FOR VALUE RECEIVED —By Edith Barnard Delano

One of the Evening Public Ledger's New Short Stories in the Series of Unpublished Fiction by the Best American Writers of the Day

ON THE way back from the post-office Anita Prescott stopped at the turn of the road where the old apple tree was shedding its rosy petals, and looked down at Miriam's house. Just so had she first seen it on that day four years before, when she and Michael were on their honeymoon, wandering: yet it was not that moment of companioned ecstasy that had brought her back, but the remembered peace of it. Peace—that was what she had wanted; when she determined to escape from all that was not peace, all that was disillusion, a sudden vision had come to her of the little white house under the elm, the red roof and the smoke wavering up from its chimney, and the strong, smiling woman who had given them milk to drink. Peace—a refuge during the long year that she must wait for freedom; peace that she must have, and that, she told herself, she should find here. Determination, vision, flight, then a visit to a lawyer who "took" cases like hers—as if there could be any other like hers!—and, finally, speech with Miriam at the door of the white house.

"You don't want to board here," Miriam had told her. "I have a room, yes. And I'd just love to have you. But this isn't the place for you. You don't know anything about me."

Edith Barnard Delano began writing when she was little more than a girl, and sold immediately her first ten stories. Some years ago she wrote a book called "Rags," which Mary Pickford saw before it was published, and Mrs. Delano was asked to make it into a play. From there she went right on making moving pictures. But Mrs. Delano is an artist, and the call to return to the "legitimate" writing of fiction was too great. She abandoned the motion-picture field, except vicariously, for her place as a novelist.

"As much as you know about me."

The other shook her head. "I guess it's different," said she. "Folks around here don't have anything to do with me. You'd be lonely."

"I want a place where I can be—alone."

THE woman gave her a steady look; then she said, calmly, as though offering an explanation that did not touch herself at all. "My name's Miriam. Around here they seem to think it ought to be—Hagar."

Anita flushed a little under the baldness of it; but she said: "Well—there's a wilderness for most of us. I am—in flight, too."

"Come in," Miriam had said, and so far that remained the fullness of explanation between them.

Anita was thinking of it today because of the letter she had brought from the village, the letter postmarked Cleveland and forwarded by the man who took cases like hers.

"You will remember that you were warned," her mother had written. "Your hiding yourself away now is nothing more than a pose. It doesn't help things. You can get your divorce here as well as wherever you are, and you will come home at once, where you belong. The sooner it is all over, and we can forget the unfortunate affair——"

Anita's lips twisted into a bitter little smile; her eyes hardened. She crossed the road to the grassy bank under the apple tree, and leaned her elbows on the fence, looking off across the mellowing fields. Beyond a tremulous breath of green along the river; early-plowed furrows gleaming where the setting sun touched them; purpled shadows under the hill, apple-blow in her hair, bluets and violets under her feet, a world pulsing to new life—this quietude, this peace, peace but for her thoughts—her being here a pose!

Oh, yes, they had warned her! Heavens, how hadn't they warned her! She had been won by the glamour of a uniform; they didn't know anything about his people; he wasn't their 'sort'! He was poor; worse, he was visionary, with those talked-of inventions of his; did she suppose she could be happy as a poor man's wife, even though she did have a wee bit of money of her own? And look at the way his lips set, and that hard look that came into his eyes when he faced their perfectly natural opposition to the marriage! She had always been headstrong, always wanted her own way; did she think she could get on with a man like that? Oh, it was unthinkable; so the family had warned her. And their warnings had but added to her feeling of release, her joyous sense of conquest, when she had gone to her man.

Four years ago—and now it was all over! Her mother had no better word for it than to call it an unfortunate affair, that marriage and the divorce she was waiting for. No better word for those four brimming years of life. Only that, for the first glad confidence of having found her mate; for the happy making of the little home; for her pride in her Michael. That, for the daily growing loneliness, the feeling of being cut off from her own world; for the slowly creeping reserves between them that had been swept away, at lessening intervals, by the reblossoming of their love; that—for quarrels and kisses, for bitter words and repentant cheek to cheek, for the hours that he was away from her and his increasing absorption in his work and her unreasonable jealousy of it; for the crowning moments of their repledged love—oh, for all of it, everything!

Not great things; not even great things, but little things that totaled so disastrously high; and at last, for her conviction that their marriage had been a mistake, that they were not meant for each other, that the only thing to do was to end it, to end it.

Then, her flight; her communicating with him through the man who took cases like hers; and, at last, Miriam's.

NOW for a month she had been here, where she had thought peace must dwell; been here watching spring come, watching Miriam, thinking. Sap rising, birds on the wing; Miriam, working; Anita, thinking. Miriam plowing. Miriam at work in the garden, sowing early peas, digging parsnips and taking a share to the house next door and leaving them on the doorstep. Anita—watching, thinking. Miriam and her father, that old man who gave her no pleasant word, nor helped in her tasks; the old man with a snarl, a bitter name for her sometimes; the old man sitting in the sun, or in the window with a Bible on his knee. Miriam serene in the kitchen, humming, tramping from stove to table. Anita—idle, thinking. The cow lowing for her calf; Miriam carrying a brimming pail of milk across the grass to the house next door, the girl there who went in when she saw her coming with the gift; Anita, remembering Michael, his obliviousness, thinking, thinking. Bluebirds nesting; Miriam running to a child who had stumbled in the road, wiping the tears from its face; Anita, thinking of the children Michael had wanted, and she had not. The clod of a youth next door and the stone he threw at Miriam, and the way she smiled when she put hot water on the cut; Anita, thinking, thinking of the wounds of the spirit that she had kept to herself and resented, thinking, thinking.

"You aren't much like other women," Miriam said to her one day when she had come back from leaving another unthanked gift at the house next door. "You never ask any questions."

"Well—you aren't much like other women, yourself," Anita answered.

But Miriam laughed, tossed back a stray lock of hair, said "Oh, yes, I am! That's just exactly what I am!"

The old man muttered an ugly name. Anita watched Miriam, watched the swelling applebuds, thought. Thoughts that were bruises, memories that flamed and seared; questions that would not be answered; no help from the nights or days, no bread of understanding, no water of comfort. So had the weeks passed.

"Nita! It's Nita!"

"Michael! I've come back"

The day the letter came she went out after supper and sat on the doorstep. A young moon had left the night to the radiance of gleaming stars; the tender sweetness of the air was pierced by the song of the little frogs caroling their return to life and the sadness of past summers and the joy of the summer to come; the fragrance of the drying fields was like an incense. A world drowsing, yet stirring to resurrection. * * * Michael * * * at work, of course * * * later, the opening of a door and the night's air coming in; his step on the stairs and the way—the way—Ah! No—no!

MIRIAM'S skirt was brushing Anita's shoulder. "What a night!" she said. There was a basket in her hand. "Don't you want to walk down the road? I have an errand. A man who does work for me sometimes is in trouble."

They went side by side through the song and the incense and the star light, Miriam intent upon her errand, Anita—remembering, thinking. They went through the village, and those they met passed them by as though they were shadows. They came to a house on a hillside beyond, a low, poor house, where a lamp shone from within. A man came to the door. His eyes in his unshaven face looked as though some fire of pain had burned in them and died, leaving them scorched. He looked at Miriam.

"I can't come to work in the morning," he said.

"I know," she told him. "I'll be there with you tomorrow. Here's something I've brought for her to eat. You must take some, too. You'll need your strength."

"She ain't et anything yet," the man said. "She's awful sick—grievin'."

Before they had gone far on their homeward way the man overtook them. "I wanted to ask you. Would it be showing respect if I did it for them myself? The sexton charges $5, and —— But I wouldn't want to do anything that didn't show respect."

Miriam touched his arm. "It would be the most beautiful thing you could do," she said. "You'd always have it to remember—that you had done something for them."

As they neared Miriam's house she said softly: "It is such a very beautiful world."

"Beautiful!" All of Anita's bitterness, all the dregs of her accumulated thinking, lay in the word.

"Yes, it is. Struggle is not beautiful or shirking, but just living it."

"There was death back there, wasn't there? Pain first and death and sorrow. Is that beautiful? And your days—the way you have to work, the way people—that stone * * * How can you call it beautiful?"

"I know," said Miriam. "I used to feel that way, too. I hadn't weighed things. I used to think more about what I had to pay than about what I had. Of course, you have to pay for whatever you have. Everybody has to pay, one way or another. But that's only fair. Life's worth it."

"Never! Nothing could be worth what you have to pay—sometimes."

"Ah!" The word was a murmur of protest. Then Miriam said: "Look up at that sky. It was a night like this that I went away with him. Oh, I knew what I was doing. I knew what they'd think of me. Rightly, too. I knew I'd have to pay, but I'd made up my mind that what I could have would be worth it. It's the greatest thing there is. I guess everybody pays for it one way or another. We had always loved each other. I threw him over, and after mother died and I came back here to teach the school and look after father he was married to some one else. They lived next door. Yes, those are his children. He always worked hard, but he never got on. His wife—she wasn't easy to live with. At last they had to take her to the asylum—hopeless. Her mother came to look after the children. Then he got tuberculosis. There on the porch, night and day; not a chance for him here, but in the West. So we went. He lived eight years. And I lived them. Now—I'm paying; that's all. It was worth it."

Oh, those thoughts that sobbed and sang, those thoughts that stung and throbbed and flamed! "Worth it! Then what you had was different; somehow greater——"

"It was just what other women have. Good and bad. The better and the worse. Marriage is like that. Neither of us was an angel. You don't live with any man eight years on honey. His wife died soon, and we were married before the law; but sometimes I remembered what I'd done, and something in me shrank away from myself; sometimes he was lonely, fretful, impatient. We said things; we wanted things. But we had each other. We belonged—— Yes, it was worth it."

They walked on through a shadowy place and came out into the starlight again. "You are so strong," whispered Anita.

"Because I came back here to look after them all? I'd have had to pay, anyway. It's life that's strong. You don't get away from life. Life makes you pay, even when you think you're dodging payment. Honest—life is. It gives, but it makes you pay for value received. One way or another."

They were passing the house next door, where the surly girl and the cruel lad lived. "One thing you escaped," Anita said. "You must be thankful that you had no children."

Miriam stood still and looked at her. "I would give all the rest of my life," she said, "if I might have put a child of mine into the arms of the man I loved. I would go into any bondage if I might only serve a living child of my own, and it would be freedom, blessed freedom."

Anita shuddered. "Ah—you're not like any other woman! No one else would say that, honestly! Children are care and anxiety and mostly sorrow—do you think anybody deliberately chooses that, today?"

"I know they do! It's a small price to pay for the joy of it, child."

"Never! It's not worth it! I don't believe any one honestly thinks it is!"

Miriam walked on. "Come with me tomorrow," she said. "I think perhaps you'll understand better then."

SO, IN the morning, they walked the road together again; this time Miriam had a great sheaf of blossoms in her arms. They came to a quiet place on a hill and there they met the man of the night before. There was a small box at his feet, carefully wrapped, and in his hand a spade. He began to dig, and as the yellow earth became a mound Anita drew back, shuddering * * *

"One was a boy and one was a girl," the man said. "Twins. The others is all girls."

"Yes," said Miriam, softly. "Two to love. Two to remember."

"We'll do that," said the man. "Both of us will do that."

Anita's hand went to her throat. They waited until the mound was higher, until the man stood waist-deep in the earth.

"I guess it's enough," he said, looking up at Miriam. "They're so little."

She gave him the boughs of bloom. "Make them a soft bed," she told him. He took them—blossoms that would never be fruit—and lined the grave with them. Anita watched his mired fingers touching their pink and whiteness, caressing them, laying them so that no stems protruded. Then he climbed out, and knelt beside the box on the ground.

"Would you want to see it?" he asked.

"Oh, yes!" Miriam murmured, stooping; Anita had all she could do not to draw back. But she could not take her eyes from those soil-grimed hands with their nails broken by toil, as they unfastened the paper. The hands were shaking, shaking; the man did not look up.

"It's velvet. See—white velvet."

Miriam knelt and touched the soft fabric. "Oh, lovely, lovely," she said.

"Twins," the man said, his voice husky. "They're layin' in there with their arms around each other. They look like little dolls."

"It isn't everybody has twins," Miriam said. "You've had them."

"That's what my wife said. 'I'm glad we had them anyway, Ben,' she said." He laid the little box down upon the soft bed of flowers.

Anita, feeling as though the wings of her spirit were beating against her heart, stumbled away into the woods. Last year's leaves underfoot; a dead thrush in the path; ferns unfolding, and—and the earth falling from the spade, back there * * * Life, that was life, everywhere * * * honest life, that gave and gave, and made you pay * * * Bread of understanding * * * Water of comfort * * * Michael * * *

SHE found their little house locked and unlighted; she guessed that he had not used it since her flight. She found him on the old couch in his office, an arm thrown over his eyes in the gesture of sleep that she remembered. Her picture was still on his desk; but the littered untidiness of his papers, his crumpled clothes, the weary relaxation of him, all impressed her as never before with the pitiable helplessness of the male, his unconscious dependence on woman-made comfort.

"Michael—Michael—" Oh, on her knees—just to touch him * * *

The eyes that met hers were like that other man's who had lost and suffered, blackened from a fire that had burned too hot and too long. "Nita!" he whispered. Then, sitting up, "Nita! It's—Nita!"

Not a sob—speech first, and her hands upon him. "Michael! I've come back. I'm sorry. Michael. I didn't understand!"

"Understand—"

"It's you I want, Michael—and life—to be together. I'm willing to pay—"

His grasp on her arms hurt her, but the hurt made her glad. "Nita! What are you talking about? Pay?"

"Pay—yes! I've found out, Michael—I've thought, oh, thought! I was wrong—I wanted happiness, and I wasn't willing to pay for it. I thought you could have, without paying. I know better now. You have to pay for everything—life makes you do that, whether you want to or not. But it's worth it, Michael, it's worth it."

His face close to hers, his eyes smoldered, with a gleam of fire in them deep. "Worth it!"

"Ah—yes! You and me, together! That's the great thing. Nothing else counts. Life—I want all of it, good days and bad; all our joy and even—even sorrow. And children—I want children; and work, and—and wanting and hoping—oh, I want you! You, Michael! I'm willing to pay whatever I must * * *"

Now it was his arms that hurt, and his heart on hers that made the singing. "Oh, my darling! Life can't be long enough, to pay for all that! I need you so * * *"

Oh, spring and blossoming summer, and the fall of leaves. Oh, life and its song and its battles! Oh, the dear weight of his head on her breast, her hand on his hair! Oh, promise—fulfillment!

"Yes, dear — yes! I'm here with you * * *"

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NOBODY'S MAN

How a Great Leader, Almost Ruined by a Money Marriage and a Faithless Wife, Regains Success and Happiness Through an Unusual Woman's Love Is Fascinatingly Told in This Story of Intrigue, Politics, Mystery and Romance by the Noted Author of "The Great Impersonation," "The Profiteers," "The Great Prince Shan" and a Score of "Best Sellers"

By E. Phillips Oppenheim

WHO'S WHO IN THE STORY

ANDREW TALLENTE—brilliant statesman, approaching middle age, but still young in spirit. Defeated for Parliament, he becomes interested in a new political party, aiming at cooperation of capital and labor for the public welfare, and is its choice for Premier.

MRS. TALLENTE—who has married Andrew to forward social ambitions, trading her great wealth for his political prestige. Furious at his declining a peerage, she plots with his secretary, Anthony Palliser, in whom she has a sentimental interest.

ANTHONY PALLISER—who has stolen valuable political papers from Andrew, and who, after a quarrel, has mysteriously disappeared.

LADY JANE PARTINGTON—Andrew's nearest neighbor, who stirs his interest greatly after his separation from his calculating wife. Though the daughter of a Duke, she is somewhat socialistic, conducting her estate on such principles. She is in love with Andrew.

STEPHEN DARTREY—the great Labor-Liberal chief, a statesman, but without ability as a party leader, for which he sacks Tallente.

NORA HIALL—a fascinating young feminist and radical, is love with Dartrey.

MILLER—a coarse-grained radical.

"DEAR NORA," he begged, "be kind to me. It is for your sake. I know what love should mean for you, what it must mean for every sweet woman. You see only the present. It is my hard task to look into the future for you.

"Can't you understand," she whispered feverishly, "that I would rather have six years of your life, and its aftermath, than an eternity with any other man? Bend down your head, Stephen."

Her hands were clasped around his neck, her lips forced his. For a moment they remained so, while the room swam around her and her heart throbbed like a mad thing. Then she slowly unlocked her arms and drew away. As though conscious of what she was doing, she found herself rubbing her lips softly with her handkerchief. She threw herself back in her chair a little recklessly.

"Very well, Stephen," she said, "you know your heart best. Drink your coffee and I'll be sensible again directly."

To his horror she was shaken with sobs. He would have consoled her, but she motioned him away.

"Dear Stephen," she pleaded, "I am sorry—to be such a fool—but this thing has lived with me a long time, and—would you go away? It would be kindest."

He rose to his feet, hesitated for one moment of agony, then crossed the room with a farewell glance at the pale and little feast. He closed the door softly behind him, descended the stairs and stood for a moment in the entrance hall, looking out upon the street. A cheerless, drizzling rain was falling.

The streets were wet and swept with a cold wind. He looked up and down, thought out the way to his club and shivered, thought out in misery the way back to Chelsea, the turning of his latch-key, the darkened rooms. The house opposite was brilliantly lit up. They seemed to be dancing there and the music of violins floated out into the darkness. Even as he stood there he felt the bands of self-control weaken about him. A vision of the cold, gray days ahead terrified him. He was pitting his brain against his heart. Lives had been wrecked in that fashion. Philosophy, as the years creep on, is but a dour consolation. He saw himself with the jewel of life in his hand, prepared to cast it away. He turned around and ran up the stone steps, light-hearted and eager as a boy.

Nora heard the door open and raised her head. On the threshold stood Stephen, transformed, rejuvenated, the lover shining out of his eyes, the look in his face for which she had prayed. He came toward her, speechless save for one little cry that ended like a sob in his throat, took her into his arms tenderly but fiercely, held her to him while the unsuspected passion of his lips brought paradise into the room.

"You care?" she faltered. "This is not pity?"

He held her to him till she almost swooned. The restraint of so many years was broken down.

"Must I, after all, be the teacher?" he asked passionately, as their lips met again. "Must I show you what love is?"

Tallente was seated at breakfast a few mornings later when his wife paid him an unexpected visit. She responded to his greeting with a cold nod, refused the coffee which he offered her and the easy-chair which he pushed forward to the fire.

"I got your letter, Andrew," she said, "in which you proposed to call upon me this afternoon. I am leaving town. I am on my way back to New York, as a matter of fact, and I shall have left the hotel by midday, so you see I have come to visit you instead."

"It is very kind," he answered.

She shrugged her shoulders and looked disparagingly around the plainly furnished man's sitting room.

"Not much altered here," she remarked. "It looks just as it did when I used to come to tea with you before we were married."

"The neighborhood is a conservative one," he replied. "Still, I must confess that I am glad I never gave the rooms up. I don't think that nature intended me to dwell in palaces."

"Perhaps not," she agreed, a little insolently. "It is a habit of yours to think and live parochially. Now what did you want of me, please?"

"There is a scheme on foot," he began, "to bring about my political ruin."

"You don't mean to tell me," she exclaimed with a sudden light in her eyes, "that you, my well-behaved Andrew, have been playing around? You are not going to be a co-respondent or anything of that sort?"

"I used the word 'political,'" he reminded her coldly. "You would not understand the situation, but its interest and my danger centers round a certain document which was stolen from my study at Martinhoe on or just before the day of my arrival from London last August."

"How dull!" she murmured.

"That document," he went on, "was purloined by Anthony Palliser from the safe in my study. It was either upon him when he disappeared or he disposed of it on the afternoon of my arrival to a political opponent of mine—James Miller."

"I had so hoped there was a lady in the case," she yawned.

"If you will give me your attention for one moment longer," he begged, "it will be all I ask. I want you to tell me, first of all, whether James Miller called at the Manor that afternoon and saw Palliser, whether any one called who might have been helping him or—"

"Well?"

"Whether you have heard anything of Palliser since his disappearance." She looked at him hardly.

"You have brought me here to answer these questions?"

"Pardon me," he reminded her, "your coming was entirely your own idea."

"But why should you expect that I should give you information?" she demanded. "You refused to give me the thing I wanted more than anything in life, and you have thrown me off like an old glove. If you are threatened with what you call political ruin, why on earth should I intervene to prevent it?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"You take a severe and, I venture to believe, a prejudiced view of the situation between us," he replied. "I never promised you that I would make you a peeress. Such a thing never entered into my head. Every pledge I made to you when we were married I kept. You cannot say the same."

"The man't point of view. I suppose," she scoffed. "Well, I'll tell you what I know in exchange for a little piece of information from you, which is—what do you know about Anthony Palliser's disappearance?"

He was silent for several moments. The frown on his forehead deepened.

"Your very question," he observed, "answers one of the queries which have been troubling me."

"I have no objection to telling you," she said, "that since that night I have neither seen nor heard of Palliser."

"What happened that night was simple," Tallente explained calmly; "perhaps you would call it primitive. You left the room. I beckoned Palliser to follow me outside. The car was still in the avenue and the servants were taking my luggage in. The spot where we stood on the terrace, too, was exactly underneath your window. I took him by the arm and I led him along the little path toward the cliff. When we came to the open space by the wall I let him go. I asked him if he had anything to say. He had nothing. I thrashed him."

"You bully!"

Tallente raised his eyebrows.

"Palliser was twenty years younger than I and of at least equal build and strength," he said. "It was not my fault that he seemed unable to defend himself."

"But his disappearance—tell me about that."

"We were within a few feet of the edge of the cliff. I struck him harder, perhaps, than I had intended, and he went over. I stood there and looked down, but I could see nothing. I heard the crashing of some bushes, and after that—silence. I even called out to him, but there was no reply. Some time later Robert and I searched the cliff and the bay below for his body. We discovered nothing."

"It was high tide that night!" she cried. "You know very well that he must have been drowned."

"I have answered your question," Tallente replied quietly.

There was a cold fury in her eyes. The veins seemed to stand out on her clenched, worn hands. She looked at him with all the suppressed passion of a creature impotent yet fiercely anxious to strike.

"I shall give information!" she cried. "You shall be charged with his murder!"

Tallente shook his head.

"You will waste your time, Stella," he said. "For one thing, a woman may not give evidence against her husband. Another thing, there cannot very well be a charge for murder unsupported by the production of the body. And for a third thing, I should deny the whole story."

Her fury abated, though the hate in her eyes remained.

"I think," she declared, "that you are the most cold-blooded creature I ever knew."

The irony of the situation gripped at him. He rose suddenly to his feet, filled with an overwhelming desire to end it.

"Stella," he said, "to me you always seemed, especially during our last few years together, cold and utterly indifferent. I know now that I was mistaken. In your way you cared for Palliser. You starved me. My own fault, you would say? Perhaps. But listen. There is a way into every man's heart and a way into every woman's, but sometimes that way lies hidden except to the one right person, and you weren't the right person for me, and I wasn't the right person for you. Now answer the rest of my question and let us part."

"Tell me," she asked, with almost insolent irony, "do you believe that there could ever have been a right person for you?"

"My God, yes!" he answered, with a sudden fire. "I suffer the tortures of the damned sometimes because I missed my chance! There! I'm telling you this just so that you shall think a little differently, if you can. You and I between us have made an infernal mess of things. It was chiefly my fault. And as regards Palliser—well, I am sorry. Only the fellow—he may have been lovable to you, but he was a coward and a sneak to me—and he paid. I am sorry."

She seemed a little dazed.

"You mean to tell me, Andrew," she persisted, "that there is really some one you care for, care for in the big way—a woman who means as much to you as your place in Parliament—your ambition?"

"More," he declared vigorously. "There isn't a single thing I have or ever have had in life which I wouldn't give for the chance—just a chance—"

"And she cares for you?"

"I think that she would," he answered. "She has been brought up in a very old-fashioned school. She knows of you."

Stella smiled a little bitterly.

"Well," she said, "I suppose I am a brute, but I am glad to know that you can suffer. I hope you will suffer; it makes you seem more human, anyhow. But in return for your confidence I will answer the other part of your question. The man Miller was at the manor that afternoon. Palliser confessed to me that he had given him some important document."

"Given him!"

"Well, sold him, then. Tony hadn't got a shilling in the world and he would never take a halfpenny from me. He had to have money. He told me about it that night before you came. Miller gave him five thousand pounds for it—secret-service money from one of the branches of his party. Now you know all about it."

"Yes, I know all about it," Tallente assented, a little bitterly. "You can take your trip to America without a single regret, Stella. I shall certainly never be a Cabinet Minister again, much less Prime Minister of England. Miller can use those papers to my undoing."

She shrugged her shoulders as she turned toward the door.

"You are like the fool," she said, "who tried to build the tower of his life without cement. All very well for experiments, Andrew, when one is young and can rebuild, but you are a little old for that now, aren't you, and all your brain and all your efforts, and every thought you have been capable of since the day I met you have been given to that one thing. You'll find it a little difficult to start all over again. Don't trouble, I know the way down and I have a car waiting. You must take up golf and make a water garden at Martinhoe. I don't know whether you deserve that I should wish you good fortune. I can't make up my mind. But I will—and good-by!"

She left him in the end quite suddenly. He had not even time to open the door for her. Tallente looked out of the window and watched her drive away. His feelings were in a curiously numb state. For Stella he had no feeling whatever. Her confirmation of Palliser's perfidy had awakened in him no new resentment. Only in a vague way he began to realize that his forebodings of the last few days were founded upon a reality. Whether Palliser lived or was dead, it was too late for him to undo the mischief he had done.

Tallente took up the receiver and asked for Dartrey's number. In half an hour he was on his way to see him.

CHAPTER XIV

Tallente had the surprise of his life when he was shown into Dartrey's little dining room. A late breakfast was still upon the table and Nora was seated behind the coffee pot. She took prompt pity upon his embarrassment.

"You've surprised our secret," she exclaimed, "but, anyhow, Stephen was going to tell you today. We were married the day before yesterday."

"That is why I played truant," Dartrey put in, "although we only went as far as Tunbridge Wells."

Tallente held out a hand to each. For a moment the tragedy in his own life was forgotten.

"I can't wish you happiness, because you have found it," he said. "Wise and wonderful people! Let me see if your coffee is what I should expect, Nora," he went on. "To tell you the truth, I have had rather a disturbed breakfast."

"So have we," Dartrey observed. "You mean the Leeds figures, of course?"

Tallente shook his head.

"I haven't even opened a newspaper."

"Horlock went down himself yesterday to speak for his candidate. Our man is in by 5700 votes."

"Amazing!" Tallente murmured.

"It is the greatest reversal of figures in political history," Dartrey declared. "Listen, Tallente. I was quite prepared to go the session, as you know, but Horlock's had enough. He is asking for a vote of confidence on Tuesday. He'll lose by at least sixty votes."

"And then?"

"We can't put it off any longer. We shall have to take office. I shall be sent for as the nominal leader of the party and I shall pass the summons on to you. Here is a list of names. Some of them we ought to see unofficially at once."

Tallente looked down the slip of paper. He came to a dead stop with his finger upon Miller's name.

"I know," Dartrey said sympathetically, "but, Tallente, you must remember that men are not made all in the same mold, and Miller is the link between us and a great many of the most earnest disciples of our faith. In politics a man has sometimes to be accepted not so much for what he is as for the power which he represents."

"Has he agreed to serve under me?" Tallente inquired.

"We have never directly discussed the subject," Dartrey replied. "He posed rather as the ambassador when we came to you at Martinhoe, but as a matter of fact, if it interests you to know it, he was strongly opposed to my invitation to you. I am expecting him here every moment—in fact, he telephoned that he was on the way an hour ago."

To be continued Monday

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