

head and looked at Humphrey, half-appealingly. "You don't know what she is to me, Humphrey! I could sooner forget that I had an immortal soul than I could think of life without her, now! You can't understand, she is my——," he looked away, biting his lip. Her presence was very near to him, and he knew he must keep cool if he hoped to win this battle.

Humphrey winced. He, too, had strayed into that part of nature's workshop where cupid barbs his arrows, but he had never told what he found there.

"Marriage is not for you or me," he said curtly. "We knew that long ago. This must go no further."

"By George, it shall then!" Neil blazed into sudden fury. "You may worship your own Quixotic notions of right and wrong, if you like, but you needn't expect me to do likewise! I'm not going to spoil my life for a scruple that may never come to anything—nor her's either!"

Humphrey caught him by the shoulder.

"What!" he cried; "you haven't dared—"

Neil shook him off, and his grey eyes darkened.

"I told her to-night that I loved her," he said, breathing short. "I couldn't help it—and I'm glad of it! And she loves me. You can say what you like, but you can't take that from me. You are so confoundedly pessimistic, and you've polished up that family skeleton till you can't get along without it. I tell you, I don't believe in it! But, even if I do suffer, I'll chance it for what comes first."

Humphrey leaned heavily against the mantel, and his face went grey.

"You will suffer, sure enough," he said slowly. "And, by Jove, you'll deserve all you'll get, you young coward! But we'll keep a third person out of this. Neil, you must go down to Wakarewa, and put an end to it."

"I'll be shot if I do!" Neil paced the room quickly with his free impatient step, trying to crush down his rising fury, and the elder man watched him with desperate resolve growing on his strong face. Then he spoke steadily.

"Neil, since your own code of honour does not tell you what to do, I must take this into my own hands. I have the power to prevent your marriage, and I swear I'll use that power if you drive me to it!"

Neil swung round, towering above short sturdy Humphrey, and his face was not good to see.

"What do you mean?" he hissed between his teeth. "If you——"

"Neil," said Humphrey brokenly, "old man, I've always dreaded having to tell you this—I'd give my life not to. But I must, and you must listen. You—you don't know yourself. You don't see yourself as outsiders see you—and they haven't seen what I have. When you get one of your bad fits, its—its not temper——" he faltered before the tense look on the face opposite him.

Neil caught his breath sharply.

"Go on," he said.

"Old man, you're not safe, and—and you're getting worse. You can't help it, and I would have hidden it from you as long as I could, but I must think of her first. I—I couldn't let you marry, Neil. If you persist in this, I'll have to—have to—don't make me say it——"

But it was an unaccustomed choking in his throat that silenced him, for Neil made no sign.

Humphrey gazed vacantly at the dying ashes in the grate, and the room was very still.

Then the long, quivering cry of a weka sounded through the quiet night, like the wail of a lost soul, and Neil turned away abruptly, dropping into a chair, and laying his head on the table.

Humphrey remembered the attitude well. Neil had always borne punishment thus in the old days, when comfort had lain in hard-bake and peg-tops. But the punishment was different, now, and this Gehenna must be fought through alone. And Humphrey, knowing this, went silently away.

When the first fingers of the pale dawn slid past the blind, they touched Neil's face, and he rose, flinging up the window with an indefinable longing for something—he knew not what.