

'Not one of them was Neil,' said Nan, that happy note still in her voice. 'It never could have been anybody but Neil. He is going to the office to-morrow morning, father, just to settle things with you.'

'To settle things with me?' Balamaine's lips took on a firmer line. 'Just to settle things with me, eh?'

Nan, absorbed in her happiness, did not notice the grimness of his tone. She nodded, and put up her face to be kissed. 'I'm so perfectly wide awake and happy that it's hardly worth while going to bed,' she said. Then, struck through all her self absorption by something in his eyes, she clung to him a moment. 'Father, you will like Neil? You're glad?'

'I haven't met him yet, Nan, and how can I be glad? But the man you love has got to prove himself worth while, just because of that, just because you love him and will have to spend your life with him. I'll be quite reasonable, my dear, trust your old father.'

'I do,' Nan spoke wistfully. 'Of course I do, just as I trust Neil from the bottom of my heart, though a week ago I hadn't met him. He's the one man I could ever love like that.'

She reached the door, and there turned, her cloak a shimmering heap in her arms. Throwing it away from her, she ran impulsively back again, putting a hand on his coat sleeve. 'Father, you're not one of those ridiculous people who imagine love can't come quickly, that just a short time isn't enough to make one care for always? Looking back, I see now that with Neil and myself love came at once—in a flash.'

'I fell in love with your mother at first sight,' said Balamaine quietly, staring into the fire. 'It was with us no thing of days or weeks or months, Nan, and therefore I am not likely to make matters too hard for you and Hesketh. I have no doubt he will readily prove himself.'

'He will do anything in reason,' said Nan, 'just as I will, father.' There was another sound in her voice, a trace of apprehension.

Balamaine watched her pick up her cloak and pass slowly through the door-way. He dropped into his chair, and there sat with tightly clenched hands until the last red embers faded into gray, and dawn framed the windows.

'It's bound to make a difference!' he said, getting up stiffly from his chair. 'All the difference in the world!'

He looked about him drearily and, stooping, picked up the rose she had dropped a few hours before. For a moment he stood with it in his hand, then walked across the room to his writing table. There he unlocked a drawer in which were the few birthday letters she had written to him in childhood, and one or two trifles that had belonged to his girl-wife. He dropped the rose in with them, and locked the drawer again.

'It's bound to make a difference!' he said slowly, and went up to his room.

After one of the few sleepless nights of his healthy young existence, Hesketh sat waiting, his eyes on the clock. He was not troubled with any doubts of his acceptance as a son-in-law by the self-made man who controlled so many business interests and whose life story differed so enormously from his own. Nan loved him—nothing else mattered!

He fell into a reverie now, as he thought of her face last night, of the wonder of her beauty, the warmth of her lips as his own touched them for a moment behind the friendly shade of a palm in the conservatory. She loved him, and he loved her! From the first moment he had seen her, love had come to him with a force, an ecstasy, a maze of feeling, that left him very humble and very glad. He had endured a torture of doubt where she was concerned; but he had none at all about her father. He was glad to be rich, that he need not be accused of fortune hunting, glad that his family was unimpeachable enough to stand with the best.

But now he thanked God that he had no ugly door in his past to keep closed against Nan.

In no way a vain man, his life had conspired to give him assurance and a sane belief in himself. He was young, rich, strong, and popular with a large circle of friends. The more serious side of life had only lately come his way. He contributed to deserving charities when asked, he flung largesse to a tramp if he encountered one. He was good natured, easy going, and since his college days, when his abilities had enabled him to take a good place in spite of himself, he had travelled, gone in for sport and amusement with a zest worthy, perhaps, of a better cause. Hasty tempered, he was generous, and possessed of a sense of humor which kept him from being in the least small minded.

There was an eagerness now in his eyes and upon his tanned face with its clean cut lips that Nan would have liked to see.

He presently sprang to his feet and shook his clenched hand at the clock. 'Hurry, can't you? If I hadn't my watch to confirm you, I'd swear you were working backward! Eleven o'clock, she said, as then his letters would be read and his secretaries seen, and there would be a few minutes' breathing space to bestow on me before other affairs claimed his attention. He's a perfect fiend for work, they say, and not the pleasantest man in creation to deal with.'

He walked over to a table littered with papers, and took up a magazine. When he came to the page he sought, he propped it open, and thoughtfully considered the somewhat harsh lineaments of the iron-master.

Marshall Balamaine's life story often figured in the press. People apparently never tired of hearing how the great man made his money. It pleased the multitude of workers to know that once he was in a more humble position even than themselves; that some day, by a stroke of the magician's wand, they too might be millionaires. They forgot that, together with an enormous faculty for work, he had unusual business acumen, and that, above all, he had done what is not given to all men to do—seized his opportunity, taken the tide at the flood, with the result that in comparatively few years he ranked high among the richest men of his time.

All this Hesketh might have read in the words surrounding the great man's portrait; but he knew the details by heart. Among them there was not the faintest hint as to how he would be likely to treat suitors for his only child's hand, and, as this was the sole subject of interest at the moment, Hesketh presently flung the magazine aside and prepared for his interview.

Balamaine's offices were in town, away from the great works he owned; but not so far but that from the topmost windows could be seen the huge chimneys that belched forth flames and smoke and noisome smells. Balamaine went there nearly every day of his life. The works were his pride; next to his daughter, the most desirable thing in existence. It was a thousand pities, people said, that he had no son to follow in his steps.

Arrived at the offices, Hesketh sent in his card. Balamaine kept him waiting hardly a moment. But during that moment the clerks behind their desks had time to dart envious glances at him. Tall, wiry, and brown, a young giant, immaculately dressed, this brought to mind the fashionable world where sport and enjoyment seemed the only business worth while.

In his turn, Hesketh looked about him with frank interest, as was natural, considering this was the environment of her father. There was no shadow of doubt in his eyes as he followed the clerk into Marshall Balamaine's private room, but only a desire to be free to go to Nan as her lover and future husband. He wondered how soon he might marry her. In six weeks, perhaps, at longest. It was Austria they had planned—a little town among the mountains—

The door closed behind him. He found himself confronting the man he had come to ask for his daughter.

It was a grim face that he saw, set in hard, inflexible lines. Balamaine's business face. Balamaine had risen and now stood facing him. Both were tall men, almost of a height, and as they measured glances the doubt in Hesketh's mind gave way to another sensation, a tingling of the nerves that meant effort, fight, a something that braced the mental faculties as the ring of crossed steel tautens the muscle of a swordsman.

As Balamaine's eyes swept over the visitor, his expression changed. He held out his hand, and Hesketh grasped it, then sat down in the chair placed for him opposite the window.

Balamaine was a silent man who ordinarily seemed to weigh every word. Now he spoke slowly, ponderously. 'You wished to see me?'

Before replying, Hesketh deliberately placed his hat and stick on an adjacent chair. A close observer might have found characteristics oddly alike in the two men. Then he looked full at Balamaine.

'I have come on no business matter, Mr. Balamaine, but on a personal one. I love Nan, and she—thank God!—loves me.' He spoke with an undercurrent of fervor. 'May I conclude that you will not withhold your consent to our marriage?'

It was hardly a query. The quiet self-confidence of the words brought Balamaine's heavy brows together in a frown. Upon the writing table stood a small bronze statuette of a workman leaning on his pickaxe. He lifted the thing up and put it down again, as if weighing it in his hand. Then he gave his attention again to Hesketh.

'You seem very certain of my consent,' he remarked dryly.

The young man's tanned face took on a degree more color. 'Why not?' he said. 'Nan loves me; there is nothing in my life to my discredit. You will want to put me through my facings, and you naturally want to know the kind of man your daughter is marrying. She has told me all that you are and have been to each other, and of course—'

He broke off, some of his self-confidence torn away by the older man's expression. He half rose; but Balamaine's great hand waved him back.

'Come, that's better,' he said. 'I like you to be frank with me. I'm not the man to beat about the bush myself. You're outspoken with me; I'm going to speak my mind to you; and if you get a few hard knocks—well, I guess my little girl's worth 'em.'

He rose and took a leisurely turn round the room, then came back to his chair, and, leaning forward, faced Hesketh. 'Nan seems to have taken a fancy to you, and you seem to think you've fallen in love with Nan. No, wait—don't begin interrupting me—you shall have your say later. You've known each other for a week, she tells me, and last night at a ball matters came to a head.'

It was all hideously commonplace put that way. Fortunately Hesketh's sense of humor came to his aid. He folded his arms, set his lips firmly, and made no comment. Marshall Balamaine, fidgetting again with the bronze statuette, nodded to himself.