CHAPTER IV

MR REGINALD DAKER

"As when a Gryfon through the Wilderness,
With wingéd course ore Hill or moarie Dale,
Pursues the Arimaspian."

JOHN MILTON, *Paradise Lost.*

IV. MR REGINALD DAKER

I

I CAN tell this story out of the fullest knowledge, for Reggie Daker had long made it a habit to pour out to me his inmost mind. But he was such an inconsequent being that it was not always easy to follow the involutions of that mind. So if my narrative has ragged edges it is because of its principal figure, who had a genius for discontinuity.

He had read in that upper room at Flambard quite clearly an announcement of an expedition to Yucatan, of which he was a member, and which was alleged to have left England on June 9th the following year. Now, Reggie believed in Moe more implicitly than any of us, for one of his chief traits was a profound credulity. But he did not in the least believe in the announcement. Or rather let me put it that, while he was quite certain that the words he read would be in *The Times* a year hence, he was not less certain that they did not concern him. Nothing would induce him to go to Yucatan or any place of the kind. He did not trouble to consider how he was to square his belief in the accuracy of this piece of foreknowledge with his determination that it should not be true in fact. He only knew that he was not going to budge from England.

He did not know where Yucatan was, for he had the vagueness about geography which distinguishes the products of our older public schools and universities, and he had not the curiosity to enquire. He fancied that it must be in the East; places ending in "tan" were always in the East; he remembered Afghanistan, Baluchistan, Gulistan. But, east or west, it mattered nothing to him. A man could not be hustled off abroad unless he wanted to, and nothing was farther from his inclinations.

Reggie was one of a type created by the post-War world. My nephew Charles, who was seven years his senior, and had been much battered by campaigning, said that it comforted him to look at Reggie, for it made him realise that the War chapter was really closed. His mother had died when he was a baby, and his father fell in the Yeomanry fight at Suvla, leaving him a small family property in the Midlands. A sudden industrial expansion made this property valuable, and in the boom year after peace his trustees sold it for a big sum, so that Reggie went to Oxford with a considerable income and no encumbrances. He was not distinguished at the University except for his power to amass friends. He had the family gift of horsemanship, and for a time showed extraordinary energy in riding in "grinds" and country steeplechases. Reggie, with his kit in a brown-paper parcel, might have been seen catching very early trains for remote places. But the craze passed, though his love

of horses endured, and Reggie settled down to make a comfortable nest for himself in life.

His intellectual powers were nothing to boast of, but no man had a finer collection of interests. He had a knack of savouring the quality of a variety of things, never going far below the surface, but getting the maximum of pleasure for the minimum of pains. He dabbled in everything—art, literature, field sports, society, even a little corner of philanthropy. He was modest, eager, enthusiastic, and as generous a soul as God ever made. Also he had a pretty talent for sheer farcical fun. The result was that he was widely popular, for in his innocent way he oxygenated the air around him. He had been a member of Pop at Eton, though he had no athletic or scholastic distinctions, and he went down from the University with a larger equipment of friends—not acquaintances merely, but friends—than any of his contemporaries.

He cast about for a job, for he had a conscience of a sort, but, as I have already mentioned, he was a difficult creature to fit into any niche. He was too mercurial, and after a week or two managed to tumble out. But all the time he had his own private profession. His purpose was to make an art of English life. The ritual of that life had been badly dislocated by the War, but enough remained to fascinate Reggie. He was in love with every detail of the ordered round which carried youth of his

type from January to January. He adored London in all her moods—the snugness of her winters, new faces at dinner-parties, the constant meetings of friends, plays and books, glossy ponies and green turf at Roehampton, cricket matches and race meetings, the view over St. James's Park in May, Piccadilly in summer, Kensington Gardens in their October russet. Nor did he appreciate less the rural background to London's life—riverside lawns, a cutter on the Solent in a fresh breeze, smoky brown coverts in the December dusks, purple Scots twilights when the guns moved homeward from the high moors. Reggie was supremely content with the place where his lines had been cast. It seemed to him that, if he lived to the age of Methuselah, he could not exhaust England.

He had a pleasant little house near the Brompton Road, where an elderly couple looked after his wants. He belonged to two good clubs—one a young man's and the other an old man's—and enjoyed them both. He hunted regularly with the Saturday Bicester, had a rod on a dry-fly stream in Berkshire, went every year on a round of Scots visits, and, being an excellent shot, was a welcome guest at covert shoots. Indeed, Reggie was a welcome guest anywhere, for he had the gift of making whatever he did seem better worth doing to those who companioned him. His enthusiasm, which was never boring, put colour and light into other people's worlds. I have come down to breakfast before a day's par-

tridge shooting, apathetic about the prospect, and have been compelled by Reggie to look forward to it with the ardour of a boy. Small wonder he was popular; many people remain young, but few can communicate youthfulness.

You must understand that he was no undiscriminating epicurean. Every day he was developing a more perfect technique of appreciation. It sounds a selfish and effeminate mode of spending one's time, and certainly there was nothing of the strenuous life about Reggie. He had no inclination to buffet opponents about the head and build up the Empire. But he was so warm-hearted and friendly that people were very ready to condone a slight lack of virility, the more so as he had considerable repute as a bold man to hounds. For myself, though now and then he exasperated me, on the whole it did me good to contemplate anyone so secure and content.

Reggie was wise enough to see that he needed some string to unite his many interests and give some sort of continuity to his life. So he was on the look-out for a regular job, occasionally found one, and invariably lost it. Then he decided that his avocation lay in the sale of old books. He had always been rather bookish, and had picked up a good deal of general information on the subject. It fitted in perfectly with his other tastes and the general tenour of his existence. He took to frequenting sales, cultivated dealers and collectors, enlarged his American acquaintance, and on a country-

house visit made a point of investigating the library.

So at the time of the Flambard Whitsuntide party he had started in a modest way as a dealer in old books, specialising in the English seventeenth century. He had had a few successes, and was full of hope. Here was a profession which in no way interfered with his rule of life, was entrancing in itself, and might repair the ravages which the revenue authorities were making in his private income.

He came to lunch with me in London in July, and I realised that the impression made by Moe was fast disappearing. "Terrible business," said Reggie. "I'm hanged if I quite know what happened, for, looking back, I think we were all asleep. Oh, I read *The Times* all right. It said I had started off to a place called Yucatan with an expedition. Rotten idea!"

I asked him if he believed in the reality of his vision.

"Of course," he replied. "I can't explain how—no one can, except poor old Moe, and he's dead—but I read the words in the paper as clearly as I am seeing you."

"You think they are true—will be true?"

"I think that they will appear in *The Times* of June 10th next year. True in that sense. But not true in the sense that I shall have gone to Yucatan. Catch me doing anything so idiotic! Forewarned, forearmed, you know."

And Reggie plunged into an account of the pirated pre-first edition of the *Religio Medici*, of which he had heard of a copy.

II

So he went off to Scotland for the Twelfth, quite easy in his mind. He rarely thought about the Moe business, and, when he did, it was only to reflect with some amusement that in ten months' time an eminent newspaper would be badly out in its facts. But he was thinking a great deal about Pamela Brune.

We have all our own Scotlands, and Reggie's was not mine, so we never met north of the Tweed. He would have abhorred the rougher kind of deer forest, for he would never have got up the mountains, and he was no salmon fisherman. The kind of place he liked was a civilised country house where the comforts of life were not forgotten. He was a neat shot at driven grouse, and loved a day on a mild moor where you motored to the first butts and had easy walks to the others. He liked good tennis and golf to be available on by-days, and he liked a large house-party with agreeable women. Reggie was the very opposite of the hard-bitten sportsman; sport was for him only one of the amenities of life, a condiment which should not be taken by itself, but which in combination gave flavour to the dish. So he selected his visits carefully, and was rarely disappointed.

This year he had an additional purpose; he went where he thought it likely that he might meet Pamela Brune. He believed himself to be very much in love, and he still had hopes; for in the last few weeks of the season Pamela had been a little kinder. She had been rather gentle and abstracted, and he hoped that her heart might be softening towards him.

He did not meet Pamela Brune, for reasons which I shall have to record elsewhere. But he had a very pleasant two months in comfortable dwellings, varied with a week in a yacht among the Western Isles. It was a fine autumn in the north, and Reggie returned with a full sketch-book—he dabbled in water-colours—and a stock of new enthusiasms. He had picked up a lot of folk-lore in the Hebrides, had written a good deal of indifferent verse in Pamela's honour, had conceived a scheme for the making of rugs with Celtic designs coloured by the native Highland dyes, and had learned something about early Scottish books—David Lyndesay and the like—on which he hoped to specialise for the American market. He meant to develop these lines in the pleasant London winter to which he was looking forward.

Only one visit had been a failure. He had known Lamancha for some years as a notable connoisseur of pictures, and he had gladly accepted an invitation to Leriot. But Lamancha in Scotland was a very different person from Lamancha in London. Reggie found a party of men only, and with none of them, not even

his host, did he appear to have much in common. They shot all day on the famous Leriot moors, and there he acquitted himself reasonably well, though he found the standard higher than elsewhere. But it was the evenings that proved out of joint. Eight sleepy men gossiped in the smoking-room till they stumbled to bed, and the talk was of two things only. All except Reggie had served in the War, and half the evenings were spent in campaign reminiscences which bored him profoundly. "Worse than golf shop," he complained to me. But the conversation of the other half scared him, for it was all about adventures in outlandish parts of the globe. It seemed that everyone but himself had sojourned in the oddest places. There was Maffit who had solved the riddle of the Bramaputra gorges, and Beavan who had been the first to penetrate the interior of New Guinea and climb Carstensz, and Wilmer who had been with the second Everest expedition, and Hurrell who had pursued his hobby of birds to the frozen tundras of the Yenesei. Apparently they were not garrulous, but they spoke of their doings with a quiet passion which frightened Reggie. They were all men of some distinction in English life, but they talked as if what they were now doing was the merest triviality, and the real world for them lay across the seas. Even Lamancha, who was supposed to have the ball at his feet in politics, confessed that he would give up everything for the chances of being the first man to cross the great desert of southern Arabia.

To me later Reggie waxed eloquent on his discomfort.

"You never saw such a set of toughs," he said. "Real hearties."

I grinned at the word, and pointed out that "hearty" scarcely described the manner of Lamancha or Hurrell or Beavan.

"Oh, I don't mean that they were the cheery, back-slapping type of lad. Their style was more like frozen shell-fish. But they were all the lean, hard-bitten, Empire-building breed. To listen to them you would think it was a kind of disgrace to enjoy life at home as long as there was some filthy place abroad where they could get malaria and risk their necks. They made me feel an abject worm. . . . And, hang it all, you know, they began to infect me with their beastly restlessness. I was almost coming to believe that I was a cumberer of the ground, and should take up the white man's burden or do something silly. They were such cocksure pagans—never troubled to defend their views, but took it for granted that everybody but a hermaphrodite must share them."

There had been one exception, a middle-aged man called Tallis, who had a place in Wales. He was an antiquary of sorts, and appeared in his time to have done his bit of globe-trotting, but he was now settled at home, and had inherited a fine library about which he was willing to talk. But the rest had been repellent, and what scared Reggie was that they had not been repellent enough. He had been attracted

against his will; he had felt himself being slowly drawn into an atmosphere utterly at variance with all his tastes. He uneasily remembered Flambard. These men were mostly Oriental travellers, and somewhere in the East lay Yucatan. . . . Reggie cut short his visit to Leriot, and fled for safety to town.

There he found what seemed to be complete sanctuary, and presently the memory of Leriot and its outlanders grew dim. He lapped himself in urban peace. By Christmas he had realised that Pamela Brune was not for him, and, being a philosophic soul, accepted the fact with resignation. He found many consolations in his life. The economic troubles which hit most people did not greatly affect a *rentier* like Reggie, whose modest but sufficient investments were widely and wisely distributed. He had enough exercise and fresh air to keep him fit —regular golf, an occasional day with the Bicester and an occasional covert-shoot, and he took care that the company he kept was very different from that of Leriot. The people he met on his shooting visits were mostly from the City, and their one aim was to recover a lost stability. The older men talked with longing of the comfortable Edwardian days, and Reggie wholeheartedly shared their regrets. All the world he mixed with seemed to be converted to his own view of life. Lamancha, making speeches in the House and presiding at public dinners, was very unlike the savage who at Leriot had sighed for the Arabian desert. Even Hurrell, whom he saw occasionally in one

of his clubs, was a respectable black-coated figure, more concerned with a paper he was to read to the Royal Society than with the Siberian tundras.

Reggie had rarely spent more agreeable months. During November and December there was a good deal of frost, and London had never seemed at once so tonic and so cosy. Being a good-hearted fellow he did a little mild philanthropy, and sat on a committee which took care of several distressed mining villages, besides putting in one evening a week at his boys' club. For the rest he had his pleasant little dinners of selected friends, his club luncheons, his researches at the Museum, his plays and picture shows, and his steadily growing bibliophilic fervour. And behind everything he did was the delicious background of London, which linked up the centuries and made even the new and the raw seem long-descended—an atmosphere which at once soothed and stimulated—the last perfection of man's handiwork—the true setting for a civilised life.

He made real progress, too, with his bookselling, and it looked as if he had found at last the thing he could do well. It was the kind of subject which Reggie could cope with, for he had an excellent memory, and, when his interest was actively engaged, a real power of absorbing knowledge. Also the times suited him, for there was a slump in everything but books. Pictures, furniture, houses, land—there were plenty of sellers and few buyers; but in books the demand kept level with the

supply. Hard-up country gentry put their libraries into the market, and it was often possible to buy these privately at modest prices. Reggie had several such lucky speculations, and found that often half a dozen volumes returned him his outlay with a handsome profit.

III

Then in January a little thing happened which had momentous consequences.

He picked up a cheap lot of books at a sale in the Midlands, and one of these was a copy of a little-known political poem of Thomas Gray, called, I think, *The Candidate*. It was printed in the familiar Caslon type of the Strawberry Hill press, and it had on the fly leaf a long inscription to a certain Theophilus Tallis, in which comment was made on the poet and his work. The inscription was signed "H. W.," and on the inside of the cover was the armorial bookplate of Tallis of Libanus Hall. If this inscription were genuine, here was an "association" book of a high order. Reggie compared it with many specimens of Horace Walpole's handwriting, with the general style of which it seemed to agree. Could he establish the identity of Theophilus Tallis, and ascertain that he had been a friend of Walpole's, the authenticity would be complete. . . . Then he remembered the man he had met at Leriot. His name was Tallis, and he had a place on the Welsh border. Reggie had scribbled down his club address, so

he wrote to him there and asked him for information. In a day or two a reply came from Libanus Hall. The Theophilus in question was his great-grandfather, said the writer, and doubtless the book had strayed from his library. Such things often happened—an undergraduate would carry off a volume to Oxford and forget about it, or a guest would borrow and fail to return. The old Theophilus had left many papers which had never been examined, but in which the connection with Walpole could no doubt be traced. Let Reggie pay him a visit, for there were many things in his library to interest him.

So in the last week of January Reggie departed for the Welsh marches. The association of Tallis with Leriot gave him no anxiety, for recently he had been so lapped in urban life that he had forgotten about Leriot and its uneasy guests, and in any case Tallis had been different from the others. Tallis had not looked like them, for he was a man of a comfortable habit of body, with a round, high-coloured face —a hunting squire with a dash of the *bon vivant*. Reggie remembered with satisfaction how he had criticised Lamancha's port. It was true that he seemed to have travelled much, but his wandering years were over. He had merely hinted at his doings abroad, but he had spoken at length and with gusto about his collections and his library.

Libanus proved to be a dwelling after Reggie's heart, a Tudor manor-house, built round a border keep, according to the fashion

of the Welsh marches. It stood on a shelf in a shallow river valley, backed with low, scrub-clad hills, and behind them were wide, rolling moorlands. It was a bachelor establishment, very well run, and Tallis was the perfect host. The collections did not interest Reggie—stone plaques, and queerly marked tiles, and uncouth stone heads which suggested a more primitive Epstein. He took them for Assyrian, and when Tallis called them "Mayan" the word conveyed nothing to him. But the library far surpassed his hopes. It had been founded in the seventeenth century, when Wales was full of lettered squires, by a certain John Tallis, who had obligingly kept a note-book in which he recorded his purchases and the prices he paid for them. It was especially rich in authors with a Welsh connection, like Henry Vaughan and the Herberts, but there was a fine set of Donne, two of the Shakespeare folios, and many of the Cavalier lyrists, besides a quantity of devotional and political *rariora*. The other collector in the family had been Theophilus Tallis in the reign of George III. He had specialised in illustrated books, mostly French, but he had also added to the shelves some notable *incunabula*, for he lived into the day of the Roxburghe and Heber libraries. Reggie hunted up Theophilus in the family archives, and found that he had been a friend of Gray and a frequent correspondent of Horace Walpole. There were batches of letters from both, which had never been published.

Tallis was also a master of foxhounds, a mountainy pack, with some of the old shaggy Welsh strain in them, which hunted about a hundred square miles of wild country at the back of Libanus. The river valley was pockety and swampy, but the short bent of the moors made splendid going. Reggie was well mounted by his host, it was soft, grey weather in which scent lay well, and he had several glorious days up on the roof of things. "You never saw such a place," he wrote to me. "Nothing much to lep, but you must ride cunning, as on Exmoor, if you want to keep up with hounds. I couldn't keep my eye on them for the scenery. One was on a great boss, with a hint far away of deeper valleys, and with lumps of blue mountain poking up on the horizon—foreshortened, you know, like ships coming into sight at sea. It fairly went to my head. Then the hunt was pure Sir Roger de Coverley—hard-riding farmers and squires that had never stirred from their paternal acres. I felt as if I had slipped through a chink of time into an elder England."

Reggie enjoyed every moment, for it was the precise ritual in which his fancy delighted. He and Tallis would get home in the twilight, and have poached eggs and tea by the library fire. Then would come a blessed time in slippers with a book or a newspaper; then a bath and dinner; and after that a leisurely ranging among the shelves and pleasant sleepy arm-chair talk. Tallis was an ideal host in other ways than as a provider of good sport, good

quarters and good fare. He never obtruded his own interests, never turned the talk to the stone monstrosities in the hall which he had given half his life to collect, or expounded the meaning of "Mayan." With Reggie he was the bibliophile and the rural squire, prepared to agree with him most cordially when he proclaimed that there was no place on earth like his own land and wondered why anyone was foolish enough to leave it.

"Fate," said Tallis. "Something switches you abroad before you know where you are. I've always started unwillingly, but there has never been any alternative if I wanted to get a thing done."

Reggie shook his head, implying that he would prefer the thing to remain undone.

He was in this mood of comfort, sentimentality and complacency when Verona Cortal came to dine. Tallis was apologetic. "The Reeces at Bryncoch have a niece staying with them—she comes every year for a week or two's hunting—and I always give Jim Jack a hand to entertain her. She's rather a pleasant child, and deserves something nearer her age than an old buffer like me. I hope you don't mind. She's pretty knowledgeable about books, you know—been to college and that sort of thing." So the following evening Reggie found himself seated at dinner next to an attractive young woman with whom he had no difficulty in conversing. Miss Cortal was of the marmoreal blonde type, with a smooth white skin and a wealth of unshingled fair hair. Her eyes were

blue, not the pale lymphatic kind, but a vivacious masterful blue. She was beautifully turned out, polished to a high degree, and to the last degree composed and confident. Reggie did not think her pretty; she was a trifle too substantial for one who was still under the spell of Pamela Brune's woodland grace; but he found her an entrancing companion.

For she seemed to share his every taste and prejudice. They talked of the countryside, for which she had a lively enthusiasm. Her own home was in Gloucestershire, to which her people had moved from the West Riding, where they had been local bankers till they amalgamated with one of the London banks. Her father was dead, but her brothers were in business in London, and she lived partly with them and partly with her mother in the country. Reggie had never met anyone, certainly no woman, who seemed to savour so intelligently the manifold delights of English life, as he understood them. Pamela had been blank and derisory when he tried to talk of such things, but this girl seemed instinctively to penetrate his moods and to give his imponderables a clean-cut reality. It was flattering to be so fully comprehended. They talked of books, and it appeared that she had taken a degree in history at Oxford, and was making a study of the Roman remains in Cotswold. They discovered that they had friends in common, about whose merits and demerits they agreed; and presently in a corner of the shabby drawing-room, while her aunt dozed and Jim Jack

and Tallis were deep in hounds, they advanced to the intimacy which comes to those who unexpectedly find themselves at one in their private prepossessions. Reggie saw the Bryncoch car depart with the conviction that he had never before met quite so companionable a being.

It only needed some little thing to set Verona in a romantic light, and that something befell next day. The soft grey weather broke up into one of those clear, late-winter afternoons which are a foretaste of spring. The hounds, after various false starts in the morning, had run right to the top of the moorlands, and killed near the standing stones called the Three Brothers. Verona's mare got an overreach in a bog, and she and Reggie were left behind to make their way home alone in the gathering dusk. The girl looked well on horseback, and the excitement of the day and the winds of the moor had given her a wild-rose colour and abated the trimness of her get-up. As they jogged home Reggie wondered that he had not thought her pretty before; the polished young lady had gone, and in its place was something very girlish and young, something more primitive and more feminine. They rode slowly under a sky of lemon and amethyst, and stopped to watch the sunset flaming over the remote western hills, or to look east to where the shadows were creeping over the great hollow which was England. Then they descended by green drove-roads to the valley woods, and saw the lights' twinkle, miles apart, of their respec-

tive homes. It was dark now, and Reggie had to help with the limping mare in some of the dingles. On one such occasion she laid a light hand on his arm.

"What a day!" she said, in a rapt whisper. "This is what I love best—to come out of the wilds into ancient, habitable peace. You can only do it in England. What a land! Who was it called it 'Merlin's Isle of Gramarye?'"

"What a girl!" thought Reggie. "She knows what I want to think before I have thought it."

Two days later he went to Bryncoch to luncheon. Verona was delightful. At Libanus she had been the accomplished woman of the world; on the moors she had been touched with romance; but here she was a child, eager to show her playthings to another child. She dragged him through the library, and out of a wilderness of forestry journals and reports of agricultural societies unearthed volumes worthy of a bibliophile's eye. She acted showman to the architectural curiosities of the house, and after luncheon led him to the old-fashioned walled garden. "They used to be able," she told him, "to grow all kinds of hothouse fruits here out of doors. Do you know why?" She pointed out the flues which ran from a furnace at each corner through the immense brick walls. "That is how they beat the frost and the east winds. They kept the walls all winter at an even temperature. They could do it a hundred years ago, when coal cost little more than the

price of carting it from the pit-heads over the hills."

"I love all these relics," she said with the prettiest sentiment. "I want the memory of them to survive. We should keep the past next door to us in our lives and be always looking back to it."

Reggie warmly approved, for it was his own philosophy. But he was a little surprised when she embarked on a most business-like discussion as to the price of coal, and what it would cost to do the same thing to-day. She quoted figures like an accountant. He was spurred to tell her of his own work, of his book-selling schemes, the successes he had had and his plans for the future. She listened eagerly and made what seemed to him some acute suggestions.

He went back to London next day with his mind in a pleasant confusion. He did not think that he was in love with Miss Cortal, but he decided that in her he had found a most congenial comrade. To have discovered someone so like-minded, so able to justify the faith they shared, gave him a welcome sense of security. Whatever was in store for him he had now a puissant ally.

IV

I do not want to give the impression that Reggie was a vapid, sentimental young man. He was very much the other way. He had plenty of shrewdness, and had all the reticences

of his kind. No virginity was ever more fastidiously guarded than the sacred places of the English male in youth. He would perish sooner than confess the things nearest to his heart. If anyone had told Reggie in his presence that he was an artist in life, a connoisseur of evasive sensations, the charge would have been hotly denied. He believed himself to be a normal person, who rejoiced in running with the pack. I guessed his creed, but it was only from casual unguarded phrases and his manner of life, never from his own confession. He would have blushed to say the things which Verona was always saying. But in her mouth they delighted him, for she put into words what he was incapable of expressing himself—incapable partly from shamefacedness and partly from simple lack of the gift for definition. She was magnificently explicit, and carried it off. I have been told that, when you can adequately formulate a grief, you have removed half the sting of it, and I fancy that in the case of the pleasing emotions the same explication doubles the pleasure. That is the virtue of the poets, since they do for the ordinary man what he cannot do for himself. Verona was Reggie's bard. She gave a local habitation and a name to his airy nothings, and in so doing she confirmed him in his faith. He felt that the things he cared for were given a new stability when she became their most competent prophet.

They had arranged to meet in London, and next week he dined at the Cortals' large, dull house in Eaton Square. I happened to be a

guest, for my nephew Charles was connected with the Cortals in business, and I had been their counsel in a complicated House of Lords appeal. It was the first occasion on which I met the daughter of the house.

It was a big dinner-party, representative of the family's many interests, starred with celebrities, none of whom were quite of the first order, except Geraldine, the Tory leader. There was a corps commander in the late War, who had taken up politics and hankered after a British variant of Fascism; Lord Lavan, who had governed some Dominion; a Royal Academician, who painted mystical topical allegories, a sort of blend of Blake and Frith; a director of the Bank of England; Smithers, the Cambridge economist; one or two city magnates; Claypole, the buxom novelist, whom his admirers regarded as an English Balzac; a Cotswold master of hounds up in London to visit his dentist; nothing young except Reggie.

The dinner was the elaborate affair which used to be in fashion when I first came to London—two dishes in every course, and the old-fashioned succession of wines instead of the monotonous champagne of to-day. Mrs Cortal sat beaming at her end of the table, with the blank amiability of the stone deaf, and the duties of hostess fell upon her daughter. I did not then realise her power over Reggie, but I watched her with admiration. She sat between Geraldine and Claypole, and she kept a big section of the table going. Her manner was a

gentle alertness, quick to catch the ball of talk and return it, but never for one moment asserting itself. She had a pleasant trick of turning to a speaker with bright eyes and slightly raised brows, a trick which was an invitation to confidences. Being opposite her, I had a chance on such occasions of observing her face in profile, and it struck me that when she grew older she would have a look of Queen Victoria—the same ripeness and authority. Her performance was extraordinarily efficient, for she managed to make her neighbours talk as freely as if it had been a *tête-à-tête,* and at the same time broadcast the results to a considerable part of the company. Claypole's bubbling utterances were clarified by her into good conversation, and used as baits to entice Geraldine. The novelist's pose was that of a detached observer of life, a kindly and half-contemptuous critic of the ordinary struggle for success, whereas Geraldine was frankly an adept at the game, who made no concealment of his devotion to it. Claypole's mild cynicism, as interpreted by Verona, was just the thing to rouse the latter, who was adroitly led into spirited confessions of faith. There is no talker to compare with Geraldine when he is stirred, with his Irish humour, his dazzling overstatements, and his occasional flights into serious passion, and I have rarely heard him better than under Verona's stimulus. Claypole was flattered, for he was not in the habit of consorting with ex-Prime Ministers; the others were flattered, for they seemed to be privileged to share a great

man's confidences. I saw Reggie's eyes fixed on the girl in respectful wonder.

When the women rose I had a talk with one of her brothers. There were two of them, very much alike except that one was fair and one was dark; both were clean shaven, and both wore eyeglasses. One was a director of the bank which had absorbed the family business, and the other was a partner in a well-known financial house. It was the latter who took the chair beside me, and presently I found myself able to place the Cortal family. The brothers belonged to the type which in my irreverent youth we called the "blood stockbroker"—the people who wanted to be gentlefolk first and city men afterwards, but were determined to be a complete success in both rôles. They had been to the best public school and the most fashionable college, and had acquired a manner blended of the guardsman, the country squire and the man of affairs. Young Mr Michael talked hunting to me and the prospects of the National, touched upon spring salmon and his last year's experience in Scotland, and told an excellent story which he had heard that afternoon in White's; but he also said some shrewd things about politics, and when I asked him a question about certain rumours in the City I got a crisp and well-informed reply. The Cortals were assuredly a competent family, though I decided that there was most quality in the girl. There had been something Napoleonic in that graceful profile which I had studied during dinner.

Afterwards in the drawing-room I saw Verona and Reggie in a corner. They were smiling on each other like old friends, and she was saying something to him with an affectionate, almost maternal air. I had decided that she would make an excellent wife for an ambitious politician, but now I began to wonder if she were not the wife for Reggie. Far more suitable than Pamela Brune, whose rarity and subtlety required a different kind of mate. Reggie needed somebody to form him and run him, somebody who would put order into the attractive chaos of his life. Those firm white hands of hers might do much with such plastic stuff.

That dinner was followed by many meetings between the two. Verona dined with him in his little house, they went to the play together, she mounted him with her own pack, the Myvern, and they had several days with the Bicester. The first dinner in Eaton Square was soon succeeded by another, this time a family party—the four Cortals, a maiden aunt, a married uncle and several cousins. Reggie was the only stranger, and he was there as an adopted member of the clan, Verona's chosen friend. Not a suitor but a friend. There was as yet no suggestion of love-making. It was one of these new-fangled, cold-blooded companionships between the sexes.

But at this dinner it was apparent that the Cortal family had taken up Reggie seriously. He had already expounded his book-selling ambitions to Verona, as the kind of activity

which made an appropriate background for the life he desired, and she had approved. Now it appeared that the whole family knew of it, and were acutely interested. There was a good opportunity, said the uncle—his name was Shenstone, and he was a member of a shipping firm which had done well during the War—for men like Reggie, who had the entry to many corners of English society, to establish himself as an honest broker between those who had, and wished to sell, and those who had not, and wished to buy. At present, he said, both sides went to the big dealers, and there was no human touch, but the human touch was needed in what should be more than a matter of cold business.

"Take pictures," said Mr Shenstone, who was a connoisseur. "I see very little fun in picking up what I want at a big sale at Christie's. What I like is to run something to earth in some odd corner of England, and get it by friendly negotiation. When I look at it on my walls, I remember the story behind it as well as its artistic merits. It stands for an episode in my life, like a stag's head which recalls a good stalk. I must say I am always grateful to anyone who puts me in the way of this sporting interest in collecting."

The others agreed. Mr Algernon, the elder brother, expanded the theme. "Reggie," he declared (they had very soon got on to Christian name terms), "can be the link between supply and demand, and a benefactor to both sides. He might be a sort of English Rosen-

bach. In every shire there are families who just manage to keep going. They have family possessions which they are far too proud to send to a sale, except in the very last resort. But very often they would gladly sell a picture or a book privately, if they knew how to do it, and such a sale might make all the difference to their comfort."

The maiden aunt assented, and told how a family of her acquaintance in Shropshire had been saved from penury by a discovery in a garret, through the medium of a visiting Cambridge don, of three Shakespeare quartos. One of the cousins recounted a similar event in Westmorland.

"Money is tight, no doubt," continued Mr Algernon, "but there's more of it about than people imagine. Fortunes are made on a falling as well as on a rising market. And people who have it do not know how to invest it. Industrials are too precarious, Government stocks have lost caste, and, since every part of the globe is under the weather, there is not the old attraction about foreign securities. I believe that there will be a growing tendency for people who have an ample margin of income to do what the Germans did when the mark was tumbling, and buy objects of art. But it must be something which is going to increase in value. Now, the fashion in pictures fluctuates, but not in books. There are only, say, twenty copies of an old book known to exist, and the numbers cannot be added to. An association book—say one which Walter

Scott presented to Wordsworth with an autograph inscription—can never be duplicated. These things are better than bank-notes—they are solid bullion. The Americans have recognised this. A new millionaire in the States, as soon as he has made his pile, starts to found a library, though he may be scarcely literate. He knows what is certain to appreciate. He remembers the Huth and the Britwell sales."

"And think of the charm of the business!" said Verona. "You are dealing in spiritual as well as in commercial values. And the cleanness of it!"

"But it needs careful handling," said Mr Shenstone. "You cannot depend upon yourself, Mr Daker. You must get a staff together, and lay down your lines carefully, for what you want is an intelligence department and a scientifically arranged clearing-house. You have to organise the buying side, and know just where to lay your hands on what you want. And you have to organise your customers—to get into touch with the people on both sides of the Atlantic who are hungering for your services. Your watchword must be organisation."

"Rationalisation," said Mr Michael with a pleasant smile. "You must be in the fashion, my dear Reggie."

Reggie was flattered that his ideas should be taken so seriously by such a company, for he had the reverence for the business man which is often an obsession with the unbusinesslike. He was excited, too. He saw himself becoming

a figure, a power, a man of wealth, all that he had ruled out as beyond his compass—and this without sacrifice of the things he loved. . . . But, as he caught Verona's beaming eyes, he had far down in his heart a little spasm of fear. For he seemed to see in them a hint of fetters.

V

The transformation of Reggie into a business man was begun at once, and it was Verona who took charge of it. Politics at the moment were exciting, and in order to attend critical divisions I had to dine more than I liked at the House. The result was a number of improvised dinner-parties there, and at one of them I found Verona. No doubt Reggie had talked to her about me, so she treated me as if I were his elder brother. I thought her attractive, but I am bound to say a little formidable also, for I have rarely met any woman who knew her own mind so clearly.

The first thing to do was to get Reggie to organise his life. "You cannot achieve anything," she said sagely, "unless you make a plan." It was idle to think of running a business from the house in Brompton, so she had induced him to take an office—a pleasant little set of rooms which were fortunately vacant in the Adelphi neighbourhood. She had got him a secretary, a girl who had been at college with her, and she had started a system of card in-

dexes, on which she dwelt lovingly. There was one for books, another for possible buyers, and a third for his acquaintances. She made a great point about codifying, so to speak, Reggie's immense acquaintance, for it was his chief asset in the business. Properly managed, it should give him access to quarters into which no dealer could penetrate. She nodded her head, and emphasised her points by tapping her right-hand fingers on her left-hand palm, exactly like a pretty schoolmistress. And several times she said "we," not "he," when she mentioned the undertaking.

She thought that he had better limit its scope. *Incunabula* and missals and such-like might be put aside as too ambitious. He should specialise on his old love, the seventeenth century, with excursions into the eighteenth and early nineteenth. There was already a vigorous interest in the Augustans, and she predicted a revival in the post-Romantics and the Victorians. Above all, he should specialise in "association books" and manuscripts, which were the kind of thing to which he was likely to have access. More was needed than an intelligence bureau: they wanted a research department to verify *provenances*. There would have to be a good deal of work in the Museum, and for this she could enrol several young women who had been with her at Oxford. She was compiling a list of experts in special branches, university dons and so forth, to whom they could turn in special cases for advice. . . . Also they must make friends

with the dealers, for it was no use antagonising the professionals: they could work in with them up to a point, and put little things in their way. Reggie knew a good many, and they were having some carefully selected luncheon-parties to extend his acquaintance. As for buyers, her brothers could help, for, being in the City, they knew where money was. Especially with America, she thought; both Algernon and Michael had a great deal of American business passing through their hands, and were frequently in New York. The American rich, she said, were an easier proposition than the English, for they talked freely of their hobbies instead of hiding them away like a secret vice.

I confess that I was enormously impressed by the girl's precision and good sense, and I was still more impressed when a few days later I ran across Reggie in the Athenæum, a club which he had taken to frequenting. She had made a new man of him, a man with a purpose, tightened up and endowed with a high velocity. His eagerness had always been his chief charm, but now, instead of being diffused through the atmosphere, it seemed to have been canalised and given direction. "I'm one of the world's workers," he announced. "Office hours ten to five, and longer if required. I hop about the country too, like a bagman. I never knew that a steady grind was such fun."

"How is your colleague?" I asked.

"Marvellous!" It was his favourite adjective. "By Jove, what a head she has! Already

she has forgotten more about my job than I ever knew!"

"What do you call yourself?"

"Ah, that's a puzzler. We must have a little private company, of course. We rather thought of 'The Interpreter's House.' Bunyan, you know. You see the idea—the place where things are explained to people and people are explained to themselves. It was Verona's notion. Jolly good, I think."

It seemed an ambitious name for a dealer in old books, but it was not for me to damp Reggie's ardour. I could only rejoice that someone had managed to break him to harness, a task in which his friends had hitherto conspicuously failed. I met him occasionally in the company of the Cortal brothers, and I fancied that these glossy young men had something of the air of horsebreakers. They peered at the world through their glasses with a friendly proprietary air, and clearly regarded Reggie as their property. I was never quite at ease in their presence, for their efficiency was a little too naked; they were too manifestly well equipped, too elaborately men of the world. But Reggie was fascinated. He, whose clothes had never been his strong point, was now trim and natty, and wore, like them, the ordinary city regimentals.

I asked my nephew Charles what he thought of the brothers, and he laughed. "The shiny Cortals!" he replied. "Good enough chaps in their way, I believe. Quite a high reputation in their own line. Can't say I care much for

them myself. Their minds are too dashed relevant, if you know what I mean. No margin to them—no jolly waste—everything tidied up and put to its best use. I should think more of them if now and then they condescended to make a bloomer. Their gentility is a little too self-conscious, too. Oh, and of course they haven't a scrap of humour—not what you and I would call humour."

One night I dined with one of the livery companies, and sat next to the uncle, Shenstone, who was prime warden. Under the influence of some wonderful Madeira he became talkative, and I realised that the harness laid upon Reggie's back was going to be something more than a business set. For Shenstone spoke of him as if he were a member of the family, with just that touch of affectionate candour with which one speaks of a promising but still problematical relative. "Dear old Reggie," said the uncle. "Best of good fellows and full of stuff, you know. Slackly brought up, and needs to learn business habits, but improving every day." I forbore to mention Verona's name, for I feared confidences. But I understood that Reggie was no more the unattached spectator of life; he had been gathered into the fold of a tightly knit and most competent clan.

Just before I went abroad for Easter I dined again in Verona's company, and had the privilege of a long and intimate talk. I learned why the name of "Interpreter's House" had been selected. Verona had visions which soared far beyond the brokerage of old books. She

wanted to make the firm a purveyor of English traditions, a discreet merchant of English charm. It would guide strangers of leisure into paths where they could savour fully the magic of an ancient society. It would provide seekers with a background which, unless they were born to it, they could never find. It would be a clearing-house for delicate and subtle and indefinable things. It would reveal and interpret the sacred places of our long history. In a word, it would "rationalise" and make available to the public the antique glamour of these islands.

It all sounds preposterous, but there was nothing preposterous about her exposition. She had a trick, when excited, of half-closing her lids, which softened the rather hard vitality of her eyes, and at such times she lost her usual briskness and was almost wistful. "*You* must understand what I mean. We are all agreed that England is Merlin's Isle of Gramarye." (I quote her exact words.) "But to how many is that more than a phrase? It is so hard to get behind the veil of our noisy modernism to the lovely and enduring truth. You know how sensitive Reggie is to such things. Well, we want to help people who are less fortunate. Strangers come to London—from the provinces—from America—steeped in London's romance which they have got from books. But the reality is a terrible anticlimax. They need to be helped if they are to recapture the other Londons which are still there layer on layer, the Londons of Chaucer and the Elizabethans,

and Milton and Dr Johnson and Charles Lamb and Dickens . . . And Oxford . . . and Edinburgh . . . and Bath . . . and the English country. We want to get past the garages and petrol pumps and county council cottages to the ancient rustic England which can never die."

"I see. Glamour off the peg. You will charge a price for it, of course?"

She looked at me gravely and reprovingly, and her lids opened to reveal agate eyes.

"We shall charge a price," she said. "But money-making will not be our first object."

I had offended her by my coarse phrase, and I got no more confidences that evening. It was plain that Reggie was being equipped with several kinds of harness; his day was mapped out, he was inspanned in a family team, and now his vagrant fancies were to be regimented. I thought a good deal about him on my holiday, while I explored the spring flowers of the Jura. One of my reflections, I remember, was that Moe's moment of prevision had failed badly so far as he was concerned. Reggie was not likely to undertake any foreign adventure, having anchored himself by so many chains to English soil.

VI

Some time in May I began to have my doubts about the success of the partnership.

May is the pleasantest of months for a London dweller. Wafts of spring are blown in from

its green cincture, the parks are at their gayest, there is freshness in the air, and the colours, the delicate half-shades of the most beautiful city on earth, take on a new purity. Along with late October, May had always been Reggie's favourite season. First there would be the early canter in the Park. Then a leisurely breakfast, the newspaper, and his first pipe, with the morning sun making delectable patterns on the bookshelves. He would write a few letters and walk eastward, dwelling lovingly on the sights and the sounds—the flower-girls, the shoppers, the bustle of the main streets, the sudden peace of the little squares with their white stucco and green turf and purple lilacs and pink hawthorns. Luncheon at one of his clubs would follow, or perhaps an agreeable meal at a friend's house. In the afternoon he had many little tasks—visits to the Museum, the sales or the picture galleries, researches in bookshops, excursions into queer corners of the city. He liked to have tea at home, and would spend the hours before dinner over books, for he was a discriminating but voracious reader. Then would come dinner; with a group of young men at a club or restaurant; or at some ceremonial feast, where he enjoyed the experience of meeting new people and making friendly explorations; or best of all at home, where he read till bedtime.

He had his exercise, too. He played a little polo at Roehampton and a good deal of tennis. He was an ardent fisherman, and usually spent

the week-ends on a Berkshire trout stream, where he had a rod. He would have a delightful Friday evening looking out tackle, and would be off at cockcrow on Saturday in his little car, returning late on the Sunday night with a sunburnt face and an added zest for life. . . . I always felt that, for an idle man, Reggie made a very successful business of his days, and sometimes I found it in my heart to envy him.

But now all this had changed. I had a feverish time myself that May with the General Election, which did not, of course, concern Reggie. When I got back to town and the turmoil was over, I ran across him one afternoon in the Strand, and observed a change in him. His usual wholesome complexion had gone; he looked tired and white and harassed —notably harassed. But he appeared to be in good spirits. "Busy!" he cried. "I should think I was. I never get a moment to myself. I haven't had a rod in my hand this year—haven't been out of London except on duty. You see, we're at the most critical stage—laying down our lines—got to get them right, for everything depends on them. Oh yes, thanks. We're doing famously for beginners. If only the American slump would mend. . . ."

I enquired about Miss Cortal, as I was bound to do. No engagement had been announced, but such a relationship could only end in marriage. People had long ago made that assumption.

"Oh, Verona's very well. A bit overworked like me." There was an odd look in his eyes, and something new in his voice—not the frank admiration and friendliness of the pre-Easter period—something which was almost embarrassment. I set it down to the shyness of a man in first love.

I asked him to dine, but he couldn't—was full up for weeks ahead. He consulted a little book, and announced his engagements. They all seemed to be with members of the Cortal family. Luncheon was the same. On my only free days he was booked to Shenstone, the maiden aunt, and cousins from Norfolk who had taken a house in town. He left me with the same hustled, preoccupied face. . . . Next day I saw him on the Embankment walking home with the Cortal brothers. They were smiling and talking, but somehow he had the air of a man taking exercise between two genial warders.

I spoke to my cynical nephew about it. "The Shinies!" Charles exclaimed. "Not the Sheenies—there's nothing Jewish about Cortal Frères. When will the world realise that we produce in England something much tougher than any Hebrew? We call them the Shinies, because of their high varnish. . . . Old Reggie is corralled all right, shoes off, feet fired and the paddock gates bolted! . . . Will he marry the girl? I should jolly well think so. He's probably up to his ears in love with her, but even if he loathed her name he would have to go through with it. . . . And he'll espouse a

dashed lot more than the buxom Miss Verona —all her uncles and her nephews and her cousins and her aunts for ever and ever. They say that when a man marries a Jewess he finds himself half-smothered under a great feather-bed of steamy consanguinity. Well, it will be the same with the Cortals, only the clan will be less sticky. Reggie will never again call his soul his own. I'm not sure that he'll want to, but anyhow he won't. They'll never let him alone. He used to be rather a solitary bird, but now he'll have his fill of relations, all as active as fleas. What does the Bible say? 'He shall receive an hundredfold houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers—with persecutions....' With persecutions, mark you. Reggie is for it all right."

As it happened I was so busy with arrears of cases that my life was cloistered during the last week of May and the first of June, and I thought no more of Reggie's fortunes. But on the 7th day of June I had a letter from him, enclosing the proof of a kind of prospectus and asking me what I thought of it.

I thought many things about it. It was a statement of the aims of the "Interpreter's House," which was to be circulated to a carefully selected list in England and America. In every sentence it bore the mark of Verona's fine Roman hand. No man could have written it. There was an indecency about its candour and its flat-footed clarity from which the most pachydermatous male would have recoiled.

In its way it was horribly well done. It was a kind of Stores List of the varieties of English charm and the easiest way to get hold of them. Merlin's Isle of Gramarye had at last got its auctioneer's catalogue. Not that it was written in the style of an estate-agent. It was uncommonly well written, full of good phrases and apposite quotations, and it carried a fine bookish flavour. But ye gods! it was terrible. Relentlessly it set down in black and white all the delicate, half-formed sentiments we cherish in our innermost hearts, and dare not talk about. It was so cursedly explicit that it brushed the bloom off whatever it touched. A June twilight became the glare of an arc lamp, the greenery of April the arsenical green of a chemist's shop. Evasive dreams were transformed into mercantile dogmas. It was a kind of simony, a trafficking in sacred things. The magic of England was "rationalised" with a vengeance.... There could be no doubt about its effectiveness. I could see the shoddy culture of two continents seizing upon it joyously as a final statement of the "English proposition." It was a magnificent commercial prospectus for the "Interpreter's House." But I wondered how Reggie felt about it—Reggie who had always had a maidenly shyness about his inner world.

It seemed to me that the time had come for a heart-to-heart talk with him. I resolved to be very careful, for I was dealing with perilous stuff. If he was in love with Verona I dared not speak my mind, and even if there

was no love, there were deep obligations of gratitude.

He dined with me at the House on the evening of June 8th, and afterwards we talked in a corner of the terrace. His looks made me uneasy, for he seemed both listless and restless. He kept looking nervously about him, as if at any moment something hostile might attack him. He had the air of a smallish rabbit caught in a largish trap.

But it was a stoical rabbit, for to me he made no complaint. In a leaden voice he announced that he was the most fortunate of men. His business was flourishing, and in the autumn it was proposed to form a company. . . . At last he had found a vocation in life. Yet there was as much conviction in his voice as in the babbling of a sleep-walker.

I asked him baldly when he was going to be married. In even tones he replied that nothing had as yet been settled. But the form of his answer implied that something would soon be settled. I forbore to enquire farther, for his gaze was fixed glassily on the tower of Lambeth Palace.

Then of his own accord he asked me what I had thought of the prospectus. I hastily resolved that no good could come of candour. Reggie had made his bed and meant to lie on it, and it was not for me to put in extra thorns.

"Very well done," I said; "what the Germans call *appetitlich*. It should give you an excellent send-off."

"You didn't think it vulgar?"

"Not a bit," I lied. "Half-tones and broken lights won't do in business. You must be emphatic."

He nodded. "I agree with you. She wrote it, you know. Michael revised it, but in substance it was her work."

I said something silly about having detected the finer female touch. Then he rose to go—he had an appointment with an American at the Savoy. It had been the most hopeless evening, for I had never come near him. He seemed to be separated from me by a vast thicket, and I felt that if I laid an axe to the bushes they would scream like mandrakes.

When we said good-bye, I felt a sudden wave of liking and pity. I patted him on the shoulder. "I hope you're going to be very happy, old man," I said, but he made no answer.

As I went back to my rooms I suddenly thought with grim amusement of what had happened at Flambard a year before. That story, so far as Reggie was concerned, was over. Youth's infinite choice of roads had given place to a rigid groove, presided over by a relentless marmoreal blonde.

VII

But I was wrong. It may have been merely the sight of me as part of his old life, or it may have been my last words, but something that night brought Reggie to breaking-point. When

he got home he rang up Tallis at Libanus, found that he was in London, ran him to ground at the Travellers', and arranged to meet him the following morning. I do not know why he turned to Tallis, except that it was at his house that he had first met Verona, and that he seemed to stand for him on the dividing-line between a world which he had loved and a world which he had come to hate and fear.

Tallis told me this part of the story. They lunched together, and talked afterwards beside the fireplace in the hall. He had not seen Reggie for nearly six months, and was shocked at the change in him. As he expressed it, Reggie's coat was all sulky and his body like a cab-horse.

According to Tallis, Reggie plunged at once into his tale, telling it with a kind of angry vehemence, rather dim about details, but desperately clear on the main points. He had lost everything he cared for in life, he said; he was involved in a juggernaut of a business, ground under a juggernaut of a family, and about to be tied up for life to a juggernaut of a girl. This last he only implied, for he spoke no disrespectful word of Verona.

"You haven't proposed to her?" Tallis asked.

Reggie said he hadn't, but that everybody expected him to, including, he feared, the lady herself. There was to be a Cortal family dinner the following night, and it had been gently but firmly hinted to him that that would be a fitting moment to announce the engagement.

"I gather that you're not in love with her?" said Tallis.

Reggie looked wooden. He was trying to live up to his code. "I admire her immensely," he stammered. "And I'm grateful to her—far more grateful than I can ever express—I owe her a tremendous lot. . . . She has worked like a slave for me—given up most of her time—oh, she's a marvel! Unselfish, too. . . . Nobody has ever taken such an interest in me. . . ."

"I know, I know. But do you love her?"

Then, just as an ice jam cracks on a river, Reggie's decorum went with a rush.

"No, by God," he cried wildly. "I don't love her! And she doesn't love me. She has taken me up, and she'll stick to me till I'm in my grave, but she doesn't love me. She couldn't love anybody—not made that way. I'm only her business partner, the thing she needed to round off her life. . . . Love her! O Lord, I'm nearer hating her. I'm in terror of her. She mesmerises me, like a stoat with a rabbit. She has twenty times my brains, and I've simply got to do as I'm told. . . . And then there's her awful family. I'm lapped in them, suffocated by them. I loathe her infernal apes of brothers—they're so cursed gentleman-like and efficient and patronising. Dash it all, man, there are times when I can scarcely keep from hitting their blinking faces."

He dragged a paper from his pocket, and flung it at Tallis.

"There's worse still. Look at that. Read it

carefully and smack your lips over its succulent beastliness. That's the Cortal idea of what I'm going to give my life to. That's the prospectus of my business. The 'Interpreter's House,' by God! It has interpreted them to me all right. Do you grasp the perfect hell of it? I'm to spend my days with the things I thought I cared about, but the gloss is rubbed off every one of them. I'm to be a sort of Cook's guide to culture on a sound commercial basis. Damn it, I'd rather clean out drains in Chicago, for then I should know that there was a jolly world to which I might some day return. But it's just that jolly world that's been blasted for me."

He dropped his head on his hands and groaned.

"There's no way out except to cut my throat, and that wouldn't be playing the game. I suppose I must go through with it. I mustn't behave like a cad. . . . Besides, I daren't. I simply haven't the nerve."

Tallis was smiling cryptically.

"Funny you should tell me this. For the same thing happened to me about a quarter of a century ago."

Reggie looked up quickly. "Gospel truth?" he asked.

"Gospel truth. She was an American—from Philadelphia—very pretty, and sweet, and sticky as barley sugar. She had a family, too, just like the Cortals, and she had a business mind. She took me up, and meant to run me, and at first I was fascinated. Then I saw that

it would mean Gehenna—Gehenna for both of us."

"What did you do?" The question came like a pistol crack.

"I did the only thing. Ran away and hid myself. Very far away—to western Tibet. I thought at the time that I was behaving like a cad, but now I know that it would have been far more caddish to have gone on. Marriage by capture doesn't suit people like you and me."

Reggie stared.

"I am not going to Tibet," he said. He had forgotten all about Moe and Flambard, but something remained by way of an inhibition against the Orient.

"No need to. The world is wide. There's plenty of other places."

Tallis rose and rang a bell.

"I'm an abstemious man," he said; "but I always drink brandy in moments of crisis. This is a crisis for you, my lad, and I'm going to take charge of it. You must run away and hide, like a little boy. It's the only thing to do, and it's also the wisest and the most courageous thing. Cut the painter, burn the ship, hew down the bridge behind you."

There was light in Reggie's dull eyes.

"Where shall I run to?" he asked, and his voice had lost its flatness.

"Come with me," said Tallis. "I'm off to-morrow morning, and shall be away for the better part of a year. I have a bit of work to do before I can finish my book. I have shut

up Libanus and sent my valuables to the bank. We go up to Liverpool to-night, so you will just have time to make your arrangements."

"I'm not going east," said Reggie, as the vague recollection rose again in him.

"No more am I. I am going west."

Tallis fetched a sheet of club notepaper on which he wrote with a fat gold pencil.

"We must proceed according to Cocker," he said. "No secret shuffling out of the country. This is an announcement of my departure which will appear in the press to-morrow, and I have added your name. It is your Declaration of Independence to all whom it may concern. Also you are going straight from here to see Verona and tell her. That will correspond to the tea chests in Boston Harbour. The train for Liverpool leaves at ten minutes past seven. We can dine on it."

"What shall I say to her?" Reggie faltered, but not as one without hope.

"That's your concern. You will find words if you really mean business. You are improving on my conduct, for I never made my adieux to the lady, but then Verona has done a good deal for you, and she is old Jim Jack's niece. After all, it's a kindness to her, for a girl with her brains can do better for herself than a chap like you. When you get home, you'll find that she has espoused some appalling magnate."

Reggie was on his feet, his lassitude gone, his shoulders squared. He spruced himself up with the help of an adjacent mirror, and his movements were brisk.

"Right," he said. "The seven-ten at Euston. I needn't take much luggage, for I can buy what I want in . . ." He stopped short. "New York is no good. I can't hide myself there. The Cortals know half the place, and those blighted brothers are always hopping over."

Tallis was paying for the brandy.

"You needn't worry about that," he said. "New York is only our jumping-off point. We are bound for farther south . . . Central America . . . a place called Yucatan."