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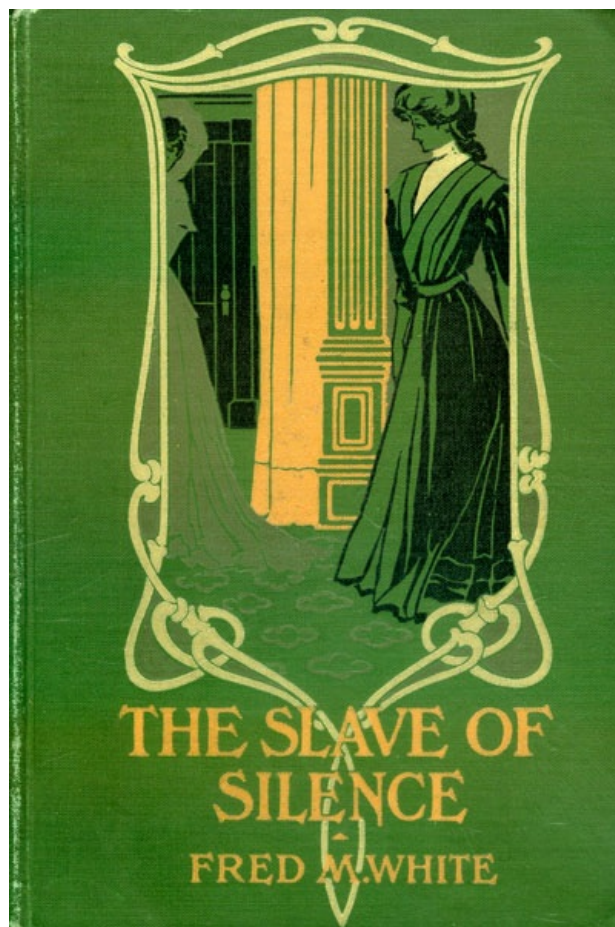
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THE SLAVE OF SILENCE



"Nothing daunted, the pair made a rush at Berrington who fired right and left."

FRONTISPIECE. [See page 191.](#)

THE SLAVE OF SILENCE

BY

F. M. WHITE

AUTHOR OF "TREGARTHEN'S WIFE" "THE WHITE BATTALION"

"THE ROBE OF LUCIFER" ETC ETC

ILLUSTRATED

BOSTON

LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY

1906

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THE SLAVE OF SILENCE

CHAPTER I

The girl turned away from the splendour of it and laid her aching head against the cool windowpane. A hansom flashed along in the street below with just a glimpse of a pretty laughing girl in it with a man by her side. From another part of the *Royal Palace Hotel* came sounds of mirth and gaiety. All the world seemed to be happy, to-night, perhaps to mock the misery of the girl with her head against the windowpane.

And yet on the face of it, Beatrice Darryll's lines seemed to have fallen in pleasant places. She was young and healthy, and, in the eyes of her friends, beautiful. Still, the startling pallor of her face was in vivid contrast with the dead black dress she wore, a dress against which her white arms and throat stood out like ivory on a back-ground of ebony and silver. There was no colour about the girl at all, save for the warm, ripe tone of her hair and the deep, steadfast blue of her eyes. Though her face was cold and scornful, she would not have given the spectator the impression of coldness, only utter weariness and a tiredness of life at the early age of twenty-two.

Behind her was a table laid out for a score of dinner guests. Everything was absolutely perfect and exceedingly costly, as appertained to all things at the *Royal Palace Hotel*, where the head waiter condescended to bow to nothing under a millionaire. The table decorations were red in tone, there were red shades to the low electric lights, and masses of red carnations everywhere. No taste, and incidentally no expense had been spared, for Beatrice Darryll was to be married on the morrow, and her father, Sir Charles, was giving this dinner in honour of the occasion. Only a very rich man could afford a luxury like that.

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"I think everything is complete, madame," a waiter suggested softly. "If there is anything——"

Beatrice turned wearily from the window. She looked old and odd and drawn just for the moment. And yet that face could ripple with delighted smiles, the little red mouth was made for laughter. Beatrice's eyes swept over the wealth of good taste and criminal extravagance.

"It will do very nicely," the girl said. "It will do—anything will do. I mean you have done your work splendidly. I am more than satisfied."

The gratified, if slightly puzzled, waiter bowed himself out. The bitter scorn in Beatrice's eyes deepened. What did all this reckless extravagance mean? Why was it justified? The man who might have answered the question sauntered into the room. A wonderfully well-preserved man was Sir Charles Darryll, with a boyish smile and an air of perennial youth unspotted by the world, a man who was totally unfitted to cope with the hard grip and sordid side of life. There were some who said that he was a grasping, greedy, selfish old rascal, who under the guise of youthful integrity concealed a nature that was harsh and cruel.

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"Well, my dear child," Sir Charles cried. "And are you not satisfied? That table-setting is perfect; I never saw anything in more exquisite taste."

"It will all have to be paid for," Beatrice said wearily. "The money——"

"Will be forthcoming. I have no doubt of it. Whether I have it at the bank or not I cannot for the moment say. If not, then our good friend Stephen Richford must lend it me. My dear child, that black dress of yours gives me quite a painful shock. Why wear it?"

Beatrice crossed over and regarded her pale reflection in the glass opposite. The little pink nails were dug fiercely into the still pinker flesh of her palm.

"Why not?" she asked. "Is it not appropriate? Am I not in the deepest mourning for my lost honour? To-morrow I am going to marry a man who from the bottom of my heart I loathe and despise. I am going to sell myself to him for money—money to save your good name. Oh, I know that I shall have the benediction of the church, less fortunate girls will envy me; but I am not a whit better than the poor creature flaunting her shame on the pavement. Nay, I am worse, for she can plead that love was the cause of her undoing. Father, I can't, can't go through with it."

She flung herself down in a chair and covered her face with her hands. The boyish innocence of Sir Charles's face changed suddenly, a wicked gleam came into his eyes. His friends would have found a difficulty in recognizing him then.

"Get up," he said sternly. "Get up and come to the window with me. Now, what do you see in this room?"

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"Evidences of wealth that is glittering here," Beatrice cried. "Shameless extravagance that you

can never hope to pay for. Costly flowers——"

"And everything that makes life worth living. All these things are necessary to me. They will be with me till the end if you marry Stephen Richford. Now look outside. Do you see those two men elaborately doing nothing by the railings opposite. You do? Well, they are watching *me*. They have been dogging me for three days. And if anything happened now, a sudden illness on your part, anything to postpone to-morrow's ceremony, I should pass the next day in jail. You did not think it was as bad as that, did you?"

The man's face was livid with fury; he had Beatrice's bare arm in a cruel grip, but she did not notice the pain. Her mental trouble was too deep for that.

"It's that City Company that I hinted at," Sir Charles went on. "There was a chance of a fortune there. I recognized that chance, and I became a director. And there was risk, too. We took our chance, and the chance failed. We gambled desperately, and again fortune failed us. Certain people who were against us have made unhappy discoveries. That is why those men are watching me. But if I can send the chairman a letter to-morrow assuming innocence and regret and enclosing a cheque for £5,000 to cover my fees and to recover all the shares I have sold, then I come out with a higher reputation than ever. I shall shine as the one honest man in a den of thieves. That cheque and more, Richford has promised me directly you are his wife. Do you understand, you sullen, white-faced fool? Do you see the danger? If I thought you were going to back out of it now, I'd strangle you."

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Beatrice felt no fear; she was long past that emotion. Her weary eyes fell on the banks of red carnations; on the shaded lights and the exquisite table service. The fit of passion had left her indifferent and cold. She was not in the least sullen.

"It would be the kindest act you could do, father," she said. "Oh, I know that this is no new thing. There is no novelty in the situation of a girl giving herself to a man whom she despises, for the sake of his money. The records of the Divorce Court teem with such cases. For the battered honour of my father I am going to lose my own. Be silent—no sophistry of yours can hide the brutal truth. I hate that man from the bottom of my soul, and he knows it. And yet his one desire is to marry me. In Heaven's name, why?"

Sir Charles chuckled slightly. The danger was past, and he could afford to be good-humoured again. Looking at his daughter he could understand the feelings of the lover who grew all the more ardent as Beatrice drew back. And Stephen Richford was a millionaire. It mattered little that both he and his father had made their money in crooked ways; it mattered little that the best men and a few of the best clubs would have none of Stephen Richford so long as Society generally smiled on him and fawned at his feet.

"You need have no further fear," Beatrice answered coldly. "My weakness has passed. I am not likely to forget myself again. My heart is dead and buried——"

"That's the way to talk," Sir Charles said cheerfully. "Feeling better, eh? I once fancied that that confounded foolishness between Mark Ventmore and yourself,—eh, what?"

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A wave of crimson passed over Beatrice's pale face. Her little hands trembled.

"It was no foolishness," she said. "I never cared for anyone but Mark, I never shall care for anybody else. If Mark's father had not disowned him, because he preferred art to that terrible City, you would never have come between us. But you parted us, and you thought that there was an end of it. But you were wrong. Let me tell the truth. I wrote to Mark in Venice, only last week, asking him to come to me. I got no reply to that letter. If I had and he had come to me, I should have told him everything and implored him to marry me. But the letter was not delivered, and therefore you need have no fear of those men in the street. But my escape has been much nearer than you imagine."

Sir Charles turned away humming some operatic fragment gaily. There was not the least occasion for him to give any display of feeling in the matter. It had been an exceedingly lucky thing for him that the letter in question had miscarried. And nothing could make any difference now, seeing that Beatrice had given her word, and that was a thing that she always respected. All Beatrice's probity and honour she inherited from her mother.

"Very foolish, very foolish," Sir Charles muttered benignly. "Girls are so impulsive. Don't you think that those carnations would be improved by a little more foliage at the base? They strike me as being a little set and formal. Now, is not that better?"

As if he had not either care or trouble in the world, Sir Charles added a few deft touches to the deep crimson blooms. His face was careless and boyish and open again. From the next room came the swish of silken skirts and the sound of a high-bred voice asking for somebody.

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"Lady Rashborough," Sir Charles cried, "I'll go and receive her. And do for goodness' sake try to look a little more cheerful. Stay in here and compose yourself."

Sir Charles went off with an eager step and his most fascinating smile. Lord Rashborough was the head of his family. He was going to give Beatrice away to-morrow; indeed, Beatrice would drive to the church from Rashborough's town house, though the reception was in the *Royal Palace Hotel*.

Beatrice passed her hand across her face wearily. She stood for a moment looking into the fire, her thoughts very far away. Gradually the world and its surroundings came back to her, and she was more or less conscious that somebody was in the room. As she turned suddenly a tall figure turned also, and made with hesitation towards the door.

"I am afraid," the stranger said in a soft, pleading voice; "I am afraid that I have made a mistake."

"If you are looking for anybody," Beatrice suggested, "my father has these rooms. If you have come to see Sir Charles Darryll, why, I could——"

It struck Beatrice just for a moment that here was an adventurer after the silver plate. But a glance at the beautiful, smooth, sorrowful face beat down the suspicion as quickly as it had risen. The intruder was unmistakably a lady, she was dressed from head to foot in silver grey, and had a bonnet to match. In some vague way she reminded Beatrice of a hospital nurse, and then again of some *grande dame* in one of the old-fashioned country houses where the parvenue and the Russo-Semitic financier is not permitted to enter.

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"I took the wrong turn," the stranger said. "I fancy I can reach the corridor by that door opposite. These great hotels are so big, they confuse me. So you are Beatrice Darryll; I have often heard of you. If I may venture to congratulate you upon——"

"No, no," Beatrice cried quickly. "Please don't. Perhaps if you tell me your name I may be in a position to help you to find anybody you may chance——"

The stranger shook her head as she stood in the doorway. Her voice was low and sweet as she replied.

"It does not in the least matter," she said. "You can call me the Slave of the Bond."

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CHAPTER II

The guests had assembled at length, the dinner was in full swing. It would have been hard for any onlooker to have guessed that so much misery and heart-burning were there. Sir Charles, smiling, gay, debonair, chatted with his guests as if quite forgetful of the silent watchers by the railings outside. He might have been a rich man as he surveyed the tables and ordered the waiters about. True, somebody else would eventually pay for the dinner, but that detracted nothing from the host's enjoyment.

Beatrice had a fixed smile to her face; she also had disguised her feelings marvellously. There were other girls bidden to that brilliant feast who envied Miss Darryll and secretly wondered why she was dressed so plainly and simply. On her left hand sat Stephen Richford, a dull, heavy-looking man with a thick lip and a suggestion of shiftiness in his small eyes. Altogether he bore a strong resemblance to a prize-fighter. He was quiet and a little moody, as was his wont, so that most of Beatrice's conversation was directed to her neighbour on the other side, Colonel Berrington, a brilliant soldier not long from the East.

A handsome and distinguished-looking man he was, with melancholy droop to his moustache and the shadow of some old sorrow in his eyes. Colonel Berrington went everywhere and knew everything, but as to his past he said nothing. Nobody knew anything about his people and yet everybody trusted him, indeed no man in the Army had been in receipt of more confidences. Perhaps it was his innate feeling, his deep sense of introspection. And he knew by a kind of instinct that the beautiful girl by his side was not happy.

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"So this is your last free party, Miss Beatrice," he smiled. "It seems strange to think that when last we met you were a happy child, and now——"

"And now an unhappy woman, you were going to suggest," Beatrice replied. "Is not that so?"

"Positively, I refuse to have words like that put into my mouth," Berrington protested. "Looking round the table I can see four girls at least who are envying you from the bottom of their hearts. Now could any society woman be miserable under those circumstances?"

Beatrice flushed a little as she toyed nervously with her bread. Berrington's words were playful enough, but there was a hidden meaning behind them that Beatrice did not fail to notice. In a way he was telling her how sorry he was; Richford had been more or less dragged into a sporting discussion by the lady on the other side, so that Beatrice and her companion had no fear of being interrupted. Their eyes met for a moment.

"I don't think they have any great need to be envious," the girl said. "Colonel Berrington, I am going to ask what may seem a strange question under the circumstances. I am going to make a singular request. Everybody likes and trusts you. I have liked and trusted you since the first day I met you. Will you be my friend,—if anything happens when I want a friend sorely, will you come to me and help me? I know it is singular——"

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"It is not at all singular," Berrington said in a low voice. He shot a quick glance of dislike at Richford's heavy jowl. "One sees things, quiet men like myself always see things. And I understand exactly what you mean. If I am in England I will come to you. But I warn you that my

time is fully occupied. All my long leave——"

"But surely you have no work to do whilst you are in England on leave?"

"Indeed I have. I have a quest, a search that never seems to end. I thought that I had finished it to-night, and singularly enough, in this very hotel. I can't go into the matter here with all this chattering mob of people about us, for the story is a sad one. But if ever you should chance to meet a grey lady with brown eyes and lovely grey hair——"

"The stranger! How singular!" Beatrice exclaimed. "Why, only to-night in this very room."

"Ah!" the word came with a gasp almost like pain from Berrington's lips. The laughter and chatter of the dinner-table gave these two a sense of personal isolation. "That is remarkable. I am looking for a grey lady, and I trace her to this hotel—quite by accident, and simply because I am dining here to-night. And you saw her in this room?"

"I did," Beatrice said eagerly. "She came here by mistake; evidently she had quite lost herself in this barrack of a place. She was dressed from head to foot in silver grey, she had just the eyes and hair that you describe. And when I asked her who she was, she merely said that she was the Slave of the Bond and vanished."

Colonel Berrington's *entrée* lay neglected on his plate. A deeper tinge of melancholy than usual was on his face. It was some time before he spoke again. [Pg 12]

"The Slave of the Bond," he echoed. "How true, how characteristic! And that is all you have to tell me. If you see her again——but there, you are never likely to see her again ... I will tell you the story some other time, not before these frivolous creatures here. It is a sad story; to a great extent, it reminds me of your own, Miss Beatrice."

"Is mine a sad story?" Beatrice smiled and blushed. "In what way is it sad, do you think?"

"Well, we need not go into details here," Berrington replied. "You see, Mark Ventmore is an old friend of mine. I knew his father intimately. It was only at Easter that we met in Rome, and, as you say, people are so good as to regard me as worthy of confidence. Beatrice, is it too late?"

Berrington asked the question in a fierce, sudden whisper. His lean fingers clasped over the girl's hand. Sir Charles was leaning back in his chair talking gaily. Nobody seemed to heed the drama that was going on in their midst. Beatrice's eyes filled with tears.

"It is a great comfort to me to know that I have so good and true a friend," she said with her eyes cast down on her plate. "No, I do not want any wine. Why does that waiter keep pushing that wine list of his under my nose?"

"Then you are quite sure that it is too late?" Berrington asked again.

"My dear friend, it is inevitable," Beatrice replied. "It is a matter of—duty. Look at my father."

Berrington glanced in the direction of Sir Charles, who was bending tenderly over the very pretty woman on his right hand. Apparently the baronet had not a single care in the world; his slim hand toyed with a glass of *vintage* claret. Berrington gave him a quick glance of contempt. [Pg 13]

"I do not see what Sir Charles has to do with it," he said.

"My father has everything to do with it," Beatrice said. "Does he not look happy and prosperous! And yet you can never tell. And there was a time when he was so very different. And the mere thought that any action of mine would bring disgrace upon him——"

Beatrice paused as she felt Berrington's eyes upon her. The expression of his face showed that she had said enough, and more than enough.

"I quite understand," Berrington said quietly. "You are a hostage to fortune. Honour thy father that *his* days may be long in the land where good dinners abound and tradesmen are confiding. But the shame, the burning shame of it! Here's that confounded waiter again."

Beatrice felt inclined to laugh hysterically at Berrington's sudden change of tone. The dark-eyed Swiss waiter was bending over the girl's chair again with a supplicating suggestion that she should try a little wine of some sort. He had a clean list in his hand, and even Berrington's severest military frown did not suffice to scare him away.

"Ver' excellent wine," he murmured. "A little claret, a liqueur. No. 74 is what—will madame kindly look? Madame will look for one little moment?"

With an insistence worthy of a better cause, the Swiss placed the card in Beatrice's hand. [Pg 14]

It was a clean card, printed in red and gold, and opposite No. 74 was a pencilled note. The girl's eyes gleamed as she saw the writing. The words were few but significant. "In the little conservatory beyond the drawing-room. Soon as possible."

"I shall have to complain about that fellow," Berrington said. "Miss Beatrice, are you not well?"

"I am quite well, quite strong and well," Beatrice whispered. "I implore you not to attract any attention to me. And the waiter was not to blame. He had a message to deliver to me. You can see how cleverly he has done it. Look here!"

Beatrice displayed the card with the pencilled words upon it. Berrington's quick intelligence took everything in at a glance.

"Of course that is intended for you," he said. "A neat handwriting. And yet in some way it seems quite familiar to me. Could I possibly have seen it anywhere before?"

"I should say that it is extremely likely," the girl said. "It is Mark Ventmore's own handwriting."

Berrington smiled. He had all a soldier's love of adventure, and he began to see a very pretty one here.

"I wrote to him a little over a week ago," Beatrice said rapidly. "If he had got my letter then and come, goodness knows what would have happened. I was not quite aware at that hour how close was the shadow of disgrace. I expect Mark has found out everything. Probably he has only just arrived and feels that if he does not see me to-night it will be too late. Colonel Berrington, I must see Mark at once, oh, I *must*."

Nothing could be easier. Beatrice had merely to say that she was suffering with a dreadful headache, that the atmosphere of the room was insupportable, and that she was going to try the purer air of the conservatory beyond the dining-room. [Pg 15]

"No, you need not come," Beatrice said as Richford lounged heavily to his feet. "I do not feel the least in the mood to talk to anybody, not even you."

The listener's sullen features flushed, and he clenched his hands. Beatrice had never taken the slightest trouble to disguise her dislike for the man she had promised to marry. In his heart of hearts he had made up his mind that she should suffer presently for all the indignities that she had heaped upon his head.

"All right," he said. "I'll come into the drawing-room and wait for you. Keep you from being interrupted, in fact. I know what women's headaches mean."

There was no mistaking the cowardly insinuation, but Berrington said nothing. Richford could not possibly have seen the signal, and yet he implied an assignation if his words meant anything at all. It was a cruel disappointment, but the girl's face said nothing of her emotions. She passed quietly along till she came to the little conservatory where presently she was followed by the Swiss waiter, who had given her the card with Mark Ventmore's message upon it.

"Madame is not well," he said. "Madame has the dreadful headache. Can I get anything for Madame? A glass of water, an ice, a cup of coffee, or——"

Beatrice was on the point of declining everything, when she caught the eye of the speaker. Apparently there was some hidden meaning behind his words, for she changed her mind. [Pg 16]

"No coffee," she said in a voice that was meant for the lounge in the drawing-room, "but I shall be very glad if you will let me have a cup of tea, strong tea, without milk or sugar."

The waiter bowed and retired. Beatrice sat there with her head back as if utterly worn out, though her heart was beating thick and fast. She looked up again presently as a waiter entered leaving the necessary things on a tray. It was not the same waiter, but a taller, fairer man who bowed as he held out the silver salver.

"The tea, Madame," he said. "May I be allowed to pour it out for you? Steady!"

The last word was no more than a whisper. Beatrice checked the cry that came to her lips.

"Mark," she murmured. "Mark, dear Mark, is it really you?"

The tall waiter smiled as he laid a hand on the girl's trembling fingers.

"Indeed it is, darling," he said. "For God's sake don't say I have come too late!"

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CHAPTER III

From the point of view of the onlooker there could have been nothing suspicious in the attitude of the pseudo waiter with his tray. He could see Beatrice leaning back as if the pain in her head had made her oblivious to everything else. As a matter of fact, Beatrice was racking her brains for some way out of the difficulty. The self-elected waiter could not stay there much longer, in any case, at least not unless the suspicious Richford took it in his head to return to the dinner-table again.

"It is so good of you to come," Beatrice said, still with her head thrown back in the air. "That man has followed me, though Heaven knows what he has to be suspicious about. Go away for a few minutes, as if you had forgotten something, and then return again."

Mark Ventmore assented with a low bow. Scarcely had he left the conservatory by a door leading to the corridor than Richford strolled in.

"Feeling better now?" he asked ungraciously. "Funny things, women's headaches!"

"For Heaven's sake go away," Beatrice exclaimed. "Why do you come and torture me like this? You are the very last I want to see just now. Don't drive me over the border. Go back to the others, and leave me in peace."

With a sullen air, Richford lounged away; Colonel Berrington was crossing the drawing-room, and Beatrice's heart beat high with hope. She might have known that the gallant soldier would help her if possible. With unspeakable relief she saw Richford tactfully drawn away and disappear. Very quickly Beatrice changed her seat, so that she could command a view of the drawing-room without herself being seen. The side door opened, and Mark Ventmore came in again. He carried a tray still, but he no longer looked like a waiter. With one quick glance around him he advanced to Beatrice and knelt by the side of her chair.

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"My darling," he whispered. "Oh, my dear little love! Am I too late?"

Beatrice said nothing for a moment. She was content only to forget her unhappy lot in the knowledge that the one man she had ever cared for was by her side. Ventmore's arm stole about her; her head drooped to his shoulder. There was a faint, unsteady smile on the girl's lips as Ventmore bent and kissed her passionately.

"Why did you not come before?" she asked.

"My dearest, I could not. I was away from my quarters, and I did not get your letter. I am only here quite by chance. But is it too late?"

"Oh, I fear so; I fear so," Beatrice murmured. "If you had come a week ago I should have asked you to marry me and take me away from it all. And yet, if I had done so, my father would have been ruined and disgraced."

Mark Ventmore moved his shoulders a little impatiently.

"So Sir Charles says," he replied. "Sir Charles was always very good at those insinuations. He has played upon your feelings, of course, sweetheart."

"Not this time, Mark. He has mixed himself up in some disgraceful City business. A prosecution hangs in the air. And I am to be the price of his freedom. My future husband will see my father through after I become his wife. Even now there are private detectives watching my father. It is a dreadful business altogether, Mark. And yet if you had come a week ago, I should have risked it all for your sake."

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Ventmore pressed the trembling figure to his heart passionately. Under his breath he swore that this hideous sacrifice should never be. Was this white-drawn woman in his arms, the happy laughing little Beatrice that he used to know? They had parted cheerfully enough a year since; they had agreed not to write to one another; they had infinite trust in the future. Mark was going to make his fortune as a painter, and Beatrice was to wait for him. And now it was the girl's wedding eve, and the fates had been too strong for her altogether.

"Leave your father to himself and come," Mark urged. "I am making enough now to keep us both in comfort; not quite the income that I hoped to ask you to share with me, but at least we shall be happy. I will take you to a dear old friend of mine, and to-morrow I will buy a license. After that no harm can molest you."

Beatrice closed her eyes before the beatitude of the prospect. Just for the moment she felt inclined to yield. Mark was so strong and good and handsome, and she loved him so. And yet she had given her word for the sake of her father.

"I cannot," she said. Her voice was very low but quite firm. "I have promised my father. Oh, yes, I know that I had promised you first. But it is for the sake of my father's honour. If I do what you wish he will go to jail—nothing can prevent it. I only knew to-night."

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"And you are sure that Sir Charles is not—not ... you know what I mean?"

"Lying to me?" Beatrice said bitterly. "Not this time. I always know when he is making an effort to deceive me. Mark, don't press me."

Mark crushed down his feelings with an effort. Blindly and passionately in love as he was, he could see that duty and reason were on the side of the girl. She would have to be sacrificed to this scoundrelly father, and to please the other rascal who coveted her beauty and her fair white body all the more because Beatrice kept him so rigidly at a distance.

"It seems very, very hard," Mark said thoughtfully. "Terribly hard on both of us."

"Yes, but it is always the woman who suffers most," Beatrice replied. "There is no help for it, Mark. I must see this thing out to the end. If you had only come before!"

"My darling, I came as quickly as I could. I am staying here to-night, and my room is in the same corridor as that of Sir Charles. I shall see him to-night, or early to-morrow, and tell him a few of the things that I have discovered. Perhaps when I open his eyes to the truth as to his future son-in-law, he will change his mind."

"He will never do so," Beatrice said mournfully. "My father can always justify himself and his conscience where his own interests are concerned. But how did you know—"

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"That you were in trouble? It came to me quite by accident. I was in Paris a day or two ago to see a wealthy American who wants some of my work. And as I was alone in the evening, I went to one of the theatres. There were two English ladies by me in the stalls and presently they began to talk about *you*. I could not help hearing. Then I heard everything. Do you know a tall, elderly lady with dark eyes and white hair, a lady all in silver grey?"

Beatrice started. Surely Mark was describing the Slave of the Bond, as the grey lady whom Beatrice had encountered earlier in the evening had called herself.

"I know her, and I don't know her," the girl cried. "She came into the dining-room here before dinner quite by accident. I thought she was some adventuress at first. But her face was too good and pure for that. I asked her who she was, and she said she was the Slave of the Bond. Is this a coincidence, or is there something deeper beyond? I don't know what to think."

"Something deeper beyond, I should imagine," Mark said. "Be sure that in some way or another this grey lady is interested in your welfare. But I am absolutely sure that she did not know me."

"And so you came on at once, Mark?" Beatrice asked.

"As soon as possible, dear. I heard about the dinner whilst I was in the theatre. My train was very late, and I could not possibly carry out the programme that I had arranged. My next difficulty was to get speech with you. Happily, a half sovereign and an intelligent waiter solved that problem. When Richford followed you I had to borrow that tray and the rest of it and disburse another half sovereign. Then I saw that my old friend Berrington had come to my rescue. Did you tell him, Beatrice?"

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"He saw the message on the wine card and recognized your handwriting. But I shall not be able to stay much longer, Mark. Those people may come into the drawing-room at any moment. This must be our last meeting."

"I am not going to be so sure of that, Beatrice. What I have to say to your father must move him. The idea of your being the wife of that man—but I will not think of it. Oh, love will find the way even at this very late hour."

Mark would have said more, only there was the flutter of a dress in the drawing-room beyond, and the echo of a laugh. The dinner guests were coming into the drawing-room. With a quick motion, Mark snatched the girl to his heart and kissed her passionately.

"Good night, darling," he whispered. "Keep up your courage. Who knows what may happen between now and twelve o'clock to-morrow? And after I have seen your father——"

Another kiss, and the lover was gone. Beatrice lay back in her chair striving to collect her thoughts. Everything seemed to have happened so suddenly and unexpectedly. There were people about her now who were asking smoothly sympathetic questions in the hollow insincerity of the world.

"I'm no better," Beatrice said. "If my aunt is ready I should like to go home. My father will stay and see that you get your bridge all right."

Beatrice had gone at length with Lady Rashborough, the rest of the guests had finished their bridge, and the party was breaking up. Mark Ventmore was sitting, smoking cigarettes in his bedroom, waiting for the chance to see Sir Charles. It was getting very late now, and all the guests had long since been in their rooms. With his door open Mark could see into the corridor.

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Then he gave a little whistle of astonishment as the door of Sir Charles's sitting-room opened and the grey lady, the Slave of the Bond of Silence, came out. She was dressed just as Mark had seen her before; as she walked along, her face was calm and placid. She came at length to the end of the corridor and disappeared quietly and deliberately down the stairs. With a feeling of curiosity, Mark crossed over and tried the handle of Sir Charles's door. To his great surprise it was locked.

For a little time Mark pondered over the problem. As he did so, his head fell back and he slept. It was the sound sleep of the clean mind in the healthy body, so that when the sleeper came to himself again it was broad daylight; the hotel was full of life and bustle. With a sense of having done a fearful thing, Mark looked at his watch. It was ten minutes past eleven!

"This comes of having no rest the night before," he muttered. "And to think that the fate of my little girl should be hanging in the balance! If Sir Charles has gone!"

But Sir Charles had not gone, as one of the waiters was in a position to assure Mark. He had not retired to bed until past three, and at that time was in a state of hilarity that promised a pretty fair headache in the morning.

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"Well, there is time yet," Mark thought, grimly. "And Sir Charles must be moving by this time, as the wedding is to take place at twelve."

But the minutes crept on, and it was pretty near to that hour when Sir Charles's man came down the corridor with an anxious expression on his face. He had been hammering at the bedroom door without effect.

A sudden idea thrilled Mark, an idea that he was ashamed of almost before it had come into his mind. He stood by idly, listening. He heard a clock somewhere strike the hour of midday. He stepped up to the little knot of waiters.

"Why don't you do something?" he demanded. "What is the use of standing stupidly about here? Call the manager or whoever is in attendance. Break down the door."

With all his force Mark thrust himself against the stout oak. The hinges yielded at last.

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CHAPTER IV

Beatrice woke to the knowledge of her own utter misery. Contrary to her anticipation, she had slept very soundly all night, much as condemned criminals are supposed to do on the eve of execution. She felt well and vigorous in herself, a brilliant sunshine was pouring into her room, and all around her lay evidences of her coming slavery. Here were the bridal veil and the long train, there were the jewels laid out on the dressing table. A maid was moving quietly about the room.

"Good morning, miss," she said. "A lovely morning. And if there's any truth in the saying that 'happy's the bride that the sun shines on,' why——"

The maid stopped and smiled before she caught sight of Beatrice's pale, set face.

"I suppose you think I am to be envied?" Beatrice asked. "Now don't you?"

The maid lifted her hands to express her dumb admiration. "Who would not be happy to be dressed in those lovely clothes, to be decked in those jewels and to marry a man who will give you everything that the heart could desire?" Beatrice smiled wearily.

"You are quite wrong, Adeline," she said. "If I could change places with you at this moment I would gladly do so. You have a sweetheart, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, miss. He's in a shop. Some day he hopes to have a shop of his own, and then——"

"And then you will be married. You love him very dearly, I suppose. And I——"

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Beatrice stopped, conscious of the fact that she was saying too much. She ate sparingly enough of her breakfast; she went down to the drawing-room and wrote a few letters. It was not quite ten yet and she had plenty of time. Lady Rashborough was not an early riser, though Rashborough himself had breakfasted and gone out long before. Beatrice was moodily contemplating her presents in the library when Mr. Stephen Richford was announced. He came in with an easy smile, though Beatrice could see that his hands were shaking and there was just a suggestion of fear in his eyes. With all his faults, the man did not drink, and Beatrice wondered. She had once seen a forger arrested on a liner, and his expression, as soon as he recognized his position, was just the same as Beatrice now saw in the eyes of the man she was going to marry.

"What is the matter?" she asked listlessly. "You look as if you had had some great shock, like a man who has escaped from prison. Your face is ghastly."

Richford made no reply for a moment. He contemplated his sullen, livid features in a large Venetian mirror opposite. He was not a pretty object at any time, but he was absolutely repulsive just at that moment.

"Bit of an upset," he stammered. "Saw a—a nasty street accident. Poor chap run over."

The man was lying to her; absolutely he was forced to the invention to save himself from a confession of quite another kind. He was not in the least likely to feel for anybody else, in fact he had no feeling of human kindness, as Beatrice had once seen for herself. There had been a fatal accident at a polo match under their very feet, and Richford had puffed at his cigarette and expressed the sentiment that if fools did that kind of thing they must be prepared to put up with the consequences.

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"You are not telling the truth!" Beatrice said coldly. "As if anything of that kind would affect *you*. You are concealing something from me. Is it—is there anything the matter with my father?"

Richford started violently. With all his self-control he could not hold himself in now. His white face took on a curious leaden hue, his voice was hoarse as he spoke.

"Of course I have no good points in your eyes," he said with a thick sneer. "And once a woman gets an idea into her head there is no rooting it out again. Your father is all right; nothing ever happens to men of that class. I saw him to his room last night, and very well he had done for himself. Won over two hundred at bridge, too. Sir Charles can take care of himself."

Beatrice's face flamed and then turned pale again. She had caught herself hoping that something had happened to her father, something sufficiently serious to postpone to-day's ceremony. It was a dreadfully unworthy thought and Beatrice was covered with shame. And yet she knew that she would have been far happier in the knowledge of a disaster like that.

"Why did you want to see me?" she asked. "I have not too much time to spare."

"Of course not. But you can cheer yourself with the reflection that we shall have so much time together later on when the happy knot is tied. Has it occurred to you that I have given you

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nothing as yet? I brought this for you."

Richford's hands, still trembling, produced a bulky package from his pocket. As he lifted the shabby lid a stream of living fire flashed out. There were diamonds of all kinds in old settings, the finest diamonds that Beatrice had ever seen. Ill at ease and sick at heart as she was, she could not repress a cry.

"Ah, I thought I could touch you," Richford grinned. "A female saint could not resist diamonds. Forty thousand pounds I gave for them. They are the famous Rockmartin gems. The family had to part with them, so the opportunity was too good to be lost. Well?"

"They are certainly exquisitely lovely," Beatrice stammered. "I thank you very much."

"If not very warmly, eh? So that is all you have to say? Ain't they worth one single kiss?"

Beatrice drew back. For the life of her she could not kiss this man. Never had his lips touched hers yet. They should never do so if Beatrice had her own way.

"I think not," she said in her cold constrained way. "It is very princely of you, and yet it does not touch me in the least. You made the bargain with your eyes open; I told you at the time that I could never care for you; that I sold myself to save my father's good name. I know the situation is not a new one; I know that such marriages, strange to say, have before now turned out to be something like success. But not ours. All the heart I ever had to bestow has long since been given to another. I will do my best to make your life comfortable, I will do my best to learn all that a wife is asked to become. But no more."

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Richford turned away with a savage curse upon his lips. The cold contempt struck him and pierced the hide of his indifference as nothing else could. But he was going to have his revenge. The time was near at hand when Beatrice would either have to bend or break, Richford did not care which. It was the only consolation that he had.

"Very well," he said. "We understand one another. We shall see. *Au revoir!*"

He took up his hat and his stick, and strode off without a further word. Beatrice put the diamonds away from her as if they had been so many deadly snakes. She felt that she would loathe the sight of diamonds for the rest of her life.

The time was drawing on now, it only wanted another hour, and the thing would be done. Lady Rashborough came in and admired the diamonds; in her opinion, Beatrice was the luckiest girl in London. Her ladyship was a pretty little blue-eyed thing adored by her husband, but she had no particle of heart. Why a girl should dislike a man who would give her diamonds like these she could not possibly imagine.

"You will be wiser as you grow older, my dear," she said sapiently. "Why didn't I meet Richford before?"

Beatrice echoed the sentiment with all her heart. She resigned herself dully to the maid; she took not the slightest interest in the proceedings; whether she looked ill or well mattered nothing. But though her own natural beauty was not to be dimmed, and though she had the aid of all that art could contrive, nothing could disguise the pallor of her face.

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"A little rouge, miss," Adeline implored. "Just a touch on your cheeks. Your face is like snow, and your lips like ashes. I could do it so cleverly that——"

"That people would never know," Beatrice said. "I have no doubt about it, Adeline. But all the same I am not going to have any paint on my face."

A big clock outside was striking the three quarters after eleven; already the carriage was at the door. As yet there was no sign of Sir Charles. But perhaps he would join the party at the church, seeing that the head of the family and not himself was going to give the bride away. Lord Rashborough, a little awkward in his new frock coat, was fuming about the library. He was an open-air man and hated the society into which his wife constantly dragged him.

"Don't be too late," he said. "Always like to be punctual. Of course that father of yours has not turned up, though he promised to drive to the church, with us."

"Father was never known to be in time in his life," Beatrice said calmly. Her dull depression had gone, she was feeling quite cool and tranquil. If anybody had asked her, she would have said that the bitterness of death had passed. "It is not necessary to wait for him."

"He'll understand," Lord Rashborough joined in. "We can leave a message, and he can follow to the church in a hansom. Let us be moving, Beatrice, if you are quite ready."

With wonderful calmness Beatrice answered that she was quite ready. A little knot of spectators had gathered outside to see the bride depart. Two or three carriages were there, and into the first, with the splendid pair of bays, Lord Rashborough handed Beatrice. They drove along the familiar streets that seemed to Beatrice as though she was seeing them for the last time. She felt like a doomed woman with the deadly virus of consumption in her blood when she is being ordered abroad with the uncertain chance that she might never see England again. It almost seemed to Beatrice that she was asleep, and that the whole thing was being enacted in a dream.

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"Here we are at last," Rashborough exclaimed. "What a mob of women! What a lot of flowers!

Why anybody wants to make all this fuss over getting married beats me. Come along."

It was a society wedding in the highest sense of the word, and the church was crowded. There was a rustle and a stir as the bride swept up the aisle, and the organ boomed out. There was a little delay at the altar, for the father of the bride had not yet arrived, and there was a disposition to give him a little latitude. Only Lord Rashborough rebelled.

"Let's get on," he said. "Darryll may be half an hour late. One can never tell. And I've got a most important appointment at Tattersall's at half-past two."

Beatrice had no objection to make—she would have objected to nothing at that moment. In the same dreamy way, presently she found herself kneeling at the altar, and a clergyman was saying something that conveyed absolutely nothing to her intelligence. Presently somebody was fumbling unsteadily at her left hand, whereon somebody a great deal more nervous than she was trying to fix a plain gold ring. Someone at the back of the church was making a disturbance.

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The officiating clergyman raised his head in protest. Except the exhortation, the ceremony was practically finished. A policeman appeared out of somewhere and seemed to be expostulating with the intruder. Just for a minute it looked as if there was going to be an open brawl.

"I tell you I must go up," somebody was saying, and just for a moment it seemed to Beatrice that she was listening to the voice of Mark Ventmore. "It is a matter of life and death."

Beatrice glanced up languidly at the silly society faces, the frocks and the flowers. Did she dream, or was that really the pale face of Mark that she saw? Mark had burst from the policeman—he was standing now hatless before the altar.

"The ceremony must not go on," he said, breathlessly. There was a nameless horror in his white face. "I—I feel that I am strangely out of place, but it is all too dreadful."

Beatrice rose to her feet. There was some tragedy here, a tragedy reflected in the ghastly face of her groom. And yet on his face was a suggestion of relief, of vulgar triumph.

"What is it?" Beatrice asked. "Tell me. I could bear anything—*now!*"

"Your father!" Mark gasped. "We had to burst open his door. Sir Charles was found in his bed quite dead. He had been dead for some hours when they found him."

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CHAPTER V

Mark Ventmore repeated his statement three times before anybody seemed to comprehend the dread meaning of his words. The shock was so sudden, so utterly unexpected by the majority of the people there. Of course nobody in that brilliant throng had the least idea of the bride's feelings in the matter, most of them were privileged guests for the reception. They had been bidden to a festive afternoon, a theatre had been specially chartered for the evening, with a dance to follow. This was one of the smart functions of the season.

And now death had stepped in and swept everything away at one breath. People looked at one another as if unable to take in what had happened. There was a strange uneasiness that might have been taken for disappointment rather than regret. Perhaps it partook of both. Somebody a little more thoughtful than the rest gave a sign to the organist who had begun to fill the church with a volume of triumphal music. The silence that followed was almost painful.

Then as if by common consent, every eye was fixed upon the bride. Beatrice had turned and walked down the altar steps in the direction of Mark, who advanced now without further opposition. Beatrice stood there with her hand to her head as if trying to understand it all. She was terribly white, but absolutely composed.

"Did you say that my father was dead?" she asked.

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"I am afraid so," Mark stammered. "He—he has been dead for hours. I came on here as fast as I could, hoping to be in time to—"

He paused, conscious of the fact that he was about to say something terribly out of place. Just for an instant Mark had forgotten that he and Beatrice were not alone. He was looking into her beautiful, dilated eyes, oblivious to the fact of the spectators. He was going to say that he had hurried there in the hopes of being in time to stop the ceremony. And Beatrice had divined it, for she flushed slightly. It seemed a terrible thing, but already she had asked herself the same question. The shock of her father's death had not quite gone home to her yet, and she could still think about herself. Was she really married to Stephen Richford? Was the ceremony legally completed? The thought was out of place, but there it was. A mist rose before the girl's eyes, her heart beat painfully fast.

"Don't you think we ought to do something?" Mark asked.

The question startled Beatrice out of her stupor. She was ready for action. It was as if a stream of cold water had been poured over her.

"Of course," she cried. "It is wrong to stand here. Take me home at once, Mark."

It was a strange scene strangely carried out. The bridegroom stood irresolute by the altar, feeling nervously at his gloves, whilst Beatrice, with all her wedding finery about her, clutched Mark by the arm and hurried him down the aisle. The whole thing was done, and the strangely assorted pair had vanished before the congregation recovered from their surprise.

"Come back!" Richford exclaimed. "Surely it is my place to——"

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Long before Richford could reach the porch, his wife and Mark had entered a hansom and were on their way to the *Royal Palace Hotel*. The story had got about by this time; people stopped to stare at the man in tweeds and the bride in her full array in the hansom. To those two it did not seem in the least strange.

"Did you manage to see my father, after all?" Beatrice asked.

"No, I tried to do so; you see, I had to wait for him. He was very late, so I fell asleep. It was after eleven to-day when I awoke to find Sir Charles had not left his room. I ventured to suggest that he had better be roused or he would be too late for your wedding. Nobody could make him hear, so the door was broken in. He was quite dead."

Beatrice listened in a dull kind of way. There was no trace of tears in her eyes. She had suffered so terribly, lately, that she could not cry. The horrible doubt as to whether she was free or not could not be kept out of her mind. Yet it seemed so dreadfully unnatural.

"He died in his sleep, I suppose?" Beatrice asked.

"That nobody can say yet," Mark said. "The doctor we called in was very guarded. Nobody seems to have been in the bedroom, though the sitting-room adjoining is not locked, and last night I saw a lady come out of it, a lady in grey."

"A lady in grey!" Beatrice cried. "What a singular thing, Mark! Do you mean to say it was the same lady who sat next to you in the Paris theatre?"

"Well, yes," Mark admitted. "It was the same. I have not told anybody but you, and it seems to me that nothing will be gained by mentioning the fact."

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Beatrice nodded thoughtfully. She could not identify the grey lady, the Slave of Silence, with anything that was wrong. And yet it was strange how that silent woman had come into her life. She must have been known to Sir Charles or she would never have ventured into his sitting-room. If she was still staying in the hotel, Beatrice made up her mind to seek her out. There was some strange mystery here that must be explained. It was uppermost in Beatrice's mind as she descended from the hansom and passed through the curious group of servants into the hall.

The fine suite of rooms was ready for the festive throng; in the dining-room a banquet had been spread out. The scarlet flush of red roses gave a warm note to the room; the sun came streaming through the stained-glass windows, and shone upon the silver and glass and red glow of wine, and on the gold foil of the champagne bottles. In the centre of the table stood a great white tower that Beatrice regarded vaguely as her wedding cake. A shudder passed over her as she looked at it. She longed for something dark and sombre, to hide her diamonds and the sheen of her ivory satin dress.

The place was silent now; the very bareness and desolation of the scene sickened Beatrice to the soul. No guests were here now—they were not likely to be. A polite manager was saying something to the bride, but she did not seem to heed.

"Mr. Marius is talking to you," Mark said. "He wants to know if he can do anything."

"Mr. Marius is very kind," Beatrice said wearily. "I should like to see the doctor. I suppose that he is still here? May I see him at once?"

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The doctor had not gone yet. Mark procured a small plate of dainty sandwiches and a glass of port wine which he forced Beatrice to take. To her great surprise she found that she was hungry. Breakfast she had had none; now that the crisis had passed, her natural healthy appetite had returned. The feeling of faintness that she had struggled against for so long passed away.

The doctor came in, rubbing his hands softly together. He regretted the unfortunate occasion, but when he had been called in, Sir Charles was long past mortal aid. Evidently he had been dead for some hours.

"You are in a position to be quite sure of that?" Beatrice asked.

"Oh, quite," Dr. Andrews replied. "One's experience tells that. Sir Charles was quite stiff and cold. I should say that he had been dead quite four hours when the door was broken down."

Just for an instant the doctor hesitated and his easy manner deserted him.

"I must see Sir Charles's regular medical man before I can be quite definite on that point," he said. "I have no doubt that death was caused by natural means, at least I see no reason at present to believe anything to the contrary. Indeed, if any doubt remains after that, there must be a *post mortem*, of course. But still I hope that such a course will not be necessary."

In a vague way Beatrice felt uneasy. If this gentleman was not actually concealing something, he

was not quite so satisfied as he assumed to be.

"I should like to see my father, if I may," Beatrice said quietly.

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The doctor led the way to the bedroom and closed the door softly behind the girl. His face was a little grave and anxious as he walked down the stairs.

"You appear to be a friend of the family," he said to Mark as he stood in the hall. "There are symptoms about the case which frankly I don't like. There was no occasion to lacerate Miss Darryll's feelings unduly, but I must see the family doctor at once. It is just possible that you may happen to know who he is."

Mark was in a position to supply the desired information, and Dr. Andrews drove off, his face still very grave and thoughtful. Meanwhile Beatrice found herself alone with the dead body of her father. He was only partially undressed; he lay on the bed as if he had been overcome with a sudden illness or fatigue. The handsome boyish features were quite composed; there was a smile on the lips, and yet the expression on the face was one of pain. Sir Charles appeared to have died as he had lived—gay, careless, and easy to the last. Always neat, he had placed his studs and tie on the dressing-table; by them stood a little pile of letters which had evidently come by a recent post. They had been carefully cut open with a penknife, so that Beatrice could see they had been read.

There were tears in the girl's eyes now, for Beatrice recalled the time when Sir Charles had been a good father to her in the days before he had dissipated his fortune and started out with the intention of winning it back in the city. Those had been happy hours, Beatrice reflected.

There was nothing further in the room to call for notice. On the carpet, in contrast to the crimson ground, lay what looked like a telegram. It was half folded, but there was no mistaking the grey paper. If there was anything wrong here, perhaps the telegram would throw a light on it. Beatrice picked up the message and flattened it on her hand. Then she read it with a puzzled face. Suddenly a flash of illumination came upon her. Her hand clenched the paper passionately.

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"Is it possible," she muttered, "that he could have known? And yet the date and the day! Why, that coward *must* have known all the time."

A glance at the dead, placid face there recalled Beatrice to herself. Hastily she thrust the message in her corsage and quietly left the room. Some time had elapsed since Beatrice entered the hotel, but as yet the man she called her husband had not returned. It seemed strange, but Beatrice said nothing. She stood regarding her wedding finery with some feeling of disgust.

"I must have a room somewhere and change," she said; "it seems horrible to be walking about like this when my father is lying dead upstairs. Mark, my woman is here somewhere. Will you try and find her and send her to Lady Rashborough for something black and quite plain? Meanwhile, I'll go to a bedroom and get some of this finery off. The mere touch of it fills me with loathing."

Beatrice's maid was discovered at length, and despatched in hot haste to Lady Rashborough's. Beatrice had scarcely entered before Stephen Richford drove up. He looked anxious and white and sullen withal, and he favoured Mark with a particularly malevolent scowl. Richford knew the relationship that had existed at one time between Mark and Beatrice.

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"I suppose you must be excused under the circumstances for racing off with my wife in this fashion," he said hoarsely. It seemed to Mark that he had found time to drink somewhere, though, as a rule, that was not one of Richford's failings. "Where is she?"

"She has gone to change," Mark said. "This is a very unfortunate business, Mr. Richford."

Richford shrugged his shoulders with an assumption of indifference. His hand trembled slightly.

"Sir Charles was getting on in years," he said; "and Sir Charles had not troubled to give very great attention to the question of his health. In fact, Sir Charles had gone it steadily. But it seems now to me that so long as the doctors are satisfied as to the cause of death—"

"I am not at all sure the doctor is satisfied," Mark said significantly. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing, nothing," Richford stammered. "Nothing more than a twinge of that confounded neuralgia of mine."

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CHAPTER VI

Beatrice came down from her room presently, dressed in quiet black. In her hand she carried not only the telegram but a letter she had taken from the dressing-table of the dead man.

The little group in the hall had by this time been augmented by the presence of Colonel Berrington; Stephen Richford had slipped off somewhere. Mark had not failed to notice the restlessness and agitation of his manner.

"I think I have got rid of everybody," Berrington said. "It has been a most distressing business, and I am afraid that there is worse to come. Dr. Andrews has just telephoned. He has seen Sir

Charles's medical man, and they have decided that there must be an inquest. I don't suggest that anything is wrong, but there you are."

"I am not surprised," Beatrice said coldly, "I have been to my father's room looking over his papers. And I found a letter that puzzles me. It was written last night as the date shows, in the hotel, on hotel paper, and evidently delivered by hand, as the envelope proves. Look at this."

Colonel Berrington held out his hand for the envelope. He started slightly as he looked at the neat, clear handwriting. Something was evidently wrong here, Mark thought. The Colonel was a man of courage, as he very well knew, and yet his fingers trembled as he glanced interrogatively at Beatrice before he drew the letter from the envelope.

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"Yes," Beatrice said; "I want you to read it. I brought it down on purpose."

"There does not seem to be much," Berrington said. "As there is no heading and signature, the letter may be intended for anybody."

"Only my father's name happens to be on the envelope," Beatrice said quietly. "Pray read it aloud."

Berrington proceeded to do so. There were only two or three lines in which the writer said that she must see the recipient of the letter without delay, and that it was of no use to try and keep out of the way. There was nothing more; no threat or sign of anger, nothing to signify that there was any feeling at all. And yet so much might have been concealed behind those simple lines. Berrington looked grave, and trembled as he handed the letter back to Beatrice.

"Clearly it is our duty to find out who wrote that letter," Mark observed. "It was written in the hotel, probably by somebody dining here last night. It is just possible that it was written by someone who was staying in the hotel. In that case we can easily ascertain the name of the writer."

"How is that possible?" Berrington demanded. He asked the question quite nervously. "In a place so large as this, with so many visitors continually going and coming——"

"There is a rigid rule here," Mark proceeded to explain. "Every guest, even if only passing a single night under the roof, has to sign the visitors' book. With this letter in my hand I can compare signatures. If there is no signature like this characteristic handwriting, then our task is no easy one. On the other hand, if there is——"

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The speaker paused significantly. Berrington's agitation deepened. With all her distress and sorrow, Beatrice did not fail to notice it.

"Perhaps you will go down to the office and see at once, Mark," Beatrice suggested.

Ventmore went off obediently enough. Berrington stood watching him for a moment, then he turned to Beatrice and laid his hand gently on her arm.

"Believe me, this is not going to help anybody," he said in a low voice. "Unless I am greatly mistaken, I know who wrote that letter. What connection she had with your father and what the secret was between them I shall perhaps never know. But the lady who wrote that letter——"

"Ah," Beatrice cried, with a flash of sudden inspiration, "it was the grey lady, I am sure of it."

"You have guessed correctly," Berrington went on. "It was the person whom you have elected to call the grey lady. It was a great shock to me to recognize that handwriting. The secret is not wholly mine to tell, but for a long time I have been seeking the grey lady. I had not the remotest idea that she and Sir Charles had anything in common; little did I dream that she was here in this hotel last night. But whatever may be the meaning of this mystery, if there has been foul play here, the grey lady is quite innocent of it. Don't ask me to say any more, because I cannot, I dare not."

Beatrice nodded in sympathy. The brave, grave soldier by her side was terribly agitated; indeed Beatrice could not have recognized him as being capable of such a display of emotion.

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"I am going to believe in you both," she said. "Probably the grey lady was the last person to see my father alive. She may have told him some terrible news; she may have given him the shock that killed him. But there was another who knew——"

"What do you mean by that?" Berrington asked.

"Nothing. I have said too much. That is quite between myself and—and could possibly have had nothing to do with my father's death. Oh, if only Mark had arrived five minutes sooner!"

Berrington knew exactly what was passing through Beatrice's mind.

"A great pity, indeed," he said quietly. "What a difference moments make in our lives. Still——"

"Still there is always the doubt," Beatrice whispered eagerly. A constant throng of people passed through the great hall where the death of Sir Charles was already forgotten. "I am living on the doubt, Colonel Berrington; am I or am I not married to Stephen Richford?"

"I could not say," Berrington replied. "I have very little knowledge of these matters. As far as I could see, the marriage ceremony was completed, the ring was placed on your finger, therefore

—"

"Therefore you think that I am married," Beatrice said. She was twisting the gold badge of servitude on her finger nervously. "I am going to find out for certain. The service was not quite finished; there was no exhortation, there was no signing of the register. Surely I am free if it is my desire to be free. After what I found to-day—"

Again Beatrice paused as if aware of the fact that she was saying too much. There was a certain expression of relief on her face as she saw the figure of Mark approaching. [Pg 45]

"Well, have you done anything?" she asked eagerly. "Have you made any great discovery?"

"I have only been partially successful," Mark said. "I have identified the writing with a signature of a guest in the visitors' book. The lady came only yesterday, as the date is opposite her writing. She came without a maid and with very little luggage, and she called herself Mrs. Beacon Light."

"Beacon Light," Beatrice said reflectively. "It sounds like a *nom de plume*; it suggests the kind of name a lady novelist would assume. Too singular to be real. And are you quite sure that the lady wrote that letter to my father?"

"I should say there is very little doubt about it," Mark replied. "The handwritings are identical. It seems that Mrs. Beacon Light stayed here last night and dined in the red salon. She had breakfast here very early, and then she paid her bill and departed. The clerk cannot say where she went, for her small amount of baggage was placed in a hansom and the driver was told to go in the first instance to Peter Robinson's. That is everything that I could ascertain."

There was no more to be said for the present, and very little to be done. A tall, stiff man, with an air of Scotland Yard indelibly impressed upon him, came presently, and asked to be allowed to see Sir Charles's suite of rooms. He had been waited upon at his office, he explained, by the deceased baronet's medical man, who had suggested the necessity for an inquest, which had been fixed upon for ten o'clock the following day. Under the circumstances the suite of rooms would be locked up and the seal of authority placed on them. The inspector was sincerely sorry to cause all this trouble and worry to Miss Darryll, but she would quite see that he was doing no more than his duty. [Pg 46]

"But why all this fuss?" Stephen Richford demanded. He had come up at the same moment. Troubled and dazed as Beatrice was, she could not help noticing that Richford had been drinking. The thing was so unusual that it stood out all the more glaringly. "There's no occasion for an inquest. Dr. Oswin has told me more than once lately that Sir Charles was giving his heart a great deal too much to do. This thing has got to be prevented, I tell you."

"Very sorry, sir," the inspector said politely; "but it is already out of private hands. Both Dr. Oswin and Dr. Andrews have suggested an inquest; they have notified us, and, if they wished to change their minds now, I doubt if my chief would permit them."

Richford seemed to be on the point of some passionate outburst, but he checked himself. He laid his hand more or less familiarly on Beatrice's arm, and she could feel his fingers trembling.

"Very well," he said sulkily. "If you have made up your minds as to this course, I have no more to say. But there is nothing to gain by standing here all day. Beatrice, I have something to say to you."

"I am quite ready," Beatrice said. "I have also something to say to you. We will go on as far as my sitting-room. Please don't leave the hotel, Colonel Berrington; I may want you again."

The hard corners of Richford's mouth trembled, but he said nothing. He did not utter a word until the door of the sitting-room had closed upon Beatrice and himself. He motioned the girl to a chair, but she ignored the suggestion. [Pg 47]

"It is a very awkward situation," Richford began. "As my wife—"

"I am glad you have come so quickly to the point," Beatrice said eagerly. "Am I your wife? I doubt it. I do not think I am your wife, because the ceremony was not quite completed and we did not sign the register. You know what my feelings have been all along; I have never made the slightest attempt to disguise them. If I had known that my father was dead—that he had died on the way to church, I should never have become Mrs. Stephen Richford. To save my father's good name I had consented to this sacrifice. My father is dead beyond the reach of trouble. If I had only known. If I had only known!"

The words came with a fierce whisper. They stung the listener as no outburst of contempt or scorn could. They told him clearly how the speaker loathed and despised him.

"Nobody did know," he sneered. "Nobody could possibly have known."

"That is not true," Beatrice cried. She had come a little closer to Richford; her cheeks were blazing with anger, her eyes flamed passionately. "It is a cowardly lie. There was one man who saw my father after his death, and I am going to prove the fact in a way that cannot possibly be disputed. One man was in my father's room after his death. That man saw my father lying there, and he crept away without giving the slightest alarm. You may sneer, you may say that such a thing is impossible, that the man I allude to would have nothing to gain by such a course; but as I said before, I am going to prove it. Look at this telegram I hold in my hand. It was sent before ten [Pg 48]

o'clock to-day to the person to whom it is addressed. It evidently relates to some Stock Exchange business. The address is quite clear; the time the telegram was delivered is quite clear, too; and by the side of my father's body I found the telegram, which could only have been dropped there by the party to whom it was addressed. So that party knew that my father was dead, and that party made no alarm. Why?"

"Why," Richford stammered. "Why, because,—well, you see it is quite possible to explain——"

"It is not," Beatrice cried. "The telegram is addressed to *you*. It was you who called on my father; you who found him dead. And in your agitation you dropped that message. Then you grasped the fact that if the marriage was postponed it would never take place, that I was in a position to defy you. You locked my father's door; you said nothing; you made up your mind to let the ceremony go on. That accounts for your agitation, for the fact that you have been drinking. Cowardly scoundrel, what have you to say to this!"

"What are you going to do?" Richford asked sullenly.

"Unless you release me here and now," Beatrice cried, "I swear by Heaven that I am going to *tell the truth!*"



"Richford stood there shaking and quivering with passion." *Page 49.*

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CHAPTER VII

Richford stood there shaking and quivering with passion, and yet not free from the vague terror that Beatrice had noticed all along. Beatrice could not repress a shudder as she looked at that evil, scowling face. To be with that man always, to share his home and his company, seemed to her a most impossible thing. She had lost her father; the future was black and hopeless before her, but she felt a strength and courage now, that she had been a stranger to for a long time. There was hope, too, which is a fine thing when allied with youth and vitality.

She need not live with this man; she had every excuse for not doing so. Beatrice cared very little, for the moment, whether she was married or not. It might possibly be that in the eyes of the law she was this man's wife; the law might compel her to share his home. But now Beatrice had a weapon in her hand and she knew how to use it.

"Give me that telegram," Richford said hoarsely. "Hand it over to me at once."

He advanced in a manner that was distinctly threatening. Certainly he would not have stopped at violence if violence would serve his end. But Beatrice was not afraid.

"I shall do nothing of the kind," she said. "You may as well strike me as look at me like that. If you use violence you may obtain possession of the telegram. But I warn you that I shall not yield without a struggle that will arouse the whole hotel. I am not coming with you, and we part here and now. Oh, I am not in the least afraid."

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Just at that moment it looked as if the scene of violence would take place. With an oath Richford grasped the girl by the wrist and drew her to him. A blow full in the face would have laid her senseless at his feet, then he could have helped himself to that priceless telegram. But Richford had been in the world long enough to know how to control his temper when it suited him to do so. He forced something in the semblance of a smile to his lips.

"Don't let us discuss this question like two silly children," he said. "You have fairly caught me out. I did go to your father this morning—there was an urgent reason why I should see him. We need not go into that now, for it was purely on matters of business. If you ask me how I got into that room when the door was locked, I will tell you. Before I thought of marrying you and setting up a house of my own, I had that suite of rooms."

"Is all this material to our discussion?" Beatrice asked coldly.

"Yes, I think so. At any rate I never gave up the suite of rooms, and the keys are still in my possession. That is how I got in to see your father without anybody being the wiser. I was going to show him the very telegram which has fallen into your hands. But I found that Sir Charles was dead, and it was a great shock to me. I must have dropped that telegram in my agitation and forgotten it. So far you follow me, do you not?"

"I follow you," Beatrice said bitterly. "I quite understand; I admire your restraint and your cunning. You reasoned it all out in a flash. If you raised the alarm everybody would have known the truth in a few minutes. And, that being so, there would have been no marriage. You took all the risks, and fortune favoured the bold as fortune always does. Nothing happened until it was too late, and I was married to you. But there is one thing you failed to reckon upon—that my father is no longer a pawn in the game."

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Beatrice was speaking quietly and steadily enough; she felt that the victory was in her hands now. And Richford had never coveted her so passionately as he did at this moment when he realized that she was lost to him for ever.

"My father's death leaves me free," the girl went on. "He is dead and nobody can touch him. If he had died yesterday the match would have been broken off, as you know. I was prepared to take my chance. If this vile thing had not happened, then I should have respected my wedding vows and made you as good a wife as I could. I should have hated and loathed it, but I should have become accustomed to it in time. But this vile action of yours makes all the difference. When you and I part after this painful conversation, we part for good. We shall be talked about; there will be a lot of idle gossip, but I care nothing for that. And if you raise a hand, if you try to use the law on your side, I produce that telegram and tell my story."

Again the look of mingled rage and terror came into Richford's eyes.

"You talk like a fool," he said hoarsely. "What can you possibly do to get a living? You are my wife; you can never marry anybody so long as I am alive. You are very pretty, but you have been brought up to be utterly useless."

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"I have strength and courage," Beatrice replied, "and they are worth a good deal. I can go into a shop if the worst comes to the worst. My relatives, the Rashboroughs—"

"Lady Rashborough will turn her back on you if you do this. She will be furious."

"Well, then, I must depend upon myself. But you are not going to say anything—for some reason you are too frightened to say anything."

"And all the wedding presents, the diamonds and the like?" Richford asked feebly.

"The wedding presents will go back to the senders. There is a plain clothes policeman keeping guard over them now—your diamonds are amongst the lot. I will see that they are safely sent to you. And I do not know that I need say any more."

Beatrice had reached the corridor by this time. She was passing Richford with her head in the air. It came to him suddenly that he had lost everything, that he was baffled and beaten. In a sudden spasm of rage he caught the girl by the shoulders in a savage grip. She gave a little moan of pain as she looked around for assistance. It came quite unexpectedly.

At the same moment Mark Ventmore was coming from his room. He took in the situation at a glance. With one bound he was by Richford's side, and he had wrenched his hands away. With a snarl Richford turned upon the man whom he knew to be his successful rival, and aimed a blow at him. Then Mark's fist shot out, and Richford crashed to the ground with a livid red spot on his forehead. Sick and dizzy he scrambled to his feet.

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"You are more than a match for me that way," he panted. "But there are other ways, my friend, of wiping that blow out. Look to yourself."

There was a deadly menace in the threat, so that Beatrice shuddered as she watched the retreating figure. She knew perfectly well that that blow would not be forgotten. Mark laughed as

he heard, then his face changed and he sighed.

"What does it all mean, Beatrice?" he asked. "For that man to lay hands upon you and so soon after you are—but I cannot bring myself to say the word."

"He was not altogether without excuse, Mark," Beatrice said. "We have come to an understanding. Never shall I stay under the same roof with Stephen Richford."

"Well, thank God for that," Mark said fervently. "Something unexpected has happened!"

In a few words Beatrice told the story to which Mark listened with vivid interest. An expression of the deepest disgust came over his face as Beatrice finished her story and handed over the telegram. At the same time the feeling nearest her heart was one of relief.

"It was the act of a scoundrel, darling," he said. "And yet things might have been worse. For instance, you might not have found that telegram. But since you have done so, the game is all in your hands. You are quite right to defy that fellow and refuse to live with him. He dare not oppose you, Beatrice. Thank Heaven, I shall be able to think of you as pure and free from contamination. But what are you going to do?"

"I have not thought of that yet," Beatrice said with a faint smile. "For a day or two I shall get the Rashboroughs to give me a home. When my father's affairs come to be settled up there will be a little less than nothing for me to have. Still, I have some jewels which may bring me in a few hundred pounds. But I shall find something to do." [Pg 54]

Mark shut his teeth tightly together to keep back the protestations of love that rose to his lips. It was no time to speak of that kind of thing. He felt that he had been tricked out of the only girl for whom he had ever cared, but, thank goodness, he would not have to think of her as dragging out a lengthening chain by the side of Stephen Richford. And Beatrice would find something to do—of that he felt certain.

"I will come and see you in a few days, dearest," he said. "Though you are bound to that man by the cruel sport of chance, you still belong to me. There can be no harm in my helping you. And may God bless and keep you wherever you go, darling."

Mark bent and kissed Beatrice's hand tenderly, and made his way down the stairs. There was nothing now to stay for; Beatrice would go to her friends, and the strange ending of the Richford-Darryll marriage would be food for the scandal-mongers for many a day to come. All these thoughts crowded into Mark's mind as he made his way down into the big dining-room for luncheon. He was sad and sick at heart, but man must eat, all the same. He did not look as if he could eat here at present, for every table was filled. The last seat had fallen to Richford, who found himself seated opposite to Colonel Berrington. Richford would far rather have been anywhere else, but there was no help for it. [Pg 55]

The Colonel bowed coldly to the other's surly nod. Richford belonged to a class that the gallant soldier frankly detested. He expressed no surprise at seeing Richford here; it was natural under the circumstances that Beatrice should keep to her own room. And Berrington had heard nothing of the matter of the telegram.

"Oh, never mind all that rubbish," Richford said testily, as the waiter passed the elaborate *menu* with its imposing array of dishes. "What's the good of all that foreign cat's meat to an honest Englishman? Give me a steak and plain potatoes and a decanter of brandy."

The brandy came before the steak, and Richford helped himself liberally to the liquid. Berrington was a little astonished. He had more than once heard Richford boast that he was positively a teetotaler. He usually held in contempt those who called themselves merely moderate drinkers.

"What a time they keep you here," Richford growled. "If I'd gone to one of those City places I should have got my steak in half the time. Oh, here the fellow comes. Now, then, I——"

Richford paused in his growling, and contemplated the red hot plate on which the steak was displayed with a queer gleam in his eyes and a clicking of the corners of his mouth. Just for the moment it seemed to Berrington as if his *vis a vis* was going to have a fit of some kind.

"There is salt in the plate," Richford gasped. "Who has taken the liberty of putting——"

He said no more; he seemed to be incapable of further speech. The waiter looked sympathetic; it was no fault of his. And the salt was there, sure enough. [Pg 56]

"It certainly is salt," the waiter said. "I did not notice it before. It's a lot of salt, *and it is exactly in the shape of a rifle bullet*; it's——When I was in South Africa——"

Berrington's glass clicked as he raised it to his lips. Just for an instant his face was as pale as that of the man opposite him. With a gesture Richford motioned the waiter away. Then he rose unsteadily from the table, and finished the rest of his brandy without any water at all. He crossed the room like a ghost. Directly he had passed the swinging doors Berrington rose and followed. He saw Richford in the distance entering a hansom; he called one himself. Evidently he had no desire for Richford to see him.

"Where shall I drive, sir?" the cabman asked.

"Keep that cab in sight without being seen," Berrington said hastily. "Do your work well, and it

CHAPTER VIII

The cabman gave a knowing wink and touched his hat. Berrington lay back inside the hansom abstractedly, smoking a cigarette that he had lighted. His bronzed face was unusually pale and thoughtful; it was evident that he felt himself on no ordinary errand, though the situation appeared to be perfectly prosaic. One does not usually attach a romantic interest to a well-dressed military man in a hansom cab during broad daylight in London. But Berrington could have told otherwise.

"Poor little girl," he muttered to himself. "Sad as her fate is, I did not think it was quite so sad as *this*. We must do something to save her. What a fortunate thing it is that I have always had a love for the study of underground human nature, and that I should have found out so much that appears only normal to the average eye. That innocent patch of salt in the shape of a bullet, for instance. Thank goodness, I am on my long leave and have plenty of time on my hands. My dear little grey lady, even your affairs must remain in abeyance for the present."

The drive promised to be a long one, for half London seemed to have been traversed before the cabman looked down through the little peep-hole and asked for instructions, as the hansom in front had stopped.

"The gentleman inside is getting out, sir," he said. "He's stopped at the corner house."

"Go by it at a walk," Berrington commanded, "and see what house our man enters. After that I will tell you exactly what to do, driver. Only be careful as to the right house."

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The cab pulled up at length once more, and the house was indicated. Berrington proceeded a little further, and then sent his own driver away rejoicing, a sovereign the richer for his task. Turning up his collar and pulling down his hat, Berrington retraced his steps.

He was enabled to take pretty good stock of the house Richford had entered, and without exciting suspicion, because there were trees on the opposite side of the road and seats beneath them. It was a fairly open part of London, with detached houses on the one side looking on to a kind of park. They were expensive houses, Berrington decided, houses that could not have been less than two hundred and fifty a year. They looked prosperous with their marble steps and conservatories on the right side of the wide doorways; there were good gardens behind and no basements. Berrington could see, too, by the hanging opals in the upper windows that these houses had electric lights.

"This is unusual, very unusual indeed," Berrington muttered to himself, as he sat as if tired on one of the seats under the trees. "The gentry who cultivate the doctrine that has for its cult a piece of salt in the shape of a bullet, don't as a rule favour desirable family mansions like these. Still, fortune might have favoured one of them. No. 100, Audley Place. And No. 100 is the recognized number of the clan. By the way, where am I?"

A passing policeman was in a position to answer the question. Audley Place was somewhat at the back of Wandsworth Common, so that it was really a good way out of town. The policeman was friendly, mainly owing to the fact that he was an old soldier, and that he recognized Berrington as an officer immediately. He was full of information, too.

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"Mostly rich City gents live in Audley Place, sir," he said. "There is one colonel, too—Colonel Foley of the East Shropshire Regiment."

"An old college chum and messmate of mine," Berrington said. "I followed Colonel Foley in the command of that very regiment. What house does he live in?"

"That's No. 14, sir," the delighted officer grinned. "Excuse the liberty, sir, but you must be Colonel Berrington, sir. I was with you all through the first Egyptian campaign."

Berrington blessed his own good fortune. Here was the very thing that he wanted.

"We'll fight our battles over again some other day," he said. "I am pretty sure that I shall see a great deal more of you—by the way, what is your name? Macklin. Thank you. Now tell me something as to who lives yonder at No. 100. I am not asking out of idle curiosity."

"I can't tell you the gentleman's name, sir," Macklin replied. "But I can find out. The people have not been there very long. A few good servants, but no men, no ladies so far as I can tell, and the master what you might call a confirmed invalid. Goes about in a bath chair which he hires from a regular keeper of this class of thing. Not a very old gent, but you can't quite tell, seeing that he is muffled up to his eyes. Very pale and feeble he looks."

Berrington muttered something to himself and his eyebrows contracted. Evidently he was a good deal puzzled by what he had heard.

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"That is very strange," he said, "very strange indeed. I will not disguise from you, Macklin, that I have a very strong reason for wishing to know everything about No. 100, Audley Place. Keep your

eyes open and glean all the information you possibly can. Talk to the servants and try to pump them. And write to me as soon as you have found out anything worth sending. Here is my card. I shall do no good by staying here any longer at present."

The policeman touched his helmet and strode on his way. Berrington strolled along under the friendly shadow of the trees till he had left Audley Place behind him. Once clear of the terrace he called a cab and was whirled back to town again.

Meanwhile, absolutely unconscious of the fact that he was being so closely shadowed, Richford had been driven out Wandsworth way. He did not look in the least like a modern millionaire of good health and enviable prospects as he drove along. His moody face was pale, his lips trembled, his eyes were red and bloodshot with the brandy that he had been drinking. The hand that controlled the market so frequently shook strangely as Richford pressed the bell of No. 100 Audley Place. There was no suggestion of tragedy or mystery about the neat parlourmaid who opened the door.

"Mr. Sartoris desires to see me," Richford said. "He sent me a messenger—a message to the *Royal Palace Hotel*. Will you please tell him I am here."

The neat parlourmaid opened the drawing-room door and ushered Richford in. It was a big room looking on the street, but there was nothing about it to give the place the least touch of originality. The furniture was neat and substantial, as might have befitted the residence of a prosperous City man, the pictures were by well-known artists, the carpet gave to the feet like moss. There was nothing here to cause Richford to turn pale, and his lips to quiver.

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He paced up and down the room uneasily, starting at every sound until the maid returned and asked if the gentleman would be good enough to step this way. Richford followed down a passage leading to the back of the house into a room that gave on to a great conservatory. It was a fine room, most exquisitely furnished; flowers were everywhere, the big dome-roofed conservatory was a vast blaze of them. The room was so warm, too, that Richford felt the moisture coming out on his face. By the fire a figure sat huddled up in a great invalid chair.

"So you have come," a thin voice said. "Most excellent Richford, you are here. I was loath to send for you on this auspicious occasion, but it could not be helped."

There was the faintest suggestion of a sneer in the thin voice. Richford crossed the room and took another chair by the side of the invalid. The face of the man who called himself Carl Sartoris was as pale as marble and as drawn as parchment, the forehead was hard and tangled with a mass of fair hair upon it, the lips were a little suggestive of cruelty. It was the dark eyes that gave an expression of life and vitality, surprising in so weak a frame. Those eyes held the spectator, they fascinated people by their marvellous vitality.

"What devil's work are you upon now?" Richford growled.

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"My dear sir, you must not speak to an invalid like that," Sartoris said. "Do you not know that I am sensitive as to my own beloved flowers? It was my flowers that I asked you to come and see. Since you were here last, the room has been entirely redecorated. It seemed to me to be good that I should share my artistic joy with so congenial a companion."

"Damn your flowers!" Richford burst out passionately. "What a cruel, unfeeling fellow you are! Always the same, and will be the same till the devil comes for you."

"Which sad event you would regard with philosophic equanimity," Sartoris laughed. "So, we will get to business as soon as possible. I see that Sir Charles Darryll is dead. I want to know all about that affair without delay. What did he die of?"

"How should I know? Old age and too much pleasure. And that's all I can tell you. I found him first."

"Oh, indeed. The evening paper says nothing about that."

"For the simple reason that the evening papers don't know everything," Richford growled. "Quite early to-day I found Sir Charles dead in his bed. I dared not say a word about it, because, as you know, I was going to marry his daughter. But, of course, you all knew about *that*, too. You see if I had made my little discovery public, Beatrice would have known that death had freed her and her father from certain very unpleasant consequences that you and I wot of, and would have refused to meet me at the altar. So I locked the door and discreetly said nothing, my good Sartoris."

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The little man in the invalid chair rolled about horribly and silently.

"Good boy," he said. "You are a credit to your parents and the country you belong to. What next?"

"Why, the wedding, of course. Lord Rashborough, as head of the family, was giving Beatrice away. Sir Charles did not turn up, but nobody wondered, as he had never been known to attend to an appointment in his life. And so we were married."

Once more the little man shook with unholy mirth.

"And the girl knows nothing about it?" he asked. "I suppose you'll tell her some day when she is not quite so loving as she might be? Ho, ho; it is a joke after my own heart."

Richford laughed in his turn, then his face grew dark. He proceeded to tell the rest of the story.

The little man in the chair became quieter and quieter, his face more like parchment than ever. His eyes blazed with a curious electric fire.

"So you have lost your wife before you have found her?" he asked. "You fool! you double-dyed fool! If that girl chooses to tell her story, suspicion falls on you. And if anybody makes a fuss and demands an inquest or anything of that kind——"

"They are going to hold an inquest, anyway," Richford said sulkily. "Dr. Andrews was in favour of it from the first, and the family doctor, Oswin, has agreed. The police came around and sealed up that suite of rooms before I left the hotel. But why this fuss?"

"Silence, fool!" came from the chair in a hissing whisper. "Let me have time to think. That senseless act of folly of yours over the telegram bids fair to ruin us all. You will say so yourself when you hear all that I have to tell you. Oh, you idiot!"

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"Why?" Richford protested. "How did I know Sir Charles was going to die? And if his death took place in a perfectly natural manner and there was no foul play——"

"Oh, *if* it did. Perhaps it was wrong on my part not to take you more fully into my confidence. But there is one thing certain. Listen to me, Richford. Whatever happens between now and this time to-morrow *there must be no inquest on the body of Sir Charles Darryll!*"

The words came with a fierce hissing indrawing of the speaker's breath. He tried to get up from his chair, and fell back with a curse of impotence.

"Push me along to the door," he said. "Take me to that little room behind the library where you have been before. I am going to show you something, and I'm going to reveal a plot to you. We shall want all your brutal bulldog courage to-night."

The chair slid along on its cushioned wheels, the door closed with a gentle spring, and, as it did, a female figure emerged from behind a great bank of flowers just inside the conservatory. She crossed on tip-toe to the door and as gently closed it. As the light fell it lit up the pale sad features of the grey lady—the Slave of Silence.

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CHAPTER IX

It was with a sigh of relief that Beatrice found herself at length alone. There was nothing for her to do now but to get her belongings together and leave the hotel. There would be an inquest on the body of Sir Charles at ten o'clock the following morning, as the authorities had already informed her, but Beatrice had looked upon this as merely a formal affair. She would pack her things and leave them in Sir Charles's dressing-room—the door of which had not been sealed—and send for everything on the morrow. All her costly presents, including the wonderful diamonds from Stephen Richford, she had entirely forgotten. A somewhat tired detective was still watching the jewels in a room off the hall where the wedding breakfast was laid out. But the fact had escaped Beatrice's attention.

Lady Rashborough was having tea alone in her boudoir when Beatrice arrived. Her pretty little ladyship was not looking quite so amiable as usual and there was the suggestion of a frown on her face. She had been losing a great deal at bridge lately, and that was not the kind of pastime that Rashborough approved. He was very fond of his empty, hard, selfish, little wife, but he had put his foot down on gambling, and Lady Rashborough had been forced to give her promise to discontinue it. The little woman cared nothing for anyone but herself, and she had small sympathy for Beatrice.

"What are you doing here?" she asked pettishly. "Where is your husband?"

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"That I cannot tell you," Beatrice replied. "You hardly expected that I should have started on my honeymoon under such circumstances, did you?"

"My dear child, don't talk nonsense! Of course not. The proper thing is to go to some very quiet hotel and dine respectably—to lie low till the funeral is over. Of course this is all very annoying, especially as you have such a lovely lot of new frocks and all the rest of it, but I dare say they will come in later on. Not that it matters, seeing that you have a husband who could stifle you in pretty frocks and never miss the money. What a funny girl you are, Bee. You don't seem to appreciate your good luck at all."

"You regard me as exceedingly lucky, then?" Beatrice asked quietly.

"My dear girl, lucky is not the word for it. Of course Stephen Richford is not what I call an ideal husband, but with his amazing riches——"

"Which are nothing to me, Adela," Beatrice said. "I have discovered the man to be a degraded and abandoned scoundrel. From the first I always hated and detested him; I only consented to marry him for the sake of my father. Adela, I am going to tell you the discovery that I made in my father's bedroom this morning."

In a few words Beatrice told her story. But if she expected any outburst of indignation from her

listener, she was doomed to disappointment. The little figure in the big arm chair didn't move—there was a smile of contempt on her face.

"Good gracious, what a little thing to fuss about!" she cried. "It seems to me that the man was paying you a compliment. If I had been in your place I should have said nothing till I wanted to get the whip hand of my husband. My dear child, you don't mean to say that you are going to take the matter seriously!"

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Beatrice felt the unbidden tears gathering in her eyes. She had been sorely taxed and shaken today, and she was longing more than she knew for a little sympathy. People had told her before that Lady Rashborough had no heart, and she was beginning to believe it.

"Do you mean to say," Beatrice stammered, "do you really want me to believe—that——"

"Of course I do, you goose. Money is everything. I married Rashborough because it was the best thing that offered, and I did not want to overstay my market. It was all a question of money. I would have married a satyr if he had been rich enough. And you sit there telling me that you are going to leave Stephen Richford."

"I shall never speak to him again. He and I have finished. I have no money, no prospects, no anything. But I decline to return to Stephen Richford."

"And so you are going to have a fine scandal," Lady Rashborough cried, really angry at last. "You think you are going to hang about here posing as a victim till something turns up. I dare say that Rashborough would be on your side because he is of that peculiar class of silly billy, but you may be sure that I shall not stand it. As a matter of fact, you can't stay here, Beatrice. I rather like Richford; he gives me little tips, and he has helped me over my bridge account more than once. If he should come here to dinner——"

Beatrice rose, her pride in arms at once. It was put pretty well, but it was cold, and hard, and heartless, and the gist of it was that Beatrice was practically ordered out of the house. She had hoped to remain here a few weeks, at any rate until she could find rooms. She was pleased to recall that she had not sent her things.

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"You need not trouble to put it any more plainly," she said coldly. "In the eyes of your Smart Set, I have done a foolish thing, and you decline to have me here for the present. Very well, I shall not appeal to Frank, though I am quite sure what he would say if I did. All the same, I could not tax the hospitality of one who tells me plainly that she does not want me."

Beatrice rose and moved towards the door. With a little toss of her head, Lady Rashborough took up the French novel she had been reading as Beatrice entered. Thus she wiped her hands of the whole affair; thus in a way she pronounced the verdict of Society upon Bee's foolish conduct. But the girl's heart was very heavy within her as she walked back to the *Royal Palace Hotel*. It was only an earnest of the hard things that were going to happen.

And she had no money, nothing beyond a stray sovereign or two in her purse. She had taken off most of her jewellery with the exception of an old diamond bangle of quaint design. She hated the sight of it now as she hated the sight of anything that suggested wealth and money. With a firm resolve in her mind, Beatrice turned into a large jeweller's shop in Bond Street. The firm was very well known to her; they had supplied the family for years with the costly trifles that women love. The head of the house would see her at once, and to him Beatrice told her story. A little later, and with a comfortably lighter heart, she made her way back to the *Royal Palace Hotel* with a sum of money considerably over two hundred pounds in her purse.

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The manager of the hotel was sympathetic. Unfortunately the house was full, but Beatrice could have Sir Charles's sitting-room and the dressing-room where a bed could be put up. And would Mrs. Richford—Beatrice started at the name—give instructions as to those presents?

"I had quite forgotten them," Beatrice said. "Will you please have everything, except some jewels that I will take care of, locked up in your safe. There are some diamonds which I am going to give into the hands of Mr. Richford at once. I am so sorry to trouble you."

But it was no trouble at all to the polite manager. He begged that Mrs. Richford would let him take everything off her hands. Warily Beatrice crept down to dinner with a feeling that she would never want to eat anything again. She watched that brilliant throng about her sadly; she sat in the drawing-room after dinner, a thing apart from the rest. A handsome, foreign-looking woman came up to her and sat down on the same settee.

"I hope you will not think that I am intruding," the lady said. "Such a sad, sad time for you, dear. Did you ever hear your father speak of Countess de la Moray?"

Beatrice remembered the name perfectly well. She had often heard her father speak of the Countess in terms of praise. The lady smiled in a sad, retrospective way.

"We were very good friends," she said. "I recollect you in Paris when you were quite a little thing. It was just before your dear mother died. You used to be terribly fond of chocolates, I remember."

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The lady rambled on in a pleasing way that Beatrice found to be soothing. Gradually and by slow degrees she began to draw out the girl's confidence. Beatrice was a little surprised to find that she was telling the Countess everything.

"You are quite right, my dear," she said quietly. "The heart first—always the heart first. It is the only way to happiness. Your father was a dear friend of mine, and I am going to be a friend of yours. I have no children; I had a daughter who would have been about your age had she lived."

The Countess sighed heavily.

"I would never have allowed a fate like yours to be hers. I go back home in a few days to my chateau near Paris. It is quiet and dull perhaps, but very soothing to the nerves. It would give me great pleasure for you to accompany me."

Beatrice thanked the kind speaker almost tearfully. It was the first touch of womanly sympathy she had received since her troubles had begun, and it went to her heart.

"It is very, very good of you," she said. "A friend is what I sorely need at present. When I think of your goodness to a comparative stranger like me——"

"Then don't think of it," the Countess said almost gaily. "Let us get rid of that horrible man first. You must return those fine diamonds to him. Oh, I know about the diamonds, because I read an account of them in the papers. Perhaps you have already done so?"

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"No," Beatrice said, "they are in my dressing-room at the present moment."

"Oh, the careless girl! But that shows how little you value that kind of thing. Well, General, and what do you want with me at this time of the evening?"

A tall, military man had lounged up to them. He was exquisitely preserved. He bowed over Beatrice's hand as he was introduced as General Gastang.

"Delighted to meet you," he said. "I knew your father slightly. Countess, your maid is wandering in a desolate way about the corridor, looking for you, with some story of a dressmaker."

"*Ma foi*, I had quite forgotten!" the Countess exclaimed. "Do not go from here, *chérie*; talk to the General till I return, which will not be long. Those dressmakers are the plague of one's life. I will be back as soon as possible."

The General's manner was easy and his tongue fluent. Beatrice had only to lean her head back and smile faintly from time to time. The General suddenly paused—so suddenly that Beatrice looked up and noticed the sudden pallor of his face, his air of agitation.

"You are not well?" the girl asked. "The heat of the room has been too much for you."

The General gasped something; with his head down he seemed to be avoiding the gaze of a man who had just come into the drawing-room. As the newcomer turned to speak to a lady, the General shot away from Beatrice's side, muttering something about a telegram. He had hardly vanished before Beatrice was conscious of a cold thrill.

After all she knew nothing of these people. Such scraps of her history as they had gleaned might have come from anybody. Then Beatrice had another thrill as she recollected the fact that she had told this strange Countess that the diamonds were in her dressing-room. Suppose those two were in league to——

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Beatrice waited to speculate on this point no longer. She hurried from the room and up the stairs to her bedroom. The corridors were practically deserted at this time in the evening. Beatrice gave a sigh of relief to see that her door was shut. She placed her hand gently on the handle, but the door did not give.

It was locked on the inside! From within came whispering voices. In amaze, the girl recognized the fact that one of the voices belonged to Countess de la Moray, and the other to the man who called himself her husband, Stephen Richford.

There was nothing for it now but to stay and wait developments.

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CHAPTER X

Beatrice had not long to wait. Only a few minutes elapsed before the door flew open and Richford came out so gently that Beatrice had barely time to step into a friendly doorway. Her senses were quick and alert now in the face of this unknown danger, and the girl did not fail to note the pale face and agitated features of the man who had so grievously harmed her. Evidently Richford had been drinking no more, but certainly he had had some great shock, the effects of which had not passed away. He muttered something as he passed Beatrice, and looked at his watch. Directly he had disappeared down the corridor, Beatrice stepped into her room.

The Countess was standing by the dressing-table picking up the odds and ends there in a careless kind of way, but evidently in an attitude of deep attention. Beatrice's feeling of alarm became somewhat less as she saw that the case of diamonds on the dressing-table had not been touched. If anything like a robbery had been contemplated she was in time to prevent it. Just for the moment it occurred to Beatrice to demand coldly the reason for the intrusion, but she thought the better of that. Clearly there was some conspiracy on foot here, and it would be bad policy to

suggest that she suspected anything. So Beatrice forced a little smile on her lips as she crossed the room.

"I shall have to give you in charge as being a suspicious character," she said. "I shall begin to believe that your dressmaker only existed in your imagination." [Pg 74]

The Countess gave a little scream, and her face paled somewhat under her rouge. But she recovered herself with marvellous quickness. Her lips had ceased to tremble, she smiled gaily.

"I am fairly caught," she said. "There is nothing for it but to plead guilty and throw myself on the mercy of the court. You see, I have not taken the diamonds, though I have looked at them."

It was all so admirably and coolly said, that it might have deceived anybody who did not know quite so much as Beatrice. But she had made up her mind that no suspicion of the truth should come out. Quite carelessly she opened the lid of the jewel cases so that she might see for herself that she was not the victim of this magnificent adventuress.

But the gems were there right enough. Their marvellous rays seemed to fill the room with livid fire. Beatrice glanced at her companion; the latter had caught her underlip fiercely between her teeth, her hands were clenched. And Beatrice knew that but for the intervention of that stranger in the drawing-room and the sudden flight of the General, she would never have seen those diamonds again. And yet Stephen Richford had been in the same room with this brilliant adventuress! Beatrice would have given a great deal to see to the bottom of the mystery.

"Oh, it is indeed a narrow escape that you have had," the Countess said. "I was not feeling very well, so I sent my maid to ask you to come to my room. She said you had already gone, so I took the liberty of coming here. Is not that so?"

"Then we had perhaps better stay and talk here," Beatrice suggested. "Adeline, will you take this case down to the office and ask the manager to place it with my other valuables in the safe? Be very careful, because they are diamonds." [Pg 75]

Adeline, who had just come in, took the case in her hand. The Countess had turned her back, but Beatrice caught sight of her face in the cheval glass. It was livid with fury, and all wrinkled up with greed and baffled cupidity. The girl was afraid to trust her voice for a moment. She knew now that unless she had taken this course, the diamonds would not have been hers much longer. A woman who could look like that was capable of anything. Some cunning plan, perhaps some plan that took violence within its grasp, would have been carried out before the evening was over. So alarmed was Beatrice that she followed Adeline to the door. She wanted to see the jewels safe and regain her lost self-possession at the same time. It seemed to be a critical moment.

"If you will excuse me," she said, "I had forgotten to give my maid another message."

The Countess nodded and smiled gaily. She was master of herself once more. Beatrice stepped out of the room and followed Adeline at a safe distance to the end of the stairs. So far as she knew to the contrary a confederate might be lingering about waiting for a signal. Surely enough, General Gastang was loitering in the hall smoking a cigarette. But he seemed to be powerless now, for he made no sign, and with a sigh of relief Beatrice saw Adeline emerge presently from the office minus the cases which she had previously carried.

"Now, I fancy I have finished my business for the evening," Beatrice said. "I have been thinking over the very kind offer you made to me a little time ago. You can hardly understand how anybody as lonely as myself appreciates such kindness as yours." [Pg 76]

The Countess raised her hands as if to ward off the gratitude. They were slim hands with many rings upon them, as Beatrice did not fail to notice.

And on the finger of the left hand something was hanging that looked like a wisp of silk thread.

"Excuse me," Beatrice said, "you have something attached to one of your rings. Let me remove it for you. That is all right. It seems very strange, but——"

Beatrice checked herself suddenly and walked rapidly across the room. She had made what in the light of recent events was a startling discovery. At first she had imagined that the long silken fluff was attached to one of the rings, but this her quick eyes had proved to be a mistake. On one of the slim fingers of the Countess was a thick smear of wax.

Beatrice could see a little of it sticking to the palm of the hand now. She understood what this meant. That neat little woman was by no means the sort of person to dabble habitually in tricks of that kind, and Beatrice suddenly recollected that wax was used for taking impressions of locks and keys and the like. But surely there could be nothing worth all that trouble in this room, she thought. Nor would anything of that kind have been necessary to get possession of the jewels. Besides, if any waxen impression of anything had been taken, Stephen Richford would have done it. Just for a moment it occurred to Beatrice that it would be a good idea to change her room, but she dismissed the impulse as cowardly, and besides, the manager had advised her that he had not another room at his disposal in the hotel. [Pg 77]

Still, she was on her guard now, and she made up her mind to slumber lightly to-night. After all the exciting events of the day, it was not likely that she would sleep at all. And yet she felt very dull and heavy; she could think of nothing to say, so that the Countess rose presently and

proclaimed the fact that she was quite ready for bed herself.

"I am selfish," she said. "I am keeping you up, for which I should be ashamed of myself. Good-night, my dear, and pleasant dreams to you."

The speaker flitted away with a smile and a kiss of her jewelled fingers. Beatrice drew a long sigh of relief to find herself alone once more.

She locked the door carefully and commenced a thorough examination of the room. It was some time before her quick eyes gave her any clue to the meaning of the wax on the Countess's hands. Then she found it at last. There was another of the silken threads hanging on the lock of the door leading to the room where Sir Charles lay. On the official seal placed there by the police officers was a tiny thread of silk. It was not attached to the seal in any way. It came away in Beatrice's hands when she pulled it, as if it had been fixed there by gum. Beatrice knew better than that. On the silk was wax, as she discovered when her hand touched it. A piece of soft white wax had been pressed on the seal, and had left strong traces behind.

Now, what did this strange mystery mean? Beatrice asked herself. Why did anybody require an impression of that seal? What object could anyone have in getting into the room where the dead man lay? The more Beatrice asked herself this question the more puzzled did she become. She thought it over till her head ached and her eyes grew heavy. So engrossed was she that she quite failed to notice several little impatient knocks at the door. Then the girl came to herself with a start, and opened the door to admit her maid, as she expected.

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But it was not Adeline come back, but the Countess with a dazzling white silk wrap over her shoulders. She was profoundly apologetic, but what was she to do? Her maid had been taken ill and she had been commanded to bed by a doctor. The Countess was very sorry for Marie, but she had a little sympathy left for herself. It was impossible for her to unhook the back of her dress. Would Beatrice be so kind as to do it for her?

"Of course I will," Beatrice said. "It is awkward being without a maid. Let me shut the door."

It was no great task that Beatrice had set herself, but it was not rendered any more easy because the Countess pranced about the room as if unable to keep still. She held in her hand a smelling bottle with a powerful perfume that Beatrice had never smelt before. It was sweet yet pungent, and carried just a suggestion of a tonic perfume with it. But the task was accomplished at length.

"I fancy that is all you require," Beatrice said. "What scent is that you are using?"

"It is some new stuff from Paris," the Countess said carelessly. "It is supposed to be the most marvellous thing for headaches in the wide world. Personally, I find it a little too strong. Do you like perfumes?"

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"I am afraid they are a weakness of mine," Beatrice confessed. "It is very silly, I know, but it is so."

The Countess removed the glass stopper from the bottle.

"Try it, if you like," she said. "Only you must not take too much of it at first."

Beatrice placed the bottle to her nostrils. A delicious thrill passed through her veins. All sense of fatigue had gone; she felt conscious of only one thing, and that was the desire to lie down and sleep. In a dreamy way she watched the Countess depart and close the door behind her; then she crossed over to the bed and lay on it just as she was—her thoughts seemed to be steeped in sunshine.

When Beatrice awoke at length, it was broad daylight, and Adeline was leaning over her. The girl's face was white and her lips unsteady.

"I am glad you have come round, Miss," she said. "You wouldn't believe the trouble I have had to arouse you, and you such a light sleeper as a rule. Don't you feel well?"

"I never felt better in my life," Beatrice said. "I have slept for hours and hours. But it is for me to ask if you don't feel well, Adeline. Your face is so curiously white and your lips tremble. What is it? Has something happened? But that is quite out of the question. All the dreadful things came together yesterday. Tell me, what time is it, Adeline?"

"It's a little past ten, Miss," Adeline said in a low voice that shook a little. "On and off, I have been trying to wake you since eight o'clock. And there is a gentleman to see you in the sitting-room as soon as you have time—two gentlemen, in fact."

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Beatrice asked no further questions, though she could see from Adeline's manner that something out of the common had taken place. But Beatrice felt curiously strong and steady to-day. It seemed impossible that fate could have anything worse in store than had already befallen her. With a firm step she went into the sitting-room where two men rose and bowed gravely. One she recognized as the inspector of police who had come after the tragedy yesterday, the other was Dr. Andrews.

"You sent for me, gentlemen?" she said quietly. "It is a matter of the inquest, of course? Will you have to call me? I am afraid I can give you no information—my father never had anything the matter with him as far as I know. If you could spare me the pain—"

Dr. Andrews nodded gravely; he seemed unable to speak for the moment.

"It is not that," he said quietly. "If we spare you one pain we give you another. Miss Darryll, I should say Mrs. Richford, a terrible thing has happened, a strange, weird thing. As you know, the inquest was to have been to-day. Events have rendered that utterly impossible. Please be brave."

"You will not have to complain of me on that score," Beatrice whispered.

"Then it is this. By some strange means, certain people entered Sir Charles's room last night and carried him away. It is amazing, but the body of Sir Charles has disappeared!"

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CHAPTER XI

Beatrice reached out a hand and steadied herself against a chair. Just for a moment the whole world seemed to be spinning around her. Brave and courageous as she was, these shocks, coming one after the other, had been too much for her. When she opened her eyes again she found that Mark Ventmore was standing by her side.

"Courage, darling," he whispered. "We seem to have come to the worst of everything. Whatever may be the result and meaning of this dastardly outrage, nothing can hurt your father."

The colour was slowly coming back into the girl's pallid lips. With an effort she struggled for the possession of herself. She was alone in the world, she had a position that would cause most of her women friends to turn coldly from her, but Mark remained. And there was always the feeling that she had nothing further to fear from Stephen Richford.

"I can bear it all now," she said. "Tell me everything, please."

"Up to the present there is very little to say," Inspector Field observed. "I came here a little before ten this morning to open Sir Charles's bedroom so as to be prepared for the visit of the jury and the coroner. After the decision arrived at by both doctors, of course the inquest to-day would have been quite formal. It would have been deferred for a few days pending the *post-mortem* examination. I am putting it as delicately as possible."

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"Oh, I know, I know," Beatrice said with a shudder. "Only it is a dreadful thing for a daughter to listen to. Will you go on, please?"

"In the course of my duty I have to see that the seals have not been tampered with. Of course in a large hotel like this, where guests are in the corridor all day and night, I never for a moment anticipated anything wrong. Still, I examined the seals carefully and they appeared to me to be absolutely intact. With my sergeant we broke the seals and entered the room, the door of which was locked. Imagine our astonishment when we found that the body of the poor gentleman had vanished. In all the extraordinary cases that have ever come under my notice, I never recollect anything so amazing as this."

It was amazing, stupendous—so much so, that nobody spoke for a little time. Beatrice had taken a seat and sat waiting for somebody to ask questions. She was no longer dazed and frightened; her brain was working rapidly. It seemed to her that she would be able to throw a light on this mysterious disappearance presently.

"Are you quite sure that the seals are intact?" Mark asked.

"If you had asked me that question half an hour ago, I should have said most assuredly so, sir," Field replied. "I looked carefully to see. We always do. How on earth a body could have been spirited away like this with people about till late, to say nothing of the night watchman going his rounds, and the night porter down below—but we need not go into that yet. My seals appeared to be in perfect order."

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"But that really could not have been the fact," Mark persisted. "I fancy we can dispense with the idea that Sir Charles was removed by spiritual agency. Now, would it not have been possible for anyone to have taken an impression of the seals?"

"Just possible," Field admitted. "But what would have been the use of—"

"A great deal of use, it seems to me," Mark went on. "But I will come to that presently. Let us take one thing at a time. For some reason or other, those scoundrels have found it imperatively necessary to spirit away the body of Sir Charles. Perhaps they are afraid of the result of a *post-mortem*. That is another point we need not bother about for the present. Did you give any orders to the watchman here to keep an eye on that door?"

"Well, I did," Field admitted. "I particularly mentioned the seals, in case any very zealous housemaid, imagining that somebody had been disfiguring the doors, should remove them."

"Then if the seals had been broken, the night watchman would have noticed it?"

"I should say that such a thing was highly possible," Field admitted with an admiring glance in the direction of his questioner. "Really, sir, you would make an admirable detective. You mean that the scoundrels might require some little time in the next room and that any interruption—"

"Precisely," Mark proceeded. "Let us admit, for the sake of argument, that these men were staying in the hotel last night. Where so many people come and go, they would not be noticed, and, on the whole, that plan would be safer. If they were seen, even in the dead of night, in the corridor—possibly in slippers and pajamas—by the watchman, no suspicion would have been aroused. Previously they had managed to get an impression of the seal and made one like it. They then broke the seal and entered the room by means of a master key. The confederate outside immediately clapped on another seal, and those inside were quite safe until they were ready. After the body was stolen, another seal was affixed which gave them plenty of time and prevented discovery by the night watchman, to say nothing of the addition of mystery to the thing."

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The inspector nodded approvingly. So far as he could see, the reasoning was perfectly clear. But then it did not tend to throw any light on the strange disappearance of the body.

"So far I follow you perfectly, sir," Field said. "Nothing could be clearer or more logical. In that way it would be comparatively easy to enter the bedroom and make preparations for the removal of the body without any chance of being interrupted. At this part the real trouble begins. The body is a bulky thing, and has to be removed from the hotel. How was that to be done? How could it be done without somebody knowing? That is where I am at fault."

"It could be done in this way," Mark said. "The body might have been removed to a bedroom close by and packed in a large trunk by somebody who ostensibly was going by a very early train."

"Pardon me," the inspector interrupted, "nobody went by an early train. We have gone into that most carefully. Of course a lot of people have left early to-day—as they do every day—but, so far as I can hear, nobody in the least suspicious."

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"Then it was done in another manner. It is not quite clear to me how, at present, although I have my idea on the subject. Before I could speak definitely on that point I should like to see the night watchman and the hall porter."

But neither of these officials was present. They had gone off duty at seven o'clock, and they did not return again till late in the afternoon. It seemed a pity to disturb their rest, but Field decided that they must be sent for—and indeed he had already dispatched a messenger for that purpose. Till the two men came to the hotel, nothing further could be done in that direction. There was a little pause here.

"I fancy I can throw some light on this," Beatrice said. "In the first place, will somebody ascertain for me whether the Countess de la Moray and General Gastang are still staying in the hotel? I feel pretty sure they are gone, but it is just possible that such may not be the case. Let this inquiry be made delicately, please."

Inspector Field departed to ask the question himself. He came back presently with the information that the General and the Countess had already gone, in fact they had not really been staying in the hotel at all—their luggage was elsewhere, as the hotel they generally favoured was full—they had only come to the *Royal Palace Hotel* for the night, and it had been their intention to proceed to Paris in the morning.

"Then it is General Gastang and the Countess de la Moray that we have to look after," Beatrice cried. "The Countess came to me last night in the drawing-room. She professed to be an old friend of my father, and, indeed, I must confess that she knew a great deal about the family. She was very nice indeed, and asked me to go and stay with her near Paris. Being a little lonely just at present, I quite took to her. Subsequently the General was introduced to me. He brought a message to the Countess, who excused herself. Then some stranger came in and the General vanished. He was quite taken aback for a moment, and evidently went in deadly fear of being recognized. Of course this aroused my suspicions. I had heard of these well-dressed, good-class swindlers in hotels before, and immediately I thought of my jewels. I went straight to my room and the door was locked. People were talking inside and I waited. Then the door opened and a man came out and walked away."

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"Would you recognize that man again, Miss?" Field asked eagerly.

"I should certainly be able to recognize him again," Beatrice said quietly. She passed the point over rapidly. Something prevented her—shame, perhaps—from saying it was the man who called himself her husband. "After that I entered my room. The Countess was taken aback, but very quickly she recovered herself. Then I noticed that there was a thread of silk sticking to her hands, and after that I further noticed that her hand was covered with wax. Even then the truth did not dawn upon me till I saw a similar thread sticking to the seal on the door leading to my father's room. And then I knew that the Countess had taken an impression of the seal. They did not dare to take the impression in the corridor, I suppose, and that was why they hit upon the clever expedient of using the privacy of my room for the purpose."

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"Excellent!" Field said. "Nothing could be better. Beyond the shadow of a doubt these people are at the bottom of the whole business. Did you frighten the lady, Miss?"

"Not in the least," Beatrice replied. "I was particularly careful not to arouse suspicions that I had noticed anything out of the common. But I knew perfectly well that I was just in time to save my diamonds. However, that has nothing to do with the question. The Countess came back very late,

under the pretence that she required my services as her maid. She managed to drug me with some very powerful scent, I presume, with a view of using my room whilst I was unconscious, if any hitch took place. But you may be sure that these people are under the impression that nobody could possibly identify them with the outrage. There will not be any great difficulty in tracing them."

"Thanks to your skill and courage," Field said admiringly. "We can do nothing further till we hear from the night porter and his colleague. I will make a few inquiries in the hotel, and I shall be very glad, Miss, if you will write down for me as clear and as accurate a description as possible of the General and the Countess."

A little time later Beatrice found herself alone with Mark. Colonel Berrington was waiting down in the hall. Mark looked tenderly into Beatrice's pallid, beautiful face, and he gently stroked her head.

"This is a very dreadful business for you, darling," he said. "Your courage——"

"My courage can stand any strain so long as I know that I am free of my husband," the girl said. "When I think of my troubles, and they begin to overcome me, I always go back to that reflection. It seems to lift me up and strengthen me. Mark, I believe I should have died, or killed myself, had I been compelled to be with that man."

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"You have not seen any more of him, I suppose?" Mark asked.

"Last night," Beatrice whispered. "Mark, I did not tell the detective one thing—I felt that I really could not. I spoke of the man who was closeted in my room with the Countess. I said I would recognize him again. It was my husband, Stephen Richford."

Mark's face expressed his amazement. Before he could reply the door opened and Inspector Field came in again. His face was grave and stern.

"This is a fouler business than ever I imagined," he said. "Both hall porter and night watchman are missing. Neither has been seen at their lodgings since they left duty to-day."

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CHAPTER XII

The story had gone abroad by this time. All London knew of the strange disappearance of the body of Sir Charles Darryll. Of course the wildest rumours were afloat, the cheaper newspapers had details that had been evolved from the brilliant imagination of creative reporters; a score of them had already besieged the manager of the *Royal Palace Hotel* and were making his life a burden to him. The thing was bad enough as it stood; enough damage had been done to the prestige of the hotel without making matters worse in this fashion.

There was nothing further to say at present except that the news was true, and that the police had no clue whatsoever for the moment.

"Not that it is the slightest use telling them anything of the kind," Field muttered. "Whenever there is a mystery the press always gives us the credit for the possession of a clue. In that way they very often succeed in scaring our game away altogether. I don't say that the papers are useless to us, but they do more harm than good."

All the same, Field was not quite at a loss to know what to do. Beatrice had given him a full and accurate description of the two adventurers who had vanished, leaving no trace behind them. They had suggested that all their belongings were at the *European Hotel*, but a question or two asked there had proved that such was not the case.

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"And yet they have gone and covered up their tracks behind them," Field said. "Why? Miss Darryll—I should say, Mrs. Richford—is quite sure that she did not alarm either of them. Then why did they disappear like this? Perhaps they were spotted by somebody else over another matter. Perhaps the gentleman who so scared our 'General' in the drawing-room of this hotel had something to do with the matter. We shan't get much further on the track of this interesting pair until I have had a talk with some of the foreign detectives."

"You can, at any rate, look after the missing hotel servants," Mark suggested.

But that was already being done, as Field proceeded to explain. It was just possible that they had been the victims of foul play. Most of the newspaper men had been cleared out by this time, and there being nothing further to learn, the hotel resumed its normal condition. People came and went as they usually do in such huge concerns; the mystery was discussed fitfully, but the many visitors had their own business to attend to, so that they did not heed the half score of quiet and sternfaced men who were searching the hotel everywhere. At the end of an hour there was no kind of trace of anything that would lead to the whereabouts of the missing men. Colonel Berrington came to the head of the grand stairway presently holding a little round object in his hand.

"I have found this," he said. "It is a button with the initials R. P. H. on it, evidently a button from the uniform of one of the servants. As there is a scrap of cloth attached to it, the button has

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evidently been wrenched off, which points to a struggle having taken place. Don't you feel inclined to agree with me, Inspector?"

On the whole Inspector Field was inclined to agree. Would Colonel Berrington be so good as to take him to the exact spot where the button was found? The button had been discovered on the first landing, and had lodged on the edge of the parquet flooring on the red carpet. They were very thick carpets, as befitted the character of the hotel.

Inspector Field bent down and fumbled on the floor. He had touched a patch of something wet. When he rose his fingers were red as if the dye had come out of the carpet.

"Blood," he said, as if in answer to Berrington's interrogative glance. "Very stupid of us not to think of something like this before. But these carpets are so thick and of so dark a colour. Beyond doubt some deed of violence has taken place here. See."

The inspector smeared his hand further along the carpet. The red patch was very large. A little further along the wall there were other patches, and there was the mark of a blood-stained hand on the handle of a door which proved to be locked.

"Is anybody occupying this room at present?" Field asked a hotel servant.

"Not exactly, sir," the man replied. "That door gives on to one of the finest suites in the hotel. It is rented by the Rajah of Ahabad. His Highness is not here at present, but he comes and goes as he likes. He keeps the keys himself, and the door is only opened by his steward, who comes along a day or two before his royal master."

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"All the same they are going to be opened now," said Field grimly. "Go and tell the manager that I want him here at once. I suppose there are master keys to this."

But there were no master keys to the Royal suite; the locks had been selected by the Rajah himself. It was an hour or more later before a locksmith from Milner's managed to open the door. They were thick doors, sheet lined, and locked top and bottom. Field switched up the electric lights and made a survey of the rooms. The blinds were all down and the shutters up. Suddenly Inspector Field gave a grunt of satisfaction.

"We've got something here, at any rate," he said. "And the poor chap seems to be badly hurt. Carry him out gently and see if the doctor is still here."

A body lay on the floor; the hands and arms were secured to the sides by straps; a tightly rolled pad of black cloth was fixed in the poor fellow's mouth. There was a ghastly wound on the side of his head from which the blood was still oozing; a great deal of it had congealed on his collar. A slight groan proved that the victim was still alive. "It's the hall porter," the manager cried. "It's poor Benwort. What a horrible thing!"

"Looks like concussion of the brain," Field said. "Thank goodness, here's Dr. Andrews. We will make a further search of these rooms, for it's pretty certain that the other fellow is here also. Ah, I felt very sure that we should find him."

A second man, also in the livery of the hotel, lay by a sofa. He seemed to have fared better, for there was no blood on his face, though a great swelling over his right ear testified to the fact that he had been severely handled. He was not insensible, but he hardly knew what he was talking about as he was placed on his feet.

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"Tell us all about it," the inspector said encouragingly. "What really happened?"

"Don't ask me," Catton, the night watchman said, as he held his hands to his head. "My brain feels as if it had been squeezed dry. Somebody hit me on the head after a lady in grey came and fetched me. A little lady in grey, with a sad face and grey eyes."

Berrington started violently, and Mark looked up in surprise. The grey lady—Beatrice's Slave of Silence—seemed to run through this mystery like the thread of a story. It was an entirely interesting moment, but unhappily the night watchman could say no more.

"Don't worry me so," he whined. "Put some ice on my head and let me sleep. I dare say I shall be able to puzzle it out in time. Somebody carried something down the stairs; then the big door opened and the night porter whistled for a cab. That's all."

The speaker lurched forward and appeared to fall into a comatose state. There was nothing for it but to put him to bed without delay. Field looked puzzled.

"I suppose that poor fellow was talking coherently in snatches," he said. "No doubt just after he got that crack on the head he did see a bulky package taken downstairs. But then he says he heard the door open and a cab whistled for by the night porter. Now that's impossible, seeing that the night porter got his quietus also. Now who called up that cab? Evidently somebody did, and no doubt the cab came. Well, we shall find that cab. Saunders, go at once and see what you can do in the direction of finding that cab."

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The mystery seemed to get deeper and deeper the more Field got on the track. He could quite understand how it was that both of these hotel servants had been put out of action, so to speak, but who was the grey lady who had given the note of warning, and why had those two men been placed in the suite of rooms belonging to the Rajah of Ahabad? The gagging and the hiding were all right, and that line of policy gave all the more time to the ruffians who had done this thing.

Also it was possible on reflection to understand why the Rajah's room had been chosen, as no search, but for the bloody door handle, would have been made there. But where had those people procured those patent Brahma lock keys from?

The wild supposition that the Rajah himself was in the business was absurd. That idea might be dismissed on the spot. The more Field thought of it the more was he puzzled. He would take an early opportunity of seeing the Rajah.

"He's a quiet sort of man," the hotel manager explained. "I should fancy that he has an English mother, by the look of him. Anyway, he is English to all intents and purposes, having been educated at Eton and Oxford. He only took these rooms a few months ago; he was brought here after a bad illness, and when he went away he was carried to his carriage. But they say he's all right now. But, Mr. Inspector, you don't mean to say that you think that the Rajah——"

"Has any hand in this business? Of course I don't," Field said testily. "I'm just a little put out this morning, so you must forgive my bad temper. The more one digs into the thing, the more black and misty it becomes. I think I'll go as far as the Yard and have a talk to one or two of our foreign men. Well, Saunders?"

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"Well, I've done some good," Saunders said. "I have not found the cabman we want, but I've got on the track of another who can tell me something useful. He's a night man, and he is waiting down in the hall for you at this moment, sir."

"I think I'll go along, if you don't mind," Berrington suggested.

Field had no objection to make, and together the two descended to the hall. A little, apple-faced, shrivelled-looking man was waiting for them. There was no reason to ask his occupation—London cabman was written all over him in large letters.

"I can't tell you much, sir," he said. "It was just past two when I heard the whistle here. I was waiting with my cab at the corner of Shepherd Street. It's out of my line a bit, but I pulled up there in the hopes of getting a return fare. When I heard the whistle I came up with my cab, but I was just a shade too late. There was another cab before me, a black cab with a black horse, a rather swell affair. The driver was wearing a fur coat and a very shiny top hat. We had a few words, but the hotel porter told me to be off, and I went back to the stand where I stayed till just daylight. Nobody else left the hotel in a cab."

"This is important," Field muttered. "By the way, would you recognize the hall porter again? You would! Then come this way and we will see if you can."

But the cabman was quite sure that the damaged man lying on the bed at the top of the hotel was not the same one who had ordered him away a few hours before. He was quite sure because the lights in the hotel portico were still full on, and he had seen the hall porter's face quite distinctly.

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"A regular plant," Field exclaimed. "A clever thing indeed. Was the black cab empty when it came up, or was there anybody inside it?"

"Somebody was inside it," was the prompt reply. "A pale gentleman, very lame he was. He tried to get out of the cab but the driver pushed him back, and he and the hall porter hoisted the big trunk on top of the cab. And that's all, sir."

Berrington listened intently. He was struggling with some confused memory in which the grey lady and Stephen Richford were all mixed up together. Suddenly the flash of illumination came. He smote his hand on his knee.

"I've got it," he cried. "I've got it. The lame man of No. 100 Audley Place!"

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CHAPTER XIII

Berrington's exclamation of surprise was not lost upon Inspector Field. He stood obviously waiting for the gallant officer to say something. As there was a somewhat long pause, the inspector took up the parable for himself.

"In a great many cases that come under our hands, so many give us a chance," he said. "We allow something for luck. More than once in looking up one business I have come across a burning clue of another."

"What is the meaning of all this philosophy, Mr. Field?" Berrington asked.

"Well, I think it is pretty obvious, if you care to see it. We are engaged, just for the present, on looking for a private hansom, painted black, in which is seated a lame gentleman. The rest of our investigation does not matter just now, because we have beyond doubt actually traced the parties who conveyed the body of Sir Charles from the hotel. When the lame gentleman is spoken of you say something about No. 100, Audley Place. It is quite obvious that you know something of the man, or at any rate you think you do. May I point out that it is your duty to help us if you can."

Berrington looked uncomfortable. As a matter of fact he had made up his mind to say nothing as

to Audley Place.

"There are several Audley Places in the Directory," Field went on. "I am sure you would not put us to the trouble of looking them all up, sir. Tell me all you know. Anything that you may say will be treated as confidential."

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"I quite see your reasoning," Berrington replied. "Let me tell you that I should have said nothing—for the present, at any rate—had I not betrayed myself. Look here, Field, I might just as well inform you that we are treading on very delicate ground here. As soon as I begin to speak, Sir Charles's daughter comes into the business."

"You mean Miss Darryll—Mrs. Richford, I should say. How, Colonel?"

"Because I am quite sure that she knows something of the matter. In the first place you must understand that the marriage was the reverse of a love match. Sir Charles's affairs were in anything but a prosperous condition at the time of his death."

"In fact he was on the point of being arrested in connection with a certain company," Field said coolly. "I got that information from the City Police. It was a mere piece of gossip, but I did not identify it as in any way connected with the subsequent tragedy."

"Well, I should not be surprised to hear that it had an important bearing on the mystery. As far as I could judge after the wedding there was a quarrel between Mr. and Mrs. Richford—"

"Ah!" Field exclaimed. His face was shrewd and eager. "Can you tell me what about?"

"Indeed, I cannot. I cannot even guess. But I can't see what that has to do with it."

"Can't you indeed, sir?" Field asked drily. "Mrs. Richford shall tell me herself, presently. But we are getting no nearer to the lame gentleman in Audley Place."

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"Oh, yes we are. Let us admit that quarrel. I am certain of it because yesterday Mr. Richford had luncheon at the same table as myself. He ordered a steak and potatoes. When it came, he asked the waiter who had been putting salt on his plate. Sure enough there *was* salt on the plate *and in the shape of a bullet*. Directly Richford saw that, his whole aspect changed. He was like one beside himself with terror. He did not know that I was watching him, he knew nothing beyond the horror of the moment."

"You mean that shaped salt had some hidden meaning, sir?" Field asked.

"I am certain of it. Now don't run your head up against the idea that you are on the track of some political society, or that Anarchism has anything to do with it. It so happens that I have seen that salt sign before in India under strange circumstances that we need not go into at the present moment. The man who pointed it out to me disappeared and was never heard of again. The sign was in his own plate at dinner. A little later I was enabled to get to the bottom of the whole thing; the story shall be told you in due course."

"Well, I wanted to see what Mr. Richford would do next. Was the sign an imperative one or not? Evidently it was, for he got up, finished his brandy, and left the table without having had a single mouthful of food. Under ordinary conditions I should have taken no action, but you see Mrs. Richford is a great friend of mine, and I was anxious to see how far her husband was in with these people. To make a long story short, I followed Richford's cab and traced him to No. 100, Audley Place, which is somewhat at the back of Wandsworth Common. There I was so fortunate as to find a policeman who had been in my regiment, and he gave me all the information he could as to the inhabitants of the house. The gist of that information was that the owner of the house was a lame gentleman who sometimes went out in a bath chair. *Now* you do see why I cried out when the cabman finished his story to-day?"

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Field nodded thoughtfully. He saw perfectly well. For a little time he was silent, piecing the puzzle together. On the whole he was more than satisfied with the morning's work.

"I see," he said at length. "The lame gentleman, of course, sent the message to Mr. Richford. Within a few hours the body of Sir Charles disappears. Why, then, was this message sent? So that the lame man could get posted in all his facts with a view to stealing the body. In other words, Mrs. Richford's husband was a party to that daring crime. Why that body was fetched away we cannot inquire into, at present. What I want to know, and what I must know, is what Mrs. Richford and her husband quarrelled about."

Berrington winced. He had no pleasant vision of Beatrice being cross-examined by this sharp, shrewd policeman. And yet the thing was inevitable. Field's eyes asked a question.

"All right, Inspector," Berrington said, not without some irritation. "I'll go and see the lady, and let her know what you have already found out. I suppose it is fatal to try and conceal anything. This comes of a lady marrying such a sweep as that."

Beatrice listened calmly enough to all Berrington had to say. It was not nice to have to tell her story over again, but she decided to conceal nothing. She had done a foolish thing, a wrong thing to save her father, and the world was going to know the whole sordid truth. But so long as Mark stood by her, what did the opinion of the world matter?

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"Ask Inspector Field in here," she said. "No, I do not blame you, my dear old friend. Is it not far better that everything should come out? A dreadful crime has been committed and the guilty

should be punished, whoever they are."

Inspector Field came in, very sorry and very apologetic for the trouble he was causing. He was quite different from the hard man who had been cross-examining Berrington outside.

"I fancy you can give me certain information," he said. "I have some little hesitation in saying anything personal as to the character of Mr. Richford—"

"You need not hesitate," Beatrice said bitterly, "on my account. I am going to speak freely, and all the more so because I see the possibility of having to repeat it all in the witness box. I married my husband with the sole idea of saving my father from dis—"

"Unpleasantness," Field said swiftly. "There is no occasion for anything of *that* kind to come out in the witness box. For family reasons you became Mrs. Richford. There is no reason why your sacrifice should have been altogether in vain."

"That is very good of you," Beatrice said gratefully. "Let me say that I am not in love with the man whose name I am supposed to bear. Had anything happened to my father before yesterday, my marriage would never have taken place. My quarrel with my husband was that he knew my father was dead two hours before the ceremony was fixed to take place."

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Hardened as he was, Field started. This information was unexpected as it was dramatic.

"I am not speaking idly," Beatrice went on. "I came back here, directly my father's death came to my ears. In his room I found a telegram. It was dated yesterday, the hour was clearly marked upon it—about ten o'clock yesterday morning. That telegram was addressed to my husband; it was found by me close to my father's body. The doctor said that Sir Charles had been dead some hours before he was discovered. Therefore I had conclusive proof in my hands that my husband had seen my father's corpse and that he had stolen out of the room and said nothing, knowing that I should never be his wife if he spoke the truth."

"It seems almost incredible," Field muttered. "What did Mr. Richford say?"

"What could he do or say beyond admitting the truth of my accusation? Even his cunning failed before the production of that fateful telegram. He had to admit everything, he had to admit that the telegram belonged to him, that he had occasion to see my father very early on pressing business, and that he had not raised the alarm because he knew if he did so he would lose me. At one time the suite of rooms in which we stand was rented by Mr. Richford; indeed his term has not expired yet, and that is why my father came here. I can tell you little if any more. What I said to my husband does not matter in the least. I told him plainly that I had done with him, and I hope that I may never see him again."

Field had few questions to ask further. A hundred theories were flying through his nimble brain. Beatrice seemed to divine something of this.

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"In common fairness I am bound to say that Mr. Richford could have had nothing to do with my father's death," she said. "In the first place he had everything to gain by Sir Charles keeping his health. I know the doctors are suspicious that there is foul play somewhere, but recollect that they are prepared to swear to my father's death some hours before his body was found. A little before ten, Mr. Richford must have been at home or he could never have had that telegram. Therefore it was after ten before he sought out my father, who, according to the medical view of the cause, had passed away hours before."

"That is very cleverly and logically reasoned," Field said, not without admiration. "And in any case Mr. Richford would be able to give a really convincing account of the reason why he remained silent—especially after a jury had seen you in the witness box."

It was a pretty compliment and a tribute to Field's sound judgment as to human nature, but Beatrice did not appear to heed his words.

"I had better finish and tell you everything," she said. "I have said everything I can, in common fairness to my husband. I feel convinced that if there was foul play he had no hand in it, no actual hand, that is. But there is another side to the question. I have already told you all about the Countess and the General. I told you how my suspicions were aroused, and when I came up to my room as quickly as possible—the door was shut and two people were talking inside. You asked me just now, Inspector Field, if I could recognize the man again—the man who was in the room when the Countess was actually taking impressions of the seals on the door, and I said I could. Can you guess who that man was?"

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The inspector looked puzzled for a moment, then the light of illumination came over his face. He glanced up eagerly; his dark eyes were dancing.

"You don't mean to say that it was Mr. Richford?" he asked.

"Indeed I do," Beatrice said quietly, "I had intended to keep that piece of information to myself, but you have forced my hand. Of actual crime, of actual *murder*, I am quite sure that Stephen Richford is innocent. But as to the rest I cannot say. At any rate I have concealed nothing that is likely to injure the course of justice."

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CHAPTER XIV

Inspector Field took up his hat and gloves from the chair where he had deposited them. He was satisfied, and more than satisfied with the interview. In a short time he had achieved excellent results.

"We will not trouble Mrs. Richford any more at present," he said. "It may be some consolation to her to know that I agree with all her reasonings. But there is plenty of work to do."

Field bowed himself out, followed by Berrington. The latter asked what the inspector was going to do.

"In the first place I am going down to the Yard," Field explained. "I am then going to get rid of my correspondence and have my dinner. After that till it gets dark I propose to pursue what Lord Beaconsfield called a policy of masterly inactivity for a time. Once it is really dark, I intend to go as far as Wandsworth Common, and learn something of the gentleman who is lame and has a private hansom painted black. You see, sir, the scene of the story is changed. The next act must be played out at Wandsworth."

"You have some settled plan in your mind?" Berrington asked.

"Indeed I have not, sir. I may make no more than a few simple inquiries and come home again. On the other hand, before morning I may find myself inside the house. I may even return with the lame gentleman as my prisoner. It is all in the air."

"By Jove," Berrington cried. "I should like to go with you. As an old campaigner, and one with some little knowledge of strategy I may be useful. Anything is better than sitting here doing nothing. Would you very much mind, Inspector?"

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Field regarded the brown, eager, clever face and steadfast eyes of the questioner shrewdly.

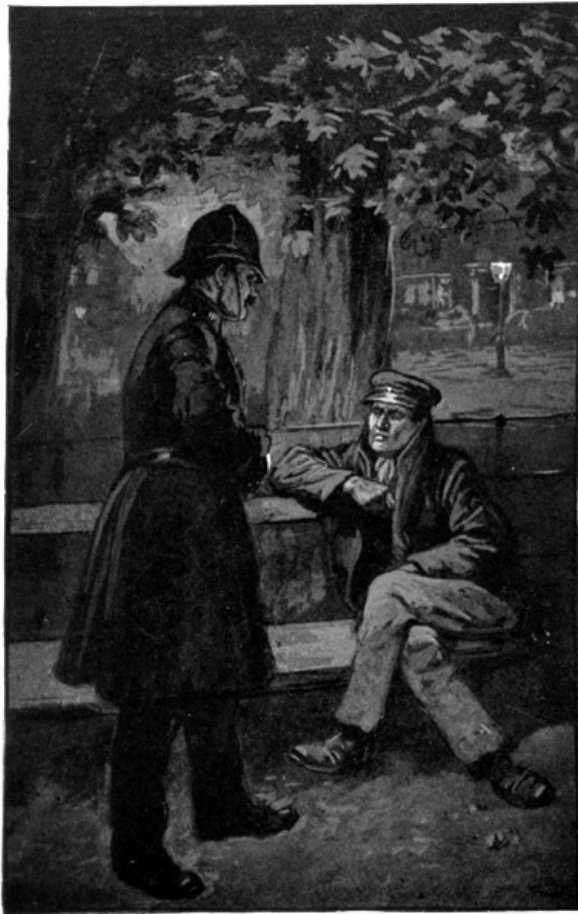
"I shall be delighted, sir," he said heartily, "with one proviso—that you regard me as your senior officer and commander in this business. Military strategy is one thing, the hunting of criminals quite a different thing. I shall start from the Yard before ten o'clock, and even then I shall not make my way to Wandsworth direct. We are dealing with an exceedingly clever lot, and it is just possible that I may be watched. Therefore I shall disguise myself, and you had better do the same. Then you can meet me at eleven o'clock where you like."

"That's a bargain," Berrington said eagerly. "I'll go over to Wandsworth pretty early and try to see my police friend, Macklin. At eleven o'clock I shall be under the trees opposite Audley Place, waiting for you. Probably I shall assume the disguise of a sailor."

"Um, not a bad idea," Field remarked. "We will both be sailors just paid off from a ship and with money in our pockets. Sailors, in that condition who have assimilated a fair amount of liquid refreshment, do strange things. Oh, we shall be all right. Merchant seamen let us be, from the ship *Severn*, just home from South America. Good afternoon, sir."

It was nearly ten before Berrington reached the rendezvous. He was perfectly disguised as a sailor fresh from a tramp steamer, his clothes were dirty and grimy, and the cap in his hand had a decided naval cock. So far as he could judge there were no lights visible at No. 100, opposite. He waited for Macklin to come along, which presently he did. The police officer looked suspiciously at the figure in a slumbering attitude on the seat, and passed before him.

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"The police officer looked suspiciously at the figure." *Page 107.*

"Now, then," he said sharply. "What are you doing here? Come out of that."

Berrington came unsteadily to his feet and blinked into the lane of light made by the policeman's lantern. He was rather proud of his disguise and the way in which it was passing scrutiny.

"All right, Macklin," he said in his natural voice. "It's Colonel Berrington. Not quite the same sort of disguise that I tried to pass into the Madi Halfa camp with when you were on guard that night. Still it took you in, didn't it?"

"It did indeed, sir," Macklin said, not without admiration. "And might I beg to ask what manner of game the Colonel of my old regiment is up to in London at this hour?"

"We need not go into details, Macklin," Berrington said. "Regard me as your senior officer for a moment, and answer my questions without comment. As I told you yesterday, I am interested in that house opposite. Have you found out anything?"

"Nothing worth speaking about, sir," Macklin replied. "They seem to be just respectable people who have plenty of money and very few visitors. Last night about half past eleven the old gentleman went out in a cab, and came back about half past two with a friend who had a big box on the top of the cab. That's all I can tell you."

"Ah, perhaps that is more important than it seems," Berrington muttered. "Anything to-day?"

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"Nothing to-day, sir. Oh, yes, there is. The parlourmaid reported to the man who is doing day duty here this week that the house would be closed till Saturday, and that the police were to keep an eye on the place at night. Looks as if they've gone, sir."

Berrington swore quietly and under his breath. It seemed to him as if he and Field were going to have their trouble for their pains. No. 100 was not the kind of house where people are unduly economical on the score of lights, and there was not one to be seen.

"I should like to go and have a prowl around," Berrington said, after a pause. "I suppose if I did, I shouldn't have any officious policeman to reckon with."

"Well, sir, I'm not quite sure," Macklin said dubiously. "Of course I know you to be a gentleman as wouldn't do anything in the least wrong, but there's my sergeant to consider. Still, as this is on my beat, no other officer is likely to see you."

"Good," Berrington exclaimed. "What time will you be back here again?"

Macklin calculated that he would reach the same spot again an hour or so later,—about eleven o'clock, to be exact. The hour tallied precisely with the coming of Field, and in the meantime Berrington was free to make what he could of the house opposite.

But there was precious little to be gained in that respect. The house was all fastened up, there

were shutters to the windows on the ground floor; the garden was tried next, but there was no litter anywhere such as might have been caused by a hasty removal. Clearly if the house was closed up it was only for a day or two, as the parlourmaid had told the policeman.

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At the end of an hour Berrington was not a whit wiser than before.

He crossed over the road and there on a seat under the trees was a sailor like himself. Field did not assume to be asleep but was pulling at a short clay pipe.

"Come and sit down, sir," he said. "I've just come. As I anticipated, I am being watched. But I managed to give my shadowers quite a wrong impression and I passed from the house, where I keep a few stock disguises, under their very noses. They imagine that they are following me up West by this time."

"I am afraid all the trouble has been wasted," Berrington said irritably. "The birds have flown."

"Indeed, sir. And who did you get that valuable piece of information from?"

"From my friend the policeman that I told you about. The house is shut up for a few days and the authorities have been informed of the fact. I have been all around the house and it is as silent as the grave."

"Well, that might be merely a blind, after all," Field said cheerfully. "When did they go?"

"So far as I can gather from Macklin, they departed early this morning."

Field chuckled but said nothing. A little while later there was a thud of heavy boots on the pavement, and Macklin and his sergeant came, together. The latter was about to say something but Field produced his card and the effect was instantaneous.

"No, we don't want any assistance at all," the Scotland Yard official said. "All you can do is to go about your work as if nothing was taking place. You may notice something suspicious presently at No. 100, across the road, but you are to ignore it. You understand?"

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The sergeant nodded and touched his helmet; he understood perfectly well. The two passed on together and the sham sailors crossed the road. Very quietly Field proceeded to the back of the house. It was a little dark here, and he guided himself by pressing his fingers to the walls. Presently he stopped, and a low chuckle came from his lips.

"Discovery the first, sir," he said. "Press your hand on the wall here. What do you notice?"

But Berrington noticed nothing beyond the fact that the wall was quite warm. He said so, and the inspector chuckled once more. He seemed to be pleased about something.

"That should tell you a story, sir," he said. "That house is supposed to be empty; nobody has been here since early this morning. If you will look up, you will see that the blank wall terminates in a high chimney—obviously the kitchen chimney. This wall is quite hot, it is the back of the kitchen fireplace—so obviously, if those people went early to-day there would be very little fire, in fact the range would have been out long ago. And what do we find? A hot wall that tells of a good fire all day, a good fire at this moment, or these bricks would have cooled down before now. If you listen you will hear the boiler gently simmering."

It was all exactly as Field had said. Perhaps the servants had been sent away for a day or two, indeed, it was very probable that they had. But there was the big fire testifying to the fact that somebody was in the house at that very moment.

"We are going to take risks," Field whispered. "If we are discovered we shall be given into custody as two drunken sailors, given into the custody of your friend Macklin and his sergeant, from whom we shall probably escape. You may be very sure that we shall not be charged, for the simple reason that the people here don't want their names or anything about them to get into the papers; in fact, the less they see of the police the better they will be pleased. Come along."

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Field strode around to the kitchen window. The shutters were up, but not so in the larder, which had no bars, and was only protected by a square of perforated zinc. The inspector took a tool from his pocket and with great care and dexterity, and without making the least noise, removed the zinc from its place. Then a lantern flamed out.

"Come along," said Field, "we can easily get through here. We shall be safe in the kitchen, for we know that the maids are not in the house."

For the present everything was absolutely plain sailing. And as Field had anticipated there was nobody in the kitchen and nobody in the corridor leading to the better part of the house. All the same, a big fire, recently made up, was roaring in the range, showing that the place was not quite deserted. And yet it was as silent as the grave.

It was the same in the hall, and the same in the living-rooms, where no lights gleamed. From somewhere upstairs came a sound as if somebody was gently filing some soft metal. The noise ceased presently to be followed by the rattle of a typewriter, or so it seemed. The two adventurers stood in the darkness of the dining-room listening; it seemed to them as if that rattle was getting closer. Field flashed a light into the room, but it was quite empty; the polished mahogany of the table reflected the flowers on it.

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Then suddenly the rattle grew louder, and Field hid his light under the slide. As suddenly as his light had faded out, the dining-room glowed in a perfect bank of shaded yellow light, as if by magic the table stood with a perfect meal, a dainty cold supper with glass and silver and crystal and gold-topped bottles upon it; the whole thing seemed a most wonderful piece of conjuring. At the same instant there was the rattle of a latch-key in the front door. Field pulled his companion into the darkness of the drawing-room doorway. A man came in, peeled off his coat, and entered the dining-room. Field gasped.

"What is the matter?" Berrington asked. "Do you know who it is?"

"Rather," Field replied, "I should say that I do. Why! that's no other than the Rajah of Ahbad! Well, if this doesn't beat all!"

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CHAPTER XV

Used as he was to quick scenes and dramatic changes, Berrington was surprised for the moment. The thing was like some bewildering Eastern vision. A moment ago the place had been dull and dark, and now like a flash, warmth and light were there, to say nothing of the tasteful extravagance of the supper-table. Berrington could see the fruit and the flowers, the dainty confections and the costly wines. How had the thing been managed?

But it was no moment to speculate about that. So far it merely tended to prove the almost diabolical cleverness of the people with whom the police had to deal. The Rajah himself could be seen standing moodily in the doorway chewing a cigar between his strong, yellow teeth. Berrington observed him very carefully.

As one who knew India, Berrington was in a position to judge the man fairly well. As a matter of fact, the newcomer did not look in the least like an Eastern potentate. True, his skin was dark, but not more sallow than that of many a European. His hair was thick, but his eyes were dark blue, and his dress was eminently that of a man about town. With his public school and University education, the Rajah had passed for an Englishman.

"What sort of a reputation does he bear?" Berrington asked in a whisper.

"Shady," Field replied briefly. "What you call a renegade, I should say. Has all the vices of both hemispheres, without the redeeming features of either. Low-class music halls, ballet dancers, prize-fighters and the like. At the same time he's got the good sense not to flaunt these vices before the public, and he knows how to conduct himself with dignity when there is any necessity for it. Despite his handsome income, he is frequently in dire need of money. Still, I should never have identified him with this business had I not seen him here. I had no idea that he even knew Sir Charles Darryll and Mr. Richford."

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The Rajah stood there biting his nails impatiently, as if waiting for somebody. He crossed over to the table and opened a bottle of champagne to which he helped himself liberally. The fizz of the wine could be distinctly heard in the drawing-room.

"I'd give half my pension to know how that thing is worked," said Berrington. "A moment ago there was nothing on that table, and now look at it! It would have taken the staff of a large hotel half an hour to arrange a meal like that. The flowers alone would have occupied the time. The servants here——"

"You may bet your life that the servants know nothing about it," Field said. "They have been sent away right enough. I feel quite sure that they are innocent of everything. It would never do to let domestics talk of these matters."

The Rajah was pacing up and down the dining-room talking to himself. A moment later there was a rattle of a latchkey and two people came in. The first was a young man with the unmistakable stamp of the actor on him, smart, well groomed, clean shaven, the society actor of to-day. He was followed by an exceedingly pretty, fair-haired woman, who might have belonged to the same profession. Just for the moment it occurred to Field that these were ordinary guests who knew nothing of the mystery of the house. There was nothing about either of them to connect them with crime or mystery.

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They pitched their wraps carelessly on the hall table as if they had been there before, and made their way to the dining-room. The Rajah's face grew eager.

"Well, my children," he said in excellent English, "have you had any luck? Cora, dear, tell me that you have succeeded in our little counterplot."

The woman's pretty face grew hard. She pulled a chair up to the table and sat down.

"Give me some of that *pâté* and open a bottle of champagne," she said. "What with this doubling about and covering up one's tracks, I've had no time to think of food. The same remark applies to poor Reggie here. Haven't we succeeded well enough for you?"

"Well, yes, you managed the big thing all right, but that's not everything. You managed the big thing so well that the police are utterly baffled and don't know which way to look. But the stones,

carissima, the sparkling stones. What of them?"

The woman gave a shrug of her ivory shoulders. She could be plainly seen by the watchers lost in the darkness of the drawing-room.

"The deplorable luck was against us," she said. "I actually had my hands upon the stones and nearly snatched them away under the very eyes of the adorable Richford. I said to myself we are not going to do his work for nothing. He followed me to the room where the stones were and we talked. You see I had business in the room as you know. And Reggie here was downstairs, making himself agreeable to the fair owner of the stones, so that I had a free hand in the matter. If Reggie had not been so indiscreet as to leave the poor child——"

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"But what could I do?" the man called Reggie protested. "Never was so cruel a piece of bad luck in the history of war. Who should come down but Langford?"

"But you were so carefully disguised that Langford could not possibly have known you," the woman said.

"I admit it. I positively had forgotten the fact for the moment. The sight of Langford was such a shock to me. On the spur of the moment I made my excuses and departed."

"Leaving the little girl uneasy and suspicious," said the woman, "so that she came up to her room where I was and walked off with the gems. I was very near to taking her by the throat and half strangling her. But there were greater issues at stake and I had to restrain my feelings. I had to smile and nod and play my part whilst the little lady was sending the jewels off to the safe custody of the hotel clerk. I could have danced with fury, I could have wept with rage. But what was the good?"

The Rajah swore roundly and passionately. He could be seen from the drawing-room, striding about the place and muttering as he went.

"It is more than unfortunate," he said. "If we could have got hold of those jewels we should have had a fortune in our grasp. We were quite justified in robbing Richford, who only serves me for his own ends. He is a bully and a coward and he must pay the price. He says that he has no ready money, that his affairs are more desperate than we imagine. And yet he could find the cash to buy those diamonds."

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"They always mean cash," the woman said. "It is a good thing for the wife of a speculator to be in possession of a lot of fine diamonds. It would have been a precious good thing for us, too, if Reggie had not lost his nerve last night."

"Have you any idea who those people are?" asked Berrington of his companion.

"Not personally," Field replied, "but I have a pretty shrewd idea. It is very good of them to come here, just as nature made them, and without disguises. Surely you know what they are talking about? The discussion is over Mrs. Richford's diamonds which she nearly lost, as she told me. Unless I am greatly mistaken, we are listening to a confession of the way in which that robbery had been planned. Stripped of their very clever disguises, these two people yonder are no other than Countess de la Moray and General Gastang."

Berrington nodded, wondering why he had not found them out before. From the dining-room came the sound of a match, as the Rajah lighted another cigar.

"We shall have to go back to our original scheme," he was saying. "There was never anything better. We must get the other man into this. He must be frightened. Send him the salt."

There was another rattle of the latchkey, and the watchers were not in the least surprised to see Richford come in, with the air of a man who is quite at home. He was looking white and anxious and a little annoyed as he took off his coat and entered the dining-room. Unhappily he closed the door behind him, so that no more conversation could be heard.

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"That's unlucky," Field said in a vexed tone. "What does that salt allusion mean? You recollect telling me that Richford was frightened by finding that salt on his plate?"

"It's a kind of Indian dodge," Berrington proceeded to explain. "It has to do with caste and religious observances and all that sort of thing. Don't be deceived with the idea that you are on the track of an Anarchist society or anything of that kind."

"Is it something more or less on the line of freemasonry, then?" Field asked.

"Well, yes, you can put it that way if you like," Berrington said thoughtfully. "I made a special study of that kind of thing in India, though I only came across the salt fetich a few times. It seemed to me to be more religious than anything else, though in one or two instances it was attended by tragedy. There was a young native prince who was a great friend of mine and he was about to be married to a princess who was as bright and intelligent as himself. She had been educated like himself in Europe, so that they were free from a deal of superstition and prejudice. The prince was dining at my bungalow one night when I noticed a little bullet of salt on his plate. It was useless to ask him how it got there for one could never have elicited the truth from any of the native servants. My friend got dreadfully pale for a moment, but he turned it off and he thought no more about the matter. But the next day the prince was found dead in his bed; he had shot himself with a revolver."

"And you never got to the bottom of it?" Field asked with pardonable curiosity.

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"Never. There are mysteries in India that puzzle us as much as they did in the good old days of John Company. What's that noise?"

There was a sound like the rumble of wheels along the hall, and presently appeared a kind of invalid chair, self-propelled by its occupant, a little man with a pale face and dark eyes. He paused before the dining-room door and rattled the handle.

"Evidently the master of the house," Berrington suggested. "The lame man who can't walk. It was he who sent the message to Richford."

"Sure enough," Field exclaimed. "Must have been in the abduction business. Evidently the same gentleman who was waiting in the black cab outside the *Royal Palace*. Rather a nice looking man, with by no means unpleasant face. Hope they won't shut the door upon him."

Somebody opened the dining-room door at this moment and the lame man steered himself in. Where he had come from was a mystery, as the house had appeared to be quite empty when Berrington and his companion entered it. Clearly the man could not have come from the upper part of the premises, for his physical condition disposed of that suggestion.

"Well, my friends," the newcomer cried gaily, "very glad to see you all safe and sound again. So our little scheme has not been a failure. Richford, judging from the gloom on your brow, you have not had the luck you desire. You must be content with the knowledge that virtue brings its own reward. And yet if you only knew it you are the most fortunate of men. For your sweet sake we have undertaken difficulties and dangers that——"

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"Oh, shut up," Richford growled. "I don't understand what you are driving at. Anybody would think that you were no more than a silly child who had nothing to do but to attend to your flowers and stick your postage stamps in your album. And yet——"

"And yet I can give my attention to more serious matters," the cripple said with a sudden stern expression and in a voice that had a metallic ring in it. "You are right. And if you two have eaten and drunk enough we will get to business."

There was a little stir amongst the listeners, the Rajah pitching his cigar into the grate and coming forward eagerly. Evidently something was going to happen.

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CHAPTER XVI

Cool and collected as he usually was, even Field was excited now. He crept as near to the drawing room door as he dared, and peeped into the ring of light, eagerly. He popped back hurriedly as the man called Reggie and the Rajah came into the hall and proceeded to enter a room opposite, under the direction of the little cripple. Richford seemed to be vague and irritated.

"What the deuce is the good of all this mystery?" he asked. "Why don't you come to the point, Sartoris? But no, you must always be so infernally close, just as if you were the only one of us who rejoices in the possession of brains."

"Well, so I am," Sartoris said, without the least display of temper. "You don't delude yourself that you are a person of intellect, surely? Cunning you have of a low order, the mean, vulgar cunning that enables people to make money in the city. But that is not intellect, my dear friend—intellect is quite another matter. We very nearly landed ourselves in a serious mess because I did not care to trust you too far. And when we were face to face with that mess, what good were you? What good was anybody besides myself? Where was the brain that schemed out everything and made success certain? True, I had allies upon whom I could depend—Reggie and Cora, for example. But they could have done nothing without me. And now we have the thing in our hands again. Come along, then."

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Richford subsided, muttering to himself. From the room opposite came the sound of somebody moving a heavy package of some kind, and presently the man called Reggie and the Rajah appeared shuffling a big case between them. The box scraped over the polished parquet floor, leaving deep scratches as it went; amidst a strained, breathing silence it was pushed into the dining-room. Sartoris watched these proceedings with a curious gleam in his eyes.

"So far, so good," he said. "All we want now is Bentwood. He's very late. Go out and see if you can make anything of him, Reggie. If that fellow has dared to get drunk to-night, I'll give him a lesson that will last him for the rest of his life."

The little man's voice grew harsh and grating. Evidently he was a man that it would be dangerous to trifle with. A curious silence fell over the little group; the whole room grew so still that Field could hear his companion breathing. They were perfectly safe up to now, but if anybody happened to go into the drawing-room for anything, and they were discovered, each knew that his life was not worth a minute's purchase. Very steadily Sartoris steered his chair to the side of the big case on the floor, and his hands began to fumble with the strings.

The front door opened with a bang that startled everybody, for nerves were strung up to high tension and the least noise came with a startling force. The door burst open, only to be as quietly closed, and a big man, with a red face and small red eyes, reeled across the hall and almost collapsed in a heap on the floor.

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"Night," he said unsteadily, "night, all of you. You may say that I've been drinking. Nothing of the kind. The man who says I've been drinking lies. Experiment. Nothing in the world but a lot of experiments which a braver man than I would shrink from. Sartoris, if you say I am drunk, then I say that you are a liar."

"I should be a liar if I agreed with you," Sartoris said. "The whole place reeks of drink."

"So it does," the newcomer said with amiability. "Upon my word, you yourselves seem to be doing remarkably well while I've been working for the good of the community. Give me a bottle of champagne, to begin with. Poor stuff, champagne, only fit for women. But then, there appears to be nothing else—why—"

The big red-faced man reached his hand out and Sartoris caught him a savage blow on the knuckles. The little man's face was livid with fury, his eyes flashed like electric points.

"Pig, beast, drunken hound," he screamed. "Have you no sense of shame or duty? After to-night I will give you a lesson. After to-night you shall know what it is to play with me."

The man called Bentwood lapsed into sudden dignity.

"Very well," he said. "Have it your own way. When you say that I am drunk you outrage my feelings. You don't seem to understand that you can't get on without me. If I like to snap my fingers in your face you are powerless. But I do nothing of the kind—such is not my nature. Give me a glass of brandy and I shall be myself again."

Just for a moment Sartoris seemed to be fighting down the rage that consumed him. It was evidently a big struggle, but the mastery came.

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"Very well," he said. "I'll do as you want. Wait a moment."

The invalid carriage rolled rapidly across the room and down a long passage to the back of the house. When Sartoris came back again he had a glass in his hand and a cup of black coffee balanced on the chair before him. Bentwood snatched eagerly at the glass and drained it at a gulp. Then he pressed his hand to his heart and staggered back.

"My God, you have poisoned me," he gasped. "The pain! The pain! I can't breathe."

"You'll be all right in a moment," Sartoris said. "I don't profess to your wonderful medical knowledge, but some things I know, and one of them is how to treat a man in your condition. What you regard as poison is a strong dose of sal-volatile—as strong a dose as I dare venture to give even to a powerful man like you. Now drink this coffee."

There was a ring of command in the tone which was not to be disobeyed. As soon as Bentwood had regained his power of speech, he drank his coffee. After the harsh, astringent drug, the flavour was soothing and gratifying. In a marvellously short space of time the big man grew quiet and a little ashamed of himself. His face was less red, he became more quiet and subdued in his manner.

"I am truly sorry, Sartoris," he said. "I'm afraid I was very drunk and rude just now. But I was not entirely to blame. Would any man be entirely to blame who had led a life like mine! The things that I have seen, the things that I should like to find out! Then the madness comes on me and I must drink or destroy myself. I fought for the possession of myself to-day until I was a mere nervous rag of a man, if I had fought much longer I should have blown my brains out. And what would you have done then?"

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The man's tone was eager, almost passionate. Sartoris bent his head down so that the expression of his face could not be seen by anyone.

"Say no more about it," he said. "You are quite sober now, which is the important part of the case. I will discuss the other matter with you on a future occasion."

The speaker's tones were smooth enough, but his eyes gleamed like coals of fire. He was bending again and fumbling with the straps of the great packing case. Field, watching everything intently, asked Berrington what he thought of it all.

"I hardly know what to think," the latter whispered. "This has been a night of surprises—therefore you will be prepared to hear that I know the man Bentwood well."

"You mean that you knew him in India?" Field asked.

"Yes, years ago. He was an army surgeon, and quite the cleverest man at his profession that I ever had the privilege to meet. He might have made a large fortune in England, but he got into some trouble and had to leave the country. It was much the same in India. Bentwood had a positive genius for the occult and underground. After a time very few white people cared to associate with him and he became the companion of the dervishes and the mullahs and all that class, whose secrets he learned. I believe he is the only European who ever went through the process of being buried alive. That secret was never betrayed before, and yet yonder fellow got to

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the bottom of it. Also he learned all the secret poisons that they use out yonder, and we were pretty sure that he was mixed up in the great scandal that followed the sad death of the Rajah of Abgalli. You recollect that?"

Field nodded. He had a fine memory for all stories of that kind.

"We always said that Bentwood was the actual culprit, and that he experimented with certain poisons that produced quite new results. Some said that the Rajah committed suicide. Perhaps the poison administered to him took that form. Anyway, Bentwood disappeared, and it was generally understood that he met his death by falling out of a boat when shooting sea fowl. That was the story that one of his servants brought back, but we could never ascertain how far that fellow was in his master's pay. Anyway, a year later one of our men came back from his long leave, saying that he had seen Bentwood at Monte Carlo, and that he appeared to be bursting with money. Another of ours was reported to have seen him after that, almost in rags, in London. Anyway, he is an amazingly clever man, and perhaps one of the greatest scamps that ever lived. Still, if we get any luck to-night, he will almost have shot his bolt."

"I think you may safely reckon upon that," Field said drily. "It's exceedingly lucky for me that I ran up against you in this way, Colonel. But for that accident I should have been utterly at fault. Anyway, I should not be here at this moment."

There was no chance for further talk, for by this time Sartoris had released the straps of the packing case and raised the lid. The others stood around him, looking white and anxious, with the exception of Bentwood, who was smoking a cigarette quite carelessly. With an impatient gesture, Sartoris pointed to the case by his side. [Pg 127]

"Now, then," he said curtly, "are you people going to keep me waiting all night? Do you think that a cripple like me can do everything? Give a hand here, you men, whilst one of the others clears the table. Pull the cloth off."

There was a clatter of china and glass and a clink of bottles, at the sound of which Bentwood looked around with a sudden spasmodic grin on his face. But Sartoris scowled at him furiously, and he turned his watery gaze in another direction. The table was clear now, and the Rajah, with the help of the man called Reggie, and Richford, raised some inanimate object from the trunk. It was limp and heavy, it was swathed in sheets, like a lay figure or a mummy. As the strange thing was opened out it took the outlines of a human body, a dread object, full of the suggestion of crime and murder and violence. Berrington breathed hard as he watched.

"If we only dared to do something," he muttered. "I suppose it is easy to guess what they have there?"

"Easy enough, indeed, sir," Field said between his teeth. "It's the body of Sir Charles Darryll. There is a deeper mystery here than we are as yet aware of. They are laying the body out on that table as if for some operation. I don't know what to think; I——"

"Shut that door," Sartoris commanded in a hard high voice. "There is a deuce of a draught coming in from somewhere. You don't want that, eh, Bentwood!" [Pg 128]

Bentwood muttered that it was the last thing he did desire. The door closed with a bang, there was a long silence, broken at last by a feeble cry of pain, a cry something like that of a child who suffers under some drug. Berrington leaped to his feet. As he would have crossed the hall a figure came along—the figure of a woman in a grey dress. It was the grey lady that Beatrice had seen on that fateful evening, the woman who had sat by the side of Mark Ventmore in the Paris theatre. She wrung her hands in silent grief.

"Oh, if only there was somebody to help me," she said. "If God would only give to me and send to me a friend at this moment, I would pray——"

Berrington stepped out into the light of the hall.

"Your prayer has been answered," he said quietly. "I am here to help you, Mary."

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CHAPTER XVII

The grey lady stood there, with her hands pressed to her heart, her great pathetic eyes dilated with a curious fear. It was a long time before she spoke, though it was easy to see that she had penetrated Berrington's disguise. But then, he had spoken in his natural voice, which made all the difference. It seemed to him that the grey lady would have fallen had he not put out his hand and supported her slender frame.

"Wait a bit," Berrington whispered. "Don't try to talk yet. You are surprised to see me here, Mary. And yet it is natural enough—you must know that I have been seeking you for years. Why have you carefully avoided me all this time?"

A little colour crept into the cheeks of the grey lady. Field had drawn into the background with a feeling that he was not wanted here. Yet he was not pleased at the unexpected contretemps. The detective had mapped out a line for himself, and he desired now to bring it to a successful

conclusion. And yet the interruption might not altogether be without its good results. Field had, of course, already heard a great deal about the grey lady, and he did not doubt that the pathetic figure standing there in the doorway was the same person.

"You will not forget to be cautious," he whispered.

The grey lady started. She had not anticipated that anybody else was there.

"Who is that?" she asked. "And how did you get here?"

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"Well, we got into the house by the pantry window," Berrington explained. He had himself well in hand again by this time. "I am afraid that we must have some kind of an understanding, Mary. Would you mind, Inspector?"

Field was understood to say that he had no objection so long as it did not lead to anything rash. He began to wish that he had half a dozen or so of his most trusted men with him. Meanwhile his hands were tied and he could do no more than wait developments. He had naturally a keen desire to know what was going on behind the closed door of the dining-room, but on that score he would have to possess his soul in patience for the time. He had the comfortable assurance that he could bag his birds, one by one, later on.

"Don't go out of earshot and don't betray yourself, sir," he said. Berrington gave the desired assurances and he and his companion passed quietly across the hall to a morning room beyond. This was at the back of the house, with a French window that gave on to the lawn. The grey lady softly undid the catch.

"That will be an easy way out for you, if necessary," she said. "If anybody comes in here you can slip out into the garden. And now, Philip, how did you find me?"

Berrington made no reply for the moment. He was looking at the pale features of his companion with something like a lovelight in his eyes. Looked at closely it was a beautiful face, despite its sorrow and the grey hair that crowned it. Berrington recollected the grey lady as a merry laughing girl, who seemed not to have a single care in the world. His mind was very far away from Audley Place at that moment.

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"How long since we last met, Mary!" he said.

The woman sighed and her eyes filled with tears. Berrington had struck a tender cord.

"Four months, four years, four centuries!" she said with a passionate catch of her voice. "You are not angry with me, Phil? I can see you are not angry with me."

"My dearest, no. When I look at you I can feel no anger in my heart against you. My God, what you must have suffered! The same and yet so different. All your colour has gone, the laughter from your eyes, the tender lines of your mouth. And yet at the outside your years cannot be more than thirty."

"Thirty-one," the other said mournfully. "And yet I seem to have lived such a long, long life. You think that I treated you very badly, Phil?"

"My dear Mary, how could I come to any other conclusion? You were engaged to me, we were going to be married, the very hour was fixed. Then you disappeared utterly, leaving nothing more than a note to say that I was to forget you and not seek you. I was to think of you as being utterly unworthy to become a good man's wife."

"If you had done so a great deal of trouble and anxiety would have been saved, Phil."

"Yes, but I declined to do anything of the kind," Berrington said eagerly. "I knew that in some way you were sacrificing yourself for others. And when I found that your brother had gone, I felt absolutely certain of it."

"Did you discover anything about him?" the grey lady asked anxiously.

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"Dear Mary, there was nothing fresh to discover. Your love for Carl made you blind to his faults. Did we not all know what he was! Every man in India who knew him could have told you. It is a painful thing to say, but he was an utter blackguard. But for influence, he had been expelled the Civil Service long before he chose to vanish. It used to madden me to see the way in which he traded upon your affection for him. Oh, he was a bad man."

The red blood flamed into the cheeks of the listener. Berrington could see her hands clasped together.

"You are wrong," she said, "oh, I am sure you are wrong. Carl was a little selfish, perhaps, but then he was so brilliantly clever, so much sought after. And when he fell in love with—with the right woman, I was entirely happy. He was passionately in love, Philip."

Berrington gave a dissenting gesture. There was a bitter smile on his lips.

"Carl never cared for anyone but himself," he said. "It was a physical impossibility."

"Indeed you do him wrong, Phil. He was very much in earnest with Sir Charles Darryll's ward who came out with her brother and his wife to Simla. All was going brilliantly when a rival came on the scene. You were not in Simla at the time, and I daresay if you had been you would never

have heard anything about that unhappy business. Whether the rival used his power unscrupulously or not I never knew, but there was a quarrel one day, out riding. Even Carl refused to speak of it. But his rival was never seen again, and from that day to this Carl has been a physical wreck. He——"

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"You don't mean to say," Berrington burst out, "you don't mean to say your brother is the Carl Sartoris who is master of this house?"

The woman hesitated, stammered, her face had grown very pale.

"You seem to know more than I imagined," she said. "Perhaps I shall understand better when I know what brings you here. But Carl Sartoris is my brother."

"So he has gone back to his mother's maiden name! Does an honest man want to do anything of that kind? But for the expression of your face, which is sweet and fair as ever, I should say that you were in this business. But I have only to glance at you to feel assured on that point. You say that your brother is more sinned against than sinning. Can you look me in the face and say that he has no past behind him, that he is not making a mystery now?"

The girl's face grew pale and she cast down her eyes. Berrington kept down his rising passion.

"You cannot answer me," he went on. "You find it impossible to do so. You are running great risks for a worthless creature who is as crooked in mind as he is in body."

"Oh, don't," Mary Sartoris said. "Don't say such terrible things, please; they hurt me."

"My dear girl, I am sorry, but it is best to state these things plainly. You may not know everything, but you can guess a great deal. Otherwise, why did you try and see Sir Charles Darryll the night before his death, why did you write him the note that was found in his bedroom? And again, why did you stay in the hotel that night and try to warn the servants on night duty? You see, Mary, it is quite useless to try to keep the secret from me."

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Mary Sartoris looked at the speaker with dilated eyes. For a moment she could not speak. And yet there were no signs of guilty terror on her face.

"I did not imagine that you knew so much," she said.

"I know more, but I would far rather know a great deal more," Berrington admitted. "Mind you, matters are out of my hands and the police are hot on the track. Why do you not confess everything and save yourself, Mary? For instance, you stand a chance of being placed in the dock on a charge of being concerned in the disappearance of Sir Charles Darryll's body."

"I am as innocent of that as the grave, Phil. I only did my best to try to prevent——"

"Oh, I know, I know," Berrington said impatiently. "But the fact remains that the body of Sir Charles Darryll was stolen for some vile purpose, and that the culprits are in grave danger. Your brother is at the bottom of this affair; he it was who drove up to the *Royal Palace Hotel* in that black hansom that took the body away. And yet you say that that man——"

"Is more sinned against than sinning," Mary Sartoris cried. "I say it still. Of course you regard me as blind and foolish, but then you do not know everything."

"It is not a matter of what I know," Berrington protested. "Of course I should believe every word that you tell me. But the police will take another view of the matter altogether. Do you know what is going on behind that closed door yonder?"

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The girl shuddered and hid her face in her hands. She seemed afraid to say anything. Berrington asked the question twice before he could get any reply.

"Indeed I don't," she said. "I am not altogether in my brother's confidence. I ventured to say something to him to-day and he was dreadfully angry. He locked me in my bedroom, but I managed to get the door of the dressing-room open and escaped that way. I was going to interfere when I saw you. There seem to be other people there."

"Oh, there are," Berrington said bitterly. "There are two adventurers, called Reggie and Cora, who very recently passed at the *Royal Palace Hotel* for General Gastang and Countess de la Moray. There is the scoundrel Stephen Richford who tricked Beatrice Darryll into marrying him, and then there is also a ruffian called Dr. James Bentwood. What was that?"

"It seemed to me like a cry of pain," Mary Sartoris said in a frozen whisper.

It was very like a cry of pain indeed, a fluttering, feeble cry ending in a moaning protest. Acting on the impulse of the moment, and forgetting Inspector Field altogether, Berrington crossed the hall and laid his hand on the knob of the door. Mary Sartoris darted after him, her face white with fear, and terror and anxiety in her accent.

"Don't do it," she said, "pray restrain yourself. There are mysteries here, strange, horrible mysteries that come from the East, of which you know nothing, despite the years you have passed in India. Oh, the danger that lies there!"

In spite of his courage, Berrington hesitated. He might have recovered his self-possession and returned to the drawing-room, only the strange feeble cry of pain was raised again. It was more than flesh and blood could stand, and in a sudden passion Berrington opened the door. He would

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have entered resolutely, but Mary pulled him back.

"The mischief has been done," she said hurriedly. "If anyone has to suffer let it be me. I have brought you to this pass and I must get you out as best I can. Carl, what is this?"

The girl thrust herself past Berrington who stood in the shade of the doorway. There was a sudden snarling, with a cry from the girl, as a blow tingled on her cheek. Somebody laughed as if approving this cowardly business.

With a cry of rage Berrington darted into the room. Instantly a pair of strong hands were laid on him and he was borne backwards. Just for a moment he lashed out freely and successfully and then the weight of numbers was too much for him. The dining-room door was closed again.

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CHAPTER XVIII

Inspector Field swore a good round oath under his breath. He had not looked for an insane folly like this from a well-trained officer who might have been expected to keep his feelings in check. But, as Field sadly reflected, it was useless to anticipate anything rational when a woman came into the case.

Everything had been going beautifully and smoothly a few minutes ago, and now the plot was ruined. Field was anything but a timid man, he had been in too many tight places in his life to know the meaning of the word timidity, but then he had to exercise a certain discretion.

At the same time he was not blind to the fact that his military ally was in considerable danger. The only thing now would be to bluff the whole thing through, to pretend that the game was up and that the house was surrounded with police.

With this intention in his mind, Field crossed the hall and tried the dining-room door. He was not altogether surprised to find the door locked. He listened at the keyhole, but he could not hear anything whatever. Furthermore, the application of an eye to the keyhole disclosed the fact that the room was in darkness. Despite his courage a thrill ran down the spine of the inspector. There was some more than usually devilish work going on here.

"Well, it can't be helped," Field muttered. "It's the fortune of war. One of us has come to grief, and if I stay here I may share the same fate, and I the only one left who knows anything of the secrets of the prison house. I'll run over and get assistance and we'll search the house. After all, my friend the Colonel has only himself to blame."

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Without waiting for anything further, Field slipped out by the way he had come. Once in the road, he glanced back at the house, but the whole place seemed to be in pitchy darkness. There was nothing for it now but to make his way to the nearest police station, and get all the assistance possible. There was no trouble at the station across the Common, the mere mention of Field's name being sufficient. A few minutes later half a dozen constables in silent shoes were on their way to the scene of action. There was to be no fuss and bother; they decided to enter quietly and unostentatiously by the larder window, which was done without any noise whatever.

Once the exits were guarded, there was no necessity for further concealment. But though the lights were turned up all over the house and the most careful search made, not a sign of human life could be seen. Everybody had vanished, as if the whole thing had been a dream. Field, standing in the hall and biting his nails, was fain to admit that he was beaten.

How on earth had those people managed to efface themselves in that amazing manner? They had all apparently vanished off the face of the earth. And there was that bulky package too, that Field believed contained the body of Sir Charles. It was long past midnight before Field left the house, having taken precautions not to disturb anything, but even those precautions might have been in vain. For all he knew to the contrary, the place might be watched by its late occupants who were laughing in their sleeves.

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"No use staying here any longer, Macklin," he said disgustedly. "I shall have to go back on my tracks once more. Never do I take an amateur into my business plans again. But it looks as if he has paid for his indiscretion. Good night."

It was late into the following afternoon before Field saw Beatrice Darryll again. When he did so, he had nothing to report save failure. Beatrice listened with the greatest interest to what had taken place the night before, but her interest gave place to grave anxiety when she heard what had been the result of Colonel Berrington's daring action.

"Do you suppose that he is in real danger?" Beatrice asked.

"Well, I'm afraid he is," Field admitted. "You see we are dealing with the most daring and clever and unscrupulous gang of scoundrels that I ever encountered. They would not stick at murder or anything else if anybody crossed them. Mind you, it was a most foolish thing for the Colonel to do. Still, he is a soldier and a very resourceful man and he may pull through. Again these people may not have designs on his life; it is just possible that they might keep him a prisoner until their plans had been successfully carried out. Of course when the Colonel was talking to the grey lady

to-night I was not supposed to listen. But I have very good ears, and they spoke loudly at times. I gathered that the scoundrel Sartoris was once engaged to a young lady who threw him over. Now it occurred to me that the young lady might give me an idea or two, provided that she is in England at the present moment."

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"Why should you think that she is not here?" Beatrice asked.

"Because the engagement took place at Simla. This young lady was staying with her brother and his wife; unfortunately I did not catch the name. The curious part of the affair is that she is a ward of your late father."

Beatrice looked puzzled for a moment. She did not quite understand.

"You mean that my father was guardian under a will or something of that kind?" she asked.

"That's it, miss," Field exclaimed. "We ought to be able to identify the young lady between us, especially as the affair only took place three years ago or so, as I understand. If you will pardon me for saying so, Sir Charles was a very careless gentleman, and hardly the man that a careful parent would choose as a guardian. The young lady's father must have known yours very intimately indeed, or very little, it does not matter which. Still, I don't suppose that Sir Charles had many of these affairs on hand. Now, see if you can recollect anything of the kind happening during the last three or four years, Miss Darryll."

Beatrice thought the matter over carefully for a moment. Her face lighted up presently.

"I fancy that I have it," she said. "Lord Edward Decié, who was a great friend of my father, died about three years ago. The two men did a lot of speculating together, and indeed Lord Edward passed for a shrewd and successful man. When he died I know my father was executor under the will and that he had some control over the Hon. Violet Decié. I never saw the girl, because she went to India with a married brother, and, for all I know she is there still. I understood that she was rather an impulsive kind of girl who did wild things on the spur of the moment. But you can easily inquire."

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Field's face expressed a guarded satisfaction. So far he was not very much out.

"That is the young lady, miss," he cried. "I'll put the inquiries on foot at once. And I don't think that I need detain you any longer."

"One minute," Beatrice said. "What about Colonel Berrington? What steps have you taken to find him? Are you going to have that house at Wandsworth watched?"

Field intimated that he was, though in his opinion it was time wasted.

"They will expect something of the kind, you see," he said. "Of course it is a help to me that my presence in the house was not suspected. They may conclude that Berrington was alone in the business, and on the other hand they may not conclude anything of the kind. But, all the same, I am going to have the house carefully watched."

Before the day was out the disappearance of Sir Charles's body was obscured by the strange absence of Colonel Berrington. Field would have kept this latter fact concealed as far as possible, but then Berrington's landlady had been his old nurse, and she was not rational in the matter at all. The authorities had promised to do all they could, though the press accused them of being exceedingly lax in the business. As a matter of fact, Field had given his chiefs an inkling of the situation, so that they were really doing their best all the time. A carefully planned watch on the Wandsworth Common house had come to nothing, but the people there had not yet returned; indeed very little could have been done if they had.

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And Field was turning in another direction. He had to trace the young lady who at one time had been engaged to Carl Sartoris, and he had found it a more difficult business than he had anticipated. It was a delicate business, too, calling for tactful manipulation. A somewhat talkative aunt of the young lady was found at length. She took Field for a lawyer who was seeking the Honorable Violet for her own advantage.

"Oh, yes. She has been back from India a long time," Lady Parkstone said. "Violet is a very strange and clever girl. Yes, she has been engaged more than once. But the engagements are always broken off. Violet was always in love with herself. But very clever, as I said before. At one time she bade fair to become quite a famous artist, and she has had stories in the magazines. Her last fad was the stage and that has lasted quite a long time. In fact she is on the stage now."

"In London, my lady?" Field asked. "She is not acting under her own name, of course?"

"No," Lady Parkstone explained. "She is Miss Adela Vane; at present she is playing at the Comedy Opera House. It is just possible that you know the name."

Field knew the name very well. He departed presently well satisfied with the progress that he had made. It was getting quite late by the time he had found out where Miss Vane lodged, but he had time to go back to Scotland Yard again. There, a note from the superintendent of the Wandsworth Police was awaiting him, asking him to go down as soon as possible. The note was vague but it suggested possibilities.

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The Wandsworth authorities had not much to say, but they had one detail. Last night one of the men who was told to watch No. 100 had seen something. The windows were all shuttered from

top to bottom, each shutter having a little ventilator in it. Field nodded, for he had noticed this himself.

"Very well, then," the superintendent went on. "So far as we know the house is empty. But is it? If so why should a light have been seen last night, behind the little round ventilator? The light came and went, and in a great flashing, dazzling kind of way for half an hour, and then stopped. It was as if a child was playing with the switch of the electric light."

Field nodded and smiled. He looked exceedingly pleased with himself.

"Guess I understand," he said. "Especially as we are seeking for a military gentleman. We'll go as far as Audley Place at once, and investigate. Only we shall have to call at the Post Office and borrow a clerk out of the telegraph department. Come along."

Field volunteered no explanation, and his puzzled colleague followed him out of the office. The telegraph operator and the others stood opposite the house in Audley Place till the patience of all was pretty well exhausted. Then suddenly the light began to flicker in the upper part of the house.

"Isn't that a message of some kind?" Field asked of the telegraph clerk.

"Right," the other said promptly. "That's a kind of telegraph dash and dot system. Whistle a bar from 'when we are married.' Thank you, sir. That's what the gentleman who is sending out those flash signals is asking somebody to do who happens to understand. That last lot of flashes means 'Thank the Lord!' Now he's getting to business. He wants to know who we are before he goes on."

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"Can't you give it back again in any way?" Field asked. "Say it's me."

Very loudly the telegraphic operator tapped the pavement with his stick. It sounded quite meaningless, but the light in the house flared up and down in a triumphant kind of way. The flickering began once more and then stopped.

"It's Colonel Berrington," the clerk said presently. "He says you are not to bother about him in the least, as he is quite safe, and so long as he is in there the men are not likely to do anything rash. And here comes the gist of the message. You are to go to Edward Street in the Borough and keep an eye on one of the houses there,—the Colonel doesn't know which. And you are to go at once, he says."

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CHAPTER XIX

Something had been accomplished, at any rate. It was good to know that Berrington was safe and as satisfied with his surroundings as it was possible to be under the circumstances. Though he was a prisoner, he seemed to have been able to obtain important information which he had managed to convey to the outside world without alarming his captors.

"It's not so bad altogether," Field said. "Though I am by no means pleased with the gallant Colonel, who has only himself to blame for the position in which he finds himself. You can all go back to the station, and I shall not want the telegraph gentleman, whose services have been so valuable. Of course, you will say nothing of what you have seen, sir."

The little telegraph clerk gave the desired assurance and went his way. But Field did not turn his steps in the direction of London all at once. For a long time he stood looking thoughtfully at the house in Audley Place. He was just about to turn away finally when the light began to flash and flicker again. It went on a little time and finally ceased.

"Now, has he forgotten something?" Field asked himself. "I wonder if it is possible——"

Field crept quietly towards the house, across the lawn, and made his way to the back by which he had entered the place on a previous occasion. As he expected, the glass removed by him had not been replaced, so that he was free to enter if he pleased. It was a very risky proceeding under the circumstances, but Field decided to try it. He would be much better satisfied to gain speech with Berrington, though the latter's escape might have alarmed the criminals and sent them to cover again.

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Field was inside the house again before he had made up his mind what to do. The place was very quiet, and it was evident that the servants had not returned. Perhaps there was nobody there besides Berrington, who was a prisoner in one of the upper rooms. That being the case it was by no means impossible to gain speech with him. Very carefully Field crept along the passages, listening with all his ears.

He had not gone far before he heard a sound as of somebody moving. That somebody was coming in his direction was certain. Field began to blame himself for his folly. If he fell into a trap now, everything would be ruined. He turned down a side passage, without the remotest idea where he was going, and came at length to a lighted room, at the end of which was a conservatory full of flowers. The conservatory was open to the room, so that the whole place was a veritable bower of blooms. On one side was a large bank of azaleas, behind which Field proceeded to hide himself. He had hardly done this when there was a kind of creaking sound, the door was pushed open,

and Carl Sartoris entered in his chair. With great difficulty the cripple proceeded to crawl into a big arm-chair, after which he took from his pocket a wig and a pair of spectacles. He seemed to be expecting somebody. He gave a little cough, and immediately somebody in the hall began to talk.

"Mr. Sartoris is in the conservatory room, miss," a voice said, and Field had no difficulty in recognising the voice of the doctor, Bentwood. "Will you come this way, please?"

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Field congratulated himself upon the line that he had taken. From behind the bank of flowers he could see pretty well himself, without being discovered. A pretty girl, with wonderfully beautiful fair hair and dark vivacious eyes, came into the room. She was not in the least timid; there was an air of eager expectation about her.

"This is very good of you," she said. "I understand that you sent for me. If you are not in a proper state of health to talk to me I can call again, Mr. Sartoris."

Just for the moment Sartoris made no reply. It seemed to Field that he was not altogether free from physical pain. He shaded his spectacled eyes with a trembling hand, as if the light proved a little too strong for him.

"It is not in the least inconvenient," he said. "I sent for you at this somewhat late hour because I may have to leave England to-morrow. If I do so it will be for some considerable time."

In his mind, Field differed. He had other views for the speaker. He was puzzled, too, at all these quick changes, and because there were so many threads in the plot.

"I can give you an hour," the girl said. "I *must* be in London by ten o'clock."

"Very well, I dare say we can manage it by that time. As I told you in my letter, I am a very old friend of your father. We were in one or two ventures together, and some of them turned out to be very successful indeed. Did he ever mention my name?"

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"I cannot call it to mind," the girl said. "And yet it is not a common name."

"It is not in the least common," Sartoris smiled. "Perhaps your father did not speak of me because we were not quite friends towards the last. At one time I was to be your guardian if anything happened to your father. But we need not go into that, because it is not material to the case at all." The girl nodded brightly, and her eyes expressed admiration of the beauty of the surroundings.

"I believe my guardian was Sir Charles Darryll," she said.

"So I understand," Sartoris proceeded in the same grave way. "It was a most extraordinary selection for a man with a keen business head like your father."

"But you are greatly mistaken," the girl exclaimed. "My father was a perfect child in business matters. Even I was capable of advising him for his good. I should say that there never lived a man who was so easily befooled as my father."

"Is that so?" Sartoris blurted out. "I'm—I mean, of course, yes, as to mere money, but he was clever enough in some ways. Still, the fact remains that he made Sir Charles Darryll your guardian. Did you ever trouble him at all?"

"I never so much as saw him, at least in a business sense."

"Ah," Sartoris cried. There was a deep ring in his voice. "Is that really a fact? You don't know then that certain papers and documents belonging to your father passed to Sir Charles? Your father told you nothing of this?"

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"Not a word, except in a joking way. He spoke of securities and mortgages and the like that were to be my fortune when he died. He told me to ask Sir Charles about them."

"Did you take the trouble to do so?"

The girl thought a moment before she replied.

"Once," she said. "Once I did say something to Sir Charles. He told me that every paper in his possession had been deposited with his lawyers."

Once more Sartoris shaded his eyes with his hand. Field could see his fingers shaking. In a hard voice Sartoris asked if the girl meant the family solicitor.

"No, I don't," she said without the slightest hesitation. "As a matter of fact the family solicitor would have nothing to do with Sir Charles—he found him too expensive. It was some little man in one of the Inns, Gray's Inn or Clement's Inn, who kept his creditors at bay. But more than that I am afraid I cannot tell you."

Sartoris muttered something that might have been the strangling of an oath. Field began to understand. Papers, and probably valuable papers, belonging to Sir Charles were necessary; and the gang of thieves was at a loss what to do without them.

"I dare say I can find out," Sartoris said. "If I do, I fancy you will benefit considerably. More than that I dare not venture for the present, my dear young lady, because so frequently these things

turn out very differently. If you could think of the name of that solicitor—"

"Perhaps I might," the girl said. "I have a good memory, especially for trifles. If I do recollect the name I will write you here. Do you know you remind me of a man I knew in India. He was much younger than you, of course, and different in many ways. And yet every time I look at you and hear your voice I think of him."

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"As a matter of fact I never was in India at all," Sartoris said hastily. There was a nasty ring in his voice that caused the girl to look up, whereon Sartoris laughed, seeing that he had made a mistake. "Excuse me, but this neuralgia of mine is very troublesome to-night. And I am afraid that I am detaining you."

The girl muttered something soothing and sympathetic; at the same time she rose and crossed to the bell. But Sartoris merely reached out a hand and asked her to help him into his chair. He sank back into the wheeled contrivance at length with a sigh that might have been pain.

"I'll go as far as the door with you," he said. "No, I can move myself along. And I hope that you will come here again; I'll let you know when it is quite convenient. Don't forget that I may be the indirect means of bringing you a fortune. I am a very old gentleman, my dear; won't you give me a kiss? Are you very much offended?"

The girl laughed and blushed as she bent down and touched Sartoris's cheek with her lips. A moment later they were gone, and Field had emerged from his hiding-place. He had discovered all that he required, for the present, and he decided not to take any further risks. The confused pieces of the puzzle were beginning to fit together in his mind, but they were by no means complete yet. Without further adventure the inspector crept back to the pantry and found himself at length in the road. He looked at the upstairs window whence the flickering signals had come, but it was all dark and still now, though it was not as yet late.

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"So far, so good," Field muttered to himself. "It strikes me that that young lady is likely to be of service to me. I'll find out who she is and whence she comes. And now to go off to the Comedy and see if I can get in touch with the little actress who must play her part in more dramas than one. I wonder if I had better see her at the theatre or follow her to her rooms. I'll be guided by circumstances."

It was not more than half-past ten when Field reached the theatre. It was a popular house for the moment, where the management was running a kind of triple bill, consisting of one-act musical comedies, each of which contained the particular star artist. Two of the shows were already over, and the curtain was about to rise on the third, when Field reached the stage door. The inquiry for Miss Adela Vane was met by a surly request to know what was wanted. If the inquirer thought that he was going into the theatre he was jolly well mistaken.

"So you just be off, or I'll call the police," the crusty doorkeeper said. "One way or another, I'm pestered out of my life by you chaps. Oh, you can leave a message or a bouquet or something of that kind, but it's long odds it's shoved into the dusthole."

Field smiled as he produced his card and handed it over. The effect of the little square of shining pasteboard was marked and instantaneous. The man behind the bar was at once cringing and ready to do anything.

"I'm sure I beg your pardon, sir," he said, "but we are pestered out of our lives from morning till night. I dare say I can get you a few words with Miss Vane, who does not come on the stage till the third piece. And from the bottom of my heart, I hope that there is nothing wrong, for a nicer young lady than Miss Vane—"

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"There is nothing wrong at all," Field hastened to say. "On the whole I've changed my mind. Don't say a word to Miss Vane about me, it may alarm her. Give me a programme; I'll just slip into the house and see Miss Vane from the stalls. Thank you."

Field made his way round to the front of the house, and presenting his card at the box office, desired to have a seat for half an hour or so.

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CHAPTER XX

The immaculately dressed young man in the office turned Field's card over doubtfully. He had every desire to oblige, he said, but really the house was packed to its utmost capacity. Also the well-dressed young man hoped that there would be nothing to disturb the harmony of the proceedings.

"You may make your mind quite easy on that score," said Field with a reassuring smile. "There will be no disturbance as far as I am concerned. I want to identify somebody whom I believe is in the house, and when that is done my work is finished. Never mind about a seat—let me stand by the side of the stalls so that I can pass for an official."

There was no difficulty whatever about this, and therefore Field stepped into the house as the curtain was going up on the last of the brilliant trifles of the evening. The house was packed to its

utmost capacity with an audience that seemed decidedly to appreciate the bill of fare that had been prepared for their delectation.

Field glanced round the house with his usual blank way that nevertheless took in everything. Most of the people in the stalls were known by sight to him. In an upper box on the prompt side he saw the dark face and eager eyes of the Rajah of Ahabad. He seemed to be looking for somebody, for his glasses were constantly in use. There was a restless air, too, about the Rajah, that showed that he was not altogether at his ease. [Pg 154]

"We live and learn," Field told himself. "I wonder what yonder wily oriental would think if he knew all that I have discovered lately. I suppose one of his favourite ballet girls is in the piece. Pretty piece, too, and pretty music."

Field laid himself out for enjoyment for the next quarter of an hour. The heroine of the piece in the form of Miss Adela Vane was late in appearing. The thing was dragging, too, or so it seemed to Field. All at once there were voices at the back of the stage as if somebody was quarrelling. Suddenly the bright tuneful chorus broke off altogether and a female voice screamed. A little puff of smoke came from the stage.

In the twinkling of an eye the whole house rose and shuddered. There was a sharp crack-crackle, followed by smoke, and forked tongues of flame licked the imitation forest, and with a swish all the chorus fled from the stage. Far away up in the gallery somebody was roaring "Fire!" A rush to the doors was already taking place.

From the stalls rose a tall man with a military air, who commanded everybody to wait. There was no danger, he cried, if the audience only kept their heads. On the stage a manager, with a white face and a perspiring forehead, announced the fact that the appliances for dealing with the fire were of the finest possible description, and that there was no danger at all.

But it was all too late. The panic had already gripped the audience, and a yelling, frightened crowd pressed to the exits. The smoke was getting thicker and blacker; the flames were making the place unpleasantly warm. Field could feel the heat on his face. He had been close to the stalls exit, and might have slipped away at once, but he had held his ground. It was he who stood with his back to the door now. [Pg 155]

"I'll knock down the first man who tries to pass me," he cried. "There is plenty of time. For God's sake, control yourselves. Come quietly. Don't you know that the whole theatre can be emptied in three minutes if people will only go quietly? Now come along and don't press." The stern, hard tones were not without their effect. Field looked so calm and collected and confident himself, that the feeling spread quickly all over the stalls. The fireproof curtain had not been dropped for the simple reason that it would not work, as is often the case with appliances of the kind. The stage was burning furiously.

But in the pit and dress circles and in the higher parts of the house other cool and collected men had risen to the occasion. Women were crying and sobbing, and more than one had fainted, but the mad panic was over, and something like order had been restored. The stalls were moving quietly along now, and it was marvellous to see how quickly the place was being deserted. In the vestibule a long queue of police had gathered and stood to prevent people huddling together. In less time than it takes to tell, everybody was outside. Like magic an engine had appeared, and men in helmets were jumping nimbly over the stalls laying their hose down. As Field turned to go a little cry from the stage attracted his attention.

A girl stood there, dressed as a Watteau shepherdess. She seemed absolutely dazed and frightened, a pretty and pathetic little figure in her great golden wig.

"Go back," Field yelled. "You'll have that blazing scenery on top of you. Why don't you go back to the stage door?" [Pg 156]

The actress turned at last and shook her head. Tears were rolling down her face.

"I can't," she said. "The fire is too great. I was in my dressing-room, and I did not know. Oh, why doesn't somebody save me?"

It was quite clear that the little girl was too dazed and frightened to do anything. Without any further loss of time Field jumped into the orchestra and scrambled onto the stage. The hot flames drove him back for the moment; he could see already that the wig of the pretty little shepherdess was being scorched by the hot fiery breath. He lifted the girl in his arms and made a bold leap over the orchestra into the stalls. Then he carried her out into the street and called for a cab. The air of the night was not without effect on the frightened actress.

"Where shall I tell the man to drive?" Field asked.

"I shall remember presently," the girl said. "I am altogether dazed and stupid for the moment. I can see nothing but fire and smoke. Let me think. Oh, yes, it is coming back to me. Yes, Mrs. Marsh, 124, Copeland Avenue, Regent's Park. Oh, it is very good and kind of you. Will you let me tender my thanks when I am better?"

"I have done nothing," Field said modestly. A sudden idea occurred to him, accustomed as he was to think matters out quickly and in all kinds of startling surroundings. "If I may, I will call upon you to-morrow morning. Good-night."

The cab was whirled away, and Field went thoughtfully down the Strand. It seemed to him that he had seen the pretty little actress before, but then such queer sensations are frequent in times of danger and excitement, Field reflected. At the same time he could not quite rid himself of the idea that he had seen the girl before. He pondered over the matter until another idea filled his mind.

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"By Jove," he exclaimed, "I had quite forgotten the Colonel's message. I was to go to Edward Street near the Borough and wait to see what I should see. I'll just go and hang about there for half an hour or so on the off chance, though I am as tired as a dog already. It seems to me that I can't do better than take a cab."

A cab accordingly whirled Inspector Field to the upper end of Edward Street, which is by no means a bad type of street for the Borough. The houses are of a respectable class for the most part, the class of houses that let lodgings to medical students and the like. It is not the sort of thoroughfare that is generally given over to adventures, and Field loitered about there for a long time before his search was rewarded.

He was chatting to a policeman on the beat, seeing that he could not loaf there without arousing the suspicions of the intelligent officer on duty, without disclosing his identity, when a couple passed him. The man wore a long fawn overcoat and a silk hat; he was a well-dressed man, as Field could see by his smartly cut trousers and patent leather boots. He was not alone, for he had a lady with him, a lady with a handsome wrap. There was a genuine West End air about these people that did not tally at all with Edward Street, as Field did not fail to notice. People of that stamp generally had a cab when there was any outing to be done at that time of night.

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"Pull those people up and ask them some question," Field whispered to the officer. "I want to get a good look at their faces."

The matter was managed quite easily, though the man in the fawn coat was short and inclined to be curt in his replies. But it sufficed for Field, who expressed no astonishment as he recognized the features of the man called "Reggie," and the woman called "Cora," whom he had seen the night before at No. 100, Audley Place. In other words, he was once more hot upon the scent of Countess de la Moray and General Gastang.

"Very good, indeed, Watson," he said. "That's a bit of luck I hardly expected. I'll just follow these people and make certain. Good night."

Field had not far to go, seeing that the man in the fawn coat produced a latchkey and let himself into a house a little farther down the road. The house was an ordinary looking one enough, with plain green venetian blinds and muslin curtains below. In the drawing-room window there was a card to the effect that lodgings were to be let there. It was pretty late still, but a light in the basement testified to the fact that the housekeeper, or landlady, or whoever she was, had not yet gone to bed.

"It's late, but I'll try it," Field said to himself. "So here goes."

The inspector walked up the steps and rang the bell. After a little time a tall slatternly woman came to the door and looked sleepily out. She seemed by no means pleased to be disturbed, and the way she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand suggested the fact that she had been taking some of a pleasing and not altogether unintoxicating fluid with her supper.

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"And what may you want at this time of night?" she asked suspiciously.

"Lodgings," Field said promptly. "I've just come to London, and I find the hotels so expensive. I'm prepared to pay an advance—a matter of five and twenty shillings a week or a little more, as it's only for so short a time. You see I am at the hospital."

"Well, if you are at the hospital you'd better stay there," the woman said with a laugh. "We don't let lodgings at this time of night, and besides, I settled with a party to-day. I'm not going to stand gossiping here all night. Be off with you."

The door closed, but not before Field had got a glimpse of the inside. The house was most beautifully furnished, as he could see. There was an atmosphere of hothouse flowers and fruit, and the like; a suggestion of exquisite cigars. A man in evening dress, with a diamond flashing in his shirt, crossed the hall; somebody was laughing in a well-bred voice. All of this Field did not omit to note as the door closed on him.

"That card about lodgings is a blind," he said. "That place must be watched. I'll get to bed, for I'm dead tired. In the morning I'll go and see my actress friend. Probably she can tell me all about Miss Adela Vane."

It was a little after eleven the next day before Field found time to visit the little actress. He had stupidly forgotten to ask her name, but he seemed to be expected. He waited for some time in a small prettily furnished room till the lady of the last night's adventure came down. She arrived presently, bright and pretty and smiling, her hand outstretched—words of gratitude on her lips.

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"But I shall never be able to thank you properly," she said. "The public came very near last night to losing their dear, dear Adela Vane."

"You are Adela Vane?" Field gasped. "Really you are Adela Vane?"

CHAPTER XXI

To go back for a space to Berrington. Heedless of his promise, he had burst headlong into the dining-room whence the cry came. He had forgotten altogether about Field. The fact half crossed his mind that nobody knew of the presence of the inspector in the house, so that anyway the latter's personal safety was not jeopardized.

It had been a foolish thing to do, as Berrington realised almost as soon as his mind cleared. He had been somewhat badly mauled in the preliminaries, and now it seemed to him that he was a prisoner in the hands of these people. The only consolation that was left to him was the fact that Field would come to his rescue in good time.

But Berrington was by no means done for yet. To begin with, there was not the slightest trace of fear in his heart. He had been in too many tight places before to have any emotion of that kind. He fell back against the wall, panting for breath; he looked around him again for some avenue of escape, but he could see none.

It was a curious scene, altogether, the elegantly furnished room, the litter of glasses and china and crystal in one corner, the mysterious outlined figure on the table. The glare of electric lights shone on the faces of the men there, on the impudent features of the woman who had posed as the Countess de la Moray, and on the pale, supplicating face of Mary Sartoris. For a little time nobody said anything.

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It was Mary Sartoris who was the first to speak. She crossed over to her brother and held out her hand with a gesture of passionate supplication.

"It is all a mistake," she cried. "Colonel Berrington is under a misapprehension. He imagines that something wrong is taking place here; he has acted on the spur of the moment. He did not come to the house to see anybody but me."

Sartoris grinned in evil fashion. Just for the moment he looked half convinced.

"He comes in strange fashion," he said. "All the same, I have not the least doubt of the value of Colonel Berrington's friendship so far as you are concerned. But that is not the point. Did you admit your friend Colonel Berrington to the house?"

For the fraction of a second a bold lie trembled on Mary's lips. But she could not utter it. She looked down in confusion, and her face trembled. Sartoris grinned in the same wicked fashion. A black rage was rising in his heart.

"Good girl," he sneered. "Always tell the truth. It is the proper thing to do, and it will bring its own reward in the end. Only it is attended with personal inconvenience at times, such as the present, for instance. How did Colonel Berrington get here?"

"I will save your sister the trouble of replying," Berrington cried. "I came here, acting on certain information that had come to my knowledge. I came here to discover if I could learn some facts bearing on the disappearance of Sir Charles Darryll's body. And I am not disposed to think that my efforts are altogether in vain."

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It was a bold speech and not without its effect. The woman called Cora turned a shade paler, and the clean-shaven man by her side winced. The only one who seemed disposed to a mild course of policy was Bentwood.

"For heaven's sake don't let us have any violence," he said hoarsely. "There has been too much of that already. I mean there is no necessity for anything of the kind. If Colonel Berrington knows anything of any of us——"

"I know everything," Berrington replied. It seemed to him that a bold course of action was the best to be taken under the circumstances. "For instance, I have a pretty accurate knowledge of the checkered past of Dr. Bentwood and the malignant scoundrel who calls himself Carl Sartoris. Of Miss Mary Sartoris I will say nothing. There are others here, too, whose past is not altogether wrapped in mystery. There are General Gastang and Countess de la Moray, for instance. And once I am outside these walls——"

Sartoris pushed his chair close to the speaker. He was seething with passionate rage, his face was livid with anger. For the moment he could do nothing; he only thirsted for the blood of the bold Berrington.

"You are not outside these walls," he said. "You are not likely to be outside these walls for some time to come. You have described us in language that you have spared no trouble to render abusive. You know too much. And we have our own way here of dealing with enemies of ours who know too much."

There was no mistaking the dreadful threat that underlay the hoarse speech. There was underground murder in the eyes of Sartoris. Berrington smiled scornfully.

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"I know exactly what you mean," he said; "indeed, I know more than you give me credit for. And I will make my suspicions certainties."

Berrington advanced swiftly to the table and laid a hand on the sheet that covered the still, silent form there. Another instant, and the whole mystery would have been exposed. But Sartoris propelled his chair forward and grabbed Berrington by the arm.

"You cowards," he yelled. "If I were not cursed by these crippled bones of mine, I would have plucked that fellow's heart from his body. Don't stand there like a lot of mummies. Pull him back, I say, pull him back."

The harsh, ringing command seemed to restore the other listeners to a sense of what they owed to themselves. With a cry, the man called Reggie was on Berrington, though Mary Sartoris had fallen and clasped him around the knees. With an oath, Bentwood darted forward and flung himself upon Berrington's shoulders. The struggle was a hot one, for the Colonel fought well, but the odds were too many for him, and he was borne at length heavily to the ground. His head came in contact with the floor, and he lay there just a minute dazed and giddy.

He had failed, too, which was the most humiliating part of the business. He had, at any cost, resolved to make assurance doubly sure. He could see the grinning triumph on the face of Sartoris, as he scrambled to his feet; he could see the tears in Mary's eyes. For the personal danger to himself he cared nothing.

"Let's make an end of it," Sartoris cried. "He's too dangerous to live. Let us make an end of him. Dead men tell no tales." [Pg 165]

"No, no," Mary cried. "You shall not do it. No, no."

"Then go and fetch the police," Sartoris said with a little laugh. "Fetch them in, I say. Let them come here and investigate, and after that you can stand in the dock and give evidence against your own brother. My child, you are free to depart as soon as you like. Go now!"

Mary Sartoris stood there trembling and hesitating. Sartoris wheeled his chair rapidly and dexterously across to her, and then raised his fist in a threatening manner. For a moment it seemed as if he meant to strike the girl.

"Go now!" He repeated his command harshly. "Go at once! Go out of my house and never come back again, you white-faced mewling cat. Pah, you dare not do anything. You are not to stay in the room. Go!"

The girl seemed dazed and unable to exercise her own will. She crept with faltering steps to the door. As she was going out, she turned an eye of affection on Berrington.

"If you will only promise me that there will be no violence," she said, "I—"

"I promise that," Bentwood said in a cringing voice. He was the only man there who seemed to be restless and uneasy and anxious. "There is going to be no violence so long as I am here. Why should there be any violence at all?"

The man asked the question with an eye on Berrington. For some reason or other he seemed very desirous of pleasing the soldier, and yet not offending his comrades. Sartoris laughed. [Pg 166]

"Cautious man," he said. "Always be on the safe side. Hang the girl, is she going to stay here all night? Go, I tell you; take your white face from me. Go."

The door closed behind Mary Sartoris, and something like a sob came from the hall. With a sudden fury and new strength Berrington darted to the table again. Once more he might have been successful, but the keen eye of Sartoris was upon him; the cripple seemed to read his thoughts. Like a flash the invalid chair caught Berrington on the shin, and sent him sprawling across the floor; the chair sped on and there was a sudden click and the room was in darkness. Berrington had a quick mental picture of where different objects were—and he made a dash for the switch. Some great force seemed to grip him by the hands, he was powerless to move; he heard what seemed to him to be the swing and jolt of machinery. Somebody was laughing much as if a funny play was being performed before delighted eyes, with Berrington for the third man of the company, and then the light came up again.

Angry and baffled and disappointed as Berrington was, all these feelings gave way to amazement as he looked around the room. Every sign of a body had disappeared, the room was empty save for Sartoris, who sat smoking a cigarette, with a sardonic smile on his face. All the others had gone, and the body was gone from the table; on the latter was a dark crimson cloth surmounted by a mass of flowers arranged tastefully around an electric stand. Sartoris laughed in an easy, mocking way. [Pg 167]

"Miracles whilst you wait," he said. "I just press a button and there you are. You say that you saw a lot of people here and some object on the table. You would swear to that?"

"Being in full possession of my faculties, I would," Berrington said grimly.

"And where are they? There was no lady, there were no people, only my humble, sweet self always glad to see my distinguished friend Colonel Berrington."

Berrington made no reply for a moment. It seemed hopeless to try to cope with the little fiend

who appeared to have all the powers of hell behind him. He looked down at the floor as if to find evidence of magic there, but the pattern of the turkey carpet was intact, the big brass-headed nails were in the corners and along the fireplace.

"There are more things in Heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy," Sartoris quoted. "As a rule your soldier is a dull man and not gifted with much imagination. And so you have taken this matter up on the principle that Satan finds some mischief still for idle hands to do. You see that I am in a mood to quote to-night. But on the whole you are not what the world calls a bad fellow. On the contrary, I *am*. And that being the case, and as I am not supposed to be in the least scrupulous in my methods, it stands to reason that I am likely to get the better of you. Now you are a man of honour, and if you give your word it is as good as your bond. Give me your word that not one suggestion of what has taken place here to-night shall be spoken, and you are free to go."

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Berrington laughed as he looked around him.

"Who is going to stop me?" he asked. "You seem to be sure of your ground. If you were not a cripple I would give you the most perfect specimen of a thrashing that you ever had in your life. My word will be passed to worthier stuff than you."

"So you are going to take advantage of my weakness and walk out of the house?" Sartoris asked.

"That is part of the programme," Berrington said. "I feel perfectly sure that a bold front would dismay your friends. I wish you good night."

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CHAPTER XXII

Sartoris sat in his chair without expressing any opinion or emotion of any kind. There was just a faint suggestion of a smile on his face as if he were getting a little more pleasure than usual out of his cigarette. He glanced quite casually in the direction of the doorway, and he moved his chair just a little. Then his left hand stole quietly to his side.

"The battle is not always to the strong," he said in quite a gentle tone of voice. "But since you will not give me your word, I must do without it. If you want to go, there is no reason why I should detain you any longer. Good night, sir, and pleasant dreams to you."

Though the words were uttered in quite a simple fashion, there was a ring about them that Berrington did not altogether like. He wanted to flatter himself that he had conquered this murderous ruffian by sheer force of will, as he had done more than once with certain native tribes that he had been sent out against.

But he could not think that he had any kind of right to the feeling. These people had really got the best of him, for they had spirited away that mysterious parcel, and what was more to the point, he had betrayed the fact that he had a pretty good idea of what that parcel was. Why, then, was there this sudden change of front on the part of Carl Sartoris? The thought was uppermost in Berrington's mind as he laid a hand on the door.

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Then he reeled back as if struck by some stupendous unseen force. A great pain gripped him from head to foot, his brain seemed to be on fire. In vain he strove to release his hand on the door knob; it seemed welded to the metal. From head to foot the shooting agony went on. With his teeth ripping his lower lip till the blood came, Berrington tried to fight down the yell of pain that filled his throat, but the effort was beyond human power. A long piteous wail of agony and entreaty came from him. It was only when the third or fourth cry was torn from him and he felt the oppression of a hideous death, that the thing suddenly ceased and Sartoris's gentle, mocking laughter took the place of the agony.

"You are not feeling very well," Sartoris called out. "If you are not altogether in a state of physical collapse, will you kindly walk this way. A little brandy will about fit the case."

Berrington was past protest and past flight, for the moment. He seemed to be sick to the soul. There came back to him the vivid recollection of the time when he had lain out in the jungle all night, with a bullet through his lungs, waiting wearily for death in the morning. He flung himself exhaustedly into a chair and gasped for breath. Sartoris watched him as some cold-blooded scientist might have watched the flaying of a live animal.

"Your heart is not nearly so bad as you think," he said. "When the pressure goes from your lungs you will be much better. That is a little dodge of mine which is built upon a pretty full knowledge of electricity. Up to now I have not had an opportunity of giving it a good trial. Are you feeling any better?"

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Berrington nodded. The colour was coming back to his cheeks now, the painful feeling at his chest was abating. The brandy was going to the right place.

"You malignant little fiend," he gasped. "I should be doing the world a service if I took you by the throat and squeezed the life out of you."

"Well, the remedy is in your hands, though I doubt whether or not a judge and jury would take

the same sanguine view of the case. But you are free to try if you like. I am only a mere miserable bag of bones, and you are a strong man. Get to work."

The cackling challenge passed unheeded. Actually there was something about the strange little man to be afraid of. He took up the thread of conversation again.

"You will find that every exit is guarded in the same way," he said. "I have only to set the whole machinery in motion and you are powerless. You are in my hands. If you had touched me when I asked you just now, you would have been dead at my feet. But strange as it may seem, I have a heart hidden in this crooked little body of mine somewhere. I was not always bad, as you know. There was a time when I was another man."

"Never," Berrington said dispassionately. "The seeds of evil were always there."

"Well, let that pass, if you like. A bad man and a bad woman and a dreadful accident have reduced me to what you see. What took place here to-night is beside the mark. The fact remains that you know too much. You stand between us and a scheme that I have been plotting for years. Whether that scheme is connected with Sir Charles Darryll matters nothing. The great point, as I said before, is that you know too much. What are you going to do?"

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"Wait my chance and publish my knowledge to the world," Berrington cried.

"And lose Mary for ever? Oh, I know that you are still in love with her, I know that you will never be happy till she is your wife. But you seem to lose sight of the fact that she is strongly attached to me. And if harm comes to me through you, Mary will never become Mrs. Berrington. She will love you and leave you as they do in the stories."

"You cannot detain me here for any length of time," Berrington said coldly.

"I can keep you here till I have finished my campaign," Sartoris replied. "I could murder you, and nobody be any the wiser."

Berrington thought of Field, and smiled. Hitherto he had not tried diplomacy. His contempt and hatred for this man, his knowledge of his own strength and courage, had sufficed for the present. Now it seemed time to resort to strategy.

"You are quite correct, so far," he said. "I know much, I know a great deal more than you imagine. But in taking the risks I took to-night I did not do so blindly. I had my own reasons for attending to the work privately. But I recognized my danger and the man I had to deal with. So, indeed, I would proceed to make my retreat safe. Did you ever hear of sealed orders?"

"Naturally I have. But what have they to do with the present case?"

"Everything. When an admiral detaches a part of his fleet in war time, he sends the detached part away with sealed orders which are to be opened under certain circumstances. If those said circumstances do not arise, then the sealed orders are destroyed. As I do not desire my second in command to know too much, I gave him sealed orders. If I do not return by a certain time, those orders are to be opened. I should say that they are being opened about now. You understand me?"

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Sartoris nodded; it was quite clear that he understood perfectly well. But his dry little face did not change in the slightest.

"That was clever," he said; "but not quite clever enough. I should have gone a little further if I had been in your position. What you say merely induces me to get rid of you altogether. But let us go into my room and discuss the matter quietly. Kindly turn my chair around, no, not that way. Grip the handle at the back and push me——"

Berrington heard no more. As his hands came in contact with the brass rail at the back of the chair there came a tremendous blow at the base of the brain, a cold feeling of sudden death, and the crisis was past. When Berrington came to himself again he was lying on a bed in a small room; there was a lamp on a table by his side. He had no feeling whatever that he had suffered from violence of any kind, his head was clear and bright, his limbs felt as elastic and virile as ever. He was like a man who had suddenly awakened from a long sleep; he was just as fresh and vigorous. The bed on which he was lying completed the illusion.

"What new devil's work is this?" Berrington muttered. "Oh, I recollect."

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The room was small but comfortably furnished. There was a fire ready laid in the grate; on the ceiling was a three-branch electrolier, but the switch by the door had been removed for some reason or other.

On the table by the bed was a very liberal supper, flanked by a decanter of whisky and a syphon of soda water, also a box of cigarettes and another of cigars. A silver match-box invited the prisoner to smoke. He took a cigarette.

Clearly he was a prisoner. The window was shuttered with iron, and a small round ventilator; high up, inside the door, was another sheet of iron. There was perhaps a little consolation in the fact that no personal violence was intended. For a long time Berrington reviewed the situation. At any rate he could see no way out of the mess for the present. He smoked his cigarette and ate his supper, and that being done, a feeling of fatigue stole over him. Looking at his watch, he saw that it was past one o'clock in the morning, a very late hour for him.

"I'll go to bed," Berrington told himself. "Perhaps I shall be able to see a way out in the morning. On the whole my diplomacy does not seem to have been a success. It would have been much better if I had not hinted that I had taken somebody else into my confidence."

Despite his danger Berrington slept soundly. Bright sunshine was pouring into the room through the little porthole in the iron shutter as he came to himself. By his side was a cold breakfast, with a spirit lamp for the purpose of making coffee. Berrington had hardly finished and applied a match to a cigarette before he was startled by the scream of a whistle. Looking around to see whence the sound came, his eyes fell upon a speaking tube. His heart gave a great leap as it occurred to the prisoner that perhaps Mary Sartoris was calling him. He crossed over and pulled out the whistle at his end and answered promptly.

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"Glad to hear that you have had a good night's rest," came the dry voice of Sartoris. "The bed is comfortable, the sheets well aired, and I can vouch for the quality of the cigars. By the way, as I have seen nothing of your confederate I am confirmed in my previous judgment that you were trying to bluff me. Is not that so?"

Berrington said nothing, silence giving consent. On the whole it occurred to him it would be far better to let Sartoris conclude that he was alone in the business.

"Very good," the dry voice went on; "you are like the curly-headed boy in the song who never—or hardly ever—told a lie. Now there is one little thing that I am going to ask you to do. And if you refuse I shall be under the painful necessity of causing you a great deal of physical suffering. On the table by the side of your bed you will find writing paper, pen and ink. You will be so good as to write a letter to Miss Beatrice Darryll or to Mrs. Richford—whatever you prefer to style her—asking her to call upon you at the address which is stamped on the head of the paper. You are to tell Miss Darryll that she is not to say anything to anybody about the visit—that she is to come at ten o'clock to-night or later. Tell her also that she is to bring the little bunch of keys that she will find in her father's dressing-case. You may take it from me that no harm whatever is intended to the young lady. When the letter is finished you will be so good as to push it under the door of your room."

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"It is an excellent programme for you," Berrington said drily. "There is only one flaw in the little arrangement that I can see—I decline to do anything of the kind. You may do whatever you like and treat me in any way you please, but I shall decline to write that letter. And you may whistle up the tube all day, so far as I am concerned."

An oath came up the tube, then the voice of Sartoris, as if talking to somebody else. The whistle was clapped on, but almost immediately it was removed and another voice whispered the name of Berrington. His heart gave a great leap. Mary was speaking.

"For heaven's sake, write that letter," came the agonized whisper. "I pledge you my word——"

The voice stopped and the whistle was clapped into the tube again.

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CHAPTER XXIII

The request was a strange one, Berrington thought.

Not that he failed to trust Mary Sartoris. In spite of everything, he had faith in her. Whatever she was doing in that queer household, no shadow of shame or disgrace could possibly lie on her.

And yet what could she want that letter for? Again, what was the need to drag Beatrice Darryll into this black business? The more Berrington thought it over, the more puzzled he became. Only one thing was tolerably clear—Sir Charles Darryll had valuable interests somewhere, interests of which he had been in utter ignorance, and which these ruffians had determined to obtain and apply to their own ends.

Still, Berrington hesitated. He did not know what would be for the best. If he declined to write that letter it might be the worse for him and everybody else in the long run; if he did write the letter it might possibly prove harmful to Beatrice. Certainly Carl Sartoris had that end in view. Then there was another thing to take into consideration. Had Inspector Field got safely away?

Berrington could not be absolutely certain, for the reason that there had been no attempt to rescue him which was Field's obvious duty when he escaped. Yet a great many hours had passed and there had been no attempt of the kind.

Very thoughtfully Berrington took paper and pen and ink from the drawer in the table. He was not surprised to see that the paper bore the address "100, Audley Place." So Beatrice was to be lured there for some reason, or other, and Berrington was to be used for the purpose. He threw the pen down and determined that he would do nothing in the matter. He had barely come to this conclusion when the whistle in the tube sounded very faintly. It might have been no more than the wind in the pipe, and yet on the other hand it might have been meant for a cautious message. Berrington crossed over and asked a question in a low voice. Immediately a reply came in the faintest possible whisper.

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"It is I who speak," the voice said. "Mary, you know. By accident I have a chance of a few words with you again. My brother thinks that I am in ignorance of everything. He told me that you had left the house and that everybody had gone. At the same time he declined to have the servants back yet, and that aroused my suspicions. You can hear me?"

"My dearest girl, I can hear you perfectly well," Berrington replied. "Where is your brother now? Can you speak freely to me for a time?"

"For a minute or two perhaps, certainly not more. Carl has gone into the conservatory for something; he may be back almost at once. He told me that you had gone. I did not believe it for a minute, so I watched and listened. Then I found out that you were a prisoner here; I found out all about the letter."

"The letter to Beatrice Darryll, you mean?"

"Yes, yes. Don't ask me why they desire to get her here, because I can't tell you,—I don't know. But there is something about Burmah and ruby mines that I fail to understand. It has something to do with Sir Charles Darryll and Miss Violet Decié's father."

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"Shall we ever get to the bottom of this business!" Berrington exclaimed. "But why should you particularly want me to write that letter?"

"Because I shall be chosen as the messenger," the girl said eagerly. "There are no servants here; the rest of my brother's friends are busy elsewhere. I gather that the letter is urgent; that being the case, I shall be chosen to take it. You see, I am supposed to know nothing whatever about it. I shall be able to see Miss Darryll myself."

Berrington expressed his appreciation of the suggestion. Perhaps Mary might find herself in a position to do more than that.

"Very well," he said. "Under the circumstances I am to write that letter with the understanding that you are going to convey it to its destination and warn Miss Darryll. But you must do more than that, Mary. It is impossible that I can remain a prisoner here like this. The thing is a daring outrage in the middle of London; it sounds more like a page from a romance than anything else. At all risks, even to the brother by whom you are standing so nobly, you must do this thing for me. After you have seen Miss Darryll you are to go down to Scotland Yard and ask for an interview with Inspector Field. Tell him where I am to be found and——"

"Oh, I cannot, Philip, dearest," came the trembling whisper. "My own brother——"

"Who has been the curse of your life and mine," Berrington said sternly. "What do you suppose you gain by standing by him in this fashion? Sooner or later he must come within grip of the law, and so all your sufferings will be futile. If there was anything to gain by this self-sacrifice I would say nothing. But to spoil your life for a scoundrel like that——"

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"Don't say it, Phil," Mary's voice pleaded. "Please don't say it. If you love me as you once seemed to do, have a little patience."

All the anger melted out of Berrington's heart. He had intended to be hard and stern, but that gentle, pleading voice softened him at once. Knowing Mary as he did, he could imagine what her life had been these last three years. Her sense of duty was a mistaken one, perhaps, but it was nobly carried out, all the same. Sooner or later the effort must be lost, and it occurred to Berrington that it would be cruel to hurry the end. Besides, there would be a greater satisfaction to him to feel that he had beaten Sartoris at his own game.

"I love you now as I loved you in the happy years gone by," he said. "Indeed, I love you more, for I know how you have suffered, dearest. Mind you, I am not afraid. I do not regard myself as being in any great danger here—that is not the point. So I will write the letter and you shall deliver it when you please. What is that?"

There was a sudden commotion at the far end of the speaking tube, and something like the sound of wheels. Berrington bent his head eagerly to listen.

"Is there anybody there?" he asked.

"My brother is coming back," Mary said in a voice so faint that Berrington could hardly catch the words. "I must fly. If he knows that I have been here he will have his suspicions. I will speak to you again as soon as possible."

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The whistle was clapped to, and the conversation ended. There was nothing for it now but patience. Berrington took the pen and began to write the letter. He wondered if he could possibly warn Beatrice between the lines. There was yet a chance that Mary might not be the messenger.

Berrington racked his brains, but all to no purpose. He must leave the matter to chance, after all. The speaking tube was going again, for the whistle trilled shrilly. Sartoris was at the other end again; he seemed to be on very good terms with himself.

"What about that letter?" he asked. "Have you changed your mind yet? Solitary confinement worked sufficiently on your nerves yet? Not that there's any hurry."

"What shall I gain if I write the letter?" Berrington asked.

"Gain! Why, nothing. The cards are all in my hands, and I play them as I please. 'Yours not to reason why, yours not to make reply,' as Tennyson says. For the present you are a prisoner, and for the present you stay where you are. But one thing for your comfort. The sooner that letter is written and dispatched, the sooner you will be free. We are not taking all these risks for nothing, and our reward is close at hand now, I may tell you. If you don't write that letter I shall have to forge it, and that takes time. Also a longer detention of your handsome person. If you consent to write that letter you will be free in eight and forty hours. Don't address the envelope."

Berrington checked a desire to fling the suggestion back in the speaker's teeth. It angered him to feel that he was in the power of this little cripple, and that events in which he should have taken a hand were proceeding without him. But it was no time for feeling of that kind.

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"I admit the defeat of the moment," he said. "I will write that letter at once. But look to yourself when my time comes."

Sartoris laughed scornfully, as he could afford to do. Berrington could hear him humming as he clapped in the whistle, and then silence fell again. The letter was finished and sealed at length, and pushed under the door as Sartoris had directed. A little later and there came the sound of a footstep outside and a gentle scratching on the door panel.

"Is that you, Mary?" Berrington asked, instantly guessing who it was. "Have you come for the letter?"

"Yes, I have," was the whispered reply. "My brother could not manage to get up the stairs. He has one of his very bad attacks to-day. He has not the least idea that I know anything. He said he dropped an unaddressed letter on this landing last night, and he asked me to fetch it. I dare not stay a minute."

"Don't go quite yet," Berrington pleaded. "I have had a brilliant idea. I can't stop to tell you what it is just now. The switch of the electric light has been removed from here. Can you tell me where I can find it?"

"You want more light?" Mary asked. "Well, it is a little dreary in there with only a lamp. The switch was taken off some time ago when the walls were being done, and the electricians forgot to replace it. It is somewhere in the room, for I recollect seeing it. But unless you understand that kind of work——"

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"Oh, soldiers understand something of everything," said Berrington cheerfully. "I shall be able to manage, no doubt. I won't detain you any longer."

Mary slipped away, and Berrington commenced to make a careful search of the room. He found what he wanted presently, in a little blue cup on the overmantel, and in a few minutes he had fixed the switch to the wall. As he pressed the little brass stud down, the room was flooded with a brilliant light.

"There's some comfort in being able to see, at any rate," Berrington reflected. "It's ten chances to one that my little scheme does not come off, yet the tenth chance may work in my favour. I'll wait till it gets dark—no use trying it before."

Berrington dozed off in his chair, and soon fell into a profound sleep. When he came to himself again, a clock somewhere was striking the hour of eleven. There was no stream of light through the little round ventilator in the shutter, so that Berrington did not need to be told that the hour was eleven o'clock at night.

"By Jove, what a time I've slept," the soldier muttered. "What's that?"

Loud voices downstairs, voices of men quarrelling. Berrington pulled the whistle out of the tube and listened. Someone had removed the whistle from the other end, or else it had been left out by accident, for the sound came quite clear and distinct.

It was the voice of Sartoris that was speaking, a voice like a snarling dog.

"I tell you you are wrong," Sartoris said. "You tried to fool me, and when we make use of you and get the better of you, then you whine like a cur that is whipped. Don't imagine that you have your poor misguided wife to deal with."

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"My wife has nothing to do with the case," the other man said, "so leave her out."

Berrington's heart was beating a little faster as he glued his ear to the tube. He did not want to miss a single word of the conversation.

"This grows interesting," he said softly. "A quarrel between Sartoris and Stephen Richford. Evidently I am going to learn something."

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CHAPTER XXIV

Every word of the conversation was quite plain and distinct. Richford seemed to be very vexed about something, but on the other hand Sartoris appeared to be on the best of terms with

himself.

"You tried to get the better of us," he was saying. "You thought that clever people like ourselves were going to be mere puppets in the play, that we were going to pull your chestnuts for you. You with the brains of a rabbit, and the intelligence of a tom cat! That low cunning of yours is all very well in the City, but it is of no use with me. Where are those diamonds?"

"Those diamonds are so safe that we can't touch them," Richford sneered.

"Very well, my friend. Believe me, we shall know how to act when the time comes. But you are wasting time here. You should be in Edward Street long ago. Edward Street in the Borough; you know the place I mean. The others are there, Reggie and Cora and the rest, to say nothing of the object of our solicitous desires. You follow me?"

"Oh, yes, I follow everything, confound you," Richford growled. "You are trying to frighten me with your cry of danger. As if I was fool enough to believe that story."

"You can just please yourself whether you believe it or not," Sartoris replied. "But the danger is real enough. I have had the salt two days now in succession. It is true that it came by post and was not addressed to me here, but it is proof positive of the fact that our yellow friends are on the right track at last. They may even be outside now. That is why I want you to go as far as Edward Street without delay."

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Richford seemed to be convinced at last, for he made no reply.

"And you need not worry about your wife for the present," Sartoris went on. "So long as she *is* your wife you come in for your share of the plunder when the division takes place. Nor need you let her know that you married her for her fortune, and not for her pretty face. People will be surprised to discover what a rich man Sir Charles really was."

Berrington started with surprise. A great flood of light had been let in on the scene in the last few words of this overheard conversation. So there was a large fortune somewhere, and this was at the bottom of this dark conspiracy. The conversation trailed off presently, and Berrington heard no more. But his heart was beating now with fierce exultation, for he had heard enough. Without knowing it, Sir Charles Darryll had been a rich man. But those miscreants knew it, and that was the reason why they were working in this strange way. A door closed somewhere and then there was silence. It was quite evident that Richford had left the house.

A minute or two later and Berrington got his flash signal at work. He used it over and over again for an hour or so in the hope that the house was being watched. A great sigh of satisfaction broke from him presently when he knew the signal was being answered. Once more there was an irritating delay and then the quick tapping of the reply. Field was not far off, and Field had grasped the scheme. Also he had to send for somebody to translate the flashing signs. Berrington understood it now as well as if he had been outside with the police.

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He sent his messages through quickly now, and received his replies as regularly. Nor did he forget to impart the information he had discovered relative to the house in Edward Street, Borough. On the whole it had not been a bad night's work.

A restless desire to be up and doing something gripped Berrington. He wandered impatiently about the room, listening at the tube from time to time, in the hope of getting something fresh. Down below he could hear the sharp purring of the electric bell and the shuffle of Sartoris's chair over the floor of the hall. Then there was a quick cry which stopped with startling suddenness, as if a hand had gripped the throat of somebody who called out with fear.

For a little time after that, silence. Then voices began to boom downstairs, voices in strange accents that seemed to be demanding something. Evidently foreigners of some kind, Berrington thought, as he strained his ears to catch something definite. Sartoris seemed to be pleading for somebody, and the others were stern and determined. It was some time before Berrington began to understand what nationality the newcomers were. A liquid voice was upraised.

"Burmah," Berrington cried. "I thought I knew the tongue. Burmese beyond a doubt. I wish those fellows would not speak quite so quickly. I wish that I had learned a little more of the language when I had the opportunity. Ah, what was that?"

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A familiar phrase had struck home to the old campaigner. One of the newcomers was saying something about rubies. There were ruby mines in Burmah, some of which had never been explored by white men. Sir Charles Darryll had been out there in his younger days and so had his friend, the Honourable Edward Decié. Suppose that rubies had something to do with the papers that Sartoris declared Sir Charles possessed. Berrington was feeling now that his weary hours of imprisonment had by no means been wasted. He heard Sartoris's sullen negative, a sound of a blow, and a moan of pain, then silence again.

Perhaps those strangers downstairs were applying torture. Berrington had heard blood-curdling stories of what the Burmese could do in that way. Bad as he was, Sartoris had never lacked pluck and courage, and he was not the man to cry out unless the pain was past endurance. The guttural language returned; it was quite evident that Sartoris was being forced to do something against his will.

"You shall have it," he said at last. "I'll ask my secretary to bring the papers down."

There was a shuffling of Sartoris's chair across the floor, and then a puff of wind came up the tube. Very quickly Berrington replaced the whistle. It flashed across him that Sartoris was going to call him to assist to get rid of those yellow friends downstairs. But how was that going to be done so long as the door was locked?

"Are you there?" Sartoris asked in French, and in a whisper, so low that Berrington could hardly hear. "Speak to me, Colonel, and use the same language that I am using."

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"All right," Berrington replied. "Anything wrong downstairs? What can I do to help you?"

"Come down as quickly as possible. Take your boots off, and creep into my study. I am in the hands of two Burmese, members of a society to which I belonged at one time. They have come to have my life or certain information that I decline to give them. You know enough of the East to be able to appreciate my danger."

The story was more or less of a lie, as Berrington was perfectly well aware, but there was a large amount of truth in it, nevertheless. Berrington smiled to himself.

"There is one little hitch in the programme," he said. "You seem to forget that I am a prisoner here, behind a door that is protected by steel."

"I had forgotten that for the moment," Sartoris proceeded rapidly. "But it is quite possible to open the door from the inside, if you know the secret. Turn the handle four times to the right quickly and firmly, and then three times to the left, and the door will open. I dare not say any more, as these fellows are beginning to look at me suspiciously. One minute more, and I have finished. There is an old Dutch bureau at the top of the stairs by your door. In the second drawer on the right is a loaded revolver. You may want to use it——"

The voice suddenly ceased, and a cry of pain floated up again. All the old fighting spirit raged in Berrington's veins now. He was going to be free, he would have a weapon that he well knew how to use in his hands, and he had obtained information of the most valuable kind. With his hand on the knob of the door he followed directions. Four times to the right and three to the left! A pull, and the door came open.

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Berrington was free at last. As soon as he realised that fact his professional caution came back to him. He kicked off his boots, and finding the Webley revolver, loaded in all chambers, he crept like a cat down the stairs, and looked into the study.

Sartoris lay back in his chair with his hands bound to his sides. Round his head the two strangers had strung a piece of knotted whipcord which one of them was drawing tighter and tighter with the aid of a penknife twisted in the bandage. The face of the victim was ghastly white, his eyes rolled, and the great beads poured down his cheeks. Berrington had heard of that kind of torture before. His blood was boiling now, not that he had any cause for sympathy with the little man in the chair.

"My God, I can't stand this much longer," Sartoris moaned. "Will that fellow never come! Or has he failed to understand my instructions? My brain is blazing. Help, help."

Berrington strode into the room, resolutely but softly. The little yellow man who was administering the torture seemed to have his whole heart in his work; he graduated the torture to a nicety. He seemed to understand exactly how much the victim could stand without losing life and reason altogether. He was like a doctor with an interesting patient.

"I think you will tell me where to find what we desire?" he said smoothly.

"And then we can depart and trouble the gentleman no more," said the other man, who was looking on as coolly as if at some landscape. "Why put us to all this trouble?"

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"I'll tell you," Sartoris moaned. "If you will look in the——God be praised!"

The last words came with a yell, for the startled eyes had caught sight of Berrington standing grimly in the background. The latter's left hand shot out and the Burmese who held the penknife in the cord staggered across the room from the force of a blow on the temple, which, had it taken full effect, would have felled him like an ox.

Before he could recover from the full impact of the blow, Berrington was on the other man. Then the two closed on him as he backed to the wall and raised his revolver.

"You see that I am too many for you," he said. "Put down those knives."

For two long cutting knives were gleaming in the light of the electrics. Nothing daunted, the pair made a rush at Berrington, who fired right and left. He had no intention that the shots should be fatal, but they both took effect, one in the shoulder and the other in the arm. When the smoke cleared away Berrington and Sartoris were alone. A cold stream of air pouring into the room testified to the fact that the front door had not been closed by the miscreants in their escape. Berrington cut the cord around the victim's head and bathed his forehead with water. A little brandy seemed to effect something in the way of a cure.

"My God, that was awful, awful," Sartoris moaned. "A second more and I should have died. Would you mind shutting the front door? The cold air makes me feel like death. That's better. I dare say you wonder what those fellows were doing here?"

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There was just a touch of slyness in the question. Berrington smiled to himself. He wondered what Sartoris would say if he only knew how much the listener had overheard.

"I suppose your sins are finding you out," he said. "They generally do. Personally, I have no curiosity on the subject at all. And I have not the slightest doubt that your punishment, though pretty severe, was at the same time well deserved. And now, sir, as fate has given me the whip hand of you, have you any reason to urge why I should stay in this house any longer? I take it that you are not quite in a position to place your electric battery at work from this room as you did from the other. If you like to——"

Berrington paused, as there was a loud knocking at the door. Sartoris's pale face grew still paler as he listened. Then he forced a smile to his pallid lips.

"Don't take any heed," he said eagerly. "Let them go away again under the impression that nobody is at the house. Let them knock all night if they like."

But Berrington was already half-way to the door.

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CHAPTER XXV

With the letter to Beatrice safe in her pocket, Mary made her way to the *Royal Palace Hotel*. She had her own idea as to what she was going to do, and that certainly was not to invite Beatrice to go to Wandsworth. For the girl had a difficult and dangerous task before her. Rightly or wrongly, it seemed to her that her place was by the side of the brother who had treated her so badly. Many a good woman before had sacrificed herself to a scoundrel, and many a good woman will do so again. Mary had always clung to the idea that Sartoris might be brought back to the fold again. She knew pretty well how far he had fallen, but she did not quite understand the deep depravity of the man's nature. After all, he was an object to be pitied; after all, he had been the victim of a woman's cruelty, or so Mary thought. But Mary did not know everything; had she done so she would have been forced to leave her brother to his own devices.

She came at length to the *Royal Palace Hotel*, and asked for Beatrice. The latter was in her room, she was told, and Mary went up. But Beatrice was not there, her place for the time being occupied by Adeline, the maid.

"My mistress is out," the maid explained; "but if you will leave any message I can deliver it. She will not be very long, in any case."

Mary hesitated. She had many things to do and no time to waste. It was not altogether imperative that she should see Beatrice just at the moment. She turned the matter over in her mind before she replied to Adeline's suggestion.

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"I rather wanted to see your mistress," she said. "Perhaps I may make it convenient to return in about half an hour or so. Meanwhile, will you please give her this letter. Will you be very careful to say that Mrs. Richford is to do nothing till she has seen me? I mean that she is not to take any steps in the matter of the letter till I come back. Will you be especially careful about that?"

Adeline promised, in a vague kind of way. She did not express the usual curiosity of her class; her mind seemed to be elsewhere. She showed Mary out with an alacrity that would have aroused her suspicions had she had less to occupy her mind. But Adeline had affairs of her own to think of. There was a very striking-looking valet on the same floor who had shown himself not insensible to the girl's attractions. Adeline laid the note on the table and promptly forgot all about it.

In the full assurance that no harm was possible for the present, Mary went her way. It was getting late in the evening now, and the hotel was full of people; a strange excitement seemed to be in the air; outside, the newsboys were particularly busy, and there seemed to be a more than usually heavy run on their wares.

Surely they were shouting a familiar name, Mary thought. She came out of her brown study and listened. It was something to do with Stephen Richford. Surely there could not be two men of the same name. No; it must be the same.

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"Startling disclosures in the City. Collapse of a great firm. Richford & Co. go down. Warrant out for the arrest of the senior partner. Flight of Stephen Richford."

Mary listened in amazement. Her brother knew a great deal about this man; he had always been spoken of as a wealthy individual. And here was Beatrice Darryll's husband a criminal and a fugitive from justice. Nobody appeared to be talking about anything else; the name was on the streets. Mary could hear it everywhere. A bent man, with a clerical hat and glasses and an Inverness cape, hurried by the girl as she came out of the hotel. Even this elderly gentleman seemed interested.

He pushed his way into the hotel and feebly ascended the stairs as if he had business there. In so large a place every respectably dressed man could pass in and out without incurring suspicion. No hall porter would stop any visitor and ask his business, so that the elderly clergyman passed

unchallenged. As he came to the door of Beatrice's room he hesitated for a moment, and then passed in and closed the door behind him.

"Nobody here!" he muttered. "Maid gone off on her own business, I suppose. Well, I can sit down here and wait till Beatrice comes back. What's this? A letter addressed by some unknown correspondent to Mrs. Richford. By Jove! Sartoris's address on the flap. Now, what does this little game mean? And who wrote the letter? My dear Sartoris, if I only had you here for the next five minutes!"

The man's face suddenly convulsed with rage, his fists were clenched passionately. He paced up and down the room with the letter in his hand. [Pg 196]

"This may tell me something," he said; "this may be a clue. I'll open it."

As frequently happens with thick envelopes, the gum was defective, and the back of a penknife served to open the cover without in any way betraying the fact that the cover had been tampered with. A puzzled frown crossed the face of the thief.

"Berrington!" he muttered; "Berrington! Oh, I know. That beast, eh? Now considering that he is more or less of a prisoner in the house of my dear friend Sartoris, why does he write like this to Beatrice? Damn Sartoris; there is no getting to the bottom of him, with his wily brain. On the whole Beatrice shall be allowed to go. It's a horrible position for a girl like her; but at the present moment I have no choice—perhaps I'll join the party later on. Hang those newsboys, too—why can't they stop their silly clatter?"

The intruder replaced the letter, and a moment later Beatrice came in. She started at the sight of the stranger, who made some apology for the intrusion. The man looked old and respectable and harmless, so that the girl smiled at him. But she did not smile when the shovel hat was removed, together with the wig and the glasses.

"Stephen!" Beatrice gasped. "What is the meaning of this?"

"Well, I can conclude that my disguise is a pretty good one," Richford grinned, "seeing that you did not recognize me at all. And as to what this means, I should say that your own common sense would tell you. Did you hear anything?" [Pg 197]

"I heard the boys with the papers," Beatrice said; "but I did not connect ... do you mean to say that you are, you are——"

Beatrice could not say the word. But there was no reason for her to ask the question.

"Why be so delicate about it in the presence of a mere husband?" Richford sneered. "Do you suppose I came here in disguise just to give you a pleasant surprise? The bubble has been pricked, and all the rest of it. I went for too much, and I failed, as many a better man has failed before me. I have Carl Sartoris to thank for this; I should have pulled through but for him. This is his revenge because I would not do as he desired. Whatever you do, beware of that man! Don't go near him under any circumstances."

"I am not likely to go near him," Beatrice said coldly; "but tell me, why did you come here? It is not possible that I can help you in any way!"

"Oh, yes it is," Richford said, with a certain good humour that caused Beatrice to turn suspicious at once. "You can do a great deal for me if you only will. I am going to leave you a desolate and disconsolate widow. A grass widow, if you like; but you will have your freedom. I am going to leave my country for my country's good; I shall never come back again. But the crash has come at a time when I least expected it, which is a habit that crashes have. I had barely time to procure this disguise before the wolves were after me. They are hot on my track now, and I have no time to spare. What I come for is money."

"Money! Surely you made a sorry mistake then!"

"Oh, no; I'm not asking for cash, seeing that you have practically none of your own. As you refuse to consider yourself my wife, in future you must also decline to take anything from me. Therefore those diamonds are not your property. If you will hand them over to me, we will shake hands and part for ever." [Pg 198]

Beatrice drew a long deep breath of something like relief. It was good to know that this man was going to rid her of his hateful presence for ever, but this was too big a price to pay for her freedom.

"Let us quite understand one another," she said. "Your business is ruined; there is nothing left. What about your creditors, the people who trusted you?"

"Burn and blister my creditors," Richford burst out furiously. "What do they matter? Of course the fools who trusted me with their money will cry out. But they only trusted it with me, because they thought that I was slaving and scheming to pay them big dividends. It will not be the welfare of my creditors that keeps me awake at night."

"Always cold and callous and indifferent to the feelings of others," Beatrice said. "Not even one single thought for the poor people that you have ruined. What are those diamonds worth?"

"Well, I gave £40,000 for them. I dare say I can get, say £30,000 for them. But we are wasting

time in idle discourse like this."

"Indeed, we are," Beatrice said coldly. "So you think that in the face of what you have just told me, I am going to hand those stones over to you! Nothing of the kind. I shall keep them in trust for your creditors. When the right time comes I shall hand them over to the proper authorities. Nothing will turn me from my decision."

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A snarling oath burst from Richford's lips. He stretched out his hand as if he would have fain taken Beatrice by the throat and strangled her.

"Don't fool with me," he said hoarsely; "don't play with me, or I may forget myself. Give me those diamonds if you have any respect for your skin."

But Beatrice made not the slightest attempt to move. Her face had grown very pale, still she was quite resolute.

"If you think to frighten me by threats, you are merely wasting your time," she said coldly. "The stones are in safe keeping, and there they remain till I can give them to your trustees."

"But I am powerless," Richford said. "How am I to get away? In a few hours all my resources will be exhausted, and I shall fall into the hands of the police. And a nice thing that would be. Your husband a felon, with a long term of imprisonment before him!"

"I see no dissimilarity," Beatrice said, "between the deed and the punishment that fits it. After all I have gone through, a little thing like that would make no difference to me."

"Then you are not going to part with those diamonds?"

Beatrice shook her head. Richford stood before her with one of his hands on her arm and his other about her white slender throat. There was a murderous look on his face, but the eyes that Beatrice turned upon him did not for a moment droop. Then Richford pushed the girl away brutally from him and walked as far as the door.

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"You don't want for pluck," he growled. "I believe that if you had flinched just now I should have killed you. And I was going to save you from a danger. I shall do nothing of the kind. Go your own way, and I will go mine."

Richford glanced at the letter on the table, then he passed out, banging the door behind him. In the *foyer* of the hotel he sat down as if waiting for somebody. In reality he was trying to collect his scattered thoughts. But it was hard work in that chattering, laughing mob, with his own name on the lips of a hundred people there.

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CHAPTER XXVI

The venerable-looking old cleric sat there for the better part of an hour in the patient attitude of one who waits for a friend, but though he puzzled his cunning brain he could see no way out of the difficulty. He had no money, and the police were after him. He recognised only too well that he had to thank Sartoris for this—he had measured his cunning against that of the little cripple, and he had failed. He had played for the greater part of the stake that was at the bottom of the mystery, and he had paid the penalty. Bitterly he regretted his folly now.

Presently, his humming brain began to clear. He saw one or two people there whom he knew; he saw Beatrice come down to the office and go out presently, with a little flat case under her arm. Richford's eyes gleamed, and a glow of inspiration thrilled him.

"As sure as fate she has the diamonds," he told himself. "She is afraid that I should hit upon some scheme for getting them, and she is going to dispose of them in some hiding-place. I'll follow her. Courage, my boy—the game is not up yet."

As a matter of fact, Richford had summed up the situation correctly. In some vague way Beatrice was a little alarmed. She had heard of such things as injunctions and the like. Suppose the law stepped in to protect the rogue, as the law does sometimes. And Beatrice had something else to do, for she had read Berrington's letter, and she had made up her mind to go to Wandsworth without delay. But first of all she would walk as far as the old family jewellers in Bond Street and deposit the stones there. She had every faith in the head of the firm, whom the family had dealt with for so many years.

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No sooner had Beatrice stepped out of the hotel than Mary Sartoris came back. She proceeded quietly up the stairs to find Adeline alone in the room of her mistress. The girl blushed as Mary put the question that rose naturally to her lips.

"I'm very sorry, miss," the girl stammered; "but I forgot all about your message and the letter. I left the letter on the table, and my mistress has just gone out."

"Did she get the letter before she went?" Mary asked quickly.

"Well, yes, I suppose so, miss," was the reply, "seeing that the letter is no longer on the table. I suppose that my mistress has got it. She must have done so, for the envelope is in the grate."

Sure enough, the envelope with the forged handwriting of Berrington upon it lay in the grate. Mary was too mortified to speak for the moment, besides there was no occasion to tell the maid anything.

"I'm sorry you were so careless," she said. "Did your mistress go out alone?"

"I believe so," the contrite Adeline said. "She had a visitor, an old clergyman who——"

But Mary was not listening, she was only thinking of Beatrice's danger. At the same time she had a clear recollection of the old clergyman, for he had pushed past her into the hotel at the moment when she was leaving the building for the first time. [Pg 203]

She went out into the street which was dark by this time. She would take a cab to Wandsworth at once and get there before Beatrice came. But there was no cab in sight, so that Mary had to walk some little way. At the corner of the road she stopped and hesitated for a moment. Close by stood the well-dressed couple who had imposed themselves upon Beatrice under the guise of Countess de la Moray and General Gastang.

Whatever were they doing here, just now, Mary wondered? Just for the moment it flashed across her mind that they were prying upon her movements. But another idea occurred to her, as the two were accosted by the old clergyman that Mary had seen before, and who had been a visitor to Beatrice Richford such a little time previously.

She saw the man raise his hat politely at some question from the clergyman, then she saw his face change to a startled expression, and instantly Mary understood.

"I know who it is," she said half aloud. "It is Stephen Richford in disguise. He has been to see his wife. I should like to know what they are talking about."

The trio were talking very earnestly indeed now. Just for the moment it had looked as if the man called Reggie and the woman called Cora had decided to give Richford the cold shoulder. But he had said a few words, and the scene was suddenly changed. The three walked off together and turned into a small restaurant a little way down the street.

Moved by a feeling which she would have had some trouble to explain, Mary followed. In some vague way she felt that Beatrice was in danger. The restaurant was by no means a fashionable one, and few people were there. Mary noticed, too, that the inside was divided into compartments in the old-fashioned way. She stepped into the box next the one where the three conspirators were seated and ordered a cup of tea. It was a satisfaction to the girl to know that she could hear all that was being said in the other box. She heard the popping of a champagne cork, speedily followed by another. She had only to sit there and listen. She had forgotten all about Beatrice by this time. [Pg 204]

"Wine like that puts life into a man," she heard Richford say.

"And gives him a tongue too," the man called Reggie laughed. "Deadly expensive stuff unless you can see some reasonable return for your outlay in the near future. Come, Richford, we are both eager to know how you propose to put money into our pockets."

"And yet I can put a lot," Richford said. "Oh, you need not be afraid of that crooked little devil at Wandsworth, for he shall not know anything about it. What do you say to £10,000 apiece and nobody any the wiser? Doesn't that make your mouth water?"

"It would if you could show me the way," Reggie said. "But in the most delicate way possible, my dear Richford, let me put it to you—that you are under a cloud at present. And why do you offer to divide the plunder in this very irrational way?"

"Simply because I *am* under a cloud," Richford growled. "I'm powerless and desperate. I don't even know where to turn for a night's lodging. Now look here, the matter may take a day or two, and in the meantime I've got to put up somewhere. And as a warrant of my good faith, I'm not going to ask you for any money. All I require is food and a bed and shelter, and that you may very well give me at Edward Street. Sartoris never goes there." [Pg 205]

"Make it worth while and the thing's done," Reggie said. "Give it a name."

"Well, suppose we call it diamonds?" Richford suggested. "Have you forgotten those magnificent diamonds that I gave my wife, bless her, for a wedding present?"

A little gasp came from the listeners. It was evident to Richford that he had struck the right chord, for he proceeded with more confidence.

"I gave my dear wife stones worth nearly, if not quite, £40,000," he said. "I didn't hand over that little lot altogether out of disinterested affection. A man who takes risks, as I do, is pretty sure to come up against a financial crisis sooner or later, only it has been sooner in this case. Though my wife chose to ignore me, I left the stones in her possession because, being my wife, no creditor could lay hands upon those gems. I went to her to-day and asked for them. Of course I did not anticipate any difficulty whatever; I expected that she would cock that imperially haughty nose of hers in the air and hand them over to me as if I were dirt beneath her feet. To my astonishment she utterly refused to do anything of the kind."

"Unkind," the woman Cora laughed; "and yet so like a modern wife. Had she pawned them?"

"Not she! I was fool enough to say something that was not quite complimentary of my creditors, and she refused to part with the stones anyhow. Said that they would go to pay my debts. I threatened violence and all kinds of things, but it was no good. I said that unless I had money in forty-eight hours I should be in jail, but it was all to no effect. Did you ever hear anything so maddening in all your life?"

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"You have my deepest sympathy," Reggie said; "but you did not bring us here to listen to a story that has no point to it like yours. You have got some scheme in your head for getting hold of the stones. But you can't do it alone."

"If I could should I be such a cursed fool as to bring you two in?" Richford growled. "But I—but I can't appear. All I can do is to show you the way and trust to your honour to give me a third of the plunder when it is turned into cash."

"Hadn't you better get to the point?" Reggie suggested with undisguised eagerness.

"I'm coming to that. After my interview with my wife I sat in the hall trying to pull myself together. Presently I saw her ladyship come down and go to the office. Those diamonds had been deposited in the hotel safe for obvious reasons. My wife came out of the office presently with the case in her hand. Then I recognized what had happened. She was afraid of some move of mine, and she was going to deposit the stones elsewhere. It did not take me long to make up my mind where she was going. She was about to take the plunder to Hilton in Bond Street."

"How long ago?" the woman called Cora asked eagerly. "This is important."

"Well, not more than an hour, anyway," Richford replied. "Why do you ask?"

"Because Hilton closes at five," the woman said. "I know that, because the firm has done several little jobs for me lately. You may be pretty sure that your wife did not deposit those stones at Hilton's to-day; therefore she still has them in her pocket. That being so, what we have to do now is to discover where she has gone. If you like I'll go round to the *Royal Palace Hotel* at once and see if she has returned. I'll ask the clerk in the office, and if he says she has returned, you may safely bet that those stones are back in the hotel safe again. If she has not returned, they are still on her person."

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"It's just as well to make sure," Reggie said reflectively.

The woman flitted away and came back soon with a smile on her face.

"So far, so good," she said. "The lady has not returned to the hotel. Now, Mr. Richford, if you can only put us on the track of the timid little hare, then——"

"Done with the greatest possible ease," Richford replied. "She's gone to Wandsworth. I can't make the thing out at all, and in any case it does not in the least matter. When I was waiting for my wife just now I saw a letter to her from Berrington,—Colonel Berrington. As you know, he is a prisoner in Audley Place, and why he should have written that letter, or how Sartoris persuaded the warrior to write it, I don't know any more than Adam. But that's where she has gone. If you can intercept her before she gets there, or waylay her when she leaves, why there you are. I don't suppose my wife will tell Sartoris that she has all that stuff in her pocket."

"Do you think that she took a cab?" Reggie asked.

"I should say not. Cabs cost money, and Beatrice has not much of that. Wandsworth is not a place you can get to in ten minutes, especially after the business trains have ceased running for the evening; so that if you took a cab——"

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Reggie jumped to his feet excitedly.

"No use wasting time here," he said. "Come along, Cora. I'll just scribble a few lines on one of my cards, so that you can be safe at Edward Street. There you are. And if I don't get those stones before bedtime, why I'm a bigger fool than the police take me for."

Thrilling with excitement, Mary followed the others into the street. She saw the two get into a cab, and she proceeded to take one herself. The cabman looked at her dubiously as he asked where he was to go to.

"No. 100, Audley Place, Wandsworth Common," Mary said. "If you get there ten minutes before the cab in front, I'll give you an extra half-sovereign."

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CHAPTER XXVII

Meanwhile the fates were working in another direction. Field had stumbled, more or less by accident, upon a startling discovery. He had, it will be remembered, called upon the little actress to whom he had rendered so signal a service on the night of the theatre panic, and whom in the heat and confusion of the moment he had failed to recognize, but now he knew that he was face to face with the lady whom he had seen with Sartoris at Audley Place.

Field was not often astonished, but he gave full rein to that emotion now. For he had made more

than one discovery at the same time. In the first place he had found Miss Violet Decié, Sir Charles Darryll's ward, who proved at the same time to be the actress known as Adela Vane. But that was a minor discovery compared to the rest. Here was the girl who at one time had been engaged to Carl Sartoris, and who was supposed to be connected more or less with his misfortunes.

Here was the girl, too, who might be in a position to supply the key to the mystery. Undoubtedly, the backbone of the whole thing was the desire for money. Sir Charles Darryll and his friend Lord Edward Decié had been engaged in some adventurous speculation together in Burmah. They had doubtless deemed that speculation to be worthless, but Carl Sartoris had found that they were mistaken. Therefore, trusting to his changed appearance and his disguise, he had asked his old sweetheart to call upon him. The conversation that Field had overheard in the conservatory was going to be useful.

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The curious questioning look in the girl's eyes recalled Field to himself. He had instantly to make up his mind as to his line of action. Miss Decié, to give her her proper name, gave the inspector a little time to decide what to do.

"How can I ever sufficiently thank you?" she asked. "Really, I could not sleep all night for thinking about the horror of the thing and your brave action. It was splendid!"

"Not at all," Field said modestly. "I am accustomed to danger. You see I am a police officer, a detective inspector from Scotland Yard. It is a little strange that I should have been able to do you a service, seeing that I came to the theatre on purpose to see you."

The girl's eyes opened a little wider, but she said nothing.

"Perhaps I had better be quite candid," Field went on. "I want you to help me if you can."

"Most assuredly. After last night, I will do anything you like. Pray go on."

"Thank you very much," Field replied. "It is very good of you to make my task easier. You see I am closely connected with the inquiry into the sudden death of Sir Charles Darryll and the subsequent startling disappearance of his body. Were not your father and Sir Charles great friends in India long ago? Do you recollect that?"

The girl nodded; her eyes were dilated with curiosity. Field could not find it in his heart to believe that she was a bad girl.

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"They had adventures together," she said. "They were going to make a fortune over some mine or something of that kind. But it never came to anything."

"You are absolutely sure of that?" Field asked.

"Well, so far as I know, the thing came to nothing. Some man was employed to make certain investigations, and he reported badly of the scheme. I only heard all this talk as a child, and I was not particularly interested. You see, I knew very little of Sir Charles, though he was my guardian. There were certain papers that he deposited with a solicitor who used to get him out of messes from time to time, but really I am as ignorant as you are."

"You don't even know the name of the solicitor?" Field asked.

"I do now," the girl said. "I found it among some letters. Do you know that a Mr. Sartoris, who claims to know my father and Sir Charles, also wrote me on the same matter? He asked me to go and see him at Wandsworth. He is a crippled gentleman, and very nice. He has a lovely conservatory-room full of flowers. I was at his house only last night, and he talked to me very much the same way as you are doing."

"I know that," Field said calmly. "I was hiding in the conservatory and listened."

Miss Decié gave a little cry of astonishment.

"Our profession leads us into strange places," Field said. "I heard all that conversation, so there is no occasion to ask you to repeat it. You will recollect saying that Mr. Sartoris reminded you of somebody that you knew years ago in India. Have you made up your mind who the gentleman in question does resemble?"

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The girl's face grew white, and then the red blood flamed into her cheeks ago.

"I have a fancy," she said. "But are not these idle questions?"

"I assure you that they are vital to this strange investigation," Field said earnestly.

"Then I had better confess to you that Mr. Sartoris reminded me of a gentleman to whom I was once engaged in India; I was greatly deceived in the man to whom I was engaged; indeed it was a tragic time altogether. I don't like to speak of it."

"Loth as I am to give you pain, I must proceed," Field said. "Was the gentleman you speak of known as a Mr. Carl Grey, by any chance?"

"Yes, that was the name. I see you know a great deal more than I anticipated. I suppose you have been making investigations. But I cannot possibly see what—"

"What this has to do with the death of Sir Charles Darryll? My dear young lady, this is a very complicated case; at least it looks like one at present, and its ramifications go a long way. I want to know all you can tell me about Carl Grey."

"I can tell you nothing that is good," the girl said. She had risen from the chair and was pacing up and down the room in a state of considerable agitation. "There was a tragedy behind it all. I don't think that I really and truly loved Carl Grey; I fancy that he fascinated me. There was another man that I cared more for. He died trying to save my life."

Field nodded encouragement; a good deal of this he knew already.

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"Let me make it easy for you if I can," he said. "I have found out a great deal from a little conversation, part of which I overheard between Colonel Berrington and Miss Mary Grey, or Miss Mary Sartoris, which you like. There was a mysterious affair, but it resulted in the death or disappearance of the other man and the permanent crippling of Carl Grey. Am I misinformed, or is this practically the case?"

"I cannot see what this has to do with Sir Charles Darryll," Violet Decié said slowly.

"Pardon me, but it has a great deal to do with the case," Field replied. "If you knew all that I do you would not hesitate for a moment. If you care to write it down——"

The girl stopped in her restless walk; her eyes were heavy with tears.

"I'll tell you," she said. "I must not forget that I owe my life to your bravery. As I said before, I was engaged to Carl Grey. But for his sister I don't think that I should ever have consented. But there it was, and I loved another man at the time. And the other man loved me. There was a deal of jealousy between the two, and I was frightened. Carl Grey was always queer and mysterious; he was ever seeking to penetrate the mysteries of the East. Strange men would come to his bungalow late at night, and I heard of weird orgies there. But I did not see anything of this till one day when I was riding on the hills with Mr. Grey. We had a kind of quarrel on the way, and he was very difficult that day. We came presently to a kind of temple in ruins, which we explored. There was a vault underneath, and Mr. Grey pressed me to enter. It all seems like a dream now; but there were natives there and some kind of ceremony progressing. The air of the place seemed to intoxicate me; I seemed to be dragged into the ceremony, Mr. Grey and I together. Somebody dressed me in long white robes. Even to this day I don't know whether it was a dream or a reality. Then there was a disturbance, and the other man came in; I do not recollect anything after but blows and pistol shots; when I came to myself I was in the jungle with my horse by my side. From that day to this I have never seen or heard of Mr. Grey, and I never again beheld the man I loved, and who gave his life to save me."

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Field listened patiently enough to the strange story. He had yet a few questions to ask.

"You think that Mr. Grey had been initiated into the mysteries of those rites?" he asked. "And that his idea was to initiate you into them also?"

"I think so," Violet Decié said with a shudder. "There are such strange and weird things in the East that even the cleverest of our scholars know nothing of them. An old nurse used to tell the most dreadful tales. Perhaps the man who died for me could have explained. I presume that he followed me, expecting mischief of some kind."

"I dare say he did," Field replied. "Did an explanation follow?"

"No. I declined to see Mr. Grey again. I heard that he had met with an accident; they said that he was maimed for life. And people blamed me for being callous and heartless. As if they knew! Even Mr. Grey's sister was angry with me. But nothing could induce me to look upon the face of that man again, and I left Simla soon afterwards."

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"And that is all you have to tell me?" Field asked.

"I don't think there is any more. It is rather strange that this thing should crop up again like this, so soon after I have been to see Mr. Sartoris, who reminded me so strangely of Carl Grey. Only of course, Mr. Sartoris is much older."

"I fancy there is not so much difference between their ages," Field said grimly. "You see, a clever disguise goes a long way. And you say that you never saw Mr. Grey after that supposed accident. A thing like that changes people dreadfully."

The girl looked up with a startled expression in her eyes.

"You don't mean to say," she faltered. "You don't mean to suggest that——"

"That Mr. Grey and Mr. Sartoris are one and the same person," Field said quietly. "My dear young lady, that is actually the fact. Mr. Sartoris knew or thought that you could give him certain information. It was necessary to see you. The name of Sartoris would convey nothing to you, and in that interview the man was right. But you might have recognised him, and so he disguised himself. I saw the disguise assumed; I saw you come into the room amongst the flowers. And long before you had finished what you had to say I began to see the motive for what looked like a purposeless and cruel crime. But you were certainly talking to Carl Grey last night."

The girl shuddered violently and covered her face with her hands. The whole thing had come back to her now; she blushed to the roots of her hair as she realised that she had kissed the man

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that she only thought of with horror and detestation.

"If I had known, no power on earth would have induced me to enter that house," she said. "That man seems to be as cruel and cunning as ever. But why should he have had a hand in the stealing of the body of Sir Charles Darryll?"

"We will come to that presently," Field said drily. "Sartoris wanted certain information from you, the address of a lawyer or something of that kind. You were not quite sure last night whether or not you could find the information. Did you?"

"Yes," Violet Decié said. "I found it in an old memorandum book of mine."

"And you were going to post the address to Mr. Sartoris?"

"I am afraid the mischief is done," the girl said. "It was posted early this morning."

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CHAPTER XXVIII

Hot words rose to Field's lips, but he managed to swallow them just in time. He could have wished that the girl had not been quite so businesslike in her methods.

"I suppose that can't be helped," he muttered. "Though it certainly gives the enemy a better start. I hope you have not destroyed the address of that lawyer?"

"Oh, no," Violet cried. "It is in my old memorandum book. Perhaps you had better take a copy of it for your own use. I have no doubt that my letter has been delivered at Wandsworth by this time, but as Mr. Sartoris is a cripple——"

Field was not quite so sure on that point. Sartoris, it was true, was a cripple, but then Field had not forgotten the black hansom and the expedition by night to the *Royal Palace Hotel*. He felt that Sartoris would not let the grass grow under his feet. From the memorandum book he copied the address—which proved to be a street in Lincoln's Inn Fields.

"Evidently a pretty good firm," Field muttered. "I'll go round there at once and see Mr. George Fleming. But there is one thing, you will be silent as to all I have told you. We are on the verge of very important discoveries, and a word at random might ruin everything."

Violet Decié said that she perfectly well understood what she had to do.

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"Sartoris may try to see you again," Field continued. "If he does, do not answer him. Pretend that you are still ignorant; do nothing to arouse his suspicions. Perhaps it would have been better if I had told you nothing of this, but I fancy that I can trust you."

"You can trust me implicitly," the girl said eagerly. "If it is to harm that man——"

She said no more, and Field perfectly understood what her feelings were. By no means displeased with his morning's work he started off in the direction of Lincoln's Inn Fields. He was pleased to find that the firm of George Fleming & Co. occupied good offices, and that the clerks looked as if they had been there a long time. It was just as well not to have a pettifogging lawyer to deal with. Mr. Fleming was in, but he was engaged for a little time. Perhaps the gentleman would state his business; but on the whole Field preferred to wait.

He interested himself for some little time behind the broad page of the "Daily Telegraph," until at length an inner door marked "private" opened and a tall man with grey hair emerged, with a crooked figure dragging on his arm. Field looked over the paper for a moment, and then ducked down again as he saw Carl Sartoris. Evidently the cripple had lost no time. He was saying something now in a low and rasping voice to the lawyer.

"My dear sir, there shall be no delay at all," the latter replied. "I am bound to confess that that deed has made all the difference. I always told Sir Charles that that property was valuable. But he would never see it, and if he had, where was the capital to work it? But why he never told me that he had made the thing over to you——"

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"Did he ever tell anybody anything that facilitated business?" Sartoris laughed. "I daresay he forgot all about it, poor fellow."

Sartoris shuffled painfully out of the office with the help of the lawyer, and got into a cab. A moment later and Field was in the inner office with Mr. Fleming. He produced his card and laid it on the table by the way of introduction.

"This is the first time I have been honoured by a detective in all my long experience," the lawyer said as he raised his eyebrows. "I hope there is nothing wrong, sir?"

"Not so far as any of your clients are concerned, sir," Field replied. "As a matter of fact, I am the officer who has charge of the investigation into the strange case of Sir Charles Darryll. And I am pretty sure that the lame gentleman who has just gone out could tell you all about it if he chose. I mean Mr. Carl Sartoris."

The lawyer again raised his eyebrows, but said nothing.

"I see you have no disposition to help me," Field proceeded. "But just now Mr. Sartoris made a remark that gives me an opening. He came to you to-day with a deed which, unless I am greatly mistaken, purports to be an assignment of property from Sir Charles to Mr. Sartoris. And that property is probably a ruby mine in Burmah."

"So far you are quite correct," the lawyer said drily. "Pray proceed."

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"I must ask you to help me a little," Field cried. "Let me tell you that Carl Sartoris was in the scheme to obtain possession of the body of Sir Charles Darryll. He was the lame man who was in the black hansom. I have been in that fellow's house, and I have seen the body of Sir Charles, unless I am greatly mistaken."

"Then, why don't you arrest that man?" the lawyer asked.

"Because I want the whole covey at one bag," Field said coolly. "Now, sir, will you let me see the deed that Carl Sartoris brought here to-day? Yesterday he did not know of your existence."

"He has been going to write to me for a long time," Fleming said.

"I am prepared to stake my reputation that Carl Sartoris never heard your name till this morning," Field said coolly. "I can produce a witness to prove it if you like. My witness is Miss Violet Decié, only daughter of Lord Edward Decié of that ilk."

The lawyer's dry, cautious manner seemed to be melting. He took up a sheet of parchment and read it. It was a deed of some kind, in which the names of Charles Darryll and Carl Sartoris figured very frequently. Field asked to be told the gist of it.

"An assignment of mining rights," Fleming explained. "A place in Burmah. It was a dangerous place to get at some time ago, but things have changed recently. At one time certain Burmese followed Sir Charles about and threatened his life unless he promised to let the thing drop. But Sir Charles had assigned all his interest for the sum of five hundred pounds paid to him by Mr. Carl Sartoris. Here is the signature."

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The deed looked regular enough. Field looked closely at the signature of Sir Charles.

"Of course it would be easy to get the body of the deed written by a clerk," he said with a thoughtful air. "If there was anything wrong about the thing, the false note would ring out in the signature. Are you sure that it is genuine?"

"Quite," the lawyer said with conviction. "I'll show you some old letters of poor Sir Charles if you like. The signature is a little peculiar in the respect that it has a long loop to the first l, and a short loop to the second. That appears in every signature. Besides there is that little flourish over the C. The flourish really forms the initials 'C. D.' Can't you see that for yourself? Leave out ever so little of the flourish, and the 'C. D.' disappears."

Field was fain to be satisfied, though he was a little disappointed too. The pretty little theory that he had been building up in his mind had been shattered.

"I suppose I shall have to give way on that point," he said. "Only it strikes me as strange that a man should have allowed this matter to lie for three years without making use of it. Unless, of course, Sir Charles's death made all the difference. Allow me."

Field's eyes began to gleam as they dwelt on the parchment. There was a red seal in the top left-hand corner, a red seal with silver paper let into it and some small figures on the edge.

"What do those figures represent?" he asked. "The figures 4. 4. '93, I mean."

"The date," Fleming explained. "Those stamped skins are forwarded from Somerset House to the various sub-offices, and they are dated on the day they go out. The date-figures are very small, and only the legal eye gives them any value at all."

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Field jumped up in a great state of excitement. He had made an important discovery.

"Then this is a forgery, after all," he cried. "4. 4. '93 means the fourth of April 1893, and the deed is dated three years ago. How are you going to get over that, sir? I take it, there are no mistakes in the date?"

Even the lawyer was forced out of his calm manner for the moment. He looked very closely at the red stamp through his glasses. It was some time before he spoke.

"You are quite right," he said. "And as to there being a mistake in the date, that is absolutely out of the question. You may be quite certain that Somerset House makes no mistakes like that. It is most extraordinary."

"I don't see anything extraordinary about it," Field said coolly. "That rascal, clever as he is, has made a mistake. Not knowing anything of legal matters in these minor points, it has never occurred to him to see whether these parchment stamps are dated or not. He simply bought a skin and got some engrossing clerk to make out the deed. Then he put in the date, and there you are."

"Stop a minute, Mr. Field," Mr. Fleming put in. "There is one little point that you have overlooked. I am quite prepared to take my oath to the fact that the signature is genuine."

Field stared at the speaker. He could find no words for the moment. He could see that Fleming was in deadly earnest. The silence continued for some time.

"Well, I thought that I had got to the bottom of this business, but it seems to me that I am mistaken," Field admitted. "In the face of the evidence of forgery that I have just produced, your statement that the signature is genuine fairly staggers me."

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"The deed purporting to have been executed three years ago has only been executed a few days, or a few months at the outside," Fleming said. "What I think is this—there must have been some reason why the deed was dated back. Perhaps the old one was destroyed and this one copied from the other, and executed say a month or two ago. Would that not meet the case? You see I am taking a legal view of it."

"You are still sure of the signature?" Field asked.

"Absolutely. On that head I do not hesitate for a moment. Whatever else may happen, I am positive that Sir Charles wrote that signature."

Field scratched his head in a puzzled kind of way. It was some time before he began to see his way clear again. Then a happy thought came to him.

"If they are so particular at Somerset House, the fact may help us. When those deed stamps are sold to the public, are the numbers taken, and all that?"

"So I understand. But what do you want to get at? Yes, I think you are right."

"Anyway, I'm on the right track," Field cried. "If what I ask is a fact, then the people at the sub-office will be able to tell me the date that parchment was sold. I see there is a number on the stamp. If I take that to Somerset House——"

Field spent half an hour at Somerset House, and then he took a cab to Wandsworth. He stopped at the Inland Revenue Office there and sent in his card. Giving a brief outline of what he wanted to the clerk, he laid down his slip of paper with the number of the stamp on it and the date, and merely asked to know when that was sold and to whom.

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He watched the clerk vaguely as he turned over his book. It seemed a long time before any definite result was arrived at. Then the clerk looked over his glasses.

"I fancy I've got what you want," he said. "What is the number on your paper?"

"44791," Field said, "and the date."

"Never mind dates, that is quite immaterial, Mr. Field. You have us now. That stamped parchment was sold early this morning, just after the office was open—why, I must have sold it myself. Yes; there is no mistake."

With a grim smile on his face, Field drove back to London. He began to see his way clearer to the end of the mystery now.

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CHAPTER XXIX

The cab with Mary Sartoris inside jolted along behind the other one, and presently Mary was greatly relieved to find that her horse was going the faster of the two. She bitterly blamed herself now for her folly in not waiting to see Beatrice, and still more so for trusting so important a letter in the hands of a mere servant.

But it was idle to repine over the thing now. The mischief had been done and the great thing was to repair it as soon as possible. As Mary's mind emerged from the haze in which it had been enveloped for the last few days, she began to see things more clearly. Now she realised that she had no settled plan of action when she set out to see Beatrice. She would have had to tell her everything or nothing had they met, and she could not have done this without making certain disclosures about her brother. She saw now that it would have been far better to have destroyed the letter and said nothing about it.

But then Mary could not tell a deliberate lie of that kind, and Carl Sartoris would have been pretty sure to have asked the question. He was pleased to regard his sister more or less in the light of a fool, but he did not trust her any the more for that.

Mary lay back in the cab and resigned herself to the inevitable. It was good to feel that she was leaving the others behind now, and her spirits rose accordingly. If she could only get to Wandsworth before the precious pair, she would be all right, provided always that Beatrice had not been in front of her. But as most of the trains were usually late there was more than a chance of success in this direction. The girl was nearing her destination now. She lifted the shutter on the top of the cab and asked if the other cab was at any distance. There was a queer sort of a grin on the cabman's face, as he answered.

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"About five hundred yards, miss," he said. "Something seems to have gone wrong with them. So far as I can see the cab has lost a tire."

The other cab had stopped, and something like an altercation was going on between the fare and the driver.

Mary had not far to go now, and she decided that it would be safer to walk the rest of the distance. There was a little crowd gathering behind her and a policeman's helmet in the centre of it. Truly fortune was playing on her side now.

It was not very far to the house; there it stood dark and silent, with no light showing in the garden in front. Mary felt pretty sure that she was in time. Then the front door of the house opened, there was a sight of the hall in a blaze of light, and in the foreground the figure of a woman standing on the doorstep.

Mary gave a groan and staggered back with her hand to her head.

"What a piece of cruel misfortune," she exclaimed passionately. "Another minute and I should have been in time. Why did I not drive up to the house? My over-caution has spoilt it all. I am sure that was Beatrice Richford."

The door of the house closed and the figure of the woman disappeared inside. Mary had had all her trouble for nothing. Not only was Beatrice more or less of a prisoner there, but those thieves were pressing on behind. What was the best thing to be done now, with Beatrice exposed to the double danger? Mary racked her weary brains in vain. And in a few minutes at the outside the others would be here. It seemed impossible to do anything to save Beatrice from this two-edged peril. Mary started as she caught sight of a figure coming up the front garden. It was a stealthy figure and the man evidently did not want to be seen. As he caught sight of Mary he stopped. It was too dark to distinguish anything but his outline.

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"Beatrice," the man said in a tone of deep relief. "Thank God, I have come in time."

Mary did not know whether to be pleased or alarmed. Evidently this man was some friend of Beatrice who had obtained an inkling of her danger and had come to save her. On the whole it seemed to Mary that she had an ally here.

"I am afraid you are mistaken," she whispered. "I am not Beatrice Richford. But I am doing my best for the young lady all the same. She is——"

"Don't say that she is in the house?" the man said in a muffled tone.

"Alas, that I can say nothing else," Mary replied. "I was just too late. Mrs. Richford had just entered the doorway as I came up. If you will tell me your name——"

"Perhaps I had better," the stranger said after a minute's hesitation. "I am Mark Ventmore; perhaps you have heard of me."

Mary gave a little sigh of relief. She knew all about Mark Ventmore. Here indeed was a man who would be ready to help her. She drew a little nearer to him.

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"And I am Mary Sartoris," she said. "If you have heard of me——"

"Oh, yes, you are the sister of that—I mean Carl Sartoris is your brother. But surely you are altogether innocent of the—the strange things that——"

"I am innocent of everything," said Mary passionately. "I have wasted my life clinging to a man in the faint hope of bringing him back to truth and honour again. I am beginning to see now that I am having my trouble for my pains, Mr. Ventmore. Suffice it for the present to say that Mrs. Richford stands in great peril."

"Oh, I know that," Ventmore said hoarsely. "I got that information from Bentwood, the scoundrel! At the instigation of Inspector Field, who has pretty well posted me on recent doings, I have been following that rascal pretty well all day. We won't say anything about Berrington, who I understand is more or less of a prisoner in your brother's house, because Berrington is the kind of man who can take care of himself. But Beatrice is in peril—Bentwood told me that. The fellow's brains are in a state of muddle so I could not get the truth from him. It was something about a case of diamonds."

"Yes, yes," Mary said. "The diamonds that Mr. Richford gave his wife for a wedding present. Mr. Richford has got himself into severe trouble."

"Richford is a disgraced and ruined man. The police are after him."

"So I gathered. He is now in the disguise of an elderly clergyman, and at present he is——"

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"Hiding in that house at Edward Street," Mark cried. "I saw him with Bentwood. But what has he to do with those diamonds?"

"Everything. I overheard the plot laid," Mary proceeded to explain. "Mr. Richford went to his wife and demanded the diamonds. He wanted to raise money so that he could go away in comfort and luxury. He told his wife exactly how he was situated. She refused to comply with the request on the ground that the stones belonged to Mr. Richford's creditors. Then unhappily, Mrs. Richford withdrew the diamonds from the custody of the hotel officials, being afraid that there would be a bother over them or something of that kind. Richford watched her do it. Then he met two accomplices who recently passed as General Gastang and Countess de la Moray, and the plot was

laid. Mrs. Richford was to come here."

"But in the name of fortune, why was she to come here?" Mark asked.

"Perhaps I had better be a little more candid with you," Mary sighed. "There is a scheme on foot between my brother and some of the gang to gain possession of certain papers that belonged to Sir Charles Darryll. There are keys, too, which Mrs. Richford is known to possess. I don't quite know what the scheme is."

"Anyway I can give a pretty good guess," Mark said. "My father has been very ill and he sent for me. We have not been very good friends, my father and I, because I turned my back on the city for the sake of art. But all that is past now, and we have become reunited. My father seems to know a great deal about Sir Charles's affairs—something about a ruby mine or something of that kind. Anyway, I'm to get my information from Mr. Fleming, who is my father's solicitor. But I am afraid that I am interrupting you."

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"There is not much more to tell," Mary went on. "Colonel Berrington was induced to write a letter to Mrs. Richford asking her to come here and see my brother."

"Berrington must have been mad to think of such a thing!"

"No, he did it at my instigation. I managed to communicate with him and assure him that no harm should come of it. No harm would have come of it if I had only kept my head and done the right thing. But the fact remains that Mrs. Richford is in there; she has those diamonds in her pocket and the thieves are on the track. It seems to me——"

Mary did not finish the sentence, for Mark held out a hand and pulled her behind a bush, just in time, as two other people came up the path. There was no occasion to tell either of the watchers that here were the people of whom they were talking. The man Reggie and the woman Cora were standing on the doorstep whispering together. It was quite a still night and the other two behind the bushes could hear every word that was said.

"So far, so good," the man was saying. "We've got here and we are pretty sure that our bird is securely caged, but what next?"

"Wait our chance," the woman said with a certain fierce indrawing of her breath. "We can appear to have come here by accident, for instructions, anything. So long as Sartoris does not know about those stones we are safe. When we get them——"

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"When we get them, Richford can whistle for his share of the money," the man said coolly. "By this time to-morrow we shall be in possession of more money than we have ever had before. I don't like this present business, it's far too dangerous. Unless we go so far as to murder that fellow Berrington and get him out of the way——"

"Don't," the woman said with a shudder. "I hate that kind of work. Anything clever or cunning, anything requiring audacity, I can do with. But violence!"

She shuddered again, and the man laughed softly as if greatly pleased with some idea of his.

"There is going to be no more violence or anything else," he said. "This game has got far too dangerous. We'll change those stones into money and then we'll quietly vanish and leave our good friend Sartoris to his own devices. What do you say to that?"

"Amen, with all my heart," the girl said. "The sooner the better. But don't forget that we have not yet settled on a plan of action."

"Leave it to chance," the man replied. "We have all the knowledge that is necessary to the success of our scheme, and the girl knows nothing. She will not stay very long, it is getting late already. Suppose we pretend that we have a cab waiting to take us back to town, and suppose that we offer to give her a lift. Then that scent of yours——" The woman called Cora laughed and clapped her hands gleefully. It was an idea after her own heart. She patted her companion affectionately on the shoulder.

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"Come along, then," she said. "Open the door with your latchkey. It's getting cold and I am longing for something to eat. This kind of thing makes me hungry."

The door opened and then closed again softly, and the conspirators had vanished. With a gesture of anger Mark strode towards the house, Mary following.

"What on earth are you going to do?" she said anxiously. "Will you spoil everything by your impatience? If you only realized the dangers that lie hidden yonder!"

Mark paused abruptly and bit his lip. The trouble was not over yet.

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CHAPTER XXX

Meanwhile, absolutely unconscious of the dangers that were rapidly closing around her, Beatrice took her way to Wandsworth. Richford had been ingenious enough to see that Beatrice would go

down by rail, as she had very little money to spare, so that if they desired it, the two conspirators could have got there before her. But there was no occasion for that, seeing that Beatrice had the treasure in her pocket and Sartoris was none the wiser.

Richford would have gone far at that moment to spite Sartoris. He had tried to play the latter false over the scheme that they had in hand together, and Sartoris had found him out. The latter made it a rule never to trust anybody, and he had been suspicious of Richford from the first. He had known exactly how Richford's affairs stood, he had seen that a sudden blow dealt at him now would pull the whole structure down and ruin it for ever. And without the smallest feeling in the matter, Sartoris had done this thing. But for him Richford could have pulled around again, as Sartoris had been aware.

But Sartoris had had enough of his ally and in this way he got rid of him altogether. Richford dared not show his face again; he would have to leave the country and never return. Sartoris chuckled to himself as he thought of this.

He was on extremely good terms with himself when Beatrice called. She had not given the letter from Berrington very much consideration, though she was a little surprised at the address. Doubtless the matter had something to do with her father, the girl thought. The mystery of that strange disappearance was getting on her nerves sadly.

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Rather timidly the girl knocked at the door of the gloomy looking house, which was opened after a pause by a little man in an invalid chair. Beatrice looked at him in surprise. She gained some courage from a quick glance at the hall with its electric lights and fine pictures and the magnificent flowers in pots and vases everywhere. It seemed to Beatrice that only a woman could be responsible for this good taste, and she took heart accordingly. No desperate characters could occupy a house like this, she told herself, and in any case a helpless little man in a chair could not prove a formidable antagonist.

"I hope I have not made any mistake," she said. "If this is 100, Audley Place——"

"This is 100, Audley Place, Mrs. Richford," the little man said. "Will you be so good as to come this way and shut the door? I have been expecting you."

"It was a letter that I received from my friend, Colonel Berrington," Beatrice said. "He asked me to call and see him here. I hope he is not ill."

"I have not noticed any signs of illness," Sartoris said drily. "I have no doubt that the Colonel had very good reasons for asking you to come here, in fact he did so to oblige me. The Colonel is out at present. He is staying with me, being fond of the air of the place. I dare say he will be back before you go."

Beatrice nodded in bewildered fashion. In some vague way it seemed to her that her host was making fun of her, there was just a faint suggestion of mockery in his tones. Was there any plot against her on foot, Beatrice wondered. But nobody could possibly know of the diamonds in her pocket; besides, she had received the letter before she had thought of removing those diamonds from the custody of the hotel people. Again, as to the genuineness of Berrington's letter she did not entertain the shadow of a doubt. Nobody, not even an expert, could succeed in making a successful forgery of the dashing hand-writing of Berrington.

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"If you will come this way," Sartoris said quietly, "we shall be more comfortable. As the evening is by no means warm you will perhaps not object to the temperature of my room. If you are fond of flowers, you may admire it."

A little cry of admiration broke from Beatrice at the sight of the conservatory room. She had forgotten all her fears for the moment. Gradually she let the atmosphere of the place steal over her. She found that she was replying to a lot of searching questions as to her past and the past of her father, Sir Charles. No, she had no papers, nor did she know where to find those keys. She wondered what this man was driving at.

"I knew your father very well at one time," he said. "I saw a great deal of him in India. In fact he and I were in more than one expedition together."

"What year was that?" Beatrice asked quite innocently.

To her surprise Sartoris gave signs of irritation and anger. He turned it off a moment later by an allusion to neuralgia, but Beatrice was not quite satisfied. Why did this man want the key of a certain desk, and why did he require a bundle of papers in a blue envelope therefrom? Beatrice resolved to be on her guard.

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"I will do what I can for you," she said. "If you can come and see me."

"I am afraid that is impossible," said Sartoris, who had lapsed into his bland manner once more. "I am sensitive of people's remarks and all that kind of thing. I dare say you will think that I am morbidly self-conscious, but then I have not always been a cripple. I was as straight as yourself once. Fancy a little crooked figure like me in a hansom cab!"

Beatrice started violently. The words had recalled a painful time to her. She recollected now with vivid force that on the night of Sir Charles's disappearance a little crooked man in a hansom cab had been the directing party in the outrage.

The girl's instinct had led her swiftly to the truth. She felt, as sure as if she had been told, that this man before her was at the bottom of this business. She knew that she stood face to face with the man who had stolen the body of Sir Charles Darryll. For a moment Beatrice fought hard with the feeling that she was going to faint. Her eyes dilated and she looked across at the man opposite. He was lying back in his chair feasting his eyes upon her beauty, so that the subtle change in the girl's face was not lost upon him.

"I seem to have alarmed you about something," he said. "What was it? Surely the spectacle of a crooked little man like me in a hansom cab is not so dreadful as all that. And yet those words must have touched upon a chord somewhere."

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"It—it recalled my father to me," Beatrice stammered. "The police found certain things out. They discovered the night my father disappeared that outside the hotel was a black hansom cab with a man inside who was a cripple."

"You don't mean to say that!" Sartoris cried.

In his turn he had almost betrayed himself. He could have cursed himself aloud now. As it was, he forced an unsteady smile to his lips.

"I mean to say that the police are very clever at that kind of thing," he went on. "But surely you would not possibly identify me or my remark with the monster in question! There are a great many people in this big London of ours who would answer to that description. Now tell me, did the police find anything more out?"

The question was eager, despite the fact that Sartoris imparted a laugh into it. But Beatrice was not to be drawn any further. She felt absolutely certain of the fact that she was talking to the real culprit who was picking her brain so that he could get to the bottom of what the police had discovered, with an eye to the future.

"Really, I don't know," the girl said coldly. "That is all that I overheard. The police I find are very close over these matters, and in any case they do not usually choose a woman as their confidant. You had better ask Colonel Berrington."

It was an unfortunate remark in more senses than one. Beatrice did not quite realize how quick and clever was the man to whom she was talking. If his instinct had told him much his cleverness told him more. Berrington was in the confidence of the police. And Sartoris had imagined that the soldier was working out the problem on his own behalf. He had counted, too, on Berrington's affection for Mary to do as little harm as possible.

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"I'll ask the Colonel," he said between his teeth. "Oh, yes, I will certainly do that. What are you looking at so closely?"

Beatrice had risen to her feet in her eagerness. She pointed to two cabinet photographs.

"Those people," she stammered. "Why, I know them. They call themselves Countess de la Moray and General Gastang. They were staying at the *Royal Palace Hotel* the night of the tragedy. They pretended to know me and all about me. I am quite sure that they are actors in disguise. But seeing that you know them——"

Sartoris turned away his face for a moment, so that Beatrice should not see its evil expression. He cursed himself for his inane folly. But he was quick to rise to the situation.

"A very strange thing," he said. "As a matter of fact, I don't know those people. But some friends of mine in Paris were their victims some little time ago, and they were anxious that the police here should be warned, as the precious pair had fled to England. Perhaps they were proud of this guise, perhaps their vanity impelled them, but they had those photographs taken and my friends got copies and sent them to me. They only arrived to-day or they would not be here. They will go to Scotland Yard in the morning."

Beatrice inclined her head coldly. She knew the whole thing was a quick and ready lie, and she could not for the life of her pretend to believe it. She buttoned her jacket about her and stood up.

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"I will not detain you any longer," she said. "If I can find what you desire I will let you know. I can find my own way to the door."

"Wait till Berrington returns," Sartoris urged. "He will not be long. He is not in the house yet, but he will be sorry he has missed you."

Beatrice stood before the glass putting her hat on straight. She could see over her shoulder in the direction of the door, and there in the gloom with his finger to his lips stood Berrington. There was just a suggestion of surprise in his eyes, surprise and annoyance, but the look which he passed the girl was a command to keep herself well in hand. The mere fact that help was so near gave her a new courage. She smiled as she turned to Sartoris.

"Well, I am afraid that I must be going," she said. "Please tell the Colonel when he comes in that I am sorry to have missed him. He will understand that."

There was the faint click of a key in the front door, and two people came noisily into the room. They were a young and handsome man and an equally young and handsome woman, well dressed, smartly groomed, and well bred. And yet, though they were strangers to Beatrice, they were at the same time curiously familiar. The girl was trying to recall where she had seen them

both before.

"We are rather late," the man said with a wink at Sartoris. "Business detained us. Yes, we are also rather hungry, having had no dinner to speak of. Hullo, I say, look here. Do you mean to say that you are fool enough to keep our photographs in our very last disguise?"

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Something like an oath broke from Sartoris as he glanced at Beatrice. The girl could not control herself for the moment; she could not hide from Sartoris and the others that she knew now that she was in the presence of Countess de la Moray and General Gastang in their proper person.

"Those are not your photographs at all," Sartoris croaked. "As a matter of fact I only got them from Paris to-day. If you will——"

The speaker paused as Beatrice was stepping towards the door. All of them realised that she knew everything. Sartoris made a sign and the man Reggie stood between Beatrice and the door.

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CHAPTER XXXI

Somebody was knocking quietly at the door, and Sartoris had made no effort to move. That was the situation in which we left Sartoris and Berrington before Beatrice came. Nobody could have failed to notice that he was greatly disturbed and agitated. With a feeling that he was going to learn something, Berrington turned as if to leave the room.

"I am going to save you the trouble of going," he said.

Sartoris clasped his hands to his head. He was still throbbing and aching all over from the ill effect of the treatment accorded him by the Burmese visitors. Berrington had come down in the nick of time and saved him from a terrible fate, but Sartoris was not feeling in the least grateful. To a certain extent he was between the devil and the deep sea. Desperately as he was situated now, he could not afford to dismiss Berrington altogether. To do that would be to bring the authorities down upon him in double quick time. True, Berrington, out of his deep affection for Mary, might give him as much rope as possible. And again, Sartoris did not quite know how far Berrington was posted as to the recent course of events. True, Berrington suspected him of knowing something of the disappearance of the body of Sir Charles, but Sartoris did not see that he could prove anything.

But he did not want Berrington to go just yet, and he was still more anxious that the Colonel should not know who was knocking at the door. Unless his calculations were very wide of the mark, it was Beatrice Richford who was seeking admission. Sartoris would have given much to prevent those two meeting.

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He smiled, though he was beside himself, almost, with passion. He seemed to have become very weak and impotent all at once. He would have to simulate an emotion that he did not possess. Once more there came the timid knock at the door.

"Berrington," he said desperately. "Do you believe that there is any good in me?"

The question was asked in almost a pleading voice. But Berrington was not in the least moved. He knew perfectly well what he had to deal with. Again, the knock at the door.

"I should say not a fragment," Berrington said critically. "I should say that you are utterly bad to the core. I have just saved you from a terrible fate which really ought to be a source of the greatest possible regret to me, but you are not in the least grateful. When that knock came for the first time, you looked at me with murder in your eyes. I am in your way now, I am possibly on the verge of an important discovery. If you could kill me with one look and destroy my body with another you would do it without hesitation. And that is the reason, my good friend, why I am going to the door."

"Don't," Sartoris implored. He had become mild and pleading. "You are quite wrong—Berrington; I once heard you say that there was good in everybody."

"Generally," Berrington admitted. "But you are an exception that proves the rule."

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"Indeed I am not. There is good in me. I tell you and I am going to do a kind and disinterested action to-night. I swear that if you interfere you will be the cause of great unhappiness in a certain household in which I am interested. I implore you not to let your idle curiosity bring about this thing. I appeal to you as a gentleman."

In spite of himself Berrington was touched. He had never regarded Sartoris as anything of an actor, and he seemed to be in deadly earnest now. Was it just possible that the man had it in him to do a kindly thing? If so it seemed a pity to thwart him. Berrington looked fairly and squarely into the eyes of the speaker, but they did not waver in the least. The expression of Sartoris's face was one of hopelessness, not free altogether from contempt.

"I can't say any more," he said. "Open the door by all means, and spoil everything. It is in your hands to do so and curse your own vulgar curiosity afterwards. Call me mad if you like, but I had planned to do a kind thing to-night."

"So that you may benefit from it in the end?" Berrington suggested.

"Well, put it that way if you like," Sartoris said with fine indifference. "But it does not matter. You can sit down again. The knocker has gone, evidently."

But the door sounded again. Sartoris turned aside with a sigh. Despite his suspicions, Berrington felt that his conscience was troubling him. He would never forgive himself if he prevented a kind action being done to one who cruelly needed it. He rose and crossed the room.

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"Let it be as you like," he said. "I will promise not to interfere. As soon as you have finished I should like to have a few words with you here. After that I shall feel free to depart."

Sartoris nodded, but the triumph that filled him found no expression on his face. Berrington was no better than a fool, after all; a few fair words had disarmed him. Sartoris would gain all he wanted and when that was done he would take good care that Berrington did not leave the house. The man was by no means at the end of his cunning resources yet. He moved his chair in the direction of the hall.

"You have made a very wise decision," he said. "And I thank you for having some confidence in me. Will you wait for me in the dining-room?"

Berrington intimated that he would go into the dining-room and smoke a cigar. He was free to depart now, but he was going to do nothing of the kind. Sartoris was likely to be engaged for some time, and meanwhile Berrington was able to make investigations. He was desirous of finding out the secret of the dining-room, the way in which things were changed there, and the like. Of course, it had all been done by human agency, and what one man can invent another can find out. There was not likely to be a more favourable opportunity.

Berrington stepped into the dining-room and closed the door behind him. But he closed it with his hand hard on the turned lock so that it should sound as if it had banged to, whereas, directly the handle was released it would fall open a little way. Berrington was not going to leave anything to chance, and he had no hesitation in playing the spy.

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From where he stood he could hear the wheels of Sartoris's chair rattling over the parquet flooring of the hall, he heard the front door open, and the timid voice of a girl speaking. It did not sound like the voice of anybody with evil intent, and just for an instant it occurred to Berrington that perhaps his suspicions had been misplaced.

But only for an instant, until the voice spoke again. He had no difficulty now in recognising the voice as that of Beatrice Richford. Berrington was a little staggered, for he had not expected this. He had totally forgotten the letter, but it came flashing back to his mind now, and Mary's promise that no harm should come of it.

And yet Mary had either overestimated her powers or placed too low a value on the cunning of her brother. At any rate, there could be no doubt of the fact that the letter had been delivered, and that Beatrice was here in reply to it.

"Very good," Berrington said between his teeth. "I will see that no harm comes of this thing. Beatrice has been brought here to be pumped as to her father's papers and the like. Still, thanks to my little adventure to-night I have a pretty good idea what these scoundrels are after. I'll just go as far as the study and see that it is all right."

Berrington slipped off his boots and crept along the hall. So far as he could see all was quiet. There was a double door to the study, so that Berrington could not hear much, but the inner door had not been closed. It was only necessary to swing back the baize door to hear all that was taking place in the study.

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But Berrington decided that he would leave that for the present. It mattered very little what Sartoris said to Beatrice, for the gist of the conversation could easily be gathered from the girl on some future occasion. But opportunities for examining that strange dining-room did not offer themselves at every hour, and Berrington made up his mind to make the best of it. He pulled on his boots again, and set to work.

For some time there was nothing to reward his search. The carpet appeared to be intact, the table a solid structure of mahogany. And yet there must be some means of moving that table up and down, much in the same way as the thing used to be done in the case of a certain French king and the lady of his affections.

But there was absolutely nothing here to show that anything of the kind had been done. Berrington removed the flowers and the table cloth and looked underneath. So far without success. He rapped in a reflective way on the solid legs and they gave back a clear ringing sound. With a smile of satisfaction, Berrington took a pocket knife from his vest.

Then he bent down and slightly scraped one of the solid-looking legs. The edge of the knife turned up and a thin strip of bright gold showed beneath the vanish. The first discovery had been made. The legs of the table were of hollow metal.

There was something to go on with at any rate. Dining tables do not have legs made of hollow metal for nothing. Berrington tried to push the table aside, so that he could tilt it up and see the base of the legs, but the structure refused to budge an inch. Here was discovery number two. The table was bolted solidly into the floor.

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"We are getting on," Berrington whispered to himself. "It seems to me that I need not worry myself any further about the table itself, seeing that, so to speak, it is attached to the freehold. It is the floor that I have to look to."

But the floor appeared to be quite intact. There were no seams along the Turkey carpet. Berrington turned the carpet back as far as it would go, but nothing suspicious presented itself to his searching eye. As he dropped the carpet back his foot touched the curb of the fireplace, and one end slid along. It seemed a curious thing that one end of the old oak curb should work on a pivot, but so it did, and Berrington pushed it as far as it would go. An instant later and he jumped nimbly into the fireplace.

It was just as well he did so, for the whole floor was slowly fading away, just up to the edge of the carpet, leaving the brown boards around intact. By accident more than anything else Berrington had stumbled on the secret. The pressure of a foot on the curb had set some hidden lever in motion; the clever machinery was doing the rest.

Standing in the fireplace Berrington watched for the effect. The floor sank away as if working on a pivot; it came around with the other side up, and on the other side was a carpet quite similar to the first in pattern. There was also another table which came up on a swinging balance so that everything on it would not be disturbed.

"Well, this is a pretty fine Arabian Nights' form of entertainment," Berrington muttered. "I wonder if I can keep the thing half suspended like that whilst I examine the vault beneath. I suppose if I push the lever half back it will remain stationary. That's it!" The lever being pushed half back caused the machinery to lock so that the floor was all on the slant. There was a kind of space below which appeared to be paved and bricked like a well. Into this the full rays of the electric light shone. It was easy to jump down there and examine the place, and Berrington proceeded to do so.

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So far as he could see there was a heap of old clothes huddled together in a corner. In an idle way Berrington turned them over. A collar fell out from the rest and Berrington took it up—a white collar that had been worn for some little time. Berrington started as his eye fell on the name plainly set out in marking ink.

"Great Scott," he cried. "Why it is one of Sir Charles Darryll's!"

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CHAPTER XXXII

Berrington was at a loss to know whether to be pleased or not at his discovery. It might prove to be an important clue, on the other hand it might point to more violence than Berrington had anticipated. It was not an old collar, as Berrington could see by the date of it; apparently it had only been worn once, for there was no laundry mark upon it, though it was dirty, more dirty than a fastidious man like Sir Charles would have used.

There was absolutely nothing further to be seen in the vault, so Berrington climbed thoughtfully out of it again. He readjusted the floor, for he had no wish for his handiwork to remain. He would wait now for Beatrice to emerge and see her safely on her way home. A little later on, perhaps, and he would have a great deal of useful information to impart to Inspector Field.

He opened the door of the dining-room and listened. It seemed to him that the voices in the study had been raised a little. If he could give Beatrice a warning he would do so. Very quietly he pushed back the swinging baize door and looked in. At the same moment Beatrice was adjusting her hat before the mirror. Their eyes met and Berrington was satisfied. He had told Beatrice as plainly as if he had spoken in words, that he was close by and that she was to look to him for protection if necessary. That being so, he crept silently away again.

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It was a wise precaution, for the front door opened and two people came in, giving Berrington hardly time to get in the shelter of the dining-room. He was at no loss to identify the newcomers, for had he not met them in that very room when he had discovered the gang who were more or less instrumental in the disappearance of Sir Charles Darryll?

That the precious pair were after no good, needed no saying. Berrington grimly congratulated himself on the fact that Sartoris had provided him with a weapon which was in his pocket at the very moment. He would lounge in the vicinity of the study, and if anything happened, if Beatrice called out for assistance or anything of that kind, he would be in a position to render efficient service. It was no part of his game to show himself to these people without urgent reasons for so doing.

He waited there while Beatrice was confronting the trio; she had made her discovery, and the others were aware of the fact. Beatrice was conscious that her heart was beating faster. She looked around for some avenue of escape. Then her courage rose again as she remembered that Berrington was close at hand and ready to assist her.

"I will not stay here any longer," the girl said. "It seems to me that I am in the way. Please to step aside and let me pass. Do you hear me?"

The man called Reggie grinned. He did not make the smallest attempt to move from the door. He would have touched Beatrice had she not drawn back.

"I do not desire to detain you," he said. "Only you made a certain remark just now that calls for an explanation. You mean that this lady and myself——" [Pg 251]

"You know exactly what I mean," Beatrice cried. She was getting angry now, and the sneering smile on the face of Sartoris did not tend to soothe her. "Out of your own mouth you have proved what I did not know—that you are dangerous thieves."

"Oh, indeed. Do you not know that such language is actionable?"

"I know that it is true," Beatrice said coldly. "There are your photographs up there. Did you not say so only a moment ago? I am greatly obliged for the information."

The girl stepped across the room and removed the two photographs from their places. Nobody interfered; as a matter of fact, they were all secretly admiring the girl's courage.

"These two faces I know," she said. "That is Countess de la Moray, and that is the man who called himself General Gastang. They were staying at the hotel on the night that my poor dear father's body so strangely disappeared. The Countess was so good as to extend to me her deepest sympathy; she asked me to go and stay with her in Paris."

The woman called Cora laughed. The comedy of it appealed to her and she could not help it. She was thinking of the easy way in which she had deceived Beatrice. Something like an oath came from Sartoris. He had his own very good reasons why Beatrice should be deceived in this matter.

"I assure you that you are quite mistaken," he said.

"Indeed I am nothing of the kind," Beatrice cried. "Now that I know the truth, I can see the likeness plainly enough. I don't say that I should have done so had I not had so strong a hint a little while ago, but you cannot disguise features out of recognition. And I say that those two people are no more than vulgar swindlers." [Pg 252]

Again the woman laughed, but the man's face grew dark.

"You are very bold," the man called Reggie growled. "If you have any friends near——"

It was on the tip of Beatrice's tongue to say that she had, but she wisely restrained herself. At the same time it was good to be reminded that Berrington was close by and that perhaps he was listening to the conversation at the present moment.

"I am stating no more than the truth," Beatrice went on. "The so-called Countess came to me and she pretended sympathy. She made me believe that she was an old friend of my father. Then she went away, leaving General Gastang to talk to me. I will tell you presently what she was going to do. I have been finding out things for myself."

The woman did not laugh this time; there was an angry spot on either cheek.

"You are piquante and interesting," she said. "Pray believe that I am listening to you with the deepest attention. It is good to have one's thoughts read for one in this fashion."

"I was alone with the General," said Beatrice, ignoring the last speaker altogether. "Fortunately for me, the General recognized some acquaintance—probably a police officer—for he disappeared discreetly and left me to myself and my suspicions. My suspicions led me to my bedroom presently, where I had left some extremely valuable diamonds." [Pg 253]

"The same that you have in your pocket at the present moment," the woman Cora exclaimed. "If ——"

A furious oath rang out from the man Reggie. Just for a moment it looked as if he were about to strike the incautious speaker. She reddened and grew confused. Sartoris listened, with an evil grin on his face. He seemed to be amused at something.

"It is good of my friends to come here to-night," he said. "So kind and disinterested. I shall know how to thank them later on. Pray proceed."

"In my bedroom was the Countess," Beatrice cried. She was so staggered to find that her possession of the gems was known to this couple that she could hardly proceed. "The Countess had evidently been overhauling my belongings. But I was just in time."

"Call me a thief at once," the woman burst out furiously. "Why don't you do it?"

"As yet I have no legal proofs to justify me in so doing," Beatrice said. "But I have not the least doubt in my own mind. You were good enough to come back and pretend that your maid was ill, and you were good enough to let me smell that scent, so that you gave me a sleep that rendered me insensible to the strange things that were taking place so near me."

"You seem to know a great deal," the woman Cora sneered.

"Indeed I do," Beatrice went on. "I know that you were in my bedroom planning some villainy with my husband; I know that you took wax impressions of the seals of my father's room; I know the part you both played afterwards. Then you disappeared, leaving no signs behind. But you [Pg 254]

have been so kind as to confess your own identity. You will be well advised to stand aside and let me pass."

Just for a moment it looked as if Beatrice's audacity was going to carry her through. But it was Sartoris who interfered this time. His face had grown black; he had thrown aside all traces of amiability now.

"You are a very clever young lady," he said with a dry sneer. "A most exceedingly and remarkably clever young lady. But you are too proud of your discoveries, you talk too much. You see, these good people are friends of mine."

"I know that," Beatrice retorted. "But one thing I am certain of—had you known what was going to happen, those photographs would never have been left for me to see. You need not have been under the necessity of lying about them, and I should have gone away, never dreaming that I had met the Countess and the General again."

"Do I understand that you drag me into your charge?" Sartoris demanded angrily.

"Certainly I do," Beatrice cried. Her blood was up now; anger had got the better of discretion. She was furious to feel that she had been lured into a den of swindlers, and so all her sagacity and prudence had gone to the winds. "Those people are accomplices of yours; the very lie that you told me proves the fact. And you, the lame man in the hansom cab——"

Beatrice got no further, for a howl of rage from Sartoris prevented more words. The cripple wheeled his chair across the room and barred the door.

"You shall pay for this," he said furiously. "You know too much. That anybody should dare to stand there before me and say what you have said to me——"

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He seemed to be incapable of further speech. The man called Reggie bent over Beatrice and whispered something in her ear. She caught the words mechanically——

"Give me what you have in your pocket," he said, "and I will see you through. Don't hesitate—what are a few paltry diamonds compared with your life? For that is in danger, and far greater danger than you know. Pass those stones over, quick."

But Beatrice was not going to be bullied like that. Above all things—the knowledge stood out before her that Berrington was not far off. She had only to call for assistance, and he would be by her side at once. The girl's eyes dilated, but not with fear as the man imagined.

"I am not so helpless as you imagine," Beatrice said. "And you will never get what you want unless you resort to violence. Now you understand me."

The man smiled. He had an eye for beauty and courage, rogue though he was. But he had to reckon with Sartoris, who seemed to be recovering his self-possession.

"What are you muttering about?" he asked suspiciously. "Ah, what was that? Did you hear it?"

The trio stood listening, quivering with excitement, tense in every limb. With a loud cry Beatrice flung herself at the door and beat upon it madly.

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CHAPTER XXXIII

Field stood in the office of the Inland Revenue at Wandsworth with a feeling that he had got on the right track at last. And yet this discovery, which he had no reason to doubt, opened up the strangest possibilities before him. He was face to face with a theory that staggered him so greatly that he could not speak for a moment. And yet he wondered why the idea had not occurred to him before.

"I suppose that you have not made any mistake?" he suggested.

The clerk was properly indignant. He was not there for the purpose of making mistakes, besides, he had all the particulars entered in his books.

"So that you can see for yourself," he said. "Look here, if you doubt me. The entries tally absolutely with the figures you have on that slip of paper. If there is anything wrong——"

"There is something very wrong indeed," Field admitted, "but that has nothing to do with you. Do you do a large business in that kind of stamped paper?"

"Well, rather, though not so large as we did. You see, those stamped deeds are exclusively used by solicitors; practically, every legal document is a stamped paper. But, nowadays, a good many lawyers get their deeds engrossed on plain paper and send them to me to be forwarded to Somerset House for the stamping."

"I see," Field said, thoughtfully. "In that case, you would have less difficulty in recognizing anybody who purchased a parchment that was already stamped? I wonder if you recognized the man who bought the one we are talking about?"

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"Oh, yes," came the ready reply. "The man's name is Acton. He is a law stationer who does odd jobs for the different firms here. He is quite broken down and shabby now, but I should say that at one time he was a gentleman. You will see his business card hanging in a shop window at the corner of Preston Street—a little news-shop on the right."

"I am greatly obliged to you," Field said. "I see the stamp is a two pound ten one. Was it paid for in cash or in the form of a note?"

"A note—a £5 Bank of England note. I recollect getting Acton to endorse it."

Field smiled to himself. Everything seemed to be going in his favour now. He tendered five sovereigns across the counter and asked the favour of the £5 note in exchange, which was granted. The note had a blue stamp on it to the effect that it had been issued by the Wandsworth Branch of the National and Counties Bank, and to that establishment Field wended his way.

There a further piece of information awaited him. The note had been paid out the day before to a messenger who had come from No. 100, Audley Place, with a cheque drawn in favour of "self" by Mr. Carl Sartoris. Field could not repress a chuckle. Everything was going on as smoothly as he could expect.

"And now for Mr. Acton," he said to himself. "I wonder if I dare build my hopes upon the theory that Sir Charles is—but that is out of the question. Still, there is that doctor fellow with his marvellous knowledge of Eastern mysteries. Hang me if I don't start from that hypothesis when I've got this thing through."

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It was an easy matter to trace Acton. Field found him in a dingy bed-sitting-room, smoking vile tobacco and eagerly reading a sporting paper. The occupant of the room turned colour when he caught sight of his visitor. The recognition was mutual, but Field did not commit himself beyond a faint smile.

"I—I hope there is nothing wrong," the occupant of the room stammered.

"That entirely depends upon you," Field replied. "So long as you tell the truth——"

"I'll tell you nothing else," Acton said. He had risen now and was standing with his back to the fire, a tall man with a pale face and mournful eyes. "Look here, Field, there is no use playing with the fact that you and I have met before. I was in a very different position then. Now I am a broken man with no ambition beyond a wish to live honestly and to keep out of sight of my friends. I write a good hand, as you know. I have served my time for forgery. But since that I have never done anything that is in the least wrong."

The speaker's words carried conviction with them.

"I am quite prepared to believe it, Mr. Acton," Field said. "All I want is a little information. Tell me, have you done more than one piece of work lately?"

"No. Only one. And that was just after ten o'clock to-day. A gentleman came to me and said he was a lawyer who was just setting up here."

"What sort of man was he?" Field asked.

"Young and fair, with an easy assurance and manner. He had taken a house in Park Road—name of Walters. There is a kind of annex to the house that at one time had been used for a billiard-room, and this was to be his office. I called upon the gentleman there by appointment. I didn't go into the house proper, but I saw that the blinds and curtains were up. The gentleman gave me a £5 note and asked me to go to the Inland Revenue Office here and get a £2 10s. stamp on a skin of parchment. When I got back he dictated a deed to me which I copied down for him."

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"Do you recollect what it was about?" Field asked.

"Well, sir, I don't, except that it was some kind of assignment. The names I quite forget. You see, one gets to be rather like a machine doing that kind of work. The gentleman paid me seven shillings for my trouble and asked me to call upon him again."

"And is that all you have to tell me?" Field asked.

"Everything, Mr. Field," Acton said. "I hope that you will not think there is anything——"

"Not so far as you are concerned, certainly," Field hastened to say. "I have only one more question to ask. Try and polish up your memory. Was there any date inserted in that deed?"

"I can answer that question without the slightest hesitation. There was no date inserted in the deed."

"Um. The thing was so unusual that you were quite struck by the fact?"

"Not at all. Dates are never inserted in engrossed deeds. They are left blank as to the day and the year. You see, there is so much delay in the law. Sometimes the deeds are not executed for months after they are signed. If the date was filled in and a delay of two months took place, a new stamp would have to be purchased, and that means dead loss. Whereas if the date is not put in till the deed is signed, that expense is saved."

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Field nodded his head in the manner of a man who is getting satisfaction for his trouble.

"Then the date was no doing of yours," he said. "I fancy I'll run around and see the young lawyer friend of yours. After that I may have to ask you to accompany me to town. There is nothing for you to do besides identifying your own handwriting. Don't go out till I come back."

Field hurried off to Park Road where at length he found the house that he wanted. The curtains and blinds were up in the windows, but no amount of knocking seemed to arouse anybody inside. Not that Field was disappointed, for he had expected something like this. A few inquiries elicited the fact that the house was in the hands of Messrs. Porden & Co., down the street, and thither the inspector repaired. Nobody had taken the house, he gathered, though a few people had been after it.

"Have you had anybody to-day?" Field asked. "I mean early to-day? A tall, fair man with pleasant manners who gave the name of Walters?"

"Well, yes," the house-agent admitted. "He came and asked for the keys; he left a card on my table, and here it is. It was early when he came, and the boy was the only one in charge of the office, so that the gentleman had to go over the house by himself."

"He found that it did not suit him?" Field suggested drily.

"No, he said it was too big for his requirements. He brought the keys back two hours later."

"And didn't ask for any more, though you offered him the choice of many houses?" Field smiled. "But what about the blinds and curtains in the windows?"

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"Oh, they belonged to the previous tenant. You see, we had to put in an execution there for rent. The landlord desired the fittings to remain."

Field went away rather impressed by the cunningness of the dodge. The whole thing was theatrical and a little overdone, but it was clever, all the same. A short time later, and Field was on his way to London with Acton for his companion.

Mr. Fleming was in the office disengaged and would see Inspector Field at once. He glanced at the latter's companion but said nothing.

"I have been very successful," Field said without preamble. "I have made some important discoveries. For instance, I have found the gentleman who engrossed that deed. It was engrossed early this morning at a house in Park Road, Wandsworth, by my companion. If you will show him the deed he will be able to identify it at once."

But Mr. Fleming did not do business in that way. He took two deeds and folded them so that a portion of each could be seen. Then he laid them both on the table and asked Acton to pick out the one that he had done. All law stationers' writing is very much alike, but Acton had not the slightest difficulty in picking out his.

"That is the one, sir," he said. "That is the one that I wrote to-day."

Fleming admitted that the choice was a correct one. He spread out the deed now and proceeded to examine it gravely through his glasses. "Did you put in the date?" he asked.

"No, sir," Acton replied. "There was no date. That is a forgery. It is not badly done, but you can see that it does not quite tally with the body of the deed. Besides, the ink is slightly darker. Look at that 'e,' too, in the word 'nine.' I never write that kind of 'e'—you will not find one like it in the body of the deed."

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Fleming was bound to admit that such was the case. Field thanked Acton for the trouble he had taken, and dismissed him. Then he came back to the office.

"Well, sir, are you quite satisfied now?" he asked. "Is there any reasonable doubt that—"

"No doubt that the deed purporting to have been signed so long ago was only written to-day. So far as that is concerned, you have proved your case up to the hilt, Field. Nobody is going to gain anything by the publication of that deed. But there is one thing that sticks, and I cannot get it down at all—the genuineness of that signature."

"It does look like a real signature," Field admitted. "But you want to suggest that Sir Charles came back from the grave to-day to write it? I wonder if there is something new in the way of forgery—some means whereby a genuine signature could be transformed from one paper to another without injuring the ink in the slightest. They say they can take all the paint off a picture and place it on a new canvas without so much as injuring a brush mark. That being the case, why couldn't it be done with a man's signature?"

Fleming bit the end of his pen thoughtfully.

"It may be possible that some cunning rascal has invented an entirely new process," he said. "But anyway, I'm prepared to swear to the genuineness of this signature. There is only one other way to account for the whole business, and as a sane man who has long come to years of discretion, I am almost afraid to mention it to a business man like yourself."

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Field looked up quickly.

"I have a little hesitation also," he said, "because you may have laughed at me. Is it possible, sir, that you and I have hit upon the same theory?"

CHAPTER XXXIV

Field walked away thoughtfully from the office of Mr. Fleming. He was a little pleased to find that the lawyer took the same view of the mystery as himself. There was a great deal to be done yet. It was getting very late indeed before Field made his way once more in the direction of Wandsworth. He had an important paper in his pocket, and he had given directions for two of his most trusted men to meet him outside No. 100, Audley Place, by eleven o'clock.

But those other men had other tasks to perform first, and they might be some time yet. With this knowledge in his mind, Field repaired to the garden in front of the house and there decided to wait for developments. It was not a cold night, the bushes in the garden were thick, and Field felt that he would be just as well there as anywhere else. His patience was not unduly tried. He chuckled slightly to himself as he saw Beatrice arrive. He had a pretty shrewd idea what she was here for.

"The old fox is not quite certain of his goal," he told himself. "He thinks he has got everything in his grip—that the forged deed will do the mischief, but perhaps there are other papers. That is why he has sent for Mrs. Richford. We shall see."

If Sartoris had known what reposed in Field's breast pocket he would not have been quite so easy in his mind. But he did not know it, and Field did not know what was transpiring inside the house. He waited a little longer till Mary Sartoris came up. She seemed to be greatly agitated about something; she stood in the garden hesitating. A little later, and she was joined by Mark Ventmore. Field was glad to see so valuable an ally here.

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From his hiding-place Field could hear all that passed. It was a satisfaction to be able to gather up such a deal of information. Richford would have to come into the net presently, and Richford was in England, which was more than Field had expected. Of course, with everybody else, he had heard of the famous diamonds that Richford had given to his wife, and supposed that before now the diamonds had been turned into money. Into funds, Richford would have had a good chance of getting away; as it was, he must still be in London.

"So that fellow is still here," Field chuckled. "Did she say Edward Street? The very house that I have my eye on. We will bag all the birds. Hullo, here come some more!"

Mark and Mary Sartoris drew back as the man and woman respectively called Reggie and Cora came up. They had their listeners, but they did not know it. Perhaps, if they had, they would not have made their plans quite so openly. As it was, they had laid bare the whole of their new scheme to the quickest ears in London. Field slipped from his hiding-place as Reggie and Cora closed the front door behind them. Mary gave a little scream.

"There is no occasion for alarm—at least, as far as you are concerned, Miss Sartoris," Field said. "I have heard everything that those people said."

"This is Inspector Field of Scotland Yard," Mark said.

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Mary's lips quivered, but she said nothing. Her own instincts told her what Field was doing here. She had always felt that the bubble must burst some day—she had always known that her noble efforts were altogether in vain. And yet she would have gone on sacrificing herself to save Carl Sartoris from the fate that was inevitable.

"Are you down here on any special business?" Mark asked.

"On business connected with the disappearance of Sir Charles Darryll and other matters," Field said. "The one thing contains the other. But you need not have the smallest apprehension for the safety of Mrs. Richford and her diamonds. She is not going to lose them."

"How did you know that she had those diamonds in her pocket?" Mary asked.

"You forget that I have been hiding here," Field explained. "Like yourself, I heard every word that passed just now. Every moment I expect to have two of my most trusted men here. Directly those two emerge from the house and get into the road, they will be arrested. In my business I often find that when you are looking for one bird you frequently find another. Mr. Reggie and Miss Cora are old friends of mine and the Paris police. They are very clever at disguises; they work together, she as a countess, and he as a general officer. Both of them were on the stage and both would have made very good names, but the honest *rôle* was too dull for them. You may rest assured that those two will be out of the way before daylight."

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Mary listened with mixed feelings. She felt that in a measure she was mainly responsible for what was going to happen. It looked as though it would be an eventful evening.

"Well, we can't stand here all night," Mark said impatiently. He was vaguely frightened for Beatrice, in the house with those rascals. "I can help you. You and I together would be a match for the lot of them. What do you say to try?"

But Field had no feeling that way at all. The cool, shrewd officer did not rush things in that fashion. He had his birds secured and he could afford to wait.

"I cannot possibly permit you to interfere with my plans, sir," he said coldly. "You must recollect that I am responsible to the authorities, and that I have my reputation to think of. In my pocket I have a warrant for the arrest of certain people, and that being the case——"

"For my brother! for Carl Sartoris?" Mary gasped. "Oh, is that really so?"

"It would be no kindness to conceal the fact," Field said in a gentle tone. "No, I cannot permit you to enter the house. The thing is absolutely inevitable, and you could not possibly prevent it. A cripple like your brother could not escape me, and any hasty action of yours might mean the escape of the other two. I am exceedingly sorry, Miss Grey."

Mary started as she heard her own name from the lips of the inspector. The expression told her that he knew everything. The blow had fallen at last, as Mary always knew that it would fall, but it was none the less bitter for that. Tears rolled down her cheeks, but she said nothing further. Mark looked at her with distress in his eyes; he and Field exchanged glances.

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"This must be very painful to you, miss," the latter went on. "By staying here you can do us no good—you are only giving yourself unnecessary pain. Is there any house you can go to, any place where you can stay for the night? A hotel?"

"I have no friends and no money," Mary said through her tears. "Since coming to England I have given myself wholly to my brother. I have done my best to make the path smooth for him and I have failed. It was no fault of mine that Sir Charles——"

"That Sir Charles was not warned," Field said hastily. "Don't say any more, please. Don't place yourself in such a position that I shall have to call you as a witness."

Mary swallowed down her choking sobs. Two figures stole across the street, and Field gave a low whistle. His two trusty subordinates had come at last. As they passed by the gate Field strode across to them and gave them their instructions. Mark turned to Mary.

"Pray let me be your banker," he said. "Let me provide the money so that you——"

"But I cannot," Mary protested. "I dare not. You would never see the money again, and like all good and generous people, you are as poor as I am myself."

"That remark may have applied to my affairs yesterday, but it certainly does not to-day," Mark said eagerly. "I told you that I have been to see my father who has been very ill lately. As he lay in bed, with no friends to come and see him—for he has been a hard and selfish man—he grew to see things in a different light. He sent for me. He was rather impressed by the tale that I had managed to do without his assistance and that I was making a name for myself. I told him everything, and we are quite good friends again. He insisted upon making me an allowance of £1,500, and as the thought of it did him good, I did not protest. After that, will you let me help you? I know how good you are, and how you have suffered."

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"I am more than grateful," Mary said in a choked voice. "It is kind of you, but I cannot take any advantage of your offer; I must stay till the end."

"And go through all the misery of it," Mark protested. "You know that all those people will sleep in jail to-night. Why should you witness the arrest? Let me take you to some quiet hotel and arrange for your accommodation there."

But Mary shook her head resolutely. She was not going to leave till she was forced to. Mark ceased his pleadings as Field came back to them.

"If you would only let me go into the house," Mary said. "I have my own key, and I shall not make the slightest noise. They do not require me! if I put my head inside the study I should at once be ordered out again. Let me go to my own room."

Field hesitated for a moment. It was not the first time he had met a good woman whose life was bound up with that of a criminal, and he had experience of what those women could do in the hour of peril. And yet he hesitated because Mary's prayer was passionate and sincere. But it was only for a moment, then he became a police officer again.

"I could not allow it," he said. "If it came to the ears of my superiors, I should suffer. And I have a wife and family to think of. In minutes of temptation such as you ask me to put before you, women are capable of anything for the sake of those they love. Besides, you would not have me do a thing that is wrong in the eyes of my employers?"

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Mary was silent. Her own sense of justice showed her that Field was right. But nothing would induce her to go away, so long as there was anything like hope remaining. She might get a chance still to whisper one word of warning. And if it came she would not hesitate. She had not been placed on her parole so far.

She turned away to wipe her shining eyes, and as she did so the door opened and Berrington crept out. His face was full of excitement, his lips were white.

"Glad to find you here," he said. "I was going to try and find a messenger. I could not leave the house for very long, considering that——"

He paused significantly, with his eyes on Mary. Evidently Berrington had made some great and startling discovery, or he would not have been so dreadfully agitated. Even in the moment of her awful sorrow, Mary could find time to speak and think of others.

"I am in a great measure responsible for this," she said. "Philip, Beatrice Richford is in the house; she has a valuable parcel of diamonds in her pocket; those thieves there know it. Go to her assistance at once; see that she is safe from harm. If anything happens to her I shall never forgive myself. Why don't you go at once?"

"I am sorry," Berrington stammered. He seemed quite dazed and confused. "I have no doubt that Mrs. Richford will be perfectly safe, seeing that assistance is at hand. Indeed, I let her know that I was in the house so that she should not be unduly frightened. But there are other matters of far greater importance than that. Sir Charles Darryll——"

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"I thought we should come to Sir Charles Darryll," Field cut in swiftly. "But we need not discuss that matter here and now. Do you want me?"

Field asked the question with a strange ring in his voice. Berrington wondered—he was rapidly regaining complete possession of himself. He moved towards the house.

"In a few minutes," he said. "Wait till I give you the signal. Thank goodness, you were so close by."

Berrington passed into the house again and closed the door behind him.

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CHAPTER XXXV

There was a thrill of excitement, an electric feeling in the air that was not lost to anyone of the little group standing there in the darkness. That some momentous event was going to happen everybody knew without being told. Tacitly, it seemed to be understood that everything was in the hands of Inspector Field.

Previously, on the arrival of his two men, he had sent one of them off with hurried instructions of some kind. The other man stood by the gate like a statue. Mark Ventmore, growing restless at last, turned to Field and asked a question. The inspector was wiping his damp hands upon his handkerchief as if he himself was a thief waiting for arrest.

"We are going to wait," he said curtly, "and there is an end of the matter."

Mark felt that he could not say any more after that. Mary was still crying softly to herself. The misery was with her yet, as she felt that it would be to her dying day, but the agony of suspense was past. Of what took place in that house from time to time she knew a great deal, but some things had been kept back from her. It was the vague feeling of what might be that frightened her.

Half an hour or more passed in the same tense, rigid silence, and yet there was no sign from the house. A figure crossed the road and came up the drive, making no more noise than a ghost. It was Field's man returning.

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The inspector turned to him with an eager agitation that seemed strange to him.

"Well," he asked, "have you anything definite?"

His voice sounded hoarse and strange. The other man touched his cap. He seemed to hesitate before the presence of so many strangers. Field urged him on impatiently.

"Don't be all night," he said. "You can speak before the lady and gentleman. They don't know everything yet, but they will in the course of a few minutes. Did you manage it?"

"Managed it all right, sir," the misty figure in the big coat said. "I got through on the telephone to the Southwark police and told them all the particulars. They said that they would send round to Edward Street without delay."

"Of course you stayed to see that they had done so?"

"Of course, sir. It isn't a very far cry to Edward Street, so I waited. I asked the inspector in charge to telephone me directly the raid had been made."

"Oh, get on, man," Field cried impatiently. "You're not in the witness box now grinding it out so that the magistrate's clerk can take it all down in long hand. What I want to know is whether or not the raid was effective."

"To a certain extent, sir. They took the housekeeper, who doesn't appear to have had much to do with the matter, and an old gentleman who looked like a clergyman. So far, there was nobody else in the house."

Field gave vent to something that sounded like a grunt of satisfaction. Mary said nothing, but she had a pretty shrewd idea who the clergyman was. Field seemed to be fairly pleased.

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"So far, so good," he said. "Are they going to send round the motor car? I shall be very glad to see our elderly clerical friend here."

The officer indicated that everything would be done in accordance with Field's desire.

"There was one other man I wanted," he said. "Not that one ever gets everything in cases like this. Unless I am greatly mistaken, there was another man in Edward Street, a tall man——"

"Called the doctor," the officer said eagerly. "I know all about him, because they told me over the wire from Southwark exactly how the raid was made. The housekeeper called to some 'doctor,' but the police couldn't find him. I expect he found some way of getting off."

"He'll come here," Field said emphatically. "He'll come if only to tell his pals exactly what has happened. He'll come post haste in a cab. If he does I shall bag the lot. This is going to be a fine evening's work."

Seeing that nothing further was expected of him, the officer saluted and went beyond the gate. Still there was no sign from the house, and the silence and suspense were growing intolerable. Mark ventured to suggest that something should be done.

Field turned upon him with the fury of a tiger. By his anger he showed that he, too, was feeling the strain of suspense.

"Confound you, sir," he said, "allow me to know my business best. Here I am close to the solution of one of the strangest and most daring crimes of the century, and yet you are asking me to spoil it by the raw haste of a schoolboy." [Pg 275]

"Perhaps I had better go," Mark said. "Come with me, Miss Sartoris. Let us leave together. It will be better for you that way."

"No," Mary said gently. "I am greatly obliged to you, but I shall stay."

"Both stay, please," Field said in a gentler tone. "Mr. Ventmore, let me make you the most handsome apology in my power. I am afraid that this thing has got a little on my nerves. You see, this is a great case, a far greater case than anybody is aware of. I only stumbled on the real truth of it more or less by accident to-day. And if there is anything like a struggle, your help may be of value."

Mark let the matter pass. He could quite understand Field's feeling. Another quarter of an hour slipped away; the road was now quite deserted, so that the wheels of a coming cab could be heard a long way off. There was a little discussion between the cabman and his fare, followed by the banging of a door, and the heavy footsteps came staggering up the street and a big man passed before the gate of No. 100, Audley Place. With a sign, Field motioned his companion to steal behind the bushes.

"One of our birds, unless I am greatly mistaken," he said. "Yes, he is coming this way."

Mary held her breath now, for she did not fail to recognise the newcomer. She could see from a casual glance that it was Bentwood.

He came with a lurch and a stagger which proved his condition. He seemed a little suspicious at first, but the silence of the house, the steady gleam of the light over the fanlight, seemed to dispel any suspicions. Then he advanced more boldly to the door. As he stood on the bottom step, Field emerged from his hiding-place. [Pg 276]

"Doctor Bentwood," he said, "I fancy I am not mistaken. You will oblige me by taking your hand off the bell. Nobody will answer your ring."

Taken aback for a moment, Bentwood stepped off the path. He bent and gripped Field by the throat.

"You little beast!" he hissed. "I'll kill you. If you only knew who you are talking to!"

But Field was made of whipcord and steel. He slipped away from the other's grip and planted two or three body blows that caused Bentwood to groan aloud. Mark stepped out at once, but there was no need of his services. Field was all over his man by this time. As he clenched and drove his left home, Bentwood came heavily to the ground. Before he could stagger to his feet again, Field had the handcuffs on him.

"It's an outrage," Bentwood blustered, though his face was white now and his big red cheeks shook like a jelly. "What does it all mean?"

"Case of Sir Charles Darryll," Field panted. "We know all about that. We shall have your friend Sartoris, in a minute, to say nothing of Reggie and Cora. If you tell us everything and make a clean breast of your part of it——"

"Shan't," Bentwood said sullenly. "You can find out that for yourself."

Field pursed his lips in a soft whistle. The two shadows by the gate came up.

"Keep him close by," Field said. "He is just valiantly drunk now, but unless I greatly mistake my man, he will listen to reason shortly. Don't take him far away, as I may want to make use of him presently. I am glad that he arrived on the scene before the motor came up." [Pg 277]

Again the tense silence fell on the group; once more they had to possess their souls in patience. Field appeared more cheerful and philosophical; the arrest of Bentwood seemed to have taken a heavy weight from his mind. He took out a cigarette and lighted it. Mark turned to Mary.

"You are sure that you will not reconsider your decision?" he said. "I wish that I could persuade you not to remain here. It has been quite painful enough for you already, and you can do no good. Why should you witness the final humiliation of it?"

Mary looked at the speaker; a grateful sigh came from her lips.

"You are more than kind to me," she said. "But I have drunk so deeply of the cup of humiliation that a draught more or less makes no difference. Heaven knows how I have tried to avert this thing, to ward off the danger that I could not see. And yet all this time I knew that sooner or later the blow would fall. Mr. Ventmore, how old do you take me to be?"

Mark could not say. It was rather an awkward question.

"I see by your silence that you would rather not reply," Mary said. "It means that you would have a delicacy in calling me an old woman. And yet I am barely thirty. When I think what I was three years ago, it seems to me as if ages had passed. Of course, this is all silly talk, but I must talk or go mad."

"There is a happier time coming for you," Mark said.

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"I know that. Once that blow has fallen, I shall regard myself as free of my cares. And now, with that prospect before me, I would avert the calamity if I could. And yet I have done my best and nobody could do more."

Silence fell again, for Mark could not think of anything else to say. The silence was broken presently by the clang and snarl of a distant motor car, and Field pitched his cigarette away. He seemed to have become good-humoured all at once.

"That is good," he exclaimed. "Our patience has been rewarded at last. Another few minutes and we will go and see what the house has in store for us. There's the other man."

The motor pulled up opposite No. 100, and two men got out—followed by a third in clerical costume. The latter seemed to be protesting about something. As he came up the drive Field stepped out, and the two men who had engineered the motor car saluted.

"You have done exceedingly well," Field said in a pleased voice. "You will just stay where you are, because you may be wanted. So you have brought the gentleman from Edward Street? I telephoned your chief to make a raid on the place just now."

"But this is an outrage," the clerical figure said in a shaky voice. "To take a gentleman from his lodgings in that way is something that even the police——"

"The police are prepared to accept all responsibility," Field said drily. "There is one little matter that I have to clear up, and that is your identity. As it is not a cold night you are not likely to suffer for the want of your wig."

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Dexterously Field snatched away wig and hat and glasses, and Richford stood exposed. He was about to say something when all attention was arrested by a sound from the house. It was a clear, crisp sound, the ring of a revolver shot.

"Look to your prisoners!" said Field crisply. "I am going into the house."

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CHAPTER XXXVI

Meanwhile Berrington had stepped aside after having arranged to give Field the signal. And Berrington had made a discovery, the importance of which it was impossible to overestimate. For the moment it had almost deprived him of the power of thinking about anything else, but now it came to him that Beatrice might be in some little danger.

In the first place, the girl was in possession of a parcel of valuable diamonds, the possession of which the others knew of and coveted. The rascals were in a tight place now, and they would not stick at much to make their escape. If they were short of funds the diamonds in Beatrice's pocket would come in useful. But Berrington, like the cool soldier that he was, had decided not to spoil the thing by an eager haste. There was plenty of assistance outside, and besides, he had a trusty revolver in his pocket. He stood now in the hall where he was in a position to hear all that was going on.

Beatrice had rushed to the door and beat her hands upon it. She was pulled away more or less roughly by the man called Reggie, but she did not seem to notice it.

"Am I mad or dreaming?" she said as she pressed her hands to her forehead. "I could have sworn that I heard a voice calling me, a voice——"

"All nonsense," said Sartoris hoarsely. "You are overstrung, and your imagination is too real for

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you. Did any of the rest of you hear a voice?"

The other two denied that they had heard anything. Beatrice broke out scornfully—

"It is a lie," she said. "You all heard it. Everybody heard it. If not, why are you all so white, and why do you all look so curiously at one another?"

It was quite true, and Sartoris had no reply for the moment. He seemed to be struggling to regain his lost self-possession. Then he glanced at the man called Reggie, who shrugged his shoulders. Sartoris was himself again by this time.

"It was certainly an effect of the imagination," he cried. "Let us talk of other things. My dear young lady, my friends here have been good enough to betray the fact that you have a lot of valuable diamonds in your pocket. Is that a fact?"

Beatrice scorned to lie, and now in any case it would have been useless. She looked from one to the other and wondered what had become of Berrington. Berrington was listening outside the door and feeling that the time for him to interfere was close at hand.

"It is exactly as these people say," Beatrice admitted.

"It is very good of them to take all this trouble," Sartoris said in a sulky voice. "Because of those stones in your pocket they are here to-night. They followed you here, because they are both lovers of that kind of thing. Out of purely disinterested motives, they had made up their minds not to tell me, but a little indiscretion on the part of my fair lady prevented that silent policy from becoming a success."

"What's all this about?" Cora asked uneasily.

"Why ask?" Sartoris said with contempt. "So that was your game, eh? Fill your own pockets and leave the rest of us to look after ourselves. Go off together and try the air of South America once more, you reptiles!"

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The other two said nothing. They had a proper respect for the keen intelligence of Carl Sartoris, and they knew that he had found them out. There was a queer gleam in his eyes.

"We will have a friendly discussion on the ethics of the case some other time," he said with an ominous frown. "Meanwhile I think you can leave the matter to me. My dear young lady, I should very much like to see those diamonds."

"I regret that I cannot accommodate you," Beatrice said. "In the first place they are not mine."

"No, but they belong to Stephen Richford, which is much the same thing."

"Again I am sorry to have to disagree with you," Beatrice went on quietly. "The man who calls himself my husband has ended his career disgracefully. He has been guilty of fraudulent conduct, and even at the present moment he may be in the hands of the police."

Beatrice spoke more truly than she had imagined. She was not in the least frightened, and yet she knew perfectly well that these people would not stick at trifles.

"My husband came to me to-night," she said. "He came and asked me for these gems. He wanted to turn them into money to fly with; he desired to have a luxurious retreat. I might have parted with them but for one thing—he seemed to have no sorrow for those that he had robbed. So I declined to part with the diamonds. I am going to keep them and hand them over to my husband's creditors. I took them from the safe in my hotel, fearing that there would be complications, but I was wrong, and I am sorry that I did so."

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"And why are you sorry?" Sartoris asked.

"Because the stones were far safer there than they are here," Beatrice said.

There was no mistaking the girl's insinuation; even Sartoris reddened.

"So you mean to say that you suspect me?" he asked.

"Most certainly I do," Beatrice said boldly. "I have only to look into your face to see that. You are all three together; there is no honesty between you. You are not even loyal to each other. And I know who you are and what part you all played in the removal of my father's body from the hotel. You who call yourself Sartoris, are the little cripple of the black hansom cab, you others are the rogues who posed as Countess de la Moray and General Gastang. And if those diamonds are to become your property, you must take them by force."

"*Le brave chien*," the woman sneered. "Well, I suppose what must be, must. Who will do it?"

"Who better than yourself?" Sartoris asked. "I had rather not lay hands on a woman, but——"

"There is no necessity. The painful thing is not going to be done at all. It is well that I am here to shield your consciences from such an outrage."

The door had opened so suddenly that the man Reggie was almost carried off his feet, and Berrington stood in the room. Beatrice gave a sudden sob of relief, for she had forgotten Berrington altogether in the tension of the moment. He stood there erect and upright, his face pale with anger and his eyes blazing like stars.

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Sartoris burst out furiously and impatiently—

"Damnation!" he screamed. "I had clean forgotten all about this fellow. His very existence had passed altogether out of my mind."

"Then your memory is very short and very convenient," Berrington said. "It is not so very long ago that my presence in the house was exceedingly convenient to you."

"You saved my life for what it is worth," Sartoris growled sullenly.

"Well, it may be worth a great deal to the police," Berrington retorted. "I saved your life, which was perhaps a foolish thing to do, especially as you had made preparations to sacrifice mine for so doing. Whilst your hands have been so full, I have been making investigations in the house. Really, I have been very well repaid for my trouble."

Sartoris started and looked up uneasily. For once his ready tongue failed him.

"Perhaps you had better be a little more explicit," he said.

"Time enough for that, presently. My first discovery was in connection with the dining-room fireplace. I fancy you know what I mean. The next item was connected with the stairs. You murderous dog, so that was the trap you laid for me. I was not to go until you had seen me again. I was to stay for the sake of your sister. Well, I am glad that I obeyed now. But my little discoveries did not end here. Mrs. Richford, what is this?"

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Berrington held out a strip of soiled linen and Beatrice took it in her hand.

"It looks like a collar," she said. "It is a collar. If you have made a discovery, Colonel Berrington, I have made another. This collar belongs to my father; I marked it for him in some new ink that does not want heating. Melanyl, I think they call it. It was one of a set of a dozen collars and I marked them all, the day of that fatal dinner party. You see that, as my father had had no valet of late—"

"You acted in his stead," Berrington said eagerly; "when did you mark this?"

"About half-past four on the day of the dinner party."

"Not long before your father went up to dress for dinner, I suppose?"

"Yes, it would be about that time. After marking the collars that had just come from the makers, I placed them in father's wardrobe in his bedroom."

"Then this is the very collar that he wore for the dinner party," Berrington cried; "the very collar that he was wearing at the time he disappeared. And the same collar I found not an hour ago in Mr. Sartoris's dining-room. Not in the dining-room proper, but in a kind of vault under the floor. What is the explanation of this, I wonder?"

"If you are so cursedly clever," Sartoris sneered, "you had better find out for yourself. Get him out of the way, get both of them out of the way, get the diamonds, and let us disappear. The game is up so far as England is concerned. Get him out of the way."

Sartoris's voice had risen to a wild scream. He sent his chair rapidly across the room in the direction of the door. Berrington pulled him up sharp.

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"No tricks," he said sternly. "Now none of those electrical contrivances of yours. If you move so much as an inch further I'll shoot you like a dog."

Sartoris pulled up suddenly. He did not need to look at Berrington's face to feel sure that he was in deadly earnest. At the same time the man called Reggie leaped at Berrington's throat and bore him backwards. The assault was so sudden that Berrington dropped the revolver that he had drawn, at the feet of Beatrice.

"Never mind about me," he called out. "Point the weapon upwards and pull the trigger."

In a mechanical kind of way Beatrice did as she was told. As the weapon swayed, the trigger clicked, and the bullet, deflected on the table, snapped the back leg of Sartoris's chair clean off, so that he came a huddled mass of bones to the floor. A report followed, and before the smoke had fully cleared away from Beatrice's eyes it seemed to her that the room was full of people. There were three or four policemen in uniform, Field cool and collected, Richford white and sullen, with the twitching face of Bentwood in the background.

As the man Reggie rose to his feet, the handcuffs were slipped over his wrists, and the woman was treated in a similar fashion. Only Sartoris, being absolutely helpless, was spared the like indignity. Field looked quite satisfied.

"Bagged the whole covey," he said. "Go and stand at the front door, one of you, and see that nobody goes out. There may be others present, of whom we know nothing as yet. Now, Mr. Sartoris, I should like to have a few words with you touching the disappearance of Sir Charles Darryll."

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"You think that I murdered him?" Sartoris sneered.

"Certainly not," Field replied. "You can't have murder without a corpse, and in this case we do

not even pretend to look for the corpse."

"Or a body perhaps," Sartoris went on. He was quite the coolest person in the room. "Well, what do you want me to say or do? If you produce the corpse——"

"As I said before, there is no corpse," Field said. "Colonel Berrington seems to have discovered something. He may be able to help us if you won't."

"I can help you," Berrington said in a thrilling voice, "beyond your most sanguine hopes."

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CHAPTER XXXVII

Sartoris sat a huddled heap on the floor, with his white snarling face looking out like the head of an angry snake. He was not in the least afraid, and yet the expression of his eyes told that he knew everything was over. As he struggled painfully to his feet, Mary ran forward and guided him to a chair. He did not thank her by so much as a gesture. All the care and tenderness was wasted upon that warped nature.

"If I were not a cripple," he snarled, "this would never have happened. And yet a cursed bag of aching bones has got the better of you all, ay, and would have kept the better, too, if I could only have moved about like the rest. But you are not going to get me to say anything if I sit here all night."

It was a strange scene, altogether,—Sartoris a huddled heap, cursing and snarling in his chair, the man Reggie and the woman Cora standing by, with uneasy grins on their faces, trying to carry it off in a spirit of false bravado. To the right of them stood Bentwood, now quite sober and shaking, and Richford sullen and despairing. Beatrice was in the shadow behind Mark Ventmore. Mary moved forward, followed by Berrington.

"What is the charge?" the man Reggie asked. "What have we done?"

Field shrugged his shoulders. Really the question did not deserve a reply. Sartoris took up the same line in his snarling voice.

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"That's what we want to know," he said. "What is the charge? If you have a warrant, read it aloud. We have every right to know."

"I have a warrant so far as you are concerned," Field replied. "For the present, you are charged with forgery and uttering a certain document, purporting to be an assignment of mining interests in Burmah from Sir Charles Darryll to yourself. The document is in my pocket, and I can produce it for your inspection, if you like. I need not tell you that there will be other charges later on, but these will suffice for the present."

"That does not touch us, at all," the woman Cora said.

"I am arresting you on my own responsibility," Field said curtly. "If I have made any mistake, then you can bring an action for illegal detention later on. Colonel Berrington, we are wasting time here. Had we not better get on with our search?"

Berrington nodded approval. There was an exulting gleam in his eyes that betokened the discovery of something out of the common. Mary crossed the room rapidly and threw herself in an utter abandonment of grief at her brother's feet.

"Oh, why don't you tell them everything?" she cried. "Why don't you tell the whole truth and save yourself? I have friends here, more than one, who care for me, and who for my sake would do much to save you from the shame and humiliation that lie before you. I know much, but I do not know all. For the sake of the old name——"

"Burn the old name," Sartoris said. "What has it done for me? You have been a good sister to me, but your attentions have been a little embarrassing sometimes. And if you had hoped to change me, you had your trouble for your pains. You may put me on the rack and torture me, but not one word do I say."

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"It seems so hard, so very hard," Mary moaned. "And when I look back to the time——"

"Oh, never mind looking back to any time," Sartoris muttered. "The game's up, I tell you. I have been beaten, and there's an end of it. I should play the same hand again if I had the chance, so make no mistake about that. Wheel me as far as the dining-room."

"It will not be of the slightest use," Berrington said in a cold, clear voice. "I know that you would blow the whole lot of us to Eternity if you got the chance, as a kind of revenge for our victory, but I have put an end to that. You will find all the wires disconnected from your battery. After that you are quite free to go into the dining-room."

Sartoris grinned and displayed his teeth in an evil smile. Heaven only knows what new form of villainy he was plotting. And he would cheerfully have blown up the house and destroyed everybody there, including himself, if he had had the opportunity to complete his revenge.

"We are wasting time," Field said. "Take all the prisoners away, except Dr. Bentwood. I have very good reasons for asking him to remain."

Bentwood smiled in a mean and sinister way. He had tried to hide himself in a corner of the room. There was something so cringing and fawning about the fellow that Berrington longed to kick him. Sartoris spoke in a waspish whisper:

"So the land lies in that quarter," he said. "We have an informer amongst us. If I had known that before, my good Bentwood,—if I had known that before!"

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Big as he was, Bentwood looked small and mean at that moment.

"You are quite mistaken," he cried. "You are altogether wrong, my dear Carl. I am as much of a prisoner as any of you. I was taken in fair fight outside after a desperate struggle. What have I to gain by an attitude of unreasonable obstinacy?"

"Oh, nothing," Sartoris replied. "But you can make things easy for yourself by affording the police information. You will probably get off with ten years. I would fight the thing out to the bitter end and chance it. But you and I are made of different stuff."

Mark Ventmore, watching the two men, thought so too, but he said nothing. One was a mere bag of bones, the other a fine figure of a man, but Mark would have preferred the cripple, who made no sign and showed no feeling as he tottered to the door, between the policemen. Mary would have said something to him, but he waved her back.

"Now don't you trouble about me any more," he said. "I shall be safe for some years to come, the law will see to that. We shall never meet again, for the simple reason that a physique like mine will not stand the prison treatment. I shall die there. Good bye."

Mary kept back her tears. She would have felt better if she could have seen even the slightest trace of remorse in her brother.

"Marry Berrington," he said. "He has been pretty faithful to you and you will be alone in the world now. You should think yourself lucky with a man like that to fall back upon. I have to say adieu to the lot of you."

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Sartoris was gone at last. In fact the whole lot were packed on the motor car which the police had sent down at Field's instigation. Being a cripple, Sartoris had been accommodated in the seat by the driver. With her eyes heavy with tears, Mary watched them depart. Sartoris was fatally correct in his prophecy; it was the last time that Mary was destined to see him. He had always recognised the fact that jail would be the death of him. He had the germs of a disease in his breast that he had only kept at bay by constant occupation and mental activity. Mary never looked upon the face of her brother in the flesh again.

Field turned to Berrington and drew a long breath.

"The atmosphere smells all the sweeter for the loss of that lot," he said. "My word, this has been an anxious night for me. I don't know when I have felt so nervous. But I see that you have made a discovery, Colonel Berrington. What is it?"

"It seems to me that I have made more than one," Berrington said. "In the first place my suspicion that the body of Sir Charles Darryll was brought here has been confirmed. To begin with, I have got to the bottom of that mysterious dining-room business. Come this way and I will show you. Bentwood and that officer of yours had better stay here for the moment."

"Anything that I can do for you, gentlemen," Bentwood said meekly. "Any information that lies in my power. You have only to command me, and I will respond."

"Presently," Field said contemptuously. "We will question you later on. Then you shall tell me all about that secret Eastern drug that you understand so well, and what effect it is likely to have on a sleeping man."

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Bentwood gave a gasp, and his face grew livid. It was evident that Field had struck and tapped a mine that the doctor had considered to be hidden from everybody. Then Bentwood sat down moodily and looked into the fire.

Berrington led the way into the dining-room, where he proceeded to explain everything in relation to the room under the floor and the vault in connection therewith. Field was particularly interested. All this worked out beautifully with his theory.

"I expect the body was concealed here," he said. "The thing has been well worked out. But do you suppose that Sartoris went to all this trouble and expense for the simple reason——"

"He didn't," Berrington explained. "Miss Sartoris, or Miss Grey as I prefer to call her, told me all about that. The house was taken four years ago and occupied by an American electrical engineer whom Sartoris knew quite well. It was he who put in all these dodges. When he died, Sartoris took the place, doubtless feeling that he might be able to use the mysteries here to good effect. I don't suppose at that time that he knew anything about the full value of Sir Charles Darryll's concessions. But once he had to take action, then this room came in very usefully."

"Do you know why they brought the body here?" Field asked.

"Yes, I have a pretty good idea on that score. Sir Charles had certain papers in his room in the *Royal Palace Hotel*, and these people wanted to gain possession of them. The robbery was fixed to take place on the night of that dinner party. Mind you, Richford did not know anything about that, because Sartoris had kept him in the dark. Bentwood was to work it. Bentwood was to administer the drug, but he gave too much. The consequence was an overdose, as you may gather."

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Field smiled peculiarly, but he gave no hint as to the extent of his own discovery.

"These people did not want a *post mortem*," Berrington said. "They did not desire that any traces of that practically unknown drug should be discovered."

"And you think that they all ran that risk to guard their secret?" asked Field. "Well, you have provided me with one or two surprises, but I am going to provide you with as many before we go to bed. Have you discovered anything further?"

"Oh, yes," said Berrington, "this collar, for instance. I am in a position to prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that Sir Charles wore it on the night of the dinner party. I found that down here in this very vault. No further proof is wanted that the body was here. But what puzzles me is this: we were so quickly on the spot that those rascals had not the slightest chance of disposing of the corpse. What then has become of it—why can't we find it? Now that one knows all about the ruby mines and the concessions—which appear to me to be very valuable—the mystery becomes tolerably clear. But the corpse, where is it?"

"Are you quite sure that there is a corpse?" asked Field drily. "Let us go and ask Bentwood."

Bentwood sat up and smiled as his two chief tormentors came back. He was ready to afford any information that the gentlemen required.

"It is not much that I am going to ask," said Field. "Only this: Please take us at once to the spot where we can find the body of Sir Charles Darryll."

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Bentwood jumped nimbly to his feet. The question seemed to fairly stagger him. If he had thought of concealing anything, he abandoned the idea now.

"Come this way, gentlemen," he said. "You are too many for me altogether. I wish to heaven that I had kept my medical discoveries to myself."

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CHAPTER XXXVIII

Bentwood led the way from the dining-room up a back staircase, and paused before what looked like a portion of the wallpaper. There was a little discoloured spot about half way between the dado and the floor, and on this the doctor pressed a shaking thumb. A part of the wall fell away and disclosed a small room beyond. The room had evidently been occupied lately, for there was a fire in the grate and the remains of a meal on the table. The room itself was empty.

"Well, I'm hanged," Bentwood cried. "Gentlemen, I can't tell you now. You asked to see the body of Sir Charles Darryll, and I have done my best to satisfy your curiosity. The last time I saw the body it was here. It seems to have vanished, and I know no more than the dead what has happened. I'm telling you no more than the truth."

That the man was telling the truth was evidenced by the expression of his face. Field had no more questions to ask, because he was quite sure of the fact. On the table lay a letter, which the inspector first glanced at and then placed in his pocket.

"I am just a little disappointed," he said, "because I fancied that I had the complete and crowning surprise for you here tonight, Colonel. You had better go off with my men, because I have no further need of your services for the present, Dr. Bentwood. Perhaps to-morrow I may have the pleasure of calling upon you. Good night."

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The doctor vanished from the house, which was empty now, save for Berrington and Field. The latter put out the lights and prepared to leave by way of the front door.

"What are you going to do next?" Berrington asked.

"Go back to headquarters and report progress," Field explained. "The rest is a matter of chance. I fancy I can see my way pretty clearly as to what has happened. Come along, sir; on the whole we have no call to be dissatisfied."

But the events of the night were by no means over yet. A battered constable at the Yard who had just had his head bandaged up had a story to tell. The prisoners from No. 100, Audley Place, had not been conveyed to durance vile without one accident that had been attended with a fatal tragedy. The officer told his story painfully.

"It was that little devil by the side of the driver," he said. "It's lucky for me that he was not a big man instead of a bag of bones. We'd come about half way when he turned and half throttled the driver and then put speed on the motor. There was a struggle for the steering gear, and then the

whole show came to grief on a bridge. We were all pitched out, but we hung to our prisoners, who are a pretty sight, sir. Mr. Richford pitched over the side of the bridge on to the metals of the railway lines below and he was killed on the spot. I don't want another game like that."

Surely enough Richford had been killed. His neck had been broken, and he had died without the slightest pain. Berrington, listening gravely to the story, felt no shock from the recital that he had heard. The world was well rid of a poisonous scoundrel, and Beatrice would be free now to marry the man of her choice.

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"Was Sartoris hurt?" he asked, a little ashamed to feel that he would have been glad to hear so for Mary's sake. "A delicate man like that——"

"Internally, the doctor says," the officer went on; "been spitting blood ever since he has."

Berrington expressed a desire to see the cripple, who received him without any sign of feeling. He was lying back in an arm chair, his face white and set.

"You need not condole with me," he said. "Don't ask me to make a deathbed confession, for that kind of thing is sheer waste of time. I know that I'm dying. I know that I may fall back at any moment, and then there will be the end. I'm full of blood inside. I might have told that fool of a doctor what he had come to find out—that a broken rib has pierced the lung, and I'm bleeding away quietly. Feel my hands."

Berrington touched the cold, clammy fingers. They were icy with the touch of death.

"*Rigor mortis*," Sartoris said. "Only a few minutes now. It's a good thing for you, and it's a good thing for Mary, who has been cursed with a brother like me. It's, it's——"

Sartoris said no more. There was a bubbling kind of sigh, blood welled from his mouth and ran down his coat, his head dropped on one side, and he was gone. There was nothing to be said, nothing to be done. On the whole it was just as well.

"It's a ghastly business altogether," Berrington said to Field. "Old soldier as I am, I have had quite enough of horrors for one night. I understand that Miss Grey returned to the *Royal Palace* with Mrs. Richford. I had better go and tell them both what has happened."

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Field agreed, and Berrington departed on his errand. It was not much past eleven yet, so there was plenty of time. Mary and Beatrice had gone back to the hotel in care of Mark Ventmore. They were seated in the drawing-room when Berrington arrived.

Beatrice crossed the room quickly. She wanted to have a few words with Berrington before the others joined in the discussion; she wanted to know if anything had been discovered.

"About my father?" she asked. "This suspense is horrible. Have they not got on the track yet? Why did they want to do that disgraceful thing at all?"

Berrington explained as far as possible. Beatrice was quick to see the meaning of it all. The recital of the story made her a little easier in her mind.

"Possibly by this time to-morrow," Berrington said. "Meanwhile I have something to tell both you and Miss Grey that will be a shock to you, though personally it would be hypocritical to regard it in the light of a deplorable event. There was an accident to the motor car."

"Mr. Sartoris, I mean Mr. Grey, has he escaped?" Beatrice cried. "Yes?"

"I don't think that he was trying to escape. I fancy it was more in the spirit of diabolical mischief than anything else, but he attacked the driver and made a grab for the steering wheel. The result was a smash on a bridge, and the motor was upset. Stephen Richford was pitched clean over the bridge on to the lines, and—and——"

"Killed on the spot?" Beatrice asked quietly. "Would that I could say that I am sorry. It is the best thing that could have happened. And the rest of them?"

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"There was not much damage done, except to Sartoris, or Grey, rather. The body of the car struck him on the chest, and a rib stuck into his lung. He bled to death. I was the last person to see him. To the end he was as hard and callous as ever. Will you tell Mary, please? It would come better from you."

Berrington and Ventmore stood talking quietly together whilst Beatrice performed her sad task. Mark listened to all that Berrington had to tell.

"And yet all this bother might have been saved," he said. "My father knew all about those concessions, and he has a pretty good idea of the value of them. Only yesterday he was talking to me about it. If Sir Charles had gone to him, he could have got every penny that he required. But you see, I was not on good terms with my father at the time, though that is all forgiven and forgotten now. At any rate I think we should ask my father's assistance if only to clear the good name of Sir Charles, and make a provision for Beatrice. Now that Richford is dead, something will have to be done. Don't you think so?"

"I am quite sure that you are right," Berrington said. "Your father is rich, and a remarkably good man of business. He is the very one to put matters on a proper footing, and see that the money is returned to the company that Sir Charles was entangled with. You say that those ruby mines are

really a good property?"

"My father says that they are splendid," Mark replied. "Enough to give Sir Charles a large income, pay his debts, and provide for Miss Decié besides. I shall see my father to-night, and will go thoroughly into the question with him."

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The thing was left at that, and Berrington made his preparations to depart. Mary was crying quietly now with the keen edge of her grief taken off. Mark and Beatrice drew aside, so that the others could talk in private.

"What shall I say to you, Mary?" Berrington asked.

"What can you say?" the girl asked in a gentle tone. "You are a good man, Phil, and it is good to know that you have loved me so devotedly and sincerely. I shall be able to come to you now and take up the thread of my happiness, where I deliberately snapped it three years ago. If my brother had not been misled by a designing woman——"

"Mary," Berrington said with firmness. "You are utterly wrong. I have had the story from Field only to-night, who has heard it from the lips of Miss Decié herself. She is a girl as good and pure as yourself. From first to last she was deceived. If Frank Leviter, the man who sacrificed his life for her sake and whom she loved, had lived, the mask would have fallen from your eyes. Your brother treated Violet Decié as he treated you, as he treated everybody. He was bad to the core of his being, and he has been saved from a shameful death by an accident. If you will try to get all that into your mind you will be a happier woman. You have lost three of the best years of your life—years that belonged to me as well as to you—in pursuit of a mistaken sense of duty. This must be clearly understood between us if the path of our married life is to be free from care."

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Mary bent her head and said nothing. And yet, deep down in her heart she knew that Berrington had said no more than the truth. She placed her hand in his.

"I am ready for you when the time comes, Phil," she whispered. "Only one thing I ask. Never let this be mentioned between us again."

"That I faithfully promise," said Berrington. "It is what I was going to suggest. Do you stay here to-night with Beatrice Darryll?"

Mary replied that that was the arrangement. Meanwhile Mark had been discussing the future with Beatrice. She had warmly approved of all that her lover had said about his father. She was glad to know that old Mr. Ventmore would not oppose the marriage, and that her love for him would not tend to keep Mark a poor man.

"So perhaps you had better let me have all those papers that Sartoris was so anxious to get hold of," Mark concluded. "Could you let me have them now?"

"Of course I can," Beatrice said. "I'll go and get them for you from my room. Mary Grey is sharing my bed with me to-night—to-morrow I shall arrange for her to have my father's room. I'll get the papers at once if you will wait."

The papers were found with some little delay, and Beatrice was preparing to come downstairs again when it seemed to her that she heard a noise in the room next to her, the bedroom that had been occupied by Sir Charles. It was a creeping kind of noise followed by what was most unmistakably a sneeze.

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Beatrice hesitated just for a moment, for her nerves had been much strained lately. Then she put her fear from her and walked into the next room. Only one of the electric lights gave a feeble glimmer over the room. A man stood there, a man who was changing his upper garments. Beatrice gave a little cry and staggered back into the doorway. The man turned at the same time, and saw that he was observed. His face was as white as that of Beatrice.

"Father!" the girl said, "father! Is it possible that I am not dreaming and that you are in the flesh before me again? Oh, father, father!"

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CHAPTER XXXIX

A deadly faintness came over Beatrice. Torn and distracted as she had been of late, this last discovery was almost too much for her. She could only stand there with her hand upon her heart to still its passionate beating.

Yes, it was her father, beyond the shadow of a doubt. How he got there Beatrice could not possibly have told. He was looking much the same as when Beatrice had seen him last, save that his clothes were not so neat and he had not been shaved for some days. He seemed quite resigned to the situation although his expression was cross and irritable. He motioned to Beatrice to shut the door.

"Why don't you close the door?" he demanded. "Suppose anybody saw me?"

Beatrice was getting back some of her self-possession by this time. She closed the door and then

took her seat on the edge of her father's bed.

"Why should you not be seen?" she asked. "What difference can it possibly make? We have all been looking for you everywhere. Where have you been?"

"I'm not quite sure," was the strange reply. "But you seem to have lost sight of my peculiar situation, Beatrice. My head is a little strange and confused, but I dare say it will come right presently. What happened to me on the night of the dinner party?"

"I did not see that anything happened," Beatrice said. "I suppose you went to bed in the ordinary way. I did not see that there was anything——"

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"You didn't notice that I had too much wine with my dinner?"

Beatrice was fain to admit that she had not noticed anything of the kind. She wondered how much her father really knew as to what had happened.

"There has been a great deal of fuss," Sir Charles said. He proceeded to dress himself in certain old clothes and took up a beard and spectacles from the dressing table. Beatrice watched him with a growing feeling that he had taken leave of his senses.

"Why are you going to use those things?" she asked.

"Because it is absolutely necessary," Sir Charles said irritably. "I came here in this disguise to pick out certain things that I needed. A kind friend furnished this disguise, and also money for me to get away."

"But why do you want to get away?" Beatrice asked, more puzzled than ever.

"My dear child, your memory must be sadly defective," Sir Charles said sharply. "You seem to forget that I am in great difficulties. Richford was going to put me right, but Richford is dead. It is just my luck."

"Who told you that?" Beatrice asked. "Why it was only tonight——"

"My dear, there was a gentleman outside the hotel who told somebody else. Richford was arrested at the house of a friend of mine; I saw the thing done. Then I realized that my position was desperate. You see I have been stopping at Wandsworth with a friend for the last two or three days."

Beatrice began to understand a little. The cunning nature of the plot was beginning to unfold itself before her.

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"The name of that friend is Mr. Carl Sartoris, I suppose?" Beatrice asked.

"That's the man. Though I cannot see how you came to know that. I met Sartoris before on business. He wanted me to sell him some rubbishy Ruby Mines concessions that Lord Edward Decié and myself procured years ago. I refused to take his money then; it did not seem fair. Besides I was in funds at the time."

Beatrice could hardly refrain from smiling at the naïve confession.

"I should like to hear more about that," she said.

"I was just coming to it," Sir Charles went on. "I must have taken too much wine on that night; I seemed to sleep for days. When I came to myself I was in a strange room, with a doctor bending over me."

"A tall man with a beard? A man who carries drink all over him?" Beatrice asked.

"That is the fellow," Sir Charles said with obvious surprise, "though how you could know all these things puzzles me. Name of Bentwood. Sartoris was in the room, too. He told me that I had been found wandering about, and he told me that I was in danger of immediate arrest. When I suggested sending for Richford, he said that Richford had come to grief, and that the police were after him. Altogether, my dear child, my situation was not one to be envied."

"I quite understand that," Beatrice said, not without sarcasm.

"My dear, it was dreadful. Richford had come to grief. So far as I knew to the contrary, my only child was mated to a felon. Think of my mental agony!"

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"I don't think we need dwell on that," Beatrice said with some traces of scorn in her voice. "You always knew that Stephen Richford was a scoundrel. He was not the less of a scoundrel because he could give me a position as the wife of a rich man, and because he could free you from a great and terrible danger. My mental agony counted for something too."

"I should think it did," Sir Charles said pompously. "I find that you were married, that all the papers were talking of my strange disappearance. Strangely enough, I never could get a sight of a daily newspaper. I don't know why. At any rate, you were married. Richford had come to grief, and thus was in hourly expectation of arrest. It was at this point that my friend Carl Sartoris came in. He kept me safe, he insisted upon giving me £500 for those concessions, which really was a delicate way of finding me the money to leave the country. Everything was arranged for my departure when the police came to the house of my friend Sartoris and took *him* off also. Directly

I found that out, that something was wrong there, I crept away from the house, and here I am."

Sir Charles held out his hands helplessly. He always expected other people to do things for him. Beatrice began to see her side of the case. Richford was dead, and the large sum of money that he had promised Sir Charles was no longer available. And Beatrice recalled the night of the dinner party, when her father had taken her to the window, and had shown her the two men watching silently below. The danger was just as great as ever; it was just as imperative that Sir Charles should leave the country. [Pg 308]

Out of the whirling emotion in Beatrice's head order began to be restored. Everybody, so far as the girl knew, believed her father to be dead. The body had been spirited away for some reason known to Sartoris and his colleagues; nobody ever expected to see Sir Charles again. If he could slip out of the country now, and go abroad, the danger would be averted. Beatrice began to see her way to manage the thing.

"I will do what I can," she said. "You have that £500 intact? Very good. But there are some things that I am bound to tell you. People who are in a position to know, say that your mining concessions are very valuable indeed."

"Worth absolutely nothing," Sir Charles said. "Tried it before. Besides, if they were worth a lot of money, it is impossible to work the mine. The country is too disturbed and dangerous for anything of that kind. Besides, I have sold the concessions, and there is an end of it. Even without a business mind you can see that."

"All the same, I feel pretty sure that I am right," Beatrice said. "My dear father, you have been the victim of a strange conspiracy. You had not taken too much wine that night, but you were drugged by some mineral or vegetable in such a manner that the next day you were taken for dead. I did not know that fact till I was married; indeed, the news was kept from me and brought to me at church. The man whom you regard as your benefactor wanted certain papers of yours, and the doctor, Bentwood, was going to do the drugging. It was done too well; you were regarded as dead. Then, for some reason or other, probably because it was necessary for you to sign certain papers—your body was stolen, and you were taken, still in a state like death, to the house of Carl Sartoris at Wandsworth." [Pg 309]

"God bless my soul, you don't really mean it?" Sir Charles cried.

"Indeed I do," Beatrice went on. "This Bentwood is a doctor who is an expert in the miracles and the hocus pocus of the East. The drug they administered to you is not known in England; the thing has never been seen here. I understand that they could have kept you in a state of suspended animation as long as they pleased. But they desired to see you in the flesh again so that you could sign that paper relating to those mines."

"I signed the paper this very morning," Sir Charles cried. "But I don't understand it all. Begin at the beginning and tell me all over again."

Beatrice did so, but it was a long time before her father appeared to comprehend. When he did so he was utterly incapable of seeing what Carl Sartoris had had in his mind.

"I can see that they didn't want to murder me," he said. "A *post-mortem* would have prevented that part of the scheme that required my signature—hence the daring theft of my body. But the main thing is that I have made £500 by the transaction."

Beatrice's lip curled scornfully.

"I had hoped that you would have taken another view of the case," she said. "I am afraid that you will never alter, father. Richford is dead, and I am free from him. Sartoris is dead, also, so we shall never know what his ultimate designs were. I don't see that you can keep that money under the circumstances, father." [Pg 310]

Sir Charles was emphatically of a different opinion. Besides, as he pointedly put it, how was he going to get away without funds?

"I had forgotten that side of the matter," Beatrice said. "But I am not without friends. There is Mark Ventmore, for instance. If I were to ask him——"

"You are not to do anything of the kind," Sir Charles said angrily. "How on earth am I going to restore this money to Sartoris when the poor fellow is dead? He may not have a single relative in the world, for all I know. The money is honestly mine, and it is sufficient to take me out of this accursed country where detectives are waiting for me at every corner. And now you want to bring Mark Ventmore into it."

"Mark is the soul of honour," Beatrice said. "I am sure that he——"

"Has been in the past a confounded nuisance," Sir Charles interrupted. "It looks as if he were going to be just as much trouble in the future."

"He is the man I am going to marry," Beatrice said quietly. "I offered my life to save you and your good name, and a merciful providence released me from the sacrifice. Next time, I please myself. I shall never marry anybody but Mark."

"Of course you won't," Sir Charles said, in an aggrieved voice. "If you had never seen Mark Ventmore you would have been married to Richford a year ago, in which case I should not stand

in my present awkward position. But we are only wasting time. Help me on with this beard and then walk as far as the hall with me. Then you can give me a kiss, and I'll take a cab and give you my blessing."

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Beatrice said nothing. She would keep his secret. And all the world should hear that Sir Charles had been the victim of a calamity that could not be solved.

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CHAPTER XL

Therefore there was nothing to be done. Perhaps after the lapse of years Mark might be told the strange sequel to the story. Sir Charles might be visited from time to time in the place where he would choose to hide himself. It would be by no means an enviable fate for a man who had lived and enjoyed the world as Sir Charles had done, but he must lie on the bed that he had made.

"It shall be exactly as you say," Beatrice said. "One moment and I will be with you again. I have some friends, downstairs, who will wonder at my long absence. I will go and make some excuse for you. Perhaps you had better come to the foot of the stairs."

At the foot of the stairs leading to the great hall, Mark stood waiting. At the sight of him Sir Charles drew back, muttering something by no means complimentary to the young man, under his breath.

"I stay in the bedroom till he has gone," he said, as he stepped back.

Beatrice hoped that her face did not betray signs of very much agitation. All the same, she rather wondered why Mark looked at her so very fixedly. Perhaps it was an uneasy conscience that was troubling the girl. Mark's first words startled her.

"So you have been the first to find it out?" he said.

"Find out what?" Beatrice stammered. "I—I don't understand what you mean."

"My dear girl, why try to blind me to the truth? Field told me Berrington actually *knows* that your father was concealed at 100, Audley Place. And I know all about that disgraceful City business, because my father told me all about it. Sir Charles has come back, he was with you just now; he is going to make his way to the Continent."

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Beatrice had no reply for the moment; her face was red with shame.

"Forgive me," she whispered at length. "You have guessed everything. I suppose it was your quick instinct that told you my companion was my father. But, my dearest Mark, cannot you see that he must fly? He has the money from Sartoris——"

"Who gave it him on purpose," Mark said eagerly. "Who bought a valuable thing for a mere song, thus putting a fortune in his pocket, and getting Sir Charles out of the way for good and all, at the same time. My dearest child, whatever your father may think or say, those ruby mine concessions are of fabulous value. My father has gone into the matter carefully, and he is prepared to back his opinion by large sums of money. My father is never wrong in these things. There is a fortune here for Sir Charles and also for Miss Decié. Let your father come out and say that he has been the victim of swindlers who had resolved to get his property from him. Let him call on my father, who to-morrow will give him a cheque for ten times the amount required to get him out of all his troubles. I can guarantee that."

"You mean to say that your father is actually prepared——"

"Certainly he is—on condition that Sir Charles and he are equal partners. I'll go and get my father to come round here now. Only I'll see Sir Charles first."

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Beatrice would have dissuaded him, but he would take no refusal. He burst into the bedroom of the discomfited baronet and asked him to remove his disguise. Sir Charles was too weak to do more than remonstrate in a gentlemanly way, but his troubled face grew clear as Mark proceeded with the argument. The sanguine side of the baronet's nature came up again.

"Really, my dear boy, this is exceedingly kind of you," he said. "Fact is, I had not the least idea that I was being treated in a really scandalous manner. I regarded Sartoris as a thoroughly good fellow who was going out of his way to do me a service. And if your father says that those mines are valuable, I am prepared to believe him, for there is no shrewder judge in the City. As Sartoris is dead, that deed that I signed falls to the ground."

"It would fall to the ground in any case," Mark said, "seeing that it was obtained by fraud. Now be so good as to dress yourself properly, and I will take a cab and go and fetch my father. The whole business can be settled on the spot."

Mark went off, Beatrice saying that she must go back to Mary Grey.

She hung lovingly on the arm of Mark as they crossed the corridor. The light was low there and nobody was about.

"I hope you are going to forgive me, dear," she said. "I came very near to paying a heavy penalty for not trusting in you, Mark. But everything is going my way now."

"Our way," Mark protested. "I don't care whether anybody is looking or not, I am going to kiss you, dearest. You have always belonged to me and to nobody else. I cannot possibly regard you in the light of Stephen Richford's widow. If I were you, I would not say anything to the others until after I have settled matters between your father and mine. Let Mary Grey have a good night's rest, and pack her off to bed as soon as possible."

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Mary was safely in bed and asleep before Mark came back. Berrington stayed long enough for Beatrice to tell him exactly what had happened. The melancholy shade that Beatrice had seen so long on Berrington's face had vanished altogether.

"My poor little girl is going to have peace and happiness at last," he said, with a deep thrill in his voice. "We shall value it all the more because we have waited for it so long, so that the three years of our probation will not be altogether wasted. I expect there will be a good deal of talk about Carl Sartoris for a few days to come, but that need not concern Mary, who has never been identified with that scoundrel, and whose name is Grey, after all. In the course of a few days I am going to take Mary away and we shall be married very quietly. I am determined to try to get the roses back to her cheeks again."

"I hope you will be happy, as you deserve to be," Beatrice said with some emotion. "But I shall be sorry to lose two such good, kind friends, and——"

"You are not going to lose us," Berrington said. "I am going to give up soldiering altogether. I have only carried it on for the last few years, because I needed something to keep me from brooding over my troubles. I am going to settle down on my property at last. Good-night."

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Beatrice shook Berrington warmly by the hand, and he kissed her little fingers. He had barely departed before Mark was back with a little wiry man with a keen face and a pair of grey eyes that seemed to see into everything.

"So this is Beatrice," he said, as he shook hands. "You must let me call you that, my dear, because you are going to be my daughter, Mark tells me. I am a plain man who has more or less lived for business all his life, but begins to see lately that business is not everything. It does not make for happiness, for instance. When I was ill I began to see that. But at any rate the result of my business can make others happy."

Beatrice blushed and smiled. She began to see that she was going to like Mark's father very much indeed. In quite a natural way she kissed him. The little grey man beamed with pleasure.

"Now that was real nice of you," he said. "Mark has a great deal more sense and discretion than I gave him credit for. He is making a name for himself, too. But you can't live on that kind of thing, at least not at first, and I'm going to give Mark £5000 a year, on condition that he takes a pretty little place in the country, where I can come and see you week ends. My dear, I feel that we are going to be very good friends indeed."

"I am quite certain of it," Beatrice said with tears in her eyes. "Everybody is so good to me. I can't think why, but they are."

"You'll find out if you look at yourself in the glass," Mr. Ventmore laughed. "There the secret lies. Not a bad compliment, eh, from a man who never tried his hand at that kind of thing before? And now let me go and see that father of yours. Did I bring my cheque-book, Mark?"

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Mark gaily answered his father that he did, and together the two went up the stairs. When they came down at length, there was an expression on the face of Mr. Ventmore that showed that he was by no means displeased with himself. Sir Charles was whistling an opera tune and was regarding a cigar with an air of critical attention.

"Everything is settled," he said. "Those City people will be paid off to-morrow, and I shall be free of them altogether. I shall never touch business again, Beatrice; this has been a lesson to me. And if not a rich man, I shall be very comfortably off. Whatever luxuries you may need in the future will not have to be schemed for. My dear girl, will you order a chicken and some salad and a pint of some good dry champagne to be brought here? I'm particularly ravenous with hunger. Wonderful how one's appetite comes back when you get your mind free from worry. And to think of those concessions being of that value, after all. Ring the bell, please."

The next day was a good one for the evening papers. Sir Charles was interviewed till he was hot and angry and disposed to order his tormentors out of the room. Scotland Yard had its own version of the case, too, which was not quite in accordance with the real facts. But as Berrington said, the excitement soon cooled down, and the next sensation drove the recollection of Sir Charles's wonderful experience out of the public mind. Sir Charles and his daughter went off to the country, so as to escape so much attention, and Berrington and Mary Grey went along. At the end of the week there was a wedding at the pretty church in the village, and Mary was happy at last. Mark and Beatrice would have to wait for six months or so, because there was public opinion to be thought of, though as a matter of fact the thing was the most empty form.

[Pg 318]

"I hope we shall be as happy as they are," Mark said as he and Beatrice watched the train slowly glide into the darkness. "They have earned it, too."

"I think we both have," Beatrice said. "But don't look backward, especially on a day like this. Let us go into the big wood, and pick daffodils."

And in the train Berrington had gathered his wife to his heart and kissed her tenderly. He looked down into the soft eyes from which the shadow had gone for ever.

"And you are happy at last, darling?" he said; "though you are very silent."

"Silent, yes," Mary said quietly. "Quiet, too. But thank God no longer the Slave of Silence!"



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Transcriber's Note:

Inconsistent hyphenation and capitalization have been retained as in the original text. Inconsistent usage of American versus British spelling has also been retained. In the original text, positive contractions (He'll, I'd, I'll, I'm, they've, etc.) were printed with half spaces before the apostrophe. These spaces have been removed in this edition.

The following corrections were made:

- Missing close quotes added: p. 43: On the other hand, if there is—"; p. 43: But the lady who wrote that letter—"; p. 178: Can you speak freely to me for a time?"; p. 237: who was a cripple."; p. 312: don't understand what you mean."
- Missing open quotes added: p. 221: "The figures 4. 4. '93, I mean."; p. 222: "4. 4. '93 means the fourth of April 1893
Extra open quotes removed: p. 262 (before Look) Look at that 'e,' too, in the word 'nine.'
- Single quote to double quote: p. 213: "If you knew all that I do you would not hesitate for a moment. If you care to write it down—"
- Typos: try to tray (p. 17: pseudo waiter with his tray); then to than (p. 17: Scarcely had he left the conservatory by a door leading to the corridor than Richford strolled in.); his to her (p. 37: To her great surprise); at to as (p. 53: as Beatrice finished her story); in to if (p. 55: as if his *vis a vis* was); must to most (p. 61: most exquisitely furnished); inspentor to inspector (p. 91: The inspector smeared his hand further along the carpet.); quiet to quite (p. 121: quite another matter); does to dose (p. 124: a strong dose of sal-volatile); mappd to mapped (p. 129: mapped out a line for himself); somethink to something (p. 130: with something like a lovelight); had to has (p. 139: But it looks as if he has paid for his indiscretion.); colon to period (p. 147: so many threads in the plot.); undertand to understand (p. 147: I understand that you sent for me.); Satoris to Sartoris (p. 177: Not that he failed to trust

Mary Sartoris.); wondred to wondered (p. 203: Whatever were they doing here, just now, Mary wondered?); Bumah to Burmah (p. 219: And that property is probably a ruby mine in Burmah.); extra 'be' removed (p. 234: Will you be so good as to come this way and shut the door?); extra comma removed (p. 301: after "Your brother treated Violet Decié"); post-morten to post-mortem (p. 309: A *post-mortem* would have prevented that part); Phillip to Philip (p. 132: He was passionately in love, Philip.)

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