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WINGARNIS

"The Wine of Life."

To-day—"Baldly I told her all. She made no interruption while I told her. Her eyes blazed, her hands were clenched on her knee, but she said not a word till I had finished. Then she amazed me.

"I don't deserve such luck," she muttered. "Your escape." She got up and paced about the room. "You might have gone. . . . It would have killed your uncle, and I should have known not another happy moment. Oh, Peronelle, can you forgive me?"

"I forgive you?" Had the burgundy caused everything to be of a sudden topsy-turvy? I felt bewildered.

"It has been my fault. I knew you were unhappy. I knew you were fretting about Martin, yet I made no effort to cheer you up and take care of you."

"But you did," I cried. "You made every effort. You were always thinking of me and planning out little entertainments; but I lied to you. I pretended I was with Monica—walking with Monica, doing things with Monica—and you believed me."

"Yes, I believed you, or made myself believe you, and I shouldn't have done. My own intelligence might have suggested to me that you were not the kind of girl just to be satisfied with a plain Monica after your experience with Martin. I deliberately shut my eyes and lived at bridge and croquet clubs, was content so long as you called for me at one or the other each evening, listened to my experiences, sympathised with me, and was under my wing at night. If you had gone with that devil it would have been entirely my fault." She ceased pacing, and, coming to the side of the bed, leaned towards me and framed my face in her hands. "But you are safe, thank God, you are safe!"

"Yes," I agreed, "I am quite safe." It seemed an ineffectual and idiotic thing to say in view of her obvious distress, but any small intelligence I possessed seemed to have vanished that evening, been washed away with my streaming tears of the afternoon.

"And dear Martin will look after you now?"

I nodded.

She bent and kissed me. "You are a lucky girl, Peronelle."

"I know."

"I wonder what made Elisabeth change her mind."

"Martin says she discovered he liked me better, and that decided her in her own feelings with regard to him, about which she's always been doubtful."

"But it's rather remarkable that he should prefer you. She's so lovely and attractive," Miss Oakwood mused. "But I think I know; she's a little cold, I should imagine. Also she's a little too sure of herself; I don't think she would lean. Men like women to lean."

"I shall not lean."

"Oh, yes, you will. And Martin will love you to lean; he'll glory in

the sensation of an oak with ivy clinging to it."

"I never knew anyone less like an oak than Martin," I said, sitting up in bed, shaking my pillow, and lying down again.

"You don't regard him as strong? Why not?"

"Had I been in his place this afternoon after he'd comforted me—I've no sensation of resentment against him that he didn't, mind you; whatever Martin does or doesn't do I shall love him just the same for ever—I should have gone straight up to Ste. Lucie and thrashed that man within an inch of his life."

"I am under the impression he's gone to do it to-night," said Miss Oakwood quietly. "He hurried through his dinner, saying he had some business to transact, and I was to give you his love and bid you good-night. I saw him leave the hotel as I came through the lounge to the lift. He was wearing an overcoat and walking very swiftly, seeing nobody and speaking to nobody—just brushing past us as if we were so many flies."

I crouched down in the bed and covered my eyes, trying to blot out the scene that of a sudden I visualised. Miss Oakwood sat down beside me and drew my head to her shoulder, murmuring kind little words of encouragement.

"I shouldn't have told you, but after all the trouble between you two of the last few weeks, I didn't want there to be another cause for—for resentment, another misunderstanding, if it could be avoided."

"There would have been no resentment."

"There would have been belittlement, which is worse. You say you will always love Martin, whatever he does or doesn't do; but, understanding a little of the human heart, you will love him more if you believe him to be fine than you would if you believed him to be cowardly."

"Sincerely cowardly—that is not the right word. If I had actually thought at all, endgelled my brains for a reason as to why he did not instantly go and settle up things with Louis, the solution I had arrived at was that he was too unnerved."

"Which I am sure was absolutely wrong. Probably he felt if he had gone then he would have killed him, or tried to. He waited for self-control, and till he saw you calm and comforted and safely tucked away in bed. He had made up his mind to ask you to go to bed the minute dinner was ended; and when I came down without you, he was relieved and said I had done the right thing. He dined with me—"

"Where was Elisabeth?"

"Out dining with old friends at Monte Carlo. They leave to-morrow—"

There was a tap at the door, and Pobby stood on the threshold. In her hand was a note which she said was for me, and requiring an answer.



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