Title: The Twickenham Peerage

Author: Richard Marsh

Release date: August 8, 2012 [EBook #40452]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Charles Bowen, from page scans provided by
Google Books (Oxford University)

Transcriber's Notes:

1. Page scan source:
http://books.google.com/books?id=-zQPAAAAQAAJ
(Oxford University)

THE TWICKENHAM PEERAGE

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE BEETLE: A MYSTERY

MARVELS AND MYSTERIES

THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

BOTH SIDES OF THE VEIL

THE JOSS: A REVERSION

THE ADVENTURES OF AUGUSTUS SHORT

THE GODDESS: A DEMON

AMUSEMENT ONLY

FRIVOLITIES

THE CHASE OF THE RUBY

THE
TWICKENHAM PEERAGE

BY

RICHARD MARSH

METHUEN & CO.

36 ESSEX STREET, W.C.

LONDON

1902

CONTENTS

BOOK I.--THE SLEEPING MAN

THE STORY IS BEGUN BY THE HON. DOUGLAS HOWARTH

CHAPTER I

A SIDE SHOW

'You and I can never marry.'

Edith's words had been in my thoughts ever since she had uttered them. All night; all the morning; now that in the afternoon I had come out to take the air. I was strolling from the club to George Douglas's rooms in Ashley Gardens. More for the sake of the exercise than in the desire of seeing him. As I was passing the Abbey I glanced at the Aquarium on my right. My eye was caught by the words on a board which ran right across the front of the building, 'At No Place In The World Can So Many Sights Be Seen.' I hesitated. It was years since I had been in the place. One might as well spend half an hour beneath its roof as with George Douglas. I crossed the road and entered.

The first thing which struck me was the general grimness of everything. A winter garden it was called. Anything less garden-like one could hardly fancy. Coming from the clear sunshine of the autumn afternoon, the effect was curious. There was a larger audience than I had expected. The people were gathered, for the most part, round the central stage, on which a performance was taking place. Three girls in tights were displaying themselves on a trapeze. A moment's glance was enough. It was the sort of thing one has seen a thousand times. I passed on.

There were numerous side shows. There was a Harem; a Giant Lady; a Miraculous Dwarf; a Working Gold Mine; a Palace of Mirrors; the old familiar things. On the extreme left a huge placard was displayed:

THE MARVELLOUS SLEEPING MAN.

THIS IS THE TWENTY-EIGHTH DAY OF MONTAGU BABBACOMBE'S THIRTY-DAYS' SLEEP, WITHOUT EATING OR DRINKING.

COME AND SEE THE MOST WONDERFUL SIGHT IN THE WORLD.

I am not consciously attracted by such spectacles, even granting their genuineness--which is to grant a good deal. But, at the moment, I had nothing to do, and the idea of a man being able to forget, at will, for thirty consecutive days, the worries and troubles of life appealed to me with singular force. I went to see the sleeping man.

In the centre of a good-sized apartment stood a table. It was entirely covered by a large glass case. Under the case was a mattress. On the mattress lay a man. He had no pillows or bolster; no bedclothes with which to cover himself; and the fact that he was clad, so far as one could see, only in a suit of white linen pyjamas lent him, as one first caught sight of him on coming in, an appearance of peculiar uncanniness. One's first impression was that under the glass case was an effigy, not a man.

If it was a trick, it was certainly well done. He lay on his back, his legs stretched out, his arms gathered to his sides. In his attitude there was a starkness, a rigidity, which suggested death. It seemed incredible that a man could lie like that for twenty-eight days and be alive. This was borne in upon me so soon as I saw the peculiar position of his body. Then I saw his face.

It was Twickenham!

The shock was so overwhelming, that in a moment my whole physical organisation seemed at a standstill. I lost my balance. The whole place swam before me. I felt myself swaying to and fro. If I had not leaned against the glass case, I believe I should have fallen. In my whole life I had never before behaved so stupidly. A voice recalled me to myself.

'Take care there, sir! Do you want to break the glass?--or to knock the whole thing over?'

A person who seemed to have charge of the place addressed to me this, under the circumstances, not unnatural inquiry. I steadied myself as best I could. After a second or two I began to see things with something approaching to clearness. By degrees I got the man inside the case, as it were, in focus.

Was it Twickenham? I could not decide. It was fifteen years since I had seen him. As regards certain details my memory had possibly become a trifle blurred. Yet it was absurd to suppose that I could by any possibility fail to recognise him if we met. If it was not he, then it was his double. His very self, reproduced in another form.

Fifteen years make a difference in a man's appearance--especially fifteen such years as it might be taken for granted that Twickenham had lived. Allowing, in my mind's eye, for that difference, I became more and more at a loss to determine whether this was or was not the absentee. Never before had I been conscious of such a condition of mental bewilderment. I lost my presence of mind; was unable to arrange my thoughts; became incapable of deciding what to say or do. The situation was the very last I had expected. Coming at such a moment it found me wholly unprepared.

If this was Twickenham, this uncanny-looking mountebank in the guise of death, then the entire edifice we had been laboriously constructing for fifteen years crumbled at a touch. Edith's words, 'You and I can never marry,' would be indeed proved true. And Reggie and Vi--what of them? Where would Reggie be if his brother turned up at this hour of the day? And I? Reggie was my debtor to the extent of nearly every penny I had ever had. If he was not the Marquis, because Leonard still was in the flesh, then he and Vi, and I, were ruined. And Edith could never marry a pauper.

Down toppled our whole card edifice, never again to be rebuilt by us.

But the question was--was the man under the glass case, lying on the mattress, in the white pyjamas, Leonard Sherrington, third Marquis of Twickenham? The Twickenham peerage carried with it rather over than under a hundred thousand pounds a year. It might, therefore, on the face of it, seem absurd to suppose that its present holder could be found posing as the Marvellous Sleeping Man in a side show at the Westminster Aquarium. But that was only seeming. To those who had the honour of the present peer's acquaintance, such a state of affairs seemed about as likely as any other. Twickenham was born mad, and continued as he was born. His father was, if anything, madder than he was. They consistently, and persistently quarrelled. Some of the capers Leonard cut were a trifle high. The old man resented any one's cutting higher capers than he did. As Leonard spent money like water, his sire let him have as little to spend as he could help. The result was disastrous. Leonard got money in ways which suggested congenital insanity. Then there came the crash. When Leonard was thirty-one, it became known that Morris Acrodato held a bill for five and twenty thousand pounds to which he had forged his father's name. Leonard vanished. The old man declined to pay. Six months after he was dead. His wife had predeceased him. He left two sons--Leonard, and a second son, born seventeen years later, Reginald. Oddly enough, considering the terms on which he had lived with him, a will was found in which he left everything to his firstborn. Under these circumstances one wondered why he had not handed over that five and twenty thousand without a fuss. But both father and son were men who were, in all things, superior to the ordinary rules of common sense. The thing which every reasonable creature did, was the one thing they never did.

Nothing had been seen of Leonard since the day of his flight. Although it was not generally known, something had, however, been heard. On seven different occasions his lawyers, Foster, Charter, and Baynes, had received intimations that he was alive. He had dropped these hints, it would seem, in a spirit of pure 'cussedness.' They had come at varying intervals, from different parts of the world. They all took the form of holograph notes, in which the writer curtly observed that he was alive and in good health, and trusted that the firm was giving to his interests all the attention they required. They bore no address, and it proved impossible to trace by whom they had been posted; but that they were bona-fide emanations from Twickenham himself seemed undoubted.

The last of these notes had come to hand more than seven years back. Since then he had given no sign. As, previously, no two years had elapsed without advice being received of his existence, the continued silence seemed to suggest that, at last, he might be dead. That he was so, I, for

one, devoutly hoped. All that I required was proof of his decease.

When the old man died, all that his second son, Reginald, had he inherited from his mother. It was barely enough to keep him alive. He was fourteen years of age. Soon after he was in the twenties he was as good as penniless. By this time I had become mixed up with his fortunes in rather a curious fashion. I had a sister, Violet, who was a year younger than he was. He had a cousin, Edith Desmond, who was four younger than myself. Violet and he, and Edith and I, belonged, as it were, to two different generations. I had a tiny place on the borders of Hants, which adjoined his aunt's. He lived with her when his father died; she was Lady Desmond, the baronet's widow. Edith and I always had a liking for one another. If my father had left me a little better off, or if Violet had been older, we should have been married years ago. But she was an only child; the most beautiful I ever saw. Her mother hoped, by her help, to restore the faded glories of the Desmonds. That meant that she was to marry money.

I was hardly in a position to marry at all, with Vi on my hands, regarding me as a sort of father. When Reggie came to live at the Moat House Vi and he became acquainted. In course of time I was informed that they were engaged. Almost in the same breath he told me that he was practically without a penny piece. I lent him something to go on with. Later I lent him more. Then again. And again. I did not like the business, but, partly for Edith's sake, partly for Vi's, partly for his own, by degrees I was practically financing him. Until it came to this--that I had invested in him, on the strength of Twickenham's death, nearly everything I had. As time went on he became convinced that his brother was dead. The brothers were practically strangers; Reggie had scarcely seen his senior a dozen times. There were enormous accumulations, amounting to over a million. If Reggie succeeded I should do well. Edith and I could be married to-morrow. If, on the other hand, Reggie did not succeed, and that soon, so far as I could see, he and I were ruined together.

And here, at the crucial moment, if I could trust my eyes, ruin was. It was not surprising that, momentarily, I became a trifle giddy.

Had the man stepped into a room in which I was, I should unhesitatingly have recognised him as Leonard, Marquis of Twickenham. There would have been no necessity for him to announce his name and title. I should have known him then and there. But, as matters stood, the case was altered. There was room for doubt. Or I tried to persuade myself there was. To begin with, a man with practically unlimited resources at his command, would hardly be likely to masquerade in such a fashion. That was what I told myself. At the bottom of my heart I was aware that it would be quite in keeping with what I myself knew of Leonard's character. He had never lost an opportunity of making an exhibition of himself, but always had an insane leaning in the direction of the esoteric and the bizarre.

I was on safer ground when I came to the questions of the likeness. There were points of difference between the two. This man looked a little shorter and thinner; smaller altogether; too old for Twickenham. Twickenham was only forty-six; his double looked sixty. Then he had a scar on his right cheek, which Twickenham had never had.

Still these things, I had perforce to admit, were quite reconcilable with the fact that the man was Twickenham. What alterations might not have taken place in such a fifteen years!

The exhibition was not liberally patronised. There had been two or three other spectators when I came in, but they had gone, and no others had taken their place. The duration of my visit, and the unmistakable interest which I took in the figure on the mattress, probably, also, the peculiar quality of my interest, attracted the attention of the individual in charge. This was the gentleman who had requested me not to lean against the glass case. He was a short, slight person, with red hair and moustache. He wore a frock coat and a hat which had seen better days, and had a trick of stroking his moustache with one of the dirtiest right hands I had ever seen; which, however, matched the voluminous shirt-cuff which protruded from the sleeve of his coat. I was conscious that for some seconds he had been eyeing me askance. Now he came sidling up--his dirty hand on his moustache.

'Wonderful man, sir.'

He alluded to the figure on the mattress.

'I suppose he really is asleep?'

'What do you think he is--dead?'

'He looks to me as if he were dead.'

'That's not surprising, considering that for eight-and-twenty days he's tasted neither bite nor sup.'

'Is that really the case?'

'Certainly. He hasn't had so much as a drop of water. The case is locked; the key is in possession of the manager of the Aquarium. Doctors are constantly in and out to see there's no collusion. You'll find their reports outside. It's will-power does it. He wills that he shall go to sleep

for thirty days, and he goes to sleep for thirty days. To try to wake him up before the end of the thirty days, to give him, say, a glass of water, would probably cause his death.'

'That's very curious.'

'It's more than curious; it's the greatest marvel of the age.'

'And when does he wake?'

'At ten o'clock on Saturday evening next--in the presence of the manager and staff of the Aquarium, and a large representative body of distinguished medical gentlemen. It will be the sensation of the hour. Though we shall charge double prices for admission, the room won't hold the people.'

I wondered. At present there seemed a good deal of space to spare.

'What is his name?'

'Montagu Babbacombe--a name known all over the world.'

The little man eyed me sharply.

'I meant, what is his real name?'

'His real name? What do you mean? That is his real name.'

'How long have you known him?'

'May I ask, sir, what prompts you to put that inquiry to me?'

'I merely thought that Mr. Babbacombe resembles a person with whom I was once acquainted, and I wondered if he might be any relation of his; that is all.'

'Ah, as to that, I know nothing. I am only here to testify to Mr. Montagu Babbacombe's bona-fides as a sleeping man, and that I unhesitatingly do.'

I held out a sovereign between my finger and thumb.

'Can you give me Mr. Babbacombe's private address?'

'If my becoming the possessor of that coin is contingent on my doing what you require, then it can't be done. There's an etiquette in my profession which on me is binding.'

'Your sentiments do you credit, Mr.----'

'FitzHoward; Augustus FitzHoward is my name, sir. But I tell you what might be managed. If you're here on Saturday night when Mr. Babbacombe wakes, I might arrange to introduce you to him. But you will have to remember, sir, that Mr. Babbacombe is a public man, and that to him, as to me, time is money.'

'If I do come I shall not fail to bear it well in mind.' The coin changed hands. 'You will not forget me?'

'No, sir, I shall not. What name?'

'What name? You say yours is FitzHoward. Well, mine is Smith; John Smith.'

There was a twinkle in Mr. FitzHoward's eye which suggested that he was more of a humorist than might at first appear.

'Smith? An unusual name like that, sir, is not likely to escape my recollection. You may rely on me.'

Some other people entered, two women and two men. They were followed by still more. Mr. Augustus FitzHoward and I parted. I went out into the main building. One thing seemed tolerably certain: 'Montagu Babbacombe,' unless appearances were even more deceptive than usual, could hardly have been conscious of my recognition, if recognition it really was. On that point I had until Saturday night to think things over. Practically two clear days.

CHAPTER II

LADY DESMOND GIVES A DINNER PARTY

That Thursday evening I dined with Lady Desmond. The old lady had been in town since Monday; staying at some rooms which she favoured in Clarges Street. She had issued her commands to me to attend on her at dinner. Had it not been for the conversation which I had had with Edith the night before, I should have still been wondering what it meant. Edith, however, had made matters perfectly clear.

Reggie and I were both to be in attendance. We were both of us to receive our dismissal. I was to be finally informed that I could not marry Edith, he that he could not marry Vi. The dowager had made other arrangements of her own. I looked forward to their announcement with feelings which were a little mixed.

Vi came to me just as I was starting. I had made no secret of my engagement. She had not commented on it till then. I thought I had seldom seen her look better. She is a willowy slip of a girl, with about her that air of the thoroughbred which, nowadays, is as great a distinction as a woman can have. She was born to be a great lady; the Howarth women always have been: yet, with it all, she is just a girl. Her chief fault is a proneness to impetuous speech. But that is a quality of youth. She let fly at me at once.

'Douglas, why hasn't Lady Desmond invited me?'

'My dear Vi, how can I tell you?'

'I know. And so do you.'

'I assure you that I do not know why Lady Desmond has not invited you.'

'Then I'll tell you. She has not invited me because it is quite likely that she never means to invite me again. She intends to wash her hands of me entirely. I shouldn't be surprised if she cuts me dead. She wants Reggie to marry Mary Magruder.' I said nothing. This was clearly a case in which silence was golden. 'I have told him he may.'

'I should have expected you to do no less.'

'He says he won't.'

'As matters are likely to turn out, that is a pity.'

'Douglas!--What do you mean?'

'Reggie is in a bad way. I'm afraid that before long he'll be in a worse.'

'How about you? Don't you stand or fall together?'

'Just so. That is it. It's because my hours are numbered that I say it's a pity. If he were to marry Mary Magruder then you might marry her masculine equivalent. You know as well as I do that he is to be found.'

I was thinking of George Charteris. An extra shade of colour came into her cheeks, just to show she knew it.

'Douglas, are you trying to be humorous?'

'Not at all. My dear Vi, I'll be plain with you. I've reason to believe that before very long both Reggie and I may come a cropper. My very earnest advice to both of you is that you agree to treat the past as past, and try to retrieve your positions while there still is time.'

She eyed me; reading on my face that I meant what I said.

'You can tell Reggie from me that I think it would be better that he should marry Mary Magruder as soon as he possibly can. We all know that she's willing enough. You may add, if you like, that I will never marry him, if things are going to be as you say they are.'

'And you?'

'I shall never marry any one but him. Please, Douglas, don't worry me to do so. You know that is so. But then I'm not one of those girls to whom marriage is all in all.'

I knew that, if that was not a falsehood, it was at least an evasion of the truth; for I was aware that, to her, happiness meant being Reggie Sherrington's wife. She asked, as I was leaving the room.

'How about Edith?'

I was still, pretending that I had not heard. She had spoken softly, so that the pretence seemed plausible; though I was conscious that it was but seeming, for Vi reads me as if I were an open book. But I had not the courage to reply. Indeed, it was a question to which I had not yet found an answer. In that lay the sting. How about Edith? was what I kept asking myself all the time. Nor had I found a solution to the problem when I reached the door of Milady's lodgings.

Lady Desmond's taste is not in all things mine; particularly is that the case with her taste in lodgings. The rooms in Clarges Street are kept by an ancient man and woman who are, no doubt, worthy folk enough, but who are also stupid, slow, and behind the times. I was shown into what is called the drawing-room--a fusty apartment, the very atmosphere of which was synonymous with depression. My hostess rose to receive me; a little stiff, bony figure, dressed in old clothes, which were ill-fitting and old-fashioned when she first had them. It was an extraordinary thing, but I have never seen that woman in what looked like a new dress yet. I believe that when she buys things she stores them away, never putting them on till they are old--and rumpled. In her left hand she had a stick; she extended two fingers of her right to me by way of greeting.

Edith came towards me from the struggling fire in the dingy fireplace. God knows she is past her first beauty; but she will always be young to me. As I took her hand in mine I told myself, for the thousandth time, what a coward I was not to have made her my wife long ago. This is not a sentimental age, and I am not a sentimental man; but for her I would go through the fires of hell. Yet there we were, I an old bachelor, she a spinster yet. Marriage, nowadays, is surrounded with so many complications.

'Hollo, Douglas! Going strong? Isn't this place enough to give you the horrors?'

This was Reggie, who had preceded me. The final portion of his remark was whispered.

The dinner was in keeping with the rooms; badly chosen, badly cooked, badly served. No one ate anything; no one talked. One couldn't even drink; the wine was frightful. We sat there like mutes at our own funerals. For my part I was glad when the cloth was cleared; though I knew that a bad quarter of an hour was coming. It could scarcely be worse than what had gone before. The old lady fired the first shot.

'Edith, had you not better withdraw?'

'No, mother. I know what you are going to say, and, as I am as much interested in it as any one else, I should prefer to stop.'

My hostess wasted no time in argument or preamble; she came straight to the point.

'Mr. Howarth, I have asked you to come here in order to tell you that any sentimental understanding which may have existed between Edith and yourself is, henceforward, at an end.' I essayed to speak; she stopped me. 'I know what you are going to say. I've heard it over and over again. What I say is this. Edith is getting on. You certainly are no longer young; you are going both bald and grey. Financially, you are worse off than when I first knew you. Isn't that the case?'

'It is.'

'You have absolutely no prospects.'

Reggie struck in.

'O aunt, come! If he's hard up it's only because I owe him such a heap. There's no doubt whatever that Twickenham's dead. We only have to prove it to be both of us in clover.'

'Twickenham is not dead. During the last few nights I've seen him several times.'

'You've seen Twickenham?'

'In dreams. I could not quite make out where he was, but he was in some extraordinary situation, from which you will find that he will presently emerge. It is no use your counting on his death. He's alive. Twickenham is not the kind of man who dies easily.'

'I thought dreams went by contraries.'

'Not such dreams as I have had.' She turned to me with a question which took me aback. 'Don't you know that he's alive?'

'My dear Lady Desmond!'

'You do know that he's alive; and I know you know. I don't want any discussion; you will only fence and quibble. But I appeal to you as a man of honour not to stand in the way of Edith's happiness.'

'That I undertake at once not to do.'

'Mother, hadn't you better tell Douglas that you wish me to marry Colonel Foljambe, and that's your idea of my happiness?'

'Colonel Foljambe is a very worthy gentleman.'

'If he isn't now,' I said,' he never will be.'

'He's not much older than you are.'

That was monstrous. Foljambe had turned seventy. But I let her go on.

'Then there's Reggie and that sister of yours. Violet Howarth's a sensible girl. She can do very well for herself if she likes, and she knows that she never will do anything at all with Reggie. The probabilities are that when Twickenham does return, it will be with a wife and family at his heels.'

'Leaving that eventuality out of the question, I am instructed by Violet to say that Reggie is at perfect liberty to do as he likes. So far as she is concerned she is quite willing to consider the engagement at an end.'

'That's Vi all over. She'd cut off her hand and throw it into the fire if she thought it would do me good. But I don't happen to be taking any; and I'll go straight from here and tell her so. It's all nonsense about Twickenham's being alive; he's as dead as that is.'

He rapped his knuckle against the table. His aunt leant over the board.

'Reggie, he's alive. Miss Sandford is right.'

'Miss Sandford?'

'Miss Sandford sees things which we don't see, and she knows things which we don't know. But now I've seen things, and I know. And what's more, Mr. Howarth knows too.'

'Douglas, what does my aunt mean by saying that you know Twickenham's alive?'

'I have not the least conception.'

'Do you know?'

'I do not.'

'Have you any reason to suppose that he's alive?'

I hesitated. Whether it was or was not a lie which I told, I could not say.

'None whatever.'

'You see, aunt: there's his answer for you.'

'For reasons of his own, Mr. Howarth has chosen to conceal the truth. But he does know; and he knows I know.'

The old lady's persistence roused me.

'May I ask, Lady Desmond, on what grounds you base your assertion?'

'I am unable to tell you; on no grounds, if you like to put it that way. But you do know; and you know I know you know.'

I rose from my chair.

'In that case discussion would be fruitless. Since Lady Desmond's reasons are of such an extremely recondite nature it would be useless for me to attempt to probe for them. Let us understand each other before I go. Edith, is it to be with us as your mother desires?'

'Not with my goodwill. I certainly will never marry Colonel Foljambe.'

'Then you never shall be asked to. I will not give you up, nor shall you give me up; but you shall be my wife before the year is out.'

'Douglas!'

'I don't know how it is to come about, but it shall come about; I do know so much. All these years have been wasted, but they shall be made up for you before long. You shall be as happy a wife as a man can make you.'

'Douglas!'

She had her elbows on the table, and her face upon her hands.

'What nonsense is this?' demanded Lady Desmond. 'Haven't I said that I brought you here to tell you that I would have no more of it?'

'My dear Lady Desmond, I think you will admit that Edith and I have arrived at years of discretion?'

'You'll never do that if you live to be a hundred. You've ruined my life, and you've ruined hers. You've made her prematurely old. Look at her! Who would think, to see her now, that not long ago she was the most beautiful girl in England, and that she had only to lift her finger to have any man in England at her feet? She has no father or brother to protect her, or she'd have been rid of you long ago. But you've promised that you'll stand no longer in her way, and if you've a shred of manhood in you, you'll keep your word.'

I went round to where she sat.

'Edith, what am I to do?'

Getting up, she put her hands upon my shoulders.

'Marry me in what I stand up in; and take me to live with you in country lodgings.'

'You hear, Lady Desmond. Edith is going to be my wife.'

'Then she'll be no daughter of mine.'

'Excuse me,' cried Reggie, 'but it strikes me that I ought to have a word in this. You seem to forget, aunt, that if Douglas is in a hole, it's because of what he's done for me.'

'I forget nothing. If you choose to behave like a sensible person, you will be able to repay Mr. Howarth any moneys he may have advanced you, together with sufficient interest, within three months.'

'In other words, if I choose to behave like a blackguard, perjure myself all round, make myself and every one connected with me unhappy, I may be able to wheedle enough money out of the woman I've lied to to enable me to treat the best friend a man had as if he were a sixty per center. Then, when it does turn out that Twickenham's dead, where shall I be? Saddled with a wife I hate; more in love than ever with the girl I've treated badly; in the bad books of the man who has stuck to me closer than any brother I ever heard of. Thank you; I'm obliged. If Vi won't marry me, it won't be because I'm not willing. Do you know, aunt, I believe that you're a bad lot.'

'How dare you speak to me like that, sir?'

'I use the term in a Parliamentary sense only. Of course I know that as a matter of fact your goodness is established beyond all question. But you don't seem to realise what Vi is to me. If it weren't that I've been living on her brother I'd have made her marry me long ago; for, hang me if I wouldn't marry her on nothing rather than not marry her at all. Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to bring it off the same day Douglas brings off his little event; especially if he can manage to make the date an early one.'

Reggie winked at me. I am afraid that his aunt perceived the movement of his eyelid. She rose with an air of extreme dudgeon.

'I will not say what I think of you all. It would only be a waste of good words. You have heard me give expression to my wishes. If you choose to act in opposition to them, you must do so. You have all arrived at what Mr. Howarth was pleased to call, I presume ironically, the age of discretion. Some of you got there a good many years ago. It only remains for me to wash my hands of any responsibility for what you may do, and, if I think it necessary, to decline your further acquaintance. Edith, are you coming with me?'

'Good-night,' I said to Edith as she turned to accompany her mother. 'I shall not see you again.'

'I shall hear from you?'

'You shall hear from me very soon. I will lose no time in making arrangements for our joint occupation of those country lodgings.'

She smiled. I held the door open for her mother and herself to leave the room. As she passed she whispered:

'I mean it.'

Reggie and I went away together. In the street he asked:

'Can I come in and see Violet?'

'Better not. At least not to-night. Just as well that you should sleep on it.'

'What do you mean by that?'

I considered a moment before I answered.

'You see, Reggie, we're all four of us playing the part of Don Quixote; Violet and you, Edith and

I. I'm beginning to fear that we've been playing the part for years. It's all very well for us to talk of marrying the women of our hearts; but there are things to be considered. There are the women.'

'Would you have me throw Vi over?'

'The word's ill chosen. It ill becomes me to play the part of mentor after the way in which I've just behaved, but--suppose Twickenham were to turn up?'

'It would be pretty bad.'

'If that were all! I doubt if he'd give you a penny: as for me, he'd laugh me to scorn. You and I'd be beggars. Would it be chivalrous to drag the women into the ditch with us?'

'But Twickenham's dead.'

We've no proof of it. We've been looking for proof for some time. A pretty penny the search has cost us.'

'What makes you talk like this? You've seemed convinced enough about his being dead. You've gone Nap on it.'

'Precisely. And I'm now inclined to wonder if I haven't gone Nap on a pretty bad hand.'

'Surely you don't believe any of that stuff about my aunt's dreams?'

'Your aunt's dreams are neither here nor there. But between ourselves, I tell you candidly that I think it's quite possible that Twickenham's alive.'

'Good God! What have you heard?'

'I have heard nothing. By the purest accident I have chanced on what may turn out to be a clue. If it does, you shall hear more next week. At present I can tell you nothing.'

'Douglas, where is he?'

'You move too fast. I believe that it's still even betting that Twickenham's as dead as a coffin nail. But you will see for yourself why you and I should not pose as being too chivalrous, and especially why you should sleep upon the matter before having another interview with Vi. Good-night.'

I left him staring after me in Piccadilly. I was afraid of his asking inconvenient questions, just as I had been afraid of not saying anything at all. I might have lighted on a mare's nest, but in case I had not, it only seemed fair that he should have some sort of warning, so that the bolt might not descend on him altogether out of the blue.

Violet met me as soon as I entered the hall.

'Well, what has happened?'

I led the way back into the drawing-room, feeling indisposed to discuss delicate matters within quite such obvious sound of the servants' ears.

'I don't know that anything has happened.'

'Is Reggie going to marry Mary Magruder?'

'He says not.'

'Who is he going to marry?'

'He says he's going to marry you.'

'Douglas! In spite of Lady Desmond's prohibition? I suppose she did prohibit it?'

'Oh, yes, she did that right enough. But he did not seem disposed to lay much stress upon Lady Desmond's prohibition; as you probably expected.' I was convinced that she would have been a surprised young woman if he had paid attention to anything his aunt might have had to say on such a matter. 'At the same time, if you will take my advice, you won't attach weight to anything Reggie may have said, either one way or the other. I, for instance, have promised to marry Edith--again in the face of Lady Desmond's prohibition. But I think it possible that, before very long, neither he nor I may be in a position to marry any one.'

'Do you think that want of money will make any difference to Edith or to me?'

'I do not. But I am sure that neither of you would feel disposed to be a clog upon your husband.'

'A clog! I a clog on Reggie? Rather than I'd be that I'd die!'

I looked at her. As I did so there rose before me a vision of a man lying on a bare mattress, clad in a suit of white pyjamas, inside a glass case. It entirely prevented my seeing Violet. I had to close my eyes to shut it out.

CHAPTER III

CROSS QUESTIONS AND CROOKED ANSWERS

The next day I paid a second visit to the Royal Aquarium. I was conscious that it might not be the wisest possible thing to do, but I could not keep away.

There was a larger attendance of the public at Mr. Montagu Babbacombe's side show. I attributed that to the fact that the period during which he had undertaken to continue asleep was drawing to a close. Mr. Augustus FitzHoward recognised me at once. He greeted me with an affable smile, as an old acquaintance.

'Ah, Mr. Smith! Glad to see you. I thought you'd come.'

I wondered what he meant; if he meant anything at all. For the second time the exhibition did not appear to me to be an agreeable one. Again I experienced a sense of shock when my glance first fell on the seemingly dead man, lying stark and rigid, covered only with those hideous white pyjamas, prisoned under the huge glass case. He resembled an exhibit in a medical museum; a gruesome one at that. I found it difficult to believe that he really lived. I could not detect the slightest sign of respiration. The face just looked as if it had been touched by the hand of Death. I have seen dead men in my time. If that was not death, then it was an awful imitation.

I caught myself hoping that he was dead. For it was Twickenham; there was not the slightest doubt of it. And yet the moment after doubts recurred. Twickenham had always been clean shaven; but I remembered that he used to tell me how he had to wrestle with his beard. In particular I had a faint recollection that if he left off shaving for a week he would have a beard three inches long. This man's chin was bristly; it did not add to the charm of his appearance. But presuming that his chin had remained untouched, it did not suggest anything like such a growth of hair as that of which Twickenham had spoken. Mr. Augustus FitzHoward was standing behind me. I put to him a question.

'Has Mr. Babbacombe been shaved since he fell asleep?'

'Shaved! Good gracious no, sir! He has not been touched; except by the medical gentlemen. Didn't I tell you yesterday that if he were prematurely roused it might be the death of him? Shaved--the idea!'

A sudden impulse actuated me to smash the glass case, by accident--to do something which might bring about the premature restoration of which Mr. Augustus FitzHoward spoke; the awaking which might result in death. For it was borne in on me again that it was Twickenham I saw. A wave of memory swept over me. I saw him in the habit in which he used to be; and was convinced that this was what he would have become after an interval of fifteen years. It was impossible, out of the stories, that two men could be so much alike. The madness which was in his blood when he was young was in it now. This was exactly the sort of insane freak in which he would have delighted. According to Mr. Augustus FitzHoward I had only accidentally to smash the case in front of me, and I should there and then be furnished with ample proof of Twickenham's death.

While I hesitated, the adroit Mr. FitzHoward improved the occasion by addressing to the assembled spectators, who now numbered perhaps twenty or thirty, some eloquent remarks.

'Ladies and Gentlemen,--It is a wonderful sight you see before you; life in the likeness of death. Death in life! Mr. Montagu Babbacombe looks dead; if you were able to touch him you would say that he feels dead. He is stiff as a corpse; there is no pulse, no action of the heart; his temperature is that of a man who has long since died. I am prepared to wager that if he were lying in your bed, or mine, instead of being on exhibition here in this glass case, the most eminent physicians called in for purposes of examination would unhesitatingly testify that he was dead. Even the surgeon's blade would disclose nothing suggesting life. And, for the last four weeks, to all intents and purposes he has been dead. To-morrow he will come back to us as a man out of the tomb. He will find that the world has moved; that great events have happened of which

he knows nothing. It will be a kind of resurrection. To-morrow will be to him to-morrow; but since his yesterday a month will have elapsed; a month of complete oblivion. If he keeps a diary, during that month each page of it will of necessity be blank.

'Ladies and gentlemen,--To-morrow, Saturday, evening, at ten o'clock to the minute, in the presence of the manager and staff of this building, and a large representative body of eminent medical gentlemen, Mr. Montagu Babbacombe will return from out of the tomb. It will be an awe-inspiring spectacle; truly the miracle of the age. You will see, before your eyes, the dead gradually put on life, and return to the form and habits of our common humanity. The price of admission will, on this occasion, be half-a-crown. Tickets, of which only a few remain, the number being necessarily limited, may be obtained at the door on going out. If you are wise, you will avail yourselves of the opportunity to purchase while there are still any to be had. May I offer you a ticket, sir?'

Mr. Augustus FitzHoward produced a bundle of tickets from his pocket there and then. I bought one, as did others--though not in such numbers as the eloquence of his remarks perhaps merited. I may safely say that had I been actuated by nothing but a desire to be the witness of what Mr. FitzHoward called an 'awe-inspiring spectacle,' I should have been no patron. It occurred to me, as it probably did to others, that the proceedings might take a form which might quite possibly prove the reverse of agreeable. As it was, I endeavoured to evade the necessity of being present.

Waiting till the almost too eloquent orator had disposed of all the tickets which his auditors could be induced to buy, I accosted him.

'Look here, Mr. FitzHoward, can't you arrange an interview for me with Mr. Babbacombe?'

'I told you that if you're here to-morrow night I'll try to manage an introduction. So I will. I can't do more than that.'

'But I don't want to be here to-morrow night; at least, not in here. Can't I see him somewhere else?'

'Does he know you?'

'That is more than I can tell you.'

'Perhaps he won't want to see you if he knows who you are.'

There was a twinkle in the speaker's eye. I realised the truth of his words. It was extremely probable, if it was Twickenham, and he had an inkling of who I was, that he would decline the pleasure of an interview. 'You see Mr. Babbacombe won't be altogether himself; after such an experience as he has had it's not to be expected. For reasons of health, if for no other, he won't be disposed to run the risk of more physical strain than he can possibly help.'

I understood the innuendo--or thought I did. If I wished to see and speak to him, I should have to be present when he returned, in his agile associate's phrase, 'from out of the tomb.' Otherwise, before I knew it, he might vanish for another period of fifteen years.

I found, at home, that something like a heated discussion was taking place. Edith and Reggie were both with Violet. What Lady Desmond would have thought of the proceedings is more than I can say. They all began at me at once.

'Douglas, what did you mean by saying last night----'

Reggie had got so far when Violet cut him short.

'Reggie, let me speak. I'll get an answer out of him. Douglas, is the Marquis of Twickenham really alive?'

As I might have expected, Reggie had scarcely been five minutes in Violet's society before he blurted out all that I had said to him. She certainly is an insinuating young woman, and shrewd to boot. It would not take her long to perceive that there was something at the back of the young gentleman's mind. Having surmised so much, almost before he knew it, she would have ascertained what it was. Apparently Edith had come in at the very moment when explanations were taking place. So that now I had all three of them against me.

'Will you please tell me at once, Douglas, if the Marquis of Twickenham is alive?'

This she said with something very like the stamp of her foot. She can be imperious when she chooses; as, one of these days, her husband will learn.

'I tell you what I will do; if you don't mind, I'll take a cup of tea.'

'Douglas, how can you be so frivolous, when, for all we know, we may be standing on the brink of a volcano?'

'If I were standing in the very heart of a volcano--if I could get it, I should like a cup of tea.'

'I'll give you one.'

This was Edith. I took the cup she offered. Before I had a chance to sip it, Violet began at me again.

'Now, Douglas, perhaps you'll tell us.'

'Tell you what?'

'If the Marquis of Twickenham is alive.'

I turned to Reggie.

'I suppose I'm indebted to you for this. Next time I have a confidential remark to make, which I wish to have shouted in the market-place, I shall know whom to address.'

'You never told me not to tell. And I haven't shouted it in the market-place; whatever you mean by that. I only told Vi.'

'Only!'

Violet answered for him.

'It's no use your attacking Reggie; I made him tell. Situated as we are, there ought to be no secrets between us; between any of us. Do you mean to say that you consider that the knowledge that the Marquis of Twickenham is alive is knowledge which you are entitled to keep to yourself?'

'My dear Vi, there is no doubt that animation suits you; but I shouldn't on that account be always in a condition of explosiveness.'

Her cheeks flamed. Nothing annoys her so much as being told that she's excitable. Edith laid her hand upon my arm.

'Douglas, tell me; is it true?'

'I don't know.'

'Do you mean that you don't know, or that you won't say? Have you any reason to believe that he's alive; any tangible reason?'

'As I told Reggie, and as I presume he has told you, I shall be in a better position to answer that question next week.'

'But why not now? What is it you do know? Why keep us in suspense? Is it fair? Think of what it means to all of us; of what it means to me. It has come to this--that to me it is almost a question of life or death.'

I understood the allusion; it cut me to the heart.

'I tell you that I know nothing.'

'Then why did you say that last night to Reggie?'

'Because I supposed him to be possessed of a few grains of common sense.'

'But you must have had some grounds to go upon. You surely wouldn't have said a thing like that without a cause--you, of all men. Miss Sandford has never doubted that he's alive; now mother seems equally convinced; now there's you, throwing out mysterious hints. Be fair to us; make us sharers even of your suspicions.'

'Very good; I'll tell you all there is to tell, though it will only unsettle you as it unsettled me.'

'We can't be more unsettled than we are already. Anything to get out of the darkness into the light.'

'You'll still be in the darkness when you've heard all I have to say; I promise you that. I know I'm fogged enough.'

I cast about in my mind how best to tell a part of the truth without revealing all. It was very far from my desire to send them all scampering off to the Aquarium, as they undoubtedly would do if they learned everything. Edith guessed what I was after.

'Are you thinking how much you can keep back? Be fair.'

'I will be fair; what's more, I'll be open too.' Always begin like that when you intend to be as much the other kind of thing as possible. 'I'll put you in possession of all the information I have in a single sentence. The other day I saw a man who was Twickenham's living image.'

They had gathered round me. I had a dim consciousness that their faces changed colour. With

their eyes they seemed to be trying to search me through and through. My statement was followed by a perceptible pause. Then Edith began to question me.

'The other day? When?'

'Yesterday.'

'Yesterday? Then you knew last evening. Mother was right.'

'I did not know. I don't know now. It seems incredible that two men could be so much alike, but, on the other hand, it seems equally incredible that, under the circumstances, it could have been he.'

'Under the circumstances? What were the circumstances?'

'That I decline to say. I must ask you to take my word for it that the circumstances under which I saw this man make it practically impossible that it could have been he.'

'Did he see you?'

'He did not.'

'Did you try to speak to him?'

'I had no chance.'

'Did you find out where he lives, or anything at all about him?'

'I did this: I found a man who knows him, and who, I have reason to believe, will bring me face to face with him at a very early date.'

'When?'

'I hope that the question of identity will be settled by Tuesday morning.'

'Hope? Is that quite the appropriate word? Because I perceive that it is Twickenham. You see, Douglas, I know you so well.'

'It is because I expected you to take that point of view that I was reluctant to speak: because I'm more than doubtful if the man I saw was Twickenham.'

'I'm not. If it had been any one but you it would have been a different case. But, you know, Douglas, your royal gift of remembering faces. You never confuse one person with another, even if it is a person you only saw for five minutes twenty years ago. If you have seen a man who was so like Twickenham that you would not like to say it was not Twickenham, it was. Reggie won't be Marquis yet.'

She leant against the mantel, looking pale. There was something in her attitude which seemed to me condemnatory. I felt ashamed. Reggie threw himself into an arm-chair.

'If it was Twickenham I shall be in a pretty tight fix.'

'We all shall. I shall have to instal Edith in those country lodgings. You will have to marry Mary Magruder. Violet will be Mrs. George Charteris.'

'I shall be nothing of the kind. I wish you wouldn't settle my future in quite such an off-handed fashion. It's not in the best of taste.'

'I certainly shall not marry Mary Magruder.'

'You might do worse.'

Vi turned on me.

'You mean that he might marry me. Douglas, you are at times so sweet. You needn't be afraid; I'll be no clog on him.'

'I'll make you marry me. You promised that you would; I imagine you are not prepared to deny it. I'll make you keep your word.'

'You'll make me! Indeed! My dear Reggie, it's news to me to learn that I'm the kind of person who can be made to do anything.'

'Good children, pray don't argue. In anticipating the very worst, we may be destined to suffer disappointment. In the first place, I am extremely doubtful if it was Twickenham; though Edith isn't. But then she didn't see him, and I did; so, of course, she knows. Even granting it was Twickenham, during fifteen years he may have altered. He may have become the most generous and delightful soul alive. In any case, he will have plenty. He can hardly refuse assistance to his only brother.'

'He won't dare to give me nothing. Especially when he knows the hole I'm in.'

'Dare!' Edith smiled. 'Twickenham dare do anything. Particularly in the way of making himself disagreeable.'

'O Lord! Don't talk like that. As Douglas says, during fifteen years he may have altered.'

'Can the Ethiopian change his skin?'

That was what I had myself been wondering.

CHAPTER IV

MR. MONTAGU BABBACOMBE AWAKES

Something of the crowd which Mr. Augustus FitzHoward foretold did assemble. It was half-past nine when I entered that part of the building in which Mr. Montagu Babbacombe was on exhibition, and already it was quite sufficiently filled. Mr. FitzHoward stood at the receipt of custom, wearing an air of triumph, and what seemed the same dirty pair of cuffs. He beamed at me as I tendered my ticket.

'All right?' I asked.

'All perfectly right, sir. In half an hour from now Mr. Montagu Babbacombe will come back from the land of the dead to the land of the living, after a thirty days' sojourn among the shadows. It may be that he will be the bearer of important news from Shadowland. Walk in, ladies and gentlemen, while there still is time.'

The major part of his remarks was addressed to folks in general. I wanted him to say something on a subject which was of interest only to myself.

'I suppose it can be arranged for me to speak to Mr. Babbacombe after the close of his entertainment.'

'Entertainment, sir! I would have you know that this is not an entertainment; a mere commonplace show. It's a modern miracle; the miracle of the age--as those who witness it will with one voice proclaim. Admission, half-a-crown!' This was said at the top of his voice. A postscript was uttered in milder tones. 'I can't make any promise. I expect it'll be pretty lively after ten, and perhaps Mr. Babbacombe mayn't feel up to much. But if you'll keep yourself handy, if I can manage an introduction I will. The rest you must manage yourself.'

'Very good. You understand that I must see him alone.'

'Alone? I didn't understand that.'

'I must see him alone. If you arrange for me to do that it will be a five-pound note in your pocket.

'Sure?'

'Certain.'

'Then you hang about as the people are going, and I'll pass you accidental-like into his dressing-room. As you go in you give me the fiver.'

'I will.'

'No kid?'

'None whatever. You do as you say and I will give you a five-pound note as certainly as I gave you a sovereign on Thursday.'

'You place yourself where I can keep an eye on you, and I'll earn that fiver.' He raised his voice to trumpet tones. 'Ladies and gentlemen. The greatest feat of modern times is now drawing to a close. The critical moment is at hand. In less than half an hour the boasted miracles of the Indian fakirs will be more than paralleled. Out of the silence Mr. Montagu Babbacombe will come; back

from the misty plains. After being dead for thirty days he will resume existence. Already the dews of life are forming on his brow. The few remaining tickets admitting to this wonderful spectacle only two-and-sixpence each.'

I did not know what Mr. FitzHoward meant by 'the dews of life,' but so far as I could see, no change whatever had taken place in the appearance of the sleeping man. He retained the same rigidity of attitude, and bore, to the full, the same uncomfortable resemblance to a corpse.

We were a curious crowd. I fancy that, before the proceedings closed, there were several there who rather wished that they had stayed away. I noticed about the people an odd air of repression; a tendency to speak in whispers; or not to speak at all. A good many seemed doubtful whether they were not standing in the actual presence of Death. I confess to some feeling of the kind myself. The man in the white pyjamas, lying on the mattress under the glass case, exercised a not altogether agreeable fascination over all of us. We had to look at him, whether we would or would not. Two young men by me were betting in undertones as to whether he was or was not dead. It seemed to me a fantastically droll idea that the subject of their wager was quite possibly Leonard, Marquis of Twickenham.

I remembered how Leonard had once told me of some fellow or other he had seen somewhere in Cashmere. I expect Mr. FitzHoward's allusion to Indian fakirs had recalled the conversation to my mind. This fellow had pretended to go to sleep, and had then been put in a hole in the ground, and covered with earth--regularly buried, in fact. Some time afterwards--I forget how long--he had been dug up again, and his friends had tried to waken him up. They tried all sorts of things; beat him with sticks, even cut him with knives. In vain. He would not be roused. So they concluded he was dead. They placed the body in the hut, or house, or whatever it was, in which Leonard was staying; in the very apartment, in fact, in which he slept. In the middle of the night Leonard woke up and saw the dead man coming to life. He stole towards Leonard's bed with a knife in his hand. Leonard lay perfectly still. In another second or two he would have himself been dead; and this time really. But, just as the fellow was leaning over, in the very act of striking, Leonard shot him with a revolver. The man fell on to him a corpse. About his being a corpse there was, on this occasion, no shadow of doubt whatever.

Twickenham's inference was that the whole thing, sleeping, burying, and digging up again, had been a trick. I wondered if the show at which we were assisting was a trick. One never knows. Though it was difficult to see where the deceit came in. There was the man; there he was two days ago. That he appeared then as he appeared now I, for one, was prepared to testify. The only question was--was he released each night, after the departure of the public, to enjoy a supper, say, of pork and beans, and a hand of cards with Mr. FitzHoward? It seemed hardly likely that the management would be a party to so egregious a swindle on the British public. It would mean ruin if discovered. Since large interests were at stake, the game would surely not be worth the candle. And without active managerial participation the thing could not be done.

Suppose, on the other hand, the man was dead, as he seemed--that he had died to make an Aquarium side show? It occurred to me that, both legally and morally, we spectators would be in rather an uncomfortable position.

Possibly it was my recollection of Twickenham's story which served to emphasise, to my thinking, the sleeper's resemblance to its narrator. As I looked I became more and more convinced that it was he I saw. Indeed, all doubt was at an end. I felt that he had only to open his eyes, and speak, for me to realise that the thing had been certain from the first. That being the case, only one of two things could save us all from ruin.

The one was death. If he was what he looked, there, at hand, was the proof for which we had been searching. Reggie was Marquis. The other was----. To be frank, it is difficult to put into words in what the other chance of salvation lay. I deemed it just within the range of possibility that in that interview which I was to have with him, and in those other interviews which I would take care should follow, I might succeed in putting the screw on him to such an extent that--well, that, comparatively speaking, all would be right. At the same time I clearly realised that my chance of doing this was something of a minus quantity; and that, for us, it would be best that he should be what he seemed, even though the whole body of spectators might have to suffer.

At a quarter to ten the place was uncomfortably full. There must have been a good harvest of half-crowns for some one. At ten minutes to, several persons appeared who entered a roped-in space immediately surrounding the glass case. I concluded that they were 'the manager and staff of the building and a large representative body of eminent medical gentlemen.' At five minutes to, Mr. FitzHoward joined them, having probably concluded that it would be difficult, if not dangerous, to attempt to pack any more people into the place, even if more could be induced to enter.

He lost no time, now that he had arrived, but instantly commenced to treat us to examples of his eloquence.

'Ladies and Gentlemen,--In less than another five minutes Mr. Montagu Babbacombe will crown his miraculous feat. It only remains for me, during the short time left at my disposal, to prove to you its bona-fideness; that there has been no deception here. Allow me to introduce you to the manager of the building.'

He singled out for our inspection a smiling, yet dignified, gentleman in evening dress; who was, apparently, a very different sort of individual to himself. By way of acknowledging the introduction this gentleman removed his hat.

'Mr. Manager, you hold in your possession the key of this glass case?'

'I do.'

'It was locked in your presence thirty days ago?'

'It was.'

'Since then the key has remained in your possession?'

'It has.'

'To the best of your knowledge and belief no other key to the case is in existence?'

'That is so.'

'The case has not been opened by your orders, or to your knowledge?'

'It has not.'

'You have examined it every day to see that it has not been tampered with?'

'Several times a day.'

'It has been watched day and night by some person or persons appointed by you, in whose trustworthiness you have faith?'

'It has.'

'Therefore, in your opinion, since Mr. Montagu Babbacombe, thirty days ago, fell asleep, and was locked in this case in your presence, no one has had access to him of any sort or kind?'

'That is my opinion.'

'I have now to ask you to hand me the key of the case.'

It was handed over. Mr. FitzHoward held it up for us to see.

'There are four locks to the case, one at each side. This key opens them all. The locks are of very peculiar construction; as, also, is the key. I will now proceed to unlock the case.'

He did unlock it. Four men came forward, lifted the case--it seemed as much as they could do--and, with considerable difficulty, because of the crowd, bore it from the room.

Mr. Montagu Babbacombe remained uncovered.

It was then ten. The fact was announced by a clock in the building; and Mr. FitzHoward stood with his watch in his hand.

'Ladies and Gentlemen, Mr. Montagu Babbacombe will now awake.'

The doctors, if they were doctors, pressed forward. We all craned our necks.

It seemed inconceivable that after a slumber of thirty days--and one so very much like death--the man could wake to an appointed minute. But he did. Scarcely had Mr. FitzHoward ceased to speak than, with the most natural air in the world, raising his hand, he passed it over his face, as one is sometimes apt to do when awaking. He opened his eyes. He sat up.

To be greeted by a storm of cheers. Which, however, presently died away, as it was realised that there was that in his appearance which was hardly in harmony with such a demonstration. He gazed about him with, on his pallid features, a look of dazed inquiry; as if he wondered where he was. Mr. FitzHoward spoke to him.

'I'm glad to see you, Mr. Babbacombe. I hope you're comfortable, sir. Here is Mr. Manager.'

The manager extended his hand.

'Feeling rested after your sound sleep?'

Mr. Babbacombe apparently did not notice the held-out hand. He answered in a curious monotone, still about him that air of vacancy. The sound of his voice set me all of a twitter.

'Rested?--Oh, yes, I'm rested.--Rested!'

Mr. FitzHoward motioned to the spectators.

'All these ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Babbacombe, are here to see you put the crown and summit on the most marvellous feat of modern times. They're here to see you wake, sir.'

'Wake?--To see me wake?'

A voice cried out from the crowd:--

'Have you been troubled by any bad dreams, sir?'

There was a tendency to titter; which was subdued when it was seen how the inquiry was taken.

'Dreams!--My dear life!--Dreams!'

There was something in the awakened sleeper's tone which was not altogether agreeable. It was too suggestive of things on which one did not care to dwell. He addressed FitzHoward.

'Give me something to eat. I want something to eat.'

He sounded as if he did; and looked it too. Putting his hand up to his head with the gesture of a tired child, he sank back upon the mattress.

'I want to rest,' he said.

We were still. He looked as if he had fallen asleep again, for good. Mr. FitzHoward dismissed the audience.

'Ladies and gentlemen, I have much pleasure in thanking you, on Mr. Montagu Babbacombe's behalf, for your attendance here, and I now wish you goodnight.'

The people began to file out. Men leaned over the mattress, and there was a whispered consultation. They spoke to him. He continued still--too still. A flask was produced and placed to his lips. He seemed to pay no attention to it whatever. The crowd showed a disposition to linger. The mattress was lifted from its place with him still on it, and borne through the departing spectators out of the room. When it had gone the audience dispersed more rapidly. I stayed on. Presently, when the place had grown comparatively empty, Mr. FitzHoward reappeared. He was buttonholed by half a dozen people at once. It seemed that they were making inquiries as to the awakened sleeper's condition. He answered them collectively, for our common benefit, in a loud voice.

'Mr. Montagu Babbacombe feels a little exhausted--as was only to be expected, having had nothing to eat or drink for thirty days, but he wishes me to say to any kind inquirer that he's all right, and that he confidently expects to feel very shortly as fit as ever he did. Now, gentlemen, I'm sorry to have to hurry you, but I must really ask you all to go.'

They went--he driving them in front of him, like a flock of sheep. I still stayed.

'How is he?' I asked.

As he looked at me there was something in his eyes which I did not understand.

'He'll be as right as rain in a minute or two.'

'Can I see him?'

He jingled some money in his trousers pocket.

'I hardly know what to say. It seems kind of going back on him. It's not professional; and I'm professional or nothing. Is it trouble?'

'Do you mean, will an interview with me be the cause to him of trouble? Not at all. If anything, I'm the bearer of good tidings.'

'Sure?'

'Certain.'

He eyed me; with a long-continued and penetrating glance.

'You shall see him inside of five minutes. The money's right?'

'It is.'

I showed him a five-pound note.

'We'll have first to get rid of those doctors. I understand him, and he understands himself, better than all the doctors put together. Doctors only mess a man about, they're thinking more of themselves than of you; I never knew a doctor yet who was worth the money you had to pay him. You wait; I'll shift them.'

He was gone more than five minutes; possibly finding the 'eminent medical gentlemen,' of whom, in private life, he apparently had so poor an opinion, more difficult to 'shift' than he had expected. When he returned he beckoned with his finger.

'Now then!' I advanced to the door at which he stood. 'Money, please.' The five-pound note changed hands. 'In you go. I've got to go to the manager's office on business. You'll have him to yourself till I come back.'

I found Mr.-Montagu Babbacombe alone, attired in a pair of tweed trousers and a coloured shirt. He was seated by a table, and embraced with his hand a glass containing what looked like whisky and water. In spite of which facts he looked almost as much like a corpse as ever. Without looking up as I entered, he asked:--

'Who's that?'

'Don't you know me?'

'Know you?' He glanced at me, with lack-lustre eyes, in which was not the faintest gleam of recognition. 'Do you owe me money? If you've come to pay me I'll know you.'

The voice was not right; he spoke with a faint American accent, which I had not previously noticed. But, in spite of its corpse-like pallor, the face was Twickenham's.

'Look at me well. Think.'

'I've quit thinking.'

'Twickenham!' He continued to stare. 'You are Twickenham?'

'I am. If there's money in it, you bet I am. Is it a place, or a thing? Sounds like a sort of password.'

'Leonard!'

'Am I him, too? I've been lots of people in my time, Lord knows. What's one more?'

'Why should you think it necessary to play this farce with me?'

'I'm asking. Excuse me, but are you----?' He touched his forehead with his forefinger. 'I am.'

I am generally tolerably clear-headed. Never before had I been conscious of such mental confusion. It was a peculiar sensation. As he made that gesture with his forefinger it was all at once borne in on me that, after all, I had made a common or garden fool of myself, and that this was actually not the man. As I observed him, closely a dozen minute points of difference forced themselves upon my notice. I so clearly realised my own asininity that, for the instant, I was speechless. Then I stammered out--

'You must excuse, sir, what probably appears to you my very singular behaviour, but, the fact is, you have the most amazing resemblance to a person with whom I was once very intimate.'

'Poor devil!'

'He was a poor devil.'

'You lay on it. If he was like me.'

A shadow of doubt returned.

'May I ask you to be serious, sir, and tell me, on your word of honour, if you have ever seen me before?'

'I have. As a child. Many a time we've played together in my mother's backyard. Let me see, your name's---- Smith?--Ah.--Mine's Brown. I mean Babbacombe. It's all the same. See small bills.'

I hesitated. On a sudden an idea came to me, as it were, on a flash of lightning. The language seems exaggerated, yet I doubt if any other would adequately portray the fact. It did come to me in a single illuminating second. Not in embryo, but wholly formed. I saw the whole thing in its entirety. There, on the instant, was the complete scheme ready to my hand.

The suddenness of the thing unhinged me. I was not that night in the finest fettle. I scarcely saw how, then and there, to broach to him the subject. Attacked brusquely, it might be ruined. He was, probably, in worse condition even than myself; he might be affected even more disagreeably than I had been. Procrastination would probably be best, though in procrastination there was risk. Still--I saw no other way.

I moistened my lips. They had all at once gone dry.

'Mr. Babbacombe, where can I see you, to-morrow, on a matter of importance?'

'What's the matter?'

'It is one which will probably result in my being able to place a considerable sum of money at your disposal.'

'You're seeing me now.'

'This is a matter on which I can hardly enter, here, and now. I should prefer, with your permission, to see you again to-morrow.

'To-morrow's Sunday.'

'That makes no difference to me.'

'Oh! you don't honour the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.' He emptied his glass. 'Give me some more.' A bottle of whisky was standing at his elbow. I poured some out. When I was proceeding to dilute it with water, he stopped me. 'None of that. Neat.' He swallowed what I had given him. 'Thank God for alcohol. There's nothing like it, when you've got where I am.--What's that you were saying about wanting to see me to-morrow?'

'Where can I see you--and when?'

'Where? In the grave; if I keep on feeling like I'm feeling now. I've slept too much.--Give me some more.'

He tilted his glass.

'You've had enough.'

'D----n you, man, what the devil do you mean by telling me I've had enough? I never have enough. If I had all that's in the world I wouldn't have enough. It's my stuff, not yours. Give me some more.' I poured him out a little. 'Don't stint, you're not paying.' Again he swallowed at a gulp what I had given him. It seemed, instead of stupefying, to clear his head. 'That's more like it. Now I'm feeling better. After half a bottle I'm pretty well, and after a bottle I'm nearly right. Listen to me. I'll see you tomorrow, Sunday morning, at the York Hotel, in Stamford Street. After twelve o'clock. Say half-past. Make a note of it.'

'I will.'

'And mind you're there.'

'I will be there. Mind you also are there.'

'If I'm alive I'll be there. You ask for Mr. Montagu Babbacombe--that's me. Let me see, your name's----'

'Smith.'

'Smith. Oh, yes, Smith. You look a Smith. I knew a Smith once who was just like you; one of the nicest fellows that ever breathed. Only an awful thief! And such a liar! Perhaps you knew him too. Might have been a brother. Did you ever have a brother who was hung? He was. What's the other name?'

'My name's John Smith, sir, to you.'

'Very well, Mr. John Smith to me, I shall expect to see you to-morrow, Sunday morning, at the York Hotel in Stamford Street, at half-past twelve. And you be there! If you're not there, I hope that you'll be hung; like your brother. You understand?

'Perfectly.'

There was a noise at the back. Turning, I perceived that it was caused by the entrance of Mr. Augustus FitzHoward. I understood that it was time for me to take my leave. I thought it possible that the newcomer might find it difficult to induce Mr. Babbacombe to leave the chair on which he was seated, before finishing the bottle of whisky--which was still half full. I had no wish to witness any discussion of the kind.

CHAPTER V

AT THE YORK HOTEL

I cannot recall spending a more cheerful night than that one. I hasten to add, as a professional humorist might do, that that remark is meant to be satirical. All night--I cannot say 'I lay in agony'--but I wrestled with various problems. Mr. Montagu Babbacombe was with me all the time. Had he been there in the actual flesh his presence could not have been more obvious.

Now that he was physically absent, the original impression recurred with its former force. I told myself, over and over again, that the man was really and truly Twickenham. His denial of the fact I accounted nothing. He always had been fond, with or without apparent cause, of denying his own identity. That game was old. When detected in an invidious position, as he was apt to be, he would swear, using all manner of oaths and with a face of brass, that he was somebody altogether different. He had been known to do it repeatedly. The thing was notorious.

If he was Twickenham, nothing was more probable than that he should assert the contrary. It was part of his crack-brainedness. I ought to have taken that for granted from the first. His voice and manner were the two chief points on which he differed from my recollections of Leonard. They could be simulated. The man had always been an actor. Still, I could scarcely force the man to claim his peerage. Little would be gained by my proclaiming, 'Behold, the Marquis of Twickenham!' if he himself declared that he was nothing of the kind. The onus of proof would rest on me. The cost of it! And what profit would accrue even from success?

However, I was not altogether at the end of my resources. I was too near drowning not to clutch at every straw which offered. I believed I saw something very like a plank. If the man was not available in one way he might be in another. Even if he was Twickenham, I fancied that I had hit upon just the sort of devil's trick which would appeal to his madman's sense of humour. If he would only keep his appointment in the morning. There was the rub. That night I blamed myself a hundred times for allowing him to pass out of my sight. It was long odds against my seeing him again.

Yet if there had been a taker, and I had laid the odds, I should have lost. The man was on the spot to time.

It was before the appointed time when I alighted from a hansom outside the York Hotel. The place seemed more of a tavern than an hotel, but there was an hotel entrance. Into this I walked. Behind the swing doors stood a person apparently in authority.

'Can I see Mr. Montagu Babbacombe?'

I expected him to say that no such person was known in that establishment. Instead of that he answered my question with another.

'What name?'

'John Smith?'

He addressed a waiter.

'Show this gentleman in to Mr. Babbacombe.'

I was shown in to Mr. Babbacombe. The 'Sleeping Man' was taking his ease in what I took to be a private sitting-room. That is, he reclined on a couch. On a small table at his side was a bottle of whisky and a tumbler. On a larger table, where it was well out of his reach, was a bottle of water--full. He was smoking what I knew by its perfume to be a good cigar. He was dressed in a suit of dark grey, which not only seemed to be a good fit, but to be well cut. He wore a high collar, and a white Jarvey tie, in which was thrust a diamond pin. He looked as if he had something to do with horses. He also looked as if he was Twickenham. If he was not--then, as the phrase goes, I was prepared to eat my hat.

He paid not the slightest heed to my entrance, but, without even a movement of his head, continued in the enjoyment of his cigar. I was angered by his air of perfect calmness. The impudence of the thing!

'May I ask what you mean by your extraordinary behaviour--extraordinary even for you? Do you take me for an utter fool?'

'Name of Smith?'

'Name be hanged! Do you suppose that I don't know you?--that I couldn't bring a hundred persons into this room who'd know you on the instant?'

'Bring two.'

'What do you propose to gain?'

'That's it.'

'Why do you conceal your identity?'

'I'm wondering.'

'If I bring the landlord into this room and tell him who you are, will you venture to deny it?'

'Depends on who I am.'

'I believe you're a criminal lunatic.'

'The same to you. And many of 'em.'

He sipped at his glass. He filled me with such rage--which was, after all, unreasonable rage--that I was unwilling to trust myself to speak. My impulse was to seize him by the scuff of his neck and drag him home with me, and show him to them all; when the question of his identity would be settled on the spot. However, I remembered in time that that was not the purpose which had brought me there. My intention was a very different one; and I proposed to carry it out. That is, if his humour fitted mine.

'Have you ever heard of the Marquis of Twickenham?'

'The Marquis of Twickenham?' Leaning back, he stroked his chin with a gesture which so vividly recalled a favourite trick of Leonard's that I could have struck him for thinking that I could be fooled so easily. 'Might.'

'Are you aware that in appearance you resemble him?'

'Good-looking chap.'

'He was a poor devil last night.'

'Extremes meet.'

'I am actuated in what I am going to say by your own eccentric behaviour. I need not tell you that I should not say anything of the kind were you to act like a reasonable being. But since, beyond the shadow of a doubt, you are partly mad, I am going to take it for granted that you are wholly mad. I make this preliminary observation because I want us to understand each other.'

'You take some understanding.'

'So do you. Are we private here?'

'You might look under the couch. I don't know that there's a cupboard.'

'I won't ask if I can trust you, because I know I can't.'

'Let's begin as we mean to go on.'

'Therefore, I will tell you at once that you can make what use you like of what I am about to say to you. Things have reached a point which finds me indifferent. Besides, talking's a game at which two can play.'

'That's so.'

'I said to you last night that I wished to see you this morning on a matter of importance.'

'Doesn't it strike you, Mr.--Smith, that you take some time in getting there?'

'I take my own time.'

'You do. And mine. Perhaps you're engaging a room in this hotel.'

'You've done some curious things, Mr.--Babbacombe.'

'That's my name. The same as yours is Smith.'

'Perhaps you're willing to do another.'

'For money.'

'Are you willing to die?'

'My hair?'

'I'll put the question in another way.'

'I would. It might sound better.'

'From what I have seen of you during the last few days I believe that you are capable of feigning death.'

'I'm capable of feigning a good many things?'

'I believe it. Among them you are capable of feigning this particular thing.'

'Explain.'

'You can so simulate death that no one can tell you from a dead man.'

'I can.'

'Not even a doctor?'

'Nary one.'

'I presume, therefore, that you can simulate the act of dying.'

'It's no presumption.'

'You can, that is, in the presence of other persons, and even of a medical man, pretend to die with such fidelity to nature that a doctor in attendance would not hesitate to grant a certificate of death.'

'You bet.'

'Will you do it?'

'Kid to die?'

'Exactly.'

'What for?'

'A thousand pounds.'

'A thousand pounds!'

He repeated my words in such a tone that again doubts passed through my mind. If he was Twickenham it was impossible that such an amount could have the attraction for him which his tone suggested. It was a drop in the ocean compared to the sums which were waiting ready to his hand. Somehow, although not a muscle of his countenance moved, I felt convinced that the figures did appeal to him; and that strongly. If such was the case, then the thing was beyond my comprehension.

'A thousand pounds is not a trifle.'

My trite observation went unanswered. He continued to puff at his cigar, as if reflecting. I, on my part, stood and watched. Presently he spoke, examining, as he did so, the ash of his cigar with every appearance of interest.

'I'm to ask no question?'

'Of what kind?'

'As, for instance, what's the lay?'

'I don't altogether follow.'

'I dare say you get near enough. Who'll I be when I'm dying--and dead?'

'Don't you know?'

'I'm asking.'

I hesitated.

'The Marquis of Twickenham.'

I kept my eyes upon his face; as, indeed, I had done since I came into the room. He did not change countenance in the least.

'It's a bold game you're playing.'

'Your part of it'll require courage.'

'But the risk'll be yours. Suppose, in the middle of the show I quit dying, and make a little remark to the effect that my name's Babbacombe; that I'm no Marquis, and that I was put up to this by a man named Smith. You'd look funny.'

'We should both of us be in rather an amusing situation.'

'You've--face.'

'You also.'

'Will I be supposed to make any remark when I'm dying--any last farewells, or any of that kind of thing?'

'You might express contrition for a wasted life.'

'Yours?--or mine? A bit of yours has been wasted; especially lately--eh? A lot of time seems to waste when you're waiting for dead men's shoes.'

'It's for you to see that I don't have to wait much longer.'

He was silent again. Again he regarded his cigar. A curious smile parted his thin, colourless lips. 'I'm to be the Marquis of Twickenham?'

'You are.'

'Because I'm so like him?'

'Exactly.'

'As the Marquis of Twickenham I'm to die?'

'That's the idea.'

'And be buried?'

'Doesn't that follow?'

'I'm to be buried?'

'Can you see any way out of it?'

'Several.'

'For instance?'

'Sitting up while they're settling me in the coffin, and remarking that I think I'd like a larger size. That would be one way.'

'Which would render the whole thing null and void.'

'Then are you suggesting that I should be buried--regular, downright buried?--nailed up, put in a hole, and all?'

'You would not be put in a hole, but in the family vault.'

'And how long would I stay there?'

I smiled. He perceived my amusement.

'Mr. Smith, you're the kind of man I admire.'

'I hope to continue to merit your admiration.'

'That dying's off.'

'Why? What I said about the family vault was but a jest.'

'A sepulchral one.'

'It might be necessary, perhaps, to put you in a coffin, but, before the arrival of the undertaker's men, I would come; you would get out, and between us we'd fasten down the lid upon the empty box.'

'A kind of sort of game of cut it fine. And what do you suppose I'd be thinking of, while I was waiting inside that handsome piece of funeral furniture for you to come?'

'Of the thousand pounds which would so soon be yours.'

He seemed to reflect once more; the smile returning to the attenuated, cruel, shifty lips which had always been one of Twickenham's most unpleasant features.

'That dying will come off. As you observed, a thousand pounds is not a trifle. I've given a show for less. I suppose the money's safe?'

'It is. When will you--die?'

'That's it. I'm engaged almost right along. It'll have to be soon. What do you say to to-morrow?'

'To-morrow?'

The imminence of the thing startled me. I had not expected to be taken up so readily. Nor had I been prepared for the appointment of so early a date. And yet, why not? It was just one of those things of which one might truly say that ''twere well done if 'twere done quickly.'

He put my thoughts into words.

'What's wrong with to-morrow? Haven't you about done wasting time enough? Why not then as soon as next week?'

'Let me understand. Would you propose to die to-morrow?'

'I'd propose to begin. This show's got to be worked artistic. I can't drop down dead as if I'd had a fit. Maybe some keen-nosed relative might start sniffing. Might want a coroner's inquest or something of that. Holy Paul! Where'd I be if they started a post mortem? I'd have to quit being dead so that I could start explaining. This job'll have to be done in a workmanlike manner; my professional reputation is at stake. To-morrow I begin by sending you a message.'

'A message?--of what nature?'

'Why, I go to an hotel, just well enough not to be refused admission, and ill enough to take to my bed directly I'm inside. If they turn shirty, and remark that that hotel is not a hospital, I'll tell them that I'm the Marquis of Twickenham. I shan't choose too swell a place, so that they may be proud of having the Marquis of Twickenham on the premises, if it's only to die there. There'll be a pretty bill for the estate to pay: because a funeral at an hotel comes dear. Then I send you a message: a note, say--"Dear Smith"----'

'Don't call me Smith.'

'No? Then what'll I call you? Brown?'

'I suppose this introducing myself is part of the farce. If you do write such a note, call me Douglas.'

'That's all?'

'My name is Douglas Howarth. You are sure you have never heard that name before?'

'Might have. I'll say, "Dear Douglas Howarth, I have returned to die. Come and smooth my pillow at the end. So that I may die grasping friendship's hand. Your long lost Twickenham."'

'A note of that kind would hardly be in keeping with the supposed writer's well-known character.'

'No? Then what price this? "Dear Doug, I'm dying. If you have a moment to spare you might look in. Twick."'

'That's better. Oddly enough he used to call me "Doug," and sign himself "Twick."'

'That's so? Why shouldn't he have done? You hurry to my suffering side, bringing with you five hundred pounds in notes, which you slip into my clammy palm.'

'I should prefer to give you the thousand pounds afterwards.'

'I shouldn't. Half first, then the rest. If you don't bring five hundred when you come--I'll recover.'

This was spoken with an accent which suggested varied possibilities.

Before I left the York Hotel the whole business was cut and dried. From one point of view my success was altogether beyond my anticipations. Yet I was not feeling quite at my ease. There was a diabolical fertility of invention about the man which recalled Twickenham each moment more and more. The whole spirit with which the idea was taken up reminded me of him. He planned everything; filled in all the details, arranged, so far as I could see, for every eventuality. I was conscious, all the while, that the scheme was entirely after the man's heart. Its daring; the brazen impudence which would be required to successfully carry it out; entire absence of anything approaching nervousness; complete callousness;--these were the requisites which Mr. Montagu Babbacombe possessed in a degree which would have seemed unique had they not reminded me forcibly of somebody else. The whimsical character of the feat he was about to attempt just fitted in with his humour, as I had foreseen.

'You know, Mr. Smith--I beg your pardon--Mr. Howarth--I shall play this game for all I'm worth: right to the limit. All I'm wondering is if it shall be a lingering death-bed, punctuated with bursts of agony, or a foreshadowing of the perfect peace that'll soon be coming. How long will I take in dying?'

'I should suggest not too long.'

'You would suggest that. Am I to do much talking?'

'As little as you possibly can.'

'Then it's not to be a story-book death-bed, with me shedding forgiveness on all those I've parted from?'

'I think not.'

'That's hard on me. I suppose I may draw a few tears from those who, in silence, stand sorrowing round?'

'Not too many.'

'Perhaps you're right. I'm a whale on tears. If I once started on the handle I might pump the well right dry. There's one remark I'd like to make, Mr. Howarth, before we part.'

'That is?'

'It's this. That I'm calculating on agitating your bosom, sir. When you see me lying there, stricken down in the prime of my life and manly beauty, you'll think of the days, so near and yet so far, when we used to play together in my mother's old backyard. Naturally your feelings will be moved, and you'll do a howl; no silent weep, but a regular screech; to the extent of damping at least two pocket-handkerchiefs. If you don't, I'll be hurt: and when I'm hurt I've an unfortunate habit of saying so. How'll you like it if, just as I'm running down for ever, and yours is the only dry eye in the room, I look up with the observation, "Mr. Howarth, how about that grief of yours?"'

It was remarks of this kind which filled me with a vague sense of disquiet as to the kind of proceedings which Mr. Babbacombe might be meditating. However I comforted myself with the reflection--if comfort it could be called--that whatever happened, or in what spirit soever he might choose to comport himself, things could hardly be worse than they were.

CHAPTER VI

A MESSAGE FROM THE MARQUIS

The 'message' came on the Monday as I was at lunch. Violet and I were alone together. I had spent the morning in doing two things--getting the five hundred pounds which would keep Mr. Montagu Babbacombe from a premature recovery, and putting my papers in order. I hardly know which I found the more difficult.

I had to lie to get the money. I had reached such a stage in my resources that to have told the truth would have been a fatal bar. I could hardly say that I shortly expected to receive news of the Marquis of Twickenham's death. That would have been to occasion inquiries of, under the circumstances, a highly inconvenient nature. Besides, after all, Mr. Babbacombe might play me false. That was always more than possible. So I manufactured another tale instead. By dint of it, I succeeded, with great difficulty, and on the most outrageous terms, in extracting another five hundred out of Abrams. I wanted him to make it six; for this was likely to be an occasion on which a little spare cash might come in useful: but the brute declined.

There was not much time, when I returned from Abrams, to look into my papers. Yet it was essential that, at the earliest possible moment, I should have some notion of how I stood. To be frank, for some time past I had shirked inquiry; having only too good reason to feel convinced that if a statement of my financial position was made out it would be clearly shown that I had been insolvent for longer than I cared to think. In such a case it had seemed to me that at any rate partial ignorance was bliss. That this was cowardice, and, possibly, something worse, I was aware. In desperate positions one does curious things. I was just able to arrive at a glimmering of the fact that unless, in Mr. Micawber's phrase, something 'turned up' soon, worse than pecuniary ruin was in store for me, when lunch was served. At lunch the news that something was likely to 'turn up' came.

Violet was not in the best of spirits. I learned that Lady Desmond, on her part, had not been

allowing the grass to grow under her feet. She had been paying the child a visit. Vi did not admit it at once, but when I taxed her with her obvious discomposure--having reasons of my own for wishing to know what was at the back of it--she let it out. It seemed that the old lady had said some very frank things--in the way old ladies can. Vi had suffered; was suffering still. She had arrived at a decision, with which she had sped the parting guest.

'I am quite resolved that--unless something happens which will not happen--all shall be over between Reggie and myself. I will not have such things said to me. I am going to write a formal note to say that I will not see him again: and you must take me away somewhere so that he cannot see me.'

'Take you away?'

I perceived that Lady Desmond had been very plain.

'Abroad; to some place as far off as you possibly can. She says that the Marquis of Twickenham is alive; and as you say so too----'

'Violet!'

'I say that the best thing you can do is to emigrate, at once. I'll keep house for you until you are in a position to offer Edith a home.'

'You march.'

'If you had heard Lady Desmond you would be of opinion that it is necessary I should. It seems to me that both Reggie and you are wasting your lives--not in pursuit of a chimera, but waiting till a chimera comes to you.'

'Is that Lady Desmond?'

'Lady Desmond said nothing half so civil; either of you or me. She is--she's a nice old lady.'

Vi pressed her lips together. There was a red spot on either cheek. Unless I err she had been crying. The reflection that that ancient female had been castigating the child with her vitriolic tongue made me tingle. While I was considering if it was advisable to say anything, and, if so, what, Bartlett entered with a note.

'The messenger doesn't know if there's an answer, sir.'

I knew from whom it came before I touched the envelope; though I had not expected that it would arrive so soon. It reached me when I was just in the mood for such an adventure.

It was addressed 'The Hon. Douglas Howarth.--If not at home please forward at once.' On the flap was stamped in red letters, 'Cortin's Hotel. Norfolk Street, Strand.' I opened it with fingers which were perhaps a little tremulous. The crisis in my life had come; the tide which might land me--where? The note was written in a hand which I did not recognise as Twickenham's, possibly because it straggled up and down in an erratic fashion, which was not out of keeping with the character of an invalid; but then, unfortunately for himself, Leonard had always been an adept with the pen. The wording was altogether dissimilar to anything which Mr. Babbacombe had suggested yesterday.

'Dear Doug.--

'The Devil's got me by the throat, and if you want to enjoy my struggles before he's dragged me down, you'll have to look in soon. I'll be dead before this time to-morrow. D---- all the lot of you! This is a filthy pen. Twick.' I felt my heart stop beating. Because, although it was not the kind of intimation I had expected to receive, it was the man himself who spoke to me from off the sheet of paper. The last time I saw Twickenham, more than fifteen years ago, when it was known that he had done the thing for which the law could--and would--make him pay heavy toll, as he was about to fly from its pursuit, he had said to me, on my hazarding an inquiry as to when we might meet once more.

'You'll never see me again before the Devil has me by the throat, and you come to enjoy my struggles before he drags me down. D---- all the lot of you!'

That was the very last thing he did--to curse his friends. Then he slammed out of the room, while his words were still ringing in my ears. I made a note of them before he had been gone ten minutes. I had offered to give him a helping hand, though he had deserved from me nothing of the kind; and I felt that it was only due to myself that I should set on record the fashion in which he had received my advances. I had that memorandum in my possession still. I had only referred to it on returning home after my first encounter with Mr. Babbacombe. And now here were almost the identical words staring up at me from the written sheet. It settled, once and for all, the question as to the identity of the person from whom that note had come, though it opened a still wider question as to what was the game which the man was playing, into whose toils I was being allured by labyrinthine yet seemingly inevitable ways.

Vi perceived by my demeanour that something unusual had happened.

'What is it?' she asked.

'Bartlett, you can go. Tell the messenger to wait.'

The man went. I could not have attempted an explanation while he was in the room. When he was gone my tongue still faltered. I re-read the words which, while they convinced me utterly, set me doubting all the more. Vi, watching me, repeated her inquiry.

'What is wrong, Douglas? Why do you look so strange?'

I handed her the note. Rapid consideration seemed to show that was the shortest and the safest way. She read it with an obvious want of comprehension.

'What an extraordinary communication. What does it mean? From whom has it come?'

'It's from Twickenham.'

'Douglas!'

She dropped her hands, note and all, on to her knee.

'To me it's like a voice from the grave. The words with which he bade me farewell are almost the identical ones with which he bids me come to him again.'

'Then it was he you saw?'

'Apparently.'

'And what does this mean?'

'It seems that he is ill.'

'Ill?' She referred to the note. 'He says that the Devil's got him by the throat. I shouldn't wonder. I believe, for my part, that there always is a time when that person comes to claim his own. You can't go on being wicked with impunity for ever. And that--he'll be dead to-morrow. Douglas, he says that he'll be dead before this time to-morrow.'

'So he says.'

'But--if he should be?'

I knew the thought which was in her mind; though I kept my eyes from off her face. I was conscious of an unusual contraction of the muscles about the region of the heart. What was this evil with which I was trafficking? She turned herself inside out, with a sublime unconsciousness of the troubled waters which I felt that I was entering.

'I'll be able to marry Reggie; and you may marry Edith. So that I needn't write to him. Why, Douglas, this bad man's death will usher in a peal of wedding bells. It ought to ease his final moments to know that he'll do so much good by dying.'

It galled me to hear her talk in such a strain. True, she had learnt it from me; but, just then, that made it none the better.

'Don't you think you're a trifle premature in marrying, and giving in marriage? He's not dead yet.'

'No, but he will be. I feel that he will be soon. You'll find that for once he's told the truth.'

'However that may be, I wish you wouldn't speak like that. It sounds a little inhuman. As if you anxiously anticipated his entering the fires of hell to enable you to enjoy the bliss of heaven.'

She looked up at me with a naïve surprise.

'Douglas, what ever do you mean by that? Haven't you always counted on his death? And isn't he a wicked man?'

'Decency suggests that we should feign some sorrow even if we feel it not.'

'It suggests to me nothing of the kind. The moment the Marquis of Twickenham's death is announced I shall rejoice--for Reggie's sake, and yours.'

'I see. And not at all for your own?'

'Also a little for my own. And Edith. For all our sakes, indeed.' I had taken up my position before the fireplace: she planted herself in front of me. 'Douglas, what has come to you upon a sudden? Here's the news for which you have been waiting arrived at last, and you look as black as black can be, and speak so crossly that I hardly know you for yourself.'

'You arrive too rapidly at your conclusions. I have grown so weary of expecting what never

comes that my sense of anticipation's dulled. The man's not died these fifteen years; why should he die now?'

'Because he says he's going to: and I tell you that, this time, what he says he means.'

Turning aside, I looked down at the flaming coals. Her words and manner jarred on me alike.

'I don't like to think, and I don't like to know you think that, for us, the only hope of life is--death.'

'Douglas, what is the mood that's on you? Don't you want the man to die?'

Asked thus bluntly, I found myself hard put to it for an answer. After all, it was doubtful if I was not sorry that I had set out on this adventure. Never before had I felt myself so out of harmony with what was in my sister's heart. Obviously the riddle of my mood was beyond her finding out. She gave a little twirl of her skirts, as if dismissing from her mind all efforts to understand me.

'My dear Douglas, you are so mysterious, and so unexpectedly--shall I say, didactic! You do intend to be didactic, don't you, dear?--that you must excuse my calling your attention to the fact that the person who brought this note still waits.'

I rang the bell. Bartlett appeared.

'Tell the person who brought this letter that the answer is: "I am coming at once."'

When the servant had vanished, Violet eyed me with a quizzical smile.

'So you are going. I hope that the Marquis of Twickenham has exaggerated the gravity of his condition, and that on your arrival you will find him in the enjoyment of perfect health. Is that the kind of observation you think I ought to make?'

'It's quite possible,' I retorted, 'that I shan't find the Marquis of Twickenham at all.'

With that I left her. As I journeyed Strandwards I discussed within myself the possibility. Such was the conflict of my emotions that when the cab was about to turn off the Embankment into Norfolk Street I bade the driver go a little farther on before taking me to my destination. I knew that from the moment in which I set foot in the building, which Mr. Babbacombe had chosen for the exhibition of his uncanny gifts, I was committed to a course of action which, I was beginning to realise more clearly every moment, might lead I knew not whither. I might have been the first to pull the strings, but the figure once set in motion, if I was not careful, might have me at its mercy for ever and a day.

'I'll put a stop to the gruesome farce at its very opening. I'll tell the fellow that I'll have nothing to do with his hideous deception. If I become the accomplice of such a fiend as he is, my latter state will be worse than my first.'

With the determination strong upon me to be quit of the man and his misdeeds, I alighted at the door of Cortin's Hotel.

'Is the Marquis of Twickenham here?'

I put the question to a female who advanced towards me as I crossed the threshold. Apparently the establishment had not attained to the dignity of a hall porter.

'The Honourable Douglas Howarth?' I admitted that I was known by that name. 'His lordship expected to see you before, sir?'

The woman's tone conveyed a reproach which I resented. Evidently to her the Marquis of Twickenham was a person in authority before whom all men should bow. Besides, I could hardly have come more quickly than I had done. As I was being conducted to his apartment I told myself that I would address his lordship in a fashion for which he probably was unprepared.

The surprise, however, was on my side. I had expected to find the man alone. No one had breathed so much as a hint that any one was with him. When I entered the room, however, I found a person bending over the bed, whom it did not require much discernment to infer was a doctor. A voice, which I did not recognise as Mr. Montagu Babbacombe's, issued from beneath the sheets.

'Who's that?--Who's that come in?'

The waiter announced my name and style, as if introducing me to an assembled company.

'The Honourable Douglas Howarth.'

'Doug--! Is that you, Doug? D----n you! I thought you'd come!'

I advanced towards the bed. The doctor bowed. He was a young man, probably not much over

thirty, with a frank, open face, which suggested rather a pleasant disposition than commanding talents. In the bed was Babbacombe--or Twickenham--whichever he chose to call himself. But what a change had taken place in his appearance since yesterday! So complete was the alteration that I was half inclined to suspect that a trick was being played on me, rather than on the rest of the world.

If this was not a sick man then surely I had never seen one. On his face there was the--I was about to write--unmistakable look of the being from whom the sands of life are slipping fast. This was a complete wreck; the husk of a man; a creature for whom, so far as this life was concerned, all things were at an end. The cheeks were hollow; the eyes dim; the jaw had an uncomfortable trick of gaping open, as if the mechanism which controlled it was a little out of order. One arm was out of bed. The hand was attenuated, so as to seem nothing but skin and bone. It had that clammy look, which one would suppose incapable of imitation, which suggests physical decay. If this man was not in the last stage of a mortal illness, then he was a master of arts which are not accounted holy. Entirely without intention I stood before him, oppressed by a feeling of half reverence, half awe, of which, I take it, most of us are conscious when we find ourselves in the presence of the coming king.

He spoke in a croaking, hoarse voice, which I certainly did not recognise as Mr. Montagu Babbacombe's.

'Doug, he's got me by the throat, and I'm fighting him; but he'll win, he'll win. The doctor'll tell you he'll win.'

I was at a loss what to say or do. The reality of the sham, if it was a sham, affected me in a way for which I was unprepared. The doctor, perceiving something of my dilemma, whispered in my ear:

'He's in a bad way. Are you a friend of his?'

The sick man's ears were keener than the speaker had supposed. He answered for me.

'A friend? Oh, yes, he's a friend of mine, Doug's a friend. Doctor, take yourself away. I want to speak to my friend.'

Whether he was influenced by the bluntness of the dismissal, I could not say; but the doctor prepared to go.

'I will send you some medicine which will ease those pains of which you speak.'

'Curse your medicine!'

'You mustn't talk too much. Rest and composure are what you principally need.'

'Confound your composure!' With a violent effort the man in the bed raised himself to a sitting posture. 'What do I want to be composed for when there's so little time to talk? There'll be all eternity to be silent in.'

As he gripped the coverlet with his cadaverous hands, blinking at us with his sightless eyes, he did not offer an agreeable spectacle. He trembled so from the exertion of the effort he had made that it was not surprising to see him, collapsing like a pack of cards, fall in a heap half in, half out of bed. With quick professional hands the doctor straightened him out. He eyed him when he had finished. The figure in the bed lay perfectly still.

'He's exhausted himself; but he'll be all right when he recovers. Can I speak to you outside before I go?' I went with him outside the bedroom door. 'Are you a relative of his?'

'I am not.'

'If he has any relatives they should be sent for at once, if they wish to see him alive. It is quite possible that he will not live over to-day.'

'What is the matter with him?'

'It's a case of general collapse; all the vital organs are weak. He seems to have lived a hard and irregular life on top of an originally poor constitution. I hope you don't mind my speaking frankly.'

'Not at all. I believe you are right. I have not seen him myself for fifteen years. We all thought he was dead.'

'He will be soon. He's consumed by fever; his lungs are affected; there's practically no pulse, and scarcely any motion of the heart. The whole machine's run down. As you see for yourself, he's nothing but skin and bone. But it's from the heart we have most to fear. If you allow him to excite himself there may be an instant stoppage.'

'Do you think we'd better have further advice?'

'That's as you please. I myself should welcome it. And it might be more satisfactory to every one concerned. But I don't think you'll find that anything can be done. Here's my card.' He handed me one; from which it appeared that he was Mr. Robert White, M.R.C.S., L.R.C.P., of 93 Craven Street, W.C. 'I'll look in again as soon as I can; and then, perhaps, a consultation may be arranged. But if any of his relatives wish to see him, if I were you I should lose no time in letting them know the state that he is in.'

He went. As I examined his card I said to myself.

'There seems no doubt that it will not be difficult to obtain a certificate of the Marquis of Twickenham's death from him. I wonder if Mr. Robert White is a friend of Mr. Montagu Babbacombe.'

Opening the door, I re-entered the room.

CHAPTER VII

MR. FOSTER INTERRUPTS

All was still. The figure in the bed continued motionless. I walked up to the bed. Whether conscious or not of my presence, he gave no sign of movement.

'Mr. Babbacombe,' I spoke a little louder. 'Mr. Babbacombe.' No answer. 'Don't you think this acting is a little overdone? Your friend Dr. White has gone. I'm all alone.'

Still not an indication to show that the man yet lived. Against my better judgment I began to feel uneasy. He lay so very motionless.

'Mr. Babbacombe!--Twickenham!--What are you afraid of? Don't you hear me, man?'

I touched him with my hand. He made no movement in response. For a second I was in danger of making an ass of myself. Could the man have carried the farce too far, and was he really dead? I all but rushed from the room, or to the bell, or somewhere, to give the alarm. Then I felt him shiver beneath my touch. I do not think that I was ever more conscious of relief than when I felt his quivering flesh. For the moment I actually imagined that I had murdered him.

The movement was but a quiver, dying away as soon as it came. I expected him, at the very least, to turn and open his eyes. But he did nothing of the kind. My impatience returned.

'Twickenham!' I thought it safer to address him by that name. Walls have ears; especially, I fancy, in hotels. 'Twickenham! Confound it, man, are you playing the fool with me again?'

No response. Concluding that this was a game which the gentleman before me intended to play in his own fashion, I awaited the issue of events. If he thought it necessary to keep up his character of dying man, and practise the lights and shadows of the rôle with me as audience, it was out of my power to prevent him. Yet as I watched how, bit by bit, he seemed to return to life; how long the process lasted; and how small the amount of vitality which he returned to seemed to be; I found myself in the curious position of being unable to decide where the sham began and the reality ended. Turning on to his back, apparently with difficulty, he gazed up with what was an astonishingly good imitation of an unseeing gaze.

'Well? As the street boys have it, I hope you'll know me when you see me again. You do it uncommonly well. The only comment I have to make, if you'll excuse my making it, is that you do it too well.'

What seemed a glimmer of consciousness stole over his skeleton countenance. It lighted up.

'Doug!' he said.

Mr. Babbacombe had not struck me as being corpulent, but it mystified me to think what he had done with the balance of his flesh within the twenty-four hours since I had seen him last. He looked as if he had lost stones; suggesting the possession of a secret for which certain jockeys of my acquaintance would give him all they possess. The voice was excellent: cracked and broken, like that of a man whose physical force is nearly spent.

'Would you mind calling me Mr. Howarth when we are alone?'

'Call you--what? See you----. Might as well ask you--call me--Marquis of Twickenham.'

'I am quite willing, when we are in private, to call you Mr. Babbacombe.'

'Call me--what? Mr.--Doug, you're drunk.'

'As usual, you credit me with a condition of mental imbecility for which no degree of drunkenness of which I ever heard could adequately account.'

'What--you talking about? Doug, I'm pretty bad.'

'You seem to be. I've brought the five hundred pounds which you stipulated I should bring if you were not to recover.'

'Five hundred pounds? Doug, I haven't seen that amount of money--Lord knows when.'

'No? Then you shall see it now. Here it is--fifty tens. I thought you would prefer to have the notes all small.'

I placed them between the wasted fingers, which still remained outside the coverlet. They just closed on them, but that was all. His eyes closed too.

'Too late.'

'Too late? What do you mean?'

'What's the use--money to me now.'

'You can have it buried with you.'

'Yes--I can. Doug, why do you speak like that?'

'Mr. Babbacombe, might I ask you not to be so thorough?'

An expression of surprise lighted up his features.

'He's wandering.'

'I did not gather, from our conversation yesterday, that it was part of your scheme to pretend to be dying even when we were alone.'

The expression of surprise had grown in intensity.

'Doug!'

'My good man, please don't look at me like that. And do not call me "Doug." Even if you were the person, and in the condition, you pretend to be, I should resent hearing the word come from your lips each second.'

'He's mad!'

It was said with a little gasp, in the most natural way in the world. Reclosing his eyes, if I could believe the evidence of my senses--which, in his case, I doubted if I was entitled to--he dozed.

I began to understand that Mr. Montagu Babbacombe was even more of an artist than I had given him credit for. As I stood watching, with curious interest, the perfection with which he simulated a sick man's slumber, I asked myself if, after all, he might not be right, and I wrong. If he chose to continue the performance even when the necessity for acting was removed, why should he not? It might tend to simplify the situation. At least, it would do no harm. If he declined to allow even me to see the mask slipped a little from his face, I had certainly no reason to complain. Later on I could say, with perfect truth, that, so far as I was able to see, he never rallied from the moment I saw him first. Situated as I was likely to be, it would be a comfort to be able to say something that was true.

The misfortune was, that I was not, myself, by any means such an artist as Mr. Babbacombe. I might be able, when in the public eye, to deceive with an air of passable candour, but in private I fell short. I had heard of men who lied with such consistency that, in the end, they deceived themselves. I had not got so far as that. Mr. Babbacombe, it seemed, could play a part so well that he actually was, for the time, the character he feigned to be. With me it was otherwise. I had not yet grown to love deception for deception's sake, as the man in front of me--whether he was Babbacombe or Twickenham--seemed to do. It filled me with an illogical sense of rage to perceive how, in this matter, he took it for granted that his point of view would--or should--necessarily be mine. He liked to keep on stealing all the time; I preferred, in private, to pretend that I was an honest man.

However, it certainly was true that the strain of the impersonation lay on him. If he did not

choose to allow himself a moment's relaxation, I had no cause to grumble. I had agreed with him that he should carry out a certain piece of deception. I could hardly complain if he carried out his part of the bargain so well that he was actually in danger of deceiving me.

Only I did wish that he would own up, for a moment, what a rogue he was. Such was my state of nervous tension that, to me, such an admission would have come as a positive relief. I was willing to admit that I was a humbug--between ourselves. Why should he not be willing to do the same? It would have come as a sort of salve to my sense of self-esteem.

Instead, he persisted in that doze--which I was convinced was make-believe. As one might watch a conjuror perform his tricks in the privacy of one's own apartment, with a feeling of resentment that he should allow no hint to escape him as to how they're done, so I observed the man in the bed pretend--even to me!--to do the things which I had the best of reasons for knowing he was not really doing. I should like to have constrained him to confession, to have taken him by the shoulders and treated him to a good shaking, so that both the sleep and sickness might have been shaken clean out of him, and he would have had to admit his mummery.

I believe that if I had remained alone with him much longer I should have done it. My fingers itched to handle him. Just, however, as I was about to take him in my grip, the door opened and some one else came in. It was perhaps just as well, if the game was to be played out, that I was not detected in the act of committing an apparently brutal and unprovoked assault upon the seeming sufferer. Some sort of explanation would have had to be made: I should have had to compel the patient to admit his fraud to save my character. Otherwise my action might have been construed as an attempt to murder at the very least.

The new comer was Reggie. His appearance on the scene I had not expected so soon: nor desired. It had been my intention to coach the patient in certain details of his family history--supposing such coaching to be necessary. It would hardly do for him to be visited by relatives of whom he had never heard. This he had prevented my doing by his determination to act the rôle of dying man up to the hilt.

Reggie explained what had brought him. He held out the note which had brought me; which I now remembered I had left with Violet.

'Vi has sent me this? what does it mean?'

I moved towards him, glancing towards the sick man, who still feigned slumber. I had hoped to give him a warning look; but the persistence with which he kept his eyes closed rendered my effort futile.

'It means what it says.' I spoke in a tolerably loud tone of voice, hoping that the sleeper would have sense enough to pick up such cues as I might give him. 'Your brother, my dear Reggie, is here--ill in bed.'

'Good gracious!' Reggie's face expressed a variety of emotions. He glanced from me to the bed; from the bed to me. He dropped his voice. 'Is he--is he really bad?'

'About as bad as he can be. The doctor is of opinion that he may expire at any moment.'

The tone in which I said this--for Mr. Babbacombe's instruction--seemed to strike Reggie as peculiar.

'Is he--asleep?'

'He seems to have just dropped off.' Reggie moved closer to the bed. I went with him. He regarded the sleeper with looks of curiosity.

'He looks frightfully queer.'

'He can hardly look queerer, and live.'

'I suppose it is Twickenham?'

'Don't you recognise him?'

He shook his head.

'I was only a kid when he went. I've told you lots of times that I don't seem to have the least recollection of what he was like. I didn't think he was so old.'

'He's crowded threescore years and ten into the life he's lived, and more. Besides, sickness has aged him.'

'Is he conscious?'

'Now? He's asleep.'

'I mean when he's awake.

'He was conscious when I saw him first; that is, after a fashion of his own.'

'Is he--' He stopped. I saw that a thought was passing through his mind to which he hesitated to give utterance. Presently it came. 'Is he conscious enough to make a will?'

The question took me aback. It suggested an eventuality for which I had made no sort of preparation. If Mr. Montagu Babbacombe took it into his head to let himself go in a 'last will and testament,' I should be in a fix. I arrived at an instant determination.

'I should say not. Any will he might make in his present condition would not be worth the paper it was written on. Of that I am sure.'

I meant Mr. Babbacombe to take the hint. I hoped he would, though I had rather Reggie had not put the question. The young gentleman startled me with another remark which was equally unexpected and undesired.

'I sent in word to old Foster as I came along.'

'You did what?'

My tone expressed not only unmitigated surprise, but also something so closely approaching to dismay, that in turn I startled him.

'What's wrong? Didn't you want me to tell him? He'll have to know.'

'That's true.' A moment's consideration showed me that it was. 'At the same time, I would rather you had consulted me before communicating with him. What did you say?'

'That Twickenham was dying at Cortin's Hotel, and that I was hurrying to him.'

'Then if you told him that, it won't be long before he's here too.'

'I don't suppose it will.'

I did not relish the prospect at all. Things were moving more rapidly than I had intended. I perceived, too late, that there were complications ahead which I ought to have foreseen, but which, owing to my having my vision fixed on one thing, and one thing only, had escaped my notice. It was of the first importance that I should say a few words in private to Mr. Montagu Babbacombe before Mr. Foster appeared, or the bubble might be pricked in a second.

Mr. Stephen Foster was the senior partner of Foster, Charter, and Baynes; who had been lawyers, agents, and doers-of-all-work for the Sherringtons even before they had been peers. He was an old man now, but keen as the youngest. I had more than a suspicion that he did not like me. He had certainly treated the various applications I had made to him on Reggie's behalf with a curtness I did not relish. It was he who had shut the family purse against the lad. Left by the terms of the late Marquis's will, in default of the appearance of the heir-at-law, in practically absolute control of the entire estate, he had administered it with a zeal and judgment which did him the greatest credit. Its value had, in all respects, immensely increased while in his charge. If only he had shown even some slight consideration for Reggie's position there would have been nothing in his conduct of which to complain. But he had persistently refused to let him have so much as a five-pound note out of the family revenues, although he well knew the straits he was in, and how he was living at my expense. For this neither Reggie nor I bore him any love. It would not be our fault if one day he was not made to smart for his pedantic adherence to what he held to be the letter of the law.

'My position,' as he stated it, 'is this. The Marquis of Twickenham is alive, until you prove him dead. I am responsible to him for every farthing of his income; just as your banker is responsible to you for every penny which stands to the credit of your account. And just as your banker is powerless, without your express authorisation, to use your money, say, to save your mother from starvation, so I am powerless to apply his lordship's money to the assistance of his impecunious brother. Besides, you know what kind of man he is. You know, as well as I know, that, unless his disposition has wholly changed--which, from my knowledge of the family character, I deem in the highest degree improbable--he would not present a single sixpence to Lord Reginald. Whether I do or do not admire what I know would be his wishes, I am bound to observe them, or throw up my charge. I prefer to observe his wishes. Show me that My Lord Marquis is dead, and my charge is at an end. Or produce his instructions, authorising me to make his brother an allowance, or to hand him over a certain sum, and those instructions shall be duly carried out. In their absence, I can do nothing. To me, so far as the Twickenham estate is concerned, Lord Reginald Sherrington does not exist.'

And this was the man who, in all probability, was hastening to Mr. Montagu Babbacombe's bedside! If he caught him unprepared he would turn the dying man inside out before the sufferer even guessed at the process to which he was being subjected. At all hazards I must get Reggie out of the room, and prepare, as best I could in the few moments at my disposal, the too conscientious Mr. Babbacombe for the legal onslaught. I hit on a device.

'My dear Reggie, although I don't wish to suggest for a moment that the doctor who is already

in attendance is not perfectly competent, I do think we ought to have another man--don't you?'

'Certainly; if you consider it necessary, we'll have a dozen.'

'I don't think we need go so far as that, but we might have one. What do you say to Hancock? He saw Twickenham into the world; so it seems only fitting that he should usher him out.' My opinion of Sir Gregory Hancock's medical attainments is perhaps not so high as his popularity might seem to warrant; but that is by the way. Reggie signified his approval of my suggestion. 'Then, my dear chap, would you mind running round to fetch him, while I stay here, to watch? If you ask him personally he'll come without a moment's delay.'

Reggie, swallowing the bait, hied in search of Sir Gregory Hancock. I turned my attention to the bed. The rogue still slumbered. The time for ceremony, however, had passed. He would have to cease pretending.

'Babbacombe!' He paid not the slightest heed. 'Confound you! Will you put a stop to this tomfoolery? A man is coming who'll see through you in less than no time if you don't let me put you up to a thing or two. Babbacombe!'

No, he would not reply. My patience was becoming exhausted. I did not propose that my whole ingenious scheme should be wrecked because he chose to play the game in his own fashion instead of mine.

'Babbacombe! If you won't wake up, upon my honour I'll make you. I tell you I want to speak to you about something which is of vital importance to both of us; something which you must hear and understand. Will you attend?'

Apparently he would not. If he was really so opinionated I was prepared, forced by the exigencies of my position, to try another method. I did. I took him by the shoulder and I shook him. At first gently, then, as no result ensued, with greater violence. Then I treated him to a really vigorous shaking, only stopping because, in my heat, I began to fear that I might be going farther than I intended. He evinced not the slightest symptom of any intention to comply with my request and listen to what I had to say. Instead, when I looked at him again, a very curious something seemed to have happened to his face. His jaw had dropped open; and, if I may so express it, all his features seemed to have twisted out of the straight. His appearance, now that I realised its peculiarity, gave me quite a shock.

'What on earth is the matter with you, man?'

'You seem, Mr. Howarth, to have rather drastic methods of attaining to the information which you seek.'

The voice was Mr. Foster's. He had entered--when? When I had been shaking Mr. Babbacombe? What a fool I had been not to turn the key. I might have expected him to sneak in without warning me of his approach. How much had he heard--and seen? I should have to find out, soon.

CHAPTER VIII

DYING

While these thoughts flashed through my brain I remained perfectly still, with my face averted. It was desirable that I should have my countenance under perfect control, before I let him see it. I spoke to him from where I stood.

'Ah, Foster, is that you?'

'If you look this way, you'll see.'

Thus directly challenged, I looked. He was a big, burly man, in appearance not at all like the typical lawyer. His clothes always had a sort of agricultural cut. Anybody seeing him in the street for the first time would have taken him for a shrewd, hard-headed, and--in spite of agricultural depression--prosperous farmer; the tiller, probably, of his own acres. His hair, still abundant, and which he parted neatly on one side, was white as snow; in his keen flashing eyes, in spite of his seventy odd years, there was yet what always seemed to me to be the light of battle. I met his

glance without, I think, a sign of flinching, though I would rather have seen him buried than, at that moment, there.

'To know you, Foster, it is not necessary to see you when one hears your voice.'

Without replying, coming to my side, he looked down with me, at the figure on the bed. After a while he spoke.

'What were you doing to him, Mr. Howarth?'

'I was trying to wake him out of sleep.'

'He looks to me as if nothing could awake him now.'

'Foster! You don't mean--that he is dead?'

Nothing could have pleased me less than such a consummation. If Mr. Babbacombe had elected to die in such an extremely irregular fashion he certainly did not deserve the balance of that thousand pounds. I had stipulated that the end should take place in the presence of others; and, by inference, after they had been afforded an opportunity of satisfying themselves as to his being the actual Simon Pure. Otherwise, in the future all sorts of questions might arise,--not to mention the fact that, after what Foster had apparently seen, I might find myself in a position of distinct discomfort. The lawyer voiced my thought, as if he had perceived it in my mind.

'It would be rather unfortunate for you if he should be dead.'

'Unfortunate for all of us.'

'Particularly for you. You were subjecting him to rather vigorous treatment. Better men have been killed by less.'

I turned and faced him, not feeling disposed to be brow-beaten by him.

'Foster, what do you mean?'

'Weren't you shaking him?'

'Shaking him! Foster! I was simply placing him in a more comfortable position.'

'Ah! And this is the position you have placed him in.'

'Your words and tone, Mr. Foster, require explanation.'

'Which they shall receive at the proper time and place. In the meantime, don't you think you'd better send for a doctor? Or shall I?'

Luckily Mr. Babbacombe proved himself to be possessed of more sense than I had begun to fear. He returned to life. Whether actuated or not by the newcomer's remarks and manner I cannot say; but he did. Just as we seemed to be on the verge of a really unseemly wrangle, without altering his position in the least, he opened his eyes, looked up at us, and spoke.

'Hollo, Foster? Is that you?'

It was excellently done; wonderfully clever. In the sudden rush of my relief I decided that his honorarium should be increased. It showed that he had kept his ears wide open, or he would hardly have known that his visitor's name was Foster. I only hoped that he had gained, from what had passed, some idea of who he was, and what was the position he occupied, without its being necessary for me to drop too plain a hint. However, the agile Mr. Babbacombe proved himself equal to the occasion. The man-of-affairs stood looking down at him before he answered.

'I am glad, my Lord Marquis, that you know me.'

'Know you? Why shouldn't I know you? Hang you, Foster!'

Instinct had supplied Mr. Babbacombe with at least one of Twickenham's habits of speech, his trick of rounding off nearly every sentence he uttered with what one might call, by courtesy, an apostrophe.

'I am sorry, my lord, to see you looking so unwell.'

'I am going to die.'

'I trust, and believe, that it is not so bad with you as that. Where has your lordship been during all these years?'

'Playing with the fires.'

'Playing with the fires?' The lawyer repeated the words as if in doubt as to their meaning. But a glance at the speaker's face made it clear to him that the answer was perhaps not so far out as

it might have been. 'Is your lordship married?'

'What the devil's that to do with you? One can't marry all of 'em.'

'But you can marry one of them. Have you done that?' There came no answer from the bed. 'I would point out to your lordship that you are in a somewhat serious condition. Should anything happen to your lordship----'

'I'm going to die.'

'We trust not: but should such a misfortune be in store for us, it is of still more importance that your affairs should be in order. I would remind you that what you have been doing during the last fifteen years is known only to yourself. Are you married?'

'Curse the women!'

Why, I wondered, could not the idiot answer No?

'If your lordship pleases. But that is not an answer to my question. You must be well aware that the fact of your having a wife, with issue, would materially alter your brother's position.'

'Let him have it all.'

'You wish Lord Reginald to inherit your whole estate, real and personal? Does that mean you're not married?'

'Foster, did you--ever know--me answer questions--when I didn't want to. I'm not--dead yet.'

This was so like Twickenham that it set me thinking. Indeed, as the conversation between the pair proceeded I became more and more puzzled to find an answer to the question--Who is the man in the bed? Foster stuck to his guns.

'Has your lordship made a will?'

'I hate wills.'

'Possibly; yet they are necessary instruments. If you have not already made a will, you must make one now. Your lordship will tell me how you wish matters to stand. I will draw up a brief, yet sufficient form, which you can complete at once.'

'Kick him, Doug.'

This was again so like Twickenham that I had no option but to smile. Foster surveyed me with grave disapprobation. He drew me a little apart.

'This is no laughing matter, Mr. Howarth. I believe you represent Lord Reginald's interests. I can only tell you that they will be very seriously imperilled if we are not able to show that he has been formally appointed his brother's heir. You have witnessed the Marquis's refusal to answer my question as to whether he is or is not married. What meaning does that refusal convey to your mind?'

'None whatever. It's just Twickenham--that's all; and you know it.'

'But suppose he has a wife and children.'

'He hasn't.'

'Then why doesn't he say so?'

'Because he never would impart information to any one, on any subject whatever. Have you forgotten that that was one of his many forms of crankiness?'

'Still it is not outside the bounds of possibility that he has a wife and, say, a son. If they appeared upon the scene, with no will in existence, they would have everything. Lord Reginald would have nothing at all.'

'That would be hard on Reggie.'

'If you have his real interests at heart--which I have no reason to doubt'--he grinned--'you will assist me in persuading the Marquis to express his wishes in proper form--that is, make a will--without further delay. At present he is perfectly capable of doing so; but an hour may make all the difference, and if he dies intestate Lord Reginald will have plenty of trouble in front of him.'

Complications were crowding on me in a fashion which was unexpected. I had never counted on Mr. Babbacombe's having to make a will. There was sound sense in what Foster said; on the other hand, considerable risk might attend my urging Mr. Babbacombe to commit forgery. Always supposing, that is, he was not Twickenham. If he was, why, then----

I decided, having glanced at the situation, so far as I was able, all round, outwardly, at least,

to join hands with Foster in endeavouring to persuade the invalid to comply with his request. To have refused, without any apparently valid reason, would have been to rouse his always active suspicions. And also, it did occur to me that if a will was made and Mr. Babbacombe, after death, did prove himself too keen in the direction of blackmail--I never for a moment lost sight of the fact that, thousand pounds or no thousand pounds, out of this little performance Mr. Babbacombe proposed, in all probability, to provide himself with a sufficient income for the rest of his life--that will might be used to keep him within the paths of reason. It was bad enough to enter into a conspiracy of the kind to which he was committed; it was, if anything, a trifle worse to forge a will; and such a will--as, later on, it might be necessary to inform him.

He proved, however, as I might have expected, too old a bird to be caught with salt. When Foster and I brought our combined forces to bear on the attack we found that he was asleep again. He had fallen into another of those profound dozes, out of which it was so difficult to wake him. Foster spoke to him; then I. He paid no heed to either; as before, he was deaf, dumb, and blind.

'Well,' I inquired, when it was plain that no verbal assault would reach him, 'what's to be done now? Would you like to shake him?'

Foster compressed his lips; he was plainly annoyed.

'It's easy for you to laugh now; I doubt if it will prove a laughing matter to Lord Reginald.--Do you think he really is asleep?'

'That is exactly the question I was putting to myself when you came in. I also had a few remarks to make which I had a shrewd suspicion he did not choose to hear.'

'What did you wish to say?'

'My dear Foster, I take at least as much interest in the Marquis of Twickenham as you can do. I'm just as anxious to find out things. I thought then, as I think now, that he intends I shall find out nothing; or you either. He's been a hard nut to crack his whole life long; he means to continue uncrackable to the end.'

'He seems very ill.'

'He does not seem well.'

'As he lies there like that he looks as if he were a corpse.'

'I don't think he is, as yet.'

'What does the doctor say?'

'Death probably within four-and-twenty hours.' Foster laid his hand upon my arm.

'Mr. Howarth, we must have that will.'

'It never was much use saying "must" where Twickenham was concerned; I doubt if it'll be much use now. I can employ means to endeavour to make him if you like, though you seemed to resent it when you caught me using them just now. Reggie has gone for Hancock. He'll be able to tell you to what extent pressure may be applied to obtain the end you have in view.--Here is Reggie; and Hancock too.'

They entered as I spoke. Reggie hastened towards me.

'Any change, Douglas?--Ah, Foster, so you've come.--This is my brother, Sir Gregory, in the bed.'

Hancock surveyed him through his gold-rimmed spectacles. We waited in silence for his verdict.

'Asleep?--Changed; but I should have known him anywhere. He's been a wonderful man.--How long has he been asleep?'

The question was put to me.

'Perhaps five minutes.'

'I doubt if he is asleep.'

This was Foster. Hancock snapped him up.

'You doubt? My dear sir, there's no room for doubt on that point. He always suffered from a weak heart; even, I remember, as a lad. Heart trouble is, I fear, at the base of the trouble now. It is part of the complaint--that the sufferer is continually falling asleep, without notice. From that sleep it is hard to rouse him. In that sleep he often passes away--as, probably, will be the case here. It would be wrong for me to say that I think there is a chance of ultimate recovery when I

don't. In a medical sense his lordship is dying now.'

That was Hancock. He gained his reputation by a carefully cultivated habit of jumping at conclusions. The average doctor hums and haws, and tells you nothing. Hancock neither hums nor haws, but tells you everything; or pretends to. He must have been right--or have managed to pass for right--pretty frequently, or he would hardly occupy the position which he does. He is well on the shady side of eighty--hale, hearty, and, what is surprising, still in fashion.

Foster was the first to speak.

'When, Sir Gregory, may the end be expected? Lord Reginald must pardon my asking so frank a question, but, as I will explain to him later, it is of the first importance that I should know exactly what we may expect.'

Reggie said nothing. Sir Gregory considered a moment.

'What is the opinion of the gentleman who is already in attendance?'

I replied. 'Dr. White thinks he will not live four-and-twenty hours.'

Hancock felt the patient's pulse. Opening his shirt he applied the stethoscope; tried his temperature. The sleeper never moved, or showed consciousness of what was going on. The condition of his body, as it was revealed when Hancock opened his shirt, amazed me. It was nothing but skin and bone. And such a colour. Was it possible that this was the man who yesterday had been smoking his cigar on the couch at the York Hotel? My perplexity grew apace. Hancock pronounced his opinion.

'What Dr. White says is correct. I should doubt myself if he will live through the day.'

'Can nothing be done?' asked Reggie.

'Humanly speaking, nothing. He is not dead, but he is so nearly so that he may be said to be already looking through the gates.'

Hancock liked to talk like that. It was supposed that remarks of that kind had made him popular with women. Foster fidgeted.

'Sir Gregory, it is essential that the Marquis should make a will. He was in possession of all his faculties before you entered. Can nothing be done to rouse him?'

Hancock shrugged his shoulders.

'What?'

'Anything. A will we ought to have at any cost. Its absence may be the cause of endless confusion.'

'I can only say, sir, that if the Marquis of Twickenham has not made a will already he never will. Any attempt to rouse him, such as you appear to suggest, might result in his instant death. If we succeeded he would be incapable of doing what you require.'

Foster turned to Reggie.

'I can only say that, from your point of view, your brother might as well have continued an absentee as, under the present circumstances, die intestate.'

I struck in. 'That's absurd. Lord Reginald will succeed.'

'Will he? Don't be too sure. There will always be a probability of other claimants. Opposition may come from a dozen quarters. How can we tell what connections such a man as he has been may not have formed during fifteen years?'

As he propounded this delightful proposition an extraordinary thing took place. Once more the sleeper awoke. He just opened his eyes and looked at us.

'Where's Foster?'

That gentleman swung round with comical rapidity. 'My lord, I am here.'

'About--what you were asking me. I've--never been married. Curse a wife, I've always said.'

'Is that so, my lord?' Then, in an aside to us,' You are all witnesses.'

'My brother's to have everything. Why the devil--hasn't he come--to see me?'

'I have.'

Reggie moved forward. Foster whispered to him as he drew back.

'Keep him engaged in conversation if you can. I'll draw up a short form embodying what he's said. I'll get him to sign it if it's to be done.'

The lawyer retired to a table on which there were pens and ink. The man in the bed looked up at Reggie with unblinking eyes.

'You're not my--brother.'

'I am.'

'You don't--look--like my brother. He--was only a boy. Come--closer. Lean--down. I can't--see you--that way off.'

Reggie leaned over the bed. The sick man put up his hand, from which I observed that the bank-notes had disappeared--though I had seen nothing of the sleight-of-hand which had spirited them away--and with his fingers softly stroked the young man's face. Reggie remained perfectly quiescent while he did it.

'You're--like--your mother. Thank God--you're not--your father's son.' When he said this I was conscious of a catching in my breath. The thing was true. Though how he knew it--save on one presumption--was beyond me altogether. Reggie bore a striking resemblance to his mother, and none whatever to his father. The man in the bed droned on. 'Your--mother--was a good woman. Your--father--was a beast. Like me. Are you--a beast?'

'I hope not.'

'Most men are. Poor devils!' There was a pause before he spoke again. He still touched Reggie softly with his finger-tips, as if doing so brought him a curious sort of comfort. 'You're like your mother, Reggie?'

'Yes.'

'I wish--I wish----. You know what I wish.'

His hand dropped limply back upon the bed. He lay still, though his eyes continued open. Hancock turned to Foster.

'If you want him to do anything you had better try him now.'

After a moment's more spluttering with the pen, Foster came hurrying forward, with a sheet of paper, pen, ink, and blotting-pad.

'My lord, I have ventured to embody your wishes, as you have just expressed them, on this sheet of paper. I will read you what I have written: "I give and bequeath so much of my estate, real and personal, as I have the power of devising, to my brother, Reginald Sherrington, absolutely." It is informal, but will serve. Will your lordship be pleased to attach his signature?'

'What's that?'

'You understand what I have said?'

'Reggie to have all?'

'Precisely. You will secure the due and proper execution of your wishes by signing this paper.'

'I--hate wills.'

'I implore your lordship not to do your brother the crowning injustice of dying without doing something to protect his interests. He is already suffering much on your account. Sir Gregory, will you assist his lordship to sit up?'

Again Hancock shrugged his shoulders.

'It's a risk,' he whispered.

'We must take it.'

Hancock raised the sick man, using as much gentleness as was possible, and the lawyer placed before him the sheet of paper on the blotting-pad. He also insinuated a pen between the wasted fingers.

'What's this?'

'Your lordship understands what you are about to do? You are about to sign your will.'

'Everything to Reggie?'

'Exactly. You are leaving everything to Lord Reginald; as is set forth on this sheet of paper. Your lordship will please attach your signature here.'

The sick man dug the point of his pen into the paper at the place to which Foster had guided his hand. Then he stopped. He looked up, with on his face a very singular expression; as of wistfulness. We watched; wondering what it was he desired to say. There was evidently something. When it came it was not at all what any of us had supposed.

'I want--to see--a good woman. Isn't there--a good woman--in the world?'

I do not know what we had expected him to say. I, of course, cannot answer for all. But I am tolerably certain that neither of us had imagined him to be struggling to give expression to such a wish as that. We exchanged glances. Did it mean that his wits were wandering?

What immediately ensued seemed to suggest that his wits were, if anything, keener than ours.

CHAPTER IX

DEAD

I am inclined to think that I had not given Mr. Montagu Babbacombe credit for all the cleverness he possessed. I began, indeed, to suspect that to his cleverness--if it was only cleverness--there were no limits. While we stared and wondered, a waiter entered the room with a card on a salver, which he brought to me. It was Edith's card. On it she had pencilled a line:

'I am here with Violet. Can't I see him? I should like to.'

'Let her come! Let her come!'

The instruction--it amounted to that--came from the man in the bed. It seemed that he had not only known that the women were in the house before I had had any intimation of their presence, and that the knowledge had prompted him to make his remark, but it also appeared that he knew what was written on that card. Was the fellow possessed of the occult powers of which we read in fairy-books? While the others eyed me askance, inquiring his meaning, I eyed him.

As a matter of fact I welcomed neither Edith nor Violet. I had far rather they both of them had kept away. The business on hand was one with which I desired that they should have no sort of connection. It was bad enough that I should be entering, with my eyes wide open, into such a sea of falsehood. That they should soil even the hem of their skirts by standing, unwittingly, upon the edge was a notion I did not fancy. They were stainless: above reproach. It was my business to keep them so. It did not matter so much for me.

Yet I did not see how I could prevent them coming if they chose to come, even into that atmosphere of foul fraud and lying; especially if my friend, the dying man, desired their presence. The motive which had brought Edith I could understand. After all, Twickenham had been the playmate of her childish days. And he had wooed and won her dearest friend, who still waited, in full confidence, his coming. But why Violet? The man had not even a pseudo-sentimental attraction for her. I turned to the waiter.

'Tell the ladies I will be with them directly.'

The dying man was not to be balked. He evinced a degree of vigour which was altogether beyond anything he had previously shown.

'Let them come! Let them come!' he repeated.

He stretched out his hand, from which the pen dropped out unused, in such a condition of tremulous agitation that Hancock promptly laid him back upon the pillow.

'Gently! Gently! Don't excite yourself, my lord; be calm! What does he mean?' he asked me. I perforce explained.

'Miss Desmond is below, and wishes to know if she may come up.'

'Let her come!' gasped the invalid.

'Better humour him,' murmured Hancock.

'I will go down and speak to her.'

But when I prepared to go the patient shook his head at me in a frenzy of excitement; struggling all the while for breath in a fashion which it was not agreeable to witness. Hancock strove to soothe him.

'Gently, my lord, gently.'

'He's--he's not--to--go. Let them--let them--come.'

'It appears, Mr. Howarth, that his lordship would like Miss Desmond to come without your going to fetch her. Can you not send a message through the waiter?' He added, *sotto voce*, 'Better do as he wishes; she'll get no harm.'

I had my doubts; but I directed the waiter as Hancock desired. As soon as he was gone Foster returned to the charge.

'Now, if your lordship will be pleased to attach your signature.'

The sick man would have none of him. He merely continued to mumble:

'Let them--come! Let them--come!'

It was clear that the completion of that will would have to be postponed. Foster's chagrin was obvious. To his legal mind form and precedent were everything. What does it matter if we die, so long as our affairs are left in order? To have been so near the attainment of his wishes--for it had looked as if the wily sinner was about to sign--only to be disappointed after all, was a severe trial to his sense of professional propriety. For my part, on that point at least, I was at ease. I was persuaded that Reggie would not find so many thorns in his path as his man of business predicted.

While the sick man mumbled, I regarding him askance, with half an eye on Foster's discomfiture, in came Edith, with Violet at her heels. I had not meant that Violet should come, too, and made a half-step forward to request her to withdraw. But both Reggie and Hancock were in front of me. Reggie made a dash towards Vi, the physician appropriating Edith. Indeed he assumed command of both; his remarks being addressed to the pair. He spoke in a sort of stage aside; his words being perfectly audible to me.

'My dear Miss Desmond! My dear Lady Violet! Our long-lost friend is in a sad way; very, very sad. At any moment the end may come. But he expresses such a desire to see you, and shows so much impatience at the idea of your being kept from him that I thought we might venture. Only be careful not to agitate him.'

'Our long-lost friend' showed impatience then and there.

'What's he--what's he--gabbling about? ---- the man! Let them come!'

Hancock shrugged his shoulders; he dropped his voice.

'You hear?--Such language! But you mustn't mind.' He brought them forward. 'Here, my dear lord, are two ladies who have come to see you--Miss Desmond and Lady Violet Howarth.'

'Edith?' He hit upon her surname; he alone knew how. 'You're an old woman--aren't you?'

That was a civil thing to say,--particularly from a man in his position. I could have shaken him again. Edith only smiled.

'I'm not so young as I was. But you're not an old man, and I'm younger than you.'

'Old?--I am old. Rotten. Done. I feel a thousand. The years lie heavy--on me. I was--never--young.'

The thing was curiously true of Twickenham. He never had been young. Mentally, physically, and morally, he had been born old. As a boy he had all an old man's vices. As Edith perceived what a wreck the creature seemed I saw that tears were in her eyes.

'I am sorry to meet you, after all these years, like this. Poor Leonard!'

She stretched out her hand to touch his brow. I could have snatched it back. He lay perfectly still, staring up at her with fixed, unseeing eyes.

'Why--sorry?'

'I had hoped it would all have seemed so different.'

'It's all right. I've had enough. Glad it's over.'

'Are you in pain?'

'Pains of hell.'

He said this, in his tremulous, croaking tones, with a depth of sincerity which impressed even me. The fellow was a past master of his art, or in possession of unholy powers. Edith's hand visibly trembled.

'Poor Leonard!'

'Soon--over. Who's the girl?'

'This is Violet Howarth--Douglas's sister. Vi, you remember Twickenham? This is Reggie's brother.'

Vi said nothing; possibly because she had nothing to say. She surveyed the object in front of her with looks which were a blend of pity, curiosity, and, unless I err, disgust. She had, perhaps, more than her share of the severity of youth, and I knew what she had thought of the man she supposed herself to be looking at. He spoke to her, with the same request which he had made to Reggie.

'Come--closer; lean--down.'

I believe that Vi rebelled; but when Edith touched her on the shoulder she did as he asked. Whereupon he went through the same performance with which he had favoured Reggie; putting up his hand, and examining her features with his finger-tips.

'You're a pretty girl--but ---- hard.'

It was not surprising that the blood flamed through her skin, although, saving the perhaps unnecessary vigour of the adjective, the thing was true enough. When she likes she can be as hard as nails.

'Why don't you--marry--Reggie?'

'I'm going to, when you're dead.'

I fancy, in her impetuous fashion, that the words were out of her mouth before she was able to stop them. They were out, anyhow; creating a small sensation. It is a common feeling that a deathbed, even of such a character as Twickenham had been, is a place where one ought only to say sentimental and, also, agreeable things; especially young women. One wants to keep the clear, dry light of truth outside. Vi turned white; then red again. Reggie endeavoured to insinuate her hand in his; by way, perhaps, of expressing his sympathy. But she would have none of it. She took her hand away. The sick man's comment showed that his wits moved pretty quickly.

'A nice--wife--you'll make him. He'll be married--and done for--when he's got you.'

Unmistakably a retort quivered on the young lady's tongue. Edith, slipping her arm about her, restrained its utterance.

'It's all right, Vi,' she whispered. Instead, therefore, of that retort, Vi addressed him an inquiry, in even, measured tones.

'Have you quite finished with me?'

'What a girl! Doug--she does you--proud.'

A peculiar sound proceeded from his throat, which was perhaps intended for a chuckle. His hand dropped. Vi stood up. We were silent. A feeling of awkwardness was in the air; a consciousness that Vi had struck an inharmonious note. Hancock relieved the situation--or tried to.

'I think now, my lord, if you were to take a little sleep.'

'Hang--sleep. Shan't I--have enough--sleep soon?'

Foster proffered his suggestion.

'Will your lordship be pleased to attach your signature?'

'Foster!'

'My lord?'

'Give me the will.'

Foster advanced the sheet of paper, on the blotting-pad, and a pen, newly dipped in ink. To the pen the sick man paid no heed.

'The will?'

'Here is the will.'

'Give it--to me.'

The lawyer held out the sheet of paper. The sick man took it, and tore it in half. It was rather a niggling process: he made one or two abortive attempts. But the result was unmistakable. Two crumpled fragments represented the document which Foster had deemed of such importance. Its destroyer made a single remark.

'I--hate--wills.'

The lawyer's face was a study. There was a common feeling that Violet's behaviour had something to do with what had happened. I think that for little he would have told her so, in language of vigour. Perhaps her own conscience assailed her. She whispered to Reggie:

'What's he torn?'

'His will.'

'His will? What was in it?'

'Everything to me.'

'Everything? Reggie, you don't mean that you'll have nothing then?'

'Not so bad as that.--Hush.'

The admonition was only administered in the nick of time. Then came a voice from the bed.

'That girl's ---- tongue! She's a--jade, Reggie!'

'Yes.'

'You'll be a fool--if you marry her. Don't you do it.'

Reggie spoke hotly in reply. 'You don't know what you're talking about.'

'You--you--young devil--speak to me like that? Foster.'

'My lord?' Hancock interposed.

'I beg, my lord, that you will not excite yourself.'

'Excite myself! What in thunder do you mean? I'll do--what I please--with myself.' He was illumined by a sudden burst of really vigorous passion; actually raising himself in bed to give it tongue. He spoke with an amount of fluency which after the recent struggle he had made to utter disconnected words was surprising. 'I'm not dead yet, so don't let any one order me about as if I were--curse you, you bald-headed old fool!' This was to Hancock; the top of whose scalp is smooth. 'I'm not going to have my brother mixed up with a bold-faced judy; he's not going to make a girl of whom I disapprove the Marchioness of Twickenham. I tell you, Foster, that if Reggie marries that jade--if he marries--if he----'

He stopped as if at a loss for a word. Then a shudder passed all over him; his whole frame became perceptibly rigid; he dropped back, still. Hancock turned to us.

'I think if one of you gentlemen were to take the ladies out. I'm afraid this may be serious.'

As we were going, the door opened to admit Dr. Robert White. I welcomed him.

'Dr. White, you are just in time. I don't know if you are known to Sir Gregory Hancock. Your patient has just had a relapse.'

The two doctors bent together in consultation over the bed. Edith touched me on the arm.

'Let us wait,' she whispered.

Presently Hancock spoke to Reggie.

'My lord marquis, it becomes my painful duty to inform you that your brother is dead.'

It was a diplomatic way of announcing the news. Vi, as usual, told the truth with too much candour: 'He was a wicked man; he died as he had lived.'

Hancock shook his head.

'Of the dead, my dear young lady, let no man speak ill.'

I led her from the room, Edith following with Reggie. So soon as I got her outside I started to scold her there and then.

'I need not tell you, Violet, that you have behaved very badly.'

'You should not have let him touch me. I could not bear his fingers against my skin.' She shuddered at the recollection. 'Those dreadful hands! To think of all they've done!'

'You might at least have remembered that the man was on the threshold of the grave. One day you may yourself stand in need of a lenient judgment.'

'I wish I'd never seen him.'

'I wish it also. The mischief you have done is irrevocable. If it hadn't been for you a will would be in existence by the terms of which Reggie would be in indisputable possession of everything.'

'But, surely, the destruction of that piece of paper will make no difference.'

'Won't it? You wait till you hear what Foster has to say.'

'Reggie, is it true that I've done you so much harm?'

'My dear Vi, you've done me no harm at all. Douglas exaggerates. If I had been in your place I should have said and done exactly what you said and did. But, come--hadn't you better go? There's no use your staying now. We'll follow you as soon as we can.'

As we were going down the stairs I heard her whisper in his ear--'My lord marquis!'

What he said I did not catch; but it was something which made her smile.

So they went, and we were left to minister to the dead man.

CHAPTER X

AND BURIED

On one point it was absolutely essential that I should know at once exactly where I stood. I settled it as we were returning up the stairs.

'Reggie, there is one thing I wish to say. I will do everything for Twickenham that remains to be done.'

'You mean as regards the funeral and that kind of thing?'

'I do. If you will leave everything to me I will make all necessary arrangements.'

'Thank you. That's one more service. I wonder for how many things I am really in your debt, besides bread and cheese, and--even kisses.'

'Don't talk nonsense.'

'It's not nonsense. And it'll have to be talked about some day. My turn's coming.'

'We've been in stormy waters; if now we're going to sail over summer seas together, I'll be content.'

'I'll see we do.'

I had not the slightest doubt of it. And I also would see. The time of the harvest was at hand. I was quite ready to take my share of the golden grain.

The doctor was chatting to Foster. Striding up to the bed I looked down on the recumbent figure.

'I suppose, gentlemen, that there's no doubt whatever that he's dead?'

Hancock was unable to conceal his amusement.

'Are you suggesting, Mr. Howarth, that we don't know our business, or that I don't know

mine? That is the late Marquis; the present Marquis is here.' He motioned with one hand towards the bed, with the other towards Reggie. To Reggie he addressed himself. 'I beg, my lord, to offer you my congratulations. I will not disguise from you that I am aware that this is an occasion on which you are entitled to receive them. We all know that your late brother was not all that he ought to be, and that he has been to you the occasion of great, long-continued, and undeserved anxiety. That burden has now been happily removed. I am sure that in the future your noble house will be worthily represented.'

'Thank you. I hope you're right.'

After all, Hancock was a prosy old fool.

'Is there anything else I can do for you, or arrange before I go? Dr. White has kindly promised to see that the late Marquis receives all proper attention.'

'Much obliged; but Mr. Howarth will see to everything.'

'I will see to the funeral.' This was Foster.

'Well, Mr. Howarth has undertaken----'

'Quite right, Reggie, I will see to everything--including the funeral, Mr. Foster. We don't propose to trouble you more than we can help.'

Mr. Foster made a few remarks to Reggie which were also meant for me.

'I trust, my lord, that my attitude towards you in the past will not be misconstrued. As I did what I held to be my duty towards your brother, so I will observe equal fidelity towards you. If it should be happily shown--which I do not doubt it will be--that you are now the Marquis and in possession of the family estates, I will study your interests with the same honesty of purpose with which I studied his.'

'Very good of you, Foster. You shall hear from me in due course.'

Reggie turned on his heel; and the great, and hitherto supreme, Mr. Foster, was snubbed. It was injudicious, perhaps, but we both of us owed him a good deal more than a snubbing.

At last Reggie and I were alone. The first thing he said, directly their backs were turned, showed what was in his mind.

'It would be awkward if what that brute Foster keeps hinting at was true, and Twickenham was married.'

'No fear of that. He wasn't. Twickenham wasn't a marrying man.'

'Let's hope it. A wife and family of his would be a crowning mercy.'

'There's not the slightest fear of anything of the kind. I'm sure of it. It's Foster's cue to make you fidgety. Don't you let him have the satisfaction of thinking that he even retains the power of making himself disagreeable.'

Reggie was observing the silent figure.

'He does look a bad lot, even now.'

'He was.'

'Vi was quite right; he died as he had lived. I believed that if he had had a few minutes longer he would have robbed me of all he could.'

'I shouldn't be surprised; the ruling passion strong in death.'

Presently he departed. I was alone with the man in the bed.

It was a curious sensation. It had all been so much easier than I had ever ventured to hope. So quickly over too. The idea which had been only mooted yesterday was already carried out. And in such triumphant fashion. And we had waited fifteen years! But then during that period I had never lighted on a Mr. Montagu Babbacombe. The man was a consummate actor; altogether beyond anything I had ever seen or heard of. On the stage his fame would fill the world; and then ring down the ages. The arch-impostor had duped them all; with the most ridiculous ease. No wonder; on one or two points he had deceived even me--whose idea the whole thing was. The death certificate would be forthcoming--poor old Hancock's conduct had been fatuous. This was a great physician! If all documents of the kind are granted with equal readiness, how many people are buried alive? The reflection was not an agreeable one. The recognition in each case had been unhesitating. Even that Didymus, Foster, was persuaded at last. There only remained one or two trifling details which required attention, and the stakes were ours.

I was a little at a loss how exactly to proceed. The key had been turned to prevent untoward

interruption, but still the fact remained that voices might be audible without. If we were heard--or even if I was heard, I might be asked whom I was talking to,--which, conceivably, might be awkward. Obviously, it was a case for the extremest caution.

I leant over the bed, and I whispered,

'Babbacombe!'

He did not answer. I had not expected he would. By now I had gained some insight into his methods.

'I only want to tell you that I understand a woman's coming to wash you; "lay you out," I believe, they call it. I suppose you don't object?'

Not a sign; not a sound.

'That's all right; I don't suppose she'll worry you overmuch. By the way, where have you put that money? I don't want to know; only women of that kind are as sharp as needles; and not over scrupulous either. If you like to confide it to my keeping it will be quite safe in my charge, and you can have it whenever you want it, with the other five hundred, as you know very well.'

Nothing to show he heard.

I turned down the bedclothes, thinking that he might have slipped the notes between the sheets. Not he! Nothing in the shape of a bank-note was to be seen. My curiosity being piqued--the depths of this man really were too deep!--I looked for them in every place I could think of, subjecting the whole bed to a minute examination; he evincing not the slightest apparent interest in my proceedings. Not the vestige of a note. Could he have swallowed them? If he had not, I could not conceive what had become of them. They were not upon his body. They could hardly, at his bidding, have vanished into air. Although I was quite prepared to admit that, 'for ways that are dark,' compared to him the Heathen Chinee was an innocent suckling.

'Well, as I can't find it I imagine that the woman won't; so I suppose I make take it that the money's safe. There's only one other topic on which I wish to touch--the funeral. The undertaker's man will come and measure you to-day. The shell, and, I presume, the coffin also, will arrive to-morrow morning. You'll be placed inside, and, in the afternoon, the coffin will be closed. It will be taken down in the evening by a special train to Cressland--where you may, or may not, be aware is the family vault--the interment taking place on Wednesday. As we are none of us particularly proud of you, the interment will be as private as possible. As, I take it, you don't want to be inside the coffin when it's placed in its last resting-place, I'll look in before the undertaker's fellows; you must give up being dead, and, between us, we'll screw down the lid. I'll find an excuse which will satisfy them. I have an idea in this fertile brain of mine.--You clearly understand and agree. Say so if you don't!'

He said nothing, nor signified in any way whatever that he had attained to even a glimmer of comprehension. But I knew him. Taking his immobility to signify acquiescence, I left him asleep upon the bed.

But though I left him he was with me all the time. I could not get him out of my head. I interviewed the landlord, with whom I made arrangements on a very liberal scale to compensate him for the inconvenience the affair was causing him; and all the while that we were talking I saw, with my mental eye, the silent figure on the bed!

Thence I went to Tattenham, the funeral furnisher. The figure was with me there. I wondered what my feelings would be if I knew that I was being measured for my coffin. With what amount of ceremony would the measurer treat me? To be touched for such a purpose by such hands! I feared that under his kind offices I should not lie so still as I trusted Mr. Montagu Babbacombe would do.

At home I found, as I expected, Edith and Reggie confabulating with Violet. As I also expected, Vi began at me at once--though her tone and bearing were alike surprising. She was unwontedly meek.

'Doug'--it was very rarely that she called me 'Doug,' I had rather she had not done so then. I had too recently heard the abbreviation proceeding from other lips--'Doug, I'm sorry I behaved so badly. I know I was a wretch. Edith has made me see that, and it's no use Reggie pretending that I wasn't.'

My manner was brusque. It was a subject about which I wished to hear nothing more.

'That's all right. I wouldn't be too penitent if I were you. There was no harm done.'

'But it prevented him making his will?'

'If it did it did; and what's done can't be undone. Not that I think it matters.'

'Don't you really think it matters? Supposing any of those things happen at which it seems that Mr. Foster hinted; what then?'

'What then? Wait till then. Till then say nothing.'

I do not think she altogether grasped my meaning. Indeed I doubt if I myself clearly understood what it was I wished to say. I told them what arrangements I was making with regard to the funeral, and so on, Reggie showing himself quite of my opinion that everything should be done as quietly as possible. Had the third marquis died, after a well-ordered life, in the odour of sanctity, his corpse might have been interred with all possible honour; as things were, it was advisable that he should be laid in his last resting-place with as little form and ceremony as was compatible with decency.

When I left the room, anxious to be by myself, to think, Edith followed me. For the first time in my life I found her presence irksome. She followed me to the small apartment which I dignified by the name of library, evidently assured of the welcome which hitherto had never failed her.

'At last!' she began, as soon as we were alone together. I busied myself with some papers which were on my writing-table.

'Yes; at last.'

'We have waited for it a good many years; you and I.'

'That is so.'

This was platitudinous. I felt that if she had nothing more original to say I should have to ask her to excuse me if I gave my attention to matters which pressed. Her words, her voice, her very neighbourhood, seemed to have a singular effect upon my nervous system. It was as if I were ashamed. In some curious way, it was as if I were afraid of her. I wanted to take her in my arms; to hold her to me; to find strength in her sweet tenderness; for it was strength I needed. But I was conscious of an awkward inability to do as I had done a hundred times before--ay, a thousand. A shadowy something seemed to have interposed itself between us, as her own quick sight perceived.

'What is the matter with you, Douglas?'

The question took me aback. I looked up at her with a start, experiencing an unwonted difficulty in meeting her inquiring glances.

'The matter? Why?'

'You seem changed.'

'Changed? It's your fancy.'

'It's a very vivid fancy then. I noticed it first the night you dined with us.' On the afternoon of that day I had first seen the sleeping man. Are there any detectives like the eyes of the woman who loves? 'It has grown more perceptible since. Until now it sits upon you in a guise so that you seem transformed.'

'Many things have happened during the last day or two.'

'Yes. Have you told us of them all?'

'Of them all? What do you mean?'

'Douglas, don't you know what I mean?' She came close to me, laying her hand upon my arm. I actually quivered beneath her touch; a fact of which I had an uncomfortable conviction she was conscious. 'I've another fancy--which is also a very vivid one, that there is something behind all this of which you've said nothing. Douglas, can't you tell me?'

'What your fancy is? I'm afraid you ask something which is beyond my capacity; since it probably takes the shape of poetry rather than prose.'

'Douglas--is Twickenham married?'

'Married? My dear Edith, is that the shape your fancy takes? I know no more whether he was married than you do. Although I have a private conviction--to which I intend to adhere till the contrary is proved--that he wasn't.'

My manner plainly showed her that her shot had failed to hit the mark. She let fly another arrow; this time with a better aim.

'Douglas, where did you see him first?'

'Some day I may tell you. I don't propose to now.'

'Was he ill?'

'Not that I'm aware of.'

'It wasn't in a hospital?'

'A hospital! Edith, what is it you are driving at?'

'Nor in any place of the kind?'

'Are you suggesting that I dragged him from a sick bed to die for our benefit? Because, if so, let me assure you that when I first saw him I had no notion that anything ailed him, or that he was any nearer death than I am.'

'Well, Douglas, I won't worry you now, because I know that you are already worried about something, the burden of which I hope that one day you'll share with me.'

So she went, leaving me in a condition of mental unrest to which I had never supposed I could have fallen a prey. I could not shake off that ridiculous feeling that I had for company the silent figure on the bed; the dead man who was not dead. The interview with Edith invested him with a new significance. Already she suspected that there was more in the matter than met the eye. Was I so poor an actor? Had I so wholly failed to profit by the great example which had been set me? If it was Edith now, when would it be Violet and Reggie? If either of them gained the faintest inkling of the actual state of affairs, what would become of my house of cards, and of me? How infinitely worse would my latter state be than my first! I had never, so far as I knew, done a dishonourable thing till then. Now, on a sudden, here I was, tilting against the laws both of God and man. If I had a fall, there would be an end of me.

The next day I was busied about a multitude of things. The story had already got about, thanks, I imagine, to the people at the hotel; as a consequence I was inundated with inquiries, to some of which I was compelled to give personal attention. For instance, Morris Acrodato--grown old, but still relentless--came, assuring me that he had that unfortunate bill of Twickenham's in his pocket, and wanting to know--if he did not take out a warrant to arrest the corpse, if his claim would be favourably considered by the succeeding peer. Over and over again both Reggie and I had begged Foster to pay him what he asked, and so silence him so far as he could be silenced; but with equal persistency he had retorted by requesting us to furnish him with Twickenham's instructions to do as we desired. So after fifteen years Acrodato was still waiting for his money or his man. A portentous sum the amount which he demanded had become. Although I laughed at his notion of arresting a dead man--we are not in Sheridan's days, when a corpse was seizable--I had no hesitation in giving him my personal assurance that all should be done for him which equity called for. He rather pulled a face at my allusion to equity, that being hardly the point of view from which he wished his case to be regarded.

Try as I would, I could not get through the things which had to be done at anything like the rate which I desired, the result being that the afternoon was already well advanced before I was able to make my promised visit to Cortin's Hotel.

I realised, with a sense of shock, that a hearse stood before the door. What had happened? I looked at my watch. It was after six. The train which was to bear the coffin to Cressland was due to start in something like an hour. What an idiot I had been! Better have left everything else undone rather than run the risk of being too late.

Suppose the undertaker's men were already in the room, and Mr. Babbacombe--mistaking the cause of my non-arrival, and setting it down as intentional--had realised that their purpose was to prison him in that narrow box, and shut him off for ever from the light of day, what might not be taking place! I leaped from the cab and rushed up the steps. The landlord met me in the hall.

'The undertaker's men have arrived, sir. They are closing the coffin now.'

'Closing the coffin!'

I waited to hear no more. Never before had I mounted a flight of stairs as I did those then. I was up them in a hop, skip, and jump; not pausing to consider what I was to say or do when I reached the chamber of the supposititious dead, but only anxious to get there.

When I got there it was already too late. I saw it at a glance. Never shall I forget with what sensations!

Four men were in the room, all dressed in black. One had his hat on; the hats of the other three were together on a single chair. An oak coffin stood on a black velvet pall, which doubtless covered trestles. Two men, one at either end, were screwing on the lid. A third was prowling about the room. The fourth--the one with his hat on--was standing, with his hands in his pockets, surveying the proceedings. They all glanced towards me as I entered, unmistakably taken by surprise. The fourth man, withdrawing his hands from his pockets, made haste to remove his hat. The prowler came hurrying towards the others.

'You're--you're not closing the coffin?'

'Yes, sir. By Mr. Tattenham's instructions.'

'But it's not time.'

'Excuse me, sir, but it is. The coffin has to be placed in the van before it's attached to the train; and that means some time before it's due to start. Did you wish, sir, to see him?'

I felt dazed; filled with a whirl of confused thoughts. The voice of the undertaker's man sounded to me like a voice in a dream.

'See him. Is he'--I was about to add 'in there?' Because it seemed incredible that even so consummate an artist as Mr. Montagu Babbacombe could consent to remain quiescent while being consigned to a living tomb. But the question in such a form might have seemed too suggestive; so I substituted, 'Is he all right?'

It seemed that the man somewhat mistook my drift.

'Perfectly, sir. Make a fine photograph, sir. Looks calm and peaceful; as well as he possibly could look. We can easily remove the lid; would you like to see him, sir?'

'See him? No. I--I don't want to see him.'

'In that case, since the lid is closed, we'll be starting, sir, if you don't mind.'

I do not know what I said. Something, I suppose; because shouldering the coffin there and then, they started. They carried it from the room and bore it from my sight. I remained behind, picturing the man inside fighting for freedom. I wondered when the struggle would begin. What was that? I thought I heard a voice calling to me from the stairs without; a voice I seemed to know. I went to the door and listened. Not a sound. Across the hall below passed the four men in black, bearing the living man shut up in the box upon their shoulders.

Was he already tapping at the inner shell? Would they hear him if he were? The shell was presumably a substantial one; the wood of the outer coffin thick. He would be shrouded in his winding-clothes; his movements would be cumbered. He would quite possibly be unable to rap with sufficient force to make them hear him. He might call; or try to. In that stifling atmosphere would he be able to use his voice?

At any rate it seemed plain that nothing took place inside that polished tomb to attract their attention. The bearers passed through the swing doors, out into the street. I waited. No doubt the coffin was being placed inside the hearse. Was Mr. Babbacombe aware of it? Presently one of the undertaker's men returned to fetch the four hats which had been left behind in the room. He went down the stairs with two in either hand. Another interval. Presumably the hearse had started.

What was that noise--like the scratching of fingernails against wood? Whose voice called me? Did it come from the bed? I spun round like a teetotum.

It was merely a delusion. It must have been. The bed was unoccupied. Its emptiness affected me more than anything which had gone before. It exercised on me so singular a fascination that I continued to stare at it as if unable to take my eyes away.

What was that noise--like the scratching of a man's nails against wood? The hearse must have long since got out of the street. If it had a fast pair of horses it was probably already half-way to the station. It could not come from the bed.

When--I do not know how long afterwards--I went down the stairs, feeling as if a century had elapsed since I went up them, the landlord stopped me to express a hope that everything had been done to my satisfaction.

BOOK II.--THE LOST HUSBAND

THE STORY IS CONTINUED BY MRS. JAMES MERRETT

CHAPTER XI

AN ENCOUNTER IN PICCADILLY

I couldn't make it out. Nor could Mr. FitzHoward.

'Well,' said Mr. FitzHoward to me, 'your governor certainly is a caution'--which I was far from denying it--'but this beats anything; it does that.'

And tilting his hat on to the back of his head, he looked at the ceiling, as if in the hope of seeing James up there. But nothing of the kind.

'You say you've heard nothing of him,' he continued. 'You're quite sure? This isn't a little game he's playing off on me, in which you're taking a hand?'

'Mr. FitzHoward, I'm not that sort of person. I've not heard one word; nor half a one. He came home that night after he'd been doing that sleep at the Aquarium--well, he'd been drinking.'

'You'd have been drinking if you'd only just woke up after being asleep for thirty days.'

'No, Mr. FitzHoward, I should not; though I can quite understand what an awful feeling it must be. And how he can go wasting his life like that----'

'You don't call it wasting his life when he earns nearly a hundred pounds in a month?'

'It's the first I've heard of it if he did earn nearly a hundred pounds. He gave me the money to pay the rent, and five pounds to pay the bills, and another five pounds to buy the children and me some clothes--it's a lucky thing I didn't buy them, or I should have been penniless--and that's all the money I ever heard of. That was on the Sunday morning. He had on a suit of clothes which I'd never seen before, and in them he looked a perfect gentleman.'

'He's a gentleman to his finger-tips--when he likes.'

'When he chooses he's anything and everything. His equal I never knew or heard tell of. I'm not a superstitious woman, but it's sometimes my belief that he has dealings with those he didn't ought to.'

'I shouldn't be surprised.'

I could tell from his tone that he was laughing; as I let him see.

'You may laugh, Mr. FitzHoward, and welcome. But I know more about him than you do, and he's done things which make me believe he has traffic with the powers of evil.'

'You'd better tell him so.'

'I have told him so, more than once; and then he's spoken as if he was running a sword right through me. Not cross--that's one of his queer ways--he never is cross; you can't make him cross. But for sarcasm there never was his match. He makes you wish that you'd bitten your tongue off before you spoke. Well, as I was saying, that Sunday morning he came down with a new suit of clothes on, laid the money on the table, said what it was for, and walked right out. I didn't dare to ask him where he was going to.'

'They aren't many wives like you, Mrs. Merrett.'

'And there aren't many wives, Mr. FitzHoward, who've got husbands like mine. However, though I asked no questions I thought that, after being away a month, he'd be home for dinner, especially as I had expressly told him that I'd got as good a dinner for him as man could want. The children and I waited till the dinner was spoilt, but he never came. I cried; I was disappointed. That's nearly a fortnight ago, and from that hour to this I've seen and heard nothing of him.'

'Has he done this kind of thing before?'

'Plenty of times. Sometimes he's been away months at a stretch.'

'And left you penniless?'

'He's never done that. Money's always come along just as I was beginning to want it; with nothing, except his writing on the envelope, to show from whom it came.'

'He's a curiosity.'

'He's more than that. He's a mystery.'

'I don't know if you're aware that he's entered into certain contracts, and that, if he doesn't

keep them, it'll be a serious thing for me.'

'He thinks nothing of breaking contracts; not he.'

'That's pleasant hearing. I hope he'll think something of breaking these.' He stood biting his fingernails; which is a habit I can't abide.

'Do you know anything about a man named Smith?'

'I've known something about a good many Smiths.'

'Yes, but this is a particular Smith. A very tall, well-set man; swell written large all over him; a military swagger; and a big brown moustache just turning grey.'

'I can't say that I recognise him from your description. But there's very few of my husband's friends I do know. Was this Mr. Smith a friend of his?'

'That's what I would like to know. I can give you one piece of information, Mrs. Merrett. When your husband left here that Sunday morning I can tell you where he went.'

'Perhaps you can tell me where he is now.'

'I wish I could. It would be a weight off my mind. He's booked to open at Manchester next week, and I want to see him to make arrangements. That Sunday morning he went to the York Hotel. There he engaged a private sitting-room, in which he had an interview, by appointment, with Mr. John Smith. After Mr. Smith went he had dinner.'

'Did he?'

'He did; and a good one, too--from what I hear. He stayed at the York Hotel all day; he slept there that night.'

'How could he! And I sat up half the night hoping and longing for him to come home.'

'He left very early the next morning, without leaving word where he was going; and where he did go is what I want to know.'

'How do you know all this?'

'It's no secret. I happened to mention, in the hearing of the young lady behind the bar, that I couldn't make out what had become of Babbacombe, and she said that he'd slept there one night. Then the boss told me all there was to tell.'

'Who is this Mr. Smith James had the interview with?'

'That's another thing I want to know; and that's why I asked if you knew. The first time I saw him was on the Thursday--the twenty-eighth day of your husband's sleep. When he caught sight of your governor he turned quite queer.'

'Queer? What do you mean?'

'Why, he went so white and tottery that, for all the big man he is, I thought he was going to faint. If he hadn't seen your husband before, and wasn't precious sorry to see him again, I'm a Dutchman. The next day, Friday, he turned up again. Then he said that if I'd manage to let him speak to your husband he'd give me a five-pound note.'

'Good gracious! He must have been very anxious to speak to him.'

'He was--uncommon. Sure enough on the Saturday night he was there. After your husband had finished his show, I told him that a party named Smith wanted to see him.'

'Did you tell him he had offered to give you a five-pound note?'

'No; I didn't think that was necessary. The governor said, "Show him in." As I showed him in he slipped me the fiver. When I came back, I saw that something had taken place between them which had put your husband in a mood I couldn't understand. He must have made an appointment with this Smith for the next morning--though he said nothing about it to me. As he kept that appointment, and after keeping it disappeared, it looks very much as if Smith knew where he disappeared to, and why: if we could only find him.'

'If you take my advice, Mr. FitzHoward, you won't interfere in my husband's private affairs any more than you can help. He's not the kind of man who takes interference kindly.'

'His private affairs in this case are mine. At his request I have made certain engagements for him. If he doesn't keep them I shall be blamed. I'm a man, Mrs. Merrett, to whom professional reputation is dear. If he doesn't keep them it shall be through no fault of mine. If what you call interference is necessary to induce him to keep them, I'm going in for just as much of it as ever I can.'

'Very well, Mr. FitzHoward. Only don't ask me to help you. I've long since given up interfering with Mr. Merrett's comings and goings, either by word or deed.'

'As I said before, Mrs. Merrett, you're a remarkable wife. You see, I'm only his business manager; so I expect I'm actuated by different motives.'

Shortly after that he took himself away. And I wasn't sorry to see him go. Though, when he went, he left behind him as unhappy a woman as you'd find in England.

James used to tell me I was pretty. He tells me so sometimes now. I wish he'd say it oftener; because it won't be true of me much longer, and my prettiness is all I ever had. I'm not a bit clever. I'm an ignorant, common woman. That's all. My father was a small farmer over Horsham way. James came to lodge with us one summer; for we took lodgers sometimes, when we could get them. He hadn't been in the house a week before he was all the world to me. He was years and years older than I was; nigh as old as father. But that made no difference. There never was another man like him. Not all the other men put together would make his equal. I thought so then, and I think so now.

The strange thing was that he cared for me. He told me so one afternoon. And while I was half beside myself with joy they came and told me father was dead. He had been thatching the big barn, and had slipped off the roof and broken his neck. The day after father was buried, I went over with James to Horsham, and was married at the registrar's by special licence. Father was all the relation I had, and me being alone in the world, with no money, James thought it would be best.

James being as near as possible a stranger, it wasn't till after we were married that I learned anything at all about him; and then only what he chose to tell me. It wasn't long, however, before I began to find out that I'd got a queer one for a husband; but how queer I don't believe I know to this very hour. I'm not one to tell tales of my own man, the father of my children, but I could tell tales which would make some people's hair stand up on end. Some of the things he's done have made me wonder if he's not in league with the devil. Not that I wasn't happy--at least until I saw that to him a woman was just nothing at all. Though he loved me in his way. But his way was such a funny one. For a week together he'd be so nice that I'd begin to think I was in Heaven. Then he'd go out, as I'd think just for a stroll, and I'd never see him again for weeks, and sometimes months. Where he went to, or what he did, he'd never tell me. And, in time, I gave up asking; because the way he treated me when I did ask made me more miserable than ever.

I'm not old now. I've not been married six years, and I wasn't seventeen when I was married. And twenty-three isn't old compared to some. And I've two of the dearest little children. I believe they're a blessing God has given me to make up for what I have to bear from James. Jimmy, he's four and a half, and good as gold; and Pollie, she's three, the prettiest and best child that ever lived. They say that she takes after me; but I'm sure that I don't know. What I should do without them I tremble to think.

And now here was James gone off again! He'd been giving some dreadful performance--though, to my thinking, performance was not the word--at the Royal Aquarium. Actually been to sleep for thirty days on end. It made my blood run cold to think of it. What people could see in such a thing beats me. But there--you never know. Some like all kinds of things. There was once a lady who lived near me who called herself the Boneless Wonder. She was a wonder! She'd twist herself into the most horrid shapes you ever saw. Yet she seemed to like to do it, and people paid to see her. One afternoon when I was having a cup of tea with her, she did such awful things right in front of me upon the kitchen table that I was ill for a week.

There are some women who wish their husbands never would come home. But I'm not that sort. When James has been away, how I've waited and watched for him no one knows, or ever will. And prayed too. And I've taught the children to pray for Daddy to come home. We've all three knelt down together, though they can hardly speak. And when Jimmy says 'Please, God, send Daddy soon,' it goes right through me. I wish He would--to stop. Every footfall I've hoped was his, and at a rap at the door my heart stopped beating. And then when he did come, he'd be as cool and as calm as if he'd never been away. If you ran to him, and made a fuss, he'd say something that would cut you like a knife. But if you kept yourself in as tight as you could, and waited for him to start the fussing, sometimes he'd be that nice that I'd forget all my heavy heart and weary watching, and be as happy as the day was long.

Mr. FitzHoward hadn't got used to him like I had. He hadn't been his 'business manager' for long--though what business James had that he was manager of was beyond me altogether--and the way in which James had taken himself away again seemed to worry him even more than it did me. So far as I could make out, James had bound himself to go to certain towns on certain dates; and if he didn't go Mr. FitzHoward would have to pay. He didn't like the idea of that at all. And I can't say that I blame him. He was in and out sometimes two or three times a day to know if there was news of him. What with his constant worrying, and James keeping away, it was almost more than I could stand. It was only the children kept me up. If I hadn't loved my husband it wouldn't have mattered; but I did. And though I let no one guess it, least of all Mr. FitzHoward, my heart kept crying out for him as if it would break.

One morning, two days after he'd been telling me about that mysterious Mr. Smith, he came

rushing into the house without even so much as knocking. He was so excited that he made me excited too. I went up to him with my hands clenched at my sides, feeling all of a tremble.

'Well, where is he?'

His answer made me go as cold as I'd gone hot.

'I'd give a five-pound note to know; the one presented me by Mr. Smith, with another one on top of it.'

'What's the matter with you then, if you don't know?'

He seemed to think that there was something singular in my appearance.

'I say--Mrs. Merrett--don't hit me!' As if I was going to hit him. Though he deserved shaking for making me think such things. I went back to the roly-poly pudding I was making for the children's dinner. 'I tell you what it is, Mrs. Merrett; I'm beginning to feel uneasy.'

'Who cares what you feel?'

Disappointment had made me angry.

'Not many people, I admit. It's a solemn fact that my feelings are not of national importance; but when you've heard what I've got to say, perhaps you'll begin to feel uneasy; then it'll be my turn to make inquiries. You know that Mr. Smith I told you about?' I nodded. I had heard enough of the mysterious Smith. 'Yesterday afternoon, as I was going along Piccadilly on a 'bus, I saw him on the pavement.

'Alone?'

'He was alone right enough; though, for all I know, a ghost ought to have been walking by his side.'

'Mr. FitzHoward! What do you mean?'

'Aren't I going to tell you, if you'll wait? Even the best of women--and, Mrs. Merrett, you must pardon my saying that you are the best I ever met, and I've met some--are impatient.' I wished he'd stop his nonsense. 'I jumped off the 'bus, went up to Mr. Smith from behind, reached out my hand, and touched him on the shoulder. He gave such a jump that he made me jump too. I never saw a man so startled. He didn't look much happier when he saw me; he knew me right enough. "Good God!" he said. "You!" "Yes," I said. "Mr.--Mr. Smith, might I be permitted to inquire what you've done with Mr. Babbacombe?" I don't know what made me ask the question, at least in that way. It must have been a kind of inspiration. For when I did ask it, it seemed to strike him all of a heap. He gave a lurch so that I thought that he was going to fall; and if the wall of St. James's Church hadn't been handy for him to lean against, he'd have come a cropper. The sight he was took me quite aback. It made me think all sorts of things. I couldn't make it out at all. It was some time before he'd got hold of himself enough to speak; and then it was with a stammer. "What--what do you mean by--by asking me such a question?" "I asked it because I want an answer. What's become of him since you had that interview with him at the York Hotel?" "How do you know I had an interview with him?" "That's tellings. I know one or two things, and I want to know one or two more. Mr. Smith, what have you done with Mr. Babbacombe?" "I know nothing whatever, sir, of the person to whom you refer." He tried to pull himself together, and pass things off with an air. But it wasn't altogether a success. Just as he was making as if to take himself off, a friend came rushing up to him. "Hollo, Howarth!" he cried, "you're the very man I wanted to see." I pricked up my ears at this. "Excuse me, sir," I said. "Is this gentleman's name Howarth?" The friend looked me up and down; like those swells do. "Who's this?" he asked. Mr. Smith--or Mr. Howarth--took his arm. "Some person who wishes to make himself offensive to me." And he was going to walk off. But I got in front of him. "Excuse me, Mr. Smith, or Mr. Howarth, or whatever your name is, but before you go perhaps you'll tell me what you've done with Mr. Babbacombe." He was more himself by now, and looked at me in a way I didn't like; as if I was so much dirt under his feet. "What's he mean?" asked his friend. My gentleman beckoned to a policeman who was standing a little way off. "Officer," he said, "be so good as to prevent this person from annoying me." "Constable," I said in my turn, "I want to know what this gentleman has done with a friend of mine." However, Mr. Smith, or Mr. Howarth, called a cab; and as the bobby had as near as a toucher, planted himself on my toes, I had to let him get into it. "Who's that?" I asked the copper, as he was driving off. "That's the Honourable Douglas Howarth. What do you want with him?" "I want to know what size he takes in boots," I said. That gentleman in blue had given me the needle. There's a Court Guide where I live. When I opened it this morning the first name I saw was Howarth. The Hon. Douglas Howarth is the third son of the late Earl of Barnes, and the uncle of the present Earl. He's a bachelor. He has a sister, Lady Violet, who's unmarried; and he lives in Brook Street, Grosvenor Square. All of which sounds very different to "John Smith."'

'But why should he have called himself Smith? And what was it he was so anxious to say to James?'

'Exactly. That's what you're going to find out.'

'I! Mr. FitzHoward!'

'You--Mrs. Merrett! Who's entitled to know who killed the husband if it isn't his wife?'

'Mr. FitzHoward!'

'So this afternoon you're going to call on the Hon. Douglas Howarth, alias Mr. John Smith, at his residence in Brook Street, to make inquiries.'

CHAPTER XII

MRS. MERRETT IS OVER-PERSUADED

I sat down with the rolling-pin in my hand. He made me feel uneasy. Though what he said was beyond me altogether. And as he stood in front of the grate he kept saying things which made me uneasier still.

'Mrs. Merrett, I'm not a romantic character. I'm without feeling; dead to emotion. It's the consequence of the professional life I've led; the profession first, the rest nowhere. You may beat against this heart for years, and yet not find entrance.' He banged his hand against his side. I should have thought it hurt him. 'I'm a man who only believes what he sees--and only about a quarter of that. Therefore, when I tell you that I am possessed by an overwhelming, a predominating conviction that something has happened to your husband, you will know that my conviction is not a thing to be laughed at.'

'But what can have happened to him?'

'As I was going home yesterday afternoon, I slipped on a piece of orange peel; that means danger. In our street I saw three black cats; that means mourning for a friend. I found myself putting my walking-stick upside down into the stand; that means trouble. When I got upstairs, death stared me in the face out of my sitting-room fire. As I was smoking a pipe, your husband's portrait fell from its place on the wall, and chipped a piece off one of the corners; you know what that means as well as I do. I'll say nothing about the horrid dreams which haunted me all through the night because I'm not a superstitious man, and they may have had something to do with the dressed crab I had for supper. But I will say this, that I woke up this morning profoundly persuaded that there is something wrong. And that persuasion is with me now.'

'But what can be wrong?'

He came and leaned against the edge of the table.

'Mind the flour,' I said.

He waved his hand.

'What does it matter about minding the flour when we've got such facts as those to face? Mrs. Merrett, we have to put two and two together. I unhesitatingly say that the result of our doing that is to point the finger of suspicion towards the man who masqueraded as John Smith.' He rapped his knuckles so hard against the board that a piece of suet which I had left there stuck to them. 'If you don't go to Mr. John Smith, alias the Hon. Douglas Howarth, and ask him, as I asked him, what he's done with Mr. Babbacombe, you'll be neglecting your duty as a wife.'

'Mr. FitzHoward!'

'You will, Mrs. Merrett, you will! If you love your husband----'

'"If!"'

'I say, if you love your husband you will insist on getting from him the answer which he refused to give me. There's a mystery, Mrs. Merrett--a mystery; and that double-named gentleman is at the back of it. My varied experience in all branches of the profession has given me the eyes of a hawk, and yesterday I saw right through him.'

'But, Mr. FitzHoward----'

'But me no buts. If you won't go I will; and I'll try to conceal the fact that I've come because you wouldn't. There are wives like that, but I didn't think that you were one.'

I stood up, and I hit the table with the rolling-pin. I was not going to stand talk like that from him, or from anyone.'

'Mr. FitzHoward, I know my James, and he won't thank you for interfering with his private affairs, nor me either. If you come to mysteries, why, his whole life's a mystery: but he'll be the first to tell you not to trouble yourself about him, but to look after mysteries of your own.'

'What if he's dead?'

'Mr. FitzHoward! how can you say such things? What makes you think it?'

'I don't want to agitate you; I don't want to cause alarm. But I have my intuitions--here.' He tapped his shirt front. 'What surprises me is that you haven't got intuitions, too.'

'What makes you--have them?'

'My trained intelligence. If all's well there'll be no harm done by your running round to Brook Street, and putting that question to the Hon. Douglas Howarth. If he's able to clear himself--which, mind, I hope!--he'll have my congratulations, and you too. No one can blame the anxiety of a loving woman's heart. And I can only say that if I were in your position, knowing what you know, and what I know, I shouldn't be able to lay my head upon my pillow this night, if I was weighed down by the consciousness that I hadn't moved a finger to find out whether my husband was alive or dead. I shouldn't dare to go to sleep.'

Oh, dear, how that man did work upon my feelings! How he did upset me! He almost drove me to hysterics. Goodness knows that often and often I've laid awake all night, wondering if James was dead, and, if so, where he was buried, sopping my pillow with my tears, and making myself quite ill. But I never had been talked to like that man talked to me that afternoon. I was half beside myself through not knowing what I ought to do. I knew very well that I should get into trouble with James if it turned out that he was only carrying on as usual; while if what Mr. FitzHoward kept talking about was true, or anything like it, I should never forgive myself for leaving the least thing undone that I could do.

The end of it was that I was over-persuaded. He got me into such a state that I didn't dare to hold out any longer; and though I was trembling in my shoes to think I had the courage, I decided to go with him to see that Mr. Howarth. I gave the children their dinner--the roly-poly had to be put off to supper-time--I never had a chance to cook it. Mr. FitzHoward went away to have his dinner. I washed and tidied the children--they are pictures when they're tidy!--and took them round to Mrs. Ordish, to stop with her till I came back. She hasn't any of her own, and very glad she was to have them--as who wouldn't be? Then, when Mr. FitzHoward came back I was ready to start.

He would have a hansom cab. Simply, I believe, that he could keep on talking to me, and working of me up. Then, as we were getting near the house, he said:

'You understand? You're to go in, and I'm to wait outside. Then when I think you've had time to put your question, and receive a satisfactory explanation, if you don't appear I'll come in too. If between us we don't make him sit up I'll be surprised. I'll be even with him for setting that copper on me yesterday.'

I really do believe that that was at the bottom of it all; his wanting to be even, as he called it, with the gentleman for calling to the policeman. And at the last moment, if I'd dared, I'd have gone straight back then and there, and never have gone into the house at all. But that was more than I had courage for, having come all that way, with Mr. FitzHoward, and him saying all those things.

So I left him at the corner, and went to the number he'd told me of. It wasn't a large house, quite the other way; I shouldn't have thought that an Earl's son would have lived in such a small one. The door was opened by a gentleman whom I at first took to be Mr. Howarth himself; but then supposed to be a servant--though he wasn't dressed like one, being just in evening clothes. He looked at me so that I wished right straight away that I'd never come.

'Mr. Howarth?' I just managed to get out.

'Mr. Howarth? Not at home. What name?'

I was stammering that it didn't matter, and was going to take myself away, and glad to get the chance of doing it, when a young lady came out of the side room into the passage. She was quite the lady, though dressed as plain as plain could be, with not a scrap of jewellery about her. When she saw me standing on the step, she said to the gentleman who had opened the door:

'Bartlett, who is this?'

'Wants to see Mr. Howarth, my lady.'

She came to the door and looked at me again.

'On what subject do you wish to see Mr. Howarth? I am his sister.'

The servant's calling her 'my lady' had sent me all of a twitter. So that when she spoke to me I felt that silly I could have bitten myself.

'If you please, miss, I want to speak to him.'

I could have scratched myself for calling her miss, she being my lady. But she didn't seem to mind. She had another look at me, and then she said:

'Come in. Perhaps you can tell me on what subject you wish to speak to my brother.' I followed her into the room she had just come out of. There was another lady in it; but, except that somehow I knew that she was older than the other, I didn't take any notice of what she was like. 'Now, is there any message which you can give me and which I can deliver to my brother?'

She looked at me so straight, and with such an odd something in her eyes, that I grew more confused than ever.

'If you please, miss, I mean my lady, I only wanted to ask him what he's done with my husband.'

'You only wanted to ask him what?'

'What he's done with my husband.'

I had to put my handkerchief up to my eyes. But it was as much rage as anything; through my feeling such a fool, and, no doubt, looking one. The young lady glanced at the other. I knew what she was thinking, and small blame to her; I could have boxed Mr. FitzHoward's ears for getting me into such a mess.

'I don't understand you. Who are you? And what has my brother to do with your husband?'

'If you please, miss, I mean my lady, my name's Merrett; but my husband's known as Mr. Montagu Babbacombe. He's the famous Mr. Montagu Babbacombe.'

I've a sort of suspicion that the young lady smiled.

'The famous Mr. Montagu Babbacombe? I am afraid that his fame has not reached me. And what has my brother to do with Mr. Babbacombe?'

'That's what I want to know.'

'Where is your husband?'

'I want to know that too.'

'Do you mean that he's left home?'

'I haven't seen or heard of him since he went out last Sunday week to see your brother.'

'To see my brother? How do you know that he went to see my brother?'

'He had an interview at the York Hotel with your brother, who called himself Mr. John Smith.'

'My brother called himself Mr. John Smith?'

'Yes, my lady; and yesterday when Mr. FitzHoward saw him in Piccadilly----'

'Who's Mr. FitzHoward?'

'My husband's business manager. He went up to him and asked him what he'd been doing with my husband. And he was so struck all of a heap, and went on in such a way, that Mr. FitzHoward felt sure that he'd been doing something he didn't ought to. Then he found out that his name wasn't Smith at all, but Howarth; so he brought me here to ask what he's been doing to my James.'

The young lady, turning to the older one, made a queer movement with her hands.

'I don't understand her in the very faintest atom; do you? Do you think she's--quite right in her mind?'

'Hush!' said the other.

She came to me. And I saw that she wasn't so very old after all. While for loveliness I had never seen anything like her. Compared to her I was like a doll. She was beautifully dressed, and she had a way about her I can't describe. And such a voice it did you good to hear her speak.

'Sit down, my dear,' she said. I sat down, and she sat down beside me. 'Now tell me all about it from the beginning. Where do you live?'

'At 32 Little Olive Street, Vauxhall Bridge Road.'

'And you say that your name is Merrett, and your husband is known as Mr. Montagu Babbacombe. What is he?'

'Anything and everything.'

'That's rather vague.'

'The last thing he did was a thirty days' sleep at the Royal Aquarium.'

'A thirty days' sleep. Now I think I begin to understand. I remember reading something about it in the papers. So that was your husband?'

'That was my James. And that was where Mr. Smith--or Mr. Howarth, as it seems that he is--first saw him.'

'Indeed! And when did he first see him? On what day?'

'Let me see. It was the Thursday before he went away--that was a fortnight last Thursday.'

'A fortnight last Thursday?'

The young lady burst out with something I didn't understand.

'How very odd! That was the day on which he first saw Twickenham.'

The other lady was silent for, I should think, quite a minute. And when she did speak her voice seemed changed.

'Yes; it is odd. At that time your husband was giving an exhibition as--what?'

'As a sleeping man.'

'As a sleeping man? What a strange thing to do! What kind of man is your husband? Is he old?'

'He's older than I am.'

'Older than you are? About forty?'

'About that, I should think.'

'Have you known him all your life?'

'I've been married six years, and I only knew him a week before we were married.'

'Only a week! What a courageous thing to do! Do you know his relatives?'

'I don't think he has any. I never heard him speak of them. The only thing I know about him is that he's a gentleman.'

'What do you understand by a gentleman?'

'I can't explain. But I know a gentleman when I see him, and I'm sure my James is one.'

She seemed to hesitate before she put her next question.

'When he went out that Sunday morning was he well?'

'He was never better.'

'Did he suffer from a weak heart?'

'He's never had an hour's illness during all the time I've known him.'

Somehow I don't think that was just the answer she expected. She kind of drew her breath, as if she was relieved. The young lady interrupted.

'I don't know, Edith, what it is you're driving at, nor do I as yet at all understand how, or why, Mrs. Merrett associates Douglas with her husband.'

'Nor I. But here comes Douglas to answer for himself.'

As she said it the room door opened, and in came a gentleman. He was very tall, and his brown hair, which was curly, was just turning grey; as, likewise, was his big moustache, which turned up at the ends. His good looks were not what I had expected: and his sweet smile reminded me of the lady who had been asking me questions. Somehow he looked worried--

downright ill, indeed; and he had a queer way of starting at nothing, and looking about him, as if he saw and heard something which you didn't, which would soon have got upon my nerves.

'Douglas,' said the young lady, 'here is some one who wishes to ask you a question.'

She spoke as if she was sure he'd find the question an amusing one. But as soon as I set eyes upon him I knew better. Although he smiled at the two ladies as he came in, all the while he was glancing at me in a fidgety sort of way as if he resented my intruding.

'Indeed!' he said. 'And who may this lady be?'

'You had better ask her. She will be able to tell you better than I can. I am so stupid that I'm quite unable to understand.'

When he came in, the lady, who had been asking me questions, had moved a little to one side. I stood up and faced him. Although he was so big and tall, and quite the great gentleman, somehow I was not half so afraid as I had expected to be. I gave him look for look.

'You wish to see me?'

'Yes, sir.'

'In private?'

'That, sir, is for you to say.' The young lady put in a word.

'I don't think, Douglas, that any privacy is necessary. Mrs. Merrett merely wishes to ask you a plain and simple question.'

He repeated my name.

'Merrett? Merrett? Are you Mrs. Merrett?'

'I am, sir. And I'm the wife of Mr. Montagu Babbacombe.'

Just what Mr. FitzHoward had spoken of happened again. He sort of reeled; and a look came on to his face which was shocking. I never saw a man so changed all of a sudden. I thought he was going to have a fit. The two ladies were every bit as much surprised as I was. The younger one went hurrying to him.

'Douglas, what ever is the matter?' He seemed to have a difficulty in speaking, as though his breath was short.

'I--I've not felt very well to-day; that's all.'

'It's the first time you've spoken of it. Shall I send for the doctor?'

'No. It's nothing. It's only a passing touch.' He tried to brace himself up: but though he tried hard he still seemed limp. 'If you will come to my room, Mrs.--what did you say your name was?'

'Merrett, sir.'

'If you will come into my room, Mrs. Merrett, I will speak to you there.'

'Douglas,' said the elder of the ladies, just as he had his hand upon the handle of the door, 'who is Mr. Montagu Babbacombe?'

'Babbacombe?' He tried to meet her eyes: but couldn't. 'Oh, he's a wretched mountebank.'

It fired my blood to hear him speak of my James like that.

'Begging your pardon, sir, but he's nothing of the kind. And if that's the way you're going to speak of my husband I'd rather say what I have to say before the ladies.'

'I dare say you would; but you won't. You will come into my own room, Mrs. Merrett.'

'Excuse me, sir, but I will not. You can tell me just as well here as anywhere what it is you've done with my husband.'

CHAPTER XIII

WHO'S THAT CALLING?

I do believe, if we'd been alone, he would have struck me. As it was, I'm sure he would have liked to. That I should dare to speak to him like that--him so big, and me so small, and him a great gentleman, and me just nothing and nobody--it did put his back up. He glared as if he would have liked to eat me. And yet, all the while, I knew that somewhere inside of him he was afraid of me. It mayn't sound sense, I own; but I know what I mean if I can't just say it.

The elder lady came and put her hand upon his arm.

'Douglas, why do you look at her like that? She's only a child.'

He spoke, as it might be, between his gritted teeth.

'Since Mrs. Merrett won't come to my room, I'm afraid I must ask you two to leave this; to enable me to speak a few plain truths to her in private.'

'She's only anxious for her husband. Why should you be angry with her on that account? She says that you first saw him on the day on which you first saw Twickenham.'

He shot round at her with quite as savage a look as he had given me.

'Who told you that?'

'She was telling us just before you came.'

'It strikes me she's tarred with the same brush as her scoundrelly husband.'

It did make me wild to hear him! It always does when people say things against James. And especially him!

'How dare you stand there and speak of him like that before my face--when, for all I know, his blood's upon your hands!'

I didn't mean it; not at the time I didn't. I just said it because I was in a rage. But if I had meant it ever so much it couldn't have affected him more. He shrank back from me as if I were some dreadful thing; his jaw dropped open; he stared as if his eyes would start out of his head. It was horrid to see. The young lady came stalking up to me. She spoke that cold and haughty as if I was the dirt under her feet; which perhaps she thought I was.

'Aren't you forgetting yourself, my good woman, in using such language? Or are you, as I thought at first, a little mad?' Having given me one, she gave him one too. 'And pray, Douglas, why should you behave in such an extraordinary fashion merely because this person talks as if she were insane?'

He did not reply at once. Instead, he turned his back and walked away from us across the room. When I saw his face again he looked more like he ought to. He stood before the fireplace, and, in his turn, set up to be haughty. But it didn't sit so well on him as it did upon his sister. I should say that it came to her by nature--while he had to practise how to do it.

'I am placed in a difficult position.'

'I don't see it. Why don't you answer her question?'

'Because I have no answer to give her.'

'You mean that you don't know what has become of her husband?'

'Absolutely nothing.'

The young lady turned to me.

'You hear what my brother says.'

'I hear; but you must excuse my saying, miss, I mean my lady, that I don't believe him.'

'Why should you doubt my brother's word?'

'Don't you--after what you've just now seen?'

She bit her lip.

'Impertinent creature!' she said, as she turned away. But I knew she doubted too.

I put a question on my own.

'Mr. Howarth, sir, why did you give Mr. FitzHoward a five-pound note to make you known to my husband under a false name?'

'Pure curiosity. Your husband gave a rather remarkable exhibition. As the person you allude to seemed to think that I ought to have some sort of a name I gave the first which occurred to me. By the way, your husband himself seems to have had what you call a false name.'

'Yes, sir, but that's different; as you know very well. Although he is a gentleman, he's not in the position you are. And what was it you wanted to say to him that Sunday morning at the York Hotel?'

He put his shoulders up, and smiled as if, at least, my question did amuse him.

'All sorts of things, my dear Mrs. Merrett. I'm afraid I'm not able, at this distance of time, to furnish you with a particular catalogue. I found your husband a somewhat interesting person; and as interesting persons are rare we sharpened our wits together on a variety of topics. I did not suppose that I should have to pay so severe a penalty for having found his society amusing. Now that matters appear to stand on a somewhat more agreeable footing, let me ask you a question or two in my turn. Do I understand you to say that your husband has--what shall I call it--disappeared?'

'I have not seen him since that Sunday morning; as you know very well.'

'As I know? Not only do I not know anything of the kind, but I am curious to know on what grounds you credit me with the possession of such knowledge. It is not as though I were the last person who spoke to him. A waiter came into his room as I was going out of it. I understood that he was going to have his dinner. Didn't he have his dinner? The landlord will be able to tell you. Probably you will be able to find a dozen persons who saw and spoke to him after I had gone. So little did I know of your husband, or--you will excuse my saying so--care to know, that I was not aware that his name was Merrett; that he had a wife; or, indeed, that he had any home save the place in which he certainly seemed to me to be entirely at home.'

When he had finished I had my say. Somehow, the more affable he grew, the surer I knew that he was false.

'Mr. Howarth, sir, you can make things seem very plain and simple, and quite all right, now that you've had time to think them over. But how was it that when you were spoken to unexpectedly yesterday you almost tumbled down in the street when you were asked what you had done with my husband?'

'I have many worries of my own, Mrs. Merrett. Mr. FitzHoward took me unawares, as you admit. My thoughts were far away, and, as the result of his sudden intervention, I found that my nerves were more unstrung even than I had supposed. I don't know what is the matter with me lately. My health must have run down. I seem unhinged by the slightest thing.'

'You must be in a very bad state, sir, when you almost tumble down in the street because you're asked a simple question.'

'As you say, I suppose I must be.'

'You must. There's such a thing as a bad conscience, as well as bad health. And I take leave to tell you that I'm quite sure there's more behind your words than you want me to think.'

He laughed--though not so heartily as I dare say he would have wished.

'Mrs. Merrett, you're incorrigible. Is it because you are so young that you're so difficult to convince? My dear Edith,' he turned to the elder lady--somehow I'd felt all along that he was quite as anxious to convince her as me, and that half what he was saying was meant for her address--'I will tell you the whole true tale of the beginning and the end of my connection with the individual who Mrs. Merrett now informs us is her husband. I saw him, for the first time, under very extraordinary circumstances.'

'You saw Twickenham for the first time under very extraordinary circumstances.'

I did not know what she meant, but his face went black again.

'What do you mean?'

'I was merely commenting on the coincidence.'

'Coincidence!' I could see that angry words rose to his lips, but he choked them back again. He managed, with difficulty, to smile. 'My dear Edith, I'm afraid you allow yourself to sympathise so warmly with Mrs. Merrett's misfortune, that you confuse the issues. What has my seeing the one man to do with my seeing the other?'

'I didn't say it had anything.'

'Then why drag it in?'

'Hadn't you better go on with your story?'

She smiled; and there was something about her smile which seemed to sting him as if she had cut him across the face with a whip. I believe he trembled; though whether it was with rage or not I could not say. When he spoke again all his affability had vanished. His voice was dry and hard.

'We will postpone the continuation of my story, as you call it, to a further occasion. Are there any other questions, Mrs. Merrett, which you would like to ask me? Pray ask them. Whether they do or do not impugn my veracity is not of the slightest consequence. I am in the box. Nor does it matter that I have a rather pressing engagement. That I should suffer for your--may I say, erratic husband? Well, at any rate, his erratic proceeding is, I presume, only poetic justice. Though I don't myself see where the justice quite comes in.'

I could be just as proud as him, in my way; and I let him see it. I tried to make myself as stiff as he was; though I don't suppose I came within a mile of it.

'Thank you, Mr. Howarth, sir, but I've got no more questions just now which I want to put to you. You know what you do know, and perhaps one of these days I'll know it. Until then I can only say that I'm sorry to have troubled you.'

With that I opened the door and went out into the passage, none of them moving from where they were, or speaking a word as I went. When I got into the passage there came a pull at the front door bell, and a rat-tat-tat at the knocker.

'That's Mr. FitzHoward,' I said to myself.

As I felt convinced of it I made no bones about opening the front door, which I did do, and sure enough it was he. There he was, standing on the door-step. When he saw it was me that had opened the door he seemed surprised.

'Hello! Is that you?' he said. 'Well, I've come at last.'

'So I perceive--and as I'm just going, we can go together.'

'Has he answered that question?'

I felt a kind of want on me to keep on being haughty. If I hadn't, I believe I should have broken down. So I put my head up in the air, and I replied:

'You'll excuse me, Mr. FitzHoward, if I remark that whether he has or has not is my affair and not yours.'

He looked at me sharply.

'Oh, that's the time of day, is it? Then if that's the case I've half a mind to go in and put the question on my own account. I'll soon size him up.'

'As to that, you are of course quite at liberty to do exactly what you please; only, if that is what you are going to do I'll wish you good-day.'

I went off down the street. He let me go a little way, and then came hurrying after me.

'What's become of Babbacombe?'

'If you don't mind my saying so, Mr. FitzHoward I don't want to talk to you about nothing whatever till I'm in my own home.'

'Then, if that's how you feel, the sooner we get to your own home the better.'

And he called another hansom cab. I did think of the expense, two hansom cabs in one day, but in the state of mind in which I was I didn't feel as if I could get into an omnibus, and sit straight up in it, with the people staring at me all the way. It only wanted a very little to make me behave like a silly. I don't believe I spoke a dozen words the whole way. Mr. FitzHoward kept trying to make me. He was the most persevering man I ever met. But I wouldn't. So, as soon as we got in he said sarcastically:

'Well, we have had a nice little talk! You're about the most talkative woman I've had the pleasure of knowing. You can be silent in one language, at any rate.'

'Mr. FitzHoward, how much do I owe you for that hansom cab?'

'Owe me? Nothing. The cab was mine.'

'You paid going, and I'll pay coming back. You gave the cabman eighteenpence--because I saw you. There's the money. I'll be beholden to no man except my husband.'

I put a shilling and a sixpence on the table. He looked at the coins, and then he looked at me. Then he took them up.

'Oh, all right. I'm willing. Money's always welcome. It doesn't look as if I was going to make much out of your husband, so I don't see why I should lose on you. Besides, I can buy something with it for those two little kids of yours. I don't suppose you can prevent my doing that. Now, Mrs. Merrett, let's understand each other, you and I. What did Mr. John Smith say when you put that question?'

'Nothing.'

'Nothing! You don't mean that! You don't mean that you didn't get an answer out of him after all! Then hang me if I don't go right straight back.'

'I mean that he knows nothing. At least that's what he says.'

'And do you believe him?'

Then I was just the silly I expected. I sat down at the table and cried as if I'd nothing else to do. Presently I felt a hand upon my shoulder. It was Mr. FitzHoward.

'Now then, none of that! Do you hear? Stop it! It's only my nonsense. I exaggerate; it's a professional habit I've got into. It's a kind of second nature; so that people who don't know me think that I mean more than I really do. I believe your husband's as sound and well at this moment as I am.'

'I don't know what to believe.'

'But I do; don't I tell you that he's as sound and well as I am?'

'First you say one thing, and then you say another.'

'That's me; that's my character; you've hit it off exactly; you've got to believe what I say last. That's where I'm truthful; at the end. This is the end; I tell you that there's no more the matter with your husband than there is with me. As for Mr. John Smith, he gave me a touch of the needle yesterday, so I thought I'd let him have a touch of it in his turn; that's the solid fact. As for your husband--if you'll kindly give me your attention when you've finished, Mrs. Merrett--who's the most remarkable man I ever had the pleasure of meeting, the marvel of the age--though I say it to his wife--I have an inner conviction here!'--I could hear him beating his hand against his side--'that he's as sound as a bell, in the enjoyment of perfect health, and that he's simply gone on one of those periodical little jaunts you were telling me of. Now, Mrs. Merrett, where are those kids of yours?'

'They're with Mrs. Ordish--at No. 17.'

'Then I'll go to No. 17, and fetch them from Mrs. Ordish.'

'I should be much obliged to you if you would.'

'I am now going to fetch them. There's only one remark I have to make, and that is that I do hope that you're not going to wring the feelings of those tenderhearted infants by letting them see their mother with a red nose.'

When he went, I hurried upstairs, and I took my hat and jacket off, and washed my face, and made myself stop. Luckily he didn't come back with them directly, so that I had a chance of trying to look decent. And when they did come the children were laden with sweets, and cakes, and toys which he'd been buying them. They came rushing to me with their new belongings, looking that sweet and pretty--the darlings!

'Now, Mrs. Merrett, Miss Merrett and Master Merrett have asked me to come to tea. I don't know if you endorse their invitation, but I appeal to them in your presence. Haven't you asked me to come to tea?'

They burst out both together in a chorus of exclamations.

'Yes! yes! Oh, mother, can't he come to tea?'

So he came to tea. You would never have thought he was the same man, to listen to the jokes he made. He kept them laughing all the time. And sometimes I had to smile. And after tea the games he played with them! I never did meet any one who knew such a number of games. And just the very ones for children.

Of course, I knew what he was doing it for; and when he was going I told him so.

'I thank you very much, Mr. FitzHoward, for being so kind to the children, and to me.'

'Kind!' he said. 'Oh, yes, there's a lot of kindness about a man of my professional experience. Hard as nails that kind of thing makes you; hard as nails. I tell you what it is, Mrs. Merrett;

you've the two cleverest and sweetest and prettiest children I've ever come across, bar none. Not that I wonder at it with such a mother as they've got. I envy you; and I envy them. But there--some people have all the luck.'

What he meant I can't say; some nonsense, I've no doubt. But whatever it was it seemed to do me good. As I put the children to bed I felt more cheerful than I had done all day. Until all at once Jimmy asked me when Daddy was coming home. Before I knew it the tears were in my eyes. It's strange how close they sometimes are; and that, in a manner of speaking, without your suspecting they're within a mile. Especially when you're weak and silly. I caught him in my arms, and said:

'Jimmy, you must ask God to send him soon.'

'But, mother, I'm always asking God to send him soon.'

That finished me. I was that stupid. I dare say I should have cried myself ill if it hadn't been that I found that I was frightening the children. They tried to comfort me; and when they found they couldn't, they started crying too. So then, because I couldn't bear to see them crying, I stopped. And we all knelt down by their bedside, and prayed God send home Daddy soon.

When I had put them into bed--and as soon as they were between the sheets they were asleep, the dears!--down I went upon my knees again and prayed God send me James. When I was a girl and went to Sunday-school, I remember hearing teacher talk about wrestling with God in prayer. I never knew what she meant until that night. If ever a poor, ignorant, helpless woman wrestled with her Maker that He might be merciful, and send back to her her man, I was that woman then. I'd been wicked; I knew that I'd been wicked; but it wasn't for want of trying to be good, and oh! I felt if He'd only send me James I would be good.

Cry! It wore me out. I cried till I thought that there wouldn't be anything left of me. I was so tired. And yet when I got into bed it was ever so long before I could sleep. And as soon as I did I started to dream. Oh, dear, such dreams! They came crowding on me, one after another: I couldn't get away from them. And all at once I thought I heard James call to me. It was as clear as clear could be.

I woke with a start, and sat up in bed and listened. Was it in the house, or was it in the street? I was sure it was his voice. I should know it among ten thousand. It came again through the night.

'Mary! Mary!'

Where was he? What did it mean? Where could it be? It seemed to come from afar off. I got from between the sheets, and stood upon the bed, trembling so that I could hardly stand. It came again.

'Mary! Mary!'

What was I to do? I couldn't think. What did he want? I knew he wanted something, but what? I tried to collect my senses. They were all in a whirl. What did he mean by calling me, like that, in the night, from afar? The dreadful part was that I couldn't move; now that I stood there I couldn't move. What did it mean? What was there wrong?

He called again. And this time there was in his voice such fear, such pleading, and such pain, that my heart seemed to turn to ice inside me.

'Mary! Mary!'

'James! James!' I cried. 'I'm coming to you, James? Where are you? Oh, tell me where you are, that I can come.'

CHAPTER XIV

HELPING TO MAKE THE PUDDING

I was lying outside the bed, and it was broad day. I couldn't think what had happened. Then I remembered the voice. Had I heard it? Had James called to me? Or was it a dream? If so it was

the strangest dream ever heard of. The door opened and the children came running in. So soon as they were old enough James never would let them sleep in the same room with us. So long as he was there I didn't mind; but when he wasn't I wanted them for company. Yet I felt that I couldn't do what he didn't like. But every morning, as soon as they were awake, they'd come rushing in to me. And that was something. But now that the mornings were getting colder I wasn't sure that it was wise: though I hadn't the heart to stop them, for I did love to have them for a few minutes in my arms with me in bed. And they loved to come. Somehow it seemed to make the day have a better beginning.

It was that day all the strange things began to happen. Though I had no notion of anything of the kind as I listened to the children's chatter. We'd finished breakfast some time. I'd washed the things, and tidied up the place. Indeed I'd been round the corner to get the dinner. Liver and bacon we were going to have--the children are so fond of the gravy--and a baked rice pudding. I had just set Jimmy down to table and he was starting to learn his letters. There are some who say he ought to go to school: but I don't hold with children going to school so young, away from their mother, nor, I am thankful to say, does James either. I can give them all the teaching he wants. I've the time and I've the will; and I'm scholar enough for that. The way that boy picks up things is wonderful. He's a deal quicker than me--which perhaps isn't saying much. But he'll read before some of them who go to school--and so I can tell them. He knows his letters quite well, both large and small, and he can make out little words. And before long I'm going to start him writing.

As I was saying, I'd set him down to table with his book, and Pollie--little pet!--was drawing what she calls 'Injuns,' on her slate. It was Jimmy started her doing that; that boy's full of Indians; where he got them from I can't think. And I was getting out my mending, of which there always does seem plenty, when there came a knock at the door. We were in the parlour--for James never will have us in the kitchen more than can be helped. He says if a parlour's not for living in, what's it for?

'Who's that?' I wondered. 'I do hope it's none of the neighbours come gossiping just as Jimmy's starting reading'--for the neighbours round our part will gossip--'and in particular I do hope it isn't that FitzHoward.'

It wasn't either. When I saw who it was you might, as the saying is, have knocked me down with a feather.

It was the lady who'd asked me all the questions at Mr. Howarth's. Dressed that beautiful she was like a picture. The sight of her made me forget my manners. I stared, feeling as if I could hardly believe my eyes.

'You seem surprised,' she said. Surprise wasn't the word! 'I hope I haven't arrived at an inconvenient hour. May I come in?'

'Of course, miss; and welcome.'

She went into the parlour, making it look like a different room. I was ashamed of myself, but I couldn't take my eyes from off her.

'Have you had any news of your husband?'

'No, miss; that I haven't.'

'Are these your children?'

'Yes, miss, they are.'

'But you're quite a child.'

'I'm twenty-three.'

'Twenty-three! You don't look twenty. How is it that you manage to look so young?' She sat down by the table. 'What is your little boy's name?'

'Jimmy.'

'Jimmy? Why do you call him that?'

'His father's name is James.'

'James? Hasn't he another name?'

'I've never heard him speak of it.'

'What pretty children they are--and how beautifully you keep them!'

Her words made me tingle; because, although I say it, there are no children round these parts who are kept like mine. She sat staring at Jimmy; and he didn't seem a bit afraid.

'Come here,' she said. He went, and she put him on her knee. 'He's like his father.'

'That's what I say, miss.'

'He has his father's eyes.'

Which was a fact. Though how she knew it was is more than I could say. Pollie, who always follows Jimmy, had placed herself beside her brother.

'The girl's like you; though she's not so pretty as her mother.'

'Oh, miss, you shouldn't talk like that; especially before the children. Besides, I'm not pretty now. I know I was once, because they used to tell me so. But now I'm old.'

'Old? Oh, yes, you're very old. I wish I was as young, and half as pretty.'

'Oh, miss.' I stammered--through being that eager to say something I knew I didn't ought to--'if you'll excuse me for making so free, you're the most beautiful lady I ever saw.'

She laughed right out.

'Then you've never seen a looking-glass, because I assure you I was never half so pretty as you are at this minute. It seems odd for two women to be paying each other compliments, but yours is the kind of face which is seen only once in a generation. Tell me--how did you meet your husband?'

I told her the whole story. She listened, as it seemed to me, with wonder.

'How strange! And you married him, knowing nothing about him except what he told you.'

'He told me nothing.'

'But you must have known something of his previous history--what he'd been, and what he'd done.'

'I never thought to ask.'

'But he's told you since.'

'He hasn't; not a word. He never talks of himself at all.'

'But, my child, you must know something of him at this time of day. Where are his parents--his relations?'

'I don't think he has any. I've never met them, and he's never spoken of them to me. I've heard him say that his mother died before his father, and that his father and he didn't get on.'

'They did not.' I wondered how she knew. 'By the way, what is your Christian name?'

'Mary, miss.'

'Mary? A good old-fashioned name. I love it. You look sweet and pure enough even to be a Mary.' I wished she wouldn't talk like that; she made me tingle. 'I am Edith Desmond. Have you ever heard the name?'

'Not that I remember, miss; and I don't think I should have forgotten if I had.'

'I am going to ask you a strange question; especially coming from a stranger. But I want you to tell me; do you love your husband?'

'Love him!' I felt a catching of my breath. The idea of her asking if I loved him! 'There's nothing I wouldn't do for love of him. He's my man.'

'Your man? That's another good old-fashioned word. Your man!' She seemed to hesitate before she spoke again. 'Have you--have you your husband's photograph?'

'Heaps, miss. He's always having them taken. I think it's something to do with his profession.'

I went to the drawer, and took out a pile. The first she looked at she gave a start. She put her lips together, and a hard look came on her face. She looked older, and not so beautiful as she sat staring at my James's portrait, as if she was looking at a ghost. It was quite a minute before she spoke; and then it was to herself rather than to me.

'It's he. I wonder what it all means.'

The way she'd changed made me half-afraid of her; but I plucked up courage to put a question which was slipping, as it were, off the tip of my tongue.

'Begging your pardon, miss, but--do you know my James?'

'Once I knew him very well. He was--he was a friend of my family.'

My heart gave a jump against my ribs.

'Then he was a gentleman? I always knew he was a gentleman! That makes it all the more wonderful that he should ever have married me.'

Her lips twisted themselves up in a way I didn't like.

'There was nothing wonderful in that. You might have married any one you liked, if you had known how to play your cards, my dear.' She kept looking at the likenesses, one after the other. 'He makes a good photograph; he comes out well in all of them. And in appearance, he doesn't seem to have materially changed.'

'He hasn't changed one bit since the day that first I saw him.'

When she'd seen all the likenesses she began to tap against the table with the edge of one, as if she was turning something over in her mind.

'Mary?'

'Yes, miss.'

'Don't call me miss. Call me--well, there'll be time enough for that.' She smiled--though what at I could not say. 'What should you do if you met with a sudden change of fortune?'

'I shouldn't mind being poorer, with James.'

'I don't mean in that direction, but in the other. What should you say at being richer?'

'Thank you, miss.'

She laughed.

'Is that all?'

'Of course, I should say more than that. But I couldn't tell you what I should say till it happens. It depends. And I'm afraid I'm not much good at saying anyhow. Of course, the money would be welcome.'

'For what?'

'All sorts of things. Everything seems to cost more as time goes on. As the children grow up they cost more. Then I want to send them to a proper school--and not to a Board School, where you pay nothing. I want them to be educated like gentlefolk's children--so that they may grow up to be like their father, and not like me.'

'They may grow up to be ashamed of their mother.'

'Never. I love them too much ever to be afraid of that.'

'You're a lucky woman.'

'I know I'm lucky.'

'Which makes your luck still greater. Do you know that since I've been in this room it's grown upon me more and more that you're one of those persons on whom the gods shower fortune.'

'I'm glad to hear it, miss--though I don't know what you mean.'

'You queer child! With how much more money could you do?'

'Well, I can hardly say. You see, James is very generous. He gives me a good three pounds a week, and often more.'

'Three pounds a week! What would you say to three pounds a day?'

'Three pounds a day!' I stared. 'Of course, I know that there are people who have that amount of money, but I don't know what use it would be to me--unless it was for James.'

'I see. Always James?'

'Yes, miss, always James.'

She eyed me sharply, as if she wasn't sure what it was I meant. Though I don't know what I'd said that wasn't plain. All this time she'd had the children on her knee. Now she put them down and began to walk about the room. I thought how tall she was; almost a head above me. I've always wished I wasn't so little. I wished it more than ever when I saw how beautiful she was. The idea of her comparing herself with me was too ridiculous.

After a time she began to talk again; still moving about.

'Mary, I want to ask you something else, and think before you answer.--Did I understand you to say yesterday that your husband enjoys good health?'

'Always, miss. He's never had an hour's illness since I've known him.'

'You're sure of it?'

'Quite sure, miss.'

'He hasn't, for instance, to your knowledge, a weak heart?'

'A weak heart? He's nothing of the kind. He's strong as strong can be. I'm sure of it.'

'Does he look well?'

'The picture of health.'

'On that Sunday morning, when you last saw him, was he looking well when he went out?'

'Perfectly well.'

'And he was well?'

'As well as well could be.'

'And you say he wasn't liable to sudden attacks of illness?'

'Nothing of the kind. Who's been telling you stories about my James?'

'Then the only thing I can say is that I don't understand it in the least.'

She seemed to be speaking to herself rather than to me; and it's not for me to pretend that I know what she meant. The only thing I know is that what I said was clear enough. She went back to the table and began looking through James's photographs again, examining them that closely you'd have thought they were puzzles.

'It's impossible that there can be any mistake; impossible. And yet, how can he have gone out in perfect health upon the Sunday, and--It's beyond my comprehension. There's a knot somewhere which wants unpicking. Do you know I'm inclined to think that you know even less about your husband than you suppose.'

'I know all I want to know.'

'I mean with reference to his health. I fancy that he had not such good health as you seem to imagine.'

'You must excuse me saying, miss, that I can't help what you fancy. May I ask what you know about my husband?'

'I?'

'Yes, miss--you!'

She looked at me as if my question had startled her. Then she laughed; it seemed to me not quite a natural laugh; as if she wanted to appear at her ease when she wasn't.

'Mary, I'll be frank with you. I came this morning because I wanted to find out how much I really do know about him.'

'I don't understand.'

'If I knew him----'

'If? You said just now you did.'

'The only thing which makes me doubt is what you say about his health. The person I knew was an invalid; so great an invalid that his life was despaired of.'

'That's not my James. How long ago is it since you knew him?'

'How long? Oh'--she was tapping the table again with the corner of one of his photographs--'fifteen years.'

'Fifteen years? Why, that's before I knew him--I was only in short frocks. I've come into his life since that. He may have been ill then, and all you say. If he was, then marrying me has done him good. You'd never have thought it if you'd known him as I have these six years. Do those children look as though they had a sick father? No!--they're like him--strong as strong. I tell you, my James is as sound and healthy a man as there is in England; and if you ever see him you won't need for him to tell you so himself to know it.'

She looked at me, I couldn't help thinking, a little queerly, half laughing, half solemn.

'Mary, any one would think I'd been traducing your husband's character in suggesting that he might be an invalid.'

'Well, I don't like to hear any one keep saying he's weak when I know he's not.'

'Then he's not. He's as strong as a cart-horse--or two, if you prefer it--and always shall be; and there's an end.' She changed her tone all of a sudden and became quite brisk. 'My dear child, I'm afraid that by this unconsciously long visit of mine I'm hindering you in your household duties. Is there anything that you might be wanting to do?'

'Well, I did want to put the rice in soak; I'm going to make a pudding.'

'A pudding? Then the rice shall be put in soak. Come along, little lady; and you, young man.' She caught up Pollie, and took Jimmy by the hand. 'Let's go and see mother put that rice in soak.'

I hardly knew what to make of it. I didn't want to have a real lady in my little kitchen watching me make a small rice pudding. But she never gave me a chance to say so, she carried things off with such an air. She marched out of the room in front of me, Pollie in her arms, and Jimmy holding her hand. And, of course, like the little goose he was, he must lead her straight to where I didn't want him. So that there she was in the kitchen almost before I knew it. As I have said, I didn't know what to make of her at all--she did carry on in such a fashion, talking about all sorts of things at once; pretending to be interested in the pudding; playing such pranks with the children--they were in raptures. And she dressed that beautiful--a queen in her robes couldn't have looked better. Altogether she reminded me of Mr. FitzHoward the night before; playing, as it were, the fool, to hide what she was thinking of. Though what that was--or what she was doing in my house at all--was beyond me altogether.

Just as she was at the height of her capers there came a knocking at the front door.

'There!' she cried. 'Now, mother, go and open the door, and I'll be nurse to the children. So, Mistress Mary, off you go.'

And off I did go, feeling pretty muddled at being ordered about in my own house like that, and hoping to goodness that those two wouldn't spoil all her lovely things before she'd done with them.

You can imagine my feelings--or, rather, nobody ever could, because they were beyond my own imagining--when, on opening the door, I saw, standing on the step, the Honourable Douglas Howarth. It isn't often I'd had visits from the gentry, but now they'd once started it seemed as if they were going to keep on. There was Miss Desmond, as she said her name was, helping me make a rice pudding--as if she herself had ever seen one made in all her life before!--and carrying on with my two youngsters in the kitchen, just as much at her ease, for all I could see, as if children and kitchens were what she always had been used to; and now, if I could believe my eyes, was an Earl's son, come, as it seemed, to keep her company. I hoped that he wouldn't want to lend a hand at the pudding too.

CHAPTER XV

THE NEW PEER: AND HIS MOTHER

One thing I saw at once; that he wasn't anything like so much at his ease as the lady was. Perhaps he wasn't much used to dropping down promiscuous-like on folks like me. I felt fuddled enough, I will admit; and was beginning to wonder if I was standing on my head or heels. But then I'm not used to high society; and it doesn't take much to upset a silly thing like me. He seemed even more fuddled than I was--I was conscious of so much, at any rate--and stood there, staring, on the doorstep as if his tongue was tied. And what there was about me to tie his tongue, or anybody else's, was what I couldn't think. Only his behaving like that made me worse; so that the only thing I could do was to keep on rubbing my hands together as if I was half-witted.

At last he did manage to say something.

'Can I speak to you, Mrs. Merrett, in private?'

It reminded me of what he had wanted to do the day before. But this time I didn't know how to refuse. I don't believe that I had sense enough.

'If you'll walk in, sir.'

He did walk in. Now as soon as you step into my passage, there's the parlour door upon the left. And as it was standing open, without waiting to be invited he walked right in. I meant to tell him about Miss Desmond being in the kitchen; but I felt that stupid that I didn't know how to say it. He upset me much more than he had done the day before.

To begin with, I couldn't imagine what he was at. He was all of a fidget. And he being so big, and all the gentleman, it did seem so ridiculous. First he put his hat upon the table, with his umbrella alongside of it. Then he took up his hat, and began to brush it with his sleeve. Then he took up his umbrella, and sticking the point into my carpet, leaned upon the handle. Then he appeared to make up his mind that perhaps, after all, they might both of them be safe, so back again he laid them. Then he started rubbing his gloves together, and putting his hands in front of him and behind. Then he got as far as a remark.

'May I ask you, Mrs. Merrett, to sit down for a few minutes?'

'If you don't mind, sir, I'd rather stand.'

My answer seemed at once to disconcert him and to make him pull himself together. He went and leaned against the mantelshelf; as I've noticed men, whether they're gentlemen or not, seem fond of doing. It's like a looking-glass to some women. I'm sure Mr. FitzHoward is standing in front of a fireplace most of the time there's one about for him to stand in front of. Directly Mr. Howarth felt that mantelpiece in the small of his back, he began to seem more at his ease.

'I was sorry to hear yesterday that you have had no news of your husband lately.'

'Were you indeed, sir?'

'I cannot imagine what possible grounds you have for associating me with his absence.'

'Whether that is true or not, sir, you know better than I do.'

'I understand that these absences of his are by no means infrequent.'

'That is so. Sometimes he has been away from me for months together.'

'Then why, in this particular case, should you suggest that I have been inciting him to desert his wife and home?'

'I suggest nothing, sir. It is you who are suggesting.'

'I may as well tell you that during my very brief acquaintance with your husband, I was very much struck by what I saw of him.'

'I hope, sir, that he was equally struck by you.'

'Well, we'll hope so. Indeed, without self-conceit, I think I may safely say that I believe he was.'

There was something in his tone which struck me.

'I don't know what you mean, sir, but I see you do mean something. I hope it's something to your credit.'

He moved, leaning his elbow on the mantelpiece, so that his face was half-turned away from me. He was so tall that he had to stoop to get his elbow in its place, though the shelf is pretty high.

'So the real name of the man I knew as Montagu Babbacombe is Merrett.'

'Yes, sir; James Merrett.'

'James Merrett. That is his real name?'

'So far as I know.'

'At any rate it is the name under which you married him.'

'It is.'

'Where were you married, Mrs. Merrett?'

'What has that to do with you, sir?'

He smiled, though not what I should call merrily.

'True. What has it? I was only thinking that, if he had one pseudonym he may quite possibly have had another, and that his name might not be Merrett after all: in which case, as his wife, you might find yourself in a peculiar position.'

'I don't see how. I married him in good faith, and whether his name is Brown or Robinson, I'm his wife.'

'I should advise you not to be too certain. The law has its own way of looking at such matters.'

'I'm not afraid of the law. When I require its protection, Mr. Howarth, I shall have it. Why have you come to put such thoughts into my head?'

'I was thinking of you last night after you had gone, and I could not but feel interested in your case, both on account of your youth and your beauty.'

My fingers began to tingle that he should talk to me like that.

'If that's all you have to say, Mr. Howarth, you must excuse my saying that I was just making a pudding when you came.'

'And an excellent pudding, too, I am sure. By the way, Mrs. Merrett, have you any children?'

'I have two.'

Just then there came screams of laughter from the other side of the wall. He held up his hands.

'Ah? There they are! I thought I heard childish voices. Both girls?'

'A boy and a girl.'

What he was driving at I could not think. Somehow I felt pretty sure that the idea of my having children was one he didn't like at all; though what it had to do with him was beyond me altogether, and like his impudence. The queer thing was that, in spite of the fuss she made of them, I'd had the same feeling about Miss Desmond. I was beginning to wonder what connection there was between them; and how it came about that they were both in my house at the same time. That they were there to find out something, I could see; I could also see that they already knew more about me than I did about them. The interest which this fine lady and gentleman took in my belongings was clean out of the common. It was a good deal more than mere curiosity. And as for supposing that it was just sympathy with a stranger, I wasn't so simple as to do that. That Mr. FitzHoward was right, and that Mr. Howarth was mixed up in some way with my James, was getting clearer and clearer; but exactly in what way I had yet to discover.

He had got back to his fidgeting again. I could see that there was something which he very much wanted to say, but which he didn't find it easy to put quite in the shape he wanted. When he did start to get it out, and I began to have some idea of what it was he meant, I was almost too taken aback for words.

'As I have already remarked, I took the greatest possible interest in Mr. Merrett--or, as he was known to me, Mr. Montagu Babbacombe.'

'I heard you say it.'

'And while not accepting even the slightest shadow of a shade of responsibility for his--er--no doubt temporary absence from his family, I should like, at the same time, to assure you that my interest is of a thoroughly practical kind.'

He stopped, as if expecting me to say something. I didn't know what he meant; and said so.

'If you'll explain, Mr. Howarth, I dare say I shall understand what you're talking about.'

'It's quite simple, Mrs. Merrett; perfectly simple.'

I didn't think so. If I'd been asked I should have said that there wasn't anything simple about him. He wasn't that kind. He went on in that smooth, easy voice of his, every tone of which rang false to me.

'Be frank with me, Mrs. Merrett. Believe me, you will find in me a friend.' I didn't believe anything of the kind. 'Financially, has Mr. Merrett left you in any way awkwardly placed?'

'Do you mean, am I short of money?'

'Exactly. Plain language is always the best; isn't it, Mrs. Merrett? Are you short of money?'

'And what business have you to ask me such a question, any more than I have to ask you?'

'I ask merely because I should propose, if such were the case, to supply any deficiency. It would give me genuine pleasure.'

'What would give you genuine pleasure?'

Holding out his hands in front of him he began to wave them up and down--as if he wanted to persuade me how simple he really was. But it wouldn't do. Especially as what he started saying nearly took my breath away.

'It's in this way. From what you've said of your husband's previous proceedings--we won't call them eccentricities, you might object.'

'I should object.'

He smiled.

'I thought so. Well, from what you've said, it appears to be quite within the range of possibility that his absence may continue several weeks; even months. Under those circumstances one can easily understand how, as you yourself put it, you may become short of money. One moment!' He saw how words were trembling on the tip of my tongue, which it was all I could do to keep from tumbling off it. 'If that is, or should become, the case, I shall be very happy, while his absence continues, to make you an allowance.'

'To make me an allowance?' I stared. 'What allowance?'

'Well, shall we say, five pounds a week?'

'Five pounds a week?' I gasped. 'You'll allow me five pounds a week?'

'As I observed, to do so would give me genuine pleasure. I wish you to understand, Mrs. Merrett, that in me you have a sincere friend.' I believed it every moment less and less. 'Indeed, not only should I be willing to make you such an allowance, but I should be happy to see that your children are properly educated; particularly your boy.'

'You'll educate Jimmy?'

'Is that his name? I will see that he is educated. And, also, if you like, your little girl.'

For a moment or two I struggled against a rush of words. There were so many things which seemed to want saying all at once.

'Mr. Howarth, what has my James to do with you?'

'To do with me? I don't understand.'

'Oh yes, you do. What is there between my James and you?'

'Nothing; absolutely nothing. We have gone into that before; is it necessary to do so again?'

'Listen to me, Mr. Howarth. You take my advice, be careful what you say. Here's my husband's portrait. You look at it; and when you've looked at it you tell me what there is between you two.'

I handed him one of the heap off the table, which I had got out for Miss Desmond to see. He took it with a frown.

'So he was photographed? I shouldn't have thought he was that kind of man.'

'Then you're wrong. Because he was always being photographed.'

'It's not unlike him.'

'It's his very image. As you know very well.'

He had got to the table and was taking up the likenesses one by one.

'There are a great many here. Do I understand you to say that there are others in existence?'

'Plenty.'

'Where are they?'

'That's my business. Answer my question if you please. Did you never see my James--the man whose likeness that is--before you saw him that Thursday afternoon at the Aquarium?'

He looked me straight in the face and spoke as bold as brass.

'Never. To the best of my knowledge and belief, never.'

'That you swear?'

'I say it, Mrs. Merrett, on my honour, as a gentleman.'

'Then there's lying somewhere. Then do you mean to say that you come to me--a stranger, and

the wife of a stranger--and offer to make me an allowance of five pounds a week, and to educate my children? Why, Mr. Howarth, why?'

'From quixotic motives, if you like to put it so. I say--which is the simple truth, Mrs. Merrett, although it seems so strange to you,--because of the interest with which your husband inspired me, even after our very brief acquaintance.'

'He called to me last night.'

'He? Who?'

'My James.'

'He called to you? What do you mean?

Returning to the fireplace, Mr. Howarth stood so that I couldn't see his face.

'Out of a box.'

He turned sharply round.

'Out of a box?'

'Out of a box into which you put him.

'Into which I put him? Woman! Are you mad?'

Whether I was mad or not I could see that he was more upset than he cared to own.

'Didn't you put him in a box? and leave him there?'

His face changed as it had done when I put the question to him the day before. He quite frightened me. He seemed to have been seized with a sort of paralysis. I half-expected to see him tumble all of a heap; I dare say he would have done, if it hadn't been for a voice which, coming from the door, startled me almost as much as it did him.

'Don't you think you'd better own it, Douglas? Hasn't the farce been carried far enough? Haven't we soiled our hands enough already?'

It was Miss Desmond. If I'd only thought, it was exactly what I might have looked for. She'd get tired of playing with the children; wonder what had become of me; leave the kitchen to find out; and discover him there. That it was a discovery there was very soon no doubt. That it was one of which he'd never dreamt there was just as little. If I'd ever had any suspicion that either knew of the other's visit, or that their presence in my house together was arranged, it was all blown away as I saw his look when he heard her voice.

My question seemed to have knocked the stuffing right out of him, as I have heard them say; hers made him jump straight up in the air. I never saw a man give such a jump. It was like a jack-in-the-box. And when he did come down he stared as if the jump had woke him out of a dream.

'Edith!'

'Yes, it is I. Odd that we should both have taken into our heads to pay Mrs. Merrett a morning call; isn't it, Douglas?'

'What--what are you doing here?'

'That is precisely the inquiry I was about to put to you. Because it would really seem as if your reiterated assurance to me last night that you took no personal interest whatever in Mrs. Merrett was--What shall we call it, Douglas?'

'I don't know what bee you've got in your bonnet lately. I believe you're going mad.'

'I think I just now heard you accuse Mrs. Merrett of going mad. It does seem strange that we should all of us be going mad together, and that you should be the only one to continue sane.' He turned his back on us. I saw that for some cause he was afraid of her; that she knew it; and that the knowledge stung her to the heart. 'Douglas, don't you think we'd better prick the bubble?'

'What do you mean?'

'Shall I tell you what I mean?'

'I have no desire to know. Your meaning, lately, is a puzzle to which I have no clue; nor wish for any. I have no taste for the twists and turns of a disordered brain.'

'Douglas! You didn't use to speak to me like that--before.'

'You mean before you developed your new fancy for prying into matters which are no concern of yours; and, in consequence, discovering mountains where there are not even molehills.'

'I have heard it stated that, when it comes to the sticking-point, a woman has more courage than a man; but I never dreamed, Douglas, to learn that it was true of you.'

'Fools, my dear Edith, step in where angels fear to tread.'

It appeared to dawn on her more quickly than it did on him that they were beginning to talk to each other in a way which wasn't exactly dignified in the presence of a stranger. Her voice and manner both changed as she came farther into the room, holding Jimmy with one hand, and Pollie with the other.

'Come, Douglas, let's play the game. You've often said it to me; now it seems as if it were my turn to say it to you.'

'You see, Edith, it depends on what is your idea of what you call the game. Unfortunately it sometimes happens that the feminine idea is a peculiar one.'

'My idea, on the present occasion, is to be frank, honest, and above-board; to use another phrase of yours, to face the music.'

'I'm afraid the music you want to face comes from a very funny sort of band.'

'Douglas, let's stop chopping phrases, you and I. Let me introduce you to some one instead.'

'Introduce me? What do you mean?'

'Let me introduce you to the Marquis of Twickenham.'

He had turned. Now he stared. I stared too. What she meant I did not understand, if he did.

'Edith! are you stark, staring mad?'

'Douglas, haven't you heard that it's a symptom of insanity to hurl at others reckless accusations of insanity. I can say to you, with Paul, I am not mad. But I am beginning to wonder if, somewhere deep down in your heart, you are not inclined to credit me with being something worse. For the second time let me ask your permission to make you known to the Marquis of Twickenham.'

She held Jimmy a little forward. What she meant I still had not the faintest notion. But it was plain that Mr. Howarth had. I could see that he shook; but whether it was passion or not was more than I could say.

'Edith, you are--you are making a serious mistake. Be careful; before you do mischief which you may be never able to undo.'

She looked at him for a second, as if she didn't catch what he meant. Then she took up one of James's likenesses.

'Isn't that Leonard?'

'No; it is not.'

'Douglas!--are you seriously saying that to me?'

'I tell you it is not. You are under a complete misapprehension. I am not able, nor, at this moment, am I willing, to tell you what the facts of the case actually are, but I do assure you of this--and I beg you to be so good as to remember that I have never told you a falsehood in my life--that the original of that photograph is not the person you suppose; and that any conclusions you may deduce from the supposition that he is are erroneous.'

'Douglas, in reply, shall I tell you what I think? Not all; for that would be to entirely destroy the whole fabric on which my life has been reared; but in part.'

'Edith, I entreat you to be warned in time; before the mischief's done beyond repair. Whatever you have to say to me say when we're alone.'

'You've not allowed me to say anything even when we've been alone; you've always wished to put a lock upon my lips. And think what you have said to me! No; it will not do. By some process of reasoning which is beyond my comprehension you appear to have made a compromise with your own conscience which will be productive of more evil than that of which you are afraid.'

'Afraid!--I am afraid of nothing.'

'Of nothing? And yet you're afraid that I should speak; and do not dare to speak yourself.'

I simply fear your rashness.'

Then, indeed, my dear Douglas, you are afraid of nothing; for I'm not of that constitution from which rashness springs. The truth is, you exaggerate. Your life has been so dominated by a single hope that, now a new factor appears, you over-estimate the consequences which may accrue. I

have always held it better policy to look the truth straight in the face; and, until now, I have imagined that you thought with me.'

'And you've been right. In this case I tell you again and again, that what you take to be the truth is not the truth.'

'Douglas, all our lives we have known each other, but until now I have not known you to be this man.'

What she meant I couldn't say; whatever it was, it made him turn away from her.

'Edith! You're--you're doing me a great injustice.'

Her voice faltered when she spoke again.

'Is this--is this to be parting of the ways? Won't you speak, and so save me from shaming you?'

'You'll shame yourself if you will not be advised by me.'

'Then I'll be shamed. For I'm of opinion that to be a party to the concealment of what I deem to be the truth, now that I know it, would be to make my shame much more.' She lifted Jimmy in her arms. 'My little man, it's my sad duty to have to inform you that you're the Most Honourable the Marquis of Twickenham. My Lord Marquis, I salute you.'

She kissed him. It was plain that Jimmy had no more notion why she did it, or what was the meaning of her hotch-potch of words, than I had. He wasn't very far from crying.

I had been listening to their going at it hammer and tongs, in a genteel sort of way, with, strong on me, a growing feeling that the world was turning topsy-turvy. When she said that to my boy I at last had a chance of getting a word in edgeways.

'If you please, miss, what was that you said to Jimmy?'

For answer she set down Jimmy and picked up his father's likeness.

'You say that this was your husband?'

'Yes, miss; he was; and is.'

'Then, my dear, in that case you're the Marchioness of Twickenham.'

'Miss! What--what's that you say?'

'I say that you're the Marchioness of Twickenham, since it's certain your husband was the Marquis; and I say also that your son, reigning in his stead, is the Marquis of Twickenham now.'

'I--I don't understand.'

My heart was beating against my ribs--oh, dear!

'Your husband's life was a strange one. One day I'll tell you as much of it as you care to know. But its strangeness did not alter the fact that he was the Marquis of Twickenham; and, indeed, now that I have seen you, I am beginning to understand that at least the latter part of it was not so strange as I imagined.'

'You--you say my James is--the Marquis of Twickenham?'

'He was.'

'Was? Where is he?'

'My dear, he's dead. Your boy is the Marquis now.'

'Dead?--dead?--dead? My James--dead?'

'He died on the day following that on which you saw him last.'

'Died? He died? And--you knew it?'

'I did not know that you were his wife; or, indeed, that he had a wife at all, until just now.'

'And--he knew it?'

'Mr. Howarth knew that the late Marquis was dead; whether he knew that he was your husband is another matter. My dear, you must judge him leniently. When you know the whole strange story you will think better of us all than you may be disposed to do at present.'

'You say--my James is dead? Then--he killed him?'

'Hush! You mustn't utter such wild words; you mustn't think such dreadful thoughts. Your

husband died in his bed--in my presence, and in the presence of other persons, among whom were two doctors.'

'He killed him!' She laid her hand upon my shoulder. I shook it off. 'Don't touch me!--don't dare! He killed him!'

'My dear child, if, as you will have it, there was any killing, the hand which slew him was the Lord's. Although you don't seem to have been aware of the fact, your husband's heart was always weak. What had been expected for years took place at last; his heart collapsed, and there was an end.'

'You, who've been in my house all the morning pretending you knew nothing, when all the time you knew that my James was dead--you now want to make out that you knew him better than I did! You may be a sly fine lady, but you're a fool. What you say's lies--lies--all lies! But it's not you I want to speak to--you're nothing. It's him! Get out of my way, and let me pass.'

She got out of my way, or I'd have knocked her down. I could have done it. And I went to Mr. Howarth.

'You killed him; and, as I stand here, in the presence of your God and mine, I swear that you shall hang for it, unless you kill me too. He called to me last night. How often, in the night, does he call to you?--out of the box into which you put him? As I live, I believe his voice is always in your ears--calling, calling, calling.'

Although he was a big man and I'm a little woman, I could have taken him and killed him, then and there, with my two hands, and he could have done nothing to have stayed me. For his heart was as butter, and his soul was white with fear.

CHAPTER XVI

MR. FITZHOWARD OPENS THE DOOR

They went; and my curse went with them. I would listen to nothing they had to say; neither he nor she. For while she tried to whisper soft words into my ears, and quiet me, and make me think the things she wished that I should think, I knew that, the whole time, at the bottom of her heart, she was all for him. I threw open the door, and I told him to go, if he did not wish me to shriek out 'Murder!' in the street. He did not need a second telling. He was glad, at any price, to take himself away. His face was like an old man's--his knees shook as he passed me. I had it in my mind to strike him as he slunk out into the street. My word for it he'd have shivered if I had! But I held my hand. Not in such fashion would I strike the man who'd killed my James. When I did strike it should be once for all. From nothing living should he ever feel another blow.

When he'd gone I packed her after him. She begged and prayed that I'd be calm; that I'd hear what she called reason; that I'd do this, that, and the other thing. But not I! not I! I'd see the back of her; and that was all I would see. And I saw it. She went out as white as he had been, with her heart as heavy. It was only her pride kept her from crying.

I didn't cry. I couldn't. When they had gone, and I was alone with the children, I felt as if I was going mad; but I couldn't cry. It was only when I began to understand that the children were afraid of me that I tried to keep a tight hold of the few senses I had left. I sat down at the table and tried to think. There were the children, as far off in the corner as they could get--holding each other by the hand. They wouldn't come near me--their mother, because they were frightened; too frightened even for tears.

What was I to do to calm their fear? I couldn't imagine. I wasn't the same woman I had been. I knew that I was altogether different; that I had changed in the twinkling of an eye. Still, I didn't want my children to be afraid of me; not Pollie and Jimmy. I tried to think of words with which to speak to them. But they wouldn't come. I sat there like a thing turned stupid, knowing that they were growing more and more afraid of me.

It was a strange thing which roused me at least a little; it was the smell of burning. I couldn't think what it was, or where it came from. Then I remembered. It was the rice which I had put into the oven to soak. The milk had caught; it wanted stirring. I got up, and I went to stir it. It was burnt badly; the rice was all stuck to the bottom; the pudding was spoilt. We should never be

able to eat it for dinner.

The thought of dinner made me look at the clock. It was dinner time. No wonder the pudding was spoilt. It had been in the oven all that time without being once stirred. What was I to do? There was nothing cooked. The children must be hungry. Something made me look round. There they were, standing at the door. They were evidently still afraid, for they still were hand in hand, half in the room, half out. I found my voice and words. Yet, somehow, it didn't sound as if it was me who was speaking.

'If you children are hungry, you'll have to have a piece of bread and butter or jam. Dinner isn't ready; and the fire's gone down.'

They said nothing, but looked at each other, as if they wondered if it was I who spoke to them, and what it was I said. I had some difficulty in keeping myself from being cross. It seemed stupid of them to be standing there as if they couldn't make out who or what I was. It was only my thinking that it might make them more afraid that kept me from starting to scold. I went to the cupboard, and cut some bread and jam, and sat them down at the table, and set them to make their dinner off that. It was funny how they seemed to take it all as a matter of course, and ate their bread and jam as if that was the sort of dinner they were used to every day. They followed me with their eyes wherever I went, and never said a word.

It was funny, too, how calm I felt. All the rage had gone clean out of me. While they ate I made up the fire, and did odd jobs about the room. Doing something seemed to clear my head. As it got clearer, I grew quieter. That seemed funny too. Something in me seemed to be dead. I felt more like a machine than a human being, and moved about, feeling as if I had been wound up and had to go.

After a while there came a knock at the door. I had just got out a pile of mending, and was sitting down to do the children's socks. Jimmy and Pollie were quieter than I had ever known them. I was conscious of their quietude in a curious, uninterested sort of way. They were playing at some game in a corner, talking to each other in whispers. They'd neither of them spoken to me since I'd been left alone. When I went to see who was at the door, I found it was Mr. FitzHoward. I showed him into the sitting-room, and sat down to my mending again without a word. I dare say he thought my manner was strange, for he took up his favourite position in front of the fire, and, for a moment or two, was as silent as I was. At last he spoke.

'Well--and how are things?'

'James is dead.'

I had startled him back into silence. I don't know how long it was before he spoke again. It seemed to me an age.

'Mrs. Merrett! What do you mean?'

'James is dead.'

'Dead! How--how do you know?'

By degrees, in reply to the questions which he put, I told him all that there was to tell. He stood staring at me, biting his finger-nails, as if he found it difficult to turn it into sense.

'Then am I to understand that Montagu Babbacombe is--or was--the Marquis of Twickenham?'

'They say so.'

'But the Twickenham peerage is one of the richest in England?'

'Maybe.'

'Then if he was the Marquis, you, as his wife, are the Marchioness.'

'I dare say.'

'Dare say! But there's no dare say about it. It's a question of fact. And, by George, that Jimmy of yours, he's a Marquis too.'

'So Miss Desmond says.'

'She does, does she? And Pollie, she's the Lady Pollie. Why, you've got a room full of titles, and I'm the only common person in it. I'm not accustomed to having intimate relations with the upper circles, so you'll have to excuse me if my manners fall short of what they ought to be. Talk of the romance of the stage. Nothing I ever heard of in that line comes within shouting distance of this. To think of you having been a Marchioness all these years and never knowing it! And such a Marchioness too! None of your pauper peeresses who have to introduce American young women to the Queen in order to make two ends meet, but the real, gilt-edged, rolling-in-riches, house-in-Grosvenor Square kind. Why, I have heard that the income of the Marquis of Twickenham is over a hundred thousand pounds a year, all profit--besides plenty of perquisites. That's better than

being a Star of the Halls.'

He was silent; I expect because he was turning things over in his mind.

'I remember now reading about the Marquis of Twickenham's being rather a funny lot, and I've a sort of notion that I did hear that no one knew where he was. So Babbacombe was he! Well, tastes do differ. And without wanting to know too much about what caused him to turn up, being a Marquis, I can only say that it would have wanted a lot to have made me take to the game of Wonderful Sleeping Man instead. Between a real live Marquis and even a Marvel of the Age there is a difference.'

Another pause. I seemed to hear him talking to me like a person in a dream.

'Well, Marchioness--I don't know if that's the proper way in which to address a lady in your position, but if it isn't you'll have to excuse me till I do know--you are now one of the greatest ladies in the land, and I shall have to behave to you as such. As for my lord the Marquis, I shall have to mind my p's and q's with a vengeance when I'm talking to him. I suppose he'll give up his taste for hardbake, and won't look at anything under chocolate creams. Which is a pity--because I happen to have some hardbake in my pocket at this very moment--My Lord Marquis!' Spoken to like that, Jimmy wouldn't go. 'Pardon me if I'm over familiar just this once, but--Jimmy!'

Jimmy went. Mr. FitzHoward was mistaken if he really did think hardbake wasn't good enough; because Pollie and the boy began to get rid of what he gave them in a style which I knew meant sticky fingers and dirty faces.

'There is only one remark, my dear Marchioness--if you'll allow me to make so bold as to call you so--which I wish to make, and that is that it's a pretty sure thing that you'll do honour to the high position to which you have so suddenly been called. You'll look the part just as well as you will act it, And if there's any woman who's more worthy of being the great lady than you are, I've yet to come across her. In a man who's had such a varied experience of the profession as I have had, that's saying something, as you know.'

'Mr. FitzHoward, you forget one thing.'

'What's that?'

'James is dead.'

'I don't forget it. I remember it all the time. But there are visitations of Providence, Marchioness, which we must all put up with; the lowly like me, as well as the great like you.'

'He was killed.'

'Killed! Mrs. Merrett! I mean, Marchioness!'

'Mr. Howarth killed him.'

'I say! My dear lady--if you'll pardon my dropping the title for just this once--don't you go taking foolish words of mine as if they'd been meant. As I explained to you yesterday, I've a professional way of talking and an unprofessional; and when I'm talking professionally, I'm not, between you and me, to be taken as meaning just exactly what I say. Now this is an unprofessional moment, in which we're dealing with the cold, dry truth; so let me take this opportunity to tell you that what I was saying about Mr. Howarth, in my professional manner, was just tommy rot, and nothing more. A man in Mr. Howarth's position is no more likely to kill your husband, or any one else, than he is to ride on a broomstick to the moon.'

'But he did kill him.'

'Now, my dear, my esteemed Marchioness, what grounds have you for saying that? What tittle of evidence--outside my balderdash, which, mind, was balderdash, and nothing else--have you which points that way?'

'I haven't told you how they say he died.'

'Well, let's hear.'

'They say he died of heart disease.'

'Of what?'

'Of heart disease--on the day after he left home.'

'That he certainly never did. There's some mistake there. His heart was sound as a bell. He had it examined by three doctors before the Aquarium people would let him start upon that sleep of his. They were unanimously of opinion that its condition was perfect. They gave their certificate to that effect--I have it at home now. And the night he woke he was overhauled by at least half-a-dozen. Every man Jack of them said that his heart and lungs were flawless, and that his general condition was altogether beyond their expectation.'

'Miss Desmond says he has suffered from a weak heart his whole life long.'

'A mistake altogether. The truth is, your husband was as hard as nails, and had a constitution like iron. I shouldn't have been mixed up with him in a game like that if I hadn't known that was the case. I remember his saying to the doctors that he'd never had a day's illness in his life, and their replying that they rather fancied it would be a good long time before he did have.'

'And yet his heart collapsed so that he was dead upon the Monday.'

'It does seem odd. I should like to have a look at that medical certificate. I suppose there was one.'

'I can't tell.'

'There must have been. Where's he buried?'

'I don't know.'

'Don't know where your own husband's buried?'

'I didn't ask. All I wanted to do was to get them out of the house, because I knew that his blood was on their hands.'

'Without going so far as that--and if I were you I shouldn't be quite so, what I may call, virulent--I do think that there are circumstances about the case which it would be as well to look into. The position, so far as I understand, is this. Your husband's been away from his family for--how long?'

'They said fifteen years.'

Fifteen years; we'll say, for reasons of his own. All that time he never went near them, though he must have known exactly where they were, and all about them; so that his reasons for keeping away must have been tolerably strong. Suddenly a friend--who seems to have taken an uncommon interest in him--sees him, we'll say, engaged in a remarkable line of business. He's so conscious that your husband, if he knows who he is, won't see him, that he bribes me to slip him in as plain John Smith. On the Sunday there's an interview between them, at which we don't know what took place; and on the Monday he returns to his family. By the way, did he return to his family.'

'I don't know.'

'If he did, it seems--queer; his arriving at such a sudden resolution after knowing for fifteen years just where they could be found. He must have had strong reasons; it's only right that Mr. Howarth should tell you clearly what those reasons were. On the day of his return, he dies; of a disease he never had. His health seems to have had a quick change for the worse directly he got back to the bosom of his family. However you look at it, it's a queer start all the way along. I should like to see that medical certificate. I've heard of some funny ones, but that must have been an oddity worth looking at. I should also like to have a peep at the man who gave it. Where did your husband die?'

'I never asked.'

'Then I'll tell you what we'll do. You and I will go together, and we'll pay another call on Mr. Howarth, and we'll put to him, or to some one else, one or two of those questions which you didn't ask. This time I rather fancy that the Marchioness of Twickenham won't be refused the information she requires. And if she is refused, her humble friend and servant--meaning me--will soon show her how to get it in one way if not in another. We're in a position to command; and if Howarth and Co. don't see it, it won't take us long to compel due and proper recognition. As we'll show them.'

I didn't altogether like the way he spoke. There was too much of the Marchioness and not enough of James. It was ridiculous to speak to me as if I was any one, or ever should be. But he meant well. And, after all, he was a man. And he had known James. And I felt that in the trouble which might be coming I should want to have a man upon my side--one, too, who'd stand by me through thick and thin. And that I believed Mr. FitzHoward would do. If he wouldn't, no one else would; because, besides my James, he was the only man in the world I knew. And in spite of the nonsensical way he had of talking he had got some sense in his head, besides knowing as much of the world and its ways in his little finger as I did in my whole body. I never knew how silly I really was till I wanted to be wise.

So I decided that I'd go with him to pay another call, as he put it, on Mr. Howarth; though I shrank, in a way I can't describe, from seeing that smooth-voiced, false-tongued man again. But just as I was going to send Mr. FitzHoward to ask Mrs. Ordish if she'd look after the children, a hansom cab came rattling along the street, and pulled up before the house.

'Hollo,' cried FitzHoward in that absurd way of his, 'here's another member of the Upper Ten. All the British aristocracy are paying calls in Little Olive Street to-day.'

There came a hammering at the knocker.

'You go and see who it is,' I said. 'And if it's Mr. Howarth----'

'I'll show him in; and, also, I'll show him up.'

But it wasn't Mr. Howarth. I could hear that the voice was different directly Mr. FitzHoward opened the door. What was taking place I didn't know. But it was quite two or three minutes before Mr. FitzHoward returned. Then he threw open the door with a flourish.

'This gentleman wishes to speak to you--though he has not done me the honour of mentioning his name.'

Some one came into the room.

'I'm the Marquis of Twickenham,' he said.

He was quite young, and not bad-looking, and carried himself as, to my mind, only a gentleman can. He was very polite, though in quite a different way to Mr. Howarth. What he said I felt he meant; and I never had that feeling about the other man. I liked him, in spite of all my trouble, directly I set eyes on him and heard him speak. Though the idea of my mixing as an equal with the likes of him did strike me, even then, as against nature. You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear; and a sow's ear I am, so to speak, and shall be.

When he saw me he stared at me; not as if he wanted to, but as if he couldn't help it.

'I beg your pardon, but are you the lady Miss Desmond saw this morning?'

'This morning I did see Miss Desmond.'

'This,' said Mr. FitzHoward, stretching out his arm towards me as if he was a sign-post, 'is the Marchioness of Twickenham.'

I could have shaken him. The young gentleman looked him up and down, in that Who-on-earth-are-you kind-of-way which gentlemen do have; sometimes, I have heard say, without their knowing it.

'Indeed.--And may I ask, sir, who are you?'

'You may. I'm not ashamed of my name, and never shall be. I'm Augustus FitzHoward. For the last twenty years I have been connected with the profession, acting in a managerial capacity for some of the greatest stars who have ever illuminated the theatrical firmament. There, sir, is my card.'

The young gentleman held it between his finger and thumb as if he was afraid it would scorch him.

'Ah.' He turned to me. 'Is this gentleman a friend of yours?'

'He's a friend of my husband's.'

I said it pretty briskly--because I didn't mean to have Mr. FitzHoward sat upon, even though he would talk silly.

'May I speak in front of him?'

'Certainly. I have no secrets from Mr. FitzHoward.

The absurd man must put in his word. He pulled up his shirt collar and arranged his tie.

'Thank you, Marchioness, for this mark of your confidence; though, knowing you as I do, I have no hesitation in saying that it's no more than I expected. I may take this opportunity of informing the gentleman that I was on the most intimate terms with the late Marquis, both as regards business and friendship.'

'The late Marquis?'

'The late Marquis is what I said, and the late Marquis is what I meant. He was known to the public, with whom he had a world-wide reputation, as that Marvel of the Age--Montagu Babbacombe.'

CHAPTER XVII

THE MARCHIONESS IN SPITE OF HERSELF

I could see that the young gentleman didn't altogether know what to make of Mr. FitzHoward. I'm not sure myself that I wouldn't just as soon he'd left us alone together. Anyhow I did wish he wouldn't keep on everlastingly talking about theatres, just as though sensible people cared about such things.

The young gentleman said to me--

'Miss Desmond has been telling me such a very remarkable story, that, though I fear that my presence here at this moment may be the occasion to you of inconvenience, I felt myself compelled to endeavour to learn, from your own lips, with the least possible delay, exactly how the matter stands. Is it a fact that you are my brother's wife?'

'I know nothing about that, sir. My husband called himself James Merrett; and it was under that name I married him.'

'So I'm told. You have your husband's portrait, I hear. May I see it?' I gave him one. 'Is this the portrait of your husband?'

'It is.'

'Then, as it is certainly the portrait of my brother, it seems that you must be my sister--or sister-in-law, whichever you please. And you've a son.'

I showed him Jimmy. He stood him on the table in front of him. Jimmy did not seem a bit afraid.

'Young man, you settle it. You're my brother's son; a superior edition--for which you're indebted probably to your mother--but his son. Do you know that I'm your uncle, and that you're a Marquis? I thought I was, but it seems I'm not. I was a usurper in your place. You go up, I go down; it's the fortune of war.' He turned to me again. 'You understand that my presence here is quite informal. I'm simply here for my own peace of mind. If the lawyers knew, they'd probably object. So far as I'm concerned, if I'm personally satisfied that I'm holding what isn't mine, and occupying a position to which I have no right, that personal knowledge is sufficient. I shall need no legal forms to compel me to retire from a false situation. I suppose you have a copy of your marriage-certificate.'

'It's in my box upstairs.'

'And therefore can easily be verified. And I take it that your husband has left papers?'

'I don't know where they are. He never would keep letters. He tore them up as fast as he received them.'

'I can testify to that,' put in Mr. FitzHoward. 'And I remember what he said when I spoke to him about it. His answer struck me at the time as being a funny one, but now I think I can see what he was after. 'I never do keep papers,' he said, 'because you can't tell what tales some day they may tell of you.'

'Well, we won't go into that now. I think that, until the things are gone into, it would be better that you should come, with your children, to my house; or, rather, to what I expect will turn out to be your son's house.'

'Do you mean that you want me to--leave home?'

'On the contrary, I want you to come home; to your real home; to the home which I believe to be yours. It would be better, for your son's sake, as well as your own, that you should not stay here.'

'But--if James were to come--and find me gone!'

'James? You mean my brother? My dear lady, he is dead.'

'You talk about all sorts of things I don't understand, like those other two, but you say nothing about the only thing I care for. I can't believe that my James is dead--unless he was killed.'

'You would have no difficulty if you'd seen him as I saw him; and as for killing, that's absurd. I don't wish to say anything to pain you, but your words make it necessary that you should be told the truth. When I saw him he was nothing but skin and bone; the mere shadow of what he had been; weak and helpless as a new-born child. The doctors agreed that he must have been dying

for weeks, if not months, and that the only marvel was how he had lived so long.'

'Then--then there was witchcraft.'

'Witchcraft? What do you mean?'

I couldn't tell him. I hardly knew myself. Only if what he said was true, and I felt sure that he believed it was, then somewhere there was a mystery which was beyond my understanding. I let Mr. FitzHoward talk to him instead of me.

'Excuse me, sir--or my lord, as it seems you are--but might I ask what the late Marquis is supposed to have died of?'

'Supposed? There is no supposition about it. He died of heart disease.'

'Then give me leave to tell you there's a good deal of supposition about it. Although I'm not a betting man, I'm ready to bet a thousand pounds to a brass button that he did nothing of the kind.'

'Do you add medical qualifications to those others you were speaking of.'

'I do not; but I do add common-sense. I suppose there was a medical certificate? Who signed it?'

'Sir Gregory Hancock, a physician of whom you may have heard, and Dr. White.'

'Then, between them, they made a jolly fine muddle. The day before he died he was in perfect health, and as fit as you and I--if not fitter!'

'It's incredible.'

'Is it? I'll produce half-a-dozen doctors, at least, who'll certify--I have some of their certificates at home in my desk at this minute--that his heart was sound as sound could be, and that his general health and condition were the best possible.'

'I say again it's incredible.'

'Do you? The night before he died he slept at the York Hotel. Before he left, on the morning of his death, he ate a good breakfast and had two or three goes of whisky. The landlord had a chat with him before he went, and he'll tell you, as he told me, that he never saw him in better health or spirits; and you can bet your life that that wasn't the first time he'd seen him.'

'If what you say is correct, then there's something which I fail to understand.'

'There's a good deal which I fail to understand. I believe there's only one person who does understand, and that's the Hon. Douglas Howarth.'

'Your tone seems to convey something injurious to Mr. Howarth.'

'I don't know about injurious, only I should just like to know how he managed it, that's all.'

'Managed what?'

'Well, doesn't it strike you there was management about it somewhere? It does me.'

'I have been intimately acquainted with Mr. Howarth my whole life long, and I know him to be incapable of doing anything in the least degree unworthy.'

'Well, I've known him to tell a lie or two--and red-hot ones at that.'

'How dare you say, sir, that Mr. Howarth told you a lie?'

'Look here, my lord, this isn't a question of words, but of fact. How did Mr. Howarth transform a man who, in the morning, was hale and hearty, by the afternoon, into the kind of creature you spoke about--so that, by the night, he was dead? If he's a friend of yours, you'll get him to explain how he did it before he's made to.'

'Mr. Howarth will give you any and every explanation you have a right to demand.'

'My lord, I'm a mouthpiece for this lady. It's her husband we're talking about. A wife has as much right as a brother, not to speak of a brother's friend.'

The young gentleman turned to me.

'Surely you cannot seriously suppose that your husband was--as this gentleman seems to suggest--the subject of foul play?'

'My James was well upon the Sunday; you say he died upon the Monday. I don't believe he did die; but if he did die, he was killed.'

'But this is monstrous. If what Mr. FitzHoward says about the condition of your husband's health when you last saw him is correct----'

'It is correct.'

'Then in that case there is something somewhere which I own that I don't understand; but to suggest that it is anything which will not bear the light of day, or which a few words will not make clear--that is absurd. But come with me, and you shall have all the explanation which you can possibly require, probably inside half-an-hour.'

'From Mr. Howarth?'

It was Mr. FitzHoward who asked.

'If Mr. Howarth has anything to explain, I am quite sure he will explain it--to the proper person.'

'With your permission, Marchioness'--the man would keep talking to me in that silly way; I wished he wouldn't!--'we'll have this matter settled, once for all, in a proper business manner. His lordship keeps snubbing me, thinking, I suppose, that I'm the sort of person who oughtn't to have anything to do with his aristocratic family; but as I also happen to have had some interest in his brother, the nature of which I'll explain to him a little later on, he won't find that I'm easily snubbed. This is an affair which is not likely to be pleasant to any of us; therefore I say that the sooner we get at the bottom of it, so that we can be quit of it for good and all, the better. So as I say, Marchioness, with your permission I'll go and get those certificates of which I spoke, and I'll hunt up at least one of the gentlemen who signed them, and with him I'll follow you to Mr. Howarth's.'

'We're not going to Mr. Howarth's, but to my--or rather--well, to what is at present my house in St. James's Square.'

'Very good; I'll be there nearly as soon as you are. And if you'll allow me to suggest, my lord, you'll have one of the gentlemen who signed that certificate to meet my doctor when he comes.'

'It will be quite unnecessary.'

'You must excuse my remarking that I rather fancy you'll find you're wrong. I don't want to be accused of saying anything monstrous; but the more I think things over, the more I become convinced that there's something in this business which will--well, we'll say, create astonishment. Anyhow, this lady is entitled to be made acquainted with all the details of her husband's unexpected and mysterious death; and also to see, and talk to, the medical gentleman who attended him in his last hours.'

'If that is the way in which you put it, it will be easy to call at Sir Gregory Hancock's as we go, and to request him to favour us with his presence at Twickenham House. He will soon satisfy any doubts which this lady may entertain.'

In this way it was arranged, though not altogether to my liking. The children and I went with the young gentleman in a four wheeler, though it was with a heavy heart I shut the door of No. 32 behind me. He wouldn't let me take hardly any clothing, except a few things I put together in a bag. He wouldn't even let me put the children into their best things; I had to take them just as they were. He said we should get everything we wanted at Twickenham House. Just as though I wanted other people's things when I'd got everything as nice as possible of my own!

As we rattled through the streets--and the cab did rattle!--my head was all in a whirl. What I had gone through during the last few hours was almost more than I could bear. I had got used to watching and waiting, day after day and week after week, for what seemed as if it would never come, but this was beyond that altogether. It doesn't take much to muddle me, and amidst it all the only thing I could take right hold of was that they said that my James was dead. I sat with my heart as cold as ice, and my eyes burning, as if something had stung them. If I could have cried, it would have been something; but I couldn't. Whether I was doing a wise thing in leaving my own house, and coming to this strange place, I couldn't think.

We stopped at a house which I understood was Sir Gregory Somebody's, the great doctor. It seemed, from what passed, that he was to come on after us. It wasn't long before we stopped again; this time at a great house in a great square. The young gentleman got out, and he had hardly touched the bell before the door was open, and he was leading the children and me into the house. I never saw the likes of it. There were footmen in white stockings and powdered hair, and a hall which was bigger than any room I ever came across. It seemed against nature that I should go into such a place as if I owned it. No wonder that I pressed the children's hands, so that they clung tighter to me. I felt that the mites were trembling; I don't doubt I trembled too.

He took me into a room in which were the two ladies who had been the day before at Mr. Howarth's--Miss Desmond and the young one. Miss Desmond came hurrying towards us.

'So you've brought them, have you? You clever man!' She put her hands upon my shoulder, and kissed me--before I could stop her. 'My dear Mary, welcome home.'

'Begging your pardon, miss, but this isn't my home, or ever will be.'

Somehow the very thought of such a thing made me shiver again. She laughed.

'Isn't it? We shall see.' She knelt down to talk to Jimmy. She kissed him too. 'Well, my Lord Marquis, and what do you think of your new house? You haven't seen much of it, but you shall see it all before you are much older. We think it's rather a nice house; and we hope you'll think so too.' Jimmy said never a word. 'What!--you won't speak!--not even to me! Never mind; I dare say you'll let me know you have a tongue when we've made friends.' Getting up, she turned to the young lady--who had been standing on one side, eyeing me and the children in a way I was conscious of and didn't like. 'Mary, this is Violet Howarth.'

The young lady put out her hand, keeping herself as stiff and cold as if she were a kind of iceberg.

'How do you do? Is it true that you're the widow of the late Marquis of Twickenham?'

I paid no attention to her hand whatever.

'About that I know nothing. I am Mrs. Merrett.'

I let her see I could be as stiff as she was--in spite of all that I was feeling. Miss Desmond slipped her arm through mine.

'That's right, Mary; you're a faithful creature--stick to the name which you know best. Leonard must have had some redeeming qualities, or he would never have been able to win the love of a good woman and keep it. There must be something in a man if he can do that. Come, you three, let's go and see what we can find upstairs.'

She was leading us out of the room--I seemed to have lost all power of resisting anything or any one--when the door opened and Mr. Howarth entered. His face when he saw us was a picture.

'Reggie, what--what insensate folly's this?'

'My dear Douglas, it's no folly at all. There'll come a time, and that before very long, when you'll realise that it's the truest wisdom. Let me introduce you to the Marquis of Twickenham, and to his mother, my sister, the Marchioness.'

'Don't--don't talk such d---- nonsense. You don't know what an ass you're making of yourself.' He strode across the room, avoiding us as much as he possibly could--as if we wanted him to come near! He turned on Miss Desmond with a sort of snarl. 'Is it you who have instigated him to make such a crass exhibition of this masterpiece of imbecility?'

'I told him the truth, Douglas. Whereupon he concluded that, from every point of view, honesty would be the better policy. It surprises and pains me to learn you don't.'

'Honesty! honesty! honesty!' He put his hands up to his head, so that I thought he was going to tear his hair, like those people in the Bible. But he didn't. 'Good Lord! You're only fit for a lunatic asylum, all the lot of you!'

'There are worse places than lunatic asylums, Douglas.'

'But there's none more suitable. You haven't the faintest notion of what it is you're doing. I tell you you're doing irreparable mischief, in complete unconsciousness of the career of stark, staring madness on which you've started.'

Silence followed his burst of temper. I don't fancy the young gentleman was best pleased, either by his words or his manner. When he spoke there was something in his voice which I hadn't heard in it before.

CHAPTER XVIII

MR. HOWARTH AGAINST THE WORLD

'Suppose, Douglas, you enlighten our ignorance. We are acting in accordance with our lights. If we are moving in darkness, surely the fault is rather yours than ours.'

Somehow I felt that, in his turn, Mr. Howarth didn't like the young gentleman's tone. It was quite a time before he spoke again. It seemed as if he was trying to get the better of his temper.

'Reggie, can I speak to you in private?'

'Certainly. But--aren't we in private here?'

'This isn't the sort of privacy I mean.'

The young gentleman seemed to hesitate.

'What is it you wish to say to me?'

'When we're alone I'll tell you.'

'I'll see you alone directly. But before I do so there are one or two things which I should like you to explain, in the presence of this lady.'

'As, for instance?'

'How the late Marquis of Twickenham came to die from heart disease.'

The answer came from the door. There, sure enough, with a gentleman at his side, was Mr. FitzHoward. Never had I seen him when he'd seemed more at his ease. I hadn't thought that it was in him. I know that I'd felt a coward ever since I'd put my foot across the doorstep. He came right forward into the room, without waiting for any one to invite him, as bold and confident as you please. As for Mr. Howarth's black looks--and he gave him some, and somehow there they seemed more hard to meet than they'd been in my home--they never frightened him one little bit.

'That is one thing which we should like you to explain, Mr. Howarth, if you don't mind;--how did the late Marquis of Twickenham come to die of heart disease?'

I believe there'd have been trouble if Mr. Howarth had had Mr. FitzHoward alone in a room with him. If ever I saw a man look like meaning mischief, it was him then. He seemed to draw his body together like a cat does before it jumps. And his hands quivered, as if they itched to beat him. But the fact that he wasn't alone made all the difference, though I fancy he only remembered it just in time. He glanced about him with a kind of start, and drew a long breath. When he spoke there was passion in his voice, which he couldn't disguise.

'What--what's the meaning of this--gentleman's presence here?'

Mr. FitzHoward's manner was as unlike his as it very well could have been. As I've said, I never saw him when he was more himself.

'It means that I want a little explanation, Mr. Howarth--that's all. Quite a simple little point. There's a gentleman here whom I should like to introduce to the ladies and gentlemen present;--Dr. Clinton, M.D. My lord, this is Dr. Philip Clinton--of whom you may have heard.'

The young gentleman held out his hand, which the other took.

'Have I the pleasure of speaking to the Dr. Clinton who is the great authority on the functions of the heart?'

'I am Dr. Clinton, and I have made the heart my special study.'

I liked him, as I had done the young gentleman, directly he opened his mouth. He had a quiet, pleasant way of speaking. He wasn't over young, nor yet he wasn't over old; but he had as nice a face as I could care to meet, with hair on it; brown, comfortable-looking eyes; and about the corners of his mouth what you felt to be a friendly smile.

'Dr. Clinton,' said Mr. FitzHoward, and he waved the hat which he held in his hand as if he owned the house, 'might I ask you what was the character of the late Marquis of Twickenham's heart?'

Dr. Clinton shook his head.

'I'm afraid that I'm hardly in a position to answer that question in the form in which you put it.'

'Then we'll put it in another way. I will ask you what was the character--of course, I mean the physical character--of the heart of the late Mr. Montagu Babbacombe?'

'Sound. But since you have been so good as to enlighten me as to the reasons which may make my presence here of service, perhaps you will allow me to make a brief statement in my own way.'

'Certainly, Doctor. That is what we desire--in your own way.'

'I examined Mr. Montagu Babbacombe on three occasions, each time in association with certain colleagues whose names I will mention if desired. The examination was very thorough. And as a result we unanimously agreed that he was emphatically what the insurance people call a "good life." He showed no traces of organic weakness; and as for the heart, in a medical sense, I never met a better one. I may add that I met him on the morning of the day on which, I learn to my surprise, it is stated that he died. I was driving along Stamford Street when he came out of the York Hotel. I stopped and spoke to him--asking him how he felt after his thirty days' sleep. His own words were that he was as "fit as a fiddle and game for anything"; and he looked it. Under anything like normal circumstances it was practically impossible that he could have died on the afternoon of that day of heart disease.'

'In what way,' asked Mr. Howarth, 'is this of interest to us? The connection which certain persons seem desirous of establishing between Mr. Montagu Babbacombe and the late Marquis is one of the purest presumption.'

Mr. FitzHoward handed a photograph which he took out of his pocket to Dr. Clinton.

'Doctor, do you know the original of that?'

'I do; it is Mr. Montagu Babbacombe; he gave me a similar one. A capital likeness it is.'

'My lord, do you know the original of that?'

Mr. FitzHoward handed on the likeness to the young gentleman.

'I do. It's the portrait of my brother.'

'Thank you. You see, Mr. Howarth, the connection between them is not so shadowy as it seems you'd like us to think; it's recognised by every one but you. And we're still waiting for you to explain how the Marquis of Twickenham came to die of heart disease.'

Mr. Howarth looked at Mr. FitzHoward as if he'd have liked to have torn him in pieces. I'm confident that if it hadn't been for all of us being there, there'd have been violence used.

'I'm not a medical man, you--clever fellow.'

'It seems as if you know how to manufacture heart disease to order, anyhow.'

'What the----!'

He moved forward so that I thought he was going to strike him; only at the last moment he stopped short and changed his mind. The young gentleman laid his hand on Mr. FitzHoward's shoulder.

'Come, sir; let us not deal in innuendo, if you please. Here comes some one who may be able to give you the information you require.' An old gentleman came into the room. He wore gold spectacles. With the fingers and thumb of one hand he lifted them in their place on his nose as he advanced. 'Sir Gregory, this is very kind of you. Your arrival is most opportune. A rather curious point has arisen with regard to my brother's death. We require your aid for its solution. I believe that you certified that the cause of his death was heart disease.'

'Certainly; the immediate cause. Heart disease of long standing. Your brother always had a weak heart, my lord.'

'Then in that case Mr. Montagu Babbacombe wasn't the Marquis of Twickenham.'

This was Dr. Clinton. When he spoke, the old gentleman looked at him and knew him.

'Is that you, Clinton? I didn't catch what it was you said.'

Mr. FitzHoward put himself forward before Dr. Clinton had a chance of answering. He handed the old gentleman the photograph.

'May I ask, sir, if you know who is the original of that?'

'Certainly; very well. It's the late Marquis--as I used to know him.'

'That's a portrait of Mr. Montagu Babbacombe, as he appeared on the morning of the day on which the late Marquis is stated to have died.'

'Of whom?'

'Of Mr. Montagu Babbacombe.'

'Mr. Montagu Babbacombe? Then in that case--but I don't understand.' He turned to the young gentleman. 'Surely this is a portrait of your lordship's brother?'

'Undoubtedly.'

Dr. Clinton spoke.

'The point, Sir Gregory, is this. The idea is that Montagu Babbacombe was only another name for the Marquis of Twickenham; but before that can be admitted there's a difficulty to be got over. I knew Montagu Babbacombe, and I'm ready to testify that he never had anything the matter with his heart in the whole of his life, and that on the morning of the day on which the Marquis died he was in excellent health.'

'Then your Babbacombe wasn't my Marquis. The Marquis of Twickenham inherited a weak heart from his father; and as for being in excellent health on the morning of his death, he'd been dying for months.'

The young gentleman appealed to Mr. Howarth.

'Douglas, I really do believe that the solution of the puzzle is in your hands. Did Leonard masquerade as Montagu Babbacombe?'

'My dear Reggie, I don't propose to furnish any information.'

'But that's an impossible position, one for which I can't conceive your justification. Can't you answer Yes or No?'

'Your brother's dead. That's enough for me. It ought to be enough for you.'

'But don't you see the difficulties which must inevitably arise if you refuse to answer?'

'I confess I don't.'

'Then you must be more short-sighted than I supposed. If my brother called himself Babbacombe, then this lady is his wife; and here's her son. Everything is theirs, and I have nothing.'

'I assure you that this lady is not your brother's wife, and that the young gentleman is no relation of yours.'

'Then do you say that Leonard wasn't Babbacombe?'

'I don't see how it matters if he was or wasn't.'

'Not if this lady was his wife?' Mr. Howarth shrugged his shoulders. 'The attitude of your mind is altogether beyond my comprehension. I thought I knew you; but it seems I don't. During the last few days you have been a different man.'

'Don't talk such nonsense.'

'You have--and you know it. I've felt that there was something at the back, and now I begin to have a glimmer of an idea of what it is. You have persistently refused to tell me what were the circumstances under which you first saw Leonard. I'm sorry to say that I'm beginning to believe that it was because, for reasons of your own, you wished to conceal your knowledge of the fact that he was Babbacombe.'

'Reggie, if you take my serious advice, you will restrain yourself from making any further remarks until we are alone. You are not behaving wisely.'

'Wisely? Thank you; there's a sort of wisdom which I would rather be without. Let me tell you this. I do not intend to allow this doubt to confront me a moment longer than I can help. There is one step which I can take towards its solution, and that step I'll take at once. I'll have the coffin opened, and I'll see who is inside.'

'What?'

'I say I'll have the coffin opened and see who is inside.'

'You--you'll do nothing of the kind.'

Dr. Clinton asked a question.

'Can you do that at once? Won't the legal forms which you have to go through before you can obtain permission involve considerable delay?'

'I'll do it first and obtain permission afterwards. The coffin is on a shelf in our mausoleum at Cressland. I only have to remove the lid and put it back again. The whole thing needn't occupy half an hour.'

'Reggie, you--you shan't do it.'

'I shall; and will.'

'I say you shall not. Come, don't--don't let us quarrel. This sort of thing in public isn't--isn't

edifying. And--all about nothing. When you have heard what I have to say to you in private, you will see the matter in a different light.'

'Say what you have to say to me here.'

'I will not. You must wait till we're alone. Wait, I say--wait!'

'Very good. I will. I'll have the coffin opened to-morrow, and wait till afterwards to hear what it is you have to say.'

'Reggie! You won't! I know you won't. You won't be such a fool.'

'What are you afraid of?'

'Afraid? I'm afraid of nothing. Of what should I be afraid?'

'Then why should you object?'

'Because--it's a dreadful thing to think of, after he's been dead so long.'

'Is that the only reason?'

'What other reason should I have?'

I went and held the young gentleman by his arm with both my hands.

'Open the coffin!'

'I intend to.'

'My husband is not inside.'

'How do you know?'

'If he were inside, why should I hear him calling?'

'Calling? What do you mean?'

'I keep hearing him calling to me all the time.'

Mr. Howarth flung himself at me, seeming half beside himself with rage.

'It's a lie! You don't!'

'I do. You hear him too.'

I never saw a man behave so wildly. He seemed to have all at once gone mad.

'I don't! I don't! How can you tell if I do or do not? The idea's nonsense. It's a figment of the brain. I'm--I'm run down, and I fancy things--that's all. Besides, how could he call so that I could hear him--all the way--from Cressland? He must be dead--long since! long since! You're a fool, woman, to suppose he isn't dead--a fool! a fool!' He seemed to suddenly realise how he was talking, and to see our startled faces. 'Why are you all looking at me like that? What's the matter? There's nothing wrong. Reggie, I've not--been very well--lately. You're quite right, I'm a different man. All this--has been too much for me. I want--I want--Who's that calling?'

'It's James.'

'James? It's Babbacombe! It's Babbacombe! What's the use of his calling? They've fastened him down. They did it before I came. What shall I do? What shall I do?'

He stood there before us all, sobbing like a child. The old gentleman they spoke of as Sir Gregory went up to him.

'Come, my dear sir, you must control yourself. The excitement has been too much for you. If you're not careful, you'll be ill.'

But I heard Dr. Clinton whisper to the young gentleman who'd brought us there--

'If I were you, I'd see what's inside that coffin.'

'I intend to.'

Suddenly Pollie and Jimmy, overtaken by sudden alarm, came running to me. And they began to cry.

'Where's Daddy?' wailed Jimmy. 'Oh, mother, where is Daddy?'

'Hush!' I said. I drew them quite close to me. 'You'll see him before very long.'

CHAPTER XIX

IN TELEPATHIC COMMUNICATION

The rest of the events of that day do seem so jumbled together. I can hardly remember all that happened. Miss Desmond took the children and me into a room upstairs that big you could have put almost the whole of our house in Little Olive Street inside of it. There was a bed in it and all sorts of things, but the idea of my sleeping in it was too ridiculous. But it seemed that I was going to. There were two servants to wait on us, both grander than me, and one that dignified I didn't dare to look her in the face. When they went out for something, I begged and prayed Miss Desmond not to let them come back again, for they did make me that uncomfortable that I didn't know what I was doing. She smiled, in that quiet way she had, and when the one who spoke and looked as if she was a perfect lady--and I'm sure she was much more of a lady than ever I shall be--came back again, Miss Desmond got rid of her with some excuse or other, and glad enough I was.

Presently she took us into another room which, according to her, was called the school-room, and which she said the children would use as a nursery; though it was more like a room in a palace. There were heaps and heaps of things for them to play with--the likes of some of them I never did see; they must have cost a fortune, that they must--and it wasn't long before they were as happy as a king. For with little children, bless them! trouble's like water on a duck's back; they're crying broken-hearted one minute, and laughing as if they'd burst themselves the next.

Miss Desmond was that nice! She was a lady, she was. She had a way about her which seemed to take you right out of yourself; and made you feel at peace. But with all her gentle, pleasant manner I could see that she herself was just weighed down with trouble. I suspected that there was something between that Mr. Howarth and her; and that the way he had been carrying on was wearing her to a shadow. And when I knew she liked him, as any one could see she did, I thought better of him myself; for if a woman like her held him dear he couldn't be altogether bad. I hadn't been talking to her many minutes before I began to put this and that together, and to see how the whole matter stood. A queer business it all was. No wonder she'd had her troubles like the rest of us. Somehow the knowledge that that was so made my own trouble less.

I had no notion of what was going on downstairs. I didn't care much either. But I could see she was worried. Mr. Howarth's sister never came near us. She didn't like that; though I was glad enough. I could understand how, if my James was the Marquis, I should be in her way, through her wanting to marry the young gentleman who was the Marquis now, and so be the Marchioness. Considering that I was nothing and nobody, and had sprung up all in a moment, as it were, it wasn't strange she didn't like me, and perhaps never would. So on all accounts I felt it was just as well she kept away. At the same time, with Miss Desmond it was different. She'd done nothing to upset Miss Howarth, or Lady Violet as it seemed she was, and I could see she was afraid of a coldness growing up between them. So I begged that she wouldn't stop with me, for I should be perfectly right alone; and, after a while, she went.

She hadn't been gone very long, and off I'd started to think again--or rather to try to think, for, somehow, my thoughts wouldn't come; I felt all dazed--when in came the young gentleman with Mr. FitzHoward.

'I've come to tell you,' he said, 'that I've made arrangements to go down to Cressland to-morrow morning. Dr. Clinton and Mr. FitzHoward have been good enough to promise that they will come too, so--as they will be present on your behalf--it will be quite unnecessary for you to accompany us.'

'Do you mean that--you're going to have the coffin opened?' He bowed. 'Then I'll come--of course, I'll come. I could not stay away.'

He tried to persuade me to change my mind and say I wouldn't go.

'It is not a pleasant spectacle which we expect to see. You must forgive my reminding you that your husband has been buried a fortnight.'

'My husband? My husband's not in that coffin. I'm sure of it.'

'How can you be sure of it?'

'Because he's alive: I know that he's alive. Do you--do you think I'd be talking to you like this if I didn't know? I was afraid at first, but now I know that my James is alive. He keeps talking to me all the time.'

He looked puzzled; exchanging glances with Mr. FitzHoward.

'My dear lady, I beg that you will not be too sanguine. I admit that complications have arisen which I had not foreseen, but I am still convinced that my brother was your husband, and that he lies buried at Cressland. Don't raise any airy fabrics of hope, or the disappointment may be greater than you will be able to bear. Besides, if you are right, then your husband was not my brother, and you are no relation of mine--which is absurd.'

'Not so absurd as that I should be a relation of yours--the likes of me!'

'The likes of you! Do you know that the differences of which you are thinking are only on the surface? In an incredibly short time they'll disappear, and you'll be as great and as fine a lady as any of them all.'

'Never! I'll never be a lady; and as for a fine lady--not me!'

'Marchioness--'

'Don't call me that! It's not my name! It sounds as if you were laughing at me.'

'Sister--'

'I'm not your sister. I'm just Mrs. James Merrett of Little Olive Street.'

'Mrs. Merrett then: if you like I'll always call you Mrs. Merrett.'

'That's my name.'

'I wish to convey to you my personal assurance that if you are the person I believe you to be, I shall welcome you and your children, and shall be proud to call myself your brother.'

'I'm sure--I'm sure--if I am your sister you shan't be any more ashamed of me than I can help.'

'I shall not be ashamed of you. Never be afraid of that. Only, if you will come with us to-morrow, don't allow yourself to be buoyed up by delusions. Be prepared to face the facts--as my sister should do.'

'It's no delusion that my James is alive. Whether he's your brother, or whether he isn't, I know that he's alive.'

As the day went on I grew more sure of it. When they had gone, and I was alone again with the children while they played, I sat there feeling that if it wasn't for my stupidity I could soon find out what James wanted. He wanted something; that I knew. What it was, I couldn't think. I couldn't hear his voice, as I had done before, but I knew that he was trying all the time to get something into my head, which, if I wasn't so silly, I should understand. I'd a sort of feeling that he wanted to tell me where he was; to get me to come to him; to get him out of trouble. That he was in trouble of some sort I was sure.

He used to talk to me about what he called 'telepathy.' I remember the word, because he wrote it down and made me learn it. It was one of those strange ideas he was always getting hold of. I always believed that, when he chose, he was a regular old-fashioned magician--like you read of in the Bible. Some of the things he did--and a great many more that he wanted to do--were against nature. When I hinted that that was what I felt, he'd look at me in that queer way of his, and say that magic was knowledge, and knowledge was magic; and that you'd only got to know everything to do everything. It was the same with this 'telepathy.' According to him you can make yourself understood by a person who's thousands of miles away--if you've only got the knack of it. He declared that when he was away from me, sometimes, if he was just in the right frame of mind, he could tell what I was doing and saying, and even thinking. There was something in what he said. When he'd been away for weeks together, when he came back he'd tell me what I'd been doing at a certain time on a certain day--even my very words!--but principally at night when I was alone. When I was praying for him he always knew. Dozens of times has he shown me the words--written down on a sheet of paper, date and hour and all!--which I had used in my prayers, when I was asking God to tell me where he was, and send him home to me. It did make me feel so ashamed; because he had such a way about him when he was showing you a thing like that.

But while he could understand me I couldn't him, though over and over again I've known that there was something he wanted to say to me, and that he was trying to say it. And, as he told me to, I've put down on paper the time the feeling came over me. And when he returned he'd show me his piece of paper; sure enough, when he was trying to speak to me was the very time I felt he was.

'Persevere,' he'd say. 'You and I'll get into telepathic communication yet before we've done; and when we do we'll show this ancient and highly civilised nation a thing or two. There's more to be got out of Egyptian tombs than mummies.'

What he meant I couldn't say. He was always talking in a way that was beyond me altogether. But I knew that he had some scheme in his head.

Now the feeling I have been talking about was on me again; that he was trying to say something he wanted me to understand. It was that feeling made me so sure he wasn't dead; though what he wanted to say I couldn't imagine. I knew that it was only my silliness which prevented me from finding out, and that made me so mad. I might be doing the very thing he didn't want me to; and I wouldn't do anything he didn't want me to do for all the world. I would have given something to have just been sensible enough to understand, but if you're not sensible always you can't be now and then. Though I have heard tell of how even idiots have an occasional gleam of good, sound, sterling sense.

Idiot or no idiot--and I know I'm not far off even at the best of times--how I did wish that I could have had one gleam just then!

CHAPTER XX

THE OPENING OF THE COFFIN

Shall I ever forget the day which followed?--the greatest in all my life! I'll have to be very old first, and far gone in my dotage. When I woke up in the morning I couldn't think where I was. I hadn't slept out of Little Olive Street, since James took me there after we were married, I don't think half-a-dozen times. And never in such a room as I was in then; nor yet in one anywhere like it.

When it all came back to me somehow I felt happier than I'd done for I don't know how long. I'd had a good night's sleep; not a worry on my mind. I could have sung as I lay in bed; yes, and laughed. There were the children; Jimmy on one side, and Pollie on the other. They'd wanted to make up a separate bed for them, but I wouldn't hear of it; and when that grand lady, who it seemed was the housekeeper, put on airs, as if they were her children, I let her see--and I felt sure that, before very long, their father'd be beside me too.

I wasn't a bit afraid. With the night even the last shadow of a doubt had gone. Whatever or whoever was in that mausoleum place they talked about, and which we should soon be going to see, I knew it wasn't James there. There might be trouble in it for some one, but I was sure it wasn't for me.

We had breakfast with the family--oh dear! it was a meal. There was the young gentleman and Miss Desmond and the children and me. I was on pins and needles all the time lest the children should do something they didn't ought. They weren't used to eating in company; and everything was that grand I was in a muddle enough myself without having to think of them. The servants--the serving-men that is--they were the worst. The children couldn't eat their breakfast for staring at them. They asked all sorts of questions--about their white stockings, and their white hair and I don't know what. The young gentleman seemed to think it was a joke. But Miss Desmond could see I wasn't comfortable; so she sent the men out of the room, and then we had a little peace.

It was a lovely morning when we started to drive to the station, Miss Desmond, the young gentleman, and me; in a beautiful carriage, with such a pair of horses! I'd have liked to have stroked them, only I didn't dare. I hadn't touched a horse since I was at home at the farm. There was a special whole carriage engaged for us in the train; and waiting for us on the platform was Sir Gregory Hancock, and Dr. Clinton, and, of course, Mr. FitzHoward. He was the most important person of us all. I don't know if he was supposed to be managing everything, but he might just as well have been. He was dressed in black from head to foot, with a band of crape right up to the top of his hat, and another round his arm. He did make me so angry. Just as though any one was dead who had to do with him--or me either. As if I didn't know my James was alive. I was dressed as I always am. When he saw it he looked at me as if I'd done something improper. About some things he has no sense.

Just as the train was going to start up came Mr. Howarth, and, with him, Lady Violet. I don't believe either of them was expected. Lady Violet was pretty stiff. She just gave Miss Desmond an icy kiss on the cheek, the young gentleman the tips of her fingers, and towards me she gave a little movement with her head, as if she wished me to understand that she saw me, and that was all she intended to do. Mr. Howarth seemed quite ill. He even walked like a sick man; coming along the platform with uncertain steps, as if he found it difficult to lift his feet.

We were a strange company, as the train bore us into the country out of the town. Mr. Howarth's face got on my nerves. That something was badly wrong with him one couldn't help seeing. I couldn't help looking his way every now and again, and every time I did my spirits sank a little lower. Lady Violet sat as straight as a broom handle; with pale face, shut lips, and gleaming eyes. Scarcely a word would she speak to any one. The way she treated the young gentleman--considering they were sweethearts, as Miss Desmond had told me--was queer. These two had a depressing effect on all of us. And when you put to that the fact that Mr. FitzHoward had taken it into his head all of a sudden to behave as if he were a mute at a funeral, and would do nothing except look straight along the tip of his nose, it will be seen that we weren't exactly lively. If it hadn't been for the two doctors I doubt if a dozen words would have been said. Somehow I felt that the whole affair amused Dr. Clinton; and he and Sir Gregory kept talking together in whispers nearly the whole of the way.

There were carriages to meet us at the station where we stopped--though I had begun to think that we never should get there; and presently we were bowling along through country lanes. After we had gone some way, perhaps three or four miles, we turned through some open gates into an avenue of trees. One thing I noticed, that they were all elms and silver beeches; and that they were planted in turns, so that when there was an elm on one side there was a beech upon the other.

It was a great old house we came to. We passed under an arch into a courtyard, where there was a fountain in the middle. If all this indeed belonged to my James I couldn't help wondering more and more why he gave it all up; and, above all, how he ever came to marry the likes of me. There was a huge fire blazing in the hall, which cheered it up a bit. It wanted brightening, for it was so large, and the black oak walls made it seem more than a little grim and sombre.

'We'll first have some lunch,' explained the young gentleman to us, as we stood all together in the hall; 'and then afterwards we'll drive over to the mausoleum.'

It wasn't a festive luncheon. Only the doctors and Mr. FitzHoward ate anything. I'm sure the rest of us would have been just as well without it; particularly Mr. Howarth, for he did nothing else but drink. In spite of myself I kept getting more and more into the dumps. The air of the place and the air of the people, the feeling, too, that something unpleasant was at hand, began to fill me with a sense of worry. Mr. Howarth's face and manner, and the way he drank, made it worse. He must have had two or three bottles of wine to himself; if not more, tumbler after tumbler. What wine it was I couldn't say. The fact that nobody else drank anything at all made the fact of his drinking so much all the more conspicuous. We all sat peering at him out of the corners of our eyes, wondering what was going to happen.

By the time lunch was over, and we were getting ready to start, I was all of a fidget. I was still persuaded that there was no bad news in store for me, but I was equally sure that there was for some one. What Mr. Howarth feared I couldn't think. I remembered once reading an account of a man who was hanged; how, as he approached the gallows, his face seemed to get more and more set, and he moved more and more like a rickety machine. It all came back to me as I looked at Mr. Howarth. I wished it wouldn't. In particular I did wish that he'd manage to put himself somewhere where I couldn't see him. The fear that was on him began to pass to me. Miss Desmond's face was like a sheet for whiteness. When she came close to me I saw that she was shivering, and that there were deep lines about the corners of her lips and eyes.

As a servant came to tell us all was ready, the young gentleman, noticing how strange she looked, came towards us with an anxious face. He himself didn't look as well as he might have done. But he was resolute and stern rather than white with the terror of what was to come; as she was.

'Edith, I think that you had better stay behind; and you, too.'

This was to me. But I would have no truck with any such suggestion. I had no fear of what I was going to see; I knew it wouldn't be my James. It was because I had no fear that I was resolved to see. Their eyes I wouldn't trust; not Mr. FitzHoward's, nor Dr. Clinton's, nor any one's, except my own. If James was dead, and in that coffin, of which I'd heard so much, then for me there was an end of everything. But I knew he wasn't, and, let them tell what tales they might, I'd require the evidence of my own eyes before I believed he was. It was right and proper that Miss Desmond should stay behind, for that she was in a piteous plight was plain; and this was a business in which her concern was as nothing compared to mine, but with me it was a different tale.

'I shall go. But you--' I turned to her; 'I think that you had better stay.'

'I can't! I can't!' she said. Then she dropped her voice. 'I daren't!'

The young gentleman's face grew darker.

'I shall have to forbid you. You are not well; there is no reason why you should come; rather there is why you shouldn't; and you must excuse my saying, Edith, that we want no scenes.'

'Don't--don't forbid me.' She put her hand on his arm. 'I promise you shall have no scene.'

She went; she and I alone together in a carriage. It turned out that the mausoleum wasn't very far away; half a mile, perhaps, or three-quarters; but she never would have walked it. All the way she sat holding my hand, sometimes squeezing it so tight that she hurt. And such a look upon her face! Just before we stopped she spoke; I expect because she couldn't keep still any longer.

'What do you think he's afraid of?'

The question took me aback; because I had been wondering myself, and the more I wondered the less I could think.

'I don't know. But if I were you I wouldn't trouble, whatever it is.'

'You wouldn't trouble? And he's my man?'

I knew she was hinting at what I'd said about James. When she spoke like that I'd nothing else to say.

I never saw anything like that mausoleum. It was like a little church built of granite. We went through a door into a sort of tiny room. The two doctors met us. Sir Gregory spoke.

'Everything is ready. Now, my dear ladies, this young lady'--meaning me--'is the only one of you for whose presence there is the slightest necessity. Lady Violet, and you, Miss Desmond, if you take my urgent advice, will remain here till she returns.'

He spoke in a way which showed that he meant that his advice should be attended to; I dare say the young gentleman had been saying a word or two upon the road. Anyhow they did as he wished. They stayed behind, and I went with him and Dr. Clinton into a kind of room which was beyond. It was a dome-shaped place. The walls and floor were of bare granite. The only light came through some small painted windows which were high above the ground. There were narrow holes in the walls here and there to let the air come through. All round the place were shelves; on some of the shelves were coffins. One of them, which had been taken, I expect, from where it had stood upon a shelf, was raised above the ground on a black pall in the centre of the floor. Four men, who looked like mechanics, stood one at either corner, each with a screw-driver in his hand.

'This is my brother's coffin' said the young gentleman. 'As I have already informed you, I thought it better that it should not be touched except in our presence. I need not remark that it has not been opened since it came.'

'How do we know? How do we know?'

This was Mr. Howarth.

'You do know,' was all the young gentleman replied. He nodded to the four men. They began to remove the screws.

The young gentleman had made me take his arm. I was glad of it before they'd got those screws all out. I don't know how many there were, but I thought they never would come to the end of them. No one spoke a word. I don't believe I ever breathed. I know I had to lean upon the young gentleman's arm to help me to stand. When they made ready to remove the lid I gave a start.

'Not yet,' he whispered. 'There's a shell within.'

I'd forgotten that the gentry are buried in two coffins, and sometimes three. When my turn comes I know that one will be enough. I shouldn't like to be fastened up in all that quantity of wood. Sure enough, when the lid was taken off, there was another one beneath. There was another weary lot of screws, though I don't think quite so many as before. Then one of the men said,

'That's the last.'

We all drew closer. The young gentleman spoke, his voice seeming strange.

'Remove the lid.'

The four men lifted it. Then all was still. I think that each was reluctant to be the first to see what might be seen. Mr. Howarth, indeed, drew back. I felt that the arm on which I leaned was trembling. That made me tremble too. The two doctors advanced together. They leaned over the open coffin. Sir Gregory spoke first.

'That is the Marquis of Twickenham.'

Then Dr. Clinton:

'Then the Marquis of Twickenham and Mr. Montagu Babbacombe were one; for that certainly is Mr. Babbacombe.'

When he said that, if it had not been for the young gentleman I believe I should have fallen. I could neither move nor speak. Mr. FitzHoward joined them.

'That's Babbacombe right enough; but he looks as if he were alive.'

'Alive? Alive?' gasped Mr. Howarth. 'Pray God--that he is alive.'

'He certainly is in a wonderful state of preservation,' murmured Dr. Gregory. 'Altogether beyond anything I expected to find.'

My strength returning, I tried to go forward. But the young gentleman stopped me.

'Be careful! Haven't you heard enough?'

'I want to see! I want to see!'

I went and saw.

I saw something lying in a coffin; something so like my James that it wasn't strange they should think that it was he. But I was his wife; and I saw with different eyes; so that I knew better in an instant.

'That's not my James! That's not my James! Why--I don't believe--that--it's a man at all.'

Dr. Clinton, putting out his hand, touched the face which lay there staring up at us.

'She's right. It's some sort of a dummy.'

There was a curious cry, like none I'd heard before, and the sound of a heavy body falling. It was Mr. Howarth tumbling to the ground. Miss Desmond, hastening in, knelt on the floor at his side.

BOOK III.--THE GENTLEMAN WITH NINE LIVES

THE ADVENTURES OF A GENTLEMAN IN SEARCH OF FORTUNE, AS TOLD BY HIMSELF

CHAPTER XXI

A PEER IN EMBRYO

Extraordinary how small the world Is. A remark which is not original. Thus making the fact still more conspicuous. For a thing must be very obvious to force itself on the attention of the ordinary ass.

Who would have thought that a lying scamp was telling the truth when I supposed him to be more than usually engaged in its perversion?

It was at a certain house of call in San Francisco that I first met him--M'Croskay's, where they knew a thing or two. There was a man standing before the fire when I went in. When he saw me he said, 'Hollo! You're me!' That was the first time I heard him speak the truth, and, until the other day, I believed it was the last. It was a fact. I was him; his *alter ego*; his brother Dromio. The joke was, he was a blackguard too. At a sale we might have been exploited as an interchangeable lot; and a bitter bargain. If there was anything he'd stick at, I never found it. He

was as mad as I was. And as great a liar. There was only one point on which we differed; and that was tongue. How that man could talk! A hundred and twenty thousand words to my one.

It was convenient, at times--that conversational gift of his. For he'd contradict himself so often in the course of half-an-hour that you'd begin to wonder if the truth hadn't slipped into the mess by accident. It seems it actually did. Though it took me ten years to discover just where.

He was fond of telling us who he was. But it seemed that he was so many people that one got to feel that it didn't matter over-much which particular one of them he might happen to be. One night when we'd been having a little euchre, and he'd had a bottle or so of Bourbon, and lost, and wanted to play on the nod, and we wouldn't have it, he started clearing his mind of what he thought of us. And he told us he was an English nobleman; one of the greatest English noblemen; and that his yearly income was in the neighbourhood of a million dollars. As he'd been a Russian banker a little earlier in the evening, and an Australian squatter a bit ahead of that, and two or three other things besides, we didn't think his tale was good enough to play for owings on. If I'd taken interest enough in what he said I'd have asked him what nobleman he was. Then I might have been in front of Mr. Smith.

Four years afterwards--six years ago--I married. It was all done in a week. So quick that I haven't got used to it yet. When I remember I'm married I brace myself, and a sort of shudder of wonder goes right through my bones. One promise I made to myself when I stood with her before the registrar--and to myself I always keep my word. That I'd keep her out of the mud in which I live, and move, and have my being. Whenever I've gone home to her I've left everything that wasn't clean outside. So that to this hour she's as simple as on the day on which I married her; and that's saying something; and she hasn't found me out. It's the queerest thing in the world to know that there's some one thinks you're good.

This encounter with Mr. John Smith is likely to cause a complication. As my life was already such an intricate piece of machinery, it didn't seem as if there was room for many more complications. But when he would have it that I was the Marquis of Twickenham, my thoughts flew back to that master of lies who was so like me, and who would have it that he was an English nobleman. It was something to wake from a thirty days' sleep--with occasional intervals for exercise and refreshment--to find oneself a Marquis. That interview with Mr. Smith at the York did tickle me. So I was a Marquis; and as a Marquis I was to die, for his benefit--and a thousand pounds. I'm a fool; we're all fools; but I'm not the kind of fool who can't see things when they're shown him. When he began to talk like that, I saw the infinite possibilities of the position in a flash. I'd had a go at some pretty big things in my time, but never at anything within a good few miles of this. The first thing was to die, and then---- Why then, we'd see. And so probably would Mr. Smith.

I died. I've died before, for money. Same as I've slept for thirty days. But it's not a pleasing pastime. Not the kind of thing I should recommend to any gentleman who's looking for some agreeable occupation with which to fill up his spare time. Especially when you have to ready yourself for it in two or three hours, as I had then. By the time you are ready you feel as if it was going to be a case of genuine death at last. I know I did. Then I had got up the game so thoroughly that I had to cling on to life by my eyelids.

The show was artistically a success; though, while it lasted, I kept thinking of the Chinaman from whom I'd learnt the trick. For reasons of his own--most of them connected with the police--that ingenious yellow terror was constantly finding it convenient to slip his cable. Once, as I'd cause for knowing, he slipped it so well that it parted for ever. As I lay that Monday afternoon, with the various members of the noble house of Twickenham standing by my bed of suffering, the memory of that Chinaman came back more clearly than I liked, and I devoutly hoped that I wasn't going to follow his example. It had been my original intention to prolong the agony, and to keep on dying for a day or two. There were a good many little hints I wanted to pick up from the members of my family. But the agony turned out to be so very real that the idea of prolonging it didn't appeal to me one little bit. So we had to part before we'd really met; and I had to postpone, until after my death, the acquirement of the information I stood so much in need of.

It was not surprising that the old fossil of a doctor announced that I was dead; for I had done the thing so extremely well, and was in such a state of collapse, that I myself wasn't sure I wasn't.

My experiences, on that occasion, by no means terminated with my decease. It's an odd sensation to be 'laid out' by a lady of a certain age and peculiar habits. It's a funny thing to be measured for your coffin. It's a still funnier one to be placed inside it. And it was when I was placed inside it that one of the not least difficult and delicate parts of the game began.

I've often thought that there's something to be said for an Irish wake, besides the pleasing opportunity it gives for the consumption of Irish whisky. And still more for the custom which obtains of never leaving a corpse alone until it's underground. From my point of view. For if they hadn't left me alone I'd have been in a trifling fix. Mr. Smith's idea was that he should appear upon the scene before the undertaker's men, that I there and then should come to life, and that we should screw down the lid upon an empty coffin. But apart from the fact that I didn't trust Mr. Smith, not half as far as I could see him, that notion of his was worth just nothing. He hadn't allowed for the absence of my weight from that elegant chest. They'd have to be a rummy lot of undertakers' men who couldn't tell, even when they were dead drunk, an empty coffin from a full

one. But as I'd made arrangements of my own for supplying the deficiency I didn't trouble to go into details with Mr. Smith. As things turned out, from every point of view, it was just as well I had.

I took with me to Cortin's Hotel my double. There were only two men in the world who ever knew of its existence. I'm one; the other's dead. Real dead; and not for money. He was a Frenchman named Pétion--Edward Pétion. He was a modeller in wax. He had been attached to a waxworks museum in Paris; where, I fancy, propriety according to English notions was not the strongest point. That had been before I made his acquaintance. At the time I knew him the only thing to which he was attached was absinthe. The bonds of that attachment were never relaxed. He was penniless. And though he required no food he did want drink. With that I provided him on condition that he made my double. And he did.

It was made on the principle of a lay figure, with flexible limbs; and in every respect was an exact copy of the great original--so far, that is, as the means available permitted. The result altogether exceeded my expectations. It was my weight to an ounce. And when it was lying down, with its eyes closed, not the keenest observer, standing at a little distance--unless he had some prior cause of his own for doubt--would suspect that it wasn't me, especially when the light was a little bad. In support of that statement I need only mention that the public--and even my own manager--has stared at it when it was inside a glass frame without entertaining the faintest suspicion of the substitution which had taken place. With one accord they imagined themselves to be looking at me.

This was the double which I had taken with me to Cortin's Hotel. And when the time came that I judged myself to have had enough of being cribbed and cabined in that elegant example of the undertaker's art, I just got out of it, placed the garments in which I was attired on Myself No. 2, and laid him comfortably to rest in the position I had recently quitted. That any one would detect the change, without entering on a closer examination than in such a case was likely, I knew from experience was in the highest degree improbable.

My intention was, when Mr. Smith did arrive, to come out of my hiding-place, tell him what I had done, and so render detection practically impossible. But, as it happened, the fact that the undertakers' men came first introduced a new factor into the situation. They made no bones about the matter. Only one fellow glanced at the corpse, and his one remark was to the effect that 'the old chap looks pretty fresh.' Without any waste of time they proceeded to put on the lid. I could not help reflecting, as I viewed the proceedings, that it was just as well that things weren't what they seemed.

Just as they had got the last screw home, Mr. Smith did arrive. I was curious to know what would happen now. Practically nothing happened. He let them walk off with the coffin, in the full belief that I was its contents, without moving so much as a finger to save me from the living death to which he supposed me to be doomed. Beyond doubt his intention was to murder, and so rid himself of the unfortunate wretch whom he had incited to conspiracy. I had a queer shivery-shakery feeling as I thought of the fate I had escaped. I also reflected that, although he didn't know it, he had put another card into my hand. Hardly had he left the room, than I followed him down the stairs--not as my own proper self, but as a bearded individual who they probably imagined, in the confusion, was one of the guests of the house.

I bought a portmanteau, together with the necessary clothes with which to fill it, crossed town in a cab, and, as Mr. Leonard, took rooms in a highly respectable house in Clifford Street, Dalston. There, while maturing my plan of campaign, I watched the issue of events. I wasn't going to die and be buried for a mere monkey, as, in course of time, Mr. Smith would learn. In trying murder he'd given the game away, and not only so, had destroyed, for ever, his own peace of mind. I knew the kind of man he was. There are plenty like him. You probably see one when you look in the glass. To cut some one's throat is the shortest way out of heaps of holes into which one gets. It is only what some call conscience, and others blue funk, which stays one's hand. It wasn't the cutting of the throat which he objected to, but what came after. He'd be glad enough to have me boarded up, and out of the way, for ever and a day. But I'd lay odds that there'd come times when he'd hear me talking to him out of that box; and at those times he'd not be happy. It's a nasty moment when the man you dropped comes out of the hole into which you shovelled him to whisper in your ear.

He'd worry a good deal about the man he'd buried alive, being, unless I erred, of a worrying nature; and then, when he'd had about enough of worrying, the live man would come unburied; and that, so far as he was concerned, would be a finisher. The remainder of the proceedings wouldn't be of much interest to him.

During the next few days I saw in some of the papers that the Marquis of Twickenham had died. They didn't all of them come out with the news together. It appeared that there had been something of a private character about that deathbed. It seemed to me that the family wanted to hush the matter up. But nowadays when the British Press has got to make a living out of anything or everything, hushing-up's not easy. The funeral was quite private. The interment took place in the family vault at Cressland in the presence of only a few members of the family. I wondered if Mr. Smith was one of them. After the funeral was over I bet his thoughts wandered Cressland way oftener than he quite liked.

Then there was more about it in the society papers.

I fancy the late Marquis wasn't altogether a credit to his family. There were some funny stories and hints galore. This was a pity--because it would have been my desire to have figured as a man of unblemished character. I always have had aspirations towards the stainless life. Odd how difficult it is to attain to one's ideal. Every time I've been some one else he's been a scamp. And it really did look as if this British nobleman was going to turn out to be the worst egg in the basket.

But there were alleviations. I'm not denying it. They were alleviations of a good and solid kind. That aristocrat at San Francisco hadn't been far out when he talked of his million dollars a year. I made some roundabout inquiries in the proper quarter, and learned that there were accumulations in the neighbourhood of a million sterling awaiting the Marquis's going home. That was apart from the annual income. The property had been carefully nursed, and those seven figures represented savings only. That's what it is to have a reasonably honest man of business. I do like honesty in another man. A million! If I could only get hold of that I wouldn't worry about the income for a year or two.

This was going to be a bigger thing even than I'd supposed. What kind of an idiot that San Francisco ruffian could have been was beyond my fathoming. I've had a few deals with sample idiots, but he was too much in the wholesale. I took it that he'd cut and run because, happening to be one of nature's blackguards, he'd done something, or perhaps two or three somethings, which didn't smell altogether sweet in the nostrils of the good. If he'd only had his character to live upon, that would have been reason enough. But seeing that there was somebody else's money, in truckfulls, the fact that that was all he had got was just the reason why he should keep hard by.

The members of the Twickenham family would find that the head of the house had changed; mercifully. Time had worked the usual wonders; we'll call it time. The days of his prodigality were at an end; relatively, let us say. And he wasn't anything near the fool he used to be. Also, certain members of the family would find that he'd developed quite a novel strain of generosity.

There sometimes is a motive for crime--though a sufficient motive is not by many chalks as indispensable a criminal property as wise folk like to think. Plenty do evil for the love of doing it. I've tried both. I've found doing evil quite as amusing as doing good. Often more. Even when you don't get any pull out of it when it's done. It's the sporting instinct in a man. When a man tells me that he's fond of sport, I know that there's more significance in his words than he himself supposes. But in the case of Mr. John Smith the motive was pretty plain. The Marquis had better be dead than keep away from his sorrowing family. You could have an occasional cut at him if you knew where he was; you couldn't if he was the Lord knows where. In his absence the law looked after his interests; cuts--except by the law itself--were barred. And there were so many who wanted one--including Mr. John Smith. So it was necessary that the Marquis should die, in order that he might have a cut at his successor.

If I had only understood what he was driving at from the first, things might have been arranged in quite a different way. I might have said:

'You're quite right, Douglas, my boy. I'm the long-lost Twickenham. Your recognition of me does you the greatest credit. Ask no questions, and you'll be surprised to find how, in certain directions, my character's developed. If the blessed lot of you were starving, I'm the man to fill your hungry bellies. How many of you are there? Six? What do you say to five thousand a year apiece; and, say, fifteen thousand down to clear off backwardations? You shall have my bond for it; my bond, my boy. It shall be a first charge on my estate. Ah! in the school of experience one learns what it is to be wise.'

And then perhaps I might have winked. Yet I don't know. Under such circumstances with a man like Smith a wink might be a mistake. He's one of those who like to pretend that you believe, and that he believes, that t-h-e-f-t spells straight as a die. No winking for him. It turns up the right place in the dictionary with too much of a rush.

Anyhow we might have arranged matters right along. I could have entered into the possession of my ancestral estates straight away, and we'd all have been as happy as the day was long. But that's where the trouble is; the mistakes you make at first, through ignorance, they're hard to repair. Sometimes bitter hard.

As things were, the game was going to be a lot more difficult, both for me and Smith. Though Smith, just at present, didn't know. In the first place I should have to learn, with a quantity of surprise which was on so large a scale as to be altogether beyond the power of words to describe, how he'd been deluded by a two-faced scoundrel. I didn't die. 'No. The Marquis is alive. My dearest dears, I'm he! That wasn't the head of the house of Twickenham you saw sink to rest. Certainly not! The tears you shed--I didn't notice any, but there might have been a leakage--were all clean thrown away. The gentleman you have boxed up--well, I shouldn't be surprised if they had to open the coffin to find out who he was.' When they did find out I'd laugh. I wonder if Smith would join me. Anyhow he'd have the straight griffin that if he wasn't on my side trouble for him was only beginning. Recognise the rightful Marquis, debts would be paid, and there'd be a nice little yearly income. Be too nastily inquisitive, and it would be clearly shown to Mr. Smith that he

was the kind of felon with whom the law is rarely gentle.

Now it's an odd thing that the chief difficulty which confronted me was one of which most men would have thought nothing at all. I'd a wife and children. They're possessions of which plenty of men would be glad to get relieved. I didn't happen to be one of them. I've tried all sorts of things. I've had plenty of money. I've been in some queer corners of the world, and seen some queer capers, and done them. There are games I can play, at which no man can hold his own with me; nor yet begin. But there's only one thing which doesn't taste nasty in my mouth. And that's my wife. She's the only thing I ever came across that was quite worth having; and, my God, she is. It's a complete illustration of life's little ironies that I should have been the man to have got her; for though she doesn't know it, inside and out we're as unlike each other as the poles are far asunder. During the last six years it had been one of my chief ends and aims not to let her find it out. And she hadn't--to that hour.

Now what was going to happen? In this game which I was starting on, where did she come in?

If I'd laid myself out to play it on different lines from the first, she might have been the Marchioness of Twickenham. Jimmy, when his turn came, might have been a peer of the realm. And yet I didn't know. That would have been to have smirched her with my brush. If I ever was bowled out, which was a prospect I always had to face, they'd possibly try to make out, and would certainly think, that she'd been in the know with me. That would be as death to Mary.

The more I thought it over the more it seemed to me that that cock wouldn't fight. Apart from the fact that I meant, as the Marquis of Twickenham, to disavow all connection with Mr. Montagu Babbacombe, who had behaved so basely in deluding Mr. Howarth, it was obvious to me that it would still be the better policy to keep Mary out of my ditches, and without the knowledge of their existence. I always had lived, as all men do, and, I suppose, most women, a double, treble, or quadruple life, as circumstances required. For a little arrangement of that sort, in the future, I should be better placed than ever. I only had to remove the lady from Little Olive Street, and ask her to acquaint no one with her new address. She need never know me as anything but James. As the Marquis I should be entitled to my little eccentricities; his lordship always had indulged in them. And after an absence of fifteen years, no one could cavil if I still continued to disappear whenever the humour took me. Mr. and Mrs. Merrett would have a better time together than they had ever had before.

CHAPTER XXII

A MARQUIS IN FACT

Since the Marquis of Twickenham was alive I thought it would be just as well to announce the fact in the grand style. So one morning, having arrived at the conclusion that it was about time that the announcement should be made, I paid up what was owing for those rooms in Clifford Street, Dalston, had my portmanteau put on the top of a cab, and having put myself inside, drove off to Twickenham House in St. James's Square. It was a good horse, and as it took me along as a horse ought to, from the tingle at the tips of my fingers, and the tickle at the balls of my feet, which made me feel I'd like to do something high-toned in the way of fancy dancing, I knew that I was going to enjoy myself.

Cab stopped; I stepped out, overpaid cabby, got in some work on the knocker and the bell. Door opened and there was a young six-footer, in a lovely livery, beautiful silk stockings, and with a teaspoonful of flour on his manly head, looking down at me. I just walked past him as if he wasn't there, tipped my thumb over my shoulder and remarked,

'Luggage.'

He didn't seem as if he knew what to make of me at all.

'I beg your pardon, sir, what name?'

'What name?' I looked him up; I couldn't look him down, he was a size too large. 'Bring in that luggage.'

I don't know whether it was the power of the human eye, or what it was; but he didn't need a second telling. He nipped down the steps, took the portmanteau which the cabman was holding

out, and deposited it in the hall as neat and nice as ninepence. While he was engaged in doing this another gentleman in the same rigging came sailing up to me.

'What name, sir?'

'Don't you know me?'

'No, sir.'

'Don't you call me "sir" again, or you never will.'

I turned into a room upon my left--the first there was to turn into. It was a good large room, but it wanted livening up. There was too much darkness about the place, and too much solidity about the furniture, to suit me. Footman No. 2 had followed me to the door.

'May I ask your name, sir?'

'Didn't I tell you not to call me "sir "?'

Plainly he was like his friend--didn't know what to make of me.

'I'll send Mr. Gayer to you.'

Presently in came a tall, thin old party, with a stoop. Old family servant written large all over him. Bound to have been in the house his whole life long. Served my father; probably my grandfather too. So I shot an arrow into the air.

'Hollo, Gayer! Why, you're as thin as I am.'

He came right into the room and took a squint at me.

'My lord!'

He gave a little hop.

'How do? I want something to eat. Now.'

The old chap was trembling all over.

'My lord, I--I'm delighted to see you, if I may make so bold as to say so, but I--I don't understand. It's been given out that your lordship is dead.'

'I'm not dead. As you'll find if you don't soon feed me. Where's every one--or any one?'

'The Marquis has gone to Cressland.'

'Who's gone to Cressland?'

'Your lordship's brother. I--I've got in the way of calling him the Marquis.'

'Then get out of it. What's he gone to Cressland for?'

'Well, my lord, it's not generally known in the house, but I believe he's gone to look at your lordship's coffin.'

'To look at my what?'

'At the coffin, my lord, which your lordship's supposed to be in.'

'Inside or out?'

'I rather think the coffin's to be opened. I imagine some doubt has arisen.'

'If I'm the doubt, I have arisen. Well. Gayer, I'll talk to you another time. At present I want something to eat.'

'Something shall be ready within five minutes. Would your lordship like to go upstairs while it's being prepared?'

'I don't mind.'

'Your lordship's brother occupies the blue room, would your lordship like the oak room?'

'I don't care. Anything will do--for the present.'

I emphasised the last three words, to prepare his mind for the alterations which were at hand. Directly I got into the oak room I knew that if I was to continue to reside in that establishment there'd have to be as many as several. I don't like old-fashioned houses: I don't believe I like old-fashioned anything. If I had my choice, I'd have every thing, and every one, about me up-to-date with the procession; not a mile and a half behind it. That great grim room, with the black oak

walls, and the catafalque of a bed wouldn't suit me one little bit. I'd sooner have it a study in rose-coloured silk.

Things had begun well. The mischief was that experience had inclined me to the belief that a good beginning meant a bad ending. Still it was something to have been recognised by Mr. Gayer. It was also something to have learned what was taking place at Cressland. I'd no notion what had caused suspicion to be aroused. If, within a fortnight, Mr. Smith's conscience had pricked him to that extent, then he must be possessed of an outsize in consciences. Anyhow they'd find that it wasn't me who'd been putting in a stay at the family mausoleum.

As I was going downstairs I heard the sound of children's laughter coming from a room above. It sounded queer in that old house. Youth seemed out of place within those black walls. But I'd soon change all that. Youth's what I keep betting on all the time. Where it don't go, I don't go either.

'There are children in the house,' I said to Gayer, as he was settling me at table.

'There are, my lord. They came yesterday. I hope they didn't annoy your lordship.'

'No; they didn't annoy me.' The idea of children annoying me made me smile. I never met a child yet with whom I wasn't on terms of friendship at first sight. 'Send down to Mr. Foster and tell him to come up to me at once.'

'Mr. Stephen Foster?'

'Mr. Stephen. I suppose he's alive.'

'Oh, yes, my lord, and very well. If your lordship will excuse my saying so, he'll be as much surprised to see your lordship as gratified. He told me with his own lips that he was present at your lordship's deathbed.'

'Was he? One day I may return the compliment. Perhaps I'll be present at his. Has he gone with my brother to Cressland?'

'Not that I'm aware of. In fact, I don't believe he knows Lord Reginald has gone.'

'Then fetch him along to me.'

They fetched him along in such fashion that he arrived as I was finishing lunch. I made a hasty meal, for I was aware that a curious interview was close ahead. I can do as much on an empty stomach as most men; but all the same when serious business is on hand, I like to have it comfortably filled. And I'd made up my mind from the very first that I'd have one meal in Twickenham House if I never had another.

Gayer came into the room with an air.

'Mr. Foster has arrived, my lord.'

'Show him in here.'

There appeared the pertinacious old buffer who'd tried to worry me into signing a will. It didn't require more than half an eye to see he was all of a tremble.

'Hollo, Foster! I hear that you recently assisted at my decease.'

'I--I 'He came two or three steps more forward so that he could inspect me at closer quarters. 'It is the Marquis of Twickenham! But--I don't understand.'

'Nor I. I've come back to make a little stay, and I'm received as if I were a ghost.'

'The truth is, we have been made the victims of a most audacious fraud. Your lordship has returned at a most opportune moment. I was just about to hand over the conduct of affairs to Lord Reginald.'

'The deuce you were.'

'It's--it's a most incomprehensible business altogether.' He took out his handkerchief to wipe his brow; agitation actually made him perspire. 'I have advanced Lord Reginald a considerable sum of money.'

'My money or your own?'

'Your lordship's money. But, of course, you can call upon me to refund. I can only plead in mitigation that I supposed myself to have stood beside your deathbed, and to have seen your lordship actually expire. A gigantic imposition has been practised; though how, at present, I altogether fail to understand.'

'How much has he had?'

'I'm afraid as much as twenty thousand pounds.'

'What's he done with it?'

'I have reason to believe that the major part of it has been transferred to Mr. Howarth.'

'What, Douglas! Does he think I'm dead?'

'Mr. Howarth was the prime mover----' He stopped. 'I wish to say nothing--speaking, as I do, as one in the dark--which I may have to recall hereafter, so I will simply observe that it was Mr. Howarth who discovered you.'

'Discovered me?'

'Discovered, that is, the person who pretended to be you.'

'You don't mean to say that Douglas Howarth mistook another man for me?'

'He did.'

'Was the fellow so like me, then?'

'Now that I am actually standing in your lordship's presence I perceive that there are points of difference. But the resemblance was so strong that at the time I was deceived, as were the others.'

'This is a very funny story, Foster.'

'It is. And to you, my lord, I am aware that it must seem strange indeed. A thorough investigation will have to be made, when I think your lordship will allow that I was not deluded so easily, or so egregiously, as may at present appear.'

'On that point, as matters stand, I can, of course, say nothing. But since I've always understood that you were a smart man, Foster, I take it that the man who took you in must have got up early. How much has gone besides that twenty thousand?'

'Nothing. You will find everything in perfect order. The estate was never in a more flourishing condition. And there is a very large sum standing to your lordship's credit.'

'In cash?'

'In investments which are as good as cash.'

'I like your end better than your beginning.'

'May I ask where, all this time, your lordship has been?'

'You may.'

'Your absence has been the cause of great anxiety. Where has your lordship been?'

'Foster, do you remember that I never did like answering questions?'

'I have a clear recollection of that trait in your lordship's character.'

'I've got it still--that trait. I said you might ask, and you have asked; so that's over and done with. What's the next business on the paper?'

We talked figures. Very pleasant figures they were--from my point of view. I learnt more from Mr. Stephen Foster about things I wanted to learn than I should have thought would have been possible in such a very few minutes. It never seemed to enter his head for a single instant that he was being had a second time. His one desire apparently was to rid himself of the consequences of his original blunder as completely as he possibly could. He wanted me, in short, to still give him credit for shrewdness, even though on one occasion he had lacked discretion. And I gave it him. Not ungrudgingly; for that, I felt, would have been to display an undue willingness to overlook his error. But I allowed him to think, by degrees, that his observations were carrying conviction to my mind, and that I perceived that, after all, he was not such a fool as I had at first supposed.

While we were still talking some one came into the room with a rush. It was Lord Reginald--with his hat on his head. I guess he was in too much of a flurry to have thought of removing it.

'What is this I hear? Foster! Who is this?'

He spoke with a bit of a splutter, as though his words tumbled over each other, he was in such a hurry to get them out.

'Lord Reginald, this is your brother--the Marquis of Twickenham.'

I rather fancy Foster gave me the whole of my title because it was like a slap in the face to the

young gentleman at the door. There was no love lost between the pair. My affectionate relative frowned till his eyebrows met at the top of his nose.

'Twickenham!'

I wasn't uneasy, and I wasn't flurried. Though this was an odd way of meeting--and greeting--one's brother. It was plain he'd rather I'd kept away. So I just turned in my chair, and I looked at him; this time up and down; and I did a drawl.

'This Reggie? 'Pon my word, how you have grown!'

He came forward to the table, leaning against it with both hands, and bending over it to stare.

'Are you--are you--Foster, are you sure this is my brother?'

'There is certainly no doubt this time, Lord Reginald.'

'But--but--what infernal trick has been played on us?'

'That is what I propose immediately to learn.'

I chimed in.

'And I also.'

'Possibly,' suggested Foster, 'Howarth may be able to offer an explanation.'

I came in.

'Douglas! Don't tell me that Douglas mistook another chap for me. It's too thin.'

'We all mistook him.'

'All? Who's all? What did you know about it? I don't believe you know me now. You were a nice little boy when I saw you last, and I shouldn't have recognised you; that moustache does make a difference. I don't feel flattered. You seem to have been in a deuce of a hurry to take it for granted I was dead. Sorry to disappoint you, but do wait till I've had my innings.'

'Where have you been all these years?'

'What the deuce has that to do with you?'

'We never heard from you; we thought you were dead.'

'It was because you didn't think that I was dead that you arranged that some one else should die instead of me. It's lucky for you that I've come now. If I'd waited till you'd got both your fists in the money-box there might have been trouble. And do you mean to say that you've got some rank outsider down at Cressland in a coffin which bears my name?'

'I don't mean to say anything of the kind.'

'Then who have you got? Are you suggesting that you've got me?'

'That--that's the most infernal part of it! A pretty trick's been played by some one! It's not a man at all.'

'Not a man? Is it a woman?'

'It's a confounded doll!' I leaned back in my chair and laughed. He didn't seem to like it. 'It's all very well to laugh, but it's got up so confoundedly like you that--that----' He hesitated; then brought it out with a plunge. 'Look here, Twickenham, has all this been a joke of yours?'

Although I didn't know it, the question offered me the greatest chance I had had--or was to have. If I'd only owned up that it was a joke, and I'd been amusing myself by bamboozling Howarth, and all the lot of them, I believe--well, I believe it might have been easier. But we're bats--even those of us who have the keenest sight; and I didn't see at the moment what the result of a negative would be. So I let him have it straight from the shoulder; the funniest part being that I thought I was doing something cute.

'What do you mean? Or, rather, perhaps you hadn't better tell me what you do mean. We might both of us be sorry. I don't want to prosecute my only brother; but when, to cover your own action, you suggest that I've been conspiring to defraud myself for your benefit, it's a trifle steep. Especially as Foster tells me you've already got hold of twenty thousand pounds.'

He put himself on a chair by the table, and he covered his face with his hands.

'I wish I was dead!' was the observation which he made.

While Foster and I were watching him some one else appeared at the door--Augustus

FitzHoward.

CHAPTER XXIII

SURPRISES

Seeing FitzHoward gave me just a little something of a turn. I got then and there the first faint glimmer at the mistake I'd made. But as it's a motto of mine to put on an extra size in smiles each time I'm downed, I just sat tight and wondered who he was. There didn't seem to be much in the wonder line about him. He came sailing straight across at me, his hand stretched out. 'Mr. Babbacombe!'

His tone betokened joy. I knew FitzHoward. I wasn't responsive.

'Who's this person with his hat on his head? Has it become the rule here for men to enter a room with their hats on?'

This was one for Reggie as well as Fitz. Both hats were off before I'd hardly finished. Fitz's enthusiasm seemed a little damped. His hand went back.

'Mr. Babbacombe, I--I was afraid you were dead.'

'What are you talking about? Foster, I hope I don't happen to have dropped into the wrong house by any chance. First I'm mistaken for a ghost, then--for the deuce knows who.'

Fitz kept staring at me as if he couldn't stare enough.

'You're either Montagu Babbacombe or his ghost!'

'Sorry, but I don't chance to be either. And as I've not the pleasure of your acquaintance, and don't desire your intrusion here, allow me to remind you that the street's handy. Foster, touch the bell.'

Foster touched the bell. Reggie interposed.

'Twickenham, this gentleman, Mr. FitzHoward, has rendered me a very great service in exposing the fraud that has been practised.'

I sat tight. A footman appeared.

'Show Lord Reginald's acquaintance to the front door.'

Poor Fitz was all of a fluster.

'I'm a man who requires no second hint that my room's preferred to my company, but if you're not Montagu Babbacombe I'll eat my hat.'

He clapped it on to his head as if to illustrate his meaning. Reggie stopped him as he was going.

'I am very much obliged to you, Mr. FitzHoward, for what you have done for me; and trust to be able to avail myself of an early opportunity to tender you my thanks in a more suitable form.'

'My lord, you are welcome. Any little service I may do you I am always yours to command.'

Out marched Fitz, with banners flying. I turned my attention to Reggie.

'Reggie, to save trouble later on, may I call your attention to two points? The first is, that I'm not dead. The second is, that I should be obliged by your not using my house as if it were your own. As I have still something which I wish to say to Foster, will you have the extreme kindness to allow me to say it?' He was turning away with--I'll bet a pound!--unfraternal feelings in his breast--strange how little brotherly affection some men have--when a thought occurred to me. 'By the way, where's Douglas?'

'He's ill.'

'Ill? Since when?'

'Since this morning.'

'I asked you where he was.'

'He's at home with Violet.'

'Violet? Is that that young sister of his?'

'Young? She's old enough to be my promised wife.'

As I looked at him he eyed me with quite a disagreeable expression in his eyes. I whistled.

'Is that so? Indeed! I really think that I begin to see how extremely desirous it was that I should be dead. What a happy family you would have been! So sorry I'm alive. Dead men's shoes always are slow travellers. Thank you, Reggie. I shall perhaps see you again a little later on.'

I feel convinced he'd have liked to hit me as he went out. There's an utter lack in some people's bosoms of that true sympathy, the absence of which strikes a fatal blow at the very root of the family system. It's a fact; I've noticed it before. Why, because your brother merely twists your nose off your face, should you resent it? It's that kind of feeling which tears an united family asunder.

I improved the occasion with Foster; filling him, I feel sure, with a profound conviction that there wasn't much difference between the Marquis of fifteen years ago and his lordship of to-day. I had to be him all the way along; and I was. When I'm playing a character I like to be thorough. When I'd been thorough enough I shunted Foster.

I felt a sort of desire to be alone. I'd been in some funny places, but this did seem as though it was going to be the funniest. It looked as if this was going to be the Julius Cæsar kind of thing. As if there wasn't to be any opposition at all. I'd only had to hang up my hat in the hall to become king of the castle. When I'd wanted all that a chap had got I'd always been game to fight him; but I wasn't used to his handing it over to me, without so much, even, as a trifling argument, with a remark that it was mine. It looked as if I was in for a real good thing.

And yet--human nature's a freak; you never know where to class it!--and yet, I wasn't sure that I felt so inclined to kick up my heels as I expected. The Marquis of Twickenham was an uncommonly fine person to be: for those who liked to be the Marquis of Twickenham. I hadn't been him much more than an hour, and already I was beginning to wonder if I did. There were houses and lands, and money at the bank, and servants to kick, and sacred duties to play old Harry with; but--well, I was starting to doubt if there was freedom. The kind of freedom I was used to, which has always been to me like the air I've breathed. On my davy, I didn't wonder that lying scoundrel made a bolt of it. A chap like that would have been clean wasted in Twickenham House. Maybe he wasn't all the fool I took him for.

One thing was sure, I was going to be as free as I could manage. What was the use of being lord of all if I wasn't above grammar? If there came over me an inclination to dine in my shirt sleeves he'd be a bold man who would try to stop me. And yet, as I went up again to that oak room, I was uncomfortably conscious that, after all, circumstances might prove too strong; and that underneath that roof I'd have to be decent. It wasn't an inspiriting kind of thought, and I plumped down into an armchair with the solemn conviction strong upon me that the first thing the Marquis of Twickenham had got was the hump.

I hadn't been there two minutes before old Gayer came in and wanted to know if he should valet me. Here was an occasion on which it was necessary to begin where I meant to go. The idea of having that old fossil messing about gave me the twitters. So I spoke to him like a father.

'Gayer, you're a man in the prime of life.'

I stopped, so as to give him his chance.

'I'm an old man now, my lord.'

'Oh, no, you're not; and I'll tell you how I know. If you'd seen one twenty-fifth part as much of the world as I have, you'd know at a glance that I am the kind of man who does everything for himself that can be done. It's because you're so young that you don't see it.'

'But your lordship will have a body servant?'

'What'll you bet on it? Come! I don't like the man who won't stand shoulder to shoulder with his own opinion; what are you laying?'

'Well, my lord, I'm not a betting man.'

'Sorry to hear it, Gayer--because I am. Lay my boots against yours on any little game you like. A man of your age ought not to have allowed the higher branches of a religious education to remain so neglected. Good-bye. When I want you I'll ring; I suppose there are bells to be broken.

And I don't want you, or any one, till I do ring. Hear, and then bear that carefully in mind.'

He'd hardly gone, with something about him which seemed to say he couldn't altogether make me out--I've noticed that look on people a good many times; I don't know how it gets there; I'm sure I'm simple to the breaking point--I say that dear old Mr. Gayer had hardly gone, when somebody started fumbling at the handle of the door, and presently open it came with a rush. When I saw that handle start jigging about I said to myself--

'Here's Gayer's venerable grandfather come to know if he can curl my hair. From the way he's playing upon that handle, I should say he'd got a touch of the shakes. I'll give him another touch before I've done with him.'

It struck me that the old-servant ticket was going to be run for all that it was worth. The sooner I buried the entire boiling, whether at Cressland or elsewhere, the more comfortable the Marquis would be. This conviction had me at grips; and I was just about to give it due and proper expression, when who should come flying into the room but--Jimmy! My Jimmy!

I do believe that that was the first time in my life I was ever really taken by surprise. I'm not the sort of person that's easily amazed. Always expecting the unexpected I get used to meeting it when it comes. But that time it had me fair. As we stared at each other I don't know which of the two was the more astonished. But he's a spry kid, is Jimmy. He knows his father when he sees him. And when he had got it clear that it was me, he came at me with a run.

'Dad!' he cried. 'Dad!'

Now I was in a quandary. I was getting into the region of the unusual. I wanted to put my arms about that boy, lift him on to my knee, and say, 'Hollo, Jimmy!' But if I went on like that, the show'd be busted. He'd go about telling people that I was his father. One of his father's two thousand and forty-five names was Montagu Babbacombe. I'd faced it out that I wasn't acquainted with any party of that name; supposing, when I said so, that I'd counted the cost. But this was an item which hadn't figured in the bill as I'd got it down at all. If I wasn't careful the Marquis would have to walk downstairs. So I kind of compromised.

'Little boy, whose little boy are you?'

'I'm your little boy--yours! yours! yours!'

He put his hands on my knees, and began to caper about as if he was happy. Now I'd been in the habit of playing with that small child a kind of a game in which I'd ask him whose little boy he was, pretending I didn't know; and he'd say, 'Yours! yours! yours!' He thought I was playing that game with him then. Which was where he was wrong.

'You take a good deal for granted, young gentleman.'

'I don't! I don't! I don't!'

He flung himself against me, still thinking I was playing the game.

'I say you do. May I ask how you've come here!'

'I came with Pollie.' Before I could stop him or guessed what he was going to do, he was off to the door, which he had left wide open, and had started to bawl,' Pollie! Pollie! Here's dad! Here's dad!'

Children have a pleasant habit of bawling. But I don't think I was ever so struck by it as I was then. I was after him like a shot.

'Here, I say. You mustn't make that noise!'

I might as well have talked to the wall. When he'd got a thing to mention he was bound to mention it--at the top of his voice.

'I'm playing hide-and-seek with Pollie, and she won't know where I am. Pollie! Pollie! Here's dad!'

I had to throw him up in the air before he'd stop. By then it was too late. Tearing down the stairs came Pollie, my heart in my mouth for fear she'd tumble, and if I'd shut the door in her face she'd have dashed herself against it. I had to let her in, and shut the door behind her when she was in, and hope that there was nobody about with long ears and sharp wits.

'Allow me to ask what you young persons mean by behaving in this extraordinary manner; for whom do you take me?'

'You're dad! dad! dad!'

There they were, bouncing about me like two indiarubber balls. They still thought I was playing the game. The worst of it was, I almost felt as if I was, myself. I could hardly keep my countenance, in spite of the stake which was dependent on it.

'Pray may I inquire why you call me dad?'

'Tause you are!' cried Pollie. 'Give me a tiss!'

I picked up the small bundle of girl and kissed her; till her laughter might have been heard on the other side of the square. While I was still engaged in this operation the door was opened again. When I turned to see who might be this fresh disturber of my privacy, there was Mary.

Then I knew the fat was in the fire. This was quite a different kettle of fish. Playing the fool with those two children was one thing. Admitting myself to be Mr. James Merrett, after my repudiation of Mr. Montagu Babbacombe, was altogether another. I hadn't time to consider; to ask myself what was the meaning of her presence there. It was a case of act first and think afterwards. That was what I did.

A smile lit up her face when she saw me standing there with Pollie in my arms. With the prettiest cry she came towards me, holding out both her hands. There never was a lovelier woman in this world than my Mary; nor a better shaped. And her movements are in keeping. I'm keen on grace in a woman. If there's anything more graceful than she is, whether she sits, or stands, or moves, it's in a picture. I'll swear it isn't flesh and blood. As she came, with her arms stretched towards me, I thought that I'd never seen her looking better.

'James!'

I'd have given a trifle to have been able to take her in my arms. But I didn't dare. I drew back--civility itself.

'I beg your pardon?'

She came closer.

'James!'

'I think there must be some mistake.'

When I said that, her arms dropped to her sides; the smile vanished; her face went white. It hurt me to see how she changed. I asked myself if there was any game going in which the stakes were worth all this.

'Don't you--don't you know me, James? I'm--I'm Mary.'

'Mary?' How the very name rang in my heart as I repeated it. 'I'm afraid I'm hardly entitled to address a stranger by her Christian name.'

'A stranger? I'm--I'm your wife.'

'My wife?' Lord! how glad I was to know it. Never man had one so good. 'I'm afraid that, unlike many men who are more fortunate, that's an article I don't possess.'

I could see that she pressed her finger-tips into her palms. I had never seen her look more lovely than she did then, in her bewilderment and distress. My heart cried out to me to take her and to hold her fast. But I didn't dare.

'What does it mean? You know my children, and you don't know me?'

'Your children?' I was still holding Pollie. On this I put her down. 'This young lady and gentlemen address me as dad, but I fear that that is an honourable appellation to which I have no title. There would seem to be a singular confusion. It appears that there must be some one in existence who has an uncomfortable resemblance to myself. Already this morning my identity has been mistaken. I was addressed as Mr.--really at the moment I forget the name, it was rather an uncommon one, something like--Babbincombe.'

'Do you deny me, James?'

'I don't see, madam, how I can be said to deny you when this is the first time I have had the pleasure of encountering your charming personality. Nor is my name James. I am the Marquis of Twickenham.'

'Daddy, I want to have a game with you.'

This was that rascal, Jimmy. I'm sure I was quite as ready for a game as he was. Only at that particular second I didn't altogether see my way. Mary caught at his words, with a sort of sob, which brought a lump into my throat.

'He knows his father!'

'They say it's a wise child which knows its own father. It would seem, madam, that your little boy is not overstocked with the quality which King Solomon so ardently desired. You seem to take this matter somewhat to heart. It is the humorous side of it which appeals to me. Suppose I had

taken advantage of your innocent misapprehension, what a vista of tragedy suggests itself! I think that when you return home you will probably find that your husband is awaiting you. And it is then that the humorous side of the situation will appeal to you.'

'I don't understand! I don't understand!'

'Nor I. I have been away from home for something like fifteen years, and have returned to find there are two or three things which I don't understand. I am taken for a ghost by some; for a Mr. Babbington, or some such person, by some one else; for their father by those two dear little children; and for her husband by the most charming lady I have had the honour of meeting. You will allow, madam, that these circumstances present a concatenation of misunderstandings which are not unlikely to confuse the rather befogged brains of a wayfarer who has so recently returned to the purlieus of civilisation.'

I was beginning to believe that I had brought off the greatest feat which I had ever yet essayed--I had almost persuaded Mary that I wasn't me. She certainly couldn't depose on oath that either voice, manner, or language was her husband's. It was, of course, impossible to convince her altogether; at least, as she stood before me there and then. That I recognised. Complete conviction would require time and--well, we'll say other circumstances. But I had managed to shake her faith--to instil a doubt in her mind as to whether she mightn't, in some altogether incomprehensible way, be wrong. I knew my Mary. She was one of those not infrequent persons who are bewildered by an appearance of calm assurance. You had only to tell her, with an air which suggested that you were stating the merest commonplace, that two and two make five, and if you persisted long enough she'd begin to wonder if the thing could possibly be. When she began to wonder she was lost; at least while the wonder continued. Her mental processes were never clear ones. And the simple explanation of her credulity was that she preferred to distrust her own senses, rather than believe that there was such a liar in existence.

It was a failing on virtue's side, and I loved her for it. I protest it cut me to the quick to play the scoundrel with her on such lines. I'd never done it before, I'd not have done it then had not the situation developed in such unexpected directions that I saw no other way. While her white face, quivering hands, and trembling form were almost tearing me in two--and--hurting me the more because I dare not show it--the situation was fortunately relieved by the advent of Miss Desmond.

All at once she stood in the open doorway, observing the picture we presented.

CHAPTER XXIV

AN IDYLL

I went to her upon the instant.

'Surely it is Cousin Edith?'

'Twickenham? Leonard. What does it all mean?'

'That, cousin, is the question which I asked myself. I return, after, it is true, a somewhat lengthy absence, to find all sorts of things. For instance, a lady whom I have never seen before claims me as her husband.'

'Then she is not your wife?'

'Cousin! I have no wife!'

'Then you are not Montagu Babbacombe?'

'Who on earth is Montagu Babbacombe? Is that this lady's husband's name? Have I had the pleasure of addressing Mrs. Babbacombe?'

'Come!'

Miss Desmond put her arm round Mary's shoulders, and with Pollie attached to her disengaged hand, and Jimmy hanging on to her skirts, escorted my family out of the room. Which was nice for me. I might have succeeded in throwing dust into Mary's lovely eyes, but the

knowledge that, for the time at least, I'd possibly gained my ends, didn't puff me up unduly. If it were not for the fact that I'd made it a rule of my life never to quit a position I've once taken up till driven from it at the bayonet's point, the Marquis of Twickenham would have been sent flying, and James Merrett would have gone hopping up those stairs to make love to his wife.

That first day as a marquis didn't come up to my expectations. I know that first impressions are not to be trusted. That which begins in a fog ends, occasionally, in a blaze of sunlight. But I didn't feel as if there was going to be much shine about this little racket.

I went down to the library, sent for Miss Desmond, and caught her just as she was going to shake the dust of Twickenham House from off her trotter cases. We had a *tête-à-tête*. Talk about the glacial period! It was warm compared to her. I said one or two nice things, or tried to, but the cold she radiated was altogether too much for their vitality. I made one or two friendly inquiries about how the family had got on, and she in particular; but for all I could scrape out of her it didn't seem as if there had been any family to get on. She'd kind of brought into that apartment a wall about twenty feet thick and a hundred high; she'd set it between us, and kept me on the other side of it. It was no manner of use my trying to jump up so as to get a peep at her over the top, because I couldn't do it. When I showed a mild curiosity as to the personality of the lady who'd mistaken me for her husband, the way in which she received my fugitive observations I didn't like one little bit. I'd a dreadful notion that right inside of her she'd a suspicion that I'd been treating Mary as no man ought to, and that I now proposed to add desertion to the rest of my offences. It did make me feel funny, the idea that she should think a thing like that. Of my Mary, too! That quiet-speaking female had such a way of making me understand that whether I was or wasn't the Marquis of Twickenham she didn't set much account on me anyhow, that I was glad to see the last of her. If the other members of the House of Twickenham were going to model their behaviour on hers, we should still continue to be a divided family.

Old Foster came up to dine with me, as per invitation. He wasn't what you'd call exciting, but he was amusing. He'd got some interesting things to talk about, and assisted me in cramming up family details at a rate of which he had no notion. The style in which he took it for granted that there was no deception this time was to me a cause of perpetual surprise. He was a long-headed man, and, in a general way, if you'd wanted to get on his blind side, you'd have had to get up early. But Reggie and Howarth had put his nose out of joint. They'd given him to understand that he was to have the kick because his conduct during my fifteen years of absence hadn't suited their convenience. No man likes to have the Order of the Boot as a reward for his fidelity. My re-appearance meant his triumph over his enemies. His appreciation of that fact I rather think tended to blunt his faculties of observation. In the first flush of his joy he was perhaps naturally unwilling to spoil the situation by any show of impertinent curiosity.

At the same time let me hasten to add that his opinion of the Marquis of Twickenham didn't seem to be much higher than Miss Desmond's. He didn't say so in so many words, but it was easy to see that morally and mentally he didn't rate his lordship very high. It was painful to me to reflect that I'd come back to a family whose good opinion of me I should have to level up; if there was any of it to level. Because, so far as I could gather, there wasn't any one anywhere who thought anything of the Marquis of Twickenham at all.

For instance, when I asked in a casual sort of way, as the conversation seemed to lag: 'And how are all my old friends?' Foster looked at me curiously out of the corners of his eyes; then down at his glass. There was a dryness in his tone as he answered,

'I didn't know your lordship had any.'

Now that wasn't a pleasant answer to receive. The Marquis of Twickenham ought to have some friends. What made it worse was the way in which he said it. However I dissembled my emotions.

'Not one?'

'Whom would your lordship have called a friend of yours?'

Although there was the suggestion of a sneer, which I resented, it was an inquiry which I was quite unable to answer. I wanted all the information to come from him. I endeavoured to cap his sneer with another.

'Well, if it comes to that, I don't know that there was any one who owed me money.'

'I should imagine that there was not.' Directly he said that, I knew that I had blundered--that, in fact, it had been only too notorious that the owing was all the other way. Presently he added something which did not tend to sweeten my temper.

'By the way, my lord, it is only right that I should tell you--since I should not be doing my duty were I to withhold the information--that there are certain matters in which your lordship was concerned which have not been forgotten--one in particular which your lordship will probably bear in mind.'

When a man hits me, I hit him back. When the discussion's over I ask him to explain his reasons; not before. Business first, pleasure after. If a man makes it his business to decorate my

features, I make it mine to endeavour to induce him to wish he hadn't. It had been growing on me that the Marquis of Twickenham was a blackguard on lines which weren't just mine, and that I'd no intention of bearing the burden of sins I was not inclined to. I leaned my elbows on the table, and I eyed my man of affairs.

'Foster!'

'My lord?'

'Look at me!'

'I am looking, my lord.'

He was, with, I fancied, a certain surprise.

'You remember the sort of man I was?'

'I do.'

'I'll tell you the sort of man that I've become. Are you listening?'

'Your lordship sees I am.'

'I've become a man who resents any attempt on the part of any other man to take a liberty. You understand?'

'I trust, and believe, that your lordship will not find a trace of such a disposition in me.'

'You have taken more than one liberty since you've been inside this room.'

'My lord!'

'Do you remember what a nauseous little brat you were when you were two?'

'I!--My lord, I don't understand!'

'No?--Perhaps your memory doesn't carry you so far back. Mine doesn't carry me back fifteen years. In my presence don't let yours. Do you understand that? Another point. I don't quite know why I've come back. I may go away next week for another fifteen years.'

'I cordially hope that your lordship won't.'

'I hope, Foster, that you're not getting old. Old men are apt to dodder.--How do you like the expression of that hope? Sounds personal, doesn't it? In the same sense, yours did to me.--We're apt to hope that other people won't do what they want to, but we resent that hope when it's applied to us. I hope you're not getting old. But as the relations which exist between us hardly justify me in attempting to interfere with the tribute which you pay to the passing years, I trust that I retain a remnant of courtesy sufficient to induce me not to meddle with matters with which I have no personal concern. I feel sure that, in that sense, you have almost as much courtesy as I have. Oblige me, Foster, by keeping a small stock of it on hand.--I was saying that I may go away again next week for another period of fifteen years; or I may not. It may amuse me to take up what is called my proper position in the country. If I choose to do so, I assure you that, with my money, and my rank, and the way I shall set about doing things, fifteen years ago won't count. Don't let them count with you.'

All the same I could see that there was something which had happened in the days of auld lang syne which was slithering about on the end of his tongue; and, to be frank, I was a trifle curious to know what it was. But after the sesquipedalian sentence I'd discharged at his head, for very shame's sake I couldn't ask, nor let him say. So I got rid of him instead.

The next day we journeyed together down to Cressland, to see how things had gone since the last time I was there. What a place for a man to have all his own! Twenty thousand acres in the heart of England, with a mediæval castle in which to sleep o' nights. There was another great property in Scotland, something in Ireland, and a villa at Cannes; besides oddments here and there. When I remembered that the principal part of my income came from London ground rents I thanked my stars that I hadn't to keep all the land I owned clean and wholesome with just my own pair of hands.

When I'd made an end of spying out some of the wonderful things which I possessed, back I came to town with Foster. When we parted at the station I dare say he thought I was going straight back home--that is, to the family mansion in St. James's Square. But I wasn't: I didn't. My objective was Mary. But I had to cover my tracks on the road to her. It wouldn't do to have it discovered that directly the Marquis of Twickenham disappeared at one end Mr. James Merrett came out at the other. That night I spent in Brighton. In the morning up to town. Dropped into a little crib where I store a few trifles which I'm not peculiarly anxious that other people should know about, and changed into the garments of James Merrett. Got on to the top of an omnibus. Then outside another. Landed finally in the neighbourhood of Little Olive Street.

I was well aware that, use whatever precautions I might, I was still taking on a pretty considerable risk. But then I'd got to be a kind of a dealer in hazards. Been gambling in them my whole life long. And since I'd turned myself into a family man some of them had assumed rather curious shapes. They say that the pitcher which goes often to the well gets broken at last. Maybe. Perhaps I'd had a chip or two already. But that's part of the game.

I sailed along the pavement as if I hadn't a thing in the world to fear. I'm sure that no one who'd taken stock of me would have supposed my conscience wasn't as clear as the average. Reached No. 32. Turned the handle of the front door, and walked right in. There was Mary in the sitting-room, with a pile of sewing on a table in front of her, just as I expected.

'Well, my girl,' I said, 'how's things?'

I put my hat down on a chair; up she jumped, over went the sewing, and into my arms she flew.

'James! James!'

I got my arms right round her, and I held her tight; you bet I did. I didn't say much, but I supplied the deficiency in another way. Presently I did make a remark.

'Why, my girl, you look--well, I really think you're getting pretty.'

'James!'

She turned the colour of a strawberry that's just getting ripe--the cream showing through the red. Every time I pay her a compliment she seems to tingle right to the roots of her hair. It's an old joke, my pretending to discover that she's getting pretty--as though she hadn't always been that vision of all that's fair in woman, of which, until I met her, I had only dreamed!--but every time I make it she looks that sweet she reminds me of a meadow on the slope of a hill, in which the spring flowers are tipped with dew.

I gave the youngsters a turn.

'Hollo! I do believe you're that little boy of mine whose name was Jimmy.'

'Dad! dad! I knew you'd come home soon, 'cause I did ask God so hard last night to sent you.'

'And--isn't that girl named Pollie?'

'Tourse it is! tourse it is! Ooo know it is.'

There they were, dancing about me, as fine a pair of youngsters as you'd meet in a long day's journey.

'It's a most extraordinary thing; what does make these pockets of mine stick out? I wonder what it is inside.'

Then there was the business of turning those pockets of mine inside out, and discovering that there was something in every one of them. Amazing how such things could have got there. Ah, there's nothing like these family reunions. There wasn't a happier home than ours in the whole of that great city. Mary on my knee--how glad I was to have her there again--the children divided between their delight at their new possessions, and their joy at seeing father--it's only in such moments that we really live.

And such a tale as that wife of mine had to tell. Dear! dear! it's a strange world, and the most incredible things do happen.

It seemed that she had been anxious about me.

'Now, Mary, haven't I told you not to be anxious? Can't you understand that the very thought of your anxiety increases mine?'

Down came her pretty head.

'Sometimes I--I can't help it, James.'

This time she hadn't been able to help it to a very considerable extent. She'd actually thought that I was dead. That was, FitzHoward had been putting ideas into her head. And there was something about a man named Smith. But the tale got pretty considerably mixed; she never was much of a hand at telling a tale, my Mary. I couldn't make sense of it at all. My saying so, and laughing at her, didn't make it any plainer. Somebody--a Miss Something-or-other--had actually made her think that I was a nobleman. That idea did tickle me so, and I put it in such a way, that I started her laughing at it herself. And then when she'd once started she wouldn't stop; she's a keen sense of humour, Mary has. And she does look so pretty when she's laughing. It does me good to see her. Then the children joined. Oh, what a laugh we had at the idea of my being a British nobleman!

But the most surprising part of the story was that she'd actually been to some great house, and there fancied that she'd seen me. I couldn't follow all the ins and outs of the business as she told it, but what I did understand fairly took my breath away.

'Do you mean to tell me,' I said, 'that you mistook another man for your own husband?' She was ashamed. No wonder. 'What would you think if I mistook another woman for you?'

'James!'

Down came her face against mine. Was there anything I wouldn't forgive her when the touch of her cheek filled me with so sweet a rapture?

'Do you know, Mary, I don't understand all you've been talking about--though I know I ought to, considering what a gift for narrative you have.'

'James!'

'But what I do understand makes me think of something that happened to me--ah, years and years ago. Have you ever heard of a place called San Francisco?' She nodded. ''Pon my word, I don't think there's anything you haven't heard of. You're a much greater scholar, wife of mine, than you care to own.' She laughed, and snuggled closer. 'Once upon a time I was in San Francisco.'

'James, I do believe that you've been everywhere.'

'There's only one place where I've ever wanted to be, and that's in your heart.'

'You know you're there.'

'Mary!'

Then there was an interval. There were a good many intervals before I'd finished my remarks. Nothing like an interruption now and then to give you what I call zest.

She listened with the prettiest interest. Just as she'd have listened if I'd recited one of Euclid's propositions. She cared nothing for my story. All she wanted was to know, and to feel, that I was there. The consciousness that her evil dreams had vanished was sufficient. When she pressed herself against me, and felt how my heart kept time with hers, and how her tremors set me trembling, that was all the explanation she required. A woman's love has nothing to equal it in its power of forgetting. If she loves you you needn't ask her to forgive you; she forgets that she has anything to forgive.

We had tea, and Pollie and Jimmy and I made toast, and she superintended the proceedings. She considered that we weren't so good at it as we ought to have been; so she showed us how to improve. When I said that the chief thing she'd toasted was her cheeks, she whispered that I wasn't to say such things; so I kissed them instead. Whereupon she asserted that that piece of toast was spoilt; but we ate it all the same. And I declared, as I was eating it, that I could detect, from the taste, the exact spot on which she was engaged when the accident occurred. Which statement she positively asserted that she didn't believe.

I dare say it's a funny thing to be in love with your wife. I don't know. It's not too common a form of humour. And perhaps I'm not a judge of what is comical. But I'm glad that I'm in love with mine. I'm glad that she's my sweetheart--although she is my wife. The exigencies of a life which is not entirely commonplace prevent my devoting so much time as I could wish to my domestic duties, but this I may safely say, that however far away from each other we may be, the consciousness that my wife is my wife is ever with me; and the knowledge fills me with that complete content which makes me equal to any fortune.

After tea we had a romp with the children. I helped to bathe and put them to bed. And when they'd gone, and we'd told each other love tales by the fire, we, too, went up to rest. On the way we went into the youngsters' room, and stood side by side, looking down upon them as they slept.

'Don't you think,' asked Mary, 'that Pollie's pretty?'

'Well,' I said,' she's a little bit like you.'

She pressed my arm.

'Jimmy's just your image.'

'Poor lad!'

'James! How can you talk like that? Can anything be better for him than to be like his father?'

'There are better men.'

'I don't know where. Nor any a hundredth part as good. I can't imagine why you don't think more of yourself--when you're the most wonderful man in the world.'

This assertion caused me furiously to think.

'Mary, I shouldn't be surprised but what you're right.'

'I'm sure I'm right.'

'I also have an inclination to be sure. I must be the most wonderful man in the world, because I've you.'

'James!'

The rest is silence ... What does that writing fellow say about 'Sweet music, long drawn out'? Is there any music like the silent pressure of a woman's lips?

After all, there's something in being in love with your wife.

CHAPTER XXV

A REVERSION FROM THE IDYLLIC

Mr. Gayer met me in the hall. 'A gentleman, my lord, wishes to see you.' He spoke in a half-whisper, as if he was afraid of being overheard. There was something in his face I didn't understand.

'A gentleman? What gentleman?' Gayer came closer.

'Mr. Acrodato. We told him your lordship wasn't at home, and tried to keep him out, but he made so much disturbance we thought we'd better let him in. He's been walking all over the house, and behaving very badly.'

As Gayer imparted his information, with an air half of deprecation, half of mystery, there came through the dining-room door a gentleman. He was big. His huge beard and mop of hair were tinged with grey; his top hat was on the back of his head; his hands were in the pockets of his unbuttoned overcoat. He surveyed me with a look which did not suggest respect, speaking in accents which were not exactly gentle.

'So you've come.--Well?'

A feeling of resentment had been growing up within me with every yard which I had been placing between Mary and myself. I had been telling myself that this Marquis of Twickenham game was hardly worth the candle, and that if I had to choose between Mary and the marquisate, the dignity might go hang. Only let his lordship withdraw from his banking account thirty or forty thousand pounds in cash, and it was not improbable that he might disappear for another fifteen years. In which case Mr. and Mrs. James Merrett would take a trip abroad.

This loud-voiced, blustering bully had caught me in a dangerous mood. What he might want with the Marquis of Twickenham I had no notion. But the contrast he presented to the sweet saint in Little Olive Street offered me just the opportunity I needed to take it out of some one. I walked past him into the dining-room. He followed, leaving the door wide open.

'Have the goodness to shut the door.'

His response was the soul of courtesy.

'Shut it yourself! I'm not your servant.'

Directly he said that, I remembered where I had seen him last, and the name by which he had been known to me; the recollection gave me the most genuine sensation of pleasure. The Marquis of Twickenham should be avenged.

'Mr. Fraser, shut that door!'

When I called him by that name he started.

'Who are you speaking to?'

'To Andrew Fraser--who lately carried on one of the branches of his usurer's business at 14 Colmore Road, Birmingham. I have a statement referring to you, which was made to me by Isabel Kingham, also of Birmingham, half an hour before she died. That statement will supply the police with some information they are very anxious to receive. If you would like me to provide any one who may be listening outside with spicy details of your connection with the lady, I am willing.'

It's not often you are able to bag a man with the first barrel, especially a man of the type who was then in front of me. But when you do succeed, the sensation is delicious, as I experienced on that occasion.

That he had come to crush the Marquis of Twickenham was obvious; having good reasons for believing that that fortunate peer was his to crush. That he was the kind of individual who enjoyed crushing any one or anything was as plain as the fact that he was likely to resent with the utmost bitterness any attempt which might be made at crushing him. Nothing, probably, had been further from his mind than the idea that his intended victim would essay so hazardous a feat. He thought, possibly, knowing his man, that all he had to anticipate was his more or less abject humiliation. That first shot of mine was not only unexpected, but hitting him even before he was fairly on the wing, it bowled him completely over. The look of amazement which was on his hirsute countenance was distinctly comical. He shut the door with almost acrobatic rapidity.

'What the devil are you talking about?'

'So Andrew Fraser and Morris Acrodato are the same persons. With what gratification the press, the public, and the police will receive the news. We all know that Morris Acrodato carries on his business of blood-sucking under various aliases, but it is not generally known that Andrew Fraser is one of them. Every hand is against the most extortionate usurer in England, and at last one of them--the hangman's hand--will get it right home.'

He was so used to bully others, that the idea of being effectually bullied himself was beyond his comprehension.

'Don't--don't you try to bluff me.'

'Not at all. On the contrary, Mr. Fraser, I propose to have you hanged.'

He glanced round the room as if he feared that the walls had ears.

'What nonsense are you talking?'

'Nothing will give me greater pleasure. I once had an acquaintance who called herself Isabel Kingham. She died in great agony. At the inquest the medical examination showed that the immediate cause of death had been the administration of certain illegal drugs; but by whom they had been administered it was admitted, in the Coroner's Court, that there was not sufficient evidence to show. More than sufficient evidence is, however, in my possession that they were administered by Mr. Andrew Fraser.'

'It's all a lie.'

'At that time I had not sufficient leisure to justify me in seeing the business through. Although there was no moral doubt as to the person from whom the medicine came, you had so managed affairs as to leave me without actual proof. It is only within the last few weeks that I have had the pleasure of meeting a gentleman named Matthew Parker.'

'When did you see him?'

'It appears that Mr. Parker was once a clerk in the employ of Mr. Andrew Fraser. He distinctly remembers being instructed by his master to purchase a bottle of a certain mixture, and to forward it to a certain lady.'

'I'll wring his neck.'

'The missing link in the chain of evidence being thus supplied, I still had to learn what had become of Mr. Fraser. Now that I have had the pleasure of this fortunate encounter all that remains is to place the entire matter in the hands of the police.'

As I observed the looks with which Mr. Acrodato favoured me, I was conscious that he was struck, as others had been, by some development in the Marquis of Twickenham's character which he found himself unable to explain. And I realised, not for the first time, that there were, as was after all only inevitable, marked points of difference between the Two Dromios. His conduct was evidently actuated by reminiscences of what his lordship used to be, and he endeavoured to buoy himself up by the pleasant delusion that any alteration which might have taken place in an inconvenient direction could only be superficial after all.

'Look here, my lord. You bolted fifteen years ago because you'd got twenty-five thousand pounds out of me by forging your father's signature. And it seems that you've only come back now because you hope to beat me again by chucking this cock and bull story in my face. Don't you make any mistake. I'm going to have my money--with interest; proper interest, mind; and no

silly nonsense--or I'll have you!'

So that was how I came to meet my double in San Francisco. He had made a little mistake with a pen. Well, his lordship might esteem himself lucky that at least that piece of business had fallen into my hands. I would do him a service right away.

'I have one remark to make, Mr. Fraser----'

'My name's Acrodato. Don't you call me out of my name!'

He positively shouted. I, also, can raise my voice. It was undignified, but I shouted back again.

'I say that I have one remark to make, Mr. Fraser!'

He gave a startled look round; he didn't seem to relish the notion that I might be audible on the other side of the square.

'Don't speak so loud.'

'I make it a rule to reply in the tone in which I am addressed; the pitch, therefore, depends on you. I was about to observe, when you interrupted me, that I have only one remark to make, Mr. Fraser, with reference to the matter on which you have touched. You have been completely misinformed with regard to the authenticity of the signature which is attached to the document in question.'

'Well! You always were a bit of a liar, but that takes the biscuit! Do you mean to say your father's name on that bill isn't a forgery?'

'I do.'

'When you ran for it because he said it was?'

'I had no wish to create a scandal by impugning my father's veracity.'

'You used to have a face before you went; but I never saw anything like the one you seem to have come back with. I don't want to be hard on you, although you treated me so bad. You've got the money now, and I'm willing to let bygones be bygones. Hand over my capital and decent interest and I'll say no more about it.'

'I don't intend to give you a penny.'

'What's that you say?'

'I intend to hang you--unless a spirit of mollycoddleism commutes the sentence to one of penal servitude for life. Look here, my lad. Lord or no lord, don't you take me for a fool. If you don't satisfy me inside five minutes I'll have a warrant for you in an hour.' I rang the bell.

'What's that for?'

A servant came.

'Fetch a constable at once.'

Mr. Acrodato seemed unhappy.

'Don't you--don't you be a fool!'

He turned to the man at the door.

'Don't you do anything of the kind.'

'You heard what I said?'

The servant was withdrawing when Mr. Acrodato became excited.

'Stop! Look here, my lord, don't you do anything in a hurry. You first of all listen to me!'

'See that some one is ready to fetch a constable the moment I ring; two of you remain within call.'

The man withdrew. Mr. Acrodato evidently did not relish my parting injunction.

'We don't want to have any confounded servants listening to what we have to say.'

'Corroboration, Mr. Fraser----'

'Don't call me out of my name.'

'Corroboration, Mr. Fraser, is sometimes useful--you will have to be quick if you wish to say anything before I ring the bell.'

'Look here. Of course I know you're only bluffing me, but I don't wish to make myself disagreeable. You give me those papers you've been talking about and my capital, and five per cent, interest, and you shall have the bill.'

'Mr. Fraser----'

'I wish you wouldn't call me by that name. What's the good of it?'

'I'll tell you what I might be persuaded to do. You give me that bill, and your word of honour that you will contradict any libellous stories you may hear reflecting on the genuineness of my father's signature, and so long as you refrain your own tongue from indiscretion I may keep still.'

'And I'm to lose my money?'

'And save your life.'

'Don't talk silly nonsense. I'm not going to let you rob me with my eyes open. Now I'll tell you what I'll do. You give me thirty thousand pounds.'

'Mr. Fraser, if you don't hand over that bill in sixty seconds I ring the bell. If I ring again, you pass into the hands of the police and the law must take its course.'

'Give you the bill? You don't suppose I've got it on me?'

I stood with my watch in hand. 'Fifteen seconds.'

'My lord, you've had my money--you can't deny you've had my money! And you've had it all these years! A great gentleman like you don't want to rob a man like me!

'Thirty seconds.'

'My lord, listen to reason! I'm a poor man! I really am! I've had the most frightful losses! I've had to do with a lot of thieves!'

'Forty-five seconds.'

'Have mercy, my lord, have mercy! Make it half the money! Say ten thousand! Call it five! You don't want to leave me without a penny, my lord!'

'Sixty seconds. What they call the Birmingham Mystery will now be solved.'

'My lord, don't ring that bell.'

He caught me by the arm.

'Remove your arm.'

'You shall have the bill.'

'Give it me.'

He began to fumble with a pocket-book. 'My lord, I do ask you to listen to reason! I'm sure you don't want----'

'If you say another word I ring.'

He handed me a slip of blue paper. It was a bill, dated some sixteen years back, promising to pay thirty thousand pounds three months after date. It was signed 'Sherrington.' An endorsement was scrawled across it--'Twickenham.' That endorsement was the little accident which had sent my double to San Francisco.

When I had gathered the purport of the document I looked at Mr. Acrodato. Murder was in his eyes.

'What are you going to give me for it?'

'Your life.'

'You cursed thief?'

I didn't like the words, nor the way in which he said them. There are occasions on which the devil enters into me. That was one.

I was a much smaller man than he, but I have physical strength altogether beyond what the average stranger suspects, and a curious mastery of what we will call certain tricks.

On a sudden I took him by the throat, beneath his beard, and with a twist which I have reason to know almost broke his neck, I jerked him back upon a chair. Driving his head against the back of it, I all but choked the life right out of him. It was only when I felt it slipping through my

fingers that I thought it time to stop.

'Mr. Fraser, I'm afraid that one day I shall have to kill you. I've a mind to do it now; only it would be difficult to explain your corpse.'

I never saw a man cut a more ludicrous figure. The pain he had had to bear was no small thing. I shouldn't be surprised if for days his neck was conscious of the twist I had given it. But his amazement eclipsed his suffering. Not until that moment had he realised what a change had taken place in his lordship's character, and in his lordship's methods. For some seconds he gasped for breath--as was only natural. When he shambled to his feet he shrank from me like some panic-stricken, half-witted fool. While he was still staring at me, as if I had been some uncanny thing, the door opened and Mr. Smith came in.

'Surely it is Douglas Howarth! My dear Douglas, I am very glad to see you. This is Mr. Acrodato. He tells me that some injurious reports have been current with reference to a bill which my father backed at my request. Here is the bill. He has undertaken, in future, to give any such reports which may reach his ears the fullest contradiction. Mr. Acrodato, you may go.'

He went--and, I believe, was glad to go, even though he left both his bill and his money behind him.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE SCALES OF JUSTICE

I turned to Mr. John Smith--I should say to my old friend Douglas Howarth; who had been staring from me to Mr. Acrodato, and from Mr. Acrodato back to me, apparently wholly at a loss to understand the situation. Funny how opaque some men can be.

'Conscience,' says the bard, 'makes cowards of us all.' The Prince of Denmark wasn't quite so right as he supposed; but it had certainly succeeded in making, in a marvellously short space of time, a wreck of my dear old friend. Even the inexperienced eye could not fail to perceive that he had aged both morally and mentally. I was willing to bet a trifle that instead of scoring off the little game he had tried to play, he had passed from the prime of life to old age in the course of a single deal. He wasn't half the man who had called himself John Smith. He had acquired a new stoop; and that stoop was typical of all he had acquired. As he stared at me with astonished eyes it was clear that he had not so much control over his nerves as he would have liked to have had.

'As I just observed, I am glad to see you, my dear Douglas. My relatives and friends have not flocked round me as I had hoped they would. Am I to take it that this is a case of better late than never?'

'How did you get out?'

'How did I get out? Of what?'

'How did you get out of the coffin?'

'Out of----? My dear Douglas, aren't you well? Is that the explanation of your laggard step?'

'You are Babbacombe!'

I shrugged my shoulders.

'So that bee's in your bonnet. Very well, I am Babbacombe. I've been told it before; but no one has told me who Babbacombe is.'

'Don't--don't play any more tricks with me. Can't you see I've been nearly driven mad? Tell me; aren't you that--that devil?'

'Douglas, I have learned, to my pain, that you have lately not cut a very pretty figure. I am willing to excuse you on the charitable supposition that, as you say, you have been nearly driven mad. But do not let your madness go too far. Show some method in it, Douglas. Is it money you're in want of? If so, I've plenty, and am quite content that there should be some of it for you. What's the figure, man.'

'The figure?'

He looked as if his wits were wool-gathering. Going to a sideboard I poured out some brandy into a glass.

'Come, Douglas, swallow this. A pick-me-up may do you good. It strikes me that you ought to be in bed rather than abroad.'

He took the glass of brandy with a hand which trembled.

'It's a day of miracles.'

'Have you only just found that out? Surely you and I have reached an age at which we ought to know that wherever we turn, a miracle stares us in the face. What's the matter with you, my dear old chap?'

'Are you--are you Babbacombe?'

'My dear Douglas, I'm any one you please. Come, drink your brandy.' He took a sip; then put the glass on the table? 'Now tell me, what's the trouble? Is it money? If so, consider that I'm your banker and draw on me.'

Although I fancy that the sip he had taken had done him good, it still was sufficiently clear that the situation was beyond his comprehension; at which, on the whole, I wasn't surprised.

'Either, Leonard, you're a very remarkable actor, or you're a very remarkable man.'

'If you like we'll grant both hypotheses. And now may I ask you what you mean?'

'Should you desire it, I am quite willing to ignore the fact that I ever knew you as--anybody else, but I shouldn't like you to suppose that I'm an utter fool.'

'Howarth, you oblige me to adopt a tone with you for which I have no relish. Your words and manner convey an insinuation which I must ask you to explain. What am I to understand by what you have just now said?'

'Tell me, honestly. Have you not been masquerading as Montagu Babbacombe?'

'I have not. Nor, until I returned to the bosom of my family, was I aware that there was such a person in existence. Now tell me, in your turn, why are you so anxious to confound me with the gentleman in question?'

'If you never have assumed the name of Montagu Babbacombe, I beg your pardon.'

'In what dirty waters have you been paddling together? I was a pretty warm member when I was younger; I didn't expect to find you had become, with advancing years, the sort of man you apparently are. You have been attempting to do me out of my birthright; and now, as far as I understand, you are trying to do me out of my identity, too.'

He put both hands up to his head, as if it ached.

'I'm doing nothing of the kind; I only repeat that this is an age of miracles. When you meet Mr. Babbacombe--if you ever have so much good fortune'--his words had an ironical intonation which I couldn't but notice--'you'll understand the sense in which I use the words.'

'Douglas, what was there between this man and you?'

'I'll tell you. It will be at any rate a comfort to tell some one.'

He did tell me--the story with which I was even better acquainted than he was. The course of action which I should have to pursue loomed clearer and clearer as his tale proceeded. If I wished to stifle any remaining doubts which he might have, I should have to make an example of Mr. Howarth. Which I promptly proceeded to do.

I waited till he had reached the end of his pleasant little narrative, and then I let him have it. I fancy that the confession, which was good for his soul, was not received quite in the way he anticipated. In matters of this kind the world is full of disappointments. When it comes to confessing our sins, so few of us receive just the treatment we consider ourselves entitled to expect.

'Howarth, your attitude presents a curious psychological study. You tell your--I will flatter you by calling it amazing--story to me, as if you had been the sufferer. On the same line of reasoning the man who, having cut his father's throat, finds himself deserted by the wretched creature whom he has incited to assist him in his crime may pose as an injured martyr. Shall I inform you what I think? That you are a skulking thief and a cowardly scoundrel--that most pestilent type of blackguard whose one end and aim is to shift the onus of his own filthy deeds on to another's shoulders.'

He started; as if plain speaking was as unexpected as it was unwelcome. But I was only just beginning.

'According to your own statement you bribe a miserable mountebank to play a part in so hideous a fraud that I am conscious of a sensation of nausea when I think of it; and when with horrible fidelity the wretch has played his part, what do you do? Do you play your part? Lord, no! You're not that kind of man. Your one anxiety is to save your own leprous skin--double-dyed cur and coward that you are. He at least has trusted you; so you reward his faith by subjecting him to the most terrible death the mind can contemplate--you bury him alive. You have not even the courage of the common murderer. You crucify yourself for your own crime. See what a pallid, shrinking, stammering wretch you have become! Out! out! out! before I soil my hands by taking you by the throat, and throwing you into the street.'

Mr. Smith didn't seem as if he was enjoying himself. As I came towards him he seemed to shrink into a smaller and smaller compass, as if I were an avenging spirit before whose anger he had perforce to dwindle into nothing. I was wondering if I should play the farce right through, and really deposit him in the gutter, when the advent of two new-comers created a diversion. They were my affectionate brother, Lord Reginald Sherrington, and a rather incongruous companion, in the shape of Mr. Augustus FitzHoward. Fitz kept a little in the rear--as if not altogether at his ease as to the sort of reception he might receive; but the mere fact of his presence was proof enough that if I wished to keep myself free from such intrusions in the future, mercy was a quality against which, for the present at any rate, my heart must be steeled. This was a case when the downfall of vice must be carried to its legitimate conclusion.

So I gave Reggie the benefit of some candid criticisms on Mr. Smith.

'Reggie, you come at a convenient moment. You afford me an opportunity of closing, once for all, an incident of which I never wish to hear again. You see this nameless thing--this libel on our common manhood, whom, I am ashamed to reflect, I once regarded as my friend? With what sort of tale do you suppose he has been regaling me? He tells me that by the promise of a payment of one thousand pounds, he suborned some hard-driven wretch, who bore some real or imagined resemblance to myself, and induced him to feign death. Think of it! He persuaded the creature to simulate the greatest of all the mysteries, and to pretend to pass into the valley of the shadows. And when he lay in a coffin--actually in a coffin--think of it, ye gods!--waiting for this--this thing, to fulfil his part of the bargain, and release him, Mr. Howarth, deeming discretion to be the better part of honour, caused him to be fastened in his prison house and buried alive. What judgment would you pronounce upon so unique a gentleman?'

'Is this true?'

'Ask him. I tell you the story as I had it just now from his own lips.'

'Douglas, is this true?'

Mr. Smith put his fingers inside his shirt collar, as if its tightness worried him. It was some seconds before he spoke. Then it was in tones which were curiously unlike his own.

'Yes, it's true--all true.'

'And you are not Montagu Babbacombe?'

This was Reggie to me.

'You ask me that, knowing that Babbacombe was the name of the wretch who was his accomplice in the fraud of which you have just now heard--is that so?'

'It's a question of resemblance.'

'Are you asking me if I'm the wretch in question? Answer!'

'When you put it that way it seems impossible; I recognise that. But if you had seen his photograph----'

'Reggie, stop. I'll speak to you when we're alone. I have not your capacity for forgetting that we are brothers.' I turned to Fitz. 'The other day, sir, I presented you with the key of the street. Why are you here again?'

Reggie answered.

'He came with me.'

'Allow the man to speak for himself. Why are you here?'

Straightway Fitz began to fidget; and, also, to stammer.

'The plain truth is, sir, I mean, my lord, that the likeness is so striking that----'

'Well?'

For Fitz had stopped. When he continued he went off at a tangent----

'Of course I wasn't acquainted with what I've just now heard, or I should have known that your lordship couldn't possibly be the--the man I thought you were. But at the same time----'

'Well?'

For Fitz had stopped again.

'The fact is, my lord, I've become liable for Mr. Babbacombe in certain directions, and his disappearance puts me in a hole.'

'Well?'

'He went home to his wife the other day----'

'His wife?'

'Yes, my lord, his wife; without saying where he had come from, or where he was going to, or without mentioning a word about the liabilities I had entered into on his behalf. So I--I--I----'

Fitz stopped short in a stutterer's quagmire. I perceived that next time Mr. Merrett went home, Mr. FitzHoward's difficulties would have to be attended to.

'Well? Continue, sir, if you please.'

'My lord, after what has transpired all that remains for me to do is to apologise to your lordship for my intrusion, and to assure your lordship that it shan't occur again. So, begging your lordship's pardon, I wish you, my lord, good day.'

Fitz withdrew. I wondered what would be his mental condition when he found himself in the street. I rang the bell, pointing, when a footman appeared, to Mr. Smith, who sat crumpled up on a chair, as if his backbone was broken.

'Throw that thing into the street.'

As I had expected, Reggie interposed with an air of shocked surprise.

'Twickenham!' He moved towards his invertebrate friend. 'Come, Douglas, let me give you my arm.'

I struck in.

'Reggie, if you allow that man to touch you, you will go with him out of this house, and I will never speak to you again. More! By to-morrow morning he shall be standing in a felon's dock.' I fancy it was because, in spite of himself, my dear brother was influenced by what he saw upon my face, that he refrained from pressing on the other his friendly offices. I turned again to the footman. 'Do you hear what I say? Throw that thing into the street.'

Mr. Smith saved himself from that crowning humiliation--the pressing persuasion of a servant's hand. He got upon his feet.

'I can take myself away.'

He did. As he shuffled towards the door I pushed his shoulder, so that he stumbled into the footman's arms. As he cast a backward glance at me I was reminded of a humorous picture I had seen somewhere, representing St. Peter hurling a lost soul through the gates of Paradise. One could not but feel that the Hon. Douglas Howarth had brought his wares to an uncommonly bad market. Reggie moved as if to offer him assistance; but I stood in his way so that he could not pass.

When we were alone I endeavoured to explain to Reggie what was the kind of brother with whom Providence had blessed him.

'There are men who are content to let their brothers live as long as they conveniently can. You belong to the other class. Foster informs me that for years you have been assuring him that the time had really come for you to pick my bones. I can understand your disappointment at finding that, after assisting at my death and burial, I still persist in remaining alive. But I beg you, for your own sake, not to allow your disappointment to carry you too far. For I assure you that if it comes to my knowledge that you ever again attempt, by word, look, or sign, to associate me with the accomplice of that scoundrel's villainy, although I am your brother, I will chastise you physically, and I will take steps to publicly brand you as the blackguard I shall know you are.'

'Your threats are unnecessary. You speak as if I were to blame for what has happened. I deny it wholly.'

'Explain yourself--with care.'

'Look at the way in which you have treated me, You had no right to leave me for fifteen years

in ignorance of whether you were dead or alive.'

'Is that your reason for confounding me with this man Babbacombe?'

'The man's your living image.'

'Is that your reason?'

'I say it is a reason; if you saw the man yourself, you'd know it was a reason.'

'I begin to perceive your point. You were of opinion that I could be that sort of man; an accidental resemblance convinced you that I was. I am obliged to you. I will instruct Foster to see that a sum of five thousand pounds is paid to you annually, and Gayer that you are not to enter this house again. I shall refuse to acknowledge you when we meet; nor will I stay in any room in which you are. Now go.'

'I am sorry that you should take this tone. If I have done you an injustice it has been unintentionally.'

'Go.'

'I am going. I only wished to apologise to you before I went. That's all.'

And my affectionate brother followed his friends.

CHAPTER XXVII

A WHIPPING BOY

I had won all along the line. But I wasn't exhilarated. Fighting's fun; and in a certain kind of row I'm happiest. I can lay my hand on my heart and say I believe that I was born a fighting man. A forlorn hope and a smile to my mind go together. And it's when I'm facing fearful odds, not for the ashes of my fathers and the temples of my gods, but for amusement only, that I'm surest I'm alive.

Yet when those gentlemen retired one after the other, leaving me in possession of the field, I couldn't have bet sixpence that a glass of brandy wouldn't have acted as a pick-me-up. And when a man's reduced to alcoholic bracers there's something ails him somewhere.

The scrap with Acrodato was good business, and the capture of his lordship's pen-slip was an unmitigated joy. Bluff; all bluff. An apt example of how conscience can knock out the toughest subjects. I had had reason to suspect the worst in that business down at Birmingham, but I had never got beyond suspicion. The accessories were invention--pure invention. If he had compelled me to produce that statement, or the other trifles of which I had so boldly boasted, I should have had to plead that a thief had broken in to steal; or that they had got themselves mislaid.

Therefore the capture of that bill was a pure delight.

What worried me was the character of the man whose shoes I occupied. In San Francisco I realised that he was trash, but only in the halls of his fathers did it come home to me what trash he was. He couldn't have been long in the world when he concluded to travel, but he had been long enough to make his name, even after the lapse of fifteen years, stink in men's nostrils. Yes; and women's. It was hard that that man's reputation should be mine. It was because he was that kind of man that people--including my own brother--were so ready to conclude that I was Mr. Babbacombe--perceiving that the trick he had played was quite in keeping with his lordship's character. Figuring as the Marquis of Twickenham wasn't the soft snap I had hoped.

I felt that there wasn't a man or woman in the house, from old Gayer downward, who didn't despise me; who couldn't tell some pretty tale to my discredit. Foster regarded me as a mixture of clumsy rogue and cowardly fool. When I gave him to understand that that was not a point of view which I appreciated, although he gave no outward and visible smile, I knew that at the bottom of his heart he smiled. I could have kicked the man. But then if I had once started I should have had to kick so many.

As the days went on the Twickenham romance was in all the papers. Some of them made it

quite a feature. I wished to goodness they wouldn't. They showed how the Marquis had returned--after his family had supposed that he was dead, and had actually buried some one else instead of him. I'm not thin-skinned, but some of their comments made me squirm. The Head of the House of Twickenham could not occupy his proper place in the public eye, while the papers were suffered to print such things of him.

One morning I took a bundle of them down to Foster.

'Have you seen these papers?' I inquired.

'I've seen some of them.'

'Isn't it nice reading?'

'If I were your lordship I should pay no attention to what appears in the public prints.'

'Not when they leave me without a shred of character?'

'Your lordship's return is still a novelty. They may continue to make copy of it for a time. Presently they will cease to speak of you at all.'

'You have a pleasant way of putting things! Then, until they do choose to treat me with silent contempt, I'm to allow them to say that I cheat at cards, that I don't pay my debts, that I'm an evil liver of the lowest type, and, in fact, an all-round beast and blackguard.'

Foster eyed me with a curiosity which was distinctly the reverse of flattering.

'Your lordship will permit me to speak with that frankness which alone can be of service?'

'My good man, be as frank as you choose.'

'Your lordship has surely not forgotten that there were incidents in your youthful career which did not redound to the credit of your character.'

'But when it comes to stating that I was kicked--literally kicked!--down the steps of a club for cheating at cards!'

'It is not a savoury subject, but is that not what happened? I am not aware that your lordship offered any contradiction at the time, although a signed statement of what occurred was posted on the notice board of the club in question. If your lordship will take my very serious advice, you will endeavour to live down the recollection of these things, and not, by legal or other action, drag them into the public eye.'

How I writhed when I left my counsellor's presence. This was indeed to be a whipping boy. Also this was the result of not being a student of the British peerage. If I had known what kind of an ornament to it his lordship really was, I rather fancy the Marquis would have stayed away. That I am a sinner, the saints know well. I'll not say that I'd be aught else if I had the choice. But this man appeared to have committed all the sins for which I've no stomach. He was, before all else, an unmanly man. Nothing mean, it seemed, he had left undone. In none of his misdoings had he shown a spark of courage. Nor, so far as I could learn, had he once remained to face the music. He had lied and cheated, in all sorts of dirty fashions, blubbered and run away.

That was a nice character for a man who ever from his youth upward had been a fighter to find himself possessed of. I did wish he had been a sinner on some other lines. There are offences which a man, having committed, may, as Foster suggested, live down. But none of them seemed to have come his lordship's way. He had done the unforgivable, and unforgettable, things--the things whose memory load a man with ignominy long after he has rotted in his grave. One might as well talk of flying as of living them down. Even though he attained to the years of Methuselah, to the last hour of his life he'd be a pariah. Perhaps, after all, his lordship had done the wisest thing in going away. It was I who had been a fool in coming back.

The Marquis of Twickenham was a frost. The accidents of his position only made that fact the more notorious. Though he had a million in ready money, so huge a rent roll, lands and houses, decent folks would have none of him. It was not necessary for me to have become such a mangy knave if I desired to hobnob with the other sort. Not a clean-smelling soul came near. But I had visits from various representatives of the scum of the earth, who thought, even after fifteen years, that they had a pull on me. Lord! how I enlightened them. They all, with one accord, were struck by certain developments in his lordship's character.

But I hadn't done this thing to convert the riff-raff, nor with any intention of conveying to their benighted intelligence the elementary fact that there's no fool like a certain kind of knave. I wasn't happy.

Better Mary, and the kids, and Little Olive Street, a hundred thousand times than this. The joke was when Foster, who saw how the shoe pinched, suggested I should marry. I thanked him kindly, and asked him, since he had gone so far, if he'd go a little further and name a lady.

'For instance, have you a daughter of your own?'

'My lord, I remain a bachelor.'

'Then who has a daughter, or a sister, who you think would suit?'

'Undoubtedly there are many such.'

'Of my own degree?'

'There are good women of all degrees.'

'Meaning that the good women of my own degree would probably decline.'

'My lord, if you will allow me to say so, I think you take too pessimistic a view of your own position. At first I thought your point of view too optimistic. Now you appear to have gone to the other extreme.'

'I didn't know then what I know now.'

'I don't understand.'

'Possibly not. You think me too pessimistic. Go on.'

'For one who has lived such a youth as your lordship it seems to me that one very desirable course is open.'

'Suicide?'

'No, my lord, not suicide.'

'Murder? To be of the slightest service it would have to be on a wholesale scale.'

'The course I would advise would be a new environment.'

'Meaning?'

'Let the past be past. Treat it as a closed book not to be reopened. Cut it adrift. And let your lordship seek fresh acquaintances, and fresh associations.'

'Without, I presume, making any reference to the contents of that Bluebeard's Chamber, and hoping to goodness that no one else will either.'

'There are, I am thankful to know, a large number of excellent people--excellent in every sense--who, whatever your past may have been, perceiving that it is your present intention to become a worthy member of society----'

'Who says it is?'

'I am not so dull as not to perceive that such is your intention; and I do so with the most heart-felt satisfaction.'

'You flatter me.'

'I intend to do no such thing. I say that there are many excellent people who, recognising your intention, will be content, and proud, to take you for what you are in the present, and intend in the future to be.'

'Where are those persons to be found?'

'Wherever men and women are gathered together.'

'Let us come to the concrete. Would you suggest, for instance, that I should go to a residential hotel at one of our English watering-places, where sociability is made a feature of the prospectus, and where respectable mothers are to be found with respectable daughters?'

'Your lordship might do worse.'

'You think that at a place of the kind no questions would be asked, and I should be made welcome.'

'I recognise the bitterness of your lordship's humour, but am convinced that under such circumstances you might find more happiness than you may be disposed to believe.'

'Suppose they find me out?'

'Let me tell you one thing, old bachelor though I am. If you win a woman's love she'll forgive you much, especially those things you did before you knew her. It should not be difficult for your lordship to win such love as that.'

It was the wisest thing the old gentleman had said. It made me think.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE GOING: AND THE COMING

I may mention, incidentally, that I had resolved to act on Foster's advice before he offered it. Only, with a difference. I contemplated seeking a new environment, in a sense which he had not suggested. The Marquis of Twickenham was going on another little excursion, which might endure for another fifteen years, or perhaps for ever.

To be plain, the game was hardly good enough. I was unable, even after mature consideration, to explain to myself exactly what it was I proposed to gain by assuming brevet rank, with the attendant collaterals, but whatever it was I hadn't got it. That was a dead-sure thing. I hadn't even got the fun of the fair. The joke fell flat. About the business there wasn't even a flavour of adventure. No spice at all. I had walked into the house as through my own front door, and from the first moment no one had said me nay. The excitement wasn't worth a tinker's curse.

All I had gained was a blackguard's name and his unspeakable reputation, a property which no decent creature would approach while I was near, and a shipload of money for which, under existing circumstances, I had no use whatever. As it happens, my tastes are simple. I like plain food, well cooked, and sound whisky. Those things don't cost much. In the matter of personal adornment I'm not taking anything. I'm not a tailor's block, and as for jewellery, I never wore even a finger ring or a scarf pin--and never will. I've a respectful admiration for the gentleman who plasters his money on his person, but as a general rule I find that I prefer to look at him from the other side of the room. I like a horse, and I'd always have good cattle. But riding alone's no fun, and from driving with a groom for constant company, the Lord preserve us! I've a pretty straight eye along the barrel of a gun: but who wants to go shooting in one's own society? I've a taste for the sea, but a yacht with only the crew aboard is dull o'nights. There's no one round who's fonder of a gamble, but I do bar sitting down with a job lot of men all with their eyes skinned to notice when you first begin to cheat.

No; if I was to do these things I'd do them as the Marquis of Twickenham should, or not at all. I'd be courted: I'd not court. I'd not descend into the gutter to be hail-fellow-well-met with those to whom my rank and fortune were everything, and who'd be willing, to my face--I'd never dare to turn it away for fear of what they'd say behind my back--to excuse my character on their account. My peers or nothing; and they, at least, on equal ground. My Lord of Twickenham was a great man; if he wasn't, he was nothing. As for living things down, I hadn't the time to spare. I'd be dead before I was a hundred years older; and, anyhow, it wasn't good enough.

It got borne in on me more and more, as I continued to reside in that atmosphere of undignified dignity, that there was something that was good enough, and that was just across the road. Mary and the kids. I had only seen her that once, and I was starving for another sight. I wasn't surrounded by trusting friends; and slipping from Twickenham House to Little Olive Street and back again was a trick which might be played once too often. If it was, Mary would find me out. And then-- I'd be a Marquis of Twickenham to her. The Lord forbid!

I had thought of a better way. The Marquis of Twickenham had placed where he knew he'd always be able to find it a nice little sum of money. I don't want to overload this part with details, so I won't say just how much. It was enough. The interest would enable Mr. and Mrs. Merrett to live the rest of their lives in something more than comfort. Mary would think herself rich beyond the dreams of avarice. God bless the girl!

The Marquis of Twickenham would just go out one morning, and Mr. James Merrett would come home. This time for good. He'd announce that he had had enough of leaving wife and children, and that he had therefore resolved in future, wherever he went, to take them with him. I guessed that Mary would be pleased. So Little Olive Street would soon be a thing of the past, and presently a united family would be found in quite another quarter.

It was a pretty programme, and I was bent on carrying it out. Foster's notion of a new environment wasn't bad, but I was vain enough to think that mine was better. I was going to learn from the best of all teachers, experience, what being married to the woman you're in love with really means. I didn't unduly hurry, but I lost no time. I made all the arrangements I could think of; then I looked at them once or twice all round, to see that they were made. It seemed to me they were.

Then one evening his lordship stepped out of Twickenham House into St. James's Square, bent on taking another excursion of some length. I had said nothing to any one in the house. The servants did not even know that I was going out. My goings and comings had nothing to do with them. My notion was that I would send Foster, say, from Paris, a letter containing no address. In it I would inform him that I was about to act upon his hint, and seek a fresh environment. How long the search would continue I could not say. Therefore I should be obliged if he would see that during my absence certain arrangements, which I would name, were carried out, so that my affectionate brother might not think it necessary to have me buried by proxy a second time.

I was conscious as I left the house that it was a clear and pleasant evening, and that the sky was peopled with many stars. At the foot of the steps I paused and looked about me. It was not my intention to go straight to Little Olive Street, but to spend that night, and probably the following day, in transacting certain little business matters of my own. As I stood there, my feelings were those of the boy who quits, for ever, a hated school. A whimsical mood came over me. Wheeling round, I shook my fist at the door, which had just been closed.

'I hope I'll never come through you again. The Marquis slips his skin!'

Turning, I moved along the pavement. I hadn't gone a dozen yards when I came upon a man who advanced from the direction in which I was going. At sight, each, on the instant, recognised the other. We both stopped dead.

It was my double--the man with a tongue whom I had seem at M'Croskay's in San Francisco. His lordship's very own self. Simon Pure.

BOOK IV.--THE SINNER

THE AUTHOR THROWS LIGHT UPON AN INTERESTING SITUATION

CHAPTER XXIX

BACK TO THE WORLD

The monks were working in the garden. A little apart, a man, whose costume suggested that he had not yet taken the full monastic vows, was going over a patch of ground with a rake. The patch was on a slope. Here and there were currant-bushes. The rake loosened the soil which was between them. Presently the man came to a piece of printed paper, which apparently had been carried by the wind till it found lodgment against a bush. He picked it up. It was part of a page of an English newspaper, left, probably, by some sight-seeing Englishman, who, mindful of the things which in that part of the world one ought to do, had tasted of the monastic hospitality. The finder, glancing at what he held, was about to crumple it up and throw it from him, when his eye was caught by the heading of a paragraph--'Death of the Marquis of Twickenham.'

When he perceived the words, for a moment his purpose was postponed. He stared as if they conveyed to his mind something which filled him with amazement. Then, remembering where he was, and looking about him to see if he was observed, he crushed the piece of paper into a pellet, which he placed within his cassock. Then he continued to rake as if nothing had happened.

Presently the workers retired to their cells to prepare for vespers; the monks first, the man with the rake at a respectful distance in the rear. As soon as he was in his cell, and had closed the door, out came the scrap of paper. He scanned what followed the heading which had caught his eye with a show of eagerness which was distinctly uncanonical. It was a brief statement to the effect that Leonard, third Marquis of Twickenham, had died of congenital disease of the heart on the preceding afternoon, at Cortin's Hotel, in the presence of various members of his family; and

was apparently going on to give further particulars when the paper stopped short. It had been torn in such a way that only the first three or four lines of that particular paragraph remained. These the man read over and over again, as if desirous of extracting from them the last shred of their significance.

'Died!--died!--died!--What does it mean?' He turned the piece of paper over and over in his hands. 'There's nothing to show from what journal it comes, but--I think--it's from one of the dailies. And nothing to show the date. It isn't new. It's come from England; and looks as if out in the garden there it had been buffeted by wind and rain. I wonder how old it is; and what it means by saying that I died in the presence of members of my family.'

He went down with the monks to vespers, occupied his usual place below the board at supper, joined the fraternity in saying compline, then retraced his steps towards the straw pallet on which he was supposed to rest.

A few minutes afterwards he was standing in the presence of the Father Superior. Without a word of introduction he laid upon the table at which the Prior sat the scrap of paper which he had found beneath the currant-bush. The monk glanced from it to his visitor.

'What is this, my son?'

'If you will look at that paper, father, you will see.'

They had spoken in French; but that the Prior understood English was made clear by the evident ease with which he read the printed extract. As his visitor had done, he gave it a second and a third perusal. Looking down, he drummed with his fingertips upon the board. Then, glancing up at the Englishman, he addressed him in his own language.

'Where did you get this?'

Its finder explained.

'What does it mean?'

'That is what I seek to know.'

'Nothing, probably--a canard.'

'I cannot say.'

'I'll have inquiries made, and you shall be acquainted with the result.' The Englishman was still. 'Well, won't that content you?'

The reply was hardly to the question.

'I thank you, my father, for having forbidden me to take the vows.'

'You thank me--now? It's not so long ago since you were in despair, being fearful lest by my refusal I had slammed the gates of heaven in your face. How often have you besought me to let you enter on the holy life? How long is it since you lay three nights upon the chapel stones, broken-hearted, because I advised you still to meditate upon its threshold? Answer me, my son.'

'I was wrong. You were right, my father--as you always are.'

'As I always am? Our Lady and the Blessed Saints know better. In only one thing was I right--alas! that I should have to say it--I knew you better than you did yourself. How long have you been with us?'

'Nearly five years.'

'So long? Are we so much nearer to the Day of Judgment? What were you when you came?'

'A thing to mock at.'

'Ay, indeed, a thing to mock at; a thing to make the angels weep. And, like many another, you desired to beat your head against the Cross, hoping by a little agony to atone for a life of sin. And have you raised yourself a little from the ditch?'

'Else were I a wretch indeed.'

'That are we all--miserable wretches! It has been my constant grief, in your particular case, that it was written that the first-fruits of your mother's womb should be unstable as water; that he should not excel. May my grief be turned to joy! So you have been beneath this holy roof five years? And now--what now?'

'I seek to leave you.'

'To leave us? You propose to join a fraternity in which the ordinance is more severe?'

'I wish to go back into the world again.'

The Prior raised his hands with a show of surprise which was possibly more feigned than real.

'To go back into the world again? You poor fool, you know not what you say. My son, in reading what is on this piece of paper you were guilty of offence. Punishment has followed fast. Already your eyes have been shut out from the contemplation of heavenly things. Return to your cell. Meditate. In a month, if you wish it, I will speak to you again.'

'In a month? But, my father, I cannot wait so long.'

'What word is this--you cannot?'

'I am under no vow of obedience. You yourself refused to let me take it. I am free to go or stay.'

'You are under no vow of obedience? And you have been here five years? What fashion of speech is this?'

'It is true--I am under no vow. And I have to thank you, my father, for my freedom.'

'My son, return to your cell.'

'If you desire it----'

'Desire!'

'But I came to tell you that I should leave you in the morning.'

'Leave us--in the morning! Are you mad, that you speak to me like this?'

'What this house has been to me, and what I owe to you who have given me so much more than shelter, is known only to God and to myself. Don't let us part in anger, or my last state will be worse than my first; but, father, I must go.'

'Must?'

'Yes, my father, must. Speed me on my way with some of those words of help and comfort which you can speak so well; give me your blessing before I go.'

The Prior put up his hand as if to screen his face from the other's too keen observation.

'What is the meaning of this--I will not say unruly spirit--but sudden, strange necessity?'

'That piece of paper.'

'But I have already told you that that may mean nothing; that I will have inquiries made, with the result of which you shall be acquainted.'

The Englishman continued silent for some moments, clasping and unclasping his hands in front of him; plainly torn by a conflict of emotions, to which he was struggling to give articulate utterance.

'My father, I believe that I see in that piece of paper the finger of Heaven.'

'Men have supposed themselves to see the finger of Heaven in some strange places; your obliquity of vision is not original, my son.'

'But, my father, don't you understand? It shows that my duty lies outside these walls.'

'In supposing it to lie along the broad road, you have again had predecessors.'

'My presence here may be the occasion of actual sin; indeed, if I construe what is written there aright, it already is. If that statement is correct, it points to fraud--to crime. Advantage has been taken of my continued absence--my silence. An impostor has arisen. Have I done right in allowing those who have charge of my possessions to remain in ignorance? Have I not put temptation in their path, and so sinned?'

'All this may be remedied by half-a-dozen lines upon a sheet of paper.'

'My father, I must go. Without, I shall be as much your son as I am within.'

'You think it.'

'I swear it.'

'Swear not at all. Oaths in your mouth are apt to be but vain repetitions. What have you not sworn within the last five years? How much more would you have sworn if I had sanctioned it?' The Englishman was still. 'My son, I ask myself if you are an unconscious hypocrite. Men say that

hypocrisy is, in a peculiar sense, your national vice. When I consider you, I wonder. I believe--I will give you so much credit--I believe that you mean what you say; although I know, if you don't, that you mean something altogether different.'

'I swear at least this much, that within a week of my reaching England fifty thousand pounds shall be paid to your credit.'

'Fifty thousand pounds? It is a large sum of money. I know that your family has riches, and that you are a great man in your own land. Your country should be proud of you.'

'My father!'

'My son, you are so poor a creature that I know not how to speak to you. You are like a sponge, quickly sodden, easily squeezed. These five years I have been hoping against hope that I might pluck you as a brand from the burning; at the least little flame, back you fall again.'

'I am not what I was when I came.'

'No. Your physical health is better.'

'My father!'

'My son, is it not true? What guarantee have I that you will endow Holy Church, and this her house, with the sum of which you speak?'

'I will give you my written bond.'

'Will that be a legal instrument in England?'

'Certainly. But do you think that in such a matter my word may not be trusted?--that it will be necessary for you to invoke the law? If so, I must indeed stand low in your eyes.'

'I have heard you vow, with tears of blood, using all the protestations of which you were master, that you would never forsake the shelter of this holy house. Do I understand that you propose that your withdrawal shall be final.'

'I cannot say.'

'Nor I. I think it possible that you may return, when the devil has fast hold of you again.' The Englishman put his hands up to his face and shuddered. 'He always has his finger-tips upon your shoulder; you only have to turn your head to see his face. I admit that in a sense--your sense--you are free. Had you vowed a hundred vows, in your sense you would still be free. It was because I knew it I desired to save your soul from blasphemy. If you will suffer me I will make you a suggestion, to which I beg that you will give serious consideration.'

'I am in your hands, my father.'

'Words, my son; words--words! I desire that you shall have as travelling companion a discreet priest, whom I will recommend, and who will attend to your spiritual welfare.' The other's silence sufficiently hinted that the proposition did not commend itself to him. 'In quitting these precincts your offence is grave. I presume you do not wish to make it greater.'

'I will give you the fifty thousand pounds.'

'Is that so? You are indeed good. If you English crucified Christ afresh, I imagine you would consider the Holy Father sufficiently appeased by a pecuniary compensation. In your country you are the Marquis of Twickenham?'

'I am.'

'You have been guilty of offences so rank, and so notorious, that you fled your father's anger, and hid your face from your kith and kin.'

'I have suffered for my sin.'

'You have suffered? Wait for the wrath to come.

'My father!'

'Your family is Protestant?'

'Alas!'

'You are entitled, from your spiritual elevation, to pity heretics, especially those of your own flesh and blood. Here are pens, ink, and paper. Sit down and write the bond of which you have spoken.' His lordship did as he was told. 'So far, so good. But do not imagine that this is a quittance for the debt which you owe Holy Church. As you are entrusted with this world's goods, so the Church demands from you her tithes. On your property you will provide a sufficient religious establishment. You will build churches and endow them. And in all your affairs you will

be advised by Holy Church. As you are seated, write that also.'

'My father!'

'Obey. Or I will summon the fraternity, and in their presence I will call down on you the curse of the Church and of the Holy Ghost, and will chase you from the fold out into the darkness of the night, that night which for you shall be unending. Do not think that because you leave us, we leave you. The arm of the Church is long, and, as you have learned from experience, the fires of hell burn from afar. Write as I have said.' His lordship wrote. 'Do not imagine that this bond which you have given me is but an empty form, any more than is your promise to pay the fifty thousand pounds. You are of the Church, if you are not in it, a leaf, if not a branch; and she will demand from you exact and prompt payment of every jot and tittle which is her due. Above all, do not neglect your religious duties, not for a single hour of a single day.'

'But, my father, I cannot be a monk out in the world.'

'You will neglect them at your proper peril. Do not suppose I shall not know. You will be in error.'

'Do you intend to have me spied upon?'

'We intend to have you kept in sight. You had better do as I advised, and have a discreet priest as your companion.'

'But I am entitled to my freedom!'

'And is the presence of such an one incompatible with your ideas of freedom? My son, you'll be on your knees calling for me within a week.'

'At least--at least wait until I call.'

'In that case, take care lest you call in vain. Remember five years ago. If you become again what you were then, it will be for ever, and ever, and ever! You'll be but a voice perpetually calling out of hell.'

'My father, I--I am stronger than I was then.'

'We will hope it. Though I seem to hear the devil laughing. Now, my son, go!'

'Bless me, my father, before I go.'

'Yes, I will bless you. But be careful, O my son, lest, as Aaron's rod was transformed into a serpent, by your own action my blessing becomes a curse.'

His lordship knelt. The Prior blessed him. Then his lordship went to bed, though the straw pallet on which he cast himself could hardly, on that occasion at any rate, be described as a bed of rest.

CHAPTER XXX

THE ONE MAN--AND THE OTHER

There were peas in his lordship's shoes: unboiled.

For some time he had been arriving at the conclusion that he had no so whole-hearted a leaning towards the religious life as he had once imagined. The scrap of paper was the top brick; it crowned the edifice of his discontent. More, it supplied him with the necessary courage to confess his backsliding to his superior; that keen-sighted religious being perhaps better prepared for the confession than the penitent imagined. It is even possible that some expectation of the kind had always been part and parcel of the Prior's plans. The Marquis of Twickenham, who is at once a millionaire and a backboneless scamp, is not the kind of bird which often drops into the monastic draw-net, whether at home or abroad. When caught, he may be even more useful at the end of a piece of string than in a cell.

Which explains the ease with which his lordship regained what he fondly hoped would be his

liberty. The truth being that persons of his type are never free; owing to their habit of mistaking licence for liberty placing them in continual bondage to some one or something.

There were peas in his lordship's shoes: unboiled. It is a fact that on the homeward way he proposed to treat himself, in Paris, to what he called a little amusement. Those peas spoilt all his pleasure. At the Moulin Rouge, while the ladies whirled their skirts and leered, and the music blared, the shadow of his monastic vigils obscured it all. Wherever he turned he saw the white Figure on the huge black cross, which had so often loomed down at him in the midnight darkness from over the altar in the chapel; against which, as the Prior said, in his frenzied fervour he had longed to dash his head. When, like a guilty thing, he stole from the unfestive revels he saw a priest standing on the pavement without; the sight of whom filled him with such unreasoning terror that he took to his heels and ran.

Luck had always been against him. Not all the evil he had done had been brought to light, but he was convinced that a most unfair proportion had been dragged into the noontide glare. The majority of men go with even their trivial peccadilloes undiscovered to the grave. In his case seven dirty things out of every ten he did were sure to get him into trouble. Did a man promise him a thrashing, dodge though he might, he was sure to light upon that man at the very moment when he least desired his presence. An instance of which aggravating species of misfortune occurred upon his homeward way.

Hardly had the boat left Boulogne harbour than he ran against a man to whom he had lost a bet--or two--which he had never paid. A bookmaker. There were three or four items outstanding against him in that particular book when the Viscount Sherrington--as his lordship then was--encountered its owner in the ring at Doncaster, and expressed a desire to once more back his fancy. The bookmaker would have none of him until the Viscount protested, with many oaths, that if he lost he would not only pay that particular bet, but all else he owed. But although he lost he did not pay. Whereupon the bookmaker took an early opportunity to inform him that wherever and whenever he met him he would favour him with his candid opinion of his character.

The average declaration of the kind is merely a figure of speech--or many gentlemen, who are now of the elect, would have to peep round every corner before they turned into a street. It was more than fifteen years since they had met, and during five of those years his lordship had been a penitent of quite exceptional strength. In the case of any other man there would probably have been a stare, a muttering beneath the breath, and then an end. But his lordship was not like any other man; his luck was his own. That bookmaker had a most aggressive memory, and he had been drinking. So when he perceived who it was who had all but trodden on his toe he addressed him much above a whisper.

'What, yer? Slippery?'

'Slippery' was the nickname by which his lordship had been known in certain circles once upon a time, but was not a style of address at all suited to a person of pronounced piety who had just emerged from prolonged cloistral seclusion.

Then and there, in the presence of quite a number of persons, that bookmaker gave utterance to his loud-voiced opinion of the man who had made that bet with him more than fifteen years before.

The Marquis set foot on his native soil with a distinct feeling of depression. If he was going, to have many encounters of that kind, better, after all, the religious life. In the cloister self-respect is an offence, and self-abasement the order of the day. It is different in the world. There men dislike to be kicked in public, nor do they even wish to have people informed that they deserve a kicking. In that respect, if in no other, his lordship was one of the crowd.

So, to raise his spirits, when he reached town he had a good dinner, and a large quantity of wine. The result, again, was neither what he expected nor desired. Seeking that feeling of conviviality which should follow a feast, he got indigestion instead. As he paid the reckoning he was painfully conscious that if the waiter would only include a couple of liver pills with the change he would do him a genuine service.

Hence he was hardly in a mood to make a triumphal return to the home of his fathers, particularly as that return was attended with circumstances which might be described as delicate. He had decided to put in an appearance at St. James's Square that very night. When he found himself in the street his resolution wavered. The glare and tumult bewildered him. He was more than half afraid of the kaleidoscopic crowd. When a man, who has crucified himself during a period extending over years, drops off his cross, he is hardly in a mood to appreciate at once London as it is at night. Besides, the place was strange. He saw changes on every hand; and when he had at last concluded to try and play the man, he had to ask his way to his own home. And then he lost himself upon the road.

He found himself, however, when he entered the sombre purlieus of St. James's Square. That was familiar ground. Wherever he had gone he had carried a picture of it in his brain. So far as he could see, for the place was more in shadow than in light, it was unchanged. He walked right round. As he went, a backwater from the past rushed over him, bearing him on its current to the days that were. He seemed to see himself once more a lad. With uncomfortable clarity of vision,

he saw what kind of lad he was. He shuddered; and, as he neared his father's house, drew back ashamed. It was almost as if an invisible barrier had prevented his close approach. Round the square he went again. As, coming from the other direction, he approached Twickenham House a second time, he saw a man come through the door; a man who stood upon the pavement for a moment to shake his fist at the building which he had just quitted. Then, wheeling round upon his heels, he came smartly forward. As his lordship observed the approaching figure he was conscious of an odd sensation of amazement--of shock--as if he were staring at something which was not to be explained by the ordinary definitions which we use in our everyday experience, and which he more than half suspected was a trick played him by his eyes.

When they came close together the two men stopped short. Each regarded the other with surprise which, for a moment or two, was speechless. Then the newcomer spoke.

'You're me. What price San Francisco? How goes it, my Lord Marquis?'

There was an interval before the answer came. This took the form of an inquiry.

'What are you doing here?'

'Relinquishing the title. And you?'

'I'm returning home.'

Mr. Merrett whistled.

'Seems as if I might have known you were coming back from the husks and swine, my dropping on to you like this. Anyhow, you're welcome. You come along with me; I'll post you up to date.'

Mr. Merrett, slipping his hand through the other's arm, wheeled him right round. His lordship offered no remonstrance. Not even when, having entered a hansom which Mr. Merrett had hailed, that gentleman directed the cabman to drive to an address in the Euston Road. Scarcely a word was exchanged by the strange companions on the road. Possibly each found his attention fully occupied by a mental revision of this latest phase in the situation. The peer asked a single question as the vehicle stopped.

'What place is this?'

'This is Parkinson's Private Hotel; strictly temperance, and respectable to a fault.'

Mr. Merrett seemed well known in the establishment. He merely stopped to greet a matronly female who met them in the hall, then, leading the way upstairs, entered a spacious apartment on the first floor, which was furnished as a bed- and sitting-room. The gas was lighted; a bright fire burned in the grate. Mr. Merrett, locking the door, drew a heavy curtain in front of it.

'Now, my dear Double, you and I will have a little pleasant conversation.'

Their likeness to each other, as they stood face to face in the well-lighted room, was an illustration of what nature can do when she is in a freakish mood. In height, build, even in feature, there was so close a resemblance that it was not difficult to understand the ease with which either might be mistaken for the other. And yet in carriage and expression there was so marked a difference that, when seen together, it was the unlikeness rather than the likeness which struck one most. Ease of bearing, strength, decision, boldness, were as striking characteristics of the one man as they were wholly lacking in the other. Quickness, resource, courage, were unmistakably attributes of Mr. Merrett, just as plainly as hesitation, doubt, pliancy, were the distinguishing marks of the prodigal peer.

Mr. Merrett's quick eye summed up his lordship in a trice.

'You haven't changed. Those developments haven't taken place in your character which I've announced. It's a pity; so it is.'

'What do you mean?'

'It's to tell you what I mean that I've brought you here.'

Mr. Merrett told. As first one spoke, then the other, the same peculiarity was noticeable in their voices as in their persons. The unlikeness, with the likeness. The tone was the same; so that frequently any one, standing outside the door, for instance, would not have been able to say which of the twain was speaking. But Merrett spoke with an odd clearness, looking the person whom he addressed straight in the face; he had a trick of making his words convey their full natural meaning and more. The peer's utterance, on the other hand, was apt to be both rapid and indistinct; his glance continually wandered; one suspected, as one listened, that words coming from his mouth were both meaningless and valueless.

'And do you mean to tell me that you've been playing at being Marquis of Twickenham in my place?'

'I do. It hasn't been much of a game, but, as Marquis, I'm worth about a hundred and fifty thousand of you. That's the cold truth.'

'You don't lack assurance.'

'I do not. All I ask is to agree with you.'

'And you have the--the impudence to tell me that you've been making free with my money?'

'Free's the word. And the amount's been named. It might have been larger. But I'm a modest man. It will serve.'

'You are aware of the consequences to which you have made yourself liable?'

Mr. Merrett took out, from a pocket-book, a slip of blue paper; which, unfolding, he held out in front of him.

'See that? That's the bill on which you forged your father's name. Now, sir, for a man who takes a liberty of that kind with his own father I have no use. But a prison has. You've had a run for your money--a fifteen years' run. Now that run's over. In a nice warm cell in a police station you'll find your billet for to-night, and then from one of His Majesty's jails you'll have no chance of running for probably the next fifteen years.'

'Why do you talk to me like that? Do you--do you think you frighten me?'

'I'm quite sure I frighten you. It can't be nice to come back to find the danger staring you in the face from which you ran. A man finds prison less cheerful at your time of life than when he was younger.'

'What do you want for the bill?'

'Nothing. It's not for sale. All I want is an understanding. We can't be friends--I never could be friends with a man who forged his father's name--but we can be on terms of common agreement.'

'You've placed me in a most awkward situation.'

'Not a bit of it. I've placed you in a better situation than you were in all your life. The Marquis of Twickenham is more respected at this moment than ever before. It's understood that he's turned over a new leaf; that he's a reformed character; that his character has developed in a manner which is altogether beyond the expectations of his friends. And it's got to be generally known that any one who takes liberties with him does so at his peculiar peril. You've only got to go to Twickenham House, and enter the front door, letting them think that you've come back from a stroll, to find yourself received with an air of deference--which I'm sure that you'll find welcome. You'll have no questions asked, especially no nasty ones. You'll just find yourself on rollers.'

'Are you actually suggesting that I should carry on the fraud which you initiated?'

'Depends on how you call it. This fraud'll drift into the paths of virtue; as fraud sometimes does. You'll be in every way a fool if you drop a word to cause any one to think that you haven't been the Marquis all along. For one thing, you'll lose the good character I've earned you; and, for another, you'll be in jail.'

'But I shan't be able to continue the deception for a moment.'

'Why not? If there's one thing you're good at, it is deception.'

'Suppose that I'm found out?'

'Then you may expect trouble--from me.'

'How did you come in possession of that--that acceptance?'

'For information on that point I refer you to Mr. Acrodato; though I don't advise you to apply for it. So long as he continues to believe that you are me all will be merry as a marriage bell; the moment he suspects that he's been tricked the band will begin to play.'

'Give me that bill and I'll give you a quittance for the money you've taken, and nothing shall be said of what you've done.'

'You'll do all that, and more--without my giving you the bill.'

'Are you proposing to blackmail me?'

'I'm proposing nothing of the kind. I'm proposing to keep that bill; that's all. So soon as it comes to my ears that you've given any one--it doesn't matter who--the least cause to suspect that it isn't you who've been Marquis of Twickenham all the way along you'll hear I've got it--not till.'

'But, Carruthers, or Babbacombe, or Merrett, or whatever your name is----'

'My name, sir, is James Merrett; and don't you ever let on that you knew me as Carruthers at San Francisco, or anywhere else.'

'It seems to me that between us we've got a good many things we don't want people to know of.'

'You've hit it. That's the point to which I've been trying to bring you. Let's sit on them together.'

'Merrett, I quite recognise that you're the stronger man.'

'Recognition's something.'

'But, whether you choose to admit it or not, you've got me in a hole. While it is quite possible, and even probable, that in starting to be Marquis on your own account you've cleared the ground for me in some directions, in asking me to continue on your lines undiscovered, you are setting me a task which is beyond my powers.'

'I see that you are trying to get somewhere. Get.'

'It is quite possible that I may become a monk.'

'A what?'

'A monk. For the past five years I've been living the life of a religious.'

'You don't say! It sounds funny.'

'Therefore you will easily perceive that I am scarcely prepared to take upon myself all at once the responsibilities of the position which--you have arranged for me.'

'Get on. You do move slow.'

'Merrett, I want you to stand by me, and help me through the troubles I see ahead.'

'What do you mean by standing by--and what's your idea of helping?'

'Can't you, with your fertile brain, see some means of rendering me assistance without--compromising either of us?'

Again Mr. Merrett whistled.

'Your head isn't so much on the slant as some might perhaps be thinking. Together we'll be a match for a world in arms. You see, it's this way. There are persons who are foolish enough to think that I'm myself. Between us we might manage to convince them that I'm not. You slip round to Twickenham House. Then sometime to-morrow I'll appear as the injured Merrett--red-hot with an indignant desire to know who has had the cheek and impudence, peer or no peer, to get himself mistaken for me. I shall see you; perceive, with amazement--kept within judicious bounds--how like you are to me. Then I shall understand how the mistake's arisen, and my indignation will tone down. We'll have a little talk together. I may be of assistance to you--in other ways. One never knows.'

Mr. Merrett winked. His lordship smiled.

CHAPTER XXXI

AN INTERIOR

Mr. Merrett gently opened the door, then stood listening, the handle in his hand. The sound of voices reached his ear. He stepped into the passage. The door of the room upon his left was open; he peeped through. A woman was sitting at a table with a pile of photographs in front of her. Two children were standing at her knee; a boy and girl. They regarded the photograph on which the woman's eyes were fixed.

'Shall I be like father when I grow up?' inquired the boy. 'I hope you will; as like him as you can. O Jimmy, I would be proud if you were like your father.'

'Will I be like him too?' This was the little girl. The boy derided her. 'Girls aren't never like their fathers--never!'

The woman, stopping, put her arm about the young person's neck, and said: 'You be your mother, Pollie; and love him with all your heart and soul. Father'll like that just as well.'

'Father'll like it better!' observed Mr. Merrett, standing at the door.

Mother and children started. They turned to see who it was had spoken. The woman, dropping the photograph she held, ran towards the door, uttering an exclamation that was like a long-drawn sigh.

'James!'

She threw her arms about his neck, he put his about her waist, and they were still--until the children claimed their share of notice.

'To think that you should come home to-day!'

She spoke as if the day were sanctified by his coming. She was a woman whose beauty was rare both in type and in degree. Small, there was that about her which caused the defect, if defect it was, to go unnoticed. She moved with a grace and freedom which dignified her every gesture. The eye followed her with continual joy. Every change of attitude was a fresh delight. Whether in movement or repose she suggested the physical side of life at its highest and its best; she seemed charged, to the finger-tips, with so delicious a vitality. The thing about her face which struck one most was its expression of perfect innocence. One wondered if such a being ever could grow old. One felt sure that she would face whatever fortune fate might send her with the same quaint illuminating smile, and that nothing would ever shake her faith in the good that was to be.

Mr. Merrett had a child on either knee. His wife was kneeling beside his chair, regarding him with a rapturous affection which it was curious to contemplate. A man's capacity to win and retain a woman's love is by no means necessarily dependent on his moral qualities. Which is fortunate for some of us.

'James,' she whispered, from the post of vantage her head occupied upon his shoulder, 'when you come home the whole world seems somehow different.'

Her tongue betrayed her. Her speech was hardly that of an educated woman, and yet her voice was such a sweet one, and her manner so naturally refined, that one could not doubt that it needed but little to make her command over the King's English greater than it was.

'Seems different, doesn't it? Now that's strange. Do you think, having come, if I stayed it would keep on seeming different?'

'O James, if you would stay--a week.'

One could not but perceive that her sentence had changed between its beginning and its end. He chose to construe the alteration in a fashion of his own.

'A week! You don't think it would keep on seeming different if I stayed longer than that?'

'If you--if you'd only try.'

Her voice dropped; as if alarmed at her own daring. This was one of those foolish women who are fearful of saying anything which may be contrary to the wishes of the man they love.

'I'm going to try; if try's the word which adequately expresses the situation. I'm going to stay more than a week. I'm going to stay for ever.'

She looked up at him with an expression of singular amazement.

'James, do you mean--that you've come--to stay with us--for good?'

'That's it; for good. I like your word better than mine. Then we'll see how long the world will keep on seeming different.'

'It will keep on seeming different for ever. Stay with us always? James, you--you don't know what that means.'

Back went her head upon his shoulder, and she was still. He put up his hand to stroke her hair.

'It's in this way. After prolonged and arduous toil----'

He cleared his throat; as if the words stuck a little. She mistook the cause of his hesitation.

'I'm sure you've worked too much.'

'I have worked hard--at times.' There was a grimness in his tone which it is to be hoped she did not detect. 'As a result of my--labours, I have amassed a small fortune which will relieve me, in the future, from the necessity of making more money, and will enable me to devote the whole of my attention to the claims of my wife and family.'

'Do you mean that you are rich?'

'Rich is a relative term, I hope that I have enough to provide us all with bread and cheese for the remainder of our days.'

'Without working any more?'

'Without working any more.'

'James, shan't we be happy?'

I think we shall. It's about my idea of happiness to have you always close at hand.'

'James!'

'My idea is to leave this part of the world behind us; and--what do you say to a little travel?'

'Travel? I've always wanted to travel,--and with you! But it costs so much.'

'I'll see that it doesn't cost more than I can afford, Then, when we've had enough of travelling, we'll decide which of the places we have seen we like best, and there we'll take up our abode.'

'James, how good God is to us!'

Mr. Merrett said nothing, His lips were wrinkled by a peculiar smile, which it was perhaps as well for her peace of mind that she did not see; and he smoothed the lady's lovely hair.

While the silence still remained unbroken the door opened--manners in Little Olive Street are primitive--and Mr. Augustus FitzHoward stood looking in.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE LAST JOURNEY TO TWICKENHAM HOUSE

The scene which met his eyes appeared to fill Mr. FitzHoward with an access of amazement to which it was altogether beyond his power to give adequate expression. Mr. Merrett, on the other hand, greeted him with a smile of the heartiest kind.

'What you, Fitz! How goes it, my old pal?'

The fashion of the greeting seemed to render Mr. FitzHoward's amazement greater. On a sudden words came tumbling from his lips.

'So you have come home. Well, I'm a Dutchman if this doesn't beat anything!'

'Who says you're a Dutchman? You give me his name and address and I'll pay him a call. Yes, Fitz, I have come home; and I hope you're as glad to see me as I am to see you.'

'You weren't glad to see me a little while ago.'

'I should have been if I'd had the luck. But we don't always have the luck. I hope, old man, that my presence hasn't caused you any inconvenience?'

Mr. FitzHoward had his hands in his trousers' pockets; his agitation was such that it caused him to agitate those garments in a way which was peculiar.

'I don't know what kind of a fool you take me for. I know I'm a bit of one, but I'm not the altogether you seem to think.'

'What's the matter with you, Fitz? Perhaps it's because I haven't seen you for so long, but your manner appears to me to be a trifle odd.'

'I suppose you're not the Marquis of Twickenham now?'

'Not who? I say, have you--been beginning early?'

'I suppose you never were the Marquis of Twickenham? I suppose I'm not to believe the evidence of my senses? Oh, dear no! If you tell me that you're Jones to-day, and Brown to-morrow, and Robinson the day after, and God knows who next week, I'm never to cast doubt upon your word by suggesting that I ever knew you as anybody else. Is that the kind of man you think I ought to be? Because, if so, although you mayn't like it, I can only tell you that I'm not. I always have said that you were the marvel of the age, but I'm only just beginning to realise what a marvel you really are.'

'Mary, what does the fellow mean?'

She said something which was audible to him alone, When she had finished, Mr. Merrett, lifting the children from off his knees, rose to his feet.

'Mary, when I was here last you spoke of somebody who you seemed to think had been masquerading as me. Fitz, your remarks apparently point in the same direction. What does this person call himself?'

'He calls himself the Marquis of Twickenham--when he's not James Merrett.'

'Is that meant to be funny? Because, if so, take my advice, and don't try to be humorous in a wrong key. Where does he live?'

'His address is Twickenham House, St. James's Square--when it's not Little Olive Street.'

'More humour? Pretty soon I'll give you leave to get in all the laughter you have handy. You come right away along with yours truly, and we'll interview the gentleman who's pretending to be me.'

'He's not pretending to be you; he's pretending that he isn't you.'

'That so? We'll investigate his pretensions anyhow. You just come right along.'

Mr. FitzHoward stared.

'What new caper's this?'

'It's a caper that's going to show you just where the laugh comes in, if you're ready.'

'James, you're not going to leave us?'

'You have tea upon that table at five o'clock; a good tea, mind; and I'll be back for it; back for good. There seems to be some little game going on over in St. James's Square which I'm going to take a hand at. You remember my telling you about a man Jones saw who might have sat for me? Looks as if he had come to life again, and was making trouble. Now trouble of that kind is a thing I don't mean to have come into the life which, from this time forward, you and I are going to live together. So I'm going along with Fitz till tea-time to see that it don't.'

As the two men went side by side along the pavement, Mr. FitzHoward kept glancing at his companion as if he found something about him which was not only strange but altogether beyond his comprehension. Presently he asked a question.

'Well! What's the game now?'

'The game?' Mr. Merrett regarded the other with a glance of innocent inquiry. 'That's what I'm after; that's what I'm going to find out--what the game is.'

They went some little distance before Mr. FitzHoward ventured on another remark.

'You have a face!'

'I hope so. I hope you have one too--even if it's not such an ornament as mine.'

'Ornament!'

Mr. FitzHoward emitted a sigh which might have been intended to mark the interjection. Mr. Merrett hailed a passing cab.

'Drive us to Twickenham House, St. James's Square. Now, Fitz, in you jump.'

That gentleman appeared to hesitate:

'Look here. I don't know what your game is, you're beyond me altogether, but don't you go kicking me out when we get there.'

'Kicking you? Out of what? The cab?'

'No, my Lord Marquis; out of your palatial abode. Because, if you do, this time there'll be trouble.'

'Fitz, would you do me the favour to step into that cab, and don't talk as if you had been let out of a lunatic asylum before your time?'

Thus adjured, Mr. FitzHoward did as he was requested. As the cab bowled along he continued to regard his companion with glances which were brimful of curiosity. But nothing was said. The cab reached Twickenham House. When Mr. Merrett got out he looked the building up and down.

'This the place?'

'Oh, yes, this is the place.'

'Don't look extra lively, does it? As if they kept a funeral on the premises. Nodding plumes out of every window would give a finishing touch. A bit too much in the big bow-wow style to suit me.'

'It does take a big man to properly fill it, as perhaps you found.'

'I found? Fitz, you're a fair treat. You'd better take something for it before it goes too far.'

Mr. Merrett sounded a salute on the knocker and the bell. The door flew open. A powdered footman stood within.

'Marquis of Twickenham at home?'

'His lordship is----' the footman began, then stopped to stare. 'I beg pardon, I----' The man stopped again.

'Well? Get it out! You thought what! For pains in the back try Jujah!'

'I beg your lordship's pardon. I thought your lordship was engaged. I wasn't aware your lordship was out.'

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE TWINKLE IN THE FATHER'S EYES

Mr. Merrett looked the man very straight in the face; as if he suspected him of an intention to be humorous.

'Not so much "your lordship" about it, if you please. Is it the old complaint? Try a bushel of pills before breakfast and a scuttleful at lunch. A young man with a pair of legs like yours ought to have more sense. He did really. For goodness gracious sake don't be a fool just because you look it. Try to behave as if you'd left your face at home. Did you hear me ask if the Marquis of Twickenham is at home, or are you deaf both back and front?'

The footman plainly did not know what to make of the position.

'Your lordship----'

Mr. Merrett sprang up the steps. 'Look here, you perambulating cauliflower, if you give me any more of "your lordship" I'll dot you upon the frontispiece. Are you the only fool about the place? Or isn't there any one who can give a civil answer to a civil question?'

Another footman advanced. Behind him the venerable Mr. Gayer. Both stared with unmistakable surprise at Mr. Merrett. He returned them stare for stare.

'Well? The charge for this entertainment is generally one shilling, but really good-looking men are admitted free. Do you both of you want a pass, upon your faces?'

He put his hand up to his mouth, and bawled:

'Is the Marquis of Twickenham at home? Sorry I didn't bring a foghorn out with me, but perhaps that's loud enough for somebody to hear.'

'What name?'

'What's yours?'

'My name is Gayer.'

'Mine's Merrett; James Merrett, Esquire. Glad to meet you. We're getting on nicely, Mr. Gayer, you and I. It's always a privilege to meet a man who's got sense, even if you can't think where he keeps it. Might I ask you if the Marquis of Twickenham is at home? My top notes are a little rusty; I didn't know I should have had to do so much shouting, or I'd have had them oiled before I came.'

'His lordship is engaged. He gave special instructions that he was not to be disturbed.'

'Oh, he did, did he? Then his instructions are going to be disturbed--and so I tell you. I'm going to see his lordship right now. There's some game going on here which it's my intention to see the bottom of. That fairy-like flower of the flock with the lily-white hair has kept calling me his "lordship" more than I quite care for; so I'm going to see what his lordship's like, for a lord's the very last thing I wish to be. Now, Fitz, I'm going to call on the Marquis. You come along and see me through.'

Mr. Gayer had placed himself in Mr. Merrett's way.

'Excuse me, sir!'

'Excuse me, my dear Mr. Gayer, but would you mind removing yourself to a more convenient distance, unless you wish me to demonstrate that my fighting weight is greater than you might think?'

On a sudden Mr. Merrett was across the hall, before Mr. Gayer was prepared for him to make a move. Throwing open a door he looked into the room which it disclosed.

'Hollo!' he exclaimed, 'what have we here?'

Two persons were within. One, a priest of the Roman Catholic Church, was taking his ease in an armchair, the other was kneeling in front of him with his hands held up to his face. At the sound of the opening door this person withdrew his hands, and turned. It was the Marquis of Twickenham.

Mr. Merrett stared at him with every appearance of the most profound amazement. He plucked off his hat.

'I--I--I'm sure I beg pardon, but are you the Marquis of Twickenham?'

'I am.'

'D--d--d--does your lordship know how much you are like me?'

The man on his knees was still. The priest stood up; a fine, steady figure; in striking contrast to the abject creature at his feet. He regarded Mr. Merrett with twinkling eyes.

'There certainly is a resemblance. Is it to that fact that we are indebted for the pleasure of your presence, unannounced?'

'Well, I was told that there was a gentleman here who was so like me that father got taking me for him; and as this was promising to become inconvenient, I thought I'd come and see.'

'And having seen?'

'I beg your pardon for having intruded, and hope I'll be excused.'

'Your name?'

'Merrett--James Merrett. And yours?'

'I am Father Anthony Coppard. Now that I regard you more attentively, I perceive that the resemblance is greater than I at first realised. You interest me, Mr. Merrett. May I ask you to favour me with your address, so that, perhaps, I may have the pleasure of seeing you again.'

'If you'll let me have yours, I'll come and call on you.'

'You prefer it that way? Well, as you please. I am content. Here is my card, Mr. Merrett. Let me know when you are coming; and--be sure you come.'

Father Anthony Coppard bestowed on Mr. Merrett, with his card, a glance which was full of meaning.

As the two visitors were going down the steps, Mr. Merrett put up his hand to smooth his chin. He appeared to be lost in a maze of wonder.

'Well, this beats anything I've ever heard of. If I hadn't seen him with my own eyes I wouldn't have believed it--that two men could be so alike. Why, if I hadn't seen him in a looking-glass I might have mistaken him for me.'

'I'm sure I apologise, Mr. Babbacombe, if I seem to have doubted anything you may have said, but as you observed, I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. Nobody could.'

'I'm not surprised that my wife mistook that man for me; and although it seems to be against nature, upon my word I'm not surprised.'

'It would have been surprising if she hadn't.'

'You've hit it--it would. Mr. FitzHoward, you're a level-headed man, and always have been, so that when you talked to me in the way you did do, it was beyond me altogether. But now I understand what you were driving at; and I find I have to thank you for affording me an opportunity to throw light upon a matter which, had it remained wrapped in mystery, might have been against me all my life--and poisoned it, FitzHoward--poisoned it.'

'I'm sure, Mr. Babbacombe, you're welcome to anything I may have done, and it's very handsome of you to put it in that way.'

'Don't mention it, Fitz, my dear old boy; don't mention it.'

Putting out his hand, Mr. Merrett squeezed Mr. FitzHoward's arm in a way which was eloquent of what he felt. Presently he added another remark:

'I wonder what he was saying to that priest?'

For the first time, perhaps, he spoke the truth. He really did wonder. The twinkle which had been in the father's eyes he did not understand.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE PENITENT

That the Marquis of Twickenham lives a religious life is a matter of public notoriety. His benefactions to the Church whose faith he had adopted are in the mouths of every one. By far the larger portion of his income must, in some form or other, go into priestly hands. His family seat at Cressland is ordered almost as if it were a house of the religious. Priests are everywhere. Both a convent and a monastery have been established in the grounds. His days are ordered as if he himself were one of the brotherhood. Prayer and fasting are his rules of life. Strange stories are told of self-inflicted penances.

Thus he seeks, it would seem, to atone for the sins of his early life. In the opinion of certain persons the penitential spirit came on him with altogether unexpected suddenness. Mr. Stephen Foster, who had charge of the family finances till they were transferred to the custody of Roman Catholic administrators, to this day cannot understand how the alteration came about. He declares that when the truant peer first returned from his prolonged absence, his lordship struck him as being very much more of a scoffer than a bigot. Yet all at once he was in sackcloth and ashes. Mr. Foster cannot make it out at all. He is persuaded that there is something curious somewhere.

Lord Reginald Sherrington keeps a keen eye upon his brother's proceedings. His lordship's generosity has enabled him to marry Lady Violet Howarth, and it is understood that the match is, on the whole, a happy one; but he cannot rid himself of a feeling that the priestly element which rules at Cressland requires attention and constant observation. In which respect he is not impossibly correct.

Miss Desmond is still unmarried. Douglas Howarth is dead. The Marquis seemed by his return to have signed his death warrant. He was never again the man he used to be.

Mr. Merrett flourishes exceedingly. His wife is happy as the day is long. She declares that since her James came home 'for good' she has never known a shadowed hour. May the sunset for her be indefinitely postponed!

Mr. Augustus FitzHoward, whose name is familiar to many of us as the manager of one of our most popular London theatres, when speaking of his friend James Merrett, still proudly proclaims him to be 'the marvel of the age.'

Mr. Merrett sometimes assures Mr. FitzHoward, with a dry little smile, that he has no notion how exact his definition is.

THE END

**Printed by T. and A. Constable, (late) Printers to Her late Majesty
at the Edinburgh University Press**

1.B. “Project Gutenberg” is a registered trademark. It may only be used on or associated in any way with an electronic work by people who agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement. There are a few things that you can do with most Project Gutenberg™ electronic works even without complying with the full terms of this agreement. See paragraph 1.C below. There are a lot of things you can do with Project Gutenberg™ electronic works if you follow the terms of this agreement and help preserve free future access to Project Gutenberg™ electronic works. See paragraph 1.E below.

1.C. The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation (“the Foundation” or PGLAF), owns a compilation copyright in the collection of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works. Nearly all the individual works in the collection are in the public domain in the United States. If an individual work is unprotected by copyright law in the United States and you are located in the United States, we do not claim a right to prevent you from copying, distributing, performing, displaying or creating derivative works based on the work as long as all references to Project Gutenberg are removed. Of course, we hope that you will support the Project Gutenberg™ mission of promoting free access to electronic works by freely sharing Project Gutenberg™ works in compliance with the terms of this agreement for keeping the Project Gutenberg™ name associated with the work. You can easily comply with the terms of this agreement by keeping this work in the same format with its attached full Project Gutenberg™ License when you share it without charge with others.

1.D. The copyright laws of the place where you are located also govern what you can do with this work. Copyright laws in most countries are in a constant state of change. If you are outside the United States, check the laws of your country in addition to the terms of this agreement before downloading, copying, displaying, performing, distributing or creating derivative works based on this work or any other Project Gutenberg™ work. The Foundation makes no representations concerning the copyright status of any work in any country other than the United States.

1.E. Unless you have removed all references to Project Gutenberg:

1.E.1. The following sentence, with active links to, or other immediate access to, the full Project Gutenberg™ License must appear prominently whenever any copy of a Project Gutenberg™ work (any work on which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” appears, or with which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” is associated) is accessed, displayed, performed, viewed, copied or distributed:

> This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at www.gutenberg.org. If you are not located in the United States, you will have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook.

1.E.2. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is derived from texts not protected by U.S. copyright law (does not contain a notice indicating that it is posted with permission of the copyright holder), the work can be copied and distributed to anyone in the United States without paying any fees or charges. If you are redistributing or providing access to a work with the phrase “Project Gutenberg” associated with or appearing on the work, you must comply either with the requirements of paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 or obtain permission for the use of the work and the Project Gutenberg™ trademark as set forth in paragraphs 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.3. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is posted with the permission of the copyright holder, your use and distribution must comply with both paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 and any additional terms imposed by the copyright holder. Additional terms will be linked to the Project Gutenberg™ License for all works posted with the permission of the copyright holder found at the beginning of this work.

1.E.4. Do not unlink or detach or remove the full Project Gutenberg™ License terms from this work, or any files containing a part of this work or any other work associated with Project Gutenberg™.

1.E.5. Do not copy, display, perform, distribute or redistribute this electronic work, or any part of this electronic work, without prominently displaying the sentence set forth in paragraph 1.E.1 with active links or immediate access to the full terms of the Project Gutenberg™ License.

1.E.6. You may convert to and distribute this work in any binary, compressed, marked up, nonproprietary or proprietary form, including any word processing or hypertext form. However, if you provide access to or distribute copies of a Project Gutenberg™ work in a format other than “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other format used in the official version posted on the official Project Gutenberg™ website (www.gutenberg.org), you must, at no additional cost, fee or expense to the user, provide a copy, a means of exporting a copy, or a means of obtaining a copy upon request, of the work in its original “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other form. Any alternate format must include the full Project Gutenberg™ License as specified in

paragraph 1.E.1.

1.E.7. Do not charge a fee for access to, viewing, displaying, performing, copying or distributing any Project Gutenberg™ works unless you comply with paragraph 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.8. You may charge a reasonable fee for copies of or providing access to or distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works provided that:

- You pay a royalty fee of 20% of the gross profits you derive from the use of Project Gutenberg™ works calculated using the method you already use to calculate your applicable taxes. The fee is owed to the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, but he has agreed to donate royalties under this paragraph to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. Royalty payments must be paid within 60 days following each date on which you prepare (or are legally required to prepare) your periodic tax returns. Royalty payments should be clearly marked as such and sent to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation at the address specified in Section 4, “Information about donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation.”

- You provide a full refund of any money paid by a user who notifies you in writing (or by e-mail) within 30 days of receipt that s/he does not agree to the terms of the full Project Gutenberg™ License. You must require such a user to return or destroy all copies of the works possessed in a physical medium and discontinue all use of and all access to other copies of Project Gutenberg™ works.

- You provide, in accordance with paragraph 1.F.3, a full refund of any money paid for a work or a replacement copy, if a defect in the electronic work is discovered and reported to you within 90 days of receipt of the work.

- You comply with all other terms of this agreement for free distribution of Project Gutenberg™ works.

1.E.9. If you wish to charge a fee or distribute a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work or group of works on different terms than are set forth in this agreement, you must obtain permission in writing from the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the manager of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark. Contact the Foundation as set forth in Section 3 below.

1.F.

1.F.1. Project Gutenberg volunteers and employees expend considerable effort to identify, do copyright research on, transcribe and proofread works not protected by U.S. copyright law in creating the Project Gutenberg™ collection. Despite these efforts, Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, and the medium on which they may be stored, may contain “Defects,” such as, but not limited to, incomplete, inaccurate or corrupt data, transcription errors, a copyright or other intellectual property infringement, a defective or damaged disk or other medium, a computer virus, or computer codes that damage or cannot be read by your equipment.

1.F.2. LIMITED WARRANTY, DISCLAIMER OF DAMAGES - Except for the “Right of Replacement or Refund” described in paragraph 1.F.3, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, and any other party distributing a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work under this agreement, disclaim all liability to you for damages, costs and expenses, including legal fees. YOU AGREE THAT YOU HAVE NO REMEDIES FOR NEGLIGENCE, STRICT LIABILITY, BREACH OF WARRANTY OR BREACH OF CONTRACT EXCEPT THOSE PROVIDED IN PARAGRAPH 1.F.3. YOU AGREE THAT THE FOUNDATION, THE TRADEMARK OWNER, AND ANY DISTRIBUTOR UNDER THIS AGREEMENT WILL NOT BE LIABLE TO YOU FOR ACTUAL, DIRECT, INDIRECT, CONSEQUENTIAL, PUNITIVE OR INCIDENTAL DAMAGES EVEN IF YOU GIVE NOTICE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGE.

1.F.3. LIMITED RIGHT OF REPLACEMENT OR REFUND - If you discover a defect in this electronic work within 90 days of receiving it, you can receive a refund of the money (if any) you paid for it by sending a written explanation to the person you received the work from. If you received the work on a physical medium, you must return the medium with your written explanation. The person or entity that provided you with the defective work may elect to provide a replacement copy in lieu of a refund. If you received the work electronically, the person or entity providing it to you may choose to give you a second opportunity to receive the work electronically in lieu of a refund. If the second copy is also defective, you may demand a refund in writing without further opportunities to fix the problem.

1.F.4. Except for the limited right of replacement or refund set forth in paragraph 1.F.3, this work is provided to you ‘AS-IS’, WITH NO OTHER WARRANTIES OF ANY KIND, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR ANY PURPOSE.

1.F.5. Some states do not allow disclaimers of certain implied warranties or the exclusion or limitation of certain types of damages. If any disclaimer or limitation set forth in this

agreement violates the law of the state applicable to this agreement, the agreement shall be interpreted to make the maximum disclaimer or limitation permitted by the applicable state law. The invalidity or unenforceability of any provision of this agreement shall not void the remaining provisions.

1.F.6. INDEMNITY - You agree to indemnify and hold the Foundation, the trademark owner, any agent or employee of the Foundation, anyone providing copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in accordance with this agreement, and any volunteers associated with the production, promotion and distribution of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, harmless from all liability, costs and expenses, including legal fees, that arise directly or indirectly from any of the following which you do or cause to occur: (a) distribution of this or any Project Gutenberg™ work, (b) alteration, modification, or additions or deletions to any Project Gutenberg™ work, and (c) any Defect you cause.

Section 2. Information about the Mission of Project Gutenberg™

Project Gutenberg™ is synonymous with the free distribution of electronic works in formats readable by the widest variety of computers including obsolete, old, middle-aged and new computers. It exists because of the efforts of hundreds of volunteers and donations from people in all walks of life.

Volunteers and financial support to provide volunteers with the assistance they need are critical to reaching Project Gutenberg™'s goals and ensuring that the Project Gutenberg™ collection will remain freely available for generations to come. In 2001, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation was created to provide a secure and permanent future for Project Gutenberg™ and future generations. To learn more about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and how your efforts and donations can help, see Sections 3 and 4 and the Foundation information page at www.gutenberg.org.

Section 3. Information about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation is a non-profit 501(c)(3) educational corporation organized under the laws of the state of Mississippi and granted tax exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service. The Foundation's EIN or federal tax identification number is 64-6221541. Contributions to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation are tax deductible to the full extent permitted by U.S. federal laws and your state's laws.

The Foundation's business office is located at 809 North 1500 West, Salt Lake City, UT 84116, (801) 596-1887. Email contact links and up to date contact information can be found at the Foundation's website and official page at www.gutenberg.org/contact

Section 4. Information about Donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

Project Gutenberg™ depends upon and cannot survive without widespread public support and donations to carry out its mission of increasing the number of public domain and licensed works that can be freely distributed in machine-readable form accessible by the widest array of equipment including outdated equipment. Many small donations ($1 to $5,000) are particularly important to maintaining tax exempt status with the IRS.

The Foundation is committed to complying with the laws regulating charities and charitable donations in all 50 states of the United States. Compliance requirements are not uniform and it takes a considerable effort, much paperwork and many fees to meet and keep up with these requirements. We do not solicit donations in locations where we have not received written confirmation of compliance. To SEND DONATIONS or determine the status of compliance for any particular state visit www.gutenberg.org/donate.

While we cannot and do not solicit contributions from states where we have not met the solicitation requirements, we know of no prohibition against accepting unsolicited donations from donors in such states who approach us with offers to donate.

International donations are gratefully accepted, but we cannot make any statements concerning tax treatment of donations received from outside the United States. U.S. laws alone swamp our small staff.

Please check the Project Gutenberg web pages for current donation methods and addresses. Donations are accepted in a number of other ways including checks, online payments and credit card donations. To donate, please visit: www.gutenberg.org/donate

Section 5. General Information About Project Gutenberg™ electronic works

Professor Michael S. Hart was the originator of the Project Gutenberg™ concept of a library of electronic works that could be freely shared with anyone. For forty years, he produced and

distributed Project Gutenberg™ eBooks with only a loose network of volunteer support.

Project Gutenberg™ eBooks are often created from several printed editions, all of which are confirmed as not protected by copyright in the U.S. unless a copyright notice is included. Thus, we do not necessarily keep eBooks in compliance with any particular paper edition.

Most people start at our website which has the main PG search facility: www.gutenberg.org.

This website includes information about Project Gutenberg™, including how to make donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, how to help produce our new eBooks, and how to subscribe to our email newsletter to hear about new eBooks.