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EDGAR**

THE ANGEL OF
TERROR

Edgar Wallace

The Angel of Terror

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Chapter I

The hush of the court, which had been broken when the foreman of the jury returned their verdict, was intensified as the Judge, with a quick glance over his pince-nez at the tall prisoner, marshalled his papers with the precision and method which old men display in tense moments such as these. He gathered them together, white paper and blue and buff and stacked them in a neat heap on a tiny ledge to the left of his desk. Then he took his pen and wrote a few words on a printed paper before him.

Another breathless pause and he groped beneath the desk and brought out a small square of black silk and carefully laid it over his white wig. Then he spoke:

"James Meredith, you have been convicted after a long and patient trial of the awful crime of wilful murder. With the verdict of the jury I am in complete agreement. There is little doubt, after hearing the evidence of the unfortunate lady to whom you were engaged, and whose evidence you attempted in the most brutal manner to refute, that, instigated by your jealousy, you shot Ferdinand Bulford. The evidence of Miss Briggerland that you had threatened this poor young man, and that you left her presence in a temper, is unshaken. By a terrible coincidence, Mr. Bulford was in the street outside your fiancée's door when you left, and maddened by your insane jealousy, you shot him dead.

"To suggest, as you have through your counsel, that you called at Miss Briggerland's that night to break off your engagement and that the interview was a mild one and unattended by recriminations is to suggest that this lady has deliberately committed perjury in order to swear away your life, and when to that disgraceful charge you produce a motive, namely that by your death or imprisonment Miss Briggerland, who is your cousin, would benefit to a considerable extent, you merely add to your infamy. Nobody who saw the young girl in the box, a pathetic, and if I may say, a beautiful figure, could accept for one moment your fantastic explanation.

"Who killed Ferdinand Bulford? A man without an enemy in the world. That tragedy cannot be explained away. It now only remains for me to pass the sentence which the law imposes. The jury's recommendation to mercy will be forwarded to the proper quarter...."

He then proceeded to pass sentence of death, and the tall man in the dock listened without a muscle of his face moving.

So ended the great Berkeley Street Murder Trial, and when a few days later it was announced that the sentence of death had been commuted to one of penal servitude for life, there were newspapers and people who hinted at mistaken leniency and suggested that James Meredith would have been hanged if he were a poor man instead of being, as he was, the master of vast wealth.

"That's that," said Jack Glover between his teeth, as he came out of court with the eminent King's Counsel who had defended his friend and client, "the little lady wins."

His companion looked sideways at him and smiled.

"Honestly, Glover, do you believe that poor girl could do so dastardly a thing as lie about the man she loves?"

"She loves!" repeated Jack Glover witheringly.

"I think you are prejudiced," said the counsel, shaking his head. "Personally, I believe that Meredith is a lunatic; I am satisfied that all he told us about the interview he had with the girl was born of a diseased imagination. I was terribly impressed when I saw Jean Briggerland in the box. She—by Jove, there is the lady!"

They had reached the entrance of the Court. A big car was standing by the kerb and one of the attendants was holding open the door for a girl dressed in black. They had a glimpse of a pale, sad face of extraordinary beauty, and then she disappeared behind the drawn blinds.

The counsel drew a long sigh.

"Mad!" he said huskily. "He must be mad! If ever I saw a pure soul in a woman's face, it is in hers!"

"You've been in the sun, Sir John—you're getting sentimental," said Jack Glover brutally, and the eminent lawyer choked indignantly.

Jack Glover had a trick of saying rude things to his friends, even when those friends were twenty years his senior, and by every rule of professional etiquette entitled to respectful treatment.

"Really!" said the outraged Sir John. "There are times, Glover, when you are insufferable!"

But by this time Jack Glover was swinging along the Old Bailey, his hands in his pockets, his silk hat on the back of his head.

He found the grey-haired senior member of the firm of Rennett, Glover and Simpson (there had been no Simpson in the firm for ten years) on the point of going home.

Mr. Rennett sat down at the sight of his junior.

"I heard the news by 'phone," he said. "Ellbery says there is no ground for appeal, but I think the recommendation to mercy will save his life—besides it is a *crime passionelle*, and they don't hang for homicidal jealousy. I suppose it was the girl's evidence that turned the trick?"

Jack nodded.

"And she looked like an angel just out of the refrigerator," he said despairingly. "Ellbery did his poor best to shake her, but the old fool is half in love with her—I left him raving about her pure soul and her other celestial etceteras."

Mr. Rennett stroked his iron grey beard.

"She's won," he said, but the other turned on him with a snarl.

"Not yet!" he said almost harshly. "She hasn't won till Jimmy Meredith is dead or—"

"Or—?" repeated his partner significantly. "That 'or' won't come off, Jack. He'll get a life sentence as sure as 'eggs is eggs.' I'd go a long way to help Jimmy; I'd risk my practice and my name."

Jack Glover looked at his partner in astonishment.

"You old sportsman!" he said admiringly. "I didn't know you were so fond of Jimmy?"

Mr. Rennett got up and began pulling on his gloves. He seemed a little uncomfortable at the sensation he had created.

"His father was my first client," he said apologetically. "One of the best fellows that ever lived. He married late in life, that was why he was such a crank over the question of marriage. You might say that old Meredith founded our firm. Your father and Simpson and I were nearly at our last gasp when Meredith gave us his business. That was our turning point. Your father—God rest him—was never tired of talking about it. I wonder he never told you."

"I think he did," said Jack thoughtfully. "And you really would go a long way—Rennett—I mean, to help Jim Meredith?"

"All the way," said old Rennett shortly.

Jack Glover began whistling a long lugubrious tune.

"I'm seeing the old boy to-morrow," he said. "By the way, Rennett, did you see that a fellow had been released from prison to a nursing home for a minor operation the other day? There was a question asked in Parliament about it. Is it usual?"

"It can be arranged," said Rennett. "Why?"

"Do you think in a few months' time we could get Jim Meredith into a nursing home for—say an appendix operation?"

"Has he appendicitis?" asked the other in surprise.

"He can fake it," said Jack calmly. "It's the easiest thing in the world to fake."

Rennett looked at the other under his heavy eyebrows.

"You're thinking of the 'or'?" he challenged, and Jack nodded.

"It can be done—if he's alive," said Rennett after a pause.

"He'll be alive," prophesied his partner, "now the only thing is—where shall I find the girl?"

Chapter II

Lydia Beale gathered up the scraps of paper that littered her table, rolled them into a ball and tossed them into the fire.

There was a knock at the door, and she half turned in her chair to meet with a smile her stout landlady who came in carrying a tray on which stood a large cup of tea and two thick and wholesome slices of bread and jam.

"Finished, Miss Beale?" asked the landlady anxiously.

"For the day, yes," said the girl with a nod, and stood up stretching herself stiffly.

She was slender, a head taller than the dumpy Mrs. Morgan. The dark violet eyes and the delicate spiritual face she owed to her Celtic ancestors, the grace of her movements, no less than the perfect hands that rested on the drawing board, spoke eloquently of breed.

"I'd like to see it, miss, if I may," said Mrs. Morgan, wiping her hands on her apron in anticipation.

Lydia pulled open a drawer of the table and took out a large sheet of Windsor board. She had completed her pencil sketch and Mrs. Morgan gasped appreciatively. It was a picture of a masked man holding a villainous crowd at bay at the point of a pistol.

"That's wonderful, miss," she said in awe. "I suppose those sort of things happen too?"

The girl laughed as she put the drawing away.

"They happen in stories which I illustrate, Mrs. Morgan," she said dryly. "The real brigands of life come in the shape of lawyers' clerks with writs and summonses. It's a relief from those mad fashion plates I draw, anyway. Do you know, Mrs. Morgan, that the sight of a dressmaker's shop window makes me positively ill!"

Mrs. Morgan shook her head sympathetically and Lydia changed the subject.

"Has anybody been this afternoon?" she asked.

"Only the young man from Spadd & Newton," replied the stout woman with a sigh. "I told 'im you was out, but I'm a bad liar."

The girl groaned.

"I wonder if I shall ever get to the end of those debts," she said in despair. "I've enough writs in the drawer to paper the house, Mrs. Morgan."

Three years ago Lydia Beale's father had died and she had lost the best friend and companion that any girl ever had. She knew he was in debt, but had no idea how extensively he was involved. A creditor had seen her the day after the funeral and had made some uncouth reference to the convenience of a death which had automatically cancelled George Beale's obligations. It needed only that to spur the girl to an action which was as foolish as it was generous. She had written to all the people to whom her father owed money and had assumed full responsibility for debts amounting to hundreds of pounds.

It was the Celt in her that drove her to shoulder the burden which she was ill-equipped to carry, but she had never regretted her impetuous act.

There were a few creditors who, realising what had happened, did not bother her, and there were others....

She earned a fairly good salary on the staff of the *Daily Megaphone*, which made a feature of fashion, but she would have had to have been the recipient of a cabinet minister's emoluments to have met the demands which flowed in upon her a month after she had accepted her father's obligations.

"Are you going out to-night, miss?" asked the woman.

Lydia roused herself from her unpleasant thoughts.

"Yes. I'm making some drawings of the dresses in Curfew's new play. I'll be home somewhere around twelve."

Mrs. Morgan was half-way across the room when she turned back.

"One of these days you'll get out of all your troubles, miss, you see if you don't! I'll bet you'll marry a rich young gentleman."

Lydia, sitting on the edge of the table, laughed.

"You'd lose your money, Mrs. Morgan," she said, "rich young gentlemen only marry poor working girls in the kind of stories I illustrate. If I marry it will probably be a very poor young gentleman who will become an incurable invalid and want nursing. And I shall hate him so much that I can't be happy with him, and pity him so much that I can't run away from him."

Mrs. Morgan sniffed her disagreement.

"There are things that happen—" she began.

"Not to me—not miracles, anyway," said Lydia, still smiling, "and I don't know that I want to get married. I've got to pay all these bills first, and by the time they are settled I'll be a grey-haired old lady in a mob cap."

Lydia had finished her tea and was standing somewhat scantily attired in the middle of her bedroom, preparing for her theatre engagement, when Mrs. Morgan returned.

"I forgot to tell you, miss," she said, "there was a gentleman and a lady called."

"A gentleman and a lady? Who were they?"

"I don't know, Miss Beale. I was lying down at the time, and the girl answered the door. I gave her strict orders to say that you were out."

"Did they leave any name?"

"No, miss. They just asked if Miss Beale lived here, and could they see her."

"H'm!" said Lydia with a frown. "I wonder what we owe them!"

She dismissed the matter from her mind, and thought no more of it until she stopped on her way to the theatre to learn from the office by telephone the number of drawings required.

The chief sub-editor answered her.

"And, by the way," he added, "there was an inquiry for you at the office to-day—I found a note of it on my desk when I came in to-night. Some old friends of yours who want to see you. Brand told them you were going to do a show at the Erving Theatre to-night, so you'll probably see them."

"Who are they?" she asked, puzzled.

She had few friends, old or new.

"I haven't the foggiest idea," was the reply.

At the theatre she saw nobody she knew, though she looked round interestedly, nor was she approached in any of the *entr'actes*.

In the row ahead of her, and a little to her right, were two people who regarded her curiously as she entered. The man was about fifty, very dark and bald—the skin of his head was almost copper-coloured, though he was obviously a European, for the eyes which beamed benevolently upon her through powerful spectacles were blue, but so light a blue that by contrast with the mahogany skin of his clean-shaven face, they seemed almost white.

The girl who sat with him was fair, and to Lydia's artistic eye, singularly lovely. Her hair was a mop of fine gold. The colour was natural, Lydia was too sophisticated to make any mistake about that. Her features were regular and flawless. The young artist thought she had never seen so perfect a "cupid" mouth in her life. There was something so freshly, fragrantly innocent about the girl that Lydia's heart went out to her, and she could hardly keep her eyes on the stage. The unknown seemed to take almost as much interest in her, for twice Lydia surprised her backward scrutiny. She found herself wondering who she was. The girl was beautifully dressed, and about her neck was a platinum chain that must have hung to her waist—a chain which was broken every few inches by a big emerald.

It required something of an effort of concentration to bring her mind back to the stage and her work. With a book on her knee she sketched the somewhat bizarre costumes which had aroused a mild public interest in the play, and for the moment forgot her entrancing companion.

She came through the vestibule at the end of the performance, and drew her worn cloak more closely about her slender shoulders, for the night was raw, and a sou'westerly wind blew the big wet snowflakes under the protecting glass awning into the lobby itself. The favoured playgoers minced daintily through the slush to their waiting cars, then taxis came into the procession of waiting vehicles, there was a banging of cab doors, a babble of orders to the scurrying attendants, until something like order was evolved from the chaos.

"Cab, miss?"

Lydia shook her head. An omnibus would take her to Fleet Street, but two had passed, packed with passengers, and she was beginning to despair, when a particularly handsome taxi pulled up at the kerb.

The driver leant over the shining apron which partially protected him from the weather, and shouted:

"Is Miss Beale there?"

The girl started in surprise, taking a step toward the cab.

"I am Miss Beale," she said.

"Your editor has sent me for you," said the man briskly.

The editor of the *Megaphone* had been guilty of many eccentric acts. He had expressed views on her drawing which she shivered to recall. He had aroused her in the middle of the night to sketch dresses at a fancy dress ball, but never before had he done anything so human as to send a taxi for her. Nevertheless, she would not look at the gift cab too closely, and she stepped into the warm interior.

The windows were veiled with the snow and the sleet which had been falling all the time she had been in the theatre. She saw blurred lights flash past, and realised that the taxi was going at a good pace. She rubbed the windows and tried to look out after a while. Then she endeavoured to lower one, but without success. Suddenly she jumped up and tapped furiously at the window to attract the driver's attention. There was no mistaking the fact that they were crossing a bridge and it was not necessary to cross a bridge to reach Fleet Street.

If the driver heard he took no notice. The speed of the car increased. She tapped at the window again furiously. She was not afraid, but she was angry. Presently fear came. It was when she tried to open the door, and found that it was fastened from the outside, that she struck a match to discover that the windows had been screwed tight—the edge of the hole where the screw had gone in was rawly new, and the screw's head was bright and shining.

She had no umbrella—she never carried one to the theatre—and nothing more substantial in the shape of a weapon than a fountain pen. She could smash the windows with her foot. She sat back in the seat, and discovered that it was not so easy an operation as she had thought. She hesitated even to make the attempt; and then the panic sense left her, and she was her own calm self again. She was not being abducted. These things did not happen in the twentieth century, except in sensational books. She frowned. She had said almost the same thing to somebody that day—to Mrs. Morgan, who had hinted at a romantic marriage. Of course, nothing was wrong. The driver had called her by name. Probably the editor wanted to see her at his home, he lived somewhere in South London, she remembered. That would explain everything. And yet her instinct told her that something unusual was happening, that some unpleasant experience was imminent.

She tried to put the thought out of her mind, but it was too vivid, too insistent.

Again she tried the door, and then, conscious of a faint reflected glow on the cloth-lined roof of the cab, she looked backward through the peep-hole. She saw two great motor-car lamps within a few yards of the cab. A car was following, she glimpsed the outline of it as they ran past a street standard.

They were in one of the roads of the outer suburbs. Looking through the window over the driver's shoulder she saw trees on one side of the road, and a long grey fence. It was while she was so looking that the car behind shot suddenly past and ahead, and she saw its tail lights moving away with a pang of hopelessness. Then, before she realised what had happened, the big car ahead slowed

and swung sideways, blocking the road, and the cab came to a jerky stop that flung her against the window. She saw two figures in the dim light of the taxi's head lamps, heard somebody speak, and the door was jerked open.

"Will you step out, Miss Beale," said a pleasant voice, and though her legs seemed queerly weak, she obliged. The second man was standing by the side of the driver. He wore a long raincoat, the collar of which was turned up to the tip of his nose.

"You may go back to your friends and tell them that Miss Beale is in good hands," he was saying. "You may also burn a candle or two before your favourite saint, in thanksgiving that you are alive."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said the driver sulkily. "I'm taking this young lady to her office."

"Since when has the *Daily Megaphone* been published in the ghastly suburbs?" asked the other politely.

He saw the girl, and raised his hat.

"Come along, Miss Beale," he said. "I promise you a more comfortable ride—even if I cannot guarantee that the end will be less startling."

Chapter III

The man who had opened the door was a short, stoutly built person of middle age. He took the girl's arm gently, and without questioning she accompanied him to the car ahead, the man in the raincoat following. No word was spoken, and Lydia was too bewildered to ask questions until the car was on its way. Then the younger man chuckled.

"Clever, Rennett!" he said. "I tell you, those people are super-humanly brilliant!"

"I'm not a great admirer of villainy," said the other gruffly, and the younger man, who was sitting opposite the girl, laughed.

"You must take a detached interest, my dear chap. Personally, I admire them. I admit they gave me a fright when I realised that Miss Beale had not called the cab, but that it had been carefully planted for her, but still I can admire them."

"What does it mean?" asked the puzzled girl. "I'm so confused—where are we going now? To the office?"

"I fear you will not get to the office to-night," said the young man calmly, "and it is impossible to explain to you just why you were abducted."

"Abducted?" said the girl incredulously. "Do you mean to say that man—"

"He was carrying you into the country," said the other calmly. "He would probably have travelled all night and have left you stranded in some un-get-at-able place. I don't think he meant any harm—they never take unnecessary risks, and all they wanted was to spirit you away for the night. How they came to know that we had chosen you baffles me," he said. "Can you advance any theory, Rennett?"

"Chosen me?" repeated the startled girl. "Really, I feel I'm entitled to some explanation, and if you don't mind, I would like you to take me back to my office. I have a job to keep," she added grimly.

"Six pounds ten a week, and a few guineas extra for your illustrations," said the man in the raincoat. "Believe me, Miss Beale, you'll never pay off your debts on that salary, not if you live to be a hundred."

She could only gasp.

"You seem to know a great deal about my private affairs," she said, when she had recovered her breath.

"A great deal more than you can imagine."

She guessed he was smiling in the darkness, and his voice was so gentle and apologetic that she could not take offence.

"In the past twelve months you have had thirty-nine judgments recorded against you, and in the previous year, twenty-seven. You are living on exactly thirty shillings a week, and all the rest is going to your father's creditors."

"You're very impertinent!" she said hotly and, as she felt, foolishly.

"I'm very pertinent, really. By the way, my name is Glover—John Glover, of the firm of Rennett, Glover and Simpson. The gentleman at your side is Mr. Charles Rennett, my senior partner. We are a firm of solicitors, but how long we shall remain a firm," he added pointedly, "depends rather upon you."

"Upon me?" said the girl in genuine astonishment. "Well, I can't say that I have so much love for lawyers—"

"That I can well understand," murmured Mr. Glover.

"But I certainly do not wish to dissolve your partnership," she went on.

"It is rather more serious than that," said Mr. Rennett, who was sitting by her side. "The fact is, Miss Beale, we are acting in a perfectly illegal manner, and we are going to reveal to you the particulars of an act we contemplate, which, if you pass on the information to the police, will result

in our professional ruin. So you see this adventure is infinitely more important to us than at present it is to you. And here we are!" he said, interrupting the girl's question.

The car turned into a narrow drive, and proceeded some distance through an avenue of trees before it pulled up at the pillared porch of a big house.

Rennett helped her to alight and ushered her through the door, which opened almost as they stopped, into a large panelled hall.

"This is the way, let me show you," said the younger man.

He opened a door and she found herself in a big drawing-room, exquisitely furnished and lit by two silver electroliers suspended from the carved roof.

To her relief an elderly woman rose to greet her.

"This is my wife, Miss Beale," said Rennett. "I need hardly explain that this is also my home."

"So you found the young lady," said the elderly lady, smiling her welcome, "and what does Miss Beale think of your proposition?"

The young man Glover came in at that moment, and divested of his long raincoat and hat, he proved to be of a type that the Universities turn out by the hundred. He was good-looking too, Lydia noticed with feminine inconsequence, and there was something in his eyes that inspired trust. He nodded with a smile to Mrs. Rennett, then turned to the girl.

"Now Miss Beale, I don't know whether I ought to explain or whether my learned and distinguished friend prefers to save me the trouble."

"Not me," said the elder man hastily. "My dear," he turned to his wife, "I think we'll leave Jack Glover to talk to this young lady."

"Doesn't she know?" asked Mrs. Rennett in surprise, and Lydia laughed, although she was feeling far from amused.

The possible loss of her employment, the disquieting adventure of the evening, and now this further mystery all combined to set her nerves on edge.

Glover waited until the door closed on his partner and his wife and seemed inclined to wait a little longer, for he stood with his back to the fire, biting his lips and looking down thoughtfully at the carpet.

"I don't just know how to begin, Miss Beale," he said. "And having seen you, my conscience is beginning to work overtime. But I might as well start at the beginning. I suppose you have heard of the Bulford murder?"

The girl stared at him.

"The Bulford murder?" she said incredulously, and he nodded.

"Why, of course, everybody has heard of that."

"Then happily it is unnecessary to explain all the circumstances," said Jack Glover, with a little grimace of distaste.

"I only know," interrupted the girl, "that Mr. Bulford was killed by a Mr. Meredith, who was jealous of him, and that Mr. Meredith, when he went into the witness-box, behaved disgracefully to his fiancée."

"Exactly," nodded Glover with a twinkle in his eye. "In other words, he repudiated the suggestion that he was jealous, swore that he had already told Miss Briggerland that he could not marry her, and he did not even know that Bulford was paying attention to the lady."

"He did that to save his life," said Lydia quietly. "Miss Briggerland swore in the witness-box that no such interview had occurred."

Glover nodded.

"What you do not know, Miss Beale," he said gravely, "is that Jean Briggerland was Meredith's cousin, and unless certain things happen, she will inherit the greater part of six hundred thousand pounds from Meredith's estate. Meredith, I might explain, is one of my best friends, and the fact that he is now serving out a life sentence does not make him any less a friend. I am as sure, as I am sure

of your sitting there, that he no more killed Bulford than I did. I believe the whole thing was a plot to secure his death or imprisonment. My partner thinks the same. The truth is that Meredith was engaged to this girl; he discovered certain things about her and her father which are not greatly to their credit. He was never really in love with her, beautiful as she is, and he was trapped into the proposal. When he found out how things were shaping and heard some of the queer stories which were told about Briggerland and his daughter, he broke off the engagement and went that night to tell her so."

The girl had listened in some bewilderment to this recital.

"I don't exactly see what all this is to do with me," she said, and again Jack Glover nodded.

"I can quite understand," he said, "but I will tell you yet another part of the story which is not public property. Meredith's father was an eccentric man who believed in early marriages, and it was a condition of his will that if Meredith was not married by his thirtieth birthday, the money should go to his sister, her heirs and successors. His sister was Mrs. Briggerland, who is now dead. Her heirs are her husband and Jean Briggerland."

There was a silence. The girl stared thoughtfully into the fire.

"How old is Mr. Meredith?"

"He is thirty next Monday," said Glover quietly, "and it is necessary that he should be married before next Monday."

"In prison?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"If such things are allowed that could have been arranged, but for some reason the Home Secretary refuses to exercise his discretion in this matter, and has resolutely refused to allow such a marriage to take place. He objects on the ground of public policy, and I dare say from his point of view he is right. Meredith has a twenty-years sentence to serve."

"Then how—" began Lydia.

"Let me tell this story more or less understandably," said Glover with that little smile of his. "Believe me, Miss Beale, I'm not so keen upon the scheme as I was. If by chance," he spoke deliberately, "we could get James Meredith into this house to-morrow morning, would you marry him?"

"Me?" she gasped. "Marry a man I've not seen—a murderer?"

"Not a murderer," he said gently.

"But it is preposterous, impossible!" she protested. "Why me?"

He was silent for a moment.

"When this scheme was mooted we looked round for some one to whom such a marriage would be of advantage," he said, speaking slowly. "It was Rennett's idea that we should search the County Court records of London to discover if there was a girl who was in urgent need of money. There is no surer way of unearthing financial skeletons than by searching County Court records. We found four, only one of whom was eligible and that was you. Don't interrupt me for a moment, please," he said, raising his hand warningly as she was about to speak. "We have made thorough inquiries about you, too thorough in fact, because the Briggerlands have smelt a rat, and have been on our trail for a week. We know that you are not engaged to be married, we know that you have a fairly heavy burden of debts, and we know, too, that you are unencumbered by relations or friends. What we offer you, Miss Beale, and believe me I feel rather a cad in being the medium through which the offer is made, is five thousand pounds a year for the rest of your life, a sum of twenty thousand pounds down, and the assurance that you will not be troubled by your husband from the moment you are married."

Lydia listened like one in a dream. It did not seem real. She would wake up presently and find Mrs. Morgan with a cup of tea in her hand and a plate of her indigestible cakes. Such things did not happen, she told herself, and yet here was a young man, standing with his back to the fire, explaining in the most commonplace conversational tone, an offer which belonged strictly to the realm of romance, and not too convincing romance at that.

"You've rather taken my breath away," she said after a while. "All this wants thinking about, and if Mr. Meredith is in prison—"

"Mr. Meredith is not in prison," said Glover quietly. "He was released two days ago to go to a nursing home for a slight operation. He escaped from the nursing home last night and at this particular moment is in this house."

She could only stare at him open-mouthed, and he went on.

"The Briggerlands know he has escaped; they probably thought he was here, because we have had a police visitation this afternoon, and the interior of the house and grounds have been searched. They know, of course, that Mr. Rennett and I were his legal advisers, and we expected them to come. How he escaped their observation is neither here nor there. Now, Miss Beale, what do you say?"

"I don't know what to say," she said, shaking her head helplessly. "I know I'm dreaming, and if I had the moral courage to pinch myself hard, I should wake up. Somehow I don't want to wake, it is so fascinatingly impossible."

He smiled.

"Can I see Mr. Meredith?"

"Not till to-morrow. I might say that we've made every arrangement for your wedding, the licence has been secured and at eight o'clock to-morrow morning—marriages before eight or after three are not legal in this country, by the way—a clergyman will attend and the ceremony will be performed."

There was a long silence.

Lydia sat on the edge of her chair, her elbows on her knees, her face in her hands.

Glover looked down at her seriously, pityingly, cursing himself that he was the exponent of his own grotesque scheme. Presently she looked up.

"I think I will," she said a little wearily. "And you were wrong about the number of judgment summonses, there were seventy-five in two years—and I'm so tired of lawyers."

"Thank you," said Jack Glover politely.

Chapter IV

All night long she had sat in the little bedroom to which Mrs. Rennett had led her, thinking and thinking and thinking. She could not sleep, although she had tried hard, and most of the night she spent pacing up and down from window to door turning over the amazing situation in which she found herself. She had never thought of marriage seriously, and really a marriage such as this presented no terrors and might, had the prelude been a little less exciting, been accepted by her with relief. The prospect of being a wife in name only, even the thought that her husband would be, for the next twenty years, behind prison walls, neither distressed nor horrified her. Somehow she accepted Glover's statement that Meredith was innocent, without reservation.

She wondered what Mrs. Morgan would say and what explanation she would give at the office. She was not particularly in love with her work, and it would be no wrench for her to drop it and give herself up to the serious study of art. Five thousand pounds a year! She could live in Italy, study under the best masters, have a car of her own—the possibilities seemed illimitable—and the disadvantages?

She shrugged her shoulders as she answered the question for the twentieth time. What disadvantages were there? She could not marry, but then she did not want to marry. She was not the kind to fall in love, she told herself, she was too independent, too sophisticated, and understood men and their weaknesses only too well.

"The Lord designed me for an old maid," she said to herself.

At seven o'clock in the morning—a grey, cheerless morning it was, thought Lydia, looking out of the window—Mrs. Rennett came in with some tea.

"I'm afraid you haven't slept, my dear," she said with a glance at the bed. "It's very trying for you."

She laid her hand upon the girl's arm and squeezed it gently.

"And it's very trying for all of us," she said with a whimsical smile. "I expect we shall all get into fearful trouble."

That had occurred to the girl too, remembering the gloomy picture which Glover had painted in the car.

"Won't this be very serious for you, if the authorities find that you have connived at the escape?" she asked.

"Escape, my dear?" Mrs. Rennett's face became a mask. "I have not heard anything of an escape. All that we know is that poor Mr. Meredith, anticipating that the Home Office would allow him to get married, had made arrangements for the marriage at this house. How Mr. Meredith comes here is quite a matter outside our knowledge," said the diplomatic lady, and Lydia laughed in spite of herself.

She spent half an hour making herself presentable for the forthcoming ordeal.

As a church clock struck eight, there came another tap on the door. It was Mrs. Rennett again.

"They are waiting," she said. Her face was a little pale and her lips trembled.

Lydia, however, was calmness itself, as she walked into the drawing-room ahead of her hostess.

There were four men. Glover and Rennett she knew. A third man wearing a clerical collar she guessed was the officiating priest, and all her attention was concentrated upon the fourth. He was a gaunt, unshaven man, his hair cut short, his face and figure wasted, so that the clothes he wore hung on him. Her first feeling was one of revulsion. Her second was an impulse of pity. James Meredith, for she guessed it was he, appeared wretchedly ill. He swung round as she came in, and looked at her intently, then, walking quickly towards her, he held out his thin hand.

"Miss Beale, isn't it?" he said. "I'm sorry to meet you under such unpleasant circumstances. Glover has explained everything, has he not?"

She nodded.

His deep-set eyes had a magnetic quality that fascinated her.

"You understand the terms? Glover has told you just why this marriage must take place?" he said, lowering his voice. "Believe me, I am deeply grateful to you for falling in with my wishes."

Without preliminary he walked over to where the parson stood.

"We will begin now," he said simply.

The ceremony seemed so unreal to the girl that she did not realise what it portended, not even when a ring (a loosely-fitting ring, for Jack Glover had made the wildest guess at the size) was slipped over her finger. She knelt to receive the solemn benediction and then got slowly to her feet and looked at her husband strangely.

"I think I'm going to faint," she said.

It was Jack Glover who caught her and carried her to the sofa. She woke with a confused idea that somebody was trying to hypnotise her, and she opened her eyes to look upon the sombre face of James Meredith.

"Better?" he asked anxiously. "I'm afraid you've had a trying time, and no sleep you said, Mrs. Rennett?"

Mrs. Rennett shook her head.

"Well, you'll sleep to-night better than I shall," he smiled, and then he turned to Rennett, a grave and anxious man, who stood nervously stroking his little beard, watching the bridegroom. "Mr. Rennett," he said, "I must tell you in the presence of witnesses, that I have escaped from a nursing home to which I had been sent by the clemency of the Secretary of State. When I informed you that I had received permission to come to your house this morning to get married, I told you that which was not true."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Rennett politely. "And, of course, it is my duty to hand you over to the police, Mr. Meredith." It was all part of the game. The girl watched the play, knowing that this scene was carefully rehearsed, in order to absolve Rennett and his partner from complicity in the escape.

Rennett had hardly spoken when there was a loud rat-tat at the front door, and Jack Glover hastened into the hall to answer. But it was not the policeman he had expected. It was a girl in a big sable coat, muffled up to her eyes. She pushed past Jack, crossed the hall, and walked straight into the drawing-room.

Lydia, standing shakily by Mrs. Rennett's side, saw the visitor come in, and then, as she unfastened her coat, recognised her with a gasp. It was the beautiful girl she had seen in the stalls of the theatre the night before!

"And what can we do for you?" It was Glover's voice again, bland and bantering.

"I want Meredith," said the girl shortly, and Glover chuckled.

"You have wanted Meredith for a long time, Miss Briggerland," he said, "and you're likely to want. You have arrived just a little too late."

The girl's eyes fell upon the parson.

"Too late," she said slowly, "then he is married?"

She bit her red lips and nodded, then she looked at Lydia, and the blue eyes were expressionless.

Meredith had disappeared. Lydia looked round for him in her distress, but he had gone. She wondered if he had gone out to the police, to make his surrender, and she was still wondering when there came the sound of a shot.

It was from the outside of the house, and at the sound Glover ran through the doorway, crossed the hall and flew into the open. It was still snowing, and there was no sign of any human being. He raced along a path which ran parallel with the house, turned the corner and dived into a shrubbery. Here the snow had not laid, and he followed the garden path that twisted and turned through the thick laurel bushes and ended at a roughly-built tool house. As he came in sight of the shed he stopped.

A man lay on the ground, his arm extended, his head in a pool of blood, his grey hand clutching a revolver.

Jack uttered an exclamation of horror and ran to the side of the fallen man.

It was James Meredith, and he was dead.

Chapter V

Jack Glover heard footsteps coming down the path, and turned to meet a man who had "detective" written largely all over him. Jack turned and looked down again at the body as the man came up.

"Who is this?" asked the officer sharply.

"It is James Meredith," said Jack simply.

"Dead?" said the officer, startled. "He has committed suicide!"

Jack did not reply, and watched the inspector as he made his brief, quick examination of the body. A bullet had entered just below the left temple, and there was a mark of powder near the face.

"A very bad business, Mr. Glover," said the police officer seriously. "Can you account for this man being here?"

"He came to get married," said Jack listlessly. "I dare say that startles you, but it is the fact. He was married less than ten minutes ago. If you will come up to the house I will explain his presence here."

The detective hesitated, but just then another of his comrades came on the scene, and Jack led the way back to the house through a back door into Rennett's study.

The lawyer was waiting for them, and he was alone.

"If I'm not very much mistaken, you're Inspector Colhead, of Scotland Yard," said Glover.

"That is my name," nodded the officer. "Between ourselves, Mr. Glover, I don't think I should make any statement which you are not prepared to verify publicly."

Jack noted the significance of the warning with a little smile, and proceeded to tell the story of the wedding.

"I can only tell you," he said in answer to a further inquiry, "that Mr. Meredith came into this house at a quarter to eight this morning, and surrendered himself to my partner. At eight o'clock exactly, as you are well aware, Mr. Rennett telephoned to Scotland Yard to say that Mr. Meredith was here. During the period of his waiting he was married."

"Did a parson happen to be staying here, sir?" asked the police officer sarcastically.

"He happened to be staying here," said Jack calmly, "because I had arranged for him to be here. I knew that if it was humanly possible, Mr. Meredith would come to this house, and that his desire was to be married, for reasons which my partner will explain."

"Did you help him to escape? That is asking you a leading question," smiled the detective.

Jack shook his head.

"I can answer you with perfect truth that I did not, any more than the Home Secretary helped him when he gave him permission to go to a nursing home."

Soon after the detective returned to the shed, and Jack and his partner were left alone.

"Well?" said Rennett, in a shaking voice, "what happened?"

"He's dead," said Jack quietly.

"Suicide?"

Jack looked at him oddly.

"Did Bulford commit suicide?" he asked.

"Where is the angel?"

"I left her in the drawing-room with Mrs. Rennett and Miss Beale."

"Mrs. Meredith," corrected Jack quietly.

"This complicates matters," said Rennett, "but I think we can get out of our share of the trouble, though it is going to look a little black."

They found the three women in the drawing-room. Lydia, looking very white, came to meet them.

"What happened?" she asked, and then she guessed from his face. "He's not dead?" she gasped. Jack nodded. All the time his eyes were on the other girl. Her beautiful lips were drooped a little. There was a look of pain and sorrow in her eyes that caught his breath.

"Did he shoot himself?" she asked in a low voice.

Jack regarded her coldly.

"The only thing that I am certain about," and Lydia winced at the cruelty in his voice, "is that you did not shoot him, Miss Briggerland."

"How dare you!" flamed Jean Briggerland. The quick flush that came to her cheek was the only other evidence of emotion she betrayed.

"I dare say a lot," said Jack curtly. "You asked me if it is a case of suicide, and I tell you that it is not—it is a case of murder. James Meredith was found with a revolver clutched in his right hand. He was shot through the left temple, and if you'll explain to me how any man, holding a pistol in a normal way, can perform that feat, I will accept your theory of suicide."

There was a dead silence.

"Besides," Jack went on, with a little shrug, "poor Jimmy had no pistol."

Jean Briggerland had dropped her eyes, and stood there with downcast head and compressed lips. Presently she looked up.

"I know how you feel, Mr. Glover," she said gently. "I can well understand, believing such dreadful things about me as you do, that you must hate me."

Her mouth quivered and her voice grew husky with sorrow.

"I loved James Meredith," she said, "and he loved me."

"He loved you well enough to marry somebody else," said Jack Glover, and Lydia was shocked.

"Mr. Glover," she said reproachfully, "do you think it is right to say these things, with poor Mr. Meredith lying dead?"

He turned slowly toward her, and she saw in his humorous eyes a hardness that she had not seen before.

"Miss Briggerland has told us that I hate her," he said in an even voice, "and she spoke nothing but the truth. I hate her perhaps beyond understanding—Mrs. Meredith." He emphasised the words, and the girl winced. "And one day, if the Circumstantialists spare me—"

"The Circumstantialists," said Jean Briggerland slowly. "I don't quite understand you."

Jack Glover laughed, and it was not a pleasant laugh.

"Perhaps you will," he said shortly. "As to your loving poor Jim—well, you know best. I am trying to be polite to you, Miss Briggerland, and not to gloat over the fact that you arrived too late to stop this wedding! And shall I tell you why you arrived too late?" His eyes were laughing again. "It was because I had arranged with the vicar of St. Peter's to be here at nine o'clock this morning, well knowing that you and your little army of spies would discover the hour of the wedding, and would take care to be here before. And then I secretly sent for an old Oxford friend of mine to be here at eight—he was here last night."

Still she stood regarding him without visible evidence of the anger which Lydia thought would have been justified.

"I had no desire to stop the wedding," said the girl, in a low, soft voice. "If Jim preferred to be married in this way to somebody who does not know him, I can only accept his choice." She turned to the girl and held out her hand. "I am very sorry that this tragedy has come to you, Mrs. Meredith," she said. "May I wish you a greater happiness than any you have found?"

Lydia was touched by the sincerity, hurt a little by Glover's uncouthness, and could only warmly grip the little hand that was held out to her.

"I'm sorry too," she said a little unsteadily. "For you more than for—anything else."

The girl lowered her eyes and again her lips quivered, and then without a word she walked out of the room, pulling her sable wrap about her throat.

It was noon before Rennett's car deposited Lydia Meredith at the door of her lodging.

She found Mrs. Morgan in a great state of anxiety, and the stout little woman almost shed tears of joy at the sight of her.

"Oh, miss, you've no idea how worried I've been," she babbled, "and they've been round here from your newspaper office asking where you are. I thought you had been run over or something, and the *Daily Megaphone* have sent to all the hospitals—"

"I have been run over," said Lydia wearily. "My poor mind has been under the wheels of a dozen motor-buses, and my soul has been in a hundred collisions."

Mrs. Morgan gaped at her. She had no sense of metaphor.

"It's all right, Mrs. Morgan," laughed her lodger over her shoulder as she went up the stairs. "I haven't really you know, only I've had a worrying time—and by the way, my name is Meredith."

Mrs. Morgan collapsed on to a hall chair.

"Meredith, miss?" she said incredulously. "Why I knew your father—"

"I've been married, that's all," said Lydia grimly. "You told me yesterday that I should be married romantically, but even in the wildest flights of your imagination, Mrs. Morgan, you could never have supposed that I should be married in such a violent, desperate way. I'm going to bed." She paused on the landing and looked down at the dumbfounded woman. "If anybody calls for me, I am not at home. Oh, yes, you can tell the *Megaphone* that I came home very late and that I've gone to bed, and I'll call to-morrow to explain."

"But, miss," stammered the woman, "your husband—"

"My husband is dead," said the girl calmly. She felt a brute, but somehow she could not raise any note of sorrow. "And if that lawyer man comes, will you please tell him that I shall have twenty thousand pounds in the morning," and with that last staggering statement, she went to her room, leaving her landlady speechless.

Chapter VI

The police search of the house and grounds at Dulwich Grange, Mr. Rennett's residence, occupied the whole of the morning, and neither Rennett's nor Jack's assistance was invited or offered. Before luncheon Inspector Colhead came to the study.

"We've had a good look round your place, Mr. Rennett," he said, "and I think we know where the deceased hid himself."

"Indeed!" said Mr. Rennett.

"That hut of yours in the garden is used, I suppose, for a tool house. There are no tools there now, and one of my men discovered that you can pull up the whole of the floor, it works on a hinge and is balanced with counter-weights."

Mr. Rennett nodded.

"I believe it was used as a wine cellar by a former tenant of the house," he said coolly. "We have no cellars at the Grange, you know. I do not drink wine, and I've never had occasion to use it."

"That's where he was hidden. We found a blanket, and pillows, down there, and, as you say, it has obviously been a wine cellar, because there is a ventilating shaft leading up into the bushes. We should never have found the trap, but one of my men felt one of the corners of the floor give under his feet."

The two men said nothing.

"Another thing," the detective went on slowly, "is that I'm inclined to agree that Meredith did not commit suicide. We found footmarks, quite fresh, leading round to the back of the hut."

"A big foot or a little foot?" asked Jack quickly.

"It is rather a big foot," said the detective, "and it has rubber heels. We traced it to a gate at the back of your premises, and the gate has been opened recently—probably by Mr. Meredith when he came to the house. It's a queer case, Mr. Rennett."

"What is the pistol?"

"That's new too," said Colhead. "Belgian make and impossible to trace, I should imagine. You can't keep track of these Belgian weapons. You can buy them in any shop in any town in Ostend or Brussels, and I don't think it is the practice for the sellers to keep any record of the numbers."

"In fact," said Jack quietly, "it is the same kind of pistol that killed Bulford."

Colhead raised his eyebrows.

"So it was, but wasn't it established that that was Mr. Meredith's own weapon?"

Jack shook his head.

"The only thing that was established was that he had seen the body and he picked up the pistol which was lying near the dead man. The shot was fired as he opened the door of Mr. Briggerland's house. Then he saw the figure on the pavement and picked up the pistol. He was in that position when Miss Briggerland, who testified against him, came out of the house and saw him."

The detective nodded.

"I had nothing to do with the case," he said, "but I remember seeing the weapon, and it was identical with this. I'll talk to the chief and let you know what he says about the whole affair. You'll have to give evidence at the inquest of course."

When he had gone the two men looked at one another.

"Well, Rennett, do you think we're going to get into hot water, or are we going to perjure our way to safety?"

"There's no need for perjury, not serious perjury," said the other carefully. "By the way, Jack, where was Briggerland the night Bulford was murdered?"

"When Miss Jean Briggerland had recovered from her horror, she went upstairs and aroused her father, who, despite the early hour, was in bed and asleep. When the police came, or rather, when

the detective in charge of the case arrived, which must have been some time after the policeman on point duty put in an appearance, Mr. Briggerland was discovered in a picturesque dressing gown and, I presume, no less picturesque pyjamas."

"Horried, too, I suppose," said Rennett dryly.

Jack was silent for a long time. Then: "Rennett," he said, "do you know I am more rattled about this girl than I am about any consequences to ourselves."

"Which girl are you talking about?"

"About Mrs. Meredith. Whilst poor Meredith was alive she was in no particular danger. But do you realise that what were advantages from our point of view, namely, the fact that she had no relations in the world, are to-day a source of considerable peril to this unfortunate lady?"

"I had forgotten that," said Rennett thoughtfully. "What makes matters a little more complicated, is the will which Meredith made this morning before he was married."

Jack whistled.

"Did he make a will?" he said in surprise.

His partner nodded.

"You remember he was here with me for half an hour. Well, he insisted upon writing out a will and my wife and Bolton, the butler, witnessed it."

"And he has left his money—?"

"To his wife absolutely," replied the other. "The poor old chap was so frantically keen on keeping the money out of the Briggerland exchequer, that he was prepared to entrust the whole of his money to a girl he had not seen."

Jack was serious now.

"And the Briggerlands are her heirs? Do you realise that, Rennett—there's going to be hell!"

Mr. Rennett nodded.

"I thought that too," he said quietly.

Jack sank down in a seat, his face screwed up into a hideous frown, and the elder man did not interrupt his thoughts. Suddenly Jack's face cleared and he smiled.

"Jaggs!" he said softly.

"Jaggs?" repeated his puzzled partner.

"Jaggs," said Jack, nodding, "he's the fellow. We've got to meet strategy with strategy, Rennett, and Jaggs is the boy to do it."

Mr. Rennett looked at him helplessly.

"Could Jaggs get us out of our trouble too?" he asked sarcastically.

"He could even do that," replied Jack.

"Then bring him along, for I have an idea he'll have the time of his life."

Chapter VII

Miss Jean Briggerland reached her home in Berkeley Street soon after nine o'clock. She did not ring, but let herself in with a key and went straight to the dining-room, where her father sat eating his breakfast, with a newspaper propped up before him.

He was the dark-skinned man whom Lydia had seen at the theatre, and he looked up over his gold-rimmed spectacles as the girl came in.

"You have been out very early," he said.

She did not reply, but slowly divesting herself of her sable coat she threw it on to a chair, took off the toque that graced her shapely head, and flung it after the coat. Then she drew out a chair, and sat down at the table, her chin on her palms, her blue eyes fixed upon her parent.

Nature had so favoured her that her face needed no artificial embellishment—the skin was clear and fine of texture, and the cold morning had brought only a faint pink to the beautiful face.

"Well, my dear," Mr. Briggerland looked up and beamed through his glasses, "so poor Meredith has committed suicide?"

She did not speak, keeping her eyes fixed on him.

"Very sad, very sad," Mr. Briggerland shook his head.

"How did it happen?" she asked quietly.

Mr. Briggerland shrugged his shoulders.

"I suppose at the sight of you he bolted back to his hiding place where—er—had been located by—er—interested persons during the night, then seeing me by the shed—he committed the rash and fatal act. Somehow I thought he would run back to his dug-out."

"And you were prepared for him?" she said.

He smiled.

"A clear case of suicide, my dear," he said.

"Shot through the left temple, and the pistol was found in his right hand," said the girl.

Mr. Briggerland started.

"Damn it," he said. "Who noticed that?"

"That good-looking young lawyer, Glover."

"Did the police notice?"

"I suppose they did when Glover called their attention to the fact," said the girl.

Mr. Briggerland took off his glasses and wiped them.

"It was done in such a hurry—I had to get back through the garden gate to join the police. When I got there, I found they'd been attracted by the shot and had entered the house. Still, nobody would know I was in the garden, and anyway my association with the capture of an escaped convict would not get into the newspapers."

"But a case of suicide would," said the girl. "Though I don't suppose the police will give away the person who informed them that James Meredith would be at Dulwich Grange."

Mr. Briggerland sat back in his chair, his thick lips pursed, and he was not a beautiful sight.

"One can't remember everything," he grumbled.

He rose from his chair, went to the door, and locked it. Then he crossed to a bureau, pulled open a drawer and took out a small revolver. He threw out the cylinder, glanced along the barrel and the chambers to make sure it was not loaded, then clicked it back in position, and standing before a glass, he endeavoured, the pistol in his right hand, to bring the muzzle to bear on his left temple. He found this impossible, and signified his annoyance with a grunt. Then he tried the pistol with his thumb on the trigger and his hand clasping the back of the butt. Here he was more successful.

"That's it," he said with satisfaction. "It could have been done that way."

She did not shudder at the dreadful sight, but watched him with the keenest interest, her chin still in the palm of her hand. He might have been explaining a new way of serving a tennis ball, for all the emotion he evoked.

Mr. Briggerland came back to the table, toyed with a piece of toast and buttered it leisurely.

"Everybody is going to Cannes this year," he said, "but I think I shall stick to Monte Carlo. There is a quiet about Monte Carlo which is very restful, especially if one can get a villa on the hill away from the railway. I told Morden yesterday to take the new car across and meet us at Boulogne. He says that the new body is exquisite. There is a micaphonic attachment for telephoning to the driver, the electrical heating apparatus is splendid and—"

"Meredith was married."

If she had thrown a bomb at him she could not have produced a more tremendous sensation. He gaped at her, and pushed himself back from the table.

"Married?" His voice was a squeak.

She nodded.

"It's a lie," he roared. All his suavity dropped away from him, his face was distorted and puckered with anger and grew a shade darker. "Married, you lying little beast! He couldn't have been married! It was only a few minutes after eight, and the parson didn't come till nine. I'll break your neck if you try to scare me! I've told you about that before...."

He raved on, and she listened unmoved.

"He was married at eight o'clock by a man they brought down from Oxford, and who stayed the night in the house," she repeated with great calmness. "There's no sense in lashing yourself into a rage. I've seen the bride, and spoken to the clergyman."

From the bullying, raging madman, he became a whimpering, pitiable thing. His chin trembled, the big hands he laid on the tablecloth shook with a fever.

"What are we going to do?" he wailed. "My God, Jean, what are we going to do?"

She rose and went to the sideboard, poured out a stiff dose of brandy from a decanter and brought it across to him without a word. She was used to these tantrums, and to their inevitable ending. She was neither hurt, surprised, nor disgusted. This pale, ethereal being was the dominant partner of the combination. Nerves she did not possess, fears she did not know. She had acquired the precise sense of a great surgeon in whom pity was a detached emotion, and one which never intruded itself into the operating chamber. She was no more phenomenal than they, save that she did not feel bound by the conventions and laws which govern them as members of an ordered society. It requires no greater nerve to slay than to cure. She had had that matter out with herself, and had settled it to her own satisfaction.

"You will have to put off your trip to Monte Carlo," she said, as he drank the brandy greedily.

"We've lost everything now," he stuttered, "everything."

"This girl has no relations," said the daughter steadily. "Her heirs-at-law are ourselves."

He put down the glass, and looked at her, and became almost immediately his old self.

"My dear," he said admiringly, "you are really wonderful. Of course, it was childish of me. Now what do you suggest?"

"Unlock that door," she said in a low voice, "I want to call the maid."

As he walked to the door, she pressed the footbell, and soon after the faded woman who attended her came into the room.

"Hart," she said, "I want you to find my emerald ring, the small one, the little pearl necklet, and the diamond scarf pin. Pack them carefully in a box with cotton wool."

"Yes, madam," said the woman, and went out.

"Now what are you going to do, Jean?" asked her father.

"I am returning them to Mrs. Meredith," said the girl coolly. "They were presents given to me by her husband, and I feel after this tragic ending of my dream that I can no longer bear the sight of them."

"He didn't give you those things, he gave you the chain. Besides, you are throwing away good money?"

"I know he never gave them to me, and I am not throwing away good money," she said patiently. "Mrs. Meredith will return them, and she will give me an opportunity of throwing a little light upon James Meredith, an opportunity which I very much desire."

Later she went up to her pretty little sitting-room on the first floor, and wrote a letter.

"Dear Mrs. Meredith.—I am sending you the few trinkets which James gave to me in happier days. They are all that I have of his, and you, as a woman, will realise that whilst the possession of them brings me many unhappy memories, yet they have been a certain comfort to me. I wish I could dispose of memory as easily as I send these to you (for I feel they are really your property) but more do I wish that I could recall and obliterate the occasion which has made Mr. Glover so bitter an enemy of mine.

"Thinking over the past, I see that I was at fault, but I know that you will sympathise with me when the truth is revealed to you. A young girl, unused to the ways of men, perhaps I attached too much importance to Mr. Glover's attentions, and resented them too crudely. In those days I thought it was unpardonable that a man who professed to be poor James's best friend, should make love to his fiancée, though I suppose that such things happen, and are endured by the modern girl. A man does not readily forgive a woman for making him feel a fool—it is the one unpardonable offence that a girl can commit. Therefore, I do not resent his enmity as much as you might think. Believe me, I feel for you very much in these trying days. Let me say again that I hope your future will be bright."

She blotted the letter, put it in an envelope, and addressed it, and taking down a book from one of the well-stocked shelves, drew her chair to the fire, and began reading.

Mr. Briggerland came in an hour after, looked over her shoulder at the title, and made a sound of disapproval.

"I can't understand your liking for that kind of book," he said.

The book was one of the two volumes of "Chronicles of Crime," and she looked up with a smile.

"Can't you? It's very easily explained. It is the most encouraging work in my collection. Sit down for a minute."

"A record of vulgar criminals," he growled. "Their infernal last dying speeches, their processions to Tyburn—phaugh!"

She smiled again, and looked down at the book. The wide margins were covered with pencilled notes in her writing.

"They're a splendid mental exercise," she said. "In every case I have written down how the criminal might have escaped arrest, but they were all so vulgar, and so stupid. Really the police of the time deserve no credit for catching them. It is the same with modern criminals...."

She went to the shelf, and took down two large scrap-books, carried them across to the fire, and opened one on her knees.

"Vulgar and stupid, every one of them," she repeated, as she turned the leaves rapidly.

"The clever ones get caught at times," said Briggerland gloomily.

"Never," she said, and closed the book with a snap. "In England, in France, in America, and in almost every civilised country, there are murderers walking about to-day, respected by their fellow citizens. Murderers, of whose crimes the police are ignorant. Look at these." She opened the book

again. "Here is the case of Rell, who poisons a troublesome creditor with weed-killer. Everybody in the town knew he bought the weed-killer; everybody knew that he was in debt to this man. What chance had he of escaping? Here's Jewelville—he kills his wife, buries her in the cellar, and then calls attention to himself by running away. Here's Morden, who kills his sister-in-law for the sake of her insurance money, and who also buys the poison in broad daylight, and is found with a bottle in his pocket. Such people deserve hanging."

"I wish to heaven you wouldn't talk about hanging," said Briggerland tremulously, "you're inhuman, Jean, by God—"

"I'm an angel," she smiled, "and I have press cuttings to prove it! The *Daily Recorder* had half a column on my appearance in the box at Jim's trial."

He looked over toward the writing-table, saw the letter, and picked it up.

"So you've written to the lady. Are you sending her the jewels?"

She nodded.

He looked at her quickly.

"You haven't been up to any funny business with them, have you?" he asked suspiciously, and she smiled.

"My dear parent," drawled Jean Briggerland, "after my lecture on the stupidity of the average criminal, do you imagine I should do anything so *gauche*?"

Chapter VIII

"And now, Mrs. Meredith," said Jack Glover, "what are you going to do?"

He had spent the greater part of the morning with the new heiress, and Lydia had listened, speechless, as he recited a long and meaningless list of securities, of estates, of ground rents, balances and the like, which she had inherited.

"What am I going to do?" she said, shaking her head, hopelessly. "I don't know. I haven't the slightest idea, Mr. Glover. It is so bewildering. Do I understand that all this property is mine?"

"Not yet," said Jack with a smile, "but it is so much yours that on the strength of the will we are willing to advance you money to almost any extent. The will has to be proved, and probate must be taken, but when these legal formalities are settled, and we have paid the very heavy death duties, you will be entitled to dispose of your fortune as you wish. As a matter of fact," he added, "you could do that now. At any rate, you cannot live here in Brinksome Street, and I have taken the liberty of hiring a furnished flat on your behalf. One of our clients has gone away to the Continent and left the flat for me to dispose of. The rent is very low, about twenty guineas a week."

"Twenty guineas a week!" gasped the horrified girl, "why, I can't—"

And then she realised that she "could."

Twenty guineas a week was as nothing to her. This fact more than anything else, brought her to an understanding of her fortune.

"I suppose I had better move," she said dubiously. "Mrs. Morgan is giving up this house, and she asked me whether I had any plans. I think she'd be willing to come as my housekeeper."

"Excellent," nodded Jack. "You'll want a maid as well and, of course, you will have to put up Jaggs for the nights."

"Jaggs?" she said in astonishment.

"Jaggs," repeated Jack solemnly. "You see, Miss—I beg your pardon, Mrs. Meredith, I'm rather concerned about you, and I want you to have somebody on hand I can rely on, sleeping in your flat at night. I dare say you think I am an old woman," he said as he saw her smile, "and that my fears are groundless, but you will agree that your own experience of last week will support the theory that anything may happen in London."

"But really, Mr. Glover, you don't mean that I am in any serious danger—from whom?"

"From a lot of people," he said diplomatically.

"From poor Miss Briggerland?" she challenged, and his eyes narrowed.

"Poor Miss Briggerland," he said softly. "She certainly is poorer than she expected to be."

"Nonsense," scoffed the girl. She was irritated, which was unusual in her. "My dear Mr. Glover, why do you pursue your vendetta against her? Do you think it is playing the game, honestly now? Isn't it a case of wounded vanity on your part?"

He stared at her in astonishment.

"Wounded vanity? Do you mean pique?"

She nodded.

"Why should I be piqued?" he asked slowly.

"You know best," replied Lydia, and then a light dawned on him.

"Have I been making love to Miss Briggerland by any chance?" he asked.

"You know best," she repeated.

"Good Lord!" and then he began to laugh, and she thought he would never stop.

"I suppose I made love to her, and she was angry because I dared to commit such an act of treachery to her fiancé! Yes, that was it. I made love to her behind poor Jim's back, and she 'ticked me off,' and that's why I'm so annoyed with her?"

"You have a very good memory," said Lydia, with a scornful little smile.

"My memory isn't as good as Miss Briggerland's power of invention," said Jack. "Doesn't it strike you, Mrs. Meredith, that if I had made love to that young lady, I should not be seen here to-day?"

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I mean," said Jack Glover soberly, "that it would not have been Bulford, but I, who would have been lured from his club by a telephone message, and told to wait outside the door in Berkeley Street. It would have been I, who would have been shot dead by Miss Briggerland's father from the drawing-room window."

The girl looked at him in amazement.

"What a preposterous charge to make!" she said at last indignantly. "Do you suggest that this girl has connived at a murder?"

"I not only suggest that she connived at it, but I stake my life that she planned it," said Jack carefully.

"But the pistol was found near Mr. Bulford's body," said Lydia almost triumphantly, as she conceived this unanswerable argument.

Jack nodded.

"From Bulford's body to the drawing-room window was exactly nine feet. It was possible to pitch the pistol so that it fell near him. Bulford was waiting there by the instructions of Jean Briggerland. We have traced the telephone call that came through to him from the club—it came from the Briggerlands' house in Berkeley Street, and the attendant at the club was sure it was a woman's voice. We didn't find that out till after the trial. Poor Meredith was in the hall when the shot was fired. The signal was given when he turned the handle to let himself out. He heard the shot, rushed down the steps and saw the body. Whether he picked up the pistol or not, I do not know. Jean Briggerland swears he had it in his hand, but, of course, Jean Briggerland is a hopeless liar!"

"You can't know what you're saying," said Lydia in a low voice. "It is a dreadful charge to make, dreadful, against a girl whose very face refutes such an accusation."

"Her face is her fortune," snapped Jack, and then penitently, "I'm sorry I'm rude, but somehow the very mention of Jean Briggerland arouses all that is worst in me. Now, you will accept Jaggs, won't you?"

"Who is he?" she asked.

"He is an old army pensioner. A weird bird, as shrewd as the dickens, in spite of his age a pretty powerful old fellow."

"Oh, he's old," she said with some relief.

"He's old, and in some ways, incapacitated. He hasn't the use of his right arm, and he's a bit groggy in one of his ankles as the result of a Boer bullet."

She laughed in spite of herself.

"He doesn't sound a very attractive kind of guardian. He's a perfectly clean old bird, though I confess he doesn't look it, and he won't bother you or your servants. You can give him a room where he can sit, and you can give him a bit of bread and cheese, and a glass of beer, and he'll not bother you."

Lydia was amused now. It was absurd that Jack Glover should imagine she needed a guardian at all, but if he insisted, as he did, it would be better to have somebody as harmless as the unattractive Jaggs.

"What time will he come?"

"At about ten o'clock every night, and he'll leave you at about seven in the morning. Unless you wish, you need never see him," said Jack.

"How did you come to know him?" she asked curiously.

"I know everybody," said the boastful young man, "you mustn't forget that I am a lawyer and have to meet very queer people."

He gathered up his papers and put them into his little bag.

"And now what are your plans for to-day?" he demanded.

She resented the self-imposed guardianship which he had undertaken, yet she could not forget what she owed him.

By some extraordinary means he had kept her out of the Meredith case and she had not been called as a witness at the inquest. Incidentally, in as mysterious a way he had managed to whitewash his partner and himself, although the Law Society were holding an inquiry of their own (this the girl did not know) it seemed likely that he would escape the consequence of an act which was a flagrant breach of the law.

"I am going to Mrs. Cole-Mortimer's to tea," she said.

"Mrs. Cole-Mortimer?" he said quickly. "How do you come to know that lady?"

"Really, Mr. Glover, you are almost impertinent," she smiled in spite of her annoyance. "She came to call on me two or three days after that dreadful morning. She knew Mr. Meredith and was an old friend of the family's."

"As a matter of fact," said Jack icily, "she did not know Meredith, except to say 'how-do-you-do' to him, and she was certainly not a friend of the family. She is, however, a friend of Jean Briggerland."

"Jean Briggerland!" said the exasperated girl. "Can't you forget her? You are like the man in Dickens's books—she's your King Charles's head! Really, for a respectable and a responsible lawyer, you're simply eaten up with prejudices. Of course, she was a friend of Mr. Meredith's. Why, she brought me a photograph of him taken when he was at Eton."

"Supplied by Jean Briggerland," said the unperturbed Jack calmly, "and if she'd brought you a pair of socks he wore when he was a baby I suppose you would have accepted those too."

"Now you are being really abominable," said the girl, "and I've got a lot to do."

He paused at the door.

"Don't forget you can move into Cavendish Mansions to-morrow. I'll send the key round, and the day you move in, Jaggs will turn up for duty, bright and smiling. He doesn't talk a great deal—"

"I don't suppose you ever give the poor man a chance," she said cuttingly.

Chapter IX

Mrs. Cole-Mortimer was a representative of a numerous class of women who live so close to the border-line which separates good society from society which is not quite as good, that the members of either set thought she was in the other. She had a small house where she gave big parties, and nobody quite knew how this widow of an Indian colonel made both ends meet. It was the fact that her menage was an expensive one to maintain; she had a car, she entertained in London in the season, and disappeared from the metropolis when it was the correct thing to disappear, a season of exile which comes between the Goodwood Race Meeting in the south and the Doncaster Race Meeting in the north.

Lydia had been surprised to receive a visit from this elegant lady, and had readily accepted the story of her friendship with James Meredith. Mrs. Cole-Mortimer's invitation she had welcomed. She needed some distraction, something which would smooth out the ravelled threads of life which were now even more tangled than she had ever expected they could be.

Mr. Rennett had handed to her a thousand pounds the day after the wedding, and when she had recovered from the shock of possessing such a large sum, she hired a taxicab and indulged herself in a wild orgy of shopping.

The relief she experienced when he informed her he was taking charge of her affairs and settling the debts which had worried her for three years was so great that she felt as though a heavy weight had been lifted from her heart.

It was in one of her new frocks that Lydia, feeling more confident than usual, made her call. She had expected to find a crowd at the house in Hyde Park Crescent, and she was surprised when she was ushered into the drawing-room to find only four people present.

Mrs. Cole-Mortimer was a chirpy, pale little woman of forty-something. It would be ungallant to say how much that "something" represented. She came toward Lydia with outstretched hands.

"My dear," she said with extravagant pleasure, "I am glad you were able to come. You know Miss Briggerland and Mr. Briggerland?"

Lydia looked up at the tall figure of the man she had seen in the stalls the night before her wedding and recognised him instantly.

"Mr. Marcus Stepney, I don't think you have met."

Lydia bowed to a smart looking man of thirty, immaculately attired. He was very handsome, she thought, in a dark way, but he was just a little too "new" to please her. She did not like fashion-plate men, and although the most captious of critics could not have found fault with his correct attire, he gave her the impression of being over-dressed.

Lydia had not expected to meet Miss Briggerland and her father, although she had a dim recollection that Mrs. Cole-Mortimer had mentioned her name. Then in a flash she recalled the suspicions of Jack Glover, which she had covered with ridicule. The association made her feel a little uncomfortable, and Jean Briggerland, whose intuition was a little short of uncanny, must have read the doubt in her face.

"Mrs. Meredith expected to see us, didn't she, Margaret?" she said, addressing the twittering hostess. "Surely you told her we were great friends?"

"Of course I did, my dear. Knowing your dear cousin and his dear father, it was not remarkable that I should know the whole of the family," and she smiled wisely from one to the other.

Of course! How absurd she was, thought Lydia. She had almost forgotten, and probably Jack Glover had forgotten too, that the Briggerlands and the Merediths were related.

She found herself talking in a corner of the room with the girl, and fell to studying her face anew. A closer inspection merely consolidated her earlier judgment. She smiled inwardly as she remembered

Jack Glover's ridiculous warning. It was like killing a butterfly with a steam hammer, to loose so much vengeance against this frail piece of china.

"And how do you feel now that you're very rich?" asked Jean kindly.

"I haven't realised it yet," smiled Lydia.

Jean nodded.

"I suppose you have yet to settle with the lawyers. Who are they? Oh yes, of course Mr. Glover was poor Jim's solicitor." She sighed. "I dislike lawyers," she said with a shiver, "they are so heavily paternal! They feel that they and they only are qualified to direct your life and your actions. I suppose it is second nature with them. Then, of course, they make an awful lot of money out of commissions and fees, though I'm sure Jack Glover wouldn't worry about that. He's really a nice boy," she said earnestly, "and I don't think you could have a better friend."

Lydia glowed at the generosity of this girl whom the man had so maligned.

"He has been very good to me," she said, "although, of course, he is a little fussy."

Jean's lips twitched with amusement.

"Has he warned you against me?" she asked solemnly. "Has he told you what a terrible ogre I am?" And then without waiting for a reply: "I sometimes think poor Jack is just a little—well, I wouldn't say mad, but a little queer. His dislikes are so violent. He positively loathes Margaret, though why I have never been able to understand."

"He doesn't hate me," laughed Lydia, and Jean looked at her strangely.

"No, I suppose not," she said. "I can't imagine anybody hating you, Lydia. May I call you by your Christian name?"

"I wish you would," said Lydia warmly.

"I can't imagine anybody hating you," repeated the girl thoughtfully. "And, of course, Jack wouldn't hate you because you're his client—a very rich and attractive client too, my dear." She tapped the girl's cheek and Lydia, for some reason, felt foolish.

But as though unconscious of the embarrassment she had caused, Jean went on.

"I don't really blame him, either. I've a shrewd suspicion that all these warnings against me and against other possible enemies will furnish a very excellent excuse for seeing you every day and acting as your personal bodyguard!"

Lydia shook her head.

"That part of it he has relegated already," she said, giving smile for smile. "He has appointed Mr. Jaggs as my bodyguard."

"Mr. Jaggs?" The tone was even, the note of inquiry was not strained.

"He's an old gentleman in whom Mr. Glover is interested, an old army pensioner. Beyond the fact that he hasn't the use of his right arm, and limps with his left leg, and that he likes beer and cheese, he seems an admirable watch dog," said Lydia humorously.

"Jaggs?" repeated the girl. "I wonder where I've heard that name before. Is he a detective?"

"No, I don't think so. But Mr. Glover thinks I ought to have some sort of man sleeping in my new flat and Jaggs was duly engaged."

Soon after this Mr. Marcus Stepney came over and Lydia found him rather uninteresting. Less boring was Briggerland, for he had a fund of stories and experiences to relate, and he had, too, one of those soft soothing voices that are so rare in men.

It was dark when she came out with Mr. and Miss Briggerland, and she felt that the afternoon had not been unprofitably spent.

For she had a clearer conception of the girl's character, and was getting Jack Glover's interest into better perspective. The mercenary part of it made her just a little sick. There was something so mysterious, so ugly in his outlook on life, and there might not be a little self-interest in his care for her.

She stood on the step of the house talking to the girl, whilst Mr. Briggerland lit a cigarette with a patent lighter. Hyde Park Crescent was deserted save for a man who stood near the railings which protected the area of Mrs. Cole-Mortimer's house. He was apparently tying his shoe laces.

They went down on the sidewalk, and Mr. Briggerland looked for his car.

"I'd like to take you home. My chauffeur promised to be here at four o'clock. These men are most untrustworthy."

From the other end of the Crescent appeared the lights of a car. At first Lydia thought it might be Mr. Briggerland's, and she was going to make her excuses for she wanted to go home alone. The car was coming too, at a tremendous pace. She watched it as it came furiously toward her, and she did not notice that Mr. Briggerland and his daughter had left her standing alone on the sidewalk and had withdrawn a few paces.

Suddenly the car made a swerve, mounted the sidewalk and dashed upon her. It seemed that nothing could save her, and she stood fascinated with horror, waiting for death.

Then an arm gripped her waist, a powerful arm that lifted her from her feet and flung her back against the railings, as the car flashed past, the mud-guard missing her by an inch. The machine pulled up with a jerk, and the white-faced girl saw Briggerland and Jean running toward her.

"I should never have forgiven myself if anything had happened. I think my chauffeur must be drunk," said Briggerland in an agitated voice.

She had no words. She could only nod, and then she remembered her preserver, and she turned to meet the solemn eyes of a bent old man, whose pointed, white beard and bristling white eyebrows gave him a hawk-like appearance. His right hand was thrust into his pocket. He was touching his battered hat with the other.

"Beg pardon, miss," he said raucously, "name of Jaggs! And I have reported for dooty!"

Chapter X

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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