"We're going all out for this class of country," Roy growled.

Harley laughed in a curious manner and patted Roy's sleeve by way of apology.

Roy glanced at Harley with something of apprehension in his eyes. He was thinking that the strain had been too much for his passenger.

Harley's hope grew as they drew nearer to their destination. He remembered that Grace was an ardent lover of the sunshine and a devotee of the morning walk. The weather had been perfect yesterday. Grace would never have wasted such a glorious morning indoors.

He reconstructed her morning, basing his deductions on his knowledge of her. Breakfast at nine o'clock, or a little before. Allowing a full hour for preparation, she and Joan would have been ready to leave the hotel by ten. Possible delay, speaking to acquaintances in the hotel and so forth, say fifteen or twenty minutes. That still left half-an-hour before the shake.

He remembered Grace's passion for the beach at Fitzroy. Every fine day she had made time to visit it. He smiled as he recalled the wiggings he had received for keeping her waiting on various of her

excursions while he put the finishing touches to stories.

Yes, he decided, Grace had been on the beach when the shake occurred. She could not possibly have been anywhere else.

There had been no whisper of a tidal wave, such as usually follows a bad shake on the seaboard. The sea had receded, according to all accounts, completely draining the inner harbour and forcing the shipping in the bay to scurry for deep water.

Grace and Joan were alive, and he would find them! They would be scared, no doubt, but safe. When he found them again no other woman should part him from them so long as life lasted, so help him, God!

It did not occur to him that Grace might not want him. Harley was all a man, never doubting his desirability where the mother of his child was concerned.

A nearer view of the Bluff renewed his misgivings for a brief moment.

Supposing Grace had walked along the beach to the north!

All that part of the beach beneath the cliffs now lay buried beneath thousands of tons of rock. The once perpendicular cliffs were now precipitous slopes, over the brinks of which several houses hung precariously. No living thing which had been upon the road, or upon the beach at that spot, could possibly have survived. Assuredly, cars and trucks and their human freight must lie buried, many feet deep, under the terrible slope of rubble, for the road was widely used. But the beach——

No! Grace was a lover of her kind, and few people walked beneath the cliffs. He would find her on the beach, somewhere opposite the Masonic Hotel. He would almost stake his life on it.

He could not restrain his impatience to begin the search. He fidgeted ceaselessly in his seat, increasing Roy's suspicions of his sanity; and, when the

car slowed to a walking pace behind a sports coupé which felt its way through the crowd of excited people blocking the southern end of the Marine Parade, he sprang into the road.

"I'll pick you up later, Roy," he cried, as he swung the door shut. "Look out for me. I'll have a couple of passengers for you to take back."

Roy's suspicions vanished. He grinned happily.

"That's the talk!" he replied heartily. "You go and hunt 'em up, and I'll be right down this end, ready to take you back home. No waiting and no delay. Cheerio!"

He sounded his horn with a flourish as Harley moved into the crowd, waving his hand in acknowledgement. He did not see the woman who walked blindly across the track of the car until he had bumped her mildly with his off mudguard. He pulled up with a jerk.

"Sorry I scared you, lady," he apologised, "but it's nothing to what you did to me."

The woman, who was unhurt, looked at him without comprehension. She was hatless and her hair was dishevelled. She was clothed in something resembling a bathrobe. Roy judged her to be crazy, but she was merely dazed by the magnitude of the disaster which had taken her husband, her child and her home.

Presently she moved away aimlessly, hopelessly lost.

* * * *

Harley made his way to the beach, which was separated from the Marine Parade by a low concrete wall now twisted and cracked in many places.

The Marine Parade itself was littered, for almost its entire length, with masses of broken brickwork and other debris. It was as though some giant hand had swept across the land and brushed the entire row of buildings into the roadway. Telegraph poles leaned at drunken angles, or had snapped like thistle-

stalks in a gale. A tangle of wires, like monstrous wind-blown cobwebs, hung in festoons and cluttered the ground.

Beyond, the billowing smoke, rising from a hundred fires and gilded with grandeur by the rising sun, hid the hills and the inferno which had been a busy, hopeful mart only yesterday.

The air quivered with noise. The hum of engines, the nerve-wracking barking of motor-horns, the shouting of excited searchers in the hot ruins, the uneven murmur of hysterical conversation, the continuous crackling and recurring explosions of the conflagration, the eternal thunder of the breakers upon the shore, all the pandemonium of sound which arises when Nature kicks the human hive, set the very air alive.

Harley staggered in his walk, blundering against, and apologising to, people who noticed neither his blundering nor his apologies, so intent were they upon the business of living to the full this exciting episode in their lives.

He had not slept for many hours, and a month of semi-starvation had played havoc with his powers of endurance. The noise bewildered him, and he sat upon the sea wall to shake his head in an effort to throw off an uncomfortable dizziness.

The beach itself was an unforgettable scene.

The sea had receded for a considerable distance, proof that the land in this vicinity had been thrust upwards, and the exposed sea-bottom was white with shell-fish which would presently rot in the heat of the sun and add a zymotic stench to the sickening fetor of desolation. There was laughter here, the shrill laughter of children who knelt and played about the many pools which boiled with the struggles of the small fish entrapped in them, fish which fell a ready prey to childish hands.

The higher stretches of beach were one huge refugee camp. Household furniture of all descriptions had been carried here from wrecked dwellings,

and whole families lived in the dubious privacy afforded by tables, bedsteads, wardrobes, carpets, bed-linen and other odds and ends, hastily arranged to form screens against the perverted curiosity of that unwholesome element which manifests itself most strongly in times of calamity.

Some there were who scorned the privacy of any kind of shelter, who performed their toilets in full view of the idlers who wandered wide-eyed in the hapless settlement, and who enquired in offensive tones of such whether they had nothing better to do.

Here and there a thief followed his calling, appropriating small articles temporarily left without a guardian; and none voiced a protest, for none knew to whom such trifles rightly belonged. Each had enough to do, attending to the business of his own welfare to care greatly about the welfare of his neighbour's goods.

To James Harley this hotch-potch of humanity and its pathetic belongings recalled a fanciful story he had once written of whimpering, terrified animals driven from a burning jungle to take refuge upon the margin of a crocodile-infested lake; animals which temporarily forgot their natural antipathies in the common danger; animals which moved aimlessly, unconscious of hunger, subdued by fear.

Here, on this narrow strip of shingle which separated fire and water, were gathered men and women who had shelved their animosities for the moment. Neighbours, who had sneered at each other's futile social triumphs or tiny ambitions yesterday, now commiserated each other on their respective losses and exchanged experiences in the awful moment of the shake. Business men, who had regarded each other as conscienceless thieves yesterday, now chatted gloomily and pitied each other.

Many, men and women, hopelessly bereaved, moved about aimlessly, unable to rest. Here and there a woman sobbed without restraint, heedless of the sympathisers grouped about her. Numbers were

curled up in restless slumber, their faces shielded from the morning light by hats, handkerchiefs, or newspapers.

Here a young mother, squatting behind an outspread overcoat, fed a two-weeks-old baby at her breast, while her husband, who held the garment, glared challengingly at all who approached.

In the centre of a sneering and apathetic group, a bare-headed fanatic waved an open Bible and called upon the people of this modern Sodom to repent.

"The end of the world is at hand!" he cried at the top of his voice. "Repent! Repent! The Angel of Death comes with a flaming sword. The goats will be divided from the sheep before another sun shall set. I say unto ye, Repent of your sins, and ye shall be gathered into the Kingdom!"

Here and there showed restless red cap-bands and bonnet-ribbons, where the Salvation Army, putting actions before words in this moment of distress, lived up to its reputation for good works.

And the sea sparkled brilliantly upon the one hand, immutable; and upon the other roared the flames which forever changed and destroyed.

* * * *

In this farrago of distracted humanity, James Harley searched for his wife and child in vain.

He combed the beach from end to end, at first with confident patience, at last with terrifying doubt.

He enquired for them ceaselessly, and his inquiries were invariably met with impatient negatives. He intruded upon families who pointedly resented his presence; he disturbed sleepers who cursed him; he stayed hurrying rescuers who upbraided him for a fool; he hurried here and there as he caught glimpses of women and children who resembled those for whom he searched; he peered beneath every improvised shelter; and at noon-time he despaired.

Again he sat upon the cracked sea-wall, his shoulders hunched, his hands thrust into his pockets,

his feet piling the shingle into heaps which he immediately flattened with vicious kicks, while the sun beat down upon his bared head. Nausea seized upon the pit of his stomach, and he felt a desire for tears. Physical weariness, hunger and despair had made a woman of him, he told himself bitterly.

A heavy blow in the small of his back tumbled him face down upon the shingle, and his manhood reasserted itself.

He rose to his feet swiftly and turned.

"Who did that?" he demanded, clenching his fists.

"I did," grunted a brutal-faced young giant, who, with two helpers, was struggling to lift an upright piano over the low wall. "Sorry. Didn't see you there. Give us a hand with this, will you?"

Harley nodded sullenly and reached over to get a grip of the instrument. Together they hoisted it to the top of the wall, where they rested it. The young giant released his hold to spring over the wall and secure a fresh grip. The instrument toppled and crashed back upon the pavement with a mighty jangling. The key-fall split with the impact and the imitation-ivory keys fanned comically.

"What the hell did you let go for?" shouted the young giant to his original helpers.

"We thought you had it," answered one, feebly, while the other suppressed a laugh.

"Well, I didn't have it! Now it's nah-poohed!"

The young giant leapt upon the pavement again and stooped to lift the wreck.

"Come on!" he yelled angrily.

"What are you going to do with it. It'll do there, won't it?"

"Come on! Heave it over! And none of your back-chat!"

With savage strength they heaved it over, and Harley found it necessary to side-step quickly as it stood upright on the shingle for a moment and crashed upon its face.

"Yours, mate," the young giant assured Harley, with a generous wave of his hands. "Play 'Home, Sweet Home' on it, and we'll all come and have a good cry."

He went back to his work of salvage.

Harley, after regarding the piano and the children who gathered upon it in delight, sighed wearily, turned and followed him across the street.

The incident had revived his courage a little and banished his nausea, and he forced himself to contemplate the possibility that Grace and Joan had been somewhere in the streets at the time of the shake. There had been hundreds of people in the streets at that moment, and comparatively few had been killed and injured. Perhaps Grace had been injured and was now being cared for in the hospital camp. He would not believe that anything worse had happened to her. It was not possible after the divine resurgence of hope of the morning.

He looked up as he approached the mass of smoking ruins which was all that remained of the imposing Masonic Hotel. All the morning he had avoided looking in this direction lest he should be compelled to admit the possibility that his loved ones had died here. Now it obtruded itself, and he found himself looking at the ruins in spite of himself.

A crowd of curious people stood in the roadway at a respectful distance from the walls which threatened to fall at any moment. Under these death-traps were braver folk, straining and sweating to make ingress to the fire-blackened tomb of many victims. Some worked recklessly with black smoke curling around them, their mouths and nostrils shielded with damp rags, prising out smouldering beams with any lever which came to hand. Some had found a way beneath the mass where a doorway had resisted the terrible strain.

It was through this doorway that two men carried a small body just as James Harley elbowed his way unwillingly through the awed crowd. Ten-

derly they laid it in a cleared space in the roadway beside two other still shapes covered with a torn curtain. Someone stepped forward and covered the small body with a rain-coat.

James Harley stopped short as he glimpsed the flaxen hair spreading beyond the kindly covering. He stared, blanched, and choked. He put out a hand for support as his knees trembled uncontrollably. A woman's hand caught it, and he started as though he were stung. He moved forward fearfully. Not for a moment did he doubt who lay beneath the rain-coat.

He knew that he had found his child.

He sank upon his knees, unhindered by the crowd, and lifted a corner of the coat fearfully.

Joan stared at him with sightless eyes. Her face was blackened with smoke and dust; her right hand was raised as though to shield her head, and from between the tiny clenched fingers there protruded the bright edge of a new shilling.

James Harley sobbed, and called her name. He lifted the coat a little further, then dropped it with a cry of anguish. He crouched down and covered his face with his hands. The fire had taken the child's legs.

He knelt so for many minutes, his agony respected by the silent crowd; then the woman who had caught his hand touched his shoulder gently.

He looked up and moved obediently. Two grim-faced rescuers laid another body where he had knelt. It was but a charred and twisted effigy of a human —a woman.

"We found 'em together," one of the men said in a low voice.

James Harley shrank in horror from the ghastly figure. He staggered back into the crowd, throwing his arm before his eyes to shut out the horror. He cried out with a strange animal cry of pain, then he raised his face and his clenched fists to the bright sky and cursed Heaven and Patricia Weybourn.

He cursed the woman who had made him a murderer; he cursed her waking and sleeping, living and dead, with the practised invective and trained phraseology of the writer of romance and with the fervour of a fanatic priest.

"She tempted me!" he cried. "She tempted me!"

It was the feeble excuse of the original Adam mourning his lost Eden, the everlasting admission of man's inherent weakness.

"The woman tempted me, and I did eat . . . ."

Kindly hands seized him and led him away.

* * * *

CHAPTER XVI.

" . . . This *is* our concern, ladies and gentlemen! The concern of every one of us! These are our people, our blood relations, our brothers and sisters, hungry and homeless, robbed of their all by this terrible disaster, robbed of their loved ones! Men, whom yesterday were accounted rich, are penniless to-day! They and their wives and children are dependent upon us, ladies and gentlemen, for sustenance and shelter!

"Shall we refuse them?

"No!

"This is no time for the indulgence of petty spites—for the futile class-distinctions upon which we pride ourselves. In this hour of national calamity we must pull together and do our utmost to bring relief to the sufferers.

"A year ago we had the West Coast shake, and the nation rose nobly to the call for aid. Now we have a much greater disaster, and again the nation rises generously. Next year — next month — to-morrow!—it may be our turn to suffer. Let us do as we would be done by.

"On behalf of the citizens of this town, I have telegraphed the Prime Minister that we will billet three hundred refugees for so long as may be desired.

I will ask those ladies and gentlemen who have room in their homes for one or more of these homeless sufferers to give their names to the secretary at the close of the meeting.

"May I ask for a show of hands of those who are prepared to accommodate one or more of these poor people?

"Ah! Thank you, ladies and gentlemen! Thank you! It is extremely gratifying to observe such a magnificent response. You make me very proud.

"We come, now, to the matter of the organisation for the collecting and dispatch of relief supplies. I am going to suggest that the town be cut up into blocks, and that separate committees be set up to arrange for the handling of donations in each district. Already some supplies have been sent to the stricken area by some of our more energetic citizens; but, it seems to me, without organisation we shall have considerable overlapping. Several ladies and gentlemen have signified their willingness to act on the various committees. I will read their names, and ask all who are willing to assist in the collection and packing of goods to stay behind after the meeting . . . ."

At public meetings in every community in the country, executives, dressed in brief authority, addressed crowds momentarily shaken from their calm by the catastrophe. They spoke ably or with difficulty; and the burden of their speech was identical from North Cape to the Bluff.

"Let us forget ourselves in mutual endeavour to assist others."

On this, the day following the earthquake, national generosity flamed at white heat. At this moment the nation was willing and eager to provide shelter, food and clothing for every inhabitant of the devastated territory, and to pour out treasure enough to rebuild the destroyed towns on a magnificent scale. It waited with its wealth in its hand; waited to be asked—individually.

It was the psychological moment for ungrudged giving. Unfortunately, no mechanism has yet been devised to take full advantage of such a phenomenon.

* * * *

Patricia Weybourn leaned against the back wall in a crowded theatre in New Plymouth, and listened to the speakers whose eloquence moved her not at all.

Her expression was hard. Her eyes glittered coldly, and her lips curled in a sneer as the representatives of several local bodies grandiloquently presented cheques to the common relief fund amid applause. She detected the eternal personal motive in every speech and action of the executives and the donors—the little self-glorifications which are instinctive in the human race.

She smiled cynically when a speaker appealed to his audiences to "forget our little snobbishnesses in the present need for united effort"; and when the same speaker announced that Mrs. Langham—"Mrs. Percival Quesne Langham—has consented to act as chairwoman of the No. 2 Committee"—she laughed and drew the attention of many scandalised eyes.

Mrs. Langham, the most snobbish of them all!

The woman who bled her husband white that she might entertain at bridge three times a week and motor resplendently to the houses of stylish society which detested her but considered it unwise to say so!

Mrs. Percival Quesne Langham, who pushed her way unblushingly into every public movement, and headed every subscription list with her long-suffering husband's cheques; whose principal business in life seemed to be the broadcasting of scurrilous rumours, who boasted of blue blood, and who referred to New Zealanders as "colonials."

It was so funny as to be almost tragic, thought the girl. Very well! If Mrs. Percival Quesne Langham could forget her "snobbishness," so could Patricia Weybourn. They would work together in

united effort to relieve suffering. The arrangement should prove a distraction.

Life was terribly flat for Patricia Weybourn at this time. For her there was no joy in sacrifice. She did not feel that she had done a noble thing in sending her lover back to his wife. She considered, and called herself, a fool. Harley meant life to her—life in all its glorious fulness—and she had thrown it away. For whom? For a woman who, possibly, had lovers of her own. These quiet little women were deep.

Yes, she insisted, she had been a fool. What did she owe to Grace, anyhow? A friendship which she had forgotten for years? Hospitality? What were such little things in a whole life-time?

In her heart she cursed the earthquake and all it entailed. She felt no sympathy with the sufferers. Her own suffering forbade it. The earthquake had robbed her of her chance of happiness. It had raised an eternal barrier between her and the man she loved as she had never thought to love. Had it not occurred she would have been in her lover's arms at this moment, dreaming of happy years ahead. Nothing else could have moved her to act with a quixotry entirely foreign to her make-up. She would have claimed and held Harley though an army of Graces wept and pleaded their Joans on her threshold.

But, with Grace dead, or injured——! Oh, why had the woman chosen to go to Napier instead of to Auckland, Rotorua, or the South Island?

She was sorry for poor little Grace, of course. Life had not treated Grace fairly. But she should have recognised her limitations—recognised that she was not physically equipped to hold a man like Harley enslaved for life. She had been wrong to use deception to capture and imprison him—the deception of a dependent weakness which no real man could ignore or fail to feel flattered by. If Harley had ever loved her, he must have become merely a husband long since. The two were mismated. Pas-

sion had slept in him—a passion which she, Patricia Weybourn, alone had been able to awaken.

Now Grace, by her very weakness, held the lovers apart. She had won by leaving their consciences to fight for her. She had left the field, vanquished, and had become the victor by an accident; and, if she now lay dead over there, the victory could never be voided. The memory of her voice, of her gentle manner, of her calculated nobility, would ensure that Harley remain faithful to her in death as he had not been in life. Death would magnify her virtues, and falsely colour those of the woman who remained alive.

After all, one could not fight a dead friend.

But one might fight a living enemy and therein find a relief from heartache.

Mrs. Langham was Patricia Weybourn's enemy. She was the natural enemy of all modistes, milliners and shop assistants. She was arrogant; ridiculous in her slavish following of fashions which never seemed to suit her; soulless in her bargaining; of a commanding presence when suitably corseted; loud of voice; beady of eye; tight of mouth; haughty in the presence of those of a lower social strata, and fulsome to those above her.

Patricia recalled her encounters with Mrs. Percival Quesne Langham. She recalled Mrs. Langham's innuendoes and pryings concerning the Harleys; she recalled the lady's wordy protest against her bill, and her threat to report the "disgraceful behaviour" of the New Plymouth manageress (who, she had reason to believe, was old enough to conduct herself with decorum in and out of business hours "if she cared to") to the head office in Auckland. She recalled many unpleasant things about Mrs. Langham, and was grateful for a hate to indulge in this desolate hour.

She would do two worthy things simultaneously. She would perform her part in the work of relief,

and humble the haughty Mrs. Langham to the earth in so doing.

"Surely," she thought, smiling cynically, "the Recording Angel would give her several good marks for that!"

Others had endeavoured to humble Mrs. Langham, but the lady had frightened them off or outmanœuvred them. Patricia Weybourn had no capacity for fear now. She had nothing more to lose. And in worldly wisdom and recklessness of tongue she knew herself to be Mrs. Langham's superior.

A wild desire to smash this town which had broken her, to outrage its snobocracy by tearing it apart and exposing its straw stuffing to the jeers of the crowd, to give the community something to remember her by, took possession of her. She was finished with the place, but she would leave with her head up and a memorable cloud of dust behind her.

After that, nothing mattered. She would lose herself somewhere, no doubt. Who cared what became of her? Not she.

When the meeting had broken up, groups of earnest men and women remained upon the stage and in the auditorium—committees Nos. 1 to 7, and their helpers—making plans. The chairman of the meeting discussed the position with the newly-appointed secretary of the newly-elected Earthquake Relief Board in low tones. Curious idlers filled the exits and lingered in the aisles.

Mrs. Langham was holding an informal court in the front stalls, receiving suggestions from the members of her respectful committee with regal tolerance, and her strident objections could be heard above the din of many voices.

Patricia Weybourn approached the No. 2 Committee without that deference which the chairwoman considered her due from one so far beneath her socially. Consequently, the chairwoman failed to notice

the intruder, although Patricia stood directly before her.

It was some moments later when Patricia took advantage of a mild dispute regarding the advisability of sending pillow-cases to the stricken area to offer a suggestion.

"Why not stick to absolute necessities, such as food and clothing?" she asked bluntly. "Something to cover their nakedness and fill their stomachs? The chances are they have no pillows."

Mrs. Langham smiled frostily, her eyebrows questing skywards.

No. 2 Committee followed the lead of its chairwoman and regarded Patricia with disapproval.

"My dear Miss Weybourn," said Mrs. Langham, making a bored gesture with her hand to intimate her followers, "I have chosen my committee, and I daresay we shall be able to do some little good. I am sorry there are no vacancies here."

Any other than Patricia would have accepted the dismissal, and Mrs. Langham's expression became one of suffering as the girl spoke again.

"I shall be pleased to work under the direction of the committee, Mrs. Langham," Patricia informed her, with a smile of fictitious meekness. "Anything I can do to help——"

"We are already inundated with offers of help, thank you," lied the other unblushingly. "We have more help than we know how to use. Good-night!"

Mrs. Langham turned her commanding back upon the girl, and the five elderly ladies and two elderly subdued men of her committee followed faithfully. No. 2 Committee, in its entirety, had heard of, and seen, Miss Weybourn in her leisure and business hours, and it felt that her presence emphasised its own obvious righteousness. Her audacity in imagining that No. 2 Committee would welcome her help was pitiable rather than ridiculous.

No. 2 Committee moved in a body to a row of stalls further down the auditorium.

Patricia followed, smiling maliciously.

Mrs. Langham, having seated herself with the aid of one of the elderly subdued men, frowned angrily when she glanced up to find the girl confronting her.

"Well?" she snapped, registering her approval of her committee's attitude by quick glances to right and left and a meaning lift of her upper lip. "Is there something else?"

"I am awaiting the committee's instructions, Mrs. Langham," answered Patricia, with a provocative smile. "This is not the moment for snobbishness, and you cannot refuse offers of help, no matter how thickly they come."

"Indeed?" asked Mrs. Langham, with a short laugh.

"Indeed, Mrs. Langham," affirmed the girl. "You see, this is not your private earthquake. It is the concern of every one of us. I insist on doing my share to help."

"A commendable resolve, Miss Weybourn," said Mrs. Langham tartly. "I am sure you will be able to find many who will value your services. I regret that Mr. Harley is not here to-night. I felt sure that we might depend upon his services. I'm sure he ——."

Patricia flushed, and restrained her anger with difficulty.

"As No. 2 Committee will have control of the area in which I live, I claim the right to assist it, Mrs. Langham," she interrupted in a cold, level voice.

"No. 2 Committee thanks you, Miss Weybourn, and regrets that it cannot use you," replied Mrs. Langham with icy finality. "Good-night!"

Idlers in the vicinity, sensing an interesting development, drifted in the direction of the No. 2 Committee. The chairman of the meeting interrupted an argument by the secretary with a slight gesture, and nodded in the direction of Mrs. Langham. The secretary looked in that direction with

interest. Nos. 1 and 3 to 7 Committees (inclusive) interrupted their deliberations and looked enquiringly. In a few moments most of the other people in the theatre were looking in the direction of No. 2 Committee. For Mrs. Langham had intended that she should be heard, and now sat waiting for the general attention which she considered she merited.

She knew that the low-bred girl before her was spoiling for a fight. She realised that her reference to Harley had stung the girl to recklessness. She welcomed this opportunity to publicly repay the insolence and pin-sticking of this bold creature who cared nothing for her own reputation and that of the town upon which she had sprung from some mysterious and doubtful past.

"Good-night, Miss Weybourn," she repeated, as the girl made no move to go. "You will excuse me, I'm sure, but I have some private business to transact with my committee."

"Pardon me, Mrs. Langham," replied Patricia with equal distinctness, "I fail to see what private business you can have with a committee engaged on national affairs."

"Really, Miss Weybourn, your attitude and persistence are wearing. I have told you that we cannot use your services. I have thanked you for the offer ——."

"You have no right to refuse my services ——."

"This is a New Plymouth effort, Miss Weybourn, since you insist upon the reason of our refusal, and the Committee feels it is right to refuse the help of—ah—outsiders."

Immediately she had spoken Mrs. Langham knew that she had blundered, for there were murmurs of protest in every direction. She heard someone on the stage mention snobs. One of the elderly subdued men on her committee had the temerity to click his tongue deprecatingly. Too late she remembered that the girl had the advantage of youth and a very decided beauty, and that most men,

being fools, would feel called upon to click their tongues in her defence.

"Of course," she added hastily, with a smile meant to disarm Patricia, who had flushed angrily at the insult, "when I say 'outsiders,' Miss Weybourn, I mean—ah—well——."

"Outsiders," Patricia finished the sentence for her grimly. "Those outside your own set."

"Not at all, not at all. What I mean is that I consider it unwise to include a comparative stranger in our circle of friends. You mustn't misunderstand. My committee consists of old friends; friends who have helped me on other committees. We have done much good work in the past together, and we feel that we shall accomplish more if we are left alone to work in our own way."

Patricia looked keenly and appraisingly at the old friends, all of whom, save one, allowed their disapproval of her to show on their faces. The exception was the man who had clicked his tongue. His eyes seemed to beg her to carry on the good work.

"You require new blood on your committee, Mrs. Langham," she decided, clipping her words and speaking in a raised voice. "I see one or two members who have long since lost the confidence of the public."

"Well!" exclaimed one of the members, in pained surprise. "Well, I never!"

Some idler chuckled audibly, and there was a faint movement of approval in the audience, for whose close attention Mrs. Langham evinced less gratification than she should have done.

"And am I to understand that you represent the public of New Plymouth?" asked Mrs. Langham, staring up haughtily at this hussy who dared thus to publicly challenge her august judgment.

"Yes!" came the instant answer from somewhere in the crowd.

"Then the public is unfortunate!" snapped Mrs. Langham, losing her temper.

She rose to her feet and confronted the girl, separated from her by a row of stalls.

"Why, I never heard of such a thing!" she cried. "Do you know to whom you are speaking, young woman? Do you know who I am?"

"Of course. Mrs. Percival Quesne Langham, and a snob."

Mrs. Langham dilated, amazed at such daring.

"Snob?" she squeaked incredulously.

"What else?" asked Patricia, smiling coldly. "Why, else, do you call yourself 'Quesne' when you were christened 'Queenie'?"

The question was in the worst of taste, and Patricia knew it. She knew, also, that the public taste is never high, and the resultant laughter in the audience gratified her.

"Oh!" gasped Mrs. Langham. "Oh!"

She recognised that she was in a tight corner—that her social career was in the balance. She upbraided herself for ever having disclosed the ghastly secret of her baptismal name to this unspeakable creature in a moment when credit for the purchase of a gown was essential. Now she would be called Quesne to her face, and Queenie behind her back. The name would damn her. Already she discerned a pained expression upon the faces of her friends on the committee.

She adopted the tactics of weaker women. She glared at Patricia for a moment, then, with a faint sniff, fumbled for the fragment of cambric which was by courtesy her handkerchief.

"I never was so insulted," she moaned piteously, as she sank into her seat; "never!"

She bowed her head, valiantly choking back the urge to retort in her accustomed manner—to answer insult with insult—to speak her mind about this shameless, insolent creature who dared to humiliate her thus. But instinct warned her that the time was inopportune. She must wait.

There was a moment of silence, an awkward moment made even more embarrassing by Mrs. Langham's bass sobbing. Then the elderly subdued man, who had clicked his tongue, fumbled in a pocket and produced a silver-mounted bottle of smelling salts which he hastened to offer to the distressed lady.

The man was Mr. Percival Langham, barrister and solicitor, and the bottle was the identical one which he had carried to public meetings ever since the desire for peace had urged him to accompany his wife to such functions. He had learned that smelling-salts were potent to avert slumber.

"My dear, my dear!" he murmured, proffering the bottle. "Pull yourself together."

He looked up at Patricia reproachfully, yet the defiant girl thought she detected a glint of admiration in his eyes.

"You are unkind, Miss Weybourn," was all he could force himself to say. "Rather unkind."

At this moment, the chairman of the meeting, who had made his way unostentatiously into the midst of the No. 2 Committee, spoke placatingly.

"Pardon me, Miss Weybourn," he said, addressing Patricia directly and smiling pleasantly, "I have not had the pleasure of meeting you before, but, of course, I have seen you, and Mrs. Warburton has often spoken of you."

"How do you do?" Patricia replied formally, taking the proffered hand and smiling her sweetest smile.

"You must excuse my speaking to you without an introduction," continued Mr. Warburton, seeming not to be aware of the look of baffled rage on Mrs. Langham's raised face. "But formality must be waived for the moment. Observing your eagerness to help, I venture to think that you might care to assist my committee—if the No. 2 Committee cannot use you."

Patricia hesitated.

"I quite understand that it would be more convenient for you to assist Mrs. Langham's committee —it will have charge in your district—but we are all in need of willing helpers, and ——."

Mrs. Langham, who for years had angled in vain for an invitation to the Warburton home, saw that the moment was pregnant with possibilities. She must rise or fall on an instant decision.

She decided to rise, no matter the cost to her peculiar pride.

She sprang to her feet abruptly, toppling her husband into a seat and smashing his precious bottle.

"I—I'm so sorry, Miss Weybourn," she apologised, dabbing her lined cheeks, from which the powder bloom had departed. "I had no right to speak as I did. I—we are all very much upset by this terrible catastrophe, and we are not responsible for our hasty words. Mr. Warburton is quite right. This is no time for quarrelling over anything, especially over such trivial—ah—imaginary trifles. Please forgive me?"

"Does that mean that my committee is not to have Miss Weybourn's assistance?" asked Mr. Warburton, smiling at the repentant lady.

"I'm sorry, my dear Mr. Warburton," answered Mrs. Langham, with a fond glance at Patricia, whose ironical expression chafed her almost unbearably. "We cannot spare her."

She glanced at No. 2 Committee, whose expression did not bear her out in this. She was not dismayed.

"I can't tell you how humiliated I feel," she continued, with a catch in her voice. "I cannot imagine how I came to be so—so ——."

She reached out and clasped Patricia's nearest hand.

"You will help us?" she pleaded, smiling through the tears which she could command at will. "And you will forgive me?"

Patricia drew her hand away firmly. She looked into the older woman's eyes, and her gaze was piercing and cold.

"I will help you, Mrs. Langham," she answered, her words sounding more like a threat than an offer of assistance. "I will forgive you when I am satisfied that your apology is sincere. At the moment, it is not. You are not even remotely repentant. You are merely playing for an invitation to the Warburtons'—as you have been playing for it for years."

The words created a profound sensation.

There was a moment of dead silence, then somebody applauded. Immediately there followed a wave of sound—cat-calls, laughter, and exclamations of approval, admiration or condemnation. Mr. Warburton ran a finger around his collar and coughed in embarrassment. Mrs. Langham uttered a pitiful shriek and collapsed into her seat with a thud which threatened the whole row of stalls. Mr. Langham, squeezing himself awkwardly between the rows of seats, searched for a bottle which he hoped he could not find, chuckling uncontrollably and fearful that his wife would observe him.

Mr. Warburton spoke to Patricia, who sneered openly at her chosen enemy.

"Isn't that rather unkind, Miss Weybourn?" he asked gently.

"The truth is seldom kind, Mr. Warburton. Good-night."

The people in the aisles moved aside respectfully as Patricia made her way to the exit. Most of them approved her sense and her courage.

Mr. Warburton followed her and touched her arm as she was leaving the building.

"Excuse me, Miss Weybourn ——."

Patricia turned so sharply that he was taken aback.

"Well?" she snapped.

"Miss—er—Weybourn, if I might advise you. I—er—I think it rather unwise in you to—er—to

fight Mrs. Langham. She can be a—er—a rather unscrupulous opponent, you know."

Mr. Warburton felt and looked decidedly uncomfortable, and spoke with difficulty. He was a man of peace. He detested quarrels; scandal sickened him. He did his best to avoid and avert both in the town which was his pride.

Patricia drew herself up. Her eyes blazed. She beat her breast with her clenched hands. The ferocity of her expression appalled the worthy man.

"Fight!" she said, speaking between her clenched teeth in a low voice. "I'll fight her to a finish—and I don't care whose finish it is! I shall assist No. 2 Committee, or fight it *en masse*! It is a collection of snobs of the worst type! I'm an outsider! A courtesan!"

"Miss Weybourn!"

"Ask them! Ask Mrs. Percival Quesne Langham! She knows! She spends her life peeping into other people's affairs! She is without sin!—without conscience!—without anything but a desire to be everything in this tin-pot town!"

"My dear girl——"

"Fight! I feel like fighting the world! It doesn't like me, and I don't like it!"

Her expression changed swiftly. She spread her hands, shrugged her shoulders, sighed whimsically, and smiled.

"End of Round One," she said. "The challenger wins on points, having the support of the principal onlookers."

She gripped the surprised Mr. Warburton by the upper arm gratefully—a man-like gesture.

"Sorry I was rude about your town, Mr. Warburton. It's a grand little town, and you're not responsible for some of its inhabitants. Good-night."

Mr. Warburton watched her disappearing figure with approving eyes, then he turned back into the theatre.

"So it's ' Queenie' Langham, eh?" he mused. "I'm

sure Sylvia will find that most interesting. Looks as though the French ancestor has moved further back in history. Bah! The woman is impossible."

He was rather abstracted during the remainder of the proceedings, and short in his replies to Mrs. Langham, who fawned upon him. Every now and then it would occur to him that perhaps Harley had not been so much to blame for his indiscretion, after all.

* * * *

In the comparative darkness of Courtenay Street, Patricia Weybourn quickly walked off the glow of battle. She walked the entire length of the street twice, striving to hold her hate of Mrs. Langham to the exclusion of her love for Harley. She was not strong enough.

She leaned against a retaining wall and gazed upwards at the calm, star-speckled sky—and at last came the tears which she had almost despaired of shedding.

A few belated passers-by peered curiously at the girl who stood motionless with up-flung head in the full light of the stars, but the early dawn alone had power to disturb her.

CHAPTER XVII.

Round 2 of the Langham v. Weybourn fight took place on the morning of the third day after the earthquake.

Mrs. Langham, dismayed to find the crust of her social world so thin that it was necessary for her to tread lightly if she were to continue to live in it, strove diligently to pass over the distressing scene at the theatre with an airy lightness which ill-became her mental and physical heaviness. She professed to "see the funny side of it"—in which profession she was very much alone. She admitted to an unpardonable hastiness, and said that the least she could do

was to insist that the poor girl became a member of No. 2 Committee, which, surely, would prove that she had been sincere in her apology. Did not everyone think so?

Before breakfast on the morning following the scene, Mrs. Langham telephoned her invitation to Patricia at her flat, protesting that she really could not wait a moment longer before "putting things right, between us, my dear."

Patricia, tired and listless after her night of sleepless thought, listened in silence, her tongue in her cheek.

"Very well," she replied curtly, and replaced the receiver.

Mrs. Langham judged, by the hostility in the acceptance, that the insolent hussy would prove an obstacle to the smooth working of her committee. She said as much to her husband at breakfast. Mr. Langham replied that he sincerely hoped not. He did not mean what he said, and was thankful that the morning paper screened his features at the moment.

Mrs. Langham's forebodings were fulfilled.

From the very moment of her entry into the work of No. 2 Committee Patricia Weybourn proved a disturbing influence. After the brief formal greetings of Mrs. Langham and her old friends in the bare room which had been allotted to them as a receiving depot for donations of goods, she removed her hat and turned back her silken cuffs.

"Where is a telephone?" she asked briefly.

Mrs. Langham and her old friends, who were grouped in the centre of the room eyeing the dusty walls and floor with disapproval, were offended by the girl's authoritative tone.

"A broom seems to be the first consideration," observed Mrs. Langham, pointedly.

"It's an easy matter to borrow a broom," replied Patricia. "Trestles, benches and packing cases may not prove so easy. I know where I can get a sign

for nothing to put over the door outside to let people know where we are. And there are carters to arrange for. One of you borrow a broom while I get something started."

After which curt order she left the room in search of a telephone.

She returned within a few minutes. Mrs. Langham and her old friends were still grouped in the centre of the unswept floor. They fell silent as the girl re-entered.

Patricia spoke directly to Mrs. Langham.

"I've arranged for trestles and tables. We need them for sorting and packing. The carter will be here with them in half-an-hour. Two wholesale firms are sending packing cases by their own trucks. Two signs, one for the outer door and one for this, will be in place before lunch-time. I have 'phoned advertisements to the *News* and the *Herald*, who are inserting them free of charge. The next thing to be done——"

Mrs. Langham, despite her good resolutions, interrupted angrily.

"This is not the way to proceed, Miss Weybourn. If you had had any experience in public affairs you would know that it is for the committee as a whole to make whatever arrangements may be deemed necessary. I very much resent your usurpation of my position, as also do my old friends, who ——"

"If you had had any experience of real necessity, Mrs. Langham, you would know that this is a time for actions rather than foolish discussion," interrupted Patricia in her turn. "Please continue your dissection of my character, ladies and gentlemen, while I go and hunt for a broom."

She flashed a contemptuous glance over the astonished and embarrassed group and again left the room.

That first day was a memorable one for No. 2 Committee. Mrs. Langham and her old friends did more real work for charity than they had done in all their long careers of voluntary public service.

They actually suffered the indignity of perspiration, and one pious lady once so far forgot her piety as to use a profane expression.

Mr. Percival Langham and Patricia alone put all their energies into the work willingly. An unspoken alliance existed between them. They understood each other.

"Aren't you rather neglecting your business?" Patricia asked him, as she held up an end of a shelf while he nailed it in position.

"Oh, no," he answered lightly. "My business is to assure fair play for my clients—and my friends."

He glanced at her as he said the last words. Patricia smiled in reply.

Mrs. Langham observed the glance and the smile, and grew more sulky than ever. She could not bring herself to speak at all, merely endorsing Patricia's curt orders with an affirmative nod. She would have liked to tear the impertinent creature limb from limb in these laborious hours, and was convinced that her old friends held the same idea behind their outraged and sweating brows. As for Langham——! She would have a few words to say to him, later.

The next morning, the third after the earthquake, Mrs. Langham's attitude had changd. She was her old, bright, commanding self when she entered the depot shortly after nine o'clock. She was accompanied by her husband, who wore his customary deferential air and trailed meekly behind her.

She was surprised to see the whole committee already assembled. Her old friends were not early-risers as a rule, but, of course, her own position demanded the sacrifice of her "beauty sleep" at this time.

Only Patricia worked. The others seemed to await orders.

Patricia was in no mood to give orders this morning. Grace and Joan Harley had been listed with the dead in the *Herald* of the previous evening and,

now that the barrier of death stood definitely between herself and James Harley, the last faint hope of happiness with him had died—the hope of which she had not been conscious until she read the news. She had thought herself hopeless when Harley had left her; now she felt herself to be hopeless indeed.

This morning nothing interested her, neither the committee nor Mrs. Langham, the earthquake nor the work she was engaged upon. Her brain seemed dead. She seemed to have lost all capacity for further suffering or emotion.

Mrs. Langham revived her.

The large lady, pleasantly surprised to find that Patricia had abdicated the leadership of her own accord, smiled genially upon her old friends and pointedly ignored the girl, who was packing food-stuffs into a large case in a corner of the room.

"Now, let me see," she began happily, divesting herself of her gloves and handbag. "Where shall we start this morning? Ah, yes. We had better undo all these parcels and classify the contents. Have you the scissors, Percival?"

For some time Mrs. Langham and her old friends fussily undid parcels and classified their contents, discussing meanwhile the aches and pains resulting from their labours of yesterday, and expressing the opinion that No. 2 Committee was an example to every other committee in the country.

Patricia worked in silence and alone. The old friends avoided her, and Mrs. Langham continued to ignore her.

At last came the lead for which Mrs. Langham had waited. One of the old friends mentioned the Harleys.

"Such a nice little thing, she was," said the old friend, referring to Grace. "So quiet and unassuming."

"Clever, too," said another old friend. "I have heard that she furnished the plots for her husband's stories."

Mrs. Langham noted that Patricia had ceased her work, although she still stooped over the packing-case.

"I regard Mrs. Harley as one of the most charming young women I have ever been privileged to meet," said Mrs. Langham, raising her voice somewhat. "The Harleys are neighbours of ours, you know. It is very sad."

"My husband tells me that he rushed off to Napier on Tuesday night," said the first old friend. "What a terrible shock it must have been to find them both—like that. A sensitive man, such as he must be——"

"Of course, it must have been an awful blow, my dear," agreed Mrs. Langham, "especially under the circumstances."

The significance of the latter words did not go unnoticed, and although Mrs. Langham had her back turned, she knew that Patricia had raised her head.

The old friends drew closer together.

"There have been rumours that the Harleys were not altogether happy," said one insinuatingly.

Mrs. Langham shrugged her shoulders non-committally and was silent.

"Wasn't there some talk of another woman?" asked another.

"S-sh!"

Mrs. Langham's sibilant caution could have been heard in the next room, and her cautious nod directed the gaze of her old friends over her shoulder.

The old friends shot startled glances in the direction of Patricia as comprehension came to them. Then they became excessively busy as they saw that the girl had straightened and was approaching with a curious expression upon her white and drawn face.

Mrs. Langham, happy but somewhat apprehensive, continued her task of folding clothes in pretended ignorance of the girl's approach. She was

remarking on the beauty of the weather when Patricia spoke.

"Mrs. Langham?"

The lady turned, raising her eyebrows and smiling obligingly.

"Yes?"

"Would you care to explain, Mrs. Langham?" asked Patricia quietly.

"Explain what?"

"The 'Ssh!'"

Mrs. Langham's smile faded. She became stern.

"Are you in the habit of eavesdropping, Miss Weybourn?" she asked severely.

"Yes, when you and your kind are whispering," was the uncompromising answer.

"Then you will have heard and understood, Miss Weybourn," said Mrs. Langham, with a curl of her lip.

Patricia's right hand came into contact with Mrs. Langham's cheek so sharply that it raised a tiny cloud of pink dust and revealed a network of tiny wrinkles.

The sound of the blow echoed in the long room, and the old friends gasped in horror as they backed away. To his everlasting shame Mr. Langham thrust his hands into his pockets, strolled to the window and examined the sky while he strove to whistle a half-forgotten tune.

After the first shock of surprise, Mrs. Langham looked around for her natural protector. The sight of his back and the sound of his whistle roused her to fury.

"You—you hussy!" she barked. "How dare you! How dare you!"

"I'll dare anything where you are concerned, Mrs. Langham," replied Patricia evenly, advancing her open hand again. "Will you explain the 'Ssh!' or must I strike you again?"

"You dare! You dare!" challenged Mrs. Langham, drawing back a little nevertheless. "I'll have you given in charge! Percival!"

Mr. Langham continued to gaze at the sky, deaf to the appeal.

"I'll take the risk," said Patricia, feinting with her right hand and striking with her left. "Now!"

"Percival! Percival!" screamed the injured lady, her eyes filling with tears of rage and pain.

Mr. Langham turned slowly.

"What is it?" he asked mildly, frowning over the top of his pince-nez.

"Call a policeman, and have this woman given in charge!"

There was a moment of silence.

Mr. Langham looked at his wife and at the girl who faced her.

"Don't be ridiculous, Queenie!" he said, and returned to his study of the sky.

Mrs. Langham and her old friends ceased to breathe for a moment, so amazing was the spectacle of a worm attempting to turn.

Patricia smiled maliciously.

"What did you say, Percival?" demanded his wife imperiously, when she had recovered her breath. "What did you say?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Queenie!"

Percival Langham turned and approached the two women. His wife stared at him, fascinated, almost forgetful of her enmity in her amazement.

"You asked for it, my dear," he told his wife. "I have told you often that your tongue would get you into trouble some day. As for calling a constable, I fancy you spoke without consideration. I do not care to have my wife appear as defendant in an assault case, any more than my wife would care to argue this matter in court. Personally, I think you owe Miss Weybourn another apology."

Mrs. Langham's eyes rolled upwards until the whites beneath the pupils were visible. She gasped

twice and sank upon a convenient bench. Her heels drummed upon the floor and she moaned pitiously.

"The bottle of smelling-salts is broken, my dear," Mr. Langham reminded her as he returned to the window.

The old friends gathered around their fallen leader and obscured her from the mocking gaze of the brazen creature who stood regarding them.

In a moment they were thrown aside with violence as Mrs. Langham fairly bounced to her feet and confronted her tormentor.

"I suppose," she shrieked, forgetting her culture and aspirations in this moment of supreme anger, "you didn't move into the Harley house, bag and baggage, last Tuesday? I suppose you didn't clean up the house, make all the beds, do the washing-up and have tea with Harley? I suppose you didn't intend to stay there—knowing you had driven his wife and child away?"

"And I suppose you don't know that I am capable of putting you in the dock on a charge of criminal slander, Mrs. Langham?" returned Patricia icily.

"You would never dare!" breathed Mrs. Langham aghast, the colour leaving her cheeks, her eyes starting in affright.

"You dared me to strike you a moment since," Patricia reminded her quietly. "I have no social standing that I should be afraid of any dare, Mrs. Langham. As sure as God made you, I'll have you in the criminal court if I hear another whisper on this matter from you! My life is my own to live as it pleases me. I will not be subject to a tuppeny-ha'penny social climber such as you!"

There was a dead stillness in the room for a second, then Patricia turned away and moved towards her packing-case.

"That is the end of Round Two," she said. "Now, is there anything else you wished packed with this stuff?"

Mrs. Langham collapsed in earnest. She sat upon a benzine case and wept in bitter humiliation.

"I don't know what I have done to deserve such treatment," she complained. "I have always done my best for everybody, and this is my reward. Embroiled in a vulgar brawl—deserted by my husband——"

The old friends stood about her in a state of indecision. The mention of the criminal court had frightened them and shaken their allegiance. It was very awkward. There were faults on both sides, no doubt, but——

With the last of his courage Percival Langham crossed to the door and spoke over his shoulder as he left hurriedly.

"Serves you damn well right, Queenie!" he said, and fled.

It was a narrow shave, he told himself. Another minute and he would never have been able to muster the courage to get out.

"Great girl!" he muttered admiringly, as he took a "bracer" in the Criterion Bar. "A real Briton! Here's her health."

"Drinking alone?" a friend called to him from the other end of the room.

"No. I'm drinking with a fellow I had given up as dead."

As he left the bar his friend made a significant gesture, and the bar-tender laughed.

CHAPTER XVIII.

The third, and final, round opened with the arrival of Mr. Joseph Ezekiel.

The gentleman, short and rotund, full of energy and alive with the curious mannerisms of his race, middle-aged and wealthy, ill-favoured of feature and hearty of voice, burst into the collecting-depot of No. 2

Committee, removed his hat and smiled ingratiatingly and impartially.

"Good morning, ladies, good morning!" he cried heartily. "So busy we are as the bees this morning, eh? That's fine! Fine! I like to see it!"

He laughed loudly and approached Mrs. Langham with outstretched hand.

"Ah! Mrs. Langham! I know you by your pictures in the paper sometimes. You open bazaars and things. Yes, I can tell your face. How are you?"

He seized Mrs. Langham's hand and shook it vigorously, unheeding the garment it held.

Mrs. Langham froze. She drew her hand away sharply as she recovered from her first surprise, and looked down upon this alien, unspeakable intruder from her loftiest altitude.

"You will pardon me," she said, turning away.

The intruder laughed again.

"You don't know me," he replied. "I can see that easy. My name's Ezekiel, Joseph Ezekiel. Here, I've got my card here somewhere."

He fished a card from one of his vest pockets and held it beneath Mrs. Langham's nose. She glanced at it involuntarily, and her altitude lessened. She turned to him again.

"You are M. Picotarde?" she asked incredulously, thawing rapidly.

Mr. Ezekiel nodded.

"That's one of my dresses you've got on now," he informed her cheerfully. "I designed it myself. I do all my own designing. No use paying away good money to get something done which yourself can do very well as, eh? Rather smart, ain't it? Like the cascade effect? Cheap, too——"

"I'm very pleased to meet you, Mr. Ezekiel." interrupted Mrs. Langham sweetly, disguising her surprise and her repugnance with a mighty effort. "May I introduce my old friends?"

She introduced the old friends to Mr. Ezekiel, who took the opportunity to distribute his business

cards and extend a general invitation to the No. 2 Committee to visit his factory and show-rooms in Auckland at any time, an invitation of which the old friends sweetly promised to take early advantage.

"Yes, most people think I am French—until they meet me," he replied to a polite expression of surprise. "'Picotarde' looks better on a window than 'Ezekiel,' eh? Me? I am a Jew. All the best dress-designers are Jews. Jews are artistic—and they know the value of their brains."

He turned to Mrs. Langham as he threw his hat upon a handy bench.

"Now, what is it, Mrs. Langham?" he asked in a lowered voice. "Very expensive, rushing away from my business like this. What is the matter?"

He waved his right hand in the air and snapped his fingers noisily—a mannerism expressive of great impatience.

"This also is your business, Mr. Ezekiel," answered Mrs. Langham, drawing herself up again and glaring down the length of the room to where Patricia stood with her back to a window, her hands folded before her and an inscrutable expression on her face. "As one of your clients—as a purchaser with a large following of fashionable friends, I may add—I object to being insulted in a crowded theatre and having my face slapped by the woman in charge of your New Plymouth branch. Here, in this very room, she slapped my face twice before my committee!"

Mr. Ezekiel stared incredulously from Mrs. Langham to Patricia—whom he had not noticed previously—and back again.

"Mrs. Langham!" he exclaimed. "This is not altogether true, eh? Something else, eh?"

"I am not in the habit of telling falsehoods, sir," replied Mrs. Langham tartly. "There is the young woman herself. Ask her to deny it. Here are my friends as witnesses. I could, of course, take action in the court, Mr. Ezekiel; but I am not a vengeful woman. Nevertheless, I think that something should

be done to stop this sort of thing in our tradespeople. I hope you will understand and act accordingly."

"I can't believe it!" he muttered, as he made his way to where the girl stood watching him with half-closed, defiant eyes.

He coughed importantly as he halted before her, and hesitated as he noted her expression and her mocking "Good-morning." Patricia Weybourn was nobody's fool. He knew that from experience. That was why he had given her charge of his new branch. But he couldn't have his customers slapped in public, not in these days. In the good days, yes. It would have been good advertising. Now, with business going to pieces, it spelled ruination.

"Good morning, Pat," he replied with a paternal smile, changing his mind about being autocratic. "What is this I hear about your slapping the customers' faces in public? Is that true?"

"So far, I have slapped only one of them, Mr. Ezekiel," Patricia answered coldly. "I hope to extend operations shortly. But you did not advise me you were coming down."

"I didn't have time. Mrs. Langham wired me urgently to come down, and I——"

"Very thoughtful of Mrs. Langham, I'm sure. I must thank her."

Mr. Ezekiel made an impatient gesture.

"Don't you go slapping faces again, Pat," he commanded. "I can't afford it. What becomes of the business when you go slapping faces? Have you thought of that? Where does the business go?"

"Where all your letters have told me it is going—to hell, Mr. Ezekiel," answered the girl sweetly. "But that doesn't concern me——"

Mr. Ezekiel stared.

"Doesn't concern you?" he repeated, amazed and wrathful. "What is the matter with you? Has this earthquake sent you crazy, or what? What do I pay you money for? To come here and slap my customers,

wreck my business, and then tell me it doesn't concern you?"

"Please do not shout," begged Patricia, nodding in the direction of Mrs. Langham and her old friends. "There are ladies present."

She nodded a greeting to Mr. Langham, who had entered and now stood regarding the scene with interest from beside the door.

"I will shout if I wish, Miss Weybourn," stormed the little Jew, his temper getting the upper hand. "I have cause to shout, I shouldn't wonder. Why are you not in the shop? Why are you not attending to business?"

"The sweet cause of charity, Mr. Ezekiel——"

"Charity! I am not paying you for charity, am I? Am I? For what should I pay you for charity, eh? I pay you to work for me, not for charity! And how do you work for me, eh? Slap my customers in the faces! A fine thing! And don't you laugh at me, young lady!"

"I can't help it," confessed Patricia, allowing her contemptuous smile to broaden a little.

"You can't help it, eh?" raved Mr. Ezekiel, his hands performing wondrously in the air on either side of the girl's head. "Well, you have a good laugh, see? Have a good one! This is the one opportunity you get!"

The girl took him at his word. She laughed softly, with a mockery intended for the whole of No. 2 Committee and Mr. Ezekiel.

Mrs. Langham snorted audibly.

"Brazen hussy!" she said, just loud enough for her old friends to hear.

Mr. Ezekiel struggled furiously to drag his wallet from his breast pocket.

"That's right! That's right!" he encouraged Patricia savagely. "Open your mouth wide and laugh right down in your neck. Ha! Ha! Ha! Like that. And then you go and laugh somewhere else! You're sacked!"

He wrenched the wallet free and tore a few bank-notes from its interior.

"Thank you," replied Patricia calmly, holding out her hand. "Does that mean I am free to go now?"

Mr. Ezekiel calmed down abruptly. He cared to part neither with the extra week's salary nor Patricia Weybourn. He changed front with the easy facility of his people.

"Now, look here, Pat," he pleaded, spreading his hands in conciliation and smiling pathetically. "We don't quarrel, you and me. Not after all these years. Don't you mind my temper, my dear. You know what I'm like. We can fix this face-slapping, eh? Of course, we can."

Patricia held her hand extended for the money.

"Please," she said coldly. "You have discharged me before witnesses——"

"Pat——"

"Miss Weybourn, if you please, Mr. Ezekiel."

Mr. Ezekiel stared at the girl keenly for a second, then he shrugged and gave her the money.

"Very well, Miss Weybourn," he snapped, "if that's the way you feel about it. You're sacked, and I pay you before witnesses. Good-bye! You are not the kind of woman I want in charge of my branches. I should have known better."

He turned away sharply, but Patricia stayed him with a compelling grip on his arm.

"For the last two days this virtuous committee has treated me as though I were a woman of the streets," she said, in a voice ominously quiet. "What do you think, Mr. Ezekiel?"

"Is it my place to think?" retorted Mr. Ezekiel, wrenching his arm free. "You know what you are better than I can tell you. Does it matter to me whether you live by yourself or with somebody else's husband? Does it matter to me if you get home at daylight, like you did Wednesday, eh? No! But it matters to my business!"

Patricia leaned back against the window frame and nodded her head. Her lips curled back from her teeth, as she looked her late employer up and down with disgust.

"Did Mrs. Langham tell you all that? You fatten on her and her kind, so I suppose you feel compelled to believe her? It must have been an expensive telegram."

"Well, are they lies?" demanded Mr. Ezekiel.

"The lady never lies, Mr. Ezekiel. She has told you so herself. Stay in New Plymouth for a little while and learn the extent of her fashionable following. Examine your books and see how much her husband has paid you, and how much she owes you."

She straightened and laughed rather hysterically.

"But we are forgetting," she added bitterly. "This is a depot for charitable relief. Let us be charitable!"

She reached for her hat.

Mrs. Langham and her old friends looked upon her preparations for departure in the approving silence which had wrapped them since Mr. Ezekiel took her in hand. All were glad that she had been adequately punished. All were glad to see her go—she made their most expensive gowns appear dowdy by contrast with her own stylish attire.

Patricia paused on her way to the door to address her victorious enemy.

"The end of the third, and final, round, Mrs. Langham. It's been an interesting fight."

"And I win, I think, Miss Weybourn," replied Mrs. Langham complacently, her nose at a crushing elevation. "My dear young lady, whom do you think you are to dare pit yourself against society? I hope you have learned a lesson. Good-morning."

Patricia bowed slightly.

"So glad you feel so happy about it," she mocked.

She stopped at the door to shake hands with Mr. Langham.

"Good-bye, and thank you," she said softly.

Mr. Langham held her hand in an embarrassed manner, and when he spoke he addressed his wife.

"Queenie, we are going home—now."

Mrs. Langham and her old friends regarded Mr. Langham with pained amazement. Did the worm dare to turn again, after its trembling submission of the last two days?

"Did you speak, Percival?" Mrs. Langham asked severely.

"I did," answered Percival promptly, dropping Patricia's hand and moving into the room. "I said we are going home, now! You have resigned from this committee, and you will resign from every other committee of which you are now a member."

"Percival!"

"That you should stoop to such a despicable trick as this is unpardonable, Mrs. Langham!"

"Do you defend this woman?" Mrs. Langham cried angrily.

"I defend my good name, Mrs. Langham," answered her husband sternly. "It is none too early, it seems. I will not have it fouled by such tricks as this."

Mrs. Langham wilted, and showed signs that she would collapse again, but, as none of her old friends seemed properly sympathetic, she changed her mind.

"It is too much!" she wailed. "I do not see——"

"Please!"

Mr. Langham silenced her with a gesture and turned to Mr. Ezekiel.

"Send your account to me as soon as possible," he commanded. "And please note that I will not be responsible for any further accounts unless Mrs. Langham bears my written consent to incur them. I think you may rest assured that I shall never be in your debt again."

Mr. Ezekiel became voluble as Mrs. Langham gave tongue to a loud cry of reproach.

"But, Mr. Langham, why take it out on me?" he pleaded. "What have I done?"

"You have listened to spiteful women, sir. There is no more to be said. Queenie, come along!"

Mrs. Langham made one feeble attempt to recapture her domination.

"Indeed, I will not be treated so——"

"Come along!" commanded Mr. Langham angrily.

Mrs. Langham obeyed, passing through the doorway under the eye of the worm which had suddenly developed some of the most unpopular traits of the sergeant-major.

She passed Patricia in the passage with head held high. The girl, who was loitering in an aimless way, would not have spoken had not the older woman sniffed disdainfully .

"Shall we call it a draw, Mrs. Langham?" asked Patricia sweetly.

Mrs. Langham passed down the stairs and into the street in silence.

Her carriage was even more regal in defeat than it had been in her days of triumph.

Mr. Langham noticed it, and revealed a slight panic in his hurried words to Patricia as he hastened after her.

"Good luck, little lady," he said, in a subdued voice. "Remember me in your prayers lest I have another relapse."

Patricia went out into the sunlight, and was angry when she found that her eyes were wet.

"I must be growing soft," she thought with scorn.

CHAPTER XIX.

Patricia Weybourn's departure from New Plymouth savoured of flight. Within two hours after her final encounter with Mrs. Langham she was seated in a service car headed for the south, and in her heart was fierce resolution never again to set eyes upon, or foot in, the town which had torn her life to tatters.

She had entered the town with high hopes; but they had not been hopes of love. She had been convinced, then, that true love was merely the dream of poets and writers with too much imagination. She had had experiences with men, violent flirtations which had proved the inconstancy of human hearts, and had grown to mock those ardent fools who had proposed marriage and undying devotion.

She had been very sure of herself then. Life had been a glorious thing when she had accepted men's tributes to her beauty and had believed her heart inviolable. Now it was hateful.

Love, to her, had been a repulsive disease whose proper name was Sex—a disease from which she had believed herself immune. Now it had struck her down, and she had hugged the affliction which had taught her the meaning of life so that she could never hope to rid herself of its hurt.

Bitterly she regretted the impulse which had sent her to the Harley bungalow on the day of the earthquake. But for that, Harley might have taken her again when the hurt of Grace's death had been dulled by time. She would never have acted so had she not believed that Grace had survived. Oh, what use in thinking of what might have been? It was all a terrible mess.

Patricia repressed the impulse to look back at the distant houses, the bold rock of Paritutu and the gleaming sea beyond, as the car dipped into the valley of the Meeting of the Waters. She had finished with New Plymouth. She looked ahead at the magnificent mass of Egmont, rising above fertile, wooded lands, majestic, silent, age-old—a constant reminder of the transcience of human life—and an indefinable balm fell upon her heart.

She gazed upon the ever-changing aspect of the lone and glorious mountain as the car traversed the winding road at its foot; she watched the light clouds forming upon it and vanishing—airy masses which obscured it for a little while, then passed, leaving it

as it had been for centuries, and as it will be for centuries to come.

"Life is like that," she said musingly.

"Like what, miss?" asked the driver, beside whom she sat, who had been wondering whether this unusually beautiful passenger were of the sociable sort.

Patricia flushed and looked surprised. She had not intended to utter her thought aloud.

"Like the clouds on the mountain," she explained unwillingly. "It comes and goes, is nothing worth mentioning, and leaves the universe as it found it."

The driver pondered this. He had not expected mournful philosophy in one whom he had judged to be "one of the girls."

"That's so," he agreed vaguely, squinting at the mountain. "Ever been up to the top?" he asked, unwilling to allow the conversation to die now that the ice had been broken.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Have you ever climbed the mountain?"

"No."

The driver failed to observe the finality in the monosyllable, nor did he seem to feel the coldness of the rare "Indeed?" and "Quite so" which were her only contributions to the conversation on the perils of mountaineering, the beauty of Christchurch and the horrors of earthquakes in general and the Hawke's Bay one in particular, with which the fifty-mile journey to Hawera was beguiled.

"Staying here to-night, miss?" he asked her as he halted the car outside a hotel in Hawera. "You can pick up a bus for Wanganui this afternoon if you like. That is, of course, if you're going on?"

"I'll stay here, I think," decided Patricia. "Will you help me with my bags?"

"Certainly, miss. Hope I have the pleasure of taking you back sometime. I don't get many passengers as sociable as you are."

Patricia wondered if that were meant as sarcasm. If it were, the driver showed a Christian spirit in the

manner in which he piloted her into the hotel and bullied the girl in the office into allotting her the best available room on the first floor.

Hotel life was no novelty for Patricia. Consequently, she was neither embarrassed nor offended when the two commercial travellers, with whom she sat at a small table at dinner that evening, behaved after the manner of their kind in the presence of a beautiful stranger of the opposite sex.

With the ease of manner and practised politeness of true knights of the road, they were unobtrusively attentive to her wants, and, at the right moment, introduced each other by name. Patricia gave hers in exchange.

Patricia had met men of the road often during her business career. She knew their vanities and their virtues, their unquenchable optimism and their failings. She liked them as a class. They were such overgrown boys; so full of life and the knowledge of life. Little as she felt in the mood for life and cheery company, she would have felt convicted of the snobbishness she detested had she not responded in some degree to their attentions.

She sat between them on a chesterfield in the lounge after dinner, drinking coffee and meditatively smoking a cigarette as they exchanged reminiscences of their roving lives—stories of laughable adventures by road and rail, mildly spiced with amorous moments in widely-scattered hostelries.

After all, she reasoned, this was better than sitting alone in one's room and brooding on the impossible. Here, she might forget for a moment at least.

She accepted one of the three cocktails which one of the knights, Baden, had ordered on leaving the table. She found, somewhat to her surprise, that it did her good—"lightened the darkness," as she phrased it obscurely to her new friends.

"We rather suspected the darkness," smiled the other knight, one George. "You look rather peeked —washed-out, you know. Charity work?"

Patricia nodded.

"Something of the kind," she admitted.

"Atta girl!" exclaimed Baden heartily. "You've earned another."

"No more, thank you," replied Patricia, smiling.

"Non-*sense*!" protested the knights simultaneously, uttering their "pass-word" with gusto.

"You must, please," urged Baden.

"You'll offend us, if you refuse," urged George.

"But, really, I couldn't! I——"

"Non-*sense*!"

Patricia yielded.

A few more stories, and the little comedy was repeated. More "darkness-dispellers" were ordered, and laughter advertised their potency.

So it went on. A few more stories——

By nine o'clock Patricia was almost gay. George and Baden had crossed their near arms about her shoulders, and their stories had become racier and more involved. She had almost convinced herself that she didn't care about anything—about Jimmy, or Grace, the earthquake, Sheeny Ezekiel or fat Mrs. Langham!

The world would not thank her for breaking her heart. It would sneer at her—laugh at her—and with justification. Good Heavens! Was Jimmy the only man on earth? Either of these two men beside her were as presentable as he, and surely less conscious-tied. Where was James Harley now? What was he doing? Mooning in the wreckage of Napier, no doubt, and cursing her alive and dead for a woman without morals or pity! The trouble with James Harley was that he was just a man—that unhappy creature blended of beast and god—neither one thing nor the other—setting himself a code and suffering the tortures of hell in his foolish effort to conform to it on all occasions.

To the men beside her the code was a banner, something to look at and admire and to conform to when they felt the urge to do so.

Baden told a story of a detective who lost the sight of one eye while gathering evidence for a divorce.

Patricia recalled a line from a detective play which had thrilled her years before. She rose to her feet unsteadily and held her wine-glass above her head.

"'What does it all matter, Watson?'" she declaimed addressing the ceiling and scorning the condemnatory glances of two women who were knitting beside the empty fire-place: "'The warm breath of a few more summers—the cold chill of a few more winters—and then——'?"

She tossed her glass from her with a nonchalant gesture, tottered slightly and slumped back upon the chesterfield.

The knights applauded gravely.

"Wonderful!" declared Baden, winking significantly at George.

"Marvellous!" echoed George, returning the wink. "I think the effort calls for another dispeller. Baden, depress the doings."

Baden pressed the bell.

"Same again," he ordered, when the waiter bowed before them.

"Not so, not so!" objected George with drunken gravity. "We have suffered the indignity of coloured waters long enough, my friend. We will have a man's drink. Varlet, three whiskeys-and-sodas."

The waiter looked dubiously at Patricia, who sat with her eyes closed, careless what she drank.

"Just as you say," agreed Baden easily; "just as you say. Three whiskeys-and-soda."

Whiskey-and-soda was a strategical error on the part of George. The knights realised that some minutes later when the girl became drowsy. She lay back against their linked arms and closed her eyes, and experienced that uncomfortable sensation of floating in space with the heels much higher than the head.

Patricia had enjoyed her share of youthful parties, and had experienced the exhilarations which alcohol brings when taken sparingly. Now she experienced drunkenness and was ashamed. She tried to rouse herself, but the effort made her feel worse. Perhaps if she lay still for a little while the whirlings in her brain would stop.

Twice she opened her eyes and stared fixedly at the gyrating ceiling in order to overcome the nausea induced by the sensation of falling over backwards into a bottomless pit; then the voices of the knights receded into the distance, and she slept.

She was shaken to wakefulness by Baden.

"Come on, old thing," he was saying. "Time to wind the cat and put the clock out."

Patricia blinked at George, who was rubbing his ankle, and then at the clock over the fire-place.

The time was almost half-past eleven.

"Good Heavens!" she exclaimed, sitting up and swaying a little. "Have I been sleeping?"

"I trust so," answered Baden. "Otherwise you must have heard the shocking language of George when you kicked him in your dreams."

Patricia flushed with shame, but managed a lop-sided smile.

"I'm awfully sorry," she apologised.

"Quite all right, Pat," grinned George. "I guess you thought I was Jimmy and forgot you had your shoes on."

"And what about introducing Little Grace some day?" chuckled Baden. "The name rather takes our fancy. Sweet and old-fashioned."

"Lavender and old lace," chimed George.

Patricia, inexpressibly shocked to know that she had spoken of her sins to these hardened philanderers, rose to her feet and moved to the stairs as steadily as she might.

"I think I'll go to bed," she said shakily. "Thanks so much for a jolly evening. I'm afraid I made rather an ass of myself——"

The knights followed her to the foot of the stairs.

"Don't go yet," pleaded Baden, leaning heavily upon the banister. "The night's still young."

"You can't go to bed as you are, old thing," George informed her. "Better come for a little spin in the car. Blow away some of the wine-dust. You'll have an awfully thick head in the morning if you don't."

"No, thank you. Really, it's been nice to have you look after me. I'll see you again in the morning. I'm catching the express to Wellington. Good-night."

She allowed them both to kiss her hand with the exaggerated courtesy of the cavalier.

"Marry, 'tis a sorry blow to be deprived of thy sweet presence, Lorena," mourned George, when she smiled down upon them as she mounted the staircase wearily.

"Odds bodkins, marry and forsooth," agreed his companion.

She waved a hand as she disappeared upon the landing above.

The two knights leaned against the banisters for some moments in silence. They smiled and nodded at each other in understanding.

"What is the betting?" asked Baden, in subdued tones.

"Fifty of Ardath," answered George.

"You're on."

They linked arms and strolled into the commercial room, where they found a pack of cards, and a night-porter who resented their intention to indulge in play at this hour of the night.

* * * *

Patricia sat upon her bed for a long time, thinking. She held her head in her hands and stared at the weaving floor. Reaction had set in. The fall from false gaiety to renewed despair was swift and terrible. Her head ached abominably. She was

nauseated. Everything was wrong! It was all wrong!

She prayed that the night might be eternal. She had no desire to endure the hopeless longing of a fresh day. She was an outcast—a wanderer on the face of the earth. Oh, that she had courage to end it all! And yet, some day she might meet Jimmy again. Someday he might grow tired of his grief and his conscience—

At last she threw herself face downwards upon the bed, her arms stretched above her head, her heart crying for James Harley.

Presently she slept.

A light, insistent touch upon her shoulder awakened her. She sat up swiftly, startled.

The knight, Baden, stood beside her bed and looked down with a confident smile. He was swathed in an expensive dressing-gown, and his feet were bare.

"Hello, old thing," he whispered.

Patricia, wise in the ways of the road, rose to her feet angrily. The knight retreated a step and his smile vanished as she confronted him.

"Get out!" she commanded in a low voice, pointing to the door.

"Now look here, Pat," whispered the intruder, making hushing motions with his outspread hands and frowning warningly, "don't behave as though—"

"Get out!" she repeated a little louder. "Get out, before I have you thrown out!"

The knight's lower jaw came forward and his lips pouted. For a moment it seemed that he would lay violent hands upon her. He moved forward a step.

The girl did not flinch.

"Get out!"

The knight relaxed, shrugged his shoulders, smiled whimsically, and turned to the door.

"My mistake," he apologised, as he unlocked and opened the door softly. "But, tell me this," he requested, thrusting his head in again when he had stepped into the corridor. "What kind of woman

are you? Do you know, you've cost me fifty of Ardath?"

As Patricia gave him no answer to either question, he sighed comically, and, with a whispered "Cheerio!" closed the door.

Patricia waited for a few moments, then moved to the door and locked it.

She caught sight of her reflection in the mirror on the dressing table as she turned.

"That is the question," she said, bitterly. "What kind of woman are you, Pat Weybourn?"

She disrobed with savage gestures and went to bed.

CHAPTER XX.

On the following afternoon, when Patricia alighted from the express at Palmerston North for the purpose of "stretching her legs" upon the station platform, she was in her blackest mood.

She hated everybody and everything. She glared angrily at the men who eyed her with admiration and the women who stopped to appraise her smart travelling costume. She remonstrated sharply with those who jostled her. She was furiously impatient at the few minutes' wait in the train schedule, although she had neither definite plans nor desire for her journey's end. She detested Palmerston North, sight unseen.

It was with the greatest effort that she refrained from cutting the woman who bore down upon her from the crowd with an excited cry of recognition.

"Pat! Pat Weybourn! What on earth are you doing down this way? How is the world?"

Patricia forced a smile and held out an unwilling hand.

"Why, if it isn't little Buzzy!" she exclaimed with spurious heartiness. "So this is where you buried yourself!"

Peggy Tennyson, late member of the Live Wire Quartette, in which joyous body she had earned her nickname of Buzzy by buzzing harmoniously whenever she forgot the words of the songs—which was more often than not—fairly beamed with delight at this unexpected reunion with a fellow songster.

Buzzy Tennyson was not "little." She was almost massive. "Amazonic" was the term she applied to herself. She was a nurse, and admirably fitted for her vocation. She was reputed to stand no nonsense from anybody. Her pointed demand to know the cause of Patricia's restraint—which became obvious after the first greeting—was typical of her.

"Have you married a millionaire of something, Pat? Don't you want to know the old crowd now?"

"Don't be silly, Buzzy," protested Patricia, pressing the big woman's hand. "Of course, I'm delighted to see you, old thing."

"Well, for God's sake, act like it!" cried the exuberant Buzzy. "Come and have a cup of tea, for old time's sake."

"I can't, Buzzy. I'm sorry. I'm travelling on the express."

"Wellington?"

"Yes."

"Got an appointment in Wellington?"

"Not exactly——"

"Anyone waiting for you?"

"N—no—"

"Anyone expecting you?"

"No."

"Then you've got plenty of time for a cup of tea. Where's your luggage?"

"But, Buzzy——"

"Where is it?"

"I've checked it through."

"Have you? We'll soon fix that. Where are your checks?"

"Don't be silly, Buzzy——"

"You should know better than to argue with me, Pat," chided Buzzy, reaching out and securing the other's purse. "Are they in here?"

Patricia snatched the purse angrily.

"Please, Buzzy! Leave me alone!"

Buzzy Tennyson frowned in her best professional manner. She held her head upon one side and looked critically at her friend; then, with a dexterous movement, she produced a clinical thermometer.

"Open the mouth, please," she requested severely. "We must see about that temperature. We can't allow unruly temperaments here."

Patricia tried hard to be angry, and failed.

"But—I can't afford to stay over, Buzzy."

"You can't afford not to—unless you wish to complete your journey on a stretcher, my girl!" threatened Buzzy. "The idea! We meet again after three hundred and seventeen years, and you cannot afford to stay over! Give me those checks at once! The town is full of refugees just now, so I guess one more will make little difference."

"Refugee is the correct term," agreed Patricia, handing over the checks without further protest.

Buzzy Tennyson glanced at her sharply, took the checks and hurried away.

She returned within a remarkably short space of time, carrying a heavy suitcase in each hand. She was flushed and smiling.

"Would you believe it?" she asked, with a laugh. "The Railway Department dared to argue with me. Me! Buzzy Tennyson! I had to show 'em. It's going to take 'em an hour or two to sort the mess in the luggage-van. These things were right at the bottom. The handle's come adrift on this one, but we can fix that. Your other stuff is in the left-luggage office. Come on!"

She led the way to the street. Patricia followed meekly.

"We'll dive into the tea first," said Buzzy as they headed for the Square. "Then we'll cackle about this

and that. We'll go to Ross's. They have a proper respect for my appetite."

They walked in silence to Ross's, where Buzzy mounted the stairs to the tea-room two at a time. The suitcases worried her not at all, even though she carried the one with the damaged handle with two fingers thrust beneath the flap of the lid.

"You should have been a man, Buzzy," said Patricia, when they were seated at a table overlooking the street.

Buzzy pointed a large and theatening finger at Patricia.

"If you're going to be so frightfully original in your remarks during your stay with us, Miss Weybourn, there's going to be another earthquake," she replied with assumed ferocity. "What are you going to have? The usual?"

Patricia nodded.

"I'll be good," she promised.

They ate, saying little and eyeing each other with a natural curiosity.

When they had finished eating, Buzzy produced a cigarette case and proffered it to Patricia.

"Have a gasper, Pat," she invited, "then lean back, or forward, and tell me all about yourself. Hide nothing from your aunt Buzzy. First, how goes the glad-rag business?"

Patricia accepted a cigarette and lit it carefully at Buzzy's lighter before she answered.

"I've got the sack, Buzzy. I'm wandering at large upon the face of the earth; and I'm fed up with everything."

Buzzy lit a cigarette for herself, squinting speculatively through the manly clouds of smoke which she blew.

"What is it?" she asked calmly. "Shortage in the cash? Or an overplus of shieks?"

Patricia sneered at the ash-tray and addressed the empty tea-pot.

"It's pure madness!" she answered in a low tone. "Madness! I—I——Oh, why need we speak of it? It's over now—finished! I'm just a fool trying to run away from myself! Just a fool!"

She lifted her head abruptly and gazed out of the window.

Buzzy noted that her lips were trembling and her eyes filling with tears. She gazed at the tea-pot in her turn.

"That's rotten," she admitted. "As Omar Khayyam remarked in 1874, 'That's decidedly umpty-do!'"

"Oh, it's right that you should laugh, Buzzy——"

"I'm not laughing, my dear. You know that. I'm just mighty sorry for you, and darned glad I dropped on you this afternoon. You can tell me about it, or you needn't; but I'm the tonic you need, Pat; and you're going to get enough of me to set you on your feet again."

The big woman folded her arms upon the table and leaned forward, the cigarette drooping from a corner of her lips.

"I've made a diagnosis of your case, Miss Weybourn," she continued. "You are suffering with a bad attack of love."

Patricia turned her head sharply. Her eyes narrowed.

"So, I'm talked about here, too?" she asked angrily. "I'm a high-light in a national scandal?"

"Now you're being conceited, my dear. Nobody but little Buzzy has ever heard of you down here. Even I had given you up for dead, and often have I tried to cry myself to sleep because of it. No, my dear. I'm just being clever, that's all. Remember how we used to prophesy that you would fall in love so violently that you would hurt yourself? And how you used to wager your immortal soul that you wouldn't—that you couldn't fall in love, because love was a myth, or some such?"

"That was youthful foolishness——"

"On your part, not on ours. You were beautiful, but we were wise. And now you've been and gone and done it! But why did you have to fall in love with another woman's husband?"

Patricia flushed and half rose from her chair.

"I think I would show a little belated wisdom if I caught the next train," she said shortly, gathering up her gloves and purse.

"Sit down!" commanded Buzzy softly. "I've always been able to understand that two and two are four, Pat; and when you talk of 'a national scandal' —well, there you are. Diagnosis is easy. The symptoms are marked. The temperature is erratic. Oh, sit down!"

Patricia sank into her seat again. She looked into the keen, sympathetic eyes of her friend, then placed an elbow upon the table and covered her eyes with her hand.

"Oh, Buzzy," she murmured brokenly, "I'm so unhappy I want to die!"

Buzzy reached out and patted the unoccupied hand.

"Where is the sense in breaking your heart because the other woman is holding him, my dear?" she asked softly. "You're not a hardened husband-snatcher. All the old hands know that——"

"The other woman is dead."

Buzzy stared and sat immobile for a moment.

"Dead?"

"She—and their child—killed in Napier—where I have driven them."

Buzzy Tennyson leaned back in her chair slowly, her gaze, infinitely tender, fixed upon Patricia's bowed head. She was silent for many seconds, then she sighed, removed her cigarette from her lips and tapped the ash into the ash-tray.

"Ain't it Hell?" she asked the circumambience softly.

Patricia looked up after a lengthy silence, and searched for a handkerchief.

"Well?" she asked, with something of defiance in her voice.

Buzzy looked at her with a pitying smile.

"I'm on your side, Pat," she answered simply. "You play the game, old thing——"

"But I haven't played it, Buzzy!" cried Patricia. beating her clenched hands upon the table softly, passionately. "I haven't played it! Oh, I've been—rotten, Buzzy! Rotten!"

"I don't quite see that——"

"The other woman was my friend. Is that playing the game? I tried to play it, Buzzy; before God, I did! But, I couldn't! I couldn't! At first—yes; but later——! Oh, why didn't I have the sense to stay away?"

"Quiet, my dear!" urged Buzzy, conscious of the curious glances directed at them by the other occupants of the room. "Don't say any more about it. The damage is done——"

"Grace—little Grace Harley—she was the other woman, Buzzy," continued Patricia unheeding, her words flowing in an impetuous torrent. "You remember her, Buzzy?"

"Harley? Harley? No—the name isn't familiar—"

"Little Grace Devine, Buzzy! Married to Harley, the author. I met her again in New Plymouth—she invited me to her home—and then——"

Patricia made a fatalistic gesture, and became silent, pulling on her gloves with nervous jerks. Buzzy was silent for so long that Patricia needed all her courage to look up at her.

The big woman was frowning at the tea-pot in curious concentration. Her lips were pursed; her wide-spread fingers gently drummed upon the table; her whole rigid attitude was expressive of intense mental activity induced by an emotional shock.

"*James* Harley?" she asked suddenly, directing her frown at Patricia as she barked the question. "The fellow who writes such awful mush?"

Patricia nodded. She did not resent the reference to "mush." She held a similar opinion of the quality of Harley's work.

"Huh!" Buzzy grunted, as she rose to her feet with a business-like air. "I can understand Grace, but not Pat Weybourn. Come along!"

Patricia obeyed the curt command with a meekness entirely foreign to her. Despite the brusqueness of Buzzy, the big woman's attitude seemed less condemnatory than she had dared to hope. She followed Buzzy with a curious sensation of dependence. She felt that, if she lost Buzzy now, she herself would be lost indeed.

"I'm just a fool, Buzzy," she repeated, apologetically, as she followed the other down the stairs.

"Aren't we all?" growled Buzzy. "You come with me, Pat, and prove it."

"Where are we going?"

"Home."

They walked in silence for a few minutes, Patricia walking half a pace behind her friend who carried the suitcases and seemed unconscious of their weight or any indignity attaching to the task.

Buzzy paused at the corner of Rangitikei Street.

"Look at them, Pat," she said, in a low tone. "You don't need to ask which are refugees. See the way they stand around looking at nothing! Poor devils!"

No need to ask, indeed.

At every street corner stood a group of lost people, people who gazed indifferently at the sky and at the traffic. Lost people occupied every seat in the Square gardens and wandered upon the paths and pavements. The city was crowded with them. Every train and car from the earthquake area increased their numbers. People with nothing to do. Men, women and children. Strangers, driven from their homes by the authorities who feared pestilence in the stricken towns. Strangers, living upon their individual perplexities, oblivious to the beauties of

the city which harboured them; dazed with shock; unable to think clearly of yesterday or to-morrow.

"Where do they all sleep?" asked Patricia, momentarily aroused from the contemplation of her troubles.

"Heaven only knows. I have two families in tents on my back lawn, and four women who live in the kitchen. A lot of 'em don't sleep at all, I'll bet. Too scared. Come along!"

Some ten minutes later they halted at the gate of a large house in a residential quarter.

"Here we are!" said Buzzy, as she kicked the gate open and entered the grounds, which were neatly laid out in lawns and flower-beds. "This is where we live and have our being."

Patricia hesitated long enough to read "WANA. Sister Tennyson," upon the brass plate attached to the gate.

"Sister?" she asked, as she followed Buzzy.

"Very much so," Buzzy assured her, as they mounted the steps and entered the building, the door of which was ajar. "My own private venture, Pat. I simply sailed through my exams, and then stung father for the wherewithal to start out on my own. I'd had enough of being ordered around by little bits of women whom I could have lifted in one hand. I felt an ass, trotting around like a young elephant at the command of squirrels. It was either this, or marriage. I explained that to father. A young doctor was very sweet on me then, but he was such a little fellow that I was afraid to sit on his knee lest I injured him. Dad bought me this place to save the little fellow's life. Why is it little men run after big women, and vice versa?"

"You'll have to excuse the crush," she continued, not pausing for a reply, as she thrust open a white-enamelled door with her knee and revealed a comfortable cubicle of a bedroom into which an extra bed had been squeezed. "This is the camp. I've been crowded out of my usual quarters by the mob. This

is the best we can do at the moment. You don't mind being in a room with me?"

"I'll be thankful to have you with me, Buzzy," answered Patricia gratefully. "I may take a fit, or something."

"Not room enough to have a fit while I'm in here, old thing," said Buzzy, as she threw the suit-cases on one of the beds. "Take a seat while I get into my overalls."

Patricia sat on the bed indicated and removed her gloves thoughtfully.

"I feel that I'm going to be in the way, Buzzy, under the circumstances——"

"Then feel something else," interrupted Buzzy from the folds of the dress which she was drawing over her head. "I want you here."

"Are you sure?"

"I am. Haven't seen you in years, for one thing. For another thing, I want your assistance."

Buzzy donned her uniform, avoiding Patricia's surprised eyes.

"Tell you the truth, Pat, I was a little undecided about how to treat your case until you mentioned the other woman having been killed in Napier. Then the idea came to me, and I almost fell over backwards."

Patricia sensed the effort with which the other affected an easy manner.

"What do you mean?" she asked suspiciously. "You are not going to ask me to help you nurse people—people from over there?"

"There is nothing you need get excited about, my dear. Nothing—er—gory, or anything like that——"

"But, I've never done nursing of any kind——"

"You want work, Pat," declared Buzzy, turning to face her guest as she fastened her skirt with difficulty. "Work which will take you out of yourself. As far as I can gather, you are simply wandering about the country looking for a place in which to die. Well, you're not going to die. You're going to

live—and be glad to live. You're going to know what it feels like to ease the pain of others—to forget yourself in service for others. You're going to realise how much you don't amount to in this wicked world; and your aunty Buzzy is going to teach you."

Patricia laughed mirthlessly.

"I don't mind helping you, Buzzy, if you're rushed with business," she replied, rising, "but I have no desire to help myself——"

Buzzy made an indescribable noise. She was struggling to fasten her stiff uniform collar.

"Shut up!" she snapped. "And come and fasten this damn thing!"

Patricia fastened the collar obediently, her spirits rising involuntarily in the breezy contact with the exuberant Buzzy.

"If I make a mess of things, Buzzy——"

"You won't have a chance, old thing. I don't want you to run about with bandages and things like that. I merely want you to try to quiet a patient who disturbs all the others. She stays quiet while someone talks to her, but I'm terribly short-handed with this Napier rush. The staff hasn't time to sit around, I can tell you."

"What am I to say to her? I've never——"

"It will come to you naturally. Don't worry about that. Take off your hat, and I'll show you where she is."

Buzzy's was an overmastering personality. Patricia offered no more objections. She removed her hat, threw it upon the bed carelessly, and followed the big woman from the room.

They went upstairs and along a corridor off which opened small rooms. They passed two nurses hurrying about their duties. Buzzy nodded to them curtly. They seemed not to notice Patricia. The place reeked of antiseptics, and muffled cries and groans of pain were heard on either hand.

"Crowded out with cases from Hastings and Napier," explained Buzzy. "Some of them pretty bad."

She paused outside a door at the end of the corridor.

"She's in here."

Patricia listened to the montonous murmur from behind the closed door, and failed to understand how such a gentle sound could disturb all the other patients. She was about to remark upon it when Buzzy opened the door softly.

"Go and talk to her."

Patricia hesitated for a moment, then entered the room diffidently. Buzzy watched her approach the bed, then stop as though she had collided with an invisible wall. Patricia reeled back a pace. Her face blanched as her eyes widened with something akin to fear. Her hands clutched at her breast.

The murmur continued, the bandages which swathed the face of the sufferer upon the bed moving very slightly as the head rolled unceasingly from side to side.

Patricia stared and listened for fully a minute, then she turned slowly and faced Buzzy, who was watching her critically.

"Who is it?" she asked in a horrified whisper. "Who is it?"

Buzzy shook her head.

Patricia turned again to the patient. She approached the bed fearfully. She stopped and listened intently.

"Jimmy . . where are you, Jimmy? . . . Jimmy . . . Pat, give him back to me . . . Jimmy. . ."

A weary, hopeless repetition. Over and over again. . . . "Jimmy."

Patricia sprang upright and wheeled swiftly. Her eyes were starting from her white face. She trembled with painful excitement.

"It's Grace!" she cried, reeling towards Buzzy. "It's Grace Harley!"

She clutched at Buzzy's arms for support.

"That accounts for the 'G.H.' on her clothes," observed Buzzy with professional calm. "After this

I'm going to believe some of the things I read in detective stories. It came to me——"

"But she was reported dead!"

"So were a lot more people who are walking about to-day, my dear. Pull yourself together."

Patricia's head fell forward. Buzzy took her in her arms.

"I know it's an awful shock, Pat,—but—play the game, old thing. Play the game!"

"Oh, Buzzy! Is she badly hurt?"

Buzzy swallowed hard. She had much ado to preserve her professional calm at this moment.

"Pretty bad," she answered gently. "Blinded, and disfigured for life."

She felt Patricia shudder and go limp in her arms.

"Come, old thing," she murmured encouragingly. "I'm depending on you."

Patricia did not hear her. She had fainted for the first time in her life.

* * *

CHAPTER XXI.

Almost a month had passed since the earthquake when Patricia Weybourn walked slowly up the garden path to the Harley bungalow carrying the letters, some sodden with recent rain, which had lain in the box at the gate. The curtains of coloured net at the windows waved gently in the westerly breeze. Patricia eyed them absently.

Behind the waving curtains on the right lay Grace Harley, silent, listening to the lagging footsteps of the woman who had brought her home.

Grace Harley would never see again.

The surgeon had been definite about it. The falling beam, which had marred her soft beauty irreparably, had destroyed her sight utterly. She knew these things now, yet her lips smiled—while her soul wept in the darkness. She mourned Joan more than her sight.

The sun shone upon her as she lay beneath the white counterpane. She felt its warmth through the bandages which covered the upper half of her face and upon her hands where they lay upon her breast. She lay very still and quiet.

She was looking at the familiar objects in her room with the eyes of memory; the bookshelves near the fireplace; the Brangwyn etching and the study of a tree-fern by Trevor Lloyd which hung upon the south wall; the dressing table with its three mirrors; the crystal bowl which stood upon the window-ledge—the bowl which Jimmy detested and had threatened to smash; the set of furniture which Jimmy had made for Joan's doll's-house, and of which he had been so vain that he had decided to use it to ornament the mantel-piece; the sea-grass chair with the pink panel; the rugs; the photographs of Jimmy and Joan, and of all the family; everything—just as she had left it. She could have placed her hand upon any desired object were she allowed to rise.

Her suffering was not so vivid now as she lay in the darkness surrounded by familiar things. It had been horrible in Palmerston, where the slapping of the canvas screens on the verandah, the rumble of wheeled beds, the cries of the patients, the commands of the nurses, the faint street noises, the terrible clanking of a church bell, and the changing of the dressings had been one long nightmare—a black hell in which she had prayed in vain for light and a surcease from racking pain.

The pain had almost gone now; and here, at home, the days seemed much lighter. Here were friendliness and warmth. Her surroundings knew her and spoke to her. She knew every little sound; the click of the gate, the noise of the shaking of Mrs. Langham's mats, the soft clatter of the starlings in the pipe near the hot-water cistern, the creaking of the bathroom door, the intermittent rattling of the breeze-blown hydrangeas against the corner of the house, the slapping of drying linen on the line; the countless

little home noises which she had seldom noticed now spoke a potent language.

She could identify each neighbour's car and every tradesman's van. She could see the baker's expression of concentration as he hurried up the path, while Ginger eyed him disdainfully from his perch on the verandah rail. She could see the tall pines in the distance and Mount Egmont beyond; she could see the group of *pungas* in the gully.

It was not so dark here, at home.

She heard Patricia enter the house by the back door; heard the light the gas beneath the kettle in preparation for morning tea; heard her straighten a corner of a rug as she crossed the breakfast room; heard her cross the hall and enter the room in which she lay.

Grace turned her head expectantly as Patricia set the letters down upon the table near the window.

"Were there any?" she asked.

"Lots," answered Patricia.

"Any for me?"

"I don't think so. Some of the addresses are hard to decipher, but I think they are all for Mr. Harley."

"Of course. I am dead, to all intents and purposes."

Paricia looked pityingly at the woman on the bed and was surprised to see that she smiled.

"Grace——"

"That wasn't a complaint, Pat," said Grace gently. "I'm happy to be home again—even as I am. Pat, dear——"

"Yes?"

"Do you think it will hurt me if you call him Jimmy?"

Patricia did not answer. She spread the wet letters upon the window-ledge to dry in the sun.

"It won't," Grace assured her. "In fact, I would rather you call him Jimmy. You used to call him

that. You call him Jimmy in your thoughts—and you love him, Pat."

"I don't love him," asserted Patricia in a low, level voice. "I once imagined I did. I like him immensely, of course; but women such as I never love anyone really. We can't. There is something missing in us."

She turned to smile at Grace ruefully.

"Heaven alone knows why we are born," she continued. "It seems to me that we exist solely to make trouble for others."

The thought made her glance in the direction of the Langham home across the gully. She frowned as she saw Mrs. Langham staking chrysanthemums and keeping a watchful eye on the Harley bungalow.

"Pat, dear, there is no necessity to pretend with me," replied Grace very, very gently. "I'm not blaming you for loving Jimmy; and I am not blaming Jimmy for loving you. Love is a gypsy, you know."

She turned her face to the sun and sighed.

"Of course, I'm jealous, Pat. I am just a woman. I am not strong enough, or shallow enough, not to have regrets for a love that is dead. And I find it hard to smile in this hour of unexpected victory. That's what you call it in your heart, isn't it? Unexpected victory. You know that you could have held him but for this. Now, I hold him faster than ever. Now, his sense of duty, his sense of fairness, his remorse, will keep him at my side. He will be eager to atone. He will subject his desires, his whole life, to my wishes—and he will never be convinced that I don't want him to do that. I don't, Pat. I don't!"

The frail white hands clutched the counterpane. Her body shook with the vehemence of her final words.

Patricia hurried to her side and took the trembling hands in hers.

"Hush, dear!" she begged. "You must not speak like this. You don't know what you are saying. Mr.

Harley and I have quarrelled, irrevocably. He—he struck me. Any decent man would have done so under the circumstances."

"Pat——"

"I'm not altogether respectable, you know. Many people will tell you that. All New Plymouth will testify to the fact, I imagine. Mr. Harley was bound to find it out, sooner or later. He found out rather sooner than I had expected—that's all."

She spoke with intense bitterness, and Grace turned her head as though to look at her.

"You tell me this to comfort me, Pat."

"I tell you this because it is the truth," corrected Patricia flatly. "Your husband hates me. He hates me for destroying his contentment; for smashing his home; for killing his wife and child——"

Grace Harley shook her head slowly. Her scarred lips smiled faintly.

"He could never hate you, Pat. If he struck you, it was when he bitterly accused himself. He should have struck himself. He will know that now. He is a just man, Pat, and he must know that you were not to blame. My dear, none of us is to blame. We were driven by something stronger than convention to act as we did—all of us. Oh, I don't want Jimmy to sacrifice himself for me, Pat. I don't!"

Patricia seated herself upon the bed.

"Grace," she said softly and earnestly, "there are two kinds of love—the constant, which burns with a steady flame, a comforting thing like a fire on a hearth, and the inconstant, which flames and destroys and leaves no ashes. Some people have one, some the other. Most people are subject to both. Your husband is subject to both. You have the constant—I know only the inconstant. I'm always falling in love, and out of it. I don't wish to, but I just don't seem able to help it. Men find me attractive, and I—well, I suppose I like playing with them. It is in my blood. But, as God's my judge, Grace, I did not wish to attract your husband. I tried to avoid him.

But—it just happened, my dear. Moon-madness, that's all it was. Moon-madness."

She sat silent for a moment, the pressure of Grace's thin fingers around her own seeming an accusation rather than a gesture of sympathy. She rose to her feet with a cry of distress.

"Oh, what have I done?" she cried, clenching her hands together. "What have I done?"

Often she had cried thus in the seclusion of her room, but now Grace's magnanimity and helplessness wrung the words from her afresh.

Grace reached out and grasped Patricia's skirt.

"Won't you take Jimmy, my dear, if I ask you to?" she pleaded. "If I ask you to save him from himself? From—from slavery?"

"No!" answered Patricia almost fiercely, as she wrenched herself free and fled the room.

Grace Harley turned her face to the sun again and lay still. Her heart was singing, and the dark years ahead seemed less terrifying.

* * * *

Patricia came back presently with the morning tea-tray. She set it down upon a chair beside the bed, propped Grace into a sitting position with extra pillows, and placed a cup in her hands.

She had recovered her composure, and was now the cheerful and attentive person which she had become during these latter weeks.

"Try a meringue," she invited, placing a plate of the dainties in Grace's lap. "I won't guarantee them, but they're the best I could do. I'm afraid I'll never be a cook."

"You have made wonderful strides, I think, Pat," declared Grace, fumbling for the plate. "I think you must be a good all-rounder."

Patricia laughed softly and scornfully. She said nothing. She took her own cup to the window, where she turned over the wet correspondence between sips.

One of the letters slipped from her fingers and fell upon the floor with a slap. It was heavy and limp with water.

She stooped to recover it, and paused as she saw that the envelope had burst at the seams. She bent lower and read the printed words at the top of the disclosed sheet:

Masonic Hotel, Napier.

She lifted the sodden missive silently, glancing cautiously at the bed to see if her action were observed. Her immediate recollection of Grace's blindness shamed her, and she flushed uncomfortably.

Grace, sensing a subtle change in Patricia's attitude, spoke with timid apprehension.

"What is the matter?"

Patricia started. It was almost as if Grace had seen her slipping the letter into the pocket of her apron.

"Nothing," she answered hurriedly. "Nothing, dear."

"I thought you looked at me rather strangely, Pat."

"Nonsense, Grace," replied Patricia, forcing a laugh. "You mustn't imagine things. Another cup of tea?"

"I haven't finished this one yet."

They chatted upon the fairness of the day, the possibility of growing asters in the plot near the breakfast-room window, the Easter holidays — a number of subjects which did not include those nearest to their thoughts — and Patricia remained uncomfortably aware of the letter in her pocket and an intention to deceive the blind woman.

"I wonder where Jimmy is?" asked Grace at last, no longer able to hold back her secret thought. "Do you think he will have received your letter?"

Patricia moved to the bed.

"He will come, my dear," she answered consolingly. "You must not worry so much——"

"I can't help it. To think of him wandering in that horrible place—unwilling to come back now that he thinks there is no one here——"

"Sh! I won't have you thinking this way, Grace. Do you wish me to slap you?"

Grace smiled wistfully.

"You are sure he will want me back—after running away——"

"Another cup of tea," ordered Patricia sharply, taking Grace's cup. "And please stop talking nonsense!"

She handed the blind woman another cup of tea.

"By-the-way," she said in casual tones, "I suppose you wrote to him occasionally after you left?"

"Why—no," answered Grace, in some surprise. "To tell you the truth, I—I didn't think he would wish to hear from me. I thought he would like to make his decisions without—without——"

"I understand, dear," interrupted Patricia, leaning over to touch Grace's shoulder, her eyes shining strangely. "Now, try another meringue. I'll go and put a little more water in the pot."

"Don't bother on my account," begged Grace, as Patricia moved away.

"This is on my account," declared Patricia as she left the room.

In the small kitchenette Patricia opened the sodden letter with care, spread it upon the small table and read it through without shame. It was the late Catherine Whipple's first and last shot in her campaign to unite husband and wife; and it proved to Patricia that she still could feel, that her fight was not yet won—or lost.

Feb. 3/31.

James Harley, Esq.,
Author. New Plymouth.
Sir,

As an admirer of your stories I feel justified in taking more than a passing interest in you and yours. While I do not believe the stories current

here, I think that you should know that there are such stories which you may wish to investigate.

One such is that Mrs. Harley leaves her child in the care of strangers while she goes off on excursions with a man. I think you ought to look into this matter before it is too late.

A Sincere Friend.

It was a feeble shot. Nevertheless, it might have wrought infinite damage—or have repaired a breach—had it reached the man for whom it was intended.

Patricia read it through twice. Its cowardice seemed not to occur to her. She saw in it only a possible truth, and black bitterness enveloped her thoughts.

Here was the true explanation of Grace's presence in Hastings at the moment of the shake, when Joan had been killed in Napier. The body found with Joan's had been one of the strangers mentioned here. Grace had been away on an "excursion" with a man.

Her excuse that she went to purchase a middy suit for Joan was simply—an excuse. An excuse to meet the man—possibly a Hastings man.

Patricia laughed aloud—a cautious, hard laugh.

Grace had consoled herself very quickly. More than possibly she had found a lover before her husband had turned from her. That would account for her readiness to run away at the first sign of unfaithfulness in Jimmy.

Of course! They had been blind not to see it!

Grace, for all her meek, quiet little ways, had found a lover. It was the old story of still waters running deep.

And to think of all the sympathy, the bitter heart-aches, the agony of weeks, which had been wasted upon her! How she must have laughed in secret!

She had run off with her lover, knowing that her husband would be ready to provide her with all the money she would need—to live in comfort with her man.

It was laughable!

And now, blinded and disfigured, she still played a part. She didn't want Jimmy to sacrifice himself! Oh, no! Such a thing was unthinkable! Yet there she was, lying in the bedroom, waiting for him. Confident that he would come, that he would care for her all the days of her life—now that she was ashamed for her lover to look upon her. Doubtless the lover had deserted her—unless he too had been killed in Roach's.

It was all very pathetic, no doubt; but it was not going to work out quite like that.

"Excursions with a man!"

Patricia uttered the words mockingly as she placed the letter to dry upon the rack above the stove.

Grace had cheated, cheated very skilfully. Very well, Patricia would cheat a little. Just how she intended to cheat she did not know at the moment. The idea would come presently. All she was certain of was that this was a fifty-fifty affair of love, and that she intended to collect her due proportion by fair means or foul. She would fight Grace and her blindness.

"Clever little cheat!" she murmured admiringly, as she set about her preparations for lunch.

"Are you all right, dear?" she called, thrusting her head around the breakfast-room door. "I'm just going to start on the vegetables."

"Don't worry about me," replied Grace. "I'll be quite happy."

"You had better get some sleep before the doctor comes."

"I'll do my best—although I prefer to lie here and just think."

"Don't eat all the meringues. You'll suffer from indigestion if you do."

"Very well, dear."

Patricia sneered as she turned to her task of peeling potatoes.

She prepared the lunch, moving about the kitchenette with fierce resolution, snatching up the necessary culinary implements as though she were snatching lethal weapons with which to defend herself against physical attack. She made an unusual clatter in the sink, so that Grace smiled as she pictured her friend's incompetence.

She would not be cheated of love, she told the bubbling cabbage. She would not! Not for forty Graces—even though all were blind!

At noon she summoned enough resolution to go into the sick-room and collect the morning tea things. She smoothed her apron nervously, patted her hair into place, and practised a suitable expression of sympathy before the cheap mirror in the door of one of the cupboards, and set out on her simple errand with a fluttering heart. It was not an easy thing to fight a sick woman.

She halted abruptly on the threshold of Grace's room.

Grace, half-asleep, was speaking quietly to herself. Patricia thought that she prayed.

The words were spoken very softly and for some moments Patricia did not catch their drift; then she made out a certain rhythm, and the sadness in the low voice forced itself into her unwilling consciousness. Presently she caught two lines of the poem which Grace repeated—the final lines upon which Grace raised her voice a little.

. . . "Ah, God, if I had never known that light,
I ne'er had known how dark these shadows be."

Silence followed, an intense silence in which Patricia fancied she heard a sob.

She stood very still, her hand raised against the door-face. Sun-light, flooding through the opened front door, enveloped her and warmed her. She turned her head slowly and gazed at the varied tints of the sunlit trees, the red of the roofs, the blue of the sky, the gleam of the sea, the glory of

colour of the world in which we live—and which the sightless cannot see.

She gazed until her eyes filled with tears of pity, and a lump arose in her throat; then she turned and made her way back to the kitchenette on her tip-toes.

The letter of the Sincere Friend lay dry and curled upon the rack. She took it down and read it through again.

Now, there seemed to be something wrong about it. It seemed to breathe spite, instead of warning. Could it possibly be that the writer had reason to hate James Harley, or was this the work of some interfering busy-body such as had often made trouble for herself, Patricia? An unspeakable person such as Mrs Langham, for instance?

As though the mere thought of the lady across the gully inspired her, Patricia tore the letter across again and again, fiercely.

" 'What does it all matter, Watson?' " she quoted; and this time she was perfectly sober, and knew what she did.

* * * *

"Lunch!" she announced cheerfully, as she entered the sick-room with a laden tray. "If you don't put on weight it won't be through any fault of mine. Come and get it."

They were quite jolly over the meal, which, to tell the truth, was not a shining example of the culinary art. Patricia apologised for not salting the cabbage, and Grace laughed at the idea of mustard with mutton.

"Don't you resent my presence, Grace?" asked Patricia earnestly, when they had finished.

"Not now, dear," answered Grace, with a sad smile.

For a brief moment anger flamed in Patricia's heart at what sounded like a confident announcement of victory; then it died as suddenly as pity filled her heart.

"You are so good," explained Grace; "and you help me to forget—Joan."

Patricia rose briskly.

"Well, this wont do," she declared. "I must do the washing-up. Then I'll go into town and send another wire."

"To Jimmy?" asked Grace eagerly.

"Yes. It seems evident that the others have not found him. Third time never like the rest, they say. Buzzy thinks he must be in Napier still——"

"Has Buzzy written?"

"Yes. She hopes you are getting along nicely, and all that——"

"What does she say about Jimmy?"

"Just that somebody she knows caught a glimpse of him last week——"

"Oh——"

"Hush, dear. We will have him home again very shortly—even if I have to go and fetch him myself."

"They would never let you into the area, Pat."

"I'd like to meet the man who would refuse to let me in, after I had smiled sweetly upon him," replied Patricia. "Now, a little more sleep for you, young lady——"

Later, Patricia sent a telegram to James Harley in Napier. She signed it "Patricia." She had a curious belief that the name would find him and bring him home.

"I'm the kind of woman who carries wish-bones, and who spits on her shoes for luck when she sees a white horse," she decided at last. "In other words, a sentimental, superstitious fool!"

* * * *

CHAPTER XXII.

"Here, you!" called a harassed clerk, as a telegraph messenger sauntered past the counter of Napier's temporary central Post Office. "Take these wires and see if you can find this fellow Harley."

The telegraph messenger took the three telegrams reluctantly.

"Why pick on me?" he asked plaintively.

"Don't argue the point. Go and see if you can find him. The other two idiots couldn't."

"That's the writer chap who went off his rocker at the Masonic, isn't it?"

"So would you go off your rocker, young fellow, if you found your wife and daughter as he did. Hop it! If he's not in the camps you'll find him up on the hill, likely as not. We can stretch a point and hunt for him a bit."

"We?" snorted the telegraph messenger offensively.

"Go on! Quick and lively, before I come over there after you!"

"All right. I'm going. I'll see you about August, if I'm lucky."

The over-worked lad walked out leisurely. The clerk looked after him with murder in his glance.

"Hello, Whiskers!" the lad greeted an aproned individual over an hour later.

The aproned individual, who perspired as he wrote the mid-day menu in chalk upon a blackboard outside the cook-house which served one of the refugee camps, did not turn his head.

"Good-day, Cheeky," he returned good-humouredly. "Who let you out?"

The lad ignored the question.

"Any idea where I'll find a fellow named Harley?" he asked.

"'Arley?"

"Harley—with an aitch. James Harley."

"Never 'eard of 'im. 'Ow do you spell 'lentils'?"

"They told me he was in this camp."

"Aw! They'd tell you anything, son. If there's a wire for 'im 'e'll call for it—same as the rest of 'em. Are we getting back to normal again, or something? Running about with wires again?"

"Whatever happens, Whiskers, the Post Office goes on," said the lad proudly. "No bit of an earthquake can alter that."

The aproned individual turned to smile upon the lad. He was a corpulent man who had lost his home and his razor in the disaster, and he seemed little troubled thereby. The recent beard, which earned him his soubriquet, grew in small patches of varied tints and was a marvel to behold.

"They've been stringing you, son," he grinned. "Who learned you that piece of poetry?"

"It's the slogan of the service, Whiskers."

"Is it? You don't say! Well, the Post Office can keep on going on, son. I don't know any James 'Arley—or *H*arley—in this town; and I know most of the people what's left in it."

He turned to his blackboard again.

"'Ow do you spell 'lentils'?" he asked.

"What are lentils?"

"Just lentils. 'Alf-brothers to split peas."

"Well, put 'peas.'"

"Boy," chided the writer severely, "this ain't a cheap eating 'ouse. All society comes 'ere with their little tin plates. We've got to be posh, boy, posh. It's got to be lentils."

"Here. Give me the chalk."

The lad took the chalk and wrote "Pax Vobiscum" on the line devoted to soup; and, having written, he departed hurriedly.

The aproned individual understood neither the words nor the allusion.

"Hm!" he mused, squinting at the bold script. "We're getting a bit uppish when we 'as our menus in French. No wonder the Post Office keeps going on."

He wiped out the words with his apron and wrote "Pea."

* * * *

James Harley was on the hill.

He was standing, bare-headed, looking over the ruined town to the distant sea. About him were the crowded monuments to the virtues of those who had died in the peace of home, where gentle hands had closed their eyes. At his feet was a low mound of freshly-turned earth which covered the blackened remains of a woman and child who had died in terror and loneliness.

He looked at the distant sea, but his thoughts were roving down the past years, recalling the days of happiness before his heart had played him false.

His hair ruffled in the clean westerly breeze. It was untidy and too long; and upon the nape of his neck and upon his temples the brown hue had faded to a grey which was almost white. His face was lined and gaunt, the features thin and refined through suffering. His eyes were deeply sunken and glittered strangely beneath his slightly frowning brows.

As he stood thus straightly, his clothing hung loosely upon his wasted body. His hands, clasped behind him, were almost fleshless.

Life had become worthless to James Harley. All mortal desires seemed dead in him, save alone the desire for death.

He would not have eaten at all had it not been for the fact that Roy and an Anglican minister had appointed themselves his guardians.

These two, so different in faith and temperament, had met upon the brink of the grave wherein were laid the bodies of fifty dead. Moved by a single impulse, they had united to endeavour to console the man who had seemingly become bereft of speech after his first blasphemous outburst over the charred bodies of his loved ones, and who had gazed down upon the plain coffins lying so closely together, unable to comprehend that his own surname was written upon two of them.

Harley had seemed asleep then. His mind had been fogged, and he had gazed around with childish

wonder, unable to understand his surroundings or the solicitude of the stranger in clerical garb and his equally unfamiliar companion who uttered strange oaths.

He had moved in a long, weary dream, bewildered, speechless.

Later had come gradual and painful awakening. He remembered the events of his dream, and, as such assumed reality, his heart had become heavier and his silence had become conscious.

When, at last, had come the realisation that his loved ones had been laid in a common grave, side by side with the unidentified dead. unmourned, his horror lent him speech; so that his money, his repute, and men's charity had procured exhumation and separate burial for Grace Harley and Joan Harley in this hallowed spot nearer the stars.

Then silence had fallen upon him once more—silence, and a desire to lie beside his dead.

"Mr. Harley?" asked the telegraph messenger diffidently, as he approached.

Harley turned listlessly and nodded.

"Telegram, sir."

Harley took the folded scraps of paper and nodded the thanks he did not feel. He imagined that these were messages of condolence.

He tore one open because he saw that he was expected to do so. It was the third which had been sent from New Plymouth.

* * * *

While, to James Harley, the events of these terrible days were merely background for his grief, to Roy, the taxi-driver, they were vivid events to be spoken of in reminiscent moments all the days of his life—events comparable with those of the Great War.

Where was the pacifist who would vote for a reduction in our naval strength now? he would ask of total strangers during the first days when the officers and men of H.M.Ss. Veronica, Dunedin and Diomede brought order out of indescribable chaos.

"Dead!" he would answer himself triumphantly. "Dead and buried! For which, O Lord, make us truly thankful."

By the mercy of Providence the Veronica had berthed at the Napier wharf almost at the moment of the shake. She had been severely shaken by the restless earth, but, in short order, landing parties were in the wrecked streets, medical and food supplies were made available, armed marines were policing the ruins, naval officers were giving orders and being obeyed by seaman and landsman. Everywhere incipient panic was quelled by the splendid efficiency of men trained to emergency.

Within twenty-four hours the Navy, the police force, and the Napier Relief Committee were acting in conjunction. Every park and open space in the town was occupied. Tarpaulin shelters did duty as casualty clearing stations; prominent red crosses adorned every available ambulance—improvised and otherwise—and many private cars; every care was being taken of the injured and the survivors.

The red capes of the nurses, the service uniforms of the marines, the smoke, the areas of blackened bricks and tottering walls, the tents on the beach, the occasional clear notes of a bugle, the battleships in the bay, the thunder and dust where naval parties demolished dangerous structures, the intermittent shuddering of the earth, all induced a not unpleasant excitement in Roy.

It all reminded him of the war. The only wrong thing about it was that the sun shone every day. No self-respecting war ever happened in such perfect weather. He missed the mud, the eternal mud of the trenches. Everything else seemed to be here; the thud of explosives, the rumble of lorries, the stretchers, and the smells. Here, however, Roy assisted in a task which had not fallen to him in all the horrors of war—the sniffing for the odour of charred flesh; the horrible business of stooping over piles of hot debris, quietly searching after the manner of a dog.

Each day the odour of mortification became more pronounced. The decaying bodies of millions of fish upon the beach and upon the bed of the inner harbour, which had been lifted above sea-level; the indescribable odour of smouldering debris; the stench consequent on the wreck of the drainage system; the miasm of death, became more pestilential with every rising sun, and brought at last the inevitable order of evacuation.

Under such conditions Roy's war service stood him in good stead. When called upon to show why he should not be evacuated with the rest he lied with the assurance and ready wit of the trooper. He explained, with tears in his eyes, that he had come to Napier in company with his brother to search for his wife and two children. So far, these had not been found; but his brother's wife and child had been found—dead. He referred, of course, to the Harleys. James Harley was his brother, and—well, they saw how it was? Poor old Jim's brain had been a little unbalanced by the shock. He had not known that his wife and kiddie were in Napier. He gave no trouble. He spent every day at the graveside——

The officer in charge of the evacuation nodded. He made brief notes of the respective ages of Roy's fictitious wife and children, together with the date they were supposed to have come to Napier. He did not hold out any hope that they would be found alive. The best he could do was to hope that they had not been in the town at the moment of the shake.

Roy left the office of the commandant apparently a broken, despairing man ; and, once outside the range of the sympathetic eyes which watched him, hurried away cheerfully to inform his "brother" that he had fixed things.

"All the same, Mr. Harley," he had added, with a touch of petulance, as his "brother" set out towards the grave on the hill, "I think it would be better if you went back home. This place will break your heart."

"My home is here, Roy," Harley had replied in a lifeless tone. "All that is left of it. As for my heart —it is there."

He waved his hand in the direction of the hill and moved away.

Roy watched him go, and, when he was hidden by the intervening trees, followed him.

There was something dog-like in the manner in which Roy chose to attach himself to a master. During the war he had attached himself to a burly, good-natured, profane captain, and had been immensely gratified when his master, in moments of expansion, had patted his head and called him Fido. When his hero had thrown himself upon a Mills bomb, which a nervous bomber had dropped at his feet, and had died to save his men, Roy had been inconsolable—until, in the confusion of an advance, he had taken the opportunity to shoot the nervous bomber in the back.

Now, he had a desire to shoot somebody else in the back; but, in this senseless affair, there seemed none responsible for the wreck of his new brother's life.

Exactly how much of Roy's new attachment was due to hope of ultimate reward it is impossible to say. He himself would have angrily scouted the idea that he looked after Harley for the sake of the money that might be in it. He would have argued that, although he were only a taxi-driver—a pretty hard-bitten one at that, and not much to look at—he was possessed of a larger proportion of common decency than many of the "flash" people who hired him. He had known Harley for years; had often had him as a fare. Harley was a gentleman, for all his education, and he, Roy, wasn't the sort to desert a man like that at a time like this.

He would have pointed out that, in his earnest desire to wangle creature comforts for Harley, he had even encouraged the co-operation of a parson!

Harley had become tractable in everything but the matter of leaving Napier and returning home. He would eat when he was told to do so. He would sleep, or appear to sleep, when ordered to bed by Roy. He smiled absently when he saw that he was expected to appreciate his guardian's humour; but when it was suggested that he would be better elsewhere he became sullen and obstinate. And, with every passing day, he grew thinner and paler, the grey in his hair became more noticeable, his walk became a little more laboured.

"All he needs, parson, is something to wake him up," Roy said, with exasperation, in the third week after the earthquake. "He's walking in his sleep; and if he doesn't soon wake up he'll die on his feet."

"Time heals all things," the Anglican minister replied, shaking his head doubtingly nevertheless.

"What about God? Couldn't you pray for him?"

"I have prayed for him; but God heals only those who believe in Him. Harley does not believe. It is his, and our, misfortune."

"Well, he's got to believe in me," said Roy stoutly. "There's a tombstone up on the hill that's getting a polish on it where I sit; and I'm willing to wear the thing to a wafer with sitting before I'll allow Harley to die on my hands."

"You must be careful that he does not see you watch him," cautioned the minister. "Men in his state of mind are very near dementia."

"I'll look out for that, parson. But, I'm giving you fair warning, we may have to feed him forcibly one of these days. What beats me, though, is that nobody's been over here looking for him, or his wife. They must be orphans, the pair of them."

"Communication is so disorganised. His wife and child have been reported dead."

"That's so. That accounts for it, I suppose. Do you think he'd wake up if I went for him? Sort of smacked him in the ear and asked about it afterwards?"

The minister shook his head and smiled slowly.

"I wouldn't do that, if I were you. You wouldn't hit a child?"

"Wouldn't I?"

"Leave the awakening to Time. It will not fail—if you do not."

* * * *

Now, watching from his hiding-place upon the polished tombstone, Roy saw that Harley had awakened.

He reached out and halted the scared messenger, "Ssh!" he hissed. "I'm not going to hurt you, son. Where was that wire from?"

"New Plymouth," answered the lad, forgetting the tradition of his great office in his fright. "Let me go."

Roy let him go. The lad hurried away, glancing fearfully over his shoulder every few yards.

Roy rose to his feet, hitched up his belt with a nautical gesture, and sauntered towards Harley, whose agitation was startling, but welcome.

"Hello, Mr. Harley," he said, with simulated surprise. "Didn't expect to find you here. Just thought I'd drop down this way to town——"

Harley turned, and the other ceased speaking abruptly.

The man had awakened to some purpose. His features were a ghastly white and twitched as with a tic; his eyes glittered with the light of insanity; his lips were drawn back from his teeth, the grinding of which was audible. He seemed possessed of a wild animal ferocity. He panted noisily and his nostrils flared. His emaciated fingers looked like talons as they crushed the telegrams savagely. He crouched as though ready to spring. He was the picture of a madman.

Roy took two hasty steps backwards, tripped and sat heavily upon a flat headstone. Like a practised wrestler he rolled sideways and bounced to his feet, ready for the attack which he expected.

Harley had not moved save to draw himself upright and expunge the startling expression from his face. Now he stood erect, and with one hand brushed the long hair from his forehead while he thrust the telegrams into his pocket with the other.

He spoke, and the listlessness had gone from his voice. His speech was harsh. He snapped his words.

"Sorry I scared you, Roy. Didn't hear you approach."

"That's all right, Mr. Harley," replied Roy with a beaming smile, dropping his hands. "I'm a bit on the jump these days. How are you feeling now?"

"Where's the bus?" snapped Harley.

"Same old place. Over at the camp," answered the other briskly, his eyes lighting with eagerness.

"Right. Fill her up. We're leaving for New Plymouth this morning."

Roy sprang forward and grasped the other's hand.

"Gee! That's the best thing I've heard you say for weeks! Come on! Let's be legging it back!"

Harley snatched his hand free.

"Go on ahead. I'll be with you in a few minutes."

Roy understood. He nodded and hurried away. He glanced back as he was taking a short cut by sliding down a bank beneath a picket fence. Harley was upon his knees at the graveside.

Roy whistled blithely as he descended the hillside. His gay music seemed strangely out of place to all who heard it.

Harley was upon his knees, but he was not praying. He was swearing an oath over the bodies of his wife and child—an oath to kill.

The telegram was spread upon the grave. The message was brief and, in his eyes, an abomination.

Come home. Your happiness is here. Patricia.

Harley, his head bowed upon his breast, was speaking softly, and the ferocity had come back to his features and sounded in his low tones.

"Surely this woman is the foulest thing that walks the earth! She is without shame, without a vestige of honour! While I kneel here beside you, she waits in our home—in the place she has polluted—so sure is she that she holds me, body and soul! She is the snake which fouled our Eden, Grace, as she has fouled the Edens of others! And I? Am I so spineless that I will allow her to crawl over me to make fools of other men and women, to foul other Edens?"

He made no extravagant gesture. He spoke softly and his hands remained still, lying spread upon the earth.

"I have known Hell here, Grace; and, if I am to know Hell hereafter, I shall not be alone. Patricia Weybourn shall burn as I burn!"

He remained silent for some minutes then. His eyes, dry and burning between their twitching lids, seemed to memorise every particle of clay and rock which formed the mound before him.

At last he sat back upon his heels, folded the telegram and returned it to his pocket, entirely forgetful of the other two which remained unopened. He rose, dusting his knees.

"Good-bye, Grace. Good-bye, Joan," he said simply, and turned away.

He left the hill without a backward glance, moving with swinging, determined gait. His eyes gazed straight before him, looking neither to the right nor to the left.

He was going back to New Plymouth to kill.

Doubtless he was not wholly sane at this time.

CHAPTER XXIII.

The car was swinging down the winding hill to the small town of Waitotara when James Harley broke the silence which he had maintained ever since

they had shown their permits for the last time in the patrolled area.

"Which is the best way to kill a cat, Roy?"

The question was so totally unexpected and irrelevant to the driver's thoughts that he took his gaze from the road for an instant, and the racing vehicle promptly lunged into the grass at the edge of the macadam strip. Roy jerked the car back upon the road without slackening speed.

He had concluded that Harley had relapsed into his former lethargic state.

Roy had commenced the return journey in high spirits. He had been genially loquacious until they had reached Dannevirke. Then Harley's continued silence had taken effect, and the speed of the car had increased as Roy's loquacity diminished. Finally he had become silent, too.

There had been no mention of food at Palmerston North, and at Wanganui the silence had been equally discouraging. Roy had shot an imploring glance at his passenger as they passed a brilliantly-illumined restaurant in the Avenue into which theatre-patrons were filing in search of suppers they did not need. He had slowed the car to a walking pace, but Harley had merely shot him an impatient glance of enquiry, and he had tightened his belt and stepped on the accelerator. He had crossed the railway at the foot of St. John's Hill at a speed some twenty miles in excess of the limit, indulging a momentary resentment of Harley's lack of consideration.

Now the man talked about cats!

"What did you say?" asked Roy incredulously, when he had safely negotiated the bridge and the car was speeding along the few chains of main street in the little town.

"Which is the best way to kill a cat?"

"Why, drown the thing."

"But, supposing you couldn't catch it? Supposing it is half-wild?"

"Shoot it. That's the only way to fix 'em."

"That's what I've been thinking."

Silence settled in the car again for a few miles. Roy stole numerous glances at his passenger—suspicious glances, as though he again doubted Harley's sanity.

"Have you such a thing as a revolver, Roy?" asked Harley as they left Waverley behind.

Roy felt a cold shudder go down his spine.

"A shot-gun is best for cats," he replied. "Revolver's no good. Too easy to miss 'em."

"A shot-gun would make too much of a mess of the verandah, I'm afraid," mused Harley.

Roy sat up straight behind the wheel and spoke severely.

"Now, you want to get ideas like that out of your head, Mr. Harley."

"What ideas?" asked Harley, the faintest suggestion of amusement in his tone.

"You've got a long way to go, Mr. Harley, and you mustn't think of hopping off the track just yet. I've got an idea how you feel—going home to an empty house; but you mustn't let it get you down. You can't do any good for Mrs. Harley, or the kiddie, by doing a thing like that. You've got the best part of your life before you. People are beginning to know you. Why, I even read your yarns myself, when they come my way——"

"But there really is a cat ——"

"Yes, we know all about that," interrupted Roy scornfully. "Now, don't you go and do anything silly."

Harley touched the driver's sleeve, and, in the dim light, Roy saw that he smiled.

"You mustn't let your imagination run away with you, Roy. We have a cat, and its name is 'Ginger.' It sits on the verandah-rail all day. It doesn't like me, and I don't like it; but—Grace—Mrs. Harley—was very fond of it. I've been thinking over it all the way, and, while I'd like to keep it for her sake, I—well, I couldn't bear the thing looking at me day

in and day out, you understand. The thing would blame me—reproach me—Oh, it's hard to explain—"

His smile had vanished and his expression had become strained.

"But, surely you could get near enough to grab it, if it sits on the verandah-rail as you say," objected Roy.

"I'm afraid you don't know this cat."

"Ten to one, it's wandered away by this time."

"I have reason to believe otherwise," said Harley bitterly.

They drove in silence for another five miles.

"Why not shoo the darned thing away?" asked Roy. "It will go, if you don't feed it."

"I couldn't do that, Roy—decently. You see, the thing, being half-wild, destroys things."

"Perhaps I could drown it for you?"

"Thanks, all the same, old man; but I'd rather kill the thing myself. I don't want to act revengefully—if you know what I mean. I could sit just inside my window and pot it clean with a revolver bullet, or with a rifle. I'd like to do it decently—make a clean job of it—for Mrs. Harley's sake——"

"I think I understand what you mean, but——"

"Oh, never mind. The fellow next door has a rifle. I'll borrow that."

No more was said until the car was nearing Stratford. Then Roy, whose suspicions were as lively as at first, spoke casually.

"I've got a Fritz automatic in the back of the car, if that's any use to you."

"Thanks," said Harley quietly, after an appreciable pause.

He was glad that Roy did not glance at him at the moment. He felt that the sparkle in his eyes and the flushing of his face must be visible, even in the gloom.

Roy steered with one hand while he reached over into the darkness behind. He fumbled for a few moments, then, with a grunt, produced the pistol.

"You'll have to be careful with it," he warned, as he passed the weapon to Harley. "She's a tricky bit of ironmongery, and it isn't registered."

"I know enough about guns not to shoot myself," replied Harley, keeping a triumphant note from his tones with an effort. "I'll let you have the thing tomorrow. Is she loaded."

"There's a full clip in her. Watch the safety-catch."

"I see."

"She kicks a bit. You want to watch that."

"Thanks. Do you usually keep this thing in the car?"

"Yes. Very handy in case I pick up a hard shot, like some I saw over in Napier. Besides, you can't leave things like that around in a boarding-house. The landlady or the housemaid would raise a shriek sometime or other."

Roy chuckled, and Harley, his hands trembling uncontrollably, slipped the pistol into his coat pocket.

"Bit different, travelling this road now, eh?" asked Roy, driving the car at top speed on the straight stretches between Stratford and Inglewood. "We've got it all to ourselves."

Harley murmured his agreement.

Both men were very tired when at last the car came to a stop before the Harley bungalow. It was shortly after one o'clock in the morning, and a light rain was falling. There were no lights visible in any of the scattered suburban houses.

Harley alighted stiffly.

"I won't ask you in for a drink, Roy," he said. "The place will be all——"

"That's quite all right, Mr. Harley," interrupted the driver heartily. "I'll be getting home. I'm a bit peckish, and tired to death."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Harley, in self-reproach. "We haven't eaten all day!"

"We haven't," agreed Roy. "I'm beginning to notice it."

"I'm awfully sorry, old man——"

"Don't mention it. I could have pulled up for a feed if I had wanted one. Good-night."

The car crept forward.

"Come over in the morning, Roy, will you? I'll fix up with you then."

"Suits me. I'll be over about ten."

"Good-night, Roy, old man."

Harley held out his hand, and the driver took it rather diffidently.

"You've been a Briton, Roy. I've realised that, but I've been rather short on words lately. Sorry to have given you all this trouble——"

"Forget it, Mr. Harley. Go and have a good sleep, It will do you all the good in the world. I'll see you to-morrow. Be careful with that gun."

"I will. Good-bye."

Roy looked back as he rounded the corner of the street. He could just distinguish Harley standing still upon the kerb.

"'Good-bye,' is it?" he muttered. "What sort of a goat does he think I am?"

He drove to the bottom of the hill, stopped his car, and alighted.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Patricia Weybourn sat up in bed and listened intently. She had not been sleeping well of late, and the faintest unusual sound disturbed her.

She heard a car stop outside the gate, the opening of a car door and its closing; and then—the voice of James Harley!

Her heart seemed to miss a beat. A feeling of panic seized her. She caught her breath sharply, clutched the sheet to her breast with a convulsive movement of fear, and felt the blood draining from her face, leaving it peculiarly cold.

She had not expected Harley so soon. Nor had she expected him to arrive unannounced. She had hoped for time to depart before he came; and now—!

With a hurried movement she threw aside the clothes and sprang out of bed, her instinctive intention being to escape by the back door before Harley entered at the front.

Then she remembered his habit of entering by the back door. She paused, sitting on the edge of her bed, thinking furiously. If she went out by the front door he would see her as he came up the path. Better to wait until she knew by which door he would enter.

She had no time to dress.

Her kimono hung from the head of the bed. She found it in the darkness and donned it hastily. She dragged her suitcase from beneath the bed—the sole piece of luggage which she had brought back. It bumped against a leg of the bed noisily. She became still for a moment, then crossed the room and leaned over Grace, who was faintly discernible in the dim light from the open window.

Grace slept peacefully, one hand touching her bandaged face as though she were still conscious of pain.

Moving noiselessly and swiftly, Patricia gathered her belongings from the wardrobe and from the dressing-table, her fingers searching hurriedly that she might not miss anything. She bundled the things into the suitcase and closed it, trembling and unable to avoid making a loud click with the lock.

James Harley still talked at the gate. She heard him say good-bye.

Crossing again to Grace, she stooped swiftly and kissed the blind woman gently upon her scarred lips; then, picking up the suitcase, she hurried silently into the hall. Her hat and coat hung from hooks near the door. She found them and held them in her hand.

Nothing else? She had everything? Yes.

She heard the car swing round the corner of the street and move away down the hill.

She stared at the faintly luminous leadlight in the door and listened intently for Harley's approaching foot-steps.

They did not come.

For long minutes she waited, and the silence continued.

Then, faintly, as though it were opened by a stealthy hand, the click of the gate.

Silence.

Where was he? By which door would he enter? She had counted upon hearing his footsteps upon the path, but it seemed that he waited by the gate, or—or that he came stealthily.

Patricia's heart beat faster and louder. It seemed to her that its beating echoed in the empty hall, that it must inevitably awaken Grace.

The sweat of growing fear moistened her hands and chilled her forehead.

Something malignant was abroad! She knew it! She could feel it! Feel it through the solid door!

A loose board thudded softly upon the verandah!

Harley was there. She could almost see him!

And yet, why should she fear——?

Not until this moment did she doubt that Harley had come in response to one or both of the two first telegrams, or the letter, in all of which it had been definitely stated that Grace lived and awaited him at home.

Like a blow in the face came the conviction that he had come in response to the wire she had sent only the previous morning. The others had missed him.

He had come back, not expecting to see his wife alive, but to see the woman who had sent his wife and child to their deaths. The ambiguity of the message—an ambiguity which had struck her as

rather amusing after she had sent it—had deceived him.

He had come back to see her, Patricia, and he had not come with love!

She recalled the sentence in Buzzy's recent letter which embodied the opinion of the friend who had seen Harley in Napier. "Tony says Jimmy went mad when he found the body of Joan and the other woman; and, ever since, he has been on the border-line, and any little thing might send him of the deep-end again. Don't tell Grace that."

Patricia knew, beyond doubt, that her crazily-worded telegram had sent him off the deep-end. By a tragic accident it had reached him before the others, and now he was outside the door, crouching like a wild animal, listening, waiting to enter the house and destroy the woman whom his mad brain conceived to be without a soul.

She fancied she heard him breathing!

For one moment she contemplated flight. The back door offered escape. Then she remembered Grace.

Harley might slay in the dark. He might kill Grace, believing it to be herself, Patricia.

A sudden courage came to her, a reckless disregard for the danger which threatened.

She threw her hat and coat aside, dropped her suitcase upon the carpet, switched on the light with her right hand and threw the door wide open with her left.

Harley stood upon the threshold, coatless, hatless, shoeless, his left hand raised stealthily to insert a key in the lock, his right hand holding the automatic before him threateningly.

Patricia did not cry out. She had known what to expect. The alteration in his appearance, due to grief and semi-starvation, alone shocked her.

"Come in," she invited softly, stepping aside easily, as though the occasion were in no way extraordinary.

James Harley blinked at her, his eyes unaccustomed to the light. He was dazed. Dazed by a vision he had not expected. His gaze wandered slowly from the glorious halo of her hair lit by the lamp behind her to the blue ribbon which depended from the breast of her silken pyjamas.

His mind played him a curious trick.

For a few moments the entire memory of the past month, its agony, its long nightmare, was blotted out. He was back again on the evening of the 'quake. They had had tea—fried chops and tomatoes, he remembered—he had read the paper, and now the hour was late. Pat had retired, and he, filled with an unexpected timidity, had slept on the hard settee by the breakfast-room window. Now Pat had come to see what had happened to him. She was standing in the doorway, calling to him invitingly—

"Come in," she repeated.

"Not yet, Pat," he answered. "I'm not quite so hardened——"

The peculiar expression on the girl's face and the sound of his own voice awakened him. He shook his head, glanced hurriedly around and at the pistol in his hand, and he remembered.

He stepped over the threshold lightly. His eyes narrowed to slits. His hand held the pistol directed at Patricia's heart. He closed the door with his heel and advanced menacingly, crouching horribly.

Patricia was deathly pale, but neither her voice nor her courage faltered.

"I don't blame you," she said, glancing at the threatening weapon, "considering what you think I am."

She turned her back upon him and led the way into the breakfast-room, moving cautiously and signalling him to do likewise.

He did not understand her signal, but he followed her silently, intent only upon meting out "justice."

How like a snake she was! How sinuous were her movements, emphasised by the sheen and peculiar

pattern of her kimono! Beautiful, yes. But deadly. Deadly!

He lifted his head and sniffed like an animal as he entered the breakfast-room. Even the fragrance of her was alluring, poisonously alluring!

He closed the door and approached her where she stood beneath the light.

"Well?" he asked softly. "You know why I am here?"

Patricia nodded. She looked at him fearlessly, and with a great pity. The alteration in him was tragic. His eyes, though they glittered with a mad light, seemed strangely vacant. His unshaven cheeks, lined and sunken, quivered as though his nervous system were utterly smashed.

"I know," she answered softly.

"And you are not afraid?"

"No."

He shook his head in a puzzled manner. He had not expected this attitude in her.

"Why? Why are you not afraid?"

"Because you will not kill me, Jimmy."

He laughed silently, a horrible laugh which shook him to his heels.

"No? I will not kill you?" he mocked.

She looked at him calmly. He became savage.

"You think I will hesitate to kill you? Hesitate to kill the thing which has smashed my life?"

She did not flinch. Instead, she smiled at him pityingly.

"You will not kill me, for your own sake, Jimmy."

"For my own sake?" snarled Harley, advancing a step until the muzzle of the pistol was thrust against the girl's heart. "Do you think I care what becomes of me when you are dead? You, who have robbed me of my reason, poisoned my brain, so that even now I want to take you in my arms! In my arms and crush you—like the deadly thing you are! The Devil gave you beauty and took away your heart! You laugh at the men who grovel before you!" he con-

tinued as Patricia's smile of pity remained. "You suck them dry, and you laugh, you harlot! You laugh! You call them from the graves of their dead hopes and they come, the fools! They crawl to you, pleading for pity, and you stamp their faces in the dust! Well, here am I in answer to your call—but I do not crawl. I walk upright like a man again! And, like a man, I have come to destroy that which would destroy me!"

Throughout the tirade, which commenced on a low note and ended in something very near a scream, Patricia did not move. Although the muzzle of the pistol bruised her flesh as Harley emphasised his periods with vicious prods, she had not flinch. Instead of being crushed by the violent condemnation, she experienced a curious exaltation. As Harley proceeded and his voice became shriller and more passionate, her colour rose until she seemed to blush, her eyes sparkled with a knowledge of triumph, her beauty flamed.

In this supreme moment of peril and sacrifice, she knew that Harley loved her, that he would love her until the end, no matter what might be the outcome of this meeting. She knew that a touch of her hand, a word, would send him to his knees in tears begging for her love and her forgiveness.

It was not the real James Harley who threatened her. It was convention, the narrow conscience of a Christian civilisation which makes hypocrites of men. Harley himself, the primal man, stripped of the veneer of modernity, worshipped her still. His idolatry was in his eyes, in his words, in the violent movements of his arms which ached to hold and crush her.

Just one look, one word, and he would be upon his knees.

For a pregnant second she toyed with the idea, as they stood facing each other, tense, silent. Then she laughed, harshly, mockingly.

"Yes," she agreed, "you behave like a man. You see with one eye and reason with but half of your mind. The evil you see is not all in me, James Harley. Not all of it. Why do you think that I want you to grovel? Do you think I still want you? My dear man!"

She laughed again, throwing back her head and revealing her glorious white throat. Then she became serious.

"Pull yourself together, Jimmy," she begged, putting out her hands to deflect the pistol. "This is——"

Harley brought the heavy barrel of the pistol down upon her knuckles viciously, so that her skin was broken and the blood flowed. She drew a sharp breath, but did not cry out.

The new colour drained from her face and her knees shook as Harley thrust the muzzle of the pistol against her heart.

"Talk!" he hissed. "Talk as long as you can; but you will be better occupied talking to your God—if you have one—than to me. Talk!"

Unmistakable death leapt from his eyes. His expression was maniacal, for he knew, as the woman knew, that he loved her and must always love her; that he was fighting a terrible battle which could only end in defeat of his conscience if he hesitated to strike.

Patricia knew that he meant to kill.

For herself death did not matter, but in killing her he would destroy himself and Grace.

"Jimmy!" she screamed desperately. "Don't! For God's sake! Jimmy!"

Harley snarled savagely. His finger jerked the trigger.

"For Grace!" he muttered between clenched teeth.

There was no explosion.

Harley pulled the trigger savagely, once, twice, three times. The weapon was dead.

Patricia sighed, closed her eyes, and sank limply to the floor.

Harley stared at the weapon stupidly, pulling the trigger many times. Then he swore, and worked the safety catch furiously. Finding that ineffectual, he snapped out the cartridge-clip.

The weapon was not loaded. It had not been loaded since 1917!

With a violent movement Harley threw the weapon and the clip through the window-pane. The crash of breaking glass sounded startlingly loud in the stillness of the night.

He stooped over the crouching woman upon the floor, his long, thin hands reaching for her throat.

"Don't, Jimmy!" she cried feebly. "You don't know what you're doing! Jimmy!"

"Talk, you snake! Talk!"

He held her close, glaring into her wide, frightened eyes. He shook her fiercely; then threw her violently across the room. She struck a corner of the table and slid to the floor in a heap.

Harley crossed to her with slow, menacing strides. The blood lust was on him. He was a wild beast, stalking to kill.

"Get up!" he snarled. "Get up and talk!"

Patricia moved her head from side to side helplessly. She was in pain, and unable to raise her head.

Harley looked at the back of her neck, so white, so inviting. One good blow upon her spine with something heavy——

He looked around the room quickly. The pseudo-antique poker which hung from an ornamental stand upon the hearth appeared to be made for the work. He stole across the room and secured it. He weighed it in his hand, and turned.

"Jimmy! Is that you?"

Harley stiffened, the poker half-upraised, poised upon his toes. Someone had spoken. Or did his brain play him tricks again?

He waited, turning his head slowly towards the door.

"Jimmy!"

There! Again!

An expression of incredulity crept into his eyes. He could almost imagine that his dead wife had spoken.

"Jimmy! Is that you?"

He stood as though turned to stone. A terrible fear took possession of him. He heard the voice of the dead! He *was* mad! There was no longer any doubt.

Patricia moaned, trying to speak. He gave no heed to her.

"Jimmy!"

"Yes?" he whispered shakily, lifting his eyes and looking into space.

There was silence.

"Yes?" he shouted fiercely, as though he defied his reason to collapse.

"Jimmy!"

The voice was unmistakable now. It rang with happiness and tears. He heard the sound of someone rising from a bed.

The fury drained from him. The poker clattered upon the floor. He stared from side to side quickly, panic fastening upon him. He stared at Patricia, horrified that he had felled her. She was struggling to lift her face to him. She supported herself upon her knees with her hands flat upon the floor. She was gasping with pain.

"What is that?" he whispered, pointing to the door with shaking hand. "What is it?"

"Go to her!" Patricia gasped. "Go to her! Don't let her wander in the dark!"

Harley looked at the door, and listened to the sound of bare feet approaching it across the hall.

He straightened and backed away towards the window.

"Who is it?" he called, his voice shaking like that of a frightened child.

The door opened slowly.

Grace, clad only in a night-gown, her hair held back by the wide bandage which concealed the upper half of her face, stood in the doorway holding out to him bare, appealing arms.

Harley's jaw dropped. He rapped his knuckles sharply upon the window ledge to assure himself that he did not dream.

"Grace!" he ejaculated, unable to believe his eyes.

"Jimmy!"

The blind woman crossed the room as though she saw, and Patricia rolled from her path with difficulty as she passed the table. She walked unhesitatingly to where her husband stood in helpless amazement; then her arms moved uncertainly.

"Jimmy, where are you? I can't see you. I'm blind."

For another moment Harley stood petrified; then understanding came to him. This was his happiness to which he was bidden to come!

With a swift movement he gathered the blind woman into his thin arms. His gaunt, unshaven cheek caressed her hair, and he sobbed.

"Grace! Oh, my dear!"

Patricia lay still and silent beneath the table. Her cup of sacrifice was full, and running over.

* * * *

Roy, the taxi-driver, in his place of concealment just outside the window, relaxed with a sigh of relief. He had been in the very act of poising himself preparatory to springing through the broken window when Grace had spoken and Harley had paused in his murderous action.

He had not exactly relished the idea of braving splintered glass.

"Cats!" he chuckled, as he crept away on hands and knees in search of the pistol and clip. "Cats is right! Nine lives!"

He searched in silence, and presently found his souvenir. He sat upon the wet grass and slapped the clip home with a petulant blow of his palm.

"Some people have all the luck." he said plaintively. "Cats take to 'em naturally."

* * * *

CHAPTER XXV.

The afternoon sun shone into the room where Grace Harley lay. The window curtains waved lazily, and in the room there brooded a peace which had long been absent from it.

James Harley, clothed and in his right mind, sat at the bedside of his wife looking thoughtfully at her hands. Gentle hands they were; hands which traced endlessly the embroidered pattern of the counterpane; soft hands, doomed to grope in eternal darkness.

In his own wasted hands, hanging between his knees, he held a single sheet of notepaper. He had read the words upon it many times, aloud and silently. He knew them by heart.

Good-bye, people.
Of what use are mere words to us?
Of what use to say "Let us forget?"
We shall never forget; neither shall we forgive where there is nothing to forgive.
So, it is just good-bye.

Patricia Weybourn.

P.S. Although the hour is early, Mrs. Langham is peeping through her curtains. I intend to make a long nose at her as I go down the path. I would recommend this vulgar proceeding to you both. Good-bye. P.W.

James Harley was puzzled. He thought he had not slept. Yet he must have done so, for he had not heard Patricia depart.

He had assisted her to her bed, and had left her to fling himself upon his knees at the bedside of his wife. He had been crushed with unutterable shame and remorse, and the dark hours had been hours of intense suffering.

Yet he must have slept; and Patricia had gone before he could beg her forgiveness and utter his heart-felt thanks for her care of Grace.

He sat with the sunlight upon his greying hair, his shoulders drooping pathetically — the pitiful shadow of the man he had been. In his heart was a curious emptiness, a sense of dull finality. He felt old and tired.

A gentle hand touched his arm, settling upon it as lightly as a bird. He turned to smile upon the bandaged face of his wife, and his own hand covered hers.

"Jimmy, we haven't quite arrived at the happy ending, have we?"

He shook his head slowly.

"This is a happier ending than I could have dreamed during these last weeks, Grace," he answered softly.

"But it isn't complete, Jimmy, is it?"

"There is never completeness in happy endings, my dear. It is not in the nature of things."

"You evade the point, Jimmy. Our happiness—yours and mine—is clouded by the thought of—Pat."

"Grace!"

"Oh, I do not mean that we fear she will come between us again. I mean that we are, and always will be, conscious that she is unhappy."

James Harley was silent.

"Pat deserves happiness, Jimmy. And I stand in her way—and in your way——"

"Oh, my dear! You must not say such things."

"You're a dear old Jimmy to speak like that. It is the way you will always speak to me. But, in this darkness, Jimmy, I can read your heart. I see some things much more clearly now that I am blind."

"Please, Grace——"

Harley lifted her hands to his lips and kissed them gently, as he had done in the days of their courtship. She did not attempt to stay him; but she shook her head and smiled pityingly with her lips.

"I love you to do that, Jimmy," she said softly.

They were silent for a long time, Harley holding her hands tenderly.

"Perhaps the happy ending is not very far away for all of us," she said at last, turning her face to the sun.

"What do you mean?" he asked, looking at her sharply, his heart seeming to contract.

"The darkness will grow deeper and eternal for me—soon, Jimmy," she answered gently; "and I shall go to find Joan."

He caressed her hands, kissing them again. His eyes suffused and his throat filled.

"Grace, you must not say these things," he said unsteadily. "The sun will shine upon us both for many years, and our happiness will be fuller because we have suffered. I will never leave you——"

"I know you won't, Jimmy; and I will not ask you to—although I am blind and the little beauty I had is utterly destroyed. I know you will be true and kind to me, fighting down the thoughts of Pat which will come to you, and—I will be grateful, very grateful. But I shall keep my thoughts upon the happy ending, Jimmy. It may not come to-day, or to-morrow, or for years; but it will come, Jimmy. And I want you to promise me that, when it does come, neither you nor Pat will shun the place where I—where I sleep. For I love you both, dear, as you love both of us."

Harley could not speak. Emotion choked him.

"Read something to me, Jimmy," begged Grace lightly, after a long silence.

—THE END—

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