

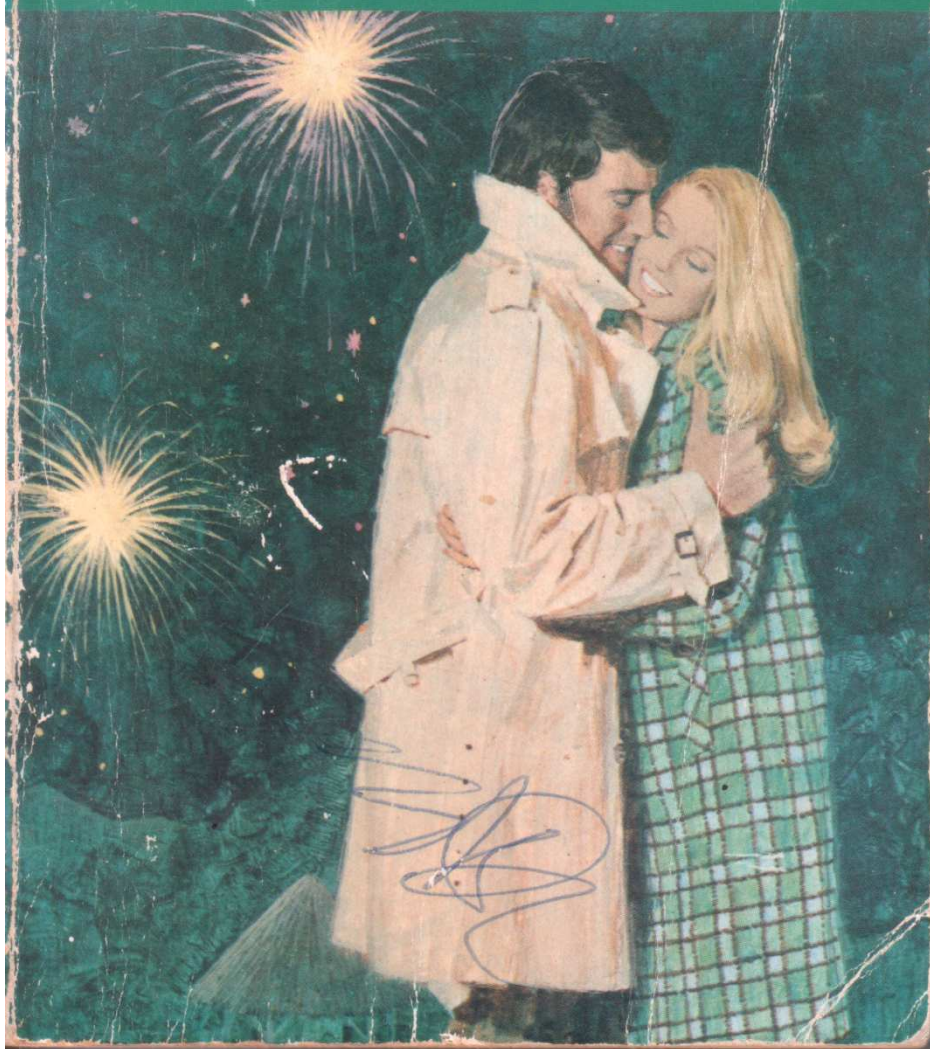


Mills & Boon

1136

SPREAD YOUR WINGS

Sara Seale



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Richard Saracen felt that he owed young Gael Cassella something; after all, he had persuaded her to sell him the horse on which he had set his heart. So when she confided that what she longed for most of all was to go to 'swinging London' he arranged for her to have a winter there. Certainly it was all a far cry from the quiet country life Gael had longed to get away from - but would it make her any happier? For she had to admit that she didn't really fit in with the smart society people with whom she was now mixing. And worse, she had fallen in love with Richard - who was more than a little involved with the sophisticated Sally Vayle . . .

CHAPTER I

IN Dublin Patsy Boyle had said, "There's a horse in Galway - if you can get him."

On the Curragh, lean men with eyes and hands which existed only for the lovely yearlings, said, "There's a horse in Galway."

For Richard Saracen, journeying across Ireland to the west, the almost certain possibility of a disappointment in store went with him. In nearly every small stud-farm in the country there existed the usual Grand National candidate. But there was a childish magic in the thought of the horse in Galway; a mysterious sense of adventure in the carelessly given information. The pursuit of a horse, like the pursuit of a woman, was for him a thing of excitement and enchantment.

For Richard, a little weary of the smoothness of living, a little tired of the facile success which money had brought him, there was something tender and significant in this return to the land of his birth. As the train bore him slowly into the wilder country of the west, he looked with eagerness at the half-forgotten mountains melting into the green, peaty bog-land and experienced a strange nostalgia for his Irish mother's country. The noisy places of the earth seemed far behind him - Paris, Monte Carlo, Cairo, even London. Here one could dream and raise children and let the world go by. Here to dream would be reality, the other life a painted phantasmagoria.

He arrived at Ballyskillen, a small grey town not far from the coast, and a ramshackle old car bore him from the station out on to a winding mountain road. A boisterous summer wind carrying the tang of the Atlantic blew straight in his face.

"How many miles to Dun Mor?" he asked the driver, and for no reason the old rhyme popped into his head:

How many miles to Babylon?
Three score and ten.

"Maybe six, maybe ten - ye can't tell at all," the man replied cheerfully. He was a tough-looking individual with a blue chin, broken nose, and a pair of mild very childlike eyes which he now opened widely in an expression of great innocence.

"An' what would ye be wanting now with the folks at Dun Mor ?" he asked encouragingly.

Richard, perched high up in the back of the ancient car and sharing the dusty seat with a crate of clucking fowls, grinned appreciatively, but made no reply.

"Would you be a relation, now?" the driver coaxed. "Though I niver heard they had grand English relations all. What would they be wanting with them, annyway - fine fellies like the Cassellas of Dun Mor ?"

"What indeed?" agreed Richard with delight. "How many of them are there ?"

"Just the four of them. The ould felly went a few weeks ago, but maybe ye know that. He made a lovely corpse."

"Yes, I'd heard."

"Maybe you're coming about that?"

"Why should I be?"

"How can I tell? But a death brings the lawyers. Ye look like a lawyer."

Richard laughed.

"I'm no lawyer," he said. 'I've come to buy a horse."

"Holy God I" cried the driver with a new note in his voice. "Why didn't you say so ? I might have saved you the journey. They've nothing much at Dun Mor. Now me brother-in-law - him that won the fight with Micky Doyle - has a broth of a harse would just suit you, He has a bit of a whistle, but he'd lep a house. Will I turn thecyar?"

"I think we'll go on to Dun Mor," Richard said firmly. "I heard they have a horse that might win a National. Do you know it ?"

"Oh, him!" The man's voice went suddenly vague. "Maybe he might, maybe he mightn't. But they wouldn't sell, annyway."

There it was again, that flavour of secrecy about the horse from Galway.

They arrived at last at a tumbledown farmhouse which the driver announced to be Casey's, and he climbed down to inspect the state of the land which, as far as Richard could see, was partially under water.

"Rest aisy," said the driver. "There's Dun Mor away beyant the bluff. I'll be having you and the hins there in the flick of a harse's tail."

The house, like so many of its kind in Ireland, lay exposed to the road, an expanse of rough ill-kept lawn spreading as far as the grey stone walls. A flight of broken steps led up to a superb front door, which stood open to the hall, which was high and dark. The driver poked his head inside and shouted:

"Are ye within, Mr. Brian?"

A couple of greyhounds hurled themselves hysterically upon Richard, and presently a dark, good- looking man appeared from one of the rooms.

"You're come about the horses?" he said to Richard in a soft, curiously pleasant voice. "You'll stay the night, of course, or maybe two. There's a race- meeting at Castleknock to-morrow. Bring in the luggage, Pat, and take the hens round to Timsy in the yard."

Richard followed Brian Cassella into a high, square room littered with oddments of fishing tackle, bits, crops, and dirty glasses. The confusion was indescribable, but well-bound books lined the walls and an exquisite walnut tallboy stood cheek by jowl with a ramshackle cupboard of rough painted deal.

Young Cassella swept the litter which filled a chair on to the floor and poured his guest a whiskey.

"We have a couple of yearlings you might fancy," he said, leaning against the mantelpiece, his hands in the pockets of his shabby breeches. "I don't mind telling you we wouldn't be selling at all, but times are damn' bad, and the old man left a packet of debts when he went. He'd never have paid them, so he died easy - if you can call D.T.s easy."

"I'm sorry about your father's death," Richard said a little awkwardly. He found this direct young man, several years his own junior, slightly disconcerting.

"You needn't be, my dear fellow," Brian replied. "The old man was all right as far as he went, but he was a devil when the drink was on him. Would you care to look at the horses now? Shane is down in the paddock with the yearlings."

Damn the boy! Richard thought. What was it about him that made him feel at a disadvantage ?

"Actually," he said, setting down his empty glass and getting to his feet, "I'm looking out for something fit to run in the National. A yearling is no use to me."

Brian shot him a swift look, then pursed his lips thoughtfully.

"There's Green Coat. He might suit you, but his form is a bit doubtful. Ulster was sold yesterday. Well, come and have a look, anyway."

Still no mention of the horse from Galway. Richard followed the young man out of the house, and as they walked round to the back, he beheld the lovely waters of Lough Corrib lapping to the edge of the lawn.

In the paddock, a young man so like Brian that their relationship could never be in any doubt was lunging a chestnut filly. The two men stood watching him for a little time, then Shane removed the halter and strolled across to meet Richard. The filly kicked up her heels and cantered across to join the other yearling at the far end of the paddock.

"We shall have to sell the filly after all, Brian," Shane said. "The stables are falling down, and we'll get no more credit from Ballyskillen until some of the old man's debts are settled."

The two brothers gazed gloomily at the yearlings throwing up their lovely heads in the summer sunshine and Richard saw that whatever ill fortune might befall the Cassellas, the sacrifice of a horse was the greatest grief of all.

Presently they walked back to the yard, and a couple of horses were led out of the stable for his inspection. Green Coat, that horse of doubtful form, was a big, raking grey with quarters that were built for jumping, but his wind was unsound, and Richard doubted whether he would ever get round the course at Aintree. The other was a six-year-old, full of quality, but as yet he had not won a race.

"Have you nothing else?" Richard asked, his eyes straying to a horse-box tucked away in a corner of the yard, from whence there came the unmistakable sound of a horse moving about in straw.

"Nothing else for sale," Brian replied rather shortly.

"I was told you had a horse that won a good race at Leopardstown," Richard said casually.

The two brothers exchanged glances.,

"That would be Scarlet Monk," said Shane slowly. "He's away in there."

The horse from Galway at last!

"Can I see him?" Richard asked, to which Brian replied a little abruptly:

"You'd better ask Gael."

"Gael?"

"Our sister. The Monk's her horse, but she'll not sell."

"Oh." Richard didn't press the point "Where can I find your sister?"

"Timsy!" shouted Brian, "where's Gael?"

"Down by the wather with her nose stuck in a buk," replied an unseen voice.

"She's probably down on the landing-stage at the back of the house. You'll find her thereabouts. We must get on with the feeding," said Brian, his manner suddenly a little cool and offhand.

"Thanks," said Richard equally coolly. "I'll go and look for her."

He made his way round the house, which was now casting long shadows over the lawn, and walked down to the edge of the lough.

A thin little girl lay flat on her stomach at the end of the wooden landing-stage. Her straight fair hair, bleached by the sun to the colour of pale straw, fell over her face, nearly touching the water as she plunged in one bare arm as far as it would go.

"What are you doing?" he asked as he came up behind her.

"I've dropped my book in the water, and I can't just reach it," she said, and would have fallen in herself if he hadn't hurriedly seized her ankles.

"Let me try," he said. "My arm's longer."

She must have suddenly realised a strange voice was addressing her, for she sat up, twisting her body round to look at him.

"I thought you, were Brian or Shane," she said, shaking the hair out of her eyes, and as he stood looking down at her curiously, he felt a faint irrational sense of disappointment.

She should have been the conventional dark-haired Irish beauty to fit in with his new-found idyll, but this child's face had a strangeness which gave no promise of beauty. There was an intelligent sensitiveness in the high forehead and wide mouth, and the eyes were light and distant and a little strange. She bore not the slightest resemblance to her two dark brothers.

"You're English, aren't you?" she said in a soft voice which held the same curious attraction as Brian's.

"I suppose I'm what you would call English," he replied with a grin. "But I had an Irish mother and was born in Dublin."

"Who'd have thought it now?" she exclaimed with polite disbelief, and he laughed.

"Well, how about that book before the fishes eat it?"

He spoke with the affectionate indulgence which he always felt towards children, but she answered quite seriously:

"Fishes don't eat books! There's salmon in Corrib."

He felt reproved, and, taking off his coat, he rolled up his shirt-sleeves and lay down on the landing-stage beside her. He discovered the book almost out of reach, caught in the reeds, and fished it out sodden and dripping.

"I'm afraid it won't be good for much after this," he said.

"Oh, I'll dry it on the copper and it'll be all right," she said carelessly. "Most of my books are a bit funny- looking. I'm always dropping them in."

They sat together looking out over the still water. The wind had dropped, and a thin wraith-like mist was coming down from the mountains. The child seemed suddenly to be quite unaware of him. She had accepted him with a lack of curiosity which slightly piqued him, and now she sat staring out over the lough, her odd eyes narrowed against the setting sun, her face still and withdrawn.

"Your brother sent me to find you," Richard said, breaking the silence. "My name is Saracen and I've come over from England to look at horses. I would like to see Scarlet Monk."

She was indifferent to the first part of his sentence - indeed, he doubted very much if she had even heard him. But at the horse's name her face suddenly altered. Her mouth curled up in a wide smile which

held a curious attraction, and she turned to him with a vivid eagerness.

"Have you seen the Monk?" she cried. "Isn't he the grandest little horse in all Ireland? We're going to run him in the English National if we can save the money."

"Your brothers wouldn't bring him out for me," Richard said with amusement. "They said I had better ask you."

"That's nice of Brian," she exclaimed. "He knows I'd want to show him to you myself. Come on this minute and I'll fetch him out for you."

"You think a lot of the horse?" Richard said, getting to his feet.

"He's the hell of a horse," Gael said, and ran on her bare, hard little feet on to the grass.

Back in the yard, Brian and Shane stood looking on silently while Gael shouted to Timsy to bring out the Monk. He was a little bay horse, not much over fifteen hands, but there was blood in him, and he had that indescribable something which marks the look of a great chaser.

"We never meant to race him in the first place," Gael told Richard. "I used to hunt him. But one day he leapt Casey's wall, which must be five feet easy. It was a hell of a leap, and Denis O'Brian, the Master, said we should run him at Leopardstown. He won a great race there, and he won again at Kilbeggan. He's just seven now and Denis said he's fit to win a National. He wanted to try the Monk himself...." She rattled on, praising the horse's points, reaching up to fondle the sensitive muzzle. The horse clearly knew and loved her.

Brian said suddenly, breaking into the stream of adulation:

"Mr. Saracen wants to buy the Monk, Gael."

The child turned and looked at Richard with a strange, distant stare.

"Oh, no," she said gently. "The Monk is not for sale. He's my own old friend, you see, and, anyway, we're going to make our fortunes with him. He's the last hope of the Cassellas, you understand."

"We may never be able to afford to run him," Brian said gravely.

"Oh, yes," said Gael. "When you've sold the yearlings and Green Coat we shall be rich."

"What they fetch will barely settle our debts."

"Well, we must raise the money some other way." She flung up her head in sudden anger. "You know very well, Brian Cassella, I will never sell the Monk. You and Shane don't care, but Conn and I love him. I will not sell and you can go to the devil! Timsy! Put him in again."

She thrust her hands into the pockets of her old cotton slacks, and walked out of the yard.

Brian turned to Richard with a comical lift of the eyebrow.

"She can be as stubborn as a mule when she likes," he said. "But she may come round. Stop on a while, anyway, and see the horse run at Knockferry next week. We'll be glad to have you."

They sat down that evening to a cold supper served in a high, dim room smelling faintly of damp. They ate tough meat off a motley collection of chipped china, but the silver was old and incredibly thin,

and the glass alternated between cheap stuff from the village store and some of the finest Waterford Richard had ever seen.

When the meal was over they sat in the crowded library and talked happily of racing. No more was said about selling the Monk. Gael seemed to have forgotten the matter, or else she had never given it a second thought. Richard agreed to stop on with them and see the horse run the following week. They seemed glad to have him and accepted him with that easy lack of surprise which was characteristic of their race. They seemed quite incurious as to his own way of life until he mentioned some incident which had happened to him in Spain, when the child, Gael, promptly plied him with eager questions.

"Where else have you been? ... Is it very beautiful? ... Do you really know all these places ?..

"She'll plague the life out of you now," laughed Shane. "She's always reading about foreign places and wishing she was there."

Richard was immediately drawn to a mind so quick to respond, and he watched her while she pulled book after book from the shelves and turned the pages.

"You'd like to travel?" he asked sympathetically.

"Oh, yes!" she cried, but added philosophically, "I never will. We'll never have the money. Do you know I've never in my life been out of Ireland? And I've only been to Dublin twice?"

He regarded her with amusement.

"That's too bad. But you'd scarcely expect to have seen the world at your age, would you ?"

He was aware of Brian watching them curiously.

"How old do you imagine Gael is, Mr. Saracen?" he asked suddenly.

Richard looked a little nonplussed.

"Well, I really hadn't thought," he replied with a smile. "Fourteen - fifteen perhaps?"

There was a shout of laughter. Then Brian said a little dryly:

"She was eighteen in May."

Richard regarded the girl with comic dismay.

"Good heavens! It isn't possible!" he exclaimed. "I'm terribly sorry. I'm afraid I've been treating you like a little girl."

"Yes, you have," she said sedately. "I expect it's because I'm so small."

He observed her slender, unformed child's body, her pale little face with its sexless charm, and wondered what they would think of Gael Cassella at home. He had a moment's vision of his cousin (Sierry, only two years older than this child, poised, experienced, self-aware; of his Aunt Clare and her changing stream of lovely young proteges.

"You'll find when you know us better, Mr. Saracen," said Conn's slightly excitable voice behind him, "that Gael's the wisest of us all."

She looked past him with that clear, distant gaze.

"I think I'll go and take the Monk a mash," she said, and disappeared out of one of the windows.

The days at Dun Mor slipped by with dream-like tranquillity.

Richard began to feel he had known the Cassellas all his life. They accepted him as one of themselves, discussed their affairs with him, asked his advice, and accorded him that true hospitality which persuades the guest that he is in his own home. There was an innate courtesy about them which contrasted oddly with that of the houses in which he was accustomed to stop. It was as if here, in their little corner of the west of Ireland, they had preserved some quality which in the rest of the world, as Richard knew it, was lacking.

The young Gael, especially, interested him. She was a curious mixture of dreams and folk-lore and sound common sense; that very wisdom, in fact, of which Conn had spoken on that first evening. He liked to sail with her on the lough, watching her practised skill with a boat while she told him tales of Conn of the Hundred Battles, the Brown Bull of Cuailgne, and that great Irish hero, Cuchulain. The old gods and heroes of the ancient Eire seemed as familiar to her as the names of pop stars were to Cherry, and he smiled sometimes to think of what the two girls would make of one another.

"Have you never cared about the things that most girls do ?" he asked her on one of these occasions.

"What things?" she said. Her face was turned towards him with eagerness, her fair hair whipping across her eyes in the wind.

"Well, clothes, dancing, flirting."

She laughed at his question, wrinkling up her nose with amusement.

"What's wrong with my clothes ?" she said. "They're old and comfortable and we don't move in dressy circles, anyway. But dancing" - her eyes grew brighter - "I love it. Conn and I often join the dancing at the crossroads, but it's dying out now."

He smiled. "I didn't mean jigs and reels."

"Oh, ballroom dancing," she said, and sighed unexpectedly. "I've often wanted to, but you see, none of the boys like it, and neither does Michael."

"Michael?"

"Michael McGlynn. I expect I shall marry him," she announced with a calm that took Richard aback.

"Oh, I didn't know you were engaged," he said as seriously as he could manage.

"I'm not," she replied. "But it's expected of us. Michael's a good creature and his land runs with ours. You'll see him this evening when he comes in for supper;"

"But, child, you're much too young I" Richard exclaimed in spite of himself.

"We marry young over here," was all she said.

He looked with curiosity at Michael McGlynn when he met him. To what manner of man was the strange child going to tie herself with such prosaic tranquillity? He was a silent, dark-eyed young man with delicate features and a proud, sensitive mouth. Here was no complacent suitor awaiting his distant marriage with calm acceptance. He said very little most of the evening, but his eyes followed Gael's movements and it was plain he loved her.

Richard watched her too. But to him her charm was elfin and, in a measure, sexless. He could not think of her as feminine, to be given in marriage. In this masculine household she seemed to him like some slender youth, going the way of her brothers, and totally without the weapons of her sex. She knew no girls of her own age, and old Kate who, with Timsy in the stables, saw to the erratic running of Dun Mor, was the only other woman who had lived in the house since

Mary Cassella had died giving birth to Gael. It was plain the old woman loved the child. She grumbled and scolded at everyone else, but for Gael she had the soft ways and speech of her kind.

Riding with Gael over the coarse, rough grass, and listening to her talk of horses, leprechauns, Casey's drunkenness, the days of Dun Mor's might and Mary Cassidy's new baby, Richard was conscious of a new contentment. The pleasures that money could buy, the pursuit of women - what were all these things to the feel of a good horse under you, the softness of Irish air, and the unity of companionship which had in it no hint of possession?

"And that," Gael was saying, "was in Tir-nan-og, the land of heart's desire."

"What is your heart's desire?" he asked on sudden impulse. "Your greatest ambition?"

"Oh!" she replied instantly, and without the slightest hesitation. "To go away from here, to dance, to meet other girls."

He was conscious of a sharp pang of disappointment. He didn't quite know what he had expected her to answer, but such a mundane, trivial wish seemed out of all proportion to the day.

"Well, that seems easy enough to achieve," he said with a short laugh.

They had pulled their horses up to a walk, and she turned in her saddle and looked at him with something of sadness in her face.

"Oh, no, it isn't," she said gently. "You think that's a very poor sort of ambition, don't you? But it's just as far out of my reach as wishing I could build a cathedral. You see, we haven't any money, and I haven't any friends."

He saw suddenly that what to other people was a commonplace might to Gael Cassella seem an unexplored territory with enchanting possibilities.

"I must get my aunt to ask you over for a bit," Richard said good-naturedly. "Would you like that?"

He was a little touched at the rapture which lit her face.

"Oh, do you really mean that?" she said. "To see London, and go to real dances? But I haven't any clothes," she added, crestfallen. "I never thought about them till you came here."

He glanced at her a little curiously. Was she, after all, feminine enough to be hurt by his careless opinions ?

"I think you always look charming," he told her with a crooked smile that always puzzled her a little.

"But if you did come over we could always fix such a small matter as clothes, couldn't we? My aunt is so very used to it."

"Tell me about them," she begged.

She never got tired of hearing about his household. Aunt Clare, who kept house for him, Cherry, her daughter, who did such surprising things, the gay- sounding young society girls whom Aunt Clare chaperoned with such success.

Gael listened, her gaze, rapt and distant, fixed between her horse's ears. Then she turned to him and said with engaging diffidence:

"There's a dance at Ballyskillen next Friday - a real dance. Would - would you take me ?"

"But of course," he said at once, privately wondering what Gael's conception of a real dance might be. "We'll have the evening all to ourselves and you'll be the belle of the ball."

She gave a wild, joyous shout, and, putting her horse into a gallop, sprang ahead with a shower of flying turf. Richard watched the two greyhounds following at her heels, their graceful bodies stretched out in lean lines of grace.

The spell of Dun Mor fell so gently upon Richard that he was scarcely aware of the passing of the days. It seemed as natural to him as it was to the young Cassellas to idle away the hours by the waters of Corrib watching the trout rise. His thoughts turned backwards in the leisurely manner of the Irish. He thought that living in the past must be a Gaelic habit of mind - perhaps because there was so little to which to look forward. The nursing of ancient grievances seemed natural. A contemplative lethargy fell upon him, and all effort was futile. Here, as in Spain, the doctrine of *manana* prevailed. Ireland in the west lay half in the world and half out, and the queer mixture of gods and heroes and fairies that mingled, through Gael, with their everyday lives held their places as firmly as the peasant types he met by the wayside.

Watching Gael bidding for a pig in Ballyskillen market place with all the shrewd, uncompromising humour of a peasant, Richard found it hard to believe that this was the romantic child whose desire for a good time had so inexplicably disappointed him, and whose rapture at the promised evening's dancing had been a little touching. Here she was the practical and highly competent young farmer of Dun Mor, doing her brothers' work with complete satisfaction. It amused him to listen to her bargaining, and watch her expression of complacency upon concluding a deal.

"I hand it to you, Gael," he said humorously. "I should be done every time."

"You would so," she agreed serenely. "You have the grand manner for a court of law. But we argue differently over pigs."

"It's a pleasant life you lead, Gael Cassella," he said, half-enviously. "Time to contemplate and philosophise."

"Time to wonder how to pay your bills and think of the world outside," she retorted.

"Still hankering after the flesh-pots ?" he asked.

She glanced at him oddly.

"The Irish aren't really an enchanted, romantic race, you know," she said. "We live too near the soil. You've some funny notions, I'm thinking."

"Perhaps I have. You're an odd child, Gael. Sometimes you talk like an old woman."

"Do I? Look - there's the hall where we'll dance on Friday. There will be buffet refreshments and coloured streamers and flags and pots of fern round the bandstand."

He made a small grimace, having a very clear vision of what he had let himself in for, but, glancing at her expression of rapt anticipation, he said gently:

"I hope it will come up to all your expectations."

"I can hardly wait," she said, and danced past the building.

"This afternoon," she announced, leaving the scattered sweets with reluctance, "we'll go fishing. You must get a salmon before you leave Dun Mor."

But Richard was unskilled in salmon fishing; The only fish he hooked broke him owing to his lack of skill in handling a big fish, and he watched, with a mixture of chagrin and admiration, Gael land a fifteen-pounder with the nice judgment of the born fisherman.

"You ought to have been a boy," he said, watching her strong, brown little hands packing up her rod.

She looked up, shaking the fair, wet hair from her eyes and her expression was startled and angry.

"Because I do men's jobs, or because I have no sex?" she countered quickly.

He was a little taken aback and felt faintly guilty. Hadn't that been just his first impression of her that night of his arrival ?

"I spoke without thinking," he said with slight awkwardness. "But you're such an odd mixture, you know. One would think you would despise all the trivial amusements and fripperies of other girls, and yet you feel cheated out of them."

She said with grave simplicity:

"What you've never had always seems important, and to feel cheated of something can sour you."

He wanted to laugh. She was so serious in her absurd statements.

"I don't think you're likely to be soured at your age!" he said with gentle raillery. "And you aren't missing much, you know."

But rowing back across the lough, he observed her still, remote little face turned into the wind, and said on impulse:

"Have you romantic notions, Gael? After all, it's very natural, I suppose, that you should. Do you feel that if you came to England and had the usual good time, you would find some exciting young man to fall in love with?"

She didn't alter her position, but the corners of her mouth turned up in a sudden grin.

"I know nothing of love," she said scornfully. "It sounds very uncomfortable. Besides, I'm going to marry Michael."

"Without loving him?"

She turned her head then, and regarded him with grave, clear eyes.

"Father Boyle says love has nothing to do with a good marriage," she said. "I'm fond of Michael; and Father Boyle says all women should marry."

"Father Boyle seems to be a gentleman of stern ideas," Richard remarked with his crooked smile. "But you surely don't call yourself a woman yet, do you, Gael?"

"I'm eighteen," she said simply. "Brian was already born when my mother was that age."

"Tell me about her." He wanted to learn more of this strange child.

"She died when I was born," she replied vaguely. "Kate would tell you. She loved her."

"And your father?"

"Oh" - her voice changed, and a light of merriment came into her eyes - "he was all right if you didn't argue with him, but he was a scroungy old devil when the drink was on him. He'd get leppin' mad then. We had a grand funeral for him though, and Patsy Doyle sang the hearts out of everyone."

Richard burst out laughing and she looked at him suspiciously.

"What is it?"

"Nothing. Just your point of view. You're very refreshing, Gael Cassella."

He rowed in a long silence after that. Gael's thoughts seemed to have turned inwards again, and she sat upright in the bows, a remote, motionless little figure.

They pulled in at the landing-stage, the fine evening mist damp on their faces. The fish were rising fast now and the splash they made was the only sound on the still air. Michael McGlynn came out of the house and crossed the grass to meet them. Gael held up her salmon, her face alight with achievement.

"Fifteen pounds, no less," she said. "Has Brian made arrangements for boxing the Monk to-morrow? We have an early start."

Michael, replying to her question, cast a strange look at Richard. He answered shortly, then, flinging a careless arm about the girl's shoulders, he walked with her back to the house, leaving Richard to follow.

For no reason, Richard felt angry and a little pitiful. He watched them through the dusk, the young man grave, in love, but Gael so unaware, so ignorant of such things. Was this, then, her destiny - snatching a living from the poor soil, bearing Michael's children, unawakened,

unfulfilled ? He gave a brief impatient exclamation, and followed the pair into the house.

CHAPTER II

THE next day they started early for the races at Knock-ferry, where Scarlet Monk was to run. Richard had not openly broached the subject again of buying the horse. He had seen him gallop and liked what he saw. It was plain that Brian and Shane wouldn't take much persuading to part with him at a good figure. Times were bad for the Cassellas, and Brian stated bluntly that he thought it unlikely they would be able to afford to run the Monk in next year's National, but the horse belonged to Gael and the final word rested with her.

It was a golden day at Knockferry and a soft, cloud-flecked sky rose above the little race-course, gay with its booths and tents. The noise of an Irish crowd came unceasingly from the gambling tables and shooting-galleries. Jaunting cars, brakes and traps were drawn up to the rails to form stands, and through it all came the thin scrape of a jig played by some decrepit old fiddler.

Richard experienced an excitement he had never known before at a race-meeting, even when Green Mantle had won the Grand Military at Sandown a couple of years ago. He knew as intense a desire for the horse to win to-day as if he had owned him himself.

Voices cried: "They're off!" A great silence fell upon the crowd, and a lark's song far above them could be distinctly heard as the thud of flying hoofs grew fainter in the distance.

The Monk was jumping magnificently, rising clean to his fences and landing with the sureness of a cat. A grand little horse indeed! Richard was conscious of Gael and Conn locked in a fierce embrace as their horse cantered home, winning easily. Gael ran like a hare to lead him in, and as they all stood in the paddock counting up their winnings, Denis O'Brian said:

"I'll give you two thousand for that horse, Gael."

"I'll give you ten," Richard said, and promptly wished he hadn't spoken, for Gael, flushed and excited with success, simply laughed at them.

"Fifty thousand wouldn't buy the finest little horse in Ireland," she said extravagantly, and forthwith challenged the Master to a shooting contest.

To Richard it had become imperative that he should possess the Monk. He had seldom in his life failed to achieve what he wanted in these matters, and, although his common sense told him that there were likely as not other horses in Ireland as good as this one to be had for less, he had set his heart on buying the Monk. There was still magic about the horse from Galway. He had become in some strange fashion a touchstone.

"Can't you persuade your sister?" Richard asked Brian, as they stood that evening leaning over the stable door, watching the Monk feed.

Brian chewed deliberately at a straw without speaking for a moment, then he shot the older man a quick, quizzical look.

"She's taken a fancy to you. You'll persuade her best yourself," he said cryptically.

Gael was in high spirits before they set out for the dance on Friday. She had made a secret expedition into Ballyskillen the day before, returning with mysterious parcels, and for the most of that afternoon she and old Kate had remained closeted in her bedroom, allowing no one to disturb them.

"It's a surprise," she told Richard. "You'll see tomorrow."

She ran downstairs just as they were going in to dinner, and danced round the hall demanding that they should admire her new dress. It was a cheap crepe she had bought at the little country store, and

hastily altered by Kate, of a shade of green which took all the colour out of her face and hair. She was plainly delighted with it, and spread out her skirts with reverent fingers.

"It's taken all my money," she told them. "But wasn't it worth it? I couldn't have shamed you, Richard, in my old party dress."

"It's charming," he said with a kindly effort, and old Kate burst out with evident pride:

"It's a broth of a dress, me darlin', and there'll be none like you there this night. It's glad I am, Mr. Saracen, sir, that you are taking the child dancing. She should be doing the things the children of quality do, no less, and turning the heads of the fine gentlemen."

But Michael McGlynn said, his bright, dark eyes never leaving Gael's face:

"You look like a dryad, Gael. You look beautiful."

Richard realised that the young man saw further than the cheap green dress with its pathetic dragged gaiety, and that he was bitterly jealous of the evening.

Richard drove the Cassellas' ancient car into Ballyskillen with Gael hardly able to keep still beside him. Looking at her, he thought of Cherry setting out for a dance, exquisitely dressed, her pretty little face carefully made up, and felt suddenly angry. The situation was ludicrous and he had an odd feeling that the child was going to be disappointed. For his own part he was resigned to a tiresome evening - the sort of evening that required a partner like Sally Vayle to turn it into an amusing episode.

As he went with Gael into the badly decorated little Town Hall with its cheap band and ill-dressed company, he found himself thinking more and more of Sally, and felt a perverse need of her presence.

During his stay with the Cassellas he had deliberately put her out of his mind, thrusting that delicate situation into the compartment reserved for future dealings. But now he found himself wishing for the subtle humour which so well matched his own, the slow provocative charm which had already held him longest in all his affairs, and, above all at the moment, he desired a partner who could dance.

For little Gael, so quick, so light running over the green turf of her native land, was as stiff and awkward in his arms as any ungainly miss from the schoolroom. In his own abstraction, he didn't realise that to Gael he seemed a disturbing stranger. She looked up into his long, thin face and knew he wasn't thinking of her at all. His lazy eyes were a little bored, and there was about him altogether a polished politeness that she found alarming. She grew nervous, and, quite unused to this manner of dancing, she stumbled and was unable to follow him.

"I don't dance very well," she said a little breathlessly when he suggested sitting out and finding her an ice.

"I'm afraid I'm much too tall for you," he replied absently, and proceeded to collect a tired-looking ice of a virulent shade of pink.

The difficult evening wore slowly away. Richard made an effort and tried to amuse the child, but for the first time since he had met her, Gael's inconsequent chatter had deserted her, and she sat beside him unhappily watching the dancers, while he vainly wished she could see someone she knew who would come to her rescue.

Once she looked down at her dress and said:

"It isn't a very nice dress after all, is it?"

"Well, I don't suppose Ballyskillen offers much selection, does it ?" he said kindly.

After another unsuccessful dance, they went and 'stood by one of the long windows which looked out on to an expanse of lawn. The summer night was still and soft and a young moon was high in the heavens.

Richard was conscious of Gael standing very straight and still beside him, and, looking down at her,

was aware that her eyes were suspiciously bright.

"I'm afraid you're not enjoying yourself very much," he said gently.

She looked up at him, and the tears were bright on her lashes.

"It's been a terrible failure - my first dance - hasn't it?" she said. "I'm sorry I asked you to take me."

She screwed up her eyes tightly, squeezing back the tears, and with a swift fleeting movement was gone from him through the open window.

He let her go, not knowing quite how to rectify the failure of the evening, and went off to the bar to get himself a drink. As he stood sipping a whiskey and soda he heard her say again, "It's been a terrible failure - my first dance..." and realised all at once the bitterness of her disappointment.

Her first dance.... He remembered her excitement before setting out, her pride in the terrible dress, his own words when he had agreed to take her: "You'll be the belle of the ball." It was he who had failed, and he felt ashamed that he should so have hurt the child. There she was crying her eyes out among the trees, conscious only of her own innocent shortcomings. It was a shame! He slapped down his glass upon the counter and went quickly into the garden.

On the edge of the lawn he paused. The band was playing a reel, and there, all by herself, was Gael, dancing in the moonlight. Unconscious of being watched, she moved over the shadowy turf, her body free of the conventions of the ballroom, abandoned to the pleasure of rhythm. In that soft radiance the cheap dress became something ethereal and delicate, and her pale, tear-washed face was sprite-like. Richard had an instant's vision of Michael's perception when he had said: "You look like a dryad, Gael. You look beautiful."

The music stopped and she turned and saw Richard standing there watching her. She waited for him, her face lifted in the moonlight, still a little lost and unaware.

He didn't know what impulse made him take her in his arms and kiss her. Perhaps he still felt the enchantment of that moment when he had come upon her dancing; perhaps it was only kindly remorse for having spoilt her evening. She looked up at him in a dazed fashion, then put her arms round his neck and kissed him with an ardency which took him by surprise.

"I'm so sorry, child," he said; "so sorry I spoilt your evening for you."

"It wasn't you who spoilt it," she said simply. "But it doesn't matter now."

"You looked so lovely dancing all by yourself. Perhaps the next time we dance together I will have left my conventional clumsiness behind me."

She didn't understand such delicate handling as this, and only looked at him in amazement.

"Oh, but I've never learnt to dance at all," she protested. "I'm afraid I trod on your toes."

"If you come over to England and stop with my aunt, we'll try again and you'll see," he told her. "Do you know, Gael, I've got to leave Dun Mor in a few days?"

"Leave Dun Mor?" she echoed as though she had expected him to stop with them for ever. "Oh, no - not yet!"

"I've stayed for too long as it is, but not only did I desperately want to take the Monk back with me, but you have all been so kind and friendly that it was difficult to leave."

She said slowly, as if she too were under some enchantment:

"You can have the Monk if you want him so much."

He looked at her a little uncertainly. Her sudden capitulation was so unexpected after her adamant refusals.

"Do you really mean it?" he asked. She nodded. "But what has made you change your mind so suddenly?"

"I would like you to have something you want as badly as that," she told him gravely. "I like you so very much. Besides, Brian says I ought to sell him. The price will settle our debts and we wouldn't be able to save enough to run him next year, anyway."

He smiled at her mixture of motives and said impulsively:

"I'd like to return the favour. What can I do for you that you want as badly as I want the Monk?"

She looked down at her dress, fingering the cheap material with distaste. "I want," she said as she had once before, "to go away from here - to do things other girls do - to be like other girls."

"You'd never be that, you funny little sprite," he told her with a smile, and added without much thought, "How would you like to spend a winter in England and be chaperoned about the place by my aunt like her other young charges?"

"To live with your aunt?" She had never quite grasped the meaning of Mrs. Windlehurst's activities.

"I live there too, you know."

"Oh!" She stared at him with a strange expression. "Would it be possible?"

"I think so," he said, wondering humorously what had possessed him to suggest such a thing. "We would make your expenses part of the Monk's purchase price - that is if your brothers agree - and by the spring you would find yourself turned into one of these little society misses. What do you think?"

"I think," she said solemnly, "it would be the most exciting thing that's ever happened to me in my life."

"And what about young McGlynn?" he asked curiously.

"Michael? What has he to do with it?"

"Well, wasn't there some question of eventually marrying the gentleman?" Richard still couldn't bring himself to take this aspect of the affair with any seriousness.

"That can wait," she said, and a strange tide of excitement welled up in her voice. "Do you think I'd let Michael McGlynn or anyone else stand in the way of my heart's desire? Oh, Richard, let's go home now - now before it's spoilt."

It was old Kate who finally decided that Gael should go to England.

"The child should have her chance," she told Brian emphatically. "Your mother would have wished it, Mr. Brian. This is no life for a young lady to be leading. She should be dancing and meeting the quality. Mr. McGlynn is a nice enough young felly, but Miss Gael should see the world before she marries a gentleman no better off than herself. Mr. Saracen is a fine English gentleman, I'm thinking, and his anty no less. You should let the child go, Mr. Brian. She'll come to no harm, for the truth of God is in her."

"Very well, you old she-dragon, you're the boss," Brian said humorously. "If you say it's all right, then it's all right."

Even Conn, faced with a desertion he had never contemplated before, said sadly:

"I'll miss you, Gael, but if you must go, you must."

"I'll be back in the spring, darling," she said with rapture. "But it's my dream, Conn, my dearest wish. You wouldn't have me lose it?"

"The brown mare will have foaled by theh," the boy said dreamily. "That will be something new to show you."

But Michael McGlynn took the news badly and it brought them near to their first quarrel. "Are you really going to England in the autumn?" he asked Gael late one afternoon as they sailed the ruffled waters of Corrib together.

"Yes," she said. "In September when we ship the Monk over."

"And who's standing the expense?"

She caught the ominous note in his voice, and shook the hair from her eyes a little impatiently.

"But you know all that, Michael. It's part of the Monk's purchase price."

"In other words, Saracen's paying. Why should a man who's never set eyes on you before offer to give you a season in England?"

"You're not very polite," she said with a smile. "Perhaps he likes me. Anyway, he's very rich, and he wants the Monk, so we bargained."

Against the sail of the little boat, Michael's black head stood out in aggressive relief.

"Gael Cassella bargaining with a stranger for a few months of frippery," he said contemptuously, and she flushed.

"There's nothing shameful in it," she said quickly,. "Otherwise my brothers would never have agreed."

"Brian knows nothing of young girls," he replied angrily. "And nothing of men who live in a different world from his own either."

"And what do you know, Michael McGlynn?" Her voice was husky now, and her strange, bright eyes were fixed on his face.

"I know his sort," he replied, unheeding. "I know he's not the kind to give without return, and I think he's turned your head."

"You ought to be ashamed," said Gael, "to talk like that of Richard. He's straight and fine and kind. You're jealous and that's all."

"You're in love with the man," he flung at her.

"Love . . ." For a moment her gaze became distant and solemn. "I'm in love with no man. And if I were..."

"Darling - don't go." He was suddenly pleading with her. "Stay with the boys and me. They'll spoil you in England. When you come back, you'll be dissatisfied with Dun Mor - with me. They'll change you, Gael. Don't go."

"I'll go," said Gael very clearly, "and nothing will stop me. Nothing - do you hear? Oh, Michael" - her voice softened and a little tender smile touched her lips - "don't you see, it's my chance? Kate understands. I want to meet other girls, do other things, before I settle down here for ever. I won't change."

"You've changed already," was all he said, and set their boat towards the shore.

The day before Richard was to leave Dun Mor they rode to an old ruined tower fourteen miles away for a last picnic. After two days of steady rain, the sun shone in a clear, cloudless sky, and the aromatic smell of crushed bog myrtle beneath their horses' hoofs was a scent that would remain with Richard long after he had left the Irish shores.

They ate their lunch on the side of the hill on which the tower stood. It was a lonely place set above a wide moor, and a little stream ran noisily between the rocks.

Lying in the coarse grass, his eyes on the wild beauty of the country, Richard knew a sharp pang at leaving Galway, and wondered if he would ever return. It seemed a long time since he had rattled along the road to Dun Mor in Pat Murphy's ancient car. *How many miles to Babylon?* The old rhyme still haunted him.

Gael he would meet again, but that would be in England. He looked across to where she was lying flat on her stomach, cupping her brown, boy's hands to catch the shining, peaty water. He could not see Gael in his aunt's well-ordered household, doing the things that

Cherry did. Funny little Gael, wanting so passionately the trivial things of life.

They climbed up the broken, crumbling steps of the tower. Leaning out from the ruined parapet, they beheld the vast wild beauty of Galway lying below them. Far away, the grey bulk of Dun Mor stood on the edge of the lough, its lawn minute and bright in the evening sun. To their left, the blue waters of Galway Bay lay revealed for the first time, dotted with tiny sails. Just below them the white greyhound was coursing another hare.

"They say Cuchulain brought his warriors down this valley," Gael said, staring out into the sun, "and Ferdiad watched him from this tower and plotted treachery. I can see Cuchulain riding down the valley on the Grey of Macha, loved by three times fifty queens."

"That sounds a pretty good record - even for those days," laughed Richard, but he looked at Gael standing beside him, her sun-bleached hair stirring in the evening wind, and knew a swift impulse to say to her: "Stay here, little Gael. Stay here with your heroes and horses and your three strong brothers. They'll rub the bloom off in London. They won't understand you." And for the space of a few moments he was afraid.

But she turned suddenly and said:

"Will you come back with me in the spring, Richard? Dun Mor is lovely in the spring. Oh! I can hardly wait for September, and I want to see Cherry more than anyone in the world. What does it feel like to be a sort of fairy godfather?"

He smiled his crooked, lazy smile. He had certainly never thought of himself in that light before.

"It's rather marvellous to be able to bring pleasure so easily," he said slowly. "I don't think I've ever experienced it before. I hope you won't be disappointed, child. Your ideas are mostly so very romantic."

But she had forgotten him again, and was gazing towards the far mountains, her eyes distant and strange. He said no more, but stood beside her watching one of the many larks rise, singing into the evening sky. It was strange that at the end of this still, blue day he should experience sadness.

Old Kate had prepared a feast for Richard's last evening. There were Dublin Bay prawns; there was a vast stew of hare; there was cold chicken and a home-cured ham. Brian fetched up some of the last of his father's good claret from the cellar, and Gael wore her new green dress.

There was about the whole evening a tender gaiety which set it apart from other evenings. Even Michael, sitting beside Gael, shed some of his distrust of Richard and joined in the laughter. In the soft light from the guttering candles, they drank toasts to each other and made speeches.

"To the Monk!" cried Gael. "May he win a great National!"

She drained her glass at a gulp and threw it over her shoulder into the fireplace. And even to Richard, toasting the horse from Galway, it didn't seem sacrilege that the glass should have been one of the Waterford goblets.

Richard got up and went outside. After the smoky atmosphere in the dining-room, the night air felt cool and heady. The dark waters of Lough Corrib were as yet untouched by the young moon, but the smell of the sea was on the wind blown over the distant hills.

Richard was aware of Michael standing beside him.

"You'll be leaving us to-morrow," he said abruptly. "I just wanted to say be good to her, and see that she comes to no harm."

"I promise you that, Michael," Richard said gravely. "She'll come back to you just as she is now." Even as he said it he knew it could not be so.

"That's not possible," said Michael sadly. "But don't let her get hurt - though I'm thinking you're the last man I should be saying this to."

"You think I'll hurt her?"

"You are not her kind."

"You'll never trust me, will you, Michael? Perhaps your instinct is right - I think it is - but it's too late now."

"Yes," the young man said with gentle resignation. "It's too late now. Her mind's set on it."

Richard left the next morning in a mist of fine rain. The Dun Mor car was needed for market, so Pat Murphy's old rattletrap took him into Ballyskillen as it had brought him that memorable day now so long ago.

They stood in the rain to see him off, the four young Cassellas, and he was conscious that here lay the end of a phase. Even should he return with Gael in the spring, nothing would be quite the same.

"My aunt will write to you," he told Brian as they shook hands. "And we'll expect the Monk and Gael over in September."

"You'll be good to Gael," Brian said gravely. "You'll look after her?"

Three pairs of young eyes looked at him with sudden directness. There was a sternness in their regard. Only Gael, exchanging repartee with the disreputable Pat, wasn't looking at him at all.

"My aunt will see to that," he said easily. "Her job is chaperoning the young, you know. Gael will be quite safe."

He got into the car beside the driver, and at the last minute Conn and Gael decided to go with him, and packed themselves into the back amongst his suitcases.

Out on the Ballyskillen road, he looked back. Dun Mor lay half hidden in mist, and the waters of Corrib were grey and ruffled with the rain. Already the thought of the journey was uppermost in Richard's mind. To-morrow he would ring up Sally Vayle. He hadn't seen her for weeks.

Leaning out of his carriage window, he watched the excited upturned faces of brother and sister and laughed when Gael said with reverence:

"First class, no less! You're very grand, Richard. I've never been first class in my life."

They seemed remote, charming acquaintances of another life, their reality already fading a little into the past.

"Good-bye!... Good-bye!" they cried as the train began to move.

"Only *au revoir!*" Richard shouted to Gael.

His last impression was of their small forms running along the platform, their fair hair, wet with the rain, streaming behind them, as they waved their last farewells.

CHAPTER III

"It's a bad start," said Clare Windlehurst, waving the open telegram in her nephew's face. "The girl is a stranger to us all and she hasn't the courtesy to fall in with the plans we make for her or let me know her own plans. These Irish are all alike - feckless and unreliable. For the hundredth time, Richard, I cannot understand why you have landed me with this girl when you had never set eyes on her before - unless, as Cherry says, you are starting an affair with her. And while she is under my roof I will not be responsible for anything you-"

"My dear aunt," broke in Richard impatiently, "for the hundredth time I will tell you I have no interest whatever of that kind in Gael. She is just a child whose strange ambition was to come to England and have a good time, and I, in a rather rash moment, promised she could. When you see her, you'll quite understand."

"I understand nothing," his aunt said with a resigned air; "but it's your house and your money; so I suppose you can please yourself."

"Exactly," said Richard, with his crooked smile. "And now I suppose I'd better drive down to Sussex and retrieve the child before she vanishes again."

Gael had been due to arrive the day before, but had never turned up, and, when nothing was heard of her all day, Richard wired to Brian. The answer had just come. Gael was crossing with the Monk to-day, and going straight to the trainer's stables in Sussex. It was tiresome that he had to rush down to the country and bring the child up to London in time for Aunt Clare's party to-night, but he felt he should have guessed that Gael would have come over with the horse.

As he drove down to Sussex, he was regretting, not for the first time, his crazy bargain with the Cassellas. It was most irritating that the

general impression seemed to be that he was having an affair with the girl.

"I suppose she's one of these wild Irish hoydens whose breathless beauty is so devastating in fiction," Cherry had said with her bitter little smile.

Even Sally, in her subtle way, had conveyed to him that there was more in this matter of the horse from Galway than met the eye.

"Is it possible," she asked with her teasing smile, "that I'm at last in danger of being cut out by a charmer with a seductive brogue?"

"Once and for all, Sally," he had said impatiently, "will you get it into your head that the child is quite unattractive to me. She's boyish, odd, rather plain, with, as far as I'm concerned, very little sex appeal at all. But you might be kind to her all the same. I feel in my bones that she may be disappointed in England. I can't see Cherry proving the girl friend of Gael's dreams."

"What does she want a girl friend for?" asked Sally with amusement, and Richard had replied:

"God knows! She never went to school."

He found Gael in the trainer's office, and she broke off in the middle of an acrimonious-sounding argument to greet Richard with pleasure. She looked just the same, except that her pale, rather tired little face wore an angry expression which vanished at the sight of him.

"Oh, Richard I" she cried. "How lovely to see you again I Now everything will be all right. You can explain to this man that the Monk *must-* "

"The young lady seems to think we have no idea of running a stable here," the trainer said dryly. He was a stocky, grey-haired little man

and at the moment his face bore signs that his patience was rapidly wearing thin.

"But don't you *see* he's not used in Ireland to - " began Gael, but Richard interrupted firmly:

"I think you can leave all matters of stable management safely to Pike, Gael. He is one of our most experienced trainers, and the Monk will be perfectly all right in his care. Let's go and have a look at him before I take you back to Town."

"Richard, I don't like that man. He doesn't understand horses," Gael said in her clear tones as they crossed the big yard.

The trainer was following a little distance behind and it was very probable that he must have heard the remark.

"Don't be so absurd, child," Richard said impatiently. "Some very famous horses indeed have come from these stables. Pike wouldn't be the successful trainer that he is if he didn't understand horses."

"Well, he doesn't understand the Monk," she said obstinately. "We had a terrible job boxing him, Richard, and he didn't stand the crossing well. It was very rough."

They went into the Monk's box, and a groom threw back the horse's rug. He was still sweating a little, and looked decidedly tucked up.

"What do you think of him, Pike?" Richard asked the trainer who had now joined them.

The man pursed his lips and looked critically at the horse.

"Well," he said slowly, "I wouldn't like to offer an opinion till I've seen him gallop. He's plenty small for a National horse and he doesn't look a stayer to me."

"He's the best little horse in all Ireland!" cried Gael indignantly. *"And,* let me tell you, he's won a great race at Leopardstown and one at Kilbeggan, and one at Knockferry, and there wasn't a horse there that could touch him. He has the great heart and he'd stay a lifetime."

"Well, we'll see," said Richard rather shortly. He was annoyed that Pike had crabbed the horse and annoyed with himself for having insisted so emphatically on buying him. Already away from his native shores, the Monk had lost some of his magic, and Gael, for all her friendliness, was just an ill-dressed child who was going to prove more of a responsibility than he cared to admit.

"What on earth made you change your plans and come over to-day?" he asked her when they were in the car. "My aunt was quite upset."

"But, Richard" - she turned to look at him, her eyes wide open and a little amazed - "you didn't think I would let my darling Monk travel alone for the first time in his life? I thought you would be sure to know that. I travelled in his box all the way."

He glanced at her creased and stained coat, at her cheap shoes, dusty and scratched. There was a grubby smear across her high forehead which she had made with a none-too clean hand. Yes, she certainly looked as if she had spent the last twenty-four hours in a horse-box.

"You must be tired," he said with an attempt at a gentler manner.

"Yes, I am a little," she replied. But she was aware now of the impatience which he hid from her, and she was conscious that her arrival was not being the success she had expected.

"I'm sorry if I've seemed rude to your aunt," she said in a rather flat voice. "I'll explain to her."

"Well, it doesn't matter now. But we have to go out to-night, so it was a bit of a rush to get you back in time."

"Oh, I see. I'm sorry," she said again, and glanced at his long, thin face a little timidly. Already he seemed different from the Richard she had remembered at Dun Mor. "Are we having a party to-night?"

"Yes. We've got a first night, so dinner is early.

We'll probably go and have supper later," he replied absently.

"Oh! My very first evening 1 How lovely 1" Nothing could quite quench her expectant spirit, and Richard, glancing down at her eager face, all at once recaptured the old charm of Dun Mor. Here she was, the strange, rather touching little creature who had shown him so much hospitality and confidence. For her, her heart's desire was coming true, and he was simply being churlish.

"It's good to see you again, Gael," he said with real warmth. "How are they all at Dun Mor ? Give me all the news at once. I'm longing to hear."

All the way up to London she talked excitedly, but as they drove over Chelsea Bridge in the dusk of a late September evening, and she saw the floodlit Power Station, she became silent, staring at the London streets with rapt eyes. It was nearly seven o'clock when Richard pulled up in front of the house high upon Campden Hill where he lived with his aunt.

"We'll have a frightful rush to change," he said as he heaved Gael's shabby luggage on to the steps.

To Gael the big drawing-room seemed to be full of people who all stopped talking to turn and look at her. She conscious of shaking hands with a large determined-looking woman who Richard said was his aunt. Someone thrust a glass into her hand which Mrs. Windlehurst immediately snatched away saying:

"There's no time for a drink now. You must go straight up and change, my dear. Dinner has already been waiting a quarter of an hour. Cherry, take Miss Cassella to her room. Now, hurry, my dear. One must never be late for a first night. Richard, we won't wait for you."

Bewildered, Gael looked hopefully about her at mention of the one name that seemed familiar, and she frankly stared at Cherry Windlehurst, receiving a blurred impression of dark eyes and hair and a lovely, sulky mouth. Cherry was looking at Gael with a mixture of defiance and resentful curiosity which slowly changed to an expression of amused tolerance. She smiled suddenly, lending an added enchantment to a face which, to Gael, was already exquisite.

"We'd better step on it," she said, and vanished from the room in a whirl of delicate chiffon.

Upstairs in her room, Gael was uncomfortably conscious of the inadequacy of her wardrobe as she unpacked her things. Cherry leant against the foot of the bed, watching her with speculative eyes.

"What are you going to wear?" she asked.

Gael eyed her sorry-looking garments spread out on the bed, and picked up the cheap green dress she had bought in Ballyskillen.

"This, I suppose," she said doubtfully. "I haven't anything else. Do you think it will do?"

"Darling, it's too *sweet*" Cherry said fervently. "I'm going down for another drink. Find your way down when you're ready."

She was gone, leaving Gael to manage as best she could. There was no time to do more than scrub her face and hands and put on the dress which looked crumpled and unbecoming in the long mirror. Why hadn't she seen at the time that it was the wrong green? She combed

her hair hurriedly, making a crooked parting still more crooked, dabbed powder on her nose with an unskilled hand, and ran downstairs.

Someone gave her a drink which she thought very nasty, but she swallowed it down at a gulp and had another. By the time they all sat down to dinner she was feeling kindly towards everyone and a little lightheaded.

Gael had no idea what she ate. She was only aware that the knives and forks were legion, that old Kate wouldn't have recognised half the dishes which were brought to the table, and that the claret they were drinking wasn't as good as her father's. The play they went on to see left her slightly bewildered, but she was enthralled with the celebrities Richard pointed out to her in the stalls, and her head still felt remarkably light.

Richard suggested going on to the Savoy for supper, but Mrs. Windlehurst firmly announced her intention of taking Gael home.

"You have had quite enough for one day after that long journey, my dear," she said not unkindly. "I'm quite ready for bed myself, and we'll let the others go on and dance half the night."

"There'll be plenty of other times," Richard whispered, smiling at Gael's disappointed face. "And you really must be tired, you know."

The rest of the party went on to the Savoy. Cherry said to the table at large:

"Did you ever see such a *frightful* dress? *Pea-green* and straight out of the village store."

"That's exactly where it did come from," said Richard coolly. "So you'd scarcely expect it to look like one of your own charming creations, would you, my sweet?" He turned to Sally Vayle sitting

beside him. "It was rather pathetic, really. The poor child spent all her money on that dreadful garment so that she wouldn't disgrace me at the local hop - a most dreary affair - and I'm afraid I didn't behave very well. Well, now you've seen her, Sally, what do you think of her?"

She was silent for a moment, smoking thoughtfully through a long black holder and expelling the smoke from her delicate nostrils.

"I still don't quite understand your motive, darling," she said then.

He moved impatiently.

"But I have no motive. Surely now you've seen the child, you realise that," he said. "She asked me once what it felt like to be a fairy godfather. Well, that's all I am - a fairy godfather. That should hand you a laugh, anyway."

But Sally didn't laugh. She said, still in that thoughtful voice:

"That's the last role I would ever see you in, my dear. Your interest in a woman has never been purely altruistic as far as I know."

He grinned. "Well, you'd scarcely call Gael a woman, would you? Besides, you must see she's not a type one would readily fall for in that sense."

"On the contrary," she smiled. "I think she's charming. Properly dressed and handled, that child could be most attractive. I'd like to have the making of her. It would be amusing."

He glanced at her with surprise.

"Well, why don't you? I can't think of anyone with better taste for the job. Her clothes are part of the bargain. Why don't you talk to my aunt about it?"

"I think I will." She looked at him with that secret expression which always intrigued him so much. "It was rather unkind of you, Richard, to shoot the poor sweet among us without even giving her a chance to have a clean face."

"I never thought about it," he confessed. "I only knew we were infernally late, and Aunt Clare would be fussing to know we'd arrived. Anyway, a little thing like that wouldn't worry Gael."

She made a small, charming grimace.

"For a man so experienced with women," she said mockingly, "you have curiously little perception. I suppose you didn't notice Cherry's expression?"

Cherry herself sat sulkily the other side of the table, hating Sally Vayle with all her might. For the hundredth time she asked herself what secret the other woman possessed to hold Richard. She wasn't even pretty. Marvellously turned out, of course, poised, wifty, a little remote. But she must be well over thirty, and it was common knowledge that her marriage had been a total failure. Yet Sally was a man's woman, and many men had loved her. Cherry jumped up, overturning a glass of hock in her hurry.

"I want to dance," she said imperiously. "Richard, you haven't danced once with me yet."

He rose immediately, and she swung into the crowd with him, conscious of his gently derisive smile above her head. But anything was better than watching the way he looked at Sally Vayle. Sally and that much- feared Irish unknown! But now she had seen her, Cherry dismissed Gael from her mind without a qualm and gave herself up to the pleasure of dancing with Richard.

Mrs. Windlehurst thankfully handed over the matter of Gael's wardrobe to Sally.

"A most difficult type to dress," she confided, the morning after Gael's arrival. "And whatever you get for her, you may be sure it will look as though it came out of the rag-bag in a week. The child has no clothes sense whatever. She told me that what she had brought over from Ireland was quite good enough for her, and what did clothes matter, anyway? I cannot understand why Richard saw fit to land us with the girl. She can have no interest for him."

"I understand he wanted the horse," said Sally demurely.

"Horse!" snorted Mrs. Windlehurst. "As if he couldn't have got a horse anywhere else at far less cost!"

Well, see what you can do with the girl," she finished. "She seems a nice child, though very young, and her head is full of all sorts of old-fashioned ideas about girl-friends and parties and nice young men. We must see if we can find some for her."

So Sally took Gael shopping. She bought cleverly, insisting on utter simplicity throughout. Nothing would turn the child into a beauty, she thought, watching innumerable fittings, but slowly the salient points were emerging. That green trouser suit accentuated an odd elfin quality that was rather intriguing; the black dress with the quaint little collar made her look like a wise schoolgirl; and the white cotton was charming for any young girl.

When they got back to the house on Campden Hill they found Richard and Cherry drinking sherry in the drawing-room together.

"I've worn the poor child out," Sally announced gaily. "We've bought and bought; but I think you'll agree I've started my job well."

Richard looked at Gael standing just inside the door, and took in the new green trouser suit with a curious glance.

"Very well, my sweet," he said slowly. "I congratulate you. Well, Gael, how does it feel to be turned into a smart young miss?"

"I don't feel any different," Gael admitted. "But I don't like clothes very much."

"The girl's unnatural!" Cherry giggled, but she looked at Gael's clothes with interest.

"Or perhaps natural," said Richard with his lazy smile. "Take your hat off, Gael. Yes, you'll pass, young woman. Have a drink. Or, on second thoughts, half a drink."

"Would you like to come down to Sussex with me tomorrow, Gael, and see the Monk gallop?" he asked as he handed Gael a glass.

Instantly she was all eagerness. "Oh, yes!" she cried. "And you'll soon see that wretched man will change his views about the Monk then."

"Can I come?" asked Cherry. "I want to see this wonderful horse that is causing so much disturbance in our family."

"No, you can't," Richard said rather shortly. Cherry was plainly in one of her tiresome moods.

"You are mean, darling. I don't see why, if Gael's going, I shouldn't."

"You wouldn't enjoy it, my sweet," he said with an irritating grin. "You'd have to sit in the back and you'd be cold watching the gallops."

"Oh, if I'm going to be gooseberry!" Cherry said childishly. "I forgot you'd bought Gael with the horse."

Richard suddenly looked straight at her, and his eyes were hard and angry.

"If I ever hear you say a thing like that again, Cherry, I'll tell you a few home truths you won't forget in a hurry. Now shut up and behave yourself."

He had seldom spoken like that to her before, and her eyes filled with mortified tears. In sheer desperation to have the last word, she flung an uncomplimentary name at him and shot out of the room.

Sally, a little surprised at Richard's sudden anger, glanced curiously from him to Gael. There was something here that puzzled her.

"I'm sorry, Gael," Richard was saying, with an easy return to his old manner. "I think the poor child must be a little jealous."

"Jealous?" exclaimed Gael in amazement. "Of me? But why ever should she be? I think she's the loveliest person I've ever seen."

"I think I'll be going, Richard," Sally remarked a little dryly. "I'm dining out tonight."

She slung her coat about her slim shoulders and accompanied Richard into the hall. It had been a disturbing day.

CHAPTER IV

DURING those first weeks, Gael experienced a strange nostalgia for Dun Mor. Mrs. Windlehurst's select little dinner parties seemed a far cry from those picnic meals served up by old Kate, with Brian and Shane and Conn in their old tweeds sitting round the disordered table. At Dun Mor if you had nothing to say, you sat silent in happy contemplation. But here there must never be a silence. The conversation must be kept flowing across the table in quick, pungent sentences.

"It isn't quite as you had imagined it, is it, Gael?" Richard said to her once.

"No," she answered with faint surprise. "They all seem so determined to be young and careless."

Richard himself didn't quite fit into that category, but there was a difference in him. Something a little more polished, a little more superficial than she had remembered. He was less kind - that was it. She became a little shy of him.

Perhaps Cherry was the biggest disappointment of all, for here was no potential companion of Gael's imagination. She was neither friend nor foe; much too busy with her own affairs to give serious attention to Richard's ewe lamb. She was a puzzling mixture of off-hand friendliness and an odd defensive petulance, especially in relation to her cousin. At first Gael thought that Cherry must dislike Richard, so rude was she at times. He treated her with the same amused affection with which he treated Gael herself, except that in his dealings with Cherry there was an added sharpness which always pricked the girl to childish retaliation.

"Don't you like each other?" Gael asked him once with her usual directness.

"Oh, Cherry's a nice child," he answered carelessly. "Wants smacking quite often, but I'm very fond of her, really."

"Oh!"

"What does that 'oh' mean, Miss Curious?"

"You say such funny things sometimes," Gael said slowly. "I don't think she likes it much."

He gave her an amused glance.

"You're a very simple little soul, aren't you, my sweet?" he said then, but there was a sudden softness in his voice which made her think of him as she had known him at Dun Mor. "Perhaps you shouldn't have come here after all," he said half-seriously. "Disillusionment is always a pity."

She gave him one of the grave, polite replies which always made him smile, then he forgot her with the unexpected arrival of Sally Vayle.

Of Sally, Gael stood in faint awe. Here was a personality which persistently eluded. In some odd way, Sally seemed the feminine counterpart to Richard. There was a quality in both which made them seem alike and at the same time pricked the imagination to know what lay beneath.

These three people, each in their separate ways, disturbed Gael and puzzled her. There were times when she almost solved that triangular relationship, then one of them would make some misleading remark and the moment would be lost.

Mrs. Windlehurst took Gael in hand with all the thoroughness she displayed in relation to any of the girls she chaperoned through a London season. She was thoroughly puzzled as to why her nephew had introduced the girl into his household at all, but she took it for

granted that the child must be given a chance and, if possible, found a suitable husband. She was a conscientious woman.

"Though how," she complained to Richard, "you expect me to marry the child off, I don't know. She is a difficult proposition at any time, and it isn't even the season."

"The idea isn't to marry Gael off," Richard replied rather irritably. "She just wants a good time. Besides, there's some fellow in Ireland. They seem to have the French attitude towards these things."

"Some impoverished young squireen or an impossible farmer person, I suppose." Mrs. Windlehurst disposed of Michael as though he barely existed. "The child's said nothing to me of any attachment. Why bring her over here at all if she's to go back and live among pigs for the rest of her days? People are always asking. It isn't as if you had known the family before."

"Let them ask I" His mouth twisted into its crooked Smile. "Perhaps I hardly know myself, Aunt Clare,

only at the time it seemed a pity that someone with such a simple heart's desire shouldn't have it granted. I think I rather envied Gael her enthusiasm for life."

"Very unsettling for the child," Mrs. Windlehurst replied with disapproval.

Gael's chief delight was to accompany Richard down to Sussex and watch the Monk at exercise. Here on the windswept Downs she felt closer to Dun Mor and to all the things she knew. Richard stabled his horses at the Grown, a little white inn at the foot of the Downs and not far from Pike's stud. Here, after a day with hounds, it was pleasant and friendly playing darts in the warm tap-room, exchanging stories with the old men and watching Richard, lazy after the day's sport, his

rather alarming superficiality shed for the time being in happy contentment.

The hunting days grew doubly dear to Gael, for she came to know Richard as she had first remembered him. Here was the dear companion of Dun Mor, the man to whom she could talk as she would to her brothers. To Richard she was a delightful adjunct to his day's pleasure. A child, a charming boy who gave him a sensation of warmth and contentment which was yet unfamiliar.

"What," asked Cherry, sitting on the end of Gael's bed, "do you and Richard talk about on these sportive occasions?"

Gael, her hands thrust into the pockets of her shabby breeches, wrinkled her nose. Cherry was always at her rudest after she and Richard had returned from hunting.

"I don't know," she said vaguely. "Horses, Ireland, anything that jumps into my head."

"Oh, hunting jargon," Cherry said, and relaxed, stretching her lovely body backwards on the bed. "You know, I can't make Richard out. He really seems to enjoy being with you."

"Is that so very surprising?" Gael asked a little sharply, but Cherry had clearly not intended her remark to be an insult. She was simply expressing exactly what she thought.

"Well, darling, as I told you before, you're not his type," she said.

"What is his type?" Gael struggled with the buttons of her breeches.

"You can see for yourself. Soignée, sleek, sophisticated, *afemme du monde* - Sally Vayle, in short."

"Mrs. Vayle is very charming."

"Oh, Sally, with her Russian cigarettes and fragrant femininity! Anyone over thirty can put over that line. She's clever and she'll get him yet, you'll see!"

"Is she in love with Richard?" Gael asked slowly.

"Quite a bit with Richard, and quite a bit with the dear boy's money. She keeps him guessing. That's why she's clever."

"And is he in love with her?"

Cherry sat up and shrugged a shoulder.

"Is a man of Richard's type ever in love?" she said carelessly. "He's had all he wanted from Sally years ago.

But you never can tell."

But Gael was lost in a sudden reverie, and she said: "Has he?" to Cherry's last remark without altogether taking it in.

Cherry glanced at her curiously.

"Better hurry, you haven't too much time," she said. "Do you play bridge? No, I suppose you wouldn't."

"Bridge?" said Gael vaguely. "Oh, yes. We played sometimes at Dun Mor."

"Well, you'll have to after dinner. David and Rupert Breme are coming in, and Mother's a demon for her game. Are you ready? Let's go down and watch Sally being feminine over drinks."

After dinner they sat down to play bridge. Cherry, who didn't play, whispered in a corner of the sofa with David Trent, a young man who came often to the **house** and was plainly hopelessly in love with her. Sally cut Mrs. Windlehurst as partner and Gael played opposite Rupert Breme, a dark, saturnine-looking man with the good looks of his type and a charm of manner which far earlier in the evening had set Gael completely at her ease. He was not a guest of whom Mrs. Windlehurst wholly approved, but he played a good game of bridge, so was occasionally asked to the house.

Gael, accustomed to the erratic family bridge at Dun Mor, didn't concentrate from the start. The calling appeared to her entirely different, and she chattered away to Rupert quite unabashed by her crashing mistakes.

"It's a funny thing," she complained as the rubber was finishing, "but the rules all seem different here."

"I think, my sweet," said Richard with his crooked smile, "you are playing auction while the others are playing contract."

"Auction - contract?" She looked up at him with a puzzled frown. "I'm just playing bridge."

"And do you play poker as well as bridge, my dear?" asked Rupert with amusement. "Let's have a little flutter now."

"No, Rupert." Mrs. Windlehurst spoke sharply. She didn't approve of poker, and she knew her guest's reputation in that line only too well. The none-too-reputable club where he played had long ago been forbidden to Cherry.

"Oh, please," he begged, and his laughing eyes silently pleaded with her to join in the jest. "If this young lady's poker is anything like her bridge it should be an education 1"

"I'm afraid I'm not very good at bridge," said Gael apologetically.

"Oh, very well." Mrs. Windlehurst gave in with a slightly wry smile. The evening was wrecked in any case. It might do Gael good to lose her own money for a change. "But count me out, please, and, mind, no high stakes. The child can't afford it."

A hand was dealt. Soon, Rupert was watching Gael with an interest which steadily grew. She played with none of the vague hesitancy she had displayed earlier in the evening, and bluffed with a quiet certitude which would have been amusing had it not very soon become evident that she was in a class as good as Rupert's own. Cherry and David left their corner of the sofa and stood and watched with interest as the girl's little pile of winnings grew steadily.

Presently the others dropped out, and Rupert settled down to enjoy a battle of wits with an opponent as good as himself.

"You must stop after this," Mrs. Windlehurst said in disapproving tones. The child's uncanny skill vaguely troubled her.

"Double the stakes?" Rupert said, his dark face avid with pleasure.

"Yes," said Gael, and put down a flush.

Rupert leant forward with eyes which were bright with excitement.

"But this is fantastic!" he exclaimed. "A natural born little poker-player, if ever there was one!"

"Yes," said Gael without surprise. "Casey taught me. He's the best poker-player in Galway. He said I had the flair."

"I should think you have I" He turned to Richard, who was watching Gael with surprised amusement. "She'd be a riot at the Thirty-Nine!"

Think of taking in a child with that guileless face and watching her fleece some of these hardened old gamblers!"

Mrs. Windlehurst said with great firmness:

"I will not have you taking Gael to poker parties, Rupert. It would be most unsuitable, and I don't like what I hear of the Thirty-Nine."

"But, Mrs. Windlehurst, a gift like that's wasted!

The child would be a sensation !"

"Gael has not been brought over to England to be a sensation," said Mrs. Windlehurst rather stiffly. "It's getting late. Would you give Rupert another drink before he goes, Richard?"

Gael was already in bed when Cherry looked in on her.

"What I'd give to have your gift!" she said, looking at Gael with new respect.

"It's no manner of use," Gael said sleepily.

"No use!" exclaimed Cherry. "Why, if I could play poker like that I'd make enough to settle all my debts very quickly. Rupert said you could make a steady income playing for really high stakes. He's pretty good himself, but you beat him."

"It would be a dull way of making money."

Cherry sat on the bed, smoking feverishly. Her eyes were very bright and a high colour stained her cheekbones. Gael thought she looked very pretty.

"Your mentality beats me," Cherry said abruptly. "If I could play like that - Mother wouldn't stop *me* from sneaking out with Rupert to the Thirty-Nine. Why don't you go one night for fun?"

Gael snuggled down comfortably among her pillows.

"It wouldn't amuse me," she said.

"You are an odd girl," said Cherry with a short laugh. "Gael" - her eyes shifted restlessly from Gael's face - "couldn't we go into partnership? I'll put up the money and you play."

"Where would be the fun in that? Besides, I'd possibly lose."

"On an average, you'd probably win, and I do need the money so badly."

"You!" Gael sat up in bed, shaking the fair hair back from her ears. "Are you in a mess, Cherry? I haven't very much, but I'd be glad to help," she finished a little shyly.

Cherry gave a bitter little laugh.

"It would be a drop in the ocean, darling," she said in a hard little voice.

"But is anything really wrong?" Gael persisted, wide awake now.

"Oh!" Cherry shrugged and threw her cigarette end into the grate. "I'm always hard up. I owe such an infernal amount of bills Mother knows nothing about, and I've got to pay them, somehow. I'd ask Richard, but he's paid up so many times before he might refuse."

"Richard pays your bills for you?"

"Well, he's my cousin, isn't he? And he's got plenty, himself. If it comes to that you've had a good bit out of him yourself."

"Indeed I have not!" retorted Gael indignantly. "He bought the Monk from me, and why not?"

"And how about the expense of your education over here--if one calls it education? That's not done for nothing."

"It was part of the bargain. I didn't want to sell and it was his own idea."

"I suppose you realise," said Cherry with a slight drawl as she got off the bed and walked to the door, "that by the time he's finished, our Richard will have paid close to twelve thousand pounds for your precious horse which may never win another race, Pike says. I wonder why he did it. Good night, my sweet."

In the darkness, Gael lay awake, pondering over all that had happened to her in the last few months. She fell asleep thinking of Richard's long face and humorous, crooked smile, and asked with Cherry: I wonder why he did it.

CHAPTER V

THE first week of November was wet and cold. Gael came in one evening, her shoes squelching and her dress soaked through. She crouched down on the rug by the fire, and the eyes she raised to Mrs. Windlehurst's were still bright with the rapture of discovery.

"Have you ever," she asked, "walked along the Embankment on a rainy night and watched the lights in the river? It's the most beautiful thing I've seen. The reflections are all starry and blurred, and the Power Station looks like a bright fortress hanging in air over the water."

Mrs. Windlehurst put down her book and looked at Gael's wet dress in amazement.

"You haven't been mooning about London on a night like this with no coat, have you?" she asked sharply.

"Coat?" Gael sounded vague, then she too looked down at her dress and observed its damp appearance. "Oh, I forgot it."

"Really, Gael, you are quite hopeless!" Mrs. Windlehurst said angrily. "Sometimes I think you do it on purpose."

"Do what, please?"

"Carry all this Irish vagueness to extremes. It's no use sitting there looking at me with your mouth open. You are the most irritating girl I've ever had in my charge."

The next day was inclined to be foggy, but Gael set out in the afternoon on one of her solitary expeditions round London, exhorted at the last by Mrs. Windlehurst to be back in good time for a cocktail

party. The fog grew thicker towards evening. Gael lost her bearings several times, walking home through Kensington Gardens, and it was half-past six by the time she emerged in the familiar precincts of Notting Hill.

She found a solitary roast chestnut barrow in one of the squares, and would have hurried on when she noticed a small monkey crouching on the pavement and looking up at her with bright, melancholy eyes. She squatted on the pavement and held out her arms, and the monkey leapt into them and chattered contentedly into her neck.

Gael looked up at the shabby figure of the man with the barrow, and Mrs. Windlehurst's party went straight out of her head, for it was an Irish voice which spoke to her, bringing with it such a wave of nostalgia that the tears sprang into her eyes.

"That's a Galway voice, I'll swear!" she said, looking at the man as if he were Cuchulain himself come to life.

"I was born in Galway, miss," the man replied with eagerness. "But it's many the year since I've been in the ould country now."

"Do you know Ballyskillen?" Gael was sitting on the pavement now, regardless of the curious stares of the few passers-by, the monkey still clasped in her arms.

"I know it well. Me brother has a cabin on the east shore of Corrib."

"Corrib!" said Gael with rapture. "But that's where my home is! Dun Mor - do you know it?"

"The Cassellas of Dun Mor," said the man, speaking " with faint wonder, "I've heard me brother speak of thim in the ould days. An' to think that out of the whole of this dirty city, I should now be talking to you, miss. Mulligan's me name."

"I know your brother, then!" Gael cried. "He made the new sails for our boat only a year ago."

The monkey started to whimper, and Gael said with pity:

"He's cold. His little paws are like ice. You must both come home with me and have a hot drink."

The monkey perched on her shoulder, and she guided Mulligan through the streets until they came to Richard's house. It wasn't until she saw the few cars parked outside that she remembered Mrs. Windlehurst's cocktail party.

"No matter," she said to the man without explaining. "They'll love to see the monkey."

Mrs. Windlehurst's drawing-room seemed to be full of people, but at the abrupt entrance of Gael, the monkey clasped in her arms, there was a sudden silence. Then Cherry gave a little shriek of delight and rushed across the room.

"Gael, how divine I" she cried. "Where did you get it?"

But the monkey, alarmed at her sudden onslaught, sprang into the middle of a tray of drinks, upsetting glasses right and left.

"Gael!" Mrs. Windlehurst's tones were ominous. "Remove that animal at once before it does any more damage."

"It isn't, mine," said Gael, making a vain grab at the monkey, who shot up one of the curtains and sat chattering on top of the pelmet. "Come in, Mulligan, and catch the monkey. Then I'll give you some food."

The man came slowly into the room, looking about him a little nervously, then he spoke gently to his monkey, who came down the curtain and perched on his shoulder.

"Beggin' your pardon, ladies and gentlemen, I think I'll be goin' now."

"Indeed you will not!" said Gael. "This is Mulligan. His brother made the new sails for our boat, and Mulligan comes from Galway and knows Dun Mor, and he's bitterly cold and so is the monkey."

There was a complete silence, then Richard threw back his head and laughed. His aunt turned upon him furiously, but she caught Sally Vayle's amused smile and crossed the room firmly to where Gael and Mulligan were still standing just inside the door.

"Richard, this is too much!" she said in an angry whisper. "Can't you do something?"

But Richard had laughed, thereby renouncing any claim to authority he might have felt inclined towards the situation.

"Leave them alone, aunt," he said good-naturedly. "It's rather a joke. Everyone's enjoying it enormously."

It was true. Smart young girls had crowded round Mulligan, trying to coax the monkey off his shoulder.

Mrs. Windlehurst resigned herself to the worst.

"Oh, very well," she said in despair. "But for heaven's sake keep an eye on the monkey and see he doesn't go off with the silver."

Cherry, helping herself to another drink, looked up quickly at her mother's words, then, swallowing her drink, went out of the room.

The whole party saw Mulligan *off*, and he stood smiling happily up at them, catching the shower of coins they threw him. But when the last guest had gone, and Mrs. Windlehurst surveyed the debris of broken glass, she could restrain herself no longer.

"Gael, I must insist that while you are staying under my roof you refrain from any more escapades of this sort," she said.

Richard, leaning indolently against the mantelpiece, remarked with a gentleness that was deceiving:

"I was under the impression, aunt, that the roof was mine?"

His aunt dismissed this with an impatient gesture, but both Sally and Cherry gave him a quick, puzzled glance, and Cherry, who had seldom heard Richard interfere on her own behalf, suddenly looked angry.

"You don't have to remind us that we live in your house," she said shrilly.

He turned and looked at her and said, still in that gentle voice:

"Don't I, my sweet ? My mistake."

Sally felt sorry for the girl, and wondered why she hadn't more sense than to try scoring off Richard, Poor Cherry's real feelings about her cousin were so very obvious, Sally thought.

Cherry was very quiet all through dinner, but her cheeks were brilliant with colour and her eyes very bright. Sally thought she was still resenting Richard's snub, and resolved to ask him later to be kinder. Half-way through the evening Cherry sat up abruptly on the sofa, her hands flying to the neck of her dress.

"My brooch has gone!" she announced dramatically.

"You've probably dropped it somewhere," said Richard without much interest.

They hunted among the cushions, and Richard went back to the dining-room to see if it was there.

"I don't remember you wearing the brooch this evening, dear," said her mother. "It's probably upstairs in your jewel case."

"I distinctly remember putting it on," said Cherry, looking at them all a little defiantly.

"Yes, you were wearing it, Cherry," Gael said. "I remember noticing how it sparkled when the monkey was playing with it."

"The monkey!" Cherry cried triumphantly. "That's what happened! The catch was always loose, and the monkey must have undone it. Probably it's trained to steal - a lot of them are. By this time, Gael, your precious chestnut man is miles away with my diamond brooch."

Gael stared at her unbelievably, but Mrs. Windlehurst said in no uncertain tones:

"There now! I knew the man would go off with something. That's what comes, Gael, of bringing strange tramps into the house. Perhaps this will teach you a lesson in future, although I'm afraid it's an expensive one for poor Cherry."

"There's always the insurance money," said Cherry quickly, and something in the way she said it made Richard look at her shrewdly.

"You'll have to be very much more certain of your facts, Cherry, before you claim on the insurance," he said gravely.

"What more proof do you want?" she demanded a little shrilly. "A strange man and a trained monkey come into our house out of the blue, the monkey plays with my brooch - Gael saw it - and it's gone."

"I don't call that proof," said Richard quietly.

"Proof enough," said Mrs. Windlehurst. "We must ring up the police at once."

"But I know" - Gael's voice was still incredulous - "I *know* you're wrong. Why, Mulligan wouldn't take a thing! I know his brother. They're decent people."

"You never set eyes on this man before today.

How can you possibly know if he's honest or not?" demanded Cherry.

"Because," said Gael with a lifted chin, "we, as a people, don't accept hospitality and return it by robbing our host."

"But we must notify the police," persisted Mrs. Windlehurst. "They'll easily be able to trace the man."

"Is that true?" Gael asked Richard tensely. "Will they really trace poor Mulligan and perhaps arrest him?"

"Oh, they'll trace him all right," Richard said slowly.

"What would be the use?" asked Cherry. "He'll have passed it on at once and one will never be able to prove it. We'd better let him go, I suppose. A nice Tartar you landed in our midst, I must say, Gael."

"Why don't you want to go to the police, Cherry?" asked Richard.

Her eyes fell away from his.

"I've told you. What would be the use, now? And I suppose we don't actually *know* the thing's stolen - at least we can't prove it."

"I see." There was an odd inflection in Richard's voice which made Gael look at him.

"Oh, Richard! They won't go after Mulligan, will they?" she cried unhappily. "You won't let them make a charge? I couldn't bear to think that by doing him a kindness I'd only brought him trouble."

"You don't mind how much trouble you bringus," muttered Cherry, but Richard turned away from her and stared into the fire.

"Very well, we'll leave it for a few days, and if it hasn't turned up by then, we'll discuss what's to be done," he said.

"But, my dear boy, you must be mad!" exclaimed his aunt. "It'll be too late then, and the police will certainly want to know why we didn't inform them at once."

"We are not," said Richard with finality, "going to inform the police, now or at any other time. It won't be necessary."

"I think," said Sally with a quizzical look at him, "in that case I'll be going. Will you see me home, Richard?"

"Of course," he said at once, and Cherry made a rude grimace at their retreating backs.

It was exactly three days later that Richard came in at tea-time and said:

"I saw your chestnut seller today, Gael."

Cherry went rather white.

"Did you speak to him?" she asked.

"Oh, yes."

"Well - what did he say ?"

"He thanked me for his party the other night and specially asked to be remembered to Miss Cassella, and when she went back to Ireland would she tell his brother she had seen him and times were hard."

"Is that all?" said Cherry.

"I think so."

"But didn't you - didn't you mention about my brooch?"

He turned and looked at her.

"No, Cherry, I didn't," he said. "I didn't think it was necessary."

"It's never turned up," said Gael despondently. "We've searched the whole house."

"Hasn't it?" said Richard, and Cherry went abruptly from the room.

There was something odd about this brooch business, Gael thought as she went upstairs to dress for dinner. Cherry's manner was so odd, and Richard's even odder- She went into Cherry's room to talk it over.

The room was empty. Cherry was having her bath, and Gael stood uncertainly by the dressing-table wondering whether she would wait or not. Cherry's little jewel case was open, and Gael began to finger the bright pieces of jewellery. She moved a heavy jade necklace and right underneath the heavy coil she saw something bright shining.

Idly she picked it out, and she was still standing with the stolen brooch in the palm of her hand when Cherry came back into the room.

"Cherry - look! Your brooch must have been here all the time, hidden under that jade necklace," she cried, but Cherry snatched the brooch out of her hand, and turned upon her a face of fury.

"How dare you pry about among my things?" she demanded. "What are you doing in my room, anyway?"

"I wasn't prying," said Gael, completely taken aback. "I wanted to talk to you about the brooch. But now we've found it, everything's all right and poor old Mulligan is cleared. But I can't think how you missed it, Cherry. You can't have looked properly."

Cherry said nothing, and looking at that angry, guilty little face, Gael said slowly:

"I believe you knew it was there all the time. I don't believe you ever thought it was stolen."

"Oh, mind your own business I" said Cherry like a small child.

Gael's chin went up.

"It is my business," she said with sudden anger. "You accused poor Mulligan of training his monkey to steal. You accused' me of bringing him to the house and making trouble, and all the time you knew - you *knew* he was innocent. The meanness of it! Trying to pin a theft on a poor man who had no defence - just because he's a beggar and has a monkey. You're rotten, Cherry, and I didn't think you had such meanness in you."

It was the first time Cherry had seen a glimpse of Gael's temper, and for once she had no retort. Quite suddenly she began to cry.

"I never meant to make a charge," she sobbed. "Richard knew - that's why he wouldn't go to the police. And then today, when he said he'd seen the man, I thought - I was going to say tomorrow that I'd found it — honestly I was. Oh, Gael, I'm so miserable."

"But why did you do it?" asked Gael, her anger evaporating at the sight of Cherry's tears. "What good was it going to do you?"

"You're very simple-minded," Cherry said with some return to her old tartness. "I was going to claim on the insurance and settle my debts. They're nearly driving me crazy."

"But that's as good as stealing," Gael said.

"No, it isn't," flashed Cherry. "Insurance companies make mints and mints out of wretched people who never get a penny from them. Why shouldn't I do them? They've done lots of other people."

Gael gave up trying to follow this piece of logic, and said instead:

"Do you owe a lot?"

"Over five hundred, and I must have it. I'm desperate."

"Oh, I wish I could do something," Gael said helplessly.

"You can," said Cherry promptly. "You can play poker."

Gael looked rather dazed. "But I could never win enough to give you five hundred pounds."

"Yes, you could - at the Thirty-Nine. Easily in two evenings - in one if you're lucky."

"And supposing I lost?"

"You *mustn't* lose."

There was a desperation in Cherry's voice that brought out all the Cassella recklessness in Gael.

"All right, I'll do it, and I'll win," she said, her eyes strange with their bright distant look. She didn't think of asking what would happen if she lost, and Cherry, seeing that odd, distant gaze, felt a superstitious hope.

"I believe you will," she said. "Oh, Gael, if you do this for me, I'll do anything for you - anything you ask me, ever."

Rupert Breme was delighted to oblige. They chose an evening when Mrs. Windlehurst and Richard were both out, and Cherry watched Gael dress in a fever of impatience.

"Rupert says if your luck holds as it did the other evening, you ought to make five hundred at one sitting," she said. "He's very amused about it all."

"And supposing I lose?"

"He'll stake you. He's got plenty, and poker's his god. You needn't mind about that. You can always play another night. I wish I was coming with you, but I might be a hoodoo on you, and I shall be so frightfully anxious."

Gael turned a pale, dreamy face to Cherry. In her white dress, with her soft light hair brushed back from her high forehead, she looked like some spellbound child.

"I shall win," she said slowly. "It's one of my nights. I can always tell."

Cherry spent a restless evening. She wished she had arranged to go out herself. The hours dragged by slowly, and she was glad to hear her mother's key in the lock just a little before midnight.

"Still up, dear?" Mrs. Windlehurst said. "Richard picked me up at the Club, which was nice. Has Gael gone to bed?"

"No, she's out."

"Out where?"

"She's dancing, I believe."

"Who has taken her?"

"Rupert Breme."

Mrs. Windlehurst frowned.

"I don't care for either of you girls going about with Rupert," she said. "He moves in a bad circle. Why didn't Gael tell me she was going out with him?" ,

"Who has Gael gone out with?" asked Richard as he came into the room.

"Rupert Breme," said his aunt in annoyed accents. "Cherry knows I don't approve. Gael should have asked me first."

"Oh?" Richard looked at Cherry. "Where's he taken her? Couldn't you have made up a four?"

"I never butt in where I'm not asked," said Cherry tartly. "And I haven't the faintest idea where he's taken her."

Richard gave her a quick look, but said nothing and poured himself out a whisky and soda.

"I'm going to bed," said Mrs. Windlehurst. "I hope Gael won't be too late. Good night, my dears. Don't stop up too long, Cherry. You're looking tired."

Cherry was just about to follow her mother out of the room when Richard spoke.

"Where has Breme taken Gael?" he asked.

She turned at the door and her face was mutinous.

"I told you I haven't any idea," she said quickly. "Why do you keep harping on it?"

"I had an idea you knew, that's all," he said with his irritating smile. "I never thought Breme was a dancing man. Are you sure he hasn't taken her *off to* play poker, my sweet?"

Cherry was on the point of a swift denial, then she shrugged. What was the use? Gael would tell them ⁴ tomorrow in any case.

"Well, as a matter of fact he has, only I didn't want to say so in front of Mother," she said. "But be a sport, Richard. Gael only wanted to have a bit of fun, and poker does seem to be her line, doesn't it?"

"You know, it strikes me that you're rather unusually anxious for Gael to have a good time tonight," he said pleasantly. "Can it be, my sweet, that it all springs from the kindness of your little heart?"

"I don't know what you mean?" she exclaimed angrily. "If it comes to that, why are you suddenly so interested in what Gael is doing?"

"Because," said Richard sharply, "I don't consider the Thirty-Nine a suitable place for a child like Gael to go to with a man of Breme's type. Is that where he's taken her?"

She said nothing, and he put down his empty glass with deliberation.

"I think," he said, "I'll just go along and see what's happening at the Thirty-Nine."

"Qh, let her alone! She's perfectly safe there!" Cherry cried.

"In that thieves' kitchen? They'll skin her before the evening's half over, and you know it. How do you suppose the child is going to pay her losses at the stakes they play for there?"

"She said she knew she'd win tonight," said Cherry, and she made it sound like a supplication. "She said she could always tell."

Richard looked at her oddly and went out of the room. "Go to bed," he called over his shoulder. "I may be late."

At the Thirty-Nine, that discreet but well-known house off Park Lane, he had a little difficulty in getting in. He wasn't a member, but had been several times before with Breme. Rupert came down to talk to him.

"Did you want to play, Saracen?" he asked casually. "It's not a very good night. The place is crammed."

"I came along to see how Gael was doing," said Richard equally casually. "She's here, isn't she?"

The other man hesitated, then gave a slight shrug.

"Come up and see for yourself," he said, and led the way upstairs.

The big room was very crowded, and a group of men and women were gathered round one of the tables watching in complete silence.

"It's miraculous," whispered Rupert. "Been going on the whole evening. She has the most fantastic luck - can't lose. She's got 'em all mesmerised."

Richard stood behind Gael's chair. She was quite unaware of him, but went on steadily playing, her pale face still and withdrawn. A pile of notes and silver lay heaped beside her.

The hand finished, and a man who had been standing in the crowd watching with expressionless half- closed eyes slipped into the chair opposite Gael.

"Will you double the stakes?" he asked in a soft, musical voice. He included the table with his question, but he spoke directly to Gael.

She nodded, taking the assent of the other players for granted, and a fresh hand was dealt.

For the first time she began to lose. No matter what cards she held the stranger held one better. The pile of notes began to dwindle. He raised the stakes again.

Quite suddenly Gael sprang to her feet.

"I would like the pack counted," she said quite clearly.

There was a moment's complete hush, then the man rose slowly to his feet.

"Do you know what you're saying?" he asked in a silky voice.

"Yes," she replied instantly. "I'm saying that I want the pack counted."

The, stranger shrugged his shoulders, spreading out his hands in a gesture of indifference. In absolute silence everyone watched while someone counted the pack. There were only fifty cards.

Gael looked across at the man with clear, accusing eyes.

"I saw you substitute a card," she said.

A dark flush crept under his skin.

"I'm perfectly willing to be searched," he said deliberately.

"Like hell you are!" she replied. "I think we shall find the two cards under the table."

With a quick movement she dived under the table and stood up again holding the missing cards.

Gone was the uncanny stillness of a few moments ago. She was just an angry child standing there in her white dress, shaking the fair hair back from her flushed face,

"Casey showed me that one when he first taught me how to play," she cried scornfully.

The man looked at her with an ugly expression.

"Do you realise, young lady," he said in his soft, dangerous voice, "that you are making a very slanderous accusation before witnesses."

"For God's sake get her away before there's a scene," said Rupert quickly.

"There's nothing slanderous in what I've said. I saw you!" Gael was saying clearly. "No wonder you wanted to double the stakes!"

"Gael!"

Richard touched her on the shoulder. She looked up, but she was too angry to feel any surprise at seeing him.

"Were you watching that hand, Richard?" she said quickly. "I saw him substitute a card."

"Never mind that now," Richard said quickly. "Collect your winnings and come home."

"But surely you aren't going to let him get away with that!"

"Do as I tell you. You can't make a scene here. Come along."

She hesitated, torn between a desire to fight the thing out and an instinct to yield to Richard's quiet authority.

"But *that* money's mine," she protested as the stranger began counting his crumpled notes.

He looked up and said with an unpleasant smile:

"The gentleman by the name of Casey didn't appear to teach you, among other things, to be a good loser."

"How dare you say that to me!" she cried hotly. "I'll lose to an honest player, but not to -"

"Gael!" said Richard sharply, and there was something in his voice which stopped her angry words. She began to gather up her winnings and stuff them savagely into her bag.

"What sort of a man is he?" Richard murmured to Breme.

Rupert shrugged.

"The child was probably quite right," he admitted. "But we can't have any unpleasantness here. I'm too well known."

"I should like," said the stranger suavely, "a retraction of that insinuation before you leave, young lady."

Richard looked straight across the table at him.

"I think, if I were you, I would say no more about it," he said softly, and, taking Gael by the arm, shepherded her through the staring throng.

"I'm terribly sorry this happened." Rupert's voice just behind him was full of apologetic urgency.

"You must have known it would happen sooner or later in this company," Richard replied. "Gael was one too many for you, that's all. I don't imagine you'll be very anxious to bring her here again?"

"Well, under the circumstances - "

"Exactly. In that case, there's no need for me to say any more. Good night."

In the taxi, Gad said:

"If that had happened in Casey's bar there would have been a free fight."

Richard smiled in the darkness.

"But the Thirty-Nine isn't Casey's bar, my sweet," he said with amusement. "And you can't go trailing your coat just for the satisfaction of a free fight, you child of trouble."

"But, Richard, you don't seem to understand," she protested. "The man cheated - I saw him I And I needed that money."

"I understood perfectly well," he replied. "But it might have been unpleasant. You don't want to find yourself in court mixed up in a slander action, do you? Think of my poor aunt's feelings!"

"Brian would have sloshed him one," was all she said.

He saw her in the light of a street lamp, sitting up very straight and small, clasping her bag to her thin little bosom. There was still an unaccustomed flush staining her high cheekbones. Quite unexpectedly he said:

"Would you like to come and dance for a bit? If you go to bed as angry as this you won't sleep a wink!"

She turned an expectant face to him. "Oh! That would be nice." Then she looked doubtful. "The last time we danced wasn't a great success, was it?"

"You'll never let me live that down, will you, my sweet? Well, just to show there's no ill feeling?"

"Oh, yes!" said Gael.

He took her to a club of which he was a member. Seated at one of the little tables with their discreetly shaded lights, he said:

"How much money did you win?" and watched her while she tumbled her winnings on to the tablecloth and began counting them with intent solemnity.

"Seventy-three pounds fifty," she said. "It's not enough."

"It sounds a reasonable little haul to me. Not enough for what?"

"I must have been done out of quite a hundred pounds," she said, not answering his question.

She saw him looking at her with an odd expression.

In the soft light, his long face had a new gentleness and the quizzical eyes were kind.

"Why did you say in the taxi that you needed the money?" he asked her.

"It was a mission," she said solemnly.

"I see. Well, I think I'd better look after it for you for the time being. What was your commission?"

"Commission?" She wrinkled her nose. "I don't understand."

"Well, it's usual when undertaking something of this sort to charge a commission, you know. Shall we say ten per cent?" He extracted seven treasury notes from the pile on the table, while she watched him with a puzzled air, and put them into the bag. The rest of the money he placed carefully in his wallet.

"I'll give it to Cherry in the morning," he said casually.

"Oh!" The colour stained her cheeks again. "I never said - "

"You never said, but it was obvious," he told her, and grinned at her dismayed expression. "What with stolen brooches and one thing and another, it isn't very hard to put two and two together."

"She won't like you knowing."

"I dare say she won't. She won't like a lot of things about me by the time I've finished with her."

"Oh, please - " Gael bit her lip and finished a little shyly: "I think she would have asked you for the money, but you have a rather unkind way with her sometimes."

He raised humorous eyebrows.

"Have I, indeed? I think she can stand it."

"You don't always understand. I used to think she disliked you - she was so rude. But I believe she's very fond of you, and you hurt her sometimes."

He shook his head at her. "Funny little squib, aren't you?" he said affectionately. "Come and dance."

At first she was nervous, then the music took command of her limbs and she yielded herself to the pleasure of being in Richard's arms.

"Well, and what's wrong with that?" he remarked, laughing down at her as the music stopped.

"I've been having lessons," she said with pride.

Just as they were leaving, Sally Vayle came in with a party.

She raised her delicate eyebrows at sight of them and said with a little laugh:

"Taking your ewe lamb out to a night club all alone, darling?"

But the laughter didn't quite reach her eyes, and Richard grinned appreciatively as he followed Gael out of the club.

Cherry was sitting up in bed waiting impatiently.

"I thought you were never coming!" she said. "It's after half-past three."

"I've been dancing with Richard," Gael said dreamily. "It was a lovely evening."

"Dancing - with *Richard*?" Cherry exclaimed. "What on earth did he want to do that for? Richard's tame dancing partners are all nicely taped and catalogued and he never varies. Well - what luck?"

"I won seventy-three pounds fifty, and I was done out of nearly a hundred by a dirty little cheat," said Gael.

"Oh, what putrid luck!" Cherry's face looked a little pinched. "Where is it, anyway? Give it to me."

"Richard's got it."

Cherry's lips set in a thin line.

"I *see*! So you had to tell him all about it, did you? Gael, you're a bigger fool than I took you for."

"Cherry, I'm sorry." Gael was distressed. "I didn't really tell him. He seemed to know. I'm so sorry - but the money's there - he'll give it to you in the morning."

Cherry flung herself down in the bed and buried her face in the pillows.

"Oh, go away - go away!" she said savagely. "I might have known he'd get it out of you. Go away and let me sleep, you silly little idiot!"

But in the morning, she asked Richard quite jauntily for her money. He handed it out, counting it up gravely.

"Sixty-seven pounds, fifty for you and seven pounds commission for Gael," he said gravely. "That's only fair, isn't it? How much more did you expect her to make for you?"

"I wanted five hundred," said Cherry, shocked into plain honesty.

"Very well. I'll write you a cheque for another three hundred, but mind, that's the last time, Cherry. I see you're wearing your brooch again. That wasn't very pretty, was it?" He looked directly at her and saw the shamed tears on her lashes.

"Mean little sweep, aren't you, darling?" he said quite pleasantly, and went out of the room.

CHAPTER VI

A FEW days later, Gael set off on another of her solitary walks.

She turned into Hyde Park, and pursued one of her favourite occupations, leaning on the rails and watching the riders in Rotten Row.

Her thoughts turned automatically to the Monk down in Sussex, that great little horse on which the Cassella hopes had rested for so long. England didn't seem to suit him much more than it suited her. She knew that Pike had little faith in the horse, and even Richard was beginning to think that he had been precipitate in buying for so high a price, though he was too kindly to say so to her directly. Gael's heart grew warm with certainty for the Monk. She knew with unshakeable faith that he could win a National.

She walked on into Kensington Gardens, meaning to arrive at Campden Hill for tea, but beside the Round Pond she made friends with a small boy who was sailing a boat with solemn concentration, and it was nearly dark when he was called away by his nurse, leaving Gael unwilling to return.

She remembered that Cherry and her mother were dining out that night and that Sally was coming to Richard's house for dinner and, experiencing a sudden distaste for making a third, she decided to go to a cinema and have a scratch meal by herself. She took a bus back to the West End and rang up the Campden Hill house from a call-box to say she would be out to dinner.

It was nearly eight o'clock when she came out of the cinema, and as she stood irresolutely on the pavement wondering where she should find something to eat, she heard herself hailed by a faintly familiar voice, and Gael turned rather thankfully from the noise and jostling to find Rupert Breme's dark face smiling down at her.

"You'll get yourself wedged in this crowd if you're not careful," he said. "Where are you going? I'll take you."

"I wasn't going anywhere," she said vaguely. "At least -I was wondering where I would get something to eat, but there seems to be such a lot of people about."

"I'm at a loose end, too," he said. "Come and have a bite with me." Gael grinned.

"It's my lucky day," she said naively. "You're the second person who's rescued me for a meal."

"Come along, then. Would it bore you to come back to my flat? Or do you think that would not be permitted by the authorities?"

"Why ever not?" demanded Gael, who had many times dined at Michael's bachelor house. He shrugged his shoulders and gave a little laugh. "Splendid. It's quite near. I'm anxious to hear more of your views on poker, young lady."

Rupert himself could have scarcely said what , impulse made him invite the child to his flat. She was not by any stretch of the imagination his type, and dressed as she was, with careless attention to detail, her coat a little muddy from her exploits at the Round Pond, her face pale and unpainted, she presented no inducement for an intimate evening *a deux*. But he was bored, his original engagement for dinner had fallen through at the last minute and he had been intrigued in spite of himself by Gael's behaviour at the Thirty-Nine. It would be amusing to see what the comic little thing was really made of.

His flat, in a modern block of service flats, was a slightly exotic affair with a lighted tank filled with tropical fish which immediately enchanted Gael. All through the meal she chattered away without shyness, telling him yarns of Casey's bar and classic games of poker

and their still more classic finish until, unwillingly, he had to admit to himself there was something about the child. That ingenuousness certainly had its charm, whether genuine or put on, and there was a freshness about her conversation which, for an evening at any rate, was amusing. But scarcely Saracen's type, all the same. And he fell to wondering what the real truth of Richard's extraordinary action was. Looking at Gael, he found it hard to credit the rumours which persisted in Richard's circle of acquaintances, and yet what other reason could a man have for playing fairy godfather to an unknown young girl.

But after dinner the evening began to pall. Gael simply didn't react to Rupert's usual technique with women, and he couldn't get her away from the fish. He had changed his dinner-jacket for a dressing-gown of purple silk, and Gael, looking slightly surprised, had remarked:

"You look exactly like the villain in the film I saw this afternoon. Do you always dress like that?"

"It's comfortable," was all he could think of to say. "Don't you like it?"

"It's a beautiful colour," she said politely. "What do you call that little fellow - the one flapping his fins in the corner?"

"Angel-fish," he replied shortly. "Come and sit on the couch, my child. I want to talk to you."

She left the big tank reluctantly and sat beside him on the edge of the sofa.

Already he was bored with her, but it was second nature to him to make love to any woman. Gael bore it for half an hour, then she rose and said politely:

"I think I'll go home. Thank you for having me to dinner, Mr. Breme, and I loved your fish."

He got up, half relieved and half sulky. A thoroughly wasted evening I But he remembered an odd glint he had surprised in her strange eyes after he had kissed her, and he began to untie the cord of his dressing-gown.

"Just a minute, and I'll see you home," he said quickly. At least the taxi might prove a little more profitable.

But Gael said earnestly:

"Oh, please don't change your beautiful dressing- gown - it goes so well with the fish. I'll take myself home."

He looked at her sharply. Was the child doing it on purpose? But her face was guileless and smiling, and he gave it up.

"Very well. I'll ring down for a taxi."

"I'd rather go on a bus," said Gael, who was always rather shocked at the lavish way in which people in London spent money. She took one last look at the fish, then went cheerfully out to the waiting lift.

Richard rose from the sofa as Gael entered and said:

"Hullo! Where have you been? I thought you were coming back to dinner."

Gael looked at Sally tucked gracefully into a corner of the sofa, and felt instinctively that she had interrupted at the wrong moment.

"I've been having dinner with Mr. Breme," she said quickly.

Richard's eyebrows went up.

"Rupert Breme?" he said with surprise. "You didn't tell me you were going out with him tonight."

"I didn't know. I met him by chance like I met you this morning."

"I see. Where did he take you? No more gambling, I hope."

"Oh, no," said Gael comfortably. "He took me to his flat."

"You dined alone with Breme at his flat?" he said slowly.

"Yes. He has a tank full of most marvellous fish. There are lovely little coloured ones, and one called angel-fish."

"My good child, are you quite crazy?" Richard said, and Gael realised for the first time that he was really angry.

"But why?" she asked, staring at him in perplexity.

"Surely even you must realise that a young girl doesn't spend the evening alone in a man's flat - especially a man of Breme's reputation. What do you imagine my aunt would have to say about it?"

"I never thought. It was rather funny - he wore a purple dressing-gown."

Sally laughed, but Richard turned on her impatiently.

"It's not in the least funny," he said quickly. "You know Breme's reputation as well as I do, Sally. He ought never to have taken the child there, and she should have known better than to go."

Sally got to her feet with a slow, graceful movement.

"Don't you think you're making rather a song and dance, darling?" she said in her cool voice. "After all, in these days - "

"Even in these days there are some things which are best not done," he retorted, "and this is one of them."

"Well, personally, I think Gael must learn to look after herself," Sally replied, and Gael broke in hurriedly:

"I can look after myself perfectly well."

"I'm sure you can, my dear," smiled Sally. "And to save you a further lecture, I'll get Richard to take me home now. It's time I was going, anyway."

She made a movement towards the door which he opened for her, but outside in the hall he said:

"If you don't mind tonight, Sally, I'll put you into a taxi. I want to try and talk some sense into the child while the moment's ripe."

She pulled her mink cape up round her throat and looked at him speculatively.

"You're being rather strange, Richard," she said slowly. "There's nothing so very odd in the affair. I think you treat the girl too much as a child. She probably enjoys her fun as much as any of us."

For a moment he felt something very near dislike for her.

"Gael *is* only a child," he said quietly. "And I'm not going to have her learning tricks of that kind."

"You're very possessive, aren't you, my sweet?" she said softly, but her eyes were watchful. "Very well, I'll take myself home. Good night."

Gael was standing irresolutely where he had left her in front of the fire. The fair hair fell in a tousled lock over one eye. She looked rather bewildered.

"Now," Richard said without preamble, "will you tell me what possessed you to do such a silly thing?"

"I can't see that it was silly," she replied stubbornly. "Sally dines alone in your house."

"That's entirely different."

"Why is it? Why should it be any more respectable for you to entertain a woman alone than for Mr. Breme?"

He kept his temper with difficulty.

"For one thing, Sally's very much older, she's a married woman and we're very old friends. In any case, it's different."

She pushed the hair out of her eyes with an excited gesture.

"Just because you say so. I don't see how you can expect me to understand the code when it's all right when you do it and all wrong when I do it."

"Well, we won't discuss it from that angle. All I'm telling you is that as long as you are stopping here I won't have it."

"Then I'd better go," she said absurdly.

"Now you're being childish. Can't you see that while you're stopping under my roof I'm responsible for you?"

"You're not. I'm responsible for myself."

He experienced a healthy desire to shake her.

"You're just talking rubbish," he said angrily. "You told me at lunch that you weren't used to the attentions of men. Doesn't that prove to you that someone's got to look after you and see that you don't make a fool of yourself?"

"I don't want to be protected," she cried childishly. "It's very insulting when it's done as you do it."

He regarded her thoughtfully, then said rather hesitatingly:

"But you are a child to me, Gael. You're utterly different from the girls I've had to deal with. Can't you see that for yourself?"

To his dismay she began to cry.

"Now what on earth is there to cry about?" he demanded with exasperation. "Just because I tell you not to go alone to a man's flat! What was there so amusing about it anyway?"

She made no reply, and he asked, watching her thoughtfully:

"Did Breme make love to you?"

"What's it got to do with you?"

"I want to know. Did he kiss you?"

"Yes, he did, and it made me feel fine!" she shouted.

"Oh, it made you feel fine, did it?" he countered grimly.

"Yes, it did," she said, then added with honesty, "but the fish were nicer."

All at once the humour of the situation struck him and he began to laugh.

"Oh, Gael, you funny child!" he said softly. "You with your nose glued to the fish tank all the evening, and poor Rupert in his purple dressing-gown!"

The corners of her mouth turned up in an uncertain smile, and he took her chin between his fingers.

"What have we been quarrelling about, funny- face?" he enquired gently. "Do you know I could have willingly spanked you ? You'd better run along to jd before I change my mind."

She rubbed her wet eyes with her knuckles and turned to go.

"Friends, Gael?" he said, watching her. "Not angry with me any more?"

She shook her head dumbly.

"Pike's running a trial for the Monk tomorrow. Coming down with me?"

She nodded again, accepting his peace-offering in silence. Then she made a little dash at him and gave him a hurried and ill-directed kiss before she ran from the room and up to bed.

CHAPTER VII

GAEL rode down the steep, chalky track which led from the Downs straight into Pike's yard. It was good to ride alone up there and smell the sea, just as at Dun Mor the wind carried the tang of the Atlantic over the Galway hills.

Richard was standing in the yard talking to the trainer, who looked coldly at Gael as she clattered over the cobbles. Only that morning they had argued hotly on the question of feeding.

"We'll go and get some lunch, and come up and watch this trial at half-past two," Richard said, and swung himself on to his horse.

"Pike seems disappointed in the last trial," he remarked as they jogged down the road to the Crown. "Says the horse won't try."

"He's had a down on the Monk ever since he came," Gael protested indignantly. "I don't wonder he won't try - this life has soured him. That man's feeding is all wrong."

"Gael, you really mustn't interfere as you do," Richard said impatiently. "You're forever getting across Pike and he doesn't like it."

"But, Richard - to feed all that green stuff - it'll only scour him. We've never done it with our horses."

"You didn't run a racing stable, my dear. It's a perfectly recognised thing to feed, lucerne. Pike ought to know."

Gael closed her lips obstinately. She had taken a dislike to the trainer as much as he had to her.

At the Crown, they stabled their horses and went into the little dining-room and ordered lunch.

"Richard" - Gael leant her elbows on the table, cupping her chin in her hands - "let me ride the Monk this afternoon."

Richard looked at her curiously. "Ride him in the trial? Pike would never stand for that."

"If you say so, he'll have to. You're the owner, aren't you?"

He grinned suddenly.

"I sometimes have doubts on that point!" he said.

Her own mouth curved into an answering smile.

"Am I very possessive about the Monk?" she said apologetically. "It's awfully hard to remember he's no longer mine."

There was something a little wistful in her voice and he said gently:

"I think in a way he'll always be your horse, Gael. He loves you, doesn't he?"

"That's why I want to ride him this afternoon," she said eagerly. "You see I know him so well. I can get the best out of him, and I don't think that lad of Pike's understands how to handle him properly."

He hesitated, then said: "Very well. It can't do any harm, and there may be something in what you say. Pike's opinion of the horse so far isn't very encouraging." He didn't add that the trainer had been eloquent and sarcastic on the subject of the Irish ability to sell a man anything. "I rather wanted to enter him for the Grand Steeplechase in December, so it'll depend on you, my sweet."

They rode in the thin November sunshine to Pike's private gallop on a crest of the Downs. The little group was already there; Pike, sitting

his stocky cob, the three horses, rugged and hooded, led up and down by their respective boys.

"Miss Cassella wants to ride the Monk herself," Richard said, and Pike, after one resigned and angry look at Gael, laconically gave his orders.

"Pity you don't let Smith ride," he said to Richard as Gael mounted. "These other two are both proved winners. The horse will have to do better than last week to put up a show."

Richard didn't reply, but watched the three horses with pleasure as they lined up, fidgeting while they waited for Pike's signal. Gael, as slight and small as any of the boys, was talking softly to the Monk. Richard could see how pale her eager face was.

The trainer's raised hand, holding a handkerchief, fell, and the horses leapt forward with that grace and surge of muscle which always set Richard's blood tingling.

The Monk seemed back in his old form. He jumped as Richard had seen him jump at Knockferry, his strong beautiful quarters lifting him over the hurdles with effortless ease. "That girl can certainly ride," said Pike's grudging voice beside him.

Over a three-mile stretch they galloped until they became small flying figures in the distance. Richard saw the Monk leap ahead of the other two and finish well in front. Gael took him in a wide circle back to the start, galloping in an ecstasy of freedom, and pulled up beside Richard and Pike. The horse was still as fresh as when he started.

"Well done!" Richard cried. "What's the verdict now, Pike?"

"I'm beginning to think you may have a chaser there, after all," the trainer said with his sardonic smile. "I congratulate you, Miss Cassella. You certainly got the best I've ever seen out of him. Any

time you care to come down and give him a schooling, I shall be pleased to see you."

"Thank you," said Gael, her face alive with pleasure, and she began explaining to the lad, Smith, how best to nurse the horse over his jumps.

"What about the Grand Steeplechase now?" said Richard.

"Well, I think we might risk it," Pike said cautiously. "It'll give him a stretch, anyway."

They rode back over the shoulder of grassland. Below them the village lay, a cluster of white cottages and the little inn where they had lunched. Ahead of them, the three race-horses walked in single file, their long tails flicking the high grass. Gael knew a happy unity with the things she loved best in life, and with Richard, riding silently beside her.

"See you tomorrow," he said to the trainer as they parted at the stables. "You'll be out for the hill meet, won't you?"

"Let me drive," pleaded Gael when they reached the car. "A Bentley makes me feel so cherished."

He watched her delicate profile as she drove, looking straight ahead at the road, her lips closed firmly in joyous concentration, and thought for perhaps the first time that she didn't always look happy.

She didn't look happy later, when, after a theatre, they went with Cherry and David Trent to dance at the Savoy. Her face wore its withdrawn look. She smiled vaguely at them when they spoke to her, but she was away from them in thought - perhaps she was still with the Monk, galloping in the November sunshine.

It was Cherry's birthday. Perhaps because of it, Richard went out of his way to be charming to the girl, and Cherry, as always when her world went well, was gay and delightful to them all. David, when they were all together, made an effort, but left alone with Gael while Richard and Cherry danced, he relapsed into gloom.

"Cherry looks lovely tonight," Gael remarked once without envy. "Aren't you enjoying yourself, David?"

"I'm afraid I'm poor company," he apologised. "But you never mind, do you, Gael? You're not like other girls. One doesn't have to make an effort."

"I suppose that's meant to be a compliment," she said with a small grimace. "But I don't blame you wanting to have Cherry to yourself."

"She hasn't eyes for anyone but Richard," he said gloomily. "I wish he'd marry his Sally and have done with it, then there might be a chance for me."

Gael examined the idea of Richard marrying Sally and found it strangely unpalatable.

"But if you love Cherry, why don't you do something about it?" she asked with an effort.

"What can I do?" he burst out. "I've asked her and asked her to marry me. She thinks I'm a sort of tame cat and never takes me seriously."

His fair, pleasant face was unhappy, and his blue eyes looked beyond her with an expression too old for his years. Gael thought how nice he was. There was a quality about him that was lacking in most of Cherry's other friends.

"She's in love with the man," he said miserably. "Oh, I can quite understand it. Women do fall for him."

Gael considered Cherry and all the inconsistencies in her nature which had puzzled her.

"I don't think she really knows what she wants," she said slowly. "I think Richard often hurts her."

"He won't take her seriously," David said with odd resentment. "Perhaps he never takes any woman seriously - even Sally."

They went down to Sussex by train the next morning, since Richard found that his car required some small job of work doing on it.

"First class!" said Gael with satisfaction. "It's the first time I've ever travelled so richly!"

"I believe you'd get enjoyment out of anything," laughed Richard. "You have a great capacity for living, haven't you, Gael?"

The meet was at a little inn at the foot of the Downs and it was Gael's first experience of a hill hunt.

"You shouldn't complain of not getting a run up here," Richard told her as they mounted their horses and joined the cavalcade following in the wake of hounds up one of the chalky tracks on to the breast of downland, which rose gently before them. "These hill foxes are big and fast."

But the morning proved blank, and it was past two o'clock when they found in a patch of gorse away over the highest ridge of grassland.

"Keep with the field today," shouted Richard. "It looks as though we'll run into a sea-fog. It's easy to lose yourself."

"Lose myself! And I used to hill mists in Galway!" called back Gael derisively, and galloped away in pursuit of hounds.

Breasting a rise, she saw the field had magically dispersed. Hounds and horsemen had completely disappeared; there was not a living thing in sight. It was an eerie sensation. One moment they were together and suddenly they had all vanished. It was as if the mist had swallowed them up, snatching them into a world of faery. Gael, sitting perfectly still and listening for any sound that might direct her, heard the beat of a horse's hoofs coming up behind her. Richard rode out of the mist and pulled up his horse beside her.

"There you are!" he said with relief. "We seem to have lost them completely."

"Where do you think they've got to? I can't hear a sound."

"Lord knows! We'll hang about a bit, then we might as well go home."

"Go home!" she cried. "This is the first decent gallop I've had since I've been hunting over here!"

Out of the sea of fog which lay below them, sounded the faint note of a far-away horn. Eerily it came to them, a plaintive call from the unseen.

"They're down there - come on!" shouted Gael, and stuck her heels into the mare's flanks.

"Don't be a fool!" cried Richard. "You can't tell where the sound's coming from."

But he had lost sight of her already in the swirling mist into which she had vanished. He could hear the mare's hoofs thudding over the turf and, cursing roundly, he went after her.

At the bottom of the valley, Gael paused and listened intently. She thought she heard the horn once more, but it was impossible to tell from where the sound came. The mare shivered, and shied away at shapes which loomed out of the fog. Gael realised that Richard had been right and it was useless attempting to find hounds under such conditions.

The fog seemed thinner now, and Gael jogged along still listening for any sound of hounds. For a moment the mist cleared sufficiently for her to see a clear stretch of flat grass ahead of her, and in the distance the waving sterns of the last couple of hounds. She put the mare into a canter, hoping to catch them before the fog closed down again, but the white wreaths drew together with uncanny swiftness and before she could slacken her pace, she felt the shock of a hidden impact, and was thrown over her horse's head.

She was completely winded, and when she got to her feet, feeling rather sick, she found the mare had vanished into the mist and she was alone. She explored the ground to see what had brought them down, and discovered that she must have been on one of the private gallops. A chain stretching between two white-painted posts had effectually stopped them.

With a shock of fear she realised her plight. Here she was, stranded on foot amidst miles of unknown, fogbound country without the slightest idea of her direction. It looked very much as if she would find herself benighted, and at that thought her old panic returned. She began to run blindly, stumbling over the rough ground, her limbs stiff with cold and the desperation of her situation. It was strange that in the midst of her fear she should think of Richard - Richard and Sally Vayle. "I wish he'd marry his Sally," David had said last night. Did he love her then? Did she hold the key to all their happiness - to Richard's happiness ?

Someone quite close at hand shouted. Gael stood still and called:

"I'm here! I'm here!" The figure of a horseman loomed suddenly out of the mist, and Richard's voice harsh with anxiety shouted: "Is that you, Gael?"

He was off his horse and holding her in a moment, and she clung to him sobbing out in sheer relief the first words which came into her head:

"Oh, Richard! Are you really going to marry Sally? The mare's gone Richard, do you love her?"

"What on earth are you talking about?" he said; and she replied a little hysterically: "I don't know!"

"Are you hurt, child?" he asked, his hands running gently over her small body.

"No, no - at least not much." She was crying and laughing in turn. "I found hounds, and then I lost them, and we ran into one of those outlandish chains. The mare's gone, Richard. I expect you'll be furious."

"I am furious 1" he said, relief at finding her safe making him speak sharply. "Now perhaps you'll learn, you little idiot, that you can't play tricks with a sea-fog. You might have been killed on one of those gallops." His voice became gentle as he felt her wet little face pressed into his neck. "Poor sweet! You've had a bad fright. Get up behind me and ride pillion, and we'll try and get put of this."

He remounted and swung her up behind him, and they set off at a walk, trying to make their way back to the gallop from which Richard said he might get his bearings. At the end of half an hour they emerged into a clear patch on the hillside, and there, quietly cropping the grass, was Gael's mare, her reins trailing loosely over her head.

"Our second and more remarkable piece of luck," Richard said, and promptly assured himself that the horse wasn't damaged in any way.

It was close on seven when they reached the Crown, soaked through and very cold. Richard was feeling decidedly cross.

"This would happen the one day we haven't got the car," he said. "By the time we've had something to eat and got our clothes dry, the last decent train will have gone. We'd better stay the night. You can't travel back - in this state."

He interviewed the landlord, whose wife bustled upstairs to prepare rooms for them, and Richard told Gael to go and have a hot bath as soon as she had finished her whisky.

They had supper in Gael's room, a little, low- ceilinged room almost completely filled by a vast old- fashioned, four-poster bed. Mrs. Smedly had lighted a fire in front of which they ate ham and eggs and drank the Crown's excellent claret.

"It's fun, isn't it?" Gael said. The wine had brought a flush to her pale face and her eyes were bright with pleasure. "Did you phone Mrs. Windlehurst?"

"She was out. Cherry took the message and gave me some fatuous and very unladylike cracks," said Richard with a wry smile.

"Cracks? Well, I expect if she could see us now shewould think it very funny."

"Oh, very funny!" agreed Richard, watching Gael at the finish of the meal bounce joyously on the bed. She wore thick flannel pyjamas belonging to the landlady's son, aged fourteen, and looked like some excited child after bath-time.

She turned a somersault on the bed just as Mrs. Smedly came in to clear away the supper things.

Richard watched her curiously when Mrs. Smedly had gone. The wine on top of the hot whisky had gone a little to her head, and she lay on her back talking nonsense until he said suddenly:

"Why did you ask me if I was going to marry Sally?"

"Did I? When?"

"When I found you in the fog. It was such a funny thing to say at that particular moment."

She stared up at the dim hangings of the bed.

"I wondered," she said slowly. "Everyone thinks you're going to." He made no reply, and she sat up suddenly and looked at him. "Well, are you?"

"It's odd how other people always know more of one's affairs than one does oneself," he said.

"I don't think," said Gael dreamily, "anyone should marry unless they love the person."

He looked at her with amusement.

"And yet I seem to remember you telling me that you would probably marry a gentleman called Michael McGlynn," he said.

"I don't think I should marry Michael now."

"Oh? You've changed."

She gave a long sigh.

"Yes, I've changed."

He felt an impulse to probe.

"What's made you change, funny-face?"

She was curled on the end of the bed, one arm twined round one of the carved oak posts. In the firelight, her face wore its withdrawn look.

"I know now that, unless you feel that someone can hurt you unbearably, you don't love them," she said slowly. "Pain is love."

She lent her fair head against the bed-post and stared into the fire.

Richard moved abruptly.

"Pain is all wrong," he said gently.

"No," she answered. "You expect it. That makes it real."

He was silent a moment, regarding her with tenderness.

"And who's taught you that, you funny little squib?" he asked.

"I'm always a funny little squib to you, aren't I?" she said, still not looking at him.

"Gael," he said hesitatingly, "I'm years older than you and know a good bit about the world. You get odd, romantic notions sometimes. It's they that hurt you."

She raised her head and looked directly at him, but said nothing.

"Who is it?" he asked in spite of himself.

She smiled, a distant, strange little smile, and said very politely:

"Oh, no. That would be embarrassing."

Suddenly she slipped off the bed and sat on the floor at his feet.

"Cherry said you make love to lots of people," she said, speaking very fast. "She says any attractive woman will do. Am I different?"

"Quite different," he said a little roughly. She was absurd, touching, rather delicious. He wanted to pick her up in his arms and hold her close in the firelight.

"I don't see how you can know," she said simply, and he leant forward and took her upturned face between his hands.

"You're such a baby," he said gently, but even as he spoke he knew she was not all child, and he remembered his promise to Michael: "She'll come back to you just as she is now."

Michael had been wiser. He should never have brought her to England.

"Listen, Gael," he said. "If I made love to you now, your brothers' trust in me would be quite unjustified. Don't you see that whatever I may have done in the past cannot apply to you? Take it as a compliment, if you like."

"A compliment?" she said gently. "That for you there is no woman in me?"

Her words hurt him with a measure of pain that was quite unexpected, and suddenly he knew that it was not so. There was in Gael a truth and wisdom that was all woman.

"Just now, you're a tired little girl who must go to bed," he said with tenderness, and picking her up in his arms, he laid her in the big

four-poster and covered her up. "Good night, my sweeting. Sleep well."

From the dim shadows of the bed she gazed up at him with her strange, bright eyes. Then, smiling, she put her arms round his neck, drawing his face down to hers.

"Good night, dear Richard," she said, and her voice was already sleepy as she kissed him.

CHAPTER VIII

It was still raining the next morning when they went up to Pike's stables to have a look at the Monk. Gael was very quiet and Richard thought she looked tired and rather pinched. They got back to the Crown to find Sally's black and cream car parked outside.

"What on earth are you doing here?" Richard asked when they went into the coffee-room to find her.

She looked up from a week-old Sussex paper and surveyed them both with cool eyes.

"I thought since your own car was out of action, you might like a lift back to Town," she said. "Had you forgotten I was coming to lunch, darling?"

"Of course not," said Richard, who had, but Gael said with simple amazement:

"We have our return tickets - first class. Why should we want a lift?"

Sally gave her an amused, tolerant look, and Gael was all at once conscious of her stained clothes, her untidy hair, straight and loose after its soaking yesterday.

"The sooner you get home and repair yourself the better, I think, my dear," Sally said with her tantalising smile. "What have you been doing to the child, Richard? Rolling her on the bar floor?"

Richard's eyes narrowed slightly.

"Didn't Cherry explain what happened?" he asked with a slight drawl. "I don't suppose either of us look our best after our adventures yesterday."

"Oh, I heard all about that," she said. "I've been talking to your landlady. Very charmed she was with your little act last night. Mr. Saracen looking so handsome in his dressing-gown, the young lady in pyjamas kicking her legs in the air on the bed."

"What are you getting at, Sally?" Richard asked quietly.

"Simply that I think it was unnecessary and rather indiscreet to behave in just that fashion," said Sally crisply.

They both seemed to have forgotten Gael, who stood nervously, watching Sally with surprise.

"Are you suggesting anything odd in my behaviour last night?" asked Richard.

"I think it was odd — yes — that you undressed and spent the evening in Gael's bedroom," she replied.

"We hadn't any clothes," Gael explained. "They were wet through. But it was fun."

"I'm sure it was," Sally said, looking at Richard, but he turned away and lit a cigarette.

"If that's how you feel, then it's hardly worth discussing it," he remarked, and his voice was cold. "Our train goes at twelve-fifteen, Gael. Are you ready?"

Sally rose gracefully to her feet.

"But I've come all this way to fetch you, darling," she said. "That scarcely seemed necessary," he replied, and moved towards the door.

"Richard!" She was angry now. "Are you really going to refuse to drive back with me? Don't you think that's rather rude?"

"I think your manner is rather rude, my sweet," he said, and smiled at her suddenly, but there was no warmth in his smile. "Very well, we'll come with you, since you went to such trouble to find us out."

She stood, biting her lip, undecided for once what reply to make, but Gael said quickly:

"Well, I for one am not going to waste my ticket. I shall go home alone."

"Just as you like," Sally said. "We'll drop you at the station."

For a moment Richard hesitated; then he shrugged his shoulders. The thing had to be dealt with some time or other - might as well get it over.

"In that case, we'd better be starting," was all he said.

When they had left Gael at the station, they drove in silence for some distance, then Sally said:

"Still angry with me, my sweet?"

"I'm not used to being hauled over the coals in this fashion," he said shortly.

"Oh!' Her lips curved in a provocative smile. "Have I trodden on your pet corn?"

"I think you came very near to making a scene about nothing."

"A scene? I?"

"Yes, you. It's not like you, is it, darling?"

She changed gear badly.

"And it's not like you, my dear, to stage a bedroom scene with a little girl like Gael," she said. "Especially after your very righteous indignation over the Rupert episode."

"Oh, 'for heaven's sake!" He moved impatiently. "Stop talking as though I'd seduced the child! You know exactly what happened. It seemed a perfectly normal procedure to me."

"Just as bringing her over from Ireland in the first place seemed a normal procedure to you, I suppose?"

"I thought that you at least had too much intelligence to join in that cry," he said impatiently.. "You'll be telling me next you're jealous of Gael."

"Of that child! Why, she's just a little Irish hooligan with the charm of any young puppy!"

"Why all the interest, then?"

"The interest is on your side, darling. For a man whose appreciation of women is well known, it's rather marked."

"Oh, for God's sake! And you'd better drive slower on these wet roads."

"Nervous?"

"Look here! Do you want to give my so-called interest in the child the extra push it needs? Because you're going the right way about it, my sweet."

She was silent, driving with a suppressed anger, her charming profile for once disturbed out of its usual calm.

"Richard," she said at last, and her voice was urgent, "for a long time now we have meant a great deal to each other. You'll admit that, won't you?"

"Yes."

"You've asked me to marry you. Does that still stand?"

"Don't be so ridiculous! You never would give me a definite answer."

"Supposing I were to give you one now?"

"Darling, you're being most unlike yourself today. Surely the fact that Gael and I spent a very respectable night at the Crown hasn't given you the necessary incentive? I would hate to be married out of pique!"

Sally braked too suddenly and the car skidded.

"You are one of the most irritating men I know," she remarked, adding unexpectedly, "and one of the most hurtful."

He had an instant's impression of Gael sitting at his feet in the firelight and saying: "Pain is love. That makes it real."

"I don't mean to hurt you, Sally," he said more gently. "I've never thought of you as a very vulnerable person, perhaps."

"Perhaps I'm not," she admitted. "That makes us a pair. You are the least vulnerable person I know."

"I think that mightn't be true," he said slowly. "Perhaps it's true of very few of us, anyhow."

She gave him a swift look. "You're different," she said abruptly, and there was a small hint of fear in her voice.

"What were we quarrelling about?" he asked with a laugh. "We, who never quarrel."

"I'm sorry," she said, "if I was precipitate and tactless."

"And I'm sorry for my ill-temper. Is my poor aunt very annoyed with me?"

The awkward little incident was dismissed in a return to normal conversation, but Richard was thoughtful, recognising in Sally's attitude an element which was new and somehow distasteful.

Mrs. Windlehurst was more than annoyed. She was very angry.

"I should have thought you would have known better, Richard, than to get the child talked about like that," she said.

"But, my dear aunt, why should Gael be talked about?" he asked patiently. "To hear you and Sally talk, anyone would think we'd taken a double room together!"

"I know, my dear boy, that you didn't think about public opinion," his aunt said. "But you should think when you have a young girl in your charge. I expect there has been enough talk already about the way you bring Gael down to hunt. You know what hunting circles are for scandal. And always hanging about these racing stables - it's most unsuitable."

"Oh, really, aunt, I'm getting sick of the whole subject," he said with exasperation. "We aren't living in Victorian days any longer."

"That's not the point," Mrs. Windlehurst said firmly. "You foisted this girl on to us, Richard - heaven knows why, for she's nothing but a trouble - but as long as she's living here, I'm responsible for her."

Perhaps it would surprise you to know that Lady Gent asked me only yesterday over the bridge table if you were having an affair with the child or if you were thinking of getting married at last."

In spite of his annoyance, Richard had to laugh.

"These old women!" he exclaimed. "And what did you say, Aunt Clare?"

"I didn't know what to say," she replied stiffly. "And I myself must be classed with these old women, as you call them, for I haven't the least idea what you're playing at."

"Perhaps with enough encouragement," he told her with a peculiar expression, "I'll play your game before long. It seems a pity, to disappoint one's public."

Gael returned late to an uncomfortable lunch. She was aware of Cherry's sharp eyes, which scarcely seemed to leave her face, and when the meal was over she went straight up to her room to change. She didn't want to listen to the girl's barbed remarks just then.

But Cherry followed her up and sat on the bed smoking feverishly, watching Gael's movements with unfriendly eyes.

"Well, my sweet, and did you enjoy your night out with Richard?" was her opening remark.

"Yes, it was fun," said Gael cheerfully. "Rather like the dormitory feasts you read about in books."

"And was Richard all-girls-together - like you read about in books?"

Gael looked round quickly at the inflection in Cherry's voice, but she only said politely:

"Richard was very nice."

"Richard was very nice!" Cherry mimicked Gael, and burst into bitter laughter. "Really, darling, I don't know how you get away with it! It isn't as if you had anything special to recommend you, either - unless our Richard is going soft in his old age. I always told you he liked his women sophisticated."

Gael suddenly wanted to cry and turned away.

"Why, anyway, do you say it was like a dormitory feast? Was there really a bedroom scene after all?"

Goaded into explanation which she felt reluctant to give, Gael said defiantly:

"Our clothes were wringing wet. We had no others, so, as we couldn't very well appear in a public dining room in our night shirts, we had supper sent up to my room. Now, I suppose that's going to annoy you as much as it annoyed Sally."

"I'll say it annoyed Sally!" said Cherry with satisfaction. "Which of you was fool enough to tell her?"

"The landlady told her."

Cherry whistled.

"Asking questions, was she? That must have annoyed Richard."

"Everybody seems to be annoyed," said Gael shortly. "I wish to goodness we'd gone straight home and caught pneumonia instead. It couldn't have caused more consternation."

"What really happened?" asked Cherry, and at the avid curiosity in her voice Gael looked up, startled.

"Nothing happened," she said slowly, and Cherry laughed.

"Darling, since it's you, I believe you, but thousands wouldn't," she said. "I bet Sally didn't. She'd be too jealous, and jealousy's a new sidelight on Sally. It makes her almost human."

"But she's not engaged to Richard, is she?" Gael, in front of the mirror, was struggling with her hair.

"Engaged!" laughed Cherry. "Well, she's been his mistress for years!" In the mirror, she saw Gael's stricken look. "Didn't you know? I thought everyone knew."

"No, I didn't know," said Gael dully, and added with an effort: "I knew they were fond of each other - I thought they might even marry."

"Oh, to give him his due, Richard would have married her," Cherry said. "But she had theories about marriage, having made one bloomer - or so she says. Personally, I always thought she liked keeping him on a string."

"How can you keep someone you love on a string?" Cherry missed the pain in Gael's voice and said pityingly:

"But that's half the game, my sweet. No man wants what comes to him easily. I ought to know.

I'd have slept with Richard myself, and he knew it."

"Oh, stop!" cried Gael with violence. She turned and saw Cherry looking at her with mild curiosity. "Don't people ever love for loving's sake? Is it always bed and sleeping and being someone's mistress? Is no one faithful?"

"Well!" said Cherry, staring. "You talk like a book! How were you brought up, anyhow?"

"Not to this!" said Gael with passion. "Not to this playing with emotions, taking them out and looking at them, and throwing them away for others. There's nothing real about such people. They don't want reality."

"But, Gael" - Cherry, groping after a philosophy she couldn't understand, tried belatedly to give vague comfort - "Richard's only like everyone else. He's had his affairs - dozens of them. He's that sort of man. No one these days expects such high-flown sentiments. But Richard's decent. Didn't you find that out for yourself?"

Gael turned back to the mirror and combed her hair automatically. Her reflection was now as still and quiet as it had been stormy.

"Yes," she said with bitterness. "I found that out for myself."

Cherry threw her cigarette-end into the grate, said "Oh, hell!" and slipped out of the room.

In the days that followed, Gael avoided Richard as much as possible. At first he put it down to the fact that she was shy of him after their conversation in the Crown, and went out of his way to put her at her ease. But later he was puzzled and a little piqued. The child had so plainly revealed her funny little heart, yet here she was, perfectly courteous, but keeping him politely at a distance.

When he received an invitation for them both to go and stay in the Pytchley country for four days' hunting, and was turned down by Gael, he protested rather angrily.

"What on earth's the matter with you these days, child?" he asked. "You seem to be making a point of avoiding me. What have I done?"

She glanced at him a little nervously, but answered serenely enough:

"You haven't done anything. I seem to have been busy."

He looked at her curiously.

"Well, can't you put up with my company for a few days for the sake of the hunting?" he asked irritably. "I thought you were so anxious to see what real English sport was like."

For some unexplained reason, he desperately wanted Gael to go away with him. The sweetness of that evening at the Crown was still with him, and he was vaguely hurt by her avoidance of him.

"It's just that I shall be busy next week," she said a little helplessly. "And there's the Monk - I want to go down and ride him again - "

"And in fact, you'll be too busy for me," he finished for her.

She stared at him dumbly, and he said, with his crooked smile:

"All right. Don't trouble with any more excuses, my sweet. I understand."

Gael watched him unhappily as he turned and left the room, then she sat down and wrote a long letter to Conn.

Those soft days at Dun Mor seemed far behind her. She knew a great longing to see again the friendly faces round the littered table, to hear Kate's scolding voice, to sail the waters of Corrib in a head wind. She looked back on that eager little girl, lost in a world of fancy, who had cried to Richard: "My heart's desire ... to go away from here, to dance, to live as other people do!" and knew the vainness of her wish. To live

as yourself was all that was possible, the ways of others were an illusion, and she didn't like what she had seen.

One day she walked up Church Street and saw in a shop window the model of a greyhound coursing. It was perfect in its construction, in its grace and movement. She longed to possess it, but on enquiring the price, sadly left the shop without it. But the greyhound became, for her, a touchstone. Nearly every day she would pass the shop to see if it was still there. She would stand in the cold street gazing at it, endowing it in her imagination with real flesh and blood. One day perhaps she would have enough money to buy it.

Cherry in these days was at her rudest. She snapped at Richard, who only made her worse by treating her like an ill-tempered child, and worried her mother to distraction with her erratic comings and goings. She was out half the night dancing with strange young men, and her gaiety had a forced brittle ring that deceived no one. In her own way she was as unhappy as Gael was in hers.

"I wish to goodness the child would find some nice young man and settle down," Mrs. Windlehurst confided to Richard. "At one time I used to think that she and David - But she seems to have no time for him."

"I shouldn't worry," Richard said absently. "She'll marry in due course and probably make a model wife. Cherry's going through a phase."

"Well, it's a phase I have no patience with," his aunt complained. "Those two girls are a perpetual worry to me. Cherry is too fond of a good time, and Gael is not fond enough."

Richard burst out laughing.

"Poor Aunt Clare! You do worry such a lot about the young," he said.

"And you never seem to worry at all," she retorted sharply. "Sometimes, I think, Richard, it's a pity you've got so much money. You've never had to take life seriously. It would do you good to marry and settle down and have responsibility."

"You seem anxious to marry us all off," he said humorously. "Nice husbands for Gael and Cherry, and a nice wife for me! I suppose it comes of perpetually launching girls upon the world. All their mothers think of is marriage."

She said with a shrewdness he hadn't suspected in her:

"Too little is thought of marriage in these days. It still has a value that this modern tendency towards an affair cannot alter. You'll come to realise that one day, Richard."

He said gravely: "Perhaps I've realised it already."

"Then why don't you and Sally - "

"It's curious how everyone takes that eventuality for granted," he said thoughtfully.

One evening, early in December, just as they were sitting down to dinner, the maid announced that a gentleman had called to see Miss Cassella.

"Who is it?" asked Mrs. Windlehurst, wondering if Gael had invited someone to dinner and then forgotten completely about him, as had happened before.

"He wouldn't give his name, madam. He said he wished to surprise the young lady," the maid said, but Gael, who was half-way to the door already, gave one glad shout of "Conn!" and flung herself into the arms of the fair, dishevelled boy standing on the threshold.

"It's good to see you, Conn," Richard said, holding out his hand. "Why didn't you let us know you were coming? This is my aunt, and my cousin, Cherry."

"How do you do?" said Mrs. Windlehurst, wondering privately why the Cassellas always timed their arrivals so abruptly. "You will stay to dinner, of course."

"Naturally he's staying here altogether," said Richard easily. "What have you done with your luggage?"

"It's at a hotel in Notting Hill," the boy replied. "The taxi-driver took me there. Thank you, I would like to stop for dinner, but I think I'll live in my hotel."

"Nonsense," laughed Richard. "It's probably some frightful little pub round there. Of course you must come to us."

"Thank you," said Conn again. "But I think I will stop in my hotel."

Richard shrugged his shoulders and didn't press the point. Watching the brother and sister, so alike in their slight fairness and the eager swiftness of their gestures, he remembered again that grave courtesy which had seemed common to all the Cassellas, but especially to Conn and Gael.

After dinner, Gael walked back with Conn to his hotel.

"What made you come?" she asked him, when they sat down in the dingy little lounge.

"I thought you sounded unhappy," he told her. "I wanted to see for myself, and you are."

She smiled and shook her head.

"Not unhappy - only homesick sometimes," she said? in the pleasure of seeing Conn again she believed her words to be true.

"Michael gave me this letter for you," he said.

She pounced Michael McGlynn's letter with unwilling fingers. She didn't want to learn the pain behind his carefully written words.

"How long are you staying?" she asked Conn.

"Oh, a few days - as long as my money lasts," he said. "I sold a couple of the greyhound pups. That's how I'm here at all."

"There's the most beautiful model of a greyhound in a shop down Church Street," Gael said dreamily. "I'll take you to see it tomorrow. If the Monk wins the Grand Steeplechase, I'm going to buy it."

At once he was impatient of news of the Monk. He asked innumerable questions, indignantly agreed with Gael's divergence of opinion with the trainer, and finally announced his intention of stopping over long enough to come with them and see the horse run at Sandown.

"All Ballyskillen will have its shirt on him for the National," he told Gael with pride. "That'll be the great day."

"Pike says if he wins at Sandown, he'll have a very good chance," Gael said. "The darling horse will walk it."

It was nearly two o'clock when Gael slipped back into the house. Her eyes were drowsy with sleep and her head was filled with the talk of Dun Mor.

"I was nearly coming round to fetch you," Richard said from a chair by the dead drawing-room fire.

She looked at him, bemused.

"Why did you wait up?" she asked.

He grinned wryly.

"I really don't know. Perhaps because I wanted to see your happy little face again before I went to bed. It's been a lovely evening for you, hasn't it, Gael?"

She nodded without speaking, her pale hair falling forward over her sleepy face.

"I think I envy you," Richard said a little wonderingly, and switched off the light.

Conn persisted in his original intention of living in his hotel in Notting Hill. But he had his meals in Richard's house, and he and Gael spent most of their evenings at the greyhound tracks.

Conn was a little puzzled by Gael's new life. The ordinary social round of a moneyed London existence seemed to him a poor exchange for the simple things of Dun Mor. Cherry, whose usual tactics left him unmoved and faintly surprised, he dismissed as a pretty young girl, but slightly unreal. Mrs. Windlehurst frankly puzzled him.

"She's like a schoolmarm ordering you here and there," he said. "Why doesn't she let you alone?"

"She makes a practice of looking after young society girls," replied Gael primly. "She has the kind heart, but she feels it her duty to find me a husband while I'm here."

"Holy God!" Conn exclaimed, and roared with laughter.

They made up a party for Sandown - Richard, Sally, Cherry and David Trent and the two young Casselljis. It was a fine day and the pleasant little course lay bathed in crisp winter sunshine. It was a crowded meeting and Richard appeared to have hosts of friends all curious about his new entry. The betting on the Monk was a hundred to eight.

"A chance for us all to make a bit," Richard said. "Pike says he's in fine form."

"Racing's quite amusing when you're running your own horse," Cherry said, lifting her charming, excited little face to smile at David.

But Gael and Conn missed the vivid life and colour of the Irish meetings. Sandown had a garden-party air that slightly depressed them.

"There are no booths and no drunks," Gael said disgustedly.

"Imagine booths and drunks at Sandown!" giggled Cherry. "We're civilised here, darling."

Richard thought of his day at Knockferry, and saw again the noisy vivid crowd, the larks soaring into the tender sky, and the Monk galloping to victory over the emerald green turf.

"Yes, there's something missing," he said regretfully, and Sally looked at him with an odd little smile.

"There's been something missing for quite a time, hasn't there, darling?" she remarked, pulling her furs more closely up under her chin.

He made no reply, and presently they wandered up to the paddock. Gael leant on the rails watching Richard as he stood talking to the trainer and the jockey. The horses were coming in for the third race, and Conn began muttering to himself:

"Don't like the black ... or the chestnut. . . that brown horse looks as if he could jump . . . number five's a likely-looking one. . . ."

"There's the Monk!" cried Gael. "He's looking grand! He should beat the lot on his head!"

They watched the little bay horse with loving eyes as he was led round the paddock. He had improved out of all recognition since he had come over from Ireland, and there was nothing there in Gael's opinion to compare with those strong, beautiful quarters.

The jockeys mounted, and soon they were going out of the paddock, a long line of lovely movement, the jockeys' colours crisp and gay in the sunshine.

The crowd began to move back to the course in leisurely fashion, but Gael and Conn raced ahead, running with an unsurpassed eagerness.

"It's a big field for Sandown," Richard said, focusing his glasses on the start. "Lucky Lad is favourite. He's done very well recently."

"The Monk will beat them all," said Gael beside him, her voice a solemn pronouncement.

Richard looked down at her and saw her face was paler than ever. Her eyes were fixed unblinkingly on the distant horses. She could see Richard's colours standing out well from the others.

"They're off!" Richard said. "No - false start. There they go!"

It was a three and a half mile race. The first two fences were taken in a bunch, then the field began to spread out. The Monk lay fourth, galloping well; a horse fell, leaving him third, and as they passed the stand he was holding his place easily. Cherry gave excited little squeaks as they passed with a thud of hoofs on the well-kept turf, but Gael and Conn stood tense and speechless, watching the cerise and white creep ahead as they went round the course for the second time. At the end the Monk seemed to leap forward, passing the favourite at the turn, and came over the last fence in a lovely effortless spring, leading by five lengths up the straight to the finish.

"The grandest little horse in all Ireland!" Gael cried as she had at Knockferry, and Conn said:

"He's the giant of a horse - the fairies are in his feet, no less!"

They walked back to the paddock, Richard stopping many times to receive congratulations.

"A great little horse! Where did you get him? . . . Licked Lucky Lad into a cocked hat and he's fancied for the National. . . . Saracen, you dark horse! Where have you been hiding him all this time? ..."

"Well, what about it?" Richard said to the trainer, as they watched the Monk being unsaddled.

"Good enough," said Pike laconically, but his smile was confident.

"How about the National now, Mr. Pike?" said Gael triumphantly.

"Well, I might have something on him, myself," the trainer replied.

"Let's go and have a drink. I'm cold," said Cherry.

In the Members' luncheon room Richard and the young Cassellas discussed at length the horse's prospects for the National. Sally

listened, smoking her Russian cigarettes through her long black holder, while Cherry, bored now with racing, flirted outrageously with David Trent.

"What are you going to do with your winnings?" Richard asked Gael, smiling at her happy little face.

"I'm going to buy a model of a greyhound I saw in a shop in Church Street," she replied promptly. "I've wanted it for weeks."

"Why didn't you tell me?" he said impulsively. "I would have loved to give it to you."

"I wanted to buy it myself," she said stubbornly, and Cherry exclaimed:

"Darling, you must be crazy I A model of a greyhound! What on earth will you do with it?"

"Just look at it," said Gael.

Sally said rather abruptly:

"Do you want to stop for the last race, Richard? I would rather like to get back to Town early."

With Conn's approaching departure, Gael became increasingly silent. Christmas was only a fortnight off and she thought with longing of Dun Mor and its smoky, turf-scented rooms, Kate's bustling preparations, the dogs crunching turkey bones by the library fire.

They were sitting round the fire, Richard and Cherry and David. Mrs. Windlehurst was out playing bridge and the room was heavy with

cigarette smoke and the smell of peppermints which Conn was sucking.

Cherry restlessly swung her legs from the end of the sofa. She had wanted David to take her out dancing, but he said an evening at home was rare for him and he was enjoying himself.

"Thank goodness we don't have Gael's sort of Christmas," she said, stifling a yawn. "You'll see what it can be like in more civilised surroundings, Gael. Richard, where can we take Gael on Christmas Day?"

"Do you always go out?" Gael asked a little doubtfully.

"Good lord, yes!" said Cherry. "Nothing's more dreary than Christmas in the home. I like to see people bursting balloons and getting tight and then come home and sleep it all off the next day."

"It sounds frightful," said Conn with his mouth full of peppermint.

Richard said:

"Wasn't that what you wanted, Gael? To dance, go to parties, live as other people lived?"

"Yes," she said rather gloomily, and stared into the fire.

"And love, and be made love to," said Cherry, darting an angry look at Richard. "Richard will have Sally, so you'll have to keep me happy, David. Who'll we get for Gael?"

Gael looked up with a slightly dazed expression.

"I don't want anyone," she said in a bewildered voice.

"Oh, I forgot." Cherry looked at Gael with an odd expression. "Sally says the Irish are chaste and passionate - a dangerous combination, she said."

"Sally knows nothing whatever about the Irish, or about me," said Gael with a hint of temper.

"Well, she knows plenty about the other thing, darling," said Cherry, and Richard put in quickly:

"Shut up, Cherry. You're talking through your hat."

"Well, you ought to know," Cherry said and, as she saw his mouth tighten, added swiftly: "Not that I blame you or her. I'm all for the bed with the right man."

Conn looked rather shocked and Richard said angrily:

"You're just talking for effect, my dear, and it isn't pretty."

Gael said slowly:

"But you do all think like that, don't you? I mean that seems to be part of the good time. Affairs and all that."

"Cherry doesn't mean half she says," David said, looking rather uncomfortable. He wondered why she had elected to have such an obvious dig at Richard in front of them all.

"Yes, I do," said Cherry defiantly. "It's time Gael learnt "Hot to be a prude. These things are going on all round one all the time. What's wrong in it?"

"It isn't what's wrong. It's the waste," said Gael unexpectedly.

"What do you mean - waste?"

"Well," - she sought for the right words - "in a series of affairs one must use up so many emotions. That's wasting yourself. What's left over for something that matters? Unless nothing matters." She answered Cherry, but she looked at Richard.

Cherry gave a shrill little laugh, and said outrageously:

"I get you, my sweet. We're each having a crack at poor Richard in our own way. But haven't you realised yet, darling, that nothing does matter in the end to some people? We talked about that after your visit to the Crown, if you remember."

"I wasn't having a crack at anyone," said Gael in a low voice. "Everyone's life is their own. I just don't understand."

"Neither do I," said Conn, getting suddenly to his feet. "I haven't an idea what you're all talking about. I'm going back to my pub."

David said he would give Conn a lift, and Cherry, her boldness suddenly evaporating, took herself off to an early bed. Gael was just on the point of following when Richard said:

"No, don't go, Gael, I want to talk to you."

She sat down on the floor and poked the fire with nervous fingers.

"Cherry's rather ill-bred exhibition has given me the opening I wanted," he said, and stood leaning against the mantelpiece, idly jingling the loose coins in his pockets. "Is Cherry's conversation after our night at the Crown the reason why you've been so studiously avoiding me of late?"

"Is Cherry always serious in everything she says?" asked Gael, and he noted with amusement the Irish habit of answering a question by asking another.

"That doesn't answer my question," he said. "I'd like to know what it is you have up against me."

"I've nothing up against you," she replied, not looking at him. "How could I have? You've been very kind to me."

"Is it this series of affairs you've both been throwing at me?"

"Oh, Richard, please. It's nothing to do with me. I know nothing about you."

"And what you do know, you don't like. Is that it?"

She hesitated.

"I was disappointed, I think. I thought you such a wonderful person. It seemed to me wrong that you shouldn't really care about anything."

"How do you know I don't?"

"Well, you couldn't - you couldn't - " She faltered and looked up at him a little unhappily. "Anyway, it can't possibly matter what I think."

His face was grave as he replied:

"On the contrary. It matters to me a great deal what you think."

She pushed the hair back from her high forehead with rather a weary gesture.

"I expect I'm all wrong," she said. "I don't really know anything except what would be right for me."

"I think, you strange child, that you don't need to know anything. You have truth and real values born in you," he said slowly.

She didn't answer, and he saw that she was already away from him in thought.

"Gael," he said gently, "would you like to go home with Conn for Christmas?"

She looked up quickly and he was oddly hurt by the eager light which came into her eyes.

"Back to Dun Mor?" she said. "Oh, could I?"

"Of course. You're a free agent, my dear. You can come and go as you please. We haven't managed to make you very happy here, have we, Gael?" he said a little sadly.

"But, Richard, you've done everything for me," she said swiftly. "I think we've been rather a poor bargain for you, the Monk and I. At least - the Monk is justifying himself now. He'll win you a National, I think."

He smiled slowly.

"Perhaps we've each got what we didn't expect from our bargain," he said cryptically, and she looked a little puzzled. "Michael was right, you know. I should never have brought you here."

"I don't have to come back after Christmas," she said, misunderstanding him, and his face grew suddenly grave.

"Our bargain was to stay until after the National," he said quickly. "Unless you promise to come back, I won't let you go." She looked at him with that clear, grave gaze, and he added with a short laugh: "Of course, I can't really stop you if you want to go. But I thought you wanted to see the Monk run at Aintree."

"I'll come back if you want me, Richard," she said simply.

Upstairs in her own room, Gael stared at the model of the greyhound with distant eyes. The firelight caught the delicate porcelain, giving it a phantasy of life. In a few days now she would see Dun Mor, in a few days she would go back to Brian and Shane - and Michael. At the thought of Michael she sighed, and began slowly to undress, kicking her clothes into their accustomed heap on the floor.

It was raining when Richard drove the young Cassellas to Heathrow. Mrs. Windlehurst said, "Goodbye" to them with a measure of relief. She had a feeling that if Gael had stayed for Christmas, Richard, in his present mood, would have tried to turn the festival into the good old-fashioned, homely kind, which would have bored Cherry unutterably and made her as cross as two sticks. Besides, she was a little worried about Gael. The child had been looking peaky lately. It would do her good to go home.

Richard looked down at Gael standing in the departure lounge in the shabby tweed coat in which she had first arrived. All the preceding day she had been alive with excitement, but now she looked pinched and tired and a little forlorn. At the last she didn't want to leave him.

"Send me a line to say you've arrived safely," he said. "And you'll come back to us after Christmas, Gael? That's a promise?"

"It's a promise," she said solemnly. "Will you meet me, Richard?"

"Of course. But come by the right plane this time!"

She giggled.

"I made a bad start, didn't I? Richard - thank you for everything. You've been very kind."

"That's a chilly-sounding phrase. But I'll always be kind to you, funny one. You're kind yourself, you know. Kind and polite and elf-like. But in spite of what you said that night at the Crown there's woman in you for me, Gael."

She was silent, meeting his quizzical eyes with a puzzled look, but at his last words she flushed.

"Please forget about that," she said gravely. "I had drunk a lot of wine."

"I don't think I want to forget," he replied, then added briskly: "You'd better be going. They're calling your flight." Unexpectedly he bent and kissed her. "Only *au revoir*, my sweet. You'll be back in the New Year."

He stood watching her go through the barrier, then he turned on his heel and walked out. He felt depressed and oddly lonely as he made his way to Sally's flat in Chelsea, and the cold seemed to have got into his bones.

Gael and Conn drove in Pat Murphy's battered car through a mist of rain along the rough road to Dun Mor.

"Irish rain is quite different from English," Gael said, sniffing the mountain air with keen pleasure.

"Kate will be frantic to see you," said Conn. "I'm glad we didn't tell them you were coming."

It seemed to him right and proper that, after all, he should not return alone. Gael in London had vaguely disturbed him, but the Gael sitting beside him, bouncing with pleasure in the back of Murphy's car, was the familiar dear companion of his days.

"Brian! Shane!" she called, running into the high, dark hall, and at the sound of her voice, old Kate rushed out of the kitchen screaming:

"Glory be to God! Is it yourself, Miss Gael? An' I praying on me two knees every night to the blessed Virgin for a sight of you! Didn't I see it in the tea- leaves, Mr. Brian? An' the turkeys have never been fatter or the holly greener. Wish now, till I take a look at you, for I'm thinking the fine ways of London city haven't changed you at all, at all."

Brian and Shane swung Gael off her feet each in turn while the two greyhounds barked hysterically and black smoke billowed out from the open library door.

"That chimney's smoking again!" cried Gael, halfway between laughter and tears, and it seemed to her an act of grace that the chimney should elect to smoke in the old, familiar way on her return.

"Gael!"

She hadn't seen Michael at first, but now he came from the library, his dark face alive with a great joy at seeing her, both hands outstretched in welcome.

"Michael, are you well?" she said with eagerness, but as he touched her, she grew quiet and she turned from his hungry gaze to seize Kate round her stout waist.

"Have you looked after them for me, Kate, you old dragon?" she exclaimed. "And you have two new white hairs, no less I... I have a greyhound model like the white dog; it cost twenty pounds. . . . Oh, Brian, the Monk won a great race at Sandown last week. The trainer thinks he has a chance for the National... Richard sent you all his love. . . ."

Grouped round the smoking fire after their cold supper, Gael thought of the house on Campden Hill. They would just be sitting down to dinner, Mrs. Windlehurst impressive in her black velvet, Cherry chattering and sulking by turn, Richard perhaps leaning across the table to talk to Sally. Afterwards those two would dance, and whisper together at one of those small lighted tables. Richard would go back to Sally's flat in the small hours for a last drink - Sally's charming, studied drawing-room a reflection of her elegant self. . . . Gael found herself restless under Michael's searching gaze, which never seemed to leave her face, and she was glad when at last he got up to go.

Kate brought in the final pot of strong tea and stayed to ask innumerable questions, and after she had gone, a silence fell upon them all. Gael, drowsy after her journey, blinked at the glowing turfs, and sat wrapped in her own disappointed thoughts until her brothers one by one drifted off to bed.

But upstairs in her own familiar room, with its odd assortment of furniture, its damp-stains on the faded walls, she flung open the window and the chill cooled her hot cheeks. The rain had stopped, and a faint watery moon hung over the distant hills. Below her, the dark waters of Corrib lapped gently on the shore, and the moon's thin path touched the ripples with silver.

Gael stood, breathing in the peace and quietness of the night. She had come home, but even into the fastness of Dun Mor a shadow had crept in with her.

CHAPTER IX

CHRISTMAS passed with nothing very untoward to mark its passage. Timsy got drunk as usual, and the ceiling fell down on old Kate's bed on Christmas Day. But these were matters of no account at Dun Mor, and Gael, pursuing her own affairs through the quiet days, was grateful for the familiar surroundings of her childhood.

Her brothers were glad to have her back, but they took her presence as a matter of course and seemed unaware that she avoided them, going off by herself for long hours at a time. But Michael noticed, and most of all noticed with pain her avoidance of himself.

The days slipped by with gentle ease and it was well into the New Year when Gael realised that her time was nearly up. Riding with Conn and Michael across the peaty moor one bitter morning, she wondered if she broke her promise to Richard, and didn't return to England, would these past months become the dream they had been in the old days? Would Cherry, with her bright brittle ways, Sally, cool and enigmatic, even Richard himself, fade into that pattern of dreams which had haunted her since childhood?

They rode towards the ruined tower where, with Richard, they had picnicked in the summer. Conn, with that odd solitariness which had always characterised him, rode a little ahead, the brindle bitch at his heels. Gael, watching him, thought with tenderness of that ancient bond between them, and could not visualise him old. There was a lightness in Conn, a wise simplicity' which he could never lose.

Michael, looking at Gael riding beside him, thought very much the same of her. A strange, remote child, he thought with sadness. Would life ever touch her? Yet, as she turned her still face to speak to him, he knew that she was vulnerable. She would grow up, be hurt like others, but for him she was out of reach.

"You look unhappy," she said, and the knowledge of her own share in his unhappiness made her gentle.

He smiled and said evasively, "It's a sad day."

She looked before her at the wild expanse of moorland, grey in the winter light, the cold wind driving through the heather and stirring the waters of Corrib to a ruffled sullenness, and the loneliness of the place entered into her.

"It's a sad land," she said softly.

He dismounted and tethered their horses to a thorn bush.

"Come up in the tower with me," he said abruptly, and she climbed the broken steps as she had once done with Richard.

They stood high up in the teeth of the strong wind, and -Michael said, shouting a little to be heard:

"Don't go back. Stay here with us."

"I must," she replied. "I promised."

Below them, Conn, his horse, and the brindle bitch, moved in a slow canter into the wind. He saw them and waved.

"Is it because of Richard Saracen you must go?" asked Michael, but his words were carried away on the wind, and Gael shivered.

"It's cold," she said. "Let's go down."

She rode home fast, racing them both, fleeing, perhaps, Michael thought, from himself. At Dun Mor a letter *from* Richard awaited her, asking for the date of her return.

Too soon it came round to the day before Gael's departure for England, and she sat on the kitchen table, watching Kate roll pastry, unsure whether she was glad or sorry to be going.

"Are you making lemon-cheese tarts for tonight?" she said idly to Kate. Kate always made lemon- cheese tarts for an occasion.

"I am that. But tomorrow night you'll be sitting down to a grand dinner with the quality. Quails and paycock's tongues and such like. What would you be wanting with lemon-cheese tarts - I'm askin' you?" Kate sounded cross.

"I've never eaten a peacock's tongue in my life, and I don't suppose they have either," laughed Gael. "It sounds frightfully rich and exotic."

"Riches is for thim that knows how to spend," said Kate obscurely. "You were not born to thim elegant things, me child."

"But, Kate" - Gael looked at the old woman in perplexity - "it was you who insisted I went in the,

first place. My mother would have wished me to have my chance, you said. This was no life for a young lady to be leading, you said."

"An' would you be throwing me own words in me teeth, Gael Cassella?" Kate banged her pastry board with vigour. "Sure, we all make mistakes. An' what good has London city done you? I'm askin' you. You were leppin' mad to go, an' it's done you no manner of good. There's poor Mr. Michael always hangin' around for a sight of you, and you send him away, cool as you please. Och! It's no use you sitting there with your eyes stickin' out at me on two sticks. You should be ashamed of yourself, me girl."

"Have I been unkind to Michael?" Gael asked a little sadly. "I don't mean to be. But, Kate" - her mouth curved suddenly in a mischievous

grin - "another thing you said the morning I left was that I'd come back with a fine English husband - a lord, no less, you said."

The old woman's face crumpled up in an unwilling smile.

"Ah, get along wid ye!" she exclaimed. "You'd argue the sinse from a lawyer!" She gave the girl a sly look. "Did you leave your heart in England? Is that the trouble?"

"There's no trouble," said Gael a little wearily. "And Englishmen are very dull - except Richard, of course."

"Sure, there's a lovely man!" said Kate with gusto. "Niver soiled his hands with work - that's how the quality should be - wisht now, here's Mr. Michael! Mind yourself, me darlin'."

"You promised to spend your last afternoon with me, Gael," Michael said a little doubtfully. "What would you like to do?"

"So I did," she agreed. "It's too wet to ride or sail. Shall we go into Ballyskillen and see a film?"

"Just as you like," he replied without enthusiasm, but she slipped off the table and put a hand through his arm.

"Come on, then. If we go now, we'll be back in nice time for supper. Kate's making lemon-cheese tarts."

Driving back from Ballyskillen in the dark, Michael said:

"Are you glad to be going, Gael?"

"I'm never glad to leave Dun Mor," she said with gentleness.

"But you like the life over there. It's what you dreamed of."

She fingered his Christmas present, a bag of cheap brown leather - Cherry would have exclaimed in horror at it.

"Perhaps nothing's ever quite what you dream of," she said with a sigh. "In the spring, it will all be over, anyway. All over for ever."

"When you come back in the spring, will you marry me, Gael?"

She gave him a troubled look.

"Oh, Michael, how can I say?" she said. "How can any of us say what we'll be feeling then?"

"I know what I'll be feeling. I've never changed. But you have. I always knew you would."

"No, I haven't," she protested a~ little too vehemently. "I'm still the same me, only I suppose one goes on growing."

"You're in love with Richard Saracen."

"Michael" - her voice sounded urgent and unhappy - "I shall be back in the spring. No matter what's gone between it will all be over, and I shall be back."

"If he hurts you - "

"He doesn't know I'm there," she said quite simply.

At the house, Michael said: "I'm not coming to supper, Gael."

"Not coming to supper?" she exclaimed in dismay. "But it's my last evening, and Kate's made lemon- cheese tarts!"

"I'd rather not. You won't mind? I'll say 'Goodbye' here."

She looked at him standing there in the wet, the rain driving into his shadowed face, and she felt with a pang that she had seen the last of the old Michael.

"I'll be waiting when you come back," he said. "Good-bye, my darling, and God bless you."

He kissed her swiftly and got back into his car. She stood on the slippery broken steps and watched his tail-light vanish down the dark road.

Gael arrived at Heathrow at tea-time and searched eagerly amongst the crowd for Richard's tall figure.

She saw him almost at once, his eyes, eager and expectant, searching the passengers. She had hailed him and flung her arms round his neck, before she became aware of Sally's slim figure standing just behind him.

"Here you are, safe and sound I" he said, slipping a hand through her arm. "I half expected you wouldn't come at all, you funny little sprite I I've missed you damnably, Gael."

"How do you do, Gael?" Sally said in her cool, unhurried voice, watching them with quizzical eyes.

They all three walked to the car park, Richard asking multitudes of questions, but Gael fell silent with Sally's unexpected presence, and the pleasure of her arrival was dimmed.

Tea was waiting in the drawing-room, and Cherry, in a new red dress, seemed surprisingly pleased to see her.

"I had your white dress sent to the cleaners, all ready for tonight, darling," she announced with naive pride at her own forethought. "We're going to a father amusing party at the Bingham's'. Did Richard tell you?"

Gael slipped back with scarcely an effort. The light chatter, the prospective parties, all assumed their normal proportions. Was it only last night that she had stood with Michael in the rain and felt for the second time that ache at leaving Dun Mor?

The next morning, Gael went up to Cherry's room after breakfast. She , was both pleased and surprised at the girl's change of attitude. Cherry seemed genuinely glad to have her back and even during last night's party had found time to giggle with Gael in a corner.

The remains of her scarcely touched breakfast stood beside the bed, and she leant against her crumpled pillows, looking tired and smoking very fast.

"I don't know how you do it," she said resentfully to Gael. "You had that long journey yesterday and were up half the night, and your skin still looks all right."

"I haven't had many late nights at Dun Mor," Gael said.

"How deadly! I'd rather have my face a mess than spend an evening at home."

"I don't believe that's really true. Parties become just as dull as staying at home."

"Anyway, they stop you from thinking."

Gael looked at her, wondering what had happened recently to make her so unhappy.

"Perhaps if you had one good think you'd solve it all," she said gently.

Cherry moved restlessly in the bed and lit another cigarette.

"There's nothing to solve," she said. "One just goes on and on. I'm glad you're back, Gael. I never thought I should miss you, but you're sane. David's sane, too."

Gael said on impulse:

"Cherry, why don't you marry David? He's terribly in love with you."

"I've thought of that, too. But what would be the good?" Cherry looked at Gael keenly, "Would *you* take second best?"

"I don't know," Gael faltered. "Sometimes there's nothing else left to do." She thought of Michael in Galway, waiting for the spring.

"Life's a rotten business," said Cherry, and frowned. "Did you notice Sally with our Richard at the party? Very possessive, I thought her. For once, I don't think he liked it."

"I think Richard's looking worried," Gael said.

"Oh, that!" said Cherry vaguely. "There's a mild financial scare on. Richard's heard rumours about International Steel. All his money's in that, you know, and it seems a bit shaky."

"Can that be serious?"

Cherry gave a short laugh.

"If the whole thing went bust we'd all be out in the snow, darling! But I expect it only means his dividends will be less or something. I think Richard missed you, too, my sweet. What is it about you, I wonder? You're nothing to look at, if you don't mind my saying so."

"It's probably because I'm undemanding," said Gael seriously.

Cherry digested this with surprise.

"Well, you've got under the fair Sally's skin all right," she said with satisfaction. "That alone gives me plenty of pleasure."

"Sally!" exclaimed Gael incredulously. "She wouldn't bother with me. She thinks I'm just a little girl. So does Richard."

"So do I until you come out with one of these sage wisecracks," Cherry replied. "Sally's no fool, you know. You're a funny girl, Gael, but you're decent. And now, be a sweet and go and turn my bath on for me."

January was a bleak month. Gael got a sharp attack of influenza and was in bed for a week. Richard was very kind, plying her with fruit and later, books, and when she was getting better he sat with her every day. On one occasion he surveyed her with a strange expression on finding David sitting on the bed. David was often there. He seemed to have acquired a real affection for Gael, and, to Cherry's open annoyance, divided his attention between the two girls.

"It seems to me you're putting Cherry's nose out of joint, my sweet," Richard said when the young man had gone.

"He likes me because he can talk about her," Gael said without conceit. "I wish she would marry him - he's such a nice person."

"Have you never heard of people being kept waiting too long, and turning eventually to somebody else?" said Richard with his crooked smile.

"I don't think David's like that."

"I wasn't only thinking of David," he remarked, and threw himself rather wearily into an easy chair.

She looked at him with loving eyes.

"Are you tired, Richard?" she asked.

He rubbed his eyes and stared into the fire.

"I'm a bit worried about my affairs," he admitted. "It looks as if there may be an almighty crash in the financial world before long."

"I don't understand about these things. Would you be penniless?"

Never having had money, she found it difficult to realise the significance of the possible loss of a fortune.

He smiled at her puzzled face.

"Well, not quite penniless. But I should be a poor man and have to get another job."

"What would you do?" she asked.

"God knows. I might try farming, though I'm told there's barely a living in it these days."

"But you could be happy out of doors," she said. "We make nothing out of horses, and Michael doesn't do much with his farm, but we get along. Perhaps it's different in Ireland."

"It's odd," said Richard reminiscently. "But when I first travelled over to look for a horse, I remember looking out at the hills and the wild pasture and thinking that here was a country where a man could settle and be at peace, and rear children. I remember thinking that money

had brought me very little in the long run. Perhaps my Irish blood counts for something after all."

"Does Sally want children?" she asked unexpectedly.

He glanced across at her, surprised^

"No, I don't think so. Why?" But, with her old evasive trick, she answered his question with another.

"Have you ever wanted anything much from life?"

"What a curious question! I suppose we all want something from life at one time or another. I'm afraid I've found most things I've wanted pretty easy to get."

She looked at him with that sternness which seemed common to all the Cassellas at times.

"Then you've never wanted anything very badly," she said.

"You're a strange child. Where have you learnt your wisdom?"

"Is that wisdom?" she asked gently. "I thought everyone knew."

He got to his feet and stood looking down at her pale little face. Against the pillows her skin had a transparent look and there were shadows under her eyes.

"There's nothing of you!" he said with impatient concern. "You must get well quickly, funny one, and get some more hunting before we're all in the workhouse."

"They wouldn't take you in the workhouse, Richard," she told him with a grin. "You're too disturbing."

He looked at her oddly.

"And what, might I ask, do you exactly mean by that?"

But "She only smiled at him tranquilly and her face assumed the withdrawn look which he had come to know so well.

*

Gael had not long, been about again when Richard succumbed. The attack left him listless and depressed, and he kept his first appointment with Sally with a feeling of oppression. She had not visited him while he was ill. She had always been afraid of contact with sickness.

"My dear, you look ill," she said as she dispensed tea in her charming drawing-room. "You ought to have kept away from Gael. It's madness to run into infection."

"It was in the house. Any of us might have got it," he replied rather shortly.

"You're very fond of your ewe lamb, aren't you, darling?"

"Gael has roots," he said, "and a strange, ageless wisdom."

She raised her delicate eyebrows, and asked softly:

"And did you find all this out on her bed of sickness?"

He made an impatient gesture.

"Oh, Sally, please - let's not discuss Gael."

She gave him a shrewd glance.

"Very well, we won't," she said gaily. "We'll discuss ourselves, which will be much more interesting. It's February now. Next month will be the National. Have you forgotten the suggestion I made at Sandown?"

He looked at her interrogatively.

"I asked you if you would like me to marry you after the race was over."

"Oh, that!"

She smiled, but her eyes were wary.

"Not very complimentary, are you, my sweet?" she said gently.

He put down his empty cup and lit a cigarette.

"Have you realised, Sally, that I'm in danger of becoming a poor man?" he asked her casually.

She smiled.

"Still worrying about these rumours ?"

"They're getting to be more than rumours now. I just wondered if you'd given thought to the possibility that your income may yet be larger than mine."

"Would that matter?"

"Yes, in our case I think it would," he said slowly. "One comes down to fundamentals then."

Her face was impassive. He had no means of knowing how his words affected her, but her slender fingers, tapping the long cigarette-holder, were not quite steady.

"Well, my dear, don't let's worry about what may never happen," she said easily. "It's the relationship that is important."

"Let's leave it over until this crisis has passed," he said, getting to his feet. "I'd rather you knew exactly what you were taking on."

She rose and stood beside him.

"Richard, do you think it's you or your money I'm in love with ?" she asked.

He hesitated for a moment, then said very gently:

"I don't think you're really in love at all."

She stared at him, and the delicate colour crept under her smooth skin.

"Isn't that rather a curious idea to get after all these years ?" she said quietly.

"Perhaps it's an idea I've had for some time," he replied equally quietly.

"Ever since you brought that very clever little girl into your house, I suppose," she flashed. "Gael has roots. Gael has wisdom! I didn't think you were such a fool as to fall for that stuff, Richard."

"Please," he said again. "Let's not discuss Gael. I don't think she really has anything to do with you and me. I'll say *au revoir*, my dear. I'm not really in a very fit state for sane argument. Please be patient."

She controlled her anger with an effort, and walked with him to the door.

"Very well, Richard, take your time," she said. At the door she raised her face to his. He could see the carefully made-up lashes stiff and oddly attractive against the delicate eye-sockets. "I wouldn't like to think - and I don't believe it's true that all that's been between us should count for nothing now."

"Perhaps not," he said, kissing her lightly. "But don't forget, my sweet, that I wanted to marry you three years ago. It was you who kept me waiting."

CHAPTER X

THE Monk continued to improve steadily and by early March the stable's hopes of him ran high. Gael and Richard went down frequently to watch him gallop, and to Richard there was now an added anxiety for his prospects.

"It may be my last chance of racing," he told Pike. "My own prospects don't look too rosy at present. I may have to sell up. It would be pleasant to finish on the highest note of all."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said the trainer, and looked at Richard speculatively. "You could always get a price for the Monk now, you know. He's getting talked about, and if he's unlucky at Aintree his value may drop."

But Richard shook his head.

"No, I'll keep him as my last gesture, whatever happens," he said. "Apart from anything else, it would break Miss Cassella's heart to sell now."

Richard had made a party up for Aintree: Sally, Cherry and Gael and David.

"That is, if we're not all sweeping crossings by then," he amended with wry humour.

"We will not!" said Gael indignantly. "We'll be watching the Monk thundering down the course to victory, loading the field like Cuchulain led his warriors- "

"Loved by three times fifty queens I" finished Richard, and laughed. "You see, I haven't forgotten."

But within a fortnight of the race the situation became suddenly serious. Rumours, which had only been ugly possibilities for so long, now became facts. Panic set in and shares fell to nothing. Richard spent long and fruitless hours with directors and lawyers, returning home late at night, weary and discouraged. They saw very little of him during those anxious few days. Then one evening he returned to find Sally ringing his front-door bell, and at sight of his tired, hopeless face, she said impulsively:

"Are things very bad?"

"Just about as bad as they can be. By tomorrow the crash will have come. International Steel is bound to go and it will drag all its subsidiary companies with it."

"Oh, my dear," she said helplessly.

"Well, at least the waiting is over," he said, straightening his tired shoulders. "We know the worst - and it is the worst. Come in and have a drink."

The big drawing-room was empty. A high, saddleback chair was drawn up before the fire, and an open book lay face downwards on one of the arms.

"Gael appears to be in," he said. "I suppose the others are all out."

He poured out a couple of drinks and they stood together at the end of the room, not talking, but looking out at the quiet street. Today had carried with it the first hint of spring. There was a freshness in the air, and the first spring flowers decked the barrows. It was inconceivable that such promise of gladness could bring with it disaster.

"It's funny the things life has in store for us, isn't it?" Richard said, his eyes fixed on the newly-budding trees. "One takes everything so

much for granted, I suppose. Even the spring which is a miracle in itself."

"There are other miracles still," she said. "Richard, I once asked you if you thought I was in love with you or your money. Your answer is here now. I'll marry you when you like."

He dragged his eyes from the window and looked at her with an effort.

"Do you realise that by this time tomorrow I shall be a ruined man?" he asked a little harshly.

Her eyes wavered a moment from his.

"Yes," she said. "I'll still marry you."

He smiled, a curious distant little smile which chilled her.

"It's too late, my dear," he said very gently.

"What do you mean?"

"Perhaps when one is suddenly brought up against stark reality one sees with great clarity," he said. "I appreciate your offer - it's gallant of you - but we don't love each other, Sally, you and I. Anything else at such a time would be impossible."

She stared at him and the colour mounted under her skin. "You mean you don't love me," she said in a carefully controlled voice.

He shook his head.

"I mean we don't love each other," he said. "Perhaps we never did - it was just one of those things. But you wouldn't like it, my dear - being

married to me on the dregs of an old infatuation, and I don't think I should like it either."

"You're not very flattering to our past association, are you?" she said, and he could hear the anger in her voice.

"Sally, I don't want to hurt you," he said rather wearily. "I don't belittle what's been between us - it was very sweet. But when I wanted you, you wouldn't have me, and now - well, perhaps we've waited too long."

"You've changed."

"Perhaps I have - or perhaps I've woken up to the reality of things. I've done so little with my life."

"You've done what you've always done!" she cried without thought or reason. "Just pursued the newest craze. Do you think I'm such a fool that I don't know who I have to thank for this - this maudlin finding of yourself, as you would put it?"

"Be careful!"

His face was suddenly stern, but she was past controlling her flood of words.

"This is Gael - the ewe lamb - the little sprite - the clever little bitch, who's caught you because of her novelty. Oh, I quite see all this ingenuousness is very refreshing after a series of sophisticated attachments, but if you're going to tell me you're in love with the child, I'll laugh in your face!"

"I'm not going to tell you anything," he said expressionlessly. "And I'd rather Gael was kept out of this conversation altogether."

"And that's another symptom," she sneered. "Your mistress mustn't mention your innocent love's name. I'd like to know what you think the difference is between us."

He said nothing, realising with faint wonder that underneath that charming, polished exterior lay simple vulgarity.

"Do you think I don't see through all this sickening protective business?" she demanded, stung by his silence. "Do you think I don't know what everyone has known for months, that the girl's your mistress?"

"Sally, please-"

"I remember an occasion very early on when you went for Cherry because she said you had bought the girl with the horse, but she only said what everyone else has been saying and laughing at you for. After all, there could have been no other reason for all this fairy godfather act, and it beats me why you should both have been such a couple of ostriches about it. That night at the Crown - any night here in your own house. Oh, you make me tired! Do you take us all for fools?"

He turned from her, suddenly too sick and weary to argue, and she flung at him quickly:

"I notice you don't even try and defend her. You're wise, or don't you mind your friends laughing behind your back at the way you've both fooled your aunt?"

A strange kind of pity for her made him say: "Sally, don't humiliate yourself any more. It's so terrible."

She stared at him unbelievably.

"*Humiliate* myself!" she exclaimed incredulously.

"Yes, don't you see - there are some things in one's inner nature one should never allow another human being to witness. Go home now. It's no time for either of us to try and think straight."

She looked at him and he knew then that she hated him. She put down her untasted drink with a jar which spilt it on the polished table.

"Oh, I'll go!" she said. "I'll go, and I'll see to it that everyone knows how I offered to stand by you at a time like this and was turned down for the shabby little beggar who exchanged her rag of virtue for a good time!"

The door slammed behind her, and at the unmistakable sound of a stifled sob, Richard was across the room, and had pulled Gael out of the saddle-back chair.

"Why didn't you stop us? Why didn't you say you were here ?" he demanded furiously.

"I was asleep," she replied. "And afterwards you shouted so loud, I couldn't. It would have been embarrassing."

The tears were streaming down her face, and he dragged her into his arms.

"Oh, blast and damn the woman!" he cried. "Gael, listen, my darling. What you've just heard can't touch you. It was the filth of a jealous woman's mind. You and I know how things are - how they could be. Nothing that others can say or think can really hurt you."

She pulled out of his arms and away from him.

"But you never denied it!" she sobbed. "You let her go on and on - you never said it wasn't true."

"It didn't seem much use."

"And all the time that's what people have been thinking, that you and I - you and I - Did you know that's what they thought? Did you know, Richard?"

"I had a pretty shrewd idea towards the end," he admitted wearily.

"Perhaps she was right! Perhaps that's what you did bring me here for - just to be your mistress - like Sally, or any of the others."

"Oh, Gael dear, stop! You know very well such an idea never crossed my mind. Have I ever behaved like your idea of an ardent lover? Funny-face - funny little squib!"

But she was beyond his raillery.

"Perhaps it didn't matter that I didn't attract you," she cried, scarcely knowing what she was saying. "Perhaps you thought in time - in exchange for all you had done for me-"

"I'm not a seducer, whatever else I am," he said shortly.

She covered her mouth with her fingers, trying piteously to hide its trembling.

"I thought you were so wonderful," she said. "Even when I knew about Sally, I thought it didn't matter because you loved her.... I loved you, Richard.... I wanted you to have all the fine, shining things. Why did you let me come back when you knew what people said?"

He looked at her a little sadly.

"Did it never strike you that I might want you? Gael" - he held out both hands to her - "I've nothing to offer you now, but will you marry me, darling?"

She stared at him as if she didn't believe her ears, then the tears came again.

"I wouldn't marry you - not if you were Cuchulain himself!" she cried absurdly. "Oh, leave me alone! Leave me alone!"

There was a great tenderness in his smile.

"You are a silly child!" he said gently. "Run along and wash your face. We'll talk about it tomorrow."

"Tomorrow I won't be here!" she said, darting to the door.

"Don't be so absurd!"

But she was gone, and he could hear her crying as she ran upstairs. With an exhausted gesture, he poured himself out another drink, then took himself off to his club for dinner.

The next day was so chaotic that Richard had no time to consider his private affairs. He sat in his club watching the tape-machines, and by lunch-time the early editions carried the headlines of the collapse of International Steel and the ruin of thousands of people.

Richard returned to Campden Hill at four o'clock to find his aunt and Cherry sitting silently in the drawing-room. David leant over the back of Cherry's chair.

"Well, it's come," Richard said, surveying them all with faintly humorous eyes. Now that the tension was over he felt a curious apathy towards the whole business. "You've seen the papers, I suppose."

"Yes, it's damnable," murmured David, and his blue eyes were grave and troubled.

"I'm afraid it means the finish of us," Richard said, looking at his aunt. "This house, the Bentley - everything will have to go. I'm better off than most, for I've a little of my mother's money that wasn't sunk in International Steel. But I can no longer keep up an establishment."

"My dear boy, you don't have to worry about us," Mrs. Windlehurst said briskly. "I have a little money of my own, as you know, and Lady Gent has heard of some rich American's young daughter who needs chaperoning through the season. Cherry - well, we'll find something for Cherry."

Looking at the young man, Richard smiled. Cherry would marry David. No, they wouldn't have to worry about Cherry.

"And there's Gael," he said, and his eyes were tender. Gael's future was solved too.

"Gael has gone," Mrs. Windlehurst said abruptly.

"Gone!" Richard stared at her.

"Yes - back to Ireland. It's a very good thing, I must say, under all the circumstances, though the girl has a most peculiar way of doing things. Went off without a word to anyone, and left a note for Cherry."

Richard sat down rather heavily. It was a fitting climax to the day. But he thought of Gael, his dear wise child, gone from him in his time of need, and his eyes were a little bitter as he said to Cherry:

"Might I see the note?"

She hesitated, and he realised that for some reason or other she was antagonistic to him.

"I'd rather you didn't," she said then.

"I see. Well, there's nothing more to discuss, is there ? I put the house in the agent's hands yesterday, and you'd better see about sacking the staff, Aunt Clare."

"What will you do, Richard?"

It was Cherry who asked, and for a moment his tired eyes rested on her ironically.

"I haven't the least idea. We still have the Monk in the bag, you know. Perhaps I shall retrieve my fallen fortunes at Aintree. If I do, I will buy you a very handsome present, my sweet," he said, and gave her a mocking little smile.

After all, Richard went alone to Aintree. Cherry and David hadn't the heart to make up a party, and Sally was out of town. Richard, as he travelled up to Liverpool surveyed his world with ironic eyes. This was his final gesture to a world that would know him no longer. What the future held he could not tell, but for this one day he was still the Richard Saracen his friends knew. His horse was running under his own colours, and he had backed him to win with his last few hundreds.

Arrived at Aintree, Richard went straight to the Monk's loose box, where he had told Pike to meet him.

"How did he stand the journey? Shoes all right? Did he eat up his feed?"

The usual questions from any owner to any trainer, but behind them Pike sensed the added anxiety. He liked Richard, and he was genuinely sorry for his misfortune.

"Everything's O.K.," he said. 'I saw Herriard last night. He's stopping at the Adelphi. He seems pretty confident."

"Good! Have you put in the starting declaration?"

"No, sir, I left that to you."

"Right! I'll go and do it now."

Having filled in the form, Richard went to the Member's' luncheon-room and sat down at one of the tables. The place was crowded with keen, carefree people, and each table seemed to have its cheerful party. Richard sat alone, and ordered a pint of champagne with his lunch. If this was to be his swan-song, he would go down gallantly.

He had no bets on the first two races, and as soon as the second race was over, he went down to the loose-box to watch the Monk being saddled. The little horse looked fitter than he had ever seen him, and the strong, tense muscles rippled under the shining skin. In the paddock, Richard watched the horses parade. There was the favourite coming in now, Dusty Minstrel, last year's winner, a beautiful horse and faultless; Malmaison, the runner-up, not looking too fit; Bronx, that gallant little mare with such a record of bad luck behind her; Bowery Boy, the American horse, and much fancied; Lucky Lad, whom the Monk had beaten at Sandown; Beau Chasseur, the French horse, winner of the Prix des Drags; the Monk, right on his toes and in fine racing condition. Pike had certainly done him well.

Richard watched them parade and felt his eyes prick. The loveliest sight in the world - this proud display of fine horseflesh, their skins like silk, catching the afternoon sun, their small proud heads jerking away from their leading-reins. He knew an intolerable ache to have Gael beside him revelling in such beauty, and, watching the Monk in

the line of horses, he understood her first reluctance to sell at any price.

Herriard walked into the paddock. He looked dapper and confident in his smart blue overcoat, and the white cap was pulled over eyes that were shrewd and steady. As Richard put him up into the saddle, he realised in passing how small the Monk was - a little horse with the heart of a lion. The jockey asked for instructions as they walked out for the parade.

"Get right away at the start," Richard said, "and remember you're on a stayer. Take a pull after the second or third jump. But you know it all I Good luck!"

He patted the Monk's gleaming neck, and went into the Owners' Stand to watch the race.

The course was packed, the day was fine, with a keen March wind, and the field of thirty-two starters filed gracefully past the stands to the start.

They were off! Richard focused his strong glasses on the first jumps and watched the surge of colour rise and fall. Safely over Becher's, and the cerise and white was lying seventh. He lost him after the Canal Turn, and there was grief at the Open Ditch. As they passed the stands, the Monk was lying fifth. Herriard was riding with steady precision, his horse untired. Over Becher's the second time round, he was fourth, with Dusty Minstrel close at his girths. Bowery Boy led and was still full of running; Malmaison must have fallen. At the Canal Tum the Monk was baulked and dropped back to fifth place; Dusty Minstrel was now leading. At Valentine's, Richard couldn't see what happened, but as they came round to the bend, the Monk was lying third. Bowery Boy was out of it - he must have fallen at Valentine's. Beau Chasseur was fourth and jumping well.

Down the far side of the course they came, a brilliant splash of colour. Richard was scarcely aware of the cheering crowds, the announcer's voice from the loud-speaker just above his head. He only saw his colours creeping up as the Monk gained steadily on the two leaders, and over the last jump they appeared in the sunshine, the Monk leading, Dusty Minstrel -jumping simultaneously with a loose horse, and Beau Chasseur a good third. The Monk was pulling away; now there were two lengths between him and the favourite, then the loose horse - Richard thought it was Bronx - suddenly ran out left-handed, crossing the leaders, who were compelled to take a pull to avoid being carried out of the course.

Richard dimly heard the crowd's shout of excitement as Dusty Minstrel refused, and as the Monk got over with a scramble which nearly brought him down, he heard a cry of: "The Monk's down. . . . No, he's not. . . ." He saw his jockey slip back in the saddle with a superhuman effort, and get his horse going again, and he saw Beau Chasseur, with a cleat run, catch and pass the leaders, leading by three lengths.

Herriard had his horse collected now, and was riding a magnificent race with his hands, and the Monk began to steal up to the leader.

"God!" thought Richard, watching with agonised immobility, "I believe he'll do it yet - it's a long run in!"

Beau Chasseur's jockey looked round to see what was coming up, and sat down to ride his horse, using his whip for the first time in the race. The announcer's voice, hoarse with excitement, blared: "Scarlet Monk is coming up. . . . He's coming up fast. ... I believe he's going to win. . . . Yes, he'll just do it!"

For a moment, Richard thought the race was his, but although the Monk was still going very gallantly, the French horse, with his pull of

nearly a stone, gradually drew away again, and passed the post, the winner by two lengths.

Richard stood stiffly in the surging mass of people. Not until that moment did he realise how much he had staked on the result of the race. His last few hundreds were gone, but with them so much more besides. The luck of Aintree.... Gael would be bitterly disappointed...

He turned on his heel and pushed his way through the crowd to the unsaddling ring.

Mrs. Windlehurst and Cherry were still waiting up when Richard got back. There was soup heating on the fire in the small room he had used as a study. All the other rooms were already shut up, and their furniture shrouded in dust-sheets. Tomorrow the silent house would be deserted; Cherry and her mother were going out of Town to stay with friends and Richard was moving to his club. The servants had already left.

His aunt greeted him with kindly commiseration. She looked tired and for once her grey hair lacked its usual immaculate precision. He reflected that she had been very good through these last days of stress. There had been endless things to see to, and he was grateful to her for her common sense and a complete absence of sentimentality.

"My dear boy, what wretched luck!" she said, taking the soup from the fire and pouring it into a china bowl. "The horse so nearly won! It must have been heart-breaking to watch."

But Cherry's eyes filled with nervous tears.

"It was rotten!" she cried vehemently. "On top of everything else! The whole of life is rotten and I hate horses and everyone."

"Hush, dear!" said her mother. "Don't use that word so much; it isn't attractive. Cherry has been very upset by the whole business, Richard. I'm glad we're getting away."

"Anyhow, the little horse ran a grand race," Richard told Cherry kindly. "He had bad luck at the end, that's all. One expects that sort of thing at Aintree."

"But you didn't expect it," Cherry persisted. "We all thought he was going to win."

Richard drank his soup absently.

"Curiously enough, I did," he admitted. "He was a sort of touchstone - a ridiculous idea to get about a horse, anyhow."

Cherry said oddly:

"If Gael had been there, perhaps he would have won. She was a sort of link - she broke the luck by going."

"Darling, what a ridiculous thing to say!" exclaimed her mother. "As if Gael's presence could have made the slightest difference to a horse winning a race or not!"

"Perhaps you're right, Cherry," Richard said slowly, and his aunt glanced at him sharply.

"You're dog-tired, Richard," she said briskly. "And no wonder! Finish your soup and get to bed. I'm going up now. We've got to be off early in the morning."

She stood in the doorway looking back, and for the first time in memory, Richard saw a defeated look on her face. "I shall miss it all," she said simply, and went out of the room.

Richard lit a cigarette and began to wander restlessly about the house. The dining-room was stern and unfriendly with its stiff rows of chairs, and the green baize stretched over the shining mahogany of the table. It didn't seem possible that anyone could ever have been gay in its gloomy fastness. In the drawing-room he stood for a long time in the cold, marking the unfamiliar outlines of the shrouded furniture; the big sofa, the tall saddle-back which had so successfully hidden Gael that memorable afternoon, and quite vividly he saw it all again. Sally flinging insults in the far window, Gael tear-stained and distraught, hiding her mouth with her brown boy's hands; the nightmare finish to a nightmare day.

There was a slight sound behind him, and he turned to see that Cherry had crept into the room after him.

"Richard, why did Gael run away?" she asked.

"I thought you knew. It was something Sally said - something I ought to have scotched long ago."

"I thought it must be you who hurt her."

He looked at her with clear eyes.

"Perhaps it was, after all," he said, and Cherry began to cry.

"I don't know what's the matter with me!" She sniffed resentfully. "I think I miss her. . . . Everything's changed so suddenly. ... I must have gone soft...."

"Not so hard-boiled as you thought you were, are you, my sweet?" he said with gentleness. "Cheer up - you'll be all right. Are you going to marry David?"

She nodded and blew her nose violently. "I think so. Gael says he has roots."

"Lord almighty! Is she responsible for you, too!" he exclaimed with humour. "Well, I think you'll be making a wise choice. He's a decent chap." He took her face between his hands and gave her a kiss. "No ill-feeling between us?" he asked, and she shook her head. "Cherry - won't you tell me now what was in Gael's note?"

"I'll fetch it," she gulped, and ran out of the room. Richard waited and was struck by the uncanny stillness of the house, and while he was still puzzling over the sensation of utter desolation, he realised what it was. Every clock in the house had stopped.

"It feels as if there's been a death," he said in surprise as Cherry came back into the room.

She watched him while he read Gael's note. His face was still as the house. He read it over twice before he handed it back to her.

"Something has happened which has made it impossible for me to stay. I think in your heart you must know about me. Will you sometimes send me news of my dear Richard? I will always love him, as I hope one day you will love David, for neither he nor Richard could ever be 'second-best'.

GAEL."

"You can keep it if you like," Cherry said as he handed it back.

"Thank you," he replied gravely, and placed the note carefully in his pocket-book.

"What are you going to do next?"

"Next?" His voice lost its tiredness and took on a new ring. "I'm going to Ireland by the first plane tomorrow."

Journeying across Ireland to the west, he remembered clearly his feelings on that other journey. The tender, half-remembrance of the land of his birth, the sight of the sleeping hills, heavy with dreams; dreams that were reality leaving that other life a dream. A land in which to settle, to rear children and let the world go by, he had thought. His pursuit of the horse from Galway had led him into strange places.

Pat Murphy's car bore him along the bumpy road to Dun Mor just as it had done before. *How many miles to Babylon..* . Was that Dun Mor already, grey against the waters of Corrib? *Can I get there by candlelight ...* - They were past Casey's now. The gates were in sight. *Yes, and back again. ...*

The front door was standing wide open as usual, and Richard ran into the hall.

"Is anyone about?" he called.

They came slowly from the library, the two elder Cassellas, dark and watchful, Conn with his yellow crest of hair.

"Am I not welcome?" Richard asked, hesitating a little on the threshold.

"Everyone's welcome to Dun Mor," Brian replied with grave courtesy. "Put the luggage in the hall, Pat."

"Where's Gael?" Richard said, and met their stern eyes-squarely.

For a moment no one answered, then Brian replied:

"You'll find her on the landing-stage."

A smile touched his grave mouth and he turned back towards the library.

Richard walked down to the edge of the lough and stood for a moment watching. There she was just as he had first seen her, a thin little girl sitting on the end of the landing-stage. A book was in her hands, but she wasn't reading. She was looking out across the water with that strange, distant gaze, motionless, withdrawn.

He called to her softly. "Hullo, funny-face!" At the sound of his voice, she turned swiftly and, springing up, stood, the book clasped to her breast, waiting for him.

"The loose horse must have soured him," she said as if she had seen him yesterday.

He took her gently into his arms.

"Cherry said you broke the luck by running away."

"Oh!" Her eyes widened in dismay. "I wonder if that would be so," she said seriously, and he threw back his head and laughed.

He watched the pale outline of her lips framing a question. "I haven't a penny, Gael. I lost what little I'd left on the race," he said gravely.

"But that was a fine gamble!" she cried with pride. "Is he - is he sold now?"

He shook his head.

"He's all I saved from the wreck. They're boxing him over at the end of the week. He's coming back to you, Gael."

Her eyes filled with tears.

"That was like you, Richard Saracen," she said simply.

"You said you wouldn't marry me - not if I was Cuchulain himself, you said," he told her. "But it's spring. You asked me to come back - in the spring. What about Michael McGlynn?"

"Michael's emigrating to Canada. The farm is doing no good." She added irrelevantly: "My greyhound got smashed coming over."

"Was that an omen, you child of portents? I'll buy you another."

The smile went from his eyes, and he looked down at her with a sadness she had never known in him.

"I would hurt you, Gael, again and again."

She said: "You have hurt me already. Women are hurt by men. I should expect it."

He looked into her strange eyes and saw there something infinitely older, infinitely wiser than himself.

"You are my conscience, my friend and my true love," he said simply.

She lifted up her pale face.

"You are my only love," she told him gently. "It's rather uncomfortable to be someone's conscience. . . . Kiss me, Richard. . . ."

As he held her in that close embrace, the book slipped from her hands and fell into the lough with a little splash.

Laughing, they lay on their stomachs and began to fish among the reeds. Under the water their fingers met, held for a moment, and parted.