

THIS is the story of Mrs. Peter Skeffington. She was a little fair-haired thing, with a pair of the most pathetic-looking blue eyes which deluded men into thinking she was helpless. Also into desiring strongly to kiss her. As far as I know, Mrs. Peter Skeffington did not kiss men.

The scene of this story is South Africa. The exact locality in which it took place is neither here nor there and is immaterial. Because South Africa is a crude country—though an almighty pleasant one—whether you regard her from the top of the Corner House at Johannesburg or from the stoep of a backveld farm. And the last thing little Mrs. Peter liked was crudeness.

She had another peculiarity—she adored her husband. Now, far be it from me to say anything against Peter Skeffington. In his way he was a very good fellow: in his correct setting he might have done admirably. But South Africa was not that setting.

She is a crude country, but she is also a strong country, and she demands of those who seek to live on her that they fight and fight and

go on fighting. Skeffington gave up before the first "i" in the first fight was dotted. In fact the only thing that happened before he gave up fighting was that South Africa discovered his weakness. She always does discover a man's weakness sooner or later: she found Peter Skeffington's before he'd used his first ten-shilling book of chits at the Rand Club, of which he'd been made an honorary member for the duration of his stay in Johannesburg. Of that, however, more a little later.

What exactly brought the Peter Skeffingtons to the country is one of those little conundrums which no logic or argument can solve. At Surbiton—let us say—they could have lived and moved and had their being without any harm to Surbiton or themselves. In South Africa something had to happen. As food Peter and his wife were thoroughly indigestible to the land of their choice, and that entails a pain somewhere.

Why it was the land of their choice is, as I have said, insoluble logically. Any man who knew the conditions of living would have told them that they were totally unsuited for those conditions. He would also have told them that out of the many land advertisements appearing so bravely in the columns of leading London newspapers, ninety per cent. are cold-blooded, dastardly swindles. Some day, incidentally, if I sit next the editor of one of these

papers at dinner I must ask him why he allows these advertisements but prohibits moneylenders. You do get something out of a moneylender, anyway: it would save trouble to drop your money in the sea in the case of the others.

To return, however, to the Peter Skeffingtons. Why they came matters not—they came. By a great stroke of fortune they missed the ninety per cent. already alluded to, and stumbled into one of the seven per cent. class which are fair to good without being very good. The three per cent. of very good are shy, retiring birds: they can afford to be.

They found themselves, did the Peter Skeffingtons, in a proposition which *in time*, when God and the Government decreed (principally the Government, in this case: it was the usual question of irrigation), would turn out thundering well and give them a very ample and pleasant return for their money. In the meantime there was nothing to do but to sit down and wait. Which is a dangerous proceeding for some people in South Africa: especially for people with the weakness of Peter Skeffington.

To those who know, the fact that Peter's weakness was made manifest at the Rand Club is all that is necessary. There are others, however, who are not so well informed.

Of all the magnificent buildings in that marvellous mushroom city Johannesburg, the

Rand Club is one of the most symbolical. In it you may obtain the comforts, cellar and table of the most exclusive London club: in it you may see—the world. Every sort and condition of man who has been, is, or will be anything in South Africa at some time or another has stood at the great three-sided bar. There was one man whose boast it was that he hadn't, and he died of drinking poisoned water.

You will see a man there who yesterday made a hundred thousand on a rumour concerning asbestos: beside him is the man who lost a good part of it. You will see a cheerful, friendly soul surrounded by pals. The calling is on him, and why not? He only owes them half a million, and his present assets he would sell willingly for a hundred. Moreover, they know it. But in addition you will also see all the men who really count.

But one great rule is necessary for the Stranger within the Gates—learn to drink slowly. And since Peter Skeffington did not know this rule—though, seeing that his weakness was what it was, it wouldn't have much mattered if he had—South Africa had brutally probed the joint in his armour exactly one hour after he entered the bar of the Rand Club.

The trouble was threefold. First, he couldn't say No. Second, he had no head for drink. Third and worst of all, he thought he had. Which is just about as hopeless a combination

as can be gathered together in a man. But had they remained in England there is no doubt in my mind that the Peter Skeffingtons would have carried on quite happily and lived to a ripe old age. In the year 1960 he would have alluded to the days when he was young and boys were boys and whisky was whisky. Because, and this is the point, Peter Skeffington was not a drunkard. He was a weak young ass who periodically drank far too much when opportunity offered. But it was the opportunity that was required—not the drink. You could have locked him up in a cellar of wine with safety for a week : you couldn't trust him in a third-rate bar for half an hour with a couple of pals. And if only someone who understood could have explained that simple fact to his wife this story would never have been written.

In the particular portion of South Africa where the Peter Skeffingtons had settled opportunities were as blackberries on an autumn hedge. The type of opportunities, too, were of exactly the sort to prove most dangerous. In the first place he had nothing to do ; in the second, most of the days in which he had to do it in were hot, dusty, arid and shadeless : in the third, there were exactly twenty-seven other men in a similar position to himself : in the fourth, there was a club placed centrally in the community where the twenty-eight met each evening for their sundowner and discussed

what particular brand of nothingness they had done during the day. And discussion is dry work, especially when it concerns that ever-prevalent subject—lack of water.

The net result was obvious. Peter Skeffington returned home in varying degrees of insobriety exactly six days of the week out of seven. That was due to the fact that the Club was shut on Sundays. I was one of the twenty-eight, so I know. We didn't notice it particularly at first because he never got offensively tight, but after a while its monotony made it obvious, and several of us refused to drink with him. But it didn't do any good: there was always someone who would. Particularly Jack Dernan. . . .

Dernan was the typical product of a young country. Tall, broad-shouldered, powerful as a horse, tanned mahogany, he was a fighter from the beginning of the chapter. And if there was one thing for which he had profound contempt it was weakness in any form. Now I don't think he realised for a moment what he was doing with Peter Skeffington. Certainly not at first. He regarded him with a kind of good-natured toleration, mingled with slight wonder. He was so completely the type of man that Dernan had no use for, that he was a source of amusement. Possessed of a head that no amount of liquor ever had the slightest effect on, it was with genuine feelings of amaze-

ment that he regarded the amount necessary to render Peter Skeffington drunk.

"No well conditioned fly could drown in it," he once remarked wonderingly. "The fellow's a damn freak."

But he didn't seem to be able to let him alone. Peter Skeffington's complete inability to absorb liquor seemed to fascinate him. He used to take mental notes of the amounts each night, and the condition arrived at. And after a time he and two or three others started private side bets on the result.

"Rather on the principle of the daily run on board ship," he explained. "Numbers from 6 to 12. 9 or 10 are good favourites, but the High Field hasn't an earthly. He'd be dead if he took more than a dozen, I should think."

"Go easy, Jack," said someone. "It can't go on like this."

"Great Scott!" cried Dernan, "I don't want to make the fellow tight. He rushes at it with his mouth open himself."

And so another of the tragedies—the square peg and round hole tragedies—began to gather form and shape: a tragedy which, as one traces it backwards, could have been so easily averted. If only someone could have explained things to Mrs. Peter—the real truth, instead of what she thought was the truth. If only someone could have said, "Take him away back to England, out of this country and never

let him return here save on a Cook's personally conducted tour," all would have been well. But no one did say it, and so she took him to Durban instead, to fight this insidious devil that had crept into her Peter's life—the devil of drunkenness.

She took him to Durban where they could get sea bathing, and golf and tennis, and I saw them off at the station. And there was a look in Mrs. Peter's pathetic blue eyes that I had never seen there before. It was not one of helplessness.

They stayed away three months, and the devil was conquered with surprising ease. But it was the wrong devil: the real one wasn't there to fight. There was lots to do in Durban: there was no small dusty club in Durban: and Peter, who was thoroughly ashamed of himself, behaved adorably to her in Durban. He made her all sorts of promises and vows about the future which he honestly intended to keep. And as proof of his assertions he pointed out to her the complete ease with which he had given up the stuff. Which would have meant a great deal more if they hadn't been chasing the wrong hare.

And so, the cure over, they returned triumphantly to begin all over again. For a fortnight the Club never saw him, though he drove past once or twice behind a new horse he had bought—an ugly-looking black brute with a vicious

eye that no one but a Peter Skeffington would have touched with the end of a barge pole.

And then one evening, like a bolt from the blue, came the tragedy. Peter Skeffington came into the Club, and found Jack Dernan and four or five others. That was at six. At six-thirty he was drunk, and our secretary was tearing his hair with irritation and anger.

"It's incredible," he fumed. "It's outrageous. It's indecent. Five—five drinks has that fellow had, and look at him. He's a menace to humanity. Why, damn it, a baby in arms would drink him under the table."

"But look here," I began angrily.

"Mea culpa, my boy," he answered, "I admit it. I said to the blighter when I saw him, 'Hullo, little stranger, have a drink?' I give you my word at the moment I'd completely forgotten all about the show. 'I will,' he answered, and then the matter passed completely out of my hands. I left him for about twenty minutes while I talked to Jackson about that mealie crop, and when I got back I found he had had four more with Jack Dernan and some others, and was tight."

He shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

"Man, you *can't* legislate for a bloke that gets tight on five whiskies and sodas."

"It's Mrs. Peter I'm thinking of," I said. "The poor little woman thinks she's saved Skeffington's soul from the curse of drink and

the first time he comes into the Club he goes and does it again."

A burst of laughter came from the bar, and I went in. There were about ten of them in there, and Peter Skeffington was holding forth very solemnly on the political situation in the Union. So I got Jack Dernan on one side and put things in front of him.

"Look here, Jack," I said, "it's not playing the game to make that silly ass tight again."

"Give you my word, old man," he answered, "no one was more surprised than I was. We were playing poker dice and we'd only had four rounds when blowed if I didn't notice he was up the pole. Somebody had got the sweepstake going, and I found I'd drawn Low Field. Well, seeing that the first number is 6, I reckoned the pool was mine."

He glanced at Skeffington who was swaying gravely by the bar.

"I really am deuced sorry, but what can you do with a fellow like that?"

"Well, for Heaven's sake, stop him drinking any more," I said. "We'll lay him out to cool for a bit, and then I'll drive him home."

But Peter Skeffington had no intention whatever of being laid out to cool. He had got into the condition when he was very much on his dignity. Really, by the way we were talking, if it wasn't so perfectly ridiculous, anyone who didn't know any better might imagine that we

thought he had had too much to drink. He was perfectly capable, thank you, of looking after himself, and he knew the time quite well and also that his horse and trap were waiting outside, a fact to which he trusted no one took any exception.

Jack Dernan shrugged his shoulders.

"Hopeless," he said to me. "He's worse than I've seen him. And if we go on he'll get offensive, and someone will hurt him."

It was half an hour later that Peter Skeffington descended the steps leading into the road. His eyes were slightly glazed; his speech was very precise; his legs moved stiffly. And suddenly—I know not why—an impulse came to me as I sat on the stoep watching him.

"I wish you'd let me drive you back, Skeffington. I'd rather like to feel the paces of that mare."

He regarded me solemnly.

"Another time, Tredgett, I shall be delighted," he said. "At the moment, however, the other seat is occupied with two large bags of chicken food."

"Well, for God's sake be careful with that brute to-night," said the secretary uneasily, as he saw her ears go back and the whites of her eyes show up.

"I am perfectly capable of handling her," replied Skeffington coldly, and even as he

spoke he lurched against the mare, who lashed out viciously.

"Dash it," cried the secretary, half rising to his feet. "Ought we to let him go? He's not in a condition to drive."

But Skeffington was already in his seat gathering up the reins with clumsy fingers.

"Go easy, man," cried someone, and for answer the fool slashed the animal across the quarters.

For the fraction of a second she stood stock still at the suddenness of it: then it happened. With a spring like a thing demented the mare shot forward; there was a jerk and a crash, and the next moment she had bolted down the road with the trap swaying and bounding behind her.

"God! She's away with him."

I turned to find Jack Derman beside me, and his face was white. We were all out in the road watching and no one else spoke. For the chicken food had been hurled out, and the reins were trailing low, and Peter Skeffington was half standing, half sitting in that crazy tearing buggy. Once we thought it was over, but it righted itself again somehow, and then came the end. One lurch into a rut, more crazy than the others, and Skeffington was flung out. And the next moment we were all of us rushing madly down the road towards him, for it seemed to us that he had hit a tree.

It was Jack Dernan who got there first, and when we got up he was standing by the thing that lay on the ground, and his hat was off. Peter Skeffington *had* hit a tree—with his head.

In the distance a cloud of dust was disappearing as the maddened mare, now completely out of control, galloped on; whilst here at our feet was sudden, stark tragedy.

"No good doing that," said Dernan gruffly, as somebody put his hand on Peter Skeffington's heart. "Look at his head."

I did—and shuddered. His hands had hardly broken the impact at all. So we got the body back to the Club, and there we held a council of war. And by common consent I was deputed to break the news to Mrs. Peter.

"Of course," said the secretary, "you'll not mention the fact that he was drunk."

"Of course not," I answered as I went out to start my Ford.

But I wondered as I drove there whether she wouldn't guess.

I found her waiting for me wild-eyed with fear. The mare had come back twenty minutes previously.

"What's happened?" she gasped. "What's happened to Peter?"

"Mrs. Peter," I said miserably, "you must prepare for a shock."

"He's dead," she said quietly, and I nodded.

"How did it happen?" she said after a while. "Don't be afraid," she added as I glanced at her. "I shan't break down—yet. I want to hear—everything."

So I told her, and when I'd finished she only asked one question.

"Was Mr. Dernan in the club?"

I stared at her in surprise: it was so completely unexpected.

"Why, yes," I said. "Jack Dernan was there."

And into her eyes there came a look to which I had no clue. It seemed to show a sort of savage determination, but to what end or on what account I could not guess.

She seemed strangely docile during the next few days. For instance, I had anticipated that she would insist on seeing her husband's body, and there were reasons why she shouldn't. The poor devil had hit that tree hard. However, when I explained things to her she made no trouble, but seemed to understand perfectly. And another thing that surprised us all was the way she bore up. Even at the grave-side she retained her perfect composure, and I heard Mrs. Drage whisper to a woman standing next her, "She's like a woman in a dream: she'll wake up soon."

But she didn't: that was the amazing part of it. What happened during the long nights when she was alone only she and God knew:

certain it was that during the days that followed her husband's death I never saw a trace of grief on Mrs. Peter's face. And I was up there off and on a good deal; she seemed to like having me about the place. Only that strange look—that look of set purpose—was stamped on her features, and it seemed to grow more quietly determined as time went by. She wasn't going to get rid of her farm, at any rate not yet; and I used to give her advice about it.

And then, about two months after Peter's death, business called me up to Rhodesia. I should be away for six months, and I went up the afternoon before I left to say good-bye. She gave me tea, and afterwards I sat on talking about the farm and various things, though I could see she was paying no attention.

And then suddenly she shot the question at me out of the blue; at least it wasn't a question so much as a statement.

"Of course, Peter was drunk that night." She looked at me with a faint smile. "There's no good denying it, Joe: your face has already given you away. Besides—I knew."

"He undoubtedly," I began feebly, "had had something to drink."

She stopped me with a weary little gesture.

"Oh! call it that if you like," she said.

"I prefer not to mince words. He was drunk,

and you know it. You remember I took him to Durban, don't you?"

"Of course I remember," I answered.

"And you know why I took him," she went on. "He was drinking too much, at that—that damnable club. Every night, Joe; practically every night. I cured him at Durban: never once the whole time he was there did my Peter get into that foul condition. He was cured when he got back here."

I said nothing: I didn't see that there was anything to say. Of what use to tell her that he wasn't cured at all because there was nothing to cure. Such refinements were beyond her: to her a man who got drunk was a drunkard.

"He talked to me while he was in Durban," she went on quietly, "when he was fighting against the craving."

"He told you he had a craving for it?" I asked curiously.

"But of course he must have had a craving for it," she said, staring at me as if I was a fool. "Why else should he have drunk? But he fought against it, and I helped him—and my Peter won. He was fine about it—fine."

"Quite," I agreed. "It was fine."

Once again there didn't seem anything else to say. I suppose it is finer to fight and conquer a terrible craving than to admit that one is so atrociously weak that you can't say No even when you don't want the stuff.

"Yes, he talked a lot to me during those months," went on Mrs. Peter quietly. "Particularly about Mr. Dernan."

"The devil he did!" I said, sitting up. "What had he got to say about him?"

She had turned away and I couldn't see her face.

"A great deal about his character," she answered almost carelessly. And then suddenly she swung round, and I gasped at the look in her eyes. "To my mind," she said tensely, "there is no hell deep enough, no punishment sufficiently vile for a man of that type."

"But, good God!" I stammered feebly. "I assure you, Mrs. Peter, that Jack Dernan isn't at all a bad fellow."

And the look she gave me flattened me out.

"To get hold of a man who has been fighting to conquer a craving, and who has succeeded, and tempt him and tempt him and tempt him until he falls again is your idea of a good fellow, is it? It isn't mine."

My mind went back to the night of the tragedy, and I realised the futility of any argument. To Mrs. Peter, her husband was a man who had fought and won, only to yield at last to the devilish temptation cast in his way by Jack Dernan. And was any good to be obtained by telling her the truth: telling her that, as a matter of fact, the first drink he had had that night had not been with

Dernan at all? Telling her, moreover, that it would have made no odds if no such person existed in the world as Jack Dernan: that Peter Skeffington had been of the clay which, in certain conditions, was unsavable?

So I let it go, and even now, looking back with the light of what was to come behind me, I should do the same thing again under similar circumstances. For who could possibly have told that a woman of the type of Mrs. Peter could ever have done the thing she did?

I got back from Rhodesia eight months later, and one of the first men I ran into was Jack Dernan. He was in the club as I came in, and I stopped short and stared at him in amazement.

"Good Lord, old man!" I cried. "What's the matter with you? Malaria?"

He looked ghastly: grey, with lack-lustre eyes and a loose mouth. He stared at me vacantly for a while, then he spoke.

"Go to hell," he snarled, and shambled out of the club.

"What do you think of him?" came the secretary's voice from behind me.

"What on earth is the matter with him?" I said as I swung round to greet him. "The man looks dreadful."

"Come and have a drink, Tredgett," he answered gravely. "I want to talk to you."

I followed him into the bar and we sat down in a corner. Luckily we had it to ourselves.

"You know, I suppose, that he's never out of Mrs. Skeffington's pocket?"

"What!" I almost shouted, my drink half-way to my lips.

"Never out of her pocket," he repeated quietly. "I'm pretty lax myself, as you know: anybody can do anything with reason, as far as I'm concerned: but this has been a bit over the odds. None of the women here will have anything to do with her, but she doesn't seem to care. She's infatuated with the fellow, and he with her. But she's thrown the most rudimentary social laws to the winds. There's no reason presumably why they shouldn't get married: I've never heard of Dernan being entangled in any way. Instead of that, he's up at her bungalow—alone with her until all hours of the night. And I'm really not surprised that everyone has put the worst construction on it."

And in my mind was ringing a certain sentence:

"To my mind there is no hell deep enough, no punishment sufficiently vile for a man of that type."

"But it's the change in the man himself that is so amazing," went on the secretary. "You remember what he was like; you saw him a few moments ago. And he's worse

than that sometimes. His temper has become unbearable—positively unbearable. In fact, at times he's positively dangerous."

But I was hardly listening: into my mind had come a sudden ghastly suspicion.

"Has he seen a doctor?" I asked, striving to make my voice sound natural.

The secretary smiled grimly.

"Tim Murphy suggested that very thing to him," he said. "But he only did so once. Dernan flew into the most ungovernable rage, and went for him. Here in this actual bar. We had the devil of a job pulling him off, and Murphy was nearly throttled before we did. I tell you, Tredgett—the man's dangerous."

"And has no one any idea what is the matter?" I said.

The secretary shrugged his shoulders.

"He's knocking off drink considerably," he answered. "Why—I don't know. Possibly the lady has a lot to do with it. And whether it's finding him out—rawing up his nerves or something of that sort—I don't know. Anyhow, you've seen him for yourself, and can form as good an opinion as I can."

I escaped as soon as I could and went back to my bungalow. Suspicion was hammering at my brain, and I wanted to think. Could it be possible that Mrs. Peter was poisoning him? That was the ghastly thought that would not be shaken off. Of what use to tell myself that

the idea was incredible : that such things don't happen outside the covers of sensational fiction ? Such things *do* happen, and, though Mrs. Peter was the last woman in the world one would have deemed capable of such a thing, I couldn't forget the look on her face the last time I had seen her. And if my suspicion was right, what was going to be the upshot ? Sooner or later a man in Jack Dernan's condition of health would have to see a doctor, and—what then ?

I tried to concentrate on arrears of work, but the figures danced before my eyes. The short dusk had gone, and outside the African night had come down, bringing no relief from the heat of the day. But I felt I could stand it no longer : I must find out for myself. Nothing would be more natural, I reflected, than that I should go and see Mrs. Peter on my return after such a long absence. And if Dernan was there I might be able to come to some conclusion.

I pulled out the Ford and started off. And it was only as I approached Mrs. Peter's bungalow that I suddenly decided to leave the car in the road and walk up the last few hundred yards. My feet made no sound on the earth track, and I was within twenty yards of the house when I saw a sight which stopped me dead in my tracks.

The light was shining out from the drawing-room windows, and I could see every detail of the room through the mosquito netting. Jack

Dernan was there sitting on the sofa, and his arms were round Mrs. Peter. His face seemed more ghastly than ever, though she was looking up into it lovingly. And suddenly he bent and kissed her.

“Isn't it time yet, my dearest?”

His voice, harsh and discordant, came to me through the still night.

She reached for a little box at her side, and drew out something that gleamed. And in my excitement I crept closer. He was holding out his arm with the sleeve rolled up, and I saw her taking the shining thing in one hand whilst with the other she caught a little roll of his skin. And then I knew: knew that what I'd suspected was true. She was giving him an injection from a hypodermic syringe.

For perhaps five minutes after she had done it he lay still, and you could almost watch his face change. The grey tinge disappeared; the shifty mouth grew firm; the eyes became clear. It was the old Jack Dernan who rose to his feet—more, it was a super Jack Dernan. He stood there—a magnificent figure of a man, with a look on his face of absolute triumph.

“My darling,” he cried, “how long are you going to keep me waiting?”

His arms were stretched out to her; even I could feel the commanding presence of the man.

And Mrs. Peter lay in the corner of the sofa and laughed.

"You fool," she answered very clearly.
"You damned fool!"

His arms dropped to his side and he stared at her.

"Only that I've been playing a game with you, Mr. Jack Dernan—and I've won." She rose and crossed to the other side of the room so that the table was between them. "A game—you beast, you cur, and you never knew. You thought I was in love with you, when I hate you, loathe you, execrate you. If it hadn't been for you, my Peter would have been alive to-night, you—you murderer. Listen, Jack Dernan—listen now, while the dope is in you, and your brain is working clearly. I've led you on from the very beginning, even though the touch of your hands nauseated me, and there were times when I didn't think I could go through with it. It doesn't matter how I got hold of the stuff; it was during that time I went up to Johannesburg. I went up there to get it, and I got it. That's all that counts. Then I came back here, and I made you fall in love with me. And after that I tempted you—even as you tempted Peter. Do you remember that first night, Jack Dernan. It was a bit of a job, but I did it. You were frightened at first—frightened of drugs. Even as my Peter was frightened of drink. Then you saw me use the syringe on my own arm, and that persuaded you. But there was just plain

water in mine, you fool, whereas yours had the drug in it. And so it has been all the time : I've been injecting myself with water, and you with the drug. And I've acted—God ! how I've acted. You've seen me, as you thought, run down, panting for it. Acting, you devil, acting."

She paused, and the man still stared at her speechless.

"It's over now. Joe Trédgett has come back from Rhodesia and he would suspect. To-night is the last night I shall ever see you ; to-night finished my stock. But when the craving is on you, Jack Dernan, and every fibre of your body is shrieking for the drug it wants—think of the man you killed as surely as if you'd shot him. I've turned you into a drug maniac, and that is my revenge. Go, you brute, go."

She stood there pointing to the window, and for a space there was silence. Then, with a strange, gasping cry Jack Dernan turned and, blundering through the mosquito netting as if it wasn't there, disappeared into the darkness.

Two months later Mrs. Peter Skeffington sold her land and returned to England. And I don't know if she ever saw a paragraph in the *Johannesburg Star*. It ran as follows :

"A dreadful tragedy took place last night in the Germiston district, resulting in the

death of four men. Two of them were well known as being engaged in the traffic of cocaine and other drugs. The third was a native, and the fourth has been identified as a man called Jack Derman. It is thought some quarrel arose over the disposal of the stuff, and revolvers were drawn. Three of the chambers of Derman's revolver had been discharged."

At any rate, that is the story of Mrs. Peter Skeffington. It is not a pleasant one: but it happens to be true.