

An Engagement

By Ella D'Arcy

I

WHEN Owen suddenly made up his mind again to tempt Fortune, and invest the remnants of his capital in the purchase of Carrel's house and practice at Jacques-le-Port, he brought with him to the Island a letter of introduction to Mrs. Le Messurier, of Mon Désir.

But with the business of settling down upon his hands—and another distraction also—nearly six weeks went by before he remembered to call. Then, having inquired his way, he walked up there one mild, blue afternoon.

He found a spruce semi-detached villa, standing back from the road, with a finely sanded path running from the gate, right and left, up to the hall door. From the centre of the large oval flower-bed which the path thus enclosed, rose a tall and flourishing monkey-tree, with the comically ugly appearance to which Owen's eyes had grown familiarised since his coming to the Island. In front of nearly every villa is planted an *auraucania* tree.

The house was of two storeys, painted white, and had green wooden shutters turned back against the walls. Dazzlingly clean and very stiff lace curtains hung before the windows. Owen was favourably

favourably impressed, and, actuated by an unusual sentiment of diffidence, wondered who were the persons he should find within, and what sort of reception awaited him.

The outer door of the house stood open, and the plate-glass panel of an inner door permitted him to see along a cool dark hall, tiled in black and white, into a sunny garden beyond. And while he waited there, looking into the garden, a girl and boy passed across his range of vision from one side to the other.

The girl was tall and slight, swung a gardening basket in one hand, and had the other arm laid round the shoulders of the boy, who was a whole head shorter than she. Although dowdily dressed in a frock of some dark material, although wearing a hideous brown mushroom hat, although she and her companion had scarcely come into sight before they had passed out of it again, nevertheless, Owen received in that fleeting moment the impression that she was pretty. And it left him absolutely indifferent.

Then a maid appeared from behind the staircase, received his card and letter, and showed him into a small sitting-room on the left of the hall, a room so full of furniture, and at the same time so dark, that for a moment or two he was unable to find a seat. The light was not only sufficiently obscured by the lace curtains he had noticed from the outside, but there were voluminous stuff curtains as well, and a green venetian blind had been let more than half-way down. Probably, earlier in the day the February sunshine had fallen upon the window, and consideration for their best parlour furniture is almost a religious cult among certain classes in the Island; stray sunbeams are fought against with the same assiduity as stray moths. In all the neat villas which border the roads leading out from Jacques-le-Port, the best parlour is invariably a room of gloom, never used but on ceremonious

monious occasions, or for the incarceration of such chance and uninvited guests as was Owen to-day.

As his eyes accustomed themselves to the darkness he began to distinguish a multiplicity of Berlin wool cushions, and bead-worked foot-stools, of rosewood *étagères* loaded with knick-knacks, of rosewood tables covered with photograph albums and gilt-bound books. He took up one or two of these and read the titles: "Law's Serious Call," "The Day and the Hour, or Notes on Prophecy," "Lectures on the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit." They said nothing to him, and he put them down again unopened. He began to study on the opposite wall a large coloured photograph of the Riviera; the improbably blue sea, the incurving coast-line, the verdure-clothed shore, dotted with innumerable white villas. But it interested him little more than the books had done, his acquaintance with foreign parts extending no farther than Paris.

Then the door opened and two persons entered—a very old lady and the young girl he had caught a glimpse of in the garden. Seen now, without her hat, she was decidedly pretty, but Owen merely glanced past her to devote all his attention to Mrs. Le Messurier.

Giving him her hand, she had said "How do you do?" waiting until he had satisfied her as to the state of his health. Then she invited him to be seated again, and introduced the young girl as "Agnes Allez, my granddaughter," only she pronounced the name "Orlay," which is the custom of the Island.

Miss Allez had said "How do you do?" too, with a little air of prim gentility, which was the exact youthful counterpart of her grandmother's. After which she sat silent, with her hands lightly folded in her lap, and listened to the conversation.

The old lady began with a few inquiries after the mutual acquaintance

acquaintance in England who had sent him to call upon her, and Owen replied suitably, while taking stock of her personality. She was dressed entirely in black, a black silk apron over a black stuff gown, a black knitted shawl, a monumental cap of black lace and flowers and trembling bugles. The dress was fastened at the throat by a large gold brooch, framing a medallion of hair ingeniously tormented into the representation of a tombstone and a weeping willow-tree. An old-fashioned watch-chain of pale gold hung in two long festoons below her waist, and on her poor hand—a hand with time-stained, corrugated nails, with swollen, purple veins, with enlarged finger joints—a worn wedding-ring turned loosely.

Owen noted the signs of her age, of her infirmity, with half-conscious satisfaction; they promised him a patient before very long. And in the pleasant evidences of means all about him, he foresaw how satisfactorily he might adjust his sliding scale of charges.

She was speaking to him of his prospects in the Island, saying, with a melancholy motion of the head: "Ah, there, but for sure, you will have some trouble to work up Carrel's practice again. He have let it go all to pieces. An'such a good practice as it was in old Doctor Bragé's time. But you know the reason?"

He knew the reason well. His predecessor had been steadily drinking himself to death for the last ten years, and his practice was as dilapidated as were his house, his dog-cart, his reputation. It was just on account of their dilapidations that Owen had bought the former articles cheap; and Carrel's reputation was of as little account to him as it was to Carrel himself, though it seemed likely, in spite of everything, to last longer than its owner would have any use for it.

"Well, I must try to work up Bragé's business again," said
Owen

Owen self-confidently. With nervous, tobacco-stained fingers he twisted and pointed one end of his black moustache, and became aware that the young girl was watching him covertly.

"There don't seem to be too many of us doctors here," he went on, "and from all accounts Lelever is very much behind the times. There ought to be a good opening, I should think, for a little new life, eh? A little new blood?"

His voice touched an anxious note. The necessity of beginning to earn something pressed upon him. But Mrs. Le Messurier's reply was not reassuring.

"Ah, my good! Doctor Lelever is, maybe, old-fashioned—I don't know nothing about that—but he is very much thought of. He is very safe, and he has attended us all. My poor boy John, who died of the consumption in '67; and my daughter Agnes's mother, whom we lost when Freddy was born; and my dear husband"—her knotted fingers went up to fondle mechanically the glazed tomb and willow-tree—"and poor Thomas Allez, my son-in-law, who went in '87."

Her dates came with all the readiness of constant reference. She entered into details of the various complaints, the various remedies, the reasons they had failed.

Owen's face wore that smooth mask of sympathetic attention with which the profession equips every medical man, but he was embittered by the praises of Le Lièvre, and drawing the two ends of his moustache into his mouth he chewed them vexedly.

His discontented glance fell upon the young girl. A sudden pink overflowed her cheeks. He pointed his moustache again, smiled a little, and let his dark eyes fix hers with an amused complacency. He saw he had made an impression. She blushed a warmer rose, and looked away.

He wondered whether she talked the same broken English her grandmother

grandmother did. He hoped not ; but the four words she had as yet uttered left him in doubt.

Mrs. Le Messurier could not pronounce the "th." She had said just now, speaking of Le Lièvre, "I don't know noddin' 'bout dat, but he is very much tought of." And she laid stress on the unimportant words ; she accented the wrong syllables. Owen felt it would be a pity if so kissable a mouth as Agnes Allez's were to maltreat the words it let slip in the same fashion.

He undertook to make her speak. The old lady had reached the catalogue of "Freddy's" infantile disorders, and as she coupled his name with no prefatory adjective of affection or commiseration Owen concluded that he, at least, was still among the living, was probably the boy he had seen.

He turned to the young girl : "Then that was your brother you were with just now in the garden, I suppose ?"

She told him "Yes," and in reply to a further question, "Yes, he is only fifteen, and I shall be eighteen in May."

She spoke always with that little primness he had noticed in her reception of him, but her pronunciation was correct, was charming.

It occurred to him that the sunny February garden, and the companionship of the girl, would be an agreeable exchange for the starched and darkened atmosphere of the parlour and Mrs. Le Messurier's lugubrious reminiscences. He drew the conversation once, and once again, gardenwards, but without success.

To be guilty of anything so informal as to invite a stranger to step into the garden on his first visit was not to be thought of. The unconventional, the unexpected, are errors which the Islanders carefully eschew. Mrs. Le Messurier merely said : "Yes, you must come up and drink tea with us one day next week, will you not ?"

not? and the children will be very pleased to show you the garden then. What day shall it be?"

The evening meal was at that moment ready laid out in the next room, and Owen, who had a long walk before him, would have been only too glad of an invitation to share it, but it is not customary in the Islands to ask even a friend to take a cup of tea, unless the day and the hour have been settled at least a week in advance.

When Owen got back to his house in Contrée Mansel, he found Carrel sitting over the fire in the dining-room, in a more than usually shaky condition. He was always cold, and pleaded for the boon of a fire upon the warmest days. He paid Owen a pound a week for the privilege of boarding in the house where he had once been master, and spent the remainder of a small annuity on spirits. Owen made no effort to check him, not considering it worth his while. He foresaw that before long his room would be preferable to his company. However, for the present, he had his uses, he knew the Islands well, and when Owen chose to ask information from him, he could always give it.

He mentioned therefore where he had been, and inquired carelessly whether the old woman was worth money. Carrel, though very fuddled, was still instructive. Oh yes, she had money sure enough; was a regular old Island woman, with her head screwed on the right way about. But Carrel doubted whether Owen would ever see the colour of it. "Lelever's got the key of the situation there, my boy, and if he don't go off the hooks before she does, he'll hold it till her death. Unless, indeed, you can get round the soft side of the granddaughter, little Agnes, hey? Little Agnes Allez. Good Lord, what a smashing fine girl her mother was five-and-twenty years ago, before she married that fool Tom Allez. He was her cousin, too, and they
were

were both the children of first cousins. No wonder the boy's a natural. Did ye see him, also?"

Owen meditated; then, referring to the grandmother, asked what she was worth. Carrel thought she would cut up for ten thousand pounds.

"Which, laid out in good sound *rentes*, would bring in £500 a year, and you would have the house, and a nice little wife into the bargain. And a family doctor is bound to marry, my boy, hey? Which reminds me to tell you," concluded Carrel, with a spirituous laugh, "that your scarlet devil of a Margot was here while you were out, inquiring after you. I wonder what she'll do when she hears you are making eyes at the little Allez girl, hey?"

"She may do as she damn pleases," said Owen, equably; "do you imagine I'm in any way bound to a trull like that?"

But all the same he was sorry to hear that the red-haired witch had been round and he had missed her. He had not seen her now for over a week.

An Island tea is a square, sit-down meal eaten in the living-room with much solemnity. It is taken at half-past five, and is the last meal of the day; you are offered nothing after it but a glass of home-made wine and a biscuit. It consists entirely of sweets; jams, cakes, and various *gôches*—*gôches à pommes*, *gôches à groseilles*, *gôches à beurre*. Sugar and milk are put liberally into every cup; and such hyper-inquisitiveness as a desire to know whether you take one or neither never occurs to the well-regulated Island mind. When you have eaten all you are able, you are urgently pressed to take a little more. It is considered good manners to do so.

When

When on the appointed day Owen found himself again at Mon Désir, he looked at Agnes Allez for the first time with a genuine interest. The ten thousand pounds mentioned by Carrel had stuck fast in the younger man's mind.

The girl sat at the tea-tray, and her grandmother faced her. The guest was at one side of the table, and the boy Frederic Allez on the other. Owen observed in him the same soft eyes, the same regular, well-proportioned features as his sister's. But his mouth would not stay shut, his fingers were never at rest, he laughed foolishly when he encountered Owen's gaze.

"I love dogs, they are so faithful," he told the visitor suddenly, apropos of nothing.

Owen assented.

His grandmother and sister did not pay him much attention, but a maid waited on him as though he were a child of six, passed him his tea, and placed wedges of cake and *gôche* upon his plate.

Mrs. Le Messurier ate little, folded her decrepit hand on the edge of the table, and looked on.

"I sometimes can't remember," she said, "that a whole generation has been taken away from me. When I look at Agnes and Freddy I could think it was the other Agnes and my boy John, who used to sit just so with me forty years ago. But we lived down in town then. Ah, but it is a *pitée*, a *pitée*, that they should have been taken and a poor, useless, old woman like me left behind!"

Owen was infinitely bored by her regrets. He had no natural sympathy or patience with the old. He gave an audible sigh of relief when, tea over, it was proposed that Agnes should show him the garden. Small and well-kept, its paths were soon explored; but at the end was a little observatory reached by a dozen wooden steps. A red-cushioned bench ran round the interior, and the
front

front of the construction, of glass and three-sided, gave an admirable view over immense skies and an island-strewn sea.

"It's beautiful, is it not?" said Agnes, with a gentle pride in its beauty. "To me it seems quite as beautiful as the Riviera. Not that I've ever been there, of course, but gran'ma took poor Uncle John there the last year of his life, and we have a picture of it hanging in the drawing-room."

She named to Owen the different islands. "That one there is St. Maclou, and further on is the Ile des Marchants. Over there to the left is the Petite Ste. Marguerite. We can't often see the Grande Ste. Marguerite without the glasses, but Freddy will go and get them."

The boy who had given them his company the whole time, punctuating their phrases with his foolish laughs, blundered off on this errand with an expression of consequential glee. Owen and the girl were left alone.

The vast expanse of sea below them still glittered in the light of the afterglow, but the cloud-curtain of evening was drawing over the eastern sky—a dreamy, delicious cloud-curtain of a soft lilac colour, opaque and yet transparent, permitting scintillating hints of the blue day behind to pierce through. And across its surface floated filmy wreathes of a fading rose-colour, while high above the observatory trembled the first faintly-shining star.

But Owen looked only at the young girl, and she grew embarrassed beneath his gaze. He knew it was on his account that she wore that elaborate, but hopelessly provincial, Sunday frock; on his account, that before coming out she had gone upstairs to fetch her Sunday hat, instead of putting on the every-day one which hung in the hall. He knew it was on his account that she was blushing so warmly; that it was to give herself a countenance she fingered her sleeve so nervously, unhooking it at the wrist, trying

trying to hook it again, not succeeding and persisting in the attempt, while every instant tinged her cheeks with a livelier rose.

Owen watched her in silence, smiling behind his moustache. Then he leaned over, took hold of her hand, and fastened it for her. He was pleasantly stimulated by the tremor he felt running through her when his fingers touched her skin.

Then the boy burst open the door, handed his sister the glasses, and flung himself down with his wearying laugh, on the cushion beside her.

"I love dogs," he said to Owen, just as he had done before, "don't you? They are so faithful." It appeared to be a stock phrase of his, beyond which he could not get.

During the next six weeks Owen was often at Mon Désir, and his visits to Agnes and his assignations with Margot afforded him agreeable alternative recreation from his work.

He had known for long, however, that Agnes was in love with him—he had for long made up his mind that she and her ten thousand pounds were desirable possessions—before he said any word to the girl herself. And then, as generally happens, the crisis came fortuitously, unpremeditatedly. They were out on the cliffs together. She had been showing him Berceau Bay, which lies below Mon Désir. They had stepped from a door in the garden into a green lane, and followed it down, down through veils and mazes of April greenness, until it suddenly stopped with them on a grassy plateau overlooking the winged bay. At their feet the shadow of the hill behind them lay upon the water, but out farther it sparkled in the sunshine with jewel-like colour and brilliancy. When they had climbed the steep cliff path on the
other

other side, they had stopped a moment to notice the gulls and cormorants perched on the rock ledges beneath them, and all at once the decisive words had passed his lips, and the girl was looking up at him with soft brown eyes that overflowed with love, with tears, before he quite knew how it had come about. But after all he was glad to have it settled, and to have the engagement sealed and confirmed that same night by Mrs. Le Messurier's tremulous, hesitating, not over-cordial sanction.

No, she was not over-cordial, the old skin-flint, he told himself as he went away, not so grateful as she should have been, but all the same, this disconcerting element in her attitude did not prevent him from boasting complacently of his good fortune to Carrel.

Carrel was comparatively sober, and his mood then was invariably a fleeting one. And his heart fed on a furious hatred and envy of Owen. He envied him his twenty-eight years, his sobriety, his strength of character. He hated his ill-breeding, his cock-sureness, his low ambitions. And though he had been glad enough when Owen had purchased the house and practice, he chose now to consider him an interloper who had ousted him from his proper place. He therefore at once planted a knife in Owen's vanity, and gave him some information he had previously held back.

"So you are going to marry little Agnes Allez? Well, you might do worse. The old lady is bound to leave her a nice little nest egg, but I expect she'll tie it up pretty tightly too. She and the old man didn't spend forty years of their lives in the drapery business, saving ha'pence, for the first vagrant Englishman who comes along to have the squandering of."

"What's that?" said Owen sharply, unable to conceal his disgust.

Carrel

Carrel turned the knife round with dexterous fingers. "You didn't suppose she was one of the *Le Messuriers* of Rozaine, did you? Pooh! She kept the shop in the High Street which Roget has now, and that's where the money comes from."

Owen, the son of a third-rate London attorney, naturally recoiled from the prospect of an alliance with retail trade. But perhaps Allez, the father, had been a gentleman?

Carrel quenched this hope at once.

"Tom Allez was son of a man who kept a fruit-stall in the Arcade. He couldn't afford to stock himself, but sold for the growers on commission. However, towards the end of his life, he began to grow tomatoes himself out Cottu way, and was doing very well when he died, and Tom, who was always an ass, brought everything to rack and ruin. But he was already married to Agnes *Le Messurier*, so the old people took the pair of 'em home to live with them. And Tom never did anything for the rest of his life but develop Bright's disease, which carried him off when he was forty-one. The boy is an imbecile, as you see. And, by the bye, in counting your eggs, he must be reckoned with. Half the money will go to him, you may be sure. I doubt whether little Agnes will get more than two hundred a year after all."

For twenty-four hours Owen meditated on this news, weighing in the balance his social ambitions against a possible five thousand pounds.

Then he came to Carrel again. "Look here," he said, "you understand these damned little Islands better than I do. Would it really make any difference in my career to contract such a marriage?"

"It would only keep you out of the society of the precious Sixties you are so anxious to cultivate, for the rest of your life," chuckled Carrel; "it would only be remembered against you to

the sixth generation. At present, as an outsider, a stranger, you are in neither camp, but once you marry a Le Messurier with two s's, you place yourself among the Forties for ever."

From this date onwards, Owen's speculations were given to the problem of how he could easiest get loose from his engagement.

II

Agnes Allez stood in her bedroom, tortured by apprehension and suspense. She asked herself what could be going on in the best parlour below her, where Owen was closeted with her grandmother, and she forbidden to join them. Her grandmother had written to Owen, asking him to call upon her, and had said to the girl, before he came, "Now, perhaps I shall send for you, but until then remain in your room."

But already half an hour, three-quarters of an hour, had gone by, and the longed-for summons did not reach her; her keen ears still detected the murmurous rumble of voices coming up from below. Then, of a sudden, they ceased; she heard the glass-door of the hall shut to, and, from outside, firm steps grind down the gravel. She ran to the open window, and through the slots of the shutters saw her lover's tall figure pass down the path and out of the gate. He never once turned his head, but taking the road to Jacques-le-Port, was lost to view behind its trees. Then came her grandmother calling to her from the hall, and she went down.

Mrs. Le Messurier told her, with kindness indeed, but also with the melancholy satisfaction which the very old find in evil tidings, that her engagement with Dr. Owen must be considered at an end. She had never completely approved of him, but lately she had heard stories, which, if true, could only merit the severest
condemnation

condemnation. She had given him the opportunity of demonstrating their falsehood. He had failed to do so to her satisfaction, and thereupon she had told him, as she now told Agnes, that the engagement between them was at an end.

The girl's first feeling was one of burning indignation against the persons who had dared to slander her lover. She knew little of what had been said, she understood less, but she was sure, she was convinced, before hearing anything, that it was all untrue.

"Pedvinn talks of bringing an action against Thoumes and his wife," Mrs. Le Messurier told her, "for misappropriating poor Louis Renouf's property."

"But not against Jack, I suppose, because he could not keep the poor old man alive!" Agnes cried, with flaming cheeks. Renouf was a patient of Owen's, who had died about three weeks before.

"The girl Margot has been seen going in and out of the surgery ever since your engagement, child."

"And suppose she has," cried Agnes, astonished, "what harm is there in that?"

But when her first anger had cooled down she awoke to a sense of her own misery, the cruelty of her fate. She had not been engaged three months, and already the beautiful dream which had come into her life was shattered at a touch. Until the unforgettable moment when Owen had first called at *Mon Désir*, she had led such dull, such monotonous days; not unhappy ones, simply because she had known no happier ones to gauge them by. She had often smiled since to remember that she had been used to find excitement in a summer picnic with the De Souchy girls at Rocquaine, in a winter lecture with magic-lantern illustrations at the Town Library.

In those days she had known of love in much the same vague unrealising

unrealising way that she had known of the Desert of Sahara ; but she had touched the fringe of courtship when young Mallienne, the builder's son, had offered her peppermints during evening chapel one Sunday last December. When she met him after that she used to smile and blush.

She, of course, had always supposed that she should some day marry. Everybody did. Last summer her friend Caroline de Souchy had married Mr. Geraud, pharmacien at St. Héliers ; but he was bald, forty years of age, and not at all handsome, and although Agnes had been one of the bridesmaids, the affair had left her cold and unmoved.

But with Owen's first visit she had suddenly awoke to the knowledge of love, and this wonderful fact, this stupendous miracle rather, had changed for her the whole world. It was as though she were endowed with a new sense ; she saw meaning and beauty everywhere ; her perceptions acquired clearness at the same time that her eyes grew clearer, more intense, that her cheek took on a lovelier colour, her mouth a sweeter, a more engaging smile.

Every hour, every moment, that she had spent in Owen's company was indelibly engraved on her memory. She could call up each particular occasion at will. She had learned his portrait off by heart at that first visit, she had done nothing but add graces to it ever since. She thought him the most handsome, the most distinguished-looking man she had ever seen. She admired his black hair, his dark eyes, his sallow skin. She admired the way he held himself, the way he dressed, although she had observed on that first visit that the stiff edges of his cuffs were frayed, although she had seen, as she watched him away from the door, that his boot-heels were trodden down on the outside. But in spite of his shabby clothes, he looked a thousand times the superior of young
Mallienne,

Mallienne, of any of the young men she knew, in their best Sunday broadcloth.

And this was before she had formulated, even to herself, her feelings for him ; long before that ecstatic, that magical moment, when he had taken her into his arms, had kissed her, had kissed her mouth, had said, "Well, little one, do you know I am very fond of you, and I fancy you don't altogether dislike me, eh?"

That had happened on a Sunday afternoon, April 28th ; a date she could never forget. They were out upon the côte ; Freddy was nominally with them, but kept wandering away to gather the wild hyacinths which just then carpeted the ground with blue. He kept bringing her bunches of them to take care of ; she could feel again the thick, pale-green, shiny stems grasped in her hand. And they were climbing the steep path which winds up from the bay to the brow of the cliff, and her dress brushed against the encroaching gorse and bracken, and her eyes followed a couple of white butterflies gyrating on ahead ; or, looking down from the height on which she stood, she saw the smooth sea below her, paving, as with a green translucent marble, every inlet, every crevice of the bay.

Then the path had bent outwards to skirt a great boulder of granite, and there, right under the shelter of the rock, was a circular clearing, a resting-place, spread with the sweet, short cliff-grass, where a broad ledge of the stone offered a natural seat.

It was here that he had kissed her, and the flowers had fallen in a blue confusion at her feet, and, "Oh, I love you so," she had whispered, and he had laughed, and said, "Yes, child, I could see that from the very first."

Then they had sat down, he with his arm round her waist. "Well, I must call you Agnes now, I suppose," he had said ; and she

she had timidly asked him his name, and he had told her, John Ashford Owen, but that his friends commonly called him Jack. "Then I may call you Jack, too, because I am going to be your best friend of all," she had answered, and then Freddy had come up and broken into loud lamentation over the scattered flowers. To appease him they had both knelt down in the grass and helped him gather them up.

Jack had kissed her many times since, but never perhaps in quite the same way. At least, she had never experienced since quite the same sweet tremulous emotion. And yet she loved him more devotedly every day. Every day her affection sent out fresh delicate tendrils which rooted themselves inextricably in him.

And now they were to be rudely torn up; at a word all her joy, all her heaven was to come to an end. It was too cruel. And for what reason? Because wicked, envious people invented calumnies concerning him. It was too monstrous.

She passed a miserable night, but with the morning plucked up faint heart again. It was impossible her engagement should really for ever be at an end. With a little time, a little patience, things must come right. Her sufferings were now all for Jack. How wounded, how outraged he must have felt, never even to have looked back when on Saturday he had left the house.

Oh, she must write to him, must tell him to have courage, not to give her up, and all would yet be well.

In the warm, silent solitude of her shuttered bedroom she wrote her first love-letter, an adorable, naïve, rambling letter; and waited in fluttering expectation during three interminable days for his reply. When it came, she had to read it twice over before she understood it. Correctly expressed, formal, in his rather illegible hand sprawling over two sides of the paper, Owen wrote that he had too much self-respect to wish to force himself

on

on a family where he was not appreciated, and too high a sense of honour to accept her well-meant proposal for a clandestine engagement.

When understanding came, she broke into floods of weeping ; then dried her tears, and sought excuses for his seeming coldness. She found them in his pride ; it was naturally up in arms, after the rebuff it had received. If he had addressed her merely as " My dear Agnes," it was because he thought it probable Mrs. Le Messurier would see the letter ; but he had signed himself " Yours, nevertheless." This was intended to show her he loved her still. Before evening, the very cause of her morning's anguish was converted into another proof of the nobility of her lover's mind.

By the end of twenty-four hours she had persuaded herself she ought to write to him again, to reproach him gently, tenderly for his attitude towards her, to assure him of her unalterable constancy, to implore him too, to be true. It was written on a Sunday, and she carried the letter to evening chapel with her, inside the bosom of her frock, both to sanctify it as it were, and to have the pleasure of feeling it against her heart as long as possible. Happy letter ! by to-morrow morning it was to have the joy, the glory, of lying in *his* hand. Her grandmother never went to chapel a second time, and Freddy made no objection to passing round by the letter-box on the way home.

There was a day of long suspense, but when Agnes came down to breakfast on Tuesday morning, purposely earlier than the others, she found his answer lying on her plate.

With her heart beating violently, she took it up, studied every line, every dot of the superscription, noticed that the stamp had been put on crookedly, that the flap of the envelope went down into a long point. She turned it over and over in her hand, filled
with

with a sort of sweet terror as she speculated on its contents. But the fear that in a few moments she would no longer be alone came to determine her. She pulled it hastily open, tearing the envelope into great jags, and unfolded a sheet of note-paper which contained five lines. They began, "Dear Miss Allez," expressed the polite regret that Mrs. Le Messurier's decided action in the matter made it impossible the writer should permit himself any longer the pleasure of corresponding with her, and were signed "Very truly yours, J. Ashford Owen."

The girl turned red, then white. Her hands trembled, her blood ran cold. She heard her grandmother and Freddy in the hall. To hide her emotion, she got up and walked over to the window. The August flowers in the garden seemed to look at her with jeering, fleering eyes.

Jack had written her a horrible letter; she repeated this to herself over and over again. He had no heart. She thought of all that had passed between them; she called up, line by line, every word of her letter to him. Her cheeks burned with shame. She hated him, hated him. She would renounce him entirely, never think of him again. And even as she said it, she burst into tears, flung herself upon her bed, and kissed and passionately kissed the letter which had pierced her heart.

Therewith began again the eternal rehabilitative process, in which every woman shows herself such an adept in relation to the man she loves.

Jack had not meant to be cruel, but he was quick-tempered; he resented the treatment he had received. Still smarting from a sense of injury, he would naturally be unjust towards every one, angry even with her. But, of course, he loved her all the same. He had loved her only a few weeks ago. One could not change so absolutely in so short a time. One could not love and not
love

love as one puts on and off a coat. It was she who was wicked to doubt him, who was unreasonable not to make allowances, who was stupid not to read his real feelings beneath the disguising words.

But no sooner was her idol again set upon his altar, than doubt, suspicion, assailed her anew. And so the struggle continued between her longing to believe her lover perfect and the revolt of her reason, her dignity, against his conduct towards her. Yet with every victory love flowed stronger, resentment ebbed insensibly away.

The last traces of resentment vanished when one Saturday in town she met him suddenly face to face. She was passing the Town Library, and exactly as she passed, Owen came out, standing still, as he saw her, on the step.

Her pulses beat tumultuously, the colour ran to her cheeks.

"Oh, Jack," she cried, taking his hand, "how could you write to me so coldly, so cruelly? If you knew what I have suffered! And it was not my fault . . ."

From the first moment of seeing her, Owen had stood transfixed, silent. Now he pushed back the swing door, and held it wide.

"At least come in here," he said slowly; "don't let us have a scene in the street."

They stood together in a corner of the great, granite-flagged hall, in cool, quiet contrast with the sunshine and turmoil outside.

"You don't care for me any more?" she asked, keen for the denial, which came indeed, but which to her supersensitiveness seemed to lack emphasis.

But his excuses were emphatic enough.

"It's no more my fault than it's yours," he told her; "it's your grandmother

grandmother who won't have anything to say to me, the Lord knows why?"

He spoke interrogatively, and she flamed a deprecating crimson.

"I can't very well force my way into the house against her wishes, can I?" he went on.

"No; but, dearest Jack, you needn't be angry with me, and we can wait a little, and I know everything will come right. If only you will go on loving me? You do love me still?" she asked again. "I shall die if you don't!"

He smiled down upon her, twisting his moustache-end; a softer look came into his eyes.

"So the poor little girlie can't live without me?" he said, and gently squeezed her arm. Her heart welled up with adoration and gratitude.

A stranger coming down the polished wooden staircase cast a sympathetic glance at this little Island love idyll.

But Owen looked at his watch.

"Oh, confound it! Half-past twelve, already, and I ought to be up at Rohais by now. I've an appointment there. I don't like to leave you, but——"

"Is it *very* important?" she asked wistfully.

"It's a new patient."

"Oh, then in that case, of course you must go," she said, with ready abnegation of her pleasure where it clashed with his interests. "But when shall I see you again? Ah, do let me see you."

"Oh, . . . well, . . . all right! I'll stroll up to-morrow in the course of the afternoon, to Berceau Bay, . . . but if I'm, prevented, you'll be down again to market, next Saturday, I suppose, eh?"

And

And he was gone.

Agnes sat down for a few moments to recover her composure. Her eyes rested on the red goldfish swimming futilely round and round the glass bowl in the centre of the hall ; but at her ear was the joy-killing whisper that the appointment had been a fictitious one.

Nevertheless, she persuaded herself he would come next day. She spent three hours, hidden in the bracken, at a point whence she could overlook the whole bay. When he did not come, she deferred her hopes to the following Saturday, to be again disappointed. He was not to be seen. Neither in the Market Place, nor at the Library, nor yet in *Contrée Mansel* ; for she could not refrain from the poor pleasure of passing along the street in which he lived, of glancing shamefacedly at his house, of envying wildly the servant she saw for an instant at an upper window. She would have thought it a privilege to be allowed to clean his boots.

But when she found herself at home that evening she was seized by an excess of silent despair. There seemed nothing on earth to do : nothing to live for.

Yet the buoyancy of youth is hard to suppress. It takes repeated blows to beat it down, just as the tears shed at eighteen may be bitter indeed, but do not furrow the cheeks.

As the year brought round another spring, Agnes found that her spirits were growing brighter with the days. She loved Jack more than ever. It was impossible to be absolutely unhappy with such a love in her heart ; with the knowledge that she lived in the same Island with him ; that once a week at least she could walk through the streets he daily trod ; that any day she ran the chance of meeting him again, of speaking at least with some one who had just spoken with him.

Against

Against dates on which she heard his name thus mentioned she put a cross of red ink in the little calendar she carried in her purse. When she was having her new summer frock fitted, the dressmaker's three-year-old son ran into the room. Agnes, who was fond of children, spoke kindly to him; but the mother, kneeling on the floor with upstretched arms and a mouthful of pins, shook her head menacingly.

"Ah, Johnnie's a bad boy. He won't take his medicine. I'll have to tell Dr. Owen 'bout him."

"Does Dr. Owen attend him?" Agnes asked, flutteringly; and the woman explained he was doctor of the club to which her husband belonged.

"He's a very clever doctor," ventured Agnes, all covered with blushes. "Don't you think so?"

"Ah, my good!" said the other, as who should say doctors are necessary evils, and there's not much to choose between them. "But he give Johnnie a fine new double piece last time he come, didn't he, Johnnie? 'Tisn't the value I ever looks at," she explained to Agnes, "but the kind thought."

Agnes felt a glow of pride at the generosity, the good-heartedness of her lover, and on going away pressed a whole British shilling into Johnnie's treacly little paw. Against this day she placed two crosses in her calendar, and the episode filled her thoughts for a week, to be succeeded by a more precious one.

The annual picnic came round, provided by the chapel for its Sunday-school. Agnes, as one of the teachers, went with the rest. They drove in waggonettes to Rocquaine, and the one point of the day to which she looked forward with excitement, with a thrill, was the passing Owen's house on the way back late at night. They went by a longer way, but they always came down Contrée Mansel on the way home. She distinguished from quite

quite a distance *his* illuminated parlour window ; but the white blind was drawn down ; she was just going to be bitterly disappointed, when a shadow, *his* shadow, passed across it. She glowed with pleasure, with gratitude, for her great good luck, and answered young Mallienne, who sat beside her, with strange irrelevancy.

For in spite of everything she could not realise to herself that Owen did not love her ; her heart refused to envisage it. Although he made no effort to see her, although he gave no sign, she still believed that all would yet be well. She leaned on Fate ; something would be sure to happen . . . some day, when she was her own mistress. . . . She thought of him constantly, loved him as tenderly as before.

The summer was extraordinarily fine. The heat which had begun in March, lasted right through to September ; in the middle of the day from July onwards, it was almost unbearable. One Saturday, when Agnes had been into town as usual, and the omnibus filling up almost the moment it reached the Market Place, had been obliged to walk back, she found, on her return, Frederic in one of those states of nervous excitement from which he periodically suffered. Mrs. Le Messurier had given him a soothing draught, the last in the house. It was essential to have more in case it were required in the night or the next day.

Agnes, pleased at the chance of a second journey into town, since it gave her a second chance of meeting Owen, volunteered to go and get it. Mrs. Le Messurier told her she looked done up with the heat already, but that she might go when she had had her dinner, and must take the omnibus both ways.

It was half-past two when she reached town, crossed over to Mager's, and waited while the prescription was made up, and
then

then had ten minutes on her hands before the three o'clock omnibus left for St. Gilles.

Mr. de Souchy stood in his shirt-sleeves on the threshold of his shop. Agnes stopped to speak to him, and inquire after the girls. They were all away from home now, but doing well. Their mother received cheerful letters every week. Agnes charged the old man with kind messages for them, and turned to go. He shook her hand heartily. "Well, good-bye, my dear," he said, in his comfortable, resonant voice, "my love to your grand'ma, and ask her when she's going to spend another day with us, eh?"

Coming down the street were a lady and two gentlemen. The men were in tennis flannels, carried rackets and balls. The girl wore a lilac and white frock, the chic of which spoke of St. Héliers at least, if not of Paris.

Agnes recognised the youngest Miss d'Aldernois, her brother the Captain, just back from India, and between the two Jack Owen. He was looking straight towards her.

The delighted blood sprang to her cheek, her eyes sparkled, her mouth smiled. She took a step forward, she half extended her hand . . . and he looked her full in the face without a sign of recognition, and passed on.

Miss d'Aldernois' silk-lined skirt brushed with a light frou-frou against hers, as, with her pretty head held high, she chattered volubly with her pretty lisp. The Captain walked in the roadway.

Agnes stood and watched the three figures with their short, slanting shadows retire further and further down the sunny street.

"Come in and take something," she heard De Souchy saying at her elbow, "a little drop of raspberry vinegar now, it will do
you

you good. Or go up and have a chat with mother, eh? You will find her in the drawing-room. She would like to read you Lucy's last letter, I know. It's downright clever."

Agnes shook her head, stammered excuses in a voice that sounded strange in her own ears, and left him.

He had cut her dead; Jack, the man she worshipped. The only man who had ever taken her in his arms and kissed her; the only man by whom she ever wished to be kissed and held. In broad daylight, openly, before witnesses, he had cut her.

Mr. de Souchy had seen what had happened; he had understood; he had pitied her.

An illumination came; Jack was ashamed of her. Because she had shaken hands with the old man, he was ashamed to recognise her before his new friends. She was connected with trade; a child of trade; and he was now received among the Sixties.

A profound humiliation overpowered her, sapped the rest of her strength. The glare of the sun was so intolerable . . . how she longed to be at home, to be in darkness.

She discovered that in her preoccupation she had taken the wrong turning. She hurried back, but the market clock showed seven minutes past three. The omnibus must be half-way up Constitution Hill by now.

There was nothing to do but to walk, as she had walked in the morning. She set out with automatic endurance.

When you get out of the last bit of shadow of the town, and, steeply climbing, reach the level top of the hill, you have before you a long unsheltered stretch of road before you come to the trees of St. Gilles. It is white and dusty underfoot; sun-parched fields lie on either hand; and in July there is a blazing sky above, to the left a blazing sea.

It seemed to Agnes that the sun was darting his rays straight
into

into her brain, that the ground was scorching up the soles of her feet. But it did not occur to her to open her umbrella.

The passing scarlet jacket of a soldier made her close her eyes with pain ; the whistle of a boy behind her set all her nerves ajar.

Should she ever get home ? . . . She dragged on with leaden feet and prayed persistently for darkness.

But when at last she lay upon her own bed in such darkness as closed shutters and drawn curtains can give, all she could say was, "Oh, the sun, the sun !" and lift her hand indeterminately towards her head. And when, a few hours before the end, she lost the power of speech, still her hand wandered up every now and again automatically towards her head.

Mrs. Le Messurier sits alone with her grandson in the living-room of *Mon Désir*. He cuts out pictures from the illustrated papers, and she gazes tirelessly through dim and tearless eyes into the past. Bright crowds of long-dead men and women pass before her, and among them the two Agneses are never absent long. Then, all at once, as the boy looks up to claim her attention, with his mirthless laugh, the vision is scattered into thin wreaths of smoke.



