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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK FIRST PERSON PARAMOUNT ***

SUCCESSFUL NOVELS

By AMBROSE PRATT.

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FIRST PERSON PARAMOUNT



"In another second I had him by the throat." (Page 189.)

First Person Paramount]

[Frontispiece

"In another second I had him by the throat." ([Page 189](#))

FIRST PERSON PARAMOUNT

BY

AMBROSE PRATT

AUTHOR OF
"VIGOROUS DAUNT: BILLIONAIRE," ETC., ETC.

LONDON
WARD, LOCK & CO., LIMITED
1908

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THE HOUSE AMONG THE PINES

FIRST PERSON PARAMOUNT

My name is Agar Hume. My mother died when I was two years old. My father was the first violin in a second-rate music hall orchestra at Birmingham. He had once been a gentleman. He taught me French and how to play the flute. Between whiles he treated me like a dog. He wished me to become a member of his orchestra. My tastes, however, inclined to the stage. From early childhood I had possessed an almost perfect talent for mimicry. When I was nineteen years old, there was not an artist I had ever seen whom I could not represent to the life. One morning, about that time, in a fit of drunken rage my father gave me a terrible beating. I was then somewhat undersized—the result of irregular meals and bad food. I could neither retaliate nor defend myself. That night, as soon as my father had set off for the theatre, I ran away from home. I walked to Liverpool, and easily obtained employment at a music hall, where for three years I nightly imitated every actor and person of note whom the Liverpoolians wished to see. They grew tired of me at last and ceased to applaud my turn. I was promptly discharged by the management. Not caring to return to Birmingham, as my father had never forgiven me for deserting him, I made my way to London. I had saved a little money, and I thought that before it was spent I should procure a new engagement. The London market, however, was simply glutted with mimics, and before three months had passed I was penniless and still without a place. I haunted the theatres and employment agencies to no purpose. I was obliged to pawn my wardrobe, and at last a day came when I stood in the Strand owning nothing in the world but the suit of decent black I wore and my make-up box, which I carried in my hand because I had been turned out of my lodging-house that morning. I had not tasted food for four-and-twenty hours. I mentioned the latter fact ten minutes later to the manager of the next employment agency I visited. He had seen me so often that he knew me well, and he sympathized with my misfortune.

"Look here," said he, "if you are so hard up as all that, your only hope is to try your hand at something else. There is no chance for you at the theatres."

"I'm ready to turn boot-black!" I assured him.

"Well, well," said he, "a client of ours inquired yesterday for a valet. If you are really willing to put your pride in your pocket, I shall personally recommend you."

"I have no pride," I answered, "but I have also no experience."

He gave me a pitying smile. "Certainly not, but I believe that you are hungry—you look it!"

I was so hungry indeed that I thanked him warmly, and a few minutes afterwards I was walking as fast as I could towards Piccadilly with a letter in my pocket which bore the following address:—"Sir William Dagmar, Bart., 22a Curzon Street."

It was a small two-storied house, but it looked good, and I raised the knocker tremblingly.

A footman opened the door, to whom I gave my precious letter. He was civil because my clothes were well cut, and because I have the appearance of a gentleman. He invited me to a seat in an anteroom, and went off with my letter. When he returned, he carried his nose in the air, and his bearing was unaffectedly contemptuous.

"Huh!" he sniffed. "Step this way, but wipe your shoes on that mat first, please!"

I obeyed. He led me to a room on the first floor, opened the second door and announced in an oily voice

"The valet—Sir William."

Had I been a man of pride, I should have felt offended. As it was I walked into the room quite undisturbed, and with the most respectful mien I was able to assume.

The door closed behind me. The walls of the room, which was a large one, were piled from floor to ceiling with books, which ran in long straggling tiers, on shelves of carven oak. Books littered the carpet about the bases of the shelves. Rows of books lying one upon another, were heaped upon an immense table that occupied the centre of the room. Dust covered the books. A revolving bookcase crammed with books stood beside the chair upon which Sir William Dagmar sat. The apartment resembled, except for its air of general untidiness, nothing so much as a corner in the British Museum library. It possessed no windows, and was lighted from the roof like a gallery of pictures. I am a keenly observant man by nature, and from a lad I had persistently developed my peculiar faculty for the sake of my profession. At that time it was only necessary for me to glance at a place, person or thing in order to photograph its character and details on my mind. A second after I entered the room I looked at Sir William, but I had already said to myself: "A book-worm!"

So he appeared, and nothing to my surprise. He was of middle size and age. His features were regular and even handsome. His complexion was yellow and bloodless. He possessed a broad rather high forehead, and a large head covered with a mass of stubbly iron-grey hair. His nose was long and straight. His chin was a trifle weak. He was clean shaven. The key to his face was his mouth. It was large and sensitive. It had a trick of screwing itself up at the corners, and sending the upper lip into a curl of sneering querulousness, which I immediately experienced an itch to imitate. His teeth were long, even and very white, but the right incisor was lacking, and this circumstance made his voice sound slightly sibilant. His eyes were grey like my own, but

they were set deeper in his head, and the man had twice my weight of years stooping his narrow shoulders.

He regarded me appraisingly. "I need a valet," he began. His voice was querulous like his mouth.

"Yes, sir," said I.

"You are recommended by Mr. Bray. You look young—rather too young. Why did you leave your last place?"

"My employer could not afford to keep me any longer. I was with him for three years, sir."

"Show me your references."

I had expected that demand. "I gave them to Mr. Bray, sir," I answered glibly. "Did he not send them on to you? He said he would enclose them in his letter!"

Sir William shook his head, and a bored look crept into his eyes. "I suppose they are all right," he muttered wearily. "I like your voice; it is soft. If you want to please me never raise it. My head aches very easily."

"I shall remember, sir," I answered in my mildest accents.

"When could you commence your duties?"

"At once, sir."

He raised his eyebrows, then nodded languidly.

"Very well. I shall give you a trial. Your wages will be £5 a month and your keep. Butts, the footman, will show you to your room and explain my ways to you. I shall ring when I require you."

"Thank you, sir."

"By the way, Bray writes me that your name is Agar Hume. I dislike it. Once upon a time I had a friend named Hume. I shall call you Brown."

"Very good, sir."

I backed out of the room, and as I half expected found the footman in the passage. His air of defiant indifference informed me that he had been listening through the keyhole. He was an owl-like looking creature, but there were garrulous wrinkles about his eyes and lips which determined me to treat him civilly.

"Sir William has engaged me, Mr. Butts," I said in a low voice. "Will you be good enough to show me to my room. I am to start work at once."

"You won't stay here long," he mumbled as he tip-toed off. "They never do."

I had no intention of staying one day longer than I could help. But I did not confide the fact to Butts. As I followed him my one thought was to get my hands on food as soon as possible. I was desperately hungry. He took me upstairs to an attic room at the back of the house. It was small, but well lighted and clean, also it smelt of lavender. It contained a deal wardrobe with a full length mirror, a truckle bed, a dressing table and a wash stand. There was also a carpet on the floor. I felt pleased, but I was famished.

"Here you hare!" growled Butts.

I put down my make-up box, and faced him.

"I should like to be friends with you, Mr. Butts," I said. "I dare say we shall be cast a good deal in each other's company. What do you say?" I offered him my hand.

He grinned and took it. My apparent ingenuousness had melted him at once. He was not a bad hearted fellow, it seemed.

"All right," he said. "What's yer name?"

"Brown."

"What did yer think of 'im," he jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

"A book-worm, isn't he—but what do you say if we discuss him over a glass of beer and some bread and cheese?"

"Good!" said Butts, and with an alacrity that delighted me, he led the way by the servants' staircase to the pantry on the ground floor. For beer, however, he gave me port wine, and for bread and cheese a cold partridge.

"You seem to live well here," I commented with my mouth full.

"So so!" answered Butts with a sigh. "Tucker's all right—but it's so cursed lonely. Master never goes out, except to meals, and it's very seldom he hever has any company here, honly about once a month."

"Oh! a bit of a hermit, eh?"

"A bloomin' misanthrope—that's what I call him! He 'ates noise like poison. Hif I was to drop a plate 'e'd ring to know what the devil I meant by it?"

"Married?"

"No. He 'ates women wors'n noise, I believe."

"How does he pass his time?"

"Reads all day—half the night too."

"What does he want with a valet, then?"

"You'll soon find out," said Butts with a snort of contempt.

"Please tell me."

Butts wagged his head. "Bar shavin' him you won't 'ave much to do, 'cept give him his medicines at the proper hours. He's a sick man is Sir William Dagmar! The last valet 'e had here, Joe Bates, was a real smart un he was. He'd done for Lord X— and Mr. Francis, and a lot more tip-toppers. He was just celebrated for fixing hevenin' dress ties; and Sir William always wears ready made ones to save trouble. Bates got the miserables in a week, an' hup an' cleared out before the fortnight was up."

"What is the matter with Sir William?"

"Consumption! He's got it bad!"

"Oh! is he rich?"

"Rich as Croesus."

"Any relatives?"

"A cousin he 'ates wors'n noise and wors'n women. A young chap name o' Sefton Dagmar. He's heir to the title, but I'm not thinkin' he'll get much o' the splosh. Sir William's got it all in Government bonds and he can leave it as he likes."

"What is this Sefton Dagmar like?"

"Not a bad sort. He's always haffable enough to me. He lives at Newhaven, but he calls here once in a while to see how Sir William is. But he hardly ever sees him. Hi! there's master's bell—I'll be back in a minute."

As soon as Butts had disappeared I gave my appetite free rein and a very hearty meal I made. He was absent a quarter of an hour, and on his return he wore a look of annoyance. "Nuisance!" he began. "He's halways worriting about this time. He's goin' to give a dinner party to-morrow night. He gives one every month. But he wants you! Hurry up, he 'ates to be kep waitin'."

I was up the stairs in a twinkle, and again standing before Sir William. He looked bored to death.

"Some gentlemen will dine with me to-morrow night, Brown," he drawled. "Six in all. Their names are on this paper, and their table places marked. I wish you to serve—Butts is a clumsy waiter."

I received the paper with a deferential bow. "Very good, sir!" I murmured.

"You will also see that card tables are arranged in the smoking room. Butts will order the dinner, he knows my ways. But you will take charge of the arrangements. You seem a capable young fellow."

"Thank you, sir!"

"And Brown," he frowned heavily.

"Yes, sir."

"Don't fill my glass too often. I am an invalid, you know, and wine does not agree with me. That is all. I shall not want you again until seven o'clock this evening, when you may dress me for dinner!"

Butts and I studied the paper that Sir William had given me, with the greatest attention. I soon gathered that the six gentlemen who were to dine with my master were not members of the smart set of society such as Butts called "tip-toppers," but men of intellectual attainment, and leaders of thought, if not of fashion. Butts knew them all. "They belong to Sir William's club, the 'Athenian,'" he remarked. "This here Sir Charles Venner who's to take the seat of honour is a cove what cuts up dead dogs and such like while they are alive."

"A vivisectionist?" I asked smiling.

"Don't know what you call 'em," responded Butts. "But he's doctor, and so is Mr. Fulton, who is to sit opposite on master's left. The next chap on the right—Luke Humphreys—is a hauthor, on political economy. Mr. Husband is the chap who wrote that article in the *National Review* on the weakness of the Navy, which kicked up such a blessed fuss a while since. You must have heard of him?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well, George Cavanagh is an artist and a R.A. Master has one of his pictures in the dining room—you'll see it presently: a naked woman with a chap—'Love and Death' it's called."

I had much ado not to laugh outright. "I've seen prints of it," I muttered. "Who is the last, Mr. Nevil Pardoe, Butts?"

"He's a playwright," answered Butts with a sigh. "They're playin' one of his pieces now at the Kensington Theatre. I went there the other night and got my pocket picked for my trouble." He kicked over a chair as he spoke, as if carried away by temper in remembering his misfortune. The bell rang on instant. "Oh, Lor!" groaned Butts. "I'm in for it again, that man has the ears of a mole!"

He came back a few minutes later looking very sour. "Called me a clod hopper!" he growled in a low voice. "He's got a reptile tongue. But come upstairs, Brown, and I'll show you his bedroom—an' where he keeps his clothes an' things!"

It was an immense apartment, magnificently furnished. But it was very untidy and medicine bottles, some full, some empty, crowded the mantelpiece and dressing tables. The place smelt like a druggist's store. "I'll clear that rubbish away first thing," I declared. But the footman seized my arm as I caught up the first bottle. "He'd go ravin' stark starin' mad if one of them was shifted," he cried. "Don't you touch 'em, lad."

I shrugged my shoulders, and watched Butts ransack our master's wardrobe, he explaining to me the while certain preferences in matters of taste and dress which Sir William had always manifested. It appeared that he detested colours. All his suits were black, also his boots and gloves.

"You seem to know him so well, Butts," I remarked at last, "that I wonder more and more why he has not made you his valet."

"It's my haccent!" sighed Butts. "He can't abear it. Whenever I drop a haitch, in his 'earing, he shrivels up."

During the afternoon I borrowed half a sovereign from Butts, and purchased some fresh linen.

While dressing Sir William Dagmar later in the evening, I only spoke when he addressed me, and then in softest monosyllables. He seemed pleased with my attentions. But then I have frequently noticed that no man is hard to please whose idiosyncrasies are humoured when detected. He gave me a list of his medicines and the hours when they should be administered, after which he departed to dine at a neighbouring restaurant, in which his habit was to take most of his meals in a private room, perfectly alone.

Butts and I dined together in the pantry, and a merry time we spent, until our master's return, when noise was prohibited.

On the morrow the house was more or less in the hands of a bevy of restaurateurs preparing for the dinner. Sir William went out early in the morning, and he was absent all day, but he returned in time for me to dress him, and he appeared to be pleased with our arrangements. The table indeed looked magnificent, for I had taken care to deck it with flowers, and my taste in such matters is excellent. I did not see the guests until dinner was served, and they were all seated at the table. I wore an evening suit of my master's, which on Butts' advice I had borrowed beforehand without the formality of asking permission, having none of my own. Sir William was not an observant man, *grace au Dieu!* I entered the room noiselessly, and slipped behind my master's chair. The table had been previously spread with oysters. No one spoke, until the shells were emptied; meanwhile I studied the six attentively. They were intelligent, but cold-faced men. Sir Charles Venner had an enormous nose, and very small grey eyes. Dr. Fulton possessed a hare-lip. Mr. Humphreys rejoiced in a squint. George Cavanagh might have stepped from a portrait by Van Dyck, but he had a trick of screwing up the tip of his nose under the influence of excitement, at intervals, as a rabbit does. Mr. Husband put out his tongue, to meet his fork as he ate, he

possessed a prodigious chin; and Mr. Nevil Pardoe had watchful heavy lidded eyes. These traits were their key-notes so to speak—their individual and predominant peculiarities, which distinguished them from each other and from other distinguished men. From the rest of the world, they were one and all distinguished by a common pallor of complexion, and a curious cough, which stamped them as consumptives.

As I removed their plates, Sir Charles Venner broke a silence that I at least was beginning to find oppressive. "I believe you will be the first to go after all, Dagmar!" he remarked in French, casting a keen glance at my master. "Pardoe seems picking up. He doesn't cough so much to-night." It was evident that no one suspected me of an acquaintanceship with French.

Sir William shrugged his shoulders. "I am ready," he returned. "But I don't think so. Will you bet, or any one?"

"I'll lay you even money that Pardoe turns up his toes before you, Dagmar!" cut in Mr. Husband.

"Very good," said Sir William. "How much?"

"A hundred!"

"It is a wager!" Sir William took out his pencil and scrawled some figures on his shirt cuff.

"I'll take you too, Husband," cried Mr. Cavanagh.

"And I," chorused Dr. Fulton and Sir Charles.

"No thanks," retorted Mr. Husband drily. "My book is full. How are you feeling yourself, Venner?"

"Nice and poorly, thanks, but with care I'll out-last the lot of you!" He broke out into a fit of coughing as he finished speaking, and the others bending forward, watched him eagerly. Their expressions reminded me of a lot of hungry carnivora eyeing a bone held just beyond their reach.

They drank their soup in silence, but while I served to them the entrée, they conversed again.

"I'm in the hands of a quack," began Nevil Pardoe. "The enterprising devil has agreed to cure me for the sake of an advertisement."

"Oh! How long?"

"Ten days now. Upon honour I feel a little better already."

"Where is he to be found?" demanded my master suddenly.

A roar of laughter drowned the reply. But Sir William looked annoyed. "It's not that I want to live," he explained in tones of anger. "I know I'm doomed, but Cavanagh stands to lose two thousand pounds—if I predecease Pardoe, and as he is only a poor devil of an artist—I'd like to improve his chances!"

"Quite so," sneered Sir Charles. "We all know your affection for Cavanagh. But my dear Dagmar, fair play is a jewel you know. You must kill or cure yourself off your own bat, unless you choose to pair with Pardoe and adopt his treatment altogether. Those are the rules."

"You need not remind me," said my master drily. "By the way, Husband, what was the result of your last examination?"

"Two pounds short of my former weight, but the hole in my remaining lung has not sensibly increased. Jackson gives me solid assurance of at least twelve months."

"Lucky devil!" sighed Mr. Cavanagh. "I'm booked in half the time, though I might drag on for a year or two if I were to try Egypt!"

"Has your limit been changed since our last meeting, Fulton," asked Mr. Pardoe.

"Only by effluxion of the intervening time. I'll feed the worms in just under ten months, unless a cab runs over me, or some other accident occurs."

Sir William raised his wineglass. "Gentlemen," said he, "I drink to the Tubercle Bacillus!"

"Our master!" chorused the others, and every glass was drained.

I quickly refilled all but Sir William's, wondering the while whether I had fallen among an assembly of ghouls, or if I was not the victim of some ghastly joke. The *pièce de résistance* of the dinner was a dressed calf's head, which Sir William Dagmar carved. Not one of his guests began to eat until all were helped. But when that was done, my master suddenly ordered me to leave the room. Butts regarded me enquiringly as I came out. "Spoke some foreign lingo, didn't they?" he asked.

I nodded.

"They allers do," he went on. "Why, I don't know, for the life o' me. A lot of death's heads I call them."

"They look like consumptives," I suggested.

"Like as not they hare!" he returned. "Look at this muss, Brown! What do you make of it?"

He held up a huge bowl of cream into which a hundred different species of nuts had been grated. "This is what they take for sweets," he said with a shiver. "It tastes 'orrible!"

"Perhaps it is medicine."

"May be. I spose you didn't make out hanything they said, Brown?"

"They spoke in French, Butts," I replied.

He shrugged his shoulders, and we waited for the bell. When it rang I took in the bowl of nut cream.

"Do you understand French, Brown?" demanded my master as soon as the door closed behind me.

"Not a word, sir."

"Very good. Serve the sweets, please."

A murmur of approval went round the table. The gentlemen ate their cream in silence, and washed it down with champagne. I refilled their glasses with the dexterity of an expert waiter, and I was about to resume my old place behind my master's chair, when he fixed me with his eyes, and addressed me suddenly in French. "Brown!" cried he, "leave the room this instant!"

I halted and looked at him with a stupid air. "Beg pardon, sir. Did you speak to me, sir?"

He smiled and answered in English. "Yes, Brown, fill my glass please. I forgot that you do not understand French!"

"You should have tested the fellow beforehand," said Sir Charles Venner in French. "The closer you approach your tomb, Dagmar, the more careless you become!"

"What does it matter," said my master wearily. "Pardoe, kindly present your report!"

Mr. Pardoe got slowly to his feet, and I marvelled to see for the first time, his lean ungainly frame. A bag of skin and bone it was, no more. A frightful fit of coughing preluded his speech. When he had recovered, he put his right foot on a chair, and leaning on his bony knee, began as follows:—

"Gentlemen, this is our seventeenth monthly gathering since the initiation of our order, and we are all, seven of us, still above ground, although we were all condemned as incurable before we first foregathered. During the period I have indicated not one of us has flinched from his bargain, and as your latest secretary, gentlemen, I am pleased to announce that I have duly and regularly received from each member the weekly contribution fixed by our rules. The amount at present standing to my credit in trust for the order is £7,000." He took a small pass-book from his pocket, and handed it to his nearest neighbour, who glanced at its contents and passed it up the table to Sir William. "You will find in that book, gentlemen, a cheque for the amount named marked 'good' by the Bank. I have the honor now to tender you my resignation. Mr. Cavanagh should, I believe, be my successor."

He sat down again, coughing terribly.

Sir William nodded. "It is your turn, Cavanagh," he said quietly. "You will hold office for the current month."

"Very well," replied Mr. Cavanagh, tugging fiercely at his moustache as he spoke. "You fellows can forward your subs, direct to my studio, without waiting for notices. I never write letters."

Sir William arose, holding the cheque above his head. "Whose shall it be this time, friends?" he demanded. "Remember that I have won three times running. Will any give me odds?"

"I," cried Dr. Fulton sharply. "I'll lay you seven to one in hundreds, Dagmar, that you do not win to-night."

"Done! Come, gentlemen."

They trooped out of the room, and I, ablaze with curiosity, made haste to follow them, carrying a silver tray of coffee and liqueurs with which Butts supplied me.

I found them standing around the larger card-table, watching, in perfect silence, Mr. Nevil Pardoe shaking an iron dice-box. Upon the middle of the cloth lay the cheque for £7,000 face upwards, which Mr. Pardoe had given to Sir William. No one heeded me, so I put down the tray and watched them. Presently Mr. Pardoe scattered the dice upon the cloth.

"Five," said Mr. Cavanagh, picking up the dice. "Your turn, Sir Charles."

Sir Charles took up the box, scarcely rattled it, and threw.

"Six," said Mr. Cavanagh. "Dr. Fulton."

The doctor threw eleven; Mr. Husband five; Mr. Humphreys thirteen, and Mr. Cavanagh sixteen.

When the latter's fortune was declared, Dr. Fulton rubbed his hands together. "He! he! he! beat that, Dagmar!" he chuckled.

Sir William took up the box for half a minute, and scattered the pieces without looking at the board.

"Seventeen!" said Mr. Cavanagh in a stifled voice. The poor young man's face was a ghastly sight to witness. He had evidently made sure of winning, and the snatching of the cup from his lips had cost him a month of his fast dwindling life, or his looks belied him. He sank into a chair and began to cough so violently that a bloody foam soon stained the handkerchief he held before his mouth.

Sir William, with a curiously blank smile, took up the cheque and slipped it into his pocket. "I'll trouble you for seven hundred pounds at your leisure, Fulton," he said quietly.

"I'll post it," snapped the doctor. "May the furies seize your luck! That is the fourth time in succession you have fleeced us!"

The others shrugged their shoulders, and sought chairs, which they drew about the board. I served them immediately with coffee. A moment later, each had a pile of bank-notes and gold before him, and at the centre of the table, in a little cup-like depression, lay a heap of sovereigns. The game was draw poker. It was a strange experience for me to watch them. All seven seemed gamblers born. All had death in their faces, and were living only by the grace of their disease. All were men of uncommon intellect. They played with a rigid affectation of indifference, that poorly concealed their underlying eagerness. They only spoke to bet, and the stakes ran high. From the first Sir William Dagmar won. His luck was marvellous. Standing as I did behind his chair, I could see his cards and his opponents' faces. Twice running, four queens were dealt him. Each time he won a considerable sum, and each time six pair of wolfish eyes detested his good fortune. Twice again he drew for a flush, and made it. On the latter occasion, two of his opponents held full hands—Sir Charles Venner and Mr. Cavanagh. The others passed out, but Venner and Cavanagh bet to the limit, a hundred pounds. Sir William called them, and with his customary blandness, scooped the pool. They arose, with muttered curses, to their feet, and became spectators. Half an hour later the game broke up. Sir William had despoiled the last of his guests, and his pockets simply bulged with money.

"It is an omen!" he declared. "I now believe that I shall be the first to go! Fate is fond of such little ironies! Brown," he added in English. "Help these gentlemen to don their cloaks. My friends, good-night."

They replied with the curtest of nods, and I attended them from the house.

While I was undressing my master I racked my brains to try to discern a means of turning to my own advantage what I had seen and heard that night. Sir William seemed worn out, and he got into bed immediately. But as I was about to extinguish the gas, he called me to him. "Well, Brown," said he, "what do you think of my luck?"

"Wonderful, sir!" I replied, "simply wonderful."

He nodded, and a sneer curled his lips. "In this life, Brown," he muttered, "the things we neither need nor desire are oftenest showered upon us. Be good enough to count my winnings."

I obeyed, eyeing him covertly the while. But he had turned his back, and appeared to pay me no heed.

"Seven thousand six hundred and thirteen pounds," I announced at last.

He glanced round at me, a smile upon his face. "I am glad to see that you are an honest man, Brown," he said quietly. "That will do—you may go."

I had been bitterly tempted, but, well he had turned his back upon me. Charmed with the result of my astuteness, I left the room and sought my own. There I occupied myself for a few minutes with my make-up box, and when quite satisfied with my appearance, I tip-toed down stairs to the pantry.

Butts was seated before a dainty meal, and in the act of opening a bottle of champagne.

"Butts!" said I, "when did I give you permission to drink my champagne?"

He sprang to his feet uttering a cry of terror, and the bottle toppled over the table.

"Sir William!" he gasped, "Oh, sir; oh, sir!"

"Look at me!" I commanded.

His eyes almost bulged out of his head. "Is there anything in my appearance?" I demanded, "which might lead you to suppose that I am the sort of man to allow my servants such indulgence."

"Oh, sir. Please forgive me, sir!" he mumbled, shaking like a leaf. "I—I——"

"Dishonest in one thing, then in another," I interrupted sternly. "How much did you steal in providing to-night's dinner? Tell me the truth, or I shall send for the police!"

"Not a penny sir—so—help me! The wine man gave me two pounds commission on the order, that is all, sir—so help me!"

"Hand it over to me at once, and let this be a lesson to you!" I commanded.

Butts, trembling, placed two sovereigns in my outstretched palm.

"Was Brown a partner in your rascality?" I demanded.

"No—no, sir," he stammered. "Oh! oh! please forgive me, sir. I'll never do it again, sir—so help me!" The fellow actually fell on his knees before me, and tears of entreaty rolled down his cheeks.

"I'll forgive you this once!" I returned, and swinging on my heel, I left the pantry.

Ten minutes later Butts poured into my ears a wild tale of how Sir William Dagmar had caught him opening a bottle of champagne, and of the row that they had had. But he told me nothing about the two sovereigns reposing that instant in my pocket.

I went to sleep that night perfectly self-satisfied, and so reconciled with my position as Sir William Dagmar's valet, that I would not have changed places with Dan Leno himself. I had formed a fine plan to enrich myself, and I determined to abandon the stage for ever.

II

THE FOUNDATION OF A FORTUNE

The next month passed very quietly. I got used to Sir William and his ways, and so assiduously attended him that I had the satisfaction to perceive that my services were gradually becoming indispensable to his comfort. I studied him so closely that before long I was able almost to read his thoughts, certainly to anticipate his wishes. I waited upon him like a shadow, as silently, as faithfully. His life was for the most part of fixed habit. At nine o'clock he arose and breakfasted. He then repaired to his library where he read or wrote until noon. I found that he was engaged in compiling a compendium of philosophy, one volume of which had already been published and which had procured for him a great measure of literary fame. His heart was wrapped up in his work. It had more charms to him than the love of woman to an abandoned rake, or dice to a gambler. Once seated there before his manuscript he permitted nothing to interrupt him, except noise—at which he raged like a madman. I have seen him bend murderous glances on Butts—entering by chance with some persistent visitor's pasteboard. I, however, came and went as I pleased with his medicines, which I obliged him to take at the proper hours. For me he had always a smile, impatient truly, but a smile; for I wore shoes of felt, and from careful practice my voice became more softly modulated every day. At noon Sir William went out for a walk in the park, and for lunch at his restaurant. He returned at three and worked steadily until seven, when I dressed him for dinner, for which he also went abroad. From ten o'clock until midnight he worked again, when I put him to bed. Such was our daily round for six days in every week. On the seventh Sir William arose an hour earlier than usual, and immediately after breakfast he left the house and seldom returned until past midnight. What he did or where he went on those occasions I could not by any means discover, for Butts was as ignorant as I, and I dared not ask our master. I determined that one day in the near future I would follow him, but I could not do so immediately, because of Butts. Visitors came to the house at times, but he seldom received any, and if he saw his friends at all it must have been during meals. I directed my leisure hours to the perfection of the plan I had formed for my own aggrandisement. In that behalf I

prosecuted diligent inquiries concerning the six gentlemen who were my master's monthly guests. I could learn very little of them it is true, try how I would, and nothing at all of the curious link of agreement which I knew bound them together. But I found that they were all men of private fortune and of great esteem in the world of learning; also that each of them, like my master, was passionately devoted to a particular intellectual hobby horse. Sir Charles Venner, it seemed, had already spent ten years of research in extending the acquaintance of science with the functions of the thyroid gland. Dr. Fulton's ambition was to discover some great destructive to the bacillus of bubonic plague, yet otherwise harmless to the human system. Mr. Humphreys was engaged upon a propagandist mission to teach the masses the blessings of what he called "Purer Socialism." Mr. Cavanagh painted riddles of pictures for the Academy, which his brother Academicians wished, without daring, to reject. Mr. Nevil Pardoe wrote problem plays, and Mr. Husband was a naval expert. Like my master, all were confirmed bachelors who had acquired a reputation for misogyny because they remorselessly eschewed society. Earnest workers and infernal idiots! So I came to regard them the more I heard of them. Indeed, who but a fool would prefer to waste his life in barren study, when he might squire instead such exquisitely beautiful dames as I saw and coveted every time I wandered down Piccadilly or the Row?

The secret of my master's monthly entertainments cost me many an unquiet night of puzzled thought and anxious contemplation. I tried to believe that he and his six fellow students had simply agreed to assemble periodically at Sir William Dagmar's house in order to enjoy a quiet gamble as a recreation from their ordinary and persistent labours, and also to gratify a morbid desire of marking the ravages which their common disease had made in each other since their last meeting. Some instinct, however, forbade me to rest satisfied with an explanation so simple. Why, I asked myself, should they always converse in French, if they had nothing better worthy of concealing? Why, again, should they subscribe weekly to a common fund, the combined fruits of which evidently passed into one man's keeping at the dictation of the dice? That seemed a curious thing, and it was a circumstance all the more puzzling to account for, since they gambled at cards for high stakes as well. Was it just possible that the winner of the cheque was bound, by rule, to apply the money to some esoteric purpose? I felt inclined to suspect it was! But what then? I watched Sir William, the last winner of the cheque, as a cat might a mouse for three weeks—but I discovered nothing. I censored his correspondence with a like result. Every Monday morning he gave me a letter to post to Mr. Cavanagh. I opened those over a bowl of steam, but each only contained a crossed and unnegotiable cheque for £250, with never a line of explanation. As for the rest of his post budget, he received many letters, but he answered none, and his correspondents seemed to be for the most part beggars. The mystery irritated me so much that it began to trouble my sleep. Butts also annoyed me. He developed such a fancy for my company that I was obliged to lock my door whenever I wished to be alone; and I frequently wished to be alone, for my great plan required that I should be able to imitate at will Sir William Dagmar's every look and gesture, his every tone and trick of speech. I foresaw that I should have to get rid of Butts. He was a naturally inquisitive, interfering fellow. But I reflected that when I had got rid of him, it would be necessary for me to perform his duties as well as my own, if I wished to have a clear field for my designs. If Sir William engaged another footman, I should have my work to do all over again. With that end in view, I persuaded Butts to instruct me in the business of ordering and providing the monthly dinners, cleaning silver, and so forth. Pride is not one of my weaknesses, as I have remarked before. I felt able to assume his post in a very few days, just two days indeed before the next monthly dinner was due. That very night I dressed myself up to resemble my master, and marched stealthily downstairs into the pantry about the hour when I knew, from experience, that Butts enjoyed a first night-cap of port wine. There he stood, a bottle before him, glass in hand.

"Butts!" said I, without preliminary, "I was wrong to forgive you for stealing my wine. But I wished to give you a chance—No, don't speak to me, Butts. You have had your chance and wasted it. If you are not out of my house before breakfast hour to-morrow, I shall give you in charge of the police. If, however, you make the least noise in taking your boxes downstairs, I shall prosecute you in any case. Be careful, therefore! Good night, Butts!"

I left him standing like a frozen image, staring after me. Half an hour later he came to my room and poured the whole story into my sympathetic ears. He was almost drunk, and bitterly incensed with my master, also he was terribly afraid of the police. I sincerely commiserated with him, and earned his undying gratitude by forcing into his hand one of the sovereigns of which I had previously despoiled him, and which I had had no occasion to spend, for Butts had put me in the way of replenishing my wardrobe on the credit system. I felt truly sorry for Butts, but he had to go. He stood in my way. My philosophy is embraced in the maxim, "First person paramount." I may be thought inhuman by some of the people who read these memoirs, but I dare swear that none will consider me a fool. The surest way to succeed in life is to kick down as soon as may be the ladders by which one climbs. To do otherwise is to court disaster, for envy is the most powerful passion of the soul, and envy is inevitably excited by contemplation of the successes of our equals or inferiors.

When I had half dressed Sir William on the following morning, I broke my fixed habit of silence.

"If you please, sir," I said very softly, "I have something to inform you which I fancy you should know."

My master looked as much surprised as if he had previously considered me to be a dummy.

"What is it?" he curtly demanded.

"Butts left this morning, sir, soon after daylight, in order to catch a train to the West. His closest living relative is dying, I believe; I persuaded him not to trouble you last night by asking your permission."

"What a cursed nuisance!" cried Sir William with a frown. "I expect guests to dinner here tomorrow night. When will Butts return?"

"I don't think he will come back, sir, he has expectations of inheriting a little fortune; he has, however, given me minute instructions regarding the dinner, and if you will be good enough to confide the matter to my hands, I think I can promise that you'll not be disappointed!"

"You are an invaluable fellow, Brown," said my master in tones of great relief. "Certainly, take charge of everything. I know that I can trust you."

"Thank you, sir," I said demurely. "Will your guests be the same as last time, sir?"

"Yes!" He shrugged his shoulders and slipped his arms into the coat I held out for him.

"And will they be placed at table as before, sir?"

"Exactly. But what about my breakfast this morning, Brown?"

"It will be ready for you in five minutes, sir."

I slipped out of the room and hurried down stairs. I had not studied my master's tastes for nothing. The breakfast I had prepared comprised every dainty that he cared about, and the look of surprise he cast about the table sufficiently rewarded my forethought.

"Why, Brown," said he, as he sat down, "you are a perfect treasure. If Butts does not return I shall feel inclined to double your duties and your pay. Some years ago I had a valet who managed the whole house without assistance."

"I could do that," I assured him quietly. "There is really only work here for one man, sir. Pardon me for saying it, sir, but half my time so far has hung upon my hands, and I detest being idle, sir."

"Well, well, we shall see," he replied. I felt that I had gained my point and I said no more.

I made four pounds in spot cash by way of commission in ordering the dinner. It was really very easy. The restaurateurs were so anxious indeed to secure my custom that I might have made more, but I am not a greedy man, and four sovereigns seemed a lot to me just then.

The dinner passed off much as the first had done. Similar grisly jokes were interchanged in the French tongue, and many bets were concluded between Sir William and his guests. They toasted the tubercle bacillus again, and after I had served the nut cream Mr. Cavanagh handed a cheque for £7,000 to Sir William and then resigned his office in favour of Dr. Fulton, just as Mr. Pardoe had done upon the former occasion. I noticed that Mr. Pardoe looked very ill, frightfully ill, in fact, and his cough was horrible to hear. It is true that all looked worse than they had before, but Mr. Pardoe had outstripped the others, and he was mercilessly rallied on his appearance. The most consequential wager was arranged between Mr. Humphreys and Sir Charles Venner. The latter laid the former six to four in hundreds that Mr. Pardoe would die within the next month. I shall never forget Mr. Pardoe's face as he listened. Its expression was indescribably vexed and full of despair, but the others roared with laughter to see it. As for me, I confess that their laughter sickened me, and I had to slip out of the room in order to recover my nerve. Such monstrous disregard of a fellow creature's manifest anguish inspired me with dismay and something like terror. Were these people men of flesh and blood, I asked myself, or ghouls? But my curiosity was so poignant that I soon returned, and when they trooped out to the card room I followed closely at their heels.

The same formula was observed as upon the first occasion that I had witnessed. The cheque was placed upon the table and all gathered round to watch and throw the dice.

Sir Charles Venner was the first to cast. As he rattled the box he looked about him with a sort of snarling smile. "By all the laws of chance it should be my turn!" he declared. "I have never won the incubus yet!"

He threw eighteen! The others exclaimed, but Mr. Cavanagh did more. He stepped back from the throng and gritting his teeth he threw out his clenched hands with a gesture of savage abandon. "There," said I to myself, "is a man who wishes more passionately to win than the rest, but why?"

"Cavanagh, your turn," said Dr. Fulton.

The artist's face was chalk white as he took up the box. "You tremble!" cried Sir Charles in mocking tones. "You tremble!"

"Bah!" exclaimed Mr. Cavanagh, and he threw.

"Eighteen!" shouted Dr. Fulton.

Sir Charles flushed crimson, and swore beneath his breath. But Mr. Cavanagh uttered a cry of triumph that had yet in it a note of agony. I watched him attentively thenceforward, because it suddenly occurred to me that he would better repay such trouble than the others. His passions were least well controlled of any there. His was the weakest face and most ingenuous. I determined that he should be my key to the mystery I wished to solve. He was a wonderfully handsome person, small, slight, elegant, exquisite. His hair was thick and black, but his moustache and pointed beard were of rich red gold. He had large and singularly soulful eyes, whose colour changed with light from black to amber. His mouth, however, though full and beautifully shaped, betrayed a vacillating and unstable disposition. I judged him for a man to trust, to admire, to like, but not to lean upon. He waited for his turn to throw again in a fever of inquietude. His hands clenched and unclenched. His features spasmodically twitched and the tip of his nose moved up and down with alarming speed. Not any of the others was lucky enough to throw eighteen, so presently Sir Charles Venner took up the dice again. He looked perfectly indifferent, but I saw his eyes, and they were gleaming. He allowed the dice to fall one by one.

"Seven!" announced Dr. Fulton.

Sir Charles bit his lip and handed the box in silence to Mr. Cavanagh.

The latter threw eight. Dropping the box he darted forward and clawed up the cheque, with a strangled, animal-like cry. The others exchanged glances of disgust; all, that is to say, except my master. He shot a look of passionate menace at the artist and called him in a dreadful voice by name.

Mr. Cavanagh stood erect, shaking and ghastly. He seemed convulsed with shame.

"I—I—forgive me, I am not myself to-night," he muttered.

"A fine, a fine," shouted Mr. Humphreys. "He has pleaded his ill-health."

"Ay, ay," cried the others, "a fine!"

"Twenty pounds!" said Sir William Dagmar.

Mr. Cavanagh paid the money to my master without demur. Sir William gave it to Dr. Fulton, and a second later all were seated at the table.

I served them with coffee, and they began to play. My master had no luck that night—he lost about four hundred pounds. Mr. Cavanagh also lost rather heavily, and so did Dr. Fulton. The principal winners were Mr. Pardoe and Sir Charles Venner; Mr. Humphreys left off as he commenced, while Mr. Husband disgustedly declared that he had won a paltry sovereign. As before, on the first stroke of midnight the game broke up and all arose. As before, no farewell greetings were exchanged, but the guests departed after curtly nodding to their host. My master looked more wearied than I had ever seen him. He retired at once to bed, and he was half asleep before he touched the pillow with his head. But I was more than pleased thereat, for the time was ripe to prosecute the first move of my plan. As soon as he dismissed me, I hurried to my room, and in less than twenty minutes I was Sir William Dagmar to the life, save for one tiny circumstance. My master, as I have previously mentioned, possessed a fine set of teeth, but his right incisor was lacking. When I had impersonated him for Butts' benefit, that detail had not troubled me, for Butts was a dull, unobservant creature. I reflected, however, that Mr. Cavanagh might be of a different calibre, and I dared run no risks. Now every tooth in my head is false. Moreover, I was wearing at that moment my stage set, which was so peculiarly constructed that with very little bother and a screw driver I might remove any tooth I pleased. I therefore whipped out the plate from my mouth, and with the aid of a penknife, I presently abstracted my right incisor. A glance in the mirror made me tingle with triumph. I believe that had Sir William seen me at that moment he would have swooned with sheer shock at seeing so perfect a double of himself. Having provided myself with a latch-key, I stole downstairs and abstracted from the hall my master's hat and cloak. A few minutes afterwards I was flying towards Mr. Cavanagh's studio and residence at St. John's Wood, in a hansom, which I chose wisely, for the horse was a speedy brute, and he drew up at Hamilton Crescent in less than half an hour.

In answer to my vigorous tug at the bell, the door opened quickly and a servant's face appeared.

"Be good enough to ask Mr. Cavanagh to let me see him for a moment, my name is Dagmar," I said haughtily, "Sir William Dagmar," I added, for the fellow seemed to hesitate.

He admitted me forthwith. "Mr. Cavanagh has not long come in," he volunteered in sleepy tones. "He is in the studio—step this way, if you please, sir." He yawned in my face and turned about. I followed him down a spacious dimly lighted hall, furnished with almost regal magnificence in the oriental style. He opened a door at the further end, announced me in quiet tones between two yawns and immediately withdrew. Sir William Dagmar would not have put up with such a servant for five minutes. Evidently, thought I, Mr. Cavanagh is not a hard man to

please. I entered the studio and shut the door behind me; but to my astonishment, I perceived Mr. Cavanagh, seated in a deep saddle-bag chair beneath an immense arc glow lamp, fast asleep. His chin was sunk upon his chest, his arms hung at his side, and he was breathing stertorously. I glanced about the room. It was rich and commodious, but conventional. Priceless silks and satins covered the walls. Rugs and skins from all parts of the world bestrewed the polished parquet floor. A large crimson curtained easel stood upon a daïs of carven oak beside Mr. Cavanagh's chair, and in a far corner glimmered an ebony framed grand piano. Beyond a few pieces of rather fine statuary, a prodigious chesterfield, and half a dozen antique throne-shaped chairs, the place contained no other furniture of note. I had expected something out of the common rather than rich, and I felt keenly disappointed, for I had seen a dozen such studios pictured in the monthly magazines and fashionable periodicals. I marched straight up to Mr. Cavanagh and placed a heavy hand upon his shoulder. He opened his eyes and looked up at me in a dazed questioning fashion, but having grasped the situation as it was apparent to him, he sprang to his feet with a cry of consternation.

"Dagmar!" he gasped. "You—you—you!" His voice trailed off in an ascending inflection into a whisper of what I considered terrified amazement.

I pointed to the chair he had just quitted, "Sit down!" I commanded sternly.

He obeyed limply; his eyes were dilated, fixed and staring. It was plain that he stood in real fear of me. I determined grimly to discover why.

Standing before him I folded my arms, and bending my brows together I surveyed him, as I had seen Irving in some of his heavy parts confront a character he was destined by his playwright to subdue.

This for two full minutes in a silence like that of the tomb. The wretched man began to shake and shiver.

"For God's sake, Dagmar," he stammered at last. His voice was as hoarse as a raven's croak.

"Cavanagh!" said I, "what are you intending to do with the money given you by the dice to-night?"

To my astonishment he covered his face with his hands and his body began to heave with sobs. Without stirring a muscle I waited for his explanation. I divined that to be my cue. He grew calmer by degrees, and at length with a sheer muscular effort he forced himself to look at me. He shivered as he met my eyes and groaned aloud.

"Woman!" I muttered cuttingly.

"You—hard devil!" he hissed with sudden passion. He started forward, and our glances contended for a moment, but his quailed before mine.

"Answer me," I commanded.

He bit his lips until the blood appeared, and he gripped the sides of his chair with all his energy.

"Answer me," I repeated.

Of a sudden he began to cough. He coughed so violently that the convulsions racked his frame, and at length he sank back in his chair half-fainting, with half closed eyes.

I waited pitiless as fate. "Answer me," I repeated. "Must I wait for ever?"

But the fight had gone out of him. He heaved a sigh, and two salt tears trickled down his cheeks. "You know," he muttered, in a low, heartbroken wail. "You know—you know!"

"Answer me," I thundered. Sir William Dagmar might have known, you see, but I was ignorant.

"I am going to give it to her—to her," he murmured; his eyes were now quite closed and he seemed upon the verge of a collapse. This would never do!

I strode forward and shook him roughly by the shoulder.

"To whom?" I hissed.

"To Marion, Marion Le Mar." He sat up and looked dazedly around. "Oh, do what you please," he cried wildly, as he met my eyes. "What do I care—I have not long to live in any case. A few months more or less, what does it matter? And she—God help her, she needs it—needs it as well you know—you hard, inhuman devil!"

"You are mad!" I hissed. "What claim has that woman upon you?"

"The woman I love?" He sprang to his feet and faced me with just such a look as a tiger might

defend his mate. "The woman I should have married, but for the accursed laws of the society which you enticed me into joining!"

"You are a consumptive, a death's head!" I sneered. "A nice man you to marry any woman! Fool that you are, ask yourself would she have married you?"

He gave me a look of almost sublime contempt. "She loves me!" he said, and there was in his bearing a dignity so proudly self-conscious, yet compassionate, that my heart went out to the man; I began to pity him profoundly, ay, and wish to help him. I could hardly understand myself. I had never felt like that for any living creature prior to that instant. But I had work to do, pressing work, and I put my feelings resolutely aside.

"George Cavanagh," said I, "you reproach me with having bound you to a society whose laws forbid your marrying the woman you love. But it seems to me you aspire to break another of its laws in giving her this money. What of that?"

"Fear nothing," he replied in tones of ice. "I shall pay the penalty. When next the society foregathers at your house, Fulton will announce your numbers lessened by one death."

In spite of myself I started. Aha! thought I—I grow hot upon the track.

"You will kill yourself?" I demanded.

He bowed his head, and sat down again. He had once more fallen to trembling. A curious man this, a mixture of strength and weakness. He was past redemption, wedded to the grave by his disease, and yet he shivered at the thought of death. And yet again, he could deliberately resolve to shorten his life.

I frowned down at him. "Cavanagh," said I, "I wish you to be good enough to repeat to me, word for word, the rule you dare to dream of breaking."

"Useless!" he retorted. "I have well considered it. For God's sake leave me, Dagmar, I am done and desperate. I believe you mean me well, but you are killing me."

I saw indeed that he was desperate, and straight away I changed my tactics.

"George," I murmured in a soft and winning voice, "I have come here to-night to save you if I can, not to break you. Listen to me—it has been well said that no rule or law was ever yet devised by human ingenuity which might not be evaded by a criminal with brains enough. You seek to be a criminal. Well, well!" I nodded my head mysteriously. "It is a pity—but I like you, boy—I don't want you to die just yet. There may be a way out, in spite of all. Now—trust me and obey me."

A curious pang altogether strange to my experience shot through my breast, as I watched the glow of hope that flashed into the poor fellow's eyes, and the colour flame into his ashen cheeks.

"Dagmar!" he gasped, "Dagmar!" and he stretched out his shaking hands as a child might do.

"Repeat it word for word!" I commanded. "Come, calm yourself—that is better; now!"

He could hardly articulate at first, but he grew calmer as he proceeded.

"Whosoever shall win!" he began, "shall win the proceeds of one completed month's joint contributions, shall—during—the succeeding month, apply the gold so gifted him by hazard of the dice unto the—the—purpose that—that is—is provided for by rule three. Should he, on the contrary, apply it—to—to—Ah! you know, Dagmar, you know."

"Ay!" said I, "I know what follows—it spells suicide in brief. But, my dear George—there is hope for you in rule three."

"Impossible!" he gasped. "Impossible!"

I smiled. "There is no such word in my vocabulary," I answered firmly. "Now, George, give me all your mind, every atom of your attention, and I shall show you a path from your dilemma—an honourable expedient. Repeat rule three!"

He knitted his brows together, and a curiously strained introspective look came into his eyes.

"You are trying me!" he muttered. "Dagmar—if you dared——"

"Fool!" I interrupted hoarsely—for my suspense was painfully intense. "What object could I serve? Do as I bid you! Do as I bid you!" I pressed his hands more tightly, and with all my strength I strove to subordinate his will to mine. I succeeded.

"I'll trust you!" he muttered in a tense trembling whisper. "I'll trust you, Dagmar. God forgive you if you play me false!"

There was something so infectious in his emotion that I felt myself tremble too, and involuntarily I followed the terrified suspicious glances that he darted about the room.

"Amen!" I cried. "Now Cavanagh—"

But he uttered an exclamation. "Oh! You are hurting me!" he cried.

In my excitement I had forgotten the man's womanish physique, and I had cruelly crushed his hands. Upon such trifling incidents does an ironical malicious fate love to hang tremendous issues! I do not remember if I have previously mentioned the fact that the thumb of Sir William Dagmar's right hand lacks a joint. But such is the case. He had lost it through a gunshot when a lad. Now this circumstance constituted the one flaw in my disguise, for my hands are perfect. In the earlier part of the interview I had been careful to conceal them from view, but startled by Cavanagh's cry of pain and words of reproach I did an unpardonably foolish thing. I permitted myself, for one second, to be victimized by a human impulse. Forgetting everything except that I had hurt him and was sorry, I opened my hands—and looked down at his delicate crumpled fingers from which my brutal grasp had driven all the blood. On the instant I realized my own fatuity and attempted to repair my error. It was, however, too late.

Mr. Cavanagh staggered back a pace. At first he looked dazed, almost stunned, but his face turned livid as I watched it and his eyes filled with flame. They swept over me with glances that scorched, that wished intemperately to harm, to avenge—to kill! Finally they met my eyes, and for a long moment we gazed into each other's souls. His was full of rage, despair and terror—mine of savage self-contempt and baffled hope, and fiery but impotent regret.

"Who are you?" he hissed. "Curse you—who are you?"

Desperate diseases require desperate remedies. Already there floated before my eyes visions of police, of handcuffs, courthouses and gaols. I saw myself a prisoner serving sentence for criminal impersonation. A shudder of horror shot through my frame. Then came a blessed inspiration. "Mr. Cavanagh belongs to a society—" cried my thoughts—"which must have a criminal foundation, since its laws dare impose such a penalty as suicide for their infraction." I set my teeth together with a grim snap and hoarsely retorted to his question. "You wish to know who I am, sir. Well, I shall answer you in part. I am a detective from Scotland Yard!"

The effect of my announcement was completely terrible.

Mr. Cavanagh threw up his hands, and with a deep groaning gasp sank limp and insensible to the floor. His face was so ghastly that I thought him dead. I sprang to his side, and kneeling down pressed my ear to his breast. I could not hear his heart beat. With a moan of agony I stood erect. I was shaking like a man in an ague—and for the first time in my life fear took hold of me, sharp, senseless fear. My mastering wish was to escape quickly and without being seen. Darting to the door, I waited but to open it without sound, and then hurried through the hall, thanking Providence in my heart that I still wore my felt-soled shoes. No one hindered, no one saw me. In another second I was out of the house, and seated in my waiting hansom.

"Marble Arch!" I muttered to the driver, "and quickly man, quickly, if you wish to earn a double fare!"

When I reached the Marble Arch I was still panic-stricken and incapable of coherent thought. I do not wish it to be supposed that I am in any sense a craven. But this was the first great crisis of my career, and, like certain brave soldiers I have read of who had fled from the field during their first battle at the first fire, I was governed by an overwhelming blind impulse impossible to withstand immediately. I believe now that my excited imagination convinced me that I stood in peril of being caught and hanged for murder. At any rate, it seemed terribly necessary to hide myself, and adopt every conceivable expedient to shake all possible pursuers off my trail. Running down Oxford Street, I hailed the first cab I met and drove to London Bridge. There I took another hansom and doubled back to Piccadilly Circus. A third took me to Tottenham Court Road. A clock chimed two as I stepped upon the footpath. I was a good deal calmer then, although still in a wreck of jangling nerves. But I found that I could both control my thoughts and think. I set off at once at a brisk walk towards Holborn, growing more tranquil at every step. I racked my brain for a plan of action. I felt that I must get out of England at once and start life anew in some foreign land. Fear, you see, was still my tyrant. But how to effect my purpose? I had only three pounds in the world, for the cabs had run away with a sovereign. Bitterly I cursed my folly and the panic which had prevented me from rifling Mr. Cavanagh's pockets. They would have yielded me a golden harvest I doubted not! Of a sudden, as I strode along, I caught sight of my reflection in a tailor's window. I stopped short, shocked—horrified. I was still Sir William Dagmar to the life! For two minutes I stood there paralyzed in body and mind, then came a second inspiration. I swung on my heel and glanced about me. The street was almost deserted, but a belated hansom was approaching. I hailed the driver. "200 Harley Street," I cried and sprang inside. I had given the fellow Sir Charles Venner's address. In a very few minutes I was ringing at Sir Charles Venner's bell. After a long wait and three successive summons, the physician himself attired in an eiderdown dressing gown and slippers opened the door.

"What, Dagmar!" he cried, in great astonishment. "Come in. Whatever is the matter?"

"A call of private urgency!" I replied. "The fact is, Venner, you can do me a favour, if you will. A very dear friend of mine must get away from England before morning on a matter of life and death, and he needs more money in cash than I have by me in the house. If you'll be so good as to

let me have three hundred pounds immediately, I shall post you a cheque within the next hour."

We were standing confronting each other in the hall beneath a low turned swinging gas jet. He raised his eyebrows and shrugged his shoulders.

"Will three hundred do?" he asked.

"Yes, thank you!"

"Then excuse me for a moment."

I waited in breathless suspense, but he returned almost immediately, carrying a bag of gold and notes from which he counted three hundred pounds into my hand—you may be sure—into my left hand. I kept my right behind me.

I curtly thanked him, begged him to excuse me, and hastily withdrew. But he stood at the door and watched me enter the cab.

I was therefore obliged to give the cabby Sir William Dagmar's address. "Back to Curzon Street!" I called out. As soon as we had turned the first corner, however, I redirected the driver to Victoria Station, and during the journey I set to work to alter my appearance as much as lay in my power. I tore off my false eyebrows, and with my kerchief I vigorously rubbed the paint from my cheeks and brow. A mirror set in an angle of the hansom showed me, by the light of a match, a blotchy nondescript face that nevertheless could not be mistaken for my master's. Better satisfied, I began to reflect on my position, and to my intense gratification I found that I was no longer the slave of fear. Arrived at the station, I discharged the cab and made inquiries for the trains to the south. I found that I should have to wait a great while. I therefore selected a dark corner and gave myself up to thought. In ten minutes I was wondering what on earth I had ever been afraid of—and calling myself moreover by very nasty names. Even if Mr. Cavanagh were dead, and I began to doubt if my perturbed examination of his body had given me the truth, who could accuse me of his death? Again, if he lived, he would infallibly, on his recovery, still believe me a detective. He had not remotely guessed at my identity. Oh! the fool I had been! But what next? Were I to fly to France, I should give myself away! My master would search my room and discover my make-up box and various disguises. Were I to stay it would probably never enter his mind to suspect me! Ai! Ai! With patience, boldness, and a little luck, I might even yet convert the defeat I had sustained that night into a triumph. I felt the blood bound in my veins. Waiting for no more I sprang to my feet and hurried from the station. Ten minutes later I noiselessly inserted my latch-key into Sir William Dagmar's door, and gently as any burglar stepped into the house. The place was profoundly still. I hung up my master's coat and hat in the hall and crept upstairs. At Sir William's bedroom door I stopped, and stooping pressed my ear to the key-hole. I distinctly heard him breathing. He was a heavy sleeper, and his respirations were deep and somewhat laboured. I passed on with a smile of purest joy. Upon my dressing table stood my make-up box and a profusion of wigs, beards and moustaches. The sight gave me pause. "It is wise to be bold!" I thought, "but not rash. Here is danger. When Mr. Cavanagh recovers and informs Sir William of to-night's happenings—Ah!—and when, moreover, Sir Charles Venner discovers that he has been swindled! What then? It is unlikely, but at the same time just possible that my master's thoughts may turn to me!"

I caught up the wigs and stuffed them into the box which I locked. Where to hide it? Not in my room, nor in the pantry! nor in any place under my control! Search would reveal it there—infallibly. I must then dispose it in some place not likely to be searched. Where then? For a third time in one evening I was suddenly inspired. Seizing the box, I stole downstairs into my master's private study and, using the utmost caution, I bestowed it behind some mounds of books that were covered with many summers' dust. Heaving a deep sigh of relief and satisfaction I returned to my little chamber and leisurely undressed. Three o'clock chimed as I pulled off my boots. I then removed the last traces of my disguise with a lavish application of soap and water, and last of all I screwed back into its plate the tooth I had removed from my false set earlier in the evening in order more perfectly to resemble my master. After that I got into bed. I felt secure and almost happy—was I not a capitalist? Under my pillow reposed three hundred pounds, and never in my life until then had I possessed more than a paltry fraction of that sum. I rejoiced in determining to bank it on the morrow, and I sleepily assured myself that I would make it the seed of a great fortune. I should have been quite happy, save for one thing. I was already beginning to repent the magnanimity or cowardice which had prevented me from asking Sir William Venner for six hundred pounds instead of three. I felt sure he would have given me six as readily as three, and it was a great opportunity wasted. Wasted! It is terribly sad to look back upon wasted opportunities; a heartrending thing indeed. Even now I recall that circumstance with melancholy. I dreamed of death and murders and shadowy unutterable horrors. Soon after dawn I awoke, bathed in perspiration, and shivering in every limb. There was a sound of rushing waters in my ears, and I retained a shuddersome impression of a dark brooding figure bending over me. With a gasp of terror I plunged my hand beneath my pillow, but my three hundred pounds were safe. The delight of that discovery quickly dispelled the phantoms of my tired fancies, and I arose, with a glad heart, to begin the work of the day, by performing the work that I should have done on the previous night—the clearing up from the dinner party.

III

THE KINGSMERE HOSPITAL FOR CONSUMPTIVES

I prepared a particularly tasty breakfast that morning for my master, and I took special pains to please him as I assisted him to dress. He was not a man given to paying compliments, but when he entered the dining-room, and was unable to discover a single trace of last night's feast, he did not dissemble his surprise.

"You have re-established order very quickly—here at all events," he remarked, "Butts always took a day or two to clear up."

"That is not my way," I softly replied. "I could not sleep until I had cleared up everything. If you take the trouble to visit my pantry, sir, I will challenge you to find a stain on floor or wall, or a single speck on plate or cutlery."

"You appear to know your business," he conceded.

"From A to Z, sir," I answered. "Let me persuade you to try this omelette, Sir William. I cooked it myself."

A talent for making omelettes is one of the few accomplishments I had acquired from my father.

My master nodded, and helped himself to a dainty little roll. He tasted it, and actually smacked his lips.

"Excellent!" he observed. "Brown, I hope that Butts will not return, for his own sake. I wish you to take charge of my household henceforth from to-day. Your salary will be eight pounds a month."

"Thank you, sir," I murmured gratefully. "I shall do my best to please you, sir."

The street bell rang as I spoke. I slipped out, and opened the front door. Mr. George Cavanagh waited upon the steps, and on either side of him stood Sir Charles Venner and Dr. Fulton.

Well was it then that over my features I can exercise an admirable control, for at sight of that trio my heart felt like lead, and I shivered in my shoes.

"We must see Sir William Dagmar at once!" said Mr. Cavanagh. "Our business is of the utmost importance."

I bowed and invited him to enter. "Sir William is at breakfast, gentlemen," I muttered as I closed the door. "I shall warn him of your presence at once. In the meanwhile will you kindly step into this ante-room."

"No!" replied Sir Charles. "We shall go directly to him. Don't be alarmed, Brown, we are sufficiently intimate with Sir William to take such a liberty."

I shrugged my shoulders, and deferentially preceded them. Their faces were paste coloured and preternaturally solemn. I was, however, glad to see Mr. Cavanagh; I liked him, and it was a relief to be sure that he was still alive.

Tapping softly at the dining-room door, I opened it and entered, but I had no occasion to utter a word, for the others had trooped in on my heels.

"Excuse this intrusion, Dagmar," began Sir Charles in the French tongue, "you may believe me when I tell you that nothing could have induced me so to invade you except necessity."

My master leaned back in his chair, his mouth agape with astonishment. "Necessity!" he repeated. "What the deuce has happened?"

"Nothing less than a calamity. But first dismiss your servant—we must run no risks, the matter is too serious."

"Brown," said my master in English, "kindly leave the room. I shall ring when I require you."

I bowed and obeyed. I would have cheerfully given my three hundred pounds for an opportunity of listening unseen to their conversation. But my fate was in the balance, and I dared not play the spy. Making a virtue of necessity I retired to the pantry, and tried to eat. But in truth I had no appetite. My nerves were on the jump. I lighted a cigarette, and consumed it in half a dozen puffs. I chewed another to pulp, but smoked the third. The sixth restored me to calm. I felt

myself again, and began to polish the glassware. I postured my indifference to myself and experienced an itch to whistle, just to show myself how brave I was. Needless to say, however, I suppressed the inclination. An hour passed so, and then the library bell smartly tingled. So they had left the dining-room. I hurried upstairs, smoothing my expression as I ran. My master met me at the door—a letter in his hand. "I wish you to go out at once, and post this at the nearest post-office—not in a letter box," he commanded. "It is an important missive."

"Certainly, sir!" I replied, and took the letter. He looked at me very keenly. His face was expressionless, but it bore traces of recent agitation. "I shall hurry back," I said.

"Not in a letter box!" he repeated. "Remember, Brown."

I bowed deeply and departed. In half a minute I was out of the house, but not until I had turned the corner did I so much as glance at the "important missive." It was directed to Mr. John Brown, Box 89, G.P.O. The envelope was of thin foreign parchment. I held it up to the sun and smiled. It contained a single sheet of blank paper. My message then was a ruse to withdraw me from the house while they searched my room. I felt so confident, however, that they would never discover my make-up box, that I smiled again, and to save myself the bother of walking, I took a cab. After posting the letter, I entered the first bank I came to, and requested the manager to allow me to make a deposit. He wished a reference, and I was bold enough to refer him to my master. I then paid into the credit of Agar Hume £290, and left the office. Two minutes later, I returned and paid in nine pounds. I thus procured two deposit slips. The one for £290 I tore in very small pieces, which I scattered far and wide; I was not afraid that the bank would swindle me. But the other I treasured carefully. I walked home very leisurely, and I found my master alone in his study. He was pacing the floor, with an abstracted air, his hands clasped tightly behind his back.

"I posted the letter, sir!" I announced.

He stopped in his walk and frowningly regarded me. "Very good, Brown," he replied. "By the way, my man, I want you to be very careful in admitting visitors here again. I don't refer to the three gentlemen who came this morning, they are friends of mine. But strangers."

"Yes, sir."

"Above all, Brown, permit no one, stranger or otherwise, to question you concerning me. If any one attempts to do such a thing, inform me at once!"

"Certainly, sir."

"That will do, you may go."

"I beg your pardon, sir," I muttered hesitatingly, "I hope you will forgive me, sir, but the fact is I have ventured to take a liberty with you this morning, sir."

"Ah!" He started and looked at me with piercing eyes.

"It's this way, sir," I said quickly, "I'm a saving man, sir, and I've always wished to have an account at a real bank, sir, not a post-office. Well, sir, I went into a bank while I was out just now, but they would not let me open an account without a reference. So—so I dared to give them your name, sir. I hope you'll excuse me, sir."

His eyes bored through me like a pair of gimlets. "How much money have you saved?" he demanded.

"Nine pounds, sir. Here is the ticket!" I eagerly handed him the slip.

He glanced at it, and his face cleared immediately.

"That is all right, Brown!" he said, smiling slightly. "If they apply to me, I shall try to satisfy them that they have secured a worthy client. Good luck to you, my man, I am glad to know you are thrifty."

It is a curious thing how tenacious of life one's conscience is. My master looked at me so kindly, that I felt a perfect brute for having so mercilessly deceived him, and I vow that for one fateful moment I was on the point of voicing my compunction.

"You are t—too kind, sir," I began. "I—I'm afraid I—"

But he cut me short with a frown. "That will do, my man," he interrupted in harsh tones. "I am busy, and I wish to be alone."

Had he remained silent, or allowed me to proceed, it is just possible that these memories might never have had occasion to be written. As it was, I hastily backed out of the room, and my conscience yielded up its final spark in the passage.

Anxious to verify my suspicion, I proceeded to my bed-room. It appeared, at first glance, exactly as I had left it, but I am not a casual observer. The door of my wardrobe stood slightly

ajar. I had latched it. My ready made evening suit was still lying neatly folded in its drawer, but the waistcoat occupied a different position from that to which I had formerly assigned it. Finally the napped edge of my counterpane was tucked beneath the bed-tick. I had left it hanging, so as to curtain the iron rail. I noted these trifling discrepancies with all the pride of an explorer who has discovered a new territory. There is no experience more gratifying to one's vanity than to have successfully penetrated and prevised another man's intention. I began to believe myself a prodigiously clever fellow, and even yet I dare to boast with reason. I have no deep learning, indeed, my knowledge of the sciences might be scratched with a pin, but I have nevertheless not permitted the talents God has given me to rust, and there is one book with whose contents I am fairly well acquainted, the book of life.

Immediately my master had gone out to lunch, I repaired to his study, and repossessed myself of my make-up box. This I carried to my bed-room, and placed in the wardrobe. I did not, however, intend to leave it there very long. I did not anticipate another search party, it is true, but I thought it thoroughly advisable to have clean hands at home. My idea was (now that I had capital to work upon) to secure a private room somewhere in the neighbourhood, which I might use as a stronghold, and to which I might repair whenever I should desire to disguise myself. During the next few days I took frequent excursions abroad in my leisure hours, and at last I discovered exactly the place I wanted. It was on the top floor of a bachelor apartment house in Bruton Street. The chamber was small, but excellently lighted, and it had this advantage, it was disconnected by an angle of the building from its fellows; moreover its door faced the stairs, and was not overlooked by any other. On that very account, it had long been untenanted, but me it suited perfectly. After a good deal of haggling with the agent, I secured it on lease for £25 a year, and by paying six months' rent in advance, I persuaded him to dispense with references. I furnished it only with things I absolutely needed. A bed-chair, in case I might ever be obliged to sleep there, an oil stove, a thick rug for the floor, a fine three-fly-full-length mirror set upon a revolving stand, a dressing-table, and a large cabinet. I procured a locksmith to fit the door with a practically impregnable latch lock, and with the key upon my chain, I felt as proud as the most bloated land-holder in Westminster. My next move was to purchase a fresh supply of paints, wigs and various other sartorial disguises including a number of new and second-hand character costumes. I have before remarked on the fact that every tooth in my head is false. Now in all the paraphernalia of disguises, there is nothing so important as the item of teeth. Teeth give expression to both mouth and voice. A difference of one twentieth fraction of an inch in their length for instance, will alter the voice beyond hope of recognition, even to a truly practised ear, however fine its sense of perception. As for the lips, they at once become drawn out, and utterly transformed in shape. My last and most tender care, therefore, was bestowed upon my teeth. I visited a dozen different dentists, and procured a dozen sets of varying shapes and sizes, whose only point of resemblance was, that they fitted my mouth. When all was done, my bank account was depleted by a hundred and fifty pounds, but I felt that I had acquired a first-rate stock-in-trade, and I did not repent of the expenditure.

While I was busy with these arrangements, I by no means neglected my master. For a week or two after the disturbing visit paid by Sir Charles Venner, Mr. Cavanagh, and Dr. Fulton, he remained in a preoccupied and gloomy mood, and seemed unable to settle down to work. I listened in my pantry by the hour, to his footsteps restlessly pacing the floor of his library above my head. He also went out more frequently than was his custom, and remained longer away from the house. He was irritable and hard to please. However quietly I entered any room where he was, he heard and anxiously confronted me. He seemed constantly to expect an unwelcome visitor. Sometimes he swore at me for startling him, but he always apologised, and I saw that he was beginning to like me well. I longed for him to trust me, for I was burning with curiosity to know what determination his society had arrived at, regarding his daring impersonator. But that was out of the question, and I was obliged to content myself with guesses. Gradually his alarm passed off, and he resumed his literary labours as of yore. That pleased me, for I felt that his attitude might be relied upon to reflect the feelings of his fellow conspirators. I began to consider what further step I should take in my campaign to elucidate the mystery surrounding that strange brotherhood. After a great deal of reflection, I resolved to shadow Sir William on the next Sunday excursion, for I could not help suspecting that his regular absences from home on that day in each week had something to do with the secret society to which he belonged. With that end in view, on the following Saturday afternoon, I begged my master to allow me a holiday until the Monday morning, pleading by way of excuse a dear friend's sudden illness. He graciously consented, upon my promising to prepare his breakfast beforehand. I left the house about nine o'clock, and repaired to my little stronghold in Bruton Street, where I spent the night. Always an early riser, I arose at dawn, and made a hearty meal of the provisions which I had brought with me. I occupied the next few hours in selecting and perfecting a disguise. On this head, I may here remark, that I have never in my life committed a mistake of attempting to assume a character representative of a class. Such an undertaking requires too great a strain upon the imagination, and however clever one may be, breeds mischievous errors of detail and anachronisms, so to say, which may readily be detected by a keen observer. My method has always been to impersonate, that is, to duplicate as closely as possible, some living person, with whose habits and idiosyncrasies I am familiar. On this occasion I chose for my model an old actor with whom I had once upon a time shared rooms in Birmingham. His name was Francis Leigh. He was a tragedian of a bygone generation, and he had many tricks and mannerisms which I had delighted to imitate. When I had completed my make-up, I am sure that had Francis and I chanced to meet in the street, he would have believed that he looked upon his own counterfeit presentment in a mirror. I wore a frock suit of shabby genteel respectability, a frayed topper, and well-worn shoes. The

original character of my mouth was altered by a set of false teeth, much longer than those I ordinarily made use of. Long iron-grey locks fell from my hat rim, to my collar, my nose was attenuated by skilfully-painted hollows, and a pair of heavily frowning false eyebrows cast my eyes into a natural and also a senna-tinted shade. I was quite ready by seven o'clock, but I occupied the hour I had to spare in practising gestures before the mirror. Perfectly satisfied at last, I strolled to Curzon Street, and before many minutes had elapsed I was gratified to perceive Sir William Dagmar emerge from his house, and set off at a brisk walk towards Park Lane. I followed him at a reasonable distance, keeping all my faculties alert. Entering Park Lane, he pursued his way towards Marble Arch, without once looking behind him. He was dressed in a sack suit of plain grey tweed, he wore a soft felt slouch hat, and he carried a stout walking stick, and a dark overcoat. Convinced that he was not in the least mindful of my existence, I gradually diminished the distance between us, until I could distinctly hear his somewhat laboured breathing. When almost at the corner of Oxford Street, he paused suddenly, glanced about him for a moment, as though he had forgotten where he was, and then abruptly crossed the road to the cab stand. He chose a hansom, and ordered the driver to take him to Hampstead Heath by way of Finchley Road and Froggnal Rise. I waited until he had disappeared, then followed in a second hansom, which bore me leisurely in his wake. He alighted and dismissed his cab at the gates of the Heath. I did likewise. I had watched him enter the Heath, and proceed in the direction of Jack Straw's Castle, as my vehicle toiled up the hill. For a while I lost sight of him, but hurrying through the gates, I was just in time as I came to White Stone Pond, to perceive him enter the inn. He emerged as I approached, wiping his lips with his handkerchief. Evidently he had partaken of refreshments. Without wasting a glance at me, he turned down Heath Brow, and set off in a north-westerly direction, towards Heath House and Hendon. He descended the hill slowly, as though already fatigued, and often he rested in a musing fashion, looking steadily before him for a minute at a time. I lingered at a great distance, confident of overtaking him when I wished. It was a glorious morning, and the green sparkling Heath was dotted with still and moving figures of men and women, taking advantage of the sunshine, in which I was revelling. Sir William Dagmar looked, however, neither to right nor left. Either he was too bitter-minded to notice and rejoice in the beauties of the landscape, or he had some pressing business to perform, which absorbed his attention. Crossing the valley he began to climb an opposing slope, and at length entered a long straggling thicket. From where I stood, I could see three different paths emerging from the thicket's further side, and as the country thereabouts was rugged and broken up with rocks and trees, I waited for some time in order to discover which path he might choose, lest I should lose him. Ten minutes went by, however, and he did not appear. At the end of another five, I began to fear that he had given me the slip. Hurrying down the hill, I crossed the slowly rising vale and cautiously approached the thicket, by the route that my master had taken. It was less dense than it appeared at a distance, but in places it was thick enough for a man to hide in. A hundred paces brought me to the edge of a small, clear patch of fresh green-sward, furnished with a couple of rustic benches, set fairly close together. Upon the further bench, my master was seated, his face set towards me, in earnest converse with a woman. I almost cried aloud in my surprise. Indeed, I must have in some fashion exclaimed, for he raised his eyes and surveyed me with an intolerant annoyed expression, as though to inform me that I intruded. On instant I pretended to be the worse for liquor. Shambling forward, I sank down upon the first bench, stretched out my feet before me, and permitted my hands to fall limply by my sides. For three or four minutes a dead silence reigned. Conscious of their examination, I kept my face set straight, and frowning heavily. I heard at length the mutter of exchanged whispers, and fearing to drive them away, I began to act. Flinging out my right hand with a fiercely tragic gesture, I declaimed in a hoarse voice, broken with hiccoughs, portions of Hamlet's immortal soliloquy. This gave me opportunity for an occasional glance at my quarry. Sir William was very pale, and he looked weary. His companion was watching me, but her face was veiled. Her figure was lithe, and beautifully shaped, and she was richly dressed. I knew she must be young. Of a sudden I resolved upon a bold stroke. I rose up, and ceasing to declaim, staggered towards them. "Friends!" I cried, "in me you behold a wreck of former greatness, a shattered hulk, cast by unkind fate on a lee shore of fortune. Gaze on this battered form, this shrunken frame, these gaunt and famished limbs, and t—r—r—emble when I tell you that time was, when in happier hours, a shouting populace acclaimed their owner's frame immortal!" I paused, and swaying from side to side the while, I drew from my pocket a tattered kerchief. "Sic transit gloria mundi—Good friends," I wailed, "kind friends, if you have tears prepare to shed them now, for by'r Lady do I swear to ye that nor bite nor sup has passed these parched and fever-smitten lips these four and twenty hours!"

I put up my kerchief to my eyes, and sobbed aloud; but my hard-hearted auditors preserved a stony silence.

Without uncovering my face, I stretched out my left hand. "Charity, friends, charity!" I muttered brokenly.

"No, Marion," said my master's voice. "Cannot you see that the rogue is tipsy?"

"True, but a small gift may induce him to depart." The woman's tones were of dulcet softness, but the accent was distinctly foreign.

"Charity!" I hiccoughed, "Charity!"

"Be off with you, you rascal!" cried my master sharply. I clutched a shilling, and broke into a stream of drunken sobbing thanks. Moving off I collided designedly with the vacant bench, and

sprawled upon the ground. There I lay pretending to be senseless. They came up, and turned me over on my back; Sir William Dagmar also kicked my ribs, but I answered all attempts to revive me with snores.

Satisfied apparently with my condition, they presently returned to their seats and began to converse. The crown of my head was presented to their gaze, so I could not see them, but I could hear, and not a word escaped me. "I thought for a moment he was really hurt," said the woman.

"He is half stunned and wholly asleep," replied my master, "nevertheless let us speak in French. We cannot be too careful, Marion."

"Would it not be as well to move on?" asked the woman.

"For you perhaps, my child. You are young and strong, but I am old, and my stroll has tired me out. Let us rest yet a little!"

"As you please, M'sieur."

"You were describing the effects of the picra toxic solution," suggested my master.

"That is true. Alas! M'sieur, we have once more a failure to record—so many failures!" she replied drearily. "The operation is always so perfect, so perfect, and yet always the patients die,—of shock!"

"Ah! Then the woman is dead."

"There will be a funeral to-morrow, M'sieur. The failure is complete. Sir Charles is sad. He does not speak, but he shuts his mouth, so!"

"And Fulton?"

"From the first he had no hope, M'sieur. He declared the drug a poison, a neurotic intoxicant—malignant, deadly. He smiles—so—like a dog, and shrugs his shoulders. But he too said little!"

"What next Marion?" asked my master in a hoarse hollow voice.

"God knows, M'sieur. Soon we shall have exhausted the pharmacopoeia. Providence is very cruel to us, very cruel. We have been vouchsafed one half of the secrets of life, and it seems to me that in seeking the remainder we expend our energies in vain. Meanwhile the hands of us all become more deeply dyed with blood! M'sieur, as God hears me, I sometimes think myself a murderess."

"Hush, Marion!"

"No, M'sieur, I shall speak what is in my heart. I cannot see these wretched creatures die, as day by day they perish, without often asking myself the question—are we justified? I have spoken to Sir Charles and Dr. Fulton, but they freeze me with their cold cold 'Science.' I swear to you, M'sieur, that were it not for George, I would be tempted to break my oath!"

"Foolish child, you must not trifle with this weakness. Crush it, subdue it!"

"Ah! Bah! M'sieur. Bid the breeze cease blowing. A woman's heart is weak!"

"But not the heart of a woman who loves, my child. Remember, this is George's life for which you are striving. And those others, what are they but worthless ones, condemned already past redemption. Granted perhaps that our experiments may hasten the inevitable end. Of what do we deprive them, but a few weeks or days of painful suffering. Ah, no my child, you must not turn back now. Any day the secret may be discovered, the door of life thrown open to us all. And that to you will mean the instant realizing of your dearest dreams. Think of it, Marion, your lover yours to wed, yours for long years of happiness."

The woman answered in a sobbing voice. "George is so miserable, M'sieur."

"Does he yet know?"

"Yes, and he speaks of death, he is filled with despair!"

"You must be firm with him, my child. I have discovered that he is in debt, deeply in debt. For that reason he most despairs, because he fears to leave you poor as well as desolate. I fear that he contemplates some desperate expedition. But you must persuade him to be patient. You know, Marion, that we are all pledged not to assist each other financially. On that account I dare not help your lover, though I care for him as if he were my son. But with you it is different."

"How, M'sieur?"

"Why, my dear—you are not of our order, being a woman, although you are attached to us by ties which may not be unravelled. Take this package, child. It contains a great sum of money. Ten thousand pounds. I shall not ask you to tell me what you do with it. No child, not a word."

"M'sieur, M'sieur!" cried the woman.

I was so amazed, so confounded with astonishment, that to have saved my life I could no longer have kept still. I sat up, and turned my head. The tableau is as clear to my remembrance now as though it had happened yesterday. My master was gazing at the woman, his companion, with a look of paternal tenderness. His countenance was transfigured beyond recognition, for in place of his half saturnine, half querulous aspect, I saw an expression of such holy and unselfish love, that in very wonder I caught my breath. The woman with both hands held the package he had given her, to her breast. Her bosom heaved and fell with deep inarticulate emotion. Moreover she had raised her veil. Never had I seen a face one half so beautiful. Her eyes were large and finely shaped, in colour a passionate red brown. Her nose was straight, and cast in the Grecian mould, with thin quivering curved nostrils. Her mouth a perfect bow. The lips were tremulously parted. I have since seen the expression they wore then, perpetuated on the canvas of Botticelli's most famous Madonna. It was indescribably pathetic, full of both bliss and pain. Her face was pure oval, and so delicately tinted was the skin, that I could have fancied that I looked upon an inspired painting, rather than a mere human woman. Fortunately for me, neither had remarked my movement. As soon as I perceived the indiscretion of which I had been guilty, I turned about again, and bending my forehead to my knees, I groaned aloud. The sound broke the spell. I heard them mutter together, and a moment later their departing footsteps. I waited until all sound had died away, then rose hurriedly to my feet, and cautiously pursued them. Shielded by the trees, I watched them from the edge of the grove take a north-westerly course, that seemed destined to lead them to a point between Child's Hill and Hendon. I followed in a diagonal direction, taking advantage of every obstacle in the landscape to conceal myself from view, for the woman frequently looked back. Quitting the Heath at length, they entered a hedge-fenced road, full of twists and turns, which helped my purpose famously. At the angle of each curve, I waited until they had turned the next, and so on. Soon, however, they abandoned the main road, in favour of a devious maze of lanes. At last I lost them; lingering over long at one bend, when I reached the next they had disappeared. They had been moving so slowly, that I knew very well that they must have entered some house. I retraced my steps, and searched the lane, which had evidently swallowed them up. Only one house had a frontage to that spot. It was a large grey stone edifice, set back about a quarter mile from the road. The grounds were encompassed with a high stone wall, and planted thickly with beeches, chestnuts, and elm trees. I nodded and approached the gates, which stood wide open. Upon one of the posts was fastened a small brass plate, inscribed with the following legend:—"Kingsmere Hospital for Consumptives." I closed one eye slowly, and nodded again. As well as if Sir William Dagmar had informed me, I knew that before me lay the key to the mystery, which it was my self-constituted task to solve. In order to make assurance doubly sure, I passed through the gates, and with the cautious cunning of an Indian, I approached the house. The path was wide and gravelled, but somewhat overgrown with weeds. It often bifurcated to surround a grove of shrubs, or shade trees. The whole garden wore a rank, uncared-for look. The plantations were thick with undergrowth. In certain beds the unpruned rose-bushes had become giants, and had grown into thickets, while in others grasses choked all memory of cultivation. The place was in fact a wilderness. The cover was so excellent, that I was able to insinuate myself within twenty paces of the building, without risk of discovery. Striking aside from the road at that point, I sneaked into a grove of laurels, that commanded a view of two sides of the house. There I cast myself down upon the ground, and although perfectly defended from the keenest observation myself, by peering through the weeds and tree trunks, I could watch both path and house, as well as any spy could wish to do. The building was three storied, but of no great size. Its front was ornamented with a doric porch; otherwise it was plain, square, and unpretentious. I judged it to contain a dozen large rooms at most. Its windows were all shut, and covered with impenetrable green blinds, though the lattices stood open, perhaps for purposes of sanitation. At the rear I could see a line of straggling stone, slate roofed sheds, which seemed to have been recently erected, for their cemented walls had a fresh, unweathered look. I wondered what they contained, for they were too large and numerous to be assigned as stores for ordinary domestic uses. "Morgues perhaps!" I thought, and shuddered. "By chance the dead patient, of whom the woman and my master had conversed, was even now lying in one of them!"

The idea gave me the creeps, for I have a horror of death. I tried to forget the sheds, and resolutely watched the house. A soundless hour went by, and I was feeling hungry, but I did not think of departing. My Waterbury told me it was half-past two o'clock. At three, I began to wonder at the silence of the place. At four, I was suspecting the place to be deserted. The shadows were lengthening to the day's close, and I was chewing my handkerchief to assuage my famished appetite when of a sudden I heard a curious noise. It was hoarse, guttural, chattering, and it seemed to issue from the sheds, which I had fancied to be morgues. I listened with every sense on strain. The noise increased, and subsided at intervals, sometimes it became a perfect babel, and harsh animal-like cries quivered through the din. My curiosity became a plague, but I no longer doubted that the place was tenanted, and I dared not explore. The queer sounds I have attempted to describe, lasted about twenty minutes, and then all was still again. I did not know what to think. Were wild animals confined in those sheds? I was still wondering when I heard footfalls on the gravel path, rapidly approaching the house from the lane. A moment later I saw Sir William Venner striding through the twilight. His face was quite expressionless. He marched up to the porch, and disappeared. As I heard neither knock nor sound of bell, I concluded that he had entered with a latch-key. More than ever determined to remain, I fought my appetite as best I could for the next three hours. By then it was quite dark, and the glow of lamps appeared through the green blinds, covering the windows of the house. Feeling wretchedly stiff and cramped, and cold to my bones, I stood up and rubbed my limbs. When the circulation was

restored, I crept out of the covert, where I had lain so long and stealthily approached the line of sheds. Their back walls were of blank stone, and showed me nothing; moreover, although of different size and height, all were attached together, and also to the house. I skirted the rear, and turned the corner. Still no window, but before me stretched an asphalted court-yard. Peering round the second corner, I saw into the hospital's kitchen, through the open back door. It was lighted up, and a comfortable fire burned in a large stove, before which stood a covered spit. A wrinkled old woman sat before a table kneading some pastry with her fingers. An old, grey-bearded man sat in a distant corner, his knees crossed, his arms folded. He was smoking a pipe, and the light glistened on his bald pate. It made rather a pretty picture, that kitchen, with its Darby and Joan interior. I considered it a while, and then glanced along the face of the mysterious sheds, only once more to be baffled. It consisted of a blank wall, pierced only with an occasional padlocked door.

Thoroughly disgusted I returned to the front of the house, and took up a position hard by the trunk of a fine old elm tree, that grew at the first branch of the path. There I waited for another hour, but at last my patience was rewarded. The door suddenly opened, a man came out, and approached me with a quick firm tread. It was too dark to see his face, but I guessed him to be Sir Charles Venner. He passed me so closely, that by stretching out my hand I could have brushed his cloak. He had not taken another ten steps, however, before the house door was again thrown open, and another man issued at a run. "Venner!" he shouted, "Venner!"

The voice was Dr. Fulton's.

"What is it?" demanded Sir Charles, from behind me, coming to an abrupt halt.

"One moment, Venner, where are you?"

"Here!"

Sir Charles Venner returned towards the house, and the two men met at the very angle of the path, within six feet of my nose. I hugged the tree-trunk, and waited, hardly daring to breathe.

"Could you strain a point, Venner, and operate to-morrow night?" asked Dr. Fulton in a pleading voice.

"No, old chap, I can't. You know my rule. I must give myself three days between each, for the sake of my nerve."

"Just for once!"

"Impossible, Fulton. I wonder that you ask me. I have myself to consider as well as the cause. We may succeed or we may not. But I am hanged if I deliberately risk destroying my own health for anything or anyone. I consider that I do quite enough for the cause as it is."

"You do, Venner, you do; but just for once do oblige Marion. She begged me to ask you. You see, the fact is, Cavanagh is cranky."

"Damn Cavanagh!"

"With all my heart, but then you see, there is Marion. What should we do without her?"

"That is all very well. But what should we do without me!"

"The poor girl is half out of her mind worrying about Cavanagh. He has not even had the grace to come here all day, though he promised."

"He is an infernal young cad!"

"I think so too, but it does not mend matters. The girl is crazily in love with him, and she thinks he will kill himself, if we can't do something for him soon."

"Puppy!" The tone was bitterly contemptuous. Sir Charles seemed to hesitate. "Look here, Fulton," he proceeded, "I am sorry for Marion, of course; nevertheless, I cannot help her. Tell her I am out of sorts, or make any other excuse you like. I shall not operate until Tuesday evening. Good-night to you!"

"One second, Venner, She begged me, if you refused her first request, to ask leave for Cavanagh to be present at the operation. You'll have no objection to that I suppose!"

"Oh! curse the fellow," exclaimed Sir Charles very irritably. "He becomes the bane of my existence. If we admit him to the room, we are bound to have a scene. He will either faint or do something equally idiotic. You know very well that the least interruption may play the devil with my knife."

"She has pledged his good behaviour, Venner. Besides, I'll promise to look after him. Come, come, old chap, don't send me back to her quite empty-handed."

"The consequences must be upon your own head then."

"Thank you, Venner, you are a good fellow! Good-night!"

"I am, on the contrary, a soft-hearted fool. Good-night!"

They parted, and I heaved a sigh of relief.

When the silence had resumed itself, I stole through the plantation to the gate, whence, after carefully fixing the locale of the hospital in my mind, I made a speedy return to civilization, and an hour later I was discussing a hearty meal in a private room at Jack Straw's Castle.

IV

THE OPERATION

Tuesday arrived before I knew quite what to do. On that particular morning the postman handed me, amongst a sheaf of bills and circulars, a letter sealed with a peculiar signet, addressed like the others to my master. As it wanted an hour to Sir William's waking time, I had plenty of leisure to investigate its contents. It puzzles me how any people can be foolish enough to imagine that a mere dab of wax, however cunningly impressed, can confer security upon their correspondence. In two minutes the seal was lying safe and uninjured upon my pantry table, and the detached envelope rested confidingly across the mouth of a bowl of boiling water. The letter ran as follows: "My dear Dagmar,—Whoever the rascal really is who imposed upon Cavanagh and myself on a recent memorable evening, he lied in declaring himself an emissary of the police. I have just succeeded in establishing this fact, and take the earliest opportunity of reassuring you, while allowing detailed explanations to await until we meet. I have no longer any doubt but that our adversary is a blackmailer, and I feel sure that before long one or other of us will be approached. I sincerely trust that the fellow will turn out, as you suspected, to be your scapegrace nephew. In that case you, of course, must deal with him, but in any other event I am convinced that our best course will be to prosecute. This will notify you that I intend to propose such a resolution at our next conclave.—Yours sincerely, CHARLES VENNER.

"P.S.—If you can, see Cavanagh to-day. I have been weak enough to permit him to witness the operation. It is possible that you may dissuade him.—C.V."

I carefully resealed the letter, and pressed the envelope with a heated flat-iron in order to remove all traces of my manipulations. All the time I was in a whirl of thought. For three days I had been wondering how I might get a footing inside the hospital and witness the operation which Mr. Cavanagh had extorted a privilege to see. After reading Sir Charles Venner's letter I was more anxious than ever to do so, but the more determined I became the less hopeful seemed my prospects. If Mr. Cavanagh had been a bigger man I believe I should have resorted to some desperate expedient to get him out of the way, so that I might take his place. Unhappily for me, however, he lacked full two inches of my stature, and I dared not attempt to impersonate him under the brilliant light which must necessarily pervade a surgeon's operating-room. I solved the problem that was troubling me, while preparing my master's breakfast, and when I proceeded to his room and handed him his letters, I knew exactly what to do. Sir William Dagmar had a scapegrace nephew—well, his scapegraceship should be my scapegoat. It is true that part of Dr. Venner's letter put the idea into my mind. I do not pretend to pose as a superhumanly clever person, but I am not without talent, and my genius is in my power to twist every accident to my own advantage.

It was my master's custom to dispose of his correspondence while I prepared his bath after awaking him. As I re-entered his bed-chamber to announce his bath ready, I found him standing before the fireplace in his dressing-gown, watching the transmutation of Sir Charles Venner's missive into ashes in the grate.

"Your pardon, sir," I murmured softly. "About a fortnight ago you commanded me to immediately inform you if any stranger should venture to question me concerning your affairs."

He swung round on the instant and faced me, his lids narrowed over his eyes, and his lips compressed in a hard straight line.

"Well!" he grated. "Well!"

"This morning, sir, about two hours ago, a man came here and asked to see you——"

"His name?" he interrupted harshly.

"He would not give his name, sir, and for that reason I took the liberty of refusing to admit him."

"You did well, Brown. What had he to say?"

"He left a message for you, sir. He asked me to tell you that Mr. Sefton Dagmar wished you to meet him alone on the railway station at Newhaven, at nine o'clock to-night precisely." Butts had told me that Sefton Dagmar lived at Newhaven. One of my greatest natural endowments is an almost perfect memory.

My master's eyes glistened and his cheeks flushed. "Oh, indeed!" he muttered. "Anything else, Brown?"

"Y—yes, sir!" I lowered my eyes and tried to look abashed. "I—I—scarcely like to tell you, sir," I stammered; "the messenger was—most—im—most impertinent, sir."

"Never mind, Brown; tell me exactly what he said."

"He declared, sir, that if you did not keep the appointment, you'd have leisure to repent your foolishness in gaol!"

"What!" he thundered, and threatened me with his clenched hands. His face went purple, then pale as death, but his eyes glowed like coals.

"I'm sure I beg your pardon, sir," I muttered, stepping back quickly and affecting to be terrified. "You—you made me tell you, sir."

With a great and manifest effort my master recovered his composure. He even contrived to smile. "I—I—you must forgive me, Brown," he muttered. "I—I could not for a moment conceive that—that my nephew would dare to send me such a message. Mr. Sefton Dagmar is my nephew, Brown, and I am sorry to say that——"

I raised my hand and quickly interrupted him. "Please, don't say any more, sir," I cried in tones of deep respect. "I am your servant, sir, and I hope I know my place. When you know me better, sir, you will find that I am not one of the prying sort, who is always trying to hear more than he should. It's likely that in your anger now you'd be telling me something that you'd afterwards regret, and if you'll forgive me for speaking plainly, sir, I like you too much, and I'm too happy in your service to want to risk losing your confidence and my place together! Such a thing has happened to me before, sir, and without my seeking either."

Sir William Dagmar was the most surprised looking man in the world at that moment. He seemed to have forgotten everything, but the enigma before him, and he stared at me as if he wished to read into my soul.

"Have you no curiosity?" he demanded at last.

"None that I can't control, sir," I replied respectfully.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he muttered. "You are either a superlatively finished hypocrite or a philosopher of sorts. Which is it, Brown?"

I looked into his eyes and sighed. "It's as you please, sir, and I won't pretend not to understand you," I answered mournfully. "But if I did act the hypocrite a bit in anticipating the occasion to speak as I did just now, where's the harm, sir? You are a rich gentleman, Sir William, and you have no idea of what a cursed thing it is for a poor fellow like me to go about looking for employment, and eating up my little bit of savings, sir. Last time I was out of a place it cost me six pounds for board, not to speak of the agent's fee; and I have been hoping that I was settled here for life, sir."

"You may yet be, if you choose, Brown. I am perfectly satisfied with you; and, upon my soul, I believe you are reliable."

"Just so, sir; but you won't continue to believe that long if you trust me with more than a servant should be trusted. It's not in human nature, sir!"

"You mule!" he cried with a gesture of impatience. "But have your way, have your way! Now return to the subject. What more have you to tell me?"

"Very little, sir, except that the man tried to pump me, but I gave him not a whit of satisfaction. Oh, I beg pardon, sir. The postman came up while he was talking. I'd have shut the door on him before, only I saw the postman coming."

"Yes, yes."

"Well, sir, the man saw that letter, and he offered me five pounds for it—cash down, sir."

"Ah! What reply did you give him?"

"I shut the door in his face, sir."

My master nodded. "What sort of a man did he appear to you, Brown. Not exactly a gentleman, I suppose?"

"No, indeed, sir. A low creature and poorly dressed. I was ashamed for the postman to catch us talking, sir."

"Would you recognize him again?"

"Among a thousand; he had a scar across his left cheek and half his left ear gone, sir."

My master nodded, and, turning, walked thoughtfully into the adjoining bath-room. We did not converse upon the matter again, but all that day the poison I had instilled into his mind was working, working. I perceived its effects when he returned to the house somewhat late in the afternoon, doubtless after having paid a visit to Mr. Cavanagh, for he did not go abroad during the forenoon. He looked worried and distraught as I admitted him, and passing me without a word, he went straight up to his bedroom. Ten minutes later his bell rang. I hurried up to find him standing in the hall, clad for the street, a heavy fur-lined overcoat across his arm and a bag in one hand.

"I'll not be home until to-morrow morning," he said curtly, "so you need not wait up for me, Brown; but, please, on no account leave the house."

"Very good, sir."

"Above all, admit no caller. You understand?"

"Yes, sir. Shall I call a cab for you, sir?"

"No." He pointed to the door, I opened it, and he went out. A cab was waiting for him beside the pavement. The clock struck five as I shut the door. At six o'clock I entered my little stronghold in Bruton Street. At eight I descended the stairs, in all things my master's double. In all things I declare advisedly, for warned by experience I wore upon the thumb of my left hand just such a little finger-stall of violet velvet as Sir William Dagmar used in order to conceal his deformity whenever he went abroad. This was secured around my wrist with an elastic band, and I took the precaution to stiffen its interior with a thin ferrule, so that no involuntary working of the thumb joint might betray me. For precaution's sake I carried a revolver, mastering by an effort of will my natural repugnance for such gruesome implements. I proceeded to the Heath by three different hansoms, and a fourth conveyed me to my point of destination, a secluded little tree sheltered spot at an angle of a lane about a hundred yards from the gate of the Kingsmere Hospital for Consumptives. There I alighted, and bidding the driver to await me, I hurried towards the hospital. The gate upon the occasion of my first visit stood open; now it was shut, but latched, not locked. I passed through and sought the house. It was my opinion, from what I had observed, that all welcome visitors to that building possessed master keys to the front door, and were accustomed to enter unceremoniously. Unwilling to attract unnecessary attention to myself, since I had no latch-key, I decided upon a rear attack. I therefore passed down the side of the house and, flanking the sheds, approached the kitchen door. It was shut, the window blinds were closely drawn, but a light gleamed through the crevices. I rapped gently on the panels once, twice, thrice, at short intervals. Upon the third summons I heard the sound of cautiously drawn bolts, and the door opened about four inches on a chain. A wrinkled grey-bearded face peered out at me. "*Qui va là?* Who is dare?" demanded a cracked voice, its foreign accent in the English fairly rasping the evidently unfamiliar words.

"It is I, my friend, Sir William Dagmar," I replied very softly in French.

The old man immediately released the chain and threw the door wide.

"Enter, Monsieur," he said politely.

I did not require a second invitation, but before attending to me the old man refastened the door. He then turned and looked at me inquiringly. His expression was a curious combination of cunning and intelligence. I saw at once that he was astonished at the manner of my coming, and that he considered that he was entitled to an explanation. "I wish to see Mademoiselle Le Mar, privately and quickly," I muttered in his ear.

"But, Monsieur," he began.

I took a sovereign from my pocket and allowed him to perceive it. He stopped dead in his speech and a greedy look came into his eyes.

"Contrive to let her know that I am here," I said quietly.

He nodded and hobbled out of the kitchen, making so little noise, however, in his exit that I guessed he wore rubber-soled boots. Mine were shod with felt. My object in sending for Marion Le Mar was to obtain a guide over the house, a very important desideratum, since I had never been inside its walls until that moment. I was kept waiting about ten minutes, when the old fellow suddenly reappeared.

"Monsieur! She comes," he muttered, and stretched out a skinny paw for the money.

I let it drop into his hand, and turned at a sound to behold standing in the open doorway the

woman I had seen in my master's company last Sunday on the Heath. I had thought her beautiful on that occasion, although her head and all the upper portion of her face were hidden with a veil. Now I caught my breath, and for an instant dreamed I looked upon a spirit from some other world. Her forehead was broad and low; her head, exquisitely shaped, was covered with a glory of gleaming gold which admirably contrasted with the dark and level pencilling of her brows, and the russet flashing of her wonderful red-brown eyes. The one weak spot in my composition is that I am the slave of female beauty wherever found, and yet until that moment I had been wise enough to worship the sex collectively. But standing in the doorway I recognized my fate, and I bowed my head before her.

She advanced and offered me her hand. Only then I perceived that she wore a uniform, a nurse's uniform; but that stiff apparel which makes most women appear unlovely could not deny the expression of her charms.

"Monsieur," she whispered, "you sent for me."

"Yes, my child," I answered in still lower tones. I pressed her hand, then let it fall, though I grieved to release it. "Where is Cavanagh?"

"Upstairs in the operating room with Dr. Fulton. I must be quick, for they are almost ready to begin. Sir Charles has just arrived."

"Ah! so Cavanagh still persists. I had hoped to find it otherwise."

"Alas! Monsieur. I have begged him to go, but he had determined to see all."

"In that case, for your sake, my child, I shall bear him company."

"What—you!"

"Yes, Marion! You have work to do, and he may need my care!"

She gazed at me a moment with a look of passionate gratitude, then of a sudden, stooping low, she caught and kissed my hand. It tingled for days afterwards.

"Heaven bless you, Monsieur!" she cried, her whole face radiant. "Come, then, and we shall go to them. Sir Charles will be enchanted, for he hates that George should be present, since we have no one to spare who might attend him if the poor boy should feel ill or swoon. If that should happen, Monsieur, you will take him away at once; is it not so?"

"Immediately, my child."

It seemed that there no longer existed any reason why we should converse in whispers, and we did not. Indeed, my beautiful conductress filled the journey with gay chatter and musical ripples of laughter. Evidently, thought I, she must love Cavanagh already to distraction, when the small courtesy I have proposed can inspire her with such happy spirits. Absurd as it may appear, I began to feel jealous of Cavanagh already, although Marion had never seen me in my proper person, and was no doubt unaware of my existence. She led me down a spacious hall carpeted with oil cloth, and up a staircase that was not carpeted at all, to the floor above. We passed down a corridor and stopped at the third closed door, from beneath which exuded a long narrow bar of brilliant white light. Her manner while ascending the stairs had gradually calmed, but she was still excited, and she opened the door with a burst of informing words pouring from her lips. Never shall I forget that moment. I glanced in with a face that I flatter myself was expressionless to the perfection of indifference, and I took care to make my lip curl in Sir William Dagmar's characteristic aspect of querulous cynicism. But in truth my every sense was awake and poignantly acquisitive. The apartment was large, full thirty feet square. It contained two operating benches placed within easy distance. The upper slab of one was absent; upon the other lay a squat, bulky figure, strapped into position and covered with a sheet. Above each table depended from the ceiling a perfect swarm of incandescent lamps, each furnished with a powerful reflector which caught and cast the rays of light upon the bench beneath. Tables stood about the walls of the room, at regular intervals, covered with all manner of basins, batteries, knives, forceps, scissors, and other surgical instruments. There was no other furniture except a solitary chair perched near the door, upon which Mr. Cavanagh was seated. Sir Charles Venner and Dr. Fulton, clad in clean white aprons and overalls, with their sleeves rolled up and secured with bands above their bare elbows, stood beside one of the tables steeping some ugly looking knives in a basin of steaming fluid. At the end of the occupied operating bench stood two full blood African negroes. Their appearance was not remarkable, and in the glance I flashed upon them I could discover no point in which they differed from any other negroes I had seen, except that like the surgeons they were both attired in white. Mr. Cavanagh got to his feet as we entered. His countenance was pale and tense. I perceived that he was nervous, but he had evidently wound himself up to the highest pitch of determination of which his nature was capable, and I thought it probable, whatever the others expected, that he would comport himself like a man. Marion addressed her announcement to the surgeons, but her eyes were bent upon her lover, and to him in truth she spoke. She lauded what she called my devotion to the skies, and to my surprise the others appeared to accept me at her valuation.

Sir Charles Venner nodded commendingly. Dr. Fulton said, "It is confoundedly good of you,

Dagmar," and Mr. Cavanagh gave me a look of earnest gratitude.

I dismissed the subject with a shoulder shrug, and asked Dr. Fulton to assign me a position. He directed me to stand near Cavanagh until all was ready. I obeyed, and for a space of some minutes I watched Marion, who flitted about the place arranging certain instruments upon the several tables, and wringing dripping sponges dry with antiseptic towels.

When Sir Charles had completed his preparations, he turned to the nearest negro. "Beudant," he said, "you may light the asbestos." He spoke in French.

The fellow bowed and hurried to the fireplace. I saw a great flame rise, which flushed the negro's glistening forehead with a crimson glow.

"Jussieu," said Sir Charles, "it is time!"

The second negro bowed and glided from the room, followed by Dr. Fulton. Sir Charles dipped his hands into a basin of fluid offered him by Marion, and wiped his fingers with a towel. Two minutes later a bell tinkled, "Beudant," said the surgeon.

The negro bowed again like a slave to a lamp, and noiselessly departed. Very soon I heard the dull tramp of slippers on the corridor without. The door opened, and the negroes re-entered the room bearing between them a long slab, on which rested the inert figure of a young man. He seemed about twenty-two years of age. His face was extremely pale. His eyes were closed and his mouth was propped wide open with a curious spring wedge. He was nude to the waist, but thence downwards wrapped in an eiderdown shawl. His chest was narrow and his body hideously emaciated. As his chest moved up and down under his deep laboured breathing the ribs projected horribly, leaving dark hollows between. He was strapped securely to the slab and in such a thorough fashion that he could scarcely have moved a muscle howsoever much he had been minded. But he was evidently unconscious, doubtless in an anaesthetised sleep. This curious procession was followed by Dr. Fulton and a tall elderly gentleman similarly apparelled to the surgeons. I had never set eyes on him before. He had an eager, enthusiastic face. His nose was very long; he had high cheek-bones and prominent grey eyes full of a strange fanatical light. I put him down at one glance as a devotee of science. Afterwards I discovered that his name was Vernet, that he was a Frenchman, and resident house-surgeon to the hospital, which in fact he owned.

He was the last to enter, and he closed and locked the door behind him. The negroes advanced to the bench, and having deposited the slab with its senseless burden, they moved over to the other operating table. Already the room had become oppressively hot, and I noticed beads of perspiration stand out on Sir Charles Venner's forehead as he bent to examine his patient with a stethoscope. Dr. Fulton beckoned Cavanagh and myself to approach, and by signs he directed us to stand at the feet of the young man upon whom Sir Charles was about to operate. We were thus quite out of the way of those who had work to do, but we could see everything, and I desired no better vantage post. Dr. Fulton stood behind the patient's head at the other end of the slab, holding in one hand a large rubber face mask, in the other a large stoppered phial, connected by a tube with the mask. Sir Charles Venner stood beside the patient between the two operating benches; and beside him was Dr. Vernet. Marion faced them from across the patient's body. She held in one hand a sponge, in the other a basin.

Sir Charles Venner lost no time in proceeding to business, nor did he give us the least warning of his intention. Casting his stethoscope aside, he seized a small thin-bladed knife and applied its edge with a free sweeping stroke, as an accomplished artist might draw a freehand with a pencil, diagonally across the patient's third and fourth ribs, within an inch of the breast bone. A thin streak of blood followed the cut as quickly as thunder follows lightning. Marion instantly applied her sponge to the wound, and the red line disappeared. The surgeon, without pausing, made another swift incision at right angles to the first along the third rib, and followed this with a third, parallel to the first, some six inches apart. Marion pursued his cuts with her sponge, dipping it each time into her basin, which doubtless contained some powerful astringent drug, for the wounds once touched ceased to bleed. Sir Charles Venner made some further rapid cuts, and with inimitable dexterity he presently raised the flap of flesh and muscle so detached by his knife from the patient's ribs, back across the chest, and secured it there with a dart attached by a string to a bandage passed about the subject's loins. With the speed of magic he applied half a dozen tiny silver spring clips to the dripping flesh, in order to secure the ruptured blood vessels. Dr. Vernet then handed him a tiny razor bladed saw, with which, to my horror, he immediately attacked the bared heaving ribs. The ghastly sight sickened me so much that I closed my eyes, and for some minutes I fought like a tiger with the weakness that threatened to undo me. The world was rocking, rocking, ay, and beginning to swing. I should in the end probably have fainted, but that my companion, Mr. Cavanagh, observing my condition of a sudden pressed his handkerchief to my nostrils. I inhaled an intoxicating, subtle, but most powerful reviving essence. Afterwards I learned that Marion had supplied him with several capsules of nitrate of amyl, of which he had himself already consumed more than one. I felt the blood rush to my head and swell out my cheeks and scalp and skin. The effect was magical. My weakness passed like a black dream, and with restored courage I opened my eyes. There was now a gaping cavity in the patient's breast, through which I could see at work the mysterious machinery of life. The inner flap of the exposed lung had been uplifted and secured aside with a ligature. Below panted and pulsed a crimson and purple-coloured shapeless thing. It fascinated

and at the same time terrified me. With a frightful effort I tore my eyes away and looked at Sir Charles. He was screwing a sharp-edged, curved hollow tube to the end of a long and curiously fashioned syringe. This syringe was furnished here and there with golden taps and tubes and tiny force pumps. One tube stretched beyond the operator and ran to the other operating table. I followed it with my eyes and saw that it terminated in a long, thick, hollow needle which reposed in the hands of the negro Beudant. The other negro, Jussieu, knife in hand, bent over an object lying on the slab before him—the squat, bulky figure which had excited my curiosity upon my entering the chamber, and which then had been covered with a sheet. But the sheet had now vanished, and before and exposed to my view lay an enormous ape, a chimpanzee I fancy, which was strapped to the bench exactly in the same fashion and attitude as Sir Charles Venner's patient. The ape's huge hairy breast was disfigured with a square, bloody opening, but I saw that he was alive, for he breathed. The negro Jussieu had evidently performed an operation on all fours with that executed by Sir Charles Venner! The idea almost stunned me. Jussieu was then a great surgeon, although a negro. Next instant I considered the ape, and a panic horror almost overwhelmed me. George Cavanagh was again my saviour. There came a sound of rushing waters to my ears, and the room began to whirl and sway. On the very threshold of oblivion once again the thin and penetrating flavour of the nitrate of amyI restored to me my faculties. I buried my teeth in my lower lip and cursed myself for a pitiful poltroon. I looked up to meet Marion's eyes. She smiled at me so tender an encouragement that I turned cold with shame; that she, a delicate woman, could bear unmoved a sight that stole my manhood, fired my heart with more of rage than wonder, though I wondered too. I fiercely resolved not to be weak again.

Until that moment the silence had been absolute, but of a sudden Sir Charles spoke. "Wait for the systole, Vernet!"

I glanced down and saw Dr. Vernet insert his right hand into the hole in the patient's breast. He was armed with a large, cup-shaped clasp. He fumbled for a moment, and then, nodding his head, he withdrew his hand.

Sir Charles threw Cavanagh a quick scornful glance. "Attend, if you wish to understand," he commanded. "I'll try to be explicit!"

I looked for the first time at Cavanagh. He held a kerchief tightly to his face, but his eyes, which I alone could see, were simply lurid.

"Go on!" he muttered in a muffled voice.

Sir Charles inserted the edged tube attached to the syringe with both hands into the patient's breast.

"This is the right ventricle," he began, speaking in quick, disjointed sentences. "Its function is to force the venous blood through the pulmonary veins to the right auricle; thence to be distributed over the body. I am now—about to—insert—a needle into the right ventricle through the pericardium and walls. How is the pulse, Fulton?"

"Right, sir."

"Are you ready, Beudant, Jussieu?"

"At the word, sir," replied the negroes.

"Good!" exclaimed Sir Charles. "I am too!" He withdrew one hand from the ghastly cavity and seized the syringe pump, which he began to compress. "I am now forcing into our subject's right ventricle the solution of my invention, which is destined to slay the tubercle bacilli. In two seconds the lungs will be suffused with the fluid, and in two minutes we shall have worked the miracle of absolutely destroying every bacillus contained therein. But we shall also have killed the patient's blood. See, it is already decomposing. Mark how white the lung grows. To work, Jussieu!" he cried. "To work!"

"Ready, sir!" cried back the negro. I could not see what he did, but I saw the tube connecting Sir Charles Venner's patient with the opposite table suddenly rigidify as though a rod had been slipped down its hollow interior.

"We are now correcting the solution's destructive action on our subject's blood by forcing into his heart a fresh supply of living arterial blood taken from the left auricle of the ape lying yonder," explained Sir Charles. "Vernet is meanwhile extracting our subject's own decomposed and now useless blood, which is really blood no longer, from the greater artery in his right leg. You see, Cavanagh, we have established a perfect system of drainage. We are supplying good blood and removing bad."

"My God!" cried Cavanagh. "It is white!"

His exclamation referred to Dr. Vernet's work. The French surgeon had made a deep incision in the patient's right thigh, from which gushed a steady fountain of yellow fluid.

"Shout when it colours, Vernet!" commanded Sir Charles.

I looked on, speechless with amazement, I had no longer the least inclination to faint. Indeed, my whole soul was so steeped in wonder, that I forgot I lived. I was merely a rapt acquisitive spirit being initiated into the fundamental mysteries of nature by a great, indeed, a giant intellect. Sir Charles Venner appeared to me then something like a god. His left hand was plunged into the patient's breast, perhaps grasping the heart, that seat of life. His right compressed and controlled the movements of the syringe. His face gleamed like marble in the brilliant white light of the reflectors. It was pale, composed, expressionless, yet full of watchful intelligence and power. He stood upon his feet as steady as a rock. Every moment he uttered some sharp, pregnant direction to one or other of his assistants, which was at once implicitly obeyed. "No greater man has ever lived!" thought I then, and I have not altered my opinion since.

In about three minutes, though the period seemed longer to my electrified imagination, I saw a red light flash into the milky fountain that flowed under Dr. Vernet's guidance.

"Enough!" he cried.

"Good!" exclaimed Sir Charles.

The fountain stopped flowing on instant, for Dr. Vernet had squeezed the artery between a pair of forceps, and with deft fingers he began to bind it with a ligature of golden wire. I glanced from him to Sir Charles. He was now bending closely above the cavity in the subject's breast; the syringe had disappeared. He seemed to be sewing something in the hollow, but I could distinguish nothing for blood. Marion's sponge plied backwards and forwards with the regularity of a machine.

"What are you doing now?" cried a voice beside me, so harsh and strained that I hardly recognized it.

"Sewing up the punctured ventricle," replied Sir Charles with a sort of chuckle. "Some of your friends would be a bit surprised, eh, Cavanagh, if you told them that you saw a doctor patch a man's heart with thread and needle, as a sempstress might a rent gown!"

Cavanagh uttered a hollow groan, and I turned just in time to catch him. He had swooned! I carried him to the other end of the room, where I laid him down upon the floor and hurriedly unfastened his collar and cravat. I was hot with rage, for I wished to witness the end of the operation; but I dared not leave him because of Marion. Even as I knelt to chafe his wrists, I heard Sir Charles address her sharply: "Now then, Marion, attend to me. The young fool is all right. Dagmar will look after him."

I managed to awaken Cavanagh at last with a capsule I found clutched in his hand, but several precious minutes had been wasted, and we returned to the table only in time to see Sir Charles sewing up with golden wire the flap of muscle which had been the door of his more important work.

The operation was over. The negroes were already starting to remove the carcass of the dead ape, whose life blood had been stolen to try and prolong the existence of its fellow creature, man! The other surgeons were grouped about the still living subject, but Sir Charles Venner was no longer in command. Dr. Fulton now held supreme authority. He occupied Venner's former post, and with one hand he fingered the subject's now unfastened wrists, while in the other he grasped a small hypodermic syringe. For some moments a deathly hush obtained, that was but intensified by the slow and stertorous breathing of the patient on the slab.

Dr. Fulton's expression was strained and passionately anxious. It formed a curious contrast to Sir Charles Venner's stolid immobility. The others watched him, not the patient. That is to say, all but Marion. She had slipped an arm about George Cavanagh, and she was tenderly supporting him, oblivious of everything else.

"Well?" asked Sir Charles at last.

I gasped with relief to hear his voice.

"Weaker; curse it!" replied Dr. Fulton.

"Inject?"

"No; last of all. The battery, quick, the glass stool!"

Sir Charles and Dr. Vernet darted off. Sir Charles returned with a glass bench, which he placed upon the floor at Fulton's feet, and upon which Fulton immediately stepped. Dr. Vernet stopped beside a distant table and began to pull out something that looked like a cylinder from the side of a huge wooden box. We heard the rapidly intermittent clicking sound of the working battery at once.

"Stop!" shouted Fulton.

I saw the patient's legs twitch and draw up half way to his stomach, and his arms spasmodically jerk.

This was repeated a dozen times in as many seconds, but gradually the motions ceased.

"Awaken him!" commanded Dr. Fulton.

Sir Charles applied a small phial to the patient's nostrils. After a while the poor fellow turned his head aside as though unconsciously trying to escape a torture. But the phial followed him remorselessly, and presently he moaned. Sir Charles at once removed the spring wedge from his mouth. His teeth clicked, shut, and he uttered a heartrending gurgling groan.

"More battery!" shouted Fulton. "Softly, softly!"

The patient's muscles jerked again, but less violently than before. He tossed and turned his head, trying vainly to escape the phial; thus for a moment, then of a sudden his eyes opened and he gazed about him.

"Stop battery!" cried Dr. Fulton. "Marion, come here!"

The girl left her lover and hurried forward. She stooped over the patient and looked into his eyes. "Ah, my poor fellow!" she murmured soothingly in English, "you are awake at last, I see. It is all over now—all over—nothing more to fear now. Soon you will be well and strong. Stronger than you have ever been in your life before—for you are cured."

He looked up at her with a dull, vacant stare, then uttered a little gasp of pain, for Dr. Fulton had plunged the hypodermic needle in his arm.

The injection's effect was miraculous. Within three minutes his face flushed crimson, his dull eyes brightened, and he actually attempted to sit up. Marion, however, gently pressed him back, but she allowed his head to rest upon her arm.

"I—I—feel fine!" he gasped.

"Hush!" said Marion; "you must not talk. You must be very good and keep still, for that is the only way you can get better."

Sir Charles Venner pressed a glass into her hand.

"Try and drink this," she proceeded. "It is not medicine, only a little brandy and water. Ah! that's right. You'll do splendidly now. There, my boy, shut your eyes, and try to sleep. You'll soon sleep, and you'll wake well and strong."

The poor lad obeyed her, and he seemed to sleep immediately, but Marion's prophecy was not fulfilled. He never opened his eyes again.

For a long hour we watched him, the hearts of us all racked with anxiety. Every few minutes Dr. Fulton injected some drug into his arm, and by degrees the full force of the battery was applied. But all in vain.

"He is dead!" said Dr. Fulton at last, stepping dejectedly from the glass stool. "Turn off the battery, Vernet, please."

"Our nineteenth failure!" observed Sir Charles Venner, folding his arms and looking down at the corpse with a face of stone. "And they have all died of shock. Nothing else."

Mr. Cavanagh started forward. "How can you be sure of that?" he demanded. "How do you know that your accursed solution did not poison him?" The young man's face was the hue of ivory, but his big eyes were ablaze with passion.

Sir Charles Venner gave a wintry smile. "We have proved it beyond doubt," he replied. "We have tested the blood a hundred times."

"Bah!" retorted Cavanagh with a savage sneer. "A fig for your tests. But even if they are reliable, how do you know that he did not bleed to death from the wound you made in his heart?"

"Test again, autopsy. Would you care to see? Look here!" He caught up a knife and approached the corpse. "I'm willing, Cavanagh, to bet you a thousand pounds that not one drop of blood has passed my puncture in the ventricle!"

"Done!"

"Venner," cried Dr. Fulton, "Venner, you are betting on a certainty."

"Then I'll pay the stake I win to any charity you like to name." Sir Charles Venner bent over the body, but even as he poised the knife to cut, Mr. Cavanagh cried out in strangled tones: "Stop! I—I withdraw."

Venner looked up with a cold sneering laugh. "Then pay!" said he.

"No—no! I—I—can't afford it." Mr. Cavanagh put his right hand into his breast pocket. His countenance was perfectly livid. He stepped back a pace and looked at Marion.

"George!" she cried, "what ails you, dear?" She was trembling like a leaf in the wind.

"Life!" he answered, and uttered a laugh that still echoes in my ears.

Next instant he produced a revolver and before our eyes put the muzzle to his mouth. There followed a click, a sharp report, and he fell at our feet a corpse.

There are periods of crisis in human happenings when a cycle of years may be compressed into a few minutes of ordinary time, and such a period was that which succeeded the tragedy I have described. I felt my soul grow cold and hard and more old than all my previous life had made it. I stood like a frozen image gazing at the artist's clay, waiting in an agony of expectation for Marion to scream. But she made no cry, and after a long, most dreadful pause, something impelled me to look at her. She was swaying to a fall and already insensible. I took her in my arms and bore her senseless body from the awful room. At the door, however, I was obliged to halt, for the threshold was occupied with the two negroes and the wrinkled old woman I had seen in the kitchen the first night I had visited the hospital. They were transfixed with horror, and I had to force a passage for my burden. In doing so, involuntarily I turned. Dr. Fulton was kneeling beside Mr. Cavanagh examining his wound. Sir Charles Venner stood at a little distance puffing calmly at a cigarette. I shuddered and passed on. Where I would have gone, Providence alone knows. But the old woman followed me, crying out in a cracked voice in French: "But, M'sieur, why not come this way, to Mademoiselle's own room."

She led me to a prettily furnished little chamber at the very end of the corridor. I laid Marion very gently down upon the bed, and turned to the old woman, who was already fussing at my side with salts and sal volatile.

"Don't touch her!" I commanded sternly. "Let her sleep as long as God wills. She will awake too soon in any case to the misery this night has brought her."

"As Monsieur pleases!" replied the beldame, and with a look of ghoulish delight she hurried off, doubtless to gloat over the corpses in the operating room.

Left alone, I leaned over the unconscious girl, and softly pressed my lips upon her beautiful, but clay cold brow. An angel could not have been the worse for that caress, for in my heart there was no thought save of pitiful and tender reverence.

A moment later I was traversing the passage, on my way to the staircase. Someone called to me as I passed the chamber of death, but I paid no heed, and I descended the steps as quickly as I could. The hall door stood before me. The latch yielded to my touch. Issuing forth I banged it shut, and ran out into the night as though I were pursued with furies. On alighting from my cab at the Marble Arch I glanced at my watch. To my astonishment it pointed barely to midnight. I thought it must have stopped, but the public-houses were still open.

A second cab took me to Bruton Street, whence having changed my attire, I drove to my master's house. As I entered I noted upon the floor at my feet a paste-board visiting card, which had evidently been slipped beneath the door by a disappointed caller. I picked it up and held it to the light, uttering, as I read, a long, low whistle of surprise. It was inscribed with three printed words: "Mr. Sefton Dagmar."

V

THE CAMPAIGN OPENS

That paste-board gave me a shock; it sent a chill, creepy feeling down my spine. It smelt dangerous. I read the name again: "Mr. Sefton Dagmar!" So, while my master was away journeying down to Newhaven to keep the appointment, I had fabricated, with his nephew; by a snarl of chance, his nephew had called at his house in London. Perhaps they had passed each other on the road.

I turned over the card and received a second shock. Across it was scrawled in pencil:—"Will call to-morrow morning at 10. Urgent."

"Curse the luck!" I muttered. "Uncle and nephew will meet and my master will learn that, in spite of his injunction not to leave the house, I disobeyed him. Subsequent discoveries will infallibly re-excite his first and easily smothered distrust of myself!" It seemed to be more than ever important that the secret of the identity of my master's impersonator should be preserved and that not the remotest breath of suspicion should attach to me. Otherwise it would be impossible to improve my fortunes without assuming the naked and hideous character of a blackmailer, the very idea of which was bitterly repugnant to my disposition. I hurried into Sir

William Dagmar's library, lit the gas and caught up a time-table. It informed me that the first passenger train from Newhaven would arrive in London on the following morning at 10.15. I made a hasty calculation. It would take Sir William fifteen minutes to drive from the station, and the train might be a little late, trains often are. If Mr. Sefton Dagmar therefore might be relied on to be punctual, I should have at least half an hour wherein to smoothe out the snarl of fate arranged for my undoing. Much might be done in half an hour! Relieved by the reflection, I put out the light and went upstairs to bed. I was very tired, but I cannot truthfully declare that I slept. Whenever my eyes closed I saw horrid visions. Mr. Cavanagh lying on the floor with his skull shattered and blood oozing from the hole in his head; or a white faced man stretched upon a marble slab with a dreadful bloody cavity in his chest; sometimes a hairy chested ape similarly situated! God defend me from such another night! At dawn I arose from my bed of torture and lay for an hour in a plunge bath filled with hot water. A subsequent ice cold shower and a careful toilet restored to my appearance its pristine freshness, but there were many grey hairs about my temples which I had never seen before. I am not a lover of wine, but I dared not face the day without support, and I derived the stimulus I needed from a bottle of my master's champagne. Afterwards I felt better, but I also felt that I should never be able to smile light-heartedly again. The hours that followed I devoted to thoughts of Marion Le Mar. I admitted to myself that I loved her, and deep down in my heart I knew that for her sake and at her bidding I would sacrifice, if need arose, anything, even my life. It was a strange conviction that, to be entertained by a man like me—a man whose motto had ever been—"First person paramount." And yet I speedily recognized that it was as much a part of me as my hand, and might only as easily be combated or parted with. I had no hope of winning her, however, no hope at all, hardly even a wish. She seemed set as far beyond my reach as the stars, and her contemplation inspired me with a realization of my unworthiness and her divinity which was neither humiliating nor discomfiting. "For," thought I, "the stars shine upon us all, the noble and the base alike, and who shall say that they discriminate between the ardent looks of worshippers?"

The bell rang and I opened the door for Mr. Sefton Dagmar. In one second I comprehended why Sir William disliked his nephew. My master, for all his faults, was a deep-natured man of large mental mould. Before me stood his absolute antithesis. I saw a small, shallow, smiling, cunning face, that betrayed to the keen observer every emotion of the mind. The features were regular, even handsome, yet puny, and the soul that looked out of his eyes was facile, treacherous and sycophantic. He wore a slight yellow moustache, and his eyebrows were white. He looked too young. I judged him to be twenty-five. He was tall and very slight; he wore a pale brown overcoat and a suit beneath of tasteless checked tweed.

"Mr. Sefton Dagmar?" I asked with deference.

He nodded, looking me swiftly up and down. "Uncle in?" he airily demanded.

"No, sir; but I expect him shortly. Will you step inside?"

"Might as well," he drawled, but he entered with alacrity, and I led the way to the ante-chamber.

"Where is my uncle?" he enquired, as I removed his overcoat.

"I do not know, sir?"

"He got my card, I suppose?"

"Not yet, sir. He has been away."

"All night?"

"Yes sir."

He whistled then faced me with a cunning smile. "You are new," he began. "Where is Butts?"

"He left a month ago."

"What is your name?"

"Brown, sir?"

He nodded, eyeing me as a cat might a mouse. "You look a good sort," he declared presently. "How do you get on with my uncle, Brown?"

I affected to hesitate. "Fairly well, thank you, sir," I replied stammering a little.

"That means damned poorly," he retorted, nodding his head again. "Oh! I know him, Brown; I know him, you need'nt tell me. Why Brown, I'm his only living relative, his sole heir, and how do you think he treats me?"

"I'm sure I don't know, sir?"

"He allows me a paltry three hundred a year, on the condition that I live in Newhaven with a beastly solicitor fellow to whom he made me sign articles!"

"That seems very hard, sir."

"Hard, Brown," he cried, his eyes a gleam, "Hard! you call it hard! Why the old monster is a millionaire, and as I told you before I am his only living relative!"

I put on an expression of shocked sympathy. "It is almost incredible!" I gasped.

He gave me a grateful look. "It is true, though!" he declared, "true as gospel. And the only excuse he could rake up for doing it was that I outran the constable a bit at Oxford. He's the meanest old skin-flint in the United Kingdom!"

"I wish I could help you, sir," I murmured in my most reverential manner. "It seems very hard and really wrong, sir, that a nice handsome young gentleman like you, if you'll pardon me for speaking so, sir, to your face, should be tied up in a little village like Newhaven when you might be enjoying yourself and seeing life in London and Paris, sir!"

"As I ought to be," he cried hotly, evidently stirred to anger at my picture of his misfortune. "It's a cursed shame, Brown, a cursed shame!"

"It is indeed, sir. I only wish I could help you, sir."

He gave me a thoughtful look. "You never know," he muttered, "the mouse helped the lion!"

I nearly laughed in his face, but controlling the impulse I said instead—"And with the best of good will, sir!"

"You're a damned good fellow, Brown!" he cried with energy. "And when I am Sir Sefton Dagmar I shall not forget you." His voice sank into a low confidential key. "By the way, Brown, there is a small service you might render me."

"Anything," I answered eagerly, "I'd do anything for *you*, sir!"

He grinned with pleasure, the callow youth. "It's nothing much," he muttered. "Only I want you to tell me exactly how your master is—the state of his health, I mean. I can never get any satisfaction out of him, and I have a lot of friends who want to know." He sighed and frowned.

Post obit bond-holders—was my reflection.

"I don't think he will live very long, sir," I whispered, looking nervously about me. "At night he coughs something dreadful, sir, and he just lives on medicines."

Mr. Sefton Dagmar's face looked for a moment like that of a happy cherub.

"Do you really think so, Brown?" he cried excitedly.

"I'm sure of it, sir."

"Well, see here, Brown, when he dies, I'll make you my man, if you like!"

"Will you really, sir?" I tried to look extravagantly delighted.

"Yes—and I'll give you twice as much screw as you get now, whatever he gives you. But for that I'll expect you to do some things for me in the meanwhile." He looked me keenly in the eyes.

"Anything at all, sir," I protested.

"Very good. I want you to drop me a line every week to tell me how he is, and if he takes any sudden turn for the worse you may send me a telegram."

"Certainly, sir. Is that all?"

"No!" He glanced anxiously towards the door. "No one can hear us, can they?"

"There's no one in the house, sir, but you and me."

"That's famous; well, Brown, see here, I'm heavily in debt and some of the beggars are pressing me into a corner. That's why I came up to town."

"Yes, sir!"

"And—and—" his face changed colour, "there is a woman too!" he stammered, "an actress!"

"There's always a woman, I should think, where a handsome young gentleman like you, sir, is concerned," I murmured with a sympathetic smile.

His vanity was tickled, but the conceited grin my words had called to his lips quickly faded into a look of anxiety. The matter was manifestly serious.

"They are the devil, Brown," he solemnly assured me. "This one has got me into a dickens

own mess, she's as pretty as a picture, Brown, but a perfect brute all the same!"

"Breach of promise, sir?"

He nodded, with a lugubrious frown. "I've been served with a writ," he muttered, "and there's nothing for it but to make a clean breast to the governor!"

"Can I help you in any way, sir?"

"I thought you might have something to suggest as to how I should broach it to him, Brown. When is he in the best humour—morning, afternoon or evening?"

"If you'd take my advice, sir," I replied, "you'll not tell your uncle at all, sir. He can't last long, and I should think that, as you are a lawyer, you ought to be able to stave off the proceedings for a month or so. If you were to confess, he'd be bound to be terribly annoyed, and the odds are he'd do you some injury in his will. He knows he is dying, sir."

Mr. Sefton Dagmar turned quite pale. "I never thought of that!" he cried. "By Jove, so he might. He might cut me off with a shilling. The entail is barred long enough ago."

I was dying to get him out of the house, if only for half an hour. I had hit upon the tail end of a plan.

"It would never do to run such a risk!" I assured him. "And if you'll allow me to guide you, sir, you'll run away at once. He will be here in a minute, and the odds are that he'll come in bad tempered."

"I'll go!" he replied. "But, Brown, I'd like to see him, just to be sure how he is looking."

"Then come back in an hour or two. But be sure, sir, and say nothing about your having been here before. He's a terribly suspicious man, and if he thought that you and I had been conferring, he would dismiss me straight off the reel!"

"Never fear, Brown. I wouldn't have you sacked for the world. You'll be too useful to me here."

"I really believe I shall, sir."

In another moment he had gone, and I watched him walking up the street, through a slit in the blind, until he had disappeared. It was exactly twenty minutes past ten. I hurried to my master's study and, quick as thought, turned the whole place topsy turvy. I ransacked his private drawers and scattered their contents broadcast, I even overturned his heap of reference books. I heard the latch turn in the front door as I descended the stairs.

"Oh, it is you at last, sir. Thank God!" I cried as Sir William Dagmar appeared.

He was looking like a ghost, white and utterly wearied out, and his chin was sunk upon his chest; but my words startled him, and he turned on me with compressed lips, in sudden energy.

"What is the matter, Brown?" he demanded.

"Oh, if you please, sir, I have had a terrible night!" (I poured out the words in a perfect stream.) "Just as I was going to bed, sir, it was about eight o'clock, sir, for I was uncommon tired, the bell rang. I went down to open the door and there you were standing, at least I thought it was you, sir. He looked exactly like you, and he spoke like you, sir, and he called me 'Brown,' sir——"

"Great God!" exclaimed my master, and he fell to trembling like a leaf. "What is that you say, but wait! wait!——"

He staggered into the dining room and clutched a decanter of spirit, which he held up with a shaking hand to his lips. He took a deep draught, and then broke into a frightful fit of coughing. I tended upon him as gently as a woman, and half led, half carried him to a sofa, where I forced him to lie down. But his anxiety was in flames, and as soon as he could he sat up and commanded me to proceed.

"What did this—this double of me say and do?" he gasped. "Tell me quickly!"

"He went straight up stairs, sir. He was there about half an hour, and then your study bell rang. He was standing by your desk with your time-table in his hand, sir. He said to me—'I suppose, Brown, you thought I had gone to Newhaven!'

"'Yes, sir,' said I, and he laughed like anything, just as though he was very much amused about something, and all the while I thought he was you, sir. The only thing was, sir, that he wore a different overcoat, and I kept wondering what you had done with your fur coat, sir. He was searching the time-table, and presently, sir, he looked over at me and he said—'Why, Brown, if I'd gone to Newhaven, I couldn't have got back until ten fifteen to-morrow morning.'

"'Indeed, sir!' says I. And at that he simply roared out laughing. 'Brown,' he cries, 'you'll be

the death of me!' I was very much astonished, sir, and I thought that you'd taken leave of your senses, sir, but after you—that is to say—*he*—after he'd got over his laughing—he looks me in the face and says—says he—'Brown, you fool, 'can't you see I'm not your master! Here look at my thumbs!' And sure enough, sir, he had both his thumbs quite complete, sir, and then I knew he couldn't be you, sir! I was that dumbfounded for a bit, sir, that I was ready to sink through the floor, and all I could do was just gape at his hands. Then of a sudden he whips one of them into his pocket, sir, and he pulled out a pistol, which he clapped to my head. 'Listen to me, Brown!' says he, very quiet like, but in a terrible voice, sir, 'Listen to me, Brown!' says he. 'Your master is in Newhaven by now, and he can't get back till the morning. When he comes tell him from me, that his double will find out to-night all he wants to know, and that he'll hear from me within a week. Tell him, too, that he needn't bother suspecting young Sefton, I could have got the young ass to help me if I'd wanted, but he was too great a fool, and I scorn to have him blamed. Tell Sir William I'm playing a lone hand, and that it rests with him to keep it a lone hand. And now, Brown, you just stay here for the next half hour, while I go through the house, and don't you budge, or as sure as death I'll plug a bullet through your brains!'

"With that, sir, he dragged me into a corner, and put my face to the wall—and—and—I stayed there, sir!"

"What!" thundered my master. "How long?"

I began to whimper. "I—I—take shame to admit I played the coward, sir," I blubbed out.

"But if—if you'd heard him—speak, sir—and seen the look in his eyes—sir—you—you—may be ___"

"Enough!" he interjected very sharply. "I'm not blaming you, my man, I'm asking for information. How long did you stay in the corner where he put you?"

"A long while, sir."

"How soon did he leave the house?"

"I don't know, sir. I seemed to hear noises for hours and hours, sir—and—and—" here I broke down with a really artistic sob. "It's turned me quite grey, sir—all about the temples—and I was brown as brown—last evening, sir!"

Sir William got to his feet and placed a hand upon my shoulder.

"There, there, Brown, compose yourself!" he said in kinder tones. "I can see that you have had a great fright, and you were right to run no risks. But tell me did you send for the police after you discovered that the man had gone?"

"I—no, sir," I stammered. "You told me on no account to leave the house!"

"Brown!" he cried indignantly.

"Well, sir—I—I—I—simply daren't venture outside the house, sir!" I blurted out.

My master frowned and shook his head. "Just as well, perhaps!" he muttered to himself. He added in a louder key. "Well, my man, you have given me much to think over, and I have trouble enough upon my hands already."

"Trouble, sir!" I repeated.

"A dear friend of mine is dead. You know him, Brown, Mr. George Cavanagh. He shot himself last night in his studio!"

It was on the tip of my tongue to scream out—"in his studio!" I was so surprised, but I restrained myself just in time and cried instead:—

"Good heavens! sir, how awful! Why did he do it, sir?"

Sir William shrugged his shoulders. "They say that it was in a fit of despair, because the great picture he was painting was accidentally destroyed by fire. But you may read for yourself, Brown, the morning papers are full of it!"

The papers! I had never even thought to look at one. I had been so preoccupied. My master went on speaking. "I'll go upstairs, Brown, and have a bath," he said, "after which I shall attend the inquest!"

"But your double, sir!" I cried. "Ought not we to tell the police at once about him, sir?"

He shook his head. "No, no, Brown. Better not, better not. He is probably some friend of mine who has been playing a practical joke at my expense. Keep what has happened to yourself, Brown. I do not wish to be laughed at!"

"Very good, sir," I muttered dubiously. "But all the same I don't think he was joking, sir. I'll be

bound you'll find he has robbed you. The study is just upside down! I have not tried to put it in order, sir, so that you might see it as he left it!"

Sir William gave me a wan smile. "I keep no valuables in the house, Brown," he replied, "except my manuscripts, and they are worthless to anyone but myself."

Without another word he left the room, and I also hurried out in order to prepare his bath. I did not venture to converse with him again, for he had fallen into one of his impenetrable silent moods which inevitably stirred him to wrath against any interrupter. As soon as I had dressed him he left the house, still steeped in speechless thought. He looked ten years older than he had the previous day, and I felt really sorry to remember the additional cup of fear and horror he would be called upon to drink when he and the others had ascertained the full extent and import of my most recent impersonation.

After he had gone, I snatched open the first paper that came to my hand. It was the *Morning Mail*. I discovered the black scare headline in a second. Yes, sure enough it related how Mr. Cavanagh's valet had found his master lying on the studio floor a little after midnight, stone dead, with a revolver clutched in his right hand. The man had not heard the shot, but he had been awakened by some noise, and he had thought his master had called out to him. He admitted that he was a heavy sleeper, and he did not remember hearing Mr. Cavanagh enter the house. The artist's great picture upon which he had been working for a year, and which was almost finished, was half destroyed by fire, and it looked as though by accident, for a naked gas jet burned perilously close to the easel. The bullet which had killed Mr. Cavanagh had been found by the police embedded in the plaster of a distant wall, near the ceiling. The writer of the article had ingeniously concluded that the artist on entering his studio and observing the fruit of his ardent labours destroyed beyond repair, had, in the first sharp flush of his despair, committed suicide!

As for me, when I scanned the page and considered one by one the circumstantial dovetailing details of that ghastly history—I confess that for a moment I doubted my senses' evidence. A little reflection, however, brought me to a realization of the truth, and a greater respect than ever for a certain eminent surgeon—to wit—Sir Charles Venner. I saw in everything I read, his calm, cold-blooded scheming. On my last glimpse he had been languidly smoking a cigarette, which he must have lighted before the breath had quite departed from poor Cavanagh's mutilated corpse. Perhaps nay, undoubtedly, he had even then been planning how to act, and so arrange matters that no scandal might be associated with the name of his accursed hospital.

As clearly as though I had been present I saw him ordering that dreadful funeral; saw him take Cavanagh's latch-key from his chain; saw him direct one of the negroes to prepare a conveyance; saw him lead the negroes carrying the body to a waiting vehicle—and that silent cortège move across the Heath to St. John's Wood. I saw him then open Mr. Cavanagh's door and noiselessly motion the negroes to bear the corpse within. I watched him dispose the body on the floor with scientific calculation as to the proper direction of the bullet, and then climbing upon a chair or perhaps on the negroes' shoulders force the bullet through the curtain into the plaster. Perhaps that noise had awakened Cavanagh's drowsy headed servant! I saw him approach the easel and set fire to the great picture, so as to supply the world with a motive for the suicide—and finally I saw him steal away with his ebony attendants from the house—three dark malignant spirits, veritable caterers of death!

Somehow I shuddered to think of Sir Charles Venner. I felt him to be a foeman more worthy of my steel than all his fellows, and I half wished, half feared to cross swords with him. It is true that already I had twice managed to out-wit him, and he had not dreamed in either case of doubting my assumed identity. But I could not claim much credit in the latter bout, nor feel much satisfaction, since throughout that awful evening Sir Charles had been too occupied to do more than throw a hasty glance in my direction. What would happen, I wondered, in a real fair battle of wits, each of us forewarned of the encounter? I had profound faith in my powers and resources, but I dared not forecast that issue! Twice we had met, and twice I had succeeded. Would we strive again, and who would win on the third and fatal meeting?

Such were the questions I asked myself unceasingly; but I could answer none of them.

It was not until almost four o'clock in the afternoon that my master returned home, and he was accompanied by Sir Charles Venner and Dr. Fulton. I was at once called into the study and put through a rigid cross-examination, by all three, regarding my pretended visitor of the previous evening. But I had expected such an ordeal, and I came through with colours flying. I was much concerned, however, to perceive that Sir William Dagmar looked very ill. He coughed incessantly and so haggard and careworn was his visage that I believed he would presently collapse. My prognostications were justified by the event. Soon after I had been dismissed the bell rang violently, and I hurried upstairs to see the two surgeons carrying my master's unconscious body to the bedroom. I undressed him there and put him to bed; whereupon they carefully examined him, and held a long and anxious consultation over his condition. An hour passed before he recovered from his swoon, but even when he awoke it was not to his proper senses, for he immediately began to babble a stream of meaningless nonsense. The surgeons looking very grave agreed to administer an opiate, and they injected some fluid hypodermically into his arm.

Sir Charles then informed me that they feared a serious attack of meningitis, and he

promised to send a trained nurse within an hour to look after the sick man. He left at once, but Dr. Fulton remained until my master went to sleep. The nurse arrived half an hour later, and I prepared one of the spare bed-rooms for her use. She was an angular hard-featured woman named Hargreaves, but she had a soft voice and pleasing manners, and she seemed to know her business. Mr. Sefton Dagmar arrived at about seven o'clock. As soon as he heard that his uncle was ill and likely to die, he went half crazy with joy and insisted upon staying in the house. I did not wish him to at all, but there was nothing for me to do except put up with the infliction, and prepare another bed-room. However, he sent me out soon after dinner to despatch a telegram to Newhaven for his baggage, and for that little involuntary service that he did me, I became reconciled to his presence. The fact was, I needed an excuse to quit the house upon business of my own. Ever since my master had swooned I had been thinking very hard, and it seemed to me that if I wished to improve my fortunes, I must strike at once before all the geese, whom I expected to lay me golden eggs, should die. Having sent Mr. Sefton Dagmar's wire, I took a cab to Cheapside and sought out a cheap stationer's shop. I bought some common note paper and envelopes, and begging the loan of a pen, I scratched in straggling print the following epistle to Sir Charles Venner:—

"Sir—If you will inquire at the Colonnade Hotel for Mr. Seth Halford to-morrow evening at nine o'clock, you will be shown to a room, where you will find Dagmar the second. Kindly bring money and come alone!"

I posted this letter at the G.P.O., and returned to Curzon Street. In the morning Sir William Dagmar was in a high fever and raving deliriously. As I had a houseful to provide for, and am not a lover of trouble, I went early abroad and arranged with a restaurateur to supply all our meals. I then drove in a cab to a post office in the Old Kent Road and sent myself a telegram from my dying mother, which arrived at noon. Sir Charles Venner visited his patient at one, and after he had gone I showed my telegram to Mr. Sefton Dagmar and Nurse Hargreaves, both of whom urged me to attend the summons, assuring me that I was not needed at the house. I tearfully allowed their protestations to prevail, and betook myself to my little stronghold in Bruton Street. There arrived, I spent the rest of that day making myself up to represent the old actor whom I had impersonated on the occasion when I had shadowed my master to the Kingsmere Hospital for Consumptives. For a purpose, to be afterwards explained, I furnished my pockets with a small assortment of wigs, beards and moustaches. When darkness fell I issued forth and rode in a cab to the Colonnade Hotel. The clerk stared at me rather haughtily when I asked for a room in so swell a place, but I satisfied his scruples with half a sovereign, which tip no doubt induced him to believe me an eccentric millionaire. I told him that I expected a visitor, my friend, Sir Charles Venner, the great surgeon, at nine o'clock, and desired him to be shown up at once to my bedroom. After that he was all obsequiousness. I dined at the hotel, and to fortify myself for the fray I drank a small bottle of sparkling burgundy. At a quarter to nine I repaired to my room, which was situated near the first angle of the building on turning from the staircase, on the second floor. It was furnished in the ordinary style very plainly and simply. I quickly stripped the dressing-table of its contents and placed it in the middle floor. I set a chair on either side of the table, and I sat down upon the one that faced the door—which I had left unlatched—I then put on a pair of goggles and waited.

Sir Charles Venner was praiseworthy punctual. Big Ben was still chiming the hour when I heard his tap on the panel.

"Come in!" I cried.

The handle turned and he entered, just pausing on the threshold to tip the waiter who had brought him up.

"My dear old chap!" I exclaimed for the waiter's benefit, "this is good of you, as ever, punctual to the tick!"

He closed the door carefully behind him, and advanced towards the table, pulling off his gloves as he did so. I, on the contrary, had been careful to keep my hands thickly gloved, for I wanted those keen eyes of his to have as few recognizing details as possible to remember, and hands are tell tale things, as I had proved sufficiently already.

"I suppose I may be seated!" he began in steady tones.

I nodded, eating him with my gaze. His countenance was perfectly impassive, but his eyes returned my stare with penetrating interest.

He sat down and calmly crossed his knees. "My time is limited," he declared. "Kindly proceed to business. You sent for me and I am here!"

I bowed my head. "True, Sir Charles," I replied in an assumed voice. "I do not propose to detain you long. The Kingsmere Hospital for Consumptives doubtless claims your care, so I shall be as brief as possible!"

I watched him sharply, but he did not turn a hair nor move a muscle. "Go on!" was all he said.

"Shall we avoid details?" I enquired.

"Unnecessary details, sir. But tell me all you know!"

"Not very much!" I said gently. "Unlawful secret society! We'll call that number one, and bracket with it George Cavanagh's death by suicide." A look of relief crossed his face at the word suicide. I smiled and proceeded. "Number two: Vivisection is unlawful—I fancy—and you might be convicted of murder on my showing. It would be for a jury to determine, for all the great surgeon that you are. I think that is enough Sir Charles!"

"Bah!" said he, and a curious gleam came into his eyes. "You can scandalize and perhaps destroy my practice, that is all. I admit you have me in a chain, but take care not to strain the bond too far. I do not depend upon my practice for a living, and in the cause of science I shall dare to face scandal, if you press me!"

"I am glad to hear that you have a private fortune," I answered quietly. "I have the less compunction in asking you to contribute to another man's support. The world's wealth is distributed very unevenly, Sir Charles. Do you not agree with me?"

For the first time a shade of annoyance crossed his face. "I must decline to discuss abstractions with a blackmailer," he replied in irritated tones. "What is your name, and what is your price?"

"My name for the present is Seth Halford, Sir Charles. I shall not deny that it is liable to frequent change—" I smiled—"but I defy you to detect its transmutations, sir, or follow its vicarious possessor to his lair. As for my price, I have no object in withholding that—It is ten thousand pounds!"

"And is it not subject, like your name, to change?"

"Not by so much as one farthing, Sir Charles."

He nodded and got languidly to his feet. "I came here prepared to sacrifice five hundred," he said quietly. "Two in cash, the balance to-morrow. I am not sure that I am not pleased to save the money."

"Will you save it?" I asked.

"Unless you hedge immediately in your outrageously extravagant demand."

"Unhappily, Sir Charles, that is utterly impossible."

"Then I shall save it!"

"How?"

"By calling in the police and arresting you for attempted blackmail."

I broke into a soft rippling laugh. "So—" I muttered, "you only value your neck at five hundred pounds! Such fine and delicate vertebrae they are too!"

The irony brought some colour to his cheek. "My neck is in no danger," he retorted angrily. "What can you prove against us you fool, except that I performed a wonderful operation in the cause of science, in the ardent hope of saving a man's life, and in the sure trust of benefitting the whole human race?"

"But the man died, doctor, and he was one of nineteen! The coroner will shortly have a harvest, nineteen autopsies, Sir Charles! Think of them! Nineteen autopsies!"

"You fool," he repeated in tones of repressed passion, "if there were even ninety—what of it? But enough of this! choose between five hundred pounds and the lock-up. Choose quickly!"

He turned as he spoke and strode to the door. His hand was already on the latch. In another second the door would have been thrown wide. Perhaps there was a policeman in the passage, I thought it unlikely but still—possible! At all events it was time for me to cease trifling with my adversary.

"You appear, Sir Charles Venner, to have forgotten the matter of Cavanagh's death!" I hissed out. "He killed himself at the hospital, and his body was discovered at the studio!"

"That can be explained!" he retorted; but his hand fell softly from the latch. "We have plenty of witnesses who saw his suicide."

"Suicide!" I sneered. "What *of rule three, you one of seven murderers!*"

Sir Charles Venner re-crossed the room and quietly resumed his chair. His face was still as expressionless as a mask, but all the lustre had departed from his eyes.

"What do you know of rule three?" he asked in lifeless tones after a long intense pause.

I knew so little that it seemed necessary to lie. "Enough to hang you," I murmured, smiling

pleasantly. "I should tell you perhaps, my dear Sir Charles, that I have impersonated Sir William Dagmar more often than I have fingers and toes—during the past twelve months. Ha! you start!" I laughed wickedly. "Did you really permit yourself to dream that you have guessed the full extent of my depredations on your order—from your one or two chance and predestined discoveries. Oh! oh! Ha! ha! This is really too good!"

He bit his lips and eyed me sternly. "I shall need better proof than your word," he said.

I nodded, got to my feet and strode to the door. I threw it open and with an elaborate bow pointed to the passage.

"You shall have it," I cried, "but only in the police court!"

"Bluff!" he sneered. "Bluff!" He did not move from his chair.

"Oh!" said I, "you choose to pay yourself a compliment! So you think I would follow your example of a moment since? But you are wrong!" I walked to the electric bell and pressed the button.

Sir Charles Venner's impassivity disappeared like magic. His face turned scarlet and he sprang instantly afoot.

"Curse you!" he grated out, "what would you do?"

"Sir, our interview is at an end. My servant will show you to the street!"

"The sum you ask is utterly beyond our means!"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Five thousand!" he hissed.

I yawned.

"Seven then, though it will ruin us!" he cried distractedly.

I took out a cigarette and struck a light. He watched me expel five puffs of vapour from my mouth, but I did not so much as glance at him. Then a servant appeared in the doorway.

"You rang, sir?" he enquired.

"Yes!" I looked at the fellow approvingly. He was a much stouter man and perhaps an inch taller than I, and he had large feet. He was attired in the hotel uniform. He wore a dragoon's moustache, and he looked like an old soldier. "I wish you to be good enough to show my dear friend, Sir Charles Venner, to the street." I turned to Sir Charles and immediately perceived that my adversary had become my victim.

"When and where shall we meet again?" he muttered hoarsely.

"Ten?" said I. He was grey, grey to his lips. His eyes shone like stars.

"Yes, ten!" he replied.

"I'll drop you a line!" I said with a smile. "But how careless of me, I almost forget my hospital subscription list. How much may I put you down for? You know the cause is a deserving one. Shall we say two hundred pounds?"

"Oh, I suppose so," he said.

"Cash, old chap? Or will you send me a cheque?" I frowned as our eyes met, and he read my meaning.

"I brought the money with me," he replied. "I may as well hand it over to you now. I shall thereby save a postage stamp!" He threw a bundle of notes upon the table.

I smiled again and looking steadily into his eyes held out one hand. "Well, good night to you, old boy—sleep well—and be good till we meet again!"

I fancy Sir Charles Venner had never been submitted to a more intolerable piece of degradation. To be commanded to shake hands with one's blackmailer! His eyes were simply murderous, but he obeyed. It was only a form of course, for our fingers barely touched, but his involuntary shiver of repulsion was communicated to my frame even in that swift contact, and I had enough fine feeling in me to appreciate his passionate disgust. To be candid, I liked him all the better because of it, for although there is not a spark of pride in my composition, a constitutional weakness obliges me to respect pride in other people.

Five minutes after he had gone, I left my room and strolled to the head of the stairs. As I had expected, a gentleman was seated upon the lounge that faced the door of the elevator, I could not see his face for it was concealed behind a newspaper. But I marked one incongruous

circumstance in his apparel. He wore evening dress, and ordinary street boots of black leather. I am afraid I was so vulgar as to permit myself the indulgence of a wink. I passed him and leisurely descended the first flight of stairs. Of a sudden I stopped, and turning about ran upstairs again at the top of my speed, taking three steps at a time. My gentleman had already begun to descend the stairs. I passed him without a glance, swearing in a low but audible key at my forgetfulness. In another moment I was back in my room pressing the electric button. "So!" thought I, "they have employed a detective to shadow me. Well, we shall see!"

Presently a knock sounded on the door, and the waiter entered, who had shown Sir Charles out.

"Shut it," I said. He obeyed.

"What is your name?" I demanded.

"Martin, sir."

"Well, look here, Martin," said I, "my old friend Sir Charles Venner has just bet me a hundred pounds that I cannot succeed in getting out of this hotel in some disguise, without his suspecting me, during the next half hour. Now he is waiting in the vestibule, is he not?"

The waiter grinned. "No, sir, just inside the coffee room door; I was wondering what he wanted. He gave me half a crown, sir."

"Half a crown!" I sneered. "Look here Martin——" I took Sir Charles' own roll from my pocket and selected two brand new five pound notes. "Now Sir Charles thinks himself very smart, and he fancies he can see through a disguise in a second. But I reckon a bit on my smartness too, for when I was a young man before I made a fortune out of mining I was on the stage. With your help, my man, I'll do Sir Charles up, do him brown—and these notes will be yours for helping me!"

Martin's eyes almost burst out of their sockets. "All right, sir!" he cried excitedly. "What do you want me to do?"

"Exchange clothes with me for ten minutes. Here are the notes, my man—I'll pay you beforehand. All I'll have to do to win my bet is to slip out of the house and return. Hurry up, Martin!"

But Martin had already begun to slip off his coat. The bank notes were tightly clutched between his teeth, so he could not reply, but I was rather glad of that. I induced him to remove even his boots, and in five minutes I was to all appearances a hotel waiter. A false moustache gave me a general look of Martin, but a glance in the mirror showed me a bad fault, the long hair of my previous character, the old Shakesperean actor, fell upon my collar, while Martin's hair was cropped closely to his head. But I dared not exchange the wig I was wearing for another in Martin's presence, for fear of exciting his distrust, neither dared I remove my false bushy grey eyebrows.

Difficulties, however, are made to be surmounted. Whispering a word of warning in Martin's ear, I opened the door, and in a loud voice commanded him to procure me a cab. Martin cried out—"Very good, sir!" and I slipped into the passage, banging the door behind me. My trick was successful, the corridor was deserted. In two seconds I had pulled off my wig and substituted another, also I tore off my false eyebrows and stuffed them into my pocket, that is to say, into Martin's pocket. I then strode down the corridor and turned the corner with the brisk step and manner of a waiter going on an urgent message. My gentleman spy was again seated on the lounge that faced the elevator, and once more entrenched behind a newspaper.

He threw at me one quick glance over the edge of the journal, and his face vanished. I had just time to photograph his features on my mind—no more. Running down the stairs I reached the vestibule, which to my delight was thronged with guests. A moment later, having given the coffee room a wide berth, I passed through the open hall door and gained the street. A gentleman was standing on the footpath paying off a cab from which he had just alighted. I sprang into the vehicle and drove to Piccadilly Circus. A second took me to Marble Arch, and a third to Bruton Street. Feeling assured that I had not been followed, I slipped upstairs and into my room.

An hour later, Brown, Sir William Dagmar's discreet valet, stepped out of an omnibus before the General Post Office, letter in hand addressed to Sir Charles Venner. The letter, which was subscribed in printed characters, contained these words:—"To-morrow afternoon, at 4.30, inquire at Bolingbroke Hotel, Piccadilly, for Dr. Rudolf Garschagen. Bank of England notes alone acceptable. Dagmar II."

I slept that night at Bruton Street.

A BATTLE OF WITS

At ten o'clock on the next morning, as I approached my master's house in Curzon Street, I saw Sir Charles Venner's brougham waiting before the door. I thought it highly probable that Sir Charles would require me to give an account of my absence from duty, whether he suspected me or not, for he was in the position of a man obliged by circumstances to suspect everyone, even his nearest and dearest friend. Nerving myself for the encounter, I assumed a dejected and lugubrious expression, and slowly mounting the steps, I inserted my latch-key in the lock. The hall was deserted, but I heard a mutter of voices in the ante-room, and thither I betook myself at once. "Best get it over quickly," was my thought.

The door was ajar, and peering through I perceived Mr. Sefton Dagmar and Sir Charles Venner in earnest converse. Mr. Dagmar's hat was lying upon the table. Sir Charles carried his in his hand. I rapped softly upon the panel and entered.

"Ah, Brown!" exclaimed the younger man. "Back, I see."

"Good morning, sir," I muttered, and turning to Sir Charles I anxiously enquired after my master.

"Your master is much worse!" he replied, looking at me very keenly. "I expect the crisis to-night!"

"He will recover, sir, I hope. You will surely save him, Sir Charles!"

"I don't know!"

Mr. Sefton Dagmar took up his hat and left the room, throwing me a wink as he passed. "I think it's up to me to take a constitutional," he observed, by way of excusing his departure. "Au revoir, Sir Charles!"

"Au revoir!" returned the surgeon. His eyes had never left my face. He waited until we heard the street door close, then he said quietly: "And how is your mother, Brown?"

"She is dead, sir!" I spoke the words in a low, dull tone, but without attempting any exhibition of emotion. I knew better than to play such a game with the man before me.

"I'm sorry to hear that," he observed. "You'll want to attend her funeral, I suppose. When is she to be buried?"

"This afternoon, sir," I answered looking at the floor.

He drew in a long, sharp inspiration, which said plainer than words: "I thought so!"

I understood that he suspected me. I raised my eyes to his, however, with a worried melancholy expression, and I said in a hesitating way. "It's very good of you, sir, to sympathize with me—I'm sure—I—I—I—feel almost emboldened to take a liberty. I'm, I'm in great trouble, sir?"

"Well, Brown?" His eyes were gleaming like drawn swords.

"It's this way, sir," I muttered. "My mother's illness has run away—with my little bit of savings, sir—and—and—the undertaker wants spot cash for the coffin, sir. He won't trust me, and I don't know what to do, seeing master is so ill. It'd be all right, if he was well, for I haven't drawn my last month's wages, sir."

"I see, you wish me to lend you some money."

I hung my head in real artistic shame. "I'd never dare—ask—you, sir!" I muttered brokenly, "but since you've said it yourself, sir, I—I—" I paused as if unable to proceed.

"How much do you need?"

"Five pounds would do, sir. Master owes me eight, and I could make it over to you, if you'd only be so good. You see, sir, I'd hate"—I choked—"a—a—pauper funeral, sir."

"Naturally, my man," his voice was much kinder. "But there will be no need for that. I shall lend you the money with pleasure. Let me see, it's ten now, I shall return to see your master again at twelve and bring the money with me. I have only a few shillings about me at this moment!"

"Thank you, sir," I stammered. "I'll never forget it of you, sir!" At that juncture I allowed a tear to roll down my cheek, as I raised my face to look at him, but I brushed it hastily away, as though ashamed.

He did not appear to notice anything, however, and without another word he left the house. I

considered that I had allayed his suspicions, but I dared not make too sure, for that man possessed a more admirable control of feature than any other I had ever known. I determined, therefore, to be careful and remit no precaution, however small or troublesome, in order to secure myself. To that end I took an early opportunity of confiding my trouble to Nurse Hargreaves, and I almost made her weep by the touching manner in which I described my mother's death.

Sir Charles returned punctually at twelve o'clock and he put five sovereigns into my hand as I admitted him. He was also kind enough to tell me that I might leave the house at once, in order to conduct my mother's funeral arrangements. I took him at his word. My first thought as I stepped into the street was this:—"Am I to be shadowed? And if so, how shall I discover the spy?" The pavement was dotted with pedestrians who all appeared to be minding their own business. I walked briskly towards Piccadilly. Before long I knew that I was followed, I cannot explain how I knew, for although I seized every opportunity I could to look back, I could not locate my shadower; but I felt that I was shadowed, felt it in my bones. I was thrilled, exhilarated! Difficulties and dangers always delight me, and always call, as with a trumpet blast, my best faculties to action. I considered what to do. I might easily have shaken off my pursuer had I wished, but to even display such a desire would inevitably convert Sir Charles Venner's suspicions into convictions. It was my ambition, on the other hand, to destroy his suspicions altogether. An inspiration came to me at Piccadilly Circus. I smothered a cry of delight, and entered an Oxford Street omnibus. The end seat was vacant. I took it, and gazed watchfully behind me. To even a trained observer like myself, it was no easy task to pick out of the great moving throng that followed my conveyance the man whose business was wrapped up in my own. But I did not despair, and set steadily to work. At Oxford Circus I was sure that he had not entered my 'bus. There I alighted and took another to London Bridge. In which of the omnibuses and cabs trailing behind me was he then seated? Nearest of all was a Bank 'bus; I did not believe it contained him. Beyond that an empty hansom rolled along, then a fourwheeler, then a greengrocer's cart, with a smart looking pony between the shafts. I thought he might be in the fourwheeler, but no, it turned down Museum Street. This brought the greengrocer's cart nearer to the empty hansom, and gave me a chance to examine some of the passengers on a Chancery Lane 'bus beyond. At Red Lion Street we pulled up, and the Bank 'bus passed us with a good start, also the empty hansom. I had now a good view of the Chancery Lane 'bus over the greengrocer's cart, and of another 'bus behind that, bound for Gray's Inn Road. We soon passed Chancery Lane, and so lost one more 'bus. The pony drawing the greengrocer's cart was now almost touching our steps with his nose. Not a soul of those who alighted from the Chancery Lane 'bus came our way. I examined the Gray's Inn Road 'bus, but it contained only three women and a boy. Two hansoms now joined the procession, but the first carried an eye-glassed snob, and the other an officer in uniform. I was beginning to feel very puzzled when it suddenly occurred to me to prospect the greengrocer's cart, which hitherto I had scarcely more than glanced at. Two costers occupied the seat, but otherwise the cart was empty. The driver was a real unmistakable hall-marked coster, but his companion gave me a doubt. For one thing, he was smoking a cigar; for another, he held on to his seat in order to support himself; for a third, although he wore no collar, he had a remarkably white neck—for a coster.

"There," said I, "is my man."

I did not look at him again. There was no need. To kill time I bought a paper at the next corner, and diligently studied its contents, until we came to London Bridge, where I alighted, and transferred myself to a New Cross 'bus. I mounted to the top and began to scan the houses that we passed with the closest possible attention. It was not, however, until we left Tabard Street behind and had half traversed the Old Kent Road, that I discovered what I was looking for. This was a "double event"—so to speak. An apartment house and an undertaker's establishment, situated within easy walking distance of each other. Many a coffin shop did I see, and many an apartment house, but they were unhappily too separated for my purpose. The fortunate combination occurred between Astley Street and Ossary Road. First came the undertaker's shop, and then the apartment house. Nothing could have been more suitable. Opposite the latter I swung myself from the 'bus, and stepped upon the footpath. The greengrocer's cart passed me by some twenty yards at a smart trot, then slowed down to a walk. I strode up to the door of the apartment house, and rapped sharply on the knocker. It was a low, grimy, building, with many grimy windows, whose shuttered blinds had once been green, but now were grey with grease and dust. A card in either lower windows signified its calling: "Apartments to let!"

The door was opened by a greasy-faced woman, whose coal black oily locks were crimped in curl-papers. I pushed past her into the hall, without so much as "by your leave," and shut the door behind me. I acted so, lest my shadower should suspect that I visited the house for the first time. The woman at once began to protest at the top of her voice, against my cavalier behaviour. But I cut her short with a sovereign, which she bit, in the fashion of her class, eyeing me the while as though she expected me to snatch it back again.

Silence thus secured, I addressed her in this fashion: "Madam, I am a woodcarver by trade, and a rich old gentleman has just commissioned me to carve a wonderful design upon a coffin in which he wishes to bury his wife who is lately dead. My master, however, jealous at my good fortune, has dismissed me from his employ, and as it is necessary for me to get immediately to work, I must hire a room in the neighbourhood without delay. If you have a front room on the ground floor which you can let to me, I shall be glad to pay you for it at the rate of one pound for

every day I use it in advance, and give you the pound you are biting, into the bargain!"

"Lawks!" she cried, then uttered a croaking laugh. "You must be getting well paid for the job!"

"A hundred pounds!" I replied.

"No wonder you are in a hurry."

"Have you such a room as I require?" I demanded impatiently.

She opened a door at her right hand, and showed me a musty guest chamber, which still smelt of its former occupant, who must have been a tanner, I should say.

"It will do," I declared.

"Yes, but will you bring the coffin here?"

"Assuredly."

"Not for a pound a day, though, mister!" she retorted with a cunning smile. "Why, all my boarders would clear out!"

"How much do you want, then?"

"Two quid, not a penny less."

I paid the money into her hand. Her eyes glinted with rage and self-contempt, because she had not demanded three, but I did not choose to heed.

"I shall return in ten minutes with the coffin!" I said quickly. "In the meanwhile that room is mine. Please see that no one goes into it, and do not on any account open the window!"

In another moment I was out of the house, and walking back briskly towards the city, followed at a distance by the greengrocer's cart.

The undertaker's shop was half a mile away. I reached it in less than four minutes, and entered with the air of a busy bourgeois.

"How much that box?" I asked of the proprietor, pointing to an imitation oak coffin that was half hidden behind several more showy constructions.

"Four pounds," said he.

"Could you deliver it at once?"

"No, sir, my carts are all out."

"You have attendants?"

He scratched his head, "How fur?" he questioned.

"Only a few hundred yards down the street! I'm willing to pay an extra five shillings for promptitude." He stepped to an open glass door and shouted—"Jim! Frank!"

Two young men, evidently apprentices, answered his call. I put down four sovereigns and five shillings on the counter.

The undertaker picked up the money, and pointed to my purchase. "Pick out the plain oak and take it to this gentleman's house!" he commanded. "He'll show you the way! Do you want a receipt, sir?"

"I'll call back for it," I replied, and strode from the shop.

The small procession that I headed occasioned a good deal of comment, and excited not a few grisly jests as we proceeded. But I paid no heed to any, and marched along with the expression of a lover lately bereaved of his sweetheart.

One pitiful "poor chap, he looks down in the mug, Bill, don't he?" more than rewarded me for all the honest effort I was putting forth, and compensated for the jokes besides. I looked neither to right nor left, and not once back; but I knew that the greengrocer's cart still steadily dogged my wanderings.

My new landlady admitted us without a protest. I made my attendants place the coffin upon the bed, and dismissed them with a shilling apiece. I then locked the door and crept to the window. I was just in time to see, through a slit in the shutter, the greengrocer's cart set off at a swift trot towards London. Cautiously raising the sash I pushed aside the blind and craned out my head. No, I had not been misled. The road ran straight, and although I watched the cart until it was swallowed up in a maze of other vehicles, near a thousand yards away, neither of the

costers seemed to find it worth while to look back.

I closed the window, and sitting down beside the coffin, laughed until my sides ached. Once again I had crossed swords with Sir Charles Venner, and once again the victory was mine. I did not respect him the less, but I admit that I glorified myself the more. I could not, however, afford much time for self-gratulation. I had a great deal to do, and it was already two o'clock. Stepping into the passage, I shouted for the landlady, and made that astonished woman a present of my coffin. It is evident that she thought me a lunatic, but what cared I for that? In another moment I was hasting down the road, looking on all sides for a cab. An empty fourwheeler overtook me at last, and I drove like mad to London Bridge, where I took a hansom to Bruton Street. I was very hungry by then, but I could not spare a minute for a meal, and I comforted myself with the reflection that, granted a little luck, I might dine that evening in absolute security on the fat of the land, a rich man in veritable deed.

I had once known rather intimately a Polish Jew named Kutnewsky, who had been my fellow lodger in a boarding-house at Leeds. Him I resolved to personate. He was a fat, podgy person, with a hook nose, and a long, thick black beard, and his voice was oily, his foreign accent hideous. All the while I dressed, I practised his voice and accent. I had it at last to a T. The wonderful development of my facial muscles enabled me to raise or depress the tip of my nose at will, so as to lend it either a pug, or a Judaic cast, as I preferred. A false wig and beard with clothes in keeping completed my disguise. I was very soon a Jew—in fact, the double of Kutnewsky. I then packed a small valise with a complete suit of fashionable clothes, which had been originally made for a man of my size, by a Bond Street tailor, and which were still almost brand new, although I had bought them at a rag shop for a song. I included also in my bag, a travelling cap, a white shirt, a doubled linen collar, a smart tie, and a pair of light patent leather boots. The boots I wore were heavy hand-sewn bluchers, two sizes too large for me. I slipped into my pocket a black moustache and a pair of large black eyebrows. Finally, I exchanged my ordinary set of false teeth for a plate planted with hideous yellow fangs, some of which protruded from my lip. At a quarter to four, I was ready to face the world. A glance at the window showed me that a fine rain was falling; I therefore put on a mackintosh, and cramming a glossy silk hat upon my head, I set out armed with my valise and an umbrella. A fourwheeler took me to Oxford Circus, whence a hansom brought me back to Piccadilly and the Bolingbroke Hotel. I presented myself to the clerk, whom I informed in execrable broken English, that I was the famous German Court Surgeon, Herr Dr. Garschagen, just arrived from Berlin, to confer with my equally eminent colleague, Sir Charles Venner, upon a case of great moment, in which my advice had been urgently demanded. I declared that I had telegraphed from Berlin to secure apartments on the first floor, and I became very angry when the clerk protested that my message had not been received, and that there was not a single vacant apartment on the first floor. He, however, very deferentially led me himself to a room on the third floor, which I reluctantly engaged. I told him to send Sir Charles up immediately he arrived, and with a foreign boorishness I slammed the door in his face. My first act was to empty my valise and conceal its contents in a wardrobe. That effected, I arranged the dressing-table just as I had done on the previous day in my room at the Colonnade Hotel, and I set my empty valise thereon. I then removed my waterproof, and putting on a pair of goggles, I sat down to await my victim. As before he was prompt to the fraction of a minute. A small thin-featured waiter ushered him in. As before Sir Charles gave his attendant a shilling and entered the room; I, grinding out the while, a string of guttural, yet oily greetings in broken English. Sir Charles Venner's face was pale, but icily composed. He eyed me for a full minute with a look of piercing hate, then, taking off his hat, he quietly sat down upon the chair I had provided. I followed his example.

"Is Dr. Rudolf Garschagen identical with Mr. Seth Halford?" he asked quietly.

"Undoubtedly, Sir Charles."

"I stood in need of your assurance!" he muttered frowning. "But I confess I should like you to explain the meaning of your present mummery. You were excellently well disguised before!"

I bowed profoundly. "Thank you for the compliment, Sir Charles. I shall explain with pleasure. It is my custom to change my appearance as often as my clothes. The wisdom of this course will be apparent to you, when you consider that you have already confessed to a confused impression of me in your mind!"

His frown grew more black. "You appear to be a confoundedly clever fellow!" he exclaimed in irritated tones.

"I entertain such a lively respect for my opponent that I have tried to show you my best!" I replied, laying a gloved hand on my heart.

"I did not come here to exchange compliments with you," he retorted coldly. "Kindly get to business."

"Have you the money?" I demanded.

"Yes. But I shall not give you a solitary farthing until I am furnished with a substantial guarantee that this will be your last impertinence. My—er—friends and I do not propose to let you hold our souls in pawn."

"What guarantee do you require?"

He took a paper from his packet and tossed it carelessly upon the table. "Read!" said he.

The paper contained a confession that I—a blank was left for my name—on a certain night, stole from Sir Charles Venner, by means of impersonation and fraud, the sum of three hundred pounds.

"I suppose you wish me to sign this?" I asked.

"Certainly, and to disclose your identity besides!"

I smiled grimly and tore the paper into shreds.

"You must be satisfied with my oath, which I give you freely, that you will never hear from me again, Sir Charles. Now, please, the money."

"I am sorry," he said softly. "But we cannot do business on those terms!"

I bowed and got at once to my feet. "Then our interview is at an end!" I moved towards the bell, but I had not advanced two paces when he cried out, "Stop!"

I turned to look into the muzzle of a revolver. Sir Charles Venner's right eye gleamed behind the sights, and his expression was diabolically wicked. I hate fire-arms. They make me nervous, especially when pointed in the direction of my vital organs, by a presumably desperate man. A cold shivering thrill quivered up my spine, and I felt my knee joints loosen. My eyes, however, did not cease to serve me, and with a gasp of reviving hope I noted that the pistol was not cocked. It, however, takes more than a second to recover from such a shock as I had received, and Sir Charles had only perceived my first sharp gush of fear.

"Remove your glasses and your wig!" he commanded in a low but terrible voice.

My impulse was to obey unhesitatingly, but with an iron effort I subdued it.

"Be quick!" he cried.

I smiled. It was a miserable grimace, I dare admit, nevertheless I smiled.

"By the God above us you will die in your tracks, unless you are unmasked before I count six!"

I said to myself—"Oh, no, I shall not. Sir Charles Venner is a consumptive, with at most a year of life before him. Men cling to life most dearly when their days are numbered. Moreover, well he knows, this surgeon, that if he kills me he must hang! and speedily."

"One!" said he.

I smiled again.

"Two!"

"You are a great mathematician!" I sneered, and bowed to him.

"Three!"

"Murder me some other time, Sir Charles!" I muttered, "when you may do so with some hope of giving the penalty leg bail!"

"Four!" he cried, in a voice that froze my blood. And with his thumb he raised the hammer of the pistol.

"You will hang!" I gasped. "You will hang, and we shall meet in Hell!"

"Five!" he hissed.

"Fire!" I cried. It was the most courageous act of my life!

Sir Charles Venner let his hand fall, and his eyes. I heard a click, and I watched him restore the pistol to his pocket. In one second he had aged ten years. He was now an old man, haggard faced and trembling.

I strode to the bell and pressed the button. I had won the battle well—woe to the vanquished! I stalked over to the door and threw it wide. "Get out of this!" I grated. "Get out of this and go—hang yourself if you want to cheat the hangman. You've had your fun, and now by heaven! I'll have my pound of flesh!"

He raised to me the face of a panic-stricken craven. "For Christ's sake!" he cried, and even pleaded with his hands. He was beaten indeed. Not only his courage, but his pride was shattered into fragments. I surveyed the wreck I had occasioned, and relented.

"Well, then!" I said, "the money!"

With feverish hands he tore from his coat a small bundle of notes and forced them upon me.

"Count them, count them!" he mumbled.

"Go!" I ordered sternly.

"But, but—your oath!"

"I'll keep it—go!"

He uttered a hollow groan, and rushed out of the room.

I looked at the notes. They were brand new, and ten in number. Each represented one thousand pounds. Hearing footfalls I concealed them, and a second later, there came to me the small thin-faced waiter who had conducted Sir Charles to my apartment.

I gave him a florin, and said. "I want a man, big—my own size—just like me—to carry a box. You are too small. Send me a man like I want at once, but he must belong to your hotel, I can trust no strangers!"

The fellow bowed and promised, and hurried off. I put on my hat, and as soon as he had disappeared, I followed him. A gentleman stood by the elevator door, as though waiting for it to ascend. I passed him, and began to descend the stairs. He immediately rang the bell three times. Was that a signal, I wondered. I returned very quickly, but he still stood there, and he did not seem to be aware of my existence. But he rang the bell *once*. I again began to descend the stairs. Again the bell rang three times. I came to the lower floor, and there another gentleman was standing before the elevator door. I passed him and he rang the bell twice. "How curious!" thought I, "my room is on the third floor of the hotel. There the bell was thrice rung; but on the second floor only twice, and most remarkable coincidence of all, the elevator does not trouble to appear!" I had left the second floor—I returned to it! The waiting gentleman rang once! I was satisfied. "Sir Charles Venner," said I, "has put at least three detectives on my trail!"

I marched straight up to the elevator door and rang the bell myself—one long continued ring. It appeared at once. "Ze third floor!" I muttered to the attendant. "Ich haf forgotten zomding!" I gave the man a shilling, and a moment later I was back in my room with the door shut. I began to undress, and when the knock that I expected sounded, I stood in my socks and underclothes alone.

"Come in," I cried.

A burly red face waiter entered. He wore a short black beard at the sight of which I rejoiced. "Shut the door!" said I. He obeyed.

"Mein friendt!" said I, looking at him very keenly, "do you vish to earn a sovereign?"

"Rather!" he cried.

"Then vill you go a message for me!"

"Yes, sir—"

"You see dose boots." I pointed to the pair I had removed.

"Yes, sir."

"Take off your own and put on dose. You are going to valk through some mud, and as it rains I do not vish you to catch cold. They will fit you!" I added, for he seemed to hesitate. He looked extremely astonished, but he sat down and did my bidding. I smiled upon him very genially. "If you do well, I shall double your reward!" I said. "What is your name, my man!"

"Clint, sir."

"Very good, Clint. Now I vant you to leaf zis hotel without any von knowing dat you go! I tell you vy ven you come back. Here, take zis zovereign."

He took it, but he frowned. "I'd get into a row, sir, if it was known," he muttered doubtfully.

I gave him another sovereign. "Don't you vorry apout dot row," said I. "I fix you wit your boss. I not vant you to do nozzing wrong, my boy, hein?"

"No, sir, of course not!" He looked much happier.

"Zen put on zis waterproof of mine, so. Button it opp to ze chin. Ach, Himmel, zat is goot! Now mein friend, zis cap, so! button ze flap under ze chin! So, sehr goot, your mutter not know you now, hein!"

He looked in the glass and laughed aloud at his reflection. I took off my goggles and handed

them to him. "Put on dose!" I said, "und dat is all!"

He obeyed me, and I almost shouted out in my delight, he looked so very like a man disguised.

"Now mein friendt, you can go!" said I.

"Where to, sir?" he enquired.

I gave him a handful of silver. "You take a cab," I began, "and you drive to ze Marble Arch, zere you get out, und you take a 'bus to Cricklewood, you mind dat?"

"Yes, sir."

"Vell, ven you come to ze Cricklewood terminus, you find a man zere waiting for you—a big Sherman gentleman, like me. You say to him: "Doctor!" und he vill take you at once across a hill to his house, und he give you a small box! You bring that box back to me quick, und take care not to lose it—for it is vorth much geld—zat is money. You know now what you do? Hein?"

He assured me that he understood, and would follow my instructions to the letter, whereupon I dismissed him to his fate. In another moment I had changed my fang teeth for a more fashionable set, and ten minutes later I slipped out of the passage, locking my door behind me, as smart a dude as ever stepped from a Bond Street band-box. My facial disguise consisted of a monocle, a dark wig, black eyebrows, and a sweet little silky black moustache. I walked with mincing steps, and I screwed up my features till they looked as vacuous and expressionless as possible. I found on turning the corner that a gentleman, whose figure I recognized, was standing before the elevator door. For a second I went cold. "Had my decoy then failed of its purpose?" I asked myself. In a fever of anxiety I began to descend the stairs, straining my ears to listen. No signal bell rang—but I heard swift footfalls in the passage. In a flash I understood. Two of my three shadowers had followed the waiter, Clint, but the third had remained behind to watch my room. He would certainly be furnished with a master key, and within a minute, he would open my door and discover my escape. Moreover, he would know for certain whom he must thenceforth follow, for he had given me a sharp look as I passed him.

Instead of hurrying, however, I walked more leisurely than before. Three spies would have been too much for me, but one I did not care for. I felt confident I would elude him as soon as I pleased. As it transpired we reached the ground floor almost together, for he descended in the elevator. I took a good look at him, and marched to the street door. Beckoning to a porter, I directed him in mealy tones to fetch me a hansom. One stood already by the kerb, but instinct told me that it belonged to my spy. The porter blew his whistle, and a second hansom soon appeared. I threw the porter half a crown and sprang aboard. "Streeters', Bond Street!" I cried, and we were off. My mission was to dispose of my bank-notes; for well I knew that their numbers would be noted, and that the longer they remained in my possession the more certainly would they provide a clue to the ultimate establishment of my identity. On the other hand, to pay them into my bank would have been equivalent to making a present of my secret to my enemy. I would, it is true, lose something by the exchange, but I could well afford to pay handsomely for my security. My shadower followed me so closely, that I perceived he was no longer anxious to conceal his occupation. We alighted from our cabs within ten paces of each other, and he trod upon my heels as I entered the great jewellers. I had a mind to turn and offer him my arm. I bought two magnificent necklaces, and a long string of splendid brilliants under his very nose, paying therefore my £10,000, and receiving two hundred pounds in change. I then purchased a little brooch for twenty guineas. As we left the shop, I nodded kindly to my shadower, and advised him in an underbreath to be careful. He made no reply, but he gritted his teeth together in the manner of a bull-dog. He looked rather like a bull-dog too, in other respects. He had a long forehead, great heavy jaws, and little watchful eyes. The clocks were striking a quarter to six as we resumed our hansom. I drove to the Alhambra Music Hall and purchased a stall. I then proceeded to Verrey's restaurant and ordered a first-rate dinner. My spy took a seat at my table without asking my permission, and we gazed at each other steadily while we discussed the meal. But while I ate roast pheasant, he partook of beef, and while I drank sparkling Burgundy, he absorbed a quart of bitter beer. I would have engaged him in conversation, for I am of a sociable disposition, and I bore him no ill-will, but the fact is, he was an extremely vulgar fellow, and if I had not been simply ravenous, his table manners must infallibly have destroyed my appetite. When I could eat no more, I bought from my waiter a sheet of note-paper, an envelope, and a lead pencil. I then smoked a cigar, and when eight struck, I drove to the theatre. My shadower secured a seat three rows behind me. I studied the programme, and discovered that the second succeeding item was to be a song dance performed by a lady named Pearl Glynn. I had never heard of her, but I know her class as well as any man that lives. Taking out my pencil and paper, I scratched the following epistle: "Dear Miss Glynn,—A humble adorer begs you to accept the enclosed, and to grant him a moment's interview, before your turn." I slipped this into the envelope together with the brooch I had bought at Streeters' for twenty guineas; I addressed it and beckoned to an usher. I gave it to him together with a wink and half a sovereign. He returned in ten minutes and begged me to follow him. I got up and glanced at my spy. He also got up, looking horribly uneasy. But I knew the theatre and he did not. I fancied I could hear him gnash his teeth, in impotent rage, to see his quarry escaping under his nose. As I approached the wing door leading to the stage and dressing rooms with my conductor, I took care not to lose sight of him. Oblivious of the comfort of those who obstructed him, he was toilfully climbing over empty

fauteuils, or squeezing his way between rows of people in my wake. I feel sure that many of his victims thought him mad, but I heartily admired him for his energy and perseverance, and just before the door closed behind me, and upon him, I turned and kissed my hand to him in token of appreciation. I knew well what he would do. Finding he could not pass the door, he would turn and rush out of the theatre to wait for me at the stage-door in the other street. I stopped dead and addressed the usher.

"My man," said I, "I have changed my mind. I'll go back."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Just as you like, sir," he replied.

In fact, we immediately returned into the auditorium, and two minutes later, I had traversed the promenade, descended the stairs, and was running like a hare across Leicester Square; alone, alone!

A cab took me to Bruton Street, and nine o'clock had barely struck when I was once again plain Brown, Sir William Dagmar's discreet and faithful valet.

I have never been intoxicated in my life, but it is often wise to assume a virtue, though you have it not, as the old proverb advises.

It seemed good to me to be drunk just then, and better still, the nearer I approached my master's house. As I mounted the steps I reeled. It cost me eighty seconds of painful effort to find the keyhole. I did not, as it happens, use it even when found, for the door opened suddenly, and I staggered forward into Sir Charles Venner's arms. I had expected him to confront me, nevertheless, it shocked me to find my expectations realized, and to be convinced how tenaciously he had clung to his first suspicions. I picked myself up and stood before him, a swaying, blinking maudlin figure. With much circumstance and drunken gravity, I explained to him that I had buried my mother, and that to steady my nerves I had taken afterwards a single glass of wine, which must surely have been drugged. Sir Charles treated me as tenderly as any woman could have done. He pretended to believe my story, and he protested that the rascally landlord, who had drugged me, deserved richly to be prosecuted. He guided me to my bed-room, and assisted me to bed. He then declared that he would prepare me a reviving draught, and taking a tumbler from my dressing-table, he dissolved with water a couple of tiny white pillules, which mixture he persuaded me to drink. I knew his purpose, of course. He wished to search me. But I was in no wise alarmed nor unwilling, for I had left everything I possessed at Bruton Street, and my pockets contained only my keys, and half a handful of loose silver. Saying to myself: "Morphia!" I swallowed the draught, and even drained the glass. Within five minutes I was sleeping like the dead, whereupon Sir Charles Venner searched to his heart's content, poor man.

VII

A DREAM OF LOVE

I awoke with a racking headache and an uneasy sensation that I had overslept myself. I sprang up and dipped my head into a basin of ice-cold water. That tranquillized the pain I suffered, yet my uneasiness continued, nay, it became intensified when I glanced at my watch, and saw that it was after nine o'clock. Very hastily I began to dress, but ere I came to my collar I paused and reflected. I am not a particularly introspective man, nor more than a skin-deep psychologist, but it was not a difficult thing to trace to its source the cause of my uneasiness. It patently derived its origin from the habits of servitude to which I had submitted myself during the last three months. There suddenly occurred to me to ask myself this question: "Agar Hume, how long will you permit such habits to persist?" I answered at once: "Why, a day or two, at most!"

The fact is, I was a rich man, and the pride of purse, the first pride I had ever experienced, was beginning to swell my head already.

In my room at Bruton Street I had almost five hundred pounds in cash, as well as jewels for which I had last night paid £9,800. I possessed, moreover, a credit balance at my bank of exactly one hundred and forty-two pounds. I considered therefore that it would be absurd for me to continue playing the lackey to my master for a beggarly eight pounds per month, when a sufficient capital was ready to my hands, with which, and one or two smiles of the fickle goddess, I could make myself a millionaire. I forthwith determined to quit Sir William Dagmar's service as soon as possible. Yes; that very morning I would leave! Why linger, when every day now spent in Curzon Street postponed my advancement in life, and perhaps wasted opportunities for self-aggrandisement that might never return. Such a course would certainly awaken and fortify Sir Charles Venner's suspicions, but what cared I for that. He could prove nothing against me, and, besides, I would soon be utterly beyond his reach. It was my idea to go to France; there realize upon my jewels, and with the proceeds speculate upon the Bourse. If I won, well and good! If I

lost, also well and good, there was always England and the blackmailing business to fall back upon! My only regret in departing was contained in this fact. Although I had met with marvellous success in exploring the secrets of my master's ghastly society of consumptives, I had by no means plumbed all its depths. The mystery of the monthly dicing by the members for the £7,000 cheque was still unexplained, and I could not think of it without tasting something of the torture that afflicted Tantalus. It was not only curiosity that plagued me. I am a good workman and, like every other really conscientious artisan, it distresses me to see a job blotched or scamped for the lack of a little skill or perseverance. For that reason in particular I hated the thought of leaving any part of the task which I had set myself to perform unfinished. Nevertheless, I felt that I should be standing in my own light if I allowed personal vanity to prevent me from seizing the earliest opportunity to improve my fortunes.

"Yes; I'll go!" said I aloud at last; and I leisurely completed my toilet. I then packed into a bag my few belongings, and proceeded noiselessly downstairs, resolved to enjoy a last breakfast at my master's expense, and thereafter bid the place a long farewell. The house was very silent. Sir William's door was shut, and no one appeared to be awake. So much the better, thought I, and having arrived upon the ground floor, I pushed open the pantry door and entered.

To my surprise, Nurse Hargreaves was standing before the table, with her back to me, doing something; but what, I could not see. She had not heard my approach, that was evident, for she did not turn her head. The stove was ablaze and the kettle was merrily singing. Perhaps its song had drowned my footfalls.

"Making a poultice, nurse?" I asked, stepping forward.

She started at my voice and turned. I uttered a little cry, then with a curious heart thrill I caught my breath and paused, transfixed, overwhelmed! I looked not at Nurse Hargreaves, but into the eyes of Marion Le Mar.

"Ah!" she murmured, "you thought I was Nurse Hargreaves?"

"My name is Le Mar!" she went on, turning calmly to her work again. "Nurse Hargreaves has gone to another case. I have taken her place!"

She was just as beautiful, nay, rather more beautiful than ever, in spite of her expression of deep melancholy and the dark sleepless hollows that undercast her eyes. I watched her—dumbstricken, but with all my heart in the looks with which I worshipped her—and through the while I gladly wondered how for one instant I could have forgotten that incomparable woman. I had forgotten her! I had coldly purposed to leave England and her. But already that resolve was dead and buried. Not even to make myself a millionaire could I forego the rapture I discovered in gazing on her face; and to remain now, meant that I should dwell under the same roof!

I forgot my life governing maxim at that moment: "First person paramount!" I was the slave of a woman, who had never seen me in my proper person until then, and who seeing me at last had turned carelessly away, after one swift unlingering regard. It was a galling thought, but it possessed no influence except to wound. I loved her and I knew it. I knew besides that her heart was buried in a dead man's grave. And yet I, the most selfish wretch alive, there and then bowed my head to fate, and in sad humility determined to sacrifice my fortunes to the uncertain chance of serving her and the sure bliss of seeing her and breathing the air she breathed.

Life is a very marvellous affair, and so too is love. I have never professed to understand either. Therefore I shall make no pretence to explain nor even speculate upon my strange experience. I shall merely relate what passed as best I may.

Marion's interest in her occupation was sincere, but it did not prevent her mentally remarking on my silence. I saw her brows contract at length, and soon afterwards she spoke, but without looking up.

"You are Brown, I suppose?"

"Yes—at—at least," I stammered, "that is how Sir William Dagmar calls me."

"Indeed! What then is your name?"

"Agar Hume, madam."

She gave me a glance of nascent curiosity, and asked me to pour some boiling water in a bowl. I complied, and she prepared to leave the room. Her poultice was made.

"Pardon me," I said. "How is Sir William this morning?"

"Still very low, although sensible. His crisis is past, however, and Sir Charles Venner feels confident he will recover."

"Thank you!" I bowed gravely. "Permit me, madam, to relieve you of that burden."

"Please do not trouble."

"Madam, pardon me, but I insist!"

She raised her eyebrows, but she gave me the bowl. I read her thoughts; they said: "This valet has borrowed manners from his master. He might almost pass for a gentleman."

My cheeks burned. I followed her upstairs and into my master's room.

Sir William Dagmar was awake. He looked a mere skeleton, and his transparent face was as white as the coverlid.

He greeted me with a wan smile and a hoarse whisper: "It is good to see you again, Brown," he muttered. "It proves to me that I am on the mend."

I took his feeble hand and pressed it gently. At the bottom of my heart I really liked the man. "You must make haste and get well, sir," I said softly. "The world grows impatient for your book."

Ah! vanity! Sir William's cheeks flushed, and a warm light flashed into his deep thoughtful eyes. "I'll not keep it waiting a minute longer than I can help!" he cried. But at that Marion stepped forward and compelled me from the room.

It was a keen pleasure to prepare her breakfast. I gave her the things that I myself liked best, and half an hour later it fed my vanity to watch her eat. I waited upon her, but she did not speak to me throughout the meal. Nurse Hargreaves had once insisted upon my sitting down with her to table. But somehow I preferred to serve Marion as a flunkey, rather than dine with any other woman in the world.

Presently she gave me instance of her spirit. Mr. Sefton Dagmar entered the room when she had almost finished.

"Ah, Brown!" said he, "I'm late as usual. Good morning, Miss Le Mar; you are looking rather pale. Did the old buck give you a bad night?"

The vacuous puppy! Marion blushed and her eyes glittered.

"Do you refer to your uncle?" she asked in freezing tones.

"Well, now," he replied with a leer of admiration, "who else would you suppose? Much better have taken my tip and gone with me to a music-hall, my dear. You are too doocid pretty a girl to be tied up by a sick bed. Waste of charms, and all that sort of thing."

Marion arose from her chair, and with a curling lip, swept out of the room. I darted forward to open the door for her, but she passed me in disdain, without a glance. Mr. Sefton Dagmar laughed loud and long. But I was mad with him, and malice prompted me to cut his laughter short.

"Sir," said I, "have you seen Sir William this morning?"

"No!" he cried, "have you?"

"Yes—he has rounded the corner. He is sensible again, and Sir Charles Venner declares that he is on the high road to recovery!"

"Hell and curses!" gasped Mr. Dagmar. "Is that true?"

"Too true!" I heaved a sigh, but in truth his despairing rage had thoroughly delighted me. He had insulted Marion.

"What in blazes am I to do?" he muttered, pushing his plate aside with savage gesture. His appetite had incontinently vanished.

"If I were you, sir," I ventured gently, "I should return at once to Newhaven. If your uncle knew you were here, who knows what he might say?"

"Be damned if I do!" he snapped. "It may be only a flash in the pan. Curse me, if I don't go up and have a look at the old boy myself."

I began to protest at once, but he hurled an oath at my head and rushed out. Desperation had lent him a rat's courage. I followed quickly, but he was already in the sick-room before I reached the door. There I paused and silently surveyed the scene. Marion, as though conscious that her patient would dislike to see his visitor, had swiftly interposed herself between Mr. Sefton and the bed, and by signs she now forbade the young man to advance.

Sir William was asleep.

"Kindly stand aside," muttered Mr. Sefton Dagmar; "I intend to see my uncle, and you won't prevent me!"

"Another time," whispered Marion, whose eyes were simply ablaze. "You cannot see him now; he is asleep!"

What wild fancy possessed the young man I do not know. Perhaps the fool imagined that his uncle was dead, and that for some base, esoteric purpose Marion wished to hide his death. At all events, he suddenly stepped forward and thrust her brutally aside.

The noise of that scuffle, slight as it was, awakened the sick man. His eyes opened and he looked up to gaze upon his nephew's rage-distorted visage. "You here!" he gasped.

Mr. Sefton Dagmar turned grey. "I—I—I—hope—I hope you're feeling better, sir!" he stammered.

"Why are—you—in London?" whispered Sir William.

"I—I—your illness, sir."

"When did you come up?"

"Last night, sir," lied the nephew.

The uncle closed his eyes, and appeared to reflect. A moment passed and then very silently he opened them again. "Marion!" he said.

She stepped to his side. She still seemed greatly agitated.

"Make him go!" whispered the sick man very faintly. "Make him leave my house at once. Tell Brown!"

The words died in a sigh. He closed his eyes once more and to all appearances he slept.

Marion turned to Mr. Sefton Dagmar with the imperial manner of a queen.

"You heard, sir!" she said coldly.

The young man for a moment made no reply; then he broke into a snarling stream of words.

"I see how it is," he hissed. "You are using your infernal prettiness to cheat me out of my inheritance. I've heard of your sort before. 'Marion' he called you—'Marion!' Perhaps you've wormed a will out of him already. Perhaps you want to marry him on his death bed! Oh! I know your sort. Of course, you'd like to turn me out of the place neck and crop; I might interfere with your precious scheming, hey? But I'm not going to let you fleece me. Not much. Here I am, and here I stay! Do your damndest——"

What further insults the vulgar ruffian might have heaped upon the beautiful woman he confronted I cannot guess. But at that juncture Marion threw me a glance of passionate entreaty, and my heart leaped to answer her appeal.

In another second I had him by the throat, and in still another I had hurled him sheer across the room and through the door. Before he could arise I was at his throat again. No man was ever nearer death than he, for I am physically strong, and at that while I was fairly lunatic with passion.

It was Sir Charles Venner that saved his life. The surgeon, who, it seems, had possessed himself some time since of my master's latch-key, entered silently in the midst of the fracas, and he pulled me from my already black-faced prey.

I got to my feet, shaking like a leaf, and hardly conscious where I was. My master's door was shut, and Marion stood against it, her two great eyes burning out of her sheet-white face. She too was trembling violently.

"What is all this?" demanded Sir Charles, stirring the insensible Sefton Dagmar with his foot.

"Brown is not to blame," muttered the girl. "Sir William ordered him to make Mr. Dagmar leave the house. He—he had forced his way into the sick-room!" She gave me once more an appealing glance, as though asking me to substantiate her story. "That—that is all!" she concluded with a sob.

"Mr. Dagmar resisted me," I added quickly. "He made a dreadful scene in the sick room. Upon my soul, sir, I believe he wished to kill his uncle!"

Sir Charles nodded. "Not unlikely," he remarked indifferently enough. "Carry the blackguard downstairs, Brown. Now, Marion, by your leave I'll see my patient."

They disappeared, and I, stooping, lifted young Dagmar in my arms and carried him below. When he recovered he gave me a look of murderous malignity, got silently to his feet, and staggered to his room. Ten minutes later he departed from the house without sparing a word to me or any other there. I was glad to see his back, for although I bore him no ill-will, I had no longer any manner of use for him.

Sir Charles Venner soon afterwards was good enough to pay a visit to my pantry.

"Was that Mr. Dagmar who went out a while ago?" he demanded.

"Yes, Sir Charles."

"Did he take his traps?"

"Yes, sir."

"Don't admit him again, Brown. He has upset your master very much. By the way, I am pleased with you Brown; you acted very properly. You need not repay me the money that I lent you, my man. I wish you to keep it as a little present—from me."

"Oh, sir!" I cried, "I could not think of doing that. I shall always be indebted to you by the memory of your kindness and glad to be, Sir Charles. But you must let me pay you back the money."

"Well, well; I'm not sure but what I like you the better for that spirit, Brown. Yet I think you are a fool."

"It is the way I was made, sir," I murmured apologetically. "Thank you kindly all the same."

He nodded and left. His suspicions were dead, that was evident. I thought it very funny, but I was less pleased than I might have been. My unwavering run of success, God knows why, was beginning to give me a Dead Sea flavour in the mouth. Perhaps Marion had something to do with it. Indeed, I could not drive her from my thoughts, except to con my own rascality. Whereon this wonder speedily arose: what would she think of me if she could know?

At about eleven o'clock she appeared in the door armed with her inevitable bowl. "I must make another poultice!" she announced.

I begged her to take a seat and direct me. She was so weary that it was easy to persuade her. And thus I entered upon her service and became a nurse.

She spoke never a word of that which had happened over stairs, but I thought I detected in her bearing a growing, if melancholy, tolerance, and perhaps some small faint trace of interest in myself. At any rate, she watched me at her work, and that was something benedictive to my mind. Silent was her mood, however, and silence suited her. It ever seemed a pity that speech should be allowed to mar the perfect calm of her reposeful countenance—until she spoke—when instantly one lost regret in wonder at the new and unexpected graces so called into existence.

During the next few days the world dealt kindly with our household. Sir William's strength very gradually improved; Marion relaxed a little of her habitual sadness, and as for me, I had never been so happy in my life. I only left the house on one occasion, in order to convey my valuables from Bruton Street to the bank. After that was done, I felt minded never to quit Curzon Street again so long as our then manner of living might continue. I spent my time between the sick room and the pantry; relieving Marion of every trouble that I could, and waiting on her with the noiseless patience of a shadow. In this I was wise, without other intention than to please her. My silence began to appeal to her imagination even more than my ceaseless studied courtesies. And in this behalf I would remark my faith that no woman lives, howso preoccupied with grief or other interests, who can long remain impervious to persistently considerate devotion. I often caught her watching me with grave, inquiring eyes. On such occasions it was I, not she, who exhibited confusion. I could not act to her. Sometimes feeling her power I grew quite terrified. Did she study me? I wondered, and what was her opinion? I was soon to know.

One evening Sir William dropped into a deep slumber far sooner than his wont. The room adjoining his I had converted from a dressing-chamber into a boudoir for Marion's convenience; and there she had become accustomed to retire, when circumstances permitted, to rest and dream perhaps, within his call. There it was I found her, replying to the summons of her bell.

"You rang, madam?" I asked in a low voice. She was reclining in a lounge. She had discarded her nurse's costume for a wrapper, and she looked the better for it; more softly lovely and more human, too, I think.

She pointed to a chair. "Will you not talk to me a while?" she asked. "I feel lonely to-night."

I felt my face burn as I bowed and sat down—upon her bidding. I could hardly credit my good fortune, and I lacked breath to reply.

"You have been very good to me," she murmured. "Why was it, Brown?"

Still I could not reply. I dared not even look at her.

She did not, however, appear to notice my confusion, or else my eyes played false. Her voice was just as even as it wandered on at the impulse of her rambling fancy, as I thought.

"I have been thinking, Brown, that you were not born a servant," she said quietly. "Will you tell me if I guessed aright?"

No prescience warned me of a snare. Had any other woman asked me such a question I should have smiled and lied, knowing well that woman's deepest policy is to persuade with flatteries. But Marion questioned, and I answered from my heart.

"My father was a gentleman by birth, madam."

"Ah!" she sighed. "He met with some unhappiness, no doubt?"

"He lies in a pauper's grave. He was a great musician."

"And have you inherited his talent?"

"I play the flute and violin indifferently well, madam."

"And you are educated too, for I have marked your speech?"

"My father did his best for me, madam, though I was slow, I fear, to learn. He was the wisest man, and yet the most unfortunate, whom I have ever known."

"Some day I may ask you to give me his history."

She sighed again, and for a time was silent, but at length she fixed her eyes upon my face and said: "You have a foreign 'air,' monsieur; I, who am French, as you certainly must have guessed, have marked it. Is it possible that your father was my countryman?"

"He had not that honour, mademoiselle."

She gave a little frown. "And yet your name, Hume—I think you said it might be French?"

"No, mademoiselle; but my mother was a Parisienne. That will account to you perhaps for the foreign 'air' you have marked in me."

She nodded her head, and half closing her eyes she began in a low voice of melting sweetness to hum to the tune of a famous little chansonette, whose refrain is inexpressibly mournful and pathetic, Maeterlinck's exquisite little poem, "Et s'il revenait un jour!"

Knowing well the sadness in her which the sadness of her song expressed, I felt my heart ache and my eyes grew strangely blurred.

Of a sudden she stopped and, leaning forward, gave me a look which seemed to reveal a longing to be comforted.

"Ah, sir!" she said in French. "I see you have a heart that might vibrate to woman's tears. And yet you cannot know how sad I am, how very, very miserable!"

And as she gazed at me her eyes overflowed with two such tears as she had spoken of.

There are times when a passion of insensate anger seizes me to look back upon my folly. Ah! woman's wiles, woman's wiles! The greatest and the least of us have been their victims. And who am I to rave of my undoing, when a Sampson, a Nelson, and even a Napoleon, that man of iron, shared my fate.

But I was blind, blind! Pierced by the sight of those tears to the very fibres of my being, I sprang up, then falling on my knee before her, I seized and passionately kissed her hand.

"Mademoiselle, you spoke justly," I cried in French. "Here is a heart that only beats to serve you, without seeking, ay, even without desiring a reward, except that which you must give me of your pleasure or without, when I shall see upon your face some promise of your happiness repaired!"

The glance of involuntary horror that she gave me, and the swift withdrawal of her hand from my embrace, should have warned me of my fatuous self-betrayal. But there is no limit to the errors of a truly clever mind astray in seeking to retrieve itself. I thought that I had angered her in venturing to hint that her disease of sorrow might be cured.

"Pardon me," I pleaded earnestly, "I have offended you with words. If any part of me could so offend, that member I would straightaway destroy."

She looked at me more kindly, and even now I believe that she was touched by the sincerity and singleness of my devotion.

"Rise, monsieur!" she murmured with an effort. "I thank you for your sympathy, but it is not seemly that you kneel to me."

I obeyed, and at her nod resumed my chair. She closed her eyes, and for a long period was deathly still. Her lovely face was extraordinarily pallid and she scarcely seemed to breathe. Then I thought her in the throes of reawakened grief for Cavanagh's death, and my pain to watch her was intense. Now I know that in her silence she was struggling with herself. Or rather that pity in her, a woman's unflinching pity for a loving being, however wretchedly unworthy of compassion,

was striving to silence her ideas of duty.

At last her eyes opened and she looked at me. Her regard was mysteriously wistful, cold, and it seemed to me a little self-ashamed. Indeed, she faintly blushed.

"Sir William Dagmar does not know that you can speak French!" she murmured. "You have deceived him, monsieur! That is wrong. I think that you should go away."

Thrice triple fool I was. Her pity had cajoled her conscience and she was offering me a chance to escape. I, in my infatuation, only thought that she chided me for my deceit.

"Ah! mademoiselle," I muttered. "It is true that I deceived him, but when I did so I was penniless and starving. I pray you from my soul that you will not bid me leave you nor inform Sir William Dagmar of my sin."

"You do not wish to go?"

"Mademoiselle!" I cried, "not though it were to Paradise assured!"

She blushed deeply, nevertheless her eyes hardened and she frowned. She was doubtless thinking—

"He has had his opportunity. His fate henceforth must be upon his own head! I wash my hands of it!"

I dreamed she was offended at my too ardent gaze. I lowered my eyes at once in sad humility.

"Stay then!" she said, and her voice assumed a tone of witching tenderness.

I looked up in quick delight to meet a dazzling smile. With such a smile Judith lured Holofernes to destruction. But it needed not that with me; I was destroyed already.

"My friend," she said, and she extended me her hand. "I thank you for your company, but, alas! the hours speed, and I have much to do. Good night!"

I tried to reply, but I could not. She permitted me to kiss her hand, however, and even smiled again. I left the room in a delirium of happiness, poor fool, and not one of my enraptured dreams that night disclosed to me the precipice upon whose brink I stood.

The days that followed were over full of strange, untried experiences for me to properly describe them. Marion was by my side whenever chance allowed. But every hour she showed to me a different mood, a varied and elusive distortion of her inmost self; so that I came to wonder more and more whether I knew truly aught of her except that she was beautiful in all her moods, and that I loved her irretrievably. One moment she was sad and steeped in cold unbending gloom. The next she was a gay companion, chattering of this and that as lightly and as brightly as a bird on sunlit bough. Again she was both grave and friendly at a time, and we conversed together of men, and books, and serious philosophies like two grey-haired, sober-minded savants. Sometimes, yet more infrequently, she forced upon me quarrels in caprice, to give her opportunity to scorch me with her scorn. And yet, again, more rarely still, she led me on with shy, alluring glances, or even bolder looks, provocative of passion, to woo her as I could; whereon, her will too readily achieved, she swiftly changed from melting fire to ice, and I was left in agonized confusion, swung like Mahommed's coffin between despair and hope.

So another week elapsed, and a third began. My master's life no longer stood in any danger, and his health and strength slowly but steadily improved. Sir Charles Venner still paid him daily visits, but they were more to satisfy the claims of friendship than of need. The great surgeon had always a smile and kindly word for me. It seemed that his suspicions had long ago been utterly eradicated, and that a liking had usurped their place. Sometimes I wondered if his penetrating insight had remarked my love for Marion. But he was far too profound an enigma for me to solve; and in any case Marion engrossed my life and mind so utterly that I had neither room nor inclination for any other problem. A sort of madness had come over me. Apart from her I dreamed; standing, sitting, or reclining as the case might be, idle and immovable as stone. I awoke to look upon her face, or listen to her voice, on instant a creature of pulsating passion; yet her humble and devoted slave, responding to her slightest will, as swiftly and obediently as a needle to the pole. And slowly but surely hope grew stronger in my breast. A thin wild hope it was at first, the veritable offspring of despair. But fostered by my passion and her wayward moods, it developed force and form, and I could at last no more deny it place in my imaginings. I hoped to win her. Yes; I hoped to win her! There were times when I forgot the gulf dug between us by her purity and my too criminal unworthiness, and I remembered only that she was a woman and I a man. The law of sex is hard to supersede. It recognizes neither morals nor conventions. It despises ethical distinctions, and it laughs with love at every human effort to confine its boundaries. At its command I began not only to hope, but to aspire. One morning Marion came to me and said: "Monsieur, Sir Charles Venner, who has just departed, has ordered me to take a holiday to-morrow. He says that I am looking pale, and that I need a little open air and sunshine. I think that he is wise, and I shall comply with his command!"

"But," I stammered, for the thought of losing her even for a day was a torture hardly to be

borne, "what of Sir William Dagmar? How will he get on without you?"

"Sir Charles has promised to send another nurse this evening, who will take my place."

"I trust, mademoiselle, that you—that you will enjoy yourself," I muttered in a trembling voice. "The house will be dull without you, though—for me."

She gave me a swift, shy glance, then cast down her eyes, folding and unfolding her hands before her.

"How could I enjoy myself—do you think—alone?" she whispered. "It will be a sad day also for me."

"Let me go with you," I blurted out. "I am not needed here. Ah! I am mad to dream that you would condescend so far. Forgive me of your pity, and forget the insolence of my presumption!"

But she clapped her hands and laughed as blithely as a child. "Will you come?" she cried. "But that will be magnificent. Ah! let us see!" She darted across the room and perched herself upon the dresser. "Come here, monsieur, quite close to me. Nay, not too close. So! Now we shall plan our day. At sunrise we shall wake and dress, and we shall have an early breakfast here, so as not to waste a single moment of our day, our day!"

I gazed at her as a Peri might at Paradise, and she rippled on.

"Afterwards we shall drive to the station, and take a train to somewhere in the country, where we may wander through green fields and flower-scattered meadows, hand in hand like children. Shall we not, monsieur?"

I nodded, lost in a perfect dreamland of delight.

"But, no!" she cried quite suddenly. "It is beautiful, that picture, yet not so beautiful as this. Listen, monsieur—but you can row a boat, of course."

I nodded again.

"Then, listen! We shall go by train to Hampton, and there we shall take boat. The river is most lovely thereabouts, and you shall slowly row me up the stream towards Staines and Windsor through the hottest hours; slowly, slowly past the green-lawned banks and pretty houses, and among the darling little osier islets. And as you row I'll sing. And we'll forget our cares and open wide our hearts to the sunshine and to happiness without an afterthought. And when the noon comes we shall eat our lunch upon an island; a merry interlude between two golden dreams. For afterwards we'll float upon our way again. And when the day is done and twilight falls we shall land at the loveliest place of all. I know it well. It is an old, old park garden, thick planted with many great solemn trees. A private park, but lonely, for the house is haunted, so they say. And there I shall lead you by the hand into a little marble, many pillared temple, open to the stars, wherein a tiny spring is born within a pool, a wishing well. And you shall look therein and I, and we shall see fresh mirrored on its surface—the faces of our loves. Shall we do all this, monsieur?"

I could but bend my head, for her siren voice had woven round my faculties a spell of charmed silence, and not one of Circe's victims was ever more powerless than I was then. When I looked up she had gone. How I lived through that day and night I scarcely know. I can in fact remember nothing clearly of the hours that followed until the moment came when I saw her seated before me in the boat, the rudder lines slipping slowly through her folded hands. It was early in the morning of an absolutely perfect day. Of the river, the witching scenery, I knew but noted little, for I looked only upon her face. She was simply and yet elegantly clad in some rich clinging stuff of purest white; her loveliness it is beyond me to portray. But this I know—she seemed to love me, and her mood was yielding and submissive to the point of tenderness. Very generously did she fulfil her promise. As I rowed, she sang to me the sweetest songs of France, and Italy, and love songs all. It was indeed a rapturous, golden dream. When at times she ceased to sing we neither of us spoke, but gazed silently into each other's eyes, until the music in her woke to song again.

We came at noon to the pretty little island she foretold; and I made her sit upon a rug while I prepared our lunch. It was strange indeed how truly all her prophesies came true. The lunch was a very merry interlude. We both ate heartily, and we pledged each other often in champagne. Afterwards we started on our way again, and only when we came upon a lock did I remember that there was a world of living people near us. So slow and idle was our journeying that twilight had already fallen as we passed by Staines. About that time I noticed that Marion maintained a longer silence than her wont, and a little later I felt a sudden thrill to see her shivering. She was looking over the side of the boat, gazing sadly on the rippled surface of the stream.

"Are you cold, dear one?" I asked, and I paused to watch her, leaning on the sculls.

She shook her head.

"Then you shivered at a thought," I ventured. "Please to tell me what it was?"

"I thought of death," she said, and turning, looked into my eyes. Her own were alight with a rich sombre glow.

"Of death! and why of death—to-day?"

"Death, Agar, my friend," she answered—she had named me so since morning,—“is never long a stranger from my thoughts.”

"What! and you so young, so beautiful," I cried.

"It is because I fear death, Agar. I have seen him in a thousand forms, and each form was more dreadful than the last. There are some who grow familiar with his face and finish by despising him. I, on the contrary, fear him more and more. But you, my friend, how do you regard him?"

"I have never asked myself the question."

"Then ask it now!"

"A morbid fancy, Marion!"

"Yet humour me, my friend; I wish to know."

To me her eyes seemed passionately curious, and I marvelled at her mood. But I answered gravely.

"I neither despise nor fear him, Marion. When in the press of time he calls for me, I shall bow to the inevitable with what dignity I can."

"I think you are a brave man, Agar," she replied. "You must be indeed, yet it is a thing that puzzles me."

"Why?" I questioned with a smile.

"Because a brave man should be honest too, and you are not."

"You are remembering the deceit I practised on Sir William Dagmar?"

"Yes; and other happenings."

"What else?"

"I am remembering the night my lover died!" She bent a little forward as she spoke, and her eyes burned into mine. I caught my breath, and I felt my hand gripped as with a hand.

"You bore me from the room of death," she proceeded in a tense passionate whisper, "and you laid me down upon my bed, and then you kissed my brow. I did not know you at the time, for you were very cunningly disguised—but now I know."

It never occurred to me to deny, or even to demand the origin of her discovery. Indeed, incredible as it may appear, I experienced some sort of delight to learn that she was thoroughly acquainted with my villainy. Quick as a flash I said to myself: "She knows, and yet she has not turned from me. It must be that she loves!"

"I believed that you were utterly insensible," I gasped.

She sighed and leaned back in her seat. A long silence fell between us. My thoughts were in a tangled whirl. I could not grasp the skein of them, and I seemed to be plucking helplessly after a dozen elusive phantom-like ideas.

At last I heard her say: "It was for me he died, Agar!" She was alluding to the dead man, George Cavanagh, and her tones were full of bitterness.

I waited with my eyes upon her averted face. "He died in vain," she went on presently. "Ah, but doubtless you already know."

"Nothing!" I muttered. "Nothing."

"He was ruined," she said sadly, "and he wished his death to profit me—with money. Money! As if money could atone!"

"Then he was dishonest too, as well as I," I muttered, trying hard to smoothe all triumph from my tones.

She uttered a low moan of pain, and wrung her hands together. "No, no," she wailed. "He wished to be perhaps, but I gave the money back to them."

"I am glad of that," I cried.

She threw at me a look of fiery scorn. "You!" she hissed; "you! Get to your work and row."

In mournful humility I immediately obeyed, and we glided on our way again. For a long while I dared not look at her, and when I dared I could not see for the dark. But I knew that she was weeping, and though I longed to comfort her, I set my teeth and kept resolutely to my work, rowing hard in an effort to forget. It was she who interrupted me. I saw her white figure start suddenly erect.

"Stop!" she cried; "we have passed the place. Go back!"

I put the boat about, and slowly we returned. Soon at her word I shipped the sculls and allowed the craft to drift. The silence afterwards was full of brooding melancholy. The long, dark shadows on the river were interspersed with flecks of shapeless mist, which fancy shaped to spirit forms, and ghostly arms outstretched to beckon or to wave forbiddingly. How Marion fared I cannot guess, but I was wretched and sunk deep in gloom. It was a miserable ending to so glorious a day, and my heart ached strangely as I thought of it, although I did not reckon all my pain until I found relief at last in her command to seek the shore. We landed upon a long green sloping bank, fringed heavily with willows, to one of which I moored the boat. She left me at that occupation, and slowly climbed the bank. But her white dress shone out through the shadows of the grove, and soon I stood before her. She laid her hand upon my lips and drew me then into a very gloomy little dell entirely girt with trees. I wondered vaguely at her action and her cautious silence, yet as always I obeyed her wish, and waited on her mood.

For a moment she kept very still, and then she put her hands upon my breast.

"You love me," she said simply.

I clasped my hands on hers and answered, "Yes."

"How much?" she whispered—very low.

"More, Marion, than life."

"And you respect me?"

"More reverently than death."

"What do you wish of me?"

"Your love!"

"What will you give for it?"

"All that I can."

"And will you suffer for it? What?"

"All that you ask."

"Then kiss me, Agar."

I bent my head and pressed my lips to hers. Her lips were very cold. But the contact set my blood on fire and I caught her in my arms, and strained her to my breast. She shivered in my clasp and deeply sighed, but I rained hot kisses on her cheeks, and eyes, and lips passionately, striving to warm her with my passion, for I knew that she was cold, and unresponsive too, in spite of her surrender.

But of a sudden she tore herself from my embrace and fled. I caught her on a stretch of lawn and held her close again. To my dismayed astonishment she was weeping wildly. I kissed the tears away and frantically implored her for their reason. And yet she would do nought but sob, and gaze around her like one distraught and terrified. "Oh, my God!" she cried at last; "I cannot, I cannot! I was mad to undertake this thing—mad—mad!"

"What thing, my sweetheart?" I demanded in amazement.

For answer she threw herself into my arms and kissed me with all the passion of her soul, once, twice. Then drawing back, she caught my hand in one of hers, and with the other pointed towards the river, trembling violently the while. "Ask me nothing now," she panted; "but let us go—quickly, quickly. This place is haunted! See, I am half sick with terror."

I passed my arm about her waist and would have led her to the boat, but at that moment a short shrill whistle sounded from the willows, and was answered by two others from the wood. The first, however, had hardly pierced the air, when Marion uttered a frightful scream, and sank swooning at my feet.

I understood then that the woman I loved had in some fashion betrayed me. For one desperate second I stood listening for sounds and thinking of escape. Then anguish overwhelmed me. The transition from my paradise of beliefs to the hell of certainties was too rapid, for hope to

spring readily therefrom, and I thought to myself—

"Let even death come, for what is there good in life when love is wrecked and ruined!"

Uttering a groan, I fell on my knee beside her, not knowing what I did, not caring what might happen.

Next instant I dimly heard a rush of feet upon the grass, a cry of rage from right to left. A sharp pain quivered through my brain. I saw a blaze of light that faded quickly into unalleviated blackness. I felt the world swing with a sickening revolution round, and then came sweet encompassing oblivion.

VIII

TORTURE

I dreamed that my nostrils were being tickled with a straw. After awhile the sensation became intolerable. I knew that I was dreaming, yet I wished to wake up. Sleep, however, pressed with a heavy hand upon my eyelids, and I contended long and desperately without at all persuading him to go.

At last a voice said, "That will do, Jussieu, he is coming round."

I opened my eyes at once, with extraordinary ease, considering my long struggle, and I looked up into the impassive countenance of Sir Charles Venner. I was seated upright in a high-backed chair, strapped securely in position, strapped in such a way indeed that I could move only my fingers and my toes. The negro surgeon, Jussieu, whom I had last seen at the Kingsmere Hospital for Consumptives, was standing to the right of Sir Charles, and three of us were grouped about the centre of a small uncarpeted brick-floored room scarce twelve feet square, that was furnished only with the chair I occupied and a bracket oil lamp whose wick was smoking. There was one other person in the room. The negro, Beudant, stood near the closed door, wiping upon a cloth a blood-smearred lancet. I noticed that my left sleeve had been ripped open, and that my arm was bandaged just above the elbow. Evidently they had bled me. But why? And where was Marion? Of a sudden I remembered all. Marion had lured me to this river park and betrayed me with a Judas kiss into the hands of my enemies. Too late she had repented of her treachery and tried to save me. She had swooned; I had knelt beside her body, and someone had stunned me with a club. It was all very simple. I had been a contemptible fool, and now I must pay the price of my folly. What price would they exact? I wondered. But I most wondered at my indifference. They can only kill me, I reflected, and the thought scarcely disturbed me. Yet I was curious. There were many things I wished to know.

"Where am I?" I asked, looking at Sir Charles.

"You are in the cellar of my private house at Staines," he answered civilly enough. "I may inform you that I keep no servants except these men you see, and the house is set in the middle of a small park some hundred and fifty yards distant from the river and at least a quarter mile from any other building. You may therefore spare yourself the useless trouble of shouting for help, should you have been so minded."

"Thank you!" said I.

"Question me further, if you wish, Mr. Hume. It will be my turn soon to play inquisitor, when you are stronger."

"Where is Marion Le Mar?"

"She returned to London, this morning. You have been four and twenty hours insensible."

"A clever woman that," I muttered coolly. "You may congratulate yourself, Sir Charles, on her assistance. But for her I would long ago have been in France."

He smiled ironically. "You praise her too much!" he replied. "She has served me well, it is true; but for the last fortnight you have been practically my prisoner."

"What do you mean?" I demanded.

"What I say. Do you remember Miss Le Mar calling you to her room one certain evening and asking you questions of your race and parentage?"

"Yes."

"Had you left the house that evening, even the very second she dismissed you, and indeed at any moment since, you would have been arrested on the instant."

"By whom?"

"By my detectives!"

"What, did you commit yourself with the police?"

He smiled again. "Oh, no! Nevertheless, you would have been arrested, Mr. Hume, and you would have thought—by the police!"

"I—see; but—but—how could you have known, I mean, how could you have been sure that I was I—until you had communicated with—with her?"

For a third time he smiled, and when he spoke it was in a tone of genuine admiration. "You are an able man, Mr. Hume!" said he, "but no chain is stronger than its weakest link, and your weakest link was revealed to me that very morning!"

"Ah! what was it?"

"An advertisement in the personal column of the *Daily Mail*."

"You deal in mysteries!" I cried impatiently, "I never inserted such an advertisement in my life."

"It ran like this"—replied Sir Charles. "If the gentleman who left a plain, oak coffin in the front room of number 904 Old Kent Road on the morning of the — day of —, does not claim it within fourteen days from date, it will be sold to pay expenses. Sarah Rosenbaum!"

"The idiot!" I gasped. "I gave it to her!"

Sir Charles burst out laughing. "Did you?" he cried—"did you indeed? Well luckily for me she could not have understood you!"

"Do you mean to say, sir, it was only that advertisement which put you on my track?"

"That, and only that. I suspected you before, but I confess that you were adroit enough to allay my suspicions and hoodwink me completely!"

"Oh! Lord," I groaned. "To think that a frowsy, oily haired Jewess should be the cause of my undoing. Why in the name of goodness was she not satisfied to take the coffin for a gift!"

"Perhaps she was afraid to sell it, or perhaps she tried to sell it and could not show a title to its would-be purchaser. You should not condemn her, Hume, upon *ex parte* evidence. Pardon me for saying it, but the fault was yours. You should not have given her the coffin at all. You should have got rid of it by other means!"

"Too true!" I groaned. "But I only wanted a day's grace then, or I'd not have been so careless!"

"You had seven!" he exclaimed. "The advertisement did not appear for a week!"

I felt my cheeks crimson. "After all," I muttered, "you owe everything to Marion."

"Were you really such a fool," he cried.

I nodded. "Give me to drink!" I said. "I'm feeling weak and sick."

He made a sign, and one of the negroes hurried out. I was very near swooning, when I felt my chair tipped back, and something was forced between my teeth. I drank and was revived. Then one of the negroes fed me with a bowl of soup and soon my strength was perfectly restored. Sir Charles Venner waited all the time before me, occasionally feeling my pulse. He seemed satisfied at last that my condition warranted his promised inquisition, and he proceeded straight away to business.

"Where are the jewels?" he demanded. "The jewels you purchased with the ten thousand pounds that you extorted from me?"

"In a safe place." I replied.

"But you must tell me where, Mr. Hume," he said, in a pleasant but determined voice.

"Ah, but you must first tell me what you intend to do with me, Sir Charles."

He shrugged his shoulders. "What can I do but kill you?" he replied. "I dare not let you go, and you are too infernally adroit to keep a prisoner! Come, Hume, I'll make a bargain with you. Give me the jewels, and I'll promise you your choice of deaths."

"Done with you!" I cried. "I choose old age!"

"Senility is not for you, my friend; I spoke of sudden deaths."

"Then we can't trade, Sir Charles!"

"Let me remind you that I am a surgeon, Hume. Some deaths are extraordinarily painful. You, who are no anatomist, I think, would be surprised to learn how tenaciously the soul may cling to its clay casket, and how deep are the wells of agony that it will often plumb before it can be prevailed upon to seek another sphere of usefulness. Now I am not a cruel man, and I should not like to see you suffer too protractedly. Let me persuade you not to force my hand."

"Give me a night to think it over," I replied.

"Why delay? No, Hume, I cannot grant your wish in any case. I have to perform a difficult operation to-morrow, and if my mind were occupied with doubts, I might not do my patient justice. If I left you here alive I should be uneasy, my knife might slip—a thousand accidents might happen. Improbable as it seems, you might escape."

"You have determined then to murder me tonight?" I gasped.

"Yes."

"But, you fool!" I cried, seeing one gleam of hope. "How then can you be sure of getting the jewels. I have only to tell you a lie in order to rob you of them for ever!"

The man positively started; nor did he attempt to conceal his mind.

"Hum!" he muttered. "That is a point I had overlooked." Of a sudden, however, his lips parted in a smile and his eyes gleamed.

"Well, well," he said. "Since there's no help, I needs must let you live a day or two. But in order to save time, Hume, be good enough to tell me your first lie at once?"

"You mean?"

"I'll be quite frank with you, my man. This is my meaning. You will presently mention a place where the jewels may be but are not. I shall prove during to-morrow that you have lied. And to-morrow night we'll speak again—and you will then tell me the truth. You understand?"

"You mean, that to-morrow night you will torture me?"

"Just so."

"And if I refuse to speak to-night?"

"You will sleep poorly, I'm afraid, my friend. But come, be reasonable. You pleaded for a night's reflection. I offer it to you."

"But with a sure prospect of torture on the morrow."

"Unless you speak the truth to-night."

"Then I shall!" I cried with a shudder. "Better death than torture!"

"Well?"

"The jewels are in Sir William Dagmar's house. You will——"

"You lie," he interjected sharply. "I drugged and searched you the night that you returned from robbing me."

"I know that, sir; but the very next day I went out and brought them to the house, I couldn't bear to have them any longer out of my reach."

"Ah!" His looks pierced me, but I did not flick an eyelash as I steadily returned his stare.

"Go on!" he said at length. "Where are they hidden, then?"

"Marion Le Mar has them, Sir Charles. I gave them to her when we left the house last morning?"

"What?" he shouted. "What?"

"It is true," I answered glibly. "I gave them to her wrapped up in a small sealed parcel, which I asked her to keep for me in her box until we had returned. I acted so for this reason. It occurred to me that you or someone might take a notion to search my room while I was away, but I felt pretty sure you'd never dream of searching Marion's box."

It were as well for me perhaps to explain straight away the monstrous falsehood last recorded. An instinct taught me that Sir Charles Venner entertained but small respect for women. I saw that he wanted the jewels very badly, and I fancied that if I could make him believe the story I had so readily invented, I might still live for many days. His natural course would be at once to demand from Marion the packet which I declared that I had given her. As I had given her nothing, she would truthfully repudiate his claim. But Sir Charles Venner's want of respect for women would immediately induce him to doubt the honesty of Marion's denial. He would think, "she has opened the packet, and the jewels—treasures so dear to women's eyes—have stolen her honour."

I would act thereafter so as subtly to foster his suspicions, and I hoped that at last, in order to satisfy himself whether Marion or I spoke true, he would confront me with the beautiful woman, for love of whom I had to die. I felt that I would be content to perish, given in exchange one opportunity to hurl at her my hate. As deep and tender as had been my love, so bitter and so ardent was my hate!

Sir Charles eyed me for a moment in thoughtful silence. Then very slowly he nodded his head.

"Did you tell her what it was you gave her?" he demanded.

"No."

"Why do you tell me now? It will cost you a day of life if you spoke the truth."

I permitted myself a show of passion.

"A life of which I am weary, weary! Have you ever loved, you man of ice? Have you ever been betrayed by the creature you adored?" I cried. "I would to God that you had killed me as I knelt beside her body in the park. I had then hardly realized her treachery!" I closed my eyes and shuddered, straining my muscles as though in a paroxysm of mental agony, the while.

"Hume!" said Sir Charles, "if you are not acting, you are desperate, and you have not lied to me. Take my advice and die while you are desperate! A pin prick and all will be over. I can promise you no pain."

The fact is I had acted far too well. It was necessary then to surpass my former effort in order to save my life, and at the same time make him continue to believe in me.

I opened my eyes and looked up at him, at first with a vacant stare. "She sold me with a Judas kiss!" I muttered, "a cursed traitress—with a Judas kiss. You've promised me my choice of deaths. You'll keep your word, Sir Charles, or by the God above us—you'll die a fouler death than I."

I gave him a look of such concentrated rage as I concluded, that, bound though I was, he started back a step and bit his lip.

"Well, well!" he exclaimed, "I'll keep my word, you need not fear."

"Then bring me a cross, and nail me to it—in my senses while I live, and while I bleed to death—you'll drag her here to see me—so that I may curse her as I die!"

"The man is mad!" he gasped, "mad as a March hare!"

"Keep your word!" furiously I hissed. "I bind you to your word!"

Sir Charles exchanged fearful glances with the negroes. I watched him, frowning like a thunder-cloud.

"Come, come!" he said at last. "You must sleep over this, Hume! You must not set me a task beyond my power—I—"

But I broke in upon him with a curse. "What!" I shrieked. "You bragged and bleated of the torture you had in store for me—and when I bid you kill me as I wish to die, you shrink and blanch and mouth your feminine humanity. But you've given me your promise—and you'll keep it or by—" I finished with a storm of maledictions so blasphemously horrible, and which I delivered with such wild and awful force, that even the stolid negroes staggered back and rolled their eyes. As for Sir Charles, he turned sheet white before I was half through, and with a look of something marvellously resembling terror, he turned and simply rushed out of the room.

I screamed my curses after him, straining and tugging at my bonds like one possessed. But at length, thoroughly outworn with the exertion, I stopped and feigned to swoon.

Next moment the cellar was in darkness, and I heard the negroes stumble out and bolt the door behind them.

I'll not relate the anguish I endured that night, more than to say it made an old man of me—in mind, if not in body. I did not sleep. I could not if I would, for I was companied with memories sharp enough to sting a soul from torpor deep as death. And I would not, if I could, because I

feared that those were by me who might take advantage of my slumber to extend my sleep beyond mortality.

But none came near me, and through the dragging hours I heard no sound. Morning came without the black dark lessening one whit, until the negro, Beudant, brought a candle with some breakfast. He was plainly afraid of me at first, and without doubt I was not a pleasant thing to gaze upon. But his fears faded as he fed me and saw me grateful for the food.

"You are in a gentler mood, monsieur, than overnight," he presently remarked. "It is better so, believe me. If I were you, I would not die upon a cross."

"Just so," I answered quickly. "I do not wish to die at all, would you like to make yourself a rich man, M. Beudant?"

"Why, yes, monsieur."

"Then help me to escape, and I shall fill your hands with gold."

"But in that case I should incur my patron's enmity."

"And in the other you will run a very certain risk of being hanged."

"Even so, monsieur."

"You fear your patron more keenly than the law!" I cried. "Believe me, you are wrong."

"Pardon!" he interrupted, "you mistake, monsieur. I fear no man. Sir Charles Venner is my patron and my teacher. But he is also my friend. I would suffer death for him, if need arose."

I sighed. "Will he really kill me, do you think?" I asked.

The negro pursed out his thick, black lips. "I feel sure of it," he muttered. "As soon as once the jewels that he seeks are in his hands, you'll die."

"Then my hours are numbered," I said gloomily, "for that will be to-day."

"But then, can it be, you told him truly, yesternight, monsieur?"

"I was mad!" I groaned aloud. "Mad. Last night I cared for nothing! I was torn apart with rage and with despair. But now it is different." I groaned again. "Ah! M. Beudant, is there no hope for me? You do not look inhuman! Would you have the murder of a fellow being on your soul. Help me to live, if only for a little while—a few short hours? One other day? I am not fit to die, Beudant. Great God, no! I am not fit to die!"

"What can I do for you, monsieur?"

"Oh! it is not much I ask. Go to your patron and persuade him that I lied last night."

"Impossible, monsieur! He has already left the house."

"Then follow him, Beudant. I am bound or I would beseech you on my knees. Beudant for the love of God——"

"Monsieur, monsieur!"

"Kind, sweet Beudant!" I wailed. "Beautiful, excellent Beudant, do this little thing for me. See it is a dying man entreats you. Sweet Beudant, pretty Beudant."

The poor negro looked the picture of distress. His eyes rolled in his head, and he knew not what to do or say.

"I cannot deceive my patron!" he cried at last.

But at that I shrieked aloud and drove him from the room with venomous blood-curdling curses. In his agitation he forgot to take with him the candle, which he had set upon the floor, and that circumstance gave me an occupation for some hours which in some degree alleviated my dark mood of bitterness. I thought that by dint of great stress and labour I might work my chair beside the flame and sear through some or other of my bonds. In four hours of constant effort I had moved a foot perhaps, but then I gave up in despair, for I had still a yard to go and already the candle guttered in its socket.

Jussieu was the next to visit me, bearing on a tray my mid-day meal. After eating heartily, I tested him in much the fashion I had tried on Beudant. He gave me similar replies, and I rewarded him with similar maledictions. But instead of flying from my oaths as the other negro had, to my astonishment, he quelled me with a rolling sermon, delivered in the finest Lutheran style. Texts quivered from his tongue, like shafts of lightning in a storm, and the black canting hypocrite, who was ready at his master's nod to murder me, dared preach to me of penitence, and summoned me in thunderous tones to prepare my soul for death.

At first rage and indignation held me speechless; but when the humour of the situation struck me properly, I yelled with laughter, and laughed and laughed until my ribs ached and the tears trickled down my cheeks.

When I had sobered he was gone, and I was glad, despite the dark. I am too good a hypocrite myself to endure a man whose hypocrisy may be pierced with a pin. And though I had laughed at him, too much of Jussieu would have made me sick.

Seven hours later Sir Charles Venner entered my prison cellar with his ebony attendants, who bore between them a small table spread with lamps, and one or two strange ugly looking implements.

The surgeon wore a gloomy look, and he made no answer to my courteous greeting. But bidding Beudant shut the door, he turned to me and said:—

"Hume, after all you lied to me!"

"What!" I cried as if dumbfounded. Then quickly recovering my countenance, I exclaimed. "Oh, yes, yes. You have discovered it. Yes, yes, I lied to you. The jewels are really hidden behind the second volume of Bruton's "Anatomy of Melancholy" in the bookshelf on the eastern wall of Sir William Dagmar's library."

Sir Charles favoured me with a black frown. "You are such an accomplished liar!" he said coldly, "that I can no longer rely upon your unsupported word."

"What would you do?" I cried.

"Persuade you to be honest with a foretaste of damnation!"

At that I felt my blood turn cold within me, and yet strange to say a hot sweat broke out on my forehead and my face.

"You monster!" I gasped. "You would really torture me?"

"I shall," he retorted. "Jussieu, will you please to operate."

"But certainly, monsieur," replied the brutal preacher, with a grin of malice which showed me that my laughter had not failed to prick his vanity.

He seized one of the implements that I had noted and immediately approached my chair. In another moment my left hand was encased in a curious steel glove, which held the fingers widely separated in rigid iron stalls. I tremulously assured myself this was a farce to try my nerve; and resolving not to watch the leering villain at his work, I looked up at Sir Charles, who met my eyes as impassively as ever.

"A test?" I sneered.

"Yes, a test," said he.

Next instant I uttered a scream of agony, for a burning pain had suddenly pierced my thumb. I looked at it and saw that a long needle had been inserted down the joint between the nail and quick. Jussieu was already busy at my forefinger. "Mercy mercy," I shouted. "I'll tell you the truth, the truth!"

"Then speak!"

"She has them, Marion!"

"Once more, Jussieu?" said Sir Charles.

Again that penetrating agony. Again I raved and screamed. Again I swore I'd tell the truth.

"Speak!" cried Sir Charles.

"They are in Sir William Dagmar's library, where I said before, behind——"

"Once more, Jussieu!" interrupted the surgeon.

I lost sight of the agonizing periods. I fainted more than once and was restored to life by pain. Sometimes I lied, more often still I shrieked aloud the truth, and was not credited. But at last growing wise under the torture, I perceived what my inquisitor wished me most to say, and I vowed time after time that Marion possessed the jewels, and Marion alone. At last Sir Charles decided to believe me, and my mangled hand was grudgingly released. I was by then well-nigh incapable of feeling, and they might have murdered me without exciting in my breast one added solitary pang.

I fell into a heavy sleep before they left the room, and when I awoke I was benumbed and very listless. I became, however, gradually aware that much had been done during my unconsciousness which must have lasted hours. The table remained in the room, and a lamp

thereon cast a yellow glitter round the plastered walls. To the left of my chair there yawned a deep hole in the floor, something coffin shaped, with bricks and earth and stones heaped against the wall behind. Two spades were sticking in the rubble, and a pick. Very patently it was a grave, my grave! I gazed at it with a sort of solemn wonder, but I thought it might prove a friend, if it would only save me from such horrors as I shuddered to remember I had lately undergone. After a time I realized that I was listening to a faint bubbling sound that seemed to issue from my grave. Then I noted in the shadowy depths a whitish froth, and understood! My grave promised me, as well as death, obliteration, nay, absolute annihilation. It was partly filled with seething quicklime!

Beudant came and made me eat and drink. I was very faint and only asked him for the time. He told me it was two o'clock upon the fourth day of my imprisonment.

While wondering at the news, I fell asleep. Beudant awoke me with more food and drink. Again I fell asleep, and again I awoke to find myself being softly carried from the cellar of my grave, into an adjoining room that was also situated underground, for it, too, was plastered walled and windowless. It contained, however, a long rack furnished with some dozens of champagne, neck downwards, and most carefully bestowed.

"A good vintage! I should say," I said to Beudant. Satan himself could not have made me to speak to Jussieu, except with sneers.

"You shall judge, monsieur!" replied the negro, and when he set me down, he took a bottle from the rack and proceeded to unfold the cork.

"Why this sudden kindness to an *ame damnée*!" I asked indifferently. "Has my last hour come?"

"God knows, monsieur; but you are, I think, to have a visitor, and I have orders! Kindly drink!"

He poured out a full cup of the frothy nectar, and held it to my lips. I quaffed it slowly, and felt the life blood surge anew along my veins. Also I felt my lacerated hand begin to pain, and soon I groaned aloud. Beudant on instant was a kind physician, and I blessed him as he poured some warm and grateful balsam on the wounds, and bound my injured fingers in a swathe of silk.

"Beudant," said I, "whichever takes me, Beelzebub or Satan, when I go, I'll sing your praises to him as a man of heart."

"Peace, blasphemer!" grated Jussieu.

"Peace yourself, you canting hound!" I cried.

For answer he smote me on the mouth. But that was too much even for me, who till that moment honestly believed that I was destitute of pride. I discovered at the touch of a blackfellow's paw that, at all events, I had a pride of race. I filled my lungs with air and shouted like a Stentor: "Help! Help! Murder! Murder!"

Jussieu shook like a leaf. "You blasted pig!" he muttered—very low. "God strike you dead!"

Truly his religion, for all his preaching, was not deep.

But Sir Charles Venner's voice answered at once, in very angry tones: "Beudant, Jussieu, what the devil are you doing?"

Next instant the door opened. I saw the tail end of a flight of brick steps, and into the room rushed Marion Le Mar, followed less quickly by the surgeon, who stopped to lock the door behind him. The girl stopped midway on the floor. But I did not look at her. I was too deeply agitated, and I wished to gather up my strength for later use.

I heard Sir Charles repeat his question. Jussieu replied—"Master, he blasphemed, and I struck him on the mouth."

Pride of race is a curious thing. I found I could not argue with the negro, though he had lied.

The surgeon whipped his servant with a dozen scorching words, then strode beside my chair.

"For this insult, Hume," he said, "I offer you my sincere apologies. Such a thing will not occur again!"

"Give me another cup of wine," I cried, "and I'll forgive you."

Within a moment it was held up to my lips, and I drained it at one draught. I was passionately craving strength to show my hate to Marion. Heaven! How I hated her!

"More?" asked Sir Charles.

"No," I answered sullenly; my eyes fell upon the floor.

"Mademoiselle Le Mar denies that you gave her any packet, Hume?"

"Does she?"

"Yes, and she is here to confront you?"

"Why?"

"To induce you to confess your falsehood!"

"And if I don't?"

"It will go harder with you than before!"

I ground my teeth. "Bah!" I snarled, "you doubt her word, or you'd not have brought her here. I see your game, you wish to make her own her theft by witnessing my torture. But you will fail, you fool. Do you forget that she betrayed me? She'll laugh to hear my screams!"

Marion spoke for the first time. "Sir Charles," she began, in low vibrating tones, "this man looks very ill. What have you done with him, and what is the matter with his hand?"

"He will tell you," said the surgeon curtly.

I looked up at her for the first time. Her eyes were dilated, and full of passionate questioning.

"You pretty actress!" I sneered, "you know nothing, oh, of course, you know nothing!"

"Miss Le Mar knows nothing, Hume," said Sir Charles, in tones of ice. "But it is time she knew. You will tell her, or shall I?"

"You," I muttered. I was a little dazed. Marion had not thought to have me tortured then. I had to readjust my mind, concerning her.

Sir Charles nodded, and the girl and he gazed into each other's eyes.

"Tell me!" she cried.

"His fingers have been pierced with frozen probes between the nail and quick!"

It seemed to me that an hour passed before their glances parted. But at last Marion uttered a little gasping sigh and slowly turned to me. Her face was very pale. "How you must loathe me!" she muttered.

"Yes!" I answered simply. "But you will better understand how much, if you will trouble to explore the room I lately occupied!"

"Come!" said Sir Charles, at once, and he strode across the cellar.

They were not absent long, yet when they returned Marion had some colour in her face. It seemed they had been talking, but I heard the end of their discourse.

"You should have known it, child," Sir Charles was saying. "I did not use bald words, because I trusted your intelligence. 'A long voyage' was the term I used. It bore one application only in my mind. You must perceive how utterly impossible it is that he should live. Why, if we kept him prisoner, he might escape—ten, twenty years hence even, and yet he still could ruin us!"

"But you spoke also of an island?"

"An island of dreams, Marion!" he replied impatiently. "Come, come, we waste time. You must be sensible!"

She bowed her head before him and appeared to think.

"Come, come," he said again, still more impatiently.

"Wait!" she replied. "I begin to understand."

"Well!"

"Mr. Hume spoke truly, monsieur, you doubted my word, and that is why you brought me here. You think it possible that I have the jewels. Is it not so?"

"Yes to all your questions!"

"And unless M. Hume confesses that he lied about the packet, I must behold his torture and listen to his screams!"

"Unhappily, my child!"

"Why should you doubt my word, monsieur? Have I ever in my life deceived you?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "How can I tell!" he sneered.

"Perhaps, perhaps, m'sieur—if he withstands the torture and persists to lie, you will then torture me? You do not see, though I see. He has planned that you should bring me here for his revenge. Therefore, he will not tell the truth! Will you torture me, m'sieur?"

"My child, you are a fool. It is the truth that I am seeking. I would give you the jewels, if you needed them. But this I shall not do—permit that man to triumph over me, in one iota! Why, Marion"—his voice broke—"he once obliged me to shake hands with him!"

I thrilled to hear him, for I saw he spoke the truth, and I understood at last how bitterly he had brooked the way that I had used him. I could write a sermon here on pride and vanity, if I had a mind. Good heavens! to what heights will they not drive, to what depths will they not drag their victims! But let another pen than mine essay the task. It is Homeric and beyond my powers to do it justice.

Marion left the surgeon's side, and came very close to me. "Agar Hume," she murmured, "I have used you ill, but how ill I did not dream till now. As God hears me I would never have betrayed you, if I had known it could have meant, what it has meant, and means!"

"Go on!" said I, "your voice is very sweet."

"You loved me once," she whispered.

"I did indeed."

"By the memory of that love I implore you now to speak the truth and forfeit your revenge. I am only a woman, monsieur, surely my punishment is great enough in knowing that I have brought you to your death!"

"I'm not dead yet, mademoiselle. You reproach yourself too soon."

"But you will die!" she cried.

"When it is written."

She clasped her hands and gazed at me beseechingly. "I want you to look back into a night, one night," she muttered very low, "I asked what would you give me for my love, and you replied, 'all that I can!'"

"Too true. I was sincere as well in what I said."

"Then give to me the memory of a man!"

"And you will keep the bargain, how? By worshipping that memory?"

She gave a little moan. "For God's sake," she pleaded, "For God's sake, M. Hume."

"For man's sake," I retorted, "I shall speak the truth," and looked beyond her.

"Sir Charles," said I, "I thought myself a liar till I met this woman—and selfish too beyond comparison. Did you ever hear the maxim I invented for the ruling of my life? It was this:—'*First person paramount!*' But look at her! She dwarfs and shadows me so much, without a maxim but her womanhood, that I can only keep my dignity by noising my defeat. Here am I, bound, helpless, ill, and threatened with a painful death, because of her. But she has jewels which she sets before my agony, and she would spare herself the shame of witnessing that agony. Wherefore she tries to fool me to the end, not caring what I suffer, so that her eyes and ears are not offended."

Sir Charles nodded his head, and it is very likely he believed me, for his eyes gleamed scorn at Marion.

"It is your turn," he said coldly.

"My turn, monsieur," she shuddered and turned crimson, it seemed to me with passion.

"Your turn," he repeated.

"Very well!" she cried in a voice grown hoarse and desperate. "Torture him! Torture him! That is all I have to say!"

Sir Charles glanced from her to the negroes. "Light the stove," he said.

The wretches disappeared behind my chair, and I heard one strike a lucifer.

"What is the bill of fare?" I jauntily inquired.

The surgeon smiled evilly. "I am too good a host to keep you in suspense!" he said. "For hors d'oeuvre, Jussieu will stroke your soles with red hot needles. Potage—we'll fill you palms with

boiling oil. The entrée——"

"Hold, monsieur!" I cried. "You go too fast. You'll spoil my appetite!"

"Your nerve is excellent!" he grudgingly admitted. "But how long will it last? Beudant, be good enough to bare our patient's feet."

Beudant obeyed. I have well-shaped feet, with not a blemish upon either. I was not ashamed to have them publicly exhibited. I could not see them myself because of my position, but Marion looked at them, and her glance was quickly riveted. Her lips were moving, and she seemed to be muttering to herself, although I heard no sound. God in Heaven! how beautiful she was, and how I hated her!

Within a few minutes, Jussieu re-appeared, bearing an iron plate, upon which was arrayed a brace of steel awls, set in wooden handles. The points glimmered blue and red. At a nod from Sir Charles Venner, my chair was tipped back in order to raise the soles of my feet. My ankles were strapped securely to the legs of the chair.

Jussieu set his plate upon the floor, and taking one of the awls in his hand, glanced up at his master.

"One moment!" cried Marion. She darted to the rack and seized the half-emptied champagne bottle which Beudant had opened for my benefit. Disdaining the cup, whose rim my lips had touched, she raised the bottle to her mouth and bending back her head drank deeply.

Sir Charles and I exchanged glances of amusement. A little later Marion recovered her position, but she continued to hold the bottle. The wine had produced an instantaneous and curious effect. She was snow white, and her eyes were dull and turgid. "I am ready!" she declared.

The surgeon stepped to the side of my chair, and presenting his back to Marion put his fingers on my right wrist.

Jussieu kneeled upon the floor, and passed his accursed awl across my instep. The pain was so exquisite that, although I fought like a tiger for control, I writhed and groaned.

The torture seared again, and then I shrieked.

But Marion glided forward, and raising the heavy bottle that she held on high, she brought it down with a crashing blow upon Sir Charles Venner's undefended head. The glass shattered into fragments, and the surgeon fell without groan or cry, unconscious at my feet.

My chair was unexpectedly released. I swung forward, seated erect again, helpless and suffering intensely, but uplifted to a mental contempt of pain in a sudden rapture of astonishment. Marion, who had stepped back almost to the farthest wall, faced the negroes with a little cocked pistol, which did not waver in her grasp. Her face was still ashen coloured, but her eyes were simply on fire.

"M. Jussieu!" said she, her voice was like a silver bell, "take up your master, if you want to live, and carry him into the other cellar!"

The negro did not move. He glared at her from where he kneeled, like a frozen image.

"In five seconds I shall kill you!" said the girl. "One—two—"

Jussieu uttered a raucous cry, and scrambled to his feet. Stooping quickly he seized the body of Sir Charles and staggered off.

"Beudant," said Marion, "lock that door quick!"

Beudant sprang to obey. I heard him slam the door and shoot home the bolts.

"Now," said the girl, "release M. Hume and take care not to hurt him."

In a moment I was free. But I could not move so much as a muscle. I had been four days in the chair, and I was not only cramped, but ill, frightfully ill. There was not an organ in my body that did not begin to give me agony immediately the supporting straps relaxed. Even as I swayed forward, I shrieked with pain and swooned. When I awoke I was stretched out at length upon the floor, and Beudant was kneading my half-naked limbs and body with all the strength and science of a skilled masseur. Marion, seated at a little distance on the chair, kept the muzzle of her pistol pointed at the negro's head. From the adjoining chamber a curious babel of sounds proceeded. Sir Charles Venner's voice, raised in passionate entreaties and commands, mingled with the noise of continual digging. Was Jussieu trying to dig a way out? For a moment I wondered why he did not attack the door with his pick, but then I remembered it was thick and stout and heavily bound with iron.

For another hour Beudant continued his massage, and Marion uttered no word nor made one move. I could not speak, because the pain I suffered obliged me to lock my teeth to keep from

shrieking, and even as it was I often groaned. Beudant paused at last in sheer fatigue, and Marion permitted him to rest. Afterwards the negro dressed me, and bound up my wounded foot. He also gave me more champagne and assisted me to rise. I found that I could stand, but my muscles were flaccid and unstrung, while every nerve was raw and quivering. I could not move without assistance. At Marion's command Beudant took me in his arms. He was very strong, that negro, and he bore me as easily as I might have done a child. She opened the door, and we passed out before her, and mounted a flight of brick steps into a kitchen above. Marion bolted the door and followed us like a shadow. I was carried thence out into the night, across a long flagged yard into a stable, Marion always close behind us, with a lanthorn in her hand. I was deposited upon a truss of straw, from which vantage post I watched Beudant, under the guidance of the pistol, harness a quiet-looking horse, and attach it to the shafts of a small basket phaeton. The negro then lifted me into the body of the vehicle, and mounting to the box took up the reins. Marion climbed in and sat beside me. "Drive to London, Beudant," she said quietly, "and if you value your life keep your eyes before you!"

Heaven preserve me from the horrors of such another drive. At every jolt and rumble of the phaeton I felt as though I were being torn apart upon a rack. My moans made such hideous music for the road, that often we were stopped by travellers with courteous questions of my state. Marion addressed me several times with the same request: "For God's sake, monsieur, let me give you an injection of morphia. It will ease your pain!"

But I loathed her, and distrusted her.

"Better the pain," was my invariable response. "Better the pain!"

"How you hate me," she would cry. "How you hate me!"

Sometimes I felt her shiver, but not often, for I kept as closely to my corner as I could, and if by chance she touched me, curses trembled to my lips which I had work to stifle.

We drove so slowly that morning had already dawned before we reached the outskirts of the city. We stopped then at an inn, where Beudant's shouts procured a flask of spirits, which I drank to drug my suffering. Afterwards I did not groan, for though the brandy scarcely eased my pain, it gave me strength to smother its expression.

Marion put away her pistol soon, for the road was full of vehicles, and Beudant was no longer to be feared. The girl's face in the early morning light was pitifully lined and haggard. I watched her, but she kept her gaze set straight before, as though conscious of my stern regard. Every now and then too, she caught her breath, and shuddered as though she were remembering. Our silence lasted until we came to Notting Hill, when I became aware of a certain chilling curiosity concerning her.

"Now that you have broken with your friends," I muttered suddenly, "what will you do?"

She did not move, yet she answered at once in tones of deep humility. "Whatever you wish, monsieur!"

"Whatever I wish," I sneered. "What has my wish to do with you?"

She turned her head and looked into my eyes. "I have used you very ill, monsieur! I would make atonement, though, if you will let me!"

"How?"

"In any way you please."

"Would you marry me, mademoiselle?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"You conceive then that you owe me extraordinary reparation?"

"The greatest possible," she answered very softly.

I knew then that I loved her still, in spite of better cause for hate than love; but so deep was my bitterness and sense of injury against her, that I felt perfectly incapable of magnanimity.

"Your penitence is of sudden growth," I sneered.

"It is none the less sincere, monsieur!"

"And your humility?"

"That too, monsieur."

"I need a wife less than a servant who will nurse me!" I said coldly.

"I will serve you, monsieur."

I looked away and reflected deeply on her words. But though I tried, I could not understand her, and ignorance intensified distrust. Yet I foresaw that a period of sickness lay before me, and I could not believe that she had saved me to again betray me. Some one I must lean upon—it was imperative. She watched me in most evident anxiety, scarcely breathing the while.

I turned at last, and said:

"Have you money?"

"None, monsieur."

I felt my lip curl. It was, then, poverty which had inspired her abject self-surrender—and perhaps, too, fear. No doubt she relied upon my aid to escape Sir Charles Venner's vengeance.

She read my thought, and murmured very low: "As God hears me, you are unjust, monsieur!"

"We shall see!" I sneered. "Stop the phaeton!" We had come upon a cab-stand. Beudant transferred me into a fourwheeler, and Marion thereupon commanded him to return to Staines. When he had departed, I gave her my Bruton Street address, and thither, in perfect silence, we proceeded. My gaolers had disdained to rob me, but my pockets contained less than four pounds, and it was necessary to provide immediately against the illness I anticipated.

When we had arrived, I explained to her the situation of my room, and bade her bring me down my cash-box, in which reposed my cheque-book and all my bank receipts. The box I knew was locked, but, in order to ensure its privacy, I obliged her to detach my latch-key from the others and give me back the bunch. She obeyed me with a sigh, and in five minutes she placed the cash-box in my hands.

"Where to now, monsieur?" she asked humbly, with downcast eyes.

"To the Colonnade Hotel."

She spoke to the driver and resumed her seat. Upon arriving at our destination, two porters carried me within, and I engaged two adjoining rooms on the third floor, to the larger of which I was carefully transported. To all seeming, I was a wounded man in charge of a nurse, for Marion wore her uniform, and I explained to the clerk that our luggage would presently follow us from the station, where we had left it. We were thus able to circumvent Mother Grundy's spirit of conventionality without the necessity of answering a single question.

With Marion's assistance I got to bed, where I lay for some time convulsed with agony. As soon as I could, however, I wrote a cheque for £100, which I gave to her for our joint use. My last recollection is of enjoining upon her a course of conduct designed to secure us from the persecution of our enemies, and directing her to purchase certain trunks and clothes so that our want of luggage might not be evilly construed. Before I had finished, however, I had to spur my wits with brandy, and within an hour I was tossing in a high fever, to all intents and purposes a helpless raving lunatic.

IX

"THE ANGLO-AMERICAN HOTELS LIMITED"

I was dying, so they said: two physicians and my nurse—Marion Le Mar. They informed me, very gravely and gently, and the explicit motive of their confidence was that I might have time to make my peace with heaven, and settle my affairs with men. It was easy to believe them. I was so feeble. When the men of medicine had gone, Marion surprised me by throwing herself down upon her knees beside my bed and bursting into the most passionate fit of weeping I have ever witnessed. As I could not calm her, I occupied the time of her abandonment in considering how I might provide best for her future. I thought of a will, but dismissed the idea, because of its publicity. Marion could not afford to advertise her whereabouts to our enemies. I decided at last to withdraw all my money and the jewels from the bank and give them to her while I lived. When, therefore, she grew tranquil, I made her write a letter and a cheque, both of which, with exhausting effort, I contrived to sign. But she resolutely declined to leave me for a moment, so I was compelled to send a waiter on the errand. He was, by good chance, an honest man, and an hour later my bed was strewn with bank-notes and with flashing gems.

But Marion would not take them. She implored me, for my soul's sake and her satisfaction, to make full restoration to the man I had blackmailed, and so vehemently and persistently did she entreat me that, in very weakness, I at length gave way, only stipulating that she should retain sufficient money to pay the debts my illness had incurred, and to keep her for a little while till

she should find employment. While she was packing up the jewels to send to Sir Charles Venner, I fell asleep, and when I awoke I was once more a pauper.

It was very curious. From that instant I grew better, and hour by hour my strength increased. On the evening of the fourth day, thereafter, I arrived, after much reflection, at the conclusion that Marion had prevailed upon the physicians to pretend that I was dying in order to rob me of the jewels. I also believed her story that she had restored them to Sir Charles to be a falsehood, and I entertained no doubt whatever but that she would presently desert and leave me to my fate. Naturally, I kept these opinions to myself. It was useless to discuss them, and I told myself that such a course would only hasten her departure. I thought her something like a fiend in human form, but she was very beautiful, and I loved her so madly that all I wished for in the world was to retain her by my side as long as possible. With that end in view, I played the hypocrite, and let her think me every simple kind of fool she wished. I derived a bitter-sweet satisfaction from the game, for on her part she pretended to be ardently attached to me. We spent the hours building castles in the air, weaving pretty fancies of love in a cottage, and a long life shared together. She said she had a friend, an old kind-hearted gentleman, whom she could depend upon to find me some employment, as soon as I was perfectly restored to health. I was then to turn over a new leaf, and live an honest, hard-working life, and she would be my wife, my comforter, my devoted helpmate, to the end. It was a very pretty dream, but the strange and bitter feature of it was that I sighed for it to come true. I was tired of my rascality. My long illness had made a changed man of me, and if I could have believed in Marion's avowals, I would have been as happy as a king to mend my ways for her sweet sake, and never do a shady thing again. Once or twice I tried my best to induce her to explain to me the mysteries connected with Sir Charles Venner's secret society of consumptives which I had been unable to fathom. On that subject, however, she maintained an adamant reticence, and when I ventured to press her in love's name, she entreated me in tears to forbear, saying that she was bound by an oath which she could not break. Her art was perfect, for she used to add: "How, dear Agar, could you trust me, if you proved me capable of breaking a solemn oath, sworn to God?"

I could only have effectually answered her by voicing my convictions of her baseness, and that would have driven her away. On the contrary, I praised her constancy, and received my reward from the exquisitely assumed love-light in her glorious brown eyes. The drama took another week to play out. By that time I was quite out of danger, and, although still painfully feeble, my physician assured me that I should soon be able to leave my bed. Marion's joy at that knew no bounds. She covered me with kisses, and insisted that she should write forthwith to her old friend, to inform him of her whereabouts, and the hopes she reposed in him for our happiness and welfare.

"What is his name, sweetheart?" I asked. I had not troubled to inquire before.

She gave me a bright smile. "I'll tell you on our wedding-day," she replied. "It is a little surprise that I am keeping for you, dear."

My thought was: "She is, after all, a poor hand at invention!" I felt convinced that she was simply paving the way with her letter for her escape, and when she went out to post it, I cried aloud in my bitterness of spirit—"To-morrow morning there will come a telegram, and she will leave me!"

So it happened! She was seated by my bed, reading me the morning journals, when, of a sudden, a knock sounded on the door, and a waiter entered with a wire upon a salver. "For Nurse Hampton!" he announced. Such was the name she had assumed when first we came to the hotel.

Marion started up with a little cry of delight that echoed itself in anguish in my heart. I knew what that envelope contained as well as she. Holding my breath, I watched her with critical intentness. But I had no fault to find. To the very last she maintained her part, playing it like the unimaginably perfect actress that she was. Tearing it open, she read its contents with an expression of happy expectation, which quickly changed before my eyes to fear and passionate concern.

"Mon Dieu!" she gasped, and crushing up the paper in her hand, she turned to me. "Agar!" she cried, "he is very ill, dying they say, and he needs me. I must go to him at once!"

I had expected it, expected it for days, and yet, none the less, the blow was stunning when it fell. Indeed, in my experience, it is always the long-expected calamity which causes most dismay. For a while I could not speak, and turning my head I weakly closed my eyes in an effort to conceal the tears which sprang unbidden there.

But when she stooped and tried to kiss me, her falseness roused a sudden madness in my breast. Flinging her aside, I started upright in the bed, and all my pent-up scorn found vent. Passion lent me strength to strip her baseness bare, and no whit did I spare her. "Go, you Jade!" I muttered at the last, for I was failing. "Go! and take with you my curse! It is years since I have breathed a prayer—but now I pray to God that never may I see your traitress face again!"

She stood before me, pale as death, her great eyes blazing in her head. But not one word did she reply, and when I fell exhausted on the pillows, she turned with one long glance, and slowly glided from the room.

Five minutes later, she returned, gowned for the street, but I merely glanced at her, then closed my eyes in icy scorn. In perfect silence she approached the bed and placed some parcel lightly on the cover-lid. I heard her steps retreat, and presently the door was very softly closed.

Sure that she was gone, I started up in order to investigate her latest act. The parcel contained an account sheet covered with her writing, which showed me that my debts to date approached one hundred pounds. Within the cover were banknotes for two hundred.

It seemed that my vituperations had stung to life in her some lingering spark of shame. Drearily I congratulated myself, and tried to find comfort in the thought that, at all events, I should not be obliged to recommence my battle with the world entirely penniless. But I was sick at heart, sick and absolutely hopeless.

The next week passed and left me more pronouncedly improved in health, but desperate in mind; so desperate that I was fit for any villainy. For still another week I nursed myself, hating to see my little stock of money dwindle, but not daring to begin the struggle without a stock-in-trade of strength.

With that at length acquired, I quitted the hotel and went to Bruton Street, where I resolved to take up my abode until, by dint of luck or craft, I might repair my scattered fortunes.

My first act was to disguise myself as a professional and somewhat portly gentleman. For a model I took the physician who had recently attended me, and as I had closely and frequently remarked his ways, I was able to reproduce him with nice enough fidelity. Having armed myself with a revolver, I employed a cab and drove straightway to Sir Charles Venner's residence in Harley Street, fiercely determined to settle my account with him at once, for good and all. To my astonishment, however, I found the place in the hands of another surgeon, who curtly informed me that Sir Charles Venner, several weeks ago, had sold his practice, and gone abroad to parts unknown. I drove thence to Dr. Fulton's house, and a similar story was related there. Thoroughly enraged, I went to my old master's place in Curzon Street. The lackey, who opened the door, seemed much astonished at my question.

"Why, sir," said he, "Lady Farmborough lives here now. Sir William Dagmar sold his lease to her before he went abroad, more than a month ago!"

I turned away in growing despair, beginning at last to perceive that the whole of the secret society must have fled from England as soon as they had heard of my escape from Venner's hands. But I determined to leave no point of hope untried, and my next visit was to the Kingsmere Hospital for Consumptives. It was shut up, and the walls were plastered over with placards—"TO LET." I then successively attacked the houses of the remaining members still unaccounted for, and ere the day was done, I discovered that Mr. Humphreys had set out upon a tour of Asia, and that Mr. Nevil Pardoe had died suddenly upon the morning after my escape from Staines.

My occupation was gone—reft from my hand! As a blackmailer, I might as well incontinently close my shutters, for there was not a soul left in Great Britain upon whom I could levy for either money or revenge, and I had no funds to pursue them on a wild-goose chase abroad.

I felt that the world was going very badly with me when I reached the end of my discoveries, but my cup was not yet full. While waiting for my dinner, at a restaurant in Jermyn Street, I picked up, by chance, the *Daily Chronicle*, to while away the time and rid my mind of its unwelcome thoughts. It was neatly folded in a small square compass, and as I smoothed it out to turn the page, a poignantly familiar name that was planted in the marriage column caught my eye. A second later, trembling with passion, I read the following announcement:—

"Dagmar—Le Mar. On the — instant, at the bridegroom's residence, Cairo, by the Rev. François Long, S.J., William Dagmar, of Flag Hill Park, Newhaven, fourth baronet, to Marion, only daughter of the late Colonel Comte Hypolite Le Mar, Huitième Régiment, Chasseurs d'Afrique."

I tore the paper into shreds, and in the act I fatuously thought that I had torn the image of that false fair woman from my heart. At all events, I contrived to eat a very hearty dinner, and before I came to coffee, I had already formed a plan to make myself a millionaire.

I should explain that at the time of which I now write, the historical American financial invasion of Great Britain was in full blast. The billionaire Yankee magnate, J. Stelfox Steele, at the head of his omnivorous trust, had already succeeded in enfolding within his octopus-like tentacles an alarming number of England's richest commercial industries. Not content with having secured our railways, tramways and shipping, his latest achievement had been to form a "combine" of hotel and brewery proprietaries, with the result that two-thirds of the breweries, and almost every important and fashionable hotel within the confines of the kingdom were conducted under his direction, while the entire liquor traffic was absolutely in his grip. This prodigious organization Mr. Stelfox Steele had named—"The Anglo-American Hotels Limited," probably in a spirit of derision, for although all the property was English, the major portion of the profits were designed to travel into Yankee pockets. It had scarcely been registered a company before the British public began to regard it with both fear and loathing, for its first and immediate work of

consequence had been slightly to raise the price of beer, and at the same time largely to increase the cost of living in hotels. In palace, public-house and thoroughfares, it constituted the topic of the hour. The fact is, it affected everyone, the highest and the lowest in the land alike, and very seldom could two men foregather for longer than five minutes without the exciting subject being introduced. As the "combine" had, to some extent, victimised me during my residence at the Colonnade Hotel, I shared in the popular indignation, and during my convalescence I had taken pains to make myself thoroughly acquainted with its construction, policy and aims, and I had carefully digested everything that had been published concerning its promoters. Mr. Stelfox Steele's sudden and brilliant appearance in the financial firmament, and his consequent magnificent and uninterruptedly successful career, had, moreover, completely captivated my romantic fancy, and I was quite anxious to hear as much about him as I could. For that reason I became speedily interested in the conversation of two gentlemen who sat at the adjoining table while I dined.

They were of interesting appearance, certainly; portly, conventional, bald-headed souls, both; typical men of business, in a large way—perhaps stockbrokers; but the matter of their talk was decidedly exciting and suggestive to a person like myself.

"What is this Stelfox Steele like to look at, Gregson? You know him, don't you?" were the first words that attracted my attention, and thereafter I did not lose a syllable.

"Well!" replied the other, "I know him in a way. That is to say, I have met him once or twice in business, though I don't suppose he would recognise me if we passed each other in the street ..."

"Oh! he is that sort, is he?"

"Now, Scott, you go too fast. I did not mean you to infer he is a snob. But he must meet a lot of people, don't you know, and they say his memory for faces is not excellent."

"Is he like his photographs?"

"He is their living image."

"Then he is no Adonis, Greg."

"N—no," said Gregson, rather doubtfully. "But I'd not call him an ugly man, Scott. There is an air of quiet force about the fellow that marks him from the crowd. And he has some quaint mannerisms, too, that are not unpleasing."

"For instance?"

"Well, he grips your hand very hard and looks very straight into your eyes, when he meets you. It quite startles one at first, but, for my part, I don't dislike it. It seems honest, if it isn't. Then again, when he talks, he invariably drops his voice and half closes his eyes, no matter what the subject is, just as though he were making you an important confidence. In my opinion he owes a good deal of his success to those two apparent trifles. There's a lot in manner, Scott; more than most people imagine, and his manner simply provokes trust."

"Good Lord, Gregson, you don't mean to say you like the beast!"

"Like him!" echoed the other, raising his glass. "Why, here's to his confusion. We'll soon be all his bond-slaves, if he has his way! You've heard about his latest scheme, to corner wolfram, haven't you?"

"Please the pigs," muttered Scott, "something will break him before he brings that off. Fancy the villain daring to even dream of interfering with the working of our arsenals. It's bounce, of course, but what tremendous bounce!"

"If he succeeds," said Gregson, gloomily, "the whole world might as well become American citizens at once. Without wolfram we'll not be able to provide our ships with armour-plate, nor manufacture a single big gun, except by the gracious favour of J. Stelfox Steele."

"Is it as bad as that?"

"Very nearly. It is impossible to harden steel properly without wolfram. Professor Bryant told me so to-day!"

"The fellow is a public danger—by Jove!"

"Say, rather a national menace, and you will not overstate the case. I tell you what, Scott, whoever tripped him up would deserve well of his country."

"I'd subscribe to a monument for such an one—by gad!"

I felt inclined to cry out at this juncture: "Sirs, look at me, the man is found!" But I restrained the impulse, despite the fact that I was thoroughly elated, and perfectly persuaded too that I had a mission to fulfil in life to save my country.

An hour later, I returned to Bruton Street, burdened with a large bundle of photographs, which I had purchased on the road. They represented J. Stelfox Steele, and in every conceivable posture and attitude which a human being can assume. I set them about my room and began earnest study. The head was large, and yet rather brainy than intellectual, and the face argued a mind rather active than reflective. The eyes were well-shaped and neither prominent nor deep-set. The nose was straight and shapely, like my own. Several photographs smiled. These evidenced him to possess a long, white set of teeth. The upper lip was long and hairless, ergo a tenacious disposition. The lower was thin and compressed—it helped his square, clean-shaven chin to express a powerful determination. For the rest he wore a short, thick, grizzled crop of hair.

A strong, well-balanced countenance upon the whole, and eminently easy to impersonate. Indeed, fortune favoured me more than her wont, for my ears and shape of face resembled his in an extraordinary degree. I spent two hours, however, in careful thought and anxious contemplation before I allowed my wish to have its way. I even tried to catch his bent of mind from his counterfeit presentments, so that nothing might be lacking in my intended effort. At last I arose, and opening a drawer, examined my collection of false teeth. I soon found the set I wanted, and in a trice made change with those I wore. I wanted to surprise myself, so I rigidly refrained from glancing at a mirror. My next act was to explore my wig-box, and presently my head was clothed. Closing my eyes, I spurred my will, and twisted suddenly the features that required such exercise. Finally, I stepped before the glass. J. Stelfox Steele looked back at me—and that result I had obtained without having employed either paint, grease-pot, or other artifice than those I have described. I almost wept with joy, I felt so gratified, for already, in my dreams, I saw myself a millionaire.

My next week was a very busy one. I procured two suits of clothes, such as it was notorious that the great magnate always wore. I practised half-a-dozen hours each day before my mirror, until I had his face by heart and could imitate it swimmingly. And last, but not least, I purchased several piles of newspapers that had recorded J. Stelfox Steele's doings and sayings, manners and habits of life, over which accounts I pored like an ardent student in my leisure hours.

At the end of that period I was perfectly self-confident and anxious to commence my task. I was compelled, however, by force of circumstance, to postpone the battle for awhile, because Mr. Stelfox Steele had unexpectedly arrived in London. He came, according to the papers—which were full of him—to instal one of his co-adjutor millionaires, named Sampson Y. May, as supreme head of the Anglo-American Hotels Limited, during his temporary absence in South America, whither he proposed to proceed immediately, in order to purchase some large tracts of wolfram-bearing territory, whose control he needed for the perfection of the trust he was then engaged in forming.

I was at first disgusted at the delay, but not for long. Something caught me by the throat and said to me: "You fool, here is the opportunity of your life. Contrive to see the man, and then you will be better able to secure your chances of impersonating him successfully."

To think was to act. It was then early morning. By ten o'clock I would have passed muster anywhere as a good-looking, languid, idle, elderly clubman. I wore a grey moustache, and side levers; a slightly darker wig and a monocle. I was, in fact, Lord Algernon Darnley. A "while you wait" printer inscribed the name upon some pasteboards, armed with which, I drove to the office of the Anglo-American Hotels Limited.

My card was deferentially received, but a polite secretary informed me that it would be impossible for the magnate to see me without a prearranged appointment.

"I have one," I drawled, unabashed by the rebuff, "Mr. Steele particularly requested me, through a common acquaintance, to call."

The secretary departed and returned. "Mr. Steele is exceedingly busy," he declared. "He will be glad if you will state your business to me."

"It's private," I said calmly. "I won't keep him long. I have a document to give him, that's all, but it's got to be placed in his hands."

I was requested to wait five minutes. I waited an hour, and was at last ushered to the great man's presence.

My first thought was: "How like his photographs!" But he was a taller man than I by a good two inches. Gregson was quite right. He looked me in the eyes very straight and keenly, and he gave my hand an energetic squeeze.

"Are we acquainted?" he demanded, in sharp, incisive tones, and he immediately sat down, pointing briskly to a chair. "Now, what's your business?"

His voice was almost free from twang, but peculiar, all the same. I had to pinch my leg to keep from mimicking it to his face.

"I fibbed," I began coolly, drawling my words to suit my character. "I could have got an introduction easily, but what's the use when a fib would do the trick as well, and quicker,

probably. I wanted to see you, don't you know!"

He gave a quick smile, and a quicker, though slighter frown. "Well," he said, "you are here, what can I do for you? I can only spare you sixty seconds!" He took out his watch.

"I've a hundred thousand lying idle," I drawled.

"Pounds or dollars?" He half-closed his eyes, and his tones, though rapid, dropped to a murmur.

"Pounds."

"Well, sir, that is, Lord Darnley?"

"I thought of Anglo-American Hotels?" said I.

"You could not do better," he declared.

"Thanks!" I stood up. "I'm much obliged to you. Good-day!"

A bell tinkled, we shook hands, and I marched off thoroughly delighted. I had his voice now, and I knew his height;—my two weak points were remedied.

On the following Sunday evening, at midnight, he set out for New York, and I was one of the crowd that watched him catch his train at Euston Station. Next morning I searched the papers through and through, but all they had to say of Mr. Steele was that he had sailed. After breakfast I packed my trunk and drove to a little unfrequented hotel in Lambert Road, where, *in propriâ personâ*, I engaged a bedroom and a sitting-room upon the first floor, in my own name—Agar Hume. About an hour later a well-dressed elderly gentleman slipped out of my bedroom, and, descending the stairs, stepped into the street. This person ordered a hansom to take him to the City, giving the driver the address of a substantial firm of stockbrokers—named Ducker and Sims. I had previously taken care to ascertain that the firm in question had never been in any way connected with J. Stelfox-Steele.

Upon arrival I begged to be allowed an immediate private interview with one of the partners, pretending that my business was of the utmost urgency. My prayer was granted, and I was conducted into a massively furnished office, where a hawk-faced man, of about forty years of age, was seated at a desk dictating letters to an ancient shorthand writer.

"Mr. Ducker?" I asked, as he glanced up.

"Mr. Ducker is at present in Chicago. My name is Sims." he replied. "Kindly take that chair. By the way, have I the honour of your acquaintance?"

"No, Mr. Sims; my name is Brown."

"Ah! And you wished to see me——"

"On private business, extremely important business, Mr. Sims." I glanced suggestively at the ancient shorthand writer, who appeared to be dozing.

"My confidential clerk, Mr. Brown," explained Mr. Sims. "You may speak before him."

"Excuse me," said I, "I am merely a messenger, and my directions are particular."

Mr. Sims raised his eyebrows, and curtly commanded his satellite to leave the room. The ancient awoke with a start, and nervously departed.

"May I lock the door?" I asked.

"Your business must be mighty curious, Mr. Brown," he replied, looking utterly astonished.

"It is," I answered simply, looking straight into his eyes.

He sprang to his feet, crossed the room, and locked the door.

"Now?" said he, returning.

"Thank you, Mr. Sims."

"Well?"

"It is my province to convince you, sir, that by momentarily disregarding the ordinary rules of courtesy which hold in your profession, you may secure a client whose business will yield you greater profit than that of any dozen others whom you have. Nay, sir, I speak on hearsay, but advisedly, for my master is well aware of the substantial undertakings of your firm."

"Your master must be a large operator," he muttered with a gasp.

I smiled. "He is, indeed."

"And his name?"

"I am forbidden to relate it, sir."

He frowned and gazed at me, the most puzzled and astonished man in London.

"What do you want, then," he demanded.

"My master wishes you to call upon him, Mr. Sims. He is unable to visit you, for reasons which he will personally explain if you will comply with his request!"

"This is most unusual!" he replied. "Where is he to be found?"

"I can only tell you, sir, if you consent to give me your word, as a man of honour, that you will go to see him at three o'clock this afternoon. I should tell you, Mr. Sims, that if you refuse, your own will be the only disadvantage."

"I—I—I never heard of such a thing in my life!" he stammered. "But—but—in any case, I cannot go—at three o'clock. I have a pressing business engagement."

I got to my feet, smiling contemptuously. "Then I have only to thank you for your patience, Mr. Sims," I said, with an expressive shoulder shrug. "Good-morning, sir!"

"I could go at four!" he cried, of a sudden.

I glanced at him, and perceived that the day was mine. Curiosity was simply eating the man. I smiled and, shook my head. "My master said Three!"

"With a great effort, I could make it half-past. What do you say, Mr. Brown; shall we split the difference?"

"I cannot, Mr. Sims. I would be dismissed at once."

"Then, three."

"And your word of honour, sir?"

He nodded. I liked that nod.

"You will find my master at the Golden Grove Hotel, in Lambert Road," I said. "Kindly ask for Mr. Agar Hume."

His face fell, and he looked absurdly disappointed.

"Agar Hume! Lambert Road!" he muttered in amazed disgust.

"Believe me, sir, it is unwise to judge men by the sounds of names, which may or not belong to them. Stelfox Steele imparts a strangely furtive signification to the ear, and yet its owner is about the richest man and biggest operator on our little globe. I congratulate you upon your determination. A little later you will congratulate yourself. But in the meanwhile, let me recommend you to keep our interview a secret even from your partner. My master will be best pleased so. Good-morning, Mr. Sims!"

"One second!" he gasped. "Am I to understand—er—that—er—Mr. Stelfox Steele——"

"Is on his way to America," I interrupted sharply. "Good-morning, sir!" Whereupon, hastily unfastening the door, I made my escape before he had time to say another word.

After bolting an apology for a lunch, I drove back to Lambert Road in a fourwheeler. During the journey, I contrived to become Agar Hume again, for I did not wish the people in my little inn to see a dozen different persons using my room as if it belonged to them. The driver stared at me aghast when I alighted. He had taken up an old man, and he put down a young one. I detest sharp-eyed cab-drivers, they are a public nuisance.

It was striking two as I entered my bedroom. At half-past, I resembled J. Stelfox Steele as closely as I wished. In order to make up the difference in our heights, I was obliged to resort to a rather inconvenient trick. I took off my bed-clothes and spread them doubled on the floor of my sitting-room, at my own side of the table. These I covered with mats, and set my chair over all. I sprang thus two inches, in as many minutes, whether seated or erect, but I could not leave my pedestal, without losing those same inches; wherefore the inconvenience. I dislike tricks of that sort, but it is my rule never to neglect any detail that I am aware of, and as my pedestal was hidden by the table-cloth, and, moreover, I could not perceive any necessity to walk about during the forthcoming interview, I had really very little to grumble at. My last act was to don a huge brown beard, and a pair of goggles. These made me look like an old hayseed farmer, but J. Stelfox Steele was underneath the disguise waiting to disclose himself. When it wanted ten minutes to the hour, I left my bedroom, the door of which I locked, entered my sitting-room, and,

mounting my pedestal, I sat down to wait. I had previously arranged a screen before the outer door, so that the servant who would show up Mr. Sims might not look in and remark my latest transformation.

I mention these details, not because they were of any urgent moment, but to evidence the amount of attention and forethought which I had bestowed upon the business in hand. The fact is, in my experience, it is always some absurdly finicking trifle, which, when neglected, brings disaster to the greatest undertakings. I was once hissed off the stage at Newcastle-on-Tyne, when attempting to impersonate Mr. Gladstone, because, forsooth, although my disguise was otherwise perfect, I had not remembered to change a pair of sharp-toed boots which I had worn a few minutes earlier while imitating Mr. Greatorex, a dandified celebrity of local fame. That failure had been a very bitter pill to swallow at the time, but it was of more real use to me than all my triumphs put together, and I never forgot the lesson that it inculcated.

Mr. Sims was only two minutes late. In answer to my brisk "come in, and shut the door behind you!" he entered silently, but as he turned the corner of the screen and caught sight of my bearded face, he uttered an unpremeditated little nervous laugh. "Just such a laugh any man might involuntarily utter, who had been wishing, but not expecting, the improbable to happen!" thought I. His laugh, translated into words, said this—"I never really believed you could be Stelfox Steele, Mr. Agar Hume, in spite of what your wily secretary tried to hint!"

I stood up, and glared at him through my goggles.

"Mr. Sims?" I demanded.

He bowed, measuring me with a sweeping hawk-sharp glance.

"Shake!" I said, of a sudden, after a full minute's silence, and briskly extended my hand.

He responded somewhat slowly and doubtfully to my invitation. But I tore off my goggles, and looking him straight and keenly in the eyes, seized his hand. I squeezed it with all my strength, then pointed to a chair.

He obeyed with a wince, wringing his hand the while.

"Really, Mr. Hume," he began, with a deprecating frown, "I am at a loss——"

"One second!" I interrupted, and deftly removed my beard.

He gave me one quick astonished look, then sprang to his feet, his eyes alight, his face flushing with excitement.

"Is it possible?" he cried.

"You know me," I demanded.

"Why sir, of course!"

"But we have never met!" I cried, frowning blackly.

"No, sir, no," he responded, hastily. "But Mr. Stelfox Steele's face is as familiar to the public as that of Mr. Chamberlain. I am glad to meet you, sir."

I nodded and sat down. "Pray resume your seat, Mr. Sims." He obeyed.

I leaned across the table and beckoned with my hand. Next moment our heads were almost touching.

"You are wondering," said I.

"Yes," he answered frankly.

"I am supposed to be on my way to New York," I went on, in very low tones. "I am being impersonated on the steamer by one of my clerks, who will keep his cabin all the way. Before he arrives at the other side—all will be over. I have taken every precaution against failure. I cannot, shall not fail, Mr. Sims, unless you fail me."

"Some big coup on exchange, I presume?" he muttered, "and a lone hand, too—eh?"

"Exactly! But you are still wondering—speak!"

He bit his lips. "It—is the honour you have paid me—me!" he stammered. "Messrs. Max and Humphreys are your brokers, I believe."

"And I have no fault to find with them," I answered quickly, "except that Sampson May, Vanderwill, and most of my other associates also deal with them. You understand?"

"Ah!" he cried, "I see! You'll be wanting me to bear stocks, eh, Mr. Steele?"

I smiled in commendation of his shrewdness. "Well, Mr. Sims," I muttered, "may I depend on you?"

"Most certainly. I am deeply——"

I waved my hand. "Money talks," I interrupted drily. "I require no assurances. Serve me well, and I'll make your fortune. Fail me, and by the God above us, I'll break you, Mr. Sims. Those are my terms."

"Agreed!" he cried, his eyes shining like stars. "Now, sir, your instructions. What am I to bear?"

"Anglo-American Hotels," I murmured softly.

He started upright, and gazed at me like one confounded. "Anglo-Americans," he gasped.

"Listen," said I. "To-morrow morning you will sell one hundred thousand shares—cash-on-delivery—to be handed over on Saturday. The market is at present steady at forty shillings. Your first operation will not affect it one iota. In the afternoon you will sell another hundred thousand—same terms. You'll get the same figure, for, although my associates will be nervous, they are too deeply involved to dare let the price fall, till they are sure, and they'll buy at evens, never dreaming that they are bucking-up against a stone wall. Next morning sell two hundred thousand. That will turn the balance. The price will probably drop a bit. In the afternoon sell three hundred thousand. You'll find by then the market in a panic, for my pals will have smelt a big rat, and they'll no longer show fight. Indeed, I expect they will follow my lead, and to save themselves, start selling too. However, keep on selling a hundred thousand each half-day, till the absolute slump. That will arrive on Friday morning at latest. I reckon the shares should by then reach bottom, say from three to seven shillings. You will then buy scrip against deliveries on your former sales and report to me here at 11 a.m. on Saturday morning, with the transfers for signature. By the way, Agar Hume is a good name, and will look fine on the transfers. Stick to it! That is all I need say, I think, except that I advise you to follow my lead as far as your means allow. The transaction will enrich you. Your commission will, of course, be at the ordinary rate."

Mr. Sims had fallen back in his chair. His eyes were as round as marbles, and his mouth gaped ajar.

"You looked surprised!" I observed, with an indulgent smile.

He passed his hand nervously across his brow, and gave himself a little shake.

"It's colossal—but immoral!" he gasped. "Colossally immoral! Your associates——" he stopped short, lacking words.

"My associates are men of business," I said, coldly. "And they would be the first to tell you that there is no morality involved in business transactions. I propose to treat them as they would treat me, if they were clever enough to perceive a way. But we waste time, sir. The question is, are you the man to handle the affair?"

"Yes," he cried. "Indeed, yes."

I nodded and stood up. "Then adieu till Saturday. My secretary, Brown, in the meanwhile, will wait upon you every afternoon. Good-day, Mr. Sims!"

He bowed, and, stammering some form of farewell, took his departure. A moment later I locked the door behind him, and, retiring into my inner room, threw myself down upon the bed—to think. I had succeeded beyond my dreams. The stockbroker had swallowed both bait and hook like the greediest of gudgeons. He had not asked me one difficult question, and, whether from diffidence or obsequiousness, he had neglected to demand the slightest proof of my *bona fides*. Concerning the latter point, however, I thought it possible that he might, after reflection, return and try to repair his folly. I therefore postponed changing my disguise for several hours, so that I might not be caught unawares. But Mr. Sims did not venture to come back, and when night fell, I felt safe. I had only ten pounds left in the world at that juncture, but I considered my future so brilliantly assured, and I felt so satisfied with myself, that, as Agar Hume, *in propria personâ*, I treated myself to dinner at the Trocadero, and afterwards to a music-hall.

I passed the next day reading a French novel, until three o'clock in the afternoon, when I assumed the form of Brown, Mr. Stelfox Steele's fictitious lackey. At a little after four o'clock I entered Mr. Sims' office, and was immediately ushered into the stockbroker's private sanctum.

Mr. Sims began to greet me with great effusiveness, but I cut him short, and even refused to sit down.

"Excuse me," I said, quickly, "a certain gentleman is very anxiously expecting my return to Lambert Road, and I simply dare not keep him waiting an unnecessary second. Did you sell the shares, sir?"

"Yes—two hundred thousand!"

"And the figure, Mr. Sims?"

"Forty shillings, Mr. Brown; just as he predicted!"

"Is the market at all upset?"

"Excited rather, I should say. Mr. Sampson Y. May, the Manager of the Trust, came to see me, and tried to pump me, but naturally, I kept a close mouth."

"Good," said I, "my master will be pleased."

"Has he any further orders for me, Mr. Brown?"

"Only to carry on. Good-afternoon, sir! I must hurry back."

"Good-afternoon, Mr. Brown; pray give Mr.—er—Hume—my kind regards."

I nodded and withdrew, happy as a king. But until the same hour on the following day I suffered the most poignant anxiety. It was relieved, however, on the way to the stockbrokers' office. As I drove over the bridge, the newsboys were crying at the top of their voices: "Great fall in Anglo-American Hotels. Panic on the Stock Exchange!"

I bought a paper and, trembling with delight, was speedily convinced of the truth of their assertions. The shares in the great trust, which yesterday had stood firm at forty shillings, had already fallen to twenty, and the market was in a state of collapse. The journal had devoted its leading article to the affair and, voicing the popular attitude, was mildly jubilant at so severe a check having been given to American enterprise. I found Mr. Sims in a state of rapturous excitement. As soon as I had entered the room, he locked the door, and, seizing both my hands, he wrung them as warmly as though I had been his dearest friend, new met after years of separation.

"To think that I almost drove you away from my door the other day!" he cried in a whirl. "Mr. Brown, what don't I owe you. What don't I owe you?"

"You owe me nothing," I replied. "Your gratitude is entirely due to Mr. Agar Hume, sir; I was merely his messenger."

"Messenger or not," he retorted warmly, "you brought me a message which has made my fortune, and when this business is over I shall insist upon making you a handsome present, Mr. Brown."

I waved my hand and shrugged my shoulders. "My master does not allow me to accept presents," I said, with dignity. "But that reminds me, I am keeping him in suspense. How many shares did you sell to-day?"

"Five hundred thousand!"

"And the figure?"

"Forty shillings for the first hundred; thirty-five for the second; thirty for the third, and twenty for the last two. The price dropped like a rocket in the last half-hour, and now the whole exchange is full of bears; there is scarcely a single buyer offering. I have no doubt but that to-morrow there will be a further heavy fall."

"Hum!" said I. "Let me see, you have now in credit for my master one million one hundred and twenty-five thousand pounds. That is to say, of course, on settlement. Am I right?"

"Perfectly, Mr. Brown. And for that sum I have disposed of seven hundred thousand shares. I hope that Mr.—er—ah—Hume—will be satisfied."

"I am sure he will be." I put on my hat. "Keep on selling till they reach five shillings, please, then buy scrip through another broker, or more, as fast as possible, until we stand even. Those are my master's latest orders, Mr. Sims."

"Very good, Mr. Brown. Anything else?"

"Not at present, sir. Good-evening!"

Next day "Anglo-American Hotels" fell as low as four shillings, and continued at that price until the following afternoon, when they began to rise, owing to the heavy purchases made on my account by the brokers employed in that behalf by Mr. Sims. On this point I need only remark that my agents, during that period, bought shares to replace the fictitious ones which had been sold at my behest for a little over £450,000.

On Saturday morning, promptly at the appointed hour, Mr. Sims came to me, at the Golden Grove Hotel. As may be readily imagined, I received him in the guise of Mr. Stelfox Steele, and I took every conceivable care that he should still persist in his delusion. He brought with him a large bundle of transfer forms, which it took me an hour to sign, writing at the top of my speed,

for not many of the shares were in larger parcels than a thousand. I subscribed them all with my own name—Agar Hume. Mr. Sims meanwhile watching my flying pen in respectful silence. When I had finished, I pushed aside the papers towards him, and heaved a deep sigh.

"Never mind details, Mr. Sims," I said, wearily, "Brown has bored me with them through the week. He tells me that when your commission is deducted I am to receive £650,000?"

"Yes, sir. A splendid week's work, Mr. Steele."

I shrugged my shoulders. "Not too bad, since I was pressed for time, but a bagatelle, Mr. Sims, to the business we shall yet do together. By the way, I leave London to-night, but Brown will stay behind me to receive the money. When can you be ready to settle?"

"On Monday, at noon, if that will suit you, Mr. Steele?"

I nodded. "It will do. Make out an open bank-cheque and hand it to Brown, who will give you a receipt signed by Agar Hume. You will understand that I cannot discharge you in my own name?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Well, Sims, I hope that you have profited by my example and advice?"

He gave me a look of deep gratitude. "Thanks to you, sir," he cried. "I am a rich man to-day, that is to say, from my point of view—not yours, sir."

"How much have you made?"

"Seventy thousand, commission included. I cannot sufficiently express my obligation to you, Mr. Steele. There are not many operators who will allow their brokers to follow their lead. But you, sir, were more than generous!"

I smiled. "I can afford such a pastime occasionally, Sims. Besides, I liked your face. Ah! well. I shall not detain you now, for I am very busy myself. Good-bye!"

He stood up, and we shook hands.

"We'll meet again, sir, I hope," he cried. "You were good enough to hint a moment since——"

"Yes," I interrupted, "We'll meet again. But our acquaintanceship must necessarily be preserved a secret from the world. Therefore be good enough not to feel offended should we by any chance encounter in public, and you receive no recognition at my hands. When I want you, my secretary, Brown, will let you know. Until then, farewell!"

He bowed deeply, and respectfully retired.

As for me, I removed my disguise as quickly as I could, and changed my clothes. I then paid my reckoning at the hotel, and set off for Bruton Street, with exactly three pounds in my pocket. There I remained until Monday afternoon, sunk in a veritable debauch of dreams. The time passed on the wings of brilliant fancies, and not an hour appeared too long, despite my natural anxiety to finger the money which my audacious dexterity had won. My extraordinary success had, in fact, turned my head a little, and had swelled my vanity to proportions so magnificent that I fell into a stupor of self-reverence, and often even forgot to eat. I awakened at length, however, to thoughts of revenge. Somewhere hiding from me in the world was a certain great surgeon—named, Sir Charles Venner—who had inflicted on my body inhuman tortures. He had driven needles into my fingers, and he had seared my feet with branding-irons. I had been obliged by poverty temporarily to relinquish all idea of vengeance. But now I was rich! rich! I sprang to my feet with a sudden cry of rage and exultation, savagely resolved to repay my enemy with interest for every pang that I had suffered at his hands. After that I dreamed no more.

My final interview with Mr. Sims was brief, but eminently satisfactory. In exchange for a receipt which I had written out beforehand, he handed to me, as he thought to Mr. Brown, an open cheque, drawn in favour of Mr. Agar Hume on the Bank of England, for £650,000—which was marked "good." He then shook me warmly by the hand and begged me to allow him to make me a present. That, however, I refused, and half-an-hour later I was again in my room at Bruton Street, stripping off for the last time my disguise as "Brown," the Secretary.

I then repaired to my bank, and, much to the old manager's astonishment, re-opened my account there with the cheque that represented my princely and strangely-gotten fortune. The manager did not ask me for a reference on that occasion. Indeed, he nearly fell over himself in his anxiety to be polite, and he personally conducted me when I departed to the outer door. Truly, money makes the man.

Two days afterwards, I set out for Paris on my way to Cairo, my pockets full of foreign gold, and armed besides with letters of credit for large amounts. My intention was to find, first of all, my false love, Marion Le Mar, now Lady Dagmar. And through her, if possible, my enemy—Sir Charles Venner.

THE HOUSE AMONG THE PINES

Clever rascals are of necessity friendless and incomparably lonely men. Prudence prevents them from confiding their affairs to any other, even their nearest and dearest; therefore they are obliged to lead self-centred and segregated lives in the truest sense of the term, and are absolutely prohibited from tasting that greatest of luxuries, human sympathy. Since my last embarkation upon a career of villainy, I had so far escaped the pangs of ennui, because my mind had been always occupied with my ambition, and action had followed mercifully fast upon design. The mere fact, however, of having succeeded in making myself a rich man, robbed me of that precious concern for the future which had hitherto been my refuge from reflection. It is true that considerations of vengeance partially supplied its place, but as I had yet to find my enemy before I could exchange purpose for practice, I began to realize the utter isolation of my state. I arrived at Paris in a desolate and listless mood, and so wearied with my own companionship that I was ready to make friends with a dog.

For that reason, while sipping coffee after dinner in the saloon of the Hotel de Louvre, where I had put up, I by no means disdained the overtures of an old and weazened little Frenchman, who appeared to be as lonely as myself.

He was a curious looking creature: grey, grizzled, and stooped of shoulder. His face was seamed with a thousand wrinkles, that even overspread his long melancholy nose. But his eyes, although small, were very bright, and his mouth was that of a humourist.

He sidled up to me by degrees, evidently wishful to make my acquaintance, and yet a little nervous of the first step. But I met him half way with an observation on the weather, and presently we were seated before the same table in close and animated conversation.

"Life is for the most part a dull and dreary affair, monsieur," said he.

"The remark of an intelligent and experienced man, monsieur," said I.

He bowed and smiled. "That is true, monsieur," he returned, "but your discernment proves that you also possess the qualities which you have mentioned."

"Yet in an inferior degree, for I take it that I am your junior, and you have the air of a man who has improved his opportunities to the utmost."

The compliment delighted him. "Monsieur," he cried, "I am fortunate to have encountered you. I desire to know you better. Permit me! I call myself—Bertrand Du Gazet. I am a native of Paris, but I have spent half my life in America, where I acquired a certain fortune. I have but just returned to France, to find my relatives and old friends dead and widely scattered, and myself utterly forgotten. It is a sad home-coming."

"Truly," I said politely. "My name, monsieur, is Henri Belloc, and, strange to say, I too have long been a stranger to my country. This very day I have come back to Paris after an absence of many years. And, like you, I have none to welcome me."

"We are then comrades in misfortune," he declared, beaming upon me the while. "I drink, monsieur, to our better acquaintance."

"And I," said I, raising my *petit verre* to my lips. "I drink to its speedy ripening into friendship."

He put one hand upon his heart and extended to me the other, which I warmly pressed.

"I am a bachelor," he observed.

"I, too, monsieur."

"Of all the things in this world, I like the gaming table," said he.

"The dice are fine thought killers, monsieur."

"I loved once a beautiful woman, and she betrayed me."

"It is a habit of the accursed sex, from which I also have suffered."

"Monsieur!" he cried, "I perceive well that we are destined to be friends. We have not only a similarity of thought and sentiment, but also of experience."

"Garçon," I shouted, "a bottle of champagne and two glasses."

The wine was brought and we pledged each other with effusion.

"I made my fortune out of oil," said Du Gazet.

"I made mine upon the Stock Exchange," said I.

"Mine is so great that I could not spend it in ten years, though I lost a thousand francs a night."

"Mine is even more considerable, M. Du Gazet."

He nodded and gave me a beaming smile. "Have you any plans for the evening, M. Belloc?"

"None," I replied.

"Then allow me to be your mentor. I know a place not far from here where one may woo the goddess Fortune to be kind. It is true that last night I lost five thousand francs by hazard of the wheel, but I would like well to recoup myself, and shall do so, as you shall see—if you will be so good as to come with me."

"With pleasure," I cried, and sprang to my feet.

I suspected by then that my new friend was nothing more or less than the tout of some gaming house. But I was reckless, and the companionship of any rascal seemed preferable to being left alone. A moment later we were strolling arm in arm down the Rue St. Germain L'Auxerrois. Chatting amiably together, we came, at the end of some few minutes, to the Rue St. Denis, up which we turned. Shortly after passing the Rue Mauconseil, we entered a narrow unnamed side-street, which was nevertheless flanked with respectable-looking houses of antique but substantial architecture. Before the door of one of these M. Du Gazet stopped, and giving me a meaning glance, he proceeded to scratch upon the panels with his ring. The signal was immediately responded to. The door opened a few inches, and a voice from the interior darkness demanded our business.

"Montereau," replied my guide.

"Enter!" cried the voice, and the door swung wide.

M. Du Gazet took my arm and conducted me in silence down a dark, thickly carpeted hall. We had barely half traversed it, however, when the door keeper suddenly turned on an electric lamp, and I perceived before us a wide staircase, supported on double rows of marble columns, that led to the floor above.

"Good!" exclaimed my mentor. "I detest gloom. Come, my friend."

Nothing loth, I followed him up the stairs, and a moment later we reached a landing-stage that was filled with huge palms growing in tubs of earthenware. A liveried attendant guarded a closed door that was half screened with fronds.

He looked at us inquiringly, but M. du Gazet muttered some pass-word in his ear, and he ushered us forthwith into an immense brilliantly illuminated apartment, which was sparsely thronged with well-dressed men and women, and furnished in imitation of the Casino at Monaco.

One table was devoted to roulette, a second to rouge et noir, and a third to baccarat. All were occupied, but, because perhaps of the earliness of the hour, there were not many onlookers. M. du Gazet led me to the second named, and after watching the game for about a quarter hour, we were both able to secure chairs at the board, owing to the evil fortune of the individuals we displaced. Like most other votaries of chance, I had and have a method. It is simple if unscientific, and it consists in backing each colour alternately seven times in succession. I at first contented myself with small stakes, being anxious to watch my mentor. M. du Gazet, however, much to my surprise, for I still believed him to be a tout, began to gamble in earnest from the moment he sat down, and each time he staked five hundred francs.

"Truly," thought I, "if he is a tout, he must have an interest in the bank, or he would not be trusted with so much money."

After I had seen him lose four thousand francs, I ceased to doubt his honesty, for his appearance was transformed. The born gambler's spirit gleamed out of his eyes. His face had assumed a warm fixed flush, and he was absorbed in his game to the absolute oblivion of every other circumstance. I spoke to him in order to make sure, but he cursed me in an undertone without turning his head. He had in fact forgotten my existence.

Feeling more at ease, I immediately increased my stakes, betting on the red. Luck favoured me, and I won steadily; on the red five times out of seven, on the black almost without a break. At the end of an hour, so large a heap of gold and notes had accumulated on the table before me, that it interfered with my elbow room, and I was obliged to stand up in order to make my game. The room had by then become filled with people, and an interested crowd had assembled to

watch me play. Success had made me excited, and given me a measure of the gambling fever. I increased my stakes to the limit and won again and again. The exclamations of the onlookers became each moment more loud and unrestrained, so that the croupier's directions could only be heard at intervals: "Faites vos jeux, Messieurs et Mesdames. Faites vos jeux! Rouge perd. Noir gagne! Faites vos jeux!"

I was in the act of stretching out my hand to place a large sum upon the black for the seventh time in succession, when some inexplicable instinctive feeling compelled me to look up from the board and into the face of a new-comer who stood watching the game from behind the chair of my immediate *vis-à-vis*. The man was a negro. With a queer thrill of apprehension I looked at him more closely, and then for a second I was almost stunned with surprise. He was Jussieu, the infernal canting negro surgeon, who at the instance of his master, Sir Charles Venner, had inflicted upon my bound and defenceless body tortures which made me shudder to remember, and who on his own account had dared to lecture and insult me. Before I could collect my scattered wits our eyes met, and the recognition became mutual. The villain started back a pace and glared at me, his eyes rolling in his head. He was attired in a fashionably cut evening suit, in which he tried to ape the gentleman, but his immaculate linen threw out his broad black face and hands into bold and hideous relief, and he looked like nothing but a monster. For a moment I shook with rage, and a murderous impulse almost overwhelmed me. Then came a wiser thought, and I grew calm. I said to myself: "Since the jackal is here, the lion cannot be far away. I shall make this scoundrel lead me to his master's lair!"

Holding him with my eyes, I fumbled with my hands upon the table, and began to stuff my winnings into my pockets. The crowd exclaimed in astonishment, but I paid them no heed. Before, however, I was half through with my business, Jussieu tore his eyes from mine and hurried towards the door. I sent my chair crashing behind me with a backward kick and seized Du Gazet by the shoulder.

"Look after my money!" I cried. "I shall see you later at the hotel."

Without awaiting a response, I broke through the crowd and darted after Jussieu. He had already passed the door, but I caught up with him half way down the stairs, and, seizing him by the shoulder, obliged him to pause.

"What, Monsieur Jussieu!" I snarled, "would you run away from an old friend? That is not kind in you."

"You mistake, m'sieur!" he cried. "That is not my name."

"Perhaps not," I muttered. "It will, however, serve my turn. Come, monsieur!" I slipped my arm through his and urged him down the stairs.

Although a larger man than me, he yielded like a coward to my imperious demand, protesting volubly the while, however, that I had made a great mistake, that his name was Grenier, and that he had never set eyes on me.

He was still protesting when we reached the street. But as soon as the door of the gambling house had closed behind us I cut him short.

"Look you, Jussieu!" I growled, "I have in my pocket a revolver that is loaded in every chamber. Take me at once to your master, Sir Charles Venner, or, by the Lord, I shall put a bullet through your head!"

"Monsieur," he began, "I assure you——"

"Silence!" I interrupted. "Another word and you are a dead man!"

A hasty glance had shown me that the street was deserted. I produced my pistol, therefore, as I spoke and presented it to his breast.

The negro started back, rolling his eyes like a maniac, but he spoke no word. He was shivering with fear. I smiled and returned the weapon to my pocket. Thereupon I gripped his arm and muttered in his ear: "Proceed!"

Uttering a sort of groan, he set off slowly for the Rue Saint Denis. "Quicker!" I commanded. He increased his pace. We turned the corner, and a smart walk brought us quickly to the Rue D'Enghien. Turning into that street the negro stopped presently before the door of a large three-storied house, whose every window was closely shuttered.

"We have arrived, monsieur," he muttered in a hollow voice.

"You have a latch-key, perhaps?" I asked.

"Yes."

I looked steadily at the house for a moment or two, then curtly ordered my companion to proceed, still, however, retaining a firm hold of his arm. Five minutes later we came to the Faubourg Poissonnière. Hailing a *fiacre*, I invited Jussieu to enter, and quickly took a seat beside

him. "The Hotel de Louvre!" I shouted to the driver, and we were off.

The negro was so still and docile that I began to suspect him of meditating some plan of escape. Producing my pistol, I thrust the muzzle into his side and cocked it with a loud click. "Death is very near to you, Jussieu!" I said.

"For God's sake, monsieur!" he groaned.

"Sit very still, Jussieu. It has a hair trigger, and my hand is trembling. I am remembering that it was you who pierced my fingers with needles and seared my foot with branding irons!"

"Mercy, mercy! Forgive!" he wailed.

His terror was so sharp and evident that I could not withstand the temptation to play upon it.

"Why should I pardon you?" I demanded. "What mercy did you show to me—you infamous wretch?"

"M'sieur, I was but the tool of others. Do not kill me. For Christ's sake put up your pistol."

"On the contrary, Jussieu," I said in a terrible voice. "Unless you consent to obey me implicitly, you shall die this instant, like the dog you are!"

"Mercy, mercy!" he cried. "I shall do anything you require—anything."

"Will you betray your master?"

"Yes, yes; only, for God's sake, put up your pistol!"

For answer I thrust the muzzle even harder into his side. "Now," said I, "tell me!" But he uttered a strangled cry.

"M'sieur—I—I—I faint, I die," he gasped, and to my astonishment he lurched forward and fell in a limp heap at my feet. I thought at first it was a trick, and held myself in readiness for a desperate struggle, for in good truth I dared not use my pistol. But the passing lamps showed me Jussieu's black face turned almost grey, and his staring eyes hideously upturned. The craven had swooned. I fell back chuckling with delight, for I had been until that moment wondering how on earth I could possibly contrive to force the brute into my hotel in case he should turn rusty and decline to accompany me.

As it eventuated, Jussieu was carried, still unconscious, to my room by two burly porters, whose garrulous surprise, occasioned by so strange a service, I reduced to speechlessness with gold. It was five minutes to eleven when I got rid of them. I locked my door and approached the couch on which the negro lay. He was beginning to wake up. Hastily tearing a linen sheet into strips I succeeded in securely binding his hands and feet before he had properly regained his consciousness. I then fastened him to the couch and stood over him with my pistol cocked.

He opened his eyes and blinked up at me.

"In what pocket is the key of your master's door?" I demanded.

"In the right hand side trouser pocket," he answered with a shudder.

"Where is Sir Charles Venner at this moment?"

"At home, monsieur, in bed, I think."

"Does he know that you are out?"

"Yes, m'sieur."

"Where does he sleep?"

"Upstairs, m'sieur, on the second floor, the second room on the left from the head of the staircase."

"Thanks. And who else is there in the house?"

"No—one, m'sieur." He closed his eyes.

"Think, Jussieu!" I growled. "Where is Beudant, your brother negro?"

He did not reply.

"My hand is getting tired," I said coldly. "Let me remind you, Jussieu, that the pistol is furnished with a hair trigger."

The threats galvanised him.

"Beudant sleeps downstairs, on the ground floor," he cried.

"And the others?"

"There are no others, m'sieur."

"You do badly to lie to me, Jussieu. Say your prayers, my man; you have just a minute to live."

His face went grey, and his eyes almost started from his head. "Mercy, mercy!" he groaned. "I shall tell you the whole truth."

"Quickly, then!"

"A lady occupies the third floor with her servants—while my master, Beudant, and I dwell on the second floor——" He paused.

"And the ground floor, Jussieu?" I cried impatiently.

"It contains only living rooms, m'sieur. No one sleeps there."

I nodded, for I saw that he had told me the truth. Uncocking the revolver I seized it by the barrel and, bending forward, before he could guess of my intention, I struck him a violent blow over the temple with the butt. A white man's skull would have been shivered into fragments. Jussieu merely sighed, but a second blow, more powerfully delivered still, rendered him insensible. Forcing his jaws agape, I gagged him with a towel, and afterwards ransacked his pockets. They contained a bunch of keys, a few gold pieces, and a handful of silver. I had scarcely bestowed his possessions about my person when a knock sounded on the door.

"Who is there?" I demanded, striding forward.

"It is I, monsieur, Bertrand du Gazet," answered a muffled voice.

Cautiously opening the door I peered out, and saw standing in the passage without the little old man who had taken me to the gambling house. His hands were full of notes and gold.

"It is your money I have brought you as you requested," he observed, smiling genially. "You were foolish to leave so soon, monsieur. Fortune does not often so bountifully confer her favours. See, here are more than seven thousand francs. Indeed, you were wrong to run away, monsieur."

I was in a quandary. I could not admit my unwelcome visitor, and I did not like to drive him away, since he had come to do me a kindness. Putting on a fine air of frankness, I said to him in low tones: "My dear Du Gazet, I cannot thank you as I ought just now—because I have a visitor, you understand."

An expression of disgust crossed his face. He thought, it seemed, that my visitor was of the fair sex.

"I would not disturb you for the world," he muttered with sarcasm, "but what of your money?"

"Oblige me by keeping it until to-morrow."

"As you will; good-night, monsieur." He shrugged his shoulders and departed, his whole bearing expressive of contempt. No doubt he considered me a liar, since I had railed against womankind quite as bitterly as he had done not many hours before.

I could not, however, afford to waste thought on him, for I had much to do. Stripping off my evening clothes, I speedily changed into a suit of dark brown tweed, and drew on my feet a pair of felt-soled shoes. Having armed myself with a large sum of money and a loaded revolver, I stole softly out of the room. While locking the door behind me I heard a distant sigh. Swinging round I peered in the direction of the sound, and for a fleeting fragment of a second saw a face at the far end of the corridor. It vanished so swiftly, however, that I had no time to register its impression on my mind, and a moment later I doubted that I had seen anything. The corridor was deserted absolutely save for myself. I waited for a few silent minutes, then, reassured, made my way to the street. A *fiacre* drove me to the Boulevard Poissonnière, where, having alighted, I walked to the Rue D'Enghien, and as the clocks were chiming the hour after midnight, I arrived before my place of destination, the house that contained my enemy. Without pausing an instant, I climbed the steps and noiselessly inserted Jussieu's latch-key into the lock of the front door. It yielded, the door opened with a slight creak, and I crossed the threshold. I found myself in a wide but dimly lighted hall. It was carpeted with cocoanut matting. Doors crowded its sides, all closed. Before me was a staircase, whose steps were composed of slate, which had been worn away in the middle, as if by centuries of footfalls. I was about to mount when of a sudden a strange wonder caught me and I paused. Until that moment blind hate had controlled my actions and carried me where I stood. But now I asked myself the question: "Agar Hume, what will you do? Is it murder that you contemplate?"

It was a fearful thought, and I shuddered as it came. But I could not answer it. I had never known so little of myself. In mind and body I was alert, expectant, calm. But there was that in me which I could not understand, a malignant remorseless spirit which had possession of my

faculties, and which declined to be questioned or displaced. At its command I ceased to speculate, and began instead to listen. The house was as silent as a tomb. Some power beyond my cognizance presently plucked at my feet, and I found myself mounting the stairs. I remember passing one door and turning the handle of a second. Then I was in a room, dark as Erebus, creeping towards a bed, upon which lay an unseen sleeper, whose long, deep respirations guided my stealthy movements. What ensued appeared even then like nothing so much as the happenings of some wild and fevered dream. I paused beside the bed and my hands, drawn by an irresistible power, glided light as feathers across the coverlid, across a man's sleeping form, unto his throat. There they settled and took hold. I heard a strangled groan. A sudden bright light filled the room, and Sir Charles Venner's livid outstarting eyes glared into mine. His arms encircled me. With an almost super-human strength he writhed beneath me from the bed, and we fell together with a full but heavy crash upon the floor. With a fierce and terrible satisfaction I watched his face blacken and swell, his tongue thicken and protrude from his ghastly open mouth. Before, however, I could kill him, a warning step and a loud cry sounded from the door. Quick as lightning I sprang erect and turned. The negro surgeon, Beudant, Jussieu's companion, was rushing towards me, an uplifted bar of iron in his hand to strike. I eluded him, and, springing to the fireplace, seized a poker. I had quite forgotten my revolver. For a moment we fenced like swordsmen with our curious weapons, speaking no word, but striking heavily and warding, filling the place with the loud clang of steel. He played so well that I could not reach his skull. But soon I remembered having read in some old book of travel that a negro's vulnerable point is his shin. Clenching my teeth I made a ferocious feint at his head. He riposted, as with a rapier, at my shoulder, but I disregarded utterly so poor a thrust, since his bar was blunt, and I brought my weapon down with a sweeping swish across his outstretched knee. He uttered a wild shriek and, dropping his bar, sank to the floor, howling dismally. Only then I remembered my pistol. Snatching it forth I held it to his head. "Stop that noise, or die!" I muttered savagely. He obeyed, but not for longer than a second was I permitted to remain master of the situation.

"Drop that pistol, villain," cried a voice from the doorway.

Two men had entered the room before I was aware of it, Dr. Vernet and Dr. Fulton. Dr. Vernet wore a shortish nightgown, from beneath which his lean, attenuated shanks humorously twinkled. He seemed extremely excited, and he moved the weight of his body from one foot to the other constantly and very quickly. Dr. Fulton was attired in a suit of pyjamas, and he too was excited, though he showed it less reservelessly. Both men were armed with revolvers, which they pointed at my breast. Glancing down the muzzles of their weapons, I allowed my own to drop to the floor. It would have been madness to do otherwise. Strange to relate, at that instant, I became once more my own master. The malignant spirit of unreasoning hate, which had so far governed my conduct, of a sudden left me, and I was able to realize to the full the mad folly into which it had driven me. My captors had only to hand me over to the police as an apprehended housebreaker—an attempted assassin, and nothing that I might do could save me from a long term of imprisonment. My very spine went cold at the idea. I looked hard at Dr. Fulton, and saw that he was on the point of recognizing me.

"Why, it's Brown, Dagmar's valet!"

I had an inspiration. "Better any fate," thought I, "than a French prison."

"Detective Hume of Scotland Yard!" I cried. "Dr. Fulton, I arrest you in the King's name! Better put down that pistol, sir, your game is up. The street is full of my men. And if I do not go out to them in the next few minutes they will come for me."

"Liar!" gasped a choking voice. Sir Charles Venner had spoken. He had recovered consciousness, and as he uttered the word he struggled to his feet.

"Liar yourself!" I retorted desperately. "If you don't believe me, look out of the window."

I had a wild hope that the noise of my struggle with Beudant might have attracted the attention of some chance wayfarers, whom my enemies might perhaps mistake for police. Sir Charles caught up my revolver, cocked it leisurely, and pointed it to my head.

"Look out of the window, Fulton," he said quietly.

Dr. Fulton crossed the room and, drawing aside a corner of the curtain, peered through the shutter into the street below.

While I waited for Dr. Fulton's pronouncement, I had a moment of grace in which to think and pull myself together. The latter I effected fairly well, but the knowledge of my recent madness obsessed my mind to the exclusion of every other thought and filled my soul with bitter self-contempt. I felt that I did not deserve to escape.

Dr. Fulton presently let the curtain fall and turned to Sir Charles. "There are four men standing on the pavement looking up at the top windows," he announced.

Sir Charles Venner nodded, and for a few seconds stood blinking his eyes in earnest thought.

"Beudant!" he cried at last.

"Monsieu!" replied the negro.

"Where is Jussieu?"

"He has not yet returned, monsieur."

"Ah, ha! I see! He has either betrayed us or been victimised. Beudant—a rope."

Beudant bowed and hurried from the room.

"What would you do?" demanded Dr. Vernet.

Sir Charles shrugged his shoulders and cocked his revolver. "We must quit Paris, or die in the attempt," he replied. "Mr. Hume, if you wish to live, you will be silent. Fulton, look out of the windows again."

Dr. Fulton obeyed. "I can no longer see any one," he reported.

Sir Charles suppressed a curse. "They must be on the steps, perhaps entering," he muttered. "Ah, Beudant! Thank heaven! Bind him, Beudant. Wait, my friends."

Even while speaking he left the room. The negro passed a rope around my arms and in a trice I was secured. I was wondering keenly what next would happen, when of a sudden I heard a loud swishing, creaking sound, as though a crane were at work in the corridor without. The groaning of wheels and chains was succeeded swiftly with a dull, muffled crash, and a second later Sir Charles returned.

"Dress quickly!" he cried to his friends. "We have not a minute to lose. I have settled some of them by springing the staircase trap, but the street door is open, and there may be others."

He set the example himself by pulling on his clothes with extraordinary rapidity. Vernet and Fulton darted off, and I was left in the care of Beudant, the only one who was completely attired. If my arms had been free, I would have tried conclusions with the negro. As it was, I helplessly waited, gnawing my lip and silently cursing at my folly. At the end of a few minutes a bell began to tinkle in a distant portion of the house. Sir Charles Venner started at the sound, and paused for a moment, intently listening. The bell rang again. Sir Charles threw a cloak across his shoulders and tip-toed to the door.

"Hola! within there," cried a raucous voice in French.

"All right!" shouted Sir Charles. "We'll be with you in a moment; wait!"

I smiled grimly. For I understood, while my enemy did not. Some passing policeman, observing the street door open, had rung the bell in order to inform the household of its carelessness. Sir Charles Vernier, however, believed that one of my agents had called out to his *confères*, who had already entered. A moment later Vernet and Fulton reappeared, dressed as though for a journey. Sir Charles then stepped behind me and put his pistol to my ear. "Allons!" he muttered, "and tread softly, if you wish to live."

Obeying the guidance of a heavy hand that gripped my shoulder, I marched from the room and began to climb the staircase towards the third storey. The whole house was now wrapped in impenetrable darkness. My captors, however, appeared to know the way very well, and I was forced without a pause along a maze of corridors, until we were brought up by a wall. A match was cautiously struck, and we entered a small unfurnished room, the door of which was locked behind us. In the middle of this apartment was a ladder that communicated with the roof. Beudant climbed it with the agility of a monkey and raised a trap in the skylight, through which we all passed in quick succession. As I emerged and stood erect, I saw a sight I shall not easily forget—the magnificent panorama of sleeping Paris. And yet Paris did not seem to sleep. True, the night was dark, but in whatever direction I glanced, I was confronted with myriads of twinkling lamps that gleamed at me like so many intelligent and baneful little eyes. I was given but little time to digest the picture. Before the muzzle of Sir Charles Venner's revolver I crossed a slightly sloping roof of lead, and stepped over a knee-high parapet of stone. Thence we traversed the tops of three other houses and came at length to a slightly lower edifice, which required some care to reach. Beudant slipped over first, and I was bodily lifted up by Fulton and Venner and dropped into his arms. The roof perilously sloped, and the journey filled me with tremors, for a mis-step meant such a destruction as is entailed by a fall of sixty feet upon a line of iron-spiked railings. But death faced me on every side, so I set my lips and strode forward. By great good hap I negotiated the pass in safety, and came to a small, square ledge that was faced with an attic door, covered with a tiny gabled roof. A moment later we were all standing in a long low ceiled chamber, into which we had been admitted by a hideous old beldame. This creature received us with chuckles of sardonic satisfaction, and at once began to haggle with Sir Charles Venner for a large sum of money which she claimed to be her due. He tried to silence her by offering half the amount demanded, but she indignantly declined and threatened to scream. He therefore yielded and gave her his purse. But while she counted the money he turned his back, and taking a phial from his pocket poured its contents on his handkerchief. At a sign Beudant took the handkerchief, and, throwing himself upon the old hag, pressed it tightly to her nostrils. She struggled like a fury, but the negro mastered her, and very soon afterwards she was lying

insensible upon the floor. I was watching Sir Charles wrest from her clenched hand his purse, when a terrible blow on my skull deprived me of consciousness.

When I awoke I thought at first I must have died in my sleep and have been thrust into hell. Every fibre of my being was racked with pain. Darkness encompassed me. With every breath I drew I was sickened with noxious odours, and I could not move a muscle. I tried to cry out, but could not utter a sound. An iron wedge had been driven deep into my mouth. My limbs were bound, and I was tightly enclosed, in a doubled-up position, in a square box. I lay upon my back and my knees were trussed up across my chest so that my chin almost touched them. I discovered these details slowly, one by one, and gradually awoke to the fact that I was still alive. For a little while I was glad to know that, but with the passing hours I prayed for death to end my tortures. Sometimes I swooned. On awakening I invariably heard a monotonous rumbling sound that was occasionally relieved by long, shrill screams. It occurred to me at last that I was being borne along upon a cart, the axles of which badly needed oiling. I had at first mistaken their screaming for the lamentations of lost souls. Thirst was my greatest agony. It always increased, while my other pains with time grew numb. Each time I fainted I hailed the swoon as kindly coming death, and for a brief moment I was happy. My recoveries were accursed periods of anguish. But I think my trances of insensibility grew ever longer as my strength wore out. However that may be, I began at length to dream, and I ceased to be able to distinguish between sleeping and waking or even to feel much pain. Then all of a sudden I felt a rush of cool air on my brow, and I looked up into a sky full of stars. Water was dashed on my face. The gag was taken from my mouth and I was given to drink. Someone clutched my arm and I shrieked aloud. I was forced, still shrieking, to my feet, and dragged by those I could not see through a plantation of tall and stately pines. I swooned again. And once more I awoke to find myself lying fully dressed, but free, upon a bed of down in a cool and pleasant room. It was morning. Through an open window near my couch I could see a wilderness of distant tree tops, larches, pines, and firs, and more dimly between and above their branches a range of hills beyond. A slant bar of sunlight streamed into my chamber and, falling on the floor a dozen feet away, marked out a golden pattern on the carpet. Against the farther wall was a book-case filled with volumes and an escritoire. A comfortable lounge chair stood near the bed. I saw also a heavy mahogany clothes press that was furnished with mirror-backed doors. So totally unprepared was I to encounter so gentle an experience that I rubbed my eyes to make sure that I was not still dreaming. The exercise obliged me to discover that my limbs were frightfully stiff and cramped. I was not long content, however, to allow my curiosity to remain unsatisfied. By dint of a good deal of exertion, and at the expense of many a sharp thrill of pain, I climbed from the bed and essayed to rise. After a few thoughts I succeeded, and then feeling dizzy, I managed to totter to a chair. I had hardly sat down when the door opened and Sir Charles Venner stood before me.

"Good morning, Mr. Hume," said he, in quite a genial voice. "I am glad to find you so much better after your distressing journey here!"

"Are you?" I muttered stupidly. I was overcome with surprise at his curious change of manner.

"Indeed, yes," he replied, and he smiled. "Do you feel well enough for breakfast?"

I nodded.

"Then permit me to assist you. Ah, good! Now take my arm."

He helped me, dumb with astonishment, out of the room and along a passage into a fine old dining-hall, that might have been part and parcel of some medieval chateau, so quaintly and elegantly was it furnished.

I could afford it no more than a glance, however, for seated at table there were Dr. Fulton, Dr. Venner, and Marion Le Mar, now Lady Dagmar.

At the sight of the beautiful woman whom I had so passionately loved, I cried out loudly, and stood still. Her face was pale. She was attired in deep mourning, and her eyes were resolutely downcast.

Sir Charles Venner uttered a low, cynical little laugh. "Quite a meeting of the clans!" he remarked. "But come, Hume, I am certain you are hungry."

Leaning heavily on his arm, I staggered to the table and sank into a chair.

"Marion!" I gasped, looking at her straight and full.

Very slowly she raised her eyes, and returned my glance with a look of cold disdain.

I thought her a thief and a traitress, and yet my eyes fell before her gaze.

"Will you try some oatmeal, Hume?" asked Sir Charles Venner, who had taken the head of the table.

"No, thank you."

"Then, some ham and eggs?"

"Please."

Beudant entered the room. "The grave is dug, master," he announced.

I looked at Sir Charles. He was biting his under lip, and curiously regarding me.

"Whose?" I demanded.

"Yours and Lady Dagmar's!" he replied with a sneer.

I looked at Marion. She was calmly eating her breakfast.

"This is some ghastly joke!" I cried.

Marion glanced up and smiled. "Say cynical, monsieur," she murmured quietly. "My good friend, Sir Charles Venner, persists in believing that we love each other—you and I—in spite of the fact that scarcely a month ago I deserted you in order to marry Sir William Dagmar."

"On his death-bed, madame!" cut in Sir Charles, in tones of ice. "You forget that you are now a rich young widow."

"Well, sir?"

"And that you have steadily refused to account to me for his money, which should have been placed, long ere this, at the disposal of our order."

"Sir William Dagmar bound me with an oath as he lay dying——"

"You have told me that story before," interrupted Sir Charles. Marion shrugged her shoulders, and put into her mouth a morsel of bread.

"Go on someone!" I cried impatiently. "See! I am utterly in your power. Why not enlighten me? Surely you are not afraid!"

Beudant placed beside my plate a cup of coffee.

Sir Charles coughed behind his hand. "I am only afraid that your appetite may be spoiled," he observed.

"Not at all," I retorted. "Watch me!" I began to eat, for in truth I was very hungry.

"We shall see," he rejoined. "You have a nerve, I know, but keep on eating while I talk—if you can!"

I nodded.

"Jussieu was released last evening by a friend of yours, a little man named Du Gazet, who induced the manager of your hotel to break into your room."

"Well?" I gasped.

Sir Charles laughed. "Jussieu is here," he said. "He arrived two hours ago, and we know now that you have no connection with the police. We were fools indeed to allow you to frighten us away from the Rue D'Enghien. But then everything always happens for the best. We could hardly have disposed of you properly in the city, unless we prosecuted you for burglary, and such a course would not have suited me."

"Do you intend to kill me?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"After breakfast."

"In broad daylight?" I asked, much astonished.

"Ah! Mr. Hume," he replied, "I read your mind. But this chateau is placed in a wood, and is distant seven miles from the nearest human habitation, and as for the rest I had as lief destroy an enemy by day as by night."

"Then I have not long to live?"

"As one measures time."

"And—Mar—Lady Dagmar?"

"You will die together. In each other's arms, if you choose to be romantic."

I turned to Marion, to find her eyes fixed upon my face. We gazed at each other for a long silent minute, and then, overcome by some strange emotion, I muttered brokenly, "Is it possible, after all, that I have wronged you?"

"You have," she replied.

"Can you forgive me?" I asked hoarsely.

"It is late to make amends."

"I was mad to doubt you. But, God knows, I suffered for it, Marion."

"Venner!" said Dr. Fulton suddenly, "can I have a word with you?"

"Certainly. Vernet, Beudant, I leave our guests to you."

Sir Charles got up from the table and walked to the farther end of the room.

"They will not kill you, Marion?" I asked in English. "Surely they are jesting."

"Yes—and no," she said. "Last night they forced me to make a will leaving them my money. They tortured me."

"How?" I gasped.

"They dragged me to the room where you lay bound and senseless. If I had refused to obey they would have cut you into pieces before my eyes."

"My God!" I cried. "And that broke your will. But I would have deserved it all for doubting you."

"Not quite," she answered, and she smiled in exceeding sadness.

"Marion, dear Marion," I whispered, "you love me still."

She looked up at me and her eyes filled with tears. "How could you treat me so?" she muttered.

I felt the blood rush of a sudden through my veins, singing a veritable poem of joy and triumph. We were both about to die, but Marion loved me, and by that knowledge I was transformed on the instant from a weak half-broken creature into a life-loving and most desperate man. I glanced quietly about me.

While Dr. Vernet ate his breakfast he watched me, but without manifesting suspicion. Beudant stood behind his chair. Sir Charles and Fulton were in earnest converse twenty paces off.

I thought to myself: "I may never get a better chance. Only a coward will permit himself to be slaughtered unresisting."

"Beudant," said I aloud, "will you be good enough to get me another cup of coffee?"

The negro nodded, and started to come round the table.

"Dr. Vernet," I said as carelessly as possible, "may I trouble you for the pepper-pot beside you?"

He bowed, and stretched out in order to render me the indicated service. In a flash I had caught his wrist in my left hand, and with my right I seized a heavy carafe of water and hurled it at his head. Next second I leaped across the table, caught him in my arms, when, guided by Vernet's own instinctive clutch to arm himself, I plunged my hand into his breast pocket and found a revolver.

I slipped to the floor and held the stunned and senseless body of Dr. Vernet before me as a shield. Sir Charles Venner and Dr. Fulton were already advancing towards me with drawn pistols.

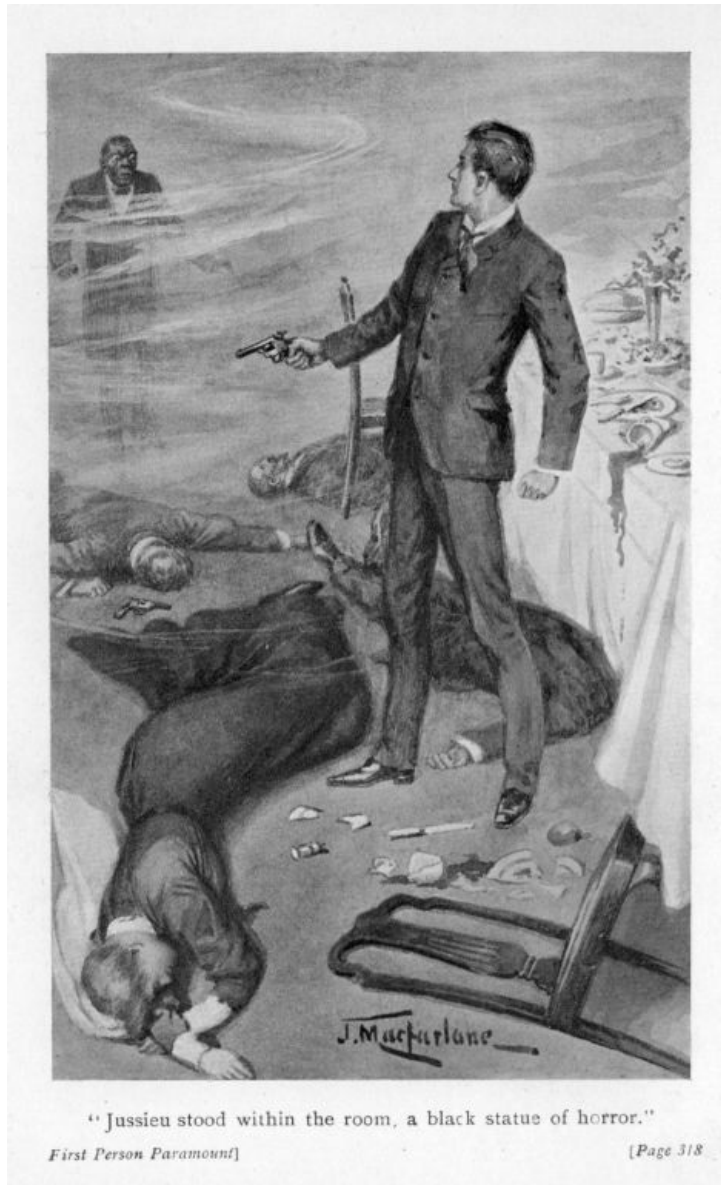
"Stop!" I shouted.

Sir Charles Venner answered me with his revolver. The bullet crashed into Dr. Vernet's brain and I felt my face spattered with blood. I fired in return, and Dr. Fulton, uttering a frightful scream, pitched headlong on the floor.

It was a bad shot, for I had fired at Sir Charles Venner.

For a moment thereafter the latter stood still, and we stared into each other's eyes across the trail of smoke. I became conscious that Dr. Vernet's dead body was too heavy for me to support longer. It was slipping from my grasp, slipping, slipping. I realized that very soon I should be without my shield. As at last it fell, I fired, twice in quick succession. I heard an answering shot, then a woman's piercing scream. I fired again. The room was by then full of smoke; I could see

nothing, but I heard someone rushing towards me shouting and cursing. For a fifth time I fired. There followed the sound of a fall, then a deep and dreadful silence. I waited with my revolver at full cock, not daring to breathe, my every nerve on strain, listening and peering vainly through the pall of smoke. Very slowly and gradually the white mist lifted. At my feet the woman I loved was lying very still. Blood was welling in a rich crimson stream from a wound in her breast. Beyond her Sir Charles Venner lay face downwards on the floor. Both his arms were extended at full length, and at a few inches from his clenched right hand was his revolver. Beudant and Dr. Fulton lay beside Sir Charles Venner's body. All seemed dead. Oppressed with a wild and hideous sense of unreality, I stared stupidly before me. A smoke wreath, growing transparent, showed me at length a living face. Jussieu stood within the room, a black statue of horror. Scarcely conscious of what I did, I raised my pistol and pointed it at his breast. He did not move. I fired and he fell.



"Jussieu stood within the room, a black statue of horror."

At the sound Marion's eyes opened. She looked up at me. I uttered a cry of agony and, throwing away my smoking weapon, I sank on my knees beside her.

"Are you hurt?" she breathed.

"No—no—but you—you are wounded—you are dying," I wailed.

She gave me a most wonderful and tender smile. "For you," she gasped. "To save you! He would have killed you—but his bullet is—here." With a great effort she raised one hand and caught at her breast.

"Oh, God! oh, God!" I groaned. "Marion, you will not die and leave me! Tell me what to do."

"Kiss me," she whispered.

But even as I stooped to obey, her spirit fled, and I kissed the lips of a corpse. No other kiss shall my lips know while I have life.

At the fall of noon I carried her from the house of death and buried her in the grave which Sir Charles Venner had destined for us both. It was in the middle of a pine forest, and perhaps that is

why the saddest sound on earth to my ears is still the sighing of pines. I left the bodies of my enemies where they had fallen—accursed carrion! I would not have touched them if I could. They were not discovered until more than a week had passed, and by then I was a thousand miles away, a desolate and broken-hearted wanderer on the face of the universe. Many years have passed and I am now a millionaire, accounted by the world a hard-headed, flinty-hearted financial magnate, and also something of a misogynist. But I have recorded these chapters of my history to show those who come after me, when I am dead, that, rascal as I was, and abandonedly selfish, I was yet capable of passion and of constancy, and that no deep-seated hatred of the softer sex has inspired the invincible solitariness of my life.

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