



***MARGARET  
PEDLER***

***THE HERMIT  
OF FAR  
END***

**Margaret Pedler**

# **The Hermit of Far End**

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# PROLOGUE

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It was very quiet within the little room perched high up under the roof of Wallater's Buildings. Even the glowing logs in the grate burned tranquilly, without any of those brisk cracklings and sputterings which make such cheerful company of a fire, while the distant roar of London's traffic came murmuringly, dulled to a gentle monotone by the honeycomb of narrow side streets that intervened between the gaunt, red-brick Buildings and the bustling highways of the city.

It seemed almost as though the little room were waiting for something—some one, just as the woman seated in the low chair at the hearthside was waiting.

She sat very still, looking towards the door, her folded hands lying quietly on her knees in an attitude of patient expectancy. It was as if, although she found the waiting long and wearisome, she were yet quite sure she would not have to wait in vain.

Once she bent forward and touched the little finger of her left hand, which bore, at its base, a slight circular depression such as comes from the constant wearing of a ring. She rubbed it softly with the forefinger of the other hand.

“He will come,” she muttered. “He promised he would come if ever I sent the little pearl ring.”

Then she leaned back once more, resuming her former attitude of patient waiting, and the insistent silence, momentarily broken by her movement, settled down again upon the room.

Presently the long rays of the westering sun crept round the edge of some projecting eaves and, slanting in suddenly through the window, rested upon the quiet figure in the chair.

Even in their clear, revealing light it would have been difficult to decide the woman's age, so worn and lined was the mask-like face outlined against the shabby cushion. She looked forty, yet there was something still girlish in the pose of her black-clad figure which seemed to suggest a shorter tale of years. Raven dark hair, lustreless and dull, framed a pale, emaciated face from which ill-health had stripped almost all that had once been beautiful. Only the immense dark eyes, feverishly bright beneath the sunken temples, and the still lovely line from jaw to pointed chin, remained unmarred, their beauty mocked by the pinched nostrils and drawn mouth, and by the scraggy, almost fleshless throat.

It might have been the face of a dead woman, so still, so waxen was it, were it not for the eager brilliance of the eyes. In them, fixed watchfully upon the closed door, was concentrated the whole vitality of the failing body.

Beyond that door, flight upon flight of some steps dropped seemingly endlessly one below the other, leading at last to a cement-floored vestibule, cheerless and uninviting, which opened on to the street.

Perhaps there was no particular reason why the vestibule should have been other than it was, seeing that Wallater's Buildings had not been designed for the habitual loiterer. For such as he there remains always the "luxurious entrance-hall" of hotel advertisement.

As far as the inhabitants of "Wallater's" were concerned, they clattered over the cement flooring of the vestibule in the mornings, on their way to work, without pausing to cast an eye of criticism upon its general aspect of uncomeliness, and dragged tired feet across it in an evening with no other thought but that of how many weary steps there were to climb before the room which served as "home" should be attained.

But to the well-dressed, middle-aged man who now paused, half in doubt, on the threshold of the Buildings, the sordid-looking vestibule, with its bare floor and drab-coloured walls, presented an epitome of desolation.

His keen blue eyes, in one of which was stuck a monocle attached to a broad black ribbon, rested appraisingly upon the ascending spiral of the stone stairway that vanished into the gloomy upper reaches of the Building.

Against this chill background there suddenly took shape in his mind the picture of a spacious room, fragrant with the scent of roses—a room full of mellow tints of brown and gold, athwart which the afternoon sunlight lingered tenderly, picking out here the limpid blue of a bit of old Chinese "blue-and-white," there the warm gleam of polished copper, or here again the bizarre, gem-encrusted image of an Eastern god. All that was rare and beautiful had gone to the making of the room, and rarer and more beautiful than all, in the eyes of the man whose memory now recalled it, had been the woman to whom it had belonged, whose loveliness had glowed within it like a jewel in a rich setting.

With a mental jolt his thoughts came back to the present, to the bare, commonplace ugliness of Wallater's Buildings.



“My God!” he muttered. “Pauline—here!”

Then with swift steps he began the ascent of the stone steps, gradually slackening in pace until, when he reached the summit and stood facing that door behind which a woman watched and waited, he had perforce to pause to regain his breath, whilst certain twinges in his right knee reminded him that he was no longer as young as he had been.

In answer to his knock a low voice bade him enter, and a minute later he was standing in the quiet little room, his eyes gazing levelly into the feverish dark ones of the woman who had risen at his entrance.

“So!” she said, while an odd smile twisted her bloodless lips. “You have come, after all. Sometimes—I began to doubt if you would. It is days—an eternity since I sent for you.”

“I have been away,” he replied simply. “And my mail was not forwarded. I came directly I received the ring—at once, as I told you I should.”

“Well, sit down and let us talk”—impatently—“it doesn't matter—nothing matters since you have come in time.”

“In time? What do you mean? In time for what? Pauline, tell me”—advancing a step—“tell me, in God's Name, what are you doing in this place?” He glanced significantly round the shabby room with its threadbare carpet and distempered walls.

“I'm living here—”

“*Living here? You?*”

“Yes. Why not? Soon”—indifferently—“I shall be dying here. It is, at least, as good a place to die in as any other.”

“Dying?” The man's pleasant baritone voice suddenly shook. “Dying? Oh, no, no! You've been ill—I can see that—but with care and good nursing—”

“Don't deceive yourself, my friend,” she interrupted him remorselessly. “See, come to the window. Now look at me—and then don't talk any more twaddle about care and good nursing!”

She had drawn him towards the window, till they were standing together in the full blaze of the setting sun. Then she turned and faced him—a gaunt wreck of splendid womanhood, her fingers working nervously, whilst her too brilliant eyes, burning in their grey, sunken, sockets, searched his face curiously.

“You've worn better than I have,” she observed at last, breaking the silence with a short laugh, “you must be—let me see—fifty. While I'm barely thirty-one—and I look forty—and the rest.”

Suddenly he reached out and gathered her thin, restless hands into his, holding them in a kind, firm clasp.

“Oh, my dear!” he said sadly. “Is there nothing I can do?”

“Yes,” she answered steadily. “There is. And it's to ask you if you will do it that I sent for you. Do you suppose”—she swallowed, battling with the tremor in her voice—“that I *wanted* you to see me—as I am now? It was months—months before I could bring myself to send you the little pearl ring.”

He stooped and kissed one of the hands he held.

“Dear, foolish woman! You would always be—just Pauline—to me.”

Her eyes softened suddenly.

“So you never married, after all?”

He straightened his shoulders, meeting her glance squarely—almost sternly.

“Did you imagine that I should?” he asked quietly.

“No, no, I suppose not.” She looked away. “What a mess I made of things, didn't I? However, it's all past now; the game's nearly over, thank Heaven! Life, since that day”—the eyes of the man and woman met again in swift understanding—“has been one long hell.”

“He—the man you married—”

“Made that hell. I left him after six years of it, taking the child with me.”

“The child?” A curious expression came into his eyes, resentful, yet tinged at the same time with an oddly tender interest. “Was there a child?”

“Yes—I have a little daughter.”

“And did your husband never trace you?” he asked, after a pause.

“He never tried to”—grimly. “Afterwards—well, it was downhill all the way. I didn't know how to work, and by that time I had learned my health was going. Since then, I've lived on the proceeds of the pawnshop—I had my jewels, you know—and on the odd bits of money I could scrape together by taking in sewing.”

A groan burst from the man's dry lips.

“Oh, my God!” he cried. “Pauline, Pauline, it was cruel of you to keep me in ignorance! I could at least have helped.”

She shook her head.

“I couldn't take—*your* money,” she said quietly. “I was too proud for that. But, dear friend”—as she saw him wince

—“I'm not proud any longer. I think Death very soon shows us how little—pride—matters; it falls into its right perspective when one is nearing the end of things. I'm so little proud now that I've sent for you to ask your help.”

“Anything—anything!” he said eagerly.

“It's rather a big thing that I'm going to ask, I'm afraid. I want you,” she spoke slowly, as though to focus his attention, “to take care of my child—when I am gone.”

He stared at her doubtfully.

“But her father? Will he consent?” he asked.

“He is dead. I received the news of his death six months ago. There is no one—no one who has any claim upon her. And no one upon whom she has any claim, poor little atom!”—smiling rather bitterly. “Ah! Don't deny me!”—her thin, eager hands clung to his—“don't deny me—say that you'll take her!”

“Deny you? But, of course I shan't deny you. I'm only thankful that you have turned to me at last—that you have not quite forgotten!”

“Forgotten?” Her voice vibrated. “Believe me or not, as you will, there has never been a day for nine long years when I have not remembered—never a night when I have not prayed God to bless you——” She broke off, her mouth working uncontrollably.

Very quietly, very tenderly, he drew her into his arms. There was no passion in the caress—for was it not eventide, and the lengthening shadows of night already fallen across her path?—but there was infinite love, and forgiveness, and understanding. . . .

“And now, may I see her—the little daughter?”

The twilight had gathered about them during that quiet hour of reunion, wherein old hurts had been healed, old sins forgiven, and now at last they had come back together out of the past to the recognition of all that yet remained to do.

There came a sound of running footsteps on the stairs outside—light, eager steps, buoyant with youth, that evidently found no hardship in the long ascent from the street level.

“Hark!” The woman paused, her head a little turned to listen. “Here she comes. No one else on this floor”—with a whimsical smile—“could take the last flight of those awful stairs at a run.”

The door flew open, and the man received an impressionist picture of which the salient features were a mop of black hair, a scarlet jersey, and a pair of abnormally long black legs.

Then the door closed with a bang, and the blur of black and scarlet resolved itself into a thin, eager-faced child of eight, who paused irresolutely upon perceiving a stranger in the room.

“Come here, kiddy,” the woman held out her hand. “This”—and her eyes sought those of the man as though beseeching confirmation—“is your uncle.”

The child advanced and shook hands politely, then stood still, staring at this unexpectedly acquired relative.

Her sharp-pointed face was so thin and small that her eyes, beneath their straight, dark brows, seemed to be enormous—black, sombre eyes, having no kinship with the intense, opaque brown so frequently miscalled black, but suggestive of the vibrating darkness of night itself.

Instinctively the man's glance wandered to the face of the child's mother.

"You think her like me?" she hazarded.

"She is very like you," he assented gravely.

A wry smile wrung her mouth.

"Let us hope that the likeness is only skin-deep, then!" she said bitterly. "I don't want her life to be—as mine has been."

"If," he said gently, "if you will trust her to me, Pauline, I swear to you that I will do all in my power to save her from—what you've suffered."

The woman shrugged her shoulders.

"It's all a matter of character," she said nonchalantly.

"Yes," he agreed simply. Then he turned to the child, who was standing a little distance away from him, eyeing him distrustfully. "What do you say, child! You wouldn't be afraid to come and live with me, would you?"

"I am never afraid of people," she answered promptly. "Except the man who comes for the rent; he is fat, and red, and a beast. But I'd rather go on living with Mumsy, thank you—Uncle." The designation came after a brief hesitation. "You see," she added politely, as though fearful that she might have hurt his feelings, "we've always lived together." She flung a glance of almost passionate adoration at her mother, who turned towards the man, smiling a little wistfully.

"You see how it is with her?" she said. "She lives by her affections—conversely from her mother, her heart rules her head. You will be gentle with her, won't you, when the wrench comes?"

“My dear,” he said, taking her hand in his and speaking with the quiet solemnity of a man who vows himself before some holy altar, “I shall never forget that she is your child—the child of the woman I love.”

# CHAPTER I

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## A MORNING ADVENTURE

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The dewy softness of early morning still hung about the woods, veiling their autumn tints in broken, drifting swathes of pearly mist, while towards the east, where the rising sun pushed long, dim fingers of light into the murky greyness of the sky, a tremulous golden haze grew and deepened.

Little, delicate twitterings vibrated on the air—the sleepy chirrup of awakening birds, the rustle of a fallen leaf beneath the pad of some belated cat stealing back to the domestic hearth, the stir of a rabbit in its burrow.

Presently these sank into insignificance beside a more definite sound—the crackle of dry leaves and the snapping of twigs beneath a heavier footfall than that of any marauding Tom, and through a clearing in the woods slouched the figure of a man, gun on shoulder, the secret of his bulging side-pockets betrayed by the protruding tail feathers of a cock-pheasant.

He was not an attractive specimen of mankind. Beneath the peaked cap, crammed well down on to his head, gleamed a pair of surly, watchful eyes, and, beneath these again, the unshaven, brutal, out-thrust jaw offered little promise of better things.

Nor did his appearance in any way belie his reputation, which was unsavory in the extreme. Indeed, if report spoke truly, “Black Brady,” as he was commonly called, had on



one occasion only escaped the gallows thanks to the evidence of a village girl—one who had loved him recklessly, to her own undoing. Every one had believed her evidence to be false, but, as she had stuck to what she said through thick and thin, and as no amount of cross-examination had been able to shake her, Brady had contrived to slip through the hands of the police.

Conceiving, however, that, after this episode, the air of his native place might prove somewhat insalubrious for a time, he had migrated thence to Fallowdene, establishing himself in a cottage on the outskirts of the village and finding the major portion of his sustenance by skillfully poaching the preserves of the principal landowners of the surrounding district.

On this particular morning he was well content with his night's work. He had raided the covers of one Patrick Lovell, the owner of Barrow Court, who, although himself a confirmed invalid and debarred from all manner of sport, employed two or three objectionably lynx-eyed keepers to safeguard his preserves for the benefit of his heirs and assigns.

No covers were better stocked than those of Barrow Court, but Brady rarely risked replenishing his larder from them, owing to the extreme wideawakeness of the head gamekeeper. It was therefore not without a warm glow of satisfaction about the region of his heart that he made his way homeward through the early morning, reflecting on the ease with which last night's marauding expedition had been conducted. He even pursed his lips together and whistled

softly—a low, flute-like sound that might almost have been mistaken for the note of a blackbird.

But it is unwise to whistle before you are out of the wood, and Brady's triumph was short-lived. Swift as a shadow, a lithe figure darted out from among the trees and planted itself directly in his path.

With equal swiftness, Brady brought his gunstock to his shoulder. Then he hesitated, finger on trigger, for the lion in his path was no burly gamekeeper, as, for the first moment, he had supposed. It was a woman who faced him—a mere girl of twenty, whose slender figure looked somehow boyish in its knitted sports coat and very short, workmanlike skirt. The suggestion of boyishness was emphasized by her attitude, as she stood squarely planted in front of Black Brady, her hands thrust deep into her pockets, her straight young back very flat, and her head a little tilted, so that her eyes might search the surly face beneath the peaked cap.

They were arresting eyes—amazingly dark, “like two patches o' the sky be night,” as Brady described them long afterwards to a crony of his, and they gazed up at the astonished poacher from a small, sharply angled face, as delicately cut as a cameo.

“Put that gun down!” commanded an imperious young voice, a voice that held something indescribably sweet and thrilling in its vibrant quality. “What are you doing in these woods?”

Brady, recovering from his first surprise, lowered his gun, but answered truculently—

“Never you mind what I'm doin'.”

The girl pointed significantly to his distended pockets.

"I don't need to ask. Empty out your pockets and take yourself off. Do you hear?" she added sharply, as the man made no movement to obey.

"I shan't do nothin' o' the sort," he growled. "You go your ways and leave me to go mine—or it'll be the worse for 'ee." He raised his gun threateningly.

The girl smiled.

"I'm not in the least afraid of that gun," she said tranquilly. "But you are afraid to use it," she added.

"Am I?" He wheeled suddenly, and, on the instant, a deafening report shattered the quiet of the woods. Then the smoke drifted slowly aside, revealing the man and the girl face to face once more.

But although she still stood her ground, dark shadows had suddenly painted themselves beneath her eyes, and the slight young breast beneath the jaunty sports coat rose and fell unevenly. Within the shelter of her coat-pockets her hands were clenched tightly.

"That was a waste of a good cartridge," she observed quietly. "You only fired in the air."

Black Brady glared at her.

"If I'd liked, I could 'ave killed 'ee as easy as knockin' a bird off a bough," he said sullenly.

"You could," she agreed. "And then I should have been dead and you would have been waiting for a hanging. Of the two, I think my position would have been the more comfortable."

A look of unwilling admiration spread itself slowly over the man's face.

“You be a cool 'and, and no mistake,” he acknowledged. “I thought to frighten you off by firin'.”

The girl nodded.

“Well, as you haven't, suppose you allow that I've won and that it's up to me to dictate terms. If my uncle were to see you—”

“I'm not comin' up to the house—don't you think it, win or no win,” broke in Brady hastily.

The girl regarded him judicially.

“I don't think we particularly want you up at the house,” she remarked. “If you'll do as I say—empty your pockets—you may go.”

The man reluctantly made as though to obey, but even while he hesitated, he saw the girl's eyes suddenly look past him, over his shoulder, and, turning suspiciously, he swung straight into the brawny grip of the head keeper, who, hearing a shot fired, had deserted his breakfast and hurried in the direction of the sound and now came up close behind him.

“Caught this time, Brady, my man,” chuckled the keeper triumphantly. “It's gaol for you this journey, as sure's my name's Clegg. Has the fellow been annoying you, Miss Sara?” he added, touching his hat respectfully as he turned towards the girl, whilst with his other hand he still retained his grip of Brady's arm.

She laughed as though suddenly amused.

“Nothing to speak of, Clegg,” she replied. “And I'm afraid you mustn't send him to prison this time. I told him if he would empty his pockets he might go. That still holds good,” she added, looking towards Brady, who flashed her a quick

look of gratitude from beneath his heavy brows and proceeded to turn out the contents of his pockets with commendable celerity.

But the keeper protested against the idea of releasing his prisoner.

"It's a fair cop, miss," he urged entreatingly.

"Can't help it, Clegg. I promised. So you must let him go."

The man obeyed with obvious reluctance. Then, when Brady had hastened to make himself scarce, he turned and scrutinized the girl curiously.

"You all right, Miss Sara? Shall I see you up to the house?"

"No, thanks, Clegg," she said. "I'm—I'm quite all right. You can go back to your breakfast."

"Very good, miss." He touched his hat and plunged back again into the woods.

The girl stood still, looking after him. She was rather white, but she remained very erect and taut until the keeper had disappeared from view. Then the tense rigidity of her figure slackened, as a stretched wire slackens when the pull on it suddenly ceases, and she leaned helpless against the trunk of a tree, limp and shaking, every fine-strung nerve ajar with the strain of her recent encounter with Black Brady. As she felt her knees giving way weakly beneath her, a dogged little smile twisted her lips.

"You are a cool 'and, and no mistake," she whispered shakily, an ironical gleam flickering in her eyes.

She propped herself up against the friendly tree, and, after a few minutes, the quick throbbing of her heart steadied down and the colour began to steal back into her

lips. At length she stooped, and, picking up her hat, which had fallen off and lay on the ground at her feet, she proceeded to make her way through the woods in the direction of the house.

Barrow Court, as the name implied, was situated on the brow of a hill, sheltered from the north and easterly winds by a thick belt of pines which half-encircled it, for ever murmuring and whispering together as pine-trees will.

To Sara Tennant, the soft, sibilant noise was a beloved and familiar sound. From the first moment when, as a child, she had come to live at Barrow, the insistent murmur of the pines had held an extraordinary fascination for her. That, and their pungent scent, seemed to be interwoven with her whole life there, like the thread of some single colour that persists throughout the length of a woven fabric.

She had been desperately miserable and lonely at the time of her advent at the Court; and all through the long, wakeful vigil of her first night, it had seemed to her vivid, childish imagination as though the big, swaying trees, bleakly etched against the moonlit sky, had understood her desolation and had whispered and crooned consolingly outside her window. Since then, she had learned that the voice of the pines, like the voice of the sea, is always pitched in a key that responds to the mood of the listener. If you chance to be glad, then the pines will whisper of sunshine and summer, little love idylls that one tree tells to another, but if your heart is heavy within you, you will hear only a dirge in the hush of their waving tops.

As Sara emerged from the shelter of the woods, her eyes instinctively sought the great belt of trees that crowned the

opposite hill, with the grey bulk of the house standing out in sharp relief against their eternal green. A little smile of pure pleasure flitted across her face; to her there was something lovable and rather charming about the very architectural inconsistencies which prevented Barrow Court from being, in any sense of the word, a show place.

The central portion of the house, was comparatively modern, built of stone in solid Georgian fashion, but quaintly flanked at either end by a massive, mediaeval tower, survival of the good old days when the Lovells of Fallowdene had held their own against all comers, not even excepting, in the case of one Roderic, his liege lord and master the King, the latter having conceived a not entirely unprovoked desire to deprive him of his lands and liberty—a desire destined, however, to be frustrated by the solid masonry of Barrow.

A flagged terrace ran the whole length of the long, two-storied house, broadening out into wide wings at the base of either tower, and, below the terrace, green, shaven lawns, dotted with old yew, sloped down to the edge of a natural lake which lay in the hollow of the valley, gleaming like a sheet of silver in the morning sunlight.

Prim walks, bordered by high box hedges, intersected the carefully tended gardens, and along one of these Sara took her way, quickening her steps to a run as the booming summons of a gong suddenly reverberated on the air.

She reached the house, flushed and a little breathless, and, tossing aside her hat as she sped through the big, oak-beamed hall, hurried into a pleasant, sunshiny room, where

a couple of menservants were moving quietly about, putting the finishing touches to the breakfast table.

An invalid's wheeled chair stood close to the open window, and in it, with a rug tucked about his knees, was seated an elderly man of some sixty-two or three years of age. He was leaning forward, giving animated instructions to a gardener who listened attentively from the terrace outside, and his alert, eager, manner contrasted oddly with the helplessness of limb indicated by the necessity for the wheeled chair.

"That's all, Digby," he said briskly. "I'll go through the hot-houses myself some time to-day."

As he spoke, he signed to one of the footmen in the room to close the window, and then propelled his chair with amazing rapidity to the table.

The instant and careful attention accorded to his commands by both gardener and servant was characteristic of every one in Patrick Lovell's employment. Although he had been a more or less helpless invalid for seven years, he had never lost his grip of things. He was exactly as much master of Barrow Court, the dominant factor there, as he had been in the good times that were gone, when no day's shooting had been too long for him, no run with hounds too fast.

He sat very erect in his wheeled chair, a handsome, well-groomed old aristocrat. Clean-shaven, except for a short, carefully trimmed moustache, grizzled like his hair, his skin exhibited the waxen pallor which so often accompanies chronic ill-health, and his face was furrowed by deep lines, making him look older than his sixty-odd years. His vivid



blue eyes were extraordinarily keen and penetrating; possibly they, and the determined, squarish jaw, were answerable for that unquestioning obedience which was invariably accorded him.

“Good-morning, uncle mine!” Sara bent to kiss him as the door closed quietly behind the retreating servants.

Patrick Lovell screwed his monocle into his eye and regarded her dispassionately.

“You look somewhat ruffled,” he observed, “both literally and figuratively.”

She laughed, putting up a careless hand to brush back the heavy tress of dark hair that had fallen forward over her forehead.

“I've had an adventure,” she answered, and proceeded to recount her experience with Black Brady. When she reached the point where the man had fired off his gun, Patrick interrupted explosively.

“The infernal scoundrel! That fellow will dangle at the end of a rope one of these days—and deserve it, too. He's a murderous ruffian—a menace to the countryside.”

“He only fired into the air—to frighten me,” explained Sara.

Her uncle looked at her curiously.

“And did he succeed?” he asked.

She bestowed a little grin of understanding upon him.

“He did,” she averred gravely. Then, as Patrick's bushy eyebrows came together in a bristling frown, she added: “But he remained in ignorance of the fact.”

The frown was replaced by a twinkle.

“That's all right, then,” came the contented answer.

"All the same, I really *was* frightened," she persisted. "It gave me quite a nasty turn, as the servants say. I don't think"—meditatively—"that I enjoy being shot at. Am I a funk, my uncle?"

"No, my niece"—with some amusement. "On the contrary, I should define the highest type of courage as self-control in the presence of danger—not necessarily absence of fear. The latter is really no more credit to you than eating your dinner when you're hungry."

"Mine, then, I perceive to be the highest type of courage," chuckled Sara. "It's a comforting reflection."

It was, when propounded by Patrick Lovell, to whom physical fear was an unknown quantity. Had he lived in the days of the Terror, he would assuredly have taken his way to the guillotine with the same gay, debonair courage which enabled the nobles of France to throw down their cards and go to the scaffold with a smiling promise to the other players that they would continue their interrupted game in the next world.

And when Sara had come to live with Patrick, a dozen years ago, he had rigorously inculcated in her youthful mind a contempt for every form of cowardice, moral and physical.

It had not been all plain sailing, for Sara was a highly strung child, with the vivid imagination that is the primary cause of so much that is carelessly designated cowardice. But Patrick had been very wise in his methods. He had never rebuked her for lack of courage; he had simply taken it for granted that she would keep her grip of herself.

Sara's thoughts slid back to an incident which had occurred during their early days together. She had been

very much alarmed by the appearance of a huge mastiff who was permitted the run of the house, and her uncle, noticing her shrinking avoidance of the rather formidable looking beast, had composedly bidden her take him to the stables and chain him up. For an instant the child had hesitated. Then, something in the man's quiet confidence that she would obey had made its claim on her childish pride, and, although white to the lips, she had walked straight up to the great creature, hooked her small fingers into his collar, and marched him off to his kennel.

Courage under physical pain she had learned from seeing Patrick contend with his own infirmity. He suffered intensely at times, but neither groan nor word of complaint was ever allowed to escape his set lips. Only Sara would see, after what he described as "one of my damn bad days, m'dear," new lines added to the deepening network that had so aged his appearance lately.

At these times she herself endured agonies of reflex suffering and apprehension, since her attachment to Patrick Lovell was the moving factor of her existence. Other girls had parents, brothers and sisters, and still more distant relatives upon whom their capacity for loving might severally expend itself. Sara had none of these, and the whole devotion of her intensely ardent nature lavished itself upon the man whom she called uncle.

Their mutual attitude was something more than the accepted relationship implied. They were friends—these two—intimate friends, comrades on an equal footing, respecting each other's reserves and staunchly loyal to one another. Perhaps this was accounted for in a measure by the very

fact that they were united by no actual bond of blood. That Sara was Patrick's niece by adoption was all the explanation of her presence at Barrow Court that he had ever vouchsafed to the world in general, and it practically amounted to the sum total of Sara's own knowledge of the matter.

Hers had been a life of few relationships. She had no recollection of any one who had ever stood towards her in the position of a father, and though she realized that the one-time existence of such a personage must be assumed, she had never felt much curiosity concerning him.

The horizon of her earliest childhood had held but one figure, that of an adored mother, and "home" had been represented by a couple of meager rooms at the top of a big warren of a place known as Wallater's Buildings, tenanted principally by families of the artisan class.

Thus debarred by circumstances from the companionship of other children, Sara's whole affections had centred round her mother, and she had never forgotten the sheer, desolating anguish of that moment when the dreadful, unresponsive silence of the sheeted figure, lying in the shabby little bedroom they had shared together, brought home to her the significance of death.

She had not cried, as most children of eight would have done, but she had suffered in a kind of frozen silence, incapable of any outward expression of grief.

"Unfeelin', I call it!" declared the woman who lived on the same floor as the Tennants, and who had attended at the doctor's behest, to a friend and neighbour who was occupied in boiling a kettle over a gas-ring. "Must be a cold-

'earted child as can see 'er own mother lyin' dead without so much as a tear." She sniffed. "'Aven't you got that cup o' tea ready yet? I can allus drink a cup o' tea after a layin'-out."

Sara had watched the two women drinking their tea with brooding eyes, her small breast heaving with the intensity of her resentment. Without being in any way able to define her emotions, she felt that there was something horrible in their frank enjoyment of the steaming liquid, gulped down to the cheerful accompaniment of a running stream of intimate gossip, while all the time that quiet figure lay on the narrow bed—motionless, silent, wrapped in the strange and immense aloofness of the dead.

Presently one of the women poured out a third cup of tea and pushed it towards the child, slopping in the thin, bluish-looking milk with a generous hand.

"'Ave a cup, child. It's as good a drop o' tea as ever I tasted."

For a moment Sara stared at her speechlessly; then, with a sudden passionate gesture, she swept the cup on to the floor.

The clash of breaking china seemed to ring through the chamber of death, the women's voices rose shrilly in reproof, and Sara, fleeing into the adjoining room, cast herself face downwards upon the floor, horror-stricken. It was not the raucous anger of the women which she heeded; that passed her by. But she had outraged some fine, instinctive sense by reverence that lay deep within her own small soul.

Still she did not cry. Only, as she lay on the ground with her face hidden, she kept repeating in a tense whisper—

“You know I didn't mean it, God! You know I didn't mean it!”

It was then that Patrick Lovell had appeared, coming in response to she knew not what summons, and had taken her away with him. And the tendrils of her affection, wrenched from their accustomed hold, had twined themselves about this grey-haired, blue-eyed man, set so apart by every *soigné* detail of his person from the shabby, slip-shod world which Sara had known, but who yet stood beside the bed on which her mother lay, with a wrung mouth beneath his clipped moustache and a mist of tears dimming his keen eyes.

Sara had loved him for those tears.