

White Fred Merrick

The Slave of Silence



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Fred M. White

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CHAPTER I

The girl turned away from the splendour of it and laid her aching head against the cool windowpane. A hansom flashed along in the street below with just a glimpse of a pretty laughing girl in it with a man by her side. From another part of the *Royal Palace Hotel* came sounds of mirth and gaiety. All the world seemed to be happy, to-night, perhaps to mock the misery of the girl with her head against the windowpane.

And yet on the face of it, Beatrice Darryll's lines seemed to have fallen in pleasant places. She was young and healthy, and, in the eyes of her friends, beautiful. Still, the startling pallor of her face was in vivid contrast with the dead black dress she wore, a dress against which her white arms and throat stood out like ivory on a back-ground of ebony and silver. There was no colour about the girl at all, save for the warm, ripe tone of her hair and the deep, steadfast blue of her eyes. Though her face was cold and scornful, she would not have given the spectator the impression of coldness, only utter weariness and a tiredness of life at the early age of twenty-two.

Behind her was a table laid out for a score of dinner guests. Everything was absolutely perfect and exceedingly costly, as appertained to all things at the *Royal Palace Hotel*, where the head waiter condescended to bow to nothing under a millionaire. The table decorations were red in tone, there were red shades to the low electric lights, and masses of red carnations everywhere. No taste, and incidentally no expense had been spared, for Beatrice Darryll was to be married on the morrow, and her father, Sir Charles, was giving this dinner in honour of the occasion. Only a very rich man could afford a luxury like that.

"I think everything is complete, madame," a waiter suggested softly. "If there is anything – "

Beatrice turned wearily from the window. She looked old and odd and drawn just for the moment. And yet that face could ripple with delighted smiles, the little red mouth was made for laughter. Beatrice's eyes swept over the wealth of good taste and criminal extravagance.

"It will do very nicely," the girl said. "It will do – anything will do. I mean you have done your work splendidly. I am more than satisfied."

The gratified, if slightly puzzled, waiter bowed himself out. The bitter scorn in Beatrice's eyes deepened. What did all this reckless extravagance mean? Why was it justified? The man who might have answered the question sauntered into the room. A wonderfully well-preserved man was Sir Charles Darryll, with a boyish smile and an air of perennial youth unspotted by the world, a man who was totally unfitted to cope with the hard grip and sordid side of life. There were some who said that he was a grasping, greedy, selfish old rascal, who under the guise of youthful integrity concealed a nature that was harsh and cruel.

"Well, my dear child," Sir Charles cried. "And are you not satisfied? That table-setting is perfect; I never saw anything in more exquisite taste."

"It will all have to be paid for," Beatrice said wearily. "The money – "

"Will be forthcoming. I have no doubt of it. Whether I have it at the bank or not I cannot for the moment say. If not, then our good friend Stephen Richford must lend it me. My dear child, that black dress of yours gives me quite a painful shock. Why wear it?"

Beatrice crossed over and regarded her pale reflection in the glass opposite. The little pink nails were dug fiercely into the still pinker flesh of her palm.

"Why not?" she asked. "Is it not appropriate? Am I not in the deepest mourning for my lost honour? To-morrow I am going to marry a man who from the bottom of my heart I loathe and despise."

I am going to sell myself to him for money – money to save your good name. Oh, I know that I shall have the benediction of the church, less fortunate girls will envy me; but I am not a whit better than the poor creature flaunting her shame on the pavement. Nay, I am worse, for she can plead that love was the cause of her undoing. Father, I can't, can't go through with it."

She flung herself down in a chair and covered her face with her hands. The boyish innocence of Sir Charles's face changed suddenly, a wicked gleam came into his eyes. His friends would have found a difficulty in recognizing him then.

"Get up," he said sternly. "Get up and come to the window with me. Now, what do you see in this room?"

"Evidences of wealth that is glittering here," Beatrice cried. "Shameless extravagance that you can never hope to pay for. Costly flowers – "

"And everything that makes life worth living. All these things are necessary to me. They will be with me till the end if you marry Stephen Richford. Now look outside. Do you see those two men elaborately doing nothing by the railings opposite. You do? Well, they are watching *me*. They have been dogging me for three days. And if anything happened now, a sudden illness on your part, anything to postpone to-morrow's ceremony, I should pass the next day in jail. You did not think it was as bad as that, did you?"

The man's face was livid with fury; he had Beatrice's bare arm in a cruel grip, but she did not notice the pain. Her mental trouble was too deep for that.

"It's that City Company that I hinted at," Sir Charles went on. "There was a chance of a fortune there. I recognized that chance, and I became a director. And there was risk, too. We took our chance, and the chance failed. We gambled desperately, and again fortune failed us. Certain people who were against us have made unhappy discoveries. That is why those men are watching me. But if I can send the chairman a letter to-morrow assuming innocence and regret and enclosing a cheque for £5,000 to cover my fees and to recover all the shares I have sold, then I come out with a higher reputation than ever. I shall shine as the one honest man in a den of thieves. That cheque and more, Richford has promised me directly you are his wife. Do you understand, you sullen, white-faced fool? Do you see the danger? If I thought you were going to back out of it now, I'd strangle you."

Beatrice felt no fear; she was long past that emotion. Her weary eyes fell on the banks of red carnations; on the shaded lights and the exquisite table service. The fit of passion had left her indifferent and cold. She was not in the least sullen.

"It would be the kindest act you could do, father," she said. "Oh, I know that this is no new thing. There is no novelty in the situation of a girl giving herself to a man whom she despises, for the sake of his money. The records of the Divorce Court teem with such cases. For the battered honour of my father I am going to lose my own. Be silent – no sophistry of yours can hide the brutal truth. I hate that man from the bottom of my soul, and he knows it. And yet his one desire is to marry me. In Heaven's name, why?"

Sir Charles chuckled slightly. The danger was past, and he could afford to be good-humoured again. Looking at his daughter he could understand the feelings of the lover who grew all the more ardent as Beatrice drew back. And Stephen Richford was a millionaire. It mattered little that both he and his father had made their money in crooked ways; it mattered little that the best men and a few of the best clubs would have none of Stephen Richford so long as Society generally smiled on him and fawned at his feet.

"You need have no further fear," Beatrice answered coldly. "My weakness has passed. I am not likely to forget myself again. My heart is dead and buried – "

"That's the way to talk," Sir Charles said cheerfully. "Feeling better, eh? I once fancied that that confounded foolishness between Mark Ventmore and yourself, – eh, what?"

A wave of crimson passed over Beatrice's pale face. Her little hands trembled.

"It was no foolishness," she said. "I never cared for anyone but Mark, I never shall care for anybody else. If Mark's father had not disowned him, because he preferred art to that terrible City, you would never have come between us. But you parted us, and you thought that there was an end of it. But you were wrong. Let me tell the truth. I wrote to Mark in Venice, only last week, asking him to come to me. I got no reply to that letter. If I had and he had come to me, I should have told him everything and implored him to marry me. But the letter was not delivered, and therefore you need have no fear of those men in the street. But my escape has been much nearer than you imagine."

Sir Charles turned away humming some operatic fragment gaily. There was not the least occasion for him to give any display of feeling in the matter. It had been an exceedingly lucky thing for him that the letter in question had miscarried. And nothing could make any difference now, seeing that Beatrice had given her word, and that was a thing that she always respected. All Beatrice's probity and honour she inherited from her mother.

"Very foolish, very foolish," Sir Charles muttered benignly. "Girls are so impulsive. Don't you think that those carnations would be improved by a little more foliage at the base? They strike me as being a little set and formal. Now, is not that better?"

As if he had not either care or trouble in the world, Sir Charles added a few deft touches to the deep crimson blooms. His face was careless and boyish and open again. From the next room came the swish of silken skirts and the sound of a high-bred voice asking for somebody.

"Lady Rashborough," Sir Charles cried, "I'll go and receive her. And do for goodness' sake try to look a little more cheerful. Stay in here and compose yourself."

Sir Charles went off with an eager step and his most fascinating smile. Lord Rashborough was the head of his family. He was going to give Beatrice away to-morrow; indeed, Beatrice would drive to the church from Rashborough's town house, though the reception was in the *Royal Palace Hotel*.

Beatrice passed her hand across her face wearily. She stood for a moment looking into the fire, her thoughts very far away. Gradually the world and its surroundings came back to her, and she was more or less conscious that somebody was in the room. As she turned suddenly a tall figure turned also, and made with hesitation towards the door.

"I am afraid," the stranger said in a soft, pleading voice; "I am afraid that I have made a mistake."

"If you are looking for anybody," Beatrice suggested, "my father has these rooms. If you have come to see Sir Charles Darryll, why, I could –"

It struck Beatrice just for a moment that here was an adventurer after the silver plate. But a glance at the beautiful, smooth, sorrowful face beat down the suspicion as quickly as it had risen. The intruder was unmistakably a lady, she was dressed from head to foot in silver grey, and had a bonnet to match. In some vague way she reminded Beatrice of a hospital nurse, and then again of some *grande dame* in one of the old-fashioned country houses where the parvenue and the Russo-Semitic financier is not permitted to enter.

"I took the wrong turn," the stranger said. "I fancy I can reach the corridor by that door opposite. These great hotels are so big, they confuse me. So you are Beatrice Darryll; I have often heard of you. If I may venture to congratulate you upon –"

"No, no," Beatrice cried quickly. "Please don't. Perhaps if you tell me your name I may be in a position to help you to find anybody you may chance –"

The stranger shook her head as she stood in the doorway. Her voice was low and sweet as she replied.

"It does not in the least matter," she said. "You can call me the Slave of the Bond."

CHAPTER II

The guests had assembled at length, the dinner was in full swing. It would have been hard for any onlooker to have guessed that so much misery and heart-burning were there. Sir Charles, smiling, gay, debonair, chatted with his guests as if quite forgetful of the silent watchers by the railings outside. He might have been a rich man as he surveyed the tables and ordered the waiters about. True, somebody else would eventually pay for the dinner, but that detracted nothing from the host's enjoyment.

Beatrice had a fixed smile to her face; she also had disguised her feelings marvellously. There were other girls bidden to that brilliant feast who envied Miss Darryll and secretly wondered why she was dressed so plainly and simply. On her left hand sat Stephen Richford, a dull, heavy-looking man with a thick lip and a suggestion of shiftiness in his small eyes. Altogether he bore a strong resemblance to a prize-fighter. He was quiet and a little moody, as was his wont, so that most of Beatrice's conversation was directed to her neighbour on the other side, Colonel Berrington, a brilliant soldier not long from the East.

A handsome and distinguished-looking man he was, with melancholy droop to his moustache and the shadow of some old sorrow in his eyes. Colonel Berrington went everywhere and knew everything, but as to his past he said nothing. Nobody knew anything about his people and yet everybody trusted him, indeed no man in the Army had been in receipt of more confidences. Perhaps it was his innate feeling, his deep sense of introspection. And he knew by a kind of instinct that the beautiful girl by his side was not happy.

"So this is your last free party, Miss Beatrice," he smiled. "It seems strange to think that when last we met you were a happy child, and now – "

"And now an unhappy woman, you were going to suggest," Beatrice replied. "Is not that so?"

"Positively, I refuse to have words like that put into my mouth," Berrington protested. "Looking round the table I can see four girls at least who are envying you from the bottom of their hearts. Now could any society woman be miserable under those circumstances?"

Beatrice flushed a little as she toyed nervously with her bread. Berrington's words were playful enough, but there was a hidden meaning behind them that Beatrice did not fail to notice. In a way he was telling her how sorry he was; Richford had been more or less dragged into a sporting discussion by the lady on the other side, so that Beatrice and her companion had no fear of being interrupted. Their eyes met for a moment.

"I don't think they have any great need to be envious," the girl said. "Colonel Berrington, I am going to ask what may seem a strange question under the circumstances. I am going to make a singular request. Everybody likes and trusts you. I have liked and trusted you since the first day I met you. Will you be my friend, – if anything happens when I want a friend sorely, will you come to me and help me? I know it is singular – "

"It is not at all singular," Berrington said in a low voice. He shot a quick glance of dislike at Richford's heavy jowl. "One sees things, quiet men like myself always see things. And I understand exactly what you mean. If I am in England I will come to you. But I warn you that my time is fully occupied. All my long leave – "

"But surely you have no work to do whilst you are in England on leave?"

"Indeed I have. I have a quest, a search that never seems to end. I thought that I had finished it to-night, and singularly enough, in this very hotel. I can't go into the matter here with all this chattering mob of people about us, for the story is a sad one. But if ever you should chance to meet a grey lady with brown eyes and lovely grey hair – "

"The stranger! How singular!" Beatrice exclaimed. "Why, only to-night in this very room."

"Ah!" the word came with a gasp almost like pain from Berrington's lips. The laughter and chatter of the dinner-table gave these two a sense of personal isolation. "That is remarkable. I am

looking for a grey lady, and I trace her to this hotel – quite by accident, and simply because I am dining here to-night. And you saw her in this room?"

"I did," Beatrice said eagerly. "She came here by mistake; evidently she had quite lost herself in this barrack of a place. She was dressed from head to foot in silver grey, she had just the eyes and hair that you describe. And when I asked her who she was, she merely said that she was the Slave of the Bond and vanished."

Colonel Berrington's *entrée* lay neglected on his plate. A deeper tinge of melancholy than usual was on his face. It was some time before he spoke again.

"The Slave of the Bond," he echoed. "How true, how characteristic! And that is all you have to tell me. If you see her again – but there, you are never likely to see her again ... I will tell you the story some other time, not before these frivolous creatures here. It is a sad story; to a great extent, it reminds me of your own, Miss Beatrice."

"Is mine a sad story?" Beatrice smiled and blushed. "In what way is it sad, do you think?"

"Well, we need not go into details here," Berrington replied. "You see, Mark Ventmore is an old friend of mine. I knew his father intimately. It was only at Easter that we met in Rome, and, as you say, people are so good as to regard me as worthy of confidence. Beatrice, is it too late?"

Berrington asked the question in a fierce, sudden whisper. His lean fingers clasped over the girl's hand. Sir Charles was leaning back in his chair talking gaily. Nobody seemed to heed the drama that was going on in their midst. Beatrice's eyes filled with tears.

"It is a great comfort to me to know that I have so good and true a friend," she said with her eyes cast down on her plate. "No, I do not want any wine. Why does that waiter keep pushing that wine list of his under my nose?"

"Then you are quite sure that it is too late?" Berrington asked again.

"My dear friend, it is inevitable," Beatrice replied. "It is a matter of – duty. Look at my father."

Berrington glanced in the direction of Sir Charles, who was bending tenderly over the very pretty woman on his right hand. Apparently the baronet had not a single care in the world; his slim hand toyed with a glass of *vintage* claret. Berrington gave him a quick glance of contempt.

"I do not see what Sir Charles has to do with it," he said.

"My father has everything to do with it," Beatrice said. "Does he not look happy and prosperous! And yet you can never tell. And there was a time when he was so very different. And the mere thought that any action of mine would bring disgrace upon him – "

Beatrice paused as she felt Berrington's eyes upon her. The expression of his face showed that she had said enough, and more than enough.

"I quite understand," Berrington said quietly. "You are a hostage to fortune. Honour thy father that *his* days may be long in the land where good dinners abound and tradesmen are confiding. But the shame, the burning shame of it! Here's that confounded waiter again."

Beatrice felt inclined to laugh hysterically at Berrington's sudden change of tone. The dark-eyed Swiss waiter was bending over the girl's chair again with a supplicating suggestion that she should try a little wine of some sort. He had a clean list in his hand, and even Berrington's severest military frown did not suffice to scare him away.

"Ver' excellent wine," he murmured. "A little claret, a liqueur. No. 74 is what – will madame kindly look? Madame will look for one little moment?"

With an insistence worthy of a better cause, the Swiss placed the card in Beatrice's hand.

It was a clean card, printed in red and gold, and opposite No. 74 was a pencilled note. The girl's eyes gleamed as she saw the writing. The words were few but significant. "In the little conservatory beyond the drawing-room. Soon as possible."

"I shall have to complain about that fellow," Berrington said. "Miss Beatrice, are you not well?"

"I am quite well, quite strong and well," Beatrice whispered. "I implore you not to attract any attention to me. And the waiter was not to blame. He had a message to deliver to me. You can see how cleverly he has done it. Look here!"

Beatrice displayed the card with the pencilled words upon it. Berrington's quick intelligence took everything in at a glance.

"Of course that is intended for you," he said. "A neat handwriting. And yet in some way it seems quite familiar to me. Could I possibly have seen it anywhere before?"

"I should say that it is extremely likely," the girl said. "It is Mark Ventmore's own handwriting."

Berrington smiled. He had all a soldier's love of adventure, and he began to see a very pretty one here.

"I wrote to him a little over a week ago," Beatrice said rapidly. "If he had got my letter then and come, goodness knows what would have happened. I was not quite aware at that hour how close was the shadow of disgrace. I expect Mark has found out everything. Probably he has only just arrived and feels that if he does not see me to-night it will be too late. Colonel Berrington, I must see Mark at once, oh, I *must*."

Nothing could be easier. Beatrice had merely to say that she was suffering with a dreadful headache, that the atmosphere of the room was insupportable, and that she was going to try the purer air of the conservatory beyond the dining-room.

"No, you need not come," Beatrice said as Richford lounged heavily to his feet. "I do not feel the least in the mood to talk to anybody, not even you."

The listener's sullen features flushed, and he clenched his hands. Beatrice had never taken the slightest trouble to disguise her dislike for the man she had promised to marry. In his heart of hearts he had made up his mind that she should suffer presently for all the indignities that she had heaped upon his head.

"All right," he said. "I'll come into the drawing-room and wait for you. Keep you from being interrupted, in fact. I know what women's headaches mean."

There was no mistaking the cowardly insinuation, but Berrington said nothing. Richford could not possibly have seen the signal, and yet he implied an assignation if his words meant anything at all. It was a cruel disappointment, but the girl's face said nothing of her emotions. She passed quietly along till she came to the little conservatory where presently she was followed by the Swiss waiter, who had given her the card with Mark Ventmore's message upon it.

"Madame is not well," he said. "Madame has the dreadful headache. Can I get anything for Madame? A glass of water, an ice, a cup of coffee, or –"

Beatrice was on the point of declining everything, when she caught the eye of the speaker. Apparently there was some hidden meaning behind his words, for she changed her mind.

"No coffee," she said in a voice that was meant for the lounge in the drawing-room, "but I shall be very glad if you will let me have a cup of tea, strong tea, without milk or sugar."

The waiter bowed and retired. Beatrice sat there with her head back as if utterly worn out, though her heart was beating thick and fast. She looked up again presently as a waiter entered leaving the necessary things on a tray. It was not the same waiter, but a taller, fairer man who bowed as he held out the silver salver.

"The tea, Madame," he said. "May I be allowed to pour it out for you? Steady!"

The last word was no more than a whisper. Beatrice checked the cry that came to her lips.

"Mark," she murmured. "Mark, dear Mark, is it really you?"

The tall waiter smiled as he laid a hand on the girl's trembling fingers.

"Indeed it is, darling," he said. "For God's sake don't say I have come too late!"

CHAPTER III

From the point of view of the onlooker there could have been nothing suspicious in the attitude of the pseudo waiter with his tray. He could see Beatrice leaning back as if the pain in her head had made her oblivious to everything else. As a matter of fact, Beatrice was racking her brains for some way out of the difficulty. The self-elected waiter could not stay there much longer, in any case, at least not unless the suspicious Richford took it in his head to return to the dinner-table again.

"It is so good of you to come," Beatrice said, still with her head thrown back in the air. "That man has followed me, though Heaven knows what he has to be suspicious about. Go away for a few minutes, as if you had forgotten something, and then return again."

Mark Ventmore assented with a low bow. Scarcely had he left the conservatory by a door leading to the corridor than Richford strolled in.

"Feeling better now?" he asked ungraciously. "Funny things, women's headaches!"

"For Heaven's sake go away," Beatrice exclaimed. "Why do you come and torture me like this? You are the very last I want to see just now. Don't drive me over the border. Go back to the others, and leave me in peace."

With a sullen air, Richford lounged away; Colonel Berrington was crossing the drawing-room, and Beatrice's heart beat high with hope. She might have known that the gallant soldier would help her if possible. With unspeakable relief she saw Richford tactfully drawn away and disappear. Very quickly Beatrice changed her seat, so that she could command a view of the drawing-room without herself being seen. The side door opened, and Mark Ventmore came in again. He carried a tray still, but he no longer looked like a waiter. With one quick glance around him he advanced to Beatrice and knelt by the side of her chair.

"My darling," he whispered. "Oh, my dear little love! Am I too late?"

Beatrice said nothing for a moment. She was content only to forget her unhappy lot in the knowledge that the one man she had ever cared for was by her side. Ventmore's arm stole about her; her head drooped to his shoulder. There was a faint, unsteady smile on the girl's lips as Ventmore bent and kissed her passionately.

"Why did you not come before?" she asked.

"My dearest, I could not. I was away from my quarters, and I did not get your letter. I am only here quite by chance. But is it too late?"

"Oh, I fear so; I fear so," Beatrice murmured. "If you had come a week ago I should have asked you to marry me and take me away from it all. And yet, if I had done so, my father would have been ruined and disgraced."

Mark Ventmore moved his shoulders a little impatiently.

"So Sir Charles says," he replied. "Sir Charles was always very good at those insinuations. He has played upon your feelings, of course, sweetheart."

"Not this time, Mark. He has mixed himself up in some disgraceful City business. A prosecution hangs in the air. And I am to be the price of his freedom. My future husband will see my father through after I become his wife. Even now there are private detectives watching my father. It is a dreadful business altogether, Mark. And yet if you had come a week ago, I should have risked it all for your sake."

Ventmore pressed the trembling figure to his heart passionately. Under his breath he swore that this hideous sacrifice should never be. Was this white-drawn woman in his arms, the happy laughing little Beatrice that he used to know? They had parted cheerfully enough a year since; they had agreed not to write to one another; they had infinite trust in the future. Mark was going to make his fortune as a painter, and Beatrice was to wait for him. And now it was the girl's wedding eve, and the fates had been too strong for her altogether.

"Leave your father to himself and come," Mark urged. "I am making enough now to keep us both in comfort; not quite the income that I hoped to ask you to share with me, but at least we shall be happy. I will take you to a dear old friend of mine, and to-morrow I will buy a license. After that no harm can molest you."

Beatrice closed her eyes before the beatitude of the prospect. Just for the moment she felt inclined to yield. Mark was so strong and good and handsome, and she loved him so. And yet she had given her word for the sake of her father.

"I cannot," she said. Her voice was very low but quite firm. "I have promised my father. Oh, yes, I know that I had promised you first. But it is for the sake of my father's honour. If I do what you wish he will go to jail – nothing can prevent it. I only knew to-night."

"And you are sure that Sir Charles is not – not ... you know what I mean?"

"Lying to me?" Beatrice said bitterly. "Not this time. I always know when he is making an effort to deceive me. Mark, don't press me."

Mark crushed down his feelings with an effort. Blindly and passionately in love as he was, he could see that duty and reason were on the side of the girl. She would have to be sacrificed to this scoundrelly father, and to please the other rascal who coveted her beauty and her fair white body all the more because Beatrice kept him so rigidly at a distance.

"It seems very, very hard," Mark said thoughtfully. "Terribly hard on both of us."

"Yes, but it is always the woman who suffers most," Beatrice replied. "There is no help for it, Mark. I must see this thing out to the end. If you had only come before!"

"My darling, I came as quickly as I could. I am staying here to-night, and my room is in the same corridor as that of Sir Charles. I shall see him to-night, or early to-morrow, and tell him a few of the things that I have discovered. Perhaps when I open his eyes to the truth as to his future son-in-law, he will change his mind."

"He will never do so," Beatrice said mournfully. "My father can always justify himself and his conscience where his own interests are concerned. But how did you know –"

"That you were in trouble? It came to me quite by accident. I was in Paris a day or two ago to see a wealthy American who wants some of my work. And as I was alone in the evening, I went to one of the theatres. There were two English ladies by me in the stalls and presently they began to talk about *you*. I could not help hearing. Then I heard everything. Do you know a tall, elderly lady with dark eyes and white hair, a lady all in silver grey?"

Beatrice started. Surely Mark was describing the Slave of the Bond, as the grey lady whom Beatrice had encountered earlier in the evening had called herself.

"I know her, and I don't know her," the girl cried. "She came into the dining-room here before dinner quite by accident. I thought she was some adventuress at first. But her face was too good and pure for that. I asked her who she was, and she said she was the Slave of the Bond. Is this a coincidence, or is there something deeper beyond? I don't know what to think."

"Something deeper beyond, I should imagine," Mark said. "Be sure that in some way or another this grey lady is interested in your welfare. But I am absolutely sure that she did not know me."

"And so you came on at once, Mark?" Beatrice asked.

"As soon as possible, dear. I heard about the dinner whilst I was in the theatre. My train was very late, and I could not possibly carry out the programme that I had arranged. My next difficulty was to get speech with you. Happily, a half sovereign and an intelligent waiter solved that problem. When Richford followed you I had to borrow that tray and the rest of it and disburse another half sovereign. Then I saw that my old friend Berrington had come to my rescue. Did you tell him, Beatrice?"

"He saw the message on the wine card and recognized your handwriting. But I shall not be able to stay much longer, Mark. Those people may come into the drawing-room at any moment. This must be our last meeting."

"I am not going to be so sure of that, Beatrice. What I have to say to your father must move him. The idea of your being the wife of that man – but I will not think of it. Oh, love will find the way even at this very late hour."

Mark would have said more, only there was the flutter of a dress in the drawing-room beyond, and the echo of a laugh. The dinner guests were coming into the drawing-room. With a quick motion, Mark snatched the girl to his heart and kissed her passionately.

"Good night, darling," he whispered. "Keep up your courage. Who knows what may happen between now and twelve o'clock to-morrow? And after I have seen your father – "

Another kiss, and the lover was gone. Beatrice lay back in her chair striving to collect her thoughts. Everything seemed to have happened so suddenly and unexpectedly. There were people about her now who were asking smoothly sympathetic questions in the hollow insincerity of the world.

"I'm no better," Beatrice said. "If my aunt is ready I should like to go home. My father will stay and see that you get your bridge all right."

Beatrice had gone at length with Lady Rashborough, the rest of the guests had finished their bridge, and the party was breaking up. Mark Ventmore was sitting, smoking cigarettes in his bedroom, waiting for the chance to see Sir Charles. It was getting very late now, and all the guests had long since been in their rooms. With his door open Mark could see into the corridor.

Then he gave a little whistle of astonishment as the door of Sir Charles's sitting-room opened and the grey lady, the Slave of the Bond of Silence, came out. She was dressed just as Mark had seen her before; as she walked along, her face was calm and placid. She came at length to the end of the corridor and disappeared quietly and deliberately down the stairs. With a feeling of curiosity, Mark crossed over and tried the handle of Sir Charles's door. To his great surprise it was locked.

For a little time Mark pondered over the problem. As he did so, his head fell back and he slept. It was the sound sleep of the clean mind in the healthy body, so that when the sleeper came to himself again it was broad daylight; the hotel was full of life and bustle. With a sense of having done a fearful thing, Mark looked at his watch. It was ten minutes past eleven!

"This comes of having no rest the night before," he muttered. "And to think that the fate of my little girl should be hanging in the balance! If Sir Charles has gone!"

But Sir Charles had not gone, as one of the waiters was in a position to assure Mark. He had not retired to bed until past three, and at that time was in a state of hilarity that promised a pretty fair headache in the morning.

"Well, there is time yet," Mark thought, grimly. "And Sir Charles must be moving by this time, as the wedding is to take place at twelve."

But the minutes crept on, and it was pretty near to that hour when Sir Charles's man came down the corridor with an anxious expression on his face. He had been hammering at the bedroom door without effect.

A sudden idea thrilled Mark, an idea that he was ashamed of almost before it had come into his mind. He stood by idly, listening. He heard a clock somewhere strike the hour of midday. He stepped up to the little knot of waiters.

"Why don't you do something?" he demanded. "What is the use of standing stupidly about here? Call the manager or whoever is in attendance. Break down the door."

With all his force Mark thrust himself against the stout oak. The hinges yielded at last.

CHAPTER IV

Beatrice woke to the knowledge of her own utter misery. Contrary to her anticipation, she had slept very soundly all night, much as condemned criminals are supposed to do on the eve of execution. She felt well and vigorous in herself, a brilliant sunshine was pouring into her room, and all around her lay evidences of her coming slavery. Here were the bridal veil and the long train, there were the jewels laid out on the dressing table. A maid was moving quietly about the room.

"Good morning, miss," she said. "A lovely morning. And if there's any truth in the saying that 'happy's the bride that the sun shines on,' why – "

The maid stopped and smiled before she caught sight of Beatrice's pale, set face.

"I suppose you think I am to be envied?" Beatrice asked. "Now don't you?"

The maid lifted her hands to express her dumb admiration. "Who would not be happy to be dressed in those lovely clothes, to be decked in those jewels and to marry a man who will give you everything that the heart could desire?" Beatrice smiled wearily.

"You are quite wrong, Adeline," she said. "If I could change places with you at this moment I would gladly do so. You have a sweetheart, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, miss. He's in a shop. Some day he hopes to have a shop of his own, and then – "

"And then you will be married. You love him very dearly, I suppose. And I – "

Beatrice stopped, conscious of the fact that she was saying too much. She ate sparingly enough of her breakfast; she went down to the drawing-room and wrote a few letters. It was not quite ten yet and she had plenty of time. Lady Rashborough was not an early riser, though Rashborough himself had breakfasted and gone out long before. Beatrice was moodily contemplating her presents in the library when Mr. Stephen Richford was announced. He came in with an easy smile, though Beatrice could see that his hands were shaking and there was just a suggestion of fear in his eyes. With all his faults, the man did not drink, and Beatrice wondered. She had once seen a forger arrested on a liner, and his expression, as soon as he recognized his position, was just the same as Beatrice now saw in the eyes of the man she was going to marry.

"What is the matter?" she asked listlessly. "You look as if you had had some great shock, like a man who has escaped from prison. Your face is ghastly."

Richford made no reply for a moment. He contemplated his sullen, livid features in a large Venetian mirror opposite. He was not a pretty object at any time, but he was absolutely repulsive just at that moment.

"Bit of an upset," he stammered. "Saw a – a nasty street accident. Poor chap run over."

The man was lying to her; absolutely he was forced to the invention to save himself from a confession of quite another kind. He was not in the least likely to feel for anybody else, in fact he had no feeling of human kindness, as Beatrice had once seen for herself. There had been a fatal accident at a polo match under their very feet, and Richford had puffed at his cigarette and expressed the sentiment that if fools did that kind of thing they must be prepared to put up with the consequences.

"You are not telling the truth!" Beatrice said coldly. "As if anything of that kind would affect *you*. You are concealing something from me. Is it – is there anything the matter with my father?"

Richford started violently. With all his self-control he could not hold himself in now. His white face took on a curious leaden hue, his voice was hoarse as he spoke.

"Of course I have no good points in your eyes," he said with a thick sneer. "And once a woman gets an idea into her head there is no rooting it out again. Your father is all right; nothing ever happens to men of that class. I saw him to his room last night, and very well he had done for himself. Won over two hundred at bridge, too. Sir Charles can take care of himself."

Beatrice's face flamed and then turned pale again. She had caught herself hoping that something had happened to her father, something sufficiently serious to postpone to-day's ceremony. It was a

dreadfully unworthy thought and Beatrice was covered with shame. And yet she knew that she would have been far happier in the knowledge of a disaster like that.

"Why did you want to see me?" she asked. "I have not too much time to spare."

"Of course not. But you can cheer yourself with the reflection that we shall have so much time together later on when the happy knot is tied. Has it occurred to you that I have given you nothing as yet? I brought this for you."

Richford's hands, still trembling, produced a bulky package from his pocket. As he lifted the shabby lid a stream of living fire flashed out. There were diamonds of all kinds in old settings, the finest diamonds that Beatrice had ever seen. Ill at ease and sick at heart as she was, she could not repress a cry.

"Ah, I thought I could touch you," Richford grinned. "A female saint could not resist diamonds. Forty thousand pounds I gave for them. They are the famous Rockmartin gems. The family had to part with them, so the opportunity was too good to be lost. Well?"

"They are certainly exquisitely lovely," Beatrice stammered. "I thank you very much."

"If not very warmly, eh? So that is all you have to say? Ain't they worth one single kiss?"

Beatrice drew back. For the life of her she could not kiss this man. Never had his lips touched hers yet. They should never do so if Beatrice had her own way.

"I think not," she said in her cold constrained way. "It is very princely of you, and yet it does not touch me in the least. You made the bargain with your eyes open; I told you at the time that I could never care for you; that I sold myself to save my father's good name. I know the situation is not a new one; I know that such marriages, strange to say, have before now turned out to be something like success. But not ours. All the heart I ever had to bestow has long since been given to another. I will do my best to make your life comfortable, I will do my best to learn all that a wife is asked to become. But no more."

Richford turned away with a savage curse upon his lips. The cold contempt struck him and pierced the hide of his indifference as nothing else could. But he was going to have his revenge. The time was near at hand when Beatrice would either have to bend or break, Richford did not care which. It was the only consolation that he had.

"Very well," he said. "We understand one another. We shall see. *Au revoir!*"

He took up his hat and his stick, and strode off without a further word. Beatrice put the diamonds away from her as if they had been so many deadly snakes. She felt that she would loathe the sight of diamonds for the rest of her life.

The time was drawing on now, it only wanted another hour, and the thing would be done. Lady Rashborough came in and admired the diamonds; in her opinion, Beatrice was the luckiest girl in London. Her ladyship was a pretty little blue-eyed thing adored by her husband, but she had no particle of heart. Why a girl should dislike a man who would give her diamonds like these she could not possibly imagine.

"You will be wiser as you grow older, my dear," she said sapiently. "Why didn't I meet Richford before?"

Beatrice echoed the sentiment with all her heart. She resigned herself dully to the maid; she took not the slightest interest in the proceedings; whether she looked ill or well mattered nothing. But though her own natural beauty was not to be dimmed, and though she had the aid of all that art could contrive, nothing could disguise the pallor of her face.

"A little rouge, miss," Adeline implored. "Just a touch on your cheeks. Your face is like snow, and your lips like ashes. I could do it so cleverly that –"

"That people would never know," Beatrice said. "I have no doubt about it, Adeline. But all the same I am not going to have any paint on my face."

A big clock outside was striking the three quarters after eleven; already the carriage was at the door. As yet there was no sign of Sir Charles. But perhaps he would join the party at the church, seeing

that the head of the family and not himself was going to give the bride away. Lord Rashborough, a little awkward in his new frock coat, was fuming about the library. He was an open-air man and hated the society into which his wife constantly dragged him.

"Don't be too late," he said. "Always like to be punctual. Of course that father of yours has not turned up, though he promised to drive to the church, with us."

"Father was never known to be in time in his life," Beatrice said calmly. Her dull depression had gone, she was feeling quite cool and tranquil. If anybody had asked her, she would have said that the bitterness of death had passed. "It is not necessary to wait for him."

"He'll understand," Lord Rashborough joined in. "We can leave a message, and he can follow to the church in a hansom. Let us be moving, Beatrice, if you are quite ready."

With wonderful calmness Beatrice answered that she was quite ready. A little knot of spectators had gathered outside to see the bride depart. Two or three carriages were there, and into the first, with the splendid pair of bays, Lord Rashborough handed Beatrice. They drove along the familiar streets that seemed to Beatrice as though she was seeing them for the last time. She felt like a doomed woman with the deadly virus of consumption in her blood when she is being ordered abroad with the uncertain chance that she might never see England again. It almost seemed to Beatrice that she was asleep, and that the whole thing was being enacted in a dream.

"Here we are at last," Rashborough exclaimed. "What a mob of women! What a lot of flowers! Why anybody wants to make all this fuss over getting married beats me. Come along."

It was a society wedding in the highest sense of the word, and the church was crowded. There was a rustle and a stir as the bride swept up the aisle, and the organ boomed out. There was a little delay at the altar, for the father of the bride had not yet arrived, and there was a disposition to give him a little latitude. Only Lord Rashborough rebelled.

"Let's get on," he said. "Darryll may be half an hour late. One can never tell. And I've got a most important appointment at Tattersall's at half-past two."

Beatrice had no objection to make – she would have objected to nothing at that moment. In the same dreamy way, presently she found herself kneeling at the altar, and a clergyman was saying something that conveyed absolutely nothing to her intelligence. Presently somebody was fumbling unsteadily at her left hand, whereon somebody a great deal more nervous than she was trying to fix a plain gold ring. Someone at the back of the church was making a disturbance.

The officiating clergyman raised his head in protest. Except the exhortation, the ceremony was practically finished. A policeman appeared out of somewhere and seemed to be expostulating with the intruder. Just for a minute it looked as if there was going to be an open brawl.

"I tell you I must go up," somebody was saying, and just for a moment it seemed to Beatrice that she was listening to the voice of Mark Ventmore. "It is a matter of life and death."

Beatrice glanced up languidly at the silly society faces, the frocks and the flowers. Did she dream, or was that really the pale face of Mark that she saw? Mark had burst from the policeman – he was standing now hatless before the altar.

"The ceremony must not go on," he said, breathlessly. There was a nameless horror in his white face. "I – I feel that I am strangely out of place, but it is all too dreadful."

Beatrice rose to her feet. There was some tragedy here, a tragedy reflected in the ghastly face of her groom. And yet on his face was a suggestion of relief, of vulgar triumph.

"What is it?" Beatrice asked. "Tell me. I could bear anything —*now!*"

"Your father!" Mark gasped. "We had to burst open his door. Sir Charles was found in his bed quite dead. He had been dead for some hours when they found him."

CHAPTER V

Mark Ventmore repeated his statement three times before anybody seemed to comprehend the dread meaning of his words. The shock was so sudden, so utterly unexpected by the majority of the people there. Of course nobody in that brilliant throng had the least idea of the bride's feelings in the matter, most of them were privileged guests for the reception. They had been bidden to a festive afternoon, a theatre had been specially chartered for the evening, with a dance to follow. This was one of the smart functions of the season.

And now death had stepped in and swept everything away at one breath. People looked at one another as if unable to take in what had happened. There was a strange uneasiness that might have been taken for disappointment rather than regret. Perhaps it partook of both. Somebody a little more thoughtful than the rest gave a sign to the organist who had begun to fill the church with a volume of triumphal music. The silence that followed was almost painful.

Then as if by common consent, every eye was fixed upon the bride. Beatrice had turned and walked down the altar steps in the direction of Mark, who advanced now without further opposition. Beatrice stood there with her hand to her head as if trying to understand it all. She was terribly white, but absolutely composed.

"Did you say that my father was dead?" she asked.

"I am afraid so," Mark stammered. "He – he has been dead for hours. I came on here as fast as I could, hoping to be in time to – "

He paused, conscious of the fact that he was about to say something terribly out of place. Just for an instant Mark had forgotten that he and Beatrice were not alone. He was looking into her beautiful, dilated eyes, oblivious to the fact of the spectators. He was going to say that he had hurried there in the hopes of being in time to stop the ceremony. And Beatrice had divined it, for she flushed slightly. It seemed a terrible thing, but already she had asked herself the same question. The shock of her father's death had not quite gone home to her yet, and she could still think about herself. Was she really married to Stephen Richford? Was the ceremony legally completed? The thought was out of place, but there it was. A mist rose before the girl's eyes, her heart beat painfully fast.

"Don't you think we ought to do something?" Mark asked.

The question startled Beatrice out of her stupor. She was ready for action. It was as if a stream of cold water had been poured over her.

"Of course," she cried. "It is wrong to stand here. Take me home at once, Mark."

It was a strange scene strangely carried out. The bridegroom stood irresolute by the altar, feeling nervously at his gloves, whilst Beatrice, with all her wedding finery about her, clutched Mark by the arm and hurried him down the aisle. The whole thing was done, and the strangely assorted pair had vanished before the congregation recovered from their surprise.

"Come back!" Richford exclaimed. "Surely it is my place to – "

Long before Richford could reach the porch, his wife and Mark had entered a hansom and were on their way to the *Royal Palace Hotel*. The story had got about by this time; people stopped to stare at the man in tweeds and the bride in her full array in the hansom. To those two it did not seem in the least strange.

"Did you manage to see my father, after all?" Beatrice asked.

"No, I tried to do so; you see, I had to wait for him. He was very late, so I fell asleep. It was after eleven to-day when I awoke to find Sir Charles had not left his room. I ventured to suggest that he had better be roused or he would be too late for your wedding. Nobody could make him hear, so the door was broken in. He was quite dead."

Beatrice listened in a dull kind of way. There was no trace of tears in her eyes. She had suffered so terribly, lately, that she could not cry. The horrible doubt as to whether she was free or not could not be kept out of her mind. Yet it seemed so dreadfully unnatural.

"He died in his sleep, I suppose?" Beatrice asked.

"That nobody can say yet," Mark said. "The doctor we called in was very guarded. Nobody seems to have been in the bedroom, though the sitting-room adjoining is not locked, and last night I saw a lady come out of it, a lady in grey."

"A lady in grey!" Beatrice cried. "What a singular thing, Mark! Do you mean to say it was the same lady who sat next to you in the Paris theatre?"

"Well, yes," Mark admitted. "It was the same. I have not told anybody but you, and it seems to me that nothing will be gained by mentioning the fact."

Beatrice nodded thoughtfully. She could not identify the grey lady, the Slave of Silence, with anything that was wrong. And yet it was strange how that silent woman had come into her life. She must have been known to Sir Charles or she would never have ventured into his sitting-room. If she was still staying in the hotel, Beatrice made up her mind to seek her out. There was some strange mystery here that must be explained. It was uppermost in Beatrice's mind as she descended from the hansom and passed through the curious group of servants into the hall.

The fine suite of rooms was ready for the festive throng; in the dining-room a banquet had been spread out. The scarlet flush of red roses gave a warm note to the room; the sun came streaming through the stained-glass windows, and shone upon the silver and glass and red glow of wine, and on the gold foil of the champagne bottles. In the centre of the table stood a great white tower that Beatrice regarded vaguely as her wedding cake. A shudder passed over her as she looked at it. She longed for something dark and sombre, to hide her diamonds and the sheen of her ivory satin dress.

The place was silent now; the very bareness and desolation of the scene sickened Beatrice to the soul. No guests were here now – they were not likely to be. A polite manager was saying something to the bride, but she did not seem to heed.

"Mr. Marius is talking to you," Mark said. "He wants to know if he can do anything."

"Mr. Marius is very kind," Beatrice said wearily. "I should like to see the doctor. I suppose that he is still here? May I see him at once?"

The doctor had not gone yet. Mark procured a small plate of dainty sandwiches and a glass of port wine which he forced Beatrice to take. To her great surprise she found that she was hungry. Breakfast she had had none; now that the crisis had passed, her natural healthy appetite had returned. The feeling of faintness that she had struggled against for so long passed away.

The doctor came in, rubbing his hands softly together. He regretted the unfortunate occasion, but when he had been called in, Sir Charles was long past mortal aid. Evidently he had been dead for some hours.

"You are in a position to be quite sure of that?" Beatrice asked.

"Oh, quite," Dr. Andrews replied. "One's experience tells that. Sir Charles was quite stiff and cold. I should say that he had been dead quite four hours when the door was broken down."

Just for an instant the doctor hesitated and his easy manner deserted him.

"I must see Sir Charles's regular medical man before I can be quite definite on that point," he said. "I have no doubt that death was caused by natural means, at least I see no reason at present to believe anything to the contrary. Indeed, if any doubt remains after that, there must be a *post mortem*, of course. But still I hope that such a course will not be necessary."

In a vague way Beatrice felt uneasy. If this gentleman was not actually concealing something, he was not quite so satisfied as he assumed to be.

"I should like to see my father, if I may," Beatrice said quietly.

The doctor led the way to the bedroom and closed the door softly behind the girl. His face was a little grave and anxious as he walked down the stairs.

"You appear to be a friend of the family," he said to Mark as he stood in the hall. "There are symptoms about the case which frankly I don't like. There was no occasion to lacerate Miss Darryll's feelings unduly, but I must see the family doctor at once. It is just possible that you may happen to know who he is."

Mark was in a position to supply the desired information, and Dr. Andrews drove off, his face still very grave and thoughtful. Meanwhile Beatrice found herself alone with the dead body of her father. He was only partially undressed; he lay on the bed as if he had been overcome with a sudden illness or fatigue. The handsome boyish features were quite composed; there was a smile on the lips, and yet the expression on the face was one of pain. Sir Charles appeared to have died as he had lived – gay, careless, and easy to the last. Always neat, he had placed his studs and tie on the dressing-table; by them stood a little pile of letters which had evidently come by a recent post. They had been carefully cut open with a penknife, so that Beatrice could see they had been read.

There were tears in the girl's eyes now, for Beatrice recalled the time when Sir Charles had been a good father to her in the days before he had dissipated his fortune and started out with the intention of winning it back in the city. Those had been happy hours, Beatrice reflected.

There was nothing further in the room to call for notice. On the carpet, in contrast to the crimson ground, lay what looked like a telegram. It was half folded, but there was no mistaking the grey paper. If there was anything wrong here, perhaps the telegram would throw a light on it. Beatrice picked up the message and flattened it on her hand. Then she read it with a puzzled face. Suddenly a flash of illumination came upon her. Her hand clenched the paper passionately.

"Is it possible," she muttered, "that he could have known? And yet the date and the day! Why, that coward *must* have known all the time."

A glance at the dead, placid face there recalled Beatrice to herself. Hastily she thrust the message in her corsage and quietly left the room. Some time had elapsed since Beatrice entered the hotel, but as yet the man she called her husband had not returned. It seemed strange, but Beatrice said nothing. She stood regarding her wedding finery with some feeling of disgust.

"I must have a room somewhere and change," she said; "it seems horrible to be walking about like this when my father is lying dead upstairs. Mark, my woman is here somewhere. Will you try and find her and send her to Lady Rashborough for something black and quite plain? Meanwhile, I'll go to a bedroom and get some of this finery off. The mere touch of it fills me with loathing."

Beatrice's maid was discovered at length, and despatched in hot haste to Lady Rashborough's. Beatrice had scarcely entered before Stephen Richford drove up. He looked anxious and white and sullen withal, and he favoured Mark with a particularly malevolent scowl. Richford knew the relationship that had existed at one time between Mark and Beatrice.

"I suppose you must be excused under the circumstances for racing off with my wife in this fashion," he said hoarsely. It seemed to Mark that he had found time to drink somewhere, though, as a rule, that was not one of Richford's failings. "Where is she?"

"She has gone to change," Mark said. "This is a very unfortunate business, Mr. Richford."

Richford shrugged his shoulders with an assumption of indifference. His hand trembled slightly.

"Sir Charles was getting on in years," he said; "and Sir Charles had not troubled to give very great attention to the question of his health. In fact, Sir Charles had gone it steadily. But it seems now to me that so long as the doctors are satisfied as to the cause of death – "

"I am not at all sure the doctor is satisfied," Mark said significantly. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing, nothing," Richford stammered. "Nothing more than a twinge of that confounded neuralgia of mine."

CHAPTER VI

Beatrice came down from her room presently, dressed in quiet black. In her hand she carried not only the telegram but a letter she had taken from the dressing-table of the dead man.

The little group in the hall had by this time been augmented by the presence of Colonel Berrington; Stephen Richford had slipped off somewhere. Mark had not failed to notice the restlessness and agitation of his manner.

"I think I have got rid of everybody," Berrington said. "It has been a most distressing business, and I am afraid that there is worse to come. Dr. Andrews has just telephoned. He has seen Sir Charles's medical man, and they have decided that there must be an inquest. I don't suggest that anything is wrong, but there you are."

"I am not surprised," Beatrice said coldly, "I have been to my father's room looking over his papers. And I found a letter that puzzles me. It was written last night as the date shows, in the hotel, on hotel paper, and evidently delivered by hand, as the envelope proves. Look at this."

Colonel Berrington held out his hand for the envelope. He started slightly as he looked at the neat, clear handwriting. Something was evidently wrong here, Mark thought. The Colonel was a man of courage, as he very well knew, and yet his fingers trembled as he glanced interrogatively at Beatrice before he drew the letter from the envelope.

"Yes," Beatrice said; "I want you to read it. I brought it down on purpose."

"There does not seem to be much," Berrington said. "As there is no heading and signature, the letter may be intended for anybody."

"Only my father's name happens to be on the envelope," Beatrice said quietly. "Pray read it aloud."

Berrington proceeded to do so. There were only two or three lines in which the writer said that she must see the recipient of the letter without delay, and that it was of no use to try and keep out of the way. There was nothing more; no threat or sign of anger, nothing to signify that there was any feeling at all. And yet so much might have been concealed behind those simple lines. Berrington looked grave, and trembled as he handed the letter back to Beatrice.

"Clearly it is our duty to find out who wrote that letter," Mark observed. "It was written in the hotel, probably by somebody dining here last night. It is just possible that it was written by someone who was staying in the hotel. In that case we can easily ascertain the name of the writer."

"How is that possible?" Berrington demanded. He asked the question quite nervously. "In a place so large as this, with so many visitors continually going and coming –"

"There is a rigid rule here," Mark proceeded to explain. "Every guest, even if only passing a single night under the roof, has to sign the visitors' book. With this letter in my hand I can compare signatures. If there is no signature like this characteristic handwriting, then our task is no easy one. On the other hand, if there is –"

The speaker paused significantly. Berrington's agitation deepened. With all her distress and sorrow, Beatrice did not fail to notice it.

"Perhaps you will go down to the office and see at once, Mark," Beatrice suggested.

Ventmore went off obediently enough. Berrington stood watching him for a moment, then he turned to Beatrice and laid his hand gently on her arm.

"Believe me, this is not going to help anybody," he said in a low voice. "Unless I am greatly mistaken, I know who wrote that letter. What connection she had with your father and what the secret was between them I shall perhaps never know. But the lady who wrote that letter –"

"Ah," Beatrice cried, with a flash of sudden inspiration, "it was the grey lady, I am sure of it."

"You have guessed correctly," Berrington went on. "It was the person whom you have elected to call the grey lady. It was a great shock to me to recognize that handwriting. The secret is not wholly

mine to tell, but for a long time I have been seeking the grey lady. I had not the remotest idea that she and Sir Charles had anything in common; little did I dream that she was here in this hotel last night. But whatever may be the meaning of this mystery, if there has been foul play here, the grey lady is quite innocent of it. Don't ask me to say any more, because I cannot, I dare not."

Beatrice nodded in sympathy. The brave, grave soldier by her side was terribly agitated; indeed Beatrice could not have recognized him as being capable of such a display of emotion.

"I am going to believe in you both," she said. "Probably the grey lady was the last person to see my father alive. She may have told him some terrible news; she may have given him the shock that killed him. But there was another who knew – "

"What do you mean by that?" Berrington asked.

"Nothing. I have said too much. That is quite between myself and – and could possibly have had nothing to do with my father's death. Oh, if only Mark had arrived five minutes sooner!"

Berrington knew exactly what was passing through Beatrice's mind.

"A great pity, indeed," he said quietly. "What a difference moments make in our lives. Still – "

"Still there is always the doubt," Beatrice whispered eagerly. A constant throng of people passed through the great hall where the death of Sir Charles was already forgotten. "I am living on the doubt, Colonel Berrington; am I or am I not married to Stephen Richford?"

"I could not say," Berrington replied. "I have very little knowledge of these matters. As far as I could see, the marriage ceremony was completed, the ring was placed on your finger, therefore – "

"Therefore you think that I am married," Beatrice said. She was twisting the gold badge of servitude on her finger nervously. "I am going to find out for certain. The service was not quite finished; there was no exhortation, there was no signing of the register. Surely I am free if it is my desire to be free. After what I found to-day – "

Again Beatrice paused as if aware of the fact that she was saying too much. There was a certain expression of relief on her face as she saw the figure of Mark approaching.

"Well, have you done anything?" she asked eagerly. "Have you made any great discovery?"

"I have only been partially successful," Mark said. "I have identified the writing with a signature of a guest in the visitors' book. The lady came only yesterday, as the date is opposite her writing. She came without a maid and with very little luggage, and she called herself Mrs. Beacon Light."

"Beacon Light," Beatrice said reflectively. "It sounds like a *nom de plume*; it suggests the kind of name a lady novelist would assume. Too singular to be real. And are you quite sure that the lady wrote that letter to my father?"

"I should say there is very little doubt about it," Mark replied. "The handwritings are identical. It seems that Mrs. Beacon Light stayed here last night and dined in the red salon. She had breakfast here very early, and then she paid her bill and departed. The clerk cannot say where she went, for her small amount of baggage was placed in a hansom and the driver was told to go in the first instance to Peter Robinson's. That is everything that I could ascertain."

There was no more to be said for the present, and very little to be done. A tall, stiff man, with an air of Scotland Yard indelibly impressed upon him, came presently, and asked to be allowed to see Sir Charles's suite of rooms. He had been waited upon at his office, he explained, by the deceased baronet's medical man, who had suggested the necessity for an inquest, which had been fixed upon for ten o'clock the following day. Under the circumstances the suite of rooms would be locked up and the seal of authority placed on them. The inspector was sincerely sorry to cause all this trouble and worry to Miss Darryll, but she would quite see that he was doing no more than his duty.

"But why all this fuss?" Stephen Richford demanded. He had come up at the same moment. Troubled and dazed as Beatrice was, she could not help noticing that Richford had been drinking. The thing was so unusual that it stood out all the more glaringly. "There's no occasion for an inquest. Dr. Oswin has told me more than once lately that Sir Charles was giving his heart a great deal too much to do. This thing has got to be prevented, I tell you."

"Very sorry, sir," the inspector said politely; "but it is already out of private hands. Both Dr. Oswin and Dr. Andrews have suggested an inquest; they have notified us, and, if they wished to change their minds now, I doubt if my chief would permit them."

Richford seemed to be on the point of some passionate outburst, but he checked himself. He laid his hand more or less familiarly on Beatrice's arm, and she could feel his fingers trembling.

"Very well," he said sulkily. "If you have made up your minds as to this course, I have no more to say. But there is nothing to gain by standing here all day. Beatrice, I have something to say to you."

"I am quite ready," Beatrice said. "I have also something to say to you. We will go on as far as my sitting-room. Please don't leave the hotel, Colonel Berrington; I may want you again."

The hard corners of Richford's mouth trembled, but he said nothing. He did not utter a word until the door of the sitting-room had closed upon Beatrice and himself. He motioned the girl to a chair, but she ignored the suggestion.

"It is a very awkward situation," Richford began. "As my wife –"

"I am glad you have come so quickly to the point," Beatrice said eagerly. "Am I your wife? I doubt it. I do not think I am your wife, because the ceremony was not quite completed and we did not sign the register. You know what my feelings have been all along; I have never made the slightest attempt to disguise them. If I had known that my father was dead – that he had died on the way to church, I should never have become Mrs. Stephen Richford. To save my father's good name I had consented to this sacrifice. My father is dead beyond the reach of trouble. If I had only known. If I had only known!"

The words came with a fierce whisper. They stung the listener as no outburst of contempt or scorn could. They told him clearly how the speaker loathed and despised him.

"Nobody did know," he sneered. "Nobody could possibly have known."

"That is not true," Beatrice cried. She had come a little closer to Richford; her cheeks were blazing with anger, her eyes flamed passionately. "It is a cowardly lie. There was one man who saw my father after his death, and I am going to prove the fact in a way that cannot possibly be disputed. One man was in my father's room after his death. That man saw my father lying there, and he crept away without giving the slightest alarm. You may sneer, you may say that such a thing is impossible, that the man I allude to would have nothing to gain by such a course; but as I said before, I am going to prove it. Look at this telegram I hold in my hand. It was sent before ten o'clock to-day to the person to whom it is addressed. It evidently relates to some Stock Exchange business. The address is quite clear; the time the telegram was delivered is quite clear, too; and by the side of my father's body I found the telegram, which could only have been dropped there by the party to whom it was addressed. So that party knew that my father was dead, and that party made no alarm. Why?"

"Why," Richford stammered. "Why, because, – well, you see it is quite possible to explain –"

"It is not," Beatrice cried. "The telegram is addressed to *you*. It was you who called on my father; you who found him dead. And in your agitation you dropped that message. Then you grasped the fact that if the marriage was postponed it would never take place, that I was in a position to defy you. You locked my father's door; you said nothing; you made up your mind to let the ceremony go on. That accounts for your agitation, for the fact that you have been drinking. Cowardly scoundrel, what have you to say to this!"

"What are you going to do?" Richford asked sullenly.

"Unless you release me here and now," Beatrice cried, "I swear by Heaven that I am going to *tell the truth!*"

CHAPTER VII

Richford stood there shaking and quivering with passion, and yet not free from the vague terror that Beatrice had noticed all along. Beatrice could not repress a shudder as she looked at that evil, scowling face. To be with that man always, to share his home and his company, seemed to her a most impossible thing. She had lost her father; the future was black and hopeless before her, but she felt a strength and courage now, that she had been a stranger to for a long time. There was hope, too, which is a fine thing when allied with youth and vitality.

She need not live with this man; she had every excuse for not doing so. Beatrice cared very little, for the moment, whether she was married or not. It might possibly be that in the eyes of the law she was this man's wife; the law might compel her to share his home. But now Beatrice had a weapon in her hand and she knew how to use it.

"Give me that telegram," Richford said hoarsely. "Hand it over to me at once."

He advanced in a manner that was distinctly threatening. Certainly he would not have stopped at violence if violence would serve his end. But Beatrice was not afraid.

"I shall do nothing of the kind," she said. "You may as well strike me as look at me like that. If you use violence you may obtain possession of the telegram. But I warn you that I shall not yield without a struggle that will arouse the whole hotel. I am not coming with you, and we part here and now. Oh, I am not in the least afraid."

Just at that moment it looked as if the scene of violence would take place. With an oath Richford grasped the girl by the wrist and drew her to him. A blow full in the face would have laid her senseless at his feet, then he could have helped himself to that priceless telegram. But Richford had been in the world long enough to know how to control his temper when it suited him to do so. He forced something in the semblance of a smile to his lips.

"Don't let us discuss this question like two silly children," he said. "You have fairly caught me out. I did go to your father this morning – there was an urgent reason why I should see him. We need not go into that now, for it was purely on matters of business. If you ask me how I got into that room when the door was locked, I will tell you. Before I thought of marrying you and setting up a house of my own, I had that suite of rooms."

"Is all this material to our discussion?" Beatrice asked coldly.

"Yes, I think so. At any rate I never gave up the suite of rooms, and the keys are still in my possession. That is how I got in to see your father without anybody being the wiser. I was going to show him the very telegram which has fallen into your hands. But I found that Sir Charles was dead, and it was a great shock to me. I must have dropped that telegram in my agitation and forgotten it. So far you follow me, do you not?"

"I follow you," Beatrice said bitterly. "I quite understand; I admire your restraint and your cunning. You reasoned it all out in a flash. If you raised the alarm everybody would have known the truth in a few minutes. And, that being so, there would have been no marriage. You took all the risks, and fortune favoured the bold as fortune always does. Nothing happened until it was too late, and I was married to you. But there is one thing you failed to reckon upon – that my father is no longer a pawn in the game."

Beatrice was speaking quietly and steadily enough; she felt that the victory was in her hands now. And Richford had never coveted her so passionately as he did at this moment when he realized that she was lost to him for ever.

"My father's death leaves me free," the girl went on. "He is dead and nobody can touch him. If he had died yesterday the match would have been broken off, as you know. I was prepared to take my chance. If this vile thing had not happened, then I should have respected my wedding vows and made you as good a wife as I could. I should have hated and loathed it, but I should have become

accustomed to it in time. But this vile action of yours makes all the difference. When you and I part after this painful conversation, we part for good. We shall be talked about; there will be a lot of idle gossip, but I care nothing for that. And if you raise a hand, if you try to use the law on your side, I produce that telegram and tell my story."

Again the look of mingled rage and terror came into Richford's eyes.

"You talk like a fool," he said hoarsely. "What can you possibly do to get a living? You are my wife; you can never marry anybody so long as I am alive. You are very pretty, but you have been brought up to be utterly useless."

"I have strength and courage," Beatrice replied, "and they are worth a good deal. I can go into a shop if the worst comes to the worst. My relatives, the Rashboroughs – "

"Lady Rashborough will turn her back on you if you do this. She will be furious."

"Well, then, I must depend upon myself. But you are not going to say anything – for some reason you are too frightened to say anything."

"And all the wedding presents, the diamonds and the like?" Richford asked feebly.

"The wedding presents will go back to the senders. There is a plain clothes policeman keeping guard over them now – your diamonds are amongst the lot. I will see that they are safely sent to you. And I do not know that I need say any more."

Beatrice had reached the corridor by this time. She was passing Richford with her head in the air. It came to him suddenly that he had lost everything, that he was baffled and beaten. In a sudden spasm of rage he caught the girl by the shoulders in a savage grip. She gave a little moan of pain as she looked around for assistance. It came quite unexpectedly.

At the same moment Mark Ventmore was coming from his room. He took in the situation at a glance. With one bound he was by Richford's side, and he had wrenched his hands away. With a snarl Richford turned upon the man whom he knew to be his successful rival, and aimed a blow at him. Then Mark's fist shot out, and Richford crashed to the ground with a livid red spot on his forehead. Sick and dizzy he scrambled to his feet.

"You are more than a match for me that way," he panted. "But there are other ways, my friend, of wiping that blow out. Look to yourself."

There was a deadly menace in the threat, so that Beatrice shuddered as she watched the retreating figure. She knew perfectly well that that blow would not be forgotten. Mark laughed as he heard, then his face changed and he sighed.

"What does it all mean, Beatrice?" he asked. "For that man to lay hands upon you and so soon after you are – but I cannot bring myself to say the word."

"He was not altogether without excuse, Mark," Beatrice said. "We have come to an understanding. Never shall I stay under the same roof with Stephen Richford."

"Well, thank God for that," Mark said fervently. "Something unexpected has happened!"

In a few words Beatrice told the story to which Mark listened with vivid interest. An expression of the deepest disgust came over his face as Beatrice finished her story and handed over the telegram. At the same time the feeling nearest her heart was one of relief.

"It was the act of a scoundrel, darling," he said. "And yet things might have been worse. For instance, you might not have found that telegram. But since you have done so, the game is all in your hands. You are quite right to defy that fellow and refuse to live with him. He dare not oppose you, Beatrice. Thank Heaven, I shall be able to think of you as pure and free from contamination. But what are you going to do?"

"I have not thought of that yet," Beatrice said with a faint smile. "For a day or two I shall get the Rashboroughs to give me a home. When my father's affairs come to be settled up there will be a little less than nothing for me to have. Still, I have some jewels which may bring me in a few hundred pounds. But I shall find something to do."

Mark shut his teeth tightly together to keep back the protestations of love that rose to his lips. It was no time to speak of that kind of thing. He felt that he had been tricked out of the only girl for whom he had ever cared, but, thank goodness, he would not have to think of her as dragging out a lengthening chain by the side of Stephen Richford. And Beatrice would find something to do – of that he felt certain.

"I will come and see you in a few days, dearest," he said. "Though you are bound to that man by the cruel sport of chance, you still belong to me. There can be no harm in my helping you. And may God bless and keep you wherever you go, darling."

Mark bent and kissed Beatrice's hand tenderly, and made his way down the stairs. There was nothing now to stay for; Beatrice would go to her friends, and the strange ending of the Richford-Darryll marriage would be food for the scandal-mongers for many a day to come. All these thoughts crowded into Mark's mind as he made his way down into the big dining-room for luncheon. He was sad and sick at heart, but man must eat, all the same. He did not look as if he could eat here at present, for every table was filled. The last seat had fallen to Richford, who found himself seated opposite to Colonel Berrington. Richford would far rather have been anywhere else, but there was no help for it.

The Colonel bowed coldly to the other's surly nod. Richford belonged to a class that the gallant soldier frankly detested. He expressed no surprise at seeing Richford here; it was natural under the circumstances that Beatrice should keep to her own room. And Berrington had heard nothing of the matter of the telegram.

"Oh, never mind all that rubbish," Richford said testily, as the waiter passed the elaborate *menu* with its imposing array of dishes. "What's the good of all that foreign cat's meat to an honest Englishman? Give me a steak and plain potatoes and a decanter of brandy."

The brandy came before the steak, and Richford helped himself liberally to the liquid. Berrington was a little astonished. He had more than once heard Richford boast that he was positively a teetotaller. He usually held in contempt those who called themselves merely moderate drinkers.

"What a time they keep you here," Richford growled. "If I'd gone to one of those City places I should have got my steak in half the time. Oh, here the fellow comes. Now, then, I –"

Richford paused in his growling, and contemplated the red hot plate on which the steak was displayed with a queer gleam in his eyes and a clicking of the corners of his mouth. Just for the moment it seemed to Berrington as if his *vis a vis* was going to have a fit of some kind.

"There is salt in the plate," Richford gasped. "Who has taken the liberty of putting –"

He said no more; he seemed to be incapable of further speech. The waiter looked sympathetic; it was no fault of his. And the salt was there, sure enough.

"It certainly is salt," the waiter said. "I did not notice it before. It's a lot of salt, *and it is exactly in the shape of a rifle bullet*; it's – When I was in South Africa –"

Berrington's glass clicked as he raised it to his lips. Just for an instant his face was as pale as that of the man opposite him. With a gesture Richford motioned the waiter away. Then he rose unsteadily from the table, and finished the rest of his brandy without any water at all. He crossed the room like a ghost. Directly he had passed the swinging doors Berrington rose and followed. He saw Richford in the distance entering a hansom; he called one himself. Evidently he had no desire for Richford to see him.

"Where shall I drive, sir?" the cabman asked.

"Keep that cab in sight without being seen," Berrington said hastily. "Do your work well, and it will be a sovereign in your pocket. Now drive on."

CHAPTER VIII

The cabman gave a knowing wink and touched his hat. Berrington lay back inside the hansom abstractedly, smoking a cigarette that he had lighted. His bronzed face was unusually pale and thoughtful; it was evident that he felt himself on no ordinary errand, though the situation appeared to be perfectly prosaic. One does not usually attach a romantic interest to a well-dressed military man in a hansom cab during broad daylight in London. But Berrington could have told otherwise.

"Poor little girl," he muttered to himself. "Sad as her fate is, I did not think it was quite so sad as *this*. We must do something to save her. What a fortunate thing it is that I have always had a love for the study of underground human nature, and that I should have found out so much that appears only normal to the average eye. That innocent patch of salt in the shape of a bullet, for instance. Thank goodness, I am on my long leave and have plenty of time on my hands. My dear little grey lady, even your affairs must remain in abeyance for the present."

The drive promised to be a long one, for half London seemed to have been traversed before the cabman looked down through the little peep-hole and asked for instructions, as the hansom in front had stopped.

"The gentleman inside is getting out, sir," he said. "He's stopped at the corner house."

"Go by it at a walk," Berrington commanded, "and see what house our man enters. After that I will tell you exactly what to do, driver. Only be careful as to the right house."

The cab pulled up at length once more, and the house was indicated. Berrington proceeded a little further, and then sent his own driver away rejoicing, a sovereign the richer for his task. Turning up his collar and pulling down his hat, Berrington retraced his steps.

He was enabled to take pretty good stock of the house Richford had entered, and without exciting suspicion, because there were trees on the opposite side of the road and seats beneath them. It was a fairly open part of London, with detached houses on the one side looking on to a kind of park. They were expensive houses, Berrington decided, houses that could not have been less than two hundred and fifty a year. They looked prosperous with their marble steps and conservatories on the right side of the wide doorways; there were good gardens behind and no basements. Berrington could see, too, by the hanging opals in the upper windows that these houses had electric lights.

"This is unusual, very unusual indeed," Berrington muttered to himself, as he sat as if tired on one of the seats under the trees. "The gentry who cultivate the doctrine that has for its cult a piece of salt in the shape of a bullet, don't as a rule favour desirable family mansions like these. Still, fortune might have favoured one of them. No. 100, Audley Place. And No. 100 is the recognized number of the clan. By the way, where am I?"

A passing policeman was in a position to answer the question. Audley Place was somewhat at the back of Wandsworth Common, so that it was really a good way out of town. The policeman was friendly, mainly owing to the fact that he was an old soldier, and that he recognized Berrington as an officer immediately. He was full of information, too.

"Mostly rich City gents live in Audley Place, sir," he said. "There is one colonel, too – Colonel Foley of the East Shropshire Regiment."

"An old college chum and messmate of mine," Berrington said. "I followed Colonel Foley in the command of that very regiment. What house does he live in?"

"That's No. 14, sir," the delighted officer grinned. "Excuse the liberty, sir, but you must be Colonel Berrington, sir. I was with you all through the first Egyptian campaign."

Berrington blessed his own good fortune. Here was the very thing that he wanted.

"We'll fight our battles over again some other day," he said. "I am pretty sure that I shall see a great deal more of you – by the way, what is your name? Macklin. Thank you. Now tell me something as to who lives yonder at No. 100. I am not asking out of idle curiosity."

"I can't tell you the gentleman's name, sir," Macklin replied. "But I can find out. The people have not been there very long. A few good servants, but no men, no ladies so far as I can tell, and the master what you might call a confirmed invalid. Goes about in a bath chair which he hires from a regular keeper of this class of thing. Not a very old gent, but you can't quite tell, seeing that he is muffled up to his eyes. Very pale and feeble he looks."

Berrington muttered something to himself and his eyebrows contracted. Evidently he was a good deal puzzled by what he had heard.

"That is very strange," he said, "very strange indeed. I will not disguise from you, Macklin, that I have a very strong reason for wishing to know everything about No. 100, Audley Place. Keep your eyes open and glean all the information you possibly can. Talk to the servants and try to pump them. And write to me as soon as you have found out anything worth sending. Here is my card. I shall do no good by staying here any longer at present."

The policeman touched his helmet and strode on his way. Berrington strolled along under the friendly shadow of the trees till he had left Audley Place behind him. Once clear of the terrace he called a cab and was whirled back to town again.

Meanwhile, absolutely unconscious of the fact that he was being so closely shadowed, Richford had been driven out Wandsworth way. He did not look in the least like a modern millionaire of good health and enviable prospects as he drove along. His moody face was pale, his lips trembled, his eyes were red and bloodshot with the brandy that he had been drinking. The hand that controlled the market so frequently shook strangely as Richford pressed the bell of No. 100 Audley Place. There was no suggestion of tragedy or mystery about the neat parlourmaid who opened the door.

"Mr. Sartoris desires to see me," Richford said. "He sent me a messenger – a message to the *Royal Palace Hotel*. Will you please tell him I am here."

The neat parlourmaid opened the drawing-room door and ushered Richford in. It was a big room looking on the street, but there was nothing about it to give the place the least touch of originality. The furniture was neat and substantial, as might have befitted the residence of a prosperous City man, the pictures were by well-known artists, the carpet gave to the feet like moss. There was nothing here to cause Richford to turn pale, and his lips to quiver.

He paced up and down the room uneasily, starting at every sound until the maid returned and asked if the gentleman would be good enough to step this way. Richford followed down a passage leading to the back of the house into a room that gave on to a great conservatory. It was a fine room, most exquisitely furnished; flowers were everywhere, the big dome-roofed conservatory was a vast blaze of them. The room was so warm, too, that Richford felt the moisture coming out on his face. By the fire a figure sat huddled up in a great invalid chair.

"So you have come," a thin voice said. "Most excellent Richford, you are here. I was loath to send for you on this auspicious occasion, but it could not be helped."

There was the faintest suggestion of a sneer in the thin voice. Richford crossed the room and took another chair by the side of the invalid. The face of the man who called himself Carl Sartoris was as pale as marble and as drawn as parchment, the forehead was hard and tangled with a mass of fair hair upon it, the lips were a little suggestive of cruelty. It was the dark eyes that gave an expression of life and vitality, surprising in so weak a frame. Those eyes held the spectator, they fascinated people by their marvellous vitality.

"What devil's work are you upon now?" Richford growled.

"My dear sir, you must not speak to an invalid like that," Sartoris said. "Do you not know that I am sensitive as to my own beloved flowers? It was my flowers that I asked you to come and see. Since you were here last, the room has been entirely redecorated. It seemed to me to be good that I should share my artistic joy with so congenial a companion."

"Damn your flowers!" Richford burst out passionately. "What a cruel, unfeeling fellow you are! Always the same, and will be the same till the devil comes for you."

"Which sad event you would regard with philosophic equanimity," Sartoris laughed. "So, we will get to business as soon as possible. I see that Sir Charles Darryll is dead. I want to know all about that affair without delay. What did he die of?"

"How should I know? Old age and too much pleasure. And that's all I can tell you. I found him first."

"Oh, indeed. The evening paper says nothing about that."

"For the simple reason that the evening papers don't know everything," Richford growled. "Quite early to-day I found Sir Charles dead in his bed. I dared not say a word about it, because, as you know, I was going to marry his daughter. But, of course, you all knew about *that*, too. You see if I had made my little discovery public, Beatrice would have known that death had freed her and her father from certain very unpleasant consequences that you and I wot of, and would have refused to meet me at the altar. So I locked the door and discreetly said nothing, my good Sartoris."

The little man in the invalid chair rolled about horribly and silently.

"Good boy," he said. "You are a credit to your parents and the country you belong to. What next?"

"Why, the wedding, of course. Lord Rashborough, as head of the family, was giving Beatrice away. Sir Charles did not turn up, but nobody wondered, as he had never been known to attend to an appointment in his life. And so we were married."

Once more the little man shook with unholy mirth.

"And the girl knows nothing about it?" he asked. "I suppose you'll tell her some day when she is not quite so loving as she might be? Ho, ho; it is a joke after my own heart."

Richford laughed in his turn, then his face grew dark. He proceeded to tell the rest of the story. The little man in the chair became quieter and quieter, his face more like parchment than ever. His eyes blazed with a curious electric fire.

"So you have lost your wife before you have found her?" he asked. "You fool! you double-dyed fool! If that girl chooses to tell her story, suspicion falls on you. And if anybody makes a fuss and demands an inquest or anything of that kind – "

"They are going to hold an inquest, anyway," Richford said sulkily. "Dr. Andrews was in favour of it from the first, and the family doctor, Oswin, has agreed. The police came around and sealed up that suite of rooms before I left the hotel. But why this fuss?"

"Silence, fool!" came from the chair in a hissing whisper. "Let me have time to think. That senseless act of folly of yours over the telegram bids fair to ruin us all. You will say so yourself when you hear all that I have to tell you. Oh, you idiot!"

"Why?" Richford protested. "How did I know Sir Charles was going to die? And if his death took place in a perfectly natural manner and there was no foul play – "

"Oh, *if* it did. Perhaps it was wrong on my part not to take you more fully into my confidence. But there is one thing certain. Listen to me, Richford. Whatever happens between now and this time to-morrow *there must be no inquest on the body of Sir Charles Darryll!*"

The words came with a fierce hissing indrawing of the speaker's breath. He tried to get up from his chair, and fell back with a curse of impotence.

"Push me along to the door," he said. "Take me to that little room behind the library where you have been before. I am going to show you something, and I'm going to reveal a plot to you. We shall want all your brutal bulldog courage to-night."

The chair slid along on its cushioned wheels, the door closed with a gentle spring, and, as it did, a female figure emerged from behind a great bank of flowers just inside the conservatory. She crossed on tip-toe to the door and as gently closed it. As the light fell it lit up the pale sad features of the grey lady – the Slave of Silence.

CHAPTER IX

It was with a sigh of relief that Beatrice found herself at length alone. There was nothing for her to do now but to get her belongings together and leave the hotel. There would be an inquest on the body of Sir Charles at ten o'clock the following morning, as the authorities had already informed her, but Beatrice had looked upon this as merely a formal affair. She would pack her things and leave them in Sir Charles's dressing-room – the door of which had not been sealed – and send for everything on the morrow. All her costly presents, including the wonderful diamonds from Stephen Richford, she had entirely forgotten. A somewhat tired detective was still watching the jewels in a room off the hall where the wedding breakfast was laid out. But the fact had escaped Beatrice's attention.

Lady Rashborough was having tea alone in her boudoir when Beatrice arrived. Her pretty little ladyship was not looking quite so amiable as usual and there was the suggestion of a frown on her face. She had been losing a great deal at bridge lately, and that was not the kind of pastime that Rashborough approved. He was very fond of his empty, hard, selfish, little wife, but he had put his foot down on gambling, and Lady Rashborough had been forced to give her promise to discontinue it. The little woman cared nothing for anyone but herself, and she had small sympathy for Beatrice.

"What are you doing here?" she asked pettishly. "Where is your husband?"

"That I cannot tell you," Beatrice replied. "You hardly expected that I should have started on my honeymoon under such circumstances, did you?"

"My dear child, don't talk nonsense! Of course not. The proper thing is to go to some very quiet hotel and dine respectably – to lie low till the funeral is over. Of course this is all very annoying, especially as you have such a lovely lot of new frocks and all the rest of it, but I dare say they will come in later on. Not that it matters, seeing that you have a husband who could stifle you in pretty frocks and never miss the money. What a funny girl you are, Bee. You don't seem to appreciate your good luck at all."

"You regard me as exceedingly lucky, then?" Beatrice asked quietly.

"My dear girl, lucky is not the word for it. Of course Stephen Richford is not what I call an ideal husband, but with his amazing riches – "

"Which are nothing to me, Adela," Beatrice said. "I have discovered the man to be a degraded and abandoned scoundrel. From the first I always hated and detested him; I only consented to marry him for the sake of my father. Adela, I am going to tell you the discovery that I made in my father's bedroom this morning."

In a few words Beatrice told her story. But if she expected any outburst of indignation from her listener, she was doomed to disappointment. The little figure in the big arm chair didn't move – there was a smile of contempt on her face.

"Good gracious, what a little thing to fuss about!" she cried. "It seems to me that the man was paying you a compliment. If I had been in your place I should have said nothing till I wanted to get the whip hand of my husband. My dear child, you don't mean to say that you are going to take the matter seriously!"

Beatrice felt the unbidden tears gathering in her eyes. She had been sorely taxed and shaken today, and she was longing more than she knew for a little sympathy. People had told her before that Lady Rashborough had no heart, and she was beginning to believe it.

"Do you mean to say," Beatrice stammered, "do you really want me to believe – that – "

"Of course I do, you goose. Money is everything. I married Rashborough because it was the best thing that offered, and I did not want to overstay my market. It was all a question of money. I would have married a satyr if he had been rich enough. And you sit there telling me that you are going to leave Stephen Richford."

"I shall never speak to him again. He and I have finished. I have no money, no prospects, no anything. But I decline to return to Stephen Richford."

"And so you are going to have a fine scandal," Lady Rashborough cried, really angry at last. "You think you are going to hang about here posing as a victim till something turns up. I dare say that Rashborough would be on your side because he is of that peculiar class of silly billy, but you may be sure that I shall not stand it. As a matter of fact, you can't stay here, Beatrice. I rather like Richford; he gives me little tips, and he has helped me over my bridge account more than once. If he should come here to dinner – "

Beatrice rose, her pride in arms at once. It was put pretty well, but it was cold, and hard, and heartless, and the gist of it was that Beatrice was practically ordered out of the house. She had hoped to remain here a few weeks, at any rate until she could find rooms. She was pleased to recall that she had not sent her things.

"You need not trouble to put it any more plainly," she said coldly. "In the eyes of your Smart Set, I have done a foolish thing, and you decline to have me here for the present. Very well, I shall not appeal to Frank, though I am quite sure what he would say if I did. All the same, I could not tax the hospitality of one who tells me plainly that she does not want me."

Beatrice rose and moved towards the door. With a little toss of her head, Lady Rashborough took up the French novel she had been reading as Beatrice entered. Thus she wiped her hands of the whole affair; thus in a way she pronounced the verdict of Society upon Bee's foolish conduct. But the girl's heart was very heavy within her as she walked back to the *Royal Palace Hotel*. It was only an earnest of the hard things that were going to happen.

And she had no money, nothing beyond a stray sovereign or two in her purse. She had taken off most of her jewellery with the exception of an old diamond bangle of quaint design. She hated the sight of it now as she hated the sight of anything that suggested wealth and money. With a firm resolve in her mind, Beatrice turned into a large jeweller's shop in Bond Street. The firm was very well known to her; they had supplied the family for years with the costly trifles that women love. The head of the house would see her at once, and to him Beatrice told her story. A little later, and with a comfortably lighter heart, she made her way back to the *Royal Palace Hotel* with a sum of money considerably over two hundred pounds in her purse.

The manager of the hotel was sympathetic. Unfortunately the house was full, but Beatrice could have Sir Charles's sitting-room and the dressing-room where a bed could be put up. And would Mrs. Richford – Beatrice started at the name – give instructions as to those presents?

"I had quite forgotten them," Beatrice said. "Will you please have everything, except some jewels that I will take care of, locked up in your safe. There are some diamonds which I am going to give into the hands of Mr. Richford at once. I am so sorry to trouble you."

But it was no trouble at all to the polite manager. He begged that Mrs. Richford would let him take everything off her hands. Wearily Beatrice crept down to dinner with a feeling that she would never want to eat anything again. She watched that brilliant throng about her sadly; she sat in the drawing-room after dinner, a thing apart from the rest. A handsome, foreign-looking woman came up to her and sat down on the same settee.

"I hope you will not think that I am intruding," the lady said. "Such a sad, sad time for you, dear. Did you ever hear your father speak of Countess de la Moray?"

Beatrice remembered the name perfectly well. She had often heard her father speak of the Countess in terms of praise. The lady smiled in a sad, retrospective way.

"We were very good friends," she said. "I recollect you in Paris when you were quite a little thing. It was just before your dear mother died. You used to be terribly fond of chocolates, I remember."

The lady rambled on in a pleasing way that Beatrice found to be soothing. Gradually and by slow degrees she began to draw out the girl's confidence. Beatrice was a little surprised to find that she was telling the Countess everything.

"You are quite right, my dear," she said quietly. "The heart first – always the heart first. It is the only way to happiness. Your father was a dear friend of mine, and I am going to be a friend of yours. I have no children; I had a daughter who would have been about your age had she lived."

The Countess sighed heavily.

"I would never have allowed a fate like yours to be hers. I go back home in a few days to my chateau near Paris. It is quiet and dull perhaps, but very soothing to the nerves. It would give me great pleasure for you to accompany me."

Beatrice thanked the kind speaker almost tearfully. It was the first touch of womanly sympathy she had received since her troubles had begun, and it went to her heart.

"It is very, very good of you," she said. "A friend is what I sorely need at present. When I think of your goodness to a comparative stranger like me – "

"Then don't think of it," the Countess said almost gaily. "Let us get rid of that horrible man first. You must return those fine diamonds to him. Oh, I know about the diamonds, because I read an account of them in the papers. Perhaps you have already done so?"

"No," Beatrice said, "they are in my dressing-room at the present moment."

"Oh, the careless girl! But that shows how little you value that kind of thing. Well, General, and what do you want with me at this time of the evening?"

A tall, military man had lounged up to them. He was exquisitely preserved. He bowed over Beatrice's hand as he was introduced as General Gastang.

"Delighted to meet you," he said. "I knew your father slightly. Countess, your maid is wandering in a desolate way about the corridor, looking for you, with some story of a dressmaker."

"*Ma foi*, I had quite forgotten!" the Countess exclaimed. "Do not go from here, *chérie*; talk to the General till I return, which will not be long. Those dressmakers are the plague of one's life. I will be back as soon as possible."

The General's manner was easy and his tongue fluent. Beatrice had only to lean her head back and smile faintly from time to time. The General suddenly paused – so suddenly that Beatrice looked up and noticed the sudden pallor of his face, his air of agitation.

"You are not well?" the girl asked. "The heat of the room has been too much for you."

The General gasped something; with his head down he seemed to be avoiding the gaze of a man who had just come into the drawing-room. As the newcomer turned to speak to a lady, the General shot away from Beatrice's side, muttering something about a telegram. He had hardly vanished before Beatrice was conscious of a cold thrill.

After all she knew nothing of these people. Such scraps of her history as they had gleaned might have come from anybody. Then Beatrice had another thrill as she recollected the fact that she had told this strange Countess that the diamonds were in her dressing-room. Suppose those two were in league to —

Beatrice waited to speculate on this point no longer. She hurried from the room and up the stairs to her bedroom. The corridors were practically deserted at this time in the evening. Beatrice gave a sigh of relief to see that her door was shut. She placed her hand gently on the handle, but the door did not give.

It was locked on the inside! From within came whispering voices. In amaze, the girl recognized the fact that one of the voices belonged to Countess de la Moray, and the other to the man who called himself her husband, Stephen Richford.

There was nothing for it now but to stay and wait developments.

CHAPTER X

Beatrice had not long to wait. Only a few minutes elapsed before the door flew open and Richford came out so gently that Beatrice had barely time to step into a friendly doorway. Her senses were quick and alert now in the face of this unknown danger, and the girl did not fail to note the pale face and agitated features of the man who had so grievously harmed her. Evidently Richford had been drinking no more, but certainly he had had some great shock, the effects of which had not passed away. He muttered something as he passed Beatrice, and looked at his watch. Directly he had disappeared down the corridor, Beatrice stepped into her room.

The Countess was standing by the dressing-table picking up the odds and ends there in a careless kind of way, but evidently in an attitude of deep attention. Beatrice's feeling of alarm became somewhat less as she saw that the case of diamonds on the dressing-table had not been touched. If anything like a robbery had been contemplated she was in time to prevent it. Just for the moment it occurred to Beatrice to demand coldly the reason for the intrusion, but she thought the better of that. Clearly there was some conspiracy on foot here, and it would be bad policy to suggest that she suspected anything. So Beatrice forced a little smile on her lips as she crossed the room.

"I shall have to give you in charge as being a suspicious character," she said. "I shall begin to believe that your dressmaker only existed in your imagination."

The Countess gave a little scream, and her face paled somewhat under her rouge. But she recovered herself with marvellous quickness. Her lips had ceased to tremble, she smiled gaily.

"I am fairly caught," she said. "There is nothing for it but to plead guilty and throw myself on the mercy of the court. You see, I have not taken the diamonds, though I have looked at them."

It was all so admirably and coolly said, that it might have deceived anybody who did not know quite so much as Beatrice. But she had made up her mind that no suspicion of the truth should come out. Quite carelessly she opened the lid of the jewel cases so that she might see for herself that she was not the victim of this magnificent adventuress.

But the gems were there right enough. Their marvellous rays seemed to fill the room with livid fire. Beatrice glanced at her companion; the latter had caught her underlip fiercely between her teeth, her hands were clenched. And Beatrice knew that but for the intervention of that stranger in the drawing-room and the sudden flight of the General, she would never have seen those diamonds again. And yet Stephen Richford had been in the same room with this brilliant adventuress! Beatrice would have given a great deal to see to the bottom of the mystery.

"Oh, it is indeed a narrow escape that you have had," the Countess said. "I was not feeling very well, so I sent my maid to ask you to come to my room. She said you had already gone, so I took the liberty of coming here. Is not that so?"

"Then we had perhaps better stay and talk here," Beatrice suggested. "Adeline, will you take this case down to the office and ask the manager to place it with my other valuables in the safe? Be very careful, because they are diamonds."

Adeline, who had just come in, took the case in her hand. The Countess had turned her back, but Beatrice caught sight of her face in the cheval glass. It was livid with fury, and all wrinkled up with greed and baffled cupidity. The girl was afraid to trust her voice for a moment. She knew now that unless she had taken this course, the diamonds would not have been hers much longer. A woman who could look like that was capable of anything. Some cunning plan, perhaps some plan that took violence within its grasp, would have been carried out before the evening was over. So alarmed was Beatrice that she followed Adeline to the door. She wanted to see the jewels safe and regain her lost self-possession at the same time. It seemed to be a critical moment.

"If you will excuse me," she said, "I had forgotten to give my maid another message."

The Countess nodded and smiled gaily. She was master of herself once more. Beatrice stepped out of the room and followed Adeline at a safe distance to the end of the stairs. So far as she knew to the contrary a confederate might be lingering about waiting for a signal. Surely enough, General Gastang was loitering in the hall smoking a cigarette. But he seemed to be powerless now, for he made no sign, and with a sigh of relief Beatrice saw Adeline emerge presently from the office minus the cases which she had previously carried.

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