

"So am I, but it seemed ungracious to decline so small a service. I didn't foresee that he was going to become offensively familiar. And I didn't know that he was going to make a great black thumb-mark on one of the envelopes. Did you see it, Dad?"

"Yes, and I saw him attentively reading the address." My little daughter was looking with shining eyes into the fire. I paused, she laid a burning cheek upon my hand, but said nothing. I must help her.

"Have you anything to tell me about Harry Markham?" I asked.

"Yes, Dad," very softly.

"I don't want to lose you yet, child. You are very young."

"Oh, not yet, Daddy dear, not forever and ever so long!"

"If I know young Markham, he won't wait ever so long," I said.

She had risen, and was standing behind me, too shy to let me see her face. She now threw her arms round my neck and kissed me, sobbing a little. "I love you too, dear old Dad!" she cried, as if she felt that I needed comfort. I assumed a matter-of-fact air. "You had better ask Harry to write to me about it, or to come, if possible, and pay us a visit. Understand me, I would rather give you to Harry Markham than to anyone else, and I hope he will make you happy, my child."

For a few days we were free from our incubus. His business detained him at Eketahuna. Mail day came, and brought an answer to Louise's letter. Enclosed was that letter itself with its envelope. In explanation of this Markham wrote: "As you have not hitherto been wont to smear your correspondence with tobacco ashes and thumb autographs, I return your letter (but I must have it again, dear) to ask you whether you can account for the state it is in. Is it possible that some one has opened it? You will see that the postmark is Eketahuna. The inference is that you entrusted it to some one to post for

you. Was your messenger trustworthy?" The rest of the letter was not for me to see.

Unfolding the returned letter, we found a large thumb-mark on the note-paper corresponding to that on the envelope. Careful comparison, with the aid of a lens, showed that the same thumb had made both impressions. Now we had seen the Bloke make the mark on the envelope. There was no doubt that he had tampered



I CHARGED HIM WITH OPENING THE LETTER.

with the letter, and Louise's face burned at the thought of his having read what her heart had prompted her to write to her lover. The letter was still in my hand when the Bloke appeared, loud-voiced and self-satisfied as ever. He was received in dead silence. Louise remained standing, white with anger. The Bloke sat down.

"Well, what's up? Who's cat's dead?" he inquired, crossing his legs, and mechanically lighting his pipe.