

Marsh Richard

# Violet Forster's Lover



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## CHAPTER I The Card on the Floor

Tickell turned his cards.

"A straight." The men all bent over to look. "King high-there you are, nine, ten, knave, queen, king; a mixed lot, but they'll take some beating."

Something on Beaton's face seemed to suggest that the other's hand was unexpectedly strong. He smiled-not easily.

"You're right, they will; and I'm afraid-" He turned his hand half over, then, letting the five cards fall uppermost on the table, sat and stared at him, as if startled. It was Major Reith who announced the value of the hand.

"A full and ace high-he's got you, Jack; a bumper, Sydney."

He pushed the salver which served as a pool over towards Beaton. Obviously it contained a great deal of money; there were both notes and gold, and cheques and half-sheets of paper.

"What will you take for it, Sydney?" asked George Pierce.

Anthony Dodwell interposed.

"One moment, before Beaton takes either the pool or-anything else. Perhaps he won't mind saying what is the card that he dropped on the floor."

They all looked at him-Beaton with a sudden startled turn of the head.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

Dodwell met his eager gaze with a calmness which, in its way, was almost ominous.

"I'm afraid that question is quite unnecessary; I fancy you know quite well what I mean. Will you pick up the card you dropped, or shall I?"

"I dropped no card." He drew his chair a little away from the table so as to enable him to see the floor. "I didn't know it, but there does seem to be one down there."

"Unless some good fairy removed it since you dropped it, there was bound to be. Draycott, would you mind picking up that card?"

Noel Draycott, stooping, picking up the card, showed it to the assembled players, in whose demeanour, for some as yet unspoken reason, there seemed to have come a sudden change.

"It's only the nine of spades."

"Exactly, which was possibly the reason why Beaton dropped it; with the nine of spades he could hardly have made a full."

Beaton rose to his feet, his face flushed, his tones raised.

"Dodwell, are you-are you insinuating-" The other cut him short.

"I'm insinuating nothing. You are the dealer; there's a pack close to your hand; you gave yourself three cards; I saw you glance at them, then drop one on to the floor, and take another off the top of the pack-in the hope, I presume, that it was a better one. It clearly was; the card you dropped was the nine of spades; the hand you have shown there consists of three aces and a pair of knaves; I can't say which was the card you took from the top of the pack, but it was one of them, and it certainly gave you the full."

There was silence, that curious silence which suggests discomfort, which presages a storm. It is not often that an accusation of foul play is made at a card-table around which are seated English gentlemen. These men were officers in one of His Majesty's regiments of Guards; they were having

what they called "a little flutter at poker" after the mess dinner-it had gone farther perhaps than some of them had intended. Considerable sums had been staked, and won and lost. Sydney Beaton in particular had punted heavily. For the most part he had lost-all his ready cash and more. For some time he had been betting with I.O.U.'s scribbled on odd scraps of paper. There had just been a jackpot. Five men had come in, dropping out one after the other until only Beaton and Tickell had been left. Tickell's last raise had been a hundred pounds; Beaton had covered the bet with an I.O.U. for £100 to see him; the hand he had exposed was, of course, the better one; there was a large sum of money in the pool, much the largest which it had as yet contained; if it was his, then it would probably more than set him on his feet again. It was the fact that there seemed to be an "if" which caused those present to stare at each other and at him as if all at once tongue-tied.

Beaton had gone red, then white; and now one felt that something must have happened to the muscles of his face, its expression seemed to have become so set and rigid. Major Reith, who was the oldest man present, broke the silence.

"Dodwell, please be careful what you say. Come, Sydney, tell him he is mistaken."

What Beaton said was gasped rather than spoken.

"It's a lie!"

Dodwell's manner continued unruffled. He turned to Draycott.

"Noel, I fancy I caught your eye. Am I wrong in supposing that you also saw what happened?"

"I'm afraid I did."

"You saw Beaton drop one of the three cards he gave himself, and take another off the top of the pack?"

"I'm afraid I did."

As Draycott repeated his former words, Beaton, still on his feet, swinging round, struck him with such violence that the man and the chair on which he was seated both went together to the floor. The thing was so unexpected that it had been done before anyone could interpose. Frank Clifford, who was on the other side of him, caught at Beaton's arm.

"Sydney! That won't do!"

Beaton, instead of heeding his words, was endeavouring to thrust the table away in order to get at Dodwell, who was on the other side. The others were able to prevent his doing that.

"If I get at him," he gasped, "I'll kill him."

But they did not allow him to get at his accuser, for they held him back; and they were five or six to one. Major Reith spoke.

"Don't make bad worse, Beaton, please; this is not a matter with which you can deal on quite those lines. Do we understand you to deny what Dodwell and Draycott say?"

The fact was, Beaton had not only had his share of wine at the table, he had been drinking since, liqueur after liqueur. Trifles of that kind, when in sufficient numbers, do not tend to cool a young man's already heated brain. For longer than they supposed Sydney had not been his real self; many and various were the causes which had been tending to make him lose his balance. Then, in that supreme moment, when he needed to keep his head more than ever in his life, he lost his balance altogether and played the fool.

"Do you think," he shouted, "that I'll condescend to deny such a charge coming from a beast like Draycott and a cur like Dodwell? I tell you what I will do, I'll take them on both together and fight them to a standstill, and choke their infernal lies back into their throats. Major Harold Reith, if I do get hold of you, I'll tear your lying tongue out by the roots."

He tried to get at the major, but of course they would not let him. For a few minutes there was a discreditable scene; Beaton behaved like a lunatic. Those who tried to keep him from attacking Major Reith he fought tooth and nail. Between them he was borne to the ground, then, as if he had been some wild beast, they had to drag him out of the room, and fling the door to in his face.

When, later, inquiries were made as to his whereabouts, he was not to be found. His room was empty. He had apparently paid a hurried visit to it. His mess uniform was on the floor. Apparently he had torn it off him and attired himself in something else. What he had done afterwards there was little to show. The sentry on duty, when closely questioned, said that Captain Beaton, in civilian dress, had passed him, reeling like a drunken man, and vanished into the night. The sentry was the last man connected with his regiment who saw him. Not a line came from him; nothing was heard; the place which had known him knew him no more. He had gone, a pariah, out into the world. He had been one of the best-liked men in the regiment; there were many who missed him; but there was one whose heart was nearly broken.

## CHAPTER II

### While the Groom Waited

Two days before that fatal night Sydney Beaton had gone down to see his brother, Sir George Beaton, head of the family, and practically its sole representative, in his old home at Adisham, in the County of Wilts. The visit had been of the nature of a forlorn hope. Sydney wanted help, pecuniary help, as he had done more than once before. He was in a very tight place. He had piled folly on to folly, and just lately he had surmounted the pile with the biggest of the lot. If he could not get money quickly matters would go very ill with him. Money-lenders and all those sort of people were not to be persuaded; he owed them already more than they ever expected to get. Nor did he know of any friend or acquaintance who would be likely to do what he required; his credit was bad even among them. He did not think he would be able to get the money from his brother; George had told him on a previous occasion that he would never let him have another farthing; there was evidence that he meant to keep his word. Still, Sydney had to try lest worse befell.

But he failed, badly. There was something very like a quarrel. Sydney confessed, after a fashion. He warned George that if he did not get the money he wanted the family name might suffer. George, in reply, said right out what he thought of him; he made it quite clear that his opinion of his brother could hardly have been a worse one. He refused to let him have even so much as a five-pound note.

"Sydney," he said with brutal frankness, "nothing can save you-certainly my money can't; I mean, nothing can save you from yourself. I mayn't be the steadiest mover; I'm not holding myself up as an example-"

"There you show your wisdom."

"But you-you're the limit. In the sense in which they use the word in the stable, you're a rogue. You're worse than an unbroken, bad-tempered colt; you're not safe either to ride or drive. You're absolutely certain to come a cropper, and probably a bad one. I give you my word that I have no intention, if I can help it, of letting you bring me down with you. You know, I'm not a rich man; I want all the money I've got for my own use-"

"That I will admit."

"If you had your way you'd make a bankrupt of me in another couple of years. But you're not going to have your own way; not another sovereign do you get out of me. That's my last word."

The younger brother seemed to be moistening his lips before answering; there was a strained look in his eyes.

"You understand that if you won't help me I'm in a hole?"

"I understand that clearly. I also understand that if I won't, what you call, 'help' you, you'll drag me in with you. In fact, what you're after is sheer blackmail. If there had been a witness of our conversation, I could give you into custody for attempting to obtain money by means of threats, and you'd be convicted. If the family name is to be dragged in the mud by you, then I shall want all the money I have to get it out again. Hadn't you better go? I don't propose to offer you a bed for the night, and if you waste much more time the last train will need some catching."

Sydney did go, after some very unbrotherly words had been exchanged; but he did not catch the last train. The last train from that part of the world left early; another interview which immediately followed the one with his brother delayed him till it was dawn. As he was leaving the house in which he was born, Ling, the butler, handed him a note, remarking, as if imparting a confidence:

"From Miss Forster, Mr. Sydney. It reached me just after you came, but I thought I had better not bring it in to you while you were with Sir George."

Without a word he tore the envelope open. Within was a sheet of paper on which were half a dozen lines.



"Dear Sydney, – Why did you not let me know you were coming? How dare you not to? If I had not seen you driving from the station I might never have known. I shall be at the old place this evening at seven o'clock; mind you come. I don't know that I need give a special reason why you are to come; I take it for granted that you will jump at the chance, but there is a special reason all the same. – Vi.

"Mind-I said seven! Just you make it *seven*."

Sydney looked at his watch; it was a quarter to seven. The last train left for London soon after eight. The station was nearly eight miles off; the dog-cart in which he had come was waiting at the door; he had not much time to spare if the train was not to go without him. He arrived at a sudden resolution-all his resolutions were arrived at suddenly, or he would have been a happier man. He spoke to the groom in the cart.

"Go down the village and wait for me at 'The Grapes.' I'll be with you as soon as I can."

He strode off. The groom touched his hat. He winked at Ling, who had appeared on the doorstep. The butler resented the familiarity.

"I don't want anything of that sort from you, Sam Evans; you mind your own business and leave others to mind theirs. You do as Mr. Sydney tells you, and wait for him at 'The Grapes.'"

"I'll wait for him right enough, but I wouldn't mind having a trifle on it that I keep on waiting till it's too late for him to catch his train."

Sam Evans grinned; he kept on grinning as he drove off, although the butler had done his best to keep him in his place. But the groom was right; the dog-cart waited outside the village inn till it was too late for Sydney Beaton to catch the last up train.

Autumn was come. The nights were drawing in. It was dusk. Sydney Beaton pursued his way through gathering shadows, through trees whose foliage had assumed the russet hues of autumn. There had been rain earlier in the day; a northerly breeze had blown it away, the same breeze was bringing the leaves down in showers about him as he walked. He went perhaps a good half-mile, taking a familiar short cut across his brother's property on to the neighbouring estate of Nuthurst. He came to a ring of trees which ran round a little knoll, on the top of which was what looked to be an old-fashioned summer-house. His footsteps must have been audible as they tramped through the dry leaves; that his approach had been heard was made plain by the fact that a feminine figure came out of the building and down the rising ground to meet him as he came. What sort of greeting he would have offered seemed doubtful; something in his bearing suggested that it would have been a less ardent one than that which he received. Moving quickly towards him, without any hesitation the lady placed her two hands upon his shoulders and kissed him again and again.

"Sydney, you are a wretch! Why didn't you let me know that you were coming?"

"I scarcely knew myself until I was in the train."

"You might have sent me a telegram before the train started."

"I'm only here for half an hour; I shall have to hurry off to catch the last train back to town."

Something in his words or manner seemed to strike her. She drew a little away from him in order to see him better.

"Sydney, what's wrong?"

He smiled, not gaily. To her keen eyes his bearing seemed to lack that touch of boyish carelessness with which she was familiar.

"What isn't wrong? Isn't everything always wrong with me? Aren't I one of those unlucky creatures with whom nothing ever does go right?"

"Have you quarrelled with George again?"

"He's told me he couldn't give me a bed for the night, which doesn't seem to point to our being on the best of terms."

There was a momentary pause before she spoke again; and then it was with quizzically uplifted eyebrows.

"More money, Sydney?"

He was silent. His hands in his jacket pockets, his feet a little apart, he stood and looked at her, something on his handsome face which seemed to have obscured its sunshine. When he spoke it was with what, coming from him, was very unusual bitterness.

"Vi, what's the use of this? I didn't want to let you know that I was coming; I didn't mean to let you know that I had come, because-what's the use of it?"

"What's the use of my loving you, do you mean? Well, for one thing, I thought that you loved me.

"An unlucky beggar who is always in a mess, and only scrambles out of one hole to get into another-what does his love matter to anyone?"

"I cannot tell you how much it matters to me. And, Sydney, doesn't my love matter to you?"

"Vi! you mustn't tempt me."

"How do you mean, tempt you?"

"If you only knew how I longed to take you in my arms, and keep you there. But what's the good of longing?"

"You can take me in your arms-and keep me there-for about ten seconds."

"Yes, I know; I know that you're a darling, the sweetest girl in the world, but what right have I to do it? What prospect have I of ever making you my wife? All debts, and nothing to pay them. What would your uncle say if he came upon us now? Wouldn't he warn me off the premises, as my brother has done? You know, my dear, you're not for such as I am. I don't want to say anything unkind, but don't you see, can't you see, that the only thing left for me to do is to withdraw and leave the field open for a better man?"

"Sydney, this time you must have come a cropper."

There was that in the girl's tone which, in spite of himself, brought a real smile to the young man's lips.

"I have. You're right. One which is going to make an end of me."

The girl shook her head gaily.

"Oh, no, it won't. I know you better. You've been coming croppers ever since I have known you, and that's all my life, some of them awful croppers; there must have been quite twenty from which you were never going to rise again. But you've managed, and you'll manage again. Only, really, I do wish you'd get out of the habit, if only for a while."

"Vi, you don't understand, this time you really don't. I'm done. I went to my brother as a last resource-you may be pretty sure it was a last resource-for the money which was the only thing that could save me. I am quite serious. He told me he would not give me so much as a sovereign; he even refused me a night's lodging. That means, as I tell you, that I'm done. I don't know quite what will happen to me, but something not pretty. When you and I meet again it is quite possible it will not be as equals; I shall be in a class of which you do not take social cognisance."

Again the young lady shook her head; if again it was with an attempt at gaiety, there was something which looked very much like tears in her eyes.

"What a cropper you must have come; it makes my blood run cold to hear you talking. Have you been robbing a bank?"

"I might as well have done. I'm likely to be in as awkward a position as if I had."

The girl looked at him steadily; his eyes met hers. Each might have been looking into the other's soul.

"Sydney, do you still love me?"

"Wouldn't it be better for you if I were to tell you straight out that I don't? Think, wouldn't it?"

"No, it wouldn't; it would be much worse. It would be a cowardly thing to say, and also, I happen to know, an untrue one. I know that you do still love me. I only asked you for the sake of hearing your answer. You do."

"It has become a habit."

"And habits are not things which are easily rooted up."

"So it would seem."

"I don't flatter myself that your love for me is such an important a factor in your life as I should like it to be, or you would keep clear of croppers. I don't think you are capable of very strong and enduring emotions where a woman is concerned; nowadays men aren't. But, in your own fashion, you love me all the same, and you'll keep on loving me. I know you. And it's a fashion with which I should be very well content if-"

"Yes, if; that's it-if! So what's the use?"

"You're frightfully selfish."

"Is that a new discovery? You've told me so-how many times? And now, when for the first time in my life I'm really generous, you say it again."

"But you're not generous; you're only considering yourself. You're more selfish than ever. You love me in your fashion, but you must remember that I love you in mine. I don't see myself how I'm going to marry you just yet awhile."

"Just yet awhile!"

"Yes, I said just yet awhile. But then, are you thinking of marrying someone else?"

"I shall never marry any other woman if I don't marry you. I'm not that kind of man."

"Precisely. I believe you. Nor am I that kind of girl. As I say, I may not be able to marry you just yet awhile, nor may I ever be able to marry you at all, but-it's you or no one. Sydney, whatever becomes of you, you will always be the only man in the world for me. You may come badly to grief; you may do things I would much rather you didn't do; you may make me suffer more than the average man makes the woman who loves him suffer; but I'd rather anything than lose you. Whatever may become of you, whatever you do, wherever you may be, be sure of one thing, always-that I love you. I'll make open confession. Sydney, I'd marry you to-morrow if you wished me. I don't think you're likely to, nor do I think that it would be good for either of us if you did, but-there's the truth. And that confession stands for always. In whatever plight you may find yourself, penniless and in rags-I'm only talking to suit your mood, you know-you have merely to say so that I can hear you, 'Come, let's marry,' and I'll be your wife, your glad and loving wife. Here's my hand on it, and my lips to boot if you'd like them, as soon as the thing may be."

## CHAPTER III

### "Stop, Thief!"

Since his brother had refused him hospitality; since Violet Forster had spoken such sweet words to him by the summer-house; since he had been thrown by his brother officers out of the room which he had regarded almost as his own-these things, to Sydney Beaton, seemed how many years ago? It was as though the Sydney Beaton that had been belonged to one world and the Sydney Beaton that was to another. And indeed that was the case. He had in truth passed from one world to another; out of a world in which it was all joy, into another in which it was all misery. But, instead of being divided by years from one another, it was only by days. It seemed incredible that so much could have happened to him in so short a time; but in cases such as his it is the incredible which happens. Scarcely more than four weeks ago, twenty-eight days, and already he was brought to this. During the last few days he had been practically penniless; now he was literally without a farthing, or the prospect of getting one, and it was November in London, one of those damp, cold, foggy, uncharitable Novembers which Londoners know well. Never since the night when he had been thrown out of the room could he be said to have had all his wits about him, to have been, in any real sense, himself. It was as though a cloud had settled on his brain and dulled it; which was, perhaps, an explanation why from that last moment of his crowning degradation he had behaved like an utter fool. He had left the barracks with, as his whole fortune, the suit of clothes which he was wearing, his watch and chain, his studs and links, and about three pounds in money. All the rest of his cash, which had been little enough, was in that last pool. His account at the bank was overdrawn; no one owed him anything; and, placed as he was, there was not a soul to whom he could turn. His first idea, if he could be said to have had a really clear one, was to get out of England-it generally is the first idea of men placed as he was; they are to be met all over the English-speaking colonies. In his case it was impossible. He had heard vaguely of a man working his passage, but he had no idea how it was done. When he found his way down to the docks, and began to have some glimmering of an idea of the state of things that obtained there, it was borne in upon him that he had as much chance of working his passage to any place worth going to as he had of getting to the moon. For him there was only London, the seamy side of it.

His money lasted about a week. Then he pawned his watch and chain for £10, and had fooled that away before he knew it. He got five more for his links and studs, and that went. There was nothing left but the clothes he stood up in. They were already in a state in which he had never dreamt that clothes of his could ever be. It is unnecessary to enter into details, but his full wardrobe was in what, a very short time ago, would have been to him an unthinkable condition. He had to get money somehow, or-he could not think or what. He had contemplated suicide during the first few days; vague thoughts in that direction still passed through his mind; but-he still lived. If he was to keep on living, food was necessary. The less chance he had of getting food the more he seemed to crave for it, with a craving which became sheer agony.

That November night hunger seemed to be driving him mad. He had lived during the last week on two or three shillings, but he himself could scarcely have said how. He had come to look upon a common lodging-house as a desirable haven, of a Rowton House as positive luxury; he had slept two nights running in a Salvation Army shelter, and had been thankful for that. The last three nights he had slept-if he could be said to have slept at all-out of doors, under the November sky, in mist and mire, cold and gloom. To-night he found himself in Hyde Park. No man knows of what he is capable until his whole being cries out for food, and gets none. When a man who has been nurtured as Sydney Beaton had finds himself on the verge of starvation, his plight is much worse than that of the man who has fared hardly all his days. His powers of resistance are less, in more senses than one. Let so much be urged in excuse of Sydney Beaton, because that night he went to Hyde Park with some idea

of asking for alms. Darkness, he thought, might shelter him; in some sort hide his shame. He would not be able to see clearly whom he accosted; what was much more, they would not be able to see him. But almost at the outset he had a shock which drove all notion of playing the beggar from him.

He was on the path on the Knightsbridge side of the Ring, under cover of a tree. A fine rain was falling; it was the only shelter to be had. Two men came swinging along the path. Something in their gait told him even in the darkness, while they were still at some distance, that they were well-to-do. He made up his mind that he would try to get out of them at least the price of a loaf of bread; the mere thought of a hot crusty loaf fresh from the oven made his brain reel. If he could only get the wherewithal to purchase one from the men who were coming towards him! Nearer they came, and nearer; they were almost on him. He was just coming out from under the tree when one of them spoke and the other laughed. He shrank back against the friendly trunk trembling, shivering. He knew who the two men were; in the other world which he had left behind they had been his brother officers: one was Anthony Dodwell, who had accused him of foul play, the other was Noel Draycott, who had supported the accusation! And he had been about to ask them for the price of a loaf of bread! If he had!

They went on. Dodwell's voice came back to him again, and Draycott's laughter. His heart was thumping so against his side that it seemed to be shaking him to pieces. He felt sure they had not seen him. He had noticed particularly that they never turned their heads; they were too anxious to press on to look his way-but if they had! It was some time after they were out of both sight and hearing that he recovered himself sufficiently to venture out into the open. Then, like a frightened cur, he slunk across the roadway towards the remoter portions of the park on the other side.

What a night that was, almost the worst of all the nights that he had had. Something, he knew not what, kept him in the park. When the hour for closing approached, he was cowering under a clump of bushes not far from the Serpentine. No one saw him. A policeman tramped along the path, but did not trouble himself to search for stragglers either on his right or left, seemingly taking it for granted that on such a night even the most miserable wretch would not choose such quarters.

Towards morning the weather improved. When the tardy light came back into the sky, Beaton ventured to show himself-a rain-sodden, half-frozen, shivering, weary, hopeless, starving wretch; his hunger seemed to be tearing at his vitals like some wild animal. A keeper eyed him suspiciously.

"What are you doing here? Where have you been all night? Have you been in the park?"

"In the park! Why, man, I spent last night at Claridge's Hotel, where I've just had breakfast. You haven't got a crust of bread about you, have you, something which you were going to give to the ducks?"

"No, I haven't. You had better take yourself outside of here. You're up to no good, I'm sure."

The keeper passed on, leaving Beaton to obey him or not as he chose. Sydney, aware that the park was now open to the public, did not choose. The morning grew brighter; positively the sun began to appear in the sky, a faint, uncertain sun in a watery sky. Riders began to come upon the scene, for the most part masculine; those victims of too much work, or perhaps too good living, who for various reasons are unable to take exercise in any other form, and are ordered by their doctors to take a regular morning ride in the park, no matter what the season of the year or the weather. Possibly because the morning, for November, was a fine one, the equestrians became quite numerous. Sydney stood up against the rail to watch them. There had been times, not so very long ago, when he had taken his morning canter in the park. As he watched the riders come and go, it seemed incredible now. In spite of his physical distress it still tickled him to notice how badly some of them rode; the "Liver Brigade" always had been famous for its bad riding. But what did it matter how they rode? The world went very well with them; they had slept on spring mattresses, between linen sheets, had come from luxurious homes, were returning to an excellent meal, which they probably lacked appetite to enjoy; while he-! He was rapidly approaching that state of mind in which the anarchist throws bombs; if he had had one handy he might have thrown it at one of those well-fed looking persons there and

then. If he were to stop one of them and ask him for the price of a loaf of bread? Was it not probable that, instead of giving him what he asked, he would summon the police? He knew them, ignorant, stupid, selfish to the backbone, thinking that no one could be hungry because they themselves were too well fed. The pangs of hunger seemed suddenly to grow more intense; he would have to get food somewhere, somehow, soon.

Two pedestrians came down the path, an old and a young man. They hailed a passing rider. He stopped; they drew close up to the rails as he came towards them. They were within three feet of Sydney Beaton. He could hear distinctly what was said. The elder man drew out a sovereign purse, and from it two gold coins. He said to the equestrian:

"You were right, Buxton, and I'm the loser. Here are your ill-gotten gains."

He held out the coins towards the man on the horse. Always a creature of impulse, Sydney Beaton gave way to the worst impulse he had ever had yet; in other words, he all at once went stark, staring mad. The old gentleman's umbrella was under his arm, in his left hand were the two coins, in his right the sovereign purse, still open. A heavy gold chain stretched from pocket to pocket across his waistcoat unguarded. Probably there was a handsome gold watch at the other end of it. No thought of anything of the kind had been in Beaton's mind one instant; the next he stepped forward and, snatching at the unguarded chain, had it in his possession before he himself clearly realised what he was doing. The act was so audacious, so instantaneous, so unexpected, so astounding, that for three or four seconds even the victim did not appreciate what had happened. Then he shouted, so that he might have been heard outside the park:

"The scoundrel's taken my watch and chain!"

Then his companion became alive to what had occurred, and the man on the horse to whom he had been about to give the coins, and presently everyone within sight and earshot. It is conceivable, and even probable, that Beaton did not understand what he was doing till he had done it; it was only when he saw the watch and chain in his own hand that understanding really came. He knew he was a thief; and the first instinct of a thief was born within him, the instinct of self-preservation. In a moment all his energies were centred in an attempt to escape. He rushed across the path, vaulted over the railing, tore across the grass as fast as his feet could carry him, with the chase at his heels. The old gentleman could not do much in the way of chasing, but seemingly his companion could, and there, were others who joined him who plainly were still capable of running after such a quarry. Swift-footed though he knew himself to be, before he had taken many steps Sydney knew that he would owe not a little to fortune if he escaped scot free. His impulse was to hurl from him the incriminating watch and chain, but that was an impulse to which he did not yield. It would do him no good; everyone would see him throw it, just as everyone had seen him take it. The watch would certainly be damaged, perhaps ruined; there would be nothing gained by treating it in such brutal fashion. So he crammed it into his jacket pocket, and set himself to move yet faster. The victim's companion was uncomfortably close behind him.

It was plain that he would have to reckon with more pursuers than one. People were coming towards him from all sides, even from the front. A crowd was gathering, all bent on capturing him. He saw a keeper hurrying down the path which bounded the stretch of grass which he was crossing, possibly the keeper who had already accosted him. A constable was advancing from the other side. If he shook off the amateur thief-catchers, he would have to reckon with them. The pair would probably be more than a match for him, but he would not be taken if he could help it. That would be indeed the end.

As he neared the opposite railing three or four persons were already there to meet him, others were rapidly approaching, including the keeper and the constable. He swerved to one side, ran rapidly along the railing, vaulted over it a dozen yards lower down, alighting within a few feet of the constable. That official halted, seeming to take it for granted that the criminal had delivered himself into his hands. He was premature. Nothing was farther from his intention. Sydney charged right at him, as he

had learnt to do in his old days of Rugby football. The policeman, taken unawares, went over like a ninepin; he made a vain grab at the other's legs as he fell. Sydney sped triumphantly on.

But, although he had sent the policeman sprawling, he knew that he had almost shot his bolt; the next fence would bring him down. His breath was failing him; the world seemed spinning round; a few more steps and he would be able to go no farther; they would have him; all would be ended.

At the very moment when already his pace was getting slower something happened which, if he had had his wits sufficiently about him and time enough to use them, would have seemed to him very like a miracle. He was coming into the road which leads through the park from the Corner to the Marble Arch. He had still sense enough to see that a motorcar was coming along the road, slowing as it came. It came to a standstill just as it was abreast of him. The sole occupant of the body of the car was a woman, who all at once opened the door, stood up, and beckoned to him. He did not pause to think what the gesture might mean, who this fair owner of a motor-car might be who had fallen from the skies. There was not time, nor had he wit enough; his senses were fast leaving him. He was so conscious that this was so that he made a last desperate effort, scrambled pantingly over the railing, got somehow to the side of the car. When he had got there, unless the woman inside had given him a helping hand, he would have been hard put to it to enter.

The moment he was in the door was slammed, the car was off. For Sydney that was the end of the chapter. He just managed to drop back on to the seat, but almost before he reached it his few remaining senses fled; he was as unconscious of what was happening as if he had not been there.

## CHAPTER IV

### The Good Samaritan

The thing was successful because so unexpected. The car was started, quickened its pace, and was out of the park before, probably, any of Beaton's pursuers understood what was being done. It was a triumph of impudence. The car had joined the other traffic, and was running along Piccadilly, without anyone lifting so much as a finger in an attempt to stop it. It turned up Bond Street, crossed Oxford Street, and began to thread its way among the maze of streets which constitute Marylebone.

The unexpected passenger continued unconscious throughout the entire run. The night and morning had completed the havoc wrought by the last few weeks; the works had run down at last. On his seat sat the chauffeur, a youngish man, clad in immaculate livery; he had apparently paid not the slightest heed to the incident of picking up in such strange fashion so singular a passenger. Although he had received no instructions as to the route he was to take, he drove steadily on without the slightest hesitation, as if carrying out a prearranged programme. By Sydney's side sat the woman who had opened the door, beckoned to him, and assisted him to enter. In spite of its being an open car, she was scarcely dressed in what is generally known as a motoring costume, but was rather attired as a lady might be who is taking the air in the park, or paying a morning call. It was not easy, from her appearance, to determine her age. Where a woman is concerned it seldom is, but she was certainly not old; she might have been anywhere between twenty-five and thirty-five. Nor was she ill-looking. At times, as she glanced at the man beside her, her face was lit by a smile which made it even more than pretty, then the smile went, and was succeeded by an expression which had in it something hard and cruel and even sinister; but even then, after some uncomfortable fashion, it was a handsome face, though scarcely one which one would have chosen for a friend. Her immobility was striking. Although she had been guilty of such a quixotic action as to rescue a man, a vagabond, who obviously was flying from the police, so soon as she was in the car her interest in him had seemed to cease. One might have supposed that this was a sentimental person, whose emotional nature was prone to lead her into what she supposed to be acts of kindness which afterwards she would have reason to regret, but there was nothing suggestive either of sentiment or emotion as she sat by Beaton. He presented such a pitiable spectacle, huddled there in the corner of the car, limp and lifeless, that the average woman would surely have shown some sign either of interest or sympathy. Not only did she do nothing to relieve his position, which was a more than sufficiently uneasy one, but she made no effort, even by speaking to him, to win him back to consciousness.

She regarded him almost continually, but rather as if he were a lay figure than a living man. One wondered if she proposed to use him as a model for a picture; she seemed to be studying him with so curious an air. She was observing him closely enough; one felt that nothing about him escaped her scrutiny—that she noted the well-cut clothes as well as the state that they were in; the hand which dangled helplessly by his side, that it was not that of a man who had done much manual labour; the face, which, unshaven and unwashed though it was, was not only a handsome one, but also the face of a man of breeding. Possibly she was putting these things together, and from them drawing her own conclusions.

Whatever her conclusions were, she kept them to herself. Clearly, instead of being the prey of her own emotions, this was a woman who kept her own feelings in the background; whose face was a mask; who was mistress of herself; who, to judge from her bearing, was as cool and calm and calculating as if she had been thrice her years. Which made this thing she had done seem all the stranger.

The car drew up in a short street of dull, old-fashioned houses, with stuccoed fronts, tall, narrow, dingy. The moment it stopped, before the lady had the chance to alight from the car, the door of



the house flew open, and a tall, clean-shaven man appeared on the doorstep who might have been a servant. Crossing the pavement, he opened the door of the car; the lady got out. As she moved towards the house she made one remark, which seemed an odd one:

"I've got him."

That was all she said. Moving easily-one noticed as she did so what a charming figure she had-she passed into the hall. The chauffeur sat still; he did not so much as glance round at the man who had come out of the house. That individual shared the general calmness of demeanour. He exhibited no surprise at what the lady had said or at the sight of the figure which was huddled in the car. He said nothing. Leaning forward, he put his arms under Beaton and raised him as if he were a child, carried him into the house, up a flight of stairs, into a room at the back, and laying him on a couch which it contained, looked down at him with an air of detached curiosity without showing any sign of having turned a hair. Beaton had grown lighter of late, but he had nearly six feet of bone and muscle, and still weighed something. The man must have been possessed of unusual strength, as well as knack; it is something of a feat to lift a big and unconscious person out of a vehicle and carry him up a steep flight of stairs as if he were a baby.

Presently the woman entered. The man was still standing by the couch, with a watch and chain and sovereign purse held in his hand. He was examining the watch. He nodded towards it as the woman appeared.

"What does this mean?"

He spoke quietly in a not unmusical voice; his accent was that of an educated person; his tone, though respectful, was that of one who addresses an equal, not that of a servant who speaks to his mistress.

"What's what?" She glanced at what he was holding. "It looks as if it were a watch and the usual appendages. Where were they?"

"In his jacket pocket. There's a name on the watch-Charles Carter-and a crest, and there are a couple of sovereigns in the purse."

"So that's why they wanted him."

"Who's they?"

"I was coming through the park when I saw that something interesting was taking place on one side of me: one man was trying to get away from a number of others. When I saw the way he bowled over a policeman I said to myself, 'That's the gentleman I want,' and here he is."

"I presume that watch and chain and sovereign purse explain the interest the crowd was taking in him. I imagine that they are articles that have only very recently come into his possession. He's a gentleman."

"I felt sure he was from the way he handled that policeman."

"There's his name on the jacket." He picked up the garment in question, of which he had relieved the still unconscious Sydney, and which was hanging over the back of a chair. "Here it is on the tab. The jacket was made in Savile Row, and here's his name: Sydney Beaton."

"It might, of course, have been made for someone else and come into his possession; he alone knows how."

"No; it was made for him, it fits too well. His name is Sydney Beaton, and he's a swell who's down on his luck."

"That's the kind of person we want, isn't it?"

For the first time the man's and woman's eyes met. In hers there was a gleam as of laughter. In his there was no expression at all. His was one of those square faces whose blue cheeks and chin show how strong the beard would be which is not allowed to grow. He glanced from the woman to the unconscious figure on the couch before he spoke.

"Perhaps. When will he be wanted?"

"By to-morrow morning. I ought to write at once to say that he is coming; it will be safer."

"Safer!" The man's thin lips were parted by what was rather a sneer than a grin, as if the word she had used had borne an odd significance. He continued to survey the unconscious Sydney, as a surgeon might survey a body which he is about to dissect. "He'll have to be ready."

"There's time; and no one can do that sort of thing better than you."

Again the lips parted in that curious substitute for a smile, as if the woman's words had conveyed a compliment.

"Oh, yes, there's time; and, as you say, I dare say I'll be able to make a decent job of him."

When the woman left him it was to remove her hat and coat. Then she went into a good-sized apartment, in which there was a blazing fire. In a corner was a bookshelf filled with books; she took one down, it was Burke's "Landed Gentry." She took a case out of some receptacle in her bodice, and lit a cigarette. Settling herself in a big arm-chair before the fire, she put her feet upon a second chair, and set to studying Burke. She found what she wanted among the B's.

"There it is: 'Beaton, Sir George, seventh baronet,' and all the rest of it. 'Seat, Adisham, Wilts; unmarried; next heir, his brother, Sydney, D.S.O., the Guards, captain, twenty-eight years old.' If that coat was built for him it looks as if that ought to be our man."

She closed the book and let it fall upon the floor. She inhaled the smoke of her cigarette, staring with a contemplative air at the flaming fire.

"I wonder what's his record? One can, of course, find out, but there will be hardly time before he's wanted. An heir to a baronetcy, a captain in the Guards, and a D.S.O. hardly comes to snatching watches and chains without good and sufficient reasons. And yet, in spite of the state he's in, he hardly looks it, and by this time I ought to be a judge of that kind of thing. He must have had some queer experiences, that young gentleman. I wonder if any of them have been queerer than the one he'll have to-morrow. And what'll become of him afterwards? It seems a pity, but so many things are pitiful which have to be."

As she indulged in the expression of that almost philosophical opinion she expelled the smoke of her cigarette from between her pretty lips, and she smiled. Then she sat up straighter in her chair, and threw her scarcely half-consumed cigarette into the fire.

"And there are those who pretend that this is a very good world that we live in!"

## CHAPTER V

### Dreaming

"Will you have all the apollinaris, Sir Jocelyn?"

Sydney Beaton looked up. He was vaguely conscious of having been roused from slumber by someone, possibly by the person who was standing by his side. He was still very far from being wide awake; his eyes, limbs, body, all were heavy. He had not a notion where he was. There was a real bed, in striking contrast to the makeshifts he had known of late; there were soft sheets, a soft pillow, and there were hangings. It was not really a large room, but, compared to the kind of accommodation with which he had recently been made familiar, it was palatial. There seemed to be some decent furniture, and a carpet on the floor. It was not well lighted; there was only one not over large window, on the other side of which was the November fog. What had happened to him? Where could he be? He put his wondering into words.

"Where am I? Who are you?"

The man at his bedside did not answer. He was holding in one hand a tray on which was a glass; in the other was a bottle, out of which he was pouring something into the glass. He repeated in another form his first inquiry:

"Will that be enough apollinaris, Sir Jocelyn?"

"I'm not Sir Jocelyn, if you're talking to me. What's in that glass?"

"A good pick-me-up. I think you will find it just about right, Sir Jocelyn." Sydney took the glass which the man advanced. Whatever its contents, they were pleasant to swallow.

"That's good, uncommon good. My word!" He had another drink. "I haven't tasted anything as good as that since" – he hesitated – "since I don't know when."

"I thought you'd find it refreshing, Sir Jocelyn?"

"Why do you call me Sir Jocelyn? Who are you? Where am I? How did I come to be here?" The question was again ignored.

"Her ladyship wished me to say that if you felt equal to it, Sir Jocelyn, she would be glad if you would join her at breakfast."

"Her ladyship! Who's her ladyship? Didn't you hear me ask you where I am?"

Perhaps it was because the man was busy with certain articles of the gentleman's wardrobe that he did not hear what was said.

"I thought you might like to wear this suit to-day." He was placing three garments over the back of a chair, which Sydney felt, hazily, were certainly not his. "Everything is quite ready, Sir Jocelyn."

Why did the fellow persist in calling him by a name which was not his? What had happened to him? What did it all mean? What was the matter with his head that he felt so incapable of collecting his thoughts? He had never felt so stupid before. Before he clearly understood what was occurring, the bed-clothes were being removed from the bed, and he was being assisted on to the floor as if he were a child or a sick man; indeed, as his feet touched the ground he felt as if, literally, he was a sick man. The room swam round him; his legs refused him support; had not the other had his arm half round him he would have collapsed on to the carpet.

"What," he asked, with a sudden thickness of voice, "what is the matter?"

Had he been clearly conscious of anything he could scarcely have helped but notice the keen scrutiny with which his attendant was observing him. His manner almost suggested a medical man; it was so suave, yet he treated Sydney as if he were an irresponsible patient.

"You've not been quite well, Sir Jocelyn. You've had rather a bad night. I think you'd better have another pick-me-up."

Sydney was placed in an easy chair. Presently he found himself drinking the contents of another tumbler. How good it was. And it did him good; it seemed to relieve some of the heaviness which weighed down his limbs and to render the confusion in his head less obvious, but it was very far from restoring him to himself. The other dressed him, slipping on garment after garment with a curious deftness, for Sydney seemed incapable of giving him any help at all. Beaton was dressed actually before he knew it in garments which he realised were not his, but which somehow seemed to fit him. How he had come to be in them he could not have told; yet so skilful was his valet that in a surprisingly short time his costume was completed, even to his collar and his tie, yet he had not once moved out of the arm-chair in which he had originally been placed.

The other took a final survey of his handiwork, standing a little back to enable him to do so. He gave audible expression to his candid opinion; he was plainly aware that the other was not in a condition to resent anything he might either say or do.

"You look very well indeed, Sir Jocelyn, quite remarkably well, considering. You want one more pick-me-up, made a trifle strong, then I think we'll take you downstairs, and breakfast with her ladyship may be trusted to do the rest."

For the third time Sydney Beaton emptied the contents of a tumbler which was insinuated into his hand. Possibly because it was more potent it had a more visible effect upon him than either of the other two. The other watched the effect the liquid made on him with about his thin lips that not quite agreeable something that was half a sneer and half a grin.

"Now, Sir Jocelyn, how are we feeling? Do you think you could manage to stand up?"

Sydney proved it by standing up there and then, but there was an unsteadiness about the fashion with which he managed to keep his feet which the other could scarcely fail to notice.

"I'm all right," he said; "pounds better; sound as a roach; if this-" He held out the glass with a hand that was shaky. "What was the stuff you gave me? It's first rate, a regular corpse reviver."

"It is rather effective, under certain conditions, in its way." The man's tone, in spite of its suavity, could hardly have been drier. "Now, Sir Jocelyn, I think you'll find that her ladyship awaits you."

"Her ladyship? Why will you keep calling me Sir Jocelyn? That's not my name. And who's her ladyship?"

Once more the questions were ignored. The other placed his fingers lightly on Sydney's arm, and Sydney found himself moving towards the door. But whether he was moving of his own volition or in obedience to the other's behest he would not have found it easy to say. The man opened the door, led him through it, walked beside him down the stairs-always with his fingers on his arm. At the foot of the stairs he paused:

"Now, Sir Jocelyn, how are you feeling?"

For the moment Sydney really could not say; he was feeling very queer indeed, incapable of expressing himself in articulate words. Had it not been that the other's arm was again half round him he might have found it difficult to retain his perpendicular.

"Another taste, Sir Jocelyn?"

It seemed that the man had brought the glass with him down the stairs refilled. Sydney had it between his fingers without his quite knowing how it came there. He took another taste; it had on him the same effect as before, seeming to steady his limbs and to clear his brain. Before the effect could pass away the man had led him to a door, had opened it, and was ushering him into the room beyond. Someone advanced to him, a woman, whom even in his hazy state he was aware was good to look at.

"I am so glad to see you; you can't think how anxious I have been. I hope you're feeling better, quite yourself again?"

Sydney knew not what to say. The woman's voice was a pleasant one, and was grateful to his ears; her face was lit by such a delicious smile, it was grateful to his eyes. He had a feeling that this must be some old and very dear friend. Yet he could not place her, he had not the dimmest notion who

she was; his memory must be playing him a trick. It was part of the general haziness through which he was looking out upon the world. But she did not seem to wait for an answer or to be hurt by his silence.

"Come," she said, "breakfast has been waiting quite a while. Will you have the seat by the fire, or will it be too much for you?"

"I'll sit wherever you please."

He managed to get out that much. She laughed, as if he had been guilty of a joke. She had quite a musical laugh.

"Then you shall sit by the fire, and I will do the honours. For once in a way I'll wait on you. I don't think you'll be required." The last words were addressed to the man who was still standing in the open doorway. They exchanged glances, of which Sydney was oblivious. The man made a significant gesture with the empty tumbler which he was holding in his hand, then touched his finger to his forehead. "I quite understand," said the lady. "But I tell you again that I don't think you'll be required. If I want you I will ring. In the meantime you may go."

The man went. Outside the door he paused; an odd look came on his face; he knit his brows; he glanced about him quickly, back and front; then he drew himself up straight and grinned.

"It's a ticklish game she's got to play, but there's few can play a ticklish game better than she can."

## CHAPTER VI

### His Wife

To Sydney it was all as if it were part of a dream. He had not dreamed—he did not know since when. This was like one of the dreams he used to have when he was a boy; a delightful dream. The sense of comfort which filled the room, the charmingly laid breakfast table, glorious with pretty china and shining plate; the charming woman who, with the most natural air, was treating him as one who not only had an assured footing, but who was both near and dear. Whether in this matter it was he who dreamed or she, he could not make sure. He wondered if he had been ill. He had such a strange feeling that he very easily might have been; he might have been ill for quite a long time; all sorts of things might have happened, and he might have forgotten all about them. It was the more possible since he could remember nothing; all he could remember was that he had awakened and found the man at his bedside with a tray on which was a tumbler. Before that, beyond that, his mind was a hazy blank.

But there seemed nothing hazy about his hostess, if she was his hostess; he supposed she was. If she was not his hostess, then who was she? She was ministering to his creature comforts in a manner which made the dream seem still more delightful, and such a very real one, too.

Through the haze which served him as a mind there seemed to gleam something which troubled him. The breakfast was excellent, the coffee, the food, everything. Was that not, in part, because at some remote period he had gone without breakfast, without anything? He was frantically hungry. There was a fragrance about the hot rolls which recalled something. Was there not a time when he had wanted a hot roll very badly, or something like it? The effort of recollection caused him to stop eating, a fact on which the lady commented.

"Of what are you thinking? You looked as if your thoughts were miles away. Won't you have a little more bacon?"

He had a little more. There was an exquisite flavour about that bacon which made it seem fit food for a god. He ate and ate, while she sat by, putting more food upon his plate as soon as it was empty or replacing one plate with another. At last he ceased. How much he had eaten he had no notion; he could eat no more.

"Now," she said, "you must have a cigar and a liqueur."

It did not occur to him to ask if it was usual to follow such a breakfast as he had had with a liqueur; he was too full of physical content to care. He watched her as she brought a box of cigars to the table, choose one, cut it, put it between his lips, and, striking a match, held it up to him. The first puff at that cigar was ecstasy, so great as to be almost painful. What was the flood of recollections which it brought back? How long ago was it since he had tasted such a cigar as that—a cigar at all? What dreadful things had happened to him since? She had poured something out of a bottle into a glass. She had spoken of a liqueur; but it was not a liqueur glass which she held out to him and from which he sipped.

It was curious how willing he seemed to be to have everything done for him; to eat and drink what was given to him; to have no taste of his own; to behave almost as if he were a puppet, moving when she pulled the string. And it seemed to amuse her to observe that it was so. One felt that she was curious to learn how far in this direction she might go, to what extent she could pull the strings and he would move. She put almost the same question to him as the man had put to him upstairs:

"Now, how are you feeling?"

"I'm feeling-well, I can't tell you how I'm feeling. I'm feeling just right. But do you know—I hope you'll forgive my saying so—but do you know, it's a fact that I can't make things out at all."

"What sort of things?"

"Why-everything; all sorts of things."

"Explain just what you mean."

"I'll try; but somehow, you know, it doesn't seem easy." He took the cigar from between his lips and had another sip from the glass which was not a liqueur glass. Something in his manner seemed to be tickling her more and more; each moment the smile on her face seemed to be growing more pronounced; it was, apparently, only with an effort that she could keep herself from bursting into a roar of laughter. He was looking her straight in the face with something in his eyes which seemed to cause her profound amusement. "Have I been ill, or-or queer, or something? I don't quite know how it is, but I feel so-rummy, if you'll excuse the word, that I feel as if I had had something."

It was some seconds before she answered. She sat with her elbows on the table looking at him with twinkling eyes.

"Well, you have had something; indeed, I should say that you had something now."

"That's how I feel. You know" – he put his hands up to his forehead-"it seems as if there was something wrong with the works. I can't think nor understand. As for remembering-I can't remember anything at all."

"I should imagine that that might be awkward."

"It is; you've no idea. For instance-you laugh-but I can't make out where I am, or how I got here, or-and that's the worst of it, it does seem so ridiculous-but I can't remember who you are."

"I'm your wife."

She said it with a face all laughter. That the statement took him aback was evident. He started and stared as if he could not make out if she were in jest or earnest.

"My-what?"

"Your wife."

"I suppose you're joking?"

"Not at all; I've seldom felt less like it. Being a wife is a very serious thing. Aren't you conscious of your weighty responsibilities as a husband?"

"I know you're joking." A strange something came on to his face which might have been a smile, but, if it was, it was a pathetic one. She smiled back at him. Into her smile there came, upon an instant, a something which was hardly genial.

"But I'm not joking. You are Sir Jocelyn Kingstone, and I am Lady Kingstone, your lawful wife."

"Now, I do know that you are pulling my leg, in spite of the something wrong up here." He touched his forehead with his finger. "I do know that my name is not Kingstone, and I'm just as sure that I'm not married-no such luck."

"Can't you regard yourself as married for, say, a few hours, perhaps even less? Can't you act as if you were?"

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing much. But, you see, I've done you a favour-I don't want to mention it, but I have-and couldn't you do me one in return?"

"I feel you've done me a favour-I've a sort of consciousness of it in my bones-but for the life of me I can't straighten things out."

He presented an odd picture as he sat there endeavouring to get his wits into working order; he seemed to be gradually collapsing under the strain. Instead of being touched by his obviously piteous plight, it seemed to add to her amusement.

"Don't let's go into details; don't try, it will only worry you. I have done you a service, and that's enough. Now I want you to do me one, and as you're a gentleman, and all that sort of thing, I don't think I shall need to ask you twice; you'll do it the first time of asking."

"What is it you want me to do? I'll do what I can, but there's precious little I can do; I'm so-well, you can see for yourself how it is with me."

"I've told you already what it is I want you to do. I want you to consent to regard yourself as my husband for-probably only a very few minutes."

"But I don't understand. I don't see what good you're going to get from my pretending to be your husband. A very poor sort of a husband I should make."

"You'll only be my husband *pro forma*-I think that's the proper term. You see, I'm in a position in which I've got to have a husband, just for a very few minutes; it doesn't matter what sort, so long as he's fairly presentable, and you know you're quite nice looking."

If he heard the compliment, it went unnoticed.

"It may be my muddled head, but I still don't see what you're driving at."

"It's like this-I'll try to make it plain: There's a large sum of money which is due to me, but I can't get it without my husband's assistance. He's got to come with me to the banker's, and sign papers, and things like that."

"Sign papers, and things like that?"

"That's all."

"That's all?" Again he echoed her words, as if, by dint of doing so, he was trying to get at their meaning. "But, signing papers, and things like that, isn't that rather a deal? What sort of papers would he have to sign?"

"Oh, nothing very dreadful." The smile with which she regarded him was a bewitching one. "You're not drinking your liqueur." She took up the glass and put it into his hand. He sipped at it with that docility with which he seemed to do all things. "You'd merely have to sign your name."

"Yes; but to what?"

"I really can scarcely tell you. I'm not a lawyer or a banker. I don't know what the forms are on such occasions, but I guess-mind you, it's only a guess-that you'll have to say you are my husband, and sign for the money after you've got it."

"Wouldn't that be forgery?"

"Forgery? How?" The smile did not fade, but a gleam came into her eyes which hinted that the question had taken her a trifle aback; it is conceivable that she had not supposed that he was sufficiently clear-headed for it to occur to him. "What an extraordinary thing to say! My dear man, it would be done with my authority, at my wish, and in my presence."

"Yes; but where is your husband?"

"At this moment he is not easily accessible, or I shouldn't want to worry you. I'd no idea that you'd have made such a fuss."

She made a little grimace, which became her very well. There was nothing to show that he observed it. He seemed to be struggling to follow out the line of thought which had come into his head.

"Is the money to be paid to your husband or to you?"

"Nominally to him, but really to me."

"Does he know about it?"

"How do you mean, does he know?" All at once she rose, and came and stood in front of him. "Young man, you're not to ask curious questions. This is a very private matter; there's a lot about it which I don't wish to explain, and which I don't think you're quite in a state to understand if I did. I'll tell you exactly what it is I want you to do. I want you to drive with me in, say, half an hour to the banker's. There I shall take you into a private room, and I shall tell them that you are my husband, Sir Jocelyn Kingstone; that you have not been very well, and cannot stand much worry, so that they're to get matters through as quickly as they can. If you like, you need not speak at all; you can leave all the talking to me, and, I may add, all the responsibility, too. Then, I imagine, they may ask you to sign a paper of some sort-I don't quite know what, but it won't be very much-then they'll hand you the money, and you'll sign for it, and then we'll come away. You see that the whole thing won't last more than five or, at the outside, ten minutes. We'll drive back here together, and in return for the



service you've done me I'll do anything you like-mind, anything you like-for you. You'll find in me the best friend you ever had."

She knelt beside him on the floor, cajoling him, whispering things which he barely understood, but which were pleasant to hear. Somehow the feeling of physical well-being seemed to dull his senses still more. The dream became more dream-like; the woman's hands softly smoothed his hair; her lips were close to his; her eyes bewitched him; her words charmed his ears. She refilled the big sherry glass, and, even unwittingly, he sipped the insidious liqueur. In short, she played the fool with him, which, after all, was easy. At the best, after what he had lately gone through, he was little more than the husk of a man; but they had taken care that he should not be at his best. Her male accomplice had, as they put it, "readied" him. It was true that they had fed and washed and clothed him, but it was also true that they had dosed and drugged him. Being helpless in their hands, they had played tricks with him of which he had no notion and against which he had no defence.

After awhile the woman went out of the room. Without, suspiciously close to the door, was the man. They exchanged a few hurried sentences. She asked: "Is the brougham outside?"

"It's been there ever since I brought him down."

"I'm going to put on my hat. Give me his; I'll put it on for him. He's in a state in which he's more in my line than in yours."

The man grinned. He rubbed his chin as if considering.

"How long shall you be?"

"I ought to be back inside an hour. I shall come straight back."

She began to ascend the stairs, the man watching her as she went.

"I'll take care that you come straight back. You may have a card up your sleeve which you mean to play; but I have another, which will perhaps surprise you."

These words were not spoken aloud; they were said to himself. He looked as if he meant them, and as if they had a significance-an ominous significance-which was a little secret of his own.

## CHAPTER VII

### Among Thieves

She sat very close to him as they went through the streets in the brougham. She had persuaded him to have still another taste of the liqueur before they started; the world seemed more dream-like than ever. When the vehicle drew up, she helped him out into the street. The air of the misty November morning seemed to add to the fog which was in his brain. Nothing could have been more gracious or graceful than her solicitude for his seeming incapacity to take proper care of himself; no wife could have taken more tender care of a delicate husband. He did not know what place this was at which they stopped, and she did not tell him. When presently he found himself seated in an arm-chair, he had only the vaguest idea of how he had got there, and no knowledge whatever of the room in which he was. There was a gentleman who occupied a seat behind a table who he had a dim feeling was observing him with considerable curiosity. Something was said to him which he did not catch, possibly because his hearing was unusually dull. The woman at his side repeated it.

"My dear Jocelyn, this gentleman is asking if you are my husband, if you are Sir Jocelyn Kingstone."

Sydney said something. He did not know what he said; he never did know; but it seemed to be regarded as an efficient answer. Shortly something else was said to him, which the woman again repeated. He had a misty notion that she was doing a good deal of talking; that notion became clearer in the days that were to come. She put her hand lightly on his arm.

"Come, Jocelyn." She led him nearer to the table, placing him on a chair which was drawn close up to it. "This is what you are to sign. They have given me the money; here it is."

She held up what, although he did not realise it, was a bundle of bank-notes.

"Is it all right?"

He did not know why he asked the question, but he asked it. It was the first thing he had said consciously since he was in the room. He had had an odd feeling that she wished him to ask the question. She smiled.

"Quite all right. I will count it if you like, but I assure you it's right. Would you rather I counted it, or would you like to count it yourself?"

"No; it doesn't matter, so long as it's right."

He was conscious that a piece of paper was on the table in front of him, and that he had a pen between his fingers, though he was not sure how either of them had got there. She pointed to the paper with her finger.

"Sign here. Just put your name-Jocelyn Kingstone. My dear boy, how your hand does shake!"

He was aware that it shook, but he was not aware of the glance that the lady exchanged with the gentleman who was on the other side of the table, to whom, when he had made an end of writing, she handed the sheet of paper.

"What a scrawl! Jocelyn, your writing's getting worse and worse." Then, to the elderly gentleman: "I'm afraid my husband's signature is not a very easy one to read."

The elderly gentleman surveyed the performance through a pair of gold-rimmed pince-nez smilingly.

"It isn't very legible, is it? Your signature is not very legible, Sir Jocelyn; it would take an expert to decipher it. Would you mind, Lady Kingstone, witnessing the fact that it is your husband's signature?"

"Do I mind? Of course I don't." She laughed as if she appreciated the joke of the suggestion. "There-'Witness, Helena Kingstone,'-I think you will be able to read that."

"That certainly is legible enough. You write a good bold hand, Lady Kingstone, the sort of hand I like a woman to write."

When the pair had left the room the elderly gentleman said to a younger one who was seated at a table to one side:

"That's a sad case, a very sad case indeed. That is quite a charming woman, and not bad-looking; while he-he's the sort of person who, in a better ordered state of society, would be consigned to a lethal chamber at the earliest possible moment. Upon my word, I often wonder what makes a woman marry such a man. Fancy, at this time of day, drunk."

The younger man seemed to consider before he spoke.

"It struck me that he was something else as well as drunk. He didn't carry himself like an ordinary drunken man. He seemed to be under the influence of some drug. She says that he's been ill; he looks it. I wonder if they've been drugging him to bring him up to concert pitch."

The elder man shook his head. He seemed to be weighing the other's words.

"It's a sad case, a very sad case, whichever way you look at it. Poor woman! She may have had her own motives when she promised to love, honour, and obey him, but it's a long row she has set herself to plough."

When the pair in question were back in the brougham, and the horse's head was turned the other way, they had not gone very far before a distinct change took place in the lady's manner. She was no longer solicitous; she no longer sat close to her companion's side; indeed, she seemed disposed to give him as wide a berth as possible, to ignore him as completely as the exigencies of the situation permitted, and she never spoke a word. She was, possibly, too engrossed with the singularity of her proceedings to pay any attention to him. On her lap was a pile of bank-notes which she was dividing into separate parcels; these parcels she was bestowing in distinctly surprising portions of her attire. She slipped one parcel in the top of one stocking, a second into the top of the other; she took off her shoes, and placed a wad of notes in each; she turned up the sleeves of her coat-into the lining about the wrists, in which an aperture seemed to have been purposely cut, she inserted quite a number. Loosening her bodice, she slipped several into the band at the top of her skirt. With the residue she performed quite a surprising feat of legerdemain. She produced a small bag which was made of what looked like oil-skin, into which she crammed the notes; raising it to the back of her neck, she gave her shoulders a sort of hunch, it slipped down the back of her dress; one could see from the movements she made that she was trying to get it to settle in its proper place. Then, for the first time, she turned towards Beaton.

Some of her performances had been hardly of the kind which the average woman would care to essay in front of an entire stranger. She had been as indifferent to her companion's presence as if he had been a mechanical figure; and, indeed, when she looked at him, one perceived that he might just as well have been. He seemed to be as devoid of intelligence, as incapable of taking active interest in what was going on about him; it was probable that he had been quite oblivious of what she had been doing. But this time the spectacle he presented, instead of amusing her, seemed to fill her with quite different feelings. She addressed him all at once as if he had been a dog, her voice hard, cold, strident, even a trifle vulgar:

"Hullo-over there!" He remained still, clearly not realising that he was being spoken to. She went on in the same tone: "Now then, wake up! Haven't you been ill quite long enough? Try another sort of game. Do you hear me speak to you?" Apparently he did not. "Don't you, or won't you? Are you drunk? Now then, this won't do. I'm very much obliged to you, but I've had quite enough of it."

Leaning towards him, taking him by the shoulder, she began to shake him with considerable vigour, considering he was a man, and a big one, and she was a woman. The effect was, in its way-a grim way, ludicrous. His hat first tilted forward over his nose, then dropped on to the floor; his head fell forward over his chest. It seemed as if, if she kept on shaking him, he would come to pieces.

Perceiving this, she stopped, eyeing him more closely, but still with no show of amusement, rather with contempt and annoyance.

"What's the matter with you? Are you ill, or is it the liqueurs and-the other things? Anyhow, I've had enough of it; I'm not going to have you ill in here. The time has come when we must part. Do you hear? Wake up!"

He did seem to wake up, in a kind of a fashion. He raised his head with an effort, looking at her with lack-lustre eyes.

"What is it?"

"What is it? It's the key of the street, the same key you had before."

A thought seemed all at once to occur to her. Stooping, she took off her right shoe, from it the wad of notes; selecting one, she replaced the others and the shoe.

"When I first made your acquaintance you had nothing, and rather less. Now, you've had a good night's rest, a bath, and other luxuries; you've had good food and drink; you are rigged out in decent clothes from head to foot; you've not done badly; but here's something else, as a sort of tit-bit."

She held out the note. He not only paid no heed to it, but seemingly he had no idea of what it was, or of what she was talking. This time she did seem to be amused; she laughed right out, as if his grotesque helplessness tickled her.

"Here, you're a pretty sort; I'll put it in your waistcoat pocket for you. Mind you, it's a ten-pound note-do you hear, it's a ten-pound note-for goodness sake do look as if you were trying to understand-and it's in your waistcoat pocket; I've put it there; take care, and don't you lose it; you'll want it before you're very much older."

She slipped the note into his waistcoat pocket without his showing the slightest sign of interest in what she was doing; he seemed to be mumbling something, for his lips were moving, but it was impossible to make out what he said.

"Now then, my funny friend, you'd better pull yourself together; we're going to part-try to look as if you were sober, if you aren't."

She tapped at the window; the carriage stopped; she opened the door and descended.

"This way, please." Taking him by the arm she drew him towards her, he yielding with the old, uncomfortable docility. Somehow he joined her on the pavement. "You've left your hat behind you, you can't go about London without a hat." Picking it up from the floor of the carriage, she placed it on his head. "That's not straight; there, that's better. What a helpless child it is! Sorry I can't stop, but I've another engagement; pleased to have met you; glad to have been able to do you a good turn."

She was re-entering the carriage with a smile again upon her face, when the man who had acted as Beaton's valet came round from the back and stood beside her; at sight of him her smile vanished. He raised his hat to Beaton.

"I also am pleased to have met you." He turned to the woman. "I think, if you don't mind, or even if you do, that we'll keep that engagement together. After you into the carriage."

Evidently she found the sight of him by no means gratifying.

"What's the meaning of this? What are you doing here? I thought it was agreed that you should wait for me till I came back."

"I had a sort of idea that I might keep on waiting; it even struck me as just possible that you might never come back at all. After you into the carriage."

She hesitated; looked as if she would like to refuse; then, with a laugh, which was hardly a happy one, she did as he suggested. He followed her; the door was shut; the carriage drove off. Sydney Beaton was left standing on the pavement; oblivious of what was taking place, of where he was; as incapable, just then, of taking care of himself as any inmate of an asylum. He remained standing where they had left him, swaying to and fro. The fog had thickened; a drizzling rain had begun to fall. It was not easy to make out where he was, but he was at the corner of a street, in what seemed

to be an old-world square, which in that moment was as deserted as if all the houses round about it had been empty and it was miles away from anywhere.

But presently his solitude was broken; two men came round the corner, doubtful-looking men, shabby-genteel looking men, in some queer way the sort of men one would expect to find prowling about in such a place at such a time. At sight of Beaton they paused; they exchanged glances; one nudged the other. Then one spoke to him, with what he possibly meant to be an ingratiating smile.

"Nasty day, captain; looks as if we were going to have a real London particular." When Sydney seemed to be unconscious even of his presence his tone became a little insolent. "Waiting for anybody, guv'nor-or are you just a-taking of the air?"

The other spoke, with a glance at his companion which had in it something which was evil:

"Can't you see that the gentleman's taking of the air? What he wants is someone to take it with him; what do you say to our offering the gentleman our society?"

Sydney remained speechless, motionless, save that he continued swaying to and fro. They again exchanged glances. The first man said, with ostentatious impudence:

"I say, old cock, can you tell us how many beans make five?" Sydney was still silent. The first man went on. "Here, Gus, you take one of the gentleman's arms and I'll take the other: what he wants is a little bright, cheerful society, and he'll get it if we take him along with us."

Each of this most unpromising-looking pair took one of Sydney's arms; and without his attempting to remonstrate, or to offer the faintest show of resistance, they led him away.

## CHAPTER VIII

### The Sandwich-man

A biting cold afternoon towards the end of January. Six sandwich-men trudged along the Strand, urged by the cutting wind to more rapid movement than is general with their class. On the board of the last man which was slung over his back were the words, "Look at the man in front." On the board which was at the back of the man in front, to which your attention was directed, was "for Warmth And Sunshine Try Cox's Bitters." The legend was repeated all along the six. It almost seemed as if it must be a joke, of a grim order, to compel such unfortunate wretches to stare for hour after hour at such advice, on such a day. One had only to glance at them to see how much they stood in need of both warmth and sunshine; yet the chance seemed extremely slight that they would have an opportunity of trying Cox's bitters.

Some of the passers-by, who were in better plight than the six in the gutter, seemed to be struck by the fact that a jest might be intended, and where there were two of them together, they commented on it to each other.

"Poor beggars!" said one of the passers-by to the acquaintance at his side. "It's pretty rough on them to make them carry about a thing like that, when they're pretty nearly at death's door for want of the very things which, according to their own showing, are so easy to get."

The words were heard by someone who happened at that moment to be passing them—a woman. Possibly, as is easy in London, the sight is such a common one, she had been unconscious that the sandwich-men were there. When she heard the words she glanced at them to see to what they might apply. As she did so she started and stopped, as if she had seen something which had amazed her. The sandwich-men passed on, none of them had noticed her; they were probably too far gone in misery to notice anything, each kept his unseeing eyes fixed on his fellow's back.

The woman stood still, seemed to hesitate, went on, then turned and looked after the retreating sandwich-men. She seemed to be asking herself if it would be possible to catch them up, they were already at a distance from her of perhaps fifty yards. Then, as if arriving at a sudden determination, she moved quickly after them. Yet, although she walked so quickly, it was some little time before she caught them up, so that she had an opportunity to consider whatever it was that was passing through her mind. At last she was abreast of them again; was passing them; she scanned the last man, the fifth, the fourth, and, with much particularity, the third. Behind the others was probably all of life that was worth having, if it had been worth having to them; it seemed scarcely likely that the scanty, broken fragments of what remained of it could be worth anything to them. Theirs would probably be a continual tramp through the gutter, or its equivalent, to the grave.

But with the third man in the line it was different. He was young. In spite of the grotesqueness of his attire—he was clad in ill-assorted, ragged and tattered oddments of somebody else's clothing—there was something in his bearing which suggested that he was still a man. These others were but torsos. And although the hair beneath his greasy cap stood in crying need of both a barber and a brush, and there was an untrimmed, unsightly growth upon his cheeks and chin, a shrewd observer might have ventured on a small wager that if his hair had been cut and trimmed and he had been shaved and washed, he would not be altogether ugly.

One thing was noticeable, that though the woman stared at him he took no heed at all of her—he did not take his eyes off the man in front of him; and that although the woman kept step beside him in a manner which the others began to mark. All at once, as if moved by an overmastering impulse, she stretched out her umbrella and touched him on the shoulder.

"Hullo!"

That was all she said, but it was enough; he turned his head. At the sight of the eyes which glanced at her out of that dreadful face she started again, not without excuse. This was the face of one of those men of whom society has good reason to go in terror. Desperation was in every line of it; something like madness was in the eyes. This was the face of a man who had suffered much, and who, if opportunity offered, would stick at nothing to get even with those who had made him suffer.

He looked at the woman with, at first, no sign of recognition in his glance. Then, a muscle moved; something came into his eyes which had not been there before; all at once the fashion of his countenance was changed. He stopped, bringing those behind him to sudden confusion. He turned, the better to look at her; beyond doubt this was a woman of nerve, or she would have shrunk from that which was on his face. One felt that if, in that first wild moment, he had not been impeded by the boards which bound him, he would have laid violent hands upon her, and she would have fared ill.

But the boards did bind him. With them there he could do nothing but stand and stare. She met his gaze unflinchingly. Not only did she show no sign of concern at the threat which was in it, something in the expression of her own face suggested that it occasioned her positive pleasure. Certainly she could not have been more completely at her ease.

"Take those things off and come with me."

The man glared at her as if he wondered if his senses were playing him a trick.

"Come with you?"

It was an interrogation conveying, it would seem, a world of meaning. She smiled; at sight of the smile the gleam in his eyes grew more pronounced, his face more threatening. But she was in no way troubled.

"You heard what I said; you're not in the state in which you were when I saw you last; but in case you didn't quite hear I'll repeat it. I said, 'Take those things off and come with me.' And be quick about it, please, if you don't want to have a crowd collect and mob us; you see they're gathering already."

There was a momentary, very obvious, hesitation, then he did what she requested—he took the things off, meaning the boards which were suspended from his shoulders. When he had them off he put a question:

"What shall I do with them—shall I bring them with me?"

From the purse she took out of her handbag she chose a coin, speaking to the man behind him:

"There are five of you, there's half a sovereign; that's two shillings apiece. Take these articles back to their owner, and explain that the gentleman who was in charge of them has been called away."

She hailed a taxicab; at her suggestion he got in first, she followed, and the cab drove off towards a destination the driver alone had heard. The five remaining sandwich-men followed it with a chorus of thanks; one of them exclaimed, "Good luck, old pal! I wish I was in your place." He was a very old man, quite probably in the seventies, small in stature, nearly bent double as if shrivelled by the cold. For some cause his words, uttered in shrill, quavering tones, seemed to amuse the bystanders. A crowd had gathered, a heterogeneous crowd which so quickly does gather in a London thoroughfare; the five remaining sandwich-men were explaining to the people, as best they could, what had happened. In the taxicab nothing was said; the passengers were a queerly assorted pair, offering even a more striking contrast than when, on that first occasion, they had been alone together in the motor in the park. Then it was she who looked at him; now it was he who looked at her.

She sat in her own corner of the cab, her glance kept straight in front of her, so that she never looked his way. He, on the other hand, never took his eyes off her; it was perhaps as well she did not see them, they were unfriendly. His grimy hands were clenched in front of him; to judge from his expression they might, in fancy, have been clenched about her throat; no one watching him could have doubted that he was capable of such an action; this was rather a savage animal than a civilised man.

The cab crossed Brompton Road into a street on the other side, and after one or two turnings drew up in front of a small house which formed one of a terrace of old-fashioned villas. The woman paid the cab, opened the door with a latch-key, ushered the man into a room of fair size, comfortably

furnished, a bright fire made it seem a veritable haven of refuge after the inclemency of the weather without. For the first time she spoke.

"Come to the fire and warm yourself; I should think you must be cold."

He echoed her last word with a very different accent.

"Cold!" He said it again in a tone of voice which was indescribable; in the word as he uttered it there was a whole dictionary of meaning. "Cold!"

"Have a drink?"

She was moving towards the sideboard on which there were bottles and glasses.

"The last time I saw you I had a drink at your expense, though I'm always paying for it."

"The world doesn't seem to have been using you very well since I met you last."

His speech was not a reply to hers.

"At least you have courage."

"Women of my sort have to; experience gives it to them. Without courage where should we be?"

"I wonder where you are sometimes even with it. Do you know that you've scarcely ever been out of my thoughts more than an hour or two at a time since we parted?"

"That's very nice of you."

"You think so. I've told myself over and over again that when I did get within reach of you—that's just the trouble, I've never quite been able to make up my mind what I'd do to you. I've told myself I'd kill you; in some of my happiest moments, in imagination, I've been wringing your neck; it was a delicious sensation."

"For you?"

"For me."

"Very well, then, give yourself that delicious sensation in real earnest—wring it. Here I am, quite close, ready to make things easy; I promise that I'll do nothing to keep you from wringing it to your heart's content." She had gone right up to him. He drew himself up straight, with a look upon his face as if he were about to take her at her word; but he stood still. Observing his indecision, she laughed. "How long do you propose to keep me waiting? Are you going to wring it now, or—it might be rather a nuisance in such a matter to have one's moment chosen for one—would you rather wait?"

"I'll wait."

"Good; then while you're waiting won't you come closer to the fire and have a drink? That's whisky and soda."

She held out to him a tumbler.

"Don't you give me that."

"Why not? It's warming."

"Last time you gave me something which was—warming."

"I see." She laughed. "You're thinking this is the same as that. I understand; or—are you very hungry?"

"Don't you ask me questions; I'll take neither food nor drink from you. I'll pay my debt and then—"

He left his sentence unfinished. If his bearing was more than a little melodramatic, hers was easiness itself.

"Before we go any farther—and we are going farther, so you needn't glare at me—we'll clear that up about what you call your debt. You think you owe me one?"

"Think! I've been in hell because of you; I'm in it still. Now I've a chance I'm going to make it my business to give you a taste of it too."

"There's nothing so silly as using extravagant language. I found that out long ago; and I'm a woman, and women are supposed to be inclined that way, and you're a man."

"You're a woman? A woman!"



"Yes, I'm a woman, a woman, a woman, and all the vitriolic bitterness you can get into your tone won't alter that. Now just you keep still and let me talk. You've your own point of view-of course, you would have, being a man-and I've mine; before you start paying that debt which weighs so heavily on your chest, you'll listen to what it is. I'll be as brief as I can, and while I'm talking I'll lay the table; I'm acting as my own maid just now. I may remark that you and I are quite alone in the house, so that if you do feel like wringing my neck you need fear no personal interference. I'm going to put some food upon the table, because I'm going to eat something, if you aren't."

Out of a drawer in the sideboard she took a tablecloth.

"Now about that debt you were speaking of; but before I talk of it, I'd better go and see what there is in the pantry that really is worth eating. Wouldn't you like to come and help me? There will be a tray to carry."

She had laid the table, and now stood at the open doorway looking at him with a smile on her face. Plainly he was in more than two minds as to what to do; this woman was, so far, proving more than a match for him. His tone was surly.

"I'm not coming with you."

"Aren't you? Very well, don't; stop there. I may as well go upstairs and take off my hat and coat and make myself look decent, even if I am to have my neck wrung directly afterwards. And then I'll go and forage in the pantry. Until we meet again."

With a saucy little nod she paused out of the room and shut the door.

A student in pantomime would have been interested by the man's proceedings when he found himself thus left alone, he was so evidently at a loss. He stared, or rather glared, at the door through which the woman had vanished; he seemed to be in doubt as to whether to go through it and out of the house. Then his eyes moved round the room, and stayed; as if it were all in such delightful contrast to what he had been used to that he had to stay. He made a half-step towards the fire, then drew back, with clenched hands and knitted brows; he would not warm himself beside this woman's fire. Then he saw the tumbler on the table, which she had left on the snowy tablecloth invitingly beneath his nose; his hand moved towards that-it was harder to keep that back, but he did. He saw, for the first time, the mirror above the mantel; as if unwillingly he went to it; the action was significant, a mirror had not been a necessary adjunct to his toilet for a considerable time.

He stared at the face that looked back at him as if it were that of a stranger, as if he found it difficult to realise that it could by any possibility be his, as if it were incredible that the man who had been could be the man who was now. He took the greasy cap off his head, as if the mirror had made him conscious that it was there. No woman could have shown keener interest in a tale told by the mirror; so absorbed was he by his own image that apparently he could not tear himself away. He became aware that the fire was just beneath; he stretched out his hands to the grateful blaze, then, remembered, glanced round him shamefacedly, moved away towards the window. How cheerless it was without, how cheery it was within. He twisted his cap as if he would have torn it; his jaw was hard set; his eyes looked this way and that. He moved from the window, this time towards the door, as if he were trying to bring himself to the sticking point, to retreat in time. He was nearly there when the door reopened and the woman appeared.

"Now then, you really must come and help me carry this tray; it's perfectly absurd to suppose that I can do everything while you do nothing. My maid is out; I only keep one, and it's her day out. You needn't eat anything; the fates forbid that I should press my food on you or my anything. But surely you can help me to get something to eat myself. Do you hear?"

"Yes, I hear."

"And you're not coming?"

"No, I'm not coming."

"You won't help me to carry the tray?"

"I won't."

"Then thank you very much. You know, you used to be a gentleman."

She passed out of the room with her head in the air. He let her go, waiting, grimly, for her return, the greasy cap between his hands. Presently she was back, bearing a well-filled tray.

"Won't you sit down? I should think even my chairs would not do you any serious injury; but, of course, stand if you prefer it; I suppose you can wring my neck better standing. I'm going to have some tea, the kettle's boiling, and I feel like tea. I suppose it's no use suggesting tea to you, but I've brought a second cup, which you can throw at me if you care to use it for nothing else. It might amuse you to throw things at me before you wring my neck, including the teapot and the tray."

She was laying the table while she spoke. He kept his eyes turned from her, which was perhaps the reason why she imparted to him information which he declined to observe for himself.

"That's a tongue; nothing of your tinned or glass things, but a Portland and Mason; and that's a ham, a small Westphalian boned ham; I like Westphalian ham, even if you don't; and that was a chicken at lunch, and it's very nearly a chicken now, and there's honey, and marmalade, and jam, and cakes, and bread, and lots of things which some people wouldn't turn their noses up at, whatever others may do. I don't know that I'm fond of a meat tea, or high tea, or whatever you call it, as a rule; though after all we do have sandwiches, all sorts of sandwiches, with tea; everybody does, so it doesn't make such a very great difference. Anyhow, I'm going to eat meat-all sorts of meat-with my tea this afternoon, and you can watch me. There are two plates, and two knives, and two forks, and two of everything for two people, and two chairs; if you should know of anyone who will do me the honour to take tea with me, I'll be very glad of his society. I'm going to begin."

She had placed a chair at one side of the table in which she sat, making as if to pour out tea; then suddenly sprang up, turning to the man who still stood twisting his cap between his fingers.

"Do you think you're playing the noble pudding-headed hero in a Drury Lane drama? Haven't you got sense enough to get in out of the rain? Do you suppose I don't know you're starving? How long ago is it since you had a square meal?"

"Didn't I tell you not to ask me questions?"

"You didn't tell me! It will need a very different person from you to tell me things of that kind in my own house."

"Then I'll leave your house."

"No, you don't!" She interposed herself between him and the door. "I say no, you don't; and you can glare at me for all you are worth. I've been glared at by much more dangerous persons than you, and I still live on. You wouldn't lay a finger on me if I'd treated you twenty times as badly as I have done; you may think you would, but you wouldn't; you may tell yourself that you will when you're all alone, but you won't, and you couldn't; you're that kind of man. The devil may get into you, but he won't get into you enough to induce you, when it comes to the pinch, to lay violent hands upon a woman. You say you are going to leave my house, and I say you're not. I say I won't let you; there's a direct challenge. You won't touch me, but I shan't hesitate to touch you. I am that kind. You understand, you are not to leave my house without my permission; and in order that we may know exactly where we are I'm going to lock the door and put the key in my pocket."

"You shan't do that."

"Shan't I? Well, we'll see." All at once her tone changed to one of the most singular appeal. "Man, do you know that I've been starving, and not so very long ago? Why, for years of my life I as good as starved; but there have been times when I've gone without food for days together, and known what it is to feel as you are feeling now." She laid her finger-tips softly on his ragged coat-sleeve. "You're a much stronger man than I supposed, but please don't be a fool; do sit down and have some tea with me, and afterwards you can wring my neck; you'll want lots of strength to do it properly."

## CHAPTER IX

### The Drapery

He was persuaded, he knew not how; he never meant to be. The something which was in him, the craving for food which was life, was on her side; he did have tea with her, a gargantuan tea. He ate of everything there was to eat, while she showed that the necessity that she should have something to eat of which she had spoken was a fiction, by trifling with odds and ends, while she watched that his plate was kept well supplied, and kept on talking. She was even autobiographical.

"Compared with what I have gone through, with my course of training in life's hard school, what you've endured is nothing, and you see that outwardly I'm none the worse for it. I used to think that there wasn't such a thing in the world as laughter for me, that it was just as improbable that I should have a good time as that I should jump over the moon. Yet, I've learnt to laugh at times, nearly all the time; and as for a good time, I've acquired the knack even of getting that. It will be the same with you, and more."

"I doubt it."

"Of course, all green hands do; they take life too seriously."

"Do they? When you left me I don't remember; when I remembered anything again I was in the workhouse infirmary. I'd been found senseless and practically stripped in an alley off the Gray's Inn Road. I'd been in the infirmary more than a week before I came to my senses, after a fashion; then they wanted me to account for myself. I couldn't, or I wouldn't, they were not sure which, so they put me out again into the street. I'm not certain, but I fancy that they gave me the choice of that or of being an able-bodied pauper. It was snowing on the day they turned me out; you should have seen the clothes I was wearing, and the boots!"

"I know the Christian charity of the parish and of the workhouse master!"

"It's rather more than two months ago, and since then I've never had a square meal nor a comfortable night's lodging. You know what kind of weather we've been having, an old-fashioned winter, the best skating we've had for years. I don't know how I've lived through it, but I have. And there are thousands who've been no better off than I have, men, women, and children; I've herded with them. What a world! And for what I've suffered I have to thank you."

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