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BY

STANLEY PORTAL HYATT

Author of "Little Brown Brother," "End of the Road," etc.

*With a Frontispiece by
H. RICHARD BOEHM*

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PROLOGUE

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Grierson refilled the magazine of his rifle carefully—when you are dealing with South American patriots it is better to take no chances, even though the enemy has retreated—then he wiped a couple of half-dried blood spots off his cheek, and, after that, went over to where lay the body of the man from whom that same blood had spurted.

For a full minute he stood very still, gazing with sombre eyes at the kindly face which seemed to be smiling back at him even in death; then he knelt down, and, with infinite gentleness, smoothed the ruffled hair, arranged the collar so as to hide the bullet hole in the bronzed throat, and crossed the hands on the breast. When he got up again his face was twitching strangely, seeing which, the American officer, who had come up behind him, suddenly became busy with his men.

It was one of those stories which seldom get into the newspapers, possibly because they are so utterly unimportant in themselves—a ragged band of half-breeds robbing and murdering in the name of liberty; a landing party of marines from the nearest warship, which happened to be American; and a futile little fight ending, as usual, in the defeat of the brigands. Only this time, an Englishman, who had gone out with the marines, had been killed; and now Grierson, his friend, was trying to realise the fact.

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"He was awfully good to me, the whitest man that ever stepped. I met him down the coast a year ago—my luck was right out—and he brought me along with him. I hadn't had a proper meal for days, much less a smoke, and he'd only my word for who I was. Yet he risked it, and I've been here ever since." Grierson, who had been walking in silence beside the marine officer, spoke suddenly.

The American nodded sympathetically. "It was hard luck to be killed by a rotten Dago outfit like that. Whenever you get a coloured man talking about liberty you know he's just prospecting round for a chance to break the Eighth Commandment."

Grierson muttered a curse; then, as if he wanted to confide in someone, possibly as a relief to his own feelings, "His partner will be here in a week's time; he was on his way already. When he comes I shall clear out and go home."

Captain Harben nodded again. "Meaning England?" he asked.

"Yes, England—London. I've had ten years knocking about the world—China, India, Australia, and all round this forsaken continent; and the sum total of what I've got to show for it is the fever and a couple of knife scars in my back—patriots again, one Hindu, one Peruvian. So I think I had better go home and begin afresh—if I can." And he gave a bitter little laugh.

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The American glanced sharply at the tall, thin figure and haggard face. When they had started out that morning to drive the saviours of their country out of the spirit stores they were looting, Grierson had struck him as a keen youngster with a rather infectious laugh, and his appreciation had been increased by the way in which the other had dropped a running insurgent at four hundred yards' range; now, however, the captain found himself wondering whether, after all, it was not too late for his companion to talk of beginning life afresh.

At dinner that night he expressed his doubts to the Consul, who shook his head. "Locke, the man they killed to-day, told me young Grierson had been through a pretty rough time, touched rock bottom. He was going into the British Army, but had to throw it up, and went out to the Orient for some Company which failed soon after, leaving him stranded. Since then everything he had been in has turned out wrong; and now this has gone.... Queer how some men do get the cards dealt them that way.... He's clever, writes very well, and might have done something at it. Locke's death will be an ugly blow to him." Being a kindly man and none too successful himself, he sighed in sympathy, then mixed another whisky and soda, and passed on to official matters.

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A little later Captain Harben harked back to the former question. "He's got plenty of pluck. He was all there when it came to a fight. I like him."

"So do I," the other answered, "only I guess pluck of that sort won't help him much in England, and you know, or at least I know, that a fellow who's knocked about a lot doesn't suit civilisation, or civilisation doesn't suit him—put it which way you like, the result is the same. His nerves go under, somehow, and it ends so," nodding towards the whisky bottle.

Meanwhile Grierson was sitting on the verandah of his dead employer's house staring out into the night, and trying to make plans for the future.

"Whatever happens, I don't mean to starve again," he muttered.

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PEOPLE OF POSITION

CHAPTER I

[Pg 1]

Mrs. Marlow flicked a crumb off her dress with rather unnecessary care. "I've had a most annoying letter from Jimmy to-day. It came by the second post, after Henry had gone to the City, and quite upset me. His employer, Mr. Locke, has been killed in some disgraceful riot, and now Jimmy himself is coming home. Of course, in a way, I shall be glad to see him, and so will the rest of the family; but I know he's got no money, and no profession to fall back upon, and I cannot see what he is going to do for a living. If I asked him to do so, I have no doubt Henry would make a place for him in the office; but I am not going to have my husband burdened with my brother. Henry is too generous as it is; and the Stock Exchange is in such a fearful state now that it is difficult to make a bare living." She sighed heavily, and glanced round the expensively furnished drawing-room, as if wondering whether that abominable tendency towards suspicion on the part of the public, which was causing it to eschew all sorts of speculation, might not result in her losing the few luxuries she did possess.

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Her visitor, Mrs. Grimmer, wife of the junior partner in the well-known City firm of Hornaday, Grimes, and Grimmer, dried fruit brokers, nodded with an affectation of sympathy which she did not feel—the Marlows had a touring car and a motor-brougham, whilst she had only a one-horse carriage—and held out her cup to be refilled. She had known her hostess for a good many years, over thirty in fact, ever since she and May Marlow, who was then May Grierson and had thick flaxen plaits tied with blue ribbon, had met at their first children's party. Walter Grierson, the eldest of the family, now a City solicitor, had been eleven at that time, whilst May had been seven and Ida five; but Jimmy had not arrived until three summers later.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Grierson belonged to eminently solid families, whose forebears for generations had looked to the City for their living. To them, the Square Mile stood for Respectability, just as the West End typified Laxity and Luxury; whilst outside these limits there was nothing but the Lower Classes. They ignored the Underworld, possibly because they knew nothing of it, more likely because it had no place in their Scheme of Things, the two main articles of their creed being that every man must choose an occupation early and abide by his choice, and that every good woman must stay at home. The logical result of these Grierson ancestors and their kind was the Victorian age, the exaltation of the Supremely Bad in Art and the Supremely Proper in mankind. Mrs. Grierson had been Victorian in the fullest sense of the word, and she had lived and died with all her principles intact, believing in the Evangelical Church, the respectability of wealth, and the evil tendencies of modern thought. On the other hand, some alien strain had crept into Mr. Grierson, and he had not accepted the family traditions in their entirety; in fact, both his own relatives and those of his wife had found much to criticise in his ideas. Had he been able to shake himself free of the family, he would have liked nothing better than to possess a ranch in America or a sheep station in New South Wales. All his life, he longed, in secret, for open air, and freedom, and the society of men whose interests did not stop at Temple Bar; but, in the end, Fate, in the form of a business bequeathed him by his father, sent him to the City, and he resolutely put his dreams on one side. The inevitable happened. He was essentially an honourable man, and, not understanding the meaning of Commercial Morality, he imagined that other men in the City were the same; consequently, he met the fate of he who of old went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, though there was no Samaritan to sympathise; rather otherwise, in fact, for his fellows shook their heads scornfully over his failure, whilst admiring the business capacity of those into whose hands his capital had passed.

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The process of Mr. Grierson's ruin had been a comparatively slow one, the law requiring certain decencies to be observed in these matters; and his wife was dead, and his three elder children grown up and married, before the day when he discovered his own ruin, and took the quickest way out of the troubles of this world. He was mad, of course; everyone agreed on that point: not the least of the proofs being the fact that the only message he left was a letter for Jimmy, who was then at Sandhurst. The coroner had read the letter, and handed it back with a remark that it had no bearing whatsoever on the case; but no one else had seen it, nor had Jimmy given a hint of its contents to any of the family. It concerned him alone, he said. He would have to leave Sandhurst now and wanted to go abroad, and the others let him go, if not gladly, at least without any great regrets. They were all provided for; Walter was partner in a growing firm of solicitors; May had married Henry Marlow, a stockbroker; whilst Ida's husband was, if not actually in the City, at least very respectable, being a Northampton boot factor. They were very fond of Jimmy,

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genuinely fond of him, both from the purely correct point of view, as being their brother, and for his own happy disposition; but, none the less, there had always been a certain jealousy of their father's evident preference for him, a jealousy mingled with surprise, or even resentment, Jimmy being essentially unpractical, and almost unconventional. Moreover, they had never liked the idea of his going to Sandhurst. None of the family had been in the Service before; and it was a matter of common knowledge that no man could make financial headway in the Army. So, when, through Mr. Marlow's influence, the boy obtained a billet in China, the family heaved sighs of relief, and though, throughout the next ten years, his sisters kept up as regular a correspondence as his wanderings allowed, their home concerns and increasing families inevitably weakened their interest in him. They had their own circles, in which he had no part, though, on the other hand, when he did think of England, which was often during those years of hardship and disappointment, Jimmy always looked on them as essentially his own people, to whom, one day, he would return, having no one else....

Mrs. Grimmer sipped her tea slowly, and asked for further particulars concerning the absent wanderer. [Pg 6]

"Does he say what he proposes to do?"

Mrs. Marlow shook her head. "No, only that he's sick of knocking about, and thinks he will try his luck at home. It's very selfish of him, because he has never been a credit to us; and, of course, naturally, everyone will know he's our brother."

"What has he done that wasn't—wasn't quite the thing?" the visitor asked.

Mrs. Marlow looked a little puzzled. "Well, I don't know that there's anything, exactly—at least that way. Only, Luke Chapman and her husband met him in Calcutta three years ago—Mr. Chapman has a branch there, you know—and Luke told me that he was doing nothing, and living at a queer sort of hotel, where ships' officers and those sort of people stay, not at all the thing. Then, you see, he's done no good. He's just as poor as when he went out ten years ago."

"So he's done no harm and no good. Then you can keep an open mind about him, May. Meanwhile, if I were you, I should try and find him a wife with money. He's sure to be interesting, you know. Men who travel usually are. Let me know when he comes back, as I should like to meet him again. Well, good-bye, dear, and don't worry too much about your black sheep. The colour may come off, or you may be able to get him whitewashed." [Pg 7]

"Edith Grimmer was very flippant about it," Mrs. Marlow complained to her husband that evening, after she had shown him Jimmy's letter and had heard his remarks thereon. "I didn't like her tone at all. She has grown rather coarse lately, since they have got into that new set. They dine in town a good deal now, and I'm sure they can't afford it. She's taken to smoking cigarettes, too."

Her husband, a small man with a waxed moustache and the most perfect fitting clothes, frowned heavily. There had been girls, in fact there were still some, who might blow whole clouds of cigarette smoke in his face and only evoke a laugh from him; but they had nothing to do with his home life. Where the latter was concerned, he was very careful; and he fully agreed with May's prejudices. Such things injured one's position in the neighbourhood. "Edith is a very foolish woman," he said severely. "And Grimmer is little more sensible. He was talking a great deal of nonsense about South African mines when we were coming down in the train this evening. Crossley and Merchant were in the carriage, and I am sure they were pleased when I took him up sharply. I do not know whether he is aware that I was interested in the promotion of the Umchabeze Gold Dredging Syndicate; if so, his remarks were positively insulting. It seems he lost money over it. So did other people; but I can't help that." He threw his cigar end into the fire with a rather vicious gesture. [Pg 8]

His wife came across to his chair, put her hands on his shoulders, and kissed him gently on the forehead. "Never mind, dear. You mustn't let these silly people annoy you. I'm sorry now I worried you to-night about my brother, Jimmy. I might have left it until the morning, when you weren't tired."

He drew her face down to his and returned her kiss. She was perfectly content for him to be away all day, even for several days when he went golfing, and he was content to go; yet, in a sense, they were lovers still, after the fashion of those whose way through life has been easy.

"You were quite right to mention it, dear," he said. "Of course we must do what we can for him, have him to stay here when he lands, and so on. I daresay he will be quite presentable, after all. Why, a man I know at the club, Heydon, Amos Heydon, was in the East for twelve years, in a bank I think, and you would never imagine he had been out of the City. He's got all our ways." [Pg 9]

Mrs. Marlow sighed. "I hope you're right, Henry. You usually are, and you've had so much experience. But I wish we knew what he intended to do for a living. He is thirty now, or nearly that, and ought to be in a better position. The whole thing is most annoying. I must take care he does not tell the children stories which will make them dream at nights—Harold is sure to ask him for some, and you know what a memory the boy has. Then, too, we don't want Jimmy proposing to any of the nice girls we know, like Laura Stephens or May Cutler; for then we should have to confess that he had no means of any sort, and it would be horribly humiliating. See how well those young Cutlers have got on in their father's office. Of course, Edith Grimmer knows that Jimmy is a failure; but she won't talk about it."

Yet, at that very moment, Mrs. Grimmer was retelling the story of May's troubles to her husband and a couple of guests who had been dining with them.

"Jimmy always was a nice boy, not a bit of a prig. But he's not what you can call a success; and I fancy the Marlows won't want to exhibit him. Still, I shall have him to dinner and get some nice girls to meet him."

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Grimmer laughed. He had not forgotten what had passed between Marlow and himself in the train, and he was far from forgiving his loss over the gold dredging syndicate. "Have him by all means, Edith, if you think it will annoy those people. Besides, a Grierson who was interesting would be quite a show animal."

CHAPTER II

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Jimmy Grierson landed in England a broken man. What was almost worse, he was aware of the fact, and, whilst he resented the way in which Fate had dealt with him, he had no great hopes of altering things. He had drifted so long that, somehow, he supposed he must go on drifting. John Locke had stopped the process for a time, and given him something to stick to, something worth doing; but a bullet from an old Remington in the hands of a ragged Dago, a bullet probably aimed at someone else, had sent him adrift again. True, that same Dago had gone, a few seconds later, to whatever place there is reserved for his kind; but that did not alter matters; it avenged, perhaps, but it could not bring back, the one man besides his father for whom Jimmy had ever cared, who had ever understood him, and, therefore, been able to keep him from drifting.

His decision to return to England had been taken on the spur of the moment, without reflection; but he held to it, because no other course seemed to offer any better prospects. He knew, perfectly well, that Locke's partner would not want to keep him on, and he shrank from the ordeal of searching for employment again. He had been through it so often before; and he had learnt, long since, that the man on the spot only gets the temporary billets; the permanent staff is always recruited at home. Moreover, he had the fevers of half a dozen different countries in his system, and the shock of Locke's death brought at least one of them to the surface. Two Dagos helped him on board ship, a wreck, and though, physically, he was much stronger at the end of the voyage, his nerves were far from being right.

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London extended its welcome to him in the form of a drenching rain, and he shivered a little under the thin, ready-made overcoat he had bought from a German store on the Coast.

He had hoped that one of the family would have met the boat train, and carried him off to a real home; but, though there had been a welcoming hand for most of his fellow passengers, he, himself, scanned the crowd in vain for a familiar face. Even those who had come across the ocean with him seemed to forget him the moment they got out on to the platform. He became the stranger at once; so he stood to one side until they had all departed, feeling horribly alone. Still, he was home at last, in his own country, and he tried to work up a proper sense of elation as he waited in the station entrance, watching a porter hoisting his battered trunks on to a cab.

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It was already evening, and the stream of people was flowing inwards through the gates of the terminus, London's workers returning to those dreary rows of villas in the suburbs, which, probably, seemed delightfully peaceful, almost rural, by comparison with the noise and grime of the City. Some were closing dripping umbrellas; others, having no umbrellas, shook the rain out of the brims of their hats, and turned down their soaking coat-collars as they came under shelter. All looked more or less draggled and weary; yet you could see that they were on their way to their own houses, where there would be someone to welcome them, someone who had been waiting for them. Suddenly all Jimmy's sense of loneliness came back, and he shivered again as the cab splashed out of the muddy station yard, towards the hotel to which he had told his people to address their letters.

There was a letter from each of his sisters awaiting him, and he tore them open more eagerly than was his wont. Ida, writing from her home in Northampton, invited him to come down for a week at some vague future date; one of the children was unwell, and until it recovered it was impossible to fix a day. Still, they would be delighted to see him again. Her letters always had a note of stiffness in them, which was purely unintentional, or rather, purely natural, reflecting the one salient point in her character.

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May's letter began with an apology. They were so sorry they could not ask him down that night; but they had a large dinner party on, and he would have made an odd man. Doubtless, too, he would be tired after his journey and disinclined for such a function. The following day, however, they would be glad to have him. It was forty minutes' run from Victoria Station, and she would send the car to meet him at the other end.

Jimmy thrust the letters into his pocket, and followed his luggage up to his room, which was a perfect example of its kind, containing the irreducible minimum of furniture an hotel guest could require, and having, as its sole wall decoration, a notice imploring you to switch out the electric light when you did not actually require it. He was disappointed, though not annoyed. The excuses appeared genuine, if rather inadequate and he never suspected that May had spent the afternoon in a distressing state of anxiety lest he should change his mind, and, instead of going to the hotel,

come straight down in time for dinner.

"There is no telling what he may be like," she said to her sister-in-law, who was staying in the house. "We must see him first before we introduce him to people here. Why, he may not even possess a dress suit."

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Jimmy dined in the hotel. The dining-room was very empty, and he had a corner of it all to himself, a miserable contrast to the cheerful, crowded saloon of the mail steamer he had quitted that morning. He ate very little, and would not wait for coffee. He felt he must get outside that gloomy barn of the hostelry, must go where there was life and movement, and, and if he could find it, society.

The rain had ceased, and, as he came out of the dull side street into the Strand, he experienced for the first time that strange thrill, excitement, anticipation, almost exhilaration, which only the returned wanderer who comes back to the Greatest of Cities after years of absence, can know. When he had driven up to the hotel, the day population had been hurrying home through the downpour; now, though the street and the pavements were still glistening with the wet, and there was another deluge to come, London, the night side of London, was out as if there was no such things as rain and mud and sodden footwear.

Jimmy stood a couple of minutes, watching it, taking it all in, as though he had never seen it before. A policeman on point duty eyed him curiously, yet with no hint of suspicion. Most men, and practically every woman, remembered Jimmy's face when they met him a second time. He was not handsome, far from it; but, in some indefinable way, his grey eyes suggested sympathy, whilst the poise of his head spoke of determination verging on obstinacy.

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He was looking at the scene as a whole, rather than at individuals, and the policeman remarked, with a kind of grim satisfaction, that he let the women pass him unnoticed. Even when one turned back at the next corner and repassed him slowly, he seemed not to see her. Just as he was turning away, however, a girl's face did catch his eye, and, unconsciously, he stopped again. She was coming out of a restaurant a few yards away, accompanied by a man in evening dress, though she herself was in an ordinary walking costume. Tall and very graceful, with dark eyes and a perfect profile, she formed a curious contrast to her short and rather stout companion. It was only a question of a minute before they got into a waiting hansom and driven away; but, somehow, the incident worried Jimmy. He wondered who she was, what she was, and was so preoccupied with her that as he walked on eastwards, he hardly noticed that he left the Strand, with its life and hurry, for the comparative quietude of Fleet Street by night. He had come out of the hotel intending to have a drink at the first likely-looking bar he came to; but he was half-way between the Griffin and Ludgate Circus before he remembered he was thirsty.

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"Hullo, Grierson, my best of piracy experts. So you've come to Fleet Street at last, as I always said you would. Sneddon, let me introduce Mr. Grierson, an old colleague of mine on a short-lived paper in Shanghai. He knows more Chinese pirates than any man I ever met, not to mention gunrunners and opium smugglers; and he's perfectly invaluable to fill a column when the news has run short." The speaker, a man of about Jimmy's own age, with a keen, smooth-shaven face and restless eyes, shook hands heartily, and ordered another round of drinks.

At the sound of his voice, Jimmy's face lit up with genuine pleasure. He had known Douglas Kelly well on the China Coast, when the other was editing a local paper for a starvation wage, and, as Kelly said, he had written him many a column to fill up space with when both copy and advertisements were short. The British and American community, being absorbed in trade, and knowing nothing of literature, and often very little of the English language, as is the way of its kind, had failed to see the genius under the wild and not too temperate exterior, and had frowned on the young editor as a rather scandalous person entirely devoid of commercial instincts; but Jimmy had always stood by him, and when a sudden access of wealth, in the form of a draft for sixty pounds for a series of short stories in an American magazine, had enabled Kelly to say good-bye both to the China Coast and to his creditors, Grierson has regretted him as much, or even more, than had the latter.

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"So you've come to Fleet Street, at last," Kelly repeated. "I knew you would. And I suppose you are going to enter into competition with me. I believe you are the one man of whom I am really afraid."

Jimmy laughed. "I only landed to-day, and I wandered down here by chance. As for writing, I have done very little since I saw you off on that tramp steamer. There were two or three acquaintances of yours watching the mail boat next day on the chance of finding you."

"Herbst, I suppose, and the other squarehead from the hotel—what was his name?—oh, Heine, and that uncleanly Greek tailor. They were a dull lot, and I've forgotten them long ago. Tell me about yourself. Where have you been?"

"India, Australia, and the Dago Republics, where I saw the beginning and the end of various presidents. I made a couple of trips on a blockade runner, and went on a hidden treasure hunt. It sounds all right, thrilling and exciting, yet, when I size it up in my own mind, it comes down to a record of fever and disappointment; with a few purple patches which were so good that, somehow, they seem to have come out of another man's book, instead of being my own experiences."

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Kelly stared into his glass. "I know," he said very quietly. "I know the game, though I got out of it

sooner than you did, being wiser, as I always told you I was. I suppose you know I'm famous?"

Jimmy smiled; long ago, Douglas Kelly had explained to him his theory of self-advertisement, how, once he was strong enough to do so, he intended to go in for a regular system of blatant, unblushing egotism, which would pay equally little regard to the feelings of others and to the recognised canons of veracity. Now, it was evident that he was translating his theory into practice.

"Even in the Dago countries we used to get papers containing articles of yours," Jimmy said. "And I saw a review of one of your books. Did you put some of our old friends of the China Coast into them?"

Douglas Kelly shook his head emphatically. "They weren't even worth satirising. They might take it as flattery if I remembered their very existence.... I've done what I said I would, Grierson. I'm making a thousand a year now." He turned to his companion. "Sneddon, you might go back to the office, and see if there's anything doing. If anyone wants me, say I'm busy"; then when the other had gone, "How are things with you, Jimmy?" he asked bluntly.

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Jimmy laughed a little awkwardly. "Well, they shot my last employer, who was also my best friend, out there; and I came home because I thought it might change the luck."

"So you're broke, just as I used to be?"

"No, not exactly. I've got a few pounds left; but I've nothing to do, and I don't know what to turn my hand to—that's all." Jimmy answered, then as Kelly dived into his pocket and produced a cheque book, he flushed quickly, "No, old man. If I want that, I'll come to you; but I don't want it yet. Thanks very much, though."

Kelly shrugged his shoulders. "You're quite a change. It's generally the other way round. Men ask me for money, and I do the refusing." Usually, his expression was hard, almost cynical, but as he looked at Jimmy it softened, and he seemed to grow years younger. He was back again on the China Coast, in the days when success was a thing of the future, and therefore greatly to be prized. "You'll do well, Grierson, you've got it in you, just as I had. And, after all, London is the one place, the only market worth bringing your stuff to."

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"I will admit I had thought of writing, but I know how hard it is to get a start, and——" Jimmy began; but Kelly cut him short.

"Rot! It's hard for the ruck, for the ninety and nine, who, after all, ought to find it impossible, not merely hard. But it's different for you and me, Jimmy Grierson, because we're not in the ruck. Of course you'll write, for it's in you, and you would be a fool to try anything else. You won't jump into a job right away; and you'll have to fight as I fought. I started as a sub-editor on three pounds a week, correcting the grammar in the copy of men who were getting five times that amount—but I can get you a start of sorts, right away. Come around now to the *Record* office, and I'll introduce you to Dodgson, the editor, a perfectly uninspired person, who ought to have been a grocer's assistant and have sung in a chapel choir. But he has the grace to realise his limitations, and take my advice. It will mean two guineas every now and then for a Page Four article—a thousand words, you know."

Jimmy finished off his drink and stood up. He was beginning to understand that, after all, there was an element of sane, cool common sense behind Kelly's blatant self-assertiveness. It might irritate what the other called the "ruck," but it also cowed them, and they got out of his path; moreover, there was always the undeniable fact that the man had genius of no common order. Jimmy had been perfectly sincere when he said he had not come home intending to make his living by his pen. He had thought of doing so, certainly, or rather had longed to do so; but, like most amateurs, he had been deterred by what he had heard of the difficulties, and had put the idea on one side. Now, however, the proposition had come to him in a concrete form, from a man who had succeeded, a man, moreover, who knew his capacity, and was able to judge his prospects of success. After all, it was only part of that game of drift which he had been playing for the last ten years; and the new phase had this advantage—he might be able to make use of what he had learned during the previous stages of his drifting. So he followed Douglas Kelly out into Fleet Street, then down one of the narrow alleys, to the *Herald* office.

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The main entrance to the *Record* building, that through which the general public enters, when it wishes to pay for advertisements, or consult the files, or order back numbers, has a rather gorgeous swing door and a quite gorgeous door-keeper in uniform with no less than four medal ribbons on his breast; but all this is closed in by an iron grille when normal people leave the City, and the staff has to enter through a small door at the back, which is guarded by an old and surly porter, over the window of whose box hangs a peremptory and uncleanly notice forbidding anyone to smoke in the building.

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Douglas Kelly ignored both the porter and the notice, and went straight up to the second floor, where, after a moment's parley with a weary-looking secretary, he and Jimmy were admitted to the editor's room.

Somehow, Jimmy had always pictured the editor of a great daily as a plethoric person with keen eyes, and a background of leather-bound volumes; but this one was thin and insignificant; there was not a single book in his room, and, at the first glance, Jimmy was inclined to believe that his friend had been right when he spoke of the editor singing in a chapel choir. Yet, after Kelly had

introduced him briefly, as an old colleague, and Dodgson had put a few curt questions, Grierson began to change his mind.

Jimmy could talk well. He had, in an unusual degree, the art of putting things vividly and crisply, and he possessed an extraordinary memory for those little details which give actuality to the picture. When he described the shooting of a presidential candidate, Dodgson could see the man with his grimy hands and torn collar, crumpling up as the volley from the firing party caught him. The editor himself had never come in contact with crude realities such as this—a London County Councillor escaping by a hair's breadth from a fully-deserved conviction for corruption over a tramway contract was the nearest approach he had witnessed—but he understood the value of Jimmy's reminiscences, and, without a moment's hesitation, he asked him for an article, hinting plainly that, if the written matter were as good as his spoken words, the paper would be glad of many others.

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Jimmy left the room with an unwonted sense of elation. Kelly had withdrawn immediately he had introduced his friend, but he was waiting in the doorway. "Well, what did you do?" he asked.

"He's going to give me a chance," Jimmy answered. Kelly nodded. "Of course he will. He must. I introduced you. Don't you realise, James Grierson, that I am a man they dare not offend, because the great fool-public wants stuff with my signature; and, if the *Record* upset me, I could go across the road to the *Herald* and, perhaps, get a bigger salary? It's all a game of bluff, as I told you years ago in that fan-tan shop in Shanghai. I know you won't bluff through as I have done, because you have a streak of—what shall I call it?—early Victorian modesty, in you; but still you will come out on top, because you've got brains, instead of the whisky-soaked sponge which occupies the space behind the brow of the average Fleet Street man."

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"I shouldn't think you're very popular in Fleet Street," Jimmy remarked grimly.

Douglas Kelly shrugged his shoulders. "The ruck would dislike me anyway, because I know more than it does. Still, it need not worry. I am going to quit journalism, and go in for fiction soon, as you will do in due course.... What's the time?" They had come out into Fleet Street again, and he glanced upwards at the *Telegraph's* clock. "Half-past ten. It's too late to take you down to stay at my place, as I can't telephone to my wife. So I may as well stay in town. We'll wander round a bit, and after closing time, I'll take you up to one of my clubs."

"Your wife. So you're married?" Jimmy smiled, as though at some recollection. "You seem to have done pretty well all round; whilst I am still where I was."

The other took him up sharply, "Still where you were. Why, you've got your head full of copy, and you're right at your market, instead of being on that forsaken China Coast. Well, let's have a drink here for a start."

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CHAPTER III

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Jimmy awoke in the morning with a slight headache, and a fixed determination not to go out again with Douglas Kelly. True, it had cost him nothing, Kelly having carried him from one club to another, cashing a cheque at each, and spending the proceeds with such freedom as to evoke a protest from his guest.

"I want to impress you," Kelly had retorted. "I want to show you how well I've done. I always do the same when I get hold of any of you fellows from out there. Yet," he paused and looked at the other keenly, "you're such a queer beggar, that I don't suppose you are impressed. I needn't have tried it on you, after all," but, none the less, he had declined to let his companion go, and it had been past three when a sleepy night porter admitted Jimmy to the hotel, Kelly having declared his intention of taking a room at the club they had visited last.

Jimmy drew up his blind to find the sun shining in a cloudless sky, and his spirits went up at once. As a result of the deluge of the night before, London looked almost clean and bright, and he began to wonder at his depression of the previous evening. After all, it was very good to be home again, and, thanks to Kelly, he had already made a small start, which might lead to much bigger things. Kelly, himself, had arrived in England with nothing, an unknown man.

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From Kelly, his mind worked backwards to the girl he had seen enter the cab. It was curious how her face seemed fixed in his memory. The thought of her, and of her possible story, worried him all the time he was shaving, and he found himself wishing he had never noticed her. Somehow, he did not like the look of her companion, who seemed to treat her with a very perfunctory sort of courtesy, verging on familiarity, or even contempt. He was still thinking of her when he went down to breakfast; but the sight of a copy of the *Record*, the first real English daily he had seen for many years, a paper, moreover, which wanted him to write for it, changed the current of his thoughts, and he forgot all about the girl.

Dodgson had told him there was no hurry for the article, any time within the next week or so would do, and he, himself, knew that it would be impossible to write in the dreary atmosphere of the hotel; so he decided to go down to the City and call on his brother, Walter. There was no one else he wanted to see in town. All his former acquaintances had dropped clean out of his life, or, rather, he had dropped out of theirs; and, probably, he could not have found one of them, even

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had he wished to do so, which was not the case. He was a very lonely man, he told himself; and yet he did not feel bitter about that fact as he had done on the previous night; his meeting with Kelly, and the new hope with which the other had infused him, had changed his views greatly. Now, it seemed as if he had a prospect of doing something definite, of starting on a new career, his success in which would depend entirely on his own exertions.

Walter Grierson was a short, clean-shaven man with a decidedly pompous manner. He had been very successful in his profession, owing to his energy, rather than to his mental capacity, and he regarded unsuccessful men as little better than criminals. His whole outlook on life was severe, except in his own home, where he was a generous husband and indulgent father. Never having been tempted himself, he had no sympathy with those who fell, being quite unable to understand them. Steadiness was the virtue he most admired in younger men, meaning by that term the capacity for choosing and sticking to an orthodox method of livelihood and for maintaining an unwavering respectability of conduct. Jimmy's career, the wanderings from one country to another, the continual changes of occupation, had been a very real grief to him, violating as it did every canon of his creed. No one could call his brother steady.

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Walter Grierson was engaged when Jimmy called, and the visitor spent half an hour glancing round the gloomy office, and wondering how anyone could be content to spend his days in such a place. He wanted to smoke, but something in the attitude of the clerks restrained him, and he put his cigarette case back into his pocket. He was not sure about the three younger ones, whether they would be scandalised, or whether the smell of the tobacco would arouse cruel longings which could not be satisfied until the too-brief luncheon hour came round; but there was no mistaking the reprobation in the old managing clerk's face. Even their richest clients knew better than to disturb the microbes on the upper shelves with their smoke. Those same clients were all City men, dignified, and understanding the ways of the City, which are very different from those of San Francisco or Johannesburg. In London, it is only foreigners and green-fruit brokers and such like doubtful people, with neither self-respect nor position to maintain, who break the City's law. Stockbrokers are, of course, men apart from the rest. They draw most of their customers from a class which knows nothing of business; and must therefore be humoured; moreover, a little eccentricity, a lightheartedness, verging at times on the clownish, is useful, for, if duly reported, it procures the Stock Exchange a free advertisement in the Press. Even Mr. Marlow had been known to play football with a silk hat and wave a little Union Jack, when the news of a British victory, which meant an improvement in the Market, was recorded in a special edition. But his brother-in-law, Walter Grierson, had never done any of these things, having neither the need, nor the desire, for advertisement. Jimmy did not know the City, but he knew a good deal of mankind, and he gleaned something of the spirit and traditions of that office, as his eyes wandered from the rows of black, shiny deed boxes to the equally shiny pate of the managing clerk, and then to the drab-looking girl typist, pale-faced and narrow-chested, who seemed to finger the key-board as though the maddening click of her abominable machine had killed any individuality she might once have had, and turned her into a mere part of the mechanism of the City. The one spot of colour in the office was an insurance company's calendar, and, even on that, the design was crude and the inscription little more than a dull list of figures. Jimmy sighed, pitying them all. He did not know that those who have never experienced the crude things of life seldom have any desire for them. Being prosaic, they are satisfied with prosaic surroundings, which is a fortunate thing in an essentially prosaic age. There is very little room for romance in a world which gauges success by the measure of a reputed bank balance.

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At last, the client, who proved to have side whiskers and an ivory-handled umbrella, took his departure, and Walter Grierson came out in his wake. The solicitor greeted Jimmy, if not warmly, at least sincerely; then sat down and slowly took stock of the returned wanderer.

"You look better than I expected from what May told me you had said in your last letter. Yes, you look decidedly better. Still, you have changed a great deal, changed in many ways." He adjusted his gold-rimmed pince-nez, in order to make a closer scrutiny.

Jimmy laughed. "Well, you must remember, it's ten years since you saw me last, and I wasn't very old then. You, yourself, look exactly the same. I should have known you anywhere. How are Janet and the children?"

Walter Grierson's face brightened perceptibly. He was a family man above everything, and he gave his brother very full details. "Let me see, you've never seen George and Christine, have you?" he asked at the end of the recital.

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Jimmy shook his head. "No, I have seven or eight unknown nephews and nieces to inspect, or I'm not sure that it isn't nine. I've rather lost count."

The elder man frowned slightly; it was not quite the thing to refer to members of the family in that flippant way. Surely Jimmy could recollect the number of his sister's children. He gave the tally of the latter, with their names and ages, and with guarded comments on their peculiarities, from which Jimmy gathered that they were decidedly inferior to the little Walter Griersons. And after that there came a pause, short in duration, certainly, but very significant. After ten years' separation the brothers had exhausted their subjects of mutual interest in little over ten minutes.

Jimmy fingered the cigarette case in his pocket, knowing the consolation and the wisdom to be found in tobacco; but he did not like to produce it, and he had already noted that Walter's room was innocent of any ash-tray; so, instead, he racked his brains for a new topic of conversation. At last:

"You're the sole partner here now, aren't you?" he asked.

Walter nodded. "Yes, Jardine died three years back, and I don't want anyone else till I can take in Ralph, my eldest boy. He has a nasty cold, or you would have seen him in the office." He shook his head, as though at the thought of the dangerous after-effects of colds, and it struck Jimmy that, for a man of forty-three or forty-four, Walter was very old and stuffy. He, himself, often felt old and more than a little weary, but in quite another way. He was not snuffly and solemn in consequence; it was only that he knew his youth was slipping from him fast, perhaps had already slipped from him, as is the case with every European who stays too long in countries made for the coloured man, and it irritated him to think that, if success ever did come to him, it would probably be when he had lost the capacity for enjoyment.

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"Have you made any plans for your future movements?" Walter asked suddenly.

Jimmy started. "Well, yes—at least, last night I met an old friend of mine, and he advised me to go in for writing. I've done a bit of it, of course, and this man, Douglas Kelly—I expect you know his name." Walter shook his head; he never read anything except the *Times*. "He's a man who's made a big hit, and he knows what I can do. So I think of taking his advice. The *Record* has already asked me for an article."

Once more, Walter Grierson frowned, and then he sighed. The only journalists he had ever met had been connected with financial papers, and his negotiations with them had taught him the subtleties of scientific blackmail. Being a man of little imagination, though of retentive memory, he judged the whole profession by the two or three members of it, or rather pseudo-members, he had been unfortunate enough to encounter professionally.

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"I am sorry to hear your decision, Jimmy," he said. "Very sorry, indeed. You will find it a most precarious way of life, and it will bring you into contact with highly undesirable people. I had hoped, we had all hoped, that now you had returned you would settle down to something steady. Personally, I think you will be making a great mistake. But I suppose you know your own business best." He shook his head, as though, in his own mind, he was quite sure Jimmy did not know anything of the sort.

Then, once more, there was an awkward pause, and it was a relief to both of the brothers when the junior clerk came in with a card in his hand. Walter Grierson glanced at the name, then got up. "I am sorry, Jimmy; but this is a man with whom I had made an appointment. I would ask you to lunch with me, but there is more than a probability of my having to take him out. You must come down and stay with us soon. Janet told me to give you her love, and ask you to fix a date. I am very glad you called. Give my love to May when you see her to-night. And, Jimmy," he hesitated a little, "of course it is not for me to advise you; but I do wish you would reconsider that decision of yours. It's a most precarious calling, most precarious, and, I am afraid, one full of temptations." There was perfectly genuine concern in his voice, and yet, within a couple of minutes, Jimmy and his affairs were clean out of his mind, and he was deep in the business of his client.

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Jimmy lighted a cigarette on the landing outside his brother's office; but neither the tobacco, nor the drink he had a few minutes later, could alleviate his sense of disappointment. He was a very lonely man.

CHAPTER IV

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The Marlow motor-car, large and luxurious, with red panels and an expensive alien chauffeur, met Jimmy at the station. Mrs. Marlow hurried down to the hall as she heard the throbbing of the engine outside the front door, and greeted her brother with emotion which verged on tears.

"I am very glad to see you again, Jimmy, dear," she said, kissing him a second time. "And Henry, too, is delighted to have you. Of course, you have grown a great deal older, but I don't know that you have changed very much." She scrutinised his face, then noted, with something akin to dismay, that his clothes, though well cut, were neither new nor fashionable.

Jimmy, on his part, was trying to readjust his ideas. He had been picturing May as still rather rosy and inclined to plumpness, essentially suggestive of good nature and repose; now, he saw her thin, almost angular, a little hard of feature, though retaining some of her good looks. In his calculations, he had forgotten the four children she had brought into the world since he had seen her last.

May asked him a number of questions about himself, his health, and his doings, hardly waiting for his answers before passing on to something, fresh, and hardly listening when she did allow him time to reply; then—

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"I'll take you up to your room," she said. "Your trunks have gone up already. I have had to give you one of the smaller spare rooms, because my sister-in-law will be back to-night—you remember Laura, of course—and there may be someone else coming to-morrow." At the door of his room she paused. "Dinner is at half-past seven. We always dress, but don't you trouble, if you would rather not, or, or—" She stammered a little.

Jimmy understood. "I always retained my suit through all my ups and downs," he said with a smile. "It is the one absolute essential. It will get you credit when nothing else will. Many a time I have gone to an hotel with only the suit and a lot of old newspapers in my trunk, and not five dollars in my pocket."

Mrs. Marlow did not smile. Instead, she looked as she felt, shocked and pained; and as she went downstairs she was casting round for some scheme to stop Jimmy's flow of reminiscences. It would never do for him to talk in that way before people like the Graylings or the Bashfords; whilst, if the servants were to hear him, it would be all round the neighbourhood in a couple of days that Mrs. Marlow's brother was, or had been, a penniless adventurer.

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Jimmy did not come down till the dinner gong went; consequently, after he had shaken hands with Henry Marlow, they went straight into the dining-room, and May lost her chance of saying anything.

Marlow himself was hungry and ate heartily, and the guest was distinctly tired, thanks to Douglas Kelly; as a result, there was little said during the first three courses, except by Mrs. Marlow, who gave her husband a full account of all her own and the children's doings for that day, and the names of the people on whom she had called, and of other visitors whom she had met at their houses. Once or twice she tried to include Jimmy in the conversation, by asking if he did not remember this one or that, friends she had known before she was married; but, in every case, they were merely names to him; they had all been grown up when he was still at school, and now, after having forgotten their very existence for ten years, he could not feel the slightest interest in them.

After a while, Marlow, having taken the edge off his appetite, asked him a few questions about his wanderings, but paid little heed to his answers. Even when Jimmy told, in his essentially picturesque way, the story of John Locke's death, his brother-in-law merely remarked that such things were never allowed to occur in the British Empire, though, doubtless, they were to be expected under governments which had injured the market so greatly in the past by repudiating their bargains. Their debased silver currency and their worthless paper money were an absolute scandal, he added.

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May, on her part, gave a little gasp when told of the end of Locke's slayer; then, looking up, and seeing the parlour-maid standing open-mouthed, with a sauce-boat balanced on a tray at a most dangerous angle, she felt it was time to intervene.

"Please don't give us any more horrors, Jimmy. We are not used to them here. Mary," severely, to the parlour-maid, "the master's plate."

Jimmy flushed and said no more; and, apparently, they were perfectly content that it should be so, for the subject of his travels dropped, and was not resumed, either then or afterwards. He saw that they were not interested, even though they were his own people; and he listened in silence when his sister went back to the apparently inexhaustible subject of their friends. Certainly, whilst they sat smoking after dinner, Henry Marlow did ask his guest some more questions, a great many more in fact, and listened with considerable attention to the replies; but, as Jimmy noted with a kind of grim amusement, they were all of an impersonal nature, having reference solely to mining conditions in South American states. Jimmy's own experiences at the hands of Dago patriots left his brother-in-law unmoved, being things which belonged rather to books, and certainly had no part in the lives of people of position; but the effect of those same patriots' doings on the development of the country, and, consequently, on the profits of British Enterprise, aroused his bitterest wrath. Once, some years before, he had lost over a thousand pounds through a new president revoking a lead-mining concession which his predecessor had granted; and, that predecessor having been sent where neither letters nor writs could reach him, none of the purchase money had been recovered despite the efforts of the Foreign Office. Mr. Marlow, himself, had never forgiven either the Dagos or the diplomatists, especially as the concession had eventually gone to a German firm, which had made a clear half-million out of it; and he argued, not without reason, that the most effective form of negotiation would have been a whiff of grapeshot, or its modern equivalent, from the guns of a British cruiser.

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Jimmy listened patiently to the grievance, which took some time in the telling, involving, as it did, full details of the careers and financial standing of the directors of the ill-fated company, men of position and weight in the City, who deserved very different treatment.

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"Disgraceful business, disgraceful," Henry added. "To think that the British Government should allow us to be robbed by a snuff-coloured rascal like that. Did you ever come across him?"

"Who? President Montez?" Jimmy laughed apologetically. "I'm very sorry; but I helped him with that revolution. I was pretty hard up at the time, and I knew something about field guns, so they gave me a job."

Mr. Marlow apparently saw nothing at which to laugh; in fact, he frowned slightly. He held rather strong views on the subject of law and order; moreover, there were people who would be very ready to sneer if they heard Jimmy's story of the affair. But his chief thought was, as usual, for his wife, who would be annoyed were she to learn the part Jimmy had played.

"I shouldn't tell May, if I were you," he said. "In fact, I don't think I should tell anyone. You see, it's not—what shall I say?—quite the thing to be mixed up in those affairs, and it would stand in your light over here, socially as well as from a practical point of view. You understand?"

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Jimmy nodded; at least he was beginning to understand.

May was doing some fancy work when they joined her in the drawing-room; but she glanced up with a smile as Jimmy entered, and told him to take the chair next to hers. After all, he looked presentable, this brother of hers, at any rate, in evening dress, a little thin for his height and rather yellow in the face perhaps, but still there was about him a certain indefinable air of distinction which most men she knew lacked. There were girls who might even call him handsome. As she thought of that, her mouth hardened momentarily. She must guard against any folly of that sort by not introducing him in dangerous quarters until he was in a very much better position financially. The last thought suggested a question she had been intending to ask him at the first opportunity.

"What are you thinking of doing now, Jimmy? I suppose you still intend to remain at home?"

Henry Marlow muttered something about the evening paper. He was always tactful where his wife was concerned, and this was a Grierson concern, in which he might seem an intruder. May would tell him anything there was to tell later.

Jimmy, remembering Walter's reception of his news, hesitated slightly. The assurance with which Douglas Kelly's words had filled him was oozing out rather rapidly. It was one thing to decide on a literary career when one was in a Bohemian club and the time was long after midnight; but, somehow, in an essentially staid drawing-room, where there was more than a hint of Victorian influence in the furniture, and with a sense of a heavy dinner still oppressing him, matters seemed different. After all, it was only natural that it should be so. He was a Grierson, with a veneration for conventions in his blood, and, in the appropriate surroundings, the force, so long latent as to be practically forgotten, began to make itself felt, not very strongly, perhaps, but still the fact remained that it was there. Just as his father had given in at last, and gone to the City, so, for a moment, it seemed to Jimmy that he must go. But then he remembered Walter's office, where you could not smoke, and the only spot of colour was that inartistic insurance calendar with its grim lists of figures. [Pg 44]

"I'm going to write," he said, "or at least try to write. I think I can make a living at it. It's worth trying. There's nothing else, you see," he added, a little lamely.

May stopped in the middle of a stitch, and stared at him with something akin to dismay. She remembered an article of his she had once read, unsigned to be sure, and only in an obscure Hong Kong paper, but so painfully outspoken that she had shown it to no one, not even to her husband; and then rose up before her the vision of him writing similar articles for London journals, and of the world, her world, knowing him to be the author. She recognised her brother's cleverness, and it never entered into her head to doubt that he could get his work into print; she knew nothing of the financial side of journalism, and, for the moment, what had formerly seemed the all-important question, Jimmy's method of livelihood, was thrust into the background, owing to her fear that he would do something to compromise both himself and his family. [Pg 45]

Yet, the idea had taken her so greatly by surprise that at first she did not know what to say. She was not afraid of offending Jimmy or of hurting his feelings. To her, he was still a boy, who would; or at least should, listen to her advice.

"Surely you don't mean that, Jimmy," she began. "I never dreamt of your contemplating such a thing; and I shall be very sorry if you go on with it. I am certain you will do yourself a lot of harm, for I know from your letters that you have picked up a number of curious, and even improper, ideas. We are all aware that there is a low public taste which likes these things; but there are already more than enough writers providing them. We had hoped that when you came home you would settle down to regular work of some sort." [Pg 46]

Jimmy had coloured a little. "What sort?" he asked quietly.

It was May's turn to flush; she did not quite like his tone, and, moreover, she had no answer ready. "Some business, of course," she answered tartly. "You have no profession. Henry has promised to see if any of his friends have vacancies in their offices. I suppose you have saved enough to keep you for a little while?"

Her brother got up rather suddenly. He had been alone so long, playing a lone hand, that he had forgotten the great unwritten law of the Family Inquisition, whose main clause is that the common rules of courtesy do not apply when two of the same blood meet; but still, he recognised the genuine kindness underlying the inquiry, and stifled his resentment, which May would not have understood, because she and Walter and Ida were in the habit of asking each other similar blunt questions.

"For a short time," he answered. "Enough for a week or two, and a friend on the Press has put me in the way of getting one commission already. As for a City office, I couldn't stand it for a day." [Pg 47]

Mrs. Marlow put another stitch in her fancy work, then pulled her thread a little viciously, breaking it. "Well, I hope you will be careful, and not write anything we need feel ashamed of. Remember, that though you may have no position to lose, we have one."

"You needn't be afraid of that, May." There was a suspicion of scorn, and more than a suspicion of anger, in his voice. "It doesn't make much difference if I don't write under my own name, so long as I can get the dollars, which are what I'm out for."

Mrs. Marlow gave in with a sigh. After all, so long as he kept the family name out of print, there would not be much harm done; and it was a relief to find that he looked at matters from a practical point of view. Of course, he ought to have accepted Henry's assistance and gone into the City; but if he would not do so, as seemed to be the case, it was some consolation to find that he was apparently anxious to make money in other ways.

But when she talked the matter over with her husband after Jimmy had gone up to bed, Henry Marlow shook his head. His opinions coincided exactly with those of Walter Grierson. "A most precarious occupation," he said, "and one which I should certainly not allow our boys to take up. It's a great pity, as I believe I could have got him into Foulger's office—Foulger and Hilmon, you know, the jobbers."

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Upstairs, Jimmy was smoking and staring into his fire. Somehow, he felt very disappointed, as though he had been working on a false assumption, and must readjust his ideas and then start afresh. He was little more at home than he had been the previous night in the hotel.

CHAPTER V

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The hours of Jimmy's stay with the Marlows dragged by slowly. The children, four boys, proved uninteresting in the extreme, whilst between himself and Laura Marlow, May's sister-in-law, there was little in common. Two other guests, an elderly aunt and uncle of Henry's, arrived in time for dinner on the second night, and Jimmy retired more and more into the background, or, rather, he found himself in the background by a kind of natural sequence. No one wanted to put him there; in fact, both his brother-in-law and his sister were kindness itself; but he was the outsider in the party, sharing none of the interests of the others.

He had been invited for a week, at least, longer if possible; yet at the end of three days he was longing for an excuse to get back to town, where he intended to take rooms; but no excuse presented itself, and so he stayed on, spending most of his time in the billiard-room, a part of the house seldom used in the daytime, writing, or trying to write, some of the articles which Douglas Kelly had suggested. He had sent his copy in to the *Record*, and each morning, immediately after breakfast, he strolled down to the little news agent's shop to buy a copy of the paper—Mr. Marlow took no halfpenny journals—but when Sunday came round it had not appeared.

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The Marlows were regular church-goers, at least Mrs. Marlow was, and her husband always accompanied her when he was not away at the seaside, golfing. May took her religion as part of her settled order of existence. She had been bred up in it, and she would have resented any attack on it as fiercely as she would have resented the abolition of class distinctions. She believed in it, and, in a sense, she loved it; but, with the one exception of her father's tragic death, her way through life had been so smooth that she had never felt the need of its consolations, and, consequently, had never analysed it in any way. Doubt had never entered into her mind, because her creed seemed to suit her circumstances so admirably. The well-dressed congregation, the well-trained choir, the cushioned seats and reserved pews, the suave, optimistic rector, and deferential curates—these were all part of a nicely balanced state of society which kept motor-cars, or at least broughams, and paid its tradesmen's bills by cheque on the first of the month.

Henry Marlow seldom, if ever, gave the matter a thought; but he subscribed generously when asked by the rector, and he kept the Ten Commandments scrupulously, so far as his home life was concerned. He respected the Church, as something which stood for solidity and the security of property, like Consols and the Mansion House, and he regarded Dissenters in much the same light as he did outside brokers, as persons who should be watched by the police. He did not try to worship both God and Mammon simultaneously; but, wholly unconsciously, he divided his life into two parts, that which he spent in the City, and that which he spent outside the Square Mile, and so avoided the difficulty.

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Jimmy, on the other hand, had heard very few services during the last ten years, and of those the majority had been read by a layman, and had begun with the words "I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord." Lack of opportunity had kept him from attending in the first case, and, after a while, having lost the habit of his boyhood, he had ceased to think of taking such opportunities as did offer.

"I think it must be five years at least since I went to anything but a funeral service," he remarked to May, as they walked towards the big red-brick church.

Mrs. Marlow threw a swift glance over her shoulder, fearing her other guests, who were following, might have heard. "Hush, Jimmy," she said. "It sounds so bad. Never say that again, especially before the servants. The rector's housemaid is sister to my parlour-maid, and it would be sure to get round to him. Of course, I know you have been in wild places where there were no churches, and we understand, but others might not. And all our friends are Church-people."

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Jimmy dropped the subject, and a few minutes later he was following her rustling skirts up the broad centre aisle to the pew four rows back from the pulpit. He wished it had not been so far forward, because the worshippers interested him, if only by reason of their sameness of type. You could see they were all people of position, with regular incomes and hereditary political convictions, solid people of that slow-moving, tenacious class which is the real backbone of the

country, holding, as it does, the greater part of the wealth, and producing, often by a kind of apparent accident, the greater part of the intellect.

Jimmy belonged to them by birth, and yet, as he sat amongst them, listening to the lisping voice of the senior curate, he found it hard to realise the fact. He tried his best to follow the service, to keep his mind on it, but, somehow, the whole atmosphere seemed wrong. The church was a modern one, the work of a famous architect, and, therefore, grossly inartistic, lacking every feature which makes for solemnity and beauty. The detail was coarse and roughly finished, the red-brick walls, as always, an offence to the eye; big texts seemed to squirm, like semi-paralysed eels, over the chancel arch and round the East window. The latter, off which Jimmy could hardly take his eyes, was a veritable triumph of the Victorian tradition. Its colouring was gruesome, its design grotesque; and yet it was a source of great pride to the congregation as a whole, having been put in to the memory of a banker who had left nearly a million. They no more dreamed of doubting its artistic merits than they did of questioning the religion it was supposed in some vague way to typify.

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The singing was good, the sermon grammatical and well delivered, and yet Jimmy left the church with a feeling of dissatisfaction. He had expected that this, his first service in England after ten years, would have carried him back to the days when he knew nothing of the Tree of Knowledge; but, instead of that, it had made no appeal to him. Its poetry was destroyed by the hideousness of the surroundings; whilst even the glorious words of the Benediction seemed but a perfunctory dismissal, giving the congregation leave to hasten away to the heavy dinners which were awaiting it at home.

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He was very silent on his way back, thinking of the past, and he was only recalled to the present when May, seeing him producing his cigarette case, thought it time to speak.

"Jimmy," she said, rather severely, "it is hardly correct to smoke on your way home from church. People notice that sort of thing so much."

Her brother coloured, and thrust the case back into his pocket. A minute later, he heard his sister's name spoken, and a tall, well-dressed woman hurried up from behind.

"I have been trying to overtake you for the last five minutes, May," she said. "Only you have been walking as if you were very, very hungry," then, disregarding Mrs. Marlow's little snort of annoyance, she turned to Jimmy, "Don't you remember me, Jimmy—Mr. Grierson I suppose I ought to say—I'm Ethel Grimmer, Ethel Jardine that was."

Jimmy laughed and took the outstretched hand.

"Of course I remember you now; but when I saw you in church where I could only catch your profile obliquely, I was not quite sure who you were. I didn't know you lived down here."

Mrs. Grimmer laughed too, but mentally she registered another grievance against May. So this Jimmy Grierson, who dressed quite decently after all, and had a distinctly interesting face, was to be kept in the background.

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"I suppose you and May have found so much to talk about," she said. "I'm sure you must, after being apart all these years, and you have such a lot to tell." She was a handsome woman with fine eyes, and she knew how to use them. "When May has done with you, or rather when she can spare you for an hour or two, you must come and see us—Jimmy." She blushed a little. "When will you let him come, May? How would dinner on Tuesday do? I know you and Henry are going to the Foulgers' that night, and this poor boy will be alone."

May bit her lip to repress an exclamation of annoyance. She did not want Jimmy to go to the Grimms', but it was impossible to deny the engagement with the Foulgers, and equally impossible to say that Jimmy was going there with her—Ethel Grimmer knew how many people the Foulger dining table would seat; so she gave in, and Jimmy arranged to go, showing rather more eagerness over his acceptance than May considered necessary. Indeed, she remarked so much to her husband whilst she was taking off her hat; then a sudden thought struck her, and she paused, with her fingers still grasping a half-withdrawn hatpin.

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"Henry, do you remember what a silly fuss Ethel used to make over Jimmy, just before he went abroad, how they used to go cycling together. Of course, she's years older than he is, but still ___"

Marlow nodded solemnly; he had never really liked the Grimms, and he knew that, several times lately, Ethel had gone out of her way to annoy his wife, whilst Grimmer himself had behaved like a fool over the Gold Dredging Company, actually hinting that, because they knew each other socially, he ought to have been warned when the thing was going wrong. As if sentiment of that sort could be allowed to intrude on business. Billy Grimmer had been in the City over twenty years, and it was quite time he knew its ways.

"Ethel is a vain, flighty woman," Marlow said, in reply to his wife's remark. "She likes to have young men like Jimmy trailing after her; and Grimmer only laughs. I suppose it's what they call being 'smart.' Pity he doesn't put a little more smartness into his business affairs." He chuckled slightly at the recollection of the dredging shares, which had been some of those he, himself, had received as vendor. "Still, Jimmy is old enough to take care of himself now," he went on, "and, after all, he will be going back to town a day or two later."

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But May shook her head. "I must warn him not to talk too much—he seems terribly indiscreet—and I think I shall give him a plain hint about falling in love, and so on. From what Ethel said the other day, she is quite capable of getting some silly girls with money to meet him."

Meanwhile, Jimmy was staring out of the window of the billiard-room, and smiling a little grimly at the memories which his meeting with Mrs. Grimmer had reawakened. They had been very great friends in his Sandhurst days, although she was several years his senior; and, for a month or two after his departure from England, he had slept with her photo under his pillow, and tried to imagine her warm farewell kisses on his lips; and then, somehow, the photo had got mislaid, and the other recollections had begun to lose their actuality, and when, a year later, he had received the news of her engagement, he had written her a hearty, and perfectly sincere, letter of congratulation. It would be distinctly amusing to meet her under the new conditions, and see how much she was disposed to remember.

CHAPTER VI

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On Tuesday morning Jimmy opened the *Record* as usual at page 4, and the first thing that caught his eye was his own article. He glanced down it quickly, with an unusual sense of exaltation: never before had anything of his appeared in a great London daily; and the *Record's* circulation ran to a considerable fraction of a million. There was no one with him to whom he could show it; but he was passing an hotel, the "Railway Tavern," and he turned in at the door, to celebrate his luck, and read his work through quietly.

The barmaid, who was polishing her spirit measures, looked at him curiously. "You seem mighty pleased about something," she said at last, perhaps a little resentfully, as though feeling that her own rather, full-blown charms deserved more attention than the paper.

Jimmy glanced up with a smile. "There's an article of mine here," he said, holding out the sheet.

The girl knit her brow and spelled out the heading. "My! Is that your writing? What's it all about. Anything spicy?" But, though she was regarding him with more interest than before, she made no attempt to read his work.

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Jimmy finished his drink and folded up the paper. Somehow, at the second reading, it had not seemed so good. There were at least two clumsy sentences, and the fool of a printer had chopped out half a dozen commas. He could see now where he could have made several improvements, and he had little doubt that Dodgson would see too, and, perhaps, reckon him a careless workman. He had yet to learn how much, or how little, the public recks of either grammar or punctuation, how it prefers semi-truths tempered by split infinitives to facts stated in balanced prose.

As he came out of the hotel, his mind was full of the career which seemed to lie ahead of him, and he did not notice Laura Marlow walking up the other side of the road; but Miss Marlow saw him, saw too where he had been, and duly reported the fact to May when she returned to the house.

Jimmy found his sister in her boudoir, busy with her tradesmen's books, searching for the errors which certainly would have been there had the butcher and the baker and the grocer not learned long since that Mrs. Marlow was in the habit of checking her accounts, a habit which they viewed with a mixture of scorn and wrath, tempered by not a little fear. They regarded her much as a municipal politician regards a chartered accountant; but they knew it was useless to add up two and five as eight, or to charge for fresh butter when cooking butter had been ordered. May allowed no one to rob her husband, even of a halfpenny. They called her a hard woman, and said many bitter things about her as they foregathered outside the chapel after service; but, none the less, they supplied her with far better goods than those they sent to Mrs. Grimmer, who paid her bills spasmodically, without attempting to check them.

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May glanced at the paper her brother held out, but she did not attempt to take it. "I will read it by and by, when I've time," she said; then she noticed his name below the heading and frowned. "I thought you were going to write under an assumed name," she added.

Jimmy coloured slightly. "I've changed my mind," he said, rather shortly. "I don't see why I should disguise myself. It's nothing to be ashamed of, as you'll see if you read it."

His sister sighed and picked up her pencil again. "I must get on with these tiresome tradesmen's books. Oh, don't leave that paper there, Jimmy." He had put it down on the table. "There's so much litter about already. I'll ask you for it later."

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Jimmy picked up the *Record* again and left the room without another word. His sister's apparent lack of interest hurt him more than he cared to acknowledge, even to himself; and his sense of grievance deepened as the day went by without her making any other reference to his article. Yet, after lunch, she found time to put in an hour studying a children's fashion paper with the greatest attention. He had the cutting from the *Record* in his pocket-book, ready for her or any of the other guests to see, but it remained there until the evening, and when he dressed to go to the Grimms' he left it behind deliberately. He was not going to risk another snub.

On entering the Grimmer drawing-room, however, Ethel met him with a copy of the paper in her

hand.

"Billy just brought this home from town," she said. "A man showed it to him in the train. I like it very much indeed, and so does my husband." She paused and gave a little laugh. "It's awfully nice of you to come, Jimmy, and—and, not be jealous or anything silly. Still, that was all years ago, wasn't it?"

"You look just the same," he answered, smiling back at her.

She laughed again, flattered, and yet relieved at his tone—some men do remember such a stupidly long time, and she had half feared lest her guest might be one of them. "Now you are being silly," she answered, lightly. "I am sure May wouldn't approve of that. But I know you're going to be good, and, as a reward, I've got two very nice girls for you to meet. Ah, here's Billy." Then she introduced the two men, adding, "Billy knows all about you already."

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The nice girls proved to be respectively Miss Farlow, the daughter of the rector, and Miss Barton, whose mother had a large house next to that of the Marlows, for whom she entertained that measure of good will which usually exists between near neighbours; but, none the less, she was very pleasant to Jimmy, knowing nothing of his financial position. Young men were by no means plentiful in the neighbourhood.

The rector, too, was pleasant, for very similar reasons, although, as a matter of fact, he was affable to all his parishioners and their relatives. There were no poor amongst his flock, no self-evident black sheep, and, consequently, he was able to know every member of his congregation socially, which, as he was never tired of repeating, was most comforting to a conscientious man.

Mrs. Grimmer, having secured Jimmy, did not mean to allow his light to remain hidden, as May apparently intended it should be; consequently, dinner had scarcely begun before she started to draw him out scientifically, and, after the dullness of the last few days, her guest was not loath to talk. He was always interesting, but this time he was almost brilliant; and when Ethel gave the signal to the other ladies, she left the room feeling that she had scored greatly over Mrs. Marlow, who would now have to explain why she had kept this distinctly interesting brother in the background. Grimmer, too, was pleased, foreseeing a chance of annoying Marlow in the train by bringing up the subject of Jimmy's adventures.

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Ethel managed to keep her guest until the others had gone, and even then she did not seem inclined to let him go.

"Stay and have a whisky and soda and another cigar with Billy. I know you would like one, and I'm quite sure it won't hurt that fat butler of May's to sit up an extra half-hour to let you in. I don't suppose May has given you a latchkey."

Jimmy shook his head at the latter suggestion, then followed her into the smoking-room.

"I think I shall have a cigarette, too, Billy," she said to her husband, after she had settled her rather elaborate draperies into a big leather chair, "only you mustn't tell May, Jimmy. I am quite sure she never smoked. I didn't myself until this husband of mine taught me." She took a few whiffs, then, "Which did you like best?" she asked, suddenly. "Mary Barton will have the most money; but Vera Farlow is the better looking, and, they say, her father will probably be a bishop some day. You see, he has private means, and married an earl's granddaughter."

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Her guest parried the question, a little awkwardly; whereupon Mrs. Grimmer, seeing his embarrassment, let the matter drop, and went on to ask about his plans for the future. "I wonder you don't live with some of your own people," she said, when he told her of his intention to take rooms. "But, still, I suppose it would be dull for you. What do you say, Billy?... You must come down here for a week-end as soon as you can find time."

It was an hour later when Jimmy left; and the fat butler had already finished the bottle of port and gone to sleep, with the result that only at the third ringing of the bell did he awaken and stumble upstairs to the front door. Jimmy was feeling more than ever disappointed at the attitude of his own people, more than ever ready to disregard both their wishes and their advice. After all, Ethel Grimmer had far more brains and sympathy than May; whilst Grimmer, though not over-brilliant, was more interesting than Henry Marlow. He woke up next morning with his sense of grievance still unabated; and his disappointment changed to something very like anger when May called him into her boudoir after breakfast, and proceeded to cross-examine him as to whom he had met at the Grimmer's.

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"I hope you will remember these people are all our friends, even more than they are Ethel's, Jimmy," she said severely, "and I trust you will not let Ethel fill your head with her own silly ideas about getting married and so on. Both Mrs. Barton and Mrs. Farlow will only allow their girls to marry men of means and position."

"And you mean that I have neither." Her brother laughed bitterly. "Good heavens, May, do you think I came home to get married, and live on a stodgy father-in-law? I've got plenty of other things to think about." But although he brushed the matter aside scornfully, May's words remained in his memory. Only men of means and position were wanted in their circle.

Jimmy's original intention had been to take a couple of rooms of which Douglas Kelly had told him. They were somewhere in that queer maze of little streets and courts which lies at the back of Fleet Street, and would have suited him admirably. But May had objected strongly to the idea. No one they knew had ever dwelt in such a quarter; and both she and Henry agreed that it was not the thing for any young man, especially for a young man of Jimmy's temperament, to live in a place where nobody would know what he was doing, or what hours he kept. So she had written to a former maid of hers, who had married and settled in a South London suburb, and arranged for her to board and lodge Jimmy for a fixed weekly sum.

Jimmy had given in reluctantly, though he had not shown his reluctance openly. Abroad, he had gone his own way, doing just as it seemed good to him; but in England it was different. He was not afraid of his own people; but he was anxious not to shock them in any way; and, at the same time, contact with them had brought back much of his respect for those conventions which had governed his boyhood. He was a Bohemian by habit, and largely so by nature, yet when he was amongst those who lived settled lives their influence and example seemed to revive some latent instinct of staid respectability within himself, and, to a certain extent, he came to see things with their eyes. True, the phase passed quickly, so quickly that often during the ensuing months his own people wondered whether he were not a hypocrite. They were used to men with fixed temperaments, men you could rely upon to maintain a suitable standard of propriety. The other kinds they ignored socially, as they certainly would have ignored Jimmy, had he not been of their own blood; but they belonged to a class which reckons family as second only to property, which, though it may quarrel with its relations, always remembers the relationship, and the sacred right of interference which relationship gives.

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Jimmy's new lodgings were half an hour's journey from the City. You reached them by means of an uncleanly train, whose driver seemed to be perpetually on the look-out for an excuse to stop with a jolt. You got out—usually ten minutes late—at a smoke-grimed station, and emerged into a wide thoroughfare, lined on either side with shops of the margarine-and-spot-cash variety, and horrible with the screeching and rattling of gigantic municipal trams, which appeared to run solely for the pleasure of the motorman and conductor. The third turning on the right and then the second on the left brought you to Mrs. Benn's house, semidetached and severe looking, with heavy curtains and a brass plate on a front door bearing the single word "Apartments."

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Jimmy groaned inwardly as the cab drew up at the little iron gate, and he wished, once more, that he had not given way to his sister. A band, obviously the product of a happy and musical Fatherland, was just packing up its music stands some fifty yards lower down the street; whilst, as he mounted the steps of the house, two Dagos appeared round the next corner, trundling a piano organ, on the top of which was seated what was apparently a small and long-tailed relative of their own. His rooms, however—two on the first floor—though small, were quite cheerful for their kind, whilst the meat tea, which the landlady presently brought up, was distinctly promising.

He had no stuff of his own, beyond the clothes in his trunks, not even a book or a photograph; and during his wandering days the lack of such things had never struck him; but now he found himself registering a mental vow to buy some pictures as soon as possible, if only to have an excuse for banishing the German reproductions of mid-Victorian art which disfigured the walls of his sitting-room. The painters of the originals had all borne great names, or at least had been accounted great in their generation; but as he sat smoking after tea, and staring at these glazed abominations, he wondered who had been the greater sinner, the English artist or the Teutonic engraver; probably the former, he told himself, for, after all, the latter had only spoiled what detail there might have been; he had copied the smugness and the false sentiment, perhaps rejoiced in them as being essentially the products of Teutonic thought, but it had been the Englishman who had put that smugness on to the canvas in the first case.

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Unfortunately, it was easier to want new pictures than to get them, even though they might cost but a few shillings apiece. Jimmy's total capital amounted to a bare fifteen pounds, and his means of subsistence so far appeared to consist of the introduction to Dodgson of the *Record*. Not that the fact troubled him greatly. A more sanguine man would have been haunted by the fear of his money giving out before any earnest of future success came to him; a less experienced man would never have dreamed of making the attempt at all; but Jimmy was used to being hard pressed for cash, and had learnt in a rough school not to expect very much. He was used to drifting, and, in any case, he had practically nothing to lose.

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On the first morning Jimmy went out to have a look at the neighbourhood, but after an hour's walk he had seen enough to kill any desire he might have felt for further exploration. The whole district was prosaic and unlovely, saturated with the spirit of municipal government. There were rows and rows of jerry-built houses running at right angles to the High Street, houses with small rooms and big rates, occupied by tired-looking men who hurried to the station about half-past eight every morning, and did not get back again till after seven in the evening, when you would meet them walking homewards rather slowly, shuffling a little perhaps, as overworked clerks are prone to do, and still carrying the halfpenny paper which they had bought on their way to town. They had read every word in it, and their wives would be too busy, or too worn-out, to give it a glance; but still it had a value as fire-lighting material. Halfpennies were not negligible factors in those desirable villa residences. You could see that when the women folk went out to do their

morning shopping. Some of them were flashily-smart, some, most perhaps, drab and weary like their husbands; but all had to pay cash to those prosperous tradesmen in the High Street, every one of whom looked like a councillor, or, at the very least, a guardian, having the air of growing rich at the expense of the multitude.

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There seemed to be a council school, aggressive in its hideousness, up every second side street; the grinding whirr of the municipal trams was always in your ears, to remind you of the poverty of the neighbourhood in case our eyes should play you false, that worst form of poverty which has to wear a decent black suit and possesses the mockery of a vote; whilst the only alternative to the pavements—laid by a councillor-contractor, and kept in repair by means of a special rate—was the recreation ground, in which a plethoric and guardian-like official spent his days in keeping the embryo ratepayers off the sacrosanct municipal grass. You felt you were in the clutch of a horrible machine, or rather of two machines, unallied perhaps, yet very similar in operation, for both took as much as possible and grudged giving anything in return. From nine till six you were part of the mechanism of the City, wearing yourself out for the bare means of subsistence, often without the slightest hope of further advancement, always with the dread of dismissal as soon as your hair began to turn grey, when a younger, cheaper man, or a German volunteer, would take your place. There was nothing in the present, save the eternal necessity for economy; nothing in the future, save the fear of unemployment. At night, you returned home, to be gripped by the municipal Frankenstein's monster, which you and your fellows had helped to make. You were never free man, you never could be free; because in London the price of freedom is usually starvation for your children and prison for yourself, if you cannot satisfy the demands of the "Guardians of the Poor."

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Jimmy smiled grimly to himself as he noted the new Town Hall. He had met a good many robber-politicians during his wanderings in the Dago Republics; but all of them had, at least, the saving grace of frankness. The aim and end of their policy was to arrive safely in Paris, with the contents of the national treasury as their baggage. They did not hunger after honours, such as knighthoods, or aspire to speak at Sunday afternoon gathering in pseudo-places of worship. Certainly, they told a number of flamboyant falsehoods before getting into office, but that was the only respect in which they copied civilised political methods; and they did run a risk from which their English counterparts would have shrunk in a cold sweat of fear. The price of failure was death.

The one tour of inspection satisfied Jimmy. He saw the tragedy underlying the lives of these people, saw it far more clearly, perhaps, than they did themselves, for he had known so many other phases, whilst they were inured to the drab monotony, most had been born to it, and so its full meaning was mercifully hidden from them. They would have waxed wrath at hearing it called a poor locality, in fact it was not one, being eminently respectable, as any house agent could tell you. Why, the late mayor, who died during his third term of office, had left nearly a hundred thousand pounds.

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For three days Jimmy wrote steadily, doing no less than five articles of the type which the *Record* had accepted. One he sent to Dodgson, the others to papers which Douglas Kelly had mentioned, and then, suddenly, inspiration seemed to fail him. He could not write a line, could not even think of a subject; and, for a whole day, he felt something nearly akin to dismay. If his ideas ran out as quickly as this his prospects were small indeed; and when the postman brought back two of his manuscripts, with printed slips conveying the editor's thanks and regrets, he began to curse his own folly in ever coming home.

That evening, the craving for companionship he had felt in the hotel the night he landed came back to him again. He had spoken to no one, save his landlady, for the better part of a week, and the loneliness seemed unbearable. He sent his supper away, practically untasted, then, without giving Mrs. Benn a chance to come up and comment on the smallness of his appetite, took his hat and went out.

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It was Early Closing Day, and the High Street was thronged, mainly with the liberated shop assistants. Jimmy walked slowly, and, owing perhaps to that fact, he got more than one glance, encouraging him to begin an acquaintance with young ladies in cheap and showy raiment. But none of them made the slightest appeal to him. He had no taste for an insipid flirtation with a girl who would probably play havoc with the aspirates. He had met many women far less innocent than these, and there had been more than one passage in his life which he did not recall with pride; and yet, withal, he was still fastidious where women were concerned. The only one who had interested him since his return home was the girl whom he had seen entering the cab in the Strand. Somehow, her face remained fixed in his memory, and many times since that evening he had found himself wondering who she was, what her story could be.

He walked down to the bottom of the High Street, to where the trams swerved round a corner with a whirr and a jolt into the domain of the next borough council. There was a large public house at that point, with much brass work and mahogany about its swing doors, and he turned in, not so much because he wanted anything to drink, but because it seemed the obvious alternative to the dreariness of his own rooms or the boredom of the street.

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The presiding deity welcomed him with the smile she reserved for new customers. Trade was not very brisk in the saloon bar—there were eight other licensed houses in the street—and she tossed her peroxide-dyed curls and flashed her new teeth at him as she poured out his whisky.

"You look pretty doleful about something," she remarked.

Jimmy laughed. "I was till I came in here." Then he began to chat to her, about nothing in particular, and somehow the time passed so quickly that it was closing time before he took his leave. She had not interested him in the least; but she was someone to talk to, and the five or six drinks he had taken had cheered him up temporarily. It was only when he got out into the now-emptying street that he remembered that he had not got a latchkey.

Mrs. Benn was sitting up for him, and received him with a rather sour face.

"I didn't know you was going to be late, sir," she said severely. "Mrs. Marlow wrote that you would always be in in good time." [Pg 76]

Jimmy muttered an apology and took his candle. On the top stair of the first flight he caught his foot in a loose piece of carpet, and stumbled, dropping the candlestick, which broke off at the base. In silence, Mrs. Benn fetched another, and handed it to him with an air of resignation, then, "You'll be sure and put it out safe, sir," she said.

Jimmy saw what was in her mind, and laughed, though there was a note of annoyance in his voice as he attempted to reassure her; but his annoyance would have changed to wrath had he known that the early post next morning carried a letter to May describing how he returned home the worse for liquor.

CHAPTER VIII

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The morning post consisted of a manuscript returned from the *Daily Herald*. Jimmy tossed the package on to the side table, with an exclamation of disgust, not even troubling to ascertain if there were any enclosure beyond the ordinary printed slip. Then, suddenly, he decided to go up to town to see if he could find Douglas Kelly.

"Will you be late again, sir?" Mrs. Benn asked, severely.

"I think not," Jimmy answered, then, remembering his former experience with Kelly, he added, "still you might let me have a latchkey on the chance. I meant to have asked you for one before."

Mrs. Benn sighed, fumbled in a pocket, took a key off her own bunch, and handed it to her lodger with an air of resignation.

"Mrs. Marlow said as you would always be in early." She repeated her remark of the previous evening. "But if you are going to be late, sir, I must ask you to be very careful with the candle. One does read of such awful things, folks burnt in their beds. I'm sure I'm afraid to look at the papers in these days." [Pg 78]

Jimmy tried to laugh, but the sound spoke of irritation rather than of amusement. "I don't think you need be afraid of me, Mrs. Benn, though I did twist my ankle on that loose piece of carpet last night."

The landlady sniffed, and descended to the basement, where she relieved her feelings, and conveyed a moral lesson, by smacking the head of her youngest son, who was not wearing his Band of Hope ribbon.

"Poor children, can't they keep sober without joining a temperance society?" a young lady lodger had once said, with a show of sympathy, and since then the badges had not been greatly in evidence; but now they should be brought out again as a rebuke to Mrs. Marlow's brother.

Jimmy went to the club which he knew Kelly used most, but the journalist was not there. The waiter on duty surveyed the caller critically through a window, then, having grown grey and wise in the ways of literary men, he decided that Jimmy was not a creditor, and volunteered some information. "Mr. Kelly's not been in yet, sir; but he's sure to come to get his letters. So you might call again."

Jimmy strolled about until two o'clock—he was not of the kind which calls just before lunch-time—then went back to the club. [Pg 79]

"Not in yet, sir," the waiter said. "But he may come about four o'clock for a cup of tea. He usually does, if he's in town."

Jimmy sighed. He was sick of waiting about; but he craved for the society of someone he knew, and the idea of going back to spend the rest of the day in those suburban lodgings seemed intolerable. So he decided to wait, and walked down the narrow side street into the Strand, and thence westwards, in more or less aimless fashion. He had never known town sufficiently well to note the changes which the last ten years had brought; possibly, they would not have interested him greatly in any case, for he was a Londoner by birth, and the true Londoner looks at the people and ignores the buildings.

He walked slowly, up to Piccadilly Circus, and thence along Regent Street to Oxford Circus, where he turned eastwards again.

"Are you saved?" A tall gaunt man, in shabby clerical costume and black woollen gloves, whispered the words in his ear, endeavoured to thrust a tract into his hand, then hurried on

towards the Circus. Jimmy looked round quickly to see him repeat the process with an obviously astonished German, then forgot all about the crank and his ways, for, coming up behind him, clad just as she had been the night he saw her getting into the cab in the Strand, was the tall girl whose face had been haunting his memory.

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Jimmy turned aside quickly and stared into a shop whilst she was passing, then started to follow her at a little distance, not with the least idea of making her acquaintance, but because some curious instinct seemed to compel him to do so. She was walking rather fast, holding her head erect, and looking neither to the right nor to the left; and, a moment later, Jimmy saw the reason, for, just behind her, obviously dogging her steps, was a great, overdressed African native, typical of those who are sent by scores to England, to have a so-called education wasted on them, sensual and lickerous savages, who may be quite admirable as carriers in the West Coast jungles, but are wholly abominable when allowed loose in the streets of London.

In common with every sane Englishman who has travelled, Jimmy had no illusions left on the colour question. To him, the bare idea of a coloured man speaking to a white woman was horrible, and here was the worst form of coloured man, the son of the cannibal and the devil-worshipper, trying to force himself on a white girl. Jimmy went hot suddenly, a woman who was passing gave a little gasp as she saw the look in his eyes; then he quickened his pace to catch up the two in front, coming behind them in time to see the native deliberately jostle the girl, then raise his glossy silk hat with a lascivious smile and begin an apology. With flaming cheeks, the girl turned quickly, coming face to face with Jimmy; but her persecutor's blood was up, and he followed, still hat in hand. In a moment, Jimmy saw red, and, almost before he knew what he was doing, he had caught the other on the point of the jaw with his fist. The black man staggered, but recovered himself, and for an instant it looked as though he were going to show fight; but his colour told, and he looked round for a line of retreat, just as a policeman, seeing the rapidly-gathering knot of spectators, came up to investigate.

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Jimmy, white-faced and fierce-eyed, listened in contemptuous silence whilst the coloured man was giving his version, which was corroborated by a rather long-haired person with a small white tie, who professed to have seen the incident.

"This person"—he indicated Jimmy with a wave of a podgy hand—"this person struck the dark gentleman a most cruel blow, entirely unprovoked. I shall be most happy to give evidence," and he produced a card, a printed one, stating that he was the Rev. Silas Lark, whilst the address indicated that his business was the conversion of the heathen.

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The constable gave him a keen look, and took the slip of pasteboard rather doubtfully. "I see," he said, then he turned to Jimmy. "What have you got to say to it all, sir?"

Jimmy told his story in a few words, then he glanced round to where the girl had been standing; but, with a mingled sense of disappointment and relief, he saw that she had slipped away. "I don't want to bring the lady's name into it, of course," he added, as he gave his own name and address.

"Now, then, move on there." The constable closed his notebook and dispersed the little crowd; then he turned to Jimmy again, "I don't expect you'll hear any more of this, sir. We've had one or two complaints about that black man and his friends, and as for the Reverend Mr. Silas," he smiled, grimly, "we've been told to watch him as a pickpocket." He glanced at Jimmy again. "You look as if you've come from abroad, sir, or else I shouldn't have told you so much. Take it from me, Oxford Street is just alive with wrong 'uns in the afternoon, women as well as men." Then he drew himself up, and went on to superintend the raising of a fallen cab-horse, which served also to draw off the few who were still staring at Jimmy. He was looking for the tall girl; and, a moment later, he was rewarded by seeing her coming out of a tea-shop with a paper-bag in her hand. She gave him a frank little smile of recognition, and, emboldened, he raised his hat and went up to her.

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"Thank you so much," she said. "I—I hope there won't be trouble for you. I couldn't be in it, you see, so I slipped in there on the excuse of buying a bun."

"Oh, it'll be all right," Jimmy answered lightly. "I don't mind paying a fine for the pleasure of teaching a nigger manners," then, seeing she looked tired and upset, he asked suddenly, "Will you come and have some tea in here?" indicating a large restaurant they were passing.

The girl nodded. "Thank you. I should like some," she answered simply. Her voice was sweet and refined, and, seeing her closely, Jimmy found that she was even better-looking than he had imagined, whilst her carriage was perfection.

Nothing more was said until they were seated at one of the little tables in the palm court, then, suddenly, "Oh, how I loathe those black men." She brought the words out with a little shudder. "There are three or four of them haunt Oxford Street."

"Are you often about town?" Jimmy asked. She looked at him with a kind of grave surprise; then she turned away as she answered, "I am always about town. I have to be. You understand?" Her voice was very low, but the words were perfectly distinct.

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Unconsciously, Jimmy twisted his gloves in his two hands so fiercely that one of them tore nearly in half. The daylight seemed to have gone suddenly, leaving the gilding of the place dull and heavy. He understood. Her words had killed all the romance of their meeting; yet, when he looked at her again, he could hardly believe she was speaking the truth.

The waiter brought the tea, and she poured it out, with far more grace of manner and movement than Mrs. Marlow would have shown. Moreover, she made no affectation about not wanting the dainty little sandwiches and cakes. "They are so delicious that I feel it's a sin to leave them," she said, when he declared he would have no more.

"What is your name?" he asked abruptly, breaking what had been rather a long silence. She was dusting some minute crumbs off her dress, and she answered without looking up, "Penrose, Lalage Penrose."

She did not ask for his name, but he volunteered it; then, "May I come and see you?" he added.

The girl hesitated a moment. "Why not?" she asked at last, but she flushed at her own words, and her hand was unsteady as she wrote down the address, which was one of a block of flats near Baker Street. [Pg 85]

"Can I come to-morrow afternoon?"

She nodded and got up. At the entrance of the restaurant she stopped and held out her hand. "Good-bye, and thank you."

"It's only *au revoir*, isn't it?" he answered, as he raised his hat, then without looking back, for fear she would think he was watching her, he walked away rapidly, his feelings a mixture of elation and of something very nearly akin to misery.

Douglas Kelly was in when Jimmy called again at the club. "The waiter gave me your card and I supposed you would come along soon. You look a bit doleful. What are you going to drink?... That was a good article of yours in the *Whitehall Gazette* this evening."

Jimmy set his glass down suddenly. "I haven't seen it; in fact, I was expecting to find the manuscript waiting for me when I got back."

Kelly laughed. "So that's the reason of the dumps? The postman drops 'em through the letter-box with a kind of sickening thud, and you feel there's nothing left to live for, unless it's to kill the editor. I went through it all, until I made 'em understand they must have my signature at my own price. Still, you haven't done so badly in the few days you've been home. Dodgson tells me they've got another article of yours in type. Here, Romsey," he hailed a man who had just come in, whose face somehow seemed familiar to Jimmy, "I want to introduce you to an old colleague of mine, Grierson, who is going to knock spots out of you all." [Pg 86]

The new-comer grinned. "I've seen him knocking spots out a nigger in Oxford Street already. It'll be in the next edition of the *Evening Post*, 'Outrageous assault on an African Prince.' I happened to be passing and got seven shillings-worth of copy out of it," he added, turning to Jimmy. "I left your name out, though. But, you see, the *Evening Post* believes in a man and a brother, and sacks its boys if it finds they have been vaccinated; so the story exactly suited them. The Prince, too, has just sold the gold-mining rights of his native swamp, and has held a reception in Exeter Hall, so he in himself was good stuff for us." Then he gave Kelly a moderately truthful account of what had occurred.

Kelly did not laugh. "It won't go down here, Jimmy, that sort of thing. Of course you were right; it's an abominable scandal to let these niggers loose; but at home people'll never understand it. If your name were to come out, you would be done, right away. And," he looked at him keenly, "your lady friends should know better than to be alone in that part of Oxford Street. Well, Romsey, are you going to pay for the drinks out of your seven shillings, or am I? Then I'm going to put Jimmy up for the club, and you can second him." [Pg 87]

CHAPTER IX

That day Jimmy did not go back to his lodgings. Instead, he sent a wire to Mrs. Benn, and went to dine and spend the night with the Kellys, although he did not get away from the club until he had been introduced to a score of journalists to whom his host described him as an old colleague. As a result they were an hour late for dinner when they reached the flat. [Pg 88]

"It doesn't matter; my wife won't mind," Kelly remarked cheerfully as they went up in the lift, and, a few moments later, when he met Mrs. Kelly Jimmy saw that her husband was speaking the truth.

Dora Kelly was a pretty, thrifty little woman, with a mass of rather untidy fair hair. She was still in the tea-gown which, apparently, she had been wearing all the day, whilst her foot-gear consisted of a pair of Japanese slippers; and yet the whole effect was charming, possibly because she was entirely unaffected and obviously happy. The flat reflected the character of its mistress. It was full of good things, all in wonderful disarray. Even the drawing-room had an air of having undergone a strenuous straightening up a month previously, since which event it had not been touched again. [Pg 89]

"Dinner won't be long, Douglas," Mrs. Kelly said. "But the cook went out at four o'clock and hasn't come in yet; I'm afraid she must have got drunk again; so I borrowed the Harmers' servant," she turned to Jimmy. "Servants are such a nuisance, Mr. Grierson, yet one daren't

discharge them, and our cook is a treasure when she's sober. Douglas says you live in lodgings in some suburb, so you don't have those worries, I suppose. Here it's dreadful." She shook her head dolefully; but a moment later she was smiling again and chattering gaily about her own experiences in lodgings. She had been on the Press herself prior to her marriage, and she knew, only too well, the ways of the London landlady.

If he had not chanced to saunter up Oxford Street that afternoon Jimmy would have enjoyed immensely his dinner and the long talk which followed it. He had been craving for the society of his own kind; yet now he had got it it did not seem such a very great thing after all; for Lalage Penrose had come into his life, and the thought of her was uppermost in his mind. Even whilst he was talking over old times with Kelly, or listening to Dora Kelly's laughing descriptions of the struggles of their early married life, he was wondering how Lalage was spending the evening, and the thought was making him sick at heart. Mentally, he cursed himself for a fool, and tried hard to put the memory away from him; but it was an effort all the time; and when Kelly finally allowed him to go to bed, long after midnight, he shut his door with a sigh of relief. But he did not undress. Instead, he sat in a big armchair, staring into the fire, which, having been lighted by the borrowed servant just before she left, a full three hours previously, had now died down to a red glow.

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He was a fool, and he knew it. The stronger part of his nature, that which came of the alien streak in his father, warned him of the danger of thinking seriously of chance female acquaintances, told him that no man of the world ever did so; whilst to the Grierson strain in him anything in the way of an intrigue was an unpardonable offence against the canons of respectability. Douglas Kelly, the Bohemian, and Walter Grierson, the city man, would both have called him mad, agreeing on this point, if on none other; for they would argue that only a madman could feel that he had any regard for a strange girl, who, by her own showing, was without the pale. Suddenly he resolved to have no more to do with Lalage. He would destroy her address, avoid those parts of the town where he might possibly see her, drop the acquaintance before it went any further.

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He got up suddenly, took the slip of paper Lalage had given him out of his pocket, and stood staring at words on it. It was well-written, in the hand of an educated girl; but there was a shakiness in it which suddenly destroyed all his wise resolutions, making an irresistible appeal to his chivalry. After all, he himself, if not actually an outcast, was one of life's failures. He had touched bed-rock, more than once, and he knew too much of the bitterness of life to judge either man or woman harshly. It is only those who have never suffered who show no mercy to others.

What was it that American girl had said to him in Iquique, when she insisted on lending him one hundred dollars, the time he was absolutely penniless and too weak from fever to refuse? "The best thanks you can give me, Jimmy, will be to help another girl if you ever get the chance." He had returned the money a couple of months later, and he had neither seen nor heard of her again; but the memory of her words had remained, and now he seized on them as an excuse for the course he wanted to follow. And so the slip of paper went back into his pocket-book, tucked in carefully, though he knew every word that was on it; and he sat down again, and remained, thinking and wondering, until the fire had ceased to show even a spark of red, and the chill of the room sent him shivering to bed, to dream of Lalage.

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Jimmy came out of his room at nine o'clock next morning to find Mrs. Kelly sweeping the dining-room. "The cook has not come back yet," she remarked cheerfully. "I do hope the police haven't taken her, for she is really a treasure when she's sober. And I can't very well borrow the Harmers' servant again. So breakfast will be late; but you said last night you weren't in a hurry, and Douglas isn't either. Won't you have a whisky and soda, Mr. Grierson, whilst you're waiting. The decanter is on the sideboard, or it should be—oh, no, I remember, Douglas has got it in the dressing-room. I'll fetch it."

Breakfast was finally over about eleven o'clock. "We're not usually so late, though it's always a movable feast," Mrs. Kelly explained, and then Douglas prepared to go down to the office.

"They can always call me on the telephone if they want me specially," he remarked, "and showing my independence is part of my scheme. I don't think you'll ever be able to bluff, Jimmy. It isn't in you. At the back of your mind, really, you're staid and respectable, with a reverence for those set in authority over you, even for those who'll set themselves there. So you'll have to trust to the merit of your work alone, and it's a slow job getting recognition that way. What do you say, Dora?"

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Mrs. Kelly smiled, and then suddenly her face grew grave, almost sad. "Yes, it is a slow job sometimes," she said, softly. "Only Mr. Grierson's old enough not to go under whilst he's waiting, and, of course, he has the knowledge. It's those raw boys from the provinces I pity." She shook her head as if at some memory, then followed her husband to the front door. "Come again, Mr. Grierson, won't you," she said as she shook hands. "Of course, you'll see Douglas often at the club, and if he gives me longer warning I'll make sure the cook doesn't get out. Douglas, dear, you might ask them at the police station if they've got her. I've got a kind of creepy feeling which tells me that they have, and, you know, the magistrate said he wouldn't fine her next time."

"You're lucky," Jimmy said abruptly, as they came down the steps of the mansions into the street.

Kelly looked up with a grin. "Do you mean in having our cook?"

Jimmy disregarded the question, and went on, "Were you lonely when you first came home,

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before you married? Did you have to go through it, or had you people of your own?"

He did not put it clearly, but the other showed he understood when he answered, "My people are all in the North, and they're Nonconformists and teetotallers. I went up once, and the governor and I quarrelled. I haven't seen them since. Dora's never seen them. We were married six months after I came home, on nothing. I wouldn't have risked it, but she insisted for my sake. I was at the old game, you know."

Jimmy nodded. He understood, remembering vividly certain wild drinking bouts which, incidentally, had given him some practical experience in newspaper work, for on more than one occasion he had taken Kelly's place, and brought out the little sheet.

They walked on a little way in silence, then, "Women are a confounded sight better than we are," Kelly jerked out. "They see so much further. We reckon we are being unselfish when we're only cowards; but they're ready to back their own opinion and run the risk; and when they win they let us take the credit."

"Some of them do, the right sort. But there are others——" Jimmy was thinking of the girls to whom Ethel Grimmer had introduced him, those whose parents had trained them in a due appreciation of the value of men of position.

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Kelly stopped suddenly and looked at him anxiously. "James Grierson," he said, "I shall put you in a book some day when you're developed. At present you're about twenty-one years old in many respects. Probably you'll marry stodgily, or else you'll go to the other extreme and make an even bigger ass of yourself."

Jimmy flushed uncomfortably, remembering Lalage; then went hot at the thought of his own folly. He had only spoken to the girl once.

CHAPTER X

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Lalage Penrose's flat was on the second floor of a small block of flats in a narrow and grimy street. Opposite the main entrance was a fried fish shop, and next door to that a coal and greengrocery stores, with the latest price per hundredweight of what were untruthfully called the "Best Household Coals" displayed in huge numerals on each of the windows. Unwashed children from the uncleanly houses which made up the rest of the street seemed to spend the whole day, and half the night, dancing to barrel organs. Garbage and paper littered the roadway, except where there was sufficient slimy black mud to cover these; but, on the other hand, there was a large and gaudy public house at the corner, opposite a similar block of flats, and a cab rank just down the side turning.

Lalage's flat consisted of three very small rooms, for which she paid fifty pounds a year. "Inclusive of rates," the agent had said; but, as the landlord himself was on the Borough Council, his assessment was, of course, not unduly high. By trade, the owner was a butcher in Maida Vale, though his friends in Tooting did not know that; moreover, besides being a councillor, he was a German by extraction; consequently, with these two qualifications, it was quite natural that he should own flats of that kind. In Capetown, where men are crude or brutal in their ways, a judge and jury between them would probably have assessed his merits at fifty lashes and two years' hard labour; in London, on the other hand, not only was his person sacred and his property safe from police raids, but he also had reasonable grounds for expecting to be mayor in due course—which often meant a knighthood—whilst even the greatest prize of all, the chairmanship of the new Electricity Committee, a body having the giving of six-figure contracts, was not beyond his grasp. He was quite a personage in the municipal life of West London, as well as in the social life of Tooting, and, being a married man with a family, he treated his tenants with righteous severity, distraining on the slightest excuse when he suspected they possessed anything of value, knowing well that his victims would not dare seek redress in the Courts.

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It was four o'clock exactly when Jimmy knocked at the door of the flat, which was opened by Lalage herself. "I've no servant," she explained, "only a woman who comes in once or twice a week." Then she led the way into the tiny slip of a sitting-room, where she had tea laid out. "I'm glad you've come," she added, "I was half afraid you wouldn't."

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"Why?" he asked with a smile.

She looked at him seriously, her head a little on one side, as though she were trying to read his character. "You seemed shy, different from most men. Are you an Englishman?"

He nodded, and gave her a brief sketch of who he was. She listened with evident interest. "It must be splendid to travel and see things. I have always longed to, at least I did once, but now ——" She broke off with a hopeless little sigh, and got up abruptly. "I'll fetch the tea now."

The tea things, like everything else in the place, were of the simplest, cheapest kind, yet as tasteful as was possible considering their price; but, on the other hand, the tea itself was good, and there was a plate of daintily-cut bread and butter and another of sandwiches.

"I was so glad of that tea yesterday." Lalage looked up suddenly. "I hadn't had anything since

some bread and milk at breakfast time, and that horrible black man made me feel quite shaky."

Jimmy frowned. "Why do you starve yourself in that way?" he asked.

In after years, he often thought of this question and her answer. He had been hungry himself more than once, and he knew, only too well, what it meant; but, somehow, he had never pictured a well-dressed girl as suffering that way. [Pg 99]

"I only had a penny left, the one I spent on that bun, and no one will trust you with as much as a loaf round here. I was afraid you would notice how greedy I was at tea." Then, as he flushed awkwardly and began to speak, she stopped him with a little gesture. "Why should you have thought of it? You were very good, as it was. And I'm all right now. I got a postal order last night," she added rather hurriedly; then she changed the subject abruptly, and went on to talk of one or two matters of passing interest, which the papers had been booming for want of anything of real importance. She had evidently received an average education, Jimmy could see that plainly, and yet he was puzzled, for in many of her ideas, and especially in her strong prejudices, she belied her apparent age; for they were those of a child of fourteen, rather than of a girl of some two or three and twenty. Insensibly, he found himself listening to her as one would to a child, and then, a moment later, she would bring out some cynical scrap of wisdom, evidently the fruit of bitter experience, which sounded strange coming from her lips. Yet, despite the utter unconventionality, there was no hint of fastness about her, and even when she touched by implication on her way of life, she did so with a kind of frank simplicity, hiding nothing and trying to excuse nothing. [Pg 100]

"What do you think of my little flat?" she asked suddenly, after what had been rather a long pause. "It's very tiny, of course; but it's a home, and when you've had nowhere to go to, not even a lodging—" She broke off, and stared into the fire. "It's simply awful to have nowhere," she went on after a while. "To walk about hour after hour with the mud squelching through your shoes, and nothing to eat; and getting more hopeless as midnight comes on. I was out two whole nights."

Jimmy breathed heavily; he had often heard the same sort of thing from men; but it sounded very different coming from the lips of a girl.

"And then one day I got ten pounds," Lalage continued, "and I made up my mind I would have a home. I paid a month's rent in advance—they don't worry over references if you do that—and I went to some hire-purchase people for furniture. Then I bought a kettle at the sixpenny halfpenny shop, and a cup and saucer and plate in the next street, where the barrows are. By the time I had got curtains and some sheets and one or two odd things like a lamp, there were only a few shillings left." She looked up seriously. "You wouldn't think till you try how expensive furnishing is; but I was so proud of my little home. I am still; and you know, when you've a place of your own, if you only have bread and milk no one is any the wiser. I've often been hard up since, but I've always managed to scrape up the rent and the hire-purchase instalment. One must do that; they don't give you a day's grace." [Pg 101]

Jimmy was chewing savagely at the ends of his moustache. It never entered into his head that she was trying to play upon his sympathies. There was some curious quality of simplicity in her manner which forbade that supposition. She interested him as no woman had ever interested him before, and, suddenly, he was filled with a desire to know her past, and, in that, to find excuses for the present.

"Where do you come from?" he asked.

"Hampshire," she answered, adding, "My people are dead. I'm quite alone in the world." Then, as if to change the subject, she got up from her seat. "You must have a look round my tiny place."

Jimmy felt almost guilty as he noted her obvious pride in the few little articles she had collected together. May's cook would have rejected with scorn the kettle from the sixpenny halfpenny bazaar, and the one or two pots and pans which had since been bought at the same shop; whilst none of the Marlow servants would have deigned to use the thick earthenware plates on the dresser. Yet everywhere there was a perfect cleanliness, which, possibly, those same servants would never have succeeded in attaining in the smoke-laden atmosphere of that street. [Pg 102]

"I do hate dirt and untidiness," Lalage explained when he made a remark on the subject. "I do everything myself, except the scrubbing; and I wouldn't have a woman in for that if it wasn't for my hands; I want to keep them nice."

She held them out for Jimmy to inspect, with the first touch of vanity he had seen in her. Perhaps, her pride was justifiable, for they were well worth looking at, being small and perfectly shaped. She wore no rings, nor, for the matter of that, any jewellery at all, whilst her dress was of the simplest.

When they went back to the sitting-room he asked her the time. "I never carry a watch," he said. "Mine went the way of a good many other things when I was first knocked out with fever, and I've never managed to afford another one."

Lalage nodded with sympathetic comprehension. "I know; but it's worst when you've nothing left to pawn. As for clothes, they give you nothing on them, at least round here. But you want to know the time." She opened the window and listened a moment. "It's just on six. I can hear the periwinkle man coming, and he's never late. This is the last part of his round, you see, because he [Pg 103]

doesn't expect to sell much here; then he goes to a stall for the evening. I know them all, and I think they like me, because I chat to them. But the people in the other flats," she shook her head with an air of disgust, "most of them are dreadful; a lot of horrid foreigners, you know. Still, the caretaker sees they don't fight on the stairs, and when I shut my door, I feel I shut them all out."

Jimmy smiled a little grimly; he could picture those other tenants and their ways. Then, "Will you put your hat on, and we'll go out and get some dinner?"

She reflected a moment. "Why not get something and bring it in here? It won't cost nearly so much, though it will be much nicer. Oh, in six months I've got simply to loathe the smell of a café. There's a nice ham and beef shop where we can get everything we want." She laughed rather ruefully. "I remember yesterday when I was so hungry looking in there and wishing I could get a roast chicken they had, all beautiful and brown, you know, with jelly on it. But they wouldn't have trusted me with even a quarter of a pound of beef. I suppose they've been robbed so often. Well, I'll put on my hat, and we'll get what we want. Really, honestly, I would much sooner have it like that than go to one of the best restaurants. Don't you yourself think cafés are hateful?"

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Jimmy watched her marketing with a distinct sense of admiration. She knew the local price of everything, and she insisted on having exactly what she ordered.

"I don't see why they should rob you," she said. "They make huge profits anyway. Now, I think that's all we want." She ticked the articles off on her fingers. "Oh, unless you care for something to drink... Yes, I like a whisky and soda with my meals; but don't get a whole bottle, it's only a waste; and they will sell it you by the quarter in that public house. I'll wait whilst you go in. But don't buy a bottle; I know you haven't got any money to throw away?" she added.

When he came out, she noted, with evident satisfaction, that he had obeyed her. "This will make a lovely supper," she declared, and her smile showed she meant it. "I like shopping like this. It's always nicer than a café, and much less expensive."

Her last remark reminded him of what she had said just as he was going in for the whisky.

"Why do you think I haven't got any money to throw away?" he asked.

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She gave a wise little nod. "You tell me you write, and I know literary men never have anything to spare."

Jimmy laughed. "How do you know?"

Lalage turned away. "Never mind, but I do know, only too well."

CHAPTER XI

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"I have not heard from you for several days," Mrs. Marlow wrote to Jimmy, "though I have had a couple of letters from Eliza Benn, who says that for two consecutive nights you did not come home. The first night you wired to her, but the second time she sat up until after midnight, fearing lest it might not be safe to let you have a light. I need not say how annoying it is to hear these things from one's former servants. Both Henry and I trust that you are not already getting into dissipated ways, and that you will remember that you belong to a respectable family, which will have to bear a large share of any disgrace into which you may fall, or be led." Then there was a postscript. "Eliza Benn is a person for whom I have a great regard; and I hear that her husband holds quite an excellent situation in Mr. Grimmer's salesrooms, where he is paid thirty-five shillings a week, which, Henry says, would only be given to a most experienced and steady man."

Jimmy tore the letter across savagely and tossed it into the fire. It annoyed him the more because his sister had got within measurable distance of the truth, at least from her point of view. He had already had some uncomfortable moments over the thought of what the family would say if it ever came to know of Lalage. He had not seen the latter again, but, though it was less than forty-eight hours since they had parted, he had written to her twice, and he could not disguise from himself the fact that she filled his life to the exclusion of all else. No other woman had ever appealed to him in the same way. Lalage had gripped his imagination. He could remember every word she had said, and, having been on the rocks himself, he could understand what she had suffered—the rain squelching through the thin little shoes, the bitter loneliness of the great city, the meals of bread and milk which had to last the whole day, the passionate longing for a home of some sort. He did not attempt to argue the thing out logically, as a Grierson would have done. The thought of her way of life inspired him, not with the scorn or loathing a man of position would have felt, even when taking advantage of it, but with a terrible, gnawing jealousy. Probably, he would not have admitted, even to himself, that he was in love, for, somehow, the phrase seemed hopelessly inapplicable. It belonged to the Grierson part of his nature, and was supposed to signify a preliminary to marriage, an altogether decorous kind of affection for a decorously-behaved girl, who had never been homeless or hungry or cold. All he cared for now was to get Lalage away, to be with her always, and, for the moment at least, anything which did not help towards that end seemed of absolutely no importance. He had thrust family considerations on one side, thrust on one side all those good resolutions, or rather those revived instincts of the past, which had been uppermost in his mind when he first came home. His own world, the Griersons and Marlows and Grimms, would have called him either mad or hopelessly

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immoral, according to the degree of charity latent in their respective natures; Kelly would have warned him bluntly not to endanger his prospects by being a fool; a mental specialist would have explained that the shock of John Locke's death, coming on top of the ten years of almost continual overstrain in bad climates, had temporarily affected his balance, an opinion with which Lalage herself would have agreed, knowing, after all, nothing of men's love; but neither opinions nor diagnosis would have altered Jimmy's determination.

He had put in two days of almost savagely hard work. Without money he would be helpless. True, most of his manuscripts had come back; but still three had actually appeared in print, and he could feel he had made a start. The old semi-indifference on the question of his ultimate success or failure had vanished completely. He was in deadly earnest now; Lalage should have no more bread-and-milk days, if he could help it.

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Mrs. Marlow's letter had arrived by the first delivery, in the cheerful company of a returned manuscript. He had heard from Lalage, her first letter to him, the evening before, and he did not expect another till that night; but when the second postman knocked at the door, and, a moment later, Mrs. Benn came creaking upstairs, he hurried to meet her, hoping the envelope might bear the West London postmark. But he was doomed to disappointment. The letter was from Ida, his sister in Northampton. "When I heard from you last week you said any day this week would do," Ida Fenton wrote. "We find we shall be able to have you to-morrow, and hope you will stay four or five days. The best train is one at 2:15, and I will meet you by that, so you need not worry about answering this note. We are all looking forward to seeing you, and though, of course Joseph is at business all day, and the children at school, I daresay you will find the rest do you good."

Jimmy frowned as he folded it up and put it back into the envelope. He had arranged to spend the next day with Lalage; they were going to have a run out somewhere—"somewhere inexpensive, like the Crystal Palace," Lalage had said in her letter—and then they were going to have another of those delightful marketing expeditions in the grimy street where the barrows were. Now, all that would have to be postponed. Jimmy would not have scrupled greatly about disappointing Ida—she had been in no hurry to see him—but May's letter had shown him how he was being watched and his doings reported, and he did not want to arouse further suspicion. He intended to move very shortly, though his plans were as yet but half formed, and, moreover, he shrank from doing anything which would offend May. He might not be afraid of his relations; but at the back of his mind he was sufficiently conscious of his own departure from the paths of rectitude to feel the weakness of his position.

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He wrote to Lalage that evening, explaining matters; consequently, she was not surprised when he came up next morning carrying a handbag. At first, it struck him that she was looking rather pale and worried, but she greeted him with frank pleasure, and, in a few minutes, she was her usual self again. As Jimmy learned later, she had in a peculiar degree the art of seeing the best side of things. In a sense, she was almost a fatalist, and though she made no disguise about the regret she felt for her ruined life, a moment later she always seemed to put the regrets aside as useless. "I try to keep as respectable as I can," she said to Jimmy.

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Normal people, being respectable themselves, would probably have sneered, knowing that those who have fallen are all on the level, and that only in those far-off days when He who pitied the Magdalen and bade the sinless cast the first stone trod the earth was there forgiveness for this greatest of sins. But Jimmy, not being normal, and being anxious to find excuses for Lalage, did not sneer, and before long he found that, though she might not be able to rise again, she was determined to fall no lower. She was almost fastidious in her hatred of bad language, and there was, as a matter of fact, an immeasurable distance between her and the German women who formed the majority of the other tenants.

"Of course I am sorry to have to go away," Lalage said in answer to Jimmy's complaints of having to go to Northampton. "But still, it's only right. Your own people ought to come first, and I shall see you when you get back, if you haven't forgotten me."

Jimmy took both her hands in his. "I shall never forget you, Lalage, never."

She shook her head. "Others have said the same, and have forgotten, none the less. I'm afraid to hope too much sometimes, for fear of disappointment. It's easier when you haven't expected anything." She freed her hands and went across to the window, where she stood, apparently staring at the gigantic telephone post on the roof opposite.

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Jimmy came up behind her. "Would you be sorry if I were to forget?" he asked.

She answered without looking round, "Of course I should."

"Why would you be sorry?" he went on.

"Because I like you very much. You are always gentlemanly and nice in your ways." Still she did not face him.

"Do you like anyone else, anyone at all?" Jimmy's voice was not very steady.

"No, no." Now she turned her head, and he saw that her eyes were wet. "There's no one I like. I don't know why I've told you things, only, somehow, you seemed to understand how hard life is; and you don't treat me—" she paused as though looking for a word, "you don't treat me lightly. You're careful to raise your hat and open the door for me, and all those little things, just as though I were," her voice broke slightly, "a good girl."

Jimmy coloured, and muttered something which Lalage did not catch, then, suddenly, she gave a little gasp of annoyance. "Jimmy, you left your bag in the hall, and it's got your name on it. The charwoman was cleaning the kitchen and now she's out in the hall. Do get it at once."

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He obeyed her with obvious surprise, then looked at her inquiringly. "Blackmail," she answered simply. "All these women round here do it if they get a chance, and they say the landlord puts them up to it. Everyone about here preys on us, in one way or another. The district lives on us, tradesmen, landlords, agents, even the gas and electric light people; and when they've bled us dry they seize our homes and turn us out. They know we can't go to law, and yet whilst they're robbing us they're sitting as guardians or councillors and going to chapel every Sunday. They treat us like dirt, and their wives and daughters shake their skirts at us, and all the time it's we who earn the money for them."

Jimmy went over to the mantelpiece, and buried his head on his hands. He was wholly unconscious of what he was doing, being too miserable to think of appearances. Lalage watched him a moment, then put her arm gently round his neck, and, for the first time, kissed him of her own accord.

"What is it, dear, tell me," she said.

"I can't stand it. The whole thing's horrible, abominable." It was the man's voice which was broken now.

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"You can't help it, Jimmy dear," she answered sadly. "It's too late now. There's no road back in these things. It's my own fault, and I must pay for it."

"There must be a way out," he answered fiercely. "I will find it when I can get this wretched visit over. You can't go on like this."

She tried to soothe him down, almost as a mother soothes a child. "All right, dear, you shall find it when you come back. We'll see what can be done."

Lalage went down to the station to see him off. They arrived in plenty of time, and when he had taken his ticket they went into the refreshment booth for some sandwiches. They sat down, and for a minute or two, neither said anything. Then, suddenly, Jimmy turned to her.

"How are you off for money, Lalage?" he asked.

The girl coloured slightly. "Quite all right, thanks," she answered after a moment's hesitation. "Really I am, Jimmy, and, anyway, I wouldn't let you run yourself short."

But he was not satisfied. "Are you sure? Take some in case of accidents."

She shook her head. "No, there's no need. I shall be able to pull along."

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He gave in reluctantly. "Well, you've got my address. Let me know if you do get short, because I should hate to think——" He broke off abruptly, then went on. "Promise you'll let me know."

Lalage nodded. "Yes, I promise."

CHAPTER XII

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Ida Fenton, Jimmy's younger sister, was a tall, fair woman with a beautiful profile and hazel-blue eyes. Women who did not like her called her a stick, and even her friends admitted that she was severe. Stiffness was the dominant note in her character. Most men, including even her husband, wondered that she had ever married. In pre-Reformation times she would certainly have been a nun, and probably a saint, being passionless, and therefore able to avoid all carnal sins without effort. However, she belonged to an age which regarded marriage as the one vocation for women, at least for those of position, and she had accepted Joseph Fenton, if not with enthusiasm, at least with satisfaction. He appeared to fulfil all the necessary conditions, and she had never found reason to regret her choice. If Fenton himself sometimes appeared hurt at the fact that she did not display more outward affection towards him or the children, she seldom worried over the matter, being fully conscious of her own rectitude of conduct and feeling.

Jimmy felt chilled the moment he entered the Fenton house. Ida's own personality seemed to be reflected in everything, in the furniture, in the pictures, and above all in the unnaturally tidy children to whom he was presently introduced. He could still feel the one cold kiss which Ida had given him, and, when he was shown up to his room, he unconsciously gave the spot an extra dab with the sponge.

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The weather was bitter, yet there was no fire in the big spare room, Ida holding that fires in bedrooms were unhealthy and extravagant, consequently, being still thin blooded as a result of ten years in tropical climates, he was shivering when he got downstairs again.

"Can I have a little whisky, Joe?" he said to his brother-in-law, whom he found in the smoking-room. "I've got a bit of a chill on me, and it takes very little to bring out my malaria."

Ida, who had just entered, frowned slightly. "Ammoniated quinine would do you more good,

Jimmy. Joseph himself never drinks between meals. It's such a bad example if the children happen to come in."

Jimmy stifled a retort to the effect that the obvious course was to keep the children out; but he refused the proffered quinine and helped himself to some of the whisky which his brother-in-law had already produced.

Ida sighed and went out, whereupon Fenton lost no time in making use of the second glass which was on the tray. [Pg 118]

"Ida likes giving people ammoniated quinine," he remarked.

Jimmy nodded sympathetically, knowing his sister of old. She had managed their father's household during the period between their mother's death and her own marriage, and he still had lively recollections of her régime.

Dinner was a dreary meal. Fenton, who was essentially a cheerful person, made several spasmodic attempts at conversation, but Ida, cold and beautiful, seemed to check him by her own silence; whilst Jimmy was thinking of Lalage, contrasting the luxury of his present surroundings, the massive plate, the costly dinner service, the deferential, silently-moving butler, with Lalage's little room, and its hire-purchase furniture, earthenware plates, and the meal bought at the ham and beef shop. Now, he was amongst his own people, a Grierson come back to the Griersons; and yet he hated it all, because he had reached the point of wanting to share everything with Lalage, whom he could never hope to introduce into houses like the Fentons'.

The long meal came to an end at last, and they went into the smoking-room, where Ida joined them. Mrs. Fenton had asked no questions at dinner, when the servants were present, but Jimmy quickly found that there were many things she wanted to know, not about the past, but about his doings since he had come home, and about his plans for the future. In a flash, he understood that May must have arranged this sudden invitation to Northampton, and he was on his guard at once. Inwardly, he was furious and a little uneasy, foreseeing the possibility of future trouble; but he kept both his temper and his composure, and in the end he lulled Ida's suspicions. When she had gone, Fenton himself breathed a sigh, which sounded curiously like one of relief, and, pulling out a couple of big volumes in the bottom shelf of the bookcase, produced a bottle of whisky of a brand greatly superior to that which stood on the tray. [Pg 119]

"She doesn't like to see it go too fast." He motioned towards the other bottle.

Jimmy nodded sympathetically, understanding; then helped himself.

"They're afraid of you going the pace." Joseph Fenton jerked the words out, looking away almost guiltily.

Once more Jimmy nodded. He liked this brother-in-law, always had liked him, knowing him to be a man, and, for a moment, he felt inclined to tell him of Lalage; but, before he could make up his mind, Joseph went on: [Pg 120]

"They don't understand, Jimmy—Ida and May and my own sisters too. Yet, hang it all, in a way I suppose they're right, because of the kids, you know." He tossed his cigar into the grate and lighted another, rather carefully. "You fellows who have knocked about, you get ideas and ways ——. But, they won't do here, Jimmy, believe me." He paused again, to help himself to another whisky, then went on, hurriedly, "This work of yours, it's a bit uphill. Are you all right for cash? If not come to me."

Jimmy flushed. He wanted some money badly, how badly only a man in his position, the lover of Lalage, could know; but still he could not take it from Fenton, for that purpose. Joseph would never understand his motives. So he stood up, suddenly.

"Thanks, very much, Joe; but I can rub along, at least I think so. If I am dead stuck, I will come to you; but I believe I can pull through." Then he said good night, and went upstairs, to think of Lalage, and to curse his own idiocy in not taking the proffered loan. Twenty pounds would have been nothing to his brother-in-law, yet to Lalage and himself it would have meant a new start. Before he lay down he had made up his mind to ask Joseph for it, after all, and he went to sleep with that resolution in his mind; but when he awoke in the morning things somehow seemed different, and before breakfast was over he had changed his mind. This was his world, and these were his own people, living ordered lives, with soles and grilled kidneys for breakfast, and family plate on the table, knowing nothing of ham and beef shops, or of milkmen who demanded cash in exchange for their milk. He belonged to them, he was one of them, sharing their principles and their prejudices, worshipping their gods, as his ancestors and theirs had done. What real kinship had he with Lalage, who made her breakfast tea out of a quarter-pound packet bought the evening before at the little general shop round the corner, and took an obvious delight in the sixpenny haddock they had purchased off the barrow with the glaring oil lamps over it? [Pg 121]

And yet, when the postman brought him no letter from that same Lalage, he grew silent and restless, as his sister's eyes were quick to note. When Joseph had departed to his office, he himself went to the smoking-room and wrote three whole sheets to the girl who lived in the flat, for the first time throwing all prudence to the winds, and saying the things he felt. His pen travelled quickly, and, whilst he was writing, he forgot all about his surroundings, his mind being full of Lalage. When, at last, he had finished and signed his name, in full, as a sign of his trust in her, disdaining any subterfuge, he looked round the luxuriously furnished room, and for an [Pg 122]

instant he was filled with a sense of his own folly; then, hurriedly, as though ashamed of what he was doing, he thrust the letter into an envelope and sealed it down, afterwards posting it with his own hands.

The hours dragged by slowly. The Marlow house had seemed dull; but the Fentons' was almost unbearable. Ida meant to be kind; but, perhaps, because she tried to show her intention, she only succeeded in making Jimmy feel his position as a poor relation. She took him for a drive in the afternoon to call on one or two elderly ladies in reduced circumstances, whom she patronised unconsciously, greatly to the discomfort of her brother, who had a kind of fellow feeling for her victims. Yet, on the other hand, he was conscious of a grim admiration for Ida; she was so sure of her own rectitude, so convinced that her husband's wealth—which meant her own position—entitled her to lecture and to interfere. It was all interesting, even amusing, or it would have been so, had Lalage never come into his life, in which case he could have regarded Mrs. Fenton from a more or less impersonal point of view. Now, however, she was a possible danger, to be guarded against, and—though he did not like to put it that way—to be lied to, if occasion demanded.

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That night, Jimmy hardly closed his eyes, being occupied with the problem of inventing an excuse for getting back to town. The evening post had brought him no letters; and, though it was improbable that Lalage would have any real news for him, he was terribly worried at her silence. Lying then through the long hours, praying for the sleep which would not come to ease him from the hideous pain of jealousy, he suffered as few men can suffer in their lives. He had no right to control Lalage, no more claim on her than anyone else had, he was mad to trouble about her, knowing what he did of her, and having ten years' experience of women behind him. Yet he lay there, wide-eyed, wondering, and tormenting himself. Twice he got up and endeavoured to smoke a cigarette, but all to no purpose. The tobacco tasted rank, and, after a few whiffs, he let the thing go out. When, towards morning, he did fall into a heavy sleep, it was only to dream of Lalage, with the mud and rain squelching through her shoes, looking for someone to give her shelter.

CHAPTER XIII

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If Ida felt any relief when, at the end of four miserably long days, Jimmy returned to town, she did not say so, even to her husband. It had been a trial in many ways, but, at the same time, she was conscious of having done her duty. She had impressed her brother with a sense of what he owed to the family in the matter of conduct, and his very depression seemed to show that he had taken the matter to heart.

"Jimmy's nerves are all wrong. He's like a man on wires. He wants a comfortable home and a wife to look after him," Fenton ventured to remark whilst his brother-in-law was upstairs, packing; but Ida brushed the theory aside scornfully.

"I am surprised at you, Joseph. It is not at all the way to speak of marriage. The Griersons have always waited until they were in a position to marry, and have never held those disgusting ideas of nerves and so on. Jimmy most emphatically cannot think of marrying for many years to come. He is perfectly well, or he would be if he did not smoke and drink so much. He has the remedy in his own hands."

Fenton shrugged his shoulders and turned away, wondering inwardly whether the Grierson strain would predominate in his own children. He almost wished Jimmy had not come down. It was annoying to be disturbed and made to think after having got out of the habit of so doing.

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The men and women of the type Ida usually invited to the house never worried him in that way, belonging as they did to the class which can afford to take its theories as facts.

Jimmy had heard once from Lalage, a brief little note, just acknowledging his letters, and telling him nothing. Mrs. Fenton had watched carefully whilst he was reading it—she had detected a woman's handwriting—but he had managed to keep his composure, and then, the better to deceive her, he had rolled the paper into a ball and tossed it on to the fire, though it cut him to the heart to part with anything which had once been Lalage's.

He had hoped the girl would have been waiting for him at the station; but he failed to see her tall figure on the platform, so, jumping into a cab, he told the driver to take him to the mansions. However, as they went up the last street, he caught sight of Lalage coming out of a hairdresser's shop. A moment later he was beside her.

Jimmy's first impression was one of delight at the look of genuine pleasure which, had come into her eyes; then he noted with concern how worn and pale she looked.

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"I didn't expect you quite so soon," she said. "I must have made a mistake in the time, and I wanted to get my hair done nicely before you got back."

"What has been the matter with you? Why didn't you write, dear?" he asked.

She parried the questions until they got inside the flat, when he repeated them, holding her hands, and looking into her eyes. She tried to avoid his scrutiny.

"I've been all right," she answered, "only there was nothing to write about."

But he would not be put off like that, and at last, with a sob, she told him. "It's over now, and I didn't mean you to know. I—I've had the brokers in." She was speaking hurriedly, in a low voice. "You see, someone has been paying my rent, and I expected it the day you went away—it should have come that morning—and it was due next day. I never heard, and I only had a few shillings, so they put the brokers in at once. These landlords always do."

Jimmy cursed silently. "Why didn't you wire to me? You know I would have sent it at once."

She shook her head. "No, no. I hate taking money from you, above everyone."

"What did you do in the end?"

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She looked up and faced him, with a kind of desperate courage. "I got it by going away for two days. It's no good disguising things, trying to make out that I don't."

It was a question which was the paler, the man or the woman. It had come home to him, as it had never done before. He dropped her hands and went over to the window, where he stood very still, staring out with absolutely unseeing eyes; whilst she watched him with a deadly pain at her heart, thinking she had killed the love which she knew had grown up in him.

"Perhaps it's best, after all, perhaps it's best." She tried desperately hard to say the words to herself, then, almost unconsciously, she took a step towards him. Possibly her action altered the whole course of two lives, for, like a flash, he turned round, seized her in his arms, and covered her face with kisses.

"I don't care, now I've come back, because it'll never happen again, it can't happen again, and what went before has nothing to do with me. We'll start afresh, dearest, we'll start afresh." He repeated the words several times, savagely, as though wishing to assure himself that it would be so.

Lalage was crying on his shoulder, sobbing quietly without noise or movement, as overwrought women do; but it was soon over, and she pulled herself together bravely.

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"I think you're very tired and we had better have some tea now," she said, smiling at him with wet eyes. He kissed away her tears, then released her, and sat down whilst she hurried into the kitchen to prepare the tray.

It was very much later, in fact not until after they had finished the supper, which she insisted should come from the next street—"Because it was so nice last time," she explained—that he went back to the subject of their future. He was so desperately in earnest that he succeeded in blinding himself to the financial difficulties ahead; and, though perhaps he did not convince either Lalage or himself, they were both in the mood to risk things.

"I'll give up my rooms at Mrs. Benn's, thankfully, and we can take some others, somewhere near Fleet Street, until we can get on our feet," he went on.

But Lalage demurred. "I can't give up this flat, at least not without losing all I've paid on the furniture, until the end of my agreement, in six months' time. Why shouldn't we stay on here?"

Jimmy frowned. He loathed the place and all its associations, but he was not in a position to give her another home of her own, as yet, and he could not answer her argument, especially when she added:

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"I can tell them at the agent's office that we are married, and we can give them some name or other."

She said it simply, without the least intention of hurting him; but the words cut him like a whip, for though, for one mad moment, he had thought of marriage, real marriage, he had put the idea on one side as utterly impossible. He was a Grierson, owing a duty to the family, and he could not do the thing. Only he had the grace not even to hint of it to her, and she gave no sign that she had the least expectation of any promise from him. She had recovered her spirits, and, apparently, was quite content with the arrangement he proposed. He was fully conscious that Society would condemn him unsparingly, if it found out, and he could not justify his own conduct, even to himself; but Lalage never seemed to consider the moral aspect of the question, that curious element of irresponsibility, almost childishness, which he had marked at the very outset, was now more noticeable than ever.

Suddenly, a new fear gripped him. "It will never do to give my people this address," he said. "They would make inquiries at once, and then——" He gave a grim little smile.

Lalage's face grew hard. "Why should they hunt you like that? If they really cared, they would have looked after you, instead of sending you to those lodgings. They want you to be like a little boy, to do just what they say, and never to have a mind of your own—oh, yes, but they do. They ought to have seen that after all you've been through, you need care and love."

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He looked up with a queer light in his eyes. "Do you love me, Lalage? You've never said so."

"I like you very, very much," she answered.

But he was not satisfied. "Do you love me?" he repeated.

"I like you better, much better, than anyone else I ever met," and with that he had to be content.

CHAPTER XIV

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"I know someone who will let you a room, just as an address, in case those horrid sisters of yours make inquiries." Lalage turned round suddenly from the looking-glass, her hands still busy with her hair.

"Who is she? Where does she live?" Jimmy asked lazily, being at the moment more interested in that same hair than in anything else.

"She lives just the other side of Baker Street, and really she's a kind of agent, you know." Lalage made a gesture of supreme disgust. "But she's not so bad as most of them, and, as her husband is a clerk in the Council office, anyone would tell your people that the house is quite respectable. Why, it belongs to the mayor himself."

Jimmy frowned. He loathed the idea of putting himself in the hands of people of that sort, people who would understand exactly how matters stood, and judge, not only himself, but Lalage as well, according to their own standards.

"I would sooner we had nothing whatever to do with any of them," he said.

He was touching mud for the first time in his life, real mud, and he did not like the feeling of it. Moreover, he had suddenly grown very particular about Lalage. They might not be married, in fact he had decided that there could be no question of marriage between them; but, none the less, as long as he was going under another name, he wanted people to believe they had legalised their union, and to respect Lalage accordingly. Had he not belonged to a family of position, he might have seen himself as a coward or a cad; but the Griersons were essentially of the Victorian age, and so he was able to quiet his conscience with platitudes; whilst under the seeming calmness with which Lalage had accepted his proposal, she was too glad of any change from the nightmare of the past to be very critical. She hoped—that was all, resolutely refusing to allow herself any fears or misgivings. And, after all, Jimmy was very young so far as these things were concerned, and Lalage was even younger; so, probably, they would not have listened to, much less have believed, anyone who had warned them that they were attempting the impossible. They were happy at the moment, having put the past behind them, and they were ready to assume that their happiness would last, ignoring its dangerous insecure foundations.

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In the end, Lalage had her way, so far as the room was concerned. Mrs. Fagin, the landlady, scenting money easily earned, was absolutely servile. Jimmy stammered a little over his explanations, but Lalage put things more plainly. "He will seldom be here; in fact I do not think he will ever actually need the room," she said. "But it will be an address for his letters, and you will know what to say if there are any inquiries. What would be your terms?"

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Mrs. Fagin looked at Jimmy, as if to get his measure. "I'm sure I don't know, sir," she began. "We haven't had that same thing before, but—"

"He will pay three shillings a week," Lalage interrupted, "and begin next week. That should suit you, Mrs. Fagin. Very well," and she sailed out.

Jimmy looked at her admiringly. "You do know how to deal with them, Lalage," he remarked.

She sighed a little wearily. "I've had to learn that, and a good many other things, since I came to town."

Down at the apartment house in the dreary suburban street, Mrs. Benn accepted a week's notice from Jimmy with a sniff of anger.

"Very well, sir. You know your own business best, though Mrs. Marlow did say as how you would be permanent. Without that, I shouldn't have gone out of my way to give you our own best room, and to wear my health, which is not too good, out in making you comfortable. But then, Mrs. Marlow was evidently mistook all round, for she said you would keep respectable hours and act as such."

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Whereupon Jimmy lost his temper, paid her a week in lieu of notice, and went straight back to Lalage, who received him with delight. "So you haven't changed your mind at the last moment, as you would have done if you had been wise, and good and," she laughed mischievously, "Grierson-like."

"All I care about is being good to you, sweetheart," he answered. "But why do you say 'Grierson-like'?"

She looked at him critically, her head a little on one side. "Because you're two men—James Grierson, who is stodgy and respectable and ought to marry what the other Griersons call a good girl, that is one with money; and Jimmy, who is awfully sweet and unselfish, just the opposite to James. Just now, you're Jimmy, the nice side of you is uppermost; but some day it may be the other way about and then you'll run off and leave poor Lalage."

He flushed, and tried to draw her to him. "Never, never," he declared. "I shall always stick to you. Who else have I got?"

She shook her head. "You've got your own people, always, ready to have you, when you'll be one of them; whilst I'm all alone, and only Lalage, the girl you met by chance in Oxford Street." [Pg 135]

Her words reawakened his curiosity as to her past. Twice before he had tried to learn her story, but now, as on those occasions, she baffled his questions.

"I am Lalage Penrose, that's all. I was a fool, and I've paid for my folly, and there's nothing else worth telling."

"Still, I should like to hear," he persisted.

"Well, perhaps you shall some day, if you don't turn into James Grierson before then. But—but, don't ask me, Jimmy." Her bantering manner changed suddenly, and with a queer little sob she jumped up and hurried into the other room.

Jimmy did not try to follow her. Instead, he lighted a cigarette, and endeavoured to settle down to work on an article which had been suggested by a paragraph in that morning's Record. A quarter of an hour later Lalage came back with a little bundle of his socks in her hand.

"These want darning," she remarked; then, in the most natural manner, she sat down in the big wicker chair beside him, and started to ply her needle.

From time to time Jimmy glanced up from his writing. He was breaking the moral code in which he had been brought up, the code which he knew, as every sane man does know, is essentially right in principle; he was risking a rupture with his own people who, certainly, would never tolerate Lalage; he was face to face with an ugly financial situation, almost penniless himself and with another dependent on him; and yet he felt more at peace than he had done for many months past. Lalage, intent on her needlework, frowning prettily over the large holes in his socks, looked so sweet and girlish, so entirely unsoiled, outwardly at least, by what she had been through, that it seemed as if, after all, there could be nothing wrong. Marriage was only a formality, he told himself, and from that time on he tried to school himself to think so, almost succeeding after a while. [Pg 136]

When his article was finished, Jimmy glanced through it rapidly, made one or two corrections, scrawled his signature at the foot, then turned to Lalage. "What is the time, dear? Have any of your clock-men come down the street lately?"

She looked up with a smile. "Yes, the watercress man, which means five o'clock. Have you finished now?"

Jimmy nodded. "I thought of taking it down to the office now. It's topical, so there's just a chance they'll use it to-night. Will you come too?" [Pg 137]

"Of course," she answered. "We can get a motor 'bus at the end of the street, and it'll be a nice little run out. Besides, it'll be lucky if I go with you. They'll be sure to take it. I've a feeling I shall bring you luck. Don't you think so yourself?"

He kissed her lightly on the hair. "I'm sure you will, sweetheart. And we want lots of luck just now."

"What a dirty place and what a grumpy old man!" Lalage remarked as they came out of the *Record* office, after handing the envelope to the surly porter, who had taken it with an inarticulate growl and tossed it to a waiting boy. "Still, if they use it and they're good to you, I don't mind how dusty their passage is, or how bad tempered the porter looks."

Jimmy pressed her arm. "Good to us, you mean, don't you?"

She laughed. "Yes, good to us, I should say now." In the morning Jimmy was out early to buy a copy of the paper; and, as she opened the door to him, his radiant face told her the news.

"They've used it," he said, unnecessarily.

She laughed softly. "I felt sure they would. You see Lalage is lucky to you already."

CHAPTER XV

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"That last article of yours I used was a very good one, and I shall always be glad to see anything you like to submit; but the amount of space we can give to foreign stuff, however good, is limited, and I do not like to have the same signature more than three or four times a month," Dodgson wrote, in returning Jimmy's next manuscript.

Jimmy passed the letter to Lalage. "Not very encouraging, is it dear?"

The girl read it through. "Oh, I think so. Three or four months means six or eight guineas from one paper alone, and then, you see, there are so many others. I'm sure you'll do well, because you're very, very clever, and because you're good to Lalage."

"Will that bring me luck?" he asked, smiling.

"Of course," she answered. "Everyone who is good to me gets on and those who are horrid come to grief. I've seen it, lots of times." She spoke seriously, with an air of conviction.

"Well, I hope you're right." Jimmy sighed. He had not sold any manuscript for several days, and was feeling distinctly worried about the future. His original capital had dwindled down to a few shillings, despite Lalage's careful management, and, so far, he had not been paid for any of his work. Already, the need of money was crippling him, robbing him of his powers of imagination, and by that hideous perversity of effect which every writer knows to his cost, making him do less instead of the more he longed to produce.

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Lalage, ever an optimist, did her best to cheer him up and to assist him, searching the papers for news items which might form the basis of an article, counting the number of words in his manuscripts to see they did not exceed the regulation column length, and even copying out his rough notes in her clear, bold handwriting.

"I wish you could get a typewriter machine, Jimmy," she remarked. "I'm sure your stuff would have a better chance, and I could soon learn to use the thing. Other girls do, so I'm sure I can."

"They cost a lot of money," Jimmy answered, rather wearily.

Lalage tossed her head. "You can get them on the hire-purchase system. I believe you think I should get tired of it, you old silly. Now don't you?"

The man stooped down and kissed her. "I don't think anything of the kind. I know you're a brick, only——." He broke off with a sigh, then, "I'm going down to the club, to see if I can find Kelly. I must do something before we get in a fix."

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She looked up at him anxiously. "Will you be long, dear? And do be careful, won't you? You walk through the traffic as if it wasn't there, unless you have me to look after you."

When he had gone out, she sat for a long time, very still, staring into the fire. Already, she was getting a little afraid. Twice, Jimmy had gone down to the club in the vain hope of hearing of something to do or picking up some useful hints, and each time he had returned a little flushed and inclined to be apologetic. Lalage did not blame him, even in her own mind. It was inevitable, she told herself, after all he had been through, to the strain of which was now added the anxiety of the present. She did not blame him, but at the same time, as she glanced round her little home, she gave a shudder of fear at the possibility of losing it all and of losing Jimmy as well. "If I were only sure of him, if I dare trust him, I wouldn't mind, I'd risk it all. But to lose everything, and then be homeless and alone again——" She suddenly felt very cold and stooped down to poke the little fire.

A moment later, the electric bell rang, three times in rapid succession, a signal she knew well. She stood up quickly, her face very pale. "It's Ralph," she muttered. "And we want money so badly. I wonder if he would just lend it." She stood, with clenched hands, trying to decide. The bell rang again, seemingly more insistently; then, deliberately, she sat down, and put her fingers in her ears. "Oh, Jimmy, I won't, because I love you. But I don't believe you trust me, and I don't believe you understand."

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Down at the club, Jimmy was seeking advice of Douglas Kelly.

"Hasn't the *Record* paid you yet?" the latter asked. "Oh, you haven't sent in an account? You should have done so on the Wednesday after your stuff appeared, then you would have got a cheque on the Friday afternoon. Still, if you go down to-day, before five, the cashier will give it to you. He's a very decent fellow, and, if you're ever badly stuck, he'll let you have it the day your article appears. I've been glad enough to get it that way, more than once."

Jimmy felt that sudden relief which only those who have been desperately short of money can know. He had led Lalage to understand that he had a couple of shillings in his pocket for his own needs beyond the half-crown he left her, whereas he had not even got his omnibus fare back from Fleet Street.

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"I hate to think of you going out without the money for a drink and so on," she had said. "What's more, I'm not going to let you do it." So he had lied bravely to her, knowing that, unless he had some luck, the half-crown would be needed for food for the morrow. Now, however, he would have money enough for a good many to-morrows.

Kelly knew nothing of Lalage, but he understood what the sudden brightening of Jimmy's face meant.

"Been hard up?" he asked, with a smile. "Why didn't you come to me, as I told you to do? Of course, you'll find it an uphill game, and I would advise you to leave it now, at the start, if I were not sure you would succeed in the end. You'll have a hard fight, because you've got ability and experience of the world, and those will tell against you at first."

"Why?" Jimmy asked.

Kelly gave a cynical little laugh. "Because there's not much demand for either in Fleet Street. You've only got to study the Press to see that—dailies, weeklies, magazines, the whole lot. They want writers who are just on the level of the mob, because then the mob can understand them."

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All your travel won't help you to get a job; but if you could go into a newspaper office and say, 'I know more about Upper Clapton, or Stockwell, or some such beastly place than any man living,' or 'I'm a crime expert, and I can give the names, and dates of execution, of every man hanged in London for the last twenty years,' then they'd welcome you as a long-lost brother, and give you about ten pounds a week."

Jimmy laughed, not quite believing him. "Then how did you yourself get on?"

Kelly finished his drink, and ordered some more before answering the question, then, "I bluffed," he said. "There was a coal strike coming on, and I swore I was an expert on coal mining, so the *Evening Guardian* gave me a job. I picked up a little knowledge locally, just a few technical terms and so on; and, as for the rest, neither the editor nor the public knew that half my stuff was utter rot. It read well, and lent itself to good headlines."

"And then, after that?" Jimmy asked.

"After that? Oh, well, I had got my foot in, and it was easy. I advertised myself, and made the ruck get out of my way, as I told you before. I'm not loved, but then I'm not in Fleet Street for the sake of earning the regard of its population."

Jimmy looked surprised. "They all seem pretty eager to talk to you."

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"Of course they do." Kelly laughed grimly. "Of course they do, because I'm a power already and I may be an editor by-and-by; but, if I went down, all they would think about would be to scramble for my place. Don't think I'm blaming them; they're a decent enough crowd, awfully decent, but the fight is too hard to have time for thinking about anyone else. Why you, yourself, are already the common foe, in a sense. You're taking up space in the *Record* which, but for you, someone else would fill. You won't get any help or advice, and most people would say I was a fool for introducing a possible competitor of my own. You'll feel the same, if you stick in Fleet Street long enough, which you won't do."

"I thought you said I was going to succeed," Jimmy retorted.

Kelly yawned. "So I did, my bright child. But when you've learnt the ropes, and can afford it, you'll go in for fiction. But just now, all your ideas are chaotic, and you won't do a decent story until you've sorted them out and fallen in love."

Jimmy coloured. "How do you know I've never done that yet?"

The other man shook his head. "You're too sweetly young in many of your ways and ideas. Oh, I daresay there's some prim maiden belonging to your sister's circle, with an aldermanic papa in the City—but you, yourself, would never really be in love with her. I know you too well; and if you did marry her, you would never write a book, until you had run away from her, as you would certainly do. Well," he got up abruptly, as if to avoid giving any reasons for his ideas, "I'm going over to the *Record* office now, and if you come, I'll introduce you to the cashier and you can get your cheque."

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Jimmy did not waste any time after he left the *Record* office. The cashier himself changed the cheque for him, the banks being shut. Jimmy hesitated a moment as to whether he should take a hansom, then remembered the lean days of the past, and jumped on an omnibus. Lalage could make a shilling go a surprisingly long way.

He found the girl sitting in the dark, in front of an almost dead fire, and his conscience smote him on account of the time he had spent in the warm, comfortable club smoking-room.

"We're in luck, sweetheart," he said, putting his hands on her shoulders, and kissing her. "I've got the six guineas out of the *Record*."

She reached up and pulled his face down to hers again, in one of her rare bursts of outward affection. "Oh, I'm so glad. I was reckoning up, and I found you must have gone out without any money, even for tobacco or a drink, and I was picturing you trudging back in this cold drizzle. You are a naughty boy to do those things."

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"And how about you, if I spent all the money? Wouldn't you think to yourself that I was a selfish beast?"

Lalage shook her head. "You could never be selfish; it's not your nature. You might be thoughtless, that's all. Promise me you won't go out like that again. I shall worry ever so much if you don't. I know, only too well, what it means to trudge about in the London mud without a penny for even a glass of hot milk. Oh, the cold." She gave a little shiver. "You know that shop in Regent Street, where they have the big fires in the window, showing off some stoves. I've stood there for as long as I dare, more than once, trying to think I was feeling the heat through the glass."

"Don't, please don't," Jimmy muttered thickly. "I do hate to think of it all. And it shan't be so again, I swear it shan't. Let's forget it all to-night, and go out and have some dinner somewhere, for a change. You're all on a shiver now. I'll go out and get some brandy, whilst you put your things on. I may as well bring in a bottle."

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Lalage put her hand on his arm. "Not a bottle, dear, only a quartern. That'll be quite enough. Do what Lalage tells you this time."

"Don't I always do what you tell me?" he asked, laughing.

"Oh, I don't want you to say that," she answered quickly. "You ought to be your own master; only when I know a thing is right I do like to tell you. A woman should, I think."

For an instant, Jimmy felt a wild longing to beg her to change the word "woman" to that of "wife," but she had already turned towards the door, and at the same moment the noise of the grimy street seemed to come in through the window and somehow fill the room. The sound recalled him to his normal self. How could he, a Grierson, take a wife from those surroundings?

CHAPTER XVI

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Mrs. Marlow had learnt of her brother's sudden change of address with mingled annoyance and anxiety. It was not pleasant to have him quit the lodgings she had found for him after so short a trial, and she could not help feeling that there was some very strong attraction drawing him to town. Mrs. Benn, that uncompromising "Son of Temperance," had come over herself to explain matters to Jimmy's sister, and had taken the opportunity to enlarge on the number of bottles she had found in her lodger's room, omitting to state, however, that these had included the best part of a dozen of Bass, which, possibly because she hated liquor so much, she had promptly sold to her next-door neighbour at a halfpenny a bottle below the retail price.

"I'm afraid as how the house was too quiet for Mr. Grierson, mum," she wound up. "Having nothing to do hisself, except just write, he seemed to think other folks couldn't be tired and want to go to bed, folks that worked." She emphasised her words with a truly British scorn for those who live by their brains. "I'm sure the hours and hours as I've sat up for him, it's fair worn me out. And him your brother, mum, and uncle to these lovely little children, what I remember coming into the world."

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Mrs. Marlow wrote plainly to her brother, doing her duty without flinching. Jimmy read the letter with a grim smile, then handed it to Lalage, who was bubbling over with wrath long before she reached the end of it.

"They are horrid, Jimmy, really they are. They see something wrong in everything you do. It's quite enough to drive you to the bad, never giving you a chance, and treating you like a silly little boy. I'm sure you don't drink as she says you do. She must be a nasty-minded woman. You know I should be the last to want to separate you from your family, or anything like that, if they were good to you; but as it is, I'm sure you're much better here than in those miserable lodgings, all alone and moping. That would make you drink."

They were having breakfast at the time, but Lalage looked so sweet, lying back in a big wicker chair, wrapped in an old kimono of Jimmy's, that he felt compelled to lean over and kiss her.

"You won't let me go to drink, will you, Lalage?" he asked.

"Of course not," she answered promptly. "You know how I feel about that. Yet your people would never believe it if they found me—when they find me. We girls," she looked up, a little defiantly, "we girls are supposed to be everything that is bad; whilst they, your City people, have got all the virtues, except charity, which they don't imagine they need."

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Jimmy coloured. "You're a bit rough on them sometimes, Lalage," he said.

She shook her head emphatically. "I'm not too rough. Have they any idea of charity, any idea of forgiveness? If I were able to live respectably again, live a good life, would they, or any of their kind, allow me to wipe out the past and start afresh?"

Jimmy suddenly became busy with a cigarette he was rolling. "You are living a respectable life now," he muttered, weakly evading the question.

But Lalage smiled bitterly, and then, with a sudden change of expression, she laid her hand on his, very gently. "No, Jimmy dear, let's be straight, even amongst ourselves. You are all right, because you're a man, and men are allowed to do these things; but they would all treat me as a bad woman, as something rather worse than a dog. Even you, dear, don't respect me, in your heart, although I have tried to make you."

The man got up suddenly, tossing his newly made cigarette into the grate. "I do respect you, you know I do. To me, you come before everyone else in the world; and I think as much of you, as if, as if—" He stammered a little, and, still very gently, she finished the sentence for him.

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"As if I were your wife."

Jimmy's eyes flashed. Somehow, it sounded wonderfully sweet, coming from her lips, and all his caution, all his Grierson traditions, seemed to slip from him suddenly. He stood up, very straight, facing her.

"My wife," he said in a low voice. "My wife. Will you be my wife, Lalage?"

The girl turned white, and her hand went to her throat, as though she were choking, then she looked away, staring into the fire, whilst he watched her, waiting for her answer with almost

pitiful anxiety.

"Dearest," she began at last, "it's very sweet of you—" Then she paused again, as though searching for the words, which came to her at last. "Jimmy, dearest, do you really mean it? Remember, you've only known me quite a little time, and you can't be sure of me yet. Can you? You see, if you made a mistake it would spoil your whole life. It means so much to you."

"And what does it mean to you?" he asked, thickly.

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"Everything," she answered, simply. "But then, I've spoilt my life already, and I mustn't spoil yours too."

"You wouldn't spoil it. You, know that as well as I do. You would give me something to work for, make me keep up to the mark." He was thoroughly in earnest now, carried away by the fear of losing her. He walked up and down the room a couple of times, then stopped in front of her. "Lalage," he asked, very quietly, "do you love me?"

The girl nodded, without looking up.

"Then will you marry me?" He said it deliberately. She clenched her hands, but answered nothing, till he repeated his question, then she faced him, white-lipped and wild-eyed.

"God forgive me for saying it—yes. But not yet, Jimmy, not yet," and without allowing him to kiss her, she jumped up and ran into the other room, shutting the door behind her.

Jimmy walked down to the club that day, not from reasons of economy—there was still some of the *Record* money left—but because he wanted to think matters over, quietly and deliberately. He was conscious of an unwonted sense of elation—Lalage was to be his, definitely and finally, so that they could face the world openly, with none of this miserable business of subterfuge and bogus address; no one would know of the past. And then, suddenly, he went cold at the thought of the family inquisition, and the falsehoods he would have to tell; whilst, even if the latter were not detected, his people would never forgive him for marrying a stranger, never agree to his marriage until he was in what they would consider a good position, which would mean years of waiting. He tried to picture Lalage, with her almost childish outlook on life, being cross-examined by the cold and immaculate Ida, or sitting down to dinner in the Marlow house, where even the servants would turn up their noses at the mention of the ham and beef shop.

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And then if, after they were married, they came across someone belonging to Lalage's old life—that was the worst idea of all, intolerable, wholly abominable. Insensibly, he quickened his pace, as though trying to get away from the thought, then, finding that useless, turned into a saloon bar, where he remained a full hour, drinking whisky practically neat, and endeavouring to interest himself in the other people who came into the place. When, at last, he did reach the club, he was feeling much more certain of the wisdom of his choice and his ability to manage his own affairs. He had determined to tell Douglas Kelly, as practically his only friend, about his engagement; and yet, somehow, he felt a distinct sense of relief when, in reply to his question, the waiter said:

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"Mr. Kelly, sir? He has been in, in a great hurry, just for letters and so on. But," and he lowered his voice discreetly, knowing Kelly to be a friend of Jimmy's and two other members being near, "but he's gone to Russia, sir, all in a hurry. Told me to tell you he wouldn't be there very long, at least he thought not."

As Jimmy turned away, he found himself face to face with Romsey of the *Evening Post*, of whom he had seen a good deal during the last few weeks.

"Hullo, Grierson," the other said. "You don't look too cheerful. I suppose you are wondering how the smash is going to affect you."

Jimmy knit his brow. "What do you mean?" he demanded. "Who has gone to smash?"

The reporter gave him an incredulous look. "Where on earth do you live that you haven't heard? Why the *Comet* ceased publication last night without warning, which means there are forty of the best men in Fleet Street out of jobs, ready to scramble for the space you and I and the other fellows used to have. Cheerful prospect, isn't it?"

Jimmy did not answer. He was wondering dully whether any of these men had ever felt the same degree of desperate anxiety about the future as he was feeling then.

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CHAPTER XVII

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Things were bad in Fleet Street. Everyone said so, and therefore it followed that the statement was true. Certainly Jimmy found no reason to doubt it. His manuscripts came back with horrible regularity, not so much because they were unsuitable but because there was so little space and so many eager to fill it. Had he been more experienced he would have known that things are always bad to the majority, whilst the successful minority has no time to waste in telling others how it is getting on; but he was raw to the game, and not over-sanguine by nature, so instead of being elated by such little luck as he did get he was terribly discouraged when he counted up the

total results of a month's hard work. He had just managed to scrape together the rent of the flat and the instalment on the hire-purchase furniture, but that had been all. There was nothing due to him from any of the papers; he was practically penniless, as well as a little in debt to such of the local tradesmen as would allow any credit. His own boots were growing uncomfortably thin, whilst, as for Lalage, he had not been able to buy her a single thing. Not that she asked him for anything, rather otherwise.

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"I can manage," she said with a brave attempt at cheerfulness. "These shoes will do me for some little time yet, as I hardly ever go out, and I know you'll get me lots of nice clothes when we grow rich."

But though she tried to encourage him she was not very successful. It is no easy task to put a new heart into someone else when there is a deadly fear gripping at your own, and as day after day went by and she saw him growing thinner, shabbier, more weary and despondent, her own hopes for the future dwindled down to the vanishing point. Hitherto he had kept away from his own people, none of whom had seen him since his return from Northampton; but they were always there in the background, and she knew that he had only to abandon her and come into line with their ideas to get his immediate needs supplied and some provision made for his future in the shape of a steady, respectable occupation. She believed in his ability as a writer far more than he did himself, but success meant months, even years, of waiting, and she saw that he had not the strength to wait. Already his nerve was going and he was trying to steady himself with whisky. Towards herself he was very loving and gentle, at least most of the time; but he was quickly becoming too worried to work in the flat. The sharp knock at the door which heralded the daily visit of one or other of their small creditors would put him off work for the rest of the day, and before long he took to spending the day at the club, sometimes writing, more often mooning about in the vague hope of meeting someone who could help him into a regular berth on one of the papers.

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For Lalage these days passed with unutterable slowness. There was, of necessity, very little to do in the way of cooking, and she had not the heart to go out. It is miserable work looking into the shop windows whilst your own pockets are empty, and, moreover, she had long since divined the terrible jealousy of the past which was always at the back of Jimmy's mind, and she knew that he hated her to be out by herself, although, on the other hand, he seemed afraid to be seen out with her. It was the dread of meeting some of his own people, she understood that perfectly well, and the knowledge increased her fears for the future. In the end she was going to lose everything, not only Jimmy but her little home as well; and all because she had been insane enough to forget that love was not for such as herself, because she had been wilfully blind to the fact that Jimmy came from the Griersons, and must ultimately go back to the Griersons and their kind.

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Now and then there was a red-letter day, when Dodgson of the *Record* wired for a special article, which probably meant two guineas on the morrow. On those occasions Lalage always went down to the office with Jimmy to hand in the copy because, as Jimmy declared, she was lucky to him, and, being elated by the commission, he was able to put on one side the fear of meeting anyone who knew him. But the next returned manuscript brought back his depression and sent him down to the club again to waste his time and drink whisky.

Lalage did not blame him for leaving her the task of meeting the little tradesmen, who grew foul-mouthed and truculent over an account of two or three shillings, as is their wont in that part of London. Rather, she sorrowed over the far smaller share of worry which did fall to him, and tried to take it all on to her own shoulders. He would leave her, she fully believed that, and, had she been as her kind is supposed to be, as perhaps it is, she would have hastened his going in order to be free again; but because she loved him she was ready to sacrifice anything to keep him as long as possible. For Jimmy's own sake, too, she dreaded his going back to his people, knowing, as she did, that he could never forget her, and that he would inevitably seek oblivion and find death in the bottle. She had divined his tendency that way from the very first, and the fear of it had never been out of her mind since.

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Jimmy was still keeping up the nominal address at the house just off Baker Street, and so far Mrs. Fagin, the landlady, had treated him with fawning politeness when he paid his weekly rent, but from the very first he had distrusted her, and he always had the feeling that she would sell his secret if she discovered the market. Once Mrs. Marlow had called and had been told by the maid that Mr. Grierson was out for the day and his room was locked, but there was ever the chance that she might call again and disclose her identity to Mrs. Fagin. The whole thing was a nightmare to Jimmy, who sometimes found himself blaming Lalage in his heart for having suggested the arrangement. He was a supremely miserable man, at least when he was alone, fearful of his own people, terribly worried about money matters, jealous almost to the point of madness, and haunted by the dread of losing Lalage in the end. If only they could have faced the world openly half the battle would have been over, and they could, he told himself, have got through the rest somehow together. And yet since that one day of madness when he had made her promise to be his wife he had never referred to the subject again. He wanted her for his own, and yet he shrank from the sacrifice of marriage. He tried to quiet his conscience by telling himself it was wiser to wait, that it really made little difference after all; whilst Lalage said nothing, being already broken-hearted and bankrupt of hope.

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When she found time to think about him seriously, which was not very often, Mrs. Marlow was far from being satisfied as to Jimmy's doings or prospects. Someone had reported having seen him walking down Fleet Street late at night, looking ill and down at heel, and the news upset her. It was not pleasant to have these things said about one of the family, even though he, himself, might be entirely to blame for it. She would have asked him down to stay for a week-end, but for the fact that she did not want him to meet Ethel Grimmer again, having the feeling that he might tell that lady things which he would not confide to his own sister. But she took counsel with Ida, and, in the end, they decided that Walter Grierson was the right person to make an investigation.

Rather unwillingly, Walter undertook the task, or said he would undertake it, and, after consultation with his wife, who was not in the least interested, detesting both Ida and May, asked Jimmy down to stay, three or four days.

"I'm sure I haven't any desire to go," Jimmy said, as he read the letter to Lalage. Then he coughed a little and put his handkerchief to his mouth. [Pg 163]

Lalage watched him with big, troubled eyes, not for the first time. "I think you had better go, dear," she said. "The change may do you good, and it'll take your mind off these stupid worries. I shall manage all right alone. I'm used to it, you see."

He took her words in the wrong sense, and glanced at her with sudden jealous suspicion, which she saw and strove hard to ignore. "You see, there's nothing urgent due just now," she went on, hurriedly, "and I've enough food in the house to last me out. If I get some condensed milk in, I can pretend we're both away."

Jimmy had the grace to feel ashamed of his own thoughts. "I must see you fixed up, sweetheart, of course, and, anyway, one night will be enough for me at Walter's. As for money, there will be a guinea and a half coming from the *Sunday Echo* to-morrow. It's their pay day, the second Friday."

But Lalage shook her head. "You must have that for a new pair of boots, Jimmy, and one or two little things. I can't let you go as you are. I only wish there had been more time, so that we could have saved enough for a new suit for you." She looked at his figure critically. "I know a place where they sell misfits very cheap, good ones, and you might get one to fit you. They would take my dinner dress in exchange, I'm sure." [Pg 164]

"No, no." Jimmy leaned forward and kissed her hand. "I won't have that. I can manage, and if Mrs. Walter thinks I'm too shabby, she won't ask me again, which will be a relief."

Lalage sighed. "I hate to see you looking thin and ill and poor. It just breaks my heart." She gave a little sob. "But, oh, Jimmy dearest, when you get to your brother's big house, don't despise Lalage and our poor little place here; because we have been so happy in it, in spite of all our troubles."

He drew her to him, very gently. "That will never happen, dear. I won't go at all, if you're afraid of anything like that. I would much rather not go, anyway. You are all I want."

But she had her way in everything, save that he insisted on leaving her five shillings, in addition to laying in a stock of provisions.

"Really, I don't want any money," she said; "or a shilling at the most, in case I want to wire to you. Take the money, Jimmy, do; you will want a drink at the station, and that sort of thing."

He looked at her with shining eyes. "Do you ever think of yourself?" he asked. [Pg 165]

"Of course I do," she laughed. "I want to make you happy, and then I'm happy, so really I'm selfish, after all."

In the end, Jimmy stayed three days at Walter's, and, if he did not actually enjoy himself, at least he was well content to be there. It was very refreshing to be away from all worries, to have no one asking you for money, to feel you could go out of the door without the fear of meeting some miserable creditor. There was plenty to eat, plenty to drink; and, even if he was not actually in sympathy with Walter and his ways, there was always the tie of blood between them. Mrs. Walter, too, made herself very pleasant. She had induced her husband to promise not to lend Jimmy any money, so she had nothing to fear from this brother-in-law; whilst, by getting on good terms with him otherwise, she might be able to use him as a pawn in her never-ending game against May and Ida.

Jimmy thought of Lalage frequently, wondering how she was getting on, and trying to persuade himself that he was anxious to get back to her; and yet, all the time, he was comparing his present surroundings with those of the flat, and dreading the return to the dreary struggle for existence, the hateful knockings at the door, the insolent refusal of goods without cash down, the feeling that you were always on thin ice, in the grip of the Council, the blackmailers, and the hire-purchase dealers, who did to you as they pleased, because they knew well that you dare not face the world openly. There was nothing like that at the Walter Griersons'. They lived as people of position ought to live, as he, Jimmy Grierson, might have lived, had he not been a fool. And then, suddenly, he thought of Lalage's unselfishness and courage and tried to tell himself that, after all, it was worth while. But still, he never felt as he had felt at Ida's, that fierce longing to be back at Lalage's side, to fight the world on her behalf. London had broken his nerve rapidly, and was now [Pg 166]

breaking his health. Somehow, things had changed. He longed for rest and comfort and security, such as his own people enjoyed.

Walter Grierson took his wife's advice and did not attempt to pry into Jimmy's affairs. "He is quite old enough to look after himself," Mrs. Walter said, "and I don't see why you should be private detective for May and Ida. I believe they would try and manage you, too, if I would let them. Oh, but they would, my dear. And yet I'm sure we have a better position than either of them. Joseph is very coarse at times, whilst you say yourself that you do not approve of several of Henry's companies." She scouted the idea that Jimmy looked unwell. "He's got a cold, that's all; and he smokes too much. Otherwise, he is well enough."

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Walter sighed. "I wish he would go into something steady. I'm afraid he will never make an income at his present work."

Mrs. Walter shrugged her shoulders. "He wouldn't take your advice when he first came home, so he can't blame you whatever happens. May seems to be afraid he may make some foolish marriage, but I'm sure I see no signs of that. Of course, if he likes to be sensible and come to you for advice again, I should be pleased if you were able to find him work in the City; but, at present, you are not called upon to interfere. I am sure our own children come first."

Her husband sighed again. He was quite fond of this brother of whom he knew so little, but he never ran counter to his wife's wishes in family affairs; and so, when Jimmy's stay came to an end, he allowed Mrs. Walter to send May a vague, though generally satisfactory, report of their visitor and his doings, which had the result of staving off further inquiries for a time, at least.

"You look better, dear," Lalage said when Jimmy got back. "I knew the change would do you good. No, I've not been worried at all. Only, of course, it's been dull without you.... Are you going down to the club for letters? Well, be in to supper, won't you, dear? I've got something very nice for you."

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"What is it?" he asked, smiling.

"You'll see," she answered. "If I don't tell you, you'll hurry home to find out. Otherwise, you may stay ever so late at that horrid old club."

The first man Jimmy met in the club was Douglas Kelly, newly returned from the Continent. Kelly listened attentively to his tale of ill-success, and when he had done, "I really don't see why you should be so down in the mouth, Jimmy," the elder man said. "I believe you've done better than most who start freelancing when they're new to Fleet Street. Why don't you try some magazine work? It's a better game than doing articles for the dailies."

Jimmy shook his head. "I have tried, but I don't seem to get the grip of a story. I suppose I've no inventive power."

"Rot," Kelly answered cheerfully. "It's because you're worrying, and you can't do that and write decent stuff. Have you tried for a job anywhere?"

The other nodded. "Half a dozen. But they all want experienced men, and, as things stand, I don't see how I'm ever going to get the experience."

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"Would you do sub-editing?" Kelly asked. "It's not pleasant work, going through other people's copy, and so on; but it's good training. You would take anything? All right. I'll see Dodgson to-night. I know he was thinking of sacking one of the subs, and he might take you on. I'll leave a note here for you if I don't see you again. Of course, the pay is rotten, as I suppose you know."

Jimmy was so full of his conversation with Kelly that he had forgotten all about Lalage's promised surprise which was awaiting him at the flat. True, he hurried back, but she saw at once that it was to tell her his news, and not to find out what she had prepared for him; in fact, he sat down at the table, and was about to carve, before it struck him that the dinner was an unusually elaborate one; then, "How on earth did you manage it, sweetheart?" he asked.

She laughed. "How do you think? I schemed it out for a whole day, all on that five shillings you made me keep. I meant you to have it, and you see you've had to, after all."

The man flushed. "You are a brick," he said. "You haven't spent a penny on yourself, and yet I've been living on the fat of the land at Walter's. But this is better than anything they gave me there."

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"That's right," she answered. "So long as you enjoy it, I don't mind all the trouble—so long as we enjoy it together, I meant. And now if you get this work perhaps the luck will change."

CHAPTER XIX

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It was quite time that the *Record* had a vacancy for a sub-editor, and Dodgson was willing to give the berth to Jimmy; only his ideas of salary were far from being satisfactory.

"You see, you're new to the work, wholly inexperienced," he explained, "and, under the circumstances, I cannot give you more than two pounds a week for a start. Afterwards, if the chief sub-editor is satisfied, I will raise it. If it is worth your while you can start to-morrow."

Jimmy bit his lip. He had expected three pounds at the very least, and this would be poor news to take back to Lalage. Still, his work would only be from about six in the evening until midnight, and he could do some articles or stories during the day, or at any rate he hoped so. After all, a certain two pounds was far better than nothing, even though the rent of the flat would swallow fully half of it. So he accepted, after a nervous and unsuccessful attempt to get Dodgson to increase the offer by ten shillings.

As he walked back westwards, he found himself wondering what the editor would have said had he explained how much that extra ten shillings would have meant to him. The paper was paying a dividend of twenty per cent., and if the wages of all the sub-editors had been doubled the shareholders would never have noticed the difference; but to Lalage and Jimmy the lack of that half-sovereign would involve semi-starvation, unless it were possible to sell some articles.

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Lalage put on a brave face when he told her. "It's a beginning, dear," she said. "Of course, it's a shame to pay a clever man like you so little; but now you've got your foot in, you'll soon get on. You mustn't be downhearted about it, Jimmy." She glanced at him keenly. "You're tired out to-night, and I don't believe you've spent anything on yourself in getting a drink and so on; and you've walked all the way from Fleet Street. Now haven't you?"

Jimmy tried to protest he was all right, but his heavy eyes betrayed him, and she insisted that he should go out and get a quarter of brandy.

"But that will take pretty well all we've got," he answered. "And what will you do to-morrow?"

"Oh, something will happen," she retorted. "And the worst thing for me would be to have you ill. What would poor Lalage do then? Now go, like a dear good boy."

As the door closed behind him, all the brightness left her face. "I suppose his people would say I was making him drink," she sighed. "Oh, Jimmy, Jimmy, I'm so afraid. If only I dare agree to give up this flat, and we could go into quite cheap lodgings. But how can I risk losing everything?"

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Jimmy's work proved more tiring than he had expected. He was thoroughly conscientious, savagely anxious to satisfy the chief sub-editor and get a raise; moreover, he was in anything but good health. Consequently, he always got back to the flat in the early mornings tired out, and, though he tried hard to write during the daytime, even he, himself, could see that the work he produced was below his usual level. Anyway, it did not sell, coming back every time with sickening regularity.

Despite his protests, Lalage always insisted on sitting up for him. "You must have something hot when you come in," she declared, "even if we can only run to a cup of cocoa and a little bit of plaice from the fried fish shop. You can't do brain work on nothing."

Jimmy gladly left all the finances to her. Sometimes he wondered how she contrived to feed him as well as she did, besides paying the rent, and letting him have at least a shilling a night when he went down to the office. She even managed to get some bottled stout for him, and yet, at any rate whilst he was at home, no one came to the door to dun her for money. Had he been stronger, he would probably have been suspicious and have made inquiries; but he was thoroughly run down and weary, and only too ready to be free from household worries. He had never kept house himself, knew but little of the cost of things, and had infinite faith in Lalage's capacity for management.

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Once or twice, during the first three months of Jimmy's engagement at the *Record*, Dodgson asked him to write a special article with reference to something which had happened abroad, and, when he went to draw his money for the first of these, Jimmy found that his rate had been raised to three guineas a column; but his weekly wage remained the same, and, somehow, he could not summon up courage to ask boldly for a raise. He was, as Lalage could see plainly, growing a little thinner, a little more weary and nervous, every week.

At the end of the second month, Lalage sprang a surprise on him. They were at breakfast when, with a rather heightened colour, she brought five sovereigns out of her purse and gave them to him. "Jimmy," she said, hurriedly, "you must get a new suit, and some collars and ties and things, really you must."

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He looked at the money, then at her. "Where did you get this, Lalage?" he asked, very quietly.

She faced him so bravely that his suspicions vanished at once. "I saved it up, from those articles of yours."

"And how about you? You want things far more than I do, sweetheart. I don't think you have had any new clothes since I met you."

Lalage shook her head vehemently. "That's for you. You have to go to work, and it worries me terribly when I see you shabby. You will feel ever so much better when you've got a new suit, and they'll think more of you at the office. Clothes give one confidence. Now, you shall come out this morning and order a nice dark tweed, or a grey. I'm not sure I shan't like you best in grey. Anyway, we'll see."

The new clothes certainly made Jimmy look better, and, for a little while, Lalage deluded herself into the belief that he really was growing stronger; then one night he came home shivering, with a severe chill, and his old enemy, the malaria, gripped him again. True, he was only absent from

the office two nights; but the trouble seemed to remain, and Lalage had to redouble her efforts to feed him up. Often, during those days, she tried to steel herself into sending him away, into forcing him to go back to his own people to be nursed as they could afford to nurse him; but when it came to the point of speaking, her resolution always failed her. She could not bear to part from him—yet. And, if she did send him away, there was always the fear, amounting almost to a certainty, that he would drink to drown remembrance of her.

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No, she told herself, she must keep him as long as she could, for his own sake, as well as for hers. What would happen to herself if the parting did come, she never tried to consider. The thought of it was too awful. Jimmy had been so sweet and kind and thoughtful that it was absolutely impossible for her to imagine anyone replacing him. The fact that the question of marriage between them had been tacitly dropped did not weigh with her now. She had never dared to hope that he would redeem his promise eventually; and, latterly, she had tried to make herself forget that the matter had ever been mentioned between them.

Jimmy had seen none of his own people since his visit to the Walter Griersons'. His work gave him a good and sufficient excuse for not leaving town, and it never occurred to him to call on either Henry or Walter in the City. Still, he wrote frequently; and, as time went on, he began to lose some of his fear of their discovering the existence of Lalage. Neither Ida nor May seemed to have any suspicions, so far as he could judge from their letters. Consequently, it gave him a terrible shock when, one morning, about the beginning of his fourth month on the *Record*, he received a wire from May commanding him to meet her as soon as possible at Walter's office.

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Lalage, who had gone deadly pale, picked up the detestable brown envelope.

"It's addressed here. So they know," she whispered.

"Yes, they know," he repeated dully.

They sat for a long time in silence, then he got up, evidently intending to go out.

Lalage stood up, too. "Jimmy, you will leave me," she said.

He turned round quickly and took her in his arms. "Never, never, sweetheart. After all you've done for me! You ought to know me better."

For answer, she gave him a long, passionate kiss, as though saying farewell.

CHAPTER XX

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Mrs. Marlow was a good woman. The rector himself had told her so only the week before when she had given him a cheque for twenty guineas in aid of his favourite charity, the Mission to the Moabites. Consequently, the discovery of Jimmy's double life had filled her with both sorrow and loathing; sorrow at the thought that a Grierson should have been so weak and foolish, loathing at the conduct of the woman who led him astray. She was sitting very grim and upright in the client's chair when Jimmy came in; whilst Walter was at the other side of the table, nervously playing with his eyeglasses and wishing inwardly he had telegraphed for his wife, a proposal which May had vetoed.

"Excuse me, Walter, but this is a matter for our father's children only," she had said, and Walter had, as usual, bowed to her ruling. Ever since their mother's death May had been the high priestess of the family fetish, the position of the Griersons.

The two brothers shook hands in silence, but Mrs. Marlow made no move beyond the very slightest nod, which seemed to be merely a recognition of the fact that the culprit had arrived.

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Jimmy laid his hat on the table, then went and leaned against the fireplace with an assumption of indifference. "Well, May," he said at last, "what is it?"

His sister turned on him suddenly. "Please don't be a hypocrite any more, Jimmy, if you can help it." Her voice was hard and scornful. "You must know from my wire that we have found out all about your disgraceful conduct. As a matter of fact we knew of it a week ago, and might have sent for you then, but we have had detectives making inquiries into that," she hesitated, "that person's character and antecedents in the hope of being able to open your eyes. Isn't that so, Walter?"

The elder man nodded and gave a little grunt of acquiescence, though it was obvious he did not relish being dragged into the matter at all.

Jimmy, white with sudden passion, took a step forward. "Confound it, May——" he began.

His sister put her hands to her ears. "Please don't make it worse by swearing at me. I am not the Penrose woman. We have the right to speak to you as one of the family, if only to save you from further disgrace, and perhaps prosecution,"—she emphasised the last words, and then repeated them, "yes, from prosecution. Not only has this person been bleeding you, working you to death, and taking your last penny——"

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Jimmy, remembering all that Lalage had done for him during the past three months, cut her short

savagely. "That's a lie. She's been everything a woman should be to me."

His sister laughed in bitter scorn. "And to half a dozen other men as well. Oh, Jimmy, Jimmy, what a fool you are, how you've been fooled. Do you think she's been true to you? Do you think a vile creature like that could be true to anyone? No, I will speak for all your swearing at me. Do you think that whilst you have been slaving at that office at nights she has been at home thinking of you? Oh, you have been a blind fool! She has told you lies about everything, over the rent, over the amount she had to pay to the hire-purchase people, over what she was spending. Do you think your paltry two pounds a week was sufficient to dress her and keep her in luxury?"

Jimmy turned away, gripping the mantelpiece for support. He remembered many little things which had given him a momentary pang of suspicion at the time; now, suddenly those suspicions became certainties; and when he looked round again his face was five years older, for he had loved Lalage, and he knew that May was telling him the truth. He had been a blind fool; but still the remembrance of the past was strong in him, and he made a last fight against believing.

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"It's a lie, it's a lie," he repeated hoarsely. There was something in his eyes which nearly broke down May's hardness, a look she had never seen on any man's face before, which she never got out of her memory again.

"I know it hurts, Jimmy, dear," she said far more gently. "It must hurt because you've been infatuated by a very clever and bad woman; but for all that it is true. Do you know anything of her past? What has she told you? We know now that she was the daughter of a scientific writer, and that, even when he lay on his dying bed, she went away with someone, then came back with a lie in her mouth, about having been to town, selling one of his unpublished books. Her own aunt told us of it, her aunt by marriage."

"I don't believe it. I won't believe it," Jimmy muttered.

May shrugged her shoulders. "We have proofs, the best of proofs. Is it not so, Walter?"

The elder brother nodded without looking up. In his case, too, it was the first time tragedy, real tragedy, had come into his life, and it was making him think. He realised dimly that the light had gone out for Jimmy, and as he scratched lines on his blotting-pad with the rim of his eyeglasses, he fell to wondering, in a dull, far-off sort of way, whether his brother would shoot himself as their father had done, and what the coroner's verdict would be, and what the world, by which he meant the City, would say. Then the spring of his glasses snapped suddenly, and the annoyance brought him back sharply to the immediate present.

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"Yes, we have complete proof, legal proof," he said. "Your sister is quite right." Words seemed to be failing him, then he got up abruptly and laid a kindly hand on Jimmy's shoulder, as he had often done many years before when they had both been boys. "It's better for you to know, old man. She's a bad lot, and you're well clear of it all. You'll soon forget her and find someone very different."

His words had the effect of rousing May's anger anew. "Don't talk like that, Walter, please," she said sharply. "It's hardly decent under the present circumstances. I presume, Jimmy, that after what we have told you, you will neither see nor write to that creature again."

Jimmy's eyes flashed. "I shall see her and ask her side of it. Am I to condemn her unheard on the strength of the gossip some vile hangers-on have concocted in return for your money? I shall go down there at once."

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Mrs. Marlow's laugh was very scornful. "I said you were a fool. Of course, she'll lie to you again, and wheedle round you. As for the hangers-on, to use your own elegant term, I heard first from Mrs. Fagin, who is a most respectable woman, I find, with a husband in a very good position in the Council office. She had no idea she was lending herself to such a deception, and sent me to the mayor, who very kindly had inquiries made. Then we actually caught this woman, as you can see by these."

She held out a little bundle of papers which Jimmy took mechanically, fingered for a moment, then with a sudden resolution he tossed it into the fire, and as it did not catch immediately drove it down into the glowing coals with the heel of his boot.

May watched him in silence, but when the blaze had died down again, "That stupid action won't alter the facts," she said; "and I may as well tell you that the mayor has asked the police to make her leave that flat. I am only sorry there is no charge we can bring against her. Anyway, she will be watched," she added vindictively. "Ida has gone to warn her now in case she tries to blackmail you."

Jimmy took up his hat quickly. "Good-bye, Walter," he said quietly, and, ignoring his sister, fumbled a little uncertainly for the handle of the door.

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May sprang up and seized his arm. "Jimmy, oh, Jimmy, dear, don't go like that, don't go back to her. We are your own people, you must remember that, and because we love you, we want to overlook all this and see you get on. Don't spoil your life in this way and make us all miserable. If you see her again she has enough wicked cleverness to get you back into her power."

There was genuine feeling in her voice, and for a moment Jimmy was inclined to change his mind, then he released her clutch very gently, and without another word went out of the office.

"He will go back to her, Walter, I am sure he will. He is weak enough for anything where a woman is concerned," May sobbed.

Walter shook his head. "I think not. No, I'm sure he won't," he said with a degree of assurance he was far from feeling; then he looked at his watch. "Well, I've got an appointment with a client in a few minutes, May; I don't want to hurry you off, but——"

May wiped her eyes and drew down her veil. "I do hope Ida manages to frighten her away before Jimmy gets there," she said.

CHAPTER XXI

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Ida Fenton did not shrink from the task of interviewing Lalage. Rather otherwise, in fact, for her own conduct had always been so correct, both her nature and her circumstances combining to keep her out of temptation, that she felt a repulsion, verging almost on hatred, towards those who had erred; consequently, she took a kind of grim pleasure in chastening the sinner. Unconsciously, too, Joseph Fenton had made things worse for Lalage by attempting a remonstrance.

"I think you and May are going too far, putting the police on her and so on," he had said. "Why can't you be content to give Jimmy a warning, and leave the girl alone. It looks bad, being so vindictive."

Whereupon Ida had turned on him in one of those cold outbursts of fury which his rare attempts at independence always provoked. She had given up her life to this man, whose natural, easy-going weakness of character she knew so well; and now he actually dared to put in a good word for an abandoned woman. As a rule, Joseph bowed to the storm, but on this occasion he, too, had lost his temper, and then, suddenly Ida had understood, or had thought she understood. Joseph knew Lalage's address. Jealousy redoubled Ida's bitterness, and she went to the flat more than ever determined to hunt its occupant out into the streets. A woman as good as herself had a perfect right to be merciless.

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When Lalage opened the door she realised instantly who her visitor must be. That hard, beautiful face was as like Jimmy's in features as it was unlike his in expression. Looking at it, Lalage understood that her own cause was lost; it would be quite useless pleading to Ida Fenton.

The visitor swept in scornfully. Lalage closed the door and then stood, waiting, white-faced and desperate.

"I have come for Mr. Grierson's things. Kindly pack them up and have them taken down to my cab." Ida's quiet voice belied the savage anger which the sight of this girl had aroused.

Lalage started. She had never thought of this. Could it be that Jimmy was not coming back at all, even to say "Good-bye," that she would never see him again?

"Did he send you?" she asked breathlessly.

In a good cause, Ida did not hesitate to strain the truth. "Of course," she answered impatiently, then she went a little too far, and added something which she thought would hurt. "He is waiting down below now."

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Lalage made a rapid mental calculation. Jimmy had only set out for the City twenty minutes before, and could not have returned, so she laughed bitterly. "I will give them to Mr. Grierson when he comes for them himself," she answered.

Ida's steely eyes glittered. "He will not be such a fool as to come back, weak and wicked though he has been."

The younger woman took a step forward so suddenly that Mrs. Fenton recoiled. "He is not weak and wicked. It is abominable for you, his sister, to say so. He is far too good for any of you, and whatever he has done wrong, you are to blame for it. You never tried to understand him or help him. You just left him drift away because he didn't fall in with your narrow-minded ideas. I may have done wrong, I have done wrong; but he has always been all that is good and true and honourable. He may leave me, but he'll never go back to you, never, never, never." She paused, breathless.

Ida Fenton had recovered her composure. "Perhaps it will alter your point of view when I tell you that if my brother continues to know you, he will never get anything from his family. We shall cut him off entirely. I believe that is the kind of argument which appeals to persons of your sort." She emphasised the last two words. "He may have misled you with the idea that he could get money out of us; but that was quite wrong; whilst, as for his own prospects, he is no good and never will be."

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"You shan't say that about him," Lalage broke in passionately. "It's only your ignorance and your jealousy of his cleverness."

Ida shrugged her shoulders scornfully. "No doubt you are a judge of what is correct and right.

You should know my brother by now. But I think he, too, will have learnt all about you this morning. That telegram which trapped you a few nights back, calling you out to meet a man in the West End, was sent by one of my brother-in-law's clerks. You were watched then, and recognised by the police. You will get notice to leave here to-day, and I do not think you will find another place in London. If you can explain all that to my brother to his satisfaction, he must be such a fool that you will be welcome to him."

Then she swept out, feeling she had vindicated the Grierson tradition.

It was an hour later, when Lalage heard Jimmy's key in the lock. She was sitting huddled up in a big armchair, his favourite chair; but she did not move when he came in, and stood in front of her, though she had noticed that he was dragging his feet a little, and breathing heavily, as though the stairs had exhausted him.

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"Well?" he said at last.

She turned her head away. "Your sister came soon after you left," she said, in a curious, dull voice.

Jimmy started. "Ida? Ida has been here already?" He passed his hand over his forehead in a dazed sort of way, then tried to pull himself together, as though to meet a blow. "Is it true, Lalage?" he asked.

She answered him with a nod.

On the second time that day, Jimmy steadied himself by the mantelpiece, only now his head went down on to his arms, and Lalage heard him give a sob.

In an instant she was on her feet, trying to turn his face towards hers. "Oh, I did it all for you, Jimmy, I did it all for you. Do you believe that, oh, you must believe that. You were ill and half-starving, and I had to get you nourishment and clothes. It was the quickest way, the only way I could think of; and it seemed so lovely to get you good food, and make you stronger. It was awful, but it would have been more awful to see you dying. Jimmy, believe me, you must believe me, every penny went for you. I didn't want it for myself, only for you; and I thought when the worry and the knocking at the door by the tradesmen were over, you would soon get on, and then I would have stopped, oh, so gladly. Jimmy, dear, Jimmy, sweetheart, say you understand, even if you don't forgive."

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The man looked up, and, for the first time, Lalage saw how he had changed. He was livid and ghastly, and, when he tried to speak, he caught his breath and coughed heavily. Lalage waited with pitiful anxiety for his answer.

"I understand," he said, "but you ought not to have done it, after your promising to marry me."

She turned away hopelessly, and sank into the chair again, knowing she had lost him. "I did it for the best," she wailed. "I only thought of you, Jimmy, only of you."

"You were wrong," he answered dully. "We were both wrong. It has all been a mistake from the first. There is nothing but misery in this sort of life, there can only be misery." He was talking in a detached kind of way, as though the pain of the blow had been succeeded by a mental numbness.

Lalage was sobbing very quietly in the chair; it was the end of everything for her.

After a while, "What will you do now?" he asked.

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She shook her head. "I don't know. I don't think I care, now I've lost you." She waited a moment in a last, desperate hope he would correct her, then went on, "Your people have been to the police, and they're hunting me out. Already, the agent has been round to give me notice to go immediately, and the hire-purchase people are sending for the furniture back. Everything has gone. Still I shall manage."

In a flash, he was jealous again. "Do you mean to say——" he began; but she cut him short.

"No, Jimmy, not that. You need never fear the old life again."

Her words gave him a new fear. "Will you promise you won't kill yourself?" He had come nearer to her, and she thought he was going to touch her.

For a moment she hesitated, confirming his suspicions.

"Promise," he said, almost sternly.

Then she looked up, and asked him a question in turn: "What will you do, Jimmy?"

He had no reply ready, or, at any rate, he did not reply, and she went on. "I will promise that, Jimmy, if you will promise me something. Promise, on your word of honour, not to let this ruin your life, not to go wrong and drink."

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Jimmy did as she had done; he hesitated a moment. "I will promise, if you will do as I want—go down into the country, away from this horrible town, and live quietly. I will manage the money, somehow."

"And not see you again? Jimmy, you don't mean not see you again, just as a friend, only as a

friend?"

His silence answered her, and she fell to sobbing once more, very quietly this time, whilst he stood at the window, staring out at nothing. At last, she grew calm and stood up, drying her eyes.

"Very well," she said. "I will leave it all to you, because I can't help myself. After a time, when I feel better, I shall get something to do, perhaps, in a shop, or dressmaking. Only, the quieter the place the better; and, Jimmy, whatever you do, you must not let your people know where I am."

"It is hardly likely I shall see much of them," he answered grimly. "I think you had better go to some quiet hotel to-night," he added. "Get your things together, and I will see you to-morrow and arrange matters then. You say they are seizing all this furniture and so on."

They had both got back to a kind of forced calmness now, and she answered him quietly. "Yes, my poor little home is going. It's no good protesting; your sisters have made that impossible; and these people can do just as they like. I suppose the landlord telephoned to the furniture people, and they are going shares. Yet I have already paid more than the goods are worth."

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Half an hour later, she came out of the bedroom with her hat on.

"I have packed your things as well, Jimmy. What are you going to do with them? Will you take them away now, and then I can leave the keys at the agent's office as we go past."

Jimmy started. He had forgotten they were both homeless now. "Yes, I suppose so. I hadn't thought. I will go to the hotel I stayed at before, and then take you down to another. I will go and get a cab."

Whilst he was out, Lalage hastily tidied up her little kitchen; then, taking a dustpan and brush, she swept up a few scraps of mud which had come off Jimmy's boots. In a drawer of the table she found his pen and a scrap of blotting paper he had used, and thrust them hurriedly into her dress. Then, during a final look round, she kissed in turn each article of furniture he had been wont to use, heedless of the tears that were dropping on them, coming last of all to his own chair, where she knelt down and buried her face in the seat. She was still there when she heard his step on the stairs; but she jumped up hastily and met him in the little hall, whither she had dragged the luggage.

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"It is all ready now," she said, and went out without looking back.

When Jimmy got down to the club a couple of hours later, he found a telegram waiting for him in the rack, signed "Joseph Fenton."

It read: "Meet me any time to-night at the Grand Central Hotel. Shall be alone."

CHAPTER XXII

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Jimmy heaved a sigh of relief as he read the telegram. In after years, he looked back on it as the one ray of brightness in the most ghastly day of his life. It did not alter the essential fact that everything had gone to pieces—nothing could alter that—but it made matters less complicated so far as Lalage's immediate future was concerned. He had intended asking his brother-in-law for a loan, and it was a load off his mind to find that Joseph was actually in town. A letter might, probably would, have fallen into Ida's hands, and this was one of those cases where an interview was better than many pages of explanations.

In reply to the telegram, Jimmy wired that he would be at the hotel at nine o'clock. He had given up all idea of going to the office that night, or, rather, of ever going there again. He must get away, at once, from everything which might remind him of the old life. He must cut himself adrift from it, immediately, altogether, if he wished to preserve his sanity. For himself, he cared nothing, at least at the moment; but, though he might never see her again once she had left London, he had to provide for Lalage. The Grierson strain in him had asserted itself in so far as it had made him determine to leave Lalage. He was able now to see her sin and his own, especially hers; but still he could not abandon her to her fate, as a true Grierson would have done, because he had been passionately in love, whilst the love of the true Grierson is always decorous, and truly tempered by financial considerations. The dowerless bride is regarded with coldness; the bride with a past is anathema; there is no road back, at least in the opinion of those who have sub-edited their religion in the interests of propriety.

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Jimmy had no difficulty in finding a substitute to take on his work at the *Record* office, especially when he made it known that there was going to be a vacancy on the staff immediately.

"I'm a bit knocked out," he explained. "The malaria has got hold of me again, and the doctor says I must go out at once."

The other man nodded sympathetically, and suggested a drink. He, himself, had been out of work for nearly six months, and the chance of securing Jimmy's berth had altered the whole outlook for him.

"Yes, you do look off colour," he said. "I've noticed it several times lately. Night work doesn't suit

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you, I suppose. Now, I'm used to it, been at it for years. Well, I'll give Dodgson this note of yours. It'll be all right. He knows me well enough. So long. Thanks very much for thinking of me."

Jimmy turned wearily, and went down the corridor to the dining-room. He had eaten nothing all day, and it struck him Lalage would be worried if she knew.

"Bring me anything you like," he said to the waiter, but when the plates came he merely took one mouthful, and then sat, staring with unseeing eyes at a paper he had picked up, whilst the gravy grew cold and greasy. He was wondering what Lalage was doing, alone in that little hotel near the General Post Office.

"As long as it's quiet, Jimmy, that's all I care about; and the further from the West End the better. Noise would drive me quite mad, I think," she had said.

So far, he had not tried to analyse his own feelings toward Lalage. All he knew was that he was sounding the lowest depths of misery, and he speculated, more or less vaguely, whether she could understand what he was suffering. He wanted to blame her, in fact he knew that he ought to blame her, that she had betrayed him and had sinned beyond all hope of forgiveness; and yet in his ears there was still ringing her heart-broken wail, "I did it all for you Jimmy, I did it all for you."

At last the voice of the waiter broke in on his thoughts. "You don't seem to like that, sir. Anything I can get for you instead?" [Pg 198]

Jimmy started. "No, no. It's quite all right. I don't feel hungry now, that's the only trouble, thanks."

The waiter was a kindly man, and he had seen a good deal of life during nearly thirty years of service in clubs; consequently, he shook his head mournfully as Jimmy went out. "Mr. Grierson's in trouble," he remarked to the carver. "He looks fair broken up, as though he didn't care what came next."

The carver, who had no imagination, grunted. "Got the sack, I suppose," he said, and began to dissect a chicken.

The waiter shook his head again. "That doesn't make a man pay for food he's not going to eat. It's a woman has played the fool with him. I shouldn't be surprised if we don't see him here again. And he's a nice gentleman, too, always polite to you and so on."

Jimmy had an hour and a half to kill before going to Joseph Fenton's hotel, and, ordinarily, he would have spent the time reading or writing in the club; but already the place had become unbearable to him; everything in it seemed to speak to him of Lalage, to remind him of her and of that past which had suddenly become such a horrible memory. Why, it was Lalage herself who had saved up the two guineas to pay his subscription, only a couple of months ago. He went hot at the thought of it, for it brought back the remembrance of so many other things she had done for him. For a moment he hesitated. She was calling him back to her side. "It was all for you, Jimmy, all for you." That part of it was true, whatever else had been false; and she was alone in that gloomy little hotel, eating her heart out, conscious that she had lost him. She had betrayed his trust because she loved him so well, because she could not bear to part with him—for a few seconds he understood that, and felt he could forgive everything; but an instant later he was a Grierson again. She had lied to him; she had been false to him in the greatest of all things; and there could be no forgiveness. His people had found her out, had proved to him what she really was, and he could not give them up for her, knowing that she understood nothing of honour or truth. So, instead of going to the hotel in the City, Jimmy went westwards, slowly, listlessly, with no aim but to kill time. The Strand was thronged with its night population, just as it had been on the first evening of his return; but now he looked on everyone with suspicion, almost with hatred. [Pg 199]

Any of these men might know his secret, might have heard of him from Lalage and have laughed at him. There was madness in the thought, and his eyes gleamed so suddenly that a policeman in plain clothes, having noticed him, thought it well to follow him for a while; but the fit passed almost as quickly as it had come on, and he became listless again, shuffling his feet a little on the pavement, as though utterly weary and disillusioned. [Pg 200]

The women caught his eye now, hard-faced, painted, weirdly-dressed, and he began to wonder how they could possibly attract anyone, and to compare them with Lalage. She had never looked like that, there had been no sort of kinship between her and these creatures, and yet—she had confessed that May's charges were true.

His way to the hotel led him in the direction of the flat. At first, he was inclined to avoid the little back street, for fear that he might be recognised and pointed at; then the longing to have one more look overcame the fear, and he turned up the road where the barrows were, past the ham and beef shop, and came opposite the grimy mansion. It seemed but natural to glance upwards at what had been Lalage's windows; though it gave him a shock to see that, whilst the curtains had been torn down, leaving a broken tape hanging forlornly, there was a light in the rooms; then he noticed, for the first time, that there was a van outside the front entrance. They were just finishing the task of clearing out the flat. [Pg 201]

From the shelter of a big gateway opposite, Jimmy watched them bring down Lalage's own chair and a wash hand stand which he himself had made for her out of an old packing case in those early days before London had taken the life out of him. Then, suddenly, the light upstairs was

extinguished, and a few minutes later a short, stout man in a seedy frock coat and decrepit silk hat came down the steps, and ordered the van to drive away.

"That's the lot," he said. "Now get back to the shop quick. These things may have to go out again to-morrow. Tell Mr. Gluck to have them polished up first thing in the morning." Then he mopped his forehead with an uncleanly bandana handkerchief, and made his way to a public-house lower down the street. Jimmy followed him thither with no definite object, save perhaps a kind of morbid curiosity.

The publican greeted the furniture dealer with a friendly nod. "Clearing another out, Mr. Ludwig?"

The other grunted assent. "One of the soft sort. She ran away. It just comes in right, as I have another customer for the goods, and there was a lot paid on them. Pretty girl she was, too," and he gave a leer which made Jimmy go red first and then very white, and leave hurriedly without touching the whisky he had ordered.

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Joseph Fenton was waiting for his brother-in-law in the hall of his hotel. Jimmy, scarcely knowing what sort of reception to expect, had come in white-faced and hard-eyed, but the elder man's handshake eased his mind at once.

Fenton led the way into the smoking-room, selected a couple of chairs in the further corner, then held out his cigar case. "Have a smoke?" he said.

Jimmy helped himself, and, for a minute or two, they smoked in silence; then:

"This is a bit of an upset, Jimmy," Joseph remarked; getting no reply beyond a curt nod, he went on, "I'm not going to talk to you about the moral side of it—I expect your sisters have done that, too much perhaps—but what is this girl going to do now? You can't let her starve."

"Ida and May say she ought to," Jimmy answered grimly. The elder man made a gesture of annoyance. "I know. Ida told me, and we disagreed." He paused and stared at the smoke curling upwards from his cigar, as though trying to find inspiration in it. He was always a little slow and awkward in his speech, and now he seemed worse than ever; but at last he went on: "Look here, Jimmy, I went through much the same sort of thing myself, before I was engaged to your sister, so I understand. You see? My people found out and sent me abroad; and I didn't hear of the girl again until it was too late." He sighed heavily, and stared once more at the cigar smoke.

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Jimmy looked up. "What had happened?" he asked.

Joseph started. "She had drowned herself." He spoke very quietly, but none the less Jimmy realised what the memory meant to this man whom he had always thought a little dull and prosaic. "When I let them ship me away—I was only a youngster at the time—I thought they would help her to get a fresh start, but they didn't. It's spoilt my life, and that's why I don't want yours spoilt. At least give her the chance to go right." He drew a packet of bank-notes from his pocket. "Here's fifty to go on with. Come to me when you want some more. Only, send her right away, where you won't be tempted to go and see her. You must drop it now. There can be no question of your marrying her; and there's only misery in this free love, as you, yourself, have seen."

Jimmy held out his hand gratefully. "It's awfully good of you, Joseph. I was coming to you for a loan when I got your wire. She,"—somehow he could not bring himself to mention Lalage's name,—"she is only too anxious to get away from town, and this money will make it possible. I suppose in time she'll get something to do; but there's been no time to make plans yet."

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"Well, let me know when you want some more money. Write to the office, not to the house. I only wish you had asked me before this happened. I've been pretty successful, at least in business; but that's not everything." He paused and then went on, in short, jerky sentences. "Don't marry a saint, Jimmy. They're better to watch than to live with. Your sister never forgives anything, and that's a big mistake. It makes life hard sometimes. I suppose I'm getting a bit old, and I feel things. The doctor says I must be careful."

Jimmy glanced at him keenly; although his mind was full of his own troubles, it had struck him that Joseph looked far from well. "Is there anything special the matter?" he asked.

Joseph nodded. "Heart," he answered briefly. "Well, I'm glad I've seen you. Don't say anything about it to Ida. I think I'll go up now, I'm feeling a little tired. Good night, Jimmy. Give her a chance to go straight, and then try to forget her."

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It was the following afternoon, when Jimmy got back to the club after having seen Lalage off at the station, that he found a note from May awaiting him.

"You will be shocked to hear," May wrote, "that Joseph was discovered dead in bed this morning. The doctor says it was heart disease. I need hardly say that Ida is terribly upset."

Two or three days later, Jimmy learnt that his brother-in-law had left him a thousand pounds.

Dr. Gregg pulled up his trap and hailed the man who was stalking along on the other side of the road.

"Are you going my way, Grierson? Can I give you a lift? Right. Whoa, mare, stand still. It's some time since I saw you, Grierson. Been away?"

Jimmy, who was already climbing into the dog-cart, did not answer until the question was repeated, then, "Yes," he said rather unwillingly. "I've been over to Paris for two or three days."

The doctor drew his ragged-looking grey eyebrows down until they formed almost a straight line. "The old game," he growled.

The young man was staring away over the hedge at the sweep of country beyond, and replied without looking round. "Yes, as you say, the old game—the inevitable game, if you like that better. The only difference being that it was liqueur brandy this time instead of whisky."

"Silly fool." The doctor was not noted for his gentle speech. "Silly fool, you know what I told you, that it means death in your case, with perhaps a spell of lunacy first—that is, if you're not really a lunatic already. You had better get some other medical man to attend you next time." He slashed at an overhanging bough with his frayed old whip, and apparently the action relieved him, for he went on in a very different voice, "How's the book getting on? Is it published yet?"

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"It's coming out next week," Jimmy answered. "I got an advance copy to-day. They've bound it and made it up rather nicely."

The doctor nodded. "So they ought to. It's good stuff, but you would never have written it at all if it hadn't been for me." The thought seemed to bring back his grievances, for he went on querulously, "Why do you always go to Paris or Brussels or some place like that? Can't you find enough bad liquor and bad company in London, at far less cost?"

Jimmy flushed. "Look here, Gregg," he began angrily, then broke off with a bitter laugh. "I suppose I've no right to take offence at you, after all. I never go to London, haven't been there for a year, I loathe the place."

"Bad memories, eh?" The doctor jerked the words out as he guided his horse past a big dray.

"Bad memories," Jimmy assented wearily. "The worst of bad memories."

"That's the advantage of being a medical man." They had just passed the dray and were coming to the outskirts of the little country town. "We understand what it means, you see, and when a woman lets us down, we don't make it worse, as you are doing. Oh, I know you didn't say anything about a woman, but I know, too, that you meant one. It's a poor compliment to her if she's any good, and if she isn't, why worry?"

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Jimmy did not answer, and the doctor changed the subject abruptly, as was his way. "Did they tell you that Drylands, the big house close to your cottage, was let at last? You'll have some society now. I hear they're people who entertain a lot."

"What is their name?" Jimmy demanded.

"Something not unlike your own—Grimston, I think."

Jimmy shrugged his shoulders. "Never heard of them, and, anyway, it probably wouldn't affect me. The neighbourhood as a whole hasn't exactly tumbled over itself in its anxiety to make my acquaintance."

"That's your own fault," the doctor retorted. "You haven't given the neighbourhood much encouragement to know you, although you would be welcome enough. You're a surly brute in many ways, Grierson."

"Thanks," Jimmy answered with a hard laugh. "At least you're outspoken. And now this is my destination, the news agent's shop. I'll try to follow your professional advice—for as long as I can."

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The doctor grunted something unintelligible and drove on. It was market day, and there were several farmers he wanted to interview before the excitement, or the local ale, or a combination of both, rendered their ideas a little more vague than at ordinary times.

* * * * *

It was a year since Jimmy had taken the cottage a mile outside the sleepy little town. He had gone there in the first place because it was far removed from everyone and everything he knew, and in some ways the experiment had proved a success. The deaf old woman who came in to do his cooking and housework worried him little, and apparently did not gossip about his actions or his habits; whilst the three rooms he had furnished were more than sufficient for his needs.

At first, on hearing of Joseph Fenton's legacy, he had thought of going abroad again, of seeking oblivion of the past few months in travel and excitement; but a chance remark of May's spoken at Joseph Fenton's funeral, the only occasion on which he had met any of the Griersons since the interview at Walter's office, had shown him that the family would welcome his departure, that it even regarded voluntary exile as the proper course for him to take under the circumstances, and, if only for that reason, he determined to stay. Probably he would have stayed in any case, for,

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though he had cut himself adrift from Lalage, had never seen her since she left London, and heard from her but seldom—brief, gentle little notes which invariably made him break his promise to her—all the old wild jealousy remained. It was torture whilst he was in England, but he felt it would mean madness if there were the ocean between them. His love for her was dead, or at least he told himself so, that part of love which comes from the joy of possession, which brings with it peace and courage, and a good comrade in the never-ending struggle against fate; but the other part, the fear and the hopelessness and the fever, remained with him always.

Once, and once only, he had had Lalage watched. He had lain awake night after night until his jealousy had culminated in his sending down a private detective. He had read the report—which was wholly in her favour, even the church working party of the village in which she was living being unable to rake up any charge against her—with an unutterable sense of shame and self-contempt, and then had thrust it hurriedly into the fire; but instead of bringing him peace it gave him another memory to brood over, and at times to try and drown.

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Lalage's fears had only been too well founded. The locality was healthy enough, the doctor had said with almost brutal frankness the first time Jimmy had occasion to consult him; and then he had gone on to diagnose his patient's case without mincing his words.

"You don't show it outwardly, at least not to a layman, but any medical man would see what was the matter with you. What makes you drink?"

Jimmy had shrugged his shoulders, half-ashamed, half-irritated. "Habit, I suppose," he had answered, whereupon the other had growled.

"A confoundedly bad and stupid habit. The sooner you get some new ones the better. You write, don't you? How do you expect to make a success of it when you're sapping your brain power in this fool's way?"

He had added a few more things, pointed and true, but none the less they had parted good friends, and for a time Jimmy tried to fight his enemy, remembering his promise to Lalage; but it was always the same in the end. His black hour would come on him, and he would recall his great treason, and tell himself bitterly that she had been the first to set the example in the matter of broken faith.

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Whatever fears May might have had on the point—and the matter certainly had worried her a good deal during the last twelve months—there had never been any question of Jimmy going back to Lalage. True, he had broken away from the Grierson tradition when he went to live at the flat, had thrown that tradition to the winds, but still he had never repudiated it openly, and in the end if he had not actually gone back to his own people, at least he had recognised that the standards of his own people were right. He was ashamed of himself, even more ashamed of Lalage. He saw his conduct—and hers—in its true light, its stupidity, and its immorality, and in the days following Joseph Fenton's death he had reached the nadir of contrition and misery, and would have made confession, and sought for absolution, had the family given him the chance. He was in the mood for it, being run-down and broken-hearted. But Joseph's death had altered the focus of things for the moment, making Jimmy's affairs a secondary consideration, and after the reading of the will, Joseph's legacy had effectually destroyed any hope of peace, at least as far as Ida was concerned. Fenton had left, it is true, nearly a hundred thousand to his wife, but the odd thousand to Jimmy almost neutralised the generosity of his other bequests, at least in Ida's sight, and Ida's personality dominated the whole family for the time being.

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Curiously enough, no one knew of Jimmy's last meeting with Joseph. At first Jimmy had held his peace about it, not wishing in any way to add to Ida's troubles; then, when he found that his own misdeeds were supposed to have preyed on his brother-in-law's mind and hastened his death, he continued to keep silence, in a kind of savage contempt. He, at least, knew what Joseph's feelings had been, and all his sympathy and all his regrets were for the dead man, and not for the saint, who, after the manner of her kind, had understood nothing and forgiven nothing.

Yet, none the less, he would gladly have made peace with the family, just as May and Walter would have made peace with him, had Ida's bitterness not rendered that so hard as to be almost impossible. She was too good a woman to overlook his sin, or to allow anyone else to overlook it. She believed in the punishment of the sinner, not in his pardon, and she did not think that Jimmy had suffered enough; possibly she believed that he had not suffered at all, for had he not in the end received a thousand pounds which should, by rights, have gone to her own children? So, though he had repudiated Lalage to pacify his people, and—it must be admitted also—to satisfy his own conscience, his only reward had been a ghastly sense of isolation, both from his own world, where the Grierson tradition rules, and from that other world into which he had strayed for a few short never-to-be-forgotten months.

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Jimmy had turned a little grey during the last year, and the boyish charm had gone out of his face. Alas! he had grown careless as regarded his appearance, and he had ceased to trouble about a number of little things on the observance of which Lalage had once insisted. He never worried as to whether his boots were cleaned or no, and he only shaved when he was going into the little town. After all, what did it matter? He had no friends, and he wanted none; society, or at any rate women's society, had ceased to be a factor in his life.

On the other hand, success had come to him professionally, though it meant very little to him, or very little compared with what it would have meant in the London days, when half the income he was making now would have seemed wealth. Joseph's legacy had allowed him breathing space.

He had quitted Fleet Street finally, abandoned all thought of journalism, and gone in for the writing of short stories. Some quality in the latter, possibly the cynical outlook on life which coloured them all, caught the fancy of editors accustomed to the milk-and-water optimism of the average writer, and in a few months his work was not only selling, but was actually in demand. Moreover, he had written a novel, and, his luck still holding good, had placed it with the second publisher to whom he offered it; but even that success had given him no sense of elation; and, when he had come to read the proofs, he had found himself wishing that he had put the manuscript into the fire. It was not the book he had dreamed of doing, the book he had so often discussed with Lalage. The doctor, who had also seen the proofs, thought highly of it; the publisher was urging him to get on with another; but he, himself, knew well that the book lacked something. He had been afraid to give it life by drawing on his own experience. He had been so anxious not to widen the breach with his family that he had ended by writing a novel for Griersons. As Jimmy walked homewards after his meeting with the doctor, he found himself wondering what Lalage would think of his novel, whether she would feel pride, or grief, or contempt. Somehow, although she had no part in his life now, he was more afraid of her judgment than of that of anyone else. "Lalage's author," she had called him in the old days, and she had always believed in him. "I know you will write nice books for Lalage, by and by; because you're very, very clever"—she had said so more than once, when he had seemed to be losing heart over his work in the *Record* office. And now he had written the book—in which Lalage had had no part. Unconsciously, he quickened his pace, as if to get away from the thought, and, perhaps for that reason, he did not notice a motor-car which was coming up behind him. When the horn was sounded, he merely drew into the hedge and did not look round. The car passed him, slowly on account of a flock of sheep which was coming out of a gate a little way ahead, and he noted, without the slightest sense of interest, that there were a couple of well-dressed women in the tonneau; consequently, he was greatly surprised when one of the women called to the driver to stop, then looked back, and beckoned excitedly to himself.

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"Mr. Grierson, Mr. Grierson—Jimmy!" she cried.

As he came up, she raised the heavy veil she was wearing, and he found himself looking into the laughing eyes of Ethel Grimmer.

CHAPTER XXIV

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Mrs. Grimmer shook hands very cordially. "This is an unexpected pleasure," she said. "Who would have dreamt of seeing you down here!" then, without waiting for his explanation, she turned to her companion. "Vera, you remember Mr. Grierson, don't you? May Marlow's brother. Jimmy, I hope you haven't been so rude as to forget Miss Farlow. You met her at our house, on that one visit you paid us, before you suddenly went away and lost yourself."

Jimmy flushed, and raised his hat again. He remembered the pretty, rather prim-looking girl as the daughter of May's favourite rector, and he remembered, too, Ethel's outspoken advice about his possible matrimonial plans.

Vera Farlow bowed, a little severely, but Ethel Grimmer gave neither of the others the chance to speak. "I've often asked May how you were getting on, but she always seemed vague as to where you were. She said you were living in the country in cottages, so as to be able to work quietly; but I never, never thought of finding you down here. Do you live in a cottage now; or have you made so much money out of those nice, wicked stories of yours that you've bought a big house?"

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Jimmy laughed. "No, I've still got a cottage, the only cottage I ever had. It's about half a mile from here."

"How jolly! Do jump in now and come along with us. Then you shall tell us all about the place and its people. We've just taken a furnished house—Drylands, I suppose you know it?—to see if we like the neighbourhood. If we do, Billy wants to build a nice place for ourselves. He's going to retire from business at the end of the year. I tell him it's better, for he can afford to, and if he stays in the City, he'll only get stodgy, and perhaps lose his money. And now do come up and have some tea with us, unless you're very busy, which I can't understand you being. Billy won't be down till Saturday, and I persuaded Vera to come with me, so that I shouldn't be too dull."

Jimmy went with them willingly, and, even if he had wished to raise an objection, Ethel Grimmer would have given him no hearing. She was obviously delighted at the meeting; and, in the end, Jimmy stayed, not only to tea, but to dinner as well.

"Never mind about dressing," Ethel said. "Vera and I won't change anyway—you see we only got down this morning—and it's so nice to meet someone one knows."

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It was the first time since he had left town that Jimmy had mixed socially with his own world, and he watched anxiously for anything which would show whether Ethel knew about Lalage; but before dinner was over he realised, with a sense of relief, amounting almost to gratitude, that May and Ida had kept the knowledge of the scandal to the circle of the family. Ethel was not even curious as to his reasons for avoiding the Marlow house; detesting May cordially, she found it quite natural that Jimmy should prefer to go his own way.

Vera Farlow thawed considerably before the evening was over. She was a well-read girl, and at home it was but seldom that she met any men who had interests outside their business or their sports. Jimmy was an entirely new type to her, and yet, as she was well aware, he belonged to a family whose standing was above question. Had a man of whom she knew nothing talked as Jimmy talked, she would probably have regarded him with a certain degree of suspicion; but there was no question of that in the case of Mrs. Marlow's brother. Jimmy, on his part, was distinctly attracted—Ethel saw that long before he got up to take a reluctant farewell; and being entirely loyal to her own husband, she felt not the slightest jealousy of Vera Farlow; in fact, as she went upstairs that evening she was wondering whether it might not be possible to turn the scheme, which she had once propounded more or less in a spirit of banter, into an accomplished fact. It would be a good thing for Jimmy, a good thing for Vera, and, perhaps most important of all, it would annoy May Marlow and Mrs. Fenton intensely. Ethel went to bed to dream of a gorgeous wedding, in which she played the part of fairy godmother; and she awoke next morning more than ever determined to arrange the match. Vera had money, Jimmy had brains, and they both belonged to families of position. She felt she almost owed it to Jimmy to find him a wife, whilst Vera was her dearest girl friend. Billy would help, she knew that. Billy always did what she told him, and though he sometimes spoiled things by laughing at the wrong time, for which she scolded him duly and without mercy, she knew he meant to do his best. His impending retirement had been one of her greatest triumphs. She was sick to death of the circle of City people, of what she flippantly called "Square milers," and that had been the main reason she had given to her husband in urging him to give up business and go into the country.

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"Let's go amongst people who don't have to catch trains, Billy," she had urged. "I'm sure you don't get half enough enjoyment out of life now, going up to town every day," and Billy had finally given way, on those grounds, never suspecting that at the back of her mind was always the fear of his being drawn into speculation and coming to grief. He was not very brilliant. Ethel knew that well, and she knew, too, what measure of sympathy the City has for those who fail.

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The night he dined at Drylands, Jimmy barely thought of Lalage. He was excited, and yet, at the same time, conscious of a feeling of restfulness, somewhat akin to that he had experienced when he first saw the shores of England on his return from South America. Once again, it seemed as if he had been a long time in the wilderness, and was getting back to his own people at last. Vera Farlow was of those who stand above suspicion. It was impossible to picture her knowing anything about life in a flat; and, whilst the memory of the past gave him a momentary sense of shame, this was quickly put aside. It was all dead, done with; and, if any women had a part in his future, they would be those like Vera Farlow, women whom the Grierson family would accept and respect.

When he turned in, Jimmy helped himself to one whisky, and one only, instead of the usual three or four, or even more, which he took when a fit of sleeplessness was on him. After all, old Dr. Gregg had been right. He was playing a fool's game. He awoke in the morning feeling much fresher than usual, and fully determined to call at Drylands on some excuse or other. As a rule, he was not down till after the postman had called; but on this occasion he met that worthy at the front door.

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"Fine morning, sir. Three for you to-day," the official said.

Jimmy took the letters and glanced at the addresses. One he crumpled up and tossed unopened into the waste paper basket, recognising the envelope of a press-cutting bureau, which circularised him regularly once a fortnight; but he looked at the others with a frown, for though the first was from Kelly, whose letters were always welcome, the remaining one had been addressed to his club in Lalage's unmistakable handwriting.

For a moment, Jimmy handled the letters with an air of hesitation; then, as though he feared some shock, and wanted to brace himself up to meet it, he went to the decanter and poured out some whisky, which he swallowed neat; yet, even then, he opened Kelly's letter first. There proved to be nothing special in it—congratulations on his book, some caustic comments on Fleet Street and its ways, and the always-repeated invitation to come to town, and stay with Kelly and his wife.

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"My wife says she feels sure you must be in love with someone down there, otherwise you could never stand the dulness of the country after town; but I always say that your fate is to marry into a solid City family, now that you have missed going to the other extreme."

Jimmy frowned as he read the last sentence. He had never given Kelly a hint, and no one else could have told him. Possibly, it was the thought of that which worried him, and made him turn to the decanter again; at any rate, he had another whisky before he opened Lalage's letter. It had been very different in the early days of their acquaintance; then, he had torn the envelopes open eagerly, and almost learnt the contents by heart before he thought of his other correspondence.

Jimmy had never given Lalage his address. All her letters went to the club, whilst those he wrote to her he sent on under cover to one of the waiters, who posted them in town. He, himself, never understood his own reasons for this caution. It was not because he feared her blackmailing him—even in his most bitter moments he had never thought of that; and he knew her too well to be afraid she might pay him a visit unasked in the hope of recapturing his affection; but probably it was due to some vague feeling that it kept them further apart in spirit, helped to preserve the barrier between them. Not that she had ever attempted to break that barrier down. On the other hand, she seemed to have accepted his decision as right, or at any rate as unalterable, and at

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times that was the most horrible part of all to him, for it suggested the possibility of someone succeeding him in her love, and, as she had long since declined to take any more money from him, he had no right to control her.

Lalage wrote from a little Yorkshire town, nearly two hundred miles distant from Jimmy. "You know I told you I had a post as nurse-companion to an old invalid lady. I am very grieved to say she died about three weeks ago. She was the sweetest, best woman I ever met; she took me without references, because she said she liked my face; and I really believe her greatest sorrow at dying was due to the thought that she could leave me nothing. All she had was a small annuity. Yet, in another way, I was fortunate; for almost at once I got a situation in a draper's shop, the only drapers here. It is not very much to boast of, I know; but still I am making my own living honestly, and it is the sort of place where one can stay all one's life. I am looking at the papers every day to see if your book is out. I do wish you the best of success with it, Jimmy," and then, without any conventional phrase before it, came the simple signature, "Lalage."

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Jimmy did not touch his breakfast that morning. Instead, he sat very still, staring out of the window, trying to picture Lalage—who had once been his Lalage—serving behind the counter in a stuffy little draper's shop. "The sort of place where you can stay all your life." Would she, could she, stand the idea of such a future? Would she go on alone always, whilst he would be getting on in the world, climbing the ladder to such fame as novelists get in these days of many novels, getting back into his own world, and possibly—?

There was a knock at the front door, and as if in confirmation of his thought, he found the Grimmer chauffeur standing on the step.

"Note for you, sir," he said.

Jimmy tore it open. "Vera and I are going for a run round the country," Ethel wrote. "Will you come with us?"

Jimmy turned round to the hat rack and took down his cap and overcoat.

"Have you brought the car down for me?" he asked.

CHAPTER XXV

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Mr. Grimmer looked up with a grin. "I don't know what the old joker will say if you bring your scheme to a head," he remarked.

Ethel, who was standing in front of the fireplace, smoking daintily, tried hard to look shocked.

"My dear Billy," she drawled. "That is hardly the way to speak of an Honorary Canon who expects to become a bishop, if his father-in-law lives long enough to get into another Cabinet. Then, for one thing, Jimmy won't propose for some time yet, not until Vera has been away and come back again; and when they are engaged what can the old joker, as you call him, do to me?"

"He might preach about you," her husband suggested.

Ethel shrugged her shoulders. "I shouldn't be there to hear him; it would make May Marlow blush and send that hateful Ida Fenton white with passion. By the way, did I tell you that Ida had taken a house in town? They think she's going to be married again, to that horrid, clean-shaven man with the damp hands, who's always collecting for some mission or other. You must know him, Billy. Surely you do; we used to call him the Additional Curate. Well, to go back to Jimmy. He wouldn't give Vera up, and her money is under her own control."

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"He had to give you up," Grimmer said.

His wife laughed. "He never had me to give up, really. Besides, I hardly knew you then, Billy, so it didn't count, did it?... Billy, you must not behave in that ridiculous way; you have crushed my flowers, and the gong will go in a moment."

It was a fortnight since Jimmy had met Ethel Grimmer again, and during that time he had not written a line. Every day, and often twice a day, he had been up at Drylands, at first, because Ethel had insisted on his attendance; and latterly, because it seemed the natural thing to do. His original feeling had been one of sincere relief at the break in the monotony of his exile, and he had been equally glad to see both Vera and Ethel; but after a while Ethel seemed to become almost uninteresting by comparison with the younger woman. He was not passionately in love, as he had been with Lalage. The thought of Vera gave him no sleepless nights. In fact, now he slept far better than he had done for many months past. He had a sense of restfulness to which he had long been a stranger, as though he had taken some mental opiate to soothe the pain of remembrance. London, and the flat, and the grinding drudgery of Fleet Street, the miserable little creditors worrying at the door—all these seemed now to belong to some former existence, to be part of the life of a different Jimmy Grierson. Vera knew nothing of such things; and, in her society, he himself managed to forget them.

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Lalage's letter was still unanswered. Day after day he meant to write; but, somehow, there was never time. He wanted to think it over carefully, he kept on telling himself, and then deliberately

turned his mind to something else.

He had smartened himself up considerably so far as appearance went. True, once or twice, it gave him a twinge of remorse when he found that he was doing again the very things on which Lalage had insisted with gentle patience in those now-distant days, observing little conventions which he had dropped during his sojourn abroad, and had lately dropped anew. Then, too, he was drinking far less. He did not need the spirit now to bring him oblivion, and he did want to keep his hand steady and his eye clear. Vera had once spoken very strongly on the subject of intemperance, which she knew only in theory; and Jimmy had listened to her words with respectful contrition. She would never forgive a man who drank, she said, and he had gone a little cold at the thought. Yet, forgetting that Lalage had known of his failing, and had tried to help him fight his demon, he told himself that Vera's was the right view for a girl of her position. She was too good and pure to come into contact with the ugly things of life.

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Already, he had made up his mind to ask her to marry him, later on, when she came back from a promised visit of indefinite duration. There was no hurry, Ethel had told him so frankly, no other suitor being in the running. At first, the thought of the past troubled him a little, in the abstract, as a kind of treason to Vera; but, after a while, he put that thought aside. She need never know, and Lalage had gone out of his life now.

His book had been published a week, and the one or two reviews which had appeared had been satisfactory, almost flattering, though one reviewer apparently voiced the general opinion when he said, "Mr. Grierson seems anxious to uphold the conventions of modern society, and yet he writes of them without conviction, as though he would like to believe in them, and could not manage to do so."

Vera had frowned over the notice. "What rubbish, Mr. Grierson. It is as much as to say that you would write one of the nasty kind of book, if you dared. I think yours is very, very good and perfectly sincere." Whereupon Jimmy had gone home well pleased, feeling that, at last, he was receiving absolution, if not from his own family, at least from his own people.

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When Vera went back to town, Ethel deputed Jimmy to see her off at the station, alleging that she herself had a headache.

"It's only *au revoir*," Jimmy said, as he shook hands at the railway carriage door.

Miss Farlow smiled brightly. "That's all. I am coming down again very soon. Father is going away for a couple of months' holiday; and, as he is taking my younger sister, Florence, Ethel has made me promise to come down here. She is awfully good-hearted, isn't she?"

Jimmy nodded emphatically. "She is indeed. One of the best I know."

As the train steamed out of the station, he stood a full minute deep in thought, staring at it until it disappeared round a slight curve; then he turned to find the doctor watching him with a grim smile.

"Hullo, Grierson," the old man said. "I've hardly seen you lately, only caught glimpses of you whizzing past in a motor, surrounded by millinery." Then he scanned the other's face critically. "You're looking better. Found the cure for it, eh? I always thought that both the reason and the remedy would prove to wear skirts."

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Jimmy flushed awkwardly. He did not altogether admire Dr. Gregg's frankness; and yet he was grateful for the implied testimony to his reformation, so he answered with a laugh, and, after a few minutes' conversation, willingly consented to go up to dinner at the doctor's that night. After all, it would be dull alone in the cottage, and he knew that Ethel would not want him, as she, too, was dining out.

The doctor was an old bachelor, or at least the town assumed him to be one. True, when he had first bought the practice, thirty years previously, he had made no definite statement on the matter; and, for a time, people had shaken their heads, and, on that purely negative evidence, had done what they called "drawing their own conclusions." His wife had run away from him, and they would hear of her one day, in connection with some scandal, and she would allege, and probably prove, that he had ill-used her. However, as months went by, and they did not hear—in fact they never heard anything—they admitted they had been wrong, and began to pity him as the husband of an incurable lunatic, who was confined in an asylum near London. But even that story had died a lingering death from sheer want of nourishment, and long before Jimmy had appeared in the neighbourhood, even the mothers' meetings had ceased to discuss the doctor's private affairs. He was just the gruff and well-beloved friend of everyone in the place, a man of whom even the preacher in the Peculiar People's chapel spoke with respect.

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"Old friends of yours at Drylands, after all?" the doctor asked abruptly, as they sat smoking in his study after dinner.

Jimmy nodded. "Yes, you got the name wrong, you see, and, naturally, I didn't recognise it. I've known the Grimms, or at least Mrs. Grimmer, all my life."

"It's a bad thing to get out of touch with people you know," the other went on. "A very bad thing. Never have a family quarrel, if you can avoid it, Grierson, or, rather, never have another."

"How do you know I have had one?" Jimmy demanded.

The old man smiled. "You've as good as told me so, a score of times. Bad things family quarrels. After all, your relations are your own flesh and blood."

Jimmy did not answer; latterly, he had begun to realise the truth of what the other was saying; and he knew more than ever the value of peace.

For a little while they smoked in silence, then, "How did you happen to light on this town in the first instance?" the doctor asked. [Pg 233]

"I hardly know myself," Jimmy answered. "I wanted some quiet place, and someone—I have never been able to remember who it was—had once mentioned it to me as the ideal spot. The name had stuck in my memory, so I came down here on chance and liked it from the first. I must say, though, I've found it dull at times."

"No place is dull when you know it well enough," the old man retorted. "Yes, I mean it. You, as a writer, ought to understand that. It's only dull if you make it so for yourself by being out of sympathy with its people.... How's the book getting on?"

"Pretty well, I believe. The publishers say they're quite satisfied with it for a first novel. One doesn't expect to make a big splash at the start."

"Some never make a splash at all, even though they do good work. I knew one." The doctor shook his head sadly. "He lived in this town, only a few doors from here. He used to write scientific books, and was admitted to be the best man in England on his own subject; yet he got more and more hard up all the time. I don't know what he and his daughter really did live on for the last year or two. It ended in something very like a tragedy. Ah, it was a bad business, a terrible business," and he sighed heavily. [Pg 234]

Jimmy's lips seemed suddenly to have become dry and hard; but his voice was almost normal as he asked, "What was it, doctor?"

The old man began to fill a pipe with rather exaggerated care. "It was the daughter," he answered, without looking up. "She was a sweet girl, the best, most unselfish girl I ever knew; but curiously young in many ways, dangerously young—you understand? She had been brought up alone with him—no woman to tell her things. That's bad. Confound it all, sir,"—he raised his voice in a sudden explosion of wrath,— "parents have no right to keep their girls in ignorance. It's criminal negligence; at least it was in this case. They were desperately poor, and he was dying; wanted all sorts of things." He paused again and made a show of lighting his pipe, but the match burnt out ineffectually, then he went on. "They hadn't a shilling, and none of the tradesmen would trust them. And a man, a young scoundrel belonging to this very town, offered her ten pounds to go away with him for a couple of days, showed her the gold.... What was that?" he demanded quickly as Jimmy's pipe stem snapped suddenly in his hands.

Jimmy himself had shifted slightly, so that the lamplight did not fall on his face; but the old man was not looking at him as he resumed his story. [Pg 235]

"She said she was going to town, to beg his publishers for money, and he, luckily, died believing it. But someone else had seen her; and the women hunted her out. She fled to London, no money, no friends, and you can guess what must have happened. Poor child!"

"What happened to the man?" Jimmy asked in a voice which made the doctor give a grim little nod of approval as he answered:

"I felt that way myself. He abandoned her like a skunk, and his people threw the blame on her for tempting him. Tempting him! He had a motor smash soon after, and I tried my utmost to pull him through, because he would have been a hideously disfigured cripple; but he died, and I never regretted a patient more."

Jimmy got up abruptly. He knew now who it was who had mentioned that town to him, and unconsciously sent him to live there. He had not the slightest doubt in his own mind what the answer would be when he asked:

"What was their name?"

"Penrose," the doctor answered. "She was Lalage Penrose."

CHAPTER XXVI

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Jimmy's mind was in a fever as he walked home that night; in fact, he felt it would be useless to try to sleep, so he went on, past the cottage, past Drylands, where the lights were all out, right to the next village, three miles away. But whilst he stalked along he gradually grew calmer. Things seemed to become simpler, more easy to bear, and to understand. He saw Lalage now in a different light, and he felt that, as her character was partially cleared, so, in some subtle way, his own sin became less, and he need no longer have any compunction about asking Vera Farlow to be his wife.

True, for one wild moment, his old love for Lalage seemed to surge up within him; but he was

passing Drylands on his way back at the time, and, as he glanced at the windows, the Grierson strain in him asserted itself triumphantly. He might pity and forgive Lalage; but his wife must be one whom he could take anywhere, introduce anywhere; there must be no horrible fear of the past coming to light again, and, possibly ruining, not only his own career, but that of his children as well. He thought of Lalage tenderly, but almost with condescension; and, when he turned in finally, Vera Farlow—who belonged to the Grierson world—was uppermost in his mind. Consequently, he slept well and awoke, not to brood over what Dr. Gregg had told him, but to speculate on a future in which Vera should play the main part.

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Vera had money of her own, Jimmy knew that, and, unquestionably, the fact weighed with him, not from a sordid point of view, but because it made the risks of marriage so much smaller. There would be no fear of his wife being left penniless, dependent on the charity of relatives. As for his own prospects, he was inclined to take a rosy view of them. He had made a good start, and that, as he was well aware, was more than half the battle. Another year, and he ought to be earning enough to justify him in marrying.

It would be very pleasant to have his own house, a permanent home. Vera had plenty of friends, and he knew that there were many others who would be glad enough to meet the rising author. They would soon have a position, especially if, as seemed probable, Canon Farlow did get the first vacant bishopric.

Jimmy had not much fear as to what Vera's answer would be. They had got to know one another very well in that fortnight at Drylands, and much of her almost prim reserve had already disappeared. She was twenty-five, or thereabouts, quite old enough to know her own mind, and it was not likely that her father, having three other unmarried daughters on his hands, would offer any serious objection. May, too, would probably be pleased when she came to look at the matter in the right light, because, as he told himself with a cynical little smile, it would prove that the Lalage episode was definitely at an end. And then, for a moment, he thought of Lalage again, the Lalage of whom the doctor had told him, young, almost childish in her inexperience, sacrificing her innocence for the sake of her dying father. Suddenly he got up, feeling half choked. If only that man had not died after the motor smash, if only he had lived to suffer.

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He walked up and down the little room several times, trying to regain his self-control, trying to put Lalage out of his mind, and to think only of Vera. But it was impossible. Phrases the doctor had used seemed to be engraved on his memory. Almost against his will, he found himself repeating them, and with them came a mental picture of Lalage's pitiful shame and grief when the real meaning of what she had done came home to her. And then the horror of it, the crowning tragedy of it all—her father had died in the end, and she had been driven to the streets of London.

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He had thought he had forgotten, and now he found he remembered everything. He could see her with the mud squelching through her shoes, friendless, penniless, homeless, without either references or experience, tramping hour after hour in the rain, standing outside the shop window where the big kitchen stoves were on exhibition, trying to imagine that some of the heat from the fires was reaching her numbed body; and then someone spoke to her—oh, it was all too hideous.

He had intended putting in a hard day's work, starting a new novel, but there could be no question of that now. He picked up the morning paper and tried to read that, but, somehow, the pages seemed to be one huge blurr, and, when the letters did come into line, they always formed the word "Lalage." At last, in sheer desperation, he took his hat, shut up the cottage, and went into the town. In the smoking-room of the principal hotel, he met several men he knew slightly. As a rule, he would merely have nodded to them, but now the old craving for companionship was on him again, and he greeted them cordially, whilst, instead of the one drink he had intended to take, he had so many that he lost count. When, at last, he did come out, he was still sober so far as external appearance went; and yet perhaps because the sunlight was bright whilst the smoking-room had been dark, he failed to notice a carriage containing a couple of ladies whom he had met at Drylands. They bowed to him, and then, when he did not raise his hat, exchanged meaning glances.

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The elder, Mrs. Richards, wife of a local magnate, put their thoughts into words. "We caught sight of him going in there two hours ago, and now he cannot see us. I had heard a rumour that there was that especial failing, but I had hoped it wasn't true. Now, however——" She was a kindly-natured woman, and she broke off with a sigh.

Her companion nodded. "I wonder if that nice Miss Farlow knows. Mrs. Grimmer hinted that an engagement was quite possible, and I think someone ought to warn the girl. It would be a dreadful thing if she found out too late."

Jimmy's outbreak was, however, of very short duration. Even as he walked back to the cottage Vera's influence, or rather, the thought of all that marriage with Vera would mean, reasserted itself, and the memory of Lalage began to grow dim again. After all, what was the good of making himself miserable about the dead past? It could not be changed, and so the best thing to do was to try and forget it, as far as possible. It was but a very poor compliment to Vera if, only the day after her departure, his mind was full of another woman.

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He might pity Lalage, but he was not going to let the remembrance of her ruin his future. He had a prospect now of regaining what he had lost when he first met her, and he would be a fool to imperil that prospect by mere foolish sentiment. Moreover, he would leave that wretched whisky

alone; it was a weak and idiotic habit to drink as he had been drinking, and the knowledge of it would shock Vera terribly. Men in her world, which was, after all, his own world too, did not do those things. He saw it now. Before the Grimms came down it had been different. For a time, he had lost all ambition, all sense of self-respect; but contact with Ethel and Vera had changed all that, had brought out the dormant Grierson instincts, the passion for order and respectability, and the comforts of life, and he had grown to detest the old mode of existence.

One thing was certain; before he proposed to Vera he must break off all correspondence with Lalage. He told himself so, several times, and tried to think out the letter he would write. He would send her a cheque for a fair amount, so that she would have a reserve fund, and then—he would never hear of her again, never know if she were alive or dead, if she had enough food, or even if she were married. Suddenly, that same queer, choking sensation came back, and he got up quickly as if wanting air. He seemed to hear Lalage's cry on that most ghastly day of his life: "I did it all for you, Jimmy. I did it all for you."

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And so, in the end, he compromised with his conscience, and wrote her a briefer letter than usual. Possibly, he might have been surprised had he known that Lalage cried herself to sleep over that same letter, though next day, and for many days after, until she heard again, she carried it in her dress through the long hours of drudgery in the little shop, and slept with it under her pillow at night. Jimmy's hand had touched that precious slip of paper.

CHAPTER XXVII

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Jimmy's engagement to Vera Farlow was an accomplished fact.

"You have got to thank me for it all, Jimmy," Ethel said, when he came to her for congratulations. "You would certainly never have done it alone. In fact, once or twice lately I have been afraid that my suggestions and advice were going to be wasted after all. Yet, I don't quite know what to think of you, even now." She put her head on one side and surveyed him critically.

"What do you mean?" he asked, smiling.

Ethel laughed. "I've known you to make love more ardently. Oh, yes. I have a very good memory. Still, I won't tell Vera. And now I'm going to write to your sister May and gloat over her. Of course I shall gloat, because I suggested getting you married off when we first heard you were coming home, and May got furious with me. Will you write too?"

Jimmy shook his head. "No, yours will do, at least for a start. I've got to write to Canon Farlow. Vera says he won't be home from Switzerland for another week. Otherwise, I would have gone to see him."

"He's rather an old stick, if I may say that of your beloved's father," Ethel went on. "You will find that out, and his sermons are very long, so don't live in his parish if you can help it. You'll have plenty of church in any case, you poor Jimmy."

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"Why 'poor Jimmy,' when you've just been congratulating me?"

Ethel gave an impatient little sigh. "I don't know, I'm sure. Now I've done it I'm wondering if I was right. It's a big responsibility, and you may both end by hating me ever after. Promise me you won't, Jimmy, do promise that." Her voice had grown unusually earnest, and her eyes were suspiciously bright.

"Of course I promise, Ethel," he said gravely. "But I don't think there is much fear of my feeling anything except gratitude."

But Mrs. Grimmer was not satisfied. "I wish I had left it alone. I don't know how it is, but you're not the old Jimmy any longer, and I can't understand you. You're not half as happy as you ought to be under the circumstances. Now, are you?"

He protested vigorously against the idea, and yet he left her so entirely unconvinced that, instead of going to Vera, she sought out her husband and had a good cry on his shoulder.

"I ought not to have done it, Billy," she sobbed. "If anything goes wrong when it's too late, Jimmy will take it to heart so terribly. I wish I wasn't responsible, but I am, and I can't deny it."

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Billy tried to comfort her. "My dear, they seem happy enough over it. I know Vera is very grateful to you."

Ethel shrugged her shoulders. "Vera! Oh, she would be happy, because she doesn't feel very deeply. She never did about anything. It was always the same with her when she was a child. But Jimmy is different. He's not in love."

"Then why did he propose?" Billy retorted. "Was it her money?"

"No, no," Ethel repudiated the idea emphatically. "Jimmy is not that sort. I think he proposed because he's been very miserable over something, and Vera took his thoughts off his other troubles. But he won't be happy."

There was no mistaking the conviction in her voice, and, for a moment, even her husband was moved out of his usual good-humoured complacency; but he soon recovered and tried to laugh away her fears, without, however, achieving much success. She was not in a mood to be reassured, although she contrived to put on a smiling face when she met the newly engaged pair at dinner.

Vera was a little inclined to blush, but obviously happy. Jimmy, on the other hand, was by turns silent, almost moody, and then feverishly talkative. Vera seemed to notice nothing amiss—possibly she put it down to natural excitement—but Ethel watched him with anxiety, which she tried hard to conceal. As she said, the whole thing was her doing. She had engineered it carefully, and she was, at least in matters like these, a clever woman. True, once or twice, she felt a slight misgiving, but she had made up her mind to succeed, and had brushed her fears aside. Only when Jimmy came with the news that her scheme had become an accomplished fact did she realise that match-making is a dangerous occupation. He neither looked nor spoke like a lover who had just been accepted, but rather like a man who sees the crisis of his life a little way ahead of him, and is fearful of his own capacity to pass through it. [Pg 246]

Vera was quite satisfied with Jimmy's farewell kiss. Had there been passion in it she might have been frightened; but, as it was, the caress he gave her seemed very sweet. She was very proud of this lover of hers, of his undoubted cleverness, his good looks, and his powers of conversation. It would be very pleasant to see his name on all the bookstalls, to know that almost every other girl of her acquaintance would envy her the possession of her author. So far, she had hardly thought of marriage and its responsibilities; all that part seemed a long way off, in the distant future, and, for the moment, she thought only of the engagement. But as Jimmy walked home in the moonlight, Vera Farlow was hardly in his mind at all; he was thinking of other kisses he had given and received, and, try as he would, he could not drive out a horrible feeling that, every time his lips touched Vera's, he was being unfaithful to Lalage. It was absurd, wholly ridiculous, he told himself so savagely; but still a sense of shame and ingratitude remained. Lalage, who had suffered so much, and, as he realised now, had suffered, too, for him, was in that shop, the sort of place where one could spend one's whole life, and he was going to marry Vera Farlow, and cut the last slender link between himself and the girl he had once loved, was going to make her a last present, of money, and ask her not to write again. [Pg 247]

Jimmy let himself into the cottage, fully determined to go through with the task there and then, to write the letter almost before he had time to think, and to post it immediately. Yet dawn found him still sitting at his desk with a pile of cigarette ends and an empty decanter on the tray, and a blank sheet of paper in front of him. At last, he got up with a sigh, extinguished the lamp, and stumbled wearily to bed. It was not that the spirit had affected him—he felt he would have given anything to have it do so—but he was utterly exhausted mentally, and, the moment he lay down, he went into a heavy, dreamless sleep, which lasted until ten o'clock. [Pg 248]

When Jimmy awakened in the morning the first thing he remembered was that he had promised to meet Vera at eleven. He would have no time for breakfast, but that did not trouble him, as he would have eaten nothing in any case. His meal, however, was not the only matter which would have to be left over. He would only have just sufficient time to shave and dress and walk up to Drylands; consequently, as he told himself with an undeniable sense of relief, his letter to Lalage must be put off until the evening, if not until the following day.

Vera did not seem to notice anything unusual in his appearance, or, if she did, she made no remark on it; but when they met Ethel a little later, that lady scanned his face anxiously, and took the first opportunity of calling him aside.

"You didn't sleep, Jimmy. You're worrying about something," she said, bluntly.

Jimmy made a rather unsuccessful attempt to laugh. "I'm taking on responsibilities," he said. "I realise it now, and the letter to Canon Farlow is still unwritten, although I must do it before the afternoon post goes out. Vera had better help me, I think. Did you write to May?" [Pg 249]

"Last night, after you had gone," Ethel answered. "It went by the nine-thirty this morning, so May will know before she goes to bed to-night." Then she went back to the subject of himself. "What is it you are worrying about, Jimmy? Is it anything that I can help you with?"

He shook his head. "There's no trouble, really there isn't. What can there be? Vera and I both know our own minds, and in another year's time I ought to be making a decent income. You will be able to point us out proudly as a couple whose happiness you secured."

He tried to speak lightly, but he did not convince her in the least; though she put on a smile when Vera came out again.

"Jimmy hasn't written to your father yet, Vera," she said. "You had better take him into the library now, and make him do it at once, or else he'll keep on putting it off. I know his ways of old. He lacks all his family's instinct for business-like promptitude. Now, his brother Walter probably had all such letters ready, or at least drafted out, before he proposed. Jimmy has none of the Grierson ways, as May will doubtless tell you." [Pg 250]

Vera frowned slightly. Sometimes Ethel's flippant speech jarred on her a little. Family matters are treated as serious things in the household of a canon who has relatives possessing influence; moreover, it was by no means pleasant to be told that Jimmy was different from the Griersons. It was almost an implied slur on his respectability. However, before she had time to make any

protest, Ethel had moved off, and Jimmy changed the current of her thoughts by suggesting that the letter to Canon Farlow had better be written at once, and she led the way into the library, well pleased at the idea.

Possibly because the letter to Lalage would be so terribly difficult to compose, Jimmy found that to his future father-in-law comparatively easy. There was not much feeling in it perhaps—even Vera, who read it with partial eyes, could not help noting the fact—but, after all, it was in a sense a matter of business; and so she was able to find consolation in its clear, incisive phrasing. She was glad when it was finished, more glad still when they had strolled down to the pillar box outside the gates, and dropped the envelope in it. Their relations were on a definite footing now, and she had little doubt that her father would be well pleased. Of course, Jimmy was still a poor man; he had been perfectly frank on that point; but still he was making a name, and, as he said, he would now have a still stronger incentive to work. Altogether, she was quite satisfied with her prospects, and convinced that she had done a wise thing in saying "Yes." Perhaps, somewhere at the back of her mind, there was sense of disappointment, a feeling that both she and her lover were wanting in enthusiasm; but, if she did experience anything of the sort, she crushed it down resolutely, knowing well that passion is closely allied to wickedness, if it is not even a form of wickedness. She had been taught from childhood that sentiment is of necessity either sinful or ridiculous, and that the basis of a successful marriage—which was her people's phrase for a happy marriage—is equality of position, combined with business instincts on the part of the man. People in her world lived to get on; it was a sacred duty with them; failure to do so was discreditable, almost criminal, as she had often heard her mother say when engaged in district visiting amongst the homes of the improvident poor. Jimmy would get on, she fully believed that, especially when he had a sensible wife to help him; moreover, he was both good looking and sweet natured; consequently, she told herself that he was all she could have wished for. It had never occurred to her that he might have a past, because neither the Griersons, nor the Farlows, nor anyone in their world, ever had such things. They seemed to live in a monotonous present of negative virtue, wholly safe and solid. So she had asked him no questions, and he had volunteered no confessions.

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The day passed all too quickly for Jimmy, too quickly, not because he was revelling in the society of his fiancée, but because each hour brought him nearer the moment when he must write that final letter to Lalage. He stayed later than usual, so late that Ethel had a hard task to hide her yawns; but when, at last, he did go back to the cottage, he made no attempt to carry out what had now become the most hateful task of his life.

"It will do in the morning," he muttered as he turned out the lamp.

CHAPTER XXVIII

[Pg 253]

May looked up from Ethel's letter with a little cry of indignation. "Jimmy is engaged to Vera Farlow, Henry! Did you ever hear of such a thing! It seems the Grimms have been staying quite close to Jimmy's cottage, and Ethel had Vera down on purpose—at least I'm sure she did. I had no idea they had met Jimmy. He never mentioned it in his last letter, nor did Ethel when I met her in town."

Henry Marlow had put down the evening paper and was staring at his wife solemnly. He scented trouble, possibly unpleasantness, and he was by no means sure what course he would be expected to take. Had they been alone it would have been different; but Ida was staying with them, and though Marlow admired his sister-in-law greatly in the abstract, or at any rate in a photograph, he was unaffectedly afraid of her, even in his own house. So he said nothing when May read out Mrs. Grimmer's letter, only shook his head twice, very gravely, and waited for Mrs. Fenton to speak.

Ida held out her hand in silence for the letter, which she read through carefully, then, "It has been a deliberate plot on Ethel Grimmer's part," she said. "She has gone out of her way to do it. I know she has got fast and vulgar lately, smoking cigarettes and talking slang; but I did not think she would do an immoral thing like this."

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Henry, who really had a sneaking admiration for Mrs. Grimmer, went rather red. "Oh, I say, Ida, that's going a little too far, isn't it?" he began, but his sister-in-law exchanged a meaning glance with May, and then cut him short.

"I beg your pardon, Henry. Have you forgotten Jimmy's conduct in town? He is hardly the fit husband for an innocent young girl like Vera Farlow; and, moreover, is he in a position to marry? He has no settled income, and his only capital was the thousand pounds which Joseph was foolish enough to leave him. I expect, too, that he has squandered that already."

Henry got up abruptly. He had heard that legacy discussed until he loathed the very mention of it; and now he had no intention of listening whilst the whole matter was threshed out anew.

"Well, I'll leave you to talk it over whilst I go and have a smoke," he said.

But his wife caught his sleeve. "Dear, you've had a cigar already this evening, and you might stay and advise us now. We must make up our minds what we are going to do."

Rather sulkily, Henry turned back, and went over to the fireplace, where he leaned against the mantelpiece, and began to fidget with his watch chain. [Pg 255]

"I don't see what there is for you to do," he said. "It's an affair for Miss Farlow and Jimmy to settle between them. Your brother has sown his wild oats now, and he'll be steady enough."

May shook her head sadly. "I know you're very kind to him, dear, kinder than he deserves; but we must not let our feelings stand in the way of our duty. What do you say, Ida?"

Mrs. Fenton nodded. "We know that besides the affair of that creature in town, Jimmy used to drink too much. Probably, he does still. We don't want to have a scandal, and perhaps to have his wife and children penniless on our hands."

Somehow, that night Henry Marlow's temper was not quite under control, and his voice was distinctly sharp as he retorted, "Miss Farlow has money of her own, at least two hundred a year, settled on her, so they wouldn't starve. What is it you propose to do?"

"Tell Canon Farlow the truth, of course," Ida answered with asperity; "then he can judge for himself. It will relieve us of responsibility in the matter. It is the only thing we can do."

Marlow frowned. "It's not my idea of what is right. You know Jimmy left this girl long ago. Why can't you forget it, and give him a chance to start again?" He addressed himself almost pointedly to his wife; but May shook her head. [Pg 256]

"One can't forget in that way, Henry," she replied, gently; "at least not in this case. It wouldn't be fair to Vera, knowing what we do about Jimmy's instincts. No; Ida is right. We must certainly tell Canon Farlow."

"But he's left the girl," Henry persisted; he had always liked Jimmy, even if he had never understood him or been greatly interested in him; moreover, the whole idea of writing to the prospective father-in-law was repugnant to his ideas of fairness.

"How do you know he has really left her?" Ida asked coldly. "He has deceived us before and may be deceiving us again. The only address he has given us is his club, and this letter from Ethel is the first intimation we have had as to where he was living. She may be there, too."

Mr. Marlow laughed scornfully. "And under Ethel Grimmer's eyes? Hardly, Ida. And, according to the character you give her, she is not likely to allow him to get engaged to someone else. When did you hear of her last?"

"Never, after she fled that night." It was May who answered. "I wish we had been able to follow her up." [Pg 257]

"Why?" Henry demanded. "I think you got pretty well revenged as it was."

Ida picked up her needlework again, rather ostentatiously. She had never seen her brother-in-law in this combative mood before, and it made her a little uneasy; but she was not going to let him see that fact, so she answered even more coldly than before:

"There was no question of revenge, Henry. Really, the suggestion is a little coarse, if May will forgive my saying so. Why we wished to find her was for this reason. Gilbert"—she coloured rather becomingly as she pronounced the name—Gilbert was Mr. Fugnell, Ethel's "Additional Curate," to whom she had recently become engaged—"Gilbert is greatly interested in a home for these people, where they do laundry work, and so on, and he was very anxious to save her. He said they had several vacancies, and they had been forced to refuse work for want of hands. That, if you want to know, is why we were anxious to discover where she had gone. It was entirely for her own good."

Marlow did not answer. He was a keen business man himself, and he liked clear balance sheets, even from a charitable institution, but Mr. Fugnell's charities issued no accounts at all. Moreover, of late a certain weekly paper had been displaying a great deal of interest in this very Home of which Ida was speaking, and only that day, coming down in the train, Henry had been wondering whether he ought not to mention the matter to Ida; but now he realised that his very advocacy of Jimmy's claim to be left alone had practically rendered it impossible for him to warn his sister-in-law. He would be doing the same thing he had condemned in her. So he held his peace, and, by a kind of tacit consent, the whole matter was dropped for the time being. [Pg 258]

When Ida had gone up to bed, however, Marlow broached the question again to his wife. "Don't you really think you had better leave Jimmy to settle his own affairs, dear?" he said. "Just think how we should have felt if anyone had come between us when we were engaged. I know it would have sent me wrong altogether."

For a moment, May wavered; then she laid her hand on his arm very tenderly. "You mustn't say that, Henry. I know you would never have done anything you shouldn't do; and then, you see, you had no past to be afraid of, which makes all the difference. No, I think Canon Farlow must be told, so that he can investigate matters and judge for himself. Think if there were a scandal after they were married, this other woman making a fuss at the house, and perhaps causing them to separate. It would ruin our position, too, and we must think of the children, even though we were ready to take the risks ourselves. Really, sweetheart, I'm right. Jimmy has only himself to blame." [Pg 259]

Her husband sighed, then bent down and kissed her. "Well, I leave it to you, May. He is your

brother, not mine. But if this sends him wrong again, you mustn't blame him too much. He will be very bitter with you and Ida."

May's face grew hard again. "We cannot help it if he is. None of us would agree to have the Grierson name dragged in the mud again."

CHAPTER XXIX

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The news of Jimmy's engagement spread rapidly. Dr. Gregg heard it within twenty-four hours, and mentioned it the same evening to Mrs. Richards, the lady whose bow Jimmy had failed to acknowledge when he was coming out of the hotel.

Mrs. Richards shook her head over the tidings. "I cannot say I am pleased to hear it, Doctor. Mr. Grierson can be very nice, and I am told he is very clever; but still I am sorry for Miss Farlow. He has an unfortunate failing."

"Do you mean he drinks?" the doctor asked bluntly.

The lady nodded. "I, myself, have seen him under the influence of liquor, before mid-day; and my maid tells me it's a common subject of conversation amongst the lower classes in the town. I understand a great many writers have the same weakness," she added, grimly.

Dr. Gregg snorted. "Nonsense, madam. When Grierson is married he will be as steady as your own sons. I know him very well, and have a great respect for him. The girl ought to be proud. He is going to make a big name for himself; whilst as for the lower classes in this town, and the upper classes as well, for that matter, their chief object in life seems to be to make up and spread lying tales."

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"Dr. Gregg, was more brusque than ever to-day," Mrs. Richards remarked to her husband an hour later. "Really, he is such a bear that if one could trust Dr. Hart I would have him instead. It's not nice to be stormed at and practically called a scandalmonger, especially when I know that what I was saying is true."

Her husband took her complaints lightly, remembering that only a year before that same bear of a doctor had snatched their youngest child out of the grip of death, and knowing well that, so long as the old man remained in practice, his wife would take his word before that of the most famous specialist in London. "What was the trouble with Gregg this time, Kate?" he asked, smiling.

"It was over Miss Farlow's engagement," she answered. "I was saying that I'm sorry for the girl, because I'm sure young Grierson drinks; and the doctor got rude about it at once."

"Perhaps you were not very wise, because Grierson is a friend of his, as well as a patient; but still, I am afraid what you said was true. I don't know the man personally; but Bateman and Knowles and one or two men who do know him say the same. I hear he's been better lately, though, since the Grimms took Drylands. Perhaps he was lonely, or something like that. He knew very few people then, and it must have been horribly dull for him."

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"I don't see that there is any excuse in that." Mrs. Richards' voice was unusually severe. "He could have known people if he liked. Mr. Button, the vicar, called on him; but he's never been to church once in over a year, at least he never went until Miss Farlow came on the scene."

Her husband smiled. "Perhaps she's converted him," he suggested.

But Mrs. Richards was in earnest. "Conversions of that sort never last," she went on. "He will be just as bad again after marriage, when the novelty has worn off. I am sure I would never allow a man of that sort to marry one of our daughters."

Mr. Richards smiled again. "You might mislead a stranger by that statement, Kate, seeing that they are both married already."

Then the dinner gong sounded, and he straightway forgot all about the matter; but his wife could not get it out of her mind. Her dearest girl friend had married a man who had turned out to be an incurable drunkard, and the tragedy of those two ruined lives came back to her vividly, so vividly in fact that she determined to call at Drylands on the following day, nominally to offer her congratulations to Vera Farlow, really to see if she could not whisper a word of warning into Mrs. Grimmer's ear.

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"Mrs. Grimmer is not at home," the servant said, in answer to her inquiry.

Mrs. Richards began to open her card case, then, acting on a sudden resolution, she looked up again and asked, "Is Miss Farlow in?"

"Yes, madam," the maid answered.

Mrs. Richards closed her card case with a snap, and followed the maid into the drawing-room.

Vera looked so happy that for a moment the visitor hesitated, then the very innocence and gentleness of the girl strengthened her resolution, clinched it, and she saw her path of duty more

clearly than ever. Deliberately, she sought for an opening.

"Have you known Mr. Grierson long?" she asked.

"Not very long, really," Vera answered. "I met him first nearly two years ago, at dinner. But after that, I did not see him again until I came down here with the Grimms. Still, he's a very old friend of Ethel's—Mrs. Grimmer, I mean—and his people are parishioners of my father's."

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"Does he often go down to see his people?" Mrs. Richards asked, a new suspicion breaking on her mind.

Vera shook her head. "He's been so busy, you see; and it's a long way; in fact, I don't think he has been there for over a year."

Mrs. Richards' last doubt had disappeared now. So Jimmy's people knew of his failing and would not receive him in their homes. Evidently, it was time that someone interfered to save this girl.

"It is sometimes a great risk marrying a very clever man. They are not always too steady."

Vera, who was rather bored with her visitor, was staring out of the window, wondering where Jimmy was, but now she looked round sharply, a glint of anger in her eyes.

"I am not afraid of that in Mr. Grierson's case," she answered coldly. "Perhaps he is one of the exceptions, that is, if the rule itself is not one of those silly ideas people get hold of and insist on believing in for no reason at all, except perhaps because they're jealous."

Mrs. Richards coloured slightly, but she did not take offence. Rather, her heart went out in sympathy to this girl whose loyalty was likely to be so ill repaid.

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"My dear," she said very gently, "I came intending to warn you, because I was afraid no one else would have the courage to tell you. No, don't jump up. Let me finish. I am afraid, in fact, I am sure, that Mr. Grierson has that very failing we referred to. It is a matter of common knowledge here; and, though he may keep steady whilst you are about, I am sorry to say that the very first day after you went away last time, I myself saw him the worse for liquor."

Vera's first impulse was to do something theatrical, to ring for the servants to turn this abominable woman out, to rush out herself and find Jimmy and implore him to avenge the insult; but something in Mrs. Richards' manner checked her, and in the end she listened in silence, sitting very still with her hand in her lap.

When the other had done, she made one attempt at disbelief. "It's not true, it's not true," she murmured, then she went on, "Oh, say it isn't true. Do say so. Why did you come and tell me when I was so happy?"

There were tears in Mrs. Richards' eyes as she answered. "My dear, it's better to know now than when it's too late, when your life is ruined. If you want confirmation you had better make other inquiries. Ask Mr. Grierson himself. He cannot deny it."

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To Vera's own astonishment, she let the visitor kiss her before they parted; in fact, she returned the kiss; and yet, when looking back on it afterwards, it seemed quite natural, for no one could have doubted the honesty of Mrs. Richards' purpose, even if they had doubted her statements. But Vera doubted neither. She knew the accusation was true; and when on Jimmy coming in a few moments later and finding her red-eyed and white-faced, she taxed him with it, he recognised the futility of denial, though he pleaded extenuating circumstances.

"I was miserable and lonely, and until I met you everything seemed to have gone to pieces. It will never happen again, darling, really it won't. You know that, don't you? surely you know it." He was fighting, not only for her love, but for his whole future, his position in society, the respect of his own class. If he lost her, he felt he would lose everything else which a Grierson holds dear. He would never have the heart to make another try.

"I don't know," she sighed at last. "I had such faith in you, and this has been such an awful shock. Oh, Jimmy, Jimmy, I could never have believed it."

Even in his misery, it struck him that she had believed it, very readily, and a hint of anger came into his bearing. After all, his promise of reformation, or rather the fact that he had already reformed, should have some weight with her. But she was judging him by the past, in which she had had no part. Still, he spoke gently, pleadingly.

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"Vera, dear, you must forgive me. It will never happen again now that I have you to look after me. You will keep me straight."

But he struck the wrong chord, and she looked up almost indignantly. "You ought to be manly enough to keep straight by yourself, you ought never to have sunk as you have done. There can be no excuse for it, none whatever."

"And no forgiveness?" he asked very quietly. She covered her face with her hands again. "Oh, I don't know, I don't know. Everything seems so dreadful, and I shall be afraid to trust you. Go away now, and let me think it over quietly."

"Very well. I will come back after dinner. Meet me down by the summer-house." There was something masterful in his tone, and for a moment she felt inclined to obey; then her sense of

injury came to her aid, and she shook her head.

"No, to-morrow morning at the earliest. I cannot decide so quickly."

Jimmy took his hat off the table. "Good-bye, then. I will come to-morrow morning." And he left the room without another word. As the door closed behind him, Vera stood up, straightened her hair in front of the glass on the mantelpiece, dabbed the tears out of her eyes with her handkerchief, and then went upstairs, holding her head rather erect, but otherwise showing no sign of emotion.

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Jimmy filled his pipe whilst he went down the front steps, and as he rammed the tobacco into the bowl he noticed, with a cynical little smile, that his hand was perfectly steady. In his heart he did not believe that the quarrel would prove final, that she would break off the engagement on the grounds of his past failings. It was just a passing cloud, he told himself. Both of them would have been more upset had their love affair come to a sudden and abrupt close. He remembered how he had felt when he had parted from Lalage, the fever and the agony of it, the sense of utter desolation and hopelessness. And from that he came to think of Lalage herself. She had never turned on him because he drank. Far otherwise. The knowledge had made her more tender, more watchful over his comfort, more anxious to shield him from worries which might drive him into the power of his enemy. She had never blamed him, even by implication. And why? He knew the answer only too well. Because she had loved him. Now the fever, which the parting from Vera had failed to arouse, came on him again. His pipe went out, and, unconsciously, he quickened his steps, as was his way when deeply stirred.

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Lalage loved him. Lalage loved him too well to turn on him. The words drummed through his brain with maddening persistency; and then, as a corollary to them, came the questions, "Did Vera love him well enough to take the risk, to give him a chance to run straight? Was he always to be the Black Sheep, and herd with others of his kind?"

CHAPTER XXX

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It was only a couple of hours after Jimmy had left Vera that the chauffeur from Drylands brought him a note in Mrs. Grimmer's sprawling handwriting.

"It will be all right," Ethel wrote. "Vera has agreed to take the sensible view, and let you show outward and visible signs of reformation during your engagement. So you must be very good, and, if you can, even pious. Come up to lunch to-morrow with a jaunty air as though nothing had happened."

Jimmy heaved a sigh of relief as he folded up the note and thrust it into his pocket. So the crisis was safely over, after all. Straightway he began to make excuses for Vera, her youth, her inexperience, the atmosphere in which she had been reared; yet he could not help remembering that Lalage was younger, by a year at least, and that her chances of gaining experience at home had been far smaller, and still Lalage had understood him and tried to help him, whilst Vera was only taking him as an offender on probation.

The latter was not pleasant thought, especially as the final letter to Lalage remained unwritten. He had intended to do it that night, had really made up his mind to do it; but now this scene with Vera seemed to have shaken his nerves, and he felt he could stand no more strain until he had had a good sleep. There was really no immediate hurry for a day or two. Both his letters to Lalage and her letters to him were so brief and so few in number that no one could object to the correspondence. So, in the end, he went to bed, moderately satisfied with his own prospects, having written nothing at all.

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Jimmy got up in the morning with a certain sense of relief in his mind. He was rather glad now that Vera did know something of his past failings; it was better for her to understand, and to forgive, than for him to live with the fear of exposure ever in his thoughts. Their little quarrel, if quarrel it could be called, would serve a useful purpose in clearing the air; and now there would be no more trouble. He would soon reassure her by giving positive proofs of reformation. Moreover, he could write to Lalage that night, after making his peace with Vera.

The morning postman brought nothing more interesting than a receipted laundry bill, which Jimmy tossed angrily on to the desk. He had been expecting a letter of congratulation from May, in fact, he had looked to receive it twenty-four hours previously, and its non-arrival worried him a little. He had been hoping that the news of his engagement would have led to a treaty of peace with his family, being, as it was, significant of his surrender to the Grierson ideals. Surely May would see that he had sown his wild oats, and was ready, eager even, to marry into a respectable family and live respectably.

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His breakfast finished, Jimmy glanced through his newspapers, at the same time keeping a look-out for the second postman; but when the latter did come down the road he hurried by without even glancing at the cottage. Obviously, he had nothing to deliver. Jimmy got up abruptly, a frown on his face. They might have written to him, and have offered their congratulations. He had given in to their ideas completely now; his engagement was in itself tacit recognition of the code of the Griersons, and he could not understand why the family should still harbour bitterness against him. Surely he had suffered enough for his revolt. But May and Ida and Walter had

always been the same, obstinate, self-satisfied, regarding everything he did as necessarily wrong. In the world of men who thought, Jimmy knew that he, himself, was quickly gaining a position, and that his wife would also have a position, through him; but his family gauged position by the standard of the pass-book, the only book it considered of any permanent importance. The successful business man was respectable by virtue of his success; it made little difference whether he had grown rich as a banker, a merchant, or a member of a County Council committee; but the man who lived by his brains it regarded with suspicion, as one who made an income without possessing capital.

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Jimmy was in a bitter mood. The little matter of the delayed letter had brought out that alien streak in him again, and once more he saw the Griersons as he had seen them in the early days of his return, unsympathetic, prejudiced, almost smug. He had been striving hard to win their approval. He had given up Lalage; he had written only things of which they could approve; he had become engaged to a girl essentially of their world, and now—

A sharp knock on the door brought him to his feet, and he opened the latch to find the ragged little girl, who generally acted as telegraph boy, holding out a yellow envelope. "Any answer, sir?" she chanted.

Jimmy read the message through. It was from Canon Farlow, and had been despatched at the London terminus. "Meet me on the station at twelve-thirty. Most important," it said.

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Jimmy crushed the paper up, and thrust it into his pocket. "No answer, thanks," he said, then he glanced at the clock. He had an hour and a half still to wait. For a moment he thought of going up to Drylands first, to see if Vera too had heard, but he put the idea aside immediately after. Already, he had scented trouble. There must be something very serious to have brought the Canon back from Switzerland in such a hurry, and he preferred to see it through alone, to keep Vera out of it, if possible.

He was on the station platform a little early, in fact, he had time for several drinks in the refreshment-room before the train came in; then, rather to his surprise, he found the Drylands' chauffeur also waiting at the barrier.

The Canon, a portly man, clean shaven, and obviously prosperous, emerged from a first-class carriage with a bag in one hand and a rug on the other arm. Perhaps for that reason, he did not offer to shake hands with Jimmy; but even when the chauffeur had hurried forward for his things, he had made no attempt to remedy the omission.

"Good morning, Mr. Grierson," he said. "I am glad to see you received my telegram. Yes, Jones," to the chauffeur, "put those in the motor-car, and kindly wait for me. I shall be going up shortly. And please put the hood up, if possible.

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"Now, Mr. Grierson, is there anywhere we can talk. I have a few questions of a rather serious nature, of a distinctly serious nature, I might say, to ask you."

Jimmy, now fully convinced that his theory of trouble ahead was right, pulled himself together to meet it. The Canon's manner had already aroused his antagonism, and he was in no mood to submit tamely.

"We can talk in there, if you like," he answered, nodding towards the refreshment-room. "I see the waiting-rooms are occupied."

The Canon frowned, thinking he detected a hint of flippancy in the younger man's manner. "I said it was a serious matter," he replied, severely, "and a public bar is hardly the place for discussion, hardly the place I should be likely to visit in any case." He glanced along the platform, which was already deserted. "I think we will walk up that direction, if you please."

Jimmy, now thoroughly nettled, took out his case and lighted a cigarette with rather ostentatious coolness, waiting for the other to begin.

At last when they got to the open end of the platform, Canon Farlow cleared his voice with a little cough which he had often found most effective on solemn occasions. "I understand from your letter that you have proposed marriage to my daughter, Vera."

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Jimmy corrected him quietly. "I am engaged to Miss Farlow. I am sorry if I didn't make that quite clear to you."

If men in his position did such things, the Canon would have snorted; as it was, however, he remembered his dignity in time. "Pardon me, Mr. Grierson, my daughter knows better than to accept a proposal of marriage from any man without my permission. Anything she may have said was provisional, simply provisional, until I, myself, had made inquiries. I regret to say now that what I have learnt about you is greatly to your discredit, terribly so. I have had a letter from your sister, Mrs. Fenton."

Jimmy was pale already, and he went, if possible, a shade paler, with anger; but he spoke very calmly. "Yes, and what does Ida say about me? Something pleasant, surely."

Hitherto the Canon had spoken more in sorrow than in wrath, but now he began to lose his temper; he was not accustomed to being treated lightly. "Something most unpleasant on the other hand," he snapped. "Something which, if true, as I believe it to be, renders you totally unfit to associate with an innocent young girl like my daughter. Mrs. Fenton informs me that a little

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while ago you were living a most scandalous life in London."

Jimmy knew that his case was hopeless. He had been betrayed, and had already been judged, unheard. Still, he made one last attempt at defence. "It was over a year ago, and I have never seen her since. I have run straight enough since the time I left London; and I know I should be true to your daughter."

"You admit it is correct, then?" The canon gave the sigh he reserved for the convicted sinner. "And where is this woman now?"

The colour came back to Jimmy's face, suddenly. "That I shall not tell you, or anybody else," he answered curtly.

"Do you still keep up a correspondence with her?"

Jimmy realised that the question was the fatal one. For a moment he thought of explaining, of going into details as to how he was going to break the last slender tie, of pleading all the extenuating circumstances, of appealing for a chance to prove his reformation; then he glanced at his companion, and knew there was no mercy in his face. "Yes, I still correspond with her," he replied quietly.

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The Canon's wrath blazed out. "And yet you dare propose marriage to my daughter. You are a debased profligate, sir, absolutely unfit for any respectable people to know. You, you—" he spluttered a little, "you are a positive danger to society. The idea of keeping up communication with a vile creature like that, and expecting to marry my daughter." He was snorting in earnest now.

Jimmy's eyes had grown dangerously bright. "I allow no one to call my friends vile creatures, not even a man who is supposed to be a preacher of charity and good will. Whatever Miss Penrose has been in the past, she has led a perfectly good life since we parted, and I respect her as much as I respect any other woman living." He spoke proudly, defiantly, looking the cleric full in the face.

For a moment Canon Farlow was speechless, then he attempted to take refuge in scorn. "If you are really so foolish as to believe that those creatures ever reform—" he began.

But Jimmy cut him short sternly. "You have said more than enough already. Good morning." He turned on his heel and went a couple of steps, then something struck him and he faced round again. "May I venture one suggestion? Next time you preach you might take as your text, 'He amongst you who is without sin, let him throw the first stone,'" and he stalked down the platform, leaving the canon bereft of even a trace of his well-known pulpit manner.

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CHAPTER XXXI

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Jimmy did not attempt to go back to the cottage. Instead, he walked very slowly up the street towards the hotel, the door of which he was just entering when the Grimmer motor-car dashed past with the Canon sitting very erect in the tonneau. As a matter of fact, that grave personage had eventually entered the refreshment-room, feeling he needed something to steady his nerves after such a trying interview. True, the brandy did restore him a little, but the memory of Jimmy's words remained. He never forgot them, and, as his wrath subsided, they began to affect him in another way, making him ask himself whether, after all, he had read some of his Master's words aright. As time went by, the matter troubled him more and more—it is always a serious thing when a man past middle age, and a dignitary of the Church at that, begins to think—and when, a year later, Vera became engaged to the son of one of his own church-wardens, a young City man of exemplary life and undoubted wealth, he was conscious of a distinct sense of disappointment. He would have liked a son-in-law who would have understood his new point of view. He married them himself, in the blatantly new church with the sprawling texts round the chancel arch; and the world, his world, congratulated him. But on the following Sunday he preached a sermon which shocked his congregation beyond measure, and really cost him that bishopric; for he took Jimmy's suggested text, and argued, with an eloquent fire, quite alien to his nature, that if the Master was ready to forgive, His followers must do the same.

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Ida voiced the opinion of a good part of the congregation, when she said, on the way home after the service, "Poor Canon Farlow! It is too terrible. The excitement of the wedding must have unhinged his mind."

But her new husband, Mr. Tugnell, himself a candidate for orders, the owner of the living having promised that he should succeed the canon, expressed the more general view, when he said sharply, "Nonsense, my dear, the man had been drinking. Anyone could see that."

And Ida agreed, as she did to everything Mr. Tugnell said. Even when he had suggested that she should settle half of Joseph Fenton's hard-earned money on himself she had consented, knowing that he was a philanthropist, and therefore would use it well.

May Farlow, on the other hand, grieved honestly for the canon, and still retained sittings in the parish church, though she usually took the children to the chapel-of-ease, "where is an old friend

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of ours," she said, "and I'm not going to turn my back on him. There are always two sides to a question after all, and I want to hear both. Perhaps we've been wrong in some things, Ida. At any rate, now that my children are growing up, I want more than ever to be right, so that I can guide them, and prevent them from making mistakes. Sometimes I think we were too severe in the past."

* * * * *

Jimmy hardly noticed the canon passing him. His mind was too full of other things. Vera was lost to him, he knew that, and, somehow, the fact troubled him little. With her, also, he had lost all present chance of going back to the Grierson world, of becoming a true and complete Grierson again, and curiously enough, that troubled him equally little. He had ceased to have the slightest desire for such a thing. A black sheep himself, he preferred to herd with his kind.

His first feeling had been one of bitter wrath against his sisters. They had betrayed him; they had thrust him back again when he was trying to pull himself up; they were keeping him down, keeping him at a distance for fear he should damage their position. And then his anger seemed to pass away, and he laughed, first at them, then at himself. What did he care about position, what did he care about Vera Farlow, what did he care about anything—except Lalage?

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He knew it now. He knew why his engagement had made him so utterly miserable, knew why he had been unable to write that final letter to Lalage. There was only one place in the world he wanted to be—where Lalage was; only one object in life for him—to make Lalage happy, and by so doing wipe out all memory of his intended unfaithfulness to her.

But would she have him back now, would she forgive his coldness and his neglect, above all his repudiation of her in the London days? Did she still love him, as he knew she had done once, love him enough to forgive and forget, love him as he loved her? The thought drove everything else out of his mind. Vera, her father, his sisters, all seemed to belong to some distant past with which he now had no connection. His bitterness against Ida and May, his anger against the canon, his first feeling of grief, or rather of wounded pride, when he learnt that Vera was lost to him—these were as nothing compared to the fear that Lalage would refuse him. He was like a man who had awakened from a long sleep full of dreams to find that, whilst he had slumbered, a deadly peril had come down on him, a peril which could be averted only by immediate action.

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Jimmy had ordered a drink, more or less mechanically, as a tribute levied by the house; but he pushed it away untasted.

"I'm going to be absolutely sober when I do this," he muttered, then went back into the hall, where he spent five minutes poring over a timetable, following the trains down the lines of figures with a finger which trembled slightly. Every hour seemed of supreme importance now. Had he not been in dreamland for over a year? At last he found his trains. He had three hours to wait in the town, two hours in London; but he would finally arrive in the little Yorkshire town about half-past seven in the morning, before Lalage had started work in that hateful little shop.

There was no need for him to write the trains down. Their times of departure were already graven on his memory; all he had to do now was cross the road to the post-office and wire to Lalage. He was cool again, a perfectly normal man. All his anger and his excitement had gone; but, none the less, he did not hesitate a moment over taking what might be, what he hoped would be, an irrevocable step.

An hour later, the kindly, grey-bearded old draper beckoned Lalage into his private office. "There's a wire for you, Miss Penrose," he said.

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Lalage opened the envelope with trembling fingers—only one person in the world would wire to her—then she swayed a little and gripped the table for support, as she read, "Meet me at the station half-past seven to-morrow morning. Jimmy."

The draper was watching her anxiously. "No bad news, I hope," he said.

She looked at him with a smile which reassured him instantly. "No, it's good news, the best of good news," she answered.

When she had gone out the old man shook his head sadly. His own wife had died thirty years before, and he had passed nearly half of his life in waiting for the meeting on the other side; so he knew what that smile meant. Only a man, and the right man, can bring it to a woman's lips.

When Jimmy left the post-office he went straight back to the cottage. The fear of meeting any of the Drylands people did not worry him in the least. They all belonged to the dream, even Ethel, and now he had got back to the reality. Yet, when he opened the door and found a note from Mrs. Grimmer lying on the floor, he did not feel a twinge of uneasiness, dreading reproaches from her, as his hostess.

But Ethel wrote kindly. "Don't take it to heart too much, dear old boy. It was a nasty trick for Ida to play you, although just what I should have expected from her or May. As for the canon, I am afraid I have offended him mortally by sticking up for you. Vera is hopelessly weak. I was never more disappointed in anyone in my life. Still, after all, it was a mistake, and you would have never been happy. Take comfort from that, and don't do anything rash."

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Jimmy read it through a second time, then tore it up. Ethel was a good sort, but if he did what he

hoped to do, she would probably say he had disregarded her advice and acted rashly. So she, too, had better become part of the dream and be forgotten, which is the proper fate of dreams and dream-people.

It did not take him long to pack his bag and shut up the cottage; consequently, he had plenty of time to catch his train; but on this occasion he did not go into the refreshment-room. He needed no stimulant to keep him going now. If she refused to hear him it might be different; but until he saw her he was going to touch nothing. He would speak deliberately, in cold blood.

For a moment, when he came out of the terminus, London affected him as it had done on the night of his home-coming; but the feeling passed immediately, and the town became simply one stage on his journey to Lalage. Moreover, as he drove across to the other terminus, he felt none of that sickness at heart which he had dreaded so greatly, which had made him avoid the place as a plague spot. All the old memories seemed to have lost their bitterness. The women in the streets had not the slightest kinship with Lalage. His jealousy of the past had vanished, the hateful thoughts which had once gone nigh to driving him mad had lost all their power, and now the only thing in his mind was the fear that the new Lalage, which was the real Lalage, would not risk joining her life to his again.

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As the train came into the station he saw her standing there, tall, very pale, and, as he thought, looking even more beautiful than ever in her plain black dress. She was the only person on the platform, just as he was the only passenger to alight; but, seeing the look in her eyes, it would have been the same had there been a crowd.

"Lalage," he said, and took her in his arms.

When she disengaged herself, blushing, for the ticket collector had just come out, she scanned his face eagerly, and then the colour left her cheek again.

"Jimmy, oh, Jimmy, dear, you look so ill. Hasn't anyone taken care of you all these months?"

He laughed happily, knowing now that everything was well. "I will tell you all about it by and by." Then he stopped, regardless of the indignant glances of the ticket collector, who was thinking of his cooling breakfast. "Shall I send my bag to the hotel, or shall I leave it here?"

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She understood his meaning. "Send it to the hotel," she answered in a low voice.

Nothing more was said until they were clear of the station yard, then, "Where can we go and have a quiet talk?" he asked.

For answer she led him into a little public park near by. It was deserted at that hour, and he got the chance to speak at once.

"Lalage," he said in a tone she hardly recognised, "I've broken my promise to you. I've been ruining my health with liquor, trying to forget you; and I've been engaged to another woman. I know you're infinitely too good for me in every way; but I've come to ask you to marry me, not in the distant future, but now, at once, as soon as I can get a licence."

She stood very still, and, for a few seconds, he feared he had come too late, then she spoke haltingly. "Jimmy, I'm afraid ... after the past ... that you wouldn't trust me. And that would be even worse than this."

He took her hand. "Lalage, dearest, there's no question of that now, there can be no question of it when we're married. You say no one has taken care of me. Won't you do it, sweetheart, and save me from myself?"

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She looked at him with shining eyes. "You haven't said yet why you want to marry me, Jimmy."

Once more he took her in his arms unresisting. "Because I love you, dearest, because you're everything in this wide world to me, because I honour you and trust you above all women, and because life would not be worth living unless I had you as my wife."

THE END

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