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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ADRIEN LEROY ***

ADRIEN LEROY

CHARLES GARVICE

LONDON

GEORGE NEWNES, LIMITED

SOUTHAMPTON STREET, STRAND, W.C.

CHAPTER I

It was a cold night in early spring, and the West End streets were nearly deserted. The great shutters of the shops were being drawn down with a dull rumble, and every moment the pavements grew more dreary looking as the glories of the plate-glass windows were hidden.

Tired workers with haggard faces were making their way homeward; to them the day was at an end. But to the occupants of the whirring taxis and smart motors, as they sped westward, the round of their day was but half-way through; for them, the great ones of the earth, the all-important hour of dinner was at hand.

At the entrance of one of the most luxurious clubs in Pall Mall two men, in immaculate evening dress, stood carelessly surveying the hurrying throngs of people.

"Seven," said one, as the hour struck from the nearest church. "I thought Standon said seven."

"Yes, and like a woman, meant half-past," returned the other, hiding a yawn.

"Stan's too young to value his dinner properly, but Leroy ought to have been punctual. Oh, here *is* Stan!" as a slight, well-dressed man sprang hastily from a smart motor and came towards them.

"Hello!" said the new-comer, shaking hands, "you two fellows first? I hope I'm not late, Shelton."

"Of course you're late," growled Shelton, with characteristic pessimism. "You always are, and Leroy is worse. Come along, we may as well wait inside as in this beastly draught."

In the great dining-hall the snowy-covered tables were being taken rapidly by members about to dine; silent-footed waiters were hurrying to and fro, carrying out their various duties, while intermittently the sound of opening champagne bottles mingled with the buzz of conversation and the ripple of laughter.

The three men, Mortimer Shelton, Lord Standon and Frank Parselle, seated themselves at a table in a comfortable recess and took stock of the room, responding to numerous nods and smiles of recognition, while grumbling at the unpunctuality of their friend.

"Ten past seven!" groaned Shelton, looking at his watch. "I might have known that Leroy would be late. Shall we wait?"

"Oh, yes!" said Parselle; "Adrien might not like it, you know. It is a bore, though! The soup will be as thick as mud!"

"By Jove! I'd forgotten," interrupted Standon suddenly. "I met Leroy yesterday, and he asked me to tell you he might be late, as he was off to Barminster Castle last night. We were not to wait. He gave me a note, and--if I haven't left it in my other coat--" He fumbled in his pocket. "No; here it is." He produced the note with an air of triumph, and Shelton, with a muttered exclamation of disgust, ordered dinner to be served before he opened it. As he did so and ran his eye over the contents, he frowned.

"Just listen to this," he said irritably.

"MY DEAR MORTIMER,

A letter from Jasper takes me down to the Castle. I will return in time to join your little party and, with your leave, bring Jasper along too; but don't wait on any account.

"Yours,

"ADRIEN LEROY."

"Jasper--always Jasper!" commented Standon. "I'd like to know by what means Jasper Vermont has obtained such influence over Leroy."

"Ah, that's the mystery!" said Parselle, frowning.

"It's as plain as a pikestaff," growled Mortimer Shelton. "Leroy saved Vermont's life years ago--at Oxford, I think. That's enough for Adrien. If a cat or dog, or even a one-eyed monkey, placed itself under his protection, Adrien Leroy would stick to it through thick and thin. You know his little way; and this Vermont is no fool. He intends to make full use of his friend."

"And yet Leroy is not easily taken in," remarked Parselle thoughtfully.

"Every man has his weak point," retorted Shelton with a shrug, "and Jasper is Leroy's one vulnerable spot. He will believe nothing against him."

"He's a lucky chap, Vermont," said Standon pensively. "No one really knows what he is or where he springs from; yet he always seems to have plenty of money, and apparently the whole of Leroy's passes through his hands."

"Something near a million," put in Parselle enviously, "and with the run of a castle like a palace. No, Vermont's no fool!"

Mortimer Shelton nodded.

"The Castle's all right," he said curtly. "You can trust the Leroy's to have the best of everything. They treat money like dirt, and bow before nothing but Royalty and women. Yet, with it all, there's no stauncher friend than a Leroy."

"As Vermont knows only too well," muttered Standon dryly. "By the way, I saw Ada Lester in the Park this morning. Jove! Such furs!"

"In that quarter Adrien certainly treats his money like dust," said Parselle, with a short laugh. "I can't think what he sees in her; to me she seems an insatiate animal--and about as difficult to satisfy. It's a jolly good job for Leroy that, thanks to his father's generosity, his income runs into five figures--nothing else would stand the strain."

"Do you know, some one told me at the Casket the other night that Leroy had made the theatre

over to Ada entirely, and settled a thousand a year on her into the bargain," said Standon, leaning forward.

"I daresay," Mortimer commented dryly. "He's fool enough for anything. The place runs him into eight thousand a year as it is--not including Ada Lester, the lady manager--so he might just as well hand it over to her altogether. I wish to goodness the wretched building would burn down! 'Pon my word, I shall set it alight myself one fine night----"

"Hush! Here he is," said Lord Standon; adding quickly, "with Vermont, of course."

The others looked round towards the new-comers. One was a dark-haired man of about forty years of age. His face was pale, with an almost unhealthy pallor, from which his small dark eyes glittered restlessly; his thin lips, tightly closed, were set in an almost straight line. Clean-shaven, sleek of hair, he wore an expression of cautious slyness that implied a mental attitude ever on guard against some sudden exposure of his real feelings. Such was Jasper Vermont.

His companion was of a different calibre. Still apparently in the early thirties, tall, and with clear-cut aristocratic features, he was decidedly good to look upon. His face, fair as that of a woman, was perhaps slightly marred by the expression of weakness which lurked round the finely-moulded lips; but for all that it was stamped with the latent nobility which characterised his race.

The Hon. Adrien Leroy, only son of Baron Barminster, was one of the most noted figures in fashionable society. His father, who since the death of Lady Barminster had lived almost as a recluse, spent the days in the old Castle, and had practically abdicated in favour of his son. So that the colossal income accruing from the coal mines of Wales, the rentals of the Leroy estates in the Southern Counties, and the ground rents of a considerable acreage in one of the most fashionable parts of London, all passed through the hands of Adrien, who, in his turn, spent it like water, leaving Jasper Vermont--his one-time college friend and now his confidential steward--to watch over his affairs.

Leroy, with a genial smile of greeting for all, but a grave, almost weary expression in his blue eyes, parried the numerous questions and invitations that beset him on all sides, and, taking Vermont's arm, drew him towards the table where his three friends awaited him.

"I'm sorry we're late," he said in a pleasant voice, which was clear and unaffected, in strong contrast to the chatter which buzzed round him at their entry. "Blame Jasper, who, if he is as hungry as I am, is punished already."

His good-humoured laugh as he seated himself drew echoes from his friends; Leroy's popularity was never more apparent than in a gathering of this sort, composed exclusively of his own sex.

"So, have just come up from Barminster," said Shelton presently, "How is the Castle looking?"

Adrien, busily satisfying a vigorous appetite, merely nodded and smiled in reply; but Jasper Vermont answered for him.

"Beautiful!" he said, with a smile which showed his white, even teeth. "Beautiful! It's a charming view; but we saw little of it this visit. Ah, Shelton, you are really an epicure! We don't get clear turtle like this at the Pallodeon--eh, Adrien?"

"No," replied the young man, looking up. "We ought to have Shelton on the committee. No wonder they love you here, Shelton! And so the colt has lost the steeplechase? I saw the news as I came along."

"And you have lost, how much--two thousand?" queried Parselle.

"Five," said Vermont, not quickly, but just before Adrien could speak.

"Is it five?" asked Leroy indifferently. "I thought I'd backed 'Venus' for more."

"I backed her myself for a couple of hundred," put in Lord Standon ruefully. "She's a beautiful creature, though, and I'd like to buy her."

"You can have her, my dear Stan, for a mere song," said Leroy cordially.

"I'm afraid that's impossible," interposed Jasper with suavity. "She's sold."

Adrien looked up in surprise.

"Sold! To whom?" he asked.

"To the knacker," was the calm reply. "Don't you remember, Adrien, that she threw Fording and broke her leg over the last hurdle?"

Leroy's race resumed its usual air of bored indifference.

"Ah, yes, so you told me. My dear Stan, I'm awfully sorry! I had completely forgotten." He looked round the table. "Any of you seen the papers?" he inquired. "Last night was the first of the new

comedy at the Casket--how did it go?"

Frank Parselle laughed. "I was there," he admitted. "Ada played finely, but they hissed once or twice."

"Lost on my horse and on my new play. That is bad luck!" exclaimed Adrien, looking, however, very little disturbed by the news. "It must be withdrawn."

"Certainly," agreed Vermont amiably. "Certainly."

"By Jove! what did you tell me the mounting cost?" asked Parselle, addressing Vermont, but glancing significantly at the others.

"Three thousand pounds," answered Vermont glibly, while Adrien ate his fish with the most consummate indifference.

"Three thousand for four nights, that's about it. The public ought to be grateful to you," said Shelton with a tinge of sarcasm in his voice, as he nodded across at Leroy.

Adrien laughed.

"Or I to them," he said cheerfully. "It's no light thing to sit through a bad play. But how is that, Jasper? You said it would run."

"I?" protested Vermont, with a pleasant smile. "No, Adrien, not so certainly as that. I said I thought the play well written, and that in my opinion it ought to run well--a very different thing. Eh, Shelton?"

"Ah!" replied Shelton, who had been watching him keenly. "So you were out in your reckoning for once. It is to be hoped you didn't make the same mistake with the colt. I think you were also favourably inclined to that, weren't you?"

"Yes," admitted Vermont, leaning back with an admirable air of content. "I laid my usual little bet, and lost--of course."

"You should have hedged," said Shelton, who knew as a positive fact that Vermont had done so.

"I have no judgement," Vermont responded deprecatingly. "I am a man of no ideas, and I admit it. Now Adrien is all acuteness; without him I should soon go astray. I am supposed to look after his interests; but, by Jove! it is he who supplies the brains and I the hands. I am the machine--a mere machine, and he turns the handle!" He laughed gently at his own joke, and held up his glass for replenishment.

"A pretty division of labour," commented Shelton, with a faint sneer. "Now *we* give *you* the credit for all the tact and business capacity."

"Ah, what a mistake!" replied Vermont, spreading out his fat hands with a gesture of amusement. "Well, since you give me credit, I will assume the virtue, though I have it not."

He changed the subject adroitly to one of general interest; and as the wine came and disappeared with greater rapidity, the talk ran on with more wit and laughter, Vermont always handling the ball of conversation deftly, and giving it an additional fillip when it seemed to slacken. Adrien Leroy spoke little; though when he did make a remark, the rest listened with an evident desire to hear his opinion.

At length Vermont rose, with a lazy look round.

"Well, I must be off," he said smoothly. "Good-night, Adrien. I shall be with you to-morrow at twelve."

Having bade the rest of the company a hasty adieu, he turned once more to his host.

"Good-night, Shelton," he said smilingly. "Thanks for the excellent dinner. Rome would not have perished had you lived with the last of Cæsars."

"And Adrien Leroy would not go to the dogs so quickly, if you did not show him the way," murmured Shelton inaudibly, as Vermont departed, with the bland smile still hovering round his thin lips.

CHAPTER II

Outside the club door, Vermont's motor was drawn up at the side waiting for him. He looked at his watch, and was surprised at the lateness of the hour. Stepping hastily into the vehicle, he held up two fingers to the chauffeur, who apparently needed no other instructions; for the car glided off, and Vermont, as he passed the club, looked up at the windows with an ugly smile.

As Lord Standon had said, few knew his origin or his business; but, in reality, his antecedents were of a very ordinary nature. He was the son of a solicitor who had lived with but one object in his sordid life, namely, the desire to make his son a man of position with the power to mix as an equal among that portion of society which only came to Malcolm Vermont when it wanted its scandals glossed over, or to obtain money. Ill-natured people were apt to hint that he had amassed his wealth by means of usury and the taking up of shady cases. At any rate, he made sufficient to bring up his son in luxury and send him to Oxford, where Jasper had first come in contact with Adrien Leroy. At the death of his father, Vermont found himself possessed of an income of a thousand a year, which enabled him to become a member of Adrien's set, notwithstanding that the amount was a much smaller one than he had been led to expect, and, in his opinion, savoured almost of aristocratic poverty.

The car had rolled silently into a side street off St. James's, where the chauffeur pulled up sharply at the door of one of the old-fashioned, though now newly-painted houses. Vermont sprang out and rang the bell twice.

"Has Miss Lester returned yet?" he asked of the smart maid who opened the door.

"Yes, sir," she answered, and promptly led the way up a newly-carpeted staircase, redolent of Parma violet scent and glistening with white enamelled woodwork and plaster casts. The walls were adorned with pictures in the worst possible taste and the most glaring colours. As Vermont reached the first floor, a strong, savoury odour filled the air.

He smiled sarcastically, and sniffed as if the perfume were familiar to him.

"Miss Lester at supper?" he asked the white-capped maid, as she threw open the door on the first floor, and stood aside to let the visitor precede her.

"Yes, sir; supper's been served," was the demure answer.

Vermont passed into the room, which was furnished with the same lack of taste as the staircase. Two women were seated at the table, apparently just finishing their supper.

At first glance they might have been mistaken for mother and daughter, as the elder woman was clad in a sombre black velvet dress, and had a pale, thin face, crowned with heavy masses of grey hair. On closer inspection, however, one perceived that Julia Lester was far from old--indeed, not more than about forty-five, and with a peculiarly gentle, almost child-like expression, which at first took one almost by surprise.

On the other hand, her sister, though only about ten years younger, would easily have passed as twenty-five, especially when behind the footlights, which was her usual environment.

"Oh, it's you, Jasper, is it?" she remarked carelessly, pausing in the act of lighting a cigarette. "Didn't hear you come in. You're so quiet on your pins."

Like the house she inhabited, Miss Lester combined in her person prodigality of colours with a fine disregard of taste. Beautiful she undoubtedly was, with the black-browed, dark-eyed beauty of a Cleopatra, for there was some Italian blood in her veins. It was given out occasionally by the Press that she had been a theatre-dresser, an organ-grinder, and fifty other things; but nevertheless, illiterate, common and ill-bred, she had yet achieved fame--or rather, perhaps, notoriety---by her dancing and sheer animal good looks.

As a matter of fact she owed her success primarily to Jasper Vermont, who, as a young man and during a quarrel with his father, had lodged in the same house with the handsome sisters, Julia, and Ada Lester, the latter then being only about fifteen years of age. He had fallen violently in love with Julia, then in the height of her beauty, and had cruelly deceived her. To appease the indignation of the younger sister he had got her an introduction to the manager of the Rockingham Theatre, who was about to put on a new Egyptian ballet, and from that time onwards it had been plain sailing for Ada. Later on came a meeting with Leroy, planned by Jasper's connivance; and Adrien, attracted by the woman's ripe beauty, had been blind, so far, to the deficiencies of her mind and character.

To-night she looked a veritable daughter of the South. Her dress was of scarlet, touched with black, and she was wearing diamonds--gifts from her many admirers--of such intrinsic value as to render many a countess jealous.

"Yes, it is I," said Vermont. "Onions and cigarettes! I thought Leroy objected to both."

Ada laughed.

"It's the smell he don't like," she said lightly. "He's so particular. But he's not coming to-night; leastways, he said he wasn't."

"Ah!" said Vermont smiling, as he seated himself at the table and took up a small bottle which proved to be empty, "Is there anything left to drink?"

"Have some fizz," said Ada hospitably. "Ring the bell, Ju, and give me another chop. Well, Jasper, what's the news?"

"Just the question I was about to ask," he replied, as the maid-servant brought in a bottle of champagne and glasses on a silver tray. "How did the comedy go?"

"Rotten!" pronounced Ada shortly. "I told Adrien it wouldn't go, though I did my best--didn't I, Ju? The frocks were really first-class--blue satin and silver, with loads of pearls, and my turquoise armlets. All right, eh?"

"Yes," agreed Vermont, adding, with a sneer, "Perhaps the stupid public got tired of looking at the blue satin."

"Then they could have looked at me instead," retorted Ada tartly. "But I've no patience with Adrien. Why can't he get 'em something lively? A musical comedy now--I could make that go, if you like! Plenty of songs and no talky-talky business. Besides, I *can* dance."

"But can't act," murmured Jasper, with his sarcastic smile.

"Can't I!" cried Ada furiously. "That's all you know about it. Why didn't you come last night?"

"Business," he answered carelessly, sipping his wine; adding, as he saw her about to question him, "With which I won't trouble you, my fair Ada."

"Oh won't you!" was that lady's retort. "You're mighty polite, I must say. I suppose you were down at that old Castle again, and Adrien too! What were you doing there?"

"Minding our own business," he replied smilingly, as he lit a cigarette.

"Close as a fox, you are," she declared, with a short, disagreeable laugh. "Where's Adrien? Down there still?"

"No; at the Thessalian. I left him there with Mortimer Shelton."

"I hate that man," said Miss Lester viciously.

"So do I," agreed Vermont, "but I don't say so. Anyhow, Adrien's safe there for another hour, and I came on to give you a word of warning."

He turned to her companion, who had been quietly finishing her supper as if unconscious of anyone's presence.

"Julia, you look tired; you'd better get off to bed."

She rose and hesitated for a moment, looking from him to Ada; then quietly left the room. Vermont gazed after her, much as he would have watched a useless piece of furniture in course of removal; then he leant back in his chair, and, before resuming, regarded fixedly Ada's flushed, handsome face.

"Well?" she queried, impatiently striking the table with her fork.

Jasper leant forward and spoke with calm, unpleasant deliberation.

"Ada," said he, "there was once a person who killed the goose that laid him golden eggs; there was another who beat his horse till it pitched him into the ditch; but neither of these attained such a height of folly as Miss Lester bids fair to reach, if she persists in worrying her prize donkey into kicking her to the ground and leaving her in the mud."

"Oh, don't be an idiot, Jasper!" she exclaimed irritably. "Speak out plain, can't you?"

"I certainly can, and will, my dear lady. To put it plainly, then, you are going the quickest way to make Adrien tired of you. After all, if you happen to possess a goose with the propensity to lay golden eggs, surely it is wise to humour him. And if the said goose happens to dislike the smell of onions, why fill the house with that particular perfume, sufficient to suffocate an elephant? Again, is it not the height of folly to stick plaster statues on the staircase which he ascends daily, when you know this particular goose detests imitation art? In short, my dear Ada, if you persist in thrusting vulgarity down his throat, you will find yourself very soon out of the graces of our friend, Adrien Leroy."

Ada, who had been beating a loud tattoo with the fork which she still held in her hand, sprang to her feet and struck the table with a force which set the glasses jingling.

"Jasper!" she almost shouted. "You'll drive me mad! Why don't you speak out and say what you mean? What's the matter with Adrien? What does he want? Aren't there a hundred men who'd be glad enough to furnish a house for me as I like? And can't I even eat what I choose without

Adrien Leroy's delicate nose being turned up in disapproval?"

"You can go to the deuce, if you like, my dear," declared Jasper with a calm smile. "I merely warn you that you are on the way to finding yourself in the street, if I may be allowed to speak out. Have another cigarette, and spray some patchouli about the room. There are more geese than one, as you say; and, after all, it is hard if you can't indulge in onions in your own room at one o'clock in the morning."

Goaded almost to desperation by the sneering sarcasm of Vermont's words, the woman threw down her fork, thereby smashing a champagne glass, and thrust her angry, flushed countenance close to his.

"What's your game?" she hissed. "Are you playing with me and Adrien? Are you setting him against me? I know your artful tricks; but don't you play 'em on me, Jasper! What are you doing up at the Castle so often? Making yourself pleasant to old Lord Barminster's niece there, I'll be bound. P'raps she ain't fond of scent or a pork chop or two, and she can have real statues if she likes. You don't remind him of that, do you? Oh, no, of course not! But you mind your skin, Jasper, for you can't play fast and loose with me. Shuffle him on to that Constance girl, and I'll make you pay for it. I know something you wouldn't like my lord to hear about; so, if you don't want me to open my mouth and split on your little games, don't you play me any of your tricks, that's all, or I'll go straight to Adrien and tell him all!"

She stopped, out of breath, and Jasper Vermont, springing to his feet, glared down at her in impotent fury. But she only laughed at his angry face.

"Oh, no, you wouldn't like Adrien to know how you fooled poor Julia, though it is over twenty years ago. I haven't forgotten, if you have, how you took her over to Paris while I was away on my first tour, and went through some form of marriage with her. You wouldn't like him to know how you told her what you'd done, when there was no longer need to keep it dark from your father, and of the attack of brain fever it brought on, poor dear! You were a nice brute to her, you were, Jasper Vermont; and it's a lucky thing for you and her too that when she recovered her memory had gone, and she forgot you as well as the child."

Jasper stirred uneasily.

"I didn't think she would have cared so much," he said. "Besides, she's all right now; she only forgets those few years."

"Lucky thing for you," repeated Ada dryly.

"What have you done with the child?" he asked suddenly.

His companion's face lighted up with malicious triumph.

"I've put her where you can't find her, anyhow," she said. "You shan't break her heart, as you did her mother's."

"Oh, nonsense, Ada!" said Vermont contemptuously. "Don't begin to rant--you're not on the stage now. I kept all my promises to you, at any rate. I got you on at the Rockingham and I introduced you to Leroy; and if you had only played your cards properly you would have hooked him by this time. As it is, he'll marry his cousin, if you're not careful."

"If he does, it'll be your fault," she snarled. "And I'll tell Adrien all, and how you're fooling him in other ways as well."

Jasper sprang across the room, his face working with anger. There was something so deadly in the light of his dark eyes, such murderous hate in every line of his face, that the woman shrank back and uttered a cry of fear, instinctively glancing at a knife which lay on the table close to Jasper's other hand.

How far Vermont's anger might have carried him she did not know, for, to her intense relief, the door opened and Adrien Leroy himself entered the room. He gazed in surprise at the two occupants, and in an instant Jasper had regained his self-control. He did not release Ada's wrist, but, smoothing his scowl into a sleek smile, he said with a careless laugh:

"No, Ada, your arm is as slim as ever. The bracelet will just fit you." He relaxed his grip as he spoke and turned to Leroy. "Ada has bet me that the new bracelet you bought her is too small, Adrien," he explained glibly. "She thought she was getting stout."

Adrien nodded indifferently; while Ada, with a little cry of relief, ran towards him.

"Adrien, how good of you to come!" she exclaimed. "I did not expect you so soon."

Leroy did not seem to notice her, but looked round the room with evident displeasure. The table, with its remains of supper; the stained cloth; above all, the undesirable odour of food and stale tobacco; all seemed to fill him with disgust. Gently, but firmly, he put Ada from him.

"Jasper," he said, turning to Vermont, "you know why I came. Give Miss Lester the deeds of the

Casket Theatre. I am tired and am going home."

With a courteous good-night to Ada, who, without attempting to thank him for his gift, stood scowling and sullen, he passed out of the room; while Vermont leaned back against the table with folded arms and his inevitable, but significant, smile on his face.

CHAPTER III

The night was bitterly cold; but, disdainful of a taxi for so short a distance, Leroy buttoned up his coat and strode swiftly along towards his chambers in Jermyn Court, W. As he turned the corner of the square, he stumbled sharply over the slight figure of a girl, crouched near one of the doorsteps, and, with his habitual courtesy, he stopped to see if any harm had been done.

"Have I hurt you?" he asked gently, placing his hand on her shoulder.

At his touch the girl started up with a cry of distress; and, as the shawl fell back from her head, Leroy was almost startled by the vivid freshness of her beauty.

"Oh," she exclaimed in terrified accents, "I wasn't doing any harm! I will move on--I-I was only resting." Then, as she saw the kindly face looking into hers, she subsided into silence.

She was quite young, not more than about sixteen, and so slenderly formed as to appear almost a child. Her features were clear-cut as a cameo and she had a slightly foreign air. Her eyes were brown, but as the light of the gas-lamp fell full on her upturned face, they showed so dark and velvety as almost to appear black, while masses of dark hair clustered in heavy waves round her forehead.

Unconsciously Leroy raised his hat as he repeated his question. She shook her head at him as he bent over her, but made no reply.

"How is it you are out on such a night as this?" he asked. "Have you no home? Where do you live?"

"Cracknell Court, Soho," she replied, in tones singularly free from any trace of Cockney accent.

"With your parents?" queried Leroy, feeling for some money.

"No," said the girl, her red lips quivering for a moment. "Haven't got any--only Johann and Martha--and *they* don't care."

"Who is Johann?" said Leroy, with an encouraging smile.

"I don't know," she answered listlessly. "He's Johann Wilfer, that's all."

"Why have you run away, then?"

"Johann came home drunk and beat me--so I ran out."

She pushed back her ragged shawl and held up her arm, on which bruises showed up cruelly distinct. Leroy uttered an exclamation of anger.

"You poor child!" he said almost tenderly. "What can I do for you? If I give you money----"

"Johann will take it and make me beg for more," she interrupted; and Leroy withdrew his hand from his pocket, fearing this to be but too true.

"Will you go home, if I take you?" he began.

The girl shook her head, and dragged the old shawl closer round her shivering body.

"Not till morning," she said decidedly. "I shall be all right then."

"But you'll freeze to death here!"

She laughed harshly.

"I wish I was dead," she said, with an earnestness that made Leroy's heart ache, as he thought of her extreme youth and saw the bitter despair in the great dark eyes.

He drew himself up sharply as if he had decided on his course of action.

"I cannot leave you here," he said quietly, "and money is of no use to you to-night. Will you come with me?" He held out his hand as he spoke, and, without a word, the girl rose wearily and laid her own cold one in his. They proceeded thus, in silence, for the length of the square; but Leroy soon saw that, whether, from cold or from hunger, the girl's steps were growing feebler and more uncertain. Without further ado, he picked her up in his arms, wrapping her shawl more warmly round her.

"We are nearly there," he said reassuringly, "and you are as light as a feather."

She lay back, perfectly content, her head pressed against his broad shoulder, her dark eyes closed trustfully.

Adrien Leroy hurried on, for the wind cut with the force of a knife; but his face was very thoughtful as he approached his chambers.

"What else can I do?" he asked himself. "She is such an innocent child. Can I take her to my rooms without injury to her poor shred of reputation? Yet no houses are open at this hour, and I cannot hand her over to that drunken brute. There's no help for it!"

It evidently never occurred to him to turn back and deliver her into the charge of Miss Lester. Indeed, he thought that would have been greater cruelty than to have left her in the streets.

Having reached the block of buildings in which were his own rooms, Adrien walked up the stairs and opened a door on the first floor. In the hall a light was burning, held by a statuette of white marble; and Leroy, after gently setting the girl down on her feet, led her into his study.

The room in which she found herself was not lofty, but the ceiling was exquisitely painted, while from the four corners hung electric lights 'neath delicate shades. The furniture was rich in colour, solid as befitted a man's room, while on the walls were a few rare engravings. A couple of gun-cases in one corner and a veritable stock of fishing implements in another showed that Leroy was not unaccustomed to sport; it was one of his man Norgate's complaints that he was not allowed to pack them away, but must leave them there, close at hand, just as Leroy might want them.

It was not these, however, that held the girl's attention so fixedly, but the cut Venetian glass on the inlaid cabinets and the gold ornaments on the carved Florentine mantel.

"Home at last," he said with a smile; and, opening another door on the left, he led her unresistingly into a second room.

But here the girl seemed as if struck dumb with astonishment. She was evidently overwhelmed by the magnificence and luxury on which her eyes rested, and Leroy smiled in amusement at her unspoken admiration.

"Come and warm yourself," he said kindly, drawing one of the divans nearer to the fire.

Lightly she trod over the rose carpet, and dropped with a sigh into the chair.

"Give me your hands. Don't hold them near the fire yet," he said, and began to gently chafe the poor blue fingers, for he knew the danger of too sudden heat. "That is better--they will soon get warm. And now we will have something to eat."

He crossed over to the bell; and in a few moments the door opened noiselessly.

"Let us have some supper, Norgate," said Leroy; and the dignified man-servant disappeared as silently as he had entered, while his master returned to the fire-place, and stood looking down at the girl he had rescued.

As yet she had not spoken; but her eyes had been wandering over the many splendours of the room. Suddenly she lifted them to the handsome face above her, and said in a low, awe-struck whisper:

"Is this the king's palace? And are you a prince?"

Adrien Leroy smiled.

"By no means," he said. "Ah! here comes something you require, I know," he added, as the door opened, and Norgate entered, bearing a large silver tray.

Having set the chairs to table, and placed the wine and glasses at hand, the man announced respectfully that supper was served. His master dismissed him, guessing that the girl would be less embarrassed if alone with him; and Norgate retired with a face as expressionless as if the entertaining of "street waifs"--as he mentally termed the young visitor--were of nightly occurrence.

Adrien placed a plate of cold chicken on a low table beside her.

"You are warm there," he said, as he poured her out a glass of wine.

The girl looked up into his face with a mute, questioning glance; then, taking courage from the kindly eyes, she picked up her knife and fork with long, thin, but well-shaped hands.

Leroy turned to the table, and by dint of helping himself from various dishes, under a pretence of making a hearty meal, he gave her confidence; and presently he saw that she had commenced to eat. Adrien rose from time to time, and waited on her with a delicacy and tenderness with which few of his friends would have credited him; till, with a sigh of content, she laid down the knife and fork.

"Are you better now?" he asked as he took her plate.

She looked up at him in speechless adoration, and her eyes filled with tears.

"How good you are to me," she said. "I never dreamt there could be such a beautiful place as this. Do you often bring people in out of the cold?"

His face became grave.

"No," he said evasively--"not as often as I should, I'm afraid. And now, suppose you tell me your name."

"Jessica," she replied simply.

"And have you no relatives--no friends to help you?" he continued.

She shook her head sadly.

"Only Martha and Johann," was the hopeless reply.

"You poor child! And what does friend Johann do for a living?"

Again she shook her head.

"I don't know. He gets drunk."

"An overfilled profession that," said Leroy, with a sigh. "And now, what are we to do with you, little Jessica?"

She looked up with frightened eyes.

"Oh," she cried breathlessly, "are you going to turn me out into the cold again? Must I go? Oh, I knew it was too good to last!"

In her terror she had started up; but Leroy put her back gently into the chair.

"No, little one, we won't turn you out to-night," he promised. "To-morrow, we will see what can be done to make your road softer in future."

She did not understand half his words; but as with an almost womanly tenderness he placed a silken cushion beneath her head, she nestled down, smiling into his eyes with the gratitude of a child that neither questions nor doubts. To her he appeared like a being from another world--a world or which she had scarcely dared to dream, and her eyes were eloquent.

Adrien Leroy stood for a little while watching her, till her gentle breathing showed him she had fallen asleep.

"A beautiful child," he said under his breath. "She will be a still more beautiful woman." He sighed. "Poor little thing! Rich and poor, young and old, how soon the world's poison reaches us!" Then, throwing a tiger-skin over the slender body, he turned out the lights and left the room. Summoning Norgate, he gave instructions that his nocturnal visitor should not be disturbed in the morning by the housekeeper, but should be allowed to sleep on. Then he made his way to his own room, not long before the dawn broke.

He had befriended this young human thing as he would have rescued a wounded bird, and with as little thought for the consequences; yet the day was to come when he should look back on this action as one inspired, in very truth, by his guardian angel.

CHAPTER IV

The sun had risen cold and bright when Adrien Leroy awoke, and his first question was for the

child, Jessica. But here a surprise awaited him, for the bird had flown. Norgate and the housekeeper had found the room tenantless. For some inexplicable reasons of her own she must have stolen noiselessly out while the other occupants of the flat were still sleeping.

Adrien made no comment, but proceeded to undergo the labours of the toilet. A cold bath is an excellent tonic; and when Leroy entered the dining-room his calm face bore no traces of his comparatively sleepless night. He sat down to breakfast, waited on by the attentive Norgate, and turned over the heap of letters which lay beside his plate. During his leisured meal he opened them. They were principally invitations, though a few of them were bills--big sums, many of them, for horses, dinner-parties, supper-parties, jewellery, flowers--all the hundred-and-one trifles which were as necessary to a man in his position as light and air.

With a gesture of weariness, he pushed the pile from him, and throwing them carelessly into the drawer of a buhl cabinet, left them until such time as Jasper Vermont could attend to them.

"Where do I dine to-night?" he asked presently.

"At the Marquis of Heathcotes', sir--at eight," replied Norgate, who knew his master's engagements better than did the young man himself.

Leroy nodded absently.

"Order the new motor for four o'clock. I want to see how it goes."

"Yes, sir." The confidential servant coughed and looked slightly embarrassed. "I may mention, sir, that Perrier has sent in his account for the costumes made for the Fancy Dress Carnival at Prince's."

"Refer him to Mr. Vermont," was the calm reply. "I have sir, several times, but he wants to see you personally. It's a matter of discount---"

"Send him to Mr. Vermont. I know nothing of his bill or his discount. Surely you know that, Norgate," Leroy interrupted impatiently.

The discreet Norgate retreated silently; and ten minutes later Leroy started for his morning canter in the Row. Here, meeting and chatting with his numerous friends, the morning passed quickly enough; and when Leroy returned to his chambers again, Norgate was putting the finishing touches to the table already set for lunch.

"Covers for four?" said his master, as he entered the room. "Who is coming?"

"Mr. Shelton, Lord Standon, and Mr. Paxhorn, sir."

"Ah, yes, to be sure," replied the host, who had completely forgotten the invitation. "I thought it was for to-morrow."

The loud hoot of a motor outside told him that his visitors were arriving; and in another moment the door was flung open, and Mortimer Shelton, followed by Lord Standon, entered the room.

"Well, Leroy, old man," exclaimed the former cheerily, as they shook hands, "you look as fresh as if you had awoke with the dawn!"

"Nothing new in that," said Lord Standon, laughing. "Nothing upsets Leroy."

"Except a bad dinner," murmured Algernon Paxhorn, the fourth member of the party, who had just entered the room. He was the latest literary lion, and a fast friend--in more senses than one--of Adrien and the members of his set.

With jest and laughter they took their places at the table.

"Well, how's the steeplechase going?" asked Leroy, turning to Shelton. "What do you think of my 'King Cole'? Does he stand a chance?"

"A chance!" echoed all three.

"The odds are four to one on him, and few takers," announced Shelton.

Lord Standon set down his glass.

"Ah, that was yesterday," he said. "I was there later, and the odds were being lifted. You can lay what you like on him, my dear fellow, and you will have no difficulty in finding takers."

"Oh!" commented Adrien, almost listlessly. "Something better in the field, I suppose? I thought the roan was not to be touched."

"And I, also," said Mortimer Shelton; "I can't understand it! The only new entry was a weedy chestnut, listed by a Yorkshireman in the afternoon. 'Holdfast' they call him."

"He'll require more hustling than holding," returned Paxhorn sarcastically.

Lord Standon finished his wine.

"I'll back the roan while there's a penny to borrow," he said with sublime confidence. "There's nothing can touch him."

"That's what Jasper said," remarked Leroy, "and he ought to know."

"Oh, yes, he's a good judge of a horse," grudgingly admitted Shelton, who frankly hated him; "and of men too--when it pays him."

Leroy's face darkened slightly. Vermont was his friend, and he resented a word spoken against him far more than he would have done one against himself.

"You misjudge him, Shelton," he said briefly.

"Possibly," retorted the other, unabashed. "What you find so fascinating in him I can't imagine. Still, my dear fellow, setting Vermont aside, there can be no two opinions respecting your *chef*. Sarteri is a possession I positively envy you. There is not another *chef* in England that understands *entrées* as he does."

"None," echoed Lord Standon. "Leroy will be famous for one thing, at least, if it's only for his cook."

The meal came to an end, and the table was cleared by the silent Norgate. Cards were produced, and the four were soon deep in the intricacies of bridge. They played high and recklessly; and after little more than an hour, Shelton and Leroy had lost over five hundred pounds.

"A close run, eh, Shelton?" laughed Leroy as he took the notes from an open drawer. "Had they played the knave we should have won. Time for another round?"

"Not I," replied his friend, with a regretful shake of his head. "I'm due at Lady Martingdale's."

"Picture galleries again?" laughed Standon, who knew that lady's weaknesses.

"Yes," Shelton confessed, "and with Miss Martingdale too."

The others laughed significantly.

"Say no more, Mortimer," begged Lord Standon, with mock grief. "Your days are numbered. Already I see myself enacting the part of chief mourner--I should say, best man--if you will allow me."

Shelton rose, laughing good-humouredly.

"Thanks, I'll remember--when it comes to that!"

"You're incorrigible, Stan," said Leroy, as his guests were taking their leave. "You'd better settle down yourself first, and leave Shelton alone."

When they had all gone, the host stood looking at the empty chairs. They seemed, as it were, typical of the weary, empty hours of his life, and for the first time a wholesome distaste of it all swept over him. Day in, day out, an everlasting whirl--wherein he and his companions turned night into day and spent their lives in a hollow round of gaiety, in which scandal, cards, women and wine were chief features. And, at the end! What would be the end?

Then he shook himself from his unaccustomed reverie; Adrien Leroy, the popular idol of fashionable society, was not given long to introspection.

"What next?" he asked himself.

It was Norgate who answered the unspoken query, by announcing that the motor was at the door.

As Adrien descended the stairs, Jasper Vermont entered the hall below him.

"Ah, just in time!" he said with his amicable smile. "You're off to the Park, I suppose?"

"I don't know yet," returned Adrien evasively. "What do you think of the motor?"

"Worthy even of Adrien Leroy," replied Jasper, with the faintest suspicion of a sneer, which, however, passed unperceived by his friend. "By the way," he continued, as they walked to the door together, "I have just left Ada in tears, poor girl; repentance followed closely on repletion. She vows solemnly to refrain from onions and patchouli for the future, and begs for the return of your favour."

Leroy smiled gravely at his companion's flippant tones.

"You make an eloquent advocate; but there's little need for pity in her case; her tastes are natural to her class. I was to blame for not realising it before; but she'll be well set up for the future," he

said, and forthwith dismissed the subject from his mind. "But Jasper, what of this chestnut entered the steeplechase?"

Vermont's dark, restless eyes dropped for a moment; then he said lightly:

"Do you mean that Yorkshire screw? Oh, he is all right! Can't run the course, I should say, let alone the last rise. Nothing can touch the roan. If I weren't a beggar, I'd cover 'King Cole's' back with guineas."

"Do it for me," said Leroy carelessly, as he settled into the waiting Daimler, which was his latest purchase.

"What, another thousand?" asked Jasper almost eagerly.

"Two, if you like," said his friend, as the chauffeur started the car, and with a smile to Vermont he took his departure.

Vermont stood looking after him, his gaze almost still in its fixity; then he turned and passed up the stairs. In the dining-room he found Norgate, clearing away the cards and glasses, in no very amiable humour.

"Has there been a luncheon party?" queried Mr. Vermont.

"Yes, sir," answered Norgate aggrievedly; "Mr. Shelton, Lord Standon and Mr. Paxhorn."

"And bridge?" murmured Mr. Vermont inquiringly.

"Yes, sir; and from what I heard, I believe Mr. Leroy lost."

"Ah," commented the other softly, "I fear Mr. Leroy always does lose, doesn't he?"

"He's made me lose my time to-day with his fads and fancies," grumbled Norgate, removing the folding card-table; "what with bringing in street wenches at one o'clock in the morning; and they mustn't be disturbed, if you please."

Jasper Vermont was instantly on the alert. He was not above encouraging a servant to gossip, and, although Norgate was not given to err in this direction as a rule, upon the present occasion his grievance got the better of him, and Vermont was soon in possession of such slight facts as could be gleaned.

CHAPTER V

Johann Wilfer, Jessica's adopted father, was German by birth, and the son of an innkeeper in one of the tiny villages on the banks of the Rhine. In his youth he had studied as an art-student at Munich; but, finally, by his idle and dissolute behaviour, so angered the authorities that he had been compelled to return home. Tiring of the rural life there, he finally obtained from his parents sufficient money to come to London to try his fortune.

Here he soon obtained some work from the smaller art dealers, which enabled him to live in comparative comfort, and had it not been for his unreliability and his love of drink he might have been seen to be a good artist.

Wilfer was a handsome young fellow in those days, and while on one of his wandering tours in Kent he met and won the heart of a simple little country girl, named Lucy Goodwin. Lucy believed her lover to be everything that was good, and, trusted him even to the extent of her betrayal; so that, under some pretence, young Wilfer was able to entice the girl to Canterbury, where, a few weeks later, he deserted her.

She was the only daughter of a widower, a clerk in the employ of a country bank, who, broken-hearted at his daughter's ruin, threw up his situation, changed his name to that of George Harker, and fled to London with his beloved child. Here he found it extremely difficult to obtain work. His savings soon evaporated, and alas! further trouble was in store for him; for one afternoon a smooth-faced gentleman appeared at their quiet lodgings. This was none other than Jasper Vermont, who in a long private interview with the unhappy Harker informed him that he had heard of Lucy's escapade, and threatened to proclaim her shame, if Mr. Harker failed to comply with a proposition he was about to make to him. The business which he suggested was one entirely abhorrent to the ex-bank clerk; but with money running short, and the thought of his daughter's misery should her secret be revealed, what could the father do but submit?

The result of this interview was that, a month or two later, a new moneylending firm sprang up in

a narrow street in the city, under the title of Harker's Ltd., and none of the numerous clients who patronised it ever recognised that the manager, Mr. Harker, was speaking the literal truth when he repeatedly asserted his own impotence in the business. Every one believed the story to be a fictitious one, invented to assist him in his extortions.

Time passed on, and Lucy's pretty face and modest ways, perhaps her very sadness, which clung to her in never-ending remorse, caught the heart of a simple-minded man, one John Ashford. He was a flourishing grocer in a village on the banks of the Thames, and was then staying in London on a visit. After a hard struggle with herself the poor girl returned his love, and ventured to become his wife.

Wilfer, from inquiries made by Mr. Harker, was supposed to be dead. None, she thought, knew her secret except her father, for Lucy believed that Vermont had employed Mr. Harker out of friendship and sympathy, and did not know until long after her marriage that she, and therefore her husband, were in his power. So she ventured to grasp the happiness held out to her, thus strengthening the chain which bound her father and herself in slavery to Jasper Vermont's will. For if they feared disclosure before, how much more did they dread it now, when Lucy was married to a man who prided himself upon his good name and untarnished respectability!

Johann Wilfer, however, was not dead, nor had he left London. He had become a member of a gang of ingenious rascals, who lived by imitating the less known gems of the old masters, and palming them off on the credulous public and wealthy collectors as genuine. The impostures were very cleverly manipulated, and quite a little system was instituted to bring them to perfection. Mr. Wilfer's part of the undertaking was "toning"; that is, bringing to the imitations the necessary mistiness and discoloration supposed to be produced by age.

He did very well at this business; so well, indeed, that he took a house in Cracknell Court, Soho, and if he could have restrained himself from the drinking of beer and spirits he would have been in comfortable circumstances.

This perpetual intoxication eventually made its mark upon Mr. Wilfer's countenance, and contorted his face into a caricature--with its mottled skin and bleary eyes--of the good looks which had won Lucy Goodwin's heart in former times. His language had also degenerated as well as his looks. All trace of German accent had been carefully obliterated, in order that no suspicion should be aroused when selling a faked picture. He played the part of a Cockney so frequently and so well that that particular accent seemed, as it were, to be his mother-tongue.

As the years went by even the gang became tired of his habitual intoxication, and only occasionally gave him employment, so that he turned his attention to scenery painting for the stage. In this way, when engaged at the Rockingham Theatre, he met Martha Feltham, Ada Lester's dresser, and by means of boasting of his wealth finally persuaded her to marry him. It was in this manner that Jessica had first come under his sway.

When Ada found that her sister would never recover from the mental shock inflicted by Jasper Vermont when he told her that their marriage was illegal, she had made arrangements to get the child out of the house. Naturally the little girl was an eyesore and an encumbrance to her; especially as Julia--blissfully ignorant that she herself was the mother--was always worrying her sister as to the reason of Jessica's presence. Accordingly, when Ada, by reason of her improved position and higher salary, moved away from the Bloomsbury lodgings into a house of her own, she gave the child over to the care of her dresser, Martha, now Mrs. Wilfer, and had always paid regularly for her board and keep.

Mr. Wilfer did not object to this addition to his income, though he still worked occasionally for the picture gang; and it was on one of their jobs that he came within reach of Jasper Vermont.

One day he had been sent to play the usual proceedings to Mr. George Harker, presuming, naturally enough, that being a moneylender he was rich, and hearing that he had a liking for "old masters."

Johann Wilfer saw Mr. Harker, and notwithstanding the changes which time brings to us all, and the entire transformation of name and surroundings, recognised him as the father of the girl whom he had once so cruelly deceived.

The old man never having heard the name of Lucy's betrayer--for she had purposely kept it from him--knew nothing of his visitor, and eventually purchased the picture, after consulting with Jasper, who discovered the imposition at a glance, but saw in the impostor a possible new tool.

He instructed Harker to obtain a written guarantee of the genuineness of the picture, and Wilfer, being half intoxicated at the time, for once forgot his usual caution, and gave the required pledge. With that in his possession, Jasper Vermont had Wilfer in his power, and only left him undisturbed because he saw no present opportunity of using him.

But when he wanted him he knew that he had only to exert the authority which the warrant gave him, and Johann Wilfer would be his obedient servant, as many better men were already.

The picture he intended--through Mr. Harker--to compel one of the firm's wealthy clients to take as part of a loan, a well-known trick of the worst class of moneylenders.

Quite unconscious of the sword that hung over him, Mr. Wilfer, after a bout of hard drinking, went home, and it was in his drunken frenzy that he had struck Jessica. She, bruised and frightened, fled into the streets, where Adrien Leroy found her.

Left to himself--for his wife was away for a day or two--Mr. Wilfer fell into a deep slumber, in which he remained for the rest of the evening.

Early for him, on the following morning he was roused by a loud knocking at his front door. Now thoroughly sobered, he hurriedly dressed, stumbled down the rickety staircase, and opened the door, to himself confronted by Miss Ada Lester. Her face was flushed, and the angry light Jasper Vermont had called up by his sneers at her vulgarity the previous evening still shone in her dark eyes.

"Where is the gal?" she asked abruptly.

"The gal!" he repeated, staring at her in stolid amazement.

"Yes--Jessica!" retorted Miss Lester, her jewels flashing in a chance ray of sunlight which had found its way through the dingy court. "Where is she?"

"She is not at home," said Mr. Wilfer. "She and Martha 'ave gone out for the day to Greenwich. If you'd wrote a-sayin' you was goin' to call I'd have made 'em stay till you came."

Miss Lester looked at him keenly.

"If you don't believe me," said Wilfer, "go upstairs and look at her room."

Ada ran past him up the stairs, and quickly returned.

"It's locked," she said.

"Of course; she's quite the lady--keeps the keys 'erself," sneered Johann. "Look 'ere, 'ere's her hat and coat; there's one of 'er boots, so she must be comin' back afore long."

Miss Lester appeared convinced. She breathed more freely, as if a weight had been taken off her mind.

"Here," she said, putting some gold coins in his hand, "is something to make up for my troubling you. But I was real anxious to know if everything was right with the gal."

Wilfer--debauched and demoralised by drink--was disposed to look at the worst side of things; and from this point of view thought she meant the reverse of what she said.

"Would you be very much cut up," he said slyly, "if she wasn't able to trouble you any more or answer awkward questions, miss?"

She turned on him with a fierceness that made him recoil.

"If anything happens to that gal," she shouted, "I'll turn the police on you. For, mind my words--I mean them--I shouldn't have cared yesterday very much if I had learnt she was dead, but now I want her. Do you hear? I want her, and you take care she's alive and ready when I come for her."

Then, without vouchsafing any further information, she flounced away, leaving Mr. Wilfer staring blankly after her, and wishing for once that he had stayed his hand, instead of driving the girl into the miseries and dangers of the streets.

Little did Wilfer or Miss Lester imagine that Jessica had found safety and refuge in Adrien Leroy's chambers.

CHAPTER VI

Love is the universal epidemic, effectual in all climes and conditions; there is no inoculation that will secure exemption from its influence; only given a warm human heart, and there is the natural susceptibility.

So it is from high to low. The little blind god takes no count of difference in fortune or rank in life. Dynasties fall, thrones totter to the ground, crowns tumble to dust on kingly heads; but love rules and lives on, immortal, triumphant, unconquerable.

Jessica had never heard of Romeo and Juliet, of Faust and Marguerite, or King Cophetua and the

beggar maid. All she knew was that she loved, was conscious only that for a kind word from the lips of the man who had befriended her, for a glance from those dark eyes; she would gladly have given up all the other glories the world could have put before her.

Poor Jessica, how sweet and yet how bitter had been the awakening in that gilded cabinet. How sweet to find herself there in reality, and not only in a dream; how bitter to know that she had no right there and that she must go!

That splendid golden room, with, all the wonderful undreamt-of things, was not for her. She looked down at her wet, dirt-stained dress, at her worn, ragged shoes, at her cold, red hands, and shuddered. She had no right there. Should she take advantage of his goodness to remain and sully the beauty of his palace--for to her it seemed little less--by her unworthy presence? No, woman-child as she was, she shrank from the thought; then caught up her hat and arose, resolute.

"He will think me ungrateful," she murmured with half-closed eyes. "He will think--no matter, he will forget me before half an hour. I will go back to Johann and chance the beating. This is no place for one like me."

With a little graceful gesture she bent over the mantel and pressed her lips to the spot where Adrien had rested his arm; then with noiseless steps she stole from the room.

The sun was breaking through the morning mist, but she shivered as its warm rays touched her, and with a weary sigh turned towards Soho.

It was all over, the little patch of fairy-light in the dreary darkness of her existence, and as she reminded herself of this fact she shuddered again.

Looking back, she remembered but little beyond the days she had passed with Johann and his shrewish wife. This strange adventure had been the first ray of sunshine in her poor existence. No wonder that she was unhappy at parting with it.

Suddenly as she passed into Oxford Street she stopped, struck with an idea that sent her blood flowing into her pale cheek, flushing it into living beauty. Her large eyes grew thoughtful and full of a strange light.

"Why should I go back to Johann?" she murmured. "Can't I follow him--the kind gentleman? Can't I be his servant?"

The answer came quick enough from her inner consciousness. No, she must go back. Of what service could she be to such a man as Adrien? There was nothing for it but to return to Cracknell Court. So, wearily, but still with that grace which Southern blood bestows, even though it runs in the veins of a gipsy, or such a street waif as Jessica, she walked on and reached Johann Wilfer's house.

Jessica knew that the man was not her father, but she knew little more than that. She had never asked him or Martha for any information about her parentage--indeed, had scarcely wished for any; it was enough for her than Johann gave her sufficient bread to keep life within her.

That gentleman was, at the moment of her arrival, absent, engaged on business concerning the sale of the faked picture to Mr. Harker, and Martha was still away; so Jessica, pausing at the door of the living-room to ascertain that it was empty, softly ascended the stairs leading to the garret which served as her special apartment.

It was as small and as squalid as all the other rooms in that crowded court; but it was different from them in one respect--it was clean.

A miserable chair bedstead of the cheapest kind, covered with a threadbare quilt; a chair with the back broken off; a washstand on three legs, and a triangular piece of silvered glass, the remains of a cheap mirror, composed the furniture.

This peculiarly-shaped piece of common glass reflected the girl's beautiful face in all manner of distorted forms. The quilt just kept her from perishing with the cold. But yet the mirror, the bed, and the room itself were precious to her, for they were her own. Beyond its sacred threshold Johann or Martha never passed. She had a key to it; and to enter now she unlocked the door.

After the luxury of Adrien's rooms the mean quality of her own apartment struck the girl more forcibly than usual, and sinking upon the bed, she covered her face with her hands and gave way to a flood of tears. But the weakness did not last long; and after a moment of two, with a sudden gesture, almost Italian in its intensity, she flung back her head and rose from her crouching position.

"I will not think of the beautiful place. I will not think of him, she told herself passionately.

"But oh! will he be sorry that I ran away, or will he laugh, and ask that proud servant to see that I haven't stolen anything?"

She shook her head mournfully at her own distorted reflection in the cracked mirror, then she

sighed and went downstairs.

Johann had returned, wonderful to relate, still fairly sober; but this was probably due to the necessity of maintaining at least the appearance of sobriety in his transaction on behalf of the gang concerning the sale of the picture.

He was counting the coins on the table, some of them gold--for Jessica's quick eyes caught the shimmer of it--and he looked up half fiercely, half contemptuously as the girl entered.

"Well, where have been? You're like a cat or a policeman--never to be found when you're wanted. There was a fine lady came to see you this morning--a real swell, my girl." He laughed coarsely. "But of course, you were out of the way. Where had you got to?"

"Anywhere, nowhere," replied Jessica, who did not fear him when he was sober, though she hated him always.

"Ah, that's the style! The swell lady ought to have heard you talk like that. She'd say I was bringing you up well. Come here and let's have a look at you."

Jessica did not move, but stared at him steadily.

"What! You won't come?" he said with a grin. "Well, there's something for your obstinacy, you little mule!"

He flung a half-crown across to her, and Jessica took it up, then looked him questioningly in the face.

"You're thinking I'm mighty generous, eh? So I am, my girl--foolishly generous." He laughed mockingly, "Well, what do you say if all the lot's for you, eh?"

"All for me!" repeated the girl, stopping short in her task of making the mantelshelf neat; "all for me!"

"Yes, when you get it, little cat! All for you, indeed! No! it's for me; and I've a good mind to take the half-crown back. A fool and his money's soon parted; but he's more idiotic to part with other people's. I'm going out. I shall want some grub when I get back--'arf a pound of steak, an' a pot of porter, an' don't forget the gin. Mind you remember now, or I'll break every bone in your body." With which forcible admonition the man shuffled out.

After a few hours he returned, not blindly drunk, but spiteful, ill-tempered, and stupidly brutal.

About the same time on that day Adrien Leroy was making his way in the new car through the crowded thoroughfare of Oxford Street.

"Soho? Yus, sir. Crack'ell Court, fust turnin' on the left. I'll show yer, sir," piped the ragged urchin, whose heartfelt interest Leroy had purchased, along with his query, by means of a shilling.

Cracknell Court was small, evil-smelling, and teeming with children. Bidding the chauffeur wait at the entrance to the court, Adrien, to whom dust, noises, and evil smells were things of absolute pain, entered one of the dens and asked for Mr. Wilfer.

"There he is," said another urchin; and Leroy turned to face that individual, who was leaning against an open door.

"Am I speaking to Mr. Johann Wilfer?" he asked courteously.

"You are," returned Wilfer, taking the begrimed pipe from his mouth, and staring with bloodshot eyes at the handsome, high-bred face before him.

"Can you tell me if a young girl named Jessica returned to you safely this morning?" Leroy enquired.

"My niece, Jess, d'ye mean?" replied Wilfer, eyeing him suspiciously. "Ain't seen 'er fer months; run away last June, after 'elping 'erself to some of my cash, an' ain't been back since. 'Sides, what's it got to do with you, Guv'nor, I'd like to know? You mind yer own bus'ness."

He leered drunkenly at Leroy, who turned away with a look of disgust. He knew how useless it was to expect truth from such a quarter.

As the gentleman stepped out into the dirty court and returned to his car Johann Wilfer blinked his eyes in relief; then with an oath he stumbled up the rickety stairs into the living-room, and confronted Jessica, who was standing near the window.

"So that's yer little game, is it?" he said with a sneer; "you're goin' in for swells right away, are yer, my gal? Got your name as pat as a poll-parrot. Knows all my private business, I dessay; I'll

break every bone in yer body!"

He stumbled towards her where she stood--her face still transfigured with joy at the sound of her benefactor's voice--and made a sudden grab at her hair. But, alert and lithe as a leopardess, she bounded over the table, and slipped past him down the staircase, from the top of which he launched forth a long volley of curses.

Quivering and shaking, both with fear of Wilfer's violence and her sense of injury at his denial of her presence to Leroy, Jessica ran, as fast as her frail body would permit her, through the intricate smaller streets and passages which abound in the Soho district. Having gone far enough, in her opinion, to be fairly safe from any danger of Wilfer's pursuit, she stopped to consider whether she should endeavour to find Leroy.

"After all," she thought, "perhaps it is best as it is. He would give me money, or perhaps a few kind words, and only make me long for him more. Let him go, believing Johann's falsehoods."

As she walked wearily along dim remembrances of earlier days thronged her brain; of two women--one whom she knew she had called Auntie--and who had treated her kindly enough, before Johann had got her into his power. Mingled with these thoughts came those of the man who had befriended her and even sought her out this day. When she remembered how he had rescued her from cold, hunger, and the dangers of the streets her eyes filled with tears of gratitude. Yet, though knowing how quickly he would aid her were she but to return to the beautiful room from which she had fled that very morning, she could not bring herself to seek his charity or ask his pity. She realised well enough that one such as she could never hope to win a look of love from him; but like the moth that hovers round the flame which brings it danger she nevertheless determined to see him again.

With this object in view she slowly wended her way to Jermyn Court, wherein was the room in which she had supped and slept so delightfully. Afterwards she thought she would try to gain some work that would at least secure food and lodging, however poor, where she could be safe from the cruelty of Wilfer; surely in all London there was something she could do.

When darkness came, worn out by watching and waiting in vain for Adrien, she again found herself without a home and without shelter; so, crouching on a doorstep, as she had done the previous evening, overcome with fatigue, she fell asleep.

In the course of the night a dark-robed woman, passing on the usual round of duty assigned to her, stopped and looked at her. She was one of the band of Good Samaritan Sisters of Mercy established in some of our London suburbs, who seek out the helpless and downtrodden in the race of life--with healing in their hands and pity in their hearts--striving to raise them up from their hopeless position to something better. She stopped, bent down, and, drawing her veil aside, looked closely at the motionless face. Then she sighed and turned her head away.

"So beautiful! So young! Can it be possible? Sister, sister!"

Jessica awoke at the gentle touch, and sprang to her feet.

"Johann! Don't strike me," she exclaimed, with her eyes half closed. "I----"

"My poor girl, no one shall beat you. Will you come with me?"

"With you?" repeated Jessica, now fully awake, but still eyeing the Sister with some suspicion. "Where? Not far?"

"No, not far. But why do you say that? Is there any one you particularly wish to be near?"

"No," replied Jessica, adding to herself, as the sister of Mercy took her hand, "but she shall not take me far away from him."

"A roof of thatch is better than that of heaven," is an old Spanish proverb, and means, doubtless, that the poorest accommodation is better than none, or that which the streets provide. Jessica, clinging to the Sister of Mercy's succouring hand, was gently led from the silence of the streets to the still greater silence of an attic in a quiet byway.

Here, seated by the remains of a small fire in a narrow grate, she watched with awkward interest, that was much like indifference, the efforts of her rescuer to revive the dying embers. Soup was warmed for her, but for a time she refused to take it.

"I am not hungry," she said. "Only tired--so tired! Why did you wake me, lady?"

"I awoke you because you were unhappy, and it was dangerous for one so young as you to lie asleep in the streets," replied the meek-eyed woman. "But you must not call me 'lady'; I am not a lady. Call me 'Sister.'"

"But you are not my sister," said Jessica petulantly. "I haven't any sister or brother, or father or mother."

"Poor thing!" said the woman, who by this time had made up a bed, plain enough it is true, but

luxurious after the cold doorsteps, and she now helped Jessica to undress. "Poor thing, you are quite cold; and what are all these bruises? Ah! why will men be so cruel, when Heaven is so kind?"

"I don't know," said Jessica, who took the question as directed to herself. "I don't know anything. Besides, all men ain't cruel. *He* wasn't; he was kind--oh, so kind!"

"He--whom?" said the Sister. Then, as the girl did not reply, she looked hard at her and sighed again.

"Now you will sleep," she said, "Will you kiss me?"

With the impulsiveness of girlhood Jessica threw her arms round the linen-banded neck and kissed the Sister's pale face.

"Good-night," she said.

The Sister smoothed the coarse pillow, covered her up, and went softly from the room.

When Jessica awoke the woman was again beside her with a cup of tea, and some bread-and-butter. But the girl refused to eat.

"I am not hungry. I am not tired now, either, and I will go."

The Sister put her hand on the girl's arm. "Not yet," she said. "Where have you to go?"

"Nowhere," Jessica answered listlessly.

"Then stay with me," said the woman kindly. "See"--she brought a basket to the bedside--"here's some work. I will teach you to do this, and we will live together. Will you not stay?"

Jessica looked at the work, and silently nodded acquiescence. But nevertheless she sighed. To a nature such as hers freedom was life itself, and she was bartering it away for mere food. Besides, how could she now follow the one who had been so kind to her?

But she stayed, and patiently worked all day, striving earnestly to catch the knack of the needle, and emulating the tireless industry of the Sister, who worked thus during daylight that she might pursue her mission of mercy and succour at night. Thus passed some days, and then Jessica's blood grew restless; the narrow room seemed to her stifling and unendurable, and she pined for the open air, as a caged blackbird longs for its native woods.

The longing grew so irresistible that at last she succumbed to it; and one day, finding herself alone, she threw down the piece of work on which she was employed, and rising, snatched up her weather-stained hat.

"I can't stay," she sobbed; "I can't breathe here! I must go, or I shall die. I'll leave before she comes back. Oh! I wish she had not been so kind to me. I feel a worthless, miserable, ungrateful creature!"

Then she stole down the stairs, very much as she had slipped away from Adrien's residence, and gained the streets anew.

CHAPTER VII

It was the night of the great ball at Lady Merivale's town house. A Blue Hungarian Band was playing dreamily the waltz of the season, to the accompaniment of light laughter and gaily tripping feet. The scent of roses filled the air. Masses of their great pink blooms lurked in every small nook and corner; while in the centre of the room, half-hidden by them, a fountain sent its silver spray into the heated air.

If wealth and luxury alone could bring happiness, then surely Eveline Merivale should have been the most envied woman in the world. A renowned beauty, a leader of fashion, with every wish and ambition gratified--save the one which, at present, the chief object of her life--to enslave and retain, as her exclusive property, Adrien Leroy.

Her husband, the Earl of Merivale, she regarded as a necessary encumbrance, inevitable to the possession of the famous Merivale diamonds. His hobby was farming, and he detested Society; though quite content that his wife should be made queen so long as he was left in peace with his shorthorns.

Certainly Eveline Merivale was not in love with her husband; but, on the other hand, neither was she in love with Adrien Leroy. It simply added a zest to her otherwise monotonous round of amusements to imagine that she was; and it pleased her vanity to correspond in cypher, through the medium of the *Morning Post*, though every member of her set might have read the flippant messages if put in an open letter. There was a spice of intrigue, too, in the way in which she planned meetings at their mutual friends' houses, or beneath the trees of Brierly Park, or at Richmond.

Not for worlds would her ladyship have risked a scandal. She prized her position, and loved her diamonds far better than she was ever likely to love any human being under the sun. Still, it was the fashion to have one special favourite; and it was a great thing to have conquered the handsome and popular Adrien Leroy. It was little wonder, therefore, that, when midnight had struck and still Leroy was absent from her side, Eveline Merivale beneath the calm conventional smile, was secretly anxious and inclined to be angry.

She was looking her best to-night; and although she had already been surfeited with compliments from duke to subaltern, she yet longed to hear one other voice praise her appearance. There was, indeed, every reason why Lady Merivale should be lauded as the greatest beauty of her time, for she carried all before her by the sheer force of her personality. Dazzlingly fair, with hair of a bronze Titian hue, which clustered in great waves about her forehead; her eyes of a deep, lustrous blue, shading almost to violet. To-night she would have borne off the palm of beauty from any Court in the world, for her dress was a creation of Paquin, and enhanced to perfection her delicate colouring, which needed no artificial aids.

Diamonds glistened round her perfect throat, upon her head rested a magnificent tiara of the same stones, her hands flashed as if touched with living fire. She might have stood as a figure of Undine--as beautiful and as soulless.

All around her the little band of courtiers thronged ever-changing, and passing on to the ball-room as others eagerly took their place. Half-past twelve struck, and she grew more impatient; the blue eyes sparkled frostily, the red lips became more tightly set.

"Lady Merivale looks riled," Mortimer Shelton said to his partner as they passed her. "You can see that by the sweetness of the smile with which she has just favoured Hadley. She wishes him anywhere--I know. Funny thing about you ladies! the madder you are with one poor dev--fellow, the sweeter and deadlier you are to the rest of us."

His partner laughed; she was a bright little brunette, flushed with the dance, and thoroughly happy.

"Why should we wear our hearts upon our sleeves for cynics such as you to peck at?" she replied. "The art of dissembling is one of our few privileges. But do you think the Countess is angry? She is so beautiful."

"Marvellous!" exclaimed the cynic, raising his eyebrows. "Dear Lady Chetwold, is it possible that I hear one beautiful woman praise another's looks?"

The little lady flushed.

"It would be a greater marvel still if you men gave us credit for just a *little* generosity. But, tell me Mr. Shelton, where is Adrien Leroy?"

"My dear lady," said Shelton, with a wicked twinkle in his eyes, "if I knew that Lady Merivale would be down on me like the proverbial load of bricks. He was to have been here; but his movements are as uncertain as her ladyship's smiles. See, she has fairly extinguished poor Hadley--drowned in sweetness!"

"You are a horror," laughed his companion as the waltz came to an end. "I shall be quite afraid of you in the future--I'd no idea you were so cynical."

"I could never be cynical with *you*," he said gallantly. "By the way, have you seen Prince Pfowsky to-night?"

"Yes," said Lady Chetwold, "I am engaged to him for the next dance--if he remembers it. He is always so forgetful."

"Put not your trust in princes," quoted Shelton. "But if his Highness should be so ungrateful, perhaps you will allow me the pleasure----"

"Certainly not," she retorted brightly; "Cæsar or nothing!"

"And here he comes," laughed Mortimer; adding softly, as the Prince came up to claim his partner, "and here is some one even more interesting--look."

Lady Chetwold followed the direction of his gaze and saw Adrien Leroy advancing up the rose-decked room. As usual, his appearance created something like a stir, for he was popular with men and women alike, and no smart gathering seemed quite complete without him. But the

young man appeared totally unconscious of the interest he was evoking as he bent over his hostess's hand with a murmured greeting, then turned to make his bow to the Prince, who, as firm an admirer as the rest of Society, had paused to exchange a word before the dance commenced.

Adrien sank on to the velvet lounge beside the Countess.

"Don't scold me, *belle amie*," he said in his soft tones; "lay the blame on Mr. Paxhorn. I dined with him at the club. You know what Paxhorn is--there was simply no getting away. But, now, have you saved me a dance?"

"You do not deserve one," she said, all the irritation melting beneath the magic of his smile and the music of his voice.

"It's a mercy," he retorted lightly, "that one does not get all one's deserts in this world!"

"I saved you the next," she said, giving him her programme. "You see, I am as foolishly forgiving as ever."

"You are gracious and sweet!" he murmured in her ear. "How could you ever be otherwise?"

The soft phrase passed unreprieved.

"You have been down to Barminster again?" she inquired.

"Yes," he replied, as he settled himself more comfortably.

"You have been very attentive to your father lately," she said a little suspiciously; "I thought filial affection was not the Leroy's strong point."

"Nor is it," he said with a laugh; "but it is business, my dear Eveline, odious business, into which Jasper inveigles me."

"I thought Mr. Vermont was the new machine that was to save you trouble?"

"Yes, that's what I thought," was the languid reply. "But one has to turn the handle, even of machines. There are signatures, and leases, and Heaven knows what besides."

"How is Lord Barminster?" she inquired.

"Splendid."

"Lady Constance also well?"--with the slightest tinge of restraint in her voice.

"Yes," he answered indifferently; adding, "but you haven't asked after 'King Cole.'"

"Ah, no, but you would have told me at first if anything had been wrong with him."

Leroy smiled. He knew that to be true.

"He will win, you think?" she asked anxiously.

"Oh, yes!" was the careless reply. "Vermont says there is nothing to touch him."

The countess raised her eyebrows.

"You trust this Vermont with a great deal, Adrien. Your horses, your wine, and your legal business. He must be a wonderful man."

"Yes," he answered confidently. "Jasper's a treasure. Nothing comes amiss to him. I should be in my grave if I had to face half the worries he wrestles with daily. Come," he added, as the first bars of the new waltz floated from the gallery; and with a sigh of enjoyment she rose for the promised dance.

"No one's step suits me like yours," she breathed, when they paused for rest. "Adrien, shall I back 'King Cole' for another two hundred?"

The two sentences were, perhaps, rather incongruous, but curiously characteristic of her ladyship; for, in addition to a natural love of intrigue, she had a partiality for betting on the turf and speculation on 'Change--both, of course, *sub rosa*.

"Oh, yes," he said, as they started again. "Jasper has put two thousand more of mine on to-day. There he is," he broke off, as the sleek, carefully dressed figure of Mr. Vermont entered the ball-room.

"Talk of angels," murmured Lady Merivale, but with a glance implying that she meant a being very far removed from that celestial grade.

Jasper Vermont did not excel at dancing; yet, strange to say, he was invariably invited to every

big function of the season. Indeed, the hostesses of Mayfair would almost as soon have omitted the name of Adrien Leroy himself as that of his friend.

It was difficult to explain this other than on account of his engaging amiability. Probably Vermont would have transformed the famous advice of Uriah Heep to "Always be obliging." Certainly, no pleasanter company could be found, whether for man or woman; whatever the hour, however mixed the company, Jasper Vermont had always a smile, a jest, or a new and piquant scandal. In the smoking-room he would rival Mortimer Shelton in apparently good-natured cynicism. In a duchess's boudoir he would enliven the afternoon tea hour with the neatest of epigrams and the spiciest slander of her Grace's dearest friend. Nothing came amiss to him; as Adrien Leroy had once said, he was "a walking encyclopædia."

Yet with all Mr. Vermont's charm of manner, he could resent, smiling still, an impertinence or a snub, and deal back a tongue thrust that would effectually put his opponent *hors de combat*. Truly of him might be quoted, "I smile, and murder while I smile."

To-night he was apparently enjoying the gay scene before him. His sharp black eyes were like little snakes, darting here, there, and everywhere, while he wagged his smooth head to the time of the music, as if in keen enjoyment.

Mortimer Shelton noticed him; "gloating over his future victims," he commented, almost audibly, as he and his partner passed close to where he was standing. Vermont, however, apparently did not hear him, but continued to smile, amiably as the dancers whirled by.

It was nearly daybreak when the carriages drew up outside the great house to take the guests to their respective homes; and, having successfully steered a young marchioness into her electric brougham, Leroy found himself standing close to Vermont, not far from where his own motor awaited him.

"They call this pleasure, Jasper," he said, almost scornfully, watching the struggling, aristocratic crowd with a half-contemptuous smile on his lips. "Why, it's hard work. They fight and push for the sake of a few hours spent in a crowded, poisoned room; and there's no prophet to rise up and proclaim it madness."

"No," laughed Vermont cynically; "prophets nowadays have no liking for being stoned; and, after all, life would be unendurable, were it not for its pleasures. Let me remind you that it is nearly four o'clock, and you are due at Lord Standon's rooms."

With a sigh Leroy turned and jumped into the motor, followed by his faithful squire; and the powerful car hooted its way through the twilight of the dawn.

They reached Lord Standon's chambers, to find the finish of a theatre party. The room was filled with beautiful women, mostly stars of the musical comedy stage, including Ada Lester, who was evidently on her best behaviour.

Here, amidst light and laughter, the goddess of pleasure was being fêted by her youthful worshippers, and none appeared a more eager votary than Adrien Leroy. Yet, as he stood, champagne glass in hand, propounding the toast of the evening--or rather morning, for the dawn was breaking in the sky--there was none to tell him of the impending cloud of treachery that hung over his head. None who dare warn him to beware of the friendship of--Mr. Jasper Vermont.

CHAPTER VIII

High up in the woods of Buckinghamshire stood Barminster Castle, so old that one-half of its pile dated back to Norman times; while the whole, with the wings and parts added by the successive generations of Leroy's, might have passed for a royal palace by reason of its splendour and magnificence.

Needless to say, the Leroy's were proud of their ancestral home, for there had been Leroy's since William the Conqueror had calmly annexed the land on which it now stood, and had given it to his faithful baron, Philip Le Roi. But they valued still more the love and respect of their people, who in hamlet and village surrounded the castle as naturally as did the woods.

Yet the present Lord Barminster had done little to keep the flame of loyalty alight in the hearts of his tenants. He was an old man, nearing seventy, tall, white-headed and haughty--every feature clear-cut, as if carved from marble. Few people had ever seen the stern lines of that face relax in light-hearted laughter since the death of his young wife, which had occurred a few years after the birth of Adrien. None, outside his immediate family circle, had ever known the curtness of his speech to be softened unless in sarcasm; and his habitual expression was one of haughty

tolerance.

His friends feared him, even as they respected him, for if he had the faults of his race, he also possessed its great virtue--justice. No man, prince or peasant, friend or foe, ever appealed to Lord Barminster for that in vain.

Now, in the clear brightness of the spring morning he paced to and fro on the south terrace.

Behind him glittered the long French windows of the morning-room, one of which stood open, revealing the luxury of the room beyond; the table with its silver and delicate china service, and the purple hangings of the walls.

Presently he stopped in his stroll and turned his stern eyes towards the landscape stretching beneath him. Through the confusion of the dark woods there lay a long line of turf, cut here and there by formidable hedges, and divided by a streak of glittering silver, which was in reality a dangerous stream--indeed, higher up it became a torrent--forming the final obstacle of the Barminster steeple-course. All the Leroy's had been fond of horses. The Barminster stables had sent many a satin-coated colt to carry off the gold cup; and this race-course had been carefully kept and preserved by the family for many generations.

While he stood gazing on it a light footstep sounded behind him, and a slender hand was laid on his shoulder. He turned slowly, and with a kind of kingly courtesy kissed the long white fingers.

"You are early as usual, Constance," he said approvingly.

Lady Constance Tremaine smiled as she turned with him and walked along the mosaic pavement of the terrace. She was little more than a girl, with a slim, graceful figure, and clad in a simple white morning gown, which served to enhance her youthful beauty. Her face was a pure oval, with clear-cut features and an exquisitely curved, sensitive mouth, while her grey-blue eyes gazed from beneath their thick lashes with a calm serenity that bred faith and confidence in those who looked upon them. Crowned with a wealth of pale golden hair, together with her delicate complexion, she looked as if she had stepped from one of the old Florentine pictures of the saints.

As the two so typical of youth and age stood side by side in the clear morning light, the resemblance between them was marked. Indeed, they were related, for the Tremaines were a distant branch of the Leroy family, and the same proud blood ran in their veins. Lady Constance had been brought up in the Barminster household, and Adrien had grown to regard her in the light of a loved and trusted sister; but, as yet, nothing more.

"Won't you come in to breakfast?" she said, as they reached the end of the terrace. "Aunt Penelope is not coming down; her nerves are bad this morning."

Miss Penelope Leroy, Lord Barminster's only sister, was not strictly speaking Constance's aunt, merely a distant cousin; but as a child Constance had been accustomed to call her so, and the habit had grown up with her.

Lord Barminster smiled grimly.

"I advised her to let the cucumber alone last night," was his only comment as he turned towards the breakfast room.

Constance smiled too, for she knew that when Miss Penelope complained of her nerves, it was in reality nothing but a case of indigestion.

"How bright the course looks this morning!" she said, with a charitable wish to change the subject, for Lord Barminster was apt at times to wax caustic over his sister's small weaknesses.

"Yes," he said grimly; "like all things dangerous, it is pleasant to the eye. I hate that strip of green--it is the grave of many a Leroy's best hope. The turf has always been a fatal snare to our race. But, come," he broke off, "let us go in. Thank goodness, Adrien arrives to-day."

"To-day?" repeated Lady Constance, a delicate flush rising to her sweet face. "I thought he was not going to arrive until the morning of the race."

"The race is to-morrow, but he comes to-day," answered Lord Barminster. "I had a note from him last night saying he would be here by lunch time, and was bringing a few friends down with him."

"And Mr. Vermont, too?" inquired Lady Constance almost timidly.

The old man's face darkened and his thin lips set in a hard line.

"Yes," he said fiercely, "I suppose so. Adrien is as much in love with him as a young fellow with his first sweetheart. I know that he's a scoundrel and a rogue--but there, what would you? Times have changed since my day; we have replaced horses by motors, to spoil our roads and ruin our lands, and gentleman friends by base-born, scheming adventurers."

"Oh, but, uncle," Lady Constance timidly remonstrated, "surely Mr. Vermont is a gentleman?"

"Yes, by Act of Parliament!" snapped the old man, in whose aristocratic eyes a lawyer was but little removed from the criminal whose case he defended.

"Certainly it is strange that Adrien should be so attached to him," the girl said musingly; she, herself, had little liking for the gentleman in question, though her sense of justice had made her speak a good word for him. "But he is a clever steward, at least."

"A rogue's only virtue," said Lord Barminster dryly.

"Amusing, too," she suggested.

"We've no longer need of a court jester," returned her companion, with sarcasm. "But never mind, Adrien will find out his mistake for himself one day. Certainly, I am not going to attempt to strip the mask off his friend's face. Give him rope enough, and he will hang himself. Meanwhile, give me some more coffee, and leave the fellow's name alone; I hate even the thought of him."

Lady Constance refilled his cup and brought it to the end of the table, for she loved to wait on the old man. As she did so, his sharp eyes caught the glitter of a piece of needlework across the back of her chair, and with a curt gesture towards it, he said:

"What is that?"

She blushed, almost deeply, then took it up, and opened it out for him to see. It was a silk riding jacket, in the scarlet and white racing colours of the Leroy's, and their coat of arms, worked in silver, upon the breast.

"For the Grand National," said Lady Constance, as she refolded the jacket.

"You worked it yourself?" questioned the old man abruptly.

"Yes," she replied, blushing again. Then, as he was silent for some minutes, she said almost timidly: "You do not mind, uncle, do you?"

He started. "Mind! Good Heavens, child, why should I? You know the wish of my heart only too well. What better favour could he wear than yours? As far as I am concerned, you were plighted in your cradles. Leroy and Tremaine are no unequal match. No--no--my dear, make his jacket, and win his heart--if you can!"

Some few hours later, panting and throbbing, the Daimler motor drew up in the Castle courtyard--Adrien and his friends had arrived for the great steeplechase.

Attracted by the sound of the barking dogs, who apparently disliked the unaccustomed monster--Lord Barminster himself invariably using horses--Lady Constance stepped from her room on to the balcony which looked down upon the courtyard beneath. The gentlemen's hats flew off in greeting, and, as Adrien looked up, an unusual thrill ran through him as he noted the simple beauty of the girl above him.

"We thought we'd left the sun behind us, Constance, but evidently 'she' is still overhead," he said, smiling.

She looked down with mock reproof, playfully shaking at him a flower which she held in her hand.

"I thought compliments were out of date, Adrien. Have you enjoyed your drive?"

"Not half so much as the welcome," was the courteous reply, as he caught the rose which she had let fall.

She laughed, and blushed a little, then turned to the other members of the party, who had now alighted from the car.

"Ah, Lord Standon, I did not know you were coming." Then, as that young man's face lengthened, she added quickly: "Unexpected pleasures are always welcome. I am glad to see you, Mr. Paxhorn."

After a word of greeting to Mortimer Shelton, she drew back into her room; while the men, laughing and chatting, passed into the great hall, where they found Lord Barminster awaiting them. His stern face softened into a welcome, as, with outstretched hand, he came forward to greet his guests.

"Ah, Shelton!" he said, "so you keep my boy company, and you, Paxhorn and Standon. Gentlemen, you are welcome--though there's no need to remind you of that, I know. Adrien," turning to his son, "you have a fine day, did you drive or ride?"

"We motored down, sir," answered the young man, in his soft, melodious voice.

His father frowned slightly. He heartily detested all modern innovations, and would never hold that motors--or, indeed, any increased facilities for travelling--were improvements. "They breed discontent, sir," he would declaim vigorously. "In my young days people were content to stay in the place in which they had been born, and do their duty. Now, forsooth, they must see this country and that, and visit a dozen places in the year, where their grandparents visited one. Anything for an excuse to fritter away their hard-earned savings!"

On this occasion, however, he made no comment, but turned to Mortimer Shelton.

"You'll find the roads here better suited for horses than for oil-cans," he said grimly. "We are primitive, as you know."

Shelton laughed; but he knew his host's ideas on this subject, and was apt to respect them.

"So much the better, sir," he said in a cheerful tone; "I am a bit tired of the smell of petrol myself. Give me Nature without a corset."

"You'll certainly get that here," Lord Barminster replied, favouring his young guest with an approving glance.

Shortly afterwards, they made their way to the morning-room. Here, luncheon had been laid, and Lord Barminster, Miss Penelope, with Lady Constance, were awaiting them. The little party sat down to table, each one secretly only too ready for the meal; for the ride through the fresh, country air had been a fairly long one.

"I was really hungry, Constance," Adrien said, with his low, careless laugh. "There must be magic in the air of Barminster."

"Yet still you come here so seldom," returned his cousin gently.

"Business and the cares of State," quoted Adrien, with a smile. "But I might retaliate. Why do we not see you up in town? Society misses one of its brightest stars."

Lady Constance toyed idly with the grapes on her plate; then she looked up.

"Society has many brighter lights than I, Adrien," she said quietly. "But now, tell me about the race--auntie is terribly anxious over it; are you not, dear?"

"Yes, my love," returned Miss Penelope, who, in reality, hardly knew one horse from another.

"Oh, Adrien always wins," put in Lord Standon. "That's a foregone conclusion. Have you seen the 'King' lately, Lady Constance?"

"Oh, yes," she replied, "He is exercised in the paddock every morning, and is in fine form."

Adrien smiled.

"Poor 'King Cole'; he'll be worth his weight in gold if he wins to-morrow! What about the other horses, Stan; are they down?"

"Yes," replied Lord Standon; "my man saw some of them at the station; but no sign of the Yorkshire chestnut."

"So much the better," said Adrien; "perhaps his owner has thought discretion the better part of valour and withdrawn him."

The conversation then flowed into other channels; Paxhorn provoking roars of merriment by his stories and epigrams. Presently the ladies withdrew; Lady Constance to prepare for a ride with Adrien, which he had just suggested, and Miss Penelope to rest her "nerves."

While waiting for his cousin to rejoin him Adrien crossed over to the window, which commanded a view of the Castle entrance, and stood gazing idly down. Outside stood a smart motor, and from it was alighting the trim figure of Jasper Vermont.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, "I had forgotten Jasper."

He tapped at the window, and waved his hand in affectionate greeting to his friend, who looked up with his most amiable smile, as he brushed aside the servants who had hurried out to meet him.

There are people who are served well from sheer force of personality, and who, though neither generous nor unselfish themselves, yet contrive to abstract the very essence of these qualities from those around them; and of these Jasper Vermont was one. His tips were few, though he was lavish in smiles and honeyed words; yet not one of the retinue of servants at Barminster Castle but would fly to attend to his wants, as they would those of Adrien or Lord Barminster himself.

A few minutes later he strolled into the room where the rest of the guests were seated. As he did so Lord Barminster involuntarily drew himself up with a slight frown. He had hoped that the

"adventurer," as he invariably termed him, would remain in town and not thrust his unwelcome presence upon the guests at the Castle. But, in another minute, his natural courtesy reasserted itself; and, though it was patent to the least observant that the new arrival was not as welcome as he might have been, he answered Jasper's amiable inquiry as to his health politely enough.

"Thank you, Mr. Vermont," he said grimly, "I am quite well. But you, I fear, are an invalid."

His sharp eyes glanced towards the closed motor, which was gliding round the bend of the drive.

"No, sir, I am quite well, I assure you," Jasper replied, meekly, as if unconscious of any irony.

"But I have learned enough wisdom to feel convinced that all journeys, including that of life itself, should be taken as comfortably as possible. I prefer, therefore, to have the dust and smell outside the car instead of in. Am I not right?"

"Perfectly," returned his opponent, with a sarcastic smile; "you should surely know your own constitution best. It was an unfortunate error on my part."

At this moment, Adrien, who had been listening to the point-and-thrust conversation, exceedingly ill at ease, intervened, and under some pretext drew his father out with him into the corridor.

"I do detest that fellow so," said the old man apologetically, as though ashamed at having displayed his feelings.

"It's a pity, sir," returned Adrien, respectfully; for his father was the only person who dared say a word in disfavour of his friend. "He takes any amount of pains to save me trouble."

"Well, it pays him," retorted Lord Barminster dryly; then with a wave of the hand as if to dismiss an unpleasant subject, he added, "You're off to the stables, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir," replied Adrien, "I want to have a look at 'King Cole.'" With a friendly nod, he ran lightly down the wide oak staircase and disappeared in the direction of the stables.

For a few moments Lord Barminster stood gazing after him, his stern face relaxed, his keen eyes softened. Adrien was more to him than all his possessions, which were vast enough to have provided for a dozen sons. Therefore, he denied him nothing, however extravagant or reckless in price, and refrained from any comment on his line of conduct.

CHAPTER IX

Adrien's appearance in the stable-yard was the signal for much excitement among the hands there; and presently the head groom made his appearance, struggling into his coat, while coughing with embarrassed respect.

"Good morning, Markham," said his master with a nod; "where's the 'King'?"

"In the south stable, sir," replied the man, as he fumbled in his pocket for the keys. "You would like to see him, sir?"

Adrien nodded, and made his way to the stable, accompanied by the groom.

"No one else is allowed to enter the stable but yourself, Markham?" he asked, as the man unlocked the door.

"No one, sir. I'm always here when he's being littered or fed. Not a soul touches him without I'm at his side. He's in fine condition, sir; I never saw him in better."

Adrien passed his hand over the satiny coat of the race-horse. The dainty creature pricked up his finely-pointed ears, and turned to his master with a whinny of delight.

"He looks well enough," he admitted. "Has he had his gallop this morning?"

"Yes, sir; but would you like to see him across the paddock?"

"Yes," said Adrien. "By the way, who rides him to-morrow?"

"Peacock, sir."

"Ah, the new jockey."

"Yes, sir; Mr. Vermont's lad," returned the groom.

"A good seat?" asked Adrien.

"Capital, never saw a better, sir, and weighs next to nothing. I'll send for him." He whistled, and half a dozen stable helpers rushing forward, he despatched them to find the jockey. While waiting, the groom had the precious "King" brought into the yard and saddled; and in a few moments the man arrived. Markham had called him a lad; but in reality he was almost middle-aged, with the stunted stature of a child. Adrien looked him over critically.

"So you ride the 'King' to-morrow?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," replied the dwarf humbly.

"Let me see you take him round the paddock," said Adrien. The man threw off his coat, showing himself to be in shabby riding costume; then, vaulting into the saddle, he took the racer to the meadow at the back of the stable-yard. Adrien watched the bird-like flight of the superb animal, and nodded approvingly when he presently returned to the starting-point.

"You'll do," he said, as the jockey dismounted; "ride like that to-morrow, and we shall win. There is something for you, but no drinking, mind."

He held out a ten-pound note as he spoke. The man stared at it for a moment, then crouching almost like a dog, took it gingerly by the edge.

"Don't be afraid, man; one would think you expected a blow," said Adrien, with a smile.

Touching his forelock, the man took the note, and Adrien turned away. As he walked out of the stable-yard he happened to glance back at Markham, who was re-covering the "King," and he saw that the jockey was still gazing after him, with a tense, almost longing expression in his small, deep-set eyes.

"Poor devil!" said Leroy to himself as he went up the drive, "I must get Jasper to do something for him, especially if he wins--I only hope he doesn't get drunk!"

In the courtyard Lady Constance's horse and his own were waiting for him and in a few moments the girl herself appeared, accompanied by the ever-smiling Jasper Vermont.

Blessed by nature with a good figure, Art, as represented by French modistes and Redfern, had put the finishing touches, with the result that Lady Constance Tremaine, whether in evening dress or the blue cloth riding-habit of the field, was a joy to the eye. As she stood now, waiting Adrien's approach, he could not help mentally contrasting her natural, spiritual type of beauty with the made-up and coarsened charms of Ada Lester, and he wondered how he could have been so blind as not to notice it before.

He was not the only one who admired her. Jasper Vermont had elected himself as the girl's chief slave, and whenever he was at Barminster Castle invariably managed to carry out her lightest whims--indeed, would even endeavour to forestall them. Now it was he who attended to her saddle, and helped her into it before Adrien had fully realised what he was about to do; and for once Leroy experienced just the least feeling of resentment towards his devoted friend.

For a while the two rode almost in silence; but after the first canter Adrien reined up his horse close to that of his companion. Lady Constance purposely brought the conversation round to his estates, for, with all his dissipation and languor, Leroy was no indifferent landlord, and Lord Barminster invariably referred all complaints--such few as there were--to his son.

"I'm sorry you would not renew the lease for Farmer Darrell," she said gently; "he is almost heart-broken at having to leave Briar Farm."

Adrien pulled up his horse sharply.

"Farmer Darrell to leave Briar Farm!" he said quickly. "What do you mean, Constance?"

She looked at him steadily, as she replied:

"I rode over there yesterday, and found them all in great trouble. They told me Mr. Vermont, acting under your orders, had refused to grant them new leases. I promised to speak to Uncle Phillip; but you know how angry he gets whenever any one mentions Mr. Vermont's name, so I thought I would ask you myself." She blushed crimson, as if at her own boldness. "Of course, you mustn't do it just on my account, but--"

"Mustn't I?" interrupted her cousin, looking keenly, almost affectionately at the slim, girlish figure, and pretty piquant face. "I should certainly grant whatever you asked me if it lay in my power. As a matter of fact, however, I think Jasper said that, as they were unable to make Briar Farm pay, would I lower the rent; and as that would be creating a precedent for all the other tenants--I refused."

Lady Constance nodded her head. "Quite right," she agreed; "but I happen to know that the farm does pay splendidly, and--"

"In any case, Constance," interrupted Adrien, almost tenderly, "it is quite sufficient, if you wish it so. But I think--I am sure--Jasper must have made a mistake."

Lady Constance did not reply, but wisely changed the subject; she was too clever to pursue her advantage, and she had gained her point--sown the least little doubt of Mr. Jasper Vermont's rectitude in Adrien's mind.

Meanwhile, Mr. Vermont had also betaken himself to the stables; but he did not ask to see "King Cole"--contenting himself with beaming admiringly on Mr. Markham, while the head groom held forth on all the precautions he was taking with regard to the precious animal's safety.

"An' if he's got at, Mr. Vermont, sir, I'll eat my head," was his parting speech.

In reply to which Mr. Vermont murmured inaudibly, as he walked away: "It's a lucky job, my good fellow, that I shan't make you keep your word!"

At the end of the plantation, beyond the stable buildings, there was a little cottage attached to the straw-yard. Having reached this, Jasper listened attentively; then, without any warning knock, he lifted the latch, and entered.

To all appearances the room was empty, save for some pieces of poor furniture. But the visitor, blinking at the sudden transition from light to darkness, walked over to a rough couch, where lay the misshapen jockey Peacock, either asleep or deep in thought. Jasper shook him angrily by the shoulder, and a sullen scowl darkened the little monkey-like face as he recognised his visitor.

"Well?" he said gruffly, without attempting to change his position.

"Short, and not polite!" retorted Jasper, shaking him again. "Didn't I tell you I'd come here to-day, you imp of darkness?"

"You did, gov'nor," the man replied sullenly.

"Well, here I am. You're not drunk, are you? Here--let's look at you." With a cruel smile, the soft, amiable Mr. Vermont seized the ear of the dwarfed jockey and dragged him to the light. "No, not drunk--for a wonder. Well, you know what to do to-morrow?"

The man nodded sulkily.

"Tighten and choke off at the last hurdle. Mind you do it neatly, too. You *can* do it, I know; and it won't be the first little affair you've sold, eh? You sold one too many, though, when you crossed my path, and you know what will happen if you fail me."

"All right," the jockey muttered hoarsely.

"I hope it will be all right," said his persecutor, shaking him gently to and fro by the ear. "If not, you'll find yourself in the care of a paternal Government--I tell you--picking oakum."

The man gave a sudden jerk and released himself from the cruel grasp; then he looked up almost piteously.

"Must we do it, gov'nor?" he said hoarsely. "I've seen 'im----"

"Him! whom, you idiot?"

"Him--Mr. Leroy--as we're to sell."

"You're to sell, you mean, you gallows-bird," returned Jasper.

The man eyed him viciously.

"Yus," he growled, "you think you're going to git off scot-free, don't yer? What if I don't do it? He giv' me a tenner, he did. 'E's a real gent. What if I don't do it?" he repeated.

Mr. Vermont's eyes narrowed till he looked like a snake about to strike. Raising the riding-whip which he had in his hand, he seized the wretched creature once more, and brought the whip down again and again on his almost skeleton body.

"Play me false, you hound, and I'll kill you," he almost hissed; and, half beside himself with pain and rage, the jockey gasped brokenly:

"Stop! stop! I'll do it."

It was just five o'clock when Lady Constance and Leroy returned from their ride. During the course of it Adrien had realised something of his cousin's beauty of character, as well as of face. Until that day he had only regarded her as a younger sister, pretty, perhaps, in a quiet, retiring way, but nothing more. Now, as he lifted her down from the saddle, he could have bent and reverently kissed the little foot that lodged so lightly in the stirrup.

Woman-like, she was quick to notice the change in him, and her heart beat high with hope.

"He will love me yet," she whispered to herself triumphantly, as, with outward calmness, she bade him *au revoir* till they should meet at dinner.

Adrien went straight to his own rooms. An unusual restlessness was upon him, and his pulses throbbed wildly, but as yet he did not understand what these things meant. He, who had played the lover so lightly all his life, did not realise that it was now his turn to feel Cupid's dart, and that he was becoming as deeply enamoured of his pretty cousin as any raw boy straight from college.

As he paced up and down his luxurious study, thoughtfully smoking a cigar, his past life rose before him, with all its idleness and wasted years. He knew that with most women he had only to throw down the glove for it to be snatched up eagerly; women had loved him, petted and spoiled him ever since he could remember. But here was one who thought of him as nothing but a means to save her people--or, rather, his people---from distress. It said much for Lady Constance's powers of reserve that she had impressed him thus, and had she known it, nothing could have helped her cause more.

Throwing himself into a chair, the young man reviewed again the incidents of their ride. How beautiful she had looked; how pointedly and yet gently she had reproved him for his long absences from his estates and the people who loved him. Well, it should come to an end now, and there and then he formed a resolve to return to town directly after the race, and go through his affairs with Jasper. His friend would help him to lead a worthier and more useful life, he thought--if any one could do so.

When he went down to dinner that night few would have noticed any difference in his calm face and demeanour; none, indeed, save Lady Constance herself, who, with the subtlety which seems inbred in even the best of her sex, devoted her attention almost exclusively to Mr. Jasper Vermont. It was he who was allowed to sit next her at dinner; it was to him she turned when the race, with which all present were concerned, was the subject under discussion.

Adrien noted all this, and his heart grew heavy within him. But he did not grudge Jasper her favour--as yet; he blamed himself too deeply for the neglect of his past opportunities.

Jasper skilfully turned the conversation to Lady Merivale's ball, which he described in detail to Lady Constance; adding many little realistic touches concerning the fair hostess and Adrien, till he had convinced her--as he thought--that there was a great deal more between them than was really the case. For Vermont, as had been said before, was "no fool"; and he realised only too well in what direction events were tending with Lady Constance and her cousin.

But she showed no signs either of understanding or misunderstanding his allusions to Adrien, and began to discuss a ball which Miss Penelope was trying to arrange.

"Mr. Shelton, I am counting on you to help us," she said, turning to the gentleman on her other side. "Auntie has been besieging uncle for the last two months; and has, I think, carried the citadel."

"What is the motive of the attack?" inquired Mortimer Shelton.

"Aunt Penelope wants a fancy dress dance in the ball-room in the east wing," she returned gaily, adding, as she looked across at her cousin, who was listening attentively: "Adrien, if you would add your word, we should get it. Won't you do so?"

"A fancy dress ball here?" he replied. "But if my father has refused you, it is scarcely likely that I shall have any more influence." He turned to his aunt. "Why not have Barminster House, Aunt Penelope?" This was the town house, supposed to be given up almost exclusively to the young man's use, though he generally inhabited his own chambers in Jermyn Street. "I will hand it over to you from cellar to attic, and will bind myself to be your faithful slave from early morn to dewy eve."

His aunt laughed.

"No, thank you, Adrien, I know your idea of slavery," she said. "You would hand it over to Mr. Vermont, and he does quite enough of your work already." Vermont was a favourite with Miss Penelope, owing chiefly to his frequent gifts of *marron glacés*--a great weakness of hers. "Besides," she continued, "Barminster House is too modern. I want to revive a ball, just as it happened two or three centuries ago. It must be Barminster Castle or nothing."

Adrien smiled across at her.

"Your word is law, my dear aunt; but if I were you, and it comes off at all, I'd leave the arranging of it to Jasper."

Mr. Vermont beamed. Nothing seemed to please him so much as the idea of work, especially when it involved the spending of money other than his own.

"I am at your service, dear lady," he said amiably.

Miss Penelope rose, and gave the signal for the ladies to retire.

"I shall take you at your word, Mr. Vermont," she said graciously, as she passed out.

After the ladies had gone, the wine circulated freely, and in the merry badinage that followed it must be admitted that Jasper Vermont was the life and soul of the party. He had the newest scandal at his finger-tips, the latest theatrical news; and all was related in a witty manner that kept his listeners in a perpetual roar of laughter.

Adrien, though compelled by politeness to take his share in the conversation, was yet glad when they adjourned to the silver drawing-room. This was one of the smallest of the half-dozen drawing-rooms in Barminster Castle, and was decorated entirely in blue and silver. The furniture was upholstered in pale blue stain and silver embroideries. Curtains, hangings, and even carpet, were all of the same colour, while the mirrors and ornaments were entirely of silver.

To-night, Lady Constance's dress matched the room, for it was of palest azure silk, veiled with chiffon, on which were Etruscan silver ornaments and silver-thread embroidery. It was a colour which suited her shell-like complexion; and she looked her best in it.

She was at the piano when the men entered; and Leroy, who was passionately fond of music, and a musician of no mean order himself, came straight over to her. At his request, Constance sang song after song; while Vermont sat a little apart, listening, and occasionally glancing thoughtfully at the beautiful profile of the singer. Then his cold, malignant eyes would wander with an almost sinister expression over the rapt face of his friend and benefactor, as he leaned over the piano. But at any movement of the other guests his countenance would assume its usual amiability of expression, as though a mask were re-adjusted, while his fat, white hand softly beat time to the music.

At last Lady Constance declared she was tired, and turned to Adrien, begging him to sing instead. He hesitated for a moment; then, as if throwing off the unusual moodiness that oppressed him, he seated himself at the piano; and, after a few moments of restless improvisation, he sang song after song from Schumann's "Dichter-liebe," with an intensity of passion in the clear tenor notes that thrilled the soul of every listener.

In the silence which fell on the little company when the last chords died away, Jasper Vermont, half-hidden by the curtain, opened the window, and slipped out on the terrace. The moon shone full on his white face, distorted with an unaccountable fury, as he muttered through his clenched teeth: "Curse the fellow! How I hate him!"

CHAPTER X

The morning of the race dawned clear and bright, and the Leroy course shone like a strip of emerald velvet in the crisp, sparkling air.

Since sunrise, throngs of people, men, women, and children, had been streaming in from the outlying districts, some many miles away; while at the side of the course stretched a long line of vehicles of all kinds, which had already disbursed their load.

In twos and threes the late horses arrived swaddled in cloths, and surrounded by the usual crowd of bow-legged grooms and diminutive jockeys; while the air reeked with the smell of the stable and the oaths and slang of the men.

Later still came the bookmakers with their brisk, business-like method of entering the bets, big or small; the "swell's" thousand or the countryman's shilling were all one to them. And lastly, amid all the din and turmoil of the most crowded meeting Barminster had ever witnessed, came the army of the Castle servants to put the finishing touches to the boxes in the grand stand, over which floated the Leroy colours.

Towards noon, the hour at which the first race was to be run, the crowd grew denser, the excitement keener.

"Two to one on 'King Cole'--three to one 'Miracour'--and five to one 'Bay Star'--six to one, bar three"--all these cries rose in a loud, turbulent roar. It was known to all that the "swells"--as they termed the Castle people--had backed their champion "King Cole" for sums which, as Jasper Vermont had rightly said the preceding night, would almost equal his weight in gold; and such was their faith in him that no other horse had been entered from that same county.

Twelve o'clock struck, and no signs as yet of the Leroy party; that is to say, with the exception of one man, namely, Mr. Jasper Vermont.

"Your swells are always late," said a thick-lipped turfite, biting his stubby pencil prior to booking a favourable bet. "They gives any money for style, an' plays it high on us. It ain't their way to be to time for anything, not they--only us poor chaps."

The surrounding crowd echoed his shout of "two to one on 'King Cole,'" despite his diatribes against the swells; when suddenly attention was caught by a dark chestnut, thin in the flank, and badly groomed, which was led into the paddock by a dirty, close-shaven countryman, who looked as nonchalant and self-satisfied as if he held the bridle of "King Cole" himself.

Presently, while the crowd pushed around the sacred enclosure, Jasper Vermont walked swiftly up to the Yorkshireman, and whispered behind a sheltering cough:

"That will do. Take him off. The plant's safe without him."

Three minutes later, a laugh of derision arose as the announcement was made that the chestnut was "scratched." But further discussion died down, as the Leroy carriages arrived--only just in time, for the saddling bell had already rang.

The course was now looking its best. Long lines of glittering motors and smart carriages had joined their humbler brethren of traps and omnibuses. The seats and stands were filled with gaily-dressed people; women in their furs, velvets and exquisite hats, giving the impression from a distance of a huge living flower garden.

On the appearance of Adrien Leroy, the excitement reached its height, for he was known to everybody by name and sight, and was, moreover, the owner of the favourite.

The carriage containing Lord Barminster had been drawn up as near the course as possible, and as far from the crowd as space would permit; for his lordship invariably refused to mix with any concourse of people, even when they consisted of his own order.

Adrien, having seen that he was comfortable, escorted the ladies down to their seats on the grand stand; then he betook himself to the paddock, where "King Cole" had just been saddled.

At the sound of the loved voice the beautiful animal turned his head, with a whinny of delight. Then, as the two people he disliked with every fibre of his being approached him--Jasper Vermont and Peacock, the jockey--he laid his ears back with every appearance of alarm and distrust. It seemed as if his animal instincts were keener than those of his master.

Leroy stroked the soft nose of the race-horse, while Jasper passed his hand admiringly over the satiny neck.

"Beautiful as a daisy," he exclaimed, and as Mr. Vermont would hardly have recognised that humble flower if he had seen it, this was rather qualified praise.

"Too long in the leg," murmured a man whom Jasper had previously introduced as a sporting friend of his.

Adrien turned round and surveyed the speaker calmly for a moment.

"Too leggy, you think, do you? I'll lay two to one upon them."

"Done," said the man sharply. "Hundreds or thousands?"

"Thousands," said Adrien quietly.

Jasper touched him on the arm and whispered, in gentle remonstrance:

"Steady, old chap, there's pots of money on him as it is. Don't you think it would be as well--"

"Make it thousands," interrupted Adrien, almost haughtily, as he turned on his heel.

The man booked the bet, bowed to Vermont, as to an utter stranger, and the two gentlemen passed to the weighing-seat. Peacock had already gone to don his riding-clothes, and without waiting to see him again, Adrien and his companion returned to the grand stand. Here Leroy stopped to speak to Lady Merivale, who, with her sister, the Marchioness of Caine, had motored down from London to witness the race.

The marchioness was a lady with a passion for bridge, and an intense admiration for Adrien Leroy.

"You are quite sure your horse, that pretty creature with the long neck, is going to win?" she inquired, as he stood by her chair.

Her sister, Lady Merivale, looked up mockingly.

"Of course he's going to win, Alicia. Did not Lady Constance Tremaine say so? Surely *she* ought

to know!"

Leroy did not appear to notice the jealous sarcasm of this speech.

"I hope he will win," he said gravely. "Nothing is certain in this world, and race-horses are said to be as fickle as your sex, dear lady." This was a mild thrust at Lady Merivale; but she only smiled sweetly in response. "Still, I think you may safely bet on the 'King'; he's in fine form." Then he turned to his cousin. "Here is your *beau* cavalier, Constance," he said, almost jealously, as Jasper Vermont came leisurely up the steps of the grand stand; then, with a swift glance at the girl which was not lost upon Lady Merivale, he went down once more to his father.

"The bell is about to ring now," he said. "Are you sure you can see?"

"Quite sure," replied Lord Barminster curtly. "How is the horse?"

"In splendid form, sir," Adrien answered cheerfully. "I should think it is a safe thing. If you are quite all right, I'll get back to the others now, before the crush begins."

His father nodded, and the young man made his way back to the stand. Here he found the Castle guests already seated. Harsh cries from the betting-ring still ascended at intervals, though the majority of the vast crowd had settled down to watch the race. With a thrill of pleasure, Adrien saw that Lady Constance had kept a seat vacant for him beside herself; and with a light word to Lady Merivale as he passed, he took his place, and unstrapping the heavy field-glasses, arranged them to Lady Constance's liking.

"Can you see all right?" he asked.

"Beautifully," she replied, as she tried them. "What excitement they are all in," she added, as she surveyed the seething crowd.

Adrien smiled, pleased because she was pleased; for himself, except that he wished his horse to win in order that it should gain fresh laurels, he had no interest in the affair. Certainly he never gave a thought to the fearful amount of money involved.

Then, amid a murmur of excitement, the starting-gate went up, and the horses were off. For a while "Miracour" led; "Bluebell" running close beside him; the "King" striding along in cool, quiet canter that covered the miles at greater speed than the little mare could hope to maintain.

"There goes the 'King'!" exclaimed Lady Caine, almost rising from her seat in her excitement. "Oh, I do hope he will win don't you, Mr. Vermont?"

Jasper smiled.

"I do, indeed," he said, while his little steely eyes rested upon the shrivelled figure of Peacock, the jockey, with a keen, cold scrutiny.

Meanwhile the horses pounded away over the course, still in the same order. "Miracour" leading, "Bluebell" falling behind, and the "King" creeping up easily to the second place.

The first fence placed nearly half the horses out of the running; the next threw out two more, though the "King" cleared it in his stride, so close in the wake of his rival that a speck of white foam flecked the haunches of the leader.

Adrien nodded approvingly.

"That fellow knows how to ride," he said. "If he keeps the 'King' like that, the race is ours."

"Oh yes," agreed Vermont, smiling grimly; "he understands him, evidently. It is to be hoped he keeps him cool till the spurt comes."

"Which will be after the last jump," put in Lord Standon, as he shifted his field-glasses.

"Exactly," purred Jasper.

Hedge after hedge was cleared, and still "Miracour" was leading; but it was evident that the high blood of the "King" was burning to get away, and that his jockey was playing a waiting game.

It was at the stream that the strain began to tell. "Bluebell," the Irish mare, had struggled on gamely; but at the last she refused to leap, she stopped short, and her jockey was pitched forward into the water.

A laugh arose even in the midst of the excitement; but it was speedily drowned in the cries of "The 'King' wins. No! No! 'Miracour'!--'Vicket'--beats. No! No! the 'King'--the 'King's' got away!"

They were right, for Peacock had thought it wisest to put the spurt on already, and the "King," with every fibre stretched to its utmost, had darted ahead. "Miracour" caught up again, and side by side they raced over the level flat, cheered and shouted at by the frantic crowd.

A roar like that of the sea broke forth as the two animals neared the last obstacle, a great hedge

filled with thorn, and like a miniature mountain. Neck and neck they seemed to be, when suddenly the "King" darted forward, and, amid terrific shouts of astonishment, took the leap too short, fell sideways, and pitched his jockey into the short scrub, a dozen feet away.

"Miracour" rose for the leap, and clearing it, cantered in the winner by sixty lengths.

For a moment there was tense silence, broken by a roar of surprise, rage and disappointment, as the crowd broke away and swarmed over the course to the spot where the jockey still lay. A murmur of horror had also gone throughout the length of the grand stand; but whether of disappointment, or at the fall of the rider, it was hard to say.

All eyes were turned on Adrien. His face was rather pale, but quite calm, and closing up his field-glasses he said:

"'Miracour' ran finely. I can't understand the 'King' falling at the last jump. Jasper, let us go down and see if the fellow is hurt."

Making their excuses to the ladies they hurried down the steps, and strode swiftly over the course, the crowd making way for them in hushed silence, for they recognised Leroy as the owner of the defeated favourite.

Reaching the spot from which the crowd was being kept back, they found two men bending over the little heap of scarlet silk and leather. Shelton, who had been one of the stewards, looked up as Adrien approached, and shook his head.

Adrien bent down beside him, and gazed at the thin, shrivelled face of the jockey.

"Have you sent for a doctor, Shelton?" he asked.

"Yes," replied his friend in a hushed voice. "But I think he will be too late, his spine----"

At the sound of Adrien's voice, the heavy eyelids raised themselves; the bloodstained lips parted as if about to speak.

"What is it?" said Shelton, bending closer.

"Where--where is he?" gasped the man in disjointed words. "I want--to--see him."

"Whom?" asked Mortimer Shelton gently. "Whom do you want to see, my poor fellow?"

Mr. Vermont pushed his way forward, his face alight with eager sympathy.

"Perhaps I can be of use," he said, "I know him; perhaps he wants to tell me----"

The jockey raised his head. It seemed as if the soft, smooth voice gave him strength to speak. He glared at Jasper, then his glance fell on the pitying face of Leroy. With a sudden light in his eyes, he stretched out his hand.

"Him--him, the swell--I tell him the race--was--sold! He--Mr. Vermont----"

His breath came fast in great sobs; he glared from Adrien to Jasper, then back to Leroy, as if seeking to convey some warning, but in vain; with the last words, he fell back.

A gentleman pushed his way forward.

"Allow me, I am Doctor Blake," he said, and he knelt down beside the still form.

"He is dead," he declared solemnly, as he placed his hand on the body.

The crowd fell back still further, with murmurs of horror. There was a silence, broken at last by Jasper Vermont.

"Dear, dear!" he exclaimed in tones in which, had it not been for the absurdity of the idea, one might have fancied there was almost a spark of satisfaction. "How very, very sad. I wouldn't have had this happen for *anything!*"

CHAPTER XI

It was night and the race-course lay deserted and silent beneath the pallid moon. The noisy crowd had tramped and driven its way back to London. But there was one whom the noise and bustle of a race meet would never rouse again--Peacock the jockey, who lay dead in the stable

house.

His death had cast a depression over the entire Castle, and though both Adrien and his father--to say nothing of Jasper--had striven their utmost to keep the minds of the guests away from the unhappy event, it was yet an almost gloomy party that gathered after dinner in the silver drawing-room.

Nearly all had lost heavily through the fall of poor "King Cole." They had had such entire faith in their champion, that his loss of the race had come like a thunder-bolt; and most of all to Adrien himself. The actual monetary loss did not seem to trouble him; indeed, it was probable that he himself was unaware of the immensity of the sum involved. Only Jasper knew, Jasper who wore his usual calm, serene smile, and certainly worked hard to banish all regrets concerning such a trifle as a dead steeplechaser, as well as any lingering memories of his dying words.

"One thing is certain," said Lord Standon to Lady Constance, who had been sighing over the defeat. "Adrien will not allow any one to ride the 'King' again but himself. I heard him say so."

"He has lost heavily, I'm afraid," the girl said in a low voice.

"Immensely," replied Lord Standon, who himself had, lost more than he could afford--indeed, there was little doubt that this race would almost prove his ruin; but, nevertheless, his inordinate good humour and optimistic nature triumphed above every other consideration. Certainly, no word of blame or self-pity would he allow to pass his lips. "Yes, he has lost more heavily than any of us, as Mr. Vermont knows; I'll be bound," he broke off, as that gentleman approached.

Jasper Vermont smiled, as he did at every question or assertion made to him.

"I'm afraid he has plunged deeply this time," was his smooth reply. "Unfortunately, he only has himself to blame, though I deplore the fact that I was not with him at the time."

Both Lady Constance and Lord Standon looked up, startled by his tone as much as by his words; and Jasper continued glibly:

"He gave the jockey a ten-pound note last night, and, of course, the man got drunk. Consequences--an unsteady hand this morning, a hasty push at the last rise, and a clear loss of the race, not to mention the colossal sum in bets. All his own fault! If he will be so recklessly generous, what is to be done? But, as I said before, I blame myself for not watching him more closely."

"No one blames you, Mr. Vermont," said Lord Standon coldly, for even he, the least suspicious of men, seemed to detect the false sorrow in the speaker's voice.

Lady Constance looked at him gratefully; and Lord Standon was encouraged thereby to proceed:

"Adrien is generous to a fault; and if in this case it has had disastrous results, it is usually a fault which few imitate."

Jasper raised his eyebrows; then, with a low bow to Lady Constance, and a gentle, deprecatory shrug of his shoulders, walked away.

The girl waited till he was out of earshot, then turned impulsively to Lord Standon.

"I hate that man," she said in a low voice; "and sometimes I believe he hates Adrien too."

"So do I," returned Lord Standon, looking with intense admiration into her lovely, troubled face.

"Do you?" she murmured. "Oh, if you would only try to open my cousin's eyes to his friend's falseness--I know he's false, but Adrien is so blind."

It seemed as if he were blind in more than one direction; for at that minute Leroy himself crossed the room, with an aspect that, in any other man, would have been termed glum. The sight of the girl with whom he was so rapidly falling in love, sitting in rapt conversation with Lord Standon--even though that young man was his friend--had roused a strong feeling of resentment within his heart. He restrained himself, however, though it was in a rather cold, forced voice that he asked Lady Constance if she would sing. She rose demurely enough; for his very coldness and jealousy, slight as it was--careless as she knew it to be--proved to her that the love she so ardently desired was awakening at last.

The evening passed quietly. Adrien himself refused to sing, though he stayed close by his cousin's side, and turned over the pages of her music with such a devoted air that at last the ladies of the party began to whisper knowingly amongst themselves.

Luckily for Adrien's peace of mind--for he loathed and dreaded scenes of any description--Lady Merivale had not returned with the party to the Castle, much as Miss Penelope had wished it. Eveline Merivale was only too cognisant of what was passing between Lady Constance and her cousin; and though she knew that Adrien and herself had merely played at love, and greatly against his will, at that, still she was just as unwilling to see him the devoted slave of another woman, who was younger, if not more beautiful, than herself.

After the ladies had retired for; the night, Adrien gave himself up to unaccustomed reverie. The tenor of his life had been changed. The inane senseless round of dissipation had begun to tire him; the homage and flattery cloyed on his palate. And now, with his newborn love for Constance filling his heart and mind, had come the overwhelming failure of his beloved horse, and the death of his jockey; the last causing him more pain than the light-hearted companions around him would have believed possible. Neither had the half-defined charge made against Jasper escaped his notice, though he had disdained to make any mention of it.

Shelton noticed his absent manner, as they smoked their last cigar before going to bed.

"Counting up the losses, Adrien?" he asked casually.

Adrien started at the question, and smiled.

"Not I," he said, "I leave that to Jasper--I call him my walking account-book. I'm sorry you fellows were let in though; I can't understand it; although"--with a rueful laugh--"I suppose it was my fault with that tenner. Yet, I must say, I noticed the man as he galloped past, and saw no signs of anything wrong."

"Nor I," put in Vermont. "I was in the weighting-room, and saw him scaled. He was all right then. He always was white and seedy-looking. I saw nothing wrong."

"Nor I," echoed the others.

Adrien lit another cigar, and the light fell full on his grave face.

"The losses are heavy all round; yet, speaking for myself," he said, "I would have rather dropped treble the amount than that poor fellow should have lost his life by a horse of mine."

"His own fault. It was absolutely a case of suicide," declared Lord Standon angrily. "He put the 'King' to that last hurdle half a minute too soon. The horse was not to blame; he would have taken the hedge, and another on top of that, but for that unlucky spurt. 'Pon my soul," he concluded hotly, "if I didn't know how well he'd been cared for, I should have said it was done on purpose!"

Unlucky youth! he little knew the harm he had done his empty pockets by this rash speech. Jasper Vermont's eyes narrowed, as was their wont when anything occurred to annoy him, and he registered a mental note against the unfortunate peer's name.

Adrien frowned, as he rose with the rest.

"That is impossible," he said, almost sternly; "Jasper saw to that too well. But, in future, no one shall ride the 'King' but myself; he's just up to my weight," he concluded. "Jasper, enter him for the Cup. We will give him a chance to retrieve this day's failure."

Jasper had risen with him, and amid a volley of good-nights, the two men passed into the corridor. As Adrien was about to ascend the stairs to his own apartment, he turned to Vermont, and said quietly:

"Jasper, I should like that poor fellow to have a Christian burial in the private chapel; and if there are relations, find them out----" He broke off abruptly. "There, you know better than I what to do, and how to do it. Oh! just one word more; of course, I shall see that no notice is taken of his delirious ravings. Good-night, old man."

Jasper thanked him and returned his "good-night" with sympathetic cordiality; then turned softly to his own apartment. Having reached it, he gave himself up to a spasm of silent laughter.

"Christian burial!" he chuckled. "Oh, yes, he shall have Christian burial in the family vaults. Lucky job for me the hound died, or the game would have been all up. As it is, that fool--that popinjay, almost guessed. Well, deny everything and demand proof, that's my line. After all, it's the very risks and chances that make the game so fascinating."

He sat down and drew out a little note-book--only a very ordinary penny note-book; for it was wonderful how mean this man could be when he had to expend his own money. Save clothes, which necessarily had to be of good material, though quiet in colour, he never failed to buy the cheapest article obtainable; unless, of course, when, on the principle of "throwing a sprat to catch a herring," he stood to make a profit.

In this little book there lay the records of fortunes. A fortune spent by Leroy--a fortune gained by Jasper Vermont. He smiled to himself, as he closed one eye, and counted up the gains he had netted through this day's work.

"Eight--ten, with Yorkshire Twining's last little touch--ten thousands pounds. Ah, if those fools knew how the 'intruder' was stripping them of golden plumes, how mad they would be! Ten thousand pounds! But Twining was too risky," he muttered, frowning at the recollection, "My grand knight might have smelled a rat. Just like his noble lordship; two to one, because some stranger doubts the strength of the animal's legs."

He chuckled again as he thought how carefully he had stage-managed the day's comedy. Of the

tragedy into which it had been turned by the death of his poor tool and accomplice, Peacock, he gave no thought, his whole mind was bound up in his jealous hatred of Leroy. Just why he hated him so he, himself, could hardly have explained; but with men of Jasper Vermont's calibre, the mere fact that one possesses so much--wealth, position, and popularity--while the other must perforce live by his wits, is quite sufficient to arouse all the evil passions of which he is capable.

"A mighty regal way he has with him," he muttered again, as he put away his book. "Ten thousand pounds! Go on, Jasper, my boy--persevere! The game starts well, the winning cards are yours. Gentlemen, make your game, the ball is rolling."

With this invitation to mankind in general, and his titled and wealthy acquaintances in particular, Mr. Jasper Vermont made his preparations for the night. He kept no valet; men of his type seldom care to have another in such close relations as must necessarily happen when one man holds the keys of another. It has been said by some cynic, that "the man who takes off your coat sees what is passing in the heart beneath it," and with this statement Mr. Vermont probably agreed.

"I am a simple-minded, rough-and-ready creature," he often assured his friends; "a man to worry my tie, and force me to buy a new coat, because he desires my old one, would drive me mad."

So he undressed himself slowly, reckoning up his gains, smiling at his mask of a face in the large mirror, and hatching his little plots every knot he untied, every button he released. At last he got into bed, and slept as easily and serenely as any simple-minded farmer.

CHAPTER XII

But that night Adrien Leroy could not sleep. Dismissing his valet, he threw himself into a chair, and began to review the events of the day, which had affected him more deeply than he would confess to. Then the mere sight of Lady Constance with Lord Standon had convinced him that any hope of ever winning her for his wife was at an end. For so many years had he himself been wooed and sought after, without response, that he was as ignorant of the rules of the game of love as any child. Love! he had sneered at it, jested at its power all his life; but now he was beginning to suffer from its pangs himself. He rose hastily, and throwing open the window of his dressing room, stepped out on the balcony.

It was an exquisite night, and the stars shone like diamonds. Yet their very distance and detachment from all things earthly only served to deepen Adrien's melancholy. Before him stretched, in seemingly endless vista, the woods and lands of his heritage. As far as eye could reach, the earth and all within it and upon it belonged to him; and yet he sighed for the love and devotion of one frail girl, which, had he but known, were already his.

As he walked to and fro, he was again assailed by a wholesome distaste of his present empty, aimless existence, and a great longing came over him to break away from it and start afresh. Yes! he was very tired of it all. The men and women with whom he had up to this spent his time were becoming abhorrent to him. The thought of the soft lips and glances that had hitherto beguiled him, and lulled him into a state bordering upon stupor, now filled him with shame. Love, that marvellous panacea, had driven out the false, the impure visions of his heart, as surely and as thoroughly as ever Hercules cleansed the Augean stables.

The blood of his race stirred with him; he would have liked to have snatched Constance, and borne her away on his trusty steed, as his forefathers would have done. But instead he must stand aside, and see her married to another. Nay, he himself would be asked to attend the wedding, perhaps even give her away to the man who was surely no more worthy of her than Adrien himself.

Jasper Vermont had indeed done his work well. No sooner had he seen the light of love shining in his friend's face, than he had set to work; and, like the grim spider of evil he resembled, had filled Adrien's mind with the suggestion that Constance loved--in fact, was secretly engaged to, Lord Standon.

His reasons for this were twofold. If Adrien married Constance, Ada Lester would--whether with or without cause--hold him responsible, and was more than capable of carrying out her threat to unmask him to his patron. Moreover, Jasper looked upon Lady Constance with an appreciative and covetous eye, and felt that if he could ever ingratiate himself with her sufficiently for her to promise to become his wife, the summit of his ambition would be reached.

Adrien was easily deceived; for, with all his faults, he was not conceited. He did not guess that Constance's very openly expressed pleasure in the company of Lord Standon was to prevent the discovery of her real and passionate longing for that of her cousin.

Henceforth, he told himself, he must do his best to hide the pain that was gnawing at his heart. Henceforward, the pleasure of life would be as Dead Sea fruit to him. His hand fell on the balustrade in his unconscious despair; and at that moment, another window farther down the long balcony opened, and the figure of Lord Barminster stepped out into the moonlight.

Adrien was in no humour to meet even his father; he was too weary in spirit to confront the old man's satire with his usual calm; so he shrank back into the shadow of the buttress against which he leaned. But Lord Barminster's eyes were quick to perceive him; and, striding forward, he laid his hand on his son's shoulder.

"Well, Adrien," he commenced, "what is wrong? Can't you sleep, or are you given to spending the small hours in star-gazing?"

"I might retort in kind, sir," returned Adrien, pulling his scattered thoughts together, and smiling faintly.

"Ah! I am old," said his father. "Age has its penalties as well as its privileges; and the freedom to speak plainly is one of the latter. Come, my boy, what is wrong? At your age I was happy enough; but you seem to have taken the troubles of the world on your shoulders. Are you ill?"

"No, sir, I am well enough," returned Adrien quietly.

"Then are you worrying over your debts through that unlucky horse? Because, although, as you know, I do not interfere with your money matters as a rule, you are quite at liberty to draw on my bank if you care to do so."

His son turned to him affectionately.

"No, no, sir," he said gratefully. "I don't suppose they are as bad as all that. Jasper will see to them."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when he regretted them. His father's face darkened; his eyes grew fierce.

"Jasper! always Jasper," he snarled, even as Mortimer Shelton had done. "It's a pity he didn't break his neck this morning, instead of his miserable tool."

Adrien uttered a protesting exclamation; he would have sacrificed anything sooner than have given his father this opportunity to revile his friend.

"You must be blind, sir," continued Lord Barminster, now working himself up into a rage. "Did not you see and hear enough from that jockey this morning to make you realise what that precious friend of yours had done? I tell you, Adrien, that Jasper Vermont bribed that miserable man to rope your horse. For him, you have allowed your friends, my guests, to be swindled out of their money."

It was the first time in Adrien's recollection that the proud old man had ever even hinted that Barminster Castle was not entirely his son's yet; that the guests were those of his father's choice as well of his own.

Adrien's eyes blazed.

"Father," he said in a low voice, but as hard as steel, "I know you have always hated Mr. Vermont, but this goes farther than hate. Forgive me if I ask you, but surely you have some proofs? Otherwise you would not have accused him of such villainy. Give them to me, and I promise you to punish him as severely as you yourself could wish."

"Proofs!" his father repeated sternly with knitted brows. "What proofs would such a clever scoundrel leave about? This morning's work should be sufficient proof even to satisfy you."

Adrien drew himself up to his full height, and confronted his father with a resolute air.

"It is no use, sir," he said. "I cannot take a drunken jockey's ramblings as proof of such an awful thing as that. Jasper is my friend, and besides, it is more to his interest to help me than to hate me."

Lord Barminster sighed deeply. The experience of age had taught him the impossibility of convincing youth against its will.

"Well, my boy," he said, "have your own way, but mark my words, you will live to repent your folly! I have no more proof, and to me no more is needed. Men on their death-beds do not lie, and I am as firmly convinced that Jasper Vermont forced that man to sell the race, as though I had the confession on paper. Still, I will say no more; you are young, and 'Youth knows All.' Find out for yourself the man's character, I shall not warn you again. You are placing your faith in a thankless cur; don't grumble when he turns round and bites the hand that has helped him. As for me, I will wait. Believe me, I would far rather know myself to be wrong than deal you any further unhappiness, so let us drop the subject for a time. I did not mean to bring up the man's name. I want to speak to you of far more important things."

His voice grew more grave, indeed almost solemn.

"Adrien, I am an old man, nearing the grave, and, as is only natural, my thoughts turn to the future of our race. You are the last of our line, it is to you I look to carry it on. You are no longer a boy, with a youth's follies and tastes; it is time you took up your responsibilities."

Adrien made as if to speak; but his father checked him, with a gesture of his hand.

"Stay, hear me out," he said. "When I was your age, your mother was at my side, I had given the House of Leroy its son and heir. I was married, and had left the lighter loves of the world for a more lasting and responsible one. You know I have never interfered much with your life; but though I am no longer of the gay world, I yet hear something of its doings. You 'live the pace,' they tell me, and are the idol of the smart set. Barminster Castle, Adrien, looks for something higher than that in its lord and master. I repeat, sir, at your age I was married."

"And loved," said Adrien softly.

"Yes, indeed," exclaimed Lord Barminster, his face lighting up at the thought of the woman whom he had lost, and mourned so long. "Your mother was that which ranks above rubies, a good and virtuous woman, worthy of any man's love."

Adrien turned his pale face away, as if to avoid scrutiny, then he said gently:

"I admit your right to speak like this, sir, and if it rested with me I would obey you at once."

"It does rest with you, Adrien," returned his father quickly. "Surely you are blind, not to see that Constance Tremaine loves you with her whole heart."

Adrien started up, his face alight and quivering with excitement.

"Impossible, sir!" he exclaimed. "Would to heaven it were true; for I know no other woman to whom I would so gladly devote my life."

The grim old face softened and relaxed. He had not expected such an overwhelming victory.

"Why do you say it is impossible?" he asked.

Adrien did not answer for a moment, then he slip hoarsely:

"She is already engaged to Lord Standon."

An exclamation of astonishment burst from the old man's lips. He put out his hand in involuntary sympathy, and the two so strangely alike, yet so wide apart in years, clasped hands. Then, as if ashamed of the momentary emotion, the old man turned away, saying quietly:

"This is, of course, a surprise to me. Its truth yet remains to be proved, but I should feel inclined to doubt it myself." With which he went back to his own apartments.

Left alone once more, Adrien walked restlessly to and fro.

"If Constance really cared for me," he said to himself, "nothing else in the world would matter. Lucky Standon! I dare not think of the future, it what Jasper said was true."

At last he, too, returned to his room; but it was almost morning before he fell into a troubled slumber.

CHAPTER XIII

The morning following the disastrous steeple-chase, Mr. Jasper Vermont ordered his car, and then sat down to write to Adrien. He told him that he regretted having to leave the Castle so suddenly, but urgent business required his presence in London, and that he would return to Barminster as soon as possible.

On the appearance of the motor, he took his departure, travelling direct to Jermyn Court, where he stayed to lunch, waited on by the attentive Norgate as though he had been Adrien himself. Then, having filled his cigar-case with his friend's choicest Cabanas, he strolled through the fashionable parts of the Park.

The loungers and idle men of fashion who usually frequented it at that time of the day knew him well, and nodded with forced smiles of friendship--it was clearly to their interest to be on good, if

possible, cordial terms with a man who always had the *entrée* to the innermost circles, and who had won the confidence of a popular favourite like Adrien Leroy.

Those who had not been personally introduced to Jasper, had still heard reports of his position, and looked after him with that half-envious air which says so plainly:

"There goes the kind of prosperous, wealthy man I myself should like to be."

Mr. Vermont strolled along, his face wreathed in a perpetual smirk of recognition, his hat off half a dozen times a minute, acknowledging the smiling glances accorded to him.

When he had nearly come to Hyde Park Gate, he was confronted by one of the loungers--an old acquaintance of his--whose woe-begone countenance seemed expressive of acute mental distress.

Jasper Vermont recognised him in spite of his altered appearance--usually a very gay one--and stopped him.

"What, Beau!" he exclaimed with seemingly effusive warmth; "you here; whatever have you been doing--committing murder? Or have you married in haste, to repent of it at leisure?"

"Neither, my dear boy," answered the well-groomed young man--a captain in the "Household" Guards--one of the fastest and most generally liked fellows in town. "Neither, Vermont; but I have just come from the City."

"City of the Tombs!" drawled Jasper facetiously.

Captain Beaumont laughed, but rather mournfully.

"Yes," he said, "all my hopes are buried in that beastly place.' Really, the County Council ought to put a notice over the west side of Temple Bar monument instead of that heraldic beast: 'Abandon hope, all ye who enter here,'"

Mr. Vermont laughed, in his usual quiet way.

"How's that? The City is good enough in its way. What have they been doing to you; won't they lend you any more money?"

"Worse even than that," said the young spend-thrift; "they actually want me to repay all that I owe them already, on short notice, with the usual threats if I fail to comply within their time."

"Oh!" remarked Mr. Vermont simply; but his "oh" was full of meaning and apparent sympathy for the misfortunes of his friend.

"Yes, that hard-hearted old skinflint, Harker--what a mean brute he is! I should like to bury him, and would attend his funeral gladly to be certain I had seen the last of him. He holds a pretty little tot-up in the way of bills of mine; and I expected, naturally enough, when I call on the firm, that they would renew them at the usual Shylock rates, and I could try elsewhere for something to go on with."

"Yes," said Mr. Vermont, "of course, that's the way you have done for years."

Captain Beaumont nodded.

"Yes, that's so; but Harker only shook that long head of his, and refused me; and nothing I could say would change the old skinflint's mind either. You know that cock-and-bull story he always tells, about his not being the principal, but only the servant? Well, he says his principal has instructed him to call in my bills, and it is impossible for him to renew them; and that the usual steps will be taken if I am not able to meet them."

Jasper laughed, with gentle sarcasm.

"Of course, that's always the moneylender's excuse. I'm afraid he will sell you up, Beau."

Captain Beaumont whistled.

"My dear Vermont, it will be an awful shock for the gov'nor. He can only give us younger sons a small allowance, and he certainly won't be able to settle this matter; it would be altogether beyond him."

"What is the amount?" inquired Jasper. He was as well aware as was the young captain himself, of Lord Dunford's financial difficulties.

"Well, not much," replied Captain Beaumont. "Only seven thousand; but it's no good my going to the gov'nor for a penny piece, and how to clear it up is more than I can tell. But why do you ask?" he added, though with but faint eagerness. "Do you think you could find any one able to help me out of this beastly hole?"

"Well, I might," said Jasper, eyeing his cigar meditatively, as if seeking from its fumes some inspiration as to a method of aiding his friend.

"I only know one way to prevent Harker taking extreme measures," went on the troubled debtor; "that is, if I could get some one to back new bills. Now if, say, Adrien Leroy were to back some bills for me, Harker certainly would not refuse; but I am hardly in a position to ask Leroy."

"But I am," said Vermont, smiling with the consciousness of power; "and I will do it for you, for old friendship's sake."

"You will!" exclaimed the captain gratefully. "Jasper, you're a brick! I feel sure, somehow, he will do it for you. I should stand no chance. You are a good fellow to come to my rescue in this fashion."

"Ah," said Mr. Vermont, with a smile; "but can we be sure that Harker will accept Leroy's name of the bills?"

"Why, of course, Harker or anybody--who wouldn't?" asked the Guardsman, as the cloud dispelled from his face at hope coming so quickly from this unexpected quarter. "Why, it's as good as the Bank of England. Harker take it?--he'll snap at it. Only try him and see his greedy eyes glisten. What could Harker get by selling me up?--absolutely nothing. Besides, it would do him harm by letting others know how harshly he served me. Oh, no, Harker will not sell me up if he can find such an easy, safe way out of the difficulty."

"True," said Jasper pleasantly. "Well, I'll interview Leroy and see if I can persuade him to assist you, as a friend of mine; I believe I can do it for you. Going to Lady Merivale's to-night? Yes? Then we shall meet again; till then, *au revoir*."

So, with a shake of his fat, smooth hand, the benevolent, unselfish Mr. Vermont took his departure, still smiling serenely, on the business which had brought him that day to London.

Nobody knew Jasper's private address. He was always to be found with Adrien Leroy, and all letters were addressed to his club; or to Jermyn Court; but of the locality of that place which Mr. Vermont would sanctify by the name of "home," every one was ignorant. Whenever questioned on this subject--he never obtruded the matter on anybody--it was his custom to answer lightly:

"Home! what does such a waif, such a jetsam and flotsam of the world's flowing tide, want with a home? Really, my dear boy"--or madam, if the speaker happened to be of the gentler sex--"if ever you have occasion to see me, I am sure to be at one of these three places: Leroy's chambers, my club--the Pallodeon, or Barminster Castle."

And accordingly, to one of these places his fashionable acquaintances directed their inquiries for him. Mr. Vermont, however, really possessed a home, small, it is true, but one quite suitable to his needs, and absolutely secluded from the possible knowledge of his friends in the gay world.

After leaving Captain Beaumont, he had himself driven to the City. Alighting in front of a large jeweller's shop, apparently with the intention of purchasing something, he dismissed his car; then when it had disappeared, walked quickly along the crowded thoroughfare for some distance. At last, looking round furtively--for he was ever cautious--he dived into one of the small entrances in Lawrence Lane, and mounting two flights of stairs, entered the front room. This was the home, or rather, perhaps, refuge from the conventions of society, that Mr. Vermont possessed. Here he could find shelter at any time of the night, for he possessed a private key; and by his orders the bed was kept constantly aired and ready by the housekeeper; who had her own rooms on the floor above. It was no unusual thing for her to leave the rooms tenantless late in the evening, and find them occupied when she rose in the morning, Jasper having arrived during the dead of night, silently as was his invariable custom.

The second morning after his sudden return to town, Mr. Vermont was in his sitting-room, which was very plainly furnished indeed, partaking of a breakfast so simple that his fashionable friends would scarcely have believed the evidence of their own eyes. When he had finished, and the table had been cleared, he went over to the roll-top desk which stood in an angle by the window, and opened it, disclosing piles of letters, sheets, of closely written foolscap and slips of memorandum forms. On the corner of the desk stood a telephone, which communicated with Harker's private room, downstairs in the offices; they were dignified by the name of Harker's "Bank," and were, of course, those of the moneylending business which was carried on by Vermont in that name. Taking up the receiver now, he asked Harker to come up to him as soon as possible.

Within the next few minutes, George Harker was standing before the master he both hated and feared. He was very tall, with a thin, lined face, from which all light and hope seemed to have fled. His whole being appeared wrapped up in attendance on Jasper Vermont. He watched him eagerly now, not speaking until he was spoken to, but simply waiting patiently, doggedly, till his master was ready to attend to him.

Vermont drew the heap of various papers towards him--with keen eyes and quick brain grasped the multitude of facts they set forth, checked the long column of figures, struck the balances; and, with a nod of satisfaction, looked up at the man before him.

"All right, Harker, as far as I can see--and, as you know, that's all the way and a little beyond. But we must do better than that. Where's the private account?"

"Here, sir," said Harker, in a dry, rasping voice, somewhat like the creaking of an old, rusty-hinged door.

"Where?--oh, yes, I see. Oh, Paxhorn has come to us, has he? Writing poetry is not a paying game, eh? Or is it the fine, grand company that runs away with the golden counters? Well, all fish--or idiots--that come to our net are welcomed, no matter what wind drives them. Thirty per cent. from Paxhorn. No more?"

"I could not get any more, sir," said Harker earnestly; "I tried--tried hard--indeed I did, I assure you. I would not give in until he threatened to go to another office."

"Hem! well, I suppose it's the truth; though, of course, all moneylenders are rogues--and you're only a moneylender, you know." He looked up for a moment to laugh at the logical joke. "Who backs his paper? Lord Standon. Oh, my lord is pretty deep in our books already, isn't he? Where are his statistics?"

"Here, sir," said Harker, taking one of the papers from the heap.

Jasper Vermont glanced at it, and laid it down again with an evil smile on his face.

"Oh, he's good for more than that, Harker; but be cautious. We'll lend him another ten thousand; but put on five per cent. Lords must pay, to set the fashion to commoner folk. By the way, Captain Beaumont----"

"Whose bills you instructed me to call in, sir."

"Yes; well, I met him yesterday and promised to intercede for him you." He laughed harshly. "What fun it is, poor idiot! He shook my hand with profuse expressions of gratitude. Mr. Leroy will back the renewal and you can let it run. Beaumont's the second son, Lord Dunford is on his last legs, and the heir won't live another year, we can come down like kites when the gallant captain has the title and estates. Till then we'll wait; but stick out for another two-and-a-half per cent. Make the calves bleed, Harker; it will do them and me good."

About that small matter of the young artist, Wilson, sir?"

"Eh! Wilson? Oh, yes. You got instructions to proceed in the usual way to sell him up."

"Yes, sir, that was your order. He called yesterday, and pleaded for another week. His wife is dying, and they are starving. He begs hard for another week----"

Stuff, another week! the dog means another year. He should have thought of the time for repaying when he was borrowing. Another week--not another day. Start proceedings at once. Mind, I say it. Didn't I hear him call me a 'parasite from the pavement' one night at a ball? Screens have ears, Mr. Wilson, and parasites have memories. Sell him up--do you hear, Harker?"

"I do sir; it shall be done," replied his servant meekly.

"And now for Leroy's account." With a gleam of fiendish delight in his eyes, he scrutinized the figures and statements. "Ah! you are getting them in fast."

"All Mr. Leroy's bills we are getting in--buying up wherever they are met with, sir, according to your instructions."

"Right, get him into your hands--you know how. Be prepared for--you know!"

Mr. Harker inclined his head.

"Now for the women. Ah, those dear butterfly creatures will come to the nasty sticky papers that were meant to catch bluebottles only; well, then, they must take the consequences. What! Lady Merivale--the fair Eveline. Does she want to borrow money?"

"She dabbles in the Stock Exchange. I know her business man; he owes us money, sir, and we know some of his secrets. She has been losing lately, and has deposited her diamonds, sir--"

"Her diamonds? The famous Merivale diamonds? Where are they?"

"Here, sir." Mr. Harker produced from his long pocket a shallow morocco case which he tendered mechanically to his employer.

Jasper Vermont opened the case, and gazed on its contents with twinkling eyes; then, shutting it with a laugh, he leaned back in his chair, rubbing his smooth fat hands over his chin.

"What will her ladyship do for them, and when were those left? I saw her last night and--by Heaven! she wore--"

"Paste imitations, sir. I had them made up for her. Did you think the counterfeit good?"

"Capital. Oh, isn't it rich! that old idiot must have eyed her proudly, gloating over his famous diamonds on his wife's fair bosom, little guessing they were Mr. Harker's tawdry glass mockeries.

Capital, Harker, but take care, take care. Remember the duchess who brought her jewels to pledge, and discovered that they were paste already, and that the duke had done the transmutation before her. Beware!"

"I am careful, sir, I am careful, very; I do not think--I trust--there have been no losses, not even small ones. I do my best to secure your interests."

"Well, I believe you. You keep up the appearances, I hope? Never forget to tell people that you are only a subordinate, that you are acting for others and strictly on the instructions given to you by them. The more you assert it the more they'll think it a falsehood. Keep it up, Harker, and then, well, you know I keep my promises. By the way, how is the little Lucy?"

As he spoke the name, half scornfully, half indifferently, a visible change came over his tool and puppet. His face became paler, if that were possible, his head seemed to drop, his whole figure was expressive of deepest dejection, fear, supplication.

"Well, sir, quite well, and deeply grateful for your kindness," he said, wetting his dry lips.

"Ah! and so she should be, young hussey. A fine thing for her. Married and respectable. If that soft-hearted, simple little husband of hers knew all I know! Strange that I should have dropped on to her and that first lover of hers down in that quiet place. Strange, wasn't it? Now I daresay they thought they were as safe as at the bottom of the sea. Didn't think that Mr. Jasper Vermont, a friend of the family, could be staying at the same hotel. He ought to have married her, of course. Better that he didn't, eh? Yet that weak, amiable grocer, innocent and unsuspecting, lets her have it all her own way, and believes her just a little purer and whiter than the angels. Clever little thing, Lucy. Makes him think she loves him, I daresay."

"My poor child loves her husband better than her own life, sir," breathed the father. "She is so happy, they love each other so, and she is my own flesh and blood. Forget that accursed night and the devil that led her astray. Forget that she is anything but the wife of an honest man. Have mercy on her, sir."

"Well, Harker, I will; I am all mercy. Do your duty by me and I won't go down to tell the story of that night to Lucy's good, trusting husband. But don't ask me to forget, my good fellow, for that's folly. I never forget!"

"Thank you, sir, thank you," Harker said, wiping the perspiration from his brow. "I will do my duty and work day and night in your interests, if you will only spare my child and keep others from knowing of that one false step."

Mr. Jasper Vermont leaned back in his chair, and regarded his servant's agitation with quiet amusement for a few minutes; then he gathered all the papers together, put them away in his desk, and dismissed Mr. Harker with a nod, saying:

"You can go now. Don't forget the Leroy paper, renew Beaumont, but sell up that artist scamp to the last stick and stone. Parasites can bite as well as cling, Mr. Wilson."

CHAPTER XIV

The afternoon following the race the Castle guests returned to town, Lord Standon amongst them, and as that light-hearted gentleman departed without making any formal proposal for the hand of his young ward, Lord Barminster was greatly puzzled.

All that day he had watched Lady Constance with an unceasing vigilance, of which, fortunately, she was unaware; but he could detect no traces of affection in her intercourse with Lord Standon, nor could he find any reason for his son's despair. Like a wise man, however, he made no reference whatever to the conversation of the preceding night, for which Adrien was exceedingly grateful, as he felt ashamed of having exposed his real feelings, even to his father.

Instead, therefore, Lord Barminster endeavoured to find out the true state of the case from his sister Penelope.

That lady, disturbed from her afternoon slumber, was inclined to be testy. As far as she was concerned, she was very much against the idea of Constance marrying any one, for the girl's presence saved her a great deal of trouble in many ways; the consultations with the housekeeper, the choosing of books, the writing of invitations, these and a hundred other trifles which in the event of Constance's marriage would be shifted back on to her own shoulders.

Naturally, therefore, she considered the suitor who would be less likely to inconvenience her; and

he, of course, was Adrien. For if he married Constance, there would be, at least, some time during the year in which she would be at Barminster, and leave Miss Penelope free to resume the novel reading of which she was so inordinately fond. She scoffed, therefore, at any likelihood of Lord Standon's suit, and flatly refused to believe a word of it.

Meanwhile, Adrien was in a state of restless excitement, for which he himself could scarcely account, and accordingly he determined to return to London next day.

That night they were a family party of four, and Lady Constance noticed that her guardian's manner was considerably more cheerful than was its wont, and that during dinner he glanced with even more affection than usual at the handsome face of his only son. Afterwards, when the old man had returned to his own apartments, Adrien found his cousin in the silver drawing-room, with Miss Penelope. The latter had taken up her latest novel, and was devouring it with rapt attention.

Lady Constance, with a smile, beckoned to her cousin and made room for him beside her on the Chesterfield. He sank down with a sigh of content.

"You leave us to-morrow then?" she began, in a tone of calm inquiry.

He was filled with an insane longing to seize her in his arms, and cover her face with kisses; but he restrained himself, though he bent nearer to her as he said in a low voice:

"Yes, I am going back to try and put my affairs in better order. My father has been pulling me up--quite rightly, of course. I ought to have seen to these things before. I am afraid I have not been a good son to him."

"You do not see him very often, do you?" said Lady Constance, who knew to a day how often Adrien had visited the Castle during the last twelve months, during which she herself had sighed for his absence.

"No," he admitted. "I always seem to have so many engagements; but now I am going to try a new mode of life--thanks to your words."

"My words?" echoed Lady Constance, in genuine surprise. "I thought you said uncle had been speaking to you."

"Yes," he agreed. "But it was what you said to me during our ride that decided me really--about the tenants, and all that."

"You must not listen to all my complaints," she said, smilingly. "I am proud of the Barminster estates, naturally; and I cannot bear that they should be inferior to those of our neighbour----"

"Who is that?" he inquired quickly.

"Why, Lord Standon, of course," was the calm reply.

He started at the sound of the name of one he deemed his rival. The jealous blood rushed to his face and his heart beat fast.

"Naturally," he said, in tones as quiet as he could make them, "you would compare all estates with his--*now!*"

With womanly intuition she saw his meaning, but did not choose to dispel his suspicions just then. Not that she was a coquette or flirt, for she loved this man with all the strength of her being; but, on the other hand, she knew, or thought she knew, his disposition only too well, and she feared to yield to her natural inclinations, which were to allow him to see that he had only to speak, and she was ready and willing to listen. Instead, therefore, she merely said lightly:

"Yes, he makes a good landlord, for all he declares to the contrary. Then, too, he has a capable agent."

"Like Jasper," put in her companion, trying to keep his eyes away from her pretty, vivacious face.

Lady Constance was silent. However much she might dislike and distrust Vermont, she never expressed her opinion of him to Adrien. She therefore turned the subject quickly by inquiring after the next race.

"The Brigades'--in two months' time," he replied.

"The 'King' will run, I suppose?" she asked.

"Yes, and I shall ride him," said Adrien quietly. "After an accident such as has occurred, none shall ride him save myself; then if anything should happen----"

"Ah! no! no!" cried Lady Constance, her face paling, and her blue eyes full of alarm; "you mustn't!--you shan't!" She stopped short. "I mean," she went on, speaking more quietly, "you must think what it would be--to your father--and auntie----"

"And you," he said eagerly, catching at her hands. "Would you care, too?"

She gently drew her fingers from his grasp.

"Of course I should," she replied, in her usual quiet tones. "Am I not a sort of cousin?"

"Constance," he broke in passionately, "I have no right to speak to you, I know; but tell me just this, if--if----"

Alas! for Adrien. Alas! for poor Lady Constance. The book in Miss Penelope's hand had slid quickly from her grasp, as she sat dozing near the fire-place. At this, the most critical moment, it came with a sudden crash to the floor, and Miss Penelope opened her eyes, and sat up briskly.

Nothing more could be said under the circumstances, and Adrien was perforce obliged to spend the evening as best he might, turning over the pages of his cousin's music, and watching her with longing, ardent eyes; while Miss Penelope sat near by, tactlessly wide awake.

Presently she glanced up.

"Adrien, did you ask your father about the ball?" she asked.

Her nephew looked abashed. Truth to tell, he had completely forgotten it.

"No," he admitted candidly, "I did not. But forgive me, this time; I will ask him to-night."

A little later the ladies rose to retire.

"Good-night, my dear boy," said Miss Penelope, gathering up her precious book and chocolates. "You go to town to-morrow? Oh, then, I shall not see you again. Good-bye; and don't forget about the ball."

Adrien held the door open for her, and she passed out; then he closed it again.

"Good-night, Constance," he said, gazing longingly into his cousin's face.

"Good-night," she said, giving him her hand. "Good-night, and a pleasant journey."

"Will you not wish me a speedy return?"

"That might be an ill wish," she answered lightly--"if you did not care to come."

"You know I do," he whispered, and he raised her fingers to his lips.

With a vivid blush, Lady Constance withdrew her hand from his grasp, and left the room. Going straight up to her own apartment, she flung herself on her knees. The kiss he had impressed on her fingers seemed to burn them; the sound of his voice rang in her ears; yet, with a strength of mind extraordinary in a girl so young, she put away the sweetness of his half-formed declaration, hoping that his journey to town meant the cutting free of all entanglements, and the settling of his affairs.

Early the following morning, the sound of a motor, and the barking of dogs, brought Lady Constance to her window; below her was Adrien, followed by a servant with the travelling case, which was placed beside the chauffeur.

Adrien had already entered the car, and was about to have it set in motion, when a sudden idea seemed to strike him, and he glanced up at Lady Constance's window. Seeing this, she opened the casement and stood framed by the surrounding greenery.

Adrien waved his hand to her; then, hastily scribbling something in a note-book, he tore the page out, and evidently despatched it by one of the waiting servants.

She watched every movement, with eyes shining with eagerness, and could have cried bitterly at the thought of his absence. She knew, too, that she was playing a dangerous game, when she allowed him to return to town, his passion still undeclared; yet she felt that this was the only means of holding his affections; for she was a firm believer in the adage--"Absence makes the heart grow fonder." She sighed deeply, however, as with a parting wave of his hand, and bareheaded, Adrien was rapidly driven away.

A few minutes later the servant brought her the hastily written note. It was only a scrap of paper, and unfolding it, she read the two lines:

"My father grants us the ball. We will make it an eventful one.--ADRIEN."

Her face glowed. "We will, indeed," she murmured. "It is a high stake I play for; but it is worth the struggle. Heaven grant me his whole heart! I ask nothing else."

Carefully locking the scrap of paper away, she descended into the morning-room, where Lord Barminster was already seated at the breakfast-table. His grim face softened at the entry of the girl he had always looked upon as a daughter, and loved even more intensely--if that were possible--now that he meant to win her for his son's bride.

"So Adrien has left us again?" he began, as she poured out his coffee.

She flushed slightly at his significant tones.

"Yes," she replied. "Uncle, thank you so much for letting us have the ball----"

"Nonsense, my dear" he returned. "Adrien told me you wanted it, and that was sufficient. Why didn't you ask me yourself? Have I been such a cruel guardian?"

"No, no," she cried, and coming round to him impulsively, she pressed her lips to his forehead. "You've been the dearest uncle in the world. Indeed, no father could have been better."

He smiled at her earnestness.

"I've done my best, my dear, though I admit I'd like you for my very own daughter-in-law."

Lady Constance blushed scarlet. This was carrying the war into the enemy's camp with a vengeance.

"Nobody axed me, sir, she said," she sang gaily.

"Ah, but whose fault is that?" asked Lord Barminster, pleased that she had not refused to discuss the question.

"Please, Uncle Philip," she said, with a sudden quiver in her voice, "I'd rather not talk about it--if you don't mind."

"Quite right, my dear," replied Lord Barminster, patting her hand reassuringly.

For a few minutes there was silence. His lordship drank his coffee, while his companion stared dreamily through the window at the magnificent view of park and woods. The old man was the first to speak.

"We shall miss Lord Standon," he said, with a meaning glance at her.

Lady Constance looked up with a start; then, as she realised the significance of this simple statement, she smiled. She knew she could trust her uncle not to betray her woman's secret; and, though she had no scruple in using Lord Standon as a means to spur on Adrien, she would not allow the old man to be worried unnecessarily by doubts of her fidelity to his beloved son.

"Yes," she answered, quietly. "But he only came down for the race; and I daresay he was anxious to rejoin his *fiancée*."

It was her uncle's turn to start, and his intense surprise told Lady Constance only too well that her speculations were correct. Adrien had believed her in love with Lord Standon, and his father had undertaken to find out the truth. She was not afraid of Adrien's being undeceived now; for, even if Lord Barminster wrote--which was very unlikely--the spur would have done its work.

"I did not know he was engaged," the old man exclaimed.

"No, the news has not been made public; but he told me in confidence," Lady Constance returned calmly, as she rose from the breakfast-table. Then, having seen her companion installed with his newspaper, she passed out to the terrace.

To the astonishment of every one in Barminster Castle, some few hours later, Mr. Vermont reappeared.

In his turn he seemed quite as surprised when he learned that Leroy had already returned to London.

"Gone," he echoed, "just a few hours ago? Dear! dear! I must have missed him by telling my chauffeur to take the road across the moor."

He entered the Castle while he was speaking, and the servants hastened to learn his commands; for, next to the sun, there is nothing better than the moon--next to the Hon. Adrien came his friend and agent, Mr. Jasper Vermont. But Jasper waved them amiably aside, as he entered the dining-room.

"You would like some luncheon, sir?" inquired the butler, coming forward respectfully.

Jasper nodded.

"Just a snack, Judson. Don't put yourselves out for me, I'm off again directly."

While the estimable Judson went off to get this snack--which resolved itself into an exquisitely-laid lunch--Mr. Vermont dropped into a chair, and surveyed the scene through the open window. Strange to say, his thoughts seemed to run similarly to those of Lady Constance, earlier in the day; for he exclaimed under his breath:

"It's a large stake, worth playing for. Awkward my missing him." He smoothed out a pile of deeds and documents and replaced them in his leather bag. "He would have signed these without a word here; at his chambers, he'll amuse himself by reading them, confound it!"

A rustle of silken skirts attracted his attention; the scowl vanished, and he readjusted his smiling mask as the door opened and Lady Constance entered the room.

She had been informed of his sudden arrival; and, though heartily disliking him, she was yet bound to play the part of hostess while her aunt was resting.

Mr. Vermont bowed low over her extended hand, as over that of an empress.

"I hope your ladyship is well?" he asked.

"Quite, thank you, Mr. Vermont," she said with cold indifference. "I suppose you have come down to see Adrien? He started for London before breakfast this very morning."

"So I have just heard," he returned sweetly.

"I am not greatly surprised, as Lady Merivale was asking after him last night. I expect she summoned him."

The girl's face paled ever so slightly, though she strove to give no sign that his shaft had hit home. Adrien had received a letter that morning, as she knew, one having been brought up to her by mistake.

"Very likely," she said imperturbably. "I daresay he had to attend to some business too."

"Adrien is very changeable," Vermont said reflectively, "one can never count on his movements; following him is like wild duck shooting, down the river on Monday, and up the Fens on Tuesday. I'm sorry I missed him, though, for I have several papers which he must see."

Lady Constance tried to appear sympathetic.

"It is a pity you weren't earlier," she said with a smile. "Still, I daresay you know where to find him."

"Oh, yes," returned Mr. Vermont, glancing at her from the corner of his eye, as he aimed his second shaft. "He will be either with Miss Lester or her ladyship; he fluctuates between these two points of happiness as a rule."

Lady Constance did not appear perturbed in any way by this news.

"Lady Merivale is a charming woman," she said briefly. "But who is Miss Lester?"

"She is also a charming woman," was the smooth reply; "but with the difference that she is unattached--save to the theatre."

"Oh! an actress!" exclaimed his companion with patrician contempt. "That reminds me," she continued. "What is your last success at the Casket?"

"*My* success," echoed Mr. Vermont, with an air of pained astonishment.

"Yes, are you not the manager of that building?" she asked simply.

He bowed and smiled.

"No, Lady Constance," he said. "I fear the world gives me too much credit. I have nothing to do with this whim of Adrien's save to pay out the salaries for the company. The management is his--or rather, perhaps, I should say, Miss Lester's; and I am not answerable for its failure or its successes. I believe, too, he is about to give the whole place to Miss Lester."

Lady Constance started almost unconsciously, and Jasper knew that his words had hit home at last.

"I am sure you do your best to help him," she said, after a moment's pause.

"You are most kind," he returned with a bow and an ironic smile. "I trust you will let me prove my friendship both to Adrien and yourself."

CHAPTER XV

It was the night on which Adrien had returned to town. Jessica, ignorant that he had ever left it, had found her way to his chambers, and waited there patiently and hungrily in the hope of once more seeing him. As the clock struck eight she decided that it was useless to remain any longer, and accordingly retraced her steps through the crowded thoroughfares.

Anything would be better than waiting like this, she thought despairingly.

After the silence of the deserted street, the crowds, pushing and jostling her, brought her almost a feeling of satisfaction. Even if she were alone, at least she could not be solitary while the world rushed past her, in its eager search for pleasure.

At one point near Charing Cross a few curious loafers had collected on either side of the brilliantly-lit façade of a theatre, over which, in coloured lights, was the name, "The Casket."

As Jessica stood watching listlessly, indeed almost unconsciously, a handsome motor rolled up before the imposing entrance. The little group surged back before the white-gloved commissionaire, who hurried forward, but the door of the car had already been thrown open by the chauffeur, and a gentleman and lady stepped out.

At the sight of one of them, Jessica's indifference became changed to a feverish eagerness. The colour left her face, her eyes dilated, her lips parted. She swayed back, half fearful, half desirous that he should see her; for it was he, the man for whom she had waited so long, the man she had enshrined within her heart.

Adrien, all his doubts as to the possibility of winning Constance's love returning to him in full force once he had left her presence, had come down to the theatre with two objects. One to distract his thoughts from his hopes and fears, the other to arrange with Jasper for the entire transfer of the theatre to Ada. He meant this to be the last night as far as the Casket and Ada Lester were concerned.

Absorbed in his own reflections, he hardly saw the group of humble spectators, and did not appear to hear their murmurs of recognition, but turned and held out his hand to assist the lady who accompanied him.

Jessica's eyes flashed fiercely as they wandered from his face to that of the woman beside him.

"She is beautiful," she murmured beneath her breath. "She is beautiful, and with him!"

All the love which had been aroused in her passionate heart surged up, and, for the minute, almost turned to jealous hate. "Beautiful, and with him." It was agony to her to see him as he bent down to catch some light words of his companion, whose perfumed satin cloak swept by the crouching girl, as the pair passed into the theatre.

Full well she knew that she herself could never hope to hear his voice, or feel the pressure of his hand; yet it was with the bitterness of death that she saw him pass her by in the company of this beautiful woman. Mingled also with her jealousy was another feeling, that of partial recognition. For the moment--she could not remember where--but at some time in the past, she fancied she had seen that dark, highly-coloured face, and heard the harsh vulgar voice.

As Leroy turned from the motor, she heard him say to the chauffeur:

"Be here at eleven."

"At eleven," she thought, "then I will be here too, and see him once more."

She hung on the outskirts of the group and listened with greedy ears for any chance word that might arise about her idol.

"A reg'lar beauty, I should just think so," said a man, addressing another who had passed a remark on the lady in question. "She's the biggest star on the stage, you bet! Ada Lester knows her value, and ain't likely to forget it neither."

The other man ventured a remark concerning the lady's escort.

"Him? That's Leroy--son of Lord Barminster--the richest of 'em all. She belongs to him, she does; so does the whole theatre. Costs him a pretty penny, you bet. But lor' bless yer, he don't mind! Can't spend his money fast enough. My brother's one of the shifters; and the things he cud tell yer about 'er, and 'er temper, 'ud make yer 'air stand on end."

Jessica moved away, while members of the group aired their knowledge of the rapidly entering, smartly-dressed audience.

"That's Mr. Leroy's friend, Mr. Vermont," commenced the first speaker again. "I've 'eard tell 'e does all the work and pays out all the other one's money; but he ain't no class himself--he's not a real tip-top swell like them others." He pointed to a little group of white-waistcoated, immaculately-dressed men, now standing on the steps of the vestibule. "Lord! this 'ere Casket'll be crammed with all the swells to-night--'cos it's the fashion."

"So Ada Lester is the fashion now, eh?" commented his companion, who had probably known her in her poorer days, and therefore was inclined to be interested in her.

"Not 'arf, she ain't," agreed the man, with the Londoner's pride in laying down the law on the subject. "She's got a house like a duchess, and can eat off gold or silver if she chooses; an' all for her face, for she can't act for nuts. I've seen 'er so I know!" With which lordly criticism, he closed the subject.

As for Jessica, sick at heart with jealousy, she turned up one of the side streets to commence her long wait for Adrien Leroy; while the group dispersed, laughing and chattering.

The Casket was filled now to its utmost capacity. It was the first night of a new piece. The unfortunate comedy which Ada had so strongly condemned had been withdrawn, and a so-called musical farce--consisting of very bad music, and still worse comedy--hastily put on in its stead. As usual, no expense had been spared in the mounting, and Adrien's money had been poured out like water on extraordinary costumes, gorgeous, highly-coloured scenery, and a hundred embellishments for this new piece of elaborate and senseless burlesque, *Prince Bon-Bon*. But with all its deficiencies as regarded culture, the piece appeared to be a success.

Ada Lester could dance, if she could not act; and she could shout a vulgar patter song, if she could not sing; therefore after a tumultuous first act, during which she had been "Hongkored"--as she expressed it--to her heart's content, she was standing in the wings, with a cigarette between her painted lips, radiant with content and gratified vanity.

"Well, Shelton," said Leroy, as his friend approached him, where he leaned against a stack of scenery. "What do you think of the show this time?"

"As beautiful as it is senseless," was that gentleman's sarcastic reply. "Heaven alone knows what it cost you," he added.

"I certainly don't know myself," admitted Adrien, knocking the ash from his cigarette. "Ask Paxhorn--he wrote the lyrics, and had the management; or better still Vermont, whom I'm going to see myself presently. But this will be a success, Mortimer, and I shall make a fortune."

"Yes," said Shelton quietly, "for Paxhorn and Vermont. Well, it's no business of mine, of course."

He turned to Ada, who had been tapping her foot angrily during this little conversation. "Well, Miss Lester," he said, "haven't you a word for me to-night?"

She glared at him viciously, for Mortimer was not a favourite of hers.

"Yes," she snapped. "I hate the sight of you!"

Both men laughed as though amused.

"That was a fair hit," said Shelton, with mock grief in his voice. "Don't kill me right out, Miss Lester. Let me open a bottle of champagne for you."

"I don't want it," said the popular dancer, her eyes flashing angrily. Then, turning her back on him, she said to Adrien, "Ain't you going to the front to see me dance?"

"I can see you from here," was his answer. "You look charming, my dear Ada; doesn't she, Mortimer?"

"Yes, and as good as she is beautiful," declared that gentleman, making her a low bow.

With a furious glance at him, and a furtive look at Adrien, she passed them, and, accompanied by a burst of music from the orchestra and a storm of clapping from the audience, she commenced her dance.

Shelton watched her with a sneer.

"Hark! how they applaud," he said, glancing up at the crowded and delighted house. "They seem to admire her, anyway. Long live Miss Ada, Queen of dancers. Adrien, why do you put up with that painted vixen?"

Leroy smiled at his sudden change of tone.

"Don't let her hear you," he said. "And don't worry yourself about me, old fellow."

"You're afraid of her," continued his friend. "Oh, yes, you may think it an impertinence if you like, but I know you are. You'd face a cannon's mouth sooner than that woman's angry abuse. You

dread a scene as a musician does a false note. For me, I'm sick of the whole world."

"Why do you remain in it, then?" asked Adrien, laughing.

"For the same reason as yourself," replied the cynic. "Neither of us know what the next will be like."

Adrien laughed, but before he could explain to his friend his plan with regard to Ada, a crowd of pretty dancers in silver gauze surrounded him, begging for real bon-bons, instead of the painted property sweets given out to them.

"Do you girls think I am made of bon-bons, like the piece?" he said, waving them back. "Why, you'll make yourselves ill."

"Oh, Mr. Leroy," pouted one, "we've danced so hard, too!"

"Go to Mr. Vermont, then," was the indolent reply; "he'll give you what you want," and with a rush they swept back on to the stage.

"Always Jasper," murmured Shelton sadly, as his friend, with a genial wave of the hand, picked his way past cardboard castles and paper trees, till he disappeared through the door that would lead him to his stage-box.

At eleven o'clock the play was over; the superbly-dressed women, with their escorts, were descending the wide staircase, laughing and discussing the piece, which seemed likely to become the success of the season. Outside, the pavement was filled with the gay, excited crowds. Whistles resounded for taxis hovering in the immediate vicinity, like steel-plated birds of prey. Carriages were being shouted for, and throughout all the bustle and excitement, a slight girlish form doggedly kept its vigil near the main entrance.

The crowd of pleasure-seekers and onlookers had melted away, and the attendants were busy turning out the lights, when the glass doors swung open again, and three or four gentlemen came out, laughing and talking.

"Quite a success," said one of them.

"Yes, indeed," from another. "Paxhorn, I congratulate you again, old man."

"Thank you," replied the author, his face beaming with satisfaction. "Thanks to Leroy, it will run for a hundred nights, and my name will be made."

"On Bon-bons," sneered Shelton; "what a thing it is to be a popular playwright."

"Better to be a popular dancer," whispered Paxhorn, as the door swung open again, and Adrien came out, with Ada Lester on his arm, Mr. Jasper Vermont following behind them.

"All here?" asked Leroy in his clear voice, as they descended the steps to where the motors stood waiting. "Come along"--turning to the rest of the party--"we are all going to supper to celebrate Ada's triumph. Paxhorn, dismiss your car, old man, and come with us; we want to hear the rustle of your laurels."

Laughingly, they entered the vehicles, while, above all the others, rang the harsh voice of the woman, and Jessica, hearing it, shuddered involuntarily. Then they were gone.

Suddenly, while the girl's eyes were straining after them, the last motor stopped, and Jasper Vermont jumped out and hastened back into the theatre. More out of idle curiosity than anything else, or perhaps again prompted by the guardian angel of Leroy's honour, she waited to see him come out again. In a few minutes he re-emerged, bearing in his hand a small roll of papers, one of which he was reading, with a malicious smile on his face.

Jessica unwittingly stood in his path, and he crashed into her with such force as to knock his hat to the ground. With an oath he struggled to regain it, pushing her roughly aside.

"Out of my way, girl," he exclaimed, thinking she was about to beg from him. "I have nothing for you."

At the sound of his voice Jessica's face whitened, and she turned away, frightened, and trembling; as she did so, her foot struck against something light lying on the kerb. She stooped and found it was a small roll of papers, part of those which had been in the gentleman's hand, and which he had been studying so attentively.

She did not trouble to open it, but slipped it into the bosom of her dress and walked dreamily away.

CHAPTER XVI

"Is it a Rubens, or is it not? That is the question," drawled Frank Parselle, as he dropped his eyeglass.

On an easel in Lady Merivale's drawing-room, stood a picture, before which were grouped a small assembly of her friends, including one or two artists and connoisseurs.

Lord Merivale was also present, having been dragged away from his beloved farm, and worried into the purchase of this picture--the usual "Portrait of a gentleman"--by his beautiful wife. He himself knew nothing whatsoever about it, either as to its value or its genuineness; it was worn and dirty-looking, and, in his opinion, would have been dear at a five-pound note.

"Yes, that is the question," echoed Lord Standon. "It's not a bad face though. I should vote it genuine right enough."

"It's extremely dirty," yawned Lord Merivale, casting a longing look at the green grass of the park opposite and thinking of his new shorthorns in Somersetshire.

"Philistine!" exclaimed his wife, tapping him playfully on the arm. "You are incorrigible. Dirty! why, that is tone."

"Ah," returned her husband, turning away and gazing admiringly at a bull by Potter. He was as wise as he had been before; for the jargon of Art and fashionable society was not one of his accomplishments.

"I tell you who would be a good judge," put in Mr. Paxhorn.

The rest turned inquiring eyes on him.

"Who?" asked Lord Standon.

"Adrien Leroy. He is an artist, though he keeps his talents as secret as if they were crimes. It was he who did the designs for my last book."

A murmur of astonishment ran through the room. Nearly every one knew that it was to the illustrations the book owed the greater portion of its success.

"A modesty quite unfashionable," exclaimed Lady Merivale, whose beautiful face had flushed ever so slightly at the mention of Adrien's name.

"Yes," admitted Paxhorn. "Men have to proclaim their gifts very loudly in the market-place, before they sell their wares nowadays."

"Oh, Adrien is a veritable Crichton," put in Lord Standon. "There is very little he does not know, and even that is made up by the estimable Jasper."

"Yes, I saw them together got half an hour ago," said Paxhorn. "If I had known of this picture, I would have got them to come with me; for Vermont is a genius at settling any question under the sun."

"He's not always right, though," put in Lord Merivale, quietly. "What about that horse of Leroy's? Wasn't it Vermont who was so sure of his winning the race? Yet his Majesty did not win, did he?"

"No, I know that," said Standon, with a rueful smile, as he thought of his added debts.

"That was not Vermont's lack of judgment," put in Paxhorn, who, for private reasons of his own, always stood up for that gentleman. "I am sure the horse would have won had it not been for Adrien's ill-timed generosity."

"What was that?" inquired Lady Merivale, looking keenly over at him.

"He gave the jockey a ten-pound note the night before the race; and, of course, the fellow got drunk and pulled the 'King' up at the last fence."

"And lost his life, did he not?" asked one of the artists.

Lord Standon nodded, thoughtfully. He was attached to his friend Leroy, and did not see why he should be blamed unnecessarily.

"Yes," he replied; "the strangest part of it all was the way the poor fellow raved at Vermont."

"What do you mean?" asked Lady Merivale, sharply.

"We were all standing round him," explained Lord Standon, "and when Vermont came up the man seemed to go off his head, and practically said he had sold the race. Of course, it was all nonsense, though I believe Lord Barminster is having some inquiries made."

"But why should Vermont have sold the race? Really, it's too absurd," put in Paxhorn scornfully. "Especially as he'd backed him for five hundred pounds himself. It's hardly likely he'd do such a thing for his own sake, apart from his sense of honour, and his friendship for Leroy."

Lady Merivale glanced sceptically at the speaker. Her faith in Jasper's sense of honour was not very strong. Then she gave a deep sigh.

"Why, Eveline," said her husband, looking up, "you seem quite grieved. Not on your own account, I hope?" The idea of his wife betting was very repugnant to him, and Lady Merivale always endeavoured to keep her little flutters, whether on 'Change or on the turf, entirely to herself. She laughed lightly, therefore, as she answered:

"Oh, no, indeed; I lost a dozen of gloves, that was all." A vision of the cheque for five hundred pounds, which she had drawn, arose before her as she spoke.

"I'm afraid it will take a little more than that to settle Leroy's book," said Lord Merivale carelessly.

At this moment the door opened and Adrien Leroy himself was announced. There was the usual buzz of welcome, and her ladyship's eyes flashed just one second, as he bent over her hand.

"I am so glad you have come, Mr. Leroy," she said. "You can settle a knotty question for us. This is my latest acquisition. Now have I been deceived, or have I not? Is it a Rubens?"

Adrien smiled at the two artists, who were slight acquaintances of his.

"You ask me while such judges are near? Cannot you decide, Alford--nor you, Colman?"

"Well, I say it is," said the first.

"While I think it is forgery," laughed the second; and thereupon ensued a lengthy and detailed criticism.

Adrien bent nearer to the picture under examination; then he said quietly:

"Where two such lights cannot discover the truth, who may? I agree with you, Alford, and so I do with you, Colman. Both your arguments are so convincing that if Rubens had painted it, and were present, to hear you, Colman, he'd be persuaded he hadn't; and if he had not painted it, you, Alford, could almost convince him that he had."

There was a general smile at the artists' expense; and Adrien continued:

"Rubens' touch"--examining the face--"but--what is this?" He pointed to a small weapon thrust into the girdle of the figure.

"That is a dagger," said Alford. "Here, where are the glasses?"

"Thanks," said Adrien, "but I don't require them. It is a dagger, and a Florentine one at that. Ah! Lady Merivale, I'm afraid your picture is more a specimen of what a modern impostor can rise to than that of an old master. That dagger is of comparatively modern fashion, certainly not earlier than the eighteenth century, while Rubens died in 1640."

The two artists stared, as well they might, but were neither sufficiently acquainted with Leroy to express their surprise at his knowledge, nor had knowledge enough themselves to challenge his dates.

It was Lord Standon who spoke first.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "Adrien going in for history! Who would have thought it? My dear fellow, why not give a lecture?"

"On the vanity of human hopes and the folly of friendship?" inquired Adrien, so coldly as to startle both the company and Lord Standon himself, who not being in Lady Constance's confidence, was naturally at a loss for the reason of this sudden anger on the part of Leroy. He drew back in surprise, but any further reference to the matter was stopped by the entry of Jasper Vermont. As a matter of fact, he had arrived just in time to overhear Adrien's last words.

"What's that?" he cried, after he had greeted Lady Merivale. "Was that Leroy declaiming against the world? It's for those in his position to bewail its vanities, while poor dev--I beg your pardon, Lady Merivale--poor men like myself can only cry for them."

Adrien smiled.

"Quite right, Jasper. I'm wrong, as usual."

"Mr. Vermont," said Lord Merivale, "you remind me of the clown in the beloved pantomime of my youth."

"An innocent memory that, at least, my lord," returned Vermont, who never stayed his tongue in the matter of a repartee for lord or commoner. "May I ask why?"

"You always enter the room with a joke or an epigram," was the answer.

Mr. Vermont smiled.

"All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players," he quoted lightly, as he turned his attention to the unfortunate "Portrait of a gentleman." "Ah, what have we here-- another picture? An old master, I presume?"

The artists looked pleased; it would seem as if even the great connoisseur himself was liable to make mistakes.

"It is ugly enough, in all conscience," he continued bluntly. "For my part, I am an utter philistine, and like my art to be the same as my furniture--new, pretty to look at, and comfortable, and, for the life of me, I can't fall in love with a snub-nosed Catherine de Medici, or a muscular apostle. What is this?" He bent down to read the title. "Ah! 'Portrait of a gentleman of the sixteenth century.' Very valuable, I daresay, Lady Merivale?"

Lady Merivale, who looked upon Mr. Vermont as one of her ancestors would have regarded the Court jester, smiled indifferently.

"It all depends on the point of view," she said. "I have paid three hundred pounds for it."

Mr. Vermont looked up with an air of innocent surprise; but a keen observer might have been tempted to regard it as one of satirical enjoyment.

"Three hundred pounds! I daresay these gentlemen, good judges all, have declared it a bargain?" He motioned to the little group on the other side of Lord Merivale.

"Not at all," returned his hostess. "On the contrary, Mr. Leroy declares it an imposture."

Vermont raised his eyebrows.

"Indeed," he said. "How did he detect the fraud?"

"By the one weak point," said Colman. "That dagger; Rubens never lived to see such a dagger as that, so could not possibly have painted it!"

Mr. Vermont smiled, an approving smile that seemed to mock the picture as if it were a living thing.

"Capital," he said. "The rogue who palmed this forgery on you was evidently not a student of the antique. Poor fellow, how was he to guess who was to be his judge? You will, of course, institute proceedings against him, or send the picture back?"

"Impossible," said Lord Merivale, with a rueful smile; "I wrote the cheque last night; by this time it will have been cashed, and so the swindle is complete."

"Dear! dear!" ejaculated Mr. Vermont, in tones of the deepest commiseration, though he smiled as he added: "There's only one thing to be said, my lord. If that picture is clever enough to deceive such great experts, surely it has achieved its object. It certainly looks old enough to satisfy the most exacting of second-hand furniture shops."

He turned to Lady Merivale.

"Before I forget," he said, "let me discharge the object of my visit. Melba sings to-morrow at the Duke of Southville's party."

Her ladyship's face lighted up with real gratitude. Music was her one sincere passion; and, as she had been unable to hear that divine songstress during the season owing to various engagements, this news was welcome.

"Thank you," she said warmly. "How good of you to find out for me. It was kept such a secret. How did you discover it?"

"Ah!" said Mr. Vermont, raising his eyebrows. "If I tell you that, it would be bad policy. I may have discovered it so easily that my services as a solver of mysteries would sink to insignificance, or again I may have had to commit a crime; in either case, it is best to 'draw a veil of silence,' shall we say; sufficient be it that Melba sings, and Lady Merivale deigns to listen."

"Flatterer," she said lightly, as he rose, hat in hand. He glanced across at Adrien, who was talking to Lord Merivale. "I am off on another mission," he said, lowering his voice. "I fancy my friend must be thinking of his honeymoon."

Lady Merivale started violently. "What do you mean?" she asked, striving to maintain her usual cool, indifferent tones.

He looked down at her in innocent surprise.

"I am commissioned to buy a residence in the Swiss Lakes district for Leroy; and as I happen to know Lady Constance Tremaine is devoted to mountaineering--most exhausting work, I consider--well, there is only one construction to be laid. But, of course, this is in strictest confidence; you will not betray me, I know."

"Of course not," said her ladyship mechanically; her mind was working rapidly, so that she hardly heard the rest of Jasper's purring speech; and that gentleman, highly pleased at the pain he had so evidently inflicted, made a parting epigram and left his poison to do its work in Lady Merivale's mind.

One by one, the others followed; and Lord Merivale, with an apology to Leroy, returned to his study and the *Agricultural Gazette*, having his wife and Adrien alone.

With flushed face and outstretched hands, she turned to him reproachfully.

"I thought you had forgotten me."

"Impossible," he murmured, as he raised her hand to his lips. "I have been so bothered with various business matters, and have had so many engagements----"

"But yet had the time to go to the theatre with that awful creature," she retorted. "Then you have been spending a day or two at Barminster." She bit her lip savagely in her jealous pain and wounded vanity. "Adrien," she entreated, "tell me it isn't true."

"To what do you refer?" he asked steadily.

He knew that the struggle had commenced, and he was determined to bring this mock phantasy of love to an end. If he could not marry the one woman who had shown him what love really meant, he would at least have done with this foolish dalliance.

"Your engagement to that pink-and-white cousin--Lady----"

"Be silent," he commanded, more sternly than he had ever spoken to any man, woman or child in his life. His face had paled; his eyes were like steel. The very thought of hearing her name reviled by the jealous woman before him filled him with wrath.

She stood silent, but with flashing eyes, her breast heaving with excitement.

"It is true, then?" she panted. "You are going to marry her--tell me the truth----"

"I did not say so," he returned, slowly and painfully.

"Then you don't love her. Ah, I knew it!" she cried triumphantly.

He did not reply; and she read in his silence the confirmation of her fears.

"Adrien, is it possible--you love her, and she----"

"Eveline," he said, "for the sake of our past friendship"--she started at the words--"do not say any more. You know we have only played with the divine passion. It has beguiled many a pleasant hour, but I do not think it has been anything more than a pastime."

"Not to you," she said almost sullenly. "But how dare you doubt my feelings? How dare you insult me?"

"I did not mean to hurt you," he said gently, and her voice softened at his tone.

"Ah, Adrien," she cried beseechingly, "you do hurt me when you treat me like this. Try and forget her, unless"--she broke off abruptly--"unless you are really going to marry her. Is that so?"

"I told you," he answered wearily. "I shall never marry Constance. She is engaged to another."

"Thank Heaven!" was her, ladyship's mental ejaculation, but she said nothing aloud.

Leroy roused himself. "I must go," he said.

"So soon?" she asked tremulously. "Where are you going?"

"To the theatre."

She frowned, and, seeing it, he stopped to explain.

"It is no longer mine," he said with a faint smile.

"Not yours!" she cried in surprise.

"No, it belongs to Miss Lester."

Her quick intellect grasped his meaning at once.

"Henceforth, you mean to retire from the gay world, then?" she said, with a faint sneer, adding quickly, as his face darkened, "Ah, forgive me, if am bitter! I hate to see you unhappy. Try and forgive my ill-humour."

"You are, as ever, my queen," he said, "and can, therefore, do no wrong."

Lifting her hand to his lips, he turned and strode hastily from the room.

CHAPTER XVII

Adrien Leroy dined alone that night--a most unusual occurrence; but the scene with Lady Merivale moved him, and still troubled his mind. He had hitherto only regarded his love-making with her as part in the comedy of life, wherein he played the lover, to her lead; doffing and donning the character at will. That she had taken either him or herself seriously had never entered into his mind. Believing also in the hopelessness of his love for Lady Constance, he regretted bitterly having allowed his secret to escape him; yet so unaccustomed was he to the conventional and inevitable lying of the world in which he moved so serenely, that it had never occurred to him to deny the charge, and swear everlasting devotion to the countess alone.

Norgate, who waited on him as usual, noticed his abstraction.

"We're getting tired of London again," said that astute servant to himself, as he changed the dishes. "We're thinking of going East again or my name ain't what it is." For Adrien had spent the preceding year in Persia.

After dinner Leroy lingered in the comfortable, luxurious room, as if loth to start out again on the weary round of amusement. To youth and the uninitiated, pleasure, as represented by balls, theatres or feasting, seems to be an everlasting joy; but to those born in the midst of it, trained and educated only to amuse or to be amused, it becomes work, and work of a most fatiguing nature. To dance when one wishes to rest; to stand, hour after hour, receiving guests with smile and bows, when one would gladly be in bed; to eat, when one has no appetite for food; all this, continued day in day out, is no longer a pleasure--it becomes a painful duty.

Unlike the majority of his set, Adrien Leroy was never lonely; indeed, solitude to him was a pleasure, and one--the only one--which was difficult to obtain. Endued with a fine intellect and highly cultivated mind, even at college he had succeeded in studying when his companions had spent their time in "ragging," and other senseless occupations of a like nature. Thrown on his own resources, therefore, Leroy could have become a power in almost any of the artistic professions. Instead, his time, his youth and his faculties were being wasted in the ordinary pursuits of the people amongst whom he lived. Had he been a poorer man, he might have risen to any height by virtue of his own talents; but, lapped in luxury, lulled by the homage of society, he remained dissatisfied, discontented, and apathetic.

The clock, striking eight, aroused him. Throwing aside the cigar which had burnt itself out, he rose. He had promised Jasper to come down to the Casket Theatre; and, however weary he might be of the tinsel and glitter, yet he never thought of making an excuse, or of breaking his word.

He was about to set forth, when Norgate announced "Lord Standon," and though Adrien's greeting was as courteous as usual, the old genial warmth was gone. Lord Standon perceived this, and knew that he had not been mistaken in his belief that he had somehow angered Adrien.

Directly Norgate had closed the door behind him, therefore, he dashed, as was his wont, straight to the heart of things.

"Leroy," he said abruptly, "what's wrong with you?"

Adrien stared at him.

"Wrong!" he echoed. "What on earth do you mean? What should be wrong?"

"I don't know," returned the other bluntly; "but I seem to have rubbed you up the wrong way somehow----"

"Nonsense," said Leroy, trying hard to resume his usual warmth of manner. "What a ridiculous

idea! Have you dined, or shall I ring?" He crossed the room almost hurriedly.

"No, no, thanks," interrupted Lord Standon. "I'm just off again; it was only a passing idea. Sorry to have mentioned it."

He turned, as if to go; and Leroy made no attempt to restrain him.

"I have to congratulate you, I suppose, on your engagement?" he said coldly, when the young man had almost reached the door.

Lord Standon turned sharply, and stared at him. He grasped the situation at once, but was still greatly puzzled, for he knew Leroy was but slightly acquainted with Lady Muriel Branton.

"Thanks, old man," he returned, rather awkwardly. "But it's a dead secret, really; I suppose Lady Constance told you?"

Leroy frowned.

"Yes," he said simply, "Why not?"

"Oh, no reason at all," said Lord Standon, flushing like a boy; "only it's got to be kept quiet, you know--my affairs are in such a beastly state."

"I wonder you----" commenced Leroy.

"Dared to ask her," put in Standon, laughing a little confusedly. "Yes, it was a bit of cheek on my part, but 'faint heart never won fair lady,' you know, and by Jove! if I hadn't, some other lucky devil might have slipped in and carried her off by sheer force!"

Leroy winced; for he himself would have endeavoured to "slip in and carry her off" had it not been for his friend.

"I don't see the need of secrecy," he said coldly. "Have you spoken to her guardian?" meaning, of course, Lord Barminster.

Unfortunately, to Lord Standon, being in love, there was only one woman in the world, and therefore only one guardian, and that one, her father, the Earl of Croywood.

"Good gracious, no!" he exclaimed. "He's such an old curmudgeon--that until I get over that beastly race----" He broke off, scarlet with confusion. Absorbed in his own affairs, he had completely forgotten that he was speaking to the owner of the unlucky horse.

Leroy was pale with anger; the reference to the race annoyed him, but still more the expression of "curmudgeon" as applied to his father. Naturally, if he had stopped to consider, he would have realised that there must be some mistake; for Standon would hardly have spoken thus of Lord Barminster in his son's presence. But what lover ever does use his common sense? He drew himself up sternly, and Standon could have kicked himself for his unfortunate speech.

"I don't mean--that is--it's not your fault----" he stammered.

"Thank you," said Leroy ironically.

"Oh, you know what I mean. Don't pull me up like that, Adrien. I wasn't thinking of its being you--and you know what it is when a fellow's in love with the sweetest, dearest----"

Leroy turned sharply. It was more than any one could be expected to bear; insult to his father, blame to his horse, and now praise of the woman he himself loved.

"Excuse me, Standon," he interrupted curtly, "I'm afraid I must ask you to spare me your rhapsodies--I am due at the theatre." It was Standon's turn to be offended, and his good-tempered face hardened.

"Certainly. Pray accept my apologies for having detained you. Good-night," he said coldly, and before Leroy could even answer, he was gone.

Adrien strode restlessly up and down. For the first time in all his easy-going life trouble had touched him. He determined to forget it at whatever cost; so telling Norgate not to wait up for him, he set out for the Casket. It was such a lovely night that he dismissed the motor which was awaiting him, deciding to walk across the park to Victoria Street, and call in on Shelton, who had a flat there.

The park was beautifully silent, and still stood open to the public. Absorbed in his reflections, therefore, he left the main track and wandered down one of the by-paths, in which stood several wooden benches. Big Ben struck the half-hour. There was just time for another cigar, and Leroy sat down. He was in no humour yet to endure the heat of the theatre, or the chaff and vulgarity of Ada Lester.

He lost count of time, in the pleasant quietude of the spot; and his cigar was burnt down to an

inch when, with a half-sigh, he arose to exchange the hard seat amidst the cool trees for a lounge and a crowd of ballet girls at the theatre.

As he picked up his stick, he heard a footstep behind him, and turning, saw an ill-dressed, sullen-looking man. The light from one of the lamps near by shone full on him; and something about the stout, shambling figure, or the dirty evil-browed face, seemed dimly familiar.

To his surprise, the man nodded at him with a sulky frown, and said, in a thick voice:

"Good-evening! Don't remember me, I s'pose?"

"No, I do not," admitted Leroy, as he scanned the bleared, swollen countenance before him.

"Ah! you swells 'as bad memories; I ain't forgotten you, so don't you think it!"

Leroy gazed at him calmly; he thought the man was intoxicated.

"Do you want anything of me?" he asked, as he pulled on his glove.

"That depends," responded the man, moving forward so that he stood right in Adrien's path. "You're Mr. Leroy, ain't you?"

"I am," said Leroy. "What is it you want?"

"I wants to ask you a question," returned the other, bringing his face closer to Adrien, who recoiled involuntarily--the very smell of the fustian clothes offending his delicate nostrils.

The man noticed this, and frowned even more heavily.

"You're a gentleman," he said, "leastways I s'pose you calls yourself such--p'raps you'll act like one."

"Kindly make haste and tell me what you want, my good fellow," said Adrien impatiently. He did not know but that this was a preliminary to an attempt to rob him, and he was in no mood for a brawl.

"Oh, I'll be quick enough for you," was the sullen reply. "You don't remember me, you say; p'raps you'll remember my name--Wilfer--Johann Wilfer."

"Johann Wilfer," repeated Adrien, thoughtfully and slowly, wondering where he had heard the name before.

"Yes, Johann Wilfer, Picture Restorer, Cracknell Court, Soho."

"Oh!" said Adrien, as a burst of memory dawned on him. "I remember you now. What is it you want? But tell me first, has the girl Jessica returned yet?"

"That's just like you swells," growled the man. "Nothing like getting your word in first. Has she returned to me? You know jolly well she ain't. She won't come back to me till you've done with 'er, I'll be bound."

Adrien started, as the significance of the accusation dawned on him. He had thought more than once of the girl, with her dark eyes and silken hair. What had become of her? What, alas! could have been her fate, if she had not returned to this man, her guardian?

"What do you mean?" he said now, sternly.

"What I say," retorted Mr. Wilfer. "She ain't returned to me, an' that's my question to you. Where is she, an' what 'ave you done with her?"

"How should know what has become of her?" answered Leroy, genuinely startled. "Do you dare to insinuate that I know where she is? I have neither seen her nor heard of her."

"That's a lie," said the man shortly.

Leroy surveyed him for a moment.

"You are impertinent," he said, in his clear tones. "Stand aside, and let me pass."

Mr. Wilfer thrust his hands into his pockets, and stood his ground.

"That won't go down with me," he said insolently. "I want to know where my niece is; and by Heaven, I'll know too!"

Leroy stopped short.

"She was your niece, you say?"

"She was," said the man, "though it's no business of yours; she belonged to me."

"So I presume, or you would not have ill-treated her," retorted Adrien dryly. "When did you see her last?"

"Over a month ago--as well you know," returned Wilfer coarsely. "She ran off the morning you came gallivanting after her."

Adrien could have knocked the man down, but he restrained the longing, and said instead:

"I thought you told me she'd robbed you, and had run away? That was a lie, I suppose?"

"Course it was. Who wouldn't lie to save his gal from such as you fine gentlemen? I know yer, so it's no use coming this talky-talky surprise with me. You just tell me where she is."

"I tell you," reiterated Adrien, "I have never seen the child since the night I took her from the cold. Stand out of my path, or I shall hand you over to the police."

Mr. Wilfer laughed.

"So that's your answer, is it? Call away, my fine gentleman, call away."

He glanced round the deserted path from the corner of his shifty eyes; then, with a snarl of a savage beast, he sprang upon Leroy, and strove to bring him to the ground.

But he was no match for Adrien, who beneath all his listless mannerism possessed a grasp of steel and the strength of a gladiator. Almost shuddering at the touch of the man's greasy clothes, Leroy seized his arms, and lifting him off the ground as though he were a terrier, gave him a good shake; then he dropped him, lightly and easily, over the park railings, which edged the by-path, where they stood.

Johann Wilfer was too astonished for a moment to do anything but recover his breath, and Leroy, settling his disarranged cuffs, walked calmly away.

With a furious oath Wilfer sprang up, jumped back over the railings, and was about to pursue Leroy, when from behind him a hand was put on his collar, and he was borne rapidly and silently to the ground.

Meanwhile, Adrien, all unconscious of his deliverance from further disturbance, pursued his way to the theatre.

CHAPTER XVIII

Mr. Johann Wilfer glared vengefully at the smooth face of his assailant, and, struggling still, breathed out, with a choice assortment of oaths, the question:

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"Questions we will leave for the present, my friend," was the reply. "Are you going to struggle much longer? because if so, I shall be under the painful necessity of using still greater force."

Mr. Wilfer lessened his movements.

"Ah!" continued the suave voice. "So you decide to take things quietly. Wise man! Now have the goodness to rise and let me see to whom I have the pleasure of speaking."

Whereupon our friend, Mr. Jasper Vermont, released Johann's throat from the pressure of his knee--for it was by this means he had controlled the other's movements--and allowed him to rise to his feet. It was a very sullen and altogether puzzled individual that stood waiting, uncertain whether to listen to his captor's next words or to make his escape.

Jasper eyed him as a cat does a mouse, on the watch for the slightest attempt to move.

"So!" he said, as he took out his cigar-case, and drew forth one of Leroy's choice Regalias. "So! Now we are on our feet again, we look--well, I must say, none the less a ruffian."

The man turned savagely as if about to run away, but Jasper was too quick for him; with a grip of steel he caught hold of the other's arm.

"Not so fast," he said quietly. "What is your name, my friend?"

"What's that to you?" queried Mr. Wilfer naturally enough, as he settled his ragged scarf, which,

during the struggle, had become uncomfortably tightened.

"That is my affair," replied his opponent politely; "perhaps it is merely curiosity. But as a matter of fact, I think I have had the pleasure of meeting you before, and I never like to forget old friends."

Mr. Wilfer grunted.

"Come, let me think," Vermont continued, "were you ever at Canterbury?"

Mr. Wilfer started violently.

"Ah! I am on the right track. Yes, I remember now; it was a little inn in the summer time, a beautiful moonlight night."

"Wasn't me," snarled Wilfer, though his face was pale.

"I thought you were there," said his tormentor as cheerfully and triumphantly as if the other had admitted it. "You're not a good liar," he continued. "If a man can't do that sort of thing well, he'd better stick to the truth. At a little inn in Canterbury. Yes, I remember it all now. I'm glad my memory does not play me tricks." His grasp tightened on Wilfer's sleeve. "I don't like tricks," he purred. "How strange that we should meet again. I think at that time you were an artist; yes, that is what you called yourself, and there was a pretty little girl with you, and you called her your wife. Oh, yes, my friend, you were good at 'calling' things."

"Look here," growled Wilfer, getting his word in at last. "You just stow it, I don't know you----"

"No, I know you don't," said his companion imperturbably, "But you will; oh, yes, you will! Let us go back to Canterbury, where you manufactured such beautiful pictures."

Wilfer moved uneasily.

"Beautiful pictures," continued the mocking voice, "all by Rubens and Raphael and Titian. I shouldn't be surprised if that was one of yours I saw at the Countess of Merivale's to-day, the 'Portrait of a gentleman,' sold for £300. There was a warranty with it, signed, sealed and delivered by a Mr. Johann Wilfer."

"I didn't, it wasn't," the man stuttered, his face almost green in hue, his voice trembling with anger and fear.

Mr. Vermont smiled. He had his man safe and sound.

"Who the fiend are you?" commenced Wilfer, recovering himself; but Vermont's smooth voice interrupted him.

"I was right, I see! What a strange coincidence, Mr. Wilfer, that I should see your really admirable Rubens in the afternoon, and run against--or perhaps I should say, knock you down--in the evening."

Mr. Wilfer was goaded to desperation.

"Look here," he almost shouted, "I don't care if you're the old 'un himself; but that's enough of your jaw. What's your game anyhow? S'pose you did see me in a pub at Canterbury along of a young party, s'pose I am an artist, an' I did sell an old master, that ain't no business of yours; that don't give you the right to knock me down or interfere with me, so now then!"

"Finished?" inquired Vermont, pleasantly. "I quite agree with you, Mr. Wilfer--on some points; but it is greatly my business, as you will see. Had I not come up at that moment, I wonder if my friend would be as safe as he is now."

"Your friend," echoed the other. "Is Mr. Adrien Leroy your friend?"

"He is indeed," replied Jasper with a grin. "Now suppose you tell me what you two gentleman were discussing."

"Suppose I don't?" retorted Wilfer insolently. "You find out for yourself, if you're so clever, Mr. Know-all; I'm off." He tried to push past Vermont and thus effect his escape; but he was not to get off so lightly.

Jasper removed his cigar, which he had been puffing, and dropping his soft, mocking tone, said sternly:

"Stand back; go and sit on that bench. I haven't done with you yet, Johann Wilfer."

"I shan't," was that worthy's prompt answer.

"Then I shall call the police," returned Vermont, pulling out his silver cab-whistle.

Wilfer started back.

"Call 'em," he said defiantly. "I don't care. What's the police to me, as I should be scared of 'em?"

"A great deal," was the calm answer. "If you are mad enough to disobey me, I shall whistle for the police; they will find me struggling with a most villainous-looking ruffian, whom I instantly give in charge for assault and robbery of my dear friend, Mr. Leroy, who has gone in search of assistance."

"It's all a lie," shouted Wilfer furiously.

"Appearances would be too strongly against you, my friend. The law is 'a hass,' as doubtless you have heard before; and when it comes in the shape of a blue-coated, helmeted and thick-headed policeman, whose word do you think would be believed, yours or mine?--to say nothing of this evidence." Stooping, he picked up Leroy's gold watch and chain, which had fallen from his pocket during his struggle with Wilfer. "I found this is your hand. A clear case of assault and robbery, with penal servitude to follow."

Mr. Wilfer, dazed by the thickly-meshed net drawn round him, eyed the watch and yielded.

"Curse you!" he said. "You're a knowing one an' no mistake."

Jasper smiled.

"Thank you," he said; "a genuine compliment, and a candid one. Now then, to business. What did you want with Mr. Leroy?"

The man looked up at the smooth, masterful face, and inwardly acknowledged his opponent's power.

"I'm thinking, guv'nor," he answered slowly, "you heard all there was to hear, and saw all there was to see; an' a bit more besides," he added, as he thought of that precious gold watch he had so stupidly failed to see. "Any'ow, if you're so anxious for me to go over it all again, I wanted to know the whereabouts of a niece of mine--a young girl he took to 'is 'ome, some weeks ago."

Mr. Vermont's eyes gleamed and his hand shook slightly with excitement, as he lit another cigar; for evidently this was the girl at whom, he remembered, Norgate had grumbled. If she could only be kept out of sight, Jasper thought he saw a way to getting his beloved friend into even deeper trouble than he had ever dreamed possible.

"You can prove it, I suppose?" he asked.

"I can," said Mr. Wilfer; though, as a matter of fact, he would have found this rather a difficulty.

Mr. Jasper put his hand into his pocket; as we have said before, he was not very generous when it came to spending his own money, but there were occasions when it was necessary to buy fresh tools, and this was one of them. He drew out some gold, which Mr. Wilfer eyed as greedily as a dog would a bone.

"Now," said Vermont, "your address?"

"Cracknell Court, Soho, guv'nor," returned the man, his manner visibly altering at the sight of money.

"Well, don't you alter it without my permission," Jasper said sternly. "I may want you to do something for me; and, if so, you can get your revenge. Meanwhile, here's something to keep you out of mischief, that's to say, in drink; you'll be safer like that." He handed over the money--about three pounds. "Mind! don't go selling any more forged pictures, like the one the bond of which I hold, or you'll get caught. They make the sentences for fraud pretty heavy nowadays."

Mr. Wilfer shivered. Up to now, he himself had never been imprisoned; but other members of the gang had served various sentences, and their reminiscences were not comforting.

"I understand, guv'nor," he said; "but what of the gal?"

"All you've got to do is wait till she comes back; or if you find her about, let me know," replied Jasper. "Now, be off, and remember I can lay my hands on you--and so can the police--any minute I like, so don't play me any tricks. Good-night."

With that, Mr. Vermont turned on his heel and strode swiftly and silently away.

Wilfer looked after him with a scowl.

"He's a clever devil," he said, as he, too, went on his way.

Clever, Mr. Vermont most undoubtedly was. His worst enemies would not have denied him that virtue; but in this case his cleverness had over-reached itself. It had so amused him to torment his victim, that he had never questioned Wilfer's statement that the girl, Jessica, was his niece. Had he known her identity, subsequent events might have proved far different; but man, with all his gifts, is blind as to the future; he sees as in a glass darkly, trusting and believing in his own

feeble powers, as if he were omnipotent.

Meanwhile, Jasper trudged gaily along.

"Strange," he murmured, "how things work round for me. That princely idiot plays into my hands at every turn. What luck that I should just have followed him to-night--I'll live to see him humbled and disgraced yet!" With which pleasant thought he hummed Miss Lester's latest song and pursued his way to the theatre.

Some few hours later, he stood beside Adrien before the latter's motor.

"Are you coming with me, Jasper?" said Leroy heartily. "I'm afraid I've taken up a lot of your time to-night."

"My dear Adrien, does not my whole life belong to you?" replied the arch-hypocrite.

Adrien waved the suggestion aside.

"By the way, what is the time?" he said, feeling for his watch.

"I don't know," answered his friend, "mine has stopped."

"Well, mine has gone," said Leroy quietly. "I remember now; it was in that affair in the park."

"What?" exclaimed Jasper, in tones of the deepest sympathy. "Not that valuable repeater, surely?"

"Yes," said Adrien. "I must get another one."

Jasper smiled, as his fingers touched furtively the watch and chain in question.

"Did you find your papers?" inquired Adrien, as they rolled through the streets. "Jackson told me you lost them coming out of the theatre one night."

"No," answered Vermont, a flush of annoyance crossing his brow. "I have not. But it's of no consequence; Jackson need not have bothered you about such a trifle. Merely accounts. I dropped them somewhere between the stage and Ada's motor, and I suppose I must look upon them as gone for ever."

"I hope not," said Adrien sympathetically.

"They are of no consequence," said Vermont again, as they reached Jermyn Court.

Nevertheless, Mr. Vermont would have given many pounds of his dearly-beloved money to have had those papers safely clutched in his hand. But at present they were lying on the bosom of a wandering, homeless girl, and it was well for Jasper that he could not foresee when she was to cross his path again.

CHAPTER XIX

On the following morning, as Adrien stood before a mirror, putting the finishing touches to his toilet, carefully supervised by Norgate, his thoughts went back to Jessica. The idea of the child wandering about the streets, homeless and penniless, filled him with a supreme pity. He had meant to have spoken to Jasper about it, but he felt half ashamed; besides, he rather dreaded to see Vermont's cynical smile at the idea of his turning philanthropist to street-waifs.

He had just finished his breakfast when a servant appeared, with a dainty little note marked "Immediate."

The envelope bore no crest; for Lady Merivale used none in her correspondence with Adrien Leroy, from prudential motives. But he recognised the handwriting, and the faint Oriental scent her ladyship invariably used, and hastened to open it, fearing a lengthy epistle full of hysterical reproaches. To his intense relief he found that it contained but two lines.

"DEAR ADRIEN,--I shall spend the day with Aunt Rose at Hampton. Do you care to accompany me as you promised?"

"Indeed I do," murmured Adrien.

He recollected that on the day of the race he had promised Lady Merivale that, when next she visited her aunt, Lady Rose Challoner, at Hampton Court, he would meet her there, and row her to some of the pretty islands further up the stream, and there spend the day in delicious idleness.

So far, engagements on both sides had prevented this plan being carried out; but now Lady Merivale was evidently free, and he decided to cancel any existing arrangements, and fulfil his promise. Accordingly, sitting down at his desk, he dashed off a note:

"DEAR LADY MERIVALE,--I am motoring down to Hampton, and will gladly meet you there. I shall wire for the skiff and lunch. *Au revoir.*"

Having despatched this, he gave instructions to Norgate with regard to all his engagements, and ordered the car.

It was a splendid spring morning, just bright and hot enough to make the vision of the cool, broad river particularly tempting; and Adrien determined to put aside all cares, and take the day as it came. Lady Merivale had evidently decided to set at rest her jealous fears; and, he told himself, as Constance was not to be his, there was nothing else to do but to pass the time as best he might.

Whatever happened, he was glad to be done with Ada Lester. He had tired of her almost before the first month of their so-called friendship; but he had not had the courage--or rather the energy--necessary to relieve himself of her.

At any rate, Eveline's day should not be spoiled. It should be one to be marked with a white stone. He little thought with what danger the trip was to be fraught, or that it would prove the most momentous one of his pleasure-filled life.

Directly the motor appeared, Leroy dismissed the chauffeur, preferring to drive himself, as procuring greater safety against a breath of scandal touching her ladyship's name.

Through the crowded streets Leroy went steadily enough; but once clear of them, he put on speed, exhilarated by the rush through the pure morning air. So fast was the run that, on reaching Hampton Court, he found it would be a good half-hour before Lady Merivale was even due to arrive; and as punctuality was not one of her ladyship's strong points, he knew he had almost an hour to spare.

Having put up the motor at a local garage, he strolled down to the river, where he found his dainty little skiff, *Sea Foam*, ready and waiting for him. It was just big enough to contain two, and its upholstery of cream leather gave it the light effect which rendered its name so appropriate.

In order to while away the time, he rowed gently down to Richmond and back, and on his return found Lady Merivale awaiting him on the steps that led to the Court. She was exquisitely gowned, as usual, and in her favourite colour, pale blue, which suited her delicate colouring to perfection. She greeted him brightly and unrestrainedly. Evidently she had put all thoughts of Lady Constance from her mind, and, like Adrien himself, was determined to have the memory of at least one happy day.

"How is Lady Rose?" asked Leroy, when he had assisted his fair companion into the boat.

She smiled at him. As a matter of fact, she had barely spent five minutes with that invalid lady.

"Oh, just the same as usual," she replied. "It is quite safe; I told her I was going further up the river to visit some friends; so we'll enjoy our day--such a beautiful one, too. I am so happy! It was good of you to come, Adrien."

Leroy's face lightened at her words, for he had expected sulks, tears, and remonstrances, and here were only smiles and thanks. He did not appreciate Lady Merivale's ability. Had she been a general, never a battle would have been lost through wrong tactics. She knew Adrien too well to attempt to hold his allegiance by force; hers were silken strings with which to chain him to her side. She recognised well enough that any abuse or jealousy of Lady Constance Tremaine would only send him further from her.

Responding to these tactics, Leroy took up the sculls, and with the long swinging strokes which had gone so far towards helping the crew of his college to win their contests, sent the little boat quickly up the river.

Few men of his temperament and training could yet boast of such proficiency as this man seemed to possess. Rowing, skating, dancing, riding, and just lately motoring; at all he excelled, yet no living being had ever heard him pride himself on what he could do.

About an hour after Adrien had started, Jasper Vermont ascended the staircase to his chambers, to be informed by Norgate that his master was out for the day, and all arrangements were to be cancelled.

"Oh!" said Jasper quietly, inwardly irritated that his dupe should be absent, even for a day, without telling him of his intention and plans. "Oh! Where has he gone? He did mention it last night, but I have forgotten." He put his hand to his forehead as if trying to recall it to his mind.

But Norgate was too sharp to be caught by this time-honoured manoeuvre. He knew very well that the whole outing had been too hurriedly decided upon for Jasper to have been told on the preceding night; and he had no intention of allowing his master, to whom he was sincerely attached, to be worried by Mr. Vermont.

"I don't know, sir," he replied stolidly. "He did not leave word."

As the letter had been brought round quite openly by one of the Merivale servants, needless to say, he could have given Jasper a very fair idea of where he had gone; but he preferred to keep his own counsel.

"Oh, very well. I'll just go up and write a few letters, Norgate," said Jasper, making a pretence of indifference; and he passed into the study, Norgate returning to his own quarters.

Mr. Vermont waited until his retreating footsteps had died away, then with a quick hand and a keen eye he turned over the letters which lay where Adrien had carelessly thrown them. Amongst them was one which had been evidently overlooked, for it was unopened. It bore the Barminster postmark, and Jasper's eyes shone. Could he but learn its contents? He picked it up; turning it over and over in his hand. To his intense delight it was but lightly sealed, and by dint of a little care the letter was safely opened, uninjured and unsoiled.

It was from Lady Constance, stating that she and Miss Penelope were to spend the day shopping in London, and would be at Barminster House at eleven o'clock.

It was quite a short note, and Jasper, smiling wickedly, sealed it up. He knew there was no fear of discovery, for there was not a more unsuspecting man living than Leroy. His mind was working rapidly, seeking to mature a plan by which he could separate Leroy and Lady Constance still further.

First of all, he continued to search through the letters, pocketing those which were obviously bills. He looked at the last one with a sigh.

"Not here," he mused. "I should know her handwriting in a moment. Yet I am positive he has gone with her. She must have let him know by letter this morning. Can he have taken it with him?"

His eye caught a scrap of torn paper in the fireplace. Like a bird of prey, he pounced on it, and untwisting it, his small eyes glittered as he read.

"Ah!" he muttered. "Lit his cigar with it, and burned all save one corner--Hampton. Yes, that's it; under cover of Lady Rose they've betaken themselves to the river. Now what shall I do? Follow them, or see Lady Constance, or do both?"

Placing the scrap of paper carefully in his pocketbook he left the flat, and made his way to Barminster House. He had called presumably in order to see after some slight alterations then being made, and his surprise on finding Miss Penelope and Lady Constance established there was beautiful to witness.

On his entry into the drawing room, Lady Constance sprang up eagerly, regarding him as the forerunner of the man she loved; and Jasper smiled as he greeted them respectfully.

"This is an unexpected pleasure, Lady Constance," he exclaimed. "I had no idea you were coming to town."

"It's only for the day, Mr. Vermont," she returned as calmly as possible. "But I wrote to Adrien, for auntie, telling him all about it."

"Dear, dear!" ejaculated Mr. Vermont sympathetically. "I have just come from his chambers. I learned that he had gone out for the day."

"For the day," said Miss Penelope, "after reading our letter!"

"Perhaps he didn't get it in time," suggested Lady Constance.

"Poor Adrien," said Jasper with apparent reluctance. "I'm afraid I cannot even allow him that excuse; he had evidently taken away all his correspondence this morning."

"Oh, it's of no consequence," said the girl lightly, though her face was pale, and her eyes shone, as if through a mist of tears. "We are only going shopping for the ball, and that is dull work for a man."

"Can I be of any assistance, Miss Penelope?" enquired Mr. Vermont. "Do let me help; I love shopping!" But this neither of the ladies would allow; and with a parting shot on the subject of Adrien's whereabouts, Vermont took his leave.

His next move was to Waterloo Station, where he took a train to Hampton; and a little after noon, Jasper Vermont was strolling along the side of the river, smoking his cigar.

Very amiable he looked, and exceedingly interested in the boats, and therefore it was not surprising that the man who let them out on hire readily answered his questions as to the best season of the year, the approximate number of customers, etc., all leading up to the main question, had a boat with a lady and gentleman gone out that day?

"No," the man said. "Curiously enough, sir, no boat has gone out to-day with a lady and a gentleman in it, like what you describe."

"Oh," said Mr. Vermont. "It was my mistake. I thought I saw a gentleman rowing a lady down the river--rowing very well, too, in a light skiff."

"Ah!" said the man, puffing a cloud of smoke from his rough clay pipe, "I know who you mean, now; a gentleman--regular swell, and a lady in blue. Lor' bless yer, that ain't one of mine, that's a private boat that's kept up at the Court, I think. Oh, yes, he's all right; gone up stream, they have, and a nice day they've got."

This was what Jasper needed; and after strolling about among the boats for a few minutes more he started off along the bank, keeping at such a distance from the stream that, though he could see all who passed in the boats, no one on the river could see him.

The beauty of the day, the shimmer and sparkle of the river, with the soft lap of its waters, the singing of the birds over his head, all had no effect on him. His dark, beady eyes noted nothing but the boats that passed, none of which, as yet--though the afternoon was waning fast--contained Adrien and Lady Merivale.

Yet he knew that he had not missed them, for he had taken his lunch on the balcony of an inn commanding a view of the river, which he had kept under survey from the time he had reached Hampton earlier in the day.

Steadily, with the persistence of a bloodhound tracking its prey, he walked on and on, until he came to a village, or rather a collection of homesteads. Very small it was, consisting only of an inn, a house, half cottage and half shop, and a few red-tiled cottages wherein the bargemen lived, when they were at home, which was seldom. In the bright sunlight, the blue sky overhead and the shining river in the foreground, it formed a pretty enough picture.

In the little shop parlour now sat a woman and her husband, at their five-o'clock tea.

"John Ashford, Grocer," was the inscription over the shop door; and these were John Ashford and his wife Lucy. They had two children, now playing by the river side; and were, as the bargemen's wives expressed it, "doing comfortable."

The man's face was a good-humoured one, round, honest in expression, and commonplace. His wife was not so ordinary; a fair-haired, small-figured little woman, she showed traces of having been a "village beauty" in her young days, of the pink-and-white, shallow type. But in her eyes, and along the corners of her somewhat weak-looking mouth, there were signs of an ever-present fear.

Even now, as she sat pouring out her husband's tea, her habitual nervousness showed itself in the restless movements of her unoccupied hand, and the sudden start with which she would greet the slightest unexpected sound, or the knocking of a customer on the little counter. From where she sat she could see her children, and once or twice she smiled gently as she waved her hand to them, where they were playing with an elder girl who was in charge of them.

"I say, Lucy," said John, as he drank his tea noisily, "how's the girl going on? Getting over her shyness a bit, ain't she?"

His wife started; but he was evidently too accustomed to this to notice her.

"Yes," she said, reaching out for his cup. "Poor girl, she's seen some trouble, I'll be bound; and for one so young, too, and innocent. The world's a hard place!"

"Yes, indeed," agreed John Ashford, with a glance through the window, where the little group of three were playing. "Let me see, she's been here a matter of four weeks, hasn't she--since I went over to Walton. Rum thing me finding her at all. If I hadn't come across the moor instead of along the road, she'd 'ave been in that furze bush still."

Mrs. Ashford shuddered at the suggestions of his words.

"She hasn't given us no account of herself now," he continued in his hearty, good-tempered voice. "Not even her name, 'cept--what d'ye call it?"

"Jessica," put in his wife. "I call her Jessie, sounds more homelike."

"And hasn't she told you anything more as to why she tramped out of London?"

"No, nothing more," said his wife, "except that she couldn't bear the crowds. I haven't asked her either, John. She's a good girl, you can see that; and penniless as well as homeless. I should hate to send her to the workhouse, or perhaps worse," she half whispered. "If she's got a secret in her heart, we'll let her keep it, dear. Perhaps we all have a little corner in our hearts marked 'Private,'" she added in a low voice.

"Excepting you and me, my dear!" said John, wiping his mouth as he rose from the table, and coming round to kiss her.

She started again and paled a little.

"Of course, dear," she said; "I wasn't thinking of us."

"We've no secrets," said the good-natured grocer, as he took down his hat and coat from behind the door. "Our hearts are open like them clocks, with all the works outside, eh, Lucy, my dear?" Laughing at his own simile, he kissed her again.

"If you'll take care of the shop," he went on, as he opened the door, "I'll just run over to Richmond for those jams and things. Old Tucker's cart is going over, and he'll lend me a hand."

"Get along, then," replied his wife, "and don't forget we want some more spices."

"Right you are," said the husband, and with a wave of his hand to her he went down the path, the two children running to meet him.

Lucy Ashford stood at the door and looked after him wistfully.

"Poor John," she murmured, as she went back to clear away the tea-things. "What would he do to me, if he knew?"

Her thoughts went back to the great secret of her life. It was that which caused her strange nervousness. She had repented of the past truly enough, and no better wife could have been found throughout the kingdom; but the secret had eaten into her life. She strove now to put it away from her; for she knew she was in reality safe enough. Only her father and Mr. Vermont knew--and the latter she had not seen for years.

Now, therefore, she put away her cups and saucers and called gaily to the children, as they came running back. The girl who had been playing with them came too; and as she approached the cottage she raised her head and smiled. Lucy Ashford stooped to kiss the children, then said kindly to Jessica--for it was indeed she:

"I expect you are tired with them now, my dear. Come and sit down with me for a little while."

Jessica raised her dark eyes gratefully.

"No, ma'am, thank you. I'm not tired. I love the children; they are so good to me."

Lucy's eyes shone. What mother does not believe that her children are the best in the world? She had been like an angel of mercy to the tired girl when her husband had brought her into the little home. She had put her to bed, fed her, and clothed her in old things of her own; and she had neither questioned nor worried her since.

Jessica, only too thankful to find a home for the present, and realising the hopelessness of her strange passion for Adrien Leroy, had done what she could to repay her benefactress by helping her in the little shop, and playing with and taking care of the children. Now, at their request, she took them back to the river side again, while Lucy sat down at the table before a pile of sewing.

CHAPTER XX

Meanwhile, Adrien's skiff was moored at the landing-place of an old inn, some distance further up the river. Under a rustic porch Lady Merivale was finishing her tea, while her companion enjoyed a cigarette.

Alas! for the irony of fate! This day, during which he had strenuously endeavoured to forget Constance, had only shown him more plainly the utter impossibility of doing so. If he had but known the opportunity he had missed with that letter, his mortification and despair would have been even greater.

Constance had regretted her policy in sending Adrien from her almost before the day was over, and had purposely planned this way of seeing him. Deeming his outing--thanks to Jasper's clever

insinuations--to have been undertaken on purpose to avoid her, the girl's heart was heavy within her, and filled with something very like resentment too.

Adrien, on the other hand, all unwitting of the harm this excursion had done his cause, had talked long and quietly with Lady Merivale. He had made up his mind to break away even from these silken strings.

"So you have determined to leave me?" she said sadly.

He nodded.

"You know I must," he replied. "For your sake, as well as mine, it is best."

"Perhaps you are right," she said in a low voice. "So this is the last happy day we shall spend together?"

"Yes," he answered with a sigh. "Now, standing here, I see only too well that we ought never to have spent any at all. I dread lest I have spoilt your happiness, Eveline, lest a breath of slander should touch your name. I will not deny that I had of late hoped to marry and settle down as my father wishes, but it is not to be. Don't laugh at me when I tell you I am going to turn over a new leaf. After this ball at Barminster, I shall go abroad for awhile. That will give the world time to forget we have ever had more than a passing acquaintance."

Tears rolled down Eveline's face as she listened to his words. She had played her last card, and she knew the game was lost; though it was her vanity that suffered more than her heart. She was too clever and too proud to resist any further, however, or sue for his favour. Presently she rose, and said, as steadily as usual:

"Come, Adrien, let us turn down stream and retrace our way while we can see. It is dusk already-- I had no idea it had grown so late."

He helped her into the little skiff in silence; and as the *Sea Foam* glided over the rippling waters a profound stillness seemed to descend over the darkening landscape.

Presently Lady Merivale peered forward.

"This half-light is so deceptive," she said, in a rather nervous voice; "I nearly steered you into the bank then."

"Can you see?" he asked. "Put down the lines and let me guide the boat."

"No, no," she replied. "I can see well enough."

"Just as you like," he said gently. "I will row quicker. It's time we were in Hampton. For what hour did you order the car?"

"I came by train," she answered.

"I have my motor," said Leroy; "I suppose you would not return in that?"

"Good Heavens, no!" she exclaimed. "Whatever would people think? No, I'll return by train, and take a taxi from Waterloo. I shall even then be in time to dress for Lady Martindale's 'At Home.'"

He did not seek to alter her decision, but sent the boat along with rapid strokes, which broke up the placid water into ripples at each plunge of the oars.

Lady Merivale leaned forward and gave a sudden start.

"Look, look!" she cried in terror-stricken tones. "What is that?" She pointed to a sheet of spray rising and falling a few yards from them, or rather below them. Adrien turned his head to see the cause of her alarm, and his very heart seemed to stop beating.

"Sit still," he cried, "for Heaven's sake. You have steered us near the weir!"

With all his strength he started to row back. The strain was tremendous. That line of silver spray marked their fall to instant and certain death. No aid was possible; the solitude of the woods and lands was as absolute as if they had been in an unknown country. All he could do was to keep the woman in whose safety he was concerned quiet, if not reassured, while he exerted every nerve in his body to withdraw the little craft from the danger line.

"Cling to the boat," he shouted loudly, for the falling water rang in his ears with a deafening roar.

As he spoke, the frail craft capsized, and its occupants were plunged into the foaming, churning water. Leroy made a frantic grasp at his companion's dress, but missed it. A second later, he saw, in the midst of the foam, her slight form being carried down to the weir. With a cry of horror he struck out, in an attempt to rescue her.

In those few awful seconds he prayed that the punishment of their light-hearted folly might not fall on the woman, but on him; that his life might be lost, sooner than her good name.

Luckily, he was an expert swimmer; and aided by the stream, which was as swift as a mill-race, he soon managed to get within reach of Lady Merivale. With a great effort he grasped her firmly, and, turning slowly and painfully, swung aslant the stream to the opposite bank.

Her face was white, as if life were already extinct. Her eyes were closed.

"Heaven grant me her life!" he groaned, as, panting and nearly exhausted, he dragged himself and his precious burden up on the bank.

He laid her down and felt for some signs of life; to his intense gratitude, she still breathed; and with a silent prayer of thankfulness, he turned to look for assistance.

At a little distance a light burned in a window. Without pausing an instant, he took the still form in his arms and hastened towards it.

All unconscious of the struggle for life going on so close to her, Lucy Ashford sat working busily, her pretty face lifted to the clock every minute or so, as she waited for her husband to return.

The children were in bed, and Jessica was just coming down the tiny staircase when a sharp knock sounded at the outer door, causing Lucy to drop her work in her usual terror at any unexpected sound.

The shop had been closed, it was too late for rural customers, and wondering who it could be, she took up her candle and went to the door.

Timidly she pulled back the latch and peered out. A gentleman stood on the threshold with his face towards the river. At the sound of the opening door, he turned. Down went the candle with a crash and splutter; up went the two hands to her face.

Mr. Jasper Vermont stood looking down at her with a cruel, amused smile for a moment; then in his soft, purring voice he said:

"I'm afraid I've startled you, Miss--Mrs. Ashford. Pray let me recover the candle. There that's better." As he spoke he pushed past her into the dimly lighted shop.

"Quite startled, eh?" he continued blandly. "Unwelcome visitor, I suppose?"

"No, no!" breathed the poor little woman, who at the moment resembled a sparrow in the clutches of a hawk, or a mouse beneath the paw of its enemy, the cat. "No, no, I--I am very glad to see you, sir. Will you come in?"

At this faint welcome Mr. Vermont smiled still more.

"Thank you, Mrs. Lucy," he said, "I think I will," and he followed her into the spotless sitting-room.

Meanwhile, Jessica, at the first sound of a strange voice, and afraid of being sought for by Wilfer, had concealed herself at the back of the house.

Jasper looked round the room in mock admiration.

"What a delightful little place you have here," he continued. "Most charming! Commerce and romance mingled together, I declare. And now," sinking into a seat and fixing his eyes upon the white, frightened face of his victim, "how is your husband, Mr. John Ashford?"

"Very well, sir," faltered the miserable woman, praying with all her heart that John might not come home.

"And the children," continued her persecutor; "two, are there not? Pretty little dears! I'm so fond of children, you know, Mrs. Lucy. Quite a happy woman you must be. A most comfortable little house, I never saw anything like it, excepting once, and that was at Canterbury."

The poor woman, her worst fears realised, fell down on her knees, and turned up her white face piteously to the cruel, mocking one above her.

"Oh, sir, kind, good sir," she implored, "spare me! You will not, say you will not ruin me? We are so happy; it will break his heart if he learns my secret. He is so good. The children! Have pity on them at least, sir, and do not betray me."

Jasper smiled, and Lucy became even more incoherent.

"Oh, sir," she cried, the tears streaming down her white face unheeded. "I was so young, so giddy and thoughtless, and that man was so wicked. He tempted me. Oh, Mr. Vermont, sir, I will pray every night for you as I pray for John and my little ones, if you will but spare me and keep my secret."

She might just as well have prayed to the wooden table, as expect any mercy or pity from this man, to whom such abject misery was better than meat and drink.

With a contemptuous gesture, as if to spurn her from his sight, he said:

"Get up, my good woman. I shall keep your secret as long as it pleases me. Perhaps for ever, who can tell? Good John, simple John," he laughed maliciously. "He little thinks his wife was given to taking trips to Canterbury with handsome young men. There! There!" he added, as a moan of anguish burst from the dry lips of the tortured woman. "That will do. I shan't enlighten good kind John, as long as you do what I want. I need a bed. I'm going to sleep here to-night. Hullo! who's that?" He broke off suddenly, as Jessica, tired of waiting outside for his departure, entered the room, her dark eyes dilated with anxiety.

She paused at the sound of his voice, and stared at him. She recognised him as the man she had seen with Leroy, and some subtle instinct seemed to tell her that he was evil. Jasper, too, stared at her uneasily. A memory of another person, strangely like her, crossed his mind, but he was too full of his knowledge concerning Leroy to consider any fresh train of thought.

Mrs. Ashford hastily composed her features.

"Only a girl stopping here," she said hurriedly; then, turning to the silent spectator, she said, "Go, my dear, I shall not want you at present," and Jessica gladly left the room, while Jasper, taking her to be a servant, gave no more thought to her.

"Now what about a room?" he said imperiously, as he took off his light overcoat.

"You shall have the best, sir," replied Lucy, only too eager to conciliate him. "Anything--everything we have is yours."

"Very kind of you, I'm sure," yawned Jasper. "Set about it then."

He was tired, for he had done a great deal of walking for him, who was accustomed to use his own or his friend's motor for every journey, great or small. Besides, he had somehow missed Adrien despite his care, and was greatly puzzled and irritated.

He was turning to follow Lucy, when there came a sound of footsteps, followed by another loud knock at the door, and a man's commanding voice:

"Help! Quick here with a light!"

Lucy screamed, and Jasper Vermont turned rather pale, for he instantly recognised the voice as that of the man he had sought so diligently all that day. But he had no desire to be discovered just then, so, taking the frightened woman almost savagely by the arm, he whispered fiercely:

"You may let him in--I know him. But if he finds out that I am here, I will tell John all to-night; remember that. Hide me somewhere where I can see--do you understand? Quick!"

The knocking commenced again, and under its cover, Lucy, trembling like a leaf, opened a door, the upper part of which was glazed, and which led from the small room to the kitchen. Into this ambush Mr. Vermont hurried, while Lucy ran to the other door and threw it open to admit Adrien Leroy, who staggered into the room with his dripping burden in his arms.

"I'm sorry to knock you up," he said, trying to reassure her, "but this lady is nearly dead; our boat upset."

"Bring her in here, sir," said the good little woman, her courage and self-possession returning under the emergency. "She had better come up to the bedroom, poor lady."

Adrien carried Eveline up the narrow staircase, followed by Lucy, who had hastily produced some spirits with which to restore consciousness.

"You had better fetch a doctor, sir," she called after Adrien, as he came down again.

Leroy hesitated. He knew that Lady Merivale valued her reputation more than her life. To fetch a doctor might save the latter, but would most certainly ruin the former; for no medical man would permit her to return to London that night, and, in that case, discovery would be inevitable.

Troubled and worn with anxiety, he paced to and fro in the room behind the shop, regardless of his own dripping clothes, while Jasper, behind the little window curtain, watched him sardonically, his lips wreathed in a smile. He was well content with this finish of his day's holiday--if such it might be called; for he knew that he held Lady Merivale in the hollow of his hand. She, who had sneered at his position, while yet making every use of his services, would in the future be but another of his puppets; and he foresaw a goodly profit from the outlay of this day's time and money.

Presently Lucy ran down.

"Where's the doctor, sir?" she asked. "Oh, didn't you go after all? Well, it doesn't matter, for the

lady is alive and better."

"Thank Heaven!" ejaculated Leroy fervently.

"She says she doesn't need one."

"I understand," replied Adrien. "Is she well enough to sit up, or move?"

"Yes, sir--at least, she says so," answered Lucy. "She is changing her clothes for some of mine, sir; and she says that if you get a carriage--"

Adrien nodded.

"I understand," he said again. "Is there an inn near here where I can hire one?"

"Oh, yes, sir," replied Lucy. She quickly directed him to the tiny river hostel not far off, and Adrien disappeared.

Had it not been for that grim presence behind the door, whom, in her excitement, she had nearly forgotten, Lucy would have wished John to come home quickly; as it was, she trembled at every fresh sound as she went upstairs again to her patient.

By means of that most potent magic--gold, Leroy quickly procured a carriage, old and dusty; but a veritable thing of beauty in such a strait as this. He meant to get to Hampton, and from there use his own motor. He hastened back to the little shop, and, summoning Lucy, sent her up with a message.

"Tell the lady," he said quickly, "I have a carriage waiting, and if she is strong enough, we can start at once."

The news acted like a tonic; for in a marvellously short time Lady Merivale, pale but resolute, came downstairs into the little sitting-room.

She was wrapped up in shawls, and a long cloak covered her from head to foot. Too upset to speak, she motioned with her hand to Adrien to open the door; and, laying a ten-pound note on the table, he said a few words of thanks to Lucy, then led the unhappy countess to the carriage.

No sooner had the horse started than her calmness gave way. She covered her face with her hands and burst into tears.

"Adrien," she sobbed, "I am ruined."

"No," said Leroy reassuringly, "you are safe, now. This man is promised ten pounds if he reaches Hampton in half an hour. My motor is waiting there. I myself will drive you to Waterloo Station; there you can get a taxi, without attracting any attention, and you will reach home before ten. Your husband will think you stayed to dine with Lady Rose."

"But you--you!" she wailed, "Will you promise----"

"I," he said, with a laugh of scorn at her doubt of him. "This day of my life is yours; none will ever hear from me how it was spent, and you know it."

"You swear?"

"I give you my word," he said simply. "I can give no stronger oath than that."

Lady Merivale sank back with a sigh of relief.

Alas! Leroy did not pause to reflect that, let happen what might, there was one day of his life he could not account for--one whole day of which he had sworn to keep silent.

Faster and faster went the great car, at a pace that would have shocked chauffeur and policeman alike, but Leroy was reckless; a woman's honour and his own were in imminent peril. Death were sweeter than his failure to save it.

It was not much after nine when the car rolled into Waterloo Station, and Leroy assisted his trembling companion to alight. Wrapped up in Lucy's big coat, she stood quietly by while Leroy left his car in the care of an outside porter, then led her apparently towards the booking office. Passing through this, they manoeuvred to reach the outside, where a taxi was hailed, and the address given.

Thankful at their escape, Leroy stood bareheaded till it disappeared in the throng of vehicles; then he returned to his own motor, as he thought, unseen and unnoticed.

Alas for his vain hopes! Miss Penelope and Constance, after a long day's shopping, had come to Waterloo on their way back to Barminster. The sharp eyes of Lady Constance, quickened by love, recognised the figure of Adrien from afar; and, making some excuse to Miss Penelope, she followed and watched the departure.

She did not recognise the lady, it is true; but she saw sufficient to realise that her worst fears were fulfilled. Adrien had neglected her letter for the sake of another woman.

Jasper waited patiently until the sound of the carriage wheels had died away into the distance, then he came out of his hiding-place, his face pale, his eyes shining.

"Lucy Ashford," he said, sinking into a chair, and holding up one finger in solemn warning, "you may be asked some day to give an account of what has taken place to-night. Remember this; you know nothing, you recognised no one--till I give you leave. Disobey me, and the story of your Canterbury trip becomes the property of the whole world. I'll proclaim it through every newspaper in the world."

Trembling and crying, and too ignorant to realise the absurdity of this threat, Lucy swore to be silent; and then, to her intense relief, Mr. Vermont changed his mind as to staying the night, and announced his decision of returning to London.

CHAPTER XXI

On the night of that fateful trip, when Leroy returned to his chambers, he found Lady Constance's letter. Already tired with the events of the day, and the struggle in the water, this proved an overwhelming blow. The thought that he had spent the day in idle dalliance, when he might have been with the woman he truly loved--might have basked in the warmth of her presence, even though she would never be his, drove him almost to madness.

Jasper Vermont, who had followed him back to town by the first train obtainable, called in at Jermyn Court, and found him pacing up and down the room, more troubled and unhappy than he had ever been in the whole course of his pampered, shielded life. Vermont listened and sympathised, and stabbed afresh, with his artful accounts of Lady Constance's anger at the fancied slight. He was altogether delighted at the way in which things had turned out, though he did not know how Fortune had aided him still more at Waterloo Station.

On the following morning Leroy received a cypher note from Lady Merivale, saying that she had arrived home safely, and unnoticed; and, with a sigh of relief, he turned his attention to his own affairs. To Jasper's supreme annoyance, he insisted on going through a pile of papers which Vermont had only meant him to sign; and to that gentleman's chagrin he actually dared to interfere in the matter of rents and leases; which proceeding, naturally, did not tend to make Jasper feel the more kindly disposed to the world in general, and Adrien Leroy in particular.

When he had taken his departure, Adrien ordered the motor, and drove down to Barminster with the intention of offering an apology for his seeming discourtesy. He found all in confusion and excitement in view of the coming ball; and, whether by accident or design, he found it impossible to get a single word with Constance alone.

The two ladies received the explanation of his absence--a river-trip with a friend--with chilling indifference. To Miss Penelope nothing was of any importance except the decorations of the banqueting hall, while Lady Constance had the evidence of her own eyesight. He was compelled, therefore, to return to London the next day in the same unhappy state of mind. To distract his thoughts, he threw himself heart and soul into the preparations for the festive event; and even Jasper Vermont himself could not have worked harder.

The announcement of the fancy dress ball to be held at Barminster had made something like a sensation; for not only was the magnificence of the Castle well known, but the fact that it was so seldom used for festivities of any kind lent importance to the occasion, and had roused society, both in town and country, to the height of expectancy.

Preparations were carried on apace. The whole Castle was to be lighted and decorated, regardless of expense, while even the servants' dresses were to be manufactured by the masters of their craft, and approved of by heraldic authorities, in order that the right effect of the period, that of two hundred years back, might be maintained. Never had a ball been carried out with such a wealth of detail.

Throughout all this, and during the many visits which Adrien found necessary to make to Barminster, journeying backwards and forwards in his great car, Lady Constance maintained a smiling, gentle demeanour; but she allowed him no opportunity for explanation, seeming rather to avoid his presence. Even Lord Barminster, watching his two dear ones closely, was not blind to the gravity of the situation; but he trusted to Constance's love to make matters right in the end.

At last the eventful night came. The temporary stables which the village carpenters had been erecting close to the ordinary ones were rapidly filling. Cars and carriages stood side by side, as guests from town and the surrounding districts arrived; and the air resounded with the clatter and rattle of the horses' hoofs and carriage wheels, mingled with the hooting of motor horns.

Within the Castle all was light and mirth. Ripples of laughter and the buzz of conversation went on incessantly, as the guests arrived in their varied and gorgeous costumes.

The walls of the great reception rooms had all been covered with priceless tapestry, and as far as possible made to represent the ball-room of Antony Leroy, two hundred years ago. But the guests themselves had not been asked to keep to any period of history or fashion, and, therefore, it was the most incongruous crowd that had ever gathered within the walls of Barminster Castle. Never were dresses more regal or more magnificent, alike in materials, colour and decoration. Cavaliers in silks and satins, with plumed hats and jewelled swords; Crusaders in glittering mail and silver armour. Alsace peasant girls mingled with Carmelite monks and Sicilian nuns. Shakespeare's characters were legion--Portias, Cymbelines, Katherines and Shylocks, all laughed and jested together, their identity concealed beneath their black velvet masks. It seemed as if every character and fable had risen to throng the halls of Barminster Castle that night.

Up in the gallery above the great ball-room a famous orchestra poured forth melody, and the guests were awaiting the entrance of their host as a signal to start dancing.

The last visitor had arrived, when Lord Barminster and his sister came from the entrance hall, where they had stood so long. The old man had merely donned a domino over his evening dress and carried his mask in his hand; but Miss Penelope had had her elaborate dress copied from a picture of Lord Antony's wife, which hung in the Picture Gallery. The gown was composed of soft grey satin, over which hung a veil of gold chiffon embroidered with pearls. An embroidery of gold wheat-ears sown with pearls decorated the bodice and the long, grey satin train; this, together with the family diamonds, made Miss Penelope an imposing figure, even in that bevy of fair women and gorgeous gowns.

Immediately behind them came Adrien and Lady Constance. The latter had chosen to represent "Miranda," and her loveliness seemed almost supernatural. The pale gold of her hair and the perfect shell-pink of her complexion were set off to advantage by her gown, which, simple as it was, yet showed by that very simplicity the hand of the master by whom it had been designed. It was of palest green satin, edged with chiffon in such a way as to represent the crested waves, relieved here and there by pink sea-shells and tiny wreaths of seaweed; while her only ornaments were pearls, the gifts of her guardian. It was little wonder that Adrien had been unable to express the admiration he felt, when he looked upon her fair beauty, which was now, however, covered by a velvet mask.

He himself had taken the character of Charles the First, and, with his dark, deep eyes and melancholy face, fully looked the part of the unhappy monarch. There was a faint murmur of admiration as he entered, for every detail had been so carefully copied, from the lace collar to the jewelled order across his breast, that it was as if Van Dyck's famous picture itself had stepped down from its frame.

Unconscious of the attention they provoked, Adrien led Lady Constance out to the first dance, and opened the ball with her.

Miss Penelope was in the seventh heaven of delight, when some little time later Adrien came up to her.

"What a magnificent sight, is it not, Adrien?" she said excitedly. "I knew it would be a success; but really the dresses are wonderful. Then the mystery is so delightful. I can't recognise any one now under the masks. Look, who is that?" She glanced towards a lady dressed as Undine, who seemed to float by them, so light were her movements, on the arm of a Mephistopheles.

"That," said Adrien, whose quick eyes readily penetrated the majority of the disguises, "that is--yes, I cannot be mistaken--Ev--Lady Merivale."

His voice dropped slightly as he spoke the name; for he had not expected that she would accept Miss Penelope's invitation, and was surprised by her presence.

"Who is the Mephistopheles?" asked his aunt.

Adrien glanced after the couple rather puzzled.

"I don't know," he admitted frankly.

"It is something, a shadow only, like Mr. Vermont," suggested Miss Penelope.

"It cannot be he," said Adrien, "he is not coming to-night."

Lord Barminster, who had approached in time to hear this speech, looked affectionately at his son, and Adrien caught the glance and understood it. But without making any comment, he went in search of his partner for the next waltz.

Meanwhile, Undine and Mephistopheles had seated themselves in the deep recess of one of the alcoves.

"May I get you an ice, madam?" asked the Mephistopheles in a queer, strained voice.

Undine turned her face towards him, and her eyes flashed curiously through the mask.

"You may," she replied, also disguising her voice, "if you will tell me who you are."

"That I dare not," was the guarded reply. "My name is never mentioned in ears polite, you know."

Undine smiled.

"Since you will not tell me your name, perhaps you can tell me mine without the asking."

"I can, madam. You are--Lady Merivale, who is so fond of the river."

Undine started, her face turning suddenly pale.

"I--what do you mean? Who are you?" she asked, as she peered at him with straining eyes, seeking to pierce the clever disguise.

"Mephistopheles!" was the calm retort. Then, as if to turn the subject, he continued lightly: "It is a fair scene, and a fabulous one."

Undine began to have a slight suspicion as to whom her companion might be, and was far from comfortable in her mind. The hit at the river might have been only a chance one; but this was doubtful, if Mephistopheles turned out to be either Mortimer Shelton or Jasper Vermont, as she half feared.

She strove to conceal her uneasiness.

"The best should be happy and satisfied to-night," she said; "it is a great success."

"Yes, happy!" agreed the demon, nodding his horned head, "but not satisfied. That will never be till he sees the marriage of his beloved son----" He stopped short.

"With Lady Constance Tremaine," finished Lady Merivale, in a low voice, from which all attempt at disguise had gone.

Mephistopheles nodded again.

"You have guessed aright, my lady," he said. "See! there they are together. A handsome pair; an admirable match. Yet it is sad to think----" He stopped again.

"What?" cried Lady Merivale, grasping his scarlet-clad arm in a fierce grip.

"It will never be!"

His companion trembled with suppressed eagerness.

"What do you meant?" she exclaimed. "Can you prevent it?"

"I both can and will," was the quiet answer. "But, come, let us seek a more retired spot."

He drew her almost forcibly out of the recess into the shadow of some palms, as Adrien Leroy, with a partner on his arm, approached the alcove.

"Oh! Mr. Leroy," said Lady Chetwold, as they passed, "can you tell me who this latest arrival is?"

"I have not seen her," said Adrien rather wearily; his eyes were bent on Lady Constance, who had left him and was now dancing with Lord Standon.

"Oh, there she is!" exclaimed his voluble little companion. "Such a magnificent Cleopatra, isn't she?"

She drew his attention to a tall lady who was looking rather anxiously and constrainedly about her. Her dress certainly deserved the name of magnificent. It was made for the greater part of apricot-coloured satin, with gauze and tinselled chiffon full over it; from the shoulders was suspended a long train of imperial purple velvet, on which was embroidered in dull green, various Egyptian symbols. Her jewels too, which were abundant, consisting chiefly of diamonds and large emeralds, made her a regal, though almost theatrical figure. Yet, as her eyes met the steady regard of Adrien's, she looked nervously round as if to make her escape.

Lady Chetwold felt Adrien give a slight start, and looking up, she saw that his lips had grown stern, and even through the mask detected the angry gleam in his eyes.

"Do you know her?" she whispered.

"Yes!" he said. "But it would be a breach of confidence to betray her, Lady Chetwold."

At the close of the dance he surrendered the little lady her next partner, and went in search of the Cleopatra. He soon espied her, seated in one of the recesses, and strode across to her. She started to her feet as Adrien approached, then sinking back into her chair, she looked up at him defiantly.

At that moment the band struck up the music for the cotillion, and the mass of colours shifted in dazzling movement, as, amid the rustle of silks and the ripple of laughter, the dance commenced.

Adrien was engaged to Lady Constance for it; but in the height of his anger he had forgotten the fact.

"Ada!" he exclaimed in a low voice full of suppressed indignation. "What is the meaning of this intrusion? You've no business here."

"No business here! Oh, haven't I?" she answered harshly, her bosom heaving, and her bejewelled hands clenching.

"No," he continued, standing in front of her so that she should not be seen by the dancers. "You know that as well as I do. How did you come?"

"On my legs," retorted the lady defiantly. "They're good for something else besides dancing in your theatre, Adrien. You're an unfeeling brute to speak to me like that after the way you've treated me. Do you think I'm going to be thrown aside like a worn-out glove, just because you want to marry that grand swell of a cousin."

"Silence!" said Adrien in a tense whisper, and grasping her arm almost savagely. "Keep your mask on, and come with me. If you are discovered, I will not answer for the consequences."

She rose sullenly, but abashed by his unusual vehemence, for never yet had she seen him moved from his polite calm; and opening the door at the end of the room, he led her away from the brilliant ball-room.

"Now," he said as he closed the door and removed the mask from his face, "what does this mean? There is something more in your presence than I can understand. Whether I marry or not, it can be nothing to you, Ada; you have the money, which is all you care for."

"No, I haven't," she retorted loudly, "and you know it!"

He held up his hand with a gesture of contemptuous command.

"Speak quietly, if you can," he said, "or I leave you at once. Do you mean to tell me you have not received the deeds?"

"I do," she replied sulkily. "It ain't no use your carrying it off in this high-handed way, because I ain't going to be deceived by it! You promised me that you'd make me an allowance of a thousand a year, and give me the theatre when you left me. Well, you've left me right enough, but where's the money? That's what I want to know."

"I gave the deed to Jasper," said Adrien, looking down upon her with distaste, and vaguely wondering how he could ever have endured such a woman near him.

"You gave it to Jasper, did you?" said Ada, pulling or rather tugging off her mask viciously, as she spoke. "Hang me if I didn't think so all the time!" she exclaimed with a sudden change of tactics. "That Jasper's a thief. I heard you say something about those deeds, and Jasper told me a long rigmarole that you wouldn't sign them. Whether that's true or not, Heaven only knows. Jasper's a bad one, an' he's sold me. He's got the coin, and I'll split on him, as I threatened. No, it's no use your trying to make me hush up, I will speak out. I'll show you what a fool he's made of you, you who have been so good to him; I'll tell you a thing or two as will open your eyes a bit wider than they are now. I'll--"

"Be quiet!" said Adrien. "Not another word--there is some mistake. Jasper has forgotten, he has some reason for not giving it to you. He shall explain directly I can reach town. You shall have the money and the theatre, that I promise you; you know I have never broken my word yet. Now you must go. Every moment you stay increases your danger. My father is old-fashioned perhaps, but he would regard this as the greatest insult, and would punish it severely. You are no fool, Ada. How could you have done such a mad thing? Hush! slip on that domino." He pointed to a black masque cloak, and rang the bell. "Get away as quickly as possible," he went on as, now thoroughly subdued, she put on the cloak. "You shall have the money, I swear it."

On the servant entering, he hastily gave directions for her to be driven to the station; then without another word to her, he returned to the ball-room, just as his father's voice was heard inquiring for him.

"Ah! there, you are, my boy. I wondered if anything had gone wrong. Are you ill?" He gazed keenly at Adrien's pale, unmasked face.

"No, sir, it is rather hot though in this dress," he returned hurriedly, hating even the very semblance of a lie. "I believe Constance is waiting for me," he continued. "Ah, yes, there she is. The ball is going off well, don't you think so?"

His father nodded.

"Yes," he said, "your friends are pronouncing it to be a success. Mr. Paxhorn declares it is a vision of the period. But Constance is waiting."

Replacing his mask, Adrien made his way to his cousin, who, as usual, was surrounded by a small group of courtiers. She glanced up as he approached and, with a smile to the rest, took his proffered arm. As he looked at her sweet face, a thrill ran through him at the purity of her beauty--so great a contrast to that of the woman he had just dismissed that he loathed the very thought of ever having touched her hand. In that moment, the love he bore Constance welled up passionately in his heart, refusing to be suppressed, and again he tore off the velvet mask.

When the girl raised her calm eyes to his face, the ardent look in his startled her, and she determined to at least listen to any explanation he wished to give her. "Where have you been, Adrien?" she said gently. "I thought you had forgotten me."

"No!" he answered sharply, "that would be impossible; but I was called away. Do you care for this dance? Or, would you give me just a few moments with you alone on the terrace?"

Her eyes softened.

"Yes, if you like, Adrien," she said gently. "I am really tired now, and longing for the air."

"Come, then," he said; and catching up a silken wrap that lay on one of the seats, he threw it tenderly over her.

Together they passed out on to the terrace, and seemed to have slipped into another world, so great a contrast was the peaceful moonlit valley beneath them to the brilliant, heated ball-room they had just left.

As the curtained door swung behind them, Jasper Vermont, *alias* Mephistopheles--his scarlet costume now changed to ordinary evening dress, and covered with a long black domino, similar to that which Ada had donned--shot a sharp glance after them; then, with a sinister smile, he left the room by another exit, and made his way into the grounds. Keeping well within the shadow of the trees and shrubs, he crouched down, directly under the terrace where Adrien had led Constance; here, motionless and scarcely breathing, he listened with eager ears.

"It is hot," said Constance, removing her mask, and letting the wrap fall back from her shoulders.

"All the more reason you should be careful," said Adrien, replacing it gently.

She smiled, as she gazed up at him.

"You look very tired," she said softly. "This ball has been a strain on you, has it not?"

"Not more than usual," he returned. "At any rate, it will be my last for some time to come."

"Your last!" she echoed, looking up at him with wide, startled eyes. "What do you mean, Adrien?"

"I am going away after to-night," he said hoarsely; for the sight of her beauty was goading him almost to despair.

"Going away!" she hardly breathed the words; her face had paled in the moonlight, till it looked almost unearthly. "Why?"

"You ask me why?" he murmured, his forehead damp with the force of his emotion. "You, who know how I love you--worship your very shadow!"

She trembled under the passion of his gaze.

"Adrien!" she exclaimed, in low, reproachful tones. "Why do you speak to me like that, when I know how little your words really mean?"

"Little!" he cried with suppressed passion. "Ah, Constance, why are you so cruel to me? Why do you so misjudge me, when I would gladly die to serve you?"

The earnestness in his tones was unmistakable; but she kept her face turned from him, and he knew only from the quick-drawn breath that she had heard him.

"Constance," he pleaded, "look at me, dear. Give me this one chance. I shall never trouble you again."

"You have no right----" she began tremulously.

"No right to tell you I love you. Do you think I don't know that?" he burst out. "It is just that very

knowledge which has burnt itself into me, and seared my very soul."

"What knowledge?" she asked, forgetful, in the suddenness of his attack, the tactics she had adopted with regard to Lord Standon.

"The knowledge of your engagement," he answered hoarsely. "Ah, Constance, be merciful. Surely not even Standon himself would grudge me these last few moments."

"What has Lord Standon to do with me?" she asked, looking him full in the face with steadfast eyes.

He stared at her in amazement.

"Is he not your accepted lover?"

His voice betrayed his agony of spirit; and, hearing this, she relented. Holding up her left hand, the third finger of which was bare of rings, she said quietly, almost, indeed, demurely:

"This does not look like it, does it?"

The light of hope, new-born, flashed into his face. He sprang forward eagerly.

"Constance!" he cried. "My darling! You will try to care for me then----?" He would have taken her in his arms; but she held him off at arm's length.

"No! no, Adrien," she interrupted sadly. "Because I am not engaged to Lord Standon, is that any reason why I should love one who treats me so lightly?"

"I treat you lightly, you--the one woman I have ever truly loved? Constance, whatever sins I may have committed, you are my first love, and you will be my last. I am not worthy to touch your hand, as pure as it is white, but will you not forgive me the folly of my past life, and let me live in hope that I may do better? I swear from this day forth to cast off the old life, with all its emptiness and folly, and lay the future at your feet."

As his passionate words ceased, she turned to him.

"Adrien, I do not know what to think," she said in low, troubled tones. "I wrote to you last month--that day we came up to London, believing that perhaps you had learned to care a little for me; but when you deliberately spent the day with another woman, sooner than with me, what am I to think?"

"What do you mean?" he asked hoarsely.

"I saw you," she returned simply, "when we were at the station, auntie and I, on the twenty-second----"

"The twenty-second!" he echoed, through blanched lips.

"Yes, you were at Waterloo Station with some one, I did not see her face. But what does it matter now? If you had cared----" She stopped abruptly.

"I do care," he reiterated passionately. "Heaven above knows that; but I do not hope to make you believe me. Constance, I can give neither you nor any living being the explanation of that awful day. But I swear to you that the meeting was unsought by me. I could not help myself. I do not know how all this has come about. I understood from Standon that--that he was engaged to----"

"Muriel Branton," interrupted Constance softly. "He told me himself."

For a moment Adrien stared at her in stupefaction.

"If I had known we were at cross-purposes!" he exclaimed. "I see it all now--when it is too late," and sinking down on the stone seat he buried his face in his hands.

For a minute there was silence, broken at last by the rustle of Lady Constance's dress as she came timidly towards him.

"Adrien," she murmured, very low indeed, but not so low that he did not hear.

He looked up, gave one swift glance at her blushing face, then, with an incoherent cry of delight, caught her in his arms.

"My darling!" he cried. "I love you. Believe that, though I failed you so."

No further words were spoken--none were needed; then Adrien said gently:

"Darling, before we return, tell me, just once--let me hear it from your own lips, that you love me; for I can scarcely believe I am awake."

"It is no dream, Adrien," she said, her face flushing and quivering with pent-up emotion. "I love

you, dear."

Again he clasped her in his arms and neither heard a step behind them. It was not until a warning cough roused them, that Adrien started, and became aware of the presence of Mr. Jasper Vermont.

CHAPTER XXII

While the preparations for the ball at Barminster Castle had been going on apace, trouble and confusion reigned in the little village on the banks of the Thames.

No sooner had Mr. Jasper Vermont taken his departure, than poor Lucy Ashford sank on the floor of the shop, and burst into a flood of tears. So great had been the strain that she was completely unnerved, and had quite forgotten the likelihood of her husband's return from Richmond, as well as the mysterious disappearance of Jessica, who had not been seen in the house since the arrival of Adrien Leroy and his unconscious burden.

This sudden realisation of all the presentiment of evil which Lucy Ashford had ever in her mind, had burst on her like a thunderbolt. She had known always that the man, Mr. Jasper Vermont, who knew her secret, was alive; but never before had she been actually threatened with its betrayal. Her father, Mr. Harker, had always stood between her and that dreadful possibility.

Presently, she jumped up and called to Jessica. Then she remembered that the girl had disappeared from the time she had sent her from the room. Fearful that Vermont might yet change his mind and return for the night, she ran to the door, calling out Jessica's name in a paroxysm of nervous terror, which finally, on receiving no reply, ended in a severe attack of hysterics, in the midst of which her husband returned and found her.

With an exclamation of alarm, he raised her from the floor and bore her upstairs to the bed on which Lady Merivale had lain such a short time ago. He was greatly puzzled by the disordered appearance of the room, and his first thought was of burglars. He gave no time to this, however, but hastened to get his wife into bed, then rushed out for a doctor. When he returned with him it was found that Lucy had relapsed into a state of fever, and was talking deliriously, of an inn at Canterbury, an individual of the name of Johann Wilfer, and most of all, making plaintive appeals to Jasper Vermont not to betray her.

As the next day Jessica had not returned, Ashford found all his work cut out for him, to see after the shop and the children, as well as his wife. A kindly neighbour came to his rescue; but John insisted on nursing Lucy himself, while the woman remained downstairs.

At first, the husband paid little attention to the wandering, incoherent sentences of his wife; but as the first excitement died down, and they began to take distinct form, he bent over her, and learned the one error of her life. Naturally, poor John recoiled in horror; the whole thing seemed so incredible, so impossible to believe. Yet, when he had had time to reflect, he saw that this explained all the little strangenesses in his wife's conduct and manner; her intense nervousness at the sight of any stranger; her reticence as to her youthful days; all this was borne in on his mind, and he realised that he had been deceived. His wife, in whom he had so trusted, had loved another before him; and at the bitter truth, John Ashford utterly broke down, and, hiding his face in the counterpane, sobbed like a child. Tears sometimes are Nature's own medicine, and do more to soften the heart than any words. After the first shock had worn away, Ashford commenced to look back on the happy days he had spent with Lucy; the way she had worked with him, and for him. These thoughts did their healing work, and accordingly, a few days later, when Lucy Ashford returned to consciousness, she found her husband's eyes gazing into hers with only pitying tenderness in their depths.

"John," she said faintly, "have I been ill?"

"Yes, dear," he replied gently.

Something in his saddened tones, or perhaps strange intuition, told Lucy that her secret was no longer hers alone.

"John!" she cried, her voice shaking with terror and weakness. "You know all!" And she hid her face in her hands.

Her husband bent over her tenderly and kissed the thin cheek.

"Yes, dear," he said. "You've told me all. Why didn't you trust me before?"

She looked at him in wonder, hardly believing the evidence of her own ears. Was this all the reproach and anger he would deal out to her? Could it be possible that, knowing all, the man she had loved, yet feared, solely on this account, would not only forgive but take her into his heart again? As if in answer to her bewildered thoughts, John's arm was around her neck, and his kiss of forgiveness fell upon her lips.

Presently, she looked up, with a look of ineffable peace and gratitude on her face.

"John," she said, "send for poor father; it will be new life to him to know that this dreadful weight is off my heart, and that you, knowing what a bad woman I have been, will still call me your wife. Oh, fetch him to me soon, dear, that he may be happy too."

Her husband kissed her again, and without another word left the room. Giving some directions to the neighbour who was still in the shop, he set out at once on his journey. He drove into Hampton and took the first train to London, where he intended to tell his father-in-law the whole story, and learn what details he could; for he did not wish ever to bring up the subject again, so far as Lucy was concerned.

Now it happened that Mr. Harker was late at the office that night, bending, sad and wrinkled, over his interminable papers; the whole business connected with which was so repugnant to him. Sigh after sigh escaped his thin lips, as he read the piteous appeals, and knew that he must refuse them; must deal out fresh misery against his will. It was hard to be the tool of such a merciless fiend; to be the servant of such a master of deceit, villainy and fraud; but so greatly did the father love his child that he would scarce have hesitated in committing a murder had Jasper Vermont set that crime as a price of his forbearance and silence. He would have purchased his daughter's safety and happiness with his heart's blood, if need be.

Unconscious of the release that was so fast approaching, he worked on, setting in order the various accounts which Vermont would require to be laid before him on the following day; and entering in a book concise histories of the debts and difficulties which placed dozens of Jasper's acquaintances within his power.

A knock at the door startled him, and roused him from his task. Hastily shutting the ledger before which he was seated, and covering the deeds and documents with a large sheet of paper, the old man rose and opened the door.

It was his son-in-law, John Ashford, and at the sight of his round, kindly face, Harker staggered back, and clutched at the table.

"Lucy!" he gasped out. "Is she ill?"

"All right! All right!" said John reassuringly, but in a quieter voice than his usual jovial one. "Don't be frightened. But when she says 'Go and fetch father,' you see, I come and fetch you directly."

Mr. Harker was not to be deceived by this attempt at a jest.

"She is ill!" he cried, the perspiration breaking out on his forehead.

John nodded.

"She is better now," he said. "But I should like you to come down at once. We shall catch a train to Hampton Court, and I have a trap waiting for me there." Without any further explanation--for after thinking the matter over, he had determined that Lucy herself should break the news to her father--he helped the old man, still trembling and shaking, to put on his coat, and to lock up the office; and it was not until they were well on their way, that John told him how he had found his wife a fortnight ago, lying unconscious on the ground.

Mr. Harker's troubled face darkened, and his thin hands clenched and unclenched themselves, for he knew Mr. Vermont only too well, and the thought had already crossed his mind that this sudden illness was in some way due to that gentleman's interference.

Outside Hampton Court station they found the horse and cart for which John had arranged; and the two men got in silently and started off once more. They were within a short distance of their destination, when John pulled up the horse with an exclamation of astonishment. They were in a narrow lane, with barely room enough for the cart to pass along, and almost within a yard of the horse's hoofs stood the figure of a young girl.

Ashford recognised her in an instant; with a shout of warning, he threw the reins to his father-in-law and, leaping to the ground, caught the girl by the arm.

"Jessica!" he cried reproachfully. "What are you doing here?"

She looked up at him in silence, and her eyes filled with tears.

"I am coming back to you," she said at last, in a low voice, "if you will have me? There was some one I wanted to see again in London, or I would never have gone; for, oh! sir, I know how good you and Mrs. Ashford have been to me."

John appeared relieved.

"I thought you weren't one of the sort to go off and leave my Lucy just because she was ill and wanted extra help," he said, in a tone of relief.

"Ill," repeated Jessica, with a look of bewilderment. "She was not ill when I left her. It was the other lady who was ill."

John, of course, knew nothing of Lady Merivale, and gazed at Jessica as though she had taken leave of her senses.

"I don't know what lady you mean," he said; "but my wife has been very ill for the past two weeks, and asking for you often. You see, I thought you had run away and left her."

"I will drive back with you, please, sir, if you have room for me. I didn't know Mrs. Ashford was ill," said the girl, humbly following him, as he turned towards the trap.

He lifted her up, and fastened her in securely.

All this time Mr. Harker had taken no notice of the little episode, save to wonder slightly at the delay. But directly he caught sight of the vivid, dark beauty of the girl, he started.

"Who is this?" he asked John, who was hurriedly driving on again.

"A poor girl whom Lucy has befriended," he replied. "Why, did you think you recognised her?"

Mr. Harker shook his head. She strongly resembled some one he had seen; but, for the moment, he could not call to mind who that person was.

"What is her name?" he inquired.

"Jessica," replied his son-in-law. "She doesn't seem to know any other."

They drove on in silence, broken presently by Mr. Harker, who had stolen another glance at the silent girl.

"A wonderful likeness," he murmured. "I could have sworn that was Ada Lester, the actress, as she used to be."

He relapsed again into silence, and John was too much wrapped up in his own thoughts to question him further.

They reached the little shop at last, and Jessica ran lightly and quickly up to the bedroom. She was welcomed warmly by Lucy, who had grown to like the girl, and had been greatly upset by her absence.

"I'm glad you have come back, dear," she whispered, as Jessica bent over her. "Where have you been?"

"To London, dear Mrs. Ashford. I did not know you were ill. I came back with Mr. Ashford."

"John!" exclaimed Lucy, the colour rising in her face. "My father as well?"

"Yes," said the girl. "I will call them."

She did so, and a moment later John and Mr. Harker entered the room.

"Here he is, dear, you shall tell him the news yourself, while I take the horse back," said the kindly John. He bent over and kissed her; and Lucy followed him with wistful, adoring eyes, as he went out accompanied by Jessica.

The next half-hour was an affecting one for father and daughter. Harker could hardly believe the good news; for so long had they tried and succeeded in keeping the truth back from Ashford, that it seemed incredible indeed that he had forgiven freely and wholly. Mr. Harker looked a different being when, after kissing his daughter affectionately, he left her and went down to the little parlour.

John was sitting smoking his pipe; but he started up when the old man entered.

"What is the matter?" he said, as he looked at his pale face. "Is she worse?"

"No," said Harker. "She is better, thank Heaven! John Ashford," he continued humbly, "I have come to beg your forgiveness for the pain we have caused you. I knew my girl to be a good girl, although she had once been so foolish. I knew she would make you a true loving wife, in spite of her sin. It was I who overcame her scruples, and bade her marry you. I did it for the best. I did it that she might be happy; for I knew how she loved you, and she so feared to lose your love and respect. She tells me you have forgiven her, but can you forgive me?"

John grasped his hand.

"Of course I do," he said heartily. "You did it for her so I have nothing to forgive. If my poor darling had only plucked up courage and told me all, the hour we were man and wife, she would have learned how dearly I loved her, and it would have saved you both many unhappy years."

Tears of gratitude stood in Harker's eyes, as he returned the handclasp.

"Heaven bless you, John," he murmured. "Not many men would be so merciful. We will never speak of this again. You will not repent your generosity."

"What are you going to do?" asked Ashford; struck by something unusual in the old man's voice.

"I am going back to London," said Harker, smiling grimly, as in anticipation of a pleasant task. "I have work to do, an account to settle now--for Lucy and myself. You don't know all yet, John; you don't know, you never will know, all that Lucy and I have suffered."

He paused as if overcome by his emotion; then continued in trembling voice:

"We have been slaves all these years, trembling and shrinking under a villain's nod and frown. I've sold myself to a demon, who, in consideration of my services--of my body and soul--promised to keep his talons from my poor Lucy. He discovered her mistake; and he threatened to let the whole world know, to tell you all, if I did not bind myself to do his villainous work. I have done it for years. I have endured shame and agony unspeakable, that my darling's secret might be safe. I have been his tool and his scapegoat. I, an old man, on my way to the grave, have earned--and rightly earned--the names of usurer and thief. All this I have done and suffered that he should never blight my child's happiness by his presence. He has broken the contract. He came down here that night you went to Richmond, and, with his fiendish ways and threats, nearly killed her. Well, now his power has gone. Thanks to your generosity, your forgiveness, Lucy is free, and I am free. Now I take my turn, and for every tear he has wrung from my darling's eyes, I will wring a groan from his black heart."

John had listened to him with intense surprise. He knew his father-in-law was in business in the City; but he did not know that the business of "Harker's," for which he had a great respect, had anything to do with moneylending. Still he refrained from asking any questions; and seeing that Mr. Harker was practically exhausted by the excitement and the news, persuaded him to spend the remainder of the night with them, and travel back to town in the morning.

After reflection the old man agreed to this; and it was a very happy little party that met at the breakfast-table next day.

Mr. Harker, unable to sleep, had let his thoughts go back to Jessica; and in the silence of the night a picture had arisen before his eyes; a theatre in which a dark-eyed young girl was dancing, amidst a crowd of others. In his delight at having a clue he cried aloud, "Ada Lester, at the Rockingham!" The more he thought of it the more sure he felt that this girl must be the daughter, or at least some connection, of the well-known actress.

On questioning Jessica, all the information he could obtain from her was that which she had given Adrien Leroy. Johann Wilfer was the boundary of her existence. Harker remembered the name as that of the man from whom he had bought the picture, and he also knew now that he it was who had been responsible for Lucy's early sin. But he was not to be shaken from his belief that in some way Jessica must be related to Ada Lester, and he asked the girl whether she would travel up to London with him, and trust herself to his care.

Jessica looked up into his lined face.

"Yes," she said simply, "if you won't give me back to Johann."

Harker readily promised this, and, amid many smiles and wavings of hand from the assembled Ashford family, the two started on their way.

On reaching London, Mr. Harker's first visit was to the Casket Theatre, which Jessica at once remembered as the one before which she had kept watch for Adrien Leroy; and with that recollection came the memory of the roll of papers which she had picked up. She related this little incident to Harker; and undoing the bag in which kind-hearted Lucy had put some clothes for her, she found the papers and gave them to him.

Harker looked them over, and gave a cry of joy; for he realised at once that they delivered his arch-enemy into his hands--no miracle from Heaven itself could have done more. Jessica did not understand the reason for his excitement, but she was quite content to let the papers remain in his keeping.

At the theatre he inquired for Miss Lester; and, it being matinée day, he found that the popular actress had already arrived. It took time and money to convince the military-looking door-keeper that it was absolutely necessary to take an urgent message to Miss Lester, but eventually this was done, and Mr. Harker, with Jessica--who was almost dazed by the strangeness of her surroundings--found themselves in Miss Lester's dressing-room, a few minutes before she was due on the stage as Prince Bon-Bon.

Mr. Harker at once hastened to apologise for the intrusion; but, in the midst of his words, he broke off short, for Jessica and the actress were gazing at one another in a mutual recognition. Jessica remembered her at once as the lady who had been with Adrien Leroy; then came the earlier memory, which had so puzzled her on the night she had seen the actress entering the theatre.

"Jessica!" exclaimed Miss Lester, blankly, and she turned on the astounded Harker. "What's the meaning of this?"

The few minutes were nearly up, and the call-boy and the dresser had met in several consultations with regard to the difficulty of getting Miss Lester on to the stage in time, before Mr. Harker's explanations were through.

Ada, now thoroughly assured as to her own future, thanks to her recent visit to Barminster, was quite willing to look after her niece better than in the past; especially as her presence formed a strong link in the chain of evidence the actress intended shortly to bring against Jasper Vermont. She assured Harker that she would take care of the girl, and with this he was content; then, leaving Jessica in her aunt's charge, he made his way to his own office, prior to taking a journey down to Barminster Castle.

CHAPTER XXIII

The unexpected appearance of Jasper Vermont startled both Lady Constance and Adrien.

"Jasper!" exclaimed Adrien, almost sternly, drawing the silken wrap around Lady Constance as if to shield her from all eyes but his own. "I did not expect you here to-night."

"No," answered Jasper. "I have travelled post-haste to try and save you from heavy trouble; the matter is so pressing that you must give me my way and attend to it at once. I am sure Lady Constance would forgive this intrusion, if she only knew of what serious importance it is to you, and, indeed, to us all."

He moved forward as he spoke; and the light of the full moon falling on his smooth, clean-shaven face, showed it so ghastly white, so moved by strong emotion that Lady Constance started back a step, while Leroy himself stared in surprise.

"Good Heavens!" he said, "whatever is the matter to make you drive down in such a state? What is wrong? Is it the theatre?" A faint contemptuous smile crossed his face as he thought of Ada.

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Vermont, scornfully. "The theatre! No, Adrien, there's not a moment to be lost. I must speak with you at once. Don't look at me like that. You do not grasp what imminent peril is hanging over you."

"Peril!" gasped Lady Constance, springing forward and placing her hand on Adrien's arm, her movement showing, perhaps unconsciously, the state of her feelings towards him more than anything else could have done. It was as if she wished to share with him any approaching pain.

Jasper glanced at her from beneath his lowered lids--the sort of hungry look one would imagine a starving wolf might cast at a lamb.

"Serious peril!" repeated Lady Constance.

"Of what kind?" asked Leroy, still with that faint smile on his lips, and quite unmoved by Jasper's solemn face. Then, without waiting for an answer, he continued scornfully: "Peril! My dear Jasper, what danger can I be in? This is not the Middle Ages, and there are no assassins waiting around, are there? However, let me take Con--Lady Constance back to the ball-room again, and then I will enjoy, or at any rate listen to all you have to tell me."

Jasper Vermont smiled bitterly, and took out his watch, which had been a present from Leroy.

"Adrien," he said slowly, "you have ten minutes between you and dishonour!"

Adrien turned round sharply, and half raised his arm as if to strike, while such a stern look crossed his face that Lady Constance scarcely recognised it as the same which, but a few minutes ago, had gazed on her so lovingly.

"Adrien!" she cried, almost shuddering at the tense anger shining in his eyes. "He must be mad!" She turned proudly on Jasper. "That is sufficient, Mr. Vermont. Pray leave us at once. If this is a jest, I consider it is in extremely bad taste."

Jasper bit his lip at her words, but did not shift his ground.

"No," said Leroy, "it is no jest, dear; there is something wrong, I feel sure. I will have a few words with him in private." He led her gently towards the door, and with pale face and trembling heart, Lady Constance re-entered the ball-room she had left so happily, seating herself near the entrance in one of the many alcoves. She was overcome by a nameless fear, and that horrible feeling of utter helplessness which overwhelms one as in a heavy cloud, and darkens the horizon for us all when weighed down by suspense.

Suddenly she determined to seek Lord Barminster, and had risen to do so, when she heard not only the voices of Adrien and Vermont, but another also, a strange one, talking not loudly but very sternly. Hardly knowing what to do, she was about to return to the terrace to ascertain what was happening, when fortunately her uncle approached with Mortimer Shelton. She went quickly to meet them, and told them her fears.

Much surprised, both Lord Barminster and Mr. Shelton accompanied her; and they found the voices were issuing from one of the small anterooms adjoining the terrace. Within this room, which was far removed from where the dancing was going on, they discovered Adrien Leroy, unmasked and very pale, staring at a blue paper which had evidently been given to him by the man standing at his side--an inspector of police.

"What is the matter, Adrien?" asked his father, and seeing that Jasper Vermont was also present, he turned his eyes to him inquiringly. But Jasper seemed wishful to avoid his glance, and only shook his head.

Adrien handed back the blue paper, still without speaking, then turned, as if to address his father, who was looking sternly from one troubled face to the other, while behind him stood Lady Constance and Mortimer Shelton. But before any one could utter a word, the inspector came forward, and addressing Lord Barminster, said quietly:

"Sorry, my lord, to have to do this at such a time but I am here in the performance of my duty. I should be glad if we could go to a more private room, where I could explain to your lordship without your guests being informed of the matter."

Lord Barminster was about to sharply retort when Shelton, who seemed to realise the seriousness of the affair, touched him lightly on the arm.

"I think, sir," he said earnestly, "it would be as well to hear what this man has to say quietly, as he suggests."

Lord Barminster controlled his feelings, recognising the good sense of the suggestion, and turning coldly to the inspector, said:

"Perhaps it would be best, Inspector. Kindly come this way."

At the end of a small passage outside the anteroom, the door opened into a smaller room, which at one time had been used as a study, and was noted for its impenetrability as to sound. Here they entered; and Lord Barminster, asking all to be seated, bade the inspector proceed with such explanations as he had to offer.

"My lord," he said respectfully, "the explanation is a very simple one, and in deference to your lordship, to make it as private as possible, I have left my men outside the Castle. I, unfortunately, hold a warrant for the arrest of Mr. Adrien Leroy on a charge of forgery."

An exclamation of horror burst from all, except Adrien and Jasper; but the speaker continued:

"In performance of my duty, I arrest him, in the King's name." He touched Adrien lightly on the arm as he spoke.

Lord Barminster drew a long breath, but still hoping against his better judgment that the affair was what its originators considered, a practical joke, he restrained all appearance of anger.

"Come," he said, "this may be an excellent jest; but whoever is responsible for it must surely realise that it has gone far enough."

"This is no jest, sir," said Adrien, and he looked at Mortimer Shelton, who sat, white and bewildered, opposite to him.

"I am arrested on a charge of forging Shelton's signature to a bill for ten thousand pounds."

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed his friend, starting up in horror. "But it is impossible that they should think you--"

"Shelton," continued Adrien steadily, "has written a letter saying that the signature is a forgery."

"I wrote last week, not knowing; but, of course"--he laughed scornfully--"it is all a mistake, which can soon be rectified. The idea of coming to you for such a thing! I hope you don't believe, my dear Adrien, that I had any hand in this monstrous accusation?"

"Of course, I know that," replied his friend, holding out his hand. "But the writing has a distinct resemblance to mine, I admit; and two witnesses are ready to prove, so the inspector tells me, that they saw me enter the office of a certain 'Harker's,' I think it is, where the bill was signed, and also that my motor was standing at the door. While a third witness, a clerk at the office, has filed an affidavit that he actually saw me writing on the bill, there. All this, father"--turning once more to the old man--"passes a jest."

"Yes, indeed," replied Lord Barminster sarcastically; "for a Leroy, who can command a hundred thousand pounds by a stroke of his pen, to forge a bill for ten thousand pounds is not a jest, but simple madness. The charge is some insolent conspiracy."

Almost unconsciously, he fixed his glance on Jasper Vermont, who, during the whole time, had sat motionless and silent. It seemed as if he guessed, intuitively, that that smooth individual was at the bottom of it all. Then he turned his grey eyes to Adrien's calm face, and from his to the white one of Lady Constance, whose eyes were flashing with anger at the mere idea of any one doubting Adrien's honour.

There was a moment's silence, broken by Shelton, who rose and grasped his friend's hand.

"Adrien," he said, in a voice charged with emotion, "Adrien, I can bear this no longer. Give this foul accusation the lie. I know, my dear fellow, as surely as I know that I did not write it myself, that you had nothing to do with the accursed signature. But, for Heaven's sake, tell the others so too."

Adrien returned the friendly clasp with a smile that lit up his whole face; then looking round, he said quietly:

"I did not write it; I know nothing of it."

Lord Barminster rose from his seat at the sound of his son's voice, and put his hand on Adrien's shoulder; then, as if half ashamed of his pardonable emotion, he turned to the inspector.

"You hear, sir, Mr. Leroy knows nothing of the matter."

"That, my lord," returned the inspector respectfully, "would not justify me in leaving here without him. I fear he must accompany me; my instructions under the warrant are too strict. Mere denial is, of course, a common matter, and a usual one--begging your pardon, my lord"--for the old man had started indignantly.

"I should suggest, my lord," continued the inspector hurriedly, "that an *alibi* would be of the most service. I do not say for one moment that Mr. Leroy did commit the forgery; but, of course, he will be able to prove where he was on the twenty-second of last month, at three o'clock."

Shelton's face brightened. He wheeled round on his friend.

"Adrien," he exclaimed, "tell us where you were on that day; not to satisfy me, you know that, but to get this folly over."

Leroy gazed sadly at him, but remained silent; and Shelton grew hot, and then white with irritation, at this inexplicable silence.

"Think, my dear Adrien," he said in a quick, impatient voice. "Were you at the club, or your chambers, or Park Lane--where were you? Come, you can't have forgotten."

He stamped his foot in his impatience; for although he would have laughed to scorn any assertion of his friend's guilt, it annoyed him that a shadow should remain on Adrien's name for a single instant, and especially when a few words from Leroy himself would end the matter.

But Adrien made no indignant protest, such as might have been expected.

"No," he said at length, "I have not forgotten where I spent the day of the twenty-second----"

"Then, for Heaven's sake, man, speak out," exclaimed Shelton in excitement.

"I cannot," answered Adrien with a sigh. "I gave my word to keep secret certain events that happened on that day. They took place far away from the City, but I cannot reveal where. Those who say they saw me in London are lying, and I could easily disprove their statements; but you would not have me break my word?"

There was an awful silence, as he finished speaking. Not one present but realised the gravity of the situation, and the futility of putting further questions.

At this point the inspector turned to Lord Barminster.

"My lord," he said almost gently, "I'm afraid I must ask Mr. Leroy to come back with me--and at once; but for the sake of all here, it can be arranged so that your guests shall remain ignorant. There are not many hours before the morning now."

This was indeed true, for time waits for no man, be it spent in pleasure or in crime. "I would suggest that Mr. Leroy and myself return to London; and if he will give me his word of honour not to attempt any escape, I will dismiss my men, who were sent down with me altogether against my will."

"Certainly, you may rely on my not offering any resistance," was Leroy's reply, with a faint smile at the idea called up by the inspector's words. "I should like to change my things to something more suitable." He glanced down at the velvet and lace of his King Charles costume; all this seemed like a dream from which he must awake to find himself back in the ball-room.

"Certainly, sir," agreed the inspector, who seemed honestly reluctant to make the business any more unpleasant than necessary.

"I will come with you," put in Lord Barminster suddenly.

"I also," said Mortimer Shelton. "I will come up with you, and change into something more fitted for the journey."

Turning to Lady Constance, her uncle besought her to return to the ball-room, and thus prevent any remarks being made as to the absence of himself and Adrien. Bravely, as was to be expected of her, she turned obediently; and with a few whispered, loving words to Adrien, left the room, followed, almost unnoticed, by Jasper Vermont. He was quite satisfied with the success of his plot, but had no desire to come into contact with Lord Barminster, if he could avoid it.

Meanwhile, having ordered refreshments for the inspector, Lord Barminster prepared to accompany his son to London. The arrangements took but a short time; and when the three men, accompanied by the inspector, silently entered the car which had been brought round, the ball was drawing to an end. Carriages and motors were driving away, filled with tired but happy guests, who little guessed that their host and his son were also being driven away--but to a police-station.

Outside the Castle gates the inspector stopped to dismiss two or three plain-clothes officers who were awaiting him, telling them to return to London by the first train.

"I would suggest," he said quietly, as the car rolled through the quiet country lanes, "that we wait together in London until the court opens; and when I have delivered up my charge, you can go before the magistrate, and obtain bail, in whatever amounts are required. Mr. Leroy would then be able to return to Barminster until the actual trial--if, of course, such should be necessary."

"A very sensible idea," agreed Shelton. "Thank you, Inspector. When this matter is satisfactorily cleared up, you will not lose by your sympathy, nor by the way you have conducted the business."

Lord Barminster was also pleased at this suggestion, and, on their arrival in London, the whole party went straight to Barminster House for breakfast, after which the four walked down to the court, where application for bail was made and accepted in two sureties of ten thousand pounds each from Lord Barminster and Mortimer Shelton; then Adrien found himself free until the day of trial.

They returned to their town house, where his father telephoned to the family solicitors. Within half an hour the head of the firm arrived, and was put in possession of such meagre details as Adrien could furnish, without disclosing his doings on the fateful date, the twenty-second. The lawyer's face was very grave as he listened.

"It will not be an easy task, my lord," he ventured to say to Lord Barminster as he took his departure, "but I will do my best, and will have opinion of the highest counsel obtainable."

They were soon ready to undertake the return journey, and before parting with the kindly inspector, Lord Barminster very warmly thanked him. All felt that they had been spared a great deal of humiliation by the way he had so far conducted the case. At the Castle they found that nothing was known of the affair. Miss Penelope had retired to her own rooms to recover from the fatigue of the ball, while Constance was quite serene, strong in her loving faith in Adrien and content to ask no questions.

Jasper Vermont had also left Barminster, but had sent a note in which he stated that he was working in his friend's interest, and hoped to unearth the mystery of the conspiracy. This sounded plausible and meant nothing--which was thoroughly characteristic of Mr. Vermont.

The cases at the Central Criminal Court were fortunately light ones, and did not take long to settle, so that the interval between the acceptance of bail and the date of the trial was a short one. There was, of course, great excitement in the fashionable world over Adrien's sensational arrest, but this the young man wisely ignored; taking refuge at Barminster Castle from the curiosity and sympathy of friends and reporters alike, and resolutely refusing to be interviewed.

One thing--so characteristic of him--Adrien did at once. Notwithstanding his own cares, he remembered his promise to Ada Lester at the ball, and instructed the solicitors to prepare a deed by which the money and the rights of the Casket Theatre should be made over to her, and settled on her at once; at the same time, ordering that the papers should be handed to her personally,

thus providing against any mistakes or interference on the part of Jasper.

This kindly thought completely turned the scale of Ada's gratitude in his favour. Rejoicing at the blow which she knew this would be to Mr. Vermont, and in ignorance of his last treachery to Adrien, she determined to show him up in his true colours at the first opportunity.

Meanwhile, as the day of the trial approached, Lord Barminster and Mortimer Shelton became more and more anxious.

The solicitors had briefed the finest and best known barristers for the defence; but one and all agreed that unless Adrien could prove an alibi, only a miracle could save him from conviction.

On the actual day Adrien Leroy took his place in the dock, listening through the day with unwearied calm to the long speeches made by the counsel on both sides.

Witness after witness was called; but none could shake the evidence of Harker's clerk, who swore to seeing Leroy actually sign the bill in question, on the twenty-second of the preceding month.

Towards the end of the case, when both judge, jury and counsel were tired out by the conflicting statements, a note was sent to the barrister for the defence by a veiled lady, who had sat in the back of the court during the whole day's proceedings.

He opened it carelessly, but after a swift glance at the few lines which it contained, his face brightened. Resuming his usual confident tones, he desired that a new witness might be called, namely Lady Merivale.

At the name Adrien started forward, but it was too late. A lady in black, pale but composed, entered the witness box, and was duly sworn. Calmly she gave her evidence, stating that she had visited her aunt, Lady Rose Challoner, at Hampton Court on the twenty-second of the previous month, and while there had met Mr. Adrien Leroy. He had rowed her up the river, and as an additional witness she could produce one of the boatmen to whom she had spoken while at Hampton, and who had watched them start.

After this there was little more to be said. The miracle had indeed happened! It was clearly a case of perjury on the part of Harker's clerk, for whose arrest the judge ordered a warrant to be issued.

On the delivery of the verdict in Adrien's favour, Lady Merivale left the court. She did not glance at Leroy, nor indeed anyone present, but walked blindly out. She knew that not only had she restored the man she loved to freedom and to honour, but in all probability ruined her own social position. For Jasper Vermont's veiled threats at the Barminster fancy dress ball could not be ignored, and now that she had deliberately gone contrary to his wishes in disclosing where Adrien had spent the fateful twenty-second of May, she could not but doubt that Vermont would make use of the mysterious power which he had hinted he held over her. What this power was she could only surmise, for, of course, she was in ignorance of Jasper's connection with "Harker's Ltd." But she had an uncomfortable feeling that Adrien's freedom had been purchased at considerable danger to herself, and the thought haunted her unpleasantly.

CHAPTER XXIV

Mr. Harker, having arranged things to his liking at Lawrence Lane, returned to Miss Lester and reminded her of her promise to assist him to unmask Jasper Vermont. He found her more than willing to accompany him to Barminster, and accordingly it was arranged that they should travel down together on the following day, accompanied also by Jessica. Upon the rare occasions that Vermont and Harker had met during the past week the latter had made no sign of his recently acquired emancipation from Jasper's rule, and that gentleman was in blissful unconsciousness of the sword hanging over him. Arrived at Windleham, the nearest station to Barminster, Mr. Harker left the two women at the little hotel facing the railway, there to await his return or instructions to come on to the Castle. Then he made his way to Barminster. Here he delivered a note into the care of the footman, bidding him to take it to his master without delay. In it he had begged Lord Barminster to grant him an interview on important personal business, hinting that by so doing he might avert future peril for Adrien and himself.

In a very short time the man returned, with the message that Lord Barminster would see him at once; and Mr. Harker was shown into the Blue Room, in which Adrien Leroy had been arrested little more than a week before.

"His lordship will be with you in a few moments," said the man as he left the room.

Almost immediately Lord Barminster appeared, accompanied by Mortimer Shelton. Harker rose respectfully and rather nervously, but Lord Barminster at once put him at his ease.

"Pray be seated, Mr. Harker," he said politely, as he and Shelton set the example. "This is my son's friend, Mr. Shelton, and I should like him to be present at our interview."

Mr. Harker bowed.

"I presume you are the Mr. Harker into whose possession came the forged bill?" continued his lordship.

"As a mere servant--yes, my lord," answered Mr. Harker. "I have become aware of the identity of the man who committed the actual forgery, and also of the fact that he is now preparing to bring further trouble on yourself and Mr. Adrien Leroy."

Lord Barminster started as if to speak, but Mr. Harker continued:

"Fortunately, I am able to avert this, because I have brought the forged bills with me; and I will explain all fully, if your lordship will hear me through. It will take some little time, but I ask your patience."

Lord Barminster nodded and said quietly:

"Go on."

With a dry cough, Mr. Harker opened the little black bag he invariably carried with him, and drew from it a roll of papers. With slow precision, the old man unfastened it and looked across at his listeners.

"Five years ago," he commenced, "my master--for, as I said before, I was merely a servant, a machine, acting under instructions--ordered me to buy up any bills bearing your son's name. Furthermore, I was to lend the money to any amount within my master's credit to those who brought his name as guarantee. I did so, and every bill and liability which was contracted either in his own name or in yours, my lord, by Mr. Leroy, fell into the hands of this man, who carried on the business under cover of my name. He posed as the friend of Mr. Leroy, and by means of forgeries, and cooked accounts, he has managed to acquire control of your entire revenue."

"Jasper Vermont!" exclaimed Shelton involuntarily; while Lord Barminster leaned forward eagerly.

Mr. Harker bowed his head. "You are aware," he continued, "that all matters of business, even the tradesmen's bills, passed through his hands. That confidence he has abused, to how great an extent I alone can prove; for I was his tool and slave, and held his secrets. Not a bill was paid without his receiving his commission and adding to its amount. He it was who lent the money to Mr. Leroy's friends, after he had procured his name with which to back them; and he it was who, behind the screen which I supplied, gradually, yet surely, drew your son into his net. What object he had, besides that of gain, I know not; but he certainly desired his utter ruin in wealth and honour, and compelled me to help him in his schemes. Among other bills we held was one, presumably, indorsed by Mr. Mortimer Shelton----"

Shelton started up; but Lord Barminster said quietly:

"Let us hear the whole story first, Mortimer."

"That signature was a forgery," continued Mr. Harker, "double forgery indeed; for it imitated Mr. Leroy's handwriting as well as that of Mr. Shelton."

"I knew it," murmured his lordship in a low tone. "But pray continue, Mr. Harker."

"The double forgery," went on the dry voice, "I now know was executed by my employer's hand; but instructions were given in the name of the firm to charge Mr. Adrien Leroy with the crime. The particular day was fixed on the twenty-second simply because my master had found out that Mr. Leroy had been somewhere else, and in the company of a lady whom he knew Mr. Leroy would never betray. But this part you already know from yesterday's trial. False evidence was brought to bear, in the statement that your son had been in our office, and it was only owing to a plea of illness that I escaped being made a witness also. This was but one forgery, and I have here large numbers of bills all forged by the same hand, and which, if presented, will amount to more than the sale of three such estates as this could liquidate."

Lord Barminster uttered an exclamation of horror.

"I will leave them here with you," went on Mr. Harker, "and when the scoundrel has been unmasked, you need have no fear of any future danger. In my master's chain of villainy there was a single flaw; but that flaw has broken the whole chain. The poor tool, whom he had had so long beneath his thumb, whom he had trodden under his foot remorselessly, suddenly regained his freedom--which he had bartered for the safety of his only child."

He raised his head and looked steadily into the stern eyes of Lord Barminster.

"My child and I," he continued, "are now freed from the chains that bound us, and are willing to bear any results that may follow from this exposure. Besides these bills, my lord, I have additional proof. A young girl whom I have brought with me was fortunate enough to see Mr. Vermont----"

Lord Barminster's face shone with triumph, as the actual name of his master at last fell from Harker's lips.

"--My master--drop a roll of papers. These she picked up, and later, when by a strange coincidence she was befriended by my daughter, showed them to me. They clearly prove, by the many attempts to imitate the writing, whose hand it was who eventually committed these forgeries."

"I knew it!" cried Shelton, unable to keep silence any longer. "I knew we should catch the snake! But, pardon my interrupting you, Mr. Harker; you see, Mr. Leroy is my best friend."

Mr. Harker inclined his head and proceeded steadily.

"These forged deeds I will now, my lord, hand over to your charge, if you prefer it. But if you will have sufficient confidence in my efforts to save you from further trouble, I will hold them at your command until after Vermont is dealt with, in order not to implicate you in any way; for, of course, these bills belong to Vermont, until either he gives them up voluntarily, or they are confiscated by law."

"Keep them in your possession," said Lord Barminster quietly. "It would not do for them to be in my hands just at present. I will have confidence in you, and you shall have no cause to regret this day's work, I assure you."

Mr. Harker looked at him gratefully.

"Thank you, my lord," he said. "Your confidence is not misplaced; indeed, it is not my fault that you have not been placed in possession of the real facts of the case before this. I certainly think it would be best for me to retain them for the present. I would suggest now that we arrange a plan by which Jasper Vermont shall expose his villainy in the actual presence of your son; otherwise, we shall have difficulty, perhaps, to convince him on my bare word."

"That's true enough," put in Mortimer Shelton. "Adrien is so set on the man, that even with these proofs we shall hardly convince him of his treachery other than from Vermont's own mouth."

"Yes," said Lord Barminster with a sigh. "I think you are right. But how is this to be managed?"

"I have brought with me the girl, Jessica, to whom I referred just now, and her aunt, Miss Ada Lester," said Mr. Harker. "Both of them will be able to assist us, and I would suggest to your lordship that they be sent for, and brought into the Castle quietly. We should then be able to confront Vermont."

"Certainly," agreed Lord Barminster; and, crossing the room, he rang for his own confidential man.

"Simpson," he said, when the servant appeared, "I want you to drive down, yourself, to the station."

"The Windleham Hotel, your lordship," interrupted Mr. Harker respectfully. "I think, too, if your lordship would have no objection, a short note from me would be advisable."

"Certainly," agreed Lord Barminster. He directed Harker to a small desk, then turned once more to the waiting servant. "Bring the ladies back with you. Take them into the Octagon Room, and ask them to wait there." Then, as Mr. Harker came forward with the note, he added, "Give this to a Miss Lester."

"Yes, my lord," said Simpson, and taking the letter with a deep bow, he departed on his mission.

CHAPTER XXV

Lord Barminster conducted Mr. Harker to the Octagon Room, so named from its peculiar shape.

"If you will wait here," he said courteously, "I will have some refreshment sent up to you and the ladies, when they arrive."

"Thank you, my lord," returned Mr. Harker gratefully.

Seating himself, he waited patiently for the arrival of Miss Lester and Jessica, secretly congratulating himself on the success of his interview. The time passed quickly; and, while waiting, Lord Barminster and Mortimer Shelton held a hurried consultation with him as to the best method of exposing Vermont. Long before they had finished, Miss Lester and her niece had arrived, the former flushed with excitement and triumph at the prospect of at last, as she expressed it, "getting her own back" with Jasper.

Lord Barminster and Shelton descended to the terrace, where they found Lady Constance; and almost immediately after came Adrien, with his inevitable companion, Jasper Vermont.

Lord Barminster had already arranged for his three visitors to be in the morning-room, which opened on to the terrace, as they would there be within call, and also within earshot.

"A word with you, Mr. Vermont," began Shelton sternly.

Jasper smiled, as usual, and turned towards him.

"As many as you like, Mr. Shelton," he said smoothly.

Mortimer looked at him steadily; then he said in a voice which was hard as steel:

"Mr. Vermont, Lord Barminster has kindly allowed me to speak first. We have every reason to believe that you have had some connection with this affair of Harker's notwithstanding your profession of friendship for Adrien."

Mr. Vermont drew himself up proudly.

"I?" he said indignantly. "What should I have to do with moneylending?"

"Be careful," said Shelton sternly, "there are not people wanting who will fight for Leroy's honour even as it were their own."

Vermont smiled cynically.

"Indeed, Shelton," he said, "it is hardly for you to speak. After all, it was you who nearly ruined Adrien by your denial of the bill, not I."

Lord Barminster strode forward.

"You cowardly rascal," he exclaimed furiously; but Mortimer placed himself between them.

"My lord," he said, "leave him to me. If force is necessary, I will punish him."

Jasper smiled.

"You wrong me, Shelton," he said gently; "and not only me, but Adrien, whom you pretend to care for. I have stood his true friend, as he knows, and have done my best to keep trouble from him, when, indeed, none other could have done so. But I suppose this is all the gratitude I can expect from you for the discharge of friendship's duties. Adrien will no longer be of the fashionable world, you think, after yesterday's case; and it is high time to get rid of his humble friend, Jasper Vermont."

Adrien, who had been talking to Lady Constance, now glanced appealingly towards Mortimer; but with a gesture, as if to silence him, Shelton turned to Vermont again.

"Friend!" he exclaimed bitterly. "A pretty friend! But no more of this. I advise you to leave the Castle while you are safe, for we have sufficient proof here to send you to penal servitude."

"Yes," Lord Barminster repeated, "leave the house at once. If I find you within my grounds an hour hence, I will thrash you within an inch of your life, old man as I am."

Jasper Vermont's face grew livid with anger, and something approaching fear as well; he clenched his hands so tightly that the carefully manicured nails dug deep into his flesh. But with characteristic insolence he tried to brazen it out.

"Your grounds?" he exclaimed, in virulent scorn. "Your grounds, my lord! First tell me where I shall find them. You have no grounds. Barminster Castle is in the hands of a moneylender; these lands, as far as the eye can reach, are the property of Mr. Harker, the City capitalist, by right of countless bills and deeds which your precious son has made over to him."

With an exclamation of pain and astonishment, Adrien gazed on the man whom he had so loved and trusted. There was no mistaking the bitter hatred that was in Vermont's tones. At last, his eyes were being opened to the man's true character.

Lord Barminster regarded him steadily.

"You're mad!" he said quietly.

"Oh, no, no!" laughed Vermont. "It is not I who am mad, but you, who foolishly handed over your

wealth to your son before it was his by right. You should have let him wait till death had removed you, before you gave him full power over Barminster. Such lavish expenditure as his would empty the coffers of a nation. His folly has melted every stone of your precious Castle in the cup of pleasure, and has poured out the costly draught at the feet of his friends and parasites. Friends? He has never had any--leeches, perhaps, who have sucked him dry of all his possessions, and then deserted him."

"Speak for yourself, you cur," cried Shelton, "since it is you, and your dishonest management of his estates, that have brought him to this pass."

Jasper smiled sardonically.

"Say rather that it is I who have constantly warned him against every fresh extravagance, knowing full well what must happen. Ask him yourself, if you doubt my word; ask him whether I have not implored him, time and time again, to relinquish at least some of his many ruinous pleasures and follies; to deny himself at least one expenditure."

Adrien turned his dark eyes to his father's stern face.

"Sir," he said gently, "I really do not see why this scene should continue. If any explanations are necessary, Mr. Vermont shall give them to me."

Vermont turned away with a scornful laugh, but Shelton grasped his arm.

"One minute," he said, "before you sneak away."

"Keep your hands off me, you moneyed fool," cried Vermont, wrenching himself free from the other's grasp. "I know nothing about this City business, you must apply to Harker himself. It is your name that is forged, not mine--though I suppose you want to screen the real criminal and fix on me as a scapegoat."

Shelton was about to retort, but Adrien intervened.

"Tell me one thing," he said quietly. "What has been your motive for all this? I cannot believe that gain was your sole object. What harm have I ever wrought you, Jasper? Something else must have inspired your conduct. I ask you to give me the reason."

There was a dead silence as the gentle words were spoken. Jasper raised his eyes to the pale face of the man he had so basely betrayed, and bit his bloodless lips in dogged silence.

At this moment a commotion was heard at the lower end of the terrace. Some of the servants were trying to prevent the approach of a man, who was striving to get nearer to the little group. But he was too strong for them; with a bound he had freed himself from their restraining arms, and sprang forward, as if about to strike at Adrien. But Shelton thrust himself forward and bore him back.

"Who is this? Are we to have all the scum of the earth in here? Do you know this man, Leroy?" he asked hotly.

"Yes, I do," answered his friend in the low, restraining tones so habitual to him.

"Yes, I should just think you do!" exclaimed the man, struggling to push past Mortimer's outstretched arm. "It isn't likely as you'll forget Johann Wilfer, Adrien Leroy, nor me you either."

"This is too much!" cried Shelton, now thoroughly enraged at this fresh interruption, and again he made as if to thrust the man away.

"Stop," said Adrien, glancing almost sadly at Constance, who smiled lovingly back. "Let him speak, since he is here. Come, sir, why have you forced your way in like this? What do you want of me?"

"What I asked a month ago," replied Wilfer. "I want my niece, Jessica. I want her, an' I'm agoin' to have her, so you'd better own up where she is."

Adrien turned to the others, who were standing silent in their astonishment.

"This man," said Leroy, "has a fancied grievance against me; I know nothing of where this girl is, or what has become of her."

"That's false!" retorted Wilfer. "He does know where the girl is; he took her from her home, and she hasn't been seen since."

Lord Barminster glanced at him coldly.

"My good man," he said, "you heard what my son said just. You had better make inquiries of the police. Mr. Leroy has not seen your niece."

"That is not quite true," put in Adrien gently, "I have seen her."

Lady Constance raised her pale face, and looked at him with startled but trusting eyes.

"P'raps you'll say you didn't take her to your rooms next," said Wilfer.

"I don't deny it," replied Adrien calmly. "I found her on a doorstep, starving with hunger, fleeing from a drunken uncle, as she said. There was nowhere else to take her, being late at night; so I took her to my chambers and fed her, then gave her into the charge of Norgate and the housekeeper until morning, when I learned that she had disappeared. That is all I can tell you about her; for I have not seen her since."

"But I have," came a voice--a woman's voice--behind them, "and I have brought her here."

The little company turned round, and Adrien started as his eyes fell upon the three new-comers.

"Ada," he cried. "What is the meaning of this intrusion?"

"No intrusion this time, Mr. Leroy," she said firmly. "I am here by your father's own invitation."

Jasper, who during Wilfer's outburst had made no effort to go away, now, at the sight of Miss Lester--who looked around her triumphantly, for this was just the kind of scene she enjoyed--made an effort to slip past; but he was held prisoner by Shelton.

"Quite right, Miss Lester," said Lord Barminster, courteously. "Perhaps you will tell us what you know of the young lady." He glanced kindly at the shrinking figure of Jessica, who stood with adoring eyes fixed on Adrien.

"Well, I ought to know something of her," was that lady's retort. "I'm her aunt. I paid that man"--pointing at Wilfer--"to look after her, and a nice way he's done it, turning her out to starve, while he got drunk on my money. You get off," she turned on the astounded Johann, "and don't you let me hear any of your complaints, or I'll have something to tell the police."

At the sound of the hated word "police," Wilfer turned, and mumbling some incoherent words, slunk away. His game was up, and seeing him vanquished, Miss Lester now took the centre of the stage, as it were, and turned her attention on the scowling Jasper.

"You waste your breath with that skunk," she exclaimed, pointing a bejewelled finger at him. "He's too tough a fox for you gentlemen. I'm one of his own sort, and I'll show you what he's made of. Jasper, my fine friend, you sold me as well as Mr. Leroy there, and I'm going to cut up a bit rougher than what he has." She turned to Adrien, who had been standing bewildered by this fresh interruption. "You want to know what his little game is? Well, I'll tell you. He wanted your money first; then, having ruined you and put you out of the running, he meant to have a try for your sweetheart."

Adrien turned on her almost fiercely, and glanced at Constance, who motioned him to be silent.

"That surprises you, does it?" continued Ada. "Some of you ladies and gentlemen are as blind as bats. I could see his little game months ago. That was his object; and he didn't care what he did to gain it. But he went a bit too far when he tried to do me!"

She turned to Jessica, and, laying her hand on the girl's shoulder, drew her forward.

"You want to know who this is? Well, it's just as I said before. She's my niece. I don't think anybody, looking at the two of us, will deny the relationship, either. She takes after her mother. And now you want to know who her father is?"

Again she paused to heighten the effect of her words; but before an answer could be given, a girl's cry of horror rang out, and Jessica suddenly flung herself in front of Adrien. Jasper Vermont, for the first time catching sight of Harker, and realising at last that the game was up, indeed, had made a sudden movement, once more wrenching himself free from Shelton. Something glittered in his hand; then came a flash, a report, and with that one scream of agony, the lifeless form of Jessica fell into Adrien's arms.

In an instant, all was in confusion. Jasper Vermont, with a mocking laugh, had sprung over the stone balustrade, and was running across the turf in the direction of the stream which, lower down, spanned the race-course, and, even at this time of the year, was almost a foaming torrent. Attracted by the sound of the shot, the servants had approached, and now set off in hot pursuit.

But Jasper Vermont was fleet of foot, and when he had gained the top of the rising ground he turned for one second to laugh again. But the laugh died on his lips, as a voice--audible even above all the hubbub and confusion--the shrill voice of Ada Lester, screamed:

"You villain. You have murdered your own child!"

Those who were in pursuit saw him suddenly stagger, as he realised that the girl, whose identity he had that day learnt for the first time, had received the bullet he had intended for Adrien Leroy.

With a short, sharp cry, like that of a wounded animal, he missed his footing, fell backwards into

the stream, which at this point was both wide and deep, and was carried away; drowning before the very eyes of the man who had so loved and trusted him, and whom he had so bitterly wronged.

CHAPTER XXVI

The suddenness of the tragedy which had taken place postponed all further discussion.

The sunlight, streaming through the latticed windows of one of the rooms in the Castle, shed its rays on the still form of the young girl, who had given her life for the man she loved so well.

Beside the bed knelt Adrien Leroy, his face buried in one hand, the other resting upon the still one that lay, white as marble, on the silken coverlet. He had come, overwhelmed with pain, from the scene on the terrace, to pour forth a passionate grief and remorse over this young life that had been so generously given up to save his.

It mattered nothing to him that the dead girl was the daughter of the man whom he had befriended, and who had used his generosity only as a means by which to betray him; it mattered nothing that his grief might even now be misconstrued by the tongues of the uncharitable. He knelt in the deepest humility by the dead girl's side, deeming his life all unworthy to have been saved at such a cost; and while he implored the pardon of the great Creator for the follies of his past life he called on the Almighty to hear the vows which he now made--that for the future his steps would be in wiser paths.

When he arose from his knees his face had lost all its old languid self-possession; there was a graver, more earnest light in his eyes, and as his lips pressed the hand of the dead girl they muttered a farewell vow, which was never to be forgotten from that hour till his last.

Lady Constance, bravely overcoming her own pain and horror at the double tragedy--for Jasper's body had been recovered and brought back to the house an hour after the death of Jessica--had retired with poor, remorseful Ada to her own rooms, where she did her best to soothe and comfort the unhappy woman. Overwhelmed with remorse at her previous neglect of the girl, Ada blamed herself bitterly for not watching her enemy more closely, and thus protecting all concerned from danger.

Meanwhile, the last painful duty had to be done. In the Blue Room were seated in expectant silence Lord Barminster, Mortimer Shelton, and Mr. Harker. On the table lay the papers which Mr. Harker had brought with him, amongst them the all-important roll which Jessica had rescued from the streets. The three men were waiting now for Adrien, with patient respect, knowing the cause of his absence.

Presently the door opened, and the young man entered. Lord Barminster held out his hand without a word, and his son, as silently, grasped it; then, with a sigh, he seated himself at the table, prepared to learn to what extent he had been robbed by the man he trusted so fully.

Without comment, Shelton passed him paper after paper, all drawn up in the clear writing of Mr. Harker; Adrien, with deep humiliation, examining them all. With another sigh he dropped the last one upon the table and looked up.

"It is like some hideous dream," he said in a low, shocked voice. "Jasper Vermont, then, was not a traitor to me, but a forger and thief. I can scarcely believe it--though, of course, it is impossible to get away from these proofs. He must have even bribed that jockey to lose the race, as the man hinted. That he could so have used my trust and confidence to gain money, and by crime, when he could have had it for the asking, seems past belief."

His father looked pityingly at him; he knew only too well what a blow this was to the young man.

"I believed in him to the last," continued Adrien, in the same low tones. "I believed him true, in spite of all your warnings."

He turned to his friend.

"Shelton," he said, "I cannot thank you as I should like, nor indeed you either, Mr. Harker. I am deeply grateful to you all for what you have done for me. Truly a man should take heed of his self-conceit, lest he fall, as I have done."

He dropped his head on his hands, and his father turned to him affectionately.

"You do not ask if the evil this man has worked can be remedied, Adrien," he said, in a softer tone

than he had ever been known to use. "You do not ask whether anything can be regained?"

"I am willing to pay the penalty of my folly," said Adrien, in a low tone; "and if only it can be arranged that you, too, do not suffer, I shall not mind."

"Not even if it should leave you penniless?" asked his father.

Adrien raised his head with a mournful smile.

"But for one reason, I am indifferent," he said.

His father's face lit up.

"Yes," he said, "I think I know that reason. Mr. Harker, will you be so good as to place Mr. Leroy in possession of the facts which you have already given me. I am almost too tired to speak, after the strain of these last few hours."

Adrien looked at him remorsefully; for the old man had indeed undergone much suffering during the last eventful weeks.

Mr. Harker laid a small book upon the table.

"This will do so better than I can, gentlemen," he said. "It is a list of the various investments in which Mr. Jasper Vermont placed the wealth he had so fraudulently amassed. His expenses were small; and the investments which were made with Mr. Leroy's money, and which he had hoped, of course, to put to his own use, amount to a large sum. When realised, they will cover the enormous embezzlements, when the forged bills are destroyed."

Adrien took up the book and glanced through it.

"Is this true?" he said, with an earnestness that all present understood. "Am I still a rich man?"

"The statement is correct, sir," returned Mr. Harker respectfully. "You will find that you have in reality benefited by his cunning and astuteness, even after the racing debts are fully paid."

Adrien laid the book on the table.

"I am grateful," he said gravely. "But I would leave this room penniless, and gladly, if by so doing I could bring one life back to us." Then, almost overcome by his emotion, he abruptly left the room.

On the morrow, despite all efforts to hush the matter up, the news went flying through the land. Adrien Leroy, the well-beloved of Vanity Fair, had been betrayed by his friend and confidant. Great was the sensation when all the facts came out into the full light, and it was known that Adrien had been saved by the traitor's own daughter, who had given her life that his might be spared.

Mr. Harker was well rewarded for the part he had taken in exposing Jasper Vermont, and preserving the Leroy's from the pitfalls and ruin he had dug for them. All the forged bills were promptly burnt, and there remained only those real amounts that Adrien had signed, and which, all put together, only amounted to but a minute fraction of the supposed sums owing by the young man.

Jessica was buried in Windleham churchyard; the funeral was attended by all the Leroy's, as well as by many of the countryfolk, for her sad little story had become known. Ada Lester was also present; she paid her last visit to the neighbourhood of Barminster on that day, and, with a tact most unusual to her, refrained from attracting any attention so far as the Leroy's were concerned.

Well placed now in money matters, and proprietress of the Casket Theatre, she settled down to learn the art of acting as well as dancing, and eventually married her business manager. She also undertook to look after her sister, who, however, died shortly afterwards, without ever regaining her memory, or learning of the fate which had befallen the man whom she had once loved, or the daughter of whose existence she had forgotten since the day of her birth.

It took some time to settle up all the details of "Harker's Ltd." Jasper Vermont had died intestate; and although advertisements were inserted in various papers, seeking his next-of-kin, no answers were received. The money, therefore, reverted to the Crown; and Mr. Harker, taking up his real name of Goodwin, settled in Kingston with his daughter and her husband, who now, thanks to Lord Barminster, owned a flourishing business.

Lady Merivale never visited Barminster Castle again. She had succeeded in convincing her husband of the harmless nature of her flirtation with Adrien, and patiently bore the brunt of his very natural resentment at the publicity accorded to his name at the trial; though he acknowledged that under the circumstances she could have done nothing else but come forward to exonerate Leroy. Then her ladyship retired into the country with her husband, who was greatly gratified in the dutiful interest she showed in him and his farm. All love of intrigue seemed to have died out when her flirtation with Adrien ended, nor was it ever revived.

Society also lost its fashionable monarch, as far as Leroy was concerned. The vow that he had registered beside the dead body of the girl who had so loved him, was religiously kept. He disappeared from his former place in the world of amusement, and the devotees of pleasure knew him no more.

After the funeral, he stayed on at Barminster Castle for a time, with his father and Lady Constance; but, with the consent of both, he departed a few months later for Africa, on a big-game shooting expedition. Living the simple but arduous life of the hunters and trappers, he sought to bury the folly of the past, and restore his hopes of a brighter and better future.

One day, about six months after the death of Vermont, Lord Barminster sat in the dining-room of Barminster Castle. His eyes, their expression no less keen, but far more gentle than in former years, were bent, sometimes on the cheerful fire, sometimes on the calm face of his ward, where she stood in the deep embrasure of the window, gazing out over the snow.

A book was in her hand, but it was closed; and the wistful look in her sweet eyes showed that her thoughts had flown from the pages of fiction to the realities of the past and the future.

Suddenly Lord Barminster raised his head.

"Constance, what does Lady Ankerton say in her letter?"

The girl took it from the rack on the writing-desk.

"She says," replied the sweet, musical voice, "that the Ashfords are well and thriving. She has taken quite an interest in them. Mr. Harker is rather weak, but cheerful, and so happy in the love of his grandchildren."

"Ah!" said Lord Barminster, "I am glad they are happy, they deserve all the pleasure they can get."

He sighed. "When does the African mail come in, my dear?" he asked as Lady Constance put away the letter she had been reading.

"To-night, usually," she returned with a sigh. A sudden flush rose to her cheek, rendering her face still more lovely while it lasted, but leaving her paler than ever when it had gone.

"Still wandering," said her uncle sadly; "surely, by now, Adrien ought to have forgotten the past."

"He'll never come back until he does," said Lady Constance softly.

"No," said her uncle, with a touch of pride. "He will not come back until he can take up a worthier life with a worthy love, Constance. Ring the bell, my dear, and inquire for the mail."

She obeyed him and returned to the fire again, placing her hand upon the old man's shoulder. Very beautiful she looked, as the bright gleam of the firelight illumined her face, more lovely now because of its tender, womanly expression; and the old man's gaze rested lovingly on her.

"When he comes back," he said musingly, "Adrien will find a sweet prize. He loves you, and his love will increase and endure."

Almost before he had finished speaking there came the sound of footsteps, and the door opened. The girl barely turned.

"Has the mail come in?" she asked, thinking it was a servant.

But there was no answer. The footsteps came nearer, and some one bent down over the old man's chair.

"Father!" exclaimed a manly voice.

Lady Constance uttered a low cry, and Lord Barminster sprang to his feet exclaiming.

"Adrien, my boy!"

"Yes, father, it is I," said Leroy, his voice hoarse with emotion. Then he turned to Constance, who was gazing at him with tears of joy in her eyes.

"Constance, my darling," he said gently. "Will you forgive me my long neglect of you? My eyes have seen you through all the darkness of these weary months. I have hungered for you all the time, and now I have come into the light, I want you for my own."

As he spoke he drew her unresistingly within his arms, and the old man, with one loving backward look, stole silently away to apprise Miss Penelope of the joyful news.

A month later the church of Windleham was all ablaze with winter flowers, while crowds of happy, rosy-cheeked children thronged the steps and porch, for it was the marriage day of Lady

Constance Tremaine and Adrien Leroy.

There were no fashionable silk and satin-clad guests, or a body of mighty ecclesiastics to perform the ceremony. The old rector, who had known them both from childhood, made them man and wife, while Lord Barminster gave the bride away. She had chosen to be but simply dressed, and followed only by two bridesmaids--sisters of Mortimer Shelton, who acted as best man. Among the few guests there, were also Lord Standon and Lady Muriel Branton, soon now to be wedded themselves.

Adrien had explained the reason for his anger long ago, and Lord Standon too fully understood to continue the coldness which had nearly spoilt their life-long friendship.

Happy was the bride, that bright winter morning, and Adrien, as he felt her loved arm against his side, was filled gratitude and love.

"My darling," he murmured as they emerged from the church, "we do not need the world, you and I. We have each other, that shall be world enough for us."

"Not to the world do I owe you, Adrien," said Lady Constance gravely, "but to another woman." Drawing him to the marble slab, which stood close to the porch, she bent down and placed her bridal bouquet of white roses on the grave of Jessica. "But for her, life would have ended for both of us that summer day."

Adrien was deeply moved by her remembrance of the child.

"My darling," he said tenderly, "we have passed together through the dark shadows. Let us enter now into the sunlight of our love."

THE END

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