

GALLON TOM

TINMAN

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PART I

CHAPTER I What I Found in the Wood

In all that I shall set down here, in telling the strange story of my poor life, I shall write nothing but the truth. It has been written in many odd times and in many odd places: in a prison cell, on paper stamped with the prison mark; on odd scraps of paper in a lonely garret under the stars, with a candle-end for light – and I, poor and old and shivering – scrawling hastily because the time was so short. I have been at once the meanest and the greatest of all men; the meanest – because all men shuddered at the mere mention of my name, and at the thought of what I had done; the greatest – because one woman loved me, and taught me that beyond that nothing else mattered. I have lived in God's sunlight, and in the sunlight of her eyes; I have gone down into the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and have not been afraid; I have been caged like a wild beast, until I forgot the world, just as the world forgot me. In a mere matter of the counting of years I am but little past forty years of age; yet I am an old man, and I have lived two lives – just as, when my time comes, I shall have died two deaths. I have touched the warm lips of Love; I have clasped the gaunt hands of Misery. I have warmed both hands at the fire of Life; but now the fire has gone out, and only the cold grey ashes remain. But of all that you may read, just as I have written it, and as the memory of it has come back to me. Roll up the curtain – and see me as I was – and judge me lightly.

It is not necessary that you should hear what manner of boy I was, nor how I impressed those with whom I came in contact. I have no recollection of my parents; they died, perhaps mercifully for them, when I was quite young. I went to school in the ordinary way; I would not have you think that I was anything but an ordinary boy. A little dreamy, perhaps, and introspective; with those hopes and high ideals that come to youth generally a little stronger in my case than in that of most boys. I had a very decent fortune, left in the hands of a highly respectable guardian; for the rest, apart from the mere matter of education, I discovered pretty early that I was to be left to my own devices, it being considered sufficient that I should grow up as a gentleman, and should please myself. I think now that if I had had some guiding will stronger than my own, I might never have done what I did, and I might now be a highly respectable citizen, respected by those who knew me, and with a life of easy contentment spreading itself fairly about my feet. Instead of which —

I had made up my mind to be an artist; to that direction all my thoughts and dreams and ideas tended. I would paint great pictures; I would wander through the cities of the world, and see the pictures other men had painted; I would live a life that had in it nothing of commercialism, and nothing of the sordid. I did not know then how circumstances mould a life and change it; how rough-fingered Fate can step in, and tear asunder in a moment the fair threads we have woven, and twist and tangle them, and ruin the fabric. Like many another poor fool before me, I told myself that I could do what I liked with my life, and shape it in what fashion I would.

Up to this time – that is, the time when I began to think for myself, and to take my life into my own hands – I had not met my guardian. I had had one or two curt and business-like notes from him during my schooldays; and when I went to London I found that he had taken a lodging for me, and had made various arrangements for my future. He was a little contemptuous as to the profession I had

adopted; but shrugged his shoulders, and suggested that it was no real concern of his. I met him first, on my coming to London, at his office in the City – an office in a narrow dingy court, where he was in a position of some authority as manager to a big firm. I know nothing of business, and knew nothing then; I only know that he received me in a private room, and that I had a dim understanding that in another room still more private was one greater than himself, to whom he looked for instructions, just as all those below him looked to him. Jervis Fanshawe, with half a dozen little white stops let into the edge of the big desk at which he sat, to enable him to communicate with his subordinates, was evidently a power to be reckoned with.

I think, in that moment when I first saw the man, that I knew instinctively I did not like him. He was leaning forward across the great desk, with his arms stretched out upon it, and with a paper-knife balanced between his hands lengthwise; he seemed to be summing me up, and making up his mind about me. He was a man of about thirty-five, inclined to baldness, and with a long clean-shaven face; he gave one the impression that if he had allowed his beard to grow, it would have been singularly black. His nose was long and thin, with rather wide nostrils; and there was a deep cut in the very centre of his chin. Altogether it was a strong face, and a sinister.

I was beginning to feel uncomfortable when at last he dropped the paper-knife, and stood up to shake hands with me. "So you are Charles Avaline?" he said. "I'm glad to see you. How old are you? I forget times and dates."

"I shall be twenty in a month," I replied, "but I feel much older."

"Most people do at your age," he retorted. "Well – there are certain arrangements to be made about your future – your income, and so on" – he was looking down at the desk, and shifting some papers about uneasily there – "and perhaps it would be better if you came round to my rooms to-night to see me. I've got an old-fashioned place in Bloomsbury; perhaps you'll dine with me there. I'll write the address down for you; seven sharp, please."

I felt myself dismissed, and went away, to make acquaintance with that London that I felt was to be my home for some considerable time to come. Boy that I was, I wandered its streets happily enough for the greater part of the day, feeling that this was my kingdom, and that I had come into full possession of it already. Here I was to work, and live, and dream, and be happy. I have thought since of that day – dreamed those dreams again – and laughed to think that it was really to be the one day in all my life that I was to see London with those eyes at all.

It was a fine night, and I walked to Bloomsbury; having some difficulty in finding it, because my pride forbade that I should appear a country bumpkin, unacquainted with London, and under the necessity of asking my way. Coming to the house hurriedly and a little late, I saw a man who had been going along before me mounting the steps of the house, and tugging at the bell. Having rung, he turned about, with his hands on his hips, and with a cane in one hand resting against his hip, and surveyed me, as I waited a couple of steps below him, awkwardly enough, for the door to open. He had the advantage of being bigger and older than I was, to say nothing of the two steps upon which he was mounted.

He was a big young man, some ten years older than myself; very well dressed, and with a swaggering air upon him that made me even then feel my blood tingle a little. He stared down at me, and pulled at a little dark moustache he wore; and then looked over my head. I was glad when the door was at last opened, and when he faced about, and marched in.

There was another uncomfortable pause, in a room that was apparently my guardian's sitting-room, until my guardian put in an appearance; a pause during which the big young man and myself wandered about uncomfortably, and looked at the few pictures, or stared out of the window. Then Jervis Fanshawe came in, and introduced us.

"This is a – a friend of mine – Mr. Gavin Hockley," he said, glancing at the other man a little resentfully, as I thought. "My ward – Mr. Avaline." The young man glanced at me for a moment,

and nodded, and turned away. "We can go in to dinner; we're a small party – but none the worse for that, I hope."

It was not a cheerful dinner, by any means. We sat round a circular table, and were waited upon by a silent, elderly woman, who was evidently very much afraid of Mr. Fanshawe. The dinner was plain and substantial, and I was young and hungry; the wines, I believe, were good, although I was no judge of that particular department. I only know that the man Hockley drank a great deal, and told some stories I did not understand, and some that I understood only too well. He absolutely ignored me, even when I made a remark (which was but seldom), and he talked to my guardian with an easy insolent familiarity that I did not then understand. Strangely, too, my guardian seemed to defer to him in all matters, and to be afraid of contradicting even the most outrageous statement.

"I'm thinking," said Hockley, towards the close of the dinner, and pausing for a moment, with his glass held near to his lips – "I'm thinking of going down to Hammerstone Market again."

I saw that Jervis Fanshawe looked up at him quickly; when he replied, he spoke more sharply than he had yet done. "What for?" he asked.

"I'm thinking of going down – for the fishing," replied Hockley; and as I looked at him I saw that his face was creased in a grin, and that he was watching Fanshawe. "That is, of course," he added, with a guffaw, "my sort of fishing."

"You won't be welcome," said my guardian sourly; and the other man responded with an oath that he could find his welcome anywhere.

After we had left the table, I saw Jervis Fanshawe take the other man aside, and begin talking to him in a low voice, as though impressing something upon him. But Hockley shook him off, and answered whatever had been said aloud.

"I tell you I'm going – and the best thing you can do is to go with me. If it comes to that, you know what I am when I get a bit excited; I might need your restraining hand. You'd better make up your mind when you'll go, and I'll make my arrangements accordingly."

My guardian said nothing, and the other man threw himself into a large armchair, and began to smoke. It was quite late, and I had already begun to think about going, when he got up, and went off without so much as a word of farewell to either of us. Only at the door, with his hat on the back of his head, he came back to demand an answer to the question he had put at least an hour before.

"What date will suit you – next week?" he asked.

Jervis Fanshawe did not look at him; he was nervously twisting his hands together behind his back. "I shall go down on Tuesday to Hammerstone Market," he said, "and I shall stay at the house."

"Good. I shall stay at the *George*." Hockley lurched out of the doorway, and we heard him slam the outer door of the house as he went away.

And instantly there came a remarkable change over my guardian. In all my life I never remember to have seen a man so suddenly become a wild beast in a moment as Jervis Fanshawe did then. He ran to the door, and pulled it open, and spluttered out blasphemies into the darkness of the staircase; slammed the door, and came back into the room again, and raged up and down there, saying horrible things about Hockley until my blood seemed to run cold. And all the time taking not the faintest notice of me at all.

Presently he sat down at the table, pulling at his lips with his long fingers, and still muttering and breathing hard; it was like the gradual dying away of a storm. After a time I ventured to speak to him, and to wish him good-night; I believe I muttered some thanks for my entertainment. As he took no notice of me, I went to the door, and found my way to the place where my hat was; I was going out, when I heard his voice calling to me sharply. I went back, and found him waiting there, with a face that was comparatively calm.

"I don't know much about you artist fellows," he said, without looking at me – "but I believe you sketch – paint out of doors – don't you?" As I murmured that we did sometimes do that kind of thing, he went on hurriedly: "I know a place where you would probably find some good bits to sketch;

you'd better go down with me. It's the place that fellow spoke of just now – Hammerstone Market. I've got to go down there – on business; old Patton lives there."

"Patton?" I asked vaguely; for I seemed to have seen the name somewhere.

"Yes, yes," he replied impatiently. "Patton & Co.: the people for whom I am manager. You were in their place to-day. He has a country house – down there – and I go down when I like. We'll go on Tuesday; pack your things; I want you to make a bit of a splash down there – play the gentleman. Do you understand?"

"Not quite," I said.

"I want to take the wind out of this fellow's sails – this beast Hockley," he said. "I'd grind him to powder, if I had the chance – crush him to nothing. You and I will play our own game, Charlie" – (it was the first time he had called me by that name, and I was a little surprised) – "and make him put his tail between his legs. There – we won't talk any more about it; good-night!"

I walked home to the rooms Mr. Jervis Fanshawe had taken for me with my head in a whirl. I know that I fell asleep that night, with a vague idea that in some extraordinary fashion my guardian was in the power of Gavin Hockley, and was obliged, in a sense, to do what that young man suggested. Perhaps the mere act of thinking about that drove me into the dream I presently had; for I remember that I thought presently I was standing in a room, and that Hockley was before me, with that grin upon his face; in that dream I felt that some one put a weapon into my hand. Dreams are but intangible things, and this was a confused one, with only the face of Hockley grinning at me from out of it, and the knowledge in my own mind that I held a weapon of some sort gripped in my right hand. And then the face was gone, and I seemed to wake up, to see him at my feet, with blood upon him. I woke, trembling and shuddering, and glad to see the calm moon staring in at me from the little street outside. It took me a little time to shake off the horror of the thing. But I was young, and youth needs sleep; so that I presently slept until morning.

Strangely enough, that dream haunted me – sprang up before me even in the sunlight of the streets, and would not be shaken off. Seeing that I had no earthly concern with Hockley, it was at least curious that I should so persistently think of him; now as I had seen him swaggering on the steps of the house, and staring insolently over my head; now as I remembered him lounging at the table, and apparently overawing my guardian; and now again, as in my dream, with his grinning face watching me – and then lying at my feet, with blood upon him. I was too young for such horrors, and yet I could not clear my brain of them.

That Tuesday arrived on which I was to travel down to Hammerstone Market with Mr. Jervis Fanshawe. I had had a note from him the night before, appointing the time of the train, and requesting me to meet him at the railway station; and I was eager enough for the expedition. Although I did not like Fanshawe, and felt that I never could, there was yet in my heart a natural feeling of regard for him, as being the one person intimately connected with me, and, above all, the man who had looked after my interests during the years that I had been growing up. I set it down deliberately here that I wanted to please him, and that, above all things, I was anxious to win his approval. In a sense I was glad to think that he wanted my company, although I wondered a little what was going to happen at this place to which we were going.

In the train he set the matter fairly and clearly before me. "I am going to this place, Charlie, on a matter of business," he said in a low tone, and without looking at me. "Old Patton, as we call him in the business, likes to make a friend of me as much as possible; I have been down here frequently. It gives me a certain position with him – smooths business generally. I can't say exactly how long I shall stop at his house; he does not come up to the office as frequently as he used to do, and there are certain matters he wants to discuss with me."

"It is very kind of you to take me with you," I said; but with a grim smile he broke in on my enthusiasm.

"Oh, I'm not taking you to the house," he said, "I shall have to leave you at the *George*. I intend, if possible, to get an invitation for you to dinner one night – or perhaps to a luncheon; but at the moment I merely want Patton to know that you are there, and who you are. He will probably like to know that I am your guardian, and" – he hesitated for a moment as though casting about in his mind for the right word – "and responsible for you."

I have since come to think that whatever scheme was in the mind of the man then, and whatever he meant to do, his real object in taking me there, to begin with, was no deeper than that. I think he felt that it would look well that he should have the responsibility of me upon his shoulders – that it would give him an air of stability, and would cause people to think well of him – much as though he held before himself the record of a good deed as a species of shield, and cried – "This have I done – and that; judge me in the light of it."

So it came about that I was left at the *George* in the little town of Hammerstone Market, while Jervis Fanshawe went on to the house of Mr. Patton, which lay a little outside the town. The country round about seemed to be very pretty, and I was free to do as I liked until such time as my guardian should call upon me to go back to London, or to visit him at the house of his patron. I liked the look of the little old-fashioned hotel, and I liked the prospect of this new freedom, as I unpacked my bag that first night, in my room that overlooked the sleepy little High Street of the town.

Yet that prospect was blurred and made hideous in the morning by the sudden incursion into it all of that heavy young man named Gavin Hockley. I had had my breakfast (and a hearty one at that) in the old low-roofed coffee-room, and was just making up my mind to sally forth and do a long day's work, when the door was thrust open lumberingly and brutally, and Hockley strode in. Whether or not he knew from my guardian that I was there it is impossible to say; he looked over me, or through me, as on the occasion of our first meeting, and lumbered out again, slamming the door behind him. Remembering all that I had thought about him, and remembering my dream, I was too much upset by his sudden entry into the room even to be able to speak to him; he was gone before I had made up my mind what to do.

When I came out into the little hall of the place, I saw him lounging with one elbow on the low counter at one side, talking to the girl who stood among the bottles and glasses behind it; and one heavy hand was on his hip, and in that hand was his stick, just as it had been when he stood on the steps and looked down at me. The little place seemed full of him – poisoned by him; I was glad to get out into the sweet air of the little town, and further than that into the woods and the fields.

I like to think of that morning now: I have seen myself, in imagination, going so often down a long, dusty road, with my easel and colour box slung across my shoulders; I believe I sang softly to myself as I went. For the spring was in my heart and in my blood, and life was very, very beautiful. I see myself leaving the road behind me, and turning into a little wood near at hand, and sitting down to sketch the glories that stretched before me. But I was like a butterfly that morning, in that all was so beautiful that nothing wholly pleased me; I went deeper on into the wood, and started again to paint. And lost myself in my work and in a waking dream, until I was aroused by the sound of a young girl singing.

(I lay down my pen here for a moment or two, because my eyes are dim, and I cannot go on. The sunlight and the trees and all the mystery and the beauty of the woods are with me again, and the dear voice of the woman I was to love through all my life floats to me again, and stirs something within my sad heart that was stirred that morning, never to be still again. I close my eyes for a moment, and cover them with my hands; and I am back there once more, looking at her wonderingly as she comes towards me through the trees.)

I will not try to describe her; I only know that she was very, very fair, and that she seemed almost a spirit of beauty, coming out of the wood towards me. She was Nature – and Love – and Life – and Laughter – all embodied; I could only sit and watch her; it did not occur to me even to ask myself who she was.

She did not see me until she was quite close, and then she stopped, and looked at me, quite unafraid. She was quite young – only eighteen, as I knew afterwards – and she looked little more than a child. As I stumbled to my feet, she looked shyly at me, and smiled; and it seemed then as though I knew her, and as though she knew me. Afterwards, when we came at another time to talk about it, she told me that it had seemed as though she had come there to meet me out of some other life that was left behind with that moment; and indeed, I cannot better express my own feelings than in that way. Perhaps Youth called to Youth; or perhaps all that was to be was written down in some grim Book of Fate, of which we did not hold the key.

She shyly looked at my work, and asked questions about it; begged that I would go on with it – and perhaps wondered why I could not, with her distracting draperies fluttering against me almost, as she stood. Like a child, and with a child's confidence in me, she offered to show me a spot in the woods more beautiful than that I had chosen; I left my easel, and we walked side by side among the trees, talking. I do not know now of what we talked, but we seemed to speak of everything vital and important in heaven and earth. And then, surprisingly, she told me her name.

"I am Barbara Patton. I ought to have told you."

"Patton?" I said, remembering my guardian's mention of that name, and of the house at which he was living.

"Yes; Mr. Patton, up at the house there, is my father. And you?"

I gave her my name, and we laughed a little consciously at the thought that now we should know each other perfectly, and that all was fair and straight between us. I have never met any one like her – never any one so wonderful; I have known but few women, but I am sure there never was any one like her in the world. She woke in me then, apart from the love I knew had come into my heart at the mere sight of her, a desire to protect her; and to be chivalrous and manly and strong, for her sake, to every creature in the world.

I told her about my guardian; and when I spoke of him I thought I saw the girlish face change a little, and a look of anxiety come into the sunny eyes. A little reserve came over her, too, so that she spoke less freely of herself; I wondered if she disliked him as much as I did. Strangely enough, she voiced that feeling in a moment, when she faced round upon me and asked the question —

"Do you like him?"

"I – I don't know," I faltered. "I've only known him a matter of hours." Then, daringly willing to meet her mood in the matter, I added quickly: "Of course, if you don't like him – "

"I'm afraid of him," she said, looking quickly about her among the trees. Then, speaking more naturally, she said: "I hope I shall see something of you, Mr Avaline, before you go back to London. I'm sure that my father would be glad."

She held out her hand to me, as though in farewell, and as though desiring that some distance should be set between us after our easy familiarity. I took her hand, and held it for a moment, and looked into her eyes; and in that second of time something seemed to pass from the one to the other of us, and back again, that needed no words. It was as though each expressed dumbly to the other mute confidence in the other, and in what was in the other's heart.

I stumbled over the words I said to her. "I'm so glad – glad I've met you, Miss Patton," I said; and my heart sang "Barbara!" over and over again as I said it.

"I'm very glad to have met you, Mr. Avaline," she replied. And then, after shyly leaving her hand in mind for a moment, she withdrew it, and laughed, and turned away.

I watched her as she moved away through the trees, until at last she turned, and glanced back at me; and then we both turned away abruptly, and hurried out of sight. I went so fast that I stumbled, within a matter of yards, over a man lying flat on his back, smoking, and staring up at the tree-tops; I had kicked against him before I saw that it was Hockley.

"Why the devil don't you look where you're going!" he growled, in response to my apology.

I thought nothing of it then, although I have remembered it bitterly enough since. I thought only of her I had left – wondered why the world was changed in a moment for me, so that no loutish young men who sprawled in the sunlight could poison the woods for me, or spoil the prospect. And yet it seemed that that wood was haunted that day; for, as I hurried off to find my easel, I saw another man standing at the edge of a little pool, staring down into the water over his folded arms. He was so intent upon the water, or seemed to be, that he did not notice me; it was my guardian, Jervis Fanshawe.

I did not speak to him; I hurried on to where I had left my easel. Coming to it, I saw that the canvas had been overturned, and that a muddy heel had been ground into the painting, leaving it broken and ruined. I seemed to know instinctively who had done that; I hurried back through the wood in search of Hockley. But though I looked in all directions, and even called his name sternly, I saw nothing of him; and in the end I did not trouble further about it, but went home, hugging my new happiness in my heart.

There I found a note from my guardian, curtly bidding me come up to the house that night, to dine with Mr. Patton.

CHAPTER II

And What I Lost

I lunched alone that day, and spent the afternoon in the woods – perhaps with a vague hope that I might again see Barbara Patton, as I had seen her that morning. But I saw no one; even Hockley kept out of my way, perhaps for obvious reasons. I comforted myself with the reflection that I was to see her that night; I began to count the hours that must pass before I should meet her.

I got back to the inn, and began to dress, long before it was necessary that I should do so at all; I was like a girl in my desire to look well that night, and to create a good impression. Not that I had any definite feeling as to what was to happen in the future; it had not gone far enough for that. I was in love, and that was all I thought about; and I was going to meet her again, and to touch her hand and look into her eyes. I lived in an impossible world, and dreamed impossible dreams.

While I dressed in a perfunctory fashion, I happened to glance out of the window, and saw Jervis Fanshawe coming straight along the road towards the inn. I was a little surprised, and for one moment a horrible fear assailed me that he had come to tell me that the dinner had been postponed; the next, I stopped in what I was doing, to watch him as he walked, and to wonder at his hurry. For he was coming along at a sort of half trot, with his eyes bent on the ground, and his hands clasped before him; I could see the white fingers working together convulsively as he came.

He came into my room, and stood for a moment or two looking at me, as though scarcely knowing what to say, or how to account for his presence. I expressed my surprise at seeing him, and asked if anything was the matter.

"No – nothing is the matter," he replied, in a low tone. "You're early with your dressing," he added.

I muttered some excuse, and went on fastening my collar. He seated himself on the bed, so that he was directly behind me, and I could not see him. An obstinate stud happening to fall, I stooped to pick it up, and in so doing moved a little to one side; as I straightened myself again, I caught sight of his face in the looking-glass. In that momentary glimpse I had of it, I saw, to my astonishment, that it was convulsed with rage – livid with a hatred so deadly that instinctively I swung round to look at the man. But by that time the face was calm and composed, and he was speaking in an ordinary voice. The change had been so sudden and so complete that I had a dazed feeling that I must have been mistaken, and had never seen that look at all.

"I wanted to see you, Charlie, before you went to the house to-night," he began, pressing his palms closely together, and sawing his hands backwards and forwards with a regular movement between his knees as he sat. "You're going to a strange house to-night, and it's just as well, perhaps, that you should know something about the people you will meet. You're young yet, and have not had much experience."

I laughed to myself to think how little he knew that I had seen the most important person in that house that very day; mine was the wisdom of youth, and I was sorry for this man, so much older than myself, who did not understand these matters.

"Old Patton has every confidence in me – trusts me completely. In fact, I may say that he has a liking for me that he has for very few men."

I wondered a little what manner of man old Patton could be that he should like my guardian, but I said nothing.

"Mr. Patton has a daughter – a very presentable sort of girl, and, of course, a lady," went on Fanshawe; and for some unaccountable reason I found my fingers fumbling and trembling over the tying of my white tie. "Save for him, she is alone in the world, and must, of course, be provided for. Do you follow me?"

I followed him so well that the tie I was fumbling at had become a mere piece of crumpled rag; I tore it from my neck, and took another.

"So that I have decided to marry the girl, and in that way consolidate my position – and hers. It is, of course, not public in any way yet, and I do not wish you to say anything about it." He paused, and in the silence of the room I could hear his hands rubbing together over each other. "Well – why don't you speak?" he demanded at last.

I could not trust myself to look round; I spoke with my back to him. "And what about the young lady?" I managed to ask. "What does she say?"

"I don't understand," he responded blankly. "She hasn't said anything yet; she hasn't been asked. It isn't exactly a question for her."

I threw up my head, and I laughed loud and long. The thing was so absurd, from my point of view, and I was so sure of her, that I almost seemed to see Jervis Fanshawe standing before her, and asking his question; seemed to hear her laugh with me at the absurdity of it. What did this man know of love or a girlish heart?

He got up abruptly, and came and stood beside me; as I still laughed, he rapped sharply with his knuckles on the dressing-table, as though to call me to order. In that moment reserve was thrown aside, and the man blurted out what was in his mind.

"What were you doing in the wood to-day with her?" he asked, with his face so close to mine that I could feel his hot breath on my cheek. I faced round at him squarely.

"Why were you spying on me?" I demanded hotly; and at the look in his eyes I shrank back from him, a little afraid. For I had never seen on any face such a look of mingled fear and hopelessness, and longing and misery, as I saw in his face then.

"Why was I spying on you? Why do I spy on every one? Why do I feel, when I am near that child, like a weak and impotent child myself? I could crush the life out of her with that hand" – he shook it fiercely in the air before me as he spoke – "and yet she could make me do murder, with a word or a look. I want her – and I mean to have her; there's a passion in me that a boy such as you can't understand. Besides," he went on more calmly, "there are other reasons – reasons you know nothing about. I've gone too far to draw back – and yet I'm afraid to go on. Charlie" – he laid his hand on my arm, and I felt it shake – "you've got to help me somehow; we've got to get through this thing together. Unless I marry this girl – (and God knows I'd treat her well) – it means red ruin for me – and perhaps worse."

"She doesn't love you," I said coldly, urging the only argument I knew.

"I don't ask for that," he retorted bluntly, "because I don't understand it. I'm going to marry her. I think my influence is strong enough with her father for that; I am necessary to him."

"You don't know what you're talking about," I told him. "Do you think she'd turn to you, or have a word to say to you, if you tried to draw her with any other power save that of love? Women don't marry in that way," I added, with the deep wisdom that had come to me that day.

"I suppose you think she's in love with you?" he sneered.

I felt myself burning red all over the face I turned from him, yet I answered steadily. "I should like to think so," I replied; and in spite of his jeers I refused to say any more then.

He paced about the room for a time, stepping carefully over the pattern in the carpet, as though deep in thought. Presently he stopped almost behind me, and spoke in a tone that was half pleading and half threatening. "You mustn't be a fool over this matter, Charlie," he said. "Yours is calf love; you're not old enough to know anything about that sort of thing yet. Besides, old Patton would laugh at you."

"I'm not going to marry old Patton," I reminded him. "In any case, I don't want to discuss the matter, because there's nothing to discuss. Only for your own sake I would advise you to think twice before you suggest marrying Barbara Patton."

"How did you come to know her name?" he asked quickly.

"From her own lips," I replied, turning away from him, and beginning to finish my dressing.

I remember that before he hurried away he strove to patch up some sort of peace with me; held out his hand, with seeming frankness, and declared that I was a fine fellow, and that he meant to stand by me. What he meant by that I did not exactly know; I only understood that he was nervous and anxious, and although I chafed at the thought of his daring to raise eyes to my Barbara, I yet felt a sort of sneaking pity for him, as some one lower than myself, who did not understand this business of love, and had no real chance in the game.

Nevertheless I was troubled. I did not like the thought that this girl, who had suddenly become, in a matter of hours, so much to me, should be the centre of plots and intrigues; above all, I did not like to think that there might be a possibility that my guardian would be able to use a powerful lever to gain her father on his own side. I thought of her always among the trees in the sunlight – and alone with me; I could not bear to think of her then in any other way. Even while I longed for the moment to arrive when I should see her, I yet felt that insane jealousy of youth which resented the thought that others would be about her, and would claim her attention.

I walked in the gathering dusk to the house, being nearly run down in consequence by a dogcart, in which was seated a man whom I felt instinctively must be Gavin Hockley. I do not know why I thought so, except for his brutal method of driving, and for the fact that he shouted at me for daring to be on the same road with him. I wondered a little where he was going; I understood better when, on reaching the house, I saw him lounging with his hands in his pockets in the doorway of the drawing-room. I thought of my ruined painting, and of my escape from an accident but a few minutes before; but I said nothing. I could not quarrel with the fellow there, but I made up my mind that I would have something to say to him before we parted for the night.

The house was an old and roomy one – just the sort of country house that one would expect a substantial man of business to have. There were several guests besides myself: one elderly lady, whom I understood to be a sister to old Patton; a doctor from the neighbourhood and his wife; and a tall pleasant-faced young man, not very intelligent-looking, but with good-humour writ large all over him. For some reason our host was not there when we arrived, but he came in almost immediately afterwards, with Barbara on his arm, and closely followed by Jervis Fanshawe.

I cannot account for it even now, save by the suggestion that I was myself fully on the alert that night, and expectant of anything and everything that might happen; but the very air was stormy. The mere mutterings of that storm came, as it were, into the room with old Patton and his daughter; the menace of it was in the white watchful face of my guardian behind them. And yet there was nothing in the least stormy in the appearance of old Patton himself; indeed, he was quite a benevolent-looking gentleman, rather too old, I thought, to be the father of Barbara, for his hair was white, and he stooped a little as he walked. But he had a kindly face, with yet a certain strong note of determination in it.

Barbara raised her eyes to mine once, and once only; and in that flash I strove to read her thoughts and her heart. In the look I thought I detected that she mutely asked me something, or pleaded with me; so much I seemed to understand, but no more. She gave no sign of knowing me, and only bowed slightly when I was introduced; old Patton, on the other hand, greeted me warmly, and had a cordial word or two to say about my guardian. He shook hands, too, with Hockley, and seemed to know him; I gathered that Hockley had been there before.

I had had a wild dream that I might take Barbara in to dinner; but that was reserved for the young man of the good-humoured face. Somehow I felt I did not like him quite so well as I had at first, but, remembering our meeting in the wood, I felt that Barbara probably shared my feelings on the matter, and suffered as much as I did. I went in at the tail end of the little procession, and was consoled to find that Barbara was seated opposite me, and that I could watch her easily during the progress of the meal. Other eyes were watching her, too, with a curious intentness; my guardian's, with his nostrils distended, and his hands nervously gripping each other; Hockley's, with the brutal dull look that belonged to him. For her own part, she kept her eyes on her plate, and only now and

then seemed to answer a remark addressed to her by the young man of the good-humoured face, whose name I heard was Lucas Savell.

I do not remember the dinner; it seemed all Barbara. I know I replied to words addressed to me, and I suppose I replied fairly intelligently; but all the time I seemed to see that face before me, and to see it, strangely enough, as the centre of that storm-cloud that was gathering. From that face I would glance for a moment to the face of Jervis Fanshawe, that never seemed to change, and that was like a white mask; and from that again to the face of old Patton, at the head of the table, watching the bent head of his daughter; or again to Hockley, lounging clumsily in his chair, with his shoulder turned towards the doctor's wife, the while he carelessly flung a remark or two over it at that lady. And so back to Barbara again.

I awoke to the consciousness that the doctor was telling a story, and telling it, as it seemed, rather well, to judge by the interested faces about him; even Barbara had raised her head a little, and seemed to be listening.

"It came to this, therefore," the doctor was saying, "that this man had a reason for getting rid of two people, and, so far as I can make out (for, of course, you will understand that I cannot give names or dates or places), set about deliberately to compass the death of both. The one man he determined should, if possible, be induced to kill the other, and in so doing should, of necessity, kill himself, in suffering the just penalty of his crime."

"And did the plan succeed?" It was old Patton who asked the question, and it was obvious that he asked it more to keep the conversation alive than for any real interest he felt in such a subject.

"Yes, the plan succeeded," said the doctor, softly crumbling a morsel of bread, and looking down at it, before raising his bright eyes for a moment to his host. "He brought the two men together, as if in the most innocent way; saw to it that they were thrown much into each other's company; arranged that they should become on such intimate terms that they should know each other's secret lives, and so should play into each other's hands, and into his. And in that way he almost overshot the mark; for they became so friendly that there seemed for a time but little prospect that the one should ever quarrel with the other sufficiently to seek his life. Therefore our friend determined to introduce another element – a mere pawn in the game. He chose a woman."

A little sigh went up from the company, and there was some small nodding of heads, as though this was quite what might have been expected. Glancing round the table, I caught sight of only one face, and that a horrible one; the face of Jervis Fanshawe, thrust forward, with eager eyes fixed on those of the doctor. It fascinated me, and I watched it.

"He saw to it that the woman was young, and attractive, and virtuous; he rightly calculated that, if carefully managed, it might happen that the younger man would fall in love with her. And sure enough that was exactly what did happen; the younger man, although quite hopelessly, worshipped her in a romantic and very ideal sort of way."

"I begin to understand," said Lucas Savell, nodding his head. "The other man fell in love with her, too." "Nothing so commonplace," replied the doctor. "Our friend who had the scheme in mind went to that other man, and whispered lies about the woman – dropping a sure poison where he knew it would take root and spread. And presently it happened that the elder of the two men who were destined to die breathed a word against the woman the other loved, and another word, and yet another; the breach grew and grew, and the man who had repeated the lie strove hard to justify what he had said. Then came the final business of all, when the younger man, in a fit of rage, struck down his friend, and in due course paid the penalty with his life."

Another little sigh, almost of relief, as the story finished; then, after a pause, conversation broke out more generally. Looking up, I caught the eye of my guardian, and saw that he was watching me; he smiled, as a man does who catches the eye of a friend, and then looked away. And then in a moment, as it seemed, that storm that had hovered over us burst suddenly and relentlessly.

Old Patton made a sign to a servant, and whispered something to the man, who bent his head to listen; then the man and another hurried round, and began to fill the champagne glasses. I saw that Barbara was watching her father; I saw her lips parted, as though she would have spoken, but dared not. And still I did not understand; still it never occurred to me to look at the young man of the good-humoured face, who sat beside her, and who had, I imagine, begun to colour a little consciously.

"And now for something a little more pleasant," said old Patton, with the somewhat dictatorial air of the host. "Your glasses are charged, friends, and I have a toast to propose – "

"Not now, father," I heard Barbara's distressed voice say.

"A toast you will all be glad, I am sure, to drink heartily. I give you – "

"Father! – not now!"

"My dear child, better now than at any time," he retorted, nodding at her with a kindly frown. "My friends," he went on, looking round at us – "I have an announcement to make to you – an announcement of a very pleasing character." He cleared his throat, and jerked his chin up a little, with an air of importance. "I have to announce the engagement of my daughter Barbara to her cousin – Lucas Savell – and I ask you to drink their healths."

I know that my heart seemed to stand still; in the momentary silence I could only stare straight across at the girl. She had raised her eyes, and was looking straight at me; and again in those eyes I read pleading and entreaty, and perhaps a prayer that I would understand. Our eyes held each other's then, just as they had held by their glances in the wood.

"I am getting on in years, and it is more than possible that there is not much more time left to me," went on old Patton. "I shall be glad to feel that my child's future is safe in the hands of a good man. It has been the wish of my life that these two young people should marry, and after a little hesitation – coyness, I suppose – the thing has been settled. My friends" – he raised his glass, and smiled round upon us all – "the health of my daughter and of her future husband!"

We all stood up, raising our glasses, and murmuring the toast. Some little surprise and confusion was caused by the fact that the thin stem of my glass snapped in my fingers, so that the glass fell, spilling the wine over the cloth. It did not seem to matter then; nothing seemed to matter at all; the world was dead for me. I was glad when presently the ladies rose to go; I saw Savell whisper something to Barbara, and saw that she replied, without looking at him. Nor did she look at me again; she passed out of the room with bent head.

I heard a whisper at my ear. "Well, what's your opinion of women now?" I turned, and saw the leering face of Gavin Hockley, with the corners of his mouth drawn down in a sneer. I did not reply to him; I lit a cigarette that was offered me, and wondered how long I must wait before I could get away. I meant to walk the night away, and get rid of my sorrow.

We went soon into the drawing-room, for Barbara was singing, and her father wished us to hear it. Looking back on that night now, I have wondered often and often what I must have seemed like to the other guests – have wondered whether by chance any one guessed my secret, or knew the bitter ache in my heart. It was one evening in my life that was full of acutest misery; yet I was to be compensated, strangely enough, and hopelessly enough.

She had been singing, while her lover stood beside her at the piano. The room seemed suffocating, and I got up, and stood by an open French window, looking out over the dark garden; I felt somehow as though my heart, beating up madly into my throat, must burst. The music behind me ceased, and there was a movement in the room; I did not turn my head.

I heard rather than saw the movement of her dress near to me; caught the quick whisper that was as a mere breath of sound, as she stepped over the sill of the French window, and went past me into the darkness —

"I must speak to you."

I was stepping out straight after her, when I was thrust aside in a fashion that drove me hard against the window-frame, and Hockley strode out after her. I had recovered myself, and was beside him in a moment; but not before he had caught her hand, and drawn it under his arm roughly.

"Your future husband will have enough of you in the future, my dear," he said, a little thickly. "Come out into the garden."

Behind me in the room I could hear the soft well-bred laughter; before me in the darkness that little tragedy was going on. For the girl was pulling helplessly at his arm to get away; I heard her pleading with him in a whisper. The sight maddened me; I was not responsible for what I did. I spoke to him sharply; and as he swung round, and she strove again to free herself, I struck him with all my might – flinging all the rage and despair that was in my heart into the blow – fair on the temple. He threw up his arm, and went down backwards over some steps that led from the terrace. I felt certain that I had killed him.

The noise he made, and a shout he gave as he went down, had alarmed the people in the room; they came crowding out to see what was wrong. Their excited faces were behind us; up from the darkness rose the surprised face of Gavin Hockley; I saw him furtively brushing the dust from his clothes, as he rose first to his knees, and then to his feet.

"Nothing to make a fuss about," he growled. "I – I slipped. Infernally dark out here."

I caught a look on the face of my guardian that puzzled me; it was that eager look again, but intensified a thousandfold; and he was smiling straight at me as though – ridiculous thought! – I had done some worthy thing in his eyes. That look surprised me, and in a vague way terrified me.

As the confusion subsided, and the people went back into the room, I found that the girl was clinging to my arm; and it seemed natural that she should do so. Hockley had slouched away, muttering that he would put himself straight; once again it happened that Barbara and I were alone together. We passed out of sight of the windows; and then in a moment, at the end of the terrace, we stood in perfect understanding, as it seemed, with hands clasping hands, and my boyish eyes looking into her girlish ones. And it was writ in the skies above us, and whispered by the trees forlornly enough, that we loved each other, and that it was all hopeless.

"I promised a year ago – before I understood," she whispered, as though taking up a tale that had been told between us. "My father likes him; he will be good to me, I know. I – I did not understand."

I seemed to live twenty lives in that moment when I stood and held her hands, and listened to her words. There was a savage pride in my heart, greater than my misery, that I should so have won her without a word; I knew that I was greater in her sight than the man whose name she was to take. Boy though I was, I know that I dedicated myself and my life to her then; the world has never seemed to me so pure and holy since as it did then. I was not ashamed of the tears I shed, as I bent my head, and put my lips to her hands; I felt that I could not shame her with any pleadings or protestations. When presently we were calmer, I walked slowly back into the world with her, and gave her to the man to whom she belonged, and who had come in search of her.

I did not see her again that night; she pleaded fatigue, and went to her room. The little party broke up, and I presently found myself on the high road under the stars, walking beside Jervis Fanshawe. And the thing that surprised me most was the extraordinary mood the man was in. He gave vent to little soft chuckles from time to time, and snapped his long fingers, and muttered to himself; while every now and then he dropped a hand on my shoulder, and gave it an approving squeeze, as though in pure friendliness. It was only when he spoke to me that my mind went back to my encounter with Hockley that night.

"You struck well, my boy; I'd like to have seen the whole thing, but I was a bit too late. Muscle is a magnificent possession; and you must be very strong." He slipped his hand down my arm as he spoke, and chuckled again. "Always strike hard, Charlie; stand no insolence from a creature like that. He's a leper – a bullying beast – a robber!" Strong though I was, he absolutely hurt me with the grip he gave my arm.

"He's walking along just in front of us," I said a moment later, as we saw a figure slouching along ahead.

Hockley turned as we got near to him, and waited for us. I braced myself for a possible encounter; I think in that moment I rather longed for it. But the man contented himself with coming towards us, with his hands thrust in his pockets; and so stopping in the road in the darkness to look me over.

"I make it a rule to let a man have blow for blow," he said, slowly and doggedly, "but I also make it a rule to get my blow in at my own time of day. Look out for yourself, you young dog; you'll get it when you least expect it."

I said nothing, and he slouched on again for a yard or two, turned again, and came back. And this time he approached my guardian.

"As for you, Jervis Fanshawe, I've a bone to pick with you. You're responsible for this cub, and you've no right to let him loose about the country, interfering with honest men."

"Honest men, indeed!" sneered Fanshawe, getting a little behind me as he spoke.

"Yes – honest men," repeated the other. "I hope it doesn't touch you on the raw, Fanshawe," he added, with a grin. "And mark what I say: I'll have a kick at you for this night's work, and I'll begin now. I want my money within twenty-four hours."

"You know you can't have it," replied my guardian, in a voice that had suddenly changed.

"Very well – then I'll talk!" exclaimed Gavin Hockley, swinging round on his heel with a laugh, and striding off into the darkness.

I felt my arm gripped again; I looked round into a white distorted face that shocked and frightened me. If ever I saw murder in a man's eyes I saw it then.

"When next you strike him, Charlie – strike him hard," he whispered passionately in my ear. "When next you strike him – strike him dead!"

CHAPTER III

Her Wedding Day

I went to London the next morning, something to the astonishment of my guardian, who protested feebly that there was nothing to take me away, and suggested that he needed my presence in the country. But I felt that my life, so far as Hammerstone Market was concerned, was closed; I did not ever wish to see the place again.

Let it not be thought for a moment, on account of my youth, that this was a mere boyish infatuation, out of which I should in time naturally have grown, remembering it at the best as only a tender boyish romance. It was never that; it had set its roots too deeply in the very fibres of my soul ever to be rooted up. I have heard that there are men like that, to whom love, coming early, comes cruelly – bending and twisting and torturing them, and creeping into their hearts, to cling there for ever. Such a case was mine; I have never been able to shake off that first impression, nor to forget all that her eyes seemed to say to me, on the terrace under the stars, when I kissed her hands, and bade her that mute farewell.

So I came to London, and went to my rooms, and set myself to work. I had fully made up my mind that this should not change my life; I had a purpose in view, in that I felt it was vitally necessary I should justify myself in her eyes, and justify her love for me. If I had sunk then in my own estimation, or had fallen away from the high ideals I had set up, so I felt must I have sunk before her, and fallen away from her. She was never to be anything to me, but she should feel that I had at least been worthy.

It must have been about a week after my return to London when my guardian came to me. My rooms were in a narrow street off Holborn, at the very top of a house; the chief room had a great skylight stretching over nearly half of it, making it a very excellent studio. I was at work there, getting the last of the light of the dying day, when he came in, and stood for a moment watching me, before I laid down my palette and went to greet him. I thought he looked thinner and more haggard even than before, and I thought that that nervous eager intensity in his face had increased. He just touched my hand with his, and then stood for a minute or so looking at the canvas. But when he spoke it was not of the picture.

"Have you seen anything of Hockley?" he asked abruptly, without looking at me.

"No; what should I see of him?" I asked in reply. "I have seen no one."

He gave a grim chuckle, and bent forward to look at the canvas more closely. Yet still he did not speak of the picture.

"He's left Hammerstone Market," he went on. "Made it a bit too hot to hold him, I fancy. And he's been saying mad things about me – and about you." He turned his head sharply, and looked at me, and repeated the words – "About you."

"It will not trouble me very much, whatever he says," I retorted.

"Don't be too sure; he's a dangerous man," said my guardian. "He'll talk about any one, and it's all lies. I shouldn't be surprised" – he turned to the picture again, and examined it – "I shouldn't be a bit surprised if he didn't say something more about me one of these days."

"I remember that I heard him threaten to talk," I remarked. "But surely a man in your position can afford to laugh at him and his threats?"

"That's where you're wrong," broke in Fanshawe quickly. "It's the men in my position that can have lies told about them, lies which they dare not refute. I tell you he's a dangerous man. More than that, he has been talking about – about somebody else."

He walked the length of the room, keeping his back to me, and examined another of my sketches. I felt my throat beginning to swell, and knew that the blood was rising to my face; controlling my voice as well as I could, I asked a question. "Who is – who is the somebody else?"

He turned round, and came towards me, keeping his hands locked behind him. "About Barbara – Barbara Patton," he said. "It seems he saw you that day in the woods – the day I was there. And Hockley is not the man to talk nicely about those things."

Jervis Fanshawe fell back a step or two as I came straight up to him; indeed, he unlocked his hands, and put up one of them as though to guard against a blow. "What did he say?" I asked; and my voice sounded unnatural.

He shook his head. "I'm not going to tell you; I'm the last man in the world to make mischief," he said. "You're a hot-headed boy, and I ought not to have told you. You'll get nothing more from me."

"Then I'll get it from him," I said, with a little grim laugh.

"That's your own affair entirely," said my guardian; and I thought he smiled in a peculiar way as he spoke.

As I strove to master my indignation, and so gradually calmed myself a little, I came to the conclusion that Fanshawe had something more to say, and was seeking an opportunity to say it. He pottered about the studio for a time, stopping every now and then as if about to speak, and then moving on again; at last he spoke to me over his shoulder.

"They're hurrying on the wedding a bit; special licence, and all that kind of thing." Then, as I did not answer, he turned and asked sharply, "Do you hear what I say?"

"Yes, I hear," I responded. "When is it to be?"

"In about a fortnight's time. It's a whim of old Patton's to get the girl settled, and to know that she is safe. You'll be asked to go. You'll get a formal invitation, but I was to tell you from the old man that you were expected. Only a quiet wedding, of course."

Once again he started that ceaseless rambling round the studio; once again he stopped. "You don't say anything about it," he exclaimed querulously. "I thought you were sweet in that quarter?"

I looked at him quietly; after a moment he dropped his eyes, and turned away. "You told me once," I reminded him, "that you intended to marry Miss Patton yourself."

"That was a business scheme that came to nothing; I was forestalled. You were forestalled, too," he added. "I have not thought any more about it; it was only a whim."

There was silence between us for a minute or two; then I remembered something else, and spoke again. "You said it would mean red ruin to you if you did not marry her."

"Did I?" He looked at me as though he did not see me, and as though he were thinking of something else. "I don't remember it; at any rate, I didn't mean it in the sense you mean." He hesitated again, and then went on more passionately, with a rising inflection in his voice that startled me, as it had startled me once before with this extraordinary man. "On that day you met her in the woods, when she came to you, singing and with smiles, and walked and talked with you – oh, my God! – I had spoken to her in the same place – before you came at all."

The passion that consumed him was frightful; the recollection of what he had gone through, and what he had suppressed, shook and tore him like a storm. He clenched and unclenched his hands, and moistened his lips, and strove to speak; fought down that rising devil in him, and got himself calm again.

"She – she laughed at me." He beat the air before him, and swallowed hard, and stamped his foot, in a rage at himself that he could not control himself more easily. "I did not make – make love to her; I am not a boy. I told her that I wanted her, that I wanted to marry her. And then she – she laughed."

I could imagine the scene; and yet I think, if she had known all the deadly things that were to spring out of her light laughter in the wood that day – the lives that were to be shattered, and the souls brought into the dust – she might not have done it. She was but a child, and she did not know the man she had to deal with; he had meant to humble her, and she had humbled him too much.

He turned away, choking; although I despised the man, and although I remembered my own sorrow, I yet sorrowed for him. When he went on again he had got himself into some condition of calmness.

"Then I saw you in the woods, and I wondered that she should meet you as she did, because I knew you had not met before. It was your cursed youth," he broke out, his violence showing again for a moment – "you could speak to her with a voice that was not mine, and that I did not understand. That's all there is to say; I shall never speak of it again."

I did not know what to say, and so I thought it best to say nothing. Once more he made the circuit of the room, and once more he came back to me. Although I was silent, simply from lack of words, I knew instinctively that he felt himself to be a meaner thing than I was, because of his weakness and his rage, and that he hated me for that knowledge.

"I don't like the thought that you are not friends with Hockley," he said, as he came back to me, and laid his hand on my shoulder. "After all, this girl is going out of our lives, and will be nothing to us in the future. That bone of contention is gone, and I want you to meet Hockley. He's got a loose tongue, and he's not over nice in his manners; but he's not a bad sort. Say you'll meet him."

"I'd rather not," I said, with a remembrance of what the man must have said concerning Barbara and myself.

"You will be doing me a service, if you meet him, and treat him fairly," said Fanshawe, impressively. "Come, my dear boy," he pleaded, "I really want you to help me in a difficult matter. Swallow your pride, and meet the man."

"How shall I be helping you in that?" I asked.

"In a certain way – to a slight extent, that is – I am in his power," said my guardian. "Over a matter of speculation," he added hurriedly, "a little money I've lost."

I remembered that demand for money made by Hockley, and his threat when it was refused; I felt that I couldn't very well refuse to help the man who was the only real friend I had in the world. After a moment of hesitation, I grudgingly said that I would meet him, if Jervis Fanshawe wished.

"That's right; that's good of you, Charlie," he exclaimed, with more fervour than I should have expected of him. "We'll have a little dinner together, and you shall see what a good fellow he is, when you really come to know him. And we'll keep off difficult topics," he added reassuringly.

On the evening appointed for the dinner I got to Fanshawe's rooms before Hockley had arrived; and I found my guardian in a strange humour, even for him. He made clumsy attempts to be facetious, and to throw off that rather grave reserved manner he usually wore; clapped me on the shoulder, and generally behaved like the really youngish man he was in years. Before Hockley came in he referred for a moment to that matter we had discussed in my studio; but he only touched upon it lightly.

"You mustn't think anything, Charlie, of what I said the other night about – about a certain subject," he said, standing in front of me, and nervously fingering the lapel of my coat. "I mean about – about Barbara Patton. I was never really in earnest, and you and I have something else to think about in the world beside girls, haven't we?"

I laughed a little foolishly, but made no direct reply. He went on with the subject eagerly.

"I've come to the conclusion that I've been taking life too seriously, Charlie; I've been too grave and careful. I'll blossom out a bit; we'll both blossom out." He laughed in an unnatural fashion, and clapped me on the shoulder again.

"By the way," I said, as a sudden thought occurred to me, "I've been wanting to talk to you a little about my affairs – money matters, you know. I'm getting hard up, and I don't quite know how I stand in regard to such things. My income ought to be a substantial one, but I want to know exactly how much it is."

He always had an irritating way of speaking to any one over his shoulder, with his back to them and his head half turned; he adopted that method now. "Why should you trouble about your income?" he asked, a little sourly. "Don't you trust me? – don't you think you're safe in my hands?"

"Of course I trust you," I replied, a little indignantly. "But I want to know how much I can spend, that's all."

"Spend as little as possible," he said. "As a matter of fact, I've tied up your money in various ways, so that it may be safe; there's not much of it that can be handled at the moment. You shall have what you want – of course, within reason; but you must be careful – for your own sake."

I had no suspicion of him then; no doubt of him entered my mind. I knew nothing of business matters, and up to that time had always been supplied with the small sums necessary for my individual expenses, while all bills had, I believed, been sent to him. Nothing more was said about the matter then, because the entrance of Hockley drove everything else from my mind.

My guardian certainly seemed anxious to do all in his power to bring Hockley and me to a better understanding. He insisted on our shaking hands to begin with; and we performed that ceremony briefly and distrustfully. He hovered about us, and talked about our individual tastes, and wondered openly why we did not meet, or go about together.

"Two men like yourselves, with money and leisure, you ought to be friends," he asserted. "A poor devil like myself must be tied to his office chair willy-nilly; but you both are free. As for you, Hockley, why don't you take Charlie under your wing, and show him life and London?"

"I've precious little time to give to other people," said Gavin Hockley.

"I have plenty to occupy my days," I said firmly.

Even that rebuff did not discourage my guardian; he went at us again at the earliest opportunity. He was quite merry at dinner, as we sat at that round table of his; and I noticed that he plied Hockley with wine on every possible occasion. For my own part, I usually drank but little; but that night I was in a reckless defiant mood, and I drank all that was given me. My head was spinning, and I was scarcely master of myself, when we got up from the table, and went into Jervis Fanshawe's sitting-room to smoke.

And there, something to my surprise, my guardian produced cards, and flicked them audaciously before the face of Hockley. I saw the man's eyes light up, as he snatched at the pack, and began to shuffle the cards.

"I thought you'd given up playing – at all events before the child," I heard him say, in a low tone.

I sprang up from my chair. "Who are you speaking of?" I demanded hotly.

"I wasn't talking to you," said Hockley, shuffling the cards slowly, and looking at me with those dull eyes of his. "If you chance to overhear what isn't meant for you to hear, that's not my fault."

"Now, gentlemen – gentlemen; I will not have it!" interposed Fanshawe hurriedly. "A joke's a joke, and should be taken as such; I won't have you flying at each other's throats in this fashion. We'll have a friendly game, and see if it won't mend our tempers."

I do not know what game we played; I knew only the simplest games at cards, and this was a complicated thing of which I knew nothing. My guardian laughingly assisted me when I got into muddles, and showed me how to score; but it seemed always that Gavin Hockley won. At all events he won from me, because presently I found, bitterly enough, that my pockets were empty. I saw the sneer that flitted across Hockley's face as my guardian thrust some money into my hand; I could cheerfully have killed him then.

We played until it was quite late, or rather early in the morning; and I lost everything. I know at the last my guardian dropped out of the game, declaring that he could not go on; but he urged me to have my revenge, and to see if the luck would turn. But it would not turn, and Hockley calmly pocketed all I had. I got up at last, with my head swimming and my eyes burning; and I faced him shamefacedly enough.

"You're in my debt, young Avaline," he said, coolly making a note on a slip of paper. "A small matter of thirty pounds odd."

I turned to my guardian; but he laughingly shook his head. "You've cleaned me out, Charlie," he said; "give our friend an I.O.U., and square up with him another time."

Humiliated and shamed, and inwardly raging, I wrote the thing, and tossed it over to Hockley. He laughed, and folded it up, and put it in his pocket-book. Even then the brutal mind of the man prompted him to have a further fling at me.

"I'm surprised you didn't win," he said. "You know the old saying 'Lucky at cards – ' – well, I won't finish it."

I moved a step nearer to him. "What do you mean? I don't know any old sayings," I exclaimed, although I knew it well. "Explain yourself."

"The old saying is" – he grinned at me, and yet was watching me warily, I thought – "'Lucky at cards, unlucky in love.'" Fanshawe sprang between us just as I flew at my man; wound his long arms about me, and thrust me back by main force. "I tell you I won't have it," he cried. "As for you, Hockley, you've got your money; you can hold your tongue."

"The point is that I haven't got my money," said Hockley. "And I'm not quite sure that I ever shall get it."

A hot retort sprang to my tongue, but I checked it. I was in a false position; I could not talk with this man until I had paid him what I owed. That should be to-morrow, when my guardian gave me what was due to me.

But it was to happen that to-morrow was to dawn, and other to-morrows, and Hockley was not to be paid. For Jervis Fanshawe put me off with one excuse and another: now he was too busy to go into the matter of my accounts; and now he had no ready money; and now he was engaged at his office, and I could not see him. In the miserable days that followed he doled out to me a sovereign or two, sufficient to keep me going; but I got nothing else. My pride was up in arms, and I was maddened at the thought that Hockley had the laugh of me, horrified at the construction he would put upon my silence. I did not realize then, as I have realized since, how the thin and subtle net was closing in upon me, drawn tighter each day by the man who held the threads of it. I walked blindly towards a sure and certain goal, and never saw that goal until it was too late.

I do not now know what took me to Hammerstone Market for Barbara's wedding. Every instinct within me, as it seemed, fought against it; I wanted to forget that I had ever been to the place at all, even while I jealously hugged the memory of the few precious minutes I had spent with her. Perhaps it was the thought that she was going for ever out of my life, and into the life of another man, that drew me down there for the last time; perhaps it was a sort of despairing hope that there might yet be a chance that we could stand together, hand in hand, and cry out the truth of our love, and defy those who were setting us asunder. That I knew, in my own mind, was impossible; because I was bound wholly by her, and knew, as surely as her eyes had told me, that our cause was hopeless. But I went down with my guardian; perhaps he had something to do indirectly with my final decision to go, because I knew that the fact of my presence there would for ever silence his tongue.

Barbara's wedding day! I have thought of it since, over and over again; have watched her, as in a dream, going down the dim little country church in the sunlight, with her head bent, while the man of the good-humoured face waited for her. I have seen them kneel, side by side, and have heard the solemn words pronounced over them; I have seen her come out again on the arm of her husband, pale as death, and with her head bent always, and her eyes seeking no one. Stay, I am wrong; for at the last she raised her head, and looked at me fully, seeming to know, indeed, instinctively where to find me. And with that look something in me broke and died; it was as though I had torn out my heart, and thrown it in the dust at her feet. She went on into the sunlight with her husband; and I presently followed mechanically with the others; hearing about me, as in a dream, the chatter and the laughter of the gay little crowd.

They were all very merry afterwards; I remember that there was an old-fashioned wedding breakfast, and much drinking of toasts, and some speeches. I know that Lucas Savell made rather a good speech in a way, and was very properly modest and grateful for his good fortune; I know, too, that old Patton was prosy and long-winded, and that towards the end of his speech a great many

people were chattering together, and paying no attention to him. Then, after a time, it all broke up, and she was going.

I remember at the last I saw her coming down a wide staircase, with her bridesmaids fluttering about her and laughing; I think she had been crying. I know her eyes looked piteous, and her lips were quivering; but perhaps people thought that was quite the proper thing at a wedding, and with a young bride going away from home. Then, as she reached the foot of the stairs, she stopped for a moment to speak specially to one or two friends; and I was among the number. She put her hand in mine for a moment, and her lips formed the words "Good-bye"; but she could not speak. I stood there still as death; I wonder that no one noticed me. Then she was gone, and the crowd had broken up.

I found something in my hand; it was a tiny folded paper. I remember every word of it now; it was burnt in upon my brain, never to be effaced so long as I should live.

"Because I love you and trust you, I give you this, my dear, to read and then to burn. You will do that because I ask it. You have been very brave and very gentle with me; you are going always to be very brave and very gentle, so that I may carry that memory of you in my heart. I have thought of you in secret, although I shall do so no more, as my poor Prince Charlie – wandering alone, far from his kingdom; only, unlike the other poor Prince Charlie, you have no one to comfort you. Good-bye, you are not to think of me; and yet I pray that you may think of me a little. You will be my dream-love always.

Barbara."

I read it over and over until I had got it by heart – until, in fact, I knew every turn and twist of the dear writing; then I burnt it, and destroyed even the ashes. I was vaguely comforted by it; the thing was not so bitter as it might have been, because above all else I held her spirit, and she was mine in that sense, if in no other. And God knows at that time I had no other thought of her; I want that understood clearly, so that it may be understood, too, how little I deserved all that was to happen to me.

I walked about for a long time, and then I went back to the hotel; I had made up my mind to stay there for that night, and then to get to London. I have wished since, often and often, that I had gone straight back to that quiet life in town – that I had never stopped in that place until perforce I must stay the night.

My guardian had asked me earlier in the day about my movements, and I had told him that I intended to stop at Hammerstone Market. He seemed curious as to how I was going to spend the evening – seemed, indeed, anxious about me; so that I was not altogether surprised when he presently appeared in my room, and told me that he had arranged a supper party that night, and that he wanted me to be present.

"I'd rather stay quietly here, thank you," I told him brusquely. "I'm in no mood for supper parties to-night. Leave me alone."

He thrust his thin face close to mine. "You young fool, do you want everybody to be talking about you, and about her?" he demanded. "I was watching you in church to-day, and you looked like death itself. You don't know what these quiet country places are; there'll be whispers afloat to-morrow. Come, my boy – for her sake."

I looked at him in surprise; I had not expected for a moment that he would have thought of that aspect of the case. I began to feel that I had been mistaken in the man, and that there was really something rather fine about him. I suppose he saw the effect of his words, for he shook me rallyingly, and began to drag me out of the room.

"That's right, come along!" he exclaimed. "Keep a brave face, and no one can say a word. Come along!"

"Stop a bit!" I urged, drawing back. "Who's going to be there?"

"Only Hockley beside ourselves," said Fanshawe, examining his nails. "As a matter of fact, I want you to meet him again, and if possible get your revenge. I don't like that money hanging over."

"That's not my fault," I reminded him. "I've asked you again and again – "

"That's all right," he broke in soothingly. "I'll pay the money, and as much more as you like. This is going to be a lucky night for us both, Charlie; we're going to wipe off old scores."

He went down the stairs before me. On the way he glanced up to see that I was following, and it happened that the light from a lamp on the staircase fell on his face. And I remember that I did not like its expression.

CHAPTER IV

The Killing of the Lie

My story draws near now to that night of my life when all things for me were to change, and when I was to go down into the Valley of the Shadow, and come face to face with Death. I pray you hear me patiently, and believe that what I write is true of all that I felt and thought at that time. And God knows I have had years enough wherein to plan the writing of it – years of solitude and misery and exile!

I know that I felt again at that supper party the same curious premonition of a storm that I had felt in the house of old Patton. There were dreadful silences between the three of us – silences from which my guardian feverishly awoke us, or that were broken in upon by some coarse remark from Hockley. For my part I said little; I seemed to be watching and waiting; and I know now that I was alert and eager to snatch at anything the brute might say, and make much of it. Always I seemed to remember that it was Barbara's wedding day; and that I stood outside, like some pale pure knight of old, to guard her memory, and to be faithful to what she had said to me. And I knew always that the very atmosphere of the room and of the men who were with me was antagonistic to any purity of thought or feeling. From the very first I would have you understand that, from that point of view, I was a doomed man.

The supper had been carefully ordered and was excellently served; for such guests the landlord insisted on waiting in person. Also the wine was good, and it circulated freely. I seemed to see, each time that I looked over the glass from which I drank, the two faces – that of Hockley, leering and heavy and brutal; that of my guardian, white and watchful and eager; and hovering always above us that suggestion of the storm to come.

Towards the close of the meal, Hockley raised his glass and stared across at me. "I give you a toast," he said, leaning forward over the table – "I give you the pretty bride!"

"Excellent!" exclaimed Fanshawe, springing up, and raising his glass. "The pretty bride!"

"The pretty bride!" I said hoarsely; and drained my glass, and, boylike, flung it into the fireplace, where it shivered to pieces. Hockley laughed as he set his own glass down on the table.

"The one toast – eh?" he suggested, with a sneer. "The fair lady would be honoured, I'm sure, if she knew. But she's nothing to us now, whatever she may have been."

"What do you mean by that?" I demanded, looking squarely at him.

"Don't take fire so readily," he retorted. "I mean that she belongs to another man, and I hope he thinks he's got a prize. Don't glare at me like that, my young friend," he added with a laugh; "I'd be the last to say anything against the lady."

"It would be better for you if you said nothing at all about her," I said; and he lay back in his chair, and roared with laughter.

"Come, come; we're getting on dangerous ground," broke in my guardian, laying a soothing hand on my shoulder. "Surely there's no harm in toasting a lady, as our friend Hockley has done; why should you be so ready to quarrel with him, Charlie?"

Hockley was still grinning in that unpleasant fashion of his across the table; I felt bitterly enough that he looked upon me as a tiresome, quarrelsome boy, and despised me in consequence. I chafed at the thought that in all probability I must presently play cards with him – perhaps to lose again; I chafed, too, at the thought that I was dependent on this other man, my guardian, for money with which to play at all. And even while I thought that, I had a vision of Barbara coming down the staircase at her father's house, with that look in her eyes as though she had been weeping, and with her lips quivering. Altogether a bad frame of mind for a boy of twenty to be in, with two such men for company.

The table was cleared at last, and then the cards were produced. With a burning face I drew my guardian aside, and spoke to him earnestly, believing that he had forgotten my request.

"I have no money," I said, "and I already owe this man a lot. You promised to let me have some; you promised to pay Hockley."

"My dear Charlie," he whispered, "do you imagine that I carry money about with me to that extent, and especially in a little country place like this? There are ten chances to one that you will win back to-night all that you have lost, and more; you won't get two such runs of bad luck in succession. Play on, and see how the game goes; I'll back you, whether you win or lose."

"I won't play to-night," I said doggedly. "I seem to be getting tangled in a net from which I shall never extricate myself; I'm getting afraid. I won't play to-night."

"You young fool!" he exclaimed, in a low voice, "do you want to give Hockley another handle to grasp. Do you want him to say that you owed him over thirty pounds, and wouldn't pay it, and wouldn't play again? Can't you understand what manner of man he is?"

I saw that there was nothing for it but to sit down with empty pockets, and to trust that my luck would change. For a time all went well; the cards all came my way, and I seemed to see the money I had lost flowing back into my pockets. More than once my guardian clapped me on the shoulder, and cheered me on, and rallied Hockley upon his ill-luck; Hockley set his teeth, and said nothing.

Presently I staked more than I should, and lost; staked again, and lost again. I saw Hockley's heavy jaw set firm, as he laid down card after card that beat mine and my guardian's; he never said a word, as we played on steadily in a silence which was growing oppressive. A bell had been rung and an order given, and some one had put a glass beside me; I was hot, and my throat was dry, and I eagerly gulped down what was there. And still the man before me, in a deadly silence, played his cards, and made notes on a slip of paper beside him.

I got up from the table at last, overturning my chair as I did so. Hockley was leaning back, with the slip of paper held before him, and with a pencil tapping out the figures on it. My eyes were burning, and something was singing in my ears; I scarcely knew where I was.

"Bad luck, Charlie," said the voice of my guardian, cutting the silence nervously.

"Mr. Hockley," I contrived to say, "I never meant to go on as far as this. I have no money – at least, not here; I can only give you my I.O.U. Will you please tell me how much it is?"

He went on deliberately checking the figures; did not even look at me as he said the amount, yawning over it a little as he spoke. It was over seventy pounds; and I seemed to understand that my guardian owed him something also.

"I can only give you my I.O.U.," I repeated, as I drew a scrap of paper towards me, and steadied my hand to write.

"That's no good to me," he said, "not worth the paper it's written on. I've one already of yours, and what's it worth?"

"You will be paid," I said, with a helpless look at my guardian.

"If you play with gentlemen, why don't you pay like a gentleman," retorted Hockley, snatching at my scrap of paper, and getting to his feet. "I can't think what Fanshawe ever meant by bringing you into a man's business at all; this game isn't for boys."

"Be careful, Hockley!" I cried, making a movement towards him.

"To the devil with you!" he exclaimed violently. "I've had enough of your sour looks, and your threats, and your high-handed ways. Of course we're all sorry for you; you must be feeling a bit sore to-night," he sneered.

I controlled my tongue even then; I remembered the face of Barbara; I remembered the words of her note: "I love you and I trust you; you are going always to be very brave and very gentle, so that I may carry that memory of you in my heart." No such bully as this should break down my resolution; there was a power in me greater than he suspected.

It was my guardian who stirred the wound. "Why don't you be quiet, Hockley?" he said; "why don't you leave difficult subjects alone? The past is done with – "

"And so's his pretty mistress," exclaimed Hockley. And it was not so much the words as the fashion in which he said them that maddened me.

Before Fanshawe could get to me I had overturned the table, and sprang at my man. He eluded me with a quickness I should scarcely have given him credit for, and slipped round behind my guardian; danced about there, in comparative safety, with mocking words and looks, keeping Jervis Fanshawe always between us. The situation was ridiculous, and I hesitated for very shame.

"Here's a fire-eater!" he cried, emboldened by the fact that I could not get at him, and that I stood chafing. "Owes a man money, and gives his dirty scrap of paper in exchange for it; and then will not have a word said against the girl who met him in secret in the wood. Houghty toity – we're mighty particular!"

"I'll quarrel with you on any matter that your mean soul may choose – except that," I almost pleaded with him. "For your own sake as well as mine, leave her out of the conversation. She's as far above you as the stars; let your foul tongue wag about something else."

"My tongue shall wag as it chooses," he retorted, with a frown. "I know what I know, and I've seen what I've seen. You thought me asleep in the wood that day, didn't you?"

Again I saw the face of Barbara – first as she had come towards me smiling in the wood, then as she had come down the stairs, with her eyes on mine – eyes that had tears in them. And so I restrained myself, and waited there, helpless, until he should be silent.

"A fig for your saints and your Madonnas!" cried Hockley. "They're the worst of the lot. Our little meek-eyed Barbara was a lady of many loves – in secret. How did she meet you in the wood – you that had never met her before? How did she meet me – a dozen times before?"

"For the love of God, keep him quiet!" I cried to my guardian; for I felt that my head was bursting, and my throat was dry. I seemed then to be praying to the only saint I knew for strength and for confidence; I only wanted to get out of the room, before I struck the man dead. My guardian did nothing; he stood still, watching us both; and after a moment Hockley went on. I had a dim feeling, as he began to speak again, that people were moving outside the door; I think the place had been disturbed by the overturning of the table.

"That makes you wince, doesn't it?" he demanded; for I think he felt secure, now that other people were near at hand. "I tell you she was for any man that cared –"

I sprang straight at him then, and had him by the throat. I was young, and my muscles were tough; more than that, I was in finer condition than he, with all his drinking and his late nights and his vices, could hope to be. We went down together, he screaming out something that sounded like a cry for help; and I tore and raged at him as though I were mad.

When I came to myself, I was being held by three or four of them, and he was leaning against the overturned table, breathing heavily, and trying to arrange his collar and tie; his face was ghastly. After a moment he pointed a shaking hand at me, and gasped out —

"He tried to murder me; he meant to murder me. We were – we were joking, gentlemen – and he – he tried to murder me."

"Yes, I tried to murder you," I said. "And I'll try again, with more success, when I get the chance, unless you take back what you've said."

"Charlie – Charlie – come away!" exclaimed my guardian, putting his hands on my breast, and pushing me back. "I'm sorry to have disturbed all you good people," he added, turning to the landlord, who was staring at us with a scared face; "but this is only a matter of hot blood. They'll shake hands in the morning; they'll be friends again."

They were dragging me away, while I strove to break from them; I called out again to Hockley. "You shall take back what you said; I'll make you eat your lie, or I'll kill you."

I do not think I quite understood what I was saying; even the shocked scared faces about me could not make me understand the gravity of it all. I found myself outside the closed doors of the

room, panting and almost weeping with excitement, with the stout landlord holding me on one side, and a waiter on the other. My guardian was speaking – not to me, but to the landlord.

"Very well, since you insist, he shall not stop in the house," said Jervis Fanshawe. "I'll take him away to Mr. Patton's place; I can secure a bed for him there. Yes – yes – I quite understand, and I'm sorry you've been disturbed; it shall all be put right. Tell Mr. Hockley that I've gone home."

They got me out of the house; locked the door on me, in fact. I stood under the stars with Fanshawe, staring before me down the road, and panting heavily; for I knew that this was but the beginning. I seemed to see the foul lips of the man for ever breathing out lies about her – lies that must be stopped and killed now in their birth. That was what I must do, and quickly. This thing would be spread; I seemed to see the man whispering it here, there, and everywhere, with shrugs and leers and winks. Yes, I would kill it.

As in a sort of dream I heard my guardian talking to me. "Yes, my dear boy; I know it's abominable – shameful; but what can you do? Any one who knows you and knows her must know that it is all a lie from beginning to end. There – there – come away. I suppose if we lived in any other century, you might strike a man down for this; I think I should strike him down myself, if I were as young and strong as you are." He was glancing at me curiously as we stood there in the utter silence of the night; there seemed a challenge in his eyes. And his suggestion about any other century had brought back again to my mind the remembrance that I was her pure knight, pledged to do battle for her. I began to walk rapidly away in the direction of the house of the Pattons, with my guardian walking beside me, and putting in a word here and there that was meant to be soothing, and yet that only served to inflame my passion.

"I ought not to have said that about striking him down, Charlie; that would be murder," he went on. "And one may not murder another man, however much one may be tempted, or however richly the man may deserve death. But the worst of it is, of course, that one doesn't know how to stop him; he'll go on saying those things about that sweet girl, and people will begin to believe – to say there's no smoke without fire, and horrible things of that sort. What had we better do, Charlie?"

"You can leave it to me," I said. "You can safely leave it to me."

He seemed to be able to do what he liked at the house of the Pattons. A manservant let us in; my guardian seemed to whisper something to him to account for my dishevelled appearance, and for the fact that I had no hat. The man got a light in one of the lower rooms, and presently brought in a decanter and some glasses; then, at a further whispered suggestion from Fanshawe, retired and left us alone together. My guardian was hovering about me anxiously – now murmuring what a shame it was that such things should be said openly about such a girl as Barbara – now muttering what he would do if he were a younger man – now urging me feebly to forget all about it, and leave the man alone.

"Above all, Charlie – no violence," he said. "I shudder to think what you might have done if I had not prevented you to-night. You won't mend things that way; we must think of some other method."

I said nothing; I drank mechanically what he put into my hand; I acquiesced in his suggestion that I should go to bed. My last recollection of him was when he came into my room, looking thinner and more gaunt than ever in a dark dressing gown, and hovered over me with a candle, and hoped that I would sleep.

But sleep was not for me that night; I had other things to think about. The lie faced me, like a grey haunting shadow, in the night; had become more horrible with the first streaks of dawn. The more I strove to control myself – the more I told myself that what such a creature as Hockley might say could not matter – the more my passion grew. And it was a worse passion now, because there was growing up in it a method that was greater than the madness of the night before. In that long night, wherein I lay and thought the thing over, the boyish part of me seemed to have lived far back in another age; it was a new Charles Avaline that rose with the morning, and dressed and went out.

I know that I walked into the hotel at Hammerstone Market quietly enough; I was half way up the stairs leading to my room before the startled landlord came out, and called after me to know where I was going. I turned, and faced him on the stairs.

"I'm going to my room to put my things together," I answered. "Is Mr. Hockley up yet?" I steadied my voice, and made the question as careless as I could.

"Mr. Hockley's gone, sir," said the man, in what was evidently a tone of satisfaction.

I came down the stairs, and faced him for a moment in silence. "That's not true," I said quietly; "he's afraid to meet me, and you're hiding him."

"Thank the Lord, sir, he's gone," said the man earnestly. "I didn't like the look of you last night, sir; and I like the look of you still less this morning. No offence, sir, but I'll be glad when you're out of my 'ouse."

I packed my bag, and arranged for it to be sent to the station; then I tramped back to find my guardian. I found him seated at breakfast, quite alone; Mr. Patton had not yet come down. I told him that I had been to the hotel, and that Hockley was gone. I think he seemed surprised, and a little taken aback at the news.

"Well, what are you going to do?" he asked, after a silence, during which he had been twisting his long fingers about over each other nervously. "Are you going to let the matter drop, or what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to follow him; I'm going to find him," I said. "You know where he lives in London; you must give me the address."

"I won't do that," he replied instantly; "I'll have no hand in this business. Let him say what he likes, or do what he likes; it's no affair of mine, and it should be no affair of yours. I wash my hands of it."

He went on with his breakfast again, muttering to himself something about young hot-headed fools; I waited patiently. I brushed aside his suggestion that I should have some breakfast; I was impatient to be gone. I told him again that I must have Hockley's address.

"Look here, Charlie," he said at last, "I'm going to London by a train which leaves in half an hour; you can come with me. We'll talk over this matter in the train, and I'll see if I can't bring you to a more sensible frame of mind."

To that I agreed, and we presently started together for the station. During our journey I urged two things upon him: that I must have sufficient money to pay my debt to this man, and that I must have this man's address. He flatly refused to let me have the address; the money he said he would forward to Hockley himself.

"You promise that?" I asked eagerly.

"I'll send him a cheque directly I reach the office," he replied earnestly.

I urged him again to let me know where the man lived, but he would not. Finally, however, he said he would think the matter over; if I would call at his office in the City that evening, he would let me know his decision. With that I had to be content; and I left him at the station, and after taking my luggage to my rooms, set off to kill the day as best I could.

I reached Jervis Fanshawe's office in the late afternoon, to find that he was gone. But he had left a note for me; I tore it open, and read it there.

"I have sent a cheque to Gavin Hockley to cover the full amount you are indebted to him. I enclose his address, because I think that you are the best judge of what you should do.

"J. F."

I tore the note up, having got that address clearly in my mind, and set out to find Hockley. I remember now that a curious calm had come over me – a curious feeling of deadly certainty as to

what I wanted, and what I meant to have. I was no longer in his debt; I could stand face to face with him on absolutely equal terms. And I would have you bear in mind that I did not mean to kill him.

No – I did not mean to kill him. There was a thought in my mind that I might beat him to his knees, and force him to say the truth; that I might compel him, in fact, to write it down: nothing more than that. But my rage and my abhorrence had grown into a deadly thing, more dangerous than the passion of the night before; I did not know then what I have recognized since, that I had no real control of myself, and that I had sprung as it were, in one single instant, above any law that might be made by man. And I was in that condition when, in the coming gloom of the evening, I turned into Lincoln's Inn Fields, and looked for the place where Gavin Hockley lived.

It was a curious old house, with a great flagged courtyard in front of it; it had once been the house of some great man, before Lincoln's Inn had been invaded by lawyers and others in search of chambers and offices. I read his name on a plate at the door; I climbed the stairs, and as I climbed I slowly unbuttoned my gloves, and took them off. I had no weapon of any sort, save a light walking cane that would have snapped at a touch.

I came to the door of his rooms, and read his name there again.

My heart was beating a little more rapidly than usual, but I was outwardly calm. I saw that the door was open an inch or two; without knocking, I thrust it open, and went in. The place was empty. Judging at first that he had seen me coming, and had bolted I made a quick movement towards the door of the room in which I stood, with the intention of setting out in pursuit; and at that moment heard the outer door bang, and heard him come in, whistling. I stood still, just within the door of his sitting-room, and waited for him.

He came straight into the room, looking neither to right nor left; it was only as he swung about at the table that he saw me. I stood quite still, watching him, and for a moment I saw flash up in his eyes the look of a hunted creature at bay. He had stopped, with his hands resting on the table; he seemed to crouch there, waiting. I made a rapid movement, and got between him and the door.

"What do you want?" he asked at last, straightening himself, and putting his hand for a moment to his collar. I thought then that perhaps he had a difficulty in breathing, or perhaps he remembered my hands there on the previous night.

"You ran away from me this morning, because you were afraid of what I might do to you," I said steadily. "You can't run now; you've got to face me, and answer me, and do as I tell you."

"Oh, indeed!" He was getting a little of his courage back by this time, and some of his old air of bravado sat awkwardly enough upon him. "And may I ask what the devil you mean by forcing your way into a gentleman's rooms like this?"

"I had to meet you, and I chose the only way that was open to me," I replied. "I went to look for you this morning, but you had by that time decided that it was wiser to get out of my way. I want you to take back the lie you told last night."

I saw him look quickly round the room; I glanced for a moment round myself. I knew that his eyes sought a weapon; I knew that if he could frighten me out of the place, or overawe me in any way, he would laugh at anything I might threaten, and that my chance would be gone. He made a movement as if to get past me; I stood still, looking at him. The momentary glance round the walls had shown me that the place was very beautifully furnished, and that weapons of various sorts were fastened about, for the mere purpose of ornamentation. I saw that it would become a question as to which of us secured a weapon first; but even then, as I did not mean to kill him, I did not make the first move. That I will swear.

When he moved, it was to snatch a weapon that seemed characteristic of his clumsy brutality; he suddenly swooped and caught up a heavy poker from the fireplace. "It was no lie, and you know it," he blurted out. "Every one knows it, if it comes to that. Get out of my place, you cub, until you can pay your debts."

"Stay where you are!" I commanded him. "My debt is paid; a cheque has been sent you to-day. For the last time, will you take back what you have said, or shall I kill you?"

He suddenly made an ugly rush at me, swinging the poker above his head. He was blind with fury and fear; he did not seem to know where he struck. I sprang aside, and on the instant wrenched from its place on the wall a short old-fashioned heavy-bladed sword. I waited until he should turn to come at me again; and when he did his lips were spluttering out words and oaths so frightful, with her sweet name mixed horribly with them, that I felt I had no option. I struck down his weapon, and I drove straight at his head with my own. I struck him twice with all my force, and saw him drop to his knees, and then on to his side. And so lay, as in my dream, with blood upon him at my feet.

I turned round, and walked out of the place. Somehow it did not seem surprising that on the staircase I should meet my guardian, Jervis Fanshawe. He was trembling from head to foot; he took hold of my arm, and asked me in a shaking voice to tell him for the love of God what I had done.

"I've killed Gavin Hockley – and his lie," I said. Then I went quietly down the stairs, and out into the summer twilight of Lincoln's Inn Fields.

CHAPTER V

Alas! for Poor Prince Charlie!

In a great crisis of one's life perhaps the things that strike one most are those most commonplace. I remember on that summer evening, when I came out into the streets, that I was able to think first of the extreme beauty of the night, and of how quaint and wonderful the old buildings looked in the softened light of the dying day. I saw a pair of lovers strolling on before me, looking into each other's eyes; I remember thinking then, with a little strange feeling of pride, that I had killed a man that Love and Truth might live. I had come out into Holborn, and was making my way towards my rooms, when my guardian, who had hovered a little behind me, and had followed me wonderingly, touched me on the arm. I had forgotten all about him until that moment.

"Better come home with me," he whispered; "they'll look for you at your place first."

"It won't make much difference," I said; "they'll have to find me some time." Nevertheless I went home with him, walking the short distance to his place in Bloomsbury.

He watched me as we went along, and I saw that he watched me with an increasing sense of wonder. I was something detached – apart from all the world – something he had not looked upon before. He was afraid of me, and yet attracted to me in a fearful way; he spoke to me, when he spoke at all, with a strange deference. I wondered about it, as I might have wondered about anything that was happening to some other person, until at last it struck me, and that with no sense of fear, that he looked upon me as one already dead. And so we came to the house in which he lived, and went up in silence to his rooms.

He turned up the light in that room in which we had played cards, and motioned to a chair; but I did not sit down. Now that I could see his face distinctly, I read again in it that look of fierce and eager excitement that I had seen before; I understood, too, that I was nothing to him, and only what I had done made me important in his eyes. I had something to say to him, and I said it quickly.

"He told me that he had not yet had the money to redeem my I.O.U.'s," I said. "I suppose the cheque was delayed?"

"It wasn't sent," he said in reply. "I never meant to send it."

I turned on him fiercely, and spluttered out his own words: "Never meant to send it? What do you mean?"

"You don't want to murder *me*," he muttered, putting the table between us, and grinning weakly. "I tell you I never meant to send it – I never had the money to pay it."

I sat down and looked at him; the horror of the other business was falling away from me in the contemplation of this treachery. "I want you to explain," I said patiently.

"You young fool!" he exclaimed with sudden violence, as he saw how tame and quiet I was, "don't you understand that I meant this to happen from the first? Don't you understand what every one is going to say when they find him, and when they find what is in his pockets? You owed him money; you had been gambling with him, and had nothing to pay him with. You quarrelled with him at Hammerstone Market; you were heard to threaten to kill him. You follow him to his rooms; he demands the money; there is a quarrel, and the stronger and the younger man wins. Oh, you fool!"

"Why have you done it?" I asked him, still very quietly.

He paced about the room for a minute or two, and then came back to me. I knew that there was time enough, and so I waited; I did not see daylight yet.

"I have been in Hockley's clutches for years," said Jervis Fanshawe, speaking in a matter-of-fact tone; "he has bled me steadily for a long time past. I began gambling with him, and I lost; tried to retrieve my losses, and lost more. Every penny I ever had has gone to him – and other money besides."

"What other money? Mine?"

He nodded slowly. "Every bit of it, and more besides that. I'm deeply involved with the firm; that was my chief reason for trying to get hold of that girl, for with her I could have stopped all tongues wagging, and could have paid Hockley off. It was when I saw you, hot-headed and hot-blooded, and only too eager to quarrel with the man, that the idea came into my mind that I might use you. That – and the story I heard."

I remembered in a flash the story the doctor had told at that dinner party at the house of old Patton; of the man who worked on the jealous feelings of another that he might kill a third man. But my mind moved slowly, and even yet I did not even quite see what this man had done.

"I can tell you this now, because you're a dead man to all intents and purposes," said Jervis Fanshawe, leaning across the table and looking hard at me. "I always hated you – hated you, I think, for your youth and your strength, and that fair boyish face of yours that gave you a chance with women I never had. You've served my purpose, and in a way I never expected."

"Then, when they bring me to justice – when they try me for what I have done," I said slowly and patiently, "that is the story you will tell them?"

"Undoubtedly," he replied. "And you cannot contradict it."

"I would not contradict it if I could prove the truth to every one," I assured him earnestly. "And I thank you from the bottom of my heart."

He stared at me in amazement. "Are you mad?" he gasped.

I shook my head, and smiled. "No, I'm not mad," I replied. "Only this gives me the chance I never hoped to get – the chance to keep her name out of it. I was afraid you might drag that in, tell of the quarrel between Hockley and myself, and have sharp lawyers turning and twisting that lie this way and that. Tell your tale, by all means; I shall keep silent. Now give me something to eat; I'm faint and worn out."

I do not think he had understood me before; I caught him more than once stopping, as he moved about the room, to look back at me, and to ponder over me and to shake his head. I was indifferent to everything; I only thought how wonderfully it had all come about, that Barbara's name would never be mentioned; I had not hoped to kill the lie so completely as this. I ate the food he gave me, and presently lay down on the hard horsehair sofa in his sitting-room, and was fast asleep in a minute. I only woke once during the night, and then I found him bending over me with a flaring candle held above his head; there was still that wondering awestruck look in his face.

I went out long before he was awake in the morning; I had not yet decided what I should do. That it would be done for me pretty quickly I already realized; for it was not likely, after his declaration of the previous night, that Jervis Fanshawe would long leave me at liberty. So I took what was to prove my last walk through London, for that time at least; and presently saw what I had expected to see. Flaring lines on newspaper placards told me and all the world of London what had happened, and the lines were strengthened as hour after hour went by. In face of them I had a curious satisfaction in my present liberty, a curious wonder at the power that was mine. I could have gone up to any respectable citizen jogging along his respectable way, and have told him the truth calmly; I could have shouted it in the streets, and then have run, with a hundred at my heels. I was a pariah, walking the streets of a great city with men hunting for me; I had nothing in common with respectability or decency.

I remember that I tried experiments that day; touched the very fringe of what was waiting for me, in a sense, to try how near I could go to the actual danger without grasping it. I sat in a crowded restaurant at lunch time, and heard men talk of what had happened, giving details of how the man had been struck down, and offering suggestions as to the motive. I that was already dead could listen to them with equanimity; could wonder a little what would have happened had I suddenly declared how much deeper my knowledge of the business was than theirs.

One man was quite blatant about it; he had already formed his own idea of the matter, and had summed it up. There was a woman in it, of course; everything pointed to the fact that a woman had struck the fatal blow. In the first place there was no evidence of any struggle; and mark you,

gentlemen, a woman bent on such a business as that would creep upon the poor devil unawares, and strike him down before he had a chance to defend himself. It being pointed out to this clever person that a poker had been found clasped tight in the hand of the murdered man, he was ready in a moment with a smiling explanation of that. The woman had put it there, the better to make out her defence if necessary. He was quite surprised that no one had thought of that.

So I went out into the streets again, to find again what I had expected. The placards bore an additional line – "A Clue." Clearly Mr. Jervis Fanshawe had already been at work.

There was no thought in my mind of escape; I do not think that idea ever occurred to me. Once or twice, perhaps, a hot and pitiful feeling swept across me at the thought that I must pay for what I had done with my life – and I so young! But even then I thought of myself as of some one impersonal and having nothing to do with me. That was the strangest feeling of all: to tread these streets, amid these hurrying crowds, and to feel so bitterly sorry for poor Charlie Avaline, whose life was ending. But of myself I did not think.

It was growing dark as I turned into the little narrow street out of Holborn in which my rooms were situated. Against the railings of a house opposite to that in which I lived a man lounged; as I came into the street he was making a business of lighting a pipe. Twenty yards away, on the opposite side of the road, a policeman was standing; I saw that here was the end of things. As I turned into the street a wretched, forlorn old woman, with a box of matches in her hands, shambled past me, mumbling something pitifully; I stopped her, and gave her all the money I had in my pocket – all I had in the world. I left her looking blankly at the coins, and feeling about her deplorable clothes for some place in which to hide them; then I walked straight up to the house, and climbed the stairs; and knew, while I climbed, that the man who had made a pretence of lighting a pipe climbed steadily behind me.

I was so young, and life even then was so sweet, that for a minute after I had gained my room, and while yet freedom was left to me, I made shift to clasp my hands and murmur a prayer for strength. I heard the Law, in the shape of the man with the pipe, on the landing outside, and for the first time I was afraid; the passion and the fierceness of the thing had gone from me. I dropped my head upon my hands, and whispered what was in my heart —

"Let me be strong and brave; let me never speak her name. Let me die silent
– oh, God! – let me die silent!"

There was a sharp knock at the door; I pulled myself together, and went to open it. The man was inside in a moment and had closed it, but not before I had had time to look past him, and to see the grim figure of the policeman standing outside. I think at first the man who had come in, and who now announced himself, was a little astonished at my youthful appearance; he asked if my name was Charles Avaline. Even as I answered him, I felt myself vaguely wondering what he was like in private life, and if he had a son, perhaps, of about my age; for he was a pleasant-looking man of about fifty.

"My name is Charles Avaline," I said steadily.

"I have a warrant for your arrest, Mr Avaline," he said, "and I charge you with the murder of Gavin Hockley last night in his rooms in Lincoln's Inn Fields." Then, as I was about to speak eagerly, he interrupted me in a fashion I shall always remember, because it was so kindly – almost paternal, in fact. Yes, I felt sure he must have a boy of about my age.

"Now, my dear boy, don't say anything," he urged. "You know what it means; I shall only have to use it in evidence against you. I see you're a gentleman – I might have known that by the first look at you – and I know you're coming, like a gentleman, quietly. You can leave it to me; I'll see that everything is as comfortable and as sparing to your feelings as can be, consistent with my duty."

"I will give you no trouble," I said. Then, before he could stop me, I added quickly: "And I did kill the man."

He shook his head despondently. "I wish you hadn't said that, but I'm bound to repeat it," he said. "I always like a man to have a fair chance if I can. Now, sir, if you're ready we can start."

I looked round the studio in which I had been for so short a time; I thought of all the dreams I had dreamed there, of all that I was to have done to make a great name in the world. I felt that the man was watching too, and yet he had in his eyes something of that wondering perplexed look that I had seen in the eyes of my guardian. I walked out on to the staircase, where the policeman was still standing, and the man I had left in the room extinguished the light and followed me. He motioned to the constable to go ahead of us; when we got into the street a cab was just drawing up. I got in, and the man followed; the constable swung himself up to the box beside the driver, and we set off.

I do not think I was surprised to find my guardian hovering about in the hall of the police station; the only point that was remarkable was that he was nervous and anxious, and I was not. I think, in view of what I had to face, and of the desperate strait I was in, I looked upon him then as something so much smaller and meaner and more commonplace than myself. Not that I would have you believe that I regarded myself in any heroic light, but rather that I had done with this troublesome business of life, had fought my fight, and was going out into the shadows. And yet was so sorry, so desperately sorry for poor Charlie Avaline!

"My dear boy!" he began, as I walked into the place; but I checked him with a laugh as I thrust him aside.

"You've managed it more promptly than I should have thought possible," I said. "You'd much better go home."

I pass over all that happened before my trial. If I seem to touch upon it at all, or to endeavour to make you understand what were my thoughts at that time, it is only because of the old human instinct that every man and every woman has to justify what he or she has done. And at that time I suppose my chief thought, naturally enough, was of what the end would be for poor Charlie Avaline; of what people would say to him and about him; of how much he could bear, and whether, in the stress of the time that was coming, he could keep silent. But on that latter point I felt pretty certain, and was not afraid.

So the day came when I stepped up through the floor, as it seemed, and came out into a railed-in space, and faced my judge. I seemed to hear about me a rustling and a murmur that died down at once. I saw near to me the man who held my life in his hand, in the sense that he was so hopelessly to defend me; I caught sight of my guardian, seated near to me, with lips twitching, and with his white fingers coiling over each other ceaselessly. And then in the silence a voice asking me how I pleaded.

"Guilty!"

There was a great excitement then, with my counsel excitedly whispering to me, and people murmuring in court; it seemed that I had outraged all the legal technicalities. Why could they not be done with it at once, and take my word for what had happened? I did not want to be set up there, to be stared at and pointed at; I had done with the world, and they had but to pass sentence upon me. I was tired of the sorry game; I wanted to go down the steps again quickly, and be lost to the world.

But it seemed that there was much to be done. My plea was amended; legally, it appeared, I was not guilty after all until I had been tried. And in that mock fashion (for so it seemed to me) I was tried on that dreadful charge, and all the sorry story was gone into again.

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