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THE WHISKERED FOOTMAN

WHAT THIS STORY IS ABOUT

Antony Hambleton, D.S.O., having exhausted his capital in intensive gardening, in the course of which he contrives to lose the only girl in the world, realises that the great moment of his life has arrived—he must repair the shattered fortunes of his house and heart.

Borrowing £500 from a noble kinsman for petty cash expenses, he decides to make a really rich girl happy—with the aid of a padre and a sprig of orange-blossom.

He sets out for the grazing-grounds of the profiteers, and to compass his noble ideal finds it necessary to grow whiskers and enter the household of Mr. Briggs of Bootle, who wears his whiskers in a Newgate fringe and never dissimulates his wealth. Incidentally he was "Pa" to Poppy.

The adventure of the D.S.O. footman in the millionaire's household is what this book is about.

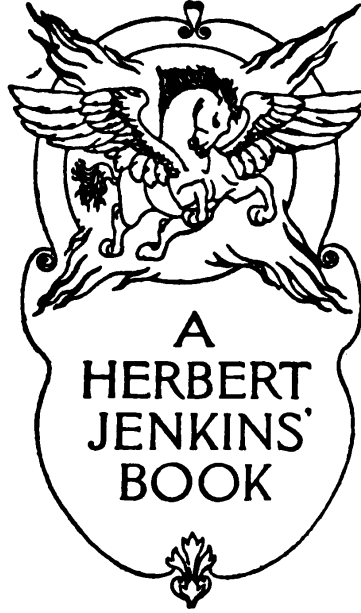
THE WHISKERED FOOTMAN

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THE WHISKERED FOOTMAN

CHAPTER I

ANTONY HAMBLETON'S GREAT CAMPAIGN

“**T**HE critical hour is on us, Anderson. Before the clock strikes six the great campaign will soar to stupendous heights of triumph or sink into the slough of irretrievable disaster. Are those the best cakes in London?” said Mr. Antony Hambleton, D.S.O., in the anxious but compelling tones of a great commander.

“Buzzard’s very best, sir. They’re the pick of a lot specially baked for the Duchess of Kenilworth herself. I only got them as a special favour. But Buzzard’s know me, sir. For the last thirty years I have never allowed any of the houses in which I was butler to deal with anyone else,” said Anderson in encouraging tones. “They are the very best in London.”

“Good. Much may depend on those cakes. They’re the tanks which go before the great

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advance. Miss Briggs is coming to tea," said Antony, drawing himself up and thrusting his hand into the bosom of his coat in the manner of the great Napoleon.

"Most young ladies have a sweet tooth, sir—especially the plump ones like Miss Briggs," said Anderson, bearing the loaded tray from the door of the kitchen to the tea-table.

On it were three plates of succulent and delicate cakes of many colours, mostly primary.

"That's exactly it. I begin by an assault on the sweet tooth, then I proceed to the main assault on the heart," said Antony in the tone of a Chief-of-Staff giving the last instructions to his attentive generals.

"I quite understand, sir. There's nothing like getting the lady in a good temper before you come to business," said Anderson.

"And business it is—urgent business," said Antony in a tone of sombre gravity.

Anderson proceeded to arrange the contents of the tray on the tea-table in a bright and attractive pattern. The primary colours of the cakes were very helpful. Antony watched him with pleased eyes. He admired Anderson; he cherished a conviction that Anderson ought to have been a bishop. He had the mild blue eye, the broad and lofty brow,

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the smooth, almost sleek, grey hair, the rounded chin, and the benignant expression which ignorant laymen are wont to associate with ecclesiastical preferment. He had never seen his legs ; but he was sure that gaiters were their natural adornment.

Anderson finished his arrangement of the table, stepped back to survey it with a critical eye, and said : “ Is it so very urgent, sir ? ”

“ Urgent isn't the word for it,” said Antony. “ Poppy—Miss Briggs is my last chance.”

“ Oh, come, sir ; not your last. There are plenty of well-to-do young ladies in the world, sir,” protested Anderson.

“ Hundreds and hundreds—every profiteer has a daughter, often several. But they are not for me. It takes money, and lots of it, to get next to them ; and I'm at the end of mine,” said Antony in a tone of heartrending sadness.

“ I'm sorry to hear that, sir,” said Anderson with deep sympathy.

“ Yes. I'm down to my last tenner—at least I shall be when I've borrowed it from Mr. Bracket to-night. The five hundred I borrowed from my uncle has gone.”

Anderson started violently, dropped the tray, picked it up, and in a tone of the

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blankest astonishment said : “ You borrowed money—five hundred pounds—from his Lordship, sir ? ”

“ I did. It was a great feat, but I performed it,” said Antony with modest pride. “ I borrowed five hundred pounds from him for six months at a hundred per cent.”

“ Ah, at a hundred per cent, sir,” said Anderson in a tone of relief ; and he appeared to breathe easily again.

“ Yes ; the rate is high. But I had to have the money. When eight months ago I lost the only girl I ever loved—you didn’t know I’d lost the only girl I ever loved ? ” said Antony with a deep sigh.

“ Well, I’ve seen you love two, sir,” said Anderson in some surprise.

“ Oh, it was neither of *them*,” said Antony a trifle contemptuously. “ She ran away and hid from me—disappeared completely—it took the heart out of me. I always hated work and now I loathed it.”

“ You would, sir,” said Anderson sympathetically.

“ Then I had a brilliant idea. If I couldn’t marry the girl I loved, I’d devote my life to making some really rich girl happy. But I needed money to get next to a really rich girl. I had to have it. I tore five hundred

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off my uncle at a hundred per cent, rented the flat, joined the Senior Mayfair, which really is the profiteers' chief club, you know, made myself agreeable, and got next to three really rich girls. Two of them were torn from me. Poppy is the last and fairest of the bunch."

"It was a great idea, sir," said Anderson in a tone of the most respectful admiration.

"It was a great campaign. But it's coming to an end either in a splendid victory or disastrous defeat. If Miss Briggs is not mine before Saturday—I bought a special marriage licence with the last thirty pounds—you and I will have to part. It will be a wrench, Anderson—a great wrench."

"It will indeed, sir," said Anderson.

"You've only been with me six months; but I've come to look on you as an old retainer—quite as one of the family," said Antony, surveying him with mournful eyes. "I'm one of those men who need old retainers. I appreciate them. I appreciate you."

"The sentiment is reciprocal, sir, if I may say so," said Anderson with respectful warmth.

"I've rarely been in service with a gentleman I liked better."

"That's a very handsome tribute," said Antony politely. "But I'm afraid that the

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fare has not been of the lusciousness to which you have been accustomed in your other places."

"The fare has been Spartan, if I may put it so, sir," said Anderson. "But it has done me no harm. When I have felt the need of a change and dined at the Café Royal I have enjoyed those dinners, sir, more than I have enjoyed my meals for years. Besides, you explained to me that the fare would be simple when you engaged me. And I've reached the time of life, sir, when I like to have young people about me; and if the fare has been simple, the cheerfulness has been beyond compare. I have never been in service with a gentleman before who could come home at half-past four in the morning and be merry in a cold bath at eight three days in succession."

"It is merely a matter of the quality of the liquor," said Antony modestly. "Some of the company I have been compelled to keep in carrying on the great campaign may have been weak about their aitches; but there were no headaches in their wine. But bring another tea-cup. Miss Briggs is bringing a friend with her. I don't know why. She doesn't know me well enough not to trust me. I suppose it's a Bootle convention."

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"They have queer ways in Bootle, sir," said Anderson gravely.

"Oh, you know Bootle, do you?" said Antony in a tone of great surprise.

He was surprised. He could not see Anderson in that enterprising, go-ahead community. There was a staidness about Anderson, quite out of keeping with the hustle of modern industrialism, which Antony believed to have been his perpetual possession. He saw him as a ripely staid boy.

"I spent my boyhood in Bootle, sir," said Anderson a trifle gloomily.

"And a very nice place too, I'm sure," said Antony with polite enthusiasm.

"A very nice place—to get out of," said Anderson with a yet gloomier conviction.

"Miss Briggs doesn't seem to think so," said Antony.

"Young ladies have queer ways of thinking—especially in the provinces," said Anderson in a tone of decided disparagement. "I could tell you things about her father, sir!" he added with a slightly malignant thoughtfulness.

"For goodness' sake, don't!" said Antony quickly. "His looks are enough for me—to say nothing of his manners."

"His hands didn't call him Bonny Ben

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Briggs for nothing, sir," said Anderson with a darkling air.

"I should think not! I should require a large consideration to call him bonny anything," said Antony with fervent conviction. "But, as I often say, sons-in-law mustn't be choosers."

"You're right, sir. And you're going to find Ben Briggs—Mr. Briggs, I should say, sir, since you're going to marry his daughter,—an uncommonly tough nut to crack," said Anderson in a tone of grave warning.

"I know it—I know it well. But when did I have any luck in fathers-in-law—fathers-in-law that were to be, I mean? Look at Sir Peter Phipps and Sir Harold Robinson! Look how they treated me when I had arranged to marry their daughters!"

"Sir Peter Phipps and Sir Harold Robinson were nothing to Mr. Briggs, sir—absolutely nothing!" asseverated Anderson.

"I know it. Bonny Ben Briggs is the crux of the campaign! He is my chief opponent! Hang Bonny Ben Briggs! He shall be downed! Downed!! Downed!!!" cried Antony; and he struck the magnificent attitude of a conqueror.

The bell of the flat rang.

Antony started, came out of his splendid

ANTONY'S GREAT CAMPAIGN 15

attitude and said in cold determined accents :
“ The hour of fate has struck. The battle
begins. Show them in.”

Anderson went to the door and through
it with his slow, dignified gait. As he shut
it behind him Antony stepped quickly to
the hearthrug, turned and faced the door
with an air of acute expectancy and his
sweetest smile.

CHAPTER II

ANTONY'S GOOD GENIUS URGES HIM ALONG THE UPWARD PATH

THE door opened and there entered a very pretty dark-eyed, dark-haired child of fourteen, very prettily dressed, Antony's sister Priscilla. Anderson followed her into the room and shut the door with a benignant smile.

Antony's face showed none of his disappointment that it was not Miss Poppy Briggs. Indeed, his smile grew, if anything, sweeter, as he went briskly forward to greet her, saying in a tone of warm welcome: "Hello, Kiddie, what good wind blew you here?"

"I borrowed a shilling from mother and came to see you," she said, and kissed him.

"Let's have a look at you," he said, holding her out at arm's length. "Why, hang it all! Your hat's on crooked again. How often am I to tell you that if you wear your

hat crooked at fourteen you'll sit in the House of Commons before you're twenty-eight?"

"I don't mind," said Priscilla with amiable indifference.

"So young and yet so callous!" cried Antony in a tone of horror.

"It is no place for a lady, Miss Priscilla," said Anderson in a shocked voice.

Priscilla looked from one to the other amiably.

"My goodness, what's this?" cried Antony, pointing to a neatly mended rent in her left sleeve.

"It's only a teeny-weeny hole," pleaded Priscilla.

"There's no such thing as a teeny-weeny hole in stuff that costs thirteen and eleven a yard," said Antony sternly.

"It wasn't my fault. The black kitten next door did it," said Priscilla.

"You've been nursing a clawed animal with your clothes on? Ruin stares us in the face!" wailed Antony.

"It always does; so it doesn't matter much, does it?" said Priscilla placidly.

"May I have tea with you?"

"I'm afraid it's impossible, Kiddie. I'm expecting ladies to tea," said Antony in a tone of distress.

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Priscilla's face fell ; and she said : " More ladies ? They're always coming to tea. I hoped it would be an off day. I suppose it's Elaine Robinson."

" There are no off days for the altruist," said Antony sadly. " And it isn't Elaine Robinson."

" Another girl ? It's a dreadful thing to have a fickle brother," said Priscilla with a shocked air.

" Fickle ? Me ? " cried Antony in a tone of amazement.

" Yes. Every month it's somebody fresh. You ought to have stuck to Pansy," said Priscilla in a tone of cold reproach.

" But how could I stick to Pansy ? " said Antony with some heat. " How can anyone stick to a girl who suddenly disappears and hides for months without even letting you know whether she's alive or dead ? It can't be done. There's nothing to stick to."

" Well, there was Gwendolen Phipps. You seemed to be very fond of her. She didn't run away and hide. You ought to have been true to her, if you weren't going to be true to Pansy," continued Priscilla in the same reproachful tone.

" But how could I be true to a girl who was torn from me by a mercenary father and

married to a ship-broker?" cried Antony.

Priscilla paused. The objection struck her as reasonable. Then she said firmly: "Well, you ought to have been true to Elaine Robinson."

"But Elaine Robinson's married too. Her mercenary father married her to a ship-builder on Tuesday week," said Antony, vindicating himself with an air of triumph.

Priscilla seemed for the moment to be worsted, silenced; then she recovered herself and said coldly: "Well, it ought to have been a warning to you—two warnings to you—to stick to Pansy. You know she's the only girl you ever loved. You told me so ever so many times, though that girl did write to you from St. Omer and that other girl from Paris."

"Now how on earth did you find out about that?" cried Antony, astounded by this revelation of long-concealed knowledge.

"Oh, if you would leave letters lying about with foreign stamps on them, how could I help seeing that they were in girls' handwritings?" said Priscilla with a virtuous air.

"Did you tell Pansy about them? Had they anything to do with her running away and hiding?" cried Antony.

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“Of course I didn’t. I didn’t even tell mother. Pansy doesn’t know anything about them. But you ought to be true to her. You know you ought. You know you’re fond of her still. You never kept Gwendolen Phipps or Elaine Robinson’s photos on the table by your bed so as to see them first thing in the morning as you do Pansy’s. You ought to wait till she comes back and be true to her. Oughtn’t he, Anderson?”

Anderson was seized by a fit of discreet and gentle coughing which prevented him from joining in the discussion.

“She isn’t coming back; and if she did it wouldn’t be any use. She wouldn’t marry me. So it’s no good my waiting for her,” said Antony with a somewhat harried air.

“Well, then, I think I’d better stop and be introduced to the new one and have tea with you,” said Priscilla, changing her tone to one of persuasion.

“I’m afraid you can’t to-day—some other afternoon. This tea is tremendously important. It’s the turning-point in our fortunes. If all goes right, you and the mater are going to have a very different time—a ripping time.”

“But how splendid!” said Priscilla; and her eyes sparkled. “It won’t matter then if my dresses do go and get torn.”

“I don't know about that. Why be wasteful?” said Antony. “But you run away now. Get yourself some tea at a tea-shop and go to the pictures.”

He thrust his hand into his trousers pocket, brought out a shilling, and surveyed it with forlorn but earnest eyes.

Then he said: “Lend me five shillings, Anderson.”

Anderson brought up a good handful of silver from his trousers pocket, picked out two half-crowns and handed them to Priscilla.

She thanked him and put them carefully in the purse in her vanity bag. Then she said a trifle disconsolately: “I did want to have tea with you, Antony. You have so much better cakes than the tea-shops.”

Antony hesitated, frowning unhappily; then his face cleared, and he said: “How would you like Anderson to give you tea in the kitchen?”

“I should love it!” cried Priscilla. “I love Anderson; and he loves me, don't you, Anderson?”

“Yes, miss,” said Anderson with conviction.

“That's all right,” said Antony in a tone of relief.

The bell of the flat rang.

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“Off you go!” said Antony sharply, catching up a plate of cakes. “Take these. They’re the nicest.”

He thrust the plates into Priscilla’s hand, and led her by the arm to the door which opened into the kitchen as Anderson went through the door into the hall. Antony opened the kitchen door. Priscilla put one foot over the threshold and stopped.

“After all, I don’t think it’s right,” she said. “You ought not to be fickle. You’re really in love with Pansy and you ought to be true to her even if you have to wait years. Tennyson says you ought to love one woman only and cleave to her—mother read it out to me.”

“Hang Tennyson!” cried her exasperated brother. “How can I cleave to a woman who, for anything I know, is in Kamchatka? It can’t be done!”

With that he pushed her through the door, shut it, stepped briskly to the hearthrug, and faced the door into the hall with an air of acute expectancy and his sweetest smile.

CHAPTER III

ANTONY DISCOVERS THAT HE HAS A WEALTHY RIVAL

THE door opened, a young man appeared on the threshold, and Anderson behind him said: "Mr. Bracket, sir."

Mr. Bracket entered the room slowly. He was a large, thick-set young man, with sleek black hair, small slate-coloured eyes, a slightly greasy, mud-coloured complexion, and an expression of smug earnestness on his round and fattish face. He was wearing a puce-coloured tweed confection by Mr. Parkinson of Conduit Street, grey suède gloves, patent-leather boots of an "out" size, a flamboyant neck-tie. He carried a soft hat and an ebony cane to which some misguided craftsman had affixed a gold top of a painfully florid decoration.

"Hallo, Bracket! how are you? I didn't expect to see you till to-night," said Antony.

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"How are you? I caught the morning boat and came straight round here as soon as I got to town. I want to talk to you particularly," said Mr. Bracket in a deep, thick, flat, oily voice.

"Then you've come at the wrong time. I've got some people coming to tea," said Antony with decision.

"I know. That's what I've come to talk to you about," said Mr. Bracket.

"What is it? Fire away! Only be quick. They may turn up at any moment," said Antony. "When they do, out you go. What's *that*?"

He stopped short and gazed at Mr. Bracket's neck-tie with a slow horror dawning in his eyes. Then he cried sharply: "My goodness, man! What have you been doing to yourself? You're wearing a neck-tie I didn't choose for you!"

Mr. Bracket's stubby-fingered hand rose nervously to the neck-tie, and he stammered: "It's a very p-p-pretty tie. It t-t-took my fancy immensely."

"It isn't pretty. It's gorgeous. And the sooner it's off the better. It makes you look like an extra-giddy undertaker taking a day off at Peckham Rye," said Antony in the tone of one standing no nonsense.

"B-B-But they're all the rage on the Riviera," protested Mr. Bracket.

"They always were," said Antony with cold scorn. "Now you go straight home and get into a tie I did choose for you." His eyes grew terrible and in a terrible voice he added: "It's too bad! I give you my word it is! Here I am slaving—SLAVING—to keep you looking presentable and you come out at four o'clock in the afternoon in a tie like that! You'll be having the rainbow cut into trouserings next! What is it you want to say? Out with it! Hurry up!"

Antony could never quite forget that he had commanded the officers' training battalion in which Mr. Bracket had been a cadet.

Mr. Bracket's features decomposed; he wobbled on his feet. "How c-c-can I hurry up? You've g-g-gone and upset every idea in my head. You know I like t-t-to t-t-take my t-t-time over things," he wailed.

"Well, while you're collecting your ideas lend me a tenner," said Antony rather loudly in imperative accents.

A born soldier, he rarely missed a chance; and Mr. Bracket's confusion looked very like one.

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"I haven't got a t-t-tenner on me," stammered Mr. Bracket.

"You've got a cheque," said Antony in a cold, unrelenting voice.

"No, I haven't," said Mr. Bracket.

"It doesn't matter. You can have one of mine. We both bank at dear old Coutts's," said Antony, taking him by the arm and drawing him towards the writing-table under the window. "Gently now—gently." He set him in the chair before the table, put his own cheque-book, open, before him, and put a pen firmly into his hand. "Now write. Nothing clears the head like writing a cheque. Write distinctly; and be very careful about your signature."

"You owe me a hundred and forty-five already," moaned Mr. Bracket, wriggling.

"Do I?" said Antony in a tone of utter indifference. "You millionaires have such heads for figures. But I hate those square sums. Make it fifteen—a round hundred and sixty."

Mr. Bracket wriggled even more bitterly, then made it fifteen with a groan. He rose and handed the cheque to Antony.

"Thanks, brave boy," said Antony cheerfully. "I'll pay you on my return from my honeymoon."

"That's exactly what I came to talk to you about," said Mr. Bracket with sudden animation. "Smithers tells me that you've been uncommonly attentive to Poppy Briggs. You're not making love to her by any chance?"

"Like a house on fire," said Antony buoyantly.

"But that won't do!" cried Mr. Bracket in a tone of horror.

"Why on earth not?" said Antony in great astonishment.

Mr. Bracket wriggled again, apparently at a loss for words. Then he said sternly: "You don't love her."

"That's quite all right," said Antony with careless confidence. "Love comes after marriage if it isn't there before. I learnt that at my nurse's knee; and the whole of French domestic life rests on that principle. I'll lay you seven to four in fivers that before we've been married a week I shall believe she's the only girl I ever loved."

"But it isn't all right! I never dreamt you'd make love to Poppy!" cried Mr. Bracket in a tone of the liveliest consternation.

"But what else is she there for? She's a pretty girl, isn't she?" said Antony in a tone of some bewilderment.

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“If a man were to make love to every pretty girl——” began Mr. Bracket solemnly.

“But I always do! That’s what they’re there for, isn’t it?” cried Antony.

“Certainly not,” said Mr. Bracket sternly. “I hold with those noble words of Lord Tennyson: ‘To love one woman only, cleave to her.’”

“Hang Tennyson!” said Antony once more. “Everybody seems bent on shoving Tennyson down my throat this afternoon!”

Then a sudden dazzling light dawned on him. Bracket, his patient, tiresome pupil, his humble and snobbish imitator—Bracket was his rival!

It was cheek! Intolerable cheek! Not to be borne! And he said in a terrible voice: “Why, hang it all! I believe you want to make love to her yourself!”

It would be inaccurate to say that Mr. Albert Bracket—blushed; but he grew distinctly more mud-coloured.

“Oh—er—well, I wouldn’t go so far as to say that,” he said cautiously, shuffling his feet. “But—er—I was always attracted by Miss Briggs—even in the old days—at Bootle—in spite of my superior station.”

“Your superior *what*?” shouted Antony.

“Station,” said Mr. Bracket.

“And you let your superior piffing station stand in the way of your making love to a pretty girl?” shouted the amazed Antony.

“B-B-Bootle isn’t like London. P-P-People are very p-p-particular in B-B-Bootle,” stammered Mr. Bracket, terribly confused by Antony’s violence.

“Well, if you were as particular as that about Miss Briggs in Bootle, I’m hanged if I see where you come in here,” said Antony with decision; and his blue eyes bored into Mr. Bracket’s slate-coloured ones with a cold disfavour.

“Circumstances have changed. Mr. Briggs must be worth three m-m-millions if he’s worth a p-p-penny,” stammered Mr. Bracket.

“Splendid! Magnificent! I thought he was only worth two!” cried Antony with enthusiasm.

“I thought it was that,” said Bracket sharply.

“You thought what was what?”

“You’re after Poppy’s money.”

“Poppy and her money,” said Antony coldly. “What’s wrong with that?”

“It’s mercenary, that’s what it is,” said Mr. Bracket in a tone of lofty indignation.

“Since you’ve embarked on this—this—

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er—matrimonial campaign, you've grown more mercenary every day. I've noticed it."

"I like that!" cried Antony indignantly. "You encouraged me to embark on it. When I put it to you that there I was—twenty-five years old, sound of wind and limb, amiable, good-looking, intelligent—a model husband, in fact—and determined to devote my life to making some really rich girl happy, you said it was a top-hole scheme. You said it combined altruism with business in the most remarkable way."

"So it did. But how was I to know you'd go interfering between me and Poppy?" said Mr. Bracket morosely.

"I'm *not* interfering between you and Poppy. I don't believe you've a dog's chance with Poppy!" cried Antony.

"But I have," asserted Mr. Bracket. "In the old days at Bootle I was much sought after by the ladies."

"These aren't the old days; and this isn't Bootle!" snapped Antony.

"But I made a great impression on Poppy," said Mr. Bracket. "I know I did. And it's still there. I'm sure it is. And I was just beginning to make approaches——"

"Then you can stop them. They're too late," interrupted Antony.

"No, they're not. I'd every prospect of success, for we Bootle people cling to one another," said Mr. Bracket.

"You let me catch you clinging to Poppy!" said Antony in a tone of vicious menace.

"And then you come along and spoil everything by making love to her yourself."

"Well, I look upon it purely as a matter of business," said Antony coldly. "And altruism, of course," he added quickly.

"And you told me yourself to be sure and not spoil things by any silly sentimentality."

"I spoke hastily. I didn't pause and consider. Besides, you already owed me forty pounds, you know. But I've thought it out since—at Monty Carlo—and I've come to the conclusion that marrying a rich wife isn't a career for a man. Haven't you ever thought of getting to work again—real work?"

"I've had enough of it," said Antony with decision. "There's no money in it."

"Ah, you don't know the feeling honest work gives you!" said Mr. Bracket with unctuous enthusiasm.

"Yes, I do; and you don't. I ran an intensive garden for two years. But you

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never did any at all, you bloated profiteer ! All you ever did was to sit in an office and let the Government throw money at you—a dozen Cabinet Ministers with twenty-four hands, all throwing as hard as they could throw.”

“I did my bit,” said Mr. Bracket with a quietly proud air.

“Come off it ! All you ever did was the taxpayer,” scoffed Antony. “And I’m not going to sacrifice a top-hole career to gratify your crawling sentimentality. It wouldn’t be business ; and you’d despise me if I did.”

Mr. Bracket gazed at him with a heavy earnestness ; then in an almost tearful voice he said : “Is this the way to treat a comrade of the Great War ? ”

“You’re nothing of the kind,” said Antony with cold conviction. “You were just lugged out of your fuggy office at the last moment and sent to an officers’ training battalion where the Comrades of the Great War gave you beans of the worst till I took pity on you and made them let up on it. It was a jolly good thing for you I had come home shell-shocked and was in command of the battalion. If I hadn’t been they’d have just eaten you up, skin, bones, hair, and all.”

"I never denied it, did I?" said Mr. Bracket.

"On the top of that I became your social mentor and started you properly in the polite world. And goodness knows, it's a tough job being the social mentor of a Bootle millionaire! And what's my reward? You come along and ask me to abandon a career because you're feeling sentimental. It isn't business," said Antony, his voice rising in an aggrieved crescendo.

Mr. Bracket hesitated, gazing at him with dull, exploring eyes, and perspiring with a freedom there was no missing.

Then he said in a suddenly hopeful voice: "All right. Let's look at it purely from the business point of view. What will you take to stop interfering between me and Poppy! I'll give you a thousand."

The proposal came late. Antony's underlying obstinacy was fully aroused. At the moment he felt that Poppy Briggs was the one thing in the world he wanted.

"I wouldn't give her up for five!" he cried.

Mr. Bracket moaned as only a millionaire in the act of being touched can moan. Then he said in a broken voice: "Five thousand pounds is a lot of money for a woman."

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“Not for Poppy. Poppy’s a jewel. One of these days she’ll be worth three million,” said Antony.

“Not to you. Her father will never hear of your marrying Poppy,” said Mr. Bracket.

“He certainly won’t hear of it till the deed is done. I’ve bought a special licence, brave boy; and I always carry it about with me,” said Antony, patting his breast-pocket. “Half an hour after she says ‘Yes, over the top we go.’”

Mr. Bracket groaned.

“Oh, it’s like that, is it?” he said in a tone of despair.

“It is. And now you’ll really have to clear out. I’m expecting her to tea, I tell you. It may come off this very afternoon.”

“It may and again it may not,” said Mr. Bracket sombrely. Then a sudden gleam of cunning sparkled in his little eyes, and he added: “There’s many a slip ’twixt the cup and the lip.”

Antony did not miss the cunning gleam. He did not like the tone in which Mr. Bracket uttered the proverb.

“Don’t you try to be the slip,” he said in a dangerous voice.

Mr. Bracket hesitated, looking into Antony’s face, which looked as dangerous as his voice

had sounded. Mr. Bracket was not brave; he did not like the tone or the face.

“Me? I shouldn’t dream of doing anything underhand. It wouldn’t be gentlemanly,” he said in lofty, virtuous tones, and went slowly to the door.

On the threshold he paused and said in a desperate, moaning voice, as if the words were torn from him by torture: “Fifteen hundred.”

“No!” roared Antony.

Mr. Bracket groaned and went.

Antony gazed at the closed door but not with his sweetest smile. A new factor had entered into the campaign, a new opponent. He was not deceived by Mr. Bracket’s virtuous protestations. This unexpected and wealthy rival would prove dangerous.

CHAPTER IV

THE RETURN OF ANTONY'S LOST LOVE

MR. ANTONY HAMBLETON'S blood was up; and his blue eyes were sparkling with the light of high emprise. He had been looking forward to his interview with Poppy Briggs as an agreeable duty; now he was looking forward to it with the keenest expectation. This was owing to the fact that Mr. Bracket also wanted her. No true Englishman likes anyone else to have anything. Antony was sorry, in moderation, for Mr. Bracket. But there it was.

The bell of the flat rang.

Once more he stepped back on to the hearth-rug and took his stand, facing the door, with an air of acute expectancy and his sweetest smile.

The door opened and Anderson ushered in a charming young lady, dressed simply with admirable taste. Her eyes of a deep

brown, under eyebrows of a deeper brown, seemed to gleam in their depths with a smouldering flame. Her nose was straight with admirably modelled nostrils, her complexion of a creamy white. Her lips were set in a slightly mutinous air which, taken with that smouldering flame in her eyes, promised a certain devilry in her dealings with her fellow-creatures; and her firm, but rounded, chin confirmed that promise.

"Miss Featherstone, sir," said Anderson, and went out.

His sweetest smile vanished from Antony's face; and he stared at his charming visitor with his mouth unbeautifully open, his eyes wide with incredulous amazement. She gazed at him almost with an air of defiance.

"Pansy!" he said in a hushed, amazed, and moving voice. "Pansy!"

His eyes grew suddenly hungry and forlorn.

A tremor ran over Miss Featherstone; and she said quickly, with a pleading imperiousness: "Don't speak and look at me like that, Tony!"

"Goodness, how the sight of you has set my heart jumping!" said Antony slowly; and his eyes were hungrier.

"It has no business to," she said; but her

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voice was not wholly firm ; and a delicate flush had warmed her creamy cheeks.

Antony recovered himself and smiled faintly. His eyes were no longer hungry ; they were simply adoring.

“Where have you hidden yourself all these months? Why did you vanish without telling me that you were going, or where you were going? Why did you never write?” he said quickly in a rather shaky voice.

“I thought it best not to,” she said.

“You thought it best to break my heart, you abominable little wretch!” he said in his severest voice, but smiling. “When you disappeared like that I was beside myself. Being shell-shocked was the merest joke to it. I hunted high and low for you. I couldn’t find a trace of you.”

“I didn’t mean you to. What was the good? You’ve got your mother and Priscilla to keep,” she said.

Her low, musical voice was as delightful to the ear as her face to the eye.

“If there’s one thing in this world I do hate, it’s prudence!” said Antony.

“I know you do ; and so somebody has to be prudent for you,” she said quickly.

“They get no thanks from me,” he said

firmly. "But where have you been? What have you been doing?"

"Making a living."

"You have my deepest sympathy. I've tried to make a living myself, you know, and I know all about it," he said in a tone of compassion.

"Oh, it's not so bad. I've got a soft job. In fact, after those three years of the Red Cross in France it doesn't seem to be work at all. The hours are not long and the pay is decent."

"Well, that is good hearing," he said in a tone of relief.

His eyes wandered over her. Her linen frock of a creamy white and small black hat, both probably of her own making, achieved an effect of distinguished simplicity which few women could get for forty guineas.

"And you're looking ripping—perfectly top-hole. You always did," he said.

She breathed a soft, quick sigh of pleasure at his appreciation, but turned the subject by saying quickly: "I expected to find Miss Briggs already here."

"How on earth did you come to know Poppy Briggs?" he said.

"Oh, I—I—I've known her a—a long while," she said in some confusion.

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Antony was surprised by it. His quick wits sprang to the conclusion that there was something odd about her association with Poppy Briggs—some mystery. His curiosity flamed up. As a rule he was free from that passion. But about Poppy he wished, naturally enough, to know everything.

Before he could question her, she recovered herself and added: "I—er—advise her about her dress. But she was to have been here at half-past four."

"I'm glad she wasn't," said Antony with heartfelt decision. "Now that I've seen you again I've lost all interest in Poppy Briggs. I'm only interested in you."

"You mustn't be, then. It's no use whatever. You've got your way to make in the world. Your mother and Priscilla make it hard enough for you," she said sternly.

"Enough for three's enough for four," he said.

"No. The Little Tarkington days are over," she said firmly.

"And they were the best ever. It's jolly hard lines!" he said mournfully.

"It can't be helped," she said in an expressionless voice.

He let his arms fall limp against his sides in a movement of extreme discouragement,

walked to the window, and gazed at the façade of the block of flats opposite. She sank into an easy chair and looked at his broad back and well-shaped lean head. A hunger had come into her eyes ; but as he turned it vanished from them.

“ Why on earth did you come back again ? Why couldn't you go on letting me forget you ? ” he said heavily.

“ I wish I hadn't—now,” she said. “ But Poppy made such a point of my coming that I couldn't very well refuse.”

“ Well, since you're as hard as adamant, it's just as well that she should be so keen on coming,” he said.

“ Is it ? ” she said, frowning at him. “ Look here : you're not making a fool of her, are you ? She's a very good-hearted girl, though she has a morbid passion for mauve.”

“ My intentions are strictly honourable and intensely immediate. I intend to marry her in haste the moment she'll let me,” said Antony in a business-like tone.

“ Without loving her ? ” cried Pansy.

“ I can't love every girl I know at the same time, you know I can't,” said Antony. “ But love will come after marriage all right. It always does.”

Pansy sat up stiffly in her chair ; the hand

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which held the handle of her parasol gripped it very tight.

“I think it’s perfectly horrid of you!” she cried; and the fire in the depths of her eyes was no longer smouldering.

“Nothing of the kind. It’s altruism,” said Antony firmly. “Poppy’s Bootle friend, Bracket, told me so; and he’s an expert in that kind of thing—learnt it at the Polytechnic. About three months after you ran away and hid from me I decided to devote my life to making some really rich girl happy; and I’m going to do it.”

“Not without being in love with her. It’s perfectly rotten of you!” cried Pansy.

“I tell you that love will come after marriage,” said Antony stoutly. “Besides, I can’t help myself. I’ve spent the five hundred I borrowed from Uncle Egbert to finance my altruistic attempt to make a really rich girl happy; and Poppy’s my last chance.”

“Do you mean to say there were *others*?” said Pansy rather breathlessly.

“Only two; and both of them were torn from me by their brutal profiteering sires and married to the shipping industry.”

“Well, I hope Mr. Briggs makes Poppy marry someone else!” said Pansy hotly.

"You've only got to say the word and I'll marry her to someone else myself. I've got a candidate," said Antony readily.

"I can't; and I won't," said Pansy. "It would be sheer lunacy!"

"And what's the matter with lunacy?" said Antony.

The bell of the flat rang.

Just the slightest spasm of pain twisted her face; then she sprang to her feet and cried: "There she is! I'm not going to sit here and see you make love to her! I must hide!"

Antony stepped to the door into the kitchen and laid his hand on the handle. "Here's the kitchen," he said. "Priscilla will give you some tea. But there's no reason why you should see me make love to Poppy. The only creature in the world I really want to make love to is you. Won't you chance the lunacy and marry me?"

"No!" cried Pansy. "I can't! I mustn't! And I won't!"

He opened the door, and as she went through it he said firmly: "Well, since I can't marry the girl I love, the only sensible thing for me to do is to marry Poppy and her millions. And marry them I will!"

CHAPTER V

ANTONY OBTAINS MORE SINEWS OF WAR

ANTONY went back to the hearthrug scowling. He was no longer looking forward with pleasant expectation to making love to Poppy Briggs. The sight of Pansy, as beautiful and charming as ever, had brought back the old memories and the old heartache. He was even doubtful whether in the tumult of his feelings he would be able to make love to Poppy with the buoyant conviction necessary to carry a girl off her feet.

As the door opened, with a violent effort he banished the scowl and smiled ; and there entered a tall gentleman of sixty-five, dressed with an uncommon spruceness in a tightly-fitting grey frock-coat, grey trousers, white spats, and patent-leather boots. He carried a white silk hat, a malacca cane with a plain gold top, diffused a faint fragrance of Windsor soap, and appeared to have stepped straight

out of the spacious days when Edward the Peacemaker was Prince of Wales.

His face was hardly as noble as his garb. A dyspepsia of many years' standing had imprinted on it all the crimes of the Borgias, or at any rate of the more fretful Borgias. His white hair was still curly and invested his head with a narrow, but remarkable, halo of lamb's-wool; his eyebrows retained their pristine golden-brown from a not infrequently renewed bottle whose label, inexplicably green, bore the legend, "Not To Be Taken Internally."

As he came into the room, Anderson from the doorway behind him said in a gloomy voice: "His Lordship, sir."

Antony glared at his Lordship. It looked as if the Fates were against his having the necessary quiet twenty minutes with Poppy he needed. He would have them. If his great-uncle had not gone when she came, he would thrust him into the bedroom. With Pansy and Priscilla in it, the kitchen was already full. But Lord Branksome should go; he would turn him out. It would not be easy; the old gentleman was apt to stick.

He stepped briskly forward, with a wholly false smile on his face, shook warmly Lord Branksome's limp hand, and said in a tone

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of warm welcome, even falser, if that could be, than his smile: "How are you, Uncle Egbert? This is a pleasant surprise."

This was not true; it was politic. The visits of his great-uncle excited no astonishment in him and even less pleasure.

"It ought not to be a surprise," said Lord Branksome in a fretful voice, wrinkling his nose—a habit he had even in the most fragrant surroundings. "I should have thought you'd have been expectin' me to be lookin' you up again to enquire how that five hundred pounds I lent you is gettin' on."

"Now I come to think of it, I was. You're always coming round to enquire about it," said Antony in a tone of pleasant deference.

"I should think I was," said Lord Branksome. "Five hundred pound is five hundred pound—especially in these days."

"People are always telling me that it's only two hundred and fifty," said Antony.

"All the worse—all the worse," said Lord Branksome bitterly. "That five hundred is worryin' me worse than ever. For the first three months it was all very well."

"Yes. It stood the first three months splendidly," said Antony.

"But for the last three months it's been wearin'—very wearin'," said Lord Branksome

in a very fretful tone. "When I lent it you I expected you to marry and settle down in four months at the latest. So did you. You told me you did. You were confident you would—quite confident."

"I'm always that," said Antony with quiet pride.

"But here we are. It's six months all but three days since I lent you that five hundred; and you're still a bachelor. How is that five hundred gettin' on?"

"It's in a poor way. On its last legs, in fact. It looked a robust sum, you know. But it didn't wear well," said Antony sadly.

His great-uncle's pale blue eyes gleamed fiercely, and he cried in a terrible voice: "But it's disgraceful! Bally well disgraceful! It's robbery! Barefaced robbery!"

Antony was not deeply moved. His great-uncle looked and spoke so very like four generals he had met.

"It's not my fault," he said calmly. "I've worked like a nigger to make a success of the scheme; and I was quite open with you about it. When I came to you and told you that the only girl I ever loved had disappeared and I had set my heart on making some really rich girl happy, you said it was a rippin' idea. Those were your very words.

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And when I suggested that you should finance it to the tune of five hundred—on condition of course that I paid you seven hundred and fifty when I came back from my honeymoon—you put up the money with a scream of joy.”

“I did not!” Lord Branksome almost yelped. “I never screamed with joy in all my life. I’m not a bally Hottentot! You *made* me put up that five hundred. You bally well carried me off my feet.”

“Did I?” said Antony in the tone and with the air of one trying to recall a forgotten incident.

“You bally well know you did!” cried his great-uncle. “Right off my feet!”

“I sometimes do carry people off their feet, I fancy,” said Antony modestly, surveying his great-uncle’s patent-leather boots with a new interest. “I get enthusiastic, you know.”

“Enthusiastic be damned!” his great-uncle continued. “You said it was a magnificent scheme—a certainty—that the two hundred and fifty was as good as in my pocket.”

“And you agreed with me. You said that I was the only one of the family who had any bally sense,” said Antony. “Those were your very words.”

“I was wrong. I was mistaken in you,” said Lord Branksome with less vehemence but no less bitterness. “When I was your age half the girls in Society were more than ready to run away with me.”

“But when you were my age you must have been far more beautiful than I am,” said Antony, with an admiring glance at his uncle’s Borgiac face.

Lord Branksome bridled.

“Besides, when you were my age you had a title and sixty thousand a year,” said Antony with an innocent air. “I can’t conceive of any father in Mayfair refusing to pay his eloping daughter’s railway fare.”

“Nonsense! It wasn’t that at all!” said Lord Branksome sharply. “I had a way with women. I have still.”

Antony looked at him and doubted. He was not disposed to dismiss the title and sixty thousand a year so lightly.

Then he said: “So have I—except with the one woman who matters. But nowadays it isn’t so much a way with women one wants as a way with their parents. Gwendolen Phipps would have married me enthusiastically and so would Elaine Robinson. But Papa Phipps married Gwendolen to a ship-broker and Papa Robinson married Elaine

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to a shipbuilder. Yet I did my best to have a way with them too. I laughed heartily at every joke they made; and they never made a new one."

"Tut! Tut!" said Lord Branksome in the rich Victorian way. "You shouldn't have given them the chance of marrying their daughters to ship-brokers and ship-builders. You should have gone off with the girls before their fathers could interfere."

"Mine is not a bigamous nature," said Antony stiffly.

"I should hope not! If a grand-nephew of mine committed bigamy, it would be a pretty state of things! Run away with one of the girls, I mean," said Lord Branksome.

"I debated the matter carefully," said Antony gravely. "But I doubted that I could make a woman happy unless she was really rich. Both Papa Phipps and Papa Robinson were easy to peeve. It was only even money against their refusing to have anything more to do with Gwendolen and Elaine if they had bolted with me, and at least nine to four against their putting up enough to provide them with the luxury to which they had been accustomed."

"You should have chanced it," said Lord Branksome with decision.

“I was ready enough to chance it. But your five hundred kept me back. I couldn’t bring myself to risk it. It would have been dreadful to come back from my honeymoon without a cheque for seven hundred and fifty written out ready for you,” said Antony in a tone of almost reverent tenderness.

“M’m! I never thought of that,” said Lord Branksome in an easier tone and frowning. Then he added fretfully: “But, after all, it was better to take the chance than lose the money like this.”

“Well, this time I’m going to take the chance. I’ve bought a special licence,” said Antony, patting his breast pocket.

“Oh, then there’s still a chance?” said Lord Branksome eagerly; and his face grew considerably brighter.

“For your seven hundred and fifty? There is,” said Antony. “A Miss Briggs.”

“Not the daughter of that low ruffian I’ve let The Towers to?” said Lord Branksome quickly.

“You’ve let The Towers!” cried Antony in a tone of horror. “Whatever did you do that for without consulting me?”

“Consulting you? Why the deuce should I consult you about lettin’ The Towers?” cried Lord Branksome.

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“ But I was going to make a dash for The Towers to spend my honeymoon there. We should have spent it in the lap of luxury ; and it wouldn't have cost me a penny,” cried Antony.

“ You were going to get your honeymoon for nothing at my expense ? ” roared his great-uncle.

“ Yes—just to get you that seven hundred and fifty. Don't you see what an impression it would have made for Poppy to write to break the news of her having married me from Branksome Towers—lent us for our honeymoon by my great-uncle Lord Branksome ? ” cried Antony. “ It would have made the seven hundred and fifty a certainty. Now you may have to wait three months for it.”

Lord Branksome's face fell : “ Of course I see,” he said bitterly. “ But it's too late now. I let The Towers to this low ruffian two months ago.”

“ It's too sickening ! ” said Antony bitterly. “ Here am I slaving—SLAVING—to make two hundred and fifty pounds for you and you go and queer my game like this ! ”

“ Well, I couldn't help it, could I ? I didn't know, did I ? You'll have to go somewhere else for your honeymoon. But look

here: is this girl—this Miss Briggs—really the daughter of that low Bootle ruffian, Benjamin Briggs?”

“She is,” said Antony.

“But he’s worth two millions!” cried Lord Branksome in a tone of high excitement.

“Three millions. I have it on the authority of another Bootle millionaire,” said Antony.

“All the better! All the better!” cried Lord Branksome with almost boyish enthusiasm.

“You think I shall be able to make Miss Briggs happy?” said Antony.

“Of course you will,” said Lord Branksome with cheerful assurance. “Any man can make any woman happy.”

“I wish I could think the converse was true,” said Antony gloomily.

“Oh, you can’t have everything, you know,” said Lord Branksome with philosophic detachment. “But what about your chances? Are they good?”

“Do you think I should have spent thirty pounds on a special licence if they weren’t?” said Antony.

“Of course not! You’ve too much bally sense. But this is a relief, I can tell you. I shall sleep better to-night than I’ve slept

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for a fortnight. That five hundred was simply wearing me out."

"You ought to have had more confidence in me," said Antony reproachfully.

"Yes. But I was in the dark, don't you know?"

"Well, I wasn't going to buoy you up with false hopes," said Antony.

"Of course not! Bally sensible of you not to. Is there anything I can do in the way of lending you a hand?" said Lord Branksome heartily.

"Of course there is. Since I can't go to The Towers for my honeymoon owing to your culpable carelessness, you'll have to finance it—another fifty ought to do it," said Antony.

Lord Branksome froze before his eyes. On the instant he changed from a blithe and buoyant English nobleman with a hundred thousand a year into a chilled Borgia.

"No, no! It might be throwing good money after bad!" he cried shrilly.

"If I don't have the fifty, there can't be any honeymoon, thanks to your carelessness; and the five hundred is bad money indeed," said Antony coldly.

Lord Branksome's face filled with a horrible despair. He hesitated—and was lost.

Antony saw his hesitation and pressed his

point home : " The five hundred is gone if I don't have the fifty," he said in an urgent tone.

" I haven't got it on me ! I haven't got a cheque ! " cried Lord Branksome wildly.

" That's all right. We both bank at dear old Coutts's ; you can have one of mine," said Antony, taking his arm in a gentle but firm grip and leading him to the writing-table.

He had no intention of letting him get away and change his mind.

Lord Branksome struggled feebly. Antony pressed him gently down into a chair, and put a pen into his hand.

" Write distinctly and be very careful about your signature," he said in a soothing voice.

Lord Branksome wrote distinctly and was very careful about his signature. Then he rose, handed the cheque to Antony, and said in heartbroken accents : " That will make eight hundred and twenty-five pounds at the end of your honeymoon."

" So it will. What a head you've got for figures ! " said Antony in an admiring tone.

Lord Branksome recovered himself. His mind misgave him. Had he thrown good money after bad ? His eyes flashed ; and he

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said in a terrible voice : “ If you fail, and I lose my money, I’ll never forgive you ! Never ! I’ll bally well disown you ! ”

Antony patted him gently on the back and said in a splendid voice : “ If I fail you, you shall ! ”

Partially reassured, Lord Branksome went slowly to the door, turned on the threshold and said in solemn tones : “ Eight hundred and twenty-five pounds. Don’t forget the amount. ”

The door closed behind him. Antony scowled at it.

“ Avaricious old sweep ! ” he murmured softly to himself. “ But hang it all ! I must bring it off, or he’ll have a stroke and pop off. I’ve got to marry Poppy ! Wild horses shan’t stop me marrying Poppy ! ”

What wild horses cannot accomplish, a Bootle millionaire may.

CHAPTER VI

POPPY AT LAST

BUT where was Poppy? Every one whose coming was irrelevant had come—always excepting Pansy: her coming could never be irrelevant. But the one person round whom the final battles of the great campaign must necessarily rage, had not come; and it was nearly five o'clock. Antony asked himself whether Mr. Bracket had mustered up sufficient courage to put in some dirty work at the cross-roads, way-laid her, and persuaded her not to come.

Then the bell of the flat rang again, and Anderson came hurrying out of the kitchen.

“I take it that I'm not to admit anyone while Miss Briggs is here, sir,” he said.

“Not a soul,” said Antony. “I hope you're giving those young people a good tea.”

“Too good for me, sir,” said Anderson in an unhappy voice. “They're making me

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eat fair ; and those really good cakes are very indigestible, sir—very indigestible indeed ! ”

“ You should be firm,” said Antony.

“ How can a man be firm with two such pretty creatures as they are, sir ? Besides, you know what Miss Priscilla is, sir.”

“ Then you must learn to suffer and be strong,” said Antony.

“ I shall certainly suffer, sir,” said Anderson sadly.

He went through the door into the hall ; and Antony once more became the impatient lover on the hearthrug.

Anderson returned and ushered into the room another pretty girl, blue-eyed, with fair hair brightened by many strands of veritable gold ; clear-skinned, her cheeks warmed by a most becoming flush of nervousness, not unmingled with a pleasant expectation of being made love to ; with a nose not disagreeably tip-tilted and very red lips ; of a plump figure of agreeable contours, dressed in an expensive frock of a rather hot mauve.

“ Miss Briggs, sir,” said Anderson in the tone of satisfaction of one who feels that he is at last filling a long-felt want ; and he shut the door.

Antony stepped briskly to Miss Briggs,

caught both her hands in his, and as he pressed them warmly, said in accents of a sincerity there could be no doubting: "How are you? It's awfully good of you to take pity on a lonely bachelor and brighten his solitude like this."

"How do you do, Mr. Hambleton?" said Miss Briggs rather timidly; and the becoming flush deepened in her cheeks. "I'm afraid I'm that late; but pa kept me." She stopped short; then added timidly: "B-But I expected to find Feather—Miss Featherstone here."

"Oh, that's all right," said Antony, leading her towards the tea-table. "She'll turn up in a minute or two—friends always do, worse luck! The later she comes the better I shall be pleased."

He guided her to the chair behind the little tea-table; and as she sat down in it, she said in a tone of no great conviction: "It would never do for me to have tea with a gentleman alone in his rooms. What they'd say in Bootle I can't think."

"It's a far cry to Bootle. They'll never know you did anything so pleasant—for the gentleman," said Antony cheerfully.

"I don't know about that. It's wonderful how they find things out in Bootle," she

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protested, but in an equable tone, as if the prospect did not greatly distress her.

“They won’t find out from me,” said Antony; and he drew up a chair to the other side of the table and sat down in it, bending forward so as to look directly into her eyes.

The door from the kitchen opened and Anderson entered, bearing the teapot on a small tray. He set it on the table, paused for a moment above them with the air of a beneficent genius, and returned slowly to the kitchen.

“Oh, I’m sure you’re far too much the gentleman to tell tales out of school, Mr. Hambleton,” said Miss Briggs. “But what about him?”

She pointed with her left thumb, over her shoulder, at the kitchen door.

“Oh, Anderson is absolutely reliable,” said Antony with cheerful confidence.

The gesture did not greatly ruffle his sensibilities. Miss Briggs’s thumb was small, very white on one side and of a pleasant pink on the other.

“That’s a relief,” she said, and sighed softly.

Then she raised the lid of the teapot, examined its contents with an earnest eye, and stirred them with her teaspoon. It was

the act of a simple child of nature ; and to Antony it seemed probable that towards the end of their honeymoon, did they ever have a honeymoon, she would drink her tea out of her saucer. The prospect left him unmoved. The hard discipline of the trenches had implanted in him a firm conviction that it is not so much what is done that matters as who does it.

“ You’ve no idea what a time I had of it in Bootle,” she went on in a confidential tone. “ All the old cats in the place seemed to have nothing to do but keep an eye on me.”

Antony liked the soft burr of her northern voice.

“ And all the men in the place—young and old—wanted to have nothing to do but keep both eyes on you always,” he said gallantly.

He had not been so quick to strike the right note, and keep on striking it, when he first embarked on his great campaign, but steady practice with Miss Phipps and Miss Robinson had made him as quick as any man in the British Isles, though there was no Irish blood in his veins. Moreover, he found Poppy more stimulating than Gwendolen and Elaine. She was prettier.

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Poppy bridled and smiled, flushed, and cried in a tone of genuine pleasure: "How you do go, Mr. Hambleton!"

"Not at all. It's obvious that they did. Why, I'd bet fifty to one they called you the Rose of Bootle," said Antony firmly.

"Then you'd lose your money," said Poppy, pouring out the tea. "The Bootle gentlemen don't say that sort of thing. It would never occur to them."

"Then it ought to have occurred to them!" said Antony with indignant warmth. "Why, when you walked down the Parade—or whatever they called the chief street——"

"The High Street, Mr. Hambleton."

"The High Street—it must have seemed as if two suns were shining."

Again Poppy bridled and flushed and smiled. "Ah, you're the one to tell the tale, Mr. Hambleton!" she said.

She held out a cup of tea to him.

"Not a bit of it!" said Antony bluffly. "I'm a plain, matter-of-fact kind of fellow, and I simply state the truth."

He held out the plate of cakes to her, and as she took one she looked at him earnestly.

"I wonder how many young ladies you've told that sort of truth to," she said rather

wistfully, as if she wished keenly that she was the first girl to whom he had ever said a pretty thing.

“Not any,” said Antony with splendid firmness. He was no believer in half measures. “But scores of men must have told you that you were the prettiest girl in Bootle—scores and scores.”

“They didn’t do anything of the kind,” she said.

“Blind idiots!” said Antony with real feeling.

“Oh, no! The Bootle gentlemen aren’t idiots,” cried Poppy in horrified protest. “They’re very clever. Look at all the money they’ve made.”

“Then they can only see their money-bags,” said Antony scornfully.

“No. It isn’t that. The Bootle gentlemen don’t hold with compliments and flattery,” explained Poppy.

“Compliments? Flattery? There’s no flattery about it. If they didn’t see that you were the prettiest girl in Bootle they were blind idiots; and if they saw it and didn’t tell you so, it was a disgraceful suppression of the truth,” cried Antony with indignant warmth.

Poppy seemed impressed by his fervour;

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but she said : “ I expect you’ve told many a young lady that, Mr. Hambleton.”

“ Not a single one ! ” cried Antony again with splendid firmness.

It was true. He had never told any other girl that she was the prettiest girl in Bootle. He had never before met a pretty girl, or indeed an ugly girl, from Bootle. His splendid firmness was in the highest degree impressive ; and she believed him.

He set down his empty teacup and, leaning yet more forward, gazed into her eyes with compelling earnestness and said : “ Ah, Poppy—may I call you Poppy ?—if you knew what it is to me to have you here, pouring out tea for me in this—er—er—domestic way, how delightful it is to face you at the tea-table and look into your beautiful eyes, you would understand what—the—the—enormous power of your beauty is and how it thrills me to the very marrow.”

His musical voice had really moving notes in it ; and Poppy thrilled to them. The flush had deepened in her cheeks ; her eyes were shining brightly and she was breathing quickly. His eloquence, as eloquence should, had little less effect on him than it had on her.

“ You do talk beautifully, Mr. Hamble-

ton," she said in accents of the warmest admiration. "No gentleman ever talked to me like that in Bootle. I declare that it's just like when Lady Margaret went to the stodio of Gerald Devereux in 'Love Knows No Rank.'"

"That was fiction. This is the real thing," said Antony with a superb air. "I shall never—if I live to be——"

A thundering knock on the door of the flat, dealt apparently by a hammer, cut him short; and on it came a shower of blows and kicks on that hapless barrier.

Poppy sprang to her feet with an air of the liveliest consternation, and cried: "That's pa! I know his knock!"

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CHAPTER VII

'TWIXT CUP AND LIP

ANTONY smothered a word he had been compelled, by the mental equipment of his platoon, to use frequently in Flanders, and ground his teeth with the fury of a musical genius interrupted in the composition of a masterpiece. His love-making had been a masterpiece. It was pitched exactly to the comprehension of Poppy. She was thrilling to it. Then on the instant he was his cool, intrepid self again, braced to the emergency.

"Never mind. He can't get in," he said in a calm, reassuring voice.

"You don't know pa. He'll have that door down in a couple of minutes," said Poppy in a tone of absolute certainty.

Antony looked at her pretty face, set in a positive scowl of resentment at this exasperating interruption, and made up his mind that anger became her.

"Oh well, you know him best," he said, and rose and pressed the button of the electric bell.

The knocking had at first seemed to be as violent as possible; but it had grown rather more violent. Anderson came through the door from the kitchen.

"I think there's someone at the door," said Antony.

"Yes, sir. Shall I say you're not at home, sir?" said Anderson, raising his voice above the din.

"It wouldn't be any use!" cried Poppy.

"No. Miss Briggs is under the impression that it's Mr. Briggs. So let him in, but don't hurry," said Antony.

Anderson walked slowly to the door into the hall, went through it, and shut it behind him.

Antony, with a great commander's grip of an awkward situation, made haste to crystallise the good impression he had made. He caught Poppy up in his arms, crushed her to him and kissed her. She was of the class which attaches little importance to kisses and made no attempt to evade them. His violence thrilled her and his kisses were sweet.

"Don't worry, dear. He won't bite," he

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said in a consoling tone ; and he kissed her again, hard.

He decided that she was very nice to kiss, nicer than Gwendolen, nicer than Elaine.

“ You don't know pa,” she said.

“ I'll see that he doesn't,” he said with stern decision.

“ What a bother he is ! ” she said, looking up at him, her pretty eyes swimming with tears of mortification. “ It's always the way when I'm enjoying myself.”

“ Never mind,” he said, and kissed her again.

“ Oh, I don't mind for myself,” she said. “ I'm used to pa. It's you I'm thinking about. I'm afraid you're going to get a proper telling off, Mr. Hambleton.”

“ I'm used to tellings off. It's a way they had in the army,” said Antony intrepidly.

He heard the door of the flat open ; and there came the sound of a raucous voice, bawling, and Anderson's voice raised in cold, incisive remonstrance. Anderson was gaining time. Antony pushed Poppy back into her chair, reached his own in one stride, and dropped into it and assumed an expression of the limpid innocence of one who has never—never kissed a pretty girl.

“ This mustn't be the end ! ” he said

quickly. "We must meet again soon—to-morrow!"

"I shan't get the chance," wailed Poppy.

"I'll *make* the chance!" cried Antony stoutly.

"Will you?" she said; and her pretty face brightened at the thought.

"You bet I will!" he said fervently.

On his words the door flew open, and in bounced Mr. Briggs, a small, small-eyed, red-faced man, with white whiskers running round under his chin in a Newgate fringe, wearing a morning coat, boldly checked trousers, patent-leather shoes. On his head was a brand-new silk hat. He stopped short, gibbering and shaking his fist at Antony with the air of an inarticulate, but insane, lobster, and jigged on his feet like a stiffly dancing marionette.

Antony rose to his feet with his sweetest smile, cried: "Why, it's Mr. Briggs!" stepped briskly to him, seized his clenched fist, and shook it warmly.

Anderson, sedate, unmoved, expressionless, appeared in the doorway.

"You look quite hot," said Antony genially. "Have some tea."

"'Ot! 'ot!" said the millionaire in a hoarse voice, tearing his fist from Antony's hearty grip.

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"Warm, then. A cup of tea will be the very thing for you," said Antony with a sunny smile. "Another cup, Anderson."

Anderson shut the door and went to get it.

Mr. Briggs found his voice ; and an uncommonly raucous voice it was. Also there was a good deal of it for so small a man.

"You scoundrel!" he cried, and again shook his fist at Antony. It appeared to be his favourite gesture. "You dirty, low-down scoundrel! So I've caught you, 'ave I? Just in the nick of time!" He turned sharply on Poppy. "And you, miss. 'Ow dare you beyave like this? Comin' along to a young waster's flat all on your own without a chaperone. I've a good mind to give you——"

"But you're quite mistaken, Mr. Briggs," broke in Antony in the carrying voice, a voice which made the windows rattle, in which he had been wont to remonstrate with his platoon. "Miss Briggs wouldn't dream of coming to my flat alone ; and I have far too great a respect for her to ask her. She was bringing a friend with her. We were expecting her every minute."

"A fine friend, I don't think!" said the millionaire in a tone of hoarse, high scorn. "You can't kid me, me lad!"

"Nobody is kidding you, pa. I *was* expecting a friend! I expected to find her here," protested Poppy.

"I don't want any o' your lies, miss!" said the millionaire in a tone of profound sincerity. "You come alonger me—double quick!"

"This is really quite absurd!" cried Antony in a tone of magnificent indignation. "You're making a mountain out of a mole-hill, Mr. Briggs! Surely a couple of ladies can come to a quiet and friendly tea at my flat without the voice of scandal being raised."

The hot-blooded millionaire turned on him with the face of a Bengal tiger in convulsions and snarled: "I'm makin' a mole-'ill out of a mounting, am I? But I 'appen to know yer little game, me lad! You're after my money—that's what you are! And you thought that if you could get 'old of this blighted little idjit, you'd git it afore I knew where I was. But a little bird come along and whispered in my ear what you was up to."

He sneered hideously.

"By Jove! The little Bracket bird!" cried Antony, his suspicion of his treacherous friend verified.

"Never you mind wot little bird it was. The game's up," snarled the millionaire.

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“ You ain’t the first blighter by a long chalk as thought ’e was going ter get away with Ben Briggs’s brass and found it didn’t come orf. An’ you won’t be the last. I’ll lay you won’t. But I know all about you, me lad. This swell flat and those fine duds o’ yours are a bleedin’ sham. You’re impecoonious! That’s wot you are—impecoonious!”

He trumpeted forth the injurious word with a high and malevolent scorn.

Antony’s serene and lofty temper had a way on occasion of suddenly going. It went now.

He stepped up to the millionaire, and said very distinctly: “ Now, my man, I’ve had enough of this. You keep a civil tongue in your head, or I’ll throw you out of the flat!”

He looked so threatening, towering over her snarling sire, that Poppy cried: “ Oh, don’t hurt him, Mr. Hambleton!”

Mr. Briggs started back, put up his arm to ward off a blow, and said in a much gentler voice: “ You lay a finger on me, an’ I’ll ’ave the lor of you.”

Antony stepped back, turned to Poppy, and said with grim politeness: “ Well, as you ask me not to, Poppy, I won’t. All the same, a lesson in manners would do him a world of good.”

Poppy looked at his eyes, which were bluer than ever in his grim face; and they impressed her. This was not at all the amiable and polite young gentleman whose violent and romantic love-making she found so thrilling after the bald discourse of the bloods of Bootle. He looked much older, able, and very dangerous. He frightened her in a very fascinating way. She found herself truly in the realm of Romance.

"A lesson in manners, hey?" cried her father, again hectoring, since he felt safe under Poppy's wing. "Do me good, would it? And 'Poppy!'—'Poppy!'"—his voice rose shrill. "You're callin' 'er 'Poppy,' are you?"

"I am. To me she is 'Poppy' and always will be—the flower of my heart," said Antony, getting back in a flash to the great campaign, and looking fondly into her eyes.

Mr. Briggs gasped, jiggled up and down marionettelike again, turned savagely on his daughter and roared, once more in a furious bellow: "Look 'ere, miss: you come alonger me this minute, or, s'welp me! I'll give yer what for! 'Ere I am, lavishin'—LAVISHIN'—money on yer; an' all the return I gets is these goin's on be'ind me back. You oughter be ashamed of yerself, you ought—carryin' on with an impecoonious

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young waster like this when you might be marryin' a man rollin' in money."

Poppy had had enough of it. Used as she was to the strenuous life which always burgeoned lushly round her active and vociferous sire, she was too deeply mortified to endure any more of it at the moment. She moved towards the door with her head high and an air of considerable dignity.

"Good-bye, Mr. Hambleton," she said. "I'm sorry pa has carried on like this."

"Not at all," said Antony quickly. "Whatever Mr. Briggs says or does, I'm quite unchanged."

"I'm sure you're always the perfect gentleman, Mr. Hambleton," said Poppy in a grateful voice. "Good-bye."

"Not good-bye—*au revoir*," said Antony cheerfully as he opened the door for her. "We shall meet again soon."

She went through the door with her head high.

As he followed her, Mr. Briggs snarled in vicious triumph: "I'm damned if you will! She's coming alonger me to Branksome Towers by the first train to-morrer mornin'! An' you'll never set eyes on 'er again until she's married to a man as could buy you up lock, stock, and barrel an' never know 'e'd spent the money!"

CHAPTER VIII

PANSY DISAPPEARS AGAIN

AS the door of Antony's flat banged behind Poppy and her lobsterous sire, the kitchen door opened, and Priscilla came forth, followed by Pansy, followed by Anderson. Pansy was frowning, and her face was a trifle strained. But Priscilla's face was flushed with excitement, animated, smiling. Anderson wore an expression of profound sympathy.

Antony turned to them with a rueful face. The golden path to matrimony, or rather the path to golden matrimony, had become a cul-de-sac with most unpleasant suddenness.

"What a splendid row!" cried Priscilla in a voice of breathless pleasure. "I opened the door a teeny-weeny bit; and we heard every word of it. We couldn't help hearing it. I *was* pleased when you said you'd throw the old pig out of the flat. I do wish you'd done it."

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"It was all very well as rows go," said Antony ruefully. "But it has torn my splendid campaign all to rags and ruined my career."

"Never mind; you'll soon have another career. You'll have another sweetheart in a week. You always do," said Priscilla with comforting conviction.

"They're jolly hard to find unless you've got the money to do things on the proper scale—at least those I want to make happy are. And I haven't got it," said Antony, uncomforted.

"You can always go back to the land," said Priscilla. "And you're bound to make a success of it this time. You know so much about it."

Priscilla was a born optimist. Also she had the highest opinion of Antony's ability.

"You can't become an extensive intensive gardener without a large capital. I've tried it with a small one and I know," said Antony glumly. "Confound that red-faced old ape! When he came butting in I was absolutely on the very point of establishing myself in comfortable circumstances for life—absolutely."

"You were, were you?" said Pansy; and there was an odd note in her voice.

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He looked at her, surprised. He could almost have fancied that she was jealous.

"I was getting on like a house on fire. I always do," he said sadly.

"I'm sure you do," she said a trifle spitefully.

"Well, it's your fault, you know," he said. "You drove me to it."

She gave herself a little shake as if to drive away the jealousy. After all, since she wouldn't give herself to him, she had no right to resent his trying to get someone else.

She said in a kinder tone: "Perhaps that row hasn't done so much harm as you think. Poppy is rather a romantic goose; but she's obstinate. In the long run she always gets her way, however furiously Mr. Briggs may storm. If she has really taken a fancy to you, her father's opposition will make her keener on you than ever."

"That's comforting," said Antony more cheerfully.

"But of course you ought to strike while the iron's hot," said Pansy.

"How can I strike while the iron's hot if I can't get at the iron?" said Antony moodily. "Didn't you hear that poisonous old lobster say that he was going to take

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Poppy down to Branksome Towers by the first train to-morrow morning?"

"Branksome Towers aren't so very far away—only thirty miles from London," said Pansy.

"Oh, I'm not beaten—not by any means," said Antony stoutly. "Bonny Ben Briggs has won a victory. It's no good blinking the fact. Consequently the operations of my great campaign need considerable readjustment. Fortunately I have fresh sinews of war. I touched Uncle Egbert for another fifty, for honeymoon expenses, and that perfidious scoundrel Bracket for fifteen, so that I can send Priscilla and my mother down to those rooms of Mrs. Potter's in Branksome village where they stayed last summer. Poppy doesn't know them and her lobsterous sire doesn't know them either, so that they can act as an advance guard and make a complete reconnaissance of the terrain. Then at the right moment I shall come down and make the grand assault."

"If you'll excuse me, sir," said Anderson gravely, "I don't think if I were you that I should expect too much from Mrs. Hambleton and Miss Priscilla's going down to Branksome. Benjamin Briggs doesn't do things by halves, sir. He'll keep a very strict watch indeed

PANSY DISAPPEARS AGAIN 79

on Miss Poppy. I doubt very much that either of them will ever get a word with her. She won't be allowed to stir a foot alone. You'll have to find a better plan for getting into touch with her than that, sir."

"You can always write to her," said Priscilla.

"Writing's no use with a girl like Poppy," said Antony in the tone of one who knows what he is talking about. "She needs contact—personal contact."

"And there's next to no chance of a letter getting to her, miss. It'll be quite an occupation for Mr. Briggs keeping you apart from her, Mr. Antony. And you may be quite sure he has plenty of spare time to give to it," said Anderson confidently.

Anderson was not an optimist. He faced the facts.

"That's true. He always has a great deal of spare time and he finds it hang very heavy on his hands. He'll make it his business never to let Poppy out of his sight," said Pansy.

"Then I certainly shall have to find a better plan. The situation doesn't look strikingly hopeful," said Antony gloomily.

"Never mind ; love laughs at locksmiths," said Priscilla cheerfully.

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"Not at all locksmiths, miss. And as a young man Mr. Briggs was the best locksmith in Bootle," said Anderson.

"Then he seems to have entered for the contest young," said Antony; and the corners of his sensitive mouth drooped mournfully. He paused and added: "But anyhow, I shall send you two down there. You may be useful, and at any rate you want the change."

"Hooray!" said Priscilla happily.

There was a pause, then Pansy said: "Well, I must be going. I have to make my peace with Poppy."

"There's no need for you to rush away," said Antony quickly. "Come and dine with me somewhere."

"I'm afraid I can't. My time isn't my own," she said rather sadly, as if she were loth to refuse.

"Well, let me have your address," said Antony. "I can't lose sight of you for months again. I really can't."

"No," she said firmly; but her eyes dwelt wistfully on his face. "It's much better not to. Besides, what would be the use? You've got to keep your mind fixed on Poppy."

"I can keep my mind fixed on Poppy and on you too," said Antony confidently.

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“ Yes : you must, Pansy ! ” cried Priscilla. “ Mother would be awfully annoyed with us if we lost you again directly we found you. You know how fond she is of you. You must let us know where you are and come and see us sometimes. You really must.”

“ In a year or two perhaps I will. But not now,” said Pansy firmly.

Antony turned away ; he perceived clearly that her mind was made up, that there was no moving her from her resolve. She kissed Priscilla good-bye and bade her give her love to her mother. Then she shook hands with Antony and bade him good-bye ; but she did not look him in the face. Then she went.

Antony sighed heavily. Priscilla looked at his gloomy face ; and her own grew sympathetically gloomy. Then she said resolutely : “ I’m not going to stand it. I’m going to track her down ! ”

“ Leave her alone. She’s had enough of us,” said Antony gloomily.

“ I don’t believe it ! ” cried Priscilla ; and she ran out of the flat.

Antony looked at Anderson, and his face cleared a little as he said : “ I wonder whether she will.”

“ If Miss Priscilla sets out to do a thing she does it, sir,” said Anderson confidently.

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This time he was wrong. Five minutes later Priscilla reappeared, breathless and scowling.

“ She got away ! ” she panted. “ I tracked her into St. James’s Street—when I came into it—she wasn’t in sight—but a taxi—was going round the top of it into Piccadilly—she got away in that taxi ! ”

CHAPTER IX

ANTONY SEEKS A PLAN AND A MAN

“**N**EVER mind, duckums!” said Antony quickly, for Priscilla seemed to be on the point of tears; and he lifted her on to his knee and kissed her. “After all, Pansy would divert my mind from my campaign. Poppy is and must be my only joy.”

He lit a cigarette, shifted Priscilla on his knee and lay comfortably back in the easy chair. His face had cleared. He wore an air of lofty serenity. The corners of his sensitive lips had resumed their humorous curve.

“I want a plan and I want a man. The man is Bracket. I told him not to be the slip 'twixt the cup and the lip; and he was. I'm sorry for Bracket. But he asked for it; and he shall get it—hot. I do not need to catch him bending. I'll bend him.”

“You think he informed Mr. Briggs that

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Miss Poppy was coming to tea with you, sir?" said Anderson.

"I do not think it; I know it," said Antony. "Poor Bracket—poor fellow."

Anderson went to the kitchen, came back with a tray, and cleared away the tea-things. Priscilla rose from Antony's lap, took a cake, and sat down again. She toyed with the cake in the wistful and delicate manner of one who has had rather too much to eat and is doubtful whether there is room for any more.

Antony tried to concentrate his mind on the change of plan of campaign made necessary by Mr. Briggs's drastic action in removing Poppy. But his mind refused to concentrate on it. It was too full of Pansy to be able to contain a plan of campaign too.

Slowly his rather long, clear-skinned, tanned face sank into an expression of deep gloom; the corners of his thin, sensitive lips again drooped; and his blue eyes, usually so alert and keen, were dull. Pansy's sudden reappearance and her no less sudden disappearance had upset him badly. During the last eight months he had brought himself, painfully, to believe that he could do without her. Once more he found that he could not. At the moment life without her

stretched before him intolerable. But he *had* to do without her. He knew that no reasoning and no entreaties would break her resolve not to be a drag on him. Only one thing could break it, and that was money; only if he came to her with, say, ten thousand pounds in the bank, would she allow both of them the happiness they craved. It did not make it any easier for him to know that she was unhappy too.

Priscilla had finished toying with her cake. Room had been found for it. She watched him with the lazy contentment of an extremely pretty kitten which has just eaten nine sparrows.

When he sighed deeply for the fifth time she said in a tone of sisterly sympathy: "She is an aggravating little devil."

"Priscilla!" he cried in a tone of horror.

"Well, I've heard you call her that—at Little Tarkington, you know. And she is," said Priscilla, wholly unmoved.

"You must *not* use such language," he said sternly.

"Not when I'm your age?" said Priscilla.

"Certainly not. It's one thing for a man to use a strong expression occasionally but quite another thing for a woman," said Antony in a tone of virtuous admonition.

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"I don't see why," said Priscilla lazily.

Neither did Antony. But it was hardly a thing he could admit. Instead of admitting it he said: "If you let yourself get into habits of that kind, you'll become——"

He stopped. For the moment he could not think what she would become.

"What?" said Priscilla in a tone of little interest.

"Oh—er—er—horsey—or—er—doggy," said Antony.

"I haven't got a horse, and it isn't likely that I ever shall have. And dogs smell so," said Priscilla.

"You'll become totally unsexed," said Antony.

"Not me," said Priscilla, rasping his wounded spirit with her grammar.

He rose and said coldly: "I think you'd better come out and walk off those cakes."

Priscilla rose, apparently with a little difficulty. Her blue eyes, like those of Antony, were a little dull, but for another reason. Their dullness did not come from her heart.

He took her for a healthy stroll down Piccadilly. They did not talk for some time. Both of them were busy with things difficult, in a different way, to digest.

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Slowly the exercise brightened Priscilla's fine blue eyes. They were not so blue as the eyes of Antony, and never would be. His were of the veritable blue of the thrush's egg.

About twenty yards east of Park Lane, Priscilla said thoughtfully: "It's a silly thing."

Antony looked down on her with a slightly apprehensive eye. He never knew.

"Love," said Priscilla.

Antony seized on the crossing of Park Lane to tell her all about the danger of crossing a London street without looking where you were going.

Undiverted, as she set foot on the opposite pavement, she said: "I wonder you fall in love. It only makes you uncomfortable. Why didn't you stop when you felt it coming on—right at the very beginning?"

Antony ground his teeth, not very loudly.

"I should," said Priscilla.

"You'll understand more about these things when you're older—a good deal older," said Antony with a patient superiority.

"But I can see what it does, can't I?" said Priscilla.

Antony swallowed a word or two. Then he said nastily: "Are you feeling better?"

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Priscilla seemed to commune with her inmost self; then she said: "Yes. They seem to have shaken down a good deal."

Antony pursued his advantage. With unfeeling brotherliness he said: "One of these days, if you're not more careful, you'll burst."

"I don't think so," said Priscilla after a thoughtful pause. "You see, I expand a good deal."

She walked on in silence for a while. He thought that she was pondering the matter, for he knew that, like the rest of her sex, she was greatly interested in herself.

Apparently he was right, for, two hundred yards further on, she said: "I suppose a doctor could always sew you up?"

"It depends," said Antony cautiously.

"After all, I don't often get the chance of eating as much as that," she said cheerfully.

At a post office in Knightsbridge he wired to his mother that he was keeping Priscilla to dinner. He felt wholly disinclined to spend the evening playing cards or billiards. He wanted someone near him who knew his trouble. He felt that it would be a comfort. He was doubtful whether he would get any sympathy from Priscilla; yet her company would be a comfort.

He took her for a healthy stroll down

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Piccadilly; and they returned to his flat. There was nothing to be done for an hour. He lit a pipe; and Priscilla, quite recovered, sat on his knee for a while and stroked his brown hair, and told him not to be miserable.

“After all, there isn’t any difference to speak of between girls. One’s as good as another; and lots of them are quite pretty—at least men seem to think so,” she said sagely.

She was a precocious observer in her lighter moments.

But Antony felt that for him Pansy was different from other girls.

At seven he assumed the immaculate dinner-jacket of an English gentleman; Priscilla made herself tidy; they walked to the Senior Mayfair, a club but lately founded by some kindly, thoughtful gentlemen to meet the needs of the new millionaires. Its building was described with perfect accuracy in the prospectus as palatial; the rooms, the chairs, the couches, the windows, the electric light brackets and chandeliers, the chef, and the ground-glass match-holders were all the largest of their kind; and members and their friends might smoke in every room.

Antony had joined it at the very beginning of his campaign. It had been one of his

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favourite hunting-grounds in his altruistic enterprise. There he had met Sir Peter Phipps and Sir Harold Robinson, renewed his acquaintance with Mr. Albert Bracket—or rather, to be exact, had had that acquaintance renewed timidly by Mr. Bracket—and had there been introduced by him, proudly, to Mr. Briggs. There was a large dining-room in which members might dine with ladies; and they did—such large ladies. But Antony had not brought Priscilla there to dine. The cost of a dinner there was even larger than the ground-glass match-holders. He had come to cash Mr. Bracket's cheque.

Among the rules of the club was one which laid it down that members might not cash a cheque for more than five pounds. This was not a reflection on the solvency of the new millionaires. But the Committee had its doubts about the banking accounts of those members—they were not a few—who had joined the club out of sheer delight in the society of those who had stung the Government so ably and so often. But the obliging Secretary made no bones about cashing a cheque for fifteen pounds which had been signed by Mr. Bracket, for whose balance at Coutts's he had a profound esteem ;

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and Antony left the club with his note-case agreeably distended.

From the Senior Mayfair he took Priscilla a healthy stroll to Soho; and they dined hardily at a small restaurant which had once been modest. At dinner he put firmly away from him all thought of Pansy and got to the discussion of plans for getting into touch with Poppy. He did not look to Priscilla for helpful suggestions; but the mere discussing his ideas with her gave him a clearer grasp of the problem. The solution of it did not come.

After dinner he left the restaurant, still feeling rather hungry. But Priscilla emerged from its portals—or rather from its portal—in that state of happy satisfaction into which a slim young girl who has feasted, after a hearty tea on Siberian chicken and tinned peaches *à la Melba*, naturally falls. They took another healthy stroll to the Coliseum. The entertainment amused Priscilla immensely and dulled somewhat the pangs of Antony's growing hunger. After it, he put her into her train to her northern home at Wood Green and turned westward to seek Mr. Bracket.

Now he could give his attention to the perfidious young Bootletonian. Also he gave his righteous indignation full rein. Before

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he had crossed Piccadilly Circus, Mr. Bracket had assumed in his mind the appearance of one of those serpents which one so disastrously warms in one's bosom, and his toes were itching to get into touch with him. He thought that it would be much easier to get into touch with Mr. Bracket than with Poppy. He was wrong.

He went briskly up Regent Street to Murray's. His quarry was not there. He walked briskly down Regent Street to Ciro's. His quarry was there. But he did not find him. This was not unnatural, for his ungrateful pupil had caught sight of his Mentor entering, had metaphorically thrown the partner with whom he was dancing to the winds, slipped round behind him, and fled into the night and the darkness.

Since Mr. Bracket was not trying to dance at Murray's or Ciro's, it was any odds that he was trying to play billiards at the Senior Mayfair. Antony strolled doggedly off to that palatial construction. His quarry was not there. He sat down in the billiard-room to wait for him. Then Fortune, who had played him such a scurvy trick at tea-time, smiled on him.

But she did not smile on him in the matter of Mr. Bracket. She was in a mood to deny

him love and vengeance but to be generous with money. In the billiard-room he found four recently wealthy gentlemen from the provinces drinking Moet et Chandon 1911 and watching a fifth, Mr. Hake, of Prestwick, playing a game of billiards, 250 up, with Captain Handley. Captain Handley, a frail-looking young man, on whose gentle face rested perpetually an engaging amiability—he was known to his intimates as cast-iron Handley for very good reasons—was at that time taking great delight in the society of the new millionaires and never out of their company between noon and two o'clock in the morning. Mr. Hake, Prestwick's bluff and burly pride, had enjoyed a great reputation as a billiard player in that town and had won the Prestwick Club billiard handicap five years in succession.

The other four wealthy gentlemen knew this, for it was not a matter of which Mr. Hake made any secret. Captain Handley did not. On the other hand, neither Mr. Hake nor his four wealthy friends knew that Captain Handley, who loved to live the expensive life, had never been so foolish as to win the Amateur Billiard Championship as he might have done. But they had a strong conviction that an easy victory awaited

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the Prestwick champion, and they acted on it, backing him freely.

They called to Antony to join them, for they liked him because he was Lord Branksome's grand-nephew. He joined them cheerfully, for he had a liking for Moet et Chandon 1911. They went on betting with Captain Handley. They felt sorry for him ; but they could not lose an opportunity of making some money easily. Antony did not feel sorry for him. He had seen him play several times and, a good billiard player himself, had gauged his form accurately. He did not, moreover, feel sorry for any of the four wealthy gentlemen.

The game was going badly against Captain Handley ; and the odds against him rose. When he was a hundred and twenty-four to Mr. Hake's hundred and ninety-eight they rose to three to one. Antony was watching him. He observed him look thoughtfully at the score with a slight tightening of the lips and take three to one in fivers with each of the five wealthy gentlemen. At once Antony invested ten pounds, two pounds with each of the wealthy gentlemen, just to have an interest in the game, as he said, on Captain Handley at the same odds.

Then Captain Handley began to fluke—

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at least they looked like flukes to the others, but Antony knew that Captain Handley had played for them. Captain Handley apologised for those flukes. Also he deplored the fact that the balls seemed to have ceased to run for Mr. Hake and he never got an opening. When Mr. Hake was two hundred and thirty-three Captain Handley was two hundred and twenty-four; then he made another fluke—the fifth. Mr. Hake seemed, as indeed he looked, to be of a choleric nature; and he ceased to score at all. Captain Handley won the game by seventeen.

He was pleasantly apologetic about those flukes, then he said generously: "I tell you what: I'll give you fifteen in a hundred and play you double or quits—double or quits with all of you."

Mr. Hake jumped at the offer; the four other wealthy gentlemen jumped at the offer. Antony could, as a good sportsman, do no less than make the same offer. They jumped at that too. Captain Handley's first shot was an amazing fluke, or an uncommonly fine stroke; then he made a break of forty-eight. That did for the choleric Mr. Hake. He was fifty-seven when Captain Handley ran out.

Each of the five wealthy gentlemen paid

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Antony £12. He came out of the Senior Mayfair with the money for two honeymoons in his pocket, but with, alas! no plan in his head for securing his abducted bride.

CHAPTER X

ANDERSON HAS AN IDEA

HE walked briskly back to the flat in a much more cheerful frame of mind, relieved for the time being from all anxieties about money. He was indeed at peace with all the world except Mr. Bracket. He changed his dinner-jacket for a comfortable old coat, made a frugal but hearty supper off bread and Cheddar cheese, with a strong Ontarian bite to it, and washed it down with a bottle of Golden ale, which at any rate awoke in him fond memories of the beer of the past. Thus fortified for reflection, he sank into an easy chair and lit a pipe.

He dismissed the problem of his abducted bride. He would sleep on it; the solution and the plan might come in the morning. He addressed himself to the Bracket problem. Fortune's kindness at the Senior Mayfair and his supper had soothed his spirit; his

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toes were no longer itching so keenly to get into touch with the perfidious young Bootletonian. Was the boot, indeed, the proper treatment for the young millionaire?

Abstract justice, of course, demanded the boot. Antony had always felt keenly the injustice of that stout, soft, young shirker's enjoying a million, when men, like himself, who had been frozen in Flanders, roasted in Mesopotamia, wounded, buried alive, and shell-shocked, were struggling to make a living. It was indeed monstrous that such a one should have played him so measly a trick.

Then his natural unromantic intelligence asserted itself. He perceived that the satisfaction he would derive from the abstractly just application of the boot would prove as transient as the young millionaire's dissatisfaction with it. Warmth soon passes. So do bruises. He had no doubt that the perfidious young Bootletonian was tender. He had been apt to snivel at the Officers' Training Camp when his comrades of the Great War had ragged him. But, after all, a millionaire's tenderest spot is his pocket. Antony began to consider the matter of a loan—a large loan. A large loan would be much more satisfying; both of them would

remember it longer. He still cherished the ambition to have a large intensive garden founded on the strong rock of sufficient capital. Yes, a really large loan. He did not hide from himself the fact that if his spirit was too deeply exacerbated by having to wait any length of time for a meeting with Mr. Bracket and a large loan, that large loan might become merely a large fine. He distrusted his scruples against taking his ill-gotten money from Mr. Bracket. He thought that they would become weak, even decrepit, if his spirit were embittered by a long delay. He foresaw the possibilities of delay. His failure to find his social protégé either at Murray's, Ciro's, or the Senior Mayfair, had given rise to the suspicion that he might be shunning him.

There came a gentle knock at the door, and Anderson entered. He wore a slightly triumphant air.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said in a tone of quiet pride, "but I think I have hit on a way of your getting into touch with Miss Briggs."

"Splendid!" cried Antony; and he beamed on him.

"Yes, sir; that is, if you wouldn't think it beneath you. And since you have spent

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six months and his Lordship's five hundred pounds on this matrimonial campaign it seems a pity not to go on with it when you are, so to speak, on the verge of success."

"It would be a pity. What's your plan?" said Antony with decision.

"Mr. Briggs has been trying to get a really capable butler for Branksome Towers, sir; and a gentleman in whose service I used to be, told him that I was the very man for the post. So Mr. Briggs has approached me on the matter."

"Tried to sneak a valuable retainer behind my back, did he?" said Antony with cold scorn.

"Yes, sir."

"Well may Uncle Egbert call him a low ruffian," said Antony.

"Yes, sir," said Anderson. "Well, I didn't say 'yes' and I didn't say 'no.' I wanted to see whether you were successful in your campaign or not, sir, for I should very much have preferred to stay with you, sir, than to go to Mr. Briggs. And that has made him keener than ever on getting me. My idea now, sir, is to accept his offer and take you with me as second footman."

"And a rum idea it is!" said Antony in a startled voice.

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“ Yes, sir. But you would not only get into touch with Miss Briggs at once, but coming from Bootle as she does and being of a romantic disposition, it would make a great impression on her. You would, so to speak, be stooping to conquer, sir,” said Anderson in a judicial tone.

“ By Jove ! It *is* an idea ! ” cried Antony, as his mind opened to the possibilities.

“ And you wouldn't find it at all a bad job, sir,” said Anderson in the same judicial tone. “ The work is light, and the food is good—much better food than you could afford if you took on any other job, sir.”

“ The food is an important consideration,” said Antony gravely.

“ The salary is poor, sir ; but the people of Mr. Briggs's class are spending their money like water ; and the tips are enormous. They're not like gentlefolk, you know, sir ; they are afraid of us.”

“ And they want to buy your esteem by tipping you lavishly,” said Antony.

“ And to show off, sir. So, even if you didn't bring it off and marry Miss Briggs, sir, you would be living well for nothing and putting by money.”

“ It sounds a most attractive scheme,” said Antony, warming to it. “ But the

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drawback is that Mr. Briggs would recognise me at once and hoof me out of his hired historic home."

"No, sir," said Anderson confidently. "That's just where his fads and fancies come in. It isn't only that you'd be in livery and he'd never dream of your being in livery, and that no gentleman ever looks at a footman, only ladies——"

"Now I come to think of it, I never did look at a footman," interrupted Antony. "I can't recall the face of a single one of the scores who have fed me at the tables of the great."

"Of course you can't, sir," said Anderson triumphantly. "Besides, you won't only be a footman and in livery, but it's Mr. Briggs's fancy to have his footmen powder their hair and grow whiskers."

"Whiskers! Did you say whiskers?" cried Antony in a startled tone.

"Yes, sir—side-whiskers," said Anderson.

"Not whiskers, Anderson! I draw the line at whiskers!" Antony broke in in a tone of horror.

"I'm afraid whiskers are a *sine qua non*, sir," said Anderson in the tone of one who is inflexible. "Mr. Briggs insists on whiskers on his footmen. Besides, they would be

absolutely necessary to change your appearance. Without them Mr. Briggs might recognise you at any moment. He might even recognise you in the middle of a dinner-party; and think what a painful scene there'd be!"

"Whiskers—whiskers," said Antony in a tone of painful dejection.

The scheme appeared less roseate to him.

"And I should suggest that you talked more gruffly, sir, and moved slower and more dignified like. You move much too fast for a gentleman in service, sir."

"I understand: I'm to croak like the raven and crawl like the tortoise—the whiskered tortoise," said Antony gloomily.

The thought of whiskers still weighed heavily on his buoyant spirit.

"If you'll pardon my saying so, sir. This is a serious undertaking and not a matter for levity," said Anderson in a tone of pained severity.

"That's all right. If I do take this job on, you can rely on me to be as serious as a whiskered judge," said Antony in a reassuring tone.

"You couldn't take a better model, sir," said Anderson with great satisfaction.

Antony fell into earnest reflection; then

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he sighed heavily and said: "It's a terrible price to pay—terrible. But, after all, the disfigurement would only be temporary. I could shave the whiskers off directly I got Poppy away from The Towers. And have I, as an altruist, the right to let my heartfelt detestation of these hirsute appendages, noble and manly as it is, stand in the way of another's real happiness? Anderson, I have not. Poppy's happiness must come first."

He ended in a tone of almost unexampled nobility.

"That's the way to look at it, sir," said Anderson in warm approval.

"You're right, Anderson. It *is* the way to look at it. Besides, it will for ever banish every doubt from her heart. A man who will make such a sacrifice for her, can only be actuated by the loftiest devotion."

"There's no denying it, sir," said Anderson enthusiastically.

"There is not!" said Antony even more enthusiastically. "And whiskers or no whiskers, I'll do it!"

CHAPTER XI

THE WHISKERS GROW

AFTER his noble resolve of the night before, on rising next morning, Antony surveyed his face in the glass with a new interest. He tried earnestly to guess what he would look like whiskered. His imagination failed him. When he shaved, he left untouched a generous portion of his cheeks in front of his ears. He was not one for half measures : if he was to be whiskered he would be richly whiskered.

Over his breakfast he conferred with Anderson. They decided that though, thanks to his uncle and his wealthy acquaintances at the Senior Mayfair, he had enough money to keep on the flat for another month, there was no point in his doing so since his theatre of action had been removed from London to Branksome Towers. Also they decided that he should tell neither his mother nor Priscilla nor anyone else of his projected

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removal, in the guise of a whiskered footman, to that historic house.

After breakfast Anderson wrote a dignified letter to Mr. Briggs, accepting the post of butler at The Towers, since his present employer was giving up his flat and going to live in the suburbs. This information might help to make Mr. Briggs less careful in his watch on Poppy. Anderson also suggested that he should bring with him a capable young second footman of the name of Henry James Wilkinson. It seemed to them as appropriate a name for a second footman as could well be found. Also he said that, being in need of a rest after the discharge of his arduous duties in Antony's service, he would enter on his post at The Towers in a fortnight's time, for after a careful consideration of the matter, they had come to the conclusion that since Antony was of the virile type, on whom hair grows quickly, his whiskers should by the end of that period have attained all the luxuriance required by the modern English standard.

After breakfast Antony resumed his search for Mr. Bracket and the large loan—or fine. Indeed, in the cold and reasonable light of the morning it looked much more like a fine than a loan. He did not continue the

search long, for on reaching Mr. Bracket's flat in Mount Street, he found it shut up, and learnt from the hall porter that Mr. Bracket and his man Smithers had gone into the country.

Antony made no doubt that perfidious young Bootletonian had fled from his righteous vengeance to Branksome Towers. He was not greatly perturbed by the fact that he would have Poppy to himself for a whole fortnight, for in the matter of making love he was ready to back himself to advance farther in three-quarters of an hour than his social protégé would advance in three weeks. He bore in mind also that he had the previous afternoon given Poppy such an admirable illustration of the manner in which love should be made, that for a long while she would find the young millionaire's essays in that art unimpressive indeed. But he was keenly alive to the fact that here was the delay which he had foreseen would exacerbate his impetuous spirit to the point of not borrowing from Mr. Bracket, but fining him for his treachery. He made up his mind that he might as well begin at once to regard the sum as a fine and not a loan. Five thousand pounds seemed to him to be about the sum which would soothe his harrowed sensibility.

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He returned to his flat and spent two profitable hours taking lessons in the art of footmanship from Anderson. He enjoyed best the acquiring the method of bringing old silver—he had a dozen old Hambleton heirlooms, a tankard, a Queen Anne teapot and milk-jug, four salt-cellars, and some tablespoons—to its finest lustre by polishing it with the bare hand.

That brought him to lunch-time. He walked to the Senior Mayfair to see whether any wealthy gentleman wished to pay for his lunch for the pleasure of being seen in the company of the grand-nephew of an English Peer, for his admirable appetite had, during the effort he had put into acquiring the art of polishing old silver, attained such dimensions that only a good deal of a really good lunch could satisfy it ; and his principles made it imperative that for a really good lunch somebody else must pay.

Fortune, inexorably denying him Pansy and the desire of his heart, was urbane in these smaller matters ; in the smoking-room he found his new friend Sir Percy Blodger, M.P., late of Stoke Newington, the famous meat contractor. He nodded to him without effusion, then dropped into an easy chair immediately in front of him and lit a cigarette.

Then he perceived that Sir Percy was unpromising. His large red face was set in a black scowl. There was evidently no room in his heart for the soft social emotions. He was wrong.

“ ‘Ambleton,’ ” said Sir Percy at the end of a minute’s thoughtful consideration of Antony’s distinguished profile, “ are you open to a sportin’ offer ? ”

“ What is it ? ” said Antony without enthusiasm, affecting to smother a yawn.

“ It’s that feller ‘Ake. I’m fed up with ‘im—fairly fed up with ‘im, I am. A fair ‘ot-air merchant ‘e is, ‘braggin’ an’ braggin’ all over the shop ”—money, not aitches or g’s, was Sir Percy’s long suit. “ Do you think you could lick ‘im at billiards ? ”

“ Just,” said Antony ; and he smothered another yawn.

A cunning light gleamed in Sir Percy’s eyes ; and he said in a taunting tone : “ I’ll lay you twenty-five to one in Bradburies you don’t.”

“ Done,” said Antony in a weary voice.

“ Right O,” said Sir Percy in a tone of warm satisfaction ; and he rose. “ Come an’ peck a bit o’ lunch with me and I’ll see as ‘e takes you on.”

Antony went and pecked some hors d’œuvres, a plate of turtle soup, a grilled

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sole, two helpings of saddle of lamb, a pint of peas, new potatoes, some gooseberry tart, Roquefort cheese, a bottle of champagne, a cup of black coffee, a liqueur brandy, a large cigar, and felt sufficiently fortified to play billiards without pausing till it was time for his afternoon tea.

Sir Percy, who had pecked level with him, rose and went to the table at which Mr. Hake was pecking a bit o' lunch with two friends, and arranged a match, 200 up.

As Antony took off his coat in the billiard-room he felt in uncommonly good form. He was in uncommonly good form. But he could not afford to play Captain Handley's waiting game with his opponent; he played all he knew all the time; and his score was only a hundred and thirty when Mr. Hake's was a hundred and twenty-two. Then he made two brilliant strokes which Mr. Hake assumed to be flukes. Antony did not contradict him; and Mr. Hake's temper went. Antony was the first to discover that it had gone. The betting was four to one against himself; on the instant he took eight pounds to two three times. Then he saw to it that for five consecutive shots Mr. Hake did not get an opening; and that settled it. He won the game by forty-two points.

THE WHISKERS GROW III

He put the forty-nine pounds in his pocket with considerable pleasure and went up to the smoking-room to look at the papers. They did not interest him ; his pleasure at Fortune's kindness soon passed. A sense of desolation filled him. The image of Pansy rose before him, her warmly pale face, her deep dark eyes which had thrilled him so often, her slender and delightful figure. He had loved her for four years ; and she had loved him. Her disappearance from his life, when it was plain that the intensive garden, in which he had invested his gratuity, was a failure, had been even a greater shock to him than the exploding crump which had put him out of action early in 1918. He had recovered from the shell-shock ; he would never really recover from the loss of Pansy. It was as if a great part of himself—it seemed the most important part—had been torn away from him. Poppy and all she stood for could never be more than the second best. He ached with that bitter longing for Pansy, from which in its acute form he had been free for three months. Her brief reappearance in his life had brought it back in all its old acuteness.

But his was far too active a soul to waste much time in useless regret. He knew that

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Pansy was inflexible in her resolve not to be a drag on him. With a deep sigh he dismissed her image from his mind.

After tea he went for a walk in the Park. The exercise and the observation of the fashionable throng cheered him. He reflected that, even if his campaign at Branksome Towers ended in defeat, there were plenty of really rich girls left in the world, and when he left The Towers he would still have nearly two hundred pounds to prosecute his altruistic enterprise of making some other of them happy. For if Poppy were also torn finally from him by her mercenary sire, he was not beaten, for he was an Englishman and would never know that he was beaten. But how cheerfully would he have abandoned his campaign to make a home for Pansy and fight for a living for the four of them !

The next morning he examined his cheeks in the neighbourhood of his ears with anxious and very searching eyes. With a thrill of satisfaction he ascertained that his whiskers had begun to sprout.

During the next two days he made considerable progress in the art of footmanship and made another twenty pounds in the billiard-room of the Senior Mayfair. On the

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morning of the second day came a letter from Mr. Briggs appointing Anderson butler at Branksome Towers and accepting the suggestion that he should bring with him that capable second footman, Henry James Wilkinson. The letter also contained the names of Mr. Briggs's tailor, bootmaker, and hosier, from whom Antony was to procure his crimson velvet livery, his patent-leather shoes, and his white silk stockings. Anderson accompanied him on these errands ; and the construction of livery and the patent-leather shoes was begun at once.

On the Monday morning Antony's whiskers were beginning to stand out in an entirely satisfactory fashion. They more than promised to attain the full luxuriance required in the course of the next ten days. He shaved off his moustache. It appeared otiose. He removed himself and his belongings to his mother's flat in Belvedere Mansions, Wood Green. From it he made daily excursions to the Western district to take lessons in footmanship from Anderson, comfortably established in lodgings in Brick Street, and spent a number of hours each day at the Senior Mayfair. Sir Percy Blodger, in his joy at Antony's having defeated Mr. Hake, into whom Sir Percy consistently rubbed

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that defeat, had taken a great fancy to him. He took him home to dine and introduced him to Lady Blodger and their daughter Mabel. She was the ideal of a butcher's daughter, splendidly buxom. Antony made a most favourable impression on her.

Priscilla and his mother watched the growth of Antony's whiskers with an impassioned interest. But the fact of his growing them seemed to them mysterious. They had never observed him taking any other steps to become a painter; he had never informed them that he had cherished an ambition to excel in that branch of the arts. Under pressure from Priscilla he admitted that they were essential to the new career he had in mind, a career which would establish him in affluence. Since they could not conceive that the career of footman would establish any one in affluence, it did not occur to them that that was the guise he proposed to assume; and the admission made the whiskers more mysterious and intriguing than ever. They kept the minds of Priscilla and his mother thoroughly occupied. On the next Monday morning the two of them left London to spend a month at the cottage of Mrs. Potter in Branksome village. They were still ignorant of Antony's proposed visit to The Towers.

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On the Monday afternoon Antony powdered his hair and whiskers in Anderson's lodging. He was indeed surprised by the change it made in his appearance. It was clear that no man who had not known him well would recognise that whitely whiskered face under that white thatch. They were confident that Mr. Briggs would not recognise him; and that was what really mattered. Poppy might know him; he meant her to. From the effect of his whiskers, unpowdered, on his face Antony learned why it is that all successful modern artists are round-faced men. His own face no longer looked longer than it was broad.

On the Wednesday, early in the afternoon, Antony and Anderson, either with a portmanteau of moderate size, took the train from Marylebone to Branksome. Branksome is on the Buckinghamshire plateau. Anderson had not informed Mr. Briggs of the time at which they would arrive. He distrusted his feverish energy and thought it as likely as not that it would find an outlet in meeting them himself at the station. In that case he would see Antony in mufti; and their campaign, in spite of Antony's rounded face, might end before it had ever really begun. Once he was in livery and those whiskers and

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his hair were whitened, it was far more unlikely that he would recognise him.

A fly carried them from the station, up the back drive, to the back entrance of The Towers; and Antony reached his bedroom by a back staircase, unseen by his employer. He was observed with great interest by four housemaids who were waiting in a natural impatience to discover whether he was really beautiful; but they did not matter. He found his bedroom to be a small attic with a rather cubist ceiling, lighted by a small dormer-window in the roof, from which there was an admirable view over the surrounding country.

His crimson velvet livery—such was Mr. Briggs's modest taste—and a pair of white silk stockings had been laid out on the bed, ready to put on. A pair of patent-leather shoes were under the chair. He powdered his hair and whiskers, put on his livery, and went down to the servants' quarters slowly and with a majestic air. He found that Anderson had more quickly assumed the immaculate evening dress of the English butler, and had already seized the reins of government with a firm hand.

He introduced Antony to William Symons, the first footman, and ordered Symons to

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show him the ropes. Symons, an uncommonly stolid young man with obviously a very high opinion of himself, set about doing so. Anderson went upstairs to present himself to Mr. Briggs.

He found him in the small library—the library proper is on the first floor of the west wing—which, apparently, he was using as his own private sitting-room. He was attired in a tweed suit of a rare mustard colour, a Bootle confection, which gave the rich redness of his face its full value. He was smoking a large cigar, and in addition to its delicate aroma diffused around him a rich fragrance of mixed liquors.

Mr. Briggs sprang to his feet and shook Anderson warmly by the hand.

“You’ve come in the very nick of time,” he said in a tone of the liveliest satisfaction. “I’m expecting Lord and Lady Branksome to tea ; an’ we shall be able to do the thing in slap-up style.”

CHAPTER XII

MR. BRIGGS SHOWS ANDERSON ROUND

ANDERSON displayed no delight on hearing that he was to be so soon in modest contact with those leaders of the County. On the other hand, he displayed none of the disquiet which invaded him on hearing that Lord Branksome was likely to get a very good view of his grand-nephew. He decided to do his best to prevent him from getting it.

He said coldly : " Yes, sir."

" 'Ave you brought the noo footman with yer ? "

" Yes, sir. He's already in his livery, and Symons is showing him where things are," said Anderson.

" That's all right. 'E an' Symons shall wait at tea, with you presidin' like. That'll make a pretty good show. The other footmen ain't no good. They 'aven't got no style. I'm goin' to sack 'em directly I can get two better ones."

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Anderson's hope of keeping Lord Branksome from getting that good view of Antony vanished.

"Now come alonger me ; an' I'll show you round a bit," continued Mr. Briggs, going briskly to the door. He opened it, and paused. "That reminds me. I thought a magnum of the bubbly would go well with our tea. But Symons said it wasn't the thing. What do you think? It always looks tasty, a magnum of the bubbly."

"I think not, sir. The aristocracy, after a certain age, do not drink champagne in the middle of the afternoon," said Anderson, with decision.

Mr. Briggs's face fell ; but he said : "Orl right. You know best. But 'ave a bottle 'andy in 'ere. I expect 'is Lordship will be ready enough to drink a glass of it if it's on tap like."

"Very good, sir," said Anderson ; and he followed his new employer through the door.

They came out into the great hall and Mr. Briggs stopped and looked round it, but not with the air of pride its size might have justified.

"The bankwittin' 'all," he said in a faintly disparaging tone. "But I couldn't do much with it. I was goin' to 'ave that wooden

ceilin' gilded. But 'Emmings—the 'ead of 'Emmings and Tidthwaite, you know, the decorators wot did up the place—persuaded me not to. 'E said that it was one of the features of the place people came to see, an' I'd better leave it as it was. It's bin just like this since the days of William the Orange—one of them early kings." He paused and said in the tone of a seeker after truth: "You don't 'appen to know why they called 'im 'the orange'?"

"No, sir," said Anderson.

"P'raps 'e was fond of them. Or p'raps it was just a fancy name," said Mr. Briggs thoughtfully. Then with more animation he added: "But wot I did do was to 'ave electric lights put in the 'elmets of all them soots of armer. They look prime when they're lighted up at night."

Anderson looked at the suits of armour respectfully.

"That was all I could do to the bank-wittin' 'all," said Mr. Briggs rather sorrowfully; and he looked round it with the air of one who saw many other ways in which it might be brightened—ways which he might not take. Then, cheerful again, he added: "But I chose the colours of all the other rooms meself." He crossed the hall quickly,

opened a door on the left, and said proudly :
 " This is the blue drorin'-room."

He went through the door and Anderson followed him into a room of a dazzling blue. The walls were a bright blue ; the curtains were a bright blue ; the carpet was a bright blue ; and the chairs and couches were covered with bright blue silk. The walls were covered thickly with pictures whose skies seemed to be of the brightest blue that could be wrested from the palette. The Bootle confection, of that rare mustard colour, which adorned the torso and limbs of Mr. Briggs grew positively restful to the eye in that wealth of importunate blueness.

" It always was the blue drorin'-room," said Mr. Briggs thoughtfully. " But if you'd seen it two months ago you wouldn't know it for the same room."

" No, sir," said Anderson.

" The curtains were a dingy blue an' so was the wall-paper an' the seats of the chairs an' sofies. I don't believe as they'd been re-covered for an 'undred years—leastways to look at them it might 'ave been an 'undred. An' I said to 'Emmings : ' Wot's the good of 'aving a blue drorin'-room if it isn't really blue ? ' An' 'e agreed with me. Leastways 'e shrugged 'is shoulders. So I chose the

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colours of everything in it meself; an' now it's really blue."

"It is a bright room, sir," said Anderson.

Mr. Briggs walked across it to one of the long windows which opened into the garden, and fingered the heavy curtain which hung beside it, lovingly.

"Wot do you think of these curtains?" he said.

"Very bright, sir," said Anderson.

"Real 'and-embroidered satin—eighty-four shillin's a yard. They made a special price to me," said Mr. Briggs.

"I expect they would, sir. Prices run very high nowadays, sir," said Anderson.

"What's prices to me?" said Mr. Briggs with a lofty air. "The best of everything an' plenty of it. That's my motter. See those pictures?" he added, waving his hand at the right wall.

"Yes, sir," said Anderson.

"Noo, every one of them—brand noo in last year's Royal Academy. I chose them from over a 'undred the dealer 'ad, just for their blueness—to match the chairs an' sofas."

"I do not remember ever seeing bluer pictures, sir," said Anderson gravely.

"You may well say so," said Mr. Briggs

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proudly. "I couldn't abide the faded old things wot 'ung on the walls—mostly by forriners. 'Old masters,' 'Emmings called 'em. I don't know about the masters; but you may take your oath to it, them pictures was old. I 'ad 'em 'ung up in the servants' bedrooms."

"I don't suppose the servants mind, sir," said Anderson.

"Why should they? It's them or none. An' a bad picture's better than none at all. They ought to be thankful for 'em. I don't 'old with pamperin' servants, mind you. But there they were; there was nowheres else to 'ang 'em. You might let it be known in the servants' 'all as it ain't pamperin'. It just 'ad to be."

"I will, sir," said Anderson.

Mr. Briggs waved his hand round the room and continued: "You'd 'ardly believe it, but most of them pictures was painted—'and-painted—by lady artists."

"I've gathered from the newspapers that the ladies are coming along in arts, sir," said Anderson.

"And a good thing too—keeps 'em out of mischief," said Mr. Briggs in a tone of warm commendation. "Ever since I found out there was money in it I've 'ad 'arf a mind to

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'ave Poppy—Miss Briggs, that is—taught paintin'. She might 'ave the knack—you never can tell. See this picture?" He pointed to a hefty canvas, in an even heftier gilt frame, which covered half of the left wall of the room. "It was painted by a lady artist. Look at those sheep—look at their faces—they might be 'uman."

"They might indeed, sir. The eyes are most expressive," said Anderson.

"You may well say so," said Mr. Briggs. He paused and added wistfully: "I wish I'd thought of it sooner. If Poppy had been taught young, she might 'ave painted pictures of sheep like that—or even cows." He said this in the tone of one who realises that cows are a higher form of art than sheep. "I paid a good price for that picture—forty-five pound, frame included."

"Did you, indeed, sir?" said Anderson.

"I did. But I don't regret it," said Mr. Briggs firmly. "I look on that picture as an investment. But come along: I'll show you the green drorin'-room. It is green."

He walked briskly to the door and opened it, paused to look round the room with warm admiration, and said: "A queer chap that 'Emmings, 'e wouldn't take any credit for this room—seemed to think orl the credit

belonged to me. 'E made rather a point of it. Why, they 'adn't bin at work a fortnight when I noticed as they'd taken down them boards with 'Decorations by 'Emmings an' Tidthwaite' on them. A poor way of doin' business, with the County 'all comin' to call on me. But them Londoners. A fat lot they know about business!"

He snorted his northern contempt and was turning to leave the room when Poppy came through the long windows followed by Mr. Albert Bracket.

Poppy, in a frock of cool mauve, was looking charming. Her colour was a little richer and her figure a little plumper for her quiet stay in the country. Mr. Bracket, on the other hand, showed sadly the absence of his Mentor's restraining guidance. He was wearing patent-leather boots, out-size, with his flannel trousers, the Riviera cravat, and a blazer, that garment so long obsolete among the polite, striped with broad stripes of orange, green, and a rich plum-colour. On his head was a cricketing cap of the same bold combination of colours.

Mr. Briggs waved an introductory hand at Anderson and said: "This is Anderson—my noo butler. You'll remember 'im. 'E was a kind of odd-job man to that impe-

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coonious young blighter 'Ambleton. But I got 'im orf 'im orl right, I did; an' I'm showin' 'im round."

" Good afternoon," said Poppy; and Mr. Bracket nodded, frowning as if any one connected with Antony was unpleasant to him.

" Good afternoon, miss. Good afternoon, sir," said Anderson.

" Where's Mr. Hambleton now? " said Mr. Bracket with a rather anxious eagerness.

" I believe that he has found work, sir," said Anderson.

" Ah, I told him he'd come to it," said Mr. Bracket with gloomy satisfaction; then he added in the same tone of anxiety: " But *where* has he found work? "

" Partly in London, partly in the country," said Anderson.

Mr. Bracket breathed a deep sigh of relief. He thought that he had no longer to fear Antony's vengeance. The exalted circles in which he moved were far removed from the circles in which men work!

CHAPTER XIII

POPPY AND MR. BRACKET GROW SYMPATHETIC

“**W**ORKIN’, is ’e, the young blighter ?
Work an’ plenty of it is wot ’e
wants. It’ll do ’im a world o’
good,” said Mr. Briggs with slow malevolence.
He paused and added despitefully : “ An’ a
fat lot o’ good ’is work’ll be to anyone when
’e’s done it. Wy, I wouldn’t pay ’im thrip-
pence an hour ! ”

Poppy sighed. As the heiress to the
Briggs millions she could not bear to think
of a man who loved her engaged in an occu-
pation so sordid as work. Sport, now—
sport was a different matter.

“ Comer long, Anderson. There’s lots
more improvements for yer to admire,” said
Mr. Briggs ; and followed by the patient
Anderson he went briskly through the door.

Poppy settled herself comfortably in the
corner of the couch which stood in the middle

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of the room ; Mr. Bracket gazed round it with admiring eyes.

“ We little guessed in the old days that we should ever find ourselves at home in a place like this,” he said, thrusting his cricketing cap well back on his head.

His voice sounded as if it had been greased with more than usual care.

“ We didn’t indeed,” said Poppy, without enthusiasm.

She was still thinking of Antony, the man who loved her, at work.

“ One of the historic homes of England,” said Mr. Bracket, apparently luxuriating in the bath of blue. “ To think that the Brank-somes have lived here since the days of Charles II ! ”

Poppy’s face became overcast ; and she frowned almost fretfully.

“ It’s all very well,” she said plaintively, “ but I’m that nervous about Lord and Lady Branksome’s calling on us that I don’t know whether I’m standing on my head or my heels.”

Mr. Bracket turned and regarded her with an air of grave understanding and sympathy : “ To tell you the truth, I’m not quite comfortable with the aristocracy myself,” he said. “ But I’m getting more used to them.

I keep telling myself that kind hearts are more than coronets and simple faith than Norman blood."

"That's a fact, even if it is poetry," said Poppy with conviction. She paused and added in a resentful tone: "I can't think how pa does it. He's just hail-fellow-well-met with all these swells."

She seemed to grudge Mr. Briggs this agreeable accomplishment.

"Your father's one of Nature's gentlemen and he never forgets that money talks," said Mr. Bracket.

"I suppose that is it," said Poppy, still resentfully.

Mr. Bracket stepped up to the picture of the sheep and regarded it with quiet admiration.

"There's a lot of work in that picture. You could almost count the blades of grass in the foreground," he said with the certitude of the seasoned connoisseur.

Poppy seemed to be pursuing another and more personal train of thought, for she said mournfully: "I sometimes wish pa hadn't made so much money."

Mr. Bracket turned sharply and regarded her with astonished eyes.

"What I mean is, if he hadn't made quite

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such a lot, we should have stayed in Bootle and never come to London. You could get what you wanted for your money in Bootle. What's the good of a beautiful drawing-room like this stuck away in the country? In Bootle there'd be people to appreciate it."

"So there will be here. You'll soon be entertaining the whole County. Lord and Lady Branksome are only the beginning," said Mr. Bracket in an encouraging tone.

"What's the good of that if the Bootle people aren't here to see it?" said Poppy. "It's them I really want to see it. They'd learn what style is."

"Oh, they get to hear about us—they get to hear about us," said Mr. Bracket in a contented voice.

"Yes; I see to that. I write and tell Myra Stubbs all about our doings every week; and you may be sure she doesn't keep it to herself. Of all the clacking tongues I ever came across, that woman has the worst," said Poppy.

"And there's many a paragraph in the *Bootle Herald*. I see to that," said Mr. Bracket in a tone of warm satisfaction.

"Do you, now?" said Poppy. "And I shouldn't wonder if you wrote them yourself."

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"I do," said Mr. Bracket proudly. "Polished paragraphs they are, if I may say so. It's a great thing to have leisure."

Poppy gazed at him with admiring eyes.

Then her face became overcast again ; and she said unhappily : " But visiting with the County will only make it worse. If there's one thing I hate, it's having to be on my p's and q's the whole time. I like to enjoy myself in my own way—with real friends."

Mr. Bracket looked at her earnestly : " It's odd," he said, " but I sometimes feel that way myself. I sometimes feel that the giddy whirl of fashionable life isn't to my taste and that I was happier in the old days at Bootle."

" I'm sure I was," said Poppy with mournful sincerity.

Mr. Bracket frowned heavily and said : " I never seem to get a chance of improving my mind nowadays. There's neither time nor opportunity, much less anyone to do it with. You'd hardly believe how I miss the old Polytechnic."

" Ah, you were always one of the serious-minded ones, Mr. Bracket," said Poppy in a tone of deep respect. " What I miss is the chapel socials. There was real enjoyment at those socials."

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She ended on a note of keen regret.

“ Yes. I did use to enjoy those socials,” said Mr. Bracket in a voice almost as regretful as her own.

Poppy sighed deeply ; then she said : “ It was at one of them—those socials I first heard you sing ‘ The Rosary.’ ”

Mr. Bracket drew himself up and seemed almost to snuff the air like a war-horse.

“ I flatter myself I can sing ‘ The Rosary.’ It suits my voice to a T,” he said with the quiet pride of a man who knows his worth.

“ No one better,” said Poppy with warm conviction.

He lost his air of a spirited war-horse, sighed, and said despondently : “ I haven’t sung it for months. There doesn’t seem to be any demand for it in Society.”

Poppy gazed at him with sympathetic eyes ; then she said : “ I did use to look forward to hearing you sing that song.”

“ And I used to enjoy singing it ever so much more when you were there,” he said.

“ Fancy that ! ” cried Poppy, blushing with pleasure at the tribute. “ And I never guessed it for a moment. Pa was in such a small way of business in those days I never dreamt you paid any heed to me at all.”

“ There’s some people you have to pay

heed to whether you want to or not," said Mr. Bracket with a polished air and also with conviction. "And you're one of them."

Poppy blushed yet more deeply as she cried: "Goodness, Mr. Bracket! What a compliment! And from you too!"

"It isn't a compliment. I never pay them," said Mr. Bracket stolidly.

He paused to admire her blushing face; and a faint glow came into his dull eyes.

He went on: "I don't mind telling you now that I was really glad when the war came and your father began to rise in the world. I felt that it was bringing us closer together."

"You don't mean to say so!" said Poppy in a tone of the deepest astonishment.

"I was never more serious in my life," said Mr. Bracket.

"And I never even dreamt it!" cried Poppy.

"I'm not one of those who wears his heart on his sleeve. But you know it now," said Mr. Bracket solemnly. "And since we've been thrown together in Society I've come to appreciate you more and more. Look here, Poppy—you don't mind my calling you 'Poppy'——"

Poppy rose quickly to her feet with a look

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of sudden apprehension on her face and said :
" Oh, but you mustn't, Mr. Bracket."

The fine flush had faded from her face, leaving it rather pale. Mr. Bracket gazed at her with a surprised, baffled air.

" Why not ? " he said heavily.

" Oh, why didn't you say this before you went away to Monty Carlo ? " she cried.

" I like to take my time over things," he said stolidly. " You don't mean to say you're engaged to someone else ? "

" Not—not—engaged exactly. It hasn't got as far as that yet. But I feel bound in a way," said Poppy in a miserable voice.

" It's that Hambleton ! " said Mr. Bracket in a tone of angry consternation. " I might have known it ! But I didn't think he'd had time ! "

" He doesn't let the grass grow under his feet, Mr. Hambleton doesn't," said Poppy in a doubtful voice, as if she were not sure whether she prized or disliked Antony's celerity.

" And I like to take my time over things. I always have," said Mr. Bracket in a tone which showed his faith in that admirable practice to be a little shaken. " It always worked very well in business," he added querulously.

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“Business is another matter,” said Poppy ; and there was a note of reproach in her tone.

Mr. Bracket stared at her in a heavy gloom. Then his face grew a little brighter ; and he said more cheerfully : “But after all, the thing’s hopeless, you know. Your father’ll never hear of your marrying an impecunious young idler without a penny to his name. You know he won’t.”

“Pa does as I want him—in the long run,” said Poppy.

“But you don’t want him to do that—you can’t. You’d never be happy with Hambleton—you know you wouldn’t. He’s not our sort,” urged Mr. Bracket with a heavy earnestness.

“He’s quite the gentleman,” said Poppy firmly.

She had no intention of allowing him to underrate Antony.

“Yes. But not in the Bootle way,” protested Mr. Bracket. “He’d never be happy in Bootle—and you’ll never be happy out of it.”

“No ; he’s too romantic for Bootle. I can see that,” said Poppy slowly. “But I’m none so sure I shouldn’t be happy with him, though he never would let me have my own way.”

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"He never lets anyone have their own way," said Mr. Bracket gloomily.

He gazed at her ; she was gazing down at the bright blue carpet with troubled eyes, and her pretty forehead was furrowed by a worried frown.

Then she said unhappily : " Well, anyhow, I've got to stick to him as long as he sticks to me."

Mr. Bracket ground his teeth ; then he said : " Well, thank goodness, that isn't likely to be long ! He's frivolous—that's what he is. I think it comes of his having idled away his time at the war. But anyhow, we're not likely to set eyes on him for a good long while. Your father will keep him away from you ; and his work, thank goodness ! will keep him away from me."

The door opened ; and with a slow and majestic gait, bearing three bright blue porcelain vases on a silver tray, there entered Antony !

CHAPTER XIV

PANSY'S SOFT JOB

AS Antony entered the blue drawing-room, bearing on the silver tray three porcelain vases of the brightest blue that ever was produced in Burslem, Poppy cast half a glance at him and murmured: "Gracious! It's a new one!"

"Your father told me that he was getting more of them," said Mr. Bracket in a low voice.

"Why can't he be content with those he's got? Just as one gets used to them, he goes and gets another," said Poppy in a tone of bitter complaint.

"It's a necessity of his station," Mr Bracket explained. "A man in his position mustn't stint himself in menials. The County expects to see them all over the place."

"Bother the County!" said Poppy, rising; and she added: "Come on; let's get out

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into the garden ; I never can talk before them. They make me that nervous I'm afraid of dropping an aitch."

She went quickly towards the window.

As Mr. Bracket followed her he said sympathetically : " I'm none too comfortable with them myself."

Antony set the tray on a small, gilded table, jagged with floral ornament, and gazed, frowning deeply, through the window at the retiring figures of his inamorata—and his variegated rival.

" She didn't know me. They call it love," he said to himself with the coldest bitterness.

Then the enormity of Mr. Bracket's attire smote him with a pang of mingled shame and horror. He ground his teeth and cried to himself : " After all the trouble I've taken with the fat-headed bounder ! "

Poppy's enmauved figure and the offending blazer disappeared behind a clump of deodars. Then the full enormity of Mr. Bracket's behaviour burst on Antony's mind.

" The mud-faced muckaroo has not only got Poppy removed from me by his sneaking. He's taking advantage of my being out of the way to try to get her himself ! " he thought, and scowled blackly at the deodars.

He had expected it ; but he had not

realised the full enormity of the young Bootletonian's conduct till he actually saw him engaged in the nefarious enterprise. On the instant there was no longer any question of obtaining a large loan from Mr. Bracket; it became definitely a heavy fine—and five thousand began to seem far too small a sum.

He turned and met the full blast of the dazzling blue.

He staggered and muttered: "Heavens! Reckitt has done fell work here!"

He knew The Towers well. Lord Branksome had been firm in the matter of keeping his poor relations at a distance. Twice Antony had been firmer than he and stayed a week with him. One of the principles which had guided his life was that he could stand no nonsense from Uncle Egbert. He could remember the charming, restful, old-world room, its delightful, soothing colour-scheme, the very opposite of this garish, distressful blueness, though it had been blue.

Then the picture of the sheep smote his eyes. It was such a blow that he looked this way and that for something to throw at it. The brass clock, which went three hundred and sixty-five days on one winding,

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caught his eye. He stepped towards it with a clutching hand.

A rustling behind him saved him. He turned to see Pansy, coming through the window—Pansy, dressed as a lady's-maid, carrying a basket of freshly cut flowers! He stared at her with unbelieving eyes.

She looked at him, knew him, and gasped.

"Why—why—it's you!" she cried; and a warm flush mantled her pale cheeks, and her eyes shone with a delightful glow of pleased surprise.

The pleasing sight banished for the while from his vision the blasting blue. He never doubted that she loved him. None the less, he could not be assured of the fact too often; and the blush and smile were firm assurances.

"It's me all right," he admitted. "But what are you doing here—dressed like that?"

She smiled again, shrugged her shoulders, and said: "Well, since you're actually in the house, it would be very difficult to conceal the fact that I'm Poppy Briggs's maid from you. So I'll admit it."

"And I'm Mr. Briggs's second footman," he said in a rather dazed voice. "Well, this is a go!"

"It is rather," she said, smiling again.

Antony relaxed under that smile; it set

him glowing. She was plainly so glad to see him. The horror of the blasting blue lifted wholly from his spirit.

"Why on earth didn't you tell me the other day, when you came to my flat, that this was your job? I've been wondering and wondering what on earth your job could be," he said, moving a little nearer to her.

"Whatever would Little Tarkington say if it heard I was a lady's-maid?" said Pansy.

"I shouldn't have ever dreamt of telling the silly little hole," he said quickly.

"You might have let it slip out, you know, in a moment of carelessness," she said.

"Not I. I'm discretion itself," he said firmly.

"If there was one thing I should have thought you weren't, it's discretion itself," she said.

"Oh, yes: I am," he said firmly. Then in a joyous voice he added: "But I say, this is top-hole. I shall be able to see something of you."

"Indeed, you won't," said Pansy with a sudden coldness. "I only associate with the housekeeper, the butler, and the chef, and have all my meals in the housekeeper's room—such good meals. You don't suppose that any of us associate with the footmen. They

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have their meals with the housemaids and tweenies and dairy-maids and laundry-maids in the servants' hall."

"That's all right," said Antony cheerfully. "I expect Anderson will attend to that. He likes my conversation."

"I don't think that even the butler could make an arrangement like that," she said doubtfully.

"Well, if he can't, there are other occasions besides meals," said Antony.

"There aren't. It would be most irregular. I should lose caste," she protested.

"Well, it can't be helped; you'll have to lose it," said Antony firmly. "If you think I could be within ten miles of you and not see a lot of you, you're wrong."

"Then you just won't!" cried Pansy. "You can attend strictly to business. You didn't come here to see me! I know you're down here on that disgusting matrimonial campaign of yours!"

"Well, I *was* stooping—in whiskers—to conquer," Antony admitted. "But now that I find you here, conquering's off," he added joyfully.

"But that's nonsense!" protested Pansy.

"It isn't," cried Antony.

"It is!" she cried. Then she said quietly:

' Of course, if you hadn't your mother and Priscilla to keep we might jog along quietly here for a few years, saving our tips and wages ; and then if we decided that we were really suited to one another, we might invest our savings in a small public-house and settle down."

She smiled at him, a cold and wicked smile.

" You're the most cold-blooded little devil I ever came across ! " cried Antony furiously. " A few years here and a few years there don't matter a hang to you ! I want you now ! "

For a breath her eyes were hungry on him ; then with a mocking smile she said : " That public-house was only a pleasing dream. You're here to marry Poppy ; and you're going to marry her. "

Antony ground his teeth : " And you'd find another place at once, " he said.

" Of course I should, " said Pansy.

He took a few steps across the room, scowling ; then he said mournfully : " To think that if only our governors, after idiotically investing all they had in Honduras copper, had only had the sense to stick to the shares instead of selling out at the bottom of the market like the fine old English investors that they were, the mater and Priscilla would have been comfortably off

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and you'd have been worth twenty thousand pounds and we could have been married a year ago. What an intensive garden we might have had with twenty thousand pounds ! ”

“ You don't mean to say those copper shares are worth anything ? ” said Pansy in a startled voice.

“ For the last five months they've been going up and up, and now they're worth a fiver apiece. In another six months they'll be worth seven pounds ten,” said Antony mournfully.

“ B—B—But it's astonishing ! Why——” said Pansy, and stopped short.

“ Why—what ? ” said Antony.

“ Poor dad ! To think of all the worry the loss of that money gave him. Why, if it hadn't been for that he'd be alive now,” said Pansy sorrowfully.

“ Yes. It was a wretched business. If only they had stuck to the shares—— But it's no good crying over spilt milk. The money's gone. But I say : don't be so infernally hard-hearted. Let me see something of you while I'm here,” said Antony in his most persuasive voice.

“ Certainly not. You stick to Poppy and business,” said Pansy coldly.

"Why shouldn't I combine business with pleasure?" pleaded Antony.

"And make love to us both at once! I know you, Tony!" said Pansy with some heat.

"Not in whiskers. These whiskers have had a great effect on my character; they've steadied it wonderfully. Besides, I tell you I'm not in love with Poppy yet. That comes after marriage. I told you it did," said Antony.

Mr. Briggs came bustling in through the window. Anderson had been shown the ground floor and then excused himself from making a tour through the conservatories on the ground that he must go to see that everything was properly prepared for the visit of Lord and Lady Branksome.

Mr. Briggs stopped short and frowned darkly.

"Now, now: I won't have this!" he said sharply. "I pay yer to work—not to gossip." He turned to Antony and looked him over with the pleased air of the proprietor of a prize bullock. "I suppose you're the noo footman as Anderson was ter bring with 'im. Wot's your name?"

"Henry James Wilkinson, sir," said Antony in a deep, rough, bass voice very different from the rich and agreeable tenor he ordinarily employed in conversation and in song.

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Mr. Briggs looked at him earnestly and said: "I seem to know your face, me lad. Was you ever in Bootle?"

"No, sir," said Antony gruffly.

"Yer seem ter remind me of some un I once knew; but me memory for faces isn't wot it was," said Mr. Briggs in a puzzled voice. "Well, run along and git to yer work. There's a couple of 'undredweight of noo old silver come yistirday as wants polishin'. Git on to it."

"Yes, sir," said Antony, moving majestically towards the door.

"I want two more of these vases, at once, please," said Pansy.

"Yes, miss," said Antony.

"You don't seem to git much of a move on yer, me lad," said Mr. Briggs to him in a tone of dissatisfaction. "You'd never do for Bootle, yer wouldn't."

"No, sir," said Antony from somewhere in the region of his boots; and he went out of the door and shut it gently behind him.

In the hall he executed a short, but joyful, *pas seul*. He had come safely through the dangerous ordeal. Mr. Briggs had failed to recognise him!

CHAPTER XV

MR. BRIGGS TRIES TO BE A BOLD, BAD MAN

AS the door closed Mr. Briggs delivered himself of a long, contemptuous sniff. Then he thrust both his thumbs into the arm-holes of his waistcoat and, gyrating slowly on his left heel, once more surveyed the blue monument of his mature taste with ineffable satisfaction.

Then he turned to Pansy and said in a deeply reproachful tone: "I'm surprised at a gal like you wastin' your time talkin' to the likes of 'im. You're a cut above a feller like that."

"He seems a very respectable young man," said Pansy, without looking up from the vase in which she was arranging a handful of flowers from her basket.

"Respecterble!" snorted Mr. Briggs with immeasurable contempt. "Why, I pays 'im a beggarly five pound a month. But there: you gals are all alike—s'welp me,

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you are! You've only got to show 'em a pair o' calves an' they're all over yer. I used to wear knickerbockers meself, so I know."

Pansy looked thoughtfully at Mr. Briggs's lower extremities and wondered.

"You oughter look 'igher, me lass—'igher," said Mr. Briggs in the tone of the young man in the poem who so often said "Excelsior."

"I will, sir," said Pansy politely.

Mr. Briggs performed another slow gyration, admiring the blue drawing-room. Then his small blue and red eyes left the survey of his masterpiece and rested on her slender figure. It seemed to please them, for they sparkled.

"Well, me lass, any noos for me?" he said in a brisk, business-like voice. "Still no letter come to Miss Poppy surrepshous-like?"

"Not to my knowledge," said Pansy, pausing in her task to look at him.

"Well, they 'aven't come by post, I'll take my oath to that. I've gone through that post-bag mornin' an' afternoon every day since we come 'ere; an' no one's got a key of it but me. All 'er letters, excep' the beggin' ones, come from Bootle. But it's odd as she doesn't show more down-

'earted—very odd. It makes me suspicious as she's getting word from 'im unbeknownst to us."

"Perhaps she's forgetting him," said Pansy, with no great interest in her voice.

"Or 'e 'er. Arter the tellin' orf I give 'im I shouldn't wonder if 'e thought that the best thing 'e could do was ter forgit 'er, an' the quicker 'e done it the better. You should 'ave 'eard the tellin' orf I give 'im; it would 'ave opened your eyes," said Mr. Briggs proudly.

Pansy could have told him that she had heard that telling off and it had not opened her eyes. She did not.

Rather deceitfully she said: "Would it indeed, sir?"

"You bet it would," said Mr. Briggs proudly. "Well, remember it's 'arf a crown for every surrepshous letter you intercep's an' brings me—'arf a crown," he added in a generous, almost prodigal, voice.

"I should think that Miss Poppy would give anyone who brought her a note from such a good-looking young man as they tell me Mr. Hambleton is, a good deal more than half a crown," said Pansy a trifle scornfully.

"'Im good-looking? That impecoonious

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young blighter good-lookin'? They 'umbugged you, me lass. An' you're wrong. Poppy 'as bin brought up very careful. She don't throw 'er money away. Besides, she 'asn't got none. I stopped 'er pocket-money direckly she come down 'ere," said Mr. Briggs triumphantly.

"You would," said Pansy with genuine conviction.

"You're right," said Mr. Briggs, bridling to the compliment.

"He may be in the neighbourhood; and if he's really fond of her he probably is. And I don't see how you can prevent their meeting when she 'goes for a stroll to the village or in the park—especially in the evening," said Pansy in a dispassionate tone.

Much as she disliked the thought of Antony's making love to Poppy, she was too loyal not to do her best for him by keeping Mr. Briggs's mind from any suspicion that he was in the house.

"I can an' I 'ave," said Mr. Briggs. "I kep' an eye on 'er for the first week myself; an' now Albert Bracket does it too—orl the blessed time. I give 'im the orfice. That was the reason I arsked 'im down 'ere—one of the reasons."

"Does he now?" said Pansy, though she

was quite alive to the fact that the young millionaire would strain every nerve to keep the lovers apart, since it was patent to every woman in The Towers that he was in love with Poppy.

Mr. Briggs surveyed her more attentively, edged a little nearer the table, in an odd, sidling movement, and said in a honeyed tone: "I say, you're lookin' prettier than ever this afternoon."

He smirked most agreeably. Pansy missed neither the smirk nor the honeyed tone; but she said nothing. She seemed absorbed in her task.

He edged a little nearer still and observed: "I don't know as I ever saw a prittier gal outside Bootle; I knows a little bit of orl right when I sees it, I do."

Pansy looked at him. Her eyes would have looked more kindly on a toad. She moved round the little table so that all of it was between them. He looked at the table and began to move round it too. Pansy continued the movement; so did he. The pace grew quicker and quicker. Of a sudden she smiled, a fleeting, ravishing smile, and pushed one of the bright blue vases off the table. It struck Mr. Briggs about the middle. There was a good deal of water in it. It ran

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down him. He trod on the vase and smashed it.

“Now, look what you’ve done,” she said in accents of chilling reproof.

“Me?” cried Mr. Briggs loudly and hoarsely. “Me? S’welp me, I never! You done it yourself! An’ yer done it a’ purpuss, you little ’ussy! You did!”

He tore from his pocket a large purple handkerchief and began to mop himself vigorously.

Poppy came through the window.

“Soppin’ wet you’ve made me trousies! I’ll catch me death o’ cold!” said Mr. Briggs raucously, but with tears in his voice.

“At your games again, pa,” said Poppy in a tone of cold and weary disapproval.

Mr. Briggs turned on her and cried in a tone of virtuous indignation: “Games? Wot games? I don’t know wot you’re talkin’ about. I just knocked up agin the table accidental-like an’ one o’ them blarsted vases fell off it and wetted me legs.” He went hastily towards the door, still plying briskly the purple silk handkerchief.

“I must go an’ change me trousies this minnit, or I’ll catch me death of cold!” he cried in a shrill whine of injured innocence.

“An’ I put on this pertickler soot because

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'er Ladyship was comin' to tea. An' now I shall 'ave to put on another ; an' I 'aven't anything 'arf so tasty !''

He went through the door and banged it behind him. A quiet fragrance of mixed liquors still floated on the blue air.

CHAPTER XVI

ANTONY BEGINS THE GRAND ASSAULT

POPPY came forward, pulling the hat-pins out of her hat and looking at the closed door with rather grim eyes.

“If pa gives you any of his nonsense, Featherstone, you just clout his head. It’s the only thing as does him any good,” she said in the careless tone of one speaking of the inclemency of the English climate.

Pansy was a little taken aback by this matter-of-fact treatment of Mr. Briggs’s endeavours to be a bold, bad man; but gathering that this was the usual attitude towards it of the circles in which he moved, she said calmly: “I will, miss.”

“If one girl clouted his head in Bootle, a dozen did,” said Poppy in a tone of careless reminiscence. “And some didn’t; and ma had to clout them,” she went on, in the same quiet vein.

It seemed to Pansy that Bootle must be a

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rather purple place, for in her youthful inexperience she had not yet learnt that it is nowadays unfair to judge a great industrial centre by its wealthier leaders of society.

“Of course that was in the old days before he made such a lot of money,” said Poppy, still dwelling on the story of her father’s life. She took off her hat, and added in a tone of resigned acceptance of the fact: “Not that he’s any better now.”

“It must be rather—rather trying,” said Pansy in a sympathetic voice.

Poppy looked a trifle surprised by this view of the matter. Some comment seemed to be required.

“Some men are like that,” she said in the tone of one to whom experience has brought a rather weary indifference. “I must say pa’s a fair terror, though. I want a hat with a broader brim. This scorching sun is fair ruining my complexion. I’ll wear the pink one I got at Margate.”

Pansy considered the effect of the hot pink of that hat with the mauve frock Poppy was wearing. She had nearly as much difficulty in keeping Poppy on the path of refinement as Antony had had in his effort to make Mr. Bracket look like a man-about-Town.

“The blue hat suits you much better,

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miss—the one you got from Madam Elise,” she said in the firm tone of the expert.

“But pink’s my favourite colour,” said Poppy plaintively.

Pansy did not say that it had no business to be. She only said in a coldly resigned, disapproving tone: “Very well, miss.”

Poppy did not miss the disapproval of the expert and she said quickly: “No! Get the blue—get the blue.”

Relieved, Pansy went to get the blue. As she went to get it, she wondered at her young mistress’s revelations of the purple patches in the history of the Briggs family.

In the meantime Mr. Briggs had dashed up to his bedroom, for the cold water was soaking through his trousers; and for cold water next his skin he had very little use. He had thrown off his coat and waistcoat and unbuttoned his braces, for like most men unversed in the art of life he had many pairs of trousers, most of them vividly checked, but only one pair of braces, when he chanced to look out of the window.

From his window there was a charming view over the extensive gardens to the home wood. In the broad aisle of the home wood he espied a spot of colour. Shading his eyes with a red, boldly veined hand, he

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gazed at it earnestly and discovered that it was a skirt. A trespasser! A veritable trespasser!

All his recently acquired instincts of a landed proprietor awoke to vigorous life. No time was to be lost. Trespassers, he knew, are fleeting things. This one might flit! He pulled on his coat, grasped the top of his trousers with a firm left hand, snuffed the breeze, hurried downstairs, and set out for the home wood at a curious waddling trot.

As the door of the blue drawing-room closed behind Pansy, Poppy went to one of the Venetian mirrors which hung on either side of the fireplace. Their frames had been recently regilded. She surveyed her heated face and powdered her nose. Then she sighed deeply. It seemed to her that life had grown uncommonly difficult. Antony's long, animated, whimsical face and Mr. Bracket's quiet brown beauty floated before her inward vision, and her mind wavered this way and that in the most distracting fashion.

The door opened, and Antony entered, bearing two more bright blue vases on a silver tray. He had been some time finding them. Poppy put away the powder-puff quickly, glanced at him nervously, and shrank

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a little nearer to the fireplace with averted eyes.

Antony looked at her as he crossed the room with the slow and majestic gait proper to his occupation. She was looking uncommonly attractive; and his sensitive spirits, dashed by Pansy's cold prudence, rose.

He set the vases on the table and said in deep, mournful, and moving tones: "Don't you know me, Poppy?"

Poppy jumped; her eyes grew uncommonly big in her head as she stared at him; then she cried in amazed, even awe-stricken tones: "Goodness gracious! If it isn't Mr. Hambleton!"

"And you didn't know me," said Antony with ineffable mournfulness.

"I never thought to look at you in those clothes," said Poppy quickly. "And those whiskers alter your face so. They make it rounder-like."

"They do indeed. They make me look like a modern painter," said Antony gloomily. "But it was the only way to come to you—to be near you."

"But fancy your dressing up like that!" she said rather breathlessly, as the astonishing and romantic situation grew plain to her.

"What does the coat matter? It's the

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heart that beats beneath it," said Antony, patting the crimson velvet above his left lung. "To be near you I would have dressed as a dustman!"

"I don't believe you'd stick at nothing!" cried Poppy loudly and with intense conviction, lapsing a little from grammar in her emotion. "And—and—it *is* romantic! Why, it's exactly like the old times one reads about in books!"

"In love there are no old times, or new. Love, true love is always the same—always laughing at locksmiths," said Antony, getting into his swing.

"I've often felt that; and you put it so beautifully, Mr. Hambleton. You ought to have been a poet," said Poppy with immense admiration. Then she added in a tone of pain: "And you've shaved off your dinky little moustache."

"It had to go," said Antony in the tone of a determined suitor. "It was but a trivial sacrifice to gain so great an end."

The phrase pleased him greatly. He made a mental note of it. It might always come in useful again. One never knew.

"I suppose it did have to go," said Poppy sadly; and then in fresh access of admiration she cried: "How those clothes

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and those whiskers do change you ! I never liked pa's livery before. But you do set it off perfectly splendid ! ”

Antony, who was already giving himself full value, contrived to draw himself up a little higher and expanded his chest as far as it would expand.

“ All the same, it's a come-down for a gentleman like you,” she added in rather unhappy accents.

The door opened. Neither of them perceived it. Pansy stood on the threshold. In her hand she carried a blue hat.

“ Nothing that brings me nearer to you can be a come-down,” said Antony with a splendid and impassioned air, striking an even more impressive attitude.

Pansy shut the door and went away. She carried with her the blue hat and an uncommonly vivid impression of Antony's splendid and impassioned air and his even more impressive attitude.

Poppy gazed at him with shining eyes. For the while she had quite forgotten Mr. Bracket and the lure of Bootle. Then she said in rather breathless admiration : “ I've never known anyone talk like you, Mr. Hambleton—only in novelettes and books—the heroes, you know. I didn't suppose

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they did. But I suppose they do talk like that in the upper classes."

"I'm hanged if they do!" cried Antony, falling to a sudden naturalness at the amazing suggestion. "You wait till you hear my Uncle Egbert talk. He's coming to tea this afternoon."

"Goodness! Is Lord Branksome your uncle?" cried Poppy in immense surprise, as Antony made a gigantic leap in her estimation. "Fancy Mr. Bracket never telling me that. If only pa knew!"

"Doesn't he?" said Antony, surprised in his turn.

So many wealthy gentlemen at the Senior Mayfair knew it that he had taken it for granted that Mr. Briggs did. It flashed on him that he had failed to use a position of great strategical advantage in his matrimonial campaign; and he murmured a kind word or two to himself under his breath for having been so careless.

"No; he doesn't know it. And he mustn't be told either. It would take all the romanticness out of it," said Poppy earnestly.

"Um! Do you think it's quite fair to him not to tell him?" said Antony doubtfully.

"Of course it is," said Poppy with decision.

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“ And, after all, you never know how pa will take anything.”

“ Then perhaps we had better keep it for a pleasant surprise for him after we are married,” said Antony, readily accepting her view of the situation.

“ Married? How you do go on, Mr. Hambleton!” she cried.

The door opened. Anderson came in quickly. Antony was between his eyes and Poppy. He began in a rather anxious voice: “ Oh, here you are, sir. I’m afraid——”

He stopped short as Antony, turning to him, disclosed Poppy.

“ It’s all right, Anderson. Miss Briggs knows who I am. Fire away,” said Antony.

“ I’m afraid there’s no getting out of his Lordship’s seeing you, sir. Mr. Briggs has given orders that both you and Symons are to wait at tea,” said Anderson somewhat anxiously.

“ That’s a nuisance! Uncle Egbert is such a fool!” said Antony frowning.

“ He’ll never recognise you in those clothes,” said Poppy confidently.

“ He might. Fools always show a little intelligence when you don’t want them to. And if he does he’ll blurt it out to a dead certainty. He goes about the world burning

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to enquire after a certain confounded five hundred pounds of his; and whenever he sees me he blithers about it," said Antony in a tone of extreme annoyance.

"If he does let out who you are, sudden-like, there'll be no holding pa. At present you're just like a red rag to a bull to him. What a scene there'll be! And what Lady Branksome will think I can't imagine!" cried Poppy in a lively consternation.

"I've never known Aunt Clementine think anything at all. So there's no need to worry about that," said Antony more cheerfully.

"Forewarned is forearmed, sir," said Anderson sententiously. "If we know that a sudden emergency is likely to be sprung on us, sir, we shall be ready to meet it. We can think out ways."

"The only way I can think of is to throttle your excited papa before his astonished guests," said Antony to Poppy cheerfully.

"No. You mustn't lay a hand on pa," said Poppy in the tone of one who recognises the excellence of the method but cannot approve its use.

"Your word is law to me," said Antony with a splendid air.

A curious scuffling noise drew their eyes to the window.

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There entered Mr. Briggs, his right hand gripping Priscilla's right arm, his left hand gripping the waistband of his trousers. Priscilla's hat was crooked on her head, but her mien was unruffled. She appeared rather interested than excited. Mr. Briggs's face rivalled the reddest carapace of any lobster ever boiled, and his eyes seemed to be sticking out of his head in the true lobstrous fashion.

Antony made a quick step towards Mr. Briggs, and, Poppy or no Poppy, would then and there have laid a hand, and a violent hand, on him, had not Anderson caught his arm and stayed him.

"Steady, sir! Leave it to me," he said sharply in a low voice.

"I've caught 'er," said Mr. Briggs in a voice of breathless triumph.

He loosed Priscilla, who calmly shook out her skirt, straightened her hat, patted her hair, turned to him, and observed quietly: "You red-faced old pig!"

"Who's this little girl? What's she been doing, pa?" said Poppy sharply.

"Trespassin'—in the 'ome wood—walkin' about as bold as brass—I caught sight of 'er from me bedroom winder—an' I was just takin' orf me trousies—an' I pulls 'em on agin—drippin' as they was—an' I run like

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an 'are, I did—I didn't stop to fasten me braces—I 'adn't time—an' I caught 'er," said Mr. Briggs, panting like a starting locomotive.

Priscilla rubbed her right arm gently and said coldly: "And why shouldn't I walk in the home wood, you red-faced old pig?"

"The magistrates—will tell you—why," panted Mr. Briggs in an explanatory tone.

"I walked about the wood whenever I wanted to last time I stayed at Branksome."

"And this time you'll be prosecuted—for trespassin'," panted Mr. Briggs; and with unaffected simplicity he began to attach his braces to his trousers.

Anderson stepped forward and said coldly: "I'm afraid, sir, if you'll excuse my saying so, that you've gone and made a bad mistake. This young lady is a niece of his Lordship and related to half the chief people in the county."

Mr. Briggs ceased completing his toilet, turned, and gazed at him somewhat blankly.

"What's that you say?" he said sharply.

"Miss Priscilla is a niece of his Lordship and related to half the chief people in the county," said Anderson yet more distinctly.

The fierce triumph faded from Mr. Briggs's face; a sudden dread dawned in his eyes; he wilted and said: "By gum! I've gone and put my foot in it again!"

CHAPTER VII

MR. BRIGGS SQUARES ANTONY'S GOOD GENIUS

SLOWLY an expression of horrified consternation spread over Mr. Briggs's mobile face, and he glared at Priscilla with the incredulous eyes of one who sees a startling natural phenomenon for the first time and can hardly bring himself to believe in it. Lord Branksome's grand-niece! And, carping the while, he had lugged her all the way from the home wood to the blue drawing-room!

Poppy gazed at her in horrified consternation. "You always will act like a bull in a china shop, pa—always!" she said in a tone of despair.

But Priscilla paid no attention to them. She was looking at Anderson with her mouth open. She was surprised to find him in Mr. Briggs's drawing-room. She was yet more surprised to find that she was Lord Branksome's favourite grand-niece. She had no

doubt in the world that had he enjoyed the pleasure of her acquaintance she would have occupied that nook in his heart, but he had never enjoyed that pleasure. He had indeed never set eyes on her—to her knowledge.

Though no sound issued from them, her girlish lips formed the pregnant words: “What a whopper!”

“You’ve put your foot in it indeed, sir,” said Anderson in icy accents. “Nothing puts the County’s back up like a new-comer meddling with one of themselves. And Miss Priscilla is a general favourite.” He ended on a note of the most incisive reproachfulness.

“’Ow was I to know that? ’Ow was I to know ’oo she was?” cried Mr. Briggs in an injured, but excited voice. “The moment I catches ’old of ’er, I arsk ’er for ’er name an’ address; an’ the young ’uss—the young lady, I mean—ups an’ tells me to go ’ome and wash me face an’ put it in a paper bag!”

“Yes, sir. She would, sir. She’s a very high-spirited young lady. The aristocracy are like that,” said Anderson in the tone of one who found Priscilla’s suggestion wholly proper, natural, and practicable.

“An’ orl I done was to make ’er come ,alonger me ter The Towers till she give me ’er name and address,” said Mr. Briggs in a

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rising whine, as his sense of injury grew keener.

“ You had no business to lay a finger on her, sir,—none whatever ! ” said Anderson severely.

“ An’ why not ? I’m a landed proprietor, ain’t I ? ” said Mr. Briggs with sudden heat.

“ Yes, sir. But these high-handed ways are all very well in Bootle with factory girls and such people ; but they won’t do with the aristocracy, sir. They really will not. You’ll be years living down this business, sir—years. Even his Lordship’s influence—supposing he could be induced to exercise it—which I very much doubt—would be of very little use in a case like this—his favourite grand-niece ! ” said Anderson in tones of the coldest severity ; and there were indubitable tears in his voice.

“ Uncle Egbert will be furious,” said Priscilla with a confidence for which her ignorance of her noble relative’s disposition gave her very slight grounds.

She felt bound to back up Anderson. For anything she knew he might have good ground for his assertions. Lord Branksome might be cherishing a concealed affection for her—might be burning to give vent to it.

“ If you will go and behave like a bull

in a china shop, pa, it's only what you've got to expect," said Poppy with filial clear-sightedness, but in a tone of the most resentful reproach.

Mr. Briggs wilted for good and all. He looked like a lobster which has made a stay of several days on a third-rate fishmonger's marble slab. But he recovered enough of his manliness to observe to his daughter: "Oh, shut your head!"

Then he looked helplessly round the room and said with extraordinary bitterness: "This is wot comes of not knowing the ropes."

He ground his teeth. Then a meagre hope dawned in his eyes; and he said: "'Ere, Anderson."

He moved rather stealthily across the room to the door and stopped. Anderson came to him.

"You gotter git me outer this," said Mr. Briggs in a low, confidential, imploring tone in Anderson's ear. "I can't 'ave the show bust up for a trifle like this arter orl the brass I've spent on it. Wot's ter be done?"

Anderson's eyes suddenly shone; but he said solemnly: "It's no trifle, sir—believe me." Then, frowning with an expression of profound reflection, he added: "I think I had better make an effort to persuade the

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young lady to let the matter drop—to say nothing to her people about it, in fact—for something in the way of a—a trinket—a necklace, say—yes, a pearl necklace—not an expensive one, of course, sir—a hundred guineas should buy the very thing.”

“A hundred guineas!” cried Mr. Briggs so shrilly that it was fortunate that Priscilla was busily engaged in receiving amiably Poppy’s apologies for Mr. Briggs’s high-handed assertion of his proprietorial rights. “Not me! Why, I’ve smacked an impertinent ’ussy’s face, an’ smacked it ’ard, in Bootle, for saying a damn sight less than what that young limb said to me about washing me face; an’ ten shillin’s every penny it cost me!”

Anderson drew himself up stiffly and said coldly: “Very good, sir. This isn’t Bootle. But of course it’s for you to say, sir.”

“I wish ter gord it was Bootle!” said Mr. Briggs fiercely. Then the fight went out of him, and he added with a groan: “Oh, square ’er, damn it! Square ’er!”

“Very good, sir,” said Anderson without elation.

Anderson went up to Priscilla, with the grave and important air of a plenipotentiary at a conference of nations, to find her regarding Antony, who was frowning fiercely at

her to suggest silence, with her mouth again open, and lending but an inattentive ear to the excuses Poppy was still making for her impetuous sire. Antony's presence, and in that garb, was even more astounding than the confident assertions of Anderson.

"If you please, miss," said Anderson, "Mr. Briggs wishes me to express his regret that he acted so hastily in his ignorance of who you were."

"I should think he did act hastily!" said Priscilla, observing that, though Anderson's face and tone were of an extraordinary gravity, his left eye was nearly shut.

"And he suggests that I should discuss the question of compensation with you over some tea and cakes in the morning-room in a friendly way. The chef's cakes are excellent, miss—better than any you can get in a London shop," said Anderson; and Priscilla was certain that, in spite of his deep respect for her, his left eye really was nearly closed in a precautionary wink.

Her haughty air of a grievously offended young lady of good family vanished wholly; and moving towards the door, she said in the friendliest tones: "All right, Anderson. Tea sounds very nice, and so does compensation."

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She paused and said in an uncommonly incisive tone to Mr. Briggs, who had stepped gloomily aside to let her pass: "All the same, cakes or no cakes, I'll bite you next time—so there! I would have this time, only I never thought of it."

"There won't be any next time," said Mr. Briggs bitterly.

"There better hadn't be," said Priscilla with an uncommonly darkling air.

Anderson opened the door, she went through it, and he followed her.

In the hall she said to him: "I say, don't you let Antony get at me. If he does, I shall get into trouble about telling that red-faced old pig to go home and wash his face and put it in a paper bag."

"Very good, miss. I'll see that Mr. Hambleton doesn't get the chance. Come in here," said Anderson; and he ushered her into the red morning-room.

It was of a redness to awake in any one who used it for half an hour in the morning a combative spirit of a fierceness to last the rest of the day. The pictures were of Oriental scenes, chosen for their redness; and Mr. Briggs had had the happy idea of getting masterpieces with plenty of blood in them, to match the colouring of the room. In one

there were two decapitated corpses, in another three; in a third Salome held the head of John the Baptist on a bloody charger; in a fourth Judith held the dripping blade just withdrawn from Holofernes' dripping breast. Every figure that could bleed was bleeding freely. It was indeed a room to begin the day in.

"Golly! But these *are* pictures!" said Priscilla in a tone of hushed but profound admiration as she looked round the walls.

"They're a trifle too bizarre for my taste; but I thought you'd like them, miss," said Anderson in a tone of extreme gratification.

"I do," said Priscilla, and it was plain that the words came from her heart.

While she studied the masterpieces with a loving eye which missed none of their more thrilling details, he rang the bell and ordered Symons, who answered it, to bring tea and the four kinds of cakes in which, from their appearance, he judged that the chef most excelled.

Symons went, and Priscilla in a thrilled and gloating tone said: "I could look at these pictures for hours and hours—and HOURS!"

"There's no need for you to hurry over it, miss," said Anderson. "But I must be

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getting away to my duties. I suggested to Mr. Briggs that he should make you a little present by way of making up to you for the manner in which he behaved—a pearl necklace.”

Priscilla clasped her hands ; her deep blue eyes shone on him with extravagant affection ; she said in thrilling tones : “ Anderson, you’re a darling ! ”

CHAPTER XVIII

THE GRAND ASSAULT

WHEN the door closed behind Priscilla and Anderson, Poppy said in filial tones: "Well, I hope you're satisfied now, pa."

Mr. Briggs did not look satisfied and he did not say that he was satisfied. He thrust his hands into his trouser pockets and with hunched shoulders walked towards the window.

"Perhaps it'll be a lesson to you not to go dragging young ladies about," Poppy continued, in a tone which showed but little hope of its having this salutary effect on him.

Mr. Briggs did not say that it would be a lesson to him; he did not say that it would not. He said: "Ow, shut it!" and went through the window with an unrepentant, even aggressive air.

Poppy turned to Antony and said in a

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bitterly explanatory voice: "Sometimes pa is really too aggravating. He was always getting into trouble in Bootle, even when he was in quite a small way of business, because he *would* act as if the whole place belonged to him; and now he's acting just the same in the country. I always say it's his Irish blood; and ma always used to say so too."

For all his approved hardihood, Antony quivered. This was a new racial factor in the matter of his father-in-law-that-was-to-be that boded no good to anyone; and many a man of a less intrepid nature and actuated by less lofty matrimonial motives, would have paused to reconsider his attitude to Poppy.

But Antony was made of sterner stuff and he said in soothing tones: "Probably he feels that the country does belong to him. Probably it ought to; for if I know anything of my Uncle Egbert he's let The Towers to him at a thundering big rent."

"Ah, well, pa can afford to pay it," said Poppy calmly and complacently. She paused and added in a tone of considerable apprehension: "If his Lordship does let out that it's you, at tea, it doesn't look as if you'd be long at The Towers."

"It doesn't," said Antony. "So I haven't

any time to lose. They interrupted us just as I was going to tell you that I find it absolutely impossible to go on living without you—absolutely.”

“Oh, Mr. Hambleton, you’re joking!” cried Poppy, bridling and flushing.

“I was never more serious in my life. It’s absolutely impossible! You don’t know what I’ve gone through this last fortnight while I was waiting for my whiskers to grow. It has been a hell on earth!” said Antony in fervid accents that would have carried conviction to a heart far less ready to be convinced.

“Has it now?” said Poppy, flushing yet more deeply, her eyes sparkling with pleasure.

“Absolutely,” said Antony with passionate conviction. “And now that I’ve seen you again it will be ten times worse—hopeless—intolerable! I realise that it can’t go on. If it does I shall go mad!”

“Oh, no!” cried Poppy.

“I shall. You’re one of those women—those siren women—who madden men—absolutely,” cried Antony; and he made two quick steps towards her, caught her in his arms and kissed her.

She struggled to escape, but with no great vigour. She was not of an upbringing, or

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class which attaches great importance to kisses. He kissed her again ; and with each kiss the image of Mr. Bracket's quiet brown beauty grew dimmer and dimmer in her mind.

" We must get out of this. We must get away to some land where we can be together free from these intolerable interruptions— somewhere where I can tell you again and again how you thrill my heart. You must run away with me ! " he said in imperative accents, imprinting another of those Bracket-effacing kisses on her lips.

" How you do carry one off one's feet ! " she cried, quivering with pleasure.

" That's all right. I mean to carry you off your feet, for I mean to carry you away this very night and marry you out of hand ! "

" B-B-But that's eloping ; and nobody elopes nowadays," objected Poppy.

" Don't they ? There are more elopements nowadays than ever there were. There are more people to elope ; and we're two of them ! " cried Antony splendidly, and once more he kissed her.

" Fancy me eloping ! " said Poppy in a tone which showed how strongly the romantic project appealed to her.

" Say you'll come," said Antony tenderly, hugging her tighter.

The big front door bell of The Towers clanged loudly.

"That's Lord and Lady Branksome! I must go and tidy myself! Loose me!" cried Poppy, awakened from the delightful dream by the ordeal before her and struggling in earnest to get free.

"Say you'll come!" cried Antony, hugging her yet tighter.

"Oh, Mr. Hambleton, I don't know what to say! I don't indeed!" she cried in the extremity of indecision.

"Say: 'Yes, Tony,'" he said softly, kissing her again.

"Yes, Tony," she said faintly.

He kissed her and said: "Right, dear angel. Meet me on the south verandah—whether I'm recognised or not—at half-past nine; and we'll catch the ten o'clock train to Town. It's quite all right. I've got a special licence. We'll knock up a parson and get married as soon as we get there." He kissed her again; added: "At half-past nine on the south verandah," and loosed her.

She ran through the window, crying over her shoulder: "Oh, you do carry one off one's feet!" and vanished.

CHAPTER XIX

TEA AT THE TOWERS

ANTONY gazed through the window after Poppy's vanishing form, heaved a deep sigh and murmured: "And that's that! as Shakespeare so often remarked." He paused and added in a tone of genuine enthusiasm: "She is a dear, though!"

Then, stepping in front of a brightly gilded mirror, he straightened his tie, pulled his coat into a perfect fit on his broad shoulders, and moved majestically towards the door. It opened in his face to admit Lord and Lady Branksome.

"I'll tell Mr. Briggs that your Lordship is here," said Anderson, who was ushering them into the room; and he made room for Antony to pass him.

Antony slipped behind Lord Branksome's back, unnoticed; and Anderson shut the door.

"That was rather a shave, sir," he said.

Lord and Lady Branksome stood stock-still, staring round the room, a little dazzled by its blasting blue.

Then Lord Branksome said in a tone in which admiration and wonder were neatly blended: "Hang it all! That low ruffian has brightened up this dingy old room! It always used to give me the blues."

"Yes, Egbert," said Lady Branksome, sitting down on the nearest couch and assuming the stiff attitude of the ramrod of a muzzle-loader with an effect of supreme Victorian correctness.

She was a tall, square woman, with pale blue eyes, pale fair hair, and pale pink lips. She wore an expression of the most amiable insipidity; and was dressed in an elaborate frock and hat of a pale blue which gave that insipidity its full value.

"No half-measures about it," Lord Branksome continued in a tone of warm approval. "New carpet—new wall-paper—new curtains—the furniture re-covered and regilded—*and* new pictures."

"Yes, Egbert," said Lady Branksome.

Lord Branksome walked slowly round the room, looking at the pictures. He stopped dead before the picture of the sheep.

"I say: look at these sheep. That's

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what I call a picture!" he said with the air of a connoisseur and in a tone of genuine, almost dazzled enthusiasm; and he raised his left foot about five inches from the ground and stood on his right foot only.

"Yes, Egbert," said Lady Branksome; but she did not look at the picture. She had astonishingly the air of seeing nothing at all.

"I never saw such intelligent sheep!" he cried with swelling enthusiasm. "I'm hanged if you couldn't teach them tricks—to sit up and beg and that kind of thing—hanged if you couldn't!"

"Yes, Egbert," said Lady Branksome.

Lord Branksome gazed, enraptured, at the picture, sheep by sheep, for perhaps three minutes; then of a sudden his face darkened. He snatched at his watch, tore it from his pocket, glanced at the dial, and cried: "Here! I say! Where is the low ruffian? Why isn't he here? What's he keepin' me waitin' for? When I agreed to take him up on condition he took The Towers, I didn't bargain for this kind of thing. Impudence, I call it—impudence!"

"Yes, Egbert," said Lady Branksome.

"What is he doin'?" cried Lord Branksome on a shriller note of exasperation.

"I don't know, Egbert," said Lady Branksome.

"Of course you don't! You never do!" cried Lord Branksome with a bitterness born of forty years' experience of rather one-sided married life.

"Yes, Egbert," said Lady Branksome.

"I say NO!" roared Lord Branksome with the most violent ferocity.

"No, Egbert," said Lady Branksome.

The door opened; and Mr. Briggs entered beaming, in a tweed suit on which, had there not been too many black and greyish-yellow squares, friends accompanying him on a railway journey, could have played chess, with Staunton chessmen of the largest size.

"Ah, here you are, are you?" said Lord Branksome in a tone of cold menace, scowling horribly at him.

"Here I am," said Mr. Briggs cheerily, beaming unabashed, as he seized the heated peer's unresponsive hand and wrung it warmly, "'Ow-do-you-do? An' this is your good lady, is it? Very pleased to make your Ladyship's acquaintance." And he wrung Lady Branksome's hand with no less warmth.

"You didn't seem to be in any hurry to make it," said Lord Branksome in a tone of

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icy ferocity; and feeling cold about the corners of his mouth, he wiped away a little foam from them.

"Better late than never," said Mr. Briggs cheerily. "Toggin' myself out, you know. Must be O.K. to entertain the aristocracy. This is a proud day for yours trooly; an' I don't mind admitting it—entertainin' the 'ighest in the county in me own drorin'-room."

"Oh, come: it's not exactly your drawing-room. You're only rentin' it from me, don't you know," said Lord Branksome captiously.

He was teeming with an iron determination to take exception to anything his tenant might say.

Mr. Briggs's eyes sparkled; the smile vanished from his face; he became the hard, red man of business. He fixed the slowly cooling peer with boring eyes, and said with steely firmness: "For seven, fourteen, or twenty-one years; and whichever I fixes on, it's mine for that period in a manner of speakin'."

"Oh, in a manner of speakin'!" said Lord Branksome more than a little contemptuously. Then, appeased, he waved his hand at the picture of the sheep, and said in an imperious tone: "I like that picture."

Mr. Briggs's face relaxed stiffly into a

gratified smile; and he said in a tone of high satisfaction: "It's my favourite picture too, Branksome. We're birds of a feather, we are."

Lord Branksome's mouth shut with a click; then he said with icy dignity: "I think it extremely improbable—extremely improbable."

"We are, though—in a manner of speakin'," said Mr. Briggs with hearty conviction.

"Oh, in a manner of speakin'!" said Lord Branksome again contemptuously.

The door opened, and Poppy entered, followed by Mr. Albert Bracket in a morning coat, grey trousers, and patent-leather boots of an engaging yellow. He had procured them since he fled from Antony's guidance. Poppy's colour was high; and for all that she was supported by the presence of Mr. Bracket, she looked unhappy and more than a little flustered. Her confusion did not at all diminish her attractiveness; if anything, it added to it.

"This is my daughter Poppy. This is Lord Branksome an' 'is good lady," said Mr. Briggs.

Poppy bobbed the little awkward curtsy in use in the British primary schools at Lord Branksome, shook hands with him,

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and said: "How-do-you-do, your Lordship?" remembered that she ought to have shaken hands with Lady Branksome first, said: "Sorry. I was forgetting," shook hands with her, said: "How-do-you-do, your Ladyship?" breathed a sigh of relief at having got it over, and stood, panting slightly, and tried, unsuccessfully, to hide one of her pretty little feet behind the other.

"Albert Bracket—a young friend of ourn from Bootle," said Mr. Briggs.

Mr. Albert Bracket came forward, elegant, assured, perspiring so slightly that the shine was barely visible, shook hands with Lady Branksome, and said: "How-do-you-do? Very pleased to meet you, Lady Branksome," shook hands with Lord Branksome and said: "How-do-you-do? Very pleased to meet you, Lord Branksome."

His voice sounded more than ever as if it had been recently greased with careful thoroughness.

"Albert Bracket's one of our risin' young men, 'e is," said Mr. Briggs solemnly. "One of these days 'e'll be Mayor of Bootle, 'e will—if 'e plays 'is cards right. You mark my words."

He gazed on Mr. Bracket almost with the loving air of a proprietor.

Lord Branksome looked Mr. Bracket up and down. Then his eyes fell to his yellow boots and stayed there, glued.

The entry of Symons, bearing a large silver tray laden with tea-things, followed by Antony, bearing a large silver tray laden with cakes and bread-and-butter, followed by Anderson, caused a shifting of the group which removed the yellow boots behind the couch on which Lady Branksome was sitting and relieved Lord Branksome's violently straining eyes.

He found his tongue again and with his eyes fixed lovingly on Poppy's pretty face, he murmured over his shoulder to Lady Branksome: "An uncommonly attractive young person, Clementine."

Then, stepping back, he tried to peer under the sofa and get another view of Mr. Bracket's interesting boots.

"Yes, Egbert," said Lady Branksome.

The group rearranged itself. Mr. Briggs sat down on the couch beside Lady Branksome and engaged her in conversation, to which he contributed everything but the monosyllables, about The Towers and the neighbourhood. Mr. Bracket stood behind the couch, recovering from the strain of his elegant entry, and envied his distinguished

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fellow-townsmen, his ease and his loquacity. Lord Branksome abandoned hope of getting that view of Mr. Bracket's boots. He must wait till they came into the open again. He drew a chair beside that on to which Poppy had sunk and set about making himself extremely agreeable while he gazed languishingly into her eyes. She was relieved. It was evident that after all he was only a man with a man's weaknesses. Anderson poured out the tea. Symons and Antony made ready to hand round the teacups, the cream, and the sugar.

Then Lord Branksome's voice rose in the words: "We shall be delighted to have such a charming neighbour. It will brighten up the whole neighbourhood. And it wants brightening up badly. The standard of beauty round Branksome is low—deplorably low."

He smiled at Poppy an obviously ravishing smile.

"What's that?" said Mr. Briggs sharply; and he sprang to his feet, once more the hard, red man of business. "Low, is it? Then I've bin done in the eye. Your agents told me that The Towers stood in some of the most beautiful scenery in England."

"So they do," said Lord Branksome. "I

wasn't talking about the scenery. I was talkin' about the young ladies."

"Oh, the gals," said Mr. Briggs in a tone of relief; and he dropped back on to the couch. "Norty! Norty! But I've got an eye for a pritty gal meself, Branksome. So it is birds of a feather, after all."

Lord Branksome, after a little fumbling, got his eyeglass into his eye, fixed Mr. Briggs with a glance of an iciness that would have withered a really hardy edelweiss plant, said in a tone even icier: "It's nothing of the kind," and turned again to Poppy.

"Well, orl I can say is, it looks uncommonly like it, don't it, Albert?" said Mr. Briggs equably; and he winked one of the most portentous winks in his repertory at the young Bootletonian.

"There are different ways of looking at the ladies, Mr. Briggs," said Mr. Bracket coldly, even austerely.

"Pa takes a lot of looking after, your Lordship," said Poppy to Lord Branksome in a tone that invited delicate sympathy.

The conversation had fallen into lines she knew.

"Does he, indeed?" said Lord Branksome in a tone wholly devoid of interest, missing the opportunity, in his cold superiority

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to the tenant he was so firmly milking, of getting on terms of sympathetic intimacy with her.

“Yes. Ma had a lot of trouble with him—a lot,” said Poppy.

“Did she indeed?” said Lord Branksome in the same tone.

“Look here, miss: don’t you tell tales out of school!” said Mr. Briggs sharply.

Antony and Symons came forward with cups of tea and cream and sugar on smaller silver trays. Symons held his tray down in front of Lady Branksome, Antony his in front of Poppy.

Lord Branksome looked at him carelessly. Then his face filled with amazement; the eyeglass fell from his eye; and he said: “God bless my soul!”

“Hush, your Lordship! Please!” said Poppy, who was on the look-out for the recognition, in a tone of agonised supplication.

“Eh? What?” gasped Lord Branksome, recovered himself on the instant, like the man of the world he was, and added: “Oh, it’s like that, is it—like that? I see, begad! I see!”

He gave vent to a cackling chuckle and took a cup of tea from the tray, grinning hideously at Antony.

Fortune had set three teacups on Antony's tray, two on that of Symons. Therefore Antony had to carry his tray round the couch to Mr. Bracket.

Mr. Bracket poured some cream into the teacup, said in the lofty tone he used to menials: "No sugar, thanks," looked at Antony, knew him, opened his mouth, and let his cup and saucer fall with a clatter.

"Nah, clumsy! That's a nice thing for the noo carpit!" said Mr. Briggs with ready irritation.

"Never mind, Mr. Bracket! Accidents will happen!" cried Poppy, quick to come to his defence.

"Sorry," said Mr. Bracket; and his mind whirled.

His eyes were wide open and he looked like a boiling owl.

"Keep your mouth shut, or I'll push my fist down it!" whispered Antony.

He picked up the cup and saucer and moved majestically to the table to get the cup refilled. Mr. Bracket stared, open-mouthed, at his broad back, then moved up and down behind the couch to get views of his face from different angles. Only Poppy observed his jerky movements.

Mr. Briggs seized on the break in their

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talk, caused by the accident, to make the conversation general.

“Arter all, Branksome, wot’s the odds as long as you’re ’appy,” he said in the accents of a philosopher. “Why shouldn’t we ’ave an eye for a pretty gal? Boys will be boys; an’ me an’ you don’t feel ’arf as old as we look, do we?”

“Suppose you speak for yourself, Mr. Briggs,” said Lord Branksome tartly, glaring at him.

“I am,” said Mr. Briggs, unruffled. “All the same, I’ll lay fairish odds as you’ve give your good lady lots o’ trouble, ’asn’t ’e, your Ladyship?”

“Yes, Mr. Briggs,” said Lady Branksome.

Lord Branksome shifted his glare to her placid face. She did not observe it.

Mr. Briggs slapped his thigh, and laughed high and shrill: “I knew it!” he cried. “I knew it as soon as ever I clapped eyes on you, Branksome! I said to myself: ‘A fair knock-out with the gals, ’e’s bin! A fair knock-out!’”

Lord Branksome ground his teeth; his eyes gleamed; and his nostrils dilated. He could have felled Mr. Briggs—like an ox.

But this was a drawing-room. He contented himself with saying in a rather breath-

less, sarcastic voice: "I suppose we're to consider this kind of conversation as the—er—the—er—proper and—er—suitable kind of thing for a young lady to listen to. Eh, what?"

"Oh, I don't mind about Poppy," said Mr. Briggs carelessly. "There's no nonsense about Poppy. She takes arter me, she does. She's got 'er 'ead screwed on straight, 'as Poppy."

"I need to have with you, pa," said Poppy with cold conviction.

Antony had brought Mr. Bracket another cup of tea while he was still in the first whirl of confusion. He had received it with a trembling hand, but in silence. Twice he received pieces of plum cake with the same uncomplaining decorum. But when Antony handed plum cake to him for the third time his tender wits had recovered their wonted balance, and he was able to regard him with the daunting eyes of the basilisk.

"So it's you, is it?" he hissed in a low whisper.

"It's me all right. And if you give me away I'll wring your neck!" replied Antony in a tone of the coldest and most convincing menace.

Mr. Bracket shrank away from him and nearly dropped his third piece of plum cake. Composed and majestic, Antony returned to

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the tea-table. He did not take the trouble to glance even at the perfidious young Bootletonian to see how he was taking his instructions.

Mr. Briggs drank two cups of tea with no little emphasis, talking to Lady Branksome about what he had done and what he was going to do to The Towers. He spoke of them as of an opponent. He finished his second cup with an unusually long-drawn sound of suction and waved the empty cup at Lord Branksome.

“Poor stuff, Branksome—poor stuff for men,” he said sadly. Then he added in an encouraging tone, “But never you mind : there’s a little tiddly waiting for us round the corner.”

He turned and resumed his monologue with Lady Branksome.

Lord Branksome gazed at him with hostile, uncomprehending eyes, turned, and said to Poppy : “What on earth is a little—er—tiddly ? ”

“I expect it’s a bottle of the bubbly. Pa is very partial to the bubbly, your Lordship,” said Poppy simply.

Lord Branksome’s eyes dilated, and he waggled on his chair. But, like the man of the world he was, he recovered himself.

Nevertheless his voice was not quite steady when he said to Poppy in a low tone : “So

my young nephew has followed you down here, has he?"

"Hush!" murmured Poppy with a fearful glance at her happy, expanded sire.

"He's a spirited young fellow—Antony—very spirited," said Lord Branksome in a tone of warm commendation.

"Oh, he is!" said Poppy with conviction.

"He takes after me," said Lord Branksome.

"Does he, your Lordship?" said Poppy.

"He does. He's a splendid young fellow," said Lord Branksome with enthusiasm.

"He's the very man to make a girl happy."

"Is he, your Lordship?" said Poppy.

"He is," said Lord Branksome in a tone of absolute certainty. "If I'd a daughter of my own of the right age, there isn't a man in England I'd sooner see her married to—not one."

He gazed at Antony's broad back with fond eyes.

"It's a pity that pa doesn't see with you, your Lordship," said Poppy gloomily.

"He will. He will," said Lord Branksome with cheerful confidence.

Poppy gazed at her happy sire with doubtful eyes.

"He doesn't often see with other people—unless they're letting him have his own

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way," she said in the same tone of gloom.

Lord Branksome did not hear her. His mind appeared to have strayed to other matters. A slow grin spread over his Borgiac face, a devilish, renaissance grin; and he broke into a high-pitched, cackling laugh.

"Wot's the joke, Branksome?" said Mr. Briggs in a tolerant, rather patronising tone.

"You were quite right—hanged if you weren't, Mr. Briggs. Boys will be boys," said Lord Branksome in the tone of one who has received enlightenment. He cackled again and added: "And girls will be girls."

"I thought you'd see it," said Mr. Briggs in an indulgent tone.

"I do," said Lord Branksome; and once more he cackled with Borgiac glee.

"It's too bad of your Lordship, pulling poor pa's leg like that," murmured Poppy, smiling at him.

Mr. Briggs rose and said: "Her Ladyship's comin' alonger me to see them golden pheasants. It seems as they was pertickler favourites of 'ers."

Lady Branksome rose.

"I'm not a poultry-fancier myself. But I knows what poultry-fanciers is," said Mr. Briggs; and he moved with her toward the window.

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Lord Branksome rose and said: "And I want to see the silver carp in the Japanese lily pond. They were particular favourites of mine—if you'll be my guide, Poppy. You don't mind me calling you 'Poppy'? I'm old enough to be your father, you know."

"You're old enough to be 'er grandfather, you mean, Branksome," said Mr. Briggs over his shoulder from the window; and he laughed heartily at the happy quip.

Lord Branksome's eyes gleamed again with a terrible ferocity; he gazed at the chequered back of his retiring host with a murderous glare. He was not proud of his white, but lamb's-wool, halo.

As he moved after Poppy to the window he observed in a dreadful voice: "Your father is a—er—er—a humorist."

"Pa *will* have his joke," said Poppy in a tone of resignation; and she went through the window.

Lord Branksome's face cleared a little; and as he followed her through the window he said: "Well, I had mine. I certainly had mine. Didn't I? Hey?"

His Borgiac cackle rose high and shrill on the sunny air at the thought that the tenant he milked was being so neatly and completely hoodwinked.

CHAPTER XX

ANTONY SENTENCES MR. BRACKET

SYMONS picked up the big tray and carried it through the door. Anderson went out after him. Antony picked up the two other trays and was on the point of following them when he changed his mind. Now was the time to deal with Mr. Bracket.

He set down the trays and turned on him with a majestic and imposing air and a frown of Rhadamanthine severity.

Mr. Bracket had come out from behind the couch and stood hesitating whether to join Mr. Briggs and Lady Branksome, or Lord Branksome and Poppy. He had a dim notion that it would be best to leave the latter pair alone and let Poppy deepen the good impression she had so plainly made on the susceptible, but fretful, peer. That way lay social advancement. Besides, now was the time to deal with Antony.

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His intention of giving him twenty minutes to clear out of The Towers was weakened by the coldly judicial frown and majestic and imposing air with which his ingenious and unscrupulous rival turned on him; but he contrived to fix him with a baleful glare, as he said violently, but rather weakly: "So it's you, is it?"

"Yes. It's still me," said Antony with a sinister calm.

"If you think I feel like being funny!" said Mr. Bracket thickly.

"Why not? You look funny. You always do," said Antony in a coldly sinister tone.

Mr. Bracket gnashed his teeth.

"Now, my gallant young friend, I've got a bone to pick with you—a good, large, meaty bone," said Antony in a suddenly harsh, rasping voice; and his air was indescribably menacing. "When you learnt from me the last time we met that Miss Briggs was coming to tea with me, you went straight off and told her father."

"I only d-d-did my d-d-duty. I'm a f-f-friend of the f-f-family," stammered Mr. Bracket, shrinking away from him, and trying to assume a virtuous air.

"It was a sneaking trick," said Antony in the same unpleasant tones. "You took

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a mean advantage of my treating you as a friend to sneak about me."

"All's f-f-fair in love and war," protested Mr. Bracket, vainly trying to get a little spirit into his tone and bearing in the face of Antony's daunting manner.

"Love! You've nothing to do with love!" cried Antony scornfully. "At any rate, not with Poppy. You had your chance at Bootle years ago, and you chucked it away out of a dirty snobbishness, thinking about your superior, piffing station!"

"It was coming back. I know it was. And then you came interfering," protested Mr. Bracket.

"And I'm going on interfering," said Antony with bitter determination.

"It isn't her you want. It's her money. You know it is!" said Mr. Bracket even more bitterly.

"You're wrong. I want both," said Antony in the tone of one who really knows what he wants and means to have it.

"And I want *her*!" cried Mr. Bracket.

"I don't believe it; and if I did you shouldn't have her," said Antony in a tone of iron resolution. "Perhaps if you hadn't played that sneaking trick on me after all I'd done for your social advancement, I

might have done the magnanimous stunt and cleared out of your way. But as it is, I'm adamant—especially about the fist. And what I want to make clear to you is that if you try to queer my pitch again here, I'll push your face with that fist—hard and often. Do you get me, Steve? ”

Antony extended his good right arm and held his good right hand, tightly closed, about three inches from Mr. Bracket's nose, in order to make his meaning quite clear.

Mr. Bracket backed away from the tightly closed hand hastily with an expression of the liveliest anxiety. Then he said bitterly: “I get you all right. Cowardly, I call it—taking advantage of your superior strength.”

“I couldn't take advantage of my inferior strength, could I?” said Antony, reasonably enough. “Besides, this is a free country. Anyhow, you asked for it when you played that measly trick on me——”

He stopped short and emitted a howl of horror. His eyes had fallen on Mr. Bracket's yellow boots!

“What's that? What's that?” he cried in the terrible voice of one who has seen an appalling sight that passes all belief.

“What's what?” said Mr. Bracket, looking down at his legs with startled anxiety.

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“What you’ve got on your feet,” said Antony.

Mr. Bracket’s eyes sank to his boots in a yet deeper anxiety. He expected to see something horrible, with many legs, crawling about them. He saw only their unblemished, shining, yellow surfaces.

“It’s my boots,” he said in a tone of extreme relief.

“Boots!” cried Antony. “Boots!” And he laughed a dreadful, blood-curdling laugh. “You call those filthy foot-coverings BOOTS!”

“Yes,” said Mr. Bracket, stooping yet lower and regarding them with even more careful attention than he had given to them in the bootmaker’s shop.

“Liar!” said Antony with the coldest and most insulting conviction. “Those vile things aren’t boots! They are monstrosities! Hideous monstrosities!”

He took a turn up and down the room; then he let his arms fall limp to his sides and said in the despondent accents of a broken man: “I made the mistake of a lifetime when I prevented the rest of the battalion from killing you at the training camp. In my heart of hearts I knew it at the time, only I let my idiotic humanity

make me act against my better judgment. The time and the thought and the care I've wasted on your beastly social education! You have the taste of a Hottentot—of a degraded Hottentot."

"What's the m-m-matter with them? They're very n-n-nice b-b-boots," stammered Mr. Bracket, still stooping low and gazing earnestly at them. "The bootmaker assured me that they were the very latest pattern. I saw them in his shop window; and they struck me at once."

"Struck you? I wish they'd brained you! You're hopeless—hopeless. The time I've wasted on a mutton-headed Hottentot!" said Antony in the bitterest tone human being ever used to human being. He drew himself upright, shook himself, and added: "Well, I'm too busy at the moment with more important and I trust more lucrative matters, to settle with you now for that dirty trick you played me. But when I come back from my honeymoon and get the time to go into it, I shall fine you five thousand pounds—five thousand pounds."

Mr. Bracket's slate-coloured eyes opened wide, and he looked as if he could not believe his ears. This was too much; it

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pricked his spirit in the tenderest spot. He snorted faintly and said almost scornfully: "And I should like to know just how you're going to do that. You're not a judge, you know, though you do give yourself the airs of one." He almost sneered.

"I'm going to do it all right. Anyone with a fist as heavy as mine can impose a fine in a free country like this," said Antony with cold, disquieting confidence. "As a matter of fact though, you'll really impose it on yourself. At least you'll have the choice of imposing it on yourself or getting a series of thrashings that will lay you up each for a month at a time."

"B-B-But that's b-b-blackmail! And b-b-blackmail's felony!" stammered Mr. Bracket in a tone of horrified surprise.

"Don't be so conventional. You're not in Bootle," said Antony in a tone of cold contempt. "You know quite well that felony isn't felony till it's found out. It's the very first principle of business."

"There's depths in you I've never suspected, Hambleton," said Mr. Bracket in a tone of hushed horror; and his eyes bulged at his Mentor's cold and distinguished face.

"You'll learn something new about me

every time you play a measly trick on me, and every time you'll like the new thing less," said Antony with grim conviction. "But this isn't blackmail; it's justice—abstract justice—retribution. And I'm not asking you to pay the fine. I'd just as soon wale you—sooner, in fact. It's for you to decide which you prefer. And you've plenty of time to think it over, for as I keep telling you, I haven't time to deal with you at the moment. I'm busy bringing a much more important piece of business to a satisfactory end."

An expression of bitter anguish contorted Mr. Bracket's face, and he said in a tone of anguish: "I know what that means. Directly I saw you I knew what you were up to. I knew you were after Poppy's money again. I was sure all the time I've been here that you'd never rest till you'd had another try for it. I don't know what to do. I really don't. I can't stand it!"

"Then try sitting it," said Antony, coldly unsympathetic.

Mr. Bracket went to the window with bowed head. On its threshold he turned and said with a harried but defiant air: "You may mock; but I shall find a way!"

CHAPTER XXI

ANDERSON TOUCHES MR. BRIGGS

ANTONY smiled an incredulous smile. His opinion of Mr. Bracket's intelligence was with very good reason not exalted. He was pretty sure that, whatever way he found, it would not be that of again acting as a little bird and whispering in Mr. Briggs's ear—the consideration that he had already incurred a fine of five thousand pounds would act as an efficient deterrent.

He picked up the two trays and was moving with them towards the door when a voice at the window behind him said: "Pstt!"

He turned to see his Borgiac great-uncle peering in through the window.

"That five hundred of mine is looking up? Eh?" he said in an eager, trembling voice and with a bright light of eagerness in his eyes.

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"Uncle Egbert, it is," said Antony with a sober confidence uncommonly reassuring.

"Good! Good!" said Lord Branksome; and the words evidently came from his heart.

He turned and went with a jaunty air, swinging his ebony stick with boyish lightness.

"Avaricious old sweep!" murmured Antony, with his youthful lack of sympathy for the anxiety of his elders.

He carried the trays to the butler's pantry, where he found Anderson having his own tea comfortably in his shirt-sleeves.

"I've just missed a chance," said Antony in a tone of vexation. "I have just had a word with my uncle and I ought to have told him that Priscilla is here and that he must on no account let on that she isn't his favourite niece. But it never occurred to me."

"That's all right, sir," said Anderson cheerfully. "I saw to that myself. I told Mr. Briggs and Miss Poppy and Mr. Bracket that they were on no account to let either his Lordship or Lady Branksome know that Miss Priscilla was in the house, because if they did and she was asked how she came to be here, being a young lady of good family, she'd certainly have to tell the truth; and

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the fat would be in the fire. I think I made the importance of their holding their tongues quite clear to them."

"You think of everything," said Antony in a tone of warm admiration. "Why they didn't secure your valuable services on our frivolous and thick-witted General Staff during the war, I can't conceive."

"I was too old to enlist, sir," said Anderson modestly.

"A great pity," said Antony sadly. "Where is Miss Priscilla?"

"She's in the red morning-room, sir, having tea—still having tea probably," said Anderson, unable to believe that Priscilla could have brought herself to spare any of those admirable cakes which he had left with her. "She seemed very much taken with the pictures, sir."

"If they're anything like that blue tosh in the blue drawing-room, I'm sorry for her taste," said Antony.

"They're not, sir," said Anderson.

"That's always something gained," said Antony. "I think I'll go and have a few words with her and see if she or my mother want anything."

"It's the second door on your left as you go into the hall, sir," said Anderson.

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“Right,” said Antony; and he left him to his well-earned meal.

He went upstairs to the red morning-room, and there he found Priscilla regarding the masterpiece in which the greatest number of figures were bleeding freely, with gloating, but rather somnolent, eyes.

“How are you, kiddie?” he said; and his eyes fell on what was left of the four kinds of cakes in which Mr. Briggs’s chef chiefly excelled. He added anxiously: “Do you think you’ll be able to walk home?”

The faintest expression of anxiety passed over Priscilla’s charming face; but she said in a fairly assured, but rather dull voice, as if speech was something of an effort: “Oh, yes, I think I shall—presently.”

Antony looked round the red, red room, and his eyes passed slowly from masterpiece to masterpiece with a growing interest.

“Well, these pictures certainly are a variation on those blue pastorals,” he said. “I understand now where Bonny Ben Briggs’s little bursts of temper come from. This is the kind of thing that really appeals to him. I expect that he kept the walls of his original Bootle home lavishly adorned with the livelier illustrations cut out of the *Police News*. But it occurs to me that the

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sooner you are out of this chamber of horrors the better. Our respected great-uncle and great-aunt are paying a call on the bonny lobster; and I can't conceive of his letting them get away without giving them the chance of laying in a good stock of nightmares by showing them this room of blood."

"It would be—a pity—for anyone to come here—and go away—without seeing them," said Priscilla with slightly heavy conviction.

She rose languidly and walked to the door with a certain appearance of heaviness. She paused on the threshold to cast round the walls a last, lingering, sleepy, gloating glance.

"Since our rich relations are in the gardens at the back the safest thing for you to do is to leave by the front door and go straight down the drive," said Antony. "There's no need to hurry."

"I couldn't," said Priscilla simply.

They lingered a few moments in the porch while he enquired whether they wanted anything and gave her affectionate messages for his mother and received her sleepy congratulations on his enterprising visit to The Towers in that effective disguise. Then she took her heavy way, a most delightful

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and charming figure of youthful innocence, her colouring the more pleasing for the slight flush of indigestion which mantled her clear-skinned cheeks, down the drive. He hoped that the cakes would, in their wonted fashion, shake down. He thought that they would.

Then he took his way to the servants' quarters. There he found that his fellow-toilers were having tea in the servants' hall. It was evident that Anderson had not arranged that he should have tea in the housekeeper's room—if indeed there was any tea in the housekeeper's room. Therefore he went into the servants' hall and joined his fellow-toilers at their meal.

He made a hearty tea and won golden opinions from the assembled gathering for his modesty and affability, especially from the two pretty housemaids to whom he addressed most of his conversation. Then he went in search of Pansy, since his fellow-toilers informed him that he was at leisure till eight o'clock, when he would wait on the Briggs family at dinner.

He could not very well ask where she was to be found at this hour. He thought that it must be an hour of leisure for her too, since it seemed improbable that she did

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anything in the way of dressmaking for her young mistress. His experience of Poppy was that she wore only the freshest of dresses and a good many of them, mostly mauve. But his knowledge of The Towers enabled him to explore thoroughly those parts of it in which Pansy was likely to be. He explored the suite of rooms which had been allotted to Poppy, on the chance of her being in them. She was not. But he approved of their decoration. Poppy had seen a room decorated in the manner of the time of Watteau at the shop of Messrs. Hemmings and Tidthwaite, had realised that such an environment would suit her, and had had her suite decorated in that manner. So far from inviting her father, so fertile in decorative ideas, to help in decorating them, she had begged him, with an earnestness the sincerity of which there was no doubting, to leave them entirely alone.

He had left them entirely alone—somewhat stuffily.

Antony did not find Pansy in them. He did not find her anywhere. He could not see her anywhere in the gardens, which he examined from nearly every window which looked on them. He came to the conclusion, knowing her fondness for the open air, that

she was probably strolling in the home wood. No self-respecting man can nowadays parade a home wood in a crimson velvet costume; and he dare not get out of his livery, for fear of chancing on Mr. Briggs and being recognised. Disconsolately he gave up the search.

He went down into the hall, and as he was passing through it he heard voices through the open door of the red morning-room, the voices of Lord Branksome and Mr. Briggs.

“I ’ad a lot o’ trouble in findin’ them,” said the voice of Mr. Briggs in a tone of pride. “They’re nearly orl o’ them by furriners. English artises don’t seem to go in for this kind er pickcher.”

Evidently the red masterpieces were under discussion.

“More fools they!” said Lord Branksome in high, excited accents and with indignant decision. “I never bought a picture in my life—never dreamt of doin’ anything so silly. But, hang it all! if I’d seen a picture like that one in the middle—the one with the two corpses and that bally nigger executioner with that bloody axe in it—it would have been a very different matter, wouldn’t it, Clementine?”

“Yes, Egbert,” said Lady Branksome

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with more animation than Antony had ever before heard in her tone.

He fancied that those red masterpieces had induced in her also an unwonted excitement. He did not wonder at it. He went, disappointed by his failure to find Pansy, to Anderson's pantry, and gloomily lit a pipe.

The bell rang from the red drawing-room.

"I'll answer it myself," said Anderson. "I expect that they're going; and I want to get that cheque from Mr. Briggs for Miss Priscilla's necklace before he has time to cool."

"You're the family benefactor," said Antony in a grateful tone.

"I'm quite sure that I shan't lose by it, sir," said Anderson confidently.

He would certainly not lose by the transit of the pearl necklace from Mr. Briggs's jewellers to Priscilla, for he had divined in them a perfect readiness, after he had had a short confidential talk with one of the leading members of the firm, to pay him ten per cent commission on the transaction.

He found Lord and Lady Branksome, Mr. Briggs, Poppy, and Mr. Bracket in the banqueting hall. Mr. Briggs was in high

feather. The call had been successful even beyond his expectations. He was convinced that he had made a most favourable impression on Lady Branksome and made a considerable advance in intimacy with Lord Branksome—or at any rate Poppy had, which was very much the same thing. As Anderson entered the hall he was urging that careful nobleman to have just one little tiddly before he departed.

“Not on any account. I haven’t drunk champagne on an empty stomach for years. I shouldn’t dream of doing such a thing!” cried Lord Branksome; and his tone was distinctly pettish.

“Well, if your good ’usband won’t be a man, you be a woman,” said Mr. Briggs heartily. “Just one little tiddly, Lady Branksome. There’s a bottle of the bubbly in the little libery fairly cryin’ out to be drunk—Polly Roger 1911.”

Lady Branksome, who, to the frequent and bitter exasperation of her husband, had the admirable digestion of the ostrich, looked more than half-inclined to accept the invitation. But Lord Branksome seized her by the arm and moved her firmly towards the door.

“You’re better without it,” he asserted

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in a voice that brooked no contradiction.

“ Yes, Egbert,” said Lady Branksome.

Her tone was sad ; she was under the impression that she would be better with it.

Accompanied by Mr. Briggs, Poppy, and Mr. Bracket, they went down the steps to their car and made their farewells.

Lord Branksome said from the tonneau in excited, friendly tones : “ I shall be comin’ round soon to take another look at those pictures.” He paused and added with a sudden, shrill ferocity : “ Why didn’t we have tea in that room ? Hang it all ! Why didn’t we ? ”

The car bore him away, unanswered.

Mr. Briggs looked after it, frowning ; then he slapped his thigh and cried : “ That’s an idee ! Why didn’t I think of it meself ? We’ll allus ’ave tea in the red mornin’-room when these County folks call. Them pick-chers shows them as I do know wot’s wot.”

He came into the hall, rubbing his hands and smiling triumphantly. Poppy followed him and went upstairs to her boudoir to think over the romantic enterprise which lay before her and surreptitiously pack a suit-case. Mr. Bracket stuck his hands in his trouser pockets, hunched his shoulders, and walked down the drive, cudgelling his

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brains, unaccustomed to the process and exceedingly resentful, to find a way.

Mr. Briggs made a bee-line for the little library. He was never one to deny himself a little tiddly out of a cowardly consideration for the coats of his stomach. Anderson followed him. An acute observer would have perceived something sinister in Anderson's air. Mr. Briggs perceived nothing but the bottle of champagne. He seized it, tore the cork from it, filled a tumbler with the sparkling liquor, and drank deep.

Then he turned to Anderson and said with hospitable warmth: "'Ave a glass. It'll warm the cockles of yer 'eart."

Anderson did not know what the cockles of his heart were, but he felt sure that other portions of his structure would bitterly resent their being warmed in that fashion at that hour. Therefore he said firmly: "No, thank you, sir. I never drink between meals."

"Ow, be a man!" said Mr. Briggs in an encouraging tone.

"No, thank you, sir," said Anderson firmly.

"Ow well, 'ave it yer own wye," said Mr. Briggs a trifle spitefully; and he emptied the tumbler and filled it up again. Then he

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added jubilantly: "It orl passed orf very well. I can't say as I exactly 'ankers arter the sossiety of the old cock; but he improves a bit on acquaintance. Them pickchers fairly warmed 'im up, they did."

"So I gathered, sir," said Anderson.

"It was an 'appy thought my showin' 'im the mornin'-room," said Mr. Briggs in a tone of deep satisfaction. "An' what might you be wantin'?"

"I succeeded in persuading Miss Priscilla not to spoil everything by informing her friends of that unfortunate affair in the home wood," said Anderson, in the self-congratulatory tone of the successful negotiator.

"Damn Miss Priscilla!" said Mr. Briggs heartily. He paused and added more graciously: "Orl the syne, I'm glad as you did. Now that things is goin' so well, it would 'a' bin silly ter go an' spile everythink by a little accident like that."

"It would indeed, sir," said Anderson, in ready agreement. "But she held out for having the necklace at the latest to-morrow afternoon. So I thought that, if you would let me have the cheque, I would run up to town to-morrow morning early and get it."

Mr. Briggs sighed heavily as he moved towards the writing-table: "She takes after

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the old cock, she does. They're a graspin' lot, these aristocracy," he said, and again sighed heavily. "I sometimes think as I should 'a' done better to 'ave stayed in Bootle. I know 'ow to 'andle the Bootle people. They don't get none of my brass orf me, I can tell you—excep' for services rendered, they don't. I should 'a' bin 'appier there. Besides, bad as the times is, there's still money to be picked up in Bootle. 'Ere an' in London it's shell out an' shell out an' shell out from mornin' till night—s'welp me if it isn't. 'Arrever, one must pye for one's fancies, one must." And he sat down at the writing-table and took his cheque-book from the drawer.

"I often wonder that you gentlemen don't stay in your native places, among your own friends, sir," said Anderson thoughtfully.

"I don't know abart friends," said Mr. Briggs doubtfully. "But we never do know wot's good for us."

He wrote out the cheque, groaned as he handed it to Anderson, and said: "An 'undred an' five pounds. Fancy 'aving ter pye orl that for 'avin' done wot I was rightly entitled ter do. It's crool—that's wot it is."

Anderson folded the cheque and put it in his pocket-book without the slightest expres-

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sion of satisfaction appearing on his placid face.

"It is a heavy price to pay, sir, for not knowing the ropes. But you'll know better another time," he said in a voice so sympathetic that it was almost dolorous.

Mr. Briggs looked doubtful and he said doubtfully: "I don't know abart that. I'm too impetchuous. That's wot's the matter with me."

"It's a fault on the right side, sir," said Anderson in a generous tone, but with doubtful accuracy; and he left the room with a dignified air.

As he took his way to his pantry his thought was that ten guineas was always ten guineas.

He did not stay long in his pantry, for he had to arrange that Antony should dine in the housekeeper's room and not in the servants' hall. It had been all very well for him to have his tea in the servants' hall; but dinner was another and much more serious matter. Besides, Anderson had not been blind to the fact that two of the housemaids were pretty. He trusted Antony implicitly, of course. But he was exceedingly unwilling that at this critical juncture anything should divert his whiskered young protégé's earnest attention from the prosecution of the great campaign.

CHAPTER XXII

ANTONY MAKES A LAST APPEAL

ANDERSON set out on his important mission with a full realisation of the difficulties that lay before him. He had moved too long in the highest circles not to be aware that compared with the rules which keep the domestic hierarchy in its exact ranks, the laws of the Medes and Persians were ordinances of gossamer. But he was braced to the enterprise by the consideration that there would not really be an infraction of those rules if Antony dined in the housekeeper's room since he was not really a footman. He could not indeed reveal the whole of the facts to his fellow-servants ; but he thought that he could win their acceptance of his proposal by assuring them that Antony was a gentleman under the weather and only a footman till his fortunes should mend.

He betook himself first to the house-

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keeper's room and the housekeeper herself, Mrs. Burchell, whom he had known for years, since the days when she had been the attractive lady's-maid of a Dowager Duchess, before she had married that Dowager Duchess's butler who had been one of his intimate friends.

He found her, a sedate and motherly lady of fifty-six, engaged in reading the *Evening News*. He had paid his respects to her, briefly, on entering the house; and when she greeted his entrance with a smile of welcome, he laid his proposal before her without any beating about the bush.

"Would you mind allowing Wilkinson, the young footman I've brought down with me, to lunch and dine with us?" he said.

Mrs. Burchell gasped and looked like to fall off her chair. "Good gracious, Mr. Anderson!" she cried in startled accents. "But I never heard of such a thing! It would be most irregular!"

"In the ordinary course of things it would be most irregular, but circumstances alter cases," said Anderson rather ponderously. "But as a matter of fact Wilkinson—it isn't his own name—isn't, strictly speaking, a footman at all. He's really a young gentleman of very good family under the

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weather for the time being. You'd be rather surprised if I told you who he really was. It was my idea that he should take up this work till things improved with him and he gets a job better suited to his position."

"Of course that does make a difference," said Mrs. Burchell with decision; and she wondered how long it would take her to get Antony's name and position out of Anderson.

"Yes; he's really quite one of us, though he is wearing livery," said Anderson.

"It's the livery that's the trouble, of course," said Mrs. Burchell. "I have never so much as heard of anyone in livery dining in the housekeeper's room in any good house." She paused and added thoughtfully: "Not that this is, now, what you could really call a good house. But that only makes it all the more necessary for us to be very particular."

"You're quite right. And the livery did rather stick in my throat," said Anderson gravely. "But I've thought how we can get over that. If he were to wear a dark tweed jacket—I don't quite like the idea of a dinner-jacket—but a dark tweed jacket, I think that we might very well overlook the breeches."

"Yes; that would get over the difficulty," said Mrs. Burchell with a sigh of relief and

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smile of gratification. "You ought to have gone into the Diplomatic Service, Mr. Anderson. I've always said so. And my poor husband used to say that he'd never known your like for tact. But you'll have to get Monsieur Legros, the chef, and Miss Featherstone, Poppy's maid, to agree to it. They might feel very uncomfortable if they found themselves dining with a young man in scarlet breeches, in spite of the tweed coat."

"Featherstone? Did you say Featherstone?" said Anderson with a startled air.

"Yes," said Mrs. Burchell. "And the odd thing is, she's a lady too. Though of course it's very different from a gentleman's being in such a position. He'd feel it more."

Anderson made no confidences; but his heart misgave him. Here was a probable diversion of Antony's earnest attention from the prosecution of the great campaign worse than any number of pretty housemaids. He went in search of M. Legros with a somewhat gloomy air.

He found him in his sitting-room, a tall, sallow moustachioed, saturnine gentleman, smoking an uncommonly fragrant cigarette and reading *The Good Soldier* with a somewhat harried air. In the most deferential fashion Anderson laid his proposal before

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him. M. Legros looked even more startled by it than had Mrs. Burchell. He seemed unmoved by the distressing fact that Antony was a young gentleman of good family under the weather. But when it came out that Antony had fought with gallantry and intelligence in France and had gained the D.S.O. and the Croix de Guerre, his objection to his dining with them wholly vanished. He had himself fought in France with gallantry and intelligence ; he too had been awarded the Croix de Guerre. He agreed with the utmost readiness that a tweed coat would enable them to overlook the scarlet breeches.

Gratified by his success, Anderson went in search of Pansy.

She had guessed that Antony, the moment he was at leisure, would try to find her. She had no wish whatever that he should find her. She had had a fortnight to consider at length the idea of his marrying Poppy ; and the longer she considered it the less she liked it. She realised clearly enough that Antony would marry, that it was only natural that he should marry. Her objection was to his marrying Poppy. The grounds of that objection were Poppy herself, though she was very careful not to consider those grounds too carefully. But the fact, the painful

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fact, was that Poppy was too pretty. If she had been long, angular, and scraggy, or short and obese, or even deformed, she could have borne their marriage with a stoical equanimity. But Poppy lacked all of these soothing qualities. Moreover, after finding him in impassioned converse with his unsuitable intended in the blue drawing-room, she had made up her mind that she never wanted to see him again. After her tea she had gone up to her room and cried about this. That had enabled her to make up her mind definitely that she hated him.

When Anderson knocked at the door of her room, she greeted him with civil warmth, and listened to his petition with civil attention. She raised no objection to Antony's dining with them in a tweed jacket. It may appear strange that, after so recently making up her mind that she never wanted to see him again, she should raise no objection not merely to seeing him again but to being brought into such close association with him. Her reticence arose from her belief that here was an excellent opportunity of letting him get an inkling of the fact that she hated him.

Anderson came away from the interview pleased with his success but doubtful in mind. Would it not have been wiser, he

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asked himself, to have left his susceptible young protégé to the possibly distracting influence of two pretty housemaids—for some men there is a certain safety in numbers, and for all he knew, Antony might have been one of those men—rather than to expose him to the certainly distracting influence of his lost love. He could only hope that Antony would be strong. At any rate, the deed was done.

Thanks to his natural serenity of spirit and a certain fatalism, he came to dinner in the housekeeper's room, at seven o'clock, with an excellent appetite. Antony's was better. It was a simple meal—only seven courses—admirably cooked. The service and the wine were excellent. Antony could not remember having ever before drunk a 1911 champagne at so perfect a temperature. Antony observed with interest that the fact that M. Legros had chosen the dishes and possibly even superintended the cooking of the more delicate, had not in any way impaired his appetite; and he gathered, from the speed with which he disposed of two, or even three, helpings of each dish, that he had uncommonly powerful jaws.

The conversation was not only pleasing but also instructive. Mrs. Burchell and

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Anderson, in the natural gratification of old friends at being again together under the same roof, were in excellent form. M. Legros made several valuable contributions to their talk. Antony and Pansy, too, if she listened to them, which is somewhat doubtful, since her attention was mainly devoted to her strenuous effort to let Antony get an inkling of the fact that she hated him, but at any rate Antony heard an immense number of interesting details about the characters and adventures of many of the most distinguished persons in the polite world.

Antony would have enjoyed the conversation extremely, had it not been for Pansy's strenuous effort. They were sitting side by side; and now and again under the covert of their elders' animated conversation he addressed a few kind, soothing, and affectionate words to her. She only scowled in a very cold and forbidding fashion. To his civil and sympathetic questions she replied in ungracious monosyllables. Do what he would, he could not induce her to meet his eye.

To M. Legros, on the other hand, who not infrequently addressed his conversation to her, she was sweetness itself. And the favourable opinion which Antony had formed

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of his gallant fellow-campaigner, especially of his jaws, became steadily less favourable. He began to seem to him a trifle too gallant.

Anything in the way of opposition aroused all that was spirited in Antony's nature, especially his virile English objection to anyone but himself having anything. As he ate his duckling *à la Carcassonne*, he found himself firmly resolved not to let Pansy go without a last effort to get her. He had grown entirely ready to let his great campaign go to the devil if he could move her from her obduracy.

At 7.45 the meal came to an end ; and they rose : M. Legros to give the last masterly touches to his employer's dinner, Anderson to marshal his forces to serve it, Pansy to dress Poppy for it. The two men went downstairs ; Pansy went up. Antony seized his chance.

He caught her on the landing and said :
" Hold on a minute. I want to talk to you."

" But I don't want to talk to *you*," she said in cold and disagreeable accents.

" All the same, I'm not going to let our happiness slip away without another grab at it. Are you still suffering from that horrible prudence of yours ? " he said in determined tones.

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“ You’ll be quite happy enough with your Poppy,” she said ; and she contrived to utter the words “ your Poppy ” in astonishingly contemptuous accents.

“ Don’t talk nonsense ! ” cried Antony. “ You know quite well that there isn’t the slightest chance of my being happy with anyone in the world but you.”

“ I don’t know anything of the kind,” cried Pansy with considerable heat. “ You were quite happy with her in the blue drawing-room this afternoon. I saw you.”

“ You didn’t see anything of the kind ! ” cried Antony, wondering uncomfortably how much exactly she had seen. “ If I have to do a thing I like to do it properly.”

“ You certainly liked doing it,” said Pansy in an extremely unpleasant tone.

“ I didn’t ! I was only pretending. And it’s no use pretending by halves, is it ? It was merely part of the campaign. You know it was.”

“ Oh yes, I know it was,” said Pansy in an ironical tone.

“ But what on earth has it got to do with anything, anyway ? Will you stop this prudence and be a woman and marry me and chance it ? ”

“ No, I won’t ! Nothing on earth would

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induce me to! You'd always be gloating over your Poppy, and sometimes—when we were harder up than usual—you'd be wishing you'd married her and got her money."

"It's extraordinary—amazing how aggravating a woman in love can be!" said Antony in a tone of extreme exasperation.

"I'm not in love!" cried Pansy.

"Well, how aggravating a woman one is in love with can be."

"Poppy didn't seem to be aggravating you at all this afternoon," said Pansy in a very unpleasant tone.

"Oh, hang—that's because she isn't in love with me nor I with her!" said Antony in a tone of the very last exasperation. Then he added more calmly: "Are you going to be a woman and marry me and chance it, or are you not?"

"I'm not," said Pansy with immense decision.

Antony drew a sharp breath and appeared to swallow with some difficulty a few kind words. Then he said in a tone of reckless determination: "All right. As soon as I've fed the bonny lobster—off come my whiskers!"

CHAPTER XXIII

MR. BRIGGS PROTESTS

ANTONY went gloomily downstairs, his fine spirit considerably embittered, in spite of the excellent dinner he had enjoyed; and as he went he cursed all women, all their ways, and all their works. He had never realised more clearly that the great, basic objection to women is their moral superiority to men, at the wrong time. Pansy went to the room of her young mistress in an even more unamiable temper. At the moment she disliked men, she disliked women, especially Poppy, she disliked herself, and she disliked her surroundings. She expected to find Poppy in a condition of pleasant trepidation and rather triumphant. She found her in no such condition. Poppy's condition was one of cold doubt. Her first excited pleasure in the romantic enterprise before her had passed quite away. So had her no less excited pleasure at Antony's

impassioned love-making. A dreadful suspicion had invaded her, a suspicion that she was about to elope with the wrong man. Her feet were cold.

Therefore only Mr. Briggs, still flushed with the joy of his triumphant debut in County society, came to dinner in really good spirits. The dinner was excellent, but, as Antony observed, not quite so good as the one he had just eaten in the housekeeper's room. Mr. Bracket was exceedingly gloomy: his brains were actually sore from their cudgeling, but he had not found a way. He was morose; and usually abstemious, he drank with a quiet perseverance.

Antony was somewhat surprised by the fact that Poppy seemed to be nearly as gloomy as Mr. Bracket, that she did not wear anything that could possibly be described as the air of a young lady about to perform the most romantic exploit possible to her sex. She would not meet his eye. He was getting rather tired of these refusals to meet his eye.

But it must not be supposed that the dinner had a gloomy aspect. Mr. Briggs saw to that. Whatever the party might be, whatever its disposition, he was the life of it. He could even make a marriage a bright and

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entertaining event. He had done so. He was the life of this party.

At the end of dinner he told Anderson to serve coffee and liqueurs on the south verandah. Antony was extremely annoyed. He wished that his employer would not have these flashes of inspiration. He could not see that Mr. Briggs on the south verandah would be of any use to him. Leaving their master whose appearance, thanks to the sherry, sauterne, and champagne he had drunk with his dinner, was already of the most lobsterous, to drink a glass or two of port, Anderson and Antony went to procure the coffee and liqueurs. They found them ready and carried them out to the south verandah, an agreeable place set with comfortable, cushioned, wicker-work chairs and small, firm tables, each affording standing-room for two glasses. From it was a delightful view across the garden to the waterfall in the stream which ran along the edge of the home wood.

Antony set his tray on a larger table at the back of the verandah, surveyed the moonlit garden, breathed deeply in the cool evening air heavy with the fragrance of flowers, and found his spirit soothed and quiet.

“Bar accidents, in three-quarters of an

hour I shall be a whiskerless man and on my way to London," he said in a quietly hopeful voice.

He appeared to Anderson to be quite free from the dismal apprehension which usually blights the man who will be married inside of three hours. He envied him his cold daring.

"I'm very pleased to hear it, sir," he said in a tone of pleased astonishment, "I didn't expect things to move as quickly as that, sir."

"I didn't expect it myself. But all the same this is my lugger," said Antony, stamping on the floor with a brave air.

"Your what, sir?" said Anderson in the tone of one not quite believing his ears; and he looked round the verandah—apparently for the mast and sails.

"My lugger—a sea-going craft in great request when the dear old nineteenth century was young. Once aboard it, and the girl is mine," said Antony in a seafaring voice.

"Meaning Miss Briggs, sir?" said Anderson.

"Meaning Miss Briggs," said Antony; and he folded his arms and assumed the desperado pose.

"That's good hearing. I wish you luck, sir," said Anderson, beaming on him.

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Antony turned sharply, let his arms fall to his side, and cried in a tone of horror : “ That’s torn it ! You should *never* wish a man luck at cards, hunting, or love ! Didn’t you know that ? ”

“ No, sir. Sorry, sir,” said Anderson in a tone of acute contrition.

“ Granted,” said Antony kindly.

The murmur of voices prevented further talk. Then, in the true baronial fashion, Mr. Briggs came through the door first. Poppy and Mr. Albert Bracket followed him. The glass or two of port had put the finishing touches to Mr. Briggs’s colour scheme. His little eyes stuck out farther than ever from his lobsterous face, which was bright with a redness which clashed fiercely with the purple silk handkerchief he had spread neatly and perfectly smoothly across the lower part of his shirt-front. He took the centre of the verandah and stood with his legs wide apart, his thumbs in the arm-holes of his waistcoat, a large cigar drooping from the corner of his mouth, and surveyed the moonlit garden with the complacent air of a proprietor and with hazy eyes. It is impossible to say whether he saw two moonlit gardens or three ; but he was very happy, or would have been but for the waterfalls. They would not stay in

their places ; they kept mingling. It did not seem quite right.

Poppy dropped heavily into a chair, frowning unhappily. Mr. Bracket dropped yet more heavily into a chair facing her, about eight feet away. Poppy gazed at him with troubled eyes. His astonishing glumness appeared to have a charm for her which it could have for no unbiased observer. She had less than ever the air of a young lady in a pleasant quiver of excited anticipation at the prospect of performing in little more than half an hour the most romantic exploit possible to her sex. Her excited pleasure in Antony's impassioned love-making seemed to be an emotion of a very distant past. She was regretting furiously her promise to elope with him. In those faery surroundings the fascination of Mr. Bracket and of Bootle had resumed its sway over her spirit. She looked at him with a mournful longing, and again, when Antony held down the tray for her to help herself to coffee, she would not meet his eye. When he carried the tray to Mr. Bracket, that unhappiest of the bloods of Bootle caught his eye readily enough and glared into it, with a rather feeble ferocity, loathing and hate.

With a cold callousness Antony winked at him.

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Mr. Briggs took his cup of coffee with fumbling fingers, still gazing diligently before him at his moonlit gardens. Possibly he was trying to separate them and to get one water fall distinctly in each. He tossed off the cup of coffee in one ringing gulp and set the cup back in its saucer on the tray. Anderson's approach with the tray of liqueurs seemed to rouse him, and a shadow fell on his face. He had reached that stage.

He turned on his guest and said in an aggrieved voice: "I can't make out wot's come over you, Albert. 'Ere you are—in one of the 'istoric 'omes of England—eatin' the best food—drinkin' the best bubbly—smokin' the best smokes—that cigar in your mouth cost me every penny of three an' a bender, 'olesale—an' you seem to 'ave an 'ump like an 'aystack."

"I know I have," said Mr. Bracket in funereal accents, taking from the tray the curaçao and brandy which Anderson had poured out for him.

"Then chuck it, me lad! Chuck it!" said Mr. Briggs in a tone of deep and sorrowful disgust.

"It's all very well to say 'chuck it,'" said Mr. Bracket more gloomily.

"Why don't *you* cheer 'im up?" said Mr.

Briggs with cold severity, turning to Poppy. "You're 'is 'ostess, aren't you? Wot else are you there for? Wot's the matter with 'im?"

"It's not so easy to cheer up a serious-minded gentleman like Mr. Bracket. He takes things to heart so," said Poppy in a half-miserable, half-complacent voice.

Mr. Bracket's gloom harrowed her tender heart; but she was not insensible to the tribute.

Mr. Briggs took a glass of liqueur brandy from the tray, raised it, and said in a tone of dignified politeness: "I looks towards you, Albert."

"I likewise has—have your eye," said Mr. Bracket with equal politeness but in accents yet more funereal.

Antony, in obedience to a nod from Anderson, went through the door into the house. Anderson followed him.

Mr. Briggs looked from Mr. Bracket to Poppy and from Poppy to Mr. Bracket. Poppy heaved a deep sigh and Mr. Bracket uttered a faint groan.

Mr. Briggs dexterously found his lips with the edge of his liqueur glass, drained it, flung it violently on the floor, stamped on it—at the third stamp—crushed it under his foot,

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and cried in a voice of the bitterest disgust :
“ Well, I’m blest ! I s’pose you think I want to spend my evening with a pack o’ moanin’ mummies. I don’t ! ” He paused to glare from one to the other, and added in a tone of savage menace : “ I’m goin’ to talk to the glow-worms, I am. ” He took three steps towards the left side of the verandah, paused, and added in the most bitterly sarcastic tone : “ They’re more sociable-like. ” He went to the top of the steps, turned, and said in a purely conversational voice : “ I’ve written to Dickson, the bird-fancier in Corporation Street, you know, to arsk ’im wot’s the proper food for them glow-worms. I’m goin’ to grow ’em. ” He paused for the murmur of sympathetic congratulation. It did not come. He said with savage bitterness : “ You can jolly well moan at one another ! ” and went down the steps.

As he started across the terrace to join brighter boon companions, they heard him say : “ Poor l’il glow-worms. ”

There were tears in his voice.

CHAPTER XXIV

MR. BRACKET FINDS A WAY

POPPY looked miserably at Mr. Bracket; Mr. Bracket looked miserably at Poppy.

“Pa gets so easily peeved,” said Poppy, more from a polite desire to make conversation than from a real delight in the obvious.

Mr. Bracket grunted an ungracious, but genuine, assent. Then he added in heart-broken tones: “What’s the good of his telling me to be cheerful? I can’t do it.”

“I’m feeling none too cheerful myself,” said Poppy. There were tears in her voice also.

“We do seem to have made a mess of things,” said Mr. Bracket in plaintive, moaning tones.

“It wasn’t my fault,” protested Poppy dismally. “How was I to know what your feelings were if you didn’t tell me?”

“I’ve been meaning to tell you for months—the best part of a year, in fact,” said Mr.

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Bracket, still plaintively. "It's my way. I do like to take my time over things. It always worked very well in business too. At least I didn't lose much by it. It's only in other things that it doesn't seem to work."

"It certainly hasn't worked well in this," said Poppy in mournful, rather reproachful, agreement.

"I know it hasn't—only too well," said Mr. Bracket. "All the same, there must be a way out of the mess," he added in slightly firmer accents.

"You'll have to find it in less than half an hour, then," said Poppy in a tone entirely free from hope.

Mr. Bracket, whose bitter gloom had huddled him into a heap in his chair, sat upright and said sharply: "You're never going to do anything silly?"

"I suppose some people would call it silly. I don't," said Poppy, but with no very earnest conviction.

"You're going to run away with Hambleton?" cried Mr. Bracket in a sudden, rather breathless apprehension.

"I may be—and again I may not," said Poppy.

The secret was not wholly her own.

"I might have guessed it! It's exactly what he would do!" cried Mr. Bracket, horror-

stricken. "But it isn't safe! How do you know he'd behave honourably, if once he got you away from here?"

"I know that all right. He's not that sort. He really is a gentleman," said Poppy confidently.

"A gentleman blackmailer!" cried Mr. Bracket bitterly. "You can't trust him."

"Oh, yes, I can," said Poppy in entirely assured tones.

"I tell you, you can't. It isn't you he's really after, it's your money," said Mr. Bracket with no less assurance.

He felt that it was no use beating about the bush; frankness—absolute frankness was the only course. Even at the risk of hurting her feelings, he must open her eyes.

"I dare say he wants my money," said Poppy, unmoved. "But he wants me as well. I'm quite sure of that, or I should never have listened to him. You can always tell—always." She paused and added in a reproachful tone: "Anyhow, whatever he wants he goes straight for it without any shilly-shallying. And that's what I like him for—among other things. Any girl would."

Mr. Bracket rose to his feet, mopping his brown brow—not that there was very much of it to mop. "Look here," he said in a tone of astonishing decision. "I'm slow, I know.

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But I want you ten times as much as he does. You give him up."

Poppy shook her head.

"Do," Mr. Bracket pleaded. "I tell you what; if you'll chuck him and marry me, I'll take you straight to live in Bootle. We'll settle down in that big house the Mortons used to live in. I bought it six months ago, thinking you'd like it."

Poppy sat bolt upright; she flushed; her eyes shone; she clasped her hands; she cried: "Oh, Albert, that *would* do us a fair treat!"

It was a cry from the heart.

"If there's one place in England you can really get your money's-worth in, it's Bootle. We should be really happy there," said Mr. Bracket with hardly less enthusiasm.

Poppy sank back in her chair; the flush faded from her cheek, the light from her eyes; limp and disconsolate, she said: "But what's the use of talking? A promise is a promise."

"I don't care! Promise or no promise, you're not going off with him. I'm going to stop it!" cried Mr. Bracket with immense decision; and he sprang to his feet.

Love on the top of a good deal of champagne was making another man of him. He spoke with spirit; his eyes flashed fire—not much fire, but still fire.

To Poppy he seemed heroic.

But she said in no hopeful tone : “ You’ll have to be quick.”

“ I’m going to be quick—quicker than ever I was in my life before. I’ve found a way ! ” said Mr. Bracket ; and his eyes flashed a little more fire as he strode to the electric bell beside the door, put his thumb on it and kept it on it. “ I’m going to have a talk with him at once.”

“ You’re not going to talk to him before me ? ” cried Poppy, and she sprang out of her chair in a panic.

“ No fear ! That wouldn’t be any use ; he’d have to be romantic ; and that’s where he’d have me at a disadvantage,” said Mr. Bracket astutely. “ I’ll talk to him in the smoke-room—just he and I—as man to man. He can’t be romantic with *me*.”

With a sigh of relief Poppy sank down again. Mr. Bracket, the man of action, kept his thumb on the bell.

“ Now mind ; you’ve got to persuade him to give me up of his own free will. I won’t have you going to pa about it. If you did I should feel more bound than ever,” said Poppy firmly.

“ I’ve tried going to your papa, and it doesn’t work,” said Mr. Bracket rather glumly, for her words had recalled to his

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mind Antony's painfully adamant fist.
"I'll persuade him all right."

Anderson entered with his usual dignified stateliness. The prolonged ringing of the bell did not seem to have quickened his steps or ruffled his serenity.

"Where's your master?" said Mr. Bracket.

"I don't know, sir. I left him with you, sir," said Anderson, suave but uninterested.

"I don't mean Mr. Briggs. I mean Mr. Hambleton," said Mr. Bracket.

"He did say that he was going up to his bedroom," said Anderson.

"Then it's too late! He's gone to shave off his whiskers! I know he'd never travel to London with me in those whiskers!" cried Poppy in the accents of despair.

"No, it isn't too late. Fetch him down and send him to me in the smoke-room at once, Anderson. Hurry up!" said Mr. Bracket imperiously.

"Yes, sir. In the smoking-room, sir," said Anderson; and he went through the doorway with decorous deliberation.

"It won't take long," said Mr. Bracket confidently.

He shuffled his feet. Then he turned to Poppy; and again his eyes flashed some fire as he said: "I tell you what: if eloping's your fancy, I'll elope with you myself!"

CHAPTER XXV

POPPY ALSO FINDS A WAY

POPPY stared at her transfigured lover in amazed admiration.

“But how splendid!” she said breathlessly. “The Bootle people would never believe you had it in you!”

“There’s a lot in me the Bootle people would never believe,” said Mr. Bracket with a darkling tremendousness.

Again he shuffled his feet, then went briskly off to the smoking-room.

Poppy gazed at the doorway through which he had gone; and slowly the enthusiasm faded out of her face. An expression of doubt and despondency took its place. Then she rose and paced up and down the verandah, her hands clasped, her head bowed, frowning in deep and painful thought.

Once she murmured: “He’ll never persuade him—never. I’ve got to stop it myself, I have,” and paced on, frowning yet more deeply.

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Pansy, walking in the deodar shrubbery, caught sight of her. She had come out in the natural expectation that the peace of the moonlit garden would presently soothe her perturbed spirit. The impression of the splendid and impassioned air with which Antony had been conducting his interview with Poppy that afternoon was, if anything, clearer in her mind than at the moment when she had received it. Any any rate it was much more painful. The peace of the moonlit garden had not soothed her perturbed spirit at all. The romantic scene, the romantic moonlight, the flower-fragrant air made it seem absurd, even preposterous, that Antony, bitterly as she hated him, was not beside her, making love to her.

She stopped to gaze at Poppy. Probably the little beast was waiting for him to meet her somewhere in the garden. A spasm of acute pain set her trembling; she clutched at her bosom. It was there she felt the pain. Then with the graceful, swinging stride of the accomplished golfer she made for the verandah. It had occurred to her that she could drop a little gall into Poppy's sweet cup of happiness.

As she came up the verandah steps, Poppy stopped dead with a shining air of inspiration

and a smile which swept the frown from her brow, and murmured : “ If she only would ! ”

She, too, had found a way.

Pansy came up on to the verandah and said in a tone of honeyed respectfulness : “ Please, miss, I wish to give notice.”

The smile fled from Poppy’s face ; Mr. Bracket, Antony, and romance fled from her mind. This bolt from the blue filled her with a blank dismay. She saw, down a dismal vista, interviews with uppish young women and an uppish young woman, chosen by herself, tyrannising over her with a cold and crushing superiority.

“ Now, if that isn’t too bad ! ” she cried in wild consternation. “ Just as I’d got used to you and was so comfortable ! ”

“ And I should like to go directly you find another maid, miss,” said Pansy, twisting the dagger in the wound, with a cold malevolence.

“ I—I—thought you liked the place ! ” cried Poppy almost tearfully.

“ Oh, yes ; I like the place as well as I could possibly like any place,” said Pansy, relenting a little in the face of this acute distress.

After all, Poppy had been the easiest mistress.

“ Then what do you want to go for ? Is

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it your wages? I'll make pa double them," said Poppy, beginning to fight for peace and comfort.

"No, it isn't the wages," said Pansy.

"You don't mean to say it's pa? Surely you don't pay any heed to his nonsense! I tell you you've only got to clout his head once or twice, and he'll be as meek as a lamb," asseverated Poppy with the greatest earnestness, and obviously with genuine conviction and knowledge.

"Oh, no; it isn't Mr. Briggs," said Pansy contemptuously.

"Ah, I know what it is: you're going to get married. It's always the way when one really gets suited," said Poppy in a tone of the last hopelessness.

"No, I'm not!" said Pansy quickly and with some heat. "I shouldn't dream of doing anything so silly!"

For a moment Poppy forgot the misfortune that had befallen her and stared at this extraordinary maid with astonished eyes; then she said: "I don't see anything silly in it. Besides, we all of us come to it sooner or later—at least those of us who get the chance. And I should think you'd get plenty of chances."

Pansy looked at her with a slightly patient

air ; then she said : “ The fact is, I don’t need a place any longer. Indeed, I never did need one. All the while, if I’d only known it, I’ve really been quite well off. But it was only to-day that I learnt that some copper shares my father left me are worth a great deal of money ; and I thought they weren’t worth anything at all.”

“ Now, if that isn’t romantic,” cried Poppy, brightening. “ And I am glad to hear it—even though it does mean your leaving. I always knew you were above your place. You were always much too civil and obliging not to be a lady. That’s one of the reasons why I shall be more than sorry to lose you.”

“ It’s very nice of you to say so,” said Pansy.

In the face of this generous spirit her hostility, if it had not wholly vanished, had abated considerably.

“ It’s true,” said Poppy with manifest sincerity. “ Ever since I left Bootle you’re the only girl I’ve come across I really liked. I—I—suppose——” She stopped short.

“ What ? ” said Pansy.

Poppy hesitated ; then she went on a little timidly : “ I suppose you wouldn’t care to be a kind of friend like ? Not intimate, of course—I shouldn’t expect that, of course—but just a friend.”

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Pansy had not come to the interview with any friendliness at all ; but she was disarmed. She said readily, with a good show of sincerity : “ But of course I should. I should like it very much. You’ve always been nice to me.”

“ That is good of you,” said Poppy gratefully. “ You’d find Bootle an awfully nice place to come visiting to. There’s always lots going on in Bootle. It isn’t like London.”

“ You’re going to live in Bootle ? ” cried Pansy in a tone of the liveliest astonishment.

She could not at the moment imagine a niche in Bootle which Antony would exactly fit.

“ Yes. At least I’m hoping to. At least I *was* hoping to,” said Poppy, and her face filled with a sudden dismay as Mr. Bracket, Antony, and romance rushed pell-mell back into her mind, perplexing and distressful. “ Oh, it’s perfectly awful your giving notice just now ! Just as I was going to ask you to do something ever so important for me.”

“ But why shouldn’t I do it now ? ” said Pansy.

“ Oh, you wouldn’t do it now. When you were my maid it was different. I was going to offer to pay you handsomely. But now you wouldn’t,” said Poppy mournfully.

“What is it?” said Pansy, her curiosity roused and rising on the instant to burning point.

“I’ve gone and made a great mistake. I’ve promised Mr. Hambleton to run away with him this very night. I thought I wanted to. It seemed so romantic-like, you know; and he made such a point of it. But I’ve had time to think it over and I don’t want to at all—not now.”

“You’ve changed your mind definitely?” said Pansy, as astonished as she was pleased.

“Definitely isn’t the word! I hate the very idea of it!” cried Poppy.

“You hate Mr. Hambleton?” said Pansy in a tone of satisfaction.

“No. Not him. No girl could hate him. He’s so cheerful and spirited,” said Poppy with conviction.

Pansy felt immensely superior: she not only could hate Antony, but she did.

“It’s the idea I hate,” Poppy went on. “Those romantic sort of things sound awfully nice at first. But when you come to think them over in cold blood like, they aren’t anything of the kind—not with the wrong gentleman, that is. Of course it didn’t occur to me at the time that he was the wrong gentleman. He carried me off my feet.”

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“ I see. You want me to tell him that you’ve changed your mind definitely. Wouldn’t it be better to tell him yourself ? ” said Pansy thoughtfully.

She did not shrink at all from carrying the unpleasant news to Antony. Indeed, hating him as she did, she could think of no occupation she would at the moment relish more. It was only that she felt bound to give Poppy the best advice.

“ Tell him myself ? ” cried Poppy in a panic-stricken voice. “ I could no more face Mr. Hambleton and tell him that than I could fly ! Besides, it wouldn’t be any use. He wouldn’t pay any heed to my telling him. He’d act just the same as if I’d said nothing at all ; and before I knew where I was I should be on my way to the station with him. He’s like that.”

“ Very well, I’ll tell him,” said Pansy.

“ But that wouldn’t be any use either. He’s so romantic. You should hear him talk. He’d pay no more heed to you than he would to me. He’d just hunt me out. And I should get carried off my feet again the same as I was when I promised to run away with him. I know I should,” said Poppy.

Pansy’s sense of superiority grew : Antony could never carry her off her feet.

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"Well, what is it you want me to do?" she said, slightly bewildered.

"Well, what I was going to do was to ask you to run away with him instead of me. And I was going to pay you well to do it," said Poppy.

"Run away with him instead of you?" cried Pansy in a tone of extreme astonishment.

"Yes. It would have been easy enough. You'd have been wearing one of my dust-coats which would have hidden your figure. It's a bit slimmer than mine. And you'd have been wearing a thick veil. People always elope in veils. And he'd have been much too pleased and excited to see that it wasn't me," said Poppy.

Pansy's first thought had been to refuse; but of a sudden she grasped the idea in all its richness. Here was a chance of really punishing Antony as he deserved. She wanted to punish him. She did not reason about it. She was blind to the fact that she had no grounds for punishing him. It was not his fault that he was marrying Poppy and not her. She merely rejoiced at the thought of dashing the cup from his lips and seeing his disappointment at his failure.

"He *would* be furious when he found it wasn't you," she said, a trifle joyously.

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"Of course. That was why I was going to pay you handsomely. But he wouldn't make himself *very* unpleasant. He's quite the gentleman, you know."

"I shouldn't mind if he did," said Pansy, and there was a note of womanly vindictiveness in her tone. "I'll do it."

"You will? You'll run away with him instead of me? B-B-But it's—it's noble of you!" cried Poppy in rather breathless astonishment and delight.

"Not at all. I don't suppose he'll be so very furious," said Pansy carelessly.

"But he will," said Poppy confidently, with a natural realisation of her value to a man. "It's more than noble—it's really brave. And I must—you'll have to let me—I won't hear of your saying 'no'—I'll give you that old French pearl necklace you like so much. It isn't really big enough for me. I like the three ropes—people can't miss seeing that."

"I don't want any necklace," said Pansy. "I shan't find it nearly so unpleasant as you seem to think."

She clenched her teeth and her lips set grim as she realised more clearly the thoroughness of Antony's punishment for the faithlessness she had forced on him.

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“But you must have it! You shall! I’ll get it out at once! Come along!” cried Poppy; and she ran through the door.

Pansy took a step after her; then she stood quite still. She was breathing quickly, and her heart was beating quickly. A great sense of relief had suddenly come upon her, almost an elation. It was annoying; but she could not even pretend to herself that they did not arise from the fact that Antony was *not* going to marry Poppy!

CHAPTER XXVI

MR. BRIGGS ASKS FOR THE CLOUT

FOR a breath, in the overwhelming relief of this full realisation that Antony was not going to marry Poppy, the world swam before Pansy's eyes. Then they cleared; and she had taken one step to follow her late mistress when a sharp "Pstt!" on her left arrested her. She turned to see Mr. Briggs swaying up the verandah steps. She did not notice his swaying gait, or that he was picking his steps with extraordinary care. It must not be supposed that he had been drinking with the glow-worms. The glass of brandy had, as the vulgar phrase it, put the lid on it.

"Hold on a minute, me lassh," he said.

Had she been in full possession of her faculties she would have gone through the door without taking any notice of his request, for at no time could his conversation on any subject give her any pleasure, at no time

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could his vivid lobsterousness delight her eye ; and now that she had given notice she was under no constraint to look at him or listen to him at all.

As it was, being rather dazed, she said with some impatience : “ What is it ? ”

“ I want ter speak to yer, me lassh—shome-thin’ very important,” said Mr. Briggs ; and he swayed circuitously towards her.

A rich fragrance of mixed liquors preceded him as an aura. The fragrance of the flowers, which had hung on the air, retired languorously before it. Pansy also retired a step or two before it. In his circuitous progress he had got between her and the door ; he came to a standstill before her, gazed at her with the purposeful, forceful eyes of the master of millions, and blinked to get their vision clear. It seemed to him that Pansy, or rather two or three Pansies were behaving like his waterfalls. They kept separating, blending into one, and separating again. It did not seem quite right to him.

She now gathered that he had looked, and looked hard, on the brandy when it was brown. Not only his aura but also his manner apprised her of the fact. But in her exhilaration at the joyful news she had just heard, she was disposed to be indulgent.

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She felt tolerant even of Mr. Briggs and his aura, and awaited the important communication with an almost amiable air.

The communication did not come immediately; and she said a trifle impatiently: "What do you want to speak to me about?"

Swaying gently, Mr. Briggs blinked at her with an immense gravity. Then he said once again with the manner of one carefully weighing his words: "You're an uncommonly pritty gal, Feathershtone."

This was no news to Pansy. Her mirror had kept her fully aware of the fact for years; so had Antony and others.

"I don't know as I've ever seed a prittier gal outside Bootle," he continued with the same judicial air.

Pansy did not even yet feel flattered. She had no opinion of Bootle as beauty's hot-bed.

"Do you really mean it?" she said in a slightly sarcastic voice, and retired a further couple of steps back from his insistent aura.

"Yes, an' I'm a judge, I am," said Mr. Briggs, warming to a little animation and assuming the air of a connoisseur. "I appreciate a pritty gal—none better—always h'ave."

His face was ineffably solemn. His tone

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was also ineffably solemn. He gazed at her with a strange intensity between the blinking. It suddenly occurred to her that he was wasting her time, that she ought even now to be donning her disguise. Of course Antony would wait; but she was in rather a hurry to be off with him. Something might happen to rob her of the opportunity of informing him of his final discomfiture. It occurred to her also that she was not really interested in the connoisseurship of Mr. Briggs. But unfortunately he was between her and the door. She must manoeuvre him out of this strategical position.

"I've been thinkin'," he said gravely.

"After dinner?" she said in a tone of polite incredulity, moving to his right in the hope that he would move after her, away from the door, and give her a chance to dart past him and through it.

Then Anderson appeared in the doorway, carrying a tray on which were a decanter of whisky and bottles of soda-water. He arrived noiselessly and as soon as he saw them stood quite still, gazing over his master's narrow shoulders at Pansy with amiable interest. Her womanly intuition assured her that, had it not been for his natural dignity, he could have winked at her.

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“You’re above your place. That’s what you are,” said Mr. Briggs solemnly. “Anyone can see it. Poppy says you’re a lady.”

“That’s very nice of her,” said Pansy in a slightly weary voice.

“As er rule I never pays no ’eed to what Poppy says. She’s a little idjit,” said Mr. Briggs with a father’s impartiality. “But she’s right for once in a w’ile. You *are* above your place—there’s no getting away from it. Likewise you’ve got your ’ead screwed straight on your shoulders.”

He seemed to prize this physical perfection highly, as if he had found it uncommon in the circles which he had adorned.

“I hope so,” said Pansy, wondering whither this long, complimentary preamble was leading and wishing that he could get to the gist of his important communication and let her go. She wondered: was he about to promote her to the post of companion to Poppy?

“You know wot’s wot,” said Mr. Briggs, again in a tone of cool, judicial appreciation. He paused, bent a little forward with a languishing air, and added in seductive accents: “’Ow would you like a little place of your own—a flat in London—in the West End?”

It struck her that he had a greater com-

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mand of himself. He had indeed acquired a greater control of his eyes. He had reduced her definitely to one Pansy. Then she was suddenly aware of an itching in her fingers ; and Poppy's golden words about clouting Mr. Briggs's head flashed into her mind. They came with a strange appeal.

"It would depend," she said quietly, but her eyes gleamed with a sudden fire.

"What on?" said Mr. Briggs.

"On whom I shared it with," said Pansy, measuring her distance from Mr. Briggs's left ear with a careful eye.

She could not have endured that any clout she might proffer should fail of its full effect.

Mr. Briggs drew himself up to his full height—five feet four—with the air of a conqueror, laid a gallant hand on his heart, bowed with a florid, Bootle grace, and said :
" 'Ow would I do? "

Pansy's fingers were aflame ; but she was too conscientious to take the chance of clouting a master of millions under a misapprehension.

"Is this a proposal of marriage?" she said.

"Yes, miss," said Anderson.

He spoke in a bright, informative tone.

CHAPTER XXVII

A MENACE TO MILLIONS

AS Anderson spoke he stepped through the doorway.

Mr. Briggs spun round, staggered to the left, staggered to the right, recovered himself and met squarely his butler's bright, intelligent smile.

"'Ere, wot the 'ell are you chippin' in for?" he snarled.

His tone and his appearance were those of a crimson wolf robbed of its little Red Riding-hood.

Anderson beamed on him and said with suave deference: "Miss Featherstone didn't seem quite to understand you, sir. She asked if it was a proposal of marriage; and I took the liberty of saying that it was—just to make it clear to her. Young ladies are apt to be confused on these occasions, sir."

"Then you take your 'ook an' mind your own business, me man! No one said

nothink about marriage!" snarled Mr. Briggs.

He had grown quite sober with astonishing suddenness. Always on the alert, his instinct, so keen in these matters, warned him that there might be money in this affair—his money for other people. There had been before, in like affairs. The sherry, the Sauterne, the Champagne, the port, and the brandy, had each and all lost their mellowing effect. He was again his hard, red business self.

An expression of extreme bewilderment appeared on Anderson's ingenuous, open countenance. Stammering slightly, but with even greater deference, he said: "B-B-But I heard you, sir. I heard you ask her to share your l-l-lot, sir—distinctly—with my own ears, sir."

Mr. Briggs was relieved. Anderson's good faith was so obvious. His ears had so evidently deceived him.

"Flat! You silly old blighter! Flat! That was wot I arsked her to share," said Mr. Briggs; and he winked at Anderson—as one man of the world to another.

"Lot, sir. I heard it distinctly," said Anderson, civilly but firmly.

"Flat! You old idjit!" cried Mr. Briggs.

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“ Was it his lot, Anderson ? ” said Pansy ; and there was a gleam in her eyes.

“ Certainly, miss. I heard it perfectly. My hearing is excellent,” said Anderson stiffly, with the injured air of a middle-aged man whose physical perfection has been impugned. “ I heard it perfectly.”

Mr. Briggs was conscious of a slight chilling of his blood.

Pansy turned to him ; and her eyes shone on him like stars full of mischief. She clasped her hands and said in a tone of rapture : “ But how nice ! All those millions ! ” She took a step towards him with outstretched arms and added in a languishing voice : “ Oh, Benjamin ! ”

Mr. Briggs threw up his left arm as if to ward off a blow and backed away from those charming arms with an ungallant, if not ungraceful, briskness : “ 'Ere ! 'Oo are you gettin' at ? ” he snarled. “ Don't you come a-Benjamming me ! ”

He glared at her with a ferocity almost inconceivable in one whose eyes had so recently rested on her with such a warmth of admiration and devotion.

“ Oh, Benjamin ! ” said Pansy once more, but in the grieved tone of one whose most exquisite sensibilities have been most cruelly

wounded by unjust and unmerited harshness.

“If you an’ this silly old blighter think you can come any o’ those games over Ben Briggs, you’re jolly well wrong!” cried Mr. Briggs in a furious, roaring voice.

Anderson stepped forward, dropped the tray on the table with a jangling clatter that jarred every fragile nerve in Mr. Briggs’s body, turned on him, and cried in the ringing accents of virtuous indignation: “Games, sir? What games? I just happened to overhear you asking this young lady to marry you——”

“You never ’eard nothink of the kind!” roared Mr. Briggs, but with not quite such a full forcibleness.

Like many violent men, he was distressed by violence in others. And Anderson was terrible; his eyes flamed like those of an avenging angel.

“I can testify to it in any court in England!” Anderson cried fiercely.

“Of course he can,” said Pansy, supporting her champion.

“And I will!” said Anderson in a terrible voice. “And with Miss Featherstone’s charming face——”

“Damn ’er charmin’ face!” interjected Mr. Briggs.

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He had changed his mind definitely about Pansy's face.

"—and your past record," Anderson went on.

"Wot parst record?" cried Mr. Briggs.

"In Bootle, sir, it's common knowledge in Bootle. There are hundreds who can swear to it. With Miss Featherstone's charming face and your record, there isn't a jury in England that won't award her heavy damages if you try to back out of it," said Anderson.

He ended in a cold, judicial, convincing tone very disquieting.

Mr. Briggs's blood ran colder in his veins. The menace to his millions grew very clear.

"There ain't nothink to back out of! I never made no proposal of marridge, an' well you know it!" he cried, emotionally lavish of his negatives.

Anderson loved to perform little deeds of kindness. His naturally warm heart had been reinforced by the assurance of an expert theosophist that the performance of little deeds of kindness would entitle him to the physique of a Jack Dempsey in his next incarnation. He had already conferred a hundred-guinea pearl necklace on Antony's pretty sister that afternoon, and now he was bent on conferring a few thousands on

Antony's pretty friend that evening—two little deeds of kindness in less than five hours. What he would get out of Mr. Briggs's cheque for a hundred guineas lay between himself and Mr. Briggs's jewellers. What he got out of Mr. Briggs's cheque for a few thousands would lie between himself and Pansy. His quick, mathematical mind had already figured it out at thirty-three and a third per cent.

Also his quick mind perceived that the time had come to cease being violent with Mr. Briggs. Violence had shaken him and served its turn. He became coldly severe.

"If you take that line, sir, there's only one thing for Miss Featherstone to do, and that's to put the matter into the hands of Messrs. Purkis and Trencher first thing to-morrow morning," he said in icy accents.

"Damn Purkis an' Trencher!" said Mr. Briggs.

"It's all very well to talk like that in the heat of the moment, sir," said Anderson in a compassionate tone. "But I can assure you that they're perfect dabs at handling a case of this kind, sir. They've never lost one."

"Evidently the only thing for me to do is to put the case into their hands," said Pansy

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in a becomingly unhappy, but decided, voice.

She had not enjoyed herself so much since the old, happy days at Little Tarkington.

“First thing to-morrow morning,” said Anderson with mournful decision.

Some old strain of Viking blood, from the Waterford district, welled up in Mr. Briggs. He went berserk. He turned on Pansy and howled: “You can go an’ drown yerself first thing to-morrer mornin’! You don’t come it over me! That you don’t! Ben Briggs an’ ’is brass aren’t so easy parted as all that, an’ don’t you think it! When it comes to the lor it’s money that talks! Money!”

He paused for lack of breath. Mr. Bracket came briskly through the door.

Mr. Briggs got his breath again and roared: “You get along an’ pack up your trunks an’ clear out bag an’ baggage! The pair of yer! If you’re not out o’ The Towers inside of ’arf an hour, I’ll ’ave yer thrown out!”

CHAPTER XXVIII

REASONING WITH MR. BRIGGS

“**H**ERE, I say : what’s all this about ? ”
said Mr. Bracket in a startled
voice.

He looked from one to the other with startled eyes. He was startled. Also he was alarmed. He shared with all the other members of the circles that Mr. Briggs adorned their keen dread of what that hard, red man of business would do next, and evidently he was doing it. It never occurred to him that Mr. Briggs might be in the right. It never did occur to anyone who knew him.

Anderson turned to the startled young millionaire, spread out his hands, and said with mournful deference : “ I’m glad you’ve come, sir. It’s Mr. Briggs, sir. He has just made a proposal of marriage to Miss Featherstone.”

“ Not me ! I——” said Mr. Briggs, stepping forward to put himself in the right.

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Anderson waved him back with a splendid gesture and went on in cold, incisive accents :
“ I overheard him distinctly, quite distinctly, asking her to share his lot. And now he says he didn't and is trying to back out of it.”

“ S'welp me, I never did ! ” Mr. Briggs broke in, in a curious, imperative howling.
“ It was my flat I arsked 'er to share ! My flat ! ”

“ What flat ? ” said Mr. Bracket.

“ Exactly, sir. What flat ? Mr. Briggs hasn't got a flat. How could he ask anyone to share what he hasn't got, sir ? ” said Anderson to Mr. Bracket. Then he turned on Mr. Briggs and added in the tone of a man of wide experience : “ That kind of prevarication is of no use with a jury, sir—no use whatever. They simply laugh at it.”

“ Damn the jury ! ” howled Mr. Briggs.

Anderson threw up his hands in the gesture of one giving up hope of doing anything with Mr. Briggs.

“ You've gone and done it now,” said Mr. Bracket sombrely to Mr. Briggs, showing no sign whatever of attaching any importance to his simple explanation of the affair.

“ I tell you I never did ! ” said Mr. Briggs in the voice of one strangling.

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“Everybody in Bootle, from the highest to the lowest, said you’d put your foot in it badly sooner or later,” said Mr. Bracket, again sombrely ignoring the denial.

He spoke gloomily enough, but there was in his voice a note of quiet pleasure such as every man must feel who lives to see the exact fulfilment of an oft-reiterated prophecy.

“Damn everybody in Bootle!” said Mr. Briggs; and there was no mistaking the fact that the impious proposal came from his heart.

“That’s all very well; but they won’t be damned. You know what they are,” said Mr. Bracket sanely. “You’ve got into a mess with your goings on, as everybody said you would; and you’d better get out of it as quickly as you can before people get to hear about it.”

There was a compelling urgency in his tone. He could not indeed bear the thought of Mr. Briggs’s appearing a yet more appalling father-in-law than he was.

“I tell you I haven’t got into any mess! It’s a plant!” said Mr. Briggs in a faint, harsh voice.

He felt as if he were shattering himself against Mr. Bracket’s incredulity as against a brick wall.

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“You have to say that of course,” said Mr. Bracket in the patiently indulgent, a trifle contemptuous tone of one accepting a rather tiresome convention. “But the sensible thing for you to do is to come to some arrangement with Featherstone and lose no time about it.”

“Two arrangements in one day?” cried Mr. Briggs loudly. “There was that imperent little ‘ussy an’ a ‘undred guineas just before dinner.”

He had again recovered a good deal of his voice.

“You’d better get it over and done with. The longer you are about it the worse it’ll be,” said Mr. Bracket sanely but impatiently.

“I don’t think Miss Featherstone could accept any arrangement, sir. Mr. Briggs has made himself very unpleasant since he learnt that there was a witness to his proposal,” said Anderson stiffly.

“There wasn’t any prop——” began Mr. Briggs.

Mr. Bracket ruthlessly cut the denial short, saying: “Oh, he can apologise for that, Anderson; and I’m sure Featherstone doesn’t want to make trouble in the family. Do you, Featherstone?”

Pansy had an inspiration. It was Ander-

son who had started the business ; he would handle it better than she and punish Mr. Briggs thoroughly. She wanted him punishing thoroughly ; she wanted it badly. She was enjoying the process immensely, more than she had enjoyed anything for months ; she would leave it in Anderson's hands.

" I leave the matter entirely in Anderson's hands," she said coldly. " He seems to know exactly the right thing to do in such circumstances."

" I ought to—after thirty years' service in the best circles. Why, dozens of such cases have come under my notice—dozens," said Anderson with quiet pride.

" I suppose they have," said Mr. Bracket with sombre resignation.

He had a business man's hatred of having anything to do with experts, unless they were in his own employ.

" But of course the gentlemen were a good deal younger than Mr. Briggs in most of the cases ; and they were *gentlemen*," said Anderson, with a sufficient emphasis on the important word.

Mr. Bracket disliked the implication that the father-in-law on whom he had set his heart was not a gentleman. But this was no time to resent it.

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“ Oh well, you’ll listen to reason,” he said confidently. “ Of course Featherstone led Mr. Briggs on a bit ; and it was after dinner.”

“ I did nothing of the kind ! ” cried Pansy indignantly, greatly affronted by the monstrous suggestion.

“ That’s a quite unwarrantable suggestion from a gentleman who knows so well what Mr. Briggs is. You don’t seem to realise that Miss Featherstone is a lady—a good deal better bred than Mr. Briggs or yourself, if I may say so, sir,” said Anderson in a tone of the coldest severity, fixing Mr. Bracket with stern, indignant eyes.

“ The devil she is ! Beg pardon—I mean I didn’t know it,” said Mr. Bracket, gazing unhappily at Pansy ; and he scratched his head. “ That doesn’t make it any better.”

“ It won’t with a jury, sir,” said Anderson in a tone of rather chilling satisfaction.

“ We don’t want any talk about juries,” said Mr. Bracket hastily, wincing as he spoke.

“ That’s for you and Mr. Briggs to say, sir,” said Anderson with cold indifference. “ But as for leading Mr. Briggs on, take it from me, sir, he did all the talking himself. I heard him. It wasn’t till Miss Featherstone quite grasped what he was driving at that she

said, 'Oh, Benjamin!' and held out her arms in a perfectly ladylike way."

"She did, did she?" said Mr. Bracket helplessly. Then he turned, frowning, to Mr. Briggs and said with sombre assurance: "It's quite clear that what you've got to do is to pay up and look pleasant."

"Pay up and look pleasant! Me?" howled Mr. Briggs, who had been recovering, in an irksome silence, from the young Bootletonian's hard unfaith.

"Well, try to look pleasant," amended Mr. Bracket gloomily. "You can't afford to be mixed up in a silly scandal like this. You know quite well you can't. You'd never be able to show your face in Bootle again—never in your life."

"Damn Bootle!" howled the lobsterous apostate.

Mr. Bracket looked unfeignedly shocked. It was one thing to damn his fellow-citizens, quite another to damn an industrial centre of such importance.

"The County would certainly take it much worse than Bootle," said Anderson in a reflective tone.

"Damn the County!" howled Mr. Briggs.

"Of course the County would. I was forgetting the County for the moment,"

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said Mr. Bracket in quick, unhappy agreement. He turned to his host and added in the gravest accents: "You'd ruin your social career."

"Damn my soshul career!" howled Mr. Briggs.

"After all the money you've spent on it? Do try to show a little sense!" said Mr. Bracket with a weary impatience.

"Mr. Bracket is quite right, sir. We all have to pay for our little mistakes, sir," said Anderson in soothing tones. Then he added cheerfully: "After all, what's five thousand pounds to you, sir?"

Mr. Briggs gasped heavily, as one who has been smitten in the wind; slowly livid streaks dulled his scarlet face. His heart-strings and purse-strings were inextricably mingled. Who tugged at the one tugged at the other. This was a real tug.

"Damn five thousand pounds!" he shrieked.

"Well, say six, or seven. It's a mere flea-bite to you, sir," said Anderson with unabated cheeriness.

Pansy was taken aback by this sudden introduction of a definite sordidness into this pleasing sport. She could see quite clearly from his tone and his eyes that Anderson was not jesting but firmly resolved

to make Mr. Briggs actually pay money, and lots of it, for his impudent insult. She perceived a ruthless glee in his cheeriness.

She stepped forward sharply and said in a tone of rather anxious protest: "But I don't really mean to——"

Anderson cut her short. Waving his hand with the superb air of one who rides the whirlwind and likes doing it, he said in a tone of the last imperativeness: "Leave it to me, miss, please—leave it to me."

"But——" said Pansy.

"Yes, yes, miss; I quite understand—quite. But I'm old enough to be your father, miss; and I thoroughly understand these little affairs. I tell you I've moved in the best circles for thirty years," he said in the same imperative tone.

There was nothing to be done. Plainly he was inexorable and unbidable, impossible to turn from his firm purpose of handling the matter in his own way and of handling all of it. Pansy gave ground. Then she changed her mind. After all, Mr. Briggs would be better for the fullest possible lesson.

"Oh well, the impudent little horror needs a complete lesson. It will do him all the good in the world," she said, moving towards the door. On the threshold she paused to

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say: "I *am* clearing out, Mr. Briggs. I'm going to pack at once and go."

She went through the door and hurried upstairs to Poppy's room. She met Poppy coming down the corridor in a flurry to learn what had become of her.

"Whatever kept you?" she asked. "I was beginning to be frightened that you'd changed your mind."

"It was only your father. He got between me and the door into the house and kept me. There was no getting past him," said Pansy.

She had no desire, nor at the moment had she the time to go into the matter of Mr. Briggs with his daughter.

"Did you clout him?" said Poppy with an eager, filial hopefulness. "I told you to. I told you it was the only thing that did him any good."

"I was just going to, when Anderson came in and took the matter out of my hands," said Pansy.

"Then I'm sorry for pa. Anderson will give him a proper telling off. I'm sure of it. But there: he's always asking for trouble, pa is," said Poppy in a tone of gentle satisfaction. "But come along. You ought to be on the south verandah in less than ten

minutes, though if pa's still there I don't know how Mr. Hambleton is going to work it."

"I expect he'll find a way," said Pansy. "I must run upstairs and get some things."

"Oh no; there's no need for that and no time either. I've got a suit-case packed already with everything in it you can possibly want. And you must be down on that verandah at half-past nine sharp."

"I must run up and get some money, anyhow," said Pansy; and she ran up quickly to her room, found her vanity bag and purse, and hurried back to Poppy.

Poppy had chosen the dust-coat and the hat. She held a thick veil and the pearl necklace in her hands.

"I chose the little blue toque because Mr. Hambleton's seen me in it," she said.

* * * * *

As Pansy went through the door into the house Anderson turned to Mr. Briggs and said in a tone of warm, even enthusiastic approval: "There, sir; you see. Miss Featherstone quite understands the proper course to take."

"Damn Miss Featherstone!" said Mr. Briggs; but his tone lacked the full intensity.

The propriety of Pansy's action daunted him. He did not know why it did; but it did.

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“ Ah, you’re heated, sir,” said Anderson in an exquisitely soothing tone. “ P’raps it would be better to drop the discussion of this little business for half an hour or so. You’ll have calmed down by then, sir.”

Mr. Briggs showed no gratitude whatever for this thoughtful consideration. On the contrary, he shook his fist at him and howled : “ I tell you what it is, my fine feller : you’re a blackmailer ! That’s what you are ! A dirty blackmailer ! ”

He was again in full song.

Anderson frowned upon him and said with a sorrowful severity : “ If you’re going to talk like that, sir, I’m afraid it will be ten thousand before we’re done. And if the matter really has to go into the hands of Messrs. Purkis and Trencher, it will cost you a lot more than that. I shouldn’t wonder at all if they fixed the damages at fifteen thousand. They have large ideas, sir. And of course there’s no saying what a jury won’t do when it’s a case of a wealthy profiteer—you know how juries hate profiteers nowadays, sir—trying to take advantage of an innocent and charming young lady living under his own roof. And Miss Featherstone’s face, being as pretty as it is, sir, will make the jury rabid—absolutely rabid.

And the newspapers, sir—their comments on the case——”

Mr. Briggs had made several attempts to interrupt these pertinent observations. Now he got in a shrill cry of: “Damn the newspapers!”

But Mr. Bracket had had enough of it. He had pressing business of his own to attend to and none too much time to attend to it in. Knowing her as he did, he did not think that Poppy could be punctual; but on such an occasion as this she might.

He turned on Mr. Briggs and said savagely: “Look here: I’m losing all patience with you! You’re only making things worse and worse; and well you know it. Be sensible, will you!”

Mr. Briggs glared at him; he had never supposed that the promising young Bootletonian could be so violent. It finally cowed him. He was beaten and he knew it. However densely the British strain in him might be ignoring the fact, the more acute Irish strain was assuring him of it, vehemently.

“Oh, go to blazes!” he snarled at Mr. Bracket, and tottered to the edge of the verandah and down the steps.

His bleeding heart craved solitude.

CHAPTER XXIX

REASONING WITH ANTONY

AS Mr. Briggs's footsteps died away along the path to the chalky bank the glow-worms chiefly inhabited, Anderson turned to Mr. Bracket and said in a tone of sad but profound conviction: "I'm afraid that what Mr. Briggs lacks is poise, sir."

"I don't care what he lacks!" cried Mr. Bracket with a callousness almost brutal in a young man speaking of his future father-in-law.

"But I think he'll be reasonable when he's calmed down a bit more," said Anderson in a kindly voice.

"I don't care whether he is or whether he isn't," said Mr. Bracket with obvious sincerity. "I want Mr. Hambleton and I want him at once. Where is he? Why didn't you send him to the smoke-room? Didn't you give him my message?"

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There was urgency in his tone ; and he looked urgent.

“ Yes, sir. And he told me to tell you—through the door of his bedroom, sir—that he was much too busy to attend to you till after his honeymoon and then he’d make a thorough job of it,” said Anderson.

“ Confound him ! There’s never doing anything with him ! ” said Mr. Bracket with considerable heat and no less disquiet.

“ No, sir,” said Anderson in a tone of quiet approval. “ He’s a very spirited young gentleman.”

“ Damn his spirit ! ” said Mr. Bracket with even more heat.

The evil communications of Mr. Briggs had plainly corrupted his good manners.

Then he added fretfully : “ He’s got to attend to me ! I *must* speak to him ! ”

Anderson shrugged his shoulders. He evidently doubted that means of compulsion were to hand.

“ It’s hardly my business, sir,” he said.

“ I believe myself that you’re running the whole show,” said Mr. Bracket with an astuteness rare in him. “ You’d better make it your business. Look here : I’ll give you—I’ll give you a fiver if you get me five minutes’ quiet conversation with him at once.”

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Anderson lost his air of aloofness: "I'll see what can be done, sir," he said with sudden animation, and started briskly for the door.

Antony, the old Antony, came briskly through it. He had shaved off his whiskers so that his face had recovered its old length. His eyes, lit with the light of a high emprise, seemed bluer than ever. His hair was again a golden brown. He was wearing a dark tweed suit and a soft hat. Really, they suited his tanned complexion better than crimson velvet and a white thatch.

A sudden frown darkened his cheerful face at the sight of Mr. Bracket and Anderson, and he said in a tone of brusque command: "Now you two! What are you doing on my quarter-deck? Get off it!"

"Very good, sir," said Anderson, grasping at once Antony's need of a clear deck; and careless of the urgent desire of Mr. Bracket, leaving him to gain it himself, if he could, he went through the door.

Mr. Bracket stood firm and said firmly: "I want to speak to you, Hambleton."

"I dare say you do. But I haven't time to listen," said Antony coldly, waving him aside. "I told Anderson to tell you that you could speak to me after my honeymoon."

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His face was stern ; he wore a preoccupied air—such an air as Napoleon wore on the eve of a battle.

“ That’s the very thing I want to speak to you about,” said Mr. Bracket quickly.

Antony gave him a darkling look ; then the frown and the sternness fled from his face ; a sunny smile illumined it ; he said graciously : “ Ah, you want to make it brighter and gayer—but not a claret-jug or a fish-slice—please. Let us have something really useful—something worthy of your practical intelligence and your millions—a gold cigar-case and a thousand Coronas, now.”

“ I don’t want to make it brighter and gayer ! ” cried Mr. Bracket with a sincerity almost vivid. “ It isn’t wedding-presents I have in my mind at all ! I want to stop it altogether, and I’m going to ! ”

The sunny smile passed swiftly from Antony’s face ; and again he frowned darkly. “ You are, are you ? ” he said in a menacing voice. “ Have you forgotten what I said about my adamantine fist—already ? ”

He advanced on Mr. Bracket with something sinister in his air, the adamantine and the other fist clenched and carried slightly in advance of his body. He trod lightly.

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Mr. Bracket backed hastily away from him with his arm up. He wore an expression of the liveliest uneasiness: "Here, steady on! Do listen to reason!" he cried. "There's a good deal more than a gold cigarette case and a thousand Coronas in what I've got to say—a good deal more!"

Antony, who was advancing lightly, dropped on to his heels and stopped short. The sinister quality vanished from his air; he observed Mr. Bracket with eyes no longer hostile but merely wary.

"There is, is there? In that case I consent to listen," he said in a magnanimous voice.

"What will you take to give Poppy up?" said Mr. Bracket, coming to the point with a most unbusinesslike directness.

Antony hesitated. In the face of this sudden and unexpected question he was at a loss. He had never considered it, for he had never supposed that Mr. Bracket had sufficient intelligence to put the matter on such a sensible basis. On the instant he recovered himself and said with an airy firmness: "The usual five per cent commission on the Briggs millions."

With an air of relief at the passing of the immediate danger, Mr. Bracket let sink the

protecting arm. Then he said with less excitement but a trifle impatiently: "Now do talk sense. That would be a hundred and fifty thousand pounds!"

"And very nice too," said Antony calmly.

He appeared to be wholly unimpressed by the roundness of the sum.

Mr. Bracket gazed at him in rather hopeless exasperation. He felt that there was no doing anything with a man who could speak with this calmness of a hundred and fifty thousand pounds. Then he said: "And you'd have to wait till I got the millions. It might be years and years."

This was not true. He could quite easily have paid Antony a hundred and fifty thousand pounds in cash and gilt-edged securities the very next morning.

This did not occur to Antony; and he said carelessly: "Not so many years. Our bonny lobster is digging his grave with his teeth and his swallow as hard as he can dig, morning, noon, and night."

"I'm not saying he's not," said Mr. Bracket in a non-committal tone. Then he added impressively: "But the thing is that however quick he is about it he'll have plenty of time to marry somebody. And there's heaps and heaps of women who'd

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simply jump at the chance. That's the danger. And don't think I'm speaking lightly. You mark my words—he will. Why, only this evening he asked Featherstone, that pretty maid of Poppy's, to marry him!"

"The devil he did! I'll wring his neck!" cried Antony with a sudden violence that made Mr. Bracket jump.

"You can't wring a man's neck for proposing to a young woman, no matter how anxious you are that he should keep single," said Mr. Bracket, mistaking the cause of Antony's outburst. "This is a free country."

"I'll show the old red sweep whether it's a free country or not! The infernal impudence of it!" cried Antony furiously.

Mr. Bracket gazed at him with a dark suspicion: "Have you been carrying on with that young woman too?" he said in a reproachful tone.

Antony said nothing. But his eyes sparkled; and he resumed his sinister air and his light manner of approach to Mr. Bracket.

"No, no; I didn't mean it really! It was only an idea!" cried Mr. Bracket hastily, backing away.

"One of these days you'll learn to keep this brilliance to yourself," said Antony coldly.

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“Yes, yes,” said Mr. Bracket. “But you see what it means. He’s backing out of it now ; and it looks as if it was going to cost him a pretty penny to get out of it. But another time he’ll go and do it in cold blood and not try to back out of it. Take my word for it, he will. Poppy isn’t nearly the catch you think she is.”

Antony was scowling darkly over the impudence of Mr. Briggs and said nothing.

“Not nearly the catch,” said Mr. Bracket in a deeply impressive tone, and he rubbed his hands together.

Antony, wearing again that sinister air, turned on him and said fiercely : “I told you that I was marrying her to make her really happy. Do you suspect me of mercenary motives ? ”

Mr. Bracket in his bewilderment opened his mouth and stared at him. Then he said in a tone that carried no conviction : “No. no ; of course not,” and he ceased to rub his hands together.

“You’d better not,” said Antony very grimly, for Mr. Briggs’s impudence had ruffled his temper badly. “It isn’t the kind of thing I should dream of allowing you to suspect. Poppy is a very nice girl ; and I should not only make her really happy but

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also a good deal nicer. Bootle has smothered her finer instincts."

Mr. Bracket eyed him in a fresh exasperation. He asked himself what could you do with a man who talked like that.

"Yes," said Antony in a quietly complacent tone. "A man of my simple tastes would be quite comfortable with Poppy, fifty thousand, and a really fine intensive garden."

"But you can't reckon on any fifty thousand—you can't really," protested Mr. Bracket earnestly. "Briggs doesn't like you——"

"He doesn't really know me," interjected Antony.

"—and he has a nasty temper—an uncommonly nasty temper," Mr. Bracket went on without heeding him.

"I have a nasty temper myself," said Antony with modest pride.

"I know you have," said Mr. Bracket with a readiness which caused Antony to take another step towards him with that sinister air. "But it isn't as nasty as his. If she married you he's more than likely to stop her allowance and cut her out of his will—he is reelly."

"Is he? I have a pleasing wallop," said Antony, stroking his adamantine fist with the other hand. "And I haven't the slightest

intention of letting anyone come between Poppy and her proper inheritance.”

“Oh come, you can't hit a man so much older and smaller than yourself,” said Mr. Bracket.

“No. But I see nothing in the world to prevent my spanking him, with or without a slipper, for his own good,” said Antony.

“That kind of thing is bound to be misunderstood,” protested Mr. Bracket.

“Not by Mr. Briggs,” said Antony with conviction.

“But anyhow, supposing you did stop him from making a fool of himself, and you'd find it a good deal harder than you think—you wouldn't get the money till they'd planted him in that granite mausoleum he is building at Bootle; and teeth or no teeth, he's good for another ten years,” said Mr. Bracket with the most earnest conviction. He paused, and in an even more impressive tone added: “What you want is a sum down.”

Antony looked at him with an air of enquiry and said in the tone of a man quite ready to listen to reason: “Do I?”

“You do,” said Mr. Bracket firmly. “And I'm the man to plank it down. I want Poppy and I'm ready to pay for her—handsomely—I'm talking business.”

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He assumed a rather imposing air and an expression of sterling honesty.

“ Handsomely,” said Antony thoughtfully ; and he considered Mr. Bracket’s sterlingly honest face with a greater interest than he had hitherto accorded to it during their interview. The scrutiny appeared to satisfy him, for he said : “ Well, in business you’re the expert ; and I feel that I ought to be guided by you.”

“ You ought—there’s no doubt about it,” said Mr. Bracket in hearty agreement.

“ But this isn’t exactly business,” said Antony slowly and even more thoughtfully. “ It’s one thing to burn to make a really rich girl really happy and quite another to be paid to refrain from the noble enterprise.”

Mr. Bracket gnashed his teeth gently : “ Now for goodness’ sake, don’t go letting sentiment interfere with business ! ” he said almost querulously.

“ It’s my generous nature,” said Antony with a somewhat mournful loftiness. “ With me it’s always sentiment first and business afterwards.”

Mr. Bracket appeared to swallow something with an effort. The Bootle tradition was raging in his heart ; and his eyes became fully expressive of the exquisite pleasure

he would derive from then and there felling Antony to the earth with a sickening thud.

But with admirable self-control he restrained himself ; and a happy thought came to him. He said plaintively : “ Well, if it comes to sentiment, what about me ? You’d like to do the friendly thing by me.”

Antony looked at him thoughtfully and earnestly ; then he said with frank conviction : “ I shouldn’t.”

“ Oh, come ! ” said Mr. Bracket in a hurt voice.

“ No : I certainly shouldn’t,” said Antony with even more profound conviction. “ After that sneaking trick you played me our relations *must* be confined to strictly business relations.”

Mr. Bracket drew a deep breath, braced himself to the effort, and said : “ Then I’ll make you a strictly business offer. I’ll give you ten thousand pounds to drop Poppy.”

Antony looked at him with a slightly horrified air and said in a pained voice : “ What a dreadful way you have of putting it. ‘ Drop Poppy ’—‘ Drop Poppy ! ’ ”

“ I’m a plain business man—as you’re always telling me ; and that’s my offer—ten thousand pounds down on the nail,” said Mr. Bracket.

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“My goodness! You must be in love with her!” said Antony in a hushed voice as the magnitude of Mr. Bracket’s devotion dawned on him.

“I am. Besides, I consider her worth it as a speculation,” said Mr. Bracket simply. Then he added hastily: “To me! To me! Not to anybody else. I know how to handle her father. I’m a Bootle man myself.”

Antony walked across the verandah and back again in frowning consideration; then his face cleared and he said frankly: “Well, it’s an attractive offer; and I have to consider Uncle Egbert’s five hundred and fifty quid. It’s a very serious consideration, for the old chap finds it rather wearing.” His tone grew rather mournful. “He told me he did. And after all, he’s the only great-uncle I’ve got.”

He looked at Mr. Bracket with rather appealing eyes as if inviting his support.

“Of course he is and of course you’ve got to consider him. It’s your duty—a—a—sacred duty. There’s no getting away from it,” said Mr. Bracket, supporting him readily and warmly.

“You think so?” said Antony.

“I’m sure of it!” said Mr. Bracket.

“Is it a go?”

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Antony drew himself up with an air of lofty dignity and said : “ If you had remained my friend it would have been impossible for me to have taken your money, though I might have borrowed it. But since by your own act, an act of incredible treachery, you have made yourself merely my business adviser, it’s a go.”

“ Right ! ” cried Mr. Bracket, grabbing hastily at his breast pocket. “ It’s the most sensible thing you ever did ! ” He pulled out his note-case and took a cheque from it. “ Here’s my cheque—for ten thousand, less the hundred and sixty you owe me.”

He was breathing quickly and his small eyes were shining brightly in his eagerness to get the matter settled ; and he handed the cheque to Antony with trembling fingers.

Antony took it and examined it with almost minute care. “ Thanks,” he said with the calmness of a man who receives a cheque for ten thousand pounds every other day. “ Nine thousand eight hundred and forty pounds.” He folded the cheque and put it in his note-case. “ After all—it’s a sad admission to make—Poppy will be happier with you than she would have been with me.” He paused, and added with an air of cold resolution : “ If she isn’t, I’ll wring your neck.”

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“I’ll see to that,” said Mr. Bracket with joyous confidence.

He was all aquiver with relief and joy at having brought the difficult negotiations to a successful end.

“You’d better,” said Antony in a tone of cold menace. Then he took out his watch and, looking at it, added: “And I may as well tell you——”

A sudden sharp, shrill howl behind him brought him sharply round to perceive that Mr. Briggs had returned from his bright comforters to the verandah and was dancing at the top of the steps.

“’Ambleton!’ he howled. “’Ambleton!’

CHAPTER XXX

MR. BRIGGS AGAIN INTERVENES

WHEN Antony's eyes fell on the dancing employer whose service he was on the point of leaving, his first sensation was one of extreme gratification that Mr. Bracket's cheque already reposed, neatly folded, in his note-case.

Then, smiling his sunniest smile, he advanced upon that employer with outstretched hand, saying: "Why, it's Mr. Briggs! How are you?"

"I knoo it! I knoo it!" said Mr. Briggs, eluding the warm hand-clasp. He turned on Mr. Bracket and added: "But wot I never did expect to see was you colloguing with 'im as thick as two thieves—be'ind my back—surrepshously! It's colloosion. That's wot it is—colloosion!"

"Nothing but a short and satisfactory business interview, I assure you," said Antony in a candid, soothing voice.

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“ Business? Fine business!” snarled Mr. Briggs. “ A likely thing that an impeconious young blighter like you ud ’ave business with a respecterble millionaire like Albert! Plottin’—plottin’ agin my best interests. That’s wot you’re up to. Albert, I’m ashymed of yer, I am. Wot you expect to git out of it beats me. Yer must be gittin’ balmy on the crumpet, yer must.”

He ended on a note of sorrowful reproach that would have moved a heart of flint.

Mr. Bracket’s heart appeared to be composed of a less movable material, for he only said in the voice of a man at the end of his patience: “ Shut it, you old fool! And clear out!”

“ Shut it? And clear out? Orf me own verandy?” said, or rather gasped, Mr. Briggs.

“ Yes. And be quick about it!” said Mr. Bracket.

“ Blimy!” said Mr. Briggs softly; and forthwith, assuming the sinister air so recently worn by Antony, and holding his small, but clenched, fists slightly in advance of his body, he advanced lightly on Mr. Bracket.

Antony stepped briskly aside to give them room, and assumed the impartial air of the complete second. Mr. Bracket, though he

had never received instructions from Poppy concerning the advantage of clouting her sire, seemed to know quite as good a way of handling him. He suddenly became terrible. Empurpled himself, he rushed at his crimson fellow-citizen, seized him by the shoulder, thrust forward his own face so that he nearly rubbed noses, after the manner of the Esquimaux, with his future father-in-law, shook him, and shouted :

“ Shut it, I tell you, you old fool ! I don't want you meddling at all ! Do you hear ? ” There was really no chance of Mr. Briggs not hearing, considering the volume of sound which poured from Mr. Bracket's lips and their nearness to Mr. Briggs's left ear. “ I've got everything straightened out at last and I don't want you muddling it up. D'you hear what I say ? ”

Mr. Briggs had quite lost that sinister air ; in truth, he looked very like a timorous red rabbit. He said in a tone almost unexampled for its meekness : “ I 'ear you, Albert. I 'ear you distinctly.”

“ Then clear *out* ! ” shouted Mr. Bracket.

On his words Anderson came through the door with a brisk and business-like air. It seemed more than likely that Anderson had never been very far from the door. At any

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rate, he was evidently wholly *au fait* with the situation.

“ Shall I take him away, sir ? ” he said to Mr. Bracket in a most obliging tone.

“ Take him away and keep him away,” said Mr. Bracket in the tone of a man who knew his own mind.

Anderson slipped his arm through that of Mr. Briggs and said in soothing tones : “ Come with me, sir. Now that you’re calmer we can settle up that little matter of business we were discussing.”

Mr. Briggs was calmer. Mr. Bracket’s violence had done its work. He went like a lamb in which there is left no single gambol.

As their steps died away down the passage Antony again took out his watch and said : “ As I was saying when your father-in-law-that-is-to-be spoke to me, you were only just in time with your offer. Poppy, or as I suppose I ought now to say, Miss Briggs, had arranged to elope with me at nine-thirty. It is now nine-twenty-eight.”

“ Goodness ! It was a narrow shave ! ” said Mr. Bracket in a hushed voice.

There was a pause ; then Antony said in a compassionate voice : “ Poor girl ! She’ll be awfully disappointed to find you waiting for her instead of me.”

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“ I’m not so sure of that,” said Mr. Bracket rather coldly. “ But she isn’t going to find me waiting for her instead of you. You’ve got to stop and explain to her how things are. That’s only fair, for she’ll take it so much more definitely coming from you than if I tell her.”

“ Will she? But it seems to me that it will be a rather awkward situation,” said Antony in the tone and with the air of one who did not relish the job.

“ Not with your gift of the gab,” said Mr. Bracket confidently.

“ I wish to goodness you wouldn’t call my golden eloquence the gift of the gab ! ” said Antony with pardonable irritation.

“ That’s what they call it in Bootle,” said Mr. Bracket in an apologetic tone. “ But I’ll clear out and leave you a fair field and no favour.”

He made hastily for the steps down to the terrace.

“ Half a minute ! ” said Antony.

Mr. Bracket stopped short.

“ You have acted as if you were a man and not a slice of cold boiled cod, for once,” said Antony slowly. “ Now I’m going to start a real intensive garden, a big one, with this capital. If it turns out a winner, I’ll

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pay you back—by instalments. If it doesn't—well, you'll have to deduct it from Poppy's millions."

"Now I call that a really gentlemanly suggestion!" said Mr. Bracket in a tone of warm appreciation; and then he added with genuine fervour: "I *do* wish you luck with that garden!"

He went hastily down the steps, as if he feared that Antony might yet call him back and refuse to break the good news to Poppy himself.

CHAPTER XXXI

REASONING WITH PANSY

ANTONY watched his retiring protégé's back with a pleased smile. He did not regret his acquaintance with Mr. Bracket. Then with frowning thoughtfulness he addressed himself to the consideration of the task before him. He had a natural desire to come out of an awkward situation with flying colours. He always had. He could only do that by making it extremely easy for Poppy. He walked up and down. His mind worked quickly, rejecting ideas.

The clock over the stables struck the half-hour; and Pansy in the dust-coat and blue toque, heavily veiled, and carrying a small suit-case, came through the door.

Antony had taken up his position on the edge of the verandah. He took three steps towards her with his arms out as if to clasp her, stopped short with a convulsive jerk, and rocked on his feet.

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“Poppy, it cannot be. I have made a most distressing discovery,” he said in a deep, mournful voice, a voice shaken by conflicting emotions.

He paused ; but Pansy said nothing.

“I have discovered that another—a good fellow—loves you, and has loved you for years,” he went on, and then paused for her to make the enquiry, natural whether she knew or did not know, who that good fellow was.

But Pansy said nothing. She merely looked at him.

“If it had been anyone else it would not have mattered,” he went on. “I fear I am too selfish to have given you up to a stranger, however worthy he might be. But Bracket—Albert—is my friend.” He cleared his throat with a pathetic cough. “What’s more, he is one of my comrades of the Great War—at that infernal training camp—and a devil of a job it was to lick him into shape.” Here his voice rang entirely sincere. “But he was worth it. He has a heart of gold ; and it will take years to pay him what I owe him. I cannot rob him of the desire of his heart and blight his life.”

He waited for a word of appreciation of his nobility. But Pansy said nothing.

“Damn it! Is she dumb?” he said to himself with some irritation.

It did not appear in his voice as he went on: “So there is nothing for it but to give you up. It will be a wrench”—his voice broke a little, beautifully—“a dreadful wrench.”

He waited for a word of sympathy, an assurance that she shared his misery. But Pansy said nothing.

He choked a little, admirably, and went on: “But I comfort myself—no—I try to comfort myself—with the thought that you will be happier with him—in Bootle—than ever you could be with me.”

He covered his face with his hands and shook with a strong man’s emotion.

“Well, you really are the limit, Tony!” said Pansy in a tone of reluctant admiration; and she raised her veil.

Antony dropped his hands and opened his mouth.

“Pansy, begad!” he said in a tone of stupefaction.

Then his eyes shone, and coming towards her he cried: “Oh, joy! Oh, rapture!”

Pansy backed hastily away from him.

“And if you’re not tiresome!” she said in a bitterly aggrieved tone. “Poppy has just given me a lovely old French pearl neck-

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lace to run away with you instead of her ; and you coolly tell me it's all off."

"No, not coolly—you can't say I told you coolly," protested Antony, hurt by the slur on his emotional efforts.

"It doesn't matter how you told me. It is off. And I shall have to give the necklace back," she said.

"But it isn't off—not by a long chalk. It's more on than ever. I've got ten thousand pounds," said Antony joyously.

"Ten thousand pounds! How on earth did you get it?" she cried in amazement.

"That noble fellow Bracket, of course," said Antony.

"But how did you get it from him? How did you get a hold on him? What has he been doing?" she said, displaying a painful doubt of Mr. Bracket's nobility.

"Are you suggesting that I blackmailed him?" said Antony with a lofty indignation.

"Well, I know how you feel about these shirkers," said Pansy in a slightly apologetic tone. "I know you'd strip the very clothes off their back if you got the chance. You told me so—more than once."

"Well, I didn't blackmail him. He came to me, entirely of his own free will, with a business proposition. He—he—er—he needed

my help in a speculative investment ; and he has paid me for it," said Antony.

" Oh, I see ! " she cried in a tone of sudden, rather angry enlightenment. " He paid you ten thousand pounds to give up Poppy ! "

" Certainly not ! " said Antony hastily. " I regard the ten thousand purely as a loan—to start an intensive garden with. Let's be getting along to it."

" That was it," said Pansy positively. " And she gave me that pearl necklace to save her from you. It's rather funny," she added in a despicable tone.

" I suppose she could change her mind if she wanted to," said Antony in a tone of utter indifference. " I don't expect all the world to be as constant as I am."

" She certainly did change it," said Pansy in a rather taunting tone.

" I expect it was her unhealthy passion for Bootle—Bootle and Bracket. But I'm sure I don't care," said Antony, with the same pleasing indifference. " Let's be getting along to that garden."

" But now that you've arranged it with Mr. Bracket, there's no need whatever for me to run away with you," said Pansy in a tone of exaggerated relief.

" No need ? " cried Antony in a tone of

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lively astonishment. "What about the pearl necklace? Why, I'll bet that you'll look more ravishing than ever in an old French pearl necklace!"

"I'm going to give it back to Poppy," said Pansy.

"I'm hanged if you are! A bargain's a bargain; and I insist on your keeping it—unless it doesn't suit you," said Antony with some heat.

"What have you got to do with it?" said Pansy coldly.

"Everything, of course!" cried Antony with a generous breadth of view. "I've got ten thousand pounds, haven't I? But let's be off. We don't want to hurry to the station on a warm night like this."

"Oh, you didn't want to hurry to the station on a warm night like this with Poppy, didn't you?" she said slowly, in a dangerous tone.

"Of course I didn't," he said quickly. "But I expected her to be a quarter of an hour late. Give me that bag."

"You don't really think I'm going to run away with you?" she said with a gentle, chilling, contemptuous laugh.

"I'm sure of it—even if I have to carry you every inch of the way," said Antony quietly, but in a tone of intense determination;

and in two long, quick strides he placed himself between her and the door.

She turned and faced him with eyes that flashed hate, and cried: "The moment you've finished making love to that girl? I'm not!"

"Oh, that. I never did make love to her—not what I call making love," he protested.

"You did!" she cried. "You know you did! You—you kissed her! This very afternoon!"

"Oh, a gentle peck or two. That was nothing," he said with honest carelessness.

"Nothing?" she cried fiercely. "Then you did! I knew you would! You—you hateful pig!"

Her eyes blazed at him. His admission and the image it called up were the last exasperation. She dropped her suit-case, sprang forward, caught him by the shoulders, and tried to shake him.

Antony clinched.

"You fat-headed little idiot!" he cried frankly and fiercely as he jerked her off her feet in a crushing hug. "You don't really suppose I could really make love to any girl but you? You know I couldn't! Not like this!" He kissed her fiercely. "Or this!" He kissed her again. "You're the dearest, stupidest, most obstinate little devil in the

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world!" he said more gently, and kissed her again. "I've loved you for a thousand years!" He kissed her again. "And now I've got you I'm never going to let you go!" He kissed her again and again and again.

She lay still and heavy in his arms, the tears trickling from her eyes.

"You bear!" she murmured. "I believe you've broken my ribs." And she laid her head against his cheek like a tired child.

"I haven't," he said, kissing her again; then added a trifle savagely: "But if ever I have to, I certainly will."

He kissed her again and set her gently on her feet, with his right arm, a girdle of throbbing iron, round her waist—she needed its support—picked up her suit-case and started with her towards the verandah steps, saying: "We mustn't miss the train. I've got a special licence in my pocket, and with any luck we'll be married in an hour and a quarter."

"How you do carry one off one's feet!" she said.

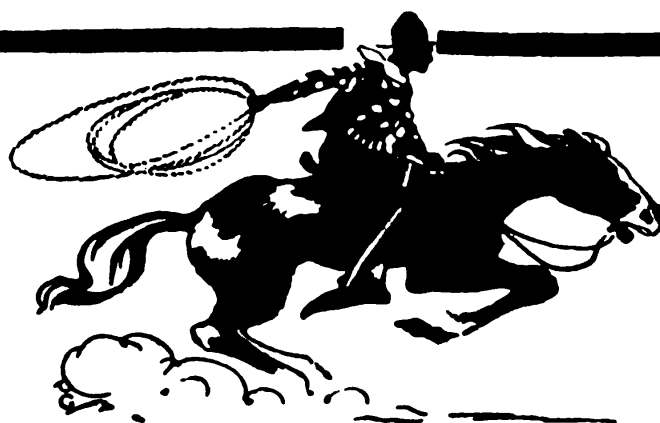
"Well, you're as light as a feather, you know," he said, half lifting her from the ground.

"I believe my heart is, Tony," she said with a little sob.

THE END



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