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LAID UP IN LAVENDER

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

—
THE HOUSE OF THE WOLF

THE NEW RECTOR

THE STORY OF FRANCIS

CLUDDE

A GENTLEMAN OF FRANCE

THE MAN IN BLACK

UNDER THE RED ROBE

MY LADY ROTH

THE RED COCKADE

A MINISTER OF FRANCE

SHREWSBURY

THE CASTLE INN

SOPHIA

COUNT HANNIBAL

IN KINGS' BYWAYS

THE LONG NIGHT

THE ABBESS OF VLAYE

STARVECROW FARM

CHIPPINGE

L A I D U P I N L A V E N D E R

BY

STANLEY J. WEYMAN

AUTHOR OF

"A GENTLEMAN OF FRANCE," "THE CASTLE INN," "UNDER THE RED ROBE," ETC.

LONGMANS, GREEN, AND CO.
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NOTE

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July, 1907.

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LAID UP IN LAVENDER

LADY BETTY'S INDISCRETION

"Horry! I am sick to death of it!"

There was a servant in the room collecting the tea-cups; but Lady Betty Stafford, having been reared in the purple, was not to be deterred from speaking her mind by a servant. Her cousin was either more prudent or less vivacious. He did not answer on the instant, but stood gazing through one of the windows at the leafless trees and slow-dropping rain in the Mall. He only turned when Lady Betty pettishly repeated her statement.

"Had a bad time?" he vouchsafed, dropping into a chair near her, and looking first at her, in a good-natured way, and then at his boots, which he seemed to approve.

"Horrid!" she replied.

"Many people here?"

"Hordes of them! Whole tribes!" she exclaimed. She was a little woman, plump and pretty, with a pale, clear complexion, and bright eyes. "I am bored beyond belief. And--and I have not seen Stafford since morning," she added.

"Cabinet council?"

"Yes!" she answered viciously. "A cabinet council, and a privy council, and a board of trade, and a board of green cloth, and all the other boards! Horry, I am sick to death of it! What is the use of it all?"

"Don't do it," he said oracularly, still admiring his boots. "Country go to the dogs!"

"Let it!" she retorted, not relenting a whit. "I wish it would. I wish the dogs joy of it!"

He made an extraordinary effort at diffuseness. "I thought," he said, "that you were becoming political, Betty. Going to write something, and all that."

"Rubbish! But here is Mr. Atlay. Mr. Atlay, will you have a cup of tea?" she continued, addressing the new-comer. "There will be some here presently. Where is Mr. Stafford?"

"Mr. Stafford will take a cup of tea in the library, Lady Betty," the secretary replied. "He asked, me to bring it to him. He is copying an important paper."

Sir Horace forsook his boots, and in a fit of momentary interest asked, "They have come to terms?"

The secretary nodded. Lady Betty said "Pshaw!" A man brought in the fresh teapot. The next moment Mr. Stafford himself came into the room, an open telegram in his hand.

He nodded pleasantly to his wife and her cousin. But his thin, dark face wore--it generally did--a preoccupied look. Country people to whom he was pointed out in the street called him, according to their political leanings, either insignificant, or a prig, or a "dry sort"; or sometimes said, "How young he is!" But those whose fate it was to face the Minister in the House knew that there was something in him more to be feared even than his imperturbability, his honesty, or his precision--and that was a sudden fiery heat, which was apt to carry away the House at unexpected times. On one of these occasions, it was rumored, Lady Betty Champion had seen him, and fallen in love with him. Why he had thrown the handkerchief to her--that was another matter; and whether the apparently incongruous match would answer--that, too, remained to be seen.

"More telegrams?" she cried. "It rains telegrams! how I hate them!"

"Why?" he said. "Why should you?" He really wondered.

She made a face at him. "Here is your tea," she said abruptly.

"Thank you; you are very good," he replied. He took the cup and set it down absently. "Atlay," he said, speaking to the secretary, "you have not corrected the report of my speech at the Club, have you? No, I know you have had no time. Will you run your eye over it, and see if it is all right, and send it to the *Times*--I do not think I need to see it--by eleven o'clock at latest? The editor," he continued, tapping the pink paper in his hand, "seems to doubt us. I have to go to Fitzgerald's now; so you must also copy Lord Pilgrimstone's terms, if you please. I proposed to do it myself, but I shall be with you before you have finished."

"What are the terms?" Lady Betty asked. "Lord Pilgrimstone has not agreed to----"

"To permit me to communicate them?" he replied, with a grave smile. "No. So you must pardon me, my dear. I have passed my word for absolute secrecy. Indeed, it is as important to me as to Pilgrimstone that they should not be divulged."

"They are sure to leak out," she retorted. "They always do."

"Well, it will not be through me, I hope."

She stamped her foot on the carpet. "I should like to get them, and send them to the *Times*!" she cried, her eyes flashing--he was so provoking! "And let all the world know them! I vow I should!"

He looked his astonishment, while the other two laughed, partly to avoid embarrassment, perhaps. She often said these things, and no one took them seriously.

"You had better play the secretary for once, Lady Betty," said Atlay, who was related to his chief. "You will then be able to satisfy your curiosity. Shall I resign *pro tem.*?"

She looked eagerly at her husband for the third part of a second--for assent, perhaps. But she read no playfulness in his face, and her own fell. He was thinking about other things. "No," she said, almost sullenly, dropping her eyes to the carpet. "I should not spell well enough."

Soon after that they dispersed; this being Wednesday, Mr. Stafford's day for dining out. At that time Ministers dined only twice a week in session--on Wednesday and Sunday; and Sunday was often sacred to the children where there were any, lest they should grow up and not know their father by sight. At a quarter to eight Lady Betty came into the library, and found her husband still at his desk, a pile of papers before him awaiting his signature. As a fact, he had only just sat down, displacing his secretary, who had gone upstairs to dress.

"Stafford!" she said.

She did not seem quite at her ease; but his mind was troubled, and he failed to notice this.

"Yes, my dear," he answered politely, shuffling the papers before him into a heap. He knew that he was late, and he could see that she was dressed. "Yes, I am going upstairs this minute. I have not forgotten."

"It is not that," she said, leaning with one hand on the table, "I want to ask you----"

"My dear, you really must tell it me in the carriage." He was on his feet now, making some hasty preparations. "Where are we to dine? At the Duke's? Then we shall have a mile to drive. Will not that do for you?" He was working hard while he spoke. There was an oak post-box within reach, and another box for letters which were to be delivered by hand, and he was thrusting a handful of notes into each of these. Other packets he swept into different drawers of the table. Still standing, he stooped and signed his name to half a dozen letters, which he left open on the blotting-pad. "Atlay will see to these when he is dressed," he murmured. "Would you oblige me by locking the drawers, my dear--it will save me a minute--and giving me the keys when I come down?"

He went off then, two or three papers in his hand, and almost ran upstairs. Lady Betty stood a while on the spot on which he had left her, looking in an odd way--just as if it were new to her--round the grave, spacious room, with its sombre Spanish-leather-covered furniture, its ponderous writing-tables and shelves of books, its three lofty curtained windows. When her eyes at last came back to the lamp, and dwelt on it, they were very bright, and her face was flushed. Her foot could be heard tapping on the carpet. Presently she remembered herself and fell to work, vehemently slamming such drawers as were open, and locking them.

The private secretary found her doing this when he came in. She muttered something--stooping with her face over the drawers--and almost immediately went out. He looked after her, partly because there was something odd in her manner--she kept her face averted; and partly because she was wearing a new and striking gown, and he admired her. He noticed, as she passed through the doorway, that she had some papers held down by her side. But, of course, he thought nothing of this.

He was hopelessly late for his own dinner-party, and only stayed a moment to slip the letters last signed into envelopes prepared for them. Then he made for the door, opened it, and came into collision with Sir Horace, who was strolling in.

"Beg pardon!" said that gentleman, with irritating placidity. "Late for dinner?"

"Rather!" the secretary cried, trying to get round him.

"Well," drawled the other, "which is the hand-box, old fellow?"

"It has been cleared. Here, give it me. The messenger is in the hall now."

Atlay snatched the letter from his companion, the two going into the hall together. Marcus, the butler, a couple of tall footmen, and the messenger were sorting letters at the table. "Here, Marcus," said the secretary, pitching his letter on the slab, "let that go with the others. And is my hansom here?"

In another minute he was speeding one way, and the Staffords in their brougham another; while Sir Horace walked at his leisure down to his club. The Minister and his wife drove in silence; he forgot to ask her what she wanted. And, strange to say, Lady Betty forgot to tell him. At the party she made quite a sensation; never had she seemed more gay, more piquant, more audaciously witty, than she showed herself this evening. There were illustrious personages present, but they paled beside her. The Duke, with whom she was a favorite, laughed at her sallies until he could laugh no more; and even her husband, her very husband, forgot for a time the country and the crisis, and listened, half-proud and half-afraid. But she was not aware of this; she could not see his face where she sat. To all seeming she never looked that way. She was quite a model society wife.

Mr. Stafford himself was an early riser. It was his habit to be up by six; to make his own coffee over a spirit lamp, and then not only to get through much work in his dressing-room, but to take his daily ride before breakfast. On the morning after the Duke's party, however, he lay later than usual; and as there was much business to be done--owing to the crisis--the canter in the park had to be omitted. He was still among his papers--though expecting the breakfast-gong with every minute, when a hansom cab driven at full speed stopped at the door. He glanced up wearily as he heard the doors of the cab flung open with a crash. There had been a time when the stir and bustle of such arrivals had been sweet to him--not so sweet as to some, for he had never been deeply in love with the parade of office; but sweeter than to-day, when they were no more to him than the creaking of the mill to the camel that turns it blindfold and in darkness.

Naturally he was thinking of Lord Pilgrimstone this morning, and guessed, before he opened the note which the servant brought him, who was its writer. But its contents had, nonetheless, an electrical effect upon him. His brow reddened. With a most unusual display of emotion he sprang to his feet, crushing the fragment of paper in his fingers. "Who brought that?" he cried sharply. "Who brought it?" he repeated in a louder tone, before the servant could explain.

The man had never seen him so moved. "Mr. Scratchley, sir," he answered.

"Ha! Then, show him into the library," was the quick reply. And while the servant went to do his bidding, the Minister hastily changed his dressing-gown for a coat, and ran down a private staircase, reaching the room he had mentioned by one door as Mr. Scratchley, Lord Pilgrimstone's secretary, entered it through another.

By that time he had regained his composure, and looked much as usual. Still, when he held up the crumpled note, there was a brusqueness in the gesture which would have surprised his ordinary acquaintances, and did remind Mr. Scratchley of certain "warm nights" in the House.

"You know the contents of this?" he said without prelude, and in a tone which matched his gesture.

The visitor bowed. He was a grave middle-aged man, who seemed oppressed and burdened by the load of cares and responsibilities which his smiling chief carried jauntily. People said that he was the proper complement of Lord Pilgrimstone, as the more volatile Atlay was of his leader.

"And you are aware," continued Mr. Stafford, almost harshly, "that Lord Pilgrimstone gives yesterday's agreement to the winds?"

"I have never seen his lordship so deeply moved," replied the discreet one.

"He says: 'Our former negotiation was ruined by premature talk. But this disclosure can only be referred to treachery or the grossest carelessness.' What does it mean? I know of no disclosure, Mr. Scratchley. I must have an explanation. And you, I presume, are here to give me one."

For a moment the other seemed taken aback. "You have not seen the *Times*, sir?" he murmured.

"This morning's? No. But it is here."

He took it, as he spoke, from a table at his elbow, and unfolded it. The secretary approached and pointed to the head of a column--the most conspicuous, the column most readily to be found in the paper. "They are crying it at the street corners I passed," he added with deference. "There is nothing to be heard in St. James's Street and Pall Mall but 'Detailed Programme of the Coalition.' The other dailies are striking off second editions to include it!"

Mr. Stafford's eyes were riveted to the paper. There was a long pause, a pause on his part of dismay and consternation. He could scarcely--to repeat a common phrase--believe his eyes. "It seems," he muttered at length,--"it seems accurate--a tolerably precise account, at least."

"It is a verbatim copy," the secretary said dryly. "The question is, who furnished it. Lord Pilgrimstone, I am authorised to say, has not permitted his note of the agreement to pass out of his possession--even to the present moment."

"And so he concludes"--the Minister said thoughtfully--"it is a fair inference enough, perhaps--that the *Times* must have procured its information from my note?"

With deference the secretary objected. "It is not a matter of inference, Mr. Stafford. I am directed to say that. I have inquired, early as it is, at the *Times* office, and learned that the copy came directly from the hands of your messenger."

"Of my messenger!" Mr. Stafford cried, thunderstruck. "You are sure of that?"

"I am sure that the sub-editor says so."

Again there was silence. "This must be looked into," said Mr. Stafford at length, controlling himself by an effort. "For the present I agree with Lord Pilgrimstone, that it alters the position--and perhaps finally."

"Lord Pilgrimstone will be damaged in the eyes of a large section of his supporters--seriously damaged," Mr. Scratchley said, shaking his head and frowning.

"Possibly. From every point of view the thing is to be deplored. But I will call on Lord Pilgrimstone," the Minister continued slowly, "after lunch. Will you tell him so?"

A curious embarrassment showed itself in the secretary's manner. He twisted his hat in his hands, and looked suddenly sad--as if he were about to join in the groan at a prayer-meeting.

"Lord Pilgrimstone," he said in a voice he vainly strove to render commonplace, "is going to the Sandown Spring Meeting to-day."

The tone was really so lugubrious--to say nothing of a shake of the head with which he could not help accompanying the statement--that a faint smile played on Mr. Stafford's lips.

"Then I must take the next possible opportunity," he said. "I will see him to-morrow."

Mr. Scratchley assented to this, and bowed himself out, after another word or two, looking

more gloomy and careworn than usual. The interview had not been altogether to his mind. He wished that he had spoken more roundly to Mr. Stafford; even asked for a categorical denial of the charge. But the Minister's manner had overawed him. He had found it impossible to put the question. And then the pitiful confession which he had had to make for Lord Pilgrimstone! That had put the copingstone to his dissatisfaction.

"Oh!" the secretary sighed, as he stepped into his cab. "Oh, that men so great should stoop to things so little!"

It did not occur to him that there is a condition of things even more sad: when little men meddle with great things.

Meanwhile, Mr. Stafford stood at the window deep in unpleasant thoughts, from which the entrance of the butler, who came to summon him to breakfast, first aroused him. "Stay a moment, Marcus!" he said, turning, as the man prepared to leave the room after doing his errand. "I want to ask you a question. Did you make up the messenger's bag last evening?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you notice a letter addressed to the *Times* office?"

The servant prepared himself to cogitate. But he found it unnecessary. "Yes, sir," he replied. "Two."

"Two?" Mr. Stafford repeated, dismay in his tone; though this was just what he had reason to expect.

"Yes, sir. There was one I took from the hand-box, and one Mr. Atlay gave me in the hall at the last moment," the butler explained.

"That will do. Thank you. Ask Mr. Atlay if he will come to me. No doubt he will be able to tell me what I want to know."

The words were commonplace, but the speaker's anxiety was so plain that Marcus when he delivered the message--which he did with haste--added a word or two of warning.

"It is about a letter to the *Times*, sir, I think. Mr. Stafford seems a good deal put out," he said, confidentially.

"Indeed?" Atlay replied. "I will go down." And he started. But before he reached the library he met some one. Lady Betty looked out of the breakfast-room, and saw him descending the stairs with the butler behind him.

"Where is Mr. Stafford, Marcus?" she asked impatiently, as she stood with her hand on the door. "Good morning, Mr. Atlay," she added, her eyes descending to him. "Where is my husband? The coffee is getting cold."

"He has requested me to go to him," Atlay answered. "Marcus tells me there is something in the *Times* which has annoyed him, Lady Betty. I will send him up as quickly as I can."

But Lady Betty had not stayed to receive his assurance. She had drawn back and shut the door quickly; yet not so quickly but that the private secretary had seen her change colour. "Hallo!" he ejaculated to himself--the lady was not much given to blushing--"I wonder what is wrong with *her* this morning. She is not generally rude--to me."

It was not long before he got light on the matter. "Come here, Atlay," his employer said, the moment he entered the library. "Look at this!"

The secretary took the *Times*, and read the important matter. Meanwhile the Minister read the secretary. He saw surprise and consternation on his face, but no trace of guilt. Then he told him what Marcus had said about the two letters which had gone the previous evening from the house addressed to the *Times* office. "One," he said, "contained the notes of my speech. The other----"

"The other----" the secretary replied, thinking while he spoke, "was given to me at the last moment by Sir Horace. I threw it to Marcus in the hall."

"Ah!" his chief said, trying very hard to express nothing by the exclamation, but not quite succeeding. "Did you see that that letter was addressed to the editor of the *Times*?"

The secretary reddened, and betrayed unexpected confusion. "I did," he said. "I saw so much of the address as I threw the letter on the slab--though I thought nothing of it at the time."

Mr. Stafford looked at him fixedly. "Come," he said, "this is a grave matter, Atlay. You noticed, I can see, the handwriting. Was it Sir Horace's?"

"No," the secretary replied.

"Whose was it?"

"I think--I think, Mr. Stafford--that it was Lady Betty's. But I should be sorry, having seen it only for a moment--to say that it was hers."

"Lady Betty's?"

Mr. Stafford repeated the exclamation three times, in surprise, in anger, a third time in trembling. In this last stage he walked away to the window, and turning his back on his companion looked out. He recalled his wife's petulant exclamation of yesterday, the foolish desire expressed, as he had supposed in jest. Had she been in earnest? And had she carried out her threat? Had she--his wife--done this thing so compromising to his honour, so mischievous to the country, so mad, reckless, wicked? Impossible. It was impossible. And yet--and yet Atlay was a man to be trusted, a gentleman, his own kinsman! And Atlay's eye was not likely to be deceived in a matter of handwriting. That Atlay had made up his mind he could see.

The statesman turned from the window, and walked to and fro, his agitation betrayed by his step. The third time he passed in front of his secretary--who had riveted his eyes to the *Times* and appeared to be reading the money article--he stopped. "If this be true--mind I say if, Atlay--" he cried jerkily, "what was Lady Betty's motive? I am in the dark! blindfold! Help me! Tell me what has been passing round me that I have not seen. You would not have my wife--a spy?"

"No! no! no!" the other cried, as he dropped the paper, his vehemence showing that he felt the pathos of the appeal. "It is not that. Lady Betty is jealous, if I dare venture to judge, of your devotion to the country--and to politics. She sees little of you. You are wrapped up in public affairs and matters of state. She feels herself neglected and--set aside. And--may I say it?--she has been married no more than a year."

"But she has her society," the Minister objected, compelling himself to speak calmly, "and her cousin, and--many other things."

"For which she does not care." returned the secretary.

It was a simple answer, but something in it touched a tender place. Mr. Stafford winced and cast an odd startled look at the speaker. Before he could reply, however--if he intended to reply--a knock came at the door, and Marcus put in his head. "My lady is waiting breakfast, sir," he suggested timidly. What could a poor butler do between an impatient mistress and an obdurate master?

"I will come," Mr. Stafford said hastily. "I will come at once. For this matter, Atlay," he continued when the door was closed again, "let it rest for the present where it is. I know I can depend upon your"--he paused, seeking a word--"your discretion. One thing is certain, however. There is an end of the arrangement made yesterday. Probably the Queen will send for Templetown. I shall see Lord Pilgrimstone to-morrow, and--that will be the end of it."

Atlay retired, marvelling at his coolness; trying to retrace the short steps of their conversation, and to discern how far the Minister had gone with him, and where he had turned off upon a resolution of his own. He failed to find the clue, however, and marvelled still more as the day went on and others succeeded it; days of political crisis. Out of doors the world, or that small piece of it which has its centre at Westminster, was in confusion. The newspapers, morning or evening, found ready sale, and had no need to rely on murder-panics or prurient discussions. The Coalition scandal, the resignation of Ministers, the sending for Lord This and Mr. That, the certainty of a dissolution, provided matter enough. In all this Atlay found nothing at which to wonder. He had seen it all before. That which did cause him surprise was the calm--the unnatural calm, as it seemed to him--which prevailed in the house in Carlton Terrace. For a day or two, indeed, there was much running to and fro, much closeting and button-holing; for rather longer the secretary read anxiety and apprehension in one countenance--Lady Betty's. Then things settled down. The knocker began to find peace, such comparative peace as falls to knockers in Carlton Terrace. Lady Betty's brow grew clear as her eye found no reflection of its anxiety in Mr. Stafford's face. In a word the secretary looked long but could discern no faintest sign of domestic trouble.

The late Minister indeed was taking things with wonderful coolness. Lord Pilgrimstone had failed to taunt him, and the triumph of old foes had failed to goad him into a last effort. Apparently he was of opinion that the country might for a time exist without him. He was standing aside with a shade on his face, and there were rumours that he would take a long holiday.

A week saw all these things happen. And then, one day as Atlay sat writing in the library--Mr. Stafford being out--Lady Betty came into the room for something. Rising to supply her with the article she wanted, he held the door open for her to pass out. She paused.

"Shut the door, Mr. Atlay," she said, pointing to it. "I want to ask you a question."

"Pray do, Lady Betty," he answered. "It is this," she said, meeting his eyes boldly--and a brighter, a more dainty creature than she looked had seldom tempted man. "Mr. Stafford's resignation--had it anything, Mr. Atlay, to do with"--her face coloured a very little--"something

that was in the *Times* this day week?"

His own cheek coloured violently enough. "If ever," he was saying to himself, "I meddle or mar between husband and wife again, may I----" But aloud he answered quietly, "Something perhaps." The question was sudden. Her eyes were on his face. He found it impossible to prevaricate. "Something perhaps," he said.

"My husband has never spoken to me about it," she replied, breathing quickly.

He bowed, having no words adapted to the situation. But he repeated his resolution (as above) more furiously.

"He has never appeared aware of it," she persisted. "Are you sure that he saw it?"

He wondered at her innocence, or her audacity. That such a baby should do so much mischief. The thought irritated him. "It was impossible that he should not see it, Lady Betty," he said, with a touch of asperity. "Quite impossible!"

"Ah," she replied, with a faint sigh. "Well, he has never spoken to me about it. And you think it had really something to do with his resignation, Mr. Atlay?"

"Most certainly," he said. He was no longer inclined to spare her.

She nodded thoughtfully, and then with a quiet "Thank you" she went out.

"Well," muttered the secretary to himself when the door was fairly shut behind her, "she is-- upon my word, she is a fool! And he"--appealing to the inkstand--"he has never said a word to her about it. He is a new Don Quixote! a modern Job! a second Sir Isaac Newton! I do not know what to call him!"

It was Sir Horace, however, who precipitated the catastrophe. He happened to come in about teatime that afternoon, before, in fact, my lady had had an opportunity of seeing her husband. He found her alone and in a brown study, a thing most unusual with her and portending something. He watched her for a time in silence: seemed to draw courage from a still longer inspection of his boots, and then said, "So the cart is clean over, Betty?"

She nodded.

"Driver much hurt?"

"Do you mean, does Stafford mind?" she replied impatiently.

He nodded.

"Well, I do not know. It is hard to say."

"Think so?" he persisted.

"Good gracious, Horry!" my lady retorted, losing patience, "I say I do not know, and you say, 'Think so!' If you want to learn so particularly, ask him yourself. Here he is!"

Mr. Stafford had just entered the room. Perhaps she really wished to satisfy herself as to the state of his feelings. Perhaps she only desired in her irritation to put her cousin in a corner. At any rate she turned to her husband and said, "Here is Horace wishing to know if you mind being turned out?"

Mr. Stafford's face flushed a little at the home-thrust which no one else would have dared to deal. But he showed no displeasure. "Well, not so much as I should have thought," he answered, pausing to weigh a lump of sugar, and, as it seemed, his feelings. "There are compensations, you know."

"Pity all the same--those terms came out," Sir Horace grunted.

"It was."

"Stafford!" Lady Betty asked on a sudden, speaking fast and eagerly, "is it true, I want to ask you, is it true that that led you to resign?"

Naturally he was startled, and he showed that he was. She was the last person who should have put that question to him, but his long training in self-control stood him in good stead.

"Well, yes," he said quietly.

It was better, he thought, indeed it was only right, that she should know what she had done. But he did not look at her.

"Was it only that?" she asked again.

This time he weighed his answer. He thought her persistency odd. But again he assented.

"Yes," he said gravely. "Only that, I think. But for that I should have remained in--with Lord Pilgrimstone of course. Perhaps things are better as they are, my dear."

Lady Betty sprang from her seat with all her old vivacity. "Well!" she cried, "well, I am sure! Then why, I should like to know, did Mr. Atlay tell me that my letter to the *Times* had something to do with it!"

"Did not say so," quoth Sir Horace. "Absurd!"

"Yes, he did," cried Lady Betty, so fiercely that the rash speaker, who had returned to his boots, fairly shook in them. "You were not there! How do you know?"

"Don't know," Sir Horace admitted, meekly.

"But stay, stay a moment!" Mr. Stafford said, getting in a word with difficulty. It was strange if his wife could talk so calmly of her misdeeds, and before a third party too. "What letter to the *Times* did Atlay mean?"

"My letter about the Women's League," she explained earnestly. "You did not see it? No, I thought not. But Mr. Atlay would have it that you did, and that it had something to do with your going out. Horace told me at the time that I ought not to send it without consulting you. But I did, because you said you could not be bothered with it--I mean you said you were busy, Stafford. And so I thought I would ask if it had done any harm, and Mr. Atlay--- What is the matter?" she cried, breaking off sharply at sight of the change in her husband's face. "Did it do harm?"

"No, no," he answered. "Only I never heard of this letter before. What made you write it?"

Lady Betty coloured violently, and became on a sudden very shy--like most young authors. "Well," she said, "I wanted to be in the--in the swim with you, don't you know."

Mr. Stafford murmured, "Oh!"

Thanks to his talk with Atlay he read the secret of that sudden shyness. And confusion poured over him more and more. It caused him to give way to impulse in a manner which a moment's reflection would have led him to avoid.

"Then it was not you," he exclaimed unwarily, "who sent Pilgrimstone's terms to the *Times*?"

"I?" she exclaimed in an indescribable tone, and with eyes like saucers. "I?" she repeated.

"Gad!" cried Sir Horace; and he looked about for a way of escape.

"I?" she continued, struggling between wrath and wonder. "I betray you to the *Times*! And you thought so, Stafford?"

There was silence in the room for a long moment during which the cool statesman, the hard man of the world, did not know where to turn his eyes. "There were circumstances--several circumstances," Mr. Stafford muttered at last, "which made--which forced me to think so."

"And Mr. Atlay thought so?" she asked. He nodded. "Oh, that tame cat!" she cried, her eyes flashing.

Then she seemed to meditate, while her husband gazed at her, a prey to conflicting emotions, and Sir Horace made himself as small as possible. "I see," she continued in a different tone. "Only--only if you thought that, why did you never say anything? Why did you not scold me, beat me, Stafford? I do not--I do not understand."

"I thought," he explained in despair--he had so mismanaged matters--"that perhaps I had left you--out of the swim, as you call it, Betty. That I had not treated you very well, and after all it might be my own fault."

"And you said nothing! You intended to say nothing?" He nodded.

"Gad!" cried Sir Horace very softly.

But Lady Betty said nothing. She turned after a long look at her husband, and went out of the room, her eyes wet with tears. The two men heard her pause a moment on the landing, and then go upstairs and shut her door. But her foot, even to their gross ears, seemed to touch the stairs as if it loved them, and there was a happy lingering in the slamming of the door.

They looked, when she had left them, anywhere but at one another. Sir Horace sought inspiration in his boots, and presently found it. "Wonder who did it, then?" he burst out at last.

"Ah! I wonder," replied the ex-minister, descending at a bound from the cloudland to which his thoughts had borne him. "I never pushed the inquiry; you know why now. But they should be able to enlighten us at the *Times* office. We could learn in whose handwriting the copy was, at any rate. It is not well to have spies about us."

"I can tell you in whose handwriting they say it was," Sir Horace said bluntly.

"In whose?"

"In Atlay's."

Mr. Stafford did not look surprised. Instead of answering he thought. As a result of which he presently left the room in silence. When he came back he had a copy of the *Times* in his hand, and his face wore a look of perplexity. "I have read the riddle," he said, "and yet it is a riddle to me still. I never found time to read the report of my speech at the Club. It occurred to me to look at it now. It is full of errors; so full that it is clear the printer had not the corrected proof Atlay prepared. Therefore I conclude that Atlay's copy of the terms went to the *Times* instead of the speech. But how was the mistake made?"

"That is the question."

It happened that the private secretary came into the room at this juncture. "Atlay," Mr. Stafford said at once, "I want you. Carry your mind back a week--to this day week. Are you sure that you sent the report of my speech at the Club to the *Times*?"

"Am I sure?" the other replied confidently, nothing daunted by being so abruptly challenged. "I am quite sure I did, sir. I remember the circumstances. I found the report--it was type-written you remember--lying on the blotting-pad when I came down before dinner. I slipped it into an envelope, and put it in the box. I can see myself doing it now."

"But how do you know that it was the report you put in the envelope?"

"You had indorsed it 'Corrected speech.--W. Stafford,'" Atlay replied triumphantly.

"Ah!" Mr. Stafford said, dropping his hands and eyes and sitting down suddenly, "I remember! My wife came in, and--yes, my wife came in."

THE SURGEON'S GUEST

THE SURGEON'S GUEST

CHAPTER I.

"To be content," said the carrier, "that is half the battle. If I have said it to one, I have said it to a hundred. You be content," says I, "and you will be all right."

For the first time, though they had plodded on a mile together, the tall gentleman turned his eyes from the sombre moorland which stretched away on either side of the road, and looked at his companion. There had been something strange in the preoccupation of his thoughts hitherto; though the carrier, lapped in his own loquacity, had not felt it. And, to tell the truth, there had been something still more strange in the tall gentleman's behaviour before their meeting. Now he had raced along the road and now he had loitered; sometimes he had stood still, letting his eyes stray over the dark groups of heather, which lay islanded in a sea of brown grass; and again he had sauntered onwards, his hat in his hand and his face turned up to the sky, which hung low over the waste, and had yet the breadth of a fen cloudscape. Whatever the eccentricity of his lonely movements, his tall hat and fluttering frock-coat had exaggerated it.

At length on the summit of one of the ridges over which the road ran he had made a longer halt, and had begun to look about him to right and left, seeking, it seemed, for a track across the

moss. Then he had caught sight of the carrier plodding up the next ridge at the tail of his cart, and he had started after him. But having almost overtaken him, he had reduced his pace and loitered as if his desire for human company had faded away. He had even paused as though to return. But a glance at the desolate waste had determined him. He had walked on again, and had overtaken and fallen to talking with the carrier. The latter on his part had been glad to have a companion, and had readily set down what was odd in the stranger's bearing to the cause which accounted for his costume. The tall gentleman was a Londoner.

"'You be content,' says I," quoth the old fellow again, his companion's tardy attention encouraging him to repeat his statement, "'and you will be all right.' I have told that to hundreds in my time."

"And you practise it yourself?" The tall gentleman's voice was husky. His eyes, now that they had found their way to the other's face, continued to dwell on it with a gleam in their depths which matched the pallor of his features. His forehead was high, his face long and thin, and lengthened by a dark brown beard which hid the working of his lips. A nervous man meeting his gaze might have had strange thoughts. But the carrier's were country nerves, and proof against anything short of electricity.

"Oh yes, I am pretty well content," Nickson answered sturdily. "I have twenty acres of land from the duke, and I turn a penny with the carrying, going into Sheffield twice a week, rain and shine. Then I have as good a wife as ever kissed her man, and neither chick nor child, and no more than three barren ewes this lambing."

"My God!" said the stranger.

The words seemed wrung from him by a twinge of mental pain, but whether the feeling was envy of the man's innocent joys, or disgust at his simplicity, did not appear. Whatever the impulse, the tall gentleman showed an immediate consciousness that he had excited his companion's astonishment. He began to talk rapidly, even gesticulating a little. "But is there no drawback?" he said--"no bitter in your life, man? This long journey--ten--eleven miles?--and the same journey home again? Do you never find it cold, hot, dreary, intolerable?"

"It is cold enough some days, and hot enough some days," the carrier replied heartily. "But dreary?--never! And cold and heat are but skin deep, you know."

The tall gentleman let his head fall on his breast, and for some distance walked on in silence. The carrier whistled to his horse, the cry of a peewit came shrilling across the moor, one wheel of the cart squeaked loudly for grease. The evening was grey and still, and rain impended.

"It is all downhill after this," Nickson said presently, pointing to the sky-line, now less than a hundred yards ahead. "You see that stone there, sir?" he continued, and pointing with his whip to a stone lying a little off the road. "There was a man died in the snow there. Three years back it would be. I went by him myself for a month and more, and took him for a dead sheep. At last a keeper passing that way turned him over with his foot, and--well, he was a sad sight, poor chap, by that time."

The carrier should have been pleased with the effect his story produced; for the stranger shuddered. His face even seemed a shade paler, but this might be the effect of the evening light. He did not make any comment, however, and the two stepped out until they gained the summit of the ridge. Here the moor fell away on every side--a dark sweep of waste bounded by uncouth round-backed hills, which rose shapeless and grey, with never a graceful outline or soaring peak to break the horizon.

"You will take a lift down the hill, sir?" the carrier asked, gathering up his reins and preparing to mount. "I am light to-day."

"No, I think not--I thank you," the stranger answered jerkily.

"You are welcome, if you will," persisted the carrier.

"No, I think not. I think I will walk," the tall gentleman answered. But he still stood, and watched the other's preparations with strange intentness. Even when Nickson, having wished him good day, drove briskly off, he continued to gaze after the cart until a dip in the descent--not far below--swallowed it up. Then he heaved a sigh, and looked round at the grey sky and darkening heath. He took off his hat.

"Hold up! what is the matter with the mare?" the carrier cried, coming to a stop as soon, as it chanced, as the dip in the road hid him from the other's eyes. "She has picked up a stone, drat it!"

He got down stiffly, and taking his knife from his pocket went to the mare's head. Having removed the stone he dropped the hoof, and stood a second while he closed the knife. In this momentary pause there came to his ear a sharp report like that of a gun, but brisker and less loud. It was difficult to suppose it the sound of a snapping stick; or of one stone struck against another. It puzzled Master Nickson, who climbed hastily to his seat again and drove on until he was clear of the dip. Then, swearing at himself for an old fool, he looked anxiously back at the top

of the ridge, which had come into view again. He was looking for the tall gentleman. But the latter was not to be seen, either standing against the sky-line or moving on the intervening road. "Lord's sakes!" the carrier muttered uneasily, "what has become of him? He cannot have gone back!"

He continued to stare for some moments at the place where the stranger should have been. At last giving way to a sudden conviction, he got down from his cart, and, leaving it standing, hurried back through the dip, and so to the top of the ridge. The ascent was steep, and he was breathing heavily when he reached the summit and cast his eyes round him. No, the tall gentleman was not to be seen. The brown grass and heather stretched away on this side and that, broken by no human figure. Not even a rabbit was visible on the long white strip of road that in the far distance grew hazy with the fall of night.

"The devil!" the carrier said, shuddering, and feeling more lonely than he had ever felt in his life. "Then he has gone, and----"

He stopped. His eyes were on a dark bundle of clothes that lay a little aside from the road between two clumps of heather. Just a bundle of clothes it seemed, but Master Nickson drew in his breath at sight of it. The peewits and curlews had gone to rest. There was not a sound to be heard on the wide moor, save the beating of his heart.

He would have given pounds to drive on with a clear conscience, yet he forced himself to go up to the huddled form, and to turn it over until the face was exposed. There was a pistol near the right hand, and behind the ear there was a small, a very small hole, from which the blood welled sluggishly. Round this the skin was singed and blackened. The eyes were closed, and the pale face, thoughtful and placid, was scarcely disfigured.

Suddenly Master Nickson fell on his knees. "Dang me, if I don't think he is alive!" he whispered. "For sure, he breathes!"

Convinced of it, the carrier sprang to his feet a different man. He lost not a moment in bringing his cart to the spot and lifting the insensible form into it. Then he led the horse to the road, and started gingerly down the hill. "It is a mercy it happened right at the doctor's door," he muttered, as he turned off the road into a track which seemed to lead through the heather to nowhere in particular. "If he lives five minutes longer he will be in good hands."

A stranger would have wondered where the doctor lived; for there was no signs of a house to be seen. But when the wheels had rolled noiselessly over the sward a hundred yards a faint curl of smoke became visible, rising from the ground in front. A few more paces brought the tops of trees to view, and nestling among them the gables of an old stone house, standing below the level of the moor in a gully or ravine, that here began to run down from the watershed towards Bradfield and the Loxley. The track Nickson was following led to a white gate, which formed the entrance to this lonely demesne.

The carrier found assistance sooner than he had expected. Leaning against the inner side of the gate, with her back to him, was a tall girl. She was bending over a fiddle, drawing from it wailing sounds that went well with the waste behind her and the fading light. Her head swayed in time, her elbow moved slowly. She did not hear the wheels, and he had to call, "Whisht! Miss Pleasance, whisht!" before she heard and turned.

He could see little of her face, for in the hollow the light was almost gone, but her voice as she cried, "Is that you, Nickson? Have you something for us?" rang out so cheerily that it strung his nerves anew.

"Yes, miss," he answered. "But it is your father I want. I have got a man here who has been hurt----"

"What? In the cart?" she cried. She stepped forward and would have looked in. But he was before her.

"No, miss, you fetch your father!" he said sharply. "It is just a matter of minutes, maybe. You fetch him here, please."

She understood now, and turned and sped through the shrubbery, and across the little rivulet and the lawn. In five minutes the grey house, which had stood gaunt and lifeless in the glooming, was aroused. Lights flitted from window to window, and servants called to one another. The surgeon, a tall, florid, elderly man, with drooping white moustaches, came out, after snatching up one or two necessary things. The groom hastened behind him with a candle. Only Pleasance, the messenger of ill, whom her father had bidden stay in the house, had nothing to do in the confusion. She laid down her violin and bow, and stood in the darkness of the outer room--it was half hall, half parlour--listening and wondering.

The sound of heavy footsteps crunching the gravel presently warned her that the man was to be brought into the house. She heard her father direct the other bearers to make for his room, which was on the left of the hall, and her face grew a shade paler as the men stumbled with their burden through the doorway. There is something monstrous to the unaccustomed in limbs which fall lifeless, or stick out stiff and stark in ghastly prominence. She averted her face as the group

passed her, and yet managed to touch the groom's sleeve. "What is it, Daniel?" she whispered.

"He has been shot, miss," the servant answered. He was enjoying himself hugely, if the truth be told.

She had no time to ask more. The door was shut upon her, and she was left alone with her curiosity. She wondered how it had happened, for this was not the shooting season, and Nickson had spoken of the man as a stranger. She pondered over the problem until the maids, who were too much upset to stay in their own quarters, came into the room with lights. Then she stepped outside, and stood on the gravel listening to the murmur of the brook, and looking at the old sundial which gleamed white on the lawn.

She had been there no more than a minute when the doctor--as every one in those parts called him--came out with Nickson. Carefully closing the door behind him--an extraordinary precaution with one who was usually the most easy-going of men--he laid his hand on his companion's shoulder. "Why did he do it, Nickson?" he asked in a low voice, which was not free from tremor. "Can you tell me? Have you any idea? He is dressed as a gentleman, and he has a gold watch and money in his pockets."

Their eyes were new to the darkness, and they did not see her, though she was within earshot, and was listening with growing comprehension. "It beats me to say, sir," was Nickson's answer--"that it does. If you will believe me, sir, he was talking to me, just before he did it, as reasonably as ever man in my life."

"Then what the devil was it?"

"That is what I think, sir," the carrier answered, nodding.

"What?"

"It was just the devil, sir."

"Pshaw!" the doctor returned pettishly. "You are sure that he did it himself?"

"As sure as I can be of anything!" the carrier answered. "There was not a human creature barring myself within half a mile of him when the pistol went off--no, nor could have been."

"Well," the doctor said, after a pause, and in a tone of vexation, "it is no good bringing in the police unless he dies, and I don't think he will. He has had a wonderful escape. I suppose you will not go blabbing it about, Nickson?"

"Heaven forbid!" the carrier replied. And after a few more words took his leave.

They went without discovering the listener, and she slipped into the lighted hall and stood there shivering. The darkness outside frightened her. It seemed to hold some secret of despair. Even in the familiar room, in which every faded rug and dusty folio and framed sampler had its word of everyday life for her, she looked fearfully at the closed door which led to her father's room. She shrank from turning her back upon it. She kept glancing askance at it. When her father came to supper, she could not meet his eye; and he must have noticed her strangeness had he not been absorbed in the riddle presented to him, in thoughts of his patient's case, and perhaps in some painful train of meditation induced by it. Such questions as his daughter put he answered absently, and he ate in the same manner, breaking off once to visit his charge. It was only when the preparations for the night were complete, when the maids had retired, and Pleasance was waiting, candlestick in hand, to say good night, that he spoke out.

"When is Woolley coming back?" he asked with a sigh.

"The twenty-eighth, father," she answered. She betrayed no surprise at the question, though it was one he could have answered for himself. Woolley was his assistant, and was absent on a holiday tour.

He was silent a moment. His tone was querulous, his eye wandered when he spoke next. "I thought--I did think that we should have this little bit to ourselves, Pleasance," he complained. And he seemed shrunken. His fierce moustaches and his florid colour no longer hid his weakness of moral fibre. He looked years older than when he had bent with professional alertness over his patient. Something in that patient's strange case had come home to him and unmanned him. "This little bit," he continued, looking at her wistfully, "though it be the last, girl."

"It will not be the last, father," she answered, meeting his look without flinching. "We shall stay together whatever happens."

"Ay, but where, child?" he cried with passion, throwing out his hands as though he appealed to the dumb things around him--"where? Do you think to transplant me? I am too old. I have lived here too long--I and my fathers before me for six generations, though I am but a broken country apothecary--for me to take root elsewhere! Why, girl"--his voice rose higher--"there is not a stone of this old place, not a tree, that I do not know, that I do not love, that I would not rather own than a mile of streets!"

To her surprise he broke down and turned away to hide the tears in his eyes--tears which it pained her deeply to see. She knew how weak he was, and what cause she had to blame him in this matter. But his tears disarmed her, and she laid her hand on his and stroked it tenderly. "How much do you owe Mr. Woolley, father?" she asked, when he had recovered himself.

"Three thousand pounds," he answered, almost sullenly.

He had never told her before, and she was appalled. "It is a large sum," she said, looking at the faded cushions on the window-seats, the fly-blown prints, the well-worn furniture, which made the room picturesque indeed, but shabby. "What can have become of it?"

He made a reckless movement with his hand--he still had his back towards her--as though he flung something from him.

She sighed. She had not intended to reproach him, for economy was not one of her own strong points; and she remembered bills owing as well as bills paid, and many a good intention falsified. No, she could not reproach him; and she chose to look at the matter from another side. "It is a great deal of money," she repeated. "Would he really let all that go if--just to marry me?"

"To be sure!" her father said briskly. "That is," he continued, his conscience pricking him, "it would be the same thing then. The place would come to him anyway."

"I see," she answered dryly. She was always pale--though hers was a warm paleness--but now there were dark shadows under her eyes. They were grey eyes, frank and resolute, now sad and scornful also. As she sat upright in a high-backed chair, with the forgotten candle in her hand and her gaze fixed on vacancy, she seemed to be gazing at the Skeleton of the House. It was a skeleton which she and her father kept for the most part locked up. Possibly it had never been brought so completely to view before.

"You will think of it?" the doctor presently ventured, stealing a glance at her.

"I may think till Doomsday," she answered wearily. "I shall never do it."

"Why not?" he persisted. "What have you against him?"

"Only one thing."

"What is it?" A gleam of hope sparkled in his eyes as he put the question. A definite accusation he might combat and refute; even a prejudice he might overcome. He prepared himself for the effort. "What is it?" he repeated.

"I do not love him, father," she said. "I think I hate him."

"So do I!" the doctor sighed, sinking suddenly into himself again. Alas for his preparations!

CHAPTER II

It was characteristic of both Pleasance and her father--and particularly characteristic of the latter--that when they met at breakfast next morning they ignored the trouble which had seemed so overwhelming at midnight. The doctor was constitutionally careless. It was his nature to live from day to day, plucking the flowers beside his path, without giving thought to the direction in which the path was leading him. Pleasance was careless too, but with a difference. She did not shut her eyes to the prospect; but she was young and sanguine, and she was confident--of a morning at any rate--that a way of escape would be found. So the doctor gazed through the window as cheerfully as if his title-deeds had been his own; and if Pleasance felt any misgivings, they related rather to the man lying in the next room than to her own case.

"How is he, father?" she asked. "Have you been kept awake much?" The doctor had spent the night on a sofa in order that he might be near the stranger.

"He is not conscious," Doctor Partridge answered, "but I think that the brain is recovering from the shock, and if all goes well he will come to himself in a few hours." Pleasance shuddered. Her father, without noticing it, went on: "But he ought not to be left alone, and I must see my patients. It is useless to ask the servants to stay with him--they are as nervous as hares. So you must sit with him for an hour or two after breakfast, Pleasance. There is no help for it."

"I?" she said.

"Yes, to be sure; why not?" he answered lightly. "You are not afraid, I suppose? There is nothing to be done, and Daniel can be within call."

She gulped down her fears and assented. She was a good girl, though she could not keep the

housekeeping bills--nor her own bills, for the matter of that--within bounds. She was used to a lonely life--Sheffield lay nine miles away, and there were few neighbours on the moorland; and her nerves had been braced by many a long ramble over the ling and bracken, where the hill sheep were her only companions.

Yet she might have answered otherwise had she known that, while the words were on her father's lips, he questioned the wisdom of his proposal. The man might on coming to his senses--the doctor did not think he would--but he might repeat his attempt. And then---

Her answer, however, clenched the matter. When they rose from breakfast the doctor said, "Now my dear, come, and I will put you in charge."

She followed him. It was a relief to her to discover--from the threshold of the room--that the bed had been moved, so that the light might not fall on the patient's face. In its new position a curtain hid him. The doctor set a chair for her behind the curtain, and she sat down outwardly calm, inwardly trembling. He went himself to the bedside, and stood for a moment gazing with a critical eye. Then he nodded to her and went softly out.

He left the door ajar, and she heard him ride away. She heard too Daniel's clumsy footsteps as he came back through the house, and the clatter of the china as Mary washed it in the kitchen. But these homely sounds served only to heighten her dislike for her task. She was not afraid. She no longer trembled. But she shrank almost with loathing from contact with her wretched companion. She conjured up a dreadful picture of him--ghastly and disfigured--defiant and hopeless--self-doomed.

He lay perfectly still. The curtain too on which her eyes dwelt hung motionless. And presently there began to grow upon her a feeling and a fear that he was dead. She fought with it, and more than once shook it off. But it returned. At length she could bear it no longer, and she rose in the silence, her breath coming quickly. She took a step towards the bed, paused, stepped on, and stood where her father had stood.

"Water!"

Before the faintly whispered word had ceased to sound she was halfway to the carafe. Where was the loathing now? She brought a little water in the tumbler, and held it to his lips. "Do not speak again," she said softly. "You are in good hands. The doctor will return in a few minutes."

She watched the weary dazed eyes close; then she went back to her chair as though she had been a trained nurse and this the most ordinary case in the world. But she was immensely puzzled. The picture of the patient as he really was remained with her, causing her to wonder exceedingly how such a man had come to attempt his life. The face handsome despite its bandages and pallor, the eyes kindly even in stupor, were features the very opposite of those which she had ascribed to the dark creature of her fancy.

When her father returned she flew to tell him what had happened. He entered and saw the patient, and came out again. "Yes," he said in his professional tone, "if he can be kept quiet for forty-eight hours he will do. Fever is the only thing to be feared. But he must not be left alone, and I have to go to Ashopton. Do you mind being with him?"

"Not at all."

This time the easy-going doctor did not hesitate. He muttered something about Daniel being within call, and, snatching a hasty meal, got to horse again.

The case at Ashopton proved to be serious. It led to complications, and even to a consultation with a London physician. And so it happened that that day, and the next, and the next, Pleasance was left in charge at home. The stranger, as his senses returned to him--and with them Heaven knows what thoughts of the past and the future, what thankfulness or remorse--grew accustomed to look to her hands for tendance. A woman can scarcely perform such offices without pitying the object of them; and Pleasance after the first morning came to wait upon the stranger's call and minister to his wants without the disturbing remembrance that his own act had brought him to this. Away from the bedside she shuddered; beside it she forgot. In the mean time the tall gentleman, who at first lay gazing upwards, taciturn and still, came more and more to follow her with his eyes as she moved to and fro in his service. None the less he remained grave and smileless, speaking little even when he began to sit up, and saying nothing from which the current of his thoughts could be judged.

"Father," she said one morning, when they had gone on in this way for several days, "do you think that he is quite sane?"

"Sane? yes, as sane as any of us," was the uncompromising answer. "Indeed," the doctor continued, looking at her sharply, "more sane than you will be if you stop in the house so much, my girl. Leave him to himself this morning and go out. Walk till lunch."

She assented, and, the weather being soft and bright, she started in excellent spirits. As she climbed she thought that the moorland had never looked more beautiful, the distance more full of colour. But this mood proved less lasting than the May weather. Reaching the brow of the hill,

she turned to look down on the Old Hall, and the sudden reflection that it must pass to strangers fell on her like a cold shadow. The tears rushed to her eyes, the walk was spoiled. She came back early, wondering at her own depression.

As she emerged from the shrubbery she saw with surprise two figures standing on the lawn. One was her father. The other--could it be Edgar Woolley come back before his time? No; this man was taller and paler, with an air of distinction which the surgeon lacked. She drew near, and her father, not seeing her, went into the house; while the other sank into an arm-chair which had been set for him, and turned and saw her. He rose with an effort, and raised his hat as she approached. It was the tall gentleman.

The fact annoyed the girl. It was one thing, she thought, to nurse him when he lay helpless, another to associate with him. She made up her mind to pass him with a frigid bow. But at the last moment the sight of his weakness melted her, and she paused on the threshold to tell him that she was glad to see him out.

"Thank you," he answered. He spoke very quietly; but a slight flush came and went on his brow. Probably he understood her hesitation.

Within doors a fresh surprise awaited her. She found the table laid for lunch, and laid for three. "Father!" she cried, in a tone of vexation, "is he going to take his meals with us?"

"Where else is he to take them?" the doctor answered gruffly, looking up from the old bureau at which he was writing. "Would you send him to the servants? If he is left alone in his room, he will go mad in earnest."

He spoke gruffly because he knew he was wrong. He knew no more of the tall gentleman, or of his reason for doing what he had done, than he knew of the man in the moon. That the stranger dressed and spoke like a gentleman, that there was no mark on his linen, that he had a watch and money in his pockets, and that he had tried to take his life--this was the sum of the doctor's knowledge; and he could not feel that these matters rendered the stranger a fit companion for his daughter. But the doctor had not strength of mind to grapple with the difficulty, and he let things slide.

Pleasance would not discuss the question, but at the meal she sat silent and cold. The doctor was uncomfortable, and talked jerkily. A shadow--but it seemed more than temporary--darkened the stranger's face. At the earliest possible moment Pleasance withdrew.

When she came down she found that the tall gentleman had retired to his room, and she saw nothing more of him that evening. Next day, the post brought a letter from Woolley, postponing his return for a day or two, and this sent the doctor on his rounds in high spirits. Pleasance herself, moving upstairs about her domestic business, felt more charitable. There might be something in what her father said about leaving the poor man to himself. She would go down presently, and talk to him, preserving a due distance.

She had scarcely made up her mind to this when she chanced to look through the window, and saw the stranger walking slowly across the lawn. She watched him for a moment in idle curiosity, wondering in what class he had moved, and what had brought him to this. Then she noticed the direction he was taking, and on the instant a dreadful fear flashed into the girl's mind, and made her heart stand still. Below the lawn the rivulet formed a pool among the trees. He was going that way, glancing sombrely about him as he went.

Pleasance did not stay to think--to add up the chances. She flung the door open, and ran down the stairs. She reached the lawn. He was not to be seen, but she knew which way he had gone, and she darted down the path that led to the water. She turned the corner--she saw him! He was standing gazing into the dark pool, his back towards her, in an attitude of profound melancholy. She ran on unfaltering until she reached him, and laid her hand on his arm.

"What are you doing?" she cried, on the impulse of her great fear.

He turned with a violent start, and found the girl's pale face and glowing eyes close to his. He looked ghastly enough. There was a bandage round his head, under the soft hat which the doctor had lent him; and in the surprise of the moment the colour had fled from his face. "Doing?" he muttered, trembling in her grasp. And his eyes dilated--his nerves were still suffering from the shock of his wound, and probably from some long strain which had preceded it. "Doing? Yes, I understand you."

He uttered the last words with a groan and a distortion of the features. "Come away!" she cried, pulling at his arm.

He let her lead him away. He was so weak that apparently he could not have returned without her help. Near the upper end of the walk there was a rustic seat, and here he signed to her to let him sit down, and she did so. When he had somewhat recovered himself he said faintly, "You are mistaken; I came here by chance."

She shook her head, looking down at him solemnly. She was still excited, taken out of herself by her terror.

"It is true," he said feebly. "I swear it."

"Swear that you will not think of it again," she responded.

"I swear," he answered.

She gazed at him awhile. Then she said, "Wait!" She went quickly back to the house, and returned with some wine. "Perhaps I startled you without cause," she said, smiling on him. He had not seen her smile before. "I must make amends. Drink this."

He obeyed. "Now," she said, "you must take my arm and go back to your chair."

He assented as a child might, and when he reached the chair he sank into it with a sigh of relief. She stood beside him. The back of his seat was towards the house, and before him an opening in the shrubbery disclosed a shoulder of the ravine rolling upwards, the gorse on one rugged spur in bloom, the sunshine everywhere warming the dull browns and lurking purples into brilliance.

"See!" she said, with an undertone of reproach in her voice, "is not that beautiful? Is not that a thing one would regret?"

"Yes, beautiful now," he replied, answering her thought rather than her words. "But I have seen it under another aspect. Stay!" he continued, seeing she was about to answer. "Do not judge me too hastily. You cannot tell what reason I had--what--"

"No!" she retorted, "I cannot. But I can guess what grief you would have caused to others, what a burden you would have shifted to weaker shoulders, what duties you would have avoided, what a pang you would have inflicted on friends and relations! For shame!" She stopped for lack of breath.

"I have no relatives," he answered slowly, "and few friends. I have no duties that others would not perform as well. My death would cause sorrow to some, joy to as many. My burden would die with me."

She glanced at him with compressed lips, divining that he was reciting arguments he had used a score of times to his own conscience. But she was puzzled how to answer him. "Take all that for granted," she said at last. "Are there no reasons higher than these which should have deterred you?"

"It may be so," he replied. "Perhaps I think so now."

She felt the admission a victory, and, seeing he had recovered his composure, she left him and went into the house. But the incident had one lasting effect. It broke down the wall between them. She felt that she knew him well--better than many whom she had owned as acquaintances for years. The confidence surprised in a moment of emotion cannot be recalled. It seemed idle for her to affect to keep him at arm's length when she knew, if she did not acknowledge, that he had confessed his sin, and been forgiven.

So when she saw him walking feebly from the house next day she went with him, and showed him where he could rest and where obtain a view without climbing. Afterwards she fell naturally into the habit of going with him; and little by little, as she saw more of him, she owned the spell of a new perplexity. Who was he? He talked of things in a tone novel to her. He seemed to have thought deeply and read much. He spoke of visits to this country, to that country. One day her father found him reading their day-old *Times*, and took it from him. "You must not do that yet," the doctor said. "My daughter can read to you, if you like, but not for long."

She asked what she should read. He chose a review of a historical work, and gently rejected the passing topics--even a speech by Lord Hartington. This gave her an idea, and she privately searched the back numbers of the paper, but could not find that any one who resembled him was missing. Yet he had been with them almost three weeks; he had received no letters, he had sent none. How could such a man pass from his circle and cause no inquiry? Here at the Old Hall they knew no more of him than on his coming. He had not offered to disclose his name, and his host, who had fallen under his spell, had not plucked up courage to ask for it, or for an explanation--had come, indeed, to no understanding with him at all.

It is possible that of himself the doctor might have gone on unsuspecting to the last. But one afternoon, as he made up his books at the old bureau in the hall--the door being open and a flood of sunshine pouring through it--he was aware on a sudden of a shadow cast across the boards. He looked up. A middle-sized fair man, with a goatee beard and a fresh complexion, was setting down a bag on the floor and beginning to take off his gloves. "Why, Woolley!" exclaimed the doctor, gazing at him feebly, "is it you? We did not expect you until Monday."

"No, but you see I have come to-day," the traveller answered. It was a peculiarity of this young man--he was not very young, say thirty-eight--that when he was not well pleased he smiled. He smiled now.

The doctor rubbed his hands to hide a little embarrassment. "Yes, I see you have come," he

said. "But how? Did you walk from Sheffield?"

"I came with Nickson."

The doctor stopped rubbing, then went on faster, as his thoughts flew from Nickson to the tall gentleman, and for some mysterious reason from the tall gentleman to Pleasance. He had never consciously traced this connection before, but something in his assistant's face helped him to it now.

"He tells me," Woolley continued, making a neat ball of his gloves and smiling at the floor, "that you had a strange case here, a case he was mixed up with, and that you made a cure of it."

"Yes."

"The fellow has cleared out, I suppose?"

"Well, no," the doctor stammered, feeling warm. How odd it was that he had never seen into what a pit of imprudence he was sinking! He had been harbouring a lunatic, or one who had acted as a lunatic--a criminal certainly; in no light a person fit to associate with his daughter. "No, he is still here," he stammered. "I think--I suppose he will be leaving in a day or two!"

"Here still, is he?" Woolley said with a sneer. "A queer sort of parlour-boarder, sir. May I ask where he is at present?"

"I think he is out of doors somewhere."

"Alone?"

When the doctor thought over the scene afterwards he whistled when his memory brought him to that "Alone." He knew then that the fat was in the fire. He saw that Woolley had pumped the carrier--who had been to the house several times since the affair--and drawn his own conclusions. "I rather think," he ventured, "I am not sure, but I think----"

"I do not think," the other said dryly, "I see."

He pointed through the open door, and alas! the tall gentleman and Pleasance were visible approaching the house. They had that moment emerged from the shrubbery, and were crossing the lawn. The girl was carrying a basket full of marsh marigolds, the man had a great bush of hawthorn on the end of his stick. They were both looking at the front of the house without a thought that other eyes were upon them. Pleasance's face, on which the light fell strongly, was far from gay, her smile but a sad one; yet there was a tenderness in the one and the other which was not calculated to reassure a jealous onlooker.

"So!" Woolley muttered, his fingers closing like a vise on the doctor's arm. "Let me deal with this."

CHAPTER III

The walk which roused so much indignation in Edgar Woolley's breast had been one of more than common interest; as perhaps something in the faces of the returning couple assured him. There is a point in the journey towards intimacy at which one or other of the converging pair turns the conversation inwards, disclosing his or her hopes, fears, ambitions. Pleasance in the purest innocence had reached this stage to-day; arriving at it by the road of that silence which is tolerable only when some progress has been made towards friendship, and which even then invites attack. The tall gentleman, having lopped and picked at her bidding, gathered up the last scraps of the hawthorn which he had ruthlessly broken from the tree. He turned to find his companion gazing into distance with a shadow on her face. "Your thoughts are not pleasant ones, I fear," he said, half lightly, half seriously. "A penny were too much for them."

"I was thinking of Mr. Woolley," she answered simply.

"Indeed!" he said, surprised. He was more surprised when she poured out of a full heart the story of her father's debt to his assistant, and of the mortgage on the old house which the Partridges had owned for generations, and which was to her father as the apple of his eye. She let fall no word of Woolley's position in regard to herself. But the voice has subtle inflections, and men's apprehensions are quick where they are interested--and he was interested here. Her story omitted little which he could not conjecture.

"I am sorry to hear this," he said, after a pause. "But money troubles--after all, money troubles are not the worst troubles." He raised his hat and walked for a moment bareheaded.

"But this is not merely a money trouble," she answered warmly. She was wrapped up in her

own distresses, and did not perceive at the moment that he had reverted to his. "We shall lose *that*."

They had reached the crown of the hill, and as she spoke she pointed to the Old Hall lying below them, its four gables, its stone front, its mullioned windows warmed into beauty by lichens and sunlight. "We shall lose that!" she repeated, pointing to it.

"Yes," the stranger said, with a quick glance at her. "I understand. And I do not wonder that it grieves you. It has always been your home, I suppose?" She nodded. "And your father thinks it must go?" he continued, after a pause given to deep thought, as it seemed.

"He thinks so."

"Something should be done!" he replied, in a tone of decision. "I conclude from what you say that Mr. Woolley is pressing for his money?"

She nodded again. Her eyes were full of tears, which the sight of the house had brought to them, and she could not trust herself to speak. His sympathy seemed natural to her, so that she saw nothing at this minute strange in his position. She forgot that only a few days or weeks earlier he had been in the blackness of despair himself. He talked now as if he could help others!

They were close to the house, and he had referred to the mouldering shield over the doorway, and she was telling its story when she checked herself and stood still. Edgar Woolley had emerged, and was standing before them with a flush of triumph on his cheek. The tall gentleman could scarcely be in doubt who he was; nor could Woolley well take Pleasance's involuntary cry for a sign of gladness--though he strove to force the smile which was habitual to him.

"Miss Pleasance," he said, "will you step inside? Your father is asking for you."

"Where is he?" she asked. He had used no form of greeting, neither did she. Something--perhaps not the same thing in each--was at work, kindling the one against the other.

"He is in the hall," he answered, chafing at her delay.

She turned to her companion. "I will take your flowers in, if you please," she said. She held out her arms as she spoke, and he laid the pile in them, Woolley looking on the while. The assistant's gaze was bent on her, and he did not see what she saw--that some strong emotion was distorting the tall gentleman's face. He turned a livid white, his nostrils twitched, and a little pulse in his cheek beat wildly.

She changed her mind, seeing that. "No, do you take them in," she said. "Will you take them in, please?" she repeated peremptorily; and she pushed the hawthorn into his arms, and held out her basket. The stranger took the things with reluctance, but without demur, and went into the house.

"Now," she said, turning rapidly upon Woolley, "what do you want?"

"My answer?" he retorted, with answering curtness.

A second before he had not intended to say that. He had meant to carry the war into the stranger's country. But his temper mastered him for a second, and he found himself staking all, when he had planned an affair of outposts. "Wait, Miss Pleasance," he added desperately, seeing in a moment what he had done, and that he had committed himself. "I beg you not to give it me without thought--without thought of others, of me, of your father, as well as of yourself! Do not judge me hastily! Do not judge me," he continued passionately, for her face was icy, "by myself as I am now, Pleasance, wild with love of you, but----"

"By what then, Mr. Woolley?" she asked, her lip curling. "By what am I to judge you if not by yourself?"

"By----"

"Well?" she said mercilessly. He had paused. He could not find words. In truth, he had made a mistake. If he had ever had a chance of winning her his chance was gone now; and, recognising this, he let his fury grow to such a pitch that he could not wait for the answer he had requested. He was mad with love of her, with rage at his own mistake, with shame at being so outgeneralled. "I will tell you, Miss Partridge!" he cried, his eyes sparkling with passion; "Judge me by the future! That fellow who was with you, do you know who he is? Do you know that I can put him in gaol any day?--ay, in goal!"

"What has he done?" she asked. "Tell me."

It was a pity he could not say, "He is a thief--a forger--a swindler!" The charge he could bring against the stranger was heavy enough; and yet he found it difficult to word it so that it should seem heavy. "You thought he was shot?" he said at last. "Bah! he shot himself."

"I know it," she answered, without the movement of a muscle.

He stared at her. How was it? he wondered. Before his departure he had been the Old Hall's master. He had wound the poor doctor round his finger, and Pleasance had been civil to him at least. Now all this was altered. And why? "Ah, well! He shall go to gaol, d---n him!" he said, putting his conclusion into words. "He shall go to gaol! and if you have a fancy for him you must go there to see him!"

She lost her self-possession under the insult, and her face turned scarlet. "You coward!" she said, with scorn. "You would not dare to say to his face what you have said behind his back. Let me pass!"

She swept into the house and left him standing in the sunlight. As she hurried through the hall, which to her dazzled eyes seemed dusky, she caught a glimpse of the tall gentleman leaning over the bureau with his back to her. Had he heard? The door was open, and so was one window. She could not be sure, but the suspicion was enough. Her face was on fire as she ran up the stairs. How she hated, oh, how she hated that wretch out there! She thought that she had never known before what it was to hate.

For there was something in what he had said. There was the sting. How had she come to be so intimate with one who had done what the tall gentleman had done? She tried to trace the stages, but she could not. Then she tried to think of him with some of the horror, some of the distaste which she had felt at the time of his arrival, when he lay ghastly and blood-stained behind the closed door. But she could not. The face we have known a year can never put on for us the look it wore when we saw it first. The hand of time does not move backward. Pleasance found this was so, and in the solitude of her own room hid her face and trembled. Could anything but evil come of such a--a friendship?

Meanwhile Woolley's state of mind was even less enviable. Hitherto his way in the world had been made by the exercise of tact and self-control; and he valued himself upon the possession of those qualities. He could not understand why they had failed him at this pinch, or why the advantage he had so far enjoyed had deserted him now. Yet the secret was not far to seek. He was jealous; and when jealousy attacks him, the man who lives by playing on the passions of others falls to the common level. Jealousy undermines his judgment as certainly as passion deprives the fencer of his skill.

Though Woolley did not allow that this was the cause of his defeat, he knew that he could not command himself at present, and before seeking the doctor he took a turn to collect his thoughts and arrange his plans. When he returned to the house he found the hall empty. He passed through it and down a short passage to a small room at the back, which Dr. Partridge used--especially in times of trouble, when bills poured in and he mediated a fresh loan--as a kind of sanctum. Woolley rapped at the door.

To his surprise no "Come in!" answered his knock, but some one rising hastily from his chair came to the door and opened it to the extent of a few inches. It was the doctor. He squeezed himself through. His face was agitated--but then the passage was ill lit, even on a summer afternoon--his manner nervous. "You want to see me, my dear fellow?" he said, holding the door close behind him and speaking effusively. "Do you mind coming back in a quarter of an hour or so? I am--I shall be disengaged then."

"I would prefer," Woolley said doggedly, "to see you now."

"Wait ten minutes, and you shall," the doctor replied, taking him by the button with his disengaged hand, as though he would bespeak his confidence. "At this moment, my dear fellow--excuse me!"

There was an odd tone in the doctor's voice--a tone half wheedling, half hostile. But Woolley concluded that Pleasance was with him--making a complaint in all probability; and this satisfied him. He thought that he could still depend on the doctor. With a sulky nod he gave way and returned to the lawn, and there he paced up and down, prodding the daisies with his stick. Things had gone badly with him. So much the worse for some one.

When he returned he found the doctor alone in the dingy little room, into which one plumped down two steps, so that it was very like a well. "Come in, come in," the elder man said fussily. "What is it, Woolley? What can I do for you?" As he spoke his hands were busy with the papers on the table. Moreover, after one swift glance, which he shot at his assistant's face on his entrance, he avoided looking at him. "What is it?"

"First," Woolley rejoined with acidity, "I should like to know whether you propose to keep that fellow in your house as a companion for your daughter?"

"The tall gentleman?"

"Precisely."

"He is gone!" was the unexpected answer. "He is gone already. If you doubt me, my dear fellow," the doctor added hastily, "ask the servants--ask Daniel."

"Gone, is he?" Woolley said gloomily, considering the statement.

"Yes, he quite saw the propriety of it," the doctor continued. "He gave me no trouble."

"And paid you no fees, I suppose?"

"Well, no, he did not."

"Then now to my second question, sir," Woolley went on, tapping with his fingers on the table. But try as he might, he could not quite rise to the old level of superiority, he could not drive the flush from his cheek or still his pulse. "What is your daughter's answer? From something which has passed between us I conclude it to be unfavourable to me."

"Indeed?" the doctor said, looking at him blankly.

"But, favourable or unfavourable," Woolley continued, "I must have it betimes. You bade me go away and give her a month to think over it. I have done so, and I am back. Now I ask, What is her answer?"

"Well," the doctor said, rubbing his hands in great perplexity, "I have not--I am not sure that I am prepared to say. You must give me a little more time--indeed you must. Let us say until the day after to-morrow. I will sound her and give you a decisive answer then--after breakfast, and here if you like."

The suitor restrained himself. He longed to reject the proposal. But he did love her in his way, and at the sound of her father's uncertain utterance hope began to tell her flattering tale. "Very well!" he said. "But you understand, I hope," he continued, his manner curiously made up of shame and defiance, "the alternative, sir? If I am not to be allied to you, it will no longer suit me to have my money tied up here, and I must have it--the sooner the better."

"Well, well," the poor doctor said testily, "we will talk about that, Woolley, when the time comes."

There seemed to be nothing more to say. Yet Woolley lingered by the table, fingering the things on it without looking up. Perhaps an impulse to withdraw his threat and end the interview more kindly was working in him. If so, however, he crushed it down, and presently he took himself off. When his step ceased to sound in the passage the doctor drew a sigh of relief.

It has been said that travellers along the moorland road which passes near the Old Hall--a road once frequented, but now little trodden, save by tramps--that travellers along it see nothing of the house. The house lies below the surface. In like manner a visitor arriving at the Old Hall itself during the next thirty-six hours would have observed nothing strange, though there was so much below the surface. The assistant contrived to be abroad at his work during the greater part of the intervening day. He judged that love-making would help him little now. The doctor rubbed his hands and talked fast to preserve appearances; and Pleasance as well as her suitor seemed to regret their joint outbreak. She was civil to him, if somewhat cold. So that when he knocked at the door of the little room--after a sleepless night in which he had pondered long how he should act at the coming interview--he had some hopes. He was feeling almost amiable.

The doctor was seated behind his table, Pleasance on a chair in the one small window recess. With three people in it the room looked more like a well than ever. With three people? Nay, with four. Woolley shut the door behind him very softly and set his teeth. For behind the doctor stood the tall gentleman.

The assistant smiled viciously. He was not prepared for this, but his nerves were strung today. "A trick?" he said, looking from one to another. "Very well. I know what to do. I can guess what my answer is to be, doctor, and need scarcely stay to hear it. Shall I go?"

"No! no!" the doctor replied, hurriedly. He was distressed and perturbed, perhaps by the menace which underlay the other's words. As for the tall gentleman, he gazed gravely over his beard, while Pleasance looked through the window, her face hot. "No, no, I have something to say which affects you. And this gentleman here----"

"Has he anything to say?" the assistant retorted, eyeing his antagonist. "I am ready to hear it--before I take out a warrant against him for attempting to commit suicide. It is punishable with a considerable imprisonment, my friend!"

"I am no friend of yours," was the stranger's reply, given very gravely. "You do not know me, Edgar Woolley."

The assistant started. It was the first time he had heard the tall gentleman's voice, and for a breathing space, while the looked two on one another, he seemed to be racking his memory. But he got no result, and he retorted with a bitter laugh, "No, I do not know you. Nor you me--yet!"

"Yes, I do," was the unexpected answer. "Too well!"

"Bah!" Woolley exclaimed, though it was evident that he was ill at ease. "Let us have an end of these heroics! If you have anything to say, say it."

"I will," the tall gentleman answered. He was still quiet, but there was a glitter in his eyes. "I

have already outlined my story, now I must ask Dr. Partridge to hear it more at length. Many years ago there was a young man, almost a boy, employed in the offices of a great firm in Liverpool--a poor boy, very poor, but of a good and an old family."

Woolley's smile of derision became fixed, so to speak. But he did not interrupt, and the other after a pause went on. "This lad made the acquaintance of a medical student a little older than himself, and was led by him--I think he was weak and sensitive and easily led--into gambling. He lost more than he could pay. His mother was a widow, almost without means. To meet the debt, small as it was, would have ruined her."

The stranger paused again, overcome, it seemed, by painful memories. There was a flush on Woolley's brow. The girl sitting in the window, her hands clasped on her knees, turned so as to see more of the room. "Now listen," the speaker continued, "to what happened. One day this clerk's friend, to whom the greater part of the money was due, came to the office at the luncheon hour and pressed him to pay. The other clerks were out. The two were alone together, and while they were alone there came in a client of the firm to pay some money. The lad took the money and gave a receipt. He had power to do so. The man left again, after telling them that he was starting to South America that evening. When he was gone"--here his voice sank a little--"the friend made a suggestion. I think you know what it was."

No one spoke.

"He suggested to the clerk to take this money and pay his debts with it--to steal it. The boy resisted for a time, but in the end, still telling himself he did not intend to steal it, he put it away in his desk and locked it up, and gave in no account of it. After that the issue was certain. A day came when, the other still pressing him and tempting him, he took the money and used it, and became a thief."

The silence in the little room was deep indeed. On Woolley a spell had fallen. He would have interrupted the man, but he could not.

"Immediately after this," the speaker continued, "those two parted. Within a week--for the man had not gone to South America--the theft was discovered. The boy's employers were merciful--God reward them! They declined to prosecute; nay, they kept the matter secret, or as secret as it could be kept, and even found him work in their foreign office. He did not forget. He served them faithfully, and in the course of years he repaid the money with interest. Then--God's ways are not our ways--strange news reached this clerk. Three distant kinsmen whom he had never seen had died within three months, and the last of them had left him a large property. The name and the honour"--for the first time the tall gentleman's voice faltered--"of a great family had fallen upon his shoulders to wear and to uphold! And he was a thief!"

"*You*," he went on--and from this point he directly addressed the man who gazed at him from beyond the table--"*you* cannot enter into his feelings, nor understand them! It were folly to tell *you* that the remembrance that he had stained the honour and disgraced the name of his family poisoned his whole life. He tried--God knows he did--to make amends by a life of integrity, and while his mother lived he led that life. But he found no comfort in it. She died, and he lived on alone in the house of his family, and it may be"--again his voice shook--"that he brooded overmuch on this matter, and came to take too morbid a view of it, to let it stand always between him and the sun." He stopped, and looked uncertainly about him.

"Yes, yes!" the doctor said. Pleasance had turned to the window, and was weeping softly. "He did, indeed!"

"Be that as it may, he met one day the manager of the firm he had robbed, and he read in the man's eyes that he remembered. And if he, why not others? He went out then, and he formed a resolution. You can guess what that was. It was a wild, mad, perhaps a wicked resolution. But such as it was--an ancestor in sterner times, writing in a book which this man possessed, had said, 'Blood washes out shame!'--such as it was he made it, and Heaven used it, and frustrated it in its own time. The lad, now a man, following blind chance, as he thought, was brought within a mile of this house--this one lonely house, of all others in England, in which you live. But it was not chance which led him, but Heaven's own guiding, to the end that his, Valentine Walton's life, might be spared, and that you might be punished."

Woolley struggled to reply. But the thought which the other's words expressed was in his mind also, and held him dumb. How had Walton been led to this house of all houses? Why had this forgotten sin risen up now? He stood awhile speechless, glaring at Walton; aware, bitterly aware, of what the listeners were thinking, and yet unable to say a word in his defence. Then with an effort he became himself again.

"That is your version, is it?" he said, with a jeering laugh which failed to hide the effect the story had produced upon him. "You say you are a thief? It is not worth my while to contradict you. And now, if you please, we will descend from play-acting to business. You have been very kind in arranging this little scene, Dr. Partridge, and I am greatly obliged to you. I need only say that I shall take care to repay you to the last penny."

"First," the doctor said mildly, yet with dignity, "I should repay you what I owe you--if you

really want your money now, that is."

"Want it? Of course I do!" was the fierce rejoinder. The man's nature was recovering from the shock, and in the rebound passion was getting the upper hand.

"Very well," said the doctor firmly. "Then here it is." He pushed aside a paper, and disclosed a small packet of notes and a pile of gold and silver. "You will find the amount on that piece of paper, and it includes your salary for the next quarter in lieu of notice. When you have seen that it is correct I shall be glad to have your receipt, and we will close our connection."

The trapped man had one wish--to see them dead before him. But wishes go for little, and in his rage and chagrin he clung to a shred of pride. He would not own that he had been outgeneralled. He sat down and wrote the quittance. The first pen--it was a quill--would not write. He jabbed it violently on the table, and flung it with an oath into the fireplace. But the next served him.

"You have lent this money, I suppose," he said, looking at Walton as he rose. "More fool you! You will never be repaid."

He did not turn to Pleasance or look at her. He had come into the room hoping to win her in spite of all. He went out--a stranger. Not even their eyes had met. He had lost her, and revenge, and everything, save his money.

CHAPTER IV

Within doors a bedroom, littered and dismantled, showed a pile of luggage stacked in the middle of the floor. Without was a grey cloudy sky, such as we sometimes have in June, and a nipping east wind that blew roughly; a wind almost visible to the man moodily gnawing his nails at the window. He found no comfort within or without, in the past or the future. Behind him he had a retrospect of humiliation, of vain hopes and ambitions; before him no prospect but that dreary one of starting afresh in a new place among new people, unfriended, save by three thousand and odd pounds. It had come to this.

"D---n him!" he whispered between his clenched teeth. It was no formal expletive. He meant it--every letter of it.

By and by he turned from the window, and his eyes fell on a small article lying on the dressing-table. It was almost the only thing, save a stout walking-stick, which he had not packed up. It was a pistol. He had hit on it the day before in a dark nook behind the medicine bottles in the surgery; and finding it in good condition, with one barrel of the two undischarged, he had had no difficulty in conjecturing whose it was and how it came there. No doubt it was Walton's, the pistol with which he had shot himself--as indeed it was. Nickson had brought it to the doctor, and the latter with a natural distaste had thrust it into the first out-of-the-way place which lay ready to his hand.

This piece of evidence Woolley presently put in his pocket, and taking his stick left the room; leaving it, as he knew, for good, and not without a last bitter glance round the place where he had slept, and schemed, and hoped for two years. He went down the stairs, and through the house to the back door, seeing no one except Daniel, who was rubbing down the mare in the yard. To the surgeon's fancy the house, as he passed through it, seemed abnormally still; as if in the hush and silence which fall upon a house in the afternoon it awaited something--as if it knew that something strange was in the air, and all the stones were saying "Hist!"

Shaking off this feeling, the surgeon took a back path, which, passing through the shrubbery, came into the main drive near the white gate. From that point the track mounted between the bracken-covered flanks of the ravine until it emerged on the crown of the moor. In one place both path and glen turned at a sharp angle, and Woolley at this corner happened to lift his eyes. He stopped short with an exclamation. Before him, strolling slowly along in the same direction as himself, with his hands behind him and his eyes on the path, was the tall gentleman--Walton.

"Ah!" Woolley whispered to himself, hating the other the more for falling in his way now, "the devil take you for a mooning lunatic! I would like to give you in charge here, and this minute, and swear you were going to try it again!"

He laughed grimly at this, his first thought; a natural thought enough, since his intention at starting had been to swear an information against Walton, and get him locked up if possible; at any rate, to cause him as much vexation as he could. But that first natural thought led to another which drove the blood from his cheek and kindled an unholy fire in his eyes. That revenge was a poor one. But was there not another within his grasp? What if Walton were found lying on the path shot and dead, his own pistol beside him?

Ah! what then? What would people say? Would they not say--would not Nickson be ready to swear that the madman had done it again, and with more thoroughness? Woolley's hand closed convulsively on the butt of the weapon in his pocket. One barrel of it was still loaded. No one had seen him take it. No one knew that he knew of its existence. Would not even the doctor conclude that Walton had repossessed himself of it, and in some temporary return of his moody aberration had used it--this time with fatal effect?

The perspiration stood on the tempted man's brow. Though the wind was blowing keenly, and a wrack of white clouds was sweeping over his head, the glen seemed to grow close and confined, roofed in by a leaden sky. "It is a devil's thought!" he muttered, his eyes on the figure before him, "a devil's thought!" At that moment there could be no question with him of the existence of a devil. He felt him at his elbow tempting him, promising revenge and impunity.

"No! Not that!" He rather gasped the words than said them, yet gasped them aloud, the more thoroughly to convince himself that he did reject the idea. "Not that!"

No, not that. Yet he began to walk on at a pace which must bring him up with the other. His brain too dwelt on the ease and safety with which he might carry out the scheme. He remembered that before he turned the corner he had looked back and seen no one. Therefore for some minutes he was secure from interruption from behind. All round the ravine he could command the sky-line. There was one no visible. He and Walton were alone. And he was overtaking Walton.

The latter heard him walking behind him, and turned and stopped. He showed no surprise on discovering who his follower was, but spoke as if he had eyes in his back, and had watched him drawing gradually nearer. "I have been waiting for you, Woolley," he said. "I thought I should meet you."

"Did you?" Woolley said softly, eying him in a curious fashion, and himself very pale.

"Yes, I wanted to say this to you." There the tall gentleman paused and looked down, prodding the turf with his stick. He seemed to find a difficulty in going on. "It is this," he continued at last. "I have done you a mischief here, acting honestly, and doing only what seemed to me to be right. But I have harmed you--that is the fact--and I am anxious to know that you will not leave here a hardened man--a worse man than I found you."

"Thank you," the other said. His lips were dry, and he moistened them with his tongue. But he did not take his eyes from Walton's face.

"If you will let me know," the tall gentleman continued haltingly--he was still intent upon the ground--"what your plans are, I will see if I can further them. Until lately I thought you had spoiled my life, and I bore you malice for it. I would have done you what harm I could. Now----"

"Yes?"

"I think--I trust it may not be so. I have dwelt too much on that old affair. I hope to begin a new life now."

"With her?"

The tall gentleman looked up, as if the other had struck him. There was menace in the tone, and menace more dreadful in the face and gleaming eyes which he found confronting him. "You fool!" Woolley hissed--passion in the calmness of his voice--and he took a step nearer to the other. "You fool, to come and tell me this!--to come and taunt me! *You* help me! *You* pardon me! *You* will not leave me worse than you found me! Ay, but you will!" His voice rose. A wicked smile nickered on his lips. His eyes still dwelling on the other's face, he drew the pistol slowly from his pocket and levelled it at Walton's head. "You will, for I--am going--to kill you."

Walton heard the click of the hammer as it rose. For a second, during which his tongue refused obedience, he tasted of the bitterness of the cup which he had held to his own lips. It flashed across him, as his heart gave a bound and stood still, that this was his punishment. Then he recovered himself.

"Not before that child!" he said coolly. He forced his eyes to quit the dark muzzle which threatened him and to glance aside.

There was no one there, but Woolley turned to look, and in an instant Walton sprang upon him, and, knocking up the pistol with his stick, closed with him. The one loaded barrel exploded in the air, and the men went writhing and stumbling to and fro, Woolley striking savagely at the other's face with the muzzle of the pistol. The taller man contented himself with parrying these attacks, while he clutched Woolley's left wrist with his disengaged hand.

Presently they were down in a heap together. Then they rose and drew apart, breathless and dishevelled, but there remained unnoticed on the ground between them a tiny white object, a small packet about the size of a letter. It was very light, for in the twinkling of an eye the wind turned it over and over, and carried it three or four paces away.

"You villain!" Walton gasped, trembling with excitement. His nerves were shaken as much by the narrowness of his escape as by the struggle. "You would have murdered me!"

"I would!" the other said, with vengeful emphasis, and the two men stood a moment glaring at one another. Meanwhile the wind, toying with the white packet, rolled it slowly along the path; then, getting under it at a place where a break in the ridge produced an eddy, it began to hoist it merrily up the slope. At this point Walton's eye, straying for a second from his opponent, alighted on it.

Just then Woolley spoke. "You have had a lucky escape!" he said, with a reckless gesture, half menace, half farewell. "Good-bye! Don't come across my path again, or you will fail to come off so easily. And don't--don't, you fool!" he added, returning in a fresh fit of anger when he had already turned his back, "pat a man on the head when you have got him down, or he will----"

He stopped short, his hand at his breast pocket. For a moment, while his face underwent a marvellous change, he searched frantically in the pocket, in other pockets. "My notes!" he panted. "They were here! Where are they?" Then a dreadful expression of rage and suspicion distorted his features, and he advanced on Walton, his hands outstretched. "What have you done with them?" he cried, scarcely able to articulate. "Where are they?"

"There!" the other answered sternly. He pointed to a little space of clear turf halfway up the slope. On this the white packet could be seen fluttering gently over and over. "There! But if you are not pretty quick, you villain, you will pay a heavy price for this business!"

With an oath Woolley turned and started up the hill, the tall man watching his exertions with grim satisfaction. The pursuer speedily overtook the notes, but to gain possession of them was a different matter. Three times he stooped to clutch them, and three times a mischievous gust swept them away. Then he tripped and fell, and his hat tumbled off, and his oaths flew freely on the breeze.

Altogether it was not a dignified retreat, but it was a very characteristic one. The last time Walton got a glimpse of him, he was on the crown of the hill. He was still running, bent double with his face to the ground, and his hand outstretched. Walton never saw him again.

The latter, getting back to the house unnoticed, said nothing for the time of what had happened. But at night before he went to bed he told the doctor. "He ought to go to prison!" the latter said sternly. He was shocked beyond measure.

"So ought I," said Walton, "if it is to come to prisons."

"Pish!"

A little word, but it cheered the tall gentleman, who, notwithstanding his escape, stood in need of cheering. He had not seen Pleasance since she had escaped from the room after hearing his explanation. She might have taken his story in many different ways, and he was anxious to know in which way she had taken it. But all day she had not shown herself. Even at dinner the doctor apologised for her absence. "She is not very well," he said. "She was a little upset this morning." And of course the tall gentleman accepted the excuse with a heavy heart, and presaged the worst.

But dressing next morning he caught sight of Pleasance on the lawn. She was walking with her father--talking to him earnestly, as Walton could see. Apparently she was urging him to some course of action, and the doctor, with his hands under his coattails, was assenting with a poor grace.

When Walton descended, however, they were already seated at breakfast, and nothing was said during the meal either of this prelude or of what was in their minds. But presently, when the doctor rose, he had something to say. It was something which it went against the grain to say; for he walked to the door--they were breakfasting in the hall, and it stood open--and looked out as if he had more mind to fly than speak. But he returned suddenly, and sat down with a bump.

"Mr. Walton," he said, his florid face more florid than usual, "I think there is something I ought to tell you. I do not think that I can repay you the money you have advanced. And the place is not worth it. What am I to do?"

"Do?" the other said, looking up. "Take another cup of tea, as I am doing, and think no more about it."

"That is impossible," Pleasance cried impulsively. She turned red the next instant, under the tall gentleman's eyes. She had not meant to interfere.

"Indeed!" he said, rising from his chair. "Then please listen to me. There came to a certain house a man who had been a thief."

"No!" she said firmly.

"A man hopeless and despairing."

"No."

"Alas! yes," he answered, shaking his head soberly. "These are facts."

"No, no, no!" she cried. There were tears in her eyes. "I do not want to hear. I care nothing for facts!"

"You will not hear me?"

"No!"

Something in her face, her voice, the pose of her figure told him the truth. "If you will not listen to me," he said, leaning with both hands on the table and speaking in a voice scarcely audible to the doctor, "I will not say what I was going to propose. If I must be repaid, I must. But you must repay me, Pleasance. Will you?"

The doctor did not wait to hear the answer. He found the open door very convenient. He got away and to horse with a lighter heart than he had carried under his waistcoat for months. He felt no great doubt about the answer; and indeed all that June morning, which was by good luck as fine as the preceding one had been gloomy, while he rode from house to house with an unprofessional smile on his lips and in his eyes, the two left at home walked up and down the lawn in the sunshine, planning the life which lay before them, and of which every day was to be as cloudless as this day. A hundred times they passed and repassed the old sundial, but it was nothing to them. Lovers count only the hours when the sun does *not* shine.

THE COLONEL'S BOY

THE COLONEL'S BOY

A stranger, coming upon the Colonel as he sat in the morning-room of the club and read his newspaper with an angelic smile, would have sought for another copy of the paper and searched its columns with pleasant anticipations. But I knew better. I knew that the Colonel, though he had put on his glasses and was pretending to cull the news, was only doing what I believe he did after lunch and after dinner, and after he got into bed, and at every one of those periods when the old campaigner, with a care for his digestion and his conscience, selects some soothing matter for meditation. He was thinking of his boy; and I went up to him and smacked him on the shoulder. "Well, Colonel," I said, "how is Jim?"

"Hallo! Why, it's Jolly Joe Bratton!" he replied, dropping his glasses, and gripping my hand tightly--for we did not ride and tie at Inkerman for nothing. "The very man I wanted to see."

"And Jim, Colonel? How is the boy?" I asked.

"Oh, just as fit as a--a middy on shore!" he answered, speaking cheerfully, yet, it seemed to me, with an effort; so that I wondered whether anything was wrong with the boy--a little bill or some small indiscretion, such as might be pardoned in as fine a lad as ever stepped, with a six-months'-old commission, a new uniform, and a station fifty minutes from London. "But come," the Colonel continued before I could make my comment, "you have lunched, Joe? Will you take a turn?"

"To be sure," I said; "on one condition--that you let Kitty give you a cup of tea afterwards."

"That is a bargain!" he answered. And we went into the hall. Every one knows the "Junior United" hall. I had taken down my hat, and was stepping back from the rack, when some one coming downstairs two at a time--that is the worst of having any one under field rank in a club--hit me sharply with his elbow. Perhaps my coat fits a bit tightly round the waist nowadays, and

perhaps not; any way, I particularly object to being poked in the back--it may be a fad, or it may not--and I turned round and cried "Confound----"

I did not say any more, for I saw who had done it. My gentleman stammered a confused apology, and taking a letter which it seemed I had knocked out of his hand, from the Colonel, who had politely picked it up, he passed into the morning-room with a red face. "Clumsy scoundrel!" I said, but not so loudly that he could hear.

"Hallo!" the Colonel exclaimed, standing still, and looking at me.

"Well?" I said, perhaps rather testily. "What is the matter?"

"You are not on very good terms with young Farquhar, then?"

"I am not on any terms at all with him," I answered grumpily.

The Colonel whistled. "Indeed!" he said, looking down at me with a kind of wistfulness in his eyes; Dick is tall, and I am--well, I was up to standard once. "I thought--that is, Jim told me--that he was a good deal about your house, Joe. And I rather gathered that he was making up to Kitty, don't you know."

"You did, did you?" I grunted. "Well, perhaps he was, and perhaps he wasn't. Any way, she is not for him. And he would not take an answer, the young whipper-snapper!" I continued, giving my anger a little vent, and feeling all the better for it. "He came persecuting her, if you want to know. And I had to show him the door."

I think I never saw a man--certainly on the steps of the "Junior United"--look more pleased than the Colonel looked at that moment. "Gad!" he said, "Then Jim will have a chance?"

"Ho! ho!" I answered, chuckling. "The wind sets in that quarter, does it? A chance? I should think he would have a chance, Colonel!"

"And you would not object?"

"Object?" I said. "Why, it would make me the happiest man in the world, Dick. Are we not the oldest friends? And I have only Kitty and you have only Jim. Why, it is--it is just Inkerman over again!"

Really it was, and we stumped down the steps in great delight. Only I felt a little anxious about Kitty's answer, for though I had a suspicion that her affections were inclined in the right direction, I could not be sure. The young soldier might not have won her heart as he had mine: so that I was still more pleased when the Colonel informed me that he believed Jim intended to put it to the test this very afternoon.

"She is at home," I said, standing still.

"Ha! ha! ha!" he responded, taking my arm to lead me on.

But I declined to move. "I'll tell you what," I said--"it is a quarter to four; if Jim has not popped the question by now, he is not the man I think him. Let us go home, Colonel, and hear the news."

He demurred a little, but I had him in a hansom in the time it takes to blow "Lights out," and we were bowling along Piccadilly in two minutes more. Suddenly he uttered an exclamation, and, following the direction of his hand, I was in time to catch a glimpse of Jim's face--no other's--as he shot past us in a cab going eastwards. It left us in no doubt, for the lad's cheeks were flushed and his eyes shining, and as he swept by and saw us, he raised his hat with a gesture of triumph.

"Gad!" the Colonel exclaimed, "I'll bet a guinea he has kissed her! Happy dog!"

"Tra! la! la!" I answered. "I dare swear we shall not find Kitty in tears."

The words were scarcely out of my mouth when the cab swerved to one side, throwing me against my companion. I heard our driver shout, and caught sight of a bareheaded man mixed up with the near shaft. The next moment we gave a lurch and stopped, and a crowd came round us. The Colonel was the first out, but I joined him as quickly as I could. "I do not think he is much hurt, sir," I heard the policeman say. "He is drunk, I fancy. Come, old chap, pull yourself together," he continued, giving a shake to the grey-haired man whom he and a bystander were supporting. "There, hold up now. Here is your hat. You are all right."

And sure enough the man, whose red nose and shabby attire lent probability to the policeman's charge, managed when left to himself to keep his balance; but with some wavering. "Hallo!" he muttered, looking uncertainly upon the crowd round him. "Is my son here to take me home? Isaac? Where is Isaac?"

"He's one part shaken," the policeman said, viewing him with an air of experience. "And three parts drunk. He had better go to the station."

"Where do you live?" the Colonel asked.

"Greek Street, Soho, number twenty-seven, top floor"--this was answered glibly enough. "And I'll tell you what," the man added with a drunken hiccough and a reel which left him on the policeman's shoulder--"if any gentleman will take another gentleman home, I will make him rich beyond the dreams of avarice. I'll present him his weight in gold. That I will. His weight in gold!"

"I think----" the Colonel began, turning and meeting my eye.

"His weight in gold!" murmured the drunken man.

"Quite so!" I said, accepting the Colonel's unspoken suggestion. "We will see him home, policeman." And paying our cabman, I hailed a crawling four-wheeler, into which the officer bundled our man. We got in, and in a moment were jolting eastwards at a snail's pace.

"Perhaps we might have sent some one with him," the Colonel said, looking at me apologetically.

"Not at all!" I answered. I have no doubt that we both had the same feeling, that, happy ourselves, it behooved us to do a good turn to this poor wretch, whose shaking hands and tattered clothes showed that he had almost reached the bottom of the hill. I have seen more than one brother officer, once as gallant a lad as Jim, brought as low; and, perhaps, but for Providence, old Joe Bratton himself--- But there, it may have been some such thought as this, or it may have been an extra glass of sherry at lunch, made us take the man home. We did it; and the Lord only knows why fellows do things--good or bad.

Hauling out our charge at the door of twenty-seven, we guided him up the dingy stairs, the gibberish which he never ceased to repeat about the dreams of avarice and our weight in gold sounding ten times as absurd on the common stairs of this dirty tenth-rate lodging-house. The attic gained, he straightened himself, and, winking at us with drunken gravity, he laid his hand upon the latch of one of the doors. "You shall see--what you shall see!" he muttered, and throwing open the door he stumbled into the room. The Colonel raised his eyebrows in a protest against our folly, but entered after him, and I followed.

We found only one person in the garret, which was as miserable and poverty-stricken as a room could be; and he rose and faced us with an exclamation of anger. He was a young fellow, twenty years old perhaps, of middle size, sallow and dark-eyed; to my thinking half-starved. The drunken man seemed unaware of his feelings, however; for he balanced himself on the floor between us, and waved his hand towards him.

"Here you are, gentlemen!" he cried. "I'm a man of my word! Let me introduce you! My son, Isaac Gold. Did not I tell you? Present you--your weight in gold--or nearly so!"

"Father!" the lad said, eyeing him gloomily, "go and lie down."

"Great joke! Your weight in gold, gentlemen!"

"Your father was knocked down by a cab," the Colonel said quietly, "and finding that he was not able to take care of himself we brought him home."

The young man looked at us furtively, but he did not answer. Instead, he took his father by the arm and forced him gently to a mattress which lay in one corner, half hidden by a towel-rail--the latter bearing a shirt, evidently home-washed and hung out to dry. Twice the old fool started up muttering the same rubbish; but the third time he went off into a heavy sleep. There was something pitiful to my eyes in the boy's patience with him: so that when the lad turned to us at last, and, with eyes which resented our presence, bade us begone if we had satisfied our curiosity, I was not surprised that the Colonel held his ground. "I am afraid you are badly off," he said gently.

"What's that to you?" was the other's insolent reply. "Do you want to be paid for your services?"

"Steady! steady, my lad!" I put in. "You get nothing by that."

"I think I know you," the Colonel continued, regarding him steadily. "There was a charge preferred against you, or some one of your name, a few weeks ago, of personating a candidate at the examination for commissions in the army. The charge failed, I know."

The young man's colour rose as the Colonel spoke. But his manner indicated rather triumph than shame, and his dark eyes sparkled with malice as he retorted: "It failed? Yes, you are right there. You have been in the army yourself, I dare say?"

"I have," the Colonel said gravely.

"An honourable profession, is it not?" the lad continued in a tone of mockery. "How many of your young friends, do you think, pass in honestly? It is a competitive examination, too, mind you. And how many do you think employ me--me--to pass for them?"

"You should be ashamed to boast of it," the Colonel replied, "if you are not afraid."

"And what should they be? Tell me that!"

"They are mean fellows, whoever they are."

"So! so! You think so!" the young man laughed triumphantly. And then all at once the light seemed to die out of his clever face, and I saw before me only a half-starved lad, with his shabby clerk's coat buttoned up to his throat to hide the want of a shirt. The same change was visible, I think, to the Colonel's eye; for he looked at me and muttered something about the cab. Understanding that he wanted a word with the young fellow alone, I went to the window and for a moment or so pretended to gaze through its murky panes. When I turned, the two men were talking by the door; the drunken father was snoring behind his improvised screen; and on a painted deal table beside me I remarked the one and only article of luxury in the room--a small soiled album. With a grunt I threw it open. It disclosed the portraits of two lads, simpering whiskerless faces, surmounting irreproachable dog-collars and sporting pins. I turned a page and came on two more bearing a family resemblance in features, dog-collars, and pins to the others. I turned again with a pish! and a pshaw! and found a vacant place, and opposite it--a portrait of Jim!

I stared at it for a moment in unthinking wonder, and then in a twinkling it flashed across me what these portraits were, and above all, what this portrait of Jim, placed in this scoundrel's album meant. I remembered how anxious the Colonel had been as the lad's examination drew near; how bitterly he had denounced the competitive system, and vowed a dozen times a day that, what with pundits and crammers and young officers who should have been girls and gone to Girton, the service was going to the dogs. "To the dogs, do you hear me, sir!" And then I recalled his great relief when the boy came out quite high up; and the change which had at once taken place in his sentiments. "We must move with the times, sir; it is no good running your head against a brick wall! We must move with the times, begad!" and so forth. And--well, I let fall a pretty strong word, at which the Colonel turned.

"What is it, Major?" he said. But, seeing me standing motionless by the window, he turned again and spoke to the young man beside him. "Well, think about it, and let me know at that address. Now," he continued, advancing towards me, "what is it, Joe?"

"What is what?" I said. I had shut the album by this time, and was standing between him and the table on which it lay. I do not know why--perhaps it came of the kindness he had been doing--but I noticed in a way I had never noticed before what a fine figure of a man, tall and straight, my old comrade still was. And a bit of a dimness, such as I have experienced once or twice lately when I have taken a third glass of sherry at lunch, came over my sight. "Confound it!" I said.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Something in my eye!"

"Let me get it out," he said--always the kindest fellow under the sun.

"No! I'll get it out myself!" I snarled like a bear with a sore head. And, without stopping to explain I plunged out of the room and down the stairs. The Colonel, wondering no doubt what was the matter with me, followed more at his leisure, after pausing to say a last word to the young rascal at the door, whom I had not had the patience to speak to: so that I had already closed a warm dispute with the cabman, by sending him off with a flea in his ear and his fare to a sixpence, when the Colonel overtook me.

"What is up, Joe?" he asked, laying his hand on my shoulder.

"That d---d dizziness came over me again. But there, I have always said the '73 sherry at the club is not sound. I do not feel quite up to the mark," I continued with truth. "I think I will go home alone, Colonel--for to-day, if you do not mind."

"I do mind," he said stoutly. "You may want an arm." But somehow I made it clear to him that I would rather go alone, and that the walk would do me good, and he got into a hansom at last and drove off, his grey moustache and fine old nose peering at me round the side of the cab, until a corner hid him altogether.

I walked on a few paces, waving my umbrella cheerfully. Then I stopped, and, retracing my steps, I mounted the staircase of twenty-seven, and without parley opened the door. The young fellow we had left was pacing the floor, turning over in his mind, I fancied, what the Colonel had said to him. He stood still on seeing me, and then glanced round the room. "Have you forgotten anything?" he said.

"Nothing, young man," I answered. "I want to ask you a question."

"You can ask," he replied, eyeing me askance.

"That album," I said, pointing to it--"it contains, I suppose, the photographs of the people you have been employed to personate?"

"Possibly."

"But does it?"

"I did not know," he said slowly, the most provoking manner, "that I had to do with a detective. What is the charge?"

"There is no charge," I answered, keeping my temper really admirably. "But I have seen the face of a friend of mine in that book, and I'll in a word, I'll be hanged, young man, if I don't learn all about it!" I continued. "All--do you hear? So there! Now, out with it, and do not keep me waiting, you young rascal!"

He only whistled and stared; and finding I was getting a little warm, I took out my handkerchief, and wiping my forehead, sat down, the thought of the Colonel's grief taking all the strength out of me. "Look here," I said in a different tone, "I'll take back what I have just said, and I give you my word of honour I do not want to harm the--the gentleman. But I have seen his portrait, and, if I know no more, must think the worse. Now I will give you a ten-pound note if you will answer three questions."

He shook his head; but I saw that he wavered. "I did not show you the portrait," he said. "If you have seen it, that is your business. I will name no names."

"I want none," I answered. I threw open the album at the tell-tale photograph, and laid my shaky finger on the face. "Was this sent to you that you might personate the original?"

He nodded.

"From what place?"

He considered a moment. Then he said reluctantly: "From Frome, in Somerset, I believe."

"Last year?"

He nodded. Alas! Jim had been at a crammer's near Frome. Jim had passed his examination during the last year. I took out the money and gave it to the man; and a minute later I was standing in the street with a sentence common enough at mess in the old days, ringing in my ears: "Refer it to the Colonel! He is the soul of honour."

The soul of honour! Ay! And what would he think of this? The soul of honour! And his son, his son Jim, had done this! I walked through the streets, lost in amazement. I had loved the boy right well myself, and was ready to choke on my own account when I thought of him. But his father--I knew that his father was wrapped up in him. His father had been a mother to him as well, and that for years--had bought him toys as a lad, and furnished his quarters later with things of which only a mother would have thought. It would kill his father.

I wiped my forehead as I thought of this and put my latchkey into the door in Pont Street. I walked in with a heavy sigh--I do not know that I ever entered with so sad a heart--and the next moment, with a flutter of skirts, Kitty was out of the dining-room, where I do not doubt she had been watching for me, and in my arms. Before Heaven! until I saw her I had not thought of her--I had never considered her at all in connection with this matter! No, nor how I should deal with her, until I heard her say, with her face on my shoulder, and her eyes looking into mine: "Oh, father, father, I am happy! Be the first to wish me joy."

Wish her joy! I could not. I could only mutter, "Wait, girl--wait, wait!" and lead her into the dining-room, and, turning my back on her, go to the window and look out--though for all I saw I might have had my head in a soot-bag. She was alarmed of course--but to save her that I could not face her. She came after me and clung to my arm, asking me again and again what it was.

"Nothing, nothing," I said. "There--wait a minute; don't you know that I shall lose you?"

"Father," she said, trying to look into my face, "it is not that. You know you will not lose me! There is something else the matter. There is something you are hiding from me! Ah! Jim went in a cab, and----"

"Jim is all right." I answered, feeling her hand fall from my arm. "In that way at any rate."

"Then I am not afraid," she answered stoutly, "if you and Jim are all right."

"Look here, Kitty," I said, making up my mind, "sit down, I want to talk to you."

And she did sit down, and I told her all. With some girls it might not have been the best course; but Kitty is not like most of the girls I meet nowadays--of whom one half are blue stockings, with no more fitness for the duties of wives and mothers than the statuettes in a shop window, and the other half are misses in white muslin, who are always giggling pertly or sitting with their thumbs in their mouths. Kitty is a companion, a helpmeet, God bless her! She knows that Wellington did not fight at Blenheim, and she does not think that Lucknow is in the Crimea. She knows so much, though she knows no Greek and she loves dancing--her very eyes dance at the thought of it. But she would rather sit at home with the man she loves than waltz at Marlborough House. And if she has not learned a little fortification on the sly, and does not know how many men stand between Jim and his company--I am a Dutchman! Lord! when I see a man

marry a doll with a pretty face--not that Kitty has not a pretty face, and a sweet one too, no thanks to her father--I wonder whether he has considered what it will be to sit opposite my lady at, say, twenty thousand nine hundred meals on an average! That is the test, sir.

So I told Kitty all, and the way she took it showed me that I was right. "What?" she exclaimed, when I had finished the story, to which she had listened, with her face turned from me, and her arm on the mantelpiece, "is that all, father?"

"My dear," I said sadly, "you do not understand." I remembered how often I had heard--and sometimes noticed--that women's ideas of honour differ from men's.

"Understand!" she retorted, turning upon me, fiery hot. "I understand that you think Jim has done this mean, miserable, wretched thing. Father," she continued, with sudden gravity, and she laid both her hands on my shoulders, so that her brave eyes looked into my eyes, "if three people came to you and told you that I had gone into your bedroom and taken money from the cash-box in your cupboard to pay a bill of mine, and that when I had done it I had kept it from you, and told stories about it--if three, four, five people told you that they had seen me do it, would you believe them?"

"No, Kitty," I said, smiling against my will, "not though five angels told me so, my dear. I know you too well."

"And, sir, though five angels told me this, I would not believe it! Do you think I do not know him--and love him?"

And the foolish girl, who had begun to waltz round the room like a mad thing, stopped and looked at me with tears in her eyes and her lips quivering.

I could not but take some comfort from her confidence.

"True," I said. "The Colonel brought him up, and it seems hardly possible that the lad should turn out so bad. But the photograph, my girl--the photograph? What do you say to that? It was Jim, I swear. I could not be mistaken. There could not be another so like him."

"There is no one like him," she said softly.

"Very well. And then I have noticed that he has been in bad spirits lately. I'm afraid--I'm afraid a bad conscience, my dear."

"You dear old donkey!" she answered, shaking me with both her hands. "That was about me. He has told me all that. He thought Mr. Farquhar--Mr. Farquhar, indeed!"

"Oh, that was it, was it?" I said. "Well, that may account for his depression. But look you here, Kitty; was he not rather nervous about his examination?"

"A little," she answered with reluctance.

"And, nonetheless, did he not come out pretty high?"

"Seventeenth. Thirteen thousand four hundred and twenty-six marks," Kitty replied glibly.

"Just so! And if he had failed he would have suffered in your eyes?"

"Not a scrap. And, besides, he did not fail," she retorted.

"But he may have thought he would suffer," I answered, "if he failed. That would be a sharp temptation, Kitty."

She did not reply at once. She was busy rolling up a ribbon of her frock into the smallest possible compass, and unrolling it again. At last--it was clear I had made her think--

"I know he did not do it," she said, "but that is all I do know. I cannot prove to you that white is not black; but it is not, and I know it is not."

"Well, my dear, I hope you are right," I answered. And it cheered me to find that she held him worthy of confidence.

She promised readily to let me have the first word with the lad when he called next day. And as for undertaking to have nothing more to do with him if the charge proved to be true, she made nothing of that--because, as she said, it meant nothing.

"A Jim who had done that would not be my Jim at all," she explained gaily, "but quite a different Jim--a James, sir."

Certainly, a girl's faith is a wonderful thing. And hers so far affected me that I regretted I had not taken a bolder course, and, showing the photograph to the Colonel, had the whole thing threshed out on the spot. Possibly I might have saved myself a very wretched hour or two. But no; on second thoughts I could not see how the boy could be innocent. I could not help piecing the

evidence together--the damning evidence, as it seemed to me; the certain identity of Jim with the original of the photograph, the arrival of the latter from Frome, where the lad had spent the last weeks previous to his examination, the fears he had expressed before the ordeal, and his success beyond his hopes at it; these things seemed almost conclusive. I had only the boy's character, his father's training, and his sweetheart's faith, to set against them.

His sweetheart's faith, did I say? Ah, well! when I came down to breakfast next morning, whom should I find in tears--and she, as a rule, the most equable girl in the world--but Kitty.

"Hallo!" I said. "What is all this?"

At the sound of my voice she sprang to her feet. She had been kneeling by the fireplace groping with her hands inside the fender. Her cheeks were crimson, and she was crying--yes, certainly crying, although she tried by a hasty dab of the flimsy thing she calls a pocket-handkerchief to remove the traces.

"Well!" I said, for she was dumb. "What is it, my dear?"

"I have--torn up a letter," she answered, a little sob dividing the sentence into two.

"So I see," I answered dryly. "And now, I suppose, you are sorry for it."

"It was a horrid letter, father," she cried, her eyes shining like electric lamps in a shower--"about Jim."

"Indeed," I said, with a very nasty feeling inside me. "What about Jim? And why did you tear it up, my dear? One half of it, I should say, has gone into the fire."

"It was from--a woman!" she answered.

And presently she told me that the letter, which was unsigned, asserted that Jim had played with the affections of the writer, and warned Kitty to be on her guard against him, and not to be a party to the wrong he was doing an innocent girl.

"Pooh!" I said, with a contemptuous laugh. "That cock will not fight, my dear. It has been tried over and over again. You do not mean to say that that has made you cry? Why, if so, you are--you are just as big a fool as any girl I know."

In truth, I was surprised to find Kitty's faith in her lover, which had been proof against a charge made on the best of evidence, fail before an unsigned accusation--because, forsooth, it mentioned a woman. "What postmark did it bear?" I asked.

"Frome," she murmured.

That was certainly odd--very odd. Pretty devilments I knew those fellows at crammers' were up to sometimes. Could it be that we were mistaken in Master Jim, as I have once or twice known a lad's family to be mistaken in him? Was he all the time an out-and-out bad one? Or had he some enemy at Frome plotting against his happiness? This seemed most unlikely and absurd besides; since we had lit upon Isaac Gold by a chance, and on the portrait by a chance within a chance, and no enemy, however acute--not Machiavelli himself--could have foreseen the *rencontre* or arranged the circumstances which had led me to the photograph. Therefore, though the anonymous letter might be the work of an ill-wisher, I did not see how the other could be. However, I gathered up the few fragments of writing which had escaped the fire, and put them aside, to serve, if need be, for evidence.

On one thing I was making up my mind, however--I must put an end to the matter between Jim and my girl unless he could clear himself of these suspicions--when what should I hear but his voice, and his father's, in the hall. There is something in the sound of a familiar voice which so recalls our knowledge of the speaker that I know nothing which pierces the cloud of doubt more thoroughly. At any rate, when the two came in, I jumped up and gave a hand to each. Behind Jim's back one might suspect him: confronted by his open eyes, and his brown, honest, boyish face--well, by the Lord! I could as soon suspect my old comrade, God bless him!

"Jim," I found myself saying, his hand in mine, and every one of my prudent resolutions gone to the wind, "Jim, my boy, I am a happy man. Take her and be good to her, and God bless you! No, Colonel, no," I continued in desperate haste, "I do not ask a question. Let the lad take her. If your son cannot be trusted no one can. There, I am glad that is settled."

I verily believe I was almost blubbing; and though I said only what I should have said if this confounded matter had never arisen, I let drop, it seems, enough to set the Colonel questioning, for in five minutes I had told him the whole story of the photograph.

It was pleasant to observe his demeanour. Though he never for a moment lost his faith in Jim--mind, he had not seen the portrait--and his eyes continued to shoot little glances of confidence at his son, he drew back his chair and squared his shoulders, and assumed a judicial air.

"Now, sir," he said, with his hands on his knees, "this must be explained. We are much obliged to the Major for bringing it to our notice. You will be good enough to explain, my lad."

Jim did explain; or, rather, he answered frankly that he had never heard Isaac Gold's name before and certainly had never given him a photograph, and I believed him. Then he jumped up with his usual impetuosity and proposed to go at once to Gold's house and see the photograph, and I was delighted. In half a minute we were all three in a cab, and in twenty more had the good luck to discover old Gold alone at home. A five-shilling piece slipped into the drunkard's hand sufficed to obtain for us the view we desired.

"I suppose it *is* a likeness of me," Jim murmured, looking hard at the photograph.

"Certainly it is!" the Colonel replied rather curtly. Up to this moment he had thought me deceived by a chance resemblance.

"Then let us see who took it, and where it was printed," Jim answered in a matter-of-fact tone. "I do not believe I have ever been taken in this dress. See, it bears no photographer's name; so an amateur has taken it. Let me think."

While he thought, old Gold potted about the open door of the room on the watch for Isaac's return. "Yes," Jim said at last, "I think I have it. I was photographed in this dress as one of a group before a meet of the hounds at Old Bulcher's.

"At Frome?"

"Yes. And this has been enlarged, I have no doubt, from the head in the group. But why, or who has done it, or how it comes to be here, I give you my honour, sir, I know no more than you do."

At this moment young Gold's footsteps were heard ascending. He seemed to have some suspicion that his secrets were in danger, for he came up the stairs three at a time, and bounced into the room--looking for a moment, as his eyes alighted on us and the open album, as if he would knock us down. When his glance fell on Jim, however, a change came over him. It was singular to see the two looking at one another, Jim eyeing him with the supercilious stare of the boy-officer, and young Gold returning the look with a covert recognition in his defiant eyes. "Well," said Jim, "do you know me?"

"I have never seen you before, to my knowledge."

"Perhaps you will explain how you came by this photograph?"

"That is my business!" said Gold sternly.

"Oh, is it?" retorted Jim with fire. "We will see about that." I think it annoyed him, as it certainly did me, to detect in the other's glance and tone a subtle meaning--a covert understanding. "If you do not explain, I'll--I will call in the police, my man."

But here the Colonel interfered. He told me afterwards that he felt some sympathy for Gold. He silenced Jim, and, telling the other that he should hear from him again, he led us downstairs. I noticed that, as we passed into the street, he slipped his arm through his son's, and I have no doubt he managed to convey to the young fellow as plainly as by words that his faith was unshaken.

Very naturally, however, Jim was not satisfied with this or with the present position of things; which was certainly puzzling. "But, look here!" he said, standing still in the middle of the pavement, "what is to be done, sir? That fellow believes or pretends to believe, though he will not say a word, that I have used him to do my dirty work. And I have not! Then why the deuce does he parade my photograph? Do you think--by George! I believe I have got it--do you think it is a case of blackmail?"

"No," the Colonel said with decision, "it cannot be. We came upon the photograph by the purest accident. It was not sent to us, or used against you. No! But see here!" The Colonel in his turn stopped in the middle of the pavement and struck the latter with his stick. He had got his idea, and his eyes sparkled.

"Well?" we said.

"Suppose some other fellow employed Gold to pass the examination, and, having this very fear--of being blackmailed--in his mind, got a photograph of a friend tolerably like himself? And sent it up instead of his own? What then?"

"What then? Precisely!" I said. And we all nodded at one another like so many Chinese mandarins, and the Colonel looked proudly at his son, as though saying, "Now what do you think of your father, my boy?"

"I think you have hit it, sir!" Jim said, answering the unspoken question. "There were nearly thirty fellows at Bulcher's."

"And among them there was one low rascal--a low rascal, sir," replied the Colonel, his eyes sparkling, "who did not even trust his companion in iniquity, but arranged to have an answer ready if his accomplice turned upon him! 'I suborned him?' he resolved to say--'I deny it. He has

my name pat enough, but has he any proof? A photograph? But that is not my photograph!' Do you see, Major?"

"I see," I said. "And now come home with me, both of you, and we will talk it over with Kitty."

By this time, however, it was two o'clock. Jim, who had only come up for an hour or two, found he must resign the hope of seeing Kitty to-day, and take a cab to Charing Cross if he would catch his train. The Colonel had a luncheon engagement--for which he was already late. And so we separated then and there in something of a hurry. When I got back the first question Kitty--who, you may be sure, met me in the hall--asked was: "Where is Jim, father?" The second: "And what does he say about the letter?"

"God bless my soul!" I exclaimed, "I never gave a thought to the letter! I am afraid I never mentioned it, my dear. I was thinking about the photograph. I fancy we have got to something like the bottom of that."

"Pooh!" she said. And, she pretended to take very little interest in the explanation I gave her, though--the sly little cat!--when I dropped the subject, she was quite ready to take it up again, rather than not talk about Jim at all.

I am sometimes late for breakfast; she rarely or never. But next morning on entering the dining-room I found the table laid for one only, and Matthews, the maid, waiting modestly before the coffeepot. "Where is Miss Bratton?" I said grumpily, taking the *Times* from the fender. "Miss Kitty had a headache," was the answer, "and is taking a cup of tea in bed, sir." "Ho, ho!" thought I, "this comes of being in love! Confound the lads! Sausage? No, I won't have sausage. Who the deuce ordered sausages at this time of year? Bacon? Seems half done. This coffee is thick. There, that will do! That will do. Don't rattle those cups and saucers all day! Confound the girl!--do you hear? You can go!" The way women bully a man when they get him alone is a caution.

When I returned from my morning stroll, I heard voices in the dining-room, and looked in to see how Kitty was. Well, she was--in brief, there was a scene going on. Miss Kitty, her cheeks crimson and her eyes bright, was standing with her back to the window; and facing her, half angry and half embarrassed, was Jim. "Hoity, toity, you two!" I said, closing the door behind me. "These are early times for this kind of thing. What is up?"

"I'll be hanged if I know, sir!" Jim answered, looking rather foolish.

"What have you got there, my dear?" I continued, for Kitty had one hand behind her, and I was not slow to connect this hand with the expression on her pretty face.

"He knows," she said, trembling with anger--the little vixen.

"I know nothing!" Jim returned sheepishly. "I came in, and when I--Kitty flew out and attacked me, don't you see, sir?"

"Very well, my dear," I answered, "if you do not feel able to explain, Jim had better go. Only, if he goes now, of course I cannot say when he will come back."

"I will come back, Kitty, whenever you want me," said the young fool.

"Shut your mouth, sir," I shouted. "Now, Kitty, attend to me. What is it?"

"Ask him--to whom he gave his photograph at Frome!" she said, in a breathless sort of way.

"His photograph? Why, that is just what we were talking about yesterday," I replied sharply. "I thought it did not interest you, my girl, when I told you all about it last night."

"That photograph!--with withering contempt--"I do not mean *that!* Do you think I suspect him of *that?*" She stepped forward as though to go to him, and her face altered wonderfully. Then she recollected herself and fell back. "No," she said coldly, "to what woman, sir, did you give your photograph at Frome?"

"To no woman at all," he said emphatically.

"Then look at this!" she retorted. She held out as she spoke a photograph, which I identified at once as the portrait we had seen at Gold's, or a copy of that one. I snatched it from Jim. "Where did you get this, my girl?" I asked briskly.

"It came this morning--with another letter from that woman," she murmured.

I think she began to feel ashamed of herself; and in two minutes I got the letter from her. It was written by the same hand as the letter of the day before, and was, like it, unsigned. It merely said that the writer, in proof of her good faith, enclosed a photograph which Master Jim--that gay Lothario!--had given her. We were still looking at the letter, when the Colonel came in. I explained the matter to him, and I will answer for it, before he understood it, Kitty was more ashamed of herself than ever.

"This photograph and the one at Gold's are facsimiles," said he thoughtfully. "That is certain."

And both come from Frome. Doesn't it seem probable that the gentleman who obtained Jim's photograph for his own purpose last year--to send to Gold--printed off more than one copy? And having this one by him, and wishing to cause mischief between Kitty and Jim, thought of this and used it? The sender is, therefore, some one who passed his examination last year and is still at Frome."

Jim shook his head.

"If he passed, sir, he would not be at Bulcher's now," he said.

"On second thoughts he may not be," the Colonel replied. "He may have sent the two letters to Frome to a confidential friend with orders to post them. Wait--wait a minute," my old chum added, looking at me with a new light in his eyes. "Where have I seen a letter addressed to Frome--within the last day or two? Eh? Wait a bit."

We did wait; and presently the Colonel announced his discovery in a grim voice.

"I have it," he said. "It is that scoundrel, Farquhar!"

"Farquhar!" I said. "What do you mean, Colonel?"

"Just that, Major, just that. Do you remember him knocking against you in the hall at the club the day before yesterday? He dropped a letter, and I picked it up. It was addressed--I could not help seeing so much--to Frome."

"Well," Jim said slowly, "he was at Bulcher's, and he passed last year."

"And the letter," continued the Colonel in his turn, "was in a large envelope--an envelope large enough to contain a cabinet photograph."

There was silence in the room. Kitty's face was hidden. Jim moved at last--towards her? No, towards the door. He had his hand on it when the Colonel observed him.

"Stop!" he said sharply. "Come back, my boy. None of that. The Major and I will deal with him."

Jim lingered with his hand on the door.

"Well, sir," he said, "I will only---"

"Come back!" roared the Colonel, but with a smile in his eyes as he looked at his boy. "You will stop here, you lucky dog, you. And I hope this will be a lesson to you not to give your photograph to young ladies at Frome!"

If Kitty squirmed a little at that, she deserved it. I said before that a woman's faith is a wonderful thing. But when there is another woman in the case--umph!

* * * * *

"Mr. Farquhar, sir? Yes, sir, he is in the house," the club porter said, turning in his glass case to consult his book. "I believe he went upstairs to the drawing-room, sir."

"Thank you," the Colonel replied, and he glanced at me and I at him; and then, fixing our hats on tightly, and grasping our sticks, we went upstairs.

We were in luck, as it turned out, for not only was Farquhar in the drawing-room, but there was no one else in the long, stiff, splendid room. He looked up from his writing, and saw us piloting our way towards him between the chairs and tables. And I think he turned green. At any rate, my last doubt left me at the sight of his face.

"A word with you, Mr. Farquhar," the Colonel said grimly, keeping a tight hand on my arm, for I confess I had been in favour of more drastic measures. "It is about a photograph."

"A photograph?" the startled wretch exclaimed, his mouth ajar.

"Well, perhaps I should have said two photographs," the Colonel replied gravely; "photographs of my son which are lying, one in the possession of Major Bratton, and one in the album of a friend of yours, Mr. Isaac Gold."

He tried to frame the words, "A friend of mine!" and to feign astonishment and stare us down. But it was a pitiable attempt, and his eyes sank. He could only mutter, "I do not know--any Gold. There is some mistake."

"Perhaps so," the Colonel answered smoothly. "I hope there is some mistake. But let me tell you this, Mr. Farquhar. Unless you apply within a week for leave to resign your commission, I shall lay certain facts concerning these photographs before the Commander-in-Chief and before the mess of your regiment. You understand me, I am sure. Very well. That is all I wish to say to you."

Apparently he had nothing to say to us in return. And we were both glad to turn our backs on that baffled, spiteful face, in which the horror of discovery strove with the fear of ruin. It is ill striking a man when he is down, and I was glad to get out of the house and breathe a purer air.

We had no need to go to the Commander-in-Chief. Lieutenant Farquhar applied for leave to resign within the week, and Her Majesty obtained, I think, a better bargain in Private Isaac Gold, who, following the Colonel's advice, enlisted about this time. He is already a corporal, and, aided by an education rare in the ranks, bids fair to earn a sergeant's stripes at an early date. He has turned over a new leaf--the Colonel always maintained that he had a keen sense of honour; and I feel little doubt that if he ever has the luck to rise to Farquhar's grade, and bear the Queen's commission, he will be a credit to it and to his friend and brother officer--the Colonel's boy. Not, mind you, that I think he will ever be as good a fellow as Jim! No, no.

A GOOD MAN'S DILEMMA

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The clock of St. Martin's was striking ten as Archdeacon Yale, of Studbury, in Gloucestershire, who had taken breakfast at the Athenæum, walked down the club steps, eastward bound. He was a man of fresh complexion and good presence; of tolerable means and some reputation as the author of a curiously morbid book, "Timon Defended." As he walked the pavement briskly, an unopened letter which peeped from his pocket seemed--and rightly--to indicate a man free from anxieties: a man without a care.

Before he left the dignified stillness of Pall Mall, however, he found leisure to read the note. "I enclose," wrote his wife, "a letter which came for you this morning. I trust, Cyprian, that you are not fretting about the visitation question and that you get your meals fairly well cooked." The Archdeacon paused at this point and smiled as at some pleasant reminiscence. "Give my love to dear Jack. Oh--h'm--I do not recognise your correspondent's handwriting."

"Nor do I!" the Archdeacon said aloud; and he opened the enclosure with a curiosity that had in it no fear of trouble. After glancing at the signature, however, he turned into a side street and read the letter to the end. He sighed. "Oh dear, dear!" he muttered. "What can I do? I must go! There is no room for refusal. And yet--oh dear!--after all these years. Number 14, Sidmouth Street, Gray's Inn Road? What a place!"

It was a shabby third-rate lodging-house place, as perhaps he knew. But he called a cab and had himself driven thither forthwith. At the corner of the street he dismissed the cab and looked about him furtively. For a man who had left his club so free from care, and whose wife at Studbury and son at Lincoln's Inn were well, he wore an anxious face. It could not be--for he was an Archdeacon--that he was about to do anything of which he was ashamed. Bishops, and others of that class, may be open to temptations, or have pages of their lives folded down, which they would not wish turned. But an Archdeacon?

Yet when he was distant a house or so from No. 14 he started guiltily at a very ordinary occurrence; at nothing more than the arrival of a hansom cab at the door. True, a young woman descended from it, and let herself into the house with a latchkey. But young women and latchkeys are common in London, as common as--as dirt. It could hardly be that which darkened his face as he rang the bell.

In the hall, where a dun was sitting, there was little to remove the prejudice he may have conceived; little, too, in the dingy staircase, cumbered with plates and stale food; or in the first-floor rooms, from which some one peeped and another whispered, and both giggled; or in that second-floor room, at once smart and shabby, and remarkable for many photographs of one young girl, where he was bidden to wait--little or nothing. But when he had pished and pshawed at the tenth photograph, he was called into an inner room, where a strange silence prevailed.

Involuntarily he stepped softly. "It was kind of you to come," some one said--some one who was lying in a great chair brought very near to the open window that the speaker might breathe more easily--"very kind. And you have come so quickly."

"I have been in London some days," he answered gently, the fastidious expression gone from his face. "Your daughter's letter followed me from the country and reached me an hour ago. It has been no trouble to me to come. I am only pained at finding you so ill."

"Ah!" she answered. Doubtless her thoughts were busy; while his flew back nearly thirty years to a summer evening, when he had walked with her under the trees in Chelsea Gardens and heard her pour into his ear--she was a young actress in the first blush of success--her hopes and ambitions. There was nothing in the memory of which he had need to be ashamed. In those days he had been reading for orders, and, having lodgings in a respectable street, had come by chance to know two of his neighbours--her mother and herself. The two were living a quiet domestic life, which surprised and impressed him. The girl's talent and the contrast between her notoriety and her simple ways had had a charm for him. For some months the neophyte and the actress were as brother and sister. But there the feeling had stopped; and when his appointment to a country curacy had closed this pretty episode in his life, the exchange of a few letters had but added grace to its ending.

Now old feelings rose to swell his pity as he traced the girl's features in the woman's face. "You have a daughter. You have been married since we parted," he said.

"Yes. It is for her sake I have troubled you," was her answer. "She is a good girl--oh, so good! But she has no one in the world except me, and I am leaving her. Poor Grissel!"

"She is on the stage?" he inquired gravely.

"Yes; and she has succeeded young, as I did. We have not been unhappy together. You remember the life my mother and I had? I think it has been the same over again."

She smiled ever so little. He remembered something of the quiet pathos of that life. "Your husband is dead?" he asked.

"Dead! I wish he were!" she answered bitterly, the smile passing from her face. "My girl had better be alone than with her father. Ah, you do not know! When he went to America years ago--with another woman--I thanked God for it. Dead? Oh, no! There is no chance that he is dead."

Mr. Yale was shocked. "You have not got a divorce?" he said.

"No. After he left me I fell ill, and there were expenses. We were very poor until last year, when Grissel made a good engagement. That is why we are here. Now that her name is known he will come back and find her out. She plays as Kittie Latouche, but the profession know who she is, and--and what can I do? Oh, Mr. Yale! tell me what I can do for her."

Her anxiety unnerved him. Her terror of the future, not her own, but her child's, wrung his heart. He had a presentiment whither she was leading him; and he tried to escape, he tried to murmur some commonplace of encouragement.

"You may yet recover," he urged. "At any rate, there will be time to talk of this again."

"There will not be time," she entreated him. "I have scarcely three days to live, and then my child will be alone. Oh, Mr. Yale! help me. She is young and handsome, with no one to guide her. If her father return, he will be her worst enemy. There is some one, too--some gentleman--who has fallen in with her, and been here. He may be a friend--what you were to me--or not! Don't you understand me?" she cried piteously. "How can I leave her unless you--there is no one else whom I can ask--will protect her?"

He started and looked round for relief, but found none. "I? It is impossible!" he cried. "Oh dear, dear! I am afraid that it is impossible, Mrs. Kent."

"Not impossible! I do not ask you to give her a home or money! Only care. If you will be her guardian--her friend--"

She was a woman dying in sore straits. He was a merciful man. In the end he promised to do what she wished. Then he hastened to escape her gratitude, unconscious, as he passed down the stairs, of the whispering and giggling, the slatternliness and dirt, which had been so dreadful to him on his entrance.

He walked along Oxford Street in a reverie, "Poor thing!" falling from him at intervals, until he reached the corner of Tottenham Court Road, and his eye rested upon a hoarding--at the first idly, then with a purpose, finally with a sidelong glance. The advertisement which had caught his attention was a coarse engraving of half a dozen heads, arranged in a circle, with one in the centre. Under this last, which was larger and more staring, and less to be evaded than the others, appeared the words, "Miss Kittie Latouche." He went on with a shiver, crossing here and there to avoid the hoardings, but only to fall in with a string of sandwich-men bearing the same device. He plunged into the haven of Soho as if he were a political conspirator.

The portrait and the name of his ward! In a few days he would be left in charge of an actress whose name was known to all London--guardian, *in loco parentis*, what you will, of the closest and most responsible, to a giddy girl of unknown antecedents, and too well-known name! He wondered whether Archdeacon had ever been in such a position before, a position which it would be hard to acknowledge and impossible to explain. He could talk of his old friendship for her mother, the actress, and his duty to a dying woman. But would the world believe him? Would even his wife believe him? Would not she read much between the lines, though the space were white as snow? He, a man of nearly sixty, grew red and white by turns as he thought of this.

"I will tell Jack the story," was his first resolve. "I will tell it him at dinner to-night," he groaned. But would he have the courage? He had much respect for his son's practical nature. He had heard him called "hard as nails." And when he found himself opposite to him, and eyed the close-shaven young lawyer, who looked a decade older than his years, he resorted to a subterfuge.

"Jack," he said, "I want your opinion for a friend of mine."

"It is at your service, sir," his son said, his hand upon the apricots. "What is the subject? Law?"

"Not precisely," the Archdeacon replied, clearing his throat. "It is rather a question of knowledge of the world. You know, my boy," he went on, "that I have a very high opinion of your discretion."

"You are very good," said Jack. And he did that which was unusual with him. He blushed; but the other did not observe it.

"My friend, who, I may say, is a clergyman in my archdeaconry," the elder gentleman resumed, "has been appointed guardian--it is a ridiculous thing for a man in his position--to a--a young actress. She is quite a girl, I understand, but of some notoriety."

"Indeed," said Jack drily. "May I ask how that came about? Wards of that kind do not fall from heaven--as a rule."

The Archdeacon winced. "He tells me," he explained, "that her mother was an old friend of his, and when she died, some time back, she left the girl as a kind of legacy, you see."

"A legacy to him, sir?"

"To him, certainly," the elder man said in some distress. "You follow me?"

"Quite so," said Jack. "Oh, quite so! A common thing, no doubt. Did you say that your friend was a married man, sir?"

"Yes," the Archdeacon replied faintly.

"Just so! just so!" his son said, in the same tone, a tone that was so dreadful to the Archdeacon that it needed Jack's question, "And what is the point upon which he wants advice?" to induce him to go on.

"What he had better do, being a clergyman."

"He should have thought of that earlier--ahem!--I mean it depends a good deal on the young lady. There are actresses *and* actresses, you know."

"I suppose so," the Archdeacon admitted grudgingly. He was in a mood to see the darkest side of his difficulty.

"Of course there are!" Jack said, for him quite warmly. And indeed that is the worst of barristers. They will argue in season and out of season if you do not agree with them quickly. "Some are as good--as good girls as my mother when you married her, sir."

"Well, well, she may be a good girl--I do not know," the elder man allowed.

"You always had a prejudice against the stage, sir."

The Archdeacon looked up sharply, thinking this uncalled for; unless, horrible thought! his son knew something of the matter, and was chaffing him. He made an effort to get on firmer ground. "Granted she is a good girl," he said, "there are still two difficulties. Her father is a rascal, and there is a man, probably a rascal too, hanging about her, and likely to give trouble in another way."

Jack nodded and sagely pondered the position. "I think I should advise your friend to get some respectable woman to live with the girl," he suggested, "and play the duenna--first getting rid of your second rascal."

"But how will you do that? And what would you do about the father?"

"Buy him off!" said Jack curtly. "As to the lover, have an interview with him. Say to him, 'Do

you wish to marry my ward? If you do, who are you? If you do not, go about your business."

"But if he will not go," the Archdeacon said, "what can my friend do?"

"Well, indeed," replied Jack, looking rather nonplussed, "I hardly know, unless you make her a ward of court. You see," he added apologetically, "your friend's position is a little--shall I say a little anomalous?"

The Archdeacon shuddered. He dropped his napkin and picked it up again, to hide his dismay. Then he plunged into a fresh subject. When his son upon some excuse left him early, he was glad to be alone. He had now a course laid down for him, and acting upon it, he next day saw the landlady in Sidmouth Street and requested her to take charge of the young lady in the event of the mother's death and to guard her from intrusion until other arrangements could be made. "You will look to me for all expenses," the Archdeacon added, seizing with eagerness the only ground on which he felt himself at home. To which the landlady gladly said she would, and accepted Mr. Yale's address at the Athenæum Club as a personal favour to herself.

So the Archdeacon, free for the moment, went down to Studbury, and as he walked about his shrubberies with the scent of his wife's old-fashioned flowers in the air, or sat drinking his glass of Leoville '74 after dinner while Vinnells the butler, anxious to get to his supper, rattled the spoons on the sideboard, he tried to believe it a dream. What, he wondered, would Vinnells say if he knew that master had a ward, and that ward a play-actress? Or, as Studbury would prefer to style her, a painted Jezebel? And what would Mrs. Yale say, who loved lavender, and had seen a ballet--once? Was Archdeacon ever, he asked himself, in a position so--so anomalous before?

"My dear," his wife remarked when he had read his letters one morning, a week or two later, "I am sure you are not well. I have noticed that you have not been yourself since you were in London."

"Nonsense," he replied tartly.

"It is not nonsense. There is something preying on your mind. I believe," she persisted, "it is that visitation, Cyprian, that is troubling you."

"Visitation? What visitation?" he asked incautiously. For indeed he had forgotten all about that very important business, and could think only of a visitation more personal to himself. Before his wife could hold up her hands in astonishment, "What visitation! indeed!" he had escaped into the open air. Mrs. Kent was dead.

Yes, the blow had fallen; but the first shock over, things were made easy for him. He wrote to his ward as soon after the funeral as seemed decent, and her answer pleased him greatly. Ready as he was to scent misbehaviour in the air, he thought it a proper letter, a good girl's letter. She did not deny his right to give advice. She had not, she said, seen the gentleman he mentioned since her mother's death, although Mr. Charles Williams--that was his name--had called several times. But she had given him an appointment for the following Tuesday, and was willing that Mr. Yale should see him on that occasion.

All this in a formal and precise way; but there was something in the tone of her reference to Mr. Williams which led the Archdeacon to smile. "She is over head and ears in love," he thought. And in his reply, after saying that he would be in Sidmouth Street on Tuesday at the hour named, he added that if there appeared to be nothing against Mr. Charles Williams he, the Archdeacon, would have pleasure in forwarding his ward's happiness.

"I am going to London to-morrow, my dear, for two nights," he said to his wife on the Sunday evening. "I have some business there."

Mrs. Yale sat silent for a moment, as if she had not heard. Then she laid down her book and folded her hands. "Cyprian," she said, "what is it?"

The Archdeacon was fussing with his pile of sermons and did not turn. "What is what, my dear?" he asked.

"Why are you going to London?"

"On business, my dear; business," he said lightly.

"Yes, but what business?" replied Mrs. Yale with decision. "Cyprian, you are keeping something from me; you were not used to have secrets from me. Tell me what it is."

But he remained obstinately silent. He would not tell a lie, and he could not tell the truth.

"Is it about Jack?" with sudden conviction. "I know what it is; he has entangled himself with some girl!"

The Archdeacon laughed oddly. "You ought to know your son better by this time, my dear. He is about as likely to entangle himself with a girl as--as I am."

But Mrs. Yale shook her head unconvinced. The Archdeacon was a landowner, though a poor

one. It was his ambition, and his wife's, that Jack should some day be rich enough to live at the Hall, instead of letting it, as his father found it necessary to do. But while the Archdeacon considered that Jack's way to the Hall lay over the woolsack, his wife had in view a short cut through the marriage market; being a woman, and so thinking it a small sin in a man to marry for money. Consequently she lived in fear lest Jack should be entrapped by some penniless fair one, and was not wholly reassured now. "Well, I shall be sure to find out, Cyprian," she said warningly, "if you are deceiving me."

And these words recurred disagreeably to the Archdeacon's mind on his way to town and afterwards. They rendered him as sensitive as a mole in the sunshine. He found London almost intolerable. He could not walk the streets without seeing those horrid placards, nor take up a newspaper without being stared out of countenance by the name "Kittie Latouche." While his conscience so multiplied each bill and poster and programme that in twenty-four hours London seemed to him a great hoarding of which his ward was the sole lessee.

Naturally he shrank into himself as he passed down Sidmouth Street next day. He pondered, standing on the steps of No. 14, what the neighbours thought of the house; whether they knew that "Kittie Latouche" lived there. He was spared the giggling and dirty plates on the stairs, but looking round the room at the ten photographs, and thinking what Mrs. Yale would say could she see him, he shuddered. Nervously he picked up the first pamphlet he saw on the table. It was a trifle in one act: "The Tench," Lacy's edition, by Charles Williams. He set it down with a grimace, and a word about birds of a feather. And then the door by which he had entered opened behind him, and he turned.

One look was enough. The kindly expression faded from his handsome features. His face turned to flame. The veins of his forehead swelled with passion, and he strode forward as though he would lay hands on the intruder. "How dare you," he cried when he could find his voice--"how dare you follow me? How dare you play the spy upon me, sir? Speak!"

But Jack--for Jack it was--had no answer ready. He seemed to have lost for once (astonished at being taken in this way, perhaps) his presence of mind. "I do not--understand," he said helplessly.

"Understand? You understand," the Archdeacon cried, his son's very confusion condemning him unheard, "that you have meanly followed me to--to detect me in--in----" And then he came to a deadlock, and, redder than before, thundered, "Are you not ashamed of yourself, sir?"

"I thought I saw a back I knew," Jack muttered, looking everywhere but at his father, which was terribly irritating. "I was coming through the street."

"You were coming through the street? I suppose you often pass through Sidmouth Street!" retorted the Archdeacon with withering sarcasm. But his wrath was growing cool.

"Very often," said Jack so sturdily that his father could not but believe him, and was further sobered. "I saw a back I thought I knew, and I came in here. I had no intention of offending you, sir. And now I think I will go," he added, looking about him uneasily, "and--and speak to you another time."

But the Archdeacon's anger was quite gone now. A wretched embarrassment was taking its place as it dawned upon him that after all Jack might by pure chance have seen him enter and have followed innocently. In that case how had he committed himself by his outbreak--how indeed! "Jack," he said, "I beg your pardon. I beg your pardon, Jack. I see I was mistaken. Do not go, my boy, until I have explained to you why I am here. It is not," he went on, smiling a wretched smile at the pretty faces round him, "quite the place in which you would expect to find me."

"It is certainly not the place in which I did expect to find you," Jack said bluntly. And he looked about him, also in a dazed fashion, as if the Archdeacon and the photographs were not a conjunction for which he was prepared.

"No, no," assented the Archdeacon, wincing, however. "But it is the simplest piece of business in the world which has brought me here." And he recalled to his son's memory their talk at the club.

"Ah, I understand!" Jack said, as if he did, too. "You have come about your friend's business."

The Archdeacon could not hide a spasm. "Well, not precisely. To tell you the truth, there never was a friend, Jack. But," he went on hurriedly, holding up a hand of dignified protest, for Jack was looking at him queerly, very queerly, "you know me too well to doubt me, I hope, when I say there is no ground for doubt?"

The son's keen eyes met the father's for an instant, and then a rare smile softened them as the men's hands met. "I do, sir. You may be sure of that!" he said brightly.

The Archdeacon cleared his throat. "Thank you," he said; "now I think you will understand the position. Miss Kent, the young lady in question, lives here; and I have called to-day to see her by appointment."

"The dickens you have! It is like your impudence!" cried some one--some one behind them.

Both men swung round at the interruption. In the doorway, holding the door open with one hand, while with the other set against the wall he balanced himself on his feet, stood a smart Jewish-looking man. "The dickens you have!" this gentleman repeated, leering on the two most unpleasantly. "So that is your game, is it? Ain't you ashamed of yourself," he continued, addressing himself to the shuddering Archdeacon--and how far away seemed Vinnells and the lavender, and the calm delights of Studbury at that moment!--"ain't you ashamed of yourself, old man?"

"This is a private room," Jack said sternly, anticipating his father's outburst. "You do not seem to be aware of it, my friend."

"A private room, is it?" the visitor replied, closing one eye with much enjoyment. "A private room, and what then?"

"This much, that you are requested to leave it."

"Ho, ho!" the man replied; "so you would put me out of my daughter's room, would you--out of my own daughter's room? I daresay that you would like to do it." Then, with a sudden change to ferocity, he added, "You are bragging above your cards, young man, you are! Dry up, do you hear? Dry up."

And Jack did dry up, falling back against the table with a white face. The Archdeacon, even in his own misery--misery which far exceeded his presentiments--saw and marvelled at his son's collapse. That Jack, keen, practical, hard-headed, should be so completely overwhelmed by collision with this creature, so plainly scared by his insinuations, infected the Archdeacon with a kind of terror. Yet, struggling against the feeling, he forced himself to say, "You are Mr. Kent, I presume?"

"I am, sir; yours to command," swaggered the wretch.

"Then I may tell you that your daughter," the Archdeacon continued, resuming something of his natural self-possession, "was left in my charge by your wife, and that I am here in consequence of that arrangement."

"Gammon!" Mr. Kent replied, distinctly, putting his tongue in his cheek. "Gammon! Do you think that that story will go down with me? Do you think it will go down with any one?"

"It is the truth."

"All right; but look here, when did you see my wife? On her death-bed. And before that--not for twenty years. Well, what do you make of it now? Why," he exclaimed, with admiration in his tone, "you have the impudence of the old one himself! Fie on you, sir! Ain't you ashamed of hanging about stage doors, and following actresses home at your age? But I know you. And your friends shall know you, Archdeacon Yale, of the Athenæum Club. You will hear more of this!"

"You are an insolent fellow!" the clergyman cried. But the perspiration stood in great beads upon his brow, and his quivering lips betrayed the agony of his soul as he writhed under the man's coarse insinuations. The awkwardness, the improbability of the tale he would have to tell in his defence flashed across his mind while the other spoke. He saw how cogently the silence he had maintained about the matter would tell against him. He pictured the nudge of one friend, the wink of another, and his own crimsoning cheeks. His son's unwonted silence, too, touched him home. Yet he tried to bear himself as an innocent man; he struggled to give back look for look. "You are a madman and a scoundrel, besides being drunk!" he said stoutly. "If it were not so, or--or I were as young as my son here----"

"I do not see him," the man answered curtly.

"Jack!" the Archdeacon cried, purple with indignation. "Jack! if you have a voice, speak to him, sir!"

"It won't do," Mr. Kent replied, shaking his head. "Call him Charley, and I might believe you."

"Charley?" repeated the Archdeacon mechanically.

"Ay, Charley--Charley Williams. Oh I know him, too," with vulgar triumph. "I have not been hanging about this house for two days for nothing. He has been here heaps of times! What you two are doing together beats me, I confess. But I am certain of this, that I have caught you both--killed two birds with one stone."

It was the Archdeacon's turn to fall back, aghast. The light that shone upon him with those words so blinded him that every spark of his anger paled and dwindled before it. His son, Charles Williams? He sought in that son's eyes some gleam of denial. But Jack's eyes avoided his; Jack's downcast air seemed only too strongly to confirm the charge. The shock was a severe one, taking from him all thought of himself. The why and wherefore of his presence there could never again be questioned. A real sorrow, a real trouble, gave him courage. "Jack!" he said, "we had better go from here. Come with me. For you, sir," he continued, turning to the actor, "your suspicions are natural to you. Nothing I can say will remove them. So be it. They affect me not one whit. It is

enough for me that I came here in all honour, and with an honourable purpose."

"Indeed," replied Mr. Kent mockingly. "Indeed? And your son, Mr. Charles Jack Williams Yale, Archdeacon? No doubt you will answer for him, as he has not got a word to say for himself? He, too, came with an honourable purpose, I suppose? Oh yes, of course; we are all honourable men!"

For an instant the Archdeacon quailed. He saw the pitfall dug before him. He knew all that his answer would imply of disappointed hopes and a vain ambition. He recognised all that might be made of it by his listeners, friend or foe, and he blenched. But the cynical eye and sneering lip of the wretch recalled him to himself. Nay, he seemed to rise above himself, as he replied more sternly, "Yes, sir; I *will* answer for my son, as for myself! I will answer for him that he came here in all honour."

The man sneered still. But he knew better things if he did not ensue them, and he stood aside with secret respect and let the two go unmolested.

"Sir," Jack said, when they had walked halfway down the street in silence, which his father showed no sign of breaking, "you are thinking more ill of me than I deserve."

"You gave a false name," the Archdeacon snarled.

"Not in a sense--not wilfully, I mean. I wrote a play some time ago, and, as is usual for professional men, I submitted it under a *nom de plume*. I was known as Charles Williams at the theatre, and I had no more idea of doing wrong when I was introduced to Grissel in that name than I have now."

"I hope not," the Archdeacon said grimly. He was not a man to go back from an engagement. "I trust not," he added with a bitterness. "You may break your word to the girl if you please, but I will not break mine to the mother. So help me Heaven!"

"Sir," Jack said, his utterance a little husky, "God bless you! She is a good girl, and some day she will honour you as I do."

They parted without more words. The Archdeacon, hardly master of his thoughts, walked on until he reached the corner of Oxford Street. There he paused, and seeing girls pass, young, graceful, soft-eyed, leaning back in carriages with parcels round them, ay, and thinking that Jack might have chosen out of all these, while he had chosen in Sidmouth Street--Sidmouth Street, Gray's Inn Road--he could not stifle a groan. He plunged recklessly across and found himself presently in St. James' Square, and round and round this he walked, fighting the battle with himself. His poor wife, that was the burden of his cry. His poor wife, and the shock it would be to her, and the downfall of hopes! He knew that she a woman would recoil from such a daughter-in-law far more than he did, who had known Grissel's mother, and knew that actresses may be good and true women. It would be dreadful for her, with her old-world notions; the Archdeacon knew it. But he valued one thing above even the peace of his home, and that was his honour. It was not in sarcasm we called him a good man. To break his word to the dead woman who had trusted him; to leave this girl, whom it behooved him to protect, in the hands of her wretched father, and so to leave her with her faith in goodness shattered--this he could not do.

But he was tempted to think hard things of Jack, to think that Jack, who had never given him the heartache before, had better not have been born than bring this trouble on them. It went no farther than temptation; and he was marvellously thankful next morning that he had not framed the thought in words; for, as he entered the breakfast-room, looking a year older than he had looked, chipping his egg yesterday, the hall-porter put a telegram into his hands. "Come at once--Jack," were the words that first made themselves intelligible to him; and then, a few seconds later, the address "St. Thomas's Hospital."

How swiftly does a great misfortune, a great loss, a great pain, expel a less! I have known a man lose his wife and go heavily for a month, and then losing a thousand pounds become as oblivious of her as if she had never been born. But the Archdeacon was not such a man, and rattling towards Westminster in a cab he felt not only that a thousand pounds would be a small price to pay for his son's safety, but that, if Providence should take him at his thought, he might have worse news for his wife than those tidings which had almost aged him in a night.

His son, however, met him at the great gates, whole and sound, but with a grave face. "You are too late, sir," he said quietly. But he flushed a little at the grasp of his father's hand, and a little more when the Archdeacon told him to pay the cabman a double fare. "I have brought you here for nothing. He died a quarter of an hour ago, sinking very rapidly after I sent to you."

"Who? Who died?" the Archdeacon asked, pressing one hand heavily on the other's shoulder, as they walked back towards the bridge.

"Mr. Kent."

The elder man said nothing for a while--aloud at least. But presently he asked Jack to tell him about it.

"There is little to tell. After we left him he went out. Going home late last night, and not I fear

sober, he was run down by a road-car. When they brought him to the hospital he was hopelessly injured, but quite sensible. They fetched his daughter, and then he asked for me--as your son. He did not know my address, but the assistant-surgeon happened to be a friend of mine, and did, and he sent a cab for me."

And really that seemed all. "It is very, very sudden; but--Heaven forgive me!--I cannot regret his death," the clergyman said. "It is impossible."

They had reached the corner of the bridge. "There is something else I should tell you," Jack said nervously. "When he had sent for me he had a lawyer brought, and made his will."

"His will!" the Archdeacon repeated, somewhat startled. "Had he anything to leave?" He asked the question, rather in pity for so wretched a creature as the man seemed to him, than out of curiosity.

"If we may believe him," Jack said slowly, "and I think he was telling the truth, he was worth thirty thousand pounds."

"Impossible!" the Archdeacon cried.

"I do not know," replied Jack. "But we shall learn. He said he had made it in oil, and had come home a poor man to see how his wife and child would receive him. I do not think he was all bad," Jack continued thoughtfully. "There must have been a streak of romance in him."

"I fear," the Archdeacon muttered very sensibly, "that it is all romance!"

But it was not all romance; there is oil in the States yet, and Mr. Kent, of whom since he is dead we all speak with respect, by hook or crook had got his share. The thirty thousand pounds were discovered pleasantly fructifying in Argentine railways, and proved as many reasons why Mrs. Yale, when Jack's fate became known to her, should smile again. The Archdeacon put it neatly: To marry an actress is a grave offence because a common one, and one easily committed; but to marry an actress with thirty thousand pounds! Such ladies are not blackberries, not do they grow on every bush.

"Mr. and Mrs. John Yale have not yet established themselves at the Hall. They live at Henley, and their house is the summer resort of all kinds of people, among whom the Archdeacon is a very butterfly. An idea prevails--though a few of us are in the secret--that Mrs. Jack comes, in common with so many pretty women, of an old Irish family; and the other day I overheard an amusing scrap of conversation at her table. 'Mrs. Yale,' some one said, 'do you know that you remind me, I if may say it without offence, of Miss Kittie Latouche, the actress?'"

"Indeed?" the lady replied with a charming blush. "But do you know that you are on dangerous ground? My husband was in love with that lady before he knew me. And I believe that he regrets her now."

"Tit for tat!" cried Jack. "Let us all tell tales. If my wife was not in love with one Mr. Charles Williams a month--only a month--before she married me, I will eat her."

"Oh, Jack!" the lady exclaimed, covered with confusion. But this story would not be believed in Studbury, where Mrs. John passes for being a little shy, a little timid, and not a little prudish.

BAB

BAB

CHAPTER I

HER STORY

"Clare," I said, "I wish that we had brought some better clothes, if it were only one frock. You look the oddest figure."

And she did. She was lying head to head with me on the thick moss which clothed one part of the river bank above Breistolen near the Sogne Fiord. We were staying at Breistolen, but there was no moss there, nor in all the Sogne district, I often thought, so deep and soft, and of so dazzling an orange and white and crimson as that particular patch. It lay quite high upon the hills, and there were gigantic grey boulders peeping through the moss here and there, very fit to break your legs if you were careless. Little more than a mile above us was the watershed, where our river, putting away with reluctance a first thought of going down the farther slope towards Bysberg, parted from its twin brother--who was thither bound with scores upon scores of puny green-backed fishlets--and instead, came down our side gliding and swishing and swirling faster and faster, and deeper and wider, and full, too, of red-speckled yellow trout all half-a-pound apiece, and very good to eat.

But they were not so sweet or toothsome to our girlish tastes as the tawny-orange cloud-berries which Clare and I were eating as we lay. So busy was she with the luscious pile we had gathered that I had to wait for an answer. And then, "Speak for yourself," she said. "I'm sure you look like a short-coated baby. He is somewhere up the river, too." Munch, munch, munch!

"Who is, you greedy little chit?"

"Oh, you know," she answered. "Don't you wish you had your grey plush here, Bab?"

I flung a look of calm disdain at her; but whether it was the berry juice which stained our faces that took from its effect, or the free mountain air which father says saps the foundations of despotism, that made her callous, at any rate she only laughed scornfully and got up and went down the stream with her rod, leaving me to finish the cloud-berries, and stare lazily up at the snow patches on the hillside--which somehow put me in mind of the grey plush--and follow or not as I liked.

Clare has a wicked story of how I gave in to father, and came to start without anything but those rough clothes. She says he said--and Jack Buchanan has told me that lawyers put no faith in anything that he says she says, or she says he says, which proves how little truth there is in this--that if Bab took none but her oldest clothes, and fished all day and had no one to run her errands--he meant Jack and the others--she might possibly grow an inch in Norway. As if I wanted to grow an inch! An inch indeed! I am five feet one and a half high, and father, who puts me an inch shorter, is the worst measurer in the world. As for Miss Clare, she would give all her inches for my eyes. So there!

After Clare left it began to be dull and chilly. When I had pictured to myself how nice it would be to dress for dinner again, and chosen the frock I would wear upon the first evening, I grew tired of the snow patches, and started up stream, stumbling and falling into holes, and clambering over rocks, and only careful to save my rod and my face. It was no occasion for the grey plush, but I had made up my mind to reach a pool which lay, I knew, a little above me. I had filched a yellow-bodied fly from Clare's hat with a view to that particular place.

Our river--pleased to be so young, I suppose--did the oddest things hereabouts. It was not a great churning stream of snow water foaming and milky, such as we had seen in some parts, streams which affected to be always in flood, and had the look of forcing the rocks asunder and clearing their paths even while you watched them with your fingers in your ears. Our river was none of these; still it was swifter than English rivers are wont to be, and in parts deeper, and transparent as glass. In one place it would sweep over a ledge and fall wreathed in spray into a spreading lake of black, rock-bound water. Then it would narrow again until, where you could almost jump across, it darted smooth and unbroken down a polished shoot with a swoop like a swallow's. Out of this it would hurry afresh to brawl along a gravelly bed, skipping jauntily over first one and then another ridge of stones that had silted up weir-wise and made as if they would bar the channel. Under the lee of these there were lovely pools.

To be able to throw into mine, I had to walk out along the ridge on which the water was shallow, yet deep enough to cover my boots. But I was well rewarded. The "forellin"--the Norse name for trout, and as pretty as their girls' wavy fair hair--were rising so merrily that I hooked and landed one in five minutes, the fly falling from its mouth as it touched the stones. I hate taking out hooks. I used at one time to leave the fly in the fish's mouth to be removed by father at the weighing house; until Clare pricked her tongue at dinner with an almost new, red tackle, and was so mean as to keep it, though I remembered what I had done with it, and was certain it was

mine--which was nothing less than dishonest of her.

I had just got back to my place and made a fine cast, when there came--not the leap, and splash, and tug which announced the half-pounder--but a deep, rich gurgle as the fly was gently sucked under, and then a quiet, growing strain upon the line which began to move away down the pool in a way that made the winch spin again and filled me with mysterious pleasure. I was not conscious of striking or of anything but that I had hooked a really good fish; and I clutched the rod with both hands and set my feet as tightly as I could upon the slippery gravel. The line moved up and down, and this way and that, now steadily and as with a purpose, and then again with an eccentric rush that made the top of the rod spring and bend so that I looked for it to snap each moment. My hands began to grow numb, and the landing-net, hitherto an ornament, fell out of my waist-belt and went I knew not whither. I suppose I must have stepped unwittingly into deeper water, for I felt that my skirts were afloat, and altogether things were going dreadfully against me, when the presence of a reinforcement was announced by a cheery shout from the far side of the river.

"Keep up your point! Keep up your point!" some one cried briskly. "That is better!"

The unexpected sound--it was a man's voice--did something to keep up my heart. But for answer I could only shriek, "I can't! It will break!" as I watched the top of my rod jiggling up and down, very much in the fashion of Clare performing what she calls a waltz. She dances as badly as a man.

"No, it will not," he cried bluntly. "Keep it up, and let out a little line with your fingers when he pulls hardest."

We were forced to shout and scream. The wind had risen and was adding to the noise of the water. Soon I heard him wading behind me. "Where's your landing-net?" he asked, with the most provoking coolness.

"Oh, in the pool! Somewhere about. I don't know," I answered, wildly.

What he said to this I could not catch, but it sounded rude. Then he waded off to fetch, as I guessed, his own net. By the time he reached me again I was in a sad plight, feet like ice, and hands benumbed, while the wind, and rain, and hail, which had come down upon us with a sudden violence, unknown, it is to be hoped, anywhere else, were mottling my face all kinds of unbecoming colours. But the line was taut. And wet and cold went for nothing five minutes later, when the fish lay upon the bank, its prismatic sides slowly turning pale and dull, and I knelt over it half in pity and half in triumph, but wholly forgetful of the wind and rain.

"You did that very pluckily, little one," said the on-looker; "but I am afraid you will suffer for it by-and-by. You must be chilled through."

Quickly as I looked at him, I only met a good-humoured smile. He did not mean to be rude. And after all, when I was in such a mess it was not possible that he could see what I was like. He was wet enough himself. The rain was streaming from the brim of the soft hat which he had turned down to shelter his face; it was trickling from his chin, and turning his shabby Norfolk jacket a darker shade. As for his hands, they looked red and knuckly, and he had been wading almost to his waist. But he looked, I don't know why, all the manlier and nicer for these things, because, perhaps, he cared for them not a whit. What I looked like myself I dared not think. My skirts were as short as short could be, and they were soaked; most of my hair was unplaited, my gloves were split, and my sodden boots were out of shape. I was forced, too, to shiver and shake with cold, which was provoking, for I knew that it made me seem half as small again.

"Thank you, I am a little cold, Mr. ---, Mr. ---?" I said gravely, only my teeth would chatter so that he laughed outright as he took me up with--

"Herapath. And to whom have I the honour of speaking?"

"I am Miss Guest," I said, miserably. It was too cold to be frigid with advantage.

"Commonly called Bab, I think," the wretch answered. "The walls of our hut are not soundproof, you see. But come, the sooner you get back to dry clothes and the stove, the better, Bab. You can cross the river just below, and cut off half a mile that way."

"I can't," I said, obstinately. Bab, indeed! How dared he?

"Oh yes, you can," he answered, with intolerable good temper. "You shall take your rod and I the prey. You cannot be wetter than you are now."

He had his way, of course, since I did not foresee that at the ford he would lift me up bodily and carry me over the deeper part without a pretence of asking leave, or a word of apology. It was done so quickly that I had no time to remonstrate. Still I was not going to let it pass, and when I had shaken myself straight again, I said, with all the haughtiness I could assume, "Don't you think, Mr. Herapath, that it would have been more--more----"

"Polite to offer to carry you over, child? No, not at all. And now it will be wiser and warmer for

you to run down the hill. Come along!"

And without more ado, while I was still choking with rage, he seized my hand and set off at a trot, lugging me through the sloppy places much as I have seen a nurse drag a fractious child down Constitution Hill. It was not wonderful that I soon lost the little breath his speech had left me, and was powerless to complain when we reached the bridge. I could only thank Heaven that there was no sign of Clare. I think I should have died of mortification if she had seen us come down the hill hand-in-hand in that ridiculous fashion. But she had gone home, and at any rate I escaped that degradation.

A wet stool-car and wetter pony were dimly visible on the bridge; to which, as we came up, a damp urchin creeping from some crevice added himself. I was pushed in as if I had no will of my own, the gentleman sprang up beside me, the boy tucked himself away somewhere behind, and the little "teste" set off at a canter, so deceived by the driver's excellent imitation of "Pss," the Norse for "Tchk," that in ten minutes we were at home.

"Well, I never!" Clare said, surveying me from a respectful distance, when at last I was safe in our room. "I would not be seen in such a state by a man for all the fish in the sea!"

And she looked so tall, and trim, and neat, that it was the more provoking. At the moment I was too miserable to answer her; and I had to find comfort in promising myself, that when we were back in Bolton Gardens I would see that Fräulein kept Miss Clare's pretty nose to the grindstone though it were ever so much her last term, or Jack were ever so fond of her. Father was in the plot against me, too. What right had he to thank Mr. Herapath for bringing "his little girl" home safe? He can be pompous enough at times. I never knew a stout Queen's Counsel--and he is stout--who was not, any more than a thin one, who did not contradict. It is in their parents, I believe.

Mr. Herapath dined with us that evening--if fish and potatoes and boiled eggs, and sour bread and pancakes, and claret and coffee can be called a dinner--but nothing I could do, though I made the best of my wretched frock and was as stiff as Clare herself, could alter his first impression. It was too bad; he had no eyes! He either could not or would not see any one but the draggled Bab--fifteen at most and a very tom-boy--whom he had carried across the river. He styled Clare, who talked Baedeker to him in her primmest and most precocious way, Miss Guest; and once at least during the evening he dubbed me plain Bab. I tried to freeze him with a look then, and father gave him a taste of his pompous manner, saying coldly that I was older than I seemed. But it was not a bit of use; I could see that he set it all down to the grand airs of a spoiled child. If I had put my hair up, it might have opened his eyes, but Clare teased me about it and I was too proud for that.

When I asked him if he was fond of dancing, he said good-naturedly, "I don't visit very much, Miss Bab. I am generally engaged in the evening."

Here was a chance. I was going to say that that no doubt was the reason why I had never met him, when father ruthlessly cut me short by asking, "You are not in the law?"

"No," he replied. "I am in the London Fire Brigade."

I think that we all upon the instant saw him in a helmet sitting at the door of the fire station by St. Martin's Church. Clare turned crimson, and his host seemed on a sudden to call his patent to mind. The moment before I had been as angry as angry could be with our guest, but I was not going to look on and see him snubbed when he was dining with us and all. So I rushed into the gap as quickly as surprise would let me with, "Oh, dear, what fun! Do tell me all about a fire!"

It made matters--my matters--worse, for I could have cried with vexation when I read in his face that he had looked for their astonishment; while the ungrateful fellow set down my eager remark to childish ignorance.

"Some time I will," he said with a quiet smile *de haut en bas*; "but I do not often attend one in person. I am the Chief's private secretary, aide-de-camp, and general factotum."

It turned out that he was the son of a certain Canon Herapath, so that father lost sight of his patent box altogether, and they set to discussing Mr. Gladstone, while I slipped off to bed feeling as small as I ever did in my life and out of temper with everybody. Not for a long time had I been used to young men talking politics to him, when they could talk--politics--to me.

Possibly I deserved the week of vexation which followed; but it was almost more than I could bear. He--Mr. Herapath, of course--was always on the spot fishing or lounging outside the little white posting-house, taking walks and meals with us, and seeming heartily to enjoy father's society. He came with us when we drove to the top of the pass to get a glimpse of the Sultind peak; and it looked so brilliantly clear and softly beautiful as it seemed to float, just tinged with colour, in a far-off atmosphere of its own beyond the dark ranges of nearer hills, that I began to think at once of the drawing-room in Bolton Gardens with a cosy fire burning, and afternoon tea coming up. The tears came to my eyes, and he saw them before I could turn away from the view; and said to father that he feared his little girl was tired as well as cold--and so spoiled all my pleasure. I looked back afterwards as father and I drove down; he was walking beside Clare's cariole and they were laughing heartily.

And that was the way always. He was such an elder brother to me--a thing I never had and do not want--that a dozen times a day I set my teeth together viciously and vowed that if ever we met in London--but what nonsense that was, because, of course, it mattered nothing to me what he was thinking, only he had no right to be so rudely familiar. That was all; but it was quite enough to make me dislike him.

However, a sunny morning in the holidays is a cheerful thing, and when I strolled down stream with my rod on the day after our expedition, I felt that I could enjoy myself very nearly as much as I had, before his coming spoiled our party. I dawdled along, now trying a pool, now clambering up the hillsides to pick raspberries, and now counting the magpies that flew across, feeling altogether very placid and good and contented. I had chosen the lower river because Mr. Herapath usually fished the upper part, and I would not be ruffled this nice day. So I was the more vexed when I came upon him fishing; and fishing where he had no right to be. Father had spoken to him about the danger of it, and he had as good as said he would not do it again. Yet he was there, thinking, I daresay, that we should not know. It was a spot where one bank rose into a cliff, frowning over a deep pool at the foot of some falls. Close to the cliff the water ran with the speed of a mill race. But on the far side of this current there was a bit of slack water so promising that it had tempted some one to devise means to fish it, which from the top of the cliff was impossible. Just above the water was a ledge, a foot wide, which might have served only it did not reach the nearer end of the cliff. However, the foolhardy person had espied this, and got over the gap by bridging the latter with a bit of plank, and then had drowned himself or gone away, in either case leaving his board to tempt others to do likewise.

And there was Mr. Herapath fishing from the ledge. It made me giddy to look at him. The rock overhung the water so much that he could not stand upright; the first person who fished there must have learned to curl himself up from much sleeping in Norwegian beds, which were short for me. I thought of this as I watched him, and I laughed, and was for going on. But when I had walked a few yards, meaning to pass round the rear of the cliff, I began to fancy all sorts of foolish things might happen. I felt sure that I should have no more peace or pleasure if I left him there. I hesitated. Yes, I would. I would go down, and ask him to leave the place; and, of course, he would do it.

I lost no time, but ran down the slope. My way lay over loose shale mingled with large stones, and it was steep. It is wonderful how swiftly a thing that cannot be undone is done, and we are left wishing--oh, so vainly--that we could put the world, and all things in it, back by a few seconds. I was checking myself near the bottom, when a big stone on which I stepped moved under me. The shale began to slip in a mass, and the stone to roll. It was done in a moment. I stayed myself, that was easy, but the stone took two bounds, jumped sideways, struck the piece of board which only rested lightly at either end, and before I could take it in the little bridge plunged end first into the current, which swept it out of sight in an instant.

He threw up his hands, for he had turned, and we both saw it happen. He made indeed as if he would try to save it, but that was impossible. Then, while I cowered in dismay, he waved his arm to me in the direction of home--again and again. The roar of the falls drowned what he said, but I guessed his meaning. I could not help him myself, but I could fetch help. It was three miles to Breistolen, rough rocky ones, and I doubted whether he could keep his cramped position with that noise deafening him, and the endless whirling stream before his eyes, while I was going and coming. But there was no better way; and even as I wavered, he signalled to me again imperatively. For an instant everything seemed to go round with me, but it was not the time for that, and I tried to collect myself, and harden my heart. Up the bank I went steadily, and once at the top set off at a rim homewards.

I cannot tell how I did it; how I passed over the uneven ground or whether I went quickly or slowly save by the reckoning father made afterwards. I only remember one long hurrying scramble; now I panted uphill, now I ran down, now I was on my face in a hole, breathless and half-stunned, and now I was up to my knees in water. I slipped and dropped down places from which I should at other times have shrunk, and hurt myself so that I bore the marks for months. But I thought nothing of these things: all my being was spent in hurrying on for his life, the clamour of every cataract I passed seeming to stop my heart's beating with fear. So I reached Breistolen and panted over the bridge and up to the little white house lying so quiet in the afternoon sunshine, father's stool-car even then at the door ready to take him to some favorite pool. Somehow I made him understand that Herapath was in danger, drowning already, for all I knew; and then I seized a great pole which was leaning against the porch, and climbed into the car. Father was not slow either; he snatched a coil of rope from the luggage, and away we went, a man and boy whom he had hastily called running behind us. We had lost very little time, but so much may happen in a little time.

We were forced to leave the car a quarter of a mile from the river, and walk or run the rest of the way. We all ran, even father, as I had never known him run before. My heart sank at the groan he uttered when I pointed out the spot. We came to it one by one and we all looked. The ledge was empty. Mr. Herapath was gone. I suppose I was tired out. At any rate I could only look at the water in a dazed way, and cry without much feeling that it was my doing; while the men shouted to one another in strange hushed voices and searched about for any sign of his fate--"James Herapath!" So he had written his name only yesterday in the travellers' book at the posting-house, and I had sullenly watched him from the window, and then had sneaked to the book and read it. That was yesterday, and now! Oh, to hear him say "Bab" once more!

"Bab! Why, Miss Bab, what is the matter?"

Safe and sound! Yes, when I turned he was there, safe, and strong, and cool, rod in hand, and a smile in his eyes. Just as I had seen him yesterday, and thought never to see him again; and saying "Bab" exactly as of old, so that something in my throat--it may have been anger at his rudeness, but I do not think it was--prevented me answering a word until all the others came around us, and a babel of Norse and English, and something that was neither yet both, set in.

"But how is this?" my father objected, when he could be heard, "you are quite dry, my boy?"

"Dry! Why not, sir? For goodness' sake, what is the matter?"

"The matter! Didn't you fall in, or something of the kind?" father asked, bewildered by the new aspect of the case.

"It does not look like it, does it? Your daughter gave me a very uncomfortable start by nearly doing so."

Every one looked at me for an explanation. "How did you manage to get from the ledge?" I asked feebly. Where was the mistake? I had not dreamed it.

"From the ledge? Why, by the other end, to be sure. Of course I had to walk back round the hill; but I did not mind. I was thankful that it was the plank and not you that fell in."

"I--I thought--you could not get from the ledge," I muttered. The possibility of getting off at the other end had never occurred to me; and so I had made such a simpleton of myself. It was too absurd, too ridiculous. It was no wonder that they all screamed with laughter at the fool's errand they had come upon, and stamped about and clung to one another. But, when he laughed too--and he did until the tears came into his eyes--there was not an ache or pain in my body--and I had cut my wrist to the bone against a splinter of rock--that hurt me one-half as much. Surely he might have seen another side to it. But he did not; and so I managed to hide my bandaged wrist from him, and father drove me home. There I broke down entirely, and Clare put me to bed, and petted me, and was very good to me. And when I came down next day, with an ache in every part of me, he was gone.

"He asked me to tell you," said Clare, not looking up from the fly she was tying at the window, "that he thought you were the bravest girl he had ever met."

So he understood now, when others had explained it to him. "No, Clare," I said coldly, "he did not say that; he said 'the bravest little girl.'" For indeed, lying upstairs with the window open I had heard him set off on his long drive to Laerdalsören. As for father he was half-proud and half-ashamed of my foolishness, and wholly at a loss to think how I could have made the mistake.

"You've generally some common-sense, my dear," he said that day at dinner, "and how in the world you could have been so ready to fancy the man was in danger, I--can--not--imagine!"

"Father," Clare put in suddenly, "your elbow is upsetting the salt."

And as I had to move my seat at that moment to avoid the glare of the stove which was falling on my face, we never thought it out.

CHAPTER II

HIS STORY

I was not dining out much at that time, partly because my acquaintance in town was limited, and partly because I cared little for it. But these were pleasant people, the old gentleman witty and amusing, the children, lively girls, nice to look at and good to talk with. All three had a holiday flavour about them wholesome to recall in Scotland Yard; and as I had expected that, playtime over, I should see no more of them, I was pleased to find that Mr. Guest had not forgotten me, and pleased also--foreseeing that we should kill our fish over again--to regard his invitation to dine at a quarter to eight as a royal command.

But if I took it so, I was wanting in the regal courtesy to match. What with one delay owing to work which would admit of none, and another caused by a cabman strange to the ways of town, it was fifteen minutes after the hour named when I reached Bolton Gardens. A stately man, so like the Queen's Counsel, that it was plain upon whom the latter modelled himself, ushered me into the dining-room, where Guest greeted me kindly, and met my excuses by apologies on his part--for preferring, I suppose, the comfort of eleven people to mine. Then he took me down the table, and said, "My daughter," and Miss Guest shook hands with me and pointed to the chair at her

left. I had still, as I unfolded my napkin, to say, "Clear, if you please," and then I was free to turn and apologise to her--feeling a little shy, and being, as I have said, a somewhat infrequent diner out.

I think that I never saw so remarkable a likeness--to her younger sister--in my life. She might have been little Bab herself, but for her dress and, of course, some differences. Miss Guest could not be more than nineteen, in form almost as fairy-like as the little one, and with the same child-like innocent look in her face. She had the big, grey eyes, too, that were so charming in Bab; but hers were more tender and thoughtful, and a thousand times more charming. Her hair too was brown and wavy; only, instead of hanging loose or in a pig-tail anywhere and anyhow in a fashion I well remembered, it was coiled in a coronal on the shapely little head, that looked Greek, and in its gracious, stately, old-fashioned pose was quite unlike Bab's. Her dress, of some creamy, gauzy stuff, revealed the prettiest white throat in the world, and arms decked in pearls, and these, of course, no more recalled my little fishing mate than the sedate self-possession and dignity of the girl, as she talked to her other neighbour, suggested Bab making pancakes and chattering with the landlady's children in her wonderfully acquired Norse. It was not Bab in fact: and yet it might have been: an etherealised, queenly womanly Bab, who presently turned to me--

"Have you quite settled down after your holiday?" she asked, staying the apologies I was for pouring into her ear.

"I had until this evening, but the sight of your father is like a breath of fiord air. I hope your sisters are well."

"My sisters?" she murmured wonderingly, her fork half-way to her pretty mouth and her attitude one of questioning.

"Yes," I said, rather puzzled. "You know they were with your father when I had the good fortune to meet him. Miss Clare and Bab."

She dropped her fork on the plate with a great clatter.

"Perhaps I should say Miss Clare and Miss Bab."

I really began to feel uncomfortable. Her colour rose, and she looked me in the face in an odd way as if she resented the inquiry. It was a relief to me, when, with some show of confusion, she faltered, "Oh, yes, I beg your pardon, of course they were! How very foolish of me. They are quite well, thank you," and so was silent again. But I understood now. Mr. Guest had omitted to mention my name, and she had taken me for some one else of whose holiday she knew. I gathered from the aspect of the table and the room that the Guests saw much company, and it was a very natural mistake, though by the grave look she bent upon her plate it was clear that the young hostess was taking herself to task for it: not without, if I might judge from the lurking smile at the corners of her mouth, a humorous sense of the slip, and perhaps of the difference between myself and the gentleman whose part I had been unwittingly supporting. Meanwhile I had a chance of looking at her unchecked; and thought of Dresden china, she was so dainty.

"You were nearly drowned, or something of the kind, were you not?" she asked, after an interval during which we had both talked to others.

"Well, not precisely. Your sister fancied I was in danger, and behaved in the pluckiest manner--so bravely that I can almost feel sorry that the danger was not real to dignify her heroism."

"That was like her," she answered in a tone just a little scornful. "You must have thought her a terrible tom-boy."

While she was speaking there came one of those dreadful lulls in the talk, and Mr. Guest, overhearing, cried, "Who is that you are abusing, my dear? Let us all share in the sport. If it's Clare, I think I can name one who is a far worse hoyden upon occasion."

"It is no one of whom you have ever heard, father," she answered, archly. "It is a person in whom Mr.--Mr. Herapath--" I had murmured my name as she stumbled--"and I are interested. Now tell me, did you not think so?" she murmured, leaning the slightest bit towards me, and opening her eyes as they looked into mine in a way that to a man who had spent the day in a dusty room in Great Scotland Yard was sufficiently intoxicating.

"No," I said, lowering my voice in imitation of hers. "No, Miss Guest, I did not think so at all. I thought your sister a brave little thing, rather careless as children are, but likely to grow into a charming girl."

I wondered, marking how she bit her lip and refrained from assent, whether there might not be something of the shrew about my beautiful neighbour. Her tone when she spoke of her sister seemed to import no great goodwill.

"You think so?" she said, after a pause. "Do you know," with a laughing glance, "that some people think I am like her?"

"Yes," I answered, gravely. "Well, I should be able to judge, who have seen you both and am

not an old friend. And I think you are both like and unlike. Your sister has beautiful eyes"--she lowered hers swiftly--"and hair like yours, but her manner and style are different. I can no more fancy Bab in your place than I can picture you, Miss Guest, as I saw her for the first time--and on many after occasions," I added, laughing as much to cover my own hardihood as at the queer little figure I conjured up.

"Thank you," she replied--and for some reason she blushed to her ears. "That, I think, must be enough of compliments for to-night--as you are not an old friend." And she turned away, leaving me to curse my folly in saying so much, when our acquaintance was in the bud, and as susceptible to over-warmth as to a temperature below zero.

A moment later the ladies left us. The flush I had brought to her cheek lingered, as she swept past me with a wondrous show of dignity in one so young. Mr. Guest came down and took her place, and we talked of the "land of berries," and our adventures there, while the rest--older friends--listened indulgently or struck in from time to time with their own biggest fish and deadliest flies.

I used to wonder why women like to visit dusty chambers; why, they get more joy--I am fain to think they do--out of a scrambling tea up three pairs of stairs in Pump Court, than from the same materials--and comfort withal--in their own house. I imagine it is for the same reason that the bachelor finds a charm in a lady's drawing-room, and there, if anywhere, sees her with a reverent mind. A charm and a subservience which I felt to the full in the Guests' drawing-room--a room rich in subdued colours and a cunning blending of luxury and comfort. Yet it depressed me. I felt myself alone. Mr. Guest had passed on to others and I stood aside, the sense that I was not of these people troubling me in a manner as new as it was absurd: for I had been in the habit of rather despising "society." Miss Guest was at the piano, the centre of a circle of soft light, which showed up a keen-faced, close-shaven man leaning over her with the air of one used to the position. Every one else was so fully engaged that I may have looked, as well as felt, forlorn; at any rate, meeting her eyes I could have fancied she was regarding me with amusement--almost with triumph. It must have been mere fancy, bred of self-consciousness, for the next moment she beckoned me to her, and said to her cavalier--

"There, Jack, Mr. Herapath is going to talk to me about Norway now, so that I don't want you any longer. Perhaps you won't mind stepping up to the schoolroom--Fräulein and Clare are there--and telling Clare, that--that--oh, anything."

There is no piece of ill-breeding so bad to my mind as for a man who is at home in a house to flaunt his favour in the face of other guests. That young man's manner as he left her, and the smile of intelligence which passed between them, were such a breach of good manners as would have ruffled any one. They ruffled me--yes, me, although it was no concern of mine what she called him, or how he conducted himself--so that I could do nothing but stand by the piano and sulk. One bear makes another, you know.

She did not speak; and I, content to watch the slender hands stealing over the keys, would not, until my eyes fell upon her right wrist. She had put off her bracelets and so disclosed a scar upon it, something about which--not its newness--so startled me that I said abruptly, "That is very strange! Pray tell me how you did it?"

She looked up, saw what I meant, and stopping hastily, put on her bracelets; to all appearances so vexed by my thoughtless question, and anxious to hide the mark, that I was quick to add humbly, "I asked because your sister hurt her wrist in nearly the same place on the day when she thought I was in trouble. And the coincidence struck me."

"Yes, I remember," she answered, looking at me I thought with a certain suspicion, as though she were not sure that I was giving the right motive. "I did this in the same way. By falling, I mean. Isn't it a hateful disfigurement?"

It was no disfigurement. Even to her, with a woman's love of conquest it must have seemed anything but a disfigurement--had she known what the quiet, awkward man at her side was thinking, who stood looking shyly at it and found no words to contradict her, though she asked him twice, and thought him stupid enough. A great longing for that soft, scarred wrist was on me--and Miss Guest had added another to the number of her slaves. I don't know now why the blemish should have so touched me any more than I could then guess why, being a commonplace person, I should fall in love at first sight and feel no surprise at my condition, but only a half-consciousness that in some former state of being I had met my love, and read her thoughts, and learned her moods; and come to know the womanly spirit that looked from her eyes as well as if she were an old friend. But so vivid was this sensation, that once or twice, then and afterwards, when I would meet her glance, another name than hers trembled on my tongue and passed away before I could shape it into sound.

After an interval, "Are you going to the Goldmace's dance?" she asked.

"No," I answered her, humbly. "I go out so little."

"Indeed?" with an odd smile not too kindly. "I wish--no I don't--that we could say the same. We are engaged, I think"--she paused, her attention divided between myself and Boccherini's minuet,

the low strains of which she was sending through the room--"for every afternoon--this week--except Saturday. By the way, Mr. Herapath--do you remember what was the name--Bab told me you called her?"

"Bonnie Bab," I answered absently. My thoughts had gone forward to Saturday. We are always dropping to-day's substance for the shadow of tomorrow; like the dog--a dog was it not?--in the fable.

"Oh, yes, Bonnie Bab," she murmured softly. "Poor Bab!" and suddenly she cut short Boccherini's music and our chat by striking a terrific discord and laughing at my start of discomfiture. Every one took it as a signal to leave. They all seemed to be going to meet her next day, or the day after that. They engaged her for dances, and made up a party for the play, and tossed to and fro a score of laughing catch-words, that were beyond my comprehension. They all did this, except myself.

And yet I went away with something before me--the call upon Saturday afternoon. Quite unreasonably I fancied that I should see her alone. And so when the day came and I stood outside the opening door of the drawing-room, and heard voices and laughter behind it, I was hurt and aggrieved beyond measure. There was a party, and a merry one, assembled; who were playing at some game as it seemed to me, for I caught sight of Clare whipping off an impromptu bandage from her eyes, and striving by her stiffest air to give the lie to a pair of flushed cheeks. The close-shaven man was there, and two men of his kind, and a German governess, and a very old lady in a wheel-chair, who was called "grandmamma," and Miss Guest herself looking, in the prettiest dress of silvery plush, as bright and fair and graceful as I had been picturing her each hour since we parted.

She dropped me a stately courtesy. "Will you be blindfold, or will you play the part of Miss Carolina Wilhelmina Amelia Skeggs, Mr. Herapath, while I say 'Fudge!' or will you burn nuts and play games with this gentleman--he is neighbour Flamborough? You will join us, won't you? Clare does not so misbehave every day, only it is a wet afternoon and so cold and wretched, and we did not think there would be any more callers--and tea will be up in five minutes."

She did not think there would be any more callers! Something in her smile belied the words and taught me that she had thought--she had known--that there would be one more caller--one who would burn nuts and play games with her, though Rome itself were afire, and Tooley Street and the Mile End Road to boot.

It was a simple game, and not likely, one would say, to afford much risk of that burning of the fingers, which gave a zest to the Vicar of Wakefield's nuts. One sat in the middle blindfolded, while the rest disguised their own or assumed each other's voices, and spoke one by one some gibe or quip at his expense. When he succeeded in naming the speaker, the detected satirist put on the poke, and in his turn heard things good--if he had a conceit of himself--for his soul's health. The *rôle* presently fell to me, and proved a heavy one, because I was not so familiar with the others' voices as were the rest; and Miss Guest--whose faintest tones I thought I should know--had a wondrous knack of cheating me, now taking off Clare's voice, and now--after the door had been opened to admit the tea--her father's. So I failed again and again to earn my relief. But when a voice behind me cried with well-feigned eagerness--

"How nice! Do tell me all about a fire!"--then, though no fresh creaking of the door had reached me, nor warning been given of an addition to the players, I had no doubt who spoke, but exclaimed at once, "That is Bab! Now I cry you mercy. I am right this time. That was Bab!"

I looked for a burst of applause such as had before attended a good thrust home, but none came. On the contrary, with my words so odd a silence fell upon the room that it was clear that something was wrong. And I pulled off my handkerchief in haste, repeating, "That was Bab, I am sure."

But if it was, I could not see her. And what had come over them all? Jack's face wore a provoking smile, and his friends were bent upon sniggering. Clare looked startled, and grandmamma gently titillated, while Miss Guest, who had risen and turned away towards the windows, seemed to be annoyed with some one. What was the matter?

"I beg every one's pardon by anticipation," I said, looking round in a bewildered way; "but have I said anything wrong?"

"Oh, dear no," cried the fellow they called Jack, with a familiarity that was in the worst taste--as if I had meant to apologise to him! "Most natural thing in the world!"

"Jack, how dare you?" Miss Guest exclaimed, stamping her foot.

"Well, it seemed all right. It sounded natural, I am sure. Well done, I thought."

"Oh, you are unbearable! Why don't you say something, Clare? Mr. Herapath, I am sure that you did not know that my name was Barbara."

"Certainly not," I cried. "What a strange thing!"

"But it is, and that is why grandmamma is looking shocked, and Mr. Buchanan is wearing threadbare the friend's privilege of being rude. I forgive you if you will make allowance for him. And you shall come off the stool of repentance and have your tea first, since you are the greatest stranger. It is a stupid game after all!"

She would hear no apologies from me. And when I would have asked why her sister bore the same name, and so excused myself, she was intent upon tea-making, and the few moments I could with decency add to my call gave me no opportunity. I blush to think how I eked them out; by what subservience to Clare, by what a slavish anxiety to help Jack to muffins--each piece I hoped might choke him! How slow I was to find hat and gloves, calling to mind with terrible vividness, as I turned my back upon the circle, that again and again in my experience an acquaintance begun by a dinner had ended with the consequent call. And so I should have gone--it might have been so here--but the door-handle was stiff, and Miss Guest came to my aid, as I fumbled with it. "We are always at home on Saturdays, if you like to call, Mr. Herapath," she murmured carelessly--and I found myself in the street.

So carelessly she had said it that, with a sudden change of feeling, I vowed I would not call. Why should I? Why should I worry myself with the sight of other fellows parading their favour? With the babble of that society chit-chat, which I had often scorned, and--still scorned, and had no part or concern in. They were not people to suit me, or do me good. I would not go, I said, and I repeated it firmly on Monday and Tuesday; on Wednesday I so far modified it that I thought at some distant time I would leave a card--to avoid discourtesy. On Friday I preferred an earlier date as wiser and more polite, and on Saturday I walked shame-faced down the street and knocked and rang, and went upstairs--to taste a pleasant misery. Yes, and on the next Saturday too, and the next, and the next; and that one when we all went to the theatre, and that other one when Mr. Guest kept me to dinner. Ay, and on other days that were not Saturdays, among which two stand high out of the waters of forgetfulness--high days indeed--days like twin pillars of Hercules, through which I thought to reach, as did the seamen of old, I knew not what treasures of unknown lands stretching away under the setting sun. First that Wednesday on which I found Barbara Guest alone and blurted out that I had the audacity to wish to make her my wife; and then heard, before I had well--or badly--told my tale, the wheels of grandmamma's chair outside.

"Hush!" the girl said, her face turned from me. "Hush, Mr. Herapath. You don't know me, indeed. You have seen so little of me. Please say nothing more about it. You are under a delusion."

"It is no delusion that I love you, Barbara!" I cried.

"It is!" she repeated, freeing her hand. "There, if you will not take an answer--come--come at three to-morrow. But mind, I promise you nothing--I promise nothing," she added feverishly. And she fled from the room, leaving me to talk to grandmamma as best, and escape as quickly, as I might.

I longed for a great fire that evening, and failing one, I tired myself by tramping unknown streets of the East End, striving to teach myself that any trouble to-morrow might bring was but a shadow, a sentiment, a thing not to be mentioned in the same breath with the want and toil of which I caught glimpses up each street and lane that opened to right and left. In the main, I failed; but the effort did me good, sending me home tired out, to sleep as soundly as if I were going to be hanged next day, and not--which is a very different thing--to be put upon my trial.

"I will tell Miss Guest you are here, sir," the man said. I looked at all the little things in the room which I had come to know well--her work-basket, the music upon the piano, the table-easel, her photograph. And I wondered if I were to see them no more, or if they were to become a part of my everyday life. Then I heard her come in, and turned quickly, feeling that I should learn my fate from her greeting.

"Bab!" The word was wrung from me perforce. And then we stood and looked at one another, she with a strange pride and defiance in her eyes, though her cheek was dark with blushes, and I with wonder and perplexity in mine. Wonder and perplexity that grew into a conviction, a certainty that the girl standing before me in the short-skirted brown dress with tangled hair and loose neck-ribbon was the Bab I had known in Norway; and yet that the eyes--I could not mistake them now, no matter what unaccustomed look they might wear--were Barbara Guest's!

"Miss Guest--Barbara," I stammered, grappling with the truth, "why have you played this trick upon me?"

"It is Miss Guest and Barbara now," she cried, with a mocking courtesy. "Do you remember, Mr. Herapath, when it was Bab? When you treated me as a toy, and a plaything, with which you might be as intimate as you liked; and hurt my feelings--yes, it is weak to confess it, I know--day by day, and hour by hour?"

"But surely, that is forgiven now?" I said, dazed by an attack so sudden and so bitter. "It is atonement enough that I am at your feet now!"

"You are not," she retorted. "Don't say you have offered love to me, who am the same with the child you teased at Breistolen. You have fallen in love with my fine clothes, and my pearls and my

maid's work! not with me. You have fancied the girl you saw other men make much of. But you have not loved the woman who might have prized that which Miss Guest has never learned to value."

"How old are you?" I said, hoarsely.

"Nineteen!" she snapped out. And then for a moment we were both silent.

"I begin to understand now," I answered as soon as I could conquer something in my throat. "Long ago when I hardly knew you, I hurt your woman's pride; and since that you have plotted---

"No, you have tricked yourself!"

"And schemed to bring me to your feet that you might have the pleasure of trampling on me. Miss Guest, your triumph is more complete than you are able to understand. I loved you this morning above all the world--as my own life--as every hope I had. See, I tell you this that you may have a moment's keener pleasure when I am gone."

"Don't! Don't!" she cried, throwing herself into a chair and covering her face.

"You have won a man's heart and cast it aside to gratify an old pique. You may rest content now, for there is nothing wanting to your vengeance. You have given me as much pain as a woman, the vainest and the most heartless, can give a man. Good-bye."

With that I was leaving her, fighting my own pain and passion, so that the little hands she raised as though they could ward off my words were nothing to me. I felt a savage delight in seeing that I could hurt her, which deadened my own grief. The victory was not all with her lying there sobbing. Only where was my hat? Let me get my hat and go. Let me escape from this room wherein every trifle upon which my eye rested awoke some memory that was a pang. Let me get away, and have done with it all.

Where was the hat? I had brought it up. I could not go without it. It must be under her chair by all that was unlucky, for it was nowhere else. I could not stand and wait, and so I had to go up to her, with cold words of apology upon my lips, and being close to her and seeing on her wrist, half hidden by fallen hair, the scar she had brought home from Norway, I don't know how it was that I fell on my knees by her and cried--

"Oh, Bab, I love you so! Let us part friends."

For a moment, silence. Then she whispered, her hand in mine, "Why did you not say Bab to begin? I told you only that Miss Guest had not learned to value your love."

"And Bab?" I murmured, my brain in a whirl.

"She learned long ago, poor girl!"

The fair, tear-stained face of my tyrant looked into mine for a moment, and then came quite naturally to its resting-place.

"Now," she said, when I was leaving, "you may have your hat, sir."

"I believe," I replied, "that you sat upon this chair on purpose."

And Bab blushed. I believe she did.

GERALD

GERALD

I have friends who tell me that they seldom walk the streets of London without wondering what is passing behind the house-fronts; without picturing a comedy here, a love-scene there, and behind the dingy cane blinds a something ill-defined, a something odd and *bizarre*. They experience--if you believe them--a sense of loneliness out in the street, an impatience of the sameness of all these many houses, their dull bricks and discreet windows, and a longing that some one would step out and ask them to enter and see the play.

Well, I have never felt any of these things; but as I was passing through Fitzhardinge Square about half-past ten o'clock one evening in last July, after dining, if I remember rightly, in Baker Street, something happened to me which I fancy may be of interest to such people.

I was passing through the square from north to south, and to avoid a small crowd, which some reception had drawn together, I left the pavement and struck across the road to the path round the oval garden; which, by the way, contains a few of the finest trees in London. This part was in deep shadow, so that when I presently emerged from it and recrossed the road to the pavement near the top of Fitzhardinge Street, I had an advantage over persons on the pavement. They were under the lamps, while I, coming from the shadow under the trees, was invisible.

The door of the house immediately in front of me as I crossed was open, and standing at it was an elderly man-servant out of livery, who looked up and down the pavement by turns. It was his air of furtive anxiety that drew my attention to him. He was not like a man looking for a cab, or waiting for his sweetheart; and I had my eye upon him as I stepped upon the pavement beside him. My surprise was great when he uttered an exclamation of dismay at sight of me, and made as if he would retreat; while his face, in the full glare of the light, grew so pale and terror-stricken that he might before have been completely at his ease. I was astonished and instinctively stood, returning his gaze; for perhaps twenty seconds we remained so, he speechless, and his hands fallen by his side. Then, before I could move on, he cried, "Oh! Mr. George! Oh! Mr. George!" in a tone that rang in the stillness more like a wail than an ordinary cry.

My name, my surname I mean, is George. For a moment I took the address to myself, forgetting that the man was a stranger; and my heart began to beat more quickly with fear of what might have happened. "What is it?" I exclaimed. "What is it?" and I pulled from the lower part of my face the silk muffler I was wearing. The evening was close, but I had been suffering from a sore throat.

He came nearer and peered more closely at me and I dismissed my fear; for I could see the discovery of his mistake dawning upon him. His pallid face, on which the pallor was the more noticeable, seeing that his plump features were those of a man with whom the world went well, regained some of its lost colour, and a sigh of relief passed his lips. But this feeling was only momentary. The joy of escape from whatever blow he had thought imminent gave place to his previous state of expectancy of something.

"You took me for another person," I said, preparing to pass on. At that moment I could have sworn--I would have given one hundred to one twice over--that he was going to say yes. To my immense astonishment, he did not. With a visible effort he said "No!"

"Eh! What?" I exclaimed. I had taken a step or two.

"No, sir."

"Then what is it?" I said. "What do you want, my good fellow?"

Watching his shuffling indeterminate manner I wondered if he were sane. His next answer reassured me. There was an almost desperate deliberation in his manner. "My master wishes to see you, sir," was what he said, "if you will kindly walk in for five minutes."

I should have replied, "Who is your master?" if I had been wise; or cried, "Nonsense!" and gone my way. But often the mind when it is spurred by an emergency over-runs the more obvious course to adopt a worse. It was possible that one of my intimates had taken the house, and said in his butler's presence that he wished to see me. Thinking of that I answered, "Are you sure? Have you not made a mistake, my man?"

With a sullenness that was new in him, he said, No, he had not. Would I please to walk in? He stepped forward as he spoke, and induced me by a kind of urgency to enter the house, taking from me with the ease of a trained servant my hat, coat, and muffler. Finding himself in the course of his duties he gained composure; while I, being thus treated, lost my sense of the strangeness of the proceeding, and only awoke to a full consciousness of my position when he had shut the door behind us and was putting up the chain.

Then I confess I looked round, alarmed at my easiness. But I found the hall spacious, lofty, and dark-panelled, the ordinary hall of an old London house. The big fireplace was filled with plants in flower. There were rugs on the floor and a number of chairs with painted crests on the backs, and in a corner was an old sedan chair, its poles upright against the wall.

No other servants were visible. But apart from this all was in order, all was quiet, and the

notion of violence was manifestly absurd.

At the same time the affair seemed of the strangest. Why should the butler in charge of a well-arranged and handsome house--the house of an ordinary wealthy gentleman--why should he hang about the open doorway as if anxious to feel the presence of his kind? Why should he show the excitement, even the terror, which I had witnessed? Why should he introduce a stranger?

I had reached this point when he led the way upstairs. The staircase was wide, the steps were low and broad. On either side at the head of the flight stood a Venus of white Parian marble. They were not common reproductions, and I paused. I could see beyond them a Hercules and a Meleager, and delicately tinted draperies and ottomans that under the light of a silver hanging-lamp--a gem from Malta--changed a mere lobby to a fairies' nook. The sight filled me with a certain suspicion; which was dispelled, however, when my hand rested for an instant upon the pedestal that supported one of the statues. The cold touch of the marble was enough. The pillars were not of composite; as they certainly would have been in a gaming-house, or worse.

Three steps carried me across the lobby to a curtained doorway by which the servant was waiting. I saw that the "shakes" were upon him again. His impatience was so ill-concealed that I was not surprised, though I was taken aback, when he dropped the mask. As I passed him--it being now too late for me to retreat undiscovered, if the room were occupied--he laid a trembling hand on my arm and thrust his face close to mine. "Ask how he is!" he whispered, trembling. "Say anything, no matter what, sir! Only, for the love of Heaven, stay five minutes!"

He gave me a gentle push as he spoke--pleasant all this!--and announced in a loud quavering voice, "Mr. George!"--which was true enough. I found myself walking round a screen at the same time that something in the room, a long dimly-lighted room, fell with a brisk rattling sound. This was followed by the scuffling noise of a person, still hidden from me by the screen, rising to his feet.

Next moment I was face to face with two men. One, a handsome elderly gentleman, who wore grey moustaches and would have seemed in place at a service club, was still seated. He regarded me with a perfectly unmoved face, as if my entrance at that hour were the commonest incident of his life. The other had risen and stood looking at me askance. He was five-and-twenty years younger than his companion and he was as good-looking in a different way. But his face was white and, unless I was mistaken, was distorted by the same terror--ay, and a darker terror than that which I had surprised in the servant's features; it was the face of one in a desperate strait. He looked as a man looks who has put all he has in the world upon an outsider--and done it twice. In that quiet drawing-room by the side of his placid companion, with nothing in their surroundings to account for his emotion, his panic-stricken face shocked me inexpressibly.

They were in evening dress; and between them was a chess-table, its men in disorder. Almost touching this was another small table bearing a tray of Apollinaris water and spirits. On this the young man was resting one hand as if but for its support he would have fallen.

To add one more fact; I had never seen either of them in my life.

Or wait; could that be true? If so, I must be dreaming. For the elder man broke the silence by addressing me in a quiet ordinary tone that matched his face. "Sit down, George," he said, "don't stand there. I did not expect you this evening." He held out his hand, without rising from his chair, and I advanced and shook it in silence. "I thought you were in Liverpool. How are you?" he continued.

"Very well, I thank you," I muttered mechanically.

"Not very well, I should say," he retorted. "You are as hoarse as a raven. You have a bad cold. It is nothing worse, my boy, is it?" with anxiety.

"No, a throat cough; nothing else," I murmured, resigning myself to this astonishing reception--this evident concern for my welfare on the part of a man whom I had never seen in my life.

"That is well!" he answered cheerily. Not only did my presence cause him no surprise. It gave him, without doubt, pleasure!

It was otherwise with his companion. He had made no advances to me, spoken no word, scarcely altered his position. His eyes he had never taken from me. Yet there was a change in him. He had discovered his mistake, as the butler had discovered his. The terror was gone from his face, and a malevolence not much more pleasant to witness had taken its place. Why this did not break out in an active form was part of the mystery given to me to solve. I could only surmise from glances which he cast from time to time towards the door, and from the occasional creaking of a board in that direction, that his self-restraint had to do with my friend the butler. The inconsequences of dreamland ran through it all. Why the elder man remained in error; why the younger with that passion on his face was tongue-tied; why the great house was so still; why the servant should have mixed me up with the business at all--these were questions as unanswerable, one as the other.

And the fog in my mind grew denser when the old gentleman turned from me as if my presence were a usual thing, and rapped the table before him. "Now, Gerald!" he cried in sharp

tones, "have you put those pieces back? Good heavens! I am glad that I have not nerves like yours! Don't remember the squares, boy? Here, give them to me!" With a hasty gesture of his hand, something like a mesmeric pass over the board, he sat down the half-dozen pieces with a rapid tap! tap! tap! which made it abundantly clear that he, at any rate, had no doubt of their various positions.

"You will not mind sitting by until we have finished the game?" he continued, speaking to me, in a voice more genial than that which he had used to Gerald. "I suppose you are anxious to talk to me about your letter, George?" he went on when I did not answer. "The fact is that I have not read the enclosure. Barnes, as usual, read the outer letter, in which you said the matter was private and of grave importance; and I intended to go to Laura to-morrow, as you suggested, and get her to read the other to me. Now you have returned so soon, I am glad that I did not trouble her."

"Just so, sir," I said, listening with all my ears; and wondering.

"Well, I hope there is nothing very bad the matter, my boy?" he replied. "However--Gerald! it is your move! Ten minutes more of such play as your brother's, and I shall be at your service."

Gerald made a hurried move, the piece rattling upon the board as if he had been playing the castanets. His father made him take it back. I sat watching the two in wonder and silence. What did it all mean? Why should Barnes--now behind the screen listening--have read the outer letter? Why must Laura be employed to read the inner? Why could not this cultivated and refined gentleman before me read his--Ah! That much was disclosed. A mere turn of the hand did it. He had made another of those passes over the board, and I learned from it what an ordinary examination would not have detected. He, the old soldier with the placid face and light blue eyes, was blind! Quite blind!

I began to see more clearly now. And from this moment I took up, in my own mind, a different position. Possibly the servant who had impelled me into the middle of the scene had had good reasons for doing so, as I began to discern. But with a clue to the labyrinth in my hand I could no longer move passively. I must act for myself. For a while I sat still and made no sign. But my suspicions were presently confirmed. The elder man more than once scolded his opponent for playing slowly; in one of the intervals caused by his opponent's indecision he took from an inside pocket of his waistcoat a small packet.

"You had better take your letter, George," he said. "If there are originals in it, they will be more safe with you than with me. You can tell me all about it, now you are here. Gerald will leave us presently."

He held the papers towards me. To take them was to take an active part in the imposture, and I hesitated, my hand half outstretched. But my eyes fell at the critical instant upon Master Gerald's face, and my scruples took themselves off. He was eyeing the packet with an intense greed, with a trembling longing--a very itching of the fingers, to fall upon the prey--that put an end to my doubts. I took the papers. With a quiet, but I think a significant, look in his direction, I placed them in the breast-pocket of my coat. I had no safer receptacle about me, or into that they would have gone.

"Very well, sir," I said. "There is no particular hurry. I think the matter will keep, as things now are, until to-morrow."

"So much the better. You ought not to be out with such a cold, my boy," he continued. "You will find a decanter of the Scotch whisky you gave me last Christmas on the tray. Will you have some with hot water and a lemon? The servants are all at the theatre--Gerald begged a holiday for them--but Barnes will get you the things in a minute."

"Thank you; I won't trouble him. I will take some with cold water," I replied, thinking I should gain in this way what I wanted--time to think; five minutes to myself, while they played.

But I was out in my reckoning. "I will have mine also now," he said. "Will you mix it, Gerald?"

Gerald jumped up to do it with tolerable alacrity. I sat still, preferring to help myself, when he should have attended to his father--if his father it was. I felt more easy now that I had those papers in my pocket. The more I thought of it, the more certain I became that they were the object of whatever devilry was on foot; and that possession of them gave me the whip-hand. My young gentleman might snarl and show his teeth, but the prize had escaped him.

Perhaps I was a little too confident; a little too contemptuous of my opponent; a little too proud of the firmness with which I had taken at one and the same time the responsibility and the whip-hand. A creak of the board behind the screen roused me from my thoughts. It fell upon my ear trumpet-tongued: it contained, I know not what note of warning. I glanced up with a conviction that I was napping, and looked instinctively towards the young man. He was busy at the tray, his back to me. Relieved of my fear of something--perhaps a desperate attack upon my pocket, I was removing my eyes, when I caught sight of his reflection in a small mirror beyond him.

What was he busy about? Nothing. Absolutely nothing, at the moment. He was standing

motionless--I could fancy him breathless also--a listening expression on his face; which seemed to me to have faded to a greyish tinge. His left hand was clasping a half-filled tumbler; the other was at his waistcoat pocket. So he stood during perhaps a second, a small lamp upon the tray before him illumining his handsome figure; then his eyes, glancing up, met the reflection of mine in the mirror. Swiftly as thought could pass from brain to limb, the hand which had been resting in the pocket flashed with a clatter among the glasses; and turning as quickly, he brought one of the latter to the chess-table, and set it down unsteadily.

What had I seen! Actually nothing. Just what Gerald had been doing. Yet my heart was going as many strokes to the minute as a losing crew. I rose abruptly.

"Wait a moment, sir," I said, as the elder man laid his hand upon the glass, "I don't think that Gerald has mixed this quite as you like it."

He had already lifted it to his lips. I looked from him to Gerald. The young man's colour, though he faced me hardily, shifted, and he seemed to be swallowing a succession of oversized fives-balls. But his eyes met mine in a vicious kind of smile that was not without its gleam of triumph. I was persuaded that all was right before his father said so.

"Perhaps you have mixed for me?" I suggested pleasantly.

"No!" he answered in sullen defiance. He filled a glass with something--perhaps it was water--and drank it, his back towards me. He had not spoken so much as a single word to me before.

The blind man's ear recognized the tone. "I wish you boys would agree better," he said wearily. "Gerald, go to bed. I would as soon play chess with an idiot from Earlswood. Generally you can play the game if you are good for nothing else; but since your brother came in, you have not made a move which any one save an imbecile would make. Go to bed, boy! Go to bed!"

I had stepped to the table while he spoke. One of the glasses was full. I lifted it with seeming unconcern to my nose. There was whisky in it as well as water. Then *had* Gerald mixed for me? At any rate, I put the tumbler aside, and helped myself afresh. When I set the glass down--and empty, my mind was made up.

"Gerald does not seem inclined to move, sir," I said quietly, "so I will. I will call in the morning and discuss that matter, if it will suit you. To-night I feel inclined to get to bed early."

"Quite right, my boy. I would ask you to take a bed here instead of turning out, but I suppose that Laura will be expecting you. Come in to-morrow morning. Shall Barnes call a cab for you?"

"I think I will walk," I answered, shaking the proffered hand. "By the way, sir," I added, "have you heard who is the new Home Secretary?"

"Yes, Henry Matthews," he replied. "Gerald told me. He had heard it at the club."

"It is to be hoped that he will have no womanish scruples about capital punishment," I said as if I were incidentally considering the appointment. And with that last shot at Mr. Gerald--he turned green, I thought, a colour which does not go well with a black moustache--I walked out of the room, which looked so peaceful, so cosy, so softly lighted, I went downstairs. I hoped that I had paralysed the young fellow, and might leave the house without molestation.

But as I gained the foot of the stairs he tapped me on the shoulder. I saw then, looking at him, that I had mistaken my man. Every trace of the defiance which had marked his manner upstairs was gone. His face was still pale, but it wore a smile as we confronted one another under the hall lamp. "I have not the pleasure of knowing you, but let me thank you for your help," he said in a low voice, yet with a kind of frank spontaneity. "Barnes' idea of bringing you in was a splendid one, and I am greatly obliged to you."

"Don't mention it," I answered, proceeding with my preparations for going out, as if he were not there. Although I must confess that this complete change in him exercised my mind no little.

"I feel so sure that we may rely upon your discretion," he went on, ignoring my tone, "that I need say nothing about that. Of course, we owe you an explanation, but as the cold is yours and not my brother's, you will not mind if I read you the riddle to-morrow instead of keeping you from your bed to-night?"

"It will do equally well--indeed better," I said, putting on my overcoat, and buttoning it across my chest, while I affected to be looking with curiosity at the sedan chair.

He pointed to the place where the packet lay. "You are forgetting the papers," he reminded me. His tone almost compelled the answer, "To be sure!"

But I had made up my mind, and I answered instead, "Not at all. They are quite safe, thank you!"

"But you don't--I beg your pardon----" He opened his eyes very wide as he spoke, as if some new light were beginning to shine upon his mind and he could scarcely believe its revelations. "You don't mean that you are going to take those papers away with you?"

"Certainly."

"My dear sir!" he remonstrated earnestly. "This is preposterous. Pray forgive me the reminder, but those papers, as my father gave you to understand, are private papers, which he supposed himself to be handing to my brother George."

"Just so!" was all I said. And I took a step towards the door.

"You mean to take them?" he asked seriously.

"I do; unless you can explain the part I have played this evening. And also make it clear to me that you have a right to the possession of the papers."

"Confound it! If I must do so to-night, I must!" he said reluctantly. "I trust to your honour, sir, to keep the explanation secret." I bowed, and he went on: "My elder brother and I are in business together. Lately we have had losses which have crippled us so severely that a day or two ago we decided to disclose them to Sir Charles and ask his help. George did so yesterday by letter, giving certain notes of our liabilities. You ask why he did not make such a statement by word of mouth? Because he had to go to Liverpool at a moment's notice to make a last effort to arrange the matter. As for me," with a curious grimace, "my father would as soon discuss business with his dog! Sooner!"

"Well?" I said. He had paused, and was nicking the blossoms off the geraniums in the fireplace with his pocket-handkerchief, looking moodily at his work the while. I cannot remember noticing the handkerchief, yet I can see it now. It had a red border, and was heavily scented with white rose. "Well?"

"Well," he continued, with a visible effort, "my father has been ailing, and this morning his doctor made him see Bristowe. He is an authority on heart-disease, as you know; and his opinion is," he added in a lower voice and with some emotion, "that even a slight shock may prove fatal."

I began to feel hot and uncomfortable. What was I to think? The packet was becoming as lead in my pocket.

"Of course," he resumed more briskly, "that threw our difficulties into the shade; and my first impulse was to get these papers from him. All day I have been trying in vain to effect it. I took Barnes, who is an old servant, into my confidence, but we could think of no plan. My father, like many people who have lost their sight, is jealous, and I was at my wits' end when Barnes brought you up. Your likeness," he added, looking at me reflectively, "to George put the idea into my head, I fancy. Yes, it must have been so. When I heard you announced--for a moment I thought that you were George."

"And you called up a look of the warmest welcome," I put in.

He coloured, but answered immediately, "I was afraid that he would assume that the governor had read his letter, and blurt out something. Good lord! if you knew the funk in which I have been all the evening lest my father should ask me to read the letter!" He gathered up his handkerchief with a sigh, and wiped his forehead.

"I could see it very plainly," I answered, going slowly over what he had told me. To tell the truth, I was in no slight quandary what I should do, or what I should believe. Was this really the key to it all? Dared I doubt it? or that that which I had constructed was a mare's nest--the mere framework of a mare's nest? For the life of me I could not tell!

"Well, sir?" he said, looking up with an offended air. "Is there anything else I can explain? or will you have the kindness to return my property to me now?"

"There is one thing, about which I should like to ask a question," I said.

"Ask on," he replied; and I wondered whether there was not a little too much of bravado in the tone of sufferance he assumed.

"Why do you carry"--I went on, raising my eyes to his, and pausing on the word--"that little medicament--you know what I mean--in your waistcoat pocket?"

He flinched. "I don't quite--quite understand," he began to stammer. Then he changed his tone and went on rapidly, "No! I will be frank with you, Mr. Mr.----"

"George," I said.

"Ah, indeed?" a trifle surprised, "Mr. George! Well, it is something Bristowe gave me this morning to administer to my father--without his knowledge, if possible--should he grow excited. I did not think that you had seen it."

Nor had I. I had only inferred its presence. But having inferred rightly, I was inclined to trust my inference farther. Moreover, while he gave this explanation his breath came and went so quickly that my former suspicions returned. I was ready for him when he said--

"Now I will trouble you, if you please, for those papers?"

"I cannot give them to you," I replied, point blank.

"You cannot give them to me?" he repeated.

"No. Moreover the packet is sealed. I do not see, on second thoughts, what harm I can do you--now that the packet is out of your father's hands--by keeping it until to-morrow, when I will return it to your brother, from whom it came."

"He will not be in London," he answered doggedly. He stepped between me and the door with looks which I did not like. At the same time I felt that some allowance must be made for a man treated in this way.

"I am sorry," I said, "but I cannot do what you ask. I will do this, however. If you think the delay of importance, and will give me your brother's address in Liverpool, I will undertake to post the letters to him at once."

He considered the offer, eyeing me the while with the same disfavour which he had exhibited in the drawing-room. At last he said slowly--

"If you will do that?"

"I will," I repeated. "I will do it immediately."

He gave me the direction--"George Ritherdon, at the London and North-Western Hotel, Liverpool," and in return I gave him my own name and address. Then I parted from him, with a civil good night on either side--and little liking--the clocks striking midnight, and the servants coming in as I passed into the cool darkness of the square.

Late as it was, I went straight to my club, determined that, as I had assumed the responsibility, there should be no laches on my part. There I placed the packet, together with a short note explaining how it came into my possession, in an outer envelope, and dropped the whole, duly directed and stamped, into the nearest pillar-box. I could not register it at that hour, and rather than wait until next morning, I omitted the precaution, merely requesting Mr. Ritherdon to acknowledge its receipt.

Some days passed during which it may be imagined that I thought no little about my odd experience. It was the story of the Lady and the Tiger over again. I had the choice of two alternatives--at least. I might either believe the young fellow's story, which certainly had the merit of explaining in a fairly probable manner an occurrence which did not lend itself freely to explanation. Or I might disbelieve his story, plausible in its very strangeness as it was, in favour of my own vague suspicions. Which was I to do?

I set out by preferring the former alternative. This, notwithstanding that I had to some extent committed myself by withholding the papers. But with each day that passed without bringing an answer from Liverpool, I leaned more and more to the other side. I began to pin my faith to the tiger, adding each morning a point to the odds in the animal's favour. So it went on until ten days had passed.

Then a little out of curiosity, but more, I declare, because I thought it the right thing to do, I resolved to seek out George Ritherdon. I had no difficulty in learning where he could be found. I turned up the firm of Ritherdon Brothers (George and Gerald), cotton-spinners and India merchants, in the first directory I consulted. And about noon the next day I called at their place of business, and sent in my card to the senior partner. I waited five minutes--curiously scanned by the porter, who without doubt saw a likeness between me and his employer--and then I was admitted to the latter's room.

He was a tall man with a fair beard, not a whit like Gerald, and yet tolerably good-looking; if I say more I shall seem to be describing myself. I fancied him to be balder about the temples, however, and greyer and more careworn than the man I am in the habit of seeing in my shaving-glass. His eyes, too, had a hard look, and he seemed to be in ill-health. All these things I took in later. At the time I only noticed his clothes. "So the old gentleman is dead," I thought, "and the young one's tale was true after all!" George Ritherdon was in deep mourning.

"I wrote to you," I began, taking the seat to which he pointed, "about a fortnight ago."

He looked at my card, which he held in his hand.

"I think not," he said slowly.

"Yes," I repeated. "You were then at the London and North-Western Hotel, at Liverpool."

He was stepping to his writing-table, but he stopped. "I was in Liverpool," he answered in a different tone, "but I was not at that hotel. You are thinking of my brother, are you not?"

"No," I said. "It was your brother who told me you were there."

"Perhaps you had better explain," he suggested, speaking in the weary tone of one returning to a painful matter, "what was the subject of your letter. I have been through a great trouble lately, and this may well have been overlooked."

I said I would, and as briefly as possible I told the story of my strange visit in Fitzhardinge Square. He was much moved, walking up and down the room as he listened, and giving vent to occasional exclamations, until I came to the arrangement I had made with his brother. Then he raised his hand as one might do in pain.

"Enough!" he said. "Barnes told me a rambling tale of some stranger. I understand it all now."

"So do I, I think!" I replied dryly. "Your brother went to Liverpool, and received the papers in your name?"

He murmured what I took for "Yes." But he did not utter a single word of acknowledgment to me, or of reprobation of his brother's deceit. I thought some such word should have been spoken; and I let my feelings carry me away. "Let me tell you," I said, warmly, "that your brother is a----"

"Hush!" he said, holding up his hand. "He is dead."

"Dead!" I repeated, shocked and amazed.

"Have you not seen it in the papers? It is in all the papers," he said wearily. "He committed suicide--God forgive me for it!--at Liverpool, at the hotel you have named, and the day after you saw him."

And so it was. He had committed some serious forgery--he had always been wild, though his father, slow to see it, had only lately closed his purse to him--and the forged signatures had come into his brother's power. He had cheated his brother before. There had long been bad blood between them, the one being as cold, business-like, and masterful as the other was idle and jealous.

"I told him," the elder said to me, shading his eyes with his hand, "that I should let him be prosecuted--that I would not protect or shelter him. The threat nearly drove him mad; and while it was hanging over him, I wrote to disclose the matter to Sir Charles. Gerald thought his last chance lay in recovering this letter unread. The proofs against him destroyed, he might laugh at me. His first attempt failed; then he planned with Barnes' cognisance to get possession of the packet by drugging my father. Barnes' courage deserted him at the last; he called you in, and--you know the rest."

"But," I said softly, "your brother did get the letter--at Liverpool."

George Ritherdon groaned. "Yes," he said, "he did. But the proofs were not in it. After writing the outside letter I changed my mind and withheld them, explaining my reasons within. He found his plot was in vain; and it was under the shock of this disappointment--the packet lay before him, re-sealed and directed to me--that he--that he did it. Poor Gerald!"

"Poor Gerald!" I said. What else remained to be said?

It may be a survival of superstition, yet, when I dine in Baker Street now, I take some care to go home by any other route than that which leads through Fitzhardinge Square.

JOANNA'S BRACELET

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On a morning early in the spring of last year, two men stood leaning against the mantelpiece

of a room in one of the Government offices. The taller of the two--he who was at home in the room--was a slim, well-dressed man, wearing his hair parted in the middle, and a diamond pin in the sailor knot of his tie. He had his frock-coat open, and his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat. The attitude denoted complacency, and the man was complacent.

"Well, the funny part of it is," he said lightly, his shoulders pressed against the mantelpiece, "that I am dining at the Burton Smiths' this evening!"

"Ah?" his companion answered, looking at him with eyes of envy. "And so you will see her?"

"Of course. She is to come to them to-day. But they do not know of our engagement yet, and as she does not want to blurt it out the moment she arrives--why, for this evening, it is a secret. Still I thought I would tell you."

He stepped away as he spoke, to straighten a red morocco-covered despatch-box, which stood on the table behind him. It bore, in addition to the flaunting gilt capitals "I.O.," a modest plate with the name "Ernest Wibberley"--his name.

The other waited until he resumed his place. Then, holding out his hand, "Well, I am glad you told me, old boy," he said. "I congratulate you most heartily, believe me."

"Thank you, Jack," Wibberley replied. "I knew you would. I rather feel myself that 'Fate cannot harm me. I have dined to-day.'"

"Happy dog!" said Jack; and presently he took himself off.

The Burton Smiths, of whom we've heard them speak, are tolerably well known in London. Burton Smith himself is a barrister with money and many relations--Irish landlords, Scotch members, Indian judges, and the like. His wife is young, gracious, and fond of society. Their drawing-rooms, though on the topmost flat of Onslow Mansions--rooms with sloping ceilings and a dozen quaint nooks and corners--are seldom empty during the regulation hours.

This particular dinner-party had been planned with some care. "Lady Linacre will come, no doubt," Mrs. Burton Smith had said one day at breakfast, conning a list she held in her hand; "and Mr. May."

But Burton Smith objected to May. "He will talk about nothing but India," he protested, "and the superiority of Calcutta to London. A little of these Bombay ducks goes a long way, my dear."

"Well, James," Mrs. Burton Smith replied placidly--the Hon. Vereker May is a son of Lord Hawthorn--"he will take me in, and I do not mind. Only I must have Mr. Wibberley on the other side to make conversation and keep me alive. Let me see--that will be three. And Joanna Burton--she comes that afternoon--four. Do you know, James, when we were at Rothley for Christmas I thought there was something between your cousin and Mr. Wibberley?"

"Then, for goodness' sake, do not let them sit together!" Burton Smith cried, "or they will talk to one another and to no one else."

"Very well," Mrs. Smith assented. "They shall sit facing one another, and Mr. Wibberley shall take in Mrs. Galantine. She will be sure to flirt with him, and we can watch Joanna's face. I shall soon see if there is anything between them."

Mr. Wibberley was a young man of some importance, if only in his capacity of private secretary to a Minister. He had a thousand acquaintances, and two friends--perhaps three. He might be something some day--was bound to be. He dressed well, looked well, and talked well. He was a little presumptuous, perhaps a trifle conceited; but women like these things in young men, and he had tact. At any rate, he had never yet found himself in a place too strait for him.

This evening as he dressed for dinner--as he brushed his hair, or paused to smile at some reflection--his own, but not in the glass--he was in his happiest mood. Everything seemed to be going well with him. He had no presentiment of evil. He was going to a house where he was appreciated. Mrs. Burton Smith was a great ally of his. And then there would be, as we know, some one else. Happy man!

"Lady Linacre," said his hostess, as she introduced him to a stout personage with white hair, a double chin, and diamonds. Wibberley bowed, making up his mind that the dowager was one of those ladies with strong prejudices, who drag their skirts together if you prove to be a Home Ruler, and leave the room if you mention Sir Charles Dilke. "Mr. May, you have met before," Mrs. Smith continued; "and you know Miss Burton, I think?"

He murmured assent, while she--Joanna--shook hands with him frankly and with the ghost of a smile, perhaps. He played his part well, for a moment; but halted in his sentence as it flashed across his mind that this was their first meeting since she had said "Yes." He recovered from his momentary embarrassment, however, before even Mrs. Burton Smith could note it, and promptly offered Mrs. Galantine his arm.

She was an old friend of his--as friends go in society. He had taken her in to dinner half a

dozen times. "Who is that girl?" she asked, when they were seated; and she raised her glasses and stared through them at her *vis-à-vis*. "I declare she would be pretty if her nose were not so short."

He seized the excuse to put up his glass too, and take a long look. "It is rather short," he admitted, gazing with a whimsical sense of propriety at the deficient organ. "But some people like short noses, you know, Mrs. Galantine."

"Ah! And theatres in August!" she replied incredulously. "And drawing-room games! But, seriously, she would be pretty if it were not for that."

"Would she?" he questioned. "Well, I think she would, do you know?"

And certainly Joanna was pretty, though her forehead was too large, and her nose too small, and her lips too full. For her eyes were bright and her complexion perfect, and her face told of wit, and good temper, and freshness. She had beautiful arms, too, for a chit of nineteen. Mrs. Galantine said nothing about the arms--not out of modesty, but because her own did not form one of her strong points. Wibberley, however, was thinking of them, and whether a bracelet he had by him would fit them. He saw Joanna wore a bracelet--a sketchy gold thing. He considered whether he should take it for a pattern, or whether it might not be more pleasant to measure the wrist for himself.

But Mrs. Galantine returned to the charge. "She is a cousin, is she not?" she asked, speaking so loudly that Joanna looked across and smiled. "I have never met her before. Tell me all about her."

Tell her all about her! Wibberley gasped. He saw a difficulty in telling "all about her," the more as the general conversation was not brisk, and Joanna must bear a part. For an instant, indeed, his presence of mind failed him, and he cast an appalled glance round the table. Then he bent to his task. "Mrs. Galantine," he murmured sweetly, "pray--pray beware of becoming a potato!"

The lady dropped her knife and fork with a clatter. "A potato, Mr. Wibberley? What do you mean?"

"What I say," he answered simply. "You see my plate? It is a picture. You have there the manly beef, and the feminine peas, so young, so tender! And the potato! The potato is the confidante. It is insipid. Do you not agree with me?"

"Bravo, Mr. Wibberley! But am I to apply your parable?" she spoke sharply, glancing across the table, with her fork uplifted, and a pea upon it. "Am I to be the potato?"

"The choice is with you," he replied gallantly. "Shall it be the potato? or the peas?"

Mrs. Burton Smith, seeing him absorbed in his companion, was puzzled. Look as she might at Joanna, she saw no sign of jealousy or self-consciousness. Joanna seemed to be getting on perfectly with her partner; to be enjoying herself to the full, and to be as much interested as any one at table. Mrs. Burton Smith sighed. She had the instinct of matchmaking. And she saw clearly now that there was nothing between the two; that if there had been any philandering at Rothley neither of the young people had put out a hand--or a heart--beyond recovery.

But this success of Wibberley's with Mrs. Galantine had its consequences. After the ladies had withdrawn he grew a trifle presumptuous. By ill-luck, the Hon. Vereker May had reached that period of the evening when India--as seen through the glasses of his memory--was accustomed to put on its rosiest tints; and the two facing one another fell to debating on a subject of which the returned Civilian had seen much and thought little, and the private secretary had read more and thought not at all. They were therefore on a par as to information, and what the younger man lacked in obstinacy he made up in readiness. It was in vain the Nabob blustered, asserted, contradicted--finally grew sulky, silent, stertorous. Wibberley pushed his triumph, and soon paid dearly for it.

It happened that he was the last to enter the drawing-room. The evening was chilly, and the ladies had grouped themselves about the fire, protected from assault, by a couple of gipsy-tables bearing shaded lamps. The incomers, one by one, passed through these outworks--all but Wibberley. He cast a glance of comic despair at Joanna, who was by the fireplace in the heart of the citadel; then, resigning himself to separation, he took a low chair by one of the tables, and began to turn over the books which lay on the latter. There were but half a dozen. He scanned them all, and then his eyes fell on a bracelet which lay beside them; a sketchy gold bracelet, with one big boss--Joanna's.

He looked at the party--himself sitting a little aside, as we have said. They were none of them facing his way. They were discussing a photograph on the overmantel, a photograph of children. He extended his hand and covered the bracelet. He would take it for a pattern, and to-morrow Joanna should ransom it. He tried, as his fingers closed on it, to catch her eye. He would fain have seen her face change and her colour rise. It would have added to the charm which the boyish, foolish act had for him, if she had been privy to it--yet unable to prevent it.

But she would not look; and he was obliged to be content with his plunder. He slid the gold trifle deftly under the fringe of the table, and clasped it round his arm--not a lusty arm--thrusting it as high as it would go that no movement of his shirt-cuff might disclose it. He had a keen sense of the ridiculous, and he would not for the world that any besides Joanna should see the act: that doddering old fossil May, for instance, who, however, was safe enough--standing on the rug with his back turned, and his slow mind forming an opinion on the photograph.

Then--or within a few minutes, at any rate--Wibberley began to find the party dull. He saw no chance of a private word with Joanna. Lady Linacre, his nearest neighbour, was prying on to Mrs. Burton Smith, his next nearest. And he himself, after shining at dinner, had fallen into the background. Hang it, he would go! It was ten o'clock.

He rose, and was stooping across the table, murmuring his excuses to Mrs. Burton Smith, when Lady Linacre uttered an exclamation. He was leaning across her between her head and the lamp, and he fancied he had touched her head-dress. "Pray pardon me, Lady Linacre!" he cried gaily. "I am just going--I have to leave early. So the encroachment will be but for a moment."

"It is not that," the old lady replied. "But where is my bracelet?" She was feeling about the table as she spoke, shifting with her white, podgy hands the volumes that lay on it.

No one on the instant took in the situation. Mrs. Burton Smith had risen, and was listening to Wibberley. The others were talking. But Lady Linacre was used to attention; and when she spoke again her voice was shrill, and almost indecently loud. "Where is my bracelet?" she repeated. "The one with the Agra diamond that I was showing you, Mrs. Burton Smith. It was here a moment ago, and it is gone! It is gone!"

Wibberley was still speaking to his hostess. He heard the old lady's words, but did not at once apply them. He finished his leave-taking at his leisure, and only as he turned recollected himself, and said, with polite solicitude, "What is it, Lady Linacre? Have you dropped something? Can I find it for you?"

He stooped as he spoke; and she drew her skirt aside, and both peered at the floor, while there was a chorus from those sitting nearest of, "What is it, Lady Linacre? Dear Lady Linacre, what have you lost?"

"My Agra diamond!" she replied, her head quivering, her fingers groping about her dress.

"No?" some one said in surprise. "Why, it was here a moment ago. I saw it in your hand."

The old lady held up her wrists. "See!" she said fussily, "I have not got it!"

"But are you sure it is not in your lap?" Burton Smith suggested. Lady Linacre had rather an ample lap. By this time the attention of the whole party had been drawn to the loss, and one or two of the most prudent were looking uncomfortable.

"No," she answered; "I am quite sure that I placed it on the table by my side. I am sure I saw it there. I was going to put it on when the gentlemen came in, and I laid it down for a minute, and--it is gone!"

She was quite clear about it, and looked at Wibberley for confirmation. The table stood between them. She thought he must have seen it; Mrs. Burton Smith being the only other person close to the table.

Burton Smith saw the look. "I say, Wibberley," he said, appealing to him, half in fun, half in earnest, "you have not hidden it for a joke, have you?"

"I? Certainly not!"

To this day Ernest Wibberley wonders when he made the disagreeable discovery of what he had done--that he had taken the wrong bracelet! It was not at once. It was not until the aggrieved owner had twice proclaimed her loss that he felt himself redden, and awoke to the consciousness that the bracelet was on his arm. Even then, if he had had presence of mind, he might have extricated himself. He might have said, "By Jove! I think I slipped it on my wrist in pure absence of mind," or, he might have made some other excuse for his possession of it--an excuse which would have passed muster, though one or two might have thought him odd. But time was everything; and he hesitated. He hated to seem odd, even to one or two; he thought that presently he might find some chance of restoring the bracelet. So he hesitated, peering at the carpet, and the golden opportunity passed. Then each moment made the avowal more difficult, and less ordinary; until, when his host appealed to him--"If you have hidden it for a joke, old fellow, out with it!"--madness overcame him, and he answered as he did.

He looked up, indeed, with well acted surprise, and said his "I? Certainly not!" somewhat peremptorily.

Half a dozen of the guests were peering stupidly about as if they expected to find the lost article in a flower-vase, or within the globe of a lamp. Presently their hostess stayed these explorations. "Wait a moment!" she said abruptly, raising her head. "I have it!"

"Well?"

"John must have moved it when he brought in the tea. That must be it. Ring the bell, James, and we will ask him."

It was done. John came in, and the question was put to him.

"Yes, sir," he said readily; "I saw a bracelet. On the table by the lamp." He indicated the table near Lady Linacre.

"Did you move it?"

"Move it, sir?" the man repeated, surprised by the question, the silence, and the strained faces turned to him. "No, sir; certainly not. I saw it when I was handing the tea to--to Mr. Wibberley, I think it was."

"Ah, very well," his master answered. "That is all. You may go."

It was not possible to doubt the man's face and manner. But when he had left the room, an uncomfortable silence ensued. "It is very strange," Burton Smith said, looking from one to another, and then, for the twentieth time, he groped under the table.

"It is very strange," Wibberley murmured. He felt bound to say something. He could not free himself from an idea that the others, and particularly the Indian Civilian, were casting odd looks at him. He appeared calm enough, but he could not be sure of this. He felt as if he were each instant changing colour, and betraying himself. His very voice sounded forced to his ear as he repeated fussily, "It is very odd--very odd! Where can it be?"

"It cost," Lady Linacre quavered--irrelevantly, but by no means impertinently--"it cost fourteen thousand out there. Indeed it did. And that was before it was set."

A hush as of awe fell upon the room. "Fourteen thousand pounds!" Burton Smith said softly, his hair rising on end.

"No, no," said the old lady, who had not intended to mystify them. "Not pounds; rupees."

"I understand," he replied, rubbing his head. "But that is a good sum."

"It is over a thousand pounds," the Indian Civilian put in stonily, "at the present rate of exchange."

"But, good gracious, James!" Mrs. Burton Smith said impatiently, "why are you valuing Lady Linacre's jewellery--instead of finding it for her? The question is, 'Where is it?' It must be here. It was on this table fifteen minutes ago. It cannot have been spirited away."

"If any one," her husband began seriously, "is doing this for a joke, I do hope----"

"For a joke!" the hostess cried sharply. "Impossible! No one would be so foolish!"

"I say, my dear," he persisted, "if any one is doing this for a joke, I hope he will own up. It seems to me that it has been carried far enough." There was a chorus of assent, half-indignant, half-exculpatory. But no one owned to the joke. No one produced the bracelet.

"Well!" Mrs. Burton Smith exclaimed. And as the company looked at one another, it seemed as if they also had never known anything quite so extraordinary as this.

"Really, Lady Linacre, I think that it must be somewhere about you," the host said at last. "Would you mind giving yourself a good shake?"

She rose, and was solemnly preparing to agitate her skirts, when a guest interfered. It was the Hon. Vereker May. "You need not trouble yourself, Lady Linacre," he said, with a curious dryness. He was still standing by the fireplace. "It is not about you."

"Then where in the world is it?" retorted Mrs. Galantine. "Do you know?"

"If you do, for goodness' sake speak out," Mrs. Burton Smith added indignantly. Every one turned and stared at the Civilian.

"You had better," he said, "ask Mr. Wibberley!"

That was all. But something in his tone produced an electrical effect. Joanna, in her corner--remote, like the Indian, from the centre of the disturbance--turned red and pale, and flashed angry glances round her. For the rest, they wished themselves away. It was impossible to overlook the insinuation. The words, simple as they were, in a moment put a graver complexion on the matter. Even Mrs. Burton Smith was silent, looking to her husband. He looked furtively at Wibberley.

And Wibberley? So far he had merely thought himself in an unpleasant fix, from which he must escape as best he could, at the expense of a little embarrassment and a slight loss of self-respect.

Even the latter he might regain to-morrow, if he saw fit, by telling the truth to Mrs. Burton Smith; and in time the whole thing would become a subject for laughter, a stock dinner-party anecdote. But now, at the first sound of the Indian's voice, he recognised his danger; and saw in the hundredth part of a second that ruin, social damnation, perhaps worse, threatened him. His presence of mind seemed to fail him at sight of the pit opening at his feet. He felt himself reeling, choking, his head surcharged with blood. The room, the expectant faces all turned to him, all with that strange expression on them, swam round before him. He had to lay his hand on a chair to steady himself.

But he did steady himself; to such an extent that those who marked his agitation did not know whether it proceeded from anger or fear. He drew himself up and looked at his accuser, holding the chair suspended in his hands. "What do you mean?" he said hoarsely.

"I should not have spoken," the Civilian answered, returning his gaze, and speaking in measured accents, "if Mr. Burton Smith had not twice appealed to us to confess the joke, if a joke it was."

"Well?"

"Well, only this," the other replied. "I saw you take Lady Linacre's bracelet from that table a few moments before it was missed, Mr. Wibberley."

"You saw me?" Wibberley cried. This time there was the ring of honest defiance, of indignant innocence, in his tone. For if he felt certain of one thing it was that no one had been looking at him when the unlucky deed was done.

"I did," the Civilian replied dispassionately. "My back was towards you. But my eyes were on this mirror"--he touched an oval glass in a Venetian frame which stood on the mantelpiece--"and I saw quite clearly. I am bound to say that, judging from the expression of your face, I was assured that it was a trick you were playing."

Ernest Wibberley tried to frame the words, "And now?"--tried to force a smile. But he could not. The perspiration stood in great beads on his face. He shook all over. He felt himself--and this time it was no fancy--growing livid.

"To the best of my belief," the Civilian added quietly, "the bracelet is on your left arm now."

Wibberley tried to master, but could not, the impulse--the traitor impulse?--which urged him to glance at his wrist. The idea that the bracelet might be visible--that the damning evidence might be plain to every eye--overcame him. He looked down. Of course there was nothing to be seen; he might have known it, for he felt the hot grip of the horrible thing burning his arm inches higher. But when he looked up again--fleeting as had been his glance--he found that something had happened. He faltered, and the chair dropped from his hands. He read in every face save one suspicion or condemnation. Thief and liar! He read the words in their eyes. Yet he would, he must, brazen it out. And though he could not utter a word he looked from them to--Joanna.

The girl's face was pale. But her eyes answered his eagerly, and they were ablaze with indignation. They held doubt, no suspicion. The moment his look fell on her, she spoke. "Show them your arm!" she cried impulsively. "Show them that you have not got it, Ernest!" she repeated with such scorn, such generous passion that it did not need the tell-tale name which fell from her lips to betray the secret to every woman in the room.

"Show them your arm!" Ah, but that was just what he could not do! And as he comprehended this he gnashed his teeth. He saw himself entrapped, and his misery was so plainly written in his face that the best and most merciful of those about him turned from him in pity. Even the girl who loved him shrank back, clutching the mantelpiece in the first spasm of doubt, and fear, and anguish. Her words, her suggestion, had taken from him his last chance. He saw that it was so. He felt the Nemesis the more bitterly on that account; and with a wild gesture, and some reckless word of defiance, he turned blindly and hurried from the room, seized his hat, and went down to the street.

His feelings when he found himself outside were such as it is impossible to describe in passionless sentences. He had wrecked his honour and happiness in an hour. He had lost his place among men through a thoughtless word. We talk and read of a thunderbolt from the blue; still the thing is to us unnatural. Some law-abiding citizen whom a moment's passion has made a murderer, some strong man whom a stunning blow has left writhing on the ground, a twisted cripple--only these could fitly describe his misery and despair as he passed through the streets. It was misery he had brought on himself; and yet how far the punishment exceeded the offence! How immensely the shame exceeded the guilt! He had lied in careless will, with no evil intent; and the lie had made him a thief!

He went up to his rooms like one in a dream, and, scarcely knowing what he did, he tore the bauble from his arm and flung it on the mantel-shelf. By his last act--by bringing it away--he had made his position a hundred times more serious. But he did not at once remember this. After he had sat a while, however, with his head between his hands, wondering if this really were himself--if this really had happened to himself, this irrevocable thing!--he began to see things more clearly. But he could not at once make up his mind what to do. Beyond a hazy idea of returning

the bracelet by the first post, and going on the Continent--of course, he must resign his employment--he had settled nothing, when a step mounting the staircase made him start to his feet. Some one knocked at the door of his chambers. He stood pallid and listened, struck by a sudden fear.

"The police!" he said to himself.

A moment's thought satisfied him that it was improbable, if not impossible, that they could be on his track so soon; and he went to the door listlessly and threw it open. On the mat stood Burton Smith, in a soft slouched hat, his hands thrust into the pockets of his overcoat. Wibberley glanced at him, and saw that he was alone; then leaving him to shut the door, he returned to his chair, and sat down in his old attitude, with his head between his hands. He looked already a broken man.

Burton Smith followed him in, and stood a moment looking at him uncomfortably enough. It is bad to have had such a scene as has been described in your house; it is worse, if a man be a man, to face a fellow-creature in his hour of shame. At any rate, Burton Smith felt it so. "Look here, Wibberley," he said at length, as much embarrassed as if he had been the thief. "Look here, it will be better to hush this up. Give me the d----d bracelet to hand back to Lady Linacre, and the thing shall go no farther."

His tone was suggestive both of old friendship and of present pity. But when he had to repeat his question, when Wibberley gave him no answer, his voice grew more harsh. Even then the man with the hidden face did not speak, but pointed with an impatient gesture to the mantel-shelf.

Burton Smith stepped to the fire-place and looked. He was anxious to spare the culprit as far as possible. Yes, there was the bracelet. He took possession of it, anxious to escape from the place with all speed. But he laid it down the next instant as quickly as he had taken it up; and his brows came together as he turned upon his companion.

"This is not the bracelet!" he said. There was no smack of affection in his tone now; it was wholly hostile. His patience was exhausted. "Lady Linacre's was a diamond bracelet of great value, as you know," he said. "This is a plain gold thing worth two or three pounds. For Heaven's sake, man!" he added with sudden vehemence, "for your own sake, don't play the fool now! Where is the bracelet?"

Doubtless despair had benumbed Wibberley's mind, for he did not reply, and Burton Smith had to put his question more than once before he got an answer. When Wibberley at last looked up it was with a dazed face. "What is it?" he muttered, avoiding the other's eyes.

"This is not Lady Linacre's bracelet."

"That's not?"

"No; certainly not."

Still confused, still shunning the other's look, Wibberley rose, took the bracelet in his hand, and frowned at it. Burton Smith saw him start.

"It is of the same shape," the barrister repeated, ice in his voice--he thought the exchange a foolish, transparent artifice--worse than the theft. "But Lady Linacre's has a large brilliant where that has a plain boss. That is not the bracelet."

Wibberley turned away, the thing in his hand, and went to the window, and stood there a long moment looking out into the darkness. The curtains were not drawn. As he stood, otherwise motionless, his shoulders trembled so violently that a dreadful suspicion seized his late host, who desisted from watching him and looked about, but in vain, for a phial or a glass.

At the end of the minute Wibberley turned. For the first time he confronted his visitor. His eyes were bright, his face very pale; but his mouth was set and firm. "I never said it was!" he answered.

"Was what?" the other cried impatiently.

"I never said it was Lady Linacre's. It was you who said that," he continued, his head high, a change in his demeanour, an incisiveness almost harsh in his tone. "It was you--you who suspected me! I could not show you my arm because I had that bracelet on it."

"And whose bracelet is it?" Burton Smith murmured, shaken as much by the sudden change in the man's demeanour as by his denial.

"It is your cousin's--Miss Burton's. We are engaged," Wibberley continued sternly--so entirely had the two changed places. "She intended to tell you to-morrow. I saw it on the table, and secreted it when I thought that no one was looking. I needed a pattern--for a bracelet I am giving her."

"And it was Joanna's bracelet that Vereker May saw you take?"

"Precisely."

Burton Smith said a word about the Civilian which we need not repeat. Then, "But why on earth, old fellow, did you not explain?" he asked.

"First," Wibberley replied with force, "because I should have had to proclaim my engagement to all those fools; and I had not Joanna's permission to do that. Secondly--well, I did not wish to confess to being such an idiot as I was."

"Ah!" said Burton Smith, slowly, an odd light in his eyes. "I think you were a fool, but--I suppose you will shake hands?"

"Certainly, old man." And they did so, warmly.

"Now," continued the barrister, his face becoming serious again, "the question is, where is Lady Linacre's bracelet?"

"I don't care a d---n," Wibberley answered. "I am sure you will excuse me saying so. I have had trouble enough with it--I know that--and, if you do not mind, I am going to bed."

But though his friend left him, Wibberley did not go to bed at once. Burton Smith hurrying homeward--to find when he reached Onslow Mansions that Lady Linacre's bracelet had been discovered in a flounce of her dress--would have been surprised, very much surprised indeed, could he have looked into Wibberley's chambers a minute after his departure. He would have seen his friend down on his knees before a great chair, his face hidden, his form shaken by hysterical sobbing. For Wibberley was moved to the inmost depths of his nature. It is not given to many men to awake and find their doom a dream. Only in dreams, indeed, does the cripple get his strength again, and the murderer his old place among his fellow-men. Wibberley was fortunate.

And the lesson? Did he take it to heart? Well, lessons and morals are out of fashion in these days. Or stay--ask Joanna. She should know.

THE BODY-BIRDS OF COURT

THE BODY-BIRDS OF COURT

"Eighty-eight when he died! That is a great age," I said.

"Yes, indeed. But he was a very clever man, was Robert Evans Court, and brewed good beer," my companion answered. "His home-brewed was known, I am certain, for more than ten miles. You will have heard of his body-birds, sir?"

"His body-birds?" I exclaimed.

"Yes, to be sure. Robert Evans Court's body-birds!" With which he looked at me, quick to suspect that his English was deficient. He had learned it in part from books; hence the curious mixture I presently noted of Welsh idioms and formal English phrases. It was his light trap in which I was being helped on my journey, and his genial chat that was lightening that journey; which lay through a part of Carnarvonshire usually traversed only by wool-merchants and cattle-dealers--a country of upland farms swept by the sea-breezes, where English is not spoken at this day by one person in a hundred, and even at inns and post-offices you get only "*Dim Sassenach*" for your answer. "Do you not say," he went on, "body-birds in English? Oh, but to be sure, it is in the Bible!" with a sudden recovery of his self-esteem.

"To be sure!" I replied hurriedly. "Of course it is! But as to Mr. Robert Evans, cannot you tell me the story?"

"I'll be bound there is no man in North or South Wales, or Carnarvonshire, that could tell it better, for Gwen Madoc, of whom you shall hear presently, was aunt to me. You see Robert Evans"--and my friend settled himself in his seat and prepared to go slowly up the long steep hill of Rhiw which rose before us--"Robert Evans lived in an old house called Court, near the sea, very windy and lonesome. He was a warm man. He had Court from his father, and he had mortgages, and as many as four lawsuits. But he was unlucky in his family. He had years back three sons who helped on the farm, or at times fished; for there is a cove at Court and good boats. Of these sons only one was married--to a Scotchwoman from Bristol, I have heard, who had had a husband before, a merchant captain; and she brought with her to Court a daughter, Peggy, ready-made as we say. Well, of those three fine men there was not one left in a year. They were out fishing in a boat together, and Evan--that was the married one--was steering as they came into the cove on a spring tide running very high with a south wind. He steered a little to one side--not more than six inches, upon my honour--and pah! in an hour their bodies were thrown up on Robert Evans' land just bits of seaweed. But that was not all. Evan's wife was on the beach at the time, so near she could have thrown a stone into the boat. They do say that before that she was pining at Court--it was bleak, and lonesome, and cold in the winters, and she had been used to live in the towns. But, however, she never held up her head after Evan was drowned. She took to her bed, and died in the short month. And then, of all at Court, there were left only Robert Evans and the child, Peggy."

"How old was the child then?" I asked. He had paused, and was looking to the front, thoughtfully, striving, it would seem, to make the situation clear to himself.

"She was twelve, and the old man eighty and more. She was in no way related to him, you will remember, but he had her stop, and let her want for nothing that did not cost money. He was very careful of money, as was right; it was that made him the man he was. But there were some who would have given money to be rid of her. Year in and year out they never let the old man rest but that he should send her to service at least--though her father had been the captain of a big ship; and if Robert Evans had not been a stiff man of his years, they would have had their will."

"But who----"

By a gesture he stopped the words on my lips; and then there rose mysteriously out of the silence about us the sound of wings, a chorus of shrill cries. A hundred white forms swept overhead, and fell a white cluster about something in a distant field. They were seagulls. "Just those same!" he said proudly, jerking his whip in their direction--"body-birds. When the news that Robert Evans' sons were drowned got about, there was a pretty uprising in Carnarvonshire. There seemed to be Evanses where there had never been Evanses before. As many as twenty walked in the funeral, and you may be sure that afterwards they did not leave the old man to himself. The Llewellyn Evanses were foremost. They had had a lawsuit with Court, but made it up now, to be sure. Besides, there were Mr. and Mrs. Evan Bevan, and the three Evanses of Nant, and Owen Evans, and the Evanses of Sarn, and many more who were all forward to visit Court, and be friendly with old Gwen Madoc, Robert's housekeeper. I am told they could look black at one another, but in this they were all in one tale, that the foreign child should be sent away; and at times one and another would give her the rough word."

"She must have had a bad time," I observed.

"You may say that. But she stayed, and it was wonderful how strong and handsome she grew up, where her mother had just pined away. The sailors said it was her love of the sea; and I have heard that people who live inland about here come to think of nothing but the land--it is certain that they are good at a bargain--while the fishermen who live with a great space before them are finer men, I have heard, in their minds as well as their bodies; and Peggy *bach* grew up like them, free and open and up-standing, though she lived on land. When she was in trouble she would run down to the sea, where the salt spray washed away her tears and the wind blew her hair, that was of the colour of seaweed, into a tangle. She was never so happy as when she was climbing the rocks among the seagulls, or else sitting with her books in the cove where the farm-people would not go for fear of hearing the church bells that bring bad luck. Books? Oh yes, indeed next to the sea she was fond of books. There were many volumes, I have been told, that were her mother's; and Robert Evans, though he was a Wesleyan, went to church because there was no Wesleyan chapel, the Calvinistic Methodists being in strength here; and the minister lent her many English books and befriended her. And I have heard that once, when the Llewellyn Evanses had been about the girl, he spoke to them so that they were afraid to drive down Rhiw hill that night, but led the horse; and I think it may be true, for they were Calvinists. Still, he was a good man, and I know that many Calvinists walked in his funeral."

"*Requiescat in pace*," said I.

"Eh! Well, I don't know how that may be," he replied, "but you must understand that all this time the Llewellyn Evanses, and the Evanses of Nant, and the others would be at Court once or twice a week, so that all the neighbourhood called them Robert Evans' body-birds; and when they were there Peggy McNeill would be having an ill time, since even the old man would be hard to her; and more so as he grew older. But, however, there was a better time coming, or so it seemed at first, the beginning of which was through Peter Rees's lobster-pots. He was a great friend of hers. She would go out with him to take up his pots--oh, it might be two or three times a week. So it happened one day, when they had pushed off from the beach, and Peggy was steering, that old

Rees stopped rowing on a sudden.

"'Why don't you go on, Peter?' said Peggy.

"'Bide a bit,' said old Rees.

"'What have you forgotten?' said she, looking about in the bottom of the boat. For she knew what he used very well.

"'Nought,' said he. But all the same he began to put the boat about in a stupid fashion, afraid of offending her, and yet loth to lose a shilling. And so, when Peggy looked up, what should she see but a gentleman--whom Rees had perceived, you will understand--stepping into the boat, and Peter Rees not daring to look her in the face because he knew well that she would never go out with strangers.

"Of course the young gentleman thought no harm, but said gaily, 'Thank you! I am just in time.' And what should he do, but go aft and sit down on the seat by her, and begin to talk to Rees about the weather and the pots. And presently he said to her, 'I suppose you are used to steering, my girl?'

"'Yes,' Peggy answered, but very grave and quiet-like, so that if he had not determined that she was old Rees's daughter he would have taken notice of it. But she was wearing a short frock that she used for the fishing, and was wet with getting into the boat moreover.

"'Will you please to hold my hat a minute,' he said; and with that he put it in her lap while he looked for a piece of string with which to fasten it to his button. Well, she said nothing, but her cheeks were scarlet, and by-and-by, when he had called her 'my girl' two or three times more--not roughly, but just offhand, taking her for a fisher-girl--Peter Rees could stand it no longer, shilling or no shilling.

"'You mustn't be speaking that fashion to her,' he said gruffly.

"'What?' said the gentleman looking up. He was surprised, and no wonder, at the tone of the man.

"'You mustn't speak like that to Miss McNeill Court,' repeated old Rees more roughly than before. 'You are to understand she is not a common girl, but like yourself.'

"The young gentleman turned and looked at her just once, short and sharp, and I am told that his face was as red as hers when their eyes met. 'I beg Miss McNeill's pardon,' he said, taking off his hat grandly, yet as if he meant it too; 'I was under a great misapprehension.'

"After that you may believe they did not enjoy the row much. There was scarcely a word said by any one until they came ashore again. The visitor, to the great joy of Peter, who was looking for a sixpence, gave him half a crown; and then walked away with the young lady, side by side with her, but very stiff and silent. However, just as they were parting, Peter could see that he said something, having his hat in his hand the while, and that Miss Peggy, after standing and listening, bowed as grand as might be. Upon which they separated for that time.

"But two things came of this; first, that every one began to call her Miss McNeill Court which was not at all to the pleasure of the Llewellyn Evanses. And then, that whenever the gentleman, who was a painter lodging at Mrs. Campbell's of the shop, would meet her, he would stop and say a few words, and more as the time went on. Presently there came some wet weather; and Mrs. Campbell borrowed for his use books from her, which had her name within; and later he sent for a box of books from London, and then the lending was on the other side. So it was not long before people began to see how things were, and to smile when the gentleman treated old Robert Evans at the Newydd Inn. The fishermen, when he was out with them, would tack so that he might see the smoke of Court over the cliffs; and there was no more Peggy *bach* to be met, either rowing with Peter Rees or running wild among the rocks, but a very sedate young lady who, to be sure, did not seem to be unhappy.

"The old man was ailing in his limbs at this time, but his mind was as clear as ever, and his grip of the land as tight. He could not bear, now that his sons were dead, that any one should come after him. I am thinking that he would be taking every one for a body-bird. Still the family were forward with presents and such-like, and helped him perhaps about the farm; so that, though there was talk in the village, no one could say what will he would make.

"However, one day towards winter Miss Peggy came in late from a walk, and found the old man very cross. 'Where have you been?' he cried angrily. Then, without any warning, 'You have been courting,' he said, 'with that fine gentleman from the shop?'

"'Well,' my lady replied, putting a brave face upon it, as was her way, 'and what then, grandfather? I am not ashamed of it.'

"'You ought to be!' he cried, banging his stick upon the floor. 'Do you think that he will marry you?'

"Yes, I do,' she replied stoutly. 'He has told you so to-day, I know.'

"Robert Evans laughed, but his laugh was not a pleasant one. 'You are right,' he said. 'He has told me. He was very forward to tell me. He thought I was going to leave you my money. But I am not! Mind you that, my girl.'

"Very well,' she answered, white and red by turns.

"You will remember that you are no relation of mine!' he went on viciously, for he had grown very crabbed of late. 'No relation! And I am not going to leave you money. He is after my money. He is nothing but a fortune-catcher!'

"He is not!' she exclaimed, as hot as fire, and began to put on her hat again.

"Very well! We shall see!' answered Robert Evans. 'Do you tell him what I say, and see if he will marry you. Go! Go now, girl, and you need not come back! You will get nothing by staying here!' he cried, for what with his jealousy and the mention of money, he was furious--'not a penny! You had better be off at once!'

"She did not answer for a minute or so, but she seemed to change her mind about going, for she laid down her hat, and went about the house-place getting tea ready--and no doubt her fingers trembled a little--until the old man cried, 'Well, why don't you go? You will get nothing by staying.'

"I shall stay to take care of you all the same,' she answered quietly. 'You need not leave me anything, and then--and then I shall know whether you are right.'

"Do you mean it?' he asked sharply, after looking at her in silence for a time.

"Yes,' said she.

"Then it's a bargain!' cried Robert Evans--'it's a bargain!' And he said not a word more about it, but took his tea from her and talked of the Llewellyn Evanses who had been to pay him a visit that day. It seemed, however, as if the matter had upset him, for he had to be helped to bed, and complained a good deal, neither of which things were usual with him.

"Well, it is not unlikely that the young lady promised herself to tell her lover all about it next day, and looked to hear many times over from his lips that it was not her money he wanted. But this was not to be, for early the next morning Gwen Madoc was at her door.

"You are to get up, miss,' she said. 'The master wants you to go to London by the first train.'

"To London!' cried Peggy, very much astonished. 'Is he ill? Is anything the matter, Gwen?'

"No,' the old woman answered very short. 'It is just that.'

"And when the girl, having dressed hastily, came down to Robert Evans' room, she found that this was pretty nearly all they would tell her. 'You will go to Mrs. Richard Evans, who lives at Islington,' he said, as if he had been thinking about it. 'She is my second cousin, and will find house-room for you, and make no charge whatever. To-morrow you will take this packet to the address upon it, and the next day a packet will be returned to you, which you will bring back to me. I am not well to-day, and I want to have the matter settled, yes, indeed.'

"But could not some one else go, if you are not well?' she objected, 'and I will stop and take care of you.'

"He grew very angry at that. 'Do as you are bidden, girl,' he said. 'I shall see the doctor to-day, and for the rest, Gwen can do for me. I am well enough. Do you look to the papers. Richard Evans owes me money, and will make no charge for your living.'

"So Miss Peggy had her breakfast, and in a wonderfully short time, as it seemed to her, she was on the way to London, with plenty of leisure for thinking--very likely for doubting and fearing as well. She had not seen her sweetheart, that was one thing. She had been despatched in a hurry, that was another. And then, to be sure, the big town was strange to her.

"However, nothing happened there, I may tell you. But on the third morning she received a short note from Gwen Madoc, and suddenly rose from breakfast with Mrs. Richard, her face very white. There was news in the letter--news of which all the neighborhood for miles round Court was full. Robert Evans, if you will believe it, was dead. After ailing for a few hours he had died, with only Gwen Madoc to smooth his pillow.

"It was late when she reached the nearest station to Court on her way back, and found a pony trap waiting. She was stepping into it when Mr. Griffith Hughes, the lawyer, saw her, and came up to speak.

"I am sorry to have bad news for you, Miss McNeill,' he said, and he spoke nicely, for he was a kind man, and, what with the shock and the long journey, she was looking very pale.

"Oh, yes,' she answered, with a sort of weary surprise; 'I know it already. That is why I am come home--to Court, I mean.'

"He saw that she was thinking only of Robert Evans' death, which was not what was in his mind. 'It is about the will,' he said in a whisper, though he need not have been so careful, for every one in the neighbourhood had learned about it from Gwen Madoc. 'It is a cruel will. I would not have made it for him, my dear. He has left Court to the Llewellyn Evanses, and the money between the Evanses of Nant and the Evan Bevans.'

"'It is quite right,' she answered, so calmly that he stared. 'My grandfather explained it to me. I understood that I was not to be in the will.'

"Mr. Hughes looked more and more puzzled. 'Oh, but,' he replied, 'it is not so bad as that. Your name is in the will. He has laid it upon those who get the land and money to provide for you--to settle a proper income upon you. And you may depend upon me for doing my best to have his wishes carried out.'

"The young lady turned very red, and her voice was hard.

"'Who are to provide for me?' she asked. "'The three families who divide the estate,' he said.

"'And are they obliged to do so?'

"'Well--no,' he allowed. 'I am not sure that they are exactly obliged. But no doubt----'

"'I doubt very much,' she answered, taking him up with a smile. And then she shook hands with him and drove away, leaving him wondering at her courage.

"Well, you may suppose it was a dreary house to which she came home. Mr. Griffith Hughes, who was executor, had been before the Llewellyn Evanses in taking possession, and besides a lad or two in the kitchen there were only Gwen Madoc and the servant there, and it was little they seemed to have to tell her about the death. When she had heard what they had to say, and they were all on their way to bed, 'Gwen,' she said softly, 'I think I should like to see him.'

"'So you shall, to-morrow, honey,' answered the old woman. 'But do you know, *bach*, that he has left you nothing?' and she held up her candle suddenly, so as to throw the light on the girl's tired face.

"'Oh!' she answered with a shudder, 'how can you talk about that now?' But presently she had another question ready. 'Have you seen Mr. Venmore since--since my grandfather's death, Gwen?' she asked timidly.

"'Yes, indeed, *bach*,' answered the housekeeper. 'I met him at the door of the shop this morning. I told him where you were, and that you would be back to-night. And about the will moreover.'

"The girl stopped at her own door and snuffed her candle. Gwen Madoc went slowly up the next flight, groaning over the steepness of the stairs. When she turned to say good night, the girl was at her side, her eyes shining in the light of the two candles.

"'Oh, Gwen,' she whispered, 'didn't he say anything?'

"'Not a word, *bach*,' answered the old woman, stroking her hair tenderly. 'He just went into the house in a hurry.'

"Miss Peggy, I am believing, went into her room much in the same way. No doubt she would be telling herself a great many times over before she slept that he would come and see her in the morning: and in the morning she would be saying, 'He will come in the afternoon'; and in the afternoon, 'He will come in the evening.' But evening came, and darkness, and still he did not appear. Then she could endure it no longer. She let herself out of the front door, which there was no one now to use but herself, and with a shawl over her head she ran all the way to the shop. There was no light in the window upstairs; but at the back door stood Mrs. Campbell, looking after some one who had just left her.

"The girl came, shrinking at the last moment, into the ring of light about the door. 'Why, Miss McNeill!' cried the other, starting at sight of her. 'Is it you, honey? And are you alone?'

"'Yes; and I cannot stop. But oh, Mrs. Campbell, where is Mr. Venmore?'

"'I know no more than yourself, my dear,' the good woman said reluctantly. 'He went from here yesterday on a sudden--to take the train, I am supposing.'

"'Yesterday? At what time, please?' the young lady asked. There was a fear, which she had been putting from her all day. It was getting a footing now.

"'Well, it would be about midday. I know it was just after Gwen Madoc called in about the----'

"'But the girl was gone. It was not to Mrs. Campbell she could make a moan. It was only the

night-wind that caught the 'Oh, cruel!' which broke from her as she went up the hill. Whether she slept that night at all I am not able to say. Only when it was dawn she was out upon the cliffs, her face very white and sad-looking. The fishermen who were up early going out with the ebb saw her at times walking fast, and then again standing still and looking seaward. But I do not know what she was thinking, only I should fancy that the gulls had a different cry for her now, and it is certain that when she returned and came down into the parlour at Court for the funeral, there were none of the Evanses could look her in the face with comfort.

"They were all there, of course. Mr. Llewellyn Evans--he was an elderly man, with a grey beard like a bird's nest, and thick lips--was sitting with his wife on the horse-hair sofa. The Evanses of Nant, who were young men with lank faces and black hair combed upwards, were by the door. The Evan Bevans were at the table; and there were others, besides Mr. Griffith Hughes, who was undoing some papers when she entered.

"He rose and shook hands with her, marking the dark hollows under her eyes, and fixing it in his mind to get her a settlement. Then he hesitated, looking doubtfully at the others. 'We are going to read the will before the funeral instead of afterwards,' he said.

"'Oh!' she answered, taken aback--for she had forgotten all about the will. 'I did not know. I will go, and come later.'

"'No, indeed!' cried Mrs. Llewellyn Evans, 'you will be doing well, whatever, to hear the will--though no relation, to be sure.'

"But at that Gwen Madoc came in, and peered round with an air of importance. 'Maybe some one,' she said in a low voice, 'would like to take a last look at the master?'

"But no one moved. They sighed and shook their heads at one another as if they would like to do so--but no one moved. They were anxious, you see, to hear the will. Only Peggy, who had turned to go out, said, 'Yes, Gwen, I should,' and slipped out with the old woman.

"'There is nothing to keep us now?' said Mr. Hughes, briskly, when the door was closed again. And every one nodding assent the lawyer went on to read the will, which was not a long one. It was received with a murmur of satisfaction, and much use of pocket-handkerchiefs.

"'Very fair,' said Mr. Llewellyn Evans. 'He was a very clever man, our old friend.' All the legatees murmured after him 'Very fair!' and a word went round about the home-brewed, and Robert Evans' recipe for it. Then Llewellyn, who thought he ought to be taking the lead at Court now, said it was time to be going to church.

"'There is one matter,' put in Mr. Griffith Hughes, 'which I think ought to be settled while we are all together. You see that there is a--what I may call a charge on the three portions of the property in favour of Miss McNeill.'

"'Indeed, but what is that you are saying?' Llewellyn cried sharply. 'Do you mean that there is a rent charge?'

"'Not exactly a rent charge,' said the lawyer.

"'No!' cried Llewellyn with a twinkle in his eyes. 'Nor any obligation in law whatever?'

"'Well, no,' Mr. Hughes assented grudgingly.

"'Then,' said Llewellyn Evans, getting up and putting his hands in his pockets, while he winked at the others, 'we will talk of that another time.'

"But Mr. Hughes said, 'No!' He was a kind man, and anxious to do the best for the girl, but he somewhat lost his temper. 'No!' he said, growing red. 'You will observe, if you please, Mr. Evans, that the testator says, "Forthwith--forthwith," so that, as sole executor, it is my duty to ask you to state your intentions now.'

"'Well, indeed, then,' said Llewellyn, changing his face to a kind of blank, 'I have no intentions. I think that the family has done more than enough for the girl already.'

"And he would say no other. Nor was it to any purpose that the lawyer looked at Mrs. Llewellyn. She was examining the furniture, and feeling the stuffing of the sofa, and did not seem to hear. He could make nothing of the three Evanses, Nant. They all cried, 'Yes, indeed!' to what Llewellyn said. Only the Evan Bevans remained, and he turned to them.

"'I am sure,' he said, addressing himself to them, 'that you will do something to carry out the testator's wishes? Your share under the will, Mr. Bevan, will amount to three hundred a year. This young lady has nothing--no relations, no home. May I take it that you will settle--say fifty pounds a year upon her? It need only be for her life.'

"Mr. Bevan fidgeted, but his wife answered the lawyer as bold as brass. 'Certainly not, Mr. Hughes,' she said. 'If it were twenty pounds now, once for all, or even twenty-five--and Llewellyn and my nephews would say the same--I think we might manage that?'

"But Llewellyn shook his head obstinately. 'I have said I have no intentions, and I am a man of my word, whatever!' he answered. 'Let the girl go to service. It is what we have wanted her to do. Here are my nephews. They will be liking a young housekeeper.'

"Well, they all laughed at this except Mr. Hughes, who gathered up his papers, looking very black, and not thinking of future clients. Llewellyn, however, did not care a penny for that, but walked to the bell, masterful-like, and rang it. 'Tell the undertaker,' he said to the servant, 'that we are ready.'

"It was as if the words had been a signal, for they were followed by an outcry overhead and quick running upon the stairs. The legatees looked uncomfortably at the carpet; the lawyer was blacker than before. He said to himself, 'It is that poor child that has fainted!' The confusion seemed to last some minutes. Then the door was opened, not by the undertaker, but by Gwen Madoc. The mourners rose, they were thankful to see her; to their surprise she passed by Llewellyn, and with a frightened face walked across to the lawyer. She whispered something in his ear.

"'What!' he cried starting back a pace, and speaking so that the wine-glasses on the table rattled again. 'Do you know what you are saying, woman?'

"'It is true,' she answered, half-crying, 'and no fault of mine neither.' Gwen added more in short sentences, which the family, strain their ears as they might, could not overhear.

"'I will come!' cried the lawyer. He waved his hand to them to make room for her to pass out. Then he turned to them, a queer look upon his face; it was not triumph altogether, for there was some doubt and some alarm in it as well. 'You will believe me,' he said, 'that I am as much taken aback as yourselves--that till this moment I have been as much in the dark as any one. It seems--so I am told--that our old friend is not dead.'

"'What are you meaning!' cried Llewellyn in his turn. 'It is not possible!' and he raised his black-gloved hands.

"'What I say,' Mr. Hughes replied patiently. 'I hear--wonderful as it sounds--that he is not dead. Something about a trance, I believe--a mistake discovered in time. I tell you all I know; and however it comes about, it is clear we ought to be glad that Mr. Robert Evans is spared to us.'

"With that he was glad to escape from the room. When he was gone, I am told that their faces were very strange to see. There was a long silence. Llewellyn was the first to speak. He swore a big oath and banged his great hand upon the table. 'I do not believe it!' he cried. 'I do not believe it! It is a trick!'

"But as he spoke the door opened behind him, and they all turned to see what they had never thought to see, I am sure. They had come to walk in Robert Evans' funeral; and here was the gaunt form of Robert Evans himself coming in, with an arm of Gwen Madoc on one side and of Miss Peggy on the other--Robert Evans beyond doubt alive. Behind him were the lawyer and Dr. Jones, a smile on their lips, and three or four women, half frightened, half wondering.

"The old man was pale, and seemed to totter a little, but when the doctor would have placed a chair for him, he declined it, and stood gazing about him, wonderfully composed for a man just risen from his coffin. He had all his old aspect as he looked upon the family. Llewellyn's declaration was still in their ears, and they could find not a word to say either of joy or grief.

"'Well, indeed,' said Robert, with a dry chuckle, 'have none of you a word to throw at me? I am a ghost, I suppose? Ho, ho!' he exclaimed, as his eye fell on the papers which Mr. Hughes had left upon the table. 'That is why you are not overjoyed at seeing me. You have been reading my will. Well, Llewellyn! Have not you a word to say to me now you know for what I had got you down?'

"At that Llewellyn found his tongue, and the others chimed in finely. Only there was something in the old man's manner that they did not like; and presently, when they had all told him how glad they were to see him again--just for all the world as if he had been ill for a few days--Robert Evans turned again to Llewellyn.

"'You had fixed what you would do for my girl here, I'm thinking?' he said, patting her shoulder gently, at which the family winced. 'It was a hundred a year you promised to settle, you know. You will have arranged, whatever.'

"Llewellyn looked stealthily at Mr. Hughes, who was standing at Robert Evans' elbow, and muttered that they had not reached that stage.

"'What!' the old man cried sharply. 'How was that?'

"'I was intending,' Llewellyn began lamely, 'to settle----'

"'You were intending!' Robert Evans burst forth in a voice so changed that they all started back. 'You are a liar! You were intending to settle nothing! I know it well! I knew it long ago! Nothing, I say! As for you,' he went on, wheeling furiously round upon the Evanses of Nant, 'you knew my wishes. What were you going to do for her? What, I say? Speak, you hobbledehoy!'

"But they were backing from him in absolute fear of his passion, looking at one another or at the sullen face of Llewellyn Evans, or anywhere save at him. At length the eldest blurted out, 'Whatever Llewellyn meant to do, we were going to do, sir.'

"'You speak the truth there,' cried old Robert, bitterly; 'for that was nothing. Very well! I promise you that what Llewellyn Evans gets of my property you shall get too--and it will be nothing! You, Bevan,' and he turned himself towards the Evan Bevan who were shaking in their shoes, 'I am told, did offer to do something for my girl.'

"'Yes, dear Robert,' cried Mrs. Bevan, eagerly, 'we did indeed.'

"'So I hear. Well, when I make my next will, I will set you down for just so much as you proposed to give her! Peggy, *bach*,' he continued, turning from the lady, who was looking very queer, and putting into the girl's hands the will which the lawyer had given him, 'tear up this rubbish! Tear it up! Now let us have something to eat in the other room. What, Llewellyn Evans, no appetite!'

"But the family did not stay even to partake of the home-brewed. They were out of the house, I am told, before the coffin and the undertaker's men. There was big talking amongst them, as they went, of a conspiracy and a lunatic asylum. But though, to be sure, it was a wonderful recovery, and the doctor and Mr. Hughes as they drove away after dinner were very merry together--which may have been only the home-brewed--at any rate all that came of Llewellyn's talking and inquiries was that every one laughed very much, and Robert Evans' name for a clever man was known beyond Carnarvon.

"Of course it would be open house at Court that day, with plenty of eating and drinking and coming and going. But towards five o'clock the place grew quiet. The visitors had gone home, and Gwen Madoc was upstairs. The old man was sleeping in his chair opposite the settle, and Miss Peggy was sitting on the window-seat watching him, her hands in her lap, and her thoughts far away. Maybe she was trying to be really glad that the home, about which the cows lowed and the gulls screamed in the afternoon stillness that made it seem home each minute, was hers still; that she was not quite alone, nor friendless, nor poor. Maybe she was striving not to think of the thing which had been taken from her and could not be given back. Whatever her thoughts, she was roused by some sound to find her eyes full of hot tears, through which she could see that the old man was awake and looking at her with a strange expression which disappeared as she became aware of it.

"He began to speak. 'Providence has been very good to us, Peggy,' he said with grim meaning. 'It is well for you, my girl, that your eyes are open to see our kind friends as they are. There is one besides those who were here this morning that will wish he had not been so hasty.'

"She rose quickly and looked out of the window. 'Please don't speak of him,' she pleaded in a low tone. 'Let us forget him.'

"But Robert Evans seemed to take a delight in the--well, the goodness of Providence. 'If he had come to see you only once, when you were in trouble,' he said, as if he were summing up the case in his own mind, and she were but a stick or a stone, 'we could have forgiven him, and I would have said you were right. Or even if he had written.'

"'Oh, yes, yes!' the girl sobbed, her tears raining down her averted face. 'Don't torture me! You were right and I was wrong--all wrong!'

"'Yes, indeed! Just so. But come here, my girl,' said the old man. 'Come!' he repeated, as, surprised in the midst of her grief, she wavered and hesitated, 'sit here;' and he pointed to the settle opposite to him. 'Now, suppose I were to tell you he had written, and that the letter had been--mis-laid, shall we say? and come somehow to my hands? Now don't get excited, girl!'

"'Oh!' Peggy cried, her lips parted, her eyes wide and frightened, her whole form stiff with a question.

"'Just suppose that, my dear,' continued Robert, 'and that the letter were now before us--would you stand by it? Remember, he must have much to explain. Would you be guided by me, my girl?'

"She was trembling with expectation, hope. But she tried to think of the matter, to remember her lover's flight, the lack of word or message for her, and her misery. She nodded, and held out her hand, for she could not speak.

"He drew a letter from his pocket. 'You will let me see it?' he said suspiciously.

"'Oh yes!' she cried, and fled with it to the window. He watched her while she tore it open and read first one page and then another--there were but two, it was very short. He watched her while she thrust it from her and looked at it as a whole, then drew it to her and kissed it again and again.

"'Wait a bit! wait a bit!' cried he, testily. 'Now let me see it.'

"She turned upon him, holding it away behind her, as if it were some living thing he might

hurt. 'He thought he would meet me at the junction,' she stammered between laughing and crying. 'He was going to London to see his sister--that she might take me in. And he will be here to fetch me this evening. There! Take it!' and suddenly remembering herself she stretched out her hand and gave him the letter.

"'You said you would be led by me, you know,' said the old man gravely.

"'I will not!' she cried impetuously. 'Never!'

"'You promised,' he said.

"'I don't care! I don't care!' she replied, clasping her hands. 'No one shall come between us.'

"'Very well,' said Robert Evans, 'then I will not be speaking for nothing! But you had better tell Owen to take the trap to the station to meet your man.'"

THE VICAR'S SECRET

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The windows at the rear of Acton Chase, an old house in Worcestershire, look on a quaint bowling-green flanked by yew hedges, and backed by a stream of good size, on the farther side of which a sparsely timbered slope leads up to the home farm. It leads also to half a dozen smaller farms, which once formed the Chase. Zigzag up this slope runs a track--probably it has so run for centuries, for at the foot of it is a ford--which in spring is almost invisible, but in autumn is brown and ruddy. The Chase has long been a Roman Catholic house, and up this track dead-and-gone squires, debarred from converse with their neighbours, have ridden a-hunting, mornings innumerable; so that to-day people sitting in the garden towards evening are apt to see them come trailing home, their horses jaded, and themselves calling for the black-jack.

Our story is not of these, but of two men who strolled down this path on an evening no farther back than last August. They seemed, outwardly at least, ill-matched. The one, a young fellow under thirty, fair-haired, pink-cheeked, prim-looking, was of middle size. He was dressed as a clergyman, but more neatly and trimly than the average country clergyman dresses. The other was one of the tallest and thinnest men ever seen outside a show--a man whose very clothes, his worn jacket and shrunken knickerbockers, had the air of sharing his attenuation. He looked like a gamekeeper, and was, in fact, the squire's son-in-law, Jim Foley.

"I really cannot make you out," he said, as the two sighted the house; and, shifting his gun to the other shoulder, he took occasion to glance at his companion. "What do you do, old boy? You never kill anything, unless it is a trout now and then. Now I could not live without killing. Must kill something every day!"

"And do you?"

"Seldom miss," the long man rejoined cheerfully, "except on a hunting day when we draw blank. Rats, rabbits, otters, pike, sometimes a hawk, sometimes, as to-day, a brace of wood-pigeons. And game and foxes in their season. Must kill something, my boy."

His companion glanced at him, looked away again, and sighed.

"Well, what is that for?" Foley asked, in the tone of an aggrieved man.

"I was only thinking," the other replied drily, "what a lucky fellow you were to have nothing to do but kill."

The tall man whistled. "I say," he said, "for a man who is to be married in a week or so, you are

in roaring spirits, ain't you? I tell you what it is, my boy; you do not take very kindly to your bliss. I can see Patty flitting about in the garden like a big white moth, waiting, I have no doubt, for a word with her lord; and your step lags, and your face is grave, and you try to be cynical! What is up?"

The younger man laughed, but not merrily; and there was a tinge of sullenness in his tone as he answered, "Nothing! A man cannot always be grinning."

"No; but *pâté de foie gras* is not a man's ordinary meat," Jim retorted imperturbably. "Jones!"

"Well?" the other said snappishly.

"You are in a mess, my boy--that is my opinion! Now, don't take it amiss," Jim continued drily. "I am within my rights. I am one of the family, and if the squire is blind and Patty is young, I am neither. And I am not going to let this go on until I know more, my boy. You have something on your mind of which they are ignorant."

The young clergyman turned his face to his companion, and Jim Foley, albeit of the coolest, was taken aback by the change which anger or some other emotion had wrought in it. Even the clergyman's voice was altered. "And what if I have?" he said, stopping so suddenly that the two confronted one another. "What if I have, Mr. Foley?"

Jim deliberately shut his eyes and opened them, to make sure that the tragic spirit, so suddenly infused into the pleasant landscape, with its long shadows and its distant forge-note, was no delusion. Satisfied, he rose to the occasion. "This," he said, outwardly unmoved. "You must get rid of it. That is all, Jones."

"And if I cannot?"

"Will not, you mean."

"No, cannot!" the clergyman replied with vehemence.

"Then," Jim drawled--"I am not a moral man, don't mistake me, but I belong to the family--your majesty must go elsewhere for a wife! And a little late to do so!" he continued, harshness in his tone. "What! you are not coming to the house?"

"No!" the other cried violently. And, without a word of farewell, he turned his back on his companion, and strode away through the lush grass to a point a little higher up the stream, where a plank-bridge gave access to the Chase outbuildings, and through them to the village.

Foley stood awhile, looking after him. "Well," he said, speaking gently, as if rallying himself on some weakness, "I am afraid--I really am afraid that I am a little astonished. I should know men by now, yet I did think that if any one could show a clean bill of health it was the vicar. He is smug, he is next door to a prig. The old women swear by him, the young ones dote on him. They say he is on foot from morning till night, and not one blank day in a fortnight! And now--pheugh! I wonder whether I ought to have knocked him down. Poor little Patty! There is not a better girl in the country--except the Partridge!"

He looked pathetically at the gardens below him; then, seeing that the chimneys of the house were smoking briskly, he bethought him of dinner, and strode down to the gate with his usual air of *insouciance*.

Meanwhile the young clergyman gained the side avenue, and walked rapidly towards the village, his eyes dazzled by the low beams of the sun which shone in his face, and his mind confounded by the tumult of his thoughts. A crisis which he had long foreseen, often dreaded, and as often postponed, was now imminent, the power to control it gone from his hands. He looked on the past with regret, and forward with shame. That which had once been feasible--nay, as it seemed to him now, easy--time and his cowardice had rendered impossible. He stood aghast at his own feebleness; not considering that the routine of parish work and the satisfaction derived from small duties done, had weakened his moral fibre; even as the peace of the life about him, and the transparent truthfulness of those, with whom his lot was cast, had made the task of disclosure more formidable. He had fallen--no, he had not fallen; but he had put off the act which honour demanded so long that, though the day of grace was still his, there could be no grace in the doing.

The rooks, streaming homeward in some order of their own, were cawing overhead as he opened the gate and entered the vicarage garden, where the great hollyhocks stood in rows, and the peaches, catching the last rays of the sun aslant, were glowing against the southern gable. To the stranger--to the American, in particular--who looked in as he passed, it seemed a paradise, that garden. But--for peaches are not peace, nor hollyhocks either--its owner passed through it with compressed lips and tingling cheeks. He entered the porch, where one or two packing-cases told of coming changes; then he stood irresolute in the cool hall, remembering that he had intended to dine at the Chase, and that there was nothing prepared for him here. Not that he had an appetite, but dinner was a decent observance, and it seemed to him that not to dine would be to lose his hold on life and fall into abysses before his time.

It is well, when we are unfortunate, to consider how much worse a minute, a few seconds, may see us. A faint sound at his elbow caused him to turn. The door of the dining-room was ajar, and through the opening a face peered at him. The young vicar did not start, but he drew a deep breath, and stiffened as he gazed. A minute, and his lips--while the other face, with a shifty smile, half mockery, half shame, returned his look--formed the word "Father!"

It was not audible two paces away. But as it fell the clergyman glanced round with a gesture of alarm, and at a single stride he was in the dining-room, and had shut the door behind him. The other man--a shambling creature, grey-haired and blear-eyed and unwashed, with a beard of a week's growth--fell back to the table and leaned against it. His rusty black clothes and his broken boots seemed to share, rather than to impart, the look of decay which marked his person. The vicar, with his back against the door, looked at him and shuddered, and then looked again, his face hard and his eyes gloomy. "Well," he said, in a low stern voice, "what is the meaning of this? You know our agreement. Why have you broken it, sir?"

The old man pursed up his lips, and, with his head on one side, contemplated his questioner in silence. Then he said suddenly, "Blow the agreement!"

The vicar winced as if he had been struck. But he found words again.

"If you can do without the money," he said, "so much the better. But----"

"Blow the money!" cried the old man, with the same violence. Notwithstanding his words, he stood in awe of his son, and was trying to gain courage by working himself into a passion. "What is money?" he continued. "I want no money! I am coming to live with you. You are going to be married. I heard of it, though you kept it close, my boy! I heard of it, and I said to myself, 'Good! I will go and live with my boy. And his wife shall take care of my little comforts.'"

The younger man shivered. He thought of Patty, and he looked at the old man before him, sly, vicious, gin-sodden--and his father! "You do not want to live with me," he answered coldly. "You could not bear to live with me for one week, and you know it. Will you tell me what you do want, and why you have left Glasgow?"

"To congratulate you!" his father answered, with a drunken chuckle. "Walter Jones and Patty Stanton--third time of asking! Oh, I heard of it! But not through you. Why," he continued, with a quick change to ferocity, "would you not ask your own father to your wedding, you ungrateful boy?"

"No," the vicar replied sternly, "he being such as he is, I would not."

"Oh, you are ashamed of him, are you? You have kept him dark, I fancy?" the old man replied, grinning with wicked enjoyment as he saw how his son winced at each sentence, how his colour went and came. "Well, now you will have the pleasure of introducing me to the squire, and to daughter Patty, and to all your friends. It will be a pleasant surprise for them. I'll be bound you said I was dead."

"I have not said you were dead."

"Don't you wish I was?"

"God keep me from it!" the vicar groaned.

On that, the two men stood looking at each other, the one neat, clean-shaven, conventional, the other vile with the degradation of drink. Though the windows stood open, the room was full of the smell of spirits, and seemed itself soiled and degraded. Suddenly the younger man sat down at the table, and, burying his face between his hands, fell into a storm of weeping.

His father shifted his feet, and licking his lips nervously, looked at him in maudlin shame; then from him to the sideboard, in search of his supporter under all trials. But the sideboard was bare, the doors closed, the key invisible. Mr. Jones grew indignant. "There, stop that foolery!" he said brutally. "You make me sick."

The rough adjuration restored the young man's nerve, and he looked up, his cheeks wet with tears. Tears in a man are shameful; but this tragedy was one not to be evaded by manliness, or, indeed, by any help of men. "Tell me what it is you want," he said wearily.

"More money," his father snarled. The liquor with which he had primed himself was losing its effect. "I cannot live on what you give me. Glasgow is a dear place. The money ought to be mine; all of it!"

"You have had two hundred a year--one-half of my mother's money."

"I know. I want three."

"Well, you cannot have it," the son answered languidly. "If you must know, I have agreed to settle one-half of my income on my wife now, and the other half at your death. Therefore it will not be in my power to allow you more. You have spent your own fortune, and you have no claim on my mother's money."

"Very well," Mr. Jones answered, his head trembling with rage and weakness. "Then I stay with you. I stay here. Your father-in-law that is to be will be glad to meet his old friend again--I have no doubt. We were at college together. I dare say he will acknowledge me, if my own son is too proud to do so. I shall stay here until I am tired of the country."

The young man looked at him in despair. Supplication he knew would avail him nothing, and the only threat he could use--that he would stop his father's allowance--would have no terrors, for he could not execute it. To let his father go to the workhouse would increase the scandal a hundred times. He rose at last and went out. His housekeeper had come in, and he told her, keeping his burning face averted, to prepare a bed and get supper for two. He shrank--he whose life in Acton had been so full of propriety--from saying who his guest was. Let his father proclaim himself if he would; that would be less painful. The truth must out. Once before, at his first curacy, the young man, younger then and more hopeful, had tried the work of reformation. He had made a home for his father, and done what he could. And the end had been hot, flaming shame, and an exposure which had driven him to the other end of England.

When he left the house next morning, though his mind was made up to go to the squire and tell him all, he lingered on the white dusty road. The sunlight fell about him in dazzling chequers, and, save for the humming of the bees overhead and the whirr of a reaping-machine in a neighbouring field, the stillness of the August noon hung with the haze over the landscape. His heart, despite his resolution, grew hot within him, as he looked around, and contrasted the peacefulness of nature with the tumult of shame and agitation in his own breast. There was the school which he opened with prayers four times a week. Between the trees he caught a grey glimpse of the church--his church. As he looked his secret grew more sordid, more formidable.

He turned at last with an effort to enter the gates, and saw Patty and her sister, Mrs. Foley, coming down the avenue. They were still a long way off, their light frocks and parasols flitting from sunlight to shadow, and shadow to sunlight, as they advanced. The young man halted. Had Patty been alone, he would have gone to her and told her all; and surely, surely, though he doubted it at this moment, he would have won comfort--for love laughs at vicarious shame. But the Partridge's presence frightened him. Mrs. Foley, round and small and plump, in all things the antithesis of her husband, had yet imbibed something of Jim's dryness. The vicar feared her under the present circumstances, and he turned and fled down the road. He would let them pass--probably they were going to the vicarage--and he would then step up and see the squire.

He was right in supposing that the ladies were going to the vicarage. As they went in that direction, they came upon a strange dissolute old man whom they eyed with wondering dislike, and to whom they gave a wide berth as they passed. They had not gone by long before a third person came through the lodge gates and sauntered after them. This was Jim Foley, come out, with his hands in his pockets and a one-eyed terrier at his heels, to smoke his morning pipe. He, too, espied the old toper, and at sight of him took his pipe from his mouth and stood in the middle of the road, an expression of surprise on his features; while Mr. Jones, becoming aware of him too late--for his faculties were not of the sharpest in the morning--also stood by some instinct and looked, with a growing sense of unpleasant recognition, at his lanky figure.

"Hallo!" said Jim. Mr. Jones did not answer, but stood blinking in the sunshine. He looked more blear-eyed and shabby, more hopelessly gone to seed, than he had looked in the vicarage dining-room.

"Hallo!" said Foley again. "My old friend Wilkins, I think!"

"My name is Jones," the man muttered.

"Ah, Jones is it? Jones *vice* Wilkins resigned," Jim replied, with ironical politeness. "Come down to Acton upon a little matter of business, I suppose. Now look here, Jones *vice* Wilkins," he continued, pointing each sentence with a wave of his pipe, "I see your game. You have come down here to screw out a ten-pound note, by threatening to tell the squire some old story of my turf days. That is it, isn't it?"

Mr. Jones opened his mouth to deny the charge but thought better of it; either because of the settled scepticism which Foley's face expressed, or because he saw a ten-pound note in the immediate future. He remained silent.

"Just so," Foley went on with a nod, replacing his pipe in his mouth and his hand in his pocket. "Well, it won't do. It won't do, do you understand? Because, do you see, you have not accounted for the last pony I sent you to put on Paradox for the Two Thousand. And I will just trouble you for it and three to the back of it. Three to one was the starting price, I think, Mr. Jones."

Mr. Jones's face fell abruptly, and he glared at Foley. "It never reached me," he muttered huskily.

"You mean that you are not going to refund it," Jim retorted. "Well, you don't look as if you had it. But I'll tell you what you'll do. You will go back whence you came within three hours--there is a train at two-forty, and you will go by it. You have caught a Tartar, do you see?" Jim continued sternly, "and though you may, if you stay, give me an unpleasant hour with the squire, I shall give you a much more unpleasant hour with the policeman."

"But the squire----" the old man began; "the squire----"

"No, the policeman!" Foley retorted sharply. "Never mind the squire. Keep your mind steadily on the policeman, and you will be the more certain to catch the train. Now mind," Jim added, pausing to say another word after he had turned away, "I am serious, my man. If I find you here after the two-forty train has left, I give you in charge, and we will both take the consequences."

Jim strolled on towards the vicarage, congratulating himself on his presence of mind and chuckling over the skill with which he had foiled this attempt on his pocket; while Mr. Jones, though his appetite for a country walk was spoiled by the meeting, tottered onwards too, in the opposite direction, rather than seem, by turning, to be dogging Foley, who had inspired him with a very genuine terror. The consequence was that the next turn in the road brought the old man face to face with his son.

"Walter, I am going back," he said, quavering piteously. The interview had shaken him. He seemed less offensive, less of a blot on the landscape; on the other hand, more broken and older. It is not without a sharp pang that the man who has once been a gentleman finds himself threatened with the handcuffs, and forced to avoid the policeman.

The vicar had been for passing him in silence, but the statement brought him to a standstill. What if his father should indeed go? To explain him in his absence seemed an easy, almost a normal, task. Yet he feared a trap, and he only answered, "I am glad to hear it."

"I am going by the two-forty train," the old man whined. "But I must have a sovereign to pay my fare, Walter."

"You shall have it," the vicar said, his heart bounding.

"Give it me now! Give it me now!" his father repeated eagerly. "I tell you I am going by the two-forty. Do you think I am a liar?"

Reluctantly--not because he grudged the money, but because he feared that, the coins once obtained, his father would prove a liar, the clergyman took out two pounds and handed them to him. The old man gripped them with avidity, and, thrusting them and his hands into his pocket, turned his back on the donor, and hobbled away, mumbling to himself.

The vicar remained where he was, standing irresolute at the turn of the road, which brought the lodge gates into view. He found it was a quarter past twelve. He wondered what Patty was thinking of him, and his strange avoidance of her. And what his housekeeper was thinking of his guest, and whether many people had observed him. He began to feel himself at a loose end in the familiar scene. He should have been moving to and fro about his business; instead, he was here, hovering stealthily upon the outskirts of the village, dreading men's eyes, and prepared to fly from the first comer. By going straight to the squire he might put an end to this intolerable position. But the temptation to postpone his explanation until his father had left overcame him, and he turned and walked from the village.

He long remembered that tramp in the heat and dust. Throughout it he was weighed down by the feeling that he was an outcast, that people who met him looked strangely at him, that while he roamed aimlessly his duty called him home. Presently a new fear rose to vex his soul--that his father would not keep his word; the consequence of which was that half an hour before the train started he was lurking about the fir-plantation at the back of the station-house, peeping at the platform, which lay grilling in the sunshine, and tormenting himself with the suspicion that his watch was wrong.

Presently the station woke up. One or two people arrived, and took seats on a barrow in a shady place. The station-master labelled a hamper and gave out a ticket. Then some one who was by no means welcome to the vicar appeared--Jim Foley. He did not enter the station, but the vicar caught sight of him standing on the bridge which carried the road over the railway. What was more, Jim Foley at the same moment discovered the vicar.

Jim looked elsewhere, but he had his suspicions. "Hallo!" he muttered. "Friend Jones grows more of a riddle than ever. I suppose he has had dealings with Master Wilkins, and has an equal interest with me in seeing him off. I hope he has got rid of him as cheaply! But it is odd! I shall tell the Partridge, and hear what she says. She likes him."

He forgot his wife a few minutes later, when the train had steamed slowly in, and stood, and steamed out again, and the two people who had come by it had passed him, and even the vicar, slowly and perforce, had crawled up to him on the bridge. Foley by that time had found something else to consider. "I say," he exclaimed on the impulse of the moment, meeting the clergyman open-mouthed, "this won't do, you know."

Jones was dazed, struck down and prostrated by his disappointment. "What," he said feebly--"what won't do?"

"He has not gone!"

"No!"

"The old buffer! I guessed what was up when I saw you hanging about. Did he get anything out of you?"

The question sounded brutal, but the clergyman answered it. "Yes," he said, his cheek dark--and he looked down at the end of his stick and wondered how the other had found it out. "Two sovereigns."

"By Jove! Well, what is to be done now--that is the question?"

"I shall go to the squire," Jones said.

"What? And tell him this?"

"Yes."

Jim shrugged his shoulders. "Well," he said, after a pause in which he tried to see if this would hurt him, "I dare say it is the best thing you can do. While you are telling other things, perhaps you may as well throw this in."

Jim strolled towards the Acton Arms, after making this handsome concession, much puzzled in his mind by the new light which events were shedding on the character of Jones. The discovery that his future brother-in-law had done a little betting did not surprise him. But, in conjunction with the entanglement to which the vicar had owned the day before, it seemed to indicate a character so different from the model of propriety he had hitherto known, that he was staggered. "And he never kills a thing," Jim thought, turning it over. "You would not think that he knew what sport meant!"

The village policeman was loitering outside the inn, and Foley, who had a word for every one, invited him to come in and have a glass of ale. The road in front of the Acton Arms is separated from the Chase only by a sunk fence; and Jim, casting a glance behind him as he entered, could see the windows of the great house flashing in the sunlight, and the vicar pounding along the avenue towards them. He went in, the constable at his heels, and turned into the cool fireless taproom, which he took to be empty. His stick had scarcely rung on the oak table, however, before a man who had been sitting on the settle, his head on his hands and his senses lost in a drunken stupor, leapt up and, supporting himself by the table, glared at the two intruders.

"Ah!" the squire's son-in-law said drily, "so you are here, Master Jones *vice* Wilkins, are you? I might have known where to find you!"

It is probable that the wretched man, recognising him, and seeing the policeman with him, thought that they had come to arrest him. Roused thus abruptly from his slumbers, bemused and drink-sodden, he saw in a flash the hand of the law stretched out to grasp him, and an old and ungovernable terror seized upon his shattered nerves. "Keep off! keep off!" he gasped, clawing at the two with his trembling hands. "You shall not take me! I will not be taken! Don't you see I am a gentleman?"--this last in a feeble scream.

"Easy, easy, old fellow," Jim said, surprised by his violence, "or you will be doing yourself a mischief."

But the words only confirmed the poor man in his mistake. "I won't be taken!" he cried, waving them off. "My son will pay you, I tell you," he cried, his voice rising in a shriek which rang in the road outside, and startled the house-dog sleeping in the sunshine--"I tell you my son will pay you!" One of his hands as he spoke overturned the empty glass, and it rolled off the table--on such trifles life rests. For the policeman instinctively started forward to catch it, and the old man misunderstood the movement. He fell in a fit on the floor.

Of course there was a great commotion. The inn was roused from its afternoon slumber, and the policeman was sent for the doctor; with one thing and another half an hour elapsed before Foley left the house and slowly made his way to the Chase. He was thinking a great deal more seriously than was his wont. As hard as nails, some of his friends called him; but there is a soft spot in these men who are as hard as nails, if one can find it. Approaching the house, he caught sight of his sister-in-law, and shrugged his shoulders and shook himself to get rid of unpleasant thoughts. Patty was a favourite with him, and, seeing her loitering round the sweep before the house, he guessed that she was waiting to intercept her betrothed and learn the cause of his conduct. Jim said a naughty word under his breath and went to her, as if he had something to say. But, reaching her, he listened instead--as a man must when a woman has a mind to speak.

"What is it, Jim?" she broke out. Her eyes were full of trouble and her pale complexion was a shade paler than usual. "What is the matter with Walter? He did not dine here last night, though he meant to do so. And when we went to learn the reason this morning he was out. He was away at luncheon-time, and the school had never been visited. And now, when he appeared at last, he told Robert not to call me, and said he would wait in papa's study until he came in."

She stopped. "He is here now?" Jim asked.

"Yes; papa has come in, and they are in the bowling-green."

"I will go to them," he said.

"But, Jim, what is it?" she repeated, speaking with a little quaver in her voice; and laying her hand on his arm, she detained him. "Tell me, is there anything the matter?"

Jim looked down at her. She was one of those soft plump feminine women who seem made to be protected--whom to hurt seems as wicked as to harm a child. "The matter?" he said. "Nothing that I know of. What should be the matter? I will go and see them."

He escaped from her and, entering the hall, of which both the front and back doors were open, he found that she was right. The young vicar, the dust on his shoes and an unwonted shade of depression darkening his face, was walking up and down the sward with the squire--a little man as choleric as he was kind-hearted, who passed two-thirds of his waking hours in breeches and gaiters. Jim Foley strode towards them, a purpose in his mind. The vicar, just embarked on his confession, found it interrupted and made a thousand times more difficult. "Jones has come to explain matters, I hope, sir," Jim said.

The clergyman winced. "He has come to turn my brain, I think," the squire cried, angry and suspicious. "I cannot make out what he would be at."

"I was telling you, sir," the vicar answered with some impatience--"that my father----"

"You had better leave your father alone, I think!" Foley struck in with a manner like the snapping of a trap. "And explain to Mr. Stanton the matter you mentioned to me yesterday."

"I was explaining it!" the clergyman rejoined. "I was saying that my father--he was at school with you, sir, you remember?"

"To be sure," the squire said, his grey whiskers curling with impatience as he looked from one to the other. "And at college."

"He lost money after my mother's death," the young man continued, "and went to live in Glasgow." In his shrinking from the disclosure he had to make his voice took a rambling tone as he added, "I think I told you that, sir."

"To be sure! Twice!"

"But I did not tell you," the clergyman replied, driving his stick into the ground and working it about while his face grew scarlet--"and I take great shame to myself that I did not, Mr. Stanton--that my father was much----"

"Good heavens, Jones!" Jim broke out, his patience exhausted. "What on earth has your father to do with it? Yesterday you gave me to understand that you had some entanglement which weighed on your mind. And I thought that you had come here to make a clean breast of it. Instead of which--for Heaven's sake man, don't make me think that you are not running straight!"

The vicar glared at him, while the squire gazed at both. "But that old man," Jones said at last, almost at choking point by this time, "whom you saw this afternoon was----"

Jim struck in again savagely. "We do not want to know anything about him either. As for him, he is----"

"My father!"

"He is dead," Jim persisted, raising his hand for silence, and determined to keep his man to the point and to have things straightened out. "We do not want to hear anything about him. He is dead. We want----"

"Who is dead?"

The question was the vicar's. He wheeled round as he put it, his face white, his voice changed. The squire, who, like most listeners, had learned more than the talkers, saw his tremendous agitation, and, grasping some idea of the truth, tried to intercept Foley's answer. But he was too late. "The old fellow we went to see off," Jim said, almost lightly. "He is dead. Died in a fit half an hour ago, I tell you."

"Dead?"

"Yes, dead. At least the doctor says so."

The vicar put his hands to his face, and turned away, his back shaking. The others looked at him. "He was--he was my father!" he murmured--almost under his breath. And even Jim, his eyes as wide as saucers, understood.

"Fetch some wine, you fool" the squire muttered, giving him a nudge. And he put his arm round the clergyman, and led him to a seat in the shade. There, I think, Walter Jones prayed that he might not be thankful. Man is weak. And conventional man very weak.

Once a gentleman always a gentleman, was the squire's motto. There was no attempt at concealment. The poor man, whose life had been so unlovely, lay at peace at last in the best room at the vicarage, and was presently, with some tears of pity shed by gentle eyes, laid in a quiet corner of the churchyard. There was talk, of course, but the talk was confined to the village, where the possession of a drunken father was not uncommon, or uncharitably considered. The worst of the dead man was known only to Jim Foley, and he kept it even from his wife; while any Spartan thoughts which the squire might otherwise have entertained, any objections he might have raised to his daughter's match, were rendered futile and quixotic by the strange mode in which the denouement had been reached in his presence. He consented, and all--after an interval--went well. But the vicar will sometimes, I think, in the days to come, when prosperity laps him round, wander to the churchyard and recall the hot noon when he walked the roads haunted by that strange sense of forlornness and ruin.

THE OTHER ENGLISHMAN

THE OTHER ENGLISHMAN

"You are English, I take it, sir?"

It was clear to me that the speaker was. I was travelling alone, and had not fallen in with three Englishmen in as many weeks. I turned to inspect the new-comer with a cordiality his smudged and smutty face could not wholly suppress. "I am," I answered, "and I am glad to meet a fellow-countryman."

"You are a stranger here?" He did not take his eyes from me, but he indicated by a gesture of his thumb the busy wharf below piled high with hundreds and thousands of crates full of oranges. From the upper deck of the *San Miguel* we looked down upon it, and could see all that came or went in the trim basin about us. The *San Miguel*, a steamer of the Segovia Quadra and Company's line, bound for several places on the coast southward, was waiting to clear out of El Grao, the harbour of Valencia, and I was waiting impatiently to clear out with her. "You are a stranger here?" he repeated.

"Yes; I have been in the town four or five days, but otherwise I am a stranger," I answered.

"You are not in the trade?" he continued. He meant the orange trade.

"No, I am not. I am travelling for pleasure," I answered readily. "You will understand that, though it is more than a Frenchman or Spaniard can." I smiled as I spoke, but he was not very responsive.

"It is a queer place to visit for pleasure," he said, looking from me to the busy throng about the orange crates.

"Not at all," I retorted. "It is a lively town and quaint, and it is warm and sunny. I cannot say as much for Madrid, from which I came two or three weeks back."

"Come straight here?" he asked.

I was growing tired of his curiosity, but I answered, "No. I stayed a short time at Toledo and Aranjuez, and at several other places."

"You speak Spanish?"

"Not much. *Muy poco de Castellano*," I laughed, calling to mind the maddening grimace by which the Spanish peasant indicates that he does not understand, and is not going to understand

you. He is a good fellow, is Sancho Panza, but having made up his mind that you do not speak Spanish, the purest Castilian is not Spanish for him.

"You are going some way with us--perhaps to Carthagena?" the inquisitor persisted.

He laid some stress on the last word, and with it shot a sly glance at me--a glance so unpleasantly suggestive that I did not answer him at once. Instead, I looked at him more closely. He was a wiry young fellow, rather below than above the middle height, to all appearance the chief engineer. Everything about him, not excluding the atmosphere, was greasy and oily, as if he had come straight from the engine-room. The whites of his eyes showed with unlovely prominence. Seeing him thus, I took a dislike for him. "To Carthagena!" I answered brusquely. "I am not going to stay at Carthagena. Why should you suppose so? Unless, indeed," I added, as another construction of his words occurred to me, "you think I want to see some fighting? No, I fancy the fun might grow too furious."

I should say that three days before there had been a mutiny among the troops at Carthagena. An outlying fort had been captured, and the governor of the city killed before the attempt was suppressed. The news was in every one's mouth, and I fancied that his question referred to it.

My manner or my words disconcerted him. Without saying more he turned away, not going below at once, but standing on the main deck near the office in the afterpart. There was a good deal of bustle in that quarter. The captain, the second officer, and clerk were there, giving and taking receipts and what not. He did not speak to them, but leaned against the rail close at hand. I had an uncomfortable feeling that he was watching me; and this gave rise to a shrinking from the man, which did not affect me always, but returned from time to time.

Presently the dinner-bell rang, and simultaneously the *San Miguel* moved out to sea. We were to spend the next day at Alicante, and the following one at Carthagena.

Dinner was not a cheerful meal. The officers of the ship did not speak English or French, and were not communicative in any language. Besides myself there were only three first-class passengers. They were ladies, relatives of the newly appointed Governor of Carthagena, and about to join him there. I have no doubt that they were charming and fashionable people, but their partiality for the knife in eating prejudiced them unfairly in English eyes. Consequently, when I came on deck again, and the engineer--he told me his name was Sleigh--sidled up to me, I received him graciously. He proffered the omnipresent cigarette, and I provided him with something to drink. He urged me to go down with him and see the engine-room, and after some hesitation I did so. It was after dinner.

"I have pretty much my own way," he boasted. "They cannot do without English engineers. They tried once, and lost three boats in six months. In harbour, my time is my own. I have seven stokers under me, all Spaniards. They tried it on with me when I first came aboard! But the first that out with his knife to me I knocked on the head with a shovel. I have had none of their sauce since!"

"Was he much hurt?" I asked, scanning my companion. He was not big, and he slouched. But there was an air of swaggering dare-devilry about him that gave colour to his story.

"I don't know," he answered. "They took him to the hospital, and he never came aboard again. That is all I know."

"I suppose your pay is good?" I suggested. To confess the truth, I felt myself at a disadvantage with him down there. The flaring lights and deep shadows, the cranks and pistons whirling at our elbows, the clank and din, and the valves that hissed at unexpected moments, were matters of every hour to him; they imbued me with a desire to propitiate. As my after-dinner easiness abated, I regretted that it had induced me to come down.

He laughed harshly. "Pretty fair," he said, "with my opportunities. Do you see that jacket?"

"Yes."

"That is my shore-going jacket," with a wink. "Here, look at it!"

I complied. It appeared at first sight to be an ordinary sailor's pea-coat; but, looking more closely, I found that inside were dozens of tiny pockets. At the mouth of each pocket a small hook was fixed to the lining.

"They are for watches," he explained, when he saw that I did not comprehend. "I get five francs over the price for every one I carry ashore to a friend of mine--duty free, you understand."

I nodded to show that I did understand. "And which is your port for that?" I asked, desiring to say something as I turned to ascend.

He touched me on the shoulder, and I found his face close to mine. His eyes glittered in the light of the lamp that hung by the steam-gauge; they had the same expression that had perplexed me before dinner. "At Carthagena!" he whispered, bringing his face still closer to mine. "At Carthagena! Wait a minute, mate, I have told you something," he went on. "I am not too

particular, and, what is more, I am not afraid! Ain't you going to tell me something?"

"I have nothing to tell you!" I answered, staring at him.

"Ain't you going to tell me something, mate?" he repeated. His voice was low, but it seemed to me that there was a menace in it.

"I have not an idea what you mean, my good fellow," I said, and, turning abruptly, my eye discovered a shovel lying ready to his hand--I ran as nimbly as I could up the steep ladder, and gained the deck. Once there, I looked down. He was still standing by the lamp, staring up at me, chagrin plainly written on his face. Even as I watched him he rounded his lips to an oath; and then seemed to hold it over until he should be better assured of its necessity.

I thought no worse of him for his revelations. In a country where the head of the custom-house lives like a prince on the salary of a beggar, smuggling is no sin. But I was angry with him, and vexed with myself for the haste with which I had met his advances. I disliked and distrusted him. Whether he was mad, or took me for another smuggler--which seemed the most probable hypothesis--or had conceived some false idea of me, whatever the key to the enigma of his manner might be, I felt that I should do well to avoid him.

Like should mate with like, and I am not a violent man. I should not feel at home in a duel, though the part were played with the most domestic of fire shovels, much less with a horrible thing out of a stoke-hole.

About half-past ten the *San Miguel* began to roll, and I took the hint and went below. The small saloon was empty, the lamp turned down. As I passed the steward's pantry I looked in and begged a couple of biscuits. I am a tolerable sailor, but when things are bad my policy is comprised in "berth and biscuits." With this provision against misfortune, I retired to my cabin, happy in the knowledge that it was a four-berth one, and that I was its sole occupant.

In truth I came near to chuckling as I looked round it. I did not need the experience I had had of a cabin three feet six inches by six feet three, shared with a drunken Spaniard, to lead me to view with contentment my present quarters. A lamp in a glass case lighted at once the cabin and the passage outside, and gave assurance that it would burn all night. On my right hand were an upper and lower berth, and on my left the same, with standing room between. A couch occupied the side facing me. The sliding door was supplemented by a curtain. What joy--to one who had known other things--to arrange this and stow that, and fearlessly to place in the rack sponge and tooth-brush! What wonder if I blessed the firm of Segovia Quadra and Company as I sank back upon my well-hung mattress.

I sleep well at sea. The motion suits me. A slight qualm of sea-sickness does but induce a pleasant drowsiness. I love a snug berth under the porthole, and to hear the swish and wash of the water racing by, and the crisp splash as the vessel dips her forefoot under, and the complaint of the stout timbers as they creak and groan in the bowels of the ship.

Cosy and warm, I fell asleep, and dreamed that I was again in the engine-room, seated opposite to the other Englishman. "Haven't you something to tell me? Haven't you something to tell me?" he droned monotonously, wagging his head from side to side, with the perplexing smile on his face which had distressed me waking. "Haven't you something to tell me?"

I strove to say that I had not, because I knew that if I did not satisfy him, he would do some dreadful thing, though I did not know what. But I could not utter the words, and while I struggled with this horrible impotency, the thing was done. I was bound hand and foot to the crank of the engine, and was going up and down with it, up and down! I wept and prayed to be released, but the villain took no heed of my prayers. He sat on, regarding my struggles with the same impassive smile. In despair I strove to think what it was he wanted--what it was--what---

How the ship was rolling! Thank Heaven I was awake! Thank Heaven I was in my berth, and not in that horrible engine-room. But how was this? The other Englishman was here too, standing by the lamp, looking at me. Or--was it the other Englishman? It was some one who had a smudged and smutty face. All the wonder in my mind had to do with that. I lay for a while, between sleeping and waking, watching him. Then I saw him reach across my feet to a little shelf above the berth. As he drew back, something that was in his hand--the hand that rested on the edge of my berth--glittered as the light fell upon it; and, wide awake, I sprang to a sitting posture in my berth, and cried out for fear.

He was gone on the instant, and in the same second of time I was out of bed and on the floor. A moment's hesitation, and I drew aside the curtain, which still shook. The passage was still and empty. But opposite my cabin and separated from it by the width of the passage was the door of another cabin, which was, or had been when I went to bed, unoccupied. Now the curtain, drawn across the doorway, was shaking, and I did not doubt that the intruder was behind it. But behind it also was darkness, and I was unarmed, whereas the thing upon which the light had fallen in the man's hand was either a knife or a pistol.

No wonder that I hesitated, or that discretion seemed the better part of valour. To be sure I might call the steward and have the cabin searched; but I feared to seem afraid. I stood on tiptoe listening. All was still; and presently I shivered. The excitement was passing away, I began to feel

qualms. With a last glance at the opposite cabin--had I really seen the curtain shake? might it not have been caused by the motion of the ship?--I closed my sliding door, and climbed hastily into my bunk. Robber or no robber I must be still. In a short time, what with my qualms and my drowsiness, I fell asleep.

I slept until the morning light filled the cabin, and I was roused by the cheery voice of the steward, bidding me "Buenos dias." The ship was moving on an even keel. Overhead the deck was being swabbed. I opened my little window and looked out--and the night's doings rose in my memory. But who could think of dreams of midnight assassins with the sea air in his nostrils, and before his eyes that vignette of blue sea and grey rocks--grey, but sparkling, gemlike, ethereal under the sun of Spain? Not I. I was gay as a lark, hungry as a hunter. Sallying out before I was dressed, I satisfied myself that the opposite cabin was empty, and came back laughing at my folly.

But when I found that something else was empty, I thought it no laughing matter. I wanted a snack to stay my appetite until the steward should bring my *café complet*, and I turned to the little shelf over my berth where I had placed the biscuits. They were not there. Curious! And I had not eaten them. Then it flashed upon my mind that it was with this shelf my visitor had meddled.

After that I did not lose a moment. I examined my luggage and the pockets of my clothes; the result relieved as much as it astonished me; nothing was missing. My armed apparition had carried off two captain's biscuits, and nothing else!

I passed the morning puzzling over it. Sleigh did not come near me. Was he conscious of guilt, I wondered, or offended by the abruptness of my leave-taking the night before? Or was he engaged about his work?

About noon we came to our moorings at Alicante. The sky was unclouded. The shabby town and the barren hills that rose behind it--barren to the eye, since the vines were not in leaf--looked baking hot. I had found a cool corner of the ship, and was amusing myself with a copy of "Don Quixote" and a dictionary, when the engineer approached.

"Not going ashore?" he said.

For the twentieth time I wondered what it was in his manner that made everything he said a gibe. Whatever it was, I hated him for it; and I gave my feelings vent by answering sullenly, "No, I am not." And forthwith I turned to my books again.

"I thought you travellers for pleasure wanted to see everything," he said. "Maybe you know Alicante?"

"No," I answered snappishly. "And in this heat I don't want to know it!"

"All right, governor, all right!" he replied. "Think it might be too hot for you, perhaps?" And with a hoarse laugh that lasted him from stem to stern, and brought the blood to my cheeks, he left me. But I could see that he did not lose sight of me, and at intervals I heard him chuckling at his own wit for fully half an hour afterwards. But where the joke came in I could not determine.

Towards evening I went ashore, slipping away at a time when he had gone below for a moment. I found a public walk in an avenue of palm-trees which ran beside the sea. The palms were laden with clusters of yellow dates, that were more like dried sea-weed than fruit. As darkness fell, and with it coolness, I sat here, and watched the vessels in the port fade one by one into the gloom, and little sparks of light take their places. A number of people were still abroad, enjoying the air, but these sauntered in the indolent southern fashion, so that when I heard the step of a man approaching in haste, I looked up sharply. To my surprise, it was Sleigh, the engineer!

He passed close to me. I could not be mistaken, though he had put off his slouching, shambling air, and was keenly on the alert, glancing from this side to that, as if he were searching for some one. For whom? I was one of half a dozen on a seat in deep shadow. If I were the person he wanted, he overlooked me, and went on. I sat some time after his step had died away in the distance, my thoughts not pleasant ones. But he did not return, and I went up to the Hôtel Bossio prepared to eat an excellent dinner.

The *table d'hôte* in the big whitewashed room was half finished. I was late; and perhaps for this reason the waiters eyed me, as I took my seat, with odd attention; or possibly it was because the English were not numerous at Alicante, or not popular; or, again, it was possible that some one--Sleigh, for example--had been there making inquiries for a foreigner--blond, middle-sized, and speaking very little Spanish. Their notice made me uncomfortable. It seemed as if I could nowhere escape from my Old Man of the Sea.

Nowhere indeed, for I was to have another rencontre that night, with which my mind mixed him up, and which must be told because of the light afterwards thrown upon it. Returning to my ship along the dark wharf, I came upon figures loafing in the shadow of bales or barrels, and, passing them, clutched my loaded stick more tightly. I got by all, however, in safety and reached the spot where the ship lay. "San Miguel! Bota!" I shouted in the approved fashion of that coast.

"San Miguel! Bota!"

The words had scarcely left my lips when there was a rustling close to me. A single footstep sounded on the pebbles, and the light of a lantern was flashed in my face. I recoiled. As I did so two or three men sprang forward. Dazzled by the light, I had only an indistinct view of figures about me, and was on the point of fighting or running, or making an attempt at both, when by good luck the clink of steel fell upon my ear.

By good luck! For they were police who had stopped me; and it is ill work resisting the police in Spain. "What do you require, gentlemen?" I asked in my best Spanish. "I am English."

"Perdone usted, señor," replied the leader, who held the light. "Will you have the goodness to show me your papers?"

"Con mucho gusto!" I answered, delighted to find that things were no worse. I was for producing my passport on the spot, but the sergeant, with a polite but imperative "This way!" directed me to follow him. I did so for a short distance, a door was flung open, and I found myself in a well-lighted office, which I guessed was a custom-house. The officer took his place behind a desk, and by a gesture of his cocked hat signified his readiness to proceed.

I had had to do with the police before, but I was aware of a suppressed excitement in the group, of strange glances which they cast at me, of a general drawing round their chief as he bent over my passport, which seemed to indicate that this was no ordinary case of passport examination. Singular, too, was the disappointment they evinced when they found that my passport bore, besides the ordinary *visa*, the signatures of the Vice-Consul and Alcalde at Valencia. As their faces fell my spirits rose. Full conviction took possession of them after I had answered half a dozen questions; and the interview ended with the same "Perdone usted, señor," with which it had begun. I was bowed out; a boat was instantly procured for me, and in two minutes I was climbing the ladder which hung from the *San Miguel's* quarter.

The first person I saw on board was Sleigh. He was lolling on a bench in the saloon--confound his impudence!--drinking aguardiente and staring moodily at the table. I tried to pass by him and reach my cabin unnoticed, but on the last step of the companion I slipped. With an oath at the interruption he looked up, and our eyes met.

Never did I see a man more astonished. He gazed at me as if he could not trust his sight. "Well, I never!" he cried, slapping his thigh with an oath, and speaking in a jubilant tone. "Well, I am blest, governor! So you did not go ashore after all! Here's a lark!"

I saw that he had been drinking. "I have been ashore," I answered, my dislike increased tenfold by his condition.

"Honour bright?" he exclaimed.

"I have told you that I have been ashore," I replied.

He whistled. "You are a cool hand," he said, looking me over with a new expression in his face. "I might have known that, precious mild as you seemed! Dined at the Hôtel Bossio, I warrant you did, and took your walk in the Alameda like any other man?"

"I did."

"So you did! O Lord! O Lord! So you did!" Again he contemplated me at arm's length. I could construe his new expression now--it was one of admiration. "So you did, governor! And came aboard in the dark, as bold as brass!"

That thawed me, for I thought that I had done rather a plucky thing in coming on board alone at that time of night. But I told him nothing of the affair with the police. I merely answered, "I do not understand why I should not, Mr. Sleigh. And as I am tired, I will bid you good night."

"Wait a bit, governor," he said, in a lower tone, arresting me by a gesture as I turned away. "Don't you think you are playing it a bit high? You are a cool one, I swear, and fly--there is nothing you are not fly to, I'll be bound! But two heads are better than one--you take me?--letting alone that it is every one for himself in this world. Do you rise to it?"

"No, I don't rise to it," I answered, drawing back from his spirituous breath and leering eyes. He was more drunk than I had fancied.

"You don't? Think again, mate," he said, almost as if he pleaded with me. "Don't play it too high."

"Don't talk such confounded nonsense!" I retorted angrily.

He looked at me a moment, a scowl darkening his face and not improving it. Then he answered, "All right, governor! All right! Pleasant dreams! and a pleasant waking at Carthage!"

"I have no doubt I shall enjoy both," I replied, "if you will have the goodness not to disturb me

as you did last night!" He should not think he had escaped detection.

"It is your turn now," he replied more soberly. "I don't know what you are up to now. I didn't disturb you last night."

"Some one did! And some one uncommonly like you."

"What did he do?" he asked, eyeing me with suspicion.

"I startled him," I answered, "or I do not know what he would have done. As it was he did not do much. He took some biscuits."

"Took some biscuits!" He pretended that he did not believe me, and he did it so well that I began to doubt. "You must have been dreaming, mate."

"I could not dream the biscuits away," I retorted.

The stroke went home. He stood thinking, drawing patterns on the table with his finger and a puddle of spilled water. Guilty or innocent, he did not seem ashamed, but puzzled and perplexed. Once or twice he glanced cunningly at me. But whether he wished to see how I took it, or suspected me of fooling him, I could not tell.

"Good night!" I cried, losing patience at last; and I went to my cabin. The last I saw of him, he was still standing at the table, drawing patterns on it with his finger.

I turned in at once, satisfied that after what had passed between us there would be no repetition of last night's disturbance. In a pleasant state between waking and sleeping I was aware of the tramp of feet overhead as the moorings were cast off. The first slow motion of the engines was followed by the familiar swish and wash of the water sliding by. The ship began to heel over a little. We had reached the open sea. After that I slept.

I awoke suddenly, but in full possession of my senses. The cabin was still lit by the lamp. I guessed that it was a little after midnight; and "*O utinam!*" I sighed, "that I had not taken that cup of coffee after dinner!" My portmanteau too had got loose. I could hear it sliding about the floor, though, as I lay in the upper berth, I could not see it. I must set that to rights.

I vaulted out after my usual fashion. But instead of alighting fairly and squarely on the floor, my bare feet struck something soft, a good distance short of it, and I came down on my hands and knees--to form part of the queerest tableau upon which a cabin-lamp ever shone. There was I, lightly clothed in pyjamas, glaring into the eyes of a dingy-faced man, who was likewise on his hands and knees on the floor, but with more than half the breath knocked out of his body by my descent upon him. I do not know which was the more astonished.

"Hallo! how do you come here?" I cried, after we had stared at one another for some seconds.

He raised his hand. "Hush!" he whispered: and obeying his gesture I crouched where I was, while he listened. Then we rose to our feet as by one motion. I had not time to feel afraid, though it was far from a pretty countenance that was close to mine. Terror was written too plainly upon it.

"You are English?" he said sullenly.

I nodded. I saw that he had a pistol half-hidden behind him, but somehow I felt master of the position. His fear of being overheard seemed so much greater than my fear of his pistol; and it is not easy to do much with a pistol without being overheard. "You are English, too," I added, below my breath. "Perhaps you will kindly tell me what you are doing in my cabin?"

"You will not betray me?" he cried.

"Betray you, my man!" I replied, with a prudent remembrance of his weapon and the late hour of the night. "If you have taken nothing of mine, you may go to the deuce for me, so long as you don't pay me another visit."

"Taken anything!" he retorted, almost forgetting his caution, "do you take me for a thief? I will be bound----" he went on with a pride that seemed to me very pitiable when I understood it--"that you are about the only man in Spain who would not know me at sight. There is a price upon my head! There are two thousand pesetas for whoever takes me--dead or alive! There are bills of me in every town in Spain! Ay, of me! in every town from Irun to Malaga!"

I knew now who he was. "You were at Carthagena," I said sternly, thinking of the old grey-headed general who had died at his post.

He nodded. The momentary excitement was gone from his face, leaving him what he was, a man, dirty, pallid, half famished. About my height, he wore clothes, shabby and soiled, but like mine in make and material. In his desperate desire for sympathy, for communion with some one, he had already laid aside his fear of me. When I asked him how he came to be in my cabin he told me freely.

"I intended to ship from Valencia to France, but they watched all the boats. I crept on board this one in the night, thinking that as she was bound for Carthage she would not be searched. I was right; they did not think I should venture back into the lion's jaws."

"But what will you do when we reach Carthage?" I asked.

"Stay on board and, if possible, go with this ship to Cadiz. From there I can easily get over to Tangier," he answered.

It sounded feasible. "And where have you been since we left Valencia?" I asked.

"Behind this sailcloth." He pointed to a long roll of spare canvas which was stowed away between the floor and the lower berth. I opened my eyes.

"Ay!" he added, "they are close quarters, but there is room behind there for a man lying on his face. What is more, except your two biscuits I have had nothing to eat since the day before yesterday."

"Then it was you who took the biscuits?"

He nodded; then he fell back against my berth, all his strength gone out of him. For from behind us came a more emphatic answer. "You may take your oath to that, governor!" it ran; and briskly pushing aside the door and curtain, Sleigh the engineer stood before us. "You may bet upon that, I guess!" he added, an ugly smile playing about his mouth.

The refugee's face changed to a sickly white. His hand toyed feebly with the pistol, but he did not move. I think that we both felt we were in the presence of a stronger mind.

"You had better put that plaything away," Sleigh said. He showed no fear, but I observed that he watched us narrowly. "A shot would bring the ship about your ears. There is no call for a long tale. I took the governor here for you, but when he told me that some one was stealing his biscuits, I thought I had got the right pig by the ear, and five minutes outside this door have made it a certainty. Two thousand pesetas! Why, hang me," he added brutally, "if I should have thought, to look at you, that you were worth half the money!"

The other plucked up spirit at the insult. "Who are you? What do you want?" he cried, with an attempt at bravado.

"Precisely. What do I want?" the engineer replied with a sneer. "You are right to come to business. What do I want? A hundred pounds. That is my price, mate. Fork it out and mum's the word. Turn rusty, and----" He did not finish the sentence, but grasping his neck in both hands, he pressed his thumbs upon his windpipe and dropped his jaw. It was a ghastly performance. I had seen a garotte and I shuddered.

"You would not give the man up? Your own countryman?" I cried in horror.

"Would I not?" he answered. "You will soon see, if he has not got the cash!"

"A hundred pounds!" the wretched fellow moaned. Sleigh's performance had completely unmanned him. "I have not a hundred pesetas with me."

As it happened--alas, it has often happened so with me!--I had but three hundred pesetas, some twelve pounds odd, about me, nor any hope of a remittance nearer than Malaga. Still, I did what I could. "Look here," I said to Sleigh, "I can hardly believe that you are in earnest, but I will do this. I will give you ten pounds to be silent and let the man take his chance. It is no good to haggle with me," I added, "because I have no more."

"Ten pounds!" he replied derisively, "when the police will give me eighty! I am not such a fool."

"Better ten pounds and clean hands, than eighty pounds of blood money," I retorted.

"Look here, Mister," he answered sternly; "do you mind your own business and let us settle ours. I am sorry for you, mate, that is a fact, but I cannot let the chance pass. If I do not get this money some one else will. I'll tell you what I will do." As he paused I breathed again, while the miserable man whose life was in the balance looked up with renewed hope. "I will lower my terms," he said. "I would rather get the money honestly, I am free to confess that. If you will out with two thousand pesetas, I will keep my mouth shut, and give you a helping hand besides."

"If not?" I said.

"If not," he answered, shrugging his shoulders--but I noticed that he laid his hand on his knife--"if you do not accept my terms before we are in port at Carthage, I go to the first policeman and tell him who is aboard. Those are my terms, and you have time to think about them."

With that he left the cabin, keeping his face to us to the last. Hateful and treacherous as he was, I could not help admiring his coolness and courage, and his firm grasp of the men he had to do with.

For I felt that we were a sorry pair. I suppose that my companion, bad as his position seemed, had cherished strong hopes of escape. Now he was utterly unmanned. He sat on the couch, his elbows on his knees, his head on his hands, the picture of despair. The pistol had vanished into some pocket, and although capture meant death, I judged that he would let himself be taken without striking a blow.

My own reflections were far from being comfortable. The man grovelling before me might deserve death; knowing the stakes, he had gambled and lost. Moreover, he was a complete stranger to me. But he was an Englishman. He had trusted me. He had spent an hour--but it seemed many--in my company, and I shrank from the pain of seeing him dragged away to his death. My nature revolted against it; I forgot what the consequences of interference might be to myself.

"Look here," I said, after a long interval of silence, "I will do what I can. We shall not reach Carthagena until eight o'clock. Something may turn up before that. At the worst I have a scheme, though I set little store by it, and advise you to do the same. Put on these clothes in place of those you wear." I handed to him a suit taken from my portmanteau. "Wash and shave. Take my passport and papers. It is just possible that if you play your part well they may not identify you, and may arrest me--despite our friend upstairs. For myself, once on shore I shall have no difficulty in proving my innocence."

Not that I was without misgivings. The Spanish civil guards give but short shrift at times, and at the best I might be punished for connivance at an escape. But to some extent I trusted to my nationality; and for the rest, the avidity with which the hunted wretch at my side clutched at the slender hope held out to him drove hesitation from my mind.

As long as I live I shall remember the scene which ensued. The grey light was beginning to steal through the port-hole, giving a sicklier hue to my companion's features, as I helped him with trembling fingers to dress. The odour of the expiring lamp hung upon the air. The tumbled bed-clothes, the ransacked luggage, the coats swaying against the bulkheads to the music of the creaking timbers, formed surroundings deeply imprinted on the memory.

About seven o'clock I procured some coffee and biscuits and a little fruit, and fed him. Then I gave him my papers, and charged him to employ himself about the cabin. My plan was to be out of the way, ashore, or elsewhere, when Sleigh fired his mine, and to trust my companion to return my luggage and papers to my hotel at Malaga; until I reached which place I must take my chance. In reality I played no fine and magnanimous part, for, looking back, I do not think I believed for a moment that the police would be deceived.

A little after eight o'clock I went on deck, to find that the ship was steaming slowly between the fortified hills that frown upon the harbour of Carthagena; a harbour so spacious that in its amphitheatre of waters all the navies of the world might lie. For a time the engineer was not visible on deck. The steward pointed out to me some of the lions--the deeply embayed arsenal, the distant fort, high-perched on a hill, which the mutineers had seized, the governor's house over the gateway where the wounded general had died; and we were within a cable's length of the wharf, crowded with idlers and flecked with sentinels, when Sleigh came up from below.

Although the morning was fine, he was wearing the heavy pea-jacket which I had seen in the engine-room. He cast a spiteful glance at me, then, turning away, he affected to busy himself with other matters. Bad as he was, I think that he was ashamed of the work he had in hand.

"Do we stay here all day?" I asked the steward.

"No, señor, no. Only until ten o'clock," I understood him to say. It was close upon nine already. He explained that the town was still so much disturbed that business was at a standstill. The *San Miguel* would land her passengers by boat and go at once to Almeria, where cargo awaited her. "Here is the police-boat," he added.

Then the time had come. I was quivering with excitement--and with something else--a new idea! Darting from the steward's side, I flew down the stairs, through the saloon and to my cabin, the door of which I dragged open impatiently. "Give me my papers!" I cried, breathless with haste. "The police are here!"

The man--he was pretending to pack, with his back to the door, but at my entrance he rose with an assumption of ease--drew back. "Why? will you desert me too?" he cried, his face blanched. "Will you betray me? Then, my God! I am lost!" and he flung himself upon the sofa in a paroxysm of terror.

Every moment was of priceless value. This a conspirator! I had no patience with him. "Give them to me!" I cried imperatively, desperately. "I have another plan. Do you hear?"

He heard, but he did not believe me. He was sure that my courage had failed at the last moment. But--and let this be written on his side of the account--he gave me the papers; it may be in pure generosity, it may be because he had not the spirit to resist.

Armed with them I ran on deck as quickly as I had descended. I found the position of things but slightly changed. The police-boat was now alongside. The officer in command, attended by

two or three subordinates, was mounting the ladder. Close to the gangway Sleigh was standing, evidently waiting for him. But he had his eye on the saloon door also, for I had scarcely emerged before he stepped up to me.

"Have you changed your mind, governor? Are you going to buy him off?" he muttered, looking askance at me as I moved forward with him by my side.

My answer took him by surprise. "No, señor, no!" I exclaimed loudly and repeatedly--so loudly that the attention of the group at the gangway was drawn to us. When I saw this, I stepped in front of Sleigh, and before he guessed what I would be at, I was at the officer's side. "Sir," I said, raising my hat, "do you speak French?"

"Parfaitement, monsieur," he answered, politely returning my salute.

"I am an Englishman, and I wish to lay an information," I said, speaking in French, and pausing there that I might look at Sleigh. As I had expected, he did not understand French. His baffled and perplexed face assured me of that. He tried to interrupt me, but the courteous official waved him aside.

"The man who is trying to shut my mouth is a smuggler of foreign watches," I resumed. "He has them about him, and is going to take them ashore. They are in a number of pockets made for the purpose in the lining of his coat. I am connected with the watch trade, and my firm will give ten pounds reward to any one who will capture and prosecute him."

"I understand," the officer replied. And, turning to Sleigh, who, ignorant of what was going forward, was fretting and fuming in a fever of distrust, he addressed some words to him. He spoke in Spanish and quickly, and I could not understand what he said. That it was to the point, however, the engineer's face betrayed. It fell amazingly, and he cast a vengeful glance at me.

That which followed was ludicrous enough. My heart was beating fast, but I could not suppress a smile as Sleigh, claspng the threatened coat about him, backed from the police. He poured out a torrent of fluent Spanish, and emphatically denied the charge; but, alas! he cherished the coat--at which the police were making tentative dives--overmuch for an innocent man with no secret pockets about him.

His "No, señor, no!" his "Por dios!" and "Madre de Dios!" and the rest were breath wasted. At a sign from the grim-looking officer, two of the policemen seized him, and in a twinkling, notwithstanding his resistance, had the thick coat off him, and were probing its recesses. It was the turn of the by-standers to cry, "Madre de Dios!" as from pocket upon pocket came watch after watch, until five dozen lay in sparkling rows upon the deck. I could see that there were those among the ship's company besides the culprit who gazed at me with little favour; but the eyes of the police officer twinkled with gratification as each second added to the rich prize. And that was enough for me.

Still I knew that all was not done yet, and I stood on my guard. Sleigh, taken into custody, had desisted from his prayers and oaths. I saw, however, that he was telling a long story, of which I could make out little more than the word "Inglese" repeated more than once. It was his turn now. If he had not understood my French, neither could I understand his Spanish. And I noticed that the officer, as the story rolled on, looked at me doubtfully. I judged that the crisis was near, and I interfered. "May I beg to know, sir, what he says?" I asked courteously.

"He tells me a strange story, Mr. Englishman," was the answer; and the speaker eyed me with curiosity. "He says that Morrissey, the villainous Englishman--your pardon--who was at the bottom of the affair of last Sunday, has had the temerity to return to the scene of his crime, and is on this vessel."

I shrugged my shoulders. "A strange story!" I answered. "But it is for Monsieur to do his duty. I am the only Englishman on board, as the steward will inform you; and for me, permit me to hand you my papers. Your prisoner wishes, no doubt, to be even with me!"

He nodded as he took the papers. And that upon which I counted happened. The engineer in his rage and excitement had not made his story plain. No one dreamt of the charge being aimed against another Englishman. No one knew of another Englishman. The steward sullenly corroborated me when I said that I was the only one on board; and all who heard Sleigh--befogged, perhaps, by his Spanish, which, good enough for ordinary occasions, may have failed him here--did not doubt that his was a counter-accusation preferred *en revanche*.

For one thing, the improbability of Morrissey's return had weight with them; and my credentials were ample and in order. Among these, too, a note for two hundred and fifty pesetas had slipped, which had disappeared when they were returned to me. Need I say how it ended? Or that while the police officer bowed his courteous "Adios" to me, and his men gathered up the watches, and the crew scowled, the prisoner was removed to the boat, foaming at the mouth, and screaming to the last threats which my ears were long in forgetting. I walked up and down the deck, brazening it out, but very sick at heart.

However, the *San Miguel*, despite her engineer's mishap, duly left in half an hour--a nervous half-hour to me. With a thankful heart I watched the fort-crowned hills about Carthagena change

from brown to blue, and blue to purple, until at length they sank below the horizon.

But officers and men looked coldly on me; and that evening, at Almeria, I took up bag and baggage and left the *San Miguel*. I had had enough of the thanks, and more than enough of the company, of my cabin-fellow, whom I left where I had found him--behind the sailcloth. I believe that he succeeded in making his escape. For fully a month later a friend of mine staying at the Hôtel de la Paz, at Madrid, was placed under arrest on suspicion of being Morrissey; so that the latter must at that time have been at liberty.

KING PEPIN AND SWEET CLIVE.

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Upon arriving at the middle of the Close the Dean stopped. He had been walking briskly, his chin from custom a little tilted, but his eyes beaming with condescension and goodwill, while an indulgent smile played about the lower part of his face relieved its massive character. His walking-stick swung to and fro in a loose grasp, his feet trod the pavement of the precincts with the step of an owner, he felt the warmth of the sun, the balminess of the spring air, and somewhere at the back of his mind he was conscious of a vacant bishopric, and that he was the husband of one wife. In fine he presented the appearance of a contented, placid, unruffled dignitary, until he reached the middle of the Close. There, alas! the ferrule of his stick came to the ground with a thud, and the sweetness and light faded from his eyes as they rested upon Mr. Swainson's plot. The condescension and goodwill became conspicuous only by their absence. The Dean was undisguisedly angry; he disliked opposition as much as lesser men, and met with it more rarely. For Bicester is old-fashioned, and loves both Church and State, but especially the former, and looks up to principalities and powers, and even now, on account of a mistake he made, execrates the memory of a recreant Bicesterian, otherwise reputable. It was at a public dinner. "I remember," said this misguided man, "going in my young days to the old and beautiful cathedral of this city. (Great applause.) I was only a child then, and my head hardly rose above the top of the seat, but I remember I thought the Dean the greatest of living men. (Whirlwinds of applause.) Well (smiling), perhaps, I do not think quite that now." (Dead silence.) And so dull at bottom may a man be whose name is known in half the capitals of Europe, that this degenerate fellow never guessed why the friends of his youth during the rest of the day turned their backs upon him.

Such is the faith of Bicester, but even in Bicester there are heretics. To say that the Dean rarely met with opposition is to say that he rarely met with Mr. Swainson, and that he seldom saw Mr. Swainson's plot. As a rule, when he crossed the Close he averted his eyes by a happy impulse of custom, for he did not like Mr. Swainson, and as for the latter's plot, it was *anathema maranatha* to him. The Dean was tall, Mr. Swainson was taller; the Dean was stubborn, Mr. Swainson was obstinate; so that there arose between them the antagonism that is born of similarity. On the other hand the Dean was stout and Mr. Swainson a scarecrow; the Dean was comely and clerical, but not over-rich, Mr. Swainson was pallid, lantern-jawed, wealthy, and a lawyer, and hence the dislike born of difference. Moreover, years ago, when Mr. Swainson had been Mayor of Bicester, there had been a little dispute between the Chapter and the Bishop, and he had shown so much energy upon the one side as to earn the nickname of the "Mayor of the Palace." Finally Mr. Swainson delighted in opposition as a cat in milk, and cared as little to have a good reason for his antagonism as puss in the dairy about a sixty years' title to the cream-pan.

But a sixty years' title to his plot was the very thing which Mr. Swainson did claim to have. Exactly opposite his house--his father's and grandfather's house in which, said his enemies, they have lived and grown fat upon cathedral patronage--lay this debatable land. His front windows commanded it, and on such a morning as this he loved to stand upon his doorstep and gaze at it with the air of a dog watching the spot where his bone lies buried. But if Mr. Swainson was right, that was just what was not buried there; there were no bones there. True, the smoothly shorn

surface of the little patch was divided from the green turf round the cathedral only by a slight iron railing, but, said Mr. Swainson, ponderously seizing upon his opponent's weapon and using it with effect, it was of another sort altogether; of a very different nature. It had never been consecrated, and close as it lay to the sacred pile, being separated from it on two sides but by a sunk fence, it did not belong to it, it was not of it; it was private property, the property of Erasmus John Swainson, and the appanage of his substantial red-brick house just across the Close.

And no one could refute him, though several tried their best, to his delight. It cannot now be computed by how many years the discovery of his rights prolonged his life--but certainly by some. His liver demanded activity, namely a quarrel, and what a coil this was! If he had been given the choice of all possible opponents, he would have selected the Dean and Chapter, they were so substantial, wealthy, and formidable. And such a thorn in the side of those comfortable personages as these rights of his were like to prove he could hardly have imagined in his most sanguine dreams, or hoped for in his happiest moments.

It was great fun stating his claim, flouting it in their faces, displaying it through the city, brandishing it in season and out of season; but when it came to making a hole in the smooth turf hitherto so sacred, and setting up an unsightly post, and affixing to it a board with "Trespassers will be prosecuted. E. J. Swainson," the fun became furious. So did the Dean, so did the Chapter, so did every sidesman and verger. Bicester was torn in pieces by the contending parties, but Mr. Swainson was firm. The only concession which could be wrung from him was the removal of the obnoxious board. Instead he set a neat iron railing round his property, enclosing just thirty feet by fifteen. Such was the *status in quo* on this morning, and with it the Dean had for some time been forced to rest content.

Yet, sooth to say, the greatest pleasure of the very reverend gentleman's life was gone with this accession to the roundness and fulness of Mr. Swainson's. No more with the thorough satisfaction of the past could he conduct the American traveller through the ancient crypt, or dilate to the Marquis of Bicester's visitors upon the beauty of the quaint gargoyles. No; that railed-in spot became a plague-spot to him, ever itching, an eyesore even when invisible, a thing to be evaded and dodged and given the slip, as a Dean who is a Dean should scorn to evade anything. He winced at the mere thought that the inquisitive sightseer might touch upon it, and probe the matter with questions. He hurried him past it with averted finger and voluble tongue, nor recovered his air of kindly condescension, or polished ease (as the case might be), until he was safe within his own hall. Only in moments of forgetfulness could the Dean now walk in his Close of Bicester with the grace of old times.

But on this particular morning the sunshine was so pleasant, the wind so balmy, that he walked halfway across the Close as if the river of Lethe flowed fathoms deep over Mr. Swainson's plot. Then it chanced that his eyes in a heedless moment rested upon the enclosure: and he saw that a man was at work in it, and he paused. The Dean knew Mr. Swainson too well to trust him. What was this? By the man's side lay a small heap of greyish-white things, and he was holding a short-handled mallet, which he was using to drive one of the greyish-white things into the ground. From him the Dean's eyes travelled to a couple of parti-coloured sticks, one at each end of the plot. What was this? A thing so terrible that the Dean stood still, and that change came over him which we have described.

Great men rise to the occasion. It was only a moment he thus stood and looked. Then he turned and walked to a house. A tall thin man was standing upon the steps of the house, with the ghost of a smile upon his face. For a moment the Dean could only stammer. It was such a dreadful outrage.

"Is that," he said at last, "is that, sir, being done by your authority?" With a shaking finger he pointed to Mr. Swainson's plot. The tall man in a leisurely way settled a pair of eye-glasses upon his nose and looked in the direction indicated. "Ah, I see what you mean," he said at last. "Certainly, Mr. Dean, certainly!"

"Are you aware, sir, what it is?" gasped the clergyman; "it is sacrilege!"

"Nothing of the kind, I assure you, my dear sir. It's croquet!"

The tone was one of explanation, and the words were uttered with so transparent an air of frankness, that the veins in the Dean's temples swelled and his face grew, if possible, redder than before.

"I won't stay to bandy words with you!" he cried.

"Bandy!" returned the tall man, intensely amused. "Ha, ha, ha! you thought it was hockey! Bandy! Oh, no, you play it with hoops and a mallet. Drive the balls through--so!"

And to the intense delight of the Close people, many of whom were at their windows, Mr. Swainson executed an ungainly kind of gambado upon the steps. "Disgusting," the Dean called it afterwards, when talking to sympathetic ears. Now he merely put it away from him with a wave of the hand.

"I will not discuss it now, Mr. Swainson," he said. "If your feelings of decency and of what is

right and proper do not forbid this--this profanity--I can call it nothing else--I have but one word to add. The Chapter shall prevent it."

"The Chapter!" replied the other, in a tone of contempt, which gave place to temper as he continued, "you are well read in history, Mr. Dean, they tell me. Doubtless you remember what happened when King Canute bade the tide come no further. I am the tide, and you and the Chapter--sit in the chair of Canute."

The Dean, it must be confessed, was no little taken aback by this defiance. He was amazed. The two glared at one another, and the clergyman was the first to give way; baffled and disconcerted, yet swelling with rage, he strode towards the Deanery. His antagonist followed him with his eyes, then looked more airily than ever at his plot and the progress made there, considered the weather with his chin at the decanal angle, finally with a flirt of his long coat-tails he went into the house, a happy man and the owner of a vastly improved appetite.

But the Dean had more to suffer yet. At the door of his garden he ran in his haste against some one coming out. Ordinarily, great man as he was, he was also a gentleman. But this was too much. That, when the father had insulted him, the son should collide with him on his own threshold, was intolerable; at any rate at a moment when he was smarting under a sense of defeat.

"Good morning, Mr. Dean," said the young fellow, raising his hat with an evident desire to please that was the antipodes of his father's manner--only the Dean was in no mood to discriminate--"I have just been having a delightful game of croquet."

It is to be regretted, but here a short hiatus in the narrative occurs. The minor canons, than whom no men are more wanting in reverence, say that the Dean's answer consisted of two words, one of them pithy and full of meaning, but in the mouth of a Dean, however choleric, impossible. Accounting this as a gloss, we are driven to conjecture that the Dean's answer expressed mild disapprobation of the game of croquet. Certain it is that young Swainson, surprised by so novel and original a sentiment, answered only--

"I beg your pardon."

"Hem!" the Dean exclaimed. "I mean to say that I do not approve of this. I will come to the point. I must ask you to discontinue your visits at my house." The young man stared as if he thought the excited divine had gone mad; the Deanery was almost a home to him. "Your father," the Dean went on more coherently, "has taken a step so unseemly, so--so indecent, has used language so insulting to me, sir, that I cannot, at any rate at present, receive you."

Young Swainson was a gentleman; moreover, for a very good reason, the Dean failed to anger him. He raised his hat as respectfully as before, bowed in token of acquiescence, and went on his way sorrowfully.

He had a singularly pleasant smile, this young man, though this was not a time to display it. Mrs. Dean had once pronounced him a pippin grafted on a crab-stock, and thereafter in certain circles he had become known as King Pepin. He was tall and straight and open-eyed, with faults enough, but of a generous youthful kind, easily overlooked and more easily forgiven. Doubtless Mr. Swainson would have had his son more practical, cool-headed, and precise, but the shoot did not grow in the same way as the parent tree. Old Swainson would not have been happy without an enemy, nor young Swainson as happy with one; and if, as the former often said, the latter's worst enemy was himself, he was likely to have a prosperous life.

In a space of time inconceivably short, the doings of the old lawyer and the Dean's remonstrance were all over Bicester. Nay, fast as the stone rolled, it gathered moss. It was asserted by people who rapid-grew to be eye-witnesses, that Mr. Swainson had danced a hornpipe in the middle of his plot, snapping his fingers at the Dean, while the latter prodded him as well as he could through the railings with his umbrella; finally that only the arrival of Mr. Swainson's son had put an end to this disgraceful exhibition.

Neither side wasted time. The Dean, the Canon in residence, and the Præcentor, an active young fellow, consulted their lawyer, and talked largely of ejectment, title, and seisin. Mr. Swainson, having nine points of the law in his favour, and as well acquainted with the tenth as his opponent's legal adviser, devoted himself to the fighter pursuit of the mallet and hoop. In a state of felicity undreamt of before, he played, or affected to play, croquet, his right hand against his left, the former giving the latter two hoops and a cage. He played with a cage and a bell; it was more cheerful.

Of course all Bicester found occasion to pass through the Close and see this great sight, while every window in the precincts was raised, that visitors might hear the tap, tap of the sacrilegious mallet. The Cathedral lawyer, urged to take some step, and well versed in the strength of the enemy's position, was fairly nonplussed. While he pondered, with a certain grim amusement, over Mr. Swainson's crotchet, which did not present itself to his legal mind in so dreadful a light as to the mind clerical, some unknown person took action, and made it war to the knife.

"Who did it?" Bicester asked when it rose one morning, to find Mr. Swainson in a state of mind which seemed to call for a padded room and a strait waistcoat. Some one during the night had

thrown down the iron railing, taken up and broken the hoops, crushed the bell, and snapped the pegs; all this in the neatest possible manner, and with no damage to the turf. War to the knife indeed! Mr. Swainson, like the famous Widdrington, would have fought upon his stumps on such a provocation.

He expressed his opinion with much heat that this was the work of "that arrogant priest," and that he should smart for it. A clergyman in this kind of context becomes a priest.

The Dean said, if hints went for anything, that it was a more or less direct interposition of Providence.

Young Swainson said nothing.

The vergers followed his example, but smiled broadly.

The Dean's lawyer said it was a very foolish act, whoever did it. Mrs. Dean said that she should like to give the man who did it five shillings. Perhaps her inclination mastered her.

The Dean's daughter sighed.

And Bicester said everything except what young Swainson said.

I have not mentioned the Dean's daughter before. It is the popular belief that she was christened Sweet Clive, and if people are mistaken in this, and the name "Sweet" does not appear upon the favoured register, what of it? It is but one proof the more of the utter want of foresight of godfathers and godmothers. They send into the world the future loungeur in St. James's handicapped with the name of Joseph or Zachary, and dub the country curate Tom or Jerry. No matter; Clive, whatever her name, could be nothing but sweet. She was not tall nor short; she was just as tall and just as short as she should have been, with a well-rounded figure and a grave carriage of the head. Her hair was wavy and brown, and sometimes it strayed over a white brow, on which a frown came so rarely that its right of entry was barred by the Statute of Limitations. There were a few freckles about her well-shaped nose. But these charms grew upon one gradually; at first her suitors were only conscious of her grey wide-open eyes, so kind and frank and trustful, and so wise, that they filled every young man upon whom she turned them with a certainty of her purity and goodness and loveliness, and sent him away with a frantic desire to make her his wife without loss of time. With all this, she overflowed with fun and happiness--except when she sighed--and she was just nineteen. Such was Sweet Clive. If her picture were painted to-day, there would be this difference: she is older and more beautiful.

To return to Mr. Swainson's enclosure. Bicester watched with bated breath to see what Mr. Swainson would do. No culprit was forthcoming, and it seemed as if the day were going against him. He made no sign; only the broken hoops, the cage and battered bell, so lately the instruments and insignia of triumph, were cleared away and, at the ex-mayor's strenuous request, taken in charge by the police. Even the iron railing was removed. The excitement in the Close rose high. Once more the Cathedral vicinage was undefiled by lay appropriation, but the Dean knew Mr. Swainson too well to rejoice. The ground was cleared, but only, as he foresaw, that it might be used for some mysterious operations, of which the end and aim--his own annoyance--were clear to him, but not the means. What would Mr. Swainson do?

The strange unnatural calm lasted several days. The Cathedral dignitaries moved in fear and trembling. At length the dwellers in the Close were aroused one night by a peculiar hammering. It was frequent, deep, and ominous, and it came from the direction of Mr. Swainson's plot. To the nervous it seemed as the knocking of nails into an untimely coffin; to the guilty--and this was near the Cathedral--like the noise of a rising scaffold, to the brave and those with clear consciences, such as Clive, it more nearly resembled the erection of a hoarding. Indeed, that was the thing it was, and round Mr. Swainson's plot.

But what a hoarding! When the light of day discovered it to waking eyes, the Dean's fearful anticipations seemed slight to him, as the boy's vision who dreaming he is about to be flogged, awakes to find his father standing over him with a strap. It was so unsightly, so gaunt, so unpainted, so terrible; the stones of the Cathedral seemed to blush a deeper red at discovering it, and the oldest houses to turn a darker purple. Had the Dean possessed the hundred tongues of Fame (which in Bicester possessed many more) and the five hundred fingers of Briareus, he could not hope to prevent the Marquis's visitors asking questions about *that*, nor to divert the attention of the least curious American. He recognised the truth at a glance, and formed his plan. Many generals have formed it; before; it was--retreat. He despatched his butler to borrow a continental Bradshaw from the club, and he shut himself up in his study. The truly great mind is never overwhelmed.

The vergers alone inspected the monster unmoved. They eyed it with glances not only of curiosity, but of appreciative intelligence. Not so, later in the day. Then Mr. Swainson appeared, leading by a strong chain a brindled bull-dog, of the most ferocious description and about sixty pounds dead weight. The animal contemplated the nearest verger with satisfaction, and licked his chops; it might be at some grateful memory. The verger, who was in a small way a student of natural history, pronounced it a lick of anticipation, and appeared disconcerted. Mr. Swainson entered with the dog by a small door at the corner, and came out without him. The other vergers

left.

Their coming and going was nothing to Mr. Swainson. It was enough for him that he stood there the cynosure of every eye in the Close; even Mrs. Dean was watching him from a distant garret window. In slow and measured fashion he walked to the steps of his own house, and, taking thence a board he had previously placed there, he returned to the entrance of his plot, now enclosed to the height of about ten feet by his terrible hoarding. Above the door he hung the board and drew back a few feet to take in the effect. Mrs. Dean sent down for her opera-glasses, but there was no need of them. The legend in huge black letters on a white ground ran thus: "No Admittance! Beware of the Dog!!!" A smile of content crept slowly over Mr. Swainson's face, and he said aloud--

"Trump that card, Mr. Dean, if you can."

As he turned--Mrs. Dean saw it distinctly and declared herself ready to swear to it in a court of justice--he snapped his fingers at the Deanery. And the dog howled!

It was the first of many howls, for he was a dog of great width of chest; not even the surgeon of an insurance company, if he had lived twenty-four hours in Bicester Close, would have found fault with his lungs. Why he howled during the night, for it was not the time of full moon, became the burning question of each morning. That he joined in the Cathedral services with a zest which rendered the organ superfluous, and drove the organist to the verge of resignation, was only to be expected. There was nothing strange in that, nor in his rivalry of the Præcentor's best notes, whose voice was considered very fine in the Litany. The voluntary, Tiger made his own; of the sermon he expressed disapproval in so marked a manner that it was hard to say which swelled more with rage, the Dean within or the dog without. Their rage was equally impotent.

Things went so far that the Dean publicly wrung his hands at the breakfast-table. "You could not hear the benediction this morning?" he wailed, with tears in his eyes. "And I was in good voice too, my dear!"

"You should appeal to the Marquis," his wife suggested. It must be explained that the Marquis in Bicester ranks next to and little beneath Providence. But the Dean shook his head. He put no faith in the power even of the Marquis to handle Mr. Swainson. "I will lay it before the Bishop, my dear," he said humbly. And then, then indeed, Mrs. Dean knew that the iron had entered into his soul, and that the hand of the Mayor of the Palace was very heavy upon him; and her good, wifely heart grew so hot that she felt she could have no more patience with her daughter.

For Clive's sympathies were no longer to be trusted. She was not the Sweet Clive of a month ago, but a sadder and more sedate young woman, who had a way of defending the absent foe, and of sighing in dark corners, that was more than provoking. Duty demanded that she should be an ocean, into which her father and mother might pour the streams of their indignation and meet with a sympathising flood-tide. And lo! this unfeeling girl declined to make herself useful in that way, and instead sent forth a "bore" of light jesting that made little of the enemy's enormities and a trifle of his outrages. More, she showed herself for the first time disobedient; she refused to promise not to speak to King Pepin if opportunity served, and, clever girl as she was, laughed her father out of insisting upon it, and kissed her mother into a not unwilling ally. A wise woman was her mother and clear-sighted; she saw that Clive had a spirit, but no longer a heart of her own. Yet at such a time as this, when her husband was wringing his hands, Clive's insensibility to the family grievance tried Mrs. Dean sorely. It was hard that the Canon's sleepless night, the Præcentor's peevishness, the singing man's influenza, and all the countless counts of the indictment against Mr. Swainson should fail to awaken in the young lady's mind a tithe of the indignation felt by every other person at the Deanery, from the Dean himself to the scullery-maid. But then, love is blind, for which most of us may thank Heaven.

Day after day went by and the hoarding still reared its gaunt height, and the unclean beast of the Hebrews still made night hideous, and the day a time for the expression of strong feelings. At length the Dean met his lawyer in the Close, within a few feet of the obnoxious erection. He kept his back to it with ridiculous care, while they talked.

"We have come to something like a settlement at last," the lawyer said briskly. "Con-fusion take the dog! I can hardly hear myself speak. We are to meet at the Chapter House at five, Mr. Dean, if that will suit you; Mr. Swainson, the Bishop, Canon Rowcliffe, and myself. I think he is inclined to be reasonable at last."

The Dean shook his head gloomily.

"You will see it turn out better than you expect," the lawyer assured him. "Let me whisper something to you. There is an action begun against him for shutting up a road across one of his farms at Middleton and it will be stoutly fought. One suit at a time will satisfy even Mr. Swainson."

"You don't say so? This is good news!" the Dean cried, with unmistakable pleasure. "Certainly, I will be there."

"And--I am sure I need not doubt it--you will be ready to meet Mr. Swainson halfway?"

The Dean looked gloomy again. But at this moment a long howl, more frenzied, more fiendish than any which had preceded it, seemed to proclaim that the dog knew that his reign was menaced, and, like Sardanapalus, was determined to go out right royally. It was more than the Dean could stand. With an involuntary movement of his hands to his ears, he nodded and fled in haste to a place less exposed, where he could in a seemly and decanal manner relieve his feelings.

The best-laid plans even of lawyers will go astray, and when they do so, the havoc is generally of a singularly wide-spread description. The meeting in the Chapter-house proved stormy from the first. Whether it was that the writ in the right-of-way case had not yet reached Mr. Swainson, so that he clung to his only split-straw, or that the Dean was soured by want of sleep, or that the Bishop was not thorough enough--whatever was the cause, the spirit of compromise was absent; and the discussion across the Chapter-house table threatened to make matters worse and not better. Whether the Dean first called Mr. Swainson's enclosure the "toadstool of a night," or Mr. Swainson took the initiative by styling the Dean the "mushroom of a day" (the Dean was not of old family), was a question afterwards much and hotly debated in Bicester circles. Be that as it may, the high powers rose from the table in dudgeon and much confusion.

There was behind the Dean at the end of the Chapter-house a large window. It looked immediately-upon what he, in the course of the discussion, had termed "The Profanation," and since the eventful day of Mr. Swainson's match at croquet it had been, by the Dean's order, kept shuttered, that he might not, when occupied in the Chapter-house, have the Profanation directly before his eyes. At the meeting the shutter remained closed; it may be that this phenomenon had weakened Mr. Swainson's doubtful inclination towards peace.

The Dean was a choleric man. As the party rose, he stepped to this shutter and flung it back. He turned to the others and cried with indignation--

"Look, sir; look, my lord! Is that a sight becoming the threshold of a cathedral? Is that a thing to be endured on consecrated ground?"

They stepped towards the window, a wide low-browed Tudor casement, and looked out. The Dean himself stood aside, grasping the shutter with a hand which shook with passion. His eyes were on the others' faces. He expected little show of shame or contrition on that of Mr. Swainson, but he did wish to bring this hideous thing home to the Bishop, who had not been as thorough in the matter as he should have been. Yet surely, as a bishop, he could not see that thing in its horrid reality and be unmoved!

No, he certainly could not. Slowly, and as if reluctantly, his lordship's face changed; it broke into a smile that broadened and rippled wider and wider, second by second as he looked. His colour deepened, until he became almost purple! And Mr. Swainson? His face was the picture of horror; there could not be a doubt of that. Confusion and astonishment were stamped on every feature. The Dean could not believe his eyes. He turned in perplexity to the lawyer, who was peeping between the others' heads. His shoulders were shaking, and his face was puckered with laughter.

The Bishop stepped back. "Really, gentlemen, I think it is hardly fair of us to--to use this window. This is no place for us." He was a kindly man; there never was a more popular bishop in Bicester, and never will be.

At this the Canon and the lawyer lost all control over themselves, and their laughter, if not loud, was deep. The Dean was puzzled--confused, perplexed, wholly angry. He did at last what he should have done at first, instead of striking that attitude with the shutter in his hand. He looked through the window. It was dusty, and he was somewhat nearsighted, but at length he saw; and this was what he saw.

In the further comer of the enclosure, a couple of lovers billing and cooing; about and round them Mr. Swainson's big dog cutting a hundred uncouth gambols. Bad enough this; but it was not all. The ingenuous couple were Frank Swainson and--the Dean's daughter. Frank's arm was around her, and as the Dean looked, he stooped and kissed her, and Clive, raising her face, returned his gaze with eyes full of love, and scarcely blushed.

When the Dean turned he was alone.

Was it very wrong of them? There was nowhere else, since this miserable fracas had begun, where freed from others' eyes, they could steal a kiss. But into Mr. Swainson's plot no window, save a shuttered one, could look; the door, too, was close to one of the side doors of the cathedral, and they could pop in and out again unseen, and as for the big dog, Frank and Tiger were great friends. So if it was very wrong, it was very easy and very sweet and--*facilis descensus Avernii*.

For one hour the Dean remained shut up in his study. At the end of that time he put on his hat and walked across the Close. He knocked at Mr. Swainson's door, and, upon its being opened, went in, and did not come out again for an hour and five minutes by Mrs. Canon Rowcliffe's watch. I have not the slightest idea of what passed between them. More than two score different and distinct accounts of the interview were current next day in Bicester, but no one, and I have

examined them all with care, seems to me to account for the undoubted results. First the disappearance next day from Mr. Swainson's plot of the famous hoarding, which was not replaced even by the old iron railing. Secondly, the marriage six weeks later of King Pepin and Sweet Clive.

FAMILY PORTRAITS.

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On a certain morning in last June I was stooping to fasten a shoe-lace, having taken advantage for that purpose of the step of a corner house in St. James's Square, when a man passing behind me stopped.

"Well!" said he, after a short pause during which I wondered--I could not see him--what he was doing, "the meanness of these rich folk is disgusting! Not a coat of paint for a twelvemonth! I should be ashamed to own a house and leave it like that!"

The man was a stranger to me, and his words seemed as uncalled for as they were ill-natured. But being thus challenged I looked at the house. It was a great stone mansion with a balustrade atop, with many windows and a long stretch of area railings. And certainly it was shabby. I turned from it to the critic. He was shabby too--a little red-nosed man wearing a bad hat. "It is just possible," I suggested, "that the owner may be a poor man and unable to keep it in order."

"Ugh! What has that to do with it?" my new friend answered contemptuously. "He ought to think of the public."

"And your hat?" I asked with winning politeness. "It strikes me, an unprejudiced observer, as a bad hat. Why do you not get a new one?"

"Cannot afford it!" he snapped out, his dull eyes sparkling with rage.

"Cannot afford it? But my good man, you ought to think of the public."

"You tom-cat! What have you to do with my hat? Smother you!" was his kindly answer; and he went on his way muttering things uncomplimentary.

I was about to go mine, but was first falling back to gain a better view of the house in question, when a chuckle close to me betrayed the presence of a listener; a thin, grey-haired man, who, hidden by a pillar of the porch, must have heard our discussion. His hands were engaged with a white tablecloth, from which he had been shaking the crumbs. He had the air of an upper servant of the best class. As our eyes met he spoke.

"Neatly put, sir, if I may take the liberty of saying so," he observed, with a quiet dignity it was a pleasure to witness, "and we are very much obliged to you. The man was a snob, sir."

"I am afraid he was," I answered; "and a fool too."

"And a fool, sir. Answer a fool after his folly. You did that, and he was nowhere; nowhere at all, except in the swearing line. Now, might I ask," he continued, "if you are an American, sir?"

"No, I am not," I answered; "but I have spent some time in the States."

I could have fancied that he sighed.

"I thought--but never mind, sir," he began. "I was wrong. It is curious how much alike gentlemen, that are real gentlemen, speak. Now I dare swear, sir, that you have a taste for pictures."

I was inclined to humour the old fellow's mood. "I like a good picture, I admit," I said.

"Then perhaps you would not be offended," he suggested timidly, "if I asked you to step inside and look at one or two. I would not take the liberty, sir, but there are some Van Dycks and a Rubens in the dining-room that cost a mint of money in their day, I have heard; and there is no one in the house but my wife and myself."

It was a strange invitation, strangely brought about. But I saw no reason why I should not accept it, and I followed him into the hall. It was spacious, but sparsely furnished. The matted floor had a cold look, and so had the gaunt stand which seemed to be a fixture, and boasted but one umbrella, one sunshade, and one dog-whip. As I passed a half-open door I caught a glimpse of a small room well furnished with prints and water-colours on the walls. But these were of a common order. A dozen replicas of each and all might be seen in a walk through Bond Street. So that even this oasis of taste and comfort told the same story as had the bare hall and dreary exterior; and laid, as it were, a finger on one's heart. I trod softly as I followed my guide along the strip of matting towards the rear of the house.

He opened a door at the inner end of the hall, and led me into a large and lofty room, built out at the back, as a state dining-room or ball-room. At present it resembled the latter, for it was without furniture. "Now," said the old man, turning and respectfully touching my sleeve to gain my attention, "now you will not consider your labour lost in coming to see that, sir. It is a portrait of the second Lord Wetherby by Sir Anthony Van Dyck, and is judged to be one of the finest specimens of his style in existence."

I was lost in astonishment; amazed, almost appalled! My companion stood by my side, his face wearing a placid smile of satisfaction, his hand pointing slightly upwards to the blank wall before us. The blank wall! Of any picture, there or elsewhere in the room, there was no sign. I turned to him and then from him, and I felt very sick at heart. The poor old fellow was--must be--mad. I gazed blankly at the blank wall. "By Van Dyck?" I repeated mechanically.

"Yes, sir, by Van Dyck," he replied, in the most matter-of-fact tone imaginable. "So, too, is this one;" he moved as he spoke a few feet to his left. "The second peer's first wife in the costume of a lady-in-waiting. This portrait and the last are in as good a state of preservation as on the day they were painted."

Oh, certainly mad! And yet so graphic was his manner, so crisp and realistic were his words, that I rubbed my eyes; and looked and looked again, and almost fancied that Walter, Lord Wetherby, and Anne, his wife, grew into shape before me on the wall. Almost, but not quite; and it was with a heart full of wonder and pity that I accompanied the old man, in whose manner there was no trace of wildness or excitement, round the walls; visiting in turn the Cuyp which my lord bought in Holland, the Rubens, the four Lawrences, and the Philips--a very Barmecide feast of art. I could not doubt that the old man saw the pictures; but I saw only bare walls.

"Now I think you have seen them, family portraits and all," he concluded, as we came to the doorway again; stating the fact, which was no fact, with complacent pride. "They are fine pictures, sir. They, at least, are left, though the house is not what it was."

"Very fine pictures," I remarked. I was minded to learn if he were sane on other points. "Lord Wetherby," I said, "I suppose that he is not in London?"

"I do not know, sir, one way or the other," the servant answered with a new air of reserve. "This is not his lordship's house. Mrs. Wigram, my late lord's daughter-in-law, lives here."

"But this is the Wetherby's town house," I persisted. I knew so much.

"It was my late lord's house. At his son's marriage it was settled upon Mrs. Wigram; and little enough besides, God knows!" he exclaimed querulously. "It was Mr. Alfred's wish that some land should be settled upon his wife, but there was none out of the entail, and my lord, who did not like the match, though he lived to be fond enough of the mistress afterwards, said, 'Settle the house in town!' in a bitter kind of joke like. So the house was settled, and five hundred pounds a year. Mr. Alfred died abroad, as you may know, sir, and my lord was not long in following him."

He was closing the shutters of one window after another as he spoke. The room had sunk into deep gloom. I could imagine now that the pictures were really where he fancied them. "And Lord Wetherby, the late peer?" I asked after a pause, "did he leave his daughter-in-law nothing?"

"My lord died suddenly, leaving no will," he replied sadly. "That is how it is. And the present peer, who was only a second cousin--well, I say nothing about him." A reticence which was calculated to consign his lordship to the lowest deep.

"He did not help?" I asked.

"Devil a bit, begging your pardon, sir. But there, it is not my place to talk of these things. I doubt I have wearied you with talk about the family. It is not my way," he added, as if wondering at himself, "only something in what you said seemed to touch a chord like."

By this time we were outside the room, standing at the inner end of the hall, while he fumbled

with the lock of the door. Short passages ending in swing doors ran out right and left from this point, and through one of these a tidy, middle-aged woman wearing an apron suddenly emerged. At sight of me she looked much astonished. "I have been showing the gentleman the pictures," said my guide, who was still occupied with the door.

A flash of pain altered and hardened the woman's face. "I have been very much interested, madam," I said softly.

Her gaze left me to dwell upon the old man with infinite affection. "John had no right to bring you in, sir," she said primly. "I have never known him do such a thing before, and--Lord a mercy! there is the mistress's knock. Go, John, and let her in; and this gentleman," with an inquisitive look at me, "will not mind stepping a bit aside, while her ladyship goes upstairs."

"Certainly not," I answered. I hastened to retire into one of the side passages, into the darkest corner of it, and there stood leaning against the cool panels, my hat in my hand.

In the short pause which ensued before John opened the door she whispered to me, "You have not told him, sir?"

"About the pictures?"

"Yes, sir. He is blind, you see."

"Blind?" I exclaimed.

"Yes, sir, this year and more; and when the pictures were taken away--by the present earl--that he had known all his life, and been so proud to show to people just the same as if they had been his own, why it seemed a shame to tell him. I have never had the heart to do it, and he thinks they are there to this day."

Blind! I had never thought of that; and while I was grasping the idea, and fitting it to the facts, a light footstep sounded in the hall and a woman's voice on the stairs; such a voice and such a footstep, that, it seemed to me, a man, if nothing else were left, might find home in them. "Your mistress," I said presently, when the sounds had died away upon the floor above, "has a sweet voice; but has not something annoyed her?"

"Well, I never should have thought that you would have noticed that!" exclaimed the housekeeper; who was, I daresay, many other things besides housekeeper. "You have a sharp ear, sir; that I will say. Yes, there is a something has gone wrong; but to think that an American gentleman should notice it!"

"I am not American," I said, perhaps testily.

"Oh, indeed, sir. I beg your pardon, I am sure. It was just your way of speaking made me think it," she replied. And then there came a second louder rap at the door, as John, who had gone upstairs with his mistress, came down in a leisurely fashion.

"That is Lord Wetherby, drat him!" he said, on his wife calling to him in a low voice; he was ignorant, I think, of my presence. "He is to be shown into the library, and the mistress will see him in five minutes; and you are to go to her room. Oh, rap away!" he added, turning towards the door, and shaking his fist at it. "There is many a better man than you has waited longer at that door."

"Hush, John. Do you not see the gentleman?" his wife interposed, with the simplicity of habit. "He will show you out," she added rapidly to me, "as soon as his lordship has gone in, if you do not mind waiting another minute."

"Not at all," I said, drawing back into the corner as they went on their errands. But though I said, "Not at all," mine was an odd position. The way in which I had come into the house, and my present situation in a kind of hiding, would have made most men only anxious to extricate themselves. But I, while I listened to John parleying with some one at the door, conceived a strange desire, or a desire which would have been strange in another man, to see this thing to the end--conceived it and acted upon it.

The library? That was the room on the right of the hall, opposite to Mrs. Wigrams's sitting-room. Probably, nay I was certain, it had another door opening on the passage in which I stood. It would cost me but a step to confirm my opinion. When John ushered in the visitor by one door I had already, by way of the other, ensconced myself behind a screen, which I seemed to know would mask it. I was going to listen. Perhaps I had my reasons. Perhaps--but there, what matter? As a fact, I listened.

The room was spacious but sombre, wainscoted and vaulted with oak. Its only visible occupant was a thin, dark man of middle size, with a narrow face, and a stubborn feather of black hair rising above his forehead; a man of Welsh type. He was standing with his back to the light, a roll of papers in one hand. The fingers of the other, drumming upon the table, betrayed that he was both out of temper and ill at ease. While I was still scanning him stealthily--I had never seen him before--the door opened, and Mrs. Wigram came in. I sank back behind the screen. I think some

words passed, some greeting of the most formal; but, though the room was still, I failed to hear it, and when I recovered myself he was speaking.

"I am here at your wish, Mrs. Wigram, and your service, too," he said, with an effort at gallantry which sat ill upon him. "Although I think it would have been better if we had left the matter to our solicitors."

"Indeed."

"Yes. I thought you were aware of my opinion."

"I was; and I perfectly understand, Lord Wetherby," she replied, with a coldness which did not hide her dislike for him, "your preference for that course. You naturally shrink from telling me your terms face to face."

"Now, Mrs. Wigram! Now, Mrs. Wigram! Is not this a tone to be deprecated?" he answered, lifting his hands. "I come to you as a man of business upon business."

"Business!" she retorted. "Does that mean wringing advantage from my weakness?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I do deprecate this tone," he repeated. "I come in plain English to make you an offer; one which you can accept or refuse as you please. I offer you five hundred a-year for this house. It is immensely too large for your needs, and too expensive for your income, and yet you have in strictness no power to let it. Very well, I, who can release you from that restriction, offer you five hundred a-year for the house. What can be more fair?"

"Fair? In plain English, Lord Wetherby, you are the only possible purchaser, and you fix the price. Is that fair? The house would let easily for fifteen hundred."

"Possibly," he retorted, "if it were in the open market. But it is not."

"No," she answered rapidly. "And you, having the forty thousand a year which, had my husband lived, would have been his and mine; you who, a poor man, have stepped into this inheritance--you offer me five hundred for the family house! For shame, my lord! for shame!"

"We are not acting a play," he answered doggedly, but I could see that her words stung him. "The law is the law. I ask for nothing but my rights, and one of those I am willing to waive in your favour. You have my offer."

"And if I refuse it? If I let the house? You will not dare to enforce the restriction."

"Try me," he rejoined, drumming with his fingers upon the table. "Try me, and you will see."

"If my husband had lived----"

"But he did not live," he broke in, losing patience, "and that makes all the difference. Now, for Heaven's sake, Mrs. Wigram, do not make a scene! Do you accept my offer?"

For a moment she seemed about to break down, but, her pride coming to the rescue, she recovered herself with wonderful quickness.

"I have no choice," she said with dignity.

"I am glad you accept," he answered, so much relieved that he gave way to an absurd burst of generosity. "Come!" he cried, "we will say guineas instead of pounds, and have done with it!"

She looked at him in wonder. "No, Lord Wetherby," she said, "I accepted your terms. I prefer to keep to them. You said that you would bring the necessary papers with you. If you have done so I will sign them now, and my servants can witness them."

"I have the draft, and the lawyer's clerk is doubtless in the house," he answered. "I left directions for him to be here at eleven."

"I do not think that he is in the house," the lady answered. "I should know if he were here."

"Not here!" he answered angrily. "Why not, I wonder! But I have the skeleton lease; it is very short, and to save delay I will fill in the particulars, names, and so forth myself, if you will permit me to do so. It will not take twenty minutes."

"As you please. You will find a pen and ink on the table. If you will ring the bell when you are ready, I will come and bring the servants."

"Thank you. You are very good," he said smoothly, adding, when she had left the room, "and the devil take your impudence, madam! As for your cursed pride--well, it has saved me twenty-five pounds a-year, and so you are welcome to it. I was a fool to make the offer." With that, now grumbling at the absence of the lawyer's clerk, and now congratulating himself on the saving of a lawyer's fee, my lord sat down to his task.

A hansom cab, on its way to the East India Club rattled through the square, and, under cover

of the noise, I stole out from behind the screen, and stood in the middle of the room, looking down at the unconscious worker. If for a minute I felt the desire to raise my hand and give his lordship such a surprise as he had never in his life experienced, any other man might have felt the same; and as it was I put it away and only looked quietly about me. Some rays of sunshine, piercing the corner pane of a dulled window, fell on the Wetherby coat of arms blazoned over the wide fireplace, and so created the one bright spot in the bare, dismantled room; which had once, unless the tiers of empty shelves and the lingering odour of Russia lied, been lined from floor to ceiling with books. My lord had taken the furniture; my lord had taken the books; my lord had taken--nothing but his rights.

Retreating softly to the door by which I had entered, and rattling the handle, I advanced afresh into the room. "Will your lordship allow me?" I said, after I had in vain coughed to gain his attention.

He turned hastily and looked at me with a face full of suspicion. Some surprise on finding another person in the room was natural; but possibly also there was something in the atmosphere of that house which threw his nerves off their balance. "Who are you?" he cried in a tone which matched his face.

"You left orders, my lord," I explained, "with Messrs. Duggan and Poole that a clerk should attend here at eleven. I very much regret that some delay has been caused."

"Oh, you are the clerk!" he replied ungraciously. "You do not look much like a lawyer's clerk."

Involuntarily I glanced aside, and saw in a mirror the reflection of a tall man with a thick beard and moustaches, grey eyes, and an ugly scar seaming the face from nose to ear. "Yet I hope to give you satisfaction, my lord," I murmured, dropping my eyes. "It was understood that you needed a confidential clerk."

"Well, well, sir, to your work!" he replied irritably. "Better late than never; and after all it may be better that you should be here and see it executed. Only you will not forget," he continued, with a glance at the papers, "that I have myself copied four--well, three--three full folios, for which an allowance must be made. But there! Get on with your work. The handwriting will speak for itself."

I obeyed, and wrote on steadily, while the earl walked up and down the room, or stood at a window. Upstairs sat Mrs. Wigram, schooling herself, I dare swear, to take this one favour that was no favour from the man who had dealt out to her such hard measure. Outside a casual passer through the square glanced up at the great house, and seeing the bent head of the secretary and the figure of his companion, saw as he thought nothing unusual; nor had any presentiment--how should he?--of the strange scene which the room with the dingy windows was about to witness.

I had been writing for five minutes when Lord Wetherby stopped in his passage behind me and looked over my shoulder. With a jerk his eyeglasses fell, touching my shoulder.

"Bless my soul!" he exclaimed, "I have seen your handwriting somewhere! And lately, too. Where, I wonder?"

"Probably among the family papers, my lord," I answered. "I have several times been engaged in the family business in the time of the late Lord Wetherby."

"Indeed." There was both curiosity and suspicion in his utterance of the word. "You knew him?"

"Yes, my lord. I have written for him in this very room, and he has walked up and down, and dictated to me, as you might be doing now."

His lordship stopped his pacing to and fro, and on the instant retreated to the window. But I could see that he was interested, and I was not surprised when he continued with transparent carelessness. "A strange coincidence. And may I ask what it was upon which you were engaged?"

"At that time?" I answered, looking him full in the face. "Upon a will, my lord."

He started and frowned, and abruptly resumed his walk up and down. But I saw that he had a better conscience than I had given him credit for possessing. My shot had not struck where I had looked to place it; and, finding this was so, I turned the thing over afresh, while I pursued my copying. When I had finished, I asked him--I think he was busy at the time cursing the absence of tact in the lower orders--if he would go through the instrument. And he took my seat.

Where I stood behind him, I was not far from the fireplace. While he muttered to himself the legal jargon in which he was as well versed as a lawyer bred in an office, I moved to it; and; neither missed nor suspected, stood looking from his bent figure to the blazoned shield, which formed part of the mantelpiece. If I wavered, my hesitation lasted but a few seconds. Then, raising my voice, I called sharply, "My lord, there used to be here----"

He turned swiftly, and saw where I was. "What the deuce are you doing there, sir?" he cried in astonishment, rising to his feet and coming towards me, the pen in his hand and his face aflame

with anger. "You forget----"

"A safe--a concealed safe for papers," I continued, cutting him short in my turn. "I have seen the late Lord Wetherby place papers in it more than once. The spring worked from here. You touch this knob."

"Leave it alone, sir!" he cried furiously.

He spoke too late. The shield had swung outwards on a hinge, door-fashion; and where it had been, gaped a small open safe lined with cement. The rays of sunshine, that a few minutes before had picked out the gaudy quarterings, now fell on a large envelope which lay apart on a shelf. It was as clean as if it had been put there that morning. No doubt the safe was air-tight. I laid my hand upon it. "My lord!" I cried, turning to look at him with ill-concealed exultation, "here is a paper--I think, a will!"

A moment before the veins of his forehead had been swollen, his face had been dark with the rush of blood. But his anger died down at sight of the packet. He regained his self-control, and a moment saw him pale and calm, all show of resentment confined to a wicked gleam in his eye. "A will?" he repeated, with a certain kind of dignity, though the hand he stretched out to take the envelope shook. "Indeed, then it is my place to examine it. I am the heir-at-law, and I am within my rights, sir."

I feared that he was going to put the parcel into his pocket and dismiss me, and I was considering what course I should take, when instead he carried the envelope to the table by the window, and tore off the cover without ceremony. "It is not in your handwriting?" were his first words. And he looked at me with a distrust that was almost superstitious. No doubt my sudden entrance, my ominous talk, and my discovery seemed to him to savour of the devil.

"No," I replied unmoved. "I told your lordship that I had written a will at the late Lord Wetherby's dictation. I did not say--for how could I know?--that it was this one."

"Ah!" He hastily smoothed the sheets, and ran his eyes over their contents. When he reached the last page there was a dark scowl on his face, and he stood awhile staring at the signatures; not now reading, I think, but collecting his thoughts. "You know the provisions of this?" he presently burst forth, dashing the back of his hand against the paper. "I say, sir, you know the provisions of this?"

"I do not, my lord," I answered. Nor did I.

"The unjust provisions of this will?" he repeated, passing over my negative as if it had not been uttered.

"Fifty thousand pounds to a woman who had not a penny when she married his son! And the interest on another fifty thousand for her life! Why, it is a prodigious income, an abnormal income--for a woman! And out of whose pocket? Out of mine, every stiver of it! It is monstrous! I say it is! How am I to support the title on the income left to me, I should like to know?"

I marvelled. I remembered how rich he was. I could not refrain from suggesting that he had remaining all the real property. "And," I added, "I understood, my lord, that the testator's personalty was sworn under four hundred thousand pounds."

"You talk nonsense!" he snarled. "Look at the legacies! Five thousand here, and a thousand there, and hundreds like berries on a bush! It is a fortune, a decent fortune, clean frittered away! A barren title is all that will be left to me!"

What was he going to do? His face was gloomy, his hands were twitching. "Who are the witnesses, my lord?" I asked in a low voice.

So low--for under certain conditions a tone conveys much--that he shot a stealthy glance towards the door before he answered, "John Williams."

"Blind," I replied in the same low tone.

"William Williams."

"He is dead. He was Mr. Wigram's valet. I remember reading in the newspaper that he was with his master, and was killed by the Indians at the same time."

"True. I fancy that that was the case," he answered huskily. "And the handwriting is Lord Wetherby's."

I assented.

Then for fully a minute we were silent, while he bent over the will, and I stood behind him looking down at him with thoughts in my mind which he could no more fathom than the senseless wood upon which I leaned. Yet I mistook him. I thought him, to be plain, a scoundrel; and--so he was--but a mean one. "What is to be done?" he muttered at length, speaking rather to himself than to me.

I answered softly, "I am a poor man, my lord," while inwardly I was quoting "*quem Deus vult perdere.*"

My words startled him. He answered hurriedly, "Just so! just so! So shall I be when this cursed paper takes effect. A very poor man! A hundred and fifty thousand gone at a blow! But there, she shall have it! She shall have every penny of it; only," he concluded slowly, "I do not see what difference one more day will make."

I followed his downcast eyes, which moved from the will before him to the agreement for the lease of the house; and I did see what difference a day would make. I saw and understood and wondered. He had not the courage to suppress the will; but if he could gain a slight advantage by withholding it for a few hours, he had the mind to do that. Mrs. Wigram, a rich woman, would no longer let the house; she would not need to do so; and my lord would lose a cheap residence as well as his hundred and fifty thousand pounds. To the latter loss he had resigned himself; but he could not bear to forego the petty gain for which he had schemed. "I think I understand, my lord," I replied.

"Of course," he resumed nervously, "you must be rewarded for making this discovery. I will see that it is so. You may depend upon me. I will mention the case to Mrs. Wigram, and--and, in fact, my friend, you may depend upon me."

"That will not do," I said firmly. "If that be all, I had better go to Mrs. Wigram at once, and claim my reward a day earlier."

He grew very red in the face at receiving this check. "You will not in that event get my good word," he said.

"Which has no weight with the lady," I answered.

"How dare you speak so to me?" his lordship cried. "You are an impertinent fellow! But there! How much do you want?"

"A hundred pounds."

"A hundred pounds for a mere day's delay? Which will do no one any harm?"

"Except Mrs. Wigram," I retorted drily. "Come, Lord Wetherby, this lease is worth a thousand a year to you. Mrs. Wigram, as you know, will not voluntarily let the house to you. If you would have Wetherby House you must pay me. That is the long and the short of it."

"You are an impertinent fellow!" he cried.

"So you have said before, my lord."

I expected him to burst into a furious passion, but I suppose there was a hint of power in my tone, beyond the defiance which the words expressed; for, instead of doing so, he eyed me with a thoughtful gaze, and paused to consider. "You are at Poole and Duggan's," he said slowly. "How was it that they did not search this cupboard, with which you were acquainted?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "I have not been in the house since Lord Wetherby died," I said. "My employers did not consult me when the papers he left were examined."

"You are not a member of the firm?"

"No, I am not," I answered. I was thinking that, if I knew those respectable gentlemen, no one of them would have helped my lord in this for ten times a hundred pounds.

He seemed satisfied, and taking out a note-case laid on the table a little pile of notes. "There is your money," he said, counting them over with reluctant fingers. "Be good enough to put the will and envelope back into the cupboard. To-morrow you will oblige me by rediscovering it--you can manage that, no doubt--and giving information at once to Messrs. Duggan and Poole, or to Mrs. Wigram, as you please. Now," he continued, when I had obeyed him, "will you be good enough to ask the servants to tell Mrs. Wigram that I am waiting?"

There was a slight noise behind us. "I am here," some one said. I am sure that we both jumped at the sound, for though I did not look that way, I knew that the voice was Mrs. Wigram's, and that she was in the room. "I have come to tell you, Lord Wetherby," she went on, "that I have an engagement at twelve. Do I understand that you are ready? If so, I will summon Mrs. Williams."

"The papers are ready for signature," the peer answered, betraying some confusion, "and I am ready to sign. I shall be glad to have the matter settled as agreed." Then he turned to me, where I had fallen back to the end of the room. "Be good enough to ring the bell if Mrs. Wigram permit it," he said.

As I moved to the fireplace to do so, I was conscious that the lady was regarding me with surprise. But when I had regained my position and looked towards her, she was standing near the window gazing steadily into the square, an expression of disdain rendered by face and figure. Shall I confess that it was a joy to me to see her head so high, and to read even in the outline of

her form a contempt which I, and I only, knew to be so justly based? For myself, I leant against the edge of the screen by the door, and perhaps my hundred pounds lay heavily on my heart. As for him, he fidgeted with his papers, although they were all in order. He was visibly impatient to get his bit of knavery accomplished. Oh! he was a worthy man! And Welshman!

"Perhaps," he presently suggested, for the sake of saying something, "while your servant is coming, you will read the agreement, Mrs. Wigram. It is very short, and, as you know, your solicitors have seen it in the draft."

She bowed, and took the paper negligently. She read some way down the first sheet with a smile, half careless, half contemptuous. Then I saw her stop--she had turned her back to the window to obtain more light--and dwell on a particular sentence. I saw--God! I had forgotten the handwriting! I saw her eyes grow large, and fear leap into them, as she grasped the paper with her other hand, and stepped nearer to the peer's side. "Who?" she cried. "Who wrote this? Tell me! Do you hear? Tell me quickly! Who wrote this?"

He was nervous on his own account, wrapt in his own piece of scheming, and obtuse.

"I wrote it," he said, with maddening complacency. He put up his glasses and glanced at the top of the page she held out to him. "I wrote it myself, and I can assure you that it is quite right, and a faithful copy. You do not think----"

"Think! Think! no! no. This, I mean! Who wrote this?" she repeated, her voice hysterical with excitement. "This? This?"

He was confounded by her vehemence, as well as hampered by his evil conscience.

"The clerk, Mrs. Wigram, the clerk," he said petulantly, still in his fog of selfishness. "The clerk from Messrs. Duggan and Poole's."

"Where is he?" she cried breathlessly. I think she did not believe him.

"Where is he?" he repeated in querulous surprise. "Why, here, of course; where should he be, madam? He will witness my signature."

It was little of signatures I recked at that moment. I was praying to Heaven that my folly might be forgiven me; and that my lightly planned vengeance might not fall on my own head. "Joy does not kill," I said to myself, repeating it over and over again, and clinging to it desperately. "Joy does not kill!" But oh! was it true? in face of that white-lipped woman!

"Here!" She did not say more, but she gazed at me with dazed eyes, she raised her hand and beckoned to me. And I had no choice but to obey; to go nearer to her, out into the light.

"Mrs. Wigram," I said hoarsely, my voice sounding to me as a whisper, "I have news of your late--of your husband. It is good news."

"Good news?" Did she faintly echo my words? or, as her face from which all colour had passed peered into mine, and searched it in infinite hope and infinite fear, did our two minds speak without need of physical lips? "Good news?"

"Yes," I whispered. "He is alive. The Indians did not----"

"Alfred!" Her cry rang through the room, and with it I caught her in my arms as she fell. Beard and long hair, and scar and sunburn, and strange dress--these which had deceived others were no disguise to her--my wife. I bore her gently to the couch, and hung over her in a new paroxysm of fear. "A doctor! Quick! A doctor!" I cried to Mrs. Williams, who was already kneeling beside her. "Do not tell me," I added piteously, "that I have killed her?"

"No! no! no!" the good woman answered, the tears running down her face. "Joy does not kill!"

An hour later this fear had been lifted from me, and I was walking up and down the library alone with my thankfulness; glad to be alone, yet more glad, more thankful still, when John came in with a beaming face. "You have come to tell me----" I cried, pleased that the tidings had come by his lips--"to go to her? That she will see me?"

"Her ladyship is sitting up," he replied.

"And Lord Wetherby?" I asked, pausing at the door to put the question. "He left the house at once?"

"Yes, my lord, Mr. Wigram has been gone some time."

THE END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK LAID UP IN LAVENDER ***

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