GEORGE GISSING

EVE'S RANSOM

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Gissing G.

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I

On the station platform at Dudley Port, in the dusk of a February afternoon, half-a-dozen people waited for the train to Birmingham. A south-west wind had loaded the air with moisture, which dripped at moments, thinly and sluggishly, from a featureless sky. The lamps, just lighted, cast upon wet wood and metal a pale yellow shimmer; voices sounded with peculiar clearness; so did the rumble of a porter's barrow laden with luggage. From a foundry hard by came the muffled, rhythmic thunder of mighty blows; this and the long note of an engine-whistle wailing far off seemed to intensify the stillness of the air as gloomy day passed into gloomier night.

In clear daylight the high, uncovered platform would have offered an outlook over the surrounding country, but at this hour no horizon was discernible. Buildings near at hand, rude masses of grimy brick, stood out against a grey confused background; among them rose a turret which vomited crimson flame. This fierce, infernal glare seemed to lack the irradiating quality of earthly fires; with hard, though fluctuating outline, it leapt towards the kindred night, and diffused a blotchy darkness. In the opposite direction, over towards Dudley Town, appeared spots of lurid glow. But on the scarred and barren plain which extends to Birmingham there had settled so thick an obscurity, vapours from above blending with earthly reek, that all tile beacons of fiery toil were wrapped and hidden.

Of the waiting travellers, two kept apart from the rest, pacing this way and that, but independently of each other. They were men of dissimilar appearance; the one comfortably and expensively dressed, his age about fifty, his visage bearing the stamp of commerce; the other, younger by more than twenty years, habited in a way which made it; difficult to as certain his social standing, and looking about him with eyes suggestive of anything but prudence or content. Now and then they exchanged a glance: he of the high hat and caped ulster betrayed an interest in the younger man, who, in his turn, took occasion to observe the other from a distance, with show of dubious recognition.

The trill of an electric signal, followed by a clanging bell, brought them both to a pause, and they stood only two or three yards apart. Presently a light flashed through the thickening dusk; there was roaring, grinding, creaking and a final yell of brake-tortured wheels. Making at once for the nearest third-class carriage, the man in the seedy overcoat sprang to a place, and threw himself carelessly back; a moment, and he was followed by the second passenger, who seated himself on the opposite side of the compartment. Once more they looked at each other, but without change of countenance.

Tickets were collected, for there would be no stoppage before Birmingham: then the door slammed, and the two men were alone together.

Two or three minutes after the train had started, the elder man leaned forward, moved slightly, and spoke.

"Excuse me, I think your name must be Hilliard."

"What then?" was the brusque reply.

"You don't remember me?"

"Scoundrels are common enough," returned the other, crossing his legs, "but I remember you for all that."

The insult was thrown out with a peculiarly reckless air; it astounded the hearer, who sat for an instant with staring eyes and lips apart; then the blood rushed to his cheeks.

"If I hadn't just about twice your muscle, my lad," he answered angrily, "I'd make you repent that, and be more careful with your tongue in future. Now, mind what you say! We've a quiet quarter of an hour before us, and I might alter my mind."

The young man laughed contemptuously. He was tall, but slightly built, and had delicate hands.

"So you've turned out a blackguard, have you?" pursued his companion, whose name was Dengate. "I heard something about that."

"From whom?"

"You drink, I am told. I suppose that's your condition now."

"Well, no; not just now," answered Hilliard. He spoke the language of an educated man, but with a trace of the Midland accent. Dengate's speech had less refinement.

"What do you mean by your insulting talk, then? I spoke to you civilly."

"And I answered as I thought fit."

The respectable citizen sat with his hands on his knees, and scrutinised the other's sallow features.

"You've been drinking, I can see. I had something to say to you, but I'd better leave it for another time."

Hilliard flashed a look of scorn, and said sternly—

"I am as sober as you are."

"Then just give me civil answers to civil questions."

"Questions? What right have you to question me?"

"It's for your own advantage. You called me scoundrel. What did you mean by that?"

"That's the name I give to fellows who go bankrupt to get rid of their debts."

"Is it!" said Dengate, with a superior smile. "That only shows how little you know of the world, my lad. You got it from your father, I daresay; he had a rough way of talking."

"A disagreeable habit of telling the truth."

"I know all about it. Your father wasn't a man of business, and couldn't see things from a business point of view. Now, what I just want to say to you is this: there's all the difference in the world between commercial failure and rascality. If you go down to Liverpool, and ask men of credit for their opinion about Charles Edward Dengate, you'll have a lesson that would profit you. I can see you're one of the young chaps who think a precious deal of themselves; I'm often coming across them nowadays, and I generally give them a piece of my mind."

Hilliard smiled.

"If you gave them the whole, it would be no great generosity."

"Eh? Yes, I see you've had a glass or two, and it makes you witty. But wait a bit I was devilish near thrashing you a few minutes ago; but I sha'n't do it, say what you like. I don't like vulgar rows."

"No more do I," remarked Hilliard; "and I haven't fought since I was a boy. But for your own satisfaction, I can tell you it's a wise resolve not to interfere with me. The temptation to rid the world of one such man as you might prove too strong."

There was a force of meaning in these words, quietly as they were uttered, which impressed the listener.

"You'll come to a bad end, my lad."

"Hardly. It's unlikely that I shall ever be rich."

"Oh! you're one of that sort, are you? I've come across Socialistic fellows. But look here. I'm talking civilly, and I say again it's for your advantage. I had a respect for your father, and I liked your brother—I'm sorry to hear he's dead."

"Please keep your sorrow to yourself."

"All right, all right! I understand you're a draughtsman at Kenn and Bodditch's?"

"I daresay you are capable of understanding that."

Hilliard planted his elbow in the window of the carriage and propped his cheek on his hand.

"Yes; and a few other things," rejoined the well-dressed man. "How to make money, for instance.—Well, haven't you any insult ready?"

The other looked out at a row of flaring chimneys, which the train was rushing past: he kept silence.

"Go down to Liverpool," pursued Dengate, "and make inquiries about me. You'll find I have as good a reputation as any man living."

He laboured this point. It was evident that he seriously desired to establish his probity and importance in the young man's eyes. Nor did anything in his look or speech conflict with such claims. He had hard, but not disagreeable features, and gave proof of an easy temper.

"Paying one's debts," said Hilliard, "is fatal to reputation."

"You use words you don't understand. There's no such thing as a debt, except what's recognised by the laws."

"I shouldn't wonder if you think of going into Parliament. You are just the man to make laws."

"Well, who knows? What I want you to understand is, that if your father were alive at this moment, I shouldn't admit that he had claim upon me for one penny."

"It was because I understood it already that I called you a scoundrel."

"Now be careful, my lad," exclaimed Dengate, as again he winced under the epithet. "My temper may get the better of me, and I should be sorry for it. I got into this carriage with you (of course I had a first-class ticket) because I wanted to form an opinion of your character. I've been told you drink, and I see that you do, and I'm sorry for it. You'll be losing your place before long, and you'll go down. Now look here; you've called me foul names, and you've done your best to rile me. Now I'm going to make you ashamed of yourself."

Hilliard fixed the speaker with his scornful eyes; the last words had moved him to curiosity.

"I can excuse a good deal in a man with an empty pocket," pursued the other. "I've been there myself; I know how it makes you feel—how much do you earn, by the bye?"

"Mind you own business."

"All right. I suppose it's about two pounds a week. Would you like to know what *my* in come is? Well, something like two pounds an hour, reckoning eight hours as the working day. There's a difference, isn't there? It comes of minding my business, you see. You'll never make anything like it; you find it easier to abuse people who work than to work yourself. Now if you go down to Liverpool, and ask how I got to my present position, you'll find it's the result of hard and honest work. Understand that: honest work."

"And forgetting to pay your debts," threw in the young man.

"It's eight years since I owed any man a penny. The people I *did* owe money to were sensible men of business—all except your father, and he never could see things in the right light. I went through the bankruptcy court, and I made arrangements that satisfied my creditors. I should have satisfied your father too, only he died."

"You paid tuppence ha'penny in the pound."

"No, it was five shillings, and my creditors—sensible men of business—were satisfied. Now look here. I owed your father four hundred and thirty-six pounds, but he didn't rank as an ordinary creditor, and if I had paid him after my bankruptcy it would have been just because I felt a respect for him—not because he had any legal claim. I *meant* to pay him—understand that."

Hilliard smiled. Just then a block signal caused the train to slacken speed. Darkness had fallen, and lights glimmered from some cottages by the line.

"You don't believe me," added Dengate.

"I don't."

The prosperous man bit his lower lip, and sat gazing at the lamp in the carriage. The train came to a standstill; there was no sound but the throbbing of the engine.

"Well, listen to me," Dengate resumed. "You're turning out badly, and any money you get you're pretty sure to make a bad use of. But"—he assumed an air of great solemnity—"all the same—now listen–"

"I'm listening."

"Just to show you the kind of a man I am, and to make you feel ashamed of yourself, I'm going to pay you the money."

For a few seconds there was unbroken stillness. The men gazed at each other, Dengate superbly triumphant, Hilliard incredulous but betraying excitement.

"I'm going to pay you four hundred and thirty-six pounds," Dengate repeated. "No less and no more. It isn't a legal debt, so I shall pay no interest. But go with me when we get to Birmingham, and you shall have my cheque for four hundred and thirty-six pounds."

The train began to move on. Hilliard had uncrossed his legs, and sat bending forward, his eyes on vacancy.

"Does that alter your opinion of me?" asked the other.

"I sha'n't believe it till I have cashed the cheque."

"You're one of those young fellows who think so much of themselves they've no good opinion to spare for anyone else. And what's more, I've still half a mind to give you a good thrashing before I give you the cheque. There's just about time, and I shouldn't wonder if it did you good. You want some of the conceit taken out of you, my lad."

Hilliard seemed not to hear this. Again he fixed his eyes on the other's countenance.

"Do you say you are going to pay me four hundred pounds?" he asked slowly.

"Four hundred and thirty-six. You'll go to the devil with it, but that's no business of mine."

"There's just one thing I must tell you. If this is a joke, keep out of my way after you've played it out, that's all."

"It isn't a joke. And one thing I have to tell *you*. I reserve to myself the right of thrashing you, if I feel in the humour for it."

Hilliard gave a laugh, then threw himself back into the corner, and did not speak again until the train pulled up at New Street station.

CHAPTER II

An hour later he was at Old Square, waiting for the tram to Aston. Huge steam-driven vehicles came and went, whirling about the open space with monitory bell-clang. Amid a press of homeward-going workfolk, Hilliard clambered to a place on the top and lit his pipe. He did not look the same man who had waited gloomily at Dudley Port; his eyes gleamed with life; answering a remark addressed to him by a neighbour on the car, he spoke jovially.

No rain was falling, but the streets shone wet and muddy under lurid lamp-lights. Just above the house-tops appeared the full moon, a reddish disk, blurred athwart floating vapour. The car drove northward, speedily passing from the region of main streets and great edifices into a squalid district of factories and workshops and crowded by-ways. At Aston Church the young man alighted, and walked rapidly for five minutes, till he reached a row of small modern houses. Socially they represented a step or two upwards in the gradation which, at Birmingham, begins with the numbered court and culminates in the mansions of Edgbaston.

He knocked at a door, and was answered by a girl, who nodded recognition.

"Mrs. Hilliard in? Just tell her I'm here."

There was a natural abruptness in his voice, but it had a kindly note, and a pleasant smile accompanied it. After a brief delay he received permission to go upstairs, where the door of a sitting-room stood open. Within was a young woman, slight, pale, and pretty, who showed something of embarrassment, though her face made him welcome.

"I expected you sooner."

"Business kept me back. Well, little girl?"

The table was spread for tea, and at one end of it, on a high chair, sat a child of four years old. Hilliard kissed her, and stroked her curly hair, and talked with playful affection. This little girl was his niece, the child of his elder brother, who had died three years ago. The poorly furnished room and her own attire proved that Mrs. Hilliard had but narrow resources in her widowhood. Nor did she appear a woman of much courage; tears had thinned her cheeks, and her delicate hands had suffered noticeably from unwonted household work.

Hilliard remarked something unusual in her behaviour this evening. She was restless, and kept regarding him askance, as if in apprehension. A letter from her, in which she merely said she wished to speak to him, had summoned him hither from Dudley. As a rule, they saw each other but once a month.

"No bad news, I hope!" he remarked aside to her, as he took his place at the table.

"Oh, no. I'll tell you afterwards."

Very soon after the meal Mrs. Hilliard took the child away and put her to bed. During her absence the visitor sat brooding, a peculiar half-smile on his face. She came back, drew a chair up to the fire, but did not sit down.

"Well, what is it?" asked her brother-in-law, much as he might have spoken to the little girl.

"I have something very serious to talk about, Maurice."

"Have you? All right; go ahead."

"I—I am so very much afraid I shall offend you."

The young man laughed.

"Not very likely. I can take a good deal from you."

She stood with her hands on the back of the chair, and as he looked at her, Hilliard saw her pale cheeks grow warm.

"It'll seem very strange to you, Maurice."

"Nothing will seem strange after an adventure I've had this afternoon. You shall hear about it presently."

"Tell me your story first."

"That's like a woman. All right, I'll tell you. I met that scoundrel Dengate, and—he's paid me the money he owed my father."

"He has *paid* it? Oh! really?"

"See, here's a cheque, and I think it likely I can turn it into cash. The blackguard has been doing well at Liverpool. I'm not quite sure that I understand the reptile, but he seems to have given me this because I abused him. I hurt his vanity, and he couldn't resist the temptation to astonish me. He thinks I shall go about proclaiming him a noble fellow. Four hundred and thirty-six pounds; there it is."

He tossed the piece of paper into the air with boyish glee, and only just caught it as it was fluttering into the fire.

"Oh, be careful!" cried Mrs. Hilliard.

"I told him he was a scoundrel, and he began by threatening to thrash me. I'm very glad he didn't try. It was in the train, and I know very well I should have strangled him. It would have been awkward, you know."

"Oh, Maurice, how *can* you–?"

"Well, here's the money; and half of it is yours."

"Mine? Oh, no! After all you have given me. Besides, I sha'n't want it."

"How's that?"

Their eyes mete Hilliard again saw the flush in her cheeks, and began to guess its explanation. He looked puzzled, interested.

"Do I know him?" was his next inquiry.

"Should you think it very wrong of me?" She moved aside from the line of his gaze. "I couldn't imagine how you would take it."

"It all depends. Who is the man?"

Still shrinking towards a position where Hilliard could not easily observe her, the young widow told her story. She had consented to marry a man of whom her brother-in-law knew little but the name, one Ezra Marr; he was turned forty, a widower without children, and belonged to a class of small employers of labour known in Birmingham as "little masters." The contrast between such a man and Maurice Hilliard's brother was sufficiently pronounced; but the widow nervously did her best to show Ezra Marr in a favourable light.

"And then," she added after a pause, while Hilliard was reflecting, "I couldn't go on being a burden on you. How very few men would have done what you have–"

"Stop a minute. Is *that* the real reason? If so–"

Hurriedly she interposed.

"That was only one of the reasons—only one."

Hilliard knew very well that her marriage had not been entirely successful; it seemed to him very probable that with a husband of the artisan class, a vigorous and go-ahead fellow, she would be better mated than in the former instance. He felt sorry for his little niece, but there again sentiment doubtless conflicted with common-sense. A few more questions, and it became clear to him that he had no ground of resistance.

"Very well. Most likely you are doing a wise thing. And half this money is yours; you'll find it useful."

The discussion of this point was interrupted by a tap at the door. Mrs. Hilliard, after leaving the room for a moment, returned with rosy countenance.

"He is here," she murmured. "I thought I should like you to meet him this evening. Do you mind?"

Mr. Marr entered; a favourable specimen of his kind; strong, comely, frank of look and speech. Hilliard marvelled somewhat at his choice of the frail and timid little widow, and hoped upon marriage

would follow no repentance. A friendly conversation between the two men confirmed them in mutual good opinion. At length Mrs. Hilliard spoke of the offer of money made by her brother-in-law.

"I don't feel I've any right to it," she said, after explaining the circumstances. "You know what Maurice has done for me. I've always felt I was robbing him–"

"I wanted to say something about that," put in the bass-voiced Ezra. "I want to tell you, Mr. Hilliard, that you're a man I'm proud to know, and proud to shake hands with. And if my view goes for anything, Emily won't take a penny of what you're offering her. I should think it wrong and mean. It is about time—that's my way of thinking—that you looked after your own interests. Emily has no claim to a share in this money, and what's more, I don't wish her to take it."

"Very well," said Hilliard. "I tell you what we'll do. A couple of hundred pounds shall be put aside for the little girl. You can't make any objection to that."

The mother glanced doubtfully at her future husband, but Marr again spoke with emphasis.

"Yes, I do object. If you don't mind me saying it, I'm quite able to look after the little girl; and the fact is, I want her to grow up looking to me as her father, and getting all she has from me only. Of course, I mean nothing but what's friendly: but there it is; I'd rather Winnie didn't have the money."

This man was in the habit of speaking his mind; Hilliard understood that any insistence would only disturb the harmony of the occasion. He waved a hand, smiled good-naturedly, and said no more.

About nine o'clock he left the house and walked to Aston Church. While he stood there, waiting for the tram, a voice fell upon his ear that caused him to look round. Crouched by the entrance to the churchyard was a beggar in filthy rags, his face hideously bandaged, before him on the pavement a little heap of matchboxes; this creature kept uttering a meaningless sing-song, either idiot jabber, or calculated to excite attention and pity; it sounded something like "A-pah-pahky; pah-pahky; pah"; repeated a score of times, and resumed after a pause. Hilliard gazed and listened, then placed a copper in the wretch's extended palm, and turned away muttering, "What a cursed world!"

He was again on the tram-car before he observed that the full moon, risen into a sky now clear of grosser vapours, gleamed brilliant silver above the mean lights of earth. And round about it, in so vast a circumference that it was only detected by the wandering eye, spread a softly radiant halo. This vision did not long occupy his thoughts, but at intervals he again looked upward, to dream for a moment on the silvery splendour and on that wide halo dim-glimmering athwart the track of stars.

CHAPTER III

Instead of making for the railway station, to take a train back to Dudley, he crossed from the northern to the southern extremity of the town, and by ten o'clock was in one of the streets which lead out of Moseley Road. Here, at a house such as lodges young men in business, he made inquiry for "Mr. Narramore," and was forthwith admitted.

Robert Narramore, a long-stemmed pipe at his lips, sat by the fireside; on the table lay the materials of a satisfactory supper—a cold fowl, a ham, a Stilton cheese, and a bottle of wine.

"Hollo! You?" he exclaimed, without rising. "I was going to write to you; thanks for saving me the trouble. Have something to eat?"

"Yes, and to drink likewise."

"Do you mind ringing the bell? I believe there's a bottle of Burgundy left. If not, plenty of Bass."

He stretched forth a languid hand, smiling amiably. Narramore was the image of luxurious indolence; he had pleasant features, dark hair inclined to curliness, a well-built frame set off by good tailoring. His income from the commercial house in which he held a post of responsibility would have permitted him to occupy better quarters than these; but here he had lived for ten years, and he preferred a few inconveniences to the trouble of moving. Trouble of any kind was Robert's bugbear. His progress up the commercial ladder seemed due rather to the luck which favours amiable and good-looking young fellows than to any special ability or effort of his own. The very sound of his voice had a drowsiness which soothed—if it did not irritate—the listener.

"Tell them to lay out the truckle-bed," said Hilliard, when he had pulled the bell. "I shall stay here to-night."

"Good!"

Their talk was merely interjectional, until the visitor had begun to appease his hunger and had drawn the cork of a second bottle of bitter ale.

"This is a great day," Hilliard then exclaimed. "I left Dudley this afternoon feeling ready to cut my throat. Now I'm a free man, with the world before me."

"How's that?"

"Emily's going to take a second husband—that's one thing."

"Heaven be praised! Better than one could have looked for."

Hilliard related the circumstances. Then he drew from his pocket an oblong slip of paper, and held it out.

"Dengate?" cried his friend. "How the deuce did you get hold of this?"

Explanation followed. They debated Dengate's character and motives.

"I can understand it," said Narramore. "When I was a boy of twelve I once cheated an apple-woman out of three-halfpence. At the age of sixteen I encountered the old woman again, and felt immense satisfaction in giving her a shilling. But then, you see, I had done with petty cheating; I wished to clear my conscience, and look my fellow-woman in the face."

"That's it, no doubt. He seems to have got some sort of position in Liverpool society, and he didn't like the thought that there was a poor devil at Dudley who went about calling him a scoundrel. By-the-bye, someone told him that I had taken to liquor, and was on my way to destruction generally. I don't know who it could be."

"Oh, we all have candid friends that talk about us.

"It's true I have been drunk now and then of late. There's much to be said for getting drunk."

"Much," assented Narramore, philosophically.

Hilliard went on with his supper; his friend puffed tobacco, and idly regarded the cheque he was still holding.

"And what are you going to do?" he asked at length.

There came no reply, and several minutes passed in silence. Then Hilliard rose from the table, paced the floor once or twice, selected a cigar from a box that caught his eye, and, in cutting off the end, observed quietly—

"I'm going to live."

"Wait a minute. We'll have the table cleared, and a kettle on the fire."

While the servant was busy, Hilliard stood with an elbow on the mantelpiece, thoughtfully smoking his cigar. At Narramore's request, he mixed two tumblers of whisky toddy, then took a draught from his own, and returned to his former position.

"Can't you sit down?" said Narramore.

"No, I can't."

"What a fellow you are! With nerves like yours, I should have been in my grave years ago. You're going to live, eh?"

"Going to be a machine no longer. Can I call myself a man? There's precious little difference between a fellow like me and the damned grinding mechanism that I spend my days in drawing—that roars all day in my ears and deafens me. I'll put an end to that. Here's four hundred pounds. It shall mean four hundred pounds'-worth of life. While this money lasts, I'll feel that I'm a human being."

"Something to be said for that," commented the listener, in his tone of drowsy impartiality.

"I offered Emily half of it. She didn't want to take it, and the man Marr wouldn't let her. I offered to lay it aside for the child, but Marr wouldn't have that either, It's fairly mine."

"Undoubtedly."

"Think! The first time in my life that I've had money on which no one else had a claim. When the poor old father died, Will and I had to go shares in keeping up the home. Our sister couldn't earn anything; she had her work set in attending to her mother. When mother died, and Marian married, it looked as if I had only myself to look after: then came Will's death, and half my income went to keep his wife and child from the workhouse. You know very well I've never grudged it. It's my faith that we do what we do because anything else would be less agreeable. It was more to my liking to live on a pound a week than to see Emily and the little lass suffer want. I've no right to any thanks or praise for it. But the change has come none too soon. There'd have been a paragraph in the Dudley paper some rainy morning."

"Yes, I was rather afraid of that," said Narramore musingly.

He let a minute elapse, whilst his friend paced the room; then added in the same voice:

"We're in luck at the same tune. My uncle Sol was found dead this morning."

"Do you come in for much?"

"We don't know what he's left, but I'm down for a substantial fraction in a will he made three years ago. Nobody knew it, but he's been stark mad for the last six months. He took a bed-room out Bordesley way, in a false name, and stored it with a ton or two of tinned meats and vegetables. There the landlady found him lying dead this morning; she learnt who he was from the papers in his pocket. It's come out that he had made friends with some old boozer of that neighbourhood; he told him that England was on the point of a grand financial smash, and that half the population would die of hunger. To secure himself, he began to lay in the stock of tinned provisions. One can't help laughing, poor old chap! That's the result, you see, of a life spent in sweating for money. As a young man he had hard times, and when his invention succeeded, it put him off balance a bit. I've often thought he had a crazy look in his eye. He may have thrown away a lot of his money in mad tricks: who knows?"

"That's the end the human race will come to," said Hilliard. "It'll be driven mad and killed off by machinery. Before long there'll be machines for washing and dressing people—machines for feeding them—machines for–"

His wrathful imagination led him to grotesque ideas which ended in laughter.

"Well, I have a year or two before me. I'll know what enjoyment means. And afterwards–"

"Yes; what afterwards?"

"I don't know. I may choose to come back; I may prefer to make an end. Impossible to foresee my state of mind after living humanly for a year or two. And what shall *you* do if you come in for a lot of money?"

"It's not likely to be more than a few thousands," replied Narramore. "And the chances are I shall go on in the old way. What's the good of a few thousands? I haven't the energy to go off and enjoy myself in your fashion. One of these days I may think of getting married, and marriage, you know, is devilish expensive. I should like to have three or four thousand a year; you can't start housekeeping on less, if you're not to be bored to death with worries. Perhaps I may get a partnership in our house. I began life in the brass bedstead line, and I may as well stick to brass bedsteads to the end the demand isn't likely to fall off. Please fill my glass again."

Hilliard, the while, had tossed off his second tumbler. He began to talk at random.

"I shall go to London first of all. I may go abroad. Reckon a pound a day. Three hundred and —how many days are there in a year? Three hundred and sixty-five. That doesn't allow me two years. I want two years of life. Half a sovereign a day, then. One can do a good deal with half a sovereign a day—don't you think?"

"Not very much, if you're particular about your wine."

"Wine doesn't matter. Honest ale and Scotch whisky will serve well enough. Understand me; I'm not going in for debauchery, and I'm not going to play the third-rate swell. There's no enjoyment in making a beast of oneself, and none for me in strutting about the streets like an animated figure out of a tailor's window. I want to know the taste of free life, human life. I want to forget that I ever sat at a desk, drawing to scale—drawing damned machines. I want to–"

He checked himself. Narramore looked at him with curiosity.

"It's a queer thing to me, Hilliard," he remarked, when his friend turned away, "that you've kept so clear of women. Now, anyone would think you were just the fellow to get hobbled in that way."

"I daresay," muttered the other. "Yes, it *is* a queer thing. I have been saved, I suppose, by the necessity of supporting my relatives. I've seen so much of women suffering from poverty that it has got me into the habit of thinking of them as nothing but burdens to a man."

"As they nearly always are."

"Yes, nearly always."

Narramore pondered with his amiable smile; the other, after a moment's gloom, shook himself free again, and talked with growing exhilaration of the new life that had dawned before him.

CHAPTER IV

Hilliard's lodgings—they were represented by a single room—commanded a prospect which, to him a weariness and a disgust, would have seemed impressive enough to eyes beholding it for the first time. On the afternoon of his last day at Dudley he stood by the window and looked forth, congratulating himself, with a fierceness of emotion which defied misgiving, that he would gaze no more on this scene of his servitude.

The house was one of a row situated on a terrace, above a muddy declivity marked with footpaths. It looked over a wide expanse of waste ground, covered in places with coarse herbage, but for the most part undulating in bare tracts of slag and cinder. Opposite, some quarter of a mile away, rose a lofty dome-shaped hill, tree-clad from base to summit, and rearing above the bare branches of its topmost trees the ruined keep of Dudley Castle. Along the foot of this hill ran the highway which descends from Dudley town—hidden by rising ground on the left—to the low-lying railway-station; there, beyond, the eye traversed a great plain, its limit the blending of earth and sky in lurid cloud. A ray of yellow sunset touched the height and its crowning ruin; at the zenith shone a space of pure pale blue save for these points of relief the picture was colourless and uniformly sombre. Far and near, innumerable chimneys sent forth fumes of various density broad-flung jets of steam, coldly white against the murky distance; wan smoke from lime-kilns, wafted in long trails; reek of solid blackness from pits and forges, voluming aloft and far-floated by the sluggish wind.

Born at Birmingham, the son of a teacher of drawing, Maurice Hilliard had spent most of his life in the Midland capital; to its grammar school he owed an education just sufficiently prolonged to unfit him for the tasks of an underling, yet not thorough enough to qualify him for professional life. In boyhood he aspired to the career of an artist, but his father, himself the wreck of a would-be painter, rudely discouraged this ambition; by way of compromise between the money-earning craft and the beggarly art, he became a mechanical-draughtsman. Of late years he had developed a strong taste for the study of architecture; much of his leisure was given to this subject, and what money he could spare went in the purchase of books and prints which helped him to extend his architectural knowledge. In moods of hope, he had asked himself whether it might not be possible to escape from bondage to the gods of iron, and earn a living in an architect's office. That desire was now forgotten in his passionate resolve to enjoy liberty without regard for the future.

All his possessions, save the articles of clothing which he would carry with him, were packed in a couple of trunks, to be sent on the morrow to Birmingham, where they would lie in the care of his friend Narramore. Kinsfolk he had none whom he cared to remember, except his sister; she lived at Wolverhampton, a wife and mother, in narrow but not oppressive circumstances, and Hilliard had taken leave of her in a short visit some days ago. He would not wait for the wedding of his sister-in-law enough that she was provided for, and that his conscience would always be at ease on her account.

For he was troubled with a conscience—even with one unusually poignant. An anecdote from his twentieth year depicts this feature of the man. He and Narramore were walking one night in a very poor part of Birmingham, and for some reason they chanced to pause by a shop-window—a small window, lighted with one gas-jet, and laid out with a miserable handful of paltry wares; the shop, however, was newly opened, and showed a pathetic attempt at cleanliness and neatness. The friends asked each other how it could possibly benefit anyone to embark in such a business as that, and laughed over the display. While he was laughing, Hilliard became aware of a woman in the doorway, evidently the shopkeeper; she had heard their remarks and looked distressed. Infinitely keener was the pang which Maurice experienced; he could not forgive himself, kept exclaiming how brutally he had behaved, and sank into gloominess. Not very long after, he took Narramore to walk in the same direction; they came again to the little shop, and Hilliard surprised his companion with a triumphant shout. The window was now laid out in a much more promising way, with goods of modest value.

"You remember?" said the young man. "I couldn't rest till I had sent her something. She'll wonder to the end of her life who the money came from. But she's made use of it, poor creature, and it'll bring her luck."

Only the hopeless suppression of natural desires, the conflict through years of ardent youth with sordid circumstances, could have brought him to the pass he had now reached—one of desperation centred in self. Every suggestion of native suavity and prudence was swept away in tumultuous revolt. Another twelvemonth of his slavery and he would have yielded to brutalising influences which rarely relax their hold upon a man. To-day he was prompted by the instinct of flight from peril threatening all that was worthy in him.

Just as the last glimmer of daylight vanished from his room there sounded a knock at the door.

"Your tea's ready, Mr. Hilliard," called a woman's voice.

He took his meals downstairs in the landlady's parlour. Appetite at present lie had none, but the pretence of eating was a way of passing the time; so he descended and sat down at the prepared table.

His wandering eyes fell on one of the ornaments of the room—Mrs. Brewer's album. On first coming to live in the house, two years ago, he had examined this collection of domestic portraits, and subsequently, from time to time, had taken up the album to look at one photograph which interested him. Among an assemblage of types excelling in ugliness of feature and hideousness of costume—types of toil-worn age, of ungainly middle life, and of youth lacking every grace, such as are exhibited in the albums of the poor—there was discoverable one female portrait in which, the longer he gazed at it, Hilliard found an ever-increasing suggestiveness of those qualities he desired in woman. Unclasping the volume, he opened immediately at this familiar face. A month or two had elapsed since he last regarded it, and the countenance took possession of him with the same force as ever.

It was that of a young woman probably past her twentieth year. Unlike her neighbours in the album, she had not bedizened herself before sitting to be portrayed. The abundant hair was parted simply and smoothly from her forehead and tightly plaited behind; she wore a linen collar, and, so far as could be judged from the portion included in the picture, a homely cloth gown. Her features were comely and intelligent, and exhibited a gentleness, almost a meekness of expression which was as far as possible from seeming affected. Whether she smiled or looked sad Hilliard had striven vainly to determine. Her lips appeared to smile, but in so slight a degree that perchance it was merely an effect of natural line; whereas, if the mouth were concealed, a profound melancholy at once ruled the visage.

Who she was Hilliard had no idea. More than once he had been on the point of asking his landlady, but characteristic delicacies restrained him: he feared Mrs. Brewer's mental comment, and dreaded the possible disclosure that he had admired a housemaid or someone of yet lower condition. Nor could he trust his judgment of the face: perhaps it shone only by contrast with so much ugliness on either side of it; perhaps, in the starved condition of his senses, he was ready to find perfection in any female countenance not frankly repulsive.

Yet, no; it was a beautiful face. Beautiful, at all events, in the sense of being deeply interesting, in the strength of its appeal to his emotions. Another man might pass it slightingly; to him it spoke as no other face had ever spoken. It awakened in him a consciousness of profound sympathy.

While he still sat at table his landlady came in. She was a worthy woman of her class, not given to vulgar gossip. Her purpose in entering the room at this moment was to ask Hilliard whether he had a likeness of himself which he could spare her, as a memento.

"I'm sorry I don't possess such a thing," he answered, laughing, surprised that the woman should care enough about him to make the request. "But, talking of photographs, would you tell me who this is?"

The album lay beside him, and a feeling of embarrassment, as he saw Mrs. Brewer's look rest upon it, impelled him to the decisive question.

"That? Oh! that's a friend of my daughter Martha's—Eve Madeley. I'm sure I don't wonder at you noticing her. But it doesn't do her justice; she's better looking than that. It was took better than two years ago—why, just before you came to me, Mr. Hilliard. She was going away—to London."

"Eve Madeley." He repeated the name to himself, and liked it.

"She's had a deal of trouble, poor thing," pursued the landlady. "We was sorry to lose sight of her, but glad, I'm sure, that she went away to do better for herself. She hasn't been home since then, and we don't hear of her coming, and I'm sure nobody can be surprised. But our Martha heard from her not so long ago—why, it was about Christmas-time."

"Is she"—he was about to add, "in service?" but could not voice the words. "She has an engagement in London?"

"Yes; she's a bookkeeper, and earns her pound a week. She was always clever at figures. She got on so well at the school that they wanted her to be a teacher, but she didn't like it. Then Mr. Reckitt, the ironmonger, a friend of her father's, got her to help him with his books and bills of an evening, and when she was seventeen, because his business was growing and he hadn't much of a head for figures himself, he took her regular into the shop. And glad she was to give up the school-teaching, for she could never abear it."

"You say she had a lot of trouble?"

"Ah, that indeed she had! And all her father's fault. But for him, foolish man, they might have been a well-to-do family. But he's had to suffer for it himself, too. He lives up here on the hill, in a poor cottage, and takes wages as a timekeeper at Robinson's when he ought to have been paying men of his own. The drink—that's what it was. When our Martha first knew them they were living at Walsall, and if it hadn't a' been for Eve they'd have had no home at all. Martha got to know her at the Sunday-school; Eve used to teach a class. That's seven or eight years ago; she was only a girl of sixteen, but she had the ways of a grown-up woman, and very lucky it was for them belonging to her. Often and often they've gone for days with nothing but a dry loaf, and the father spending all he got at the public."

"Was it a large family?" Hilliard inquired.

"Well, let me see; at that time there was Eve's two sisters and her brother. Two other children had died, and the mother was dead, too. I don't know much about *her*, but they say she was a very good sort of woman, and it's likely the eldest girl took after her. A quieter and modester girl than Eve there never was. Our Martha lived with her aunt at Walsall—that's my only sister, and she was bed-rid, poor thing, and had Martha to look after her. And when she died, and Martha came back here to us, the Madeley family came here as well, 'cause the father got some kind of work. But he couldn't keep it, and he went off I don't know where, and Eve had the children to keep and look after. We used to do what we could to help her, but it was a cruel life for a poor thing of her age—just when she ought to have been enjoying her life, as you may say."

Hilliard's interest waxed.

"Then," pursued Mrs. Brewer, "the next sister to Eve, Laura her name was, went to Birmingham, into a sweetstuff shop, and that was the last ever seen or heard of her. She wasn't a girl to be depended upon, and I never thought she'd come to good, and whether she's alive or dead there's no knowing. Eve took it to heart, that she did. And not six months after, the other girl had the 'sipelas, and she died, and just as they was carrying her coffin out of the house, who should come up but her father! He'd been away for nearly two years, just sending a little money now and then, and he didn't even know the girl had been ailing. And when he saw the coffin, it took him so that he fell down just like a dead man. You wouldn't have thought it, but there's no knowing what goes on in people's minds. Well, if you'll believe it, from that day he was so changed we didn't seem to know him. He turned quite religious, and went regular to chapel, and has done ever since; and he wouldn't touch a drop of anything, tempt him who might. It was a case of conversion, if ever there was one.

"So there remained only Eve and her brother?"

"Yes. He was a steady lad, Tom Madeley, and never gave his sister much trouble. He earns his thirty shillings a week now. Well, and soon after she saw her father going on all right, Eve left home. I don't wonder at it; it wasn't to be expected she could forgive him for all the harm and sorrows he'd caused. She went to Birmingham for a few months, and then she came back one day to tell us she'd got a place in London. And she brought that photo to give us to remember her by. But, as I said, it isn't good enough."

"Does she seem to be happier now?"

"She hasn't wrote more than once or twice, but she's doing well, and whatever happens she's not the one to complain. It's a blessing she's always had her health. No doubt she's made friends in London, but we haven't heard about them. Martha was hoping she'd have come for Christmas, but it seems she couldn't get away for long enough from business. I'd tell you her address, but I don't remember it. I've never been in London myself. Martha knows it, of course. She might look in to-night, and if she does I'll ask her."

Hilliard allowed this suggestion to pass without remark. He was not quite sure that he desired to know Miss Madeley's address.

But later in the evening, when, after walking for two or three hours about the cold, dark roads, he came in to have his supper and go to bed, Mrs. Brewer smilingly offered him a scrap of paper.

"There," she said, "that's where she's living. London's a big place, and you mayn't be anywhere near, but if you happened to walk that way, we should take it kindly if you'd just leave word that we're always glad to hear from her, and hope she's well."

With a mixture of reluctance and satisfaction the young man took the paper, glanced at it, and folded it to put in his pocket. Mrs. Brewer was regarding him, and he felt that his silence must seem ungracious.

"I will certainly call and leave your message," he said.

Up in his bed-room lie sat for a long time with the paper lying open before him. And when he slept his rest was troubled with dreams of an anxious search about the highways and byways of London for that half-sad, half-smiling face which had so wrought upon his imagination.

Long before daylight he awoke at the sound of bells, and hootings, and whistlings, which summoned the Dudley workfolk to their labour. For the first time in his life he heard these hideous noises with pleasure: they told him that the day of his escape had come. Unable to lie still, he rose at once, and went out into the chill dawn. Thoughts of Eve Madeley no longer possessed him; a glorious sense of freedom excluded every recollection of his past life, and he wandered aimlessly with a song in his heart.

At breakfast, the sight of Mrs. Brewer's album tempted him to look once more at the portrait, but he did not yield.

"Shall we ever see you again, I wonder?" asked his landlady, when the moment arrived for leave-taking.

"If I am ever again in Dudley, I shall come here," he answered kindly.

But on his way to the station he felt a joyful assurance that fate would have no power to draw him back again into this circle of fiery torments.

CHAPTER V

Two months later, on a brilliant morning of May, Hilliard again awoke from troubled dreams, but the sounds about him had no association with bygone miseries. From the courtyard upon which his window looked there came a ringing of gay laughter followed by shrill, merry gossip in a foreign tongue. Somewhere in the neighbourhood a church bell was pealing. Presently footsteps hurried along the corridor, and an impatient voice shouted repeatedly, "Alphonse! Alphonse!"

He was in Paris; had been there for six weeks, and now awoke with a sense of loneliness, a desire to be back among his own people.

In London he had spent only a fortnight. It was not a time that he cared to reflect upon. No sooner had he found himself in the metropolis, alone and free, with a pocketful of money, than a delirium possessed him. Every resolution notwithstanding, he yielded to London's grossest lures. All he could remember, was a succession of extravagances, beneath a sunless sky, with chance companions whose faces he had forgotten five minutes after parting with them. Sovereign after sovereign melted out of his hand; the end of the second week found his capital diminished by some five-and-twenty pounds. In an hour of physical and moral nausea, he packed his travelling-bag, journeyed to Newhaven, and as a sort of penance, crossed the Channel by third-class passage. Arrived in Paris, he felt himself secure, and soon recovered sanity.

Thanks to his studious habits, he was equipped with book-French; now, both for economy's sake and for his mental advantage, he struggled with the spoken language, and so far succeeded as to lodge very cheaply in a rather disreputable hotel, and to eat at restaurants where dinner of several courses cost two francs and a half. His life was irreproachable; he studied the Paris of art and history. But perforce he remained companionless, and solitude had begun to weigh upon him.

This morning, whilst he sat over his bowl of coffee and *petit pain*, a certain recollection haunted him persistently. Yesterday, in turning out his pockets, he had come upon a scrap of paper, whereon was written:

"93, Belmont Street, Chalk Farm Road, London, N.W."

This formula it was which now kept running through his mind, like a refrain which will not be dismissed.

He reproached himself for neglect of his promise to Mrs. Brewer. More than that, he charged himself with foolish disregard of a possibility which might have boundless significance for him. Here, it seemed, was sufficient motive for a return to London. The alternative was to wander on, and see more of foreign countries; a tempting suggestion, but marred by the prospect of loneliness. He would go back among his own people and make friends. Without comradeship, liberty had little savour.

Still travelling with as small expense as might be, he reached London in the forenoon, left his luggage at Victoria Station, and, after a meal, betook himself in the northerly direction. It was a rainy and uncomfortable day, but this did not much affect his spirits; he felt like a man new risen from illness, seemed to have cast off something that had threatened his very existence, and marvelled at the state of mind in which it had been possible for him to inhabit London without turning his steps towards the address of Eve Madeley.

He discovered Belmont Street. It consisted of humble houses, and was dreary enough to look upon. As he sought for No. 93, a sudden nervousness attacked him; he became conscious all at once of the strangeness of his position. At this hour it was unlikely that Eve would be at home an inquiry at the house and the leaving of a verbal message would discharge his obligation; but he proposed more than that. It was his resolve to see Eve herself, to behold the face which, in a picture, had grown so familiar to him. Yet till this moment he had overlooked the difficulties of the enterprise. Could he, on the strength of an acquaintance with Mrs. Brewer, claim the friendly regards of this girl who had never heard his name? If he saw her once, on what pretext could he seek for a second meeting?

Possibly he would not desire it. Eve in her own person might disenchant him.

Meanwhile he had discovered the house, and without further debate he knocked. The door was opened by a woman of ordinary type, slatternly, and with suspicious eye.

"Miss Madeley *did* live here," she said, "but she's been gone a month or more."

"Can you tell me where she is living now?"

After a searching look the woman replied that she could not. In the manner of her kind, she was anxious to dismiss the inquirer and get the door shut. Gravely disappointed, Hilliard felt unable to turn away without a further question.

"Perhaps you know where she is, or was, employed?"

But no information whatever was forthcoming. It very rarely is under such circumstances, for a London landlady, compounded in general of craft and caution, tends naturally to reticence on the score of her former lodgers. If she has parted with them on amicable terms, her instinct is to shield them against the menace presumed in every inquiry; if her mood is one of ill-will, she refuses information lest the departed should reap advantage. And then, in the great majority of cases she has really no information to give.

The door closed with that severity of exclusion in which London doors excel, and Hilliard turned despondently away. He was just consoling himself with the thought that Eve would probably, before long, communicate her new address to the friends at Dudley, and by that means he might hear of it, when a dirty-faced little girl, who had stood within earshot while he was talking, and who had followed him to the end of the street, approached him with an abrupt inquiry.

"Was you asking for Miss Madeley, Sir?"

"Yes, I was; do you know anything of her?"

"My mother did washing for her, and when she moved I had to take some things of hers to the new address."

"Then you remember it?"

"It's a goodish way from 'ere, Sir. Shall I go with you?"

Hilliard understood. Like the good Samaritan of old, he took out twopence. The face of the dirty little girl brightened wonderfully.

"Tell me the address; that will be enough."

"Do you know Gower Place, Sir?"

"Somewhere near Gower Street, I suppose?"

His supposition was confirmed, and he learnt the number of the house to which Miss Madeley had transferred herself. In that direction he at once bent his steps.

Gower Place is in the close neighbourhood of Euston Road; Hilliard remembered that he had passed the end of it on his first arrival in London, when he set forth from Euston Station to look for a lodging. It was a mere chance that he had not turned into this very street, instead of going further. Several windows displayed lodging-cards. On the whole, it looked a better locality than Belmont Street. Eve's removal hither might signify an improvement of circumstances.

The house which he sought had a clean doorstep and unusually bright windows. His knock was answered quickly, and by a young, sprightly woman, who smiled upon him.

"I believe Miss Madeley lives here?"

"Yes, she does."

"She is not at home just now?"

"No. She went out after breakfast, and I'm sure I can't say when she'll be back."

Hilliard felt a slight wonder at this uncertainty. The young woman, observing his expression, added with vivacious friendliness:

"Do you want to see her on business?"

"No; a private matter."

This occasioned a smirk.

"Well, she hasn't any regular hours at present. Sometimes she comes to dinner, sometimes she doesn't. Sometimes she comes to tea, but just as often she isn't 'ome till late. P'r'aps you'd like to leave your name?"

"I think I'll call again."

"Did you expect to find her at 'ome now?" asked the young woman, whose curiosity grew more eager as she watched Hilliard's countenance.

"Perhaps," he replied, neglecting the question, "I should find her here to-morrow morning?"

"Well, I can say as someone's going to call, you know."

"Please do so."

Therewith he turned away, anxious to escape a volley of interrogation for which the landlady's tongue was primed.

He walked into Gower Street, and pondered the awkward interview that now lay before him. On his calling to-morrow, Miss Madeley would doubtless come to speak with him at the door; even supposing she had a parlour at her disposal, she was not likely to invite a perfect stranger into the house. How could he make her acquaintance on the doorstep? To be sure, he brought a message, but this commission had been so long delayed that he felt some shame about discharging it. In any case, his delivery of the message would sound odd; there would be embarrassment on both sides.

Why was Eve so uncertain in her comings and goings? Necessity of business, perhaps. Yet he had expected quite the opposite state of things. From Mrs. Brewer's description of the girl's character, he had imagined her leading a life of clockwork regularity. The point was very trivial, but it somehow caused a disturbance of his thoughts, which tended to misgiving.

In the meantime he had to find quarters for himself. Why not seek them in Gower Place?

After ten minutes' sauntering, he retraced his steps, and walked down the side of the street opposite to that on which Eve's lodgings were situated. Nearly over against that particular house was a window with a card. Carelessly he approached the door, and carelessly asked to see the rooms that were to let. They were comfortless, but would suit his purpose for a time. He engaged a sitting-room on the ground-floor, and a bed-room above, and went to fetch his luggage from Victoria Station.

On the steamer last night he had not slept, and now that he was once more housed, an overpowering fatigue constrained him to lie down and close his eyes. Almost immediately lie fell into oblivion, and lay sleeping on the cranky sofa, until the entrance of a girl with tea-things awakened him.

From his parlour window he could very well observe the houses opposite without fear of drawing attention from any one on that side; and so it happened that, without deliberate purpose of espial, he watched the door of Eve Madeley's residence for a long time; till, in fact, he grew weary of the occupation. No one had entered; no one had come forth. At half-past seven he took his hat and left the house.

Scarcely had he closed the door behind him when he became aware that a lightly tripping and rather showily dressed girl, who was coming down the other side of the way, had turned off the pavement and was plying the knocker at the house which interested him. He gazed eagerly. Impossible that a young person of that garb and deportment should be Eve Madeley. Her face was hidden from him, and at this distance he could not have recognised the features, even presuming that his familiarity with the portrait, taken more than two years ago, would enable him to identify Eve when he saw her. The door opened; the girl was admitted. Afraid of being noticed, he walked on.

The distance to the head of the street was not more than thirty yards; there lay Gower Street, on the right hand the Metropolitan station, to the left a long perspective southwards. Delaying in doubt as to his course, Hilliard glanced back. From the house which attracted his eyes he saw come forth the girl who had recently entered, and close following her another young woman. They began to walk sharply towards where he stood.

He did not stir, and the couple drew so near that he could observe their faces. In the second girl he recognised—or believed that he recognised—Eve Madeley.

She wore a costume in decidedly better taste than her companion's; for all that, her appearance struck him as quite unlike that he would have expected Eve Madeley to present. He had thought of her as very plainly, perhaps poorly, clad; but this attire was ornate, and looked rather expensive; it might be in the mode of the new season. In figure, she was altogether a more imposing young woman than he had pictured to himself. His pulses were sensibly quickened as he looked at her.

The examination was of necessity hurried. Walking at a sharp pace, they rapidly came close to where he stood. He drew aside to let them pass, and at that moment caught a few words of their conversation.

"I told you we should be late," exclaimed the unknown girl, in friendly remonstrance.

"What does it matter?" replied Eve—if Eve it were. "I hate standing at the doors. We shall find seats somewhere."

Her gay, careless tones astonished the listener. Involuntarily he began to follow; but at the edge of the pavement in Gower Street they stopped, and by advancing another step or two he distinctly overheard the continuation of their talk.

"The 'bus will take a long time."

"Bother the 'bus!" This was Eve Madeley again—if Eve it could really be. "We'll have a cab. Look, there's a crawler in Euston Road. I've stopped him!"

"I say, Eve, you *are* going it!"

This exclamation from the other girl was the last sentence that fell on Hilliard's ear. They both tripped off towards the cab which Eve's gesture had summoned. He saw them jump in and drive away.

"I say, Eve, you *are* going it!" Why, there his doubt was settled; the name confirmed him in his identification. But he stood motionless with astonishment.

They were going to a theatre, of course. And Eve spoke as if money were of no consequence to her. She had the look, the tones, of one bent on enjoying herself, of one who habitually pursued pleasure, and that in its most urban forms.

Her companion had a voice of thinner quality, of higher note, which proclaimed a subordinate character. It sounded, moreover, with the London accent, while Eve's struck a more familiar note to the man of the Midlands. Eve seemed to be the elder of the two; it could not be thought for a moment that her will was guided by that of the more trivial girl.

Eve Madeley—the meek, the melancholy, the long-suffering, the pious—what did it all mean?

Utterly bewildered, the young man walked on without thought of direction, and rambled dreamily about the streets for an hour or two. He could not make up his mind whether or not to fulfil the promise of calling to see Miss Madeley to-morrow morning. At one moment he regretted having taken lodgings in Gower Place; at another he determined to make use of his advantage, and play the spy upon Eve's movements without scruple. The interest she had hitherto excited in him was faint indeed compared with emotions such as this first glimpse of her had kindled and fanned. A sense of peril warned him to hold aloof; tumult of his senses rendered the warning useless.

At eleven o'clock he was sitting by his bedroom window, in darkness, watching the house across the way.

CHAPTER VI

It was just upon midnight when Eve returned. She came at a quick walk, and alone; the light of the street-lamps showed her figure distinctly enough to leave the watcher in no doubt. A latchkey admitted her to the house. Presently there appeared a light at an upper window, and a shadow kept moving across the blind. When the light was extinguished Hilliard went to bed, but that night he slept little.

The next morning passed in restless debate with himself. He did not cross the way to call upon Eve: the thought of speaking with her on the doorstep of a lodging-house proved intolerable. All day long he kept his post of observation. Other persons he saw leave and enter the house, but Miss Madeley did not come forth. That he could have missed her seemed impossible, for even while eating his meals he remained by the window. Perchance she had left home very early in the morning, but it was unlikely.

Through the afternoon it rained: the gloomy sky intensified his fatigue and despondence. About six o'clock, exhausted in mind and body, he had allowed his attention to stray, when the sudden clang of a street organ startled him. His eyes turned in the wonted direction—and instantly he sprang up. To clutch his hat, to rush from the room and from the house, occupied but a moment. There, walking away on the other side, was Eve. Her fawn-coloured mantle, her hat with the yellow flowers, were the same as yesterday. The rain had ceased; in the western sky appeared promise of a fair evening.

Hilliard pursued her in a parallel line. At the top of the street she crossed towards him; he let her pass by and followed closely. She entered the booking-office of Gower Street station; he drew as near as possible and heard her ask for a ticket—

"Healtheries; third return."

The slang term for the Health Exhibition at Kensington was familiar to him from the English papers he had seen in Paris. As soon as Eve had passed on he obtained a like ticket and hastened down the steps in pursuit. A minute or two and he was sitting face to face with her in the railway carriage.

He could now observe her at his leisure and compare her features with those represented in the photograph. Mrs. Brewer had said truly that the portrait did not do her justice; he saw the resemblance, yet what a difference between the face he had brooded over at Dudley and that which lived before him! A difference not to be accounted for by mere lapse of time. She could not, he thought, have changed greatly in the last two or three years, for her age at the time of sitting for the photograph must have been at least one-and-twenty. She did not look older than he had expected: it was still a young face, but—and herein he found its strangeness—that of a woman who views life without embarrassment, without anxiety. She sat at her ease, casting careless glances this way and that. When her eyes fell upon him he winced, yet she paid no more heed to him than to the other passengers.

Presently she became lost in thought; her eyes fell. Ah! now the resemblance to the portrait came out more distinctly. Her lips shaped themselves to that expression which he knew so well, the half-smile telling of habitual sadness.

His fixed gaze recalled her to herself, and immediately the countenance changed beyond recognition. Her eyes wandered past him with a look of cold if not defiant reserve; the lips lost all their sweetness. He was chilled with vague distrust, and once again asked himself whether this could be the Eve Madeley whose history he had heard.

Again she fell into abstraction, and some trouble seemed to grow upon her mind. It was difficult now to identify her with the girl who had talked and laughed so gaily last evening. Towards the end of the journey a nervous restlessness began to appear in her looks and movements. Hilliard felt that he had annoyed her by the persistency of his observation, and tried to keep his eyes averted. But no; the disturbance she betrayed was due to some other cause; probably she paid not the least regard to him.

At Earl's Court she alighted hurriedly. By this time Hilliard had begun to feel shame in the ignoble part he was playing, but choice he had none—the girl drew him irresistibly to follow and watch her. Among the crowd entering the Exhibition he could easily keep her in sight without risk of his espial being detected. That Eve had come to keep an appointment with some acquaintance he felt sure, and at any cost he must discover who the person was.

The event justified him with unexpected suddenness. No sooner had she passed the turnstile than a man stepped forward, saluting her in form. Eve shook hands with him, and they walked on.

Uncontrollable wrath seized on Hilliard and shook him from head to foot. A meeting of this kind was precisely what he had foreseen, and he resented it violently.

Eve's acquaintance had the external attributes of a gentleman. One could not easily imagine him a clerk or a shop-assistant smartened up for the occasion. He was plain of feature, but wore a pleasant, honest look, and his demeanour to the girl showed not only good breeding but unmistakable interest of the warmest kind. His age might perhaps be thirty; he was dressed well, and in all respects conventionally.

In Eve's behaviour there appeared a very noticeable reserve; she rarely turned her face to him while he spoke, and seemed to make only the briefest remarks. Her attention was given to the objects they passed.

Totally unconscious of the scenes through which he was moving, Hilliard tracked the couple for more than an hour. He noticed that the man once took out his watch, and from this trifling incident he sought to derive a hope; perhaps Eve would be quit ere long of the detested companionship. They came at length to where a band was playing, and sat down on chairs; the pursuer succeeded in obtaining a seat behind them, but the clamour of instruments overpowered their voices, or rather the man's voice, for Eve seemed not to speak at all. One moment, when her neighbour's head approached nearer than usual to hers, she drew slightly away.

The music ceased, whereupon Eve's companion again consulted his watch.

"It's a most unfortunate thing." He was audible now. "I can't possibly stay longer."

Eve moved on her chair, as if in readiness to take leave of him, but she did not speak.

"You think it likely you will meet Miss Ringrose?"

Eve answered, but the listener could not catch her words.

"I'm so very sorry. If there had been any–"

The voice sank, and Hilliard could only gather from observance of the man's face that he was excusing himself in fervent tones for the necessity of departure. Then they both rose and walked a few yards together. Finally, with a sense of angry exultation, Hilliard saw them part.

For a little while Eve stood watching the musicians, who were making ready to play a new piece. As soon as the first note sounded she moved slowly, her eyes cast down. With fiercely throbbing heart, thinking and desiring and hoping he knew not what, Hilliard once more followed her. Night had now fallen; the grounds of the Exhibition shone with many-coloured illumination; the throng grew dense. It was both easy and necessary to keep very near to the object of his interest.

There sounded a clinking of plates, cups, and glasses. People were sitting at tables in the open air, supplied with refreshments by the waiters who hurried hither and thither. Eve, after a show of hesitation, took a seat by a little round table which stood apart; her pursuer found a place whence he could keep watch. She gave an order, and presently there was brought to her a glass of wine with a sandwich.

Hilliard called for a bottle of ale: he was consumed with thirst.

"Dare I approach her?" he asked himself. "Is it possible? And, if possible, is it any use?"

The difficulty was to explain his recognition of her. But for that, he might justify himself in addressing her.

She had finished her wine and was looking round. Her glance fell upon him, and for a moment rested. With a courage not his own, Hilliard rose, advanced, and respectfully doffed his hat.

"Miss Madeley–"

The note was half interrogative, but his voice failed before he could add another syllable. Eve drew herself up, rigid in the alarm of female instinct.

"I am a stranger to you," Hilliard managed to say. "But I come from Dudley; I know some of your friends–"

His hurried words fell into coherence. At the name "Dudley" Eve's features relaxed.

"Was it you who called at my lodgings the day before yesterday?"

"I did. Your address was given me by Mrs. Brewer, in whose house I have lived for a long time. She wished me to call and to give you a kind message—to say how glad they would be to hear from you–"

"But you *didn't* leave the message."

The smile put Hilliard at his ease, it was so gentle and friendly.

"I wasn't able to come at the time I mentioned. I should have called to-morrow."

"But how is it that you knew me? I think," she added, without waiting for a reply, "that I have seen you somewhere. But I can't remember where."

"Perhaps in the train this evening?"

"Yes so it was You knew me then?"

"I thought I did, for I happened to come out from my lodgings at the moment you were leaving yours, just opposite, and we walked almost together to Gower Street station. I must explain that I have taken rooms in Gower Place. I didn't like to speak to you in the street; but now that I have again chanced to see you–"

"I still don't understand," said Eve, who was speaking with the most perfect ease of manner. "I am not the only person living in that house. Why should you take it for granted that I was Miss Madeley?"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.