

Marsh Richard

The Woman with One Hand, and Mr. Ely's Engagement



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THE WOMAN WITH ONE HAND

CHAPTER I AN "AGONY"

It caught my eye at once. When a man is dining off his last half-crown he is apt to have his eyes wide open. Having just disposed of a steak which, under the circumstances, did not seem to be so large as it might have been, I picked up a paper which, as he had laid it down, the diner in front appeared to have done with. As it was folded, the agony column stared me in the face. And among the "agonies" was this: -

"If James Southam, at one time of Dulborough, will apply to the undersigned, he will hear of something to his advantage. - Messrs. Cleaver and Caxton, Solicitors, Thirteen, Bacup Street, London, S.E."

Now, I am James Southam, at one time of Dulborough, but,

although I do answer to that description, a very clear something told me that if I did hear of anything to my advantage by applying to anybody, then the age of miracles was not yet done with. Still, as, when a man has spent on a doubtful meal one-and-sevenpence out of his last half-crown, something to his advantage is exactly what he wants to hear of, I clipped that advertisement out of the paper under the waiter's nose, and put it in my waistcoat pocket.

On referring to a directory in a convenient post-office, I found that Bacup Street was in the neighbourhood of the Old Kent Road. That did not seem to be a promising address, and, so far as appearances went, it fulfilled its promise. It struck me that Bacup Street, speaking generally, looked more than a trifle out at elbows, and Number Thirteen seemed to be the shabbiest house which it contained. An untidy youth received me. After keeping me waiting for a quarter of an hour in what might have served as an apology for a cupboard, he ushered me into a room beyond. In this inner room there were two men. One was seated at a table, the other was standing with his hat at the back of his head in front of the empty fireplace. They looked at me, then they looked at each other; and, unless I am mistaken, they exchanged a glance of surprise. The man at the table addressed me, without evincing any desire to rise.

"Well, sir, and what can we do for you?"

"That," I said, "is what I want to know."

The man smiled, as if he was not quite sure that there was anything to smile at. I took the newspaper cutting out of my

waistcoat pocket.

"I have just seen this advertisement. I am James Southam, at one time of Dulborough, and if you are Messrs. Cleaver and Caxton, I have come to you to hear of something to my advantage."

For some moments my words remained unanswered. They both stared at me as if they were endeavouring by mere force of visual inspection to find out what sort of person I really was. Then the man at the table spoke again.

"Of course you have evidence as to the truth of what you say?"

"I have my card in my pocket; here are letters which have been addressed to me. If you will tell me what I am going to hear of to my advantage I will place you in the way of obtaining a sufficiency of any sort of evidence you may require."

I placed a card on the table, and some old envelopes, having first of all taken out the letters. The two men forgathered. They examined my "documents." They spoke to each other in whispers. Holding out one of the envelopes, the man who had already spoken pointed with a stubby and unclean first finger to the address which was on the front of it.

"Is this your present address?"

"No; at present I have no address."

"What do you mean?"

"I have been presented with the key of the street."

"Do you mean that you are impecunious?"

"I do."

The individual with the hat on who had not yet spoken to me, spoke to me now, with a decidedly unpleasant grin. "Stone-broke?" he said.

I did not like to turn myself inside-out to strangers, especially to such strangers: but I had recently had to do a good many things which I had not liked. Above all, I had begun to realise the truth of the adage which tells us that beggars must not be choosers.

"I am as nearly stone-broke as a man can be who is in possession of a fair variety of pawn-tickets, the clothes he stands up in, and elevenpence in cash."

There was some further whispering between the pair, then the individual with the hat on addressed me again.

"If you will step outside, in a few minutes we will speak to you again."

I stepped outside. They kept me outside longer than I altogether relished.

I was on the point of, at all hazards, asserting my dignity, when the man with the hat on, opening the door of the inner office, invited me to enter. It was he, when I entered, who took up the conversation.

"We are not, you must understand, at liberty to furnish you with particulars of the matter referred to in our advertisement without first of all communicating with our client."

"Who is your client?"

"That, without having received permission, we cannot tell you either. Can you not guess?"

The fellow stared at me in a manner which I instinctively resented. His glance conveyed a meaning which seemed to be the reverse of flattering.

"I certainly cannot guess, nor have I the least intention of trying. I have the pleasure of wishing you good-day."

I turned to go; the fellow stopped me.

"One moment! Where are you off to?" I turned to him again. This time he was eyeing me with what I felt was an insolent grin. "For a man in the position in which you say you are you don't seem over anxious to hear of something to your advantage."

"Nor do you seem over anxious to tell it me."

"We are solicitors, man, not principals. It is our business to act on the instructions we have received. Listen to me." I listened. "We have reason to believe that our client would desire to be acquainted with your address, so that he may be able to place himself in immediate communication with you, should you turn out to be the James Southam he is in search of. As you don't appear, at present, to have an address of your own, we are willing to provide you with one."

"Explain yourself."

"We will take you to an hotel, and we will guarantee your reasonable expenses there until you hear from us again. Should you not turn out to be the required James Southam, we will pay your bill, withdraw our guarantee, and there will be an end of the matter, so far as we are concerned. You will have received some advantage, at any rate."

I accepted the proposition. When the sum of elevenpence stands between a man and starvation he is apt not to be over particular in picking holes in proffered offers of board and lodging. The untidy youth fetched a cab. The individual with the hat on accompanied me in it, there and then, to one of those innumerable private hotels which are found in the side streets off the Strand. He went inside, while I waited for him in the cab. When he reappeared he fetched me in, introduced me to a tall, thin woman, whom he called Mrs. Barnes, drew me aside, told me that he had made all arrangements, that I should hear from him again, and that, in the meantime, I should find myself all right. Then he went, leaving me in that private hotel, for all I knew to the contrary, a pensioner on his bounty.

CHAPTER II

THE WAITER-AND THE HAND

When I had dined-they gave me for nothing a better dinner than the one I had had in the middle of the day for one-and-sevenpence-the feeling that, to say the least of it, I was in an equivocal position, began to chasten. Instead, I began to feel, as the schoolboys have it, that I was in for a lark. That I really was going to hear, either through Messrs. Cleaver and Caxton, or through anybody else, of something to my advantage, I never for a moment believed. I was an orphan. I had what I take it are the best of reasons for knowing I have not a single living relative. I have no friends: I never had. I was, at my mother's death, employed in an office from which I was shortly after ignominiously ejected, owing to a difference of opinion I was so unfortunate as to have with the senior clerk. I had spent my substance, such as it was, and twelve months, in seeking for other occupation.

My story was a prosaic and a sordid one. That I could hear of something to my advantage, from any source whatever, was an idea I utterly scouted.

I dined alone. The waiter informed me that, for the moment, I was the only visitor in the house. No doubt, under those circumstances, I was welcome. This waiter was a man with iron-grey hair and a pair of curiously big, black eyes; I noticed them as

he flitted about the room, but I had much better reason to notice them a little later on. As I rose from the table I gave outspoken utterance to words which were a sort of tag to the sequence of my thoughts-

"Well, James Southam," I exclaimed, "you're in for it at last."

This I said out loud, foolishly, no doubt. The waiter was moving towards the door. He had some plates in his hand; as I spoke, he dropped these plates. They smashed to pieces on the floor. He turned to me as if he turned on a pivot. The fashion of his countenance changed; he glared at me as if I or he had suddenly gone mad. The pupils of his eyes dilated-it was then I realised what curious eyes they were.

"Who the devil are you?" he cried. "How do you know my name's James Southam?"

I do not know how it was, but a splash of inspiration seemed all at once to come to me-I do not know from where.

"You are James Southam," I said; "at one time of Dulborough."

I could plainly see that the man was trembling, either with fear or with rage, and it struck me that it was with a mixture of both.

"What has that to do with you?" he gasped.

"It has this to do with me-that I want you."

An empty beer-bottle was on the table. With the rapidity of some frantic wild animal, rushing forward he caught this bottle by the neck, and, before I had realised his intention, he struck me with it on the head. He was a smaller man than I, but, when

next I began to take an interest in the things of this world, I was lying on the floor, and the room was empty. My namesake, all the evidence went to show, had felled me like a log, and, without any sort of ceremony, had left me where I fell.

I sat up on the floor, I put my hand to my head. It ached so badly that I could scarcely see out of my eyes. With some difficulty I sprang to my feet. On attaining a more or less upright position I became conscious that the trepidation of my legs inclined me in another direction.

"If this," I told myself, "is hearing of something to my advantage, I've heard enough."

As I endeavoured to obtain support by leaning against the mantelpiece the room door opened, and the tall, thin woman, whom I had been told was Mrs. Barnes, came in.

"I beg your pardon," she began. She looked round the room, then she looked at me. So far as I could judge in the then state of my faculties, she appeared surprised. "I thought the waiter was here."

"He was here."

"How long has he been gone?"

"Some minutes."

"It is very odd! I have been looking for him everywhere. I thought that he was still upstairs with you." She glanced at the ruined crockery. "What has happened? – who has broken the plates?"

"The waiter-he dropped them. He also dropped the bottle."

I did not explain that he had dropped the latter on my head, and almost broken it into as many pieces as the plates.

"It is very careless of him. I must see where he is."

I fancied, from the expression of her face, that she perceived that there was more in the matter than met the eye. But, if so, she did not give audible expression to her perceptions. She left the room, and, when she had gone, I also left the room, and went to bed. I realised that the complications, and, if I may be permitted to say so, the ramifications of the situation, were for the moment beyond my grasp. In the morning I might be able to look the position fairly in the face, but, just then-no! I hastened to put myself between the sheets. Scarcely was I between them than I fell asleep.

I was awakened, as it seemed to me, just after I had fallen asleep, by some one knocking at the bedroom door. The knocking must have startled me out of a dreamless slumber, because it was a moment or two before I could remember where I was. Then I understood that some one was endeavouring to attract my attention from without.

"Who's there?" I said.

"It is I, Mrs. Barnes, the landlady. I wish to speak to you."

"What, now? What time is it? Won't the morning do?"

"No, I must speak to you at once."

It seemed that, in my hurry to get into bed, I had forgotten to put the gas out. Slipping into some garments I opened the door. There stood Mrs. Barnes, with a lighted candle in her

hand. For some cause or other she was in a state of unmistakable uneasiness. She looked white and haggard.

"I cannot find the waiter," she said.

"You cannot find the waiter!" I stared. "I am sorry to hear it, if you want to find him. But may I ask what that has to do with me?"

"I believe it has a good deal to do with you. What took place between you in the coffee-room?"

"Really, I am not aware that anything took place between us in the coffee-room that was of interest to you."

She came a step forward. Raising the lighted candle, she almost thrust it in my face. She stared at me with strained and eager eyes. She seemed to see something in my face: though what there was to see, except bewilderment, was more than I could guess.

"I don't believe you. You are deceiving me. Did you quarrel with him? Who are you? Tell me! I have a right to know-I am his wife!"

"His wife!" Complications seemed to be increasing. "I thought your name was Barnes."

"So is his name Barnes. What has happened? What do you know about him? Tell me."

"What do I know about him? I know nothing. So far as I am aware, I never saw the man in my life before."

"I don't believe you-you are lying! Where has he gone, and why? You shall tell me-I'll make you!"

She forced her way into the room; in doing so she forced me back. When she was in, she shut the door and stood with her back to it. Her voice had risen to a scream. Her manner almost threatened personal violence. I felt that the hotel to which I had been introduced was conducted on lines with which I had not been hitherto familiar.

"If, as you say, and as I have no reason to doubt, this person is your husband, and he has really disappeared, I can understand that your excitement is not unjustified; but you are mistaken if you suppose that I am in any way to blame. I will tell you exactly what happened between us." I turned aside so that I might have some sort of chance of making up my mind as to how much, on the spur of the moment, it might be advisable to tell her. "Your husband waited on me at dinner. During dinner we scarcely exchanged half a dozen words. After dinner I said something which, although it was spoken out loud, was said to myself, but which affected him in the most extraordinary and unexpected manner."

"What did you say?"

"I said 'I want you.'"

"You said, 'I want you'?" The woman gave a sort of nervous clutch at the door behind her. "Are you a policeman?"

"I am nothing of the kind. You ought to know better than I what your husband has on his conscience. I can only suppose that, for some cause, he stands in terror of the officers of the law; because, no sooner had I innocently uttered what, I believe, is a

regular policeman's formula, than, without a word of warning, he caught up the empty bottle which was on the table, like a madman, and knocked me down with it."

"Knocked you down with it!" The woman's face was as white as her own sheets. I saw that she needed the support of the door to aid her stand. "You said nothing to me when I came in."

"I was so astounded by the man's behaviour, and so stunned by his violence, that I was not in a fit state for saying anything. I intended to wait till the morning, and then have it out both with you and with him."

"You are telling me the truth?"

"I am."

So I was, though I might not have been telling all of it. I appeared to have told enough of it for her, because immediately afterwards she departed-unless I err, not much easier in her mind because of the visit she had paid to me.

In the morning, as might have been expected, I woke with a headache. I did not feel in the best of health, either physical or mental, when I went down to breakfast. That meal was served by a maidservant. Bringing in a letter on a waiter, she asked if it was for me. As it was addressed to me by name-"Mr. James Southam" - I not only claimed, I opened it. It contained a letter and some enclosures. Here is the letter, word for word: -

"Dear Sir, - I have just had a telegram from Messrs. Cleaver and Caxton, acquainting me with your address. It gives me great pleasure to write to you. I am just now detained by business, but

I hope to call on you at the very earliest opportunity, at latest in the course of a day or two. I assure you that it will be greatly to your advantage. As some slight guarantee of this I beg your acceptance of the enclosed. You need have no fear. You will find in me, in all respects, a friend.

"I will let you know, by telegram, when I am coming. Until then,

"Believe me, your sincere well-wisher,

"Duncan Rothwell."

The "enclosed" took the shape of four five-pound bank-notes. Who "Duncan Rothwell" was I had not the faintest notion. To me the name was wholly unfamiliar. The letter was neither addressed nor dated. The post-mark on the envelope was Manchester. Messrs. Cleaver and Caxton must have telegraphed so soon as I had left them, and clearly Mr. Rothwell had written immediately on receipt of their wire. The letter was fairly worded, but something about the writing, and indeed about the whole get up of the thing, suggested that it had not been written by a highly educated man—a gentleman.

In any case it seemed sufficiently clear that it was not intended for me, until, fingering the thing, and turning it over and over, I chanced to open the sheet of paper on which it was written. It was a large sheet of business letter-paper. The communication was all contained on the front page, and as there was still plenty of room to spare, it did not occur to me that there could be additions, say, for instance, in the shape of a postscript. It was by the purest

chance that my fidgety fingers pulled the sheet wide open. So soon as they had done so I perceived that I was wrong. In the middle of the third page was this: -

"P.S. – It was with great regret that I heard of your mother's lamented death at Putney. I had the melancholy satisfaction of visiting her grave in Wandsworth Cemetery. This will facilitate matters greatly."

Then the letter was intended for me after all. My mother had died at Putney-she had been buried in Wandsworth Cemetery. There might, although I had not been aware of it, have been two James Southams in Dulborough; the coincidence was credible. But it was scarcely credible that the other James Southam's mother could also have died at Putney, and have been buried in Wandsworth Cemetery. Why, or in what sense, my mother's death might facilitate matters, was more than I could say. But, in the face of that postscript, there still seemed sufficient doubt as to which James Southam was about to hear of something to his advantage, to justify me in remaining where I was, and allowing events to take their course.

As I was standing at the window, meditating whether or not I should go for a stroll, the maidservant appeared with a message.

"Mrs. Barnes's compliments, and if you are at liberty, could she speak to you in the private parlour?"

I was not anxious to see Mrs. Barnes. I had a suspicion that if I was not careful I might become more involved than was desirable in her private affairs. Still, if I remained in her house I could

scarcely avoid speaking to her. My impulse was to go to Messrs. Cleaver and Caxton, and ask them to shift my quarters. But they might decline, and-well, I shrugged my shoulders, and went and spoke to her.

The private parlour proved to be a small room, and a stuffy one. Mrs. Barnes received me on the threshold. She opened the door to permit me to enter, and having followed me in she shut it behind us.

"He has not returned," she said.

"You mean-?"

"I mean my husband."

"Frankly, I think it is almost as well that he should not have returned-at least, while I remain an inmate of your house. You can scarcely expect me to pass over his extraordinary behaviour in silence."

She stood staring at me in that strained, eager manner which I had noticed overnight. Her hands were clasped in front of her, her fingers were twisting and untwisting themselves in what seemed pure nervousness.

"I have been married to Mr. Barnes twelve months." As she paused, I nodded-I did not know what else to do. "I have regretted it ever since. There is a mystery about him."

"I am bound to admit that there is a good deal about him which is mysterious to me; but whether it is equally mysterious to you is another question."

"He is a mystery to me-he always has been." She paused again.

She drew in her lips as if to moisten them. "You are a stranger to me, but I want a confidant. I must speak to some one."

"I beg that you will not make a confidant of me-I do assure you-"

As she interrupted me, her voice rose almost to a scream.

"I must speak to you-I will! I can endure no longer. Sit down and let me speak to you."

Perceiving that, unless I made a scene, I should have to let her at least say something, I did as she requested and sat down. I wished that she would sit down also, instead of standing in front of the door, twisting her hands and her body, and pulling faces-for only so can I describe what seemed to be the nervous spasms which were continually causing her to distort her attenuated countenance.

"I never wished to marry him," she began. "He made me."

"I suppose you mean that he made you in the sense in which all ladies, when their time comes, are made to marry."

"No, I don't. I never wanted to marry him-never. He was almost as great a stranger to me as you are. Why should I marry a perfect stranger, without a penny to his name-me, who had been a single woman, and content to be a single woman, for nearly forty years?" – I could not tell her; I am sure I had no notion. – "This house belongs to me; It was my mother's house before me. He came in one day and asked me if I wanted a waiter-came in with hardly a shoe to his foot. It was like his impudence! I did not want a waiter, and I told him so; but he mesmerised me, and

made me have him!"

"Mesmerised you, Mrs. Barnes! You are joking!"

"I'm not joking." To do her justice any one who looked less like joking I never saw. "I've always been a nervous sort of a body. Directly he saw me he could do anything he liked with me. He was always mesmerising me. In less than a month he had mesmerised me into marrying him. As soon as we were married I began to think that he was mad!" – In that case, I told myself, that most promising couple must have been something very like a pair! – "He was always asking me if I would like to sell myself to the devil. He used to say that he would arrange it for me if I wanted. Then he used to dream out loud-such dreams! Night after night I've lain and listened to him, frightened half out of my wits. Then he took to walking in his sleep. The only thing he brought into the place was a little wooden box, tied up in a pocket-handkerchief. I never could make out what was in this box. Once when I asked him I thought he would have killed me. One night, in the middle of a dream, he got out of bed and went downstairs. Although I was so frightened that my knees were knocking together, I went after him. He came in here. This box of his was in that bureau-it's in that bureau now." She pointed to a tall, old-fashioned bureau which was just behind my chair. "He kept muttering to himself all the time; I could not catch all that he said, he spoke so low, but he repeated over and over again something about the devil. He took this box of his out of the bureau. He did something to it with his hands. What he did I don't

know. I suppose there was a secret spring about it, or something. But though I've tried to make it out over and over again since then, I've never been able to find the secret of it to this day. When he handled it the top flew open. He put the box down upon that table; and I stood watching him in the open doorway-just about where I am standing now-without his having the least notion I was there. I believe that, if he had known, he would have killed me."

"Do you mean to say, while he was doing all you have described, that he was asleep?"

"Fast asleep."

"You are quite sure, Mrs. Barnes, that you also were not fast asleep?"

"Not me; I almost wish I had been. I've never had a good night's sleep from that hour to this. I've grown that thin, for want of it, that I'm nothing but a skeleton. As I was saying, when he had opened it he put the box down on the table. He gave a laugh which made my blood run cold." – She struck me as being the sort of woman whose blood on very slight provocation would run cold. – "Then he took something out of the box. When I saw what it was I thought I should have fainted." A nervous paroxysm seemed to pass all over her; her voice dropped to a whisper: "It was a woman's finger!"

"A woman's finger, Mrs. Barnes?"

"It was a woman's finger. There was a wedding-ring on it: it was too small for the finger, so that the ring seemed to have eaten

into the flesh. He stood staring at this wedding-ring."

"What! staring! and he was fast asleep!"

"I don't know much about sleep-walkers; he was the first I ever saw, and I hope he'll be the last. But I do know that when he was sleep-walking his eyes were wide open, and he used to stare at things which, I suppose, he wanted to see, in a way which was horrible to look at. It was like that he stared at this wedding-ring. Then he said, right out loud: 'I'll cut you off one of these fine days, and see how you look upon my finger.' Then he put the finger down on the table, and out of the box he took three other fingers and a thumb."

"You are quite sure they were real, genuine, human fingers, Mrs. Barnes?"

"I know fingers when I see them, I suppose. You hear me out. He placed them on the table, nails uppermost, close together, just as the fingers are upon your own hand. He spoke to them. 'You'll never play any more of your devil's tricks with me that's a certainty!' he said. And he leered and grinned and chuckled more like a demon than a man. Then he took something out of the box, wrapped in a piece of calico. I saw that on the calico there were stains of blood. Out of it he took the palm of a woman's hand. Raising it to his lips, he kissed it, looking like the perfect devil that he was. He put it down palm downwards on the table, and he did something to the fingers. Then" – Mrs. Barnes gave utterance to a gasping sound, which it did not do one good to hear—"he picked it up, and I saw that by some devil's trickery he

had joined the separate parts together, and made it look as if it were a perfect hand."

She stopped. I do not mind owning that if I had had my way, she would have stopped for good. Unfortunately I did not see my way to compel her to leave her tale unfinished.

"I suppose that at that dreadful sight I must have fainted, because the next thing I can remember is finding myself lying on the floor and the room all dark. For some time I dared scarcely breathe, far less move; I did not know where my husband might be. How I summoned up courage to enable me to creep upstairs, to this hour I do not know. When I did I found my husband fast asleep in bed."

"You really must excuse my asking, Mrs. Barnes, but do you happen to recollect what you ate for supper that night, and are you in the habit of suffering from nightmare?"

"Nightmare! That was the first time I watched him. I have watched him over and over again since then. I soon found out that regularly every Friday night he walked in his sleep, and went downstairs, and gloated over that dreadful hand."

"You say that he did this every Friday. Are you suggesting that with him Friday was some sort of anniversary?"

"I don't know. What was I to think? What was any one to think? Don't laugh at me-don't! You think I am a fool, or lying. You shall see the hand for yourself, and tell me what you make of it. I will show it you, if I have to break his box open with a hammer."

In a state of considerable and evident excitement, she crossed the room. I rose to enable her to approach the bureau. She took a small canvas bag out of the pocket of her dress. Out of this bag she took some keys.

"He has my keys. He made me give him them. He never knew that I had duplicates. But I always have had. He seldom went outside the front door; I think he was afraid of being seen in the streets. Whenever he did go I used to lock myself in here, and try to find the spring which opened the box. I had an idea that there might be something in it which I had not seen. I will open it now, if I have to smash it into splinters."

She let down the flap of the bureau. Within there were nests of drawers, and one small centre cupboard. This cupboard she unlocked. When she had done so, she gave a stifled exclamation. "It has gone!" she said.

I stooped beside her. "What has gone?"

She turned to me a face which was ghastly in its revelation of abject terror. Her voice had suddenly degenerated into a sort of panting hiss.

"The box! It was here last night. After he had gone I unlocked the bureau, and I looked, and saw it was there." She caught me by the arm, she gripped me with a strength of which, in her normal condition, I should imagine her incapable. "He must have come back like a thief in the night and taken it. He may be hidden somewhere in the house this moment. Oh, my God!"

CHAPTER III

THE MAN IN THE DOORWAY

I called at Messrs. Cleaver and Caxton's to ask what I should do with the four five-pound notes which had arrived in the letter. The individual who had taken me to the hotel was the only person in the office. It seemed, from his own statement, that he was Mr. Cleaver, the senior partner. When he learned why I had come, he laughed.

"Do with them? Why, spend them, or throw them into the river, or give them to me."

I hesitated. The truth is, the situation threatened to become too complicated. I had an uneasy consciousness that the something which James Southam was to hear of might be something to his exceeding disadvantage. I had heard enough of that sort of thing of late. I did not wish to stand in somebody else's shoes for the sake of hearing more. I resolved to have some sort of understanding with Mr. Cleaver.

"Who is Duncan Rothwell? Is he the client for whom you are acting?"

Mr. Cleaver was occupying himself in tearing a piece of paper into tiny shreds with his fingers. He replied to my question with another. "Why do you ask?"

"Because the signature attached to the letter which brought the bank-notes is Duncan Rothwell; and, as to my knowledge, I

know no Duncan Rothwell, I should like to know who Duncan Rothwell is."

"Do you mind my looking at the letter?"

I did not mind. I let him look at it. He read it through.

"If you will take a hint from me, Mr. Southam, I think I should advise you to restrain your not unnatural curiosity, and wait for things to take their course."

"But, unless I am careful, I may find myself in a false position. I may not be the required James Southam. In fact, I don't mind telling you that I don't believe I am. I am acquainted with no Duncan Rothwell. His whole letter is double Dutch to me. There may be dozens of James Southams about."

"Recent inhabitants of Dulborough? I thought Dulborough was a mere hamlet."

"So it is."

"How long did you live there?"

"I was born and bred in the place."

"Have you any relatives of your own name?"

"I have not a relative in the world."

"If, as you say, you were born and bred in such a place as Dulborough, I presume that you had some knowledge of the inhabitants?"

"I believe I knew something of every creature in all the country side."

"And did you know anything of another James Southam?"

"That is the queer part of it. So far as I know, I was the only

Southam thereabouts."

Mr. Cleaver laughed.

"According to your own statement, it appears that, to put it mildly, there is at least a possibility of your being the James Southam we have been instructed to find. Frankly, Mr. Southam, we know very little more about the matter than you do yourself. We have simply been instructed to discover the present address of James Southam, at one time of Dulborough, and we have done so."

"Is that the case?"

From their manner the day before I had suspected that Messrs. Cleaver and Caxton might be merely, as it were, lay figures, and that it was somebody else who held the strings.

"There is something else I should like to mention: I wish to change my hotel." Mr. Cleaver stared.

"Change your hotel? Why? Isn't it good enough?"

"It is not that exactly. It is the domestic arrangements which are not to my taste."

"The domestic arrangements? What do you mean?"

I did not know how to explain; or rather, I did not know how much to explain.

"What do you know of Mrs. Barnes's husband?"

"Really, Mr. Southam, your bump of curiosity appears to be fully developed. What has Mrs. Barnes's husband to do with you—or with me? If you don't like your present quarters you are at perfect liberty to change them; — only in that case you must

become responsible for your own expenditure." I turned to go. "One moment. If you intend to change your quarters, perhaps, under the circumstances, you will be so good as to let us know where you propose to go."

"I will let you know if I do go. At any rate, until to-morrow I intend to remain where I am."

Whether it would have been better for me, considering the tragedy which followed, never to have returned to Mrs. Barnes's house at all, is more than I can say. That particular tragedy might not have happened, but, looking at the matter from a purely personal and selfish point of view, whether that would have been better for me, or worse, is another question altogether.

That night I went to a music-hall, changing one of Mr. Rothwell's notes to enable me to do so. Afterwards I supped at a restaurant in the Strand. Then I returned to the hotel to bed. I was more than half afraid of being waylaid by Mrs. Barnes. But, to my relief, it was the maidservant who let me in. I saw and heard nothing of the landlady. I spent the night in peace.

A telegram was brought me the next morning after breakfast. It was short and to the point-

"Shall be with you at twelve-thirty. – Duncan Rothwell."

As I perceived that it had been despatched from Derby station, I concluded that Mr. Rothwell had telegraphed while in the very act of journeying to town. Half-past twelve arrived, and no one, and nothing came for me. About a quarter to one I went into the hall with some vague idea of seeing if some likely looking person

might be coming down the street. The hall was really nothing but a narrow passage. The front door was open. With his feet just inside the open doorway was a man lying face downwards on the floor. My first impulse was to beat a retreat, because I at once jumped to the conclusion that Mr. Barnes, or Mr. James Southam, or whatever the landlady's mysterious husband's name might be, had returned to the bosom of his family, not only unpleasantly inclined, but drunk. A brief inspection from the other end of the passage, however, made it sufficiently clear that, whoever the recumbent individual was, it was not the gentleman who had first waited on and then assaulted me.

I could see that he was, in every way, a larger man. His silk hat had fallen sufficiently off his head to enable one to perceive that he was bald. As I stood and watched him, I began to be conscious of a curiously unpleasant feeling. He lay so still; and in such an uncomfortable posture. He was a big, fat man; it struck me that he must weigh some seventeen or eighteen stone. He had fallen flat upon his stomach; his face was so close to the floor that he must have found it difficult to breathe. His right arm was bent under him, in a way which disagreeably suggested a broken limb. The man must surely be something more than drunk. He must, I told myself, have fallen in a fit.

With an indefinable feeling of repugnance, I advanced to give him aid. I bent over him. I laid my hand upon his shoulder; I withdrew it with a start. The man's coat was wet. I glanced at my own palm; it was covered with some red pigment. Thoroughly

aroused I sprang to my feet.

"Help! Mrs. Barnes!" I cried.

Mrs. Barnes and the maidservant came running up together.

"Mrs. Barnes," I said, still staring at the patch of red upon my hand, "I believe there has been murder done."

"Murder! Oh, my God! Do you think he did it?"

I looked at her. I knew what she meant, but I did not answer her, "You had better send for the police, and for a medical man."

It was the servant who retained sufficient presence of mind to catch at my suggestion.

"Doctor Granger lives across the road. I'll fetch him!"

She did fetch him. Luckily the doctor was at home. So soon as he learned what urgent need there was for his services, he came hurrying to render them. Presently a policeman came upon the scene. He was followed by others. They kept the street clear, for some distance from the hotel, of the crowd which began rapidly to gather. The whole house, as it were, was taken in charge.

CHAPTER IV

THE ALIAS

"This man was alive within the last few minutes." That was the doctor's verdict. "He is still quite warm." The doctor looked at me. "What do you know about the matter?"

"Nothing. I was expecting a visitor. As he was late, I came down from the coffee-room, and went into the hall with the intention of seeing if he was coming. As I was coming down the stairs I saw this man lying on the floor."

The body had been moved into the little front room on the ground floor, which, I afterwards learned, was used as a private sitting-room for such visitors to the house as chose to pay for one. There were present in the room, besides myself, the doctor, a young man with a shrewd but kindly face, an inspector of police, a sergeant, who kept the door, while Mrs. Barnes and the maid kept each other close company in the corner by the fireplace. When I had answered the doctor, the inspector questioned me upon his own account.

"What is that upon your hand?"

I held out the hand to which he referred.

"Blood! This unfortunate man's blood! When I saw him lying on the floor my impression was that he was either drunk or in a fit. I laid my hand upon his shoulder with a view of rousing him. Directly I did so I found that his coat was wet. When I

withdrew my hand I saw that it was covered with blood. It was then I realised that there had been foul play."

The dead man had been laid on the table. It was not large enough to hold the whole of him, so that his feet hung over the edge. He was a big man all over-in particular, he had one of the biggest heads I ever saw. There was not a hair on the top. But on his large, fat cheeks were what used to be called mutton-chop whiskers, which were in colour a dirty red. He was dressed from top to toe in glossy black broadcloth. He wore black kid gloves upon his hands. In the centre of his wide expanse of shirtfront was, so far as I was a judge of such things, a large diamond stud. A heavy gold chain spanned his waistcoat.

"Is this the person you were expecting?" inquired the inspector.

"That is more than I can tell you. The person I was expecting was to me personally a stranger."

"What was his name?"

"Duncan Rothwell. I received a telegram from him this morning to say that he would be here by half-past twelve. Here is the telegram."

I handed it to the inspector.

"Half-past twelve. And when do you say that you discovered this man on the floor?"

"About a quarter to one. When I gave the alarm the landlady of the hotel and the servant came running to me immediately. They will be able to tell you what time it was; and I should say

that the doctor was here within five minutes."

The inspector turned to the doctor.

"And what was the time, sir, when you arrived?"

"I should say as nearly as possible about ten minutes to one. I lunch at one; I was just going to wash when I was called."

"And how long do you say, sir, he had then been dead?"

"He had probably been alive five minutes before."

"Then, in that case, he must have been alive when this man says he entered the hall." The inspector pointed to me.

"I do not say that. The man was stabbed in the back, under the left shoulder, probably just as he was in the act of entering the house. I have only made a superficial examination, but I think it probable that the blow killed him in an instant-before, that is, he could breathe the breath which he was breathing, as it were, right out. And I do say this, that if this gentleman had entered the hall a minute before he actually did, he would have seen the man in the very act of being murdered."

The inspector turned again to me.

"Where did this Mr. Duncan Rothwell live?"

"That also is more than I can tell you. The fact is, I know nothing whatever about him. A firm of solicitors placed him in communication with me."

"What was he coming to see you about?"

"With reference to this advertisement."

I gave the inspector the advertisement which had placed me in the position which, so far, did not promise to be much to my

advantage.

"What is your name?"

"James Southam."

"Are you the James Southam here alluded to?"

"That, again, is more than I can tell you. I saw that advertisement the day before yesterday. I at once communicated with Messrs. Cleaver and Caxton. Yesterday I received this letter, and this morning the telegram which you already have."

The inspector carefully read the letter which had come to me signed "Duncan Rothwell." Then, without asking with your leave or by your leave, he placed the letter, the advertisement, and the telegram in his pocket-book, and the pocket-book in his pocket. The action struck me as extremely, and indeed unpleasantly, significant.

An examination of the dead man's pockets disclosed the somewhat curious fact that they contained nothing but a massive gold watch, without a maker's name; a sheaf of bank-notes, which, unenclosed in any cover, was simply thrust in the breast-pocket of his coat, and consisted of no less than one hundred ten-pound notes; some gold and silver coins-four pounds, thirteen shillings, if I remember rightly-in a plain leather purse; and, in an apparently forgotten corner of his right-hand waistcoat pocket, was a torn scrap of a visiting card. On it was the name, "Raymond." But the card was torn in such a manner that, whether this was a surname or a Christian name, there was, as the police would themselves have said, no evidence to show. But beyond

these articles there was absolutely nothing which would serve or could be used as a means of identification. It almost seemed as if the dead man had taken care that there should be nothing about him by means of which he could be identified.

As soon as the inspector seemed disposed to allow me to quit his presence I went straight away to Messrs. Cleaver and Caxton. Again I found the senior partner alone. My appearance seemed to surprise him; possibly in my bearing there was something which was a trifle suggestive of the condition of my mind.

"Well, has Mr. Rothwell been?"

I shut the door behind me, looking him full in the face.

"You appear to have let me in for a nice little thing, Mr. Cleaver."

"What do you mean?"

"It is what you mean I intend to understand before I leave this room. You will be so good as to answer me one or two questions, Mr. Cleaver. First, is Mr. Duncan Rothwell the name of the client for whom you have been acting?"

He leaned back in his chair, regarding me with rather a curious smile.

"You have a singular method of address, Mr. Southam. Before I answer this question perhaps you will answer mine. Has Mr. Rothwell been to see you?"

"What does he look like?"

"Look like!" Again the curious smile. "You continue to answer question with question. Tell me, sir, has any one calling himself

Duncan Rothwell been to see you? We will discuss the question of what he looked like afterwards."

I paused before I spoke again, then keenly noted the effect of my words.

"For all I know, Mr. Duncan Rothwell lies murdered at Mrs. Barnes's hotel."

Mr. Cleaver sprang to his feet. "Murdered!"

"Precisely! Some one lies there murdered. If you will tell me what he looks like I will tell you if it is Mr. Duncan Rothwell."

Not unnaturally, Mr. Cleaver appeared bewildered.

"Explain yourself a little more clearly, Mr. Southam; and, to begin with, will you be so good as to answer Yes or No to my question. Has any one calling himself Duncan Rothwell been to see you?"

I told him what had happened-so far as I understood it. His amazement unmistakably was genuine.

"You say that the dead man had nothing on him by means of which he could be recognised. Then, in that case, we can do nothing to assist in his identification; we ourselves have never seen Mr. Duncan Rothwell in our lives. All our communications with him have been by letter."

He acknowledged one thing: that the person for whom they had been acting was Mr. Duncan Rothwell. But, beyond that one fact, I learned nothing at all. He protested that Mr. Duncan Rothwell had instructed them, by letter, to advertise for a James Southam, of Dulborough, and that that was all they knew of the

matter. He even suggested that, since I was James Southam, I, if I chose, could fill up the blanks.

When I returned to the hotel, little wiser than I left it, as soon as I set foot inside the door the inspector of police, clapping his hand upon my shoulder, drew me aside. I did not like the fashion in which he addressed me at all.

"See here, Mr. Southam. I do not wish to make myself disagreeable, but I need scarcely point out to you that there are circumstances in this case which are, to say the least of it, peculiar. I may as well tell you that your movements will be under the surveillance of the police; and, should you make any attempt to elude us we may consider it our duty to place you in safe custody."

"That's all right," I replied. "Lock me up and hang me, do! It only needs some little trifle of that kind to make the situation altogether what it should be. The man is a perfect stranger to me, and I know no more how he came to his death than the man in the moon; which things are, possibly, a sufficient reason why the police should make of me one of their proverbial examples."

It struck me that the inspector did not altogether know what to make of me; Although he did not arrest me, to all intents and purposes he might almost as well have done. Until the inquest took place the hotel was practically in charge, with everybody in it. A policeman slept on the premises; other policemen were continually about the premises, asking questions and making themselves objectionable both by day and night. I myself began

to feel that I had a haunted, hangdog sort of air. As for Mrs. Barnes, if she had not a great crime upon her conscience, it was not because she did not look it. She seemed to be growing hourly thinner. I knew very well that she was full of a great anxiety to say a word or two to me in private, but dared not for fear of prying eyes and ears. She solved the difficulty in her own way by pinning a note to my pillow, so that I found it on going to bed on the night before the inquest.

It had neither beginning nor end, and ran something like this; every word was underlined-

"Say nothing to-morrow about my husband, for God's sake! I am quite sure that he had nothing to do with this deed of horror-you know that he had not-and I know! No good purpose will be served by dragging him into it, and so bringing on me greater ruin than has come already!"

As I read this scarcely judicious appeal I told myself that Mrs. Barnes was certainly wrong in saying that I knew that her mysterious husband had had nothing to do with the crime which had been wrought. As a matter of fact, I knew nothing.

The more I reflected, however, the less I liked the look of the circumstances, which seemed to suggest a guilty knowledge on the part of my whilom friend, the waiter. It appeared at least possible that he was the James Southam who had been actually advertised for, and that he was very well aware that Duncan Rothwell had something to say to him which was, very distinctly, not to his advantage. Looking at the violence which, without

hesitation, he had used towards me, was it not conceivable that he might have, and indeed had, used still greater violence towards Mr. Rothwell?

The inquest was not over in a day, though the only light it threw upon the crime went to prove the identity of the murdered man. A singular state of things the evidence upon this point revealed-by no means tending to elucidate the mystery. The dead man actually turned out to be Jonas Hartopp-the head, and, in fact, the sole remaining partner, in the well-known firm of manufacturing jewellers-Hartopp and Company. The strange part of the business was that he seemed to have been Duncan Rothwell as well-that is, he had assumed that name for reasons which were very far from being plain.

Hartopp and Company were a Birmingham firm-a wealthy one. Jonas Hartopp himself had had the reputation of being as rich as a reasonable man would care to be. Duncan Rothwell had written to Messrs. Cleaver and Caxton from Liverpool, where he had taken rooms, as it would seem, for the special purpose of communicating with them.

He had never occupied the rooms, but had given the most peremptory instructions that all letters and telegrams should at once be forwarded to an address at Aston. The address at Aston turned out to be a tobacconist's shop. The tobacconist at once recognised the dead man as being the person he had known as Duncan Rothwell. Why the wealthy Birmingham jeweller, Jonas Hartopp, had chosen to masquerade as Duncan Rothwell, or

what was the something to his advantage which he proposed to communicate to James Southam, there was not a shred or tittle of evidence to show; nor was there a thread of light thrown upon the shadows which enveloped the mystery of his sudden death.

As it chanced, no question was asked me while I was in the witness-box which gave me an opportunity of bringing in the incident of Mrs. Barnes's husband. I had a sufficiently bad time of it without being actuated by a burning desire to involve myself in further complications. Never in my life had I been so badgered. They would not accept my plain statement that I had not the faintest notion why James Southam had been advertised for, or who had advertised for him, or what was the something which he was to learn to his advantage. The coroner and the police, and, for the matter of that, the public too, appeared to be under the impression that, since I owned that my name was James Southam, therefore I held the key of the mystery in the hollow of my hand; or, at any rate, that I ought to. They had raked up the circumstances of my life from my earliest days; they had made all sorts of inquiries about me in all sorts of directions, yet they could find nothing which could fairly be said to tell against me; and that for the sufficient, and, from my point of view, satisfactory reason, that there was nothing to find.

Notwithstanding which, when the inquiry closed, I was conscious that more than one person in court, and a good many out of it, cherished the impression that I had had a hand indirectly, if not directly, in the murdered man's despatch, the

verdict of the coroner's jury being that Jonas Hartopp, otherwise known as Duncan Rothwell, had been murdered by some person or persons unknown.

CHAPTER V

THE NEW GUEST,

Oddly enough it was not until I was smarting under the feelings occasioned by the reflection that I had come out of the inquiry with a smirch upon my character that it occurred to me what a fool I had been, when I was in the witness-box, in not going even out of my way to transfer suspicion from myself to the scamp whom Mrs. Barnes had assured me was her husband. I arrived, then and there, at a resolution. I would play, on lines of my own, that favourite part in fiction—the role of the amateur detective. I would trace to their sources the various threads which had become complicated in such a tangled web of crime. I would unravel them, one by one. Single-handed, if necessary, I would make the whole thing plain.

In theory, an excellent resolution; situated as I was, not an easy one to put into practice. Before the end of the coroner's inquest Messrs. Cleaver and Caxton informed me that their guarantee to provide for the expenses of my sojourn at Mrs. Barnes's establishment thenceforward was withdrawn. Of the four banknotes which had come to me in Duncan Rothwell's letter about fifteen pounds remained. If that sum might be credited to my account, on the debit side of the column was the injury which my connection with the affair had, at least temporarily, done my character. If before I had found it difficult

to obtain remunerative employment, I should find it now still harder.

On the morning after the close of the inquiry I was meditating taking an immediate departure from the house in which I had met with experiences which had been to anything but my advantage, when Mrs. Barnes came into the room. Her worries had worn her almost to a shadow. I felt that, if she continued to diminish at the same rate long, she soon, literally, would entirely waste away. Her nervous tricks seemed to have become accentuated. She stood rubbing her hands together, apparently for the moment at a loss for something to say.

"I hope, sir, that you are not going?"

"Then you hope wrong, Mrs. Barnes. I certainly am going, and that at once."

"You mustn't sir-you really mustn't."

"You are wrong again, Mrs. Barnes, for I really must, if on one account only-that I am not in a position to pay your terms."

She gave a sudden movement forward, coming to lean with both her hands upon the table. Her voice dropped to that odd, palpitating whisper of which she seemed to be so fond.

"You needn't let that trouble you. You can live board and lodging free, and you'll be welcome."

I observed her closely. In her face there was something which was positively uncanny. If ever a person had a haunted look it was Mrs. Barnes.

"Why do you make to me such a proposition? Do you consider

that I am the sort of person who would be willing to snatch at anybody's charity, or are you in the habit of giving strangers board and lodging free?"

"Indeed, no; but it's different with you. If you leave me now I shall not dare to stay in the house, and that's the truth. I feel as if you were guarding me; as if hungry eyes were on the house, seeking for a chance to work me evil, but that the hidden watchers dare not come in to do that to me which they desire while my roof still shelters you. Sir, do you think that 'he' did it?"

"Do I think that who did what?"

"Do you think that my husband killed that man?"

"To be frank with you, I think it extremely possible that he knows as much of the business as may altogether be good for him-more, for instance, than you or I. I have been reproaching myself for having done as you requested, and not having at least alluded to the gentleman in question when giving my evidence before the coroner."

My words set her trembling.

"You did quite right. You would have been sorry for it afterwards. I cannot tell you why or how, but I am certain that my husband had no more to do with that deed of blood than you or I."

The woman's intense earnestness made me stare.

"I can only say, Mrs. Barnes, that I regret that I am unable to share your certainty."

"That is one reason why I ask you-why I implore you to stay."

There is a cloud hanging over you and over me-it is the same cloud! If you stay I feel that it may be lifted; but, if you leave, it may rest on us for ever."

What she said was nonsense pure and simple. Still, I suffered myself to be persuaded. I agreed to stay on-at any rate, for a time. The satisfaction with which she received my decision was so pronounced that one might have thought that I had done her the greatest service in the world.

I went out in the afternoon. When I came back in the evening, not a little to my surprise, my food was brought me by a man. I stared at him askance. Hitherto the whole service of the house, in which I had been the only guest, had been done by the maid. Now I found myself confronted by a quite irreproachable-looking waiter, attired in the orthodox costume of his kind. His presence was so unexpected that I found it impossible to conceal my astonishment.

"Who the deuce are you?" I blurted out.

The fellow began to smirk in reply. "New waiter, sir-only came this afternoon, sir!"

"I had no notion that Mrs. Barnes contemplated making such an addition to her establishment."

"No, sir; perhaps not, sir. Business is very slack just now, but the season is coming on, and the house will very soon be full."

This was emphatically a lie. So far from the season just coming on, in an hotel-keeper's sense, it was rapidly drawing to an end; and so far as Mrs. Barnes was personally concerned,

apparently a bitter one, too. What she wanted, circumstanced as she was, with such a gorgeous individual as this about the place, or what she could find for him to do, surpassed my comprehension.

The fellow bustled about the room, pretending to busy himself, in accordance with a trick of his trade, with nothing at all.

"Been here long, sir?"

"You know very well how long I have been here."

"Beg pardon, sir, how's that?"

"You have read it in the papers. Don't feign ignorance with me, my man."

The fellow turned away. He was industriously polishing an already spotless glass.

"You allude to the recent unfortunate occurrence, sir? I believe that I did see something about it."

"You believe! Is that all? You are perfectly aware that you are as well up in what you call the recent occurrence as I am. You know all about me; how I came into the house, when I came, my name, and everything."

I do not know why I said this, but I did say it, and I felt that it was true. The man seemed taken aback.

"Mrs. Barnes did mention your name," he murmured.

"You knew it without her mentioning it. You can leave the room. When I want you I will ring."

I was glad to be rid of him. His presence seemed to chafe me.

I knew not why. He was not ill-looking. His bearing was wholly respectful; and yet some instinct had seemed to warn me that while I was in his near neighbourhood it would be just as well that I should be upon my guard.

When I had eaten I sallied forth in quest of Mrs. Barnes. Her nervous system had not improved since the morning; even the sight of me seemed to fill her with terror. Her eyes looked at everything except at me. I wondered if some disaster had been added to the sum of her already over-numerous troubles.

"You have a new waiter," I began.

"Yes." She spoke in a stammering whisper. Her features were agitated with the former reminiscence of St. Vitus's Dance. "Yes; a new waiter."

"I hope very sincerely, for your sake, Mrs. Barnes, that he may ere long have other guests to wait upon besides myself."

"Yes." The same irresolute muttering. "Yes; I hope he may."

"I had no idea that you thought of making an engagement of the kind just now."

"No-I don't think-I told you."

What was the matter with the woman? Why did she persist in speaking in that tone of voice, as if she was fearful of being overheard! And why did she apparently not dare to allow her eyes to rest, even for a moment, on my face? She had been so effusive in the morning. Now, on a sudden, she had returned to the condition of almost doddering terror which had marked her bearing during the time we had a policeman quartered in the

house.

"Where did you get the man? What is his name? And what do you know of him?"

As I put my questions I thought for a moment that she was going to favour me with one of her frenzied bursts of confidence. But while I waited for her to speak, all at once her frame became rigid. I seemed to see the unspoken words lying on her lips. Turning to discover the cause of the obvious change in her manner, I found that the new waiter had opened the door and, unannounced, had entered the room. At sight of him her agitation again assumed the upper hand.

"I-I must ask you to excuse me, sir. I have something which I must do."

I did excuse her; but when I had left her I decided in my own mind that my instinct had been right, and that there was more in the new waiter than met the eye. It seemed scarcely likely that even a landlady of such an eccentric type as Mrs. Barnes would increase her staff when the only guest which her house contained was such an emphatically unprofitable one as I bade fair to be.

However, in one respect the position of affairs was destined to be speedily changed. The house received not only another guest, but also one who bade fair to be as profitable a one as a landlady's heart could wish. It was on the day immediately following that Mrs. Lascelles-Trevor arrived. I had been out all the morning and afternoon, renewing the weary search for employment which might provide me with the means for obtaining my daily bread.

The first intimation I had of her arrival was when, having dined, I was thinking of a quiet pipe, and of an early retirement to bed.

CHAPTER VI

THE WOMAN WITH ONE HAND

"Mrs. Lascelles-Trevor's compliments, sir, and would you mind stepping upstairs?"

I had a lighted match in my hand, and was in the very act of applying it to the bowl of my pipe when the latest importation in waiters brought me the message.

"Mrs. Lascelles-Trevor?" I let the match go out. "And pray who may Mrs. Lascelles-Trevor be?"

"The lady who arrived to-day, sir, and who has taken a private sitting-room-No. 8."

"Indeed! And what does Mrs. Lascelles-Trevor want with me?"

"I don't know, sir; she asked me to give you her compliments, and would you be so kind as to step upstairs."

I stepped upstairs, wondering. I was received by a tall and somewhat ponderous woman, who was dressed in a dark-blue silk costume, almost as if she were going to a ball. She half rose from the couch as I came in, inclining her head in my direction with what struck me as a slightly patronising smile. She spoke in a loud, hearty tone of voice, which was marked by what struck me as being a Yorkshire twang.

"It is so good of you to come to see me, Mr. Southam. I was really more than half afraid to ask you. As it is, I beg ten thousand

pardons, but I do so want you to write me a letter."

"To write you a letter? I am afraid I am a little slow of comprehension."

"I have lost my hand." She stretched out her right arm. Both arms were bare to the shoulder. I could not but notice how beautifully they were moulded, their massive contours, their snowy whiteness. She wore gloves which reached nearly to her elbows. So far as I could judge there appeared to be a hand inside of both. She seemed to read my thoughts, still continuing to hold her right arm out in front of her.

"You think my hand is gloved? I always wear it so. But the glove conceals a dummy. Come and feel it." I bowed. I was content to take her at her word; I had no wish to put her to the actual test. "I have never been able to gain complete control over my left hand-to use it as if it were my right. I suppose it is because I am not clever enough. I can scribble with it, but only scribble. When I desire to have a letter properly written I am dependent upon outsiders' help. Will you write one for me now?"

It was an odd request for a new-comer at an hotel to address to a perfect stranger, but I complied. The letter she dictated, and which I wrote at her dictation, seemed to me the merest triviality-a scribble would have served the purpose just as well. She chattered all the time that I was writing, and, when I had finished, she went on chattering still. All at once she broke into a theme to which I ought to have become accustomed, but had not.

"Do you know, Mr. Southam, that I have been reading about

this dreadful murder case? How the papers have all been full of it! And I don't mind telling you, as a matter of fact, that in a sort of a way it was that which has brought me to this hotel."

If that were so, I retorted, then her tastes were individual; she perceived attractions where the average man saw none. She laughed.

"I don't know that it was exactly that, but the truth is, Mr. Southam, I was interested in you." The way in which she emphasised the pronoun a little startled me. "I made up my mind that I would ferret you out directly I got to the hotel, and that then, if I liked the look of you, would make you an offer. You see how frank I am."

She certainly was frank to a fault, in one sense. And yet I wondered. As I replied to her my tone was grim.

"It is very good of you. And now that, as I take it for granted that you do like the look of me-as you can scarcely fail to do-may I inquire what is the nature of the offer you propose to make?"

She laughed again. Possibly my perceptions were unusually keen, but, all the time, it occurred to me that there was about her a something-an atmosphere, if you will-which was not exactly suggestive of laughter. Unless I was mistaken, her faculties were as much on the alert as mine were. She was engaged in summing me up when she feigned to be least observant.

"You must understand, Mr. Southam, that I know all about you which the papers had to tell, and that was not a little! So we are not exactly strangers. At least, that is, you are not wholly

a stranger to me. Besides which, I myself once knew a person whose name was Southam."

I started. The woman's eyes were fixed on me, although she pretended to be trifling with her dress.

"You knew a person whose name was Southam. Indeed! Who was it, a man or a woman?"

She ignored my question.

"Have you any relatives of your own name?"

"Not that I am aware of, though there seems to be more than one Southam about in the world. What Southam was it you knew?"

Her tone was ostentatiously indifferent. "Oh, it doesn't matter. It was a long time ago, and, as you say, I suppose there are heaps of Southams about in the world. I only wanted to explain to you that you were not so absolutely unknown to me as the fact that this is our first actual meeting might lead you to imagine. Will you allow me to ask if you are still seeking employment? I thought, from what I read in the papers, that it was just possible you might be."

"You have supposed correctly. I am."

"Would you like to fill the post of secretary?"

"Of secretary?" I paused for a moment to consider-not the suggestion of such a post, but the source from whence the suggestion came. "To whom?"

"To me."

"It is very kind of you, but do you clearly understand, madam,

that you are speaking to a person whose character is under a cloud?"

"Because you were suspected of having murdered that man?"

Her question was brutal in its candour.

"Precisely. Because I was suspected, and, for all I know, still am."

"The people who suspected you were fools. I will back my capacity as a judge of character, even at sight, against their suspicions. You are not of the stuff of which murderers are made."

Her tone was short and sharp-I had almost written sarcastic-as if she thought it a shame to a man not to be made of the stuff of which murderers are. She went on, speaking quickly, even brusquely.

"I will trust you, if you, on your part, will trust me. As I have told you, and as I will prove to you, if-as I almost believe-you doubt me, I have lost my hand. See!" Hastily, before I could stop her, she began to unbutton her right glove. She only unloosed a button or two, when the whole thing, glove, hand and all, came clean away, and she held out towards me her handless arm. I stared, at a loss for words, not a little shocked-the disfigurement was so dreadful, and seemed to have been so recent. Her voice grew bitter. "I lost that hand under circumstances which impressed its loss upon my memory. As it were, I seem to be losing it anew, every hour of every day. It has left me impotent. Will you relieve my impotence? Will you become my secretary?"

There will not be much for you to do, but there will be something; the salary which I shall pay you will not be a large one, but it will, perhaps, suffice till something better offers; I will give you a hundred pounds a year, and, as they say in the advertisements, all found. Do not give me your answer at once. It may be that I shall stay in the hotel some time, and, at any rate, while I am here, possibly you will not refuse to act as my amanuensis. You can see with your own eyes how much I am in want of one."

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